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CLASSICS

Georges Simenon Maigret Hesitates



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Maigret Hesitates

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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 HOWARD CURTIS



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1.

‘Hello, Janvier.’

‘Morning, chief.’

‘Good morning, Lucas. Good morning, Lapointe.’

When he got to Lapointe, Maigret couldn’t help smiling, and not only because the young inspector was sporting a tight-fitting new suit, pale-grey with thin red flecks. Everyone was smiling that morning, in the streets, on the buses, in the shops.

The previous day, a Sunday, had been grey and windy, with squalls of cold rain that recalled winter, and now suddenly, even though it was only 4 March, they had woken to spring.

True, the sun was still a little acidic, the blue of the sky fragile, but there was a gaiety in the air and in the eyes of people in the streets, a kind of complicity, a joy in living and in rediscovering the delicious smell of Paris in the morning.

Maigret had come just in a jacket and had walked most of the way. Immediately on getting to his office, he had gone to the window and half opened it. The Seine, too, was a different colour, the red lines on the funnels of the tugboats more vibrant, the barges done up like new.

He had opened the door to the inspectors’ room.

‘Coming, boys?’

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It was what they called the ‘little briefing’, to distinguish it from the real briefing, for which the heads of departments gathered in the commissioner’s office at nine o’clock every morning. This one was just for Maigret’s closest colleagues.

‘Did you have a good day yesterday?’ he asked Janvier.

‘We took the children to see my mother-in-law in Vaucresson.’

Lapointe, embarrassed by his new suit – so early for the time of year – stood apart from the others.

Maigret sat down at his desk, filled a pipe and started going through the mail.

‘This one’s for you, Lucas. It’s about the Lebourg case.’

He held out other documents to Lapointe.

‘To be taken to the prosecutor’s office.’

It was still too early to speak of foliage, but there was nevertheless a hint of pale green in the trees along the river.

There was no big case in progress, none of those cases that fill the corridors of the Police Judiciaire with reporters and photographers and are the cause of urgent telephone calls from the higher echelons. Nothing but routine. Cases to be followed up . . .

‘A madman or a madwoman,’ he announced, picking up an envelope on which his name and the address of Quai des Orfèvres were written in block capitals.

The envelope was white and of good quality. The stamp had been postmarked at the post office in Rue de Miromesnil. What struck Maigret first, when he took the sheet of paper out, was the paper itself, a beautiful thick vellum that wasn’t the usual size. The top of it must have been

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cut off to remove an engraved letterhead, a task that had been carefully carried out with the help of a ruler and a well-sharpened blade.

The text, like the address, was in very regular block capitals.

‘Maybe not a madman,’ he grunted.

Detective Chief Inspector,

I do not know you personally but what I have read about your investigations and your attitude towards criminals inspires trust. This letter may surprise you, but please do not throw it in the wastepaper basket too quickly. It is neither a joke nor the work of a maniac.

You know better than I do that reality is sometimes far-fetched. A murder will be committed soon, probably in a few days. Perhaps by someone I know, perhaps by myself.

I am not writing to you to prevent the tragedy occurring. In a way, it is inevitable. But when it does take place, I would like you to know.

If you take me seriously, please place the following small ad in *Le Figaro* or *Le Monde*: ‘K. R. Expect a second letter.’

I do not know if I will write it. I am very confused. Some decisions are hard to make.

I may see you one day, in your office, but by then we will be on different sides of the barrier.

Your devoted servant.

He had stopped smiling. With a frown, he let his gaze wander over the sheet of paper, then looked at his colleagues.

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‘No, I don’t think this is a madman,’ he repeated. ‘Listen.’

He read out the letter slowly, emphasizing certain words. He had received letters of this kind before, but most of the time the language was less carefully chosen and usually certain phrases were underlined. Often, they were written in red or green ink, and many contained spelling mistakes.

Here, the hand had not shaken. The strokes were firm and unadorned, without any crossings-out.

He held the paper up to the light and read the watermark: *Morvan Vellum*.

Every year he received hundreds of anonymous letters. With few exceptions, they were written on cheap paper, the kind found in neighbourhood grocery stores, and occasionally the words had been cut out of newspapers.

‘No specific threat,’ he said in a low voice. ‘An underlying sense of anxiety . . . *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, two newspapers read above all by the thinking middle classes . . .’

He again looked at the three of them.

‘Will you take care of it, Lapointe? The first thing to do is get in touch with the paper manufacturer, who’s presumably in the Morvan.’

‘Got it, chief.’

This was the start of a case that was to give Maigret more trouble than many crimes that made the front pages of the newspapers.

‘And place that ad.’

‘In *Le Figaro*?’

‘In both papers.’

