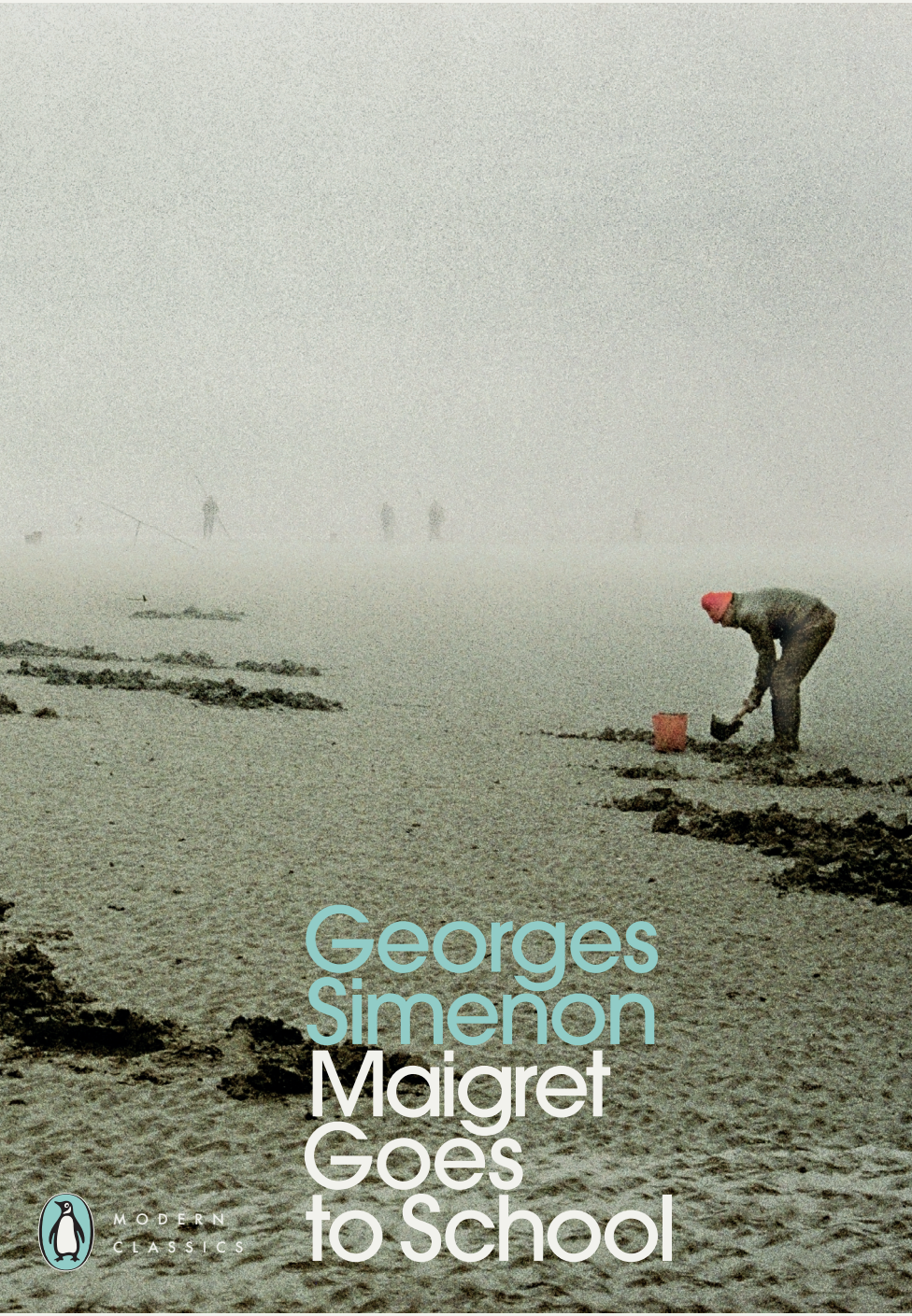
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 Goes to School

Translated by LINDA COVERDALE

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Contents

1. *The Teacher in Purgatory*

Some images you record unconsciously, with the precision of a camera, and when you find them later in your memory, sometimes you rack your brains to recall where you saw them.

After so many years, Maigret no longer noticed that when he arrived, always slightly winded, at the top of the bare, dusty stairs of the Police Judiciaire, he would pause a moment, glancing automatically at the glassed-in cage that served as a waiting room and was called the aquarium by some colleagues, Purgatory by others. Perhaps they all paused there, in what had become a kind of occupational reflex.

