

The Haunted Automaton

W. C. Morrow

Table of Contents

<u>The Haunted Automaton</u>	1
<u>W. C. Morrow</u>	1

The Haunted Automaton

W. C. Morrow

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Old man Erkins had three principal faults: he was rich, stingy, and a hard drinker. For the first of these he was to blame; for the second, pitied; for the third but wait and read further before you express an opinion. At all events, by reason of these things and of others that I shall now write concerning him, I say and you will say that he should have been killed; which I am restrained from doing in this very line by the necessities of this story and not at all by fear either of the law or of punishment in the world to come.

Upon recovering from a hard spree, toward the end of which he would begin to see strange things, Erkins would not touch a drop for several days; then, recovering his nerve, he would laugh at his past timidity and take a drink; the next day one, the next three, the next four, and so on, until snakes and other queer things would creep out of dark places.

There was an old servant, named Sarah, that kept his large prison (for such was his house) in order; and the one green spot in her shaky old life was a pretty girl, old Erkins' niece, ward and prisoner combined Alice by name, and the prettiest girl in all the country thereabout, though a very unhappy one, to be sure. Alice had inherited Sarah, who was Alice's mother's trusted servant, and who vowed that she never, never would leave the poor young orphan, though the old house should swarm with snakes and things.

Now, the old miser loved his niece in a certain way. There are persons who love others so deeply that they murder them. There are various ways of committing murder, and one of the cruelest is to shut up a pretty girl in a big house and never let a young fellow even look at her.

Merely because she accidentally entirely accidentally fell in love with a poor but good-looking young machinist whom she met at church, her old guardian, in a spirit of mean tyranny, forbade her ever going out again, and in a most insulting and over-bearing manner told this young man, Howard Rankin, that the girl should never see him again, and that any mendicant fortune-hunter who should ever present himself at the house or seek to capture her for her quarter of a million would be riddled with buckshot.

Old Erkins had a mania for curious mechanisms. He had clocks that did all manner of wonderful things, and hundreds of other ingenious contrivances of various kinds. Whenever he read of some curious invention he would have it. He never tired of amusing himself with these things. There was one thing that Erkins needed to complete his happiness as well as his collection, and that was an automaton a working counterfeit man. He had read everything that had ever been written on the subject of such automata. He had visited museums and wax-works shows, and had seen gladiators and Zouaves dying their several deaths again and again; but they were all too suggestive, for there were times when old Erkins' nerves were weak. Once he did buy a dying gladiator at enormous expense, but on the occasion of his next bad spell that gladiator's departing life seemed to take the form of numberless snakes and monkeys; and, frantic with fright, its owner chopped it to pieces with a hatchet.

Howard Rankin had a certain inventive genius. Knowing the old man's weakness, he conceived the idea of constructing an automaton, with which he hoped, he told a friend, to reinstate himself in the old man's good graces. However, this was a secret. All that he gave out was that he was going to construct an automaton he knew

The Haunted Automaton

what would result. He really did think that he loved Alice very, very deeply. Why shouldn't he? He promptly began to put his idea into execution, and selected the back room of his work-shop.

Very soon the project caused such talk that old Erkins heard of it. As the work progressed and favored bends were permitted to see the wonderful automaton as it grew under its author's hands, old Erkins, hearing the stories, became more and more interested. When a few months had passed he heard that the automaton was nearly finished.

Erkins could restrain himself no longer he must see that automaton and must secure it. But how should he proceed? He had grossly insulted the inventor. This was a serious difficulty. He pondered over it a few days, and then boldly sent a polite note, asking permission to see the automaton. A formal note, granting the request, came in reply. The old man went at once.

The young man received him with polite condescension. Erkins' keen old eyes glittered eagerly; and Howard, noticing it, was secretly elated accordingly. Outwardly he was stiff and cold.

"And so you are at work on an automaton?" Erkins asked, as he was ushered into the back room.

"Yes," deliberately responded the young mechanic, as he quietly proceeded with his work.

"Cheerful one?"

"What?"

"Cheerful?"

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't die, or anything of that sort, does it?"

"Oh, no!"

"Cause I had a dying gladiator once, and it died so hard that sna that that it was unpleasant."

He stepped closer to the half finished automaton. It sat in an easy-chair. "So I killed it," he said.

"Killed what?"

