

STARTLING STORIES

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A Complete Novel



FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY

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Officer Clancy lunged forward and caught hold of the hand

Dimension: Praecox

By BLAIR REED

Folks were in for a rude awakening when they saw a disembodied hand reach into their shops and homes!

AT 2:45 P.M. of a fall day, a customer in the Houseware Department of Lochwald's Department Store approached Mr. Phoebus and asked to see the aluminum soup pots. Mr. Phoebus, floor-walker, was gracious. He gave the impression that he had been waiting all day for just this request. A slight, dapper man, with receding brown hair, a bow tie, and a saccharine smile, he had been with Lochwald's for ten

years and he was plainly proud of knowing his business. Now, in his best ingratiating manner, he bowed slightly from the hips, which was all his girdle would allow, and said:

"Yes, madam. If you will step this way, please?"

Flattered by such gallantry, the stout, middle-aged woman in the flowered dress flushed a little with incongruous coquetry slightly

complicated by high blood pressure.

At the cooking utensils counter, the shining aluminumware was neatly stacked.

"Ah!" breathed Mr. Phoebus ecstatically, "you are very fortunate, madam. There is just one soup tureen remaining. Now this is especially durable material which—"

And then Mr. Phoebus broke off in open-mouthed horror. For there, right before his bulging eyes, the shining soup pot—apparently of its own volition—rose jerkily from the counter and swiftly disappeared into thin air. . . .

The Eugenie Jewelry store, conservative and long-established, had all the dignity and hushed reverential air of a marble-halled art gallery. Mr. Lucas, impeccable and distinguished in his blue pin-stripe, was nodding his neat gray head politely as he showed wristwatches to Mrs. Carruthers, a middle-aged society matron. In his hands, with loving care, he held one of the smallest and most expensive watches in the store.

Mrs. Carruthers had decided she would take it. Smiling pleasantly over this considerable sale, Mr. Lucas peered through his glasses at the store electric clock. This, he said later, was what fixed the time in his mind. "Three p.m.," he remarked to his wealthy customer. "I will wind the watch and set it for you. Of course, in the first few days it may vary in accuracy by a minute or so; but if you will bring it back, we will be glad to make the necessary adjustment. All watches, you see, need—"

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Carruthers, hardly listening, "I understand. I'll send it with Pierre, my chauffeur."

Mr. Lucas nodded and, having set and wound the watch, laid it gently back in its plush case. As he started to hand it to Mrs. Carruthers, he blinked.

FOR THE HAND that took the case from his was certainly ill-kept. Mr. Lucas stared at it, shocked. Its knuckles were gnarled, it was large, the fingernails were broken and not exactly clean. He could hardly believe it of a woman so prominent. As the hand and plush box disappeared over the edge of the counter, he looked up askance. It was a moment before he realized that there was an even more baffled expression on the well-groomed Mrs. Carruthers' face.

"Where is the watch?" she frowned.

Mr. Lucas blinked. "Why," said he, "I just gave it to you,"

"You— Now look, Mr. Lucas, I have dealt here for a long time and I am in no mood for games. Really, this is ridiculous at your age. Practical joking in business! Come now, what have you done with the watch?"

A growing consternation seized him. "E-but Mrs. Carruthers," he stammered in protest, "there is no trick! I—I handed it right across the counter here and—"

He looked down at the counter. His jaw sagged. Because Mrs. Carruthers' hand was on the counter now and it was beyond doubt a small, feminine hand, white and neatly manicured.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Carruthers frostily.

Mr. Lucas moved his jaw up and down several times, but no words came out. He was quite speechless. . . .

It was 3:20 p.m. at Antoine's, specialist in ladies' millinery, gowns, and accessories. Miss Hildreth, a shapely, attractive brunette, gave a sigh of relief that the scatterbrained debutante, who didn't know what she wanted, had finally gone. Now, shaking her head, Miss Hildreth, with a little, sinuous movement, pushed her frock down a bit over her curving hips and set about putting away all the hats the debutante had tried on.

