Title: The Huddlers

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Release Date: June 20, 2010 [EBook #32904]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at https://www.pgdp.net

The Huddlers

By William Campbell Gault

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[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from If Worlds of Science Fiction May 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

He was a reporter from Venus with an assignment on Earth. He got his story but, against orders, he fell in love—and therein

That's what *we* always called them, where I come from, huddlers. Damnedest thing to see from any distance, the way they huddle. They had one place, encrusting the shore line for miles on one of the land bodies they called the Eastern Seaboard. A coagulation in this crust contained eight million of the creatures, *eight million*.

They called it New York, and it was bigger than most of the others, but

typical. It wasn't bad enough living side by side; the things built mounds and lived one above the other. Apartments they called them. What monstrosities they were.

lies this story.

We couldn't figure this huddling, at first.

All our attention since Akers' first penetration into space had been directed another way in the galaxy, and though I'll grant you unified and universal concentration may be considered unwise in some areas, it's been our greatest strength. It's brought us rather rapidly to the front, I'm sure you'll agree, and we're not the oldest planet, by a damned sight.

Well, by the time we got to the huddlers, Akers was dead and Murten was just an old man with vacant eyes. Jars was handling the Department, though you might say Deering ran it, being closer to most of the gang. Jars was always so cold; nobody ever got to know him really well.

They divided on the huddling. Fear, Jars said, and love, Deering said, but who could say for sure?

As Deering said to me, "What could they fear? They've got everything they need, everything but knowledge and their better specimens are getting closer to that, every day."

In the laboratory, Deering said this, and how did we know old Jars was in a corner, breaking down a spirigel?

"They fear each other," Jars said, as though it was an official announcement, as though any fact is permanent. "And they fear nature. It's the most fear ridden colony of bipeds a sane mind could imagine."

Deering looked at me, and winked.

Jars went back to the spirigel.

Deering said, "Love, love, love. All they sing about, all they write about, all they talk about, love, love, love."

Jars was just tracing a *z* line on the spirigel and he put down his legort at that. "Rather superficial thinking, from a scientist," he said quietly. "Surface manifestations to be considered as indicative. Oral and verbal camouflage to be accepted as valid. Deering, old thing, please—"

Deering shrugged. "So I am—what do they call it, a Pollyanna. Isn't that a pretty word? So, I'm a Pollyanna."

"I rather think that describes you partially," Jars said, "and with this particular planet we're discussing, it can be a dangerous attitude."

"So?" Deering said, nudging me. "And could I ask why?"

"Ask it."

"I ask."

"You've recorded the state of their development. They have, among other things, achieved nuclear fission."

"So? In the fourth grade we are teaching nuclear fission."

"We are a scientific people. They haven't been, until very, very recently. You have noted, I hope, their first extensive use of this new discovery?"

"Hero—Helo—" Deering shrugged. "My memory."

"Hiroshima," Jars supplied. "Love—, my friend?"

"I have noted it," Deering said. "We spoke, a while ago, of surface manifestations."

"We shall continue to. You have witnessed the mechanical excellence of their machines, in some ways beyond ours, because of their greater element wealth. You have noted the increased concentration of their better minds, their scientific minds. How long do you think it will be, friend, before they are ready for us?"

"Ready, ready—? In what way, ready?"

"The only way they know, the only thing they seem to have time for—ready for war."

"War—," Deering said, and sighed. "Oh, Jars, they will be beyond war, certainly, before they are cognizant of us. They are no tribe of incompetents; they grow each day."

"They—?" Jars' smile was cynical. "Their scientists grow. Are their scientists in command, sir?"

That "sir" had been unnecessary; Jars was the senior mind, here. Deering didn't miss it, and he flushed.

Jars said softly, "I apologize. It was not a thing to say. I have spent too much time in the study of these—monsters."

They had gone to school, together, those two, and the bond was there and the respect, but they were different, mentally, and each knew it.

"You have a sharp tongue," Deering said, "but a sharper mind. I believe I can stand it." He smiled. "Love, fear, hate—what does it matter to us, except as phenomena?"

"It matters to us, believe me, please. It concerns us very much, Arn."

When Jars got to first names, he was emotionally wrought. I looked at him in surprise. And so did Deering. We weren't ever going to warm up to him, but he was our best mind and there wasn't a man in the department who didn't appreciate that.

