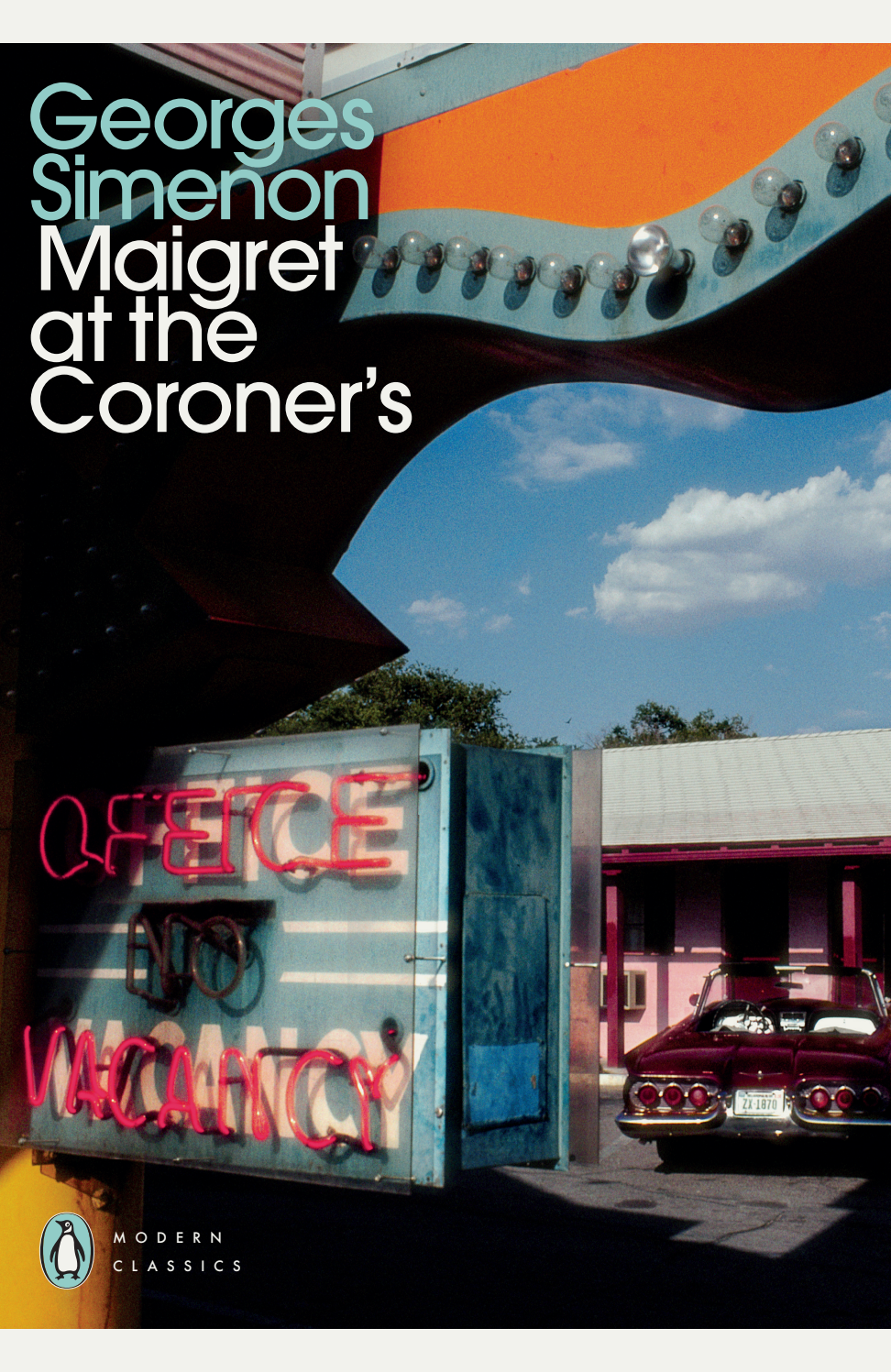


Georges Simenon Maigret at the Coroner's



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Maigret at the Coroner's

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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 at the Coroner's

Translated by LINDA COVERDALE



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1. *Maigret, Deputy Sheriff*

‘Hey, you!’

Maigret turned around, as if at school, to see who was being singled out.

‘Yes, you, over there . . .’

