

# The Head Hunters

Ralph Williams

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RALPH WILLIAMS

# THE HEAD HUNTERS

The man crouched shuddering in the sparse shelter of the spruce clump, flattening himself into the ground, holding moveless, guarding even the terrified thoughts which flitted through his mind. He was gaunt and unshaven, and the knife-sharp mountain wind whipped through the tattered remnants of his clothing. He drew it closer about him—not for warmth, it was past providing warmth—but so the ragged flutter would not betray him.

In the dry wash below, the thing that hunted him rustled and muttered to itself. Once it seemed to come his way, and he froze ever stiller, striving to quiet the beating of his heart, desperately blanking his mind. It passed and moved on up the valley, and he relaxed slightly; still fearful, but with hope beginning to grow. Half an hour passed, and the thing did not return, and he stretched and burrowed in the moss, making himself comfortable, but still he did not move from his hiding place. For the rest of the afternoon he remained in the shelter of the spruce clump, not moving, not even thinking, simply waiting.

When it was well dark he ventured out, stealthily and fearfully, although he knew the thing he feared moved only in the light. He ran silently from cover to cover, stopping and listening often with open mouth. Gradually, as he put distance between himself and danger, the urgency of his

terror faded. Yet still he kept moving. It was dark, the wind was cold, he had not eaten his fill for days; and he stumbled often, tearing his hands and bruising his body; still he kept doggedly on, working out of the mountains, down toward the foothills.

Somewhere down there was the railroad and people like himself and safety. The thought of this drove him along, but actually it was farther than he thought, and he was not approaching it directly, he was bearing off at an angle which would have led him down onto the river flats. If he had not seen the fire, he would certainly have died somewhere in the hills or boggy flats.

When he first saw the fire winking and flaring on the far side of a little mountain lake, his none-too-clear mind did not recognize it, and he might have wandered past. Then as he came opposite he suddenly knew it for what it was, a campfire—he could even make out vague figures moving about it, human figures, and he shouted several times. There was no answer. With weary, dogged determination he began to work his way around the lower end of the lake, wading through boggy spots up to his waist, tripping over stunted, rooty willow clumps, crawling through alder brakes woven like basketry by wind and the weight of winter's snows. It was slow, heartbreaking work—

Neely had been hunting sheep, and he had not been finding them. Or rather, though he had seen sheep, he had seen none with the head he wanted, a head which would put

his name well up in the record book. Consequently, he was not in a charitable mood.

He was a short, choleric, self-assured man, carrying forty pounds of suet on a frame which had once been muscular; and he had a short, bristly pepper-and-salt mustache and light-blue, unfriendly eyes. He was accustomed to command, to pay well for service and receive it. In this case, he did not think he was getting what he had paid for, and he made no attempt to conceal his displeasure.

Perhaps he was right. Halvarsen had not shown him the sheep he wanted, and it is a guide's business to satisfy his sport's wants within reason—and this was not an unreasonable want. A man does not pay good money for a trip to Alaska, hire airplanes and outfits and the best sheep hunter in the country, spend perhaps one or two thousand dollars, because he has a taste for wild mutton.

He does things like this for heads, and in the four days they had been here Halvarsen had not shown him the right head, or anything near it. Halvarsen himself did not understand it. Only the month before he had flown over this area with the Game Commission man, making a preseason check, and there had been plenty of sheep, good heads among them. Something had run them out, and it was beginning to worry him, in two more days the float-plane would return to pick them up, and if a man as important as Neely went back to the States without his sheep, it could be very bad business. Big-game hunting does not depend on mass advertising, its clientele is too restricted and specialized, a man's reputation is made or broken by word-

of-mouth endorsement or disparaging rumor among the sports in the big cities Outside.

So now Halvarsen moved morosely about the evening camp chores, and Neely sat grumpily back under the lean-to tent, half-reclining against his rolled-back sleeping bag, and sucked at his pipe.

Suddenly Halvarsen froze and turned slowly in a listening attitude to look out over the lake.

Neely listened too, but his city-dulled ears heard nothing.

"What is it?" he asked irritably. "You hear something?"

