

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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**A corpse had vanished, not to
mention a killer. Or was the
choir-boy just imagining things?**

GEORGES SIMENON

Elusive

"Perhaps the greatest and most truly novelistic novelist in French literature today," is what Andre Gide has said of Georges Sim—who, under the pen name Simenon, is world famous as the creator of Inspector Maigret. At present living in the United States, he was born in Belgium but at 20 moved to Paris. By the time he was 30 he had written more than 200 popular novels, and while aboard the yacht Ostrogoth was looking for fresh ideas one day when the inspiration for Maigret suddenly smote him. For two years thereafter he wrote a Maigret novel a month, then in 1936 abandoned the detective in order to write "more personal" fiction. In 1940, however, American publishers contracted for 25 Maigret books in English. They were an instantaneous success. Today many American readers rank the inimitable Maigret with Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Michael Shane, Arsene Lupin, Perry Mason and other prime sleuths of mysterydom.

RAIN WAS FALLING in a cold drizzle and it was still dark. Only at the end of the street, near the barracks, was there a pale light in one window. The rest of the street was asleep. It was a quiet, wide street, bordered by one- and two-story houses almost exactly alike, typical of the suburbs of a sizeable city in the provinces.

The whole section was new, and there was nothing mysterious about it. Nothing sinister or secretive.

Maigret, overcoat collar turned up around his neck, had squeezed himself into the gateway of the public school. He waited, smoking a pipe; and looking at the watch in his hand.

At exactly a quarter-to-six he heard the bell of the parish church behind him. Just as the boy had said, this must be the "first call" to six o'clock mass. With the tolling of the bell still echoing in the damp air, Maigret barely heard the alarm-clock go off

Witness

in the house across the street. The sound lasted only a few seconds. The boy's hand must have reached out of a warm, dark bed to grope for the clock and stop the alarm. A few seconds later a light went on in a dormer window. Things were going exactly as the boy had told him. He was the first to get up, making an effort not to awaken the others in the sleeping household. Now he was probably slipping on shirt and socks, dashing water on hands and face, running a comb through his hair. As for shoes, he had said:

"I put them on when I get to the bottom step so as not to wake up my parents."

The same thing happened every day, Winter and Summer alike, during all the period of nearly two years that Justin had served at the six o'clock mass in the hospital. He had said also:

"The hospital clock is always three or four minutes behind that of the church."

Now the inspector knew it for a

fact. The previous day his subordinates on the Mobile Squad, to which he had been assigned several months before, had shrugged their shoulders over all these tiresome details of bells and the "first call" and "second call" to mass. Perhaps it was because Maigret had once been a choir-boy himself that he didn't smile. First the church bell at a quarter-to-six, then the alarm clock in Justin's attic room. And finally, a few minutes later the higher, more silvery notes from the hospital chapel.

He was still holding his watch. It took the boy more than four minutes to dress, then the light in his window went out. He must be groping his way down the stairs. He would sit down on the bottom step to put on his shoes, and then take his coat and cap from the bamboo hat-rack at the right of the hall. . . The front door swung open. The boy shut it quietly and looked anxiously up and down the street until he saw the bulky form of the police inspector coming toward him.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be here. . ."

He began to walk quietly, a thin fair-haired little fellow of twelve, sober for his years.

"You want me to do everything the same way as usual, don't you? I always hurry. In Winter when it's dark, I'm scared. A month from now, of course, it will be nearly light at this hour."

He turned into the first street on the right, shorter and even quieter than the one they had just left. Maigret took in a host of details that reminded him of his own childhood. The boy walked at a certain distance from the houses, doubtless because he was afraid someone might rise out of the shadow of a doorway. And when he crossed the circle he kept away from the trees; a man might have been hiding behind them. He was a stout fellow, after all, to have come out every morning for almost two years in all kinds of weather, sometimes in a thick fog or in the total blackness of a moonless night.

"When we're halfway up the Rue Sainte Catherine, you'll hear the second call to mass at the church. . ."

"What time does the first trolley go by?"

"Six o'clock. I've only seen it two or three times, when I was late . . . once my alarm clock didn't go off; another time I fell asleep all over again."

His face looked narrow and pale in the darkness and rain, his eyes were still motionless with sleep; he had a thoughtful expression, reflecting a trace of anxiety.

"I shan't serve at mass any longer. I only came today because you insisted."

They turned left, into the Rue Sainte Catherine which like the other streets in the district had a lamp post every fifth yard. Quite unconsciously the boy walked faster in the dark, intermediary spaces than in the areas of light and safety. A few windows were now lit up. They could hear steps on a cross street, probably those of some worker on his way to an early shift.

"You didn't see anything when you came to the corner?"

This was a delicate question. The Rue Sainte Catherine was perfectly straight and empty. The shadowy spaces between the lamp posts were not large enough to conceal the presence of two men engaged in a quarrel, even a hundred yards away.

"Perhaps I wasn't looking ahead. I remember that I was talking to myself. . . There was something I wanted to ask my mother when I got home and I was going over what I meant to say. . ."