And the gaunt old man with the immense white moustache, who seemed sprung full-blown from the Bible, pointed with a trembling arm. At whom? Maigret looked at his neighbours: a man; a woman. Abashed, he finally realized that everyone – including the coroner, the Air Force sergeant on the witness stand, the jurors, the sheriffs, the attorney – was looking at him.

‘Me?’ he asked, apparently ready to stand up, astonished that they would have need of him.

All those faces were smiling, however, as if he were the only person not in on some joke.

‘Yes,’ intoned the old man, who looked like Ezekiel – and Clemenceau, too. ‘Put out your pipe and be quick about it!’

He couldn’t even remember lighting it. Embarrassed, he sat back down, mumbling apologies as his neighbours laughed in a friendly way.

It was not a dream. He was wide awake. It was he, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire, sitting there more than 10,000 kilometres from Paris,

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attending an inquest held by a coroner wearing neither jacket nor waistcoat yet looking as grave and well mannered as a bank clerk.

In truth, he was perfectly aware that his colleague, Agent Cole of the FBI, had delicately got rid of him, but Maigret could not manage to feel offended: he would have done the same in the other man's place. And hadn't he done just that two years earlier in France, when chaperoning his colleague Mr Pyke, of Scotland Yard, and had he not often left him on some café terrace, the way you deposit an umbrella in a cloakroom, and told him with a reassuring smile, 'I'll be back in just a moment . . .'

Except that the Americans were more welcoming. In New York as well as in the ten or eleven other states he had travelled through so far, everyone would clap him on the shoulder.

'What's your first name?'

He could hardly tell them he didn't have one! He had to admit that his name was Jules. The other man would mull that over for a moment.

'Oh! Yes . . . Julius!'

They pronounced it 'Joulious', which seemed to him already somewhat improved.

'Have a drink, Julius!'

And so all along his journey, in many a bar, he had downed innumerable beers and Manhattans and whiskies.

He had already been drinking that day, before lunch, with the mayor of Tucson and the county sheriff, to whom he had been introduced by Harry Cole.

What amazed him the most was not so much his

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surroundings or the people but himself, or, rather, the fact that he, Maigret, was here in a city in Arizona and that for the moment, for example, he was sitting on a bench in a small room presided over by a justice of the peace.

Although they had had drinks before lunch, iced water had been served with the meal itself. The mayor had been quite pleasant. As for the sheriff, he had handed him a little piece of paper and the handsome silver badge of a deputy sheriff, like the ones seen in cowboy films.

It was the eighth or ninth badge he had received that way: he was already a deputy in eight or nine counties in New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North or South Carolina (he could no longer remember which), Texas – and New Orleans.

He had often welcomed foreign colleagues in Paris, but this was the first time he had undertaken such a trip, a ‘study tour’ they called it officially, ‘to learn about American methods’.

‘You ought to spend a few days in Arizona, before you get to California. It’s on your way.’

It was always on his way. And that way they had him covering hundreds of miles. What these people referred to as a small detour took three or four days.

‘It’s just next door!’

That meant it was at least as far away as from Paris to Marseille, and sometimes he rolled along in a Pullman car for a whole day without seeing a real city.

Cole, the FBI agent, had taken charge of him in Arizona.

‘Tomorrow,’ he had said, ‘we’ll go take a look at the Mexican border. It’s right in the neighbourhood.’

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This time, that meant only about 100 kilometres away.

‘Nogales will interest you. It’s a border town, straddling both countries, and most of the marijuana passes through here.’

Maigret had learned that marijuana, a Mexican plant, was slowly making inroads on opium and cocaine with drug addicts.

‘Nogales is also the exit point for most of the cars stolen in California.’

In the meantime, though, Harry Cole had sidelined him. He must have had something else to do that afternoon.

‘It so happens there’s a coroner’s inquest today. Would you like to sit in on it?’

He had taken Maigret and parked him on one of the three benches in the little room with white walls. An American flag hung behind the justice of the peace, who doubled as a coroner. Without telling his French colleague that he would be leaving him on his own, Cole had gone off to shake some hands and pat a few shoulders.

Then he had passed by to say casually, ‘I’ll be back to get you later.’

Maigret knew nothing about the matter before the court. No one in the room was wearing a jacket. True, the temperature was around 45°C. The six jurors were sitting on the same bench as he was but at the other end, over by the door, and they included a black man, an Indian with a strong jaw, a Mexican who looked a bit like both of them, and a middle-aged woman wearing a flowered dress and a hat perched strangely forwards on her head.