Halvarsen shrugged. "Somet'ing hollered," he said. "Sounded funny." He moved out a little toward the water's edge.

The fire was crackling and snapping, and the ripples stirred by the breeze lapped against an old stump in the lake, but the next time Neely heard it too—a faint yodeling yell.

"Loon," he snorted contemptuously.

"Might be," Halvarsen said doubtfully. "Sounded funny, though." He listened a few moments longer and then went back to his pots and pans. He thought Neely might be right, but did not believe it. A man long alone in the woods gets away from logical thinking, he grows to depend on feeling and knowledge which comes without conscious thought. He hears a stick crack back in the woods, and he does not think: That might be a moose. Instead, his memory ties

instantaneously back to the seen but unnoticed dung half a mile away, the almost invisible hoof prints on a gravel bar, the clipped willow-tips the corner of his eye telegraphed in and stored as he looked at something else; and he *knows* that *is* a moose, a picture of a bull sneaking around through the trees to get down-wind of him comes into his mind.

The noise Halvarsen had heard brought no such picture into his mind, nor any other picture, it was simply a funny noise. Probably, in the subconscious part of his mind which stored and collated the material out of which these pictures were built, there was also filed under "Unidentifiable" certain unnoticed traces of whatever it was that had driven the sheep away, and the absence of the sheep themselves; and this little store of uncertainty may have made him doubly sensitive to further false notes.

A little later, as he was unrolling the sleeping bags and arranging Neely's pneumatic mattress, he heard a faint splash from the bottom end of the lake. He knew this was not a beaver, nor a moose, nor anything else that should have been there, but he did not mention either the noise or this knowledge to Neely.

He crawled into bed and lay quietly, following the thing's progress around the lake by the occasional splash, crash of brush, or suck of feet in marshy grass. It was moving slowly but without caution, and clumsily, and suddenly he knew what it was, it still left some loose ends, but the picture was in his mind now.

He rose on one elbow and nudged Neely.



"Somebody out there," he said. "Coming this way."

"Nuts," Neely said. "What would anybody be doing here?"

Halvarsen did not answer. The man was close now, stumbling recklessly along, and making hard going. And the picture in Halvarsen's mind began to take on detail and color, picturing someone hurt or long lost in the hills, until it resembled surprisingly the ragged man he had not yet seen.

"I better go help," he said. He pulled on his boots and picked up a flashlight. "HOY!" he shouted. "Hold up! I bring a light!"

By the time he was back with the ragged man over his shoulder, Neely had kicked up the fire. Halvarsen eased the man down on one of the sleeping bags. The stranger was conscious, but played out.

"People," he said dully over and over. "Real people. I made it, I foxed the stinking bugger, he won't get me now. People, real people. I made it. I made it."

"Shut up," Neely said. He rummaged in a pack and brought out a bottle of whisky. "Here, take a drink of this."

The stranger opened his mouth apathetically and then, as the whisky stung his throat, grasped the bottle and swallowed avidly. Tears started in his eyes and he gasped and then drank greedily again.

"Hey, cut that out." Halvarsen pulled the bottle away. "You drink too much, way you are, you be drunker than a hoot

owl. You wait a minute, I warm up some of this stew."

Neely was studying the man closely, noticing the heavy growth of beard and the tattered clothing; the red-rimmed eyes and gaunt belly.

"What happened?" he asked. "You look like you've had a tough time. Lose your outfit?"

The whisky had brightened the man. He sat up now and crouched closer to the fire. "It was the panda," he said. "I was running away from him. He thought he had me in the cage, but I got away, picked the lock and got away." The stranger giggled. "I foxed him, he killed Joe, but I got away, clear away." He glanced nervously at Halvarsen and Neely. "You fellows won't let him get me, will you? You get me out of here, I'll make it worth your while. Wilson's my name, Steve Wilson. I've got plenty of money. I can pay whatever you think it's worth."

"Panda?" Neely said irritably. "What are you talking about? There're no pandas around here."

