



By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by RITTER

*The odds against being found out were 2½ billion to one—and Vee was camouflaged to the very last hair!*

**I**T'S not so that two things can't occupy the same space at the same time. Certainly they can.

Of course, it doesn't do either of them any good.

It took only seven seconds for the huge, powerful, beautiful spaceship to become a

# in a body

crumpled, disorganized mess coasting on aimlessly through space, and for the 192 passengers, with a single exception, to become quite dead.

Like all such disasters, it shouldn't have happened. It was supposed to be impossible. But safety devices have al-

ways had one peculiarity. They function perfectly on test; and when it isn't a test, but the real thing, they often don't function at all.

In this case, despite all the safety devices, the Vigintan ship inserted herself into normal space in the middle of a vast cloud of nebulous matter.

There were seven seconds of hell.

Afterward, what was left of the ship careered on, life casually deleted from it, lines twisted to grotesque deformity, all power and purpose in the giant engines blasted to absurdity.

A few of the passengers had had two or three seconds knowledge of disaster. Half a dozen had seven seconds of terror and helplessness and agony.

Only one had five seconds grace and was able to make use of it.

Vee was in the long outer passage on her way to the control room when it happened.

She was actually passing the open port of one of the lifeboat shells. At the first screaming, tearing intimations of mortal agony in the ship, she dived into the shell and pulled the emergency black handle. The tiny lifeboat slid shut with two seconds to spare, cast itself loose and scuttled away desperately from the parent ship.

**W**ITHIN a few minutes Vee knew from the blank silence of the radio that she was the sole survivor. Am was dead.

Her grief twisted her in knots. To a member of Vee's race, the death of a husband or wife was like . . . no, humans could never understand it.

Suppose a woman, watching, saw her husband, her three children and her mother and father die. Suppose in the same catastrophe all her friends, everybody who spoke her language, her native country and everything in it were obliterated.

That woman might feel as Vee felt at the death of Am.

But Vee had to go on living, if she could. She had much the same instinct of self-preservation as humans had, although Vee was not human. The fact that she didn't want to live was irrelevant.

She tried, unsuccessfully, to face the near certainty that whether she survived a hundred seconds or a hundred years more, she would never see any of her own kind again.

Over the vast distances of the Galaxy, radio was less useful, less reliable, than a bottle thrown in the sea on the wrong world. When a ship was wrecked, there wasn't a chance of a survivor ever being found. Hyperspace travel

was the only way to cross vast distances in a small fraction of a lifetime, and hyperspace travel was, by definition, a shorter distance between two points than a straight line.

At least you could search along a straight line. You couldn't search along a hyperspace route.

The one faint chance Vee had of ever seeing her home world again—negligible, but far greater than the chance of being picked up by a rescue ship—was finding some world where the inhabitants were approaching the starship stage of development.

Automatically the tiny lifeboat, so small that she could hardly change her position in it, was homing on the nearest world on which she might conceivably live. There was never any guarantee that there would be one within the light-year which was the boat's extreme limit; in fact, it was most unlikely.

However, Vee's lifeboat was already moving purposefully. The scanners had found something.

Without further delay, Vee threw the switch which would keep her in suspended animation until the boat reached its destination. There was nothing for her to do. The boat's electronic eyes had found a world on which it might be possible for her to survive. All she could do was

go there and find out whether it was possible or not—by living or dying.

"I WANT to know the truth, Bill," said Walt.

Dr. McEwan ran a hand through his five remaining hairs. "I wonder why people always want to know the worst, and won't be satisfied till they get it. I've told you there's nothing to worry about. You won't believe me. Obviously you're not going to believe anything except—"

"Bill, you ought to know me by this time," said Walt. "The one thing I can't take is uncertainty."

"There's *no* uncertainty! Sure, you may be smashed to pieces by a truck as you leave this office, but apart from that there's no particular reason why you shouldn't live another fifty years or so."

"Bill, I've played poker with you. You always lose because you can't bluff. Listen. I know it's right to conceal things from some people. Even if they beg you to tell them the truth, all they really want is reassurance. I'm different. I want to plan my life knowing I'm going to have it for a while, or knowing the other thing. Remember, Bill, it's me, Walt Rinker, you're talking to. Not somebody you know nothing about. I'm asking you as a friend. I want you to tell me as a friend."

"All right," said Dr. Mc-

Ewan after a pause. "It's leukemia. You're going to die."

Walt nodded quite calmly. "I knew it. How long have I got?"

"A year maybe."

Walt took a deep breath. "Well, that's a long time. Couple of hundred people in town are going to die before me. I'm pretty high on the list, but nowhere near the top. There's no chance, Bill? No treatment?"

"There's X-ray treatment that sometimes helps. But you asked me as a friend, Bill—if it were me, I wouldn't spend all my money and the rest of my time hanging around hospitals and dying anyway."

"Me neither. How long have I got more or less as I am now?"

The truth was too brutal. The blood count and the number of immature white cells present showed that the disease was already acute. In other words, although Walt was thin and in anything but glowing health now, he would never again be in as good shape as he was at present.

"Six months, perhaps," McEwan said.

There was silence for a moment. Then Walt said: "Thanks for telling me, Bill."

**J**ANET looked particularly desirable that night, her light tan wonderfully set off

by her white dress. She was a small, slim, one-hundred-per-cent-feminine brunette. No tomboy or tough, athletic, wise-cracking sex-bomb, Janet. She was eleven years younger than Walt and believed that a man ought to be master in his home.

She was so desirable that Walt resolved never to see her again.

Sure, she loved him. Sure, they could have been happy. Sure, she wasn't going to like what he was going to say.

But a broken romance at nineteen wasn't the end of the world, even though it would seem so at the time. It certainly wasn't as bad as being widowed at twenty, after spending six months watching the man you loved die.

"Honey," he said, "hang on to something. I'm going to kick you in the guts."

Her bright smile faded and tears filled her eyes. "So you know," she said.

"Mean you know, too? How?"

"Never mind. Did Dr. McEwan tell you?"

"I made him."

"He shouldn't have told you."

"By God, he should!" said Walt with sudden force. "This was the kind of thing I was afraid of, the kind of thing I was trying to avoid."

"What kind of thing?"

"Everybody knowing all

about it but me. People I don't like suddenly being nice to me. Me making plans and people humoring me, knowing I wasn't going to be around to follow through. Everybody thinking: 'I'm not going to be the one to tell him.'"

"Walt, what good does it do, your knowing that—"

He interrupted her impatiently. "That wasn't all, Janet. It doesn't matter any more, now that I know. What I was going to say was—I don't think we'd better see each other again after tonight."

She was hurt, frightened. She seemed to shrink. "That's certainly a dirty one," she whispered. "I wanted . . . I hoped . . . I thought we'd get married and have a little while—"

He shook his head decisively. "I can't do it, Janet. I want us to break here and now. It'll hurt you if we never see each other again after tonight, but it would hurt a hell of a lot more if we got married and I died just about the time our first kid would be born."

"Walt, you haven't had time to think about this. Can't you see, this is all the more reason for us to get married right away? Women get married in wartime, have a forty-eight-hour honeymoon, and often never see their husbands again. I—"

"For one thing," said Walt-

er drily, "people who do that are fools. For another, fools though they are, they're at least planning for the future. The men don't *expect* to die. Marriage is planning, Janet. It isn't diving into bed together today, because tomorrow it may not seem such a good idea. It's meant to be—"

"Forget what it's *meant* to be!" said Janet vehemently. "We can't plan for fifty years together, maybe. Some marriages don't last a year anyway."