Now and then Ezekiel would get up and try to adjust

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the huge ceiling fan, which made so much noise that it was hard to hear people's voices.

Things seemed to be toddling along nicely. In France, Maigret would have said '*à la papa*'. Up on a dais, the coroner was wearing an immaculate white shirt with a floral-patterned silk tie.

The witness, or the accused – Maigret wasn't exactly sure – was seated on a chair nearby. He was an Air Force sergeant, in a beige twill uniform. There were four more like him, lined up facing the jury, and they looked like overgrown schoolboys.

'Tell us what happened on the evening of July 27.'

The man addressed was Sergeant Ward, whose name Maigret had already heard mentioned. He was at least 1.85 metres tall, with blue eyes beneath thick black eyebrows that met above his nose.

'I went to pick up Bessie at her place at around seven thirty.'

'Louder. Turn towards the jury. Can you hear, jurors?'

They indicated that they could not. Sergeant Ward coughed to clear his throat.

'I went to pick up Bessie at her place at around seven thirty.'

Maigret had to listen with extra care, because he had had almost no occasion to speak English since his school-days. Words were escaping him, and he found some expressions baffling.

'You are married and have two children?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How long have you known Bessie Mitchell?'

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The sergeant sat thinking, like a good pupil preparing to answer a teacher's question. At one point, he glanced over at someone sitting next to Maigret, who had no idea yet who the man was.

'Six weeks.'

'Where did you first meet her?'

'In a drive-in place where she was a carhop.'

Maigret had become familiar with drive-ins. His official escorts would often stop, especially in the evenings, at small roadside eateries. They would stay in the car, and a young woman would come over to take their order, then bring them sandwiches, hot dogs or spaghetti on a window tray that hooked on to the outside of the car door.

'Did you have sexual relations with her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That same evening?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where did this happen?'

'In the car. We parked out in the desert.'

The desert, cacti and sand, began at the city limits. Patches of desert even survived among some neighbourhoods in Tuscon.

'Did you see her often after that evening?'

'About three times a week.'

'And each time you'd have relations with her?'

'No, sir.'

Maigret almost expected the punctilious little judge to ask, 'Why is that?'

But his question was, 'How many times, then?'

'Once a week.'

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And only Maigret smiled slightly at that.

‘Always out in the desert?’

‘Out there and at her place.’

‘She lived alone?’

Sergeant Ward searched among the faces of those sitting on the benches and pointed out a young woman sitting to Maigret’s left.

‘She lived with Erna Bolton.’

‘What did you do, on 27 July, after you picked up Bessie Mitchell at her place?’

‘I drove her to the Penguin Bar, where my friends were waiting for me.’

‘What friends?’

This time the sergeant pointed to the four other soldiers in Air Force uniforms, giving their names one by one.

‘Dan Mullins, Jimmy Van Fleet, O’Neil and Wo Lee.’

This last was a Chinese youth who looked barely sixteen.

‘Was there anyone else with you at the Penguin?’

‘No, sir. Not at our table.’

‘Were there people at another table?’

‘There was Bessie’s brother, Harold Mitchell.’

This was the man just to the right of Maigret. The inspector had already noticed a large boil below his neighbour’s ear.

‘Was he alone?’

‘No. With Erna Bolton, the musician and Maggie.’

‘How old was Bessie Mitchell?’

‘She’d told me she was twenty-three.’

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‘Did you know that she was really only seventeen years old and therefore too young to drink legally in a bar?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You’re sure her brother didn’t tell you that?’

‘He told me later, at the musician’s place, when she began drinking whisky straight from the bottle. He told me he didn’t want anyone giving his sister drinks, that she was a minor and that he was the one who had been made her guardian.’

‘Were you unaware that Bessie had been married and divorced?’

‘No, sir. I knew.’

‘Had you promised her to marry her?’

Sergeant Ward clearly hesitated.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You wanted to get a divorce to marry her?’

‘I had told her I would do that.’

In the doorway was a big deputy sheriff – a colleague! – wearing dull yellow cotton duck trousers, a shirt unbuttoned at the neck and a leather belt full of cartridges. An enormous horn-handled revolver hung over one buttock.

‘Did you all have drinks together?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you have a lot to drink? About how many glasses of beer?’

Ward closed his eyes for a moment to think about this.

‘I didn’t keep count. Judging from the rounds, maybe fifteen or twenty.’

‘Each?’

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Ward calmly replied, 'Yes, sir. And a few whiskies besides.'