The ragged man cringed back. "Well, not a panda exactly," he said defensively. "I called it that, it kind of looked like one. It had this cave and kept me in the cage—"

Back in the cave he had hollowed to shelter himself and the spaceship and his equipment, Snrr grumbled sourly to himself. It was a bad habit he had fallen into from being much away from others of his kind; but it seemed to relieve

his feelings, especially when things were not going well. They had gone abominably, today. He had had another of those frightening spells of disorientation, the blank periods when he froze unmoving and unseeing. He knew he was getting too old for these one-man field trips; the increasing frequency of the attacks indicated this might be his last.

Worse yet, he had lost his best specimen, a live mammal showing definite signs of intelligence which he had intended to present to the zoo at Ebrrl as the fitting climax to a lifetime of distinguished fieldwork for the Royal Museum. The manner of its escape argued an even higher degree of cunning than he had supposed it possessed, and this made its loss doubly annoying. The door to its cage had over six hundred possible combinations, not too many for any intelligent creature to solve; but still requiring time and fixity of purpose, together with a systematic approach. He had never seen his captive show the slightest interest in the lock; yet it must have fiddled patiently with the thing at every opportunity over a period of days or weeks, whenever he was absent or his back was turned; to learn and memorize the combination for use when opportunity offered.

And what cleverness to wait for one of his attacks, to trip the door catch and sneak quietly out during his paralysis, switch off the protective field outside the cave entrance, and scamper away! He moaned inwardly, feeling a loss like a vacuum in his belly, at the thought of this engaging animal escaping him, and regretting that he had been too busy to properly evaluate and study it before.

Well, he thought resignedly, what can't be helped must be borne. He went about preparing his evening meal, moving with the pattering fussiness of a very old bachelor. Afterward, he plodded wearily up the ramp to his bed in the ship. His bones ached—he had gone far afield that day, trying to track down the runaway. Ordinarily, he worked deliberately and methodically, husbanding his strength, plotting out the ranges of the specimens he sought, feeling them out with his mind, patiently nudging them toward him with carefully disguised mental impulses, till they came within range of his anaesthetic darts. This scurrying and running after a panicky quarry was not to his taste nor best abilities, and the exertion had taken its toll.

Still, he paused for a moment in the storeroom to gloat over his loot—the carefully cleaned and preserved skins, skeletons, and heads, all neatly packed; the bundles of meticulous notes, sketches, and films; and best of all, on the wrapping bench, still unpacked, the twin to the specimen he had lost. He picked up the head and turned it gently in his tentacles, admiring again the regularity of features; the noble height and breadth of forehead, the wisp of black mustache; the lifelike plastic eyes, with their bold, bright, fierce stare.

Neely and Halvarsen had not done too well at prying information from the fugitive. After being fed, he lapsed into semicoma from which he mumbled disjointed and repetitive responses to their questions, and finally they let him sleep. At intervals during the morning they woke him and fed him and tried again, but his rambling replies continued to be

irritatingly vague and senseless. Apparently a reaction to the shock of his captivity and flight had set in which made it difficult for him to speak or think coherently.

What they were able to get did not make sense, at least to Neely.

Halvarsen did not try to make sense of it.

He had listened and watched quietly most of the time, while Neely questioned, and a new picture had begun gradually to form in his mind. This picture was of a large, teddy-bearish creature, furry and black, with white markings, and two sets of short sturdy tentacles branching from its shoulders. Halvarsen had never seen a panda, but his business was big game, he had seen pictures and read of them, and he knew this was not one, though Wilson called it that. This was no common animal, it was something which thought and acted like a man, which used tools and machines, which killed for pleasure rather than food. It tortured and mutilated its prey, penning live captives in cages until their turn came.

The picture was full of holes and blurry, the animal moved jerkily and in ways not clear, its motivation was vague and its origin vaguer; but as far as it went it fitted the absence of game and the other little subconscious observations Halvarsen had made.

He believed it.

Neely had no picture and he did not believe what he had heard, but he had come to think something had followed Wilson, perhaps a wolverine, and he was curious.

"There aren't any sheep here," he said flatly. "They've moved out, there's no use looking any more."

Halvarsen nodded gloomily. "That's right. This panda thing scared them away."

Neely eyed him sharply. "You think that's why they've left?"

