



MODERN  
CLASSICS

A photograph of a man in a dark jacket and light trousers standing in a street corner, looking towards a building with a diamond-shaped door. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The man is standing on a sidewalk, and the building is a light-colored wall with a dark door. In the background, there are other buildings and a street with a car.

Georges  
Simenon  
The Hanged  
Man of  
Saint-Pholien

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

## *The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points . . . 'understand and judge not'.

GEORGES SIMENON

*The Hanged Man  
of Saint-Pholien*

*Translated by* LINDA COVERDALE



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# Contents

1. The Crime of Inspector Maigret 1
2. Monsieur Van Damme 14
3. The Herbalist's Shop in Rue Picpus 27
4. The Unexpected Visitor 41
5. Breakdown at Luzancy 53
6. The Hanged Man 67
7. The Three Men 80
8. Little Klein 93
9. The Companions of the Apocalypse 106
10. Christmas Eve in Rue du Pot-au-Noir 119
11. The Candle End 130

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## 1. *The Crime of Inspector Maigret*

No one noticed what was happening. No one suspected that something serious was taking place in the small station's waiting room, where only six passengers sat dejectedly among odours of coffee, beer and lemonade.

It was five in the afternoon, and night was falling. The lamps had been lighted, but through the windows one could still see both German and Dutch railway and customs officials pacing along the platform, stamping their feet for warmth in the grey dusk.

For Gare de Neuschanz is at the northern tip of Holland, on the German border.

A railway station of no importance. Neuschanz is barely a village. It isn't on any main railway line. A few trains come through mostly in the morning and evening, carrying German workers attracted by the high wages paid in Dutch factories.

And the same ceremony is performed every time: the German train stops at one end of the platform; the Dutch train waits at the other end. The train staff in orange caps and the ones wearing the dull green or Prussian blue uniforms get together to pass the time during the hour allotted for customs formalities.

As there are only twenty or so passengers per train, mostly regular commuters on a first-name basis with the customs men, such formalities do not take long.

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The passengers go and sit in the station restaurant, which resembles all those found at international borders. The prices are marked in *cents* and *Pfennige*. A display case contains Dutch chocolate and German cigarettes. Gin and schnapps are served.

That evening, the place felt stuffy. A woman dozed at the cash register. Steam was shooting from the coffee percolator. Through the open kitchen door came the whistling of a wireless as a boy fiddled with its knobs.

A cosy scene, and yet a few small things were enough to insinuate an uneasy sense of mystery and adventure into the atmosphere: the two different national uniforms, for example, and the posters, some advertising German winter sports, others a trade fair in Utrecht.

Off in a corner was a man of about thirty, his face wan and stubbled, in threadbare clothing and a soft felt hat of some vague grey, someone who might well have drifted all around Europe.

He had arrived on the Holland train. When he had produced a ticket for Bremen, the conductor had explained in German that he had chosen a roundabout route without any express trains.

The man had indicated that he did not understand. He had ordered coffee, in French, and everyone had considered him with curiosity.

His eyes were feverish, too deeply sunk in their orbits. He smoked with his cigarette stuck to his lower lip, a small detail that spoke volumes about his weariness or indifference.

At his feet was a small suitcase of the kind sold in any cheap store, made of cardboard treated to look like leather. It was new.

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When his coffee arrived, he pulled a handful of loose change from his pocket: French and Belgian tokens, some tiny silver Dutch coins.

The waitress had to select the correct amount herself.

People paid less attention to a traveller sitting at the neighbouring table, a tall, heavy fellow, broad in the shoulders. He wore a thick black overcoat with a velvet collar and a celluloid protector cradled the knot of his necktie.

The first man kept anxiously watching the railway employees through the glass door, as if he feared missing a train.

The second man studied him, calmly, almost implacably, puffing on his pipe.

The nervous traveller left his seat for two minutes to go to the toilet. Without even leaning down, simply by moving a foot, the other man then drew the small suitcase towards him and replaced it with one exactly like it.

