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THE SLEEPER IS A REBEL

A Novel of the Future by **BRYCE WALTON**

THE SHAPE OF THINGS *by* **RAY BRADBURY**



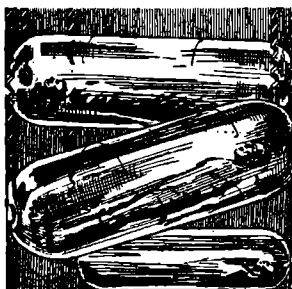
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A Novel of the Future

THE SLEEPER IS A REBEL

By BRYCE WALTON

Because he is branded a misfit, Deker volunteers for Nirvana—which brings him surcease for aeons—but at each awakening he is again tormented by evil reality! 13

Two Complete Novelets

- THE SEVEN TEMPORARY MOONS..... William Fitzgerald 56
When enemy space-ships ride aloft in menacing array, Dr. Murfree again calls on the amazing hillbilly genius, Bud Gregory, for help!
- TRANSURANIC..... Edmond Hamilton 72
Earth's scientists on the Moon create a new life form and then must battle to destroy it—or face inhuman elements beyond control

Short Stories

- THE DOBRIDUST..... Margaret St. Clair 41
This little gadget gave Oona and other folks more than a headache
- THE SHAPE OF THINGS..... Ray Bradbury 47
Peter Horn's child was a small blue pyramid of another dimension!
- THE LONG WAY BACK..... John Barrett 84
Carl Reese and Thela Brill dodge the Martian death in their space ship

Features

- THE READER SPEAKS..... The Editor 6
- SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW..... A Department 110

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As Deker retrieved his sword, the long lance smacked, stuck into the albino's twitching back

The Sleeper Is a Rebel

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Because he is branded a misfit, Deker volunteers for Nirvana—which brings him surcease for eons—but at each awakening he is again tormented by evil reality!

CHAPTER I

Surrender

WITH bitter resignation Deker faced the two immaculately clothed Psych Staffmen. His figure was gaunt, wild, that of a savage anachronism. His dirt-caked face cracked in a wry smile.

The staffmen's faces showed fear.

"I'm surrendering," Deker said. "I thought I could live alone, but I couldn't. My abnormality isn't that kind."

Their fears of violence placated, the two Psychos led him to the small waiting gyro. He sat between them and watched the wild expanse of forest diminish beneath them as they headed for City Three. It had been a

A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE

dangerous freedom in the sea of unsullied North American forest, living precariously from what he could squeeze from a well-stocked but selfish Nature. He had almost starved for a while, until he had learned the rudiments of survival.

And then—the brooding loneliness.

Man cannot live alone. He is a social animal. But Deker was also an off-sized cog, a misfit that would never find a place in the perfectionistic mechanism of the Hundred Cities Utopian Federation.

"You will volunteer for the Experimental Labs of course," the man on his right said. "Scientist Brenn needs volunteers. I can't understand why you haven't accepted Nirvana before this, Deker! Ordinarily, an Abnormal is more than willing to accept it. It's for the good of the Federation, you know!"

"I know," said Deker acrimoniously.

The Federation was the only thing that mattered. A lone, maladjusted pariah labeled Deker didn't matter. From the time the individuals of the Federation were artificially semenated, placed in a row of generation jars in the Embryo wards, they were conditioned to take their predestined place in the social machinery.

But if an abnormality, a misfit, appeared he was tolerated, though socially ostracized, psychologically forced to volunteer to be done away with, legally. "Nirvana"—a kind, soft word for extermination.

They didn't kill you, for such a thing would be unthinkable in the perfect order. One slept, was put to permanent gelid sleep in Brenn's encystment capsule. Deker had tried to escape. But there was no escape for an *abnormal*. Nothing but Nirvana. . . .

DEKER STOOD, looking across a gleaming desk at the head of the Psych Council for City Three. From having been here for consultation many times before, Deker knew this man's name as Jak. He was eighty years old, though his voice and face were still young, virile, enthusiastic. The Conditioners did well.

"You surrendered voluntarily," Jak said, his eyes unwaveringly on Deker's. "It's fortunate that your ill-advised attempt to escape ended so amicably."

Deker's thin lips curled. "I wonder if you've considered the fact that your 'perfect' system is responsible for me, an imperfection?"

"Of course. But this is only Twenty-one-

sixty A.D. At this early stage we must expect incidental imperfections. The Federation is only two centuries old. It's the glorious whole of our Hundred Cities one must consider. A little too much thyroxine injection, or a slight irregularity in the saltine schedule, and you resulted. A martyr to the ultimate planned perfection of the Hundred Cities! If only you had reacted properly to the Conditioners!"

Deker walked to the great window overlooking Bellamy Square. Yes, outwardly it was Bellamy's Utopian dream. But . . . He turned back toward Jak.

"For five years I forced myself to be a lathe worker. But I hated it. So to compensate, I illegally studied books, all the books I could get, and that made me even more maladjusted. You speak of perfection! But we're physico-chemical structures. We're variable, subject to unpredictable alterations. I'm one of many abnormals decanted from the wards. Perhaps only small insignificant errors. But you have no way of foreseeing or preventing big errors, Jak! It's tinsel veneering. A house of glittering sound."

Jak shook his head sadly. "Too bad they don't proceed with the space-flight development. A splendid release for your type. But no benefit to the Federation, so it must be dropped. However, I'm glad you've volunteered for Nirvana. Brenn badly needs more subjects for his suspended animation experiments."

Deker remembered then how desperately they had tried to correct their decanting error by reconditioning processes. The individual was conditioned from prenatal stage on to perform specific tasks in the social machinery, and he was also conditioned to think that specific task simply wonderful. But not for Deker. He was too negativistic. The machinery droning over and over into his brain, month after futile month those words:

"The lathe worker is the most necessary worker in the Federation. No other worker is so important as those who operate the lathes. I'm proud to be a lathe worker." Or: "I'm so very, very glad I'm a lathe worker." Or again: "I could never, never be anything but a lathe worker."

Deker looked at Jak. "You labeled me a negativist. Because after five years of that, I decided that being a lathe worker was about the most sorry job a human being could have, in this socialized futility."



The girl stood looking out of the window of her sanctum

Jak exuded sympathy from his clear eager eyes.

"For you, yes," he agreed. "That's why it is best for you and the Federation that you accept Nirvana. It's too bad, really, that the Federation cannot use you. Potentially, you have a high-A mental capacity. But you've destroyed any possibility of specialization by the secret studying you did during those years you worked on your lathe. Generalized knowledge is dead."

After an empty, painful silence Deker said: "I'm ready to go, Jak. I've never even been smiled at by a woman and my life's a third gone. I think that has decided me more than anything else. Imagine how you would feel if every woman stared and shied away from you as though you were some kind of animal out of a zoo!"

Jak coughed, motioned. The two staffmen entered.

"Good-by, Deker," Jak said. "You may go into the experimental labs happily, knowing you are contributing to the ultimate and eternal glory of the Federation."

Deker walked out between them, was taken to the scientist, Brenn. Enroute, he saw or heard little because of a shock-absorbing haze of amnesia. A haze that broke immediately when he met Brenn for the first time and became aware of a startling, stunning fact:

Brenn, himself, was an Abnormal!

Brenn was motioning nervously about his laboratory, after the two staffmen had left. Motioning at the elaborate machinery, the time-encystment capsules suspended from the ceiling like pendular streamlined coffins.

SMALL, erratic, in soiled plastic working gown, Brenn was a man whose eyes gleamed with secrecy. Small, blue-veined hands twisted constantly. Deker couldn't believe it. Brenn, one of the Federation's top ranking research psych-physicists, an Abnormal! Surely the Class One Intellectuals knew!

"You recognize me for what I am, Deker," Brenn said. "So do they. But they can't prove it, officially. But I'm a different kind of Abnormal than you and these others asleep in my capsules. Mine isn't a result of physiological error during embryo or prenatal. In spite of the Conditioners, I developed high degree insight and free agency. I've been able to conceal my abnormality deliberately and make a socially acceptable adjustment.

You could have done the same—with insight." He added with a sly wink, "*Many have.*"

Brenn commenced pacing the length of the time-vault.

"I've explained to the others before I put them in stasis," he said. "I can explain to you now."

Deker dropped down on an alloy bench, slightly dizzy with amazement.

"Deker," Brenn went on, "you have probably realized that the Federation is a silly dream punctured with holes. The fabric glitters, but it's false."

Deker nodded. The scientist continued in a grave tone:

"Created out of desperation because of the sudden mastery of basic energies, the World Federation seeks final standardization, socialization, as the only defense against self-annihilation. That's wrong. It will be solved by individual development or not at all. At any time incurable inherent factors in human nature may spawn a will-to-power fanatic who, with knowledge of basic energy, can destroy all our wonderful Hundred Cities overnight. There are, for example, the Anarchs."

Deker started at Brenn, his amazement growing.

"You're surprised that there actually is an underground organization of Anarchs? So would be many others. And there may be other organizations and individuals who are not a part of the Federated system. Destructives. That's why I'm working with my experiments here in suspended animation. You sleepers may survive the disaster."

Deker looked around as Brenn paused. Eleven capsules were suspended from the low metal ceiling. Inside each capsule, a body, a freak, an Abnormal from prenatal and embryo wards. Each body would live, unaging, while it was administered to properly. Suspended animation.

"You see," said Brenn, enjoying the dramatic effect. "I'm responsible for you. For you and those others here in the capsules. I intentionally caused your abnormalities!"

Deker was immunized now to shock. He only blinked.

"By my Class One rating," explained Brenn, "I have been legally admitted to the embryo wards whenever I desired. Secretly I caused the alterations in certain normally developing embryos. I caused teratological freaks to emerge instead of sponges for the colorless liquids poured from the condition-

CHAPTER II

The Gods Awake

ing machines. Physically, I'll admit some of the results are ugly." He indicated the hanging capsules. "In that capsule sleeps a two-headed man. There, a hunchback; and there, a Cyclopean monster with three eyes and a ferocious temper. There is an albino, a trembling raw lump of sensitivity. There is one who almost sprouted wings and became a birdman. Like you, some are only mentally distorted. Remember the woman, Shar, who tried to commit suicide? She's here."

Deker couldn't hate Brenn. Even being a twisted freak was preferable to being a mindless child of the Conditioners, happy because of a total lack of free associative thought.

"Individuals and organizations like the Anarchs," said Brenn, "could destroy all the Hundred Cities of Utopia overnight. Civilization as we recognize it now may not survive. But my hope is that you will. This vault is surrounded by tons of protective sheeting. I needed subjects for this experiment in suspended animation, and used the only legal method there was for obtaining them."

"And you?" asked Deker.

"No importance. I will die. Humanity must persist! That's the only thing that matters. The position of humans will at times become so precarious that survival will seem impossible. But humanity will keep driving forward, Deker. It must. I'm putting my faith in that."

Brenn explained something about the encystment principle. Temperature mean down to 7.1 degrees centigrade. Could go on living indefinitely. Human organism a chemical complex. His life short and fast, because it's hot. But all these suspended sleepers were cold, cold.

But Deker had lost interest. He was tired. He wanted escape. Nirvana. And later, outstretched within the capsule, he hardly realized that his consciousness was beginning to fade.

A sharp strange odor closed over his face like a sticky gas. Brilliant flashes of light circled round and round his head like bursting novae. He was swimming in a pool of dark red. It was like blood, only it was thin and wonderfully cool. Slowly and more slowly he swam until he was floating weightless, looking up into an endlessly swirling green mist.

