

MAIGRET RETURNS

CHAPTER I

'UNCLE!' Without opening his eyes, Maigret frowned, as if he mistrusted that voice that had called out to him from the depths of his sleep.

His eyes still closed, he sighed and groped for the bed-clothes. Then he realized that he was not dreaming, that something must have happened, because what his hand should have encountered, the warm body of Madame Maigret, was not in its usual place.

At last he opened his eyes. It was a bright night. Madame Maigret had pulled aside the curtain and was standing looking out of the diamond-paned window, while down below someone was banging at the door and the sound re-echoed through the whole house.

'Uncle! It's me --'

Madame Maigret still stood looking out, her hair, in curling-pins, making a strange aureole round her head.

'It's Philippe,' she said, knowing quite well that Maigret was awake and waiting for her to tell him. 'Will you get up?'

Maigret went downstairs first, his bare feet thrust into felt slippers. He had hastily pulled on his trousers, and he buttoned his jacket on the way down. At the eighth step he had to stoop to avoid a beam. Usually he did it without thinking. But to-night he forgot and cracked his head on it,

growled out an oath, and passed from the icy staircase to the kitchen, where a little warmth still lingered.

There were iron bolts on the door. He heard Philippe saying to someone on the other side:

'I won't be long. We'll be back in Paris before daybreak.'

Madame Maigret was dressing, he heard her moving about upstairs. He opened the door, still bad-tempered from the bump on his head.

'It's you, is it?' he growled, as he saw his nephew standing in the road.

An enormous moon was floating over the leafless poplars. The sky was so light that every branch was clearly outlined, and the Loire just round the corner was a mass of silver spangles.

'Wind's in the east!' Maigret thought mechanically, like any peasant when he sees the surface of the river ruffled. It was a habit he had got from living in the country, like standing in the doorway without saying a word, looking at the intruder and waiting for him to speak.

'I do hope I haven't wakened Aunt,' said Philippe.

His face was stiff with cold. Behind him, against the open country white with hoar-frost, was the absurd silhouette of a Paris taxi.

'Are you leaving the driver outside?'

'I must speak to you immediately.'

'Come in quickly, both of you,' Madame Maigret called from the kitchen, where she was lighting an oil-lamp.

'We haven't got electric light yet,' she added for the benefit of her nephew. 'The house has been wired, but they haven't connected the current.'

There was, in fact, a bulb hanging from the end of a wire. Such details like that are apt to assume an irrational importance, especially when one is in a nervous state. For the next few minutes Philippe kept looking at the bulb and the insecure wire, which only served to emphasize the age

of this house in the country, or perhaps the instability of all modern conveniences.

'Have you come from Paris?'

Maigret leant against the mantelpiece, only half-awake. The presence of the taxi on the road made the question as unnecessary as the bulb. But there are times when one talks for the sake of talking.

'I'll tell you all about it, Uncle. I'm in a terrible mess. If you won't come to Paris and help me, I don't know what'll happen to me. My mind just won't work. Oh, I haven't kissed Aunt yet.'

Madame Maigret was wearing a dressing-gown over her nightdress. He hastily kissed her on both cheeks, going through the ceremony like a child. Then he promptly sat down at the table and buried his head in his hands.

Maigret filled his pipe and watched him, while his wife heaped up twigs in the fireplace. There was something unusual and threatening in the air. Since his retirement, Maigret had got out of the habit of rising in the middle of the night, and involuntarily he was reminded of nights spent with the sick or the dead.

'I can't think how I could have been such a fool!' Philippe blurted out. Then his pent-up emotion came to a head and he collapsed into tearless sobs. He looked round desperately for something to steady himself by, and, in calm contrast, Maigret turned up the wick of the lamp, while the sticks began to crackle in the fireplace.

'First of all, you must have a drink.'

He took a bottle of brandy and two glasses out of a cupboard in the wall, which was used as a larder and smelt of cold meat. Madame Maigret put on sabots and went to fetch some wood from the shed.

'Your health! And do try to pull yourself together.'

The smell of the burning twigs mingled with the smell of the brandy. Philippe gave a dazed look at his aunt as she

reappeared noiselessly from the darkness, with her arms full of firewood.

He was short-sighted, and seen from a certain angle, his eyes looked enormous behind his spectacles, giving him a look of childlike despair.

'It happened only to-night. I was detailed to watch a man in the Rue Fontaine --'

'One moment,' Maigret interrupted, straddling a rush-bottomed chair and lighting his pipe. 'Who are you working under?'

'Inspector Amadiou.'

'Go on.'

Maigret puffed quietly at his pipe and, with reminiscent eyes, lingered over memories as familiar to him as the whitewashed walls and the shelf with the copper pans on it. At the Quai des Orfèvres, Amadiou's room had been the last on the right at the end of the corridor. Amadiou himself was a thin, melancholy man, who had been appointed Divisional Inspector in Maigret's place when he retired.

'Has he still got long moustaches?'

'Yes. Yesterday a warrant was issued for the arrest of Pepito Palestrino, the proprietor of the *Floria* in the Rue Fontaine.'

'What number?'

'Fifty-three - next to the spectacle shop.'

'In my time it was called the *Toreador*. What was it - drugs?'

'Yes, drugs for one thing, other things as well. The Chief had heard that Pepito was in the Barnabé affair. You know, he was the chap who was done in last week at the Place Blanche. You must have read about it in the papers.'

'Make some coffee!' Maigret said to his wife.

With the comfortable sigh of a dog finally settling down after turning round, he leant his elbows on the back of his chair and put his chin on his crossed hands. Now and again

Philippe took off his glasses and wiped them, and for a few moments he looked quite blind. He was a great, plump, red-haired lad with a pink complexion.

