

Monsieur Bluebeard

by Emil Petaja, 1915-2000

Published: 1944
in »Weird Tales«



“Miss Twisp!”

No answer.

Malcolm G. Retts, editor of *Ghoulish Shockers (Read 'Em and Creep)*, put his long forefinger down on the desk buzzer and held it there.

In a moment an emaciated female with stringy hair and large eyes fluttered in, pad and pencil clutched in her elfin hands.

“Where have you been, Miss Twisp? Out seeing a double feature twice?”

Lila Twisp laughed carefully. But there was no humor in it. She had the appearance of one who has wandered by mistake into a horror museum, and can't find the way out.

“No, sir. There's a strange man—”

“No doubt!” snapped her gaunt-faced employer sarcastically. “Meanwhile I must shout myself hoarse! Well, never mind about that—have you found a suitable autobiographer for our new feature *Famous Fiends?*”

Miss Twisp gulped.

“Well, have you?”

“I don’t think—”

“That’s just the trouble! You never think! Well, we mustn’t expect the impossible, must we, Miss Twisp!” Retts scraped the glass on his desk with his nails, and made Miss Twisp writhe. “Do you realize that we’re losing thousands of readers every month! I don’t know what’s come over this country. Did you get any answers on that questionnaire business we sent out?”

Miss Twisp nodded scaredly.

“Hundreds, Mr. Retts! They all say the same things—the newspapers, true-life periodicals, and newsreels are cornering the horror market. The readers say they find our *Shockers* mild by comparison!”

“Do they indeed!” growled the editor. “Is that all they say?”

“There’s one more thing,” Miss Twisp began meekly.

Her eyes roved to the serried ranks of books and bound magazines that decorated three sides of the ornate office—to one corner, especially.

Retts noticed her fearful glance at the corner shelf.

“Ah! The *Bluebeard* murders!”

“Yes, sir. The papers are full of it. Last Tuesday it even pushed the Russian campaign back to page three.”

“I see.”

Malcolm Retts sighed, and cast a fond lingering glance at his favorite collection.

Retts had made a hobby of gruesome crimes, both ancient and modern. He had made an especially meticulous study of the infamous Baron of the Middle Ages, who was the start of the famous “Bluebeard” legend. He had accumulated all the literature he could find on the subject, and even, on prewar trips to Europe, had visited the ruins of the old Castle of Terror where Bluebeard had lived—terrorizing the countryside. There he had procured further data about Bluebeard.

Retts boasted that he was the greatest living authority on the Bluebeard legend, and no one disputed his claim to that dubious honor.

Five months ago the city had been rocked to its very foundations by a crime so appallingly grisly that the calloused coroner who was called in, on seeing the *body*—and what had been done to it—whitened and staggered back, muttering “*Bluebeard!*”

The newspapers took up his cry.

Four more such crimes occurred, with fiendish regularity. They were spaced roughly a month apart, and in each case the victim was found in a lonely spot, weirdly disfigured, with a look of utter horror in his eyes. All newspaper accounts, as well as magazine articles, concerning these killings were carefully cut out by Editor Retts and added to his Bluebeard collection.

“Well, Miss Twisp,” Retts asked querulously, “are you quite sure you understand just what my plan is? Since the public wants *truth*—we’ll give it to them. I plan to interview a fiend personally, and if he can qualify as an authentic subject of horror, I will pay him very handsomely for an autobiography of his—er—activities. That should put *Ghoulish Shockers* back on its feet! Remember our mottoes, Miss Twisp!”

“Yes, sir. *Read ’Em and Creep.*”

“And?”

“*We Aim to Freeze!*”

“Good! That’s all, Miss Twisp. Keep a weather eye out for fiends!”

“Yes, sir. But I wanted to—”

“Run along, Miss Twisp!”

“I mean, I want to tell you that—”

“Well, stop drooling, and tell me!”

Miss Twisp breathed deeply, then took the plunge.

“There’s a man in the outer office now, sir. He claims that he is just the sort of—of fiend you’re looking for. Shall I send him in?”

The horror editor’s blasé old eyes flickered.

“What’s he look like?”

“Creepy, sir.”

