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# Georges Simenon Maigret in New York

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## *Maigret in New York*

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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 in New York*

*Translated by* LINDA COVERDALE



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## 1.

The ship must have reached the Quarantine Landing at about four in the morning, and most of the passengers were asleep. Some had half-awakened at the loud rattling of the anchor, but in spite of their earlier intentions, very few of them had ventured up on deck to gaze at the lights of New York.

The final hours of the crossing had been the hardest. Even now, in the estuary, a few cable lengths from the Statue of Liberty, a strong swell heaved under the ship . . . It was raining. Or rather, drizzling: a cold dampness that fell all around, soaking everything, making the decks dark and slippery, glistening on the guard rails and metal bulkheads.

As for Maigret, just as the engines fell silent he had put his heavy overcoat on over his pyjamas and gone up on deck, where a few shadows strode this way and that, zig-zagging – now high overhead, now way lower down – as the ship pitched at anchor.

Smoking his pipe, he had looked at the lights and the other vessels awaiting the health and customs officials.

He had not seen Jean Maura. Passing his cabin and noticing light under the door, he had almost knocked, but why bother? He had returned to his own cabin to shave. He had swallowed – he would remember this, the way one remembers unimportant details – a mouthful of brandy

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straight from the bottle Madame Maigret had slipped into his suitcase.

What had happened next? He was fifty-six; this was his first crossing and he was amazed to find himself so lacking in curiosity, so unimpressed by the magnificent view.

The ship was coming to life. Stewards noisily dragged luggage along the corridors as one passenger after another rang for assistance.

When he was ready Maigret went back up on deck. The misty drizzle was turning milky, and the lights were growing dim in that pyramid of concrete Manhattan had set before him.

‘You’re not angry with me, are you, inspector?’

Maigret had not heard Maura come up to him. The young man was pale, but everyone out on deck that morning looked bleary-eyed and a little ashen.

‘Angry with you for what?’

‘You know . . . I was too nervous, on edge . . . So when those people asked me to have a drink with them . . .’

All the passengers had drunk too much. It was the final evening; the bar was about to close. The Americans in particular had wanted to enjoy their last chance at the French liqueurs.

Jean Maura, however, was barely nineteen. He had just been through a long period of intense emotional strain and had rapidly become intoxicated, unpleasantly so, growing maudlin and threatening by turns.

Maigret had finally put him to bed towards two in the morning. He’d had to drag him off by force to his cabin, where the boy rounded on him in protest.

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‘Just because you’re the famous Detective Chief Inspector Maigret doesn’t mean you can treat me like a child!’ he shouted furiously. ‘Only one man – you hear me? – only one man on earth has the right to order me around, and that’s my father . . .’

Now he was ashamed, feeling upset and queasy, and it fell to Maigret to buck him up, to clap a hearty hand on his shoulder.

‘I went through the same thing well before you did, young man.’

‘I behaved badly, I was unfair. You understand, I kept thinking about my father . . .’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m so glad to be seeing him again and to make sure that nothing has happened to him . . .’

Smoking his pipe in the fine drizzle, Maigret watched a grey boat heaving up and down on the swell draw skilfully alongside the gangway ladder. Officials seemed practically to leap aboard, then vanished into the captain’s quarters.

Men were opening the holds. The capstans were already revolving. More and more passengers were appearing on deck, and in spite of the poor light, a few of them insisted on taking photographs. Others were exchanging addresses, promising to write, to see one another again. Still others were in the ship’s lounges, filling out their customs declarations.

The customs men left, the grey boat pulled away, and two motor-boats arrived alongside with officials from the immigration, police and health departments. Meanwhile, breakfast was served in the dining room.

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At what point did Maigret lose track of Jean Maura? That is what he had the most trouble determining later on. He had gone to have a cup of coffee, had then handed out his tips. People he barely knew had shaken his hand. Next he had queued up in the first-class lounge, where a doctor had taken his pulse and checked his tongue while other officials examined his papers.

At one point, out on deck, there was a commotion. Maigret was told that journalists had just come aboard and were taking pictures of a European minister and a film star.

One little thing amused him. He heard a journalist who was going over the passenger list with the purser exclaim (or so he thought, for Maigret's knowledge of English dated back to his schoolboy days): 'Huh! That's the same name as the famous chief inspector of the Police Judiciaire.'

Where was Maura at that moment? Passengers leaning on their elbows at the rail contemplated the Statue of Liberty as the ship moved on, pulled by two tugs.

Small brown boats as crammed with people as subway cars kept passing close to the ship: commuters from Jersey City or Hoboken on their way to work.

'Would you come this way please, Monsieur Maigret?'

The steamer had tied up at the French Line pier, and the passengers were disembarking in single file, anxious to reclaim their luggage in the customs hall.

Where was Jean Maura? Maigret looked for him. Then his name was called again, and he had to disembark. He told himself that he would find the young man down on

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the pier with all their luggage, since they had the same initials.

