

# Georges Simenon Maigret and the Old Lady



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## *Maigret and the Old Lady*

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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 and the Old Lady*

*Translated by* ROS SCHWARTZ



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## 1. *The Lady of La Bicoque*

He alighted from the Paris–Le Havre train at the bleak little station of Bréauté-Beuzeville. He'd had to get up at five o'clock and, unable to find a taxi, had taken the first Métro to Gare Saint-Lazare. Now he was waiting for his connection.

'The train to Étretat, please?'

Although the time was past eight o'clock and it had been broad daylight for ages, it felt like dawn here because of the drizzle and the damp cold.

There was no restaurant in the station, no refreshment room, only a sort of tavern on the opposite side of the road, where the old carts belonging to the livestock traders were stationed.

'Étretat? You've got plenty of time. Your train's over there.'

The man pointed at the carriages without a locomotive waiting in a siding. They were old-style carriages, painted a green that was rarely seen nowadays. Behind the windows sat a few rigid passengers who looked as if they'd been waiting since the previous day. There was something unreal about the train. It was more like a toy, or a child's drawing.

A family – Parisians, of course! – ran towards the engineless train until they were out of breath, goodness knows

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why, picking their way over the rails, the three children carrying shrimping nets.

That was what triggered the memory. For a moment Maigret was ageless and, even though they were at least twenty kilometres from the sea, he had the impression he could smell the salty tang and hear the rhythmic pounding of the waves; he looked up and gazed with a certain awe at the grey clouds that must have drifted in from the sea.

Maigret had been born and spent his childhood far inland, and his image of the seaside had remained unchanged: shrimping nets, a toy train, men in flannel trousers, beach umbrellas, hawkers selling seashells and souvenirs, cafés serving white wine and oysters, and family boarding houses which all had the same smell, one that is peculiar to those family boarding houses where, after a few days, Madame Maigret felt so miserable doing nothing with her hands that she would gladly have offered to help with the washing-up.

He knew, of course, that it was illusory, but the image of a cheery, artificial world where nothing grim could ever happen resurfaced whenever he found himself close to the sea.

During the course of his career he had carried out several investigations on the coast and had seen some real tragedies. And yet, as he drank a Calvados at the bar of the tavern, he was tempted to smile once again at the thought of the old lady named Valentine and her stepson, Besson.

It was September, Wednesday 6 September, and as usual

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Maigret hadn't managed to take the time off to go on a summer holiday. At around eleven o'clock the previous day the old clerk had come into his office at Quai des Orfèvres and handed him a visiting card with a black border.

Madame Ferdinand Besson, widow

*La Bicoque*

Étretat

'Is she specifically asking to see me?'

'She insists on seeing you, even if it's only for a moment. She says she's come all the way from Étretat.'

'What's she like?'

'She's an old lady. A delightful old lady.'

The clerk showed her in and she was indeed the sweetest old lady imaginable, slender and petite, with a delicate pink face and immaculate white hair, so lively and so gracious that she seemed more like an actress playing an elderly marchioness than a real old lady.

'You probably have no idea who I am, detective chief inspector, which makes me all the more grateful to you for being so kind as to see me. I know about you from having read about your fascinating cases for many years. If you come to my home, as I hope you will, I can even show you countless newspaper cuttings.'

'Thank you very much.'

'My name is Valentine Besson, which doubtless means nothing to you, but it may ring a bell when I tell you that my husband, Ferdinand Besson, invented Juva beauty products.'

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Maigret was old enough to be familiar with the name Juva. As a boy he had seen it in newspaper advertisements and on billboards, and he thought he remembered his mother using Juva cream on special occasions when she put on her best clothes.

The elderly lady before him was dressed with studied elegance, slightly old-fashioned, and wore a large amount of jewellery.

‘Since my husband’s death five years ago, I’ve lived alone in a little house I own in Étretat. Or rather, until last Sunday evening I lived there alone with a maid who’d been with me for several years, a local girl. She died on Sunday night, inspector; she died instead of me in a way, and that is why I’ve come to request your help.’

She did not sound melodramatic. Her faint smile seemed to be apologizing for speaking of tragic things.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not mad. I am not even what people call a batty old woman. When I say that Rose – that was my maid’s name – died instead of me, I am almost certain I am not mistaken. May I briefly explain?’

‘Please do.’

‘For at least twenty years I have been in the habit of taking medication at night to help me sleep. It’s a fairly bitter medicine, and the taste is disguised by a strong aniseed flavour. I know what I’m talking about because my husband was a pharmacist.

‘Last Sunday, before retiring, I prepared my sleeping draught as usual and got into bed. Rose was with me when I wanted to drink it.

‘I took a sip and thought it tasted more bitter than usual.

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“I must have put in more than twelve drops, Rose. I shan’t have any more,” I said.

“Good night, Madame.”

