

The First One

Herbert D. Kastle

The lower half of the image features a solid blue background with several abstract green geometric shapes. These include two vertical bars on the left, a horizontal bar on the right, a curved arc on the right, a horizontal bar in the center, a large inverted triangle in the center, and a vertical bar on the right. The text 'Project Gutenberg' is overlaid in white at the bottom right.

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THE FIRST ONE

By HERBERT D. KASTLE

Illustrated by von Dongen

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Frontis

The first man to return from beyond the Great Frontier may be welcomed ... but will it be as a curiosity, rather than as a hero...?

There was the usual welcoming crowd for a celebrity, and the usual speeches by the usual politicians who met him at the airport which had once been twenty miles outside of Croton, but which the growing city had since engulfed and placed well within its boundaries. But everything wasn't usual. The crowd was quiet, and the mayor didn't seem quite as at-ease as he'd been on his last big welcoming—for Corporal Berringer, one of the crew of the spaceship *Washington*, first to set Americans upon Mars. His Honor's handclasp was somewhat moist and cold. His Honor's eyes held a trace of remoteness.

Still, he was the honored home-comer, the successful returnee, the hometown boy who had made good in a big way, and they took the triumphal tour up Main Street to the new square and the grandstand. There he sat between the mayor and a nervous young coed chosen as homecoming queen, and looked out at the police and fire department bands, the National Guard, the boy scouts and girl scouts, the Elks and Masons. Several of the churches in town had shown indecision as to how to instruct their parishioners to treat him. But they had all come around. The tremendous national interest, the fact that he was the First One, had made them come around. It was obvious by now that they would have to adjust as they'd adjusted to all the other firsts taking place in these—as the newspapers had dubbed the start of the Twenty-first Century—the Galloping Twenties.

He was glad when the official greeting was over. He was a very tired man and he had come farther, traveled longer and over darker country, than any man who'd ever lived before. He wanted a meal at his own table, a kiss from his wife, a

word from his son, and later to see some old friends and a relative or two. He didn't want to talk about the journey. He wanted to forget the immediacy, the urgency, the terror; then perhaps he would talk.

Or would he? For he had very little to tell. He had traveled and he had returned and his voyage was very much like the voyages of the great mariners, from Columbus onward—long, dull periods of time passing, passing, and then the arrival.

The house had changed. He saw that as soon as the official car let him off at 45 Roosevelt Street. The change was, he knew, for the better. They had put a porch in front. They had rehabilitated, spruced up, almost rebuilt the entire outside and grounds. But he was sorry. He had wanted it to be as before.

The head of the American Legion and the chief of police, who had escorted him on this trip from the square, didn't ask to go in with him. He was glad. He'd had enough of strangers. Not that he was through with strangers. There were dozens of them up and down the street, standing beside parked cars, looking at him. But when he looked back at them, their eyes dropped, they turned away, they began moving off. He was still too much the First One to have his gaze met.

He walked up what had once been a concrete path and was now an ornate flagstone path. He climbed the new porch and raised the ornamental knocker on the new door and heard the soft music sound within. He was surprised that he'd had to do this. He'd thought Edith would be watching at a window.

And perhaps she *had* been watching ... but she hadn't opened the door.

The door opened; he looked at her. It hadn't been too long and she hadn't changed at all. She was still the small, slender girl he'd loved in high school, the small, slender woman he'd married twelve years ago. Ralphie was with her. They held onto each other as if seeking mutual support, the thirty-three-year old woman and ten-year-old boy. They looked at him, and then both moved forward, still together. He said, "It's good to be home!"

Edith nodded and, still holding to Ralphie with one hand, put the other arm around him. He kissed her—her neck, her cheek—and all the old jokes came to mind, the jokes of travel-weary, battle-weary men, the *and-then-I'll-put-my-pack-aside* jokes that spoke of terrible hunger. She was trembling, and even as her lips came up to touch his he felt the difference, and because of this difference he turned with urgency to Ralphie and picked him up and hugged him and said,

because he could think of nothing else to say, "What a big fella, what a big fella."

Ralphie stood in his arms as if his feet were still planted on the floor, and he didn't look at his father but somewhere beyond him. "I didn't grow much while you were gone, Dad, Mom says I don't eat enough."

