

1.

It was only nine in the morning and it was already hot. Maigret, who had taken off his jacket, was lazily going through his mail and occasionally glancing through the window. There was no quiver from the foliage of the trees on Quai des Orfèvres, and the Seine was as flat and smooth as silk.

It was August. Lucas, Lapointe and at least half the inspectors were on holiday. Janvier and Torrence had taken theirs in July, and Maigret was planning to spend much of September in his house in Meung-sur-Loire, which looked like a presbytery.

For nearly a week, every day, late in the afternoon, a brief but violent storm had broken out and rain pattered down, forcing the people in the streets to hurry on, as close to the buildings as possible. It was the end of the heatwave, and it cooled the air for the night.

Paris was empty. Even the street noises were not the same as usual, and there were intervals of near-silence.

What you saw the most were the coaches of all colours and all nationalities, invariably stopping at the same places – Notre Dame, the Louvre, Place de la Concorde, Place de l'Étoile, Sacré-Cœur and, inevitably, the Eiffel Tower – to discharge their loads of tourists.

When you walked in the streets, you were surprised to suddenly hear French being spoken.

The commissioner was on holiday, too, which meant that the chore of the daily briefing had been dispensed with. There wasn't much mail, and purse snatching was the most common crime.

The ringing of the telephone startled Maigret out of his lethargy. He picked up the receiver.

'The chief inspector from the first arrondissement is on the line. He wants to speak to you personally. Shall I put him through?'

'Please do.'

Maigret knew him well. He was a somewhat affected man, always immaculately dressed – a highly cultivated man, too, who had been a lawyer for several years before joining the police.

'Hello, Ascan.'

'I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

'I have all the time in the world.'

'I'm calling you because I thought the case I was landed with this morning might interest you.'

'What is it?'

'A murder. But not an ordinary murder. It'd take too long to explain. When will you be free?'

'I'm free now.'

'I hope you don't mind my asking you to meet me in my office. This thing happened in an almost unknown dead-end street on the edge of Les Halles.'

It was 1965, and Les Halles, Paris' central food market, had not yet been transferred to Rungis.

'I'll be at the station in a few minutes.'

He indulged in a few grunts, like a man who is being disturbed, but the fact was, he wasn't upset to get away

for a while from the routine of the last few days. He went into the inspectors' room. Usually, he would have taken Janvier with him but he needed somebody he could trust, somebody who could take the initiative, to stay at Quai des Orfèvres in his absence.

'Come with me, Torrence. Take one of the cars in the courtyard.'

The police station of the first arrondissement wasn't far, in Rue des Prouvaires. Maigret went straight to Chief Inspector Ascan's office.

'You're about to see one of the most appalling sights I've ever witnessed. I'd rather not say too much in advance . . . Ah, Torrence! . . . It's best to leave the car here. It's only round the corner.'

They walked round the outside of the market, from which, in this heat, the smell was very strong, and which wasn't closed, even though it was August. They passed through narrow little streets lined with shops and rooming houses of varying degrees of seediness. There were a few tramps about, including a completely drunk woman holding on to the walls in order not to fall.

'This way . . .'

They came to Rue de la Grande-Truanderie, and Ascan plunged into a dead-end street so narrow that a lorry wouldn't have been able to get through it.

'Impasse du Vieux-Four,' he announced.

There were no more than ten or so old buildings, and, halfway along, a gap left by one that had already been demolished. The others were also due for demolition and had been cleared of occupants.

Timber supports had been put up against some of them in order to stop the walls collapsing.

The one outside which Ascan stopped had lost its windowpanes, and part of the frames had also been removed. The front door had been replaced with planks, and Ascan pulled away two of them from which the nails had been removed. Behind it they found a wide corridor.

‘Be careful on the stairs. There are steps missing and the ones that are left aren’t very stable.’

There was a smell of dust and decay, in addition to the lingering odour from Les Halles.

They climbed three floors. A boy of about twelve sitting against the cracked wall sprang to his feet, bright-eyed, when he saw the three men coming.

