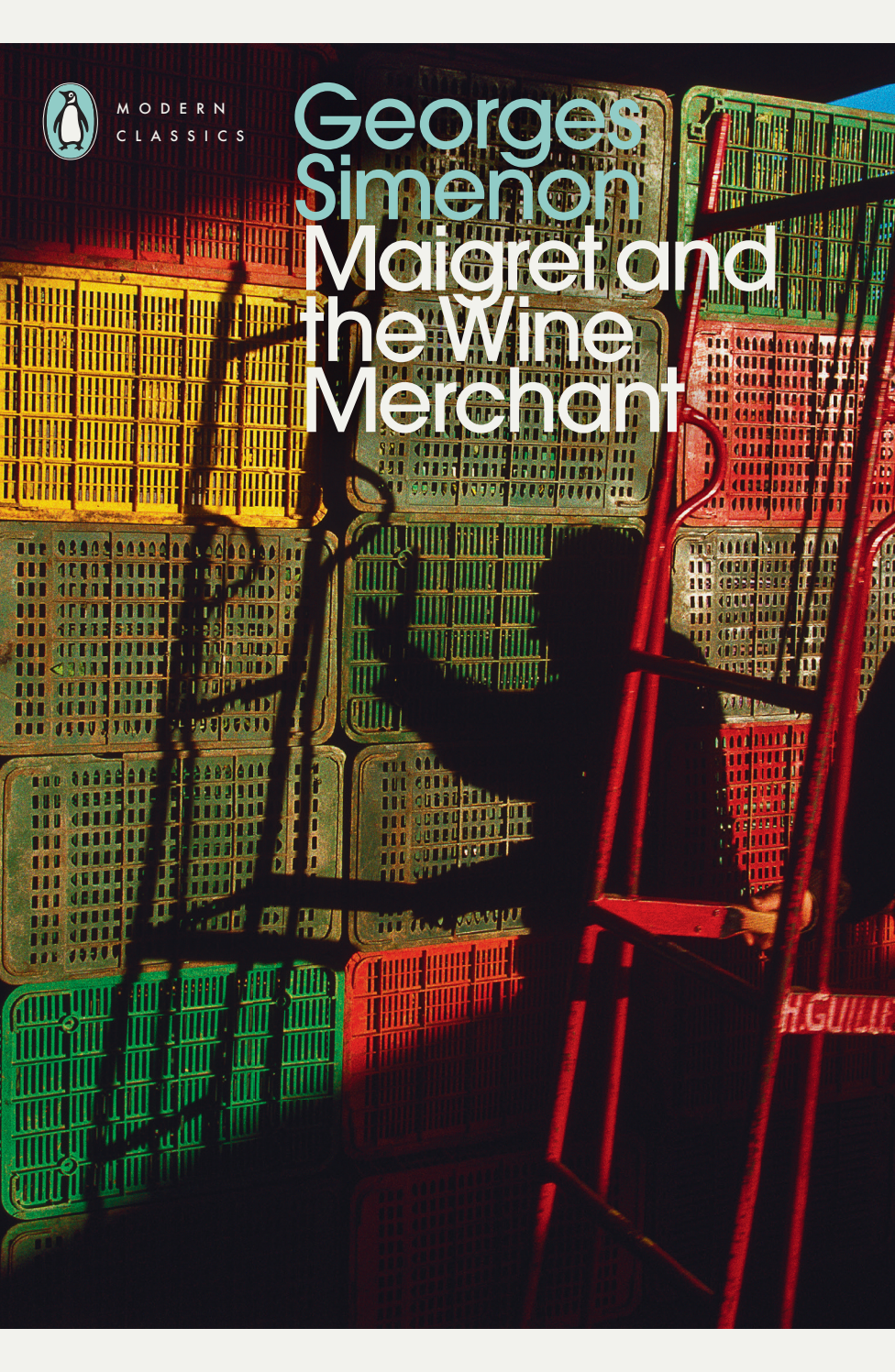




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Georges Simeñon Maigret and the Wine Merchant



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Maigret and the Wine Merchant

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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 and the Wine
Merchant*

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ



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One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
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


Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *Maigret et le marchand de vin* by Presses de la Cité 1970
This translation first published 2019
Published in Penguin Classics 2025
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Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-30428-0

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Maigret and the Wine Merchant

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1.

