

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 17 (Obloquy)

[We left Hex in mid-air, being borne up a cliff side by the friendly apeman who speaks colloquial Esperanto. The volcanic bowl in which they have been sheltering is warming up for a full-scale eruption, and the System's forces are hard on their heels.]

When Hex regained consciousness he was being deposited on a mat of grass. He looked up and saw Piltdown preparing to descend once more to fetch Ascii.

Half a minute later the four evacuees heard a single bark, then silence. They waited.

"He took six minutes & ten seconds with you," Zap informed Hex, "but he's more tired now so I'd expect him to take about eight for the dog."

"How long has he been gone?" Hex questioned him.

"Ten minutes now."

Hex crept to the ledge and peered over. There was nothing to see.

Perhaps he's taking a well earned rest," opined Cleo.

Hex was afraid that the bionic beasts had quarrelled.

The geyser spurted again. They could just see the white foam at its crown, level with their vantage point. While they watched, a curt command startled them.

"Stay right where you are!"

It was an ambush by the two animal handlers who had tracked Piltdown and reported their presence to Error Squad HQ. Tiring of their vigilance at the tunnel entrance and attracted by the sound made by the escapers, as well as by Ascii's lights, they had picked their way round the peak and taken this opportunity to steal up unobserved. Hex now found himself with his back to a hundred metre drop looking down the barrel of a recoilless impact device. The second robot, an UltiMate, touted a hypodermic stun-gun -- evidently brought to tranquilize Piltdown with a chemical dart when they caught up with him. There was little they could do except raise their arms in surrender.

They did not have long to wait before the scraping of Piltdown bearing Ascii up the cliff became audible. The robot with the stun-gun crouched down and took aim.

But it was the metallic Ascii who came over the edge first into his sights. There was a discordant 'thwang' as a dart ricocheted harmlessly off his steel hide. While the robot hastened to re-load, Piltdown hoisted himself over the side.

Everything happened at once. Piltdown was no bovine quarry but a fully sentient being. He knew the threat they posed to his life, as well as his liberty. With a bellow like an elephant on heat he bore down on the luckless UltiMate, whose auto-feed mechanism had jammed, picked him up by the antennae and hurled him bodily into the void. The howl of terror as he fell to his doom imprinted itself permanently on their memories.

But the other robot was not so slow. Dodging a hard diskette flung at him, frisbee-style, by Zap, he let loose a volley of fire that caught the noble savage head on. It was the end. The heroic creature's legs buckled. As he was falling, another hail of shots ploughed into his body. He swayed, teetered for a long moment on the brink, and toppled -- almost gracefully -- into the pit.

Ascii's revenge was swift and decisive. No sooner had the lethal bullets left his gun than the murderous robot was lit up like an incandescent bulb by the full power of Ascii's lasers. The hound, enraged at seeing his blood cousin scythed down, did far more than was necessary to toast the robot's circuitry to a frazzle. He would have drained his batteries and left Piltdown's killer a melted lump of iron had not Hex intervened to stop him.

The dust settled; but nobody spoke. Then into the silence Hex injected the most inept remark of his career.

"The box!" he cried. "We've lost the M5!" He began scrabbling around the corpse of the fried robot, who had carried a rope slung over his shoulders for lasooing Piltdown, but it was too scorched to use.

The others didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"We've just lost someone who gave his life in saving ours, and all you can think of is your goddamned black box!" expostulated Cleo, outraged by his callous insensitivity.

The rebuke hardly penetrated. "It was our only hope of defeating the System."

"Only hope? The bloody thing didn't even work. If Piltdown and I hadn't logged you off you'd still be down there sitting like a dead zombie, waiting for the mountain to blow its top."

"Of course it worked," was Hex's denial. "You just butted in at the wrong moment. You didn't even know how to log us out properly."

"Perhaps I might have known if you hadn't forgotten the golden rule: no implementation without documentation."

"It was pretty obvious. Just type STOP, END; FINISH. \$ENDJOB."

"Oh yes, obvious! 'STOP END FINISH ENDJOB'," shouted Cleo, rising to a new pitch of indignation.

"You still got it wrong," goaded Hex, now angry in his turn. "It's space STOP comma END semicolon FINISH fullstop carriage-return linefeed dollar ENDJOB end-of-text."

"Oh I see," replied Cleo with heavy sarcasm. "It's all self-evident really. You might almost call it self-documenting. Truly a monument to the system designer's art. That judiciously placed semicolon. Such exquisite elegance. Its aesthetic implications are breathtaking. And the fullstop. What a masterstroke! Words fail to do it justice. So simple in concept, so conclusive in execution. Pure poetry in JCL."

"You're just ignorant," he stormed. "The M5 represented a radically new departure. It deployed a matrix of holonic processors with bisociative memory. There has never been anything like it. It would have opened a whole new era."

"And you're just obsessed with gadgets. You're still a systematist at heart. You don't care about people. You're only a half-man," was her scornful denunciation.

"I'm not half a man. I'm a whole android."

"Well, whose side are you on?"

"Yours," he yelled, surprising himself by his own vehemence. Cleo burst into tears.

"Come on you two," cajoled Zap. "You're not married yet."

- Aren't women strange?
- Are they?