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HARRY FERMAN -

"A kaleidoscope of pale tortured faces swirled past, to disappear into the dull mist of eternity."

# The Man Who Came Back

By FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER, JR.

*The genius of a great scientist brought back to vigorous life the soldiers who had fallen in battle, and a ruthless dictator tried to claim them for his own*

THE tall pines lining the mountainside were like dark, shrouded figures. Ahead, the road wound endlessly upward in ever-mounting spirals. The robot-like chauffeur at the wheel of the little car presented a stolid, impassive back; he had not spoken since we left Belgrade five hours before. Once again I glanced at the slip of paper in my hands.

"A matter of the most vital importance demands your presence," it read. "As a comrade of the late Eric Naetzel you cannot refuse to help. The bearer of this message will drive you to your destination. Refuse to come and you will always regret it."

Reading the letter over for the twentieth time did not make it any more clear. The peremptory tone of the message was disturbing, yet in spite of the warning note in the last sentence, it seemed to express urgency rather than any threats. The reference to Eric Maetzel, in particular, was puzzling. At the outbreak of the terrible war of 1980 he and I had been drafted at the same time, thrown into the same squad, become fast friends. In the savage fighting around Prague, however, that friendship had been broken. A strato-plane, spitting explosive bullets, had dived. When it zoomed up once more, Eric had been only a ghastly, blood-stained corpse and my left foot so badly shattered that its amputation had been necessary. And now, two years after the end of the war,

this queer letter, bringing bitter memories. Foolish of me, perhaps, to have embarked upon so mysterious a mission, yet the mention of Eric . . .

A drone high above the gloomy mountains reached my ears. Glancing upward, I saw a squadron of war planes, dark ravens against the gray sky. Sight of them filled me with ominous forebodings. Out of the chaos that followed the war one man, an ex-army officer, had risen to make himself dictator of the defeated Central-European bloc. And this man, Hjalmar Hajorky, preached the gospel of revenge. Already the Central States, and among them my own beloved nation, were re-arming, building planes, guns, tanks. A people ruined by war was being forced to prepare for another holocaust. And the many who, like myself, hated war and Hajorky's hymn of hate, dared not speak; the A.K.R., secret Government police force, had agents everywhere. Peace . . . the world, looking at the rows of graves, the ruined homes, the barren fields, cried for peace. And Hajorky, dreaming of revenge, planned war. One thing alone held him back: lack of man-power. Our casualties in the last struggle had been tremendous. With only a pitiful remnant of our once mighty forces war seemed out of the question; yet a madman like Hajorky might try anything. I stared at the squadron of strato-planes, shook my head.

The sallow, black-browed chauffeur on

the front seat also glanced upward, frowning, the first sign of emotion he had displayed since leaving Belgrade. He had driven like an automaton all day and now, in the bleak dusk, I was completely lost. Mountains loomed on all sides, but what range I could not tell.

"How much farther?" I asked.

"Soon," the driver grunted, nosing the car ever upward along the winding road.

THAT was as much as I could get out of him; so I settled back in my seat to wait the outcome of this mad adventure. The roadway had narrowed to a mere goat-path and the car, its Diesels humming, barely crawled up the steep, heavily wooded incline. A mile of this followed until we at last reached the crest of the slope. Before us in a cup-shaped hollow was a great castle, hoary with age, its crumbling masonry as gray as bleached bones against the dark clumps of evergreens. A slight mist cloaked its towers in mystery and the dark, deep-set loop-holes peered like sightless eyes at the surrounding hills.

"There!" My chauffeur motioned to the ancient keep, headed toward it.

As the car drew up before the massive pile, I fought down a feeling of foreboding, of fear. The chauffeur grinned cadaverously at my hesitation.

"Go on in," he said, stretching his cramped muscles.

Picking up my crutch, I hobbled across the courtyard, hammered on the huge, iron-studded doors. Slowly, like the portals of some mausoleum, they swung open.