Then somewhere a bell clanged loudly. It rang three times.

DEKER floated on the red sea long after he began hearing the bell. And he knew that the key threshold which Brenn had left open for activation had been stimulated. Sometime later, he was fully conscious.

He stretched his body, felt the strong new pumping of blood that had been flowing with such infinite slowness. Flooding oxygen lifted him to his elbows with a dizzy exuberance. He pressed a stud, and the cowling above the capsule slid back noiselessly. Deker climbed out onto the vault floor.

One by one the others were climbing from their capsules, transforming the metal-lined vault abruptly into a weird distorted nightmare. The hunchback swung his stocky, humped figure to the floor on enormous arms. He stood uncertainly a moment, running big hands through a bush of black hair. He smiled with sardonic humor on his gargoyle face, motioned with a sweeping gesture toward the others.

The two-headed man, both heads misshapen and ugly, groaned softly. He opened his two pairs of pain-raddled eyes, glared at Deker and the hunchback, then buried the eyes in thin pale arms.

"He's always in pain," the hunchback explained with easy friendliness. "They kept him doped with hypnosene for years before he finally consented to accept Nirvana. Nothing here in the vault to alleviate his pain. And who knows what's outside?"

The white-haired albino came hopping nervously across the floor, waving red hands, sighing with fear. The giant three-eyed man's middle eye was a bright, evil glare.

The manic-depressive, Shar, who had tried to commit suicide by jumping from City Three's highest building, walked past the Cyclops and stood close to Deker. Black, feverish eyes matched the shining black of her hair. Deker saw nothing except the moist full redness of her lips.

There were others—drab, colorless women, an insignificant little bald-headed man, and the man who had almost grown wings. But the slightly clothed figure of the woman, Shar, demanded most of Deker's attention.

"Who are you, friend?" the hunchback

said in a deep rich basso. "I'm Gans."

"Deker." He walked a few steps back and forth, tentatively. Feeling was still coming into his limbs.

"No sign of Brenn, so at least we must have slept longer than he lived," suggested Shar in a deep, husky voice. She shifted her hips sinuously.

"Or maybe he's outside the vault," whispered Deker harshly, watching Shar. She also watched him. No woman had ever looked at Deker that way.

"True," said the hunchback. "These opaque sections allow the morbidly curious to see inside, though we can't see out. I wonder how long it's been?"

The distorted face grinned. And, surprisingly enough, he began to sing. A deep, droning chant. He began swinging his arms with the music. Shar undulated nearer Deker.

"Well"—her ripe lips curled with bitter malice—"Brenn's failed us."

Her arms swept round the interior of the vault. There were no openings in it other than the tightly-sealed series of three heavy metal doors. Deker could still hear the steady beat of the metronome.

"We're right back in reality again," she said and, with her eyes on Deker, she added softly, "But reality can be interesting, sometimes."

Deker shook off part of the woman's spell with an uneasy laugh.

"Reality," he said. "Only time gives it meaning. But for us—we could have been in suspended animation for ten seconds, or ten million years."

Shar looked at him oddly. "You came in here after we did. Did you volunteer for this trap?"

Deker's solid line of eyebrow wriggled like a caterpillar. "I volunteered. Finally."

The albino, squealing in high falsetto, scuttled across the floor.

"Listen, the metronome's stopped! That means the whole thing's quit!" He ran wildly around the base of the smooth walls, scurrying like a giant white rat.

"Take it easy, Red," cautioned Deker. "We can get out. They can see us in here, and we've been revived only a little while."

Shar slid over, leaned against him. He had never had a woman do that before. Not in reality.

The Cyclops shambled over toward him, his middle eye blazing anger, and Shar

moved away, looking both frightened and pleased. Deker moved between Shar and the Cyclops. The middle eye shone with a blind insensate jealousy.

"Shar is mine," the Cyclops said sullenly. "Mine."

"Are you?" Deker asked Shar.

THE albino was huddled in a far corner. The hunchback was singing again. The two-headed man was sitting on the vault floor, a head in each hand, moaning.

"I don't belong to anyone," Shar replied. Her eyes blinked slowly at Deker. "Yet."

The metal door opposite Deker began sliding open slowly. Every eye turned toward it, each one breathlessly waiting. The lower half of the door was dark, the upper part of the oval a deep soft blue, and a little to the left of the horizon line, a full red moon shone. A cold wind entered, and the sparsely clothed freaks shivered. Otherwise nothing happened, then.

Standing there, Deker suffered a strange thrill. Things were so different now. Even a woman, Shar, desired him. Among these freaks he was certainly the most desirable in a physical sense. With sudden surging enthusiasm he realized that he had escaped!

They all undoubtedly were in a far future time now. And surely this new era, whenever and whatever it was, held new hope and promise for him!

"Everything's changed out there," squealed the frightened albino, nervously. "City Three was never cold. And we can see the sky, and the moon too. When we came into this vault we were buried in the very heart of City Three. Now we're in the open."

And the hunchback's deep voice sang. He improvised, sometimes in free verse, sometimes in rhyme, as the mood hit him:

The sky is blue with cold, and bitter is the
wind.

The moon is red, blood-red is the moon.
The cold wind blows where once the City
rose.

And what has happened to the world we
knew?

Now, no one knows.

Staring at the hunchback, Deker felt something of the situation's timeless fantasy, the abnormality. Lost in time. Unsuitable perhaps to any era except some legendary scene. This hunchback might be some sly jester from the court of an ancient king; the girl, Shar, a frustrated princess escaped from a

tower. And the others, the teratological freaks, seemed part of a dusty mythology.

A wind sighed from the strange and otherwise silent world outside, bringing a cloud of fine dust. Shar cowered against Deker. Instinctively he held her tightly, felt deeply her warm, slightly tremulous flesh. It was difficult now to remember the Hundred Cities Utopian Federation. Dead, buried, forgotten, the perfect order. Or was it?

Then they heard the weird chanting of many voices outside the vault. The gong sounded again, much louder. Then the chanting rose to a fanatical droning dirge.

"Let's go," said Deker. He kept his arm about Shar and led the others toward the exit. But the Cyclops stayed beside Shar, eyes balefully on Deker. The others fell cowering behind, the albino moaning, the two-headed man stumbling with pain. There were fifty feet of metal passageway before they stood in the ruin of the final exit. The chanting stopped.

A single wailing voice intoned:

"The gods have awakened! Hail, all hail god Deker. Our salvation and our light!"

Deker peered through the moonlight. A thin, ragged figure stood before a mass of prone bodies that quivered with emotion like the surface of a lake. Behind them towered the jagged pattern of a colossal and terribly twisted ruins. The voice droned on:

"Hail to Him of the Three Eyes of the All-Seeing Vision! Hail to the Two-Headed One of Wisdom! Hail to the Dark Goddess! Hail to the Gnarled One, the Storm Chief! Hail to the White One who knows of the evil things that crawl beneath the Earth!"

"Begin the sacrifice. Blood shall bathe the City's ruins. Offer up yourselves to the gods who have arisen to save us from—the beasts!"

A roar rose up from the bowed bodies.

"Hail the gods who will conquer the Beasts that Run in the Night!"

DEKER shivered against the cold wind and the brittle red moonlight. And against something he could not name. Shar trembled against him, and the hunchback ran a hairy hand over his thick lips.

To Deker's right, three bent peeled poles leaned together, supporting the huge gong. Two ragged figures stood beside it with clubs in their hands. It was difficult to make out details characterizing the horde groveling on the slope that stretched from the vault into a dark valley of warped metal and



Everything about her except the glossy, shining uniform was —Peri

molten plastic. The vault was still covered with the mountain of protective sheeting. Brenn had indeed prepared well for the holocaust.

The small filthy-bearded man who had been exhorting the horde, ran and fell on his face at Deker's feet. The moonlight reflected his gleaming fanatical eyes. Eyes with little intelligence; only superstitious awe. An aged cracked voice climbed up in trembling ecstasy.

"God Deker of the City that Was, and of The City that Shall be Again, your people who have waited long for your awakening welcome you!"

He beat his forehead a number of times, then scurried crablike backward before turning and again facing the horde of kneeling worshippers.

"Let the sacrificial fires burn brighter than the moon!" he screamed. "There need never again be fear. The Temple Gods of Brenn will protect us!"

Deker turned toward the gnarled ruins in the valley. He shuddered as his eyes lost themselves among those starkly wrenched remains of what had once been the gleaming structures of City Three. His eyes probed blindly into the impenetrable blackness beyond.

He turned. Behind him the others were whispering, staring, stunned with inability to comprehend.

"Don't leave the vault yet," cautioned Deker, "until we make sure of what's going on."

The hunchback laughed heavily, then he sang again. Deker was shaken by the weird unreality of their circumstances as the man sang:

Out of the sable night of time
The dead gods rise to battle beasts and find
Salvation for the ragged ones who keep
The sacrificial flames afire!

The fires leaped into roaring life, blown into erratic patterns by the mountain winds. Strange contorted dances began. After a few moments of discussion on the part of the gods, two haggled creatures in roughly dyed robes of several brilliant colors, led the arisen sleepers to a crude platform of stones and metal overlooking the sacrificial ritual. It wasn't far from the vault, to which they could return if necessary.

From his Olympus, Deker and his godlings looked down.

CHAPTER III

The Beasts

THROUGH POOLS of red moonlight, hysterical screaming celebrants twisted and leaped. Altar fires flared and, in the light, showed the quivering faces of those who wailed with released fear. Around the altars, stones ran deep with the darkest red of all.

It was a far cry from the dignified perfection of City Three, yet these yammering savages were still human. And so was Deker. The wailing rhythm was a bitter-sweet poison in his brain. His blood ran hotly and his temples throbbed.

He looked at Shar. She was bent forward. Her face was high lighted shadow, flushed and terror-stricken with an instinctive fascination. The albino cringed with his pinkish hands on either side of his chin like a rat's paws. The two-headed man groaned, unimpressed by the ritual. He was too pain-raddled to care. In this savage environment, he couldn't survive long. But for that matter would any of them?

The hunchback, whom these savages had labeled "The Gnarled One, God of The Storm," swayed sensually to the pristine dirge. His long arms swung.

The "Temple Gods of Brenn" had been seated with Deker in front, Shar, the hunchback, and the Cyclops beside him, the others indistinct behind. Two high priests stood a few feet from Deker. He had questioned them. They chanted an alternating answer while the Cyclops kept his eyes fixed on Deker, waiting.

Priest I: "The lightning gods of the Anarchs brought their bolts from the skies and the great cities melted in the supernal sun fires."

Priest II: "Long have we waited for the awakening of the gods. Now shall the Anarchs die within their glowing shields."

Priest I: "The Beasts that Run in the Night shall be driven back into the mountains beside the blue river and shall never again dare attack us and eat our women and children."

Priest II: "Faithfully the Priests of Brenn have kept the altar fires."

Priest I: "Protect us against the Anarchs and the Beasts and the Roaring Winds, and

the Ice, and the Burning Death that comes from the Ruins."

Priest II: "We have fulfilled the Prophecy of Brenn. His temple has been kept inviolate. The cities of the Utopes shall reach again to the stars."

A wail of sonorous supplication rose in mighty chorus:

"Hail, all hail, the Temple Gods of Brenn!"

