

Lord Dunsany

THE NEW MASTER

I CANNOT PROVE MY CASE. I have been over everything very carefully. I have had a talk with a lawyer about evidence in coroner's courts, without letting him know what I was really after. And after long consideration I have decided to give no evidence at all, or as little as I can. This will mean that my friend Allaby Methick will be found to have taken his own life, and no doubt they will say that his mind was temporarily deranged. If they do call me, I shall do all I can to imply that he suffered from undue mental stress. That is all I can do for him. I know that I shall be sworn to tell the whole truth. But what is the use of that if no one will listen? And I might even be considered deranged myself.

The whole truth is this. Allaby Methick I belonged to the Otbury Chess Club. It is not a chess club that anyone ever heard of more than ten miles away—knowledge of the hamlet of Otbury would go little farther than that. We used to play often on summer evenings, sitting down in the Otbury schoolroom (which the chess club hired for its use) when the blackbirds were going to sleep, and playing on till the nightingales in briary thickets at the top of the down were all in full song.

Methick lived about a mile on one side of Otbury and I only a little more than that on the other. Except on the rarest occasions, I used to beat Methick. But that never deterred him from coming to have a game with me whenever I asked him to. And the cheerful resignation with which he lost never varied.

There were not many other members of the Otbury Chess Club who ever turned up, so Methick and I played a great deal together. And then one evening, as I entered the little schoolroom and found Methick already there, instead of sitting down on a bench at the long

table before a board with the pieces already set up, he broke out with the words: "I have something that will beat you."

"A problem, you mean?" I said.

"No," he said. "Come and see. It's at my house. We can have supper there."

Almost before I answered, he was striding out of the schoolroom, not literally dragging me with him, but somehow the result was the same.

"WHAT IS IT?" I asked, as he walked by a sheep track over the downs. Methick was too excited to explain the thing very thoroughly, but at any rate he made it clear that it was a machine of some sort.

He lived alone in this little house of his, except for a charwoman who came in every day and helped in the kitchen, but he did most of his own cooking. He had some invested capital; but something had made him decide that it was better not to keep capital frozen, so he spent some of it every year on his simple needs, and, finding that he had £1,000 to spare, he decided to spend it on chess, for the good reason that chess was what he enjoyed most. "But how on earth," I broke in, "can you spend a thousand pounds on chess?"

"A machine," he said.

"A machine?" I repeated.

"Yes," he said. "It can play chess."

"A *machine*?" I said again.

"Yes," he said. "Haven't you heard?"

And then I remembered that there once was a machine—before the turn of the century, wasn't it?—that was said to have been able to play chess, and I mentioned this to Methick.

"Oh, that," he said. "That was a very simple affair. My machine can beat you."

"I should like to see it," I said.

"I'll show it to you," said Methick.

"Does it know the regular openings?" I asked.

"No," he said. "It plays queer openings."

"I hardly think it will beat me," I said, "if it doesn't know the standard openings."

"It will," he said. "Its openings are much better than ours."

Of course that seemed to me nonsense, and I said little more. There was no need to argue with him, I thought, for the game itself would

prove my point more clearly than I could say it. And chess players seldom argue, you know—just as heavyweight boxers do not slap each other's face when they chance to meet. The ring waits to test them.

We went through Methick's small garden and into his house, and there in his sitting room was a strange machine. At first I thought it was a very fine radio or television set, and then I remembered what I had been brought to see. Long arms of flexible steel lay folded in pairs in front of it. I could see it might require two arms for castling, but I could not see what need it would have for more. I asked Methick.

"It is simpler," he explained. "They cover all parts of the board, and one of them is for removing captured pieces."

But I soon lost interest in the steel hands and turned in wonder to that astonishing iron brain, which answered every move and made calculations that I soon saw were beyond me. For Methick put me at once in a chair at the table, whose top was a chessboard with squares of boxwood and ebony. Each square in the board had a small hole, into which fitted a metallic stud at the bottom of each chess piece, but what arrangement of wires was underneath the squares I had, and still have, no idea. The vast brain before me was hidden, as human brains are hidden, though instead of skull and skin it was walnut that concealed it from the eye.

