

1.

In a still timid ray of March sunshine, Maigret was playing. He was playing not with building blocks, like when he was a child, but with pipes.

There were always five or six on his desk and, each time he filled one, he had carefully selected it to suit his mood.

His gaze was vague, his shoulders hunched. He had just decided on the future of his career. He had no regrets, but even so he felt a certain sadness.

Mechanically, and with the utmost seriousness, he arranged the pipes on his blotting pad to create geometric or animal shapes.

The morning's post sat in a pile on the right-hand side of the desk, but he had no wish to deal with it.

On his arrival at the Police Judiciaire just before nine that morning, he had found a summons from the prefect of police, which was rare, and he'd gone to Boulevard du Palais wondering what it boded.

The prefect had received him at once, cordial and smiling.

'Can you guess why I wanted to see you?'

'I have to admit I can't.'

'Have a seat and light your pipe.'

The prefect was young, barely forty, a graduate from an elite university. He was stylish, perhaps a little too stylish.

‘You are aware that the head of the Police Judiciaire will be retiring next month after being in post for twelve years . . . I discussed his replacement yesterday with the interior minister, and we were both agreed that we should offer the position to you . . .’

The prefect was probably expecting to see Maigret’s face light up with pleasure.

But on the contrary, Maigret looked downcast.

‘Is that an order?’ he asked, almost grumpily.

‘No, of course not, but you must appreciate that it is an important promotion, the biggest step up that an official of the Police Judiciaire can hope for . . .’

‘I know. But all the same, I’d rather stay head of the Crime Squad. Please don’t take my reply the wrong way. I’ve been an active police officer for forty years, and I’d find it hard to spend my days in an office, studying files and dealing with administrative matters . . .’

The prefect did not conceal his surprise.

‘Why don’t you take some time to think it over and give me your answer in a few days? You might also wish to discuss it with Madame Maigret.’

‘She would understand.’

‘I understand too, and I don’t want to press the matter . . .’

Even so, he appeared slightly disappointed. He understood without understanding. Maigret needed the human contact his investigations afforded him, and he’d often been criticized for not conducting them from his desk, choosing instead to play an active role and undertaking tasks that were usually carried out by inspectors.

He toyed with his pipes, his mind a blank. The latest arrangement reminded him of a stork.

The window sparkled in the sunlight. The prefect had shown him to the door and shaken his hand warmly. Even so, Maigret knew that his superiors would be annoyed.

He slowly lit one of his pipes and smoked it in little puffs.

Within minutes, he'd decided his future, in the short term anyway, because, in three years' time, he would have to retire. At least let him spend those three years as he pleased, for goodness' sake!

He needed to get out of his office, soak up the atmosphere and discover different worlds with each new investigation. He needed the cafés and bars where he so often ended up waiting, at the counter, drinking a beer or a calvados depending on the circumstances.

He needed to do battle patiently in his office with a suspect who refused to talk and sometimes, after hours and hours, to obtain a dramatic confession.

He felt queasy. He was afraid that, on reflection, he would be forced to accept this appointment, one way or another. But he didn't want it at any price, even though it was a sort of badge of honour.

He stared at the pipes, occasionally moving them like the pieces on a chessboard. He jumped when he heard discreet taps on the door between his office and that of the inspectors.

Without waiting for a reply, Lapointe came in.

'Sorry to disturb you, chief—'

'You're not disturbing me at all.'

It was now nearly ten years since Lapointe had joined the Police Judiciaire and he'd been nicknamed 'young Lapointe'. He'd been thin and lanky in those days. Since then, he'd filled out a bit. He had married and had two children. But the nickname had stuck and some called him 'Maigret's little puppy'.

'There's a woman in my office who is adamant she must see you in person. She won't say a word to me. She's sitting bolt upright, absolutely still, and is determined to have her way.'

This often happened. Because of articles in the press, people insisted on seeing him and only him and it was often difficult to get them to change their minds. Some even came to his apartment in Boulevard Richard-Lenoir – goodness knows how they had managed to get hold of his home address.

'Did she give you her name?'

'Here's her card.'

Madame Sabin-Levesque
207a, Boulevard Saint-Germain

'I find her strange,' said Lapointe. 'She stares straight ahead and has a sort of twitch that pulls down the right-hand corner of her mouth. She hasn't taken her gloves off, but you can see her fingers are clenched.'

'Show her in and stay here. Grab your notebook, just in case.'

Maigret looked at his pipes and heaved a rueful sigh. Playtime was over.

When the woman entered, he rose to his feet.

‘Please have a seat, madame . . .’

Her eyes bored into him.

‘You are Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, are you not?’

‘Yes.’

‘I imagined you fatter.’

She was wearing a fur coat and matching hat. Was it mink? Maigret had no idea, because the wife of a divisionary chief inspector generally had to be content with rabbit or, at best, muskrat or nutria.

Madame Sabin-Levesque’s eyes roved slowly around the office as if making an inventory. When Lapointe sat down at the end of the desk, with his notebook and pencil, she asked:

‘Is this young man going to stay in the room?’

‘Of course.’

‘Is he going to make a note of our conversation?’

‘It’s the rule.’

Her brow furrowed and she gripped her crocodile-skin handbag tighter.

‘I thought I’d be able to speak with you in private.’

Maigret did not reply. He observed his customer and, like Lapointe, found her odd, to say the least. Sometimes her gaze was disturbingly fixed, and sometimes she seemed absent.

