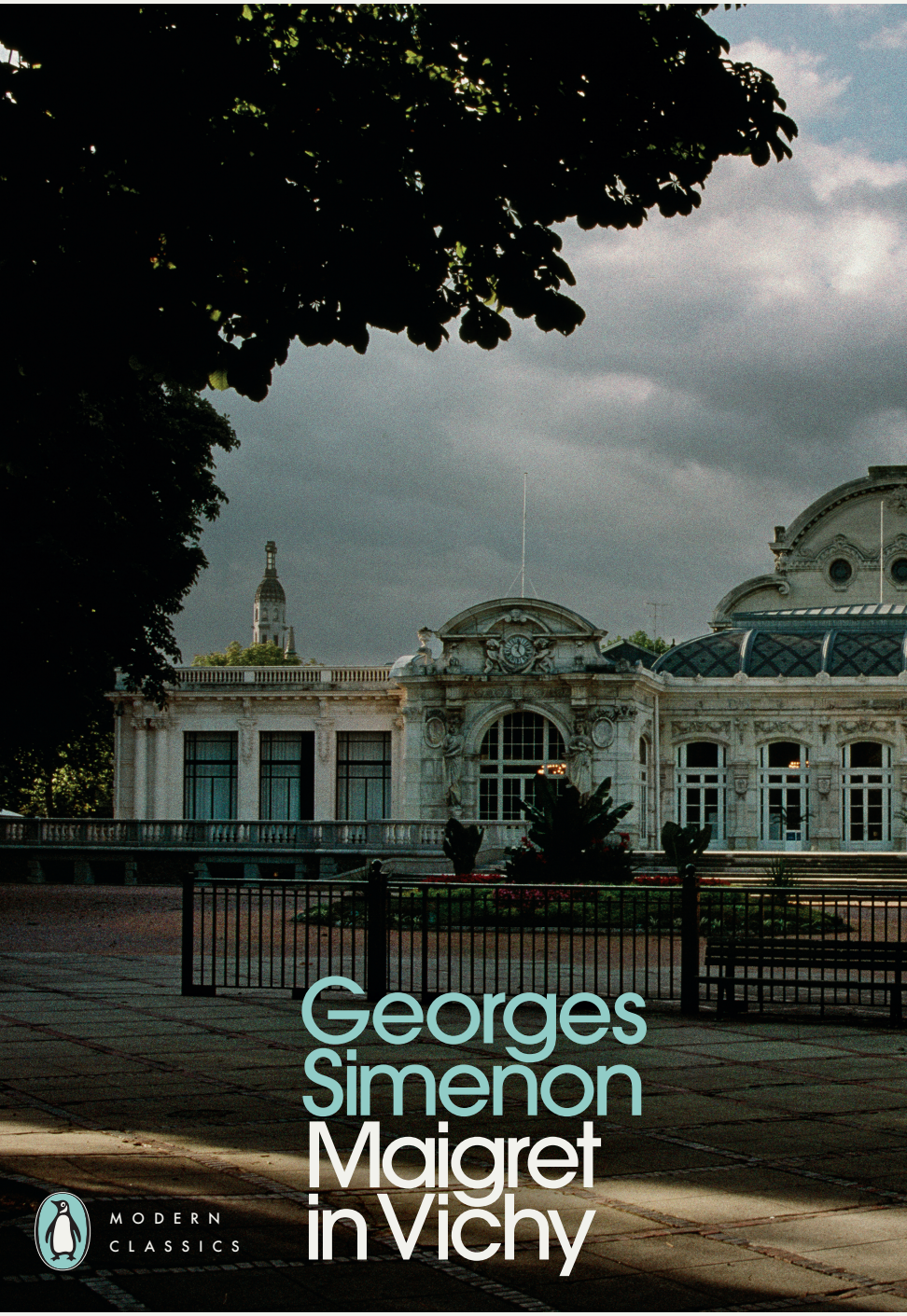
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Maigret in Vichy

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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 in Vichy

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ

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Maigret in Vichy

1.

'Do you know them?' Madame Maigret asked in an undertone as her husband turned around to look at a couple they had just passed.

The man had also turned around and was smiling. He even gave the impression he was about to retrace his steps to shake Maigret's hand.

'No . . . I don't think so . . . I don't know . . .'

The man was short and stout, his wife barely taller than him and podgy. Why did Maigret have the feeling that she was Belgian? Because of her fair complexion, her almost yellow hair and her bulging blue eyes?

This was the fifth time at least that their paths had crossed. The first time, the man had stopped dead and his face had lit up as if in delight. Hesitant, he had half-opened his mouth, while Maigret frowned and racked his brains in vain.

