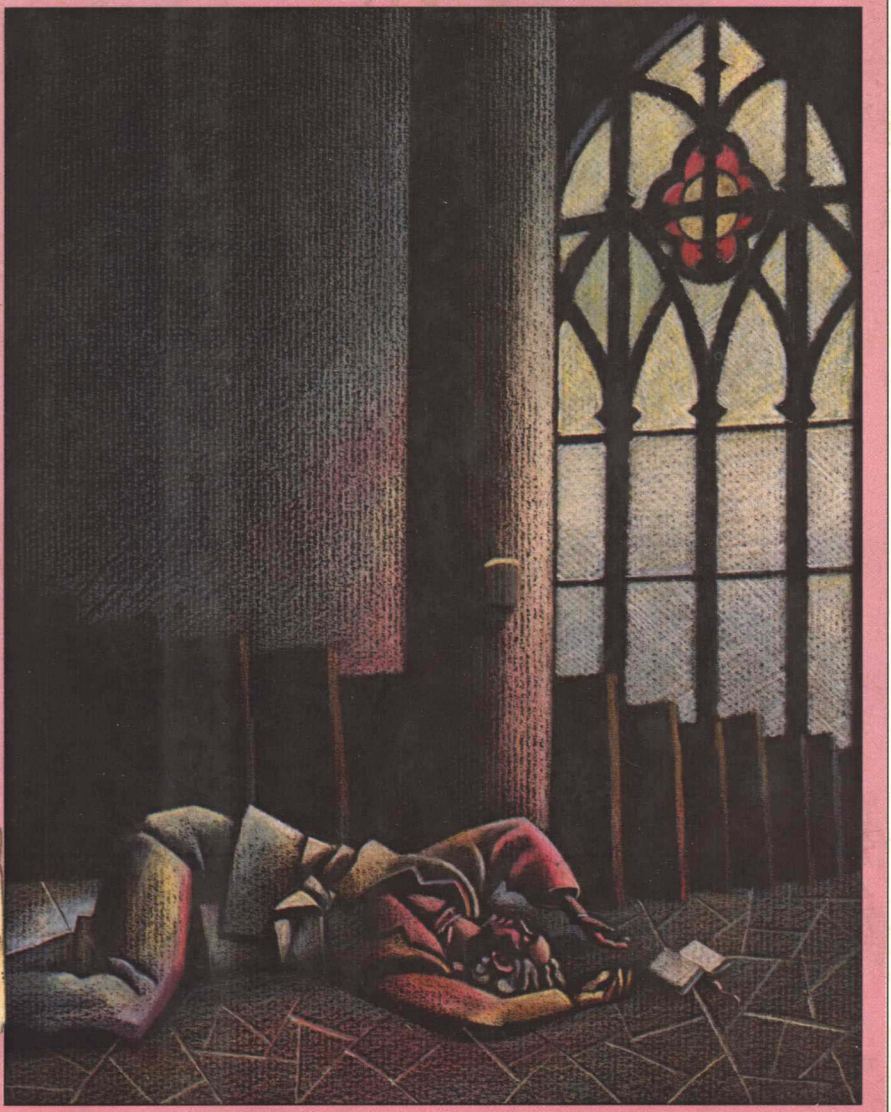
SIMENON

MAIGRET GOES HOME



Georges Simenon

Maigret Goes Home

Translated by Robert Baldick

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The Little Girl with the Squint

There was a timid scratching at the door, the sound of an object being put on the floor, a furtive voice:

"It's half past five! The first bell for All Souls' Day Mass has just been rung. . . ."

Maigret raised himself on his elbows, making the mattress creak, and while he was looking in astonishment at the skylight cut in the sloping roof, the voice went on:

"Are you taking Communion?"

By now Chief Inspector Maigret was out of bed, standing barefoot on the icy floor. He walked toward the door, which was closed with a piece of string wound around a couple of nails. There was the sound of footsteps hurrying away. When he looked out into the hallway, he was just in time to catch sight of the figure of a woman in a bed jacket and a white petticoat.

