

CHECKMATE - - -

By Sandy Miller

FLAREN lounged comfortably at one end of the huge living-room. The fluoro-walls cast a gentle diffused light over the rich furnishing. Flaren reached for the control knob which would switch on the huge vidi-screen opposite his soft padded chair. Abruptly his hand stopped in mid-air.

I won't, he thought. Why should I watch that tripe? Why listen to some moaning bellowing adolescent? Why should I want to see the activities of some quaint uncivilized villagers?

He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a quick nervous gesture. You're jittery, his mind said. You've been under too much pressure. Go back to the simple things. Then the idea struck him. Why not a game of chess.

He got up and strode over to the game

table. It was a large flat surface, a boxy structure, equipped with a comfortable chair also. He sat down and touched a stud. At once a chess board swung up, its pieces set in order and ready to play. Flaren pressed another stud and the clicking of a relay told him the set was primed. The machine would give him a good game. He glanced to see if the handicap control was set at "class two"—it was.

He made the conventional Queen's Pawn opening. Magically the other side of the board moved correspondingly. Flaren knew it was a magnetic field beneath the board, but the ghost-like precision of the movement affected him strangely. He shook off a feeling of apprehension and concentrated on the play...

An hour later, he saw the trap he was

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in. The inexorable laws of the game had caught him and the machine made no mistakes—very few at least, for his grade of handicap. Flaren made the move. Swiftly the machine countered. A relay clicked again. The recorder went on softly. "Check King—checkmate!"

Flaren stood up. His arm swept over the table and the little figurines scattered across the room. Calmly he opened the case of the chess-playing machine. Its tubes and relays were exposed. He picked up an ornamental statuette of bronze and with one savage gesture flung it into the array

of tubes and wiring. The machine spluttered and squawked, flared up and died.

Flaren punched the button on the vidi-screen. Light groped across its face. The voice of the announcer dulled out, "—pit your wits against the machine. Thirty credits will buy a Maelzel Number eight—set it to your handicap and have fun..." The voice ran on and on. Flaren sat down and cupped his head in his hands. Very softly he began to cry. "Machines," he whispered, "machines..." The words sounded strange in his apartment. "Machines..."