

## **THE SIMENON/DARD CONFLICT**

**By Thierry Cazon**

**Traduction Henry Krasnopolski**

Three plays have been based on Simenon's work. The first one, "*Quartier Nègre*" (Black Quarter) adapted by Simenon himself, was put on stage in Brussels in 1936. The success being far from his expectations, Simenon ended its run before being criticized by the public and columnists. He gave up this kind of exercise temporarily.

In 1950, he accepted to try again. However, Frédéric Dard, young and prodigious author looking for literary recognition, proposed him the adaptation of one of his novels "*La Neige Etait Sale*" (Dirty Snow).

Simenon accepted the project and Dard's collaboration but kept the control of the work minimizing Dard's contribution.

But Dard did not see it that way. He obtained that his name be put next to Simenon's on the playbill.

"*Dirty Snow*" was very successful, it was played one hundred and twenty five times and met a great response from critics.

In 1952, during a reception in honour of him, Simenon said "I do not have an adapter". His pride deeply hurt, Dard recounted the incident several times to journalists and his biographers as if he wanted to signify that Simenon was not quit with it.

The rest was passed over in silence but this silence was a menacing revenge.

Two years later, a young and unknown comedian, Frédéric Valmain, sent Simenon, the adaptation of a "Maigret" (Simenon's recurrent police superintendent) "*Liberty Bar*". Simenon was seduced by the proposed work and accepted to give it a try. The play was put on stage at the Charles de Rochefort Theatre. With more than five hundred performances, the play was a great success but was not the great sensation that was expected.

Then, all went surprisingly silent, first about the success of the play then around Frédéric Valmain's amazing career. What had happened?

In the first *Bulletin Des Polarophiles*, I tried an introduction to the Simenon/Dard clash. I recounted

in detail the incident which happened between Simenon and Dard on March 19<sup>th</sup> 1952.

If Frédéric Dard came back on this story very often, he did not dwell on it.

Considering anomalies I have found in other fields, I came to the conclusion that Frédéric Valmain was Dard's straw-man. I will not say more about it since it has been largely outlined before.

As soon as I started my investigation, I had the feeling that I would find an explanation on Valmain's unexpected appearance on the literary scene and the adaptations for the theatre.

In 2000, after Frédéric Dard had passed away, I published a pamphlet to honour this great author, including a mention about Valmain (see the article on Internet at *Polarophiles.com* site). Before this publication, I tried to get some details about him from Fleuve Noir who convinced me that he was dead. However, the person from the editor who gave me the news about Valmain's death, called me later to give me his telephone number!

I called him and he did not succeed in convincing me that my hypothesis was wrong. He refused to let me have a copy of his correspondence with G. Simenon.

I did not yield an inch of ground to pressure nor to threats of proceedings.

Since, some new elements have clarified this matter.

The agitation that I produced around Valmain encouraged the latter to enhance his literary reputation, first in publishing an article called “*Frédéric Valmain , a popular writer*” including his bibliography but excluding his last work “*Une Sacrée Fripouille*” (A Hell of a Crook) which, strangely, is the only one published under his name with the editor Fleuve Noir (collection Special Police). This work marks the definitive end of his novelist activities. In 2002, he allowed the Association “*Les Amis de Georges Simenon*” (G. Simenon's Friends) to publish the correspondence he refused to let me have.

These letters were published in full in the N - 16 of the *Cahiers Simenon* (Simenon's notebooks) with the title “*Les Feux De La Rampe*” (Footlights) but I learnt of it only after the first issue of the *Bulletin N - 1 des Polarophiles Tranquilles* devoted to the Dard/Simenon Clash and published some time after the “*Cahiers Simenon*”. The *Simenon's Friends* wrote me: it's a pity that you were not aware of our publication N - 16 [...] this would have helped you to avoid some mistakes and besides, not to assimilate Dard to Valmain. Valmain is alive, I met him! I glanced through his original letters to Simenon about “*Liberty Bar*”.

I bought the “*Cahiers N - 16*” which did not contradict my thesis. For me, Dard, author of “*Liberty Bar*” adaptation, used Valmain to fool Simenon.

I went to Brussels to meet the “*Amis de Simenon*”'s secretary and learn the details of the Simenon/Valmain encounter (which was followed by the publication of the correspondence).

As a result of this visit, I found out some anomalies:

- The secretary, who went to Valmain's home after his death, did not find any manuscript in

- his personal archives.
- The manuscript of the “*Liberty Bar*” adaptation and Valmain's correspondence are also missing from Simenon's archives kept at Liège University. Professor Benoit Denis confirmed so.

At this time, Denise Simenon (Simenon's wife) was the secretary. All documents were meticulously indexed and classified. The lost correspondence with Valmain probably shows Simenon's will to throw a discreet veil on this episode.

