

The Hunters

Joseph Samachson

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THE HUNTERS

BY WILLIAM MORRISON

ILLUSTRATED BY VAN DONGEN

To all who didn't know him, Curt George was a mighty hunter and actor. But this time he was up against others who could really act, and whose business was the hunting of whole worlds.

There were thirty or more of the little girls, their ages ranging apparently from nine to eleven, all of them chirping away like a flock of chicks as they followed the old mother hen past the line of cages. "Now, now, girls," called Miss Burton cheerily. "Don't scatter. I can't keep my eye on you if you get too far away from me. You, Hilda, give me that water pistol. No, don't fill it up first at that fountain. And Frances, stop bouncing your ball. You'll lose it through the bars, and a polar bear may get it and not want to give it back."

Frances giggled. "Oh, Miss Burton, do you think the polar bear would want to play catch?"

The two men who were looking on wore pleased smiles. "Charming," said Manto. "But somewhat unpredictable, despite all our experiences, *muy amigo*."

"No attempts at Spanish, Manto, not here. It calls attention to us. And you are not sure of the grammar anyway. You may find yourself saying things you do not intend."

"Sorry, Palit. It wasn't an attempt to show my skill, I assure you. It's that by now I have a tendency to confuse one language with another."

"I know. You were never a linguist. But about these interesting creatures—"

"I suggest that they could stand investigation. It would be good to know how

they think."

"Whatever you say, Manto. If you wish, we shall join the little ladies."

"We must have our story prepared first."

Palit nodded, and the two men stepped under the shade of a tree whose long, drooping, leaf-covered branches formed a convenient screen. For a moment, the tree hid silence. Then there came from beneath the branches the chatter of girlish voices, and two little girls skipped merrily away. Miss Burton did not at first notice that now she had an additional two children in her charge.

"Do you think you will be able to keep your English straight?" asked one of the new little girls.

The other one smiled with amusement and at first did not answer. Then she began to skip around her companion and chant, "I know a secret, I know a secret."

There was no better way to make herself inconspicuous. For some time, Miss Burton did not notice her.

The polar bears, the grizzlies, the penguins, the reptiles, all were left behind. At times the children scattered, but Miss Burton knew how to get them together again, and not one was lost.

"Here, children, is the building where the kangaroos live. Who knows where kangaroos come from?"

"Australia!" clanged the shrill chorus.

"That's right. And what other animals come from Australia?"

"I know, Miss Burton!" cried Frances, a dark-haired nine-year-old with a pair of glittering eyes that stared like a pair of critics from a small heart-shaped face. "I've been here before. Wallabies and wombats!"

"Very good, Frances."

Frances smirked at the approbation. "I've been to the zoo lots of times," she said to the girl next to her. "My father takes me."

"I wish my father would take me too," replied the other little girl, with an air of wistfulness.

"Why don't you ask him to?" Before the other little girl could answer, Frances paused, cocked her head slightly, and demanded, "Who are you? You aren't in our class."

"I'm in Miss Hassel's class."

"Miss Hassel? Who is she? Is she in our school?"

"I don't know," said the other little girl uncertainly. "I go to P. S. 77—"

"Oh, Miss Burton," screamed Frances. "Here's a girl who isn't in our class! She got lost from her own class!"

"Really?" Miss Burton seemed rather pleased at the idea that some other teacher had been so careless as to lose one of her charges. "What's your name, child?"

"I'm Carolyn."

"Carolyn what?"

"Carolyn Manto. Please, Miss Burton, I had to go to the bathroom, and then when I came out—"

"Yes, yes, I know."

A shrill cry came from another section of her class. "Oh, Miss Burton, here's another one who's lost!"

The other little girl was pushed forward. "Now, who are *you*?" Miss Burton asked.

"I'm Doris Palit. I went with Carolyn to the bathroom—"

Miss Burton made a sound of annoyance. Imagine losing *two* children and not noticing it right away. The other teacher must be frantic by now, and serve her right for being so careless.

"All right, you may stay with us until we find a policeman—" She interrupted herself. "Frances, what are you giggling at now?"

"It's Carolyn. She's making faces just like you!"

"Really, Carolyn, that isn't at all nice!"