‘She took away the glass. Did she try it out of curiosity? Did she finish off the entire glass? It’s likely, because the empty glass was found in her room.’

‘During the night, at around two o’clock in the morning, I was woken by the sound of groaning, because the house isn’t very big. I got up and bumped into my daughter, who had also got up.’

‘I thought you lived alone with your maid?’

‘Sunday was my birthday, the third of September, and my daughter, who was visiting from Paris, stayed the night.’

‘I don’t want to take up too much of your time, inspector. We found Rose lying in bed, dying. My daughter ran to fetch Doctor Jolly, but by the time he arrived Rose was dead, having suffered convulsions.’

‘The doctor had no hesitation in certifying that she had been poisoned with arsenic.’

‘Since she wasn’t the sort of girl to commit suicide, and since she’d eaten exactly the same food as us, it is fairly obvious that the poison was in the medicine that I was meant to take.’

‘Do you have any suspicions as to who might have attempted to kill you?’

‘Who on earth could I suspect? Doctor Jolly, who’s an old friend and who treated my husband, telephoned the police in Le Havre, and an inspector came straight away on Monday morning.’

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'Do you know his name?'

'Inspector Castaing. A dark-haired man with a ruddy complexion.'

'I know him. What did he say?'

'He didn't say anything. He questioned the local people. The body was taken to Le Havre for the autopsy.'

She was interrupted by the telephone ringing. Maigret picked it up. It was the head of the Police Judiciaire.

'Would you come and see me in my office for a moment, Maigret?'

'Right away?'

'If possible.'

He apologized to the elderly lady.

The chief was waiting for him.

'How would you like to spend a few days by the sea?' he asked.

Why did Maigret reply without thinking:

'In Étretat?'

'How do you know?'

'I don't. Tell me about it.'

'I've just received a telephone call from the minister's office. Do you know Charles Besson?'

'Is he also of Juva creams?'

'Not exactly. He's the son. Charles Besson lives in Fécamp and was elected deputy for the Lower Seine region two years ago.'

'And his mother lives in Étretat.'

'Not his mother, his stepmother. She's his father's second wife. What I'm telling you now, mind you, I've only just learned myself over the telephone. Charles

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Besson has spoken to the minister to request that you handle a case in Étretat, even though it's not your patch.'

'His stepmother's servant was poisoned on Sunday night.'

'Do you read the Normandy newspapers?'

'No. The old lady is in my office.'

'To ask you to go to Étretat as well?'

'Exactly. She made the journey especially, which suggests that she's unaware of her stepson's involvement.'

'What have you decided?'

'That depends on you, chief.'

That was why, shortly after half past eight on the following Wednesday at Bréauté-Beuzeville, Maigret finally boarded a train so small that it was hard to believe it was real. He leaned out of the window to catch a glimpse of the sea at the first opportunity.

As they approached the sky brightened and, when the train emerged from between the hills covered in pastureland, it was a pale blue wash with just a few light, fluffy clouds.

Maigret had telephoned the Le Havre Flying Squad the previous day to inform Inspector Castaing of his arrival, but there was no sign of him as he alighted. Women in summer frocks and bare-chested children waiting on the platform created a holiday mood. The stationmaster, who seemed to be scrutinizing the passengers anxiously, approached Maigret:

'Would you happen to be Monsieur Maigret by any chance?'

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'I would happen to be him, yes.'

'Then I have a message for you.'

He handed him an envelope. Castaing had written:

*My apologies for not being there to meet you. I am at Yport, at the funeral. I recommend the Hôtel des Anglais, where I hope to join you for lunch and put you in the picture.*

It was only ten o'clock and Maigret, who had brought just a light suitcase, made his way on foot to the hotel, which was close to the beach.

But before going in, and despite his suitcase, he went to look at the sea and at the white cliffs enclosing the pebble beach; there were boys and girls cavorting in the waves, and others playing tennis at the back of the hotel; mothers sat knitting in deck chairs while elderly couples shuffled across the sand.

For years, when he was a schoolboy, he had seen his friends come back from their holidays, tanned, with lots of stories to tell and their pockets full of shells. He had been earning his living for a long time before he too was able to gaze at the sea.

He was a little saddened by the realization that he no longer experienced that little thrill, watching with an indifferent eye the dazzling foam on the waves and the lifeguard with bare, tattooed arms in his boat, which was sometimes obscured from view by a huge wave.

The smell of the hotel was so familiar that he felt a pang and suddenly missed Madame Maigret, because it was always with her that he had inhaled that particular smell.

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‘Do you intend to stay long?’ asked the man behind the desk.

‘I have no idea.’

‘I’m asking because we shut on the 15th of September and today’s already the 6th.’

Everything would be closed and the town would look like an empty stage set – the souvenir shops and patisseries would be shuttered, and the deserted beach would be returned to the sea and to the gulls.

