

Georges Simenon The Cellars of the Majestic



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The Cellars of the Majestic

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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.

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 HOWARD CURTIS



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Contents

1. Prosper Donge's Tyre 3
2. Maigret Goes Cycling 18
3. Charlotte at the Pélican 34
4. Gigi and the Carnival 50
5. The Spittle on the Window 63
6. Charlotte's Letter 80
7. The Evening of 'What's He Saying?' 96
8. When Maigret Dozed Off 111
9. Monsieur Charles' Newspaper 130
10. Dinner at the Coupole 144
11. Gala Evening at the Police Judiciaire 156

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The Cellars of the Majestic

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1. Prosper Donge's Tyre

A car door slamming. That was always the first noise of the day. The engine still running outside. Charlotte was presumably shaking the driver's hand. Then the taxi drove away. Footsteps. The key in the lock and the click of a light switch.

A match was struck in the kitchen, and the gas stove made a *phffft* sound as it came on.

Slowly, like someone who has spent all night standing up, Charlotte climbed the overly new staircase. She came noiselessly into the bedroom. Another light switch. A bulb came on, with a pink handkerchief over it as a lampshade and wooden tassels at the four corners of the handkerchief.

Prosper Donge had not opened his eyes. Charlotte looked at herself in the wardrobe mirror as she undressed. When she got down to her girdle and brassiere, she sighed. She was as fat and pink as a Rubens, but she was obsessive about squeezing herself in. Once naked, she rubbed the flesh where there were marks.

She had an unpleasant way of getting into bed, kneeling on it first, which made the base tilt to one side.

'Your turn, Prosper!'

He got up. She quickly huddled into the warm hollow he had left behind, pulled the blankets up to her eyes and stopped moving.

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'Is it raining?' he asked as he flushed the toilet.

A vague grunt. It didn't matter. The water for shaving was ice cold. Trains could be heard passing.

Prosper Donge got dressed. From time to time, Charlotte sighed, because she couldn't get to sleep while the light was on. He had one hand already on the doorknob and was stretching his right arm towards the light switch when he heard a thick voice:

'Don't forget to go and pay the instalment for the wireless.'

On the kitchen stove, the coffee was hot, too hot. He drank it standing up. Then, like all those who make the same gestures at the same time every day, he wrapped a knitted scarf around his neck and put on his coat and cap.

Finally, he took his bicycle, which was in the passage, and pushed it outside.

Invariably, at that hour, he was greeted by a breath of cold, damp air, and there was wetness on the cobbles, even though it hadn't rained; the people asleep behind the closed shutters would probably know only a warm, sunny day.

The street, lined with detached houses and little gardens, sloped steeply downwards. Sometimes, between two trees, the lights of Paris could be glimpsed, as if at the bottom of a chasm.

It was no longer night, but it wasn't yet day. The air was mauve. The lights were coming on in a few windows, and Prosper Donge braked before he got to the level crossing, which was closed. He had to get across through the gates.

After the Pont de Saint-Cloud, he turned left. A tugboat

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followed by its string of barges was whistling furiously, asking for the lock gate to be opened.

The Bois de Boulogne . . . The lakes reflecting a paler sky, with swans waking up . . .

Just as he reached Porte Dauphine, the ground suddenly felt harder beneath Donge's wheels. He went a few more metres, then got off and had a look. His rear tyre was flat.

He looked at his watch. It was ten to six. He began walking quickly, pushing his bicycle, and there was a slight mist in front of his lips, while the heat of the effort burned his chest inside.

Avenue Foch . . . Closed shutters in all the mansions . . . A high-ranking officer, followed only by his orderly, was trotting along the bridle path . . .

Light behind the Arc de Triomphe . . . He was hurrying now . . . He felt really hot . . .

Just at the corner of the Champs-Élysées, a policeman in a cape, standing near the news stand, cried out:

'Flat tyre?'

He nodded. Three hundred metres to go. The Hotel Majestic, on the left, with all its shutters closed. The street-lamps were no longer giving out much light.

He turned into Rue de Berri, then Rue de Ponthieu. A little bar was open. Two buildings further on, a door that passers-by never noticed, the service entrance of the Majestic.

A man was just coming out. A suit could be glimpsed under his grey coat. He was bare-headed. He had slicked-back hair, and Prosper Donge assumed it was the dancer, Zebio.

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He could have glanced into the bar to make sure, but the thought never occurred to him. Still pushing his bicycle, he entered a long grey passage lit by a single light. He stopped by the clocking-on machine, turned the wheel, inserted the card into his number, 67, and as he did so glanced at the little clock on the machine, which showed ten past six. A click.

It was now an established fact that he had entered the Majestic at ten past six in the morning, ten minutes later than usual.

Such, at least, was the official statement of Prosper Donge, the head coffee maker for the luxury hotel on the Champs-Élysées.

As for what happened next, he claimed that he had continued to act as he did every morning.

At that hour, the vast basement areas with their complicated corridors, their multiple doors, their walls painted grey like the gangways of a freighter, were deserted. Through the glass partitions, all you could see, here and there, were the dim bulbs with their yellowish filaments which constituted the night lighting.

