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Title: The Gift Bearer

Author: Charles Louis Fontenay

Release Date: April 2, 2008 [EBook #24975]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GIFT BEARER ***

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The Gift Bearer

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

This could well have been Montcalm's greatest opportunity; a chance to bring mankind priceless gifts from worlds beyond. But Montcalm was a solid family man—and what about that nude statue in the park?

It was one of those rare strokes of poetic something-or-other that the whole business occurred the morning after the stormy meeting of the Traskmore censorship board.

Like the good general he was, Richard J. Montcalm had foreseen trouble at this meeting, for it was the boldest invasion yet into the territory of evil and laxity. His forces were marshaled. Several of the town's ministers who had been with him on other issues had balked on this one, but he had three of them present, as well as heads of several women's clubs.

As he had anticipated, the irresponsible liberals were present to do battle, headed by red-haired Patrick Levitt.

"This board," said Levitt in his strong, sarcastic voice, "has gone too far. It was all right to get rid of the actual filth ... and everyone will agree there was some. But when you banned the sale of some magazines and books because they had racy covers or because the contents were a little too sophisticated to suit the taste of members of this board ... well, you can carry protection of our youth to the point of insulting the intelligence of adults who have a right to read what they want to."

"You're talking about something that's already in the past, Mr. Levitt," said Montcalm mildly. "Let's keep to the issue at hand. You won't deny that children see this indecent statue every day?"

"No, I won't deny it!" snapped Levitt. "Why shouldn't they see it? They can see the plate of the original in the encyclopaedia. It's a fine copy of a work of art."

Montcalm waited for some rebuttal from his supporters, but none was forthcoming. On this matter, they apparently were unwilling to go farther than the moral backing of their presence.

"I do not consider the statue of a naked woman art, even if it is called 'Dawn,'" he said bitingly. He looked at his two colleagues and received their nods of acquiescence. He ruled: "The statue must be removed from the park and from public view."

Levitt had one parting shot.

"Would it solve the board's problem if we put a brassiere and panties on the statue?" he demanded.

"Mr. Levitt's levity is not amusing. The board has ruled," said Montcalm coldly, arising to signify the end of the meeting.

That night Montcalm slept the satisfied sleep of the just.

He awoke shortly after dawn to find a strange, utterly beautiful naked woman in his bedroom. For a bemused instant Montcalm thought the statue of Dawn in the park had come to haunt him. His mouth fell open but he was unable to speak.

"Take me to your President," said the naked woman musically, with an accent that could have been Martian.

Mrs. Montcalm awoke.

"What's that? What is it, Richard?" she asked sleepily.

"Don't look, Millie!" exclaimed Montcalm, clapping a hand over her eyes.

"Nonsense!" she snapped, pushing his hand aside and sitting up. She gasped and her eyes went wide, and in an instinctive, unreasonable reaction she clutched the covers up around her

own nightgowned bosom.

"Who are you, young woman?" demanded Montcalm indignantly. "How did you get in here?"

"I am a visitor from what you would call an alien planet," she said. "Of course," she added thoughtfully, "it isn't alien to me."

"The woman's mad," said Montcalm to his wife. A warning noise sounded in the adjoining bedroom. Alarmed, he instructed: "Go and keep the children out of here until I can get her to put on some clothes. They mustn't see her like this."

Mrs. Montcalm got out of bed, but she gave her husband a searching glance.

"Are you sure I can trust you in here with her?" she asked.

"Millie!" exclaimed Montcalm sternly, shocked. She dropped her eyes and left the room. When the door closed behind her, he turned to the strange woman and said:

"Now, look, young lady, I'll get you one of Millie's dresses. You'll have to get some clothes on and leave."

"Aren't you going to ask me my name?" asked the woman. "Of course, it's unpronounceable to you, but I thought that was the first thing all Earth people asked of visitors from other planets."

"All right," he said in exasperation. "What's your name?"

She said an unpronounceable word and added: "You may call me Liz."

Montcalm went to the closet and found one of Millie's house dresses. He held it out to her beseechingly.

As he did so, he was stricken with a sudden sharp feeling of regret that she must don it. Her figure ... why Millie had never had a figure like that! At once, he felt ashamed and disloyal and sterner than ever.

Liz rejected the proffered garment.

"I wouldn't think of adopting your alien custom of wearing clothing," she said sweetly.

"Now look," said Montcalm, "I don't know whether you're drunk or crazy, but you're going to have to put something on and get out of here before I call the police."

