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Georges Simenon

Maigret and the Man on the Bench



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Maigret and the Man on the Bench

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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 Man on
the Bench*

Translated by DAVID WATSON



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1. *The Yellow Shoes*

For Maigret the date was easy to remember, as it was his sister-in-law's birthday: 19 October. It was a Monday, which also made it memorable, as it is common knowledge at Quai des Orfèvres that murders rarely take place on Mondays. And as well as this, it was the first investigation of the year that had a feel of winter about it.

It had rained all day Sunday, a fine, cold drizzle; the rooftops and the pavements were black and glistening, and a yellowish mist seemed to creep in through the gaps in the windows, leading Madame Maigret to say:

'I should think about getting some draught excluders put in.'

Every autumn for the last five years at least Maigret had promised to fit them himself the following Sunday.

'You should wear your thick overcoat.'

'Where is it?'

'I'll go and look for it.'

It was 8.30. All the apartments still had their lights on, and Maigret's overcoat smelled of mothballs.

It didn't rain that day. At least, not a rain that you could see, but the pavements remained damp and became progressively more slippery as the crowds walked over them. Then, around four in the afternoon, a short while before it got dark, that same yellowish mist of the morning

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returned, blurring the lights of the streetlamps and the shop windows.

When the telephone rang, neither Lucas nor Janvier nor young Lapointe were in the room. It was answered by Santoni, a Corsican who was new to the brigade, having worked ten years in the Gambling Squad and then Vice.

‘It’s Inspector Neveu from the third arrondissement, chief. He wants to speak to you in person. It seems it’s urgent.’

Maigret grabbed the receiver.

‘What is it, my friend?’

‘I’m ringing you from a bar on Boulevard Saint-Martin. A body has been found, stabbed with a knife.’

‘On the street?’

‘No. Not exactly. In a sort of side passageway.’

Neveu had been on the force for a long time, so he knew right away what Maigret was thinking. Stabbings, especially in a working-class area, weren’t usually of much interest. Often they were the result of drunken brawls, or else a settling of accounts between gang members, Spanish or North African, for example.

So Neveu made a point of adding:

‘There’s something really strange about this. I think you should come and see. We are between the large jeweller’s and the shop selling artificial flowers.’

‘I’m on my way.’

Maigret brought Santoni along with him for the first time. Inside the cramped black police car, Maigret was uncomfortably aware of the scent emanating from him. The Corsican was small in stature and wore stacked heels.

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His hair was slicked back, and he sported a large yellow diamond, probably fake, on his ring finger.

Dark silhouettes passed by on the dark streets, their soles clicking on the greasy surface. A crowd of about thirty people had gathered on the pavement of Boulevard Saint-Martin, where two policemen stood guard to prevent them moving forwards. Neveu was there waiting for them and he opened the door of their car.

‘I asked the doctor to hang on until you got here.’

It was the time of day when this generally crowded corner of the Grands Boulevards was at its busiest. Up above the jeweller’s a large clock showed 5.20. The artificial flower shop, which had only a single window, was dimly lit and looked so dusty and faded that you wondered whether anyone ever went in there.

Between the two shops was the entrance to a sort of alleyway that was so narrow that you could easily miss it. It was little more than an unlit passageway between two walls, which probably led into a courtyard of the type that was common in this neighbourhood.

Neveu cleared a path for Maigret. Two or three metres down the alley they found a small group of men waiting for them in the darkness. Two of them were carrying electric torches. You had to look very closely to make out faces.

It was colder and damper than out on the main street. There was a constant draught. Despite their best efforts to push it away, a dog slipped between their legs.

A man lay on the ground, pressed against the dripping wall, one arm bent under him, the other, with a pale hand at the end of it, almost barring the passageway.

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‘Dead?’

The local doctor nodded:

‘Death would have been instantaneous.’

As if to corroborate these words, the beam from one of the electric torches played over the body, throwing the shape of the knife still implanted in his back into eerie relief. The other torch lit up a semi-profile, an open eye and a cheek that had been scraped by the stones in the wall as the victim slumped to the ground.

‘Who found him?’

One of the uniformed officers, who had been waiting for his moment, stepped forwards. It was hard to make out his features. He was young and appeared distressed.

‘I was doing my rounds. I usually take a quick look in all the alleyways, because people get up to all sorts there in the dark. I noticed a shape on the ground. At first I thought it was a drunk.’

‘Was he already dead?’

‘Yes. I think so. But the body was still warm.’

‘What time was this?’

‘A quarter to five. I whistled to summon a colleague and then rang the station.’