'You know we can't do as we like now. In your day you would have thought nothing of arresting Pepito in the middle of the night. But now we have to stick to the letter of the law. That is why the Chief decided to proceed with the arrest at eight in the morning. In the meantime, I was told off to keep an eye on him -'

He was lulled by the deep peace of the room; then suddenly, with a start, he remembered his predicament and gave a distracted look round him.

To Maigret some of the phrases his nephew used were like getting a whiff of Paris. He saw the neon-lights of the *Floria*, the door-keeper opening the car doors, and his nephew waiting close by.

'Take off your coat, Philippe,' Madame Maigret interrupted. 'You'll catch cold when you go out.'

He was wearing a dinner-jacket. It looked very strange in the low kitchen, with its rafters and red-tiled floor.

'Have another drink -'

Philippe started up, wringing his hands in yet another fit of despair.

'If you only knew, Uncle -'

He wanted to cry and he couldn't. His glance lighted on the bulb and he stamped his feet.

'I bet they arrest me straight away.'

At that, Madame Maigret, who was pouring boiling water on the coffee, turned round with the kettle in her hand.

'What's that you're saying?'

Maigret went on smoking, and loosened the red-embroidered collar of his nightshirt.

'You were on duty opposite the *Floria* -'

'Not opposite. I had gone inside,' said Philippe, without

resuming his seat. 'At the far end of the room there is a little office where Pepito had had a camp-bed put in. He generally slept there ~~after~~ he'd locked up.'

A cart rumbled along the road. The clock had stopped. Maigret looked at his watch, which hung from a nail above the fireplace, and noticed that it was half-past four. They had started milking in the cowsheds, and the carts were setting off for the Orléans market. The taxi still stood on the road in front of the house.

'I thought I'd be smart,' Philippe confessed. 'Last week the boss tuckered me off and said - ' He broke off, blushed, and looked round in confusion.

'What did he say?' Maigret asked.

'I can't remember -'

'I know what it was! If it was Amadieu, it was something like this: "You're a dreamer, young man, a dreamer like your uncle!"'

Philippe said neither yes nor no to this.

'Anyway, I wanted to be smart,' he went on hastily. 'When the guests left at half-past one, I hid in the lavatory. I thought that, if Pepito had wind of what was going to happen, he'd try to get rid of the stuff. And do you know what happened?'

Maigret looked more serious and shook his head slowly.

'Pepito was alone - I'm quite certain of that. Suddenly there was a shot. It was a few seconds before I took it in, and another few before I reached the room. Everything seemed bigger in the darkness. There was only one light burning. Pepito was lying between two rows of tables, and in his fall had knocked over some chairs. He was dead -'

Maigret rose and filled up his own glass, while his wife made signals that he wasn't to drink too much.

'Is that all?'

Philippe started walking up and down; and though he

generally found talking difficult, he poured out a flood of words in a hard, miserable voice.

'No! That's not all! It was then I was a fool. I suddenly got the wind up. I couldn't think. The empty place looked sinister and there were shadows lurking everywhere. There were streamers trailing all over the floor and the tables. Pepito was lying in a queer way, on his side, with a hand on his wound, but he seemed to be looking at me. How can I explain? I took out my revolver and started shouting, and the sound of my own voice frightened me even more. Everywhere there were shadowy corners, and I thought I saw the hangings move. I made a tremendous effort and went and looked. I clutched at a velvet curtain, and a door flew open. Then, at the far end, I found the switchboard and tried to turn on the lights. I tried several switches at random. And then it was much worse. I turned on a red spotlight, and then the ventilators started whirring in all the corners.

'"Who's there?" I called again.'

He moistened his lips. His aunt looked at him, just as affected as he was. He was her sister's son, born down in Alsace, and Maigret had got him into the Quai des Orfèvres.

'I'd like him to be a Civil Servant,' his mother had said.

And now he gasped: 'Don't be angry with me, Uncle. I don't know myself how it happened - I can scarcely remember. I know I fired because I thought I saw something moving. I rushed forward and then stopped. I thought I heard footsteps and whispers. But there was nothing there. I could never have imagined that a room could be so large and contain so many obstacles. Finally, I found myself in the office. There was a revolver on the table. Mechanically I seized hold of it. The barrel was still warm. I opened it and found there was a bullet missing -'

'Idiot!' Maigret muttered between his teeth.

The coffee was steaming in the cups, and Madame

Maigret stood with the sugar-bowl in her hand, not noticing what she was doing.

'I was quite out of my mind. I again thought I heard a noise near the door. I rushed off. It was only later that I noticed that I'd a gun in each hand.'

'What did you do with the gun?' Maigret's voice was stern.

Philippe lowered his eyes.

'All sorts of thoughts passed through my mind. If it was a murder, people would think that as I was alone with Pepito -'

'Good heavens!' murmured Madame Maigret.

'That lasted only a few seconds. I put the revolver down beside the dead man's hand so as to make it look like suicide; then -'

Maigret rose and took up his favourite position in front of the fire, his hands behind his back. He had not shaved. He had grown a little fatter since the days when he used to stand like that in front of his stove at the Quai des Orfèvres.

'You met someone when you got out, I suppose?'

He seemed quite certain.

'Just as I was shutting the door behind me, I collided with a man who was walking along the pavement. I apologized. Our faces very nearly touched. I don't even know whether I shut the door properly after that. I walked as far as the Place Clichy, and there I took a taxi and gave your address.'

Madame Maigret put the sugar-bowl down on the beech-wood table, and slowly asked her husband:

'What suit will you want?'

For the next half-hour there was complete confusion.