“Good! Send him right in.” He rubbed his bony hand along his chin. “No, wait five minutes. I’ve got to shave first. I’ll buzz you.”

“Yes, sir,” said Miss Twisp and scuttled out gratefully.

Retts took the electric razor out of his desk, plugged it in, and went to work on his thin, rather cadaverous cheeks.

The editor was very fastidious about his personal appearance. He shaved twice, a day, regular as clock-work, and wore a beautiful chestnut toupee that he had bought in Hollywood, the home of luxurious wigs, and it added a touch of colorful gaiety to his thin-lipped sardonic face.

He shaved carefully, then sprinkled a generous amount of cologne on. Then he pushed the buzzer, glancing out the window as he did so.

The day was murky. The sky was a mass of sullen black clouds. The air was sluggish, and there was a tendency to rolling fog. Although it was not yet four o’clock in the afternoon, it seemed like evening.

The office door opened abruptly. A man came in.

He was all muffled in an antiquated cape. He wore square dark-blue glasses. He held the top of his cape up so that it concealed most of his face.

“Monsieur Retts?” he rasped.

“This is my private office,” Retts said drily, studying the stranger carefully. “And you?”

The stranger looked around the room furtively. Then, seeing that they were alone, he drew closer to the desk. Without speaking, he dropped the folds of his voluminous cloak that hid the lower half of his face. Retts stood up. He gave a sharp gasp. “Not—?”

“Yes!” hissed the stranger. “I am *Monsieur Bluebeard!*”

Indeed the mysterious stranger looked the part: He wore a full beard that was not so much pure black as it was *blue* black! It was a most magnificent beard—just like the one Retts had read about in his ancient books. It curled up into little locks, and the tip of each lock was distinctly *blue!* That was how the Baron Bluebeard of the Middle Ages had got his name...

Underneath this blue beard the stranger’s skin looked brown and dry, like old parchment.

“So you are the *modern* Bluebeard!” Retts exclaimed.

The stranger seemed to smile in his beard. “Oui, *monsieur.*”

"You are French?"

"I was."

"Oh. A naturalized American, eh?"

The stranger only smiled.

"Now that I think of it," said Retts, rubbing his lean hands together jovially, "there's a certain old-world charm about you, M.—er—Bluebeard. You remind me of the most dismal slums of Paris. Or perhaps some of the most loathsome aspects of Berlin..."

The stranger bowed.

"Yes, it is just possible that you are the man I have been looking for!"

"*Merci*," said the stranger courteously. "I hope so, Mr. Retts."

"You need money, eh? Well, I suppose conducting a campaign such, as yours does entail a good deal of expense. We shall see. But first, I require some information—"

"*Naturalment*."

Retts motioned his visitor to draw up a chair, which he did. He drew out a shabby ancient hand-bag from under his cloak and set it down primly on his lap.

Retts noticed that he wore black gloves. He saw also that his hair hung down to his collar under his musty opera hat.

Retts took all this in with evident relish. Here was a character out of *Ghoulish Shockers* come to life.

"Now, *monsieur*," Bluebeard asked, in his odd rasping voice, "what is it that you wish to know?"

"You committed the five murders which the newspapers call the *Bluebeard* killings, I suppose?" Retts asked, toying casually with his sharp paper knife.

"Only four, *monsieur*," the stranger said quickly. "I regret to admit it. It seems, in the last case, that someone duplicated my—technique so as to divert suspicion from himself."

"Oh? That's hardly cricket, is it?"

"Deplorable!" the stranger hissed. "However, I've been so busy lately. So many diversions—"

"Such as—"

"Well, for one, I simulated a vampire scourge quite effectively in a distant city."

"Interesting. How did you do that?"

"Very simply, *monsieur*. I misdirected blood-donors for the Red Cross to an old deserted mansion where—I think you can imagine the rest!"

"Yes. Very clever."

"*Merci*. But to proceed with the interview—"

"Yes."

"What information do you require?"

"Well, as you have already learned from Miss Twisp, we are conducting a departure from commonplace horrors in our magazine *Ghoulish Shockers*. I want to obtain an authentic autobiography by a real fiend. I—er—don't suppose you object to being referred to as a fiend?"

"But no, M. Retts! I appreciate the honor!"