He picked up the jug of hot water Marie Tatin had brought him, closed his door, and looked for a piece of mirror in front of which he could shave.

The candle had only a few minutes of life left. Outside the skylight, it was still night, a cold night in early winter. A few dead leaves were clinging to the branches of the poplars in the marketplace.

Maigret could stand up only in the middle of the attic, because of the double slope of the roof. He was cold. A thin draft, the source of which he had been unable to trace, chilled the back of his neck.

It was precisely this quality of coldness that disturbed him, by plunging him into an atmosphere he thought he had forgotten.

The first bell for Mass . . . The bell ringing out over the sleeping village . . . When he was a boy, Maigret did not usually get up so early. He would wait for the second bell, because in those days he did not need to shave. Did he so much as wash his face?

Nobody brought him any hot water. Sometimes the water was frozen in the jug. Soon afterward his shoes would be clattering along the frozen road.

Now, while he was getting dressed, he could hear Marie Tatin coming and going in the main room of the inn, rattling the grate of the stove, moving crockery about, and turning the handle of the coffee mill.

He put on his jacket, his overcoat. Before going out, he removed from his wallet a piece of paper with an official slip pinned to it bearing the words:

MUNICIPAL POLICE OF MOULINS

Communicated for information and possible action to the Police Judiciaire in Paris:

Then a sheet of lined paper with laborious handwriting:

This is to tell you that a crime will be committed in the church at Saint-Fiacre during the first Mass on All Souls' Day.

The sheet of paper had lain around for several days in the offices of the Quai des Orfèvres. Maigret had noticed it by accident, and had asked in surprise:

"Is that the Saint-Fiacre near Matignon?"

"Probably, since it was sent to us by Moulins."

And Maigret had put the piece of paper in his pocket. Saint-Fiacre, Matignon, Moulins: words more familiar to him than almost any others.

He had been born in Saint-Fiacre, where his father had been the estate manager of the chateau for many years. The last time he had gone there had, in fact, been after the death of his father, who had been buried in the little graveyard behind the church.

. . . a crime will be committed . . . during the first Mass . . .

Maigret had arrived the day before. He had taken a room at the only inn in the village: Marie Tatin's. She had not recognized him, but he had known her because of her eyes. The little girl with the squint, as they used to call her. A puny little girl who had become an even skinnier old maid, squinting more and more, and endlessly bustling about the bar, the kitchen, and the yard, where she kept rabbits and hens.

The chief inspector went downstairs. The ground-floor rooms were lit by oil lamps. A table was laid in one corner. There was coarse gray bread, a smell of coffee with chicory, and boiling milk.

"You're wrong not to take Communion on a day like today. Especially seeing that you're taking the trouble to go to the first Mass. . . . Heavens! That's the second bell ringing already!"

The voice of the bell was faint. Footsteps could be heard on the road. Marie Tatin fled into her kitchen to put on

her black dress, her cotton gloves, and her little hat, which her bun prevented from staying on straight.

"I'll leave you to finish your breakfast. . . . You'll lock the door, won't you?"

"No, wait! I'm ready."

She was embarrassed to be walking with a man. A man who came from Paris! She trotted along, a small bent figure, in the cold morning air. Some dead leaves were fluttering about on the ground. The crisp sound they made showed that there had been a frost during the night.

There were other shadowy figures converging on the dimly shining doorway of the church. The bell was still ringing. There were lights in the windows of some low-built houses: people dressing in a hurry for the first Mass.

Maigret rediscovered other impressions from his childhood: the cold, the eyes smarting, the tips of the fingers frozen, a lingering taste of coffee in the mouth. Then, on going into the church, a wave of warm air, of soft light; the smell of the tapers and the incense.

"Excuse me, will you? . . . I've got my own prayer stool," she said.

And Maigret recognized the black chair with the red velvet armrest of old Madame Tatin, the mother of the little girl with the squint.

The rope, which the bell ringer had just let go of, was still quivering at the far end of the church. The sacristan was lighting the last tapers. How many were there in that ghostly gathering of half-asleep people? Fifteen at the most. There were only three men: the sacristan, the bell ringer, and Maigret.

