

GEORGES **SIMENON**

Signed, Picpus

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



Georges Simenon

signed, picpus

Translated by David Coward



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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.

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'.

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SIGNED, PICPUS

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EXTRA: Chapter 1 from *Inspector Cadaver*



1. Did Picpus Lie?

Three minutes to five. A white light flashes in the huge map of Paris which fills the whole of one wall. An operator puts down his sandwich, plugs a line jack into one of the myriad holes that is a telephone switchboard.

‘Hello? Is that the fourteenth *arrondissement*? ... Has your bus left yet?’

Maigret, trying hard to look unconcerned, with the sun full on him, wipes his forehead. The operator mutters a few monosyllables, unplugs the jack, reaches for his sandwich and murmurs for the benefit of the detective chief inspector from the Police Judiciaire:

‘A Bercy!’

In the jargon, a ‘Bercy’ is a drunk. It is August. Paris reeks of tarmac. The noise from the Cité in the heart of Paris drifts in through the large, open windows into this room which is the nerve centre of the Police Emergency Service. Below, in the courtyard of the Préfecture de Police, two vans full of policemen are visible, ready to leave whenever the word is given.

Another light winks on, this time in the eighteenth *arrondissement*. Sausage sandwich down. Plug in.

‘Hello? ... Ah, Gérard! ... On duty? ... What’s happening your end? ... Right! ... Fine! ...’

Defenestration. It’s the method of choice of poor people who commit suicide, especially the old men and, oddly enough, especially in the eighteenth *arrondissement*. Maigret knocks out his pipe on the window-sill, refills it and glances up at the clock. Yes or no: has someone killed the clairvoyant?

The door opens. Sergeant Lucas, short, podgy, flustered. He wipes his brow too.

‘Still nothing, chief?’

Like Maigret, he has just walked across the boulevard which separates the headquarters of the Police Judiciaire from the Préfecture. A neighbourly call.

‘So, our man’s there ...’

‘Mascouvin?’

‘He’s as pale as papier mâché. He’s insisting on talking to you. He’s saying suicide is the only way out left to him ...’

Another light comes on. Maybe this is it? No ... Just a brawl out at Saint-Ouen.

The phone rings. The commissioner of the Police Judiciaire, for the inspector.

‘Maigret? ... Got something? ... *Anything?* ...’

The irony in his voice is audible. Maigret is getting angry. He is hot. He’d give anything for a freshly drawn beer. And for the first time in his life he is almost on the point of wanting a crime, the crime he is expecting, to happen. Absolutely! If the clairvoyant is not killed at exactly five o’clock or rather, as was written on the blotting-pad, ‘at five in the afternoon’, then he’ll have to put up with months of sarcastic smiles and jokes, some funnier than others.

‘Go and bring me Mascouvin.’

God knows but the man looks like a joker! He turned up the previous evening at the Police Judiciaire with gloom written all over him, and wouldn't take no for an answer, his face twitching with a nervous tic, insisting loudly on speaking to Detective Chief Inspector Maigret in person.

‘It's a matter of life and death!’ he said.

A small, thin man, rather dull to look at, neither young nor old, exuding the stale smell of a bachelor who does not look after himself. He pulls his fingers and cracks his knuckles while telling his tale, the way a schoolboy recites his lesson.

‘Fifteen years I've worked for Proud and Drouin, property dealers on Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. I live alone in a two-roomed flat, 21, Place des Vosges ... Every evening I go for a game of bridge in a club in Rue des Pyramides ... For the last two months, I've been having a run of bad luck. I've lost all my savings ... I owe the countess 800 francs ...’

Maigret only half-listens, thinking that one half of the population of Paris is on holiday and that at that moment the other half is downing cold drinks under the awnings of pavement cafés. Who was the countess? Well, the sad little man explains. An upper-class lady who has been through hard times and set up a bridge club in Rue des Pyramides. A good-looking woman. It's obvious: this small dull man is in love.

‘Today, at four o'clock, inspector, I took a thousand-franc note from my employers' till.’

He could not have cut a more tragic figure if he'd wiped out an entire family. He continues with his confession, still cracking his fingers. After the offices of Proud and Drouin closed for the day, he wandered around the boulevards with the thousand-franc note in his pocket. He was racked by guilt. He walked into the Café des Sports at the corner of Place de la République and Boulevard Voltaire, where he usually has a lonely drink before his evening meal.

‘Can I have pen and paper, Nestor?’

For he called the waiter by his Christian name. Yes, he will write to his employers. He will confess everything and send the thousand-franc note back! His luck has deserted him for too long! He has been losing steadily for two months. The countess he silently adores only has eyes for a retired army captain and is always strict in making Mascouvin pay up what he owes her.

Surrounded by the bustling crowd, he stared at the blotting-pad which lay open in front of him. Mechanically, he had put his pince-nez down on the blotter and looked at it there with his large, short-sighted eyes. It was at that moment that the strange thing happened. One of the lenses, acting as a mirror, reflected the criss-cross, hatched ink marks which had dried on the blotter. Mascouvin made out the words: *will kill* ... He looked more closely ... The lens restored the original image:

Tomorrow, at five in the afternoon, I will kill ...

Tomorrow, at five in the afternoon, I will kill the clairvoyant.

Signed, Picpus.

Five past five. The operator has had time to finish eating his sausage, which smells of garlic, for the white lights on the map of Paris have remained dormant. A sound of footsteps on the stairs. It is Lucas bringing sad little Mascouvin.

