

Les demoiselles de Concarneau

G.Simenon

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A 'roman noir'. It is indeed. The pathetic protagonist Jules Guérec lives with his two older sisters in the family house, with a third sister escaped through marriage, yet living as a close neighbor. The family is well off and respected in the small Breton fishing village of Concarneau. He is forty years old yet treated tenderly and condescendingly by his sisters who in their concern give him out a short leash.

The family has just bought a car, and this being in the 30's (the book written in 1936), it is a fairly big deal and Guérec has just learned to drive, which he does gingerly especially in the dark, and returned from a trip to nearby Quimper when he accidentally hits a small boy, who is grievously wounded and later dies. As our driver does not know how to turn around the car he ends up not acknowledging his responsibility, and the whole unfortunate incident is turned into a regular 'hit and run'. Why is it that if someone deliberately kills somebody and runs away, he does not earn our contempt as much as the one who only accidentally, often through no fault of his own, kills and then evades responsibility? Is it because the latter shows such cowardice, while in the former case, the act of killing is considered an act of bravery, and the escape is part of the whole package? After all in Swedish law, people jailed cannot be punished for any kind of attempt to escape, even if successfully done.

A coward may not be devoid of a conscience, in fact cowardice may come with an enhanced one. Our Jules does suffer, yet he does not want to get caught. He gets fascinated by the young mother (by name of Marie Papin), as an act of making amends, but he convinces himself that he is in love with her and offers her marriage, which she does not seem to be entirely averse to.

But the older sister Celine surmises gradually that her younger brother is the culprit, so many circumstantial details corroborate her suspicions and she finally confronts him, and he gives in, as he always does to his sister. She suggests that she gives the woman some 8000 francs, a big sum at the time, on the condition that the whole thing is hushed up. She does not want a scandal and above all she does not want a liaison between Jules and that poor woman (in fact many years before Jules made some forlorn woman pregnant and they managed to prevent marriage, and the child miscarried anyway). Jules opposes the idea but does not really think that she will go through with it. But she does, and in a fury of frustration he hits her and starts to damage the house. Suddenly after all those years of being dominated he explodes and loses all semblance of control. In the end he leaves the house, goes to Rennes, but is at a loss what to do with himself. He learns that Marie Papin very much preferred a cash payment than being married to him, and that is the last straw. He returns home, the house and business (including the fishing boats on which their income mainly depended) are sold, because of the scandal caused they cannot very well continue living in their Native village.

The last chapter is devoted to the epilogue, how they go from place to place, without

being able to settle down happily or even profitably. The oldest sister Françoise catches bronchitis which turns into pneumonia which kills her, and the two survivors find themselves in a void, and the book ends.

It is indeed a sad book rather painful to read. In some ways it reminded me of Fontanes' 'Die Puggenpohls' of course not as to plot, in that aspect the two books have nothing in common, but as to some general 'feel'. In both cases there seems to much that does not meet the eye but lies submerged. Thus the thin books give the impressions of being of epic proportions far richer in contents than what is explicitly put down. Can this be seen as a sign that the imagination of the reader has been kindled deeply? Simenon dreamed about that call from Stockholm, and this book shows that he was indeed so much more than a mere crime writer.

March 10 , 2020 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se