

GEORGES SIMENON

Maigret's Madwoman

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



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Maigret's Madwoman

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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'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

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Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS



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Maigret's Madwoman

1.

Duty Officer Picot was standing to the left of the arched doorway at Quai des Orfèvres, with his colleague Latuile to the right. It was about ten o'clock. On this May morning, the sun was shining and Paris was bathed in pastel colours.

At some point, Picot noticed her, but without paying much attention: a frail little old lady, wearing a white hat, white cotton gloves and a grey dress. Her legs, slightly bowed with age, were very thin.

Was she carrying a shopping bag or a handbag? He couldn't remember. He hadn't seen her arrive. She had stopped on the pavement a few steps away from him and was peering into the courtyard of the Police Judiciaire, where the small staff cars were parked.

There are often curious onlookers, especially tourists, who come to peep inside police headquarters like that. She ventured as far as the entrance, looked the officer up and down, then turned round and walked away towards the Pont-Neuf.

Next day, Picot was once more on duty, and at about the same time of day he saw her again. On this occasion, after hesitating for quite a while, she walked up to him and spoke:

'This is where Inspector Maigret has his office, isn't it?'

‘Yes, madame. On the first floor.’

She looked up at the windows. She had very delicate and fine-drawn features, and her light grey eyes seemed to have a constant expression of surprise.

‘Thank you, officer.’

She turned away, and it was a shopping bag she was carrying, which led him to think she must live nearby.

The following day, Picot was off duty. The officer replacing him paid no attention to the little old woman who slipped inside the courtyard. She cast about for a moment before taking the door on the left and starting up the stairs. On the first floor, the long corridor intimidated her, and she seemed rather lost. Old Joseph, the usher, went up to her and asked in a kindly voice:

‘Were you looking for something?’

‘Inspector Maigret’s office.’

‘You want to speak to Inspector Maigret?’

‘Yes. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Have you been sent a summons?’

She shook her head, looking distressed.

‘Do you have to have a summons?’

‘Would you like to leave him a message?’

‘I need to speak to him personally. It’s very important.’

‘If you fill in this form for me, I’ll see if the inspector is able to receive you.’

She sat down at the table with its green baize cloth. There was a strong smell of fresh paint in the offices, which had recently been redecorated. She did not know this and thought that for an official institution the atmosphere was quite cheerful.

She tore up the first form. She wrote slowly, pausing over every word and underlining some of them. The second form went into the waste paper basket too, and then a third, and only at the fourth attempt did she seem satisfied, before going across to Joseph.

‘You will deliver this into his own hands, won’t you?’

‘Yes, madame.’

‘I suppose he’s very busy?’

‘Yes, very.’

‘Do you think he will see me?’

‘That I don’t know, madame.’

She was over eighty, possibly eighty-six or seven, and she could have weighed hardly more than a child. Her body seemed refined by the passage of time, and her skin was almost translucent. She was smiling timidly, as if to try to flirt with old Joseph.

‘Please do what you can. It’s so very important to me!’

‘Take a seat here, madame.’

He went towards one of the doors, on which he tapped. Maigret was conferring with Lapointe and Janvier, both of whom were on their feet; sounds from the outside world were reaching them through the wide open window.

Maigret accepted the form, glanced at it and frowned.

‘What’s she like?’

‘A very proper old lady, a bit shy. She asked me to insist that you see her.’

On the top line, she had written her name in quite firm and regular handwriting: *Mme Antoine de Caramé*.

The address she had given was 8a, Quai de la Mégisserie.

As the reason for her visit, she had put:

Wishes to tell Inspector Maigret something of the utmost importance. It is a matter of life and death.

By this point, the handwriting had become more shaky and the lines less straight. Some words were underlined: 'Inspector', then 'utmost importance'. And 'a matter of life and death' was underlined twice.

'Is this some madwoman?' Maigret muttered, puffing at his pipe.

'She doesn't look like it. She seemed very composed.'

