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BUTTON, BUTTON

It was the tuxedo that fooled me and for two seconds I didn't recognize him. To me, he was just a possible client, the first that had whiffed my way in a week – and he looked beautiful.

Even wearing a tuxedo at 9:45A.M.he looked beautiful. Six inches of bony wrist and ten inches of knobby hand continued on where his sleeve left off; the top of his socks and the bottom of his trousers did not quite join forces; still he looked beautiful.

Then I looked at his face and it wasn't a client at all. It was my uncle Otto. Beauty ended. As usual, my uncle Otto's face looked like that of a bloodhound that had just been kicked in the rump by his best friend.

I wasn't very original in my reaction. I said, "UncleOtto!"

You'd know him too, if you saw that face. When he was featured on the cover of Time about five years ago (it was either '57 or '58), 204 readers by count wrote in to say that they would never forget that face. Most added comments concerning nightmares. If you want my uncle Otto's full name, it's Otto Schlemmelmayer. But don't jump to conclusions. He's my mother's brother. My own name is Smith.

He said, "Harry, my boy," and groaned.

Interesting, but not enlightening. I said, "Why the tuxedo?"

He said, "It's rented."

"All right. But why do you wear it in the morning?"

"Is it morning already?" He stared vaguely about him, then went to the window and looked out.

That's my uncle Otto Schlemmelmayer. I assured him it was morning and with an effort he deduced that he must have been walking the city streets all night.

He took a handful of fingers away from his forehead to say, "But I was so upset, Harry. At the banquet -"

The fingers waved about for a minute and then folded into a quart of fist that came

down and pounded holes in my desk top. “But it’s the end. From now on 1 do things my own way.”

My uncle Otto had been saying that since the business of the “Schlemmelmayer Effect” first started up. Maybe that surprises you. Maybe you think it was the Schlemmelmayer Effect that made my uncle Otto famous. Well, it’s all how you look at it.

He discovered the Effect back in 1952 and the chances are that you know as much about it as I do. In a nutshell, he devised a germanium relay of such a nature as to respond to thoughtwaves, or anyway to the electromagnetic fields of the brain cells. He worked for years to build such a delay into a flute, so that it would play music under the pressure of nothing but thought. It was his love, his life, it was to revolutionize music. Everyone would be able to play; no skill necessary – only thought.

Then, five years ago, this young fellow at Consolidated Arms, Stephen Wheland, modified the Schlemmelmayer Effect and reversed it. He devised a field of supersonic waves that could activate the brain via a germanium relay, fry it, and kill a rat at twenty feet. Also, they found out later, men.

After that, Wheland got a bonus of ten thousand dollars and a promotion, while the major stockholders of Consolidated Arms proceeded to make millions when the government bought the patents and placed its orders.

My uncle Otto? He made the cover of Time.

After that, everyone who was close to him, say within a few miles, knew he had a grievance. Some thought it was the fact that he had received no money; others, that his great discovery had been made an instrument of war and killing.

Nuts! It was his flute! That was the real tack on the chair of his life. Poor Uncle Otto. He loved his flute. He carried it with him always, ready to demonstrate. It reposed in its special case on the back of his chair when he ate, and at the head of his bed when he slept. Sunday mornings in the university physics laboratories were made hideous by the sounds of my uncle Otto’s flute, under imperfect mental control, flatting its way through some tearful German folk song.

The trouble was that no manufacturer would touch it. As soon as its existence was unveiled, the musicians’ union threatened to silence every demiquaver in the land; the various entertainment industries called their lobbyists to attention and marked them off in brigades for instant action; and even old Pietro Faranini stuck his baton behind his ear and made fervent statements to the newspapers about the impending death of art.

Uncle Otto never recovered.

He was saying, “Yesterday were my final hopes. Consolidated informs me they will in my honor a banquet give. Who knows, I say to myself. Maybe they will my flute buy.” Under stress, my uncle Otto’s word order tends to shift from English to Germanic.

The picture intrigued me.