Neveu chipped in:

‘I took the call and got here straight away.’

The local police station was a short distance away, on Rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth.

Neveu went on:

‘I instructed my colleague to call the doctor.’

‘Did anyone hear anything?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

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There was a door a little further on, with a dimly lit fanlight above it.

‘What’s that?’

‘It leads to the office of the jeweller’s. It’s rarely used.’

Before he left Quai des Orfèvres Maigret had alerted Criminal Records, and the forensics team turned up with their equipment and cameras. Like all technical types they didn’t ask questions but merely applied themselves to their task; their only concern was how they would manage to work in such a tight space.

‘What’s at the other end of the courtyard?’ Maigret asked.

‘Nothing. Just walls. A single door which was nailed shut years ago, leading into a building on Rue Meslay.’

The man had been stabbed in the back – that much was clear – about ten paces into the alleyway. Someone had followed him without a sound, and the passers-by on the main street had been completely oblivious to what was happening.

‘I slid my hand into his pocket and found his wallet.’

Neveu handed it to Maigret. One of the forensics men, without being asked, shone a torch on it that was several times brighter than the inspector’s.

It was a normal wallet, neither new nor particularly worn, of reasonably good quality, nothing more. It contained three thousand-franc notes and a few hundreds as well as an identity card in the name of Louis Thouret, warehouseman, 37, Rue des Peupliers, in Juvisy. There was also a voter’s registration card in the same name, a sheet of paper on which five or six words had been

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written in pencil and a very old photograph of a little girl.

‘Can we make a start?’

Maigret nodded. Flash bulbs popped, cameras clicked. The crowd at the end of the alleyway was growing larger, and the police were struggling to hold them back.

After this, the forensics team carefully pulled out the knife, which was consigned to a special box, and finally they were able to turn the body over. They then saw the face of a man in his forties and his expression of utter bewilderment.

He hadn’t understood what was happening to him. He had died without understanding. His look of surprise was so childlike, so much the opposite of tragic, that one of the policemen in the shadows let out a nervous laugh.

His clothes were clean, respectable. He was wearing a dark suit, a beige raincoat and on his feet, which were twisted at an odd angle, he wore greenish-yellow shoes, which seemed out of keeping with a day as colourless as this.

Apart from his shoes, he appeared so ordinary that he would have passed completely unnoticed on the street or on one of the numerous café terraces on the boulevard. Nevertheless, the policeman who had discovered him said:

‘I get the feeling I’ve seen him before.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t recall. His face is familiar. You know, he is one of those people you see every day but don’t pay any attention to.’

Neveu chipped in:

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‘He looks familiar to me too. He probably works around here somewhere.’

But this didn’t explain why Louis Thouret had come down this narrow alleyway that led nowhere. Maigret turned to Santoni, because he had been in Vice for many years, and in this neighbourhood there are a certain number of sex maniacs with good reason to be lurking in dark alleyways. Nearly all of them are known to the police. A few of them are men of some standing. They get arrested from time to time. When they are released, they take up where they left off.

But Santoni shook his head.

‘Never laid eyes on him.’

So Maigret made a decision:

‘Carry on, gentlemen. When you’ve finished, take him off to the Forensic Institute.’

Then, to Santoni:

‘Let’s go and see the family, if he has any.’

If it had been an hour later he would probably not have gone to Juvisy himself. But he had the car. He was intrigued above all by the sheer ordinariness of the man and even his profession.

‘Juvisy.’

They stopped for a short while at a bar at Porte d’Italie and had a beer. Then they were on the highway, streetlights flashing past, overtaking a string of heavy lorries. When they arrived in Juvisy, near the railway station, they asked for directions to Rue des Peupliers but had to approach five people before they found anyone who knew.

‘It’s over that way, in a new development. When you get there, check the street signs. The streets are all named after trees. They all look the same.’

They drove past the huge marshalling yard, where carriages were constantly being switched from one line to another. There were twenty locomotives, belching steam, whistling, puffing. Carriages were shunted together with loud clangs. On the right was the edge of a new housing estate, the pattern of streets marked out by electric lights. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of detached houses that all seemed to be the same shape and size, built from the same plan. The famous trees which gave the streets their names had not had time to grow; in places the pavements had not yet been finished; there were still black holes, patches of empty ground, while elsewhere there were gardens already coming into bloom.

Rue des Chênes . . . Rue des Lilas . . . Rue des Hêtres . . . Perhaps one day it would all look like a park, provided all these badly built houses, which resembled a child’s construction set, didn’t fall down before the trees had grown to full height.

