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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A WOMAN'S PLACE ***



A Woman's Place

By MARK CLIFTON

Illustrated by ESMH

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It was the speaking of Miss Kitty's name which half roused her from sleep. She eased her angular body into a more comfortable position in the sack. Still more asleep than awake, her mind reflected tartly that in this lifeboat, hurtling away from their wrecked spaceship back to Earth, the sleeping accommodation was quite appropriately named. On another mental level, she tried to hear more of what was being said about her. Naturally, hearing one's name spoken, one would.

Home is where you
hang up your spaceship
—that is, if you have
any Miss Kitty along!

"We're going to have to tell Miss Kitty as soon as she wakes up." It was Sam Eade talking to Lt. Harper—the two men who had escaped with her.

"Yes, Sam," the lieutenant answered. "What we've suspected all along is pretty definite now."

Still drowsing, she wondered, without any real interest, what they felt they must tell her. But the other level of her mind was more real. She wondered how she looked to these two young men while she slept. Did she sleep with her mouth open? Did her tiara slip while she snored?

Vividly, as in full dreaming, she slipped back into the remembered scene which had given birth to the phrase. At some social gathering she had been about to enter a room. She'd overheard her name spoken then, too.

"Miss Kitty is probably a cute enough name when you're young," the catty woman was saying. "But at her age!"

"Well, I suppose you might say she's kept it for professional reasons," the other woman had answered with a false tolerance. "A school teacher, wanting to be cozy with her kiddies, just a big sister." The tolerance was too thin, it broke away. "Kind of pathetic, I think. She's so plain, so very typical of an old maid school teacher. She's just the kind to keep a name like Miss Kitty."

"What gets me," the first one scoffed, "is her pride in having such a brilliant mind—if she really does have one. All those academic degrees. She wears them on every occasion, like a tiara!"

She had drawn back from the door. But in her instant and habitual introspection, she realized she was less offended than perversely pleased because, obviously, they were jealous of her intellectual accomplishments, her ability to meet men on their own ground, intellectually as good a man as any man.



The half dream drowsiness was sharply washed away by the belated impact of Sam Eade's question to Lt. Harper. Reality flashed on, and she was suddenly wide awake in the lifeboat heading back to Earth.

"What is it you must tell me?" She spoke loudly and crisply to the men's broad backs where they sat in front of the instrument panel. The implication of the question, itself, that they had been holding

something back....

Lt. Harper turned slowly around in his seat and looked at her with that detested expression of amused tolerance which his kind of adult male affected toward females. He was the dark, ruggedly handsome type, the kind who took it for granted that women should fawn over him. The kind who would speak the fatuous cliché that a woman's place was in the home, not gallivanting off to teach colonists' children on the fourth planet of Procyon. Still, perhaps she was unjust, she hardly knew the man.

"Oh, you awake, Miss Kitty?" he asked easily. His tone, as always, was diffident, respectful toward her. Odd, she resented that respect from him, when she would have resented lack of it even more.

"Certainly," she snapped. "What is it you must tell me?"

"When you're dressed, freshened up a bit," he answered, not evasively, but as if it could wait.

She started to insist, but he had already turned back to the nose window to study the starry sky and the huge misty green ball of Earth in front of them. Sam Eade, the radioman, was intently twisting the dials on his set with a puckered frown between his blond eyebrows. He was an entirely different type, tall, blond, but just as fatuously masculine, as arrogantly handsome. Probably neither one of them had an ounce of brains—handsome people so seldom needed to develop mental ability.

Sam, too, turned his face farther away from her. Both backs told her plainly that she could dress, take care of her needs, with as much privacy as the lifeboat could allow anybody.

Not that it would take her long. She'd worn coveralls since the catastrophe, saving the dress she'd had on for landing on Earth. They'd had to leave most of her luggage behind. The lieutenant had insisted on taking up most of the spare space in the lifeboat with that dismantled space warper from the wreck of their ship.

She combed her short graying hair back of her ears, and used a little water sparingly to brush her teeth. Perhaps it had been a quixotic thing, her giving up a secure teaching post on Earth to go out to Procyon IV. Except that she'd dreamed about a new colony where the rising generation,

under her influence, would value intellect—with the girls no different from the boys. Perhaps it had been even sillier to take a cabin on a freighter, the only passenger with a crew of four men. But men did not intimidate her, and on a regular passenger ship she'd have been bored stiff by having to associate with the women.

Two of the men....

It wasn't quite clear to her, even yet, what had happened. They'd used the normal drive to get clear of regular solar shipping lanes. The warning bell had rung that they were about to warp into hyperspace, a mechanism which canceled out distance and made the trip in apparent time no more than an overnight jaunt to Mars. There was a grinding shudder—then a twisted ship which looked as if some giant had taken a wet rag and torqued it to squeeze out the water. Lt. Harper and Sam had got her out of her cabin, and finally into the lifeboat which was only partly crippled.

The other two men of the crew....

She zipped up the front of her coveralls with a crisp gesture, as if to snap off the vision. She would show no weakness in front of these two men. She had no weakness to show!

"All right, gentlemen," she said incisively to their backs. "Now. What is it I must be told?"

Lt. Harper pointed to the ball of Earth so close ahead. It was huge, almost filling the sky in front of them. The misty atmosphere blurred outlines slightly, but she could make out the Eastern halves of North and South America clearly. The Western portions were still in dim darkness.

