Reading: *The Problem of Cell 13*

Some Information about Jacques Futrelle's Life

Jacques Futrelle was born in Georgia, USA, in 1875 and died in 1912 at the age of 37, one of the unfortunate victims of the sinking of the *Titanic*. Futrelle was working as a journalist on the editorial staff of the Boston American – now the Boston Herald – when the publication of *The Problem of Cell 13* in 1905 brought him fame. Cell 13 was the first of a series of stories to feature the scientific detective, Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, more commonly known as The Thinking Machine, a character who combines elements of Edgar Allen Poe's Auguste Dupin (note the similarity between the two first names) and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Like Dupin and Holmes, Van Dusen was an example of the gentleman amateur detective, men of independent means[1] for whom solving crimes was more a hobby than a profession.

The Problem of Cell 13, like the other Thinking Machine stories, was first published in the newspaper where Futrelle worked, challenging the reader to find the solution.

When Futrelle went down with the *Titanic*, the world lost a fine journalist and a great master of the short story.

The Story: The Problem of Cell 13

The Thinking Machine, a remarkable, though somewhat eccentric scientist who spends all his time in the lab inventing brilliant and outrageous theories, decides one day to have a bet with two friends. He bets that a prisoner can escape from a cell using just his mind, and to prove it to his companions he decides to volunteer for the experiment himself. Locked in Cell 13 of Chisholm Prison and with no help from outside he must try to escape. But the prison is absolutely secure, its walls impossible to climb, the cell impossible to escape from and infested with rats.

Will he manage to win his bet? How?

- *Fill in the text below using the adjectives in the box.*

~~strange~~ ~~famous~~ ~~thin~~ ~~bizarre~~ ~~mental~~ ~~little~~ ~~small~~ ~~blue~~
~~profound~~ ~~pale~~ ~~unusual~~ ~~thick~~ ~~yellow~~ ~~brilliant~~ ~~large~~

Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen's appearance was as strange as his name. He was thin with the thin shoulders of a student and his face was extremely pale. His eyes were the eyes of a man who studies little things. They were always half-closed in concentration. Although he wore thick glasses you could

[1] of independent means: with his own money

see that his eyes were _____blue_____. But his strangest feature was his abnormally _____large_____ forehead, on top of which sat a crown of _____yellow_____ hair. Together all these things gave him a _____bizarre_____ , almost grotesque personality.

Professor Van Dusen's family came from Germany. Many of his ancestors had been _____famous_____ scientists; he was the logical result, the master mind. And logic was his passion. He believed that two and two always equal four, except in _____unusual_____ cases, when they may equal three or five. He believed that all things that start must go somewhere and he was able to concentrate all the _____mental_____ force of his ancestors to solve any problem.

The public knew Van Dusen as The Thinking Machine and perhaps this phrase described him best of all. He spent all his time in his _____small_____ laboratory where he invented _____brilliant_____ theories that shocked scientists and had a _____profound_____ effect on the world.

A) Read Chapter One (*The Bet*, p. 8 – 17) and decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F). Correct the false ones.

1. The Thinking Machine was very ~~sociable.~~ unsociable
2. The Thinking Machine and his friends discussed issues concerning the material world and the mind.
3. Dr Ransome and Mr Fielding were very sceptical about The Thinking Machine's ideas.
4. Mr Fielding smoked ~~cigarettes.~~ cigares
5. The Thinking Machine was supposed to wear shoes, ~~short~~ long socks, trousers and a shirt for his experiment.
6. It was very ~~difficult~~ easy to obtain (= get) permission for the experiment.
7. Dr Ransome felt very sorry about the fact that The Thinking Machine had to spend some time in prison like a real prisoner.
8. The warden reassured Ransome and Fielding that they would be very strict with their new prisoner.
9. The Thinking Machine was ~~likely~~ unlikely to succeed in bribing the guards.
10. Cell 13 was where they kept condemned killers.
11. The Thinking Machine had to make his escape within one week.

B) Prediction: The Thinking Machine had three requests:

- some toothpaste
- one five-dollar and two ten-dollar bills
- to have his shoes cleaned

Can you think of some reasons for this?

C) Further predictions. After each chapter that you have read, try to either solve the problem or make a prediction. Take notes.

Chapter Two (*Chisholm Prison*):
Try to work out the following problems:

- Where did The Thinking Machine find the cloth to wrap the money around?
- What did he use to write?