The curious thing was, no one seemed particularly surprised.

'It was at the Penguin that you had an argument with Bessie's brother?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is it true that he reproached you for having relations with his sister, and you a married man?'

'No, sir.'

'He never reproached you for that? He didn't ask you to leave his sister alone?'

'No, sir.'

'Why were you arguing?'

'Because I wanted him to pay me the money he owed me.'

'Did he owe you a large amount?'

'About two dollars.'

Barely enough to cover one of those many rounds at the Penguin.

'Did you get into a fight?'

'No, sir. We went outside to settle the matter, then returned to the bar to have a drink together.'

'Were you drunk?'

'Not very, yet.'

'Did anything else happen at the Penguin?'

'No, sir.'

'In short, you were drinking. You drank until one in the morning, closing time at the bar.'

'Yes, sir.'

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‘Wasn’t one of your pals flirting with Bessie?’

‘Sergeant Mullins,’ Ward admitted, after a moment.

‘You spoke to him about it.’

‘No. I made sure he wouldn’t be next to her.’

His friend Mullins was as tall as he was, also dark-haired, a fellow whom girls must have thought good-looking and who vaguely resembled some film star, although it was hard to say which one.

‘What happened at one in the morning?’

‘We went to Tony’s place. Tony Lacour, the musician.’

The man must have been in the courtroom, but Maigret didn’t know what he looked like.

‘Who paid for the two bottles of whisky you took away with you?’

‘I think Wo Lee bought one of them.’

‘Had he been drinking with you throughout the evening?’

‘No, sir. Corporal Wo Lee does not drink or smoke. He insisted on paying for something.’

‘How many rooms are there in the musician’s apartment?’

‘. . . A bedroom . . . a small living room . . . a bathroom and a kitchen.’

‘What room were you and the others in?’

‘All of them, sir.’

‘In which room did you quarrel with Bessie?’

‘The kitchen. We weren’t quarrelling. I caught Bessie drinking whisky out of the bottle. It wasn’t the first time that had happened.’

‘You mean, not the first time that evening?’

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‘I mean that she’d done it other times before July 27. I didn’t want her drinking too much because afterwards she’d be sick.’

‘Bessie was alone in the kitchen?’

‘She was with him.’

He jerked his chin towards Sergeant Mullins.

And now Maigret, who had been sluggish and somnolent, Maigret, who knew nothing about this case, began opening his mouth at times as if a question were burning his lips.

‘Who suggested driving to Nogales to spend the rest of the night there?’

‘Bessie.’

‘What time was it?’

‘Around three in the morning. Maybe two thirty.’

Nogales was the border town where Harry Cole wanted to take Maigret. Tucson’s bars close at one a.m., but people can drink all night long on the other side of the fence.

‘Who got into your car?’

‘Bessie and my four pals.’

‘Bessie’s brother didn’t go with you? Or the musician, or Erna Bolton, or Maggie Wallach either?’

‘No, sir.’

‘You don’t know what they did?’

‘No, sir.’

‘When you set out, where were you all sitting in the car?’

‘Bessie was up front, between me driving and Sergeant Mullins. The other three were in the back seat.’

‘Didn’t you stop the car shortly before crossing the city limits?’

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‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you asked Bessie to sit elsewhere. Why?’

‘So she wouldn’t be next to Dan Mullins any more.’

‘You had her switch places with Corporal Van Fleet and sit in the back. It was fine with you that she’d be behind your back, in the dark, with the other two?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Suddenly, without any warning, the coroner announced brusquely, ‘Recess!’

He rose and headed towards the neighbouring office marked ‘private’ on the frosted-glass door. Ezekiel pulled an enormous pipe from his pocket and, as he lit it, he shot Maigret a funny little look.

Everyone left the courtroom: the jurors, the Air Force men, the women, the few curious spectators.

The room was on the first floor of a vast building in the Spanish Colonial style, with colonnades around a patio. The jail was in one wing, while the other housed the various administrative services of the county.

The five Air Force men went to sit on a bench by the colonnade, and Maigret noticed that they were not talking among themselves. It was extremely hot. In one corner of the arcade there was a red machine where people were dropping nickels into a slot to get a bottle of Coca-Cola.

Almost everyone was going there, including the grey-haired gentleman who must have been the district attorney. They were all drinking casually from the bottle, then putting the empties into a bottle crate.

Maigret felt a little like a boy at his first playtime in a

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