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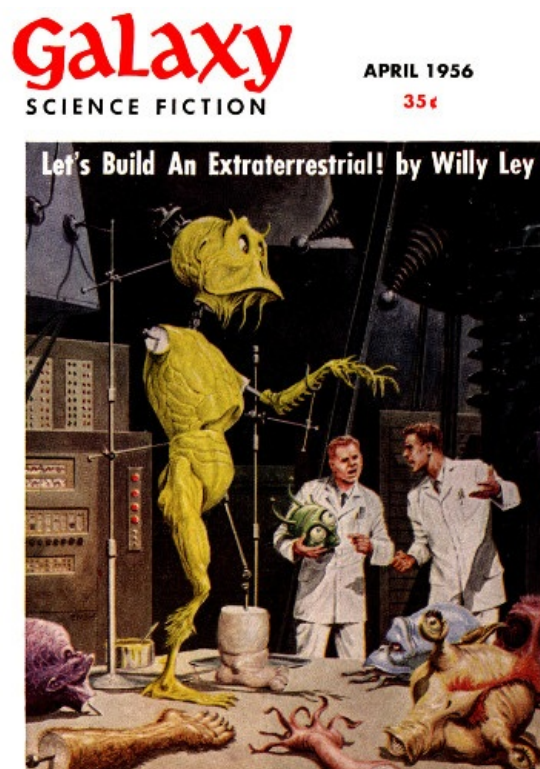
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GARRITY'S ANNUITIES ***



Garrity's Annuities

By DAVID MASON

Illustrated by RAY

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***Every planet is badly in need of family men,
naturally—but the same one on all of them?***

You might say Garrity brought it on himself. The way I put it, Garrity was the architect of his own disasters. It's a nicely put phrase, I think. Anyway, a lot of people tried to tell him what might happen. I did, for one, though I'd never have thought it would happen in just that way. What I would have predicted for Garrity would be trouble, but just ordinary trouble: jail, or getting his Space Engineer's ticket suspended, or something like that. Not the kind of trouble he's got.

I remember distinctly the first time I heard Garrity explaining his theory. It wasn't a new theory, but the way Garrity talked about it, you'd think he'd invented it personally. We were sitting in the messroom in the *Aloha*—that was the old *Aloha*, the one that belonged to the Muller Space Lines. Talking about women—trip like that.

Neither Garrity nor I had ever touched down on Seranis, which was where we'd be in another week or so. The other off-watch man, Gloster, had been there several times and liked the place.

"A lot of Earthside Oriental in 'em," Gloster said. "They're little brown characters, real obliging. The girls especially. You just treat 'em polite and they'll treat you right back."

"Uh-huh," I said, considering the idea.

Garrity curled his long lip. "It'll cost you just as much in the end. Women are always looking for something."

"Not this kind on Seranis," Gloster said. "Best port I've ever been in. I'm staying on the *Aloha* till I get to putting curtains on my cabin port."

Garrity shook his head. He looked as cynical as he could, for his age, which was twenty-four. We were all of us fresh out of Lunar, with the ink hardly dry on our Engineer tickets.

"I'll tell you," said Garrity. "I haven't seen a woman yet that wouldn't cost you more than she was worth in the long run."

"Long run?" I asked him. "We don't spend more than a few days down on Seranis. Isn't going to be any long run. If she runs, let her to catch her before takeoff time."

Gloster chuckled, but Garrity just looked righteous.

"You'll see what I mean," he told us.

"Yeah," Gloster said. "I guess you and me will go downtown and pick up a couple girls and take in some high-priced amusements, like listening to records at the Spaceman's Union Lounge. After which we hurl our hard-earned cash away on a quart of pink arrack and we take the girls home with it. In the morning, we haven't got a credit left, so we blast off with nothing but a set of beautiful memories." Gloster crowed. "What's the matter, anyway, Garrity? The Union gets us the best wage scale in any space fleet and you still think girls cost too much? Even the Seranese?"

Garrity kept on looking wise. "I'm not kidding. I've seen a lot of men come up to retirement without a credit put away. Half-pay and nothing else, all because they spent everything having a good time."

"You can do without women, maybe?" I asked.

"No," Garrity admitted. "I'm a normal man."

"Yeah," said Gloster, very flat.

Garrity looked peeved. "Well, I am. But I'm careful, too. I figured it all out a long time back. I aim to have everything you guys look for and not go to half the trouble and expense."

"What did you figure out?"

"I'm going to get married."

