

Bob Knowlton at Simmons Securities

Bob Knowlton was sitting alone in the conference room of Simmons Securities. The rest of his group had left. One of the secretaries had stopped and talked for a while about her husband's enrollment in graduate school and had finally gone home.

Bob, alone on the floor, slid a little farther down in his chair, looking with satisfaction at the results of the first computer simulation of the newest Millenium derivative. He liked to stay after the others had gone. His appointment as project head was still new enough to give him a deep sense of pleasure. His eyes were on the graphs before him, but in his mind, he could hear Dr. Alan Jerrold, the director of research, saying again, "There's one thing about this place you can bank on. The sky is the limit for a person who can produce!"

Knowlton felt again the tingle of happiness and embarrassment. Well, dammit, he said to himself, he had produced. He wasn't kidding anybody. He had come to Simmons Securities two years ago. While testing some proposed derivatives, he had stumbled on the idea behind the Millenium family of derivatives, and the rest just happened. Jerrold had been enthusiastic: A separate project had been set up for further research and development of these derivatives, and he had gotten the job of managing it. The whole sequence of events still seemed a little miraculous to Knowlton.

He shrugged out of the reverie and bent determinedly over the sheets of paper when he heard someone come into the room behind him. He looked up expectantly; Jerrold often stayed late himself and now and then dropped in for a chat. This always made the day's end especially pleasant for Bob. It wasn't Jerrold. The man who had come in was a stranger. He was tall, thin, and rather dark. He wore steel-rimmed glasses and had a very wide leather belt with a large brass buckle. Lucy remarked later that the Pilgrims probably wore such a belt. The stranger smiled and introduced himself. "I'm Simon Fester. Are you Bob Knowlton?" Bob said yes, and they shook hands. "Dr. Jerrold said I might find you in. We were talking about your work, and I'm very much interested in what you are doing." Bob waved to a chair.

Fester didn't seem to belong in any of the standard categories of visitors: customer, visiting fireman, or stockholder. Bob pointed to the sheets on the table. "There are the preliminary results of a test we're running. We have a new derivative by the tail and we're trying to understand its properties. It's not finished, but I can show you the tests we've run." He stood up, but Fester was deep in the graphs. After a moment, he looked up with an

odd grin. "These look like plots of a Jennings surface. I've been playing around with some autocorrelation functions of surfaces – you know that stuff." Bob, who had no idea what Fester was referring to, grinned back and nodded, and immediately felt uncomfortable. "Let me show you the test software," he said, and he started the program.

After Fester left, Knowlton slowly put the graphs away, feeling vaguely annoyed. Then, as if he had made a decision, he quickly locked up and took the long way out so that he would pass Jerrold's office. However, the office was dark. Knowlton wondered whether Jerrold and Fester had left together.

The next morning, Knowlton dropped into Jerrold's office, mentioned that he had talked with Fester, and asked who he was. "Sit down for a minute," Jerrold said. "I want to talk to you about him. What do you think of him?" Knowlton replied truthfully that he thought Fester was very bright and probably very competent. Jerrold looked pleased. "We're taking him on," he said. "He's had a very good background in complex securities, and he seems to have ideas about the problems we're tackling here." Knowlton nodded in agreement, instantly wishing that Jerrold would not place Fester with him.

"I don't know yet where he will finally land," Jerrold continued, "but he seems interested in what you are doing. I thought he might spend a little time with you by way of getting started." Knowlton nodded thoughtfully. "If his interest in your work continues, you can add him to your group." "Well, he seemed to have some good ideas even without knowing exactly what we are doing," Knowlton answered. "I hope he stays; we'd be glad to have him."

Knowlton walked back to the Millenium group with mixed feelings. He told himself that Fester would be good for the group. He was no dunce; he'd produce. Knowlton thought again of Jerrold's promise when he had promoted him – "The man who produces gets ahead in this outfit." The words seemed to carry the overtones of a threat now.

Fester didn't appear until mid afternoon that day. He explained that he had had a long lunch with Jerrold, discussing his joining the Millenium group. "Yes," said Knowlton, "I talked with Jerry this morning about it, and we both thought you might work with us for a while." Fester smiled in the same knowing way that he had smiled when he mentioned the Jennings surfaces. "I'd like to," he said.

