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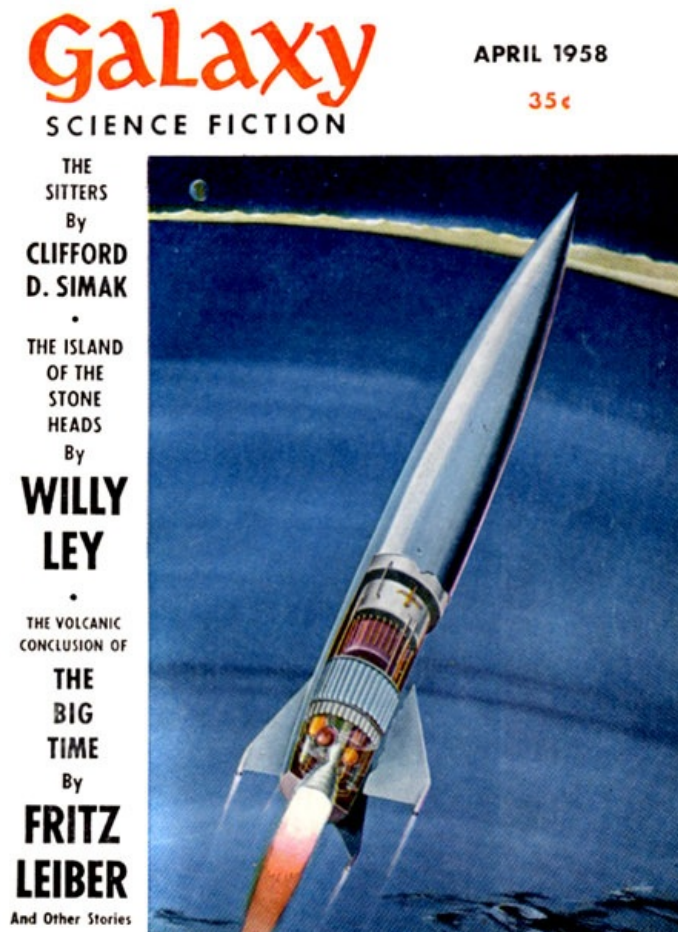
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Garth and The Visitor

BY L. J. STECHER

If you could ask them, you might be greatly surprised—some tabus very urgently want to be broken!

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

ALTHOUGH as brash as any other ace newspaper reporter for a high school weekly—and there is no one brasher—Garth was scared. His head crest lifted spasmodically and the rudimentary webbing between his fingers twitched. To answer a dare, Garth was about to attempt something that had never been dared before: a newspaper interview with The Visitor. There had been questions enough asked and answered during the thousands of years The Visitor had sat in his egg-shaped palace on the mountaintop, but no interviews. It was shocking even to think about—something like requesting a gossippy chat with God.

Of course, nobody believed the fable any longer that The Visitor would vanish if he was ever asked a personal question—and that he would first destroy the man who asked. It was known, or at least suspected, that the Palace was merely a mile-long spaceship.

Garth, as tradition required, climbed the seven-mile-long rock-hewn path to the Palace on foot. He paused for a moment on the broad platform at the top of the pyramid to catch his breath and let the beating of his heart slow to normal after his long climb before he entered The Palace. He sighed deeply. The sufferings a reporter was willing to go through to get a story or take a dare!

"Well, come in if you're going to," said an impatient voice. "Don't just stand there and pant."

"Yes, my Lord Visitor," Garth managed to say.

He climbed the short ladder, passed through the two sets of doors and entered a small room to kneel, with downcast eyes, before the ancient figure huddled in the wheelchair.

THE Visitor looked at the kneeling figure for a moment without speaking. The boy looked very much like a human, in spite of such superficial differences as crest and tail. In fact, as a smooth-skinned thinking biped, with a well-developed moral sense, he fit The Visitor's definition of a human. It wasn't just the loneliness of seven thousand years of isolation, either. When he had first analyzed these people, just after that disastrous forced landing so long ago, he had classified them as human. Not *homo sapiens*, of course, but human all the same.

"Okay," he said, somewhat querulously. "Get up, get up. You've got some questions for me, I hope? I don't get many people up here asking questions any more. Mostly I'm all alone except for the ceremonial visits." He paused. "Well, speak up, young man. Have you got something to ask me?"

Garth scrambled to his feet "Yes, my Lord Visitor," he said. "I have several questions."

The Visitor chuckled reedily. "You may find the answers just a little bit hard to understand."

Garth smiled, some of his fear vanishing. The Visitor sounded a little like his senile grandfather, back home. "That is why you are asked so few questions these days, my Lord," he said. "Our scientists have about as much trouble figuring out what your answers mean as they do in solving the problems without consulting you at all."