“What an idea,” I said. “A thousand giant flutes secreted in key spots in enemy territories blaring out singing commercials just flat enough to -”

“Quiet! Quiet!” My uncle Otto brought down the flat of his hand on my desk like n pistol shot, and the plastic calendar jumped in fright and fell down dead. “From you also mockery? Where is your respect?”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Otto.”

“Then listen. I attended the banquet and they made speeches about the Schlemmelmayer Effect and how it harnessed the power of mind. Then when I thought they would announce they would my flute buy, they give me this!”

He took out what looked like a two-thousand-dollar gold piece and threw it at me. I ducked.

Had it hit the window, it would have gone through and brained a pedestrian, but it hit the wall. I picked it up. You could tell by the weight that it was only gold plated. On one side it said: “The Elias Hancroft Sudford Award” in big letters, and “to Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer for his contributions to science” in small letters. On the other side was a profile, obviously not of my uncle Otto. In fact, it didn’t look like any breed of dog; more like a pig.

“That,” said my uncle Otto, “is Elias Bancroft Sudford, chairman of Consolidated Arms!”

He went on, “So when I saw that was all, I got up and very politely said: ’Gentlemen, dead drop!’ and walkedout.”

“Then you walked the streets all night.” I filled in for him, “and came here without even changing your clothes. You’re still in your tuxedo.”

My uncle Otto stretched out an arm and looked at its covering. “A tuxedo?” he said.

“A tuxedo!” I said.

His long, jowled checks turned blotchy red and he roared, “I come here on something of first-rate importance and you insist on about nothing but tuxedos talking. My own nephew!”

I let the fire burn out. My uncle Otto is the brilliant one in the family, so except for trying to keep him from falling into sewers and walking out of windows, we morons try not to bother him.

I said, “And what can I do for you, Uncle?”

I tried to make it sound businesslike; I tried to introduce the lawyer-client relationship.

He waited impressively and said, “I need money.”

He had come to the wrong place. I said, “Uncle, right now I don’t have -”

“Not from you,” he said.

I felt better.

He said, “There is a new Schlemmelmayer Effect; a better one. This one I do not in scientific journals publish. My big mouth shut I keep. It entirely my own is.” He was leading a phantom orchestra with his bony fist as he spoke.

“From this new Effect,” he went on, “I will make money and my own flute factory open.”

“Good,” I said, thinking of the factory and lying.

“But I don’t know how.”

“Bad,” I said. thinking of the factory and lying.

“The trouble is my mind is brilliant. I can conceive concepts beyond ordinary people. Only, Harry, I can’t conceive ways of making money. It’s a talent I do not have.”

“Bad,” I said, not lying at all.

“So I come to you as a lawyer.”

I sniggered a little deprecating snigger.

“I come to you,” he went on, “to make you help me with your crooked, lying, sneaking, dishonest lawyer’s brain.”

I filed the remark, mentally, under unexpected compliments and said, “I love you, too, Uncle Otto.”

He must have sensed the sarcasm because he turned purple with rage and yelled, “Don’t be touchy. Be like me, patient, understanding, and easygoing, lumphead. Who says anything about you as a man? As a man, you are an honest dunderkopf, but as a lawyer, you have to be a crook. Everyone knows that.”

I sighed. The Bar Association warned me there would be days like this.

“What’s your new Effect, Uncle Otto?” I asked.

He said, “I can reach back into Time and bring things out of the past.”

I acted quickly. With my left hand I snatched my watch out of the lower left vest pocket and consulted it with all the anxiety I could work up. With my right hand I reached for the telephone.

“Well, Uncle,” I said heartily, “I just remembered an extremely important appointment I’m already hours late for. Always glad to see you. And now, I’m afraid I must say good-bye. Yes, sir, seeing you has been a pleasure, a real pleasure. Well, good-bye. Yes, sir -”

I failed to lift the telephone out of its cradle. I was pulling up all right, but my uncle Otto’s hand was on mine and pushing down. It was no contest. Have I said my uncle Otto was once on the Heidelberg wrestling team in ’32?

He took hold of my elbow gently (for him) and I was standing. It was a great saving of muscular effort (for me).

“Let’s” he said, “to my laboratory go.”

