

The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Wedge, by H. B. Fyfe

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Wedge

Author: H. B. Fyfe

Release Date: March 31, 2010 [EBook #31833]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Robert Cicconetti, Alexander Bauer and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WEDGE ***

Transcriber's Note:

This e-text was produced from the September 1960 issue of *If*. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

Every effort has been made to replicate this text as faithfully as possible.

WHEN the concealed gong sounded, the man sitting on the floor sighed. He continued, however, to slump loosely against the curving, pearly plastic of the wall, and took care not to glance toward the translucent ovals he knew to be observation panels.

He was a large man, but thin and bony-faced. His dirty gray coverall bore the name "Barnsley" upon grimy white tape over the heart. Except at the shoulders, it looked too big for him. His hair was dark brown, but the sandy ginger of his two-week beard seemed a better match for his blue eyes.

Finally, he satisfied the softly insistent gong by standing up and gazing in turn at each of the three doors spaced around the cylindrical chamber. He deliberately adopted an expression of simple-minded anticipation as he ambled over to the nearest one.

The door was round, about four feet in diameter, and set in a flattened part of the wall with its lower edge tangent with the floor. Rods about two inches thick projected a hand's breadth at four, eight, and twelve o'clock. The markings around them suggested that each could be rotated to three different positions. Barnsley squatted on his heels to study these.

Noting that all the rods were set at the position he had learned to think of as "one," he reached out to touch the door. It felt slightly warm, so he allowed his fingertips to slide over the upper handle. A tentative tug produced no movement of the door.

"That's it, though," he mumbled quietly. "Well, now to do our little act with the others!"

He moved to the second door, where all the rods were set at "two." Here he fell to manipulating the rod handles, pausing now and then to shove hopefully against the door. Some twenty minutes later, he tried the same routine at the third door.

Eventually, he returned to his starting point and rotated the rods there at random for a few minutes. Having, apparently by accident, arranged them in a sequence of one-two-three, he contrived to lean against the door at the crucial instant. As it gave beneath his weight, he grabbed the two lower handles and pushed until the door rose to a horizontal position level with its hinged top. It settled there with a loud click.

BARNLSLEY stooped to crawl through into an arched passage of the same pearly plastic. He straightened up and walked along for about twenty feet, flashing a white-toothed grin through his beard while muttering curses behind it. Presently, he arrived at a small, round bay, to be confronted by three more doors.

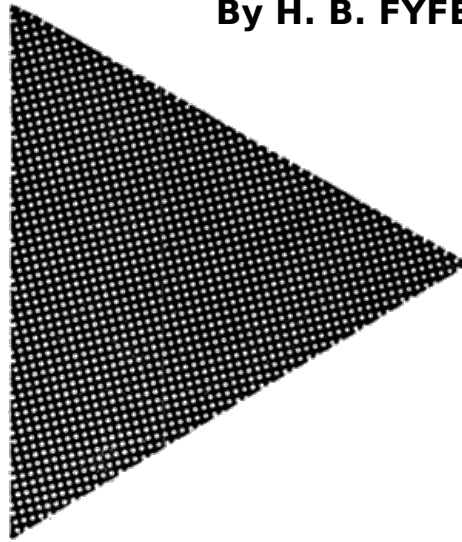
"Bet there's a dozen of you three-eyed clods peeping at me," he growled. "How'd you like me to poke a boot through the panel in front of you and kick you blubber-balls in all directions? Do you have a page in your data books for that?"

He forced himself to *feel* sufficiently dull-witted to waste ten minutes opening one of the doors. The walls of the succeeding passage were greenish, and the tunnel curved gently downward to the left. Besides being somewhat warmer, the air exuded a faint blend of heated machine oil and something like ripe fish. The next time Barnsley came to a set of doors, he found also a black plastic cube about two feet high. He squatted on his heels to examine it.

I'd better look inside or they'll be disappointed, he told himself.

From the corner of his eye, he watched the movement of shadows behind the translucent panels in the walls. He could picture the observers there: blubbery bipeds with three-jointed arms and legs ending in clusters of stubby

By H. B. FYFE



Finding his way out of this maze was only half the job.

The Wedge

but flexible tentacles. Their broad, spine-crested heads would be thrust forward and each would have two of his three protruding eyes directed at Barnsley's slightest move. They had probably been staring at him in relays every second since picking up his scout ship in the neighboring star system.

That is, Barnsley thought, it must have been the next system whose fourth planet he had been photo-mapping for the Terran Colonial Service. He hoped he had not been wrong about that.

Doesn't matter, he consoled himself, as long as the Service can trace me. These slobs certainly aren't friendly.

53

He reconsidered the scanty evidence of previous contact in this volume of space, light-years from Terra's nearest colony. Two exploratory ships had disappeared. There had been a garbled, fragmentary message picked up by the recorders of the colony's satellite beacon, which some experts interpreted as a hasty warning. As far as he knew, Barnsley was the only Terran to reach this planet alive.

To judge from his peculiar imprisonment, his captors had recovered from their initial dismay at encountering another intelligent race—at least to the extent of desiring a specimen for study. In Barnsley's opinion, that put him more or less ahead of the game.

"They're gonna learn a lot!" he muttered, grinning vindictively.

