

DP

Arthur Dekker Savage

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DP ***

Illustrated by Paul Orban

DP

*Once upon a time life was perfection. Government made sure its
citizens were supplied with every comfort and pleasure. But
sometimes perfection breeds boredom and ...*

BY ARTHUR DEKKER SAVAGE

ALLEN KINDERWOOD slowed his pace so his forelock would quit bobbing. The damn thing wasn't supposed to bob; it was supposed to be a sort of peaked crest above rugged, handsome features—a dark lock brushed carelessly aside by a man who had more important things to do than fuss with personal grooming. But no matter how carefully he combed it and applied lusto-set, it always bobbed if he walked too fast.

But then, why should it matter now? He wasn't looking for a woman tonight. Not when his appointment with the Social Adjustment counsellors was tomorrow morning, and he would get a Departure Permit. *Should* get one, he corrected himself. But he had never heard of a petition for a DP being refused.

He wanted to spend his last night in the city over here in the main park of C Sector, walking in the restless crowds, trying to settle his thoughts. He moved through slow aimless eddies of brightly appareled citizens, avoiding other pedestrians, skaters and the heavy, four-wheeled autoscooters. Everything was dully, uncompromisingly the same as in his own sector, even to the size and spacing of the huge, spreading trees. He had hoped, without conviction, that there might be some tiny, refreshing difference—anything but the mind-sapping sameness that had driven him to the petition.

Allen was careful not to brush against any girl with an escort. Since he wasn't on the make, what would be the use of fighting? Kind of an odd feeling, though, to know you'd never date or fight again, or ... Or what? What else was there to do, if you hadn't the luck to be a jobman or a tech? You ate, and slept, and preened, and exercised, and found what pleasure you could, and fought mostly because it was momentarily stimulating, and, eventually, after a hundred and fifty years or so, you died.

Unless you were a tech. If you were a tech, Government gave you stuff to keep you alive longer. A jobman got a somewhat different deal—he got nothing to keep him alive abnormally, because ninety percent of Earth's population was waiting for his job anyway.

Allen skirted a huge fountain throwing colored, scintillant spray high into the dark summer sky, stealing a glance backward over his shoulder. That girl was still behind him. Following him? It wouldn't be anything new, in his case—especially in his own sector—but maybe she just happened to be going his way.

It would be easy to find out. He circled the fountain twice. With her looks she should have been picked up before she'd left her compartment building block—except that whoever got her might have to fight more than once during the evening to hold her. Definitely a young man's darling.

And, the way it began to look, definitely Allen's darling. On the second trip around, she had backtracked to meet him face to face—her purpose obvious.

He tried to dodge, but there was no way it could be done without insult. Damn....

"Hi, brute. Nedda Marsh. Alone?" She ran soft hands along the hard biceps under his short jacket sleeves. The motion threw open her shriekingly bright orange cloak, displaying saucy breasts, creamy abdomen and, beneath her brief jeweled skirt, long smooth thighs. And the perfume assailed his nostrils with almost physical force.

"Hi, Nedda. Allen Kinderwood. Alone, natch." Natch, hell. But what could any male do to combat Government perfume? He smiled, his pulse suddenly quickening. "Date, darling?" She *was* a beautiful thing.

Her large, sparkling eyes showed pleasure. "Take me, Al." She touched vivid red lips lightly against his. And the formula was complete. Private citizens Allen Kinderwood and Nedda Marsh were dated at least until dawn—or a better man did them part.

He squeezed her arm where she'd snuggled it against his side, starting with her away from the fountain. "How come the most gorgeous thing in Kansas

City wasn't dated earlier?"

She looked up at him, and the passion in her gaze made his heart skip like a teenager's. "Could be I'm very particular, darling, but," her look was suddenly beseeching, "the truth is, I'm protected."

A slow, tiny fire of distaste fanned itself alive in Allen's brain. Why in the name of World Government did every other girl who made first play with him have to be protected? But there was his out. By unwritten social code he could declare the date off. Except that he had grown to increasingly hate the spiteful practice of 'protection'. It meant Nedda had peeved some local lothario who, along with other males in his clique, was going to damn well see she wasn't intimate with anyone else until she begged another date with the original one. If you had a sadistic turn of mind, it meant you could keep a delectable bit in freeze until her natural inclinations forced her into your arms. But you'd have to fight any man who tried to date her in the meantime.

