

Georges
Simenon

Copyrighted Material

A Man's Head



MODERN
CLASSICS

A Man's Head

'I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov'
— William Faulkner

'A truly wonderful writer . . . marvellously readable – lucid,
simple, absolutely in tune with the world he creates'
— Muriel Spark

'Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the
bleakness of human life'
— A. N. Wilson

'One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century . . .
Simenon was unequalled at making us look inside, though the
ability was masked by his brilliance at absorbing us obsessively
in his stories'
— *Guardian*

'A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part
of it'
— Peter Ackroyd

'The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in
literature'
— André Gide

'Superb . . . The most addictive of writers . . . A unique teller
of tales'
— *Observer*

'The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all
their disconcerting complexity'
— Anita Brookner

'A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined
a high literary reputation with popular appeal'
— P. D. James

'A supreme writer . . . Unforgettable vividness'
— *Independent*

'Compelling, remorseless, brilliant'
— John Gray

'Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century'
— John Banville

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'.

Copyrighted Material

GEORGES SIMENON

A Man's Head

Translated by DAVID COWARD



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Classics is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *La tête d'un homme* by Fayard 1931

This translation first published in Penguin Books 2014

Published in Penguin Classics 2025

001

Copyright © Georges Simenon Limited, 1931

Translation copyright © David Coward, 2014

GEORGES SIMENON and  © **Simenon.tn**®, all rights reserved

MAIGRET ® Georges Simenon Limited, all rights reserved



original design by Maria Picassó i Piquer

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the author and translator have been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.

Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

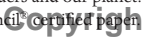
Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-39351-3

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council  certified paper



Contents

1. Cell 11, High Surveillance 1
2. The Sleeping Man 16
3. The Torn Newspaper 34
4. General Headquarters 45
5. The Man Who Liked Caviar 60
6. The Inn at Nandy 74
7. Little Man 86
8. A Man in the House 101
9. The Next Day 117
10. A Cupboard with a Surprise 133
11. Four Aces 146
12. The Fall 167

Copyrighted Material

1. *Cell 11, High Surveillance*

When a bell somewhere rang twice, the prisoner was sitting on his bunk with his two large hands clasped about his folded knees.

For the space of perhaps a minute he did not move, as if suspended in time; then with a sudden release of breath, he stretched his arms and legs and stood up in his cell, a huge man, ungainly, his head too big, his arms too long and his chest hollow.

His face was unreadable, expressing only numbness or perhaps a kind of inhuman indifference. Yet before he moved across to the door with the spyhole, now closed, he brandished a fist towards one of the walls.

On the other side of that wall was an identical cell, one of the cells on the Santé prison's High Surveillance wing.

In it, as in four other cells, was a convicted criminal waiting for either a stay of execution or the arrival of the solemn party of men who would come one night and wake him without saying a word.

Every day for five days, every hour, every minute, the other prisoner had groaned, at times in a low monotonous whimper, at others accompanied by screams, tears, howls of defiance.

Number 11 had never set eyes on him, knew nothing of

him. At most, judging by his voice, he could make a guess that his neighbour was young.

At this moment, the groaning was weary, mechanical, while in the eyes of the man who had just got to his feet there was a flash of hatred, and he clenched his large-knuckled fists.

From the corridor and passageways, from the exercise yards, from every part of the fortress that is the Santé prison, from the streets surrounding it, from Paris, no sound reached him.

Except for the moaning of the man in cell 10.

Number 11 pulled jerkily on his fingers, then froze twice before reaching out to put one hand on the door.

The cell light was on, as laid down in regulations for High Surveillance watch.

Normally, a guard was required to be on duty in the corridor, to open the doors of all five prisoners every hour.

Number 11's hands played around the lock with a gesture made solemn by a tremor of fear.

The door swung open. The guard's chair was there. No one was sitting on it.

The man began walking, very fast, bent double, his senses reeling. His face was dead white, and only the red-tinged lids of his greenish eyes had any colour.

Three times he stopped and went back the way he had come because he had taken a wrong turning and had come up against locked doors.

At the end of one corridor he heard voices. Guards were smoking and chatting in a duty room.

Finally he found himself in a yard, where the darkness

Copyrighted Material

was punctured at intervals by the round discs of lamps. A hundred metres ahead, in front of the outer gate, a sentry was walking to and fro.

To one side was a lighted window through which a man could be seen, pipe in mouth, bent over a desk littered with papers.

