



Viewpoint
Garrett, Randall

Published: 1960

Type(s): Short Fiction, Science Fiction

Source: <http://gutenberg.org>

About Garrett:

Randall Garrett (December 16, 1927 - December 31, 1987) was an American science fiction and fantasy author. He was a prolific contributor to *Astounding* and other science fiction magazines of the 1950s and 1960s. He instructed Robert Silverberg in the techniques of selling large quantities of action-adventure sf, and collaborated with him on two novels about Earth bringing civilization to an alien planet.

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There was a dizzy, sickening whirl of mental blackness—not true blackness, but a mind-enveloping darkness that was filled with the multi-colored little sparks of thoughts and memories that scattered through the darkness like tiny glowing mice, fleeing from something unknown, fleeing outwards and away toward a somewhere that was equally unknown; scurrying, moving, changing—each half recognizable as it passed, but leaving only a vague impression behind.

Memories were shattered into their component data bits in that maelstrom of not-quite-darkness, and scattered throughout infinity and eternity. Then the pseudo-dark stopped its violent motion and became still, no longer scattering the fleeing memories, but merely blanketing them. And slowly—ever so slowly—the powerful cohesive forces that existed between the data-bits began pulling them back together again as the not-blackness faded. The associative powers of the mind began putting the frightened little things together as they drifted back in from vast distances, trying to fit them together again in an ordered whole. Like a vast jigsaw puzzle in five dimensions, little clots and patches formed as the bits were snuggled into place here and there.

The process was far from complete when Broom regained consciousness.

Broom sat up abruptly and looked around him. The room was totally unfamiliar. For a moment, that seemed perfectly understandable. Why shouldn't the room look odd, after he had gone through—

What?

He rubbed his head and looked around more carefully. It was not just that the room itself was unfamiliar as a whole; the effect was greater than that. It was not the first time in his life he had regained consciousness in unfamiliar surroundings, but always before he had been aware that only the pattern was different, not the details.

He sat there on the floor and took stock of himself and his surroundings.

He was a big man—six feet tall when he stood up, and proportionately heavy, a big-boned frame covered with hard, well-trained muscles. His hair and beard were a dark blond, and rather shaggy because of the time he'd spent in prison.

Prison!

Yes, he'd been in prison. The rough clothing he was wearing was certainly nothing like the type of dress he was used to.

He tried to force his memory to give him the information he was looking for, but it wouldn't come. A face flickered in his mind for a moment, and a name. Contarini. He seemed to remember a startled look on the Italian's face, but he could neither remember the reason for it nor when it had been. But it would come back; he was sure of that.

Meanwhile, where the devil was he?

From where he was sitting, he could see that the room was fairly large, but not extraordinarily so. A door in one wall led into another room of about the same size. But they were like no other rooms he had ever seen before. He looked down at the floor. It was soft, almost as soft as a bed, covered with a thick, even, resilient layer of fine material of some kind. It was some sort of carpeting that covered the floor from wall to wall, but no carpet had ever felt like this.

He lifted himself gingerly to his feet. He wasn't hurt, at least. He felt fine, except for the gaps in his memory.

The room was well lit. The illumination came from the ceiling, which seemed to be made of some glowing, semitranslucent metal that cast a shadowless glow over everything. There was a large, bulky table near the wall away from the door; it looked almost normal, except that the objects on it were like nothing that had ever existed. Their purposes were unknown, and their shapes meaningless.

He jerked his head away, not wanting to look at the things on the table.

The walls, at least, looked familiar. They seemed to be paneled in some fine wood. He walked over and touched it.

And knew immediately that, no matter what it looked like, it wasn't wood. The illusion was there to the eye, but no wood ever had such a hard, smooth, glasslike surface as this. He jerked his fingertips away.

He recognized, then, the emotion that had made him turn away from the objects on the table and pull his hand away from the unnatural wall. It was fear.

Fear? Nonsense! He put his hand out suddenly and slapped the wall with his palm and held it there. There was nothing to be afraid of!

He laughed at himself softly. He'd faced death a hundred times during the war without showing fear; this was no time to start. What would his

men think of him if they saw him getting shaky over the mere touch of a woodlike wall?

The memories were coming back. This time, he didn't try to probe for them; he just let them flow.

He turned around again and looked deliberately at the big, bulky table. There was a faint humming noise coming from it which had escaped his notice before. He walked over to it and looked at the queerly-shaped things that lay on its shining surface. He had already decided that the table was no more wood than the wall, and a touch of a finger to the surface verified the decision.