The high priests draped the gods in fur robes to protect them from the cold, a long-haired white one for Deker, a tawny yellow and black-striped skin for Shar. The alternating black matched the black of her eyes and the blue-black of her hair.

"Shar," said Deker, "this sickens me. I'm not atavistic enough to appreciate it."

Shar said nothing. Intently, unalterably fascinated by the bloody spectacle before her, she stared, and her fists were clenched, her full lips taut. Deker shrugged and shifted away from her, hardly knowing that he was doing it. There seemed to be something about this primitive libation that was fully appreciated by Shar's feminine masochism. She had been even more abnormal in that Utopian past than he. For even to him, self-destruction had been unthinkable. At least he had volunteered for Nirvana instead of being compelled to accept it. Shar was truly primitive.

Yet if all the feminine remains of the Hundred Cities were as these yammering troglodytes, then Shar was perhaps the only woman in the world for him. But he shook her from his immediate mind. The decay of the Federation had been only a matter of time and fate, as he had known. But what had contributed directly to the final devastation?

"The lightning gods of the Anarchs."

Brenn had mentioned an underground of Anarchs who still carried on some esoteric cultish worship of their individualistic philosophy as opposed to the strict socialism of the Federation.

"The Anarchs brought their bolts from the skies and the great cities melted in the supernal sun fires."

Evidently the utilization of basic atomic energies to destroy the Federation which Brenn had mentioned as a possibility had become catastrophic reality. The will-to-power fanaticism—they hadn't been able to condition that out of certain stubborn inherent characteristics. The Anarchs, then, had struck unexpectedly, destroyed the rigidly disciplined collectivism they had despised

for so long.

With a soft ironic laugh, Deker recalled the code of the Utopes who had established the Hundred Cities Federation from the stuff dreams were then made of. Something from the works of Bellamy:

With a tear for the dark past, turn we then to the dazzling future, and veiling our eyes, press forward.

THE fanatical chanting came back to him, the quivering filthy faces, the sea of leaping, whirling celebrants. This—this was the dazzling future. An Utopian thought it had been, to attempt to escape from an imperfect society into one conceived to fulfill ideal human values. But the word, Utopia, was from an ancient race, the Greeks, and significantly enough meant: "Nowhere."

They had ignored the temper of individuals, variable human nature—which they had thought to control by conditioning—or the inevitable opposition of entrenched groups such as the Anarchs. And now that magnificent but deluded civilization had been reduced to a pack of shivering, superstition-haunted primates, whining and grubbing about in the ruins of a former glory they had forgotten except as glittering myth and frightful legend.

The scientific hierarchy which had guarded the encystment-vault had altered only slightly to become a hierarchy of priesthood. And the unwanted freaks of the Hundred Cities had become gods!

Deker stiffened. His eyes probed outward beyond the firelight where a distorted cry had cut off the other shrieks of the celebrants. The two high priests sank down, murmuring incantations against evil. The ragged mob around the fires were frozen into taut outlines staring toward the valley to the north.

"What is it now?" the hunchback murmured into Deker's ear. "What awful world have we found, trying to escape that other one?"

Shar gripped his arm tightly. With a terrible abruptness then, from a thousand or so straining throats, the cry was torn:

"The Beasts!"

Deker was on his feet, eyes fighting the glimmering vagueness of fires and moonlight. The two-headed man moved his two puckered mouths in a desperate effort to speak. Finally he formed halting words:

"Deker! My pain was padded with dreams before. Now there can be no more dreaming.

Deker, I must die! Kill me!"

The priests were marching away. Deker heard them exhorting the shivering mob with hysterical boldness.

"Fight, children of Utopia. The Temple Gods of Brenn stand over us. Slay the Beasts. Revenge! Kill!"

After a pulsing silence, Deker thought he could feel the waves of growing courage beating round him. With it, in himself, grew an ecstatic surging longing. Then his straining eyes saw the vague loping forms dodging through the leaning ruins. They seemed to be half the height of the Utopes, but long, slender, and fast. These were only soft, delicate padding sounds as they moved in closer to the kill.

Deker turned toward the lesser gods on the platform with him. He saw their white, desperate faces, knew they were groping, trying to comprehend the vastness of the circumstances into which time and the vagaries of an old man had thrown them. Some of them had made adjustments to their own abnormalities back in their own time, had accepted Nirvana, to escape a world that despised them. And instead of a rewarding sleep, dreams, Lethe, they got this! There was no equipment here to send them once more out of reality. Unless they returned to the vault to the encystment capsules. Deker wondered.

He clenched his fists. He cursed Brenn. Yet, without Brenn, he might have remained just another cog in an uninteresting static machine until he was destroyed. Now, at least, he lived.

"These are our people, still," he said tensely, quickly. "Maybe no one survives in the other cities, but these Utopes still live because we gave them hope, and faith. We were misfits in the Federation, but we're gods now. Do whatever you choose. I'm going to fight."

He jumped from the platform. And even as he hit the ground he felt the hunchback beside him.

"Fool, Deker!" he heard Shar hiss. "Come back! Let's not die among those dogs!" But Deker didn't even look at Shar.

The hunchback swung along beside him, his wide, heavy mouth stretched in a gleaming grin. His deep-set eyes above bony cheeks shone with bright anticipation.

"*Götterdämmerung*," he chuckled. "A short, sweet life for the gods."

The priests were screaming commands. The tattered horde had formed into a rough

defense line. Behind it huddled a group of cowering women and naked children with bloated stomachs. Around them stood old men with clubs. The others, preparing to fight, held crude swords beaten from heat-softened metal.

A SIDE from the hunchback, four others of the "gods" had followed Deker—the albino, the two-headed man, the little bald-headed freak with the pallid skin, and the other oddity with a delicate airy stride who seemed almost to have been a bird. There were bulges on each shoulder that could have been wings. Together they edged their way through the trembling, tightly-packed Utopes.

As Deker broke through the front line, he stopped. The hunchback drew in his breath hoarsely, then began humming a strange wordless dirge. The albino squealed and hid behind the hunchback.

No firelight here. A jagged mass of steely splinters jutted upward behind the Beasts. They stood silently, only partially visible in the purple black shadows and the splashing pools of moonlight, about fifty feet from Deker. Then their long sleek lengths began rising upward, growing before Deker's startled gaze. They became taller than Deker, and their forepaws were making motions to each other! Then he heard them talking—talking!

"The sport is over. They must all be killed now."

"Yes. They who have been awakened might make the others able to fight us."

"Those who have awakened are different. Get them first. Kill!"

Deker shot a desperate glance to either side. For one incredulous instant he realized the significance of what he was seeing, hearing. These creatures still appeared more feline than human, but they walked upright. They had a crude human speech. And their forepaws had become—hands! Hands with long, flexing talons.

Deker flung himself to one side. He heard a rising moan of fear—fear and something else. Tortured mental conflict. The Utopes turned. They were routed without even a gesture of resistance. Their clubs and crude words clanged in piles as they threw them away and scrambled back, pawing, mouths twisting with fear. While Deker fought, dazedly as though in a nightmare, he saw the expanse behind him suddenly barren of all Utopes.

Only their gods remained to battle the Beasts!

Deker rolled along the partly frozen ground. His hand closed over the rough handle of an abandoned sword. He leaped at a grinning, whiskered face. He saw the hunchback beside him, a club in one hand, a dripping sword in the other. The albino, of whom Deker caught darting glimpses, was squeaking furiously, leaping about with nervous frantic speed, his blade flashing in and out like a needling fang.

A swishing talon spun Deker's weapon from his hand. His left arm was suddenly numb. As agony stunned his brain, he fell to his knees. Above him was the Beast's grinning face, with brilliant probing green eyes. He saw the talon sweeping down, retracting, coily playing. It struck again.

"*Götterdämmerung!*" repeated the hunchback, with a panting laugh.

CHAPTER IV

Ruins of Death

WHEN the blow failed to fall, Deker shifted his eyes upward and saw why. The two-headed man was wrapped in the Beast's arms. Blood streamed from the Beast's throat from a wound the two-headed man's sword had put there. Deker heard the crunching sounds as the Beast smashed the two heads one after the other. The Beast then fell sprawling over the body of the two-headed man, its tail twitching even after it was dead.

Deker managed to gain his feet. Five Beasts still remained to battle the gods. The others—how many Deker didn't know—had sped off in pursuit of the fleeing Utopes. The hunchback and the albino stood on either side of Deker, swords ready. Two Beasts lay motionless on the ground.

"Let's fall back deeper into the ruins," suggested Deker weakly.

The albino squealed. "Yes! They want *me* more than anyone."

Then Deker remembered. "Where's Shar?"

He eyed the silent Beasts whose green and yellow eyes stared fixedly. As if in answer, Deker heard a long, roaring laugh. He turned. The Cyclops ran past with Shar thrown over his shoulder. She was yelling,

beating with impotent fists on the Cyclop's broad back. They disappeared beneath the high mound of twisted metal.

A Beast started to spring after them.

"Back, Jhar!" another warned. "The death waits there. Back!"

Deker swayed toward the dark mass hiding the Cyclops and Shar.

"Easy," cautioned the hunchback. "We'll retreat after them, but take your time. These Beasts aren't so tough. They hate cold steel."

"All right," agreed Deker.

They backed slowly toward the decline leading under the pile of metal. But the Beasts seemed reluctant to follow. Nowhere could Deker see a sign that any Utopes had remained behind near their crude shelters to fight beside their gods. But from varied distances he did hear the cries of the fleeing and the dying.

"We at least gave them courage," said Deker drily. "For a few thousand years. Gave them hope anyway. We were effective gods all right—as long as we slept."

One of the Beasts started to cut off their retreat. But again one of the four ordered him back. Deker knew the Beasts were playing with them.

The Beasts were comparatively tireless; they could wait. Soon many more of their kind would return from the slaughter. And unless some unforeseeable development occurred fast, the remaining gods would soon join the others. The two-headed man's pain was ended forever. The man who might have had wings no longer dreamed of what he might have been. The little pallid bald-headed man was dead. Gone from their brief, unsought Olympus.

But what really mattered was what had happened to Shar! Mentally the Cyclops had conditioned himself by brooding introspection and reading to assume the attitudes his physical appearance suggested. A monstrous, three-eyed colossus out of legend.

The nearest Beast gestured frantically. He called—a high mewling cry.

"Back, Jhar!"

Deker glanced behind him. They were at the head of the long slope ending in the heart of the pile concealing Shar and the Cyclops. It was then Deker noticed the slight emanating glow. A sentient cold. Radio-activity!

"Wait," Deker said harshly. "Hold it, Red!"

The albino stopped. The Beasts had already stopped some distance away, though

one of them kept impatiently easing toward Deker, then jumping back, trembling with frustration.

Deker knew enough about physics from his compensatory studying those long evenings after working with his despised lathe, to know why they might die. "The Burning Death." The priests had said it came out of the atom-blasted ruins. For perhaps thousands of years these metals filled with neutrons had radiated their poisons, might continue to do so for many more.

The unstable nuclei of the metal which had captured the wandering neutrons were still disintegrating slowly. If a living organism got too much, the blood corpuscles would disintegrate too. The area was a deadly pool of rays and radio-active particles. Only this heart of the field still remained deadly after so long a time.

Deker explained while the Beasts stood off, silently waiting.

"We evidently have only two choices," he finished. "Stay here where the Beasts are afraid to follow, and die—unpleasantly—in some unpredictable future. Or go back out now and fight the Beasts."