Fighting was legal, of course, as long as the loser was surgically repairable, and it was considered a normal catharsis for strained relationships between males.

Not, Allen thought glumly, that he had any stake in the future of frantically weary society, but he had reached the conclusion long ago that a man without the courage to back up his personal convictions wasn't worth the energy it took to down him.

He stopped and held Nedda against him protectively. "I still want the date, sprite," he said. "I have to leave early tomorrow, but I'll try to get you out of protection—okay?"

Her lips trembled. "Oh, yes. If you knew how it's been, these last few days —"

He shook her again, but more tenderly. "Deal. We'll try to reach your compartment." Living quarters were a sanctuary no one but a medic could legally enter without invitation. He removed his stainless identification plaque and slipped its chain about her throat. "If you see any of the guys who're watching for you, tell me but don't look at them." He took her arm

again and alertly began to work through the throng. "Describe your protector."

"Jeff Neal-Hayne. He's big, Al. Bigger than you. Heavier, but you've got muscles like he never saw. You look faster, too."

Allen didn't know him, but the name was revealing. Not that anything but your Earth society number was official, but use of a double surname meant your father had elected to stay with your mother for at least a while after you were born. Most babies, of course, were immediately turned over to a Government creche, but it had always seemed to Allen that kids raised by one or more parents had other advantages too, although he had never been able to figure out just what they were. Maybe it was only his imagination.

AT THE edge of the park they chose the nearest double scooter which showed full battery charge.

Allen leaned against the forward rail. "Herd it, will you, Nedda? Every time I think of the hundreds of hours I've spent plowing air with one of these gut-weighted things I want to break one. Hell, I can run faster. Anyway, you know where we're going."

The girl smiled, pushed the power lever into forward range and steered into slow-moving traffic. "I saw a man lift a single, once, but that's all he was able to do with it."

The lighted street seemed intensely bright after the dimmer reaches of the park. "Ever think of running one into the river?"

She looked at him in amazement. "Fright, no. Why—you'd have to drive along a pedestrian path for at least a block to reach the bank!" Nedda spun the steering wheel to avoid a long string of solemn teeners playing follow the leader on singles. "You have funny thoughts, Al."

"I'm laughing." He flexed his muscles, impatient, as usual, with another citizen's sluggish mentation. "I suppose the damn music never gets on your

nerves, either?"

"Music? Oh—the music." She listened as though for the first time to the muted strains which played continuously throughout the city—calming, soothing, lulling. "Of course not. Why should it?"

"They've got it synchronized," said Allen. "Government's got it synchronized so you hear it just the same volume no matter where you are outside. You *have* to listen to it."

"Darling, your boredom's showing."

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Don't let me spin you, lovely. I've got the answer."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I applied for a DP this morning."

"Al—*no*!"

"Why not?" He put it like the needle thrust of a fighting knife, daring her to find a reason, half hoping she could.

"I—" She glanced at him once, quickly, then away. Then she drew a deep breath and let it sigh out. "How about Mars, Al? There aren't many service machines, and they even let women do lots of little detailed things. I almost went, once."

He was watching her shrewdly. "Why didn't you?" He had fought this one out with himself before.

"Oh—I don't know. Just never did."

"I'll tell you why you really didn't. It'd be too different. When the Government provides every convenience, every comfort you can think of here, you can't stand having to work in a mine, with an oxygen helmet, stuffed into heavy clothes. You can't stand the danger and the fear—and somehow, inside, you must know it. I'm pretty strong, and I never met a man I was afraid of, but I know I couldn't stand Mars." He gripped the rail and stared out over the wide, swarming street. "But Earth is a trap, Nedda.

A big comfortable trap where you walk around endlessly without being any use at all."

She trod the brake and barely missed bumping a couple who had stopped to embrace. "*I'm* some use, hon. Wait'll we get home." Her eyes held a promise she could barely restrain.

Automatically, he caressed her with a practiced hand—and grabbed the wheel when she suddenly strained against him, trembling, pressing eager lips against his neck.