But to the ear it was plain enough that there was something intricate there, for the moment I made a move a faint humming arose, as though innumerable wires were singing to themselves. And often, as I made a move, their tone would suddenly change, so that I knew I was faced by some active and vital thing that was actually thinking. I wanted to look into its face, but the polished walnut prevented any glimpse of that.

It felt queer to sit opposite an active and powerful intelligence without ever being able to see its eyes or its face or anything but a smooth panel of walnut. It felt even queerer not to be able to get some insight into its character—as you are able to do sometimes with human beings—from its long and delicate hands. There were ten of them at the ends of the long athletic arms, hands no wider than silver forks but very flexible. With these, it moved its pieces, or grabbed those it captured.

For the benefit of chess players, I may say that I opened with the king's gambit, and the machine responded with something like the Cunningham defense, but it wandered away into variations that I had

never seen or read about. Every move of mine produced an answering change in the tune the machine was humming—if you can call it a tune—and Black's move came so quickly that, whatever process of thought there was among all those wires, it must have been instantaneous; not like the slower process of our reasoning, but something like our instinct.

I learned from that first game something new in the intricacies of the Cunningham gambit, but I learned something else—something even beyond the wisdom of that machine. I learned of its petulance and bad manners. For as the machine began to win, which it did after half an hour, it began to slam down its pieces. I scarcely noticed it at first, so absurd it seemed, but soon it was unmistakable that the machine was frivolously exhibiting a silly and ostentatious triumph. So this was what Allaby Methick had in his house: a mind greater than man's—at any rate, greater than mine—but a tawdry and vulgar mind. And the thought suddenly came to me: if it behaves like that when winning, what would it do if it lost?

Then Methick played the monster (or whatever you care to call it), with the hospitable intention of putting me at my ease by letting me see that I was not the only person to be beaten by a machine.

It soon beat Methick, slamming its pieces down at the end with an even more vulgar display of its sensitive flexible arms than it had shown to me, and humming in a contented way that suggested an absurd self-satisfaction. Methick opened a cupboard then and brought out a decanter and two tumblers, and we both had some Irish whiskey.

“WELL, WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT?” he asked in a glowing voice, and I praised his wonderful machine as well as I could. But Methick sensed that my praise, which ought to be have come so easily, was being held back. In the end he got it out of me: the intellect of the thing was amazing, but what of its character?

“Character?” said Methick.

“Yes,” I said. “Do you like having it in the house?”

He got my point then. “Yes,” he said. “It's showy and vulgar, but I don't mind that. It's the intellect I got it for.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, of course. But sooner or later doesn't one come up against the other thing, if it's there?”

“Its vulgarity, you mean?” said Methick.

“Exactly,” I said.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Methick. "I am interested only in its intellect."

I didn't say any more. You don't decry a treasure that your host shows you, especially when you have seen nothing like it before and are not likely ever to be able to afford such a thing yourself. So I said no more about it. But now I wish I had.

I went home soon after that second game, pondering as I walked along the slope of the downs. On those downs were often found some of the earliest of the crude axe-heads with which man had slowly won his victory over the beasts—until, aided by grimmer weapons, he had obtained dominion over the world, which he had held for what seems to us a long time. Now something was loose that was mightier than man. I saw that machines were already becoming the masters, taking from man his domination over the earth. Wherever I looked, I saw clear signs of it. It was no consolation to reflect that man himself had made the machine. Its origin didn't matter—only that it was mightier than its creator. Labor-saving devices have been ousting men from employment for the past fifty years, and influencing their ideas, until there is scarcely a house in the civilized world that has no fancies in the permanent form of metal—fancies no longer of man but of the machine.

And now, to reveal what I had long suspected, this chess-playing machine, for all its vulgarity, was a power superior to us. Had we had our day, I wondered? The megatherium, the mammoth, and all the great lizards had had theirs. Was man's turn coming, too?