Knowlton introduced Fester to the other members of the Millenium group. Fester and Link, the group's mathematician, hit it off well and spent the rest of the afternoon discussing a method for analyzing patterns that Link had been worrying over for the last month. It was 10:00 when Knowlton finally left the office that night. He had waited almost eagerly for the end of

the day to come – when they would all be gone and he could sit in the quiet rooms, relax, and think it over. "Think what over?" he asked himself. He didn't know.

Shortly after 8:30 p.m., they had almost all gone except Fester, and what followed was almost a duel. Knowlton was annoyed that Fester was cheating him out of his quiet period and he resentfully determined that Fester would leave first. Fester was sitting at the conference table reading, and Knowlton was sitting at his desk in the little glass-enclosed cubby he used during the day when he needed to be undisturbed. Fester had gotten the last year's progress reports out and was studying them carefully. The time dragged. Knowlton doodled on a pad, the tension growing inside him. What the hell did Fester think he was going to find in the reports? Knowlton finally gave up and they left the office together. Fester took several reports with him to study in the evening. Knowlton asked him if he thought the reports gave a clear picture of the Millenium group's activities. "They're excellent," Fester answered with obvious sincerity. "They're not only good reports; what they report is damn good, too!" Knowlton was surprised at the relief he felt, and grew almost jovial as he said goodnight.

Driving home, Knowlton felt more optimistic about Fester's presence in the Millenium group. He had never fully understood the analysis that Link was attempting. If anything was wrong with Link's approach, Fester would probably spot it. "And if I'm any judge," he murmured, "he won't be especially diplomatic about it." He described Fester to his wife, who was amused by the broad leather belt and brass buckle. "It's the kind of belt that Pilgrims must have worn," she laughed. "I'm not worried about how he holds his pants up," he laughed with her. "I'm afraid that he's the kind that just has to make like a genius twice each day. And that can be pretty rough on the group."

Knowlton had been asleep for several hours when the telephone jolted him awake. He realized it had rung several times. He swung off the bed muttering about damn fools and telephones. It was Fester. Without any excuses, apparently oblivious of the time, he plunged into an excited recital of how to solve Link's patterning problem. Knowlton covered the mouthpiece to answer his wife's stage-whispered "Who is it?" "It's the genius," replied Knowlton. Fester, completely ignoring the fact that it was 2:00 in the morning, went on in a very excited way to start in the middle of an explanation of a completely new approach to certain of the Millenium group's problems that he had stumbled on while analyzing past simulations. Knowlton managed to put some enthusiasm in his own voice and stood there,

half-dazed and very uncomfortable, listening to Fester talk endlessly about what he had discovered. It was probably not only a new approach but also an analysis that showed the inherent weakness of the previous simulation and how simulation along that line would certainly have been inconclusive.

The following day Knowlton spent the entire morning with Fester and Link, the mathematician, having cancelled the customary morning meeting of his group so that he and Link could go over Fester's work of the previous night intensively. Fester was very anxious for this, and Knowlton was happy to cancel the meeting for reasons of his own.

For the next several days, Fester sat in the back office that had been turned over to him and did nothing but read the progress reports of the work done in the last few weeks. Knowlton caught himself feeling apprehensive about Fester's reaction to his work. He was a little surprised at his own feelings. He had always been proud – although he had put on a convincingly modest face – of the way in which his group had broken new ground in the development of derivatives. Now he wasn't sure, and it seemed to him that Fester might easily show that the line of research they had been following was unsound or even unimaginative.

The next morning (as was the custom), the members of the Millenium group, including the secretaries, sat around a conference table. Bob always prided himself on the fact that the group as a whole guided and evaluated its work, and he was fond of repeating that it was not a waste of time to include secretaries in such meetings. Often, what started out as a boring recital of fundamental assumptions to a naive listener, uncovered new ways of regarding these assumptions that would not have occurred to the researcher, who had long ago accepted them as necessary. These group meetings also served Bob in another sense. He admitted to himself that he would have felt far less secure if he had had to direct the work based on his own understanding. With the group meeting as the principle of leadership, it was always possible to justify exploration of blind alleys because of the general educative effect on the team.