"I'm not going to marry you knowing—"

"Then we *won't* get married. I don't care about marriage. If you don't want to get married with this hanging over you, I'll move in with you anyway."

"What's your mother going to say about that?"

"What my mother says doesn't matter!"

Walt stood up. "Honey, the longer we go on, the worse it gets. I guess I'd better go. Forget me as soon as you can."

Shutting his ears to her cry, he strode out without a glance over his shoulder.

**T**HE FACT that Vee woke at all showed that the landing had been successful and that conditions on the planet she had landed on were not entirely impossible.

But there was something of at least equal importance

to be settled before she could think of going on living.

She threw the radio's net wide and switched on.

To her astonishment, she was almost blasted out of her tiny cell. There was more radio communication of more kinds on this world than on any she knew.

This, then, was a civilized world.

She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

For a while she thought of Am, drawing a little strength even from the memory of him. He would want her to find another soulmate, for he would want her to live. They had had no children, being spacebound. Am would want her to find another soulmate, because only if she did so could anything of him survive.

Vigintans needed companionship as they needed food and water. Almost as necessary as simple companionship was a soulmate. Not just a friend, not just a lover, but a spouse so close physically, mentally and spiritually that nothing divided them, nothing remained to divide them. Only with such a soulmate could any Vigintan approach happiness.

For hours Vee listened to the radio, concentrating with every cell in her mind on learning all she could of the people of this world. Soon, somehow, she must be able to

pass among them as one of themselves, no matter what they looked like.

As an alien you could be liked, you could be respected, you could even be revered. But you couldn't be loved.

So Vee had to become a human, down to the last physical decimal point, so human that she could reproduce as humans did, so human that it could never occur to anybody that she had ever been anything else.

That, for her, was quite possible.

Though she was no technician, the cathode tube was set up so that even uninformed fiddling would eventually try every possible adjustment, and at last she began to get television pictures.

**F**ROM then on, progress was easy. Even before she had any idea how these creatures who called themselves *men* and *women* were formed under their curiously elastic skins, she had begun to change her appearance to conform with theirs.

It was fortunate, Vee thought, that she was a woman. Many hours of watching TV gave her little or no information on the anatomy of the males, but provided a great deal about the anatomy of females. She saw chorines' legs flashing in so many routines that she was able to work out in detail exactly

what the relevant bone and muscle structure must be, and set to work immediately to reproduce it. An acrobat in a costume which covered only the primary and secondary characteristics showed Vee the entire bone structure of the feminine torso, and she made good use of the information.

Certain details would have to wait, of course. A visit to a library—once she could read—would probably fill in most of the gaps left by television.

Meantime she had enough to do learning the language and customs of these creatures and modifying her body. She would look and sound like a human female long before she really was one.

At night, when most transmissions ceased, she turned to another problem—where her ship had landed, and what she was to use for food.

In accordance with standard practice, the lifeboat had buried itself in soft ground and pulled the hole in after itself. Digging her way to the surface—though her transformation had begun, she was still well equipped for digging—Vee found to her delighted amazement that she was right in the middle of the richest larder imaginable, covered by it, hidden by it. She could eat almost every form of vegetation, and she was in thick undergrowth which already

had swung back to conceal the passage of her tiny ship.

Collecting enough leaves to last her for several days, she returned to her ship, reflecting that the only food difficulties were going to be when she was nearly human and could no longer live on leaves, and would need much more air than she normally required.

However, that wouldn't be for some days yet.

**N**EXT day, when radio transmission started, she was again busy.

Vigintans, like humans, had enormously high potential when all their interests were at stake. Under the stress of dire necessity, a man who isn't particularly brave, skillful or intelligent will often do things which are well beyond his normal capacity. Vee, likewise, was able to employ several times her normal capacity in learning from radio and TV, making the necessary deductions and applying the results.

The finer points of the psychology of these humans were beyond her and might always be. But on the whole they were decent enough people, and, after all, among all civilized races the fundamental principle of cooperation was the same—I'll do what you want if you do what I want.

In fact, these humans even put it in the form of a maxim:

*You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.*

No, Vee didn't anticipate any real trouble in dealing with them and getting what she wanted.

What she *needed*.

AS WALT came out into the street, he heard his name called. He turned before he realized it would have been much more sensible to pay no attention.

In the car by the curb was Janet.

"Look, Janet," he said. "I told you—"

"Do you have to go there?" she said bitterly. "Don't you know that if you've got to have a woman, I'm waiting?"

He straightened and would have walked on.

"I'll drive after you," she said, "calling your name. Get in and talk to me."

He hesitated, then got in beside her. Janet was showing far more guts and persistence and determination than he had ever believed her capable of—and he wished she wouldn't.

"Janet," he said, "I was right. I'm as good as dead. Why can't you just tell yourself I'm dead now?"

"Walt, I don't think you know what love is. What kind of a girl would walk out on her man when he needs her most?"

"I don't need you. If we'd been married, you'd have

stood by me. I know that. I'd have expected it. But it's crazy to go on when there's no future for us. Find some other guy. Do it now, instead of waiting till they actually screw the lid down on me."

"Until you find some other girl, I won't leave you."

"There isn't going to be any other girl. Why should I try to make somebody else miserable because I'm going to die? All I want is—"

"To make a martyr of yourself. To give up everything so that you die with nothing, with nobody caring about you, so that you can feel sorry for yourself and say, 'Look how cruel fate has been to me.' "

"It's not like that at all. I just want to tie up some loose ends."

"Walt, you're wrong, your whole attitude's wrong. The natural, the right thing for a man to do is begin new things till the day he dies."

"Let's not get started on that again, Janet."

"If you think it's wrong to come to me, what's so damned right about going to a woman like that?"

"I can't hurt her," said Walt patiently. "She's forgotten me already. It was just a business transaction."

"And knowing you're going to a place like that is supposed to make me wild with joy?"

"You're not supposed to know anything about me."

You're supposed to forget you ever knew me."

She was silent for a moment. Then she said: "I'll drive you home. I'm not strong really, Walt. I can't keep up an argument for long. I have to wait for a while before I have strength to start it again."

"Then why start it, honey?"

She began to cry quietly, helplessly. It took all Walt's self-control to stop himself from taking her in his arms, but he succeeded.

Presently, blinking hard, she started the motor and put the car in gear.

**I**T WAS three o'clock in the morning, and apart from the soft, rustling sounds of the country at night, all was still. But down in the forest something stirred.

It was an approximate girl who weighed 118 pounds, was five feet six inches tall, blonde, and 38, 23, 37.

It was Vee.

She had no intention of being seen by anyone this trip.

Apart from lack of clothes, she didn't expect to pass as a normal human female yet. One difficulty was color. Television didn't show whether her skin should be gray, pale yellow, blue, green or pink.

By the time she returned to her lifeboat, before dawn, she hoped to have clothing,

money, and most of the biological information she still lacked. She had no special advantages except her Vigintan warning instinct, which was better than the human variety. In addition to hearing, sight and smell, she had a kind of crude telepathy which enabled her to place accurately—even with her eyes closed—all living intelligences within two or three hundred yards.

