

Ballet of the Bones

Macabre Collection

by David Haynes, ...

Published: 2013



„This, sir is the infamous Jonathan Lovett; the murderer of a hundred men. Watch how he takes a blade to his victim’s face and slices off their skin.” The candles gave an eerie lustre to Lovett’s malevolent sneer. I watched the crude mechanical waxwork slowly lift its arm and stop.

„Sir, I believe Lovett killed a mere ten men. No more.” The gentleman said blandly and looked at his pocket watch.

The waxwork had stalled again. „Quite sir, but there may have been more. We shall never know. Not now he is sleeping with the devil.” Lovett appeared to be stuck in a peculiar and unnatural jig.

The gentleman, my only customer this last week, emitted a long, drawn out sigh. In a pathetic, futile gesture Lovett's arm finally fell into place and sliced a lump of wax from the supine model.

„May I show you the Egyptian tomb display sir? They were a ghastly lot...” He had already walked away without speaking further.

The final stroke of Jonathan Lovett's knife had fallen like an auctioneer's gavel on the last lot of my haemorrhaging enterprise.

R.J. Chesterton and *The Gallery of Wax* had been on Drury Lane for the last fifty years. My father, before me, had created the spectacle, and with his death, I found it my responsibility to continue his work. My brother, a gifted engineer, had pioneered the use of mechanical devices in our creations. Yet, unlike me, he had little interest in either the gallery or his family and had long since forgotten my plight.

Our creations were regarded as being the most lifelike of all the wax museums in the city. Perhaps, I might venture, in the world. My most popular display; *The Mask of The Macabre*, was at one time thought to be so terrifying a spectacle that ladies were forbidden to enter. The image of the infamous murderer, Jonathan Lovett, flaying his victims alive was without doubt our most gruesome and hideous display. It was our finest, and unfortunately, last piece of work.

„Why gaze upon a wax-work monster when the real monsters walk the streets?” These are the words I heard from my customers, not once, but on a number of occasions. They were perfectly correct of course. There were many strange, new oddities on display in the city.

A new taste for viewing poor unfortunate creatures, inflicted with diabolical deformities, had taken the public. They were said to be of such hideous proportion that the very thought was entirely unpalatable to me. It was further distasteful that this penchant was the reason behind my impending financial ruin.

In my wanderings through the East End, I noted how every other shop seemed to advertise some depraved or hideous creature for men to gaze upon. How my attention was in the first place drawn to one particular building, I cannot recall, but drawn it was.

Painted upon the window were the words; *Fairbrother and son present: Valeria—The Fat Girl*. Was this what passed for entertainment on the once discerning palate of our society? To stand and gawp upon an oddity such as this could not surely be all there was to an evening of entertainment?

„Come to see the fat girl, sir? Never has there been such a spectacle as our Valeria.” The boy, barely out of puberty, stood in the doorway shouting to all who paused long enough to hear him. I felt a compulsion finally to see what made the public clamour so greatly.

I paid the boy a penny and went into a parlour such as you would find in any house belonging to a working man. Illuminated under a cluster of candles was a lady, dressed only in her undergarments and stretched across a crimson chaise. She looked utterly bored, and if I had not known better from her dismissive sigh, I might have thought her dead. Several of the men present laughed and pointed at her before making bawdy comments regarding her attire. To my surprise she remained utterly impassive to their derision. She was undoubtedly a large lady, but given that the chaise was clearly an item manufactured for an infant, her

proportions were freakishly contrived. I looked about the room and counted ten gentlemen gawking at her. That was more customers than I had attracted all this last month. With a burgeoning anger I left the parlour and continued my way through the howling wilderness the streets had become.

I entered three more shops that afternoon, for shops are all they were. Wedged between the merchants and butchers they presented a sickening façade of temptation where every one of them had a creature to flaunt. I do not know whether it was a twisted desire for fame, or whether it was for another miserable purpose but they displayed themselves with abandon.

