EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GEORGES SIMENON**

TITLE: ***Journey Into Time***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Maigret

LOCALE: Near Vitry-aux-Loges, France

COMMENTS: *Mood, atmosphere, and Simenon's deep understanding of a French village—of its people and its way of life. Maigret's investigation of the Potru case was like stepping into a past century.*

It was one of those rare cases which can be solved by studying diagrams and documents and by applying police methods. In fact, when Inspector Maigret left the Quai des Orfèvres he had all the facts clearly in mind—even the position of the wine barrels.

He had expected a short jaunt into the countryside. Instead, he found himself making a long journey backward into time. The train which took him to Vitry-aux-Loges, scarcely a hundred kilometres from Paris, was a conveyance straight from the picture-books of Épinal which he had not seen since his childhood. And when he inquired about a taxi, the people at the station thought he was joking. He would have to make the rest of the trip in the baker's cart, they said. However, he persuaded the butcher to drive over in his delivery truck.

"How often do you go down there?" the inspector asked, naming the little village to which his investigation was taking him.

"Twice a week, regularly. Thanks to you, they'll have an extra meat delivery this week."

Maigret had been born only forty kilometres away, on the banks of the Loire, yet he was surprised by the sombre, tragic aspect of this sector of the Forest of Orléans. The road ran through deep woods for ten kilometres without a sign of civilisation. When the truck reached a tiny village in a clearing, Maigret asked, "Is this it?"

"The next hamlet."

It wasn't raining, but the woods were damp. The trees had lost most of their foliage and the pale, raw light of the sky bore down heavily through the bare branches. The dead leaves were rotting on the ground. An occasional shot cracked in the distance.

"Is there much hunting around here?"

"That's probably Monsieur the Duke."

In another smaller clearing some thirty one-storey houses were clustered about the steeple of a church. None of the houses could be less than a century old, and their black-tile roofs gave them an inhospitable air.

"You can let me off at the house of the Potru sisters."

"I guessed that was where you'd be going. It's right across from the church."

Maigret got out. The butcher drove on a little farther and opened the back of his delivery truck. A few housewives came to look, but could not make up their minds to buy. It was not their regular day for meat.

Maigret had pored so long over the diagrams sent to Paris by the original investigators that he could have entered the house with his eyes shut. As it was, the rooms were so dark that he wasn't much better off with his eyes open. As he walked into the shop at the front of the house, he seemed to be stepping into a past century.

The room was as dimly lit as a canvas by an Old Master. The dark brown tonality of an ancient masterpiece was diffused over the walls and furniture—a monochrome in chiaroscuro broken only by a highlight here and there, on a glass jar or a copper kettle.

The older of the Demoiselles Potru had lived in this house since her birth sixty-five years before—her younger sister was sixty-two. Their parents had spent their lives there before them. Nothing in the shop had changed in all that time—not the counter with its old-fashioned scales and its gleaming candy jars, nor shelves of notions, nor the grocery section with its stale odours of cinnamon and chicory, nor the zinc-covered slab which served as the village bar. A barrel of kerosene stood in a corner next to a smaller barrel of cooking oil. In the rear were two long tables, polished by time, flanked by backless benches.

A door opened at the left, and a woman in her early thirties came in, carrying a baby in her arms. She looked at Maigret.

"What is it you want?"

"Never mind about me. I'm here for the investigation. I suppose you are a neighbour?"

The woman, whose apron ballooned over a rounded belly, said, "I'm Marie Lacore. My husband is the blacksmith."

"I see." Maigret had just noticed the kerosene lamp hanging from the ceiling. So the hamlet had no electricity . . .

The second room, which Maigret entered without invitation, would have been completely dark were it not for the two logs blazing on the hearth. The flickering light revealed an immense bed on which were piled several mattresses and a puffy, red eiderdown quilt. An old woman lay motionless on the bed. Her haggard, rigid face was lifeless except for the sharp, questioning eyes.

"She still can't speak?" Maigret asked Marie Lacore.

The blacksmith's wife shook her head in the negative. Maigret shrugged, sat down on a straw-bottomed chair, and began taking papers from his pockets.

There was nothing sensational about the actual crime, which had taken place five days earlier. The Potru sisters, who lived alone in the hovel, were believed to have accumulated a considerable nest-egg. They owned three other houses in the village and had a long-established reputation as misers.

During the night of Saturday to Sunday, their neighbours remembered hearing unusual noises but had thought nothing of it at the time. However, a farmer passing the house at dawn on Sunday noticed that the bedroom window was wide open, looked in, and shouted for help.

