

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Samson Synapse discovers the strange effects he can have on living things when some apple trees he planted bear floppy discs as fruit. He knows that in a world dominated by the fanatical Nullards he dare not tell anybody about it, but, even so, little does he realize -- in his first flush of enthusiasm for computers -- just how dangerous his mysterious gift will prove.]

Samson gave himself up to the subtle seductiveness of software completely. His secret night-time visits to the cedar wood where Bootstrap had hidden the moonshine micro became more frequent. Thanks to Bootstrap's acquisitiveness and his own green fingers he possessed the finest micro lab in the world. There he taught himself Basic and several assemblers, and there he spent many happy hours entranced by the musical whirl of discs humming in their drives or devouring back issues of the CP/M User Group Newsletter -- otherwise known as the Gary Kildall Fanclub Magazine.

The brilliant flame of forbidden knowledge shone into the crevices of his mind like the glare from an atomic explosion. It took him over. Computing became the focal point of his life. Programming was his opium: if a day went by without a line of coding his hands would tremble and his limbs begin to twitch. He even started constructing simple microcircuits from some plans Bootstrap had left behind, though he was hampered by a shortage of solder.

Meanwhile his behaviour at home became more and more erratic. His mother was worried and Johnny McNull grew deeply suspicious. Samson's nocturnal outings took their toll: there were black bags under his eyes, and his conversation was absent-minded to the point of idiocy. Sometimes he dozed off at the table in the middle of a meal from sheer tiredness. Preoccupied with the mental dance of registers and stack-pointers he became lazy in his work on the family plot, where before he had been an energetic and eager little boy. His relations with the rest of the household took a turn for the worse. McNull in particular was angered by the change that had come over him.

His home life would have come under strain anyway at that time, for his mother was pregnant once more. Her relationship with McNull, who now spent virtually all his time with them, had ripened over the years in an unspectacular fashion. Though nothing had ever been said, it was accepted that he was the man about the house and, in effect, Samson's stepfather.

The imminent arrival of a new baby, combined with his own erratic behaviour, distanced him from his mother; and his relationship with McNull deteriorated badly. He had never had much truck with Piltdown 2, so that left only Lambda to talk to. Sometimes he tried to coax some computer information from her, but she was not usually forthcoming.

"Aunt Lambda," he enquired one day, trying to sound off-hand, "you know when you have a PIO attached to the interrupt line of a Z-80 processor?"

"Yes," she answered guardedly, giving him a quizzical look.

"Well, how do you get it to hold the signal on the second channel if it's already busy with the first one?"

"Now why should you want to know a thing like that?" she replied with a wry smile, and the conversation was at an end.

During the period leading up to the birth he kept up his experiments in vegetable cultivation on a small scale. He had his own little plantation at a discreet distance, well concealed from the house. He was not really worried that it would be discovered. His main concern was that he would inadvertently affect some of his mother's vegetables and give the game away. This only happened once, when a row of runner beans started sprouting RS232 interfaces and he was forced to take the blame for the destruction of their entire bean crop.

In his own allotment there was nothing as dramatic as his first effort with the apple trees, though one myrtle bush surprised him by growing a plastic leaf with straight edges which was to come in useful later on. On one side it had the words 'American Express' embossed in blue lettering with his own name underneath. On the reverse it bore the legend 'I promise to provide the bearer, on demand, anything he can credit'. Not knowing what to do with it, he popped it in his back pocket and kept it for luck. It had a reassuring feel to it, and when he brought it out and waved it about he felt oddly self-confident. He assumed it was some sort of charm for warding off evil spirits.

On one plant he lavished particular affection. It grew from a cutting he saved when he had to uproot his original apple orchard. He put it in a pot and kept it on the window ledge of his bedroom. Sometimes he would sit gazing abstractedly at the delicate tracery of its branches spreading outwards and upwards from the smooth green surface of moss at its base. On one of these occasions McNull barged in.

"Wherefore doest thou waste time sitting up here?" he demanded. "If thou wouldst do something of value the potato beds need weeding."

"This is the Binary Tree of Knowledge," declared Samson, still half in his reverie.

"Talk not of such things," warned McNull, "for fear the Nullards hear of it; and if they take thee this time, I shall not try to save thee."

"You didn't save me last time."

"I said I shall not try," answered McNull. Then he turned and swept out of the room.

Samson waited till his footsteps faded then rushed to his bed and lifted the mattress to reveal a few precious sheets of notepaper. Looking at the branching of his tree had suddenly given him an idea for a new sorting procedure. Feverishly he began scribbling in assembly code to fix the idea before it slipped his mind.

So busy was he with his tree-sort routine that he did not notice the rumpus downstairs which started a few minutes later, nor the fact that McNull returned shortly afterwards.

McNull took one look at what he was doing and snatched the papers away.

"Hey!" he expostulated. "I need those."

"Others have needs greater than thine," replied McNull. "Hasten to thy mother's side. Do as thine aunt commands, for the child is shortly to be born."

Cleo's labour had begun.

"What about my subroutine?" Samson demanded.

McNull turned to face him and, very deliberately, tore it to shreds in front of his eyes. Something in Samson's head clicked at that moment. He looked up at his stepfather and saw an enemy.

Grudgingly Samson slouched downstairs.

Soon both he and McNull were scurrying about under Lambda's direction, fetching water, heating up pails, rushing about with clean linen and bumping into one another.

The baby was born late at night. It was a little girl. McNull held her up and made a long speech no one could understand while Lambda looked on beaming. Cleo sat propped up by pillows looking somewhat stupefied. Samson was left to do most of the clearing up. There seemed to be an awful lot of blood around. He did not like any of it -- the blood, his mother's moans, McNull's speechifying. It had a peculiar effect on him: he felt a little nauseated and at the same time light-headed.

Lambda swaddled the baby and put it in its cot. It dropped off at once and the whole household settled down to rest, but Samson could not sleep. A strange hunger gnawed at his entrails. After what seemed like hours of restless tossing and turning he crept downstairs.

He peered at the little infant, sleeping so peacefully by candlelight. Only its head and one plump shoulder were showing out of its wrappings. Samson licked his lips. He stared at one tiny blue vein in its neck, trembling like a butterfly's wing.

An animal compulsion took hold of him. He bared his teeth and bent down, his eyes feasting on the succulent newborn flesh.

- Has Dracula risen from the grave?
- Find out in next month's bloodcurdling instalment.