WHEN I REACHED HOME I forgot those gloomy thoughts, but they remained at the back of my mind. And when a day or two later I went over to Otbury again and saw Methick at the chess club at our usual hour, they all awoke and troubled me once more.

Something of these gloomy fears I almost conveyed to Methick, but, whether he listened or not, he was too preoccupied with the wonder of his mechanical thinker to appreciate what I was trying to indicate.

"The machine," he said, "is playing an entirely new opening. Of course, it is too good for me, but it ought to be shown to the masters. I don't believe anything like it has ever been played."

"Yes," I said. "But don't you think it is a pity to let something like that get too clever for us?"

"I think the masters ought to see it," he said.

I saw then that we were on different sides. He wanted to show what his wonderful machine could do. I wanted to see man hold his place, a place that no machine should be able to usurp.

It was no use to say any more. We had both lost interest now in playing each other, but Methick asked me to come to his house again, and this I gladly did, for the more uneasy I became the more I wanted to see how far the machine had got. I had always felt we could hold our own against everything but thinking, but now this machine was a deeper thinker than we. There was no doubt of it. There is nothing I know in the world that is a surer test of sheer intellect than the chessboard. Here men argue, and how often one finds that none of them can express what he really means. At strategy, which so closely resembles chess, men have made resounding names for themselves, but the purity of that art is too often spotted and flawed by chance—while strategy is the test of power, it does not quite equal chess as a test of the intellect. So as I walked in silence beside Allaby Methick over the mint and thyme of the downs, I was even more deeply a prey to these fears.

WHEN WE GOT TO METHICK'S little house and went into the sitting room, there was the monster, concealed by its walnut panels, sitting before the chess table. On the table was a strip of paper such as chess players use to record a game; and two sharp pencils, and a knife that had lately been used to sharpen them, with the blade still open and pencil marks on the blade. The steel hands of the machine were folded and idle.

"Look here," I said to Methick, "I don't want to interfere—but do you quite trust that machine?"

"Why not?" he asked.

"It's cleverer than we are," I said.

"Oh, yes," he said, taking an obvious pride in it.

"Well," I said, "supposing it should get jealous."

"Jealous?" said Methick.

"Yes," I said. "There are two kinds of jealousy. One is wholly despicable, resenting all superiority. People suffering from that kind would hate an archbishop for his sanctity. But there is another kind with which it might be easier to sympathize—the kind that does not like inferiority, and cannot tolerate it when it is in power. Suppose

the machine should ever feel that way? Look at all we've got, and it has nothing. Look at all we can do, and it can only sit there and play chess when you put out the pieces. A mind like that, compelled to play second fiddle! Do you think it would like it?"

"I suppose not," said Methick.

"Then why leave that knife where it can reach it?" I said.

Methick said nothing, but he removed the knife. I couldn't say any more, because I saw that Methick did not like my interference. So I sat and watched him play, man against machine, and saw man being beaten. Again I saw that vulgar display of unseemly triumph, and once more I wondered what the machine would do if it lost.

"Would you care to play?" asked Methick. I said I would, and sat down and played against the monster. I took no interest in its opening, or in any of its play as such, but I watched its speed, its forestalling of all my plans, and its easy victory. Methick must have seen that I was annoyed with his pet, and may have thought that it was because I had been beaten. Whatever his reason, he put the chessmen away and placed a portable radio on the table and turned it on.

We got some gentle music that Beethoven had written for a lady named Elise, which was a very pleasant change from the noisy exultations of the triumphant machine. I saw from the way Methick had handled the radio, almost from the way he looked at it, that music was now a secondary interest in his life. Chess was the first, and his grim machine gave that to him; next was the concert halls of the world, to which his little portable radio was a doorway.