The previous evening, Maigret told him to go home, turn up for work as usual and put the thousand francs back where they belonged. As a precaution, Lucas had followed him. At about nine o'clock,

Mascouvin was hanging around in Rue des Pyramides but did not go into the countess's building. He spent the night at home in Place des Vosges. Next morning he went to his office and at midday ate his lunch in a cheap café on Boulevard Saint-Martin.

Then, at four thirty, when it was all getting too much for him, he suddenly left the sombre offices of Proud and Drouin and headed off towards Quai des Orfèvres.

'I can't stand it any more, inspector ... I daren't look my employers in the face ... It seems like ...'

'Sit down ... Don't say anything ...'

Eight minutes past five! A glorious sun lights up the teeming streets of Paris; the men are in shirt-sleeves and the women are almost naked under their light dresses. Meanwhile, the police are keeping watch on eighty-two clairvoyants, some more far-sighted than others.

'You don't think, Maigret, it could be a hoax?'

Lucas is worried about his chief, who stands to make himself a laughing-stock. A light goes in the third *arrondissement*.

'Hello? ... Right ... Fine ...'

The operator turns to Maigret and sighs:

'Another Bercy ... But it's not Saturday ...'

Mascouvin, unable to stop fidgeting and pulling his fingers, opens his mouth:

'Excuse me, sir ... I'd just like to say ...'

'Well don't!' snarls Maigret, shutting him up.

Come on, yes or no, is this Picpus going to make up his mind and kill himself a clairvoyant?

The light of the eighteenth *arrondissement* again.

'Hello? ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret? ... I'll put him on ...'

Maigret's heart misses a beat as he grabs the receiver.

'Hello ... Yes ... The station in Rue Damrémont? ... Say again? ... 67A, Rue Coulaincourt ...'

Mademoiselle Jeanne? ... A clairvoyant?'

His voice is loud and urgent. His face lights up.

'Come on, look lively! ... Lucas, take him back ... You never know ...'

Joseph Mascouvin, like a sleepwalker, the lugubrious kind of sleepwalker, follows the two men down the dusty stairs. A police car is waiting in the courtyard.

'67A, Rue Coulaincourt ... And step on it ...'

On the way, Maigret flicks through the list of clairvoyants and fortune-tellers which had been drawn up the evening before. He had ordered a discreet watch to be kept on them ... Of course, Mademoiselle Jeanne's name is not on it! ...

'Faster!'

And now this clown Mascouvin asks timidly:

'Is she dead?'

For a moment, Maigret wonders if he is as simple-minded as he looks. He'll find out sooner or later!

'Gun?' whispers Lucas.

'Knife.'

There is no need to look at the numbers on the houses. Just opposite Place Constantin-Pecqueur, a

small crowd identifies the house where the crime has just occurred.

‘Shall I wait for you?’ stammers Mascouvin.

‘Come inside with us ... Come along! Keep up!’

The uniformed policemen give way to let Maigret and Sergeant Lucas through.

‘Fifth floor. On your right.’

No lift. The house is clean, quite comfortable. Tenants out on the landings, all as it should be. On the fifth floor, the police chief in charge of the eighteenth *arrondissement* precinct holds out his hand to Maigret.

‘Come in ... It’s only just happened ... Stroke of luck that we were informed so soon, as you’ll see ...’

They walk into virtually full sunlight. The small living room has a bay window, now wide open, which leads out to a balcony with a view over the city. The room is daintily stylish, hushed, with light coloured curtains, Louis XVI armchairs, tasteful curios and knick-knacks. A local doctor straightens up.

‘There’s nothing I can do ... The second thrust of the knife was the one that killed her ...’

The room is too small for the number of people now in it. After filling his pipe, Maigret takes off his jacket and reveals a pair of mauve braces which his wife bought for him the previous week. The police chief smiles at the sight of the braces, which, even more extravagantly, are made of silk. Maigret scowls.

‘So? ... What have you got? ... I haven’t got all day ...’

‘Well. I haven’t had time to gather much information, not least because the concierge isn’t the chatty sort. You have to dig words out of her, like pulling teeth ... A Mademoiselle Jeanne, real name Marie Picard, born Bayeux ...’

Maigret has raised the sheet which has been thrown over the body. Fine-looking woman, and no mistake. Fortyish. Well upholstered, well groomed, hair blonde but maybe not naturally so?

‘She wasn’t registered as a medium and didn’t advertise. But she had regular customers, most of them quite well-heeled apparently, who used to come here to consult her ...’

‘How many clients did she see this afternoon?’

‘The concierge, Madame Baffoin, Eugénie Baffoin, doesn’t know. She reckons it’s none of her business. Says not all concierges are as nosy as they are made out to be. At a few minutes after five, this lady here ...’

A small, brisk woman, also middle-aged, gets to her feet. The hat she is wearing is a touch ridiculous. She explains:

‘I knew Mademoiselle Jeanne. She used to come down to Morsang sometimes for a few days. Do you know Morsang? ... It’s on the Seine, just upstream from Corbeil, where the dam is ... I run the inn there, the Beau Pigeon ... Isidore had been out fishing, he caught some fine tench, and since I was coming to Paris anyway, I thought ...’

The tench, wrapped in green leaves, still fresh, are there, in a basket.

‘Well, I knew she’d be pleased, for she did like her fish ...’

‘Had you known Mademoiselle Jeanne long?’

‘Maybe five years or so? ... One time she stayed with us for a month ...’

‘Alone?’