. . . *a crime will be committed* . . .

At Moulins, the police had treated the matter as a bad joke and had not worried about it. In Paris, they had been surprised to see the chief inspector set off.

Maigret heard some noises behind the door to the right of the altar, and he could guess second by second what was happening: the sacristy, the altar boy arriving late, the priest putting on his chasuble without a word, joining his hands together, and walking toward the nave, followed by the boy, stumbling along in his cassock . . .

The boy was red-haired. He shook his bell. The murmur of the liturgical prayers began.

. . . *during the first Mass* . . .

Maigret had looked at all the shadowy figures one by one. Five old women, three of whom had a prayer stool reserved for her own use. A farmer's fat wife. Some younger farm women and one child . . .

The sound of a car outside; the creak of the door; some light footsteps: then a lady in mourning walked the whole length of the church.

In the chancel was a row of stalls reserved for people from the chateau, hard seats of polished old wood. And it was there that the woman took her seat, noiselessly, followed by the farm women's eyes.

"Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . ."

Maigret could perhaps still have recited the responses to the priest. He smiled at the thought that in the past he had preferred the Requiem Masses to the others, because the prayers were shorter. He could remember Masses that had been celebrated in sixteen minutes.

But now he had eyes only for the occupant in the Gothic stall. He could barely make out her profile. He hesitated to identify her as Countess de Saint-Fiacre.

"Dies irae, dies illa . . ."

It was she, all right! But when he had last seen her, she was thirty-five or thirty-six. She was a tall, slim, melancholy woman, whom he used to catch sight of from a distance in the park.

Now she would be well into her sixties. She was praying fervently, her emaciated face pale, her long delicate hands clasping a missal.

Maigret had remained in the last row of straw-bottomed chairs, those that cost five centimes at High Mass, but were free at Low Mass.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

He stood up with the others at the first Gospel. Details attracted his attention on all sides, and memories forced themselves upon him. For example, he suddenly thought:

On All Souls' Day the same priest celebrates three Masses.

In his time, he used to have breakfast at the priest's house between the second and third Masses: a hard-boiled egg and some goat cheese . . .

It was the Moulins police who were right. There couldn't be a crime.

The sacristan had taken his seat at the end of the stalls, four places beyond the countess. The bell ringer had walked away with a heavy tread, like a theatrical producer who has no desire to watch his own production.

There were no other men left but Maigret and the priest, a young priest with the passionate gaze of a mystic. He didn't hurry like the old priest the chief inspector had known. He didn't mumble half the verses.

The stained-glass windows were turning pale. Outside, day was breaking. A cow was lowing on a farm.

And soon everybody was bending double for the Elevation. The altar boy's bell tinkled shrilly.

Maigret was the only one who did not take Communion. All the women walked toward the altar rail, their hands folded, their faces expressionless. Hosts so pale that

they seemed unreal passed for a moment through the priest's hands.

The Mass continued. The countess's face was buried in her hands.

"Pater Noster . . .

"Et ne nos inducas in tentationem . . ."

The old woman's fingers parted, revealed a tormented face, opened the missal.

Another four minutes . . . The prayers, the last Gospel, and then everybody would go out. And there would not have been a crime.

The warning stated clearly: *the first Mass.*

The proof that it was over was that the sacristan was standing up, ready to go into the sacristy.

Countess de Saint-Fiacre's head was buried in her hands once more. She was not moving. Most of the other women were just as rigid.

"Ite, missa est." The Mass is over. . . .

Only then did Maigret feel how anxious he had been; he had scarcely realized it as he waited impatiently for the last Gospel. Heaving an involuntary sigh, he was thinking about breathing the fresh air outside, seeing people moving around, hearing them talking about this and that.

The old women woke up all together. Feet shuffled on the cold flagstones of the church. One started for the door, then another. The sacristan appeared with a candle extinguisher, and a thin wisp of blue smoke took the place of each flame.

Day had broken. Gray light was entering the nave along with drafts of air.

Three people were left . . . two. . . . A chair moved. Only the countess remained, and Maigret's nerves became taut with impatience.