Despite such occasionally harassing customers, she didn't mind working here at Antoine's. It was a lovely store, dainty, feminine. It looked, she thought, like a picture in *Vogue* or Harper's Bazaar. The clientele was nice for the most part and nobody could ask for more exclusive surroundings. No, she didn't mind it at all, she reflected; in fact she would distinctly like it if it weren't for Antoine himself. Not that he wasn't pleasant. That was just it; he was *too* pleasant. The old lecher.

She shivered a little with distaste. He must be at least fifty. Of course, he was slender for his age and graceful, but that little mustache, and those dark, glittering eyes that always seemed to be undressing her—ugh. She had read about these Frenchmen; you had to watch them.

As she stooped to put a hatbox on a shelf under the counter, she saw that Antoine was directly behind her adjusting the gown on a wax mannequin. She drew a breath and went on with her work busily. She was always uneasy when he was near her. Why, she asked herself, didn't he pick on one of the other girls? They weren't exactly unattractive. But no—

Suddenly Miss Hildreth felt a hand on her

shoulder. Her jaw tightened. The hand moved softly down over her bare arm and then was gone. The nerve! Her nostrils flared indignantly.

With compressed lips, she turned. What did he think she was—dumb? Standing there fooling with that mannequin as though he was the most innocent lamb in the world! Well, she'd let him know, all right.

"Mr. Antoine," she said firmly. "I came here to work as a salesgirl, is that clear? Just that and no more!"

With this, she tossed her pretty head and walked off, leaving Antoine to stare after her bewilderedly. After a moment, he smiled and gave an expressive shrug, rolling his eyes to heaven. These American girls—ouf! Such spirit! Who could understand them?

He was about to turn back to the mannequin when he froze in his tracks, eyes widening at the hat counter. He was seeing it and he couldn't believe he was seeing it: an arm without a body. The hand was feeling over a hat. It picked the hat up. Then, arm, hand, and hat soared upward through the air into nothingness. Antoine's face turned green, then a mottled purple. He tried to speak, to call out. Instead, he fainted dead away. . . .

Horace Niblock, young inventor, was skinny. Atop a bony and angular frame, perched on a pipstem neck, his head looked very much like a billiard ball with a crew cut, horn-rimmed glasses and flaring ears. Altogether, he was not a very prepossessing figure, but he had accomplished a very prepossessing thing.

Now he was bending over a strange, dial-covered contraption which resembled a record cabinet with a built-in radio.

"Madge!" he yelled. "Look what I've got now!"

HIS ARM was in the cabinet, a queer sight because the cabinet didn't seem deep enough to contain it.

Madge, his well-built, chestnut-haired wife, came running down the basement stairs to his laboratory. She was breathless.

"What, Horace? What now?"

Withdrawing his arm from the machine, he produced a woman's hat. It was a smart, sophisticated, expensive hat. Madge's eyes lighted.

"Horace!" she squealed. "It's gorgeous!" She had it on her head in a flash, turning this way and that. "How does it look on me? Is it chic? Does it suit me?"

She ran to a mirror on the wall. "It's a wow!" she breathed. "Darling, why didn't you invent that thingumajig long ago?"

"Thingumajig," grunted the horn-rimmed inventor, straightening up his unbelievable angles. "That's a woman for you! I've been telling you all day this is a fourth dimensional projector. Thingumajig!"

Madge was still occupied with her reflection in the mirror. "Oh, Silly, I don't pay any attention to all those involved explanations. How does it work?"

Horace groaned at this feminine masterpiece. "There is," he said, exasperated, "utterly no use telling you, but here we go again once and for all. To keep it simple enough for your incredibly minute brain, time is the fourth dimension. This is a machine to reach through that dimension, through time. Time is spelled T-I-M-E. Get it? The dials are set for fifty years from now, which means that anything put into that cabinet is immediately transported fifty years into the future. I have, you might say, been reaching into the world of Nineteen Ninety-Nine. Of course, there is no way of governing place as yet and I have evidently reached into future merchandising establishments, judging by the articles I brought back."

"What I don't understand, though, Horace," Madge interrupted, tilting her head to one side before the looking-glass, "is why the box the watch came in had the Eugenie Jewelry Store's name in it; that's one of our stores here in town."

"Which," Horace shrugged, "is exceedingly simple, my beloved lamebrain. It is not inconceivable that Eugenie's will be in existence fifty years from now, is it?"

