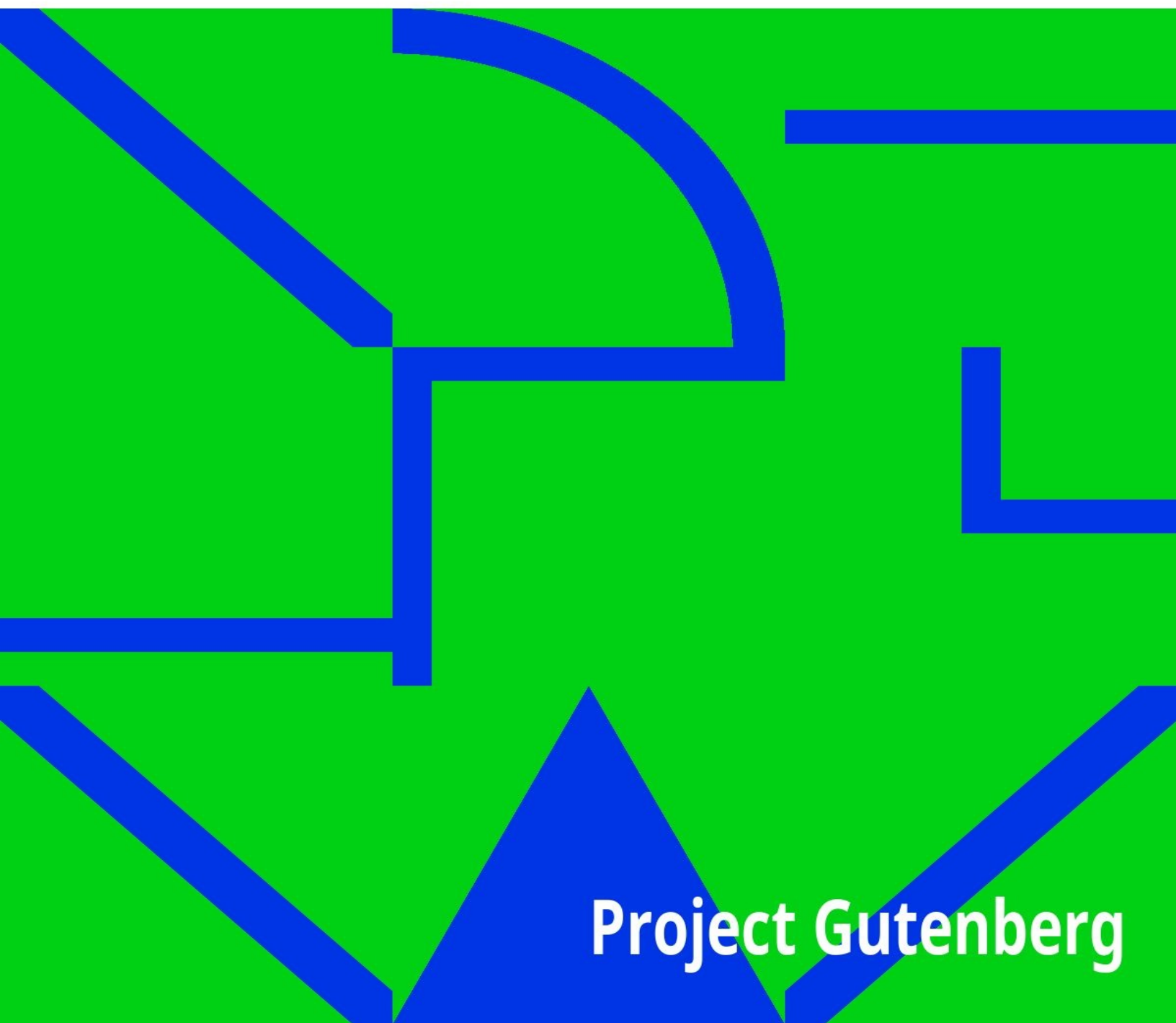


Micro-Man

Forrest J. Ackerman



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MICRO-MAN

BY WEAVER WRIGHT

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The little man dared to venture into the realm of the Gods—but the Gods were cruel!