Number 11 wished he could have taken another look at the note he had found three days earlier stuck to the bottom of his dinner pail, but he had chewed and swallowed it following the instructions of whoever had sent it. For while, only an hour before, he had known what it said by heart, there were now parts of it which he could not remember exactly.

At 2 a.m., 15 October, your cell door will be left open and the guard will be busy elsewhere. If you follow the directions as marked below . . .

The man passed a burning hand over his forehead, stared in terror at the discs of light and almost cried out loud when he heard footsteps. But they came from the other side of the wall, from the street. Free people were talking out there, and their heels clacked on the pavement.

‘When I think they charge fifty francs a seat . . .’

It was a woman’s voice.

‘Yes, but they have expenses . . .’ came a man’s voice.

The prisoner felt his way along the wall, stopped because his foot had encountered a stone, listened, so whey-faced, cutting such an odd figure with those interminable arms which dangled loosely, that if this had been happening anywhere else people would just have assumed he was a drunk.

★

Copyrighted Material

The small knot of men was waiting less than fifty metres from the invisible prisoner, in a recess of the wall, near a door on which was written: *Bursar's Office*.

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret had chosen not to lean against the blackened brick wall. With his hands thrust into the pockets of his overcoat, he was standing so squarely on his strong legs, so absolutely still, that he gave the impression of lifeless bulk.

But at regular intervals there came the dragging sizzle of his pipe. His eyes were watchful, but he couldn't quite eradicate the apprehension in them.

A dozen times at least, he must have nudged the shoulder of Comélieu, the examining magistrate, who would not stay where he had been put.

Comélieu had come directly from a social engagement in evening dress, his thin moustache neatly trimmed and with more colour in his cheeks than usual.

Close to them, with a scowl on his face and the collar of his coat turned up, stood Monsieur Gassier, governor of the Santé, who was trying to distance himself from what was happening.

There was a slight chill in the air. The sentry by the gate stamped his feet, and his breath rose in the air like thin columns of steam.

The prisoner, who avoided areas that were lit, could not be seen. But however careful he was to make no noise, he could still be heard moving around, and the onlookers were able, after a fashion, to follow his every movement.

After ten minutes, the examining magistrate shuffled nearer to Maigret and opened his mouth to say something.

Copyrighted Material

But the inspector gripped his shoulder with such strength that the magistrate desisted, sighed and from a pocket mechanically took a cigarette, which was snatched from his hands.

All three had understood. Number 11 did not know the way and at any moment might stumble into a patrol.

And they could do nothing about it! They could hardly lead him by the hand to the place at the foot of the wall where the parcel of clothes had been left for him and where a knotted rope dangled.

At intervals a vehicle drove past in the street outside. Sometimes there were also people talking, and their voices echoed in a particular way in the prison yard.

All the three men could do was to exchange glances. The look in the governor's eyes was bad-tempered, sarcastic, fierce. Comélieau, the examining magistrate, was aware of his own growing anxiety, and the apprehension too.

Maigret alone did not flinch, his strength of will ensuring that he remained confident. But if he had been standing in a strong light, his brow would have been observed to glisten with sweat.

When the half-hour struck, the man was still dithering, all at sea. But one second later, the three watching men were all startled and felt the same shock.

They had not heard the release of breath, they had rather sensed it, they could feel the feverish haste of their man who had just stumbled over the parcel of clothes and seen the rope.

The footsteps of the sentry continued to mark the

Copyrighted Material

rhythm of passing time. The magistrate took his opportunity and hissed:

‘You’re sure he . . . ?’

Maigret turned such a look on him that he fell silent. The rope twitched. They made out a lighter stain against the dark wall: the face of number 11, who was using his powerful wrists to haul himself up.

It took an age. It took ten, twenty times longer than they had anticipated. And when he reached the top, it looked as if he had given up, because he had completely stopped moving.

They could make him out now, or at least his silhouette, lying flat on the top of the wall.

Was he paralysed by vertigo? Was he hesitating about dropping down into the road? Were there passers-by or a courting couple crouching in some recess who were stopping him?

Comélieau snapped his fingers impatiently. The governor muttered:

‘I don’t suppose you need me any more . . .’

The rope was hauled up so that it could be dropped down the other side. The man disappeared.

‘If I didn’t have such confidence in you, detective chief inspector, I swear I’d never have let myself be mixed up in anything like this. All the same, I still think Heurtin is guilty. And what if he manages to get away from you? What then?’

‘Will I see you tomorrow?’ was all that Maigret asked.

