

# The Waxwork

by Alfred Burrage

Raymond Hewson wanted to stay the night in the famous Marriner's Waxworks, and write a newspaper feature about the Murderers' Room. A new waxwork, Dr Bourdette, had just been moved in, and earlier that day there had been some talk of a fire in the room. 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 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 all 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 at Crippen. 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 just 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 me 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 and 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 and 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.

Source: New English Digest

#### GLOSSARY

**waxworks:** wax museum (*museo de cera*)

**waxwork:** a statue made of wax (*escultura de cera*)

**night watchman:** night security guard (*sereno nocturno*)

**making eyes to you:** looking at you in an amorous manner (*comiéndote con los ojos*)

**after some thought:** after thinking a little (*después de pensar un poco*)

**died away:** become less in intensity (*apagaron*)

**before long:** shortly (*al rato*)

**I'm afraid:** I'm scared (*tengo miedo*)

**wax:** a substance from crude petroleum, usually used for candles and for waterproof coatings (*cera*)

**took out:** removed something from a container, a pocket, etc. (*sacó, extrajo*)

**he must leave immediately:** he was forced to go away (*tenía que irse de allí de inmediato*)

**murderers:** killers (*asesinos*)

**jumpy:** nervous, agitated (*nervioso, agitado*)

**breathe:** expel air (*respirar*)

**he half-turned:** turned half way (*dio media vuelta*)

**to take up your time:** to absorb your time (*ocupar tu tiempo*)

**undressed:** took off his clothes (*desvestí*)

**throats:** front part of the neck below the chin (*gargantas*)

**went on:** continued (*continuó, prosiguió*)

**to go back:** to return (*de regresar*)

**razor:** an edge tool used in shaving (*navaja*)

**comes up:** arises (*salga, aparezca*)