Maigret was shaving and dressing in his bedroom. Madame Maigret was cooking an egg dish and questioning Philippe.

'What news have you of your mother?'

'She's quite well. She meant to come to Paris for Easter.'

The taximan was persuaded to come in, but not to take off his heavy brown overcoat. Drops of water trembled from the ends of his moustaches. He sat in a corner and did not stir.

'Where are my braces?' Maigret called down.

'In the top drawer of the chest of drawers.'

He reappeared in his overcoat with the velvet collar and his bowler hat. He pushed aside the eggs and drank a fourth glass of brandy in spite of his wife.

It was half-past five when the door opened and the three men got into the taxi. It took a long time to start up. Madame Maigret stood shivering behind the door, and the light of the oil-lamp danced rosily on the diamond window-panes.

It was so light that it almost looked as if day were breaking, but this was February and it was only the moonlight. Every blade of grass was tipped with rime, and the apple-trees in the neighbouring orchard were white with frost and looked as fragile as spun glass.

'I'll be back in a couple of days!' Maigret called back. And Philippe's embarrassed voice called out in its turn: 'Good-bye, Aunt.'

The driver shut the door and started off with a grinding of gears.

'I'm sorry, Uncle.'

'What for?'

What for? Philippe did not dare say. He had apologized because he felt there was something dramatic about this departure. He thought of his uncle as he had seen him a few minutes before by his fireside, in his nightshirt, his old jacket, and his bedroom slippers.

And now he scarcely dared look at him. It was Maigret all right who was beside him, his velvet collar turned up and his hat pulled well down. But not an enthusiastic

Maigret. Not even a self-confident Maigret. Twice he looked back at his little house before it disappeared from view.

'Is it eight o'clock that Amadieu is due at the Rue Fontaine?' he asked.

'Yes, eight o'clock.'

They could just do it. The taxi was keeping up a good speed. They passed through Orléans as the first trams were rumbling through the streets. Less than an hour later, they had reached the market at Arpajon.

'What are you thinking about, Uncle?'

The bottom of the taxi was draughty. The sky was light and there was a faint glow in the east.

'How could Pepito have been killed?' sighed Philippe, getting no answer.

They stopped beyond Arpajon to warm up at a café, and quite suddenly it was day, with a pale sun slowly rising over the fields.

'There was no one else there - '

'Shut up!' said Maigret wearily.

His nephew subsided in his corner like a scolded child and did not dare take his eyes off the door.

They got to Paris just as the early morning bustle was beginning. They passed the Lion de Belfort, drove along the Boulevard Raspail and over the Pont-Neuf.

The city was as bright and shining as if it had been washed in clear water. A string of barges was going slowly upstream, and a tug hooted a warning and let off immaculate puffs of steam.

'How many people were there in the Rue Fontaine when you came out?'

'I only saw this man I bumped into.'

Maigret sighed and knocked out his pipe on his shoe. The driver opened the window.

'Where do you want to go?' he asked.

They stopped for a moment on the embankment to leave Maigret's bag at a hotel, then they went on to the Rue Fontaine.

'It's not what happened at the *Floria* that's worrying me. It's that man you ran into.'

'What do you think?'

'I don't think anything.'

It was one of his favourite expressions, which rose out of the past just as he looked round and saw the once-familiar outline of the Palais de Justice.

'For a moment, I thought of going to the Chief and telling him everything,' Philippe murmured.

Maigret made no reply. All the way to the Rue Fontaine he retained a vision of the Seine flowing in a fine blue and gold mist.

They stopped a hundred yards away from No. 33. Philippe turned up his coat-collar to hide the fact that he was wearing a dinner-jacket, but passers-by turned round to look at his patent-leather shoes.

It was only ten minutes to seven. They were washing down the windows of the café at the corner, the *Tabac Fontaine*, which stayed open all night. People on the way to work were hastily swallowing cups of white coffee.

A black-haired young man from Auvergne was serving behind the bar counter. His boss did not go to bed until five or six, and only rose at midday. On a table cigar and cigarette ends were scattered round a slate upon which the points of a game of *belote* were marked up.

Maigret bought a packet of cigarettes and asked for a sandwich, while Philippe waited impatiently.

'Anything happen last night?' asked the ex-detective, with his mouth full of bread and ham.

'They say the *patron* of the *Floria* was killed,' said the boy indifferently as he collected the money.

'Palestrino?'

'I don't know. I'm only on during the day and I don't bother much about those night dives.'

They went out. Philippe did not dare say a word.

'You hear that?' Maigret growled. And on reaching the pavement he added: 'That is the work of the man you knocked into, you know. Logically, nothing should have been known before eight o'clock.'

They went towards the *Floria*, but stopped fifty yards away. They could see the cap of a police sergeant at the door, and there was a crowd on the pavement opposite.

'What shall I do?'

'Your boss is probably on the premises. Go and join him and tell him -'

'But what about you, Uncle?'

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and continued:

'and tell him the truth.'

'And suppose he asks me where I went afterwards?'

'Tell him you came to get me.'

His tone was resigned. They had made a bad start, that was all! The whole business was so tiresome, it made you grind your teeth.

'I'm sorry, Uncle!'

'Don't make a scene in the street. If you're still free, we'll meet at the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*. If I'm not there, I'll leave word.'

They did not even shake hands. Philippe went off to the *Floria*. But the police sergeant did not know who he was and tried to stop him. Philippe showed his badge and disappeared inside.

Maigret stayed close by, his hands in his pockets like an ordinary onlooker. He waited. Nearly half an hour went by without his having any idea of what was going on inside.

Inspector Amadiou came out first, followed by a commonplace little man who looked like a café waiter.

