Georges Simenon

Maigret in Court

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Maigret in Court

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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 ROS SCHWARTZ

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Maigret in Court

1.

How many times had he been here, two hundred? Three hundred? Even more? He had no wish to count or to remember every single case, even the most notorious, the ones that had gone down in the annals of legal history, because this was the most distasteful side of his profession.

But didn't most of his investigations end up in court, like today? He would have preferred not to know, or at least to remain at a remove from these last rites to which he had never become fully accustomed.

In his office at Quai des Orfèvres, the battles that generally ended in the small hours were a struggle between one man and another, on an equal footing so to speak.

A few corridors away, a few flights of stairs, and it was a different scenario, a different world, where words no longer had the same meaning – an abstract, monastic world that was both austere and absurd.

Along with the other witnesses, he had just left the dark-wood panelled courtroom where the glow from the electric globe lights dissolved into the greyness of a rainy afternoon. The elderly usher, who had been the same age for as long as Maigret had known him, showed them into a smaller room, like a schoolmaster leading his pupils, and gestured towards the benches screwed to the walls.

Most of the witnesses meekly sat down, obeying the instructions of the presiding judge, not saying a word, reluctant even to look at their companions.

They stared straight ahead, tense, withdrawn, keeping their secrets for the solemn moment later on when, alone in an intimidating courtroom, they would be cross-examined.

It was a little like the sacristy of a church. As a boy Maigret used to serve mass every morning at the village church and now he experienced the same anxiety as when he was waiting to follow the priest to the altar lit by flickering candle flames. He could hear the footsteps of the invisible worshippers taking their seats, the comings and goings of the sacristan.

In the same way, he was able to follow the ritual ceremony taking place on the other side of the door. He recognized the voice of Judge Bernerie, the most meticulous and pernickety of the magistrates, but perhaps also the most scrupulous and the most determined to root out the truth. Thin and sickly looking, with a dry cough and feverish eyes, he resembled a stained-glass-window image of a saint.

Then came the voice of Aillevard, who sat on the prosecution bench.

Lastly, footsteps could be heard, those of the court usher who, opening the door to the courtroom a fraction, called:

'Detective Chief Inspector Segré.'

Segré, who had not sat down, glanced over at Maigret and entered the courtroom in his overcoat, holding his

grey hat. The others gazed at him for a moment, thinking that soon it would be their turn and wondering anxiously how they would conduct themselves.

A patch of colourless sky was visible through the windows, which were so high up they had to be opened and closed with a cord, and the electric light sculpted the faces with their blank stares.

The room was warm, but it would have been inappropriate for Maigret to remove his overcoat. There were certain court rituals that were sacrosanct, and it made no difference that Maigret was a neighbour and had made his way to the court along the dusky corridors of the Palais de Justice: he kept his coat on and held his hat in his hands like all the others.

It was October. Maigret had only returned from his holiday two days earlier, to a Paris deluged by rain that felt as if it would never stop. He had gone home to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and then to his office, with an indefinable feeling, a sort of mixture of pleasure and sorrow.

Earlier, when the judge had asked him his age, he had replied:

'Fifty-three.'

Which meant that he would be forced to retire in two years' time, in accordance with the regulations.

He had often thought about stopping, and usually with joyful anticipation. But this time, coming back from holiday, retirement was no longer a vague or distant thought; it was a logical, inevitable and imminent reality.

During their three weeks in the Loire region, the future

had become concrete when the Maigrets had finally bought the house where they would spend their old age.

They had done so almost half-heartedly. As in previous years, they had stayed at a hotel in Meung-sur-Loire where they felt at home, and where the owners, the Fayets, treated them as part of the family.

Posters on the walls of the little town advertised the auction of a house on the edge of the countryside. He and Madame Maigret went to visit it. The property was very ancient and had a grey-walled garden. It reminded them of a presbytery.

They had been charmed by the blue-tiled corridors, the kitchen with its heavy beams, which was three steps below ground level and still had a pump in a corner; the sitting room smelled like the parlour of a convent and the leaded windows broke up the sun's rays, creating mysterious light patterns.

At the auction, the Maigrets, standing at the back of the room, had looked at each other questioningly and had both been surprised when Maigret raised his hand, while the local farmers turned around . . . 'Going . . . Going . . . Gone!'

For the first time in their lives, they were property owners and, the very next day, they brought in a plumber and a carpenter.

They had even spent the remaining days of their holiday visiting local antiques shops. They bought, among other things, a firewood box emblazoned with the coat of arms of Francis I. They put it in the hallway by the door of the sitting room, which had a stone hearth.

Maigret hadn't mentioned the house to Janvier or Lucas, or to anyone, almost as if he were ashamed to be planning for the future, as if it were a betrayal of Quai des Orfèvres.

The previous day, he'd had the impression that his office wasn't exactly the same and, this morning, in the witnesses' room, listening to the sounds from the courtroom, he was beginning to feel like an outsider.

In two years' time, he'd be fishing, and on winter afternoons he'd probably go and play cards with the locals in a corner of the café where he too was becoming a regular.

Judge Bernerie asked very precise questions to which the inspector from the 9th arrondissement gave equally precise replies.

The witnesses on the benches around Maigret had all passed through his office, some of them spending several hours there. Was it because these men and women were intimidated by their imposing surroundings that they appeared not to recognize him?

