



an extra-special
HOCUS POCUS
HOTEL
adventure

by Michael Dahl


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The Clockwork Man
and the Curious Maid



1. – Abracadabra Hotel, Present Day

Charlie Hitchcock and Tyler Yu followed the hunched-over back of Brack, the ancient elevator operator, as he led them through the sub-basement of the Abracadabra Hotel. Brack shined his flashlight toward the back wall.

“Ah, there it is!” he cried.

Tyler let out a howl, and Charlie jumped. The flashlight fell on a pair of eyes staring back at them. The eyes were set in an angry pale face. Two claw-like hands reached toward them.

Brack chuckled. “It’s not human,” he said.

“That’s even worse!” said Tyler.

“No,” explained Brack. “I mean it’s not human at all. It’s a machine.”

“A robot?” said Charlie.

“An early version of a robot,” said Brack, nodding. “They use to be called automatons. Mechanical men.”

“I remember reading about them in *Hugo Cabret*,” said Charlie.

“Hugo who?” asked Ty.

Brack stepped closer to the machine. His flashlight showed a mechanical man covered in jewels and wearing a silver turban. Its gloved hands glittered with rings and bracelets. And it sat, cross-legged, on a fancy cart, also covered

in jewels, that moved on tiny wheels. “Help me push it back to the elevator,” said Brack.

“This will be cool to put into the charity raffle,” said Tyler, pushing the heavy cart. “My mom will really be happy.”

“How did you know this robot guy was down here, Mr. Brack?” asked Charlie.

As the two boys rolled the automaton into the elevator, Brack let out a long sigh. “This fellow — Metronome, the Mechanical Mind-Reader — was part of a very unusual performance here at the hotel, and one of the worst.” Brack pushed the button to close the elevator doors. “It took place many years ago, when the hotel had been open less than a year. And it started with a frightened girl, a maid. . . .”

* * *

2. - *Abracadabra Hotel, Summer 1948*

When Gwen O'Hara, the junior maid, stepped inside room 555 of the Abracadabra Hotel and saw the half-man in the half-dark, she was wholly scared.

"Holy cats!" she screamed.

She quickly backed out of the room and dropped the clean linens she had been carrying inside for the bed. Then she turned and ran down the hall. When she reached the staff staircase, she flew down five flights of steps and rushed into the laundry room.

"Mother!" she cried. "There's a — a thing in the room!"

Mrs. O'Hara, without looking up from her ironing, calmly asked, "What thing and what room, Gwen? We have 480 rooms."

"The magician's room," gasped Gwen.

Mrs. O'Hara pushed a loose lock of hair out of her eyes and stared at her daughter. "This

hotel has more magicians than a dog has fleas, dear. Now take a deep breath and start over.”

The woman listened gravely to her daughter.

A few minutes later, they were both on the fifth floor of the hotel, knocking on the door to room 555.

The door swung open. A tall man with red hair and a red goatee smiled down at them. “Yes, ladies?”

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but my daughter Gwen here,” said Mrs. O’Hara, “well, she says she saw a . . . well, um, she says . . .”

“I was early bringing your clean sheets, sir,” said Gwen. “And I saw a half-man in your room.”

Mrs. O’Hara was quick to add, “She thinks she saw it, and —”

“Your daughter most certainly did see it,” said the red-haired man. “Step inside.”

And then the O’Haras became the first people in the hotel — in fact, in the entire city — to see the amazing automaton.

Its name was Metronome.

The red-haired man was the famous Greek magician Theopolis, from a family of magicians. He was touring the country with the silver-plated robot as part of his act. Theopolis would walk through the audience and ask for objects from pockets and purses, and the robot would write down what the objects were, even though they were hidden from Metronome's eyes. Even though Metronome was simply an empty robot, and its eyes were made of glass.

Theopolis proudly displayed the automaton. He flipped open a door on its chest, showing gears and dials inside. Then he bent the turbaned head back and pulled it off the sitting body. "I'm afraid poor Metronome is unhinged," he said with a laugh. He looked at the women, but they didn't laugh.

Theopolis coughed, and then went on. "So you see, dear lady," he said. "Young Gwen did see a half-man. She saw Metronome sitting on his

cart. And in the dim light, he looked like a man without legs, a half-man.”

“We’re so sorry we bothered you, sir,” said Mrs. O’Hara, giving her daughter a sharp look. “And we’ll get your bed changed right away.”