"Which was?"

"I want a bicycle, have wanted it a long time. I've already saved three hundred francs from what I earn at mass. . ."

It seemed to Maigret—or did he merely imagine it?—that the boy shied even farther away from the houses; he stepped off the pavement into the street.

"Here we are. Do you hear? . . . There's the "second call" from the church. . ."

With an utter lack of self-conscious-

ness Maigret tried to enter into the boy's world, the world Justin lived in every morning.

"I must have raised my head all of a sudden. You know the way you somehow feel an obstacle in your path, like when you're running without looking where you're going and you come up against a wall? It was right here. . ."

He pointed to the dividing line on the pavement between a dark space and the light cast by a street lamp, which glittered like gold dust in the drizzling rain.

"First I saw a man stretched out full length. He looked so big I'd have sworn he took up the whole pavement. . ."

This was impossible; the pavement was at least eight feet wide.

"I don't know exactly what I did. I must have stepped back. I didn't run off right away, because I stayed long enough to see the knife sticking into his chest, with a dark horn handle. . . I noticed it particularly because my Uncle Henri has one almost exactly the same and he told me the handle was made from the antlers of a stag. . . I'm sure the man was dead."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He looked like a dead man."

"Were his eyes shut?"

"I didn't notice his eyes. I just had a feeling he was dead. The whole thing flashed in front of me very quickly, as I told you yesterday in your office. The cops made me go over the same thing so many times, you know, that I'm quite mixed up.

Especially when I think they don't believe me. . ."

"And the other man?"

"When I looked up, I saw a man standing a little farther on, five yards maybe. Very blue eyes. He stared at me for a second before he started to run. The murderer, of course. . ."

"How do you know?"

"Because he ran off as fast as he could go."

"Which way?"

"Straight ahead, over there. . ."

"You mean toward the barracks?"

"Yes. . ."

It was true that Justin had been questioned at least ten times the previous day. Still not a single detail of his testimony varied.

"What did you do then?"

"I began to run too. . . It's hard to explain. . . It must have been the sight of the man hotfooting it away that scared me. Yes, I ran. . ."

"In the opposite direction?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think of calling for help?"

"No, I was too afraid. . . I wheeled half-way around and went as far as the Place du Congrès. . . You see, I took the other street that leads to the hospital, but in a roundabout way."

"Let's keep on walking."

Another chime rang, this time in the higher pitch of the hospital chapel. Fifty yards ahead there was an intersection; on the left the walls, studded with loopholes, of the barracks, and on the right a huge, dimly lit door below the pale face of a clock. It was three minutes to six.

"I'm a minute late. . . Yesterday I managed to be on time in spite of everything because I ran so hard."

The boy banged a heavy knocker attached to the massive oak door. A watchman in bedroom slippers opened up and let Justin in, but he blocked Maigret's path and eyed him suspiciously.

"What's all this?"

"Police. . ."

They went through a passageway, redolent of hospital smells, then past a second door into a large courtyard. Far away they could barely see in the darkness the white caps of the nuns, who were walking toward the chapel.

"Why didn't you say anything yesterday to the watchman?"

"I don't know. . . I was in too much of a hurry."

Justin seemed put out at the idea that the inspector, who might be an unbeliever, was going to enter these hallowed precincts. From his sensitive reaction Maigret understood better what it was that inspired the boy to get up so early every morning.

The chapel was small and warm. Already hospital patients in their blue-gray uniforms were seated in the pews, some with bandages around their heads, slings on their arms or crutches beside them. The nuns herded like a little flock of sheep, in a balcony above, white caps bowing all together in a sort of mystical unison.

They climbed several steps and passed by the altar where the candles were already lit. At the right was the sacristy with its dark woodwork. A tall, gaunt priest was just putting

on the last of his vestments, a fine lace surplice. One of the nuns was busy filling the cruets with water and wine. Here it was that Justin had come to a halt the morning before, breathless and with knees knocking together. Here he had cried out:

"A man's just been killed on the Rue Sainte Catherine. . ."

The hands of a small clock fitted into the woodwork stood at exactly six. The bell rang again, sounding fainter than it had from outside. Justin said to the nun as she handed him his surplice:

"This is the police inspector. . ."

Maigret stayed in the sacristy, while the boy took his place ahead of the priest and proceeded, with his cassock swishing about his legs, toward the altar.

THE NUN in the sacristy said:

"A fine little fellow; very devout, and he never tells a lie. Every now and then he misses a mass, and you might expect him to say he was ill. Not at all! He always says that he couldn't bear to get up on account of the cold or because nightmares woke him up in the night and he was still tired."

And, after mass, the chaplain with the clear eyes of a saint in a stained-glass window exclaimed:

"How can you think that the boy made up such a story?"