"See anything wrong, Miss Kitty?" the lieutenant asked quietly.

She looked more closely, sensing a possible trap in his question, a revelation of her lack of knowledge.

"I'm not an authority on celestial geography," she said cautiously, academically. "But obviously the maps I've seen were not accurate in showing the true continental proportions." She pointed to a small chart hanging on the side wall. "This map shows Florida, for example, a much longer peninsula than it actually is. A number of things like that. I don't see anything else wrong, but, of course, it's not my field of knowledge."

Lt. Harper looked at her approvingly, the kind of look she gave a bright pupil who'd been especially discerning.

"Only it's not the map that's wrong, Miss Kitty," he said. "It is *my* field of knowledge, and I've seen those continental outlines hundreds of times. They always corresponded to the map ... before."

She looked at him without comprehension.

"Not only that," Sam Eade entered the conversation. "As soon as we were clear of the wreck, Lt. Harper took a fix on stars and constellations. He's an astrogator. He knows his business. And they were wrong, too. Just a little wrong, here and there, but enough. And even more than that. On a tight beam, I should have been able to make a connection with Earth headquarters on this set. And I haven't yet got communication, and we know there's nothing wrong with this set."

"Sam knows his business, too, Miss Kitty," Lt. Harper said. "If he can't get communication, it's because there isn't any."

She looked wide-eyed from one to the other. For once, she was more concerned with a problem than with concealing her ignorance about it.

"It means," the lieutenant said, as if he were answering a question she hadn't yet asked, "that the Earth we are returning to is not the Earth we left."

"I don't understand," she gasped.

"There's a theory," Lt. Harper answered slowly. "Heretofore it has been considered only a mathematical abstraction, and having no counterpart in reality. The theory of multiple dimensions." She looked at him closely, and in her habitual ambivalence of thought reflected that he sounded much more intelligent than she had suspected.

"I've read about that," she answered.

He looked relieved, and threw a quick look at Sam. Apparently he had underestimated her intelligence, too—in spite of all her degrees.

"We never thought it could be real," he emphasized. "But the theory was that multiple universes lay side by side, perhaps each an instant's time away from the other. The only thing I can see is that some flaw in the space warper threw us out of our dimension into another one closely adjacent—not far enough for things to be totally different, just different enough that the duplication isn't identical. It's Earth, but it's not our Earth. It's a New Earth, one we don't know

anything about."

"In another few hours, we'll be entering the atmosphere," Sam put in, "and we don't know what we'll find. We thought you ought to know."

She flared in exasperation at the simple assumption of male arrogance.

"Of course I should know!" she snapped back. "I am not one of your little bits of blonde, empty-headed fluff to be protected by strong males! I should have been told immediately!"

Lt. Harper looked at Sam with a broad grin. It was amusement, but it was more—a confirmation that they could depend on her to take it in her stride—an approval. Apparently, they had discussed more things about her than she'd overheard, while she slept. He didn't turn off the grin when he looked directly at her.

"What could you have done about it, if we had told you, Miss Kitty?" he asked mildly.

It was not the same Earth. The charts and maps had not been wrong. Her tentative theory that perhaps there were vision flaws in the plastic nose window which had not stood up.

The continents, the lakes, the rivers—the topography really was distorted. Now there was the Mississippi River, one spot swinging rather too widely to the East. The Great Lakes were one huge inland sea. The Gulf of Mexico swung high up into what had once been Alabama and Georgia.

There was no New Orleans, shipping center of the world, headquarters of Space.

There were no cities anywhere up and down the Mississippi. Where St. Louis should have been, there was virgin forest. As they dropped down into the upper reaches of atmosphere, experiencing the familiar and sometimes nauseating reference shift from ahead to below, there had been no New York to the East, no San Francisco to the West. There had been no Boulder Dam, no Tennessee Valley project, no continuous hydroelectric installations running the entire length of the Mississippi, where the strength of the Father of the Waters had finally been harnessed for Man. There were no thin lines of highways, no paint-brush strokes of smoke against the canvas of the Gulf of Mexico to denote steamers, for atomic power was still not available to all.

On this New Earth, Man could not yet have reached a state of complex technology.

And as they dropped lower still, through their telescope sights, they saw no canoes on the river or the feeder streams. They saw no huts along the river shore, no thin streamers of wood smoke from huts hidden under the trees along the bayous. New Earth was purple and blue, then shading into green as they dropped lower. They sighted a deer drinking at the edge of a pool.

But there was no trace of Man.

"If there are no scars, no defacements upon this forest primeval," Miss Kitty said didactically, "then Man has not evolved on New Earth." Since it was spoken in the tone of an axiom, and there was no evidence to refute it, neither of the two men felt like arguing the matter.

They were low enough now that they were flying horizontally rather than dropping vertically. They were still searching for traces of some kind of artifacts. They were also searching, Lt. Harper advised them at last, for a suitable place to land. They wanted a higher ground than the delta country so they might be free of insect pests, assuming there were some since deer could be seen throwing their heads back along their sides as if to chase away flies. They wanted higher ground with a stream of water going over falls to supplement their limited power in the lifeship. On the chance there were fish, it would be nice to be handy to a lake. A forest for game. A level ground for a permanent camp.

Since they were here, and it might be some time before they could figure out a way to return to Old Earth, they may as well make the best of it.