As Gwen helped her mother pick up the linens and make the bed, she gave a glance now and then at the mechanical man, bolted to its cart in the corner of the room. *If that’s what I saw, Gwen thought, then why did I see it in a different part of the room? And why were its hands moving?*

Something else bothered Gwen even more — earlier, when she had seen the robot, it had opened its mouth. And it had a very human tongue.

* * *

3. - *Abracadabra Hotel, Summer 1948*

“I don’t trust that Theopolis fellow,” said young Arthur Drake. “There’s something sneaky about him.”

Arthur was munching on a hard roll as he leaned against the wall in the employees’ staff room. Gwen, sitting at the table, nodded. “I know I saw a half-man,” she said. “And it wasn’t that mechanical man on the table, either. I saw it sitting on the desk in that room.”

“Maybe it’s not really a machine,” said Arthur. “Maybe it’s alive.”

“I don’t think so, Arthur,” Gwen said, shaking her head. “He took off the thing’s head. And he showed us its insides. It’s like a clock. And it wasn’t in the same spot.”

“You don’t think Theopolis just moved the machine man out of the way, before you went back?” Arthur asked.

“No, I don’t,” said Gwen. “That fancy

cart looks awful heavy. I don't think one man could move it by himself. Besides, the room is crammed full of stuff. He's a pack rat. Clothes and old books and stuff for the magic act and his big steamer trunks. There's no way to move things around in there. It's even hard stepping around his bed to put on the new sheets."

"Maybe that's why he doesn't tip when I polish his shoes," said Arthur, frowning. "He can't find his money."

Gwen laughed.

"And when I took his dinner up last night, that tray was very heavy," said Arthur. "No tip for that either!"

Gwen suddenly looked serious. "Last night I went to his room to turn down his bed, and he hadn't finished eating. He had a plate of cold soup and a whole bowl of cold potatoes left over. He apologized and said he wasn't as hungry as he thought, and couldn't touch another bite. All the same, he wouldn't let me take the tray."

“I was up there this morning to drop off Mr. T.’s shoes,” said Arthur, “and the tray was outside his room. And he had eaten everything.”

“Who wants to eat cold soup?” asked Gwen.
“Or cold potatoes?”

Arthur looked grimly at his hard roll.
“Anything’s better than this.”

“Come on,” said Gwen. “I’ll see if Ma has some stew left.”

“Beef stew?” asked Arthur. “Again?”

“Just be thankful it’s hot,” said Gwen.

* * *

4. – Abracadabra Hotel, Present Day

“That week, Theopolis and his magical toyman, Metronome, played to packed audiences in the theater downstairs,” said Brack.

He and Tyler and Charlie had pushed the mechanical marvel to the middle of the vast lobby.

Sunlight slanted into the hotel and glittered on the dusty jewels that studded Metronome and his cart.

“Are those diamonds real?” asked Tyler, bending down for a closer look.

“Theopolis said they were,” said Brack. “Which is why he always had two security guards take the cart from his room each night, wheel it into an elevator, and take it down to the stage where he was waiting for it. Theopolis was afraid of rivals stealing the cart or damaging it. And he had guards move it, instead of himself, not only for protection but also because he said it was heavy.”

It wasn't that heavy, thought Charlie.

“Theopolis said it also proved that he was not tampering with the machine before the performance,” explained Brack.

“So how did it work?” asked Ty.

Brack shook his head. “No one could figure it out. Well, not until Gwen O’Hara came along.

You see, during the performances, the amazing Metronome sat alone on the stage, gleaming in the spotlights. Theopolis walked through the audience and asked people for personal items they carried on them. When Theopolis then shouted out to the machine and asked what the magician was holding in his hand, Metronome suddenly whirred into life. It creaked, it clicked, and it hummed. One of its hands grabbed a feather pen and wrote on a piece of paper. Then, a volunteer from the audience would run up onstage, and read aloud what the automaton had written. Sometimes it would be ‘jewelry’ or ‘a watch’ or ‘a handkerchief’ or ‘money.’ Then as audiences grew wiser, they started bringing stranger items to the show in order to stump the magician and his companion. Once, a woman brought a pineapple! But Metronome still guessed it.”

“It cheated,” said Ty.

“But how, Master Yu?” asked Brack, with a smile. “How would the mechanical man,

without a brain, or eyes, or ears, know what the magician was holding in his hand? And how could a mechanical arm, without bone or muscle or blood, write an answer? Always the correct answer, too.”