There was no feeling of uneasiness in the air, no tension. Maigret felt leaden, tired out by a difficult crossing and by the impression that he had made a mistake in leaving his house in Meung-sur-Loire.

He felt so out of his element! In such moments, he easily turned peevish, and, as he hated crowds and formalities and had a hard time understanding English, his mood was souring rapidly.

Where was Maura? Now he had to search for his keys, for which he inevitably fumbled endlessly through all his pockets until they turned up in the place where they naturally had to be. Even with nothing to declare, he still had to unwrap all the little packages carefully tied up by Madame Maigret, who had never personally had to go through customs.

When it was all over, he caught sight of the purser.

‘You haven’t see young Maura, have you?’

‘He’s no longer on board, in any case . . . He isn’t here, either. You want me to find out?’

The place was like a train station, but more hectic, with porters banging suitcases into people’s legs. The two men looked everywhere for Maura.

‘He must have left, Monsieur Maigret. Someone probably came to get him, don’t you think?’

Whoever would have come to get him, since no one had been informed of his arrival?

Maigret was obliged to follow the porter who had carried off his luggage. He had no idea what the barman had

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handed him in the way of small change or what he should give as a tip. He was literally pushed into a yellow cab.

'Hotel St Regis,' he said four or five times before he could make himself understood.

It was perfectly idiotic. He should not have let himself be so affected by that boy. Because he was, after all, only a boy. As for Monsieur d'Hoquélus, Maigret was beginning to wonder if he was any more reliable than the young man.

It was raining. They were driving through a grimy neighbourhood with nauseatingly ugly buildings. Was this New York?

Ten days . . . No, it was precisely nine days earlier that Maigret had still been ensconced in his usual spot at the Café du Cheval Blanc, in Meung, where it was also raining, as it happens. It rains on the banks of the Loire just as well as in America. Maigret was playing cards. It was five in the afternoon.

Wasn't he a retired civil servant? Was he not fully enjoying his retirement and the house he had lovingly set up? A house of the kind he had longed for all his life, one of those country houses with the wonderful smell of ripening fruit, new-mown hay, beeswax, not to mention a simmering ragout, and God knows Madame Maigret knew her way around simmering a ragout!

Now and then, with an infuriating little smile, fools would ask him, 'You don't miss it too much, then, Maigret?'

Miss what? The echoing chilly corridors of the Police Judiciaire, the endless investigations, the days and nights spent chasing after some lowlife or other?

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So there! He was happy. He did not even read the crime reports or more sensational local news items in the newspapers. And whenever Lucas came to see him – Lucas who for fifteen years had been his favourite inspector – it was understood that there would be absolutely no shop talk.

Maigret is playing belote. He bids high-tierce in trump. Just then the waiter comes to tell him he is wanted on the telephone, and off he goes, cards in hand.

‘Maigret, is that you?’

His wife. For his wife has never been able to call him by anything but his family name.

‘There’s someone up from Paris here to see you . . .’

He goes home, of course. In front of his house is parked a well-polished vintage car with a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. Glancing inside, Maigret thinks he sees an old man with a plaid blanket around him.

He enters his house. As always in such circumstances, Madame Maigret awaits him by the door.

‘It’s a young man,’ she whispers. ‘I put him in the sitting room. There’s an elderly gentleman in the car, his father, perhaps. I wanted him to ask the man inside, but he said I shouldn’t bother . . .’

And that is how, stupidly, while cosily playing cards, one lets oneself be shipped off to America!

Always the same song and dance to begin with, the same nervousness, the clenched fists, the darting sidelong glances . . .

‘I’m familiar with most of your cases . . . I know you’re the only man who . . . and that . . .’ and blah blah blah.

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People always think their predicament is the most extraordinary drama in the world.

‘I’m just a young man . . . You’ll probably laugh at me . . .’

Convinced they will be laughed at, they all find their situation so singular that no one else will ever understand it.

‘My name is Jean Maura. I’m a law student. My father is John Maura.’

So what? You’d swear he thinks the whole universe should recognize that name.

‘John Maura, of New York.’

Puffing on his pipe, Maigret grunts.

‘His name is often in the papers. He’s a very wealthy man, well known in America. Forgive me for telling you this, but it’s necessary, so that you’ll understand . . .’

And he starts telling a complicated story. To a yawning Maigret, who couldn’t care less, who is still thinking about his card game and who automatically pours himself a glass of brandy. Madame Maigret can be heard moving around in the kitchen. The cat rubs against the inspector’s legs. Glimpsed through the curtains, the old man seems to be dozing in the back of the car.

‘My father and I, you see, we’re not like other fathers and sons. I’m all he has in the world. I’m all that counts. Busy though he is, he writes me a long letter every week. And every year, during the holidays, we spend two or three months together in Italy, Greece, Egypt, India . . . I’ve brought you his latest letters so that you’ll understand. They’re typewritten, but don’t assume from this that they

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were dictated. As a rule my father composes his personal letters on a small portable typewriter.'