‘What do you take her for? ... Anyway, I popped in here while I was doing my shopping ... The door wasn’t shut ... Being as it was half open, I called: “Mademoiselle Jeanne! ... It’s just me, Madame Roy ...” Then, since there was no answer, I came in ... She was sitting at that little table, bent over. Tell the truth, I thought she was sleeping ... I put my hand out to shake her and ...’

So at about seven minutes past five, Mademoiselle Jeanne, a clairvoyant, was already dead from two stab wounds in the back.

‘Has the weapon been found?’ asks Maigret, turning to the police chief.

‘No.’

‘Any furniture broken?’

‘Nothing ... No signs of a struggle ... It doesn’t seem as if the murderer went into the bedroom ... This way ...’

He opens a door. The bedroom is as cheerful as the living room. A genuine boudoir, all light colours. The nest of a flirtatious woman who likes her comfort.

‘And you say the concierge ...’

‘Claims she doesn’t know anything ... Madame Roy went down to the bar next door to phone us. We found her waiting downstairs, by the door. There’s just one detail ... Hold on, here’s the locksmith I sent for ... In here, please ... Open this door, would you?’

Maigret happens to look up and sees Mascouvin sitting on the edge of his chair. The clerk from Proud and Drouin says:

‘I feel as if my heart’s giving out, inspector ...’

‘That’s too bad!’

Later, when the people from the prosecutor’s office and the specialist team from Criminal Records show up, it will get a lot worse! If only Maigret had time for a beer in the Café Manière!

‘As you can see,’ the police chief is telling him, ‘the apartment has this living room, a rustic-style dining room there, the bedroom, a box-room and ...’

He nods towards a door where the locksmith is at work.

‘I assume it’s the kitchen ...’

A master-key turns in the lock. The door opens.

‘Huh! ... What are you doing in there? ... Who are you? ...’

It’s so unexpected it’s almost comic. In a small, spotlessly neat kitchenette, where no plates or dirty glasses have been left lying about, what is revealed but an old man perched on the edge of the table, solemnly waiting.

‘Speak up! ... What are you doing here?’

The elderly gent stares in bewilderment at the two men who are challenging him and finds nothing to say. The oddest thing is that in the middle of August he is enveloped in a greenish overcoat. His cheeks are hidden by an ill-kempt beard. He looks away, his shoulders droop.

‘How long have you been here, in this kitchen?’

He concentrates, as if he hasn’t quite understood, then takes out his pocket-watch and opens the front.

‘Forty minutes,’ he says eventually.

‘So that means you were here at five o’clock?’

'I got here before that ...'

'Were you here when the crime was committed?'

'What crime?'

He is hard of hearing and leans his head towards his interrogator the way deaf people do.

'You mean you don't know that ...'

The sheet over the corpse is lifted. The old man stares in amazement and stands rooted to the spot.

'Well?'

He does not answer. He wipes his eyes. But it doesn't necessarily mean that he's crying, for Maigret

has already observed that his eyes were watery to start with.

'What were you doing in the kitchen?'

He stares at them again. It's as if words have no meaning for him.

'How is it that you were locked inside the kitchen?' he is asked again. 'The key wasn't on the inside. It isn't outside either ...'

'I don't know ...' he whispers quietly, like a child who's afraid of getting the stick.

'What don't you know?'

'Nothing.'

'Have you got any papers?'

He searches through his pockets, awkwardly, wipes his eyes again, snuffles, and finally hands over a wallet with initials on it picked out in silver. The police chief and Maigret exchange looks.

Is this old man really senile or is he acting a role and doing it to perfection? From the wallet, Maigret takes out an identity card and reads it aloud.

'Octave Le Cloaguen, retired ship's doctor, age: sixty-eight, 13, Boulevard des Batignolles, Paris.'

'Clear the room!' Maigret barks suddenly.

Joseph Mascouvin gets meekly to his feet.

'Not you ... Stay here, dammit! ... And sit down!'

It is literally stifling for the ten or fifteen people in this doll-sized flat.

'You sit down too, Monsieur Le Cloaguen! ... And you can begin by telling me what you were doing in this house.'

Le Cloaguen gives a start. He has heard the sound of the words but has not understood their meaning. Maigret repeats his question and is obliged to shout.

'Oh, yes! ... Sorry ... I'd come ...'

'To do what?'

'To see her ...' he stammered, motioning to the body under the sheet.

'You wanted to know what the future has in store for you?'

No reply.

'Tell me, were you, yes or no, one of her clients? ...'

'Yes ... I'd come ...'

'And what happened?'

'I was sitting here ... Yes, on this gilt chair ... Someone knocked on the door ... Like this ...'

He goes to the door. It seems possible that he intends to run off. But no, it's only to knock in a particular, jerky way.

‘Then, *she* said ...’

‘All right, tell us ... What did she say?’

‘She said: “Quick, in here!” ... and she pushed me into the kitchen ...’

‘Was she the one who locked you in?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What happened then?’

‘Nothing ... I sat on the table ... The window was open ... I looked out into the street ...’

‘After that?’

‘After that, nothing ... A lot of people came ... I didn’t think I should show my face ...’

He speaks quietly, slowly, almost ruefully and then suddenly asks a very unexpected question:

‘You wouldn’t have any tobacco on you?’

‘Cigarette?’

‘Tobacco.’

‘You smoke a pipe?’

Maigret holds out his pouch. Le Cloaguen takes a twist of tobacco and puts it in his mouth with visible satisfaction.

‘There’s no point telling my wife ...’

Meanwhile, Lucas has been searching the flat. Maigret knows exactly what he is looking for.

‘Well?’

