

Scientific study of
non-scientific subjects
sometimes produce new
subjects, and sometimes
new forms of social
disaster and dismay.

THE SCHLEMIHL HYPOTHESIS

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Peter Harris, graduate student in chemistry, was a shlemihl. He spilled the soup in the university cafeteria over the dress of the girl in front of him, he reached for a test-tube and his elbow knocked over the elaborate distilling apparatus it had taken three days to set up, he turned the petcock on the nitrous oxide tank so hard it broke off, filling the laboratory with gas.

That last accident exasperated Dr. Morgan, his advisor. "Why do you keep having these stupid accidents?" he raged. Peter shrugged. "Accidents are accidents. They just happen."

"You call yourself a scientist?" Dr. Morgan exploded. "Nothing happens by accident. Everything has a cause." He tightened his lips. "Maybe if you think that things just happen, you'd be better off in another field." He turned away.

Peter was aggrieved when he repeated Dr. Morgan's comment to his roommate, George Clark, that evening. "He was unfair. The petcock must have been flawed. It could have happened to anyone."

"But it didn't," George pointed out. "It happened to you. Others used the tank before you."

"Sure," Peter replied. "So what? The repeated stresses finally broke the petcock."

George's thesis was on the philosophy of science. He was very conscious of hidden assumptions. "Wrong," he said. "The repeated stresses *plus* you broke the petcock. Watch yourself from now on."

For three weeks Peter's laboratory work proceeded without untoward event. But then he upset a bottle of reagent over the chromatograph, and because he was unnerved by the black look the *diener* gave him, he tripped over his own shadow going out of the door and lurched against the model of the heme molecule that was used for demonstration purposes. It fell from its platform; the little plastic balls rolled in all directions. Dr. Morgan, running out of his office to see what the noise was all about, stepped on one of them, fell, and hurt his dignity.

George was a Job's comforter that evening. "I wouldn't blame Morgan if he told you to go elsewhere. As he asked, why do all these idiotic accidents happen to you?"

"I'm just unlucky, that's all."

"Luck! Chance! Accident! You sound like a superstitious savage! Next you'll be quoting Murphy's Law to me." George noted Peter's raised eyebrow.

"Murphy's Law. You know—if anything can go wrong, it will. There was a humorous article on it in last month's *American Chemical and Engineering News*."

To keep away from the laboratory and Dr. Morgan, Peter went the following day to the library to read the article. He smiled at the third corollary, sometimes known as the law of specific gravitation: "if a tool is dropped, it will land where it does the most damage." He doodled and day-dreamed. An inspiration came to him.

He wrote down a list of the ridiculous accidents he had had since the beginning of the academic year. He was appalled at the length of the list. Thirty-one accidents! He sat and thought for a long time before going back to search through George's books.

George returned from class. "What's up?" he asked.

"Serendipity," was the reply.

"What do you mean?"

"Serendipity—doing research in one direction and discovering something valuable but unrelated to the research. Like Fleming finding penicillin in the course of culturing bacteria."

"So what's your discovery?"

"Inverse serendipity. Me. I go to do something and something bad happens. An accident. Only you're right. It's not an accident. I cause it."

"You're nuts! Next you'll be saying you're a hoodoo. Come off it, Pete."

Peter shook his head. "No. I think I've made a find." He outlined his theory to George. "You know, there wouldn't be such universal acceptance of Murphy's Law if it didn't fit in with observations. It's not a joke. People wouldn't talk about hoodoos and jinxes and evil eyes without evidence they exist. Maybe people like me create a peculiar vortex in space and time around ourselves. Maybe we make things go wrong just by being there. Sort of an ESP, if you get what I mean, except it's not under our control."

Georgesnorted. "Apply Occam's razor. Accident-prone individuals get that way because of a psychologic disturbance in themselves. They punish themselves by getting hurt."

"You miss the point. I don't get hurt—not much anyway. But things and people (like Dr. Morgan) around me do."

"So prove that such a negative force exists."

"That's just it. It's hard to prove. Accidents can't be created to order. But there must be some way to demonstrate

the truth or falsity of my hypothesis. You're the expert on scientific method. Set me up an experiment along that line."

