

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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Edited by Robert W. Lowndes

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, Second Edition, published by Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y. Copyright 1954 by Columbia Publications, Inc. Printed in the U.S.A.

When the entire culture is based upon giving things away; when one's prestige depends entirely upon the imbalance in his favor between objects given and received, there's no such thing as charity!

Give Away

by MILTON LESSER

I COULDN'T sleep last night, but I'm not tired. You don't come of age every day; I've waited a long time for this and I'm going to get even with them. All of them, I don't care how long it takes me.

Here comes Dad, now. I'll wipe that frown off his face someday; it isn't my fault if I'm not the oldest son.

"You don't have to look so happy," he said.

I could have told him it was because I wouldn't have to go crawling around on my belly any more, always getting things and being able to give nothing in return. I could have told him it was because I had matured early, and looked like a man these past four years, but went right on receiving gifts anyway, with a list a mile long to repay. Just watch them all grovel, though—for I'd repay in double.

I said, "It's because I can own property now."

Dad cooked breakfast himself, since Sis was under-age and didn't have to do anything except build up resentment and feelings of inferiority. She was sixteen, but maturing early; I guess it's a family trait. Mother was killed six years ago, when someone mistook her for Dad in the dark, and thought he'd have a chance at my old man's titles and wealth. They've been making fun of Dad ever since. He's been saving up property so hard for today, my coming of age, that he hasn't been able to put enough aside for a decent wife; maybe that's why he hates me so.

I get nothing but the property, which we'll have to give away immediately. Sometimes I wish I'd been born first, instead of my brother Ted. He's been doling out gifts faster than he can get his hands on them, because he's now a joint owner with Dad. The lucky stiff will be a rich man someday, unless I can find a way to shame him.

Well, we ate breakfast without talking, without even looking at each other. I could tell Dad wanted to serve me, one more time at least, but you can bet I didn't let him. He looked as if he was going to strike me, until he remembered I'd come of age today. You could see he was sorry I'd be leaving the house for good after breakfast. All he had left at home was Sis, and there are limits to how far you could humble a girl with presents and service. Dad would be a holy terror at business for the next few months, getting over it. He'd probably even go into debt; but since he charges a hundred and fifty percent interest, it will just make him richer in the long run.

I STOOD UP from the table and wiped my mouth, preparing to leave. By then, Sis was coming downstairs. I beat Dad to the stove and started making her breakfast while he glared at me. She was glaring too, sullenly, so I took special care to make everything just right. It wasn't much of a gift, really, but it was my first.

When I put the tray down on the table in front of her she pushed it away. "I'm not hungry," she said.

She'd be all right, that girl; there was no sense in her getting obligated to anyone but Dad, not when she still had four more years—almost five—before she came of age. I shrugged and left the house with my list of gifts tucked in one pocket, and list of neighbors in another.

I had them, all right. Some people are just plain stupid that way, talking so much they can't keep their coming of age a secret; then everyone has return gifts ready, and what good does it do? But I'd matured early, so none of the neighbors were sure of my age, especially since we moved into this neighborhood only five years ago—the one time I ever saw Dad beaten. He had to take over Willis Overly's house, and since he could never repay Willis with the required minimum interest, and save for my coming of age at the same time, he had had to kill the man, thus absolving the debt. Now he gets all purple in the face every time you mention Willis Overly's name.

Mr. Chalmers wasn't home, but his wife's face turned the color of snow, and she looked ready to faint when I gave her the ownership papers to a brand new ground car. Dad always taught me to make the most of a situation, and he would have been proud of me right then if he had seen and didn't hate me. I stared suggestively at Mrs. Chalmers, who's ten years my senior but not bad-looking, and she got the idea. Her husband would like it fine if he never had to worry



about the debt, so we signed a contract on the spot for her to pay me back the way a female always can. I was careful to keep the number of times low, however, unless I wanted to admit defeat in my first transaction. It was kind of insulting to Mrs. Chalmbers, too, but she'd either have to take the contract as it stood, or tell her bread-giver about the debt. She took it.

I gave the Pomeroy's a jetcycle for their kid; the Smythe's a layette for the baby they expected in a couple of months; the Richardson's five hundred units in cash because they were poor and it was the easiest way to push their faces in the mud further. I went right down the list and left curses and glares of mayhem in my wake.