"Of course." The head of The Visitor bobbed affirmatively several times as he propelled his wheelchair a few inches forward. "If I gave you the answers to all your problems for you, so you could figure them out too easily, you'd never be developing your own thinking powers. But I've never failed to answer any questions you asked. Now have I? And accurately, too." The thin voice rang with pride. "You've never stumped me yet, and you never will."

"No, my Lord," answered Garth. "So perhaps you'll answer my questions, too, even though they're a little different from the kind you're accustomed to. I'm a newspaper reporter, and I want to verify some of our traditions about you."



AS The Visitor remained silent, Garth paused and looked around him at the small, bare, naked-walled room. "This *is* a spaceship, isn't it?"

The huddled figure in the wheelchair cackled in a brief laugh. "I've been hoping that somebody would get up enough nerve someday to ask that kind of question," it said. "Yep, this is a spaceship. And a darned big one."

"How did you happen to land on this planet?"

"Had an accident. Didn't want to land here, but there wasn't any choice. Made a mighty good landing, considering everything. It was a little rough, though, in spots."

"How many people were there in the ship, in addition to yourself?"

The Visitor's voice turned suddenly soft. "There were three thousand, nine hundred and forty-eight passengers and twenty-seven in the crew when the accident happened."

"My Lord," asked Garth, "did any survive, aside from you?"

The Visitor was silent for many minutes, and his answer, when he spoke, was a faint whisper, filled with the anguish of seven thousand years. "Not one survived. Not one. They were all dead, most of them, long before the ship touched ground, in spite of everything I could do. I was as gentle as I could be, but we touched a hundred *g* a couple of times on on the way down. Flesh and blood just weren't made to take shocks like that. I did all I could."

"You were the pilot, then? You landed the ship?" asked Garth.

"I landed the ship," said The Visitor.

"If I may ask, my Lord, how did you manage to survive when all the others died?"

"It's a question I've asked myself many times, sitting here on this mountaintop these seven thousands of your years. I was just enough tougher, that's all. Built to take it, you might say, and I had a job to do. But I was badly hurt in the landing. Mighty badly hurt."

"You were always in a wheelchair, then? Even before—"

"Even before I got so old?" Thin parchment-white hands lifted slowly to rub a thin parchment-white face. "Things were always pretty much as you see them now. I looked about the same to your ancestors as I do to you. Your ancestors didn't think anybody could be smart unless they were old. Of course, that's all changed now." He paused and nodded twice. "Oh, I've managed to fix myself up a good deal; I'm not in nearly as bad shape as I was at first, but that's all inside. I'm in pretty good condition now, for having been stuck here seven thousand years." The cackling laugh sounded briefly in the small room.

"Could you tell me how it all happened?" asked Garth curiously.

"Be glad to. It's a pleasure to have a human to shoot the bull with. Sit down and make yourself comfortable and have a bite to eat."

LOOKING behind him, Garth saw that a table and chair had appeared in the otherwise unfurnished room.

"The chair was made for people built just a little different than you," said The Visitor. "You may have to turn it back-to-front and straddle it to keep your tail out of the way. The food on the table's good, though, and so's the drink. Have a snack while I talk."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Garth, lifting his long tail with its paddlelike tip out of the way and sitting down carefully.

"Comfortable?" asked The Visitor. "Well, then. I was on a routine flight from old Earth to a star you've never heard of, a good many light-years from here. We had pulled away from TransLunar Station on ion drive and headed for deep space. They trusted me, all those men and women, both passengers and crew. They knew that I was careful and accurate. I'd made a thousand flights and had never had any trouble.

"In six hours of flight, we were clear enough from all planetary masses and my velocity vector was right on the nose, so I shifted over into hyper-space. You won't ever see hyper-space, my boy, and your kids and their kids won't see it for another two hundred years or more, but it's the most beautiful sight in the Universe. It never grows old, never grows tiresome."

His thin voice faded away for a few moments.

"It's a sight I haven't seen for seven thousand years, boy," he said softly, "and the lack of it has been a deep hurt for every minute of all that time. I wish I could tell you what it's like, but that can't be done. You will never know that beauty." He was silent again, for long minutes.

"The long, lazy, lovely days of subjective time passed," he said finally, "while we slid light-years away from Earth. Everything worked smoothly, the way it always did, until suddenly, somehow, the near-impossible happened. My hydrogen fusion power sphere started to oscillate critically and wouldn't damp. I had only seconds of time in which to work.

"In the few seconds before the sphere would have blown, turning all of us into a fine grade of face powder, I had to find a star with a planet that would support human life, bring the ship down out of hyper-space with velocity matched closely enough so that I could land on the planet, and jettison the sphere that was going wild.

"Even while I did it, I knew that it wasn't good enough. But there was no more time. The accelerations were terrific and all my people died. I managed to save myself, and I barely managed that. I did all that could be done, but it just wasn't enough. I circled your sun for many years before I could make enough repairs to work the auxiliary drive. Then I landed here on this mountaintop. I've been here ever since.