Fester was there; Lucy and Martha were there; Link was sitting next to Fester, their conversation concerning Link's mathematical study apparently continuing from yesterday. The other members, Bob Davenport, Georgia Thurlow, and Arthur Oliver, were waiting quietly. Knowlton, for reasons that he didn't quite understand, proposed for discussion this morning a problem that all of them had spent a great deal of time on previously with the conclusion that a solution was impossible, that there was no feasible way of analyzing it in an experimental fashion. When Knowlton proposed the

problem, Davenport remarked that there was hardly any use of going over it again because there was no way of approaching the problem with the available data and software tools. This statement acted as a shot of adrenaline on Fester. He said he would like to know what the problem was in detail and, walking to the blackboard, began setting down the "factors" as various members of the group began discussing the problem and simultaneously listing the reasons why the group had abandoned it. Very early in the description of the problem it was evident that Fester was going to disagree about the impossibility of solving it. The group realized this, and finally the descriptive materials and the recounting of why they had abandoned the problem dwindled away. Fester began his statement, which, as it proceeded, might well have been prepared the previous night, although Knowlton knew this was impossible. He couldn't help being impressed with the organized and logical way that Fester was presenting ideas that must have occurred to him only a few minutes before. Fester had some things to say, however, which left Knowlton with a mixture of annoyance, irritation, and at the same time, a rather smug feeling of superiority over Fester in at least one area. Fester asserted his opinion that the way that the group had analyzed problem was very typical of group thinking. With an air of sophistication that made it difficult for a listener to dissent, he proceeded to comment on the American emphasis on team ideas, satirically describing the ways in which they led to a "high level of mediocrity."

During this time, Knowlton observed that Link stared studiously at the floor, and he was very conscious of Georgia Thurlow's and Bob Davenport's glances toward him during Fester's little speech. Inwardly, Knowlton couldn't help feeling that this was one point at least in which Fester was off on the wrong foot. Following Jerrold's philosophy, the whole Millenium group talked, if not practiced, the theory that small teams were the basis for effective research. Fester insisted that the problem was solvable and that he would like to study it by himself. Knowlton ended the morning session by remarking that the meetings would continue and that the very fact that a supposedly insoluble problem was now going to get another chance was another indication of the value of such meetings. Fester immediately remarked that he was not at all averse to meetings to inform the group about the progress of its members. The point he wanted to make was that creative advances seldom occurred in such meetings; they came from an individual "living with" a problem closely and continuously, in a rather personal relationship to it. Knowlton went on to say to Fester that he was very glad that Fester had raised these points and that he was sure the group would

profit by reexamining the basis on which they had been operating. Knowlton agreed that individual effort was probably the basis for making major advances. He considered the group meetings useful primarily because they kept the group together and they helped the weaker members of the group keep up with the ones who were able to advance more easily and quickly.

It was clear as days went by and meetings continued that Fester came to enjoy them because of the pattern that the meetings assumed. It became typical for Fester to hold forth, and it was unquestionably clear that he was more brilliant, better prepared on the relevant subjects, and more capable of going ahead than anyone else in the group. Knowlton grew increasingly disturbed, as he realized that Fester had, in fact, usurped his leadership of the group. Whenever Fester came up during his occasional meetings with Jerrold, Knowlton would comment only on the ability and obvious capacity for work that Fester displayed. Somehow, he never felt that he could mention his own discomforts, not only because they revealed a weakness on his part but also because it was quite clear that Jerrold himself was considerably impressed with Fester's work and with the contacts he had with him. Knowlton now began to feel that perhaps the intellectual advantages that Fester had brought to the group did not quite compensate for what he felt were evidences of a breakdown in the cooperative spirit he had seen in the group before Fester's coming. Knowlton found himself cancelling the morning meetings more and more often.

Fester's opinion concerning the abilities of others of the group, except for Link, was obviously low. At times during morning meetings or in smaller discussions he had been on the point of rudeness, refusing to pursue an argument because he claimed it showed another person's ignorance of the relevant facts. His impatience of others led him to make similar remarks to Jerrold. Knowlton inferred this from a conversation in which Jerrold asked whether Knowlton intended to retain Davenport and Oliver; Jerrold's failure to mention Link, the mathematician, led Knowlton to suspect that these questions reflected private conversations between Fester and Jerrold. It was not difficult for Knowlton to make a convincing case on whether the brilliance of Fester was sufficient recompense for the beginning of this breaking up of the group.