“Good! Well—this is awkward for me—but you see I have to be careful of frauds, and—I must have some proof that you *are* the modern Bluebeard. Now, if you will tell me just exactly how and why you committed—”

The stranger broke in.

“I regret that I am unable to give that information! You will understand why. You see, there are to be *others*—”

“Of course, of course. How stupid of me!” Retts frowned and shook his head. “Well, M. Bluebeard, that seems to be that. Since you can’t give us the information we want there quite obviously isn’t any story in it. I’ll ring for Miss Twisp to show you out. In the meantime, keep in touch—”

The stranger stood up quickly.

“M. Retts, there will be no other time. I will not find it convenient to visit your office again!”

Retts displayed his palms in a significant gesture.

“M. Retts,” the stranger suggested, “suppose I tell your readers how, as a child, I—”

Editor Retts, long an expert at browbeating his writers into submissive obedience to his whims, shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“Frankly,” he said, cracking his dry knuckles. “I’m disappointed. I don’t feel that you’re fiendish enough. I know that it must sound heartless of me to say that, but you know how readers are. They want something really blood-curdling and—well, *supernatural*. In point of fact, they expect it! So you see...”

The stranger clutched his hand-bag and drew himself up ominously. He set the hand-bag down on the chair. Then his long claw-like fingers reached across the desk—toward the editor’s throat.

Retts lit a cigarette.

“*Please!*” he said caustically. “These demonstrations don’t impress me at all. They’ve been tried before.”

The stranger drew back, hissing.

“M. Retts!” he snarled. “You force me into revealing something I had sworn to keep secret forever! Now I shall allow you to know my true identity!”

Retts’ eyes gleamed.

“Now,” he said succinctly, “we’re getting some place!”

The stranger folded himself back in the chair like a monstrous bat.

“All right,” Retts said. “I’m listening.”

“I,” declared the cloaked stranger, “am the *original, and only Bluebeard!*”

Retts drew in his breath sharply, dropping his cigarette.

“According to my information—and I warn you that I am an expert on the subject—the Baron who was called Bluebeard was burned at the stake in the village square, by outraged peasants under the leadership of some Franciscan monk—way, way back in the seventeenth century!”

The stranger smiled.

“Wizards don’t die so easily,” he said.

“As you say.”

There was a portentous silence. Then the storm-clouds burst in a dramatic trumpeting of thunder. Rain began to lash at the windows.

“Tell me,” Retts asked, leaning forward with a shrewd gleam in his eyes, “is it true that you kept your victims—er—chained in dank fungus-grown dungeons of your old castle? Is it also true that they number in the hundreds?”

The stranger nodded.

“Quite true, *monsieur*. One hundred and twenty-three, to be exact.”

“That many, eh? Um. We might title the article, *Wholesale Slaughter*. Tell me more.”

The stranger went into minute detail, describing crime after crime of the most diabolical kind. The stories he told would have turned the hair of an ordinary man snow white, and sent him screaming from the room.

But Malcolm Retts was no ordinary man. Besides, he wore a jaunty chestnut wig.

His long haggard checks and thin lips remained placid, but his eyes glistened. “And this holy man—this monk. LeCardeau, I believe you called him. He vowed that he would send you to—er—Hades?”

“LeCardeau made a most sacred vow to St. Francis that he would put an end to my activities if he had to follow me to the ends of the earth to do it. It was he who arranged my little barbeque in the little French village. It was he, also, who sneaked into my castle in the dead of night and put a drug in my wine glass while I dozed by the fire.

“I had my fierce dogs all around me, but for some reason they would not harm him, and made no sound. One might have said he was under the personal protection of St. Francis himself!

“By this trick I was overtaken. Two of my henchmen had been replaced by peasants. It was they who carried me into the village.

“I shall never forget that morning. The sun rose blood-red. The peasants for miles around had gathered to see me die. There was scarcely a family in the entire district who did not have a personal reason for wanting to see me burn.

“A hollow-faced old woman with starting eyes, who had once had three young daughters and now had none, carried the torch and set it to the dry faggots that were piled up around me. I was most carefully tied to the stake. I could not move so much as a muscle.