And then I met Julia Lawrence, who had to go and spoil everything. It's always easier for a girl, especially a pretty one, and you can't lie about things like that. Julia is gorgeous, but how should I know she was coming of age the same day?

Julia and me used to always play together and it hardly seemed right, her acting like a grownup. She had on one of those trick outfits, you know the kind; now you see it, now you don't. It has something to do with the polarization of lights, I think. Anyway, now I didn't—see it, I mean, so Julia had me. It was just a quick peek, but Trading Center had already established Julia's measurements as worth half a dozen years of hard servitude.

I BLINKED my eyes and pulled the lid of one down so hard, it started tearing. "I had something in my eye," I said; "I didn't see anything."

"You're a liar." And I used to like her voice.

Well, you don't lie about those things. You can try, but you never push it. "All right," I admitted; "I didn't know you were coming of age today."

"I didn't know you were, either. Brother, you walked right into it, skipping down the street and dropping gifts like manna. From now on, keep those things secret; don't go around advertising it. No husband of mine is going to walk into a trap like you did."

"What did you say?"

"That I don't want you walking into traps."

"You said husband."

"You *are* going to marry me, aren't you? Unless you'd prefer six years of hard service, with nothing to show for it."

"That isn't fair," I said; "not on my first day."

Julia grinned sweetly. "Tough."

"But receiving a wife is just as bad; I'll be in debt to your father the rest of my life."

"No, just come to work for him."

"Sure," I said bitterly. "And what am I supposed to repay my own father with?"

"You'll have a nice equity coming in from the gifts you gave out today."

"That's true," I admitted. "But a man has got to get ahead. If you marry me now, you'll get a lot of personal satisfaction out of it; but with all those debts on my head, you'll never have a rich husband. Why don't you think about it a while?"

"Because this is my chance to pay off my father, that's why."

"I won't do it," I said. I was young; I could afford to take chances. It was a pretty awful thing, admitting defeat on your very first day, but I'd make up for it. What had happened would be published in the paper and Julia would have legal claim to the prestige I had forfeited. While there's nothing lower than admitting you can't repay a gift, even if it's something you never wanted, I wasn't going to saddle myself with a wife—not to mention a father-in-law.

Julia shrugged smooth shoulders. "Suit yourself, Henry. I think you're making a mistake." She wrote out the transaction in the prestige section of her Trading pad and held it steady while I signed it. Naturally, I had to sign over my equity from the morning's gifts as well, since I wasn't a first-born and had no names or titles I could give her instead. I wondered what Julia would do with the debt Mrs. Chalmbers owed her as I walked away. It was a damned shame; I could have escaped easily enough if I'd had a few names or titles to toss around, but we all can't be first born.

THAT STARTED me to thinking: Henry Bartzen, broke. If anyone gave me a gift now, I'd really be sunk. Julia wouldn't spread the word, because she'd probably want to give me something herself tomorrow; but what had happened would be in the paper and it wouldn't be hard to figure I was broke. I could go off some place and become a hermit for a while, building wealth with my own hands. But that's a last resort, because they say something bad happens to a man's character if he can't give things away every day.

The other alternative was my brother Ted. You couldn't do anything about primogeniture unless the first-born died, and you took his

place. Of course, I would then owe a debt to Ted's widow, since I'd have given her her freedom—but you can't slip through a transaction without any loss. I could always pay her with some of the titles Ted would own outright when Dad died.

It wouldn't be the easiest thing in the world, finding where Ted lived. A man doesn't go around broadcasting his home-address to his relatives, especially if he's first-born. But I'd find him, even if I had to wait for one of the big yearly gatherings where everyone brings his surplus property and burns it in the center of town at the big incinerator. That's even better than giving gifts, by the way, provided you have a sufficient surplus.

It's a little hard to explain, like owing a debt to Ted's widow, if I killed him—because I'd given her her freedom. It's the opposite of giving, since freedom is a negative thing, but I don't have a word for it. Anyway, you're not giving away things at the great burning; you're destroying them. Then other people have got to destroy their property, too, and they can go almost crazy if they don't have enough. There's always the crematorium, where you can throw your first-born when you have nothing else, or even yourself; but that's rare.