‘You killed her to rob her, didn’t you?’

‘I didn’t want to kill her. The proof is, I only had a toy gun.’

‘You knew she had a lot of money?’

‘I didn’t know how much. She’d worked all her life so by the age of eighty-two or eighty-three, she must have had savings.’

‘How many times did you go and ask her for money?’

‘I don’t know. A few times. When I came to see her, she knew why I was there. She was my grandmother and would always give me five francs. Just think what you can do with five francs when you’re unemployed.’

Maigret was solemn and brooding, a little sad. It was a mundane case, a sordid crime of the kind committed almost every week: a boy still in his teens who mugs an elderly woman living alone to fleece her. The difference with Théo Stiernet was that he’d attacked his grandmother.

The boy was much calmer than expected and he answered the questions as best he could. He was a slightly chubby, listless boy, with a round face, almost no chin, bulging eyes and thick lips, so red that at first glance he appeared to be wearing lipstick.

‘Five francs, the same as a kid coming to get his weekly pocket money!’

‘Is her husband dead?’

‘He died nearly forty years ago. She ran a little

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haberdashery in Place Saint-Paul for ages. It's only in the past two years that she's had difficulty walking and had to give up the shop.'

'What about your father?'

'He's in the nut house at Bicêtre.'

'Is your mother still around?'

'I haven't lived with her for a long time. She's always drunk.'

'Do you have any brothers or sisters?'

'I've got a sister. She left home at fifteen and no one knows what became of her.'

He spoke without emotion.

'How did you know that your grandmother kept her money in her apartment?'

'She didn't trust banks, not even the Savings Bank.'

It was nine o'clock. The murder had been committed the previous evening at the same hour. It had taken place in the old building in Rue du Roi-de-Sicile, where Joséphine Ménard lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor. A resident from the fourth floor had passed Stiernet on the stairs as he was leaving his grandmother's. She knew him well, and they'd greeted one another.

At around 9.30, another neighbour, Madame Palloc, who lived in the apartment opposite, had dropped by for a chat with the old woman, as she often did.

She knocked, but there was no reply. The door wasn't locked and she turned the handle. Joséphine Ménard was dead, huddled on the floor, her skull split open, her face a pulp.

By six o'clock in the morning, Théo Stiernet had already been found on a bench at the Gare du Nord, where he was sleeping.

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‘What gave you the idea of killing her?’

‘I didn’t mean to. She attacked me and I was frightened.’

‘You threatened her with your toy gun?’

‘Yes. She didn’t bat an eyelid. Maybe she saw straight away that it was only a toy.’

“Get out of here, you thug!” she said. “If you think I’m afraid of you . . .”

‘She grabbed the scissors from the round table and came towards me, repeating: “Go away . . .! Go away, I say, otherwise you’ll be sorry for the rest of your life . . .”

‘She was tiny and she seemed frail, but she was very energetic.’

‘I panicked. I thought she was going to gouge my eyes out with those open scissors. I looked around for something to defend myself with. Next to the stove, there was a poker and I grabbed it.’

‘How many times did you hit her?’

‘I don’t know. She wouldn’t fall down. She carried on staring straight at me.’

‘Was her face bloody?’

‘Yes. I didn’t want her to suffer. I don’t know. I carried on hitting her.’

Maigret thought he could hear the assistant public prosecutor, in court, saying: *‘Stiernet then launched into a savage attack against his unfortunate victim . . .’*

‘What about when she collapsed?’

‘I looked at her and I couldn’t take in what had happened. I didn’t want to kill her. I swear. You can believe me.’

‘But you remained cool-headed enough to search the drawers.’

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‘Not straight away. At first I walked towards the door. Then I remembered that I only had one franc fifty left in my pocket and that I’d been thrown out of my lodgings because I owed three weeks’ rent.’

‘So you retraced your steps?’