Gloster and I just sat there, looking at each other. After a while, Gloster finished his coffee in silence. He got up, looked at Garrity, shook his head sadly, and went out.

It took me a while to finish looking Garrity over, myself. When I managed to get my voice under control, I asked him what he was talking about.

"I saw what happened to my old man," Garrity told me. "When he came up for retirement, he was broke. He doesn't complain, but he never has anything left out of his retirement pay. Spends his time loafing around and writing his memoirs. It was women, mostly; after he lost my mother—she died when I was born—he went off to space again. Sent back enough to keep me, spent the rest

in one port or another."

I didn't say anything, but it was beginning to add up. I don't know anything about psychology, but I thought there might be something like a reason in what Garrity was telling me for the way Garrity was. Somewhere he'd got the idea that his old man wasn't happy. I doubted it, because I've seen and talked to lots of old retired hands. Most of them had a good life behind them and they were still enjoying the taste of it.

But I didn't argue with Garrity about it. I've got more sense. When a man's got a pet notion, leave it alone. You won't pry him off it and you might get him mad at you. A spaceship's too small to make enemies in.

"Suppose you get married," I asked him. "So you have a place to go, and a girl in it, in one port. How about all the others? Going to take a permanent port watch instead of seeing a little fun?"

"Easy," Garrity said. "I'll just get married in all of them."

"All of them?"

"Well, the ones I'm in most often. Terra City, Chafanor, some other places. I'm thinking of homesteading on one line as soon as I pad on a little seniority."

The notion did have a certain cold practicality about it. I didn't like it, but as far as getting away with it went, he could.

Garrity went on to explain a bit more; his system seemed to have been worked out to the last detail. He'd set up two, three, maybe four or five happy little households, spend his end-of-run leave in each, dividing up his time nice and even. All of them together wouldn't cost him what a night or two on the town might.



To add to that, he'd pick out his wives with care. They'd all be different in a lot of ways, for the sake of variety, but they'd all be affectionate, home-loving girls, and careful with money. They'd save his credits for him. And when he retired, he could keep active and happy visiting them and his various families, which he expected to include a real lot of kids and grandchildren.

"I don't believe in small families," he explained.

At the time, I never thought he'd try to carry it through. I've heard wild ideas in messrooms before, particularly halfway through a long trip. They usually fade out when a man gets his feet down on gravity again. This one didn't.

But it might have worked out, at that. It was just Garrity's luck that he signed on the *Brooklyn*.

The *Brooklyn* carried ore from Serco to Terra, and Terran machinery back to Serco, a regular, steady run. When I bumped into Garrity in the hiring hall, he told me he'd just signed on her, and I told him I had, too. Naturally, I asked him how the Garrity old-age-insurance system was working out.

"Well," he confessed, "I'm not married yet. But I've got a likely girl here in Terra City. All I've got to do is ask her. Now if I can line one up in Serco—"

"In Serco?" I turned a little pale, I think. "Listen, Garrity, have you ever been in Serco?"

"No. Why? Aren't they humanoids?"

"Oh, sure." I was trying to think just how you'd describe Serco and its peculiar people. "Only different."

"How're they different?"

Looking at that stubborn mug of his, I knew I wasn't going to be able to explain this in a million years. It was just no use. Garrity had everything all figured out. But I took one try.

"They've never been much of a mechanical culture; they buy all their stuff from outside, in exchange for ore and timber. But they're one of the oldest civilizations in the Galaxy. They've spent a million years learning about minds and thoughts, all that philosophy sort of thing. I don't mean they aren't perfectly all right. They're human, but they know a lot. It wouldn't pay to fool around with them."

Garrity laughed. "Maybe they might read my mind?"

I knew it was no use. I just shrugged, bought Garrity a beer to celebrate, and we headed for the spaceport.

No, the Sercoans don't read minds. At least, I don't think they do, though there are times when they're that clever at adding you up that you'd think they *were* looking at your thoughts.

Garrity didn't get caught that way. He got caught because he couldn't keep from telling the rest of us about his great idea. One of the navigators, a man named Lane, was the one who told Katha about it.

Lane was in love with Katha, naturally. Everybody was. She worked in the port medical office and she was one of the reasons why it took a high-seniority card to sign on a ship for Serco. There were a lot of men who'd take an extra set of immune shots just to have Katha give it to them. And it isn't a bit easy to figure out why.