Thirty minutes later, the train left. The two men took seats in the same third-class compartment, but without speaking to each other.

At Leer, the other passengers left the train, which still continued along its way for the two remaining travellers.

At ten o'clock it pulled in beneath the monumental glass roof of Bremen Station, where the arc-lamps made everyone's face look deathly pale.

The first traveller must not have known a word of German, because he headed several times in the wrong direction, went into the first-class restaurant and managed only after much coming and going to find the third-class buffet, where he did not sit down. Pointing at some

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sausages in bread rolls, he gestured to explain that he wished to take them with him and once again paid by holding out a handful of coins.

Carrying his small suitcase, he wandered for more than half an hour through the wide streets near the station, as if he were looking for something.

And when the man with the velvet collar, who was following him patiently, saw him finally turn left and walk quickly into a poorer neighbourhood, he understood that the fellow had simply been seeking an inexpensive hotel.

The younger man's pace was slowing down, and he examined several such establishments suspiciously before choosing a seedy-looking one with a large white globe of frosted glass over the front door.

He was still carrying his suitcase in one hand and his little sausages in bread rolls wrapped in tissue paper in the other.

The street was bustling. Fog began to drift in, dimming the light from the shop windows.

The man with the heavy overcoat finally managed to obtain the room next to that of the first traveller.

A poor room, like all the other poor rooms in the world, except, perhaps, that poverty is nowhere more dispiriting than in northern Germany.

But there was a communicating door between the two rooms, a door with a keyhole.

The second man was thus able to witness the opening of the suitcase, which turned out to contain only old newspapers.

He saw the other fellow turn so white that it was painful to witness, saw him turn the suitcase over and over in

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his trembling hands, scattering the newspapers around the room.

The rolls and sausages sat on the table, still in their wrapping, but the young man, who had not eaten since four that afternoon, never even gave them a glance.

He rushed back to the station, losing his way, asking for directions ten times, blurting out over and over in such a strong accent that he could barely be understood: 'Bahnhof?'

He was so upset that, to make himself better understood, he imitated the sound of a train!

He reached the station. He wandered in the vast hall, spotted a pile of luggage somewhere and stole up to it like a thief to make sure that his suitcase wasn't there.

And he gave a start whenever someone went by with the same kind of suitcase.

The second man followed him everywhere, keeping a sombre eye on him.

Not until midnight, one following the other, did they return to the hotel.

The keyhole framed the scene: the young man collapsed in a chair, his head in his hands. When he stood up, he snapped his fingers as if both enraged and overcome by his fate.

And that was the end. He pulled a revolver from his pocket, opened his mouth as wide as he could and pressed the trigger.

A moment later there were ten people in the room, although Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, still in his overcoat with its velvet collar, was attempting to keep them out. *Polizei*, they kept saying, and *Mörder*.

The young man was even more pitiful dead than alive.

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The soles of his shoes had holes in them, and one leg of his trousers had been pushed up by his fall, revealing an incongruously red sock on a pale, hairy shin.

A policeman arrived and with a few imperious words sent the crowd out on to the landing, except for Maigret, who produced his detective chief inspector's badge of the Police Judiciaire in Paris.

The officer did not speak French. Maigret could venture only a few words of German.

Within ten minutes, a car pulled up outside the hotel, and some officials in civilian clothes rushed in.

Out on the landing, the onlookers now discussed the *Franzose* instead of the *Polizei* and watched the inspector with interest. As if snapping off a light, however, a few orders put an end to their excited speculation, and they returned to their rooms. Down in the street, a silent group of bystanders kept a respectful distance.

Inspector Maigret still clenched his pipe between his teeth, but it had gone out. And his fleshy face, which seemed punched out of dense clay by strong thumbs, bore an expression bordering on fear or disaster.

'I would like permission to conduct my own inquiry while you are conducting yours,' he announced. 'One thing is certain: this man committed suicide. He is a Frenchman.'

'You were following him?'

'It would take too long to explain. I would like your technicians to photograph him from all angles and with as much clarity of detail as possible.'