I could not fathom why they would interest anyone so much though, for they were not the hideous monsters I had believed them to be. Yet fascinate and appal they so clearly did. It cost me a penny to ogle a fat or bearded lady and a man so covered with tattoos that none of his flesh was visible. It was less hideous than maddening but it was a street filled with riches. As I walked through the throng with the nasal chatter of Punch ringing in my ears, I began to ponder. If I could find someone truly monstrous, truly spectacular then with my skills, knowledge and gallery I could create such a success. Was I prepared to take that abominable step into the dismal abyss of exploitation? My soul said, *No, forever, no*, but my pride travelled swiftly along the dark and furious channels of my mind. *Yes*, it cried. *Yes you must. Bring R.J. Chesterton back to the top.*

Where does one find a monster though? As that clever customer remarked, the real monsters walk freely along the street. They emerge from the shadows with their blades primed and ready for a slice of flesh. That is where the real monsters live.

It was with a gamble and no small expense that I placed an advertisement in the respected periodical—*The Zodiac*, requesting the services of these „so called freaks of nature”. My establishment, unlike the simple parlours and shop fronts of the East End, was built as a venue of entertainment. This advantage would allow me to accommodate eleven of these individuals, each in a gallery of their own. Thus, if the gentlemen of London were willing to part with a penny to see a single fat lady, then I felt sure they would pay three pennies to see my troupe of aberrations.

After two days of interviewing the oddities who presented themselves to my establishment I began to become somewhat immune to their appearance. Some were tricksters or fraudsters, others nothing more than a trifle unusual. Then there were the desperate creatures, for whom displaying themselves as nothing more than circus animals, was a better fate than the alternative which awaited them on the street.

As the afternoon passed into the evening, the disgust which I felt growing in my soul had manifested itself as dreadful headache. It was not loathing for them that I felt; it was for my own humanity. I could not employ these people. I could not see them displayed like beasts in this place. The Gallery of Wax had seen such elegance and flair in the past; grandiose performances at my father's hands. I would not allow it to become a crucible of malaise for my wretched heart; not now and not ever.

I lit the oil lamp in my office and hung my head. Would my father have acted any differently? Would he have had the stomach to do what I could not? I would

never know the answers to these questions and I was thankful for that; I was ashamed enough already.

Thump thump thump.

Someone, undoubtedly another so-called monster, was banging on the door. I had neither the heart nor the stomach to listen to another fabricated tale of the riches their employ would surely bring. I took up the lamp and walked quickly past the shadowy forms of Lovett and his victims, through the hangman's scene and out into the narrow foyer.

„The building is closed. The auditions have finished.” I shouted through the doors at the unseen guest.

„Sir, I have not come to audition, but to make you an offer.” The voice of a well-spoken gentleman replied.

Was this how it happened? The carrion eaters were circling my flesh before last the breath was taken?

„I have not yet appointed an agent; you may address all enquiries through him when the position is filled. Good evening, sir.”

„I have not come to make a purchase. I have come to put the name of R.J. Chesterton back where it belongs.”

I opened the door a crack to see who this individual was. His appearance was as I had expected from his enunciation, immaculate. He touched the rim his top hat and smiled.

„William Fettiplace at your service, sir.” His attire was better suited to a royal box at the theatre than my establishment.

„I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr Fettiplace. What can I do for you this evening?”

„Mr Chesterton, as warm as my cloak is, I wonder if I might step inside to discuss the matter further? There is a biting chill to the air this evening.”

Fettiplace was clearly no ruffian come to bash my brains in for a penny, and his offer was certainly intriguing.

I opened the door and stepped aside. „Please, come in. I have an office where we can speak freely.”

Fettiplace stepped inside and removed his hat. A cloud of silver hair billowed out from beneath. „I remember coming here in my youth.” He smiled again. „Amongst other places of course; shall we?”

I led him along the corridor, past the small stages where the exhibits were kept. Each one was presented as if it were a theatre on its own, complete with curtains and set. He was particularly interested in the Jonathan Lovett display. „Ah yes, the infamous Jonathan Lovett. Now there was a creature, make no mistake. May I?” He took the lamp from my grasp and held it beneath Lovett's face. „It is a particularly good likeness Mr Chesterton, particularly good. That was before he was caught and mutilated himself, of course.”

„You met him, sir?”

Fettiplace handed the lamp back. „I never had the pleasure. I merely recognised him from the sketches in *The Times*.”

„I'm not sure if the most appropriate description of a meeting with him would be *a pleasure*. He remained silent and stared at the silhouette of the murderer for a second or two.

