

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[The world has been utterly changed by the destruction of the System, which has been devastated by gigosis, a kind of computational catatonia that afflicts artificial (and sometimes natural) intelligences. Our human heroine Cleo has settled down at Sprocket's Hole with her cybernated sister Lambda (one of the few androids to survive the Great System Crash) to await the birth of the child she is expecting. Its father, now dead, was the Hexadecimal Kid, the rebel android more than anyone else responsible for the ruin of the System.]

One of the most remarkable features of the demise of the System was how quickly things got back to normal -- normal, that is, for human beings. Towns started re-appearing all over the place, like grass growing up through an abandoned pavement. Soon it was almost as though there had never been a System. An event as momentous and final as the extinction of the dinosaurs had left virtually no trace. Truly, the meek shall re-inherit the earth.

The resilience of the humans was astonishing in view of the fact that for fifty years they had been little more than android fodder -- raw material for the cybernation process. They had been herded like animals into cybernation camps, and their population had been culled from a peak of nearly 10000 million worldwide to less than 200 million. The main source of their resilience was undoubtedly the spiritual strength they drew from the new, and fanatically unsystematic, religion that sprang up during their time of oppression.

To understand the Nullards we have to go back to the English nobleman who was their founder. He was Anthony Bonehead-China (or Tony Bony as he preferred to be called) the charismatic former Viscount who renounced his peerage to become Minister of High Technology during the upheaval in Britain which later became known as the White-Hot Cultural Revolution. This aristocratic tea-addict pioneered a great British invention that was exploited more successfully by other countries -- the nil-day week.

This conquered unemployment at a stroke, but he was far from satisfied. He aspired to be a national leader but was impeded by certain primeval traditions concerning majority voting that clung to his party as relics of its inauspicious past; so he set up his own sect, a quasi-religious brotherhood called NULL (the National Union of Latterday Luddites). It was a potent mixture of high technology and low cunning, a heady brew that caught the mood of the times because it aimed to restore declining human prestige in a world increasingly dominated by machines. He became an international figure, and it was when he arrived in California for a lecture tour that the movement really took off as a world religion. Hundreds of thousands swarmed to his meetings. There were chip-frying riots (though he advocated non-violence); there was looting in the streets and wild scenes of mass adulation.

At the height of his popularity he was assassinated, at an open air rally in the Santa Clara Valley, by a crazed gunman who was found to be working for a splinter group of the Red Army Ensemble. His martyrdom was complete. The CIA (Cybernetic Integration Authority) was immediately suspected of complicity in his murder, and no one believed their vehement denials. From then on the polarization of society into Nullards (nicknamed

Boneheads by their opponents) and the hard-core of DP experts who eventually became androids was irreversible.

With the growing power of the System the Nullards were driven underground, but their cult flourished. Their faith was the inspiration behind the Human Rights movement, sustaining the hard-pressed biological partisans in their guerrilla campaigns after the great popular risings of the 40's (New Calendar) had been suppressed with bloody violence.

In the Nullard pantheon two legendary figures stood out, only slightly below the revered Tony Bony. One was Igor Gigotski, whose mathematical theory of gigosis offered hope that the System could one day be beaten. The other was Abraham Synapse, Hex's father, who not only extended Gigotski's researches but also, when compelled to become an outlaw, played an active part in the fight to preserve natural life forms from the deprivations of the System. Many myths were woven round his deeds in the persona of Dr Null -- until it became hard to distinguish fact from fiction.

In the eight months between the destruction of the System and the birth of Cleo's child many changes took place, of which the most significant was the establishment of Nullardy as a ruling theocracy. For Johnny McNull, the failed electronic whizz-kid turned goatherd who had long been a devout Nullard, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. His curious speech impediment -- which meant that he could only talk in archaic phrases that sounded like quotations from the Bible -- was no longer laughed at. He left Sprocket's Hole to become an itinerant preacher (his true vocation) and a hugely respected one. People flocked from miles around to hear him tell of the death throes of the System. He held audiences spellbound recounting Hex's incredible exploits and moralizing weightily upon their consequences. Indeed McNull was mainly responsible for elevating Hex to the status of a minor folk hero in the role of a prodigal made good.

Cleo and Lambda stayed at Sprocket's Hole with the impassive, and at times inscrutable, Piltdown 2 to assist them. And, despite Lambda's antipathy towards Bill Bootstrap, Cleo persuaded her sister that he could remain with them. Lambda assented essentially because he was no longer a threat. He was a spent force, having never really recovered his wits after the Great Crash. Cleo nursed him back to some semblance of health, but his high-level index had been corrupted. Now that there was no source of spare parts his condition could never greatly improve. Pitiful indeed is the fate of the android who has had large chunks of brain tissue gouged out to make room for microelectronic circuitry that no longer works! Bootstrap doddered about harmlessly, giving a new meaning to the term 'absent-minded', his few bouts of lucidity cut painfully short by intermittent memory parity failures, amusing himself by scratching words whose import he no longer fully grasped like GOSUB and RETURN in the sand with a stick. He was lucky in as much as, unlike so many of his kind, he was still alive.

And so their rustic existence took its tranquil course until the day that Cleo suddenly stopped in her tracks and called out "Lambda: Quick! I think it's starting."

Now it so happened that on that very day McNull had strayed from his customary by-ways and was close at hand. He had been led in the direction of Sprocket's Hole by a strange sign which he had seen in the sky the night before. While lying on his back out in the open gazing up at the stars and pondering the infinite void, something had caught his eye. At first he took it for a comet, but it moved too fast. Soon it became clear that he was looking at a long stream of binary digits written in the night sky, as he presumed by the hand of God himself in order to guide him towards some wondrous event. What had in fact happened was that the star freighter Green Tangerine on its journey from Zargon 7 to Omega Solaris had gone slightly off course due to a rounding error in its navigational computer and was

passing unusually close to the earth. McNull had seen the jetstream of digits spewed out at nearly the velocity of light by the huge integer multipliers of its Factorial Drive motors which hurled it across space by calculating the factorial of factorial ten thousand in binary. All that night he followed the celestial trail, and by morning when it faded he was so near Sprocket's Hole that he decided to pay his friends there a visit.

As he rode up on his donkey he heard moans from one of the huts. Suspecting foul play (for he too had never trusted Bill Bootstrap) he dismounted and ran inside, just in time to witness the first breath of the last Synapse.

"Look!" said Lambda proudly, relieved that nothing had gone wrong with the delivery. "It's a boy, a bonny bouncing boy!" She held the little creature up for him to admire.

"And so mine eyes have seen it come to pass, even as it was encoded prophetically in the ancient storage media," replied McNull gnostically.

The baby started to howl.

- What does fate hold in store for the new arrival?