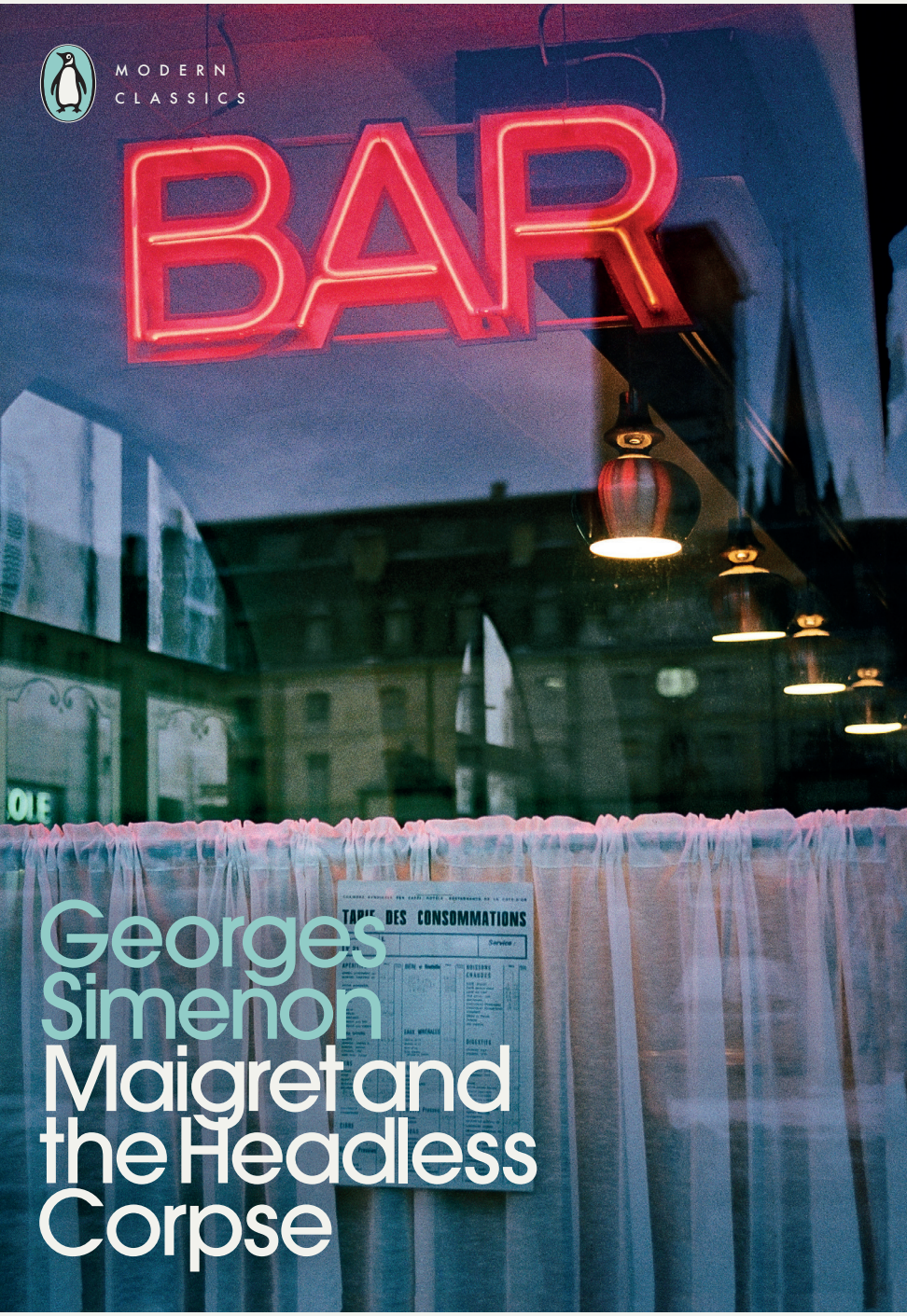

Georges Simenon

Maigret and the Headless Corpse

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Maigret and the Headless Corpse

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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 Headless Corpse

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS

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1. The Naud Brothers' Discovery

The sky was just starting to lighten when Jules, the elder of the two Naud brothers, appeared on the deck of the barge, first his head, then his shoulders, then his big lanky body. Rubbing his as yet uncombed flax-coloured hair, he looked at the lock, Quai de Jemmapes on the left, Quai de Valmy on the right. A few minutes went by, time enough to roll a cigarette and smoke it in the coolness of the early morning, before a light came on in the little bar on the corner of Rue des Récollets.