We stared at him, and he sat down on the high bench near the Maling converters. He looked old and he was tired, we could see. "Evil," he said quietly. "Fear, hate, evil—which of the three is the father and which are the sons? I suppose fear is the father."

"I'd always thought so," Deering said, "though my education was almost completely confined to the technical. I'm rather skimpy on the humanities."

"And I," Jars said, and now looked at me. "But not you, Werig."

"I don't know them, sir," I said. "Surface manifestations, as we've said before today. It would need a closer study. Their huddling is what intrigues me the most."

One of the rare smiles came to Jars' lined face as he looked at Deering. "Huddling, the lad says. If you don't say it, I won't, Arn."

Deering smiled in return. "We'll change the routine, this time; you say 'love' and I'll say 'fear'. But seriously, Jars, you fear these—people?"

"I fear them," Jars said. "Scientifically, perhaps, they are tyros, but mechanically they are not. They have discovered forces and developed machines which they do not understand, and yet, have achieved efficiency with them. I fear any monster that powerful even though it is blind."

"And you think there is a possibility of their becoming—aware of us within any determinable time?"

"I do. You will remember how quickly the Algreans developed, once they achieved unity? You will remember how quickly they became a threat?"

"Yes," Deering said quietly, "and I have been trying a long time to forget what we did to that planetoid."

"It was necessary for survival," Jars said simply. "I think, by any standards, we would be the ones chosen to survive."

Deering's smile was cynical. "At least, by *our* standards. We had a closer communication with them. About the huddlers, we know only what we convert from their stronger video broadcasts. It is a device they seem to use more for entertainment than for information."

Jars nodded, and stood up. "And love is their major entertainment, perhaps. Love and war. But we gabble. I had a plan in mind, a plan to put before the assembly."

He had a plan, all right, and I was part of it. The humanities had been no major with me, but they didn't want a scholar, they wanted a reporter, anyway. Or perhaps I could be called a recorder.

Jars talked and the assembly listened. They always do, when Jars talks.

And I was their boy, and went into a concentrated and complete briefing. They put me under the lucidate and poured it to me, night and day, all the information we had on the huddlers and all the theories based on that information.

They put me into a space sphere, and said "good luck" and do our people proud, young man. Oh, yes. And don't fall in love. Oh, no. They'd pick me up, again, when they got a signal. They didn't expect to wait too long for that, I guess, at the time.

The sphere was a relic of the Algrean business, and Algrea hadn't been this much of a trip. But Mechanics said it would do, and it did.

I landed in the Pacific, about three-quarters of a mile off the Santa Monica yacht basin, and let the sphere float north for a while until I reached a secluded spot. In a small curve of the shore line, a few miles above Santa Monica, I beached her, and opened the dissolving cocks.

I watched her melt into the surging water, and turned to face the red and green light almost immediately overhead. I walked up from the beach to the road, not even knowing what they looked like. Their evolution should have matched ours, but who could be sure?

For all I knew, I might be a freak to them. I should have thought of that before dissolving the ship.

Above, the light changed from red to green and across the street, I saw a sign. This was Sunset Boulevard, and the Pacific Coast Highway. This was open country, but Los Angeles.

Along the Coast Highway, a pair of lights were bearing down on me, and they seemed to waver,

as though the machine were under imperfect control.

I moved back, out of the way, and the light overhead turned to red. The car stopped about even with me, its motor running.

I couldn't see the occupants nor the driver. The light changed, the car jerked, and the motor stopped.

"Damn," somebody said. It was a female voice.

There was a grinding noise, and another damn, and then a head appeared through the open window on my side of the road.

It was a blond head, and what I could see of the face looked attractive.

"Are you sober?" she asked.

"Not always," I answered. "Some times I'm quite cheerful. But I'm some distance from home, and have nothing to be cheerful about, at the moment."

"Try not to be a Cerf," she said angrily. "What I mean is, are you—have you been drinking?"

"Not recently, though I could use some water." I could see her face more clearly now, and it was like the faces of our women, only prettier than most, I thought.

I could see her face more clearly now, and it was like the faces of our women, only prettier than most, I thought.