Even on mornings like this one, when clear, bright sunlight as cheerful as lilies-of-the-valley shone on Paris and made the pink chimney pots gleam, a lamp glowed all day in the windowless Purgatory, where daylight entered only from the immense corridor.

Sometimes you'd see some rather disreputable characters in the armchairs and on the green velvet chairs, familiar customers rounded up by an inspector during the night and now waiting to be questioned, or perhaps informers, or witnesses summoned the previous day who looked up with hangdog faces whenever anyone walked by.

For some mysterious reason, that was where the photographs of policemen killed in the line of duty were displayed, in two black frames with gold fillets. Other people passed through Purgatory, men and women from what is known as high society, who at first remained standing, as if they'd be summoned any minute now, as if they were there simply for some routine matter. After a good while, you'd see them draw closer to a chair on which they would eventually sit down, and it was not unusual to find them slumped there in dejection three hours later, having lost all sense of their class privilege.

That morning, there was only one man in Purgatory, and Maigret noticed that he was the sort who was commonly called rat-faced. He was on the thin side. His sloped and balding brow was crowned with a froth of reddish hair. His eyes must have been blue or violet, and his nose seemed to thrust itself all the more forwards over a receding chin.

From our schooldays on, we meet people like that everywhere, whom we tend not to take seriously, God knows why.

Maigret felt he had paid so little attention that, if he had been asked, as he pushed open his office door, who was in the waiting room, he might not have known what to reply. It was 8.55. The window was wide open, and a light mist, of a blue tinted with gold, was rising from the Seine. He had put on his between-season overcoat for the first time that year, but the air was still crisp, air you felt like drinking as if it were a light white wine, air that made your face feel taut.

As he took off his hat he looked briefly at the visiting card placed in plain sight on his desk blotter. The ink was pale. *Joseph Gastin, teacher.* Then, in a right-hand corner, in smaller letters obliging him to lean closer, *Saint-André-sur-Mer.*

Making no connection between this card and the rat-faced man, he simply wondered where he'd heard of Saint-André-sur-Mer before. Out in the corridor, the bell rang for the daily briefing. He took off his overcoat, picked up a dossier he had prepared the day before and, as he had done for so many years, set off for the commissioner's office. Along the way he encountered other inspectors, whose eyes all revealed the same mood he'd seen in passers-by in the street.

'This time, spring is here!'

'So it seems.'

'We're going to have a splendid day.'

Sunshine streamed in through the big windows of the commissioner's office as if into a country church, and pigeons cooed on the stone ledge outside.

Everyone who entered rubbed his hands together and said:

'Spring is here.'

They were all over forty-five, and the matters they were about to discuss were of a serious, at times even a macabre nature, yet they delighted like children in the suddenly mild air and especially in the light that bathed the city, turning every street corner, façade, roof and all the cars crossing the Pont Saint-Michel into pictures anyone would be glad to hang on the wall.

'Have you seen the deputy director of the bank in Rue de Rivoli, Maigret?'

'I have an appointment with him in half an hour.'

Nothing of importance. His week was practically empty. The deputy director of a bank branch in Rue de Rivoli, a few steps from Les Halles, suspected one of his employees of certain irregularities.

Looking out of a window, Maigret filled his pipe while his colleague from Special Branch discussed a different case involving a senator's daughter who had got herself into a compromising situation.

Back at his office, Maigret found Lucas with his hat already on his head, waiting to accompany him to Rue de Rivoli.

'We're going on foot?'

It was close by. The visiting card had slipped Maigret's mind. Going past Purgatory, he noticed the rat-faced man again, along with two or three other customers, including a nightclub proprietor whom he recognized, who was there in connection with the senator's daughter.

They reached Pont-Neuf, the two of them, Maigret striding along while Lucas, with his short legs, had to struggle to keep up with him. Later on, they would have been hard put to say what they'd talked about. Perhaps they had simply been looking around them. At Rue de Rivoli, the air smelled strongly of fruits and vegetables, and lorries were loading up baskets and slatted crates.

They went into the bank, listened to the explanations of the deputy director, then toured the premises while keeping a discreet eye on the employee under suspicion.

In the absence of evidence, they would set a trap for him. They discussed the details, shook hands. Outside again, Maigret and Lucas found the air so balmy that they carried their overcoats on their arms, which gave them a kind of holiday feeling.

