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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 is Afraid

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ



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1. *A Train Journey in the Rain*

All of a sudden, between two small stations whose names he didn't know and of which he could see almost nothing in the dark, apart from the slashing rain in the beam of a large lamp and human shapes pushing carts, Maigret wondered what he was doing there.

Perhaps he'd dozed off for a moment in the overheated compartment? He couldn't have lost consciousness entirely because he knew he was on a train – he could hear its steady chugging. He would have sworn that he'd occasionally seen the lit windows of an isolated farmhouse dotted among the dark expanses of countryside. All these things were real, as were the smell of soot mingled with that of his damp clothes and the regular murmur of voices from an adjacent compartment, but everything had somehow lost its immediacy, it could no longer be located in space or, more specifically, in time.

He could have been elsewhere, in any dinky train travelling across the countryside, and he could have been a fifteen-year-old Maigret coming home from school on a Saturday, on a local train exactly like this one, with old-fashioned carriages whose partitions creaked as the engine strained. There would be the same voices in the dark at each stop, the same men busying themselves around the mail compartment, the same stationmaster's whistle.

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He half-opened his eyes, puffed on his pipe, which had gone out, and his gaze lighted on the man sitting in the opposite corner of the compartment. He could have been a passenger on the train that once used to take Maigret to his father's. He could have been the count or the owner of the château, the dignitary of a village or of any small town.

He wore a light tweed golfing suit and the sort of raincoat that is sold only in very expensive shops. He had a green hunting hat, with a tiny pheasant plume tucked under the ribbon. Despite the heat, he hadn't taken off his fawn gloves, for those people never remove their gloves on a train or in a car. And, despite the rain, there wasn't a spot of mud on his immaculately shiny shoes.

He looked about sixty-five. An elderly gentleman. Isn't it curious how men of that age pay so much attention to every detail of their appearance? And how they still like to pretend they are different from common mortals?

His complexion was the pink that is peculiar to his kind, and he had a thin silver-white moustache stained yellow from smoking cigars.

His gaze, however, did not contain all the assurance one might have expected. From his corner, the man was watching Maigret who, meanwhile, darted little glances in his direction and twice or three times looked on the verge of saying something. The train set off again, grimy and wet, into a dark world punctuated by scattered lights. Sometimes, at a level-crossing, you could just make out a person on a bicycle waiting for the convoy to pass.

Was Maigret sad? It was a more nebulous mood. He wasn't feeling completely at ease with himself. And for a start, he

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had drunk too much these past three days, but it had been an obligation, not a pleasure.

He was on his way back from the international police congress in Bordeaux. It was April. When he had left Paris, where the winter had been long and dreary, it had felt as if spring was around the corner. But, in Bordeaux, it had rained non-stop for three days, with a cold wind that plastered your clothes to your body.

It so happened that the few friends he usually met at these congresses, like Mr Pyke, were not there. Each country seemed to have contrived to send only youngsters, men of thirty to forty who were new faces. They had all been very kind to him, very deferential, as people are towards an elder they respect but consider a bit out of touch.

Was it all a figment of his imagination, or had the never-ending rain made him grumpy? Or was it all the wine they'd had to drink at the wineries they had visited at the invitation of the Chamber of Commerce?

'Are you having a good time?' his wife had asked him on the telephone.

He had replied with a groan.

'Try and have a bit of a rest. You looked tired when you left. Anyway, it will be a change of scene. Don't catch cold.'

Perhaps he was suddenly feeling old? Not even the discussions, which had nearly all been about new scientific techniques, had interested him.

The dinner had been held the previous evening. That morning there had been a closing reception, at the town hall this time, and a lunch washed down with copious amounts of wine. He had promised Chabot that he would take advantage

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of the fact that he didn't have to be in Paris until the Monday morning to drop in and see him in Fontenay-le-Comte.

Chabot wasn't getting any younger either. They had been friends long ago, when Maigret had been a medical student for two years at Nantes University. Chabot had been studying law. They had shared lodgings. On two or three occasions, on a Sunday, he had gone with his friend to visit his mother in Fontenay.

