NEVER GO BACK

By CHARLES V. DE VET

You've heard the story about the man who moved back through time and murdered his own grandfather? Well, don't worry; this isn't it! So many yarns are variations on this theme that it has become a science-fiction cliche. In fact, most time-travel stories are pretty much an old-hat routine these days, and editors flinch whenever they run into one.

Which is why we flinched when Charles De Vet tossed the ms. of Never Go Back *on our desk. But*

because we have a fine large admiration for his ability, we swallowed our qualms (they're mint-flavored) and read what, on the surface, promised to be just one more tired tale of time travel. That our fears were groundless is evidenced by the fact that the story is proudly presented in these pages.

SUCCESS! He had returned! But as he stood with the warm rain splashing against his shoulders and running sluggishly down his naked body, the feeling of triumph he should have felt was dulled and numbed by a presentiment of disaster. Unease, tinged with a sense of horror, centered at the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. An aura of sourceless despair seemed to surround him. He felt it reach for him.

There was just enough light to make out, vaguely, the features of the old deserted house in front of him.

He must not be found here without clothes, he thought, as he walked around the wing of the house. His legs felt heavy and he had to lift them with an obvious effort. It was as though the night air had become viscous and clung to his legs.

The second window was unlatched, as he had expected. He raised it and crawled through.

Groping carefully in the dark, dim mists of memory returned as he felt remembered pieces of furniture scattered about the room. In the downstairs bedroom he found the old iron bed still standing in its corner. Ripping a tattered curtain from one of the windows, he wiped himself dry.

He lay on the bed and curled up to sleep. The summer night was warm and the old house still held its trapped heat. He'd need no blankets.

This was the same bed his grandfather had died in months before, but it gave him no feeling of unrest to sleep here. He had always liked his grandfather, and the liking had been returned.

The bed had a faint odor of mold and mustiness.

Sometime toward morning Meissner awoke. Coolness had crept into the houses and he was too uncomfortable to go back to sleep. Through the window at his head he saw the first light of breaking dawn.

He rose and rubbed his body vigorously to bring warmth back into the flesh. Then he left the bedroom, went through the dining room, and up the stairway to the second floor.

In one of the clothes-closets off the hall he found a shirt, a pair of trousers — slightly too large for him — and shoes. There were no stockings but the pants came down low on his legs and probably no one would notice. In one of the trouser pockets he found a half-dollar. This was an unexpected bit of luck and, for a moment, it lifted the black depression that still rode his spirits like a cloak.

When his grandfather had died, Meissner remembered, the house had been left pretty much as it was for almost a year. Now and then some one of his children —all of them married — would drop in and pick up something he wanted. But it was a year before the house was completely cleaned out and sold.

Meissner waited until broad daylight before venturing outside. He had not walked far before recognized two men coming toward him.

"Good morning, Mr. van Immortal. And Mr. Plucker," Meissner said, as they met.

The men looked at him in surprise and grunted noncommittal replies. This would never do, Meissner

reflected. Too much familiarity with his surroundings could easily lead to trouble. He must keep his identity secret at all costs.

At the Busy Bee Meissner had wheat cakes and coffee. He took his time eating them, waiting for the business district of the small town to come to life. In the meantime he glanced at the calendar and verified the date. July 8, 1933. Becker had done a good job in figuring when he would appear again in his trip into the past. He should be in time to save Norbert Kerr s life.

At a quarter to nine he left the Busy Bee and walked over to the school grounds. And now the first excitement of expectation ran through him like a live current —but mingled with it was the ever-present dread. He wished he could put his finger on the reason for that dread.

In a few minutes he should be able to see himself as he had been twenty years earlier. What would his sensations be as he watched himself playing in the school yard?

Most of the children were already out on the grounds, playing a game called pump-pump-pullaway. He had almost forgotten that game, but it had been very popular in his youth.

For five minutes Meissner watched, but saw no signs of his former self. However, he recognized one of the smaller boys as Norbert Kell.

