

GEORGES

SIMENON

The New
Investigations of
Inspector Maigret

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



PENGUIN CLASSICS

The New Investigations of Inspector Maigret

'I love reading Simenon. He makes me think of Chekhov'

– William Faulkner

'A truly wonderful writer . . . marvellously readable – lucid, simple, absolutely in tune with the world he creates'

– Muriel Spark

'Few writers have ever conveyed with such a sure touch, the bleakness of human life'

– A. N. Wilson

'One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century . . . Simenon was unequalled at making us look inside, though the ability was masked by his brilliance at absorbing us obsessively in his stories'

– *Guardian*

'A novelist who entered his fictional world as if he were part of it'

– Peter Ackroyd

'The greatest of all, the most genuine novelist we have had in literature'

– André Gide

'Superb . . . The most addictive of writers . . . A unique teller of tales'

– *Observer*

'The mysteries of the human personality are revealed in all their disconcerting complexity'

– Anita Brookner

'A writer who, more than any other crime novelist, combined a high literary reputation with popular appeal'

– P. D. James

'A supreme writer . . . Unforgettable vividness'

– *Independent*

'Compelling, remorseless, brilliant'

– John Gray

'Extraordinary masterpieces of the twentieth century'

– John Banville

Copyrighted Material

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.

GEORGES SIMENON

*The New Investigations
of Inspector Maigret*

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS
and by ROS SCHWARTZ



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *Les Nouvelles Enquêtes de Maigret* by Gallimard 1944
This translation first published 2022

Copyright 1944 by Georges Simenon Ltd

Translations of 'The Hanged Couple', 'The Boulevard Beaumarchais Case',
'The Open Window', 'Monsieur Monday', 'Jeumont, Fifty-one-minute Halt',
'Death Penalty', 'Candle Wax', 'Rue Pigalle' and 'Maigret Gets It Wrong'
copyright © Howard Curtis, 2022

Translations of 'Madame Maigret's Suitor', 'The Old Lady from Bayeux',
'The Inn of the Drowned', 'Stan the Killer', 'The Étoile du Nord',
'Storm Over the Channel', 'Mademoiselle Berthe's Lover' and
'The Notary from Châteauneuf' copyright © Ros Schwartz, 2022

GEORGES SIMENON ® Simenon.tm

MAIGRET ® Georges Simenon Limited

All rights reserved

The moral right of the translators has been asserted

Set in 12.5/15 pt Dante MT Std

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: 978-0-241-48854-6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Contents

The Hanged Couple	I
The Boulevard Beaumarchais Case	18
The Open Window	36
Monsieur Monday	54
Jeumont, Fifty-one-minute Halt!	72
Death Penalty	90
Candle Wax	103
Rue Pigalle	117
Maigret Gets It Wrong	130
Madame Maigret's Suitor	143
The Old Lady from Bayeux	187
The Inn of the Drowned	229
Stan the Killer	269
The Étoile du Nord	310
Storm over the Channel	354
Mademoiselle Berthe's Lover	401
The Notary from Châteauneuf	446

Copyrighted Material

The Hanged Couple

The keeper of the lock at Le Coudray was a thin, sad-looking man in a corduroy suit, with droopy moustaches and a mistrustful expression, a type frequently encountered among estate managers. He didn't distinguish between Maigret and the fifty people – gendarmes, reporters, police officers from Corbeil and members of the prosecutor's office – to whom he had told his story over the past two days. And, while talking, he kept looking upstream and downstream at the murky surface of the Seine.

It was November. It was cold, and the white of the sky, a harsh white, was reflected in the water. 'I'd got up at six in the morning to take care of my wife.' (It struck Maigret that it was always these honest, sad-looking men who had sick wives to take care of.) 'I was still lighting the fire when I had the feeling I heard something. But it was only later, when I was making the poultice, up on the first floor, that I finally realized someone was calling out. I went back downstairs. Once I was outside on the lock, I could just about make out a black shape against the barrier. "Who's there?" I called out. "Help!" replied a hoarse voice. "What are you doing there?" I asked him. "Help!" he said again. So I took my skiff and rowed over there. I saw it was the *Astrolabe*. It was finally starting to get light,

Copyrighted Material

and at last I saw old Claessens on deck. I'd swear he was still drunk and had no more idea than I did what the barge was doing up against the barrier. The dog wasn't on its chain, I even asked him to hold on to it. And that's it.'

What mattered for him was that a barge had crashed into his barrier and might even have breached it if the current had been stronger. But the fact that the only things found on board, apart from the drunk old carter and a big sheepdog, were two hanging bodies, a man and a woman, was no longer any concern of his.

The *Astrolabe* had been pulled loose, but it was still there, 150 metres away, guarded by a gendarme who was keeping warm by walking up and down the towpath. It was an old, unmotorized barge, the kind known as a 'stable': the name given to boats that mainly ply the canals and have their horses on board. Passing cyclists turned to look at this greyish hull about which the newspapers had been talking for the last two days.

As usual, when Detective Chief Inspector Maigret had been assigned to a case, it was as good as saying there were no longer any new clues to be found. Everyone had got involved in the investigation, and the witnesses had already been questioned fifty times, first by the gendarmerie, then by the police in Corbeil, the magistrates and the reporters.

'You'll see, it was Emile Gradut who did it!' he had been told.

And now Maigret, who had just interrogated Gradut for two hours, had come back to the scene, his hands in the pockets of his thick overcoat, his mood sullen, and

Copyrighted Material

was looking at the bleak landscape as if planning to buy a plot of land there.

The interest did not lie at Le Coudray, where the barge had ended up, but at the other end of the reach, eight kilometres upstream, at the La Citanguette lock.

The surroundings were the same as downstream, basically. The villages of Morsang and Seine-Port were on the other bank, some distance away. All that could be seen was the still water lined with thickets, with, occasionally, a dip where there had once been a sand quarry.

But at La Citanguette, there was a bistro, which meant that the people on the boats did everything they could to stay there overnight. A real bargemen's bistro, where they sold bread, canned food, sausages, rigging and hay for the horses.

It was there, it might be said, that Maigret was really conducting his investigation, without seeming to, having a drink from time to time, sitting near the stove, going for a little walk outside, while the owner's wife, almost as blonde as an albino, watched him with a respect tinged with irony.

This is what was known about Wednesday evening. Just as it was starting to get dark, the *Aiglon VII*, a small tug from the Upper Seine, had brought its six barges to the lock at Citanguette, like a line of chicks. At that point, drizzle was falling. Once the boats had been moored, the men, as always, had gathered in the bistro for an aperitif while the lock-keeper made sure the lock was closed.

The *Astrolabe* only appeared round the bend half an

Copyrighted Material

hour later, when it was almost completely dark. Old Arthur Aerts, the bargee, was at the tiller, while on the towpath Claessens walked ahead of his horses, his whip over his shoulder.

