THE LOCK AT CHARENTON

CHAPTER I

If you look down at fish in a bed of water, you will see them resting motionless for a long time, for no apparent reason, and then, with a flicker of fins, off they move a little farther, only to resume their waiting again.

In the same atmosphere of calm, and also for no apparent reason, the last No. 15 (Bastille-Créteil) tram trailed its yellow lights the whole length of the Quai des Carrières. At the corner of a street, near a green gas-lamp, it looked as if it would stop, but the conductor struck his bell and off it darted towards Charenton.

The wharf was left as silent and still as a scene at the bottom of the sea. On the right, barges floated on the moonlit canal. A thin stream of water trickled through an imperfectly closed sluice, but this was the only sound beneath a sky more still and deep than a lake.

Lights were still showing from two cafés which stood opposite each other at the corner of the street. In one of them, five men were playing cards slowly and silently. Three of them wore sailor's caps. The *patron*, who was sitting with them, was in his shirt-sleeves.

In the other one, nobody was playing. There were only three men sitting round a table, gazing reflectively into their brandy-glasses. The light was grey and drowsy. Now and again the *patron*, who had black moustaches and wore a blue jersey, gave a yawn and stretched out a hand towards his glass.

Opposite him was a little man, his face completely overgrown with a stubble of yellow bristles. He was sad, or torpid, or perhaps only drunk. His pale eyes watered, and occasionally he would nod his head as if in approval of some inner thought. His neighbour, also a boatman, was gazing out into the night.

Time passed noiselessly, without as much as the ticking of a clock. Next to the café was a row of small houses enclosed in gardens, but their lights were all out. No. 8 was a six-storied house standing alone, old and begrimed with smoke, and too narrow for its height. On the first floor a faint illumination filtered through the slats of the shutters. On the second, where there were no shutters, a cream-coloured blind made a rectangle of light.

On the bank of the canal opposite were heaps of stones and sand, a crane, and some empty trucks. That was all.

And yet somewhere, throbbing in the air, was the sound of music. It was not easy to find. Farther along than No. 8, standing right back from the road, was a wooden hut bearing the legend '*Bal*'.

There was nobody dancing. Indeed, there was nobody there except the plump proprietress, who sat reading a paper and occasionally putting five sous into the mechanical piano.

Something or someone had to move at a given moment. It was the hairy waterman in the café on the right. He rose with difficulty, looked at the glasses, and made a mental calculation while he fumbled in his pocket. Then he counted out some money, put it down on the polished wood table-top, touched the peak of his cap, and lurched off towards the door.

The other two watched him. The *patron* winked. The old man's hand clutched the air before he managed to get hold of the door-handle, and he swayed as he turned to close the door behind him.

His irregular footsteps echoed as if the pavement were hollow. He would take two or three steps forward and then stop, hesitating or pausing as if uncertain of his balance. When he came to the canal, he knocked into the parapet with a resounding crash, staggered down the stone steps, and found himself on the loading-wharf.

The boats were sharply outlined in the moonlight, and one could read their names as if it were broad daylight. The nearest barge, connected to the wharf-side by a plank which served as a gangway, was the *Golden Fleece*. Beyond it were other barges on either side at least five deep, some near the crane with their holds open, waiting to be unloaded, others with their bows already pointing to the lock-gate through which they would pass at daybreak, and others again such as are always seen in a port, left there apparently quite useless, Heaven knows why.

The old man, alone in a motionless universe, hiccupped and set foot on the sagging plank. Half-way across it occurred to him to turn round, perhaps to look back at the lights of the café. He managed the first part of the manoeuvre, then wobbled, stiffened the small of his back, and found himself in the water, clutching the plank with one hand.

He did not utter a cry, he did not so much as grunt. There was nothing but a short splash, which died away immediately, for he scarcely moved in the water. His forehead was furrowed, as if he were thinking hard. He rested his weight on his wrists and tried to work his way back onto the plank. He could not manage it, but still he persisted, his eye fixed and his breathing heavy.

A pair of lovers on the wharf, pressed against the stone wall, listened motionless, holding their breath. A car hooted in Charenton.

Suddenly a frightful howl arose, shattering the immense stillness.

It was the old man in the water, screaming himself

hoarse with terror. He no longer made any rational effort, but lashed out like a madman, churning the water with his legs. Other sounds could be heard – people stirring on a barge, the sleepy voice of a woman saying:

'Go and see. . . .'

Doors on the wharf-side opened – the doors of both cafés. Under the stone wall the lovers disengaged themselves and the man whispered:

'Go in, quick!'

He took a few steps, paused, and called out:

'Where are you?'

Then he listened, trying to locate the answering cry. Other voices were approaching, and people were leaning over the parapet.

'What is it?'

'I don't know yet,' said the young man as he ran along. 'Down there . . . in the water. . . .'

His companion stayed where she was, her hands clasped, not daring to move.

'I see him now! . . . Hurry up! . . .'

The cry had subsided into a terrible rattle. The lover saw two hands clutching the plank and a head emerging from the water, but he did not know how to get at him, so he stood there and called again.

'Hurry up! . . .'

'It's Gassin,' said someone indifferently.

Seven men were coming, five from one café and two from the other.

'Come on. . . . You take one arm and I'll take the other. . . .'

'Mind the plank!'

It bent under their weight. From the hatchway of the barge emerged a white form with bright hair.

'Have you got him?'

The old man had stopped yelling. He had not fainted.

He looked straight in front of him uncomprehendingly and made no effort to help his rescuers.

The white figure came up to the plank. It was a girl in a long nightgown, with bare feet, and the moon's rays made an aureole round her and outlined her naked body under the garment. She was the only one who was still looking at the water, and then she in turn cried out and pointed at something as pale and amorphous as a jellyfish.

Two of the men who were helping the bargeman looked round, and when they saw the milky blob on the black water they felt their flesh creep.

'Look – over there – '

They all looked, forgetting the bargeman, who flopped down on the ribbed paving-stones.

'Get a boat-hook!'

It was the girl who snatched one from the deck of the barge and handed it to them. There was quite suddenly a change in the whole atmosphere. They were changed men. Even the night had become colder, with an occasional warm gust.

'Can you get the hook in?'

A steel boat-hook trailed in the water and pushed away the inert mass in an attempt to grapple it. A man, flat on his belly on the plank, waved his hand about in the water, trying to catch a scrap of clothing.

On the barges, in the night, people were standing and waiting in silence.

'I've got him – '

'Bring him in – careful – '

While the old man on the wharf was shedding water like a sponge, they brought in another body, bigger, heavier, and limper. From a distant tug, a voice enquired simply:

'Dead?'

The girl in the nightgown watched the men laying the body on the wharf beside the old boatman. She did not

seem to understand. Her lips trembled as if she were going to cry.

'Good God, it's Mimile!'

'Ducraul'

The men standing by the two bodies did not know where to look. They were obviously distressed. They wanted to get busy, but they seemed afraid.

'We'd better – straight away – '

'Yes – I'll go – '

Someone ran towards the lock and could be heard beating on the door of the house with both hands, shouting:

'Hurry up! Bring the pump! It's Émile Ducraul'

Émile Ducraul – Émile Ducraul – Mimile! – the words passed from barge to barge, and people jumped over tillers and gangways while the *patron* from the café raised and lowered the drowning man's arms.

The old bargeman had been forgotten. No one even noticed when he sat up amidst the confusion of jostling legs and cast a dazed look round him.

The lock-keeper came running up. A man came down the steps, followed by a policeman.

A window opened on the second floor of the tall house and a woman leant out, pink in the pink light of a silk lampshade.

'Is he dead?' someone whispered.

No one knew. No one could tell. The lock-keeper set up his apparatus, and the rhythmical sound of the pump started.

In the midst of the flurry, of stammered words, of orders given in a low voice, and of feet scraping on the stones, the waterman raised himself on his hands, swayed, and bumped into a neighbour, who helped him to his feet.

It was all vague and blurred, distorted like a scene under water.

The old man could scarcely stand. He gazed at the other

body as if he were in a dream, and gasped out, still drunk, his breath reeking with alcohol:

'He grabbed me from below!'

It might have been a ghost standing there and talking, he looked so strange. He stared at the body and the pump and the water – especially the water, beyond the plank.

'He wouldn't let go, the bastard!'

They listened to him unbelievingly. The girl in white tried to put a scarf round his neck, but he pushed her away and stood planted in the same place, puzzled, suspicious, as if he were confronted with a superhuman problem.

'He came up from the bottom,' he growled to himself. 'Something got hold of my legs. I kicked and kicked, but the more I kicked the tighter he gripped.'

A woman from a barge brought a bottle of brandy and offered him a glass. He spilt more than half of it, for his eyes did not leave the body, and he was still puzzling things out.

'What exactly happened?' asked the policeman.

But the old man only shrugged his shoulders and went on muttering the same phrases into his stubbly beard.

Apart from the men who were working the pump, groups of people were standing about irresolutely on the wharf, waiting for the doctor.

'Go off to bed,' someone said to his wife.

'You'll come and tell me – ?'

No one noticed that the old man had got hold of the bottle, which had been left on the stone ledge, and was now sitting by himself, with his back to the wall, drinking out of the bottle and thinking so hard that his face was quite contorted.

From where he sat he could see the drowned man, and he continued muttering at him, hurling reproaches and loading him with abuse. He was accusing him of sinister

machinations, and occasionally even defying him to recover consciousness.

The girl in the nightgown tried to take the bottle from him, but he ordered her to go to bed, pushing her aside, for she was obstructing his view of the other man. They were both about the same height, but the other man was broader and heavier, with a massive neck and a square head, covered with thick hair.

A car drew up, with a grinding of brakes. All eyes were turned to the figures which emerged and came down the steps. It was the doctor and the police. The policeman automatically pushed back the crowd. The doctor deposited his bag on a block of cement.

A plain-clothes man who had been talking to the crowd went up to the old man, who had been pointed out to him. But it was too late to get anything out of him. He had drunk half the contents of the bottle of brandy and was regarding everyone with a suspicious eye.

'Is this your father?' he asked the girl in the nightgown.

She did not seem to understand. Then several things happened at once. The *patron* of the café came up and said:

'Gassin was tight. He must have slipped on the plank.'

'And who is this?'

The doctor was undressing the other man.

'That's Émile Ducrau, the barge and quarry owner. He lives here. That's his house.' The *patron* pointed to the tall house where the lights were showing through the shutters on the first floor and from the pink window on the second.

'On the second floor?'

There was some hesitation.

'No, on the first floor,' someone said.

'And on the second too,' another added mysteriously. 'Anyway, there's someone on the second floor.'

'Another *ménage*, so to speak.'

Up on the wharf-side, the window of the pink room closed and the blind was drawn down.

'Have the family been told?'

'No. We were waiting until we knew.'

'Go and put on some stockings,' a man was telling his wife, 'and bring me my cap.'

Every now and then, figures would pass from boat to boat. Through hatchways and port-holes one could see oil-lamps, and occasionally a bed, and photographs on the pitch-pine walls.

The doctor said in a low voice to the detective:

'You'd better let the authorities know. This man was stabbed before he fell into the water.'

'Is he dead?'

It almost seemed as if the drowned man had been waiting for this. He opened his eyes, and with a sigh vomited up a lot of water. From where he lay on his back, he got a lop-sided view of the world. The sky, pitted with stars, reached down to his horizon. People rose gigantic into infinity, their legs like interminable pillars. He said nothing. Perhaps he had not started to think yet. He stared round gravely, and gradually his eyes lost their fixed look.

His sigh must have been heard, for everyone immediately surged forward, and the police suddenly gave the scene its normal official character by forming a cordon and pushing back the crowd, only allowing within the circle those whose presence was necessary.

The man on the ground saw space emptying around him, uniforms and peaked caps with silver braid. Grey water was still dribbling down his chin onto his chest, and his arms were still being relentlessly pumped up and down. He watched the movements of his own arms with curiosity, and frowned when someone murmured:

'Is he dead?'

Old Gassin rose without letting go of the bottle. He took

three uncertain steps forward, planted himself between the drowned man's legs, and started to address him. But his tongue was so thick and coated that not a syllable was intelligible.

But Ducrau could see him. He never took his eyes off him. He was thinking. He seemed to be rummaging in his memory.

'Get back a bit!' growled the doctor, and pushed Gassin so roughly that he rolled onto the ground, broke his bottle, and stayed where he was, groaning and fulminating and trying to push away his daughter, who was bending over him.

Another car stopped on the wharf-side, and another group gathered about the Police Inspector.

'Is he fit for questioning?'

'No harm in trying.'

'You think he'll pull through?'

It was Emile Ducrau himself who answered. He smiled. It was a strange smile, still vague and rather like a grimace, but it was quite clear that he understood the question that had been asked.

The Inspector, slightly confused, saluted him by raising his hat.

'I'm glad to see that you are feeling better.'

It was awkward talking down to a man whose face was turned to the stars and whose arms were still being worked up and down.

'Were you attacked? Was it near here? Do you know the exact spot where you were attacked and thrown into the water?'

Ducrau was still bringing up water in spurts. He made no attempt to reply. Indeed, he made no effort to talk at all. He turned his head slightly when the girl in white came into his range of vision, and his eyes followed her as far as the gangway.

With the help of a neighbour she began to make coffee for her father, who was protesting against the idea that he should go to bed.

'Can you remember what happened?' the Inspector asked Ducrau.

Then, as Ducrau still made no reply, he took the doctor aside.

'Do you think he understands?'

'You'd imagine so - '

'But - '

His back was turned when the drowned man suddenly electrified everyone by saying:

'You're making me sick.'

Everyone stared at him. It seemed to cost him an effort to speak. Painfully moving an arm, he added:

'. . . want to go home. . . .'

His hand was trying to point at the six-storied house just behind him. The Inspector hesitated, at a loss.

'Excuse my insisting, but it is my duty! Did you see who attacked you? Did you recognize them? Perhaps they're not far off.'

Their eyes met. Emile Ducrau's did not waver. And still he did not answer.

'There will be an enquiry. The examining magistrate is sure to ask - '

Then the unexpected happened. This seemingly inert mass, lying on the pale paving-stones of the loading-wharf, suddenly moved and thrust away everything that was holding him down.

'Home!' he repeated angrily.

It was plain that, if they went on opposing him, he might get annoyed and regain enough strength to get on his feet and push his way through the lot of them.

'Take care!' said the doctor. 'You may start your wound bleeding again.'

But he didn't care a rap, this bull-necked man, who was suddenly fed up with lying on the ground and being stared at by a crowd.

'Carry him to his house,' said the Inspector, with a sigh of resignation.

A stretcher had been brought from No. 1 lock. Ducrau didn't want it. He growled and they had to hold his arms, legs, and shoulders. As he was being carried off, he cast furious looks all round, and the crowd shrank back in fright.

The procession crossed the road. The Inspector made it halt.

'One moment. I must warn his wife.'

He rang the bell, while the stretcher-bearers waited under the green lamp-post which marked the tram- and bus-stop.

While this was going on, the watermen were having the greatest difficulty in getting old Gassin across the gangway of the *Golden Fleece*. Not only was he dead-drunk, but he had also cut his hand on the broken brandy-bottle.

CHAPTER 2

It was ten o'clock in the morning when, two days later, Inspector Maigret got out of the No. 13 tram and stood at the edge of the pavement, his eyes filled with sunshine and his ears with noise. He waited, frowning, for a time, while lorries, white with cement, passed between him and the canal.

He had not taken part in the preliminary investigation, and his knowledge of the district and the whole affair was purely theoretical. On the small plan which had been drawn up for him it was all very simple: the canal on the right, with the lock and Gassin's barge moored to the unloading-wharf; on the left, the two cafés, the tall house, and, right at the end, the little dance-saloon.

Perhaps that was what it was really like, without any perspective, background, or life. But, in the matter of barges alone, there were fifty of them in the basin above the lock, some at the wharf-side, others packed close to one another, and others again slowly manoeuvring in the sun. In the street there was a continuous din, caused mainly by heavy lorries thundering along.

But the soul, or rather the heart, of the place was elsewhere, and its beats made the very air pulsate. The heart was at the edge of the water, a high, irregular building, with a rickety iron tower, which by night could only be a grey blur, but which during the day spewed out noise from every metal sheet, girder, and pulley, as it crushed the stone which went clattering down onto the sieves, only to move on and end up finally in smoking heaps of dust.

Right at the top of the machine he could make out a blue enamel sign which read: 'Emile Ducrau & Company.'

Washing was hanging out on the barges, and a fair girl

was vaguely sprinkling water on the deck of the *Golden Fleece*.

Another 13 tram passed, and yet another, and Maigret, basking in the warmth, his skin pleasantly moist, as it only can be in the early April sun, set off without conviction towards the tall house. He could see no signs of a porter through the window of the lodge. There was a worn, dark-red stair-carpet, the steps were varnished, and the walls painted in imitation marble. The entrance looked dusty and shabby, but highly respectable, with its mahogany doors and the gleam of the polished door-knobs. A ray of sunshine slanted across the courtyard and filtered through a skylight, gilding the stairway.

Maigret had to ring two or three times. After the second ring he heard sounds inside, but five minutes went by before the door opened.

'Does Monsieur Ducrau live here?'

'Yes.'

The maid was flushed and evidently excited. Without rightly knowing why, Maigret smiled as he looked at her. She was a big appetizing girl, especially from behind, for at first sight her coarse face with its rough irregular features was rather disappointing.

'What name, please?'

'The *Police Judiciaire*.'

She took two steps, and had to bend down to pull up her stockings; then another two, and, thinking she was hidden by the half-open door, fastened her suspender and pulled up her knickers. Maigret's smile grew broader. Then he heard some whispering close at hand, and the girl came back.

'Please come in.'

It wasn't only the fault of the sun if Maigret's smile persisted. It trembled at the corners of his lips and spread into a grin. In the passage, almost on the door-mat, he had an

intuition what had been going on, and now as he enquired, 'Monsieur Ducrau?' he was quite sure.

His eyes danced, his lips involuntarily twitched, and it was just as if the truth had been admitted between the two men. Ducrau looked at the servant, then at his visitor, then at the red plush armchair. Then he smoothed his thick hair quite unnecessarily and smiled too, a smile that was responsive, slightly embarrassed, but gratified all the same.

*

Sunlight streamed in through three windows, one of which was wide open and let in the street-noises and the din of the stone-crusher to such an extent that, when Maigret tried to speak, he could scarcely hear his own voice.

Émile Ducrau sat down again on his armchair with a sigh of contentment, and Maigret had the feeling that, in spite of everything, he was not quite strong yet. The scene with the servant had left a faint glistening on his brow, and he was breathing rather fast. But even on the previous day the examining magistrate had been taken aback to find a man whom he expected to find prostrate in bed sitting up in an armchair.

He wore bedroom slippers and an old jacket over a nightshirt embroidered in red round the neck; and there were the same traces of slovenly shabbiness in every detail of the room, with its commonplace furniture dating back thirty or forty years, the photographs of barges and tugs in their black and gold frames, and the roll-top desk in a corner.

'Are you in charge of the case?'

The smile was gradually fading, and Ducrau was his usual self again, with a searching look and a voice already becoming aggressive.

'I suppose you've already got your own theories about

the business? No? All the better, but, coming from a detective, that surprises me.'

He did not mean to be unpleasant. It was just his natural manner. Now and again he grimaced slightly, when the wound in his back hurt.

'You'll have a drink, won't you? – Mathilde! – Mathilde! – Mathilde! – Drat the girl!'

When the girl finally appeared, her hands all soapy, he said:

'Bring in a bottle of white wine. Something good.'

His great bulk filled the armchair, and the fact that his feet were resting on a hassock made his legs seem too short.

'Well, what have you been told?'

He kept on giving quick glances out of the window while he was talking, and suddenly he growled:

'Look at that! They are letting one of Poliet and Chausson's tugs run them aground!'

Maigret saw a loaded barge, its sides painted yellow, coming slowly into the lock. Behind her, another barge, marked with a blue triangle, was lying across the canal, and three or four men were gesticulating and probably hurling abuse.

'The boats with the blue triangle belong to me,' Ducrau was explaining, when the maid came in. He pointed to a chair.

'Put the bottle and the glasses down there,' he told her. – 'We don't stand on ceremony here, Inspector. What was I saying? Oh yes! I'd like to know what story they're telling.'

His good nature had just a touch of malice about it, which became accentuated the more he looked at Maigret, perhaps because the Inspector was physically as broad and powerful as himself, only taller, and because his impassivity in that room had the effect of some big rock impossible to dislodge.

'I only got the dossier this morning,' said Maigret.

'Have you read it?'

The front door opened, someone crossed the passage and came into the room. It was a woman of about fifty, thin, dejected, carrying a string-bag.

'Excuse me. I didn't know – ' she apologized.

'Madame Ducrau? Delighted to make your acquaintance.'