Christ, how long had she been protected? He felt a mounting anger against the social ennui which drove men's minds to such inhuman activity. Departure was the only escape from this kind of thing, and from the city—from any city.

But the Departees had always been only a tiny minority. Did that mean they—and he—were wrong? He brooded about it for seemingly the googolth time, guiding the scooter without conscious thought, turning as Nedda directed.

A trap, he'd told her. Well, he could see no reason to change that. The blazingly glorious sensotheaters, cafes, gymnasiums, dancing salons, amusement rides and hypnodream houses, crowding every main thoroughfare with their fantastically ornate architecture, were—when you thought about it—designed to trap people's minds, keep them from thinking of anything but a gossamer, useless pursuit of personal pleasure. And wasn't the design faulty when everyone was bored, when some chose Departure and others sank to the unnatural practice of protection to whet their sated appetites?

Nor was there any apparent hope for the future. Theatre productions, dream tapes, even the elaborate home televue shows were all historical. Why? Was Government admitting there was nothing but staleness in the present? Why the concern with backtime?

Because of Government entertainment diet, Allen could probably, with a bit of practice, fish skillfully from an outrigger, make and use a longbow expertly, run a store profitably in the Money Ages, weave cloth correctly, build complete wooden houses—oh, any number of ancient things.

But he couldn't even talk the same language as the relative handful of trained men who built and operated the unbelievably intricate robomachinery which activated and maintained the complex cities of Earth.

NEDDA'S soft voice broke into his thoughts. "Al—Dan Halgersen's coming up behind us on a single. He's one of Jeff's—"

"Hold on." Allen swung the scooter hard right and adroitly darted across traffic toward an emblazoned theatre entrance. Here, now, was a situation he knew how to deal with. He said rapidly, out of the side of his mouth, "Jump off when I stop at the entry and kiss me like good-by. Register your plaque in the ID slot and head for the door—then look back. If I'm down, go on in and lose yourself. If he's down, come back."

He made a wrenching stop at the very edge of the crowd, swung Nedda through the opening between front and side rails and gave her a hard, sterile kiss.

She clung to him a moment. Without letting her eyes stray she said, "Slowing down right behind you. Luck, lover." Then she turned and started to pick her way across the walk.

Allen swung the scooter in a fast, tight circle to the left. Assuming his opponent to be right-handed, this would help avoid a knife slash from the rear if the other rammed his scooter—further assuming the man had *not* been tricked into thinking his presence was unnoticed.

He hadn't. When Allen whipped his head around to look at him, there was barely time to brake the heavier double to avoid a shrewdly planned collision. Halgersen, Nedda had said. He was thick-set, with heavy brows and large jaw. The type Allen had learned to associate with power and endurance but not too much speed.

Halgersen was holding a knife in his right hand. Allen quickly slipped his own blade from the sheath conveniently held at the front of his belt. They

cut intricate patterns of feint, attack and withdraw, using passing vehicles as buffers. But not for long.

A voice from the crowd called, "Fight!" and space grew miraculously about the combatants, leaving a huge clearing in the street rimmed solidly with scooters and pedestrians. A few shouts of encouragement began to be heard as individuals selected one or the other of the men as a likely winner.

Allen dodged a sudden attempt at a side-swipe collision and the attendant vicious swipe of Halgersen's blade—and then drew first blood by a lightning riposte to the arm. Legal knife target was arm, leg, abdomen and a forehead cut without thrust—which would obscure vision with blood without doing organic damage.

The bright yellow luminescence of a police copter dropped and hovered as Allen tried to follow up his momentary advantage. The scene, he knew, would now be simultaneously filmed for possible legal record and broadcast on all television news programs. Entertainment for adults, education for the teenagers.

A feminine voice in the front ranks called, "Two stunts to one on green jacket!" and was immediately taken up by another girl near by.

He had little time to think with satisfaction that no female had ever been forced to pay off a bet of some ingeniously embarrassing public behavior on his account. Halgersen was now trying to maneuver him for a straight ram which would bring them definitely together. He wasn't being weakened by the slow drip of blood from his arm and he didn't seem to be bothered by pain.