George thought a while. "Well, first do a statistical survey of those to whom accidents happen. Experiment can come later. I'll figure one out."

The next day, January fifteenth, he and Peter made the rounds of the university laboratories. They asked, pretending they were a safety committee, what accidents had occurred the day before, no matter how trivial. In the evening they compared notes.

"Chemistry Lab One: Mary Carr dropped a flask and cut her finger picking up the pieces. Chem Lab Two: Joe Palino sneezed and struck his head on the glass enclosing the balance, breaking it. Chem Lab Three: the sleeve of Tom Marsh's lab coat knocked over the row of bottles he had on his table. Biology Lab Two: Mike Czerny reached for lens paper and pushed the tray of microscope slides to the floor. Physiology Lab One: Hortense Plotkin upset a bottle of red ink over her completed kymogram. Biochemistry One: Claude Merrill mixed up his two blood unknowns in the qualitative test. Biochemistry Two: Matthew Long finished a quantitative urine analysis and then lost the slip of paper on which he had written the original volume. Genetics: Louis Pollock didn't notice he had jarred the gate separating the albinos from the black guinea pigs for the mosaic studies, thus permitting free copulation between the two groups. Physics Three: John Houseman's pen dropped into the centripetal force experiment cage and broke the fine wires supporting the steel balls. " There was a total of sixteen accidents.

On February twelfth they did a similar survey. Again there were sixteen accidents but the coincidence in number was not the marvel.

"Look!" Peter showed George his chart. "Only four new names on my list."

"And only two on mine. That makes ten repeaters, not counting you." George shook his head in disbelief. "I think we've got something. Now for the next step. I'll take Joe Palino. You take Hortense Plotkin. That's a random enough selection to start with. Their last names begin with P."

Joe Palino, too, was a shlemihl. "My grandmother used to say I had the *malocchio*. I have good muscle control but just the same when I hit a fly ball, it breaks a window or when I screw a nail in, the wood splits. At our last big family

dinner I was helping my mother. I brought in a big tureen of spaghetti and just as I was putting it on the table one of the handles broke and the spaghetti, sauce and all, spilled over everything."

Hortense Plotkin, a slim graceful girl, also admitted she was unlucky. "I can't tell you how many times I've cried about it. Last month I slammed the car door on my date's fingers. And the very next day I dropped an open bottle of nail polish over a brand new sweater." Tears came to her eyes. "I don't know what it is. I make things go wrong wherever I am."

She and Peter were sitting in a booth in the student lounge. "Don't worry," he said. "Things happen when I'm around too." On an impulse he reached out to pat her hand. He knocked over the

loosely. They made apologies, helped collect the books and papers, and walked more slowly to the Zeta Phi house. There while they stood on the steps saying goodbye, an avalanche of shifting snow slid off the slanting porch roof onto their heads.

George got excited when Peter told him what had happened. "Don't you see? Your theory about the vortex around you must be correct. The two of you had a whole series of accidents." He looked over the list of names. "Why don't you go to see Pollock tonight? That's the only other P. He's floor proctor in Woolrich Hall."

Peter knocked at the door of Pollock's suite, on the second floor of the freshman dormitory. The sound

it up and cracked their heads together. Peter turned and fled from the room. On the wooden stairs he slipped on a wet spot and finished his journey bum-bump to the bottom.

George's enthusiasm rose. "See? The two of you together created disaster." A gleam came into his eye. "Pete, you know I think we have the clue to what the guys at Duke call psychokinesis, the ability of humans to influence physical events. You can do it, Pollock can do it, the others can do it, but you don't know how. Maybe we can find out."

He got a set of Rhine cards. Nothing came of the experiments with Peter except for the hole burned in the rug when a cigarette fell unnoticed from an ash-tray.

Throwing dice was another matter.

If accident prone people actually exist, is there any concentration of them which will equal critical mass with critical results?



half-empty mug of tepid coffee and watched in helpless horror the brown liquid spread over the neatly typed pages alongside her.