"Look," she said, "I'm drunk. Could you drive this thing? Could you drive me home?"

"I'd be glad to," I answered, "if you will tell me where you live."

She gave me an address on Sunset, and this was Sunset, this lateral street, ending at the ocean. So, quite obviously, it was an address I could find.

I went over to climb in behind the wheel. There were two smells in that pretty car with the canvas top. One smell was of gasoline, the other was of alcohol.

"There's obviously alcohol in the gasoline," I said, "though that shouldn't prevent it from igniting."

"A funny, funny man," she said. "Keep the dialogue to a minimum, will you, Bogart? I'm not exactly sharp, right now."

I depressed the starter button, and the motor caught. I swung left onto Sunset, and started up the hill.

The car was clearly a recent model, but Jars had been wrong about the mechanical excellence of these huddlers. The machine simply had no life, no zest.

We drove past a shrine and around two curves, climbing all the while, past some huddled houses on the left, and the whole shining sea spread out on the right.

The woman said, "If you know a place where the coffee is drinkable, stop."

"I have no money," I said. Diamonds I had, a bagful of them, for we knew that huddlers treasured diamonds. But no money.

"I've got money," she said. "I've got a hell of a lot more money than I have sense. Have you ever been in love, Bogart?"

"Never," I said.

We were coming into a small huddled area, now. A sign read, *Pacific Palisades*.

"I have," she said. "I still am. Isn't it a miserable rotten world?"

"This one?" I asked, and then said quickly, "I mean—this part of it?"

"Any part of it," she said. "I've seen most of it, and any part where there's men is bad, Bogart."

"My name," I told her, "is not Bogart. My name is Fred Werig."

"A pleasure, Fred," she said. "My name is Jean Decker. And I'm beginning to feel better."

"It couldn't be my company," I said, "so it must be the air. I haven't seen any coffee places that are open."

I caught a flare of light from the corner of my eye, and turned to see her applying flame to something in her mouth. I remembered from our history; she was smoking. It was a habit long dead where I came from.

And then I remembered what she'd said about being drunk, and knew that, too, as one of our long disused vices. What was it Akers had said about 'being directed'? A theory, but discredited now, since our scientific advance. But this almost parallels evolution?

"Cigarette?" she said, and I said, "No, thanks. I—don't smoke."

"You're the only thing in Los Angeles that doesn't," she said bitterly. "Where are you from, Fred?"

"New York," I said. "Where are you from, Jean?"

"Believe it or not, I was born here," she said. "I'm one of the three people in this town who was born here."

"It's a big town, isn't it?" I said. "Less huddled than the others."

"Huddled," she said, and laughed. "Huddled. I like that. They huddle, all right, and not just the football teams. The gregarious instinct, Freddy boy."

"Well, yes," I agreed, "but why, Jean? Why haven't they outgrown it? Is it—fear?"

"You would have to ask somebody bright," she said. "When you get to Bundy, turn over toward Wilshire. We'll find an eating place that's open."

"You tell me when I get to Bundy," I said. "I'm not exactly familiar with this part of town."

She told me, and we got to Wilshire, eventually, and on Wilshire there were many eating places.

We went into one; it was too cold to eat outside. And it was bright in there, and I got my first really clear look at the face and figure of Jean Decker.

Well, it was ridiculous, the attraction that seemed to emanate from her. It actually made me weak.

And she was staring at me, too.

"If you're hungry," she said finally, "get a sandwich. You won't find me stingy.... What in the world is that material in that suit, Fred?"

"I don't know," I said. "You are beautiful, Jean."

She smiled. "Well, thanks. You can have a piece of pie, too, for that. That certainly is a fine weave in that material. What did your tailor call it?"

We were next to a sort of alcove, furnished with a table and two high-backed benches, and she sat down. I sat across from her.

"I don't have a tailor," I said. "Your lips are so red, Jean."

She frowned. "Slowly, sailor."

Then a waitress was there, and I saw how red her lips were, too, and I realized it was another of the old vices I'd forgotten, cosmetics.

"Just coffee, for me, black," Jean said. "Golden boy over there will have a beef barbecue, probably, won't you, Fred?"

"I guess," I said. "And some milk, cow's milk."

Jean laughed. "It's my money. Have canary milk."

"Not tonight," I said.

