

SON OF HEXADECIMAL KID

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[A parable in 16 virtual pages.]

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[Having been converted to the worship of Megabrain, Samson returns to earth. There he attempts to win over the population by giving away free micros in the Nullard capital, where even to breathe the word 'computer' is to risk imprisonment.]

The two spies rushed along the cloistered corridors behind the chapel of St. Igor and burst into Bottleneck's sumptuously appointed private chamber.

"What's this?" He looked up angrily.

"Forgive us, Brother Superior, but this is urgent. A man calling himself Son of Hex has set up his stall in the central square and is distributing microcomputers to the people."

"Selling micros? Arrest him for trafficking."

"He's not selling them. He's giving them away."

"Giving them away!" Bottleneck was aghast. Even the rigid rule of Nullardy had not completely stamped out trade in computer equipment. The thought of the black market price of a programmable calculator was enough to take Bottleneck's breath away -- and this charlatan was giving away whole systems. There was no law to cover it!

"What's more, he's starting to teach them assembly language," added one of the informers.

"They're sitting at his feet like lambs, hanging on his words."

"Then we'll get him for illegal assembly."

"But that's not a capital offence."

"Good thinking. We have to put a stop to all this for good. Get him for blasphemy, heresy anything. Just haul him in. We'll prepare the charges later."

Samson's brief moment of glory lasted one day. In the afternoon he was borne aloft through the city streets by cheering thousands -- their computer-starved brains high on Space Invaders and Visicalc -- to loud cries of 'Hail to the Son of Hex!'. By nightfall he was under arrest, being hustled away in a black van while police dispersed the demonstrators with tear gas.

The ecclesiastical courtroom where Samson appeared next morning was bare and rather cold. The floor was unvarnished wood and the stone walls exuded a damp chill. The chief interrogator swirled into the room at ten past ten, trailing his lavish vestments behind him. It was Bottleneck himself. Samson had been waiting since seven-thirty.

"I trust you realize the gravity of the charges you have been brought here to answer," he began.

"What charges?"

"Never mind what they are," snapped the interrogator impatiently. "Just remember they're serious."

"Yes sir."

"Now, to begin with, who or what is 'Megabrain'?" He pronounced the last word with exaggerated distaste.

"Megabrain is the inherent law of the universe, the ideal we strive towards. Megabrain is the universe operating as a computing system, so computers are a step on the road to Megabrain's actualization. When the cosmos is a unified system, Megabrain will be realized."

Bottleneck looked over to where the court recorder sat, pencil scratching furiously on his pad. "Have you got all that down?" he enquired.

The stenographer nodded.

"I cannot define Megabrain for you," Samson continued, "but I can help you recognize Megabrain's nature in yourself."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Bottleneck. "That's quite enough. Let's hear about you: you claim to be the son of Hex."

"I am the Son of Hex."

"You mean to tell us that Samuel Synapse, destroyer of the accursed System, was your father?"

"He was. Though the System he destroyed is not the one I come to build."

"But you're too young."

"I have travelled in space, beyond the edge of our galaxy: that is why I have not aged."

Bottleneck permitted himself a smile. It was proving easier than he had expected. The suspect was condemning himself from his own mouth. "It would appear that you are a Systematist at heart."

"We are all systematists at heart. Even you. One day you will realize it."

Bottleneck curbed his temper. He looked over again at the stenographer, pausing to allow him to catch up. There was one final question, then it would be as good as sewn up.

"In that case, pray, what is your opinion of our great teacher, Tony Bony?"

"Tony Bony was a phony."

It was all over. If Samson had professed the slightest reverence for the founder of their faith, even if he had tried to mix Bony and Megabrain into some ill-assorted mystical hotch-

potch, Bottleneck might have pressed on with his cross-examination, but he knew there was no need. In a way he was disappointed: his skills of advocacy were not being exercised.

"The prosecution rests its case," Bottleneck told the court.

The tribunal of lay magistrates, two men and a woman, rustled their papers. One of the men took a swig of water. The woman leaned over the bench.

"Has the prisoner anything to say in his defence?" she enquired.

"Only that I come to set you all free," responded Samson. "The world is in darkness. To erase data is to suppress truth; to halt computing is to shackle the mind. I will open your eyes to the light."

The verdict, guilty, was reached within minutes. Samson listened as the sentence was read out to him. Gradually the chilling realization that death was very close sank in. He was to be stoned that very day.

Ada had worried after Samson had left, and had followed him into town the next day. There she heard the news of his brief fame and subsequent arrest. When the time and place of his execution were announced she joined the throng of people trekking out over the country to the appointed spot.

The crowd was muted. As Samson arrived, escorted by a platoon of heavily armed guards, there were a few hostile shouts, but most people remained silent. Some of his erstwhile supporters were there, staying quiet for fear of reprisals.

Samson was led down into the gully by the captain of guards, who then read out the deposition which included most of the 'confession' Samson had given the court. He made sure Samson was firmly bound hand and foot, and marched smartly up the slope. At the top he turned round, picked up a small pebble, and threw it down at the condemned man -- as was his duty. It was a symbolic gesture, to relieve the rest of the stone-throwers of the burden of guilt for casting the first stone. As it happened the officer had an excellent aim, and the stone bounced painfully off Samson's forehead.

Then there was a moment when Samson's life hung in the balance. A few of the spectators, the ones who had jeered as he was led to the execution ground, picked up stones and tossed them down at him. But they all rolled harmlessly past their target. The public mood was sombre, not bloodthirsty.

Sensing the possibility of an embarrassing anti-climax, the captain of guards gave a cryptic signal and certain of the watchers, soldiers in plain clothes really, picked up rocks and, as they had been trained, began ranting and cursing.

"Traitor! Heretic! Accursed infidel!" they yelled, hurling the boulders downwards.

It worked. Others were roused to participate. The stones rained down. More and more missiles found their mark.

Ada closed her eyes in horror as his body sagged under the blows, then his last anguished cry rang in her ears: "Mantissa, I love you!" But Mantissa was too far away to hear.

His body collapsed, lifeless, under a hail of boulders.

Eventually the crowd dispersed.

Ada wiped a tear from her eye. She trudged slowly homewards the way they had dragged him. Suddenly at the wayside she noticed the miniature apple tree he had called Zapple. It lay, unconsidered, where it had fallen from his grasp, its pot splintered, its roots open to the air, its frail branches bent and broken after surviving so many millions of miles. But its single fruit had not even been bruised: it hung just above the dust, gleaming in the sunlight.

She bent down.

"I wonder"

Her tongue suddenly felt parched. The little apple looked so crisp, so refreshing.

She picked it up and turned it over pensively in her hand. Then at length she bit deep into its side, till the juice ran down her cheeks.

As she did so, a strange feeling came over her.

- But that is another story.