‘Do you know Madame Besson?’

‘Valentine? Of course I know her. She’s a local girl, she was born here. Her father was a fisherman. I didn’t know her as a child because I’m younger than her, but I can remember when she was an assistant at the Seuret sisters’ patisserie. One of the sisters died but the other one’s still alive. She’s ninety-two. Her house isn’t far from Valentine’s, actually; there’s a blue fence around the garden. Would you mind filling in your form?’

The manager – the owner perhaps? – read it and studied Maigret with more interest.

‘Are you the Maigret from the police? And you’ve come from Paris specially for this case?’

‘Inspector Castaing’s staying here, isn’t he?’

‘Well, since Monday he’s been eating most of his meals here, but he goes back to Le Havre every night.’

‘I’m expecting him.’

‘He’s at the funeral, in Yport.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you think someone really tried to poison Valentine?’

‘I haven’t had the time to form an opinion.’

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‘If they did, it can only have been one of the family.’

‘Do you mean her daughter?’

‘I don’t mean anyone in particular. I know nothing. There were a lot of them at La Bicoque last Sunday. And I can’t think who, around here, would have it in for Valentine. You have no idea how much good that woman did when she had money, when her husband was alive. She still does and, even though she’s not rich, she only thinks about giving to others. It’s an ugly business, believe me; Étretat has always been a quiet place. Our policy is to keep to a select clientele, chiefly families, preferably of a certain social class. I could tell you . . .’

Maigret preferred to go for a stroll through the sunny streets. Coming into Place de la Mairie, he saw a sign above a white shop front: ‘Pâtisserie Maurin, formerly Pâtisserie Seuret’.

He asked a delivery man the way to La Bicoque, and was shown a path that snaked gently down the hillside dotted with a few houses surrounded by gardens. He stopped at a distance from a house hidden among the greenery, where a wisp of smoke could be seen rising slowly from the chimney against the pale blue of the sky, and by the time he returned to the hotel, Inspector Castaing had arrived; his little black Simca was parked outside the entrance and he himself was waiting at the top of the steps.

‘Did you have a good journey, sir? I’m very sorry I wasn’t able to come and meet you at the station. I thought it would be a good idea to attend the funeral. If what I hear is true, that’s your method too.’

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‘How did it go?’

They set off along the seafront.

‘I don’t know. I feel like saying: rather badly. There was something unspoken in the air. The girl’s body had been brought from Le Havre this morning, and the parents were waiting at the station in a van that drove them to Yport. It’s the Trochu family. You’ll hear about them. There are lots of Trochus around here, nearly all of them fishermen. The father caught herring around Fécamp for years, as the two older boys still do. Rose was the eldest daughter. There are two or three others, one of them works in a café in Le Havre.’

Castaing had thick hair and a low forehead, and he pursued his idea as single-mindedly as he would have pushed a plough.

‘I’ve been based at Le Havre for six years now and got to know every corner of the region. In the villages, and especially around the chateaux, you still come across respectful, humble people who speak of “our master”. There are others who are tougher, suspicious, sometimes resentful, tetchy. I don’t know yet which category the Trochus come under, but this morning the atmosphere around Valentine Besson was distinctly cold, almost menacing.’

‘Earlier I was told she was well loved in Étretat.’

‘Yport isn’t Étretat. And young Rose, as she was called here, is dead.’

‘So the old lady was at the funeral?’

‘Yes, in the front pew. Some people call her the Chate-laine, possibly because she once had a chateau in the Orne, or in Sologne, I can’t recall. Have you met her?’

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‘She came to Paris to see me.’

‘She told me she was going to Paris, but I didn’t know that it was to see you. What do you make of her?’

‘Nothing for the time being.’

‘She was once colossally wealthy. For years she had her Paris mansion in Avenue d’Iéna, her chateau and her yacht, while La Bicoque was just a pied-à-terre.

‘She’d come here in a big chauffeur-driven limousine, and another car followed behind with the luggage. She caused a stir on Sundays when she attended mass, sitting in the front row (she still has her pew in the church), and she would hand out fistfuls of money. If someone was in need, people would say: “Go and see Valentine.”

‘Many still call her by her first name, especially the old folk.

‘This morning she arrived in Yport by taxi, alighting with all the airs and graces of her past grandeur. It was as if she were the one conducting the funeral. She brought a huge wreath, which completely dwarfed the others.

‘I may be mistaken, but I had the impression that the Trochus were annoyed and were giving her filthy looks. She insisted on shaking the hand of each member of the family and the father held his out reluctantly, refusing to look her in the eye. One of the sons, Henri, the eldest, quite simply turned his back on her.’

‘Did Madame Besson’s daughter accompany her?’

‘She went back to Paris on Monday on the afternoon train. I had no authority to stop her. You must already have realized that I’m out of my depth. But I do think we’ll need to question her again.’

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