The great hall of the castle was dark, shadowy; windows thick with the dust of years shut off the fading sunlight. A fire crackled at one end of the room, threw eery shadows on the stone floor. Two persons stood before the fire: a man, tall, gray-bearded, his broad shoulders bent; and a slender, dark-eyed girl clad in somber black. Oddly enough, I found a certain

familiarity in the girl's face, a haunting recollection that I could not place.

"Ah!" The tall man moved forward, bowing ceremoniously. "You are Lieutenant Josef Grentz?"

"I was, during the war. Your message?"

"So! It was good of you to come." Again he bowed. "I am Doctor Hans Vettner. And this is my daughter, Anna."

I studied the girl's face closely as I shook hands with her. The death-like pallor of her cheeks, the deepness of her large eyes, gave a queer impression of unreality. Yet somehow the feeling of familiarity lingered.

"And now"—Vettner stood with his back to the fire, rubbing long nervous hands—"I suppose I should explain. In the first place, you were a friend of Eric Maetzel."

"I was with him when he died," I murmured. "But I don't see——"

"Did—did he suffer much?" The girl touched my sleeve, her gaze intent.

"It was over in a second. I——" Suddenly I remembered the picture Eric had carried with him during those years of hell—a dirty, thumbed photograph, yet treasured beyond all his possessions. Across the bottom of it had been written, "All my love. Anna."

"You were his fiancée?" I muttered. "The girl he——"

"My daughter and Eric were engaged." Vettner nodded solemnly. "But to continue my explanation. I am a psychologist. In certain work I am undertaking I need the assistance of a skilled bio-chemist. You were showing signs of prominence in that field before the war."

"Before the war!" I echoed bitterly. "Now . . . what does Hajorky care about health, the prolongation of life? If I were a munitions expert or a breeder of disease germs——"

"True." Vettner inclined his gray leonine head. "But you will find here

work worthy of your intelligence. Unbelievable work—so unbelievable that I dared not explain in my letter for fear you would think it the ravings of a madman. You may still think so when I explain what I hope to do. Yet I am hoping you will share my belief."

VETTNER paused, his hollow eyes boring past me across the hall. I turned to follow his gaze, but the great room was empty. The girl Anna, her death-white face drawn, was nodding slightly, as though listening to far-off music or voices we could not hear. Rigid she stood, not moving a muscle, yet her long black dress swayed slightly as if someone had brushed past her. Somewhere a dog was howling, howling, endlessly.

Soft, shuffling footsteps sounded on the stone floor behind me. Whirling, I saw the dark, bony figure of my erstwhile chauffeur, now clad in a butler's costume.

"Dinner is ready," he croaked, bowing.

With these words the spell was broken. The fire blazed up brightly and the chilling, musty dampness that had gripped me disappeared. The girl Anna, suddenly weak, leaned heavily upon her father's arm.

"Come," Vettner said solemnly. "Let us eat!"

The dining-room was large, apparently the feast hall of olden days. A moldering black tapestry hung upon its walls, a tapestry depicting in faded figures the Dance of Death. Once again that feeling of being in a great tomb took possession of me. The oblong, coffin-shaped table, with its two tall tapers, the monstrous, evil shadows that crept about the corners of the room, the dog outside, howling . . . howling . . .

The table, I noticed, was set for four. Sarth, the sallow, vulpine butler, served the empty place with scrupulous care, removing the untouched dishes at the end of each course. Indeed, I believe I was the only one who ate; Doctor Vettner and his

daughter seemed only to touch the food to their lips. When this strange, silent repast had been finished, the doctor took my arm.

"You will be tired after your long drive," he muttered. "I'll show you to your room."

I turned to Anna, a pallid wraith in the flickering candlelight, bade her good-night. A slight nod was her only acknowledgment. Shrugging, I followed Vettner from the dining-room, up the massive stone staircase. Our footsteps echoed hollowly along the corridor of the second floor. A weary wind sighed about the old building, and once I saw a huge bat fluttering before one of the cobwebbed windows. At the doorway of a small, cell-like room Vettner paused.

"I trust you will be comfortable here," he said, lighting a candle. "Your duties commence in the morning. I have an adequate supply of chemicals and apparatus in my laboratory. We will need large quantities of synthetic protoplasm."