"Sure," Halvarsen said. "Sheep, they're pretty particular what comes around them."

Neely shrugged. "Maybe. Anyway, we might as well see if we can find this thing, whatever it is. You think you can backtrack Wilson?"

"Sure," Halvarsen said. "Why not?"

Wilson did not take kindly to the idea of being left alone, but they gave him what was left of the bottle and reassured him they would be gone only a short time, and he grudgingly promised to remain at the camp until they returned. Even Neely could follow his backtrail in most places, but the hunters moved cautiously, not knowing just where they might encounter the thing they sought, nor how wary it might be. They came to the place where Wilson had hidden late in the afternoon, and were almost ready to turn back when Halvarsen froze and grunted, pointing with his chin, and Neely followed the direction of his eyes. Neely saw nothing

at first, and then suddenly it moved and he saw it, a patch of starkly black and white fur, moving up a little slope perhaps half a mile away. It might have been anything—a skunk, a magpie, or even a man; except that skunks are not found at that altitude, and it did not move like a man or a magpie.

It had not seen nor sensed them, Neely thought, and he motioned Halvarsen down, crouching himself with a slow, almost imperceptible motion, so as to blend into the hillside, till from a little distance he would have seemed an old, gnarled stump, or perhaps a rock. He dared not use the glasses, lest their flash catch the thing's attention, and with his bare eyes he could make out no details. It was simply an indefinable mass, moving unhurriedly, purposefully along.

Snrr was feeling better today. He had started out on a halfhearted continuation of his search for the lost specimen, and sometime during the afternoon had suddenly become aware that two others of the same species were approaching him. What luck! Fresh, unaware minds, susceptible to suggestion!

He followed their progress avidly, his pleasure mounting as he became aware they were consciously seeking him, out of curiosity stirred by knowledge of the escaped animal. He stimulated this curiosity gently, and showed himself to them at the moment they were almost ready to turn back. Now he squatted in the entrance to his cave, feeling them hidden on the ridge across, studying him in their turn. Their wariness and curiosity made them easy subjects; their high-keyed

nervous systems reacting beautifully to the slightest mental touch. He let them stay there for a while, wondering how best to ambush them.

Across the narrow valley, Neely lay flat on his stomach just under the ridge, his glasses now glued to his eyes. The light was fading fast, but Snrr's cave was on the westerly slope, and he showed clearly in the glasses. His huge, benign face was turned ruminatively down the valley, and the white markings like spectacles about his eyes, the white-banded muzzle and lower jaw and belly, did make him look startlingly like a huge toy panda. Only the tentacles, coiled idly along his forelegs, were out of place.

"I can't believe it," Neely whispered. "Here, you look. See what you think."

Halvarsen took the glasses and focused them carefully.

"Yah," he said stolidly. "That's him, all right."

He shifted the glasses slightly, studying the approaches to the cave. "You see that funny yiggle in the air, like heat waves?" he asked. "I bet that's that thing that Wilson feller said you couldn't see, but couldn't get through either, till he turned the switch off. What do you think, huh?"

Neely had not noticed. He took the glasses back. Now his attention had been called to it, he could see a faint shimmer in the air directly in front of the cave.

"It must be," he said. "It just don't make sense, but it's there." He was a matter-of-fact individual, used to seeing



things proceed in orderly and methodical fashion, and what he was seeing now offended the deepest core of his logic. Still, he found himself accepting it as true. He did not realize this urge for acceptance proceeded, in part, from Snrr.

It was almost dark now, and Snrr did not function well in the dark. He caught the embryo thought in Neely's mind that it might be better to return to camp and come back in the morning for another look. This fitted well with Snrr's plans, it would give him time to prepare a proper ambush for them. He gently built the thought up into resolution in Neely's mind, and followed the two men back until mental contact faded out with distance.

Back at camp, the two men found the whisky gone, Wilson asleep, and the fire out. Neely broke out a fresh bottle while Halvarsen found wood and started the fire.

For the first time, Neely offered to share his whisky, and Halvarsen accepted gratefully, both for the improvement in relations it betokened and for its own sake.

