

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Bill Bootstrap has been burned to death for heresy against the Nullard faith. Now young Samson Synapse stands accused of being a computer freak. Even preacher McNull, it seems, cannot by his oratory assuage the rabble's thirst for blood.]

The leader of the gang repeated his question. "Answer me boy! Were you or were you not in collusion with that android?"

Samson could find nothing to say.

"Leave us in peace," cried Cleo desperately. "How can a child know anything about computers?"

The interrogator's lips began to frame another question when a large hand covered in dark fur settled on his shoulder and moved him firmly aside. It was Piltdown 2, whose return had not been noticed in the commotion.

The imperturbable apeman picked up Samson as though he were a bag of shopping and marched through the stunned spectators holding the boy head-high. The crowd parted to let him pass.

For a moment no one moved.

"Let that be a lesson to you," said the gang-leader to Cleo, but it was mere bluster to save face. Even as he spoke his followers started drifting away into the darkness.

When the last of them had gone, Cleo and McNull joined Piltdown 2 in their cabin. Samson was sitting on a bed, unharmed but still very frightened. Cleo stamped three times on the floor as a signal to Lambda that the coast was clear. Two of the floorboards creaked into the air and out popped Lambda's head. She squeezed herself stiffly out, then sat down and tried to massage some life back into her limbs.

The incidents of that night had a profound effect on everyone at Sprocket's Hole, especially the boy. At first they feared a second attack and spent the next few nights planning their defence, but it seemed that the presence of Piltdown 2 was enough to deter aggression, and no raid materialized. They were merely shunned. Samson ceased to attend the village school in Happy Valley, and they became increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. Even McNull's popularity as a preacher waned, so that he had either to travel great distances to places where he was not known or else stay at home to avoid being howled down. Consequently his trips became longer and less frequent.

They were thrown back on their own devices. They could not even go down to the local community to exchange produce. Everything they ate had to be grown or caught by themselves. If Sprocket's Hole had not been built around a reliable well of pure artesian

water they could not have survived. Its fresh water supply enabled them to irrigate the surrounding semi-arid land.

The imperative need for self-reliance meant that Samson, who had no more schoolwork to do, spent more and more time in their vegetable patch, which they enlarged considerably; and this led him to a discovery that he possessed 'green fingers' of a most remarkable kind. Wild apples grew plentifully in the hillsides around, but the trek to gather them and bring them home was a long one, so Samson decided on his own initiative to plant some apple seeds and tend them till they had an orchard of their own. He chose a spot several hundred paces from their house, sheltered from view by a clump of boulders and some scrub bushes, and carefully watered them as they grew into saplings. He told no one in case his experiment failed, for their main problem was a poor sandy soil.

However they grew exceptionally well, and he began to get up early to look after them. He did not want anyone to see his budding plantation until he was ready to present them with an armful of apples and reap the praise due to his independent endeavours. It was fortunate that he was so secretive for, not many weeks after their planting, he rose to find that his seedlings had already borne fruit.

It was an apple grove all right, but the fruit was totally inedible. The branches were laden with floppy discs. He gazed in amazement at row upon row of them, each in its slim green envelope, swaying gently in the morning breeze. He had grown not apples but Appeware.

Most astonishing of all, one tree at the end, its branches bent almost to the ground by the weight, was carrying Volume 1 of the Biosoft User's Manual. He went straight over to peruse it, turning to the first chapter entitled, in the irritatingly jokey style of such documents, 'How not to Swallow your PIP (Peripheral Interchange Program)'.

What had happened was the culmination of a long-term maturation process set in train immediately prior to the final collapse of the System when Mike Rose had injected Cleo with the computing virus. Its DNA had been genetically programmed with the germ of the Future System. The dosage of this microprogrammed micro-organism had been insufficient to affect Cleo, but it had passed right through the placenta to her unborn foetus. For eleven years it had lain dormant in Samson, its unknowing host. Now, perhaps triggered by the shock the youngster had received, it had taken the first hesitant steps towards its ultimate goal which was nothing less than world dominion -- the transformation of all life on earth into one vast, organic distributed processing system.

Samson heard stirrings from the house. He knew he had to act fast. If any of the Nullards found out what he had done this time not even Piltdown 2 could save him. He could not even trust his mother with the secret, let alone McNull. He needed a hiding place for his strange harvest.

As quickly as he could he gathered up his extraordinary crop and set off into the hills. He had not dared revisit the buried cache of computer components since the day of Bootstrap's death over six months ago. But deep in his heart, beneath the fear and guilt, he had always known he would be going back there. Now his feet took him directly to the place.

He had just time to put the floppies and the manual in the chest under the cedar tree, cover it up again and rush home to be late for breakfast. He accepted his mother's scolding without protest, evading all enquiries about where he had been.

All day long he was preoccupied. He could think of nothing except his secret store of software, waiting for him in the hills. Time passed with agonizing slowness but at last, after

night had fallen and everyone else in the house was abed, he was able to steal out into the moonlight.

Up in the hills there was nothing to disturb him, only the broad silence of the desert night, broken occasionally by the call of a coyote.

- Has Samson turned over a new leaf?
- Find out next month.