Primarily, he had come back out of scientific curiosity, to see if the medium he and Becker had devised would work. However, in picking a date he had decided on July 8, 1933. That was the date young Kerl had drowned in the old stone pit. And, incidental as it was to the main purpose of his journey, Meissner wanted to prevent that tragedy, if at all possible.

He did not know how long it would be before he snapped back into the future. Perhaps he would not have time to prevent Kerl from going to the swimming hole, so he decided to scare him away somehow. He walked nearer to where the boys were playing. "Norbert," he called, "will you come here a minute?"

"Yeah?" Kerl asked as he ran over.

"How's the water in the old swimming hole?" Meissner asked.

"Pretty good," Kerl answered, looking at him questioningly.

"I was over there the other day," Meissner said. "And I saw a mother copperhead with fourteen young ones swimming around. That's going to be a dangerous place to swim for awhile."

"Copperheads?" Kerl asked. "They're poison, ain't they?"

"A bite from one of them will kill you in ten minutes," Meissner told him. "I wouldn't go near there for a long time if I were you."

"I won't," Kerl said. "Thanks." He shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I got to go back and play now."

"Just a minute," Meissner said, before Kerl could leave. “Where is little Art Meissner now? I don't see him playing."

"I don't know him."

"Oh, sure you do," Meissner said. "He's about your size. Dark hair. You play with him a lot."

"There ain't no kid here by that name," Ken answered. He ran back to the other children.

No kid here by that name! The dreariness that had been gnawing at Meissner's vitals became a cry of agony. He remembered the school, and the children — though he had forgotten most of their names — and everything he saw around him. He, in his youth, had to be there somewhere. He decided to take the risk of talking to his old teacher.

"Miss Gallagher," Meissner said, "I'm looking for a boy by the name of Arthur Meissner. I understand he's in your class."

"No, I'm afraid not," Miss Gallagher replied. "There's no boy by that name in school. There is a George Meissner in the eighth grade; but he has no brothers."

George Meissner was his older brother. The feeling was worse now. She had said that George had no brothers. That wasn't possible.

"Well, thank —" the words caught in Meissner's throat and he turned and stumbled blindly out of the room.

Something was wrong here —terribly wrong. But he had to be absolutely certain that he was making no mistake. He started determinedly down the street.

At the end of three blocks Meissner came to the large, square house where he had lived as a boy. His mother should be home now.

It wouldn't do to blurt out that he had come from the future and that he was her son, he decided. Especially now that there was a mystery here that he must clear up. He'd have to think up some plausible story to use while he talked to her. He rang the bell.

"Yes?" The woman who answered was younger than Meissner had remembered. She was younger than he. Yet, she was unmistakably his mother. Her face and figure already bore the signs of hard work's molding. She had always worked hard, he remembered.

"I'm Mr. Anderson," Meissner said. "I've been hired by the board of education to conduct a survey of parents with children in school. You have two, have you not, Mrs. Meissner?"

"I have only one child," the woman said, drying her hands oil the dish towel she carried. "His name is George, and he's in the eighth grade."

The crying inside became worse and Meissner could no longer hold it inside. "Mother," he cried, "don't you recognize me? I'm your son!"

The woman looked alarmed, and instantly Meissner realized how grave a misstep he had made. Here he was, a man older than she, claiming to be her son. "I'm afraid I can't talk any longer," the woman said. She was clearly frightened now.

"Please, just one more question," Meissner begged. "You're positive that you do not have a son by the name of Arthur?"

"Yes," she said and closed the door quickly.

Meissner spent the afternoon at the old swimming hole. He did not think it wise to remain around town.

Probably by now his mother had spread an alarm about a queer-acting man. The townspeople would undoubtedly think him insane. Perhaps they would even arrest him. Further, he wanted to be certain that young Ken did not visit the swimming hole that day. As he remembered, Ken had drowned at about four-thirty in the afternoon.