Charlie stared at Metronome. The robot’s silver face and glass eyes stared back without expression. “You said something about Theopolis being part of the worst performance given at the Hocus Pocus — I mean, the Abracadabra,” said Charlie.

“Yes, indeed,” Brack said, nodding. “And it was so terrible precisely because Gwen was such a good maid.”

* * *

5. - *Abracadabra Hotel, Summer 1948*

Gwen stood at the back of the theater and gazed at the moving automaton onstage.

Everyone in the audience was full of amazement and curiosity and disbelief. But Gwen alone was frightened. While the other spectators wondered how the magic act was done, Gwen knew: Metronome was alive.

She was so certain that the mechanical man was alive, she never went into room 555 again unless Arthur Drake accompanied her.

“Just don’t tell Ma that you’re in here,” Gwen said one day, as she went in to change the linens.

“No worry about that,” said Arthur. He walked through the crowded room, collecting the magician’s extra shoes for polishing. “You were right,” he said. “This room is a mess.”

“I don’t think I can stand it anymore,” said Gwen. “Come, lend me your muscles.”

The two of them put away the clothes into the closet and wardrobes. They organized the books and magical props. They lined up the gloves and hats and cufflinks.

Gwen folded the handkerchiefs and put them into drawers. She pushed the steamer trunks into the corners to make more room.

“Now that’s more like it,” said Gwen. With the extra room, she was able to make the bed in less than a minute.

Arthur noticed that Gwen was still glancing around the room. “What are you looking for?” he asked.

“Last night I brought up a whole chicken for Mr. Theopolis,” she replied. “I don’t see it anywhere. He can’t have eaten the bones and the platter, too!”

There was a knock at the door. Arthur let in two of the hotel’s security guards.

Gwen looked at the watch pinned to her blouse. “You’re early.”

“All the other magicians are giving Mr. Theopolis a special going-away supper, for his last performance tonight,” said one of the guards.

“So Mr. Brack said to bring down the mechanical fellow now, and save Mr. T. some time.”

“Right this way, gentlemen,” said Arthur, waving toward the silent Metronome.

The guards each grabbed an end of the silver cart and guided it out the door. Gwen gathered up the dirty bed sheets, and then she and Arthur followed the men into the hall and locked the door behind them.

That night, when Theopolis began his magic act, something happened. Or rather, something didn't happen. Metronome did not move. When Theopolis picked an object from his first audience member, his mechanical partner on stage would not move. No creak, no click, no hum. The silver metal hand, covered in rings and bracelets, did not move. It did not write a single letter.

Theopolis tried another object. No response from the automaton. Then he tried a third object. Nothing.

The audience grew restless, then angry, then

hostile. A few people threw things onstage at the motionless Metronome. Soon other people joined in, throwing theatre programs and coins.

Gwen had been watching from the back.

Suddenly, the double doors at the back of the theater flew open, and Arthur Drake rushed inside. He ran over to Gwen and grabbed her shoulder. "Something's happening up in room 555," he whispered, excited. "The other guests are complaining about weird noises."

The two ran out of the theater and through the lobby. As they hurried toward the elevators, the hotel manager, Mr. Eisenstein, halted them.

"Drake, I need you," said Mr. Eisenstein. "There's a problem on the fifth floor."

Arthur turned and raised an eyebrow at Gwen as if to say, *See? I told you.* Then the two followed the manager upstairs.

When they reached room 555, Mr. Eisenstein pulled out his ring of keys and opened the door. He stepped inside and flipped on the light switch.

Everything looked exactly as Gwen and Arthur had left it hours earlier.

Except for one thing.

“That steamer trunk shouldn’t be there,” said Gwen, pointing. “It’s on the floor, but Arthur and I had pushed it into the corner.”

A muffled moan echoed through the room. Blood drained from Gwen’s face.

“The noise,” said Mr. Eisenstein. He bent down and put his ear to the steamer trunk. “I believe it’s coming from inside.”

Gwen felt her heart racing. Something was not right with the room.

Mr. Eisenstein reached over and carefully unlatched the trunk. The case snapped open and out burst . . .

* * *

6. – *Abracadabra Hotel, Present Day*

“Wait, don’t tell me!” cried Charlie. “I know what it is!”

Brack smiled. “I thought you might, Master Hitchcock,” he said.