I didn't think about killing Ted too long. I guess most thinking and doing—and even giving—stopped temporarily in our town about that time of morning. That's when you beings came down from the sky in your spaceship, and started trying to change our ways and our ideas. I'm telling you, it won't work. It doesn't matter if we were a colony; we're not a colony now. You don't understand.

Well, anyway—

YOU PROBABLY think we couldn't build a spaceship. That's exactly what I mean, a failure to understand us. Sure, we know all about physics and astrophysics; we have the books, haven't we? Economics is more important, that's all. Why should we want to leave our planet? We like it here.

So, down came your spaceship. Not gradually, but suddenly it was there in the sky. You know, from the old books, we really expected something bigger. It seemed a mighty meanlooking spaceship to visit our planet with; I mean, if we had visited *your* planet, you can bet we'd have come in a bigger, newer, better ship.

It was my lucky day, after all. I reached the ship first after you landed, and claimed it. It's even a lucky thing you didn't land one day sooner, because I was still under age then, and wouldn't have been able to do a thing.

Now maybe you can see what I mean. Your whole concept is wrong; you land on a large planet in a tiny spaceship, except to step outside and *claim the whole world*. What are you going to give in return? Have you another world twice the size? We won't believe you until we see it, you know. Understand now? You've got it backwards; *I* claimed the spaceship and so it's mine, even if I have to kill my brother Ted and give you all his titles in exchange. I don't think that's necessary, though; you'll see.

You had one advantage, though; you knew who we were and we weren't sure about you. We figured you must have been our ancestors, though—that is, progeny of our ancestors—since you spoke English. But make no mistakes; we're not a colony, and we don't owe you anything. Your ancestors set our ancestors down on this world—what was it, five hundred years ago? That's a negative giving, because the world was no good at the beginning; we had to make it good. No, you can't give us your world in return. We'd be getting a pig in a poke, you see; what are you smiling about?

"We have come to give you the benefits of our advanced culture," you said. I remember every word; I guess it surprised you when I refused.

"Are you the leader?" you asked. "A young man like you?"

"No," I said. "I'm not the leader."

"Then why don't you let *him* make the decision?"

I tried to explain to you we had no leader. What did we need one for? You didn't understand.

"Son," you said, "we've come a long way to find you. You're Earth citizens, all of you; all we want you to do is claim your heritage."

"We don't need it, thank you," I said. You have to admit it was a shrewd guess on my part. You had asked me to claim our heritage; you didn't offer to give it. I figured you weren't going to force the issue and put us in debt to you, so I refused. After what happened with Julia, I wasn't taking any chances.

I asked you, "Do you have any titles?" Maybe you still don't quite understand why, but you'll see.

"Well," you said, "I'm a sub-director of Anthropology Central," whatever that is. It didn't sound very impressive, but if it means you can go around giving out cultural heritages, as I guess it does, it's a valuable title to have. You see, we can give personal property and things any time we want, but you have to be a Realtor, for instance, to be able to give away land.

Then I bluffed you. I had some business to attend to and I said, "Don't go 'round giving away cultural heritages while I'm gone." Honestly, I hardly cared; nobody would want them, anyway. But I didn't want you talking to anyone else, because they might trick you into debt before I got back, and then where would I be?

IT SURPRISED Julia when I said I'd changed my mind and would marry her. "Have you given the information to the paper yet?" I demanded.

"No, Henry, you're just in time; you're being very sensible."

We don't marry for love here, as you probably know by now. You said we don't know any emotions but the gamut from triumph to shame, whatever all that means. You said our whole social structure is based on it, and all our institutions revolve about it. Well, I won't argue with you; it doesn't matter. I don't even care if you think, as you said, that we've institutionalized a type of behavior which you consider as abnormal and irrational in your culture. You said it took a long time before you could beat down the paranoid, megalomaniac trend on English (I mean Earth, that's the name of the place, isn't it?) You said we had institutionalized it and glorified it.

You said our civilization sprung from an ample supply of goods which we could obtain without working very hard. You said we'd warped an aspect of your own system, and magnified it and lived by it.

Well, we don't marry for love. We know what love is; we read about it in some of the old books and it sounds ridiculous, if you don't mind me saying so. Instead of trying to shame your mate and achieve triumph at her expense, you're supposed to work together with her toward some common goal which is never clearly defined. Pardon me, but it sounds fantastic.

