

Schrödinger's mousetrap

Part 4: A very public humiliation.

Laura Garwin

Nigel Lorimer was worried. He'd seen enough television detective shows to suspect that the dishevelled man opposite him, who was currently fighting an unequal battle with a packet of nicotine gum, probably had a mind like a steel trap. "Come on, Nige, relax," he said to himself. "If you can hold your own in a dispute with an aggrieved member of the National Academy of Sciences, you can certainly handle this flatfoot."

With the gum finally in his mouth and the drug coursing reassuringly through his veins, Lister returned to the question at hand: "And where were you between 10:30 and 11:00?"

Lorimer thought for a moment. "Let's see, I ducked out of the session on colossal magneto-resistance at about 10:30, made a quick phone call back to the office, and then spent the rest of the time before the lecture in the hallway by the coffee and biscuits."

"Did you speak to anyone in the coffee break?"

"Did I speak to anyone?! What do you think *Nature* pays me for? Plus there are always people wanting to speak to me."

Lister asked for details, and Lorimer duly supplied the names of several physicists who could vouch for his presence. "I don't suppose you spoke to Professor Jaeger?" Lister asked.

Lorimer flushed at the sound of the dead man's name. "No," he said, after a short pause. "Rufus was busy having some kind of dust-up with that sidekick of his, Wilfred de Bruijn."

Now it was Lister's turn to pause. "Are you sure that's why you didn't speak to him?" he said, locking his eyes on Lorimer's. "From what I hear, the professor wasn't exactly in your good books."

Despite himself, Lorimer began to sweat. "If you're referring to the infamous quantum-relay paper, that's water under the bridge," he said, trying to sound casual. Lister said nothing, but let Lorimer tell the story at his

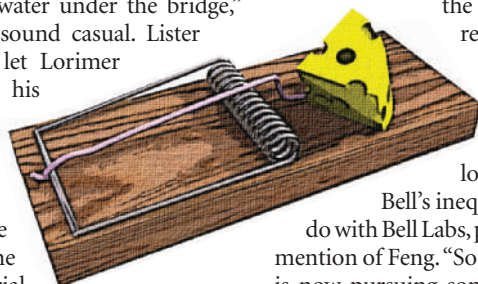
own pace, which accelerated as his thoughts returned to that embarrassing time. For, despite his protestations, the wound to his editorial pride was still raw.



The paper had looked so good at the start. Even now, Lorimer could remember the little shiver of excitement he'd felt when he'd read it for the first time — and how grateful he'd been to Jaeger for choosing to send the paper to *Nature*. The referees were equally enthusiastic — one had called the work a landmark in the field of quantum information — and the paper appeared to great acclaim in the first issue of 1999. But then it all went horribly wrong. First there were whispers in the corridors at conferences, then letters to the editor pointing out inconsistencies in the results, and finally the retraction, published towards the end of the same year.

In public, as would be expected, all of the authors shared the blame for the miscalibrated detector that led to the rogue result. But everyone assumed that the real culprit was the paper's first author, Jaeger's brilliant but erratic graduate student Jirong Feng. After all, Feng had been dismissed from Jaeger's group shortly before the retraction was published. "I've always wondered why our referees — one of them, in particular — didn't spot the mistake during the review process," Lorimer concluded, with a sigh.

Lister, who had been wondering what an entangled photon looked like, and whether Bell's inequalities had anything to do with Bell Labs, pricked up his ears at the mention of Feng. "So I suppose this guy Feng is now pursuing some less desirable career track — investment banking, perhaps?"



"You would think so, wouldn't you?" Lorimer replied. "But that's the odd thing. A year or so after Jirong left Rufus's group, Petra Pruszczyński took him on at Gdansk. I think he's nearly finished his PhD now, and he seems to be doing some great work."

"Really? What's he working on?" asked Lister, writing something down in his notebook.

"You can ask him yourself," Lorimer replied. "He's here at the conference."

"And this Professor Prusz... Pruszyk... you know, the woman in Gdansk — have you had any dealings with her lately?"

After a moment's hesitation, Lorimer replied, looking pleased with himself. "Well, just between you and me, I'm handling a paper from her at the moment — one that could be quite important, if it

stands up."

"And who are the referees of that paper?" Lister asked.

Lorimer bristled. "Now you're going too far. That's deeply confidential information. And besides, what possible reason could you have for wanting to know?"

Lister responded gravely, once again holding Lorimer's gaze with his own. "Dr Lorimer, suffice it to say that I have reason to believe there is a connection between Professor P's paper and Professor Jaeger's murder."

Lorimer caught his breath. "All right," he said slowly, "I'll give you the names of the referees. But you must keep them to yourself!" Lister nodded, holding his pen at the ready. "One of them is Fenton Baumgarden, who's here at the conference. The other was Jonas Prirsali from Innsbruck."

"Was?" Lister asked sharply, looking up from his notebook.

"Yes. Sadly Jonas died two weeks ago from a heart attack. He must have been in his seventies, and he hadn't been well for quite some time. But at least he finished his referee's report before he died."

"You sound like a very dedicated editor," Lister said drily, as Lorimer's ears turned pink with embarrassment.

To be continued...

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