She shook hands awkwardly and backed out. They could hear her talking to the servant, and Maigret smiled again, for now he could picture better than ever the details of that morning's scene.

'My wife has never been able to get out of the habit of doing the housework,' grumbled Ducrau. 'She could afford ten servants if she wanted to, but she insists on going to market herself.'

'You started with one tug, I suppose?'

'I started where everyone else starts – in the stoke-hole! The old tub was called the *Eagle*. I got it by marrying the owner's daughter – whom you've just seen. Now there are twenty-four of the *Eagle* class in this basin alone. There are two going up to Dizy again to-day, and I'm told there are five going downstream. All the pilots in the two cafés down there work for me; I've already bought up eighteen barges, several storeships, and two dredgers.'

His eyes narrowed until they bored straight into Maigret's.

'Is that what you wanted to know?'

Then, turning to the door:

'Shut up in there!' he shouted to the two invisible women, whose conversation came in a faint murmur.

'Your health! I suppose you've been told that I'm offering the police twenty thousand francs if they find out who attacked me. That's why they've sent someone good, I expect. What are you looking at?'

'Oh, nothing. The canal, the lock, the boats – '

There was a tremendous animation about this scene framed in the windows. From above, the barges looked even heavier, as if they were sunk deep in water of a greater density. Standing on his wherry, a bargeman was busy tarring the grey hull of his boat, which stuck out six feet. There were dogs, and hens in a wire-netting cage, and the fair-haired girl was polishing the brasses on deck. People were coming and going across the lock-gates, and boats coming downstream seemed to hesitate before slipping into the current of the Seine.

'In fact, all this belongs to you, so to speak?'

'All is an exaggeration. But almost everybody that you see here is to a certain extent dependent on me, especially since I bought up the chalk quarries in Champagne.'

The furniture of the room was the sort one sees piled up in sale-rooms to be sold off on Saturdays, when the *petits bourgeois* come looking for a cheap table or a wash-hand basin. A smell of fried onions came from the kitchen, and one could hear the butter sizzling on the stove.

'One question, if you'll allow me,' said Maigret. 'The report says that you have no recollection of what happened just before you were rescued.'

Ducrau, his eyes heavy, was cutting the end off a cigar.

'Exactly at what moment does your memory fail? Can you tell me, for instance, what you did on the evening of the day before yesterday?'

'My daughter and her husband dined here. Her husband is a captain in the Infantry at Versailles. They come over every Wednesday.'

'You have a son too?'

'Yes, he's at the School of Librarianship, but we don't see much of him down here, since I've given him a room on the fifth floor.'

'So you didn't see him that evening?'

Ducrau was in no hurry to reply. He kept his eyes fixed

on Maigret, and, puffing slowly at his cigar, weighed every question he was asked and every word he uttered.

'Listen, Inspector. I'm going to tell you something important, and I advise you to bear it in mind, if you're anxious for us to understand each other. No one's ever tried to out-smart Mimile! I'm Mimile. They called me Mimile before I got my first boat, and there are still lock-keepers in the upper Marne who don't know me by any other name. Do you get me? I'm no worse than you. In this business it's I who am paying. It's I who was attacked. And it was I who asked you to come.'

Maigret wasn't frowning now. For the first time for a long while he was rejoicing at having found someone who was worth knowing.

'Drink up. Have a cigar. Put a few in your pocket. Yes, yes. Do your job, but no hanky-panky! When the Public Prosecutor's Department came to see me yesterday, there was a bossy little chap of an examining magistrate who walked in here with his yellow gloves on, as if he was afraid of getting his hands dirty. Well, I asked him to take off his hat and stop smoking, and then I puffed smoke in his face. D'you get me? Up to now, I've been listening to you.'

'Then let me ask you one question,' said Maigret. 'Do you want to maintain your charge? Do you really want me to find the guilty party?'

On Ducrau's lips there was the ghost of a smile. Instead of answering, he asked:

'Anything else?'

'That's all. There's still time.'

'You've nothing else to say to me?'

'Nothing.'

And Maigret rose and planted himself, his pupils narrowed by the sun, in front of the open window.

'Mathilde! Mathilde!' shouted the invalid. 'First of all,

will you try and come as soon as I call you? Then put on a clean apron. Now go and fetch a bottle of champagne. One of the eight bottles down at the end on the left.'

'I don't drink champagne,' said Maigret when the maid had gone.

'You'll drink this,' said Ducrau. 'It's extra dry still 1897, and was sent me by the biggest vintner in Rheims.'

He was mollified. He was even slightly impressed, though it was scarcely perceptible.

'What are you looking at now?' he asked.

'Gassin's boat.'

'You know, Gassin is an old pal of mine. We made our first trips together. I put him in charge of one of my boats that goes as far as Belgium.'

'That's a pretty daughter of his,' said Maigret.

It was the merest impression, because, from that distance, Maigret could see practically nothing but a silhouette. And yet it was enough to suggest that the girl was beautiful. Quite a simple silhouette – black dress and white apron, bare feet in sabots.

Ducrau did not answer, but after a few moments' silence he burst out:

'Go on! The lady upstairs, the skivvy, and all the rest of them – I'm waiting.'

The kitchen door opened slightly. Madame Ducrau coughed and ventured to ask:

'Shall I put it on ice?'

'Why don't you go and fetch it all the way from Rheims?' was the furious reply.

She disappeared without answering, and the door remained ajar while Ducrau went on:

'Upstairs on the second floor, just above this room, I've established a person called Rose, who was a hostess at *Maxim's*.'

He did not lower his voice. On the contrary. His wife

was meant to hear. Glasses tinkled in the kitchen. The maid came in with a clean apron and a tray.

'If you want more details, I give her two thousand francs a month and her clothes, but she makes most of them herself. All right. Put it down there and get out. – Would you like to draw the cork, Inspector?'

Maigret had already got accustomed to the noises from the outside world. The din of the stone-crusher, the noises from the street, now merged with the buzzing of two bluebottles inside the room.

'You were asking what I did the day before yesterday. My daughter and her fool of a husband dined here, and, as usual, I left after dessert. My son-in-law is a shit, and I don't like shits. Your health!'

He clicked his tongue and sighed.

'That's all. It was about ten o'clock. I went along the road and had a glass with Catherine, who keeps the dance-hall along there. Then I went on and came to the corner of the little street where there's a red lamp. I'd rather drink my beer with tarts than with my son-in-law.'

'When you left this house, did you notice whether you were being followed?'

'I didn't notice anything at all.'

'On which side were you walking?'

'I've no idea.'

His voice had again become aggressive. He swallowed a large mouthful of champagne, choked, coughed, and spat on the faded carpet.

The doctor's report had said that the wound in the back was superficial, and that the barge-owner had been three or four minutes in the water, going under perhaps once or twice.

'Then you don't suspect anyone?'

'I suspect everyone.'

He was a strange-looking fellow with his broad head,

fleshy and thick-featured, which yet suggested that the skull was hard, and exceptionally solid. His look, when he was on the watch for Maigret's reactions, recalled those old peasants who will one moment drive a hard bargain at the fair, and the next look at you with a baffling naïveté in their blue eyes.

He would threaten, shout, swear and defy you, and every now and then you would wonder whether he were not doing it all for his own amusement.

'This is what I want you to know. I am entitled to suspect everyone, my wife, my son, my daughter, her husband, Rose, the servant, Gassin – '

'His daughter?'

'Aline too, if you like.'

But there was a shade of difference in his voice.

'And I'm going to tell you something else. I give you leave to tackle all my dependants as much as you like. I know the police. I know the way you go sniffing out all the skeletons in our cupboards. In fact, we can begin right away. – Jeanne! – Jeanne!'

His wife appeared, looking surprised and timid.

'Come in, for heaven's sake. What's the use of my introducing you to people when you behave like a servant? Take a glass. Yes, yes, have a drink with the Inspector. Now, can you guess what he wants to know?'

She was pale and negative, badly dressed, her hair badly done, ageing shabbily, like the furniture in the room. The sun hurt her eyes, and, after twenty-five years of married life, she still jumped every time her husband shouted at her.

'He'd like to know what we talked about at dinner with Berthe and her husband.'

She tried to smile. The hand that held the glass of champagne trembled, and Maigret saw that her fingers were crinkled from washing dishes.

'Answer. Have a drink first.'

'We talked about all sorts of things.'

'That's not true.'

'Excuse me, Inspector. I really can't see what my husband means.'

'Oh yes, you can! Come on. I'll help you.'

She stood close to the red armchair, in whose depths Ducrau was huddled, as if for his moral support.

'It was Berthe who started it. Remember? She said – '

'Émile!'

'None of your Émiles! She said she was afraid she was going to have a child, and in that case Decharme couldn't remain in the army, as he'd be earning too little to pay for a nurse and all the other necessaries. I advised him to go and sell peanuts. Isn't that so?'

She tried to apologize for him with a feeble smile.

'You ought to be resting.'

'And what did he propose, the ass? Answer! What was it he suggested? That I should divide up my money and give him his share straight away, as I'd have to do it eventually. With his share, my fine gentleman would settle in Provence, where the climate, it seems, would be excellent for his progeny. And we could go and see him in the holidays.'

He wasn't getting heated or speaking in a sudden access of anger. On the contrary, he pronounced every word slowly, heavily, and distinctly.

'What did he add just as I was putting on my hat? I want *you* to say it.'

'I've forgotten.'

She was on the verge of tears. She put down the glass so as not to spill it.

'Tell him!'

'He said that you spent plenty of money elsewhere.'

'He didn't say elsewhere.'

'On – '

'Well?'

'On women?'

'What else?'

'On the one upstairs.'

'You hear that, Inspector? Have you anything else to say to her? I'm asking you now, because she's going to cry and it's not particularly amusing. You can go.'

He sighed again, a deep sigh which could only have come from that massive chest.

'There's one specimen for you,' he said. 'If it amuses you, you can now carry on on your own. To-morrow I'll be up, whatever the doctor says. You'll see me on the docks as usual from six o'clock onwards. Another glass? You've forgotten to help yourself to a cigar. Gassin managed to smuggle five hundred for me in his boat. You see, I'm keeping nothing from you.'

He rose heavily, leaning on the arm of the chair.

'Thank you for your hints,' said Maigret, in the most banal terms he could think of.

Ducrau's eyes twinkled. The Inspector's twinkled back. They looked at each other with a suppressed amusement full of hidden implications, perhaps of challenge, perhaps also of a curious attraction.

'Shall I call the maid to show you out?'

'No, thanks. I know the way.'

They did not shake hands, and this, too, seemed to be by mutual consent. Ducrau remained by the open window, a dark silhouette against the background of light. He must have been much more tired than he wished to appear, for his breathing was quick.

'Good luck! Perhaps you'll lift the twenty thousand francs.'

As he passed the kitchen door, Maigret heard the sound of crying. He passed out onto the landing, went down a few steps, and stopped in the ray of sunlight, which had shifted its position, to consult part of the dossier in his

pocket. It was the doctor's report, and said among other things:

The hypothesis of attempted suicide can be ruled out, as it would be impossible for a man to stab himself on the spot where the wound is.

Someone was moving about in the semi-darkness of the porter's lodge. The concierge must have come back. The pavement was a welter of heat, light, noise, coloured dust and bustle. The No. 13 tram stopped and moved off again. The bell of the café on the right rang out, while the pebbles rattled down the chute of the stone-crusher, and a small tug with a blue triangle screeched with rage behind the lock-gate which had closed in front of its very nose.

CHAPTER 3

In the middle of a bright-blue signboard was a steamboat surmounted by a flight of gulls. Underneath was the legend: *Au Rendez-Vous des Aigles! Pilotage de la Marne et de la Haute Seine.*

That was the café on the right. Maigret pushed the door open, and to the accompaniment of complete silence sat down in a corner. There were only five men in the place, sitting at one table, cross-legged, chairs tilted forward, caps over their eyes to shade them from the sun. Four of them wore high-necked blue jerseys, and they all had bronzed and finely wrinkled skin and hair that was bleached at the temples and the back of the neck.

One of them, the *patron*, got up and came over to Maigret.

'What'll you have?'

The café was scrupulously clean. There was sawdust on the floor, the zinc had been polished until it gleamed, and the air was filled with the sugary-bitter smell of *apéritifs*.

'Well! well!' exclaimed one of the men as he relit his cigarette-end.

That was meant for Maigret. He had ordered a beer and was quietly filling his pipe. Opposite him, in the group at the table, a little old man with a yellow beard emptied his glass in a single gulp, wiped his moustache, and growled:

'The same again, Fernand!'

The fact that his right arm was bandaged revealed him as old Gassin. The others began to make knowing signs, pointing at the old boatman, who was staring at Maigret with an intensity that contorted his whole hairy face.

It was obvious from his flabby gestures that he had been

drinking. He had sensed that Maigret was from the police, and the others were amused by his agitation.

'Fine day, Gassin!'

That infuriated him.

'Haven't you anything you'd like to tell the gentleman?'

One of them looked at Maigret as though to say:

'Don't pay any attention. You see the condition he's in!'

The *patron* was perhaps the only one who was a little worried, but his customers were frankly enjoying themselves, and the general atmosphere was quite friendly. Through the window Maigret could see the parapet of the wharf, with the masts and the tillers of the barges and the roof of the lock-keeper's house.

'When do you hoist anchor, Gassin?' one of them asked.

And another added in a lower voice:

'Talk to him.'

It almost looked as if his advice would be taken.

The old man got up, and with the unnatural airiness of the drunkard, marched up to the bar.

'Give me another, Fernand!'

He was still looking at Maigret with a sort of apprehensive effrontery mixed with dull despair.

The Inspector rapped on the table with a coin to call the *patron*.

'How much?'

The *patron* leaned over his table, named a figure, and added in an undertone:

'Don't get him excited. He hasn't been sober for two days.'

He had not spoken above a murmur, but the old man growled:

'What's that you're saying?'

Maigret rose. He didn't want trouble. With his most benevolent expression, he made for the door. When he had

crossed the street, he looked back and saw that Gassin had gone to the window, glass in hand, and was following him with his eyes.

The air was warmer and of a deeper gold. A tramp was sleeping, stretched at full length on the stones of the wharf, with a newspaper spread out over his head.

Cars were passing, and lorries and trams, but Maigret realized that they had no real part in this case. Paris might be on its way to the banks of the Marne, but what really mattered was the lock, the hooting of the tugs, the stone-crusher, the barges and the cranes, the two cafés, and, especially, the tall house with Ducrau's red armchair framed in the window.

The people were at home in the open air – crane-drivers having their lunch sitting on a pile of sand, a woman setting a table on the deck of her boat, and her neighbour busy with her washing.

Quite leisurely the Inspector went down the stone steps, and there he recovered the pulse of that slow, powerful rhythm so well known to him from a crime he had once investigated on the Upper Marne. Even the distinctive canal smell evoked a picture of barges that glided along without rippling the surface of the water.

He found himself close to the *Golden Fleece*, its woodwork sticky with amber resin. The deck had just been scrubbed and was drying in patches, but the pretty girl was nowhere to be seen.

Maigret took a couple of steps along the gangway, turned, and saw old Gassin leaning over the parapet. He went on, and when he was across called out:

'Anyone on board?'

A woman doing her washing on a neighbouring barge watched him as he approached a double door embellished with panes of red and blue glass.

At the bottom of some steps he could see a clean and

tidy room; he could even make out the corner of a table covered with a cloth.

He went down and found himself face to face with the fair-haired girl, who was sitting on a straw-bottomed chair, suckling a baby. For some reason, this was so unexpected, and yet after all so natural, that he rather clumsily took off his hat and backed away, pushing his pipe, still alight, into his pocket.

'I beg your pardon.'

He must have startled her. She looked at him as if she were trying to guess his intentions. But she did not move from her place, and the baby's little mouth went on sucking away at her breast.

'I didn't know. I'm in charge of this case, and I took the liberty of coming to ask you a few questions.'

As he watched her, Maigret was conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness, the dawn of some misgiving that he could not quite define.

The cabin in which he stood was large and entirely lined with varnished pitch-pine. In one corner was a bed, covered with a counterpane, above it an ebony crucifix. The centre of the cabin was used as a dining-room, and the table was set for two.

'Sit down,' said the girl.

Her voice, too, was unexpected, although even from Ducrau's window Maigret had felt that there was something strange about Aline. From a distance, she had looked ethereal.

Yet she was neither slender nor fragile. Now that she was close to him, he saw that she was firm and sound and glowing with health. Her features were regular and the colour in her cheeks was enhanced by her fair hair.

Why, then, that impression of fragility, of someone in need of comfort and protection?

'Is that your baby?' he asked for something to say,

pointing to the baby, whose wooden cradle was just beside him.

'It's my godson,' she smiled politely, still with a touch of fear.

'You're Gassin's daughter, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

Her voice was the voice of a child, the docile voice of a good child answering questions.

'I'm ashamed to disturb you just now. But I thought that, as you were here the day before yesterday, when all those things happened, you'd know whether anyone came on board that evening – Émile Ducrau, for instance?'

'Yes.'

It was the last answer Maigret had expected, and he wondered whether she had understood the question.

'You're sure Ducrau was here the night he was attacked?'

'I didn't open the door to him.'

'But he came on board?'

'Yes. He called out. I was going to bed.'

Maigret caught a glimpse of a second cabin, narrower than the other and containing a fixed bunk.

While she was speaking, the girl gently took her breast from the baby, wiped its lips, and fastened her bodice.

'What time was that?'

'I don't know.'

'Was it long before your father fell into the water?'

'I don't know.'

For no apparent reason she was becoming agitated. She rose to put the baby in the cradle, and when it opened its mouth to cry, she gave it a red rubber dummy-teat.

'You know Ducrau well?'

'Yes.'

She poked up the fire in the stove and put salt on a pan-ful of potatoes. Maigret, who had been watching her every movement, understood at last. She wasn't perhaps insane,

but there was some sort of a veil between her and the outer world. Everything about her was muted and subdued, her movements, her voice, her smile. For she smiled apologetically when she had to pass in front of him.

'You don't know what Ducrau came for?'

'It's always the same thing.'

Maigret grew increasingly uneasy. His hands were sticky. Every word the girl spoke suggested dramatic implications. At every question the mystery seemed to clear, and yet he was afraid to interrogate her. But did she actually realize what she was saying to him? Or would she say yes to anything he asked her?

'It's Ducrau's son you're talking about, isn't it?' he said, to test her.

'Jean didn't come.'

'It's his father, then, who is paying you attentions?'

She looked at him a moment, and then turned away her head. He decided to get it over. He was so near a possible revelation.

'When he comes here, it's for that, isn't it? He pesters you. He tries – ?'

He stopped dead, for she was crying and he didn't know what to say.

'I'm sorry. Forget about it.'

She was so close to him that he mechanically patted her shoulder. And that was the worst thing he could have done. She sprang away, rushed into the other cabin and locked the door. He could hear her sobbing on the other side of the wooden partition. The baby had lost his dummy and was crying too. Maigret awkwardly gave it back to him.

There was nothing to do but go. The steps were low, and he bumped his head on the roof of the hatchway. He expected to find old Gassin on deck, but there was no one about except the people on the next boat, who, seated at table near the tiller, watched him go.

Nor was Gassin on the wharf. As Maigret got back to the pavement, he saw a car draw up in front of the tall house. It was a nondescript car of medium horse-power, and bore a Seine-et-Oise number-plate. The Inspector had only to take one look at the woman who came out of it to know who it was.

It was Ducrau's daughter. She had all her father's uncouthness and vigour. Her husband, who was in civilian clothes, locked the car doors and slipped the key into his pocket.

But they had forgotten something. The wife, already on the doorstep, turned back, and her husband took out the key again, unlocked one of the doors, and brought out a parcel, which probably contained the sort of hothouse grapes one takes to invalids.

Finally the couple disappeared, arguing, into the house; and one could guess that the husband was both commonplace and small-minded.

Maigret, standing under the green tram-stop, forgot to signal a passing tram. He was full of disconnected thoughts, which he wanted to straighten out. The boatmen were coming out of the café and shaking hands before separating. One of them, a big fellow with an open face, came towards Maigret. The Inspector stopped him.

'Excuse me, I'd like to ask you something.'

'I wasn't there, you know.'

'It's not that. You know Gassin. Who's the father of his daughter's child?'

The boatman burst out laughing.

'That's not her child.'

'Are you sure?'

'It was old Gassin who brought it back one fine day. He's been a widower for fifteen years. He must have had the child up north by some woman who keeps a cabaret, or a lock-keeper's wife.'

'And his daughter has never had a child?'

'Aline? Have you seen her? By the way, you'd better go slow with her. She's not all there.'

They were standing in the way of the passers-by, and Maigret could feel the sun burning the back of his neck.

'They're decent people. Gassin drinks a bit too much, but you mustn't think he's always like what he is to-day. That business two days ago gave him a bit of a jolt. He thought you meant to go for him this morning.'