The day was warm and Meissner lay in the cool shade of a willow tree. Overhead a bird chirped cheerfully, and Meissner knew that ordinarily he should have felt peaceful and relaxed on a day like this. But his nerves were taut as stretched wires, and his emotions were those of a man sentenced to die. All day long a dog howled dismally off in the distance.

When dusk came Meissner knew that at least he had managed to prevent Kerl's drowning — on that day anyway. He started back for his grandfather's house.

Becker had estimated that Meissner would spend about twenty-four hours in past time before he snapped back into the future. His analogy had been that it would be like a rubber band, snapping twenty years into the past, where it would pause — for the time he would be able to spend there — before it began its return journey. Becker had not been able to estimate it exactly.

Meissner opened the door of his grandfather's house and felt himself snatched as in a giant hand and whisked out of time and space.

When Meissner returned he found himself standing in the dim light of early dawn. But where was Becker, he wondered. Becker was supposed to be waiting for him. And when he was not able to be here, he was to have left a change of clothing for Meissner. There was none to be seen.

Becker had not been able to estimate the exact time he would return. He had only been able to conclude that it would be a bit beyond the time Meissner had started. His rubber band would snap him back and its momentum would carry him a bit beyond his original starting point. Probably about a week into the future. That would give Becker plenty of time to make arrangements for his return. But there was no one here.

Perhaps Becker had underestimated the time, Meissner thought. Or perhaps he had returned to a time before he started. But then he would have met himself again before he left. More likely Becker had miscalculated and he had gone farther into the future than Becker had judged. But even so Becker should be waiting, or he should have left some sign that Meissner would recognize.

Meissner shrugged. Whatever the explanation, he couldn't afford to be caught here without clothes. He turned down an alley that ran to his left. A third of the way down the alley he saw a shirt and a pair of overalls hanging on a line. Slipping into the back yard, Meissner pulled the clothes off the line and put them on.

He was just fastening the last button on the shirt when he heard the clink of milk bottles. Then a shout. "What are you doing there?" a man's sleepy voice called. Meissner ran, but the man followed, shouting, "Stop! Come back with those clothes!"

Meissner increased his pace. He'd begun to outdistance the man when he stubbed his bare toe on a rock and fell.

His hands scraped along the cinders, and one knee tore through the leg of the overalls. He almost lost out then, but he climbed quickly to his feet and sprinted around the corner.

Meissner knew now where he'd go to hide. The Chicago and Minneapolis railroad tracks ran through a gully about six blocks away. The sides of the gully were overgrown with Indian coffee bushes and weeds. Meissner had lost his pursuer now. At least he heard no sounds of him.

Once down in the gully, he crawled into the thickest bushes and lay down.

'He was more tired than he had suspected; and he was thirsty, but he dared not leave. The man from whom he had stolen the clothing might still be looking for him. Soon sleep swept away his troubles and he dozed for the remainder of the forenoon.

Sometime during the afternoon Meissner awoke and his mouth was pinched with a tight and dry sourness. His whole body ached and protested against his every move. He placed the back of his hand against his forehead and it was hot and feverish. He knew he had to have food and water soon.

It should be safe to venture out now, he decided. If the man — or the police — were looking for him, and caught him, he could call Becker. There would be some explanations necessary, but probably no great danger of detention.

"Good God, don't tell me you don't know, me either?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Doctor Becker said, "but to the best of my knowledge I've never seen you before in my life."

"But you must have!" Meissner's voice was high and unsteady. "I'm Arthur Meissner. You and I discovered the secret of travelling in time! I went back to my childhood, and now I've returned. You must remember me!"

"Are you sure that you feel well?"

"Of course I do," Meissner exclaimed. "Why won't you admit that you know me? You're like the others in the past. They insisted that nobody like me had ever lived there. Even my mother denied me." His voice lost its tenseness and sank to a gray hopelessness. "Now, if you don't know me, I don't know what I'll do." His knees trembled, and he leaned his hand against the door for support. A flash of fever coursed through his body and burned into his eyes.

"If there's something I can do . . ."