He to his laboratory went. And since I had neither the knife nor the inclination to cut my left arm off at the shoulder, I to his laboratory went also…

My uncle Otto’s laboratory is down a corridor and around a corner in one of the university buildings. Ever since the Schlemmelmayer Effect had turned out to be a big thing, he had been relieved of all course work and left entirely to himself. His laboratory looked it.

I said, “Don’t you keep the door locked anymore?”

He looked at me slyly, his huge nose wrinkling into a sniff. “It is locked. With a

Schlemmelmayer relay, it's locked. I think a word – and the door opens. Without it, nobody can get in. Not even the president of the university. Not even the janitor. ”

I got a little excited, “Great guns, Uncle Otto. A thought-lock could bring you -”

“Hah! I should sell the patent for someone else rich to get? After last night? Never. In a while, I will myself rich become.”

One thing about my uncle Otto. He's not one of these fellows you have to argue and argue with before you can get him to see the light. You know in advance he'll never see the light.

So I changed the subject. I said, “And the time machine?”

My uncle Otto is a foot taller than I am, thirty pounds heavier, and strong as an ox. When he puts his hands around my throat and shakes, I have to confine my own part in the conflict to turning blue.

I turned blue accordingly.

He said. “Ssh!”

I got the idea.

He let go and said, “Nobody knows about Project X.” He repeated, heavily, “Project X. You understand?”

I nodded. I couldn't speak anyway with a larynx that was only slowly healing.

He said, “I do not ask you to take my word for it. I will for you a demonstration make.”

I tried to stay near the door.

He said, “Do you have a piece of paper with your own handwriting on it?”

I fumbled in my inner jacket pocket. I had notes for a possible brief for a possible client on some possible future day.

Uncle Otto said, “Don't show it to me. Just tear it up. In little pieces tear it up and in this beaker the fragments put.”

I tore it into one hundred and twenty-eight pieces.

He considered them thoughtfully and began adjusting knobs on a – well, on a machine.

It had a thick opal-glass slab attached to it that looked like a dentist's tray.

There was a wait. He kept adjusting.

Then he said, "Aha!" and I made a sort of queer sound that doesn't translate into letters.

About two inches above the glass tray there was what seemed to be a fuzzy piece of paper. It came into focus while I watched and – oh, well, why make a big thing out of it? It was my notes. My handwriting. Perfectly legible. Perfectly legitimate.

"Is it all right to touch it?" I was a little hoarse, partly out of astonishment and partly because of my uncle Otto's gentle ways of enforcing secrecy.

"You can't," he said, and passed his hand through it. The paper remained behind, untouched. He said, "It's only an image at one focus of a four-dimensional paraboloid. The other focus is at a point in time before you tore it up."

I put my hand through it, too. I didn't feel a thing.

"Now watch," he said. He turned a knob on the machine and the image of the paper vanished. Then he took out a pinch of paper from the pile of scrap, dropped them in an ashtray, and set a match to it. He flushed the ash down the sink. He turned a knob again and the paper appeared, but with a difference. Ragged patches in it were missing.

"The burned pieces?" I asked.

"Exactly. The machine must trace in time along the hypervectors of the molecules on which it is focused. If certain molecules are in the air dispersed – pff-f-ft!"

I had an idea. "Suppose you just had the ash of a document."

"Only those molecules would be traced back."

"But they'd be so well distributed," I pointed out, "that you could get a hazy picture of the entire document."

"Hmm. Maybe."

The idea became more exciting. "Well, then, look, Uncle Otto. Do you know how much police departments would pay for a machine like this. It would be a boon to the legal -"

I stopped. I didn't like the way he was stiffening. I said, politely, "You were saying,

Uncle?”

He was remarkably calm about it. He spoke in scarcely more than a shout. “Once and for all, nephew. All my inventions I will myself from now on develop. First I must some initial capital obtain. Capital from some source other than my ideas selling. After that, I will for my flutes a factory to manufacture open. That comes first. Afterward, afterward, with my profits I can time-vector machinery manufacture. But first my flutes. Before anything, my flutes. Last night, I so swore.

