

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Young Samson's fatal curiosity about computers has led him to Bill Bootstrap's buried hoard of semiconductor components. There Bootstrap proudly unveils his creation, the Moonshine Micro, and tries to dazzle him with terminology, but he is unimpressed. What he wants to know is whether it can play Space Invaders.]

"Sure it can play Space Invaders. It has at least thirteen different versions -- two of them in ROM. Here:" Bootstrap tossed over a stack of discs: "the best version's among that lot."

Some of the discs fell onto the sand beside him, making Bootstrap glower ferociously at his clumsiness. Samson scabbled around, quickly putting them in a pile again though he shuffled them in the process. Then he started rummaging through them. There was a cross-assembler for the PDP-11, a sort-merge package, an accounting suite and several colour graphics demonstration programs. It wasn't until the last disc but one that he came to one labelled 'Mae West Catalog #0000 — Star Wars, Star Trek, Space Invaders, Galactic Warfare'.

He handed it to Bootstrap, who shook his head and gave it back.

"What's that in your hand?" asked Bootstrap.

Samson read out the label of the last disc: "Mae West Catalog #0001 -- Star Wars, Star Trek, Space Invaders, Galactic Warfare: this one works."

"That's the one you want," said Bill Bootstrap.

Soon the hillside was ringing with the thin electronic screeches of alien spacecraft exploding.

After an entertaining afternoon spent destroying spaceships, planets (including earth), alien civilizations and entire galaxies, they packed up, re-covered the chest with earth and trudged back home. As they walked Bootstrap explained in detail to the uncomprehending boy the prodigious feats of improvisation he had been forced into by the lack of proper equipment.

Even before they drew in sight Samson sensed that something was wrong, and when they crested the ridge overlooking Sprocket's Hole he saw what it was: over 100 villagers from Happy Valley had congregated round the wooden houses armed with hoes, machetes and scythes. It was a Nullard vigilante party.

They had already been seen, so there was no sense in turning back. When they reached the welcoming committee the gang-leader stepped forward and pointed at Bootstrap. "You are accused of heresy. What is your defence?"

Samson looked anxiously for his mother, but couldn't see her in the crowd.

Bootstrap said nothing to the charge. He just stood staring defiantly at his accuser.

"Speak now Metal Man," ordered the leader waving his pitchfork, "in the name of Tony Bony."

"Tony Bony was a phoney!" spat Bootstrap, eyes narrowed. His answer condemned him at once. There was no longer any need even for the pretence of a trial. The mob surged forward, shouting angrily, and Samson found himself grabbed by a pair of strong hands. Bootstrap meanwhile was subdued, kicking and struggling, under a ruck of bodies. When he had finally been overpowered the leader gave orders for a fire to be built, and many eager hands began gathering up brushwood.

The irony of it was that it was a flash of human bitterness that had betrayed the android. By feigning dementia -- a role he had successfully maintained for ten years -- he might well have been let off with a tarring and feathering or a beating up; he might even have been hauled up before an ecclesiastical tribunal (as was his right in Nullard law) for an interminable investigation. If he had been a purely rational calculating engine, that would have been the obvious course. But if he had been that he would never have survived the Great System Crash. Here was a man, or rather a man/machine system, who had had an entire cerebral hemisphere excised to make room for electrological equipment which had been rendered defunct at a stroke -- leaving him partially paralysed, unable to speak coherently and, in short, a mental wreck. His very survival to that date was a testimony to the extraordinary recuperative powers of the human brain. Such had been the tenacity of his biological half that he had clawed his way back to near-normality (though without giving any outward sign of recovery away). He had even reached a position where he could effect some repairs on the hardware side, which he did by scouring the country for abandoned robot and android corpses whose precious semiconductor components, if they were in working order, he cannibalized. He owed his life to his humanity, to the fact that he had been imperfectly cybernated, which was why he had been exiled to Sprocket's Hole in the first place; but this only served to increase his poisonous resentment towards the human race. Now, in a sense, that debt was being paid.

When he had been securely bound and dumped on the top of the bonfire, the leader stood holding up a burning brand and asked him if he had anything to say before he died.

"The System is dead. Long live the System!" cried the android.

The leader bent down and lit the pyre.

Samson turned away, but the grip on his shoulders tightened and he was forced around. "No sonny," came a voice from above, "you watch. See what happens to those who dabble in computing."

Not another sound escaped the android's lips as the flames licked up. He just stared fixedly at Samson. Samson knew that he was being entrusted with the safekeeping of the Moonshine Micro and its accessories.

When the fire died down the crowd began milling around, and some melted away into the gathering dusk. There was no longer a focus for them. The man who had been holding Samson walked off, and at last his mother rushed over to him. She had been locked in the house before his arrival, and only just released.

Before all the people had dispersed, however, a voice called out "what about the boy?"

"Yes," chimed in another, "he must know something about it."

Suddenly Samson felt many eyes boring into him. The mob leader reappeared.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell us, young man, what you were doing with that heretic? And where did all those noises come from?"

Samson swallowed hard.

"What's the matter? Devil got your tongue?"

"Leave him alone." cried Cleo. "He's too young to understand."

"I think he understands me all right. Don't you, you little computer freak?" There was menace in his voice.

At that moment McNull barged through the encircling ring of bodies. He held up his hand. "Harm not the boy, for I say unto you all that whosoever harms so much as one hair of his head shall be cast into everlasting perdition."

McNull's words silenced them for a moment, but then the ringleader turned on him. "How come you know so much Holy Man?" he asked with a sneer. "You've been hobnobbing with a heretic."

A murmur of agreement buzzed around the crowd.

Cleo clasped her son more tightly to her.

- Cannot even preacher McNull's eloquence prevail over the ugly mood of the crowd?