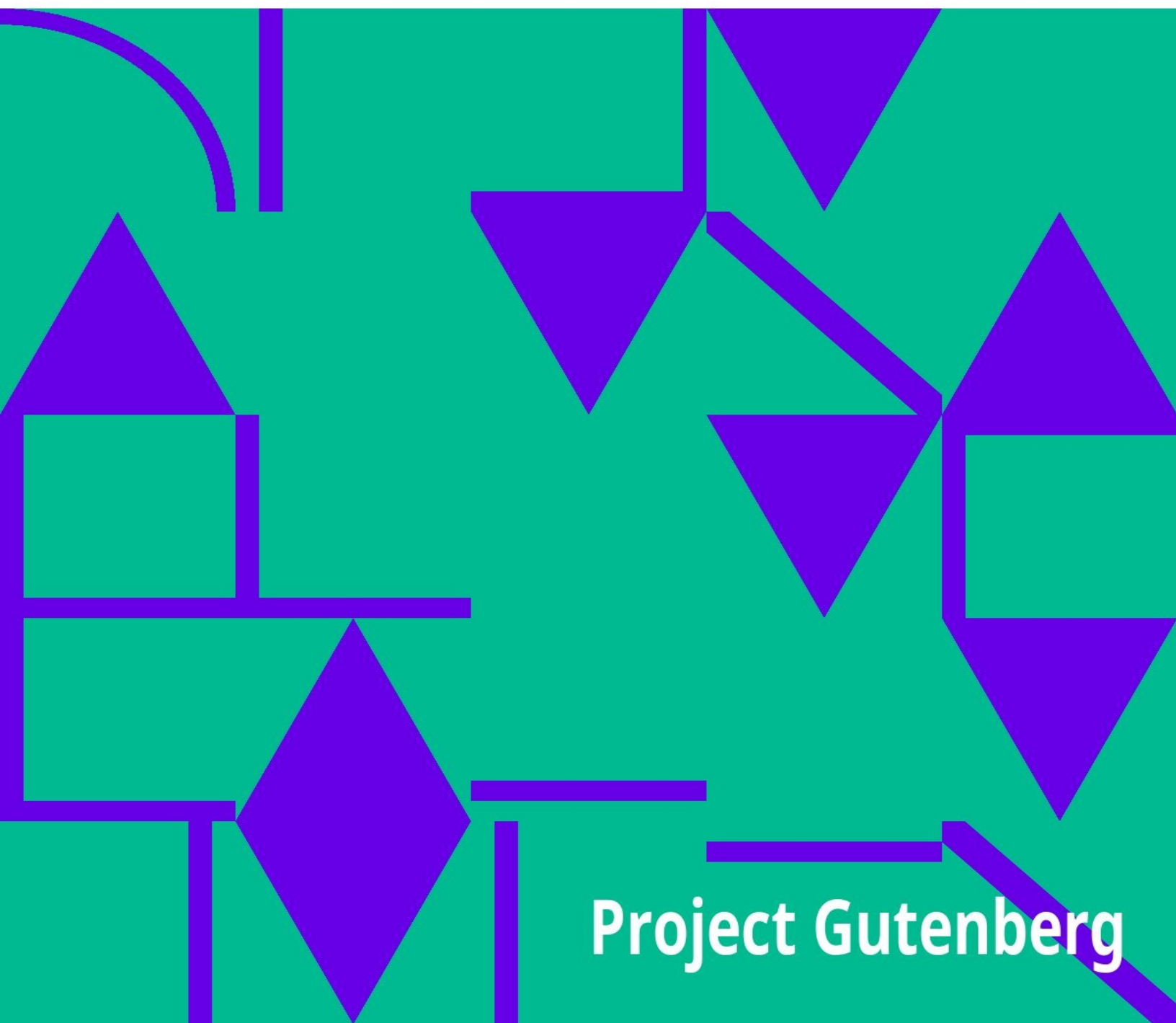


It's a Small Solar System

Allan Howard



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Frederik Pohl wrote recently about the time, when he was young, when he spent more time in Barsoom than in Brooklyn. Allan Howard, Director of the Eastern Science Fiction Association in Newark, takes us back to those nostalgic days in this vignette of man's first hours on Mars.

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by ALLAN HOWARD

**Soon the three representatives of Earth were walking
shoulder to shoulder, the Captain first to touch soil.**

KNOW HIM?

Well you might say I practically grew up with him. He was my hero in those days. I thought few wiser or greater men ever lived. In my eyes he was greater than Babe Ruth, Lindy, or the President.

Of course, time, and my growing up caused me to bring him into a perspective that I felt to be more consonant with his true position in his field of endeavor. When he died his friends mourned for fond remembrance of things past, but privately many of them felt that he had outlived his best days. Now with this glorious vindication, I wonder how many of them are still alive to feel the twinge of conscience....