And then they were close to the circle rim. Allen swung his scooter so the cooling downdraft from the copter—coming from above the center of the cleared area—was directly against his back, a method he had devised for knowing his position without having to take his eyes from a close opponent. He let his shoulders droop suddenly, as though he was tired, and at the murmur of disappointment from many onlookers he began to back slowly away from Halgersen.

The blue-jacketed figure rolled into the trap scowling. He tried again for a head-on ram. Allen let him come, and at the last possible instant, when

Halgersen would be unable to reverse, stop, or even swerve, he flipped the bar to full power ahead. And braced himself accordingly.

The scooters met with a bone-jarring thud of perimeter rubber. Halgersen was hurled neatly over his own guard rail to land gaspingly across Allen's.

Allen grasped the back of the other's belt in a grip that had dismayed many a combatant, hauled him into position and hamstrung both legs with two dextrous thrust-and-cut movements. It took but a moment longer to leap above a desperate slash at his own legs, drag the heavier man to the thick floor of the scooter and render him unconscious with a stamping kick of one sandaled heel. It left an easy repair job for the medics, but would keep one Dan Halgersen from fighting again for more than a week—and maybe make him think twice about joining in another protection pact.

Allen leaped up and balanced on two guard rails while the police copter settled down to pick up Halgersen. He signaled Nedda to move on along the walkway.

While the onlookers were clapping approval of the show, he removed Halgersen's plaque, leaped down and dodged an attempted kiss from the girl who had given odds on him—glancing back warily in case her escort felt insulted—then pushed through the mob to join Nedda.

She hugged his arm ecstatically. "Darling, every woman should have a guy like you."

"Yeah." He felt no sense of triumph. It had happened too many times before. Everything had happened too many times before—repetitive, palling and purposeless. He tucked the won plaque into her decorative belt. It was Nedda's proof that protection was ended, and Halgersen would have to call for it accompanied by a witness.

"Where the hell is your place?" he asked. For a moment he wondered why he didn't just turn abruptly and leave her, social mores notwithstanding. Then Nedda's perfume began its chemical magic again, and he carefully straightened his jacket and set his forelock in its proper place.

"NEDDA," he accused lazily, "you're a nymph. Ever tried psychoconditioning?"

She gave him a tender, lingering kiss and burrowed more comfortably in his arms. "Not yet, darling. Would you prefer me less—responsive?"

Allen patted her as carefully as possible to show approval without arousing her again. "No man would. But it must be rough between dates, isn't it?" And just why should he be worrying about anyone else at this stage of the game? Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was just curious now that it no longer mattered.

She avoided his eyes in the cool semigloom of the compartment. "I—usually manage to have enough dates. Until some moron like Neal-Hayne puts me under protection."

He disengaged himself gently, rolled off the pliant couch and increased the room's light with the wall knob. "You should register a complaint, Nedda. After three he'll be forcibly psyched, you know." He dialed the servoconsole and focused a morning meal menu on the viewscreen. "Ready for breakfast, pip?"

"Mmm—if you are." Nedda came over and lifted the phone from its panel recess. "That number six algal protein is supposed to be a new taste sensation. Like?"

He shrugged. "Let's try it. It'll be my last go at this robot feed."

When the meals had been deposited in the service chute she looked at him pleadingly. "Hon, why don't *you* try being psyched? They could make you satisfied with—things as they are."

Allen lifted a thin transparent food cover while he shook his head. "Maybe they could, Nedda. But it would have to be almost total erasure to change my slant on everything, and being forced to accept what I hate is worse than anything else I can think of. It wouldn't be me when they got through. Whatever causes me to think like I do is the *me*, and that'd be gone."

Some of the resentful animosity surged up in him and he had to talk about it. "Look at your compartment. The same as every other single in the city—or any city. The walls are the shade of green that's best for the eyes. Furniture and fixtures are always the same colors. Every compartment has a servoconsole to condition the air, control the temperature and humidity, bring you food or any other standard service, provide televue shows, music or requests. You could live your life inside this square hole. Everybody has everything and nothing means anything—can't you see that?"

She came around the table and sat on his lap with her head against his neck. "No, presh, but if you'll change your mind about a DP you can date me any time, always. I'd like to share a double with you forever."