"That's what I mean!" she wailed. "Now I'll have to redo that report and it's due tomorrow. Let's get out of here."

They walked across the snow-covered campus. An ice-encrusted branch of a tree snapped off as they passed under it, knocking them both to their knees. They got up and ran toward Sorority Row, hand in hand. They bumped smack into Dr. Barriwell, sending his books flying and the interleaved notes fluttering

startled Pollock, putting the finishing touches on the chromosome map he was making for his biology section; the marking brush smeared across it. "Come in!" he shouted angrily and turned quickly in his swivel chair, forgetting he had moved the bridge lamp close to the desk for better illumination. Crash! His head struck the lamp.

Peter entered and closed the door behind him a little too hard. The hanger holding a portrait of Father Mendel loosened; the picture fell to the floor. Fortunately the glass remained unbroken. Both Peter and Pollock went to pick

Peter's throws followed the normal distribution curve until they started playing for pennies. Then he rolled snake-eyes so often he gave up in disgust.

After his experiences with Hortense and Pollock, Peter refused to go on with the research. George went ahead, however. He interviewed the remaining seven on the list. Five were graduate students; two were undergraduates. Their biographies were astounding. Not only were they shlemihls but they were a special type of shlemihls. They were all bright; three were actually geniuses. They were not clumsy; one was a part-

time instructor in ballet at the Drama School, one had a hobby of sleight-of-hand. But all of them repeatedly mistook salt for sugar, dropped keys down gratings, used shaving cream for tooth-paste and aerosol furniture polish for hairspray, and worst of all—they often managed to inflict damage on whatever or whomever was nearby. Terry, for example, substituted medicated foot powder for the talcum when he changed his baby's diapers. And Giacobbe changed the rotor on the ultracentrifuge without noticing the pins were not in place, causing \$1400 worth of damage to the machine.

George invited all ten to join him in a study that would affect them personally. Peter came to the meeting reluctantly, only after George had agreed that

fearfully at each other and drew their chairs farther apart. A foot of Mary Carr's chair caught in a deep crack; it wobbled; to guard herself from falling she flung out her arms; the ball-point pen she was holding flew out of her hand to hit Terry's white shirt, streaking it.

George's next remarks kept them from leaving at that moment. "Once we know for sure that such a force exists," he said, "we can master it. 'Out of the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom' to quote Engels. Once man knew what gravity was, the way was open to overcome it for men to fly."

An excited babble broke out. One of the undergraduates, Merrill, sadly confessed he had been practically ostracized for what his classmates called oafishness. "But I'm not awkward," he explained.

three or more would get together, even more unexpected events would take place. We could grade those events on a scale and determine if the force increases by simple addition or exponentially."

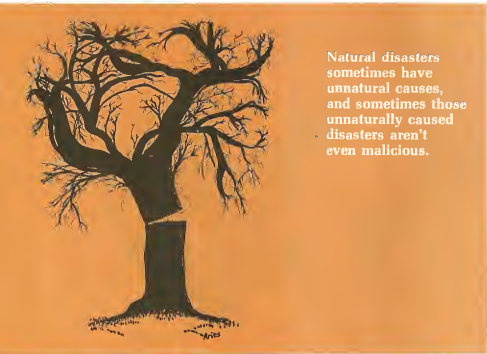
"Just a minute," Tom Marsh interrupted. "Assuming that you're correct, how could all eleven of us ever get together? Unless you're proposing for us to join hands in the Kremlin or Peking."

George licked his lips. "That is a problem. I've thought about that. We must go slowly. I suggest that first you arrange to meet in pairs in an isolated area, stay there an arbitrary minimum of an hour, and then separate. Record anything unusual. We'll meet here in a week and compare notes."

An uneasy silence pervaded the room. At last Houseman spoke up. "Count me out. You've convinced me. I don't want to risk any more trouble just for the sake of science. As the Irishman said, 'What did posterity ever do for me?'" Terry and Marsh also refused to join in the experiment. They got up to leave the room together. The door handle came off in Terry's hand. In helping him put it back on, Marsh put his hand through the upper glass pane and Houseman ripped his jacket sleeve on a projecting splinter. The remaining eight moved farther apart. George made the assignments. "I suggest you leave one by one and make arrangements by telephone for your meeting place and time."