‘Yes. I didn’t search the apartment as you seemed to be saying. I just opened a few drawers. I found an old purse which I slipped into my pocket. Then I came across a cardboard box containing two rings and a cameo brooch.’

These items were on Maigret’s desk, by his pipes, and so was the worn purse.

‘You didn’t discover her stash?’

‘I didn’t look for it. I was in a hurry to get out of there, away from the sight of her. Wherever I was in the room, she still seemed to be staring at me. On the stairs, I passed Madame Menou. I went into a bar and drank a brandy. Then, seeing as there were sandwiches on the counter, I ate three.’

‘Were you hungry?’

‘I suppose so. I ate, I drank a coffee, then I started wandering through the streets. I wasn’t much better off than before, because there was only eight francs twenty-five in the purse.’

I wasn’t much better off than before!

He had said that as if it were the most natural thing in the world and Maigret, pensive, couldn’t take his eyes off his face.

‘Why did you choose the Gare du Nord?’

‘I didn’t choose it. I ended up there by chance. It was very cold out.’

This was the 15th of December. The chill wind sprinkled tiny snowflakes on to the cobblestones like dust.

‘Did you want to get to Belgium?’

‘With the few francs I had left?’

‘What were your plans?’

‘First of all, to sleep.’

‘Did it occur to you that you’d be arrested?’

‘I didn’t think about it.’

‘What did you think about?’

‘Nothing.’

In fact, the police had found the hoard of money: twenty-two thousand francs wrapped in packaging paper on top of his grandmother’s wardrobe.

‘What would you have done if you’d discovered the money?’

‘I don’t know.’

The door opened and Lapointe came into the office.

‘Inspector Fourquet has just phoned. He wanted to speak to you, but I told him you were busy.’

Fourquet belonged to the seventeenth arrondissement, a very bourgeois, wealthy neighbourhood where murders were rare.

‘A man has been killed in Rue Fortuny, two hundred metres from the Parc Monceau. From his ID, it seems he’s quite a big shot, an important wine wholesaler.’

‘Is that all that’s known?’

‘Apparently he was walking to his car when he was hit by four bullets. There were no witnesses. It’s not a busy street and, at that moment, there was no one about.’

Maigret’s gaze fell on Stienet and he shrugged.

‘Is Lucas here?’

He went over to the door and spotted Lucas at his desk.

‘Would you come in for a minute?’

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Stiernet's round eyes went from one to the other as if none of this concerned him.

'Question him again from the beginning and write down his answers. Then have him sign the statement and take him down to the cells. You, Lapointe, come with me.'

He put on his heavy black overcoat and wound the navy-blue wool scarf knitted by Madame Maigret around his neck. Before going out, he filled a fresh pipe, which he lit in the corridor, after a last glance at the murderer.

Although it wasn't that late, there were few people out and about because of the icy wind that stung faces and blew straight through the thickest clothes. The two men clambered into one of the little black cars belonging to the Police Judiciaire and drove to the other side of Paris in record time.

In Rue Fortuny, officers were stopping traffic and preventing curious bystanders from approaching the body, which could be seen lying on the pavement. Four or five men were coming and going around it.

Fourquet was there and stepped forwards to meet Maigret.

'The neighbourhood chief inspector has just arrived, and so has the doctor.'

Maigret already knew the chief inspector well and he shook his hand. He was an elegant, pleasant man.

'Do you know Oscar Chabut?'

'Should I know him?'

'He's quite an important man, one of the biggest wine merchants in Paris: Le Vin des Moines. You'll have seen the name on lorries and posters. He has barges on the river and railway tank-wagons.'

The man lying on the pavement was corpulent but not

fat. He had the build of a rugby player. The doctor had stood up and was dusting down the knees of his trousers, which were covered in powdery snow.

‘He couldn’t have survived more than two or three minutes. The autopsy will tell us more.’

Maigret looked at the very light-blue, almost grey, staring eyes, the craggy face with a solid jaw that was beginning to sag.

The van with the team from Criminal Records pulled up by the kerb and the forensic experts brought out their equipment, as a film or television crew would.

‘Have you informed the prosecutor’s office?’

‘Yes. He’s going to send a deputy and an examining magistrate.’

