

The Waxwork

It was closing time at Marriner's Waxworks. The last few visitors came out in twos and threes through the big glass doors. But Mr Marriner, the boss, sat in his office, talking to a caller, Raymond Hewson. Hewson was a thin man, carefully but poorly dressed. He spoke well but seemed to be losing his fight to do well in the world.

Marriner began to speak, in answer to a question from his visitor.

'Please don't think that what you're asking for is anything new,' he said. 'A lot of people ask to stay the night in our Murderers' Room. We always say no, because it does nothing for us. But you are a writer. Now that's quite different. We like people to read about us. It helps to bring in more visitors - and more money.'

'That's just what I thought,' said Hewson. 'I knew that you wanted my help.'

Marriner laughed. 'Oh I know what you're going to say next. Somebody told me that Madame Tussaud's gives people one hundred pounds to stay the night in their Murderers' Room. But you mustn't think that we're as rich as they are. Tell me, what newspaper do you work for, Mr Hewson?'

'Oh I work for any newspaper that takes what I write,' said Hewson carefully. 'I know that I can easily sell this story. The Morning Times takes anything to do with murderers. Just think: "A Night with Marriner's Murderers". Every newspaper is going to want that!'

Marriner thought for a minute. 'Very well, Mr Hewson, let's say this. If your story comes out in The Morning Times, there's five pounds waiting for you here the next day. But please understand it's not easy, what you want to do. I know all about our waxworks, you see. I walk past them hundreds of times every day. But spend a night down there with all those figures? No thank you!'

'Why not?' asked Hewson.

'It's difficult to say. I don't like the idea, that's all. You're not going to have an easy night, you know.'

Hewson knew that only too well. But he smiled, not wanting to show his feelings. He remembered his wife and family. He must work hard because of them. They had not got much money left, this month. He must not lose this lucky opening. That newspaper was going to pay him well for this story. And then there was the five pounds from Marriner too. Perhaps if he wrote a good story, the newspaper had more work to give him. But he must do this story well first.

'Murderers often have a hard time but we writers have our difficulties too,' he said, laughing. 'Your Murderers' Room is no hotel bedroom. But I don't think your waxworks are going to make me too unhappy.'

'You don't feel afraid then?'

'Oh no,' laughed Hewson.

Mr Marriner smiled and stood up. 'Right,' he said. 'The last people are all out now. Wait a minute. I want to tell the man down there not to put the covers on the waxworks. And to tell our night people that you're going to be down below. Then I can

show you round.'

He picked up a telephone and spoke into it. Then he said, 'There's just one thing I must ask. There was some talk of a fire down in the Murderers' Room earlier this evening. I don't know who said there was a fire but it seems it was a mistake. So please don't smoke. Now if you're ready, let's make a move.'

Hewson followed Marriner through five or six rooms where his men were at work covering up the kings of England and other famous people. Marriner spoke to one of the men, asking him to bring an armchair to the Murderers' Room.

'I'm sorry but that's the best we can do,' he said. 'Perhaps if you sit in the chair, you can get some sleep.'

He took the writer down to the Murderers' Room. It was a big room without much light. Hewson thought of a church: you felt you had to speak very quietly in here. But this was not a good place. It was a place for remembering wrongdoers, murderers and the bad things that made them famous.

The waxwork figures stood on small stands, with numbers at their feet. He knew some of the figures but not others. There stood Thurtell, the murderer of Weir. Over there was little Lefroy, a killer hungry for money. Five yards away sat Mrs Thompson, known for her unusual lovers. Browne and Cennedy, the two newest figures, stood next to Mrs Dyer and Patrick Mahon.

Marriner showed Hewson the more interesting murderers one by one. 'That's Crippen, as you perhaps know. A weak little man, not very interesting to look at. There's old Vaquier. You can tell him by all that hair on his face. And this is-'

'Yes, who's that?' asked Hewson quietly.

'Oh he's the best figure in our show. Of all these people, he's the only one living today.'

Hewson looked at the waxwork closely: a small, thin figure only five feet tall. It had a little moustache, big glasses and an unusual coat. It was easy to see that he was French.

Without knowing why, he felt suddenly afraid of that smiling face. He moved back from the figure, finding it difficult to look at it again.

'But who is he?' he asked.

'That,' said Marriner, 'is Dr Bourdette.'