The *Astrolabe* had moored behind the line of barges, and Claessens had put his horses back on board. At that moment, nobody, basically, had paid them any attention.

It was at least seven, and everyone had already had supper by the time Aerts and Claessens had come into the bistro and sat down by the stove. The master of the *Aiglon VII* chatted away, but the two old men had nothing to say. The owner's wife, a baby in her arms, served them *marc* four or five times, without bothering too much about them.

This was how things went, Maigret now realized. Everyone knew everyone else, more or less. You came in, vaguely greeting everyone. You went and sat down without saying a word. Occasionally, a woman would come in, but only to do her shopping for the next day, after which she would say to her husband, who would be busy drinking:

‘Don't come home too late.’

That had happened with Aerts' wife, Emma, who had bought bread, eggs and a rabbit.

From that moment, every detail acquired a crucial importance, every testimony became extremely valuable. Thus, Maigret insisted:

‘Are you sure Arthur Aerts was drunk when he left about ten?’

‘Blind drunk, as usual,’ the owner's wife replied. ‘He

Copyrighted Material

was a Belgian, a good man basically, who'd sit in his corner without saying a word and drink until he had just enough strength left to get back on board.'

'What about Claessens, the carter?'

'It took him a bit longer. He stayed about a quarter of an hour more, then left, then came back to look for his whip, which he'd left behind.'

Up until that point, everything had gone well. It was easy to imagine the banks of the Seine at night, below the lock, the tug in front, the six barges behind, then Aerts' barge – with a stable lantern on each boat and a steady drizzle over everything.

At about nine thirty, Emma went back on board with her provisions. At ten, Aerts went back in his turn, dead drunk, as the owner's wife said. And at ten fifteen, the carter at last headed for the *Astrolabe*.

'I was only waiting for him to go before I closed, because the bargees go to bed early, and there was nobody left.'

That was all, as far as the solid, checkable things went. From that point, there was no precise information at all. At six in the morning, the skipper of the tug was surprised not to see the *Astrolabe* still there behind his barges. A little while later, he noticed that the mooring ropes had been cut.

Simultaneously, the lock-keeper at Le Coudray, who was tending to his wife, heard the old carter's cries and soon afterwards discovered that the barge had crashed into his barrier.

The dog on deck had been let loose. The carter, who had

Copyrighted Material

just woken up because of the impact, knew nothing and claimed that he had slept all night in his stable, as usual.

But in the cabin in the stern, Aerts was found hanging, not from a rope, but from the dog's chain. Then, behind a curtain drawn across the washbasin, his wife, Emma was also found hanging, from a sheet torn off the bed.

That was not yet all. Just as they were getting under way, the master of the tug *Aiglon VII* called in vain for his stoker, Emile Gradut, and realized that the latter had disappeared.

'It was Gradut who did it.'

Everyone was positive about that. By evening, the newspapers carried headlines like: *Gradut spotted prowling about near Seine-Port . . . Manhunt in the forest of Rougeau . . . Old Aerts' hoard still nowhere to be found . . .*

All the testimonies confirmed that old Aerts had had money stashed away, and everyone even agreed on the figure: a hundred thousand francs. Why? That was quite a story, though actually it was very simple. At the age of sixty, Aerts, who had two married sons, had taken a new wife: Emma, a formidable woman from Strasbourg, who was only forty.

It was not a happy marriage. At every lock, Emma would complain about the old man's stinginess, saying he barely gave her enough to buy food.

'I don't even know where he puts his money!' she would say. 'He wants it all to go to his sons when he dies. And I'm supposed to work myself to death looking after him, running the boat. Not to mention . . .'

Copyrighted Material

She would cynically go into details, in front of Aerts if need be, while Aerts would stand his ground, merely shaking his head. It was only once she had gone that he would murmur:

‘She only married me for my hundred thousand francs, but she’ll be disappointed.’

Emma would also say:

‘As if his sons needed it to live on!’

Indeed, the elder son, Joseph, was the skipper of a tug in Antwerp, and Théodore, with the help of his father, had bought a fine motorized barge, the *Marie-France*, which had been alerted as it passed through Maestricht in Holland.

‘But I’ll find his hundred thousand francs.’

She would say that out of the blue, even to people she’d only known for five minutes, coming out with the most intimate details about her elderly husband and concluding cynically:

‘After all, he can’t think it was out of love that a woman as young as me . . .’

And she cheated on him. The testimonies were unquestionable. The master of the *Aiglon VII* himself knew about it.

‘I’m only saying what I know. But what’s for sure is that during the two weeks we were laid off at Alfortville and the *Astrolabe* was taking on cargo, Emile Gradut would often go to see her, even in broad daylight.’

And then?

Emile Gradut, who was twenty-three years old, was a lowlife, that much was obvious. He had been arrested

Copyrighted Material

after twenty-four hours, dying of hunger, in the forest of Rougeau, less than five kilometres from La Citanguette.

'I didn't do anything!' he screamed at the gendarmes, trying to parry the blows.

An unpleasant, unwholesome little lowlife, whom Maigret had had in his office for two hours and who had kept stubbornly repeating:

'I didn't do anything.'

'So why did you run away?'

'That's none of your business!'

The examining magistrate had been convinced that Gradut had hidden the hoard in the forest. He had ordered more searches to be carried out there, but nothing had been found.

There was something infinitely bleak about all this, like the river that reflected the same sky from morning to evening, like these strings of boats that announced themselves with blasts on the horn (one blast for each barge being towed) and that passed through the lock in an endless succession. Then, while the women on deck simultaneously looked after their brats and supervised the manoeuvre, the men would go up to the bistro, have a drink and plod back down.

'Cut and dried!' one of Maigret's colleagues had said to him.

And yet Maigret, as sullen as the Seine itself, as sullen as a canal in the rain, had come back to his lock and couldn't tear himself away from it.

It's always the same: when a case appears too clear, nobody thinks of looking into the details. Everyone was

Copyrighted Material

sure Gradut had done it – he looked so much like the kind of person who would that it had been accepted as a fact.

But now they had the results of the two post-mortems, which yielded some curious conclusions. Thus, where Arthur Aerts was concerned, Dr Paul said:

. . . Slight trauma at the base of the chin . . . According to the state of rigor mortis and the stomach contents, it can be stated with precision that death by strangulation took place between ten o'clock and ten thirty . . .

Aerts had gone back on board at ten. According to the bistro owner's wife, Claessens had followed him a quarter of an hour later and, according to his statement, had gone straight to his stable.

'Was there any light in the Aerts' cabin?'

'I don't know.'

'Was the dog still on its chain?'

The poor old man had thought about this for a long time and finally made an impotent gesture. No, he didn't know, he hadn't paid attention. How could he have foreseen that his movements that particular night would subsequently be considered of crucial importance? He lived from one drink to the next. He slept fully dressed, on straw, wrapped in the warm smell of his horses . . .

