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FREDERIC DARD OU LA CREVE D'ETRE HOMME

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Traduction Henri Krasnopolski

What fools, they are all at the window with their ugly look. Their joy is ghastly. Watch their faces. I wonder how I could have lived among them for so long. Now I cannot bear them anymore. I have the feeling that I am the captive of a slaughterhouse meat locker. Before they trampled each other in the public squares: vive Pétain! Now, they are waiting...

Frédéric Dard, « *La Crève* » (approximate translation: The Hell With Them), Original editor: Confidences 1946, reissued by Edition du Fleuve Noir 1989, (Pages 63-64)

For those who consider Superintendent San-Antonio the only character that Frédéric Dard ever created, his novel « *La Crève* » offers the perfect counterpoint and probably the best introduction to the work of this little-known writer. Dard, himself, was particularly fond of this novel in which burst forth simultaneously all the pessimism and cruelty that would feed into his subsequent work as well as the humanism that would pave the way for the investigations of San-Antonio.

We know that Dard started to write while still quite young: he was nineteen in 1940 when he came out with « *La Peuchère* », (Poor Thing), the series of short stories, tales and minor novels that would sustain his publishers in Lyons up to 1949. Despite his youth, however, this author was neither idealistic nor naïve. After all, in those days (second world war), the continuous cat-and-mouse game with the occupying forces or between « good » Frenchmen did not permit it. Each book published at this time: *La Mort des Autres*, Edition Optic 1945, (The Others' death), *Croquelune*, Edition de Savoie 1944 (Bite the Moon), *Les Pèlerins de l'Enfer*, Edition de Savoie 1945, (Pilgrims of the Underworld), - and what revealing titles they are! - betrays his aversion to the average French puppet in whom are combined a taste for denunciation, instant profits and a false naïveté (« after all, we have to survive.... »).

With a nauseating zeal, this crowd which seems to illustrate Léon Bloy's point in *Exegesis Of Platitudes (L'Exégèse Des Lieux Communs)*, Edition Rivage 1902), accompanies us up to « *La Crève* », which is the astounding depiction of the liberation as seen through the eyes of a « collabo » (collaborator) family terrified by the settling of scores to come.

The son had been a member of the Milice, and the daughter had sinned with the occupying forces, all of which the parents hid under the Noah's garment. How could the balance between fear and malice in each of the four characters be made to ring so true? Why do these *petits bourgeois*, worthy as they are of Marcel Aymé, nonetheless move us so deeply? Because beyond the extreme and artificial style of a young who admires Simenon, an excess of metaphors put the emphasis on the lucidity of the sensitive man who is too aware to hush up or feed the French dualistic bad and good.

It all started with a real event witnessed by Dard: the lynching of a member of the Milice during the liberation of Lyons. Dard was sufficiently shaken up that he started to write « *La Crève* » a year later but in reverse chronological order, starting with the execution and showing it to be the logical culmination of a long process in the course of which that he depicts many true facts and offers psychological insights.

The intent is to suggest that one should avoid judging or deluding oneself with patriotic verses such as those produced by the duet of Aragon and Triolet and, instead, try to understand why an entire family chose to collaborate.

Really, Simenon could not have had a truer follower.

This accuracy is of simplicity equally rigorous and tragic. One cannot imagine the mass movement that a visionary like Zola could have created out of the liberation. Dard prefers the opposite: a touch of realism, a specific setting (the room of the son's comrade from the Milice where the family hides) and four heroes with the presentation of their feelings as sole engine.

Contrary to Zola who favored themes dealing with real life, Simenon preferred to be in the shoes of his characters to depict their immediate reactions to life in a small home and social setting and so accede to their true nature.

Here again, Dard draw the lesson and even after he broke with his mentor Simenon, following an incident regarding the play «*La Neige Etait Sale*, 1948 »(Dirty Snow), he will always favor the unpretentious setting and a limited number of characters.