Deker knew what he had to do—go into the very heart of the radiation after Shar. He wondered why he hadn't done it before. Then the moon went down behind a black cloudbank. After that the only light was the soft bluish glow from the fissioning ruins.

THE albino's eyes were small red glares in the dark. The hunchback's big hands closed on Deker's arm. He heard a deep laugh. Then the strange song coming out of the dark chilled Deker, yet soothed him.

Cold steel in the heart and final sleep;
Cold steel and the claws of the Beast.

"No!" whined the albino. "Not me. I'll take the gamma rays—anything but the Beasts! Stay here with me!"

Ten slitted yellow-green eyes glowed back at Deker as he stood there waiting. Then from behind them Deker heard Shar scream. He heard the bellowing roar of the Cyclops. Shar screamed again. After that came a terrible silence that went on, a timeless pulsing fear. Deker pawed the darkness. He must go after Shar. But what could he do against the Cyclops, with his swelling helpless arm?

"How long can we stay within the radiation field without being fatally affected?" asked the hunchback.

"I don't know," said Deker. "We can stand some without damage. We're just within the field evidently. Shar and the Cyclops are in its heart. However, there's no way of knowing how long after exposure the symptoms will appear, then death."

"We should take the chance until dawn," the hunchback reasoned. "We wouldn't have a chance against the Beasts in the dark. They can see. We can't—except the albino. And it's quite plain that he doesn't want to fight them anyway."

"Let's wait until dawn," begged the albino. "wait with me."

"All right, Red," Deker agreed. "I want some kind of chance. At least I want to see. We need some rest, too."

Deker felt of his arm. It was swelling rapidly, pain growing with the increased size. He gripped his crude sword.

"Deker!" the albino was asking desperately. "What does it mean? These Beasts becoming almost human?"

"Natural evolutionary processes wouldn't account for it," said Deker. "Unless we've been in suspended animation for millions of years instead of merely thousands. And I don't believe we have."

"Abnormal evolutionary development rate," said the hunchback with unexpected profundity.

"Probably," agreed Deker. "The radio-activity from the hundred blasted cities has created a freak world into which we fit no better than in the world we left. No telling what hard radiation has done to the normal processes we once knew. But why haven't the Utopes changed, too? Accelerated evolutionary growth, if it's caused by the radiation, should apply to all living organisms."

"Why bother with logic here?" sighed the hunchback. "Accept what we find, as we find it. Logic is false; it can never be complete. The Utopian Federation was based on mechanistic logic. It's gone."

During a pause, Deker could hear the distant cries of Beasts and sometimes a cry that might have been human. The hunchback broke the depressing silence with an appropriate chant:

Gone, gone the crystalline heights
Of Tyre and Sodom and Gomorrah.
Alexandria and Ninevah and New York, too,
are gone.
And the Hundred Cities' dust has mingled
without song.
Ah, Deker, no man is infallible.
No city—no city is immortal.

"You sing well," commented Deker wearily, his eyes drooping with fever and fatigue. "When could you have learned to be a singer of verse in the unemotional Federation?"

"You studied at nights, Deker, to take your mind from your inherent feelings of inferiority, of not belonging. Well, I sang. In the museum libraries, illegally of course, I read of the darkest histories of man; for I knew that only in the past would I have ever fitted in. I never thought I would find my world in a distant future. Yet I should have known that dark always must follow the light. And the light the dark."

Deker started away into the heart of the radio-active field after Shar. But the hunchback seemed to sense his movements in the dark. Powerful arms wrapped around him, held him back.

Deker explained, and the hunchback softly called him a fool.

"She isn't worthy of you, Deker. She is too abnormal, even for you. Her mind is more bestial than those who wait for us. She could have escaped the Cyclops, followed us into battle. She loves the Cyclops, his brute strength, mastery and savagery. She isn't for you, Deker."

"It's a thing I've got to do," whispered Deker. He tried to fight free.

"No, Deker. You aren't going. Listen!"

DECKER heard it. It was close at first, then began fading as the two ran away together on the far side of the radio-active debris. Shar's laughter. Not demented laughter, but sly, triumphant.

As Deker slumped down, his heart was heavy with the pain of defeat. He stretched out unfeeling on the hard, partly frozen ground. Finally he felt nothing at all except

an infinite thickening softness. He would sleep. . . .

Some time later he felt hands shaking him. He opened burning eyes. The hunchback's gargoyle face was grinning close above his, eyes gleaming with cynical humor.

"There's no escape for us through sleep, Deker," the hunchback said. "We tried it for a long time. We've always got to wake up to realities. It's time now, Deker. It's dawn."

Deker rolled over, watching the serrated outline of the crumbled city against a crimson sunrise. Then, coming on over on an elbow, he saw the Beasts. Five of them still standing there fully erect on their strangely bent haunches, fixed with terrible patience. The dew of the night had settled like minute jewels over their sleek glistening fur.

"All right," said Deker, climbing painfully to his feet. His body was stiff with cold, and chills of fever jerked uncontrollably over the length of his throbbing body. His arm was a swollen useless lump.

"It's time, so let's go."

He gripped the sword in his good hand.

The albino screamed, but Deker didn't hear him. He didn't hear anything as he walked forward, except the mad pounding of his own heart. But his fevered brain was groping frantically for some last strategic effort. A seething anger clutched him as he ran toward the Beasts. He didn't want to die yet.

He heard himself yelling. Roaring, the hunchback was beside him. And the Beasts moved, blurs of feral lightning energy.

Deker realized then how weak and useless he was as he stumbled, went down. Again and again he swung the blade, shearing only cold morning mist. Hooked talons raked down, then just short of decapitating him,

[Turn page]

the claws flexed inward, and a sadistic slap sent him sprawling. A Beast was straddling him, its tongue licking through gleaming fangs.

A paw gave him a playful cuff, and he rolled across the thawing ground. Dazed, Deker saw that the hunchback had been more successful. His sword dripped red. A Beast was twitching on the ground. The hunchback laughed as he ran to Deker, stood over him.

The Beast that had been toying with Deker fell back, its emotionless round face staring. It was still breathing normally in spite of the short, intense skirmish.

"You can fight," it said. "Last night you fought, but we thought it only an exceptional instance. You can still fight! Why is this? None of the Utopes or the Glowing Ones fight."

Deker could detect fear. Not of any immediate danger from himself or the hunchback or the albino, but of this mysterious ability to fight.

Deker frowned through a mist of fevered weariness. It wasn't at all normal. Whatever else the human species had lacked they had always been children of conflict. They thrived on barriers to achievement. But the humans of this era had never been known to fight the Beasts.

Why?

The Utopes here were groveling in cowardice, helplessly fleeing in constant terror of the Beasts. They had made swords, but they couldn't use them. They had made them in anticipation of the gods awakening and giving them courage.

But the gods had failed.

"What has happened that you humans can fight?" the Beast asked again.

So Deker bluffed. "Not us alone. All the Utopes have changed. Soon we'll all be hunting you again. For sport. You've been good hunting for a long time."

With snarling screams, the Beasts leaped in again. Deker screamed this to be his last combat. But he didn't care. Deep beneath his fear, was a gladness for all that had happened.

How much better a way was this than even Nirvana.

He managed to get to his feet, swaying. Then the woman in the sphere appeared. Waiting behind a column of twisted metal, she had been watching the strange combat, watching and listening.

CHAPTER V

Perl of the Sphere

FROM behind the blackened heap, the woman came near before Deker realized that she was there. First he saw only the shimmering sphere moving noiselessly over the ground, then he saw the woman through the translucent shell.

She didn't seem human, glowing with an argent brilliance through shifting hues. Her hair was red-gold. Her tall body was soft rich bronze covered slightly with glittering stuff. She was walking with austere measured strides over the debris, and the coruscating globe encircling her followed her movements faithfully like an enwrapping splendid shadow.

Rather boredly she moved straight toward the Beasts. They sprang back with long leaps of thirty feet. They landed crouched, tongues licking and eyes flaming. The one that had spoken with Deker trembled down the tawny sleekness of its body.

"A Glowing One!" it growled to its followers, then lapsed into a slurred spitting gibberish.

Then they ran. Long, frightened bounds took them away with startling speed, down the long slope of ruin, sent them diving headlong into the thick sea fog of the valley.

The girl moved past the panting hunchback, toward Deker. The albino crept up beside the hunchback, crying, his little pink hands rubbing at his eyes.

Deker made some exclamation of awe, while the girl came as near to him as was possible without the translucent sphere touching him. It had about a ten-foot radius. It seemed to be a sphere within a sphere, the outside one rotating around the other. The sphere represented great danger—and power.

Deker backed away. The sphere followed, and the hunchback laughed. But the girl didn't seem to notice, as she studied Deker. He felt small again, inferior, embarrassed. He hated her a little then, with the resentment he had felt for the exalted environment of the Federation.

The albino edged closer, leaving the hunchback. Deker waited, for what, he didn't know. He only knew this woman was in a position to make the first, maybe even the final, gesture.

He blinked with pain, holding his shoulder. His arm seemed ready to burst. The woman didn't seem interested in his arm.

"There were really men sleeping in the vault then," she finally said.

The protection surrounding her had no nullifying effect on her voice which was rich and low and coldly impersonal.

Deker nodded. Her arrogant cyanogen-blue eyes narrowed.

"You have slept in that vault a very long time, if the myth of the Utopes is fact. Our history also speaks of you sleepers, but I hardly believed it. You came from before the Change? That is almost too incredible. I wouldn't believe it, except that you can fight. It is odd to see a human with that ability—disgusting and terrible too. Tell me, what was the date in which you were put into this—sleep?"

Deker said in a faint whisper, "Twenty-one-sixty."

Awe broke the cold mask of detachment for an instant. But her interest was only that of an indurated scientist who had coldly drawn something new out of a test-tube.

She started to speak, then jerked her head with a startled gesture toward the sky. Deker followed her gaze. A cloud of flying things in perfect formation was descending, growing larger with fearful speed. A distant buzzing grew into a sullen roar.

"Flies!" the hunchback yelled wildly. "Flies, twice as big as a man!"

"I would advise you two to seek shelter," the girl in the sphere said calmly. "They cannot touch me inside this composite protective field."

The formation of bee-flies was hurtling straight for Deker. His eyes frantically sought shelter, though the beauty of the attacking giants penetrated his fear.

The black velvet bodies into which the sunlight sank and disappeared; the fringe of golden hairs along their bodies, the steel-gray many-faceted eyes of which their heads were made. He saw the incredibly delicate formation of their wings which seemed to have a spread of almost thirty feet, so thin the light in passing through them was refracted into rainbow tints so that the whole sky was a blaze of color.

"You probably find it rather amazing what has happened even to flies in forty thousand years," the woman said carelessly.

But Deker was running in slow painful haste, with the hunchback and the albino.

The sky was a riotous blaze of fantastic coloration as the bee-flies circled overhead, huge lancets below enormous compound eyes expanding and dripping with hunger as they reached down, preparing to draw the blood from their prey.

Deker saw the hunchback now, crawling under the debris. But a sound had stopped Deker. Not an ordinary scream, even of terror. But a soul-wrenching cry that sent little pockets of fear bursting inside Deker's stomach, chilling his back.

DEKER turned. The albino fell. Evidently he had badly injured his foot or ankle for he repeatedly fell. And just above him a bee-fly hovered, its wings quivering, its lancet projecting down long and bristling, a filamented mouth gaping at its tip.

