

La Neige était sale

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This is a 'story-noir' set during the occupation, and written by the author in American exile just after the war. The main protagonist is a young man by name of Frank Friedmaier, still a teenager, who lives with his mother Lotte, who runs a brothel under the protection of the local head of the police by name of Kurt Hamling, a clandestine establishment which caters to the petty officials of the occupying forces. The set-up suits the son perfectly, allowing him easy access to young women (who are regularly replaced to provide variety to the clients) without the complications of emotional involvement. Besides under the protection his mother's apartment is privileged as to when it comes to heating and feeding, provoking both envy and contempt among the neighbors. Frank Friedmaier has a slightly older friend Fred Kromer whom he always hangs around with, mostly in the bar run by Timo providing a link to the shady world of collaboration and the opportunity that provides for petty criminality. Frank in emulation of his friend, who has already committed murder, wants to lose his 'innocence' and commit a murder himself. As a victim he singles out one of the occupying junior officers who regularly frequents the Timo bar often brandishing his revolver for all to see. The latter becomes a suitable excuse for the act, and for that purpose Frank borrows a knife from his friend. While waiting in ambush for the victim, Gerhard Holst comes along, a neighbor supporting himself as a tram driver, although his background is that of a music critic, and hence keeping irregular hours. Frank is almost obsessed by Holst and his daughter Sissy, a sixteen year-old, he imagines to be a virgin. The murder is committed, and through the machinations of Hamling, suspicions are diverted to another neighbor, a violinist and active in the resistance. Shortly thereafter he takes out Sissy to the movies. She is exalted and soon imagines that she is in love with Frank (an infatuation she may already have nourished in secret before the encounter, making her so ready to take up his invitation), who is somewhat embarrassed by her innocent attention. Meanwhile he strikes a deal with Kromer to steal some watches, which the latter knows to sell to another officer of the occupational forces, a general to boot. Frank knows where to get them, in a village he grew up in, there was a watchmaker by name of Vilmos living with his sister and whom he often visited in his childhood. He is supplied with a car and a driver, and an additional man, and is driven to the village. As the couple obviously knows him (incidentally as it turns out the brother is dead since some time), he hides his face behind a mask. The robbery is successful, except as far as his mask momentarily slides down and his face is spotted by the victim, who immediately recognizes him as the young innocent boy she used to know. For that reason he has to kill her, what he does with little compunction. The proceeds are shared by Kromer, and in addition there is a deal, in which Frank receives a so called green card, which entitles its bearer with free passage in occupied territory, and Kromer the promise to sleep with a virgin, namely Sissy. The latter act is attempted at the apartment of Frank and his mother, where she is lured into a dark room under the illusion that she will sleep with Frank. The ruse is accidentally

revealed as her head hits the light switch at the head of the bed and she runs out in the cold only scantily clad. Frank gets a bad conscience and tries to find her, reminded of a childhood episode of trying to rescue a cat from a tree. Frank worries that she might be dead as his quest to find her fails.

In the last part of the novel Frank is arrested placed in an old school, subjected to repeated interrogations conducted by different officers, maybe from rivaling sectors of the occupational forces. Frank, out of principle, refuses to co-operate and admits nothing. He is visited by his mother, who is aghast at the gradual decay of her son. He is unshaven and dirty and his clothes turn to tatter, and she supplies him with food and clean clothes. He learns that the amiable relation between Hamling and his mother goes back a long time, which makes him indulge in the dream that he might be his father, just as Holst earlier has played a similar part in his fantasies. While in confinement he spots an open window at an opposite wall, behind which dwells a young woman with a baby, and hence most likely a husband as well. It strikes him as idyllic and he dreams about being in the shoes of the man he never actually spots. At the end he is visited by Holst and his daughter Sissy, who once again, in spite of what Frank has submitted her to, expresses her love for him. This gives him hope and he makes a clean breast of his crimes to one of the interrogators. In the end he is taken out to be shot. The last sentences of the novel are.

Et il a oublié de regarder la fenêtre, il oublie de penser. Il est vrai qu'il aura tout le temps après.

What does 'after' actually refer to? In my first reading of the end, in my desire for a happy ending, I subconsciously blurred the crucial distinction between 'il' and 'ils' to make such a far-fetched interpretation possible. I was taken out of my misunderstanding by the Italian version of the Wikipedia article (which only exists additionally in Swedish and French, but neither with a synopsis) which ends with ... *fino al giorno in cui viene scortato alla fucilazione.*

The settings are vague, in particular the nationality of the occupying forces is not revealed, nor the location, although it seems obvious that Germany is involved set in either France or Belgium. It is set in winter with snow everywhere, the whiteness of which may be thought of symbolizing innocence steadily abused and sullied. There are repeated references to snow and falling snow.

Le ciel est bas, trop clair, avec cette luminosité qui fait plus triste que la vraie grisaille.

...tandis qu'une neige toute fine recommence à tomber du ciel et passe lentement dans le noir au-delà des vitres.

Toujours la neige sale, les tas de neige qu'on dirait pourrie, avec des traces noir, des incrustations de détritius.

Le ciel blanc comme un drap de lit, plus blanc et plus pur que la neige, qui a l'air de s'être durci et d'où ne tomb qu'un peu de poussière glacée.

La neige tombe, épaisse qu'on distingue à peine les fenêtres de la maison d'en face et même dans la cuisine, la qualité de l'air est changée.

A few years later adaptations to the theater as well as to the film were made. The film version, reaching the biggest audience one assumes, has been seen as a precursor to the

cult movie 'Lucien Lacombe' of the mid-seventies. Many amateur commentators on the net express surprise that Simenon was not just a purveyor of 'policiers' but wrote novels inviting comparisons with Camus.

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