The waitress went away, and there was a noticeable period of silence. Jean was tracing some design on the table top with her index finger. Her nails, too, were painted, I saw. I liked the effect of that.

She looked up, and faced me gravely, "Fred, you're a very attractive gent, which you undoubtedly know. Are you connected with pictures?"

I shook my head. "Just a traveler, a tourist."

She said, "Oh" and went back to tracing the design. I thought her finger trembled.

A very dim smile on her face, and she didn't look away from the table top. "You've been—picked up before, undoubtedly."

"No. What kind of talk is this, Jean?"

Now, she looked up. "Crazy talk. You're no New Yorker, Freddy lad. You're a Middle Westerner; you can't fool me. Fresh from the farm and craving cow's milk."

"I never saw a cow in my life," I told her truthfully, "though I've heard about them. What makes you think I'm from a farm?"

"Your freshness, your complexion and—everything about you."

The waitress brought our food, then, and I didn't answer. I tried to keep my eyes away from Jean as I ate; I had a mission, here, and no time for attachments beyond the casual. I was sure, even then, that loving Jean Decker would never qualify as casual.

She drank her coffee and smoked; I ate.

She asked, "Where are you staying, in town, Fred? I'm sober enough to drive, now."

"I'll get public transportation," I said. "You get home, and to bed."

She laughed. "Public transportation? Freddy, you don't know this town. There isn't any. Did you just get here, tonight?"

I looked at her, and nodded.

"On the bum?" she said quietly.

"I—suppose," I said honestly, "though the word has connotations which don't describe me." I put my hand in my jacket pocket and fumbled in the open bag for one of the smaller diamonds. I brought one out about the size of my little finger nail, and placed it on the table.

All the light in the room seemed to be suddenly imprisoned there. She stared at it, and up at me.

"Fred—for heaven's sake—that's not—real, is it?"

I nodded.

"But—it—" She glanced from the diamond to me, her mouth partially open. "Fred, what kind of monstrous gag is this? God, I thought I'd seen everything, growing up in this town. Fred—"

"I'd like to sell it," I said. "You, Jean, are my only friend in this town. Could you help me arrange for its sale?"

She was looking at me with wonder now, studying me. "Hot?" she asked.

"Hot—?"

"Stolen—you know what I mean."

"Stolen? Jean, you didn't mean to accuse me of that."

Skepticism was ugly on her lovely face. "Fred, what's your angle? You step out of the darkness like some man from Mars in a strange suit, with no money, but a diamond that must be worth—"

"We'll learn what it's worth," I said. "Mars isn't inhabited, Jean. Don't you trust me? Have I done anything to cause you to distrust me?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Do you distrust all men, Jean?"

"No. Just the ones I've met. Oh, baby, and I thought you were a farmer." She was crushing out her cigarette. "You haven't a place to stay, but I've got a guest house, and you'll stay there,

tonight. You aren't stepping back into the darkness, tonight, Fred Werig. You, I want to know about."

The words held a threat, but not her meaning, I was sure. And what better way to orient myself than in the home of a friend?

That was some home she had. Massive, in an architecture I'd assumed was confined to the south-eastern United States. Two-story place, with huge, two-story pillars and a house-wide front porch, the great lawn studded with giant trees.

And she lived there alone, excepting for the servants. She was no huddler, and I told her that.

"Dad owned a lot of property in this town," she said. "He was a great believer in the future of this town."

At the time I didn't understand what that had to do with her lack of huddling.

The guest house was small, but very comfortable, a place of three bedrooms and two baths and a square living room with a natural stone fireplace.

I had my first night of sleep on this planet, and slept very well. I woke to a cloudy morning, and the sound of someone knocking on the front door.

It was a servant, and she said, "Miss Decker sent me to inform you that breakfast will be ready any time you want it, sir. We are eating inside, this morning, because of the cold."

"I'll be there, soon, thank you," I said, and she went away.

Showering, I was thinking of Akers for some reason and his directed theory and what was that other theory he'd had? Oh, yes, the twin planets. Senile, he was, by that time and not much listened to, but a mind like that? And who had he been associated with at that time? It was before my birth, but I'd read about it, long ago. The Visitor, Akers had called this man. The Earth man who had come to Venus. And what had his name been?