"No, it seems not," Meissner said tonelessly. He turned to go, but his knees sagged slowly beneath him and he slumped to the doorstep.

"At last you've come around," Becker said. "I was a bit worried about you." He felt Meissner's wrist. "Your pulse has slowed down some, but your fever is as high as ever. I fail to find evidence of anything wrong with you, though, except for the scratches on your knees and hands."

Meissner spoke eagerly. "Tell me, Doctor," he said, "and please — please don't joke. You do re member me, don't you?"

Becker shook his head.

"But then, what's happened to me? Why doesn't anybody know me?"

"Take this sedative, please," Becker said. "You need more rest. After you sleep we'll talk again."

This time when Meissner awoke he felt better, and his head was clear. His fever still burned, but it did not affect his thinking.

Becker must have heard him moving, for he entered the bedroom almost immediately. "How are you feeling now?" he asked.

"Some better, I guess," Meissner replied. "I suppose you think I'm crazy?"

"No. But your high fever has induced some strange hallucinations. I hope you've managed to rid yourself of them."

"Doctor," Meissner said earnestly, "I want you to do me a favor. Just pretend — at least until I've told you my story — that you don't think I'm crazy or have hallucinations. Think and act as if what I'm going to tell you could have happened. Will you do that?"

"Of course," Becker answered. "Go right ahead."

"All right. To start with, my name is Arthur Meissner. Six years ago I met a man by the name of Walter Becker. This was not a coincidence. Becker was a physicist; one of the best in the country. I, on the other hand, was an amateur, working along unusual lines of somatology. The story is long, but its essential feature is that I had an idea for building a time machine and, with Becker's help and scientific knowledge, succeeded.

"I went back twenty years into time, to my youth. And when I arrived I found that I had never existed there — even though I remembered everything I saw. Now, when I return here, I find that you know nothing about me, or our experiments. Can you possibly give me any explanation?"

Becker was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "The Becker you refer to, I presume, is supposed to be me. You say that he was a famous physicist. I am a medical doctor! So, if I were to grant that your story is true, are you certain that I'm the man you're looking for?"

"Positive. You're not only identical, but you live in this same house. I've spent many hours with you, working in your laboratory in the basement."

"I have a woodshop in the basement," Becker said, "but no laboratory.

"I have thought over everything you told me," Becker said. "I've considered it objectively, as you asked. Strangely enough, I believe you. Or at least I'm convinced that you're sincere. Why don't you bathe and shave, if you feel well enough, and after you're through we can talk again."

"A good idea." Messiner rose and walked into the bathroom. He looked into the looking glass and was startled at his reflection. His bitter experience had done ghastly things to him. He would hardly have recognized himself. His face seemed bloated and puffed, his brows were heavier, and his whiskers were black and tough as steel barbs. He shaved with difficulty. But after it was over he did feel better.

"Now," Becker said, after they'd seated themselves, "acting on the assumption that your story is true, I've arrived at an answer to the mystery of what happened to you. Naturally, I can give you no assurance that it is the correct one, but it is an explanation, and may help you get peace of mind, if nothing else."

Meissner sat up straighter. "Go ahead," he said.

"Nature," Becker continued, "has certain immutable laws which cannot be defied with impunity. True, science is finding new truths every day, and finding that the old accepted beliefs are wrong. However," Becker paused while he searched for the exact words he wanted, "certain truths and laws are inviolable by their own intrinsic necessity. To use an example, you've probably heard the old saw about what happens when an irresistible force strikes an immovable object. Theoretically at least, it is possible to have an irresistible force. And it is just as possible to have an immovable object. But it is not possible to have both. If the force is irresistible, it will move any object. If, on the other hand, the object is immovable, no force will be able to move it.

"Another immutable law of nature is this: No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. You may have heard that stated before?"

"I believe I have," Meissner answered. "But what does that have to do with what's happened to me?"

"I'm coming to that," Becker said. "If you travelled backward in time as you claim, you attempted to violate a law of nature which may be regarded as a corollary of the axiom that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time. The one you violated is one so self-evident that it's probably never been defined by an axiom. It may be stated as: no object, undivided, can occupy more than one unit of space at one time."