‘You’re Inspector Maigret, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘If anyone had told me I’d see you in the flesh one day . . . I have a scrapbook of all the photographs of you they publish in the papers.’

‘This is young Nicolier,’ Ascan explained. ‘Your first name is Jean, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘His father’s a butcher in Rue Saint-Denis. The only one in the neighbourhood not to have closed in August. Tell us your story, Jean.’

‘It happened just like I said. Most of my friends are at the seaside. I can’t play on my own, so I wander around. I look for places I don’t know, even though I was born around here. This morning, I noticed this building. I tried to move the planks across the door and realized they weren’t nailed on. I walked in. I called out, “Is anyone

here?" And my voice just echoed. I wasn't looking for anything. I kept going, just to see what there was. I pushed open that broken door you see there on the right, and that was where I found the man. I ran downstairs and rushed to the police station. By the time I got there, I was out of breath . . . Do I have to go back into that room?

'I don't think that'll be necessary.'

'Shall I stay here?'

'Yes.'

It was Maigret who opened the door, which was so rotten it wasn't even good for making firewood. He stopped in the doorway and realized why Ascan had wanted to surprise him.

The room was quite large, and in the two windows the panes had been replaced with cardboard and thick paper. The uneven floor, with gaps several centimetres wide between the boards, was cluttered with an incredible jumble of totally useless objects, most of them broken.

What particularly drew the eye was a man lying fully dressed and obviously dead on an iron bedstead covered with an old straw mattress. His chest was covered in caked blood, but his face had retained a serene expression.

The clothes were those of a tramp, in marked contrast to the dead man's face and hands. He was quite old and had long silvery hair with bluish streaks. His eyes, too, were blue, but their fixed stare made Maigret uncomfortable, and Ascan closed them.

He had a white moustache which was slightly turned up at the ends and an equally white Richelieu-style goatee beard.

Apart from that, he was clean-shaven, and Maigret had

another surprise on discovering that the dead man's hands had been carefully manicured.

'He looks like an old actor playing the part of a tramp,' he murmured. 'Did he have any papers on him?'

'No, nothing. No identity card. No old letters. My inspectors who know the neighbourhood came and had a look at him. None of them recognized him. Just one thinks he may have spotted him going through the dustbins.'

The man was very tall and exceptionally well built. His trousers were too short for him and had a hole in the left knee. An old jacket, a real rag, lay on the dusty floor.

'Has the pathologist been?'

'Not yet. I'm expecting him any minute. I wanted you to be here before anything was touched.'

'Torrence, phone from the nearest bistro and ask for the men from Criminal Records to get here as soon as possible. Also ask for the prosecutor's office to be informed.'

That face on the warped iron bedstead continued to fascinate him. The moustache and beard had been trimmed with care, and there was every sign that this had been done the previous day at the latest. As for the well-tended hands with their polished nails, it was hard to see them sifting through rubbish bins.

And yet the man must have been doing that for a long time now. The whole room was cluttered with the most unexpected objects. Broken, almost all of them. An old coffee grinder. Badly chipped enamel jugs, buckets with dents or holes, a kerosene lamp without a wick and without kerosene, unmatched shoes.

'I'll have to make an inventory of all this.'

There was a wash-basin on the wall, and Maigret went and tried the tap. As he had expected, the water had been cut off. So had the electricity and the gas, as in all these buildings marked down for demolition.

For how long had the man been living here? Long enough to have accumulated all these old things. It was impossible to question the concierge and the neighbours, since there weren't any. Ascan went back out on the landing and spoke to young Nicolier.

'Do you want to make yourself useful? Wait downstairs in the street and when a group of gentlemen arrive, which'll be in a few minutes, bring them up here.'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'Don't forget to point out the steps that are missing.'

Maigret was coming and going, touching some of the objects, which was how he discovered a candle end and a box of matches. The candle had been stuck to the bottom of a chipped cup.

