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Georges Simenon Maigret at Picratt's

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Maigret at Picratt'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 Picratt's

Translated by WILLIAM HOBSON



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Penguin Random House UK

One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *Maigret au Picratt's* by Presses de la Cité 1951

This translation first published 2016

Published in Penguin Classics 2025

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Typeset in India by Thomson Digital Pvt Ltd, Noida, Delhi

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-24028-1

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Maigret at Picratt's

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1.

For Officer Jussiaume, whose beat took him to the same places at almost exactly the same time every night, these comings and goings were such a part of his routine that he registered them unconsciously, a little as people living next to a station register the arrivals and departures of trains.

It was sleeting, and Jussiaume had taken shelter for a moment in a doorway on the corner of Rue Fontaine and Rue Pigalle. Picratt's red sign was one of the few in the neighbourhood still to be on, its reflection leaving what looked like splashes of blood on the wet cobbles.

It was Monday, a slack day in Montmartre. Jussiaume could have told you the order in which most of the nightclubs had shut. He saw Picratt's neon sign go out in its turn, and the proprietor, short and stout, a beige raincoat over his dinner-jacket, came out on to the pavement to wind down the shutters with the crank.

A figure – a street urchin, it looked like – slid along the walls and went down Rue Pigalle towards Rue Blanche. Then two men, one of them with a saxophone case under his arm, headed up towards Place Clichy.

Almost immediately another man set off towards Carrefour Saint-Georges, his overcoat collar turned up.

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Officer Jussiaume didn't know their names, he barely knew their faces, but these figures, and hundreds of others, meant something to him.

He knew that a woman would come out next, wearing a light-coloured, very short fur coat, perched on exaggeratedly high heels, and break into a very fast walk as if she were afraid to find herself alone on the street at four in the morning. She only had a hundred metres to go to get to her apartment block. She had to ring the bell, because at that time of night the front door was locked.

Finally the last two women came out together, as they always did, walked to the corner of the street, talking in low voices, and went their separate ways a few metres from where he was standing. One of them, the older, taller one, strutted back up Rue Pigalle to Rue Lepic, where he had sometimes seen her go into her apartment block. The other hesitated, looked at him as if she wanted to talk to him, and then, instead of going down Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, as she should have, made for the café-tabac on the corner of Rue de Douai, which still had its lights on.

She had been drinking by the looks of it. She was bare-headed. He could see her golden hair gleam when she went under the streetlights. She walked slowly, stopping from time to time as if she were talking to herself.

'Coffee, Arlette?' the café owner asked familiarly.

'With a shot.'

The characteristic smell of rum heated by coffee immediately filled the air. Two or three men were drinking at the bar, but she didn't look at them.

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The owner said later that she had seemed very tired.

That was probably why she had a second coffee with a double shot of rum, and her hand fumbled a little as she took the coins out of her bag.

‘Good night.’

‘Good night.’

Officer Jussiaume saw her head back his way, and, as she came down the street, her gait was even less steady than when she had gone up. When she drew level with him, she noticed him in the shadows, turned to face him and said:

‘I want to make a statement at the station.’

‘Easily done. You know where it is.’

It was almost directly opposite, more or less behind Picratt’s, in Rue de La Rochefoucauld. From where they were standing, both of them could see the blue light and the police bicycles lined up against its wall.

He thought she wouldn’t go at first. But then he saw her crossing the road and entering the station.

It was 4.30 when she walked into the dimly lit office, which was empty except for Sergeant Simon and a young trainee officer.

‘I want to make a statement,’ she repeated.

‘I’m listening, sweetheart,’ replied Simon, who had been in the area for twenty years and knew its ins and outs.

She was wearing a lot of make-up, which had run a little, and a black satin dress under a faux mink coat. She staggered slightly and held on to the handrail dividing the police officers from the public area.

‘It’s about a crime.’

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‘There’s been a crime committed?’

A large electric clock hung on the wall, and she gazed at it as if the position of the hands held some significance.

‘I don’t know if it has been committed.’

‘Then it’s not a crime,’ the sergeant said, winking at his young colleague.

‘It’s probably been committed. I’m sure it’s been committed.’

‘Who told you?’

She seemed to be laboriously following her train of thought.

‘The two men, just now.’

‘Which men?’

‘Customers. I work at Picratt’s.’

‘I thought I’d seen you somewhere. You’re the one who gets her clothes off, aren’t you?’