Knowlton spoke privately with Davenport and with Oliver, and it was quite clear that both of them were uncomfortable because of Fester. Knowlton didn't press the discussion beyond the point of hearing them say that they did feel awkward and that it was sometimes difficult to understand

Fester's arguments, and often embarrassing to ask him to fill in the basis for his arguments. Knowlton did not interview Link in this manner.

About three months after Fester's came into the Millenium group, Simmons Securities' top managers met to review the research work. It was customary at the morning meetings for project heads to present the research being conducted in their groups. The other members of the groups attended other meetings later in the day and open to all, but only project heads and top managers attended the morning meetings. As the time for this meeting approached, it seemed to Knowlton that he must avoid making the morning presentation at all cost. He doubted that he could present Fester's ideas and work in sufficient detail and answer questions about them. He also did not feel he could ignore Fester's work and present only material completed or started before Fester's arrival. He suspected also that Fester might, in his blunt and undiplomatic way – if he were at the meeting, that is – comment on his [Knowlton's] presentation and reveal Knowlton's inadequacy. Yet, it seemed quite clear that it would not be easy to keep Fester from attending the meeting even though he was not on the administrative level of the other attendees. Knowlton found an opportunity to speak to Jerrold and raised the question of Fester's attendance. He told Jerrold that, with the meetings coming up and with the interest in the work and with Fester's contributions to the work, Fester would probably like to come to the meetings; but there was a question of how the others in the Millenium group would feel if only Fester were invited. Jerrold passed this over very lightly by saying that he didn't think the group would fail to understand Fester's rather different position and they certainly should invite Fester. Knowlton immediately said he agreed: Fester should present the new work because much of it was work he had done, and this would be a nice way to recognize Fester's contributions and to reward him because he wanted to be recognized as a productive member of the Millenium group. Jerrold agreed, which decided the matter.

Fester's presentation was very successful and in some ways dominated the meeting. He attracted the interest and attention of many, and a long discussion followed his presentation. Later in the evening – with the firm's entire staff present – during the cocktail period before the dinner, a little circle of people formed about Fester. One of them was Jerrold himself, and a lively discussion took place concerning the application of Fester's theory. All of this disturbed Knowlton, and his reaction and behavior were characteristic. He joined the circle, praised Fester to Jerrold and to others, and remarked on the brilliance of the work.

Knowlton, without consulting anyone, began at this time to take some interest in the possibility of a job elsewhere. After a few weeks, he found that a new firm of considerable size was being organized and that his experience would enable him to get a project-head job equivalent to the one at Simmons Securities and with slightly more money. He immediately accepted it and notified Jerrold by letter, which he mailed on a Friday night to Jerrold's home. The letter was quite brief, and Jerrold was stunned. The letter merely said that Knowlton had found a better position; that he didn't want to appear at the firm any more for personal reasons; that he would be glad to come back at a later time to assist if there was any mix-up in the past work; that he felt sure Fester could lead the Millenium group; and that his decision to leave so suddenly was based on personal problems – he hinted at problems of health in his family, his mother and father.

All of this was fictitious, of course. Jerrold took it at face value but still felt that this was very strange behavior and quite unaccountable, for he had always felt his relationship with Knowlton had been warm and that Knowlton was satisfied and, in fact, quite happy and productive. Jerrold was considerably disturbed, because he had already decided to place Fester in charge of another project that was going to be set up very soon. He had been wondering how to explain this to Knowlton, in view of the obvious help Knowlton was getting from Fester and the high regard in which he held him. Jerrold had, indeed, considered offering Knowlton the opportunity to add to his group another person with the kind of background and training that Fester possessed. Jerrold made no attempt to meet Knowlton, however. In a way, he felt aggrieved about the whole thing. Fester, too, was surprised at the suddenness of Knowlton's departure. When Jerrold asked Fester whether he preferred to stay with the Millenium group instead of the new project, he chose the new project and began working on it the following week. The Millenium group was hard hit. The leadership of the Millenium group went to Link with the understanding that this would be temporary until someone could come in to take over.

(Revised from a case originally written by Alex Bavelas.)