Deker wondered why he did it. He didn't care for the albino, a queer little helpless wretch in a perpetual funk. But in spite of the giant bee-flies, Deker started back to help the albino. He managed to retrieve his sword. He retched as the long lancet smacked, stuck against the Albino's twitching back.

The translucent wings beat in shimmering waves as the blood-sucking instruments fixed inexorably on the albino. Deker threw some last bit of burning energy into his wavering brain and tottering legs—but the bee-fly was taking his meal with him, up into the air. Deker saw the albino's red eyes bulging with final horror. The white face opened, and a last tattered cry ripped out.

Leaping upward, Deker futilely swung his sword. Around him there seemed suddenly a thousand sucking lancets. Then one moment of bursting pain. His mind seemed to explode. There was a ripping agony as though every atom in him were flying apart.

Then the gently swaying music. The caress of soft depthless clouds. And no more pain. Somehow he felt that the pain could never return. It was the last impression he remembered before the dark cloud released him from all the others. . . .

Deker opened his eyes. He was inside the sphere! He was lying at the girl's small sandaled feet, and she was looking down at him with detached interest.

"You live," she stated. "Remarkable. I didn't think you would. Though I had to take the chance, for the bee-flies would certainly have killed you. You must be radically different physically from the ordinary human, or you would never have passed through the

shield, even though I did lower its rate as much as possible."

He turned on his side. The world out there was a shimmering unreality as though viewed through watered glass. High up, the bee-flick were winging away across the fog-bound valley. The hunchback was out there staring, sword poised.

He reached out with the blade.

"No!" Deker heard the girl exclaim. "Don't touch the shield. You would die!"

"I'm just as inhuman as he is." The hunchback grinned. "But you're the boss right now, lady. You, Deker—you all right?"

Deker tried to speak, failed.

"He is very ill," the girl said. Her voice held no compassion. "I'm taking him with me to my sanctum."

"And where is your—sanctum?"

"Not so far from here. I will go slowly so that if you are his—friend, is that the word?—then you may follow us."

"Why are you taking Deker with you?"

"Is that his name? Odd—Deker. Anyway I'm taking him because of a certain curiosity. I've often wondered about the ancient Utopes who were said to be sleeping in the vault. I will cure him of his wound by ray treatment. I would learn more of his ability to fight. In our world, only Beasts can do that."

There it was again, mused Deker, half asleep. The outsiders, the freaks.

Again reality faded for him, and he dreamed. How easy it was anymore for him to return to sleep as an escape from reality. Well, his body had certainly been conditioned to it long enough. But it was a weakness now. He slept too easily.

Peculiar woman, his fading thoughts decided. Unpleasantly arrogant and emotionless and egotistical, but so pleasantly beautiful and desirable. And she was controlling nuclear forces in a world shattered to barbarism by the atom, reduced to another dark age of half human horrors, accelerated evolution, monsters, in which the only other humans he had seen were little more than crawling apes.

But he slept. . . .

He felt much better after he awoke, ate, drank some bitter-sweet juice, and found that his arm had almost healed. He had slept for five days.

Her sanctum was a high naked tower of metal four miles from the remains of City Three. It was built on the side of a heavily forested slope at the foot of mist-softened

mountains, beside a clear cold stream. And her sanctum had never been intended for anyone else but her. It's interior was a simple, utilitarianly designed cylindrical shell. Its walls were the same as the sphere in which she traveled, a composite force shield against any interference in her individual pathway of existence.

GANS, the hunchback, sat outside in the warm noonday sun, singing beside the mountain water. Deker, sprawled out on pneumatic cushions beneath the window from which he could see distant peaks and past which an occasional winged monster broodingly flapped. He listened to the hunchback's resigned, introspective, and rather sad song:

Never shall I strain my dull eyes more
For hidden meaning; I shall be as one
Who in his dim perception of the skies
Sees but the certain glory of the sun
And does not care to question or devise
An answer to his own oblivion.

The girl stood looking out the window. Her body, now free of the protective shield, was bronzed, and almost too beautiful in the sunlight which was strangely bright in her red-gold hair. Her name was Perl. She had no other name. She was an Anarch.

Deker wondered how these philosophies could endure through eons of wars and even beyond the final war of all. A simple little philosophy that could be traced back, according to Perl, to a time-lost philosopher called Zeno the Stoic, the first Anarch.

Perl turned, eyes shining with fanatical self-conviction, withdrawn into her lonely self-sufficiency. She repeated the code of the Anarchs:

Every man is his own government, his own law, his own church, a system within himself.

"It has never died, our philosophy," she said. "It has reechoed through the ages. And there was never a greater need for it than during the reign of the Utopes who had submerged the individual completely to the mechanistic dictates of government."

"Your Anarch ancestors launched the lightning gods that finished civilization?" asked Deker.

She shook her head. "The Utopes. They cannot admit that their own faulty system destroyed itself, so they blame the Anarchs. But the Federation was undermined by its

own weak base, by erratic though very human madness that is inevitable in a social order."

Yes. No one had suspected Brenn of being anything other than a scientist devoted to the Federation. So there had been others.

"The Fascios built an underground scientific hierarchy," Perl explained. "They devised weapons of terrible destructiveness. They had no reason—they were human, victims of socialization. They wanted power. They launched their attack and, a few hours later, all the Hundred Cities were destroyed."

Beneath her cold exterior she was quivering with a growing fear, a terrible fear that Deker could feel only as vague tendrils clawing on his consciousness. From behind her eyes deep stark shadows shone. And Deker knew a racial memory persisted in this girl's mind of madness beyond comprehension.

"Maybe only a few Utopes remain in the world now," she said. "And they have been dying rapidly. They have learned too much to fight for survival. So they must die, and that is best."

CHAPTER VI

"Humanity Is Doomed!"

INTEREST grew in Deker as he listened to Perl talk. He asked her about the Anarchs who had survived the destruction, retaining a high scientific culture.

"Ours isn't a society," she said with sudden vehemence. "Society is evil. We have reached the final logical stage of man. This is ultimate individualism. The highest and only sane law is that of individual expression. Compulsion, for whatever purpose, serves only to corrupt otherwise normal individual activities."

"But man is naturally social," said Deker. "He's always been. He managed to survive because he cooperated. The trouble with the Utopian Federation is simply that it became too standardized."

Perl solemnly shook her head. "Perhaps that was true, in the beginning. But being cooperative was only a step upward in the evolutionary scale. We have evolved beyond that stage. We have found individual perfectionism, absolute anarchism. Any social group demands leaders; that means power in

individuals over the others which in its very nature is a pernicious influence. Those who rule are bound, even against their best intentions, to become self-seeking, unmindful of those whom they represent." There was an exalted pause, then she added, "We have reached perfection. The individual is his own god!"

Deker thought of the ironic twist. He had escaped one system of final and static socialism into one of equally static and suicidal individualism.

"How many of you Anarchs survived the Atom War?" he asked.

"Not many. We were far underground where we built our laboratories. We knew that the rest of the socialistic Hundred Cities would be annihilated. And when the—awful destruction came, we survived. Everything about our individual order has remained exactly the same. We have the dominant intelligence."

"To dominate over what?" asked Deker.

"Ourselves, whom we have learned to control and guide completely. Free from any social restriction, any communal government or organization, man is in his perfect state." Her expression changed. Her line of thought had altered. "You actually lived before the Change?" she said. "What were you in that other terrible time?"

Deker smiled wryly. "I was a freak there, as I am here. I hated that world as much as your Anarch ancestors did—maybe more. Standardization killed individual freedom. But this Anarch system of yours, by following an entirely divergent path, has reached the same gray end of stagnation and futility."

She didn't comment. He went on, told her all about the encystment vault.

"But how have you preserved, intact, the culture with which you started?" he asked then. "How has your race survived if the individual is so—er—inviolate?"

"I've said there is—procreation. A form of marriage." She revealed emotion for the first time, a brief blush. She turned away, again looking out the window as she talked. "Each composite protective shield, both of the sanctums and the spheres, is attuned to the individual vibratory pattern. Sometime during our lives we may find another Anarch whose vibratory pattern is similar. If that should happen we consider such vibratory rapport all that is necessary for mating. If such a meeting occurs we must mate. It is our only law, and that is strictly for sur-

vival of the species. We terminate the association as quickly as possible."

Deker smiled openly. "You're not even fooling yourself, Perl. You say no one except one suitable for mating with you can penetrate your composite shield. I did. You say it's because I'm physically not human. Why not admit that my vibratory pattern is almost identical with yours? That is why I was able to penetrate your commuting shield and the walls of your sanctum."

Perl's reaction was violent. Her face flushed a deep red, then paled.

"You!" she said, with dripping acidity.

It hurt, the way she said it.

"Physically, that's the only explanation," he said. "We're for each other, Perl, according to your own implacable laws, whether you like it or not."

"It's ridiculous. As soon as your arm is completely healed you can leave. In fact, your arm is well enough now. Good-by! Go back and marry one of your bestial Utopes!"

"If there are any left," said Deker harshly. "The Beasts were pursuing them. It seems as though the Beasts have let the Utopes live for sporting purposes. Now, since we awoke, they're out to kill every remaining Utope for fear they'll develop the ability to fight. And there's nothing we can do." Deker was on his feet now, standing close to her, looking straight into her eyes. "Unless you help us, Perl!"

SHE trembled with repugnance and horror.

"You are primitive and brutal indeed. You actually would destroy?"

"For survival, Perl! You have the knowledge, the power the Beasts don't have—yet. Use it now before the Beasts overtake and surpass you scientifically. You've got to help or humanity's finished. You think you can survive in your individual egoistic shell, but you're dying the same as the Utopes. Man can't live isolated. I found that out one time. You can't survive. You need the associative processes of society to develop. You said yourself that nothing about your culture has changed in thousands of years.

"Listen, Perl! Help me fight the Beasts! Help me organize the Utopes, make them sane again so they can fight to survive. We can begin a new civilization over the old ruins, start the long trail back up. The human race is almost gone. Unless we organize a social group, start soon on the road back—

unless we do, we'll die here. The Beasts will rule!"

Perl fell back. A huge black form passed across the window. Deker caught a quick glance of a gigantic beak. It was a bird much larger than the body of a man.

"It was the Atom War," she said softly. Her lips quivered, her eyes smoldered with that rising fear tide. "It's a racial memory which no human can lose from his mind. Man's socialized aggressiveness led to that war, his inherent desire to evolve. He's lost that now, because he had to. To preserve sanity he adopted an attitude of nonchange, the only logical attitude. The horrors of the war into which his desire to progress led him changed his entire psychology. Those of us who are Anarchs, and even the Utopes, can worship only immediacy. There is a fear blockage against all change."

"But the Utopes still have the spark," said Deker. "They want to fight, progress. They summoned us as gods to help them."

"But they're social minded," she said. "That isn't the right road. This is the only logical state, this individual perfectionism. Progressive evolution, as you call it, led only to mass self-annihilation, and things even worse." Her voice broke, shivered like shattered glass. "Billions slaughtered—blood—rivers and oceans of it!"

Her voice sank to a low moan. Her hands shook as Deker looked at them. She swayed. He was quickly at her side. For an instant she accepted him there, and he felt her warm young softness. Then she indignantly pushed him away. Frantically, desperately, Deker argued:

"Your introspective life can't last. Change is a natural law. Without it, an organism atrophies and dies. If you can't see that, then you're truly lost. Your generation might survive; maybe even the next, or the next. But humanity is doomed, unless you use the power you have and fight. Fight, Perl! Fight like a beast in the jungle!"