The night was warm and strongly moonlit. Vee had chosen a moonlit night because her night vision was no better than any human's, and it was no good avoiding being seen by picking a night so dark that she couldn't see either.

She liked her human body, which was more mobile and nearly as tough as the one it had replaced. Clothes were a necessity, however, she soon discovered, shivering despite the exercise of walking. Shoes of some kind were even more necessary than clothes, for although grass did her tender soles no harm, stones and twigs underfoot hurt them and made her pick her route with care.

A dog came up to her silently. Masking her fear, she radiated strong reassurance.

To her relief, the dog was so completely satisfied that he lost interest, loping off as silently as he came. Vee was pleased as well as relieved.

She knew from radio and TV that dogs did a good deal of their investigation with their noses, and from the indifference of this dog it was obvious that her body scent must be normal. This wasn't surprising, since her metabolism was now entirely human, even if all the details were not quite settled. She was living on fruit, berries, nuts and vegetables.

It didn't bother the dog that she had no clothes on.

Presently she found a road by seeing the headlights of a car on it. A road must lead somewhere, and a few minutes of patient waiting satisfied her that it was safe to walk on it. If only one car passed in twenty minutes, it could hardly be a busy highway.

She walked a mile and saw no more vehicles, met no one. Another dog investigated her much as the first one had done. She saw several cats, but they ignored her completely.

**W**HEN she saw the lights of a town, she proceeded with more caution. The street lights were a nuisance. Although the town seemed dead, she didn't dare walk along the streets.

She crept behind the first house. Three people inside, all asleep. But the fourth house was empty.

Twenty minutes spent ex-

amining the doors and windows showed her the difficulty of her task. She had to steal clothes and money. Later she would return them somehow or other; the Vigintan moral code was strict in such matters. But with limited knowledge of the people from whom she was trying to steal, it seemed to be impossible to take anything without leaving too many clues.

A fingerprint on a window would be a clue. How much more significant it would be, she thought, to leave a fingerprint which wasn't quite a fingerprint . . .

In the end she had to take the chance of entering an occupied house. Empty houses were too well locked up. The house she chose had an open downstairs window.

There were two people in the house, both upstairs. Keeping her mental eye on them all the time, Vee went from room to room searching for clothes. She found only shoes which didn't fit her. Naturally enough, clothes would be kept in bedrooms.

After half an hour of fumbling in the dark, not daring to put on a light, Vee was getting desperate. Soon she'd have to start back to the lifeboat, and she had accomplished nothing yet.

She tried another house, knowing five people were asleep in it, two of them downstairs. It was a large

house. Her reasoning was that in such a house there was more chance of things being left around in more places.

In a room facing the back, she switched on the light. Caution had got her nowhere. She soon found that recklessness had brought a rich reward.

She was in a spare bedroom and all the drawers were filled with clothes, women's clothes.

Wasting no time, she dressed herself clumsily. Fortunately television plays not infrequently showed women dressing and undressing. She selected rather the clothes which might not be missed for a while than those which fitted best, although she guessed the chances of their being missed were remote.

There were no shoes. Dressed in a sweater and skirt, she searched in other rooms and finally found a pair of sandals which fitted fairly well.

Unlike anybody else in this world, she could make her feet fit the shoes, given time.

Leaving the house, she decided to call it a night. She was dressed after a fashion. She had no idea how she would look to a human, and had no intention of finding out immediately. Future forays would be necessary.

She started to walk back to her lifeboat.

**I**T TOOK Vee two weeks more before she was ready to risk meeting people. By the end of that time she felt very low, not having had any companionship for so long. Only the radio and television programs and hope had kept her going.

She had borrowed some medical books for a few hours. She had watched people from hiding. She had seen dead bodies at the local morgue.

And she had made herself completely human, apart from certain things which she didn't abandon because she couldn't—like the ability to change back to her own shape and to exist, if necessary, on vegetable matter which ordinary humans would not regard as food.

Naturally she had tried to make herself as attractive as possible. How far she had been successful, she had no means of knowing.

Money had remained a problem for a long time. If it was difficult to steal clothes, it was ten times as difficult to steal money. These humans—of whom she thought, now, as "people"—never seemed to leave money lying around. And if you did get your hands on money which wasn't yours, you were pretty sure to be caught.

For a while she considered letting herself be caught. She'd be put in jail and looked

after, become somebody else's responsibility. But she discarded the idea because that way she'd forfeit too many rights. Private citizens had a lot of rights in this country, though the radio sometimes suggested that this wasn't so everywhere. Unless you forfeited them by becoming a criminal, you could do pretty much what you liked here and nobody interfered with you.

Her long hours of watching and waiting around the village, which she now knew was called Slacksville, finally paid off.

A storekeeper ran out when there was an accident in the street, and Vee was able to rob the till. She felt miserable about it, but she knew she had no choice. Without money, you could get by if you knew enough to get and keep a job. With money, you might be able to learn enough to get a job.

She had a little over a hundred dollars, not much, but all she intended to steal.

Only fifty miles away, she knew now, was a city—not a big, important city, but many times larger than the tiny town which had unwillingly furnished her immediate needs.

She hid the lifeboat so completely that it might not be found in a hundred years. There was nothing to pack. In her stolen sweater and skirt, she walked ten miles in

the opposite direction from Slacksville, strolled casually into another small town, and waited to see what would happen.

Nothing happened. A middle-aged woman looked at her incuriously, a child gazed up at her, a youth of seventeen gave her the once-over. Nobody stared; nobody looked away quickly.

She had been successful, then, but not completely successful. She knew how boys of seventeen were supposed to react to the kind of girl she had tried to make herself, and this one conspicuously failed to do so. However, that was of less importance than the thing which had already been quite clearly established—she could pass among humans as one of them.

**A**T THE depot she bought a ticket to the city. It was the first time she had attempted human speech. The only reaction she could observe was indifference.

It was the same on the train. Although glad that she had been so successful in her primary purpose, Vee was conscious of pique too. In her own world she had never been so disregarded. Her feminine reaction was that it would be better to be downright ugly than anonymous.

A girl in white was coming along through the car. There was a stir. Vee began to un-

derstand why nobody looked twice at her.

The girl was cleaner than a new nickel and shone as brightly. Every dark hair was in place. Her pink blush was not natural, nor were her lush dark-red lips, but there was nothing natural about this white, shiny, immaculate creature. Her high breasts were molded by nylon and elastic, her flat stomach was under rigid, unseen control, her skin was a labor of chemical love.

Television hadn't shown such detail. Vee still had a lot to learn. She was merely a girl in an old sweater and skirt that was new but only fitted more or less.

When she reached the city, she shut her eyes to its complexity, its wonder. Later she would look at it. First she needed a place to stay.

She found one easily enough, going through the routine she had seen on television: girl-arrives-in-city-finds-apartment.

She told the myopic landlady, Mrs. Decker, that she had left her luggage at the station until she found a room. Mrs. Decker was satisfied.

As Vee came out of her room, intending to go out again and take a look at the immediate neighborhood of 179 Buckwash Street, a tall, good-looking young man came out of the next room. He had black hair and rather pale

skin, as if he spent a lot of time indoors.

Vee smiled at him, and he smiled back. He nearly said something, but then he cleared his throat unnecessarily, looked away and popped back into his room like a startled rabbit.

