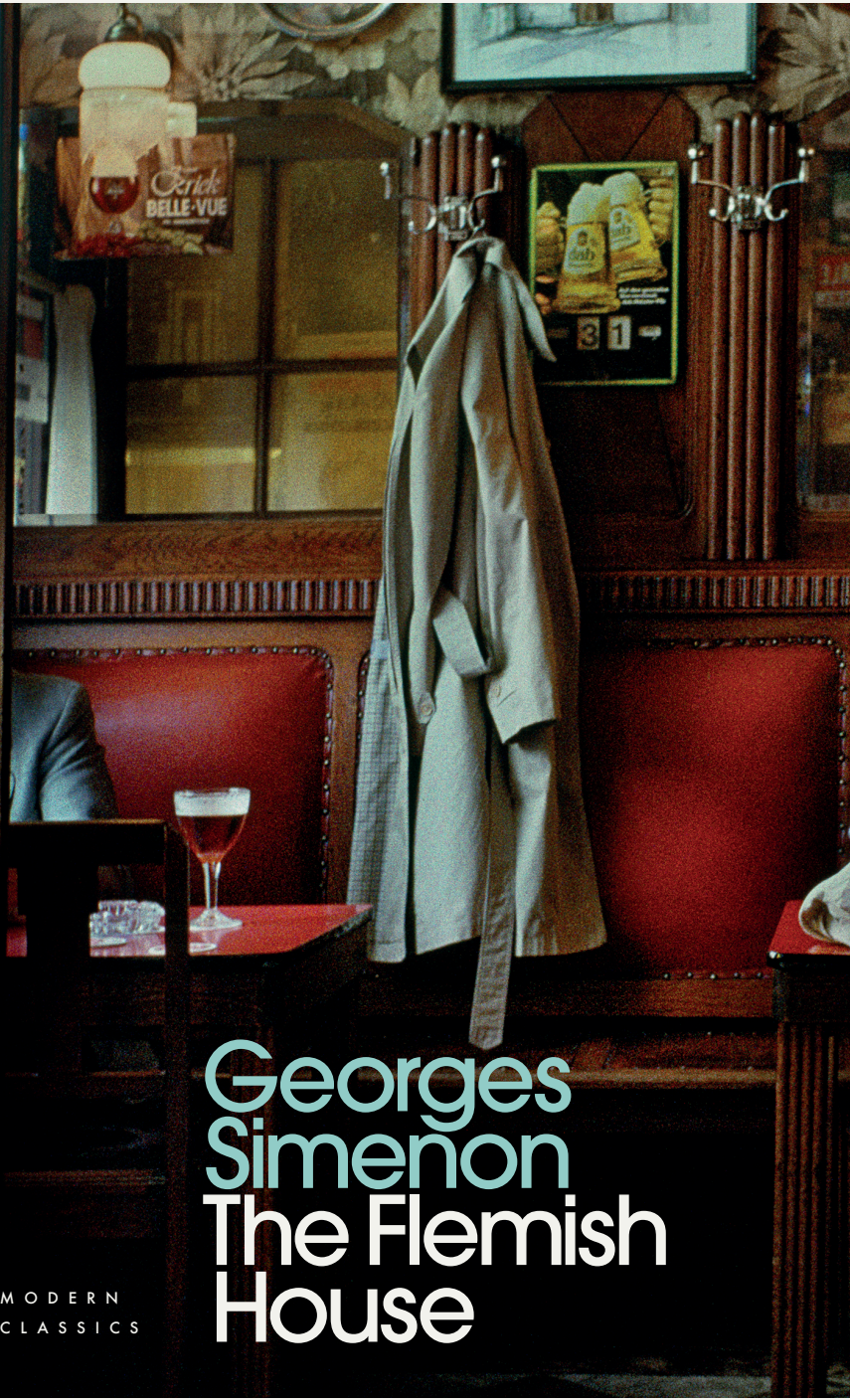


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Georges Simenon The Flemish House



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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 Flemish House

Translated by SHAUN WHITESIDE



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1. *Anna Peeters*

When Maigret got off the train at Givet station the first person he saw, right opposite his compartment, was Anna Peeters.

It was as if she had predicted that he would stop at this precise spot on the platform! She didn't seem either surprised or proud of the fact. She was just as he had seen her in Paris, as she must always have been, dressed in a gunmetal suit and black shoes, wearing a hat whose shape or even colour it was impossible to remember afterwards.

Here, in the wind that swept the platform, where only a few passengers were now walking, she looked taller, a little stouter. Her nose was red, and she was holding a handkerchief rolled up in a ball.

'I was sure you would come, inspector . . .'

Was she sure of herself, or sure of him? She didn't smile as she greeted him. She was already asking him questions:

'Do you have any other luggage?'

