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Georges Simenon Madame Maigret's Friend



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Madame Maigret's Friend

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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

Madame Maigret's Friend

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS



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Contents

1. The Young Woman in Square d'Anvers 1
2. The Problems of the Grand Turenne 21
3. The Hotel in Rue Lepic 42
4. Fernande's Adventure 62
5. Something to do with a Hat 82
6. The Vert-Galant Laundry Boat 101
7. Maigret's Sunday 120
8. The Family with the Toys 140
9. The Dieppe Photograph 160

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1. *The Young Woman in Square d'Anvers*

The chicken was on the stove, along with a fine red carrot, a big onion and a bunch of parsley, the ends sticking out of the pan. Madame Maigret leaned down and checked that the gas, which was on a very low flame, wasn't likely to go out. Then she closed the windows, except for the one in the bedroom, asked herself if she'd forgotten anything, glanced at herself in the mirror and, satisfied, left the apartment, locked the door behind her and put the key in her bag.

It was just after ten on a March morning. The air was crisp, with a sparkling sun over Paris. She could have walked to Place de la République and caught a bus to Boulevard Barbès, which would have got her to Place d'Anvers in plenty of time for her eleven o'clock appointment.

But because of the young woman, she walked down the steps into the Richard-Lenoir Métro station, which was very close to home, and made the whole journey underground, looking out with half an eye, whenever they pulled into a station, at the familiar posters on the cream-coloured walls.

Maigret had teased her about it, but not too much, because, for the past three weeks, he'd had a lot on his mind.

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‘Are you sure there isn’t a good dentist closer to home?’

Madame Maigret had never before had to have her teeth seen to. It was Madame Roblin, the lady with the dog who lived on the fourth floor of their apartment building, who had told her so much about Dr Floresco that she had decided to go and see him.

‘He has fingers like a pianist. You don’t even feel him working on your mouth. And if you tell him I sent you, he’ll only charge you half price.’

He was a Romanian, who had his surgery on the third floor of a building at the corner of Rue Turgot and Avenue Trudaine, just facing Square d’Anvers, the park in Place d’Anvers. Was this Madame Maigret’s seventh or eighth visit? The appointment was always for eleven o’clock. It had become a routine.

The first day, because of her obsessive fear of keeping people waiting, she’d arrived a good fifteen minutes ahead of time and had twiddled her thumbs in a room overheated by a gas stove. On her second visit, she’d also had to wait. Both times, she hadn’t been admitted to the surgery until a quarter past eleven.

When it came to her third appointment, because the sun was shining and the park opposite was alive with bird-song, she had decided to go and sit on a bench and wait until it was time for her to see the dentist. That was how she had made the acquaintance of the woman with the little boy.

By now, it had become so much a habit that she deliberately left home early and took the Métro in order to have more time.

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It was pleasant to look at the grass and the buds already half open on the branches of the few trees, which stood out against the wall of the secondary school. Sitting there on the bench in the sun, you could see the bustle of Boulevard Rochechouart, the green and white buses looking like big animals, the taxis weaving in and out.

The woman was there, just as on the other mornings, in her blue tailored suit and that little white hat that looked so fetching on her and was so springlike. She shifted on the bench to make room for Madame Maigret, who had brought a bar of chocolate and now held it out to the child.

‘Say thank you, Charles.’

He was two years old, and what was most striking about him were his big dark eyes, with huge lashes that made him look like a girl. At first, Madame Maigret had wondered if he was talking, if the syllables he uttered actually belonged to a language. Then she had realized, without daring to ask their nationality, that he and the woman were foreigners.

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ Madame Maigret said, ‘March is still the loveliest month in Paris, in spite of the showers. Some prefer May or June, but everything’s so fresh in March.’

From time to time she would turn to look at the dentist’s windows, because, from where she sat, she could just about see the head of the patient who usually went before her. He was a rather grumpy man in his fifties who was gradually having all his teeth extracted. She had made his acquaintance, too. He was originally from Dunkirk and lived locally with his married daughter, although he didn’t like his son-in-law.

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This morning, the little boy had a small red bucket and a spade and was playing with the gravel. He was always very clean, very well turned out.

‘I think I’m only going to need another two visits,’ Madame Maigret sighed. ‘Dr Floresco told me he’s going to start on the last tooth today.’

The woman smiled as she listened. She spoke excellent French, with a hint of an accent that made it all the more charming. At six or seven minutes to eleven, she was still smiling at the boy, who was quite surprised at the dust he had sent up into his own face, then all at once seemed to look at something in Avenue Trudaine, appeared to hesitate, then stood up and said quickly, ‘Would you mind keeping an eye on him for a minute? I’ll be right back.’

In the heat of the moment Madame Maigret wasn’t too surprised, although she hoped, thinking of her appointment, that the woman would come back in time. Tactfully, she didn’t turn to see where she was going.