He traced soothing circles on her smooth back with his fingertips. "That's the closest I've ever come to *owning* anything," he mused.

"But, hon, Government owns everything and takes care of everything. When you can always use a thing, how could it be better if you owned it?"

Allen held her against him tightly, fighting the old fight to find words. How could you explain how you *felt* things to be right or wrong, without really knowing the reasons?

"Maybe," he said slowly, "it's as though I wanted to keep you for myself alone. But Nedda, if another man made the right approach, could you refuse him?" After a minute he repeated, "Could you?"

Eventually, she made two answers.

They were warm and wet and dropped onto his chest.

THE ADJUSTMENT Building was a soaring, chastely white structure of silicoid plastic, dazzling in the hot morning sun. It crossed Allen's mind fleetingly that everything built nowadays would long outlast the builders. That seemed right, but he didn't know why.

He took his ID plaque from Nedda and kissed her. He had tried to dissuade her from coming with him, but she had merely smiled and held his arm and urged him toward a double scooter.

"This is it, beautiful," he said shortly, at the entrance. And, with an attempt at levity, "Don't take any more protection." Actually, what could you say? He went inside quickly, without looking back.

At the door marked *Kansas City Department of Social Adjustment*, he slipped his plaque into the correct slot for a moment and was admitted directly to the waiting room for those who had appointments for the day.

There was only one other waiting—a handsome blond youth whose knife was new. Allen sat down in a lounge chair across the room.

And Nedda came in and sat down beside him.

He could have understood almost anything but that. "How in the name of fear—"

"Do you think," she said mischievously, taking his hand, "the B Sector champ is the only one who can get an appointment?"

Before it could more than flash through Allen's mind that he'd not told her that, the blond youth was standing before them, his eyes hotly on Nedda. Then, obviously confused that she was already holding hands, he addressed himself to Allen as though it was what he had intended doing.

"Marty Bowen, sir. Uh—I'm going to see if they'll let me have a double compartment with some gym apparatus in it." He shifted his weight to the other foot and hung a thumb nervously in his belt, unable to keep from darting glances at Nedda.

Allen noted, with rising anger and some other unpleasant emotion he couldn't define, that she hadn't dropped her eyes. He said curtly. "Fine, kid—hope you make it." The youth mumbled something else and went back to his chair.

He had barely seated himself when a voder speaker crooned a number melodiously. With a quick backward glance at Nedda, the blond lad went on into the counsel room.

Allen's mind remained in confusion, shot through with anger at himself that he should waste thoughts now on anything but the coming interview. The room was beginning to fill quietly with others.

His number was called a few minutes later.

And Nedda's was called along with it.

Well—the place to get the answer was the counsel chamber. He got up slowly, barely noticing that Nedda continued to hold his hand as they went in.

The brilliant room was two stories high, with fluted walls and no windows. Obviously the size was to impress interviewees. But why should they have to be impressed? Wasn't the wisdom of the five tech doctors sufficient by itself? Wasn't it?

He sat in a chair indicated by the dark-skinned one, and listened while the very old one in the center talked to Nedda.

Had dating the B Sector park champion solved her difficulty with the man she had reported? Fine. It was the second such report about him in a year—the other also coming from a girl who was highly sexed. Did Nedda not consider herself to have a problem which required psychoconditioning? No? Well, perhaps in later years, when her beauty and her mind were somewhat changed.... No, there would seem to be no justification for giving her a compartment in another sector, unless she had persuaded the champion or another to share a double with her. Would that be all? Much happiness to her.

Abruptly, Allen realized Nedda had left and that the frail old man was talking to him.

"... unusual to have joint interviews without a more definite emotional tie, but we felt you would like to know how you had rendered civic aid."

So pitting him without choice against any of several men was their idea of civic aid. No wonder he'd met so many protected girls in the past. This time, they'd harnessed Nedda's restless passion to the task of dissuading him from a DP. Very neat.

It made him feel better to know they'd failed where he was concerned, and his resentment abated somewhat. He said, "Glad I could help," careful to keep his voice emotionless. Then, determined to have no further subtleties, "If I can have my departure permit, I won't trouble you further."

Maybe his approach wasn't right, but all they could do would be to refuse him. In which case there were other ways—and the hell with legality.

