Georges Simenon

Maigret's Patience

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Maigret's Patience

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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'.

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Translated by DAVID WATSON

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1.

The day had begun like a memory from childhood: dazzling and flavoursome. For no particular reason, except that life was good, there was a smile in Maigret's eyes as he ate his breakfast. Madame Maigret's eyes were no less joyful as she sat opposite him.

The windows of the apartment were wide open, letting in the smells of the outside world, the familiar sounds of Boulevard Richard-Lenoir and the air, which was already warm and shimmering; a fine mist filtered the rays of the sun and made them almost palpable.

'Are you tired?'

He was surprised by the question and replied as he sipped his coffee, which seemed to taste so much better than on other days:

'Why should I be tired?'

'All that work you did yesterday, in the garden . . . You haven't used a spade or a rake for months.'

It was Monday, Monday 7 July. On Saturday evening they had taken the train to Meung-sur-Loire, to the little house they had been setting up for years, in anticipation of the day when, according to the regulations, Maigret was due to retire. In just over two years' time! At the age of fifty-five! As if a man of fifty-five, who has never really had a day's illness in his life and doesn't suffer from any

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infirmity, becomes overnight no longer capable of running the Crime Squad!

But what Maigret had the most trouble getting his head round was that he had lived for fifty-three years.

'Yesterday,' he corrected her, 'I was mainly asleep.'

'In full sun!'

'With my handkerchief over my face . . .'

What a splendid Sunday! A stew simmering in the low kitchen with its blue stone tiles, the scent of St John's Wort permeating the house, Madame Maigret bustling from one room to another, a scarf wrapped around her head because of the dust, Maigret in shirt-sleeves, his collar open, a straw hat on his head, weeding the garden, digging, hoeing, raking, and then finally dozing off after lunch and a glass of the local white wine in a red and yellow striped hammock chair where the sun soon shone on him, but without rousing him from his torpor . . .

On the train back home they both felt heavy and sluggish, their eyelids stinging, and they brought with them an odour that reminded Maigret of his childhood in the country, a mixture of hay, dried earth and sweat: the smell of summer.

'Another coffee?'

'I'd love one.'

Even his wife's apron with the small blue checks enchanted him with its freshness, its sheer simplicity, just as he was enchanted by the reflection of the sunlight in the panes of the dresser.

'It's going to be a hot day!'

'Very.'

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He would open the windows that overlooked the Seine and work without his jacket on.

'What would you say to a lobster mayonnaise for lunch?'

It was good too to walk down the street, where the awnings of the shops formed rectangles of shade, good to wait for the bus, standing next to a young woman in a light dress on the corner of Boulevard Voltaire.

His luck was in. An old-style bus with a platform pulled up at his stop, so he could continue smoking his pipe as he watched the streets and the pedestrians gliding by.

Why did it remind him of the brightly coloured procession that had brought the whole of Paris on to the streets many years ago, shortly after he had got married, when he was still a timid young secretary in the local police station at Saint-Lazare? Some foreign sovereign and his plumed entourage were being driven in four-horse landaus while the helmets of the Republican Guard glittered in the sun.

Paris smelled the same as it did today; the light was the same, the feeling of languor the same. He wasn't thinking about retirement then. The end of his career, the end of his life seemed a long way off, too far off to worry about. Now here he was preparing a home for his old age!

No melancholy. Just a gentle smile. Le Châtelet. The Seine. An angler – there was always at least one – next to Pont au Change. Then lawyers in black gowns gesticulating in the courtyard of the Palais de Justice.

Finally, Quai des Orfèvres, of which he knew every stone, and from which he had nearly been banished.

Less than ten days earlier, a self-important prefect, who

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didn't like policemen of the old school, had asked him to resign – take early retirement, as he had so elegantly put it – because of some misdemeanours the inspector was supposed to have committed.

Everything, or nearly everything, in the dossier he flicked through, was false, and for three days and nights, without being able to call on his colleagues for help, Maigret had tried to prove it.

