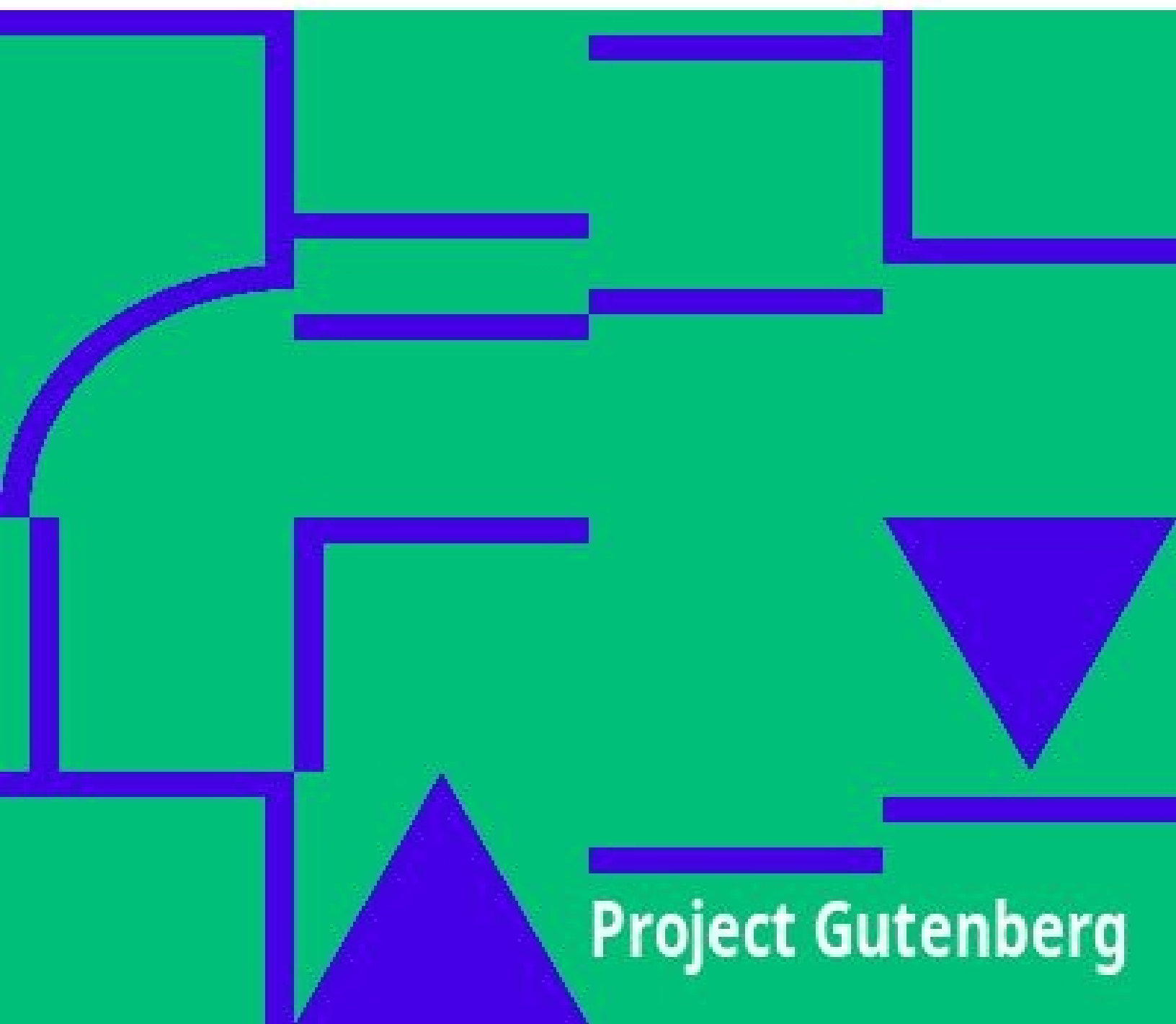


Prelude to Space

Robert W. Haseltine



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Author: Robert W. Haseltine

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You're certain to be included in a survey at one time or another. However, there's one you may not recognize as such. Chances are it will be more important than you imagine. It could be man's—



Prelude To Space



By Robert W. Haseltine

I WAS climbing the steep side of a central Wisconsin hill, holding my bow away from my body for balance, when I first saw the stranger. He sat on a stump at the crest and watched me struggle up. As I drew nearer I panted out a greeting and received his cheerful "Hi" in return. When I finally reached the top, I threw myself on the ground and began catching my breath.

He didn't say anything at first, just looked at the bow and the quiver of arrows on my back. Finally he said, "May I look at it?" and reached for the bow. I handed it to him. He examined it carefully and returned it.

"Beautiful workmanship. Is that all you use?" he asked.

"I never cared much for guns," I answered. "I've always thought a bow gave the animal more of an even chance for his life."