'Did you hear any noise?'

He didn't know! He couldn't know! He had fallen asleep and when he had woken up he had found himself in the middle of the river, jammed up against the barrier . . .

Here, though, another testimony came in. But could it

Copyrighted Material

be taken seriously? It had been given by Madame Cou-
turier, the wife of the master of the *Aiglon VII*. The chief
inspector in Corbeil had questioned her, like the others,
before letting the line of barges continue on its way to the
Loing Canal. Maigret had the transcript in his pocket.

Question: Did you hear anything during the night?

Answer: I couldn't swear to it.

Q: Tell me what you did hear.

A: It's all so vague. I woke up after a while and checked
the time on the alarm clock. It was ten forty-five. I got the
impression people were talking near the boat.

Q: Did you recognize their voices?

A: No, but I assumed it was Gradut meeting with
Emma. I must have fallen asleep again right away.

Could they count on that? And, even if it was true, what
did it prove?

Below the lock, a tug, its six boats and the *Astrolabe* had
been sleeping that night and . . .

As far as Aerts was concerned, the report was clear: he
had died by strangulation between ten and ten thirty.

But things got complicated with Dr Paul's second
report, the one concerning Emma.

. . . The left cheek bears bruises, produced by either a blunt
instrument or a violent punch. As for death, due to asphyxia
by hanging, it occurred at about one in the morning . . .

★

Copyrighted Material

And Maigret plunged ever deeper into the slow, heavy life of La Citanguette as if it were the only place he could mull things over. A motorized barge flying a Belgian flag made him think of Théodore, Aerts' son, who must have reached Paris by now.

At the same time, the Belgian flag made him think of Dutch gin. On the table in the cabin a bottle of Dutch gin had been found, more than half empty. The cabin itself had been thoroughly searched. The cloth of the mattress was found to have been torn, spreading feathers everywhere.

To find the hoard of a hundred thousand francs, obviously!

The first investigators stated:

'It's quite simple! Emile Gradut killed Aerts and Emma. Then he got drunk, looked for the hoard, found it and hid it in the forest.'

Except that Dr Paul, in performing the post-mortem on Emma, discovered in her stomach all the alcohol that was missing from the bottle!

Which meant that it was Emma who had drunk the Dutch gin, not Gradut!

'Perfect!' the investigators retorted. After killing Aerts, Gradut got Emma drunk in order to overcome her, because, don't forget, she was a strong woman . . .

If they were to be believed, Gradut and his mistress had both remained on board from ten or ten thirty, the time of Arthur Aerts' death, until midnight or one in the morning, the time of Emma's death . . .

It was possible, obviously. Anything was possible . . .

Copyrighted Material

Only, Maigret wanted – how to put it? – he wanted to get to the point where he was *thinking barge*, in other words, thinking like these people.

He had been as tough as the others with Emile Gradut. For two hours, he had really grilled him. To start with, he had tried to make him ‘sing’, as they said at Quai des Orfèvres.

‘Listen, my friend. You’re implicated, that’s obvious. But to be honest, I don’t think you killed the two of them.’

‘I didn’t do anything!’

‘You definitely didn’t kill them. But admit you knocked the old man about a bit. It was his fault anyway! He disturbed the two of you and to defend yourself you—’

‘I didn’t do anything.’

‘As for Emma, you certainly wouldn’t have harmed her, she was your mistress.’

‘You’re wasting your time! I didn’t do anything.’

Later, Maigret had been tougher, threatening even.

‘So it’s like that. Well, let’s see what happens when you’re on the boat with the two bodies.’

But Gradut hadn’t flinched at the prospect of a reconstruction of the crime.

‘Whenever you like. I didn’t do anything.’

‘All the same, when they find the money you hid . . .’

At which Emile Gradut had given a smile. A smile of pity. Such a superior smile . . .

That evening, only a motorized barge and a ‘stable’ remained at La Citanguette. At the lock below, a gendarme

Copyrighted Material

was still standing guard on the deck of the *Astrolabe* and was quite surprised when Maigret climbed on board and announced:

‘I don’t have time to get back to Paris. I’ll sleep here.’

There was the sound of water gently lapping against the hull, then the gendarme, afraid of falling asleep, walking up and down the deck. This poor gendarme, in fact, soon began to wonder if Maigret had gone mad: he was making as much noise, all alone inside, as if the two horses had been let loose in the hold.

‘Excuse me, my friend . . .’

It was Maigret, emerging from the hatch.

‘Could you go and fetch me a pickaxe?’

Going to fetch a pickaxe, at ten in the evening, in a place like this! The gendarme, however, woke the sad-looking lock-keeper, and it turned out that the lock-keeper owned a pickaxe, because he had a garden.

‘What does he want with it, your inspector?’

‘How should I know?’

And they looked at each other knowingly. As for Maigret, he went back into the cabin with his pickaxe, and for more than an hour after that, the gendarme heard dull blows.

‘Hey, my friend . . .’

It was Maigret again, sweaty and panting, sticking his head through the hatch.

‘Could you go and make a phone call for me? I’d like the examining magistrate to come here first thing in the morning and bring Emile Gradut with him.’

★

Copyrighted Material

Never had the lock-keeper looked so gloomy as he did now, guiding the magistrate towards the barge, with Gradut following between two gendarmes.

‘No, I swear I don’t know a thing.’

Maigret was asleep in the Aerts’ bed! He didn’t even apologize and seemed not to notice the magistrate’s astonishment at the state of the cabin.

The floor had been pulled up. Beneath this floor was a layer of cement, but this cement had been broken with big blows of the pickaxe. It was a total mess.

‘Come in, sir. I got to bed quite late and haven’t had time to have a wash yet.’

He lit a pipe. He had found some bottles of beer somewhere and he poured himself a drink.

‘Come in, Gradut . . . And now . . .’

‘Now what?’ the magistrate asked.

‘It’s quite simple,’ Maigret said, puffing at his pipe. ‘I’m going to explain to you what happened the other night. You see, there was one thing that struck me from the start, which is that old Aerts was hanging from a chain and his wife was hanging from a bedsheet.’

‘I don’t see—’

‘You will. Look in the police annals, and I swear you won’t find a single case of a man who hanged himself with a wire or a chain. Strange, perhaps, but that’s how it is. People who kill themselves can be quite sensitive to pain, and the thought of the links of a chain squeezing their throat or pinching the skin of their necks . . .’

‘So Arthur Aerts was murdered?’

‘That’s my conclusion, yes, especially as the trauma

Copyrighted Material

found on his chin seems to prove that the chain, which was put on him from behind, when he was drunk, first struck his face.'

'I don't see—'

'Wait! Remember, his wife was found hanging from a rolled-up bedsheet. Not even a rope, even though there's plenty of rope on board a boat! No, a bedsheet, which is the gentlest way to hang yourself, if I can put it like that.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning she hanged herself. That's indicated by the fact that, in order to summon up courage, she needed to knock back half a litre of Dutch gin, even though she never drank. Remember the pathologist's reports.'

