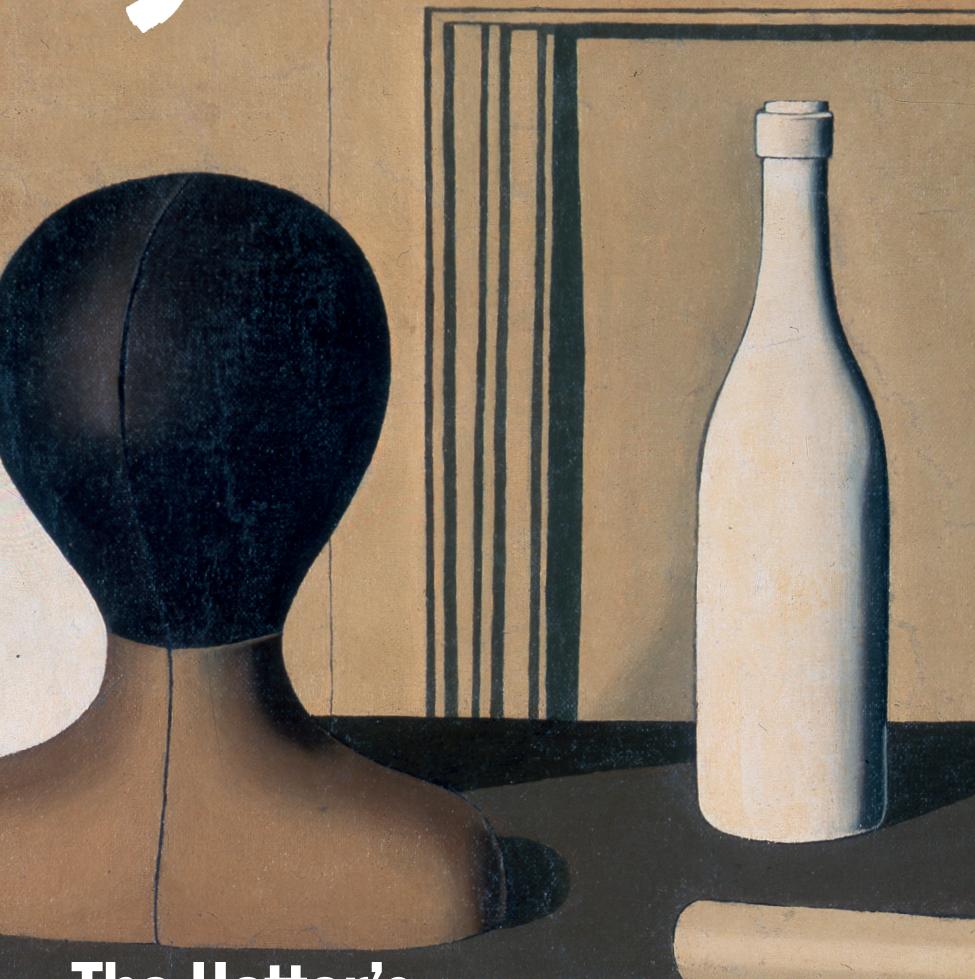
GEORGES SIMENON



The Hatter's Ghosts

PENGUIN CLASSICS

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Hatter's Ghosts

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. He is best known in Britain as the author of the Maigret novels, and his prolific output of over 400 novels and short stories has made him a household name in continental Europe. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

GEORGES SIMENON

The Hatter's Ghosts

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS

PENGUIN BOOKS

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 as *Les Fantômes du chapelier* 1949
This translation published in Penguin Classics 2022
001

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: 978–0–241–54538–6

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.

I

It was the third of December and still raining. The number 3 stood out, huge, very black and with a kind of pot belly, on the intense white of the calendar that hung to the right of the till on the dark oak partition separating the shop from the display window. That made exactly twenty days – it had happened on 13 November: another fat 3 on the calendar – since the first old lady had been murdered near the church of Saint-Sauveur, not far from the canal.

And ever since 13 November, it had been raining. In fact, for the last twenty days, it had been raining almost without interruption.

Most of the time, it pattered down for hours on end, and when you walked through town, keeping close to the buildings, you could hear the rain running in the gutters; it was best to choose the arcaded streets, so as to be sheltered for a while; you changed your shoes as soon as you got home; in every home, coats and hats dried by the stove, and those who lacked spare clothes lived in a state of perpetual cold and damp.

It was dark well before four, and some windows were lighted from morning to evening.

It was four o'clock when, as he did every afternoon, Monsieur Labbé had left the back room of his hat shop,

where wooden heads of all sizes stood in line on the shelves, and climbed the spiral staircase. On the landing, he had paused for a moment, taken a key from his pocket, opened the door of the bedroom and switched on the light.