"Protoplasm?" I repeated. "But——"

"There will be explanations . . . later." Vettner bowed ceremoniously. "Good-night, Lieutenant Grentz!"

I watched him disappear around a corner of the corridor, and re-entered my room. Its only furniture was a high-canopied bed, a chair, and a curiously carved clothes-chest. On the chest was an old leather-bound Bible. Idly I picked up the book, glanced at its flyleaf. Written in bold script upon the otherwise blank page was an excerpt from the Apostle's Creed. "I believe in the resurrection of the body . . ."

Outside, the dog continued its frenzied howling.

## 2

THE next morning I awoke early, hobbled downstairs. Neither the doctor nor his daughter was in evidence. Sarth,

the butler, served breakfast in silence; all my efforts to draw him out were in vain.

When I had finished eating, Sarth motioned for me to follow him. Across the great hall, down a winding flight of stone steps he led me, deep into the dank subcellars of the castle. On and on we went, through a confusing maze of tunnels, arched rooms, and rough-hewn galleries, their sweated walls gleaming in the light of Sarth's lantern. At length we reached a small chamber lined with beakers, retorts, crucibles—a veritable alchemist's den deep underground. Sarth lit candles, and, bowing profusely, left me alone.

Bewildered, I glanced about the little laboratory. A slip of paper on the workbench caught my eye. "Ten kilograms of protoplasm," was written upon it, followed by a list of other substances which, apparently, I was expected to manufacture: fibrous matters, dyes, calcium, a variety of seemingly unrelated compounds. For a long moment I stared at the list, wondering. Again that cold, chilling sensation which I had experienced the night before swept over me. Eric Maetzel . . . Eric Maetzel. . . . Memory of him beat at my brain. Something . . . something soft and intangible brushed my arm. I whirled about, wild-eyed, but the room was empty. Shuddering, I bent over the table, plunged into my allotted work.

It was three days before I finished. During that time I saw nothing of my host or his daughter.

On the evening of the third day, just as I was about to leave the laboratory, Vettner appeared in the doorway, his somber eyes glowing.

"You have finished?" he murmured. "Ah, good, good!" Again that nervous rubbing of his long, bony hands. "I have been a poor host these past few days, I fear. Anna has been so excited, feverish over the preparations. Ah, but we must be careful! Trust no one, not even Sarth!

Hajorcky and his agents were following my experiments so closely when I was in Belgrade! We fled at night, Lieutenant, secretly, came here. So far, I believe, he has not located us. If he should learn of my discoveries——"

Vettner broke off, glancing at my stump of a foot. "War, Lieutenant! War with its death, its cripples, its broken-hearted women!"

I studied the doctor's tortured face, convinced that I was dealing with a madman. And yet . . .

"What is this discovery that Hajorcky seeks?" I asked.

The doctor eyed me closely, appraisingly, then bent forward, whispered hoarsely.

"Man-power! The secret of unlimited man-power! Trained soldiers, the military genius of the ages! You realize, do you not, that a man dead for as long as fifteen minutes can be brought back to life by an injection of adrenalin into the heart? If deterioration of the body cells were checked, it might be fifteen days, fifteen years, fifteen centuries!"

"True," I nodded. "But that is only in cases where no bodily organs are destroyed. With people eaten up by disease, blown to bits in wars——"

"So I, too, reasoned," Vettner chuckled, caressing his beard. "But the soul, the ego, is a powerful force. Why, if its body has been destroyed, cannot it create a new one from, shall we say, raw materials? At Lourdes and other shrines, among the mystics of India, sick persons have been cured by pure force of mind, cripples enabled to walk, diseased tissue replaced by new. Furthermore, stigmata have been made to appear, the heart-beats controlled by power of the will. Several years ago I treated a man who had lost a finger at the front; sheer force of will enabled him to grow a new one, just as a lizard can grow a new tail. Now if the power of the ego can create new tissue, why cannot that same

power, the soul, create new cells, a new body, from protoplasmic matter? Thus—"

He turned as Sarth's lean figure appeared on the threshold. "Yes?"