The man's physique and face looked familiar. But who the devil could he be? Where had he met this cheerful little fellow and his marzipan wife before?

'Honestly, I can't think . . .'

It wasn't important. Besides, the people here were not the same as in normal life. Any moment now, the music would strike up. On the bandstand, with its spindly columns and ornate decorations, the uniformed musicians

were raising their brass instruments to their lips, their eyes on the conductor. Was it the firemen's band or the municipal workers? They had as many decorations and stripes as South American generals, blood-red shoulder straps and white baldrics.

Hundreds of yellow iron chairs were arranged around the bandstand, in ever-widening circles as far as the eye could see, and nearly all of them were occupied by men and women waiting in solemn silence.

In a couple of minutes' time, at nine o'clock, under the spreading trees in the park, the concert would begin. After a muggy day, the evening air was almost chilly, and the breeze made the leaves rustle softly while the light from the rows of lamp posts with milky globes made pools of a paler green on the dark grass.

'Don't you want to sit down?'

There were a few free chairs, but they never sat down. They walked at a leisurely pace. Other visitors were strolling around aimlessly like them, half listening to the music, couples, but also many on their own, men and women who were nearly all past middle age.

It was a little unreal. The casino was lit up, white and sumptuous with over-elaborate 1900s-style mouldings. At certain moments, time seemed to have stood still, until a car horn sounded on Rue Georges-Clemenceau.

'She's here . . .' whispered Madame Maigret, jerking her chin.

It had turned into a game. She'd got into the habit of following her husband's gaze and she could tell when he was surprised or intrigued.

What else did they have to do with their days? They ambled around casually. From time to time, they paused, not because they were out of breath but to admire a tree, a house, the play of light and shadow, or a face.

They could have sworn they'd been in Vichy for an eternity, whereas this was only their fifth day. They had already created a schedule for themselves which they followed meticulously as if it were of the utmost importance, and their days were measured out by various rituals which they adhered to religiously.

Was Maigret really being serious? His wife sometimes wondered, darting furtive glances at him. He was different from when they were in Paris. His step was more languid, his expression less intense. Most of the time, his vague smile expressed satisfaction, certainly, but also a sort of gloomy irony.

'She's wearing her white stole . . .'

From roaming the park and the banks of the Allier, the boulevards lined with plane trees and the teeming or deserted streets at the same time every day, they had come to recognize a number of faces and figures that were already part of their world.

Did not everyone here replicate the same actions at the same time of day, and not only at the springs where they drank their hallowed beakers of water?

Maigret's gaze picked out someone in the crowd and became more focused. That of his wife followed.

'Do you think she's a widow?'

They could have nicknamed her the lady in mauve, or rather the lady in lilac, because she always wore something

lilac-coloured. That evening, she must have arrived late and had only managed to find a seat at the back.

The previous day, she had afforded a sight that was both unexpected and moving. The Maigrets had walked past the bandstand at eight o'clock in the evening, one hour before the concert. The little yellow chairs were arranged in circles so regular that they could have been drawn with a compass.

All the chairs were empty, except one in the front row, where the lady in lilac was sitting. She was not reading by the light of the nearest lamp. She was not knitting. She was doing nothing, showing no impatience. Sitting upright, with both hands resting flat on her knees, she remained absolutely still, staring straight ahead, cutting a distinguished figure.

She looked as if she had come straight out of a picture book. She wore a white hat, whereas most of the women here were bareheaded. The stole around her shoulders was white too, and her dress the lilac colour of which she seemed fond.

Her face was very long and narrow, her lips thin.

'She must be a spinster, don't you think?'

Maigret avoided saying anything. He wasn't on a case, wasn't following any leads. Nothing was forcing him to watch people to try and discover their inner truth.

He couldn't help doing so, now and then, because it had become a reflex. For no reason, he sometimes took an interest in a person out for a stroll, and tried to guess their profession, their family circumstances and the kind of life they led when they weren't taking the waters.

It was difficult. After a few days or a few hours, everyone became part of the little circle . . . Most eyes had the same slightly vacant serenity, apart from those of the very sick, who were recognizable by their deformities, their gait, but especially from a mixture of anxiety and hope.

The lady in lilac was among those who could have been called Maigret's inner circle, the people he'd noticed from the start and who intrigued him.

It was hard to fathom her age. She could just as easily have been forty-five or fifty-five and the years had passed her by without leaving any particular scars.

One could guess she was used to living in silence, as with nuns, accustomed to solitude. Perhaps she even preferred that solitude. Whether walking or sitting, as she was at present, she paid no attention to promenaders or to her neighbours, and she would probably have been most surprised to learn that outside of any professional obligation, Detective Chief Inspector Maigret was trying to gauge her personality.