The only thing that looked at all familiar on the table was a sheaf of written material. He picked it up and glanced over the pages, noticing the neat characters, so unlike any that he knew. He couldn't read a word of it. He grinned and put the sheets back down on the smooth table top.

The humming appeared to be coming from a metal box on the other side of the table. He circled around and took a look at the thing. It had levers and knobs and other projections, but their functions were not immediately discernible. There were several rows of studs with various unrecognizable symbols on them.

This would certainly be something to tell in London—when and if he ever got back.

He reached out a tentative finger and touched one of the symbol-marked studs.

There was a loud *click!* in the stillness of the room, and he leaped back from the device. He watched it warily for a moment, but nothing more seemed to be forthcoming. Still, he decided it might be best to let things alone. There was no point in messing with things that undoubtedly controlled forces beyond his ability to cope with, or understand. After all, such a long time—

He stopped, Time? *Time?*

What had Contarini said about time? Something about its being like a river that flowed rapidly—that much he remembered. Oh, yes—and that it was almost impossible to try to swim backwards against the current or ... something else. What?

He shook his head. The more he tried to remember what his fellow prisoner had told him, the more elusive it became.

He had traveled in time, that much was certain, but how far, and in which direction? Toward the future, obviously; Contarini had made it

plain that going into the past was impossible. Then could he, Broom, get back to his own time, or was he destined to stay in this—place? Wherever and whenever it was.

Evidently movement through the time-river had a tendency to disorganize a man's memories. Well, wasn't that obvious anyway? Even normal movement through time, at the rate of a day per day, made some memories fade. And some were lost entirely, while others remained clear and bright. What would a sudden jump of centuries do?

His memory was improving, though. If he just let it alone, most of it would come back, and he could orient himself. Meanwhile, he might as well explore his surroundings a little more. He resolved to keep his hands off anything that wasn't readily identifiable.

There was a single oddly-shaped chair by the bulky table, and behind the chair was a heavy curtain which apparently covered a window. He could see a gleam of light coming through the division in the curtains.

Broom decided he might as well get a good look at whatever was outside the building he was in. He stepped over, parted the curtains, and—
—And gasped!

It was night time outside, and the sky was clear. He recognized the familiar constellations up there. But they were dimmed by the light from the city that stretched below him.

And what a city! At first, it was difficult for his eyes to convey their impressions intelligently to his brain. What they were recording was so unfamiliar that his brain could not decode the messages they sent.

There were broad, well-lit streets that stretched on and on, as far as he could see, and beyond them, fluttering fairy bridges rose into the air and arched into the distance. And the buildings towered over everything. He forced himself to look down, and it made him dizzy. The building he was in was so high that it would have projected through the clouds if there had been any clouds.

Broom backed away from the window and let the curtain close. He'd had all of that he could take for right now. The inside of the building, his immediate surroundings, looked almost homey after seeing that monstrous, endless city outside.

He skirted the table with its still-humming machine and walked toward the door that led to the other room. A picture hanging on a nearby wall caught his eye, and he stopped. It was a portrait of a man in

unfamiliar, outlandish clothing, but Broom had seen odder clothing in his travels. But the thing that had stopped him was the amazing reality of the picture. It was almost as if there were a mirror there, reflecting the face of a man who stood invisibly before it.

It wasn't, of course; it was only a painting. But the lifelike, somber eyes of the man were focused directly on him. Broom decided he didn't like the effect at all, and hurried into the next room.

There were several rows of the bulky tables in here, each with its own chair. Broom's footsteps sounded loud in the room, the echoes rebounding from the walls. He stopped and looked down. This floor wasn't covered with the soft carpeting; it had a square, mosaic pattern, as though it might be composed of tile of some kind. And yet, though it was harder than the carpet it had a kind of queer resiliency of its own.

The room itself was larger than the one he had just quitted, and not as well lit. For the first time, he thought of the possibility that there might be someone else here besides himself. He looked around, wishing that he had a weapon of some kind. Even a knife would have made him feel better.

But there had been no chance of that, of course. Prisoners of war are hardly allowed to carry weapons with them, so none had been available.

He wondered what sort of men lived in this fantastic city. So far, he had seen no one. The streets below had been filled with moving vehicles of some kind, but it had been difficult to tell whether there had been anyone walking down there from this height.