They found the kind of place they wanted, a little to the west of the Mississippi. They grounded the lifeship at the edge of a natural clearing beside a lake where a stream of sparkling water dropped from a rock ledge.

They settled the ship on the springy turf, then sat and looked at one another as if they were suddenly all strangers. Wordlessly, Lt. Harper got up and opened the door of the lifeship. He threw down the hinged metal steps. He stood back. Miss Kitty went through the door first and down the steps. The two men followed.

They stood on the ground of New Earth, and looked at one another the way they had in the ship. In the minds of each there was the thought that some kind of a ceremonial speech should be made, but no one volunteered it.

"I suppose we should have a campfire," Miss Kitty said doubtfully.

They did not realize it at the time, but it was the most effective speech which could have been devised. It was a symbol. Man had discovered and taken possession of New Earth. His instinctive thought was to place his brand upon it, an artificial fire.

All of them missed the significance of the fact that it was Miss Kitty who had made the first move in the domestication of this New Earth.

In the weeks which followed, Miss Kitty began to be dimly aware of the significance. At first they had lived a sort of Robinson Crusoe kind of life, leaning pretty heavily upon the stores of the liferaft.

It had been she who had converted it over into more of the Swiss Family Robinson pattern of making use of the resources about them.

The resources were abundant, bountiful. Yet the two men seemed little interested, and appeared content to live off the stores within the liferaft. They devoted almost all their time, except that little for bringing up firewood and trapping game, to fiddling with that gadget they called a warp motor. They were trying to hook it up to the radio sets, they said.

Miss Kitty detested women who nagged at men, but she felt compelled to point out that this was the fall season upon New Earth, and winter would soon be upon them. It should not be a severe winter at this latitude, but they must be prepared for it with something more substantial than her uncomfortable sleeping place in the liferaft; nor would the two of them continue to enjoy sleeping out under the trees, if a blanket of snow fell some night.

"I was hoping we could be back home before winter sets in, Miss Kitty," Lt. Harper apologized mildly.

She had not nagged them. She had simply shut her lips and walked away.

The next day they began cutting logs.

It was odd, the basic pleasure she felt in seeing the sides of the cabin start to take form. Certainly she was not domestic by nature. And this could, in no sense, be considered a home. Still, she felt it might have gone up faster, if the men had used their muscles—their brute strength—rather than spend so much futile time trying to devise power tools.

They were also inclined to talk too much about warping radio wave bands through cross sections of sinowaves, and to drop their work on the cabin in favor of spending long hours trying new hookups.

But Miss Kitty never nagged about it. She had even tried to follow some of the theory, to share in their efforts to put such theory into practice, to be just a third fellow. Instead she found her thoughts wandering to how an oven could be constructed so she could bake and roast meats instead of broiling and frying them over an open fire.

Game was plentiful, fish seemed to be begging for the hook. Every day, without going too far away from camp, she found new foods; watercress, mustard greens, wild turnips, wild onions, occasionally a turkey nest with eggs still edible, hollow trees where wild bees had stored honey, persimmons still astringent, but promising incredibly sweet and delicious flavor when frost struck them, chinquapin, a kind of chestnut, black walnuts. There was no end to what the country provided. Yet the men, instead of laying in winter stores, spent their time with the warp motor.

Without meaning to, Miss Kitty interrupted an explanation of Lt. Harper's on how they were calibrating the torquing degrees. She told him that he and Sam simply must help her harvest a hillside patch of wild maize she had found, before the rains came and ruined all the grain with mold, or the migrating birds ate it all.

The cabin they were erecting would contain only two rooms—a large general room for cooking, eating, visiting, such as an old-fashioned farm kitchen had once been. A little room, opening off it, would be her sleeping room. She raised her eyebrows questioningly, and Sam explained they would build a small, separate bunkhouse for himself and Lt. Harper.

She had a curious sense of displeasure at the arrangement. She knew she should be pleased at their understanding of the need for privacy. There was no point in becoming primitive savages. She should be grateful that they shared her determination to preserve the civilized codes. She told herself, rather severely, that the preservation of civilized mores was extremely important. And she brought herself up short with a shocking question, equal to a slap in the face.

Why?

She realized then she had intuitively known from the first that they would never get back to Old Earth. Her instincts had been functioning, insuring their lives, where intellect had failed them completely. She tried to laugh scornfully at herself, in feminist tradition. Imagine! Kathryn Kittredge, Career Woman, devoted to the intellectual advancement of Man, thinking that mere

cooking and cleaning and mending was the supremely important thing.

But she failed in her efforts to deride herself. The intellectual discussions among the small groups of intelligent girls back on Old Earth were far away and meaningless. She discovered she was a little proud and strangely contented that she could prepare edible food. Certainly the two men were not talented; and someone had to accept the responsibility for a halfway decent domestic standard and comfort.

As, for example, with the walls of the cabin halfway up, it was necessary to point out that while they may be going to put the little cookstove—welded together out of metal scrap—in the cabin, there was no provision for a fireplace. How would they keep warm through the long winter months this year, and in the years to come?

Lt. Harper had started to say something. Then he shrugged and a hopeless look came over his face.

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Kitty," he said humbly. "It may be spring, at that, before we can finish trying the more obvious combinations. We're trying to...." He broke off, turned away, and began to mark off the spot where they would saw down through the logs to fit in a fireplace.