"N-no," said Madge. She looked at the dazzling watch. "It sure is lovely."

Switching off the current from the machine, Horace drew his large-knuckled hand across it lovingly. "Baby," he breathed, "we've really done it. Do you know what this means? Fame, fortune, independence!" His eyes glazed behind the dark horn rims. "Why, this is the biggest thing since—"

"Horace," came Madge's tentative voice, interrupting his reverie.

He started. "Huh? What?"

"Horace, I was just wondering. It wouldn't be really stealing if you took something that hasn't been manufactured yet, would it?"

Horace Niblock's mouth fell open ludicrously. His eyes wandered speculatively to

the shining soup pot on the floor. "Why—uh!" He blinked. "I don't exactly know." Then he fixed her with a scowl. "Will someone—anyone—tell me why women have to go think of things like that? I'll figure it out after dinner. But not until then. Now scoot. Scat! In heaven's name get back to your kitchen before you think of something else."

After dinner, Horace sprawled in an easy chair and started to read the evening paper while Madge washed the dishes.

Suddenly, he shot bolt upright. "Great Caesar!" he gasped.

He read further, then shut his eyes tightly and groaned, "Oh my God!"

In the next second he was on his feet. "Madge!" he yelled, lunging toward the kitchen. "Madge!"

Madge turned from the sink. "What is it? Horace! You're white as a sheet! What's the matter? Are you sick?"

"Sick!" he shrieked wildly, brandishing the paper. "I'm ruined! I'll be prosecuted, incarcerated! Read this!" He thrust the paper in her face.

Madge was patient. "Horace," she pointed out, "I can't read it while you're holding it against my nose."

"Oh," he said. He put the paper into her hands and sank desolately to a chair. "I can't understand it. What could have gone wrong?"

Madge read the paper. The headlines were sensational:

DISEMBODIED ARM LOOTS
THREE PROMINENT STORES

PSYCHIATRISTS SAY
HALLUCINATION

"Well," she said, brows furrowed, "what has this got to do with us? We haven't lost any arms, have we? And, besides, how could an arm without a body go around and steal? Why, that's just plain silly."

Horace moaned. "Look. Don't try to think I don't want you to strain yourself. Just listen. The arm they saw was mine, do you understand, *mine*. I have made a mistake in the machine. Instead of reaching into the future, I have reached on a curve that brought my arm back into the present. Only in traveling that curve there was a lateral displacement and my arm emerged downtown in our own stores. See what that means? It makes me a thief!"

"Oh-oh," said Madge, the significance dawning on her now. "That's not good, is it?"

"Oh, it's fine," rasped Horace, waving one arm extravagantly. "Just wonderful. I'll spend the rest of my life in jail, that's all."

Madge was taken aback. "You'll do no such a thing," she said indignantly. "I simply couldn't spare you that long."

HORACE NIBLOCK smote his forehead. "I give up," he announced to the ceiling. "I absolutely surrender!"

"Oh, no!" contradicted Madge. "No, you don't. I have just figured the whole thing out. Listen. They don't know it was your arm, do they? No. Well, then, you don't have to be dope enough to tell them. The whole thing is very simple and there is nothing to worry about. We will just put those things back the same way we got them, that's what." She smiled at him brightly. "You see? That's all there is to it; things will be even all around." She added as a sudden afterthought: "Except the paper said that hat came from Antoine's and, after you replace it, I am going right down there and buy it."

Perceptibly encouraged, Horace looked both wondering and triumphant.

"My marital anathema," said he, "your Lilliputian brain has produced an idea. This is impossible and therefore a most wonderful thing. The hat is bribery of the rankest sort, but it is worth it."

Madge cooed.

Downstairs in his basement laboratory the next day, however, with the wristwatch, hat, and soup pot lined up for return, they ran into a complication. Horace, fiddling with the dials of the fourth dimensional projector, shut his eyes and groaned, "The plan won't work, Madge. I used different settings on the locator dial and now I can't remember them."

"And you talk about *my* brain," observed Madge sweetly.

"Oh, I can remember the settings all right," bristled Horace, "but I can't recall the sequence of them, I mean which one I used for which article."