And since then, over the years, they had seen each other maybe ten times in all.

'When are you going to come and look me up in Vendée?'
Madame Maigret had encouraged him.

'Why don't you go and see your friend Chabot on the way back from Bordeaux?'

He should have arrived in Fontenay two hours ago, but he had taken the wrong train. In Niort, where he had waited for ages, drinking small glasses of wine in the waiting room, he had been tempted to telephone Chabot to ask him to drive over and pick him up.

But he hadn't done so in the end because, if Julien came to fetch him, he would insist on his staying the night, and Maigret hated sleeping in other people's houses.

He would go to a hotel and telephone only once he was settled in. He had been wrong to make this detour instead of spending these two days' holiday at home, on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Who knows? Maybe it wasn't raining in Paris and spring had finally arrived.

'So they've brought you down here . . .'

He gave a start. Without realizing it, he must have continued vaguely staring at his travelling companion, who had just

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made up his mind to speak to him. This seemed to be causing him some embarrassment and he felt obliged to add a note of irony to his words.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I said I was certain they’d turn to someone like you.’

Then, since Maigret still looked bemused:

‘You are Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, aren’t you?’

The passenger became a man of the world again and rose from the banquette to introduce himself:

‘Vernoux de Courçon.’

‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘I recognized you immediately from having seen your photograph in the newspapers.’

From the way he said it, he sounded as if he were apologizing for being someone who read the papers.

‘It must happen often.’

‘What?’

‘That people recognize you.’

Maigret didn’t know what to reply. He hadn’t come fully back down to earth yet. There were beads of sweat on the man’s forehead, as if he had put himself in a situation from which he didn’t know how to extricate himself.

‘Was it my friend Julien who telephoned you?’

‘Do you mean Julien Chabot?’

‘The investigating magistrate. What surprises me is that he said nothing to me about it when I saw him this morning.’

‘I still don’t understand.’

Vernoux de Courçon studied him more closely, frowning.

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‘Are you saying it’s coincidence that brings you to Fontenay-le-Comte?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not on your way to Julien Chabot’s?’

‘I am, but . . .’

Maigret suddenly blushed, furious with himself, because he had just answered meekly, as he had done in the past with people like the man facing him, ‘the upper crust’.

‘Odd, isn’t it?’ said Vernoux de Courçon, wryly.

‘What is odd?’

‘That Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, who has probably never set foot in Fontenay—’

‘Is that what you’ve been told?’

‘I presume so. In any case, we haven’t seen you there often and I’ve never heard mention of any visits. I was saying it’s odd that you turn up just when the authorities are having to deal with the most perplexing mystery that . . .’

Maigret struck a match and gave little puffs on his pipe.

‘Julien Chabot and I were students together for a while,’ he said calmly. ‘In the past, I was an occasional guest at his home in Rue Clemenceau.’

‘Really?’

Taciturnly, he echoed:

‘Really.’

‘In that case, we’ll probably see one another tomorrow evening at my house, Rue Rabelais. Chabot comes every Saturday to play bridge.’

The train stopped one last time before Fontenay. Vernoux de Courçon had no luggage, only a brown leather briefcase lying next to him on the seat.

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‘I’m intrigued to know whether you will solve the mystery. Coincidence or not, it’s lucky for Chabot that you are here.’

‘Is his mother still alive?’

‘As hale and hearty as ever.’

The man rose to button up his raincoat, stretch his gloves and adjust his hat. The train was slowing down, lights flashed past more frequently and people on the platform started running.

‘Delighted to have met you. Tell Chabot I hope you’ll join him tomorrow evening.’

Maigret merely nodded in reply, opened the compartment door, grabbed his suitcase, which was heavy, and made for the train door without looking at the people he passed.

Chabot couldn’t be expecting him on that train, which he had only taken by chance. From the station entrance, Maigret could see all the way down Rue de la République, where it was raining even harder.

‘Taxi, sir?’

He nodded.

‘Hôtel de France?’