At Quai des Orfèvres, they were used to receiving letters from people who were mad, or at least half mad. And almost always, they contained some words heavily underlined.

'Could you see her, Lapointe? If you don't, she'll be turning up here every morning.'

A few moments later, the old lady was being shown into the small office at the end of the corridor. Lapointe was there alone, standing by the window.

'Come in, madame, and please take a seat.'

Looking at him curiously, she asked:

'Are you his son?'

'Whose son?'

'Inspector Maigret's.'

'No, madame. I'm Inspector Lapointe.'

'But you're just a boy!'

'I'm twenty-seven.'

This was true, but it was also true that he appeared to be no more than twenty-two and was often mistaken for a student rather than a police officer.

'But it was Inspector Maigret I wanted to see.'

'Unfortunately, he's too busy just now to receive you.'

She hesitated, fiddled with her white handbag and seemed unable to make up her mind to sit down.

‘Perhaps if I came back tomorrow?’

‘It would be the same thing.’

‘Does Inspector Maigret never see anyone?’

‘Only in very important cases.’

‘But this is a very important case. It’s a matter of life and death.’

‘That’s what you wrote on the form.’

‘Yes, I did, so . . .’

‘If you could just tell me what it’s about, I’ll pass it on to Inspector Maigret myself, and he can decide.’

‘And then, perhaps he’ll see me?’

‘I can’t make any promises, but it’s not impossible.’

She seemed to be weighing up the pros and cons for a long while and finally decided to perch on the edge of a chair, facing Lapointe who had sat down behind the desk.

‘So what’s this about?’

‘First of all, I should tell you that I have lived in the same apartment for forty-two years, on Quai de la Mégisserie. On the ground floor, there’s a shop that sells birds, and when their cages are out on the pavement they sing all day. So they keep me company.’

‘But you were referring to some danger.’

‘I certainly am in some danger, but you’ll assume I’m making things up. Young people tend to think that old people aren’t right in the head any more.’

‘The thought hadn’t occurred to me.’

‘I don’t know how to explain it to you. Since the death of my second husband, twelve years ago, I have lived alone

and no one ever comes into my apartment. It's too big for me now, all on my own, but I intend to stay there until I die. I'm eighty-six, and I don't need anyone to help me cook and clean.'

'Do you have any pets? A dog or a cat?'

'No. As I told you, I hear all the birds singing downstairs, because I'm on the first floor.'

'So what is troubling you, madame?'

'It's hard to say. But five times at least, in the last couple of weeks, some of my things have been moved about.'

'What do you mean? When you come home, you find they're not in the same place as when you went out?'

'That's right. Perhaps a picture frame is crooked, or a vase is the wrong way round.'

'Are you quite sure that you are remembering correctly?'

'You see! Because I'm old, you're already doubting my memory. But as I told you, I've lived in the same apartment for forty-two years. So I know exactly where all my things are.'

'But nothing has been stolen? Nothing has disappeared?'

'No, inspector.'

'Do you keep any money in the house?'

'Very little. Just enough for my needs every month. My first husband worked at the City Council offices, and he left me a pension I can draw on regularly. I have some money put by in the Savings Bank as well.'

'Do you own any valuable objects – pictures, ornaments, anything like that?'

'I've got some things I'm attached to, but they don't necessarily have any market value.'

‘And your visitor, man or woman, hasn’t left any telltale signs? For instance, if it was raining, you might have seen footprints.’

‘But it hasn’t rained for over ten days.’

‘Or cigarette ash, perhaps?’

‘No.’

‘Does anyone else have a key to your apartment?’

‘No, I keep my key in my handbag and it’s the only one.’

He looked at her with some embarrassment.

‘So in short, you’ve come to complain simply that some objects in your home are slightly out of place.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And you’ve never surprised anyone there?’

‘No, never.’

‘And you’ve no idea who it could be?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have children?’

‘No, unfortunately, I never had any.’

‘Other relations?’