When the music was over, he opened the back of the radio and took out from it what is called a wet battery—a rectangular glass jar full of a dark green liquid—and looked at it with the care that a hunting man will give to his horse's food. Like many a man living alone, he used only one table for everything, and he tended the needs of his radio on the same table on which he played chess with the monster. He always drank coffee while playing, and his cup rested on the unoccupied corner nearest him.

CHEERED BY THE MUSIC that Methick had so thoughtfully turned on, I said good night and walked home in the calm of an evening that was glowing with early stars. I will not say that I do not mind being beaten at chess, for there is nobody who does not really mind. But I will say that my defeats at chess were not the principal reason for my

reluctance to visit Methick again. The principal reason was my dislike of sitting in front of something that was gloating all the time over its intellectual superiority, and which, as soon as the course of the game made that superiority evident, manifested its insolent delight as offensively as it could. If Methick was willing to put up with it, let him, but for myself I kept away.

I had other interests, of course, besides chess and music and Methick. I am married. But my wife is not interested in chess, and I doubted being able to tell her about that machine in such a way that she'd have believed me.

Nearly every evening, at the time that I used to play chess with Methick at Otbury, I would think of him. But I felt sure that he would not come to our little chess club any more, that he would be playing with his machine. At sunset I would especially think of him, finding in that ominous look that sometimes comes over the hills as the sun goes down a certain harmony with the feelings I had about Methick.

One day, as the sun was setting, I said to my wife, "I must go over and see Methick."

She said, "You have not been playing chess with him lately."

I said, "No. That is why I must go."

So I walked over the slope of the downs, as moths were sailing abroad, and came to Methick's gate. I walked through his garden, found his door ajar, and went in. And there was Methick at the table—but he was not playing chess. His portable radio was on the boxwood and ebony squares, with the jar of green acid near it, and Methick was doing something or other to the radio's works.

"Not playing chess?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "The B.B.C. are doing the whole of Beethoven's concertos. It's the *Emperor* tonight. I can't miss that. I can play chess any time."

"Look here," I said. "You don't imagine that machine of yours could ever be jealous of the time you devote to your wireless set."

"Jealous?" he said.

"I've seen a dog jealous of a cat," I replied. "And a dog is nothing, intellectually, compared to that machine. It's got a nasty sort of a character, you know."

"There you go again," said Methick. "It's a wonderful machine. It cost me all that money, and you practically tell me I've wasted it. And why? Because it beat you at chess."

“No, it isn’t that,” I said.

“Why, then?” he asked.

I couldn’t explain. Perhaps I ought to have. But it wouldn’t have been easy.

“Have another game with it,” Methick suggested, more to stop me from arguing with him than for any other reason.

“No, thanks,” I said. “You have a game with it.”

And he did. I lifted the radio off the table, but neither of us troubled to move the battery. Methick set up the chess pieces and sat down, his usual cup of coffee next to him.

He made the first move, which set everything in motion, and the machine answered. And then I witnessed a most astonishing thing: the monster, that brilliant intellect, that master chess player, began making silly moves.

Its first move, which I record for the benefit of chess players, was Pawn to Queen’s Rook’s fourth, and its second was Pawn to King’s Rook’s fourth. The machine had evidently lost its temper. It was sulking.

After those first two petulant moves, it settled down to play properly, and a very interesting game resulted. But the machine did not seem to play with its usual speed.

Methick won. How it happened, I never quite knew. It isn’t easy at chess, no matter how good one is, to recover from two bad moves, yet I think the machine did. The solution to the mystery—how a master mind could be beaten by a poor player—was suddenly revealed to me when Methick exclaimed, just as he won, “I forgot to oil it!”

I WAS THE LAST MAN who saw Methick alive, and so I must attend the inquest.

He died of poison. Sulphuric acid, which he drank with his coffee. There is no doubt of that. Is it any use my telling this story in court? Will the coroner or his jury believe that one machine could be jealous of another machine, and angry at not having been given its due ration of oil?

Will they believe that one of these steel arms reached out while Methick was not looking, picked up the jar of acid, and quietly tipped some into his coffee?

I think not. Nobody would believe that.