So he put him down and told himself that it would all change, that everything would loosen up just as his commanding officer, General Carlisle, had said it would early this morning before he left Washington.

"Give it some time," Carlisle had said. "You need the time; they need the time. And for the love of heaven, don't be sensitive."



Edith was leading him into the living room, her hand lying still in his, a cool, dead bird lying still in his. He sat down on the couch, she sat down beside him—but she had hesitated. He *wasn't* being sensitive; she had hesitated. His wife had hesitated before sitting down beside him.

Carlisle had said his position was analogous to Columbus', to Vasco De Gama's, to Preshoff's when the Russian returned from the Moon—but more so. Carlisle had said lots of things, but even Carlisle who had worked with him all the way, who had engineered the entire fantastic journey—even Carlisle the Nobel prize winner, the multi-degreed genius in uniform, had not actually spoken to him as one man to another.

The eyes. It always showed in their eyes.

He looked across the room at Ralphie, standing in the doorway, a boy already tall, already widening in the shoulders, already large of feature. It was like looking into the mirror and seeing himself twenty-five years ago. But Ralphie's face was drawn, was worried in a way that few ten-year-old faces are.

"How's it going in school?" he asked.

"Gee, Dad, it's the second month of summer vacation."

"Well, then, before summer vacation?"

"Pretty good."

Edith said, "He made top forum the six-month period before vacation, and he made top forum the six-month period you went away, Hank."

He nodded, remembering that, remembering everything, remembering the warmth of her farewell, the warmth of Ralphie's farewell, their tears as he left for the experimental flight station in the Aleutians. They had feared for him, having read of the many launchings gone wrong even in continent-to-continent experimental flight.

They had been right to worry. He had suffered much after that blow-up. But now they should be rejoicing, because he had survived and made the long journey. Ralphie suddenly said, "I got to go, Dad. I promised Walt and the others I'd pitch. It's Inter-Town Little League, you know. It's Harmon, you know. I got to keep my word." Without waiting for an answer, he waved his hand—it shook; a ten-year-old boy's hand that shook—and ran from the room and from the house.

He and Edith sat beside each other, and he wanted badly to take her in his arms, and yet he didn't want to oppress her. He stood up. "I'm very tired. I'd like to lie down a while." Which wasn't true, because he'd been lying down all the months of the way back.

She said, "Of course. How stupid of me, expecting you to sit around and make small talk and pick up just where you left off."

He nodded. But that was exactly what he wanted to do—make small talk and pick up just where he'd left off. But they didn't expect it of him; they wouldn't let him; they felt he had changed too much.



She led him upstairs and along the foyer past Ralphie's room and past the small guest room to their bedroom. This, too, had changed. It was newly painted and it had new furniture. He saw twin beds separated by an ornate little table with an ornate little lamp, and this looked more ominous a barrier to him than the twelve-foot concrete-and-barbed-wire fence around the experimental station.

"Which one is mine," he asked, and tried to smile.

She also tried to smile. "The one near the window. You always liked the fresh

air, the sunshine in the morning. You always said it helped you to get up on time when you were stationed at the base outside of town. You always said it reminded you—being able to see the sky—that you were going to go up in it, and that you were going to come down from it to this bed again."

"Not this bed," he murmured, and was a little sorry afterward.

"No, not this bed," she said quickly. "Your lodge donated the bedroom set and I really didn't know—" She waved her hand, her face white.

He was sure then that she *had* known, and that the beds and the barrier between them were her own choice, if only an unconscious choice. He went to the bed near the window, stripped off his Air Force blue jacket, began to take off his shirt, but then remembered that some arm scars still showed. He waited for her to leave the room.

She said, "Well then, rest up, dear," and went out.

He took off his shirt and saw himself in the mirror on the opposite wall; and then took off his under-shirt. The body scars were faint, the scars running in long lines, one dissecting his chest, the other slicing diagonally across his upper abdomen to disappear under his trousers. There were several more on his back, and one on his right thigh. They'd been treated properly and would soon disappear. But she had never seen them.

Perhaps she never would. Perhaps pajamas and robes and dark rooms would keep them from her until they were gone.