The early morning streetcar, swaying and rattling along its tracks, did as much to divert my attention from the book I was reading as the contents of the book itself. I did not like Plato. Comfortable though the seat was, I was as uncomfortable as any collegiate could be whose mind would rather dwell upon tomorrow's football game than the immediate task in hand—the morning session with Professor Russell and the book on my lap.

My gaze wandered from the book and drifted out the distorted window, then fell to the car-sill as I thought over Plato's conclusions. Something moving on the ledge attracted my attention: it was a scurrying black ant. If I had thought about it, I might have wondered how it came there. But the next moment a more curious object on the sill caught my eye. I bent over.

I couldn't make out what it was at first. A bug, perhaps. Maybe it was too small for a bug. Just a little dancing dust, no doubt.

Then I discerned—and gasped. On the sill, there—it was a man! A man on the streetcar's window sill—a *little* man! He was so tiny I would never have seen him if it hadn't been for his white attire, which

made him visible against the brown grain of the shellacked wood. I watched, amazed as his microscopic figure moved over perhaps half an inch.

He wore a blouse and shorts, it seemed, and sandals. Something might have been hanging at his side, but it was too small for me to make out plainly. His head, I thought was silver-coloured, and I think the headgear had some sort of knobs on it. All this, of course, I didn't catch at the time, because my heart was hammering away excitedly and making my fingers shake as I fumbled for a matchbox in my pocket, I pushed it open and let the matches scatter out. Then, as gently as my excitement would allow, I pushed the tiny man from the ledge into the box; for I had suddenly realized the greatness of this amazing discovery.

The car was barely half-filled and no attention had been directed my way. I slid quickly out of the empty seat and hurriedly alighted at the next stop.

In a daze, I stood where I had alighted waiting for the next No. 10 that would return me home, the matchbox held tightly in my hand. They'd put that box in a museum one day!

I collect stamps—I've heard about getting rare ones with inverted centers, or some minor deviation that made them immensely valuable. I'd imagined getting one by mistake sometime that would make me rich. But this! They'd billed "King Kong" as "The Eighth Wonder of the World," but that was only imaginary—a film ... a terrifying thought crossed my mind. I pushed open the box hastily: maybe *I* had been dreaming. But there it was—the unbelievable; the Little Man!

A car was before me, just leaving. Its polished surface had not reflected through the haze, and the new design made so little noise that I hadn't seen it. I jumped for it, my mind in such a turmoil that the conductor had to ask three times for my fare. Ordinarily, I would have

been embarrassed, but a young man with his mind on millions doesn't worry about little things like that. At least, not this young man.

How I acted on the streetcar, or traversed the five blocks from the end of the line, I couldn't say. If I may imagine myself, though, I must have strode along the street like a determined machine. I reached the house and let myself into the basement room. Inside, I pulled the shades together and closed the door, the matchbox still in my hand. No one was at home this time of day, which pleased me particularly, for I wanted to figure out how I was going to present this wonder to the world.

I flung myself down on the bed and opened the matchbox. The little man lay very still on the bottom.

"Little Man!" I cried, and turned him out on the quilt. Maybe he had suffocated in the box. Irrational thought! Small though it might be to me, the little box was as big as all outdoors to him. It was the bumping about he'd endured; I hadn't been very thoughtful of him.

He was reviving now, and raised himself on one arm. I pushed myself off the bed, and stepped quickly to my table to procure something with which I could control him. Not that he could get away, but he was so tiny I thought I might lose sight of him.

Pen, pencil, paper, stamps, scissors, clips—none of them were what I wanted. I had nothing definite in mind, but then remembered my stamp outfit and rushed to secure it. Evidently college work had cramped my style along the collecting line, for the tweezers and magnifier appeared with a mild coating of dust. But they were what I needed, and I blew on them and returned to the bed.

The little man had made his way half an inch or so from his former prison; was crawling over what I suppose were, to him, great uneven blocks of red and green and black moss.

He crossed from a red into a black patch as I watched his movements through the glass, and I could see him more plainly against the darker background. He stopped and picked at the substance of his strange surroundings, then straightened to examine a tuft of the cloth. The magnifier enlarged him to a seeming half inch or so, and I could see better, now, this strange tiny creature.