‘Nothing, sir ... The key to the kitchen isn’t anywhere here ... I also asked an officer to go down and take a look around in the street, in case it was thrown out of the window ...’

Maigret sums up, for the benefit of Le Cloaguen:

‘So in short, you say you got here just before five to consult the clairvoyant. At two or three minutes to five, someone knocked on the door in a distinctive way, and Mademoiselle Jeanne pushed you into the kitchen ... Have I got that right? ... You looked out at the street, then you heard voices and you didn’t move a muscle ... You didn’t even look through the keyhole.’

‘No ... I thought she was entertaining visitors ...’

‘You’ve been before?’

‘Every week.’

‘Over a long period?’

‘Very long.’

Gaga or not gaga?

There is great excitement in the neighbourhood. More than 200 people have collected in the street below by the time the vehicles bringing the prosecutor’s people arrive. Outside are sunshine, bright colours, café terraces where it is very pleasant to sit in front of a cold beer. Maigret puts his jacket back on because the important gentlemen are coming up the stairs.

‘Ah! It’s you, detective chief inspector,’ says the deputy public prosecutor. ‘Am I to understand that we have an interesting case here?’

‘Yes, apart from the fact that so far I’m having to deal with two lunatics!’ Maigret mutters to himself.

First the moron Mascouvin, who never takes his eyes off Maigret’s bulky figure! And then there’s

this old man who chews tobacco and sniffles!

More cars arrive. This time, it's the journalists.

'Listen, Lucas ... Get these two characters out of here ... I'll be back at headquarters in half an hour.'

It is then that Mascouvin comes out with a priceless remark.

After shaking his head and looking for his hat all round the living room, which is now a mess, he murmurs with the seriousness with which he does everything:

'You do realize, inspector,' he observes, 'that it was Picpus who killed the clairvoyant!'



2. The Sweating Man

Curiously enough, it was as he sat staring mechanically at a hand, a man's hand on a knee covered by worn cloth, that Maigret all at once felt in some way involved in what had happened and stopped thinking of the man at his side as just another regular customer, though a somewhat colourful one.

Back there in Rue Coulaincourt, it had been a circus, to use Maigret's word for it. He hated being descended on by the public prosecutor's officers. In the mêlée, the inspector had thought that Octave Le Cloaguen had looked like a cranky old man who seemed permanently bewildered. At the very most Maigret had been intrigued by the vacant stare which suddenly came over his pale eyes, as if his soul had momentarily been transported elsewhere. A question would be put to him two, three times, eventually the words would finally sink in, and he would furrow his brow as he tried to understand.

Later, at Quai des Orfèvres, in his office which the sun had turned into a Turkish bath, a perspiring Maigret, repeatedly mopping his face, had questioned him thoroughly, but the results were more or less unhelpful. Le Cloaguen never got flustered. He even gave the impression that he was trying his best to please the inspector. And whereas Maigret kept wiping his forehead and the back of his neck with his handkerchief, the old man's skin stayed perfectly dry, despite the overcoat which he had not taken off. Maigret had taken note: it confirmed his suspicion.

And now both men were being driven along in an open taxi. It was eight in the evening, and the streets of Paris were filled with a pleasant coolness. Le Cloaguen did not move, and Maigret, without thinking of anything in particular, was staring at the old man's right hand, which was resting on his knee, a strangely long hand with gnarled joints and skin so parchment-like that in places it looked as if it might split, like dried-up bark. The top of the index finger was missing.

Was it this hand ...? Maigret's mind was working ... A hand could do so many things in the course of a lifetime, and what over a period of sixty-seven years had this hand ...?

Suddenly a drop of water landed on the taut skin and scattered. At that point, they were driving along Rue de Wagram, a street lined on both sides by cafés and cinemas, through the happy noise and bustle of the crowds. Maigret looked up. The man was looking straight ahead of him, his features as stiff as ever, but a fringe of sweat had spread across his forehead.

It was so unexpected that the inspector was disconcerted. Why, when he had kept his almost exaggerated composure for so long, was Le Cloaguen now suddenly showing symptoms of panic? For there could be no mistaking the signs. The perspiration had not been brought on by the heat, but by fear, that ignoble inward disintegration which cannot be resisted.

Had the old man seen something? Or someone? Unlikely. Was it having a policeman's eyes staring at his hand that had unsettled him? Could the missing finger joint possibly be some sort of clue?

They soon reached Boulevard de Courcelles and were travelling past the gilded gates and blue-black shadows of Parc Monceau when Maigret finally understood, for the sweat was pouring off the

forehead of the man at his side, and his face had acquired a pasty look: *what was causing his panic was the fact that he was getting nearer to his house.*

A few minutes more and they were on Boulevard des Batignolles. A house built of grey stone. An imposing entrance. A well-to-do, even affluent look about it. The concierge's lodge was well kept, and its occupant was trimly dressed in black. The stairs were dark, varnished and covered with a scarlet runner held in place by brass rods.

Le Cloaguen climbed up them slowly, gasping for breath and, though he did not speak, his forehead still streamed with sweat. What was he afraid of?

A single door on each floor, large doors made of dark oak with highly polished brass fittings. When they reached the third floor, Maigret rang the bell. For a whole minute, which seemed very long, a sound of furtive steps came from inside the apartment, until finally the door half opened and remained only half-open, and a woman's face appeared. It wore a curious, suspicious expression.

'Madame Le Cloaguen, I presume?'

To which she replied very quickly:

'The maid's gone out ... I myself had to ...'

Maigret sensed that she was lying. At that moment, he would have sworn she did not have a maid.

