

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 4 (His Head on the Chopping Block)

[Hex and Cleo have escaped from their captors and stumbled upon a secret hiding place high up in the Sierra Nueva. Meanwhile, back at Sprocket's Hole, there are signs of life.]

Davy Sprocket opened one bloodshot eye. The light hurt. He closed it again. His head was throbbing. A hammer seemed to be pummelling from side to side repeatedly within his skull as if his head had become a giant alarm clock that he couldn't switch off. He tried opening both his eyes.

"Oh God!" he groaned, as the walls of the hut swam into focus then blurred again. He stood up, every joint creaking audibly, and tottered out through the open doorway. Once outside he bent double and vomited violently into the sand.

This afforded him some slight relief. He was able to pull himself together sufficiently to inspect his internal error-log file. It had overflowed after 4095 entries but there was enough information left to paint a pretty dismal picture of the night before -- one 'seek fail : re-try' trace after another. His spindles had got completely out of alignment; and it showed. Not only that, spurious index records had proliferated so chaotically throughout his filestore that all the overflow buckets in his master directory were full: his entire memory organization was in imminent danger of collapse. It seemed that a fault had developed in the virtual address mapping hardware. Only the root segment was unscathed. No wonder he couldn't think straight.

"Oh God!" he moaned again, and, carrying his head like an infinitely precious but fragile work of art, he stumbled back into the hut. After the glare outdoors the dimmer light inside came as a relief. He was able to make out Bootstrap's body, sprawled awkwardly under the table.

Suddenly it all came back to him. The guns. The prisoners. They had gone.

"What's going on here?" he called out. "Goddamn it, Bootstrap, get your back-end out from under there!" He shook his partner as hard as he could, but Bootstrap remained oblivious to all sensory input. He had dropped out of real time.

"Cleo!" bellowed Sprocket. There was no reply.

Then he remembered Kludge's appointment. Galvanized by fear, he sprang to the window;. He could see no sign of anyone coming. According to the digital clock it was 0.1000E+02 precisely. That meant Kludge and his team were already late by over half an hour, which was lucky for him. He bent down and shook Bootstrap once more, without getting any response.

He was fully aware that to be caught empty-handed by Kludge having let their prisoners escape meant, essentially, the scrap heap. There was nowhere lower to sink than this deserted outpost. He would simply be recycled. Even sweeping the punch-room floor would

be too good for him after a blunder like this. Desperately he tried to think of some way out. His brows furrowed, in concentration.

"Got it!" His fist pounded the table.

If he could persuade them that Cleo and the Kid had been sprung by overwhelmingly superior forces, there was a slim chance that they might get away with it. Busily he began ransacking the room, overturning the table, smashing the legs off chairs and hurling furniture through the window. He was almost enjoying himself. When he got to the teletype, standing useless in its corner, he pushed it over and leapt up and down on it yelling "you dumb terminal!" in an attempt to deform its metal casing. But he scarcely dented it.

So engrossed was he in this wholesale vandalism that, amidst the noise of breaking glass, he failed to notice the arrival of three interested spectators who stood just outside the door staring at his bizarre activities. At last he stood knee-deep in wreckage and could breathe a sigh of satisfaction.

"Now all we need to do is tie ourselves up with some rope to make it look really convincing," he said, turning to look for some.

"You can spare yourself the trouble," said one of the visitors, holding out a pair of handcuffs.

Sprocket gasped. He found himself face to face with Inspector Extracode. Behind Extracode was the redoubtable Commander Kludge, flanked by yet a third important-looking robot. Extracode stepped forward and slipped the handcuffs crisply over his wrists.

"I can explain" began a deflated Sprocket.

"Save your explanations for the trial," interrupted Kludge. "Just tell us one thing: where are Hex and the girl?"

"Well," began Sprocket again, but he never finished the sentence. Worn out by his manic exertions, his memory befuddled by Cleo's random quadratic rehashing, and with no possibility of connection to the Network for a storage regeneration, he finally succumbed to the onslaught of semantic overload. His eyes glazed over.

"Abnormal job termination," he said in a flat voice. "Processor queue is being reloaded. Please re-submit input."

"Switch him off," ordered Kludge curtly. "He can be no further use to us. We'll learn nothing here. Our journey has been wasted. We shall return to the Computer Centre immediately."

"What about the one under the table?" asked Extracode. "If we can revive him he may tell us something."

"Let them both rot," replied Kludge, and strode imperiously from the room, his two assistants in train.

- Is this the post-mortem dump for Sheriff Sprocket and his deputy?
- Be prepared for a change of scene in our next issue.