“It was a kid,” said Charlie. “Wasn’t it?”

Ty stared at him. “A kid made of metal?” he asked, rolling his eyes.

“No,” Charlie said, laughing. “A kid who could fit inside the automaton and help Theopolis with his magic act.”

“But Brack said the magician could take off the robot guy’s head,” said Ty. “And he showed the insides to the maid and her mom. It was just a machine, like a clock.”

“Yeah, the robot part was,” said Charlie. “But what about the cart it sat on?”

Brack silently touched a switch on the old metal cart, and a small door in the front popped open.

The boys bent down and peered inside. The cart was hollow.

“Large enough for a kid,” said Charlie.

“Uh-oh,” said Tyler, looking more closely. “I see bones.”

“Bones?” Charlie gulped.

“Yeah, it’s Gwen O’Hara’s skeleton,” Ty said.

“What?!” Startled, Charlie stepped back from the cart. The blood drained from his face. He felt his heart racing.

Then Tyler reached inside and pulled out an old china dinner plate with a few bones on it. “Here’s what happened to the chicken she was looking for,” he said. He gave Charlie a big smirk.

Brack laughed. “Ozu must have been having a snack the last time he performed in there.”

“Who’s Ozu?” said Charlie.

“The small boy’s name was Ozu Ozan,” said Brack. “He had been the most famous, and the youngest magician ever to come from Japan. He and Theopolis met in Paris, where they decided

to join forces and create a magic act that neither of them would have been able to pull off alone.”

“But how did it work?” asked Tyler.

“All those jewels you asked about?” said Brack. “They were actually small telescopic lenses. Ozu could look through them and spy on the audience. He could see what Theopolis was holding. Then he used these handles and rods to move Metronome’s body above him.”

“And so Ozu is who Gwen saw jump out of the steamer trunk,” said Charlie.

“The poor girl screamed bloody murder,” said Brack. “I know, because I had followed her and the others up to room 555. I knew that something was up. And when I saw Ozu, I knew what had happened. It turned out that he always hid in the steamer trunk whenever anyone else came into the room. Then right before the show, he would slip inside the automaton cart, and wait for the guards to transport him downstairs. But that night, when Gwen and Arthur cleaned up the

room, Ozu was trapped. Remember, Gwen had pushed the trunks into the corners. That made the case snap shut, locking the small magician inside. When the guards came and took away the metal cart, it was empty.”

Charlie laughed. “And that’s why the room seemed so messy. It was full of belongings for two people, not just one. And Ozu was the person who ate the extra food.”

“And he was the guy Gwen saw in the first place,” guessed Tyler. “She must have surprised him, and she saw him in the dark and thought it was a half-man.”

“That night,” said Brack, “was the end of the amazing Metronome the Mind-Reader.”

Ty’s eyes grew wide. “I just remembered something. My mom’s dad came from Japan, and his last name was Ozan. You don’t think —?”

“Perhaps there is magic in your blood after all,” said Brack. “At any rate, when word got out about Ozu, the crowds stopped coming. A magic

trick isn't magic once everyone knows how it's done, you see. And once people stopped coming, they stopped paying."

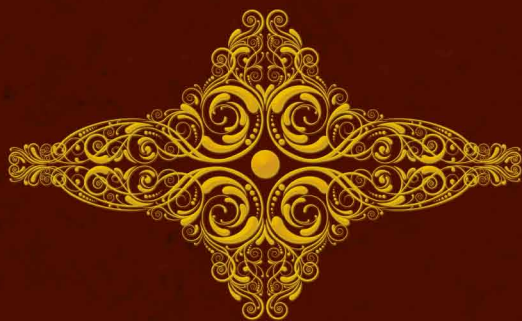
Tyler stepped back and gave the old automaton a long, thorough look. "Well, Inspector Gadget here will hopefully bring in lots of money for the raffle," he said. "They may not be real diamonds, but somebody will pay for cool telescopic lenses."

"And to own a part of magic history," said Charlie. He stood alongside Tyler, both of them looking at the automaton.

Brack agreed. *A part of magic history*, he thought. *And soon to play an even bigger part*. But while he said this to himself, he was not looking at the ancient Metronome.

Instead, he looked at Tyler Yu and Charlie Hitchcock. Both boys had magician blood in their veins.

And one of these days, they would bring even greater fame to the mysterious halls and happenings of the Abracadabra Hotel.



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