Vee didn't recognize shyness. She thought he just wasn't interested in a girl as mediocre in appearance as she was.

Since she hadn't managed to make herself into the kind of glamour girl who, in television at any rate, was always surrounded by attentive, admiring males, it was obviously useless just to wait for a soulmate to come along. She'd have to go find one.

**W**ALT saw Janet's car half a block away. "Damn," he said under his breath. She knew all the places he was likely to go—half a dozen times now, she had trapped him and they had played out half-bitter, half-tender scenes in no essential respect different from the first.

This time she hadn't seen him. He cut through the park. Let her wait—if she missed him often enough, maybe she'd give up and go away.

He was tired of fighting Janet and knew that his resistance wouldn't last much longer—although he still passionately believed he was right. Why couldn't she see

what was so clear to him, that if he thought only of himself, he wouldn't do this? It was for Janet's sake that he was trying to break with her.

Finding himself at the entrance to Bill McEwan's office, Walt went in. He was supposed to keep in touch.

McEwan was professionally hearty, and Walt decided not to call on him again. As McEwan had already admitted, he could do nothing. All he had left was his bedside manner.

As Walt was leaving, McEwan said: "Girl came in this morning asking if I could put her in touch with people like you. Said she belonged to some organization I'd never heard of, but it sounds good.

"You didn't give her my name, did you?"

"No, but I thought it might interest you."

Walt frowned at him. "Why should you think that?"

"You might like to meet this girl," McEwan said.

Shrugging, Walt took a note of her address: 179 Buckwash Street.

Outside, he barely missed running into Janet again. She had moved her car.

Exasperated, he hoped that the Friends of People with a Year to Live, or whatever they called themselves, might be able to help him to get rid of Janet. He headed toward 179 Buckwash Street.

"Miss Vee Brown?" said

the myopic landlady. "Yeah, she's in. Working in the basement. You a chemist too?"

"In the *basement*?" Walt said.

"Yeah, she rents it."

Walt went down the stone steps. He found a blonde in a white smock working at a lab bench.

She was quite pretty. Cold, somehow, he thought.

As she came toward him, wiping her hands, he said: "I'm Walt Rinker. Dr. McEwan said you'd been to see him this morning..."

He left it like that, so that she'd have to do the talking.

She nodded coolly. "You're a patient of his, Mr. Rinker?"

"Yes."

"You have an incurable disease?"

"Yes."

"Cancer?"

"Leukemia."

"Mr. Rinker, this isn't a comfortable place to talk and I can't take you up to my apartment. Would you have coffee with me in the diner next door?"

"Look," he said. "This is kind of silly. I came along just out of curiosity. Frankly, I came because I wondered about you."

"About me?"

"It was a fool thing to do. I don't need any help, I've got plenty of money, my mind isn't going to collapse under the strain. Sorry to have bothered you, Miss Brown."

"You mean you want to go now?"

For the first time he sensed emotion in her. And it was emotion of startling intensity. He began to think she was a nut, the kind of eccentric who felt she had a mission.

As he was about to turn and go up the steps again, being as rude as might be necessary to get away from her, she took off her lab smock and said quietly: "Well, it won't hurt to talk here for half an hour."

"No, I guess not," he said. They sat down.

VEE hadn't found it hard to make money after all. From television and radio she had learned that although fortunes could be made at race tracks with very little outlay, betting on horses was generally considered a gamble.

Still, she had visited a race track to confirm this view of the matter. And she had found that, for her, betting on horses wasn't foolish at all.

You could see the runners, that was the point. And Vee, with the trained eye of a species which could change its own physical structure at will, could establish an awful lot from seeing the runners. She could not merely tell the best, strongest fastest horses; far more important, she could form a pretty good impression of the probable winners.

There were failures, of

course. At first she didn't properly understand the mathematics of this particular form of betting. Even when she did, the horse which should have won didn't always win. And when the probable winner was short-priced, a bet in the small sums she could spare was neither economically sound nor particularly productive.

But she wasn't compelled to bet on short-priced horses. And the advantage of her special sense was that when a long shot was going to come up, Vee was the only one at the course who knew it beforehand.

She soon had enough money for her immediate needs. The first thing she did was buy some clothes.

She had discovered, meantime, one of the peculiarities of this society. If you were willing to be labeled a crank, you could get away with practically anything.

Walt Rinker wasn't the first person who had come to see her. There had been three hypochondriacs and two cancer cases too far gone for her to do anything for them.

She didn't know yet whether she could do anything for Walter, but he was the first to interest her personally.

She decided, at the end of the half-hour, that he was to be her soulmate.

As they emerged from the

basement, she stopped at the foot of the stairs.

"I have to go upstairs for a moment," she said. "You'll wait?"

"Sure."

She hesitated for a moment longer. Now that he had seen her, he might make his escape thankfully. However, she couldn't handcuff him to her—yet.

Running lightly up to her apartment, she once again passed Billy Clark, the tall, good-looking boy in the next room.

"Miss Brown," he said, putting out his hand as if to stop her.

"Yes?" she said. She tried not to betray her impatience, but her hand came up to open her door. The sooner she got back to Walt, the less chance there would be of finding him gone.

"Nothing," he muttered. "Some other time."

Vee went in, unlocked the middle drawer of the dressing table and took out a small package. She would have liked to change into something more glamorous than the indeterminate blue dress she was wearing, but didn't want to take the risk that Walt would walk out on her. Putting the package in her handbag, she turned and went out again.

To her surprise, Billy Clark was still waiting outside. She smiled at him automatically.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before anything came out, she was halfway down the stairs.

It was a relief to find that Walt had not gone away.

**D**RINKING coffee in an alcove, Walt was still sorry he had come. Vee Brown was, of course, a nut. The trouble was that she wasn't even an interesting nut. She talked characterlessly, like the people in bad scripts who said merely what the plot required them to say.

She asked him quite a few questions which he answered truthfully but briefly.

"How about me asking something for a change?" he said. "Just what is all this about?"

She looked at him steadily. "Mr. Rinker, are you prepared to try out an experimental cure for leukemia?"

Walt was suddenly angry. "Think I'm crazy? There's no cure."

"Then you lose nothing."

"And gain nothing."

She shook her head. "That's not true. If my method doesn't cure you, at least it will give you longer to live."

He was still angry. "Who do you think you're fooling? If there was a cure, every newspaper in the world would be carrying the story."

"Not if they didn't know about it. And nobody does."

"A thing like this would be

known about long before it happened. People don't discover things by accident any more."

"Don't they? Offhand, I seem to remember reading that isoniazid, the TB drug, was a byproduct of rocket research. Besides, did I say this cure was discovered by accident?"

"There isn't a cure!" he almost shouted, trembling.

Not until this girl claimed to be able to cure him had he realized how much he wanted to live.

You were told you had leukemia and were going to die. It was like the moment after an injury when somehow you didn't lose consciousness. There was no pain yet, only numbness.

And mercifully the numbness went on. There was no argument with cancer or leukemia. You might live longer than they said, or not as long, but you were under sentence.

With tuberculosis, meningitis, tumors, almost anything else, there was a chance. With leukemia, death wasn't a matter of *if*; it was a matter of *when*.

And that maintained the numbness, the numbness out of which Walt had been able to withstand the pleas of Janet, knowing he was right.