In Place Dauphine, they stopped with the same impulse.

'How about a quick one?'

It was early yet for an aperitif, but they both felt that the taste of Pernod would go marvellously with the springtime atmosphere. They stepped into the Brasserie Dauphine.

'Two Pernods, and quickly!'

'Do you know anything about Saint-André-sur-Mer?'

'I think it's somewhere in Charente.'

That reminded Maigret of the beach at Fouras, in the sun, and the oysters he'd eaten on the terrace of a small bistro at this same hour, around 10.30 in the morning, washed down with a bottle of the local white wine, at the bottom of which had been a little sand.

'Do you think the employee is crooked?'

'The deputy director appears convinced of it.'

'He seems like just some poor fellow.'

'We'll know in two or three days.'

They went along Quai des Orfèvres, up the great staircase, and, once again, Maigret paused. Rat-face was still there, leaning forwards, his long, bony hands clasped in his lap. He looked up at the inspector, who thought he saw reproach in the man's eyes.

In his office, he found the visiting card where he had left it and rang for the office boy.

'He's still there?'

'Since eight this morning. He got here before I did. He insists on speaking to you personally.'

Lots of people, especially the mad and the half-mad, asked to speak personally to the chief of police or to Maigret, whose name they were familiar with thanks to the newspapers. They refused to be seen by any other inspector and some would wait the entire day, return the next morning, stand up hopefully whenever they saw the detective chief inspector pass – only to sit back down and wait some more.

'Show him in.'

Maigret sat, filled a few pipes and motioned to the man now ushered in to take the chair across from him.

'This is you?' he asked, holding the visiting card.

Seeing the man close up, he realized that he had probably not slept, for his complexion was grey, his eyelids red and his eyes glittered unhealthily. The visitor clasped his hands as he had in the waiting room, so tightly that the joints cracked.

Instead of answering the question, he looked at Maigret with both anxiety and resignation, murmuring:

'You've heard the news?'

'About what?'

The man looked surprised, confused, perhaps disappointed.

'I thought everyone knew already. A reporter had arrived before I left Saint-André yesterday evening. I took the night train. I came straight here.'

'Why?'

The fellow seemed intelligent but was clearly very upset, uncertain how to begin his story. Maigret intimidated him. He had probably heard about him for years and, like many people, held him in almost God-like esteem.

At a distance, this had seemed easy. Now he was before a man of flesh and blood puffing gently on his pipe and watching him with wide-open, almost indifferent eyes.

Was this how he had imagined him? Wasn't he beginning to regret coming here?

'They must be thinking that I've run away,' he remarked nervously, with a bitter smile. 'If I were guilty, the way they're sure I am, and if I'd meant to flee, I wouldn't be here, right?'

'It's hard for me to answer that question without more information,' said Maigret softly. 'Of what are you accused?'

'Of killing Léonie Birard.'

'Who is accusing you?'

'The entire village, more or less openly. The lieutenant from the gendarmerie didn't dare arrest me. He admitted frankly to me that he had no proof, but asked me not to go anywhere.'

'You left anyway?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

The visitor, too tense to remain seated for long, sprang to his feet stammering:

'May I?'

He had no idea what to do with himself or how to behave.

'At times I even wonder what's happening to me.'

He pulled a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow; the handkerchief must have still smelled of the train, and his sweat.

'Have you had any breakfast?'

'No. I was in a hurry to get here. I absolutely did not want to be arrested before that, you understand?'

How could Maigret have understood?

'Why, exactly, did you come to see me?'

'Because I have confidence in you. I know that, if you want to, you will discover the truth.'

'When did this lady . . . what did you say her name was again?'

'Léonie Birard. She used to be our postmistress.'

'When did she die?'

'She was killed on Tuesday morning. The day before yesterday. Shortly after ten in the morning.'

'You are accused of the crime?'

'You were born in the countryside, I read that in a magazine. You spent most of your youth there. So you know how things are in a small village. Saint-André has only 320 inhabitants.'

'One moment. The crime you're talking about was committed in Charente?'

'Yes. About fifteen kilometres north-west of La Rochelle, not far from the Pointe de l'Aiguillon. Do you know it?'

'A little. But I happen to belong to the Police Judiciaire de Paris and have no jurisdiction over Charente.'

'I considered that.'

'In which case . . .'