*"My dear . . ."*

One might almost use such a tone with a beloved woman. The American papa worries about everything, about his son's health, his sleep, his outings, his moods, indeed even his dreams. He is delighted about the coming holidays: where shall the two of them go this year?

The tone is quite affectionate, both maternal and wheedling.

'I'd like to convince you that I'm not a high-strung boy who imagines things. For about six months, something serious has been going on, I'm sure of this, although I don't know what it is. I get the feeling that my father is afraid, that he's no longer the same, that he's aware of some danger.

'I should add that the way he lives has suddenly changed. For months now he has travelled constantly, from Mexico to California and on to Canada at such a hectic pace that I feel this is some sort of nightmare.

'I was sure you wouldn't believe me . . . I've underlined each passage in his letters where he writes of the future with a kind of implicit terror.

'You'll see that certain words crop up again and again, words he never used before.

*"If you should find yourself on your own . . ."*

*"If I were to be lost to you . . ."*

*"When you will be alone . . ."*

*"When I am no longer there . . ."*

'These words recur more and more frequently, as if they

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haunt him, yet I know my father has an iron constitution. I cabled his doctor for reassurance; I have his reply. He makes fun of me and assures me that, barring some accident, my father has a good thirty years ahead of him.

‘Do you understand?’

It’s what they all say: *Do you understand?*

‘I went to see my legal adviser, Monsieur d’Hoquéus, whom you doubtless know by reputation. He’s an old man, as you know, a man of experience. I showed him these latest letters . . . I saw that he was almost as worried as I was.

‘And yesterday he confided in me that my father had instructed him to carry out some inexplicable transactions.

‘Monsieur d’Hoquéus is my father’s agent in France, a man he relies on. He is the one who was authorized to give me all the money I might need. Well, recently my father has told him to make lifetime gifts of considerable sums to various people.

‘Not in order to disinherit me – believe me, on the contrary: according to signed but not notarized contracts, these sums will be handed over to me in the future.

‘Why, when I am his sole heir?

‘Because he is afraid, don’t you see, that his fortune may not be passed on to me in the proper manner.

‘I’ve brought Monsieur d’Hoquéus with me. He’s in the car. If you would like to speak to him . . .’

How could anyone not be impressed by the gravity of the old notary? And he says almost the same things as the young man.

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‘I am convinced,’ he begins, weighing his words, ‘that some important event has occurred in the life of Joachim Maura.’

‘Why do you call him Joachim?’

‘It is his real first name. In the United States, he adopted the more common name of John. And I, too, am certain that he feels he is in serious danger. When Jean admitted to me that he intended to go over there, I did not venture to dissuade him but I did advise him to go accompanied by a person of some experience . . .’

‘Why not yourself?’

‘Because of my age, first of all. And then for reasons which you will perhaps understand later on . . . I am confident that what is required in New York is a man familiar with police matters. I will add that my instructions have always been to give Jean Maura whatever money he might want and that in the present circumstances, I can only approve his desire to . . .’

The conversation had lasted for two hours, in hushed voices, and Monsieur d’Hoquéus had not been indifferent to the appeal of Maigret’s aged brandy. From time to time, the inspector had heard his wife come to listen at the door, not from curiosity, but to find out if she could finally set the table.

After the car had left, what was her amazement when Maigret, none too proud of having let himself be persuaded, had told her bluntly, ‘I’m leaving for America.’

‘What did you say?’

And now a yellow cab was taking him through unfamiliar streets made depressing by drizzle.

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Why had Jean Maura disappeared at the very moment when they reached New York? Was Maigret to believe that he had met someone or that, in his haste to see his father again, he had cavalierly left his companion in the lurch?

The streets were becoming more elegant. The cab stopped at a corner of what Maigret did not yet know was the famous Fifth Avenue, and a doorman hurried over to him.

A fresh quandary about paying the cab driver with this unfamiliar money. Then off to the lobby of the St Regis and the reception desk, where he finally found someone who spoke French.

‘I would like to see Mr John Maura.’

‘One moment, please . . .’

‘Can you tell me if his son has arrived?’

‘No one has asked for Mr Maura this morning.’

‘Is he in?’

Picking up the receiver, the clerk replied frostily, ‘I will ask his secretary.’

‘Hello . . . Mr MacGill? . . . This is the front desk . . . There is someone here asking to see Mr Maura . . . What was that? . . . I’ll ask him . . . Might I have your name, sir?’

‘Maigret.’

‘Hello . . . Mr Maigret . . . I see . . . Very well, sir.’

Hanging up, the clerk announced, ‘Mr MacGill asked me to tell you that Mr Maura sees people only by appointment. If you wish to write to him and give him your address, he will certainly send you his reply.’

‘Would you be kind enough to tell this Mr MacGill that

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