Now, irresponsibly, this woman made him face the thought of being cured, the

thought of being able to go to Janet and say . . .

As he stared down at Vee, it suddenly seemed to him that he had never known anybody who looked less crazy. Cold she was, apart from that moment in the basement when for a moment her feelings had broken through, but it was the coldness of a girl who was under strict, almost unnatural self-control.

If a girl of twenty-five or so did happen to have a cure for leukemia, she might be like this girl, act like this girl.

He sat down, still not believing in Vee, still hating her.

Vee felt his hatred and failed to understand it. She was bewildered and frightened. This was the man she had chosen as her soulmate, unless he had any really serious defect of temperament. It was a simple bargain—she would give him life and he would be hers. Other women in his life, whether he was married or not, didn't matter. The other women couldn't save him; Vee could.

Surely any reasonable creature, human or otherwise, would accept life with her as an alternative to death. If for no other reason, gratitude would compel Walt to do as she wished.

"Why do you hate me?" she asked steadily.

"You've made me hope," he said. "I know you're a sensation-seeking nut. But you've

made me think what it would be like not to die."

Vee felt better. She could understand that. "I know."

"Tell me about this cure of yours. How does it work? Convince me."

"You don't have to be convinced. It works whether you understand it or not, like serum or antibiotics."

Damn it, was there ever such inhuman self-control? She didn't even seem to feel the need to justify herself.

"Tell me about it all the same," he said furiously.

Vee considered. Could she tell him about the restorer?

**O**N VEE's world, evolution had demanded the ability to change one's physical shape. Back in the savage days, long before the first stirrings of civilization, the way to survive had been periodic metamorphosis. The briffs, the keymors, all the different types of mally, each in turn had ruled the world—physically. Mentally, Vee's race had always been supreme. But Vee's race (which never had a name of its own, for its members *called* themselves and *were* the creatures they happened to be duplicating at the time) was not warlike. Unable to survive by fighting, they had survived by *being* their enemies.

Later, much later, the other races of the Vigintan worlds so objected to this habit that

Vee's race signed an agreement never to imitate any of the Vigintan species. Although this promise was scrupulously kept, Vee and her people could no more lose the faculty of metamorphosis than a man with ears among deaf people could forget how to hear.

A human male with this faculty might retain his human shape, but he would make himself tall, strong and handsome. A human female would make herself independent of aids to beauty, as Vee had done, merely by making muscles of the necessary tone and strength.

Members of Vee's race died, usually, of disease peculiar to the kind of creature they happened to be emulating. They were particularly susceptible, for they made themselves, in effect, into pure, perfect, exact, immaculate specimens—without, of course, even the slightest experience of any of the relevant diseases. Once ill, changing again didn't help. In effect, they took the disease with them.

When technology began, however, the restorer was developed. And hardly anyone ever died any more except in accidents or of extreme old age.

The restorer was a tiny object manufactured from bodily secretions. In a sense, it was alive. It was certainly organic. Yet it was only a

pattern—a pattern of the kind of life-form the creature who secreted it was imitating. It was the essence of the species, so basic that it would be the same for Asiatic, Negro or Occidental, man or woman, child or oldster.

On becoming ill, you swallowed the restorer—part natural, part artificial. It spread in the blood to brain, heart, lungs. And the whole physical effort of the body was directed to the restoration of the natural pattern—normal good health.

When the other Vigintan races discovered that the restorer worked for them too, Vee's people suddenly became exceedingly popular, and their peculiar gift, hitherto regarded with suspicion at least, made them everybody's friend.

That was all very well in the Vigintan worlds, but Vee could hardly explain any of this to Walt.

"No," she said. She took a small pill from her handbag. "Swallow that without chewing it and your cure begins."

He took it and looked at it—an ordinary white pill. Once again he felt anger and frustration rise in him. A little white pill like that couldn't do any good.

He looked up at Vee. "What do you get out of this whole business?"

"Nothing at the moment."

"At the moment? And later?"

"I am not after money," she said firmly.

Confused, suspicious, Walt put the pill in his mouth and swallowed it.

Barring accidents, he was cured now. Although the process of cure had barely started, it was complete. He needed nothing more. But Vee didn't propose to tell him that yet.

"You're a chemist?" Walt said uncertainly.

She nodded.

He wanted to believe in her, was afraid to believe in her. "Did you work for any of the big firms?"

She smiled. "Go home. Come back here the night after next."

"Go home?"

She stood up. "In about an hour you'll feel lightheaded," she said. "It won't be unpleasant and you'll be all right if you lie down. The less you do tomorrow, the better. If you get up, stay in a chair all day. You'll probably be hungry. Eat anything you like. Come back the following night."

Maintaining her incredible composure to the end, she walked out. Walt went to the desk to pay the bill, but she had even done that.

**V**EE SPENT the next day at the race track winning carefully, not spectacularly. Some day she would have to arrange an entirely

honest income. She didn't consider betting on horses honest for her, any more than it would be honest for her to bet on the number of peas in a bottle when she knew the answer.

She had already sent money anonymously to various addresses in Slacksville. Eventually she intended to return her winnings by the simple means of making losing bets to the right bookmakers.

Vigintan morality was different from human morality. There was no arguing with it.

On the morning of the day Walt was to call, she rented a large but discreet apartment in a different part of the city, and spent the rest of the day putting it in order.

In the evening she returned to 179 Buckwash Street, and when Walt called, she took him out immediately and directed a taxi driver to take them to the new apartment.

"Where are we going?" Walt demanded.

"Wait and see."

"Miss Brown, I—"

"You might as well call me Vee."

She was as cool as ever, but twice as pretty as he remembered. In fact, she was an astonishingly beautiful girl—astonishing because, although she was undoubtedly the same girl, she hadn't left him with that impression before. If only she acted like—well, not necessarily like Janet, but like

any other girl, with likes and dislikes, a sense of humor, perhaps, not just that same cool, impersonal manner all the time—she could be a remarkably attractive woman. Not that that was anything to him, of course.

"Vee," he said, "I don't know what's been happening to me, but something has. I feel—I feel as if there's a fire in my body, but a soothing fire. Vee, tell me the truth. Am I really getting better?"

"You should be," she said.

"And that's all there is to it—taking a pill?"

That was all there was to it, but Vee had far too slight a hold on him so far to tell him that. The interval of forty-eight hours had been carefully calculated. She wanted him to believe that he was being cured, not that he was already cured.

"Pills," she amended.

"For how long?"

"It depends. When you're cured, you can stop taking pills."

"But . . . Vee . . . How come, if this works as you say, nobody knows about it? Why don't you shout it from the rooftops?"

"Walt, I want you to promise me not to tell anybody what's happening to you meantime. When I do release it, I want to know exactly what it is and what it will do."

"Sure, but every day people

are dying who might be—”

“Walt, I promise you that the treatment will be made available to everybody when I know how to handle it. In fact, you’ll help me, won’t you?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer, for the cab had drawn up and Vee was getting out.

The apartment stupefied him. As he looked at its pastel shades with the occasional splashes of saturated color, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he turned presently to look at Vee with a certain speculation which had been absent from his gaze so far.

With her near-telepathic sense, she realized at once that though she personally had not struck him as strange enough for any suspicion of the truth about her origin to cross his mind, she had overreached herself in the decoration of the apartment—although it had been done rapidly and sketchily with furniture obtainable from stock, and although much had been left as she had found it. From the moment when she had first seen an image form in the screen in her lifeboat, she had been concentrating on modeling herself on the kind of human female whom human males liked. She had devoted only a passing glance to the kind of décor they were accustomed to.