The boy hadn’t noticed anything. He was squatting, still playing at filling his red bucket with pebbles, then overturning it and untiringly starting all over again.

Madame Maigret didn’t have the time on her. Her watch hadn’t been working for years, and she never thought of taking it to the watchmaker. An old man came and sat down on the bench. He must be a local, because she’d seen him before.

‘Would you be so kind as to tell me the time, monsieur?’

He couldn’t have had a watch either, because he simply replied, ‘About eleven.’

You couldn’t see anybody’s head now in the dentist’s

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window. Madame Maigret was starting to get worried. She felt ashamed of keeping Dr Floresco waiting: he was so gentle, so nice, and always so very patient.

She looked around the square, but there was no sign of the young lady in the white hat. Had she suddenly been taken ill? Or had she spotted someone she needed to talk to?

A policeman was crossing the park, and Madame Maigret stood up to ask him the time. It was indeed eleven o'clock.

The woman hadn't returned and the minutes were passing. The boy had looked up at the bench and seen that his mother wasn't there any more, but hadn't appeared to be worried.

If only Madame Maigret could let the dentist know! There was only the street to cross, and three floors to climb. She almost asked the old man in her turn to keep an eye on the boy, long enough for her to go and inform Dr Floresco, but she didn't dare, just stood there looking around her with growing impatience.

The second time she asked a passer-by for the time it was half past eleven. The old man had gone. She was the only person on the bench. She had seen the patient who came before her leave the building on the corner and set off in the direction of Rue Rochechouart.

What should she do? Had something happened to the woman? If she'd been run over by a car, a crowd would have gathered, people would have come running. Was the boy going to start panicking now?

It was a ridiculous situation. Maigret would tease her

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even more than before. She would telephone the dentist later to apologize. Would she dare tell him what had happened?

She felt hot suddenly, because her nervousness made her skin flush. 'What's your name?' she asked the boy.

But he simply looked at her with his dark eyes and said nothing.

'Do you know where you live?'

He wasn't listening to her. It had already occurred to Madame Maigret that he didn't understand French.

'Excuse me, monsieur. Could you tell me the time, please?'

'Twenty-two minutes to twelve, madame.'

The woman still had not returned. Nor was she there by midday, when factory sirens screamed in the neighbourhood and stonemasons invaded a nearby bar.

Dr Floresco left the building and got into a small black car, but Madame Maigret didn't dare leave the boy to go and apologize.

What worried her now was her chicken, which was still on the stove. Maigret had told her it was more than likely that he would be back for lunch at about one o'clock.

Should she inform the police? To do that, she would have to leave the park. If she took the child with her and his mother returned in the meantime, she would go mad with worry. Then God knows where would she run to, and where they would meet up again! But she couldn't just leave a two-year-old alone in the middle of the park, so close to where all the buses and cars were endlessly passing.

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‘Excuse me, monsieur, could you tell me what time it is?’

‘Half past twelve.’

The chicken must be starting to burn by now, and Maigret was on his way home. It would be the first time, in all these years of marriage, that he wouldn’t find her there.

Phoning him was impossible too, because she would have to leave the park and go to a bar. If only she could see the policeman who’d passed earlier, or another policeman, she’d say who she was and ask him to kindly telephone her husband. As if on purpose, there wasn’t a single policeman in sight. She looked in all directions, sat down, stood up again. She kept thinking she caught a glimpse of the white hat, but it was never the one she was waiting for.

She counted more than twenty white hats in half an hour, and four of them were worn by young women in blue tailored suits.

At eleven o’clock, while Madame Maigret was starting to get worried, forced to wait in the middle of a park looking after a child whose name she didn’t even know, Maigret was putting his hat on his head, leaving his office, saying a few words to Lucas and heading grouchy towards the little door that leads from the headquarters of the Police Judiciaire to the Palais de Justice.

It had become a routine, pretty much for the same period of time that Madame Maigret had been going to see the dentist in the 9th arrondissement. Maigret came to the corridor where the examining magistrates had their offices, and where there were always strange

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characters waiting on benches, some surrounded by two gendarmes, and knocked on the door that bore Judge Dossin's name.

'Come in.'

Judge Dossin was the tallest examining magistrate in Paris, and he always seemed embarrassed by his size, always seemed to be apologizing for having the aristocratic figure of a borzoi.

'Sit down, Maigret. Smoke your pipe. Did you read this morning's article?'

'I haven't seen the papers yet.'

The judge pushed one towards him. It had a big headline on the front page:

THE STEUVELS CASE

Maitre Philippe Liotard addresses
the League for Human Rights

'I had a long conversation with the prosecutor,' Dossin said. 'He's of the same opinion as myself. We couldn't release the bookbinder even if we wanted to, not while Liotard is still kicking up such a fuss.'

