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CLASSICS

Georges Simenon Maigret Enjoys Himself



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Maigret Enjoys Himself

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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

Maigret Enjoys Himself

Translated by DAVID WATSON



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1. *The Inspector at the Window*

The little old man with the wisp of a goatee beard was emerging from the shade of the warehouse again, walking backwards, looking left and right and gesturing with both hands as if he were actually drawing the heavy lorry he was directing towards him. His hands were indicating:

‘Right a bit . . . Stop . . . Now straight ahead . . . Gently does it . . . Left . . . Now . . . Brake . . .’

And the lorry, which was also reversing, lurched clumsily over the pavement and on to the street, where the little man was now signalling to the traffic to stop for a moment.

It was the third lorry in the last half-hour to pull out of that huge entrance with the sign on the front reading: ‘Catoire et Potut’, words which were very familiar to Maigret, as he had seen them every day for the last thirty years.

He was standing at the window of his apartment in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, tieless and in shirt-sleeves, puffing slowly on his pipe. Behind him his wife was starting to make the bed.

He wasn’t ill, so this scene was quite out of the ordinary, as it was ten o’clock in the morning and not even a Sunday.

Here at his window in the middle of the morning, vaguely observing the comings and goings in the street, the lorries driving in and out of the warehouse opposite, he had a feeling that reminded him of certain

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days in his childhood, when his mother was still alive and he was off school because he had the flu or it was the end of term. It was the feeling of finding out ‘what went on when he wasn’t there’.

It was now the third day – the second if you didn’t count Sunday – and a vague sense of unease continued to take the edge off his delight.

He was making all manner of discoveries: his interest was grabbed not only by the movements of the man with the beard who supervised the departure of the lorries, but also, among other things, by the number of customers going into the bistro next door.

It wasn’t the first time he had spent the whole day in his apartment, but on the previous occasions it was almost always because he had been ill, and so had been in bed or in his armchair.

On this occasion, he wasn’t ill. He simply had nothing to do. He could spend his day as he saw fit. He was learning the rhythms of his wife’s routine: how she set about her housework, what time she went into the kitchen or the bedroom and how she moved from one task to another.

He was suddenly reminded of his mother, the way she busied herself around the house while he, even back then, hung around at the window.

And, just like his mother, Madame Maigret said to him: ‘Shift to one side. I need to sweep under there.’

There was even the changing smell of cooking; today, the smell was of fricandeau à l’oseille.

Like a child, he had begun to pay attention again to the play of the light, the way the dividing line between sun

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and shade moved slowly across the pavement and the way certain objects became distorted in the shimmer of a hot summer's day.

There were seventeen more days of this to come.

This had all come about through a series of chance events and coincidences. It had begun in March, when he had suffered a bad bout of bronchitis. He had got out of bed too soon, as always, because the work was piling up at Quai des Orfèvres. He had had to take further sick leave, and for a while then it was feared he had contracted pleurisy.

The coming of fine weather had restored him to health, but he continued to feel worried, irritable, ill at ease. It was as if he had suddenly become an old man, and ill health, the real sort, which diminishes you for the rest of your days, was waiting just around the corner.

He hadn't said anything to his wife, and it got on his nerves when she would observe him out of the corner of her eye. One evening he had gone to see his friend Pardon, the doctor in Rue Picpus, with whom they usually had dinner once a month.

Pardon had given him a thorough check-up and had even, just to be sure, referred him to a heart specialist.

The medics had found nothing wrong, other than a slightly raised blood pressure, but they were unanimous in their advice:

'You should take a holiday.'

He hadn't had a proper holiday for three years. Every time he had been just about to leave something had cropped up that required his attention; on one occasion he had got as far as his sister-in-law's house in Alsace

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when, on the first day, he had received a frantic telephone call summoning him back to Paris.

'All right,' he had promised his friend Pardon, grumbling. 'This year I will take a holiday no matter what.'