Maigret had no need of explanations. He knew that this

was the pedestrian who had run into Philippe. He could guess what Amadiou was asking him.

'It was here you collided with him?'

The waiter nodded. Then Amadiou beckoned to Philippe, who had waited inside and now appeared looking as wretched as a schoolboy, just as if the whole street knew of the suspicions hanging over him.

'That's the man, is it?' Amadiou was probably asking, pulling at his brown moustache.

Again the waiter nodded.

There were two other detectives there. The divisional inspector looked at his watch, and after a brief consultation, they parted company, the waiter disappearing into the café, and the detectives going back to the *Floria*.

A quarter of an hour later, two cars drew up in quick succession. The Public Prosecutor had arrived.

'I've got to go back there to repeat my evidence,' the little man was confiding to the boy behind the counter at the *Tabac Fontaine*. 'Another glass of wine, and quick!'

Embarrassed by the heavy stare of Maigret, who was drinking a glass of beer near him, he asked in an undertone:

'Who's that chap there?'

CHAPTER 2

WITH schoolboy absorption Maigret drew a rectangle, and somewhere in the middle of it a small cross. Then, with his head on one side, he regarded his work and made a slight grimace. The rectangle represented the *Floria*, and the cross Pepito. Right at the end of the rectangle he drew another to represent the office, and lastly, in this rectangle, he made a dot for the revolver.

It was quite pointless. It meant nothing. The affair was not a geometrical problem, but Maigret persevered all the same, crumpled his paper into a ball, and started all over again on another piece.

But he was not thinking in terms of rectangles and crosses. With his head on one side and an expression of concentration on his face, he was trying to snatch here and there a fragment of a sentence, a look or a gesture.

He was sitting by himself in his old haunt, the far end of the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*. It was too late to wonder whether he had been right or wrong to go there. Everybody had seen him. The *patron* had shaken hands.

'Well, how are the rabbits and the hens?'

From where he was sitting, Maigret could see the Pont-Neuf rosy in the sun, the great flight of steps in front of the Palais de Justice, and the door of the Department. The *patron*, with a beaming face, and a white table-napkin tucked under his arm, came up and added in an attempt to be pleasant:

'You like it, eh? Come back to see your pals again?'

Members of the Public Morals Squad still had the habit of playing a game of *belote* before they started on their day's work. There were some new ones whom Maigret did not

know, but the others nodded to him and then whispered to their colleagues.

It was then that he had drawn the first rectangle and cross. Hours passed. At *apéritif* time there were about ten from Headquarters in the place. Good old Lucas, who had worked with him hundreds of times, came up, slightly embarrassed.

'How are you, Chief? Come to get a breath of Paris air?'

'What's Amadieu saying?' Maigret growled between two puffs.

It was no good lying to him. He could see all the heads being put together, and he knew the *Police Judiciaire* too well not to guess what was going on. It was noon, and Philippe had not turned up yet.

'You know what he's like,' said Lucas. 'We've been having a bit of trouble lately with those night-clubs, and the Public Prosecutor has been getting annoyed. Then -'

'What's he saying?'

'That you're here, of course, and that you're going to try -'

'I know the word, "try to be smart".'

'I'll have to be going,' Lucas stammered in confusion.

Maigret ordered another pint, and again became absorbed in his drawings, while at most of the tables he was the one topic of conversation.

He lunched in the same place. The sun had now reached his table. The photographer of the Identity Department was eating a little farther along. Over his coffee, Maigret repeated to himself, pencil in hand:

'Pepito was here, between two rows of tables. The murderer was hidden somewhere - there were plenty of places to hide. He fired, not knowing that that fool Philippe was there, and then went to the office to get something. He had just put his gun down on a piece of furniture when

he heard a sound and hid again. From then on, the two of them played hide-and-seek -'

That was quite simple. Unnecessary to look for any other explanation. The murderer had finally reached the door without being seen, and was out in the street while Philippe was still hanging about inside.

So far there was nothing extraordinary. Any fool could have done as much, but the best part was what followed: the idea of getting someone to identify Philippe and give evidence against him.

And this was what actually did happen a few minutes later. The murderer found his man in the dark in a deserted street. This man knocked into Philippe as he was coming out, and ran off to the police sergeant on duty at the Place Blanche.

'I say, Officer, I've just seen a fellow coming out of the *Floria* in very suspicious circumstances. He was in such a hurry he didn't even bother to shut the door behind him.'

Without looking up, Maigret knew that his old colleagues, sitting over their pints of beer, were whispering to the young ones:

'You've heard of Inspector Maigret? Well, that's him.'

And Amadiou, who did not like him at all, had been announcing in the corridors of the *Police Judiciaire*: 'He thinks he's going to be smart. Well, we'll see!'

At four o'clock Philippe still had not arrived. The papers came from the press with details of the affair and the detective's confession. Another *coup* for Amadiou.

The Quai des Orfèvres was in a turmoil, telephone bells were ringing, dossiers being consulted, witnesses and informers being heard.

Maigret's nostrils quivered, and he sat hunched on his seat, patiently making his little design with the point of his pencil.

He must find Pepito's murderer at all costs. And just now

he wasn't in the mood. He was afraid; he wondered whether he would succeed. He watched the young detectives and tried to imagine what they thought of him.

It was a quarter to six when Philippe finally appeared. He stood for a moment as if dazzled by the light. Then he sat down beside Maigret, tried to smile, and stammered out:

'I've been a long time.'

He was so tired that he passed his hand across his forehead as if he were trying to collect his thoughts.

'I've just come from the Public Prosecutor. I was cross-examined for an hour and a half, and first they kept me waiting for two hours in the corridor.'

They were being watched. While Philippe talked, Maigret looked people straight in the face.