"Are you trying to tell me that I could not exist — at the same time — both as a youth and as an adult?"

"Yes," Becker answered. "You see, you yourself are the object in this particular instance, and by going back into time you — the same object — would be occupying two separate units of space at the same time. Which is axiomatically impossible. Therefore, nature made its adjustment; the same as it would if an irresistible force hit a so-called immovable object. It eliminates one of them. It did the same when it eliminated your past."

"I see, rather vaguely, what you mean," Meissner said. "But why, then, don't you remember me, now that I'm back?"

"But don't you see, the things you expect me to remember about you also happened in your past, and you wiped out all that by your violation of one of nature's precepts. Therefore, the things you remember about your contacts with me never happened either."

"But then how can I be here at all? I shouldn't exist if I have no past."

"That," Becker said gravely, "has given me a great deal of thought. And I dread to put into words the conclusion I came to. I pray that I'm wrong."

That evening when Meissner entered the bathroom and looked into the mirror his reflection was awe-inspiring. The swelling in his face had puffed up his lips, and spread his nostrils, giving a flattened, apelike cast to his features. His beard had grown in surprisingly fast; the whiskers had crept up closer to his eyes and down his neck until there was no break between the whisker line and the long hair on his chest. His eyebrows were heavier and longer, and his forehead appeared narrower.

The grimace he gave at the sight of his reflection drew his thick lips back into a snarl, and his eyeteeth stood out like fangs. His expression was entirely brutish.

That night Meissner was tossed by the fever and his whole body became one twitching, itching torment.

He scratched continuously until he was sore and raw-fleshed in a dozen places.

When he could stand the misery no longer, he attempted to call to Becker. But his lips and tongue refused to form words, as though dulled by long disuse. At last he forced out a shout. "Becker! Becker!" he called hoarsely. "Help me!"

Becker entered at his second call, drawing his bathrobe about him. He looked at Meissner with grave concern, but without surprise.

"Can't you stop this god-awful itching?" Meissner asked. "It's driving me mad. I can't stand much more of it."

"I'll do what I can," Becker said. He went into the bathroom and returned quickly with a jar of ointment. "Can you take your pajamas off by yourself?" he asked.

"I think so," Meissner answered. As he pulled his pajama top over his head Meissner looked down at his bare body. The skin was coarse tissued, gray and dead looking — except the patches of raw red flesh which he had scratched bare. When he touched the skin he felt a morbid chill —and yet it was dry and flaky.

"What's happened to me, Becker?" he asked, turning his bloodshot eyes up to the doctor. Suddenly, self-pity overcame him and he started to cry.

Obviously embarrassed, Becker did not speak. He avoided meeting Meissner's pleading, tearful look.

"For God's sake, if you know, tell me!" Meissner cried.

Becker drew in a deep breath. " I think I do know, Arthur," he said slowly. " Do you really want me to tell you?"

Meissner nodded, his voice muted by what he read in Becker's expression.

"Is your mind clear enough to understand everything I say?" Becker asked.

"It's not too clear," Meissner answered. "Things keep coming and going. Sometimes I'm not even sure who 1 am, or what I'm doing here."

"Do you remember the last time we talked — when you asked how you could exist at all if you were a man without a past?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Then I think you should have an explanation; at least what I believe it is. To give you this-answer, I will have to be brutally frank. Maybe I'm wrong to tell you, but in all fairness, if you want it you shall have it."

Fear crawled along Meissner's skin like a live thing. He did not know what was coming, but he realized that whatever it was it would be terrible to heap. He stared at Becker with a helpless appeal, but said nothing.

"In past ages," Becker said, "inanimate matter in some way became impregnated with life force, and through the eons it moved, through its slow evolutionary process, to its present stage of development. The crux of your whole difficulty is that, according to nature, you should not be existing now, as you have no past, and therefore are not a result of that evolutionary process. You constitute a contradiction which

must be remedied. It is moving now to eliminate the error you represent — by sending you back through that evolutionary process.