Which was not what he'd considered at all important on leaving Walter Reed Hospital early this morning; which was something he found distasteful, something he felt beneath them both. And, at the same time, he began to understand that there would be many things, previously beneath them both, which would have to be considered. She had changed; Ralphie had changed; all the people he knew had probably changed—because they thought *he* had changed.

He was tired of thinking. He lay down and closed his eyes. He let himself taste bitterness, unhappiness, a loneliness he had never known before.

But sometime later, as he was dozing off, a sense of reassurance began filtering into his mind. After all, he was still Henry Devers, the same man who had left home eleven months ago, with a love for family and friends which was, if

anything, stronger than before. Once he could communicate this, the strangeness would disappear and the First One would again become good old Hank. It was little enough to ask for—a return to old values, old relationships, the normalcies of the backwash instead of the freneticisms of the lime-light. It would certainly be granted to him.

He slept.

Dinner was at seven P.M. His mother came; his Uncle Joe and Aunt Lucille came. Together with Edith, Ralphie and himself, they made six, and ate in the dining room at the big table.

Before he'd become the First One, it would have been a noisy affair. His family had never been noted for a lack of ebullience, a lack of talkativeness, and Ralphie had always chosen mealtimes—especially with company present—to describe everything and anything that had happened to him during the day. And Edith herself had always chatted, especially with his mother, though they didn't agree about much. Still, it had been good-natured; the general tone of their lives had been good-natured.

This wasn't good-natured. Exactly what it was he wasn't sure. "Stiff" was perhaps the word.

They began with grapefruit, Edith and Mother serving quickly, efficiently from the kitchen, then sitting down at the table. He looked at Mother as he raised his first spoonful of chilled fruit, and said, "Younger than ever." It was nothing new; he'd said it many many times before, but his mother had always reacted with a bright smile and a quip something like, "Young for the Golden Age Center, you mean." This time she burst into tears. It shocked him. But what shocked him even more was the fact that no one looked up, commented, made any attempt to comfort her; no one indicated in any way that a woman was sobbing at the table.

He was sitting directly across from Mother, and reached out and touched her left hand which lay limply beside the silverware. She didn't move it—she hadn't touched him once beyond that first, quick, strangely-cool embrace at the door—then a few seconds later she withdrew it and let it drop out of sight.

So there he was, Henry Devers, at home with the family. So there he was, the

hero returned, waiting to be treated as a human being.

The grapefruit shells were cleaned away and the soup served. Uncle Joe began to talk. "The greatest little development of circular uniform houses you ever did see," he boomed in his powerful salesman's voice. "Still going like sixty. We'll sell out before—" At that point he looked at Hank, and Hank nodded encouragement, desperately interested in this normalcy, and Joe's voice died away. He looked down at his plate, mumbled, "Soup's getting cold," and began to eat. His hand shook a little; his ruddy face was not quite as ruddy as Hank remembered it.

Aunt Lucille made a few quavering statements about the Ladies' Tuesday Garden Club, and Hank looked across the table to where she sat between Joe and Mother—his wife and son bracketed him, and yet he felt alone—and said, "I've missed fooling around with the lawn and the rose bushes. Here it is August and I haven't had my hand to a mower or trowel."

Aunt Lucille smiled, if you could call it that—a pitiful twitching of the lips—and nodded. She threw her eyes in his direction, and past him, and then down to her plate. Mother, who was still sniffing, said, "I have a dismal headache. I'm going to lie down in the guest room a while." She touched his shoulder in passing—his affectionate, effusive mother who would kiss stray dogs and strange children, who had often irritated him with an excess of physical and verbal caresses—she barely touched his shoulder and fled.

So now five of them sat at the table. The meat was served—thin, rare slices of beef, the pink blood-juice oozing warmly from the center. He cut into it and raised a forkful to his mouth, then glanced at Ralphie and said, "Looks fresh enough to have been killed in the back yard." Ralphie said, "Yeah, Dad." Aunt Lucille put down her knife and fork and murmured something to her husband. Joe cleared his throat and said Lucille was rapidly becoming a vegetarian and he guessed she was going into the living room for a while. "She'll be back for dessert, of course," he said, his laugh sounding forced.