'I would like very much, if it's not too much trouble, to talk to you for a few moments ... Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, Police Judiciaire ...'

The woman, who was probably about fifty years of age, short, apprehensive, with a face that was tanned and mobile and remarkably vivacious eyes, looked at her husband. This lasted just a few seconds. Once again, Maigret had the impression of being able to detect the smell of fear in the air.

Le Cloaguen's face was expressionless. He did not say anything and explained nothing. He just stood there, his inner being again transported to some other place, waiting on the doormat to go into his apartment.

The woman, who had regained her composure, stepped to one side then took a few steps back and opened the door of an immense drawing room into which thick curtains allowed only a dim grey light to pass.

'Please be seated ... What is it ...? ... What has he ...?'

Another brief look at her husband, to whom it had not occurred to remove his overcoat or take off his hat.

Ten years hence, Maigret would still be able to reconstitute this drawing room down to the smallest details and picture the three tall windows hung with green velvet curtains with yellow tassels, antique chairs covered with dust-sheets, the small gilt table, the large mirror with dulled silvering above the black marble fireplace, the brass fire dogs ...

A faint rustling from behind a door. Someone was there, listening, a presence which Maigret had the impression was female; and he was not wrong: very soon he would learn that it was Gisèle Le Cloaguen, unmarried, aged twenty-eight.

The apartment seemed to be very big, for it occupied the whole of one floor. Certain things suggested money but others had an odour of poverty. Madame Le Cloaguen was dressed in black silk and had fine rings on her fingers and a gold-mounted cameo brooch on her breast.

'Could I start, madame, by asking if you are acquainted with someone called Mademoiselle

Jeanne?’

He was sure she wasn’t. But she ransacked her memory, obviously having expected an entirely different question.

‘What does this person do?’

‘She lives in Rue Coulaincourt ...’

‘I don’t see ...’

‘She earned her living by predicting the future ... I can tell you what this is all about in a few words ... Briefly then, this person was murdered at home today, at five o’clock ... Now it so happens that at that time your husband was present in the apartment, where he was found locked inside the kitchen ...’

‘Octave, tell me what ...’

She had turned to face him and spoke calmly and with dignity and yet she gave the impression that the calmness and dignity were no more genuine than the bronze andirons in the fireplace. Maigret was convinced that, if he got up and left, the door would scarcely have closed behind him before a sordid scene would erupt between the pair of them.

Before replying, Le Cloaguen had to swallow his saliva.

‘I was there,’ he said, looking humble and defeated.

She replied with haughty disdain:

‘I had no idea you were in the habit of having your fortune told!’

Then she suddenly lost interest in him, sat down opposite Maigret and, in her best society manner, played absently with her cameo and began speaking with increasing volubility.

‘I must tell you now, inspector. I know nothing about this business. But I do know my husband. As he may have told you, he spent a long time working as a doctor on board liners sailing on South American routes. For several years he also sailed the China seas. Since then, alas, he has not been a man like other men ...’

She was not in the least inhibited by the presence of Le Cloaguen.

‘You must surely have noticed that he has become like a child again ... It’s most unfortunate for my daughter and myself for it has caused serious harm to our social life.’

Maigret looked around at the sitting room and in his mind’s eye imagined the receptions given here on Boulevard des Batignolles, the armchairs with their dust-sheets removed, the chandelier lit up, petits fours on the round gilt table, very stiff-backed ladies simpering over the tea cups.

Later, the concierge would confirm what he was thinking. She would tell him about the weekly receptions, the ‘Mondays’, as everyone in the house sarcastically called them.

It was also true that the Le Cloaguens had no maid, that a charwoman came every morning but on Mondays a head waiter was hired from Potel and Chabot.

‘And them being so well off!’ would add the concierge, who was far more forthcoming than the one in Rue Coulaincourt. ‘People reckon they’ve got more than 200,000 francs a year coming in. A notary from Saint-Raphaël travels up special once a year, in December, to bring them the money. Makes you wonder what they do with it. The shopkeepers hereabouts will tell you. In the butcher’s they only ask for the cheapest cuts, and you wouldn’t call the amounts they buy large. You’ve seen for yourself how the poor husband is dressed, winter and summer ...’

But what connection was there between this apartment and the light, airy flat in Rue Coulaincourt?

Between this thin, tautly strung, so frighteningly self-controlled woman, and the pampered and cosseted Mademoiselle Jeanne, who had died in her living room full of sunshine?

The investigation had only just begun. Maigret was trying not to draw conclusions from what he was seeing and hearing. He preferred to imagine people in their contexts: like the strange Mascouvin at his desk at Proud and Drouin's, then at home on Place des Vosges, or even in the countess's bridge club in Rue des Pyramides.

'Just like a big, overgrown child, inspector, I can't find any other word for him ... He spends every day wandering around the streets and only comes home for his meals ... But I can assure you that he is perfectly harmless ...'

Harmless! ... The word struck Maigret. He looked up at the old man. The sweat had vanished from his forehead, and he just sat where he was, quite unconcerned by what was going on around him.

What had he been afraid of? Why had he got his self-assurance back? Or rather his indifference?

There was another scuffle at the door, and Madame Le Cloaguen said in a clear voice:

'You can come in, Gisèle ... May I introduce my daughter? She's the one really who's been hit hardest by her father's condition ... You must understand ... When she invites friends here ...'

Why did Gisèle dress so badly and why did she choose to look so sour-faced when otherwise she could have been pretty? She shook hands like a man. Not a smile, nothing warm in her greeting. Such pitiless severity in the look she turned on the old man.

