

A Piece of String

Tales of the Thinking Machine

by Jacques Futrelle, 1875-1912

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It was just midnight. Somewhere near the center of a cloud of tobacco smoke, which hovered over one corner of the long editorial room, Hutchinson Hatch, reporter, was writing. The rapid click-click of his type writer went on and on, broken only when he laid aside one sheet to put in another. The finished pages were seized upon one at a time by an office boy and rushed off to the city editor. That astute person glanced at them for information and sent them on to the copy desk, whence they were shot down into that noisy, chaotic wilderness, the composing room.

The story was what the phlegmatic head of the copy desk, speaking in the vernacular, would have called a „beaut.” It was about the kidnapping that afternoon of Walter Francis, the four-year-old son of a wealthy young broker, Stanley Francis. An alternative to the abduction had been proposed in the form of a gift to certain persons, identity unknown, of fifty thousand dollars. Francis, not unnaturally, objected to the bestowal of so vast a sum upon anyone. So he told the police, and while they were making up their minds the child was stolen. It happened in the usual way—closed carriage, and all that sort of thing.

Hatch was telling the story graphically, as he could tell a story when there was one to be told. He glanced at the clock, jerked out another sheet of copy, and the office boy scuttled away with it.

„How much more?” called the city editor.

„Just a paragraph,” Hatch answered.

His type writer clicked on merrily for a couple of minutes and then stopped. The last sheet of copy was taken away, and he rose and stretched his legs.

„Some guy wants yer at the ‘phone,” an office boy told him.

„Who is it?” asked Hatch.

„Search me,” replied the boy. „Talks like he’d been eatin’ pickles.”

Hatch went into the booth indicated. The man at the other end was Professor Augustus S.F. X. Van Dusen. The reporter instantly recognized the crabbed, perpetually irritated voice of the noted scientist, The Thinking Machine.

„That you, Mr. Hatch?” came over the wire.

„Yes.”

„Can you do something for me immediately?” he queried. „It is very important.”

„Certainly.”

„Now listen closely,” directed The Thinking Machine. „Take a car from Park-sq., the one that goes toward Worcester through Brookline. About two miles beyond Brookline is Randall’s Crossing. Get off there and go to your right until you come to a small white house. In front of this house, a little to the left and across an open field, is a large tree. It stands just in the edge of a dense wood. It might be better to approach it through the wood, so as not to attract attention. Do you follow me?”

„Yes,” Hatch replied. His imagination was leading him a chase. „Go to this tree now, immediately, tonight,” continued The Thinking Machine. „You will find a small hole in it near the level of your eye. Feel in that hole, and see what is there—no matter what it is—then return to Brookline and telephone me. It is of the greatest importance.”

The reporter was thoughtful for a moment; it sounded like a page from a Dumas romance.

„What’s it all about?” he asked curiously.

„Will you go?” came the counter question.

„Yes, certainly.”

„Good-by.”

Hatch heard a click as the receiver was hung up at the other end. He shrugged his shoulders, said „Good-night” to the city editor, and went out. An hour later he was at Randall’s Crossing. The night was dark—so dark that the road was barely visible. The car whirled on, and as its lights were swallowed up Hatch set out to find the white house. He came upon it at last, and, turning, faced across an open

field toward the wood. Far away over there outlined vaguely against the distant glow of the city, was a tall tree.

Having fixed its location, the reporter moved along for a hundred yards or more to where the wood ran down to the road. Here he climbed a fence and stumbled on through the dark, doing sundry injuries to his shins. After a disagreeable ten minutes he reached the tree.

With a small electric flash light he found the hole. It was only a little larger than his hand, a place where decay had eaten its way into the tree trunk. For just a moment he hesitated about putting his hand into it—he didn't know what might be there. Then, with a grim smile, he obeyed orders.

He felt nothing save crumbings of decayed wood, and finally dragged out a handful, only to spill it on the ground. That couldn't be what was meant. For the second time he thrust in his hand, and after a deal of grabbing about produced—a piece of string. It was just a plain, ordinary, common piece of string—white string. He stared at it and smiled.

„I wonder what Van Dusen will make of that?” he asked himself.

Again his hand was thrust into the hole. But that was all—the piece of string. Then came another thought, and with that due regard for detail which made him a good reporter he went looking around the big tree for a possible second opening of some sort. He found none.

About three quarters of an hour later he stepped into an all-night drug store in Brookline and 'phoned to The Thinking Machine. There was an instant response to his ring.

„Well, well, what did you find?” came the query.

„Nothing to interest you, I imagine,” replied the reporter grimly. „Just a piece of string.”