Now Maigret was acquainted with all that had happened the preceding morning in the hospital chapel. Justin's teeth had been chattering; he was at the end of his rope and in a

state of extreme nervous tension. Still the mass couldn't be put off any longer. The nun called the mother superior and meanwhile took Justin's place while he was given first aid in the sacristy. Only ten minutes later the mother superior realized she should call the police. She walked across the chapel and everyone had a feeling that something was up. The desk sergeant at the local police station couldn't make out what she was saying:

"What's that? The mother superior? Superior of what? . . ."

She repeated in low convent-bred tones that a crime had been committed in the Rue Sainte Catherine.

"How do you know?"

Finally the sergeant had sent two men on bicycles to the street in question where they had found nothing at all, neither the murdered nor, of course, the murderer.

Meanwhile, just as if nothing had happened, Justin went to school half-past-eight. There it was that Inspector Besson, a stocky fellow with the look of a prize-fighter about him, had found him an hour later, after a report had come in to the Mobile Squad. Poor little fellow! He had been questioned for two whole hours in a gloomy office smelling of stale pipes and a smoky stove, not as a witness, but as if he were guilty of the crime. Three inspectors, one after the other, Besson, Thiberge and Vallin, had tried to trip him up, to bring out the discrepancies in his story. On top of all this his mother had followed him to the police station. She sat in the waiting-room, sniffing,

dabbing at her eyes, and saying over and over again: "We're honest folk that have never been mixed up with the police!"

Maigret, who had worked late the evening before, came to the office not until eleven o'clock.

"What's going on here?" he asked when he saw the boy, dry-eyed and standing on his thin legs.

"This kid is trying to put one over! He claims to have seen a corpse in the street and a murderer who ran away. But a trolley car went by just four minutes later and the motorman says he didn't see a thing. The street is a quiet one and not a soul heard anything out of the ordinary. And when some nun or other called the police a quarter of an hour after the alleged crime, there was nothing on the pavement, not even a drop of blood. . ."

"Come to my office, young man. . ."

Maigret was the first that day to treat Justin with any formality, as if he were a person and not a delinquent child. The inspector asked quietly to hear the story and he listened attentively without taking notes.

"Will you keep on serving at the hospital mass?"

"No, I don't want to go there any more. I'm scared."

This meant giving up something he really cared for. The boy was sincerely devout; he reveled in the poetry of the early mass. Moreover he was paid for every mass, not much to be sure, but enough for him to have saved some money to buy the bicycle of his dreams.

"I'm going to ask you to go just once more. Tomorrow morning. . ."

"I—I'm afraid to go over the same ground."

"I'll go with you. I'll be waiting in front of your house. You've only to do things exactly the same way as usual."

Well, they had covered the boy's entire route, and now at seven o'clock Maigret stood alone at the hospital gate. An icy drizzle still fell from the gray morning sky; sleet stuck to the inspector's shoulders and he sneezed twice. A few passers-by walked along close to the houses with overcoat collars turned up and hands in pockets. Grocers and butchers were raising the iron shutters in front of their shops. The section of town was the most peaceful and commonplace imaginable. It was hard to visualize two drunkards, for instance, quarreling at five minutes to six in the morning in the Rue Sainte Catherine. There was a possibility, of course, that a tramp or common criminal might hold up an early wayfarer for his money and stick a knife into him for good measure. But then there was what came after. . . The boy said that the murderer ran away at his approach, and this was at five minutes to six; but the motor-man of the six o'clock trolley claimed to have seen nothing. Of course, he might have been looking absent-mindedly in the opposite direction.

But at five minutes past six two policemen, finishing their rounds, had come by the same way, without noticing anything. And at six or seven minutes past the hour a cavalry

captain, who lived only three houses away from the spot Justin had pointed to, passed by, as he did every morning, on his way to the barracks. He too had nothing to report! Finally at six-twenty, the two policemen with bicycles sent out from the local station had arrived on the scene and found no trace of a crime.

Had someone taken the body away by truck or automobile? Maigret wished calmly and unhurriedly to consider every possible hypothesis, but this one turned out to be as false as the rest. A sick woman lived at No. 42 of the Rue Sainte Catherine, and her husband had sat up with her all night. His statement was very positive.

"We hear every noise from outside. I'm particularly alert because my wife, who is in great pain, shudders at the slightest sound. Now that I think of it the trolley woke her up just as she had dropped off to sleep. I can swear that no vehicle except that one went by before seven o'clock in the morning. The first to come was the truck to collect garbage."

"And you didn't hear anything else?"

"There were some running steps."

"Before the trolley went by?"

"Yes, because my wife was asleep. I was just heating some coffee."

"Did it sound like one person running?"

"No, like two. . ."

"And you don't know in which direction?"

"The window-shade was down. It crackles when you raise it, so I didn't look out."

This was the only bit of testimony to support Justin's story. There was a bridge two hundred yards farther on, and the policeman on duty there had seen no car go by. Was it possible that only a few minutes after he had fled the murderer had come back, loaded the victim on his shoulders and carried him off, God knows where, without attracting any attention?

