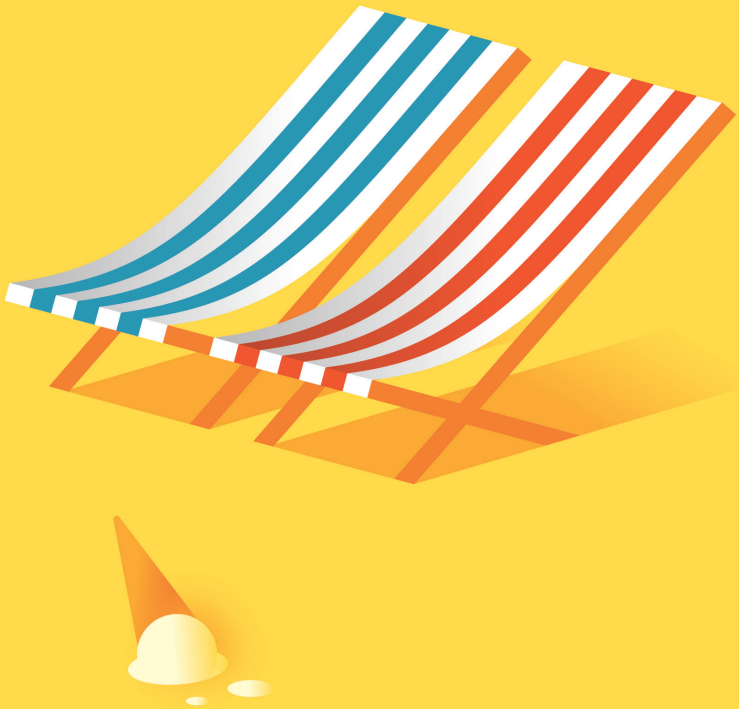
SIMENON

INSPECTOR MAIGRET

MAIGRET'S HOLIDAY



PENGUIN CLASSICS

Maigret's Holiday

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points . . . 'understand and judge not'.

GEORGES SIMENON

Maigret's Holiday

Translated by ROS SCHWARTZ

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN CLASSICS

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

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

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *Les vacances de Maigret* by Presses de la Cité 1948
This translation first published 2016
Published in Penguin Classics 2025
001

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
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: 978–0–241–78822–6

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.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC
www.fsc.org
FSC® C018179

Maigret's Holiday

1.

The street was narrow, like all the streets in the old quarter of Les Sables d'Olonne, with uneven cobblestones and pavements so narrow that you had to step off to let another person pass. The entrance to the corner building was a magnificent double door, painted a dark, rich, pristine green, with two highly polished brass knockers of the kind found only on the houses of provincial lawyers or convents.

Opposite were parked two long, gleaming cars which exuded the same aura of spotlessness and comfort. Maigret recognized them, they both belonged to surgeons.

'I could have been a surgeon too,' he thought to himself. And owned a car like that. Probably not a surgeon, but it was a fact that he had almost become a doctor. He had set out to study medicine and sometimes felt a hankering for the medical profession. If his father hadn't died three years too soon . . .

Before mounting the step, he drew his watch out of his pocket. It showed three o'clock. The same instant, the chapel's slightly shrill peal rang out, and then came the deeper chimes of Notre-Dame over the rooftops of the town's little houses.

He sighed and pressed the electric bell. He sighed because it was absurd to take his watch out of his pocket

at the same time every day. He sighed because it was no less absurd to arrive on the dot of three, as if the fate of the world depended on it. He sighed because, in the time it took to wait for the click of the door, which opened automatically, soundlessly, smoothly, thanks to a well-oiled mechanism, he would, as on the previous days, become a different man.

Not even a man. His shoulders were still the broad shoulders of Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, his burly form did not diminish.

From the minute he set foot in the wide, bright corridor, however, he felt like a little boy, the young Maigret who, long ago, in his village in the Allier, used to walk on tiptoe and hold his breath when, at dawn, his hands frozen and his nose red, he entered the sacristy to don his choirboy's cassock.