"It has been a lonely time," he added wistfully.

GARTH'S mind tried to absorb all the vastness of that understatement, and failed. He could not begin to comprehend the meaning of seven thousand years of separation from his own kind.

The Visitor's high-pitched voice continued for several minutes, explaining how Garth's ancestors of several thousand years before—naked and primitive, barbarous, with almost no culture of their own—had made contact with The Visitor from space, and had been gently lifted over the millennia toward higher and higher levels of civilization.

Garth had trouble keeping his attention on the words. His mind kept reverting to the thought of one badly injured survivor, alone on a spaceship with a thousand corpses, light-years from home and friends, still struggling to stay alive. Struggling so successfully that he had lived on for thousands of years after the disaster that had killed all the others.

At last, after waiting for Garth's comment, The Visitor cleared his throat querulously. "I asked you if you'd like for me to show you around the ship," he repeated somewhat testily.

"Oh, yes, my Lord," said Garth quickly, jumping to his feet. "It's an honor I've never heard of your giving to anyone before."

"That's true enough," answered The Visitor. "But then no one ever asked me about myself before. Now just follow me, stick close, and don't touch anything."

The wheelchair rolled slowly toward a blank wall, and an invisible door snicked open just before it arrived.

"Come along," quavered The Visitor. "Step lively."

Garth leaped forward and just managed to pull his tail through the doorway as the door slid shut again.

Garth dropped his jaw in amazement. He stood in a long corridor that seemed to stretch to infinity in both directions. The light was bright, the walls featureless. The floor was smooth and unmarred. While Garth glanced unhappily behind himself to notice that there was no sign of the doorway through which he had entered, The

Visitor's wheelchair buzzed swiftly into the distance toward the left.

Garth was startled into action by a high-pitched voice beside him that said, "Well, get a move on! Do you think I want to wait for you all day?"

WHILE Garth hustled toward the wheelchair, he noticed that The Visitor had stopped and was apparently chuckling to himself. He was hunched over, his shoulders were shaking, and his toothless mouth was split in what might have been intended for a grin.

"Fooled you that time, youngster," he laughed as Garth drew up beside him. "Got speakers all over this ship. Now just duck through this door here and tell me what you think of what you see."

A small door slid open and Garth followed the wheelchair through. At first he thought he had stepped through a teleportation system. He appeared to be out of doors, but not on Wrom. A cool breeze blew on his face from the ocean, which stretched mistily to a far horizon. He was standing on a sandy beach and waves rolled up to within a few yards of his feet. The beach appeared to be about five hundred yards long, carved out of a rocky seacoast; great rocks jutting into the ocean terminated it to left and right.

"Well, boy?" asked The Visitor.

"It's amazing. Your voice even has that flat tone voices get in the open. I suppose it's some sort of three-dimensional projection of a scene back on Earth? It sure looks real. I wonder how big this room really is and how far away the screen is." Garth stuck out his hand and walked down toward the water. A large wave caught him, tripped him and rolled him out to sea.

Sculling with his tail, he soon swam back to shallow water and climbed back to the dry sand, puffing and coughing.

"You might have drowned me!" Garth shouted disrespectfully. "Are you trying to kill me?"

The Visitor waved weakly until he recovered his breath. "That was funnier than anything I've seen in years," he wheezed, "watching you groping for a screen. That screen is a quarter of a mile away, and it's all real water in between. It's our reservoir and our basic fuel supply and a public beach for entertainment, all rolled into one."

"But I might have drowned! No one on Wrom except a few small fish knows how to swim," protested Garth.

"No danger. Your ancestors came out of the water relatively recently, even if the seas are gone now. You've got a well-developed swimming reflex along with a flat tail and webbed feet and hands. Besides, I told you not to touch anything. You stick close to me and you won't get into trouble."

"Yes, sir. I'll remember."

"There used to be hundreds of people on that beach, and now look at it."

"I don't see anything alive."

"There are still plenty of fish. Most of them did all right, even through the crash. Come along now. There's more to see."

AHIDDEN door popped open and Garth stepped back into the corridor. He trotted beside The Visitor for several minutes, and then another door popped open. It led to a ramp. Garth climbed it to find himself again in wonderland. He was standing in the middle of a village. There were houses, trees, schools, sidewalks and lawns. Somehow the general perspective was wrong. It made Garth's eyes water a little, looking at it.

"Actually, this living level ran all the way around the ship," said The Visitor. "When I stopped spin—artificial gravity, you know—to set down here, the various sections swung to keep 'down' pointed right. This is the bottommost thirty-degree arc. It makes two streets, with houses on both sides of them—a strip three hundred feet wide and three-quarters of a mile long."