"I anticipated doubt," said Liz. "I'm prepared to prove my identity."

With the words, the two of them were no longer standing in the Montcalm bedroom, but in a broad expanse of green fields and woodland, unmarred by any habitation. Montcalm didn't recognize the spot, but it looked vaguely like it might be somewhere in the northern part of the state.

Montcalm was dismayed to find that he was as naked as his companion!

"Oh, my Lord!" he exclaimed, trying to cover himself with a September Morn pose.

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Liz, and instantly Montcalm's pajamas were lying at his feet. He got into them hurriedly.

"How did we get here?" he asked, his astonished curiosity overcoming his disapproval of this immodest woman.

"By a mode of transportation common to my people in planetary atmospheres," she answered. "It's one of the things I propose to teach your people."

She sat down cross-legged on the grass. Montcalm averted his eyes, like the gentleman he was.

"You see," said Liz, "the people of your world are on the verge of going to space and joining the community of worlds. It's only natural the rest of us should wish to help you. We have a good many things to give you, to help you control the elements and natural conditions of your world. The weather, for example ..."

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a small cloud appeared above them and spread, blocking out the early sun. It began to rain, hard.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun and the cloud dissipated. Montcalm stood shivering in his soaked pajamas and Liz got to her feet, her skin glistening with moisture.

"You have a problem raising food for your population in some areas," she said....

A small haw-apple tree near them suddenly began to grow at an amazing rate of speed. It doubled its size in three minutes, put forth fruit and dropped it to the ground.

"These are only a few of the things I'll give to your planet," she said.

At her words, they were back in the bedroom. This time she had been thoughtful. Montcalm was still clad in wet pajamas.

"I don't know what sort of hypnosis this is," he began aggressively, "but you can't fool me, young lady, into believing ..."

Millie came into the room. She had donned a robe over her nightgown.

"Richard, where have you been with this woman?" she demanded.

"Why, my dear ..."

"You've been roaming around the house somewhere with her. I came in here a moment ago and you were gone. Now, Richard, I want you to do something about her and stop fooling around. I can't keep the children in their room all day."

It hadn't been hypnosis then! Liz was for real. A vision rose before Montcalm of mankind given wonders, powers, benefits representing advances of thousands of years. The world could become a paradise with the things she offered to teach.

"Millie, this woman *is* from another planet!" he exclaimed excitedly, and turned to Liz. "Why did you choose me to contact on Earth?"

"Why, I happened to land near your house," she answered. "I know how your primitive social organization is set up, but isn't one human being just as good as another to lead me to the proper authorities?"

"Yes," he said joyfully, visualizing black headlines and his picture in the papers.

Millie stood to one side, puzzled and grim at once. Montcalm picked up the house dress he had taken from the closet earlier.

"Now, Miss," he said, "if you'll just put this on, I'll take you to the mayor and he can get in touch with Washington at once."

"I told you," said Liz, "I don't want to adopt your custom of wearing clothing."

"But you can't go out in public like that!" said the dismayed Montcalm. "If you're going to move among Earth people, you must dress as we do."

"My people wouldn't demand that Earth people disrobe to associate with us," she countered reasonably.

Millie had had enough. She went into action.

"You can argue with this hussy all you like, Richard, but I'm going to call the police," she said, and left the room with determination in her eye.

The next fifteen minutes were agonizing for Montcalm as he tried futilely to get Liz to dress like a decent person. He was torn between realization of what the things she offered would mean to the world and his own sense of the fitness of things. His children, the children of Traskmore, the children of the world ... what would be the effect on their tender morals to realize that a sane adult was willing to walk around in brazen nakedness?

There was a pounding on the front door, and the voice of Millie inviting the law into the house.

"Now I'm afraid you're due to go to jail," said Montcalm mournfully. "But when they get some clothes on you, I'll try to explain it and get you an audience with the mayor."

Two blue-clad policemen entered the room.

One policeman took the house dress from Montcalm's lax fingers and tossed it over Liz' head without further ado.

Liz did not struggle. She looked at Montcalm with a quizzical expression.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My people made a mistake. If you Earth people aren't tolerant enough to accept a difference in customs of dress, I'm afraid you're too immature."

With that, she was gone like a puff of air. The astonished policemen held an empty dress.

Montcalm didn't see the flying saucer that whizzed over Traskmore that morning and disappeared into the sky, but he didn't doubt the reports. He debated with himself for a long time whether he had taken the right attitude, but decided he had.

After all, there were the children to consider.

THE END

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