Later that day, she overheard him tell Sam that, theoretically at least, there could be millions of versions of the Earth, each removed an infinitesimal point from the next. There was the chance the flaw in the torque motor, which still eluded him, might not automatically take them back to the right cross-section, even if he found it. They might have to make an incredible number of trials, and then again they might hit it on the very next combination.

"And you might not!" she cut into the conversation, with perhaps more acid in her voice than she intended. "It might not be your next, nor tomorrow, nor next spring—nor ever!"

Odd that she had felt an obscure satisfaction at the stricken looks on their faces when she had said it. Yet they had it coming to them. It was time someone shocked them into a sense of reality. It took a woman to be a realist. She had already faced the possibility and was reconciled to it. They were still living in an impossible dream.

Still she was sorry. She was sorry in the way she had always regretted having to make a bad boy in kindergarten go stand with his face to the wall. She tried to make up for it that evening.

"I understand," she said as they sat near the campfire outside the half-finished cabin. "You alter the torque, then try the various radio wave bands in the new position."

They both looked at her, a little surprised.

"It must be a slow and tedious procedure," she continued.

"Very," Sam said with a groan.

A shifting air current, carrying the sound of the waterfall, gave her an idea.

"Too bad you can't borrow the practice of Tibetan monks," she mused. "They tie their prayers to a wheel, set it in a running stream. Every turn of the wheel is a prayer sent up to their gods. That way they can get their praying done for them while they go about the more urgent matters of providing a living for themselves and their families."

She hadn't meant it to be so pointed, implying that all they were doing was sending up futile prayers to unheeding gods, implying they should be giving more attention to setting in winter stores. But even so....

"Miss Kitty," Sam said in a kind of awe. "You are a wonderful woman!"

In spite of her sudden flush of pleasure, she was irritated. As pointed as she had made it, he had missed it.

He turned and began talking excitedly to Lt. Harper. Yes, of course, they could rig up an automatic method instead of doing it by hand. It could be done faster and more smoothly with electric motors, but the idea was the same. If Lt. Harper could rig a trip to kick the warp over another notch each time, they could run it night and day. Just let some kind of alarm bell start ringing, if they hit anything at the other end!

The two of them jumped to their feet then, grabbed her arms, squeezed them, and rushed away to the little shed they'd constructed beside the lifeship to hold some of their scattered equipment.

She felt vaguely regretful that she had mentioned it.



Still she gained a great deal. The men finished the cabin in a hurry after that, and they put up their own bunkhouse in less than a week. Both jobs were obviously not done by experts, and she had fussed at them, although not unkindly, because she had had to chink such wide cracks with a mixture of clay and dried grass.

She moved into the larger cabin, discovered a dozen roof leaks during the first hard rain they'd had; got them patched, began molding clay into dishes and containers, started pressuring the boys to build her a ceramics kiln, began to think about how their clothes would eventually wear out and how she would have to find some way to weave cloth to replace them. Day by day she was less irritable, as the boys settled into a routine.

"I do believe," she said to herself one day, "I would be disappointed if they found a way back!" She straightened up and almost spilled the container of wild rice she had been garnering from the swampy spot at the upper reaches of the lake. "Why! The very idea of saying such a thing, Katheryn Kittredge!" But her heart was not in the self chiding.

But what reason, in heaven's name, would they have for staying here? Three people, marooned, growing old, dying one by one. There was no chance for Man's survival here. From the evidence about them, they had come to the conclusion that on this New Earth, in the tree of evolution, the bud to grow into a limb of primates had never formed.

She turned and looked at the tall, straight pines ahead of her. She saw the deciduous hardwoods, now gold and red, to one side of her. Behind her the lake was teeming with fish. The spicy smell of fall was all around her, and a stray breeze brought a scent of grapes she had overlooked when she was gathering all she could find to make a wine to pleasantly surprise the boys.

She thought of the flock of wild chickens which had learned to hang around the cabin for scraps of food, the grunting lazy pigs, grown quite tame, begging her to find their acorns for them, the nanny goat with two half-grown kids Lt. Harper had brought back from a solitary walk he had taken.

New Earth was truly a paradise—and all to be wasted if there were not Man to appreciate it truly.

A thought knocked at her mind, but she resolutely shut it out, refused it even silent verbalization.

Yet, while she stooped over again and busied her hands with stripping the rice from the stalks without cutting them on the sharp dry leaves, she found herself thinking about Mendelian law. Line breeding from father to daughter, or brother to sister—in domestic animals, of course—was all right in fixing desirable traits, providing certain recessives in both the dam and the sire did not thus become dominant.

"There, Katheryn Kittredge," she mumbled with satisfaction. "Assuming the responsibilities of domesticity has not made you forget what you learned."

But the danger of fixing recessives into dominants through inbreeding was even less with half-brothers and sisters. Now daughters by one—er—sire could be bred to another sire to get only a quarter relationship to a similar cross from the other father—er—sire. She must work it out with a stylus in smooth clay. The boys had preempted every scrap of paper for their pointless

calculations. But she could remember it, and it would be valuable in breeding up a desirable barnyard stock.

Yet it was odd that she assumed two males and only one female!

