

La Chambre Bleue

G.Simenon

March 16-17, 2018

This is not a Maigret. And as such it is actually much more engaging than the usual fare you associate with Simenon. It is a story about a crime, but not presented as the usual mystery, but from the point of view of the perpetrators, using a rather different technique, a kind of collage consisting of accounts in real time, appearing as retrospection (or rather the other way around, the retrospection being in real time, while the real time is in the form of future speculations). This makes for a certain amount of confusion, but works dramatically as it keeps the suspense alive, the reader not knowing what the crime is that the perpetrators are being accused of, until at the very end. The language is a bit more involved than in the standard Maigret, and it also, as already noted, more importantly manages to engage the reader much more than the events depicted in the typical Maigret novel.

At the center is a passionate love story of two adulterers, Andrée and Tony. The former married to a man (Nicolas) who is of fragile health and naturally for reasons of money (his family running the one grocery store in the village), while the latter is married happily and hence, as so often, conventionally to a good housewife (Giséla) with whom he has a young daughter on whom he dotes. The sexual excitement he does not find in his marriage he seeks in a succession of casual affairs, feeling that to be his right as a man, especially as a French man. They all live in a small village, where everybody knows everybody else. Andrée and Tony had once been school mates, and Andrée had had an unrequited crush on him. She had exercised no allure for him, instead he had been put off by her size, she actually being taller than him, and had perceived her as formal to the point of being frigid. But one day they meet accidentally along the road and he is up for a surprise. After that they meet regularly during eleven months in a room (the blue room of the title) in the hotel run by his brother in a nearby village. And of course taking great care not to raise any suspicions, that is part of the game, but conveniently also having as their confidants his brother and his sister-in-law as well as the maid at the hotel for good measure. But of course, as it will turn out, the whole village soon knows of the affair, except their respective spouses.

One day in early August, Tony sees Nicolas arriving at the hotel. Does he suspect anything? Does he even know? They separate and depart hurriedly, and Tony decides to break off the whole thing, while Andrée is much more emotionally involved and wants them to break free of their spouses and live together for life. As Thackeray observed, love relationships are never symmetric, it is always one who loves and another who merely lets him- and herself be loved. Unless of course there is a relation of mutual convenience. They do not see each other, but she sends him anonymous notes, with short messages. Her husband dies, and two months later he receives a note 'A toi!' which only can mean one thing. Now it is his turn to do his bit, had he not promised her that he loved her? And that he was ready to live with her for the rest of their lives. This correspondence is very

damaging to him for some reason the reader does not yet understand, and he tries his best to deny any knowledge of it. In the end we find out that his wife has been poisoned to death by a 'confiture' that Andrée has supplied him with in addition to those items he picks up in the morning from the grocery store ordered by his wife. As he returns home, after having been away on various visits, he comes back to a house all lighted up. He immediately suspects that something awful has happened, that some accident of some sort has taken place, and he thinks at first about his young daughter. His surprise and alarm is not taken seriously but thought to be a mere cynical comedy played on his part, and suspicions are focused on him from the start and he is arrested, and later on Andrée as well, when suspicions fall on her and the body of her dead husband is exhumed a couple of times. Although we as readers are convinced that Tony is innocent, the judicial process sees it differently, and both are condemned to imprisonment for life, something that delights Andrée, as now finally they will be together.

Now the plot has potential and could be put to definite literary uses, but Simenon is considered as a hack, something he did little to refute, rather on the contrary tried to foster in the imagination of his reading public, and hence it is not considered seriously, but of course for a movie it is excellent material, and has recently (2014) been filmed, fifty years after its conception and speedy write-up. Yet Simenon had some literary ambitions, and as Graham Greene, he divided his output into different categories, some intended just to entertain and bring in money, others to be more serious intended for his own satisfaction and self-esteem, and ultimately to win him a Nobel Prize.

March 17, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se