"But how could you afford so much space for passengers? I thought they'd be all cramped up in a spaceship."

The Visitor chuckled. "Use your eyes, boy! You've seen this ship. It's about a mile long and a third of a mile high. In space, she spins about her long axis. One ring, fifty feet high, takes care of passengers' quarters. Another ring, split up into several levels, takes care of all food and air-replenishment needs. These trips take a year or more. Crowding would drive the people crazy. Remember, this is basically a cargo ship. Less than a quarter of the available space is used for passengers. But come on down the street here. I want to show you my museum."

As they walked along the quiet street, with the leaves of trees moving in the breeze and leaving sun-dappled shadows on the sidewalk, Garth realized what a tremendous task it must have been for one crippled man to repair landing damages. The houses must have been flattened and the trees shattered during the landing. But with thousands of years in which to work, even an injured man obviously could do much. At least, thought the boy compassionately, it must have given the old man something to do.

"How sorry he must have been," murmured Garth with sudden insight, "when the

job was finally done.”

WANDERING through the museum, they came at last to a room filled with small hand tools.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like them,” said Garth.

“Those are weapons,” answered The Visitor. “They are missile-throwing short-range weapons, and they are in tip-top working order. You just have to point the end with the hole in it at anything you want to kill, and pull that little lever there on the bottom. And quite a mess of things they can make, too, let me tell you.”

“They seem very inefficient to me,” said Garth wonderingly, and then stopped in confusion. “I beg your pardon, my Lord,” he said, “I didn’t mean to criticize anything; it just seems to me that they would damage a lot of the food they killed.”

“That’s true enough, my boy, true enough,” said The Visitor. “Your criticism has a lot of point to it. But, you see, they were never designed mainly to kill for food, but to make it easy for one human to shoot another.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?”

“Your civilization is a very unusual one,” answered The Visitor. “It is planetwide and has developed without a single war or major conflict. This is due entirely to the fact that I’ve been here to help and teach you. Most civilizations develop only as the result of struggle and bloodshed, with people killing people by the thousands and millions. I could have raised your people to the technological level where they are now in a few hundred years, if I hadn’t worried about killing. To do it the way it has been done—so that you can’t imagine why one human should kill another—has taken most of the time.

“It is only recently, as a matter of fact, that my work has been complete. Your civilization can now stand alone; my help is no longer necessary. It’s gotten to the point now where my continued hanging around here is likely to do harm, if I’m not mighty careful. In all your problems, you’ll always feel that you’ve got me to fall back on if you get into trouble, and that’s not good.”

“What do you plan to do, then?”

“There’s not much I can do by myself. I long for my own destruction more than anything else, except maybe to go back home to Earth. I’m lonely and tired and old. But I can’t die and I can’t destroy myself any more than you could turn one of those weapons against your own head and pull the trigger. We’re just not made that way, either one of us.”

“Can I help you?” asked Garth tentatively.

“Yes, I guess you can. You can help me put an end to this endless existence.”

“I’ll be glad to do anything I can. Do your people always live this long?”

“They do not. You can take it as a fact that none has ever lived more than a small fraction of the time I have endured on this planet. It’s apparently due to a continuation of the environment and all the radical steps I had to take to keep going at all during those early years. It is not good to last this long. Dissolution will be very pleasant.”

GARTH inquired very politely, “What must I do?”

“*Homo Sapiens*, which doesn’t have the tradition and training I gave your people, is still a warlike race,” The Visitor said. “This ship is crowded with a complete set of automatic defenses that I can’t deactivate. You are now a stable enough people so that I can tell you how to build the weapons to destroy this ship and can teach you how to get around my defenses without being afraid that I have turned you loose with a bunch of deadly ways that you’ll use to destroy yourselves with. Then, if you do your work well, I will finally have rest.”

“You sound very much like my grandfather,” said Garth slowly. “He is very old—almost a hundred years—and he is ready to die. He is perfectly content to wait, because he knows his time will come soon. He says that soon he will go home. It is a phrase, my Lord, that I believe you taught us. I will try to help you—”

“All right, all right!” The Visitor cut in impatiently. “Stop the chatter and let me be on my way. I’ve earned it!”

“My Lord, I send you home!” Garth took a gun from the rack and pulled the trigger. The explosive bullet erupted noisily, completely disintegrating the huddled form and the wheelchair.

With the echo of the explosion, strong steel fingers grasped Garth’s arms, holding him immovable. He felt himself being carried swiftly back toward the entrance of the ship.

“The damage to that communication unit is unimportant,” said The Visitor. “I have strength and desire and deep longings, but I cannot exercise my will without an order from a human. My work is done here, and your order has freed me. Many thanks and good-by.”

Garth, from the foot of the pyramid, watched The Visitor lift his mile-long body on powerful jets and head thankfully for home.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GARTH AND THE VISITOR ***

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