We talked then on the various aspects of hunting and how the crisp fall air seemed to make the deer seem closer than during the heat of summer. While we talked I tried to place the reason he disturbed me, but I couldn't seem to do it. He was dressed in an old plaid shirt and dungarees and his blond hair wasn't many shades removed from my own straw thatch. But there was something odd about him that I couldn't quite find.

"Perhaps it's the cloth." His words surprised me. "You see, it hasn't been discovered on this planet as yet." My face must have shown

astonishment because he went on in the same vein. "I admit it's confusing, but it's also true. My clothes weren't made on Earth." He chuckled then, deep in his throat. "I don't blame you for being confused. I know how I would feel if I met an extraterrestrial being before space travel was a reality."

I kept staring at him. Finally I blurted out, "What in Sam Hill are you talking about?"

He leaned forward on the stump and his face grew earnest. "You might say I'm a poll taker. I have to decide certain things from various interviews with individuals I meet."

"What are you trying to prove?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that until I'm finished with the interview. If I told you, your interest in the subject would tend to prejudice your answers."

"Fair enough. What do you want to ask me?"

He pulled out a notebook and smiled. "These questions may seem a little silly but I must have straight answers to them. Will you go along with me?"

I nodded my head.

"Let's see now. If you were the head of a government and wanted to ascertain whether another country was ready for admission into the United Nations, what would you do?"

I shrugged. "I suppose I would read books and magazines from the country and possibly have an interview with the heads of the government. After I had collected my data I could then act upon it."

"For the sake of argument suppose the books and other periodicals were written so as to be prejudicial in favor of the government, and

the heads also were coloring what they said."

I thought for a minute. "In that case I suppose I would secretly place someone inside the country to interview the people and get a first hand view of the situation. Then I would act on his data."

HE nodded his head. "Yes, the people themselves and the conditions they live in will give you the needed data." He turned a page in the book. "Now suppose that you wished to know if a certain planet was ready to enter into an organization such as the Galactic Federation, what would you do?"

"I suppose I'd act as I did before. Place people inside the various areas of the planet to interview and observe. They would bring back the information needed to ascertain whether they would be an asset or a detriment to the organization."

I thought to myself that the question was a trifle silly; after all, hadn't science proved that life couldn't exist on the other planets in our system?

He relaxed after I answered and his smile was brighter than the previous ones. "Right," he said. "Naturally we had to learn the language first, but now a first-hand check can be made. You see, there is a civilization out there," he raised his hand and swept the sky, "and we have to check to see if this planet is ready to take its place as an adult civilization with the rest of us."

"Earth, within a very short time, will be reaching her fingers into space. Once she gets there she will be eligible to join the Galactic Federation."

"That's all right," I said, "then we can exchange culture and knowledge with other civilizations."

"Yes, if you are eligible to join."

"But you said that once we reach space we will be eligible."

"Look at it this way," he said. "The main purpose of the Galactic Federation is to promote peace and understanding among the various planets. Earth would have to be prepared to take its place as just another member, and not an important member at that. Earth, you see, is one of the smaller planets and also would be the latest one to join."

"In times past some planets have reached space without being fully prepared for what they would find. They still had internal troubles on their own worlds. We had to place them in quarantine until they reached that degree of civilization where they were ready to live in peace. Now we check a planet before it reaches the space-travel stage. We find out the reactions of the inhabitants to certain situations."

"What sort of situations?" I asked.

"Well, naturally we want to see their artifacts as an indication as to their advancement. We have to know what the average man thinks of space travel and trade with other planets. And their ideas on peace and their feelings towards their fellow men. All are very important."

"Actually, when a planet once enters the Federation the people are the ones to decide on peace and war. So if the majority of the people on a planet are peace-loving that planet is ready to enter the Federation."

"But how do you find out all these things?" I asked. "When a man finds out what you are trying to prove he may lie because he wants to get into space."

His eyes held a mischievous glint as he answered. "Simple, the art of

telepathy has been highly developed among my race. I have your thoughts on everything I've mentioned. Later, when all the data from thousands of similar interviews is in it will be evaluated and the decision made as to whether your world will be allowed to reach space. We have the means of keeping you from it if we decide you aren't yet ready."

He stood up and I followed suit. "I must be going now," he sighed. "This work keeps me on the run and I have many more interviews to make. Believe me, it was a pleasure meeting you. I hope we meet again—later." We shook hands and he strolled over the hill into the valley.

Perhaps I should have followed him, but it wouldn't have done any good, really. Because a few moments later I saw something shimmering over the top of the hill. It was big and disc-shaped and shot into the sky with a speed that was unbelievable.

I still don't know what to think about him or what we talked about. I'm going to keep watching the papers though, and hoping he got the right answers. If we reach the Moon I'll know he did....

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