Then and there, standing ankle deep in the bog of wild rice, muddy to her knees in her torn coveralls, slapping at persistent mosquitoes, she came to terms with herself. In the back of her mind she had known it all the time. All this was without meaning unless there was Man—and a continuity of Man. Even so little as this gathering of wild rice, before the migrating ducks got it, was without meaning, if it were merely to stave off death from a purposeless existence. If there were no other fate for them than eventually to die, without posterity, then they might as well die tomorrow, today, now.

The men were still living in a dream of getting back. No doubt their lusting appetites were driving them to get back to their brazen, heavy-breasted, languorous-eyed hussies who pandered to all comers without shame! Miss Kitty was astonished at her sudden vehemence, the red wave of fury which swept over her.

But of course she was right. That was their urgent drive. "A male human is nothing more than a sex machine!" Wasn't that what her roommate at college had once said? Or was it her maiden aunt who had dominated her widowed mother and herself through all the years she was growing up? What did it matter who said it? She knew it was true. No wonder they were so anxious to get back to Old Earth! Her lip lifted in cynical scorn.

"You don't dare leave a young girl alone with a boy for five minutes," her aunt had once complained bitterly. "All they ever think about is...." her voice had dropped to a whisper and she had given that significant look to Katheryn's mother. But Katheryn had known what she meant, of course.

And it was true of all men.

Women, back on Old Earth, had looked at her with pity and a little contempt, because she had never, she had never.... But you didn't have to have first hand experience to know. She had authoritative knowledge gleaned from reading between the lines of the very best text books on abnormal psychology. She hadn't had to read between the lines of sundry surveys and reports. And if there had been no organized study at all, the movies, the TV, the published better fiction—all of it centered around that one theme—that one, alone, romanticize it or obscure it though they might.

It was all men ever thought about. And many women pandered to it—those sultry, shameless, undulating....

But Sam and Lt. Harper? It had been almost two months now since they had left Earth and those vile blondes. How had they restrained themselves during all this time!

Her fuming anger was suddenly overwhelmed by a warm rush of gratitude, a sympathy which brought a gush of tears into her eyes to stream down her cheeks. How blind she had been. Of course! They were still bound by their gentleman's Word of Honor, given to her on that first night in the lifestrip.

What splendid men! All right, so they had their faults; a little impractical, dreamers all, but with such nobility of character, truly they were fit to be the fathers of a proud and noble race. And, in time, with herself to shape and guide them....

She straightened her aching back from bending over the rice reeds, thrust out her scrawny chest, and breathed deeply. She lifted her chin resolutely.

"Katheryn Kittredge," she said firmly. "A woman's place is more than merely cooking and cleaning and mending!"

Supper, that evening, was a dinner, a special dinner. She set before the two men a whole roast young tom turkey, with a touch of frosted persimmons mixed with wild honey to enliven the light meat. There was a dressing of boiled maise and wild rice, seasoned with wild onion and thyme. There were little red tomatoes, tough but tasty. There were baked yams. There was a custard of goat milk and turkey eggs sweetened with honey.

Instead of the usual sassafras tea to which their digestion had finally adjusted, there was grape wine in their cups. It wasn't a very good wine, still green and sharp, but the occasion called for it.

Both of them looked at her with wonder, when they came in at her call and saw the table. But they didn't ask any questions. They just started eating and, for once, they forgot to talk about warp theory.

She, herself, ate little. She was content to look at them. The lieutenant, tall and strong, big-boned, dark-complexioned, square-faced, white even teeth. Sam, small-boned, fair-

complexioned, hair bleached straw from the outdoor sun. He had been inclined to be a little stout when she first saw him, but now he had that muscular wiriness which comes with hard physical work—and clean living. His daughters would be delicate, lovely, yet strong. The lieutenant's sons....

She watched, in a kind of rapture, the ripple of muscles beneath their shirts, the way the pillar of the neck arose from strong shoulders to support a well-shaped head, the way the muscles of jaws rippled under their lean cheeks as they chewed. The way their intelligent eyes flashed appreciation at each savory mouthful.

"It occurs to me, Sam," Lt. Harper said as he washed down some turkey with a healthy quaff of wine. "We could give a little more attention to scraping up food for Miss Kitty to cook. Now you take this brown rice, for example, we could rig up a polishing mill so she'd have white rice...."

"Nonsense," Miss Kitty said firmly. "All the proper food value lies in the brown covering. I will not have the children's eating habits spoiled from the beginning...."

Appalled, she realized what she had said. Both men stopped chewing and stared at her.

"What children, Miss Kitty?" Lt. Harper asked, and he was looking at her intently.

She dropped her eyes to her plate. She felt the red flush arising around her neck, up into her face. She couldn't face him. Yet, it had to be done. It must be made quite clear to him, both of them, that....

"*Our* children," she said distinctly, and felt their eyes boring into the top of her head. "And I wish you both would stop calling me Miss Kitty, as if—as if you were kindergarten children and I was the old maid school teacher! All three of us are adults, men and a woman. In spite of what you may think, I am not a great deal older than either of you. There will be children! If it works out the way I plan, I believe I do have time for at least six sons and daughters before I reach ... before my barren years."

She heard Sam's fork clatter down on the table top as he dropped it. She heard Lt. Harper's feet scrape, as if he had been about to leap to his feet. Without seeing it, she almost felt them look at one another.

Well, she had made it plain enough.

But they didn't say anything.