"Gladiator."

He was devoured with curiosity concerning Howard's automaton, and yet felt such timidity that he hesitated about asking questions. Howard, volunteering no information, continued his work. Presently Erkins mustered up courage.

"I see you haven't put on its head yet," he essayed.

"No."

"Haven't got it ready?"

"No."

The Haunted Automaton

There was a pause.

"What will it do?"

"A good many things."

The old man went round it and examined it narrowly. It was the figure of a fop, dressed in the extreme of fashion, sitting in an indolent posture.

"Everything finished except the head, eh?"

"Yes," answered Howard; who seeing that he had carried his indifference far enough, left off his work, and said: "The head is to be the main part, because the more important work is to be done by it, and great care is required in making its wax face, its eyes, and so forth. Here is the block of it, with the machinery inside. That blonde wig will be its hair. As the automaton now is, however, it can give all the limb motions, though they are comparatively insignificant." Howard inserted a key in a hole in the back of the chair and wound up the automaton. The slight clicking of machinery was audible. Old Erkins trembled with excitement as he saw the automaton begin to move. It brought its right hand to the place where its mouth would be, then lowered it; brought up its left hand, and then crossed its legs.

"The right hand," explained Howard, "will carry a cigar, for the automaton will smoke. See it will take a few puffs and then withdraw the cigar. The other hand is now taking up an eye-glass.

I must now stop the machinery, as other attachments, not yet supplied, will have to be added, and still other machinery, the most intricate of all, is contained within the head."

"What will you do with the automaton?" asked Erkins, feeling his way.

"Don't know probably keep it for my own amusement."

"Wouldn't you sell it?"

"Sell it! why, who is rich enough to buy it!"

Erkins' heart sank.

"What shall you ask for it?" he inquired in sheer desperation.

"A thousand dollars."

Erkins' heart leaped with joy.

"I'll take it," he eagerly said. He had expected to hear five-thousand. "It's a go," quietly responded Howard.

Then Erkins began to reflect that possibly he had been too hasty.

"I may be giving you too much," he said.

"Don't take it if you don't want it," coolly answered the young man.

"Will you give me a written guaranty of what it will do?" he asked.

The Haunted Automaton

Howard pondered a moment. "I will do not only that," he said, "but more; for I have great confidence in the automaton. Let me see. This is the 12th of November. I will be married on Wednesday, the 24th of next month, the day before Christmas. I shall want eight hundred dollars for my wedding and to start in life. I "

"Married!" exclaimed old Erkins in astonishment.

"Yes. I will take eight hundred dollars down. If the automaton please you, you are to pay the balance; if in any particular it fall below your expectations, you may keep the two hundred. I will give you a written guaranty that the automaton shall cross and uncross its legs, smoke cigars, adjust its eye-glass, incline its head, open and close its eyes, wink and talk speak two or three words."

"Good!" cried the old man. "It's a bargain." Erkins was very happy when he left. He had had two triumphs secured the automaton and learned that Alice and her fortune were no longer in danger.

According to agreement the automaton was delivered on Saturday, December 20th, by a friend of Howard's, the inventor sending word that under the circumstances he had no desire to enter Mr. Erkins' house. The automaton was encased in a large box provided with handles, and four men were brought to carry it into the house. Old Erkins danced about in great excitement and high glee. It was a time of such rejoicing with him that he called Alice and Old Sarah to share his happiness and see the wonderful automaton. Much of his exhilaration was due to drink, for the old man was rapidly reaching the limit, and in two or three days his old wriggling friends would surely be upon him.

"How's Rankin getting along with his wedding?" asked Erkins of the friend.

The latter gave some offhand reply, and as he did so he saw Alice stagger backward to the wall and her face blanch. "By the way, Alice," said wicked old Erkins, delighting in the cruel stab he was giving, "Howard Rankin is to be married next Wednesday."

The poor girl could say nothing, for her heart was broken; but old Erkins did not notice her strange conduct nor see the agony of shame, humiliation and despair she suffered. Sarah saw it all, and it wrung her faithful old heart. She slipped her arm around the young girl's waist and would have led her away; but Erkins commanded them to remain, and Erkins' word was law.

The men set down the big box in the hall.

"Mr. Erkins," said the friend, "here are certain instructions that Howard sent for the management of the automaton. He insists that they be carried out to the letter, or he will not be responsible for failure."