A summary of the story: Petit Louis, his daughter Hélène, his father and mother, all, will spend a night and a day before us. See them crammed into the room's only bed, huddled like animals sharing warmth except that each of them is alone with his pains, his regrets and, in a reference to Sartre, his nausea.

This convergence of feelings allows Dard to trace each character's dreams and aspirations. The novel 's structure is that of a quartet in which each protagonist produces a movement of music of the mind in accordance with the extent of his humanism. In the orchestration of the four solitudes one finds the tears of the mother, the resignation of the father; the dark hatred of Petit Louis and the romanticism of Hélène, with darkness (the future) and light (childhood memory) alternating. To listen to them is to have our certainty shaken, to have dissipated our insistence on « it serves you ». With Dard, one comes to believe that it is

possible to plunge into the abyss of absolute evil.

We see the fate of four unfortunates, each deprived of his substance by the spirit of the Occupation with their resulting bitterness, their pettiness, their bestiality, but also their despair and dread of being nothing less than monsters. And the cry of the young milicien, a killer blinded by ideology who suddenly understands what he has become: « the blood can be washed, right, Hélène? » expresses the extent of Dard's pity for him. In fact, these motionless heroes never stop pursuing the humanity of which they have been deprived.

When, in the end, the liberation drags them out of their hiding place, one fears that the last part of the novel becomes unbalanced. Instead, we are transported from a world of individualized aggression to a world of a more general, public bestiality, along a path of hatred culminating in the parents' imprisonment, the shearing of Hélène's head and, ultimately, the execution stake for Petit Louis. It is however at this time, when touching the bottom of the nightmare that their human condition is revealed.

Take Petit Louis' case. In the most striking scene of the book, the past reappears to illuminate the present: Fire! He hears « Fire » and thinks « Fire » in a pleasant past, as unreal as the landscapes imagined in the glass of the cupboard of his room when he was sick.

A warm whip softly strikes his chest; a radiant laugh passes away in a golden haze... It is not a rag doll produced by the Collaboration who will be shot but a man in every sense of the word, one who has been in part transformed (and who may have inspired Simenon's « *La Neige Etait Sale* »). Certainly, we cannot deny that the Dard of 1946 is gloomy. But it is a darkness that does not blind us. In contrast to Michel Houellebecq's distorting prophecies of doom, Dard's darkness reveals life for what it is.

Behind its pessimism, « *La Creve* » is nothing less than the evolution of four characters towards their own humanity, of which the Occupation had deprived them but also the cruelty of which the liberation would bring into plain view.

Hélène (who charted her own path to humanity in « *Batailles sur la Route* » (Battles Along The Way) published in 1949 - told once her brother: « You are able to be generous ». Throughout this heart-rending book, it is the « honor to be a man » that Dard will track beyond the physical and moral aberrations, and the noxious, polluted thinking of these four heroes.

« *Batailles Sur La Route* » , Battle on the Road (Original Editor Dumas, Saint Etienne, 1949, Re-edited by Fayard, 2004)

Before considering this novel (*Bataille Sur La Route*), I re-read Frédéric Dard's « *La Crève* » (The Hell with them - 1946) which is, fascinatingly, similar to « *La Neige Etait Sale* » (Dirty Snow - 1949), by Simenon.

Read together, they convince me that « *La Neige* » is Simenon's response to « *La Crève* », the master's interpretation of the work of a talented follower.

Comparison have been discussed extensively in the Bulletin des Polarophiles # 1 and 3.

It is up to readers to read or re-read « *La Crève* » and « *La Neige Etait Sale* » to compare the two works and to form their own opinion.

Dard wrote « *La Crève* » in 1945 in light of the tragic events he had witnessed. In 1946, it was published in Lyons by Editions Confluences. That same year, Editions de Savoie came out with « *La Mort Silencieuse* » (The Silent Death), and « *Le mystère du Cube Blanc* » (The mystery of the White Cube) followed in 1947 by « *Le Cirque Grancher* » (The Grancher Circus).