He turned from her, a gasping girl, wild-eyed with shock. He looked out. The hunchback still lolled lazily by the stream, singing, eyes closed. His brown fur robe was thrown back, and his twisted massive body drank in the sun like a thirsty plain.

Sensing Deker above him, he opened his eyes. They crinkled in a laugh.

"It's time we were leaving, Deker. There's nothing here for us. We're alone here, even more than the other time."

Deker wordlessly turned from Gans the Hunchback.

"You haven't decided yet to use your knowledge of power, and work with us and with the Utopes against the Beasts," he said to Perl. A pause, and he added, "Then you will never decide. It's your burden, your conscience—the death of the human species. It's terribly wrong, because it's possible that man deserves another chance."

Deker thought that she wanted to cry, but couldn't.

"The rapidly evolving Beasts are overtaking you rapidly," he went on. "And even in your own isolated Anarch shells, they will eventually find and destroy you!"

A faint cry shivered from her. She staggered, sank down on a couch.

"Get out!" she cried in tortured shuddering anguish. "Get out!"

Never having had the opportunity to understand women, Deker walked to the wall.

"Very well. But somewhere in this twisted, defeated world we'll find humans who are really human, who will fight with us against the Beasts."

From far away he heard her trembling voice.

"There are no such people any more. I know. Even the Utopes have developed too far for that."

HER hand moved with trembling slowness. A section of the wall dissolved. Deker walked out into the sunshine. The hunchback rose lazily and they walked down toward the wide plain leading from the foothills toward a river flanked by willows.

Deker saw her shining red-gold hair framed by the window of her ivory tower. He waved, tried to bury the ache in his heart. She didn't wave back, but stood immobile in the window's frame. The hunchback laughed briefly, then bitterly sang:

She is lonely enough, dissatisfied and cold.
There is no crowd to take her to its mocking
din,
Infold her in its grasp; tighten its faulty
hold.
There she kneels, secluded and apart,
To worship, in the chapel of her heart.

Deker stared with new awe at the hunchback as they walked on through the pungent-smelling thickness of the lengthening grass. A wandering minstrel of time.

"Life has little meaning for you now,

Gans?" he asked.

"Maybe it has none," said the hunchback. "We'll see what happens, where this adventure leads us. Until then:

The sand, the sun, the sea,
The moon a gentle gleam.
A memory. The fragment of a dream."

Turning, Deker could still see the shining of her red-gold hair through the window's frame.

"She is like Semele," said the hunchback.

"Who was Semele?"

"She was the daughter of Cadmus and mother of Dionysius. Zeus having promised her whatsoever she should ask, she begged to behold him in his splendor, and was destroyed by his lightnings."

CHAPTER VII

Defeat

NOW IT WAS sunset, and the valley was again fog-bound. As Deker and the hunchback approached the ruined city, he could hear the roars of the animals grazing madly on the plains, animals Deker had grown too familiar with during the months he and Gans had wandered over an insane, distorted continent.

They had managed to survive mainly and precariously by constant flight and desperate concealment. They had seen other Anarchs, each with his or her ivory tower and force shields. But wherever they had gone and whomever or whatever they had seen, the story was the same: No human being was free from the psychic fear blockage against any kind of evolutionary change.

In contrast to this disease of unchange, they had seen the ferocious, terribly accelerated trail of the Beasts streaking with frightening speed ahead along their roadway of evolution. And none of the humans cared. They had rationalized their position. They cared nothing about the continued survival of their species.

Their own immediate generation, particularly their own individual egos, was all that mattered. For their sanity, they would pay the rather exorbitant price of racial extinction.

The two gaunt, leanly muscled wanderers trudged over a low hill and down toward the massive plain of wrenched and molten steel. Small cooking fires sent up straight streamers of smoke through breathless air. A few dark figures scurried like nervous animals among the ruins.

"A few Utopes still live," commented the hunchback. "They can never leave the city of their fathers, the place where their gods once gave them hope."

As they walked in among the cooking fires, the tattered scrawny things that had been human, stared, cried out in confused fear, and streaked into their holes.

But Deker headed straight for the encystment vault. And as much as he had hated that world of the past, some part of it was far better than this futile aberrated world poisoned by radiation and by human defeat.

As Deker and the hunchback approached the jagged opening leading into the tunneled entrance to the vault, a towering figure stepped out, regally clothed in white furred robes and glittering metal bracelets.

"The Cyclops," muttered the hunchback. "He still lives. But he's sick, very sick."

His middle eye was blacker now, deeply hollowed and fiery. Shar appeared from behind the Cyclops. She clung to him for support.

The shine was gone from her black hair which clung down in a scalp mop. A yellow beast-skin hung loosely over a skeletal form that was barely skin and bone. Red stones whirled, glistening futilely from her ears. Deep down inside a dirty white face, her feverish black eyes blazed out at Deker. Talons gripped the Cyclops' wasting arm.

"The radiation," said Deker. "I thought you had gone too far into it."

"We didn't know," rasped the Cyclops painfully. "We've found out. It hit us only recently."

"You're still faithful to the Utopes," said Deker softly. "You're their god."

"That's right," said the Cyclops. "And I'm remaining so."

"While you live, you're a god," said the hunchback as he sat down lazily on a porous, time-eaten chunk of metal.

While the Hunchback sat there with his eyes partly closed, Deker told the Cyclops and his mate everything he had discovered about the world of the Anarchs, the accelerated evolutionary development of the Beasts who were overtaking and would surpass

man. The sickening death's head skull of the Cyclops nodded.

"I know. I've tried to drive them against the Beasts. But they run until they drop, or hide. I've organized defense methods. We have signals, and stand watches so we can hide before the Beasts can surprise us. I've had them store up food, too, so they can stay in hiding for long periods. That's all I could do." He coughed.

"You've been a good god," commented Deker.

The Cyclops shook off Shar's emaciated arm, tottered forward. There was a horrible impression of great strength despite his wasted body. His right hand came from behind him grasping a heavy double-hilted sword.

"And I'm going to remain their ruler." He repeated it with growing ferocity, his middle eye glaring.

"Why worry about it if you'll soon die?" asked the hunchback.

"I'll die a god!" said the Cyclops dramatically. "As I've lived."

"Wait!" began Deker, but already the skeletal figure of the Cyclops was shambling forward, swinging the polished blade.

Deker managed a crude parry and dodged away. Then the Cyclops fell, fell gasping, battering in slowing desperation with fleshless arms. Deker dragged him off, while the awful outline of Shar fell on him like a thing from a grave, clawing frantically. Deker flung her away. She began to die there. The Cyclops crawled to her, crying with a dark bestial loneliness.

DEKER was sick as he watched. They had clung precariously to life, but this sudden abnormal effort was ending it. They had got a tremendous dose of gamma rays and neutrons. Intestinal tracts had gradually broken down, and their bodies had been unable to manufacture enough white blood corpuscles.

It took Shar a long time to die, and before she was dead, the Cyclops joined her as though he wanted to. They both went into a coma and died together, an hour later.

"Well, they died as gods," said the hunchback, "and that's what they wanted. One by one they've all found what they wanted, except us, Deker."

They stood in the entrance to the vault, and this time the hunchback had no song to sing.

Deker led the way without any further conversation into the tunnel. They stood in the dim luciferin glow of the cold light that could burn on for centuries more.

"Are you sure you don't mind staying here, Gans?"

"Are you sure you want to return to Nirvana, Deker?"

"I'm sure. My original purpose—and yours—in choosing Nirvana was to escape an intolerable world. I awoke too soon, or too late. It doesn't matter now. I want to go back to sleep."

"And I want to remain here," said the hunchback. "I seek no further for the chimera. One can search forever through the winding labyrinth and somewhere at the end of the quest, the minotaur always waits. I've had enough."

"You're bitter," said Deker. "You'll be lonely. And I'm afraid all your songs will be sad."

"My life will be short in such a world as this," declared the hunchback. "But I no longer care about escaping. There's no place to go. Who knows what conditions you will awaken to? Besides, one of us must remain behind. One must administer to the other until the encystment process is activated again."

"All right," said Deker with a conclusion arrived at several times before.

"Anyway," the hunchback added, "now that the Cyclops is gone, what few Utopes remain alive need a god. I don't think it quite fair that all their gods should abandon them."

They studied the records Brenn had left. All the necessary information was there. For Deker, who had studied and become so thoroughly educated in basic principles, it was

fairly simple.

So again Deker was inside the capsule, suspended from the low ceiling of the vault like a pendulum so that even the Earth's movement would not disturb his sleep. All sensory stimuli were shut out, permitting the vasomotor centers complete freedom from disturbance in the hermetically sealed capsule. Again the temperature would lower to the 7.1 level and another stage of Nirvana would begin. And end—except that Nirvana should have no ending.

He closed his eyes. It was much easier for him now. For almost immediately, from long conditioning, his mind, his entire nervous system responded, and he began slipping away, deep deep down into that gloriously soft dream-sea. He heard the metronomes working again, far away—and fading, fading, the last soft chanting of the hunchback, Gans, as he sang above him, or somewhere through the falling curtain of mist:

I shall not go far, Deker.

I have my story and my laugh.

And always something happens, someone comes.

Long solitude will make the bargain fair;
The exchange even. I need but wait.

IT WAS easier this time for Deker to awake. The mechanism was so arranged that one comparatively simple threshold was left at normal waking level. When this one threshold level was activated by the metronome, it started a chain reaction, as the temperature gradually returned to normal, to an activation of all his bodily faculties.

This time there was little stiffness or pain. This—time?

Opening his eyes, he looked straight up through the transparent plastic cowling of
[Turn page]

the encystment capsule. He waited a long time before he moved any other part of his body, thinking. He made one resolve then, that he knew he would keep. He would never go into the sleep again. No matter what happened, he knew he was finished with Nirvana.

Because for some reason, the thought of returning again and again to Nirvana was frightening. It was too abnormal, in a temporal sense, too vast in its possible implications. He might continue with this process forever, if that word held any meaning for him. Go on and on, beyond the race, beyond all life, find himself in some deserted sunset where there was nothing left—only dust and mute evidence of a final destruction, nothing save dust and a hot dry wind.

But as Deker looked out through the vault—everything else had changed!

Deker shivered as he pressed the button at his side. The cowl slid back. He was outside the capsule, looking across the small enclosure of the vault. Outside was incredible alteration. The protective mountain of sheeting, lead and plasticrete and steel had been removed. Parts of the steel walls of the vault had been replaced with translucent paneling.

Beyond, Deker could see towering walls and long gently winding halls that gave off a soothing pattern of shifting harmonic lights. Narrow columns rose from varied-colored pastel flooring, blossoming outward and up like monstrous flowers.

Men and women, a small group, were walking toward him down the hall. They were more or less grand, Deker decided, in brilliantly colored sandals and brief shorts—tall, willowy golden men and women with the carriage of kings and queens. They were gesticulating with a dignified excitement.

They came to the vision panels and stood looking in at him.

Deker's eyes fell down, saw his ragged fur skin hanging to his bony frame, saw the scarred flesh, the ragged, dirty nails curling on the ends of his hands. He glanced up again at his audience who were staring back with increasing curiosity, but with a high austere curiousness as though Deker were some sort of animal in an ostentatious zoo.