The sacristan, who had finished his task, looked at Ma-

dame de Saint-Fiacre. A puzzled expression passed across his face. At the same moment, the chief inspector walked forward.

The two of them stood close to her, surprised by her immobility, trying to see the face hidden by the joined hands.

Suddenly alarmed, Maigret touched her shoulder. And the body tipped over, as if it had been balanced on a knife's edge, rolled to the floor, and lay motionless.

Countess de Saint-Fiacre was dead.

The body had been taken into the sacristy, where it had been laid on three chairs placed side by side. The sacristan had run out to get the village doctor.

As a result, Maigret forgot how unusual his presence was. He took several minutes to understand the suspicious inquiry in the priest's burning eyes.

"Who are you?" the man finally asked. "How is it that . . ."

"Chief Inspector Maigret, from the Police Judiciaire."

He looked at the priest. He was a man of about thirty-five, with features that were regular but so solemn that they recalled the fierce faith of monks of old.

The man was profoundly disturbed. A somewhat unsteadier voice murmured:

"You don't mean that . . . ?"

They had not dared undress the countess. They had vainly held a mirror to her lips. They had listened for her heart, which was no longer beating.

"I can't see any wound," was Maigret's only reply.

He looked around at this unchangeable scene, in which not a single detail had altered in at least thirty years. The altar cruets were in the same place, the chasuble was pre-

pared for the following Mass, and the altar boy's cassock and surplice were ready.

The dirty light entering through a Gothic window was thinning out the rays of an oil lamp.

It was hot and cold at the same time. The priest was being assailed by terrible thoughts.

Maigret did not see the full drama of the situation at first. But memories from his childhood went on rising to the surface like air bubbles.

A church in which a crime has been committed must be newly consecrated by the bishop. . . .

How could there have been a crime? Nobody had heard a shot. Nobody had approached the countess. During the whole Mass, Maigret had scarcely taken his eyes off her.

And there was no sign of bloodshed, no visible wound.

"The second Mass is at seven o'clock, isn't it?"

It was a relief to hear the heavy footsteps of the doctor, a red-faced fellow, who was impressed by the atmosphere and looked in turn at the chief inspector and the priest.

"Dead?" he asked.

He did not hesitate to unbutton the countess's blouse, while the priest turned his head away. Heavy steps in the church. Then the bell, which the ringer had set in motion, sounded: the first bell for the seven o'clock Mass.

"I can only suppose that heart failure . . . I wasn't the countess's regular doctor. She preferred to be attended by a colleague in Moulins. But I've been called two or three times to the chateau. . . . She had a very weak heart."

The sacristy was tiny. The three men and the corpse could only just fit inside. Two altar boys arrived, since the seven o'clock was a High Mass.

"Her car must be outside," said Maigret. "We must arrange for her to be taken home."

He could still feel the priest's anguished gaze weighing on him. Had he guessed something? While the sacristan, with the chauffeur's help, was carrying the body to the car, he came over to the chief inspector.

"You're sure that . . . I have another two Masses to say. . . . It's All Souls' Day. My parishioners are . . ."

Since the countess had died of heart failure, wasn't Maigret entitled to reassure the priest?

"You heard what the doctor said."

"All the same, you came here today, to this particular Mass. . . ."

Maigret made an effort not to seem flustered.

"Just a coincidence, Father. . . . My father is buried in your graveyard."

Then he hurried out to the car, a very old one. The chauffeur was cranking the engine, but the doctor did not know what to do. There were a few people in the square, who could not figure out what was happening.

"Come with us."

The corpse took up most of the room inside, but Maigret and the doctor squeezed in.

"You looked surprised at what I told you," murmured the doctor, who had not yet recovered his composure. "If you knew the situation, you might understand. . . . The countess . . ."

He fell silent, glancing at the uniformed chauffeur, who was driving with an absent-minded expression. They crossed the sloping square, which was bordered on one side by the church built on the hillside, and on the other by Nôtre-Dame pond, which, that particular morning, was a poisonous gray color.

Marie Tatin's inn was on the right, the first house in the village. To the left was an avenue of oaks and, in the distance, the dark mass of the chateau.