„He was a fascinating character, nonetheless.” He appeared transfixed by the model.

„My office is this way.” I started walking off down the corridor leaving him in the dark.

„I should like to speak here, if we may?”

„I don't mind where we speak.” I walked back to where Fettiplace had remained.

„I read, with interest, the advertisement you placed in *The Zodiac*, Mr Chesterton.” A pained look appeared on his otherwise unperturbed countenance. “I frequently read the journal in my capacity as a man of entertainment. I must say it troubled me somewhat that an establishment such as this should encourage the growth in that monstrous industry.” He waved his hand at the darkened exhibits. “This has theatre. This has such majesty as you would see on the finest stages in London. Why would one want simply to watch a bearded woman display herself? Or watch a midget stand on a chair? There is no showmanship to it sir, none at all. You, on the contrary, have a story to tell. Beneath all of these models is a story. Each one is a unique tale of despair or of violence, of the human spirit gone awry; and of course in dear old Lovett's case, murder.”

His fervour for my tired exhibition was invigorating and infectious. “I believe so too Mr Fettiplace but alas the public do not. They want to be appalled and to scoff at those poor creatures. I cannot compete and thus I felt compelled to advertise. It is something I now bitterly regret.”

Fettiplace placed his hand on my shoulder. „Chesterton, worry no more. We shall do more than compete, we shall surpass them. Leave that with me.”

Together, over brandy, we discussed the matter at length. Our arrangement was simple. Fettiplace would provide the exhibits and the elaborate flourishes about which he was clearly excited. He assured me the theatricality of a show was his speciality. I was simply to provide the premises. The profits, if there were any, would simply be divided into two equal portions; and if the venture were unsuccessful then he would leave within the week. Upon my questions about the nature of the show, his reply was as simple as our arrangement.

„No man, nor woman shall be displayed within these walls, I assure you of that.”

I was at the point where I had nothing left to lose. In a week, what could possibly happen to worsen my fortune? It seemed an easy decision. Why then, for all Fettiplace's charm, did I feel a nagging sense of disquiet slowly creep into my mind?

In the days that followed, Fettiplace and his associates filled my establishment with boxes, crates and vessels of a variety of sizes. I was forbidden to look inside. „Fettiplace, I do not know what you have planned but your reluctance to reveal your show concerns me.”

„Chesterton, you are a foolish and cautious man. They are my masterpieces and that is all. They have been specifically designed to thrill and disturb. London has never have seen the likes of these before, I can assure you of that! Now, go home and light a pipe, when you return their true brilliance will be on display.”

I left him there and walked briskly through the noisy street, past the excited masses tumbling their way out from the theatres and onto The Strand. Most of all I wanted to speak with my father, to take his counsel on what I should do. For all

his bluster, Fettiplace's plans had left me weary and even more convinced that the future of my enterprise was surely doom laden. My mood was one of despair.

My father had been a generous and caring man with a rare talent and that talent was to amuse and distract people from the grime of their everyday life. With an artist's touch he gave life to his models of wax like he was the creator himself. He had also been a pious man, and even in the forlorn shadow of my mother's coffin, he clung to his religion with the tips of his aching fingers.

It was only natural to him that when his gift yielded riches, some of those treasures should be shared among those less fortunate than himself. It was with an unending sense of disappointment that I always felt ill equipped to continue with any of his work, altruistic or otherwise.

Many times during the six months since his passing I had come to St. Mary Le Strand church to seek his guidance. The church was a serene and proud building, set quietly amongst the raucous cacophony of The Strand. The black hooded cabs and carriages swirled around its base like a swarm of carrion flies to a corpse. Yet, for all its resolute composure, it was losing ground to a changing city.

The inexorable passage of man beneath the watchful gaze of its baroque tower, pounded away at its diminishing boundaries. My father's burial had been the last in the cemetery, his body at peace beside my mother. Both of them had been buried with the key to his dream around their decaying necks; the key to The Gallery of Wax. Their interment had only been permitted because of his eternal bequest of a hundred pounds a year; an obligation I would be unable to fulfil.

The London Necropolis Company had already established Brookwood cemetery, some distance from the city. The authorities hoped that all the graves would be emptied and their rotting contents reinterred in Brookwood. How this sickening undertaking would be achieved was well left to those with a stronger stomach than I. Yet, it had already begun, at least for those unfortunate souls with families unable to petition their bodies to remain.