“Through selfishness of a few the world of great music is being deprived. Shall my name in history as a murderer go down? Shall the Schlemmelmayer Effect a way to fry men’s brains he? Or shall it beautiful music to mind bring? Great, wonderful, enduring music?”

He had a hand raised oracularly and the other behind his hack. The windows gave out a shrill hum as they vibrated to his words.

I said quickly, “Uncle Otto, they’ll hear you.”

“Then stop shouting,” he retorted.

“But look,” I protested, “how do you plan to get your initial capital, if you won’t exploit this machinery?”

“I haven’t told you. I can make an image real. What if the image is valuable?”

That did sound good. “You mean, like some lost document, manuscript, first edition – things like that?”

“Well, no. There’s a catch. Two catches. Three catches.”

I waited for him to stop counting, but three seemed the limit. “What are they?” I asked.

He said, “First, I must have the object in the present to focus on or I can’t locate it in the past.”

“You mean you can’t get anything that doesn’t exist right now where you can see it?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, catches two and three are purely academic. But what are they, anyway?”

“I can only remove about a gram of material from the past.”

A gram! A thirtieth of an ounce!

“What’s the matter? Not enough power?”

My uncle Otto said impatiently, “It’s an inverse exponential relationship. All the power in the universe more than maybe two grams couldn’t bring.”

This left things cloudy. I said, “The third catch?”

“Well.” He hesitated. “The further the two foci separated are, the more flexible the bond. It must a certain length be before into the present it can he drawn. In other words, I must at least one hundred fifty years into the past go.”

“I see,” I said (not that I really did). “Let’s summarize.”

I tried to sound like a lawyer. “You want to bring something from the past out of which you can coin a little capital. It’s got to he something that exists and which you can see, so it can’t be a lost object of historical or archaeological value. It’s got to weigh less than a thirtieth of an ounce, so it can’t he the Kullinan diamond or anything like that. It’s got to be at least one hundred and fifty years old, so it can’t be a rare stamp.”

“Exactly,” said my uncle Otto. “You’ve got it.”

“Got what?” I thought two seconds. “Can’t think of a thing,” I said. “Well, good-bye, Uncle Otto.”

I didn’t think it would work, but I tried to go.

It didn’t work. My uncle Otto’s hands came down on my shoulders and I was standing tiptoe on an inch of air.

“You’ll wrinkle my jacket, Uncle Otto.”

“Harold,” he said. “As a lawyer to a client, you owe me more than a quick good-bye.”

“I didn’t take a retainer,” I managed to gargle. My shirt collar was beginning to fit very tightly about my neck. I tried to swallow and the top button pinged off.

He reasoned, “Between relatives a retainer is a formality. As a client and as an uncle, you owe me absolute loyalty. And besides, if you do not help me out I will tie your legs behind your neck and dribble you like a basketball.”

Well, as a lawyer, I am always susceptible to logic. I said, “I give up. I surrender. You

win."

He let me drop. And then – this is the part that seems most unbelievable to me when I look back at it all – I got an idea.

It was a whale of an idea. A piperoo. The one in a lifetime that everyone gets once in a lifetime.

I didn't tell Uncle Otto the whole thing at the time. I wanted a few days to think about it. But I told him what to do. I told him he would have to go to Washington. It wasn't easy to argue him into it, but, on the other hand, if you know my uncle Otto, there are ways.

I found two ten-dollar bills lurking pitifully in my wallet and gave them to him.

I said, "I'll make out a check for the train fare and you can keep the two tens if it turns out I'm being dishonest with you."

He considered. "A fool to risk twenty dollars for nothing you aren't," he admitted. He was right, too…

He was back in two days and pronounced the object focused. After all, it was on public view. It's in a nitrogen-filled, air-tight case, but my uncle Otto said that didn't matter. And back in the laboratory, four hundred miles away. the focusing remained accurate. My uncle Otto assured me of that, too.

I said, "Two things, Uncle Otto, before we do anything."

"What? What? What?" He went on at greater length, "What? What? What? What"

I gathered he was growing anxious. I said, "Are you sure that if we bring into the present a piece of something out of the past, that piece won't disappear out of the object as it now exists?"