Maigret looked around for Fourquet and spied him a few paces away, his long arms wrapped around his body in an attempt to keep warm.

‘Which is his car?’

There were five or six parked by the kerb, all expensive models. Chabut’s was a red Jaguar.

‘Have you searched the glove box?’

‘Yes. Sunglasses, a Michelin Guide, two road maps of Provence and a packet of cough pastilles.’

‘It’s almost certain he had just come out of a building in this street.’

Rue Fortuny wasn’t very long and, on turning round, Maigret recognized the private mansion in front of which the body still lay. It was a 1900s-style house, with ornate carved stonework around the windows. He thought he saw the cover of the spyhole in the studded oak door move.

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‘Come with me, Lapointe . . .’

He walked over to the doorstep and pressed the bell. It was some time before the door opened. A woman stood in the unlit entrance hall, half of her face and one shoulder visible from the outside.

‘What is it?’

Maigret knew who she was.

‘Good evening, Blanche.’

‘What do you want of me?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. Don’t you remember? Admittedly, it’s a good ten years since we last saw each other.’

He pushed open the door without being invited in.

‘Come in,’ he said to Lapointe. ‘You’re too young to have known Madame Blanche, as everyone calls her.’

As if he was already in familiar surroundings, Maigret turned the light switch and pushed one of the double doors that opened into a vast lounge. It was full of carpets and wall hangings, multicoloured cushions and lamps with silk shades giving out a soft glow.

Madame Blanche looked around fifty but she must have been sixty. She was a plump little woman whom some would have found very distinguished. She was wearing a black silk dress and a triple-strand pearl necklace that stood out in striking contrast.

‘As active and as discreet as ever?’

He’d first met her thirty years earlier, when she was still a streetwalker on Boulevard de la Madeleine. She was pretty and sweet, and always had a friendly smile that gave her two dimples.

Later, she became a madam’s assistant in an apartment

in Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, where clients could be assured of meeting pretty women.

She had come up in the world. Now she was the owner of this private residence offering lovers an elegant, luxurious hideaway and the best brands of champagne and whisky.

‘What happened?’ asked Maigret while she composed herself.

‘Nothing happened here. I don’t know what went on outside. I noticed some to-ing and fro-ing.’

‘You didn’t hear any shots?’

‘Were they shots? I thought it was a car backfiring.’

‘Where were you?’

‘To tell you the truth, I’d just finished eating in the kitchen. Just a little slice of bread and some ham. I never have dinner.’

‘Who is in the house?’

‘No one. Why?’

‘Who was Oscar Chabut with?’

‘Who is Oscar Chabut?’

‘You had better cooperate, otherwise I’ll have to take you to Quai des Orfèvres.’

‘I only know my clients by their first names. They are nearly all important people.’

‘And you only open the door a fraction after looking at them through the spyhole.’

‘This is a respectable establishment. I don’t accept just anyone. That’s why the Vice Squad leaves us in peace.’

‘Did you also look through the spyhole when Chabut left?’

‘What makes you think that?’

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‘Lapointe, drive her to Quai des Orfèvres, where she might be a bit more talkative.’

‘I can’t leave here. I’ll tell you what I know. I presume this Chabut is the client who left around half an hour ago.’

‘Is he a regular? Did he come here often?’

‘From time to time.’

‘Once a month? Once a week?’

‘More like weekly.’

‘Always with the same person?’

‘No, not always.’

‘Was his companion today a new one?’

She hesitated and eventually shrugged.

‘I don’t see why I should get myself into hot water. She’s been here around thirty times over the past year.’

‘Did he telephone you to tell you he was coming?’

‘As they all do.’

‘What time did they get here?’

‘Around seven.’

‘Together, or separately?’

‘Together. I recognized the red car straight away.’

‘Did they order anything to drink?’

‘The champagne was waiting for them in an ice bucket.’

‘Where is the woman?’

‘But . . . She left—’

‘After Chabut was shot?’

He caught a flicker of indecision in her eyes.

‘Of course not.’

‘You claim she left first?’

‘She did, that’s a fact.’

‘I don’t believe you, Blanche.’

He had often had to deal with establishments of this