

Le Chien jaune

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Vintage Maigret written in 1931 and hence among the very earliest one. The yellow dog of the title, is more of a herring actually, and rather red than yellow. It adds to the suspense while reading, but not to the relief when everything is being disclosed. The charm of a Maigret lies less in the resolution of a mystery than in the evocation of characters and a milieu, actually as with most crime stories which have survived. You do not read Sherlock Holmes for the excitement of a mystery, but for the depiction of a fascinating character set in a time set to engender nostalgia. Maigret is being typified by his pipe. He is always lightening it, often during adverse circumstances, sucking on it, hitting it against his heels or anything anything else to empty it, and then slowly refilling it. It is repeated so often that it no longer seems funny or tiresome, but part and parcel of the narrative, to bring his physical presence repeatedly into focus. Mentally he is very calm, unperturbed, and such a rock of solidity compared to the anguished figures he daily meets.

The scene this time is not Paris but a small village in Brittany. It rains all the time and the wind blows strongly. Shutters are being opened and closed, the streets tend to be deserted, when not an excited mob of anxious villagers are roaming around, as do the intermittent journalists coming from Paris. The center of action is the hotel, where locals drink, and the young placid girl serves them, not seldom sexually, adding to the sleaziness of the setting. Maigret takes a protective liking to the girl, and one rather contrived scene has him and his young assistant inspector perched on the roof watching through a nearby window, as through watching a silent movie, how a huge man makes love to her. The man is actually a vagabond, whose large feet have left distinctive marks, along with that of his huge dog (reminiscent of the Hound of Baskerville), and who has hence attracted the suspicion of the local police, leading to a temporary arrest out of which he was able to extricate himself. It transpires that he is her old fiance, a fisherman returning from American imprisonment in Singh-Singh due to being caught in an unfortunate venture, in order to exact some kind of vengeance. The initials SS tattooed on his body does not refer to the German SS, as the book was written in 1931, but that is something a modern reader is prone to think. Anyway, as a result of their voyeurism, Maigret is able to give him an alibi for the last crime committed. Anyway the couple get another chance, thanks to the sympathetic understanding of Maigret, and are allowed to settle in a fishing village, the woman having a baby, and this provides the happy ending of this otherwise black story of deceit.

Now as to reviews of detective stories, unless universally familiar to all readers, there is but one rule, namely not to disclose the actual culprits, and at the peril of this review becoming too short, I will adhere to the convention. Conventions should not be disparaged, after all they mostly serve important functions, especially in social life. Unconventional behavior may occasionally be a distinction, but is mostly just a nuisance.

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