There was contrary testimony, however, that made everyone shrug his shoulders at Justin's tale. The spot to which he had pointed was just opposite No. 61. Inspector Thiberge had gone there the day before and Maigret, who left nothing to chance, now rang the doorbell. The brick house was nearly new; three steps led to a varnished pine door with a shiny copper letter-box attached to it. It was only quarter past seven, but the inspector had been told he could make his call at this early hour. A dried-up hairy-faced old woman looked out at him through a peephole and argued hotly before she let him into a hallway where there was a delicious smell of freshly-made coffee.

"I'll go see if the judge can talk to you. . ."

The house was owned by a retired justice of the peace, who lived in it with this old servant. The old woman said in a disagreeable voice:

"Come in. . . Please scrape the mud off your shoes. This isn't a stable. . ."

The room into which she led Maigret was quite large and the quantity of unexpected objects piled up in it gave it the look of bedroom, study, library and attic, all in one.

"You've come to look for the body?" said a mocking voice. The voice came from near the fireplace where a thin old man was seated deep in an armchair with an afghan over his knees.

"Take your coat off. I thought the police had improved since my time, and learned to mistrust the testimony of children. Young boys and girls are the most treacherous of witnesses, and when I was on the bench. . ."

He wore a heavy dressing-gown, and in spite of the high temperature of the room he had a scarf as bulky as a shawl around his neck.

"So it's across the street from me that the crime is supposed to have been committed, is that it? And you, if I'm not mistaken, are the famous Inspector Maigret, whom the authorities have deigned to send to our city to overhaul the Mobile Squad. . ."

His voice rasped. He was an old, sarcastic codger.

"Well, Inspector, unless you are going to accuse me of being in league with the murderer, or even of being the murderer himself—all of which is quite within your rights—I am sorry to tell you, as I said yesterday to your subordinate, that you are on the wrong track. You've heard, no doubt, that old men need little sleep. Well, beginning at four o'clock in the morning I sit in this armchair, and my mind is quite wide-awake. I could even show you the book in which I was immersed yesterday morning, but since it was one of the Greek philosophers I hardly suppose it would interest you. The fact is that if an incident of the sort related

by your over-imaginative boy had actually taken place under my window, I can assure you that I should have had some notion of it. My legs are weak, as I told you, but my hearing is still good. What's more I'm still curious enough by nature to take an interest in everything that goes on in the street. If it would amuse you I could even tell you the hour at which every housewife in the neighborhood goes to do her marketing."

He looked at Maigret with a triumphant smile.

"You are accustomed, then, to hearing young Justin go by your house?" asked the inspector with angelic mildness.

"Of course."

"You both hear and see him?"

"I don't follow you. . ."

"During over half, in fact about two-thirds of the year, it's broad daylight at six o'clock mass the whole year round."

"Yes, I see him go by."

"Since his passing by is a daily event, as regular as the first trolley, you probably pay it particular attention, don't you?"

The judge looked at Maigret with beady, almost treacherous, little eyes. He seemed put out at the idea that Maigret was giving him a lesson.

"Yes, I hear him, if that's what you want me to admit. . ."

"And if he were to miss a day?"

"I might notice it and I might not. One isn't struck *every* Sunday by the absence of the factory whistles."

"What about yesterday?"

Was Maigret's impression correct? It seemed to him that the old judge

was frowning, that there was a pouting, sulky, set expression on his face. Old men, after all, are given to sulking like children; they are apt to have the same fits of waywardness.

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, yesterday."

Why should he repeat the question, unless he wanted to gain time.

"I noticed nothing at all."

"Neither his passing by. . ."

"No. . ."

"Nor his not passing by. . ."

"No."

One of the two no's was a lie; Maigret would swear to it. He decided to feel the old man out further.

"You didn't hear running steps below your window?"

"No."

This time the answer was direct and the old man appeared to be sincere.

"You heard no unusual noise?"

"No."

Again the no was not altogether frank, and there was something triumphant about it.

"No trampling about, no thud of a falling body, no death groans?"

"Nothing at all."

"Since you have been on the bench I needn't ask whether you are willing to repeat your statement under oath, should this become necessary—"

"Whenever you like. . ." said the old man with a sort of joyful impatience.

The old servant must have been just outside the room, for she appeared at the threshold at just the right moment to escort the inspector to the front door.

Maigret felt as if he had been tricked. He had the impression that at a certain moment he had been on the point of making an amusing, subtle and quite unexpected discovery, that he had teetered on the verge of success, but had not been able to make it. In his mind's eye he saw the boy, and he saw the old man, and he tried to find a connection between them. He filled his pipe slowly, standing on the edge of the pavement. Then, because he had not had so much as a cup of coffee since he had got up and his wet overcoat was sticking to his shoulders, he hailed a cab and departed for his home.

THE MASS of sheets and blankets rose up like a giant wave, one ponderous arm stuck out, and on the pillow appeared a red face beaded with perspiration. Finally an ill-humored voice grumbled:

"Give me the thermometer. . ."

Madame Maigret, who was sewing near the window, got up with a sigh.