Carolyn's face altered itself in a hurry, so as to lose any resemblance to Miss Burton's. "I'm sorry, Miss Burton, I didn't really mean to do anything wrong."

"Well, I'd like to know how you were brought up, if you don't know that it's wrong to mimic people to their faces. A big girl like you, too. How old are you, Carolyn?"

Carolyn shrank, she hoped imperceptibly, by an inch. "I'm two—"

An outburst of shrill laughter. "She's two years old, she's two years old!"

"I was going to say, I'm *tow*elve. Almost, anyway."

"Eleven years old," said Miss Burton. "Old enough to know better."

"I'm sorry, Miss Burton. And honest, Miss Burton, I didn't mean anything, but I'm studying to be an actress, and I imitate people, like the actors you see on television—"

"Oh, Miss Burton, please don't make her go home with a policeman. If she's going to be an actress, I'll bet she'd love to see Curt George!"

"Well, after the way she's behaved, I don't know whether I should let her. I really don't."

"Please, Miss Burton, it was an accident. I won't do it again."

"All right, if you're good, and cause no trouble. But we still have plenty of time before seeing Mr. George. It's only two now, and we're not supposed to go to the lecture hall until four."

"Miss Burton," called Barbara Willman, "do you think he'd give us his autograph?"

"Now, children, I've warned you about that. You mustn't annoy him. Mr. George is a famous movie actor, and his time is valuable. It's very kind of him to offer to speak to us, especially when so many grown-up people are anxious to hear him,

but we mustn't take advantage of his kindness."

"But he likes children, Miss Burton! My big sister read in a movie magazine where it said he's just crazy about them."

"I know, but—he's not in good health, children. They say he got jungle fever in Africa, where he was shooting all those lions, and rhinoceroses, and elephants for his new picture. That's why you mustn't bother him too much."

"But he looks so big and strong, Miss Burton. It wouldn't hurt him to sign an autograph!"

"Oh, yes, it would," asserted one little girl. "He shakes. When he has an attack of fever, his hand shakes."

"Yes, Africa is a dangerous continent, and one never knows how the dangers will strike one," said Miss Burton complacently. "So we must all remember how bravely Mr. George is fighting his misfortune, and do our best not to tire him out."

In the bright light that flooded the afternoon breakfast table, Curt George's handsome, manly face wore an expression of distress. He groaned dismally, and muttered, "What a head I've got, what a head. How do you expect me to face that gang of kids without a drink to pick me up?"

"You've had your drink," said Carol. She was slim, attractive, and efficient. At the moment she was being more efficient than attractive, and she could sense his resentment. "That's all you get. Now, lay off, and try to be reasonably sober, for a change."

"But those kids! They'll squeal and giggle—"

"They're about the only audience in the world that won't spot you as a drunk. God knows where I could find any one else who'd believe that your hand shakes because of fever."

"I know that you're looking out for my best interests, Carol. But one more drink wouldn't hurt me."

She said wearily, but firmly, "I don't argue with drunks, Curt. I just go ahead and protect them from themselves. No drinks."

"Afterwards?"

"I can't watch you the way a mother watches a child."

The contemptuous reply sent his mind off on a new tack. "You could if we were married."

"I've never believed in marrying weak characters to reform them."

"But if I proved to you that I could change—"

"Prove it first, and I'll consider your proposal afterwards."

"You certainly are a cold-blooded creature, Carol. But I suppose that in your profession you have to be."

"Cold, suspicious, nasty—and reliable. It's inevitable when I must deal with such warm-hearted, trusting, and unreliable clients."

He watched her move about the room, clearing away the dishes from his meager breakfast. "What are you humming, Carol?"

"Was I humming?"

"I thought I recognized it—"*All of Me, Why Not Take All of Me*"? That's it! Your subconscious gives you away. You really want to marry me!"

"A mistake," she said coolly. "My subconscious doesn't know what it's talking about. All I want of you is the usual ten per cent."

"Can't you forget for a moment that you're an agent, and remember that you're a woman, too?"

"No. Not unless you forget that you're a drunk, and remember that you're a man. Not unless you make me forget that you drank your way through Africa—"

"Because you weren't there with me!"