'You know, Uncle, it's much more serious than we imagined.'

Every word he said conjured up old associations. Maigret knew the examining magistrate, a meticulous, suspicious little Basque, who weighed every word, took several minutes to prepare the sentence he was about to speak, and finally delivered it as if he were saying:

'And what have you to say to *that*?'

And he knew the corridor up there, with the suspects and their police escorts, the benches occupied by impatient witnesses and tearful women. If Philippe had been made to wait there, it was done on purpose.

'The Public Prosecutor asked me to do nothing and make no move before the preliminary investigation was over. I am to consider myself as being on leave and to place myself at his disposal.'

It was the peak hour at the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*, the hour of the evening *apéritif*. All the tables were occupied, smoke rose from pipes and cigarettes, now and again a newcomer saluted Maigret from a distance.

Philippe did not dare look at anyone, not even at his uncle.

'I'm terribly sorry, Uncle.'

'What else happened?'

'Everyone thought, of course, that the *Floria* would close down, at least for a couple of days, but it hasn't. To-day there was a succession of telephone calls and mysterious visits. It appears that the *Floria* was sold two days ago and that Pepito was no longer proprietor. The new owner has been using Heaven knows what influence, and it will open this evening as usual.'

Maigret frowned. Was it what he had just heard, or that Inspector Amadiou, accompanied by a colleague, had just come in and sat down at the other end of the restaurant?

'Godet!' Maigret suddenly called out in a loud voice.

Godet was a detective from the Public Morals Department, he was playing cards three tables away. He looked round hesitantly with his cards in his hand.

'When you've finished your game!'

Maigret crumpled up all his bits of paper and threw them on the floor. He swallowed his beer in a single gulp and wiped his lips, looking over in Amadiou's direction.

Amadiou had heard. He watched the scene from a distance, letting water drip into his *Pernod*. Finally Godet came forward, rather intrigued.

'Do you want to speak to me, Inspector?'

'How are you?' said Maigret, shaking hands. 'Just tell me one little thing, old man. You're still in the Public Morals Squad? Good! Can you tell me whether Cageot was in the office this morning?'

'Wait a minute. Yes, I think he came about eleven.

'Thanks, old man. That's all!'

Maigret looked at Amadiou. Amadiou looked at Maigret. And now it was Amadiou who looked uneasy, and Maigret who suppressed a smile.

Philippe did not dare intervene. The affair had gone beyond him. The game wasn't up his street, and he didn't even know the rules.

'Godet!' a voice called.

This time every detective in the room jumped and looked at Godet, who, cards in hand, went up to Inspector Amadieu. There was no need to hear what was being said. It was quite clear. Amadieu was saying:

'What was he asking you?'

'Whether I had seen Cageot this morning.'

Maigret lit his pipe, let the match burn down to the very end, and finally rose.

'Waiter!' he called.

Drawing himself up to his full height, he looked nonchalantly round him while he waited for the change.

'Where are we going?' asked Philippe, when they were outside.

Maigret turned, as if surprised to see him there.

'You go to bed,' he said.

'And what about you, Uncle?'

Maigret shrugged his shoulders, buried his hands in his pockets, and went off without answering. He had just spent one of the most wretched days in his life. For hours, in his corner, he had felt old and feeble, without idea or incentive.

But reaction set in. A tiny flame flickered. But he must nurse it.

'You bet we'll see!' he growled, to give himself complete confidence.

On any other day at that hour he would have been sitting reading his paper beside the oil-lamp, his legs stretched out towards the wood-fire.

'D'you often come to Paris?'

Maigret was leaning against the bar of the *Floris*. He shook his head and answered evasively:

'H'm. Now and again.'

His good-humour was restored, a good-humour which found expression not so much in smiles as in a sensation of inner well-being. He had the faculty of being secretly amused without in any way altering the gravity of his appearance. A woman was sitting beside him. She had asked him for a drink, and he had nodded.

Two years ago, no professional would ever have made that mistake. It was not his overcoat with the velvet collar, his black suit of durable serge, and his made-up tie which gave him away. If she mistook him for a provincial on the spree, it was because he had changed.

'Something happened here quite recently, didn't it?' he murmured.

'The proprietor got shot last night.'

She was mistaken about his expression too—she thought he was getting worked up. But it was much more complicated than that! Maigret was re-discovering a world he had been away from for a long time. This commonplace little thing, for example. He knew all about her, though he had never seen her before. He was positive she was not on the Police Register, and that on her passport her profession was given as 'artiste,' or 'dancer'.

As for the Chinese barman who was serving them, he could have recited his anthropometric record. The cloak-room attendant had not been taken in and had greeted him uneasily, trying to think where she had seen him before.

At least two of the waiters had been in Maigret's office in the old days on cases similar to the murder of Pepito.

He ordered a brandy-and-soda and looked vaguely round the room, instinctively putting the crosses in their right places, as he had done on paper.

Guests who had read the papers were asking questions and being answered by waiters, who pointed to the spot near the fifth table where the corpse had been found.

'Wouldn't you like to order some champagne for us?'

'No, duckie, I wouldn't.'

This intrigued her, and she came very near to guessing the truth. Meanwhile, Maigret's eyes were following the new proprietor, a blond young man, whom he had known as the manager of a dance-hall in Montparnasse.

'You'll come back home with me?'

'Of course, right away.'

While he was waiting for her, he looked in at the lavatory to see where Philippe had hidden. At the far end of the premises he got a glimpse of the office. The door was half-open. But it held no interest for him. He had known what the place would be like before he set foot in the Rue Fontaine. And the people too. He could have gone round the room, pointing to each person and saying:

'At this table is a young married couple from the Midi on the spree. Farther on, that fashionable dancer has a police record and packets of cocaine in his pockets. He is hand-in-glove with the head waiter, who's done three years. That plump little brunette was in *Maxim's* for ten years and will end up on Montmartre.'