"Miss Anna wishes to see you at once!" Sarth muttered. "She told me to tell you that *he* will be ready tonight!"

"So soon!" the doctor exclaimed. "Ah, well! She will be happy at last, my poor child! Sarth, you may have the rest of the week off. Take the car and leave at once. Lieutenant, you will go to your room. Wait until I come for you."

In silence I obeyed. Mad . . . he was unquestionably mad. Tomorrow I would escape, head for the nearest village. Tonight, however, I was forced to humor him.

Slowly I climbed the stairs, entered my room.

**I**T WAS close to midnight when Vettner knocked on my door. He was dressed in funereal black and seemed more nervous than usual. I followed him down through the gloomy cellars, into the laboratory.

My place of work had undergone a complete change since I had left it. The litter of apparatus, of chemical equipment, had been taken away, except for the large vats containing the protoplasmic mixture. Near the vats was a mass of strange machinery, queer engines. A black-draped dais stood in the center of the room; two red-cupped candles such as are used in churches filled the room with a lurid, ruddy light.

Before the dais stood Anna. The sight of her sent a chill of horror through my veins. The girl's cheeks glowed feverishly, her eyes were fixed, staring, and she was clad in white, a wedding dress! A living corpse, she seemed, animated by some alien, supernal force. I think it was her air of expectancy, of anticipation, that shook me more than anything else.

As we entered the laboratory, the girl

did not turn. Her lips, however, moved slightly.

"Hurry!" Anna's voice was thick, strained, in the manner of a person talking in sleep. "He is near, anxious to return. Quick, before others in his world break the link between us!"

She swayed slightly, straining under a mighty mental effort. Vettner crossed the room, adjusted the tangle of queer apparatus. A thousand dim atavistic memories began to crawl through my brain. Life, life that was only a disembodied will, seemed to fill the room. Terrible mephitic forces surged like a silent gale, racking my body with their ebb and flow. The veil of the Infinite was thinning, permitting glimpses of dark, fleeting shadows. I could hear sounds of distant music—wild, unearthly music, at once sublime and terrible—a veritable symphony of death. The room seemed peopled by strange figures, gray spirits of eld, ghosts of buried centuries, their eyes shining with an eager, uneasy gleam. Low, broken voices muttered incoherently, a kaleidoscope of pale tortured faces swirled past to disappear into the dull mist of eternity. Life—life beyond the grave—caught in the grip of unholy forces, drawn into a mad, macabre maelstrom. And all the while Anna stood as though frozen, a frail white figure against the raging cosmos.

Suddenly, from this chaos of stark, soul-shaking power, a single entity crystallized. The personality of Eric Maetzel dominated all else, a terrible mind-force, a being in another world, striving to break through.

Vettner, crouched beside his machine, touched a lever. A fine, mist-like spray shot forth, hanging in an opaque cloud over the dais . . . protoplasm, the primal factor of all living matter.

Anna's face grew gray, as though she were pouring out the energy, the vital forces of her slender body, in an effort to aid her dead lover.

"Eric!" she whispered. "Eric!"

The cloud was growing more dense now, taking on a vaguely columnar shape. The strange music was loud, hammering at my ears in a thunderous yet melancholy chant. Leaning limply upon my crutch, I watched, awe-struck. The mist was gathering into human form . . . the form of a tall, broad-shouldered man. With each passing moment the features were becoming more and more distinct. No mistaking that firm jaw, that strong, determined mouth. Eric Maetzel was taking shape before my eyes!

THE mist began to fade, slowly, the figure became more tangible, more life-like. Eric, the brave, uncomplaining Eric, who had been my comrade in arms during those long years of hell! The same, even down to the rough cotton shirt, the high army boots.

"Eric!" I cried, and he smiled as if in recognition.

Doctor Vettner, still bent over the machine, touched a lever. Abruptly the humming motor ceased. A weary sigh broke from Anna's lips. Suddenly, completely exhausted, she crumpled to the floor.

"Anna! My Anna!" The tall figure on the dais stepped down, knelt beside her. "Darling! I've come back—come back!"