"—with hardly enough energy to let them dress you in that hunter's outfit and photograph you as if you were shooting lions."

"You're so unforgiving, Carol. You don't have much use for me, do you—consciously, that is?"

"Frankly, Curt, no. I don't have much use for useless people."

"I'm not entirely useless. I earn you that ten per cent—"

"I'd gladly forego that to see you sober."

"But it's your contempt for me that drives me to drink. And when I think of having to face those dear little kiddies with nothing inside me—"

"There should be happiness inside you at the thought of your doing a good deed. Not a drop, George, not a drop."

The two little girls drew apart from the others and began to whisper into each other's ears. The whispers were punctuated by giggles which made the entire childish conversation seem quite normal. But Palit was in no laughing mood. He said, in his own language, "You're getting careless, Manto. You had no business imitating her expression."

"I'm sorry, Palit, but it was so suggestive. And I'm a very suggestible person."

"So am I. But I control myself."

"Still, if the temptation were great enough, I don't think you'd be able to resist either."

"The issues are important enough to make me resist."

"Still, I thought I saw your own face taking on a bit of her expression too."

"You are imagining things, Manto. Another thing, that mistake in starting to say you were two hundred years old—"

"They would have thought it a joke. And I think I got out of that rather neatly."

"You like to skate on thin ice, don't you, Manto? Just as you did when you changed your height. You had no business shrinking right out in public like that."

"I did it skillfully. Not a single person noticed."

"I noticed."

"Don't quibble."

"I don't intend to. Some of these children have very sharp eyes. You'd be surprised at what they see."

Manto said tolerantly, "You're getting jittery, Palit. We've been away from home too long."

"I am not jittery in the least. But I believe in taking due care."

"What could possibly happen to us? If we were to announce to the children and the teacher, and to every one in this zoo, for that matter, exactly who and what we were, they wouldn't believe us. And even if they did, they wouldn't be able to act rapidly enough to harm us."

"You never can tell about such things. Wise—people—simply don't take unnecessary chances."

"I'll grant that you're my superior in such wisdom."

"You needn't be sarcastic, Manto, I *know* I'm superior. I realize what a godsend this planet is—you don't. It has the right gravity, a suitable atmosphere, the proper chemical composition—everything."

"Including a population that will be helpless before us."

"And you would take chances of losing all this."

"Don't be silly, Palit. What chances am I taking?"

"The chance of being discovered. Here we stumble on this place quite by accident. No one at home knows about it, no one so much as suspects that it exists. We must get back and report—and you do all sorts of silly things which may reveal what we are, and lead these people to suspect their danger."

This time, Manto's giggle was no longer mere camouflage, but expressed to a certain degree how he felt. "They cannot possibly suspect. We have been all over the world, we have taken many forms and adapted ourselves to many customs, and no one has suspected. And even if danger really threatened, it would be easy to escape. I could take the form of the school teacher herself, of a policeman, of any one in authority. However, at present there is not the slightest shadow of danger. So, Palit, you had better stop being fearful."

Palit said firmly, "Be careful, and I won't be fearful. That's all there is to it."

"I'll be careful. After all, I shouldn't want us to lose these children. They're so exactly the kind we need. Look how inquiring they are, how unafraid, how quick to adapt to any circumstances—"

Miss Burton's voice said, "Good gracious, children, what language *are* you using? Greek?"

They had been speaking too loud, they had been overheard. Palit and Manto stared at each other, and giggled coyly. Then, after a second to think, Palit said, "Onay, Issmay Urtonbay!"

"What?"

Frances shrilled triumphantly, "It isn't Greek, Miss Burton, it's Latin—Pig-Latin. She said, 'No, Miss Burton.'"

"Good heavens, what is Pig-Latin?"

"It's a kind of way of talking where you talk kind of backwards. Like, you don't say, *Me*, you say, *Emay*."

"You don't say, *Yes*, you say *Esyay*," added another little girl.

"You don't say, *You*, you say, *Ouyay*. You don't say—"

"All right, all right, I get the idea."

"You don't say—"

"That'll do," said Miss Burton firmly. "Now, let's get along to the lion house. And please, children, do not make faces at the lions. How would you like to be in a cage and have people make faces at you? Always remember to be considerate to others."