„Good, good!” exclaimed The Thinking Machine. „What does it look like?”

„Well,” replied the newspaper man judicially, „it's just a piece of white string—cotton, I imagine—about six inches long.”

„Any knots in it?”

„Wait till I see.”

He was reaching into his pocket to take it out, when the startled voice of The Thinking Machine came over the line.

„Didn't you leave it there?” it demanded.

„No; I have it in my pocket.”

„Dear me!” exclaimed the scientist irritably. „That's bad. Well, has it any knots in it?” he asked with marked resignation.

Hatch felt that he had committed the unpardonable sin. „Yes,” he replied after an examination. „It has two knots in it—just plain knots—about two inches apart.”

„Single or double knots?”

„Single knots.”

„Excellent! Now, Mr. Hatch, listen. Untie one of those knots—it doesn't matter which one—and carefully smooth out the string. Then take it and put it back where you found it. 'Phone me as soon after that as you can.”

„Now, tonight?”

„Now, immediately.”

„But—but—” began the astonished reporter.

“It is a matter of the utmost consequence,” the irritated voice assured him. “You should not have taken the string. I told you merely to see what was there. But as you have brought it away you must put it back as soon as possible. Believe me, it is of the highest importance. And don’t forget to ‘phone me.”

The sharp, commanding tone stirred the reporter to new action and interest. A car was just going past the door, outward bound. He raced for it and got aboard. Once settled, he untied one of the knots, straightened out the string, and fell to wondering what sort of fool’s errand he was on.

„Randall’s Crossing!” called the conductor at last.

Hatch left the car and retraced his tortuous way along the road and through the wood to the tall tree, found the hole, and had just thrust in his hand to replace the string when he heard a woman’s voice directly behind him, almost in his ear. It was a calm, placid, convincing sort of voice. It said:

„Hands up!”

Hatch was a rational human being with ambitions and hopes for the future; therefore his hands went up without hesitation. „I knew something would happen,” he told himself.

He turned to see the woman. In the darkness he could only dimly trace a tall, slender figure. Steadily poised just a couple of dozen inches from his nose was a revolver. He could see that without any difficulty. It glinted a little, even in the gloom, and made itself conspicuous.

„Well,” asked the reporter at last, as he stood reaching upward, „it’s your move.”

„Who are you?” asked the woman. Her voice was steady and rather pleasant.

The reporter considered the question in the light of all he didn’t know. He felt it wouldn’t be a sensible thing to say just who he was. Somewhere at the end of this thing The Thinking Machine was working on a problem; he was presumably helping in a modest, unobtrusive sort of way; therefore he would be cautious.

„My name is Williams,” he said promptly. „Jim Williams,” he added circumstantially.

„What are you doing here?”

Another subject for thought. That was a question he couldn’t answer; he didn’t know what he was doing there; he was wondering himself. He could only hazard a guess, and he did that with trepidation.

„I came from him,” he said with deep meaning.

„Who?” demanded the woman suspiciously.

„It would be useless to name him,” replied the reporter.

„Yes, yes, of course,” the woman mused. „I understand.”

There was a little pause. Hatch was still watching the revolver. He had a lively interest in it. It had not moved a hair’s breath since he first looked at it; hanging up there in the night it fairly stared him out of countenance.

„And the string?” asked the woman at last.

Now the reporter felt that he was in the mire. The woman herself relieved this new embarrassment.

„Is it in the tree?” she went on.

„Yes.”

„How many knots are in it?”

„One.”

„One?“ she repeated eagerly. „Put your hand in there and hand me the string. No tricks, now!“

Hatch complied with a certain deprecatory manner which he intended should convey to her the impression that there would be no tricks. As she took the string her fingers brushed against his. They were smooth and delicate. He knew that even in the dark.

„And what did he say?“ she went on.

Having gone this far without falling into anything, the reporter was willing to plunge—felt that he had to, as a matter of fact.

„He said yes,” he murmured without shifting his eyes from the revolver.

„Yes?“ the woman repeated again eagerly. „Are you sure?“

„Yes,” said the reporter again. The thought flashed through his mind that he was tangling up somebody’s affairs sadly—he didn’t know whose. Anyhow, it was a matter of no consequence to him, as long as that revolver stared at him that way.

„Where is it?“ asked the woman.

Then the earth slipped out from under him. „I don’t know,” he replied weakly.

„Didn’t he give it to you?“

„Oh, no. He—he wouldn’t trust me with it.”

„How can I get it, then?“

„Oh, he’ll fix it all right,” Hatch assured her soothingly. „I think he said something about tomorrow night.”

„Where?“

„Here.”

