

## La Prison

*G.Simenon*

September 27 - October 5, 2019

Yet another Simenon which has nothing to do with Magritte, but one of his 'noirs'. Admittedly there is a crime, police investigations, encounters with the judiciary system, and the machinations of a sleek lawyer. But this is a side-show marginal to the story as such, after all it is not a crime story, yet providing the basis of the speedy unraveling of the main character by name of Alain Poitaud.

Alain Poitaud is a young man barely over thirty who has started a very successful magazine called 'Toi'. It addresses the young adolescent crowd and supplies them with romantic escapism. His wife is a journalist, successful to boot, who wants nothing to do with his magazine, but pursues her own agenda. Husband and wife, although affectionate towards each other, lead parallel lives, hardly ever intersecting. They have a 'pied a terre' in Paris and a country retreat where they keep their only child looked after by a nurse and an older couple keeping the property and garden in shape. They love company and spend most of their free time with common friends, thus obviating the need to really interact with themselves.

And then disasters strikes. Alain is approached by a policeman, who wants him to show his revolver. The revolver is kept in a drawer next to his bed, but turns out to be gone. It turns out that his wife has just killed her sister, there is no doubt about it. Why? Maybe because of jealousy. Juries are very indulgent when it comes to crimes of passion. After all those are very dramatic and romantic, and one may add that no members of the jury may be a stranger to such fantasies themselves. It turns out that Alain is a regular womanizer, sleeping with women right and left as if that was his right. In particular he regularly sleeps with his female staff. It turns out that he has had a long on-going affair with his sister-in-law, the victim of her sister (and his wife), but that this was concluded almost a year before. This murder is indeed a rather bizarre event, and as he is a kind of public person, it attracts a lot of media attention,

But suddenly he finds himself at a loss. He is not only deprived of the company of his wife, but also of friends. No more going out with friends and he does not really know what to do. There are interviews with his brother-in-law the widower, whom he cannot stand, and also with his father-in-law whose position is very delicate to say the least. To be a parent both of a murder victim and a murderer. He is present at an encounter with his wife, who admits nothing beyond the undeniable fact of her deed, and seems incredibly aloof and hardly acknowledges his presence. And then the desperate pursuit of company, of escaping his loneliness, seeking out bars, unknown ones, where he is not known, nor knows anyone. Drinking is of course part of his social night life but the urge is uncontrollable and one night he wakes up late at home not remembering anything, including the young woman in his bed. Later on he is able to identify the club he attended and finds her half naked photo prominently displayed outside. This is a clear case of alcoholism he cannot admit to himself, after all he can hold his liquor and has only been drunk a few times

during his life. The next day he sleeps with his newly employed cleaning maid, another young woman, and of course loses all interest in her after the consummation.

The story comes to a head after he learns from the inspector in charge that both his wife and her sister have had an affair with one of his employees, a rather pathetic character, spineless and sickly, acting as photographer with no obvious attraction, and whom he never would have suspected as rival. He was thus the real reason for this 'crime passionnel'. Nevertheless the story is inconclusive and you feel cheated. Of course there is a conclusion of sorts, the protagonist slamming purposefully into a tree with his Jaguar in Bois de Boulogne after having made a brief visit to the country place and see his son, finding out that the son is more attached to the servants and nurse than to his parents. And then visiting the lover and photographer in his studio. So why did he kill himself? Because the life he was leading was empty and meaningless? Devoid of purpose and usefulness, unlike that of his father, slaving away as a dentist twelve hours a day? It is not clear. In the book he recalls a key interchange he had as a late adolescence with his mother. *Il exist deux sortes de gens, vois-tu maman: ceux qui se laisser fesser et ceux qui fessent les autres*<sup>1</sup>. So life catches up with him at last.

And besides what happens to his wife? Will she be acquitted? There is lot of money around, and he engaged a skilled lawyer who gets his clients off the hook in nine cases out of ten. I guess she will, the reader is supposed to figure that out by himself, and to her, her ordeal remaining just an incident in her life. Or will she languish in prison, the title of the book, which seems to have little to do with the action, unless taken metaphorically.

Simenon is a skilled writer and he delivers, at least for the moment. One noteworthy thing is that all the novels I have read by him have about the same number of pages. It gives the impression of a machine producing them along a conveyor belt. How did he write them? In one go in real time being carried away by the writing making up things as he went along? Or more professionally planning them with care, sketching a plot, elaborating on it, and in the end fleshing it out, finishing it off with a final polishing to a smooth luster?.

Antofagasta, October 6, 2019 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

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<sup>1</sup> 'Fesse' means of course buttocks and the standard translation into English is 'spank'. But I suspect that in the context or more vulgar translation such as 'fuck' would be more accurate. Thus some let themselves be 'fucked', meaning being taken advantage of, be treated badly, while others do the 'fucking' i.e. taking advantage and mistreating.