“Do you like it?” she said. “I’m going to have the walls

green, but the ceiling and lighting could stay, don’t you think?”

His vague, formless suspicion dissolved and was washed away. But he asked: “Why do you have two apartments?”

She shrugged. “This is where I’m going to live. The other is rented till the end of the week. Would you like a drink?”

He hesitated. Although he had dismissed from his mind the curious first impression that the room had had on him, the strangeness of this woman and her behavior and the effect of the pill she had given him made him uneasy.

“Why did you bring me here?” he asked.

Vee was uneasy too. He just didn’t react the way he was supposed to. She had changed her dress and appearance slightly, subtly, and had sensed at first that she was making a better impression on him than on their first meeting.

“I want to make some tests,” she said.

“Then hadn’t you better do that before you offer me a drink?”

“I guess so, yes.”

The undercurrent felt wrong. She would have to try something, anything. “What do you think of me?” she asked abruptly.

“You’re a strange girl.”

The words told her something, but not as much as

what accompanied them did. *You're cold. You smile, but you don't laugh. I just don't know what makes you tick.*

"Wait here a minute," she said, and went through to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

**S**HE COULD abandon Walt and find someone else. Love, for members of Vee's race, was less capricious than among humans. They found possible soulmates—which was easy, with their near-telepathy—and gradually, progressively, loved them. There were no second thoughts.

Already Vee felt too much for Walt to be willing to tear herself from him and start anew. But she could do it. She could do it now. With every hour she spent with him, it got tougher. Soon it would be impossible.

She made up her mind, shrugging away her doubts. If she failed with Walt, why should she succeed with any other human male?

Her present tactics were wrong, that was all. She remembered a television play about a girl scientist. Men thought her a washout when she wore glasses and a lab smock. But she was a wow when her hair came loose, and she got a little drunk, and the plot somehow got her into a bathing suit.

Vee would start again—remembering that her excuse

for keeping Walt here was the necessity of making tests of one sort or another.

Walt looked up as she emerged with a syringe.

"I want samples of your blood," she said. "I'm going to take a count in one hour, two hours, and three hours."

"Mean you want me to stay for three hours?"

"I'd have you stay all night, only I don't want you claiming I raped you."

She giggled at his expression. But she drew off the blood sample competently, except that a drop fell on her skirt.

"Slob," she said. "Why don't you watch where you're bleeding?"

"What are you going to do with that blood?" Walt asked.

"Get it off if I can."

"I don't mean on your skirt. What are you going to do with the sample?"

"Drink it, of course."

She went back in the other room. A moment later she put her head out the door. "Walt, make yourself useful. The bathroom's through there. See if you can get this clean."

She threw something at him which proved to be her skirt.

When she came back in five minutes, she was wearing a short wrap which showed she had exceedingly beautiful legs. "Don't stare at me as if I weren't wearing anything underneath," she said. "I am. Look."

She flicked her wrap and Walt saw she was wearing white panties. At the same time he saw she wasn't wearing anything else.

"Look, Vee," he said. "We might as well get one thing clear now, in case there's any misunderstanding. I've got a girl, Janet. We'd be married except that I wouldn't get married with this hanging over me. If I do get better, it's Janet for me. Is that clear?"

"Sure," said Vee. "I understand English real good."

Walt persisted. "I mean Janet's the only girl for me. When I thought I was going to die, I tried to brush her off. But if I don't die—well, there's going to be nobody else but Janet."

About that, Vee thought, there may be two opinions.

"Have a drink," Vee said.

She got inside the skin of the character she had adopted. She was frank, outspoken, warmly sexy, inviting. And Walt had a good time with her. She laughed easily and he wondered dazedly why he'd ever thought she was cold and stiff.

After an hour, she left him for a few minutes. Returning, she gave him another small white pill.

"Walt," she said solemnly, "I think you're going to be all right. I'll check again later, but I can tell you now—keep up the treatment and your

worries are over. Let's have a drink to celebrate."

They had a drink to celebrate. They had several drinks.

And eventually, despite his excellent resolutions, the alcohol and the proximity of Vee and the sure knowledge that she was ready and willing broke down his resistance.

At first he merely had an irresistible impulse to fold back the collar of her wrap. Finding himself practically kissing her, he did kiss her.

Vee was sure enough of herself and him to whisper mockingly: "Remember Janet, Walt."

"The hell with Janet," he said hoarsely.

**B**UT THE next day things looked different to him. Wakening about eleven o'clock, Walt lost no time in getting dressed, hardly looking at Vee.

Despite the hard drinking they'd been doing, he felt better than he had for months. There remained no doubt in his mind that he was going to be well again.

And it suddenly became a matter of desperate urgency to see Janet.

"Tonight again, Walt," Vee said before he left.

"How long do I have to keep taking pills?"

"Every night."

"Can't you give me them now?"

"No. I've got to keep checking results."

He shrugged. Her methods might be peculiar, but apparently they worked. He felt the need to say something more, feeling the awkwardness that a man always feels when something has happened which the girl takes much more seriously than he does.

"Vee, I—"

"Don't talk now," she said. "The morning's no time for talking. Tell me one thing, though—do you like my dress?"

He couldn't help grinning. She wasn't wearing a dress.

**H**E hurried out, took a cab and waited impatiently at the Kentucky House, where Janet generally lunched. For weeks Janet had been chasing him relentlessly, begging, pleading, crying, arguing, demanding, insisting. The last time they had had a scene had been just before he met Vee. With his mind he knew there was no chance that Janet had suddenly changed, yet in his heart he was terribly afraid that just at the moment when he had decided with infinite gladness that he could marry her after all, she had decided to take him at his word and never see him again.

As the minutes passed and she didn't come, he cursed himself for being so definite. Yet how could he have known

that a miracle was going to happen? Short of a miracle, he had meant all he said to Janet. But if only he hadn't been quite so hard, quite so certain . . .

The food in front of him didn't interest him at first. He'd been pecking at his meals for months, and despite what Vee had said, he hadn't been particularly hungry the day before. However, when he started pecking as usual, he ate everything in sight, ordered more, and finally stopped eating only because he didn't believe it could be right to go on eating until he burst.

Besides, there was Janet. She didn't come in to lunch. After his enormous meal, he went to her home. Her mother, surprised and doubtful at sight of him, said no, she wasn't home, no, she wasn't out of town, yes, she'd be home around eight.

"Tell her to phone me when she comes in," said Walt. He gave Vee's number, for he'd be at her apartment at eight.

It would be just as well, he decided, to make things quite clear. He'd tell Vee he expected Janet to call, and she could listen to him talking to Janet.

Maybe that was cruel to Vee, to whom he owed his life. Maybe he shouldn't have arranged things that way. But he had already told Vee about Janet, and the sooner she knew he meant what he said, the better.

**W**HEN he arrived at her apartment that night, she was already in a wrap, a long white negligee this time, and he was glad he had left a message for Janet to phone him here.

"Look, Vee," he said abruptly, "you were very sweet last night. But I told you I was going to marry Janet, and I meant it. You understood that, didn't you?"

"If we're going to have a stand-up fight," said Vee pleasantly, "let's at least sit down first."