Hewson didn't know the name. Marriner smiled. 'If you're French, you remember it well,' he said. 'For years all Paris was in fear of this little man. He worked as a doctor by day. But at night he cut people's throats. He killed just because he liked killing and always in the same way. After his first murder, the police found some important letters. They know all about him now and if only they can catch him...

'But our friend here is too clever for them. He knew the police were after him. They soon lost him. They're looking for him now all over Europe. They think he's dead but they can't find the body. Last year, there were one or two more murders. But the police believe that another person is now doing the killing in his place. It's interesting how every well-known murderer has his followers, isn't it?'

Hewson felt fear run through his body.

'I don't like him much,' he said. 'Just look at those eyes!'

'You find that his eyes eat into you! That's how he did it, you know. He could send people to sleep just with his eyes. In these killings, the murdered person never seemed to fight back. He's too small to kill anybody if they're not sleeping.'

'I thought I saw him move just now,' said Hewson, trying not to show his fear.

Marriner smiled. 'You're going to think that you see many things before the night is over. We're not going to shut you in down here. When you feel it's time to stop, come up again. There are watchmen in the building, so don't be afraid you hear them moving about. I'm sorry that I can't give you any more light. We like to have the room dark, you understand. Now come back to my office and have a strong drink before starting the night's work.'

The night watchman brought the armchair for Hewson. He tried to make him laugh.

'Where do I put it, sir?' he asked. 'Just here? Then you can talk to Dr Crippen, when you get tired of doing nothing. Or there's old Mrs Dyer over there making eyes at you. She usually likes to have a man to talk to. Just tell me where, sir.'

Hewson smiled. The man's words made him feel happier - tonight's work didn't seem quite so difficult.

'I can choose a place for it, thank you,' he said.

'Well, goodnight, sir. I'm on the floor above if you want me. Don't let any of these figures come up behind you and put their cold hands round your throat. And look out for that old Mrs Dyer. I think she finds you interesting.'

Hewson laughed and said goodnight to the man. After

some thought, he put the armchair with its back to Dr Bourdette. He couldn't say why but Bourdette was much worse to look at than the other figures. He felt quite happy as he put the chair in its place. But as the watchman's feet died away, he thought of the long night in front of him. Weak light lit the lines of figures. They seemed near to being living people. The big dark room was very quiet. Hewson wanted to hear the usual sounds of people talking and moving about, but there was nothing. Not a movement. Not a sound.

'I feel I'm on the floor of the sea,' he thought. 'I must remember to put that into my story.'

He looked without much interest at the unmoving figures all round him. But before long, he felt those eyes again, the hard eyes of Bourdette, looking at him from behind. He wanted more and more to turn round and look at the figure.

'This is all wrong,' he thought. 'If I turn round now, it only shows that I'm afraid.'

And then he heard another person speaking inside his head. 'It's just because you are afraid, that you can't turn round and look.'

These different thoughts seemed to be fighting inside him.

Finally, Hewson turned his chair a little and looked behind him. Of the many figures standing there, the figure of the little doctor seemed the most important. Perhaps this was because a stronger light came down on the place where he stood. Hewson looked at the face so cleverly made in wax. His eyes met the figure's eyes. He quickly turned away.

'He's only a waxwork, the same as the others,' Hewson

said quietly.

They were only waxworks, yes. But waxworks do not move. He didn't see any of them moving. But he did think that now the figures in front of him seemed to be standing a little differently. Crippen was one. Was his body turned a little more to the left? 'Or,' he thought, 'perhaps my chair isn't quite in the same place after turning round.'

Hewson stopped looking. He took out a little book and wrote a line or two.

'Everything quiet. Feel I'm on the floor of the sea. Bourdette trying to send me to sleep with his eyes. Figures seem to move when you're not watching.'

He closed the book and quickly looked to his right. He saw only the weak wax face of Lefroy, looking back at him with a sorry smile.

It was just his fears. Or was it? Didn't Crippen move again as he looked away? He just waited for you to take your eyes off him, then made his move. 'That's what they all do. I know it!' he thought. 'It's too much!' He started to get up from his chair. He must leave immediately. He couldn't stay one night with a lot of murderers, moving about when he wasn't looking!

Hewson sat down again. He must not be so jumpy. They were only waxworks, so there was nothing to fear. But why then did he feel so afraid, always thinking that they played games with him? He turned round again quickly and met Bourdette's hard eyes. Then suddenly, he turned back to look, Crippen. Ha! He nearly caught Crippen moving that time. 'Be careful, Crippen - and all you others,' he said. 'If I do catch you

moving, I'm going to break your arms and legs off. Do you hear?'

