

THE GIRLS FROM EARTH and Other Planetary Plots



Frank M. Robinson

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THE GIRLS FROM EARTH

Problem: How can you arrange marriages with men in one solar system, women in another—and neither willing to leave his own world?

I

"THE beasts aren't much help, are they?"

Karl Allen snatched a breath of air and gave another heave on the line tied to the raft of parampa logs bobbing in the middle of the river.

"No," he grunted, "they're not. They always balk at a time like this, when they can see it'll be hard work."

Joseph Hill wiped his plump face and coiled some of the rope's slack around his thick waist.

"Together now, Karl. *One! Two!*"

They stood knee-deep in mud on the bank, pulling and straining on the rope, while some few yards distant, in the shade of a grove of trees, their tiny yllumphs nibbled grass and watched them critically, but made no effort to come closer.



"If we're late for ship's landing, Joe, we'll get crossed off the list."

Hill puffed and wheezed and took another hitch on the rope.

"That's what I've been thinking about," he said, worried.

They took a deep breath and hauled mightily on the raft rope. The raft bobbed nearer. For a moment the swift waters of the Karazoo threatened to tear it out of their grasp, and then it was beached, most of it solidly, on the muddy bank. One end of it still lay in the gurgling, rushing waters, but that didn't matter. They'd be back in ten hours or so, long before the heavy raft could be washed free.

"How much time have we got, Karl?"

The ground was thick with shadows, and Karl cast a critical eye at them. He estimated that even with the refusal of their yllumphs to help beach the raft, they still had a good two hours before the rocket put down at Landing City.

"Two hours, maybe a little more," he stated hastily when Hill looked more worried. "Time enough to get to Landing City and put in for our numbers on the list."

He turned back to the raft, untied the leather and horn saddles, and threw them over the backs of their reluctant mounts. He cinched his saddle and tied on some robes and furs behind it.

Hill watched him curiously. "What are you taking the furs for? This isn't the trading rocket."

"I know. I thought that when we come back tonight, it might be cold and maybe *she'll* appreciate the coverings then."

"You never would have thought of it yourself," Hill grunted. "Grundy must have told you to do it, the old fool. If you ask me, the less you give them, the less they'll come to expect. Once you spoil them, they'll expect you to do all the trapping and the farming and the family-raising yourself."

"You didn't have to sign up," Karl pointed out. "You could have applied for a wife from some different planet."

"One's probably just as good as another. They'll all have to work the farms and raise families."

Karl laughed and aimed a friendly blow at Hill. They finished saddling up and headed into the thick forest.

It was quiet as Karl guided his mount along the dimly marked trail and he caught himself thinking of the return trip he would be making that night. It would be nice to have somebody new to talk to. And it would be good to have somebody to help with the trapping and tanning, somebody who could tend the small vegetable garden at the rear of his shack and mend his socks and wash his clothes and cook his meals.

And it was time, he thought soberly, that he started to raise a family. He was mid-twenty now, old enough to want a wife and children.

"You going to raise a litter, Joe?"

Hill started. Karl realized that he had probably been thinking of the same thing.

"One of these days I'll need help around the sawmill," Hill answered defensively. "Need some kids to cut the trees, a couple more to pole them down the river, some to run the mill itself and maybe one to sell the lumber in Landing City. Can't do it all myself."

He paused a moment, thinking over something that had just occurred to him.

"I've been thinking of your plans for a garden, Karl. Maybe I ought to have one for my wife to take care of, too."

Karl chuckled. "I don't think she'll have the time!"

They left the leafy expanse of the forest and entered the grasslands that sloped toward Landing City. He could even see Landing City itself on the horizon, a smudge of rusting, corrugated steel shacks, muddy streets, and the small rocket port—a scorched thirty acres or so fenced off with barbed wire.

Karl looked out of the corner of his eye at Hill and felt a vague wave of uneasiness. Hill was a big, thick man wearing the soiled clothes and bristly stubble of a man who was used to living alone and who liked it. But once he took a wife, he would probably have to keep himself in clean clothes and shave every few days. It was even possible that the woman might object to Hill letting his yllumph share the hut.

