Pickman’s Modem

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Ihadn’t seen Pickman on-line for some time; I thought he’d given up on the computer nets. You can waste hours every day reading and posting messages, if you aren’t careful, and the damn things are addictive; they can take up your entire life if you aren’t careful. The nets will eat you alive if you let them.

Some people just go cold turkey when they realize what’s happening, and I thought that was what had happened to Henry Pickman, so I was pleased and surprised when I saw the heading scroll across my monitor screen, stating that the next post had originated from his machine. Henry Pickman was no Einstein or Shakespeare, but his comments were usually entertaining, in an oafish sort of way. I had rather missed them during his absence.

“From the depths I return and greet you all,” I read. “My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience that my withdrawal might have occasioned.”

That didn’t sound at all like the Henry Pickman I knew; surprised, I read on, through three screens describing, with flawless spelling and mordant wit, the trials and tribulations of the breakdown of his old modem, and the acquisition of a new one. Lack of funds had driven him to desperate measures, but at last, by judicious haggling and trading, he had made himself the proud owner of a rather battered, but functional, 2400-baud external modem. The case proclaimed it to be a product of Miskatonic Data Systems, of Arkham, Massachusetts, and Pickman inquired innocently whether anyone in the net was familiar with that particular manufacturer.

I posted a brief congratulatory reply, denying any such knowledge, and read on.

When I browsed the message base the next day I found three messages from Pickman, each a small gem of sardonic commentary. I marveled at the improvement in Pickman’s writing—in fact, I wondered whether it was really Henry Pickman at all, and not someone else using his account.

It was the day after that, the third day, that the flamewar began.

For those unfamiliar with computer networks, let me explain that in on-line conversation, the normal social restraints on conversation don’t always work; as a result, minor disagreements can flare up into towering great arguments, with thousands of words of invective hurled back and forth along the phone lines. Emotions can run very high indeed. The delay in the system means that often, a retraction or an apology arrives too late to stop the war of words from raging out of control.

These little debates are known as “flamewars.”

And Pickman’s introductory message had triggered one. Some reader in Kansas City had taken offense at a supposed slur on the Midwest, and launched a flaming missive in Pickman’s direction.

By the time I logged on and saw it Pickman had already replied, some fifty messages or so down the bitstream, and had replied with blistering sarcasm and a vituperative tone quite unlike the rather laid-back Pickman I remembered. His English had improved, but his temper clearly had not.

I decided to stay out of this particular feud. I merely watched as, day after day, the messages flew back and forth, growing ever more bitter and vile. Pickman’s entries, in particular, were remarkable in their viciousness, and in the incredible imagination displayed in his descriptions of his opponents. I wondered, more than ever, how this person could be little Henry Pickman, he of the sloppy grin and sloppier typing.

Within four or five days, both sides were accusing the other of deliberate misquotation, and I began to wonder if perhaps something even stranger than a borrowed account might not be happening.

I decided that drastic action was called for; I would drop in on Henry Pickman in person, uninvited, and talk matters over with him—talk, with our mouths, rather than type. Not at a net party, or a convention, but simply at his home. Accordingly, that Saturday afternoon found me on his doorstep, my finger on the bell.

“Yeah?” he said, opening the door. “Who is it?” He blinked up at me through thick glasses.

“Hi, Henry,” I said. “It’s me, George Polushkin—we met at the net party at Schoonercon.”

“Oh, yeah!” he said, enlightenment dawning visibly on his face.

“May I come in?” I asked.

Fifteen minutes later, after a few uncomfortable silences and various mumbled pleasantries, we were both sitting in his living room, open cans of beer at hand, and he asked, “So, why’d you come, George? I mean, I wasn’t, y’know, expecting you.”

“Well,” I said, “it was good to see you back on the net, Henry...” I hesitated, unsure how to continue.

“You’re pissed about the flamewar, huh?” He grinned apologetically.

“Well, yes,” I admitted.

“Me, too,” he said, to my surprise. “I don’t understand what those guys are doing. I mean, they’re lying about me, George, saying I said stuff that I didn’t.”

“You said that on-line,” I said. “But I hadn’t noticed any misquotations.”

His mouth fell open and he stared at me, goggle-eyed. “But, George,” he said, “look at it!”

“I have looked, Henry,” I said. “I didn’t see any. They were using quoting software; they’d have to retype it to change what you wrote. Why would anyone bother to do that? Why should they change what you said?”

“I don’t know, George, but they did!” He read the disbelief in my face, and said, “Come on, I’ll show you! I logged everything!”

I followed him to his computer room—a spare bedroom upstairs held a battered IBM PC/AT and an assortment of other equipment, occupying a second-hand desk and several shelves. Print-outs and software manuals were stacked knee-deep on all sides. A black box, red lights glowering ominously from its front panel, was perched atop his monitor screen.

I stood nearby, peering over his shoulder, as he booted up his computer and loaded a log file into his text editor. Familiar messages appeared on the screen.

“Look at this,” Henry said. “I got this one yesterday.”

I had read this note previously; it consisted of a long quoted passage that suggested, in elaborate and revolting detail, unnatural acts that the recipient should perform, with explanations of why, given the recipient’s ancestry and demonstrated proclivities, each was appropriate. The anatomical descriptions were thoroughly stomach-turning, but probably, so far as I could tell, accurate— no obvious impossibilities were involved.

The amount of fluid seemed a bit excessive, perhaps.

To this quoted passage, the sender had appended only the comment, “I can’t believe you said that, Pickman.”

“So?” I said.