„Thank God!” the woman gasped suddenly. Her tone betrayed deep emotion; but it wasn’t so deep that she lowered the revolver.

There was a long pause. Hatch was figuring possibilities. How to get possession of the revolver seemed the imminent problem. His hands were still in the air, and there was nothing to indicate that they were not to remain there indefinitely. The woman finally broke the silence.

„Are you armed?“

„Oh, no.”

„Truthfully?“

„Truthfully.”

„You may lower your hands,” she said, as if satisfied; „then go on ahead of me straight across the field to the road. Turn to your left there. Don’t look back under any circumstances. I shall be behind you with this revolver pointing at your head. If you attempt to escape or make any outcry I shall shoot. Do you believe me?“

The reporter considered it for a moment. „I’m firmly convinced of it,” he said at last.

They stumbled on to the road, and there Hatch turned as directed. Walking along in the shadows with the tread of small feet behind him he first contemplated a dash for liberty; but that would mean giving up the adventure, whatever it was. He had no fear for his personal safety as long as he obeyed orders, and he intended to do that implicitly. And besides, The Thinking Machine had his slender finger in the pie somewhere. Hatch knew that, and knowing it was a source of deep gratification.

Just now he was taking things at face value, hoping that with their arrival at whatever place they were bound for he would be further enlightened. Once he thought he heard the woman sobbing, and started to look back. Then he remembered her warning, and thought better of it. Had he looked back he would have seen her stumbling along, weeping, with the revolver dangling limply at her side.

At last, a mile or more farther on, they began to arrive somewhere. A house sat back some distance from the road.

„Go in there!” commanded his captor.

He turned in at the gate, and five minutes later stood in a comfortably furnished room on the ground floor of a small house. A dim light was burning. The woman turned it up. Then almost defiantly she threw aside her veil and hat and stood before him. Hatch gasped. She was pretty—bewilderingly pretty—and young and graceful and all that a young woman should be. Her cheeks were flushed.

„You know me, I suppose?” she exclaimed.

„Oh yes, certainly,” Hatch assured her.

And saying that, he knew he had never seen her before.

„I suppose you thought it perfectly horrid of me to keep you with your hands up like that all the time; but I was dreadfully frightened,” the woman went on, and she smiled a little uncertainly. „But there wasn’t anything else to do.”

„It was the only thing,” Hatch agreed.

„Now I’m going to ask you to write and tell him just what happened,” she resumed. „And tell him, too, that the other matter must be arranged immediately. I’ll see that your letter is delivered. Sit here!”

She picked up the revolver from the table beside her and placed a chair in position. Hatch walked to the table and sat down. Pen and ink lay before him. He knew now he was trapped. He couldn’t write a letter to that vague „him” of whom he had talked so glibly, about that still more vague „it”—whatever that might be. He sat dumbly staring at the paper.

„Well?” she demanded suspiciously.

„I—I can’t write it,” he confessed suddenly.

She stared at him coldly for a moment as if she had suspected just that, and he in turn stared at the revolver with a new and vital interest. He felt the tension, but saw no way to relieve it.

„You are an imposter!” she blurted out at last. „A detective?”

Hatch didn’t deny it. She backed away toward a bell call near the door, watching him closely, and rang vigorously several times. After a little pause the door opened, and two men, evidently servants, entered.

„Take this gentleman to the rear room up stairs,” she commanded without giving them a glance, „and lock him up. Keep him under close guard. If he attempts to escape, stop him! That’s all.”

Here was another page from a Dumas romance. The reporter started to explain; but there was a merciless gleam, danger even, in the woman’s eyes, and he submitted to orders. So, he was led up stairs a captive, and one of the men took a place on guard inside the room.

The dawn was creeping on when Hatch fell asleep. It was about ten o’clock when he awoke, and the sun was high. His guard, wide eyed and alert, still sat beside

the door. For several minutes the reporter lay still, seeking vainly some sort of explanation of what was happening. Then, cheerfully:

„Good-morning.”

The guard merely glared at him.

„May I inquire your name?” the reporter asked.

There was no answer.

„Or the lady’s name?”

No answer.

„Or why I am where I am?”

Still no answer.

„What would you do,” Hatch went on casually, „if I should try to get out of here?”

The guard handled his revolver carelessly. The reporter was satisfied. „He is not deaf, that’s certain,” he told himself.

He spent the remainder of the morning yawning and wondering what The Thinking Machine was about; also he had a few casual reflections as to the mental state of his city editor at his failure to appear and follow up the kidnapping story. He finally dismissed all these ideas with a shrug of his shoulders, and sat down to wait for whatever was coming.

