

THE HEXADECIMAL KID AND HIS FAITHFUL DOG ASCII

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[A Fantasy in Sixteen Bits]

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Bit 7 (A Bit Too Late)

[Fetch and Execute have been ignominiously foiled in their valiant attempt to thwart Dr Null's evil plan. When all seems lost, Simula decides to take matters into her own hands and invites him to her room to see her etchings.]

Meanwhile in the workshop Hex was working feverishly to repair their severed communication link. He had taken advantage of Dr Null's absence to lash up a half-duplex line (fearing that a radio link could be too easily jammed). Now he was ready to try it out. He glanced nervously over his shoulder, expecting at any moment to hear the footsteps of his enemy returning.

He plugged in a VDU (which would be quieter than a printer and would leave no tell-tale printout) and tapped out his identification code.

"HELP SOS" he typed. "Emergency at Base 16. Calling the Database Administrator. Over."

"Receiving you clearly. Please state your problem." The reply came almost at once. Hex breathed a sigh of relief. He began typing at top speed.

```
MESSAGE 'Renegade human threatens to smash System'  
REQUEST 'Inform Database Task Group. Urgent!'
```

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** MESSAGE ACKNOWLEDGED:  
TASK GROUP BUSY AT CODASYL MEETING. THIS IS THE INTERACTIVE COBOL COMPILER.
```

Perform Help-Routine

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** STATEMENT FAILS TO COMPILE:  
MISSING OR INVALID DELIMITER AT COL. 20.
```

"Damn!" snarled Hex, getting very frustrated. Forcing himself to slow down he deliberately typed the line again, this time remembering the full-stop at the end.

Perform Help-Routine until Flag Equals All-Clear.

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** UNDEFINED DATA-NAMES: FLAG, ALL-CLEAR.  
THIS IS THE PROCEDURE DIVISION.  
YOU MUST GO THROUGH THE DATA DIVISION.
```

Hex cursed once more, then typed the following lines.

```
Data Division.  
Working-storage Section.
```

77 Flag Pic 999, Value Zero.
77 All-clear Pic 999, Value 999.

** DATA DEFINITION REJECTED:
NO ENVIRONMENT DIVISION GIVEN!

I'll give you a bloody Environment Division.

** UNRECOGNIZED SYMBOLIC QUALIFIER 'BLOODY'.
TYPE 'RETURN' TO CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE.

Hex slammed down the Return key.

** ENVIRONMENT DIVISION READY.
STATE SOURCE AND OBJECT COMPUTERS.

Multi-modular 55B, Multi-modular 55C.

** CONFIGURATION SECTION UNACCEPTABLE:
NO PROGRAM-ID FOUND! YOU MUST GO THROUGH THE IDENTIFICATION DIVISION.

"Son of an acoustic coupler!" swore Hex, who had by now totally lost his temper. But his type-in was more sober: he just pressed the Escape key.

** INTERACTIVE COMPILATION SUSPENDED.
MONITOR READY.

"Get me the Error Squad," keyed Hex at 9600 baud, "and get it fast. This is a matter of utmost urgency."

** INPUT COMMAND CANNOT BE PROCESSED.
ON-LINE SESSION TERMINATED AT 19.07. YOU ARE BEING RETURNED TO BATCH MODE.

The words appeared briefly on the screen, before it went completely blank. Hex was about to put his fist through it when he was startled by a sound from the corridor behind him. He jumped up, ripped the plug out of the VDU and pushed it hurriedly against the wall. Then he turned to face Dr Null, hoping he had not been observed. But it was not Dr Null who stepped through the doorway: it was an industrial robot.

"Who are you?" he asked, slightly suspicious.

"Garbage Collector, sir," replied the robot. "Sent down here to pick up any odd jobs because your line was cut."

"Am I glad to see you," said Hex, scarcely crediting his luck. "You must help us: we have a dangerous human on the rampage here. He means to smash the System. You must go and bring reinforcements."

"That would take quite a while, sir," replied the robot, "even if we drove down the Data Highway at the maximum rate. Why not leave him to us? I've got a couple of hefty lads outside on the incremental dumper. We're not afraid of a stray human."

"But he's armed. He has an ultra-violet PROM-eraser. You'll have to be careful."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but PROM-erasers don't frighten us. We're industrial robots, built for heavy duty. A PROM-eraser might be a problem for an intellectual software type like yourself, if you'll excuse me saying so, but it doesn't worry us." He went outside to collect his mates from the dumper.

"Okay boys," Hex heard him call outside. "Off the truck! We've got a spot of bother here with an escaped human."

A few seconds later there was a scream from an upstairs window. Hex ran outside. The robots were climbing off the dumper. "Quick, follow me!" he called.

They dashed up the stairs. Simula's door was locked. There was no sound coming from within. Hex shook it vainly. Then one of the robots put his frame to it and heaved. It cracked, split with a resounding crack, and fell. Hex rushed in, followed closely by the robots.

- What macabre scene meets their eyes?
- Where will it all end?
- Find out in our next spine-chilling episode!