It was she who told him, as if she were speaking to a servant:

'Go and take your coat and hat off.'

'Would you believe, Gisèle,' explained her mother, 'that this afternoon your father went to see a fortune-teller and as it happens there's been a scandal ...'

Curious to hear the word 'scandal' being applied to a crime! It was patently obvious that the life or death of Mademoiselle Jeanne meant little to these women. What mattered was that Le Cloaguen had been there, that he'd been marched off to Quai des Orfèvres and that now, a detective chief inspector ...

'I'm very sorry, ladies, to bother you like this but, given the circumstances, I'd be glad if I could have a look round Monsieur Le Cloaguen's room ...'

'Gisèle?' murmured Madame Le Cloaguen, as though it were a question.

The young woman blinked, which doubtless meant that the room had been tidied.

To reach it, they had first to walk through a comfortable dining room, then a bedroom, which belonged to the mistress of the household and contained antique furniture, among which were some rather fine pieces. Maigret noted the fact that there was no bathroom in the apartment, only small rooms with wash-basins in which the wallpaper had not been changed for some considerable time and the floor was covered by odd pieces of linoleum.

'His room doubles as an office,' said the wife. 'He has clung to the habit of simplicity, great simplicity, which he acquired during his travels ...'

Well! Why was the bolt on the outside of the door not on the inside, which would have been more logical? Did the old man get shut up in his room?

On this point too Maigret's intuition would be confirmed by the concierge.

'Oh yes, sir ... When the ladies have visitors the old man is shut in because they are so terrified

he'll suddenly barge in on them ... If he gets back late for his dinner, he gets punished by being locked up for a day or two ...'

A closet rather than a room, looking out, not on to Boulevard des Batignolles but on a dark, narrow courtyard. Even then the windows were covered with an opaque adhesive film which made it even dimmer inside.

A naked, dusty 25-candle-power bulb dangled from an electric wire. An iron bed. A three-legged washstand and a chipped ewer on the floor. In a corner, the item of furniture which justified the grandiose name of office given to the room: a desk made of dark wood, a huge affair and much too big for the space available, doubtless bought second-hand at a public auction.

Le Cloaguen had come back to his room without making a sound and now stood waiting, the way a schoolboy waits for the inevitable cane. Soon Maigret would go and then ...

The inspector felt almost guilty at the thought of leaving him alone with these two women. He remembered the hand with the missing finger joint, an old hand which ...

'Spartan, isn't it?' remarked Madame Le Cloaguen, pleased to have come up with the word. 'He has only to say and he could have a much more comfortable room, but he does like his simplicity. And it is he who insists on wearing that old overcoat winter and summer. You couldn't persuade him to do otherwise for all the tea in China ...'

And what about the kitchen, madame? Is he also the one who insists that it should be in such a mess, with a pile of dirty dishes on a wobbly table, pans that never get scoured, empty cupboards, a few withered vegetables left to fester and the coagulated remains of a stew which will presumably be served up for dinner?

Gisèle's room is exactly like her mother's: comfortable, well-furnished, but with the same oppressive, antiquated feel to it.

And to think that outside, the whole of Paris is making the most of a fine August evening, enjoying a sun that sets in a purple haze and coolness which is to be savoured like a fragrant sorbet, and that here, not two minutes from the world's most exciting streets, these people live in a kind of necropolis!

'Have you lived long in this apartment?'

'Ten years, inspector. Ever since we left Saint-Raphaël. It's especially since then that my husband has gone into a decline. In fact, it was to get better treatment for him that we moved to Paris.'

Now that was, at the very least, strange! As if there weren't enough notable doctors on the Côte d'Azur! As if the hustle and bustle of Paris could be of any help in recovering a poor man's wits!

Le Cloaguen has remained in his room the way a well-trained dog stays in its kennel when there are visitors. Maigret would like to see him again, talk to him. 'Fellow-feeling' is not quite the correct expression. Yet he is drawn to the man, he feels he is beginning to understand him, or rather to glimpse something of the mystery of his wretched existence.

The wife on the other hand is as transparent as before.

'As you see, there are no mysteries in our home, and if my husband took it into his head to have his fortune told, then ... But can we ever know what goes on in enfeebled minds? ... I do hope, inspector, that it won't be long before the murderer is found and that this dreadful business will not have any consequences ...'

Consequences for whom exactly? For her, of course! For her and for her daughter, who is so like her

that they form a single entity!

In fact, what is it that is missing in this apartment? Two or three times, Maigret has had the impression of an absence, as when a familiar object has been moved from its place. Yet all the usual pieces of furniture are there. He looks around him, feeling tense as people do when there is something they just can't put their finger on ...

'I'll say good evening, inspector. If there's anything else you'd like to know ...'

What will happen once the door is closed? He walks down the stairs. He can't help thinking about the man in his room, about the woman who bursts in, fuming, her face twisted by anger, by fury ...

And then it suddenly strikes him. What was absent from the apartment, the thing that had given him the impression of something missing, was that he had seen no photographs anywhere on the walls or furniture! Nothing! Not even one of those enlargements you find in the lowliest homes, no amateur snaps, souvenirs of holidays on beaches or in the mountains.

Bare walls, implacably bare!

Maigret spends a quarter of an hour in the concierge's lodge, then finds himself once more on the pavement. Inspector Janvier approaches.

'What do you want me to do, chief?'

'Stay here ... I'd be curious to know what those people ...'