Chapter Three (*A Message from Cell 13*):
Try to predict the following mysteries:

- Where did The Thinking Machine find the pieces of steel?
- What was the scream the warden heard?
- Why was the man screaming?

Chapter Four (*A Strange Voice*):
Prediction:

- How did The Thinking Machine get hold of the five-dollar bill, since he didn't have it when he entered Cell 13?
- Why did he give it to the guard?
- We know the words "Acid-acid-acid". Who was shouting? Why?

Chapter Five (*Countdown to Freedom*):
We are now approaching the solution of the mystery.
"You cannot hold a man in prison who can use his brain."
These are the things the warden found under the cover of his bed. What might each be used for?

- a coil of strong rope about ten metres long
- a knife
- three files
- three metres of electric wire
- a pair of steel pliers
- a hammer
- a pistol

Chapter Six (*How Did He Do It?*):
The key to the mystery: These are the things that helped The Thinking Machine to escape. How did he actually use them?

shoe polish	tooth paste	wire	drainpipe	metal end of the shoe lace
socks	rats	ten-dollar bill	nitric acid	wig	the workman's clothes

D) Can you find seven hidden words connected with the idea of mystery?

P	M	S	T	R	A	N	G	E	D
D	U	D	M	Y	M	X	B	Z	W
G	R	Z	Z	U	G	J	T	T	S
L	D	H	Z	R	I	D	D	L	E
S	E	Q	G	L	N	K	J	G	C
E	R	S	Y	W	E	I	R	D	R
A	R	H	P	E	Q	K	K	S	E
D	I	L	E	M	M	A	P	S	T
Q	N	M	M	P	L	S	F	H	J
F	M	S	A	K	L	C	X	Z	S

Other Prison Stories

The Château d'If from which Dantès escaped in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

One of the things that makes *The Problem of Cell 13* so interesting is that it combines elements of the detective story (the solution of a "locked room" mystery) with the drama of a daring escape. And here the detective and the "criminal" are the same person. The Thinking Machine's detection of the solution paradoxically constitutes his "crime" of escaping from prison. But Van Dusen's escape has many precedents both in literature and in life. The most famous of all prison escape stories is of course Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* in which the wrongly imprisoned hero Edmond Dantès escapes by substituting himself with the body of another prisoner, recently deceased – his friend the Abbé Faria. The guards throw what they believe to be the Abbé's body, closed in a sack, into the sea and Dantès, after freeing himself, swims to the surface and is picked up by a boat.

The Ponte dei Sospiri (= Bridge of Sighs / Seufzerbrücke); the entrance to the Venetian Prison where Casanova was imprisoned.

A true escape story that was, like many other episodes of his life, undoubtedly exaggerated by its author was that of Giovanni Giacomo Casanova, who escaped from a Venetian prison, assisted by a monk called Balbi, imprisoned in the adjacent cell. Apparently, Casanova asked a guard to deliver a bowl of pasta and a Bible to the monk. The guard was so busy trying not to spill[2] the pasta that he did not notice the unusual weight of the Bible which had been hollowed out[3] to accommodate a metal spike. Balbi then used the spike to dig a hole in the prison roof.

Most recently, the theme of escape has inspired some wonderful films, the most notable being Mervin LeRoy's *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1932, whose hero ends up back in prison years after his original escape; Don Seigal's *Escape from Alcatraz*, 1979, about the only men ever believed to have escaped from the famous island prison; and French director Robert Bresson's masterpiece *Un*

[2] to spill: accidentally let fall
[3] to be hollowed out: the inside part of the Bible had been removed

Condamné à mort s'est echappé (*A Man Escaped*), 1956, in which escape becomes almost a religious quest for the protagonist, a French resistance fighter condemned to death by the Nazis.

The Island of Alcatraz, offshore from San Francisco.

The theme of escape is one that continues to fascinate us. Its appeal to writers and film directors inevitably has something to do with the fact that escaping from prison requires a great deal of imagination. As the narrator of Italo Calvino's modern version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* says: "If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is impossible to escape, this conceived fortress either will be the same as the real one – and in this case it is certain we shall never escape from here […] or it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible than from here – and this, then, is a sign that here an opportunity of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it."

Source:

Jacques Futrelle: *The Problem of Cell 13*. Text adaptation and activities by Graeme and Silvia Thomson. Black Cat Readers, 1999.