I stared at them stupidly, my mind numbed from the effects of those staggering, titanic forces. I had seen things beyond the scope of reason, things that were not meant for human eyes, and I was dazed, inarticulate.

Anna had come to, now, was smiling up at Eric. Doctor Vettner stood watching them, impassive, tugging at his gray beard. All at once footsteps sounded in the subcellar beyond, crisp, commanding footsteps, and a tall, gray-clad figure appeared in the open doorway. With this new arrival were several uniformed attendants and Sarth, Vettner's servant. As the tall man drew near, light from the flickering

candles fell upon his face, throwing into bold relief his harsh, saturnine features.

"Hajorky!" I gasped.

"Swine!" One of the attendants sent me sprawling with a blow from the back of his hand. "You will address the Leader as His Excellency."

Huddled on the floor, I watched them; Vettner staring in bitter accusation at Sarth; Anna, her arms outstretched against the wall as though crucified; Eric, dazed, like a man just awakened from deep slumber. And Hajorky stood there grinning sardonically.

"Unbelievable!" he murmured. "Had I not viewed it all from the next room with my own eyes——"

He broke off, turned to Sarth. "You have done well, Captain. The A.K.R. will be proud of you. Ah, what this will mean to the homeland! Millions of men! Trained soldiers to carry our banners to victory! Men! An inexhaustible supply of men! All Europe, all the world, will be ours! A tremendous scientific feat, Doctor Vettner!"

The doctor did not answer. His eyes were deep pits of hell.

Hajorky turned, his medals winking in the candlelight, spoke sharply to Eric.

"Your name?"

"Eric. Eric Maetzel." My comrade seemed still dazed, confused. Then, as though through instinct, he stepped forward, saluted.

Hajorky reached out, touched Eric's hand, felt his lean hard muscles.

"So," the dictator murmured. "I was afraid perhaps some illusion. . . . Where did you die, Maetzel?"

"Before Prague," Eric answered slowly. "The battle of Bohmer Forest."

"Ah! Bohmer Forest!" Hajorky nodded. "So nearly a great victory! With just ten thousand more men we would have crushed the enemy! Next time we will have the men!" His voice was triumphant. "I will



make you a captain, Maetzel! Tell me of your comrades who were with you . . . beyond the veil?"

Eric frowned, pressed a hand to his forehead.

"I—I cannot remember, now," he murmured. "I seem to recall old Krag—and—and Varhely——"

"Good!" Hajorky nodded. "Call them! Let us see if others can come through!"

"No!" It was Vettner, his voice agonized. "They may not want to come back! Let us leave them in peace."

"You will bring them back. At once." Hajorky's flat black eyes flicked toward Anna.

"You understand, Doctor?"

Vettner stared for a moment, defiant; then his shoulders drooped forlornly. The threat to Anna in the dictator's glance was unmistakable. Bitter, broken, the doctor bent over the delicate mass of machinery, touched a lever.

Once again those dark, monstrous shadows, that solemn, rushing sound of music. Eric stood still, as Anna had stood while calling him from beyond. Roaring noises and that surge of force like a gale swirling through a mountain gorge. The cloud of embryonic matter, the dim miasmatic shape, gathering into human form.

A phrase from the Burial Service tolled like a ceaseless bell through my brain: "If, after the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me if the dead rise not?"

THE misty form was taking definite outline now. I recognized Varhely, the baby of our regiment. Just seventeen, his cheeks were pink, his soft fluffy hair like canary feathers.

"Your name?" Hajorky demanded.

The boy stepped down from the dais, bewildered, then seeing the dictator's uniform, came to attention.

"Vassily Varhely, general," he faltered.

"Killed in action at Lake Balaton. An enemy sniper——"

"You will have your revenge! I promise it!" Hajorky exulted. "The enemy shall know the wrath of the men they have slain! You, Doctor, bring back another of my soldiers!"

Doctor Vettner glanced at Anna, a tortured madonna, her back to the wall. Eric and Varhely stood stiffly before the dais. There were tears in the old scientist's eyes as he pulled the lever once more.

For a third time the room rocked and the curtain of darkness parted. Another figure took shape, a stocky, red-faced little man, middle-aged, with kindly blue eyes.