Everything had glass partitions, the kitchens on the left, then the bakery. Opposite, the room known as the couriers' room, where the higher-ranking staff ate, along with the guests' private domestics, their chambermaids and chauffeurs.

A bit further along, the dining room for the lower-grade staff, with its long white wooden tables and its benches like the kind you find in schools.

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Finally, dominating the basement like the bridge of a ship, a smaller glass cage, where the bookkeeper sat, the man whose job it was to check everything that came out of the kitchens.

As he opened the door to the coffee room, Prosper Donge had the impression that someone was climbing the narrow staircase that led to the upper floors, but paid no attention. That at least was what appeared subsequently in his statement.

Just as Charlotte had done on entering their suburban house, he now struck a match, and the gas made a *phfffft* sound under the smallest of the percolators, the one that came on first for the few guests who got up early.

Only once he had done that did he go into the locker room. This was quite a large room along one of the corridors. There were several wash-basins, a greyish mirror and, along the walls, tall, narrow metal lockers, each bearing a number.

With his key, he opened locker 67. He took off his coat, scarf and hat. He changed shoes: for his day's work he preferred elastic-sided shoes, which were softer. He put on a white jacket.

A few more minutes . . . At half past six, the basement areas started coming to life . . .

Up above, everything was asleep, apart from the night porter, who was waiting in the deserted lobby to be relieved.

The percolator hissed. Donge filled a cup with coffee and set off up the staircase, which was like one of those mysterious staircases you find backstage in theatres that lead to the most unexpected places.

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When he opened a narrow door, he found himself in the lobby cloakroom. Nobody would have guessed the door was there, covered as it was with a large mirror.

‘Coffee!’ he announced, placing the cup on the cloakroom counter. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Fine!’ the night porter grunted as he approached.

Donge went back downstairs. His three women, the Three Fat Ladies as they were known, had arrived. They were lower-class women, all three ugly, one of them old and bad-tempered. They were already washing cups and saucers in the sink, making a great clatter.

As for Donge, he did what he did every day, arranged the silver coffee pots in order of size: one cup, two cups, three cups . . . Then the little milk jugs . . . the teapots . . .

In the bookkeeper’s glass cage, he glimpsed Jean Ramuel, his hair dishevelled.

‘He must have slept here again!’ he observed.

For three or four nights now, the bookkeeper, Ramuel, had been sleeping at the hotel rather than going home, which was somewhere in Montparnasse.

As a rule, that was forbidden. At the very end of the corridor, near the door concealing the stairs to the lower basement, where the wines were kept, there was indeed a room with three or four beds. But theoretically they were reserved for those members of staff who needed a breather between busy periods.

Donge waved a brief hello to Ramuel, who responded with a similarly vague gesture.

Next, it was the turn of the head chef, huge and self-important, who had just returned from Les Halles with a

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lorry that parked in Rue de Ponthieu to be unloaded by his assistants.

By half past seven, at least thirty people were bustling about in the basements of the Majestic. Bells started ringing, the dumb waiters came down, stopped and went back up with trays, while Ramuel stuck white, blue and pink slips on the iron spikes lined up on his desk.

At that hour, the day porter, in his light-blue uniform, was just taking over the lobby and the mail clerk was sorting through the mail in his box room. It must be sunny in the Champs-Élysées but, in the basement, the only thing you were aware of was the rumbling of the buses making the glass partitions vibrate.

A few minutes after nine – at exactly 9.04, as they were able to establish – Prosper Donge left the coffee room and a few seconds later entered the locker room.

‘I’d left my handkerchief in my coat!’ he stated when he was questioned.

Be that as it may, he now found himself alone in the room with its hundred metal lockers. Did he open his own? Nobody was there to witness it. Did he get his handkerchief? It was possible.

There weren’t a hundred, but exactly ninety-two lockers, all numbered. The last five were empty.

Why did it occur to Prosper Donge to open locker 89, which, not belonging to anyone, wasn’t locked?

‘I did it without thinking . . .’ he asserted. ‘The door was ajar . . . I never imagined . . .’

What was in this locker was a body which must have been pushed into it in an upright position and had collapsed in

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on itself. It was the body of a woman of about thirty, very blonde – artificially blonde, in fact – wearing a thin black woollen dress.

Donge did not cry out. Looking quite pale, he approached Ramuel's glass cage and bent down to speak through the opening.

'Come and have a look . . .'

The bookkeeper followed him.

'Stay here . . . Don't let anyone get too close . . .'

Ramuel rushed upstairs, emerged in the lobby cloakroom and spotted the porter in conversation with a chauffeur.

'Has the manager arrived?'

The porter gestured with his chin towards the manager's office.

Standing by the revolving door, Maigret was on the point of knocking his pipe against his heel to empty it. Then he shrugged and put it back between his teeth. It was his first pipe of the morning, the best one.

'The manager's expecting you, sir . . .'

The lobby was not very busy yet. There was only an Englishman arguing with the mail clerk, and a young girl walking on her long grasshopper legs, carrying a hatbox, which she was presumably delivering.

Maigret walked into the manager's office. The manager shook his hand without a word and indicated an armchair. A green curtain concealed the glass door, but you just had to pull it slightly to see everything that was happening in the lobby.

'Cigar?'

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