Only six showed up the following week. Pollock and Merrill were missing. George called Woolrich Hall and was told that Mr. Pollock was in the infirmary in traction for a broken leg. He phoned the infirmary and on a hunch asked how Merrill was. Merrill had been discharged the day before; he was in good condition, the fracture of the forearm in a cast. The nurse had no idea how he got it.

George suppressed the news. Giacobbe, a jazz fan, had come early for his meeting with Peter at the base of the Brewster Statue; he had put the old 78 Fats Waller record he had just acquired on the ledge and sat down to wait. Peter came bustling up, said, "Sorry I'm late," and plopped himself on the record. End of record. End of meeting, for when Peter jumped up, Giacobbe's hand, hastily extended to save the record, met Peter's eye. The girls reported that Mary had caught her heel on an exposed root in the middle of the field where they met; she sprained her ankle and hobbling back to her room, leaning on Hortense, she had inadvertently tripped



Natural disasters sometimes have unnatural causes, and sometimes those unnaturally caused disasters aren't even malicious.

those present would be at least five feet apart.

They met in a study hall. George sat up front before the charts of accidents, Peter's skewed dice-rolling curve, and Houseman's recent troubles (untightened lugs on a replaced tire—auto crash; stopped wristwatch—mistiming and ruining of flash-evaporator experiment; overturned ink eradicator bottle—bleaching and spotting of partner's slacks).

They listened with mounting interest as George put forth the hypothesis of negative psychokinesis. They looked

"They blame me if the frog dies or if I open a window and papers blow around or if my grapefruit spatters."

George held up his hand for silence. "First we have to determine how negative psychokinesis works. It must be a weak force because it doesn't always manifest itself. A small magnet, for instance, has a limited range of influence. But from evidence at hand"—here Hortense blushed and Peter coughed—"we can assume that the force can be strengthened by addition. If two of you were to be in close proximity, more incidents, shall we say, would occur. If

Hortense, who fell in a puddle. Palino and Czerny met in the hothouse adjoining the arboretum; they had neglected to read the note on the door and were both drenched when the automatic sprayer went on on time.

"There's not much doubt, is there?" George asked rhetorically.

"Two of you together practically insure damage," Czerny sniffed. "But it's not all gloom. Perhaps the force is neutralized by the presence of other people. The next test is three and three together, but in a crowded place."

"Not me," Palino said. "I've had it." He waved goodbye and left the room. He slammed the door behind him and a crack appeared in the newly installed pane of glass.

Despite their misgivings, the experimenters went on. The girls were to be joined by Peter; he also would form the third with Czerny and Giacobbe. "It's not a fair trial," George conceded. "Peter's force may weight our results, but we'll try to discount that."

Calamity followed catastrophe at the Blue Bottle, where Peter met Mary and Hortense for dinner. The Blue Bottle, popular with the college crowd for its informality and its good food, was jammed. Peter stood up from the table he'd found and waved to the girls. In doing so he upset the tray of dishes the busboy behind was carrying. Mary did not notice the residual glob of mustard on her chair when she sat down; Hortense, flustered, tried to remove the stain with her napkin and succeeded in knocking over the chair against the crutch of a departing diner. The top of the salt-shaker fell in Mary's soup; Peter's ketchup splattered over Hortense's cottage cheese salad; Hortense dropped cigarette ash into Peter's ice cream. She tossed her head; her fashionably long hair caught on the sleeve button of the waiter, who disentangled himself but not without spilling the water he was carrying. Mary shifted her chair to let the busboy mop up; it ended up resting on his big toe. Peter dropped the change he was counting out for the tip; getting up from picking up the coins, he backed into a student with an armful of leaflets for the anti-draft meeting, sending him to the floor and the leaflets into the air.

George had a great deal of trouble persuading Peter to meet Czerny and Giacobbe. "This could be known as the Harris Effect," he said. "Your name could go down in history."