"You took your temperature only half an hour ago." Just the same, she shook the thermometer to bring down the mercury and slipped it in where it would do the most good. He took time for another question:

"Has no one been here?"

"You'd have heard them, since you weren't asleep."

The bed creaked. Maigret's assignment to this provincial city was to last only six months, and his wife had rented a furnished apartment. The light was glaring, there was flowered wallpaper, cheap furniture

and a bed that groaned under the weight of the inspector.

"What does the thermometer say?"

"Ninety-nine and a half."

"Last time it was nearly a hundred!"

"This evening it will be closer to a hundred and one. . ."

Maigret was furious. He was always ill-tempered when ill, and just now he looked at his wife murderously, because she insisted on staying in the house and he had an intense desire to smoke a pipe.

"You'd better drink another cup of herb tea."

This was perhaps the tenth cup since noon. The warm water was coming out of him in the form of perspiration, soaking the sheets. He must have caught grippe or a touch of influenza while he was waiting for Justin in the rain, or later while wandering about the flooded streets. At ten o'clock when he had returned to his office at the headquarters of the Mobile Squad, and automatically poked the fire in the stove, he had begun to shiver all over. Most important of all, his pipe did not have its usual appeal, and this was a fatal sign.

"Look here, Besson, if I shouldn't come back this afternoon, you'd better get on with the choir-boy business."

Besson, who always fancied himself a step ahead of the rest, had replied:

"Chief, you don't believe a good spanking would lead to a solution?"

Maigret was too stuffed up with his cold to take such in witticisms.

He went on ponderously with his instructions:

"Draw up a list of everyone that lives on the street; it's a short one, so that won't be much of a job."

"Shall I question the boy again?"

"No. . ."

Ever since these parting words Maigret had been hot and feverish. Drops of perspiration trickled down his face and there was a bad taste in his mouth. He had a horror of illness, because it humiliated him and because Madame Maigret kept strict watch over him to see that he did not smoke his pipe.

But there were moments when it was distinctly pleasant, when he could shut his eyes, forget his age and relive his childhood. He saw floating before his eyes the pale, determined face of Justin. Everything he had done during the morning passed through his memory, not with the precision of everyday reality, nor with the definite outlines of things seen, but rather with the enhanced intensity of things felt and understood by intuition. For instance, he could have given a detailed description of Justin's attic room, which he had never seen at all: the iron bedstead, the alarm-clock on the bedside table, the boy's outstretched arm and the hasty process of his silent dressing, exactly the same, day after day. Exactly the same, that was the point! If a boy serves at mass at the same hour every day for two years, his motions become practically automatic. . . The first bell for mass at a quarter-to-six, the alarm-clock, the higher notes of the chapel bell, the shoes he

slipped on at the bottom of the stairs and the door he opened gently into a cold blast of early morning air.

"You know, Madame Maigret, he's never read a detective story in his life. . ."

Although it had started as a joke, by now they had called each other "Maigret" and "Madame Maigret" so long that they had almost forgotten each other's first names.

"And he doesn't read the daily papers. . ."

"You'd be better off asleep. . ."

He closed his eyes, after a nostalgic look at his pipe, which he had laid down on the black marble mantel-piece.

"I had a long talk with his mother; she's a good woman, frightened to death of the police. . ."

"Go to sleep!"

He was silent for several minutes and breathed heavily; it seemed almost as if he had dozed off.

"She said the boy had never seen a dead body except in a coffin; it's no sight for children. . ."

"And what does that matter?"

"He told me the corpse was so big that it seemed to block the whole pavement. Well, that's the way a prostrate body would look to a boy. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"I don't see why you worry about it when Besson's on the job."

"Besson doesn't believe in the dead body."

"Try to get an hour of sleep and then I'll give you another cup of herb tea."

"Don't you think that if I took a few puffs at my pipe. . ."

"Are you quite mad?" She stepped into the kitchen to look at a pot of vegetable soup on the fire.

"I'll wager they really detest each other. . ."

His wife's voice drifted back from the kitchen: "What did you say?"

"The judge and the choir-boy. They've never exchanged a word, but old people, you know, especially when they live alone, can behave like children."

"I don't see the point. . ." She stood in the doorway with a steaming soup-ladle in her hand.

"Listen carefully. . . The judge doesn't dare tell a lie, but he's stalling me off, somehow. The man at No. 42, who was up all night with his ill wife, heard running steps. . ."

He always came back to the same point. His mind, sharpened by the fever, turned it around and around.

"But what became of the body?" objected Madame Maigret, with womanly common sense. "Just don't think about it! Besson knows his job; I've heard you say so yourself."

He sank down among the blankets and tried hard to sleep, but soon he was haunted again by the choir-boy's pale, thin legs.

He went stubbornly back to the beginning, retracing his steps from the public school, across the Place du Congrès.

"I've got it. There's where something doesn't tally. . ."

First of all because the judge had heard nothing. Unless he was lying through and through it was difficult to believe that two men had fought just below his window, only a few

yards from where he was sitting, and that one of them had run away toward the barracks, while the choir-boy had dashed off in the opposite direction. . .