Animal—in a zoo!

A terrible familiar sickness hit him. There was a difference, but also an almost terrifying similarity with that other time, now how long ago? Perhaps he could never determine.

Was there never, never to be an escape?

He shrugged off the growing sick fear. It was a selfish attitude to take in the face of the magnificent fact that man had survived!

Deker meant to find out how, and the finding would be worth all the terror and frustration. From those futile Anarchs in their egoistic shells, and from the groveling Utopes, these super-beings had developed.

A feeling of tremendous pride in his species pulsed through him as he stood there, an object of their polite disapprobation. His species were indefatigable, eternal. Their survival value was infinite, regardless of what sloughs of autodelusion and fantasy they allowed to entrap them.

A TRANSLUCENT panel slid back, and the two men stepped inside and approached him cautiously. How familiar their perfect masklike faces were, thought Deker, with that old returning bitterness. How lacking in individuality.

"We greet you, Sleeper," said one of them, uncomfortably it seemed, as though condescending toward some level he couldn't understand. "You—you may come with us."

Deker was fighting against that encroaching humility, that smothering sensation of inferiority, of not belonging.

"Is that an order, or a statement?" he said with exaggerated defiance.

The language the men spoke was strangely distorted, but Deker understood it in general. He had no difficulty there, and neither did they.

The man stammered an answer, looked slightly frightened.

"What—why, it's a request naturally. There is no coercion here."

"Of course not." Deker grinned sardonically. "Anyway, not so you would notice it. However, I would like to change into some other clothes, get something to—some nourishment. It will seem strange to feel human again."

Had he ever?

The tension sagged somewhat. Deker followed them through the staring crowd outside. He noticed how the women drew back from him with obvious distaste and antipathy they could not conceal. There was pity, too; and that was worse.

It was too infernally familiar!

For an instant, a terrible instant, Deker thought all the eons of frustration were converging in his eyes, that he was going to cry.

CHAPTER VIII

The City of Perl

BROUGHT into a room, Deker saw that it was queerly patterned, flooded with shifting hues of monochromatic lights. It was large, with a few couches, and a table supported by a single blossoming column from the ceiling. The two men motioned toward a couch and Deker sat down.

A small square in the wall slid to one side and a tray projected itself. There was a glass on it full of colorless liquid. One of the men motioned toward it with forced politeness.

"Drink, Sleeper. It will restore your strength."

"Not that you particularly care," thought Deker as he nodded and drank.

Immediately he felt strong, and the highly emotional feeling of desperate futility eased somewhat.

"This is an odd situation, socially," the man who had invited him to drink then said. "I hardly know how to approach you."

"Not as a human being," thought Deker. "Anything but that."

"You are so alien, you know," the man said, and Deker winced. "We're almost as shocked as you are. You have been something of a shrine since long before our objectively recorded history began. You have been a subject of much conjecture. Not even a High Scientist has been permitted to enter your vault. Your exact status and purpose has also been only conjecture."

"Frankly, we hardly expected you ever to awaken. Few even thought you were living, in the physico-chemical sense. This must be a great shock to you. Adjusting yourself to our highly advanced perfectly socialized culture will undoubtedly be difficult for you. We will, of course, help you all we can." He sounded dubious.

Deker said something vague; he didn't remember what. Then a man brought in some shorts and sandals, and Deker put them on. They were weightless and astonishingly thin, clinging to his flesh with an uncanny persistence.

The man who came bustling in then was obviously a man of real importance. He appeared older than anyone Deker had seen so

far, though there were no outward physical signs of age. It was the light behind his eyes that was old. Somehow, he suggested Jak, of City Three, or perhaps it was only Deker's imagination.

"I'm Kahl, Mental Adjustment Specialist for World City," he said. "You'll need me soon enough, so let us begin readjustment proceedings right now, shall we? Of course you'll want to be reconditioned?"

He nodded to the two other men. They left.

Ominous despair thickened about Deker. "Mental adjustment—reconditioning?" he heard himself murmuring.

He was sick. He was mad. He wanted to run far away, but there was no place to go.

"Naturally. This is my study. My laboratories adjoin. You see, everything in the City of Perl has his assigned duties to the city for which he is conditioned from his period of artificial semination upward. Of course I don't know what your—er—scientific background is now. But you'll soon learn the rudiments of our glorious state."

Deker was staring. A wave of dizzy dizziness swirled through the inchoate confusion of his mind. A queer crying tightness filled his throat.

"What? What did you say? The City of Perl!"

"Why yes. I suppose you would be more interested in our myths than our present day realities. The name, City of Perl, stems from the legendary beginning of our socialistic state. An odd myth, purely animistic of course. Incredibly enough, our species were savages in those days—gods and goddesses were born. Men saw many activities they could not emulate, they beheld the fall of the thunderbolt, the violence of the winds, the agitation of the waves. They imagined beings more powerful than themselves, capable of producing these great effects."

Deker listened, a chilling wind in his brain, a growing sense of magnificent irony and defeat in his feverish blood.

"There are legends from our beginning of two-headed gods and Cyclopean monsters—you know, with three eyes—and legends of animals that were like men and men who were like animals. And the myth of course includes a goddess, a race mother so to speak, called Perl. According to this quaint flowery legend, this Perl goddess brought great powers from the sun and destroyed the animals and bestowed her gifts on the savages who

later formed our glorious city. Until the last five-thousand-year plan, our ancestors considered this Perl our race mother, in a sense, not too literally, of course. Interesting, but depressingly emotional and infantile, isn't it? But to get back to our program of reconditioning. You—"

BUT Deker wasn't listening now. He was thinking deeply while his heart cried out with regret, and his mind reeled with dim-remembered pain. If only he had waited with the hunchback! Perl the Anarch had listened to him, and had acted for humanity after all. Moved by his urging, she had returned to the ruins of City Three sometime after he had gone back to Nirvana. She had given those fear-haunted aborigines her power, and in time had overcome their psychic blockage against aggressive action so that they had been able to conquer the Beasts. But he could never know exactly what had happened in that fantastically distorted time eons before.

Deker wanted to cry out his frustration, the growing madness of this futile escape. But there was no turning back for him now. He asked how long he had been in the encystment capsule.

Kahl shook his head. "Your past has been repeatedly theorized upon for at least ten thousand years. You have emerged as part of that pre-objective barbaric myth pattern along with Perl, the race mother, and the others. Your origin is a mystery. There is no definite computation possible of the length of your—er—sleep."

"What city is this?" asked Deker.

"There is only one city. World City we prefer to call it rather than the City of Perl. One tremendous city. A perfect architectural symbol of man's omnipotence. We have found ruins of other cities scattered over the earth, a very inferior pre-dawn age culture, of course. At one time a former stage of pseudo-civilized humanity heavily populated the earth, living in many cities. The perfect cooperative socialized pattern and standardization of effort such as we have must have been impossible under those conditions."

"Yes," whispered Deker wearily. "It was indeed. But I can tell you this. Perl—she was no myth. She lived. It was—" He couldn't continue.

Explaining his origin, and his knowledge of dusty pasts was futile. Later he tried to explain again, several times, but he was part of

irrational myth and legend. He told them about the Beasts and their accelerated evolutionary processes that were overtaking and surpassing man; of the Anarchs who had found the ultimate perfection of individualism, of how, even then, he had slept for 40,000 years.

He told them of that astonishingly older world order of the Hundred Cities Utopian Federation that had also been cooperative standardized perfection like World City, and of the Atom War that had destroyed that other "perfect" socialized civilization. He explained his ideas about the reality of the Perl Mother and of how she had destroyed the Beasts and returned the race to the pathway of progressive change.

He tried to make them understand the terrifying trap of the repetitive cycle of futility into which he had fallen. But it was impossible to convince them. There could never have been a civilization like theirs before, or it could not have perished.

World City had reached a state of mechanistic cooperative statism that made the Hundred Cities Federation seem like a form of anarchy. The inhabitants couldn't conceive of there ever having been any similar society, especially one that had destroyed itself. For how could socialized perfection reach such an illogical destructive end?

"Yes," Kahl was explaining to Deker a week later as Deker reported for his five hours of reconditioning, his suggestivity shots, his new integration checkup. "World City is probably man's ultimate and perfect system for survival."

"Yes, I know," said Deker. "You have reached it. Again!"

Deker was laughing inwardly. He remembered how the hunchback had laughed, and he imagined if he laughed aloud he would sound that way.

"These psycho-grams show a dubious possibility for your adjustment into our society," said Kahl.

He leaned over his desk, a tubular glass construction with row on row of info-screens connected with every library and branch director in World City.

"You understand that we sympathize with you, Deker," he said. "But you must also understand that there can be no such thing as 'individual' consideration, divorced from the broader and primary consideration of World City. At first I thought we might possibly recondition your mind so that eventual-

ly you might be able to most satisfactorily serve the city and, indirectly, yourself. But you rejected that possibility because of your peculiarly primitive individualistic attitudes."

"That's true," said Deker, with a slow dry agony. "This time, I'm staying just as I am."

DEKER had decided on his second day in the City of Perl what he was going to do. Now he had had two weeks to study and plan; two weeks of maddening loneliness in another pseudo-perfectionistic socialistic culture in which he had no place. He moved now, carried out the first step of his violent repetitive plan. He had tried this once before and though it hadn't worked out, he would try it again. He hit Kahl on the point of the jaw.

It was not a forceful blow, but Kahl crumbled without a sound across his desk.

Deker had determined once more to try living alone. . . .

He went out through the dissolving wall, entered an elevator. He emerged finally onto a narrow ramp to which two atomurbinic aircraft were held by magnetic grapples. He jumped into one, conscious of the overpowering sense of inadequacy and nervous defeatism.

High above the endlessly stretching chrome-plated grandeur of the most colossal city the world had ever seen, he felt dwarfed into individual insignificance. He didn't like that feeling. He hated the city with a suffocating hate as he sent the atomurbinic machine streaking through the clear cold air high above the city.

Deker understood the principle upon which the aircraft operated. He intended to fly it to some desolate area in the North and try again to isolate himself, again live fully his eternal rôle as the pariah.

The turbine, almost as old as history itself, had been combined with atomic power to produce the only practical approach to an atomic-powered skycraft. The turbine, geared down considerably, turned a small propellor; and the exhaust gas from the turbine, although not essential for flight, gave an added boost to that supplied by the propellor. The critical size for the self-explosion of U-235 was much too large for small vehicles.

Once settled in a well-hidden spot, Deker intended to use the machine to set up a small efficient living unit with plenty of heat and power. That would be a good beginning for

his fight to survive in the Northern wilderness.

Deker hadn't really expected to escape. But his flight ended much sooner than he anticipated. They cheated him out of even a brief thrill of flight.

An invisible magno-beam clamped on his plane. Electronic automatic radasoles severed the power circuit. He was held suddenly motionless and impotent in the air above the seemingly limitless expanse of World City. Other planes rose, took him down again and directly back to the Mental Readjustment Specialist, Kahl, who was waiting for him in stolid silence.

Five men stood behind Kahl for protection now. Three others held Deker, regarding him as little better than a mad savage.

"I knew you would rebel in some fashion," said Kahl sorrowfully. "It was evident on your thought tracings. But I was hardly prepared for such—such atavism, such barbaric methods. However, this quality of yours makes it much easier for me to conclude our conversation, which was so rudely interrupted."