A bell announced the briefing, the real one, and Maigret

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walked to the commissioner's office with a file in his hand. Here, too, the open window let in the noises of the city. One of the chief inspectors was sporting a sprig of mimosa in his buttonhole and felt the need to explain:

'They're selling them in the street for charity.'

Maigret didn't mention the letter. His pipe tasted good. Casually observing the faces of his colleagues as they took turns at presenting their little cases, he mentally calculated the number of times he had participated in this ritual. Thousands.

But there had been many more times when he had envied the detective chief inspector who had been his superior in the old days – envied him because every morning he was admitted to the holy of holies. Mustn't it be wonderful to be head of the crime squad? He hadn't dared dream of it at the time, any more than Lapointe or Janvier, or even good old Lucas, dreamed of it today.

It had happened all the same, and in all the years it had lasted he had stopped thinking about it, except on a morning like this, when the air had a delicious taste and the din of the buses raised a smile rather than a curse.

Returning to his office an hour later, he was surprised to find Lapointe standing by the window. His fashionable suit made him look thinner, taller and much younger. Twenty years earlier, an inspector would not have been allowed to dress like this.

'It was almost too easy, chief.'

'You tracked down the paper manufacturer?'

'Géron and Son, who've owned the Morvan Mills in

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Autun for three or four generations. It's not a factory, more of a cottage industry. The paper's made to measure, either for de luxe publications, especially poetry, apparently, or for writing paper. The Gérons only have about ten workers. From what they told me, there are still a number of paper mills like that in the region.'

'Do you have the name of their representative in Paris?'

'They don't have a representative. They work directly with publishers of art books and with two stationers, one in Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, the other on Avenue de l'Opéra.'

'Right at the end of Faubourg Saint-Honoré, on the left?'

'I think so, judging by the number. Roman's Stationers.'

Maigret knew the shop from having often looked in the window, which was full of invitations and business cards, with names you didn't often hear these days:

The Count and Countess of Vaudry have the honour to . . .

The Baroness of Grand-Lussac is happy to announce . . .

Princes, dukes, genuine or not – you wondered if they still existed. They invited each other to dinners, hunting parties and bridge games, announced the marriage of their daughter or the birth of a baby, all this on luxury paper.

In the second window, there were emblazoned desk blotters and morocco-bound folders for daily menus.

'You'd better go and see them.'

'Roman's?'

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‘I have the feeling that’s the right kind of neighbourhood.’

The shop on Avenue de l’Opéra was distinguished, too, but also sold pens and standard stationery items.

‘I’ll go there now, chief.’

The lucky devil! Maigret watched him leave, like when, at school, a teacher had sent one of his classmates on an errand. He himself had only everyday chores to deal with, the usual paperwork, a report of no interest whatever for an examining magistrate who would file it away without reading it because the case had been hushed up.

The smoke from his pipe was starting to turn the air blue, and a very light breeze wafted in from the Seine, stirring the papers on the desk. By eleven o’clock, Lapointe was already back, exuberant and full of life.

‘It’s still too easy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s as if that paper was chosen deliberately. By the way, Roman’s Stationers is no longer run by Monsieur Roman, who died ten years ago, but by a Madame Laubier, a widow in her fifties who wouldn’t let me go. She hasn’t ordered paper of that quality for five years, because there are no buyers. Not only is it massively expensive, it’s also hard to use in a typewriter. She still had three customers. One died last year, a count who owned a chateau in Normandy and a racing stable. His widow lives in Cannes and has never ordered any writing paper. There was also an embassy, but when the ambassador changed the new one ordered a different kind of paper.’

‘There’s still one customer?’

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‘There’s still one customer, and that’s why I said it’s too easy. The customer’s name is Émile Parendon, he’s a lawyer, and he lives on Avenue Marigny. He’s been using this paper for more than fifteen years and won’t look at any other kind. Do you know the name?’

‘Never heard of him. Has he ordered paper recently?’

‘The last time was last October.’

‘With a letterhead?’

‘Yes, a very discreet one. Always a thousand sheets and a thousand envelopes.’

Maigret picked up the phone.

‘Get me Maître Bouvier, please . . . The father.’

A lawyer he had known for more than twenty years, whose son was also a member of the bar.

‘Hello, Bouvier? Maigret here. I hope I’m not disturbing you.’

‘You? Never.’

‘I’d like some information.’

‘Confidential, of course.’

‘Yes, just between ourselves. Are you familiar with a colleague of yours named Émile Parendon?’

Bouvier seemed surprised.

‘What on earth could the Police Judiciaire possibly want with Parendon?’

‘I don’t know. Probably nothing.’

‘It does seem unlikely. I’ve met Parendon five or six times in my life, no more than that. He almost never sets foot in the Palais de Justice and then only for civil cases.’