No! Maigret had only his bellows case, in coarse mellowed leather, and he carried it himself, in spite of its weight.

The only people to leave the train were third-class passengers, who had already disappeared. The girl held out her platform ticket to the ticket collector, who looked at her insistently.

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Outside, she went on without fuss:

‘At first I thought of getting a room ready for you at home. Then I thought it through. In the end I imagine it’s better for you to stay at a hotel. So I’ve booked the best room at the Hôtel de la Meuse.’

They had walked barely a hundred metres along the little streets of Givet, and already everyone was turning to look at them. Maigret walked heavily, dragging his suitcase along at his side. He tried to notice everything: the people, the houses, and particularly his companion.

‘What’s that noise?’ he asked her, hearing a sound that he couldn’t identify.

‘The Meuse in spate, slapping against the piers of the bridge. Boat transport has been suspended for three weeks now.’

Emerging from a sidestreet, they suddenly came upon the river. It was broad. Its banks were indistinct. In places the brown waters spread into the meadows. Elsewhere, a boathouse emerged from the water.

It held at least a hundred barges, tugs and dredgers, pressed tightly against one another, forming a huge block.

‘Here’s your hotel. It isn’t very cosy. Do you want to stop and take a bath?’

It was baffling! Maigret couldn’t define the sensation that he felt. Never, he was sure, had a woman ever aroused his curiosity as much as this one; she stayed calm and unsmiling, made no attempt to look pretty and sometimes dabbed her nose with her handkerchief.

She must have been between twenty-five and thirty. A lot taller than the average, she was solidly built,

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with a bone structure that stripped her features of all grace.

The clothes of a lower-middle-class woman, extremely sober. A calm, almost distinguished reserve.

She treated him like a guest. She was at home. She thought of everything.

‘I have no reason to take a bath.’

‘In that case, will you come straight to the house? Give your suitcase to the porter. Porter! Take this suitcase to room 3. The gentleman will be back shortly.’

And Maigret thought, as he looked at her from the corner of his eye: ‘I must look like an idiot!’

For there was nothing of the little boy about him. Even though she wasn’t exactly frail, he was twice as wide as she was, and his big overcoat made him look as if he was carved from stone.

‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘Not at all!’

‘In that case, I can already tell you the first few bits of information on the way . . .’

She had already given him the first bits of information in Paris! One fine day when he got to his office, he had found this strange woman who had been waiting for him for two or three hours, and whom the office boy had been unable to send away.

‘It’s personal!’ she had announced as he questioned her in front of two police inspectors.

And once they were alone she had handed him a letter. Maigret had recognized the handwriting of one of his wife’s cousins, who lived in Nancy.

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My dear Maigret,

Miss Anna Peeters has been recommended to me by my brother-in-law, who has known her for about ten years. She is a very responsible young woman, who will tell you of her misfortunes herself. Do what you can for her . . .

‘Do you live in Nancy?’

‘No, in Givet!’

‘But the letter . . .’

‘I went to Nancy on purpose, before coming to Paris. I knew my cousin knew someone important in the police force . . .’

She wasn’t an ordinary supplicant. She didn’t lower her eyes. There was nothing humble about her bearing. She spoke frankly, looking straight ahead, as if to claim what was rightfully hers.

‘If you don’t agree to look at our case, my parents and I will be lost, and it will be the most hateful miscarriage of justice . . .’

Maigret had taken some notes to sum up her account of things. Quite a muddled family history.

The Peeters family, who owned a grocer’s shop on the Belgian border . . . Three children: Anna, who helped them with the business, Maria, who was a teacher, and Joseph, a law student in Nancy . . .

Joseph had had a child by a young local girl . . . The child was three years old . . . But the girl had suddenly disappeared, and the Peeters family were accused of killing or kidnapping her.

Maigret didn’t have to get involved in any of that. A

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colleague in Nancy was on the case. He had sent him a telegram, and received his categorical reply:

Peeters family v guilty. Stop. Arrest imminent.

That had made his mind up. He arrived in Givet without a mission, without an official title. And, from the station he fell under the wing of Anna, whom he never grew tired of observing.

The current was violent. The flood formed noisy cascades by each pier of the bridge, and dragged whole trees along.

The wind, which swept through the Meuse valley, blew against the direction of the river, lifting the water to unexpected heights and creating real waves.

It was three in the afternoon. The first hints of night falling.

There were gusts of wind in the almost deserted streets. The few passersby walked quickly, and Anna wasn't the only one blowing her nose.

'See this alleyway on the left . . .'

Anna paused discreetly for a moment, pointing almost imperceptibly at the second house in the sidestreet. A poor-looking, single-storey house. There was already a light on – a paraffin lamp – at one window.

'That's where she lives!'

'Who?'