'I do remember.'

'So, one murder and one suicide, the murder committed at about ten fifteen, the suicide at midnight or one in the morning. From that point, everything becomes simple.'

The magistrate was looking at him with a certain mistrust, Emile Gradut with ironic curiosity.

'For a long time,' Maigret continued, 'Emma, who didn't get what she wanted by marrying old Aerts, and who's in love with Emile Gradut, has been haunted by one thought: to get hold of the money and run away with her lover. The opportunity suddenly arises. Aerts returns in a very obvious state of intoxication. Gradut's nearby, on board the tug. She's already seen, when she did her shopping at the bistro, how drunk her husband was. So she unchains the dog and waits, with the chain ready to be put around the man's neck.'

'But—' the magistrate objected.

Copyrighted Material

‘Hold on, let me finish! . . . Now, Aerts is dead. Emma, giddy with her victory, runs to fetch Gradut – and here don’t forget that the tug-skipper’s wife hears voices near her boat at ten forty-five. Is that right, Gradut?’

‘Yes, it is!’

‘The couple come back on board to look for the money, even search the mattress, but can’t find the famous hundred thousand francs. Is that right, Gradut?’

‘Yes, it is!’

‘Time passes, and Gradut gets impatient. I suspect he even starts to wonder if he’s been deceived, if the hundred thousand francs really exists. Emma swears it does. But what’s the point of it, if it can’t be found? They keep looking. Gradut has had enough. He knows he’ll be blamed. He wants to go. Emma wants to go with him.’

‘Excuse me,’ the magistrate said.

‘Hold on! As I was saying, she wants to go with him, and, as he doesn’t want to lumber himself with a woman who doesn’t even have any money, he knocks her out with a punch to the face and gets away. Then, once on dry land, he cuts the mooring ropes. Is that right, Gradut?’

This time, Gradut hesitated to answer.

‘That’s pretty much it!’ Maigret concluded. ‘If they’d found the hoard, they would have left together, or else they would have tried to make it look as if the old man had killed himself. As they didn’t find it, Gradut wanders through the countryside in a panic, looking for a place to hide. Emma regains consciousness with the boat drifting on the water and the hanged man swaying beside her. No more hope, right? Not even the hope of running away.’

Copyrighted Material

She'd have to wake Claessens to manoeuvre the barge with a hook. A complete failure! So she decides to kill herself. But she's scared, so first she drinks, then she chooses a soft bedsheet . . .'

'Is that right, Gradut?' the magistrate said, looking him in the face.

'If that's what the inspector says.'

'But wait,' the magistrate goes on. 'What's to prove that he didn't find the hoard and that precisely in order to keep it . . .'

Maigret merely pushed back a few pieces of cement with his foot, to reveal a hiding place filled with Belgian and French gold coins.

'Do you understand now?'

'More or less,' the magistrate murmured, although he didn't sound convinced.

'What we should have known,' Maigret said, refilling his pipe, 'is that when old barges are repaired, a layer of cement is put on the bottom. But nobody told me that.'

Then, abruptly changing tone:

'The main thing is that I counted, and there really is a hundred thousand francs here . . . An odd couple, don't you think?'

The Boulevard Beaumarchais Case

When Inspector Martin of the Gambling Squad left his office at seven fifty, he was surprised to see the corridor still full of reporters and photographers. It was very cold, and some had the collars of their overcoats turned up as they ate their sandwiches.

‘Hasn’t Maigret finished yet?’ he asked as he walked past.

At the far end of the vast corridor, instead of taking the stairs, Martin opened a glazed door. As was the case throughout the premises of the Police Judiciaire, the waiting room outside the chief’s office was dimly lit. In the middle stood a huge, round sofa upholstered in red velvet. A man was sitting there in an overcoat, his hat on his head. Two inspectors stood not far from him, smoking cigarettes, while the elderly clerk was having dinner in his glass cage.

Martin filled his pipe. In a quarter of an hour, he would be home, having dinner with his family. He was visiting the department as an interested spectator, since this case was all anyone had been talking about for the past two days.

‘How’s it going?’ he asked one of the inspectors in a low voice.

The inspector sighed and pointed to the second door, the one to Maigret’s office.

Copyrighted Material

‘Who’s he with?’

‘Still with the sister-in-law.’

Hearing them whisper, the man on the sofa slowly raised his head and gave his companions a lugubrious look in which there was a hint of reproach. He was a thin, sickly-looking man of about forty, or perhaps slightly younger, with dark rings under his eyes and a little brown moustache.

‘He’s been here since morning,’ the inspector whispered to Martin.

At that moment, Maigret’s door opened, and Maigret appeared. As he didn’t close the door behind him, they could see the smoke-filled office and, in a green armchair, the figure of a very young blonde woman.

‘Lucas!’ Maigret called, peering at the inspectors like someone with failing eyesight. ‘Run and get me some sandwiches. Drop by the brasserie and have them bring up some beers.’

Martin took the opportunity to shake his colleague’s hand.

‘Everything OK?’

Maigret looked flushed, his eyes glistening. He gave the impression he would have given a lot for a breath of fresh air.

‘Listen,’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘let me tell you something. If I’m not done with this case by tonight, I’m giving up. You don’t understand, do you? Well, I can’t stay in there much longer.’

The man on the sofa, who couldn’t hear what he was saying, waited, trembling, but Maigret went back into his

Copyrighted Material

office, closing the door behind him, and Martin finally left, while the hand of the clock moved forwards another minute and the reporters could be heard raising their voices.

And yet it was a case that at first had appeared totally commonplace. The previous Sunday, on the fourth floor of a building on Boulevard Beaumarchais that housed a pipemaker's on the ground floor, Louise Voivin, twenty-six, had died suddenly, giving every sign of having been poisoned.

The apartment – comfortable, respectable, moderately cheerful – was inhabited, apart from Louise Voivin, by her husband, Ferdinand Voivin, a broker in precious stones, and her sister, Nicole, who was eighteen.

It was Nicole whom Maigret had had in his office for several hours and who was holding up well, nervous of course, biting her handkerchief, but still lucid despite the stifling atmosphere.

On the desk was a lamp whose vast green shade directed the light downwards. Above the shade, Maigret's face remained in shadow, whereas the girl, who was sitting in quite a low armchair, was fully in the light. The curtains at the window hadn't been drawn, and raindrops could be seen rolling down the dark panes, which were spangled with stars because of the reflection of the lights on the riverbank.

'They'll be bringing us something to drink,' Maigret said, sighing with relief.

He was so hot that he would happily have removed his false collar and his jacket, whereas the girl was still dressed

Copyrighted Material

in her grey fur coat and a pillbox hat of the same fur, which made her look particularly Nordic, especially as she had very blonde hair.