The atmosphere here was reminiscent of those days. A faint pharmaceutical smell replaced the fragrance of incense, but it was not the sickening smell of hospitals, it was more complex, more refined, more *exquisite*. Underfoot was a soft linoleum the equivalent of which he had never seen anywhere. The walls too, covered with oil paint, were smoother, of a creamier white than elsewhere. Even the moistness in the air and the purity of the silence had a quality that cannot be found anywhere other than in a convent.

He instinctively turned to the right and bowed, like the choirboy walking past the altar, murmuring:

'Good afternoon, Sister . . .'

In a neat, light-filled glazed office with a window on to

the corridor, a nun wearing a cornette sat in front of a register. She smiled at him and said:

'Good afternoon, Monsieur 6 . . . I telephoned to ask if you may go up . . . Our dear patient is improving every day.'

This one was Sister Aurélie. In ordinary life, she would probably have been a woman in her fifties, but beneath her white headdress, her caramel-smooth face was ageless.

'Hello!' she said in a hushed voice. 'Is that you, Sister Marie des Anges? . . . Monsieur 6 is downstairs . . .'

Maigret did not take offence, did not even grow impatient. Goodness, how futile this daily ritual was. They were expecting him upstairs. They knew he arrived on the dot of three. He was capable of going up to the first floor all by himself.

But no! They were sticklers for routine. Sister Aurélie smiled at him, and he looked at the red-carpeted stairs where Sister Marie des Anges would appear.

She too smiled, her hands lost in the voluminous sleeves of her grey habit.

'Would you like to come up, Monsieur 6?'

He knew very well that she would whisper, as if it were a secret or a sensational piece of news:

'Our dear patient is improving every day . . .'

He walked on tiptoe. He might have blushed if, by chance, his weight had caused a stair to creak. He even turned away slightly when he spoke, to disguise the smell of Calvados which he drank every day after his lunch.

The sunlight streamed into the corridor in slanting rays, as in paintings of saints. He occasionally passed a trolley

on which lay a patient being wheeled to the operating theatre and whose fixed stare was the only thing he remembered.

Sister Aldegonde invariably came to the doorway of the vast, twenty-bed ward, as if by chance, as if she had some business there, purely to say to him in passing, with a pious smile:

'Good afternoon, Monsieur 6 . . .'

Then, a little further on, Sister Marie des Anges pushed open door number 6, and stood aside.

Sitting up in bed with a strange expression on her pallid face, a woman watched him come in. It was Madame Maigret, with a look that seemed to be saying to him:

'My poor Maigret, how you have changed . . .'

Why was he still walking on tiptoe, talking in a quiet voice that wasn't his, moving cautiously as if in a china shop? He kissed her on the forehead, spotted the oranges and biscuits on the bedside table and, on the blanket, a piece of knitting that infuriated him.

'Again?'

'Sister Marie des Anges allowed me to do a little bit.'

There were other rituals, like greeting the old lady in the other bed. For they had not been able to get a single room.

'Good afternoon, Mademoiselle Rinquet . . .'

She looked at him with her darting, beady little eyes. His visits enraged her. All the time he was there, her worn-looking face maintained a surly expression.

'Sit down, my poor Maigret . . .'

She was the one who was ill. She was the one who had needed emergency surgery three days after their arrival in

Les Sables d'Olonne, where they had come to spend their holiday. But she was calling him 'my poor Maigret'.

It was much too hot, but nothing on earth would make him take off his jacket. Sister Marie des Anges popped in from time to time, goodness knows why, to move a glass of water, bring in a thermometer or some other item. Each time she would mutter, glancing at Maigret:

'Excuse me . . .'

As for Madame Maigret, every day she asked:

'What have you had to eat?'

But actually, she wasn't so far off the mark. What else was there for him to do, other than eat and drink? The fact was that he had never drunk so much in his life.