The big fellow smiled again, touched his cap, and made off. It was time for Maigret's lunch, too. There was a quite noticeable change of tempo. The stone-crusher had stopped, the traffic had slackened, and it seemed as if even the locks were functioning more slowly.

He would come back, of course. He would still have to spend several days in this little world, of whose essential life he was only gradually becoming aware.

Had Gassin gone back to his barge? Was he having his lunch in the varnished cabin, sitting at the table with the pink-flowered cloth?

At the Ducraus', anyway, they would be quarrelling away. Hothouse grapes weren't the sort of thing to put the old man in a good temper.

Maigret went back into the café, without quite knowing why. The place was empty. The *patron* and his wife, a pretty little brunette who hadn't had time to finish her toilet, were eating stew beside the bar, and the red wine gleamed in their tumblers.

So you're back already?' said Fernand, wiping his mouth.

Maigret had been adopted. He didn't even need to say who he was.

'You haven't been bothering Gassin's little girl, I hope? – Irma, go and draw some fresh beer for the Inspector.'

He looked out, not at the wharf, but at the café opposite.

'That poor devil Gassin will make himself ill. Of course,

it's not much fun falling into the water at night and suddenly feeling that someone's trying to drag you down to the bottom.'

'Has he gone back to his boat?'

'No, he's over there.'

The *patron* pointed over the road, where Gassin was sitting with four other men, gesticulating and hopelessly drunk.

'He just goes from one to the other.'

'He looks as if he were crying.'

'He's crying right enough. He's at his fifteenth *apéritif* since morning, not counting tots of rum.'

The *patron's* wife brought in some iced beer, and Maigret sipped it slowly.

'His daughter has never had any affairs?'

'Aline? Never.'

Fernand said it as if the idea of Aline having an affair were the most preposterous thing in the world. Yet Maigret had just seen her suckling a baby, her own or somebody else's, a frightened young mother who had ended by shutting herself up in that inner cabin. He thought perplexedly of the old man, dead-drunk and weeping into his glass, and the baby in its cradle.

'I suppose they're always on the move?'

'All the year round.'

'No one to help him?'

'No. They do it all alone. Aline handles the tiller like a man.'

Maigret knew them, those northern canals that ran between straight green banks, the poplars lining the long flat stretch of water, and the locks hidden in the depths of the countryside, the rusty windlasses, the cottages with their hollyhocks, and the ducks dabbling in the back waters.

He could imagine the *Golden Fleece* threading its way

along a ribbon of water, hour by hour, day by day, until it reached some unloading-wharf, Aline at the tiller, the baby in its cradle, probably on the deck, near the wheel, and the old man on the tow-path behind his horses.

An old drunkard, an idiot, and a suckling –

CHAPTER 4

WHEN Maigret got off the No. 13 tram at six the next morning, Emile Ducrau was already standing on the wharf, a sea-cap on his head and a heavy stick in his hand.

The spring again lent an air of innocent gaiety to the bustle of early morning Paris. Objects and people, the milk-bottles on the doorsteps, the dairywoman at her stall in her white apron, the lorry shedding its last cabbage-leaves on the way back from the market, had all become symbols of tranquillity and *joie de vivre*.

The façade of the tall house was gilded by the sun, and at one of the windows the Ducraus' maid was shaking out her duster. Behind her, in the gloom of the sitting-room, Madame Ducrau was moving about with a handkerchief knotted round her head.

On the second floor the blind was drawn up, and the sun's rays fell on the bed where the voluptuous Rose lay asleep, her arms crossed over her damp armpits.

Ducrau, already immersed in the work of the day, shouted a final word to the captain of a boat which was leaving the lock and slipping into the current of the Seine. He had seen Maigret. Out of his pocket he took a big gold watch.

'I thought I wasn't mistaken. You're like me.'

He meant to imply that Maigret was another of those who rise early to organize other people's work.

'You'll excuse me a moment?'

He was so broad he looked almost square. He was probably wearing a bandage round his body. But he was as active as usual, and Maigret saw him jump off the wall of the lock onto a barge below, which was at least a yard away.

'Good morning, Maurice. Did you come across *L'Aigle IV* above Chalifert? Have they got the couplings?'

He scarcely listened to the answer. At the man's reply, he growled a word of thanks and went on to something else.

'What happened in that accident in the Revin tunnel?'

Aline was sitting on board the *Golden Fleece* near the tiller, grinding coffee and looking vaguely in front of her. Maigret had just caught sight of her when Ducrau came up and stood before him, a short pipe between his teeth.

'Well, are you beginning to understand a bit about it?' A tilt of his chin showed that he was referring to the life of the wharf, not the assault on himself. He was much more cheerful than the day before, and less reserved.

'You see, the water here forms a sort of arm that ends in the Seine. Here it is the Marne canal. Farther along is the Marne itself, which at this point is not navigable. Then comes the Upper Seine, which takes you to Burgundy, the Loire, Lyons, and Marseilles. Le Havre and Rouen are reached by the Lower Seine. The traffic is divided between two companies, the General Canal Company and the Association of Central Canals. But from this lock, right up to Holland and Belgium, it's Ducrau!'

His eyes were blue and his skin clear in the rosy light of the rising sun.

'The block of houses round mine belongs to me, including the café, the sheds, and the little dance-hall; the three cranes down there too, and the stone-crusher, and the repairing-yards beyond the footbridge.'

He was fairly bursting with pride.

'I suppose the whole lot represents about forty million francs?' Maigret remarked.

'You're not so far out. About fifty million, I should say. Your men learned a thing or two yesterday?'

He was delighted with that question. Maigret had, in fact, sent three men to get full particulars at Charenton and

elsewhere about Ducrau, his family, and every person involved in the affair.

The results were meagre. At the brothel there was confirmation that Ducrau had been there on the evening of the assault. He was a frequent visitor, it seemed. He would pay for drinks all round, chaff the women, tell some stories, and, as often as not, would leave without asking for anything more.

Of his son Jean, the inhabitants of the quarter knew almost nothing. He was a student. He went out very little. He looked like a boy of good family, and was in delicate health.

'By the way,' said Maigret, pointing to the *Golden Fleece*, 'that's the barge your son made a three months' trip on last year, isn't it?'

Ducrau did not move a muscle, but he became a shade more serious.

'Yes.'

'He was recovering from some illness?'

'He'd been overdoing it. The doctor recommended quiet and fresh air. The *Golden Fleece* was just off to Alsace.'

Aline had gone below with her coffee-mill, and Ducrau went off to give an order to the men at the crane. Maigret could hear every word they said.

The information concerning the daughter and the son-in-law was not remarkable. The captain was the son of an accountant from Le Mans. The couple lived in a pretty little new house on the outskirts of Versailles. Every morning an orderly brought the captain's horse, and another came to do the housework.

'Are you returning to Paris?' Ducrau asked when he came back. 'If you feel like it, I walk along the wharves every morning.'

He glanced back at his house. The attic windows on the sixth floor were not open yet, nor were the curtains drawn.

The trams were packed, and the little vegetable-carts were rushing off to market from Paris.

'You all right?' Ducrau cried to the lock-keeper.

'O.K., boss.'

The barge-owner winked at Maigret to draw his attention to this mark of respect from an official.

Together they strolled along the Seine banks, past strings of barges swinging round right across the river, churning up or down stream with powerful propeller-strokes.

'Do you know how I made my fortune?' said Ducrau. 'It was the notion that, even when my tugs were idle, they could still work for me. So I bought sandpits and chalk quarries up there, and, later, anything that was going, even brickworks, as long as they were near the water.'

He shook hands with a boatman, who muttered tersely:

'Morning, Mimile.'

The Port de Bercy was littered with barrels; they passed the gratings of the famous wine-vaults.

'Every bottle of champagne is transported by me. Hello, Pierrot! Is it true that Murier's old tub got caught on a bridge pier at Château-Thierry?'

'Quite true, boss.'

'Well, if you see him, tell him it serves him right.'

He went on his way, laughing. On the other side of the river was the rectangular outline of the vast concrete buildings of the *Magasins Généraux*, and two cargo-boats, from London and Amsterdam, lent a maritime air to the very heart of Paris.

'Without seeming indiscreet, on what lines are you conducting the enquiry?'

It was Maigret's turn to smile, for obviously the whole purpose of the stroll had been to bring up this question. Ducrau understood him. He saw that Maigret had read his thoughts and smiled faintly in his turn, as if he were laughing at his own naïveté.

'Oh, just amusing myself like this, you know,' the Inspector answered, exaggerating the air of an idle stroller.

They walked on for about four hundred yards in silence, their eyes fixed on the Pont d'Austerlitz, whose steel structure rose like the set-piece in a firework display, with the architecture of Notre-Dame veiled in blue and rose beyond it.

'Hello, Vachet! Your brother has been held up at Lazicourt. He asked me to tell you that the christening is postponed.'

Ducrau marched steadily on. He gave a sidelong look at Maigret, and then said with deliberately brutal frankness:

'How much does a man like you make?'

'Not much.'

'About sixty thousand francs?'

'Much less.'

Ducrau frowned and gave him another look, this time with as much admiration as curiosity.

'What do you think of my wife? D'you think I treat her badly?'

'Oh no. If it wasn't you it would be somebody else. She's the sort that's always sad and self-effacing, whatever happens to them.'

Maigret must have hit the nail on the head, for Ducrau was quite overcome.

'She's stupid, dull, and commonplace,' he sighed, 'just like her mother, whom I keep in one of those little houses near us. She has spent her whole life weeping. Look, there's another of my stone-crushers – one of the most powerful in the Port of Paris. Tell me, what's your particular racket?'

'All sorts.'

They walked on amidst the bustle of the river. The morning air smelt of water and tar. Now and again they had to skirt a crane or stand aside for lorries to pass.

'You've been on the *Golden Fleece*?

Ducrau had hesitated much longer over this question than any other, and he pretended to be preoccupied, watching the manoeuvring of a string of barges. The question, moreover, was superfluous, because from his window he had seen Maigret going on board. So the Inspector merely remarked:

'That's a strange little mother.'

The effect was electrifying. Ducrau stopped dead; with his short legs and bulging neck he looked like a bull about to charge.

'Who told you she was a mother?'

'There was no need for anybody to tell me.'

'Well?' said Ducrau frowning, at a loss for something to say.

'Well, nothing.'

'What did she tell you?'

'That you wanted to pay her a visit.'

'That was all?'

'She refused to open the door. Didn't you tell me Gassin was an old pal of yours? And yet it looks as if – '

'The fool!' growled Ducrau in exasperated tones. 'Now, if I hadn't stopped you, that cask would have got you right on the leg.'

Then, turning to the navvy who was rolling the casks, he yelled:

'Can't you watch what you're doing, you idiot?'

At the same time he was emptying his pipe, tapping the bowl on his heel.

'I bet you've got the idea that the child is mine. Haven't you, now? With my reputation for tumbling girls. Well, Inspector, this time you're wrong.'

He said this quite mildly. His manner had changed noticeably: it was less hard, less self-assured. He had lost the air of the landowner visiting his estate.

'Have you any kids?' he asked, with the sidelong look that Maigret was beginning to know.

'Only one girl, and she died.'

'Well, I've got several. Wait a moment. I'm not going to ask you to promise to say nothing about this, because, if you were unfortunate enough to say a single word, I'd break your neck. First, I've got the two you know – the girl, who's as deplorable as her mother, and the boy. I can't tell yet, but I don't think he'll ever be up to much. You've met him? No? He's nice, shy, well-mannered, affectionate, and has a delicate constitution. That's that. But I have another daughter. You mentioned Gassin just now. He's a good chap. But he had an extraordinary wife, and I slept with her. He knows nothing about it. If he did, he'd stop at nothing, for he never goes to Paris without putting flowers on her grave. After sixteen years!'

They had crossed the Pont des Tournelles and were now on the Île Saint-Louis, bathed in a cloistered stillness. A man in a boatman's cap came out of a café as they were passing and ran after Ducrau. Maigret moved away while they exchanged a few words, his mind dwelling on the image of an Aline more unreal than ever.

He had just had a vision of the *Golden Fleece* slipping along the gleaming canals, the fair-haired girl at the tiller, the old man behind the horses, and on the deck, stretched out in a hammock or on the hot resinous boards, an over-studious convalescent.

'Right. Sunday week,' said Ducrau's voice behind him.

And he added for Maigret's benefit:

'It's a little celebration we're getting up at Nogent for one of my men who's done thirty years' service in the same boat.'

It was warm. They had been walking for an hour. Shop-keepers were taking down the shutters of their shops, and belated typists were hurrying along the pavements.

Ducrau said no more. Perhaps he was waiting for Maigret to take up the conversation where they had left it, but the Inspector seemed lost in his thoughts.

'I must apologize for bringing you so far,' said Ducrau at last. 'Do you know the *Tabac Henri IV* in the middle of the Pont-Neuf? It's not far from the *Police Judiciaire*. All the same, I bet you've never noticed that it was different from any other café. We meet there every day, five or six of us, sometimes more. It's a sort of freighters' *bourse*.'

'Has Aline always been insane?' asked Maigret.

'She's not insane. You've either got a wrong impression of her, or you understand nothing at all about such things. It's only a sort of arrested mentality. The doctor explained it quite clearly to me. At nineteen she has, if you like, the mentality of a girl of ten. But she may make up for the time she has lost. We even hoped that, at her – confinement – '

He said the word very low, almost shamefacedly.

'Does she know you're her father?'

Ducrau started, and his face reddened.

'She's the one person who must never be told. First of all, she wouldn't believe it. And Gassin must never suspect it – not at any cost!'

At that hour, if he was as early as the day before, the old boatman was probably already drunk in one or other of the cafés.

'You're sure he doesn't suspect it?'

'Quite sure.'

'And nobody else?'

'Nobody has ever known, except me.'

'And that's why the *Golden Fleece* takes longer to load and discharge than any of the other barges?'

It was so obvious that Ducrau only shrugged his shoulders. Then he said with a change of tone and expression:

'Have a cigar. Don't let's talk about it any more, if you don't mind.'

'But perhaps that's the root of the whole trouble?'

'No. You're wrong,' said Ducrau flatly, almost threateningly. 'Come in here with me. I'll only be about two minutes.'

They had arrived at the *Tabac Henri IV*, whose customers, ordinary boatmen, were leaning on the zinc counter. But there was another room partitioned off, and in there Ducrau shook hands with some of the men who stood drinking, but he did not introduce Maigret.

'Is it true that someone has taken fifty-two francs for coal from Charleroi?'

'A Belgian with three motor-barges.'

'Waiter! Half a bottle of white wine. You'll have some?'

Maigret accepted and, smoking his pipe, watched the comings and goings on the Pont-Neuf, only lending half an ear to the conversation.

It was some time before he noticed that there was an unusual sound in the air, and even longer before he realized that it was a boat's siren. It wasn't giving the customary two or three hoots as a signal that it was passing under the bridge, but emitting a prolonged note that made passers-by stop in surprise. The *patron* of the café was the first to raise his head. Two boatmen followed him to the door, beside which Maigret was leaning.

A Diesel-engined barge coming downstream slackened speed in front of the arches of the Pont-Neuf, and even reversed to check way. While the siren was still going, a woman took over the tiller and a man jumped into a dinghy and rowed towards the bank.

'It's François!' said one of the boatmen.

They went down to the wharf and were standing at the wall when the dinghy reached the bank. The woman at the

tiller was finding it hard work to keep the long barge head on.

'Is the boss there?' said the man in the dinghy.

'He's in the café.'

'You'll have to break it to him gently, I don't know how, but anyway not too suddenly, that his son – '

'What?'

'He's just been found dead. There's no end of a business going on down there. It seems he's – '

He made a significant gesture towards his throat. There was no need to finish. A tug going upstream was hooting to the barge to get out of its way. The boatman hurriedly pushed off in his dinghy.

People who had stopped on the bridge were already moving on, but on the wharf the three men stood staring at each other in distress and bewilderment. Their distress increased when they saw that Ducrau was at the door of the *Tabac Henri IV*, trying to make out what was happening.

'Is it for me?' he called out.

He was so used to its being for him. Wasn't he one of five or six men who ruled the waterways?

Maigret decided to leave it to the three men, who hesitated, jogged each other with their elbows, until finally one of them stammered out in desperation:

'You'd better go back quick, boss. There's – '

Ducrau looked at Maigret with a frown.

'What's up?'

'It's at your house.'

'Well, what's up at my house?'

He looked disturbed, and suspicious of them all.

'Monsieur Jean – '

'Speak, you fool!'

'He's dead.'

There, on the Pont-Neuf, bright sunshine poured down on the pavement, gilded the wine-glasses on the bar-

counter inside, where the *patron* stood, his shirt-sleeves rolled back over his elbows, in front of the shelves of multi-coloured cigarette-packets.

Ducrau stared vacantly around, as if he had not understood. He drew in his breath, and laughed unpleasantly.

'It's a lie,' he said; but tears sprang to his eyes.

'François stopped on his way downstream to tell you – '

He was so overpowering, this broad solid little man, that none of them dared offer their sympathy. He turned unhappy eyes on Maigret, sniffed, and then rapped out to his colleagues:

'I'll do business from number forty-eight.'

But even while he was thus demonstrating his toughness to Maigret, an almost childlike look of pride crossed his face. He hailed a red taxi. He did not even ask the Inspector to come with him, he took it for granted. And quite naturally he did not say a word to him.

'To the Charenton lock.'

They went back along the Seine, where, an hour before, he had related the story of every boat and mooring-ring. He was still looking about him, but with unseeing eyes. They had reached the vaults at Bercy when he suddenly burst out:

'The bloody little fool!'

The last syllable stuck in his throat. He choked down his sobs as they reached his own door.

The wharf looked different. People had recognized the boss through the windows of the taxi. The lock-keeper let go his windlass to take off his cap. Workmen were standing about on the wharf-side as if life itself had been suspended. A foreman was waiting on the doorstep.

'Was it you who stopped the stone-crusher?'

'Yes, I thought – '

Ducrau set off up the stairs. Maigret followed him. They heard voices and footsteps farther up. A door opened on

the first floor, and Jeanne Ducrau collapsed limply into her husband's arms. He straightened her up, looked round for a support, and deposited her like a parcel in the arms of a sniffing neighbour.

Then he continued his way upstairs. Oddly, he turned to reassure himself that Maigret was following. Between the third and the fourth floor they passed a Police Inspector coming down, hat in hand. He began to say something.

'Monsieur Ducrau, I should like to – '

'Go to hell!'

He pushed him out of the way and went on climbing.

'Inspector, I – '

'Later,' snapped Maigret.

'He left a letter – '

'Give it to me.'

Maigret snatched it as he was passing and crammed it into his pocket. Only one thing mattered – this man mounting the stair in front of him, breathing raucously and stopping now at a door with a brass knob, which was immediately opened.

It was an attic room. The light came from above. Fine dust danced in its rays. There was a table with books on it, and a red plush armchair like the one down below.

A doctor was signing the preliminary report at the table. He was too late to prevent Ducrau from turning back the sheet over his son's body.

Ducrau did not say a word. He seemed amazed, as if confronted with something inexplicable. And there was something inexplicable and strangely desolate about that long thin boy, his white chest showing at the neck of his blue-striped cotton pyjamas. There was a broad blue ring round his neck. His face was horribly distorted.

Ducrau took a step forward, as though to kiss the body. But he drew back almost as if he were afraid. He turned away his head, looked enquiringly at the ceiling, at the door.

'The skylight,' said the doctor in a low voice.

Jean had hanged himself at dawn; his mother's maid had discovered him when she brought up his breakfast as usual.

And then Ducrau proved his amazing presence of mind by asking Maigret for the letter.

He must have noticed everything, even in his agony, as he climbed up the stairs.

Maigret took it from his pocket and handed it to Ducrau, who read it at a single glance and let his arms fall wearily.

'How could he have been such a fool?'

That was all. And that was exactly what he was thinking. The cry sprang from the depths of his heart, more poignant than any fine phrases.

'Go on, read it!' he flared up at Maigret, who hadn't been quick enough to catch the letter as it fell to the ground.

It was I who attacked my father, and I am now making retribution. I hope that everyone will forgive me and Mamma will not grieve. – JEAN

Ducrau gave a choking laugh.

'Well, think of that!'

He made no protest when the doctor drew the sheet over the body, and appeared at a loss as to whether he should go downstairs, sit down, or walk about.

'It's simply not true,' he repeated.

At last he put a heavy hand on Maigret's shoulder.

'I'm thirsty!'

His cheeks were mottled purple, his forehead beaded with sweat, his hair matted to his temples. The whole attic reeked of sal-volatile which had been given to some woman who had fainted.

CHAPTER 5

SHORTLY before nine o'clock the next morning, Maigret arrived at the *Police Judiciaire*, and was informed by the office-boy that he had already been wanted on the telephone.