‘I’ll be in my office any time after ten.’

They shook hands without saying anything more. The

Copyrighted Material

governor held out a hand grudgingly and, as he left, muttered a few indistinct words.

Maigret remained close to the wall for a few moments longer and did not move off towards the gate until he had heard someone running off as fast as he could. He gave a wave to the guard on duty, looked up and down the empty street and walked along it and then into Rue Jean-Dolent.

‘Did he get away?’ he asked a dark figure which hugged the wall.

‘Headed towards Boulevard Arago. Dufour and Janvier are on his tail.’

‘You can go home now.’

Maigret, his mind elsewhere, shook the officer’s hand, moved off with his stolid tread, head down, lighting his pipe as he went.

It was four in the morning when he pushed open the door of his office on Quai des Orfèvres. With a sigh he took off his overcoat, swallowed half the contents of a glass of warm beer which had been left among his papers and sat heavily into his chair.

In front of him was a fat manila file on which a police clerk had written in a flowery hand: *Heurtin Case*.

He waited for three hours. The bare electric bulb was surrounded by a cloud of smoke, which stirred at the slightest movement of air. From time to time, Maigret got up to poke the stove then returned to his seat but not before removing first his jacket, then his collar and finally his waistcoat.

The phone was within easy reach, and at around seven

Copyrighted Material

o'clock he lifted the receiver just to make sure that they had not forgotten to give him an outside line.

The buff-coloured file was open. Reports, newspaper cuttings, witness-statements and photographs had spilled out on to the desk, and Maigret stared at them distantly, sometimes reaching for a document not so much to read it as to confirm a train of thought.

The whole collection was topped by a newspaper cutting with a forceful headline spread over two newspaper columns:

Joseph Heurtin, killer of Madame Henderson and her maid, sentenced to death this morning.

Maigret was smoking continuously, keeping an anxious eye on the telephone, which remained obstinately silent.

At ten past six, it rang, but it was a wrong number.

From where he sat, the inspector could read parts of various documents, though he now knew them by heart.

Joseph Jean-Marie Heurtin, 27, born Melun, a delivery man for Monsieur Gérardier, a florist in Rue de Sèvres . . .

The man's photograph was visible. It had been taken a year before in a fairground booth at Neuilly. A big man with unusually long arms, triangular-shaped head, washed-out complexion and clothes which denoted a vulgar dress sense.

Copyrighted Material

Brutal Killing at Saint-Cloud

Rich American stabbed to death along with her maid

It had happened in July.

Maigret pushed away the gruesome shots from Criminal Records: both corpses, seen from different angles, blood everywhere, faces convulsed, night clothes disordered, stained, torn . . .

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire has cleared up the Saint-Cloud tragedy. The murderer is behind bars.

He ruffled through the papers spread out in front of him and found the cutting, which was dated ten days earlier:

Joseph Heurtin, killer of Madame Henderson and her maid, sentenced to death this morning . . .

In the courtyard of the Préfecture, a police van was disembarking the previous night's haul, who were mostly women. The first footsteps of the day could be heard in the corridors, and the mist above the Seine was dispersing.

'That you, Dufour?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well?'

'Nothing . . . That is . . . If you want, I'll go down there myself . . . But for the moment, Janvier can manage on his own . . .'

Copyrighted Material

'Where is he?'

'At the Citanguette.'

'Say again, the what?'

'A bistro, not far from Issy-les-Moulineaux. I'll get a taxi and join you so I can put you in the picture.'

Maigret paced up and down, sent out an office junior to order coffee and croissants for him at the Brasserie Dauphine.

He had just begun to eat when Inspector Dufour, a small man neatly turned out in his grey suit and very high, very stiff detachable collar, came in with his usual air of mystery.

'First thing: what's this Citanguette?' growled Maigret. 'Sit down.'

'A bistro used by boatmen on the bank of the Seine between Grenelle and Issy-les-Moulineaux.'

'Did he make straight for it?'

'Not at all. And it was a miracle he didn't manage to give Janvier and me the slip.'

'Have you had breakfast?'

'Yes, at the Citanguette.'

'Very well, tell me what happened.'

'You saw him get away, didn't you? At first he ran as if he was scared of being recaptured. He didn't stop being jittery until he got to the Lion de Belfort. He halted and stared at it. He seemed bewildered.'

'Did he know he was being tailed?'

'Definitely not! He never turned round once.'

'And then?'

'I think a blind man, or somebody who'd never been

Copyrighted Material