In June he had settled on a date: 1 August. His wife had written to her sister. The latter, who lived in Colmar with her husband and children, owned a chalet on Col de la Schlucht, a pleasant and relaxing spot, which the Maigrets had often visited.

Alas, Charles, his brother-in-law, had just acquired his new car and had decided to take his family on holiday to Italy.

How many evenings had he and Madame Maigret spent discussing where they might go? First, they had considered the Loire, where Maigret might do some fishing, then the Hôtel des Roches Noires in Les Sables-d'Olonne, where they had spent many a happy holiday. In the end they opted for Les Sables. Madame Maigret had written to the hotel in the last week of June and had received a reply saying that all the rooms were booked until 18 August.

Finally it was sheer chance that forced the inspector's hand. One Saturday evening in the middle of July, at around seven in the evening, he had been called to Gare de Lyon on some routine police matter. It had taken half an hour to get from Quai des Orfèvres to the station in one of the Police Judiciaire cars, so heavy was the traffic.

Eight extra trains had been laid on, and the crowd in the concourse, on the platforms, everywhere, laden with cases, trunks, various bundles, children, dogs and fishing rods, brought to mind an exodus.

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They were all heading for the countryside or the sea-side, where they would occupy the smallest hotels, the most humble inns, not to mention those who would pitch a tent as soon as they found a suitable empty spot.

It was a hot summer. Maigret had come home feeling exhausted, as if he himself had been cooped up in a night train.

‘What’s the matter?’ his wife had asked, ever on the alert since his spell of bronchitis.

‘I’m beginning to wonder if it is a good idea to go away on holiday.’

‘Have you forgotten what Pardon said?’

‘I haven’t forgotten.’

He was picturing with horror the packed hotels and boarding houses.

‘Wouldn’t we be better off spending our holiday in Paris?’

At first she had thought that he was joking.

‘We almost never go for walks together in Paris. At best we might manage a weekly excursion to one of the cinemas on the Boulevards. In August everyone will be away, and we’ll have the place to ourselves.’

‘And before we know it you’ll be dashing back to Quai des Orfèvres to deal with some work business or other.’

‘I swear I won’t.’

‘So you say.’

‘We can both go on an adventure, visit parts of Paris we’ve never set foot in, have lunch or dinner in quaint little restaurants . . .’

‘If they know you’re here, the Police Judiciaire will telephone you the first chance they get.’

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‘They won’t know I’m here. Nor will anyone else. I’ll mark us down as “away” with the telephone message service.’

He found the idea irresistible, and soon he got his wife on board. So the telephone in the dining room remained silent, another detail it was hard to get used to. On two occasions he had reached out for it before he remembered he wasn’t allowed to.

Officially he wasn’t in Paris. He was in Les Sables-d’Olonne. That was the address he had provided to the Police Judiciaire, and if any urgent message came in for him it would be forwarded to him there.

He had left Quai des Orfèvres on Saturday evening, and everyone was under the impression that he had set off for the beach. On Sunday they hadn’t emerged until the end of the afternoon, in order to have dinner at a brasserie on Place des Ternes, some distance from their apartment, as if to explore pastures new.

On Monday morning, around 10.30, Maigret had gone as far as Place de la République, while his wife was doing the housework, and had read the papers on an almost deserted café terrace. They had had lunch at La Villette, dined at home and gone to the cinema.

Neither of them knew what they would do today, Tuesday, other than eat their fricandeau at home and then set off on another adventure.

It took a while to get used to this rhythm of life, as it felt strange not to be at the mercy of other commitments and watching the clock all the time. He wasn’t bored. In truth, he was slightly ashamed of having nothing to do. Did his wife realize that?

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‘Are you going to get the papers?’

It had already become a habit. At 10.30 he would go to fetch the papers and probably read them on the same terrace on Place de la République. That amused him. Barely had he escaped his normal routine before he had created a new one.

He left the window, put on a tie and some shoes and looked for his hat.

‘You don’t need to be back before twelve thirty.’

