

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Samson Synapse is in grave danger. The shrill squawks of the Moonshine Micro have given his hiding place away to a passing Nullard, who has gone off to raise the alarm. But the Nullard is not the only one to have overheard him. Far out in space the sensitive instruments on board the Green Tangerine have detected a suspiciously high Astro-Pinball score, and two of its crew have been sent down to earth to investigate.]

Samson had to act fast. First he buried his equipment, though he had little hope of ever coming back to reclaim it. Then he tucked his potted plant under his arm and set off further up into the hills. He reasoned that the wilder the terrain, the less chance a search party had of finding him. Fortunately he came soon to a little mountain stream where he was able to slake his thirst.

He hiked along for some hours, trying to put plenty of distance between him and the rest of humanity, before he heard the barking. His heart sank. He wriggled on his belly along a rocky outcrop from where he could get a good view of the lower slopes. By now he was above the tree line and it did not require very sharp eyes to pick out five or six figures, each with a tracker dog, combing the hillside beneath. The Nullards were on his scent in record time.

There was nowhere to go but up, and he was near the summit. It was a flat-capped mountain, and soon he was alone on a small plateau, bare except for a few weather-beaten bushes. Not much of a hiding place, he thought. So he ran across, intending to go down the opposite side. He was brought up short, peering over the edge of a dizzying precipice. His little tableland was ringed round by cliffs.

"Lord above!" he breathed.

Rarely has a prayer, if it was a prayer, been answered so promptly.

Just then his ears caught a faint hum. Looking up he saw what appeared to be a large Halloween pumpkin, streaked with green, hovering overhead. It descended in the middle of the little plateau, kicking up a cloud of dust. When the dust had settled he saw that a panel in its side had folded down to form a ramp down which two supermarket trolleys were rolling.

"Identify yourself," peeped one of the trolleys as it trundled over towards him, "or be evaporated."

As it moved closer Samson could see that the shopping cart was actually a rack in which dozens of printed circuit boards were slotted.

"I'm Samson Synapse. I need your help."

"Identification inadequate -- incomplete job description," answered the trolley, swivelling a parabolic reflector menacingly in his direction.

For a moment he wondered if the Nullards with their dogs were not preferable after all; but then he had a flash of inspiration.

"Take me to your leader!" commanded Samson, whipping out his American Express card and holding it up like a referee sending off a dissident footballer.

"Yes, master, we obey," piped the cybernoids together, and escorted him up the gangplank.

"I'll hang on to this," thought Samson.

The Nullard posse arrived just in time to be eye witnesses as Samson was borne off into the clouds in what looked like an unripe melon. And thus another colourful thread was woven into the rich tapestry of legend that was to become the saga of Samson Synapse.

Back on the mothership Prestel hopped from one end of his perch to the other in impatience. The docking procedure was nearly complete and he was preparing to give Rom and Ram a chewing-over. He now saw that the whole idea of a talent-scouting expedition was a non-starter, and to cap it all they had returned so quickly they could scarcely have looked for the Space Ace, let alone found one -- even in the improbable event that one lived on that primitive planet.

When the docking ports opened his fears were confirmed. They had brought back a featherless biped. It was an immature specimen, not even worth putting in a zoo.

"You're going to suffer for this," he began, fixing Ram with a cold glare.

Sensing a frosty reception, Samson pulled out his trusty credit card.

"Kindly take me to the control room," he said.

Prestel gave a smile of exquisitely obsequious servitude. "Why yes sir, of course sir. Come this way please." He was led straight to the bridge.

When he saw the flight deck Samson's eyes boggled. "The real thing at last!"

He sat his shrub down in the co-pilot's seat, buckled on his safety harness and threw the ship into Factorial overdrive. The pipelined integer addition units purred into life, supplying large Fibonacci numbers to the multiplicative boosters. Samson felt a kick in the back as supercharged digits streamed out of the rear at full thrust. The ship lurched. Rom and Ram were flung sprawling against a cabin bulkhead.

"Exhibitionist," muttered Rom under his breath.

Prestel fluttered over to perch on the back of Samson's chair.

"Octal pieces," cackled the parrot, apparently content that responsibility for their safe arrival had been taken out of his claws.

For the ship was in good hands. Samson's amazing score at Astro-Pinball had been no fluke. Stowed away in the genetic coding of his DNA was a vector processor of astounding sophistication -- his legacy from the System. When it came to pushing a spacecraft to its

limits he had no rivals in the world and precious few on other worlds, though he had no idea how he did it.

But a novice pilot, even a greatly talented one, must expect a few mishaps to start with, and Samson was heading for his first.

It was Ram who spotted the danger.

"Look out!" he cried as the unearthly surface of Neptune's largest moon loomed up on the short-range scanner.

It was too late to change tack. Samson reached forward calmly as he had many times on the Moonshine Micro and tapped out the 'bulk erase' command on the console.

The scanner screen cleared miraculously. All that was left in front of them was a little red sign saying 'TILT'. Rom and Ram looked at each other in awe. Soon they were winging their way through the void, with Ram calling out a recomputed course for the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.

Earth was at a low cultural ebb at that time, but the disappearance of Neptune's satellite Triton, the most massive in the solar system, did not go completely unnoticed. Most observers took it as a religious sign; but one stargazer who very nearly hit upon the right explanation was Johnny McNull.

He poked his head into the kitchen at Sprocket's Hole, having just witnessed the celestial firework display occasioned by Triton's dematerialization, and pronounced portentously: "those that have been with us are now gone far away, and that which had been mighty is now set at naught, even in the twinkling of an eye; for when the time for Deletion comes even the stars in their courses shall be swept from the firmament."

"Do come in and sit down dear," admonished Cleo, "your supper's getting cold."

- More food for thought next month.