The day after the operation, the surgeon had advised:

'Don't stay longer than half an hour.'

Now it had become a routine, a ritual. He stayed for half an hour. He had nothing to say. The presence of the bad-tempered spinster inhibited him. In any case, in normal times, what did he talk about to his wife when he was with her? He was beginning to ask himself this question. Nothing, in short, was the answer. So why was he missing her so much all the time?

Here, he did nothing but wait; wait for the half-hour to come to an end. After a few minutes, Madame Maigret picked up her knitting to give an impression of composure. Since she had to put up with Mademoiselle Rinquet's presence all day and all night, she treated her with consideration. If she spoke, she would hastily add:

'Isn't that so, Mademoiselle Rinquet?'

Then she winked at Maigret. He guessed what that

meant. Women hate letting their petty anxieties show, especially Madame Maigret, and there they both were confined to bed.

'I wrote a card to my sister . . . Will you be so kind as to post it for me?'

He slipped the postcard with a picture of the convent hospital with its pretty white façade and green door into his left breast pocket.

Now for a stupid detail. Left pocket or right pocket? That question was to come back to haunt him at eleven o'clock that night.

For years and years, each of his pockets had always had a clearly defined purpose. In his left trouser pocket, his tobacco pouch and his handkerchief – so there were always wisps of tobacco in his handkerchiefs. Right pocket, his two pipes and small change. Left back pocket, his wallet, which was always stuffed with useless bits of paper and made one buttock look bigger than the other.

He never carried keys on him. Whenever he took them by mistake, he would lose them. He hardly put anything in his jacket, only a box of matches in the right-hand pocket.

That is why, when he had newspapers to take away or letters to post, he slipped them in his left breast pocket.

Had he done so that day? It was likely. He was sitting by the frosted-glass window. Sister Marie des Anges had come in a couple of times, darting a furtive glance in his direction each time. She was very young. There wasn't a crease on her rosy face.

A fool might perhaps have claimed that she was in love

with him, for she would rush to meet him on the stairs and become a butterfingers when he was in the room.

He knew very well that there was something else, something much simpler, more naive and childish.

Like the idea, which had come from her, of calling him 'Monsieur 6'. Because he dreaded people's curiosity and didn't like his name being yelled right, left and centre. He was on holiday, wasn't he, yes or no?

Did he really hate being on holiday? All year long he would sigh:

'Oh to have some peace and quiet at last, hours and hours to fill as I please . . .'

Hours completely free, days with no commitments, no meetings. In Paris, in his office at Quai des Orfèvres, that sounded like unimaginable bliss.

Was he missing Madame Maigret?

No! He knew himself. He complained. He was grumpy. But deep down, he knew that this holiday would be just like all the others. In six months, in a year's time, he would be thinking:

'My goodness! I was so happy at Les Sables d'Olonne . . .'

And with hindsight, this hospital where he felt so ill at ease would seem like a delightful place. He would melt at the memory of Sister Marie des Anges' candid, blushing face.

Never did he take his watch out before hearing the little chimes of the chapel bell signalling that it was half past three. He even pretended not to have heard. Was Madame Maigret taken in? She was the one who had to say:

'Time's up, Maigret . . .'

'I'll telephone tomorrow morning,' he would say, rising to his feet, as if this were something new.

He telephoned every morning. There was no telephone in the room, but it was Sister Aurélie, downstairs, who answered:

'Our dear patient had a very good night . . .'

Sometimes she would add:

'The chaplain will be coming later to keep her company.'

His life was as highly regulated as that of a prisoner in Fresnes jail. He hated obligations. He cursed at the thought of having to be somewhere at a specific time. But in actual fact, he himself had created a schedule that he kept to more scrupulously than a train its timetable.

At what point in the day could the note have been slipped into his pocket, his left breast pocket?

It was an ordinary sheet of glazed squared paper, probably torn out of an exercise book. The words were written in pencil, in a regular handwriting that looked to him like a woman's.