In 1949, Editions Dumas published « *Batailles sur la Route* ». It is considered a sequel of « *La Crève* » in that it begins with the execution of Petit Louis, with which « *La Crève* » ended.

The illustration of the cover (see illustration, page 2, French version), similar to the jacket of the 2004 re-issued Fayard edition, seems to promote the irresistibility of the French capital.

Dard, like Simenon many years before him , will go to Paris to try his luck. He set up house in Les Mureaux near Meulan, a Paris suburb.

In 1950, Dard and Simenon collaborated in bringing to the stage the latter's « *La Neige Etait Sale* » created on December 11, the same year. The play was a great success.

In the preface of « *Bataille Sur La Route* », Frédéric Dard declares: « This is merely the story of a man in search of his own truth within the madness of his time, the harshness of his profession and the power of his love. You are going to witness his adventure. And because from time to time he will appear anxious and confused, you no doubt will frequently have the urge to whisper in his ear your recommendation on the choice he should make.

Although we are enthralled and have read the book cover to cover, « *Batailles Sur La Route* » is a relatively minor text, characteristic of an early stage in Dard's evolution towards a more refined, professional approach to the writer's craft .

As he will do often, Dard will cause a subject («*La Crève* ») to recur over and over for the purpose of creating a new story line and nurturing his literary production.

For example, Dard has tapped a new vein of creativity in Pierre, a member of the firing squad that executed Petit Louis.

Dard has Pierre so deeply moved by what he deems his participation in a crime that, in an impulsive act intended as redemption, he elopes with Hélène (or Elèna), the victim's sister. She, too, is being subjected to victor's justice, but is unaware that Pierre had a hand in her brother's execution. Under the threat of exposure of this secret, Pierre and Hélène fall in love.

As with the work of Simenon, Dard's is a story of fate, of human beings struggling with destiny, of the pathos of the human condition. A tragic event compels the hero to remain under the curse and Pierre will be led inexorably to the dramatic destruction of his love.

Pierre's slow and difficult knowledge of himself as the story progresses sounds typically « Simenonian » but with an important difference: Dard balances introspection with action, and captivates the reader with spectacular sequences teetering on the knife-edge of disaster.

It is Dard's action stories with their descriptive and narrative power, which will become his trade mark. He portrays with talent the lorry driver job (his dedication to truck drivers and the title of the novel prove it). Although peripheral to the tale itself, this description permits Dard simultaneously to display his abilities and to add volume to the work .

Frédéric Dard is a novelist who has no great success yet. He has no doubt about his talent but he has first to impose his commissioner to become as successful as his illustrious predecessor. Meanwhile, he will work in the shadow of the novelists who made it, will become their ghost-writer, will adapt their novels for the stage, field where he shines... but this is another story.

The curiosity of this book : it had a second life under the pen name of Marcel Prêtre, first as « *Deux Visas Pour l' Enfer* » (Two Visas for Hell) published in Switzerland (Editions « A la Baconnière », Neuchatel) in 1955, and again in 1983 as « *Mort en Sueur* », Special Police N°1811 (The Death in Sweat) with the Editions Fleuve Noir (the head of which became Frédéric Dard's father in law).

The first 61 pages are written in a different style, the same style used when Dard was composing under various pen names (Valmain/Carter, Chabrey, etc...).

This prologue will substitute « *La Crève* » to put in place the text of « *Bataille Sur La Route* », faithfully reproduced by transposing the French period of « Epuración » to a South American country during a revolution.

The names of the characters are hardly changed: P'tit Louis became Luisito, Hélène is Elèna...

Can we imagine that Frédéric Dard has ignored a plagiarism as evident as « *Bataille Sur La Route* » ?

As far as I am concerned, I doubt it and draw the conclusion that I shall keep for myself considering the wish of the heirs of the protagonists to let posthumously Marcel Prêtre enjoys a reputation of talented writer.

Frédéric Dard will remain an author wearing a mask.