Contarini had said that it would be ... how had he said it? "Like sleeping for hundreds of years and waking up in a strange world."

Well, it was that, all right.

Did anyone know he was here? He had the uneasy feeling that hidden, unseen eyes were watching his every move, and yet he could detect nothing. There was no sound except the faint humming from the device in the room behind him, and a deeper, almost inaudible, rushing, rumbling sound that seemed to come from far below.

His wish for a weapon came back, stronger than before. The very fact that he had seen no one set his nerves on edge even more than the sight of a known enemy would have done.

He was suddenly no longer interested in his surroundings. He felt trapped in this strange, silent room. He could see a light shining through

a door at the far end of the room—perhaps it was a way out. He walked toward it, trying to keep his footsteps as silent as possible as he moved.

The door had a pane of translucent glass in it, and there were more of the unreadable characters on it. He wished fervently that he could decipher them; they might tell him where he was.

Carefully, he grasped the handle of the door, twisted it, and pulled. And, careful as he had been, the door swung inward with surprising rapidity. It was a great deal thinner and lighter than he had supposed.

He looked down at it, wondering if there were any way the door could be locked. There was a tiny vertical slit set in a small metal panel in the door, but it was much too tiny to be a keyhole. Still—

It didn't matter. If necessary, he could smash the glass to get through the door. He stepped out into what was obviously a hallway beyond the door.

The hallway stretched away to either side, lined with doors similar to the one he had just come through. How did a man get out of this place, anyway? The door behind him was pressing against his hand with a patient insistence, as though it wanted to close itself. He almost let it close, but, at the last second, he changed his mind.

Better the devil we know than the devil we don't, he thought to himself.

He went back into the office and looked around for something to prop the door open. He found a small, beautifully formed porcelain dish on one of the desks, picked it up, and went back to the door. The dish held the door open an inch or so. That was good enough. If someone locked the door, he could still smash in the glass if he wanted to, but the absence of the dish when he returned would tell him that he was not alone in this mysterious place.

He started down the hallway to his right, checking the doors as he went. They were all locked. He knew that he could break into any of them, but he had a feeling that he would find no exit through any of them. They all looked as though they concealed more of the big rooms.

None of them had any lights behind them. Only the one door that he had come through showed the telltale glow from the other side. Why?

He had the terrible feeling that he had been drawn across time to this place for a purpose, and yet he could think of no rational reason for believing so.

He stopped as another memory came back. He remembered being in the stone-walled dungeon, with its smelly straw beds, lit only by the faint shaft of sunlight that came from the barred window high overhead.

Contarini, the short, wiry little Italian who was in the next cell, looked at him through the narrow opening. "I still think it can be done, my friend. It is the mind and the mind alone that sees the flow of time. The body experiences, but does not see. Only the soul is capable of knowing eternity."

Broom outranked the little Italian, but prison can make brothers of all men. "You think it's possible then, to get out of a place like this, simply by thinking about it?"

Contarini nodded. "Why not? Did not the saints do so? And what was that? Contemplation of the Eternal, my comrade; contemplation of the Eternal."

Broom held back a grin. "Then why, my Venetian friend, have you not left this place long since?"

"I try," Contarini had said simply, "but I cannot do it. You wish to know why? It is because I am afraid."

"Afraid?" Broom raised an eyebrow. He had seen Contarini on the battlefield, dealing death in hand-to-hand combat, and the Italian hadn't impressed him as a coward.

"Yes," said the Venetian. "Afraid. Oh, I am not afraid of men. I fight. Some day, I may die—*will* die. This does not frighten me, death. I am not afraid of what men may do to me." He stopped and frowned. "But, of this, I have a great fear. Only a saint can handle such things, and I am no saint."

"I hope, my dear Contarini," Broom said dryly, "that you are not under the impression that *I* am a saint."

"No, perhaps not," Contarini said. "Perhaps not. But you are braver than I. I am not afraid of any man living. But you are afraid of neither the living nor the dead, nor of man nor devil—which is a great deal more than I can say for myself. Besides, there is the blood of kings in your veins. And has not a king protection that even a man of noble blood such as myself does not have? I think so.

"Oh, I have no doubt that you could do it, if you but would. And then, perhaps, when you are free, you would free me—for teaching you all I know to accomplish this. My fear holds me chained here, but you have no chains of fear."

Broom had thought that over for a moment, then grinned. "All right, my friend; I'll try it. What's your first lesson?"