The sergeant hadn’t seen Picratt’s floorshows, but he passed the club every morning and evening and had seen the large-format photograph in the window of the woman standing in front of him, as well as the smaller photographs of the other two dancers.

‘So, just like that, some customers told you about a crime, did they?’

‘They didn’t tell me.’

‘Who did they tell?’

‘They were talking about it among themselves.’

‘And you were listening?’

‘Yes. I didn’t hear everything. There was a partition between us.’

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This was something else Sergeant Simon understood. When you walked past the club as it was being cleaned, the door would be open. You could see a dark room, entirely painted red, with a glossy dance-floor and tables along the walls, which were partitioned off into booths.

‘Go on, then. When was this?’

‘Tonight. About two hours ago. That’s right, it must have been two in the morning. I’d only done my act once.’

‘What did the two customers say?’

‘The older one said he was going to kill the countess.’

‘Which countess?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘When?’

‘Today, probably.’

‘He wasn’t afraid you’d hear?’

‘He didn’t know I was the other side of the partition.’

‘Were you on your own?’

‘No. With another customer.’

‘Who you knew?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who was that?’

‘I only know his first name. He’s called Albert.’

‘Did he hear too?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he was holding my hands and talking to me.’

‘About how he loved you?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you were listening to what was being said in the next booth? Can you remember their exact words?’

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'Not the exact ones.'

'Are you drunk?'

'I have been drinking, but I still know what I'm talking about.'

'Do you drink like this every night?'

'Not this much.'

'Did you drink with Albert?'

'We just had a bottle of champagne. I didn't want him to splash out.'

'He's not rich?'

'He's a young man.'

'Is he in love with you?'

'Yes. He'd like me to leave the club.'

'So, you were with him when the two customers came in and sat down in the next booth.'

'That's right.'

'You didn't see them?'

'I saw them later, from behind, as they left.'

'Did they stay for a long time?'

'Maybe half an hour.'

'Did they have champagne with the women you work with?'

'No. I think they ordered brandy.'

'And they started talking about the countess right away?'

'Not right away. At the beginning, I didn't pay any attention. The first thing I heard was something like: "You understand, she's still got most of her jewellery, but at the rate she's going it won't be for long."'

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‘What sort of voice?’

‘A man’s voice. A middle-aged man’s. When they left, I saw that one of them was short and burly, with grey hair. It must have been him.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the other one was younger, and it wasn’t a young man’s voice.’

‘How was he dressed?’

‘I didn’t notice. I think he was wearing dark clothes, maybe black.’

‘Did they leave their coats in the cloakroom?’

‘I suppose.’

‘So, he said the countess still had most of her jewellery but at the rate she was going it wouldn’t be for long?’

‘That’s right.’

‘What did he say about killing her?’

She was very young, really; certainly far younger than she wanted people to think. For a second she looked like a little girl in a panic. At moments like this she would fix her gaze on the clock, as if seeking inspiration. Her body shook imperceptibly. She must have been very tired. The sergeant picked up a slight whiff of sweat from her armpits mixed with the smell of her perfume.

‘What did he say about killing her?’ he repeated.

‘I can’t remember. You know I wasn’t on my own. I couldn’t listen the whole time.’

‘Albert was feeling you up?’

‘No. He was holding my hands. The older one said something like: “I’ve decided to finish it tonight.”’

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'That doesn't mean he's going to kill her. It could mean he's going to steal her jewellery. No reason he couldn't be a creditor who's just decided to send in the bailiffs.'

'No,' she said, with a certain stubbornness.

'How do you know?'

'Because it's not like that.'

'He explicitly talked about killing her?'

'I'm sure that's what he wants to do. I don't remember how he put it exactly.'

'It couldn't be a misunderstanding?'

'No.'

'And this was two hours ago?'

'A bit longer.'

'So, even though you knew a man was going to commit a crime, you waited until now to come and tell us?'

'I was scared. I couldn't leave Picratt's before it shut. Alfonsi is very strict about that.'

'Even if you'd told him the truth?'

'He'd probably have told me to mind my own business.'

'Try to remember everything they said.'

'They didn't talk much. I didn't hear everything. The band was playing. Then Tania did her act.'

The sergeant had been taking notes for a few minutes, but in an offhand way, without much conviction.

'Do you know a countess?'

'I don't think so.'

'Is there one who goes to the club?'

'We don't get many women coming in. I've never heard of a customer who might be a countess.'