My uncle Otto cracked his large knuckles and said, "We are creating new matter, not stealing old. Why else should we enormous energy need?"

I passed on to the second point. "What about my fee?" You may not believe this, but I hadn't mentioned money till then. My uncle Otto hadn't either, but then, that follows.

His mouth stretched in a bad imitation of an affectionate smile. "A fee?"

"Ten per cent of the take," I explained, "is what I'll need."

His jowls drooped. “But how much is the take?”

“Maybe a hundred thousand dollars. That would leave you ninety.”

“Ninety thousand – Himmel! Then why do we wait?”

He leaped at his machine and in half a minute the space above the dentist’s tray was agleam with an image of parchment.

It was covered with neat script, closely spaced, looking like an entry for an old-fashioned penmanship prize. At the bottom of the sheet there were names: one large one and fifty-five small ones.

Funny thing! I choked up. I had seen many reproductions, but this was the real thing. The real Declaration of Independence!

I said, “I’ll be damned. You did it.”

“And the hundred thousand?” asked my uncle Otto, getting to the point.

Now was the time to explain. “You see, Uncle, at the bottom of the document there are signatures. These are the names of great Americans, fathers of their country, whom we all reverence. Anything about them is of interest to all true Americans.”

“All right,” grumbled my uncle Otto, “I will accompany you by playing the ’Stars and Stripes Forever’ on my flute.”

I laughed quickly to show that I took that remark as a joke. The alternative to a joke would not hear thinking of. Have you ever heard my uncle Otto playing the “Stars and Stripes Forever” on his flute?

I said, “But one of these signers, from the state of Georgia, died in 1777, the year after he signed the Declaration. He didn’t have much behind him and so authentic examples of his signature was about the most valuable in the world. His name was Button Gwinnett.”

“And how does this help us cash in?” asked my uncle Otto, his mind still fixed grimly on the eternal verities of the universe.

“Here,” I said, simply, “is an authentic, real-life signature of Button Gwinnett, right on the Declaration of Independence.”

My uncle Otto was stunned into absolute silence, and to bring absolute silence out of my uncle Otto, he’s really got to be stunned!

I said, “Now you see him right here on the extreme left of the signature space along with the two other signers for Georgia, Lyman Hall and George Walton. You’ll notice they crowded their names although there’s plenty of room above and below. In fact, the capital G of Gwinnett runs down into practical contact with Hall’s name. So we won’t try to separate them. We’ll get them all. Can you handle that?”

Have you ever seen a bloodhound that looked happy? Well, my uncle Otto managed it.

A spot of brighter light centered about the names of the three Georgian signers.

My uncle Otto said, a little breathlessly, “I have this never tried before.”

“What!” I screamed. Now he told me.

“It would have too much energy required. I did not wish the university to inquire what was in here going on. But don’t worry! My mathematics cannot wrong be.”

I prayed silently that his mathematics not wrong were.

The light grew brighter and there was a humming that filled the laboratory with raucous noise. My uncle Otto turned a knob, then another, then a third.

Do you remember the time a few weeks back when all of upper Manhattan and the Bronx were without electricity for twelve hours because of the damndest overload cut-off in the main power house? I won’t say we did that, because I am in no mood to be sued for damages. But I will say this: The electricity went off when my uncle Otto turned the third knob.

Inside the lab, all the lights went nut and I found my self on the floor with a terrific ringing in my ears. My uncle Otto was sprawled across me.

We worked each other to our feet and my uncle Otto found a flashlight.

He howled his anguish. “Fused. Fused. My machine in ruins is. It has to destruction devoted been.”

“But the signatures?” I yelled at him. “Did you get them?”

He stopped in mid-cry. “I haven’t looked.”

He looked, and I closed my eyes. The disappearance of a hundred thousand dollars is not an easy thing to watch.

He cried, “Ah, ha!” and I opened my eyes quickly. He had a square of parchment in his hand some two inches on a side. It had three signatures on it and the top one was that of Rutton Gwinnett.