The man was wearing his best suit, which was shabby; his shirt was worn at the collar. Motionless in the middle of the office, he had bowed his head and was staring at the carpet.

'Of course . . .' he sighed.

'What do you mean?'

'I was wrong. I don't know any more. It just seemed like the right thing to do.'

'What did?'

'To come and place myself under your protection.'

'Under my protection?' repeated Maigret in surprise.

Gastin steeled himself to look up at him, with the air of a man who wonders where he stands.

'Back there, even if they don't arrest me, they might harm or do away with me.'

'They don't like you?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'First, because I'm the teacher and the secretary at the village hall.'

'I don't understand.'

'You've been away from country life for a long time. They've all got money. They're farmers or mussel-farmers. You know the mussel-farms?'

'The ones along the coast?'

'Yes. We're right in the heart of the mussel-farm and oyster-bed region. Everyone owns at least a bit of one. There's big money in it. They're rich. Almost everyone has a car or a small van. Well, do you know how many of them pay taxes on this income?'

'Not too many, I dare say?'

'Not a one! In the village, only the doctor and I pay taxes. Naturally, I'm the one they call a loafer. The way they see it, they're the ones who pay me. When I complain that the children are skipping school, they tell me to mind my own business. And when I insisted that my students greet me properly in the street, they thought I was putting on airs.'

'Tell me about the Léonie Birard case.'

'You'll really listen?'

The look in his eyes brightened with this renewed hope. He forced himself to sit, tried to speak calmly, although his voice still quavered with ill-contained emotion.

'You would have to understand the layout of the village. Here, it's hard to explain. As in almost every village, the school is behind the village hall. That's also where I live, on the other side of the courtyard, and I have a scrap of kitchen garden. The weather on the day before yesterday, Tuesday, was about the same as it is today, a true spring day, and it was a neap tide.'

'Is that important?'

'During neap tides, meaning when the tides are at their weakest, no one goes out to the mussels or the oysters. You understand?'

'Yes.'

'Beyond the school courtyard are gardens and the backs of several houses, including Léonie Birard's.'

'How old was she?'

'Sixty-six. As village hall secretary, I know everyone's exact age.'

'Of course.'

'It's been eight years since she retired. She became almost a complete invalid, no longer leaving her house, where she walked with a cane. A spiteful woman.'

'Spiteful in what way?'

'She hated the whole world.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. She was never married. She had a niece who lived with her for a long time and who married Julien, the tinsmith, who is the village officer as well.'

On another day, these stories might have bored Maigret. That morning, with sunlight bringing a spring warmth through his window, with his pipe that had a fresh taste to it, he listened, smiling vaguely, to the words that reminded him of a different village, where there were also dramas involving the postmistress, the teacher, the village officer.

'The two women no longer see each other, because Léonie didn't want her niece to marry. She doesn't see Doctor Bresselles, either, whom she accuses of trying to poison her with his drugs.'

'He tried to poison her?'

'Of course not! That's to show you what kind of woman she is, or rather, was. Back when she was the postmistress, she used to listen to phone conversations, read postcards, so she knew everyone's secrets. It wasn't hard for her to set people one against the other. Most quarrels among families or neighbours sprang up because of her.'

'So she wasn't well liked.'

'Certainly not.'

'In that case . . .'

Maigret seemed to be saying that, clearly, the death of a universally detested woman simplified things, leaving everyone free to rejoice.

'Except that, they don't like me, either.'

'Because of what you've told me?'

'That and the rest of it. I'm not a local. I was born in Paris, Rue Caulaincourt, in the eighteenth arrondissement, and my wife is from Rue Lamarck.'

'Does your wife live with you in Saint-André?'

'We live together, with our son, who is thirteen.'

'Does he go to your school?'

'There is only one.'

'Do his classmates resent him for being the teacher's son?'

Maigret knew about that as well. He remembered it from his own childhood. The tenant farmers' sons resented him for being the son of the estate manager, who collected their fathers' rent payments.

'I don't show him any favouritism, I swear to you. I even suspect him of intentionally doing less well than he could in school.'

The man had gradually calmed down. You no longer sensed the same fear in his eyes. He was not a madman inventing a story to make himself interesting.

'Léonie Birard had chosen me as her bête noire.'

'For no reason?'

'She'd claim that I egged the children on against her. I state categorically, inspector, that this is not true. On the contrary, I have always tried to make them behave like