"You know," Neely said while Halvarsen fried bacon and warmed beans, "that screen in front there, that thing you can't see, makes it kind of awkward. You think it might stop a bullet?"

Halvarsen shrugged. "Might be."

"We could try one and see," Neely said thoughtfully. "But then we might spoof him. No, we've got to either catch him

outside or get him to turn it off."

"Well," Halvarsen said, "let's eat now, we can figure on it later." He split the beans and bacon carefully between the two pans, whacked off a huge slice of bread with his knife, buttered it and passed the loaf and the butter to Neely. For a while both were too busy to talk, it had been a long time since lunch, and the whisky had sharpened their appetites.

After dinner, over their third cup of tea, they returned to the subject. It did not take them long to work out the possibilities, the object of this hunt was an unusual one, but the principles remained unchanged.

"Well, that might work," Halvarsen said finally. "But how we going to get that Wilson feller to help? He's pretty scared of that panda thing."

"Here's the convincer, right here," Neely said with a tight grin. He held up the second bottle of whisky, still more than half full. "All that boy wants to do is drink himself to sleep so he can forget what happened. We don't have to tell him where we're going, he'll follow this bottle."

"Yah, I guess so," Halvarsen said doubtfully. Something else was troubling him, but he could not quite put his finger on it. By now his mental picture of the strange beast was almost complete, and there had been something out of character in its actions this afternoon.

"You know," he said suddenly, "that Wilson says this feller can get inside your head, make you think things aren't so.

You think he might do that to us?"

Neely looked startled and thoughtful. "Well, I don't know," he said finally. "He wouldn't let us come up on him so easy, if he could do that, would he? Wouldn't he steer us away?"

"No, I don't think so," Halvarsen said slowly. "He caught Wilson and Wilson's buddy, maybe he wants to catch us, too? I think maybe we just better be pretty careful tomorrow, not do anything foolish because it looks easy."

Snrr thought they had better be careful, too. In the mid-morning he waited confidently at the entrance to his cave, the controls to his hidden dart-throwers near at hand. Presently he picked up the feeling of the men approaching, coming warily but confidently along. At first the knowledge that Wilson was with them was disconcerting, but then as they came closer and he picked up clearer thoughts, he smiled to himself. It seemed they were bringing his captive back, perhaps as some sort of peace-offering or bribe. So much the better. He would get all three. There was room for only one live specimen, but he could keep the best alive and have two more heads besides.

At the lower end of the valley the men separated, one going along the ridge they had followed the day before, the other two coming straight up the valley toward his cave. This was fine, Snrr thought, he had prepared for either route, this way he could take them one at a time without alarming them. His former captive, he noted, was one of the two coming up

the valley, and was now beginning to show signs of panic, which might not be so good, but probably would not frighten the other two seriously, since they had expected this.

The ragged man had been preoccupied before, following the big blond man without paying particular attention to his surroundings, but now he suddenly began to orient himself, and he did not like it. He hung back and remonstrated, and the big man took his arm and pulled him along, and this frightened him more. The big man pulled him around and shoved him ahead up the valley. He screamed then, in a high piercing voice, and ran a little way, then looked wildly around and ran off to one side, apparently with the intent of ducking past. The big man lifted something to his shoulder, dirt spurted in front of the ragged man, there was a sharp crash, and he paused, then began to run blindly up the valley. The big man stopped and calmly watched him go.

Snrr began to have doubts. He had lost track of the third man, and the running man's horrible fright was blanking out what the big man was thinking, but there was an unmistakable aura of menace in the air which Snrr found confusing—something intent and calculating, quite unlike the usual brainless rage of cornered animals.

He let the running man go past the first ambush, uncertain whether to take him or not. At the second point, he decided a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, and fired. The anaesthetic darts took immediate effect, but Wilson's fright continued to echo in his mind, crashing like static over the lower-pitched thoughts of the other two. The big man had disappeared at the moment Wilson fell, and Snrr could not

immediately locate him, but still he received that heavy overtone of menace, like the faraway roar of a lion. He could not see very well either, the shimmer of the protective field directly in front of him blurred his vision. He was beginning to feel boxed-in and unsure of himself, and he decided to cut the field for a moment and get a clear view of what was happening, orient himself for action against the two remaining. He reached out to the switch which controlled the field.

