

## Les Témoins

G.Simenon

July 21-23, 2019

The set up is that of a *magistrat* by name of Xavier Lhomond living and working in an unnamed regional city and unhappily married to a bedridden wife Laurence. It is a childless affair devoid of any semblance of physical passion but providing him with the convenience of a smaller fortune, in particular a big house. His physical needs are taken care of by a discrete affair with a typist whom he met needing to have some essays he written typed for publication, yet this is obviously not enough, with a timid fascination he observes the seedy underworld of alluring females with whom he invariably comes across through his profession.

We are put in *media res*. His wife has one of her cardiac crises and he finds himself in the middle of the night out of medicine to supply her with, as he has accidentally broken the bottle in which it was kept. He seeks out his aptly named pharmacist Fontane<sup>1</sup> and calls at his door, but there is no response. He seeks out a new bar to make a call, and as he exits he catches sight of a colleague and his wife without any mutual acknowledgment. He worries that his nocturnal situation outside a bar will be misunderstood and give rise to malicious rumors among his colleagues. The pharmacist having been alerted by the phone call graciously supplies him with his needs. He does not feel well but on the verge of getting a flu.

Indeed this is not very convenient as he will be presiding at a trial of young man by name of Dieudonné Lambert who is working as a mechanic in a garage, accused of having killed his wife and having had the corpse mutilated by a passing train in the middle of the night. The accused has a history of petty crimes and as his wife has been notoriously unfaithful to him he is thought to have had a strong motive and is the prime suspect.

The trial proceeds during a few days and our protagonist Lhomond tries his best in his feverish state to interview and interrogate for the benefit of the jurors a long line of witnesses, (hence the title of the book). The trial has been preceded by an extensive police investigation the results of which has been collected into a dossier he has been studying for the last few days. The main evidence is contained in it, but his role is to impartially review it and make it more accessible to the lay jurors, while the defense and the persecution have a chance to intervene. The witnesses disclose a rather lurid story, which cannot but titillate the imagination of Lhomond, the victim Mariette has had a long string of parallel lovers, many of which have to take the stand, one of them a mere teenager. Lhomond also studies the audience, where he finds another young woman - Lucienne Girard - whom he has previously come across. He is intrigued and attracted by her and speculates whether she and the accused are in fact lovers. How paltry must his own carnal life be in comparison

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<sup>1</sup> One wonders whether this is a coincidence or not. The German writer Theodore Fontane of Huguenot extraction started out as a pharmacist. Was Simenon aware of this? or even assuming that some of his readers would pick up on it as a kind of semi-private joke?

with that of those of his social inferiors.

In France apparently a case is not decided by a jury alone but the professionals will complement them. There is a long discussion and after that a secret ballot. To the surprise of everyone the majority is for an acquittal, the explanation may be that everyone thought of him- or herself as being in a minority, confident that the majority would vote for a conviction, figuring that by voting for an acquittal they would save their own consciences, as after all there was some doubt and the evidence of guilt was not entirely solid if suggestive, and really what was the alternative?

After the trial Lhomond is notified by their doctor (who has also treated Lhomond for his flu by anti-biotic injections) that Laurence has had her last cardiac crisis and been found dead. Lhomond is momentarily stunned but as he collects himself he realizes that he is now free to marry his mistress, the typist. As a reader one wonder whether this will be another joyless reunion when deprived of the spice of illegitimacy and secrecy.

The novel is classified as a *policier* although there is no 'whodunit' in the story, the court proceedings not really being central to it, even if indispensable as a general background and taking over.

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