'They didn't leave a name, but they'll call you again.'

On the top of a pile of letters was an official note:

The assistant lock-keeper at Charenton was discovered this morning hanging from the upper lock-gate.

Maigret had no time to be surprised. The telephone bell rang. He answered rather irritably, and was surprised to hear the voice at the other end of the wire deferential and almost shy.

'Hello!' Is that you, Inspector? Ducrau speaking. I wonder if you could manage to come and see me straight away? I'd willingly come to you, but it wouldn't be the same thing. Hello! I'm not at Charenton but at my office, 33 Quai des Célestins. You'll come? Thanks!'

Every morning now for ten days there had been this same sun, a foretaste of summer like the first, slightly acid, green gooseberries. By the Seine, in particular, there was the characteristic smell of spring. Maigret looked enviously at the students and old gentlemen rummaging in the dusty book-boxes on the Quai des Célestins.

No. 33 was an old two-storied house, with several brass plates fixed to the front door. Inside was the characteristic atmosphere of the small private house converted into offices. There were various notices on the doors: *Cashier*, *Secretary*, etc. Opposite him a staircase led to the first floor, and at the top, while Maigret was trying to find somebody to direct him, Ducrau himself appeared.

'Come in here,' he said.

He led his visitor into a drawing-room which had been converted into an office but still retained its moulded plaster ceiling, cornices and gilding, all faded and old-fashioned, and clashing with the plain wood furniture.

'You read the brass plates?' Ducrau asked as he pointed to a chair. 'Downstairs is the Marne Quarries Company. Up here is the Freightage Department, and on the second floor is the Water Transport. It's all Ducrau!'

He spoke without pride, but as if this information had some particular relevance. He sat down with his back to the light, and Maigret noticed that he was wearing a black band on the sleeve of his coarse navy-blue suit. He had not shaved, and his cheeks looked flabby.

For a moment he said nothing, but sat fidgeting with his empty pipe; and it was then that Maigret finally realized that there were two distinct Ducraus: one who kept up, even to himself, a rather pompous front, talked big, and was perpetually his own and other people's hero; and another who suddenly forgot all this and was no more than a rather awkward, and even timid, man.

But he couldn't resign himself to being this second Ducrau. Always he felt the need of playing the grandiose part that raised him above his real self, and even now his eyes were sparkling with the excitement of staging a new act for himself.

'I don't come here more often than I need, because there are enough mugs here to do what's got to be done. But this morning I didn't know where to go for a moment's peace.'

He was annoyed by Maigret's impassive silence, because he needed sympathetic support for the part he had set himself to play.

'Do you know where I spent the night? In a hotel in the Rue de Rivoli! Because, of course, they all swooped down on my house – my wife's old mother, my daughter, her fool

of a husband, and then all the neighbours. Between them they've organized a real funeral orgy, so I decided to hop it.'

He was quite sincere, but all the same he was evidently rather pleased with the word 'Orgy'.

'I trailed round, until I got fed up with myself. Do you know that feeling, when you get fed up with yourself?'

Then he snatched from the table a newspaper several days old, rose and, planting himself beside Maigret, thrust the paper in front of him, pointing to a paragraph with his thumb-nail.

'Have you seen this?'

We learn that Divisional Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire, although well below the age-limit, has asked for and obtained permission to retire. He relinquishes his post next week and will probably be replaced by Inspector Ledent.

'Well?' said Maigret, rather puzzled.

'How many days does that give you? Six, isn't it?'

Ducrau stood up. He had to move about. He walked up and down, sometimes with his back to the light, sometimes facing the window, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

'I asked you yesterday how much you got paid, remember? Well, to-day I'll tell you this much. I know you better than you think. I offer you from next week a hundred thousand francs a year to come in with me. Think it over before you give me an answer.'

With an impatient gesture he threw open a door and signed to the Inspector to join him. In a cheerful office, a man of about thirty, already slightly bald, was sitting in front of a pile of documents, a long cigarette-holder between his teeth, while a typist waited for him to dictate.

'This is the manager of the Freightage Department,'

Ducrau announced, and the man in question rose precipitately.

'Oh don't trouble, Monsieur Jaspar,' Ducrau added, with the emphasis on the *Monsieur*. 'By the way, tell me again what it is you do every evening. You're some sort of a champion, I seem to remember.'

'Crossword puzzles.'

'Of course. Marvellous! Do you hear that, Inspector? Monsieur Jaspar, a departmental manager at the age of thirty-two, is a cross-word-puzzle champion!'

He emphasized each syllable, and, after the last, banged the door ferociously and stood looking Maigret in the eyes.

'You saw that dolt? Well, there are more downstairs and on the second floor. All smart and soft-spoken. So-called workers. And at this very moment Monsieur Jaspar is agitatedly wondering what he can have done to displease me. The typist will spread the story round the whole building, and they'll have something to suck like a sweet for the next ten days. Because I give them the title of manager they really believe they manage something. Have a cigar?'

There was a box of Havanas on the mantelpiece, but Maigret preferred to fill a pipe.

'I don't offer *you* any title. You're beginning to get some idea of my business. First there's the transport part, then the freightage, then the quarries and all the rest of it. All the rest of it can be expanded *ad lib*. I'd write a note to the various departments so that you'd be left in peace. You'd come and go as you pleased. You'd stick your nose into everything – '

For a second, Maigret had a vision of long canals fringed with trees, countrywomen in black straw hats, and carts hurrying from the quarries to the barges. Ducrau pressed a button, and a typist came in, notebook in hand.

'Take this, please:

'*We, the undersigned Émile Ducrau and Maigret* – What's

your Christian name? – *and Maigret (Joseph) make the following agreement. From March 18th, Monsieur Joseph Maigret enters the service of –*'

He took one look at Maigret, frowned, and snapped at the secretary:

'You can clear out.'

He began walking round the room, his hands behind his back, shooting weary glances at his companion, who had said absolutely nothing.

'Well?' he enquired at last.

'Nothing doing.'

'A hundred and fifty thousand? No, it's not that.'

He opened the window, letting in the hum of the city. He was hot He threw his cigar out of the window.

'Why are you leaving the police?'

Maigret smiled and puffed away at his pipe.

'You'll agree that you're not the sort of man to be happy doing nothing?'

Although obviously seething with impatience, and perhaps a little humiliated, he was looking at the Inspector with respect and even liking.

'And it's not a question of money either?'

Maigret, glancing at the door of the next room, at the ceiling, at the floor, said gently:

'Perhaps my reasons are much the same as yours.'

'Do you mean there are mugs at your place too?'

'I didn't say that.'

The Inspector was in good humour. He felt on top of his form – a state of heightened receptivity which enabled him to think as fast as his questioner, and occasionally a jump ahead.

Ducrau refused to admit defeat, but he was losing confidence and beginning to show traces of strain.

'I suppose you think you're doing your duty,' he muttered spitefully. Then, with renewed energy:

'It looks as if I were trying to buy you, of course. But suppose I ask you the same question in a week's time?'

Maigret shook his head, and Ducrau looked as if he could have kicked him, angrily and affectionately. The telephone bell rang.

'Yes, it's me. And what happens afterwards? The funeral service? I don't care a damn for the funeral service. If you go on bothering me I won't even come to the burial.' All the same, he was very pale.

'Such rubbish!' he said. His face looked pinched as he hung up the receiver.

'They're all gathered round the poor lad, who, if he only could, would send every one of them packing. You'd never guess where I spent last night. If I told you, you'd think me a monster. All the same, a brothel was the only place where I could howl like a dog among a lot of bitches who thought I was tight and went rummaging in my pocket-book.'

He no longer felt the need to remain standing – it was all over. He sat down, rumpled his hair, and tried to pick up the thread of his thoughts. He cast a brooding look at Maigret but did not seem to see him. The Inspector gave him a short respite and then murmured:

'You know that another man has been found hanged at Charenton?'

Ducrau raised heavy eyelids and waited.

'A man you probably know, as he's an assistant lock-keeper.'

'Bébert?'

'I don't know whether it's Bébert or not, but they found him this morning hanging from the upper lock-gate.'

Ducrau sighed like a tired man.

'You've nothing to say about the matter?' Maigret asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'You might be asked where you spent the night.'

This time a smile hovered on Ducrau's lips and he nearly

said something, but thought better of it at the last moment and shrugged his shoulders again.

'You're sure you've nothing to tell me?'

'What day is to-day?'

'Thursday.'

'What day next week do you leave the Force?'

'Wednesday.'

'One more question. Suppose the case isn't finished by then, what will happen?'

'I shall hand over the dossier to a colleague, who will carry on.'

Ducrau's smile broadened, and with almost childish delight he breathed:

'A mug?'

Maigret could not help smiling too.

'They're all mugs.'

They were destined to part on this unexpected note of gaiety. Ducrau rose, his great hand outstretched.

'Au revoir, Inspector. I'll probably see you before then.'

He accompanied him as far as the landing, and even leaned over the banisters. As Maigret plunged into the warmth and dazzle of the embankment, he could feel Ducrau's eyes following him from the window.

And his own smile broadened as he waited for a tram.

*

It was the concierge's idea of the correct thing that all the occupants of the house should draw down their blinds in sign of mourning. All the boats tied up in the wharf were flying their flags at half-mast, and this gave a melancholy aspect to the whole canal.

But the general reaction was harder to assess. The more curious wandered about aimlessly, especially near the walls of the lock, until they could pluck up courage to ask which was the fatal hook.

The body was already at the mortuary, a long bony body which had been a familiar sight to Marne boatmen.

No one knew where Bébert came from, and he had no family. He had found a corner for himself on an old dredger which had been rusting in the wharf for about ten years.

He used to catch the mooring-ropes in mid-air, turn the windlass and open the gates, do any odd jobs, and collect the tips. That was all.

The lock-keeper wandered about his domain, looking important. Three journalists had already interviewed him that morning, and one of them had taken his photograph.

Maigret went straight from the tram to Fernand's café, which was busier than usual. There were whispers when he came in. Those who knew him began telling the others who he was. The *patron* came up like an old friend.

'Some nice cold beer?'

With a glance he indicated the opposite corner of the room, where old Gassin sat by himself, as surly as a sick dog, his eyelids redder than ever. He looked across at Maigret, and instead of glancing away again, made a grimace of disgust.

Maigret, however, took a great gulp of the cold beer, wiped his mouth, and lit a pipe. Framed in the window behind Gassin, he could see the serried rows of barges, and he felt a little disappointed at not seeing the figure of Aline.

Fernand leant over him and, under the pretext of wiping the table, murmured:

'You ought to do something about him. He's not even conscious of his own actions. Those scraps of paper you see on the floor are an order to go and load at the Quai des Tournelles. And look what he's done with it!'

The old man knew quite well that they were talking about him. He rose unsteadily to his legs, lurched over to Maigret, gave him a defiant look, and finally staggered out, pushing the *patron* out of his way with his elbow.

They saw him pause on the threshold. For a moment it looked as if he would stagger out into the road without noticing an approaching car. But he pulled up in time and then lurched across to the café opposite.

'What do you make of that, Inspector?'

Conversation became general. Maigret was appealed to as if he were an old friend.

'Mind you, Gassin is the finest chap in the world. But he still seems to be brooding over that business the other night, and I'm beginning to wonder whether he'll ever get over it. What do you think of the Bébert complication? Queer, isn't it?'

They were cordial and familiar. They weren't taking things too tragically, but there was something uneasy about their laughter.

Maigret shook his head, and only smiled and grunted in reply.

'Is it true that the boss doesn't mean to go to the funeral?'

So that news had already got to the café; and the telephone conversation had taken place only an hour before.

'He's a tough nut, the boss! And a fine chap too. But do you know that Bébert was seen yesterday at the *Gallia* cinema? It must have been on his way back that he was done in, as he was going on to his old dredger.'

'I was at the cinema too,' someone put in.

'Did you see him?'

'No, I didn't see him, but I was there.'

'Well, how does that help us?'

'Anyway, I was there.'

Maigret rose with a smile, and waved to the company. He had told off two men to get all the details, and he could see Lucas, on the other side of the water, tramping about on the dredger.

He passed Ducrau's house. The Decharmes' car had stood outside all morning, probably since the previous

evening. He might have gone in, but what would have been the use? He could so well imagine the 'orgy', as Ducrau called it.

He wandered round aimlessly. His mind was a blank, but he could feel that something was taking shape in it which must not be forcibly defined too soon.

He turned. Someone was hailing a taxi. It was the concierge. A few minutes later, a large woman in black silk, her eyes red with weeping, fell hysterically into the vehicle, while the concierge piled her luggage on top.

It must be Rose. He could not help smiling, and his smile grew broader at the concierge's tight-lipped expression when he came up.

'Was that the lady on the second floor?'

'And who may you be?'

'*Police Judiciaire.*'

'Then you know just as much as I do.'

'Was it the son-in-law who ordered her to leave?'

'In any case, it wasn't me, and it's their business.'

It was all quite obvious – the long, whispered conclave of the afflicted family as to whether it was decent to have the creature in the house in such solemn circumstances. Probably the son-in-law captain had been sent up as a delegate to acquaint her with the family's decision.

Maigret stopped at random in front of the little dance-saloon bearing the word '*Bal*' written in white on a blue enamel sheet. A creeper over the recessed door gave it the fresh look of a country cottage. It was dark and cool inside after the dazzling street, and the metal ornaments on the mechanical piano glittered like jewels.

There were tables, benches, a floor space, and on the wall an old backcloth which must have seen service in some theatre.

'Who's that?' called a voice from the top of the stairs.

'Come down and see.'

She must have been in the middle of washing, for there was a tap running and the sound of water splashing in a sink. A woman appeared in a dressing-gown and bedroom slippers.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' she murmured.

Like the rest of Charenton, she seemed to know Maigret already. She must once have been pretty. She had grown a little stouter and flabbier in that hothouse life, but she still retained a certain placid and nonchalant charm.

'Would you like a drink?'

'What about an *apéritif* for us both?'

She drank a *gentiane*. She had an odd way of sitting, with her elbows on the table, pressing her breasts together so that they nearly escaped from her wrap.

'I thought you'd come. Cheerio!'

She wasn't frightened. The police apparently meant nothing to her.

'Is it true what they're saying?'

'What about?'

'About Bebert. I'm probably talking too much. Who cares? Anyway, there's probably nothing in it. But they say it was old Gassin.'

'. . . who did it?'

'He certainly talks as if he knew all about it. Another glass?'

'And Ducrau?'

'What about him?'

'Did he come here yesterday?'

'He often comes to keep me company. We're still friends though he's a rich man now. He's not proud. He sits where you're sitting, and we have a glass together. Sometimes he asks me to put a penny in the slot for some music.'

'Was he here yesterday?'

'Yes. There's dancing only on Saturdays and Sundays, and occasionally Mondays. I don't close as a rule, but I'm

generally all by myself, so to speak. It was different in my husband's time, because then we kept a restaurant.'

'What time did he leave?'

'What's on your mind? You're quite wrong, let me tell you. I know him. He was after me when he'd only one little boat. And he's never tried to take advantage of me – I don't know why – like all the rest of them. You know it as well as I do. Yesterday he was a bit low.'

'Did he have much to drink?'

'Two or three glasses, and that's nothing for him. He said: "If you only knew, Marthe, how fed up I am with those mugs! I'll probably spend all night trailing round the brothels. When I think of them all there round the boy – "'

This time Maigret did not smile. He looked round at the shabby little place, the tables, the benches, the backcloth, and then at the good soul sipping the last drops of her second *gentiane*.

'You don't know what time he left?'

'Perhaps it was midnight, perhaps earlier. But don't you think it must be terrible to have so much money and still not be happy?'

Maigret didn't smile at that either.

CHAPTER 6

'THE strangest part of it,' said Maigret finally, 'is that I'm convinced that the whole thing is quite simple.'

He was talking to the Chief of the *Police Judiciaire*. The offices were all empty. A crimson sun was setting over Paris, and the Seine, where it flowed under the Pont-Neuf, was streaked with red, blue, and ochre. The two men were standing at a window, chatting in a desultory manner, their eyes on the people strolling about down below.

'As for my man – '

The telephone bell rang. The Chief answered it.

'Good evening, Madame, how are you? I'll get him for you.'

It was Madame Maigret, sounding rather desperate.

'You forgot to phone me. Yes, we arranged that you would ring me up at four o'clock. The furniture has arrived and I must go. Can you come right away?'

'I had forgotten that we were moving house,' Maigret explained as he took leave of the Chief. 'The furniture went off by van yesterday, and my wife must be down in the country when it arrives.'

The Chief shrugged his shoulders. Maigret saw it and stopped on the threshold.

'Why do you do that, Chief?'

'I was just thinking that you'll be like all the rest. After a year you'll be back on the job, but with the difference that you'll be working for some bank or insurance company.'

There was something a little forlorn about the twilit office that both men affected to ignore.

'I swear I won't.'

'Good-bye, then, until to-morrow. No slip-ups with

Ducrau, mind! He's said to have two or three deputies in his pocket.'

Maigret took a taxi, and a few minutes later was at his flat in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. His wife was bustling about. Two of the rooms were empty and the others were filled with parcels piled up on top of the furniture. Something was cooking, not on the kitchen stove, which had already been sent on ahead, but on a spirit-cooker.

'You really can't come with me? You could take the train back to-morrow evening. It's only to decide where the furniture is to go.'

Not only was it impossible, but Maigret did not even want to go. It gave him a strange feeling to come back to this devastated home that they were leaving for ever. But stranger still was the sight of certain things his wife was preparing to take with her, and the remarks she made as she moved about.

'Have you seen the folding-chairs they've sent? What's the time? It was Madame Brigaud who phoned about the furniture. She says the weather is lovely and the cherry-trees white with blossom. The goat she told us about is not for sale, but the owner will give us a kid if it has one this year.'

Maigret smiled his approval, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

'You start eating,' she called out from the next room. 'I'm not hungry.'

Neither was he. He hardly touched the food. Then he carried the heavy luggage downstairs shapeless forms – there were even some gardening tools – which filled the taxi.

'Gare d'Orsay.'

He kissed his wife good-bye at the door of the carriage, and at about eleven o'clock found himself alone on the banks of the Seine, discontented with life in general.

A little farther along, on the Quai des Célestins, he passed Ducrau's offices. They were all in darkness. The oblique rays of a gas-lamp gleamed on the brass plates.

All along the banks, boats lay idly in the river.

Why had the Chief said that? It was ridiculous. Maigret was really longing for the country, for peace and quiet, and books. He was tired.

And yet he could not manage to follow his wife in thought. He tried to remember what she had told him about the goat and the other matters. But actually he was wondering, as he watched the lights shimmering on the opposite bank:

'What is Ducrau doing at this hour of the night? Has he gone home at last in spite of his horror of the "orgy"? Or is he dining with his elbows on the table at some grand restaurant or some low dive? Or is he trailing about from one brothel to another with his son's ghost at his elbow?'

And nothing was known about the son, absolutely nothing. There are people like that, about whom nobody has a thing to say. Maigret had put two men on the job, in the Quartier Latin, the École des Chartes, and at Charenton.

'A nice boy, a bit of a hermit, and not very strong – ' Not a single vice or passion. No one even knew how he spent his evenings.

'He probably worked in his own room. After his illness, he would find the work rather harder – '

No family life. No friends. No girl friend. And one fine day he had hanged himself and left a note to say that he had tried to kill his father!

Yet he had spent three months on the *Golden Fleece* with Aline.

Jean – Aline – Gassin – Ducrau –

Maigret recognized the vaults of the Port de Bercy and, on the right, the chimneys of the electric power-station.

Trams went past. Occasionally he would stop for no reason and then walk on again.

Down there, No. 1 Lock was waiting for him: the tall house, the barges, the cafés, the little dance-saloon, a complete setting, or rather a complete little world, with its own sights and smells and the tangled lives which he was trying to disentangle.

It was his last case. The furniture had already arrived at the cottage on the banks of the Loire.

He hadn't kissed his wife a proper good-bye. He had carried her parcels with a bad grace. He hadn't even waited until the train started.

Why had the Chief said that? Abruptly Maigret boarded a tram and abandoned his abortive walk along the embankment.

The place seemed emptier than ever, with the moonlight penetrating every nook and cranny. The café on the left was already closed, and in the other, three men were playing cards with Fernand.

They must have heard Maigret coming and recognized his step, because Fernand opened the door.

'Still about at this time of night?' he asked. 'Is there any news?'

'Nothing.'

'Will you have a drink?'

'No, thanks.'

'Oh, you must. Come in and chat for a moment.'

Maigret entered, with the feeling that he was making a gaffe. The players waited, cards in hand. Fernand poured out a glass of brandy, and a second one for himself.

'Your health!'

'Aren't you playing?'

'Oh well – if you don't mind, Inspector.'

Maigret stood there, convinced that something was wrong.