'I don't think she's ever lived with a man . . .' he said as the music struck up on the bandstand.

'Or with children. Perhaps with a very elderly person needing care, an aged mother, for example?'

In that case, she couldn't be a very good nurse because she lacked gentleness and the gift of communication. If her gaze did not light on people but slid over them without seeing them, it was because it was turned inwards. It was herself, and only herself, that she looked at, and she probably derived a secret satisfaction from doing so.

'Shall we walk around the park?'

They weren't there to listen to the music. It was simply part of their routine to go past the bandstand at that time, and besides, there wasn't a concert every day.

On some evenings, that area of the park was almost deserted. They strolled across it, turned right, and set out down the tree-lined avenue that ran parallel to a street full of neon signs. There were hotels, restaurants, shops and a cinema. They hadn't been there yet, it wasn't on their itinerary.

Some people were following the same route, almost at the same pace, others were going in the opposite direction. A few took a shortcut to the casino theatre where they'd arrive late, and there were glimpses of the occasional dinner-jacket or evening gown.

Elsewhere, these folk led different lives, in different neighbourhoods of Paris, in provincial towns or in Brussels, Amsterdam, Rome or Philadelphia.

They belonged to particular social circles that had their rules, their taboos and their passwords. Some were wealthy, others poor. There were invalids whose lives the treatment merely prolonged, and others whom it enabled to spend the rest of the year without having to worry too much about their health.

Here, they all mingled. For Maigret, it had all begun uneventfully, one evening when they were having dinner at the Pardons'. Madame Pardon had cooked pressed duck, one of her specialities, which Maigret loved.

'Isn't it any good?' she'd asked anxiously, seeing Maigret eat only a few mouthfuls.

Whereas Pardon suddenly looked at his guest with concern.

'Are you in pain?'

'Not really . . . It's nothing . . .'

Even so, the doctor noticed that his friend's face was pale and that there were beads of sweat on his forehead.

He said no more during the meal. Maigret had barely taken a sip from his glass. When offered a vintage Armagnac with the coffee, he raised his hand.

'Not tonight . . . I'm sorry . . .'

Only later, Pardon said quietly:

'Shall we go into my consulting room for a moment?'

Maigret followed him reluctantly. For some time he had foreseen that this would happen one day, but he kept postponing that day. The doctor's consulting room was neither big nor luxurious. On the desk a stethoscope lay next to vials, tubes of ointment and paperwork, and the bed where patients were examined seemed to have retained the deep imprint of the last one.

'What's wrong, Maigret?'

'I don't know. Age, probably . . .'

'Fifty-two?'

'Fifty-three . . . I've had a lot of work recently, worries . . . No sensational cases . . . Nothing exciting, on the contrary . . . On the one hand, lots of red tape, because we're in the middle of overhauling the Police Judiciaire, and on the other, this spate of attacks on lone girls and women, sometimes involving rape . . . The press is making a hoo-ha and I don't have enough men to set up the necessary patrols without decimating the department . . .'

'Are you having problems with your digestion?'

'Occasionally . . . Sometimes, like this evening, my

stomach's in a knot, I have pain, or rather a sort of tightening of my chest and abdomen . . . I feel heavy, tired . . .'

'Would you mind if I examined you?'

His wife, in the next room, must have guessed, Madame Pardon too, and that bothered Maigret. He had a horror of anything even remotely connected with illness.

As he removed his tie, jacket, shirt and vest, he recalled one of his adolescent notions.

'I can't live,' he'd announced at the time, 'with pills, potions, a diet, reduced activity. I'd rather die than be an invalid . . .'

His idea of 'an invalid' was someone who was forever listening to their heart, worrying about their stomach, their liver or their kidneys, and exhibiting their naked body to the doctor on a regular basis.

He no longer wished to die young, but he was putting off the time when he would become ill.

'My trousers too?'

'Drop them a little . . .'

Pardon took his blood pressure, examined him and felt his stomach and abdomen, pressing certain places with his fingers.

'Does that hurt?'

'No . . . Maybe a little tender . . . No, lower . . .'

Now he was like the others, anxious, ashamed of his fears and not daring to look his friend in the face. He got dressed again, awkwardly. Pardon's tone hadn't changed.

'How long is it since you've had a holiday?'

'Last year I managed to get away for a week, then I was called back because—'

'What about the previous year?'

'I stayed in Paris . . .'

'With the life you lead, your organs should be in five times worse shape than they are—'

'My liver?'