Because of the dim light, the front of the bar was a harsher yellow than usual. Popaul, the owner, collarless and also uncombed, came out on to the pavement to remove the shutters.

Naud walked across the gangway and the quayside, rolling his second cigarette. When his brother Robert, almost as tall and raw-boned as he was, emerged in his turn from a hatch, he was able to see Jules leaning on the counter in the lighted bar and the owner pouring a shot of brandy into his coffee.

Robert seemed to be waiting his turn. He rolled a cigarette in the same way as his brother. When Jules came out of the bar, Robert, the younger of the two, walked off the barge, and they met in the middle of the street.

'I'm starting the engine,' Jules announced.

There were days when they didn't exchange more than ten sentences like that. Their boat was called the *Deux Frères* – the Two Brothers. They had married twin sisters, and both families lived on board.

Robert took the place of his elder brother in Popaul's bar, which smelled of coffee laced with brandy.

'Nice day,' said Popaul, who was short and fat.

Robert Naud merely looked through the window at the pink-tinged sky. The chimney pots on the roofs were the first thing in the landscape to take on life and colour. On the slates and tiles, and on some of the cobbles on the quayside, the cold of the last hours of night had left a thin layer of frost that was starting to fade.

The diesel engine could be heard spluttering. Puffs of black smoke emerged from the stern of the barge. Robert put some coins on the zinc counter, touched his cap with his fingertips and walked back across the quayside. The lock-keeper had appeared, in his uniform, and was getting the lock ready. There was the sound of footsteps in the distance, on Quai de Valmy, although nobody was yet visible. Children's voices came from the interior of the boat, where the women were making coffee.

Jules reappeared on deck, went to the stern, leaned over and frowned. His brother guessed what was wrong. They had loaded some freestone at Beauval, at Post 48 along the Canal de l'Ourcq. As almost always happened, they had taken on a few tonnes too many, and already the previous day, leaving the basin of La Villette and moving into the Canal Saint-Martin, they had stirred the sludge at the bottom.

There is usually no lack of water in March. But this year, it hadn't rained for two months, and they had to be sparing with the canal water.

The lock gates opened. Jules took up his position at the wheel. His brother went back on to the quayside to cast off. The propeller started turning and, as both of them had feared, it stirred up thick mud that rose to the surface, making big bubbles.

Leaning with his whole weight on the pole, Robert tried hard to move the bow of the boat away from the quayside. The propeller seemed to be turning without any progress being made. Accustomed to such things, the lock-keeper waited patiently, beating his hands together to warm himself.

There was a thump, then a worrying noise of clashing gears. Robert Naud turned to his brother, who stalled the engine.

Neither of them knew what was happening. The propeller hadn't touched the bottom, protected as it was by part of the rudder. Something must have got stuck in it, perhaps an old cable, such as were often found lying at the bottom of canals. If it was that, they would find it hard to shake off.

Still holding his pole, Robert headed for the stern, leaned over and tried to reach the propeller through the opaque water, while Jules went looking for a smaller pole and Laurence, his wife, put her head out through the hatch.

'What is it?'

'Don't know.'

In silence, they began to manoeuvre the two poles around the stalled propeller. After a few minutes, the lock-keeper, Dambois, whom everybody called Charles, came and stood on the quayside to watch them. He didn't ask any questions, merely puffed silently at his pipe, the stem of which had been mended with wire.

A few passers-by could be seen hurrying towards the République, as well as nurses in uniform heading for the Hôpital Saint-Louis.

'Have you got it?'

'I think so.'

'Is it a cable?'

'I have no idea.'

Jules Naud had hooked something. After a while, the object yielded, and more bubbles rose to the surface.

Slowly, he pulled out the pole, and as the hook broke the surface, a strange package appeared, wrapped in newspaper that had burst open.

It was a human arm, intact from the shoulder to the hand. In the water, it had taken on a pallid colour and the texture of a dead fish.

Depoil, the sergeant from the third district police station at the end of Quai de Jemmapes, was just finishing his night shift when the tall figure of the elder Naud brother appeared in the doorway.

'I'm just above the Récollets lock with our boat, the *Deux Frères*. The propeller stalled when we cast off and we dredged up a man's arm.'

Depoil, who had worked in the tenth arrondissement

for fifteen years, had the reaction that all the police officers informed of the case would have.

'A man's?' he echoed, incredulously.

'A man's, yes. The hand is covered in brown hair and . . .'

Periodically, a corpse was fished out of the Canal Saint-Martin, almost always because of the movement of a boat's propeller. Most often, the corpse was intact, and it would usually turn out to be a man, an old tramp, for example, who had drunk too much and slipped into the canal, or a criminal stabbed to death by a rival gang.