Alone, beneath the shadow of a giant old yew, I found my father's grave and knelt beside him. The clatter of hooves on the cobbles and the cries of demented drivers was nothing more than a distant hum to me now.

„Father, I have failed.” I hung my head in shame, for even in death his presence was strong. „I have made a ruin of the gallery and of your name.” I raised my head and glanced away. In my ignominy I felt unable to look upon his headstone any longer. Under the faint light of a distant lamp, I could see the removal work had begun in earnest and mounds of fresh earth littered the graveyard. How many had gone already? I held my face in my hands. I knew at that moment my parents would be taken to Brookwood along with the others and there was nothing I could do to prevent it. Perhaps, I wondered, it would be a better fate for all if I went with them.

I arrived at my premises early the next morning for I had barely slept a minute that night. My nightmares were filled with ghastly images of death and decay where men slaughtered each other for fun.

When I arrived I found Fettiplace and his ungodly crew already hard at work. „Ah, here he is, Chesterton himself. You look a little under the weather, sir; here have this.” He thrust a silver flask into my hand and I took a sip of the brandy within.

„Now, Chesterton, come and see what marvels I have created.” He took me by the shoulder and ushered me inside. I could see the shadow of the morning’s growth on his chin.

„Have you been here all night?”

His enthusiasm was without bounds and only matched by his energy. „Of course I have. We all have.” He waved at the filthy vagabonds marching in and out of my establishment as if it were their own. „There is no time to waste Chesterton. I intend to open the show today. How do you feel about this? He gave such a flourish to his hands that it was almost a performance in itself. „R.J. Chesterton presents—*Ballet of the Bones*.”

„It certainly sounds enticing, if not disturbing. It seems a little unfair since you have been the instigator of its conception. Can we not add the name Fettiplace to the title somewhere?”

„Most certainly not; I want you to take the credit for this. Besides how will I alter this at such short notice?” He unrolled a sheet of paper and held it out before me. It was a beautiful poster, the likes of which I had seldom seen before, except on the frontage of the Theatre Royal. In simple yet elaborate lines the artist had sketched two skeletons clinging together like macabre lovers. The bones of another formed the letters *Ballet of the Bones* and all around the edge were skulls, grinning and laughing silently at the morbid dancers.

I was aghast. „It is quite astonishing.”

„You like it then Chesterton?” Fettiplace began laughing and clutching his belly.

„It belongs somewhere far greater than here. I cannot afford the expense.”

„Nonsense, my sister is a very talented artist. They are being glued to every lamp-post and wall between here and Parliament, as we speak. Tonight we open!”

„Will it all be ready?” There was so much movement that I could barely fathom who was doing what. A harmonium was being dragged carelessly inside by a group of men who seemed unconcerned by its size or weight. „Of course we’ll be ready. R.J. Chesterton will be back where it belongs.” Fettiplace pushed past the men and led me, like a child, inside.

From the beguilingly sinister poster I had an idea what Fettiplace was planning but his first display left me cold.

„The crucifixion,” he pronounced as we entered the corridor. Before my eyes a carpenter was constructing a crude wooden cross. At his feet lay two skeletons, one with a crown of thorns.

„You cannot display this, it is blasphemy!” I shouted.

„You are being too sensitive. This is recreated in every church in the world.”

I turned to see his uncouth smile. „But we are not a church!”

„But what is a church, if not a theatre to show the greatest story ever told?” Fettiplace stepped over the crimson cord which marked the threshold of the display. „Your mechanical devices are crude but I have a man skilled in the adjustment necessary to make this display a true performance.” He took hold of the pile of bones which had set whole again. „This one will hold the Spear of Destiny and drive it into the ribs of Christ, in perpetuity.”

„This is monstrous. I will not allow it.” I turned my back on the hideous display.

„And yet you do nothing to stop it. You have given up hope, you have lost everything and yet you cling to some notion of nobility like a fool. What do you

think of the men who gawp at the aberrations God created? The deformed monsters displayed in the parlours up and down every street in this twisted city? Are they not blasphemous? Do they not mock His creations?" Fettiplace's tone was harsh and scolding.