‘I have a niece who is a professional masseuse, but I don’t see her very often, although she lives just the other side of the Seine.’

‘What about friends? Men, women?’

‘Most of the people I used to know have died. And that isn’t all.’

She was speaking normally, without emphasis, and her gaze was steady.

‘I’m being followed.’

‘You mean someone is following you in the street?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen whoever is following you?’

‘I’ve seen various people, when I have turned round suddenly, but I don’t know which one it can be.’

‘Do you often leave the house?’

‘Yes, in the morning, first thing. At about eight o’clock, I go shopping in the neighbourhood. I’m sorry the central market isn’t there any more in Les Halles, because it was so close and I was used to it. Since they knocked it down, I’ve tried different shops, but it’s not the same.’

‘Is the person who follows you a man?’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘I suppose you’re back by about ten o’clock?’

‘Yes, I sit by the window and peel my vegetables.’

‘Do you stay at home in the afternoon?’

‘Only when it’s raining or too cold. Otherwise, I go and sit on a bench, almost always in the Tuileries Gardens. I’m not the only person who’s adopted a bench. There are other people, about my age, that I’ve been seeing for years in the same place.’

‘Are you being followed all the way to the Tuileries?’

‘Someone follows me when I go out. It’s as if they want to be sure I won’t be coming home again straight away.’

‘And have you sometimes?’

‘Three times. I pretended I’d forgotten something, and went back up to my apartment.’

‘And there was nobody there, of course.’

‘All the same, other times, objects have been moved. Somebody doesn’t like me, I’ve no idea why. I’ve never done any harm to anyone. Perhaps there are several of them.’

‘What was your husband’s job at the Council offices?’

‘My first husband was a chief clerk. He had a lot of responsibility. Unfortunately, he died young, of a heart attack, at forty-five.’

‘And you married again?’

‘Over ten years later. My second husband was in charge of a department at the Bazar de l’Hôtel de Ville, selling gardening implements and tools.’

‘And he also died?’

‘He’d been retired a long time by then. If he was still alive today, he’d be ninety-two.’

‘And when did he die?’

‘I thought I’d already told you that: twelve years ago.’

‘And he didn’t have any family? Was he a widower when you married him?’

‘He just had one son, who lives in Venezuela.’

‘Look, madame, I’m going to tell Inspector Maigret what you have just told me.’

‘And you think he’ll see me?’

‘If he does decide to see you, he’ll send you an appointment.’

‘You have my address?’

‘Yes, it’s on the form, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, that’s true, I was forgetting. You see, I have such trust in him. I’m convinced he’s the only person who will understand me. I’m not saying this to be rude to you, but you do look a little young.’

He escorted her to the door and then along the corridor to the big staircase.

When he went back to Maigret’s office, Janvier was no longer there.

‘Well?’

‘I think you were right, chief. Yes, she is mad. But it’s a quiet kind of madness, she’s very calm, very in control. She’s eighty-six, and I’d like to be in that kind of shape when I’m her age.’

‘So what’s this great danger she’s in?’

‘She’s lived for forty years or more in the same apartment on Quai de la Mégisserie. She was married twice and widowed twice. She claims that when she goes out, her objects get moved around.’

Maigret relit his pipe.

‘What kind of objects?’

‘Well, she might find a picture frame crooked, or some ornament that isn’t facing the same way as before.’

‘She doesn’t have a dog or a cat?’

‘No, she’s content to hear the birds singing in the shop downstairs.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Yes. She’s convinced she’s being followed.’

‘Has she spotted anyone?’

‘No, that’s the thing, but she’s absolutely sure about it.’

‘Is she likely to come here again?’

‘She’s determined to see you personally. In her eyes, you’re God Almighty, and apparently you’re the only person who will understand her. What should I do?’

‘Nothing.’

‘She’ll be back.’

‘Well, we’ll see then. But you could just go and ask the concierge at that address a few questions.’

And Maigret picked up once more the file he had been