The path was getting crowded, more of the colonists coming onto the main path from the small side trails.

Hill broke the silence first. "I wonder what they'll be like."

Karl looked wise and nodded knowingly. "They're Earthwomen, Joe. *Earth!*"

It was easy to act as though he had some inside information, but Karl had to admit to himself that he actually knew very little about it. He was a Second System colonist and had never even seen an Earthwoman. He had heard tales, though, and even discounting a large percentage of them, some of them must have been true. Old Grundy at the rocket office, who should know about these things if anybody did, seemed disturbingly lacking on definite information, though he had hinted broadly enough. He'd whistle softly and wink an eye and repeat the stories that Karl had already heard; but he had nothing *definite* to offer, no real facts at all.

Some of the other colonists whom they hadn't seen for the last few months

shouted greetings, and Karl began to feel some of the carnival spirit. There was Jenkins, who had another trapping line fifty miles farther up the Karazoo; Leonard, who had the biggest farm on Midplanet; and then the fellow who specialized in catching and breaking in yllumphs, whose name Karl couldn't remember.

"They say they're good workers," Hill said.

Karl nodded. "Pretty, too."

They threaded their way through the crowded and muddy streets. Landing City wasn't big, compared to some of the cities on Altair, where he had been raised, but Karl was proud of it. Some day it would be as big as any city on any planet—maybe even have a population of ten thousand people or more.

"Joe," Karl said suddenly, "what's supposed to make women from Earth better than women from any other world?"

Hill located a faint itch and frowned. "I don't know, Karl. It's hard to say. They're—well, sophisticated, glamorous."

Karl absorbed this in silence. Those particular qualities were, he thought, rather hard to define.

The battered shack that served as rocket port office and headquarters for the colonial office on Midplanet loomed up in front of them. There was a crowd gathered in front of the building and they forced their way through to see what had caused it.

"We saw this the last time we were here," Hill said.

"I know," Karl agreed, "but I want to take another look." He was anxious to glean all the information that he could.

It was a poster of a beautiful woman leaning toward the viewer. The edges of the poster were curling and the colors had faded during the last six months, but the girl's smile seemed just as inviting as ever. She held a long-stemmed goblet in one hand and was blowing a kiss to her audience with the other. Her green eyes sparkled, her smile was provocative. A quoted sentence read: "I'm from *Earth!*" There was nothing more except a printed list of the different solar systems to which the colonial office was sending the women.



She was real pretty, Karl thought. A little on the thin side, maybe, and the dress she was wearing would hardly be practical on Midplanet, but she had a certain something. Glamour, maybe?

A loudspeaker blared.

"All colonists waiting for the wife draft assemble for your numbers! All colonists...."

There was a jostling for places and then they were in the rapidly moving line. Grundy, fat and important-looking, was handing out little blue slips with numbers on them, pausing every now and then to tell them some entertaining bit of information about the women. He had a great imagination, nothing else.

Karl drew the number 53 and hurried to the grassy lot beside the landing field that had been decorated with bunting and huge welcome signs for the new arrivals. A table was loaded with government pamphlets meant to be helpful to newly married colonists. Karl went over and stuffed a few in his pockets. Other tables had been set out and were loaded with luncheon food, fixed by the few colonial women in the community. Karl caught himself eyeing the women closely, wondering how the girls from Earth would compare with

them.

He fingered the ticket in his pocket. What would the woman be like who had drawn the companion number 53 aboard the rocket? For when it landed, they would pair up by numbers. The method had its drawbacks, of course, but time was much too short to allow even a few days of getting acquainted. He'd have to get back to his trapping lines and he imagined that Hill would have to get back to his sawmill and the others to their farms. What the hell, you never knew what you were getting either way, till it was too late.

"Sandwich, mister? Pop?"

Karl flipped the boy a coin, picked up some food and a drink, and wandered over to the landing field with Hill. There were still ten minutes or so to go before the rocket landed, but he caught himself straining his sight at the blue sky, trying to see a telltale flicker of exhaust flame.