'Won't you take a seat?'

Maigret looked out, but he could see nothing but the still scene outlined in the moonlight.

'Queer, isn't it, this Bébert business?'

They went on with their game.

'How much do I owe you?' Maigret asked presently.

'Oh, that was on the house.'

'No, no!'

'Yes, certainly. Wait one second and I'll join you. *Belote!*'

He threw down his cards and went off to the counter.

'What'll you have? The same again? And what about you others?'

There was something in the air, in their attitude, in their voices, which was not quite open and above-board, particularly in the case of Fernand, who seemed determined to avoid silence at any cost.

'Do you know Gassin is still dead to the world? He's having a real bout. A double one, Henry? And what about you?'

The café showed the only sign of life on the sleeping embankment.

Maigret, who had been trying to keep one eye on the room and the other on the scene outside, walked towards the door.

'By the way, Inspector,' said Fernand, 'I wanted to ask you – '

'What?' growled Maigret, turning round.

'Wait a moment. How ridiculous! It's quite gone out of my mind. What'll you have?'

It was so obviously a ruse that his friends looked at him in embarrassment. Fernand realized it himself, and his cheeks grew red.

'What's going on?' Maigret demanded.

'What do you mean?'

Maigret opened the door and looked out at the barges lying side by side in the canal.

'Why are you trying to keep me here?'

'Me? I swear – '

Then at last Maigret perceived a tiny point of light in all that mass of dark hulls, masts, and cabins. Without troubling to close the door behind him, he walked across the wharf and found himself facing the gangway of the *Golden Fleece*.

A man was standing a couple of yards away, but he almost missed seeing him.

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm waiting for my fare.'

Maigret turned and saw a taxi, with its lights out, standing farther along.

The narrow plank creaked under his weight.

A faint light glimmered through the panes of the cabin door. He opened the door without hesitation and climbed down the steps.

'May I come in?'

Here there were some signs of life. He took a couple of steps forward and stood in the middle of the cabin, which was lit by an oil-lamp. The bed was made for the night, and on the oilcloth table-cover stood a bottle and two glasses.

Two men were sitting opposite each other, silent, tense: old Gassin, his little eyes menacing, and Emile Ducrau, his elbows on the table and his cap on the back of his head.

'Come in, Inspector. I thought you'd come.'

Ducrau spoke quite naturally and seemed neither surprised nor embarrassed. The oil-lamp shone steadily and the calm was so complete that one would have sworn that before Maigret's arrival the two men had spent hours silent and motionless. The door of the other cabin was shut and bolted. Was Aline asleep? Or was she listening, lying motionless in the darkness?

'Is my taxi still there?'

Ducrau spoke like a man drugged and trying to shake off his torpor.

'Do you like Dutch schnapps?'

He rose and took a glass out of the cupboard, filled it with the colourless liquid, and stretched out a hand towards his own glass. At that moment Gassin, with a savage gesture, suddenly swept everything off the table. Glasses and bottle rolled on the floor. By a miracle the bottle was not broken but only lost its cork, and the liquid gurgled out.

Ducrau did not flinch. Perhaps he had been expecting something of the sort. But Gassin appeared to be on the verge of a brainstorm and sat breathing heavily, his fists clenched, his body leaning forward.

Someone moved in the cabin next door. The taxi-driver was still marching up and down the embankment. For a moment Gassin remained tense, then he collapsed into a chair with his head in his hands, sobbing:

'My God! My God!'

Ducrau signed to Maigret to come with him. As he passed the old man, he laid a hand on his shoulder. That was all. On deck he breathed in the limpid air. The taxi-driver ran to his car. Ducrau stood for a moment, his hand on Maigret's arm.

'I did what I could. Are you going back to Paris?'

They went up the stone steps, at the top of which the taxi was waiting with the engine running and the door open. Maigret could see the figure of Fernand silhouetted against the café window, looking out at the car.

'Did you give an order that you were not to be disturbed?'

'To whom?'

Maigret jerked his head, and Ducrau understood.

'He did that?'

Ducrau smiled, flattered but not too pleased.

'Silly fools!' he growled. 'Get in. Straight ahead, driver. To the centre of the town.'

He took off his cap and passed his hand through his hair.

'Were you looking for me?'

Maigret had no answer ready, and Ducrau didn't seem to expect one.

'Have you thought over what I proposed to you this morning?'

Not that Ducrau himself was really hopeful. He would not have been taken in by a favourable answer.

'My wife went off this evening to arrange the furniture in our new house.'

'Where is that?'

'Between Meung and Tours.'

The embankment was deserted. All the way to the Rue Saint-Antoine they passed only two cars.

The driver lowered the window.

'Where do I go now?'

'Put me down at *Maxim's*,' said Ducrau, almost defiantly, and there he got heavily out, in his coarse blue suit with the black arm-band. The door-keeper seemed to know him, and hurried forward.

'Won't you come in for a minute, Inspector?'

'No, thanks.'

Ducrau was already in the revolving doors, so there was no opportunity to shake hands or even to say good-night.

It was half-past one.

'Taxi?' asked the door-keeper.

'Yes – No – '

There was no one at the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and the big double bed had gone to the country. So Maigret did what Ducrau had done. He spent the night in a hotel at the corner of the Rue Saint-Honoré.

His wife would have arrived by now and would be sleeping, for the first time, in their new house.

CHAPTER 7

A SLOW, monotonous tramping of feet still came from the bottom of the cemetery, though the head of the procession had already reached the gates. The sound of gravel trodden underfoot, the dust filling the air with an iridescent shimmer, the clumsy column of mourners marching along and occasionally forced to mark time, seemed somehow to intensify the impression of heat.

Émile Ducrau, all in black with very white linen, was jammed up against the open gate, mopping his face with a handkerchief rolled up in a ball, and shaking hands with all and sundry. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. He had shed no tears, and even kept looking about him as if the funeral had nothing to do with him. His son-in-law was there, slim, correct, and red-eyed. It was impossible to see the women's faces under their veils.

The procession had caused a congestion in Charenton. Behind the two carriages of flowers and wreaths walked hundreds of well-scrubbed, well-combed boatmen in navy blue, with their caps in their hands.

One by one they passed through the cemetery gates, touching their foreheads with their fingers and stammering out condolences, after which they could be seen forming into awkward groups and making for a café. Their brows were beaded with sweat, and it was not difficult to guess how damp they must be under their great double-breasted jackets.

Maigret was standing on the opposite pavement, in front of the flower-shop, wondering whether he ought to stay on. A taxi drew up beside him, and one of his men got out and came up to him.

'What's up, Lucas?'

'Has anything happened?' Lucas asked. 'I've just heard that old Gassin bought a revolver at half-past eight this morning from a gunsmith at the Bastille.'

Gassin was there, one of a row of men about fifteen yards away from the family. He followed the stream without saying a word to his neighbours, with no signs of impatience, his eyes dull.

Maigret had already noticed him, for it was the first time he had seen him dressed up, with his beard trimmed and a brand-new suit and linen. Had he at last put an end to his long drinking bout? In any case, he was calmer and more dignified. He was not muttering into his beard. Indeed, it was slightly alarming to see him so transformed.

'You're quite sure?'

'Quite. He made the man show him how it worked.'

'When he's round the corner, arrest him discreetly and bring him along to the station.'

Meanwhile Maigret hurried across the road and took up a position about three yards away from Ducrau, who looked at him with some surprise. The cortège of men in blue, with their weather-beaten faces and bleached hair, filed past. As Gassin approached, his eyes met Maigret's, but the old man showed no signs of recognition or truculence.

He waited his turn, marking time behind the others. At last, without a word, he held out his gnarled old hand and shook hands with the boss.

That was all. Then he went away. Maigret looked after him, but could not tell whether he had been drinking or not. Excess of alcohol might also, of course, produce that exaggerated sang-froid.

Lucas was waiting at the corner of the street. Maigret nodded, and the two men went off, one behind the other.

'Would you go to the shop opposite the post office in the Rue du Sentier and buy a hundred yards of curtain cord?' Madame Maigret had telephoned that morning.

At Charenton there were boatmen everywhere, and soon they were sitting in their Sunday clothes in every café on the canal-bank as far as Auteuil. What had old Gassin's reactions been when Lucas arrested him? Maigret had thought it better to go off in a different direction, and now he did not know where he was.

He heard a voice hailing him. It was Ducrau, who had nearly caught him up. He must have left his family in the middle of the funeral and cut short the condolences.

'What are you doing with Gassin?'

'What d'you mean?'

'I saw you speaking to one of your men just now. Are you going to arrest him?'

'He's already been arrested.'

'Why?'

For a moment Maigret wondered whether he ought to tell him or not.

'He's just bought a gun.'

The barge-owner said nothing, but his eyes narrowed and his face hardened.

'I suppose it's for you?' Maigret went on.

'It's quite possible,' Ducrau growled, putting his hand in his pocket and bringing out a Browning.

He laughed defiantly

'Are you going to arrest me too?'

'It's not worth it. I'd have to release you straight away.'

'What about Gassin?'

'Gassin as well.'

They were standing in a patch of sunlight on the edge of the pavement. In the narrow street, housewives were doing their marketing, and suddenly, thinking of those two

men loose in Paris, each with a revolver, Maigret had the comic idea that he seemed cast in the rôle of Heavenly Father.

'Gassin won't kill me,' Ducrau asserted.

'Why not?'

'Because – '

Then he added with a change of tone:

'Will you come and have lunch with me to-morrow at my house in the country? It's at Samois.'

'I'll see. In any case, thanks very much.'

Maigret let Ducrau go, with his gun and his stiff collar which was causing him such discomfort. He was tired. He remembered that he had promised to telephone his wife to say whether he would spend Sunday with her. But first he went to the police station. At least it was cool there. The inspector in charge had gone off to lunch, and the clerk received Maigret with deferential respect.

'Your man is in the cell on the left. I've got the contents of his pockets here.'

They had been laid out on an old newspaper: first the revolver, a fairly cheap make; then a meerschaum, a red rubber tobacco-pouch, and a handkerchief with a blue border; finally a soft reddish-brown pocket-book, which Maigret fingered for a moment before he opened it.

It contained very little. In one compartment were the papers of the *Golden Fleece* and his certificate of registration, signed by various lock-keepers. There was also a little money and two photographs, of a man and a woman.

The photograph of the woman must have been taken at least twenty years ago. The print had faded, but it was still possible to make out the features of a slender young woman with a veiled smile reminiscent of Aline's.

It was Gassin's wife. Her delicate health and air of languor must have given her a certain distinction in the robust canal world. And Ducrau had slept with her! Had it

been on board, while Gassin was drinking at some café, or in some sordid furnished room?

The other was a photograph of Jean Ducrau, who had just been buried. It was a snapshot taken on board the *Golden Fleece*. He was wearing white trousers. On the back was written:

To my little friend Aline, who will perhaps be able to read this herself some day. From her big friend Jean.

And now he was dead. He had hanged himself.

Maigret put the photographs back.

'Have you found anything?' asked the clerk.

'Only dead faces!' was the answer, as Maigret opened the cell door.

*

'Well, Père Gassin?'

The old man rose from the bench where he had been sitting, and Maigret noticed with a frown of annoyance that his tie and his shoe-laces had been taken away from him. He called the clerk.

'Who did that?'

'It's the usual procedure.'

'Give them back to him.'

The old boatman looked so miserable that this police regulation seemed a gratuitous insult.

'Sit down! Here are your belongings, except the gun, of course. Now tell me, have you finished your drunk? Are you sober and in your right mind?'

Maigret sat down opposite him, with his elbows on his knees, and the old man bent down and began to fasten his laces.

'You may have noticed that I've never bothered you. You could come and go as you liked and drink yourself blind. We won't go into all that. You'll pick up all right. Do you hear?'

Gassin looked up, and Maigret suddenly realized that his reason for bending down might have been to hide a smile.

'Why do you want to kill Ducrau?'

The smile had vanished. The wrinkled old face turned to Maigret's expressed only a perfect tranquillity.

'I haven't killed anyone yet!

This was actually the first time Maigret had heard him speak, and he deliberately spoke in a toneless voice, as if it were natural to him.

'I know. But you want to?'

'Perhaps I do.'

'Ducrau?'

'Perhaps him, perhaps someone else.'

It was quite obvious that he was not drunk. But he had been drinking, or else it was the remains of his previous libations. On every other occasion he had been exaggeratedly ill-tempered. To-day he was too calm.

'Why did you buy a gun?'

'Why are you at Charenton?'

'I don't see the connexion.'

'I do.'

And, as Maigret was silenced for a moment by this swift answer, he added:

'With this difference, that it's none of your business.'

He picked up the second shoe-lace and started threading it through the eyelet-holes of his shoes. Maigret had to bend down, with his hand to his ear, in order to hear the words which Gassin was muttering into his beard. Did the old man care whether he heard or not, or was it a last drunken soliloquy?

'Ten years ago, the owner of the *Cormorant* stopped outside a fine house in Châlons, where a doctor lived. His name was Louis – the man's, not the doctor's. He was nearly off his head with joy and excitement, because his wife, who was thirty, was at last going to have a child.'

Every now and then the walls shook as a tram went by, and the door-bell of some shop near by tinkled incessantly.

'For eight years they had been hoping for a baby. Louis was prepared to give all their savings to have it. So he went to a doctor whom I knew, a dark little man with spectacles, and explained how afraid he was that the confinement might take place in some God-forsaken hole of a village, and that he would prefer to stay on at Chlâons as long as was necessary.'

Gassin straightened up, his face a little suffused.

'A week passed. The doctor came every evening. At last the pains began, about five in the afternoon. Louis couldn't stay still. He wandered about the deck and the embankment. He lived on the doctor's doorstep. He took him almost forcibly to see his wife. The doctor swore that she was doing splendidly and that everything would go without a hitch. It would be enough to call him at the last moment.'

Gassin spoke as if he were reciting a litany.

'Do you know that part of the country? I can still see the house as if it were there in front of me, a large new villa with long windows all lit up, because the doctor was giving a party. He was all dressed up and soused with scent, and his moustache was curled. Twice he dashed across to see Louis' wife, his breath smelling first of wine and then of liqueurs.

' "Splendid! Splendid!" he kept saying. "I'll be back in a moment."

'Then he would run back to the house. Someone put on a gramophone record and on the curtains were shadows of couples dancing.

'Louis' wife was groaning, and Louis was crying with despair. He was terrified at what was happening. An old woman from another barge anchored farther up swore that the child was coming out wrong.

'At midnight Louis rang the doctor's bell and was told that he was just coming.

'At half-past twelve he rang again. The hall was filled with the sound of music.

'And Louis' wife was screaming so loudly that passers-by stopped for a moment on the embankment and then hurried on.

'At last the guests cleared out. The doctor came, not quite tight, but not quite sober. He took off his jacket and turned up his sleeves.

' "We'll perhaps have to use forceps," he said.

'They were terribly cramped for space, and kept getting in each other's way. Then the doctor began talking of crushing the baby's head.

' "But you can't do that," Louis cried.

' "You want me to save the mother, don't you?"

'He was sleepy after his party. He couldn't go on. He began to lose his grip. An hour later he stood up, and Louis noticed that his wife had stopped crying and was lying quite still – '

Gassin looked Maigret in the eyes and concluded:

'Louis killed him.'

'The doctor?'

'Quite calmly. He put one bullet through his head, one through his belly, then opened his mouth, as if he were going to make him swallow the revolver, and fired again.

'The barge was auctioned three months later.'

Why was Gassin smiling? Maigret preferred him dead-drunk and malevolent.

'What are you going to do with me now, Inspector?' he asked incuriously.

'Will you promise not to do anything silly?'

'What do you call silly?'

'Ducrau has always been your friend, hasn't he?'

'We come from the same village, and we've been in the same boat.'

'He's very fond of you.'

Maigret said it rather lamely.

'Perhaps!'

'Tell me, Gassin, who are you after? I'm talking as man to man.'

'What about you? I'm asking you too. Who are you after? You're looking for something. Well, what have you found?'

It was quite unexpected. All the time that Maigret had thought of him as a hopeless drunkard getting tight in a corner, he had been working out the whole case for himself. That was what he was now giving the Inspector to understand.

'I've found nothing very precise.'

'Neither have I.'

But he was on the point of doing so. That was the intent look meant. Maigret had been right to return his tie and shoe-laces. The affair had nothing to do with this mouldy police station – not even with the police. They were two men face to face.

'You had nothing to do with the attack on Ducrau, had you?'

'Nothing at all,' was the ironic answer.

'Nor with Jean Ducrau's suicide?'

Gassin said nothing, but slowly shook his head.

'And you're neither a friend nor a relation of Bébert. So you've no reason for hanging him.'

The boatman rose with a sigh, and for the first time Maigret realized how little and old he was.

'Tell me what you know, Gassin. Your friend at Châlons left nobody behind him. You have a daughter.'

Immediately he was sorry he had said that. Gassin shot such an agonized look of enquiry at him that he felt he must lie, and lie well, at all costs.

'She will get better.'

'Perhaps.'

He spoke as if he didn't care. That wasn't the real problem. Suddenly Maigret knew what it was. They were in regions he had no wish to explore. Gassin said nothing, but that look of agony was still in his eyes.

'Up to now you have lived happily on your barge.'

'Do you know why I always do the same trip?' Gassin asked. 'Because it was the one we went on when we were married.'

His face was taut and streaked with fine black lines.

'Answer me, Gassin, do you know who attacked Ducrau?'

'Not yet.'

'Do you know why his son took the blame?'

'Perhaps.'

'Do you know why Bébert was hanged?'

'No.'

It was obvious that he was telling the truth.

'Are you going to put me in gaol?'

'I can't keep you in gaol for being unlawfully in possession of a firearm. I only ask you to keep calm and patient and to wait until I have finished my enquiry.'

Gassin's eyes were beginning to look aggressive again.

'I'm not the doctor at Châlons, you know,' Maigret added.

Gassin smiled. Maigret rose, worn out by this farcical interrogation.

'I'm going to let you out straight away.'

There was nothing else to be done. Outside there was still this fantastic spring weather, with never a drop of rain, not even a cloud. In the little square the soil round the chestnut-trees was hard and white. The municipal water-carts had spent the whole day watering the streets, and the tar was as soft as if it were the middle of summer.

On the Seine and the Marne, on the canal itself, little painted or varnished skiffs with bare-armed rowers threaded in and out between the barges.

All along the pavements the cafés had spread their tables, and whiffs of cold beer greeted the passer-by.

Many of the boatmen had not yet returned to their barges, but were wandering from one café to another, their faces growing redder over their starched collars.

An hour later, Maigret was informed that Gassin had not gone home either, but had taken one of Marthe's rooms above the dance-hall.

CHAPTER 8

It was the sort of Sunday that exists only in one's childhood memories, brand-new and fresh as paint, from the periwinkle-blue sky to the water, bright with the reflections of houses. The very taxis were greener and redder than usual, and the empty streets cheerfully echoed every sound.

Maigret asked the taxi-driver to stop just before the Charenton lock, and Lucas, whom he had left to keep an eye on Gassin, came out of the café to meet him.

'He hasn't stirred. He spent yesterday evening drinking with the dance hall woman, but he hasn't left the house. He's probably still asleep.'

The barges, like the streets, were deserted, except for one small boy sitting on a hatchway putting on his Sunday shoes.

'The crazy girl,' Lucas went on, pointing to the *Golden Fleece*, 'seemed a bit worried yesterday. Four or five times she popped up the hatchway, and once got as far as the café at the corner. Some boatmen saw her and went to get the old boy, but he wouldn't go back. What with the funeral and one thing and another, everything was a bit upside down. Up to midnight most of the barge people were on deck looking over in this direction. The dance-hall had opened up again: you could hear the music from the lock. The boatmen were still in their Sunday clothes. Well, the crazy girl must have finally gone off to sleep, but it was scarcely daylight before she was wandering about the place in her bare feet, as worried as a mother cat. On her way past, she woke up the people in several of the barges and for a couple of hours you could see them in their night-clothes at every hatchway. All the same, no one told her where the old boy was. It was probably the best thing to

do. A woman took her back to the *Golden Fleece*, and now they're making breakfast. Look, you can see the smoke coming out of the chimney there.'

Smoke was rising straight up in the air from most of the barges, whose inhabitants were dressing in the aroma of freshly-made coffee.

'I want you to go on watching him,' said Maigret.

Instead of going straight back to his taxi, he went into the dance-saloon. The door was open. Inside, Marthe was sprinkling water on the floor before she swept it.

'Is he upstairs?' Maigret asked.

'I think he's just got up. I heard him moving.'

Maigret went a few steps up the stairs and listened. Someone was walking about. A door opened, and Gassin stood there, his face covered with soap. He shrugged his shoulders and shut the door again.

