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Georges Simenon Cécile is Dead

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Cécile is Dead

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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

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Translated by ANTHEA BELL



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Cécile is Dead

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1.

The pipe that Detective Chief Inspector Maigret lit on coming out of his door in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir was even more delicious than usual. The first fog of the season was as pleasant a surprise as the first snow for children, especially when it was not that nasty yellowish fog you see on certain winter days, but a misty, milky vapour with halos of light in it. The air was fresh. The ends of your fingers and your nose tingled on a day like this, and the soles of your shoes clicked smartly on the road.

Hands in the pockets of his large velvet-collared overcoat, famous at Quai des Orfèvres and still smelling slightly of mothballs, his bowler hat well down on his head, Maigret made his way to the Police Judiciaire on foot, at his leisure, and was amused when a girl suddenly shot out of the fog at a run and collided with his dark, solid form.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, sir.’

And she set off just as fast to catch her bus or Métro train.

It seemed as if all of Paris was enjoying the fog that morning, just like Inspector Maigret, and only the tugboats on the Seine hoarsely announced their uneasiness.

A memory was to stick in his mind for no good reason: he had just crossed Place de la Bastille on his way to

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Boulevard Henri-IV. He was passing a little bistro. The door opened, because it was the first time this season that the chill in the air had made the cafés close their doors. In passing, Maigret walked through a gust of aromatic air that was, to him, the quintessence of the Parisian dawn: the smell of good white coffee, hot croissants and just a touch of rum. He guessed that behind the steamed-up windows ten, fifteen or twenty customers were sitting at the metal counter, enjoying their first meal of the day before hurrying off to work.

At nine o'clock precisely, he reached the vaulted entrance of the Police Judiciaire building and climbed the vast and ever-dusty staircase at the same time as several colleagues. As he reached the first floor he automatically glanced through the waiting-room windows and on recognizing Cécile, sitting on one of the chairs upholstered in green velour, he scowled.

Or rather, to be absolutely frank, he adopted a deliberately curmudgeonly expression.

'Hey, Maigret, there she is!'

The speaker was Cassieux, head of the Drug Squad, coming upstairs just after him. And the joke would go on, just as it always did when Cécile visited the office.

Maigret tried to get past without being seen. How long had she been there? She was capable of staying put for hours in the same place, motionless, her hands folded on top of her bag, her ridiculous green hat always tilted slightly sideways on her rather too carefully arranged hair.

Of course she spotted the inspector and sprang to her

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feet. Her mouth opened. She was inaudible because of the glazed partition, but she must be sighing, 'At last!'

Shoulders hunched, Maigret hurried to his office at the end of the corridor. The clerk came over to tell him . . .

'I know, I know,' growled Maigret. 'I don't have time at the moment.'

Because of the fog, he had to switch on the lamp with its green shade on his desk. He took off his overcoat, his hat, looked at the stove, thinking that if it was as chilly as this tomorrow he would ask to have it lit, and then, after rubbing his cold hands together, sat down heavily, with a growl of contentment, and took the telephone off the hook.

'Hello . . . is that the Vieux Normand café? . . . Will you get me Monsieur Janvier, please? . . . Hello, is that you, Janvier?'

Inspector Janvier would have been sitting in that little café-restaurant in Rue Saint-Antoine since seven in the morning, keeping watch on the Hôtel des Arcades.

'Any news?'

'They're all back in the nest, boss. The woman went out half an hour ago to buy bread, butter and a quarter kilo of ground coffee. She's just back.'

'Is Lucas in position?'

'I saw him at the window when I got here.'

'Right, Jourdan will be along to relieve you. Not too frozen, I hope?'

'A bit chilly. Not too bad.'

Maigret smiled, thinking of the change in Sergeant Lucas, who had transformed himself into a disabled old

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man four days ago. It was a case of keeping watch on the gang of Poles, five or six of them, who were staying in a squalid room in the squalid Hôtel des Arcades. There was no evidence against them, except that one of them, known as the Baron, had paid at the tote on Longchamp race-course with one of the banknotes stolen from the Vansittart farm.

The members of the gang moved around Paris with no obvious purpose, but they met in Rue de Birague, and the central figure there was a young woman; the police hadn't yet worked out whose mistress she was, or what exactly her role was in the gang.

At the window of an apartment opposite, muffled up in scarves, Lucas was keeping watch on them from morning to evening in his disguise.

Maigret rose to empty his pipe in the coal scuttle. He chose another from the desk, where he kept quite a collection, caught sight of the form that Cécile had filled in and was about to read what she had written, but at that moment a bell rang in the corridor and went on ringing.

The briefing! He snatched up the files he had ready and, along with all the other departmental heads, went to the office of the commissioner of the Police Judiciaire. This little ritual took place every morning. The commissioner had long white hair and a goatee beard like a musketeer's. Everyone shook hands.

'Did you see her?'

Maigret looked surprised.

'Who?'