Amélie Potru, the older sister, was lying on the floor in a pool of blood near the window, clad only in a red-stained nightgown. The younger sister, Marguerite, was lying on the bed, her face turned to the wall, dead, with three knife wounds in her chest, her cheek gashed, and one eye torn half from its socket.

Amélie was still alive. She had staggered to the window to give the alarm but, weakened from loss of blood, had fallen unconscious before she could cry out. She had no less than eleven stab wounds in her right side and shoulder, none of them serious.

The second drawer of the dresser had been pulled out and apparently ransacked. Among the linen scattered on the floor was a briefcase of mildewed leather in which the sisters must have kept their business papers. It was empty, but lying nearby were a savings-bank passbook, deeds to property, leases, and bills for supplies.

The Orléans authorities who made the original investigation sent Maigret detailed diagrams and photographs of the scene as well as a transcript of the questioning of witnesses.

Marguerite, the dead woman, had been buried two days after the murder. Amélie had resisted all efforts to take her to a hospital, sinking her nails into the bed sheets, fighting off neighbours who tried to move her—and demanding—with her eyes—that she be left at home. She had lost all power of speech.

The medical examiner from Orléans declared that no vital organ had been injured and that her loss of voice must be due to shock. In any case, no sound had passed her lips for five days; yet despite her bandages and her immobility, she followed all proceedings with her eyes. Even now her gaze never left Maigret for a moment.

Three hours after the Orléans authorities finished their investigation, they arrested a man who from the evidence must be the murderer: Marcel, illegitimate son of the dead Potru sister. The late Marguerite had given birth to Marcel when she was twenty-three, so he must be thirty-nine years old. For a while Marcel had worked with the hounds of the Duke's hunt. More recently he had been a woodcutter in the forest and lived in an abandoned tumbledown farmhouse near the Loup-Pendu pond, ten kilometres from the village.

The villagers looked upon Marcel as a brute, a miserable wretch who was little better than an animal. Several times he had disappeared, leaving his wife and five children for weeks on end. He beat his family

more often than he fed them. What's more, he was a drunkard.

Maigret decided to reread at the scene of the crime the transcript of Marcel's testimony: "I came on my bicycle around seven o'clock just when the old women were sitting down to eat. I had a drink at the bar, then I went out to the courtyard and killed a rabbit. I skinned it and cleaned it and my mother cooked it. My aunt yelled her head off because I ate their rabbit, but she always yells. She can't stand me . . ."

According to the testimony of other villagers, Marcel frequently came to the Potru sisters for a private spree. His mother never refused him anything, and his aunt, who was afraid of him, did nothing more than complain.

Maigret had stopped off in Orléans to see Marcel in his cell, and got further details.

"There was more argument," Marcel said, "when I took a cheese out of the shop and cut myself a hunk. Seems I shouldn't have cut into a whole cheese . . ."

"What wine were you drinking?" Maigret asked.

"Some of the wine from the shop."

"How was the room lighted?"

"The oil lamp. Well, after dinner my mother wasn't feeling well, so she went to bed. She asked me to get her some papers out of the second drawer in the dresser. She gave me the key. I took the papers over to the bed and we went over the bills. It was the end of the month."

"You took the papers out of the briefcase? What else was in there?"

"Bonds. A big bundle of bonds. A hundred francs' worth. Maybe more."

"Did you go into the storeroom?"

"No."

"You didn't light a candle to go into the storeroom?"

"Never . . . At half-past nine I put the papers back in the drawer and then I left. I drank another slug of rot-gut as I went out through the shop. . . . And anybody says I killed the old ladies is a liar. Why don't you talk to the Yugo?"

To the great astonishment of Marcel's lawyer, Maigret broke off his questioning.

Yarko, whom everyone called "The Yugo" because he was from Yugoslavia, was a bit of jetsam who had been washed into the village by the war and who had stayed on. He lived alone in the wing of a house near the Potru sisters and worked as a carter, hauling logs from the woods. He, too, was a confirmed drunkard, although for some time the Potru sisters had refused to serve him; he had run up too long a tab. One night they had asked Marcel to throw him out, and he had given the Yugo a bloody nose in the process.

The Potru sisters had another grievance against the Yugo. He kept his horses in a stable he had rented from them, a dilapidated out-building back of their courtyard, but he was always months behind in his rent. At this moment, he was probably in the woods with his team.

Maigret continued to match his thoughts with the actual scene of the crime. Papers in hand, he walked to the fireplace where the Orléans men had found a kitchen knife among the ashes on the morning

after the murder. The wooden handle had been completely burned, obviously to destroy fingerprints.