It *was* a metal cap he wore, and it did have protruding knobs—two of them—slanting at 45 degree angles from his temples like horns. I wondered at their use, but it was impossible for me to imagine. Perhaps they covered some actual growth; he might have had real horns for all I knew. Nothing would have been too strange to expect.

His clothing showed up as a simple, white, one piece garment, like a shirt and gym shorts. The shorts ended at the knee, and from there down he was bare except for a covering on his feet which appeared more like gloves than shoes. Whatever he wore to protect his feet, it allowed free movement of his toes.

It struck me that this little man's native habitat must have been very warm. His attire suggested this. For a moment I considered plugging in my small heater; my room certainly had no tropical or sub-tropical temperature at that time of the morning—and how was I to know whether he shivered when he felt chill. Maybe he blew his horns. Anyway, I figured a living Eighth Wonder would be more valuable than a dead one; and I didn't think he could be stuffed. But somehow I forgot it in my interest in examining this unusual personage.

The little man had dropped the cloth now, and was staring in my direction. Of course, "my direction" was very general to him; but he seemed to be conscious of me. He certainly impressed *me* as being awfully different, but what his reactions were, I didn't know.

But someone else knew.

In a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a dead cell of a piece of wood, five scientists were grouped before a complicated instrument with a horn like the early radios. Two sat and three stood, but their attention upon the apparatus was unanimous. From small hollowed cups worn on their fingers like rings, came a smoke from burning incense. These cups they held to their noses frequently, and their eyes shone as they inhaled. The scientists of infra-smallness were smoking!

With the exception of a recent prolonged silence, which was causing them great anxiety, sounds had been issuing from the instrument for days. There had been breaks before, but this silence had been long-enduring.

Now the voice was speaking again; a voice that was a telepathic communication made audible. The scientists brightened.

"There is much that I cannot understand," it said. The words were hesitant, filled with awe. "I seem to have been in many worlds. At the completion of my experiment, I stood on a land which was brown and black and very rough of surface. With startling suddenness, I was propelled across this harsh country, and, terrifyingly, I was falling. I must have dropped seventy-five feet, but the strange buoyant atmosphere of this strange world saved me from harm.

"My new surroundings were grey and gloomy, and the earth trembled as a giant cloud passed over the sky. I do not know what it meant, but with the suddenness characteristic of this place, it became very dark, and an inexplicable violence shook me into insensibility.

"I am conscious, now, of some giant form before me, but it is so colossal that my eyes cannot focus it. And it changes. Now I seem confronted by great orange mountains with curving ledges cut into

their sides. Atop them are great, greyish slabs of protecting opaque rock—a covering like that above our Temples of Aerat—'on which the rain may never fall.' I wish that you might communicate with me, good men of my world. How go the Gods?

"But now! These mountains are lifting, vanishing from my sight. A great *thing* which I cannot comprehend hovers before me. It has many colors, but mostly there is the orange of the mountains. It hangs in the air, and from the portion nearest me grow dark trees as round as myself and as tall. There is a great redness above, that opens like the Katus flower, exposing the ivory white from which puffs the Tongue of Death. Beyond this I cannot see well, but ever so high are two gigantic caverns from which the Winds of the Legends blow—and suck. As dangerous as the Katus, by Dal! Alternately they crush me to the ground, then threaten to tear me from it and hurl me away."

My nose was the cavern from which issued the horrifying wind. I noticed that my breath distressed the little man as I leaned over to stare at him, so drew back.

Upstairs, the visor buzzed. Before answering, so that I would not lose the little man, I very gingerly pinched his shirt with the tongs, and lifted him to the table.

"My breath! I am shot into the heavens like Milo and his rocket! I traverse a frightful distance! Everything changes constantly. A million miles below is chaos. This world is mad! A giant landscape passes beneath me, so weird I cannot describe it. I—I cannot understand. Only my heart trembles within me. Neither Science nor the gods can help or comfort in this awful world of Greatness!

"We stop. I hang motionless in the air. The ground beneath is utterly insane. But I see vast uncovered veins of rare metal—and crystal, precious crystal, enough to cover the mightiest Temple we could build! Oh, that Mortia were so blessed! In all this terrifying world, the

richness of the crystal and the marvelous metal do redeem.