"Look here, Madame Maigret. . . What if they had both run in the same direction? . . ."

Madame Maigret sighed, picked up her sewing.

"You mean the boy ran after the murderer?"

"No. The murderer ran after the boy."

"Why so?"

"Madame Maigret, I know you'll say no—but it's an absolute necessity. Let me have my pipe and tobacco . . . just a few puffs . . . I have a feeling I'm going to solve it in just a few minutes, if I don't lose my train of thought. . ."

She went to fetch his pipe from the mantel piece, and handed it to him with a sigh of resignation:

"I knew you'd find a good excuse. But, let me tell you this. . . This evening, whether you like it or not, I'm going to make you a mustard plaster. . ."

THERE WAS NO telephone in the apartment; they had to go down to the drugstore to reach Besson.

"Shall I tell him to come here?"

"Tell him to bring me, as soon as he can, not a list of all the people who live on the Rue Sainte Catherine, but a list of all the tenants of the houses on the left side, between the judge's house and the Place du Congrès."

"Try to stay under the covers. . ."

As soon as he heard her on the stairs he thrust both legs out of bed, went barefooted after his tobacco pouch, filled his pipe again and then struck an innocent pose between the sheets. He puffed with greedy haste, although his throat was extremely painful. Raindrops were still running down the windowpanes, and he was reminded again of his childhood, of the times when he had grippe and his mother had made him a caramel custard. Madame Maigret came back upstairs, a little out of breath. Her eyes wandered about the room as if she were looking for something out of order, but she did not seem to think of the pipe.

"He'll be here in about an hour."

"I have one more thing to ask you, Madame Maigret. You must get dressed. . ."

She shot him a mistrustful glance.

"You must go to young Justin's house and get his parents to let you bring him here. Be gentle with him. If I send one of the inspectors he'll be frightened, and he's quite stiff enough as it is. Just tell him I want a bit of a chat with him."

"What if his mother wants to come along?"

"Say what you like. But I don't want the mother."

Maigret was left alone, deep down in the bed, hot and perspiring, with a cloud of smoke rising from his pipe, which just stuck out of the bedclothes. He shut his eyes and again he saw the corner of the Rue Sainte Catherine. He was no longer Inspector Maigret, but a boy walking fast every morning on the same street at

the same hour and talking to himself to stave up his courage. He was just turning into Sainte Catherine. . .

"Mother, I wish you'd get me a bicycle. . ."

Justin had been rehearsing the words he was going to say to his mother. He must have put it in a more involved way than that; probably he had thought up a fairly subtle approach:

"You know, Mother, if I had a bicycle. . ."

Or else:

"I've already saved up three hundred francs. . . If you lend me the rest, and I pay you back from what I earn at the chapel, then. . ."

Maigret's fever must have gone up, but he no longer had the slightest desire to consult the thermometer. There was no harm in the fever; in fact it seemed to stimulate him. The words he murmured over to himself set up a train of pictures in his mind, and the pictures were clearer and clearer. . . He was a small boy and sick in bed; when his mother bent over him she seemed so big that she would burst her apron. . . The body lay across the pavement; it looked big to a child and a knife with a dark handle was stuck into the chest. A few yards beyond stood a man with blue eyes, who started to run away. . . He ran toward the barracks, while Justin dashed in the opposite direction. . .

"There it is! Justin didn't make the story up. . ."

His fright and panic at the hospital had not been put on. He had not simply imagined the body. And at

least one other person had heard the footsteps of a man running. What was it the judge with the unpleasant smile had said:

"You are still taken in by the testimony of children?"

Or at least he had said something very much like it. But the judge was wrong. Children can't invent things, because they need foundation, something to build on. Children may transpose, but they don't invent.

"There it is!" Once more Maigret congratulated himself. He was dripping with perspiration, but he crawled out of bed to fill his pipe for the last time before his wife arrived. Then, while he was up, he opened a closet and took a long swig of rum straight from the bottle. Never mind if his fever rose during the night.

At least this case would be off his chest. And a very neat case it would be, no ordinary affair, but one he had worked out from his bed. This was something Madame Maigret simply couldn't appreciate.

The judge hadn't lied, and yet he must have been trying to play a trick on Justin, whom he detested as if they were two children of the same age. Ah! There were steps on the pavement below, then steps on the stairs and the scuffling of a child's feet. Madame Maigret opened the door, pushing young Justin ahead of her. His heavy wool jacket glistened with drops of rain, and he smelled something like a wet puppy.

Madame Maigret looked around suspiciously. Naturally she would hardly think the same pipeful had lasted throughout her whole absence.

Perhaps she had a notion about the rum as well.

"Sit down, Justin," said the inspector, pointing to a chair.

"Madame Maigret, you'd better have a look at the vegetable soup."

When his wife had gone Maigret winked at the boy and said: "Give me the tobacco pouch there on the mantelpiece. And my pipe; it must be in my overcoat pocket. Yes, the one hanging on the door. Thanks, old man. . . Were you worried when my wife came for you?"

