

Trois Chambres à Manhattan

G.Simenon

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The setting is Manhattan, early 40's one assumes, although apart from one tiny reference there are no indications of a war going on. It is about two desperately lonely people meeting by chance and reluctantly falling in love. One is an older, meaning mid-forties, French actor (Francis), who has recently been expelled by his successful actress wife who has found a younger man; the other is a woman (Kay), no longer in the first flowering of her youth, meaning being in her early thirties, who has left her aristocratic Hungarian ambassador husband for what is described as a gigolo by malignant gossip he comes across. They meet at night in a diner, happening to sit down next to each other, and fall into conversation. One thing leads to another, and they find themselves walking the early morning streets in Manhattan ending up in a sleazy hotel room, obviously concluding with making love, maybe more out of distraction than anything else. The encounter is repeated, and then moved to the dingy apartment of the man, only later to be moved to the apartment the woman has been sharing with a girl-friend; hence the title of the novel. With each encounter, as they get to know each other more and more, the relationship deepens, as they find in themselves a greater and greater tenderness towards the other. What has begun as a purely carnal encounter develops into a more human one. Although the story is narrated in the third person, it gives the view of the man, as it is his thoughts which are being recorded and described. Why is he attracted to her, she is not particular young nor pretty, he ponders, trying to detach himself. And, he should be careful, picking up hints from his agents relaying the malicious gossip referred to above, about the trap he is becoming enmeshed in. But this leads only to a bout of intense jealousy on his part. Obviously she has had many lovers and lot of casual sex at impromptu locations. Maybe he is nothing but one of her regular pick-ups, had it not been him that morning another stray customer might have fallen into her lap; and who knows what intimacies and passions she has known with others. He gives her the third degree, desperately wanting to know how many men she has had, what they meant to her. Significantly his jealousy does not entail her marriage, maybe because a husband is easily seen as a cuckold? His jealousy becomes violent, and as a reader you squirm, because by this time you have developed a deep sympathy for the woman, and hate to see her abused and misunderstood. The crisis resolves itself, only leading to a deeper attachment and then the couple reaches a kind of stable understanding buoyed by a deep bliss. This is the real thing after all?

Then she gets a message from her ex-husband, the Hungarian count, stationed in Mexico City, to the effect that their daughter is dangerously sick, maybe fatally so. She has no choice but to go down there and they manage to get her on the train down to Mexico. She insists that he - Francis - follows her to the train station, but she does not want him to enter. Mysteriously she tells him that this is not a departure but an arrival. The following week is torture to him. He has installed a phone so she can call him. He never leaves the apartment for fear he will miss her call. But she never calls. He is in

agony, ready to give it all up, and so finally one night she comes through. Long distance calls are not the best ways of communications, especially not at that age, when such were rare and somewhat intimidating. It turns out that her daughter is out of danger, and that her thoughts have always been on him. She declares her love indisputably. He is still ravished by jealousy, as he has been reading letters arriving for her on her insistence (they have no secrets she assures him), some of them from married male correspondents (and here a reference to a sunken submarine gives the only hint of a war going on). He also the next morning gets a very long letter from her, which should if anything reassure him of her devotion. This is the very first time in her life when she has been really in love she explains. Then somewhat inexplicably, maybe because of both a desire to share his love to her with humanity at large and to rid himself of his acute loneliness and his craving for her, he seeks out the Ritz where the French crowd of film expatriates and their hangers on, regularly meet. He has a lot to drink and is saddled with a young nubile woman who somehow takes command. And in a rehash of his encounter with Kay, they walk the streets and visit the bars, and he tells her all about his love for Kay, which only seems to enhance her attraction to him. Hardly surprising they end up at his and Kay's 'chamber' on the verge of making love, when the phone rings. It is Kay and she has the good news that she will be arriving the next evening, but Francis is unable to respond with the joy which is expected. Kay senses this, and he makes up a very feeble excuse of having been woken up from sleep, lying to her in the presence of the other woman, thus committing an act of treachery. The woman leaves but the damage is done, and when they eventually meet at the La Guardia airport¹, Kay has of course suspected the presence of another person in their chamber, and Francis has to admit to everything and the novel ends after her eventual forgiveness.

The novel, finished in late January 1946, no doubt having been written in a week or two, some twenty years later was turned into a black and white movie shot in New York (of course) and directed by Marcel Carné, The French director responsible for the epic 'Les Enfants du Paradise'. Now New York of the forties may not have differed that much from New York in the sixties, maybe not even in the seventies, when I was a resident. The long walks along the deep canyons formed by skyscrapers make up for the proverbial New York scene, which more than any other American City has caught the imagination of foreigners and during the greater part of the 20th century served as the icon of urban modernity. Here we are treated to diners, bars, juke boxes, and small apartments. The settings could have been taken out of Hopper. Unlike a 'policier' in which you hardly care for the characters and shear no tears when they are found murdered, you do get engaged in the little love drama and yearn for a happy ending.

January 11, 2019 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ The name 'La Guardia' is not mentioned in the book, for the obvious reasons that it was not so named until 1953. You simply know it as New York Airport, the Idlewood one would not be opened until 1948 and would fifteen years later or so be renamed the John F.Kennedy international airport by which name it has now been associated with for over fifty years.