

L'étoile du Nord

et autres enquêtes de Maigret

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How short can a detective story be? The standard Maigret, in fact the standard Simenon novel is about 184 pages (in standard edition such as *Livre de Poche*). This is usually enough to provide atmosphere, set up suspense and to have it unfold. But what can you do in a mere 14 pages? this being the space allotted to *Rue Pigalle*, taking place in the seedy amusement quarters of Paris, as many of Simenon's mysteries are. It is more in the nature of the conclusion of a longer novel, and hence leaves the reader, at least the present, unmoved. What ensues is a short account of Maigret sitting in a restaurant and apprehending, single-handedly, a couple of gangsters, acting on an anonymous tip by phone.

The two other stories are a bit more substantial having been allotted fifty pages each. The first is *Stan le tuer* about a Polish gang who specializes in attacking isolated farms robbing the owners and cold-bloodedly killing everyone in sight, as to leave no witnesses around. Maigret has set up an observation post outside a hotel to keep track of some Poles with a view of making an eventual arrest when enough evidence has been amassed. A strange Polish man, by name of Ozup, approaches Maigret, reveals that he has made many an attempt at suicide (which can be verified) and does not consider himself worthy of life. Could he not be used and disposed of and set on a dangerous mission? Maigret is irritated by him and tries to get rid of him, after all he could be planted by the gang, but finally he decides to take a risk and concedes that use can be made of Ozup. The latter is ordered to inform the woman in the gang of the intention of the police to raid the place. The man is reluctant to do so but is finally persuaded. He seeks out the woman and then the windows to her apartment, which before have been open due to the heat allowing unobstructed observation, are closed, much to the frustration of Maigret and his assistant disguised as an old man. Maigret finally visits the room only to find the young woman murdered. Is the mysterious man Stan the killer, or maybe the woman herself, is the actual Stan, being the victim of a revenge? In fact the latter turns out to be true, she was the leader of the gang, and she was married to Ozup but killed their common child. Ozup has made his revenge and later kills himself.

Most interesting is the title novel – *L'étoile du Nord*. It concerns a murder in a low-class hotel close to Gare du Nord. Maigret is alerted to it, although after thirty years of service he has just retired and his wife waits for him at their retreat outside Paris. The case is just too sweet for him to pass up. He goes to the hotel, stops all the guests from leaving until interrogated, which of course causes a lot of frustration and anger. His suspicions are turned to a young girl who has tried to flush down one of her stockings in a toilet, the other being found at the place of murder. Obviously she and the victim have been sleeping with each other, a fact that can be corroborated by the testimony of the next door guest.

The story the girl tries to push is that she picked him up in the street in the night and got a thousand francs for sleeping with him, money discovered in her wallet. Maigret takes her to his office to be interrogated but she skillfully foils all his attempts to get to the truth. In fact she accuses him of being a lecher having had her strip and sending her clothes to be examined. Background checks on the staff of the hotel reveals that many of them come from an area close to Bordeaux, also the origin of her clothes, and more precisely the town of Moissac. The night guard spills the beans and it transpires that one of the maids is a sister-in-law of the night guard and her teen-age daughter had died during an operation caused by her pregnancy by the murder victim who has spent a lot of time in that town where he also had met the young woman who had fallen in love with him. So it all fits together in the end, her recalcitrance as a subject of interrogation turns out to be not due to saving her own skin but to save the real murderer. Maigret is sure that the latter will get a light sentence certain to engage the sympathy of judges and he lets the young woman leave. She will thus be spared being embroiled in any court proceedings, after all there is no need for that in her capacity as a witness, after all a full confession has been made. Besides she is of a good family, her father is a judge in the town of Moissac itself.

The stories were written in the late 30's and all set in the seedier parts of Paris, which exercises an inexhaustible fascination to Simenon.

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