Beer—? Beers—? No, but like that—and it came.

Ambrose Bierce.

Jean wore a light green robe, for breakfast, and it was difficult for me to take my eyes away from her.

"I'm not usually this informal at mixed breakfasts," she told me, smiling, "but I thought it might warm up enough for a swim a little later."

She threw the robe aside, and I saw she was wearing a scanty garment beneath it. Evidently the huddlers didn't swim naked, and I wondered at a moral code that sanctioned drinking alcohol but was ashamed of the human body.

I was glad the house had been cold when I answered the maid's summons, for I had worn a robe I'd found there.

Fruit juice and wheat cakes and sausage and toast and jelly and eggs and milk. We ate in a small room, off a larger dining room, a small room whose walls were glass on two sides.

"It's too old a house to modernize completely," Jean told me. "I grew up in this house."

"You don't—work, Jean?"

"No. Should I?"

"Work or study. Life must be very dull if you don't do one of those."

"You might have a point there," she said. "I tried everything from the movies to sculpture. I wasn't very good at anything. What do you do, Fred?"

"I'm a perpetual guest," I said lightly. "Do you read much, Jean?"

"Too much, though nothing very heavy, I grant you."

"Have you ever read about a man named Ambrose Bierce?"

"I've read everything he ever wrote. Why did you ask that, Fred?"

"I—heard about him. I wondered who he was."

"Where did you hear about him, Fred? In Mexico?"

"No. I don't remember where I heard about him."

"He disappeared," she said quietly, "some time right before the first world war. I've forgotten the exact year. I think it was 1914."

Before the war, before the "first" war.... And I thought of Jars' wife, who had come to us just

before this last planetary war—the "second" world war. And what was his pet name for her? Guest, he called her, and joked about her coming from another world. But didn't Jars defend the discredited late-in-life theories of Akers? I tried to remember the name of Jars' wife, and then it came.

I asked, "And Amelia Earhart?"

Jean's voice was rough. "July 2nd, 1937. I guess I'll never forget that, when my god died. What are you trying to say? Is it some new damned cult you're promoting, Fred?"

"You called her a god. Why, Jean?"

"I don't know. I was only thirteen when she died. But she was so clean, so—so free and windswept, so—oh, what the spirit of America should be—and isn't."

I looked up to see tears in her eyes. Why was she moved? This girl who certainly knew corruption, this worldly, lovely girl. I smiled at her.

She wiped the tears with the back of her hand. "Fred, you are the strangest—I know this town's a zoo, but you, Fred—"

I continued to smile at her. "I'm just a guy trying to learn. May I repeat something I said last night? You're beautiful, Jean."

"You're no three-headed calf, yourself," she said.

Twin planets and parallel evolution.... Parallel destiny? Not with a third planetary war shaping up here. Three major wars in less than fifty years. Why, why, why....

She said, "Thinking, again? You do a lot of thinking, don't you?"

"I have to think of something besides you," I told her honestly. "I can't afford to fall in love with you, Jean. I've too many places to go and too many things to see."

She just stared at me. It must have been a full minute before she said, "Well, I'll be damned."

After breakfast, it was still cold, and she said, "There'll be no swim this morning, I see. If you want to get an appraisal on that diamond, Fred, I'll phone one of our jewelers to come out."

"I'd appreciate that," I said. "Would it be all right if I took these newspapers back to my room, now?"

"Just dandy," she said. "Sorry to be boring you."

"You're not," I told her earnestly. "Believe me, you're not."

The papers were interesting. Nowhere was it stated, but a glance at the front pages showed they were on opposite sides of the political fence. On my planet, we keep the editorial opinion in the editorial columns. Not so with these. The wire services were impartial and the accounts in both papers identical. That was as far as the similarities went. Reading the other accounts was like living in two worlds.

An informed people will always be free. Well, perhaps these weren't typical.

I was to see papers a lot worse than these before long.

I was just starting the want ads when the knock came at the door. It was the maid, again; the jeweler was at the house.

A small man, suave and dark, with the manners of a diplomat, fawning like a puppy.

It was a perfect stone, he decided. He had, he was sure, a customer who would be interested. Would I accept eight thousand dollars for it?

I said I would, and he left.