"We got the soup pot first," Madge told him. "Think."

"Yes. That's it," he agreed. "Think." He frowned deeper to show he was thinking. "Let's see, the settings were ninety-five, eighty-five and seventy-five. But in that order? Mmmm. No, I started with seventy-

five, then eighty-five, then ninety-five. Or did I? Maybe, I started with eighty-five and—"

Mr. Lucas, of Eugenie Jewelry Store, was examining a diamond through his eye-piece when the incident occurred and so, failing to see it, was spared a rise in blood pressure that might have blown his gray top. For at the end of the counter a skinny arm appeared in the air, its large-knuckled hand feeling about and looking crazily like a flapping wing. Finally it touched the counter. On the instant, it disappeared for a moment and then reappeared with a chic, expensive lady's hat, which it placed gently on the counter before once more vanishing. . . .

"That's one," Horace said to Madge as he drew his arm from the projector. "Now, let's see. That next setting, I think, was—"

"Did you get the right place?" Madge was looking over his shoulder.

"Think so," grunted Horace, "but it's problematical. Be still, beanhead, will you?" His glasses slid down his bony nose and he had to lean his head back a little to see. "Uh, seventy-five on the locator. . . ."

There was a lull in business at Antoine's. Miss Hildreth, her shapely figure revealed in every lovely curve by a tight-fitting blue jersey dress, was once again straightening up the millinery counter. Behind her, Antoine was putting a new gown on the wax mannequin, and Miss Hildreth was more than ever uncomfortably aware of his presence.

Imagine that old goat caressing her arm like that yesterday, she was thinking. Queer that he had fainted right afterwards. And that story he told about a disembodied arm, the same story that was later in all the newspapers.

Phooey! The psychiatrists were right: people were always seeing things, not so long ago it was flying saucers. But crazy people had hallucinations, too. Suppose Antoine was crazy? If he is, she thought, he's sex-crazy—he's been ogling me all morning.

At this thought, a fresh wave of apprehension swept over her. She glanced uneasily behind her at Antoine. No. He was still draping that gown on the mannequin. But she wished he wasn't so close to her. . . .

Soon, Miss Hildreth, absorbed in her work, arranged a hat on the display stand and took a step backward to view it.

At this juncture, Horace Niblock, having set the projector's dial, slipped his arm into the fourth dimension to feel around for a

counter on which to put his next article. Almost at once, his eyebrows querked. "What the—" he said. "What's this? It's firm yet yielding and— Omigosh!" He jerked his arm out of the cabinet, his face reddening furiously. . . .

MISS HILDRETH, lovely creature, had just taken that step backward when she performed a series of amazing things. First her eyes went round as saucers—and then abruptly all was activity. Miss Hildreth's mouth fell open, Miss Hildreth's body shot suddenly into a forward arch, and her mouth said, "Eee-yipe!"

Once she recovered her balance, Miss Hildreth was all outrage. She whirled like a wildcat. The unsuspecting Antoine got a wallop alongside his head that knocked his toupee askew. And it did not improve his spirits any, as Miss Hildreth strode indignantly off to get her hat and purse, to see a shining soup pot materialize unthinkably on the hat counter. Antoine's eyes rolled up into his head and once again he swooned away. . . .

"One more to go," said Horace Niblock, all unaware of the commotion his innocent mistake had roused. He adjusted the dials of the projector.

Madge sighed, "Yes, the watch. I suppose I'll never have a watch like that again." . . .

Mr. Phoebus, floorwalker of the Housewares Department for the Lochwald Department Store, was patiently, and with smooth little gestures of his hands, explaining for the eleventh time to Officer Clancy just what had happened. "The lady was standing there," he said, "and I was standing—let me see—yes, about here; and—"

"Right," said Patrolman Clancy, "an' the soup pot yez lost was here." He placed a beefy hand on the cooking utensil counter.

"Quite correct," nodded Mr. Phoebus. "And I was just telling the lady that—"

Mr. Phoebus choked, his eyes bulged. One hand at his paralyzed throat, he gesticulated wildly with the other. Officer Clancy's head jerked toward the counter just in time to see a skinny arm with a large-knuckled hand lowering an oblong plush box to the counter's surface.