Before switching it on, had he walked to the window, where the thick, dusty guipure curtains were always drawn? Probably, because he usually lowered the blind before lighting the room.

At that moment, he could have seen Kachoudas the tailor in his workshop opposite, barely a few metres from him. He was so close, and the street such a narrow, trench-like space, it was as if they were living in the same house.

Kachoudas' workshop, which was on the first floor, above his shop, had no curtains. The smallest details of the room stood out as if on an engraving: the flowers on the wallpaper, the fly specks on the mirror, the thick, flat piece of chalk hanging from a string, the brown-paper templates pinned to the wall, and Kachoudas, sitting on his table, his legs folded beneath him, a naked light bulb within easy reach that he would move closer to his work with the help of a wire. The door at the back, which led to the kitchen, was always half open, although not enough, most of the time, to reveal the interior of the room. All the same, it was obvious that Madame Kachoudas was there, because from time to time her husband's lips moved. They would talk to each other, from room to room, as they worked.

Monsieur Labbé had also talked: his assistant Valentin, who was in the shop, had heard a murmur of voices,

footsteps above his head. Then he had seen the hatter come back down, first his feet in their smart shoes, then the trousers, the jacket, and finally his rather soft face, always serious but not excessively so, not at all stern, the face of a man who is self-sufficient and doesn't feel the need to express his emotions.

Before going out that day, Monsieur Labbé had steamed two more hats, including the mayor's grey one, and, during that time, the only sounds were the rain in the street, the water rushing along the gutter, the slight hiss of the gas stove in the shop.

It was always too hot in there. As soon as he arrived in the morning, Valentin, the assistant, would become flushed, and by the afternoon his head would feel heavy; he would occasionally catch sight of himself in the mirrors that hung between the shelves, his eyes glistening, as if feverish.

Monsieur Labbé did not speak any more than on the other days. He could spend hours with his assistant without saying a word.

But there was always the sound the pendulum of the clock made as it moved, as well as a click every quarter of an hour. On the hour and half-hour, the mechanism was triggered, but would stop dead after a feeble effort: presumably, the clock had originally included chimes, which had long since broken down.

If the little tailor couldn't see inside the bedroom on the first floor – during the day because of the curtains, and in the evening because of the blind – he only had to bend his head to look straight down into the hat shop.

He was definitely on the lookout. Monsieur Labbé didn't bother to make sure, but he knew. Not that he made any change to his timetable because of it. His movements remained slow and meticulous. He had rather beautiful, slightly fat, surprisingly white hands.

At five to five, having switched off the light, he had left the back room – known as the workshop – and uttered one of his ritual phrases:

'I'm just going to see if Madame Labbé needs anything.'

He had again set off up the spiral staircase. Valentin had heard his steps overhead, a muted murmur of voices, then again seen the feet, the legs, the whole body.

Monsieur Labbé had opened the kitchen door at the back and said to Louise:

'I'll be back early. Valentin will close the shop.'

He said the same words every day, and the maid replied:

'All right, monsieur.'

Then, putting on his thick black overcoat, he repeated to Valentin, even though he had heard:

'I'll leave you to close the shop.'

'Yes, monsieur. Have a good evening, monsieur.'

'You too, Valentin.'

He took some money from the till drawer and lingered a while longer, looking at the windows opposite. He was sure that Kachoudas, who had seen his silhouette a while earlier on the blind at the first-floor window, had come down off his table.

What was he saying to his wife? He was definitely saying something. He needed an excuse. Not that she ever asked him anything. She would never have taken the liberty of

making a comment. For years now, pretty much since he had set up in business, he had been going to the Café des Colonnes at about five in the afternoon and having a glass or two of white wine. Monsieur Labbé went there too, as did others who didn't stop at white wine, or just two glasses. For most people, it was the end of the day. But when Kachoudas got home, he would have a quick dinner, surrounded by his brood, then climb back up on his table, where he often stayed until eleven or midnight, working.

'I'm going out for a bit of air.'

He was very afraid of missing Monsieur Labbé, and Monsieur Labbé knew that. It hadn't started with the first murder of an old woman, but with the third, when the town was really starting to panic.

Rue du Minage was almost always deserted at this hour, especially when it was pouring down. It was emptier than ever now that lots of people were avoiding going out after nightfall. The shopkeepers, who had been the first to suffer on account of the panic, had also been the first to organize patrols. But had these patrols managed to prevent the deaths of Madame Geoffroy-Lambert or Madame Léonide Proux, the midwife from Fétilly?

