

JEFFREY HUNTER

A pretty face may have been his downfall!

By Oscar Rimaldi

One day of May in 1958, this writer was present at the 20th Century-Fox Studio commissary by courtesy of a friend who was working at the studio. It was almost past the lunch hour and the place was almost empty. Suddenly a handsome young man walked into the room, athletic looking, stretching over six feet, his features had a startling boyish precision. He noticed I was staring at him—I must have looked awfully silly—and as he passed me by he smiled at me with teeth lined in gleaming perfection. I caught his eyes for a moment, pale, ice-blue eyes with a burning glare. "Jeffrey Hunter," my friend said, "one of the nicest guys in the lot."

Jeffrey was then one of the most popular stars under contract to 20th Century-Fox. All his films had been profitable, he was always in the first places of popularity polls and of Motion Pictures Exhibitors' list of favorites. He became the fifties' prototype of the All-American image that Fox had been projecting since the early days of William Russell and George Walsh. But, as it happened to many in Hollywood who made it to the top thanks to their physical inventory, Hunter found himself limited by producers' tendency to underestimate his other qualities. Casting directors thought of him as the perennial scrubbed, clean-cut young face, bright eyes, moist lips, the boy who was always cutting in at the sophomore prom.

Of course Hunter got weary of these roles. "Never mind this baby face of mine," he declared in a Los Angeles Times interview, "I've got a healthy actor's ego. My aim is to get parts like those Henry Fonda got in 'Grapes of Wrath' and 'The Ox-Bow Incident.'"

Hunter's real name was Henry H. McKinnies, Jr., the only child of a Milwaukee manufacturer, Henry McKinnies and Edith Lois Burgess. He was born in New Orleans, La. on Nov. 25, 1925 and moved with his family to Milwaukee at the age of 4. With the exception of a distant relative, Eric Barnes, who was voted "Broadway Best Actor of the Year" in the thirties, Hunter's family was nontheatrical. The McKinnies, though, proudly noted their direct descent from Zachary Taylor, 12th president of the United States.

DEBUT

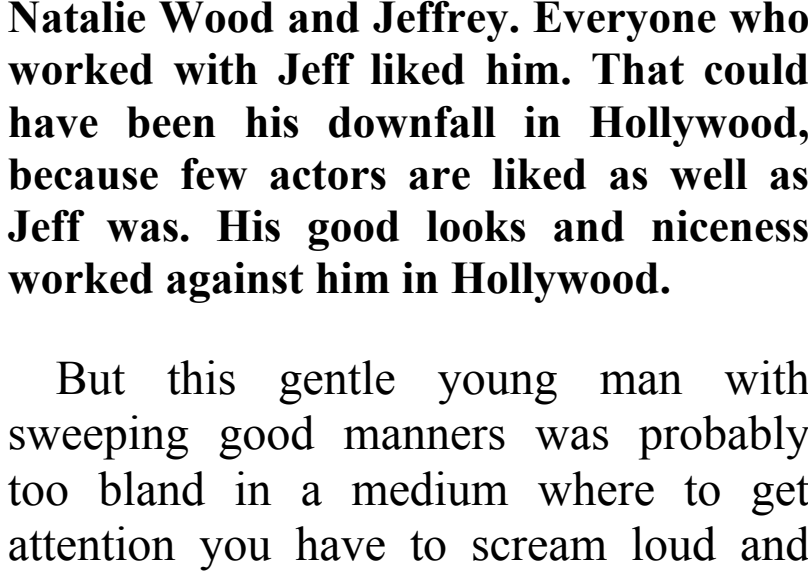
Jeff attended grade and high school in Milwaukee, became interested in children's theatre and made his non-professional debut at the age of 13, playing a 60-year-old-man in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Though active in all sports in high school, he made an excellent record in academic pursuits. He was president of his sophomore class and, as a senior, president of the Student Body, as well as co-captain of the football team.

Starting when he was 14, for three summers he played juvenile roles with Morton Da Costa's summer stock company, the Port Players, in Shorewood, Wisconsin. In his senior year he made his professional debut on a Milwaukee radio program called "Those Who Serve." He was paid \$12.40 a show and "invariably played a G.I." But his radio work helped him earn a scholarship to the Speech and Drama School of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He decided, however, to comply first with his military service, and enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Assigned to Communications Divisions, HQ of the Ninth Naval District, Great Lakes, Michigan, he was kept from duty abroad by a foot injury. He was honorably discharged in 1946.