'It has nobly withstood the strain you put it under . . . It's slightly enlarged, for certain, but not hugely swollen, and it has maintained its elasticity . . .'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing specific . . . More or less everything . . . You're tired, that's a fact, and it's not a one-week holiday that will rid you of that fatigue . . . How do you feel when you wake up in the morning?'

'Crabby . . .'

That made Pardon laugh.

'Do you sleep well?'

'My wife says I'm restless and that I sometimes talk in my sleep . . .'

'You're not filling your pipe?'

'I'm trying to smoke less.'

'Why?'

'I don't know . . . I'm also trying to drink less . . .'

'Have a seat.'

Pardon sat down too, and, at his desk, looked more like a doctor than in the dining room or the living room.

'Now listen to me . . . You're not ill and you enjoy exceptional good health given your age and your occupation . . . So get that into your head once and for all . . . Stop worrying about the odd twinge and vague aches and pains, and don't start being nervous about climbing stairs—'

'How do you know?'

'And you, when you question a suspect, how do you know?'

They both smiled.

'Now we're in late June. Paris is sweltering. You are going to take a nice holiday, without leaving an address, if possible. In any case, you must avoid telephoning Quai des Orfèvres every day . . .'

'I could do,' said Maigret gruffly. 'Our little house in Meung-sur-Loire—'

'You'll have time to enjoy that once you've retired . . . This year, I have other plans for you. Do you know Vichy?'

'I've never set foot there, even though I was born less than fifty kilometres away, near Moulins . . . In those days, people didn't all have cars . . .'

'By the way, does your wife have a driving licence?'

'We've even bought a four-CV . . .'

'I think that a course of treatment at Vichy would do you the world of good . . . A thorough cleansing of your body . . .'

He nearly burst out laughing on seeing Maigret's expression.

'Take the waters?'

'A few glasses of water each day . . . I don't think the specialist will make you sit in mud baths or hot springs, or prescribe mechanotherapy and all that nonsense . . . You're not a serious case . . . Twenty-one days of a regular lifestyle, without any worries—'

'Without beer, without wine, without eating out, without—'

'How many years have you been indulging?'

'I've had my share . . .' he admitted.

'And you'll have more, even if that share is slightly reduced . . . Is that agreed?'

Maigret was amazed to hear himself say, as he stood up, like any other of Pardon's patients:

'It's agreed.'

'When?'

'In a few days' time, a week at most, once I've tied up all the loose ends . . .'

'I'm going to refer you to one of my colleagues there who's more knowledgeable about these things than I am . . . I know half a dozen specialists . . . Let's see . . . Rian is still young and isn't at all pompous . . . I'll give you his address and telephone number . . . I'll write to him tomorrow to inform him.'

'Thank you, Pardon . . .'

'That wasn't too painful, was it?'

'You were very gentle.'

In the living room, he gave his wife a reassuring smile, but they didn't talk about illness at the Pardons.

It was only when they reached Rue Popincourt, walking arm in arm, that Maigret muttered, as if it was something unimportant:

'We're spending our holiday in Vichy . . .'

'Are you going to take the waters?'

'May as well, while I'm there!' He laughed. 'I'm not ill. Apparently, I'm in exceptionally good health. That's why I'm being sent to drink water . . .'

It didn't just date from that visit to Pardon. For some time he'd had the strange impression that everyone was

younger than him, whether it was the prefect or the examining magistrates, defendants he was questioning or, now, this Doctor Rian, who was fair-haired and affable and not yet forty.

A kid, in other words, a young man at the most, nevertheless earnest and self-assured, who was going to decide his fate.

This thought both annoyed and worried him, because he didn't feel like an old man, or even one who was ageing.

Despite his youthfulness, Doctor Rian lived in a pretty pink-brick residence on Boulevard des États-Unis and, while the décor was reminiscent of the 1900s, it was still opulent-looking, with its marble staircases, carpets, polished furniture and the maid in a frilly broderie-anglaise cap.

'I presume your parents are no longer living . . . ? What did your father die of?'

The doctor wrote his replies down on an index card, painstakingly, in the calligraphic style characteristic of a Sergeant-Major nib pen.

'What about your mother . . . ? Do you have any brothers . . . ? Sisters . . . ? Childhood illnesses . . . ? Measles . . . ? Scarlet fever . . . ?'

Not scarlet fever but measles, very young, when his mother had still been alive. It was even the warmest, most comforting memory he had of her, because he was to lose her shortly afterwards.

'What sports have you played . . . ? No accidents . . . ? Do you often get throat infections . . . ? Heavy smoker, I presume . . . ?'