The field was crowded and he caught some of the buzzing conversation.

"... never knew one myself, but let me tell you...."

"... knew a fellow once who married one, never had a moment's rest afterward...."

"... no comparison with colonial women. They got culture...."

"... I'd give a lot to know the girl who's got number twenty-five...."

"Let's meet back here with the girls who have picked our numbers," Hill said. "Maybe we could trade."

Karl nodded, though privately he felt that the number system was just as good as depending on first impressions.

There was a murmur from the crowd and he found his gaze riveted overhead. High above, in the misty blue sky, was a sudden twinkle of fire.

He reached up and wiped his sweaty face with a muddy hand and brushed aside a straggly lock of tangled hair. It wouldn't hurt to try to look his best.

The twinkling fire came nearer.

II

"A Mr. Macdonald to see you, Mr. Escher."

Claude Escher flipped the intercom switch.

"Please send him right in."

That was entirely superfluous, he thought, because MacDonald would come in whether Escher wanted him to or not.

The door opened and shut with a slightly harder bang than usual and Escher mentally braced himself. He had a good hunch what the problem was going to be and why it was being thrown in their laps.

MacDonald made himself comfortable and sat there for a few minutes, just looking grim and not saying anything. Escher knew the psychology by heart. A short preliminary silence is always more effective in browbeating subordinates than an initial furious bluster.

He lit a cigarette and tried to outwait MacDonald. It wasn't easy—MacDonald had great staying powers, which was probably why he was the head of the department.

Escher gave in first. "Okay, Mac, what's the trouble? What do we have tossed in our laps now?"

"You know the one—colonization problem. You know that when we first started to colonize, quite a large percentage of the male population took to the stars, as the saying goes. The adventuresome, the gamblers, the frontier type all decided they wanted to head for other worlds, to get away from it all. The male of the species is far more adventuresome than the female; the men left—but the women didn't. At least, not in nearly the same large numbers.

"Well, you see the problem. The ratio of women to men here on Earth is now something like five to three. If you don't know what that means, ask any man with a daughter. Or any psychiatrist. Husband-hunting isn't just a pleasant pastime on Earth. It's an earnest cutthroat business and I'm not just using a literary phrase."

He threw a paper on Escher's desk. "You'll find most of the statistics about it in that, Claude. Notice the increase in crimes peculiar to women. Shoplifting, badger games, poisonings, that kind of thing. It's quite a list. You'll also notice the huge increase in petty crimes, a lot of which wouldn't have bothered the courts before. In fact, they wouldn't even have been considered crimes. You know why they are now?"

Escher shook his head blankly.

"Most of the girls in the past who didn't catch a husband," MacDonald continued, "grew up to be the type of old maid who's dedicated to improving the morals and what-not of the rest of the population. We've got more puritanical societies now than we ever had, and we have more silly little laws on the books as a result. You can be thrown in the pokey for things like violating a woman's privacy—whatever that means—and she's the one who decides whether what you say or do is a violation or not."

Escher looked bored. "Not to mention the new prohibition which forbids the use of alcohol in everything from cough medicines to hair tonics. Or the cleaned up moral code that reeks—if you'll pardon the expression—of purity. Sure, I know what you mean. And you know the solution. All we have to do is get the women to colonize."

MacDonald ran his fingers nervously through his hair.

"But it won't be easy, and that's why it's been given to us. It's your baby, Claude. Give it a lot of thought. Nothing's impossible, you know."

"Perpetual motion machines are," Escher said quietly. "And pulling yourself up by your boot-straps. But I get the point. Nevertheless, women just don't want to colonize. And who can blame them? Why should they give up living in a luxury civilization, with as many modern conveniences as this one, to go homesteading on some wild, unexplored planet where they have to work their fingers to the bone and play footsie with wild animals and savages who would just as soon skin them alive as not?"

"What do you advise I do, then?" MacDonald demanded. "Go back to the Board and tell them the problem is not solvable, that we can't think of anything?"

Escher looked hurt. "Did I say that? I just said it wouldn't be easy."