The old man hastily read the instructions. Among them there was this one: "The automaton must be kept in a room with a temperature not below 65 degrees Fahrenheit nor above 75 degrees, otherwise the springs, catgut strings, the wax of the face and of the head, and the glue of the various parts will be ruined." Here was another: "There must be little light in the room, or the delicate colors in the face and hands will fade; and the automaton must not be placed with its face to the light" Another instruction made careful provision for ventilation, thus: "Exterior air, which at this time of year is either damp or frosty, must be excluded, and hence the window should never be opened; but as fresh air is necessary, the door must always be left slightly ajar say six inches and it must not open into any other room, but into a hall." Winding at night or more than once a day was forbidden. There were also minute instructions for preparing and lighting the cigars that the automaton should smoke.

Erkins reflected. There was only one room in the house which permitted of compliance with these instructions, and that was up-stairs. He slept down-stairs, and he had intended to place it in a room adjoining his bedroom; but as he used that one for an office and kept a hot fire in it, the automaton would be ruined there. The only objection

The Haunted Automaton

he had to its going up—stairs was upon account of his fear that Sarah or Alice, who occupied rooms near the one that must receive the automaton, would surreptitiously wind up the treasure at unseasonable times and thus ruin it. But had he been shrewd enough to guess at the loathing they had for a thing that came from Howard's hands, he would have felt no uneasiness.

"Sarah," he sternly said, "I must put the automaton in the southwest room up—stairs; but if either you or Alice dare to touch it or enter the room where it is, I'll murder you. Do you understand that? I'll murder you both."

The four men carried the big box to the southwest room up—stairs and set it just where it should be, according to the instructions. Old Erkins, gleeful and brutal, forced Sarah and Alice to accompany it, and compelled them to stand and see it uncovered. This was done by removing the top, ends, and sides of the box and lifting a cloth that covered the figure. The wonderful automaton sat revealed.

Alice had secretly hoped that Howard had made the automaton to resemble himself, though ever so slightly; but when she saw the figure, with flaxen hair and mustache, so different from his, which were black; and the broad black eyebrows; and the painted cheeks, so different from his own pale face; and the foppish costume; and the effeminately curled hair; and the general air of impudence that pervaded the whole figure, her last hope departed. There was not a shadow of Howard's quiet manliness in anything about this mimic man.

Old Erkins regarded it otherwise. He saw only a wonderful mechanism, finished and decked out with fine art; and that was all he cared for. The artificial fop reclined indolently in an easy—chair. Its head hung upon its breast and its eyes were closed, its appearance being that of a slumbering man.

The four carriers were dismissed, and the friend produced a key, inserted it in a hole in the back of the chair, and wound up the automaton. It raised its head, opened its eyes sleepily, and with the greatest dignity it slowly turned its head as though regarding each member of the company, and then it smiled and very graciously bowed. Howard's friend produced a cigar and carefully prepared it, as a lesson to Erkins, the automaton meanwhile continuing to bow and smile. Following the instructions, the friend laid the cigar on a little stand convenient to the automaton's right hand, and the automaton with absolutely accurate movement brought the cigar to its mouth and with great deliberation took several puffs. Then it removed the cigar, and with its left hand adjusted an eyeglass, with which it gravely regarded the company; then puffed at the cigar again, and then crossed its legs.

"I must go now," said the friend. "The automaton will keep this up thirty minutes longer, and then it will have run down; but it must not be wound again till to—morrow. Remember the instructions"; and he left.

Alice then begged to be allowed to go, as she was dying with a headache, she said, and had seen enough of the automaton; and so old Erkins, deeply disgusted, dismissed them.