What question could he ask her that he hadn't already asked? And yet he couldn't resign himself to letting her go. He felt a vague need to keep her close to hand, while her brother-in-law continued to wait in the next room.

To disguise his uncertainty, he leafed through his file as if, by endlessly rereading the same details, an inspiration might come to him.

Even in the first report concerning the events of Sunday, the one drawn up by the local police, there was already something unclear, despite its simplicity . . .

On the fourth floor, in a room situated at the far end of the apartment, we found the body of Louise Voivin lying on the floor. Dr Blind, who had been called half an hour earlier by the family, declared to us that she had died a few minutes earlier, shaken by horrible convulsions, and he clearly attributes the death to poisoning, criminal or accidental, probably caused by a strong dose of digitalis . . .

Then, further on:

. . . We questioned the husband, Ferdinand Voivin, thirty-seven, who claims to know nothing. He nevertheless states that for several months his wife had been showing signs of depression . . .

We questioned Louise Voivin's sister, Nicole Lamure,
Copyrighted Material

eighteen, born in Orléans, who made a similar statement to that of her brother-in-law . . .

We questioned the concierge, who states that Louise Voivin, who was in poor health, had for a long time expressed the fear that she was being poisoned . . .

To be precise, it had been the Sunday of All Saints, a cold, rainy day, the air smelling of chrysanthemums and the incense from the churches. Towards evening, the men of the prosecutor's office, soaking wet, their feet muddy, had descended on the building in Boulevard Beaumarchais. The pipemaker's on the ground floor was closed.

But that was the everyday tragedy, the stuff of almost every case. The real tragedy was one of which the waiting reporters had as yet no inkling, because it was only now, in the overheated atmosphere of his office, that Mairgret had discovered it.

While impatiently awaiting the refreshing taste of a glass of beer, he avoided looking again at the young woman, who was now staring at a corner of the desk, her features drawn.

'Come in!' he cried.

Bringing in the beers and sandwiches, the waiter from the Brasserie Dauphine glanced at Mairgret's companion.

'Will this do?'

'That's fine. And take some to the gentleman waiting outside.'

But Voivin, when he was offered food and drink, shook his head like someone who can't summon up the energy.

★

Copyrighted Material

Maigret stood chewing big mouthfuls of his sandwich, while his companion nibbled at hers.

‘How long had they been married?’

‘Eight years.’

A commonplace story of unremarkable people. During a stay in Orléans, where he had been called for some valuations, Ferdinand Voivin, a small-time broker in precious stones, had made the acquaintance of Louise Lamure, whose parents owned a shoe shop.

‘So at the time you were just a little girl?’

‘I was ten.’

‘I don’t suppose’, he tried to joke, ‘you were in love with your brother-in-law yet.’

‘I don’t know.’

He gave her a sidelong glance and lost his desire to laugh.

‘Then a year ago, when your father died, your sister and her husband took you in.’

‘I moved in with them, that’s correct.’

‘And for how long, exactly, have you been Voivin’s mistress?’

‘Since the 17th of May.’

She said this clearly, almost proudly.

‘Do you love him?’

‘Yes.’

Seeing her, so frail yet so passionate, one might have imagined that, to inspire such love, Voivin was handsome and romantic. But one of the disturbing aspects of this story was that the broker was a fellow so nondescript it was an effort to even remember his face. Even his profession

Copyrighted Material

was quite prosaic. For hours on end, he would haunt the cafés in Rue La Fayette where precious stones were bought and sold, and it was only a month earlier that he had at last been able to afford a modest second-hand car. In addition, he was in poor health.

‘What about your sister?’

‘My sister was jealous.’

‘Did she love him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What did she say when she caught the two of you?’

‘She didn’t say anything. She wrote to me. Since then, we haven’t spoken to each other at all.’

‘And when was that?’

‘The 2nd of June. It was the third time we’d been together.’

‘In the apartment on Boulevard Beaumarchais?’

‘Yes, in my room. Ferdinand thought Louise had gone out, but in fact she was in the kitchen with the cleaning woman.’

‘Did it not occur to you to move out?’

‘I wanted to. It was my sister who insisted I stay.’

‘Why?’

‘So that she could keep an eye on us. She said if I left the apartment it would be all too easy for her husband to see me in secret.’

‘And in the apartment?’

‘She never left us alone. She always wore felt slippers so she could creep up on us.’

‘How could you live together for months without speaking?’

Copyrighted Material

‘We’d exchange notes. For example, my sister would write: *Get your dirty washing ready for tomorrow. Or else: Don’t use the bathtub. There’s a leak.*’

‘What about Voivin?’

‘He was very unhappy. From the start, he refused to sleep in his wife’s room, and he set up a divan in the living room. He swore to me they’d stopped having relations.’

Maigret counted on his fingers:

‘June, July, August, September, October. Five months! So for five months, you lived like that?’

She simply nodded, as if it had been quite normal.

‘Did Ferdinand Voivin ever talk to you about getting rid of his wife?’

‘Never, I swear.’

‘And did he ever suggest the two of you should run away together?’

‘You don’t know him,’ she sighed, shaking her head. ‘He’s an honest man, don’t you see? He’s the same in business. Once he’s signed a contract, he keeps to it, whatever it takes. Ask anyone who’s worked with him.’

‘All the same, for several months, your sister seemed to foresee her own death. She wrote three letters to a friend from boarding school and in all three she mentions poisoning.’

‘I know! It was like my sister had gone mad from watching us so much. Almost every night she’d creep into my room, and I’d feel her hand in the dark, touching my face to make sure I was in my bed and I was alone.’

‘One question. After the 2nd of June, did you see Voivin again privately?’

Copyrighted Material

‘Three or four times, outside. But my sister found out. Each time she’d be waiting for us in front of the hotel. She’d follow me everywhere. Once, she came to town in her slippers because she hadn’t had time to put her shoes on.’

Maigret had visited the apartment, which was as ordinary as Voivin himself. He could imagine the life the three protagonists had led there. And he had to keep coming back constantly to the same questions, like a carousel horse endlessly turning without finding a way out.

‘Did you know there was a packet of bicarbonate of soda in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom?’

That was the crux of the matter. After Louise Voivin’s death, the apartment had been searched, and before long a glass had been found that had contained some kind of medicine. Analysis had shown that it was digitalis diluted in a little water.

Beside the glass was a packet whose label read: *Bicarbonate of soda*. But the packet contained digitalis, a large enough quantity of it to kill a hundred people.

‘What were you doing last Sunday afternoon?’

‘Same as every Sunday. It was always the most difficult day. Ferdinand was in the living room checking bills. I was reading in my room. My sister must have been in hers.’

‘What had you eaten at lunch?’

‘I remember very well. A hare that a customer of Ferdinand’s had sent him.’

She continued to say the name Ferdinand with real fervour, as if he were the handsomest and most remarkable of men.

‘Has your sister’s death affected you?’