We visited the nearest Marrier and had him perform the ceremony. After that, all the debts which I had earned through my coming of age gifts were returned to me by Julia, and we gave the Marrier the right to visit Mrs. Chalmbers the specified number of times as payment. He owed us something on the deal and he knew it, for he would gain considerable prestige at Mr. Chalmber's expense. He wanted to give me his marrying title and be done with it, but I wasn't born yesterday. I settled for a third of Mr. Chalmbers' lost prestige, which wasn't much under the circumstances.

Are you wondering why I married Julia, after all the fuss I put up

before? I needed some property in a hurry, so I'd have something to offer you.

When Julia heard it was I who had claimed the spaceship, she was delighted. "You'll be rich," she said. "Henry, that's wonderful." Naturally, I hadn't broadcast the fact; even as matters stood, people who had seen me might try to assassinate me and claim the title. The owner of a spaceship is called a Captain, isn't he?

I'm not offering you the property in exchange for your ship, don't misunderstand. The ship is mine; it fell near me and I claimed it first. The property is just to have you in my debt; it's the way people get rich. If I didn't think you were worthwhile debtors, I never would have married Julia.

MY FATHER-IN-LAW had something to say about that after he learned of our marriage. "Julia," he scolded his daughter, "you've married an idiot. If one of us were given a certain amount of property, he'd be shamed into paying it back with at least a hundred percent interest. But not those—those, what are they called?"

"Earthers," I think Julia said. "You call yourself Earthmen, don't you?"

"Earthers won't be shamed," my father-in-law pointed out angrily; "Earthers don't know the meaning of it, according to Henry."

"That's all right," I said. "I'm in no hurry. They came here to give us their cultural heritage, but—"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Julia's father wanted to know. He was still angry; he had that expression written all over his face: *what kind of son-in-law did I get?*

"I was about to tell you. It means they're going to try and change our ways. Three men, going to try and change a whole world; you tell me what will happen."

"Well," he said, mulling it over, "I guess they'll give up after a while and go away."

"They won't," I said. "They're dedicated; it's as important to them as giving gifts. They'll stay here and keep on trying, and before you know it, they'll be the ones who do the changing, not us. Then they'll realize they're in my debt."

"I doubt it," my father-in-law grumbled. "But suppose they did; you already have their ship."

That's something you don't understand, incidentally. Our farms and

factories are as important to us as our titles; we own them and we don't tolerate trespassers. But the streets of the town are common property, because a man couldn't walk from his home to his place of business otherwise. You could refuse a gift in your own home—unless it came from a member of your immediate family and you were under age—but you can't refuse a gift on the streets. In the same way, anything you get on the streets belongs to you. Although, let me tell you, it's pretty rare that things are just floating around.

"Sure," I told my father-in-law, "I already have their ship; but there are certain things they can give me which I couldn't get anyplace else."

"Like what?" He called me a name and I gave him Mr. and Mrs. Richardson's debt; you can't take that, not even from your own father-in-law.

"Like—well, knowledge," I said after the transaction. "They know things we don't know."

"Knowledge is worthless. What kind of gift is knowledge? You won't get much of a debt going if all you can give away is knowledge."

"Maybe," I said mysteriously. I wouldn't say any more, not even when Julia took her father's side in the argument. But you know the kind of knowledge I have in mind. The knowledge which gives you the power to build things faster and cheaper than anyone else. Giving away those things after I build them, I'll become a rich man. You can bet I won't give away any knowledge, though. I have to say your attitude surprises me, because it never occurred to me you'd refuse.

"What we have to offer is for all of you," you told me. "As a colony, you're entitled to the fruits of our culture. But no one man is going to get strong at the expense of his neighbors, not if we can help it. That leads to trouble."

"Of course it leads to trouble," I said. I couldn't make it clear to you. I tried to explain that this kind of trouble is the nature of things. We'll let it ride for the time being.

DID I TELL you that my brother Ted walked right into my hands? Julia was responsible, but now I won't have any trouble repaying the debt to her; I'm getting rich.