He remained alone with the automaton, sitting directly in front of it and eagerly drinking with his eyes every one of the slow, dignified, accurate motions that it made. The only sound audible was a faint ticking, a very soft creaking, of the intricate machinery. This comparative silence, and the subtle wisdom that the automaton seemed to have and its deliberate manner, and its impudence, began to work upon Erkins' diseased imagination. As the thing continued to smoke, and adjust its eyeglass, and cross its legs, and open and close its eyes and bow so gravely, it took on, in Erkins' opinion, a kind of uncanny, supernatural air that disturbed its owner. Erkins' mind was not exactly right, and he knew it; but even making due allowance for it he was positive the thing was acting strangely. It seemed to be trying to exasperate him. This feeling was steadily growing upon Erkins; so that when there came a sharp little click in the machinery and the automaton dropped the cigar to the floor and boldly winked at Erkins, the old man began to experience downright fright. Yet he reflected that the guaranty called for winks. Still, this wink was too knowing. It was an insidious, wise, searching wink, that seemed to show cognizance of every sin that Erkins had ever committed. It was a leering, impudent wink; such a wink as innocence would be incapable of; a dangerous, mocking wink. It winked not only once, but twice, thrice, four

The Haunted Automaton

times; taking a long time between winks, and accompanying each with a sinister leer. It did nothing but wink. Everything about it was perfectly still with the exception of that one eye-lid, and the stare that it kept fastened upon Erkins was a cold and deadly stare; a stare that saw through and through him, he thought, and that acted upon him with such strange effect that it held him bound, cold with terror, to his seat.

It was also in the guaranty that the automaton should speak. As yet it had not spoken. When it had winked several times there came another sharp little click, which startled Erkins. The old man had forgotten all about the speaking, but that little click warned him that something else was coming. What would it be? Something awful, he instinctively felt.

The automaton sat still for five long seconds, and then very slowly, very cautiously, very mysteriously, it leaned forward and said in a hollow, ghostly voice, that seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth:

"I'm haunted!".Erkins shivered, and he thought his heart had ceased beating. The automaton slowly resumed its former posture and fixed its dead stare upon its owner. It sat thus for what seemed to Erkins an age, and then again as before it leaned forward and in sepulchral tones it said:

"I'm haunted!"

Erkins could hear it no longer. White and trembling with fright, he backed out of the room, carefully left the door as the specifications required, and went out into the garden and shook himself like a dog.

"That thing," he muttered, "is worse than a sna than the dying gladiator. But it's a beautiful piece of work," he presently added, when he had somewhat recovered his nerve; "and of course I shall get used to it. Of course."

Nevertheless, he needed something to help him in this and he sought it in his liquor. He drank frightfully all that day, and toward evening his old unwelcome visitors began to show themselves. And they were unusually bold. He went early to bed, and actually one hideous old monkey had the effrontery to pretend he was a dying gladiator. A young monkey assumed all the airs of a fop, and smoked a cigar, adjusted an eye-glass, crossed its legs, smiled and bowed, and then winked at the miserable old man in the most impudent and insulting manner; and, not satisfied with that, it leaned forward mysteriously from its perch on the foot-board of the bed, and in a rasping, sepulchral whisper, said:

"I'm haunted!"

Thus passed this hideous night one of snakes, monkeys, dying gladiators, fops who declared they were haunted, and horrible nightmares.

But Sunday morning came at last, and old Erkins ushered in the new day with deep draughts of brandy. He was trying to steady himself for a second interview with the automaton.

At last he entered the automaton's room. There sat the ingeniously constructed thing, sound asleep in its chair. Erkins approached it gingerly, but it sat so quiet and harmless, and looked so weak and effeminate, and so unlike the ghostly thing that leered and winked at him the day before, declaring it was haunted, that his courage revived and he laughed at his fright. The old fellow was badly shattered from drinking, and his old knees tottered and his bony hands trembled as he went to the mantel and returned with the key to wind the automaton. He was very nervous and jerky about the winding; but he managed to get through with it in a fashion, and then he sat down in front of the automaton and awaited developments. The same old motions were exactly repeated, although the automaton had to puff an imaginary cigar, as Erkins was too badly shaken up to remember it. But the oversight soon began to trouble him. In his befogged condition of mind he imagined that the automaton laid it up against him. He was positive that under the smile lurked a wicked look, and he was thoroughly convinced of this when

The Haunted Automaton

the first click came and the winking and leering commenced. There was then exhibited by that soft-appearing automaton a diabolical deviltry and a deeply mysterious cunning that no mechanical thing so Erkins thought could show; and when it came to the second click, and began slowly to lean forward, the horrible thought stole into the old man's mind that the devil himself sat before him.

"I'm haunted!"

Erkins' blood ran cold. He suffered an agony of fright. Every nerve quivered, and he gasped for breath. A deathly perspiration exuded from his face and trickled down his cheeks. With hands upraised and fingers outspread, with gaping mouth and wide-staring eyes, he gazed with a terrible, tragic fascination at the awful thing before him.