Now, mind you, the signature was absolutely genuine. It was no fake. There wasn’t an atom of fraud about the whole transaction. I want that understood. Lying on my uncle Otto’s broad hand was a signature indited with the Georgian hand of Rutton Gwinnett himself on the authentic parchment of the honest-to-God, real-life Declaration of Independence.

It was decided that my uncle Otto would travel down to Washington with the parchment scrap. I was unsatisfactory for the purpose. I was a lawyer. I would be expected to know too much. He was merely a scientific genius, and wasn’t expected to know anything. Besides, who could suspect Dr. Otto Schlemmelmayer of anything but the most transparent honesty.

We spent a week arranging our story. I bought a book for the occasion, an old history of colonial Georgia, in a secondhand shop. My uncle Otto was to take it with him and claim that he had found a document among its leaves; a letter to the Continental Congress in the name of the state of Georgia. He shrugged his shoulders at it and held it out over a Bunsen flame. Why should a physicist be interested in letters? Then he became aware of the peculiar odor it gave off as it burned and the slowness with which it was consumed. He beat out the flames but saved only the piece with the signatures. He looked at it and the name Button Gwinnett had stirred a slight fiber of memory.

He had the story cold. I burnt the edges of the parchment so that the lowest name, that of George Walton, was slightly singed.

“It will make it more realistic,” I explained. “Of course, a signature, without a letter above it, loses value, but here we have three signatures, all signers.

My uncle Otto was thoughtful. “And if they compare the signatures with those on the Declaration and notice it is all even microscopically the same, won’t they fraud suspect?”

Certainly. But what can they do? The parchment is authentic. The ink is authentic. The signatures are authentic. They’ll have to concede that. No matter how they suspect something queer, they can’t prove anything. Can they conceive of reaching through time for it? In fact, I hope they do try to make a fuss about it. The publicity will boost the price.”

The last phrase made my uncle Otto laugh.

The next day he took the train to Washington with visions of flutes in his head. Long flutes, short flutes, bass flutes, flute tremolos, massive flutes, micro flutes, flutes for the individual and flutes for the orchestra. A world of flutes for mind-drawn music.

“Remember,” his last words were, “the machine I have no money to rebuild. This must work.”

And I said, “Uncle Otto, it can’t miss.”

Ha!

He was back in a week. I had made long-distance calls each day and each day he told me they were investigating.

Investigating.

Well, wouldn’t you investigate? But what good would it do them?

I was at the station waiting for him. He was expressionless. I didn’t dare ask anything in public. I wanted to say, “Well, yes or no?” but I thought, let him speak.

I took him to my office. I offered him a cigar and a drink. I hid my hands under the desk but that only made the desk shake too, so I put them in my pocket and shook all over.

He said, “They investigated.”

“Sure! I told you they would. Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha?”

My uncle Otto took a slow drag at the cigar. He said, “The man at the Bureau of Documents came to me and said, ’Professor Schlemmelmayer,’ he said, ’you are the victim of a clever fraud.’ I said, ’So? And how can it a fraud be? The signature a forgery is?’ So he answered, ’It certainly doesn’t look like a forgery, but it must be!’ ’And why must it be?’ I asked.”

My uncle Otto put down his cigar, put down his drink, and leaned across the desk toward me. He had me so in suspense, I leaned forward toward him, so in a way I deserved everything I got.

“Exactly,” I babbled, “why must it be? They can’t prove a thing wrong with it, because it’s genuine. Why must it he a fraud, eh? Why”

My uncle Otto’s voice was terrifyingly saccharine. He said, “We got the parchment from the past?”

“Yes. Yes. You know we did.” “Over a hundred fifty years in the past. You said -”

“And a hundred fifty years ago the parchment on which the Declaration of Independence was written pretty new was. No?”

I was beginning to get it, but not fast enough.

My uncle Otto’s voice switched gears and became a dull, throbbing roar, “And if Button Gwinnett in 1777 died, you Godforsaken dunderlump, how can an authentic signature of his on a new piece of parchment be found?”

After that it was just a case of the whole world rushing backward and forward about me.

I expect to be on my feet soon. I still ache, but the doctors tell me no bones were broken.

Still, my uncle Otto didn’t have to make me swallow the damned parchment.