"And your name?" Hajorky snapped.

"Wilhelm Krag." The little man saluted hesitantly. "I—I was the proprietor of a delicatessen in Lemberg. Died of wounds inflicted during the assault on Agram."

"Brave soldier!" Hajorky assumed a dramatic pose, his hand uplifted. "Honor shall be yours when we strike for vengeance! Yours the privilege of dying, not once, but twice, for the homeland! Who among men will be able to say as much?"

As Hajorky finished speaking, a thick silence fell over the room. Huddled in my corner, I could see Vettner's hands tremble, his eyes blink like sputtering embers. Anna had not moved; she seemed a waxen effigy of some saint. The three men from Beyond stood still, as if on review, their eyes troubled. The dictator glanced at his four attendants, among them Sarth, then spoke once more.

"Well," he exclaimed sharply, "have you nothing to say? Are you not proud to be the first of your country's new, all-powerful armies?"

Stiffly old Krag stepped forward.

"I came back in order to see my wife my children," he murmured. "I return to life and you offer me another death, another hour of lying in the dust watching

the puddle of blood grow larger, mad with pain, thinking of the loved ones I shall never see again. This is the honor you offer me?"

Hajorky frowned, gripped his broad leather belt; his gaze sought Varhely.

"And I"—the soft-haired boy joined old Krag—"I returned because I wished to live a life that war cut short. I wanted other memories of this existence than mangled bodies, putrefying flesh. And you offer me vengeance! The enemy lands are poor, impoverished by the last war. What advantage to conquer them? You give us ruined homes, burned fields, broken hearts—and revenge!"

Eric stepped forward, stood beside his companions.

"I returned for love," he cried, "and you give me hate! I am to be an officer, in command of many men! Men! You have forgotten what men are! Ten thousand more men and we would have won at Prague, you say! Pins on a map, moved here and there at will! A game, the sport of dictators. Men! You forget that each pin represents ten thousand pairs of weary feet, ten thousand bleeding bodies, ten thousand brains capable of feeling pain, fear, love! You offer me a chance to be the ten-thousandth part of a pin on a map!"

Hajorky stepped back, his face satanic in the red glare of the lamps.

"Fools!" he shouted. "You will be made to fight! Have you no patriotism, no thought for the welfare of your country?"

"Yes." Little Krag took a step toward the dictator.

"I am willing to return without seeing my wife and children—for my country." And he took another step forward.

Hajorky backed away, fumbling for the gun at his belt.

"Wha—what does this mean?" he muttered.

"Patriotism!" Krag cried, plunging forward.

Then the room was a hell of roaring explosions, vicious flame. From my corner I saw Doctor Vettner topple backward into his fragile machine, smashing the curious tubes, the tiny wires. I saw Hajorky go down with Krag at his throat, saw the boy Varhely slump to the floor. Eric, twisting a revolver from Sarth's hand, turned on the other attendants, shooting swiftly. And I saw Anna kneel beside her father's body, weeping.

**B**EFORE I could drag myself erect, pick up my crutch, the struggle had ceased. Eric, Anna and I were the only living persons in the laboratory.

Eric dropped the revolver, joined Anna at her father's side.

"Don't cry," he whispered. "Your father will be happy there, with your mother once more beside him. Soon—a few short years—and we will be with them again."

He took the girl's arm, turned to me, smiling. "Come, old comrade. Let us go!"

Together the three of us left the castle, mounted the slope that surrounded it.

"And now"—Eric's hand gripped my shoulders—"we must leave you. Your way leads to Belgrade, home. And ours"—he glanced down the steep mountainside—"to some land where there is no danger of my being recognized, of anyone suspecting the secret that was Doctor Vettner's. Until we meet Beyond, then, good-bye!"

I mumbled a halting farewell, watched the two erect figures disappear among the trees—a flutter of white, a flash of sunlight on Eric's sleek hair, and they were lost in the shadows. Turning, I set out along the long road home. The mountain air was cool on my cheek. From the valley below I heard the faint lowing of cattle, the sound of a shepherd's pipes. Peace. . . .