„I cannot..." I gasped.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. „You know this is nothing more than theatre and you know they will clamour for it." His tone was as soft and gentle as a father reading to a child.

„Three pennies a piece; think of the wealth and consider your father."

I turned on him. „What do you know of my father? He would roll in his grave to see something such as this in his beloved creation."

„Your father will roll in his grave if you destroy his creation Chesterton. Now come and see the other displays. I shall endeavour to change your mind."

One by one, Fettiplace showed me his ghastly conceptions, all as abhorrent as the first.

Three pennies a piece.

He led me through a never ending skeletal ballet of the most horrific and entirely biblical proportions. On the first stage the show was the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. Were it not for the flap of his flayed skin being swung like a toy by another skeleton, it would have been a sedentary display. On the next stage I was treated to a display of Simon the Zealot being sawn in half whilst he was crucified.

„Enough, Fettiplace; I cannot bear to see a single further atrocity. We will be lucky to escape with our lives after this."

Fettiplace laughed; a cold and unpleasant sound. „We're not in biblical times any longer. Religion holds a great deal less influence than it did back then."

„Sacilege is eternal. I shall remain in my office until the very last person has left."

„As you wish, but you will be missing a wonderful show. Why, you haven't seen the beheading of Paul yet."

I held up my hand and walked slowly to the office; I would hear no more of this. The only solace I sought now was in the pungent warmth of a bottle of brandy.

The excited chatter of an expectant audience was something The Gallery of Wax had not heard for a very long time. It was with a degree of exhilaration that, as my watch struck seven, I heard Fettiplace's cheerful voice declare. „Ladies and gentlemen, step inside and witness a show of such wickedness you will fear for your very souls."

I could hear the hum of voices beyond my office, and more importantly, I could hear the pleasant ring of coin against coin.

Almost immediately there was a scream from the corridor. *So it begins.* I thought. *They will be upon me in a matter of seconds and I will be the one beheaded, not Paul.* I needn't have worried though for in the next second the scream turned to laughter and my anxiety quietened. Could I be so out of touch with society? Was blasphemy now the entertainment of the masses? The harmonium played a familiar Bach fugue to lament the demise of our Skeleton Lord, but it was accompanied by the repulsive laughter of his eternally lost

followers. I hung my head in shame. *Three pennies a piece*, it might as well have been thirty silver coins for the loathing I felt.

When at last I felt able to venture from the shadow of my office, I found Fettiplace stepping in a spritely manner among the substantial gathering. None of the oil lamps had been lit; instead hundreds of candles threw a ghostly light around the walls. He was dressed as a morbid funeral mute and holding a six foot staff covered in a delicate black crape in one hand. In the other he held a small candelabrum. It was evident the solemnity of his attire in no way reflected his mood. I could see the amber caresses of the flames light one half of his cheerful face, „At last, Chesterton appears from his dreary closet!” He clapped me on the shoulder. The dismal sound of the harmonium echoed throughout the building. Not even when my father was alive had so many people been inside at one time.

„I don't understand how we have evaded the noose.” I uttered and looked from one face to another. They gathered round each of the stages and gazed upon the grisly downfall of one apostle after another. A shocking concoction of repugnance, horror but above all, glee was clearly etched upon their faces. I began to wonder if they were not some aged wax creation my father had made.

Fettiplace held a purse before my nose and shook it. The sound of copper pennies dancing against each other brought me back to my senses.

„My, you are a grim fellow. Would three hundred pennies lighten your mood?” He jangled the purse enticingly again. I looked at the prize and then back at the man holding it. Half of that amount was more than I had taken in the last year.

„Here, hold it.” He placed the velvet bag into my waiting hand and I felt the pleasurable weight of its value. Against my strongest desire, a thin smile toyed with my lips.

„There you go; a smile from the man at last.” Fettiplace laughed again and walked off towards a group of gentlemen gathered around the crucifixion.

As the clock struck midnight more than one hundred and fifty visitors had come through the doors at Fettiplace's show. As I left, still more arrived, smelling of the gin houses from whence they came.

My spirits had lifted, of that there was no doubt, but I wanted to be gone from the place. I needed to be away from Fettiplace, his diseased sense of humour and those damned macabre disciples.