"As what? Prize klutz?" Peter countered.

"As the discoverer of a psychic force that could revolutionize our lives once it's harnessed. Just consider—teleportation, levitation,—there's no limit." Peter gave in.

The trio met in the reading room of the library, crowded with students trying to catch up with their back work before the end of the semester. They sat side by side. They had agreed not to talk to each other for an hour and then leave separately. Each one made sure he had nothing spillable or breakable with him; each one busied himself with his notes and notebooks.

Giacobbe crossed his legs. His foot hit the shin of the girl opposite him. She glared at him. "Excuse me," he said, uncrossing his legs, banging her again. She said, "Clown!" arose, and left. Peter, trying to suppress his snicker at Giacobbe's discomfiture, began to cough; he reached for his handkerchief in his back pocket and felt a sharp prick at his shoulder. He felt for the sore area and found the cleaner's staple he had forgotten to remove. He got up and took off his jacket, spilling the loose change in the pocket in the process. Czerny, helping him retrieve the coins, bumped his head on the edge of the long table.

They settled down again. All was quiet in their vicinity until just before the hour was up. Peter got ready to leave. He stacked his books. The topmost book slid off and, as he described later to George, "it skittered diagonally across the table, messing up the neat piles of 3x5 cards a fellow there had just arranged, the notes for a paper. He got sore, jumped up, leaned across the table, and grabbed my necktie." Hot words passed. The security guard came running and collided with Giacobbe leaving. Giacobbe's notebook went sailing, hit a nearby student at the temple, and knocked off his glasses. Czerny stepped on them. He picked up the broken frame and stammered apologies. The unlucky myope swore at him. The noise level in that part of the room rose, attracting attention. Students, glad of a break, crowded around. The guard checked Peter's ID card, then those of the other two. The librarian-clerks shooed the curious back to their seats. The chief librarian came out and ordered the disturbers of the peace into his office.

About what happened there, Peter was incoherent later. "I don't even want to think about it," he told George. "all I can tell you is that a plaster bust of Aristotle got broken, a glue pot overturned, an old map was torn, a case of books fell over, Czerny tore a fingernail

off, Giacobbe ripped his pants, the librarian got a black eye, and I ran a splinter into my palm."

George was in stitches. "A slapstick comedy! The three of you could make a fortune in Hollywood!"

"Laugh all you want." Peter was furious. "This is the end. I don't want to see any of that bunch any more."

SD.S., Black Power, and the War Resisters Union made a united front for confrontation with the Vice-President, the main speaker at the Alumni Day exercises. George and Peter had vantage points, sitting on top of the lion in front of the Administration Building.

The square before them was jammed. Signs and effigies abounded. TV crews were on hand, as was almost the entire student body. The United Front Against War and Racism was opposed by a smaller group of conservative students with their own banners. George nudged Peter. Merrill was amongst the Y.A.F.'ers. Almost simultaneously Peter saw Houseman and Czerny, unaware of each other's presence, separated by only a few students. He began to perspire and look for a way to escape but the crowd was too dense. A cry arose and all heads turned upward. A large poster of Che Guevara was being lowered from the roof of the building. All heads turned upward. Peter saw Mary Carr and, sure enough, Hortense Plotkin only a few feet away. Searching through the upturned faces, he found Palino and, to his horror, every other one of the original ten. What was worse, the press of the crowd was pushing them together.

The disturbance that followed the arrival of the Vice-President's car surpassed the riots at Berkeley and Columbia. Every window of the building was shattered; the official automobile was overturned and set on fire; the police swung their clubs; the students replied with sticks, stones, and fists; a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a TV camera. Blood dripped from cracked heads; screams and yells filled the air. The tear gas was ineffectual because of the sudden thunder shower that sprang up. The fighting continued through the downpour until a bolt of lightning struck the old oak tree opposite the building.

Peter visited George in the hospital. From underneath the bandages George whispered hoarsely, "I hope you're convinced now. You ought to send a paper to *Science*. Get priority. Only I'm not having anything further to do with the research. And do me a special favor, Pete. Find another room-mate." ○