'Cécile! Now if I was Madame Maigret . . .'

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Poor Cécile! And yet she was still young. Maigret had seen her papers: barely twenty-eight years old. But it would be difficult to look more like an old maid, to move less gracefully, no matter how hard she tried to be pleasing. Those black dresses that she must make for herself from bad paper patterns, that ridiculous green hat! It was impossible to perceive any feminine allure under all that. Her face was too pale, and she had a slight squint into the bargain.

‘She’s cross-eyed,’ claimed Inspector Cassieux.

He was exaggerating; she wasn’t exactly cross-eyed. It was just that her left eye didn’t look in quite the same direction as her right eye.

She would arrive at eight in the morning, already resigned to her fate. ‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, please.’

‘I don’t know if he’ll be in this morning. You could see Inspector Berger, who . . .’

‘No, thank you. I’ll wait.’

And wait she did, all day, without moving, without any sign of impatience, suddenly leaping up, as if she were a prey to emotion, when the inspector came upstairs.

‘I tell you, old friend, she’s in love with you.’

The officers stayed on their feet. They chatted about this and that at first, and then, almost imperceptibly, got down to work.

‘How’s the Pélican case going, Cassieux? Any news?’

‘I’ve called in the manager for ten o’clock. He’ll have to talk.’

‘Go carefully, will you? He has a parliamentary deputy

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protecting him, and I don't want a lot of fuss. What about your Poles, Maigret?'

'I'm still waiting. I'm planning to investigate their hide-out myself tonight. If there's nothing new tomorrow I'll try to have a heart-to-heart with the woman.'

A nasty bunch. Three crimes committed within six months, all at isolated farms in the north of the country. Coarse, brutal banditry, axe murders . . .

The fog was turning golden. Electric light wasn't necessary now. The commissioner of the Police Judiciaire drew a file towards him. 'If you have a moment this morning, Maigret . . . here's some research into family interests. A young man of nineteen, the son of a large industrialist, who . . .'

'Let me have a look.'

The briefing went on for half an hour, while the air in the room was filled with pipe and cigarette smoke, and was interrupted from time to time by phone calls.

'Yes, sir . . . certainly, minister.'

And there was a constant racket of police officers coming and going in the huge corridor, doors opening and closing, telephone conversations in the offices.

Maigret, his file under his arm, went back to his own office. He was thinking of the gang of Poles. Automatically, he put the file down on the form that Cécile had filled in. Almost as soon as he was sitting down, the clerk knocked on his door.

'It's about that girl . . .'

'Yes?'

'Are you going to see her?'

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‘In a little while.’

First he wanted to finish dealing with the case that the boss had handed him. He knew where to find the young man concerned; he had already had dealings with him.

‘Hello . . . get me the Hôtel Myosotis, Rue Blanche.’

It was a shabby hotel, where the young man and others like him met, took cocaine and made no secret of their habit.

‘Hello? Listen to me, Francis, I think you’re finally going to have to close that place of yours . . . What? Well, that’s just too bad . . . You’re going too far. If you want some good advice, send me young Duchemin right away. Or even better, bring him here yourself. I have a couple of things to say to him . . . Of course. He’s with you . . . And if he isn’t I’m sure you’ll manage to unearth him for me before midday . . . Yes, I’m counting on it.’

Someone was already calling him on another phone. An embarrassed examining magistrate.

‘Is that Detective Chief Inspector Maigret? It’s about Pénicaud, inspector. He claims that you intimidated him into confessing, he says you got him to undress in your office and then left him there for five hours completely naked . . .’

And there were still orders to be given to the junior inspectors waiting in the next-door office, hats tipped over their ears, cigarettes in their mouths. It was eleven before he remembered Cécile, and he pressed the electric bell.

‘Ask the girl to come in.’

The clerk returned alone a few moments later. ‘She’s left, inspector.’

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‘Oh.’

First he shrugged his shoulders. Then, sitting down again, he frowned. This wasn’t like Cécile, who had once spent seven hours in the waiting room without moving. He looked for her form among the papers littering his desk, and finally found it under young Duchemin’s file.

You simply must see me. A terrible thing happened last night.

CÉCILE PARDON

The clerk came back when he rang again.

‘Listen, Léopold,’ (the man’s name wasn’t Léopold, but his resemblance to the former king of the Belgians had earned him that nickname) ‘when did she leave?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I’ve been called into all the offices. Half an hour ago she was still there.’

‘Were there many people in the waiting room?’

‘Two to see the boss. A middle-aged man wanting to know about our legal warrants. And then . . . well, you know how it is in the morning, all that coming and going. I can only tell you that the young lady wasn’t there.’

Maigret felt a small and unpleasant sensation, a niggling anxiety, in his chest. He didn’t like it. They had made too much fun of poor Cécile.

‘If she should come back, you . . .’

No. He changed his mind and called one of his inspectors.

‘The proprietor of the Hôtel Myosotis will be here in a few minutes’ time with a young man called Duchemin. Get them to wait. If I’m not back by midday, keep the

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young man here and send the hotelier back to his own business.'

