

A photograph of a snowy street scene in front of a half-timbered building. A person wearing a dark coat and holding a bright red umbrella is walking across the snow-covered cobblestone street. The building features a large arched doorway on the right and several windows with wooden frames. Snow is falling heavily, creating a soft, white atmosphere. The text 'Georges Simenon' is written in a light teal color, and 'The Saint-Fiacre Affair' is written in white. The Penguin Classics logo and text are in the bottom left corner.

Georges
Simenon
The
Saint-Fiacre
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The Saint-Fiacre Affair

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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 Saint-Fiacre Affair

Translated by SHAUN WHITESIDE



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1. *The Little Cross-Eyed Girl*

A timid knock at the door; the sound of something being set down on the floor; a furtive voice:

‘It’s half past five! The first bell has just rung for mass . . .’

Maigret propped himself on his elbows, and as he looked in amazement at the skylight that pierced the sloping roof the voice continued:

‘Are you taking communion?’

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret was standing up now, barefoot on the freezing floor. He walked towards the door, held shut with a piece of string rolled around two nails. There was the sound of scurrying footsteps, and when he looked into the corridor he caught a glimpse of a woman in a camisole and a white skirt.

Then he picked up the jug of hot water that Marie Tatin had left him, closed his door and looked around for a mirror to shave in.

The candle only had a few minutes left to live. Outside the skylight it was still pitch dark, a cold night in early winter. A few dead leaves still clung to the branches of the poplars in the main square.

Because of the double slope of the ceiling, Maigret could only stand upright in the middle of the attic room. He was cold. All night a draught whose source he had not

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been able to identify had left him with a chill on the back of his neck.

But precisely that quality of cold unsettled him, plunging him into a mood that he thought was forgotten.

The first bell for mass . . . Chimes over the sleeping village . . . When he was a little boy, Maigret hadn't got up so early. He used to wait for the second chime, at a quarter to six, because in those days he didn't need to shave. Had he only washed his face?

No one brought any hot water in those days. Sometimes the water was frozen in the jug. A little while later his shoes would echo on the metalled road.

Now, as he got dressed, he heard Marie Tatin coming and going in the front of the inn, shaking the grate of the stove, clattering the dishes, turning the coffee mill.

He put on his jacket and his coat. Before going out he took from his briefcase a piece of paper with an official label attached:

Municipal Police of Moulins.

Issued for any eventuality to the Police Judiciaire, Paris.

Then a squared sheet. Meticulous handwriting:

I wish to inform you that a crime will be committed at the church of Saint-Fiacre during first mass on All Souls' Day.

The piece of paper had been hanging around the offices of the Quai des Orfèvres for several days. Maigret had noticed it by chance and been taken aback.

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‘Saint-Fiacre, near Matignon?’

‘Probably, because it reached us via Moulins.’

And Maigret had put the paper in his pocket. Saint-Fiacre! Matignon! Moulins! Words more familiar to him than any others.

Saint-Fiacre was the place of his birth, where his father had been estate manager of the chateau for thirty years! The last time he had gone there had been, in fact, after the death of his father, who had been buried in the little cemetery, behind the church.

A crime will be committed . . . during first mass . . .

Maigret had arrived the previous day. He had put up at the only inn, the one that belonged to Marie Tatin.

She hadn’t recognized him, but he had recognized her, from her eyes. The little cross-eyed girl, as she had been called back then. A skinny little girl who had become an even thinner old maid with an even worse squint, moving endlessly around in the front room, in the kitchen, in the farmyard where she raised rabbits and chickens.

The inspector went down the stairs. At the bottom, the inn was lit by paraffin lights. The table was laid in a corner. Some coarse grey bread. A smell of chicory coffee, boiling milk.

‘You’re wrong not to take communion on a day like today! Especially when you take the trouble to go to the first mass . . . Heavens! There’s the second peal!’

The bells rang out faintly. There was a sound of footsteps in the road. Marie Tatin fled to her kitchen to put on her black dress, her lace gloves, the little hat which refused to sit straight on her bun.

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'I'll let you finish eating. Will you lock the door behind you?'

'No need! I'm ready.'

How confused she was to find herself walking along the road with a man. A man who had come from Paris! She took tiny steps, leaning forwards in the cold morning. Dead leaves somersaulted on the ground. Their dry rustle suggested frost in the night.

Other shadows converged towards the faint light from the church door. The bells were still ringing. There were some lights in the windows of the single-storey houses: people hastily getting dressed for first mass.

And Maigret savoured the sensations of his youth again: the cold, stinging eyes, frozen fingertips, an aftertaste of coffee. Then, stepping inside the church, a blast of heat, soft light; the smell of candles and incense . . .

'Please excuse me. I've got my prie-dieu,' said his companion.

And Maigret recognized the black chair with the red velvet arm-rest, the one that had belonged to old Tatin, the cross-eyed girl's mother.

The rope that the bell-ringer had pulled a few moments before still quivered at the end of the church. The sacristan had just finished lighting the candles.

How many were they, in this ghostly gathering of bleary-eyed people? Fifteen at most. There were only three men: the sexton, the bell-ringer and Maigret.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

In Moulins, the police had assumed it was a bad joke

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and hadn't been concerned about it. In Paris, they'd been amazed when the inspector followed it up.

He heard a noise coming from the door to the right of the altar and could guess, second by second, what was going on: the sacristy, the tardy altar boy, the priest silently putting on his chasuble, placing his hands together in prayer, heading towards the nave, followed by the little boy tottering in his robe.