On the other hand, there had been plenty of fingerprints on the dresser drawer and on the briefcase —and all of them had been Marcel's.

On a candlestick which stood on a table in the bedroom they had found Amélie Portu's fingerprints—and only hers. Amélie's cold eyes still followed Maigret's every move.

"I suppose your mind is still made up not to speak?" he growled as he lit his pipe.

Silence.

Maigret stooped to make a chalk mark on the floor around some bloodstains that had been indicated on the diagram.

Marie Lacore asked him, "Will you be here for a few minutes? I'd like to put my dinner on the stove."

So Maigret found himself alone with the old woman in the house he already knew by heart, although he had never seen it before. He had spent a whole day and night studying the dossier with its diagrams and sketches, and Orléans had done such a thorough job of groundwork that he was not in the least surprised, except perhaps to find the sordid reality even more shocking than he had imagined.

And yet he himself was the son of peasants. He knew that such things existed—that there were still hamlets in France where people went on living as they had lived since the 13th and 14th centuries. But to be suddenly plunged into this village in the forest, into this ancient house, into the room alone with the old woman whose alert mind seemed to be stalking Maigret—all this was like entering one of those wretched hospitals where the worst of human monstrosities are hidden away from the eyes of normal men.

When he had begun to work on the case in Paris, Maigret had jotted down a few notes on the original report:

1. Why would Marcel have burned the knife handle without worrying about his fingerprints on the dresser and the brief case?

2. If he had used the candle, why had he carried it back into the bedroom and put it out?

3. Why didn't the bloodstains on the floor follow a straight line from the bed to the window?

4. Since Marcel might well have been recognised in the street at 9.30 in the evening, why had he left the house by the front door, instead of going through the courtyard which led directly into open country?

But there was one bit of evidence that worried even Marcel's lawyer. One of Marcel's buttons had been found in the old women's bed, a distinctive button which definitely had come from Marcel's old corduroy hunting jacket.

"When I was cleaning the rabbit, I caught my jacket on something," had been Marcel's explanation, "and one of the buttons must have pulled loose."

Maigret finished rereading his notes. He stood up and looked at Amélie with a peculiar smile on his lips. She was going to be sorely vexed at not being able to follow him with her eyes, for he opened a door and disappeared into the storeroom.

The cubicle was dimly lit by a dirty skylight. Maigret's gaze travelled from the stacks of cord-wood to the four wine barrels against the wall—the barrels he had come all the way from Paris to see. The first two barrels were full. One contained red wine, the other white. He thumped the next two barrels. They were empty. On one of the empty barrels several tears of tallow had fallen and congealed. Technicians from *Identité Judiciaire* reported that the tallow on the barrel was identical with the tallow of the candle in the bedroom.

The report of the inspector-in-charge from Orléans had this to say about the evidence:

"The candle drippings on the barrel were probably left by Marcel when he came to drink wine. His wife admits that he was quite drunk when he got home that night, and the zigzag tyre tracks of his bicycle confirm this fact."

Maigret looked about him for something which he had expected to find but which apparently was not there. Puzzled, he stepped back into the bedroom, opened the window, and called to two urchins who were gaping at the house.

"Listen, boys. Will one of you run and get me a saw?"

"A wood saw?"

"Right."

Maigret could still feel the old woman's eyes boring into his back—live eyes in a dead face, eyes that moved only when his bulky figure moved.

The boys came back bringing two saws of different sizes. At the same time Marie Lacore returned.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said. "I left the baby home. Now I'll have to attend to——"

"Wait just a few minutes, will you?" That was a scene that Maigret intended to skip, thank you! He'd had enough without it. He went back into the storeroom and started sawing one of the empty barrels—the one with the candle drippings on it.

He knew what he would find. He was sure of his theory. If he had had any lingering doubts about it when he arrived, they had been dispelled by the atmosphere of the old house. Amélie Potru had turned out to be exactly the sort of person he had anticipated. And the very walls of the house seemed to ooze the avarice and hate he had expected.

Another thing. When he first entered the shop, Maigret had noted a pile of newspapers on the counter. That was one important fact the Orléans reports had omitted—that the Potru sisters were also the news-dealers of the village. Further, Amélie owned spectacles which, since she did not wear them about the house, were obviously reading glasses. So Amélie was able to read—and thus the biggest question mark in Inspector Maigret's theory was eliminated. His theory based on hate—a festering hate made even more purulent by long years of being shut up together within the same four walls, of sharing the same narrow interests by day, and even the same bed by night.