Suddenly she could stand it no longer. Slowly, in dignity, she arose to her feet and without looking at them she walked, head down, to her door. Then she realized she had perhaps been too crisp, too businesslike about it all. A vision of the kind of women they must have known, the kind which would arouse their passion, the kind which would make it all unmistakable....

She had a flashing memory of a girl back in college, one smitten with a football hero, trying to captivate the hero, draw him to her. On impulse, Miss Kitty imitated that girl now, and a little tableau she remembered.

At her doorway she turned, and looked at them over her shoulder. She lifted her shoulder so that it touched her chin. She drooped her eyes half shut.

"My name is Katheryn," she said, and she tried to make her voice husky instead of tremulous and frightened. "Call me Kathy, call me Kate, call me Kay."

Both men were staring at her with wide eyes and open mouths as she closed her door. She made sure there was no sound of a latch turning to discourage them.

She undressed herself slowly, and, for the first time other than for bathing, completely. She felt grateful for the time they were giving her. No doubt they were talking it over, man to man, in the way of civilized, educated.... She crawled in between the blankets, fresh and smelling of sunshine from being washed in the clear water of the lake. She was a little regretful she had no perfume; that was something they didn't put into lifeboats.

She waited.

She heard the low rumble of male voices in the other room. They were undoubtedly discussing it. She felt grateful relief that their voices had not risen. They were not quarreling over her—not yet. She did hope they would continue to be sensible.

She heard one of the stools scrape on the rough split log floor. She caught her breath in a gasp, found her hands were clutching the covers and pulling them tightly up to her chin. She willed her hands to relax. She willed the tenseness out of her rigid body.

She heard the other stool scrape. Surely they were not both....

She heard their feet walking across the floor, the heavy steps of the lieutenant, the lighter, springier steps of Sam. She gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes tight shut.

And then she heard the outer door close softly.

Which one? Which had remained behind?

She waited.

Then she heard footsteps outside. She tried to identify, by sound, which man was making the noise, but the shuffling of leaves was confusing, as if more than one person were walking outside. And where was the other man? Why had he made no sound in the outer room? Was he quietly drinking up the wine—first? Then, distinctly, she recognized two pairs of feet outside, going farther away, in the direction of the men's bunkhouse.

She could not bear the suspense. She sprang out of bed clutching one of the blankets about her. Slowly, soundlessly, she opened her door a crack. She could see no one in the flickering firelight of the room. They had turned out the lights. Or—he had. She opened the door wide.

It had been they, not he. Both men had gone.

Inadvertently something between a sob and a hiccough rattled her throat. She choked back another. She would not give way to ... rage? ... frustration? ... relief? ... *fear*?

Fear!

She had seen the movies, she had read the stories, she had overheard boys. "I'll fix you when we get outside! You meet me in the alley and I'll show you!"

These two men. Were they going off into the darkness to settle a conflict which they had not been able to resolve through sensible agreement? There, under the trees in the moonlight, would they, denying all the progress of the sacred centuries, would they revert to the primitive, the savage; and like two rutting male animals rend and tear and battle with one another for the only female?

Oh, no! No, they must not! There was no doubt that the lieutenant with his great, massive strength.... But the human race of New Earth must have the fine sensitivity, the lithe grace of Sam's kind, also!

She tugged the blanket around her shoulders and ran toward the door. She must reach them, step in between them, even at the cost of receiving some of the blows upon herself, make them realize....

She felt herself shivering as she opened the door, shivering as if with an ague. She felt her face burning, as if with a fever. Her teeth were chattering in anguish. She tried to still the noise of her teeth, to listen for those horrible sounds of silent men in a death conflict somewhere out there in the moonlight.

Then she saw a chink of light through a crack in the wall of the bunkhouse, where the clay had dried and fallen away from the logs.

In there? What were they doing in there?

Instead of their fists and crushing arms, were they stalking one another with knives? She remembered scenes from Western movies, the overturned tables, the crash of things thrown. Had some sense of chivalry still remained in the lieutenant, and he, knowing Sam wouldn't stand a chance in hand to hand conflict, devised some contest which would be more fair?

There need be no contest. If only they would be sensible, work out an equitable schedule....

Barefooted, she ran across the ground toward the bunkhouse. She had visions of herself throwing open the door, shocking them to stillness in a tableau of violence. She was close now. She should be able to hear the crashing of their table and chairs.

She could hear nothing at all. Was she too late? Even now, was one of them standing above the other, holding a dripping knife? What horrors might she run into, even precipitate, if she threw open the door? Caution, Katheryn!

Instead, she crept up to the crack in the wall. Her teeth were chattering so hard, she had difficulty in holding her head still enough to peer through the slit of light. With her free hand, her shoulders were shaking so hard she had difficulty in clutching the blanket about her with the other, she grabbed her jaw and held on, to still her shaking. Her eyes focused on the scene inside the room.

She had a three-quarter vision of each man and the table between them. They were dealing a greasy pack of cards! Were they going to gamble for her? Relief and shame intermingled in her reaction. She would have preferred they settle it with more elemental.... It would have made it less.... Yet, this way neither would be killed. Sons and daughters from both....

"How are we going to tell her now?" Sam asked, as he picked up his cards. His voice came distinctly through the wall crack.

"We should have told her about our wives and families right at the start," Harper answered

morosely. "I don't know why we didn't. Except that, well, none of us have talked about things back home. She didn't, and so we didn't either."