A few weeks earlier, that name had been more or less unknown at the Palais de Justice. Philippe Liotard, who was barely thirty, had never pleaded a major case. After five years as one of the secretaries of a famous lawyer, he was only just starting out on his own and was still living in an unglamorous bachelor apartment in Rue Bergère, next door to a brothel.

But now, since the Steuvels case had come to light, he

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was never out of the newspapers, was constantly giving interviews that caused a stir, issuing statements, even appearing in newsreels, with tousled hair and a sarcastic smile on his lips.

‘Anything new on your side?’

‘Nothing worth mentioning, your honour.’

‘Are you still hoping to track down the man who left the telegram?’

‘Torrence is in Concarneau. He’s smart.’

In the three weeks that it had been grabbing public attention, the Steuvels case had generated some interesting headlines, like the chapter headings of a serialized novel.

It had started with:

The cellar in Rue de Turenne

As luck would have it, this was an area that Maigret knew well, had even dreamed of living in, less than fifty metres from Place des Vosges.

Leaving the narrow Rue des Francs-Bourgeois at the corner of the square, and going up Rue de Turenne towards the République, the first thing you see on your left-hand side is a bistro, painted yellow, then a dairy, the Salmon dairy. Next door is a workshop with a low ceiling and a dusty front window on which you can read in faded letters: Master Bookbinder. In the shop after that, the widow Rancé sells umbrellas.

Between the workshop and the umbrella shop there is an arched carriage entrance with a concierge’s lodge and,

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at the far end of the courtyard, a former town-house, now swarming with offices and apartments.

A corpse in the stove?

What the public did not know, and the police had taken care not to tell the press, was that the case had come to light by pure chance. One morning, a dirty scrap of wrapping paper had been found in the letterbox of the Police Judiciaire on Quai des Orfèvres. It bore the words:

The bookbinder in Rue de Turenne has been
burning a body in his stove.

It wasn't signed, of course. The paper had ended up on Maigret's desk. Treating it with scepticism, he hadn't disturbed any of his older inspectors with it, but had sent young Lapointe, who was dying to make a name for himself.

Lapointe had discovered that there was indeed a bookbinder in Rue de Turenne. His name was Frans Steuvels, and he was a Belgian from Flanders who had been living in France for more than twenty-five years. Passing himself off as an employee of the sanitary department, Lapointe had inspected the premises and had come back with a detailed floor plan.

'Basically, sir, Steuvels works in the window. The workshop goes back a long way, and gets darker the further you get from the street. It's divided by a wooden partition, and Steuvels and his wife have their bedroom behind that.

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‘There’s a staircase leading down to the basement. That’s where the kitchen is, then a little room where the light has to be kept on all day long and which they use as a dining room, and finally a cellar.’

‘With a stove?’

‘Yes. An old model, which doesn’t seem to be in a particularly good state.’

‘In working order?’

‘It wasn’t on this morning.’

It was Sergeant Lucas who had gone back to Rue de Turenne for an official search at about five that afternoon. Fortunately, he had taken the precaution of taking a warrant with him, because the bookbinder had refused at first to let him search.

Lucas had come close to leaving empty-handed. Now that the case had become a nightmare for the Police Judiciaire, he was almost resented for having eventually found something after all.

Sifting through the ashes at the very bottom of the stove, he had come across two teeth, two human teeth, which he had immediately taken to the laboratory.

‘What kind of man is this bookbinder?’ Maigret had asked: at that moment he was still only dealing with the case from a distance.

‘He must be about forty-five. He has red hair, pock-marked skin and blue eyes. He’s very mild-mannered. His wife, who’s much younger than him, watches over him like a child.’

By now it was known that Fernande, who had become famous in her own right, had arrived in Paris as a domestic

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and had then spent several years as a streetwalker in the Boulevard de Sébastopol area.

She was thirty-six and had been living with Steuvels for ten years. Three years earlier, for no apparent reason, they had got married at the town hall of the 3rd arrondissement.

The laboratory had sent its report. The teeth were those of a man of about thirty, probably quite well-built, who must still have been alive a few days earlier.

Steuvels had been brought to Maigret's office, and the 'singing session' had begun. He had sat in the armchair with the green velvet upholstery, facing the window that looked out on the Seine. It had been raining heavily that evening. For the ten or twelve hours that the interrogation had lasted, rain could be heard beating against the windowpanes, and water gurgled in the gutter. Steuvels wore steel-rimmed glasses with thick lenses. His long hair was dishevelled and his tie was askew.

He was a cultivated, well-read man. He was calm, thought everything over carefully, and his fine gingery skin became easily inflamed.

'How do you explain the fact that human teeth were found in your stove?'

'I can't.'

'You haven't lost any teeth lately? Or your wife?'

'Neither of us. Mine are false.'

He had removed his dentures from his mouth, then put them back with a casual gesture.

'Can you tell me how you spent your time on the evenings of 16th, 17th and 18th February?'

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