Not only had he succeeded, but he had extracted a confession from the perpetrator of the plot, a dentist in Rue des Acacias, who had a number of crimes on his conscience.

But that was over and done with now. After saluting the two men on guard duty, he climbed the wide staircase, went into his office, opened the window, took off his hat and his jacket and stood contemplating the Seine and its boats while slowly filling a pipe.

Although his days were unpredictable, he had some almost ritualistic habits, things he did without thinking, like, once he had lit his pipe, going through the door into the inspectors' room.

There were some empty places among the typewriters and telephones, because the holidays had already begun.

'Morning, boys . . . Would you come in here a moment, Janvier?'

Janvier was leading the investigation into the thefts from jewellers' shops, more precisely from jewellers' windows. The last one had taken place the previous Thursday on Boulevard Montparnasse, using a method that had proved highly effective for more than two years.

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'Anything new?'

'Hardly anything. Youngsters again: between twenty and twenty-five, according to witnesses. There were two of them, as usual. One smashed the window with a tyre lever. The other stuffed the jewels into a black cloth bag, soon helped by his comrade. It was all carefully orchestrated. A cream-coloured Citroën DS pulled up in the street next to them just long enough for the two men to jump in, then it disappeared into the traffic.'

'Handkerchiefs masking their faces?'

Janvier nodded.

'The driver?'

'The witnesses aren't all in agreement, but he seemed to be young as well, with very dark hair and a tanned complexion. Just one other lead, which may amount to nothing: a vegetable-seller noticed a short time before the burglary a broad-shouldered, shortish man with a boxer's face, standing just a few metres from the jeweller's as if he was waiting for someone. He kept looking up to check the time on the big clock above the shop window and then consulting his own watch. According to this woman, he never took his right hand out of his pocket. While the heist took place, he didn't move, but as soon as the cream-coloured car had gone, he hopped into a taxi.'

'Did you show the vegetable-seller the photos of the suspects?'

'She spent three hours with me in Records. But in the end she didn't formally identify anyone.'

'What did the jeweller say?'

'He was tearing out the few hairs he had left. He said

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that if the theft had taken place just three days earlier it wouldn't have been that serious, because normally he doesn't have any really expensive jewellery on display. But last week he had the opportunity to buy a job lot of emeralds and on Saturday morning he decided to put them in the window.'

What Maigret didn't yet realize was that the events unfolding in his office that morning were the beginning of the end of a case that would henceforth be referred to at Quai des Orfèvres as Maigret's longest investigation.

Sometimes real events can, over the course of time, acquire the status of legend. 'Maigret's longest interrogation' was still much discussed, for example, and new comers to the department would hear all about it. It had lasted twenty-seven hours, during which the waiter from the Brasserie Dauphine had delivered a constant supply of beer and sandwiches.

Maigret wasn't the only one to grill the suspect. Lucas and Janvier took it in turns, each time starting the interrogation from scratch. Although this seemed very tedious, it did in the end produce a full confession.

Another thing that stuck in everyone's mind was 'Maigret's most dangerous arrest', the arrest of a gang of Poles, in the middle of a crowd, in broad daylight, without a single shot being fired, even though the men were armed to the teeth and were determined to save their skins.

Arguably, the business of the jewels started for Maigret twenty years earlier, when he became interested in a certain Manuel Palmari, a Corsican crook who had started small as a pimp.

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There was a changing of the guard at that time. The old bosses, who before the war owned brothels, ran secret gambling dens and organized spectacular burglaries, had retired one after the other, to the banks of the Marne or to the South of France, and for the less lucky and less clever ones to the prison in Fontevrault.

The youngsters, who imagined they would tear everything up, moved in and took over. They were more audacious than the old guard, and for several months the police were wrong-footed and kept at bay.

This was the beginning of the attacks on debt collectors and the jewellery heists in broad daylight with lots of people around.

Eventually some of the culprits were arrested. The crimes stopped for a period of time, flared up again, decreased once more, and then restarted with a vengeance two years later.

'The kids we arrest are just the footsoldiers,' Maigret had stated from the beginning of these raids.