"Even lions, Miss Burton?"

"Even lions."

"But Mr. George shot lots of lions. Was he considerate of them too?"

"There is no time for silly questions," said Miss Burton, with the same firmness. "Come along."

They all tramped after her, Palit and Manto bringing up the rear. Manto giggled, and whispered with amusement, "That Pig-Latin business was quick thinking, Palit. But in fact, quite unnecessary. The things that you do to avoid being suspected!"

"It never hurts to take precautions. And I think that now it is time to leave."

"No, not yet. You are always anxious to learn details before reporting. Why not learn a few more details now?"

"Because they are not necessary. We already have a good understanding of human customs and psychology."

"But not of the psychology of children. And they, if you remember, are the ones who will have to adapt. We shall be asked about them. It would be nice if we could report that they are fit for all-purpose service, on a wide range of planets. Let us stay awhile longer."

"All right," conceded Palit, grudgingly.

So they stayed, and out of some twigs and leaves they shaped the necessary coins with which to buy peanuts, and popcorn, and ice cream, and other delicacies favored by the young. Manto wanted to win easy popularity by treating a few of the other children, but Palit put his girlish foot down. No use arousing suspicion. Even as it was—

"Gee, your father gives you an awful lot of spending money," said Frances enviously. "Is he rich?"

"We get as much as we want," replied Manto carelessly.

"Gosh, I wish I did."

Miss Burton collected her brood. "Come together, children, I have something to say to you. Soon it will be time to go in and hear Mr. George. Now, if Mr. George is so kind as to entertain us, don't you think that it's only proper for us to entertain him?"

"We could put on our class play!" yelled Barbara.

"Barbara's a fine one to talk," said Frances. "She doesn't even remember her

lines."

"No, children, we mustn't do anything we can't do well. That wouldn't make a good impression. And besides, there is no time for a play. Perhaps Barbara will sing—"

"I can sing a 'Thank You' song," interrupted Frances.

"That would be nice."

"I can recite," added another little girl.

"Fine. How about you, Carolyn? You and your little friend, Doris. Can she act too?"

Carolyn giggled. "Oh, yes, she can act very well. I can act like people. She can act like animals." The laughing, girlish eyes evaded a dirty look from the little friend. "She can act like *any* kind of animal."

"She's certainly a talented child. But she seems so shy!"

"Oh, no," said Carolyn. "She likes to be coaxed."

"She shouldn't be like that. Perhaps, Carolyn, you and Doris can do something together. And perhaps, too, Mr. George will be pleased to see that your teacher also has talent."

"You, Miss Burton?"

Miss Burton coughed modestly. "Yes, children, I never told you, but I was once ambitious to be an actress too. I studied dramatics, and really, I was quite good at it. I was told that if I persevered I might actually be famous. Just think, your teacher might actually have been a famous actress! However, in my day, there were many coarse people on the stage, and the life of the theater was not attractive—but perhaps we'd better not speak of that. At any rate, I know the principles of the dramatic art very well."

"God knows what I'll have to go through," said Curt. "And I don't see how I can take it sober."

"I don't see how they can take you drunk," replied Carol.

"Why go through with it at all? Why not call the whole thing quits?"

"Because people are depending on you. You always want to call quits whenever you run into something you don't like. You may as well call quits to your contract if that's the way you feel."

"And to your ten per cent, darling."

"You think I'd mind that. I work for my ten per cent, Curt, sweetheart. I work too damn hard for that ten per cent."

"You can marry me and take it easy. Honest, Carol, if you treated me better, if you showed me I meant something to you, I'd give up drinking."

She made a face. "Don't talk nonsense. Take your outfit, and let's get ready to go. Unless you want to change here, and walk around dressed as a lion hunter."

"Why not? I've walked around dressed as worse. A drunk."

"Drunks don't attract attention. They're too ordinary."

"But a drunken lion hunter—that's something special." He went into the next room and began to change. "Carol," he called. "Do you like me?"

"At times."

"Would you say that you liked me very much?"

"When you're sober. Rarely."

"Love me?"

"Once in a blue moon."