Deker hardly listened. The gray cloud of defeat had thickened, dulling all sound and sight. He slumped there in stunned passive disillusionment and blighted hope. He heard distantly:

"We have considered returning you to this suspended animation from which you recently awoke. But that, according to our implacably just laws, demands your personal permission, and you have refused us that."

"Yes," mumbled Deker.

"So, Deker, there is only one alternative, one I have hitherto failed to mention because it was not certain then what your basic psychological characteristics were. Now I know. Now I'm sure the Ship is the only answer."

Deker said wearily. "What is this alternative?"

"This should appeal to your newly evidenced, atavism," said Kahl. "Our glorious order has perfected—space travel!"

CHAPTER IX

Final Escape

HEARING what Kahl said, Deker began to laugh. He laughed until a wave of

weakness stopped the laughter in a choking cry. He felt different after that. The face of Kahl was clearer, as was his voice.

"The research was started long ago, Deker," Kahl was explaining. "But according to our Council Judiciary Code, unless scientific discoveries or inventions are known to contribute directly to the progress of the city, they are not exploited. It is obvious that it would be a waste of city energy and time to develop interplanetary travel unless it could be shown to be of some benefit to the city. So far, no such benefit had been apparent until the concept of space flight was applied to the problem of our Unstables.

"Other than for that reason, space flight may never be necessary for World City. Our birth rate is perfectly regulated, you know. The population will remain at a chosen balanced level. Because everyone is perfectly satisfied, there is no pioneering spirit or desire to colonize—those being symptomatic of psychological maladjustment—as in your case.

"However,"—Kahl coughed delicately—"half a century ago a rather strange discovery was made in psycho-surgery. It was found that certain types of recalcitrants or abnormals suffered from inherent incurable anti-social attitudes. These exceptional cases are negativistic to our conditioning programs. We call these rare but somewhat persistent types Unstables."

"They've always had some sort of label," said Deker. "Imperfections within the perfect."

Yes, in a broad, terribly ironic sense, history did repeat itself—for him. But this certainly might be an unexpected way out. Space travel. He had come a long time to find it. Space travel. Something about the phrase lifted him, transported him celestially into some far height of elation.

Kahl had ignored his remark. "These Unstables appear now and then despite our most exhausting efforts to the contrary. They are erratically intelligent, capable in their own unique ways. But they are totally unsuited to our socialistic standardized system. Being unhappy, maladjusted themselves, this space travel as an escape method has appealed strongly to all our Unstables. They have been more than willing to volunteer as crew members to man the first known space ship from Earth."

"I can understand their reaction," said Deker.

"The first experimental flight is theoretically destined for the planet, Venus. You—have some acquaintinship with astronomy, Deker?"

"Vaguely," said Deker wryly.

"The Council has established a Solar Colonization Bureau which includes scientists who have been especially conditioned for this particular specialization. Well, Deker, are you interested?"

"I am," said Deker hoarsely. "You may never know how very interested."

"Of course there will be no returning," said Kahl. "That's part of the plan."

"That, too, is most agreeable to me," said Deker.

"Take him to the Unstable Wards," Kahl said to the men who were still holding Deker. "During the next few weeks he will undergo basic training under Morlo's supervision, and will get acquainted with his fellow crew members. I believe Deker will make Morlo a full crew." Kahl turned to Deker. "Good luck to you. You may feel proud that, in spite of your unfortunate background, your mysterious and unavoidable alienage, you have found a magnanimous and unforgettable place in the selfless history of our World City."

Deker was taken to the Unstable Wards. . . .

A reality Deker had never before known came in a burst of quickening, pulsing lust for life there in the Unstable Wards, there among his own kind, the maladjusted, the freaks, the men and women who were rebels and who could never fit into the social order.

After five weeks of basic training, Deker was with Giles, the chief astrogator, a fiery little man with flaring yellow hair, talking. They were aboard the Ship, standing on the little balcony ridge outside the control turret. Through the opaque glassite dome around them, they could see the distant gleam of the colossal city reflecting like a gigantic jewel against the night sky, and reflecting back again on the yellow desert sand on which the Ship's cradle had been constructed.

Giles was slowly recovering from a persecution complex contracted before he had finally volunteered as a crewman on the Ship. All the Unstables who made up the crew of the Ship were extremely capable, though neurotic. Deker had become pretty well acquainted with all of them, except the captain.

Now all of them were aboard to stay. They could never set foot on Earth again. During

that week before blasting they were to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the Ship and with their specific duties.

THE Ship was a large blunt engine of inexhaustible atomic power, gleaming silver and black, with a platinum hull insulating it against heat. It could not be oxidized or burned.

It took Deker a long time to realize that he was assistant astrogator. But it had been easy for him. His mind seemed keener and more flexible now than it had ever been, fired with an enthusiasm he had never imagined himself capable of feeling. He knew a sharp sense of growing importance, of belonging, of serving a purpose.

The crew respected him for his knowledge and his mystery, a mystery he could never clarify for them. They couldn't conceive of there ever having been preceding cultures as great as he described.

But Deker had memories of many other kinds of social orders, including those jumbled sovereign governmental ideologies existing even before the Hundred Cities Federation—Democracy, Unionism, Syndicalism, Communism, Fascism, and countless others. Deker could remember many of them. And each had been a working system, including the Federated Utopia of the Hundred Cities, a fact inconceivable to these people of World City, or the City of Perl. His unbelievable revelations were considered the delusions of a high neurotic or even a potential psychotic.

"Space will cure you," they told him kindly.

He was convinced that it would. He knew that once out in space nothing concerning Earth would be of any importance again. Anyway, they were glad to be rid of him and the other Unstables. The Ship was the only legal method they could utilize to rid their perfectly balanced order of its erratic elements. Capital punishment was, of course, not only illegal, but incomprehensible.

The only alternative to sending the Unstables away in the Ship were the Reconditioning Wards, but these Unstables wouldn't recondition. They either were completely negativistic, or they merely changed their form of instability.

Deker had spent his time wandering through the Ship, luxuriating in its beauty and gleaming utilitarian power, and he had become thoroughly familiar with its most minute part. He had come to know every

crew member well, but he hadn't met the captain at all.

"The captain is a hard person to get along with," Giles was saying, "even if you manage to meet informally."

"Why is the captain so hard to see?" asked Deker indifferently.

"I don't know, exactly," said the fiery little Giles. "They say the captain is a brooding introspective neurotic, whatever that means. Spends all the time alone."

"But the symptoms of Unstables," said Deker, "are symptoms of our desire to escape World City and all the things it represents. Surely the captain should have a new attitude now that we are getting away from World City entirely."

Giles grinned slyly. "Deker, you have an amazingly intuitive grasp of so many fields of learning, especially the workings of the human mind. Sometimes I almost feel that you are a traveler through time, that you actually have known pasts and peoples of which we cannot even dream. Anyway, maybe you can help the captain."

Giles looked at his chronodisk.

"The captain retires every night at precisely twenty-four hundred," he said. "You still have an hour. I think it would be an excellent idea if you talked with the captain. You have such a remarkable understanding of mental processes that you might be of benefit. And it will be unpleasant out there"—he motioned toward the stars—"with a captain who remains a neurotic. It might be disastrous."

Deker saw some kind of ulterior motive gleaming in Giles' eyes. He shrugged.

"All right, Giles. I've got to meet this mysterious captain anyway. And I'm sure he won't make the first gesture. . . ."

Deker felt entirely at ease, confident, strong and proud in the brown heavy-duty plasticloth space suit as he made his way to the Captain's room. He knocked lightly on the metal door. There was a long pause. Deker felt unexpectedly ill at ease as he hesitantly knocked again. There was a tense feeling of suspense he could not analyze. And then the captain opened the door and stood framed in its opening, looking at him.

His mind reeled. He stumbled back, blinked, tried to speak. But he could only gasp while his mind plummeted back through time to a wild scene at the foothills of high mountains, a running stream, a singing hunchback, a high lonely tower with an

opening, an opening framing a face.

This girl's—the captain's face!

Her red-gold hair. Her captain's uniform was a glossy black, snug-fitting so that the highlights of her beautiful figure had a shine on them. Her arrogant blue eyes—yes, they were the same blue—were brooding as they studied him.

SHE was Perl! Physically, there was not one minute difference. Everything about her was Perl, except the uniform. The red-gold hair, the blue eyes, the probing gaze, other intangible qualities only Deker would remember. It seemed to be Perl, but Deker had grown suspicious, distrustful of reality evaluated temporally.

The cycles spiraled without end, with inevitable repetitions. Only details seemed to alter. But given time, even all the most minute details might return.

Deker brushed a hand over his face.

"Perl—" he mumbled once, then managed to get hold of himself, stiffened, bowed slightly. "I thought it was about time I introduced myself," he said. "I'm Deker. Perhaps you've heard about the man who has been sleeping in the encystment vault. I am that man."

She stepped aside, invited him in. It was a small, delicate, feminine room, draped in blue. Incense burned. She motioned to a capacious couch, but she sat in a deep chair facing him. Her voice was soft, gentle, persuasive.

"You are the man who speaks of lost times no one believes ever were?"

"Yes," said Deker in a husky whisper. Even her voice was Perl's voice.

"What would you say if I said that I believed you—Deker?" Her eyes were infinitely soft, deep, as he looked into them. "For I do believe your tales of the past. For I have dreamed the same things. All the horror and darkness and terrifying vistas which you have spoken of, I have experienced in my dreams."

"I've traveled a long time, come a long way," said Deker. "But this ship ends the quest for me. The Ship is the chimera and we have found it. Maybe out there, given time, I can make you understand. All these years—eons—I've been trying to escape. I'm beginning to realize now what I was trying

to escape from. It was Earth."

"Then this isn't the end for you—for us, Deker. But the beginning. . . ."

The endlessness of space opened for Deker after that. The feeling of futility and of uselessness, and of not belonging, the sense of hopeless dusty dreariness and despair of spinning cycles—it all dropped away with the fading dull red ball of Earth. And he knew none of it would ever obsess him again.

The feeling of inferiority, of being an abnormality—that fell away too. For he knew that he and his kind did belong, that they belonged to something incredibly vaster than the smug immediacy of the systems which had created them, and then rejected them as unfit.

They would die down there in their own narrow complacency and auto-delusion. His kind would always rebel and escape into space. His kind had always rebelled, sought newness, and escape from the dull finalities in search of the broader meanings.

His arm was about Perl's slim waist. She used another name now, but to him she would always be Perl. Perl the Anarch who had changed, and saved the human species from decay and death. They stood in the control turret watching the receding Earth in the ultraview screen.

Dimly, in a haze, Deker saw the sun setting beyond the Earth, surrounded by its corona and zodiacal light. Beyond it he saw the moon, slightly blue, with a white rim. The Earth was all dark except where the sun splattered down on its far half, a pool of light, bright white in its center and graduating outward into dissipating orange and brown.

Then the whole scene was gone, and there was a mind-reeling blackness with only stark cold dots of untwinkling white.

Deker looked at the blue and white astrocharts. His arm tightened about Perl's pliant waist. The Earth was gone. And he knew that it was gone forever.

"This is what we've been searching for," he heard himself whispering. "They'll never have any problem with people like us any more. It was a disease. It's cured now. We were Earthbound, but now we're free!"

Venus waited for Deker and the captain he called Perl, and the rest of the crew of the Ship. And beyond Venus—infinity.

Next Issue: **THE FACELESS MEN**, a Novel by Arthur Leo Zagat