Copyrighted Material

‘No!’

She didn’t hide it. She even looked up to show her face.

‘My sister made him suffer too much.’

‘And what about him?’

‘Can you blame him? I know he never loved her. He lived with her for eight years, but he was never happy. My sister was always sad, always ailing. In the very first year of their marriage, she needed an operation, and after that she wasn’t quite a woman like any other.’

Maigret left the room again for a moment and from the doorway looked at the man slumped on the sofa. He had already questioned him once, the day before, but briefly, and he was reluctant to bring him in again and start on one of those interminable interrogations that are equally exhausting for both parties.

‘Didn’t he want to eat anything?’ he asked one of the two inspectors in a low voice.

‘No. He says he isn’t hungry.’

‘Is that so?’

Trying to summon up enthusiasm, Maigret went back into his office. Nicole hadn’t moved.

‘By the way, since we’re talking about illnesses, who among you suffered from stomach problems?’

‘Ferdinand!’ she replied without hesitation. ‘Not often, but it did happen sometimes, especially when he’d had palpitations.’

‘So he had palpitations?’

‘Actually, he had treatment for his heart, two years ago, I think, but it was pretty much cured.’

Copyrighted Material

‘Do you know if your brother-in-law had any stomach problems in the last few weeks?’

‘Yes,’ she said, just as categorically.

‘What day was that?’

‘The day we all felt ill.’

‘Do you remember what you’d eaten?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Did you call the doctor?’

‘No, Ferdinand didn’t want to. That night we all had headaches and nausea. Ferdinand thought it was a gas leak.’

‘Was that the only time?’

‘Yes. At least as strong as that.’

‘You mean there were other times?’

‘I know what you’re doing, inspector. But you’re not going to make me weaken. I’ll hold out to the end, despite everything, because I know Ferdinand is innocent. If anyone ought to have poisoned my sister, it wouldn’t have been him, but me. You see? I’m not afraid to say it.’

‘But you didn’t do it?’ he said in a curious voice.

‘No. It never even crossed my mind. I would have killed her in a different way, I don’t know how. It’s true we’d all been ill recently. Only, I’d like to see how you’d have coped. Can you imagine the life we led? At meals, there was always one or other of us who didn’t eat. Do you know how many cleaning women we had in five months? Eight! They all said they didn’t want to stay in a crazy house.’

She burst into tears from sheer nervous strain. It wasn’t the first time since the start of the interrogation, but she

Copyrighted Material

soon regained her composure and looked Maigret in the eyes, as if to anticipate his questions.

‘I don’t even know if we still opened the windows. It got to the point where I didn’t dare go to the corner of the street, knowing full well that my sister would be following me.’

‘So you think your sister committed suicide?’

She didn’t reply immediately, making it clear that the question disturbed her.

‘Or to put it another way, are you claiming that your sister managed to get hold of a large quantity of digitalis and, instead of trying to poison you, deliberately killed herself?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admitted.

It was clear she didn’t believe that either, that it didn’t tally with her sister’s character.

‘What, then?’

‘It’s a mystery to me. In any case, Ferdinand didn’t kill her!’

‘And what about you?’

But if he thought he would wrong-foot her, he was very much mistaken. She looked up once again, sustaining his gaze, with a hint of irony in her eyes.

‘I think at this point we should call in your brother-in-law,’ Maigret grunted. ‘Or rather – one moment. Would you mind waiting outside while I see him?’

‘What do you have to say to him?’

Standing, she was impatient now, chewing at her handkerchief, tearing little pieces out of it.

‘Bring him in!’ Maigret called out, half opening the door. ‘As for Mademoiselle, she can wait.’

He saw her out, then motioned Voivin to the armchair she had just vacated.

‘A glass of beer?’

Voivin merely shook his head.

‘Not hungry? I apologize for keeping you waiting. Your sister-in-law had a lot of things to tell me. By the way, what are you planning to do now?’

With difficulty, Voivin raised his head and looked at Maigret, at first surprised, then distrustful, as if it were obvious they weren’t going to release him.

‘One question, Voivin. Since Nicole couldn’t talk to you whenever she wanted, I assume she wrote to you?’

Struggling to grasp the connection, he shook his head.

‘No.’

‘Why not? She was in love, and so were you.’

‘It was impossible. My wife would have found the letters. She spent all her time searching the apartment, my clothes, even my shoes.’

Maigret sighed. He would have given a lot to see Nicole devote her love to someone else, to anyone rather than this mediocre man – mediocre in everything, even in his desperation.

‘Couldn’t you have found a hiding place?’

‘I tell you, Louise would have found it.’

Maigret seemed to drop the subject.

‘Never mind. There’s something else I wanted to ask you. When you had heart problems . . .’

Ferdinand smiled painfully.

Copyrighted Material

'I was expecting that question.'

'Then answer it!'

'Yes, you're right, I was prescribed digitalis. But I haven't taken any for more than two years.'

'All the same, you knew its effects. You must have been warned that a massive dose of it—'

'Believe me, inspector, I didn't kill my wife.'

'I'm convinced Nicole didn't poison her either.'

'You mean you suspected her?'

'Not at all! Calm down! You tell me you didn't kill your wife. Nicole didn't kill her. And now I'm asking you a question which you may answer or not, as you wish. Listen to me carefully, Voivin. Knowing your wife as you did, knowing she was a jealous woman who would rather keep her sister at home than make it possible for her to meet you in secret, knowing your wife, as I say, do you dare maintain that she would even envisage the possibility of killing herself, thereby leaving the way clear for both of you? Think carefully.'

'I don't know.'

'Come now! Answer or don't answer, but no lies, Voivin. No excuses.'

The man's lips were trembling. And suddenly a fetid odour in the room revealed the physical results of his panic.

Without saying a word, Maigret went and opened the window, then came back to his desk, slowly filled his pipe and drank what was left of his beer.

'I can help you, if you'd like,' he said in a gentle voice.

★

Copyrighted Material

'I suppose you'd rather I didn't bring your sister-in-law in?'

Voivin was crying, perhaps as much with humiliation as with pain, and Maigret walked up and down as he spoke, avoiding looking at him.

'If I get something wrong, please stop me. But I don't think I'll get anything wrong. Do you go to Antwerp from time to time?'

'Yes.'

'I thought as much. Antwerp and Amsterdam, where the main diamond exchanges are. It was easier and less risky for you to get hold of a certain quantity of digitalis there than in France, which explains why our searches in and around Paris were fruitless.'

'I'm thirsty!' Voivin said, his throat tight.

He was so humble that Maigret felt embarrassed. He took a bottle of brandy from his cupboard and poured a large glass for Voivin.

'You're not naturally a cheerful person. You marry a young woman and as early as the first year of your marriage, she has an operation that abruptly ages her by several years. You continue working dutifully, meticulously, the way you do everything, and after a while you develop a heart weakness. Is that right?'