“So, I didn’t say that,” Pickman said. “Of course I didn’t!”

“But I read it...” I began.

“Not from me, you didn’t!”

I frowned, and pointed out, “That quote has a date on it—I mean, when you supposedly sent it. And it was addressed to Pete Gifford. You didn’t send him that message?”

“I posted a message to him that day, yeah, but it wasn’t anything like that!”

“Do you have it logged?”

“Sure.”

He called up a window showing another file, scrolled through it, and showed me.

“PETE,” the message read, “WHY DO’NT YUO GO F\*CK YUORSELF THREE WAYS ANYWAY.”

I read that, then looked at the other message, still on the main screen.

Three ways. One, two, three. In graphic detail.

I pointed this out.

“Yeah,” Pickman said, “I guess that’s where they got the idea, but I think it’s pretty disgusting, writing something that gross and then blaming me for it.”

“You really didn’t write it?” I stared at the screen.

The message in the window was much more the old Henry Pickman style, but the other, longer one was what I remembered reading on my own machine.

“Let’s look at some others,” I suggested.

So we looked.

We found that very first message, which I had read as beginning, “From the depths I return and greet you all. My sincerest apologies for any inconvenience that my withdrawal might have occasioned.”

Pickman’s log showed that he had posted, “BAck from the pits—hi, Guys! Sorry I wuz gone, didja miss Me?”

“Someone,” I said, “has been rewriting every word you’ve sent out since you got your new modem.”

“That’s silly,” he said. I nodded.

“Silly,” I said, “but true.”

“How could anyone do that?” he asked, baffled.

I shrugged. “Someone is.”

“Or something.” He eyed the black box atop the monitor speculatively. “Maybe it’s the modem,” he said. “Maybe it’s doing something weird.”

I looked at the device; it was an oblong of black plastic, featureless save for the two red lights that shone balefully from the front and the small metal plate bolted to one side where incised letters spelled out, “Miskatonic Data Systems, Arkham MA, Serial #R1LYEH.”

“I never heard of Miskatonic Data Systems,” I said. “Is there a customer support number?”

He shrugged. “I got it second-hand,” he said. “No documentation.”

I considered the modem for several seconds, and had the uneasy feeling it was staring back at me. It was those two red lights, I suppose. There was something seriously strange about that gadget, certainly. It buzzed; modems aren’t supposed to buzz. Theories about miniature AI rambled through the back corridors of my brain; lower down were other theories I tried to ignore, theories about forces far more sinister. The brand name nagged at something, deep in my memory.

“It probably is the modem that’s causing the trouble,” I said. “Maybe you should get rid of it.”

“But I can’t afford another one!” he wailed.

I looked at him, then at the screen, where the two messages still glowed side by side in orange phosphor. I shrugged. “Well, it’s up to you,” I said.

“It isn’t really dangerous, anyway,” he said, trying to convince himself. “It just rewrites my stuff, makes it better. More powerful, y’know.”

“I suppose,” I said, dubiously.

“I just need to be more careful about what I say,” he said, wheedling.

“You don’t need to convince me,” I said, “It’s your decision.”

We were both staring thoughtfully at the screen now.

“I’ve always wanted to write like that,” he said. “But I just couldn’t, you know, get the hang of it. All those rules and stuff, the spelling, and getting the words to sound good.”

I nodded.

“You know,” he said slowly, “I’ve heard that some magazines and stuff will take submissions by e-mail now.”

“I’ve heard that,” I agreed.

“You ready for another beer?”

And with that, the subject was closed; when I refused the offer of more beer, the visit, too, was at an end.

I never saw Pickman in the flesh again, but his messages were all over the nets in the subsequent weeks—messages that grew steadily stranger and more lurid. He spoke of submitting articles and stories, at first to the major markets, and then to others, ever more esoteric and bizarre. He posted long diatribes of stupendous fury and venom whenever a piece was rejected—the usual reason given was apparently that his new style was too florid and archaic.

Sometimes I worried about what he might be letting out into the net, but it wasn’t really any of my business.

And then, after the last of April, though old messages continued to circulate for weeks, new ones no longer appeared. Henry Pickman was never heard from on the nets again, except once.

That once was netmail, a private message to me, sent at midnight on April 30th.

“Goerge,” it began—Henry never could spell— “I boroed another modem to log on, I could’nt trust it anymore, but I think its angry with me now. Its watching me, I sware it is. I unplugged it, but its watching me anyway. And I think its calling someone, I can hear it dieling.#$^&%#@$”

And then a burst of line noise; the rest of the message was garbage.

Line noise? Oh, that’s when there’s interference on the phone line, and the modem tries to interpret it as if it were a real signal. Except instead of words, you get nonsense. The rest of Henry’s message was all stuff like “Iä! FThAGN!Iä!CTHulHu!”

I didn’t hear anything from Henry after that. I didn’t try to call him or anything; I figured it might all be a gag, and if it wasn’t—well, if it wasn’t, I didn’t want to get involved.

So when I went past his place a couple of weeks later, I was just in the neighborhood by coincidence, you understand, I wasn’t checking up on him. Anyway, his house was all boarded up, and it looked like there’d been a bad fire there.

I figured maybe the wiring in that cheap modem had been bad. I hoped no one had been hurt.

Yeah—bad wiring. That was probably it. Very bad.

After that, I sort of tapered off. Telecommunicating made me a bit uneasy; sometimes I almost thought my modem was watching me. So I don’t use the nets any more. Ever.

After all, as I’ve always said, the nets will eat you alive if you let them.