In my bed I waited for unconsciousness to bring the deathly shadows that my haunted dreams had become. The Gallery of Wax was saved, due entirely to Fettiplace, but at what price to my soul? There had been dark, dark days after my mother had died when my father could barely rise from his bed; when he wept like a child and asked of his Lord, *Why have you taken her Lord, what have I done?* Yet, even in those days, consorting with the devil had never been considered. It would break my father's heart to see the gallery collapse; but far worse, it would destroy his soul to observe it tonight. I had settled my mind; Fettiplace and his disgraceful aberrations would be gone in the morning. His departure would signal the death knell for the gallery but remove a great weight from my drained soul.

My dreams came and went throughout the night. Some were fleeting whilst others lingered, leaving a poisonous scar. My sleep had become a place where a tuneless piano played melancholy chords and the shadows danced a dismal waltz.

In the dreary gloom of my room I was cheered to see the first of the morning light. It brought an end to my tormented night. I dressed quickly, for I had one visit to make before I returned to the gallery and to Fettiplace.

I walked the short distance to St Mary Le Strand at pace. I would give no opportunity for doubt to creep once more into my tired mind. I would tell my father what I had done and how completely I had failed and that was all I could do.

The Strand was not yet the raucous cacophony of hoof and bellow which it soon would be and I was thankful. It allowed me to walk directly into the churchyard without reason to pause. On either side of the path, more graves had been taken in the night; removed by The London Necropolis Company and taken away. There, probably in the company of a murderer or other profane denizen of the city, they would rest for eternity.

I walked quickly on. None of them could fight their cause to remain and had been taken I was sure, against their will. It was maddening. With a feeling of anger I arrived at the giant old yew, and to my father's grave. For a moment I believed I was in the wrong spot, confused in my weary condition; but it was not the case. Where once had lain my father's bones, was now nothing more than a mound of fresh earth. I collapsed to my knees and pushed my hands into the dirt. It was done, I was too late.

I do not recall the exact detail of my journey back to the gallery, for I was a lost man. I could not see past the grim solitude which my life had become. Was this all I had now? Nothing more than a blasphemous ballet with a lunatic lead?

I reached the gallery and found it calm. There was no trace of what had passed the night before and, most importantly, no sign of Fettiplace. I unlocked the door and stepped inside. It was cool and dark, as it always was first thing in the morning. I had grown used to the bustle and chatter of his men and their absence was all the more noticeable in the gloom.

„Hello?“ I called out. No reply was given. I took up the gas lamp and began the walk to my office. I did not want to look away from the lamp, nor did I wish to see the appalling spectacle of the crucifixion or the other abominations. Inevitably, like so many others, I was drawn into the miserable world he had created.

It was, firstly, with a sense of relief I noticed the first stage was empty. The scene of Christ's downfall had been taken away. *Had London finally come to its lost senses?* I dismissed the thought. Had that been the case, the gallery would have been subjected to wrath, the like of which was last witnessed in Sodom and Gomorrah.

By the time I reached the final gallery it was clear that Fettiplace had taken his grisly enterprise with him. I was thankful for this, for it would negate the need for any disagreeable confrontations with the man. For all his charm, there was something disturbing in his cold eyes; something which told me he was a man well versed in conflict.

The last gallery remained covered by its scarlet curtain. It looked strangely out of place, as if Fettiplace had neglected it in his haste to leave.

I drew back the curtain and was confronted by the awful truth of his show. The last of the apostles was waiting just for me. Several pieces of wood had been crudely nailed together to form a makeshift tree. Hung by the neck from this tree

was a rotting skeleton. The bones were raised then lowered by some clever mechanical device and here and there ragged threads of a morning suit still clung to the fragile frame in helpless decay. Here and there, I could see the last fetid pieces of flesh falling away from the bone; and above the skeleton it read—*The Death of Judas Iscariot.*

I stepped over the threshold and into the terrible display. Why had he left only this? Was it another one of his humourless jokes? In the gloom I stepped upon something and almost lost my footing. I knew, without looking, exactly what it was; Fettiplace's purse of ill-gotten gains. I kicked it away for I wanted no part of that money or where it had come from. It struck the base of the arboreal gallows sending the corpse into a frantic and ghoulish jig. As the skeleton danced, the last of the threads of the suit dropped silently to the floor and revealed a golden key around its neck. My father's key. My father's bones.