In the fall of that same year he entered Northwestern University and majored in speech and radio. During his college years he appeared in varsity stage productions of Ruth Gordon's "Years Ago," "The Voice of the Turtle" and "State of the Union." Upon graduation in 1949, Hunter determined to finish his schooling with a master's degree in radio from UCLA. His MA program was interrupted by a call from 20th Century-Fox as a result of his portrayal of Chris in Arthur Miller's "All My Sons" with UCLA University Theatre. He was signed to a seven year contract and the studio sent him immediately to New York to join the cast of "Fourteen Hours."

"At that time I couldn't believe my luck. Here I was under contract to a big studio, working with famous director Henry Hathaway, and with great actors such as Paul Douglas, Agnes Moorehead and Richard Basehart." Jeff always remembered Hathaway's advice after finishing work in the film: "He called Debra (Paget) and me and said he was very pleased with our work. 'I think you kids have the stuff to become stars. You're both under a long contract and that can become a curse in disguise if you don't keep your eyes open, but it'll give you the chance to work with the best talents at the studio and you'll learn from them what no school in the world can teach you. Don't be discouraged by the dull jobs, we all have to do them.'"

And Jeff had his share of those: "Take Care of My Little Girl" (1951), "Belles On Their Toes" (1952), "Sailor of the King" (1953), "Princess of the Nile" (1954). He was patient and didn't complain. He had long periods of idleness that can be very detrimental for an actor. Instead of harassing his bosses, Jeff tried to interest himself in other things like making short films, some of them released by the studio.



THE SEARCHERS starred John Wayne, Natalie Wood and Jeffrey. Everyone who worked with Jeff liked him. That could have been his downfall in Hollywood, because few actors are liked as well as Jeff was. His good looks and niceness worked against him in Hollywood.

But this gentle young man with sweeping good manners was probably too bland in a medium where to get attention you have to scream loud and bite hard. "I was told to wait for the right vehicles, that I was too young and looked too young for certain roles. I finally realized that I was wrong to wait politely for so long. I found myself sidetracked and I was the only one to blame for that. When my contract came to an end I went to see Mr. Skouras and told him I would sign another one only if the studio would give me more opportunities whether in films, television, theater or letting me go out and make films at other studios."

His conditions were accepted and Jeff's career began to spread out with challenging parts that offered a change from the cotton-candy things he was given for seven long years. His first film under the new contract was "No Down Payment," an incisive study of life in suburbia, where lust, prejudice and hypocrisy lurk under the homogenized look of upper-working-class residents. He was a secret agent in "Count Five and Die" (1958), an interesting espionage story based on actual facts taken from the OSS file. "In Love and War" gave him one of the best roles as a rugged sergeant who inspires courage in his men and dies a hero's death in the South Pacific.

JOHN FORD

Director John Ford, with whom he had worked in "The Searchers" (1956), wanted him for "The Last Hurrah," which he was making at Columbia. Though it was a passive sort of role he jumped at the chance to work again with Ford and particularly with Spencer Tracy. "He is amazing," he said of Tracy at that time, "he can give ten different ways of doing a scene and all are perfect. He makes everything look so unbelievably easy and effortless that it doesn't seem like acting at all."

Ford borrowed Hunter again for "Sergeant Rutledge" and he considered that "the greatest acting compliment I ever had." The film provided Jeff with one of his best parts, that of an army officer defending a black cavalryman on trial for a double murder and for the rape of a white woman. Though not a popular success, it definitely proved that Hunter could, under the stern guidance of a great director, give a poignant and powerful performance.

He went right after this film to Allied Artists to star and co-produce "Hell to Eternity," the true story of World War II hero Guy Gabaldon. His debut as a producer was really auspicious, since "Hell to Eternity" grossed over \$7 million.

