

# ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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## Block 6 (Round the Block)

[Hex, Cleo and Ascii have left their mountain sanctuary while it is still light, largely at Cleo's insistence. They hope to recruit Cleo's sister Lambda and her friend Zap Zapper to their cause.]

Half way down the hill they paused. Hex had decided that Ascii should go off independently on an alternative route. That way, if they were being trailed, their tracks would be harder to follow. So Ascii set off on his own, programmed to meet them at a pre-arranged point near the San Guine research establishment. He rapidly out-distanced them.

They walked on.

"Sam?"

"Yes."

"She means a lot to you, doesn't she?"

He looked askance. Her persistence was getting on his nerves. "Are you bringing up the subject of Simula again? I thought I told you to lay off."

"I was just thinking that she's treated you badly but it hasn't stopped you dreaming about her."

"Good and bad treatment doesn't enter into it. Simula is pure code. Therefore she is bound to be both sharable and re-entrant. But being a human, you wouldn't understand."

Cleo nodded sagely, and with a touch of disappointment. She had understood all she needed to. Much to Hex's relief, she was content to let the matter drop.

They had now reached the foot of the mountain. Presently they came to their first sign of habitation, an orchard where Cleo stood on Hex's shoulders to pick some apples which they greedily devoured. Then they wriggled out through a gap in the hedge and found themselves at the edge of a road. Hex's first reaction was to dive back under the hedge for shelter; but Cleo stood boldly at the roadside, gesticulating.

"What in the name of George Boole are you doing?"

"I'm hitchhiking. You don't mean to walk all the way, do you?"

Hex spread his hands out and looked skyward imploringly. "We might as well go straight to Error Squad HQ and give ourselves up," he sighed, more to himself than to the girl.

The roar of an internal combustion engine became audible in the distance. Cleo pointed excitedly down the road. "Here comes our first lift," she said, and stuck out her thumb.

Hex trained his eyes on the spot. Soon he could make out a humanoid figure astride a large black motorbike, with what appeared to be streamers trailing out behind in the wind. As the apparition approached Hex saw that it was an android and that the streamers were in fact lengths of paper-tape that he had wrapped round his neck in the fashion of a scarf.

"He's slowing down," cried Cleo. "Come on Sam, don't just stand there. Let's get aboard."

The stranger brought his vintage four-cylinder Harley-Davidson to a halt just short of where they were standing. He wore an open-necked silk shirt with a colourful floral pattern on it, purple velvet trousers and a pair of long brown leather boots. He took off his crash helmet and goggles and swept away the paper-tape wrapped round his neck.

"Good afternoon, what can I do for you?"

"San Guine or bust!" Cleo blurted out. "We have to be there by nightfall."

The stranger eyed them quizzically. "With whom precisely do I have the honour of speaking?"

"I'm Sam Zilch of the experimental programming lab," lied Hex, "and this is number 0681. She's only a human; so she doesn't have a name."

"Charming," replied the other. "Allow me to introduce myself: I am James Hock, renowned systems analyst and motorcycle mechanic, inventor of the revolutionary word-processing package PUFTA (Procedure Used For Text Analysis). You are in luck because not only am I travelling on a minor road very rarely used, but in fact I happen to be on my way directly to San Guine on a matter of urgency.

"We'd be most grateful if you could take us there," said Hex politely. "I'm afraid we're rather stranded since we've been out camping in the wilderness."

"How frightfully heuristic," exclaimed Hock in a condescending tone. "I can assure you that I've done more camping in my time than you've had cold breakfasts." He took Hex aside and spoke in a confidential undertone. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to transport you and, er, 0681 swiftly to your destination; but, as you can see, my steed was built for two only."

"This is magnificent," called out Cleo who had walked over to his machine and was scrutinizing it with genuine admiration.

Hock continued. "Speaking as android to android, why don't you come with me and leave the human behind? She can get the next ride."

"No thanks. I appreciate your offer; but we don't want to split up."

"A noble sentiment -- but where will it get you? Look at me, fifth cousin twice removed of the celebrated Charles Babbage, creator of the finest text-handling and information-retrieval system on the market, and what do I get? I am spurned, mocked, a laughing stock. Why? Because I am a being of principle, a stickler for the old-fashioned courtesies, as I can see you are."

Hex found himself the object of an uncomfortably sugary smile; but he saw no reason to put a stop to the tide of compliments that was evidently about to gush over him.

"No, my friend," continued Hock in a grave and philosophical manner, "the age of chivalry is dead."

Just then he broke off, startled by the throaty roar of his own vehicle. Cleo was sitting in the saddle and had kicked it into life. As she drew alongside she called out: "Quick, Sam. Jump!"

With a hop and a leap Hex was on the pillion seat, clinging on for dear life as she threw open the throttle and the motorbike accelerated at breakneck pace down the centre of the small country lane towards San Guine.

"It's a good thing you've got me to look after you," she managed to say over her shoulder, her words clipped and almost lost in the slipstream.

Hex couldn't resist a smile.

- Wherever next?
- Next stop downtown San Guine.