The little tailor was a bag of nerves, and Monsieur Labbé enjoyed the wicked pleasure of waiting for him without seeming to. Wasn't it a fiendish pleasure?

He finally opened his door, making the bell ring out. He passed beneath the huge red sheet-metal top hat which served as his sign, lifted his coat collar and plunged his hands in his pockets. There was a bell at Kachoudas'

door too, and Monsieur Labbé was sure to hear it after taking a few steps along the pavement.

It was an arcaded street, like most old streets in La Rochelle. This meant that, although the rain didn't touch the pavements, they were like cold, damp tunnels, lit only intermittently, the carriage entrances leading into darkness.

As they headed towards Place d'Armes, Kachoudas fell into step with Monsieur Labbé, but despite everything, he was so afraid of an ambush that he preferred to walk down the middle of the road, in the rain.

There wasn't a soul about until they got to the corner. Then came the windows of the perfume shop, the pharmacy, the shirtmaker's and finally the wide bay windows of the café. Jeantet, the young reporter, with his long hair, thin face and fiery eyes, was in his place, at the table closest to the window, writing his article over a cup of coffee.

Monsieur Labbé didn't smile, didn't appear to see him. He heard Kachoudas' steps getting closer. He turned the handle, entered the pleasant warmth, walked straight over to the tables in the middle, next to the stove, between the pillars, and remained standing behind the card players, while the waiter, Gabriel, divested him of his coat and hat.

'How are you, Léon?'

'Not bad.'

They had all known each other for so long – most of them since school – they felt no desire to talk. Those who held the cards nodded, or mechanically touched the newcomer's hand. Gabriel asked, out of habit:

'The usual?'

With a sigh of pleasure, Monsieur Labbé sat down behind one of the bridge players, Dr Chantreau, whom he called by his first name, Paul. He had seen at a glance what stage the game had reached. It was a game that could be said to have lasted for years: it resumed every day at the same time, at the same table, with the same drinks in front of the same players, the same pipes and the same cigars.

The central heating presumably being inadequate, Oscar, the owner, had kept the big shiny black stove, towards which Monsieur Labbé now stretched his legs in order to dry his shoes and the hems of his trousers. The little tailor had had time to come in and also walk towards the tables in the middle, but not with the same confidence, then nod respectfully – although nobody responded – and sit down on a chair.

He wasn't part of the group. He hadn't been to the same schools or served in the same regiments. At an age when the card players had already been friends, he had been living somewhere or other in the Near East, where people of his kind moved around like cattle from Armenia to Smyrna, from Smyrna to Syria, Greece or elsewhere.

At first, a few years earlier, he had sat a bit further away to drink his white wine and followed the game, which he probably didn't know, with a sustained attention that made him furrow his brow. Then he had moved imperceptibly closer, first pushing his chair, then bluntly changing seats, and finally tables, so that he ended up behind the players.

Nobody mentioned the old women, or the terror that

had gripped the town. They might have been discussing it at other tables, not at this one. Laude, the senator, took his pipe from his mouth, turned just slightly towards Monsieur Labbé and asked:

'How's your wife?'

'Still the same.'

It was a habit people had got into over the past fifteen years. Gabriel had served him his Picon and grenadine, which was a dark mahogany colour, and he slowly sipped at it, glancing over at young Jeantet, who was still in the middle of his article for the *Echo des Charentes*. A clock, its dial circled in brass, hung between the café proper and the area at the back where a row of billiard tables stood. According to that clock, it was a quarter past five when Julien Lambert, the insurance man, who was losing as usual, asked Monsieur Labbé:

'Will you take my place?'

'Not this evening.'

There was nothing extraordinary about that. There were six or seven of them, and they alternated joining in the game and sitting behind the players. Only Kachoudas was never invited to play – most likely, he had no ambition to do so.

He was small and frail. He smelled bad and was aware of it, so aware that he avoided getting too close to the others. It was a smell that belonged only to him and his family, you could have called it the Kachoudas smell, a mixture of the garlic in their food and the grease of the fabrics. Here, nobody said anything, they just pretended politely not to notice, but in school, the girls were not so

discreet and objected when they were placed next to the Kachoudas sisters.

'You stink! Your sister stinks! You all stink!'

He was smoking one of his few cigarettes of the day, being unable to smoke while working for fear of burning his customers' clothes. He rolled his cigarettes himself, and there was always a large saliva stain on the tip.

It was the third of December. It was a quarter past five. It was raining. The streets were dark. It was hot in the café, and Monsieur Labbé, the hatter of Rue du Minage, was watching the doctor play – he had just bid five clubs, and the insurance man had imprudently doubled it.