'It wasn't serious.'

'That's of no matter. Now all at once you're lumbered with your sister-in-law and you suddenly discover what it is to be young and to enjoy life. You're in love, madly in love! But you have too much respect for your vows to leave your wife and start a new life. You're a weakling, a

Copyrighted Material

coward, I'd even say. The day you're caught by your wife, you don't react.'

'I'd like to know what you would have done in my shoes!'

'It's of no matter. Life in that apartment on Boulevard Beaumarchais becomes torture, every minute of every day. You may be incapable of leaving your wife, but you're even more incapable of giving up your sister-in-law. Stop me if—'

'It's true!'

'You're the kind of weakling who causes disasters! I know what I'm talking about. Yes, you're the kind of person who, for fear of solitude, is quite capable of dragging lots of people to their death with him. Since life was no longer possible, you thought the three of you could die, which explains why you bought such a large quantity of poison. Is that true?'

'How could you have guessed that?'

'So far, it was easy. It was the fact that your wife died, and only your wife, that I couldn't figure out. But you gave me the explanation yourself. I'll get to that. First of all, admit that on at least two occasions you held what we might call dress rehearsals – in other words, you put small doses of digitalis in the food, which made you all ill.'

'I wanted to know . . .'

'That's it. You were afraid. You hadn't made up your mind to die. And you tried to see what it was like, by using very small doses. For the rest, your answer to one of my last questions enlightened me. Your wife watched

your every move, searched every nook and cranny of the apartment, even your shoes. In such a situation, where could you put the digitalis? What was the one medicine you were the only person to take?’

Wild-eyed, Voivin looked up without saying anything.

‘From that point, everything follows naturally. The digitalis is hidden under the benign label *Bicarbonate of soda*. And you would probably have kept dithering for weeks, perhaps even months.’

‘I don’t think I could ever have done it!’ Voivin moaned.

‘It doesn’t matter. You would have dithered for a long time, in any case, if the accident hadn’t happened. One of your customers sent you a hare as a gift. Your wife, who’s an ailing woman, can’t digest it, she goes to the medicine cabinet, sees the bicarbonate of soda and puts a spoonful of it in a glass . . .’

Voivin was hiding his face with both hands.

‘That’s all!’ Maigret said decisively, opening the window more widely. ‘By the way, there’s a washbasin next door. Would you like to use it before I call your sister-in-law back in?’

Voivin slipped like a shadow into the next room. Maigret opened the door.

‘Would you come in, Mademoiselle Nicole? Your brother-in-law will be in here in a minute.’

And abruptly:

‘Do you want to die?’

‘No!’

‘Good for you! Be careful.’

‘Of what?’

Copyrighted Material

‘Of nothing. Of letting yourself be dragged in.’

‘What did he tell you?’

‘He didn’t tell me anything!’

‘Do you still think he’s guilty?’

‘You’ll sort it out with him.’

‘Where is he?’

Maigret had to turn away his head to hide his smile.

‘He . . . he’s recovering!’ he said.

And he relit his pipe, which had gone out, while Voivin, like a man blinded by the light, groped his way back into the office.

‘Ferdinand!’ Nicole cried.

‘No, not here,’ Maigret muttered. ‘Please.’

The Open Window

It was five minutes to midday when the three men found themselves opposite 116b Rue Montmartre, not far from the corner of Rue des Jeûneurs.

‘Shall we go in?’

‘Let’s have a drink and then go in.’

They had their aperitifs at a nearby bar then, with the collars of their overcoats up and their hands in their pockets because it was cold, they entered the courtyard of the building, looked for Staircase C, found it at last and climbed two floors. On each door of this intricate old house was an enamel or brass nameplate indicating here a maker of artificial flowers, there a film company. On the second floor, at the end of a dark corridor, the nameplate bore the words *Le Commerce Français*. Sergeant Lucas went first, opened the door and touched the rim of his hat.

‘Is Oscar Laget here?’

In the waiting room, a man in his fifties was sitting behind a green baize table, sticking stamps on envelopes. He began by shaking his head, then something must have struck him about the visitors’ demeanour, and he looked at them more attentively, seemed to understand and stood up.

‘He’s never at the office in the morning,’ he explained. ‘What do you want with him?’

Copyrighted Material

‘I have an arrest warrant,’ Lucas replied, indicating a paper sticking out of his pocket. ‘Where can he be found at this hour?’

‘I doubt you’d find him. He may be at the Stock Exchange, or in one of the restaurants nearby. He’ll be back at four.’

Lucas exchanged glances with his companions.

‘Let me see his office.’

The man meekly led him along a narrow corridor and opened a door to what indeed proved to be an empty office.

‘Good! We’ll be back at four.’

The fact that for once Maigret was involved at the very beginning of a case was a matter of chance. At three o’clock, he was in his office on Quai des Orfèvres when a call came in that some Algerians had been involved in a knife fight in the Porte d’Italie area – and Algerians were Sergeant Lucas’ department.

‘I can’t go, chief. I have to be in Rue Montmartre at four for an arrest.’

‘Who are you arresting?’

‘Laget. You know, the man from Le Commerce Français, the warrant signed by the financial section of the prosecutor’s office.’

‘You go off to Porte d’Italie. I’ll handle Rue Montmartre.’

He worked until three fifty, took a taxi with the two inspectors, drove under the arch into the courtyard and, seeing this network of dilapidated staircases, asked mechanically:

Copyrighted Material

‘Is there another way out?’

‘I don’t think so.’

Not that it mattered! The commonplace arrest of a shady businessman!

‘Second floor, chief. Turn right.’

It was nothing but a chore. The fifty-year-old man, Ernest Descharneau, was still sitting behind his table, this time no longer sticking stamps but copying addresses on to envelopes. In front of him, in the waiting room, four or five people were moping around.

‘Has Oscar Laget come in yet?’ Maigret asked, without removing his pipe.

‘Not yet. He won’t be much longer. These gentlemen are also waiting for him.’

A glance at the ‘gentlemen’ in question: creditors, obviously, more or less shabby people who had been there for an hour or two, in the hope of getting a few sous out of Laget. Maigret had time to fill a pipe, after first emptying it on the floor – the floor being already dirty.

‘It’s draughty here!’ he muttered, lifting the velvet collar of his overcoat.

Ernest Descharneau leaned a little to the side, listened out and murmured:

‘I think he’s coming.’

‘Why? Doesn’t he come in through this door?’

‘He always comes in the back way. I’ll go and tell him.’

As he said these last words, he got to his feet, and just then a gunshot rang out from the direction of Laget’s office. Descharneau tried to rush out, but Maigret gestured him to stop and went first.

Copyrighted Material

There was a bend in the corridor. At the far end, an open window – the cause of the draught! – looked out onto a little courtyard, and Maigret, who was susceptible to the cold, closed it as he passed. He was expecting to find Laget’s door locked, but not a bit of it. In the office, the short, fat businessman was sitting in his place, slumped backwards, a gaping wound in his right temple. On the carpet, just below his dangling hand, lay a revolver.

