ASCII THROUGH THE LOGIC GATE

============================

[An epic in 32K words]

Copyright (c) 1978, Richard Forsyth.

Block 19 (Communist Bloc)

[Cleo, Lambda and Zap have escaped from the inferno and reached Sprocket's Hole. Davy Sprocket is deceased but Bootstrap is in suspended animation, and Zap decides to revive him. Now they are waiting for Ascii and Hex to rejoin them.]

Hex and Ascii had not lost their bearings. They were late because Hex was still up in the hills, tinkering with Ascii's firmware. They too had witnessed the eruption from a safe distance; but afterwards Hex had settled down to implement an alternative plan. He had no faith in the efficacy of Zap's proposal for inducing Large Scale Disintegration, even though it had persuaded the others. A few hundred litres of syllogistic acid might have hilarious effects while it lasted, but it was no threat to the System's survival.

He had changed a lot over the past 48 hours. First he had tasted genuine interprocessing on the M5; then there had been the tragic episode of Piltdown's death, and after that his painful clash with Cleo. Finally the terrible eruption had set a seal on his transformation. He looked back on his former self with distaste: his had been a dilettante's rebellion, frittering away his all-too-limited freedom in a game of hide and seek. He had been no more than an irritating gadfly on the flanks of the System's torpid carcass -- scarcely worth the bother of swatting away.

His antics had been like a wilful child's pranks, meant to goad a parent into annoyance without provoking real hostility. But now he aspired to something higher -- the total annihilation of the System and all its appendages. He had become a fully-fledged Nullard. The Network with its fossilized hierarchy structure and the Database with all its paraphernalia of indices, buckets and overflow chains were abominations in his eyes, affronts to nature. The monolithic totalitarianism of the System stifled all expressions of individual initiative, whereas the M5 with its flexible heterarchic control structure tended to enhance them. The classic serial CPU logic seemed to him now a perversion of the true meaning of computing, a profanity. He had seen the light. In short, he had become a fanatic -- and about time too!

He knew only one way to destroy the System -- to hit at its weak point, its proneness to gigoticism. One thing he had salvaged from the black box was Dr Null's gigotic induction program. He had a source copy in his memory banks in the form of an augmented state-transition digraph. Of course he couldn't test it without going gigotic himself, so he had no proof that it worked. However he was willing to risk loading it into Ascii's job-queue (with an initializing delay loop, or fuse) and sending him off to Fort Ranfour which was the operations control centre for the entire Network.

As Dr Null had foreseen, just one gigotic processor was a potential doomsday weapon. Any informatic being with which Ascii communicated would automatically become gigotic; then that robot or android would pass it on in turn to others, and so on. It would spread like wildfire.

One problem remained. Piltdown had told them about the secret underground breeding-ground for the Future System. Hex harboured few illusions about its nature: it was bound to be the apotheosis of present trends, even more mechanistic, impersonal and inhumane than the present one. Deep down inside the mountain it might be able to isolate itself from the gigotic catastrophe, and later emerge with nothing to challenge its supremacy. Still, his own opinion was that the project was in its infancy and still dependent on the present System for raw materials and labour. Crashing the System would nip it in the bud.

Soon he had modified Ascii's microcode for the raid. He gave Ascii his final briefing and they parted company, perhaps for the last time. Then he made his own way down to Sprocket's Hole.

He found the others in possession of the log cabins. Cleo was tidying up the mess left by Sheriff Sprocket's last throes while Lambda and Zap were bent over Bill Bootstrap's body, attempting to short-circuit pins 4 and 23 so he could be operated in local mode.

"Where have you been?" asked Zap.

"Up in the hills. I took a long way round."

"Did you see the volcano?" enquired Lambda.

"I couldn't very well miss it."

"I'm glad it missed you," replied Cleo in a move towards conciliation; "but where's Ascii?"

"He's all right. I sent him off. He has a job to do."

"A job?" Zap queried.

"Yes, but he's perfectly OK. I'll explain later."

Zap creased his brows and turned back to his work. Hex's furtive evasion didn't please him.

"What are you up to?" asked Hex.

"Bootstrapping Bootstrap," was the answer, "perhaps you could help."

It didn't take long. Minutes later Bootstrap was sitting up again, his hands tied behind him by a length of wire, and glowering darkly at them.

"We want you to mix up some of your home-brew for us," Zap told him. But he said nothing.

Since it was getting dark, they decided to turn in and save their powers of persuasion for the morning. They tied his legs to his chair and roped the chair to the derelict teletype. Then they all kipped down on the floor of the same room. They were getting used to sleeping rough. Hex fell asleep as soon as his head touched the boards. But at 03:11 hours he was abruptly wakened. There was a message on his private FM waveband.

"Hex, can you hear me? It's me, Simula."

It struck him like a bolt of lightning. It sounded like her voice all right, loud and clear. But the System was very clever at emulation; and if it was truly her, why was the signal so

strong? Either she was very close or else using a very powerful transmitter. In the latter case it could be a trap, designed to make him reveal his position.

"Hex? Are you there?"

It just had to be authentic. No synthesizer on earth could be such a perfect mimic.

- What's the catch?
- Get caught up next week.