We were in the living room, and Jean stood near the tall front windows. She had changed to a suit of some soft blue material.

"As soon as I get the money," I said, "we're going out for some fun, aren't we? I owe you for a beef barbecue."

"You don't owe me anything," she said. She didn't look at me.

"You'll get over him," I said.

"Him—?" She turned to look at me curiously.

"That man you're in love with, that man you told me about last night."

"Oh," she said. "Oh. I was drunk last night, Fred. I'm not in love."

Silence. That attraction of hers pulling at me like some localized gravity, silence, and the beating

of my heart. Silence, my hands trembling, my knees aching.

"I'd like to see some fights," I said. "Would you like to?"

She frowned. "Not particularly." She stared at me, shook her head, and looked away.

"Well," I said, "I haven't finished the want ads."

"Of course," she said. "Get right back to them, Freddy. You never know when you'll find a bargain."

They weren't very interesting. I kept seeing her standing next to the window, looking unhappy, frustrated, somehow. I kept seeing the soft fabric of the suit clinging to her beautiful body and the proud grace of her posture.

I went back to the house, and she was sitting on the davenport near the fireplace. She looked up without expression.

I asked, "Is there a library around here?"

She sighed, and rose. She said, "Follow me."

She led me to a room whose four walls were lined with books. There was a wide glass door leading out from this to the patio.

"Dad's old retreat," she said. "Everything from Aristotle to Zola. If there's something you don't see, don't hesitate to ask. We aim to please."

She closed the door behind her.

I didn't gorge; I only nibbled. But fed enough to realize this was a deep, rich culture; this planet had produced some first rate minds and exceptional talents. But still, with all this to choose from, the people seemed to prefer Milton Berle. And the people were in command.

I was reading Ambrose Bierce when she came in. She looked at the book, and at me. "Lunch," she said quietly.

I put the book down, and rose. "The unwelcome guest?"

"I'd tell you, if you were."

"Would you, honestly?"

She didn't answer that. She smiled, and said, "There are some fights at Ocean Park, tonight."

We saw those, and later, some amateur fights. Strange spectacles they were, men belaboring each other, but fascinating, too. The amateurs were less talented, but more friendly, leaving the ring arm in arm, if both were still conscious. The professionals displayed no such amicability.

Why? I asked Jean. What was the difference between the amateurs and the professionals?

"Money," she said, and looked at me strangely. "Didn't you really know that?"

I lied with a nod. "I wanted you to see it, and to word it for yourself."

"Look," she said with controlled irritation, "if I want any curbstone philosophy, I can read one of those corny columnists. I certainly don't have to sit in a screaming mob watching a couple of morons pound each other bloody to arrive at a stupid generality like that."

"Let's get a hamburger," I said.

She just stood there, on the sidewalk. "You—you—"

People were turning to stare.

"Farmer?" I suggested.

"Oh," she said, "oh, oh—"

"Or a cheeseburger," I added.

There was a small crowd, now, openly watching. One man said, "Hey, this is better than them jerks inside. Slug him, lady."

Jean started to laugh, and so did I, and then all of us were laughing, the whole crowd.

We didn't go to a hamburger place. We went to a place where we could dance, too, and I had a small glass of wine, and wondered why we'd outgrown alcohol, on our planet.

It was a night I will never forget. It was a night I learned how much she meant to me. There wasn't ever going to be anybody else for me, after that night.

We were married in Las Trenos at five-thirty the next morning.

And still, I didn't tell her where I was from. When the time came, she could go back with me, but I couldn't risk sharing that secret with her. I didn't have the right to jeopardize my people by giving her information she might divulge unintentionally.

The world was our playground, and my study hall American first. We drove east, taking our time, while I tried to get the temper of the people. I never overlooked a chance to talk to people; the papers were no substitute for that. And between the papers and the people, I found that only the hysterics were voluble, only the biased articulate. And yet, it was a country with a liberal and progressive tradition, a country that should have been informed beyond the average.

Knowledge had been made too easy; the glib were in command.

Fear, Jars had said, and it was becoming increasingly clear to me that he was closer to it than Deering. For Deering's viewpoint, I had a working model, I had Jean.

In the canyon city, New York, high in our room at the Empire-Hudson, she said, "You're an awfully nosy guy, Dream Boat."