The little boy had red hair. He rang the bell. The murmur of liturgical prayers began.

. . . *during first mass* . . .

Maigret had looked at all the shadows, one by one. Five old women, three with their own reserved prie-dieu. A fat farmer's wife. Some younger village girls and a child . . .

The noise of a car, outside. The creak of a door. Small, light steps and a woman in mourning dress walking all the way across the church.

In the chancel there was a row reserved for the people from the chateau: hard pews of polished old wood. And it was there that the woman sat down, without a sound, followed by the eyes of the village women.

'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . .'

Maigret could still have given the response. He smiled at the thought that he had once preferred requiem masses to the others, because the prayers are shorter. He could remember masses lasting only sixteen minutes!

But already his eyes were fixed on the occupant of the gothic pew. He could barely see her profile. He didn't at first recognize the Countess of Saint-Fiacre.

'Dies irae, dies illa . . .'

But it was, it was her! The last time he had seen her she had been twenty-five or twenty-six. She was a tall, thin, melancholic woman, only ever seen from a distance in the grounds of the chateau.

And now she must have been at least sixty. She prayed ardently. Her face was emaciated, her hands too long, too refined, clutching a rosary.

Maigret had stayed in the back row of straw chairs, the ones that cost five centimes at high mass but are free at low mass.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

He stood up with the others for the first reading from the Gospel. Details crowded in from all directions, and memories flooded over him. He suddenly found himself thinking:

'On All Souls' Day, the same priest celebrates three masses . . .'

Back in his day, he had had lunch at the priest's house, between the second and the third. A boiled egg and goat's cheese!

The Moulins police were right after all. There could be no crime! The sacristan had taken his seat at the end of the pew, four seats away from the countess. The bell-ringer had walked flat-footedly away, like a theatre director who doesn't care to watch his play.

The only men left were Maigret and the priest, a young man with the passionate gaze of a mystic. He was in no hurry, unlike the old priest that the inspector had known. He didn't leave out half the verses.

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The stained-glass windows paled. Day was breaking outside. A cow lowed in a farm.

And soon everyone bowed their heads for the Elevation of the Host. The altar boy's shrill bell rang out.

Maigret was the only one not to take communion. All the women stepped towards the communion rail, hands clasped, faces closed. The hosts had a pale, almost unreal gleam as the priest held them momentarily in his hand.

The service continued. The countess held her face in her hands.

'Pater Noster . . . Et ne nos inducas in tentationem . . .'

The old lady parted her fingers, revealing her tormented face, and opened her missal.

Four minutes to go! The prayers. The last reading. And that would be it. And there would have been no crime!

Because the warning said: *first mass . . .*

The proof that it was over was the sexton rising to his feet and stepping inside the sacristy.

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre had put her head in her hands again. She didn't move. Most of the other old women were as motionless as she was.

'Ite missa est.' . . . *'The mass has been said.'*

It was only then that Maigret realized how anxious he had been. It had only now caught up with him. He gave an involuntary sigh. He couldn't wait for the end of the last reading and was looking forward to breathing the fresh outside air, seeing people moving about, talking about this and that.

The old women woke up all at the same time. Feet moved on the cold blue tiles of the church. First one

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village girl headed for the exit, then another. The sacristan appeared with a snuffer, and a thread of blue smoke replaced the candle-flames.

Day had broken. A grey light entered the nave along with the cold air.

There were still three people. Two. A chair moved. Then the only one left was the countess, and Maigret's nerves tightened with impatience.

The sacristan, who had finished his task, looked at Madame de Saint-Fiacre. A look of hesitation flickered across his face. At the same time the inspector stepped forwards.

They were both quite close to her, startled by her stillness, trying to see the face hidden by the clasped hands.

Worried, Maigret touched her shoulder. And the body tilted, as if nothing had been holding it upright, then rolled to the ground and lay there inert.

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre was dead.

They had carried the body to the sacristy and laid it on three chairs set side by side. The sacristan had run to fetch the village doctor.

And Maigret forgot how uncanny his presence was. He took a few minutes to understand the suspicious question in the priest's ardent gaze.

'Who are you?' he asked at last. 'What brings . . .'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire.'

He looked the priest in the face. He was a man of thirty-five, with features that were regular but so serious that they suggested the unshakeable faith of monks from another age.

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He was deeply troubled. His voice less firm, he murmured, 'You don't mean that? . . .'

They had not yet dared to undress the countess. They had put a mirror to her lips, to no avail. They had listened to her heart, which had stopped beating.

'I see no wounds,' was all Maigret said in reply.

And he looked around him at this setting, not a detail of which had changed in thirty years. The cruets were in the same place and the chasuble ready for the next mass, and the altar boy's cassock and surplice.

The gloomy daylight, entering through an ogive window, diluted the rays from an oil lamp.

It was hot and cold at once. The priest was clearly gripped by terrible thoughts.

'But you're not trying to say that . . .'

What a drama! At first Maigret didn't understand. But memories from his childhood rose up like bubbles.

A church where a crime has been committed has to be reconsecrated by the bishop . . .

How could there have been a crime? There had been no gunshot! No one had gone near the countess. Throughout the whole of the mass, Maigret hadn't taken his eyes off her.

And no blood had been spilled; there was no apparent wound!

'The second mass is at seven o'clock, isn't it?'

It was a relief to hear the heavy tread of the doctor, a red-faced chap who was struck by the atmosphere and who looked at the inspector and the priest in turn.

'Dead?' he asked.

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