Trouble is, I think she was playing both ends against the middle; either way, she couldn't lose. She went to Ted and told him, out of spite, that I was the one who had claimed your spaceship. She came

running back to me and said Ted was on his way over to kill me, and claim both my Captain's title and the ship. If Ted succeeded, she'd be in a highly enviable situation: he'd be paying through the nose for years. If I thwarted Ted, and became the assassin and not the victim, I'd share my father's titles through primogeniture. I'd have to watch out for Sis when she came of age, I remember thinking, because she's a little toughie. But that would be years away, and as things are turning out, it doesn't matter.

Ted rigged up a pretty professional ambush, but when a man is facing one way with firearms, ready for you to come out into his range, it doesn't take much skill to sneak up behind him and crush his skull with an iron bar—winning not only his titles and his wealth, but the firearms also. See? Here they are.

I published the assassination in the paper, but brought the news to Dad firsthand. He's getting on in years, and the loss of a son is quite a blow; you could see it in his eyes, although he'd never admit it. He'll have to go out and kill someone else's first-born, thus regaining his lost prestige. I saw him thumbing through his list of names and addresses before I left.

He was good and sore and probably won't speak to me for a while. Ordinarily, it would matter, because we'd have to do business together. Sis didn't look so angry; I said that girl worries me. I could imagine the wheels spinning under the tight little ringlets on her head—with Ted out of the way, I was the only one left between her and the rewards of primogeniture. Well, that doesn't matter at all now. Let her stew.

When I returned, you were as adament as ever. That's really too bad.

"That's final, Henry," you said. "We're not making very much progress with your people, but we'll spend all the time here that's necessary. Your world certainly is a cultural deviant. We were hoping we could make a start with at least one individual, and since you've been here on our ship..."

"But it didn't work," I told you. "You wouldn't know where to begin; and even if you did it wouldn't help, since you don't insist on your right to give things."

"We still think you'll learn, Henry," you said. I'll say this for you—you have amazing optimism. People just aren't that cooperative, didn't you know?

But you really did think I'd learn. In the beginning you thought

so even more; you were very amused over the way I could learn the concepts of your spaceship so quickly. You even helped; you said I had a natural talent for such things and you wondered if all my people were that way.

I'M A RICH man now. I don't mind your insults, but comparing a man of wealth with all the people was too much. I gave you Ted's old title of Farm Supervisor and that's another debt you owe me. You understand, we give things away when we've been insulted, too. That isn't strictly a business transaction, as you probably realize; such gifts don't necessitate double payment. They're prestige gifts and as such are payable in kind.

"You'll have to leave the ship now, Henry," you said finally. "We still think you're not completely hopeless, but we're ready to go out and meet your people." And you still didn't believe a society like ours could get along without a leader; you said so.

Well, I don't believe a few things you told me about Earth, either. I don't believe, for example, that certain virtues go unrecognized on your planet, as you insist. Never mind, don't try to talk me out of it. A triumph is a triumph, whatever else you try to call it. And don't get nasty with me or I'll have to give you another gift. You grovel around in shame all the time, and you're so polite, you're just looking for trouble.

I think I'll sit around a while, if you don't mind; after all, I own this ship.

Stop pushing. Well, at least you *can* lose your tempers, after all; now you're acting like human beings.

You thought it was a big joke when I claimed the ship. The way I talked, you thought I took it for granted it was mine. Well, yes and no.

I knew it would be mine when I wanted it; I knew you hardly considered my claim valid, but I wanted you to think I thought you did. Complicated? Sometimes I can be pretty tricky.

Now you know. That's right, there's only one way I can get your ship. Naturally, I want it; now that I understand how it works, I want to go to Earth and claim the prestige your families are going to lose. You can't kid me. The Earthmen there will recognize a rich man when they see one.

You thought you were going to give us your cultural heritage and have us in your debt for the next dozen generations or so. Trading

Center hasn't put any specific figure on it, so I'm only guessing. Well, you'll never get the chance.

Stand still. There. There. There. Too bad you can't see yourselves now, lying around like that with all your prestige gone; it's mine now.

I can't wait until I get to Earth and see their faces. There were three of you, but you couldn't trick me. You didn't insist on giving away your cultural heritage because you realized we couldn't repay you with something worth twice its value and you didn't want us to commit suicide.

Well, here we go; just wait till I get to Earth and claim what's coming to me.