Oh, we're delighted of course, but it seems incredible even today to us elated oldsters. Although we were always his staunchest admirers, in retrospect we can see now that no one believed more than we that he did it strictly for the dollar. It is likely there was always a small corps of starry-eyed adolescents who found the whole improbable saga entirely believable, or at least half believed it might be partly true. The attitude of the rest of us ranged from a patronizing disparagement that we thought was expected of us, through grudging admiration, to out-and-out enthusiasm.

Certainly if anybody had taken the trouble to consider it—and why should they have?—the landing of the first manned ship on our satellite seemed to render him as obsolete as a horde of other lesser and even greater lights. At any rate, it was inevitable that the conquest of the moon would be merely a stepping-stone to more distant points.

Oh, no, I had nothing to do with the selection of the Red Planet. Coming in as head of Project P-4 in its latter stages, as I did when Dr. Fredericks died, the selection had already been made. Yes, it's quite likely I may have been plugging for Mars below the conscious level. A combination of chance, expediency and popular demand made Mars the next target, rather than Venus, which was, in some ways, the more logical goal. I would have given anything to have gone, but the metaphorical stout heart that one reporter once credited me with is not the same as an old man's actual fatty heart.

And there were heartbreak years ahead before the *Goddard* was finally ready. During this time he slipped further into obscurity while big, important things were happening all around us. You're right, that one really big creation of his *is* bigger than ever. It has passed into the language, and meant employment for thousands of people. Too few of them have even heard of him. Of course, he was still known and welcomed by a small circle of acquaintances, but to the world at large he was truly a "forgotten man."

It is worthy of note that one of the oldest of these acquaintances was present at blast-off time. He happened to be the grandfather of a certain competent young crewman. The old man was a proud figure during the brief ceremonies and his eyes filled with tears as the mighty rocket climbed straight up on its fiery tail. He remained there gazing up at the sky long after it had vanished.

He was heard to murmur, "I am glad the kid could go, but it is just a lark to him. He never had a 'sense of wonder.' How could he—nobody

reads anymore."

Afterward, his senile emotions betraying him, he broke down completely and had to be led from the field. It is rumored he did not live long after that.

The *Goddard* drove on until Mars filled the viz-screen. It was planned to make at least a half-dozen braking passes around the planet for observational purposes before the actual business of bringing the ship in for landfall began. As expected the atmosphere proved to be thin. The speculated dead-sea areas, oddly enough, turned out to be just that. To the surprise of some, it was soon evident that Mars possessed, or had possessed, a high civilization. The *canali* of Schiaparelli were indeed broad waterways stretching from pole to pole, too regular to be anything but the work of intelligence. But most wonderful of all were the scattered, but fairly numerous large, walled cities that dotted the world. Everybody was excited, eager to land and start exercising their specialties.

One of the largest of these cities was selected more or less at random. It was decided to set down just outside, yet far enough from the walls to avoid any possibility of damage from the landing jets in the event the city was inhabited. Even if deserted, the entire scientific personnel would have raised a howl that would have been heard back on Earth if just a section of wall was scorched. When planet-fall was completed and observers had time to scan the surroundings it was seen that the city was very much alive.

"What keeps them up!" marvelled Kopchainski, the aeronautics and rocketry authority.

The sky swarmed with ships of strange design. The walls were crowded with inhabitants, too far away for detailed observation. Even as they looked an enormous gate opened and a procession of mounted figures emerged. In the event the place was deserted, the Captain

would have had the honor of being the first to touch Martian soil. While atmospheric and other checks were being run, he gave orders for the previously decided alternative. Captain, semanticist and anthropologist would make the First Contact.

With all checks agreeing that it was safe to open locks, soon the three representatives of Earth were walking shoulder to shoulder down the ramp. It was apparent that the two scientists purposely missed stride inches from the end, so that it was the Captain's foot that actually touched ground first.

The cavalcade—though these beasties were certainly not horses—was now near enough to the ship for details to be seen. Surprise and wonderment filled the crew, for while the multi-legged steeds were as alien as anyone might expect to find on an alien world, the riders were very definitely humanoid. Briefly, brightly and barbarically trapped as they were by earthly standards, they seemed to be little distinguishable from homegrown homo saps.

The approaching company appeared to be armed mainly with swords and lances, but also in evidence were some tubular affairs that could very well be some sort of projectile-discharging device. The Captain suddenly felt unaccountably warm. It was a heavy responsibility—he hoped these Martians wouldn't be the type of madmen who believed in the "shoot first, inquire later" theory.

Even as he stood there, outwardly calm but jittering internally, the Martian riders pulled up ten feet from the Earthmen. Their leader, tall, dark-haired, and subtly lighter in hue than his companions, dismounted and approached the Captain. With outstretched hand he took the Captain's in a firm grip.

Let it be recorded here, to the shame of an Earth where reading for pleasure is virtually a lost pastime, that not one man on the *Goddard* realized the significance of what followed.

"How do you do?" he said in perfect English, with an unmistakable trace of Southern accent.

"Welcome to Barsoom! My name is John Carter."

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