True, he would not be the one cross-examining them. They were no longer facing a man like themselves but an impersonal machine, and it wasn't even certain that they would understand the questions put to them.

The door opened a crack. It was his turn. Like his colleague from the 9th arrondissement, he held his hat in his hand as he made his way towards the semi-circular witness stand, looking straight ahead.

'Your surname, forenames, age and profession . . .'

'Maigret, Jules, fifty-three years old, divisional chief inspector of the Paris Police Judiciaire.'

'You are not related to the defendant or employed by him . . . Raise your right hand . . . Swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

'I swear.'

To his right, he saw the profiles of the jury, their faces pale in the gloom and, to his left, behind the lawyers in their black gowns, the defendant, flanked by two uniformed guards, his chin resting on his folded hands, staring at him intently.

The two of them had spent long hours face to face in the stiflingly hot office at Quai des Orfèvres, and they had broken off the interrogation to have a sandwich and a beer, chatting like old friends.

'Now look, Meurant . . .'

Perhaps Maigret had occasionally called him Gaston?

Here, there was an unsurmountable barrier between them, and Gaston Meurant's expression was as neutral as Maigret's.

Judge Bernerie and Maigret also knew one another, not only from having chatted in the corridors but because this was the thirtieth cross-examination to which the judge had subjected Maigret.

There was no hint of any of that. Each played his part as if they were strangers, the officiants of a ceremony as ancient and ritualistic as mass.

'Can you confirm that it was you, inspector, who wrote the investigation report on the case before the court?'

'Yes, your honour.'

'Face the gentlemen of the jury and tell them what you know.'

'On 28 February last, at around one o'clock, I was in my office at Quai des Orfèvres when I received a telephone call from the chief of the 9th arrondissement. He told me a murder had just been discovered in Rue Manuel, around the corner from Rue des Martyrs, and that he was on his way to the scene. A few moments later, I had a phone call from the public prosecutor's office instructing me to go there as well and to send experts from Criminal Records and forensics.'

Maigret heard coughs and, behind him, feet tapping the floor. It was the first case of the term and every seat was filled. There were probably spectators standing at the back, near the big door guarded by uniformed men.

Judge Bernerie belonged to that minority of magistrates who applied the Criminal Procedure Code to the letter. He was not content for the court merely to listen to a summary of the investigation but would comb through it in fine detail.

'Did you find the public prosecutor at the scene?'

'I arrived a few minutes before the deputy public prosecutor. Detective Chief Inspector Segré was there, accompanied by his secretary and two neighbourhood inspectors. No one had touched anything.'

'Tell us what your saw.'

'Rue Manuel is a quiet, middle-class street, with very little traffic, which runs into the bottom of Rue des Martyrs. Number 27a is an apartment building about halfway down. The concierge's lodge is not on the ground floor but on the mezzanine. The officer waiting for me showed me up to the second floor where I saw two doors that

opened on to the landing. The one on the right was ajar and on a little copper plate was the name "Madame Faverges".'

Maigret knew that, for Judge Bernerie, every little detail mattered and that he should omit nothing, otherwise he would be reprimanded.

'I noticed nothing untoward in the hallway, which was lit by a frosted-glass electric lamp.'

'One moment. Did the door show any signs of a break-in?'

'No. It was examined later by the experts and the lock was taken apart. It was established that none of the tools generally used for breaking and entering had been used.'

'Thank you. Continue.'

'The apartment comprises four rooms, as well as the hallway. Opposite it is a sitting room with glass doors hung with cream-coloured curtains. It was in that room, which has another glass door opening into the dining room, that I saw the two bodies.'

'Where were they exactly?'

'That of the woman, whom I later learned was called Léontine Faverges, was lying on the rug, her head turned towards the window. Her throat had been slit with an instrument which was no longer in the room, and on the rug was a pool of blood more than fifty centimetres in diameter. As for the body of the child . . .'

'That was young Cécile Perrin, aged four, who normally lived with Léontine Faverges, was it not?'

'Yes, your honour. Her body was curled up on a Louis XV settee, her face buried under the silk cushions. As the

neighbourhood doctor stated and Doctor Paul confirmed a little later, after being partially strangled, the child was suffocated with the cushions . . .'

A murmur rippled through the room, but the judge simply looked up and glared at the rows of spectators, and silence reigned once more.

'After the arrival of the prosecutor, did you and your colleagues stay in the apartment until the evening?'

'Yes, your honour.'

'Tell us what observations you made.'

Maigret only hesitated for a few seconds.

'I was immediately struck by the furniture and the décor. Léontine Faverges' ID documents state that she was unemployed. She lived on a small private income, taking care of Cécile Perrin, whose mother, a cabaret hostess, was unable to look after her.'

On entering the courtroom, he had spotted the child's mother, Juliette Perrin, sitting in the front row of the public gallery, because she was the person who had brought the civil proceedings. She had dyed auburn hair and wore a fur coat.

'Tell us exactly what struck you about the apartment.'

'An unusual attention to detail, a particular style that reminded me of certain apartments from the days before the prostitution laws. The sitting room, for example, was too muted, too soft, with its profusion of rugs and cushions and prints of romantic scenes on the walls. The lampshades were in pastel colours, as they were in the two bedrooms where there were more mirrors than is customary. I subsequently found out that in the past