I was left to study the correspondence published by the “*Amis de G. Simenon*”. This analysis is quite long and runs the risk of wearing a non specialist reader. So I will show the last two letters supplied by Valmain:

First letter:

*October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1955*

*My dear Valmain,*

*Thank you for the news you gave me. My congratulations. Am very busy and answer you in a somewhat telegraphic mode. A “Maigret” quite different and easily adaptable is “Maigret Se Trompe” (Maigret is wrong). Another one which will follow “Maigret A Peur” (Maigret is afraid)*

*(both with the Editor Presses De La Cité)*

*Once published, it will be easier to send some copies of the play abroad. According to our agreement, as for “La Neige Etait Sale” (Dirty Snow), I keep the foreign countries because I am translated based essentially on my reputation and most of the time, the adaptation results from the book more than from the play. However, if there are translations from the play, I propose to give you 25% of the copyrights that I will deal directly with you. Do you agree? You can send me the check of 77.500 francs here. My best regards to all of you. G. Simenon*

*Please, just send me the foreign requests. I will answer them. Also, send me some copies of Paris-Théâtre that I will send directly to the people concerned.*

*Georges Simenon -*

*Golden Gate Av. de la Reine Elisabeth – Cannes – Alpes Maritimes*

Second letter (written letter):

*Cannes, the 10<sup>th</sup> of November*

*My dear Valmain,*

*You did misunderstand me. The article 10 specifies that it concerns the 25% of my share of the copyright in the foreign countries, which means from the share attributed to the French author. The foreign adapter gets 50% of the copyrights for it is never a translation but an adaptation.*

*This gives the foreign copyrights: 50% for the adapter, 50% for the French author.*

*It is on these 50% that I give you a share. That is 25% of 50%. All yours G. Simenon.*

These two letters speak for themselves. They give the keys to the story. It is surprising that Valmain gave them out without assessing the risks.

The first letter dated the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 1955, written after the first performance, shows that Simenon was exultant: the play was a success and he had found the adapter he was dreaming of.

Usually so reticent with his adapters, he proposed two other titles in order to continue this fruitful collaboration (bringing 77.500 francs each) What is the author being a beginner for, who would not have seized the opportunity to get fame and financial ease at the same time ?

Only a creator certain of his own value (this was Dard's position between 1950 and 1955) could afford to refuse a proposal, to not expect anything from Simenon after having proved that he was his best adapter. This adapter dealt with the novelist as an equal, imposing now his own conditions:

The play "*Liberty Bar*" published in "*Les Oeuvres Libres*" Number 114 (November 1955) mentions a Frédéric Valmain copyright "all reproduction or adaptation rights reserved for all countries including USSR". This strike only had the motivation to erase the affront he sustained for "*La Neige Etait Sale*" (Dirty Snow). It could only be Dard.

Thanks to this trick, Frédéric Dard toppled his father in literature, his old idol, to succeed him.

Some critics like Anthony Burgess (British, 1917-1993), writing an article about Simenon, highlighted this example of filiation/emancipation: "*San Antonio, Frédéric Dard, Simenon's acknowledged successor, is probably a man with more fame and an author of far more original police novels*" ( in "*Tribute to Qwert Yuiop*", Editor Grasset, Paris, 1988).

I leave Burgess the responsibility of the formula because I do not allow myself to set up a scale of values between these two, twentieth century, French literature giants, as I would not dare to compare the genius of Picasso and the one of Matisse.

What happened afterwards? Dard did not feel the need to unveil the end of the party which probably was played between the two novelists. He did have the last word for the "Maigret" were no longer adapted for the theatre. Simenon had met his match.

As far as Dard was concerned, he had tested full scale the efficiency of his stratagem.

True to himself not to lose anything of his writing, euphoric of the good trick played on Simenon with the complicity of theatrical surroundings, he put on the young Valmain the follow up of his

personal strategy which consisted in adapting a certain number of novels from first rate authors.

Did he not start himself with the adaptation of “*No Orchid For Miss Blandish*” signed together with Eliane Charles (probably the sister of a certain Frédéric Charles - a Dard pseudonym) and Marcel Duhamel, followed by “*La Neige Etait Sale*” (Dirty Snow) and all the incidents around it.

After having groped around, this experience became his strong point and allowed him to adjust his tactics and entrust the role of a menial adapter to Valmain.

And this smokescreen game was repeated first for the theatre then for the books published by either Fayard or Fleuve Noir. And it was the same for the cinema and television until Dard had decided to regain his real function.

For Frédéric Dard's great lovers and admirers, the discovery of the texts the author did not wish to publish with his name, is a happy event and a delight. I am sure that Frédéric Dard has some additional surprises in store.