Even for her he was no longer the real Maigret, now that he wasn’t going into Quai des Orfèvres, and once again he recalled his mother saying to him:

‘Go out and play for an hour, but make sure you’re back for lunch.’

Even the concierge gave him a look of surprise tinged with a hint of reproach. Should a big, strong man like him be wandering around with nothing to do?

A municipal water-cart passed slowly, and he watched, as if he had never seen such a thing before, the water sprinkling out through a multitude of holes and washing over the roadway.

At headquarters the windows would all be wide open over the view of the Seine. Half the offices were empty. Lucas was in Pau, visiting family, and would not be back until the 15th. Torrence, who had just bought a second-hand car, was touring Normandy and Brittany.

There was hardly any traffic, and very few taxis. Place de la République seemed as static as on a picture postcard, with only a coachload of tourists providing a bit of life.

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He stopped at a kiosk and bought all the morning papers he usually found on his desk and skimmed through before getting down to work.

Now he had time to read them properly; the day before he had even read some of the small ads.

He sat down on the same terrace, in the same place, ordered some beer, took off his hat and mopped his brow, as it was hot already, and unfolded the first of the papers.

The two largest headlines were about international events and a serious road accident that had claimed eight lives, when a coach had fallen into a ravine in the vicinity of Grenoble. Then his eye was caught by another headline in the right-hand corner of the page.

BODY FOUND IN A CUPBOARD

If his nostrils didn't exactly twitch, he nonetheless felt a certain quickening.

The Police Judiciaire are keeping their cards close to their chest about a macabre discovery made yesterday morning, Monday, in the apartment of a well-known doctor on Boulevard Haussmann.

The doctor in question is said to be currently on the Côte d'Azur with his wife and daughter.

When she arrived for work yesterday morning after spending Sunday with her family, the maid is said to have been struck by a strange smell. When she opened the cupboard from which the smell seemed to be emanating she discovered the body of a young woman.

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Contrary to normal practice, the Police Judiciaire are being very sparing with information, which suggests that they attach a particular importance to this case.

Doctor J—, the aforementioned, has been called back to Paris urgently, and another doctor, who has been acting as his locum while he has been on holiday, appears to be involved.

We hope to be able to provide more details on this strange story tomorrow.

Maigret unfolded the two other morning papers he had bought.

One had not picked up on the story. The other, a little late off the mark, summarized it in a few lines, albeit under a headline in bold:

A DEAD BODY AT THE DOCTOR'S

The Police Judiciaire have been investigating since yesterday a case that has the potential to be a new Petiot affair, with the difference that on this occasion there appear to be two doctors involved rather than just one. We understand that the body of a young woman has been found in the surgery of a well-known medical practitioner in Boulevard Haussmann. To date we have been unable to acquire any further details.

Maigret caught himself muttering: 'Idiot!'

It wasn't the journalists he was complaining about, but Janvier, who was in charge of the force for the first time.

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He had been waiting for this opportunity for ages, since on all of Maigret's previous holidays there had been a more senior inspector available to replace him.

This year, for nearly three weeks, he was the chief, and Maigret was barely out of the door when a major case had come up, if the scraps of information in the papers were anything to go by.

But Janvier had already made his first mistake: he had got on the wrong side of the newspaper reporters. Maigret himself had on occasion hidden things from them, but he was usually subtle about it and gave the impression that he was taking them into his confidence while in fact telling them nothing.

His first instinct was to go to the telephone booth to ring Janvier. He remembered just in time that he was officially in Les Sables-d'Olonne.

According to the papers, the body had been discovered the previous morning. The police had been immediately informed, as had the prosecutor's office. Normally the afternoon papers on Monday would have published the information.

Had someone high up intervened? Or had Janvier taken it upon himself to impose an embargo?

'A well-known doctor on Boulevard Haussmann . . .'
Maigret knew the area, and when he had first arrived in Paris it was probably that neighbourhood that had most impressed him, with its carriage gateways offering glimpses of former stables at the back of large courtyards, the dappled shade of its chestnut trees and the smart cars parked along the pavement.

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