"I like to talk to people," I said. "Haven't you been getting enough attention?"

"As much as I can handle," she said. "And I'm enjoying every second of it. But it seems to be getting you down."

"You or the people?" I asked, and mussed her hair.

She didn't answer that. "Fred," she said, "do you remember that day at breakfast, long ago? Do you remember asking about Ambrose Bierce and Amelia Earhart?"

"I guess I do."

"Don't be evasive, Fred. You know you do."

I pulled her close. "Is this going to be a questioning period? Is this one of *those* marriages?"

"Now, Fred—" she said, against my shoulder. "Be serious, please, Fred. Please be serious—oh, you, Fred—"

We went to England. What's that phrase they have—"muddling through"? That's what they were doing. Proudly, with a minimum of complaint, with no thought of rebellion, with no rationalizing or projection, living as the submerged tenth lives in America, and seeming to think that—well, things *could* be worse.

In Italy, it was the kids, the beggars and procurers and thieves and even murderers who were kids. In Spain we found much of the same. In France it was all the heat and no light, charges and counter-charges, lies and counter-lies, confusion and corruption.

In Berlin, it was Russia. The cloud that darkens the world looms darkest in Berlin. The apathy that grips the world is epitomized in Berlin. A people with no sense of guilt and no reason for hope, nor stirring to the promise of a re-armed Germany. A bled and devastated people, shorn of their chief strength, their national pride.

Jean said, "I've seen enough. Haven't you, Fred? How much can you take?"

"One more," I said. "Russia."

"Don't be silly," she said. "How would we get into Russia?"

"*We* wouldn't. But *I* would."

"Look, baby, whither though goest, I—"

"Up to here," I said. "Who's the big boss in this family?"

"Now, Fred—"

"Now, Jean—"

"Get away from me. This time, it won't work. If you think that for one second you're going into that no man's land alone—and—"

It took some talking, to convince her, it took some lies. She'd wait, she agreed finally, in Switzerland. In comfort for a change.

It took two diamonds to get to the right man, and it took a formula from there. A formula that is learned in the first year of college chemistry on my planet, a formula for converting an element. A formula this planet couldn't have been more than a decade short of learning, anyway.

The last man I saw in Berlin went along, for which I was grateful, though he didn't know that. I don't speak Russian, but he did.

They were careful, they don't even trust themselves. I told Nilenoff the formula came from America, and there were more, but I needed money. I didn't tell him the fallacy in the formula; it

had taken us three years to realize what it was.

My trips were limited, directed, and avoided the seamier side. I saw the modern humming factories, and the mammoth farms. No unemployment, no waste, no "capitalistic blood sucking"—and the lowest standard of living in the industrialized world. A vast, bleak land peopled with stringless puppets, with walking cadavers.

I remembered the faces of the crowds and the strangely mixed people in America, their obvious feelings, emotions and rivalries. There was nothing strange about these people of Russia—they were dead, spiritually dead.

The country that could have been a cultural and industrial center of the world was a robot-land of nine million square miles, getting ready for war, getting ready to take over the dreams of Hitler and make them come true.

I came out with a promise of ten thousand American dollars for every one of the future formulas I had assured them I could get to. I came out with the knowledge that I'd be a watched man from now on.

In Switzerland, Jean said, "Well—?"

"I'm ready to go home," I told her.

"America, you mean?"

"Where else?"

"I've been alone," she said, "and thinking. I've gone back to Sunset and Pacific Coast Highway and traced it all forward from there. And I don't think America's your home."

Very cool her voice, very tense her face. I smiled at her.

She didn't smile in return. "Fred—we're married."

"I'm glad," I said. "Aren't you?"

"It's no time for the light touch." Tears in her eyes. "Fred, are you a—a Russian spy?"

I shook my head.

"But—"

It was a clear night, and I went to the window. How it shone, in that clear air. Jean came over to stand next to me.

I pointed, and said, "There's my home."

"Venus," she said. "Fred, for heaven's sake—*I'm serious*!"

"Some day," I said, "this planet will learn how to see through our manufactured fog. Some day they will develop the vision we developed a century ago. And—"

"Damn it, Fred, be serious. If you'd know what I've gone through, alone here, thinking back on all the crazy things you've said and done. What have you told me about yourself, what do I know?"

