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Historic Crimes and Mysteries by Walt Mason

THE WATCHMAKER OF MONTREUIL

Monsieur Pel was not a popular man in Montreuil. His neighbors talked about him every day and shook their heads gloomily when they did so. Even the children hushed their chatter when he went by, and it is related to this day, by the old inhabitants, that the dogs showed their teeth and growled at the sight of him. His habits and appearance were all against him. For one thing, Pel would have no traffic with his neighbors, further than to mend their watches and clocks. He seemed to hate all mankind. If the grocer or the notary bade him good morning, Pel's answer would be a wolfish snarl, and the grocer or the notary would mutter something about the evil eye. If ever a man had an evil face, that man was Pel. His countenance was long and ran down to a point; his nose was hooked, and two little red, fiery eyes glared with changeless hostility upon all around him. His ears were large and stuck out from his head like sails, and his complexion was of the waxy, bloodless hue of a corpse.

His business was watchmaking; but his passion was chemistry, and all his spare hours were spent in his house, which presented a forbidding appearance. He had boarded up the lower windows and the doors always were barred and locked. He had a furnace in the house, and often strange lights of various colors and diabolical suggestion gleamed through the chinks in the window boards, and passers-by could hear the wheezing of bellows, and the roaring of flames. At times Pel never left his house for days together, and then the fire always was roaring. At other times he would appear on the streets in sober black garments, his chest covered with ribbons and decorations—which he had made himself. Then he would insist that

she would show him what was which.

Elise had been thrifty all the days of her life, and had a neat little package of francs put away for the rainy day. No sooner had she begun working for Pel than he began borrowing her money. He was engaged in an experiment which would make him rich, and everything she loaned him would be repaid a hundredfold. After making several loans she concluded that the security was too shadowy, and she refused to loosen up any more. Pel glared at her with his wicked red eyes and told her that she was reading her own death warrant.

For many hours after this Pel's furnace fire raged furiously. Black smoke belched from his chimney in a steady stream, and at night a red glare streamed from the chinks in the window boarding. It happened that a young man of the neighborhood confessed to curiosity as his chief weakness, and his curiosity overcame his fear to such an extent that he got a ladder, and quietly placed it against Pel's boarded window; then he climbed up and had a good view, over the top of the boards, of the interior of the house.

The neighbors waited at a distance, marveling at the boldness of the young man, and praying that he might return alive. He did. He came back to them and told them, in a sobbing whisper, that he had seen more than he expected to see. Pel was stoking his furnace furiously and anon throwing strange fuel into it. The young man was sure that this fuel was fragments of a human body. Moreover, there were prints of hands on the wall, and these prints looked as though they might be in blood.

Nothing was done until morning, and then the officers went to the house. Pel's fire had gone out, and there was a heap of white ashes in the furnace. But there was plenty of evidence that a great crime had been committed, and that Elise Boehmer had been destroyed. Pel was taken to jail, where he told one lie after another, trying to explain the woman's disappearance. Then there appeared at the police station a woman who said that she had called at Pel's house to see Elise Boehmer, and had found her alone and in convulsions. Elise evidently was dying, and the woman hurried away, and kept what she had seen to herself, so great was her fear of the watchmaker. It was then suspected that Pel had poisoned Elise, and, after her death, dismembered the body and burned it. This proved to be the case, and the enormity of the crime has given the red-eyed watchmaker a conspicuous place in the chronicle of bloody deeds.

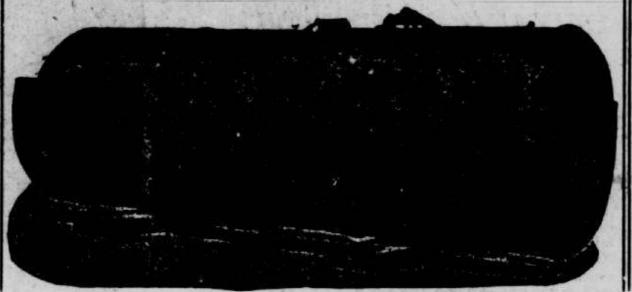
While France was simmering with excitement over this grotesque crime, further revelations increased that excitement. Somebody remembered that various women who had been so unfortunate as to become associated with Pel had died or disappeared suddenly and mysteriously; and it was recalled that Pel often had boasted of the discovery of a poison which left no traces. His first wife had died some years before, and the doctor had

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Pel Glared at Her With His Wicked Eyes and Told Her She Was Reading Her Own Death Warrant.

he was a professor of the Sorbonne, and that his chemical discoveries had startled the world. A strange man was Monsieur Pel; so strange that he was sent to a lunatic asylum once and remained there for a year or two, after which experience he resumed his watchmaking and his chemical experiments.

It was thirty odd years ago that a woman named Elise Boehmer consented to accept a situation as housekeeper in the Pel establishment. This was just after the watchmaker's second wife and her mother had made a sudden and mysterious exit from the house. The second wife and her mother were wretchedly ill when this happened, and they remained in the neighborhood only long enough to recuperate sufficiently to travel. They were not communicative. The most they would say was that they thanked God they had got away from that house alive.

This circumstance increased the unpopularity of Pel. What was going on in his house, that two women talk that way?

The friends of Elise Boehmer tried to persuade her not to take the job. It would be far better for her to work herself to death as a charwoman than to be associated in any way with a man who certainly was in league with the powers of darkness. But Elise laughed at such advice. She had a mind of her own. The mystery of the Pel home attracted her. Moreover, she was a big, strong woman, and the watchmaker was thin and frail, and if he attempted any funny business

credited her death to the eating of poisonous mushrooms. Investigation showed that she had died of poison. This was bad enough, but worse was to follow. Another doctor remembered that he had treated Pel's mother for a similar complaint and she had died. The mother's body was disinterred, and experts decided that she had died of poison. It was soon made evident that the inhuman wretch had killed his own mother to get possession of the little property she owned, which he could not touch while she lived.

Then it was remembered that two girls who had gone to work for Pel, in 1872 and 1873, had disappeared and were seen no more, after a short service with him. There could be no doubt that they had met the fate of Elise Boehmer, or something similar, but no great effort was made to trace the facts in these cases.

Pel was tried at the Melun assizes, and a distinguished French author who was there wrote of the prisoner: "Those eyes never looked straight at anyone, that shriveled mummy face surely never smiled, that impenetrable mask had had no youth."

The murderer was convicted, but was only sentenced to transportation for life, probably because of grave doubts as to his sanity.

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