

Maigret au Picratt's

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The story is supposed to have been written in about a week, while in voluntary American exile, in early December 1950. This is impressive. The setting is seedy, namely the night-life of Montmartre with which he must have had intimate knowledge. As he had gone to the States after the war, and there is no reference to occupation in the story, one surmises that the milieu he depicts may have been typical of the 30's, but probably did not change very much for decades, and would have been as representative of the 50's as well.

There are two murders: The first of the young stripper and performer at the eponymous nightclub Picratt's (supposedly a take off on a cheap red wine by name of 'picrate') run by an older couple. The other of an older duchess (by marriage). The two murders would normally be considered unrelated, save for a strange incident. Just before the murder of the stripper, incidentally by name of Arlette, she had very early in the morning after leaving the club contacted the local police office to report a planned murder of a duchess. But then she had retracted her story, returned home and shortly thereafter been killed. There is a name 'Oscar' being mentioned by Arlette in her first contact, but no one seems to know of anyone by that name. The story is centered on the search of the mysterious 'Oscar' presumed to be the common murderer (both women having been strangled in the same manner). Through patient investigations into the past of the duchess in Nice (she had been married to a much older man, an Austrian duke, who had died under suspicious circumstances) an individual by name of Oscar is discovered to exist. A valet employed by the duke and duchess in their large Riviera mansion. Further investigations, the nature of which need not concern us, confirm his existence and adds further evidence of guilt. The police communicates, wittingly and unwittingly, with the public via the newspapers which provide daily updates and it is assumed that the presumed Oscar must read them and a trap is being set up, through a 'gutter'-boy, a dirty long-haired morphinist and pederast to boot, who is released from sustained questioning motivated by his involvement with the duchess. Eventually Oscar is found at his apartment and shot to death as he tried to escape and with no regrets. And the whole affair is cleared up, although not very explicitly, leaving some work to the reader.

The ultimate interest of the story lies less in a mystery explained, which provides the *raison d'être* for the common 'policier', than in the depiction of character and 'milieu'. The duchess appears much older than she really is, due to a life spent in serious addiction, both to morphine and alcohol, living in a dirty apartment, which the author spares no efforts to describe in detail, with visible disgust. Different with Arlene, the stripper. She is tantalizing described as both much younger than she tries to appear, and as an experienced woman, providing a mixture of innocence and depravity. Her role in the nightclub is to perform a strip, which she knows how to do to the excitement of the customers. It is not just

a matter of disrobing, as anyone can do¹, but to do it in an alluring and vulgar way. And above all to derive deep pleasure from exciting the audience, and thus exciting it further. Consequently she attracts a lot of the clients and naturally provides additional services. As an example one of the young inspectors by name of Lapointe and part of Maigret's team, had actually been introduced to her before the murder and became romantically involved and as a result of predictably trying to reform her. This is a classical predicament, and he is of course devastated by the news of her death, but in the end he gets the satisfaction of killing the perpetrator, as Maigret consoles him. His involvement being an additional complication to the plot.

However, the most exciting and well-crafted part of the novel concerns the chase of the elusive Oscar. Maigret has installed himself at the nightclub, which he uses as his base, and where he sits and drinks with the proprietors, chatting along. At regular intervals Lapointe, who is shadowing in plain clothes, the gutter pederast, unwittingly serving as the decoy, aimlessly wandering around the city, reports to his boss from different bars along the way. This is done vividly to the point of the reader almost hearing the sound of traffic as well as the din of indistinct voices in the background, as he moves from one Parisian street corner to another. The reader is likely to imagine a foreign correspondent appearing live in a street corner. This is of course interesting, as well as instructive, to modern readers used to the convenience of cell phones to see how this kind of contact could be arranged in the past.

And the conclusion? One should never reveal it in a detective story, yet I need to do it. The duchess must have pushed her husband to his death from their terrace, which was witnessed by the valet, the mysterious Oscar, who was her lover as well, and used this to his advantage. He also bought a house in her home town where he many years later met Arlette as a teenager and impregnated her and had an extended relation with her, involving taking erotic pictures of er and selling. The duchess became a liability to him and he decided to dispose of her and remove the remainders of her possessions to sell and liquidate. Arlette was 'in on it'. But meeting Lapointe, she got second thoughts touched by his innocence, and decided, in a state of intoxication, to get out of it and report her lover. But as she sobered up in the morning she felt the urgent need to retract. But of course too late and to little avail.

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¹ The new girl to replace her, does not apparently have the knack, although she has a 'better' body. The old lady has to give her instructions, Maigret is informed, and he cannot but smile at the thought of an old lady teaching erotic appeal to a young lady.