But there was one experience the two sisters had not shared. Marguerite, the younger, had had a child. She had known love and motherhood. Amélie had shared only the annoying aftermath. The brat had clung to her skirts, too, for ten or fifteen years. And after he had struck out for himself, he was always coming back to eat and drink and to demand money.

It was Amélie's money as much as it was Marguerite's. More, really, since Amélie was the older and therefore had been working and earning longer.

So Amélie hated Marcel with a hate nourished by a thousand incidents of their daily life—the rabbit he had killed, the cheese he had brazenly cut into, thus spoiling its sale value. And his mother had not said a word in protest—she never did.

Yes, Amélie read the newspapers. She must have read about the scandals, the crimes, the murder trials which take up so much space in certain papers. If so, she would know the importance of fingerprints. Then too, Amélie was afraid of her nephew. She must have been furious with her sister for showing him the hiding place of their treasure, for letting him touch the bonds he most certainly coveted.

"One of these days he'll come to murder us both."

Surely those words had been uttered in the house dozens of times, Maigret reflected as he sawed away at the wine barrel. He realised he was perspiring and stopped sawing long enough to take off his hat and coat. He placed them on the next barrel.

The rabbit . . . the cheese . . . then suddenly the remembrance that Marcel had left his prints on the dresser drawer and the briefcase. And if that was not enough, there was the readily identifiable button which his mother, having already gone to bed, had not yet sewed back on his jacket.

If Marcel had killed for gain, why had he emptied the briefcase on the floor instead of taking it with him, bonds and all? As for Yarko the Yugoslav, Maigret had learned that he could not read.

Maigret's reasoning had begun with Amélie's wounds—eleven of them. There were too many by far and all of them were too superficial not to be extremely suspicious. Besides, they were all on the right side. She must have been clumsy, as well as afraid of pain. She wanted neither to die nor to suffer. She had expected help from the neighbours after she had opened the window to scream . . .

Would a murderer have given her time to run to the window?

And fate had laughed at her too. She had lost consciousness before her cries had awakened anyone, so she had spent the night on the floor, with nobody to staunch her bleeding.

Yes, that must have been the way it happened. It could not have been otherwise. She had killed her drowsing sister; then, her fingers wrapped in cloth of some kind to prevent leaving prints, she had opened the drawer and rifled the briefcase. The bonds must disappear if Marcel was to be suspected!

Hence the candle . . .

Afterward she had sat on the edge of the bed, gashing herself timidly and awkwardly, then had gone to the fireplace (the bloodstains marked her course) to throw the knife into the embers. Finally she had walked to the window and . . .

Maigret stopped sawing. From the other room came the sound of voices raised in argument. He turned abruptly, watched the door opening slowly. The fantastic yet sinister figure of Amélie Potru stood on the threshold, swathed in bandages, wearing a curious petticoat and camisole. She stared hard at Maigret while behind her Marie Lacore protested shrilly that she had no business getting out of bed.

Maigret did not have the heart to speak to her. He finished sawing open the barrel in silence. He did not even sigh contentedly when he saw the government securities and railway bonds, still curling slightly from having been rolled up and pushed through the bung.

Had he followed his inclination, he would have beaten a hasty retreat, first taking a long swig of rum straight from the bottle, the way Marcel would have done.

Amélie still spoke not a word. She stood silent, her mouth partly open. If she fainted, she would fall back into the arms of Marie Lacore who, in her advanced state of pregnancy, might not be able to catch her.

Well, what of it? This was a scene from another world, another age. Maigret picked up the bonds and walked toward Amélie. She backed away from him.

He dropped the securities on the bedroom table and said to Marie Lacore, " Go get the mayor. I want him as a witness."

His voice rasped a little because his vocal cords were strangely tight. Then he nodded to Amélie: " You'd better get back to bed, old one."

Despite his case-hardened professional curiosity, he turned his back to her. He knew she had obeyed him, for he heard the bed springs creak. He stood looking out the window until the farmer who served as mayor of the hamlet made a timid, apologetic entrance.

There was no telephone in the village. A man on a bicycle carried the message to Vitry-aux-Loges. The gendarmes arrived at almost the same moment that the butcher's delivery truck came rolling out of the woods.

The sky shone with the same pale, raw light. The trees stirred uneasily in the west wind.

" Find anything?" asked the brigadier from the gendarmerie.

Maigret's reply was evasive. He spoke haltingly, without elation, although he knew that the case of the Potru sisters would be the subject of long commentary and review by the criminologists not only of Paris but of London, Berlin, Vienna, even New York.

Listening to him now, the brigadier might well have suspected that Inspector Maigret was drunk—or, at least, a bit tipsy.

"Q"