'Her! Germaine Piedboeuf . . . The girl who . . .'

'The one your brother had a child with?'

'If the child is his! It hasn't even been proved. Look!'

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In a doorway a couple could be seen: a hatless girl, probably a little factory worker, and the back of a man who was hugging her.

‘Is that her?’

‘No, because she’s disappeared . . . But she’s the same kind of girl . . . You understand? She made my brother believe . . .’

‘Doesn’t the child look like him?’

She replied crisply:

‘He looks like his mother. Come on! These people are always watching from behind their curtains . . .’

‘Does she have a family?’

‘Her father, who is a night watchman at the factory, and her brother Gérard . . .’

The little house, and particularly the window lit by the paraffin lamp, were now etched in the inspector’s memory.

‘Do you know Givet?’

‘I once passed through without stopping.’

An endless quay, very wide, with mooring posts every twenty metres for the barges. Some warehouses. A low building with a flag flying on it.

‘French customs . . . Our house is further away, near Belgian customs . . .’

The water was lapping so furiously that the barges were bumping against one another. Untethered horses were grazing the sparse grass.

‘You see that light? That’s where we live.’

A customs officer watched them passing without a word. In a group of sailors, someone started speaking Flemish.

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‘What are they saying?’

She hesitated to reply, and averted her head for the first time.

‘That we’ll never know the truth!’

And she walked more quickly, against the wind, her back bent to offer less resistance to the wind.

Now they were outside the town. This was the realm of the river, of boats, of customs, of charterers. Here and there an electric light was lit, in the middle of the wind. On a barge, washing flapping on a line. Children playing in the mud.

‘Your colleague came to our house again and told us on behalf of the examining magistrate that we were to place ourselves at the disposal of the forces of law and order . . . It’s the fourth time everything has been searched, even the water-tank . . .’

They were almost there. The Flemish house was becoming more clearly visible. It was a building of a considerable size, beside the river, in the place where the boats were most concentrated. There was no other house nearby. The only building in sight, a hundred metres away, was the Belgian customs house, flanked by a traffic light.

‘If you would care to come in . . .’

On the glass panes of the door there were transparent stickers advertising brass-cleaning creams. A bell rang.

And from the doorway, they were wrapped in warmth, an indefinable atmosphere, quiet and syrupy and dominated by smells. But what were the smells? There was a hint of cinnamon and a darker note of ground coffee.

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There was also a smell of paraffin, but with a whiff of genever.

An electric lightbulb, just one. Behind the dark-brown-painted wooden counter a white-haired woman in a black blouse was talking in Flemish to a barge woman. The latter was carrying a child in her arms.

‘Please come this way, inspector . . .’

Maigret had had time to see shelves filled with goods. He had particularly noticed, at the end of the counter, the part that had a zinc top, some bottles tipped with tin spouts, containing eau de vie.

He didn’t have time to stop. Another glass door, with a curtain. They passed through the kitchen. An old man was sitting in a wicker armchair, right against the stove.

‘This way . . .’

A colder corridor. Another door. And it was an unexpected room, half drawing room, half dining room, with a piano, a violin case, a carefully waxed parquet floor, comfortable furniture and reproductions of paintings on the walls.

‘Give me your coat.’

The table was laid: a tablecloth with a wide check, silver cutlery and fine china cups.

‘You’ll have something to drink, won’t you?’

Maigret’s coat was already in the corridor, and Anna came back in a white silk blouse that made her look even less girlish.

And yet she had a full figure. So why that lack of femininity? It was impossible to imagine her in love. Even harder to imagine a man in love with her.

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Everything was prepared in advance. She brought in a steaming coffee pot. She filled three cups. After disappearing again, she came back with a rice tart.

‘Sit down, inspector . . . My mother is on her way . . .’

‘Are you the pianist?’

‘Me and my sister . . . But she has less time than I do. She marks homework in the evening.’

‘And the violin?’

‘My brother . . .’

‘Isn’t he in Givet?’

‘He’ll be here shortly . . . I told him you were coming . . .’

She sliced the tart. She served her guest, without asking him whether he wanted anything. Madame Peeters came in, her hands folded over her stomach, and with a shy smile of welcome on her face, a smile full of melancholy and resignation.

‘Anna told me you’d agreed . . .’

She was more Flemish than her daughter and still had a slight accent. But she had very fine features, and her surprisingly white hair gave her a certain nobility. She sat down on the edge of her chair, like a woman who is used to being disturbed.

‘You must be hungry, after your journey . . . As for myself, I haven’t had an appetite since . . .’

Maigret thought of the old man who was still in the kitchen. Why didn’t he come and have some tart as well? At that very moment, Madame Peeters said to her daughter:

‘Bring your father a piece . . .’

And, to Maigret:

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