Hank looked at Edith; Edith was busy with her plate. Hank looked at Ralphie; Ralphie was busy with his plate. Hank looked at Joe; Joe was chewing, gazing out over their heads to the kitchen. Hank looked at Lucille; she was disappearing into the living room.

He brought his fist down on the table. The settings jumped; a glass overturned, spilling water. He brought it down again and again. They were all standing now.

He sat there and pounded the table with his big right fist—Henry Devers, who would never have thought of making such a scene before, but who was now so sick and tired of being treated as the First One, of being stood back from, looked at in awe of, felt in fear of, that he could have smashed more than a table.

Edith said, "Hank!"

He said, voice hoarse, "Shut up. Go away. Let me eat alone. I'm sick of the lot of you."



Mother and Joe returned a few minutes later where he sat forcing food down his throat. Mother said, "Henry dear—" He didn't answer. She began to cry, and he was glad she left the house then. He had never said anything really bad to his mother. He was afraid this would have been the time. Joe merely cleared his throat and mumbled something about getting together again soon and "drop out and see the new development" and he, too, was gone. Lucille never did manage to speak to him.

He finished his beef and waited. Soon Edith came in with the special dessert she'd been preparing half the day—a magnificent English trifle. She served him, and spooned out a portion for herself and Ralphie. She hesitated near his chair, and when he made no comment she called the boy. Then the three of them were sitting, facing the empty side of the table. They ate the trifle. Ralphie finished first and got up and said, "Hey, I promised—"

"You promised the boys you'd play baseball or football or handball or something; anything to get away from your father."

Ralphie's head dropped and he muttered, "Aw, no, Dad."

Edith said, "He'll stay home, Hank. We'll spend an evening together—talking, watching TV, playing Monopoly."

Ralphie said, "Gee, sure, Dad, if you want to."

Hank stood up. "The question is not whether I want to. You both know I want to. The question is whether *you* want to."

They answered together that of course they wanted to. But their eyes—his wife's

and son's eyes—could not meet his, and so he said he was going to his room because he was, after all, very tired and would in all probability continue to be very tired for a long, long time and that they shouldn't count on him for normal social life.

He fell asleep quickly, lying there in his clothes.

But he didn't sleep long. Edith shook him and he opened his eyes to a lighted room. "Phil and Rhona are here." He blinked at her. She smiled, and it seemed her old smile. "They're so anxious to see you, Hank. I could barely keep Phil from coming up and waking you himself. They want to go out and do the town. Please, Hank, say you will."

He sat up. "Phil," he muttered. "Phil and Rhona." They'd had wonderful times together, from grammar school on. Phil and Rhona, their oldest and closest friends. Perhaps this would begin his real homecoming.

Do the town? They'd paint it and then tear it down!



It didn't turn out that way. He was disappointed; but then again, he'd also expected it. This entire first day at home had conditioned him to expect nothing good. They went to the bowling alleys, and Phil sounded very much the way he always had—soft spoken and full of laughter and full of jokes. He patted Edith on the head the way he always had, and clapped Hank on the shoulder (but not the way he always had—so much more gently, almost remotely), and insisted they all drink more than was good for them as he always had. And for once, Hank was ready to go along on the drinking. For once, he matched Phil shot for shot, beer for beer.

They didn't bowl very long. At ten o'clock they crossed the road to Manfred's Tavern, where Phil and the girls ordered sandwiches and coffee and Hank went right on drinking. Edith said something to him, but he merely smiled and waved his hand and gulped another ounce of nirvana.

There was dancing to a juke box in Manfred's Tavern. He'd been there many times before, and he was sure several of the couples recognized him. But except for a few abortive glances in his direction, it was as if he were a stranger in a city halfway around the world.

At midnight, he was still drinking. The others wanted to leave, but he said, "I haven't danced with my girl Rhona." His tongue was thick, his mind was blurred, and yet he could read the strange expression on her face—pretty Rhona, who'd always flirted with him, who'd made a ritual of flirting with him. Pretty Rhona, who now looked as if she were going to be sick.

"So let's rock," he said and stood up.

