

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Johnny McNull, guided by a mysterious sign in the sky, has arrived at Sprocket's Hole in time to witness the birth of Cleo's child.]

Cleo named her little boy Samson, after his father. The Hexadecimal Kid had been known to almost everyone simply as 'Hex', but she had always preferred his real name, Sam Synapse. She asked McNull to be the baby's godfather. McNull, flattered by the request, readily agreed, and his visits to Sprocket's Hole became much more frequent. He took a keen interest in the boy's upbringing, and it was only with great difficulty that Cleo persuaded him to keep secret the boy's ancestry -- for little Samson was a direct descendant of Abraham Synapse, now revered as a Nullard saint.

And so the infant grew into a youngster at Sprocket's Hole, looked after by his mother and aunt, and frequently visited by Johnny McNull. There were also in attendance Piltdown 2 and the shadowy figure of Bill Bootstrap.

Every morning Samson used to walk nearly six kilometres to the village school in what had been the Silicon Valley Human Reservation, since re-christened Happy Valley. His schoolmates teased him mercilessly about the diabolical black arts (such as assembly language programming) rumoured to be practised by Bill Bootstrap when the moon was full. Living on the fringe of events as they did, this was one of the few signs they saw of the completeness with which the new orthodoxy of Nullardy had won over the hearts and minds of the people. Its effect on Samson was to change his attitude towards Bootstrap from fear to curiosity. He was particularly puzzled by the way his mother tolerated Bootstrap's presence while clearly disapproving of him.

One day when he was ten years old he arrived home from school to find Johnny McNull's donkey tethered outside their house. He stole in quietly and found McNull in the kitchen chatting with his mother about the old days before the System Crash.

That afternoon some of the older children, who had been more fully indoctrinated about the evils of computers, had taunted him in a particularly vicious manner, one had even called him a bit-slice processor. He hardly knew what they were talking about; so, since McNull was reputed a wise teacher, he decided to try to find out.

"Hello Uncle," he said as he walked through the door, "what's a silicon chip?"

Both adults turned round suddenly, taken aback by his unannounced entry. There was a moment of cold silence.

"Hush, son!" his mother admonished him. "Don't talk about such things. Those days are all over."

"But you were talking about those days. I know you were. I heard you."

McNull drew himself up to his full height, which was scarcely more than the boy's, and attempted to tower over him.

"Be thankful," he declaimed, "that thou art not tainted with the stains of the past; for I tell thee that computers were the work of the devil. That which men called the System was a great wickedness which could have destroyed all mankind, and we must be for ever on our guard against any who seek its return. Ask therefore no more on these matters, that thy innocence be not corrupted."

Samson sat down rebuked. His mother started setting out his tea, and tried to turn the conversation onto other topics. But as he ate in silence he resolved to find out all he could about the forbidden secrets of computing. And there was only one person left to ask -- the formidable Bill Bootstrap.

His opportunity came a few days later, while his mother and aunt were busy in the vegetable garden and Piltdown 2 was out collecting firewood. He observed Bootstrap slinking off towards the hills that bordered their dwelling-place. He followed cautiously, well behind, and was immediately struck by the change in Bootstrap's habitual demeanour. Instead of the ambling shuffle of the doddering dotard his stride was quick and purposeful.

After 20 minutes or so Bootstrap stopped by a large cedar tree and looked around. Samson darted into the undergrowth, grazing both knees as he dived in. Peeping out, he saw that Bootstrap was digging under the branches. Reckoning that his quarry was sufficiently engrossed, he crept up to get a closer look.

Abruptly Bootstrap turned on him. "What have you followed me here for?" he demanded.

"I want to know about silicon chips," blurted out the young lad.

"So you're interested in microprocessors, are you?" A rare smile creased the android's features. "Well, you've come to the right place. Just stay there and watch."

Bootstrap resumed his digging. Soon he unearthed a large wooden chest, bound with ropes. He untied them and flung open the lid.

"There you are," he declared. "Gaze your fill. You won't see much of that around these days."

It was a veritable treasure chest. Samson was staring down at possibly the finest collection of microelectronic hardware still in existence. There were ROM's, RAM's, EAROM's, PROM's, UART's, LED's, processors of various technologies (Schottky TTY, NMOS, PMOS, CMOS and I2L), circuit boards, motherboards, disc-controller cards, a colour TV with video-dazzler interface, heaps and heaps of floppy discs and -- most valuable of all, though he didn't know it at the time -- fifty back copies of the CP/M User Group Newsletter. There was a place for everything, and everything was carefully put away in its proper place. Even the carpentry was impressive. There were boxes within boxes, neat little sliding partitions and shelves for the software manuals. He was looking at a decade of dedicated work.

Bootstrap drew out a pinewood box with a touch-sensitive keypad engraved on its upper surface, connected it to the TV set and slotted an 8" floppy into its side.

"Go ahead," he urged, "try it: type J 0000."

Gingerly, Samson obeyed. The screen flickered, then the message 'CP/M Version 23.04M, Copyright Mae West Software Shop' appeared, followed by the question 'Menu (Y/N)?'.

"Not bad, eh?" enquired Bootstrap. "Menu-driven CP/M. I modified it myself. What you are looking at there is the Moonshine Micro -- a scientific business system is on a chip. You want word-processing? You've got it. You want high-resolution colour graphics? It's right here. You want screen-based editing with full cursor control and programmable forward and reverse scrolling? Just press one key."

Samson wasn't sure that he did want editing with full cursor control, still less programmable forward and reverse scrolling, but he nodded appreciatively. He had tapped a rich seam of high-pressure sales patter in the normally taciturn Bootstrap, who had for so long been forced to hide his true colours. Now that he had found an audience -- albeit a poorly informed one -- years of repressed jargon gushed out like a geyser. Samson just let the buzzwords flow over him. When at length the flood abated he asked "can it play Space Invaders?"

Bootstrap tapped his forehead with the inside of his palm. "We have indexed sequential file-handling; we have PL/I; we have multiprocessing; we have stock control; we have payroll; we have nominal ledger, bought ledger, sales ledger and general ledger; we have compilers, interpreters, assemblers and more text editors than a cat has fleas; we even have a chess program better than Bobby Fischer -- but does he want to see them? Oh no! He wants to play Space Invaders?"

"So it doesn't have Space Invaders?"

- Well, does it?
- Find out next month.