*

Ducrau's country house at Samois stood on the Seine, with only the towing-path between. It was a large place, with three wings forming a courtyard. When the taxi stopped, Ducrau was waiting by the gates, dressed in navy blue as usual, with a new cap on his head.

'You can send your taxi away,' he said. 'I'll send you back in my car.'

He waited while the Inspector paid the fare; then, with unexpected caution, he himself locked the gates, put the key in his pocket, and called to the chauffeur who was hosing a grey car at the far end of the courtyard:

'Edgar! You're not to let anyone in. And if you see anyone hanging round the house, come and tell me.'

Then he looked seriously at Maigret and asked:

'Where is he?'

'Getting dressed.'

'And Aline? Isn't she in an awful state?'

'She's been looking for him. But there's a neighbour with her in the barge now.'

'Would you like a snack? Lunch won't be until one.'

'No, thank you.'

'A glass of something?'

'Not just now.'

Ducrau stayed in the courtyard, looked at the house, and pointed to a window with his stick.

'The old girl isn't dressed yet. And you'll soon hear the young people squabbling away.'

And sure enough, from an open window on the first floor came the sound of voices raised in altercation.

'The kitchen garden and the old stables are at the back. The house on the left belongs to some big publisher, and the one on the right to some English people.'

There were country houses and villas all the way from the Seine to the forest of Fontainebleau. From the next garden came the soft thud of tennis-balls. The gardens all adjoined. An old lady in white was lying in a rocking-chair on the edge of a lawn.

'You really won't have a drink?'

Ducrau seemed a little dazed, as if he did not quite know what to do with his guest. He had not shaved. His eyes were heavy.

'Well! This is where we spend our Sundays.'

He said it as if he were saying:

'Isn't life just hell?'

All around was peace, with contrasts of light and shade, white walls, rambler roses, and gravel paths. The Seine flowed gently past, flecked with little boats, and horsemen rode along the towing-path.

Ducrau led the way to the kitchen garden, filling his pipe. He pointed out a peacock floundering about in a bed of lettuce, and growled:

'That's one of my daughter's ideas. She thinks it looks

grand. She wanted to have swans as well, but there's no water.'

His thoughts were obviously far away. Suddenly he looked Maigret in the eyes and said:

'Well, have you changed your mind?'

It wasn't just a casual question. He had obviously been wanting to ask it for a long time, probably since the day before, and it occupied his whole mind. He attached so much importance to it that it obsessed him.

Maigret watched the smoke rising from his pipe into the clear air.

'I leave the police on Wednesday.'

'I know.'

They understood each other very well without seeming to. It wasn't just chance that made Ducrau lock the gates, nor was it chance that led them to choose the deserted kitchen garden for their stroll.

'Isn't that sufficient?' Maigret asked, so low and with such detachment that it almost seemed as if he had not spoken.

Ducrau stopped dead and stared fixedly at a melon under a cloche. When he raised his head again, his expression had changed. A moment before, his guard had been down. He was a worried, anxious man.

But all that was over. His face had hardened. There was a malicious smile on his lips. He was no longer looking at Maigret but at his surroundings, the sky and the windows of the big white house.

'So you've come to see me, eh?'

And at last his eyes returned to Maigret and looked him full in the face. It was the look of a man who forces himself to be optimistic and, because he is unsure of himself, tries to threaten and bluff.

'Let's talk about something else. Shall we go and have a drink after all? Do you know what surprises me? That your

enquiries haven't led you to Decharme or my mistress or – '

'I thought you wanted to talk about something else.'

But Ducrau, childishly anxious to go on, touched Maigret on the shoulder and said:

'Play fair for a minute and tell me whom you suspect.'

'Suspect of what?'

They were both smiling. From a distance it looked as if they were sharing some harmless joke.

'Of having done it all.'

'And suppose there's more than one person involved?'

Ducrau frowned. This answer obviously did not please him. He pushed open what seemed to be the door of the kitchen, where his wife stood in her dressing-gown, giving orders to a scullery-maid. She was horrified at being discovered before she had done her hair, and stammered out excuses, with her hand to her head, until her husband growled:

'Oh, shut up. The Inspector doesn't care a damn. Mélie, go to the cellar and bring up a bottle of – what'll it be? – champagne? No? Well, we'll find *apéritifs* in the sitting-room.'

He slammed the door viciously, and in the sitting-room busied himself among some bottles that were stacked on a window-ledge.

'*Pernod*? Or *gentiane*? You see what she's like. And her daughter's even worse. If she weren't in mourning she'd be down in no time, wearing a pink silk dress and her best party smile.'

He filled two glasses and pushed an armchair towards the detective.

'I'm sure our neighbours have a good laugh at us, especially when we eat on the terrace, as we shall do shortly.'

His gaze wandered over the various objects in the richly

furnished room. There was an enormous grand piano.

'Your health! When I wanted to buy my first tug there were difficulties about payment, of course. The bank promised to let me do it in twelve instalments if I had a guarantee. So I asked my father-in-law. He refused, on the ground that it wouldn't be right for him to risk sending his family to the workhouse. And now I support the old woman.'

He obviously bore such a grudge that it made him feel ill even to talk about it. He searched round for another topic of conversation, and drew up a box of cigars.

'Won't you have one? Or smoke your pipe if you prefer it.'

All the time he was speaking he kept fiddling with an embroidered cloth which covered the table.

'This is how they spend their time. And my son-in-law does those chess competitions you see in the back pages of the newspapers.'

His mind was not on what he was saying, and Maigret, who was now beginning to know him well, smiled as he observed how far Ducrau's eyes were from his words.

For his eyes kept a ceaseless watch on the detective. He was still trying to make him out, still wondering whether his first estimate of him had been correct, and above all, what his weak point was.

'What did you do with your mistress?'

'I told her to clear out. I don't even know where she went. But she showed the good taste to follow the coffin in deep mourning, with her face all painted up like an old tart's.'

He was fuming with rage. Everything seemed to irritate him, even inanimate objects like the table-cloth, which he kept fingering.

'At *Maxim's* she was gay and attractive. She stood for something different from my wife and her sort. I set her up

in her own flat, and she just got fat and spent her time making her own clothes and doing her own cooking like any concierge.'

Maigret had long understood the tragi-comedy which poisoned Ducrau's whole existence.

He had started from scratch and made his pile. He did business with big city men and got a glimpse of their lives. But his dependents dragged him down. His wife kept the same habits and did the same things at Samois as when she did the washing on the tug, and her daughter was just a caricature of a *petite bourgeoise*.

Ducrau suffered from it all as if from a personal injury, and realized perfectly well that his neighbours made fun of him in spite of his big white house and chauffeur and gardener.

He watched them enviously on their lawns, got furious, and vented his rage by spitting, sticking his hands in his pockets, and shouting coarse remarks.

The two men heard steps on the stairs. Ducrau sighed, and said with a wink:

'Here they come!'

It was his daughter and her husband, dressed in formal black, well groomed, and bowing with the sorrowful discretion of those who have sustained a great loss.

'Delighted to meet you, Monsieur. My father has often talked about you – '

'That'll do. Have a drink.'

Their presence increased his irritation. He stood at the window and gazed out at the Seine, which was framed in the gates.

'You'll excuse us, Monsieur le Commissaire?'

The son-in-law was blond, correct, and resigned.

'A spot of port?' he asked his wife.

'What are you having, Monsieur le Commissaire?'

Ducrau at the window was drumming his fingers with

impatience. Perhaps he was thinking of something malicious to say. Anyhow, he suddenly turned round and growled:

'The Inspector was asking all about you. He knows you're in debt, and was just pointing out to me that my death would settle all your debts. And Jean's death doubles your prospects.'

'Papa!' his daughter cried, applying a black-edged handkerchief to her eyes.

'Papa!' he mimicked. 'Well? What's the matter? Am *I* in debt? Do *I* want to go and live in the Midi?'

The two of them were accustomed to this sort of thing. Decharme knew how to deal with it. He gave a faint sad smile, as if he were treating the whole conversation as a joke or a mere passing ill-humour. He had pretty hands, which he kept stroking as he played with his platinum wedding-ring.

'Did I tell you they are expecting a child?'

Berthe Decharme hid her face. It was all highly embarrassing. Ducrau knew, and did it on purpose. The chauffeur crossed the courtyard, and Ducrau opened the window and called to him.

'What's up?'

'You told me to – '

'That's right. Well?'

Rather confused, the chauffeur pointed to a man who had sat down on the grass outside the gates and was taking a piece of bread out of his pocket.

'Idiot!' said Ducrau, and shut the window. A servant appeared in a white apron and started laying the table under a red umbrella on the terrace.

'Have you any idea what there is for lunch?'

His daughter took advantage of this to leave the room, and Decharme went over to the piano and started turning over some sheets of music.

'Do you play?' Maigret asked.

Ducrau answered for him.

'Him? Not on your life! Nobody here can play. The piano's just a piece of swank, like everything else.'

There were beads of sweat on his forehead in spite of the coolness of the room.

The neighbours on the left were still playing tennis and a footman was taking round refreshments when the Ducraus sat down to lunch on their terrace.

The big red umbrella was insufficient protection from the sun, and there were damp semicircles under the arms of Berthe Decharme's black silk gown. Ducrau was so much on edge that it made one tired even to look at him. Everything that he did or said was deliberately embarrassing.

When the fish was served, he demanded to have it brought to him, sniffed it, touched it with the tip of his finger, and growled:

'Take it away!'

'But, Émile – '

'Take it away!' he repeated.

His wife came back from the kitchen with red eyes. Ducrau turned to Maigret.

'You retire on Wednesday,' he said ponderously. 'Wednesday evening or Wednesday noon?'

'Wednesday midnight.'

Ducrau turned to his son-in-law.

'Do you know how much I have offered him if he'll come and work for me?' he asked aggressively. 'One hundred and fifty thousand francs. Two hundred thousand if he likes.'

He still kept ceaseless watch on everything that went on behind the gates. He was afraid. Maigret was the only one who knew that, and so was more ill at ease than any of

the others. There was something tragic and slightly hateful and ridiculous in the sight of the poor devil fighting down his panic.

When coffee was brought, Ducrau started on another topic.

'Here we are,' he said, pointing to the company sitting round the table, 'the so-called family circle. First there's the man who bears the whole burden on his shoulders, always has done, and always will do until he cracks up. Then there are the others who hang on him like dead-weights – '

'Must you start this all over again?' his daughter asked, getting up.

'That's right,' was the answer. 'Go and have a little walk. It may be your last Sunday outing.'

She shuddered. Her husband wiped his lips on his table-napkin and looked up. Madame Ducrau did not seem to have heard.

'What are you implying?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. Go on with your preparations for your move to the Midi!'

The son-in-law, who seemed to have very little feeling for the right occasion, remarked pleasantly:

'Berthe and I have been thinking things over. Perhaps the Midi is a bit far. We might be able to find something on the Loire – '

'That's right. You can ask the Inspector here to find something for you quite near him, so as to give him the pleasure of having you as neighbours.'

'You live in the Loire district?'

'He's going to. Perhaps.'

Slowly Maigret turned and looked at Ducrau, and this time he was not smiling. He had just had a terrific shock, and his nerves were still tingling. For days he had been floundering about in a state of sickening uncertainty, and

now suddenly everything was changed by the magic of one little word.

'*Perhaps!*'

Ducrau returned his look with equal gravity, equally conscious of the significance of that moment.

'Whereabouts is your place?' asked Decharme, but his voice was only a drone to which neither of them paid any attention. Ducrau's breathing quickened and his nostrils dilated. His glistening face shone with the excitement of the struggle.

They had circled round each other long enough, had taken each other's measure without venturing to come to grips.

Maigret, too, breathed more freely now. He began to fill a pipe, digging his fingers voluptuously into his tobacco-pouch.

'For my part, I'm quite fond of the part round Cosnes or Gien – '

Tennis-balls flew across the red court, and there was a flutter of white dresses. A little motor-boat picked its way along the Seine, purring like a contented cat.

Madame Ducrau rang a bell for the servant, but it meant nothing to the two men who were face to face at last.

'You'd better go up to your wife. She's probably crying in her bedroom.'

'Do you think so? I've an idea it is her "condition" that's making her nervous.'

'Get out, you nitwit!' Ducrau roared, and his son-in-law took himself off, murmuring excuses. 'And you,' he said, turning to his wife, 'what do you think you're ringing the bell for?'

'Mélie has forgotten the liqueurs.'

'Don't bother. If we want liqueurs we'll get them for ourselves. Won't we, Maigret?'

It was 'Maigret' now, not 'Inspector'.

He rose, wiped his lips on his table-napkin, threw out his chest, and looked all round. He took great draughts of fresh air, and he, too, purred with content.

'What do you think of it?'

'Of what?'

'Everything! All this! It does you good. Look, even the lock keeper having his lunch outside with his family. When I was only a hauler, right back in the early days, I used to have my lunch on the bank with Gassin, and then the horses had to rest for a couple of hours, so we used to bury our noses in the grass and have a snooze while the grasshoppers jumped over our heads.'

It almost looked as if he had double pupils to his eyes. First there was the slightly blurred look which embraced the whole landscape; then, in the centre, was another look, sharp, savage and calculating, which had nothing to do with the first.

'Will you come for a stroll to aid the digestion?'

He went to the gates and unlocked them. But before stepping out onto the towing-path he put his hand in his hip-pocket, ostentatiously drew out his Browning, and checked the loading. It was childish and melodramatic, but nevertheless impressive. Maigret did not move a muscle. He even pretended not to have seen anything.

Voices came from the room upstairs, one of them raised in anger.

'What did I tell you? They're at it again,' said Duclau.

Revolver in pocket, he walked along beside Maigret, throwing out his chest like a Sunday excursionist. He stopped a few minutes at the lock and watched the water trickling through thousands of little fissures in the gate, and the family sitting round the table at their front door.

'What's the date?'
'The thirteenth of April.'
He looked at Maigret suspiciously.
'The thirteenth, is it?' Oh!'
They resumed their walk.

CHAPTER 9

It was the time of day when things take on a deeper but less intense colour, withdrawing into themselves as if waiting for the approach of twilight. One could look into the face of the red sun that hung over the wooded hills. The reflections in the water were richer and bolder, yet there was already something cold and extinct about them.

Strollers just above the lock were watching a young man who was trying to get his motor-boat to start. The engine would make a few turns, splutter and cough, then he would give another impatient tug at the starter.

It was Ducrau who suddenly stopped, his hands behind his back, and stared at the buildings which stood on the bank at that point. Maigret had noticed nothing unusual.

'Look, Inspector!'

The buildings consisted mostly of restaurants and expensive hotels, and there was a long line of cars parked outside. But between two of the restaurants was a little café for chauffeurs, and as it was Sunday, a few tables had been set up outside to look like a restaurant terrace.

Maigret tried to find what he was supposed to see.

Passers-by cast long shadows. There were a few straw-boaters and a fair number of light summer dresses. At last Maigret's gaze fell on the familiar silhouette of Sergeant Lucas sitting on the little terrace, with a pint of beer in front of him. Lucas had seen Maigret, and smiled to him across the road. He seemed perfectly content to be sitting there on that fine Sunday under the shadow of the red and yellow awning beside a bay-tree in a tub.

On his right, at the end of the terrace, Maigret spotted old Gassin sitting with his elbows on a ridiculously small table, busy writing a letter.

People were coming back from some fête or other, marching in procession and raising clouds of dust. No one noticed that two men in the crowd had stopped, nor that one of them thrust his hand into his pocket and asked:

'Is this what is known as lawful self-defence?'

Ducrau was not joking. He could not take his eyes off the old man. Every now and then old Gassin would raise his head as if considering what he was going to write, but he seemed to see nothing of what was going on around him.

Maigret did not answer, but signed to Lucas and took a few steps in the direction of the lock, with Ducrau reluctantly following him.

'Did you hear what I asked you?'

The motor-boat had got off at last, skimming the water and tracing an arabesque in its wake.

'Well, Chief, here I am.'

Lucas had come up, and stood looking at the Seine with the rest.

'Has he a gun on him?'

'No. I went to his room and there wasn't one there. And he didn't stop anywhere on the way.'

'Has he spotted you?'

'I don't think so. He's too much taken up with his own thoughts.'

'See you get hold of the letter. So long!'

'You still haven't answered my question!' Ducrau persisted on their way back.

'Well, you heard for yourself. He hasn't got a gun.'

They were near the white house now.

'In fact,' Ducrau sneered, 'we've each of us got our guardian angel. You'd better stay to dinner. And stay the night too, if you like.'

He opened the gate. His wife, daughter, and son-in-law were having tea on the terrace. The chauffeur was mending

an inner tube, which made an aggressive red circle on the gravel of the courtyard.

*

They were both lying back in basket-chairs. Beside them was a table with bottles and glasses on it. They had not joined the rest of the family on the terrace, but stayed in the courtyard near the door of the sitting-room, which, behind them, was gradually being swallowed up in the darkness. The street-lamps had been lit far too soon and made patches of light in the clear air. The Sunday crowds were melting away and being absorbed into the railway station.

'Do you think,' asked Maigret in his most placid tone, 'that someone who has already killed a man would have much hesitation in killing a second, or even a third if need be, to ensure his peace of mind?'

Ducrau was smoking a meerschaum with a cherry-wood mouthpiece so long that he had to hold the bowl. He looked at the detective.

'What do you mean?' he asked softly, after a long pause.

'Nothing in particular. I was thinking that here we are, sitting comfortably at the close of a fine Sunday. The cognac is good. Our pipes are drawing well. Old Gassin down there will be having an *apéritif*. And on Wednesday evening what is preoccupying us now will have ceased to preoccupy us. The problem will have been solved.'

He spoke dreamily. Up on the terrace Decharme struck a match, and for a moment the flame danced against the pale sky.

'Well, you see, I am wondering which of us won't be here any longer.'

Ducrau shuddered. He made no attempt to disguise the fact.

'That's not a nice thing to say.'

'Where were you last Sunday?'

'Here. We always spend our Sundays here.'

'And your son?'

Ducrau's face hardened.

'He was here too. He spent two hours tinkering with the radio, but it hasn't gone any better since.'

'And now he is dead and buried. Bébert is dead. That's why I'm wondering who will occupy this chair next Sunday.'

They could scarcely see each other. The smell of pipe-tobacco floated over the courtyard. Ducrau jumped when someone got off a bicycle just opposite the gates.

'What is it?' he called out from his seat.

'A message for Monsieur Maigret.'

A country lad pushed a letter through the bars of the gate.

'Someone near the tobacconist's asked me to give you this.'

'That's right. Thanks.'

Ducrau had not moved. The women had gone in. It had grown too cold on the terrace for them, and Decharme was standing near the steps, obviously longing to join the two men but not quite certain of himself.

Maigret opened an envelope addressed to him. Inside was the letter which Gassin had been writing. It was addressed to *Madame Emma Chatereau, Café des Maraîchers, Lazicourt (Haute-Marne)*.

'We can put the light on in the sitting-room,' Ducrau growled, not daring to ask any questions.

'I can still see well enough here.'

It was written on the café notepaper, in violet ink. The handwriting started off very small and ended off twice as big.

DEAR EMMA,

I write to tell you that I am well and hope this finds you as it leaves me at present. Also I wish to say that if anything happens

I should like to be buried back at home near mother and not at Charenton as I said before. So you won't have to go on paying for the grave. With regard to the money in the Savings Bank, you will find the passbooks and all the papers in the sideboard drawer. Everything is left to you. You will be able to build that extra storey on to your house at last. Otherwise all is well as I know what I have to do.

Ever your affectionate brother

Maigret transferred his gaze from the small sheet of paper to where Ducrau sat pretending to be thinking of something else and puffing away at his pipe.

'Bad news?'

'It's the letter Gassin was writing.'

Ducrau controlled himself with an effort, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and looked at his son-in-law up on the terrace. Then, trying to conceal his impatience, he said:

'May I read it?'

'No.'

And Maigret folded up the letter and slipped it into his pocket-book, involuntarily giving a quick glance in the direction of the gates, behind which there was nothing to be seen but a pool of darkness.

'Who is he writing to?'

'His sister.'

'Emma? What's become of her? At one time she lived on the barge with him, and I rather think I was in love with her. Then she married a teacher in the Haute-Marne, and I believe he died shortly after.'

'She keeps an inn in the village.'

'It's turned quite chilly, don't you think? Do you mind if we go in?'

Ducrau switched on the light in the sitting-room, shut the door behind them, started to draw the shutters, then changed his mind.

'Mayn't I know what Gassin wrote to his sister?'

'No.'

'Have I anything to fear?'

'You know that better than I do.'

Ducrau smiled as he walked aimlessly about the room, and Maigret went into the garden and fetched the glasses and the cognac.

'Suppose there are two men,' he said, helping himself to a drink, 'one of whom has already killed someone and is consequently in danger of being locked up for the rest of his life, if not worse, and another who has never harmed a soul. In your opinion which of them is more dangerous?'