"Men!----I see ... I believe it is a temple! It is incredibly tall, of black foundation and red spire, but it is weathered, leaning as if to fall—and very bare. The people cannot love their Gods as we—or else there is the Hunger.... But the gods may enlighten this world, too, and if lowered, I will make for it. A sacred Temple should be a haven—friends! I descend."

The little man's eye had caught my scissors and a glass ruler as I suspended him above my desk. They were his exposed vein of metal and the precious crystal. I was searching for something to secure him. In the last second before I lowered him, his heart swelled at the sight of the "Temple"—my red and black pen slanting upward from the desk holder.

A stamp lying on my desk was an inspiration. I licked it, turned it gum side up, and cautiously pressed the little man against it feet first. With the thought, "That ought to hold him," I dashed upstairs to answer the call.

But it didn't hold him. There was quite a bit of strength in that tiny body.

"Miserable fate! I flounder in a horrid marsh," the upset thought-waves came to the men of Mortia. "The viscous mire seeks to entrap me, but I think I can escape it. Then I will make for the Temple. The Gods may recognize and protect me there."



I missed the call—I had delayed too long—but the momentary diversion had cleared my mind and allowed new thoughts to enter. I now knew what my first step would be in presenting the little man to

the world.

I'd write a newspaper account myself—exclusive! Give the scoop to Earl. Would that be a sensation for *his* paper! Then I'd be made. A friend of the family, this prominent publisher had often promised he would give me a break when I was ready. Well, I *was* ready!

Excited, dashing downstairs, I half-formulated the idea. The headlines—the little man under a microscope—a world afire to see him. Fame ... pictures ... speeches ... movies ... money.... But here I was at my desk, and I grabbed for a piece of typing paper. They'd put that in a museum, too!

The stamp and the little man lay just at the edge of the sheet, and he clutched at a "great orange mountain" covered by a "vast slab of curving, opaque glass" like the "Temples of Aerat." It was my thumb, but I did not see him there.

I thrust the paper into the typewriter and twirled it through.

"I have fallen from the mountain, and hang perpendicularly, perilously, on a limitless white plain. I tremble, on the verge of falling, but the slime from the marsh holds me fast."

I struck the first key.

"A metal meteor is roaring down upon me. Or is it something I have never before witnessed? It has a tail that streams off beyond sight. It comes at terrific speed.

"I know. The Gods are angry with me for leaving Mortia land. Yes! 'Tis only They who kill by iron. Their hands clutch the rod in mighty tower Baviat, and thrust it here to stamp me out."

And a shaking little figure cried: "Baviat tertia!... Mortia mea..." as the Gods struck wrathfully at a small one daring to explore their

domain. For little man Jeko had contrived to see Infinity—and Infinity was only for the eyes of the Immortals, and those of the Experience who dwelt there by the Gods' grace. He had intruded into the realm of the rulers, the world of the After Life and the Gods Omnipotent!

A mortal—in the land of All!

In a world deep down in Smallness, in an electron of a cell of dead wood, five scientists were grouped before the complicated instrument so reminiscent of early radios. But now they all were standing. Strained, perspiring, frightened, they trembled, aghast at the dimensions the experiment had assumed; they were paralysed with terror and awe as they heard of the wrath of the affronted Gods. And the spirit of science froze within them, and would die in Mortia land. "Seek the skies only by hallowed Death" was what they knew. And they destroyed the machine of the man who had found Venquil land—and thought to live—and fled as Jeko's last thoughts came through.

For many years five frightened little men of an electron world would live in deadly fear for their lives, and for their souls after death; and would pray, and become great disciples, spreading the gospels of the Gods. True, Jeko had described a monstrous world; but how could a mere mortal experience its true meaning? It was really ethereal and beautiful, was Venquil land, and they would spend the rest of their days insuring themselves for the day of the experience—when they would assume their comforted place in the world of the After Life.

As I struck the first letter, a strange sensation swept over me. Something compelled me to stop and look at the typing paper. I was using a black ribbon, but when the key fell away, there was a tiny spot of red....

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