When he gets to Place Clichy, he walks into a bar, phones Madame Maigret to say he doesn't know when he'll be home and finally sits down with a beer in front of him.

The business of the key is bizarre. Did Mademoiselle Jeanne, when she pushed the old man into the kitchen – always assuming that what Le Cloaguen's said is true – lock him in?

Really, it looks as if the old man is fated to keep getting himself locked up, the proof being the bolt fixed outside his room on Boulevard des Batignolles ...

But who removed the key? The murderer? So did he know there was somebody on the other side of the door?

Earlier, Maigret had blundered when he looked around the apartment in Rue Coulaincourt. Had there been a hat in the clairvoyant's living room? It was possible, probable even. Finding himself alone with a woman, Le Cloaguen would have certainly taken his hat off. If it was left in the room, the murderer could have seen it and taken the key out of the kitchen door ...

Now, when they had found the former ship's doctor in the clairvoyant's kitchen, did he have his hat with him?

Maigret took his notebook out of his pocket and wrote down the word *hat*.

He should have questioned everyone who had been there. But in all the excitement of the first hours of an investigation ...

Le Cloaguen could have locked himself in and got rid of the key by throwing it out of the window by dropping it down the lavatory.

'Here's to him!' Maigret growls, finishing a second beer. He hesitates between taking a bus or a taxi.

The bustle in the streets around him seems slightly unreal now. The Rue Coulaincourt mystery is slowly getting under his skin. The streetlamps come on, passers-by are not much more than blue shadows against a lighter blue background.

‘Quai des Orfèvres ...’

‘Right you are, Monsieur Maigret!’

It’s childish, but it’s human: it pleases him that the driver recognizes him and gives him a friendly word.

Signed, Picpus.

To whom had the note written by an unknown man or woman in the Café des Sports on Place de la République been addressed? Isn’t it strange that Joseph Mascouvin, the scrupulously honest clerk who had just, for the first time in his life, stolen a thousand francs from his employers, should ask for writing materials, put his pince-nez down on the blotter and become interested in ink stains?

‘So, Monsieur Maigret, hunting big game, are we?’

Maigret sighs, pays the taxi, walks heavily up the steps of the Police Judiciaire building. François, the aged doorman, doesn’t even give him time to go up to his office.

‘They’re waiting for you, detective chief inspector ...’

A swift glance at the commissioner’s baize door. Maigret gets the message.

The lamp with a green shade on the desk is lit, but the curtains have not been drawn. The windows are wide open and give on to a vista of wharves. Waves of cool, damp air waft into the room at intervals.

The commissioner of the Police Judiciaire looks up. Lucas is standing next to him, a Lucas who averts his eyes and looks like a whipped cur.

‘It’s you who’s got it right, Maigret ... It was obviously this Picpus who killed the clairvoyant ...’

The inspector scowls. He does not see where this preamble might be leading.

‘Unfortunately, it will be several days before the main suspect can be questioned ...’

Why does Maigret have a sudden sinking feeling? He’s only known Octave Le Cloaguen for a few hours. Can he even claim to know him? The serious expression on the commissioner’s face ... Lucas embarrassment ... Maigret scents trouble ... Has the old man ...?

Lucas mutters:

‘It’s my fault.’

When are they going to come to the point?

‘I questioned him for a good hour ...’

Ah! This isn’t about the former ship’s doctor ... It’s about Mascouvin. Lucas had been told to question him again.

‘I was intending to take him to Rue des Pyramides. It was worth a go. I thought that if I brought him face to face with his famous countess, I might get something out of him. Up to that point, he’d been quiet as a lamb. I wondered for a moment about taking a taxi. But there weren’t any on the Quai. We started making for the Pont-Neuf. There were lots of people about. The Belle Jardinière had just closed and hundreds of counter staff and other employees ...’

‘And then?’

‘It happened so fast that I didn’t have time to stop him ... Suddenly he jumped clean over the parapet of the bridge ...’

Maigret fills his pipe and says nothing.

‘He didn’t have a chance ... Before entering the water, he hit one of the piers ...’

All too easy to picture the scene in the glorious evening light: hundreds, thousands of people leaning over the parapet and lining both banks, something floating, a grey hat, a dark shape re-emerging from time to time, an onlooker takes off his coat and dives in ...

‘A tug happened to be passing and ...’

The crowd watching the scene unfold holds its collective breath. The tug manoeuvres, the propeller thrashes water streaked with red reflections of the sun, a boathook is held out to the rescuer, and at last Mascouvin, an inert Mascouvin, is hauled up the black iron hull of the boat.

‘He’s not dead, but he’s as good as ... His skull struck the stone work ... He’s been taken to hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu, and it’s Chesnard, their top surgeon who ...’

Maigret strikes a match and puffs on his pipe.

‘What do you make of it?’ asks the commissioner. ‘Wouldn’t you say that this changes everything?’

‘Changes what exactly?’ growls the inspector.

Can anyone know anything at the start of an investigation? Mademoiselle Jeanne ... She at least is dead, there’s nothing more certain in this whole business ... Stabbed twice in the back, died as she was quietly leaning over her Louis XV table ... Obviously she suspected nothing ...

Le Cloaguen in the kitchen ... Mascouvin and his countess ...

‘What’s been done about the woman?’ asks Maigret drawing on his pipe.

‘What woman?’

‘The one from Morsang ... What’s her name again? Landlady of the Beau Pigeon ...’

‘She had a train to catch ...’

‘Anyone ask if she knew Mascouvin?’

A woebegone Lucas replies:

‘I didn’t think to ... She was in a hurry. It seems their inn is full ...’