Ducrau's only answer was an even heavier smile.

'What remains unsolved is, who killed Bébert? What do you think, Ducrau?'

Maigret's voice was still quite friendly, but there was a deliberation about every word and syllable he uttered, as if each were pregnant with meaning.

Ducrau had finally sat down in an armchair, his short legs stretched out and his pipe on his chest. This gave him a double chin, and his eyes were hooded beneath his half-closed lids.

'Which brings us to the quite simple question. Who was it that one day abused Aline's simplicity and gave her a child?'

This time Ducrau jumped up as if he had been shot, with a scarlet face.

'Well?' he asked.

'Well? It wasn't you, of course. Nor was it Gassin, who has always believed he was her father. Nor was it your son Jean, who had an affection for her and who also – '

'Well? – What were you going to say?'

'Nothing bad. But I heard a few things about him. Tell me, Ducrau, after your first daughter was born, isn't it a fact that you were ill?'

Ducrau, with his back turned, gave a grunt.

'Perhaps that's the explanation. Certainly Aline was never all there. And your son was a sickly neurotic child, so sensitive that he had fits of hysteria. According to his friends, who regarded it as a bit of a joke, he wasn't quite a man. Hence this devoted but perfectly pure love for Aline.'

'What are you driving at?'

'This. If Bébert was murdered, it was because he was her lover. The *Golden Fleece* was often tied up at Charenton for weeks on end. Gassin spent all his evenings in cafés. The assistant lock-keeper was a solitary man, and one evening when he was roaming round the barges he may have seen Aline – '

'Stop!'

Ducrau, his veins standing out, hurled his pipe across the room.

'Is it true?'

'I know nothing about it.'

'Perhaps he didn't even need to use force, for she's not responsible for her actions. And no one knew! Not until her confinement. And who do you think Gassin suspected?'

'Me!' roared Ducrau. At the same time he jumped up, walked heavily across the room, and flung the door open.

Behind it stood his daughter. He raised his arm. She gave a cry, but instead of striking her he slammed the door violently.

'Go on.'

He faced Maigret like a wild beast at bay.

'I noticed that Aline was afraid of you – more than afraid. Gassin must have noticed it too. And of course you kept hanging round her.'

'That's true. Go on.'

'Probably someone else thought so too, knowing your weakness for women.'

'Go on. . . .'

'Your son. . . .'

'And then what happened?'

There were footsteps and voices overhead. Berthe was crying and telling her husband or her mother about her encounter with her father. Shortly after, the maid came in timidly.

'Well, what is it?'

'Madame wants you to come upstairs.'

He was speechless. It was too absurd. All he could do was to pour himself a glass of brandy and empty it at a single gulp.

'Where were we?'

'It seems that at least three people thought of you as a monster of depravity. Aline shut herself up in her cabin when she saw you coming, and cried when you were mentioned. Her father kept spying on you, and only waited for proof to be revenged on you. And your son tortured himself as only a neurotic can. Didn't he talk at one time of taking Holy Orders?'

'Six months ago. Who told you that?'

'It doesn't matter. He felt you were stifling and crushing him. Life held no joy for him except those three months he spent convalescing on the *Golden Fleece*.'

'Go on!'

Ducrau wiped his face and poured himself another drink.

'That's all. At least that explains his suicide.'

'I'd like to know how you work that out?'

'When he heard that you had been stabbed and thrown into the water from the barge in the middle of the night, he had no doubts at all. It was Aline whom you had molested and perhaps even seduced.'

'Couldn't he have spoken to me about it?'

'Did he ever speak to you about anything? Does your daughter? He had been refused Holy Orders, so he thought

of himself as an outcast, and he wanted at least to make a noble gesture. That's what adolescents dream about in their attic rooms. Luckily they don't often realize their dreams. Your son did. He saved Aline! He said he was guilty! Perhaps you can't understand. But any young man of that age would.'

'And how was it that *you* understood?'

'I'm not the only one. Gassin himself, for example, staggering from bar to bar dead-drunk, was silently working out the same problem. Yesterday evening he didn't go back to the barge. He left Aline alone and took a room opposite.'

Ducrau suddenly went over to the window and drew back the curtains, but he could see nothing in the bright light.

'Did you hear something?'

'No.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I don't know,' said Maigret simply. 'When two men are going to have a fight, one tries to separate them. But the law does not allow me to interfere with two men who are preparing to kill each other. It only allows me to arrest a murderer.'

Ducrau stretched his neck.

'But, for that, I must have proofs,' said Maigret.

'So what?'

'Nothing. On Wednesday at midnight I shall no longer be a member of the police force. You've just been reminding me of that. Have you by any chance got some mild tobacco?'

Ducrau indicated a stone jar, and Maigret took it down and filled his pipe and his tobacco-pouch. There was a knock at the door, and Decharme came in without waiting for an answer.

'I beg your pardon. My wife begs to be excused from

coming down to dinner. She's not feeling very well. It's her "condition".'

He did not go, but looked round for somewhere to sit, and gazed with astonishment at the glasses of cognac.

'Wouldn't you prefer an *apéritif*?'

Miraculously, Ducrau did not jump down his throat. He did not seem even to notice his presence. He picked up his pipe from the floor. It had not been broken – only the meerschaum had been cracked, and he moistened his finger and ran it along the crack.

'Is my wife upstairs?'

'She's just come down to the kitchen.'

'Excuse me a moment, Inspector.'

He looked as if he expected not to be excused, but Maigret made no sign.

'Queer chap!' Maigret sighed as the door closed. And Decharme, highly uncomfortable in the armchair where he had deposited his great body, but not daring to rise, cleared his throat and murmured:

'My father-in-law's sometimes very strange, as you have no doubt observed. In fact, he has his good and his bad moments.'

Maigret rose as if he were in his own house and closed the curtains, leaving a chink through which he could see out to the courtyard.

'One needs a great deal of patience – '

'Which I'm sure you have!' said Maigret.

'At present, for instance, the situation is rather delicate. I'm an officer, you know. It is obvious, of course, that the Army can't get mixed up in certain things – certain affairs – '

' – certain affairs?' Maigret repeated relentlessly.

'I can't exactly explain. I want to ask your advice. You have an official position too. Well, your presence here, coupled with certain rumours – '

'What rumours?'

'I can't quite explain – But supposing – It's deuced difficult to say – But this is just a supposition, you know. Suppose a man in a certain situation has put himself into a certain position – a position – '

'Have a glass of brandy.'

'No, thank you. I never touch spirits.'

But he was rather put off his stride. He had made up his mind to speak. It was no sudden impulse. And every word of his speech was prepared.

'When an officer has been "dishonoured", there is a tradition that his fellow-officers should point out his duty to him and leave him alone with a revolver. This prevents the scandal of criminal proceedings – '

'Who are you talking about?'

'No one. But I can't help being worried. And I must ask you either for definite assurance, or whether we ought to be prepared for – '

But he could not bring himself to be more precise. He rose with relief, and smiled while he awaited an answer.

'You're asking me whether your father-in-law is a murderer and whether I intend to arrest him?'

Maigret did not appear to be at all perturbed by the absence of Ducrau, who now reappeared, looking rather cooler, with his hair damp at the temples as if he had been bathing his face.

'We'll ask him,' said Maigret, drawing deeply at his pipe and balancing his glass of brandy in his hand. He avoided looking at Decharme, who had gone a ghastly white and did not dare open his mouth.

'Well, Ducrau, here's your son-in-law asking me whether you're a murderer and whether I'm going to arrest you.'

They must have heard him overhead, because the footsteps stopped dead. In spite of all his sang-froid, Ducrau seemed to have lost his breath.

'He asks – whether I – '

'Don't forget that he is an officer. He was just reminding me of their tradition in such situations. When an officer has been "dishonoured", as he so eloquently puts it, his fellow-officers leave him alone with his revolver.'

Ducrau's eyes relentlessly followed Decharme, who was walking rather aimlessly towards the far end of the room.

'Ah! – He said – '

For a few seconds it looked as if something terrible might happen. But gradually Ducrau's features relaxed, perhaps at the cost of a superhuman effort.

He smiled. His smile broadened into a grin. Then he laughed. He slapped his thighs and laughed.

'That's rich,' he bellowed at last, tears of laughter in his eyes. 'Decharme, my boy, what a charming fellow you are! Come on, children, let's go in to dinner! When an officer has been "dishonoured" – Decharme, you damned fool! And to think we're now going to sit down and guzzle together – '

Nobody watching Maigret carefully knocking the ashes out of his pipe and putting it back in his pocket would have guessed that his shirt was sticking to his body.

CHAPTER 10

The servant brought in the soup-tureen while Ducrau, with a comfortable sigh, tucked his table-napkin into his collar. The fire had not been lit, and Madame Ducrau, who seemed to be chilly, had thrown a black knitted shawl like an extinguisher round her shoulders.

Berthe's place opposite her father was vacant.

'Go and tell my daughter to come down!' he ordered the servant.

Then he helped himself to soup and put a great hunk of bread beside his plate. His wife started sniffing. He frowned the first few times, but finally he got tired of it.

'Have you a cold?'

'Yes, I think I must have,' she stammered, turning her head away so that he should not see that she was on the verge of tears again.

Decharme was listening to the sounds overhead while he manipulated his soup-spoon with the greatest elegance.

'Well, what did she say?' he asked when the servant reappeared.

'Madame Berthe says that she can't come down.'

Ducrau blew his soup noisily and turned to his son-in-law.

'You go and tell her she's to come down whether she's ill or not. Understand?'

Decharme left the room, and Ducrau looked round for something else to find fault with.

'Draw the curtains back, Mélie.'

He sat opposite the windows, which looked out on the courtyard, the gates, and the Seine beyond. He ate his bread, leaning his whole weight on the table and staring out into the darkness. Upstairs there were hurried

movements, whispers, and sobs. Decharme came back and announced to the company:

'She's coming.'

And a few minutes later his wife appeared. She had not taken the trouble to powder the shiny red patches on her face.

'Mélie!' Ducrau called.

He paid no attention to Maigret or any of the others. It was almost as if he had a separate existence and was pursuing some definite plan that had no reference to the rest of them.

'Clear away.'

As the maid leaned over the table to take the tureen, he gave her a slap on her backside. The servant at Charenton had been young, but Mélie was neither young nor charming.

'Tell me, Mélie,' he said, 'when did we last have a tumble?'

She jumped, made a vain effort to smile, and looked appealingly at her master, then at her mistress. Ducrau shrugged his shoulders and gave a pitying smile.

'There's another who thinks it's of some consequence. You can go. Actually it was this morning, when I was choosing the wine in the cellar.'

He could not help giving Maigret a look to see how he was reacting to all this, but the detective's thoughts were apparently miles away. Madame Ducrau did not react at all. She shrank a little deeper into her extinguisher and stared at the table-cloth, while her daughter dabbed at her red nose with her handkerchief.

'D'you see that?' Ducrau asked Maigret, with a jerk of his chin towards the courtyard.

A single gas-jet over the gatepost cast a tiny circle of light. In this circle stood the motionless figure of a man, leaning against the gate. He was only about ten yards away,

so that he could see everything that was going on in the brightly lit dining-room.

'It's him!' said Ducrau.

Maigret, who had very good eyesight, made out a second figure standing rather farther back on the river-bank.

While the servant, rigid with fright, was bringing in the joint and the potato purée, the detective tore a leaf out of a notebook and scribbled a few words on it.

'May I make use of your servant? Thank you. Mélie, I want you to go through the courtyard and out at the gates. First you will see an old fellow, but pay no attention to him. A few yards farther on you'll see someone else, a man of about thirty. Give him this note and wait for an answer.'

The girl scarcely dared move. Ducrau began carving the joint. Madame Ducrau, who was badly placed for seeing out of the window, was trying to make out what was going on outside.

'Do you like it underdone, Inspector?'

His hand was steady and his look composed, but there was something tragic in his attitude, remote from this dining-room and the people sitting there.

'Have you any money put by?' he suddenly asked Decharme.

'Me?' was the bewildered reply.

'Listen – ' his daughter began, trembling with anger or impatience.

'I advise you to keep quiet. And kindly sit down. If I ask your husband whether he has anything saved, I have my reasons. – Answer me!'

'Of course I haven't.'

'That's a pity! This joint is impossible. Did you cook it, Jeanne?'

'No, it was Mélie.'

He looked out of the window again, but could not see much in the darkness, hardly even the white patch of the

servant's apron as she returned. She handed a note to Maigret. There were raindrops on her hair.

'Is it raining?'

'A little. It's just beginning.'

Lucas had used the same paper, so that across Maigret's question *Has he a gun?* was the single word *No.*

It almost seemed as if Ducrau could read through the paper, for he asked:

'Has he a gun?'

Maigret hesitated, then nodded his head. Everyone had seen and heard. Madame Ducrau swallowed a mouthful of meat without chewing it, and even Ducrau, although he pretended not to care, and puffed out his chest and went on eating with affected gusto, could not restrain a shudder.

'We were discussing your savings – ' he continued.

And Maigret realized that Ducrau had got into his stride. He had found the right atmosphere, and from now onwards, nothing would stop him. He began by pushing aside his table-napkin and leaning more heavily on the table.

'Well, it's a pity! Supposing I were to pop off just now, or to-morrow, or any other time. You'd think you were well off, that I couldn't, even if I wanted to, disinherit my wife and my daughter – '

He tilted his chair forward as if he were telling some after-dinner story.

'Well, now let me inform you that you're not getting a sou.'

His daughter stared coldly at him, trying to take it in. Her husband went on eating with a look of concentration. Maigret, with his back to the window, was thinking that from where Gassin stood in the fine rain, the brightly lit dining-room must look like a peaceful domestic haven.

'You're not getting a sou,' Ducrau continued, his glance roaming from face to face, 'because I've just signed an agreement to that effect which will become valid at my

death, by which I transfer my entire estate to the Company. Forty million francs in round figures. And those forty million are not redeemable for twenty years!'

He laughed mirthlessly and turned to his wife.

'You'll be dead by then, old girl!'

'Please, Émile!'

She sat erect and dignified, but it was plain that she was nearly at the end of her endurance, and that at any moment she might sway and collapse in her chair.

Maigret looked for some fleeting trace of feeling or consideration in Ducrau, but he seemed rather to have become harder and more implacable, perhaps having determined to let nothing move him.

'You still advise me to do away with myself discreetly?' he asked his son-in-law, whose jaw was trembling.

'I swear – '

'Never swear! You know perfectly well that you're a scoundrel, a low, dirty, smooth-tongued scoundrel, and that's lower than anything else. What I'm wondering is which is the greater scoundrel of the two – you or my daughter? Would you like to make a bet? For weeks you've kept up this farce about the child you're going to have. Well, if you like, we'll call in a doctor, and if Berthe is really pregnant I'll give you a hundred thousand francs.'

Madame Ducrau's eyes opened wide at this sudden revelation of the truth, but her daughter still fixed her father with a look of calm hatred.

'Well, there we are!' Ducrau concluded, rising from the table with his pipe between his teeth. 'One, two, three! An old wife, a daughter, and a son-in-law. Not even a full table. And that's all, or, at least, all I'm supposed to have, in the way of dependants.'

Maigret, unconcerned, pushed back his chair and filled his pipe.

'Now I'm going to tell you something in front of the

Inspector, because it doesn't matter much if he's here. He's alone, and one's family can't give evidence: that's the law. I am a murderer! With these hands I have killed a man – '

His daughter started. His son-in-law stood up, stammering: 'Please – please – '

His wife did not move. Perhaps she had not heard. She was not crying, but just sat with her head in her clasped hands.

Ducrau marched heavily about the room, puffing at his huge pipe.

'Do you want to know why, and how I did the chap in?'

There was no answer. It was he who felt the need to talk without abandoning his threatening attitude. Abruptly he sat down opposite Maigret and held out his hand to him over the table.

'I'm no heftier than you, am I? Whatever people might think seeing the two of us together. Well, for twenty years I haven't met anyone who could return my grip. Hold out your hand!'

He gripped it in his with such a frenzy that Maigret seemed to feel the man's feverish intensity flowing into him. The contact seemed to release Ducrau's pent-up emotion. His voice had a warmer ring to it.

'You know the trick? It's to see which of us can force the other's fist down on the table. You're not allowed to use your elbow.'

The veins stood out on his forehead, his cheeks grew purple, and Madame Ducrau looked at him as if she expected him to have a stroke.

'You're not trying.'

It was true. Maigret suddenly exerted himself, and was amazed to feel his adversary's resistance weaken and his muscles relax at the slightest pressure. Ducrau's hand

touched the table, and he kept it there for a moment, his arm limp.

'That's how it all happened – '

He walked to the window, flung it open, and the damp river air crept into the room.

'Hi! Gassin! – '

Something moved beside the gas-lamp, but there were no steps on the gravel.

'I wonder what he's waiting for? After all, he's the only one who was ever really fond of me!'

As he said it, he gave Maigret a look which implied:

'Because you refused my friendship!'

There was red wine on the table, and he filled two glasses in rapid succession.

'Now listen. It doesn't matter if I give all the details, because I can deny the whole thing to-morrow if I like. One evening I went to Gassin's barge – '

'To see your mistress,' his daughter interrupted.

He shrugged his shoulders and said with an indescribable intonation:

'You poor fool! ... As I was saying, Maigret, I went there one evening feeling pretty sick, because those two beauties there had been trying to rook me again. I was surprised to see no light at the port-hole. I came up, and what do you think I found? A dirty dog lying flat on the deck watching my daughter undress.'

As he said 'my daughter' he gave a defiant look round, but nobody paid any attention.

'I bent down softly, seized him by the wrist and made him twist and turn like an eel until his body was half overboard – '

He again took up his stand in front of the window and spoke into the humid darkness, so that it needed an effort to catch his words.

'Up till then I had always been the heftiest fellow. Well,

I wasn't this time. I'd grown soft. The brute stopped twisting and took something out of his pocket. Suddenly I felt a stab in my back. He managed to recover his balance, and shoved me into the water with his shoulder – '

The most impressive part was perhaps his wife's immobility. It was cold. Through the open window came not only the chill of the night, but also its shadows and tremors, its fevers and menaces.

'Gassin! Hi, old boy!'

Maigret turned and saw Gassin leaning against the gates, which had not been locked.

'What a queer chap he is!' Ducrau muttered, returning to the table and pouring out wine for himself. 'He could have fired a hundred times. And he could have come up as close as he liked – '

The great drops of sweat that stood on his forehead showed that in those last few minutes he had been afraid the whole time. Perhaps it was even fear that drove him to open the window and stand in front of it.

'Mélie! Mélie! Confound you! – '

She appeared at last, without her apron and with her hat on.

'What's taken you?'

'I'm leaving.'

'Before you leave, go and bring in the old man at the gate. Tell him I must talk to him.'

Mélie did not move.

'Go on!'

'No, monsieur!'

'You refuse to do what I say?'

'I won't go, monsieur!'

She was livid, this poor skinny flat-chested creature, devoid of all femininity or charm, who was now standing up to Ducrau.

'You refuse?'

He advanced on her with his arm raised.

'Yes! – Yes! – Yes! – '

He did not strike her. Instead, taken aback by her defiance, he walked past her as though she were not there, opened the door and crossed the courtyard.

His daughter remained motionless. The son-in-law leant over to see what was happening. But Ducrau's wife rose slowly and advanced noiselessly towards the window. Maigret seemed to be taking advantage of the general inattention to help himself to a drink, and he did not go to the window until he heard the creak of the gate.

The two men stood facing each other about a yard apart, an absurd contrast in proportions. It was impossible to hear what they were saying.

Then a plaintive voice, reedy as a child's, piped up beside Maigret:

'Oh, please! – Please!'

It was Madame Ducrau who gasped out this vague appeal to him as she gazed out into the night.

The two men were not quarrelling, only talking. They came into the courtyard, Ducrau's hand was on Gassin's shoulder, and he seemed to be propelling him forward. Before they came into the house, Decharme found time to ask Maigret:

'What have you decided?'

And the detective nearly replied with Ducrau's favourite word: *Merde!*

*

Gassin screwed up his eyes in the bright light. His wet shoulders glistened and he held his cap in his hand, perhaps subconsciously aware that he had come into a dining-room.

'Come and sit down!'

He sat on the edge of a chair, nursing his cap on his knees and looking down at his feet.

'Have a glass of wine with me. Now, now, you know what I told you. Later on you can do what you like. Isn't that so, Inspector? I always keep my word, you know.'

He clinked glasses with the old boatman and drank his wine at a single gulp, making a wry face.

'It's a pity you missed the beginning of this.'

He addressed his remarks to Gassin, but kept giving sidelong looks at Maigret.

'Isn't it true that I used to be able to throw anyone with one hand? Tell me.'

'It's true.'

It was quite fantastic to hear the old man's voice so amazingly soft and docile.