It was the first time in his career that he had seen a sight like this, and the surprises kept coming.

'How was he killed?'

'From several bullets in the chest and the belly.'

'High calibre?'

'Medium. Probably .32.'

'Is there anything in the pockets of his jacket?'

He could imagine the disgust with which the elegant, fastidious Ascan had searched these grubby rags.

'A button, some pieces of string, a crust of stale bread . . .'

'No money?'

'Two twenty-five-centime coins.'

'And in the trouser pockets?'

‘A dirty cloth he must have used as a handkerchief and a few cigarette ends in a tin of cough drops.’

‘No wallet?’

‘No.’

Even the tramps on the riverbanks, who slept under the bridges, had papers in their pockets, even if it was just an identity card.

Torrence, who had returned, was no less dumbfounded than Maigret.

‘They’re just coming.’

And, indeed, Moers and his men from Criminal Records were following young Nicolier up the stairs. They looked around them in amazement.

‘Murder?’

‘Yes. There’s no way it could be suicide, there’s no weapon in the room.’

‘Where should we start?’

‘With his fingerprints. We need to identify him before anything else.’

‘It’s a pity to spoil such well-tended hands.’

They took the prints all the same.

‘Photographs?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, well, what a good-looking man, he must have been quite a strong fellow.’

The next thing they heard were the cautious footsteps of the deputy prosecutor, Examining Magistrate Cassure and the court clerk. All three were looking in amazement at the sight offered by the room.

‘When was he killed?’ the deputy prosecutor asked.

‘We’ll soon know, here’s Dr Lagodinec.’

The doctor was young and lively. He shook hands with Maigret, nodded to the others and walked over to the bed with its twisted feet. Another piece of junk the man had found in the street or on a patch of waste ground.

‘Have you identified him?’

‘No.’

They were looking anxiously at the floor: now that there were so many of them in the room, it was moving so much there was a likelihood it could collapse.

‘We might end up on the floor below,’ the young doctor remarked.

He waited until photographs had been taken before he approached the body and began his examination. The chest was uncovered, and they saw the black holes made by the bullets.

‘Three shots were fired, from less than a metre away. The murderer aimed carefully, and it’s likely his victim was asleep, or the bullets wouldn’t have been so close together.’

‘Was death instantaneous?’

‘Yes. The left ventricle was hit.’

‘Do you think the bullets went through the body?’

‘I’ll tell you that when I’ve turned him over.’

One of the two photographers helped him. Only one of the bullets had gone right through the strange tramp’s chest and would probably be found in the straw mattress.

‘Is there water in the room?’

‘No. It’s been cut off.’

‘I wonder where he washed himself so carefully. His body’s clean.’

‘Can you establish the approximate time of death?’

‘Between seven and eleven p.m. I’m sure I’ll be a bit more precise when I’ve done the post-mortem. Has he been identified?’

‘Not yet. We’ll be giving his photograph to the papers . . . By the way, when will we have the first photographs?’

‘In an hour, is that OK?’

The photographer left. The other technicians searched for fingerprints on all the objects.

‘I assume you don’t need me any more?’ the deputy prosecutor said.

‘Or me?’ Examining Magistrate Cassure added.

Maigret was slowly smoking his pipe with a distracted air. It took him a few seconds to realize they had been talking to him.

‘No. I’ll keep you informed.’

And to the pathologist:

‘Do you think he was drunk?’

‘I’d be surprised if he was. The stomach contents will tell us for sure. But at first sight, I don’t think this man was a drinker.’

‘A tramp who doesn’t drink,’ Ascan said. ‘That’s quite rare.’

‘What if he wasn’t a tramp?’ Torrence said.

But Maigret said nothing. It was as if his eyes were somehow photographing every last object and tiny detail of the room. Less than a quarter of an hour had gone by, and the technicians were still at work when a van from the Forensic Institute drew up in the street. Young Nicolier went down to show the stretcher bearers the way.

‘You can take him away, yes.’