‘Don’t let anyone in!’ Maigret growled, turning round.

Right from the start, something struck him as wrong, but he didn’t yet know what. He sniffed, looked around, his hands still in his pockets, his hat tilted slightly back, in a familiar attitude. His gaze finally came to rest on a pair of women’s shoes sticking out from under the curtain at the window.

‘What are you doing there?’ he said.

Simultaneously, a woman, still young, dressed in a fur coat, emerged from her hiding place, looked anxiously at the three men and stammered:

‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m Madame Laget!’

The inspector, who had bent over the body, finally rose again and declared calmly:

‘Dead.’

Inspector Janvier was given the task of informing the local chief inspector, the prosecutor’s office and Criminal Records, while Maigret sullenly walked round and round the room, which was illuminated by harsh daylight.

Copyrighted Material

‘Have you been in this office long?’ he asked suddenly, giving Madame Laget a sidelong glance.

‘I got here almost at the same time as you. When I heard footsteps, I hid behind the curtain, just in case.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know . . . First of all, I wanted to know . . .’

‘To know what?’

‘What had happened. Are you sure he’s dead?’

She wasn’t crying, but she was distraught. Preferring not to insist, Maigret went and spoke to the second inspector.

‘Stay in the office and keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn’t touch anything.’

He went back to the waiting room. The clients were still there.

‘None of you leave! I may need you.’

‘Is he dead?’

‘As dead as could be. As for you’ – he turned to Descharneau – ‘I’d like to speak to you in private.’

‘We can go into madame’s office. Unless she’s there . . .’

The office was opposite Laget’s. In order not to be disturbed, Maigret locked the door, mechanically fingered the damper of the stove, which wasn’t drawing, and motioned his companion to a chair.

‘Sit down. Your name and age. Tell me what you know.’

He made the man sit down, while he himself remained on his feet, walking up and down the room, as was his habit.

‘My name’s Ernest Descharneau, I’m fifty-four, a former shopkeeper, and a reserve lieutenant.’

Copyrighted Material

‘And now you’re an office dogsbody?’ Maigret grunted.

‘Not exactly,’ Descharneau corrected him, with a hint of bitterness. ‘But you’re right: it does look like that.’

Even though his clothes were worn, there was still something neat about him, and a kind of dignity in his manner, that colourless dignity peculiar to people who have known misfortune.

‘Before the war, I ran a shop on Boulevard de Courcelles, and business was quite good.’

‘What kind of shop?’

‘Guns, ammunition, hunting equipment. Then I left for the front, as a private. By the third year of the war, I was a lieutenant of artillery.’

Maigret noticed a thin red strip on the lapel of his jacket. He also noted that the man, while speaking with a slightly febrile haste, kept listening out for noises from the other rooms.

‘It was in Champagne that I met Oscar Laget, who was my subordinate.’

‘A private?’

‘Yes. Later, he became a sergeant. When I was demobbed, I found my shop closed and my wife ill. I had a little money left, and I was unlucky enough to invest it in a business that collapsed a year later. Then my wife died . . .’

There was a sound of footsteps, and Maigret guessed it was the local police but made no move to greet them. Sitting on the edge of the desk, he asked:

‘What happened next?’

‘By this time, Laget had started a company making

Copyrighted Material

chemical products, and I went to see him. He had his offices on Boulevard Haussmann and he hired me as a door-to-door salesman . . . Since you came to arrest him, I assume you know what kind of man he was?’

‘Tell me anyway!’

Sometimes, it seemed as if Maigret wasn’t listening.

‘The chemical products company lasted three years, and I managed to save a bit. One fine day, Laget closed the place down, and I found myself back on the street. There was talk of legal proceedings against Laget even then, but that didn’t stop him setting up a new business with a lot of fanfare a year later: Le Commerce Français . . .’

Descharneau was hesitant to continue, wondering whether Maigret was interested in what he was saying or not. Footsteps and voices could still be heard from the other rooms.

‘At one time, there were as many as sixty employees, and the offices occupied three floors of a modern building on Rue Beaubourg. Laget published trade journals for butchers, leather merchants, sales agents and so on . . .’

‘Were you part of it?’

‘When I went to see him again, he hired me, without a specific title, but in a way I was his right-hand man. That’s how he came to appoint me an authorized representative of most of the companies he created, and even occasionally the manager . . .’

‘Which means that now you’re also liable for prosecution?’

‘It’s quite likely,’ Descharneau said grimly. ‘You have no idea how things were. Even when we had sixty employees,

Copyrighted Material

we sometimes scabbled after two thousand francs. Laget owned his car, and Madame Laget hers. They built a house in the country for eight hundred thousand francs, but the servants went three months without being paid. We'd dig one hole to fill another. Laget would vanish for two or three days and then come back, all excited, through a side door, and give me papers to sign. "Quick, this time we'll make a fortune!" I didn't even know what I was signing. Whenever I hesitated, he'd tell me I was being ungrateful and remind me that he'd dragged me out of the gutter, so to speak. He could be generous at times. If he had money, he didn't think twice about giving me twenty or thirty thousand francs for no reason, though the next day, or the day after that, he'd be quite capable of asking for it back. We've had highs and lows, and this is where we are now. Madame Laget decided she wanted to handle the business herself, and she comes to the office every day.'

Taking his pipe from his mouth, Maignret suddenly asked a question that took Descharneau aback, despite its simplicity.

'Where did you have lunch?'

'When? Today? Hold on. I went out for a while to get some bread and sausage. The skins and the crumbs are still in my wastepaper basket.'

'Did anyone come in?'

'What do you mean? At two o'clock, some of the creditors arrived, as they always do. That's why Laget didn't dare come in by the main staircase any more. There's another way out, on Rue des Jeûneurs. You have to go all the way through two buildings, but he preferred it.'

Copyrighted Material

‘What about his wife?’

‘She prefers it too!’

‘Does she usually get to the office at four?’

‘No, she usually comes at two. But today’s the first Wednesday of the month, and she went to the ministry to collect her pension. She’s a war widow from her first marriage.’

‘Do you think she’s capable of having killed her husband?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And do you think Laget capable of having killed himself?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve told you all I know. I wonder what’s going to become of me now.’

Maigret went and opened the door.

‘I’ll see you again later.’

When he entered Laget’s office, he found ten or fifteen people bustling about, and the lights had been switched on. The photographer from Criminal Records had done his job and was now putting away his cameras. The examining magistrate and a young deputy prosecutor were conferring in low voices, while Madame Laget, her features drawn, remained seated in a corner, as if dazed by all this noise and movement.

‘Did you find anything?’ the local chief inspector asked Maigret.

‘Not yet. How about you?’

‘We recovered the cartridge case, which was definitely

Copyrighted Material