He sat as far away from her as he could.

"I shouldn't have stayed here last night," he said. "Because I knew at the time that to you it was more than . . . I mean we'd only just met, and yet somehow I knew that you—"

"That I meant to marry you," said Vee.

Her calm certainty startled him. "Well—yes. But I told you about Janet, Vee. I meant it."

"So that made it all right to sleep with me."

"Vee, Janet's going to phone me here. I'm going to tell her that I'm asking her to marry me again."

"How often have you been married to her?"

"You know what I mean, damn it."

Vee crossed her legs and lay back. "If there's going to be straight talking," she said,

"you can have the last word. I want the first."

"If there's going to be straight talking," Walt said, "pull that wrap over your legs and shut it at the top. I'm not made of wood."

"No," said Vee mildly, "I know that, Walt."

She left her wrap the way it was.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," she said. "When you were going to die, you weren't going to marry Janet. Now that you're going to live, you want her back."

"That's right."

"I'm sorry, Walt. Under those conditions, you don't get better."

He caught his breath. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. It's a simple bargain, Walt. Marry me and I'll cure you. Marry Janet and you die."

He was staring at her in horror. "You're crazy!"

"Not at all. I didn't mean to put it so bluntly so soon, Walt. I wanted to help you forget Janet and perhaps never have to deliver an ultimatum. But you've forced me to."

He shook his head incredulously. She was as calm, as businesslike as she had been earlier in their acquaintance. But for Janet, he might have loved the other Vee, the warmer, exciting Vee. This one he didn't like, Janet or no Janet.

In the silence, the phone rang.

**H**E GOT up to answer it. Vee got up too. As if aware of what he had just been thinking, she was laughing, playful. She barred his way.

"I'm going to speak to Janet," he said.

"You said yourself you wouldn't marry her unless you recovered. And if you marry her, you don't recover. So why speak to her?"

He tried to get past her. She dodged in front of him again. Grasping her firmly, he tried to push her to one side. But he was still not a well man and she was as strong as he was. He pulled at her shoulder and her wrap tore and hung to the swell of her hip at one side. She only laughed.

The bell was still ringing. Furious, he aimed a vicious blow at Vee. She caught his arm and they both fell to the floor.

"If your Janet could see you now," she giggled breathlessly, "there would certainly be no wedding."

Having gained the superior position, he tried to get up. Vee held his leg and though he kicked savagely, he couldn't get free.

The bell stopped ringing. At once Vee let go. Walt dived to the phone and picked it up. "Janet? Janet? This is Walt. Janet?"

Silence.

He slammed the phone down. Vee was getting to her

feet. "I could kill you!" he said.

"I doubt it."

He picked up the phone again and started to dial. Vee moved behind him, and as he finished dialing, she mischievously presented him with the cut end of the phone cable.

Without thinking, he chopped at her with his fist. She went down in a heap at his feet.

At once he was sorry, and picked her up. He carried her to the couch and was laying her gently on it when she opened her eyes and said conversationally: "This is nice."

He dropped her angrily.

She sat up. "Walt, when you think about it, it isn't such a bad bargain. Would you honestly really rather die than marry me?"

"I don't get it," he said bitterly. "You're young and you're anything but ugly. Why does it have to be me?"

"Because . . ." But she wasn't going to tell him it was because Billy Clark, when he had first seen her, had merely looked at her, smiled automatically and dived into his room. Because she had to have a soulmate, and soon. Because, for all her efforts, men didn't go mad at sight of her, and even after what had happened between her and Walt, he wanted to cast her aside and marry his Janet.

Because she had to be able to keep her man with her, and

if she couldn't do it without a leash and a collar, there had to be a leash and collar.

Because if she didn't have a soulmate she would die.

If Walt only knew it, she had no hold over him. The pill she would give him soon looked like the restorer she had given him that first night, but it was nothing, did nothing. She had already done all she could for him.

"Don't you owe me something, Walt?" she said.

"I don't owe you the rest of my life."

"Don't you?"

"Look, Vee, let's look at this calmly. I can't marry you and you wouldn't want me to, knowing I love Janet."

"You won't go on loving Janet."

"I will."

"You won't."

**S**HE was certain of that. Given a chance, she could mold herself to Walt so completely that he would talk of Janet shamefacedly as "a girl I used to know." Given time, Vee and Walt could be as close as any human couple in the world. She was in no doubt about that. Only she had to be given the chance, given time.

Walt tried again. "Vee, I thought at first you were pretty cold, but I don't now. You're a woman."

"Thanks, Walt. I always wondered about that."

"If you really believed, real-

ly *knew* you couldn't have me, you wouldn't condemn me to death. I know that."

Vee knew it too. Sooner or later she'd have to give the restorer to everybody; certainly she couldn't let Walt die, even if she lost him. It was unfortunate that he guessed that.

"Oh, you'd be surprised how callous I can be," she said lightly.

They talked it back and forth, sometimes calmly, sometimes angrily. Vee didn't shift her ground.

When the door chimes sounded and Vee went to open the door, Walt didn't move. It didn't seem to be anything to him that somebody was calling on Vee.

It was only when Janet came in, white and rigid, and he saw Vee's mocking smile, that he realized that Vee had known all along who it would be.

"So this is what you wanted to tell me," said Janet. Neatly dressed in a blue wool suit, she looked almost boyish beside the flamboyant Vee, her wrap torn down one side to her rounded hips.

"You must be Janet," Vee said. "I'm sure you'd like a drink."

"Janet, I want to marry you," Walt said.

Janet didn't look at Vee. "Once I said I wouldn't leave you until you found some other girl. Now you have."



"I haven't . . . Listen, Janet, Vee is a chemist. She has a treatment—I'm not going to die."

*Yes you are, if you marry her.* That was on the tip of Vee's tongue, but she stopped herself in time and didn't say it. The effect would be to put Janet on Walt's side against her.

There were tears in Janet's voice. "Walt, honey, I told you

all along if you wanted a girl I was waiting."

"Janet, I don't love Vee. Please believe that."

"It's true," said Vee. "He beats me all the time."

"She's damnably clever, Janet," Walt said. "Everything she'll say will be meant to turn you against me. She wants to marry me."

"I didn't know I was at the end of a line of girls all want-



ing to marry you," Janet whispered. "I thought you were all mine, Walt. I thought you needed me."

Vee laughed.

Like an animal at bay, Walt looked wildly around him. And suddenly he pounced. "Look!" he shouted. "When you phoned earlier, she wouldn't let me answer. And then she cut the cord. See?"

"What does that prove?" Janet asked doubtfully.

"It shows I was trying to talk to you, and she was trying to stop me."

The atmosphere changed.

**V**EE was more desperate than Walt, although she didn't show it. She was fighting, literally, for her life. Having feelings, she was sorry for Janet. But if Janet

lost Walt, she wouldn't die. Janet was young and pretty, and within three months Janet would have another man crazy about her.

In three months Vee could perhaps have a man crazy about her too, only Vee couldn't wait three months. Without a soulmate, she was on the point of perishing now. She couldn't afford to lose Walt.

"Have a drink, Janet," she said.

"How long have you known her?" Janet demanded.

"Three days," said Walt.

"Three nights," Vee murmured.

Walt spun on her. "For Pete's sake, go put something on, Vee!"