They were on the dance floor. He held her close, and hummed and chatted. And through the alcoholic haze saw she was a stiff-smiled, stiff-bodied, mechanical dancing doll.

The number finished; they walked back to the booth. Phil said, "Beddy-bye time."

Hank said, "First one dance with my loving wife."

He and Edith danced. He didn't hold her close as he had Rhona. He waited for her to come close on her own, and she did, and yet she didn't. Because while she put herself against him, there was something in her face—no, in her eyes; it always showed in the eyes—that made him know she was trying to be the old Edith and not succeeding. This time when the music ended, he was ready to go home.

They rode back to town along Route Nine, he and Edith in the rear of Phil's car, Rhona driving because Phil had drunk just a little too much, Phil singing and telling an occasional bad joke, and somehow not his old self. No one was his old self. No one would ever be his old self with the First One.

They turned left, to take the short cut along Hallowed Hill Road, and Phil finished a story about a Martian and a Hollywood sex queen and looked at his wife and then past her at the long, cast-iron fence paralleling the road. "Hey," he said, pointing, "do you know why that's the most popular place on earth?"

Rhona glanced to the left, and so did Hank and Edith. Rhona made a little sound, and Edith seemed to stop breathing, but Phil went on a while longer, not yet aware of his supposed *faux pas*.

"You know why?" he repeated, turning to the back seat, the laughter rumbling up from his chest. "You know why, folks?"

Rhona said, "Did you notice Carl Braken and his wife at—"

Hank said, "No, Phil, why is it the most popular place on earth?"

Phil said, "Because people are—" And then he caught himself and waved his hand and muttered, "I forgot the punch line."

"Because people are dying to get in," Hank said, and looked through the window, past the iron fence, into the large cemetery at the fleeting tombstones.

The car was filled with horrified silence when there should have been nothing but laughter, or irritation at a too-old joke. "Maybe you should let me out right here," Hank said. "I'm home—or that's what everyone seems to think. Maybe I should lie down in an open grave. Maybe that would satisfy people. Maybe that's the only way to act, like Dracula or another monster from the movies."

Edith said, "Oh, Hank, don't, don't!"

The car raced along the road, crossed a macadam highway, went four blocks and pulled to a stop. He didn't bother saying good night. He didn't wait for Edith. He just got out and walked up the flagstone path and entered the house.



"Hank," Edith whispered from the guest room doorway, "I'm so sorry—"

"There's nothing to be sorry about. It's just a matter of time. It'll all work out in time."

"Yes," she said quickly, "that's it. I need a little time. We all need a little time. Because it's so strange, Hank. Because it's so frightening. I should have told you that the moment you walked in. I think I've hurt you terribly, we've all hurt you terribly, by trying to hide that we're frightened."

"I'm going to stay in the guest room," he said, "for as long as necessary. For good if need be."

"How could it be for good? How, Hank?"

That question was perhaps the first firm basis for hope he'd had since returning. And there was something else; what Carlisle had told him, even as Carlisle himself had reacted as all men did.

"There are others coming, Edith. Eight that I know of in the tanks right now. My

superior, Captain Davidson, who died at the same moment I did—seven months ago next Wednesday—he's going to be next. He was smashed up worse than I was, so it took a little longer, but he's almost ready. And there'll be many more, Edith. The government is going to save all they possibly can from now on. Every time a young and healthy man loses his life by accident, by violence, and his body can be recovered, he'll go into the tanks and they'll start the regenerative brain and organ process—the process that made it all possible. So people have to get used to us. And the old stories, the old terrors, the ugly old superstitions have to die, because in time each place will have some of us; because in time it'll be an ordinary thing."

Edith said, "Yes, and I'm so grateful that you're here, Hank. Please believe that. Please be patient with me and Ralphie and—" She paused. "There's one question."

He knew what the question was. It had been the first asked him by everyone from the president of the United States on down.

"I saw nothing," he said. "It was as if I slept those six and a half months—slept without dreaming."

She came to him and touched his face with her lips, and he was satisfied.

Later, half asleep, he heard a dog howling, and remembered stories of how they announced death and the presence of monsters. He shivered and pulled the covers closer to him and luxuriated in being safe in his own home.

THE END

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