‘How old is he?’

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‘Hard to say. He could be forty, he could just as easily be fifty.’

He must have turned to his secretary.

‘My dear, can you look in the legal directory and find me the date of birth of Parendon . . . Émile. Actually, there is only one.’

Then, to Maigret:

‘You must have heard of his father, who either is still alive or died just recently. Professor Parendon, a surgeon at Laennec, member of the Academy of Medicine, member of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, etcetera, etcetera. Quite a character! When I see you, I’ll tell you all about him. He came to Paris very young from somewhere deep in the country. He was small and sturdy, like a young bull, and he didn’t just *look* like a bull, if you get my meaning . . .’

‘What about his son?’

‘He’s more of a jurist than anything else. He specializes in international law, especially maritime law. They say he’s the top man in the field. People come from all over the world to consult him, and he’s often asked to arbitrate in difficult cases with large sums of money at stake.’

‘What kind of man is he?’

‘Nondescript. I’m not sure I’d recognize him in the street.’

‘Is he married?’

‘Thank you, my dear . . . Here we are, I have his age. Forty-six . . . Is he married? I was going to say I couldn’t remember, but now it’s come back to me. Of course he’s married. And not to just anybody! He married one of

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Gassin de Beaulieu's daughters. You know Gassin de Beaulieu. He was one of the toughest magistrates at the time of the Liberation. Then he was appointed chief justice of the Court of Cassation. He's probably retired to his chateau in the Vendée. The family's very rich.'

'Do you know anything else?'

'What else do you expect me to know? I've never had to defend these people in court.'

'Do they go out a lot?'

'The Parendons? Not in the circles I mix in.'

'Thank you, my friend.'

'You owe me one . . .'

Maigret reread the letter, which Lapointe had placed on his desk. He read it twice, three times, and each time his face clouded over even more.

'You realize what all this means?'

'Yes, chief. It's going to land us in the shit. Sorry for the expression, but—'

'It's probably not strong enough. An eminent surgeon, a chief justice, a specialist in maritime law who lives on Avenue Marigny and uses the most expensive paper there is . . .'

The kind of clientele that Maigret feared the most. He already had the impression he was walking on eggshells.

'You think he's the one who wrote that—?'

'Him or someone from his household. Someone who has access to his writing paper, anyway.'

'It's strange, isn't it?'

Maigret, who was looking through the window, didn't reply. People who write anonymous letters are not

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generally in the habit of using their own writing paper, especially if it's of such rare quality.

'Well, can't be helped! I'll have to go and see him.'

He looked for the number in the phone book, then called on the direct line. A woman's voice replied:

'Maître Parendon's secretary.'

'Good morning, mademoiselle. This is Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire. If it's not too much trouble, would it be possible for me to have a word with Maître Parendon?'

'One moment, please. I'll see.'

It couldn't have been easier. Almost immediately, a man's voice said:

'Parendon speaking.'

There was a questioning hint in the tone.

'I'd like to ask you, maître—'

'Who is this? My secretary didn't quite catch your name.'

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.'

'Now I understand why she was surprised. She must have understood what you said, but didn't imagine it could really be you. I'm very pleased to hear your voice, Monsieur Maigret. I've often thought about you. I've even occasionally been on the verge of writing to you to ask your opinion about certain matters. Knowing how busy you must be, I didn't dare.'

There was a shyness to Parendon's voice, and yet it was Maigret who was the more embarrassed of the two. He felt ridiculous now, with his meaningless letter.

'As you can see, I'm the one disturbing you. And what's

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more, over a trifle. I'd prefer to talk to you about it in person, because I have a document to show you.'

'When would you like to do that?'

'Are you free at all this afternoon?'

'Would three thirty suit you? I confess I'm in the habit of taking a short nap and don't feel well when I miss it.'

'Three thirty would be fine. I'll come to your home. And thank you for your kind cooperation.'

'On the contrary, I'm delighted you're coming.'

When he hung up, he looked at Lapointe as if emerging from a dream.

'Did he seem surprised?'

'Not in the slightest. He didn't ask any questions. He's apparently delighted to make my acquaintance. Just one thing puzzles me. He claims he almost wrote to me several times to ask my opinion. But he doesn't deal with criminal cases, only civil ones. His speciality is the maritime code, about which I know absolutely nothing. Ask my opinion about what?'

Maigret cheated that day. He phoned his wife and told her he was detained at work. He felt like celebrating this spring sunshine by having lunch at the Brasserie Dauphine, where he even indulged himself in a pastis at the counter.

Maybe he was going to land in the shit, as Lapointe had said, but at least things were starting pleasantly enough.

Maigret had taken the bus as far as the Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées, then walked along Avenue Marigny, and in those hundred metres he did on foot he came across at

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