It was in the early afternoon that he heard laughter in the next room. First there was a woman’s voice, then the shrill cackle of a child. Finally he distinguished some words.

„You ticky!” exclaimed the child, and again there was the laugh.

The reporter understood „you ticky,” coupled with the subsequent peal, to be a sort of abbreviated English for „you tickle.” After awhile the merriment died away and he heard the child’s insistent demand for something else.

„You be hossie.”

„No, no,” the woman expostulated.

„Yes, you be hossie.”

„No, let Morris be hossie.”

„No, no. You be hossie.”

That was all. Evidently some one was „hossie,” because there was a sound of romping; but finally even that died away. Hatch yawned away another hour or so under the constant eye of his guard, and then began to grow restless. He turned on the guard savagely.

„Isn’t anything ever going to happen?” he demanded.

The guard didn’t say.

„You’ll never convict yourself on your own statement,” Hatch burst out again in disgust.

He stretched out on a couch, bored by the sameness which had characterized the last few hours of his adventure. His attention was attracted by some movement at the door, and he looked up. His guard heard, too, and with revolver in hand went to the door, carefully unlocking it. After a few hurriedly whispered words he left the room, and Hatch was meditating an instant rush for a window, when the woman entered. She had the revolver now. She was deathly white and gripped the weapon menacingly. She did not lock the door—only closed it—but with her own person and the attention compelling revolver she blocked the way.

„What is it now?” asked Hatch wearily.

„You must not speak or call, or make the slightest sound,” she whispered tensely. „If you do, I’ll kill you. Do you understand?”

Hatch confessed by a nod that he understood. He also imagined that he understood this sudden change in guard, and the warning. It was because some one was about to enter or had entered the house. His conjecture was partially confirmed instantly by a distant rapping on a door.

„Not a sound, now!” whispered the woman.

From somewhere below he heard the sound of steps as one of the servants answered the knock. After a short wait he heard two voices mumbling. Suddenly one was raised clearly.

„Why, Worcester can’t be that far,” it protested irritably.

Hatch knew. It was The Thinking Machine. The woman noted a change in his manner and drew back the hammer of the revolver. The reporter saw the idea. He didn’t dare call. That would be suicide. Perhaps he could attract attention, though; drop a key, for instance. The sound might reach The Thinking Machine and be interpreted aright. One hand was in a pocket, and slowly he was drawing out a key. He would risk it. Maybe —

Then came a new sound. It was the patter of small feet. The guarded door was pushed open and a tousle-headed child, a boy, ran in.

„Mama, mama!” he called loudly. He ran to the woman and clutched at her skirts.

„Oh, my baby! what have you done?” she asked piteously. „We are lost, lost!”

„Me ‘faid,” the child went on.

With the door—his avenue of possible escape—open, Hatch did not drop the key. Instead, he gazed at the woman, then down at the child. From below he again heard The Thinking Machine.

„How far is the car track, then?”

The servant answered something. There was a sound of steps, and the front door closed. Hatch knew that The Thinking Machine had come and gone; yet he was strangely calm about it, quite himself, despite the fact that a nervous finger still lay on the trigger of the pistol.

From his refuge behind his mother’s skirts the boy peered around at Hatch shyly. The reporter gazed, gazed, all eyes, and then was convinced. The boy was Walter Francis, the kidnapped boy whose pictures were being published in every newspaper of a dozen cities. Here was a story—the story—the superlative story.

„Mrs. Francis, if you wouldn’t mind letting down that hammer—” he suggested modestly. “I assure you I contemplate no harm, and you—you are very nervous.”

„You know me, then?” she asked.

„Only because the child there, Walter, called you mama.”

Mrs. Francis lowered the revolver hammer so recklessly that Hatch involuntarily dodged. And then came a scene, a scene with tears in it, and all those things which stir men, even reporters. Finally the woman dropped the revolver on the floor and swept the boy up in her arms with a gesture of infinite tenderness. He cuddled there, content. At that moment Hatch could have walked out the door, but instead he sat down. He was just beginning to get interested.

„They sha’n’t take you!” sobbed the mother.

„There is no immediate danger,” the reporter assured her. „The man who came here for that purpose has gone. Meanwhile, if you will tell me the facts, perhaps—perhaps I may be able to be of some assistance.”

Mrs. Francis looked at him, startled. „Help me?”

„If you will explain, perhaps I can do something,” said Hatch again.

Somewhere back in a remote recess of his brain he was remembering. And as it became clearer he was surprised that he had not remembered sooner. It was a story of marital infelicity, and its principals were Stanley Francis and his wife—this bewilderingly pretty young woman before him. It had been only eight or nine months back.