'I can leave now,' he thought. 'I've got a lot to write about. A good story - ten good stories! The Morning Times isn't going to know how long I stayed here. They aren't interested. But the watchman is going to laugh if he sees me leaving so early. And then there's the money from Marriner - I don't want to lose that.'

But this was too hard. It was bad that the waxworks moved behind your back. But it was worse that they could breathe. Or was it just his breathing, seeming to come from far away? These figures seemed to be doing what children do in a lesson: talking, laughing and playing when the person giving the lesson turns his back.

'There I go again,' he thought. 'I must think about other things. I'm Raymond Hewson. I live and breathe. These figures round me aren't living. They can't move and speak as I can. They're only made of wax. They just stand there for old ladies and little boys to look at.'

He began to feel better again. He tried to remember a good story a friend told him last week...

He remembered some of it but not all. He had the feeling that Bourdette's eyes were on him again. He must have a look. He half-turned and then pulled his chair right round. Now, they were face to face. As he spoke, his words seemed to fly back at him from the darkest corners of the room.

'You moved, you little animal!' he screamed. 'Yes you did. I saw you!'

Then he sat, looking in front of him, not moving, cold with

fear. Dr Bourdette moved his little body slowly and carefully. He got down from his stand and sat right in front of Hewson. Then he smiled and said in good English, 'Good evening. I did not know that I was going to have a friend here tonight. Then I heard you and Marriner talking. You cannot move or speak now until I tell you. But you can hear me quite easily, I know. Something tells me that you are - let's say, a little afraid of me. Make no mistake, sir. I am not one of these poor dead figures suddenly turned into a living thing. Oh no. I am Dr Bourdette in person.'

He stopped and moved his legs.

'I am sorry but my arms and legs are quite tired. I don't want to take up your time with my uninteresting story. I can say that some unusual happenings brought me to England, I was near this building this evening, when I saw a policeman looking at me too closely. I thought perhaps he wanted to ask some difficult questions, so I quickly came in here with all the other visitors. Then I had a very good idea. I told somebody that I saw smoke. Everybody ran out into the street, thinking there was a fire. I stayed here. I undressed that figure of me, put on its coat and quickly put the figure at the back of the room, where nobody could see it. Then I took its place here on the stand.

I must say that I had a very tiring evening. But luckily the people didn't watch me all the time. I could breathe sometimes I move my arms and legs a little.

What Marriner said about me was not very nice, you know. But he was right about one thing - I am not dead. It's important that the world thinks I am. What he said about my doings is mostly right too. Most people, you know, collect

something or other. Some collect books, some collect money, others collect pictures or train tickets. And me? I collect throats.'

He stopped talking for a minute and looked at Hewson's throat carefully. He did not seem to think it was a very good one.

'I'm happy you came tonight,' he went on. 'You mustn't think that I don't want you here. It was difficult for me to do any interesting "collecting" over the last few months. So now I'm happy to go back to my usual work. I'm sorry to see that your throat is a little thin, sir. Perhaps that is not a nice thing to say. But I like men with big throats best. Big, thick, red throats...'

He took something from his coat, looked at it closely ran it across his wet finger. Then he moved it slowly up and down over his open hand.

'This is a little French razor,' he said quietly. 'Perhaps you know them. They do not cut very far into the throat but they cut very cleanly, I find. In just a minute, I am going to show you how well they cut. But first, I must ask the question that I always ask: is the razor to your liking, sir?'

He stood up: small and very dangerous. He walked over to Hewson as slowly and quietly as a cat going after a bird.

'Please be so good as to put your head back a little. Thank you. And now a little more. Just a little more. Ah, thank you! That's right, Monsieur... Thank you... Thank you...'

At one end of the room is a small window. In the daytime it gives a weak light. After the sun comes up, this new light makes the room seem sadder and dirtier than before. The waxwork figures stand in their places, with unseeing eyes. Soon

the visitors are going to arrive. They are going to walk round, looking at this figure or that but today, in the centre of the room, Hewson sits with his head far back in his armchair. His face is up, ready for the razor. There is no cut on his throat or anywhere on his body. But he is cold. Dead and Dr Bourdette watches the dead man from his stand, without any show of feeling. He does not move. He cannot move but then, he is only a waxwork.

- THE END -

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