'Do you remember when we had that fight with those Belgians at Châlons? Well, that was the way that chap got me off my guard with his knife the other day. You don't know about that, but it doesn't matter. I was coming on to your boat and found him lying on his belly looking through the port-hole at the kid undressing – '

He seemed to take pleasure in saying it again, because it roused his anger.

'Now do you understand?'

Gassin shrugged his shoulders as if to say that he had understood for a long time.

'Listen, old boy. No, have a drink first. You too, Inspector. The others don't count, but, as they're here – '

Madame Ducrau had not sat down again, but stood against the wall, half-hidden by the curtain. Decharme was leaning against the mantelpiece. Only his wife remained at the table. Someone was moving about the house. The sound got on Ducrau's nerves. He opened the door, and the servant was discovered packing her bag in the corridor.

'No, my girl! Get out if you like. Get out or rot, but for heaven's sake keep quiet!'

'I wanted to tell the master – '

'I'm not the master. Do you want some cash? Here you are. I don't know how much is there. And I hope you're run over by a tram.'

That made him smile, and he felt much better for it.

He waited until the girl had bumped her case along to the front door, then locked it behind her and bolted it before he came back.

Meantime Gassin had not moved.

'That's one of the party gone. What were we saying? Oh yes, we were talking about the girl. If you'd been there, wouldn't you have done just the same?'

There were tears in the old man's eyes and his pipe had gone out. And all the time Maigret watched him intently and thought:

'If I don't find out in a minute or two what this is all about, something terrible will happen for which I shall be responsible.'

For what was apparently happening had no significance whatsoever. Something else, some other drama, was going on behind it all. The one man was talking, but the other was not listening. And it was this second man that Maigret was watching, but he could not even catch his eyes.

Could Gassin possibly be so indifferent at such a moment? He was not even drunk. Ducrau knew that, and was sweating profusely.

'I wouldn't have strangled him for what he did to me, but there was my son as well, for whose death he was really responsible, and then – '

He moved, and towered over his daughter.

'What are you looking at me like that for? Are you still thinking of that money you're not getting? D'you hear that, Gassin? I'm playing a little joke on them and not leaving them a sou when I die!'

Maigret suddenly rose to his feet and began to wander slowly and apparently aimlessly about the room.

'For I'll tell you one good thing. Your wife, my wife, all that doesn't count. What does count is the two of us when – '

Gassin's glass was in his left hand. His right hand was still in his jacket-pocket. He hadn't a gun, that was certain. Lucas wasn't the man to make a mistake.

On one side of him, two yards away, was Madame Ducrau, on the other was Berthe.

Ducrau stopped in the middle of his sentence when he saw Maigret standing motionless behind Gassin. What followed was all over so quickly that no one realized what was happening. Maigret leant forward and put his strong arms round old Gassin's arms and chest. There was a brief struggle. The poor old man tried in vain to get free. Berthe screamed with fright, and her husband took a couple of steps forward. Then Maigret put his hand in Gassin's pocket and took something out of it. That was all. Gassin, freed again, sat getting his breath back. Ducrau waited to see what was in Maigret's hand, and the detective, his forehead covered with a cold sweat, took a moment to recover.

'There's no further danger,' he said at last.

He was standing behind Gassin, who was thus unable to see him. Ducrau came up, and Maigret opened his right hand to show him a stick of dynamite such as is used in a quarry.

'Go on – ' he said at the same time.

And Ducrau, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, his voice firm and only slightly hoarse, went on:

'As I was saying, *mon vieux* – '

He smiled. Then he laughed. Then he had to sit down.

'It's idiotic! – '

And indeed it was idiotic for a man like him to feel his legs giving way beneath him after it was all over. But even Maigret, leaning against the mantelpiece beside Decharme, was waiting for a slightly unpleasant sensation of giddiness to pass.

CHAPTER II

THE hiss of the rain through the open window was like the discreet sound of a garden being watered, and with every breath of air the smell of damp earth was wafted into the room.

From a distance – where Lucas was standing, for instance – the spectacle of those people motionless in the bright room must have seemed quite fantastic, like some old picture in a frame.

Ducrau was the first to recover.

'Well, that's that, *mes enfants*,' he sighed. The meaningless phrase somehow relaxed the tension, set things going again and dissipated the general stupefaction. He looked round in surprise, as if he had expected to see something changed.

But nothing had changed. Everyone was in the same place, fixed and motionless. So much so that the sound of Ducrau's footsteps as he walked across to the door was quite deafening.

'That fool Mélie has gone,' he said when he came back. Then he turned to his wife.

'You might make us some coffee, Jeanne.'

She rose obediently and went out. The kitchen must have been very near, because almost immediately came the sound of coffee being ground. Berthe rose and started to clear the table.

'Well, that's that!' said Ducrau again, particularly to Maigret. A sweep of his arm gave the clue to what he meant.

'The play is over. Here we are, back again in the family circle. We're going to have coffee. Listen to them rattling the cups and saucers.'

He seemed to have slumped, to be empty and sad. As if he did not quite know what to do. He took the stick of dynamite off the mantelpiece, where Maigret had put it, and looked for the name on it. Then he turned to Gassin.

'One of mine, isn't it? From the Venteuil quarry?'

The old man nodded. Ducrau gazed reminiscently at it.

'We always used to carry a few on the boat and explode them where there seemed to be plenty of fish!'

He put it back. He did not know whether to sit or stand. He probably wanted to talk but didn't quite know what to say.

'D'you understand, Gassin?' he sighed, taking up his stand about a yard away from the old boatman. Gassin gave him a look out of his little dead eyes.

'Or rather you don't understand. But it doesn't matter. Just look at them.'

He pointed at his wife and daughter, who were serving the coffee like a couple of black ants. The door was open and the hiss of a gas-stove was audible. The house was large and even magnificent, but somehow his family managed to reduce it to their own size.

'It's always been like that. I've been trying brute force on them for years. Then for a change I go to the office and shout at the mugs there! Then – No sugar, thanks!'

It was the first time he had not shouted at his daughter, and she looked at him with astonishment. Her eyes were swollen and her cheeks streaked with red.

'Well, you're a fine sight! And you know, Gassin, all women look like this at some time or another. That's the truth. Now don't worry. You're at home. I'm very fond of you. Once and for all one must be able – '

Madame Ducrau took some knitting, probably quite mechanically, sat down in a corner, and the long steel needles started clicking away. Decharme sat stirring his coffee.

'Do you know what has worried me more than anything I ever did? The fact that I went to bed with your wife. It

was silly, to begin with. I don't even know why I did it. And then afterwards I never felt quite the same with you. I used to see you from my window with her and then with the kid – You know, your wife can't have ever known herself whose kid it was. It may have been yours, or it may have been mine – '

Berthe sighed deeply, and he gave her a hard look. It was none of her business. He wasn't worrying about her or his wife.

'Do you understand, old man? Come on, say something.'

He walked round him without venturing to look at him. There were long silences between his sentences.

'Actually you've been the happier of us two!'

He was warm, although the night was cool.

'Shall I give you back the dynamite? I wouldn't bother to jump out of the way. But someone ought to stay and look after the kid back there. . . .'

His eyes fell on Decharme, who was smoking a cigarette. His face darkened, and with all the contempt he could muster he spat out:

'I hope all this is interesting you!'

There was no answer, and he went on:

'Oh, you can stay here! You mean no more to me than the coffee-pot – and, anyway, I don't believe you're capable of being a villain.'

He seized a chair by the back, and finally ventured to set it down opposite Gassin, sat himself down on it, and touched the old man's knee.

'Well? Don't you think we're all more or less in the same boat? Tell me, Inspector, what would I get for Bébert?'

He spoke as if they were having an after-dinner discussion about holidays. The rhythmical click of the needles continued.

'You would perhaps get off with two years. Or the jury might even acquit you.'

'I don't want an acquittal. I'm tired. Two years' rest would suit me all right. And then?'

His wife raised her head but did not look at him.

'Then, Gassin, I'll get a little tug, the smallest I can get. Like *L'Aigle I* –'

Then suddenly he cried out in a choked voice:

'In God's name, say something. Can't you understand that nothing else matters?'

'What do you want me to say?' said the old man.

He really did not know what to say. He was dazed. Nothing is so confusing as a drama that hangs fire. Suddenly he relapsed into his timid ways, and sat there like a poor relation, not daring to move.

Ducrau shook him by the shoulders.

'Don't you see? Perhaps we'll still do something! Tomorrow you'll go off on the *Golden Fleece*. Then one fine day, when you least expect it, you'll hear someone hailing you from a tug. And it'll be me in a boiler suit. The chaps won't understand it at all. They'll think I've crashed. But that's not it. The truth is that I'm sick of dragging all this about after me.'

He thought fit to give Maigret a defiant look.

'You know, I could still deny everything, and you'd probably never be able to prove it. That's what I meant to do. You've no idea the things I'd thought of. When I found myself at home with a stab in my back and the police on my track, I thought I'd use the opportunity to exasperate everyone.'

Involuntarily he turned a moment to his daughter and son-in-law.

'It was a fine opportunity!'

He passed his hand over his face.

'Gassin!' he cried, his eyes sparkling mischievously at some new thought.

The old man looked up.

'Is it all right now? You're not angry with me any longer? You know, if you'd like to have my wife – '

Ducrau wanted to cry, but he couldn't. And he wanted to embrace his old friend too. He went over to the window, closed it, and drew the curtains with the methodical gestures of a *petit bourgeois*.

'Listen, *mes enfants*. It's eleven o'clock. I propose that we should all sleep here, and to-morrow morning we can all leave together – '

All this, as well as what followed, was meant especially for Maigret.

'Don't be afraid. I've no desire to run away. On the contrary. Besides, your man will be downstairs. Jeanne, let's have a small grog before we go to bed – '

She put down her needles and obeyed like a servant. Ducrau went to the door leading to the courtyard and called into the damp night:

'Hi, sergeant! Your boss wants you.'

Lucas appeared, wet and rather bewildered.

'First of all, come and have a drink with us.'

So the evening ended with them all sitting round the table with steaming glasses in their hands. When Ducrau held out his to toast Gassin, the old man did not flinch, but drank noisily.

'Are the beds made?'

'I don't think so,' said Berthe.

'Well, go and make them.'

A little later, Ducrau confided to Maigret:

'I'm dead-beat, but I feel better all the same.'

The women went from room to room, making the beds and getting night-clothes for everyone.

Maigret put the stick of dynamite in his pocket and said to Ducrau:

'Hand over your revolver and swear that there isn't another one in the house.'

'I swear there isn't.'

The tension had gone from the atmosphere. It was rather like a house of death after the funeral is over, when the prevailing feeling is one of lassitude. Once again Ducrau came up to Maigret, this time to say with a gesture that embraced the whole household:

'You see! They manage to make something sordid even out of an evening like this!'

His cheeks were more flushed than usual. He was probably slightly feverish. He led the way upstairs. On both sides of the corridor were rooms, furnished just like hotel bedrooms. Ducrau pointed to the first one.

'This is mine. Believe it or not, I've never been able to sleep without my wife.'

She had heard. She was looking in a cupboard for slippers for Maigret. Her husband gave her a slap.

'Poor old girl! I believe I'll have to find a corner for you on the tub after all.'

Daybreak found Maigret leaning on his window-sill, fully dressed, with a rug wrapped round his shoulders, for the night had been damp and chilly. The gravel in the courtyard was still wet, and although the rain had stopped, great drops of moisture were still falling from the cornice and the trees.

The Seine was grey. A tug with its tail of barges was waiting at the lock. Far away on a loop of the river another string of barges was moving along between two dark masses of forest.

The surface of the water grew paler, and Maigret took off the rug and began to tidy himself up. Nothing had happened. There had not been a sound. For further reassurance he opened the door and discovered Lucas standing in the corridor.

'Come in.'

Lucas, pale with fatigue, took a drink out of the carafe, and stretched himself in front of the window.

'Nothing to report!' he said. 'No one stirred. The young couple were the last to go to sleep. They were still whispering away at one in the morning.'

The chauffeur, who slept out, arrived on his bicycle.

'I'd give a lot for a really hot cup of coffee,' said Lucas with a sigh.

'Well, go and make one.'

As if his wish had been foreseen, they heard a shuffling in the corridor, and Madame Ducrau came into sight in her dressing-gown, with a handkerchief round her head, tiptoeing along the corridor.

'Up already?' she said in surprise. 'I was just going to make breakfast.'

The events of the previous night had left no mark on her. She was just the same as ever, mournful and harassed.

'Stay in the corridor,' Maigret told Lucas.

He washed in cold water to get properly awake, and when he looked out again the river had changed colour and the string of barges was already leaving the lock. Birds were singing and the sky was red.

Down below, an engine was throbbing. The chauffeur was bringing the car out of the garage. But it was not yet broad daylight. Maigret's bones still felt chilly – the warmth of the sun had not yet penetrated the land.

'Here he comes, Chief – '

Ducrau came out of his room and into Maigret's, his braces hanging down his back and his hair tousled, his shirt unbuttoned and showing his hairy chest.

'Is there anything you want? Can't I lend you a razor?'

He too looked out at the Seine, but with a different eye.

'Hello! They've started on the sand again.'

The sound of a coffee-mill came from downstairs.

'Tell me, what am I allowed to take to prison?'

He said it quite genuinely, without any attempt at joking.

'If you like, we'll start directly after breakfast and deposit Gassin on his boat, and that may give me the chance of getting a glimpse of Aline.'

He was quite enormous, and in his state of undress looked just like a huge bear, with his trousers corkscrewing round his legs.

'There's something else I must ask you. You know what I said yesterday about the cash. I could do it, of course, to annoy my daughter and her husband, but, in the circumstances – '

It was all over. He had wakened up with a dry mouth and a hot head, like the aftermath of some tremendous orgy.

'Well, it would certainly please your rivals,' said Maigret.

That was enough. Ducrau was again the big boss.

'What lawyer would you recommend?'

The tug hooted to warn the next lock of its approach, and in the same manner announced the number of its barges. Madame Ducrau came up noiselessly in her felt slippers.

'Coffee is ready,' she said meekly.

'Do you mind if I come down as I am? It's an old habit. We'll go and knock up Gassin.'

Gassin's room was the one next to Maigret's. Ducrau knocked at the door.

'Gassin! – Wake up, old man! – Gassin!'

He was seized with foreboding. His fingers fumbled at the door-handle. He opened the door, took a step forward, and looked round at Maigret.

There was no one in the room. The bed had not been slept in, and the nightshirt remained with its sleeves folded just as Madame Ducrau had left it on the cover.

'Gassin!'

The window was not even open, and Maigret could not

help giving Lucas a suspicious look. But Ducrau had noticed something, a bulge behind the curtain. He went forward, coldly and calmly, and tore the hangings apart.

A body hung dark and limp against the wall. The rope could not have been very strong, because at the first touch it broke and the body of the old man fell on the ground in one piece like a statue – it almost looked as if it might break.

The smell of stale tobacco still hung about the dining-room, which was littered with dirty glasses and ash-trays. The table-cloth was stained from the night before. The car was waiting outside the window, which had just been opened.

Nothing had been said to Madame Ducrau, and the young couple were moving about upstairs, not yet ready to come down.

Ducrau, his elbows on the table, devoured an enormous breakfast, as if he were gnawed with sharp pangs of hunger. He said nothing, but chewed noisily and drank his coffee even more noisily.

'Bring down my jacket and my collar and tie.'

'Aren't you going to dress in your room?'

'Do as I ask you.'

He looked straight in front of him and ate quickly. When he rose at last to put on the jacket his wife held for him, he was nearly choking.

'I've packed a bag.'

'We'll see about that later.'

'You're not waiting for Berthe?' she asked, pointing towards the ceiling, but he didn't even trouble to answer her.

'What about Gassin?'

'The Sergeant is seeing to him,' Maigret interposed, and it was true, for Lucas had already telephoned to the local police and the Public Prosecutor.

They went off, Ducrau and the Inspector, with clumsy hate. Ducrau kissed his wife absently on the forehead.

'You promised, Émile? We'll go back on a tug again?'

'Yes, of course, of course.'

He was in a hurry to get off. Something seemed to be urging him on. He fell back heavily in the car, and it was Maigret who gave the chauffeur the order.

'Charenton.'

They did not look back. Why should they? And when they were miles away, in the Forest of Fontainebleau, Ducrau gripped Maigret's arm.

'It's the truth!' he announced. 'I don't know why I went to bed with his wife.'

Then, without a pause, he said to the chauffeur:

'Can't you go any quicker?'

His beard had grown in the night. He had not washed, and his face looked dirty. He groped in vain for his pipe, but he had left it behind, and finally the chauffeur handed him a packet of cigarettes.

'Believe me or not, I've seldom been as happy as I was last night. It seemed to me – it's difficult to explain. And do you know what the old woman did when we got to bed? She snuggled up against me and cried, and said I was a good man!'

His voice was choked as if something had stuck in his throat. He leaned forward.

'For God's sake, hurry!' he implored the chauffeur.

They went through Corbeil, Juvisy, Villejuif, and passed all the week-enders' cars coming back to Paris. It was just as sunny as the day before, and the rain had made the fields and the foliage an even brighter green. They stopped at a petrol-station where eight red pumps stood in a row in the sunlight.

'Have you a hundred francs?' the chauffeur asked Ducrau.

He handed him his pocket-book. And now they were in

Paris, in the Avenue d'Orléans, at the Seine. On the Quai des Célestins the office windows were being washed. Ducrau leant out of the window. Outside a little café he stopped the car.

'Can I buy a pipe and some tobacco?'

He could only get a cherry-wood pipe for two francs, which he filled slowly. The embankments went by. They passed the vaults at Bercy.

'Go slower!'

They caught a glimpse of the lock with a barge high up inside. The stone-crusher was already at work. Washing was hanging out to dry on the barges in the wharf. In the café, men in boatmen's caps recognized the boss and came up to the window.

'I think I'd like – ' Ducrau began.

But he overcame his weakness and went down the stone steps. He did not look up at his house, nor at the maid moving about behind the open windows. He crossed the rickety landing-plank of the *Golden Fleece*. People hailed him from other barges.

He and Maigret went down the hatchway together, and together they watched Aline, one breast bare and a baby in her arms, sitting beside the table with the pink-flowered cloth.

She was nursing the baby and looking straight in front of her. And when the breast slipped out of the little mouth she would put it back with a mechanical gesture.

It was warm. The stove must have been on for a long time. A heavy jacket of old Gassin's hung on a peg, and his oilskin boots stood underneath.

Gently but firmly Maigret held Ducrau back, then led him to the tiller and handed him the letter written on the café notepaper.

I write to tell you that I am well and hope this finds you as it leaves me at present. . . .

At first Ducrau did not understand. But gradually he recalled the inn, the village in the Haute-Marne, and Gassin's sister whom he had known long ago.

'She'll be all right down there,' said Maigret.

The sun grew warmer. A boatman called out as they went by:

'The *Albatross* is held up at Meaux!'

It was Ducrau he was addressing, and he seemed surprised to get no answer.

'Shall we go?'

Everyone was watching them. A man came up to them on the wharf and touched his cap.

'I say, boss, about those stones we're to unload – '

'Later!'

'They're – '

'Shut up, Hubert!'

The tram wound along the grey paving-stones like a bright ribbon. The noise of the stone-crusher seemed to pound the very air, and a fine dust was falling everywhere.

The chauffeur reversed the car. Ducrau looked out of the back window.

'It's tremendous!' he sighed.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

Did Maigret really not understand? Now it was he who wanted the chauffeur to hurry. It seemed to him that every moment was precious. Great drops of sweat rolled down Ducrau's face. Once as they were passing a tram his hand gripped the door-handle. But he restrained himself. They crossed the Pont-Neuf.

The chauffeur turned round.

'The *Tabac*?' he asked.

For there was the *Tabac Henri IV*, red and white, opposite the equestrian statue.

'Stop here,' said Maigret; 'then go back to Samois and wait.'

It would be better to walk. They had only a hundred yards to go, along the Seine. Ducrau was next the parapet.

'Well,' he said brusquely, 'I suppose you'll be able to go off now. Two days early.'

'I don't know.'

'Is it pretty down there?'

'It's quiet.'

Twenty yards farther along they crossed the road, and there was the dark mass of the Palais de Justice, the big doors of the police headquarters, and the side door on the right.

Again Ducrau gripped Maigret's arm, and as they were crossing the road he gasped out:

'I can't.'

It was the Seine he was meaning, and the trams and everything that kept him back. . . .

On the pavement he turned. The policeman on duty had recognized Maigret. The door already stood open.

'I can't!' Ducrau repeated as they entered the echoing portals, while a pen was being dipped in purple ink to inscribe his surname and Christian names in the prisoners' register.

A tug going downstream hooted twice as a warning that it was going through the second archway, and a Belgian barge coming up the river swung out to go through the third.