He went back to the bar.

'Can I have another cocktail?' asked the woman.

'What's your name?'

'Fernande.'

'What did you do yesterday evening?'

'I was out with three young men, very high-class boys, who wanted to try taking ether. They took me to a hotel in the Rue Notre-Dame de Lorette -'

Maigret did not smile, but he could have gone on with the story himself.

'First, each of us went into a little chemist in the Rue Montmartre and bought a small bottle of ether. Then I don't know exactly what happened. We took off our clothes. But they didn't even look at me. Then we all four

got into bed. When they had inhaled the ether, one of them got up and said in a queer voice:

“Oh, there are angels on the wardrobe. Such nice ones, too. I must go and catch them—”

He tried to get up, and fell on the rug. The smell of the ether made my stomach turn. I asked them if that was all they wanted, and put on my clothes again. But I had a good laugh all the same. On the pillow, between two of their heads, was a bug. And I heard one of the chaps say as if he were dreaming:

“I see a bug in front of me.”

“And so do I,” said another with a sigh.

But they didn't move. They just lay there squinting at it.

She swallowed her cocktail at a gulp.

‘Barmyl’ was her verdict.

But she was a little worried.

‘You're sure you want me for the night?’ she said.

‘Yes, yes,’ Maigret replied.

A curtain separated the bar from the vestibule and the cloakroom. From where he sat, Maigret could see through a hole in it. Suddenly he got down from his stool and took a few steps forward. A man had just arrived and had murmured to the cloakroom girl:

‘Any news?’

‘Good evening, Monsieur Cageot!’

It was Maigret speaking, his hands in his coat-pocket and his pipe in his mouth. The man he addressed was standing with his back to him, and slowly turned round, looked him up and down, and muttered:

‘So you're here?’

Behind them was the red curtain and the music of a jazz-band. In front was the door opening onto the cold street, where the doorman walked up and down. The man called Cageot couldn't make up his mind whether to take off his overcoat.

Fernande, slightly uneasy, poked her nose through, but withdrew it immediately.

Cageot had finally made up his mind.

'You'll join me over a bottle!' he asked as he deposited his coat in the cloakroom, watching Maigret all the while.

'If you like.'

The head waiter rushed up and led them to a free table. Without looking at the wine-card, the newcomer growled:

'Mumm '26!'

He was not in evening clothes, but wore a grey suit as badly cut as Maigret's. He had not even shaved recently, and his cheeks were covered with a greyish stubble.

'I thought you'd retired?'

'So did I.'

This seemed an innocuous enough answer, but Cageot frowned and beckoned to a girl who was selling cigars and cigarettes. At the bar, Fernande was staring in amazement, and young Albert wondered whether, in his rôle of proprietor, he ought to come up or not.

'Have a cigar?'

'No, thanks,' said Maigret, knocking out his pipe.

'Going to be in Paris long?'

'Until Pepito's murderer is in prison.'

They did not raise their voices. All round them, people in evening clothes were amusing themselves, throwing cotton-wool balls and paper streamers. The saxophone-player was threading his way between the tables, playing his instrument.

'Did they recall you for this business?'

Germain Cageot had a long dead face and bushy eyebrows the colour of grey mould. He was the last person one would have expected to meet in a place of amusement. He spoke slowly and coldly, and watched the effect of every word.

'I've come back without being recalled.'

'You're working on your own?'

'That's right.'

It all seemed quite harmless. Even Fernande must be thinking that her friend and Cageot were merely chance acquaintances.

'When did you buy this place?'

'The *Floria*? You're wrong. It belongs to Albert.'

'I know. Just as it did to Pepito.'

Cageot did not deny it, only gave a mirthless smile and stopped the waiter from serving him with champagne.

'What else?' he asked, as if he were seeking for a topic of conversation.

'What's your alibi?'

Cageot gave an even more non-committal smile, and without turning a hair recited glibly:

'I went to bed at nine p.m. with a touch of influenza. The concierge, who is also my housekeeper, brought me a grog when I was in bed.'

They neither of them paid any attention to the din that shut them in like a wall. They were accustomed to it. Maigret smoked away at his pipe, and Cageot at a cigar.

'You still stick to mineral water?' the ex-inspector asked, as Cageot helped him to champagne.

'Always.'

They sat face to face, like two graven images, and a little woman, who did not know what she was doing, tried to throw cotton-wool balls at their heads from a neighbouring table.

'You got this place re-opened pretty quickly!' Maigret remarked between two puffs.

'Oh, I'm still fairly well in with Headquarters.'

'You know, I suppose, that there's a fool of a boy mixed up in the business?'

'I read something of the sort in the papers. A little *flic* who hid in the lavatory, then got the wind up and killed Pepito in a funk.'

The jazz-band went on playing. An Englishman, very drunk, and stiffer than ever, passed in front of Maigret, murmuring:

'I beg your pardon.'

'Don't mention it.'

Fernande, at the bar, watched them uneasily.

Maigret smiled at her.

'Those young detectives are apt to be rash,' Cageot sighed.

'That's what I have been telling my nephew.'

'Is your nephew interested in the question?'

'He is the little *flic* who hid in the lavatory.'

Cageot could not turn pale, as his face was always the colour of chalk. But he hastily swallowed a mouthful of mineral water and wiped his mouth.

'That's a pity, isn't it?'

'That's what I've been telling him, too.'

Fernande jugged her chin in the direction of the clock, which pointed to half-past one. Maigret made a sign that he was coming.