He replied yes again and slumped in the back of the cab, feeling irritable. It was only nine o’clock in the evening, but the town was dead, and only two or three cafés still had their lights on. The door of the Hôtel de France was flanked by two palm trees in green barrels.

‘Do you have a room?’

‘For one?’

‘Yes. And if possible I’d like something to eat.’

The hotel had already closed for the night, like a church after vespers. The receptionist had to go and check with the kitchen. He turned on two or three lamps in the dining room.

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Maigret washed his hands at a porcelain basin to avoid having to go up to his room.

‘White wine?’

He was nauseated by all the white wine he had been obliged to drink in Bordeaux.

‘Do you have any beer?’

‘Only bottled.’

‘Then give me a decent red.’

They heated up some soup for him and sliced some ham. From where he was sitting, he saw someone enter the lobby, dripping wet. Finding no one at the desk, the newcomer glanced around the dining room and looked relieved on spotting Maigret. Aged around forty, he had ginger hair and plump red cheeks, and cameras were slung over the shoulders of his beige raincoat.

He shook the rain from his hat and came into the room.

‘First of all, may I take a photo? I’m the regional correspondent from the *Ouest-Éclair*. I saw you at the station, but I wasn’t able to catch you. So they’ve asked you to come and shed light on the Courçon case.’

A flash. A click.

‘Inspector Féron didn’t tell us about you. Nor did the investigating magistrate.’

‘I am not here for the Courçon case.’

The ginger-haired journalist smiled the smile of a hack who is not fooled.

‘Of course not!’

‘What do you mean, “of course not”?’

‘You’re not here *officially*. I get it. All the same—’

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‘All the same, nothing!’

‘The proof is that Féron told me he’s on his way.’

‘Who is Féron?’

‘Fontenay’s police chief. When I spotted you at the station, I ran over to the telephone booth and called him. He said he’d meet me here.’

‘Here?’

‘Of course. Where else would you be staying?’

Maigret drained his glass, wiped his mouth and muttered:

‘Who is this Vernoux de Courçon with whom I travelled from Niort?’

‘He was indeed on that train. He’s the brother-in-law.’

‘Whose brother-in-law?’

‘Of the De Courçon who’s been murdered.’

A short figure with brown hair now came into the hotel and made a beeline for the two men in the dining room.

‘Hello, Féron!’ said the journalist.

‘Hello, you. My apologies, detective chief inspector. No one told me you were coming, which is why I wasn’t at the station. I was having a bite to eat, after an exhausting day, when—’

He jerked his head in the journalist’s direction.

‘I raced over and—’

‘I was saying to this young man,’ replied Maigret, pushing away his plate and picking up his pipe, ‘that I have nothing to do with your Courçon case. I’m in Fontenay-le-Comte through the greatest of coincidences, to say hello to my good old friend Chabot and—’

‘Does he know you’re here?’

‘He must have been expecting me on the four o’clock train. When he saw I wasn’t on it, he probably assumed I’d only be coming tomorrow or that I wouldn’t be coming at all.’

Maigret stood up.

‘And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to drop in and say hello before I go to bed.’

The police chief and the reporter both looked equally disconcerted.

‘Do you really know nothing?’

‘Absolutely nothing.’

‘You haven’t read the papers?’

‘For the past three days, the congress organizers and the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce ensured that we didn’t have the leisure.’

They exchanged sceptical glances.

‘Do you know where Chabot lives?’

‘Of course I do. Unless the town has changed since I was last here.’

They couldn’t bring themselves to let him go. Outside on the pavement, they lingered beside him.

‘Gentlemen, I wish you goodnight.’

The reporter pressed him:

‘Do you have anything to say to the *Ouest-Éclair*?’

‘Nothing. Goodnight, gentlemen.’

He reached Rue de la République, crossed the bridge and passed only two people on his way to Chabot’s. His friend lived in an old house which had once been the envy of the young Maigret. It was still the same, built of grey stone with four steps up to the front door, and tall windows. A little light filtered through the gap in the curtains. He rang the bell and

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