It must be said that Officer Clancy was a man of uncommon courage. He did not quail before this arm without a body. On the contrary he lunged for it—and caught it. The plush box dropped, bounced, went end over end to the floor. Mr. Phoebus, horrified,

staggered backwards. But Officer Clancy, struggling with the arm, finally got it into a firmly vicious wristlock and shouted, "Get help, man! Begorra, I've got it!"

Still speechless with terror, Mr. Phoebus nodded dumbly and turned to scurry off through the gathering crowd of fascinated shoppers. He would remember for the rest of his life the women shrieking and fainting all around him. And later he was to think what a pity it was that all this had not happened in the smelling-salts department. They could have sold out. . . .

Reaching into the fourth dimension with the wristwatch, all Horace knew at first was that he was in a violent universe. He felt himself yanked abruptly forward. His round head banged against the cabinet with such force that his horn-rimmed glasses popped off and hung ludicrously from one ear. For a moment Horace was dazed.

"Horace!" screamed Madge. "What's wrong? What is it? What's happened?"

With strong hands rending his arm down at Lochwald's Department Store, Horace made the only intelligent answer possible.

He yelled, "Ow-w-w!"

Madge fussed about him. "What is it, Horace?" she asked intelligently.

Gulping and gasping, Horace managed, "Somebody—uh!—has got—oof!—hold of my arm! Do something! Don't just—*OWWW!*"

Horace was going through peculiar contortions by this time.

"What'll I do?" wailed Madge. "Wait! I know. I'll smash the set! That way—"

"NO!" screamed Horace. "Do you want me going around—yipe!—for the rest of my life with my arm in the—oooh!—fourth dimension!"

Madge considered this. "N-no. I hadn't thought of that. Your right arm, too."

"*Yowww!*" agreed Horace, squirming. At that moment he was wishing profanely that he had invented a wife-exterminator.

"I know!" Madge brightened, snapping her fingers. "You stay right here till I get back." Her high heels beat a tattoo up the stairs.

When, in a moment, she came back with a carton in her hands, Horace was making faces that would have fascinated Bela Lugosi, not to mention Karloff.

"What," he howled, "in the name of Heaven, have you got there?"

"Lard," said Madge, as though any fool

ought to know that. She opened the carton. "Here. You take a nice big handful in your left hand, then reach into that thingumajig and smear it on the arm they're holding. Catch? That will make it too slippery to hold!"

MOANING, Horace dug into the greasy mess desperately and with a scooped handful thrust his left arm into the cabinet. There was some delay while he groped about, greasing first his captured arm and then, quite accidentally, Officer Clancy's squirming Irish face. Then Horace withdrew his left arm and jerked backward with his body, trying to pull free. Madge was nothing if not cooperative. "Here, let me help," she volunteered. "We'll pull together."

Horace never had time to object. Behind him, with one hand firmly under his chin and the other spread conveniently over his face so that one finger was in his nostril and another in his eye, Madge pulled mightily. For one precarious moment, Horace was foggy uncertain whether he would lose the arm or merely die of a broken neck. He said, "*Glimph!*" which Madge didn't bother to contradict.

Then, all at once, the lard did its work. Officer Clancy's hands slid free. With both Horace and Madge exerting all their strength, the release was violent. They flew backward across the laboratory, Madge fell, Horace fell on top of her and rolled off, banging his head on the floor. The fourth dimensional projector followed suit with a loud crash; wires popped out; condensers and tubes flew and shattered. Finally, when the noise and confusion subsided, a lone unbroken tube rolled slowly round and round at Horace's feet. Madge looked from her completely dazed husband to the wreckage. "Now see what you've done," she said.

Horace moaned faintly.

It was a week later. Publicity had died down, the laboratory had been cleaned up, and all was peace in the Niblock home once more. Horace, one arm in a sling, was downstairs in the laboratory and Madge, upstairs in the kitchen, was blithely cooking dinner. On her face was a fathomless smile. Horace was inventing again, but there would be no more trouble. She knew what he was making this time. It was a three-dimensional box into which, by his own scowling declaration, he meant to drop old and very three-dimensional razor blades.