"What would I have to do for you to want to marry me?"

"Amount to something."

"I like that. Don't you think I amount to something now? Women swoon at the sight of my face on the screen, and come to life again at the sound of my voice."

"The women who swoon at you will swoon at anybody. Besides, I don't consider that making nitwits swoon is a useful occupation for a real man."

"How can I be useful, Carol? No one ever taught me how."

"Some people manage without being taught."

"I suppose I could think how if I had a drink inside me."

"Then you'll have to do without thinking."

He came into the room again, powerful, manly, determined-looking. There was an expression in his eye which indicated courage without end, a courage that would enable him to brave the wrath of man, beast, or devil.

"How do I look?"

"Your noble self, of course. A poor woman's edition of Rudolph Valentino."

"I feel terrified. I don't know how I'm going to face those kids. If they were boys it wouldn't be so bad, but a bunch of little girls!"

"They'll grow up to be your fans, if you're still alive five years from now. Meanwhile, into each life some rain must fall."

"You would talk of water, when you know how I feel."

"Sorry. Come on, let's go."

The lecture hall resounded with giggles. And beneath the giggles was a steady undercurrent of whispers, of girlish confidences exchanged, of girlish hopes that would now be fulfilled. Miss Burton's class was not the only one which had come to hear the famous actor-hunter describe his brave exploits. There were at least five others like it, and by some mistake, a class of boys, who also whispered to each other, in manly superiority, and pretended to find amusement in the presence of so many of the fairer sex.

In this atmosphere of giggles and whispers, Manto and Palit could exchange confidences without being noticed. Palit said savagely, "Why did you tell her that I could act too?"

"Why, because it's the truth. You're a very good animal performer. You make a wonderful dragon, for instance. Go on, Palit, show her what a fine dragon you can—"

"Stop it, you fool, before you cause trouble!"

"Very well, Palit. Did I tempt you?"

"Did you tempt me! You and your sense of humor!"

"You and your lack of it! But let's not argue now, Palit. Here, I think, comes the lion-hunter. Let's scream, and be as properly excited as every one else is."

My God, he thought, how can they keep their voices so high so long? My eardrums hurt already. How do they stand a lifetime of it? Even an hour?

"Go ahead," whispered Carol. "You've seen the script—go into your act. Tell them what a hero you are. You have the odds in your favor to start with."

"My lovely looks," he said, with some bitterness.

"Lovely is the word for you. But forget that. If you're good—you'll get a drink afterwards."

"Will it be one of those occasions when you love me?"

"If the moon turns blue."

He strode to the front of the platform, an elephant gun swinging easily at his side, an easy grin radiating from his confident, rugged face. The cheers rose to a shrill fortissimo, but the grin did not vanish. What a great actor he really was, he told himself, to be able to pretend he liked this.

An assistant curator of some collection in the zoo, a flustered old woman, was introducing him. There were a few laudatory references to his great talents as an actor, and he managed to look properly modest as he listened. The remarks about his knowledge of wild and ferocious beasts were a little harder to take, but he took them. Then the old woman stepped back, and he was facing his fate alone.

"Children," he began. A pause, a bashful grin. "Perhaps I should rather say, my friends. I'm not one to think of you as children. Some people think of me as a child myself, because I like to hunt, and have adventures. They think that such things are childish. But if they are, I'm glad to be a child. I'm glad to be one of you. Yes, I think I *will* call you my friends.

"Perhaps you regard me, my friends, as a very lucky person. But when I recall some of the narrow escapes I have had, I don't agree with you. I remember once,

when we were on the trail of a rogue elephant—"

He told the story of the rogue elephant, modestly granting a co-hero's role to his guide. Then another story illustrating the strange ways of lions. The elephant gun figured in still another tale, this time of a vicious rhinoceros. His audience was quiet now, breathless with interest, and he welcomed the respite from shrillness he had won for his ears.

"And now, my friends, it is time to say farewell." He actually looked sad and regretful. "But it is my hope that I shall be able to see you again—"

Screams of exultation, shrill as ever, small hands beating enthusiastically to indicate joy. Thank God that's over with, he thought. Now for those drinks—and he didn't mean drink, singular. Talk of being useful, he'd certainly been useful now. He'd made those kids happy. What more can any reasonable person want?

