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Georges Simenon Maigret and the Old People



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Maigret and the Old People

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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

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Translated by SHAUN WHITESIDE



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1.

It was one of those exceptional months of May, the kind you only encounter two or three times in your life, and which have the luminosity, the taste, the smell of childhood memories. Maigret called it a 'May of hymns', because it reminded him both of his first communion and his first spring in Paris, when everything was still new and wonderful to him.

In the street, on the bus, in his office, he was often pulled up short, struck by a far-away sound, by a warm breeze, by the bright patch of a blouse that carried him back twenty or thirty years.

The day before, when they were about to go to dinner with the Pardons, his wife had asked him, almost blushing:

'Don't I look too silly in a floral dress, at my age?'

That evening their friends the Pardons had introduced a novelty. Rather than inviting them to their house, they had taken the Maigrets to a little restaurant on Boulevard du Montparnasse, where the four of them had dined outside.

Maigret and his wife, without a word, had exchanged knowing glances, because it was outside this very restaurant, thirty years before, that they had enjoyed their first meal together.

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‘Do they have mutton stew?’

The restaurant had changed owners, but there was still mutton stew on the menu, wobbly lamps on the tables, potted plants in tubs and Chavignol by the carafe.

All four of them were very cheerful. At the café, Pardon had taken from his pocket a journal with a white cover.

‘By the way, Maigret, they’re talking about you in the *Lancet*.’

Maigret, who knew the name of the famous and very austere English medical journal, had frowned.

‘I mean that they’re talking about your profession in general. The article is by one Dr Richard Fox, and I will translate the passage that will interest you more or less literally:

“A skilful psychiatrist, based on his scientific knowledge and surgical experience, is quite well placed to understand human beings. But it is possible, particularly if he is influenced by theory, that he will understand them less well than an exceptional schoolteacher, than a novelist, or even a policeman.”’

They had discussed this for a while, sometimes joking, sometimes in a more serious tone. Then the Maigrets had walked together along silent streets.

Maigret was not yet aware that the London doctor’s words would come to mind several times over the next few days, or that the memories stirred in him by this perfect month of May would come to seem almost like a premonition.

The very next day, on the bus that took him towards Châtelet, he found himself looking at faces with the same curiosity as when he had just arrived in the capital.

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And it seemed strange to him to be climbing the stairs of the Police Judiciaire as detective chief inspector and receiving respectful greetings on the way. Was it really such a long time since he had first stepped, awestruck, into this building where the police chiefs still seemed like figures of legend to him?

He felt both light and melancholy. With the window open, he went through his mail and called in young Lapointe to give him instructions.

In twenty-five years, the Seine hadn't changed, and neither had the passing boats, or the anglers who were still in the same spot as if they hadn't moved from it.

Taking little puffs on his pipe, he did his housework, as he called it, ridding the office of the files that were piled up there, clearing up unimportant matters, when the telephone rang.

'Can you come and see me for a moment, Maigret?' the commissioner asked.

Without hurrying, Maigret made towards the chief's office and went and stood by the window.

'I have just had a strange phone call from Quai d'Orsay. Not from the foreign minister in person, but from his cabinet chief. I'm being asked to send someone down there as a matter of urgency, someone capable of taking responsibility. Those are the words they used.

"An inspector?" I asked.

"It would be better if it was someone more important. It's probably a crime."

The two men looked at each other with a hint of mischief in their eyes, because neither of them was fond of

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ministries, let alone one as stuffy as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

‘I thought you would want to go there yourself . . .’

‘Perhaps that would be better . . .’

The commissioner picked up a piece of paper from his desk and held it out to Maigret.

‘You’ll have to ask for a certain Monsieur Cromières. He’s waiting for you.’

‘Is he the cabinet chief?’

‘No. He’s the person who is dealing with the matter.’

‘Should I take an inspector with me?’

‘I know nothing more than what I have just told you. These people like to be mysterious.’