He finished worrying the cover off the black box. Inside was a plastic sphere of water and several varieties of food his captors probably considered edible. The latter ranged from a leafy stalk bearing a number of small pods to a crumbling mass resembling moldy cheese. Barnsley hesitated.

"I haven't had the guts to try this one yet," he reminded himself, picking out what looked like a cluster of long, white roots.

The roots squirmed feebly in his grasp. Barnsley returned them to the box instantly.

Having selected, instead, a fruit that could have been a purple cucumber, he put it with the water container into a pocket of his coverall and closed the box.

Maybe they won't remember that I took the same thing once before, he thought. Oh, hell, of course they will! But why be too consistent?

He opened one of the doors and walked along a bluish passage that twisted to the left, chewing on the purple fruit as he went. It was tougher than it looked and nearly tasteless. At the next junction, he unscrewed the cap of the water sphere, drained it slowly, and flipped the empty container at one of the oval panels. A dim shadow blurred out of sight, as if someone had stepped hastily backward.

"Why not?" growled Barnsley. "It's time they were shaken up a little!"

PRETENDING to have seen something where the container had struck the wall, he ran over and began to feel along the edge of the panel. When his fingertips encountered only the slightest of seams, he doubled his fists and pounded. He thought he could detect a faint scurrying on the other side of the wall.

54

Barnsley laughed aloud. He raised one foot almost waist-high and drove the heel of his boot through the translucent observation panel. Seizing the splintered edges of the hole, he tugged and heaved until he had torn out enough of the thin wall to step through to the other side. He found himself entering a room not much larger than the passage behind him.

To his left, there was a flicker of blue from a crack in the wall. The crack widened momentarily, emitting a gabble of mushy voices. The blue cloth was twitched away by a cluster of stubby tentacles, whereupon the crack closed to an almost imperceptible line. Barnsley fingered his beard to hide a grin and turned the other way.

He stumbled into a number of low stools surmounted by spongy, spherical cushions. One of these he tore off for a pillow before going on. At the end of the little room, he sought for another crack, kicked the panel a bit to loosen it, and succeeded in sliding back a section of wall. The passage revealed was about the size of those he had been forced to explore during the past two weeks, but it had an unfinished, behind-the-scenes crudeness in appearance. Barnsley potted along for about fifteen minutes, during which time the walls resounded with distant running and he encountered several obviously improvised barriers.

He kicked his way through one, squeezed through an opening that had not been closed quite in time, restrained a wicked impulse to cross some wiring

that must have been electrical, and at last allowed himself to be diverted into a passage leading back to his original cell. He amused himself by trying to picture the disruption he had caused to the honeycomb of passageways.

"There!" he grinned to himself. "That should keep them from bothering me for a few hours. Maybe one or two of them will get in trouble over it—I hope!"

He arranged his stolen cushion where the wall met the floor and lay down.

A thought struck him. He sat up to examine the cushion suspiciously. It appeared to be an equivalent to foam rubber. He prodded and twisted until convinced that no wires or other unexpected objects were concealed inside. Not till then did he resume his relaxed position.

Presently one of his hands located and pinched a tiny switch buried in the lobe of his left ear. Barnsley concentrated upon keeping his features blank as a rushing sound seemed to grow in his ear. He yawned casually, moving one hand from behind his head to cover his mouth.

Having practiced many times before a mirror, he did not think that any possible watcher would have noticed how his thumb slipped briefly inside his mouth to give one eyetooth a slight twist.

A strong humming inundated his hearing. It continued for perhaps two minutes, paused, and began again. Barnsley waited through two repetitions before he "yawned" again and sleepily rolled over to hide his face in his folded arms.

"Did you get it all?" he murmured.

"Clear as a bell," replied a tiny voice in his left ear. "Was that your whole day's recording?"

"I guess so," said Barnsley. "To tell the truth, I lose track a bit after two weeks without a watch. Who's this? Sanchez?"

"That's right. You seem to come in on my watch pretty nearly every twenty-four hours. Okay, I'll tape a slowed-down version of your blast for the boys in the back room. You're doing fine."

"NOT for much longer," Barnsley told him. "When do I get out of here?"

"Any day," Sanchez reassured him. "It was some job to learn an alien language with just your recordings and some of your educated guesses to go on. We've had a regular mob sweating on it night and day."

"How is it coming?"

"It turns out they're nothing to worry about. The fleet is close enough now to pick up their surface broadcasting. Believe me, your stupid act has them thoroughly confused. They hold debates over whether you could possibly be intelligent enough to belong in a spaceship."

"Meanwhile, I'm slowly starving," said Barnsley.

"Just hang on for a couple of days. Now that we know where they are, they're in for a shock. One of these mornings, they're going to hear voices from all over their skies, demanding to know what kind of savages they are to have kidnapped you—and in their own language!"

Barnsley grinned into his improvised pillow as Sanchez signed off. Things would really work out after all. He was set for an immensely lucrative position; whether as ambassador, trade consultant, or colonial governor depended upon how well the experts bluffed the blubber-heads. Well, it seemed only his due for the risks he had taken.

"Omigosh!" he grunted, sitting up as he pictured the horde of Terran Colonial experts descending upon the planet. "I'll be the only one here that hasn't learned to speak the language!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WEDGE ***

END

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law.

Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED,

INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as

not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.