"Nothing," I said. "And what have I asked you about yourself? It's a matter of faith, Jean."

"Faith? Running all over the country like fugitives, financed by those damned diamonds, nosing into this and into that, and then running off to Russia, all alone. *With what you'd learned, Fred?*"

I shook my head, resentment stirring in me.

"Remember when we met? In Santa Monica—right there, next to the beach. You didn't have a thing but the clothes on your back and a bagful of diamonds. Was it a sub that brought you that far, Fred?"

"No," I said, "and you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me, and see," she said. She was rigid, and near hysteria.

"All right. I came there in a space sphere from Venus."

She started to sob, a wild, lonely sound and I moved forward to take her in my arms.

Her fingers clawed my face, her high heel smashed my instep. "Get out," she screamed, "get out, get out, get out—"

I got out. I went to the first floor washroom and cleaned up my bloody face, and then went into the bar. This was one habit I'd picked up on the planet.

When I came up to the suite, later, I didn't even check to see if she was in the washroom. I flopped down on the davenport and didn't know anything for the next twelve hours.

She was gone, when I came to. She'd checked out before I'd come back to the room, the night before.

I missed the plane she took from France. I missed her by a day in New York. I went back to the

big house with the high pillars on Sunset Boulevard.

And she wasn't there.

She'd come back to it, I knew. I moved in, to wait. I wasn't going home without her; I wasn't even sure I was going home with her. I was involved, now, in this planet, almost as crazy as the rest of them.

I sat. I did some drinking, but mostly I sat, going back over all our days, reading nothing, enjoying nothing, just remembering.

The Korean business started and the headlines grew uglier, and the jackals screamed and the people grew more confused.

One day, the maid told me I had a visitor. I was in the library and I told her to send him back.

When he came in, he closed the door behind him. I'd never seen him, before, but he said, "We've been looking for three weeks."

"We?"

"Thirty of us," he said. "What happened? Jars sent me."

"Oh," I said. "I can't come, now. I'm—married—"

He smiled. "If you knew what a mess it's been. We've got men all over the planet. Does your wife—know?"

"She thinks I'm crazy," I said. "Look, I—"

"I'm not going to argue," he said. "Just make your report, and I'll pick it up, tonight."

Five minutes after he was gone, I was packing. I knew he wasn't coming back for any report. He was coming back for *me*, and it didn't much matter to him if I wanted to come, or not. I was coming, or staying here—dead.

What I didn't realize is that they wanted me to run, to get out where I could be taken with a minimum of interference.

They got me the other side of Blythe, in the middle of nowhere. A clear night in the desert, and headlights coming up from behind and then the big, black car crowding me off the flat road, into the sand.... And darkness.

Deering sighed and shook his head. "Corruption, Werig? Was it the corruption, or the girl?"

"I've made my report," I said. "Don't worry about them. They've got enough to worry about without worrying about us."

"Another war, it looks like," Deering said. "It could be the last one, you know. What was the girl—your wife like, Fred? Was she pretty?"

"Beautiful," I said.

"And the people—fear, is it fear?"

"I don't know. Their vice is fear, but they have some virtues."

Deering's voice was quiet. "Jars wanted me to ask you—about your wife. Where is she? Is she coming with you? It was forbidden."

"I don't know where she is, she's not coming with me, and I know it was forbidden. But where is Jars? He has been avoiding me, hasn't he? Why?"

"He has been pleading for you, before the assembly." Deering rose, and went to the window, to look out. "Who will win this war that's shaping up among the huddlers, Fred?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I give a damn."

Deering continued to look out the window. "The gray nation, the mixed nation, this America; they have some promise of the light, have they not?"

"Some."

"But this black nation, this nation of robots, there is no chance of of light there?"

"Not under their present leaders. If they should win the war the planet would be set back five hundred years."

Deering shook his head, and turned to face me sadly. "It would be worse than that. If they should win this war shaping up, there would be no planet for them to rule."

I stared at him, not believing, still so bound up in my trip I couldn't believe his words. *Love,—faith, fear, Jean*—were running through my mind. And Jean...?

Deering answered everything for me. "We can't take the chance," he said. "We will abolish the planet. The assembly so decided this morning."

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