Dismembered bodies weren't rare, two or three a year on average, but invariably, as far back as Sergeant Depoil could remember, they were women. You immediately knew where to look. Nine times out of ten, if not more, it was a low-class prostitute, one of those you see prowling at night around patches of waste ground.

'A sex crime,' the report would conclude.

The police knew the local crowd and had up-to-date lists of all the criminals and dubious individuals. A few days generally sufficed to arrest the perpetrator of an ordinary offence, whether it was a theft from a market stall or an armed robbery. But it was rare for them to get their hands on one of these killers.

'Have you brought it with you?' Depoil asked.

'The arm?'

'Where did you leave it?'

'On the quayside. Is it all right for us to go? We have to get down to Quai de l'Arsenal. They're waiting for us to unload.'

The sergeant lit a cigarette, began by informing the

police emergency switchboard of the incident, then asked for the number of the local detective chief inspector, Monsieur Magrin.

'Sorry to wake you. Some barge people have just fished a human arm out of the canal . . . No, a man's arm! . . . That's what I thought, too . . . What? . . . He's here, yes . . . I'll ask him . . .'

He turned to Naud, without letting go of the receiver.

'Does it look as if it's been in the water for a long time?'

The elder Naud scratched his head.

'That depends what you call a long time.'

'Is it very decomposed?'

'Hard to say. In my opinion, it could have been there about two or three days . . .'

The sergeant repeated this into the telephone.

'Two or three days . . .'

Then, playing with his pencil, he listened to the inspector's instructions.

'Can we go through the lock?' Naud asked again when he had hung up.

'Not yet. As the inspector just said, it's quite possible that other pieces have got stuck to the barge, and if we let it go ahead we might lose them.'

'But I can't stay there for ever! There are already four boats behind us.'

The sergeant, who had asked for another number, was waiting for the reply.

'Hello? Victor? Did I wake you? You're already having your breakfast? Good. I have a job for you.'

Victor Cadet lived not far from there, in Rue du

Chemin-Vert, and a month rarely passed without his services being called for on the Canal Saint-Martin. Without any doubt, he was the man who had fished the largest number of ill-assorted objects, including human bodies, from the Seine and the canals of Paris.

'Just give me time to inform my assistant.'

It was seven o'clock in the morning. On Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, Madame Maigret, already washed and dressed and smelling of soap, was busy in her kitchen, making breakfast, while her husband was still asleep. At police headquarters on Quai des Orfèvres, Lucas and Janvier had come on duty at six, and it was Lucas who took the call about the discovery made in the canal.

'Strange!' he grunted to Janvier. 'They just fished an arm out of the Canal Saint-Martin, and it isn't a woman's.'

'Is it a man's?'

'What else could it be?'

'Could be a child's.'

That had happened, too, just once, three years earlier.

'Are you going to let the chief know?'

Lucas looked at the time, hesitated and shook his head. 'There's no rush. Let him at least have his coffee.'

By 7.50, a fairly large crowd had formed near the *Deux Frères*, and a policeman was keeping the onlookers at a distance from an object that lay on the flagstones, covered with a piece of tarpaulin. Victor Cadet's boat, which had been moored upstream, had been let through the lock and now came alongside the quay.

Cadet was a giant of a man. He looked as if he had had

his diving suit made to measure. His assistant, on the other hand, was a little old man who chewed tobacco as he worked and sent long jets of brown saliva into the water.

It was he who secured the ladder, primed the pump and finally screwed the huge brass sphere on to Victor's neck.

Two women and five children, all with hair so blond it was almost white, were standing in the stern of the *Deux Frères*; one of the women was pregnant, the other held a baby on her arm.

The sunlight was beating down on the buildings along Quai de Valmy, sunlight so bright and gay that it made you wonder why that stretch of the canal had such a sinister reputation. True, the paintwork on the fronts of the buildings was faded, the whites and yellows pale and washed out, but on this March morning, everything seemed as bright and clear as a painting by Utrillo.

Four barges were waiting behind the *Deux Frères*, with washing drying on lines and children being forced to keep quiet. The smell of tar dominated the less pleasant smell of the canal.

At 8.15, Maigret, who was finishing his second cup of coffee and wiping his mouth before smoking his first pipe, took the call from Lucas.

'A man's arm, you say?'

He, too, was surprised.

'Was anything else found?'

'Victor the diver is already at work. We have to clear the lock as soon as possible to avoid a bottleneck.'