"But I never dreamed Miss Kitty would start getting ideas," Sam said in a heartsick voice. "I just never dreamed she...."

"We're going to have to tell her," Harper said resolutely. "We'll just have to tell her that, well, there's still hope and as long as there's hope...."

Blindly, in an anguish of shame such as she had never known, Miss Kitty crept away from the bunkhouse, and stumbled back to the cabin. Now she was shivering so violently she could hardly walk. The exposure to the night air, the nervous tension, overwrought emotions....

She could not remember getting back into the cabin, crawling into bed. She knew only that a little later she was in bed, still shaking violently with a chill, burning with fever.

She was awakened in the morning with the sound of the axe chopping on wood. She dragged herself out of bed, forlorn, sick, filled with shame. Her head spun so wildly that she sank to her knees and lay it on the bed. Then her pride and her will forced her to her feet, and she drove herself to dress, to go into the big room, dig out glowing coals from beneath ashes, put them in the little cook stove, pile fine slivers of resin-rich kindling on top of them, blow on them.

Between painful breaths, she heard herself sobbing. Her teeth started chattering again, and there was a ringing in her ears. She heard the blows of the axe falling on the wood, and each blow transferred itself to the base of her skull. The ringing in her ears grew louder and louder.

She heard one of the men shout. It sounded like Sam. Had he hurt himself with the axe, gashed his leg or something? She'd always been afraid of that axe! She'd told them and told them to be careful!

She pulled herself up from her knees there at the stove where she had been blowing on the coals. She must get out there, help him! That terrible buzzing in her head, that ringing in her ears. No matter, she must get out there to help him.

She threw open the door and saw Sam running toward the lifeship. Had he lost his mind? The bandages were here. She had them here! She saw Lt. Harper come to the door of the bunkhouse. He was still pulling on his pants. He started running toward the lifeship, too, cinching his belt as he ran.

Then she realized that at least part of the ringing in her ears came from the lifeship. At first it had no meaning for her, then she remembered them talking about fixing up some kind of alarm, so that if they got a signal through....

She started running toward the lifeship. She stumbled, fell, got up, felt as light as a feather, as heavy as mercury. She crawled up the steps of the lifeship, she clutched at the door. She heard Sam speaking very slowly, carefully.

"Do you read me? *Is this Earth?*"

She saw his face. She knew the answer.

And that was the last she knew.



Consciousness came back in little dribbles like a montage—half reality and half nightmare of the insomniac. Lt. Harper's voice shouting at her with a roar like a waterfall, "My God, Miss Kitty, are you sick?" Blackness. More shouting, Sam calling the lieutenant, something about a red flare in the sky. A lucid moment, when Sam was explaining to her that Earth had been given the warp coordinates, and had sent a red flare to see if they could get through. Then another gap. A heavy trampling of feet, a great many feet. Some kind of memory of a woman in white, sticking a thermometer in her mouth. The prick of a needle in her arm. The sense of being carried. A memory of knowing she was in a ship. A flash that was more felt than seen.

Nightmares! All nightmares! She would wake up in a moment. She would get up, dress, go out and start a fire to heat water on the cookstove. She had planned to have coffee, a special treat from their almost exhausted store. She would have coffee. The men would come in sheepish, evading her glance.

Very well, she would simply tell them that she had misunderstood, save them the embarrassment of telling her. She would not be the woman scorned.

She moved her hands to throw back her blankets, and froze. Her fingers had not touched

blankets, they had touched cool, slick sheets! Her eyes popped open.

It had not been a nightmare, a wish fulfillment of escape. She was in a hospital room. A nurse was standing beside her bed, looking down at her. A comfortably motherly-looking sort of woman was speaking to her.

"Well, now, Miss Kittredge, that's much better!" the woman said. "So you will go gather wild rice in the swamp and get your bloodstream full of bugs!" But it was a professional kind of chiding, the same way she had talked to her kindergarten children when they'd got themselves into trouble.

"Still," the nurse chatted, "it's made our pathologists mighty happy. They've been having themselves a ball analyzing the bugs you three managed to pick up. You got something close to malaria. The two men, healthy oxen, didn't get anything at all. We had to let 'em out of quarantine in three days."

Miss Kitty just looked at her in a sort of unthinking lassitude. She was still trying to make the reality seem real. The nurse helped a little. She turned to her cart and produced a white enamel, flat container. She slid it under the top sheet.

"Upsy-daisy now, Miss Kittredge," she said firmly. "It's time you started cooperating a little."

Yes, that brought her back to reality. But she still didn't say anything.

"Although we might as well not have let 'em out of quarantine," the nurse grumbled. "They've just been living out there in the waiting room for a solid week, buttonholing everybody from doctors down to orderlies asking about you."

She gave a soft wolf whistle.

"Whew, imagine having not just one guy but two of 'em, absolutely crazy about you. Just begging to see you, hold your hand a little. Two beautiful men like that! You ready to see them soon?"

Miss Kitty felt a rush of shame again. In the cabin she would have been forced to face them, but not now.

"No," she said firmly. "I *never* want to see them again."