After leaving Halvarsen and Wilson, Neely moved up the ridge toward a spot opposite the thing's cave. The place where they had been yesterday was too far away, a good seven hundred yards, but there was a small hogback angling down to a knob directly across from the cave. It was this he was aiming for. Halfway along the ridge, he began to feel it might be better to go up the farther ridge first and reconnoiter, but this would have disrupted their carefully laid plans, and he turned off. It did not occur to him that Snrr might wish him to go on up to the booby-trapped area they had been in the previous evening, it was just that he was single-mindedly intent on getting to his assigned position. Perhaps if Snrr's attention had not been distracted, he might have felt differently.

Neely came up the far side of the knob and eased around its base until he had a good view of both the valley and the cave. Carefully, he measured the distance with his eye. Two hundred—no, nearer two fifty. Close enough, even if three hundred yards. His sights were set at two fifty, at two

hundred yards the bullet would rise one inch. At three hundred it would drop three inches. Dead on would kill, at either range.

Experimentally, he dropped his eye and sighted, his cheek nestling comfortably against the warm walnut stock, right hand automatically bringing the butt tight against his shoulder. In the thrice magnified field of the scope the beast stood sharp and clear, faced a quarter toward him, intently studying something it held in its tentacles, apparently unaware of either Neely or the other two. The picket point rested like a finger against the forward point of its right shoulder.

But was that right? Where would the vital organs of a beast such as this be? The head, perhaps, since its eyes were in its head, and its ears, as in other animals. But suppose its brain was in its belly, as he vaguely thought he remembered some reptiles' was said to be? In the chest then? What if the heart, or what served for a heart, the lungs and blood vessels, were in the abdomen? It must be the neck, for the neck would logically carry communications between the head and body, must be one of the most vulnerable points. Low down in the neck, where the muscles of chest and shoulder would give something for the bullet to work on, give it a chance to open properly, and two hundred and twenty grains of lead and copper alloy, arriving at its destination with a force of slightly better than two tons, would take care of the rest.

The picket swung gently, seeking out the spot, finding it at different angles as the beast moved about, growing used to it.

Then, with his eye still holding the thing in the scope, he moved his right hand away and waved it gently twice. He did not look to see if Halvarsen saw the signal. That was Halvarsen's job.

Presently, he did not need to look. High and shrill across the distance, he heard a scream of fear and terror, then a shot and more cries. The beast heard it too, and stared nearsightedly down the valley toward Halvarsen and the ragged man. Neely kicked the safety with his thumb and put the first faint breath of pressure on the trigger. The beast was restive now, it picked up something and fiddled indecisively with it, then manipulated it in an obscure fashion, and the screams abruptly choked off. The beast peered across at where Neely lay, then back down at Halvarsen. It stepped uncertainly to one side, raised a tentacle to something on the wall, and suddenly the faint shimmer in the air died. In the same instant, the rifle roared. Neely had the bolt worked and the slack half taken up on the trigger in the instant before the scope swung back onto the cavern.

But there was nothing to shoot at, nothing to see, except one black and white paw which scratched jerkily at a sunlit spot on the cavern floor, and then was still. Neely watched it steadily for perhaps five minutes. It did not move.

He met Halvarsen at the bottom of the hill and they climbed up to the cave together. Halvarsen stared around in awe at the ship, the strange implements and instruments, but Neely had eyes only for Snrr.

He smoothed the soft, woolly fur, noting what a beautiful pelt the thing had, and turned the head so the light struck it. Already he could see it mounted on a pedestal, holding something, perhaps a smaller animal, in its curious tentacles, peering nearsightedly off into the middle distance, exactly as it had appeared in his scope.

And underneath, the plaque: "Contributed by S.W. Neely, from his Alaskan hunt; *ursus*—no, new species; *Neeliana* (better yet) *Martianus*—? *Venusian*—? or simply *extraterrestrials*?"

[The end of *The Head Hunters* by Ralph William Slone (as Ralph Williams)]