Maigret took Janvier along in the end, and they both took a taxi. At Quai d’Orsay they weren’t directed towards the main staircase but, at the end of the courtyard, towards a narrow and rather uninviting staircase, as if they were being ushered through the wings at a theatre or the service entrance of a restaurant. They wandered along the corridors for a while before finding a waiting room, and a liveried bailiff, indifferent to Maigret’s name, made him fill in a form.

At last they were led into an office, where a functionary, very young and immaculately dressed, was standing still and silent, facing an old woman as impassive as himself. It looked as if they had been waiting like that for a long time, probably since the phone call from Quai d’Orsay to the Police Judiciaire.

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret?’

Maigret introduced Janvier, whom the young man barely deigned to glance at.

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‘Since I don’t know what the matter is, I asked one of my inspectors to come along just in case . . .’

‘Take a seat.’

Cromières liked above all to give himself important airs, and there was a very condescending ‘Foreign Affairs’ tone in his way of speaking.

‘If the ministry directly approached the Police Judiciaire . . .’

He uttered the word ‘ministry’ as if it were a sacrosanct institution.

‘. . . it is because, inspector, we find ourselves in the presence of a highly unusual case . . .’

While observing him, Maigret also observed the old woman, who must have been deaf in one ear, because she craned her neck to hear better, her head lowered, focusing her attention to the movement of the man’s lips.

‘Mademoiselle . . .’

Cromières consulted a file on his desk.

‘Mademoiselle Larrieu is the maidservant, or rather the housekeeper, of one of our most distinguished former ambassadors, the Count of Saint-Hilaire, who I am sure you have heard of . . .’

Maigret remembered the name from reading it in the papers, but it seemed to go back to a time long past.

‘Since his retirement, about a dozen years ago, the Count of Saint-Hilaire has lived in Paris, in his apartment on Rue Saint-Dominique. Mademoiselle Larrieu appeared here at half past eight this morning, and had to wait for a while before being received by a suitably senior official.’

Maigret imagined the empty offices at half past eight

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in the morning, the motionless old woman in the waiting room, her eyes fixed on the door.

‘Mademoiselle Larrieu has worked for the Count of Saint-Hilaire for over forty years.’

‘Forty-six,’ she corrected him.

‘Forty-six, then. She followed him to different postings and looked after his house. For the last twelve years she has lived alone with the ambassador in his apartment on Rue Saint-Dominique. It’s there that, this morning, after finding the bedroom empty when she brought her employer his breakfast, she found him dead in his office.’

The old woman looked at each of them in turn, her eyes keen, searching and suspicious.

‘According to her, Saint-Hilaire had been shot by one bullet or several.’

‘She didn’t go to the police?’

The fair-haired young man assumed a smug look.

‘I understand your surprise. Don’t forget that Mademoiselle Larrieu has lived much of her life in the diplomatic milieu. While the count may no longer have been active, she still felt that a certain discretion was required . . .’

Maigret glanced at Janvier.

‘And it didn’t occur to her to call a doctor?’

‘Apparently the death leaves no doubt.’

‘Who is at Rue Saint-Dominique at the moment?’

‘No one. Mademoiselle Larrieu came straight here. To avoid any misunderstandings or wasted time, I am authorized to affirm that the Count of Saint-Hilaire was not in possession of any state secrets, and that we should not

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seek a political cause for his death. Extreme caution is also indispensable. When a case concerns a prominent man, particularly one who worked for the Foreign Ministry, the newspapers tend all too often to puff these stories and come up with the most unlikely hypotheses . . .’

The young man got to his feet.

‘Might I suggest that we go there now?’

‘You too?’ Maigret asked innocently.

‘Don’t worry. I have no intention of interfering in your inquiry. If I come with you it is only to make sure that there is nothing at the scene that might cause us embarrassment.’

The old woman had stood up as well. All four of them went down the stairs.

‘It will be better to take a taxi. It will be more discreet than a ministry limousine . . .’

The journey was ridiculously short. The car stopped outside an imposing late eighteenth-century house with no crowd, no onlookers in front of it. Beneath the arch, once they had passed through the coach-gate, it was cool, and they could see, in what looked more like a drawing room than a lodge, a concierge in a uniform as imposing as the one worn by the bailiff at the ministry.