"No," was the proud answer.

"Were you annoyed?"

"Well, everyone keeps saying that I made the story up out of whole cloth. . ."

"And you didn't make it up, did you?"

"There was a dead man on the pavement, and another man who. . ."

"Not so fast. . . Sit down."

The boy perched on the edge of a chair; his feet did not reach the floor and his legs swung to and fro.

"What sort of a prank did you ever play on the judge?"

Justin stiffened instinctively.

"The old man that sits behind the window and looks like an owl. . ."

"I've never spoken to him."

"I asked what has happened between you?"

"I can't see him in winter because the curtains are drawn. . ."

"And in summer?"

"I stick out my tongue at him. . ."

"Why?"

"Because he makes fun of me; he laughs to himself when he sees me go by."

"Have you stuck out your tongue at him often?"

"Every time I can see him. . ."

"And what does he do?"

"He laughs out loud in a nasty way. I've always thought it was because I serve at mass and he's an unbeliever."

"So he did tell a lie. . ."

"What did he say?"

"That nothing happened in front of his house yesterday, or else he would have seen it."

The boy looked hard at Maigret, then he lowered his eyes.

"He did lie, didn't he?"

"There was a body lying on the pavement with a knife stuck into the chest. . ."

"Yes, I know that."

"How do you know?"

"I know it because it's the truth," said Maigret gently. "Give me a match. My pipe has gone out."

"You look terribly hot."

"That's nothing. Just grippe."

"You caught it this morning?"

"Quite likely. Sit down."

He listened intently and then called out:

"Madame Maigret! Will you go downstairs? I think I hear Besson coming and I don't want him to come up before I've finished. . . Just keep him company down there. . . Justin will call you. . ."

Then he spoke again to his young friend:

"Sit down. . . It's true also that you both ran away. . ."

"I told you it was true. . ."

"And I'm sure of it. . . Go make sure there's no one at the door and

the door is tight shut. . ."

The boy did as he was told, without understanding the reason, but suddenly aware of the importance of his every move and gesture.

"You're a good fellow, Justin. . ."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's true about the corpse, and true about the man that ran away. . ."

The boy raised his head and Maigret saw that his lip was trembling.

"And the judge didn't tell a lie, no judge would dare do that, but he didn't tell the whole truth, either. . ."

The room was redolent of grippe, rum and tobacco. The smell of vegetable soup was wafted under the kitchen door and silvery rain-drops still beat against the black window-panes that shut off the deserted street. Were a man and a child talking together? Or two men? Or two children? Maigret's head was heavy and his eyes bright with fever. There was a sick-room taste to his pipe that reminded him of the odors of the hospital, the chapel, and the sacristy.

"The judge didn't tell the whole truth because he wanted to get you into trouble. . . And you haven't told the whole truth, either. . . Look here, you mustn't cry. There's no reason why the whole world should know what we're talking about. Do you follow me, Justin?"

The boy nodded.

"If what you told me had never happened at all the man at No. 42 wouldn't have heard footsteps running away. . ."

"I didn't make it up. . ."

"Of course not. But if things had happened exactly as you say, the

judge couldn't swear that he heard nothing. And if the murderer ran in the direction of the barracks the judge couldn't swear that no one ran by his house. . ."

The boy did not move; he was staring at the tips of his swinging feet.

"When you come down to it the judge was honest, because he didn't dare say that you had gone by his house yesterday morning. But he might have added that you *didn't* go by. That was the truth, because you ran off in the opposite direction. He was honest, too, when he claimed that no one ran along the street below his window. Because the man didn't run that way. . ."

"What do you know about it?"

The boy was stiff as a ramrod, staring at Maigret with the same wide-open eyes with which he must have stared the day before at the murderer.

"There's no getting away from the fact that the man ran in the same direction as you did; that's why the man at No. 42 heard him. The killer knew you had seen him and seen the dead body. You might turn him in to the police, and so *he ran after you*. . ."

"If you tell my mother, I. . ."

"Sh! I have nothing to say to your mother or anyone else. You see, Justin I'm going to talk to you as if you were a grown man. . . A murderer would hardly be so stupid as to let you get away after what you had seen. . ."

"Well, I don't know about that. . ."

"But I know. That's my business. It's not so hard to kill a man, but

it's hard to get rid of the body. And this body has made a magnificent disappearance. In other words, the murderer is tough and strong. His life is at stake and if he had a head on his shoulders he wouldn't let you get away. . ."

"I didn't realize. . ."

"It's not so serious, after all, now that the damage has been repaired. Don't worry!"

"You've arrested him?"

His voice trembled with hope.

"He'll be arrested presently. . . . Stay in your chair."

"I won't move. . ."

"First of all, if the whole thing had taken place in front of the judge's house, halfway down the street, you would have seen what was going on from farther away and you would have had time to escape. There's where the murderer made a mistake, in spite of all his cleverness. . ."

"How did you guess it?"

