

ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

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[An epic in 32K words]

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Block 24 (Block Of Ages)

[Hex is imprisoned in Fort Ranfour. At Sprocket's Hole Cleo and Hex's former comrades are waking up to his absence.]

When they awoke to find Hex gone, they immediately instituted a search of the whole area. Needless to say, they found nothing.

Zap was scathing. "When he found he couldn't run the show, he just quit. We're better off without someone like that."

"He may have been kidnapped," suggested Cleo.

"What? The Error Squad heavies march down here, abduct him so gently they don't even disturb us, then march off again leaving us fast asleep?"

Put that way, it certainly sounded implausible.

"But if he went of his own free will," asked Lambda, "why didn't he leave any message?"

"That's exactly it. Our limelight-hogging friend cares nothing about our future. He just wants glory. He drummed us into this; but when the going gets hot, he just chickens out," denounced Zap. "I tell you: we are better off without him. He's probably gone back to the System to beg for forgiveness."

"In that case," concluded Lambda, "we're in real peril. We'd better move out of here."

"We will," Zap assured her, "as soon as I've prised the formula for Syllogistic Acid from that cowboy."

They turned to look at Bill Bootstrap, who had remained impassive throughout -- not even complaining about his cramped position tied up to the teletype.

"If you spill the beans without fuss," Zap told him, "it will be easier for all of us."

No reply.

"We haven't got time to be well-mannered about it," Zap warned, ostentatiously polishing the blade of his binary chopper.

"What good is Syllogistic Acid to you?" demanded Bootstrap gruffly.

Zap outlined his concept of LSD (Large Scale Disintegration). This had a strange effect. The recalcitrant Bootstrap became not just cooperative but positively enthusiastic. He swept aside Zap's plan as insufficiently ambitious, revealing instead his own grandiose design for VLSD (Very Large Scale Disintegration). He had obviously given the matter much thought.

"Syllogistic Acid won't be strong enough," he said. "Too dialectical. You need a really deadly nerve gas. Think big. Imagine a huge thick dark cloud of Jargonite Obnoxide drifting unstoppably towards Fort Ranfour."

"Jargonite Obnoxide," mused Cleo, "I thought that was laughing gas."

"You might laugh," replied Bootstrap with a leer.

"It's barbaric," protested Lambda with a shudder. "Jargon and all its mind-contracting derivatives have been banned from civilized warfare: it maims the intellect and brings thought processes to a standstill."

But the idea had fired Zap's imagination. He pestered Bootstrap for details. What was its composition? How was it made? Where could they obtain the ingredients? Before long, he and Bootstrap (now unchained) were immersed in technical discussion, like two boys with a chemistry set deciding to make stink bombs.

Production plans were soon well advanced. Cleo was to collect the mushrooms, Zap was to set up the filtration plant and Lambda would repair the cooking-stove -- all under Bootstrap's direction. And he hadn't even divulged the recipe yet.

Bootstrap described to Cleo in meticulous detail the markings and colouring of the fungus she was to seek (*Jargonite Intellectualis Paralytica*) as well as the kind of sheltered nook where it liked to grow, his face never betraying that they had met before.

She didn't like it at all. As she set out with an empty wicker basket for the harvest, she was filled with disquiet. Bootstrap's gaze made her distinctly uncomfortable. Unlike the others, she had first-hand experience of Bootstrap and his ways.

To add to her unease, she was worried about Hex. It was true that he was a loner and hadn't got on particularly well with Zap (nor with her latterly) but it seemed out of character for him to walk out just like that. She felt sure some evil had befallen him.

In this mood, she found she had walked a very long way from Sprocket's Hole before she recalled her task of mushroom picking. Fortunately, she had come to the kind of shady spot which was ideal habitat for them. She quickly identified a big clump and was soon busily filling her basket. She wandered around gathering them up by the handful. By the time her basket was nearly full, she had lost all sense of direction.

She started back downhill. All at once she tripped up. Mushrooms spilt out all over the place. Rising, she noticed with amazement that what she had stumbled across was an old railroad track. It seemed very odd, so remote and on such a steep incline. Quite forgetting her scattered mushrooms, she followed the rails upwards.

Before long the line simply disappeared into the side of the hill. She was standing in front of a disused mineshaft. A wooden sign was nailed to the beam over the entrance way. By scraping off the encrusted dirt and lichen she could read the words 'Quicksilver Mining Company'.

"This could be the perfect hideout," she thought to herself.

She went straight in, stooping as she walked. As her eyes grew used to the gloom, she could see that the sides of the tunnel were streaked with silvery green. She pressed on, dead level, but getting deeper into the mountain all the time. After two hundred metres she

came to a full stop. There was simply no way ahead. Looking back, the daylight was a mere pinprick. All she could hear was her own breathing and the nearby sound of dripping water. She was about to retrace her steps when her skirt caught on something. Reaching down, her fingers clasped a metal rod, set into the rock wall. It seemed to be some sort of lever.

There was a clank of rusty machinery creaking into motion. She was catapulted forwards. She had an instant of free fall in total darkness, then she landed with a bump in bright light on a table full of test-tubes and other glassware. A bottle rolled onto the floor and broke.

- Is this the lowest she can fall?
- Not by a long way.