For pity's sake, ask to see the patient in room 15.

There was no signature. Only those words. He had slipped his wife's postcard into his left pocket. Had the note been there already? It was possible. He can't have thrust his hand deep inside his pocket.

But what about later, when he had posted the card in the letterbox by the covered market?

Three little words particularly irritated him: *For pity's sake*.

Why for pity's sake? If someone wanted to speak to him, it was perfectly straightforward to do so. He wasn't the pope. Anyone could approach him.

For pity's sake . . . That was in keeping with the cloying atmosphere into which he stepped every afternoon, with the nuns' faint smiles as if effaced with an eraser, with Sister Marie des Anges' little winks.

No! He shrugged. He found it hard to imagine Sister Marie des Anges slipping a note into his pocket. Even less Sister Aldegonde, who contrived to be in the corridor, opposite the public ward, whenever he walked past. As for Sister Aurélie, she was always separated from him by a window.

That was not quite true. A detail came back to him. When he had left, she had been outside her office and had shown him to the door.

Why not the elderly Mademoiselle Rinquet, for that matter? He had brushed past her bed too. And he had passed Doctor Bertrand on the stairs . . .

He didn't want to think about it. Besides, it was of no importance. It was ten thirty at night when he found the note. He had just gone up to his room at the Hôtel Bel Air. As usual, before undressing he emptied out his pockets and placed the contents on top of the chest of drawers.

As on the previous days, he had drunk a lot. Through no fault of his own. Not intentionally, but because this was the pattern his life at Les Sables d'Olonne had taken on.

For example, when he came downstairs at nine in the morning, he was forced to drink.

At eight o'clock, Julie, the smaller and darker of the two maids, brought him his coffee in bed. Why did he pretend to be asleep when he had been awake since six o'clock?

Another little habit. Holidays meant lie-ins. He rose at dawn three hundred and twenty days of the year and more, and each morning he promised himself:

'When I'm on holiday, I'm going to catch up on my sleep!'

From his room he had a view of the ocean. It was August. He slept with the windows open. The old, heavy, red-silk curtains did not meet and he was dragged from his sleep by the sun and the sound of the breakers on the sand.

And then there was the noise from the lady in number 3, next door, who had four children aged between six months and eight years, who all slept in her room.

For an hour there was shrieking, wailing, comings and goings; he could picture her, half-dressed, wearing slippers on her bare feet, her hair dishevelled, struggling with her tetchy brood, plonking one down in a corner, another on the bed, slapping the eldest who was crying, looking for the girl's lost shoe, despairing of ever getting the spirit stove, to work so she could heat up the baby's bottle. The smell of meths seeped under the communicating door to Maigret's room.

As for the elderly couple on his right, that was another performance. They talked nonstop in a monotone, their voices indistinguishable from one another, and it almost sounded as if they were reciting psalms.

Maigret had to wait until the bathroom for their floor was free, listen out for the sound of the sink draining or the toilet being flushed. He had a little balcony. He lingered there in his dressing gown, and the view was really magnificent, the vast, dazzling beach, the sea dotted with blue and white sails. He saw the first striped beach umbrellas being planted, and the first kids arriving in their red swimming costumes.

By the time he went downstairs, freshly shaven, traces of soap behind his ears, he was on his third pipe.

What was it that prompted him to go behind the scenes? Nothing. He could, like everyone else, have gone out via the sunlit dining room, which Germaine, the plump maid with incredible breasts, was busy polishing.

But no. He pushed open the door to the staff dining room and then that of the kitchen. At that moment, the bespectacled Madame Léonard was discussing the menu with the chef. Monsieur Léonard would invariably emerge from the wine cellar. At any hour of the day, he could be seen coming up from the cellar, and yet he was fairly sober.

'Beautiful day, inspector . . .'

Monsieur Léonard was in slippers and shirt-sleeves. There were peas, freshly grated carrots, leeks and potatoes in bowls. Blood from the meats ran on to the deal table, while sole and turbot lay waiting to be scaled.