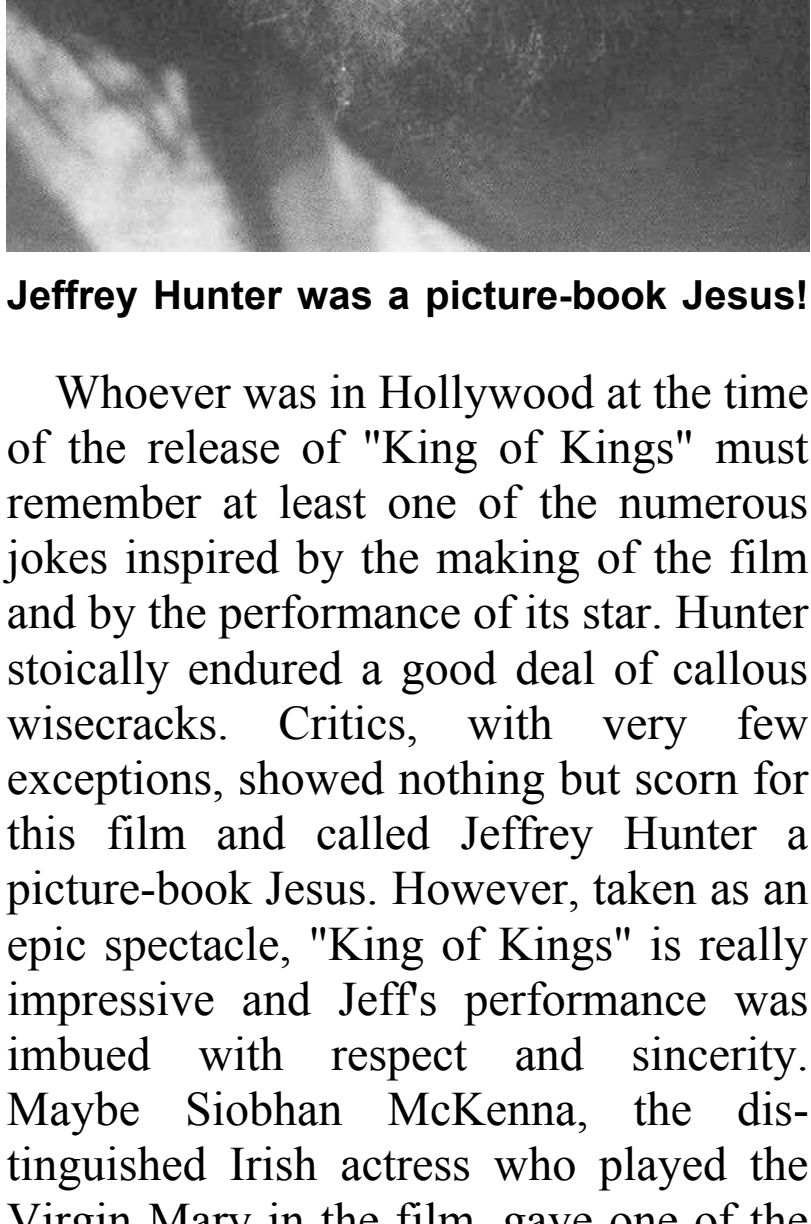
ROLE OF ROLES

Late in 1960 Samuel Bronston was preparing his multi-million-dollar motion picture about the life of Christ, "The King of Kings," to be shot entirely in Spain. The producer couldn't make up his mind about several actors tested for the role when John Ford called and suggested he call Hunter. Both Bronston and director Nicholas Ray agreed to send Jeff a copy of the script and invite him over to Madrid for tests. When it was decided he would portray Jesus, director Ray told him that since the concept of the Saviour is so very personal to every man and woman, he would try to evince complete and utter simplicity from his performance, and would request he approach the difficult undertaking with two guideposts: absolute humility and a willingness to accept the counsel of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish authorities.

"I knew the Bible, of course, but no better than most. The story of Jesus, as it had come to us, was a sacred legend. But I had never thought very much about Him as flesh-and-blood, as a man who lived on this earth, as we do, among people and times not so very different from ours today."

However conscious Hunter was about the difficulties of this assignment, he did not fully realize its tremendous implications until he found himself in the robes of Jesus, ascending a hilltop near Manzanares, in the Spanish countryside for the Sermon of the Mount scene. Some six thousand extras gathered from the surrounding villages appeared in this scene. "Of course, they were fully aware that I was merely an actor playing a part in a film. To my astonishment, quite a few of these men and women dropped to their knees and made the sign of the cross as I passed by. It was then that I began to realize what I had undertaken, and felt even more deeply as the film went along."