"I didn't guess it. You wouldn't have walked a hundred yards without looking ahead of you. . . So the body must have been closer, much closer, just beyond the beginning of the street. . ."

"Yes, just five houses in. . ."

"When you did see the body you ran. The man ran after you."

"I thought I'd die of fear!"

"He clamped a hand on your shoulder."

"He grabbed me by both shoulders. I thought he was going to choke me. . ."

"He told you to say. . ."

The boy was silently crying.

"If you tell my mother, she'll never

stop scolding me. . . She's always scolding. . ."

"He told you to say the whole thing happened farther up the street. . ."

"Yes."

"In front of the judge's house?"

"I thought of the judge's house myself, because I always stuck out my tongue at him. The man only told me to say at the other end of the street, and that he had run off toward the barracks. . ."

"Well, it was almost a perfect crime. No one believed you, because there was no murderer, no body or any traces of it, and the whole thing seemed impossible."

"And how did you work it out?"

"Oh, I didn't have much to do with the solution. It's a piece of luck that I used to be a choir-boy, and that I had this attack of fever today. . . What did the man promise you?"

"He said that if I didn't do as he said he would follow me wherever I might go, even if the police protected me, and wring my neck like a chicken. . ."

"And what else?"

"He asked me what I'd like to have for a present. . ."

"And you said: 'A bicycle. . .'"

"How do you know?"

"I was a boy once, myself. . ."

"And you wanted a bicycle?"

"Yes, and a lot of other things I never had."

"I didn't want him to be caught. . ."

"On account of the bicycle?"

"I guess that's it. I suppose you'll tell my mother."

"Neither your mother nor another

living soul. . . We're friends, aren't we? Just give me my tobacco pouch and don't tell Madame Maigret that I smoked three pipefuls since you came. Older people don't always tell the truth, either, you see. . . Which house was it in front of, Justin?"

"The yellow house, next to the butcher's."

"Go call my wife."

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs. . . She's with Inspector Besson, who was so rough with you."

"Is he going to arrest me?"

"Open the closet."

"There, it's open."

"A pair of trousers is hanging right there. . ."

"What shall I do with them?"

"You'll find a billfold in the left-hand pocket. . ."

"Here it is."

"In the billfold there are some calling cards. . ."

"Shall I bring them to you?"

"Give me just one of them. . . And the fountain pen on the table." And Maigret wrote under his own name:

"Good for one bicycle."

COME in, Besson."

Madame Maigret looked at the wreath of smoke around the oiled-paper lampshade, and then rushed into the kitchen, where there was the smell of something burning.

Besson sat down on the chair left empty by Justin and shot the boy a look of disdain.

"I have the list you asked for. But I must tell you at the start. . ."

"That it won't be of any use. Never mind. Who lives at No. 14?"

"A man from out of town, a jeweler, called Perain. . ."

Maigret's voice came out of the pillows, almost indifferently: "A fence, no doubt. . ."

"What did you say, Chief?"

"A fence. Perhaps the leader of a whole gang. . ."

"I don't understand. . ."

"It doesn't matter. Do me a favor, Besson. Hand me the bottle of rum that's in the closet. Hurry, before Madame Maigret comes back. . . I'll wager my temperature is up. Perain . . . Get a search warrant from the police magistrate. . . No, let me see! At this time of night it would take too long; he's probably playing bridge somewhere. Have you had dinner? I'm waiting for my vegetable soup. There are some blank warrants in my desk. The left-hand drawer. Fill one out. Search the house. You'll find the corpse, I'm sure of that, even if you have to tear down a wall in the cellar. . ."

Poor Besson looked worriedly first at his chief and then at the boy waiting quietly in one corner.

"Hurry, old man. If he catches on that the boy came here you'll find the nest empty and the bird flown. He's tough and clever; you'll see."

Tough and clever he was, too. Just as the Mobile Squad rang his doorbell he was getting away through the courtyard, climbing the side of a wall. It took them all night to lay their hands on him, but in the end

they caught him on a roof. Meanwhile other policemen searched the house for hours before they found the corpse, decomposed in a solution of quicklime. The murder was a settling of accounts, apparently. A gangster who was dissatisfied with the way the boss was treating him and who traced him to his hide-out in the small hours of the morning. Perain had knifed him right at the door, never dreaming that at the same instant a choir-boy was coming around the corner.

"What are you saying?" asked Madame Maigret, standing with a hot mustard plaster in her well-groomed hands.

"I tripped him up all the same . . . that judge!"

"What judge?"

It was hard to explain. The judge twisted the whole story, just to get even with the choir-boy and make a little trouble. He had said that he hadn't heard the boy pass. . . But he had omitted to say that he'd heard running steps in the other direction. Yes, old men have their second childhood. They even squabble with children, as if they were children themselves. "Oh, forget the judge."

Maigret was happy in spite of his fever. He had smoked three, no four, pipes on the sly. . . His mouth smacked of tobacco and he could relax and drift off into sleep. . . Tomorrow, because of his grippe, Madame Maigret would make him a caramel custard. . .