"All right," she said mildly, knowing Walt didn't expect that.

AS she left them together, Vee was aware that if they had the sense to walk out together, she had lost. She banked on Janet being slow to forgive.

When the door closed behind her, Walt said rapidly: "Janet, she can cure me. Believe that. But now she's blackmailing me. Either I marry her or there won't be any cure."

"I don't understand any part of this," Janet said wearily, "except that you and she are lovers."

Walt should have had an

answer ready. Silence was worse than anything he might have said.

"So its true," she whispered.

"Janet, I'm only flesh and blood, and she—"

"I'm only flesh and blood too. What was wrong with me?"

"If you'll only let me explain—"

Vee came back, cool and elegant in a white dress. Janet looked at her and Vee's fabulous figure made her jealous and unsure. Part of her said, "It's only natural that Walt should forget himself with a girl like that. Forgive him." The rest of her said, "If only Vee had been ugly, I wouldn't have minded so much."

Janet wasn't conceited, wasn't sure of herself. When her rival was a girl like Vee, what chance had she?

"Have a drink, Janet," Vee said.

"Is that how it was?" Janet asked Walt bitterly. "You were drunk?"

"She made me stay. There were tests. Some blood got on her skirt."

"So naturally she took it off. Any girl would. And you . . . you and she . . ."

Janet was well brought up. She could think things, but she couldn't say them.

"Janet, you're a nice girl," Vee said. "I don't think you quite understand Walt."

"That's right. I don't. Obviously I never did."

"Janet, will you listen?" Walt begged. "Vee said she could cure me. I had nothing to lose. I tried her way. And it works. Already I feel so much better that today I went to the Kentucky House to look for you, to ask you to marry me. But you didn't come."

"So you came here instead. And left a message for me to phone you here."

"Don't you care that now I may live?"

"With her. You can live with Vee. She can keep you going. You need her. You never needed me."

"Janet, I'm telling you—I'm not going to die."

"If you can only live with her, I don't care if you *do* die!" Janet said crying. As usual, she could keep her end up so long, no longer. She turned blindly toward the door.

And Vee made her first mistake. "That's all she cares, Walt," she said. "As far as she's concerned, you can die right now."

Janet spun around, finding more courage from somewhere. "No," she said brokenly. "No, I was wrong. If she can really cure you, Walt, stay with her. I can't do anything for you. I never could, could I?"

Vee laughed with sudden joy.

She thought she had won. But she had lost.

JANET was in Walt's arms and her tears weren't entirely tears of grief. Vee felt their love for each other, a bond that shut her out, a reconciliation which had nothing to do with facts or explanations.

"I need more treatment, honey," Walt said. "She says I don't get it unless I marry her."

Vee tried the old, unanswerable, logical argument again. "With Janet, you die. And you won't marry Janet unless you live. You'd decided that before you ever heard of me. What's changed?"

"Janet, you were right and I was wrong," Walt said softly. "Vee showed me that. I'd rather go with you, and die, than with her and live."

Vee's shoulders slumped and her figure suddenly wasn't fabulous any more.

It was physical, mental and spiritual, this need of her race to have a soulmate. In the end it would be physically that she would die, but not until the two other sides of her had already disintegrated.

She could hold out so long, as a man could hold out so long without food or water, getting weaker all the time. But since the mental part was so important, dissolution could be rapid.

It wasn't selfish, the love of

Vee's race. It had to go out and come back. From Walt it had never really come back—yet with the confidence that it soon would, Vee had been able to carry on. The moment she knew, however, knew with complete certainty that Walt was not for her, she felt all the staggering weight of all these lonely weeks, empty of everything but hope.

She couldn't fight any more. She could hardly speak.

"Go away, both of you," she said weakly. "Walt, you won't die. You don't need any more treatment."

Janet emerged from Walt's arms, blinking, to stare at Vee in dawning realization. "You did love him," she murmured. "You really do love him."

"Go away," Vee said, dropping loosely in a chair.

"Are you all right, Vee?" Walt said, suddenly solicitous. It seemed incredible that only a few minutes before Vee had been dominating the situation, and they had both hated and feared her.

"Yes. Go away. You'll be all right, Walt."

They didn't press their luck. They almost tiptoed out, arms around each other.

For a long time Vee didn't move. But even in her despair she hadn't quite lost her instinct for self-preservation, the unthinking urge to make one last try. And it would be the last one.

Others like Walt might have called at 179 Buckwash Street and left their addresses. If everything went right, if she found the right one that night, she still wouldn't be finished. She had to find reason to hope again within the next few hours. Failing that, she wouldn't wait for lingering physical death.

She dragged herself to her feet, went into the bedroom and changed into the first street dress she could find. Too tired to switch off the lights, she left them burning as she went out.

"You ill, lady?" the cabbie asked her.

"Just tired," she said.

**T**HE cab didn't leave until she had climbed the steps at Buckwash Street. The taxi driver wasn't sure he should leave her.

It was still only nine-thirty. Nobody would be in bed yet.

"Callers?" Mrs. Decker said. "There was that young man I sent down to the basement a day or two ago. Did you see him?"

"Yes, I did," said Vee, and she dragged herself upstairs. There was plenty of stuff in her apartment which would do. What would kill a human would kill Vee too.

There wouldn't be any uproar afterwards. Even a real thorough post-mortem wouldn't be likely to show

anything strange about the mortal remains of Vee Brown. And young women were often found dead in their lonely apartments.

Suddenly she was being supported. "What's the matter, Miss Brown?" she was asked.

It was Billy Clark, anxious, concerned.

"I'm tired," she said, "terribly tired."

He helped her to her room, opened the door for her, supported her to the solitary armchair. His eyes expressed his worry. They were friendly eyes.

She managed to smile. "I'll be all right, Mr. Clark," she said. "I've been on my feet too long, that's all."

He squared his shoulders. "Miss Brown," he said, "I've been trying to talk to you since you came. You don't know many people in town, do you?"

"I don't know anybody," she said bleakly.

"You know me," he said. "I was wondering . . . if maybe you'd like to see a show sometime, or something?"

"See a show?" she repeated quizzically.

"Well, I thought you might not have anybody special," he said defensively. "And I'm not so dumb once I get to know people. You won't know about this, being the kind of girl you are, but I get so nervous trying to speak to a girl that I

usually walk right on past her. Isn't that silly?"

"No," said Vee.

"The trouble is, if you're shy you get hurt, and then the next time you're still more shy, more afraid of being hurt. So that's why I wanted to ask you first—is there anybody? I mean . . ."

"Nobody," said Vee. "Nobody at all."

"Then maybe . . ."

"Billy," said Vee quietly, "I'd never hurt you."

**U**NDERSTANDING dawned in his face. "You've been hurt too. You're like me. Vee, I knew it somehow. I knew somehow that though you looked like a girl with the world at her feet, you needed somebody just like I do. Vee, you and I could . . ."

Afraid of rebuff for going too far, he stopped abruptly, coloring.

This was the way they did it. They hurt each other sometimes, for there was never any guarantee that what one would feel, the other would feel. But this was how it happened—not by bargains, not by reason, not by hard logic.

"It's a fine night," said Vee softly. "How about us going out for a walk?"

He was delighted. "But . . . surely you're too tired?"

Vee jumped to her feet. "Suddenly, Billy," she said, "I'm not tired any more."

**END**