Jacques Futrelle's "The Thinking Machine on the Case"

For sheer ingenuity, the stories which Mr. Futrelle has built up about Professor Augustus Van Dusen, the Thinking Machine, are equalled by little, and surpassed by nothing in contemporary fiction. The soundest criticism that is to be brought against this second series of tales is that, as was the case with the first series, the invention is at times almost too clever. The deductions of the Thinking Machine are so swift and astonishing that the reader is often puzzled in following them. Mr. Sherlock Holmes had an uneven disposition and occasionally made mistakes. Professor Van Dusen is also more or less irritable, but his invariable infallibility proves in the end a strain on the credulity. Yet his exploits taken in homœopathic doses must appeal to the most jaded appetite.

As has been the case with several distinguished heroes of this kind of fiction, it is only in this second series of stories that the author found the situation for the proper and impressive introduction of the Thinking Machine. In the first tale of the earlier book Professor Van Dusen performed the extraordinary feat of escaping from "Cell Number 13." It was all worked out with great skill and dexterity, and one accepted it, provided one was willing to take an intellectual marvel for granted. In the first chapter of *The Thinking Machine on the Case* Professor Van Dusen called chess a shameless perversion of the functions of the brain, and said that by the use of logic a man who had never played the game could defeat the greatest master. It happened that there were on the scene the greatest chess players of the world, foregathered for the annual championships, and the slur did not go unchallenged. It was arranged that at the conclusion of the tournament Professor Van Dusen should meet the winner. This happened to be Tschaikowsky, the Russian. The Professor, who knew nothing of the moves of the game, received a morning's instruction from

*The Thinking Machine on the Case. By Jacques Futrelle. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Hillsbury, the American master, and the same day met Tschaikowsky before a great crowd. As he sat down at the chess table the Russian smiled. He felt that he was humouring a crank.

Professor Van Dusen began the game, opening with a Queen's Gambit. At his fifth move, made without the slightest hesitation, the smile left the Russian's face. At the tenth, the masters grew tensely eager. The Russian champion was playing for honour now. Professor Van Dusen's fourteenth move was King's castle to Queen's four. "Check" he announced. After a long study of the board the Russian protected his King with a Knight. Professor Van Dusen noted the play, then leaned back in his chair with finger tips pressed together. His eyes left the board and dreamily studied the ceiling. For at least ten minutes there was no sound, no movement, then: "Mate in fifteen moves," he said quietly. There was a quick gasp of astonishment. It took the practiced eyes of the masters several minutes to verify the announcement. But the Russian champion saw and leaned back in his chair a little white and dazed. He was not astonished; he was helplessly floundering in a maze of incomprehensible things. Suddenly he arose and grasped the slender hand of his conqueror. "You have never played chess before?" he asked. "Never." *"Mon Dieu!* You are not a man; you are a brain—a machine—a thinking machine."

Throughout the tales of *The Thinking Machine on the Case* the varied results of man's mechanical cunning play a prominent part. In the first story it is a motor boat carrying a dead man wearing a uniform that leads the authorities to think him a captain in the French navy, which crashes into a wharf in Boston Harbour. Another tale deals with the mysterious murder at his key board of the operator of the wireless of an ocean steamship. Of particular grimness is the story of "The Crystal Gazer," which introduces an elaborate device by which the victim, peering into a crystal, sees what he takes to be a vision of his own murder. Again there is "The Phantom Motor," which, night after night, enters one end of a short road lined on both sides by ten-foot walls, never comes out the other end, and cannot be found between. But what, above all, marks Mr. Futrelle's work in this as well as the earlier book, is not the cleverness of any particular tale, but rather the consistent excellence and fertility of invention of them all.

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