Commotion had given way to silence in the hotel room; only Maigret and two policemen were left.

One of the Germans, a fresh-faced young man with a

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shaved head, wore a morning coat and striped trousers. His official title was something like 'doctor of forensic science', and every now and then he wiped the lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles.

The other man, equally rosy but less formal in his attire, was rummaging around everywhere and making an effort to speak French.

They found nothing except a passport in the name of Louis Jeunet, mechanic, born in Aubervilliers. As for the revolver, it carried the mark of a firearms manufacturer in Herstal, Belgium.

That night, back at the headquarters of the Police Judiciaire on Quai des Orfèvres, no one would have pictured Maigret, silent and seemingly crushed by the turn of events, watching his German colleagues work, keeping out of the way of the photographers and forensic pathologists, waiting with stubborn concern, his pipe still out, for the pathetic harvest handed over to him at around three in the morning: the dead man's clothes, his passport and a dozen photos taken by magnesium flashlights to hallucinatory effect.

Maigret was not far from – indeed quite close to – thinking that he had just killed a man.

A man he didn't know! He knew nothing about him! There was no proof whatsoever that he was wanted by the law!

It had all begun the previous day in Brussels, in the most unexpected way. Maigret happened to have been sent there to confer with the Belgian police about some Italian refugees who had been expelled from France and whose activities were now cause for concern.

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An assignment that had seemed like a pleasure trip! The meetings had taken less time than anticipated, leaving the inspector a few hours to himself.

And simple curiosity had led him to step inside a small café in Rue Montagne aux Herbes Potagères.

It was ten in the morning; the café was practically deserted. While the jovial proprietor was talking his ear off in a friendly way, however, Maigret had noticed a customer at the far end of the room, where the light was dim, who was absorbed in a strange task.

The man was shabby and looked for all the world like one of the chronically unemployed found in every big city, always on the lookout for an opportunity.

Except that he was pulling thousand-franc notes from his pocket and counting them, after which he wrapped them in grey paper, tied the package with string and addressed it. At least thirty notes, 30,000 Belgian francs! Maigret had frowned at that, and when the unknown man left after paying for his coffee, the inspector had followed him to the nearest post office.

There he had managed to read the address over the man's shoulder, an address written in a handwriting much more sophisticated than a simple schoolboy scrawl:

Monsieur Louis Jeunet  
18, Rue de la Roquette, Paris

But what struck Maigret the most was the description:  
*Printed matter.*

Thirty thousand francs travelling as simple newsprint, as ordinary brochures – because the parcel hadn't even been sent via registered mail!

A postal clerk weighed it: 'Seventy centimes . . .'

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The sender paid and left. Maigret had noted down the name and address. He then followed his man and had been amused – for a moment – at the thought of making a present of him to the Belgian police. Later on he would go to find the chief commissioner of the Brussels police and casually remark, ‘Oh, by the way, while I was having a glass of your delicious gueuze beer, I spotted a crook . . . All you’ll have to do is pick him up at such-and-such a place . . .’

Maigret was feeling positively cheerful. A gentle play of autumn sunshine sent warm air wafting through the city.

At eleven o’clock, the unknown man spent thirty-two francs on a suitcase of imitation leather – perhaps even imitation canvas – in a shop in Rue Neuve. And Maigret, playing along, bought the same one, with no thought of what might come next.

At half past eleven, the man turned into a little alley and entered a hotel, the name of which Maigret couldn’t manage to see. The man shortly reappeared and at Gare du Nord took the train to Amsterdam.

This time, the inspector hesitated. Was his decision influenced, perhaps, by the feeling that he had already seen that face somewhere?

‘It probably isn’t anything important. But – what if it is?’

No urgent business awaited him in Paris. At the Dutch border, he had been intrigued by the way the man, with what was clearly practised skill, heaved his suitcase up on to the roof of the train before it stopped at the customs station.

‘We’ll see what happens when he gets off somewhere . . .’

Except that he did not stay in Amsterdam, where he

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