The sky looked as cold as an ice rink.

"You know this is going to create some complications. . . . That's why the priest looked so upset."

Dr. Bouchardon was a peasant, and the son of peasants. He was wearing a brown shooting outfit and high rubber boots.

"I was off duck shooting by the ponds. . . ."

"You don't go to Mass?"

The doctor winked.

"Mind you, that didn't stop my being on good terms with the old priest. But this one. . . ."

They were driving into the park. Now they could make out the details of the chateau: the ground-floor windows, covered by shutters; the two corner towers, the only old parts of the building.

When the car drew up near the steps, Maigret looked down through the latticed ground-level windows and caught a glimpse of steam-filled kitchens and a fat woman plucking partridges.

The chauffeur did not know what to do, and didn't dare open the car doors.

"Monsieur Jean won't be up yet. . . ."

"Call somebody . . . anybody . . . There are some other servants in the house, aren't there?"

Maigret's nostrils were moist. It was really cold. He remained standing in the courtyard with the doctor, who started filling a pipe.

"Who is Monsieur Jean?"

Bouchardon shrugged his shoulders and gave a queer smile.

"You'll see."

"But who is he?"

"A young man . . . A charming young man."

"A relative?"

"If you like . . . In his own way . . . Oh, I might as well tell you right away. He's the countess's lover. Officially, he's her secretary."

Maigret looked at the doctor, remembering that he had been at school with him. But nobody recognized him. He was forty-two. He had put on weight.

As for the chateau, he knew it as well as anybody else, especially the outbuildings. He had to take only a few steps to see the manager's house, where he had been born.

Perhaps it was these memories that were disturbing him so much. Especially the memory of Countess de Saint-Fiacre as he had known her: a young woman who had, for the country boy he had been, personified all that was feminine, graceful, noble.

And now she was dead. They had bundled her like an inanimate object into the car, and they had had to bend her legs. They had not even buttoned up her blouse, and some white underclothing was poking out of her mourning dress.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

But the doctor maintained that she had died of heart failure. What supernatural power had been able to foretell that? And why call in the police?

People were running about inside the chateau. Doors were opening and shutting. A butler who was only half dressed opened the main door a little, hesitating to come out. A man appeared behind him, in pajamas, his hair tousled, his eyes tired.

"What is it?" he called out.

"The paramour," the cynical doctor growled in Maigret's ear.

The cook had been told too. She was looking silently

out of her basement window. Dormer windows were opening at the top of the house, in the servants' rooms.

"Well, why doesn't somebody carry the countess to her room?" Maigret thundered indignantly.

All this struck him as sacrilegious, because it did not tally with his childhood memories. It made him feel not merely morally, but physically, sick.

. . . *a crime will be committed* . . .

The second bell for Mass was ringing. People must be hurrying. There were farmers who came a long way, in light carts. They had brought flowers to place on the graves.

Jean did not dare to approach. The butler, who had opened the car door, stood there utterly crushed, without moving a muscle.

"Madame the Countess . . . Madame the . . ." he stammered.

"Well? . . . Are you going to leave her there? Eh?"

Why the devil was the doctor smiling so sarcastically?

Maigret used his authority.

"Come on now! Two men . . . You"—he pointed to the chauffeur—"and you"—he pointed to he butler—"carry her up to her room."

While they were reaching into the car, a bell rang in the hall.

"The telephone . . . That's peculiar at this hour," growled Bouchardon.

Jean did not dare answer it. He seemed to be in a daze. It was Maigret who rushed to pick up the receiver.

"Hello . . . Yes, the chateau . . ."

A voice that seemed very close said:

"Will you ask my mother to come to the telephone? She must be back from Mass by now."

"Who's speaking?"

"Count de Saint-Fiacre . . . But that's none of your business. Let me speak to my mother . . ."

"Just a minute . . . Will you tell me where you're calling from?"

"From Moulins . . . But, I tell you . . ."

"It would be best if you came over here," was all that Maigret said before he hung up.

Then he had to press against the wall to let the body, carried by the two servants, pass by.