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‘You didn’t manage to get a look at the two men’s faces?’

‘I didn’t dare. I was afraid.’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘That they’d know I’d heard.’

‘What did they call each other?’

‘I didn’t notice. I’ve a feeling one of them is called Oscar. I’m not sure. I think I’ve drunk too much. I’ve got a headache. I want to go to bed. If I’d thought you wouldn’t believe me, I wouldn’t have come here.’

‘Take a seat.’

‘Aren’t I allowed to leave?’

‘Not this minute.’

He pointed to a bench against the wall, under the usual black and white administrative notices.

Then he immediately called her back.

‘Your name?’

‘Arlette.’

‘Your real name. Have you got your identity card?’

She took it out of her handbag and passed it to him. He read: ‘Jeanne-Marie-Marcelle Leleu, twenty-four years old, born in Moulins, choreographic artist, 42 *ter*, Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, Paris.’

‘You’re not called Arlette?’

‘It’s my stage name.’

‘Have you done any acting?’

‘Not in real theatres.’

He shrugged and, after writing down her particulars, gave her back her card.

‘Go and sit down.’

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Then he quietly asked his young colleague to keep an eye on her, went into the next-door office, where he could make a telephone call in private, and called the Police Emergency Service.

‘Is that you, Louis? Simon here, La Rochefoucauld station. There hasn’t been a countess murdered tonight by any chance, has there?’

‘Why a countess?’

‘I don’t know. It’s probably a joke. The girl looks a bit crazy. At any rate, she’s drunk. Apparently she heard some guys plotting to murder a countess, a countess who supposedly owns some jewellery.’

‘Dunno. Nothing on the board.’

‘If there’s anything like that, let me know.’

They talked a little longer about this and that. When Simon returned to reception, Arlette had fallen asleep, like someone in the waiting room at a railway station. The resemblance was so striking that he automatically looked for a suitcase at her feet.

At seven in the morning, when Jacquart came to relieve Sergeant Simon, she was still asleep, and Simon filled his colleague in. He saw her wake up as he was leaving, but preferred not to hang around.

She gazed in astonishment at the new policeman, who had a black moustache, then anxiously looked round for the clock and jumped up.

‘I have to go,’ she said.

‘One moment, sweetheart.’

‘What do you want from me?’

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‘Maybe your memory is better after a nap than it was last night.’

She looked sullen now, and her skin had become shiny, especially around her plucked eyebrows.

‘I don’t know anything else. I’ve got to go home.’

‘What was Oscar like?’

‘What Oscar?’

The man was looking at the report Simon had written while she was asleep.

‘The one who wanted to murder the countess.’

‘I didn’t say he was called Oscar.’

‘What was he called then?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t remember what I said any more. I’d been drinking.’

‘So the whole story’s untrue?’

‘I didn’t say that. I heard two men talking in the next booth, but I only caught snatches of what they were saying, the odd word here and there. Maybe I got it wrong.’

‘So why did you come here?’

‘I’ve already told you I’d been drinking. When you’ve been drinking, you see things differently, you make a drama out of everything.’

‘There was no mention of the countess?’

‘Yes, there was . . . I think . . .’

‘Her jewellery?’

‘They talked about jewellery.’

‘And about finishing her off?’

‘That’s what I thought I understood. I was drunk by then.’

‘Who had you been drinking with?’

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'Some customers.'

'One of whom was called Albert?'

'Yes. I don't know him either. I only know people by sight.'

'Including Oscar?'

'Why do you keep saying that name?'

'Would you recognize him?'

'I only saw him from behind.'

'A person's back can be very easy to recognize.'

'I'm not sure. Maybe.'

Struck by a sudden thought, it was her turn to ask, 'Has someone been killed?'

When he didn't answer, she became very nervous. She must have had a terrible hangover. The blue of her eyes was washed out, somehow, and her smudged lipstick made her mouth look enormous.

'Can't I go home?'

'Not right now.'

'I haven't done anything.'

There were a number of policemen in the room now, getting on with their work and swapping stories. Jacquart called the Police Emergency Service, who hadn't heard anything about a dead countess yet, then, to cover his back, telephoned Quai des Orfèvres. Lucas, who had just come on duty and wasn't completely awake, replied, just in case:

'Send her over to me.'

After which he didn't give it another thought. Maigret arrived soon after and glanced through the night's reports before taking off his overcoat and hat.

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