"Well, now, let me tell you something, Miss Kittredge," the nurse said, and this time there was a note of seriousness. "One of the symptoms of this sickness you picked up is that it makes you talk. Gal, you have talked a blue streak for the last week. We know everything, everything that happened, everything you thought about. The doctor understood how you might feel about things. So he told the lieutenant and Mr. Eade that you had got bitten about the time you were up in the rice swamp, and that you hadn't been responsible for anything you'd said for the last three days back there on New Earth."

Miss Kitty felt a flood of relief.

"Did they believe the doctor?" she asked hesitantly.

"Sure they believed him," the nurse answered. "Sure they did. But you wanna know something? I've talked to those two men. And I've just got myself an idea that it wouldn't have made a particle of difference in the way they feel about you even if they didn't believe it. You're tops with those two guys, lady. Absolutely tip-top tops. The way you pitched in there, carried your share of things...."

She slipped the pan out from under the sheets, and put it into a compartment of the cart.

"You wanna know something else? I don't think you were out of your head at all when you propositioned those two guys. I think you were showing some good female sense, maybe for the first time in your life. And I think they know you were.

"You think it over, Miss Kittredge. If I know you—and I ought to after listening to you rave day after day—you've got what it takes. You want my advice? You go right on being a normal female. Don't you be silly enough to get back into that warped, twisted, frustrated kind of a man-hater you always thought you were.

"I gotta go now. You think it over. But not too long. Those two guys are going to be mighty, mighty hurt if they find out you're conscious and won't see them."

She went out the door, pushing her cart in front of her.

Miss Kitty relaxed her neck, willed the tenseness out of her body, and just lay for a while thinking of nothing. A gust, a rattle of raindrops, called her attention to the window. They had put her on the ground floor. She was able to see through the window to the street outside. The rain was pelting down, like that first rain they'd had there on New Earth. How chagrined the boys had looked when the roof started leaking in a dozen places!

She felt a warm sense of relief, of gratitude, that she could remember them without shame. The nurse had been right, of course. Probably the doctors had planted that particular nurse in her room, anticipating her return to consciousness, anticipating the necessity for a little mental therapy.

Good female sense. With such a semantic difference from good male sense! The mind of a man and a woman was not the same. She knew that now. And she realized that deeply, hidden from her own admittance, she had always known it. And the nurse's good earthy expression—"propositioning those two guys"—approval that it had been natural and right. And another expression, "the way you pitched in there, carried your share of things."

Carried your share of things! That meant more than just cooking, mending, cleaning. More than just seeing that the race continued, too; although it somehow tied in with all these things.

She lay in her bed, watching the rain through the window, getting comfort from the soft, drumming sound. Along the street she could see people sloshing through the film of water underfoot. She watched the scene of turned-up collars, pulled-down hatbrims, bobbing umbrellas, as if it were something apart from her, and yet a part of her. She began to get a sense of rare vision, an understanding which she knew was more complete than any intellectual abstraction she had ever managed. She began to get a woman's sense of purpose, completely distinct from that of a man.

She recalled once reading of an incident where an Oklahoma oil millionaire had built a huge mansion; then, because his squaw did not know how to make a home within it, they pitched their tepee in the front grounds, to live there, unable to feel at home in anything else.

Yes, too often the mansions of science came in for a similar treatment. The vast rooms of ideas, the great halls of expansion, the limitless ceilings of challenge, the wide expanses of speculation; all these things which would exalt Man into a truly great existence were denied, put to no use beyond mere gadgetry. And the mass of human beings still huddled in their cramped and grimy little tepees of ancient syndromes, only there feeling at home.

It was the fault of the women. They had not kept up with the men. Those who attempted it tried to be men, to prove themselves as good a man as any man, the way she had done.

They had missed the real point entirely, every single bit of it.

The male was still functioning in the way males always had. There was no essential difference between the cave man who climbed a new mountain and explored a new valley and brought back a speared deer to throw down at the entrance of his home cave; no difference between him and the modern explorer of science who, under similar hardships, brought back a bright and rich new knowledge.

But the ancient cave woman had not failed. She had known what to do with the deer to strengthen and secure the future of the race.

And what about New Earth?

Lt. Harper and Sam had talked about the possibility of millions of Earths, each infinitesimally removed from the other, and if they could bridge the gap to one, they might bridge it to an uncountable number. Perhaps there were millions of others, but for her there was only one New Earth.

Would the processions of colonists going there spoil it? Would the women going there see in it a great mansion? Or, instead, would they simply go there to escape here—escape from exhaustion, failure, anguish, bitterness—and, as always, take these things along with them? Would they still live in grimy little syndromes of endless antagonism, bickering in their foolish frustrations, because they had no wisdom about what to do with this newly speared deer?

Oh, not on New Earth!

Suddenly Miss Kitty knew what she must do. If that one particular mansion needed someone to make it into a home, why not herself? And who had a better right?

Somewhere, there, perhaps that very one striding along under the eaves of that building across the street, with his hatbrim pulled down, leaning against the rain, somewhere, close, there must be a man who could share her resolution and her dream. A man of the same breed as the lieutenant and Sam, a man who carried his head high, his shoulders back, who had keen, intelligent eyes, and laughter.

Yes, now she wanted to see the two men after all, and meet their lucky wives, and see their children, the kind of children she might have had.

Might *yet* have!

At a flash of memory, she smiled a little ruefully, and yet with an inner peace.

"I am not so old," she repeated in a whisper. "I still have time for at least a half dozen sons and daughters before—before my barren years."

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