

Maigret et son mort

G.Siméon

July 22-26, 2018

Yet another one of those quickly written Maigrets. This one was supposedly written in nine days in December 1947. However, how long does it really take to write a novel or a crime story? One thing is to sit down and actually type words on paper, another thing is to conceive of a story, not in the particulars, but its general outline. How much was planned consciously or subconsciously, and how much was the result of impulse while writing along? Probably a fair bit of both.

It is February and cold and dismal in Paris. Maigret is contacted by a man on phone who complains that he is being followed, in fact pursued and fearing for his life. He calls regularly from different bars, obviously thinking that there is safety in numbers of being around a crowd. Maigret sends one of his inspectors to aid. But too late, eventually the body is found along the deserted Place de la Concorde. It does not take too much to realize that this is not the scene of the crime but that the body has been transported here, according to witnesses in a yellow Citroën. And then the mystery unfolds, keeping Maigret awake for several nights in a row. One thing leads to another and suddenly they are on the track of a gang of mostly Czechs who have been massacring at regular intervals farmers in order to get their money, crimes that have provoked outrage and horror among the public. It is indeed a rather horrid bunch and Maigret, as well as the author, are in particular intrigued by a young beautiful woman, a Slovak, ferocious as a wild animal and who at the time of her arrest is about to give birth. She has been sleeping regularly with a number of men with who she shares an apartment. It turns out that she has been very active in the massacres and personally been torturing her victims to death. Her crimes being so heinous that nothing short of the death penalty would satisfy the judiciary, to say nothing about the public.

The mystery of the erstwhile victim, identified as a certain Albert Rochain and known as 'le petit Albert' running a small Parisian bar together with his cross-eyed wife, is resolved. The connection with the gang was most peripheral, picking up an old ticket at the horse racing, believing it was a discarded betting one, which may be reclaimed for some modest profit, but instead it turns out to be an incriminating train ticket from the leader of the gang, another habitue of the races, thus being in the position of knowing too much (a weak link in the plot?), and needing to be eliminated. If there is a happy ending to the story it is the wild idea of Maigret, descending on him unbidden, that the cross-eyed widow should adopt the new-born son of the wild Slovak woman sure to be sentenced to death.

The death penalty was still in effect in France until the 70's, the last one to be executed, a Tunisian, was so in 1977. In 1982 under Mitterrand, it was finally abolished. But public executions were still held in France until 1939 and during the war years there were an increase in death sentences implemented. However, in the 50's and 60's there were a steady drop. Siméon himself had a brother who was sentenced to death in Belgium due

to his war-time activities on the extreme right. He managed to avoid it but died anyway a violent death.

As usual the charm of a Maigret novel lies less in the resolution of a contrived mystery, who cares anyway, but in evoking the atmosphere of predominantly Paris during a number of decades. The life of the small bars, where Maigret regularly has a demi, (or something stronger), or if starving, a sandwich or two. He regularly puts tobacco into his pipe and lights it, puffing out smoke, or muttering something with the pipe clenched between his teeth. He smiles, he gruffs, he shrugs his shoulders. And his wife, whenever she manages to appear, is always so patient and suffering. Maigret seems to have almost no private life, it is all swallowed up by his work, to which he brings the most eccentric methods, but in the end they are always successful.

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