'A little glass of white wine, inspector?'

The first of the day. A little drink with the owner. It was in fact an excellent local wine with a greenish tinge.

Maigret could hardly go and sit on the beach among all the mothers. He strolled along the promenade, Le Remblai,

pausing from time to time. He gazed at the sea, at the swelling number of brightly clad figures playing in the waves close to the shore. Then, when he reached the town centre, he turned right into a narrow street which led to the covered market.

He wandered from stall to stall as slowly and methodically as if he had forty people to feed. He stopped in front of the fish, which were still quivering, then he lingered in front of the shellfish and proffered a matchstick to a lobster which snatched it with its pincer.

Second glass of white wine. Because just opposite was a little café where you went down one step and it was like an extension of the market, filled with mouth-watering smells.

Then he walked past Notre-Dame to go and buy his newspaper. Could he go back up to his room to read it?

He went back to the promenade and sat at the terrace of a café, always in the same place. He always dithered too, keeping the waiter standing there ready to take his order. As if he were going to drink anything else!

'A white wine.'

It had come about by chance. He would sometimes go for months without drinking white wine.

At eleven o'clock, he went inside the café to telephone the hospital, to hear Sister Aurélie say in her syrupy voice:

'Our dear patient had an excellent night.'

He had organized a series of little halts where he would sit at set times. In the hotel dining room too, he had his special corner, by the window, opposite the table of his two elderly neighbours.

On the first day, after his coffee, he had ordered a glass of Calvados. Since then Germaine invariably asked him:

'Calvados, inspector?'

He didn't dare refuse. He felt drowsy. The sun was scorching. At times the asphalt on the promenade melted underfoot and car tyres left their imprint on it.

He went up to his room for a nap, not in the bed but in the armchair which he had dragged on to the balcony, where he sat with a newspaper spread over his face.

For pity's sake, ask to see the patient in room 15 . . .

Anyone seeing him ensconced in his various favourite spots at different times of day would think he had been there for years, like the afternoon card players. But it was only nine days since he and his wife had arrived. On the first evening, they had eaten mussels. It was a treat they had been promising themselves since Paris: to eat a huge dish of freshly caught mussels.

They had both been ill. They had kept their neighbours awake. The next day, Maigret felt better, but on the beach Madame Maigret complained of vague pains. The second night, she had a fever. They still thought it was nothing serious.

'It was silly of me. I've never been able to eat mussels . . .'

Then, the following day, she was in so much pain that they had had to call Doctor Bertrand and he had sent her straight to hospital. Those few hours had been difficult, chaotic, to-ing and fro-ing, new faces, X-rays, tests.

'I assure you, doctor, it was the mussels,' repeated Madame Maigret with a wan smile.

But the doctors were not smiling. They took Maigret to one side. Acute appendicitis with the risk of peritonitis. His wife needed emergency surgery.

He paced up and down the long corridor during the operation, at the same time as a young man waiting for his wife to give birth, who had bitten his nails until his fingers bled.

That was how he had become 'Monsieur 6'.

In six days, a man develops new habits, learns to walk quietly, to smile sweetly at Sister Aurélie, and then at Sister Marie des Anges. He even learns to give a forced smile to the loathsome Mademoiselle Rinquet.

After which someone takes advantage of the situation to slip a stupid note into his pocket.

And first of all, who was the patient in room 15? Madame Maigret would know, for sure. They all knew one another even though they didn't meet. They all knew one another's business. She sometimes told her husband the gossip, discreetly, in a low voice, like in church.

'Apparently the lady in room 11 who's so kind and so gentle . . . poor thing . . . Come closer . . .'

She stammered under her breath:

'Breast cancer . . .'

Then she glanced over at Mademoiselle Rinquet's bed and fluttered her eyelashes, indicating that her fellow patient had cancer too.

'If you could have seen the pretty little girl they brought into the ward . . .'