

Review #52 : *Scandal in Paris* (1952)

George Sanders and Carole Landis

This is the amusing, clever story of Eugene Francois Vidocq, who was born in a Paris prison in 1775 and spent the next 30 years as a cad, a thief and a relatively successful criminal. His epiphany came, according to the movie, **through the love of a virtuous woman**, Therese de Pierremont. Vidocq then became Paris' chief of police and spent the rest of his life catching criminals. **He was, after all, an even better detective than he ever was a thief...**



SYNOPSIS

The story takes Vidocq (**George Sanders**) through his early years and his partnership in crime with a rough crook, Emil (**Akim Tamiroff**). Vidocq's inspiration is **Casanova**, and so with his dwarfish cohort, he steals his female victims' money, garters, and hearts. With the help of a file hidden in a birthday cake, the two of them escape their latest sojourn in jail to pose for a painter recreating the images of St. George and the Dragon for a church mural, and they then return to their life of crime. In Paris they encounter a **mercenary and beautiful dancer Loretta** (Carole Landis), whom Vidocq woos, steals from and leaves, and who later marries Vidocq's predecessor as police chief, which causes serious complications. His stealing of her alleged ruby garter is irresistible, but it also becomes his downfall when Loretta **reappears to exact her revenge**. Vidocq then crosses path with an **aristocratic family** from whom he and Emil plan to steal priceless jewels. The Marquise, a deliciously dotty and sarcastic dowager, falls under the charm of Vidocq. This encounter takes them **into the realms of the rich** where Vidocq passes himself off as royalty and plots further mischief, among which setting up to become police chief so that he can rob the Bank of Paris...

The film features one of the best performances of George Sanders as a **charming cad**. Akim Tamiroff starts out as an ignorant buffoon with a knife, but gradually turns the role into one of real threat. The movie is laced with **clever dialogue** by Vidocq and the **gradual resentment** of Emil towards his 'master'. When Emil suggests murdering the rich Marquise for her jewels and is surprised when Vidocq demurs, Vidocq explains : *'It's a not a question of morality but of manners. A man who is capable of killing with a knife is liable to eat with one.'*



And towards the end of the movie, when Teresa asks Vidocq if he loves her or still loves Loretta, he tells her with a smile :

'In her eyes I see myself as I am. In your eyes, I see myself as I could be...'

REVIEW

A Scandal in Paris is a masterpiece of ironical cinema by Douglas Sirk, also director of *Summer Storm* (1944), using a classical narrative and superb actors. The film has an unusually **fine pedigree**. Producer Arnold Pressburger was also responsible for Fritz Lang's *Hangmen Also Die* and Sternberg's *Shanghai Gesture*. Cinematography was handled by one of Europe's finest, the exiled Eugene Shuftan, and scored by Hanns Eisler, whose credits include several Fritz Lang films.

Vidocq is one of Sirk's most complex characters, driven to crime almost as a birthright but at the same time a **cynical romantic**. If St. George, Therese, and eventually the cuckolded Richet remind him of what he can be, Emile is the worst part of Vidocq's personality, the 'Dragon' inside him, always there to encourage his immorality.

The plot of *Scandal*, indeed the tone as well, also recalls **Lubitsch** in its **thrilling tableaux of a dazzling world of high intrigue among intelligent and sophisticated people of wavering morals**. The witty script is filled with **poetic speeches** and **cynical aphorisms**. Witness Vidocq's description of his partner's personality : '*Emile was that grimmest of characters, the early-morning optimist. All through the rainy night he had added to my misery with his unflinching cheerfulness and family stories while we were soaked to the skins we were trying to save.*' – and his description of marriage as folly : '*Sometimes the chains of matrimony are so heavy they have to be carried by three.*' Even Therese's little sister Mimi (Jo-Ann Marlowe) is masterfully mordant, summing up the entire film in the last scene with a knowing grin : '*No man is a saint.*'

The comedy of the film ranges from Vidocq's **unerring wit and the constant betrayals and forgiveness**, to the antics of '*Satan the Monkey*' and the Old World low jinks of Emile's family of comic cutthroats and thieves. Still, there's also a seriousness to *Scandal in Paris* that gives it an unexpected *gravitas*. Gene Lockhart's Richet, for example, is initially ridiculed as a buffoon, but he takes on a tragic pathos when he puts on one of his innumerable disguises — this time a cheap beard and a huge, rickety set of bird cages strapped to his back — in a desperate ploy to catch Loretta with Vidocq. His apotheosis is also Vidocq's when he begs the latter to find the man who ruined him. Vidocq tells the truth when he says he's already dispatched him, but Richet doesn't know Vidocq is describing himself.

One of the film's most enchanting spaces is a small **woodland playground** complete with merry-go-round. In this masterful studio confection, Therese reveals that she knows everything about Vidocq, and forgives him. But typical of the film, it's also the scene of Vidocq's murderous final encounter with Emile. In both instances, composer Hanns Eisler's darkly romantic theme sanctifies the space as **mysterious, ethereal, and potentially life-changing**.



With its sophisticated adult script and its air of romance with tragic underpinnings, the film joins a small, select group of **dark fairy tales** helmed by expatriate European directors. What distinguishes *A Scandal in Paris* is its additional air of **evanescence**, as if the Old Europe of **charming woodland merry-go-rounds** and **dowagers in castles** and **romantic criminals** was now a fleeting space, evaporating in the face of a spreading American culture. While Sirk made several more independent films before moving into the big American melodramas for which he's most famous, this was in a real sense his **European swan song**...