But it wasn't over with. Another old lady had stepped up on the platform.

"Mr. George," she said, in a strangely affected voice, like that of the first dramatic teacher he had ever had, the one who had almost ruined his acting career. "Mr. George, I can't tell you how happy you have made us all, young and old. Hasn't Mr. George made us happy, children?"

"Yes, Miss Burton!" came the shrill scream.

"And we feel that it would be no more than fair to repay you in some small measure for the pleasure you have given us. First, a 'Thank You' song by Frances Heller—"

He hadn't expected this, and he repressed a groan. Mercifully, the first song was short. He grinned the thanks he didn't feel. To think that he could take this, while sober as a judge! What strength of character, what will-power!

Next, Miss Burton introduced another kid, who recited. And then, Miss Burton stood upright and recited herself.

That was the worst of all. He winced once, then bore up. You can get used even to torture, he told himself. An adult making a fool of herself is always more painful than a kid. And that affected elocutionist's voice gave him the horrors. But he thanked her too. His good deed for the day. Maybe Carol would have him

now, he thought.

A voice shrilled, "Miss Burton?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Aren't you going to call on Carolyn to act?"

"Oh, yes, I was forgetting. Come up here, Carolyn, come up, Doris. Carolyn and Doris, Mr. George, are studying how to act. They act people *and* animals. Who knows? Some day they, too, may be in the movies, just as you are, Mr. George. Wouldn't that be nice, children?"

What the devil do you do in a case like that? You grin, of course—but what do you say, without handing over your soul to the devil? Agree how nice it would be to have those sly little brats with faces magnified on every screen all over the country? Like hell you do.

"Now, what are we going to act, children?"

"Please, Miss Burton," said Doris. "I don't know how to act. I can't even imitate a puppy. Really I can't, Miss Burton—"

"Come, come, mustn't be shy. Your friend says that you act very nicely indeed. Can't want to go on the stage and still be shy. Now, do you know any movie scenes? Shirley Temple used to be a good little actress, I remember. Can you do any scenes that she does?"

The silence was getting to be embarrassing. And Carol said he didn't amount to anything, he never did anything useful. Why, if thanks to his being here this afternoon, those kids lost the ambition to go on the stage, the whole human race would have cause to be grateful to him. To him, and to Miss Burton. She'd kill ambition in anybody.

Miss Burton had an idea. "I know what to do, children. If you can act animals—Mr. George has shown you what the hunter does; you show him what the lions do. Yes, Carolyn and Doris, you're going to be lions. You are waiting in your lairs, ready to pounce on the unwary hunter. Crouch now, behind that chair. Closer and closer he comes—you act it out, Mr. George, please, that's the way—ever closer, and now your muscles tighten for the spring, and you open your

great, wide, red mouths in a great, great big roar—"

A deep and tremendous roar, as of thunder, crashed through the auditorium. A roar—and then, from the audience, an outburst of terrified screaming such as he had never heard. The bristles rose at the back of his neck, and his heart froze.

Facing him across the platform were two lions, tensed as if to leap. Where they had come from he didn't know, but there they were, eyes glaring, manes ruffled, more terrifying than any he had seen in Africa. There they were, with the threat of death and destruction in their fierce eyes, and here he was, terror and helplessness on his handsome, manly, and bloodless face, heart unfrozen now and pounding fiercely, knees melting, hands—

Hands clutching an elephant gun. The thought was like a director's command. With calm efficiency, with all the precision of an actor playing a scene rehearsed a thousand times, the gun leaped to his shoulder, and now its own roar thundered out a challenge to the roaring of the wild beasts, shouted at them in its own accents of barking thunder.

The shrill screaming continued long after the echoes of the gun's speech had died away. Across the platform from him were two great bodies, the bodies of lions, and yet curiously unlike the beasts in some ways, now that they were dead and dissolving as if corroded by some invisible acid.

Carol's hand was on his arm, Carol's thin and breathless voice shook as she said, "A drink—all the drinks you want."

"One will do. And you."

"And me. I guess you're kind of—kind of useful after all."

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