They climbed four steps to the left. The lift was motionless, in a dark marble hall. The old woman took a key from her bag and opened a walnut door.

‘This way . . .’

She led them along a corridor to a room that must have overlooked the courtyard, but whose shutters and curtains were closed. It was Mademoiselle Larrieu who

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turned on the electric switch, and, at the foot of a mahogany table, they saw a body lying on the red carpet.

The three men took off their hats with the same movement, while the old maidservant looked at them with a kind of challenge.

‘What did I tell you?’ she seemed to be muttering.

There was no need to lean over the body, in fact, to know that the Count of Saint-Hilaire was well and truly dead. A bullet had entered the right eye, exploding the skull, and, judging by the rips in the black velvet dressing gown and the bloodstains, other bullets had struck the body in several places.

Monsieur Cromières was the first to approach the desk.

‘You see. Apparently he was busy correcting proofs . . .’

‘He was writing a book?’

‘His memoirs. Two volumes have already been published. It would be ridiculous to see that as the cause of his death, because Saint-Hilaire was the most discreet of men, and his memoirs were literary and artistic in style, rather than political.’

Cromières used flowery language and liked the sound of his own voice, and Maigret was starting to get irritated. There they were, the four of them, in a room with closed shutters, at ten o’clock in the morning, while the sun was shining outside, looking at a twisted and bloody old man.

‘I suppose,’ the inspector growled, not without irony, ‘that we still need to involve the prosecutor’s office?’

There was a telephone on the desk, but he preferred not to touch it.

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‘Janvier, go and call from the lodge. Alert the prosecutor’s office and the local chief inspector . . .’

The old woman looked at them one after the other as if she had been given the job of keeping an eye on them. Her eyes were hard, without sympathy or human warmth.

‘What are you doing?’ Maigret said as he saw the man from the ministry opening the doors of a bookshelf.

‘I’m taking a look . . .’

He added with a confidence disagreeable in one so young:

‘It is my role to check, just in case, that there are no papers here whose disclosure might be inopportune . . .’

Was he as young as he looked? Which service did he actually belong to? Without waiting for the inspector’s assent, he studied the contents of the library, opening files which he put back in place one after another.

Meanwhile, Maigret paced back and forth, impatient and ill-humoured.

Cromières attacked the other furniture, the drawers, and the old woman was still standing near the door, her hat on her head and handbag in her hand.

‘Would you take me to his bedroom?’

She walked ahead of the man from the ministry, while Maigret stayed in the office, where Janvier joined him soon afterwards.

‘Where are they?’

‘In the bedroom . . .’

‘What are we doing?’

‘Nothing for now. I’m waiting for this gentleman to be so kind as to make room for us.’

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He wasn't the only thing that was irritating Maigret. It was also the way in which the case was presented and, perhaps more than anything, the unfamiliar world in which he found himself suddenly immersed.

'The chief inspector will be here in a moment.'

'Have you told him what it's about?'

'I just asked him to bring the pathologist.'

'Did you phone Criminal Records?'

'Moers is on the way with his men.'

'And the prosecutor's office?'

'They're on their way too.'

The office was spacious and comfortable. While there was nothing solemn about it, it did have a certain refinement that had struck the inspector as soon as he walked in. Every piece of furniture, every object was beautiful in itself. And the old man on the ground, with the top of his head almost blown away, maintained quite a handsome appearance in this context.

Cromières came back, followed by the old housekeeper.

'I don't think there's anything more to be done here. Once again, I recommend prudence and discretion. It cannot be a suicide, since there is no weapon in the room. Are we agreed on that? I will leave you to discover whether anything has been stolen. In any case, it would be unpleasant if the press were to make a lot of noise about this business . . .'

Maigret looked at him in silence.

'I will telephone you, if you like, to see if there are any fresh developments,' the young man went on. 'It may well be that you need some information, and you can always come to me.'

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