

Easy pickings

by Pete Claisse

The session chairman looked up in surprise. The presentation had stopped quite suddenly, no summary of results or conclusions, just one last graph and it was done. The Professor was smiling at him. He had been catching his attention and tapping his watch for the last three minutes to make sure there was time for questions and now he had five minutes to fill. He looked up at the audience in relief. Some hands had gone up; he wasn't going to have to think one up himself. He took the first two from near the front, a friend of the Professor with more of a compliment than a question and an old member, well into his retirement but sharp as a knife, with one that was hard hitting but easily ducked. Finally there was the young Chinese man at the back, presumably a research student, who stood up nervously and took the roving microphone.

"The graphs mine." He said, followed by something unintelligible.

The audience separated into two groups. Those who had been watching looked nervously at the floor, clearly wishing to be elsewhere. Those who had not been listening were mostly looking at the palm trees visible through the small windows and were also wishing to be elsewhere, specifically the pool which was in front of the trees. The chair immediately saw the problem.

"Well I am sure the speakers will be glad to discuss any further questions over lunch. This will be served in the terrace bar today, on your left as soon as you are through the door behind you. Please thank the speakers in the usual way."

Chen stood in the queue for the buffet lunch. He had tried to join a group who looked as if they were also research students but none of them turned to face him or include him in their conversation. Just as he had found a plate and was about to take a spoon-full of rice he felt himself being pushed to one side, spilling the rice on the table. He looked up to see the man who had asked the first question, tall and heavily built, looming over him.

"You mind what you say about the professor sonny. You might find yourself on the next boat back home choppy choppy." With that he was gone, ignoring the startled looks of the other students.

Chen joined the other students again at a table for the dinner. It took until the dessert, and several bottles of wine, before the girl next to him spoke to him.

"Did he really copy your graphs?"

"Yes, he must have copied them from my personal files on the network. I had no idea."

"How could he do that?"

"He must have got my password from somewhere."

"If I was you I'd forget it. You won't be able to prove it and you can still put them in your thesis. He won't try to stop you doing that because then he'll have to explain how you got them. If you make a fuss you'll never pass your viva and get your PhD."

"But he stole my results. He never even listed me as a second author."

She turned away to join in the rest of the conversation on the table. Soon the speeches started. The Professor was a guest of honour and went on for a full 30 minutes.

Finally he finished and the other students started to leave. Chen was about to follow when he saw a man walking towards him through the groups of tables. He looked like another professor but it was too late to walk out. The man sat in an empty chair and faced Chen.

“You accused Bill, that’s Professor Thornton, of copying your graphs.”

“Yes I did.” By this time the remaining students were all listening.

“Are you sure?. Because if you’re sure, we need to do something. By the way my name’s Professor Hunt, that’s John Hunt.”

They had all seen some of his papers and looked on with interest.

“I represent an informal group. We deal with these things. If you see papers being redacted then that’s probably us.”

The city was different. Instead of a row of hotels behind a beach it had a small group of glass-clad skyscrapers and, all around, less than a mile away, a sprawl of factories and slums with snow-clad mountains beyond. From inside the conference hotel, however, it was identical with plush sofas set in vast open spaces with giant chandeliers above them. The pool was in a vast marble-clad room on the twentieth floor with panoramic windows to enable bathers to enjoy the view of the city which, particularly at night, was spectacular.

To the attentive members of his audience, Bill Thornton seemed slightly more nervous than would be expected of a man of his reputation and seniority. However he presented his graphs in professional manner and the data in them was nothing short of excellent. When he finished, the chair was again relieved to see several hands go up with questions. The Chinese research student was sitting nearer to the front this time, waving his hand eagerly but, possibly due to the lack of time or the number of other questions, he was never called. Now brimming with confidence the Professor smiled graciously at the chair before returning to his seat.

Chen held his hand up all the time until the Professor was seated, trying to catch his eye. The man ignored him but John Hunt gave him an almost imperceptible nod of his head when he lowered it.

Bill sat under a single fluorescent tube dimly lighting one corner of the research room. He had a fine office lined with books but if this account was opened from an unexpected node the network would flag up an exception. The files were labelled with Chinese characters but a single number at the end seemed to designate the Chapter and the graphs were all there in chapters 5 and 6. Chen’s thesis was almost complete and he could see that it would be a credit to the department. However, for whatever reason, his supervisor had never let him put his work into a conference for presentation. Bill had seen him working in the lab and his attention to detail was superb.

Bill looked up startled. It was late on a Saturday evening and he had been sure he would not be disturbed. The door opened. A torch beam swung around the room, eventually shining in his direction. He waved and managed a smile for the security guard who quickly apologised for disturbing him.

The graphs contained a lot more data than he had presented before and they were now ready to go in the final thesis with tidy diagrams to illustrate the key points and patterned shading to highlight the important data. He felt sad that he didn’t have the time to get his own data but it wasn’t his fault that he had such a high teaching and administrative load, and he had to hit his target and get two publications every year. He quickly copied the files onto a memory stick. It would only take him a few minutes to set

them up in a presentation, which was just as well because he had a dinner appointment on the other side of town in half an hour. The graphs even had convenient spaces in the bottom corner so when he sent them in to the conference secretariat they could add the sponsor's logo before setting them up ready for him on the lectern. Chen would no doubt wave his hand again but the chair would surely take his advice and not call him and Bill had used a neat little software package which stripped all identity from the files so no allegations could stand up. He had bought it for checking blind reviews for the journal he ran and it was ideal for this.

This time the sponsors had been generous, the conference was on a cruise ship. The main theatre in the bow extended through several decks and easily matched the facilities in the best conference centres. As the ship went slowly on with the day at sea he could feel no motion at all and in these new cruise liners, there was, of course, no noise or vibration from the engines to interfere with his presentation. Bill had been invited to present a keynote paper during the opening plenary session and, at his recommendation, the chair was the same man as before. He came from a minor University and was of Chinese origin but Bill was confident that he was completely reliable.

The opening speeches finished. The captain, resplendent in white uniform, had welcomed them on board on behalf of the cruise line and the Chair of the board of the sponsors had given some thinly disguised promotion for their products. Bill walked to the lectern as the technician in high heels and short skirt quickly loaded his file. He started with a couple of slides of text and moved quickly to the data. He could see that many of the audience were keen to see if the results supported and extended what he had presented before, and he was sure they would not be disappointed.

When he displayed the first graph he saw several of them turn to their neighbours and speak in hurried tones. Thinking this slightly rude, but gaining confidence from the obvious impact of the work he moved on to the next.

But now he saw that those who were talking were Chinese. He saw Chen start laughing, oddly sharing the joke with John Hunt. He turned to see that the chair had stood up and was staring at the screen. More and more of the audience were laughing, all pointing at his graph. At a loss he turned to look at it on the screen. The audience fell silent as he turned. He could hear the footsteps of the chairman on the wooden floor. They hesitated and stopped. The big screen looked slightly different from the monitor on the lectern. The patterns in the shading marking the key data seemed to stand out. He was sweating now – why was it so hot? The low rumble of the air conditioning sounded loud. He almost stumbled. Was the ship rocking? Why hadn't he noticed it before? What was it he could see in the shading? Could they be Mandarin characters? What did they say?