“The smoke began to curl up around my face. Tongues of flame shot about my ankles. The villagers shouted and laughed.

“I could see the Abbey LeCardeau, in his brown monk’s garb, lift up his silver cross and pray for my soul...

“But I had no desire to die. I called upon the name of my master—”

“Who was?” Retts said softly.

“M. Retts, I had long ago made a pact with one M. Beelzebub—”

“The devil you say!”

“Precisely! And it was he who carried me off, in a puff of smoke, and left a heap of charred bones in my place to fool the ignorant peasants...”

Retts pressed his thin lips together tightly. He was scowling heavily.

“About this pact you had with—his satanic majesty. Of what did that consist?”

“Among diverse smaller privileges, it stated that I could not die except by the hand of the Abbey LeCardeau, and—”

“And—?”

“And only then by exorcism with a portion of the sacred Staff of St. Francis!”

“Ah” Retts said, very softly.

Then he rose to his feet like an avenging spectre.

“*Who do you think you’re fooling, you cheap impostor!*”

The stranger rose to his feet also. They stood face to face across the desk. Rett’s face was livid with rage.

“You say I’m an impostor,” said the stranger mildly. “Might one ask how you know?”

Retts laughed harshly.

“Elementary, my dear *fake!* You made three important mistakes in your story. “One—you numbered Bluebeard’s victims at one hundred and twenty-three. Actually, there were one hundred and *twenty-nine!*

“*Two*—you mentioned the name of a certain saint. Had you really been the diabolical Bluebeard you would not have been able to speak his name!

“*Third*—you said that the only thing that could destroy Bluebeard is exorcism with part of the sacred staff. That is completely wrong. Actually—”

He paused, his thin lips twisting.

“Why don’t you finish, *monsieur?*”

“Why should I tell you, you miserable charlatan,” Retts said scornfully. “Who are you, anyway? Some incompetent out of work writer who—”

The stranger bent his head meekly.

“You’ve guessed it, sir!” he said in a crestfallen manner. “My name is Emil Petaja. I live in Los Angeles. I have sent you story after story for your magazine, but all of them have been rejected. So as a last desperate measure I—”

“Hah!” sneered the editor. “I can guess the rest. You heard about my project, in getting the autobiographies of famous fiends, and thought you would put over a fast one on me. You would impersonate the murderer Bluebeard and write—”

“No!” protested the crushed stranger appealingly. “I only wished to talk to you. I have tried many times, and each time you are too busy, your secretary says. I was certain my manuscripts were being returned unread. I have several right here in my handbag!”

Retts stood over his desk with his hands folded, looking down at the cloaked stranger with sardonic contempt. His visitor had turned his back and was fumbling in his hand-bag.

Suddenly he turned.

“Sir, I am overwhelmed with curiosity. I, too, in my small way, am a collector of bizarre crime stories, particularly those that concern the notorious Bluebeard. Won’t you tell me, please, what it is that can destroy this immortal monster—according to the superstition, I mean, of course?”

Retts shrugged.

“I don’t know why I should tell a nondescript little fool like you, but—well, the one thing that will destroy Bluebeard is water from the sacred spring of Assisi!”

The stranger quivered in his cloak. Suddenly his gloved hands flashed up with a little bottle. He uncorked it gravely, and flung it into the editor’s cadaverous face.

“*Merci beaucoup, le Baron Bluebeard!*” he cried out.

Miss Twisp heard her employer’s strident scream.

She hesitated a moment, then timidly opened the inner-office door and peeked in.

Her wide eyes beheld Editor Malcolm Retts writhe in agony. She heard again his cry of baffled fury.

She saw his gaunt cheeks become the hollows in the visage of a grinning skull. Then she saw the skull itself crumble into dust. Finally there was nothing left in the office chair but empty clothes—and a jaunty chestnut wig...

Miss Twisp put her hand to her mouth to suppress a wild scream. Her eyes turned to the stranger...

With a single gesture the stranger flung off his blue glasses, his false beard and wig, and his cloak.

Miss Twisp caught just a glimpse of a long brown monk's robe, an austere transfigured face, and a silver cross held aloft. Then the stranger put his slender fingers together in an attitude of prayer, and vanished.