‘I presume you know who I am?’

‘I read your name on your card.’

‘Do you know who my husband is?’

‘I expect he has the same name as you.’

‘He’s one of the most prominent lawyers in Paris.’

Her lips kept twitching, one corner of her mouth turning down, trembling. She seemed to be finding it hard to remain composed.

‘Please continue.’

‘He has disappeared.’

‘In that case, I’m not the right person to talk to. There’s a special missing persons department.’

She gave a joyless, ironic smile, and didn’t bother to reply.

It was difficult to guess her age. She couldn’t be much more than forty, forty-five at most, but her face bore the signs of suffering and her eyes were puffy.

‘Did you drink before coming here?’ Maigret suddenly asked.

‘Is that of interest to you?’

‘Yes. You’re the one who insisted on seeing me, aren’t you? You should expect questions that you may feel are indiscreet.’

‘I thought you would be different. More understanding.’

‘It is precisely because I try to understand that I need to know certain things.’

‘I had two glasses of brandy, to give myself courage.’

‘Only two?’

She looked at him but said nothing.

‘When did your husband go missing?’

‘Over a month ago. On the 18th of February. Today’s the 21st of March . . .’

‘Did he tell you he was going away?’

‘He didn’t breathe a word to me.’

‘And it’s taken you all this time to report his disappearance?’

'I'm used to it.'

'To what?'

'To him disappearing for a few days.'

'Has this been going on for long?'

'Years. It began shortly after our marriage, fifteen years ago.'

'He doesn't give you any reason for these trips?'

'I don't think he actually goes away.'

'I don't understand.'

'He stays in Paris or in the area.'

'How do you know?'

'Because, the first few times, I had him followed by a private detective. I stopped because it was always the same thing.'

Her speech was slurred and it wasn't just two glasses of brandy that she'd drunk. Nor had it been to give herself courage, because her ravaged face and her struggle to maintain her composure revealed that she was a hardened drinker.

'I'm waiting for you to give me some details.'

'My husband is like that.'

'Like what?'

'He gets swept off his feet. He meets a woman he fancies and feels the urge to live with her for a few days. Until now his longest fling, as it were, lasted two weeks.'

'You're not going to tell me that he picked them up in the street?'

'Almost. Usually in nightclubs.'

'Did he go out alone?'

'Always.'

'He never took you with him?'

'We haven't meant anything to each other for a long time.'

'Even so, you are worried.'

'About him.'

'Not about yourself?'

There was a steely glint of defiance in her eyes.

'No.'

'You don't love him any more?'

'No.'

'What about him, does he love you?'

'Even less.'

'But you still live together.'

'The apartment is large. We keep different hours, so we don't often run into each other.'

Lapointe was taking notes with surprise written all over his face.

'Why have you come here?'

'So that you can find him.'

'Were you never worried in the past?'

'A month is a long time. He didn't take anything with him, not even a small suitcase or clean underwear. And he didn't take one of the cars either.'

'Do you own several cars?'

'Two. The Bentley, which he takes most frequently, and the Fiat, which is more or less for my use.'

'Do you drive?'

'The chauffeur, Vittorio, drives me when I go out.'

'Do you go out a lot?'

'Nearly every afternoon.'

'To meet up with women friends?'

'I don't have any friends . . .'

He had rarely encountered such a bitter and disconcerting woman.

'Do you go shopping?'

'I hate shopping.'

'Do you go for walks in the Bois de Boulogne or elsewhere?'

'I go to the cinema.'

'Every day?'

'Almost. When I'm not too tired.'

As with drug addicts, there came a moment when she needed a fix, and that moment had come. It was obvious that she'd have given anything for a glass of brandy, but Maigret could hardly offer her one, even though there was a bottle in his cupboard for certain occasions that arose. He felt a little sorry for her.

'I am trying to understand, Madame Sabin.'

'Sabin-Levesque,' she corrected him.

'As you prefer. Has your husband always been in the habit of absconding for days at a time?'

'Never for an entire month.'

'You already said so.'

'I have a premonition.'

'What premonition?'

'I'm afraid that something's happened to him . . .'

'Do you have a reason for thinking that?'

'No. You don't need a reason to have a premonition.'

'You say your husband is a prominent lawyer.'

'Let us say that he has a very large firm and one of the most prestigious clienteles in Paris.'

‘How can he take leave so frequently?’

‘Gérard does as little legal work as possible. He inherited the firm from his father, but it’s mainly the chief clerk who deals with things . . .’

‘I have the impression you are tired?’

‘I’m always tired. I am in poor health.’

‘What about your husband?’

‘At forty-eight, he’s like a young man.’

‘If I understand correctly, we’re likely to learn about his movements from the nightclubs . . .’

‘I think so.’

Maigret was pensive. He felt as if his questions were on the wrong track and that the answers he received were leading nowhere.

At one point, he wondered whether he was in the presence of a madwoman, or in any case, a neurotic. He’d seen a number of them in his office over the years, and most of them had made his life difficult.

The words she spoke sounded normal, plausible; at the same time, there seemed to be a discrepancy between them and reality.

‘Do you think he had a lot of money on him?’

‘As far as I know, he generally used his cheque book.’

‘Have you discussed it with the chief clerk?’

‘We are not on speaking terms.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because, around three years ago, my husband banned me from his office.’

‘Did he have a reason?’

‘I have no idea.’