"If you remember, the last time you looked into a mirror your features were hairy and bestial. Now the hair has started to leave your body, and scales are taking its place. The twitching and itching you feel on your skin is due to its cellular change."

Once again Becker paused and gazed pityingly at the man before him. "I know this is an awful thing to tell you," he said, "but, as I mentioned before, I believe you are entitled to hear it. Lord knows it cannot make your difficulty much worse than it is now."

Despite the shock of the doctor's words, small segments of reason still clung to Meissner's brain. "But that evolutionary process took millions of years. If what you say is true, why is the reverse going so swiftly?"

"Nature is hurrying to rectify its disorder. You are not only returning quickly, but I am certain that the rate of retrogression is one of a geometrically, rather than an arithmetically, increasing rate. In other words, if you started going back at the rate of — say, two thousand years a minute —the second minute you returned at the rate of four thousand years a minute; the third minute, eight thousand ; the fourth, sixteen thousand; and so on. That's why I believe you do not have much longer to live. I wish to heaven there was some way I could help you. But I am powerless."

The sickness that had been gathering in Meissner's throat rose up and engulfed him in a great black mass of unconsciousness.

Sometime later awareness re turned to Meissner's conscious mind, spurred by the immediacy of a desire — a need — that could not be denied. He had to have water!

Arising from his bed he staggered into the bathroom and filled the wash bowl with water from its cold faucet. He buried his bald, gray, scaly head in the water and gulped in great swallows of the precious liquid.

But still his need was not satisfied. Straightening up from the bowl he let his myopic gaze wander about the room, until it rested on the bathtub. For a long moment he regarded it before4the logic of its function became evident. Then he turned on both faucets of the tub, and crawled in. He did not remove the clothing he wore.

The warm water embosomed Meissner's throbbing body, and he felt a soft glow of tranquillity — his first peace and satisfaction since the start of his horrible ordeal. For short periods he immersed his head in the water, and while he held it there his limbs fluttered idly, with a placid quiescence. He was content.

With the contentment came a bestial cunning — and a bestial decision!

The thing that pulled itself from the tub bore little semblance to a human being. Its animal cunning directed it as it fumbled at the catch on the medicine cabinet door — until it had solved the-method of its opening.

It was quiet now. Quiet with the deceptive guile of a primitive thing. Among the bottles and implements in the medicine cabinet it found a pair of scissors. It clutched them like a dagger in its webbed hand and stood swaying slowly — back and forth.

During a long minute of indecision its gaze returned to the tub with its lure of the water it needed — longingly. But its resolution returned to its stronger impellation — revenge — and soon its purpose was

once again. firmly fixed in mind.

It did not know why it must do this: that it was caught in the grasp of a psychological compulsion stronger than its elementary reasoning power. It only knew that it associated its pain with the being who had explained its cause. As such it must kill that being.

Slowly it dragged its gross body across the bathroom floor and out the door.

The evolutionary change in its tissues was an agonizing thing now. Its outer wrapping no longer merely twitched and itched. Rather, it writhed and cracked with the terrible abruptness of its structural changes. Blood ran sluggishly from the raw breaks in its lacerated flesh.

At the doorway to Becker's room it leaned against the doorframe, gathering its rudimentary wits, while the counter-evolutionary process coursed with lightning speed through its tissues. Only one spark of reason burned: it must kill! It must plunge its daggerlike shears into the form that breathed on the bed before it.

It attempted to step forward, but during its long pause the lower appendages on its carcass had joined and now formed one solid extension of its trunk. It could no longer walk!

It fell, face forward.

The sound of its fall startled Becker into an upright position. He reached up and snapped on his light. At the foot of his bed something struggled and made moist, suckling sounds with its mouth. Becker looked down.

"My God!" he said. The thing that lay on the floor inched painfully toward him. It twisted and crawled. And twisted and crawled. And twisted . . .