The memory faded from Broom's mind. Had he really moved through some segment of Eternity to reach this ... this place? Had he—

He felt a chill run through him. What was he doing here? How could he have taken it all so calmly. Afraid of man or devil, no—but this was neither. He had to get back. The utter alienness of this bright, shining, lifeless wonderland was too much for him.

Instinctively, he turned and ran back toward the room he had left. If he got back to the place where he had appeared in this world, perhaps—somehow—some force would return him to where he belonged.

The door was as he had left it, the porcelain dish still in place. He scooped up the dish in one big hand and ran on into the room, letting the door shut itself behind him. He ran on, through the large room with its many tables, into the brightly lighted room beyond.

He stopped. What could he do now? He tried to remember the things that the Italian had told him to do, and he could not for the life of him remember them. His memory still had gaps in it—gaps he did not know were there because he had not yet probed for them. He closed his eyes in concentration, trying to bring back a memory that would not come.

He did not hear the intruder until the man's voice echoed in the room.

Broom's eyes opened, and instantly every muscle and nerve in his hard-trained body tensed for action. There was a man standing in the doorway of the office.

He was not a particularly impressive man, in spite of the queer cut of his clothes. He was not as tall as Broom, and he looked soft and overfed. His paunch protruded roundly from the open front of the short coat, and there was a fleshiness about his face that betrayed too much good living.

And he looked even more frightened than Broom had been a few minutes before.

He was saying something in a language that Broom did not understand, and the tenseness in his voice betrayed his fear. Broom relaxed. He had nothing to fear from this little man.

"I won't hurt you," Broom said. "I had no intention of intruding on your property, but all I ask is help."

The little man was blinking and backing away, as though he were going to turn and bolt at any moment.

Broom laughed. "You have nothing to fear from me, little man. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Richard Broom, known as—" He stopped, and his eyes widened. Total memory flooded over him as he realized fully who he was and where he belonged.

And the fear hit him again in a raging flood, sweeping over his mind and blotting it out. Again, the darkness came.

This time, the blackness faded quickly. There was a face, a worried face, looking at him through an aperture in the stone wall. The surroundings were so familiar, that the bits of memory which had been scattered again during the passage through centuries of time came back more quickly and settled back into their accustomed pattern more easily.

The face was that of the Italian, Contarini. He was looking both worried and disappointed.

"You were not gone long, my lord king," he said. "But you *were* gone. Of that there can be no doubt. Why did you return?"

Richard Broom sat up on his palette of straw. The scene in the strange building already seemed dreamlike, but the fear was still there. "I couldn't remember," he said softly. "I couldn't remember who I was nor why I had gone to that ... that place. And when I remembered, I came back."

Contarini nodded sadly. "It is as I have heard. The memory ties one too strongly to the past—to one's own time. One must return as soon as the mind had adjusted. I am sorry, my friend; I had hoped we could escape. But now it appears that we must wait until our ransoms are paid. And I much fear that mine will never be paid."

"Nor mine," said the big man dully. "My faithful Blondin found me, but he may not have returned to London. And even if he has, my brother John may be reluctant to raise the money."

"What? Would England hesitate to ransom the brave king who has fought so gallantly in the Holy Crusades? Never! You will be free, my friend."

But Richard Plantagenet just stared at the little dish that he still held in his hand, the fear still in his heart. Men would still call him "Lion-hearted," but he knew that he would never again deserve the title.

And, nearly eight centuries away in time and thousands of miles away in space, a Mr. Edward Jasperson was speaking hurriedly into the telephone that stood by the electric typewriter on his desk.

"That's right, Officer; Suite 8601, Empire State Building. I was working late, and I left the lights on in my office when I went out to get a cup of coffee. When I came back, he was here—a big, bearded man, wearing a thing that looked like a monk's robe made out of gunny sack. What? No, I locked the door when I left. What? Well, the only thing that's missing as far as I can tell is a ceramic ash tray from one of the desks; he was holding that in his hand when I saw him. What? Oh. Where did he go?" Mr. Jasperson paused in his rush of words. "Well, I must have gotten a little dizzy—I was pretty shocked, you know. To be honest, I didn't see where he went. I must have fainted.

"But I think you can pick him up if you hurry. With that getup on, he can't get very far away. All right. Thank you, Officer."

He cradled the phone, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed at his damp forehead. He was a very frightened little man, but he knew he'd get over it by morning.

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