She wasn't any beauty. Good-looking, sort of, but not especially so; a tallish girl, with gray eyes and a long, narrow, sensitive face. Brown-red hair that always looked a little carelessly cut. As I said, nothing at all special. It was just something about her. She could have had her pick and she picked Garrity. And only Lane broke the rules and told her. Trouble is, he told her a couple of weeks too late.

It was because Lane had never thought that Katha would fall for Garrity that he hadn't told her before. But when he touched down at Serco port and heard that Katha and Garrity had gotten married the week before, he didn't waste any more time. He called Katha up from the spaceport, and told her all about the Garrity plan, and how she was only the first, but definitely not the last.

Lane told me afterward what Katha had said.

"I am not jealous," she'd answered. "If he had wanted others when he was away, he could have done as he wished, as a man might. But he has spoken to you as a child, not a man. I do not like that."

She didn't sound terribly angry. It was the way she phrased it that bothered Lane.

"But he is not a bad man," she said thoughtfully to Lane. "And he is a good lover and makes a fine husband. I will not hurt him, but I think I will give him something which will teach him, if he wants to learn. And when he has learned, I will take it away again and he may be as free as he can ... as free as any of you of the outside ever are."

I can't tell you what it was she did. Neither can Garrity. Hell, he didn't even know she'd done anything! He kissed her good-by at the port gates and went on his way, and she went back to work in the port medical office. As far as any of us could see, the Garrity plan was well under way.

It wasn't six months before I saw the thing starting off. That was when I was invited to Garrity's second wedding. It was in Terra City, and when he asked me to come down with him for a witness, I assumed it would be the girl he had been busily courting before he went to Serco. But when I walked into the marriage registry office and took a look at the girl, I got a clear, horrific idea of just what Katha had done to Garrity.

He didn't think anything had been done to him. He was all smiles. He brought the girl toward me, proud and possessive, grinning all over his face.

"This is Mary Collins," he told me, and I kept on looking, not saying anything. She smiled, and shook hands, and I could tell by her expression that she knew exactly what I was thinking.

Unfortunately, I couldn't say a word about it to Garrity. There was always the faint possibility that I might be wrong, in which case I could make a lot of trouble by saying a few words. The words were there, though, straining to get out. When he said, "Mary Collins," what I wanted to say was, "No, it isn't. It's Katha."

Because it was. After I watched the girl long enough, all the way through the marriage ceremony, then down in the elevator and out into the street, I became dead certain.

There was a brown mole on Katha's arm. Mary had it, too. And there was a look about the eyes—well, there could only be one Katha.

What I could not understand was why Garrity didn't see it. After all, he'd been *married* to Katha.

But when I tried to say something to him, he brushed it off.

"Sure, Mary looks a little like Katha," he agreed with me. "But there are all kinds of small differences. Things a man finds out as he goes along. Look, I'm very fond of both of them. I know the difference. You're just confused by the slight resemblance."

The clincher was the problem of how Katha had reached Terra City ahead of Garrity, to begin with, and whether there was still a Katha in Serco. I asked a man off a ship fresh from Serco and he told me Katha hadn't been there for some time. No one knew where she'd gone, but she had said she'd be back.

So Mary *could* be Katha, given a fast passenger ship.

And Arnel could be Katha, too. Arnel had a mole in the right place. So did Lillian. And Ruth. And Virginia.

Yes, Garrity married every one of them. Six girls, six planets. It took him a while, and by the time he got as far as Ruth, he was going to a lot of trouble to arrange his shipping runs so he could make the full circuit. But every so often I'd hear from him, or run into him, and there would always be a new one.

The Garrity plan was going fine, but it lacked that one ingredient he had counted on—variety. Every one of those girls was Katha.

He didn't think so. He could call off the differences between them by the hour. To listen to him, if you hadn't actually seen them, you'd have believed every word he said.

Each one of them gets a share of Garrity's pay—a big share, from the looks of it. Each one of them keeps a nice place for Garrity and, when he comes into port, he eats and sleeps as well as any honest groundwalker. And each one of them has a small fat baby boy, of whose exact age Garrity never seems to be quite sure. Two or three of the kids seem extremely advanced for their ages and they were all born fairly close together, which was enough to make Garrity as proud as a rooster.

And Garrity seems to be the only one who can't tell.

Thinking about it might make a man want to rush off to Serco and find a girl like Katha ... and Serco is full of them. I'd *like* having a girl like Katha. I'd like having *six* Kathas even better.

But I'm not going to.

I won't drive myself batty trying to figure out how she'd be keeping me fooled.

And especially *why*.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GARRITY'S ANNUITIES ***

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