Once at Pont Saint-Michel, he almost hailed a taxi, which could be a sign. Just because it could be a sign he didn't do it and waited for a tram. He didn't want to ascribe too much importance to Cécile, which would be tantamount to admitting that . . .

The fog, instead of lifting, had come down more densely, although it wasn't so cold. Maigret smoked his pipe on the platform of the tram, with his head bobbing to the jerky movements and the intermittent braking of the vehicle.

When had Cécile first visited the Police Judiciaire? About six months ago. He had left his notebook on his desk, but he could check when he got back. She had asked immediately for Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. True, she could have seen his name in the newspapers. She was calm. Did she realize that the story she told sounded like the work of an over-fertile imagination?

She was trying to speak with composure, looking the inspector straight in the face, and she corrected the more extravagant passages of her story with a smile.

'I assure you, inspector, I'm not making anything up, and I'm not gullible either. I know where everything in the room ought to stand, since I do the housework myself. My aunt would never have a maid. The first time it happened I might have thought I was mistaken. But after that I paid careful attention. And yesterday I looked for certain marks. I've gone further than that. I stretched a thread across the front doorway . . . and not only had two chairs changed places, my thread was broken. So someone has

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been in our apartment. Someone has spent a certain amount of time in the sitting room, and in particular opened my aunt's desk, because I left a clue there as well. That's the third time in two months. These days my aunt can do almost nothing, no one has the key to the apartment, yet the lock hadn't been forced. I didn't want to talk to Aunt Juliette about it for fear of worrying her. However, I'm certain that nothing has gone. She'd have told me if it had, because she has a very suspicious nature.'

'So the fact is,' Maigret had summed up, 'you are saying that for the third time in two months some unknown person entered the apartment where you and your aunt live, that this person spent time in the sitting room and changed the position of the chairs . . .'

'And the blotting pad too,' she pointed out.

'Changed the position of the chairs and the blotting pad and searched your aunt's desk, which was locked but shows no signs of being forced . . .'

'And I should add that someone was smoking there that evening,' she persisted. 'My aunt doesn't smoke, nor do I, and no man called to see us yesterday. But the sitting room smelled of tobacco this morning.'

'I'll come and look . . .'

'Oh, that's what I'd like to avoid. My aunt isn't easy to deal with. She'd be cross with me, especially as I didn't tell her about it . . .'

'Then what do you expect the police to do?'

'I don't know . . . I trust you . . . maybe if you were to spend a few nights on the staircase outside . . .?'

Poor thing, imagining that a detective chief inspector

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of police had nothing better to do than spend the night in a stairway to check up on a girl's stories!

'I'll send you Lucas tonight.'

'You won't come yourself?'

No, for heaven's sake no! She was going too far. And her resentment – here Maigret's colleagues were right – was like that of a woman in love.

'You see, it might not be tonight. It could be in three, five, maybe ten days. How do I know? I'm afraid, inspector. The idea of a man . . .'

'Where do you live?'

'In Bourg-la-Reine, a kilometre from Porte d'Orléans, on the main road . . . just opposite the fifth tram stop. It's a big five-storey apartment building, brick, and there's a bicycle shop and a grocer's on the ground floor. We live on the fifth floor.'

Lucas had gone there and had asked the neighbours questions. When he came back he was sceptical.

'An old lady who hasn't been out of the place for months, and her niece who acts as her maidservant and looks after her in general.'

The local police were asked to keep an eye on the building, which was under surveillance for almost a month. No one ever saw anyone but the tenants going in and out of it by night.

And yet Cécile kept returning to Quai des Orfèvres.

'He's been back again, inspector. This time he left ink marks on the blotter. I'd changed the blotting paper yesterday evening.'

'And he didn't take anything away?'

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‘No, nothing.’

Maigret had been imprudent enough to tell the story to his colleagues, and the whole of Quai des Orfèvres was greatly amused.

‘Maigret has made a conquest.’

They went to take a look at the young lady with the squint through the glazed partition of the waiting room and then visited Maigret’s office.

‘Quick – there’s someone to see you!’

‘Who is it?’

‘Your love-sick admirer.’

Lucas had spent eight nights running lying in wait in the stairwell of the building and had neither seen nor heard anything.

‘It could be tomorrow,’ Cécile said.

It was left at that.

‘Cécile is here . . .’

Cécile was famous. Everyone called her Cécile. If a junior officer wanted to see Maigret, he was told, ‘Careful. There’s someone in there.’

‘Who is it?’

‘Cécile.’

Maigret changed to another tram at Porte d’Orléans and got off at the fifth stop. A building rose on the right, by itself, alone between two tracts of waste land; you might have thought you were on a thin slice of road, cut from a block of Neapolitan ice cream.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Cars were driving towards Arpajon and Orléans. Trucks were coming back from Les Halles. The door of the apartment building was wedged

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