"We hope," smiled the old doctor benignly, "there may be another way. Perhaps, if we discuss your problem, we can find a solution which won't cost the city a handsome young citizen."

Allen made it a direct attack. "Why should the city miss any citizen? In fact, what good is the city itself—what good is any city?"

And almost, the techs seemed startled. But a younger one said easily, "A city, Mr. Kinderwood, permits a maximum of efficient service and pleasure, with a minimum of waste and discomfort."

Allen leaned back and stubbornly folded his arms. "I've had enough of pleasures and comforts without meaning, and I've nothing to do, and it doesn't look like anyone's making any progress anywhere. Even on the planets they're just repeating backtime stuff with modern equipment."

The old man waved a hand at the others and looked at Allen intently. His voice was softly insistent. "The one continuous thread in human history has been the seeking of more pleasure and greater comfort for all members of the race. Our technology gives us a maximum of both. No one labors, and the few who work prefer to do so. No one is diseased, no one stays in pain longer than the time necessary to reach a medic. Everyone can have everything he needs, without striving and without debt. And as technology advances, there will be even greater benefits for all. What more can be done to make the citizens of Earth happy?"

For the first time, Allen felt confused. "I don't know," he said slowly. "The way you put it, it sounds right. But where does it all lead? What reason have I got for living? What reason does the human race have for surviving?"

The sociologist looked even older. "In all seriousness, sir, can you answer the questions you have just asked?" His eyes were expectant—but there

didn't seem to be much hope reflected in their depths.

Allen noted a tenseness around the table. Why were they asking him for answers they were supposed to know? Or was it another of their subtleties?

"No," he said curtly, "I don't know the answer to any of them. Has it got a bearing on my getting a DP?"

The central figure sighed. "None at all." He pressed several tiny buttons on the polished table and an inscribed card rose halfway out of a slot. "We merely hope that some day a man will come along who can tell us—before someone who may not be a man comes along and makes the answers futile." He handed Allen the card. "Here is your permit. You may take it to the third office south on the corridor through that door. We don't feel it is the answer to your problem, but we admit we don't—"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Allen. He wet his lips. "Did you say 'someone who may *not be a man*'?"

"Yes. It is an aspect you have not considered, Mr. Kinderwood." The sociologist's face seemed haggard. "Even a few generations ago, Earth as it is today would have seemed like a concept of heaven. We know now it is not enough, but we don't know why. Perhaps, if we can reach the stars the problem will cease to be critical. By the same token, life from the stars may come here first.

"We have no remotest idea what such an eventuality would entail. It may provide a solution. It may quite conceivably send man back to the forests and jungles.

"You have experienced our only answer to the latter possibility. While providing man with everything to which he has aspired for milleniums, we instill in him, through the media of entertainment, knowledge of all the survival practices known to the backtimers who painfully nurtured civilization from an embryonic idea to its present pinnacle. We can do no more."

Allen flexed his arms involuntarily at the sheer enormity of the idea. It was one thing to let a useless race expire, quite another to think of its being forced back to— "But—can't anyone think of anything else to do?"

"Whoever is capable of devising anything else," the old doctor said resignedly, "will undoubtedly be able to carry it out with or without our assistance." He pressed more buttons and there was a muted sound of the voder calling a number. "The exit over there, Mr. Kinderwood. And—much happiness."

Allen's thoughts swirled in tumultuous confusion. Dimly, he realized that man had outstripped himself, and saw with intense bitterness that there was no answer on Earth for any ordinary citizen. Or was there? And if there was, was it worth trying to find? He flung open the door to the corridor violently, as though the force could quiet his mind. Maybe, if he didn't use the permit, he could stay and figure out an answer. Nedda would be sympathetic and patient while— And then he stopped. Across the wide hallway, Nedda stood beneath a window, looking at him. And the blond youth held her with flushed understanding, impatiently waiting, caressing her arm with his hand, binding her to him with the one bond she could not break.

She watched Allen start slowly down the corridor. Once, when he stumbled, she gave a stifled sob, and tears brimmed and spilled silently when he passed through the door marked *Kansas City Department of Euthanasia*.

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *If Worlds of Science Fiction* September 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DP ***

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