Tomorrow morning, when they read the newspaper, they would know what young Jeantet was writing about the murders of old women. He was conducting an impassioned investigation of his own and had even issued a kind of challenge to the police.

His boss, Jérôme Caillé, the printer, who ran the newspaper, was calmly playing bridge, paying no attention to the ardent young man. He would glance through his article later when he got home.

Chantreau had just exhausted the trumps and was going for the decisive finesse when, without needing to turn, Monsieur Labbé saw Kachoudas half rise, without completely losing contact with his chair, bend towards him and reach out his arm as if to pick up an object from the sawdust-covered floor.

But his target was the hatter's trousers. With his tailor's eye, he had noticed a small white dot near the turnup. Most likely, he had taken it for a thread. He certainly

didn't have any bad intentions. Even if he had, he couldn't have guessed the importance of his gesture.

Nor did Monsieur Labbé, who let him do it, a little surprised, but not in the least anxious.

'Excuse me.'

Kachoudas had taken hold of the white thing, which wasn't a thread, but a tiny piece of paper, barely half a centimetre in size: thin, rough paper, like newsprint.

Nobody in the café paid the slightest attention to what was happening. Kachoudas was holding the piece of paper between his thumb and index finger. It was only by chance that, body bent forwards, head bowed, the back of his buttocks still touching his chair, he glanced at it. It wasn't just any fragment from a newspaper. It had been carefully cut out with scissors. More precisely, two letters, an *n* and a *t*, had been cut from the end of a word.

Monsieur Labbé looked him up and down, and the little tailor suddenly froze, seized with panic. At last, he raised his head, straightened up and, avoiding looking the hatter in the face, held the tiny object out to him.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered.

Instead of throwing the piece of paper away, he put it back where he had found it, and that was a mistake, being an admission that he had realized its importance. Because he was timid and humble by nature, he now made a second mistake, beginning a sentence he didn't have the courage to finish:

'I thought . . .'

All he could see, through a luminous fog, was chairs,

backs, cloth, sawdust on the floor, the black feet of the stove. He heard a calm, deep voice say:

'Thank you, Kachoudas.'

Because they did talk to each other. Every morning at eight o'clock, the hatter and the tailor came out of their respective houses and took down the panels that served as shutters for their shops. The pork butcher's next door to Kachoudas had already been open for a long time. On Saturday, the local farmers who had vegetables or poultry to sell cluttered the street with their baskets, but on the other days, only the cobbles separated the two men, and Kachoudas had got into the habit of saying:

'Good morning, Monsieur Labbé.'

He would add, depending on the sky:

'Nice weather today.'

Or else:

'Rain again.'

And the hatter would reply affably:

'Good morning, Kachoudas.'

That was all. They were two shopkeepers whose shops faced each other.

This time, Monsieur Labbé had just come out with:

'Thank you, Kachoudas.'

And in more or less the same tone. Or perhaps it was exactly the same tone, in spite of the implications of the little tailor's discovery. Kachoudas felt like gulping down his drink. The glass knocked against his teeth. He tried to think very fast, to think correctly, and the harder he tried, the more muddled his ideas became.

Above all, he mustn't turn his head to the right. He had decided that from the first moment.

The table in the middle, where the senator, the printer, the doctor and the hatter sat, was the table for men of sixty to sixty-five, basically the most important people, but at the other tables there were other players. In particular, there were the *belote* players, who represented the generation of men from forty to fifty. And at that table, almost always from five until six, sat Detective Chief Inspector Pigeac, the man in charge of the investigation into the murders of the old ladies.

Kachoudas must at all costs avoid looking in his direction. Nor could he turn towards the young reporter, who was still writing – presumably once again answering one of the murderer's messages.

Twenty days had been long enough for it to become a habit, almost a tradition. After each murder, the newspaper would receive a letter, the characters of which, often entire words, had been cut out of previous issues of the *Echo des Charentes*, which published it, followed by a comment from young Jeantet. The following day, or the day after that, the murderer would reply in his turn, always with the help of bits of paper cut out and stuck onto a blank sheet.

Just the day before, the message had contained a sentence that sent a chill down the little tailor's spine:

> You are wrong, young man. I am not a coward. It is not out of cowardice that I only pick old women, but out of necessity. Should the same necessity arise tomorrow to attack a man, however big and strong, I shall do so.

Some letters were half a column long, representing hundreds of characters patiently cut out, which had led Jeantet to write:

> Not only is the murderer patient and meticulous, but he leads the kind of life that allows him a great deal of leisure time.