'Your health!' said Cageot.

'And yours.'

'It's nice, I hope, in the country? I was told you'd gone to the country.'

'Yes, it's nice.'

'Paris is rather unhealthy in winter.'

'That's what I thought when I heard about Pepito.'

'Oh, please don't trouble,' Cageot protested as Maigret opened his pocket-book.

But Maigret left fifty francs on the table and remarked as he got up:

'Well, see you soon.'

As he was passing the bar, he whispered: 'Come on' to Fernande.

'Have you paid?' she asked.

Out in the street, she was not quite sure whether she ought to take his arm. He kept his hands in his pockets and walked along slowly, taking huge strides.

'You know Cageot?' she asked at last.

'He comes from my part of the country.'

'You'd better watch your step with him, you know. He's a bit of a twister. I tell you that because you look a decent sort of chap.'

'Have you ever slept with him?'

Fernande, taking two steps for every one of Maigret's, answered with equal simplicity:

'He doesn't do it.'

At Meung, Madame Maigret was asleep in the house that smelt of log-fires and goat's milk. Philippe, too, had fallen asleep at last in his hotel room in the Rue des Dames, with his spectacles on the commode beside him.

CHAPTER 3

MAIGRET sat down on the bed, and Fernande crossed her legs and took off her shoes with a sigh of relief. In the same natural way, she drew up her dress and undid her suspenders.

'Aren't you going to take your clothes off?'

Maigret shook his head, but she did not notice, because she was pulling her dress over her head.

Her flat was a tiny one in the Rue Blanche. There was a red carpet on the stairs and a smell of floor-polish. Outside every door was an empty milk-bottle.

First they had gone through a room littered with knick-knacks, and Maigret got a glimpse of the very tiny kitchen, with every utensil arranged with meticulous care.

'What are you thinking about?' Fernande asked as she drew off her stockings, revealing long white legs, and regarded her toes with interest.

'Nothing. Can I smoke?'

'There are cigarettes on the table.'

Maigret, his pipe between his teeth, marched up and down, stopped before an enlarged photograph of a woman of about fifty, then before a plant in a brass pot. The floor was waxed, and beside the door were two pieces of felt cut out in the shape of soles, which Fernande obviously used to get about the room without spoiling the polish.

'You come up from north, don't you?' he asked, without looking at her.

'How did you guess?'

He came at last and sat down in front of her. Her hair was an indefinite blonde, with a reddish tinge. She had irregular features, a long mouth, and a pointed, freckled nose.

'I come from Roubaix,' she said.

It was quite obvious from the way the flat was arranged and polished and the orderliness that reigned in the kitchen. Maigret was convinced that, every morning, Fernande settled down beside the stove and read her paper over a huge cup of coffee. She eyed Maigret a little uneasily.

'Aren't you taking off your clothes?' she asked again, rising and going over to the mirror.

Then she added suspiciously:

'What have you come for?'

She seemed to realize instinctively that there was something different about him, and her mind began working.

'You're right, I didn't come for that,' Maigret confessed with a smile.

He smiled again when she snatched up a wrapper as if suddenly overcome by modesty.

'What do you want, then?'

She could not guess, and yet she was accustomed to classifying men. She looked at his shoes, his tie, and his eyes.

'You're not from the police, are you?'

'Sit down. We're going to have a nice, friendly chat. You're not altogether wrong. I was a detective in the *Police Judiciaire* for a long time.'

She frowned.

'Don't be afraid! I'm not one now! I retired to the country, and I'm only in Paris to-day because Cageot's been up to some dirty work.'

'That's why!' she said reflectively, thinking of the strange attitude of the two men sitting together.

'I've got to have proofs, and there are some people I can't get at.'

She was no longer quite at her ease with him.

'You want me to help you; is that it?'

'That's right. You know as well as I do, don't you, that the *Floria's* just a den of thieves?'

She sighed an assent.

'Cageot's the real owner, and he owns the *Pelican* and the *Boule Verte* too.'

'He's said to have opened a place in Nice as well.'

They were sitting opposite each other at the table now and Fernande said:

'Wouldn't you like a hot drink?'

'Not now. You heard of that business last week at the Place Blanche. A car went past at about three in the morning with three men inside. Between the Place Blanche and the Place Clichy the door opened and one of the men was thrown out with a knife in his back.'

'That was Barnabé,' said Fernande.

'Did you know him?'

'He used to come to the *Floria*.'

'Well, that was Cageot's work. I don't know whether he was actually in the car, but Pepito was, and last night it was *his* turn.'

She said nothing. She was thinking hard and frowning, and when she did that, she looked like any ordinary housewife.

'What's it got to do with you?' she objected.

'If I don't get Cageot, a nephew of mine will go to prison instead of him.'

'That big redhead like a rent-collector?'

It was Maigret's turn to be surprised.

'How do you know him?'

'He came to the *Floria* two or three times. I spotted him because he didn't dance or talk to anyone. Yesterday he stood me a drink. I tried to lead him on, and without actually putting it into words, he stammered out some explanation about not being able to tell me anything except that he was engaged upon an important mission.'

'The bloody fool!'

Maigret rose and went straight to the point.

'Well, will you do it? There's two thousand francs for you if you help me get Cageot.'

She smiled involuntarily. This was going to be fun.

'What shall I have to do?'

'To begin with, I've got to know whether our friend Cageot was in the *Tabac Fontaine* last night.'

'Have I got to go to-night?'

'Right away, if you will.'

She took off her wrapper and stood looking at him for a moment with her dress in her hand.

'Shall I really get dressed?'

'I'm afraid so,' he sighed, putting a hundred francs on the mantelpiece.