Technically she had deserted Stanley Francis. There had been some violent scene and she left their home and little son. Soon afterward she went to Europe. It had been rumored that divorce proceedings would follow, or at least a legal separation, but nothing had ever come of the rumors. All this Mrs. Francis told to Hatch in little incoherent bursts, punctuated with sobs and tears.

„He struck me, he struck me!” she declared with a flush of anger and shame, „and I went then on impulse. I was desperate. Later, even before I went to Europe, I knew the legal status of the affair; but the thought of my boy lingered, and I resolved to come back and get him—abduct him, if necessary. I did that, and I will keep him if I have to kill the one who opposes me.”

Hatch saw the mother instinct here, that tigerish ferocity of love which stops at nothing.

„I conceived the plan of demanding fifty thousand dollars of my husband under threat of abduction,” Mrs. Francis went on. „My purpose was to make it appear that the plot was that of professional—what would you call it?—kidnappers. But I did not send the letter demanding this until I had perfected all my plans and knew I could get the boy. I wanted my husband to think it was the work of others, at least until we were safe in Europe, because even then I imagined there would be a long legal fight.

„After I stole the boy and he recognized me, I wanted him as my own, absolutely safe from legal action by his father. Then I wrote to Mr. Francis, telling him I had Walter, and asking that in pity to me he legally give me the boy by a document of some sort. In that letter I told how he might signify his willingness to do this; but of course I would not give my address. I placed a string, the one you saw, in that tree after having tied two knots in it. It was a silly, romantic means of communication he and I used years ago in my girlhood when we both lived near here. If he agreed that I should have the child, he was to come or send some one last night and untie one of the two knots.”

Then, to Hatch, the intricacies passed away. He understood clearly. Instead of going to the police with the second letter from his wife, Francis had gone to The Thinking Machine. The Thinking Machine sent the reporter to untie the knot, which was an answer of „Yes” to Mrs. Francis’s request for the child. Then she would have written giving her address, and there would have been a clue to the child’s whereabouts. It was all perfectly clear now.

„Did you specifically mention a string in your letter?” he asked.

„No. I merely stated that I would expect his answer in that place, and would leave something there by which he could signify Yes or No, as he did years ago.

The string was one of the odd little ideas of my girlhood. Two knots meant *No*; one knot meant *Yes*; and if the string was found by anyone else it meant nothing.”

This, then, was why The Thinking Machine did not tell him at first that he would find a string and instruct him to untie one of the knots in it. The scientist had seen that it might have been one of the other tokens of the old romantic days.

„When I met you there,” Mrs. Francis resumed. „I believed you were an imposter—I don’t know why, I just believed it—yet your answers were in a way correct. For fear you were not what you seemed—that you were a detective—I brought you here to keep you until I got the child’s release. You know the rest.”

The reporter picked up the revolver and whirled it in his fingers. The action, apparently, did not disturb Mrs. Francis.

„Why did you remain here so long after you got the child?” asked Hatch.

„I believed it was safer than in a city,” she answered frankly. „The steamer on which I planned to sail for Europe with my boy leaves tomorrow. I had intended going to New York tonight to catch it; but now—”

The reporter glanced down at the child. He had fallen asleep in his mother’s arms. His tiny hand clung to her. The picture was a pretty one. Hatch made up his mind.

„Well, you’d better pack up,” he said. „I’ll go with you to New York and do all I can.”

It was on the New York-bound train several hours later that Hatch turned to Mrs. Francis with an odd smile.

„Why didn’t you load that revolver?” he asked.

„Because I was horribly afraid some one would get hurt with it,” she replied laughingly.

She was gay with that gentle happiness of possession which blesses woman for the agonies of motherhood, and glanced from time to time at the berth across the aisle where her baby was asleep. Looking upon it all, Hatch was content. He didn’t know his exact position in law; but that didn’t matter, after all.

Hutchinson Hatch’s exclusive story of the escape to Europe of Mrs. Francis and her boy was remarkably complete; but all the facts were not in it. It was a week or so later that he detailed them to The Thinking Machine.

„I knew it,” said the scientist at the end. „Francis came to me, and I interested myself in the case, practically knowing every fact from his statement. When you heard me speak in the house where you were a prisoner I was there merely to convince myself that the mother did have the baby. I heard it call her and went away satisfied. I knew you were there, too, because you had failed to ‘phone me the second time as I expected, and I knew intuitively what you would do when you got the real facts about Mrs. Francis and her baby. I went away so that the field might be clear for you to act. Francis himself is a detestable puppy. I told him so.”

And that was all that was ever said about it.