"I'm haunted!". The blind yet ever-watchful instinct of self-preservation dragged the old man tottering from his seat and thrust him out. Stumbling, staggering, mumbling, he found his way to his own room, and fell headlong upon the floor, and passed into grateful unconsciousness.

He lay thus an hour or more, and recovering, crawled to his bed. There he remained all day, discussing in his mind the ways and means for executing a design that he had conceived.

"He didn't exactly say it would be a cheerful one," he mused. "He said merely that it wouldn't die. But it does worse than that. The gladiator wasn't haunted. It was simply dying dying all the time. Well, I put it out of its misery. I'll have to do another thing like that. I'm going to kill that haunted automaton if I die in the attempt."

Such was his design. But he was not yet able to put it into execution. He tried his strength; he could hardly stand. The day wore away, and still he was too weak. He drank more brandy. Night finally came, and then he dreaded the undertaking in the dark.

Finally twelve o'clock struck; then one o'clock. The frightful visitors had quit creeping about the halls, and all had congregated in his room. He drank more. He became stronger, and there came to him a boldness born of desperation. Not another minute would he delay the annihilation of the haunted automaton. He got out of bed and lighted a candle. He knew where to find the hatchet with which he had put a stop to the sufferings of the dying gladiator, and he desired to use that particular hatchet in the deadly work that lay before him. It was in the rear part of the house. He found it. He went cautiously upstairs and approached the room of the haunted automaton. As he drew near to it he became more and more violently agitated so much so, in fact, that when he pushed the door to enter the room the candle fell from his trembling hand and was instantly extinguished. He nerved himself with all his might, for he was determined to accomplish the work.

As he approached stealthily, step by step, he imagined he felt that maddening wink, and momentarily he expected to hear that unearthly voice declare, "I'm haunted." So, he decided to strike from the rear. He crept around and got behind the chair. He took one step forward, and that brought him just close enough. He raised the heavy hatchet in both hands, and with all the strength of a madman brought down its keen edge upon the head of his unconscious victim.

The automaton must have turned to air, for the blow fell upon empty space; and the strength that he had thrown into it precipitated him headlong into the automaton's chair. But the haunted automaton was gone!

The old man, mad with terror and raving in delirium tremens, ran from the room, shrieking for help. He burst into Sarah's room. She was gone. He tore into Alice's room. She too was gone.

Yelling, screaming, raving, pursued by a thousand demons, desperately mad, he flew out of the house and down the street, shrieking"

The Haunted Automaton

"I'm haunted! I'm haunted! Help! Help!"

A policeman caught him and took him to prison. On Wednesday he was calm and rational, though somewhat ill and weak. A lawyer visited him at the hospital, whither he had been taken from jail, and handed him the following note, which the old man read several times before he could fully grasp its meaning:

My Dear Sir: I told you a few weeks ago that I should be married today, Wednesday, the 24th December. I have kept my word, as I was married an hour ago. If you want an automaton you may have that dummy that you saw in the back room of my workshop; for in reality that was the one you bought, and it has never left my shop. The money you paid me on account was just what I wanted to marry on. It is a little singular that when I told you I should marry to-day I had not even asked the girl! She never dreamed that such was my intention until last Saturday night, when I presented myself to her old servant, whose scream when she discovered me I greatly feared would betray my presence to a certain person who did not want me there. But the girl I wanted was sensible, and we made all necessary preparations and left the house Sunday. I feared that a certain person would hear our foot-falls, though we went on tiptoes and as softly as possible.

That certain person was the girl's uncle. He had done me a bad turn, and I am now even with him; for not only did I frighten him out of his wits but I stole his niece from under his very nose and made him pay all the expenses of the wedding.

She is an excellent girl and is rich besides. By the way, her name is Alice and she is your niece; and as I am now her legal guardian, I desire that you should make to Mr. , the bearer of this, my attorney, a full accounting of all her property.

And by the way, further, we are to have a little dinner at our hotel this evening, at which our friends are expected. Can't you come? Do so, and let's be friends; for Christmas is a time when we should all make up. Hope you are better.

Howard Rankin, alias The Haunted Automaton.

The old man thought it all over and went; and I am happy to add that he never drank another drop.