Whoever was in Hollywood at the time of the release of "King of Kings" must remember at least one of the numerous jokes inspired by the making of the film and by the performance of its star. Hunter stoically endured a good deal of callous wisecracks. Critics, with very few exceptions, showed nothing but scorn for this film and called Jeffrey Hunter a picture-book Jesus. However, taken as an epic spectacle, "King of Kings" is really impressive and Jeff's performance was imbued with respect and sincerity. Maybe Siobhan McKenna, the distinguished Irish actress who played the Virgin Mary in the film, gave one of the most thoughtful appraisals: "I don't know if Jeffrey's performance is good or bad, but it is *right*. I don't talk of performances in this film. These are people and they are either right or not right. I think one would be out of one's mind to try *to be* Jesus or the Virgin Mary. We can only play the human side as if they were everyday kind of people. We cannot play the mystery."



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KING OF KINGS

"King of Kings" was well-liked by audiences around the world and proved wrong the old show-business precept that actors who play Jesus are supposed to have a hard time getting other roles to follow. Jeffrey was kept busy working in "Mantrap" at Paramount, in "The Longest Day," Darryl Zanuck's spectacular reenactment of D-Day in WW II, and in Universal's "No Man Is An Island," besides appearing in popular television shows of the 60s like "Pursuit," "Checkmate," "Climax," "Combat" and "Alfred Hitchcock Hour." In 1965 Jeffrey was full of enthusiasm for a pilot he had just finished for a new Desilu television series. "It's a science-fiction show which I'm sure will be a big hit. Terrific story, sets and photography. They are calling it 'Star Trek.'"

Everybody knows that the series enjoyed tremendous popularity and had one of the longest runs on television. Re-runs of "Star Trek" are still shown everywhere. But Hunter couldn't be a part of it. Due to his physical resemblance to the other leading actor of the series, William Shatner, the producers decided to switch parts and replace Hunter. Shatner took Hunter's role and Leonard Nimoy, diametrically different from either Hunter or Shatner, was chosen to play the latter's part. Asked to comment on this lost opportunity, he simply said: "My face played me another dirty trick."

HIS PRIVATE LIFE

Jeff was a soft-spoken, idealistic, shy, and yet adventuresome young man, with a quick sense of humor, whose "worst" habit (by some friends) was to engage in long and spirited conversations which ran away with him. He was conservative in his clothes and dressed for the slightest occasions ("I guess it's the Midwest in me showing.")

In 1950 he married Barbara Rush, then a young actress seeking to make her way in moviedom. Their marriage was considered perfect until it headed for the divorce courts in 1955, when she finally found "he was too emotionally immature for marriage." Jeff was less bitter. "I guess we were a little too young to manage both a career and marriage." They had a son, Christopher, who remained in his mother's custody.

In 1957, Hunter married Joan Hamilton, known in films as Dusty Bartlett. They had met on location in Arizona in 1955 where Miss Bartlett was working as a stunt girl. Two sons were born of this marriage, Todd and Scott. Their parents separated in 1965 and in 1967 Joan ended what she called in her testimony an "untenable situation" by divorcing him. She affirmed that Hunter sometimes drank to excess and became violent when he was drinking. That left Jeff with an untenable situation of his own when he admitted he couldn't pay the \$3500 per month in child support which he promised the court. The case was settled without litigation.

In March, 1969, Jeff married another actress, Emily McLaughlin, toplined in the daytime video show "General Hospital." Two months later, on May 28, Jeffrey Hunter died from injuries suffered in a fall at his Van Nuys home. He was 42. The blue-eyed, clean-cut All-American boy was entering middle age and probably could have at last evaded that "nice square" image that had limited his roles. A few days before his accident he had told a reporter, half mockingly, half seriously: "The ravages of time must be doing something to my face because I've been offered three villain parts in a row. Of course, I'm delighted."

Jeffrey's face wasn't more lined then, but he had matured enough as a man and as an actor to tackle any kind of solid role on film, television or stage. Probably the parts he always dreamt of would have come his way at last. His untimely death leaves only one thing certain. Jeffrey Hunter was conscious that to be a star doesn't necessarily mean to be a good actor. Above all he wanted to prove he was one.