Just as patiently, the nineteen-year-old reporter had conducted an experiment. He had established how long it took to compose a thirty-line letter using characters cut out of old newspapers. Kachoudas couldn't remember the exact result, but it was an astonishing figure.

> Should the same necessity arise tomorrow to attack a man . . .

One of them was puffing at his pipe and watching the card game, the other had a dirty cigarette end stuck to his lip and didn't know where to look. Occasionally, Monsieur Labbé would glance at the clock. It was only five twenty-five when he ordered his second Picon, and five thirty when he stood up, which was enough to make Gabriel run to him with his coat and hat.

Did he really look Kachoudas up and down with a benign but ironic gaze? There was a blanket of smoke over the card players' heads, and the stove sent out waves of warmth. It was as if Monsieur Labbé were waiting, as if he guessed exactly what the little tailor was thinking.

'If I let him go out alone, he's quite capable of waiting to ambush me in a dark corner on Rue du Minage . . .'

And what if Kachoudas went straight to the inspector, or even the reporter? What if he pointed a finger and declared, 'It's him'?

The piece of paper had disappeared. Kachoudas looked for it in vain. He remembered that the hatter had rolled it between his fingers until it was a grey capsule. But even if the two cut-out letters had still been on the floor, how could he have proved that he had got them from Monsieur Labbé's trousers?

No, even that wouldn't have been enough. Which was why Monsieur Labbé hadn't reacted, hadn't caught fright, had simply said:

'Thank you, Kachoudas.'

And there was twenty thousand francs at stake, a fortune for a little tailor who was only ever given repairs or suits to turn, and whose elder daughter worked as a salesgirl at Prisunic.

In order to claim the twenty thousand francs, you couldn't just make a wild accusation. That would only alarm the murderer.

Now Monsieur Labbé knew. And Monsieur Labbé, who had killed five old women since 13 November – in other words, in twenty days – could quite easily do away with him.

Did Kachoudas have time to think about all that? The hatter touched the tips of his friends' fingers. They said to him:

'Have a good evening, Léon.'

That was his name: Léon. He tapped the doctor on the shoulder because he was dealing the cards and had both hands occupied, and the doctor muttered:

'I hope Mathilde feels better.'

Anyone would have sworn he was deliberately lingering, to give Kachoudas time to make up his mind. His expression was just as it had been earlier, when Valentin had seen him come down the spiral staircase. He had once been fat, perhaps very fat, and had since melted: that much was obvious from his flaccid figure and indistinct features. Even so, he probably still weighed twice what Kachoudas weighed.

'See you tomorrow.'

The minute hand had just gone past the half-hour. As soon as the door closed again, Kachoudas grabbed his coat from the next chair. He almost left without paying, so afraid was he that Monsieur Labbé would have time to turn the corner of Rue du Minage before he himself was outside, at which point he could easily fall into a trap. But he couldn't not go home.

Monsieur Labbé was walking at his regular pace, neither fast nor slow, and, for the first time, the little tailor noticed how exceptionally light he was, like most people who were fat or had once been fat, and how little noise he made as he walked.

He turned right into Rue du Minage. Kachoudas followed him at a distance of about twenty metres, carefully keeping to the middle of the road. He would still have time to cry out if need be. Two or three shops were still open – their lights could be seen through the rain – and

almost all the apartments on the upper floors were lighted.

Monsieur Labbé was following the left-hand pavement, the one where the hat shop was, but instead of stopping there, he walked straight past it, then turned his head when he had gone a bit further, perhaps to make sure his neighbour was still following him. Not that it was necessary – Kachoudas's footsteps echoed on the cobbles.

The little tailor could go home. The way was clear. His shop was still open, and he had time to pull the bolt firmly. Through the first-floor window, he could see the piece of chalk hanging above the table, near the bulb. The little girls were back from school. Esther, his eldest daughter, the one who worked at Prisunic, would be back soon after six. She would come running – she too was scared of the murderer, and none of her workmates lived in the neighbourhood.

He continued on his way. He turned left, like Monsieur Labbé, and for a moment they were in a more brightly lit street. It was reassuring to see people in the shops, a few rare cars passing, splashing through pools of water.

There were no more arcades, and Monsieur Labbé was getting the rain on his shoulders. The street was dark again now. One minute, the hatter disappeared, the next he reappeared in the circle of light thrown by a street-lamp. Kachoudas kept strictly to the middle of the road, holding his breath, paralysed with fear and yet incapable of turning back.

How many volunteer patrols were there in the town at this hour? Probably four or five, including young people