Through kitchen windows, women could be seen preparing dinner. The streets were deserted, just here and there the odd shop, also brand new and apparently run by amateurs.

‘Try on the left.’

They drove round for a good ten minutes before they found the name they were looking for inscribed on a blue sign, then missed the house, because number 37 came straight after number 21. There was only one light on – on

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the ground floor. It was a kitchen. Behind the curtain a rather large woman could be seen coming and going.

‘Let’s go!’ sighed Maigret, extracting himself with some difficulty from the tiny car.

He tapped his pipe on his heel to empty it. As they crossed the pavement, the curtain twitched, and they saw a woman’s face fix itself to the windowpane. She couldn’t have been used to the sight of a car pulling up opposite her house. He went up the three steps. The front door was in varnished pine, with wrought-iron fittings and two small windows of dark-blue glass. He looked for a doorbell. Before he had managed to find it, a voice came from inside:

‘What is it?’

‘Madame Thouret?’

‘That’s me.’

‘I’d like to have a word with you.’

She was still reluctant to open the door.

‘Police,’ Maigret added in a low voice.

That made her mind up: she slid the chain off, pulled back the bolt. Then, through a gap just wide enough to show a thin slice of her face, she checked out the two men standing on her doorstep.

‘What do you want?’

‘I have something to tell you.’

‘Can you prove that you’re from the police?’

It was pure luck that Maigret happened to have his badge in his pocket. Usually, he left it at home. He held it out where the light would shine on it.

‘OK, I suppose it’s genuine.’

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She let them in. The corridor was narrow, with white walls, the doors and door frames of varnished wood. The kitchen door was still open, but she guided them to the next room and turned on the electric light.

She was about the same age as her husband but bigger than him, though she didn't give the impression of being overweight. She was big-boned, and her flesh was firm. The grey dress she was wearing under the apron she was now mechanically taking off did nothing to soften her appearance.

The room they were in was a rustic-style dining room; it probably doubled as a sitting room. Nothing was out of place, like in the display window or shop floor of a furniture seller. Nothing had been left lying around, not a pipe or a packet of cigarettes. No piece of needlework, not even a newspaper, to suggest that there were people who actually spent part of their lives here. She didn't invite them to sit down but merely looked at their feet as if to make sure that they weren't leaving marks on the linoleum.

'I'm listening.'

'Is your husband's name Louis Thouret?'

She nodded; her eyebrows knitted as she tried to guess the purpose of their visit.

'Does he work in Paris?'

'He is deputy manager at Kaplan and Zanin's in Rue de Bondy.'

'Has he ever worked as a warehouseman?'

'Yes, a while back.'

'A long while?'

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'A few years ago. Even back then he was the one who kept the business running.'

'Would you happen to have a photograph of him?'

'What for?'

'I'd just like to be sure . . .'

'Be sure of what?'

She was growing more suspicious:

'Has Louis had an accident?'

Involuntarily, she glanced at the kitchen clock, as if to work out where her husband would be at that particular hour of the day.

'I'd like to be sure that he is the same man.'

'On the sideboard . . .' she said.

There were five or six photos there, in metal frames, among them one of a young girl and one of the man who had been found stabbed to death in the alleyway, only younger, dressed in black.

'Do you know if your husband has any enemies?'

'Why would he have any enemies?'

She left them for a moment to turn down a gas ring, where a pan was about to boil over.

'What time does he normally get home from work?'

'He always takes the same train, the 6.22 from Gare de Lyon. Our daughter takes the following train, because she finishes work a little later. She has an important position and—'

'I am obliged to ask you to accompany us to Paris.'

'Is Louis dead?'

She gave them a sharp look, as if to warn them not to lie to her.

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'Tell me the truth.'

'He was murdered this afternoon.'

'Where?'

'In an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin.'

'What on earth was he doing there?'

'I don't know.'

'What time did it happen?'

'Shortly after four thirty, as far as we can tell.'

'At four thirty he is at Kaplan's. Have you spoken to them?'

'We haven't had time. Besides, we didn't know where he worked.'

'Who killed him?'

'That's what we are trying to find out.'

'Was he on his own?'

Maigret was becoming impatient.

'Don't you think it would be better if you got dressed and came with us?'

'What have you done with him?'

'By now he should be at the Forensic Institute.'

'The morgue?'

What could he say to that?

'How can I let my daughter know?'

'You could leave her a note.'

She thought about this.

'No. We'll go to my sister's and I'll give her the key. She will come here and wait for Monique. Do you need to see her as well?'

'Ideally, yes.'

'Where should she come?'

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