Not only were there new faces each time, but those whom they arrested mostly didn't have a police record. They weren't from Paris either. They appeared to have come up from the provinces, particularly Marseille, Toulon and Nice, for a specific job.

Once or twice only they went for the large jewellers on Place Vendôme and Rue de la Paix, but these had the deterrent of alarm systems.

They quickly changed their tactics. Now they targeted small jewellers, no longer in the centre of Paris, but further out, even in the suburbs.

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'Well, Manuel?'

Ten times, a hundred times, Maigret had questioned Palmari, first at the Clou Doré, the bar he had bought on Rue Fontaine and turned into an upmarket restaurant, then later at the apartment he shared with Aline on Rue des Acacias. Manuel had never made an issue about this, and they might have passed for two old friends having a get-together.

'Sit down, inspector. What can I do for you?'

Manuel was now nearly sixty and, since he had been shot by a machine gun while lowering the shutter at the Clou Doré, confined to a wheelchair.

'Do you know a young man who was born on your island, a nasty piece of work called Mariani?'

Maigret filled his pipe; this always took a while. In the end he came to know every nook and cranny of the apartment on Rue des Acacias, especially the little corner room, full of cheap novels and gramophone records, where Manuel spent his days.

'What's he done, this Mariani? And why is it, inspector, that I am always the one who gets pestered about these things?'

'I've always been straight with you, haven't I?'

'That's true.'

'I've even done you one or two favours.'

That too was true. Without Maigret's intervention, Manuel would have found himself in a spot of bother on more than one occasion.

'If you would like that to continue, tell me more . . .'

So Manuel did: in other words, he named names.

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'You know, it's just a guess. I'm not involved and I have a clean record. I don't know this Mariani personally. I've just heard tell . . .'

'By whom?'

'I don't know, just a rumour going round . . .'

Since the shooting incident, when he had lost a leg, Palmari rarely received visitors. He knew his telephone was tapped and he was careful only to make calls that would not attract suspicion.

Moreover, for the last few months, since the jewel robberies had started up again, there were two inspectors permanently stationed in Rue des Acacias – two, because one had to follow Aline wherever she went while his partner continued to keep an eye on the building.

'OK . . . Just as a favour . . . There is an inn near Lagny, I can't remember the name, kept by an old man who is half deaf and his daughter. I think Mariani is keen on the girl and likes staying at the inn.'

Yet every time in the last twenty years Manuel had shown signs of having come into some money, this had coincided with an upsurge in jewellery thefts.

'Have they found the car?' Maigret asked Janvier.

'In a sidestreet near Les Halles.'

'Any fingerprints?'

'Nothing. Moers went over it with a fine-tooth comb.'

It was time for the briefing in the commissioner's office, and Maigret joined the other divisional heads.

Each of them summed up their cases in progress.

'And what about you, Maigret? How's it going with the jewel thefts?'

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'Do you know, sir, how many jewellers there are in Paris, not to mention the inner suburbs? More than three thousand. Some of them only sell cheap jewels and watches, but you could say that roughly a thousand of them have something on display that would tempt an organized gang.'

'What's your conclusion?'

'Let's take the jeweller's on Boulevard Montparnasse. For months it had only low-grade stock on display. By chance the other week the owner got hold of some expensive emeralds. On Saturday morning he thought he would put them on display. On Thursday his window was smashed and the jewels were stolen.'

'Do you suppose . . .?'

'I'm almost certain that a man in the trade does a tour of the jewellers' shops, sometimes moving to a different neighbourhood. Someone is alerted whenever any nice pieces are displayed in a suitable location. Then they bring up from Marseille or somewhere some youngsters who have learned the ropes but who aren't yet on the police's radar. On two or three occasions I've set traps by asking jewellers to display some rare pieces.'

'But the gang haven't fallen for it?'

Maigret shook his head and relit his pipe. He merely mumbled:

'I am patient.'

The commissioner, however, was not so patient and made no secret of the fact that he was far from happy.

'And this has been going on . . . how long?'

'Twenty years, sir.'

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