'Who's been dealing with this so far?'

'Judel.'

He was an inspector from the tenth arrondissement, a dull but conscientious young man who could be relied on in the early stages of an investigation.

'Are you going over there, chief?'

'It's not a big detour.'

'Do you want one of us to join you there?'

'Who's in the office?'

'Janvier, Lemaire . . . Wait. Lapointe has just come in.'

Maigret hesitated for a moment. Here, too, it was sunny, and they had been able to half open the window. The case might be trivial and straightforward. If it was, Judel could continue to handle it. It's hard to know at the beginning! If the arm had been a woman's, Maigret wouldn't have hesitated to wager that the rest would be routine.

But because it was a man's arm, anything was possible. And if the case turned out to be a complicated one, if Maigret decided to take charge of the investigation, what happened in the next few days would depend partly on the choice he was about to make, because he preferred to continue and finish an investigation with the inspector who had begun it with him.

'Send Lapointe.'

It was a while since he had last worked closely with Lapointe, whose youth entertained him, as did his enthusiasm – and his embarrassment when he thought he had committed a blunder.

'Shall I inform the commissioner?'

'Yes. I'll probably be late for the briefing.'

It was 23 March. Spring had officially begun two days

earlier, and you could already feel it in the air, which couldn't be said every year. It was so warm that Maigret almost went out without a coat.

Out on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, he hailed a taxi. There was no direct bus route, and this wasn't the kind of weather for shutting yourself up in the Métro. As he expected, he got to the Récollets lock before Lapointe. He found Inspector Judel leaning over the dark water of the canal.

'Anything else been found?'

'Not yet, chief. Victor's busy going all around the barge to make sure nothing's stuck to it.'

Ten more minutes went by. Lapointe was just emerging from one of the Police Judiciaire's little black cars when clear bubbles announced that Victor was about to break surface.

His assistant hastened to unscrew the brass helmet. Immediately, Victor lit a cigarette, looked around, recognized Maigret and gave him a friendly wave.

'Anything else?'

'Not in this area.'

'Can the barge go on its way?'

'I'm pretty certain it won't hit anything, apart from the sludge at the bottom.'

Robert Naud, who had heard this, yelled to his brother:

'Start the engine.'

Maigret turned to Judel.

'Do you have their statements?'

'Yes. They've both signed. In any case, they'll be spending at least four days unloading on Quai de l'Arsenal.'

That was just over two kilometres downstream, between the Bastille and the Seine.

It took some time to get the boat moving, as its bilge was too full and kept scraping the bottom, but at last it was in the lock, and the gates were closed.

Most of the onlookers were starting to move away. Those who remained had nothing to do and would probably be there all day.

Victor hadn't taken off his rubber suit.

'If there are other pieces,' he said, 'they're further upstream. The thighs, the trunk, the head – they're all heavier than an arm and are less likely to be dragged along.'

No current was visible on the surface of the canal, and the rubbish floating on it seemed motionless.

'There isn't a current like in a river, of course. But with every sluice, the water moves almost invisibly all along the reach.'

'So we'd have to search all the way to the next lock?'

'The authorities pay, and you give the orders,' Victor said, puffing at his cigarette.

'Will it take long?'

'It depends where I find the rest of him. That's if the rest of him is in the canal, obviously!'

Why would part of the body have been thrown in the canal and the rest on a patch of waste ground, for example?

'Carry on.'

Cadet signalled to his assistant to moor the boat a little further upstream and got ready to put the brass helmet on again.

Maigret took Judel and Lapointe aside. They formed a little group on the quayside, and the onlookers watched them with the respect people unconsciously show to those in official positions.

'Just in case, you should have the waste grounds and building sites in the area searched thoroughly.'

'I already thought of that,' Judel said. 'I was just waiting for your instructions to start.'

'How many men do you have?'

'This morning, two. By this afternoon, I can have three.'

'Try to find out if there have been any fights locally in the last few days, if anyone heard any screams, calls for help.'

'Yes, chief.'

Maigret left the uniformed officer to keep watch on the human arm that still lay on the quayside under a tarpaulin.

'Coming, Lapointe?'

He walked to Popaul's, the bar on the corner, which was painted a bright red, and opened the glass door. A number of factory workers from the area, already in their work clothes, were having a bite to eat at the counter.

'What can I get you?' the owner hastened to ask.

'Do you have a telephone?'

As he spoke, he saw it. It was attached to the wall, not in a booth but right next to the counter.

'Come on, Lapointe.'

He had no desire to make a call in public.

'Aren't you having a drink?'