The proof that Maigret always thinks of everything is that he now mutters, and it brings a smile to the commissioner’s lips:

‘What happened to the tench?’

Anyone would have thought he was intending to take them home to Madame Maigret for their supper.



3. The Girl in the Red Hat

Every quarter of an hour or so, Maigret, grunting and blowing, strove as mightily as if he were trying to move a mountain, but it was only himself he was trying to free from the clammy sheets, just long enough to turn over from one side on to the other and sink back into a sleep full of nightmarish shapes. And every time it happened, Madame Maigret would wake up and, taking as always a long time to get back to sleep, would fix her eyes on the blind which swelled in the breeze like a balloon.

It was a crystal-clear night. It was so clear that from here on Boulevard Richard Lenoir you could hear, or thought you could, the rumble of activity coming from the markets of Les Halles.

A window was also open at 21, Place des Vosges, but there was no one in the room, no one on the bed, though the concierge had made it up.

In a room at the Hôpital-Dieu, a nurse with horsey features was knitting at the bedside of Joseph Mascouvin, whose face was mostly hidden by bandages.

No one was sitting up with Mademoiselle Jeanne, presently lying in an icy drawer of her own in the Forensic Institute. On Boulevard des Batignolles, near Place Clichy, Inspector Janvier got up off his bench from time to time, walked a few steps under the trees and watched the moon loom up between two gable ends covered with advertisements, and then the unlit windows of number 13.

At first, women had approached him in the dark – it was an odd thing, that evening in that part of town they were all very tall – but they soon understood and now they kept their distance, they became fewer, and the bars closed one after the other while a sudden coolness, long before a paling of the sky indicated that the new day was not far away.

In Rue des Pyramides, in the countess's club rooms, the last of the gamblers did not leave until five in the morning, after staying themselves with sandwiches.

The papers were rolling off the presses. The iron gates of the Métro stations were being rolled back, gas was being lit under percolators and in cafés counters were piled high with warm croissants.

Torrence, still heavy with sleep, ran his eyes along Boulevard des Batignolles, looking for his colleague whom he had come to replace.

‘Anything?’

‘Nothing.’

Maigret, in his shirtsleeves, was having breakfast. Life was beginning to flow again in the streets, where a luminous mist still lingered.

Having tidied her flat – two rooms plus kitchen – in the district of Les Ternes, the girl in the red hat walked down the street, heading towards the Métro, and bought her usual morning paper on the way.

Instead of going to the travel agency on Boulevard de la Madeleine where she worked, she continued on to Châtelet and, her mind in a ferment and her lips trembling as if she were mumbling prayers of supplication, made her way towards the gloomy buildings of the Palais de Justice.

Maigret was in his office, standing in front of the window, busily cleaning both his pipes.

‘There’s a young woman asking for you. She hasn’t given her name. She says it’s very important ...’

And that was how, that morning, Saturday morning, the drama resumed. The young woman was wearing a navy-blue suit and a red hat. Normally, she would have been all smiles, with dimples in her cheeks and one in her chin, but her distress changed all that.

‘Where is he, inspector? ... Is he dead? ... He’s my brother, or rather half-brother ...’

She was talking about Mascouvin, whose picture was on the front page of her paper, next to one of Maigret, the same photograph which for more than fifteen years the newspapers always used whenever there was a new case.

‘Hello? ... Hôtel-Dieu? ...’

No, Mascouvin wasn’t dead. They were expecting at any moment the consultant who would examine him again. The patient was still in a coma, and no visitors were allowed.

‘Tell me about your half-brother, mademoiselle ... Mademoiselle who, may I ask?’

‘Berthe ... Berthe Janiveau. Everyone calls me Mademoiselle Berthe. I work as a shorthand typist in a travel agent’s. My father was a joiner in a village in the Oise. I was born when my parents were quite old. They’d stopped hoping they could have a child of their own and had adopted a boy from the local orphanage, Joseph Mascouvin ...’

Next to this fresh-faced young woman, Maigret looks like a fond, indulgent old father.

‘Tell me ... Would you mind coming with me to your brother’s apartment in Place des Vosges?’

He takes her there in a taxi, and she talks, talks without stopping, so that he has no need to prompt her with questions. Inside, under the central stairwell, several women who live in the building have gathered round the concierge, who is holding a newspaper in her hand.

‘Such a sober, steady man, and so polite to every-body! ...’

The first floor is occupied by a former government minister, and the second by the owner of the building. It’s only on the third floor that the visitor becomes aware of the human warmth of several families living cheek-by-jowl, ordinary folk who have rooms off both sides of a long corridor lit by the sun through a skylight.

‘Why would he have wanted to do away with himself? ... He’s never had any sort of trouble in his whole life ...’

To Maigret, Joseph Mascouvin has until now been just a rather odd, if somewhat disturbing, individual. But Mademoiselle Berthe is talking, and the apartment is also speaking: a meticulously neat room, books on serious subjects in stern bindings in a bookcase, a gramophone bought recently, closet with a washstand and a minute kitchen.

‘The truth is, inspector, he never felt he was a man like all the rest. The village children called him the kid from the orphanage. In school he was the cleverest pupil. At home, he made it a point of honour to work harder than everyone else. He was always afraid of being a nuisance, of not being wanted. He had the feeling that people only put up with him out of charity ... My parents had to make him stay on at school ... Then they died ... Against all expectation, they hardly left him a thing, and because I was too young to work, it was Joseph Mascouvin who provided for me for many years ...’

‘Why weren’t you still living together?’

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