They walked back along the Rue Blanche. At the corner of the Rue de Douai they shook hands and separated, and Maigret went along the Rue Notre-Dame de Lorette. When he arrived at his hotel, he was surprised to find that he was whistling under his breath.

*

The next morning at ten he established himself at the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*, choosing a table where the sun shone intermittently, being intercepted in a regular rhythm by passers-by in the street outside. Spring was already in the air. The tempo was livelier and the street noises more acute.

At the Quai des Orfèvres they were handing in reports. At the end of the long corridor with the offices on either side the Director of the *Police Judiciaire* was receiving his subordinates with their dossiers. Among them was Inspector Amadiou. Maigret could imagine what the Director was saying.

'Well, Amadiou, what about this Palestrino business?'

And Amadiou would bend over him, twirling his moustaches and smiling amiably.

'Here are the reports, Monsieur le Directeur.'

'Is it true that Maigret is in Paris?'

'So they say.'

'Why the devil hasn't he been in to see me?'

Maigret smiled. He was certain that this was what was happening. He could see Amadiou's long face growing longer. Then he would murmur insinuatingly:

'Perhaps he's got his reasons.'

'Do you really think it was our man who fired the shot?'

'I wouldn't swear to it. All I know is, his finger-prints were on the revolver. A second bullet was found in the wall.'

'But what would have made him do that?'

'Panic. We get young men sent us who aren't capable --'

Just at that point Philippe came in and walked straight up to his uncle.

'What will you drink?' asked Maigret.

'Some coffee. I managed to get everything you asked for, but it wasn't easy! Amadiou watches me like a lynx, and the others regard me with suspicion.'

He wiped his glasses and took some papers out of his pocket.

'First of all, Cageot. I went to the Register and copied out his record. He was born at Pontoise and is about fifty-nine now. His first appearance was at Ivons, where he acted as a clerk and got a year for forgery and passing counterfeit money. Three years later he got six months for attempting to defraud an insurance company. That was at Marseilles.

'There is no trace of him for a few years, but he turns up again at Monte Carlo as a croupier. From then on he acted as police informer, but that didn't prevent him from being involved in a gambling affair that was never cleared up.

'Finally he came to Paris. For five years he was manager of the *Cercle de l'Est*, which is nothing but a gambling-den. They closed it pretty quick, but that didn't worry Cageot.

That's all! Since then he's lived in lodgings in the Rue des Batignolles, where he is looked after by the concierge. He still pays visits to the Rue des Saussaies and the Quai des Orfèvres. At least three night-clubs belong to him, but he puts in dummy proprietors.'

'What about Pepito?' asked Maigret, taking notes.

'Twenty-nine. Born at Naples. Twice deported from France for passing drugs. No other charges.'

'Barnabé?'

'Born at Marseilles. Thirty-two. Three charges, one for robbery with violence.'

'Did they find the goods at the *Floria*?'

'No, nothing. Neither drugs nor papers. The murderer must have taken the lot.'

'What's the name of the chap who ran into you and informed the police?'

'Joseph Audiat. He's an ex-café-waiter who's mixed up with racing. He has no fixed residence and uses the *Tabac Fontaine* as an address. I think he collects bers.'

'By the way,' said Maigret, 'I met your girl friend.'

'My girl friend?' Philippe repeated, growing red.

'A tall girl in green satin whom you treated to a drink at the *Floria*. We nearly went to bed together.'

'Well, I didn't,' Philippe stated, 'whatever she may have told you!'

Lucas came in and stood hesitantly. Maigret beckoned to him to come up.

'Are you on this case?'

'Not exactly, Chief. I just wanted to let you know that Cageot's at Headquarters again. He arrived a quarter of an hour ago, and he's shut up with Inspector Amadiou.'

'Have a drink?'

Lucas filled his pipe from Maigret's tobacco-pouch. It was the time of day when the waiters cleaned up, rubbed the mirrors with whiting, and sprinkled sawdust between

the tables. The *patron*, already in his black jacket, was inspecting the hors-d'oeuvres which were set out on a side-table.

'You think it's Cageot?' asked Lucas, lowering his voice and reaching for his beer.

'I'm positive.'

'That's not too good!'

Philippe did not dare put in a word, but sat gazing respectfully at those two colleagues who had worked together for twenty years, and who now sat letting an occasional syllable fall between two puffs.

'Has he seen you, Chief?'

'Yes. I told him I was going to get him. Waiter, two more beers!'

'He'll never let up.'

Behind the windows, the vans of the Samaritaine went by, bright yellow in the sun. Long trams followed, ringing their bells.

'What do you mean to do?'

Maigret shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know. With narrowed eyes he stared beyond the busy street over the Seine to the Palais de Justice. Philippe was playing with his pencil.

'I must be going,' said Lucas with a sigh. 'I've got to look in at a case in the Rue Saint-Antoine, a Polish chap who's been up to some queer tricks. Will you be here this afternoon?'

'Probably.'

Maigret rose too.

'May I come with you?' Philippe asked nervously.

'I'd rather you didn't. Go back to the Quai des Orfèvres. We'll meet here for lunch.'

He took the bus, and half an hour later was on the way up to Fernande's room. It was several minutes before she came to the door, for she was still in bed. The room was

flooded with sunshine, and the sheets on her bed were dazzling.

'Back already?' said Fernande, holding her pyjamas together across her breast. 'I was still asleep. Wait a moment.'

She went into the kitchen, lit the gas-stove and put on a kettle of water, talking all the while.

'I went to the *Tabac* as you asked me. They didn't seem to suspect me. Did you know that the owner keeps a boarding-house at Avignon?'

'Go on.'

'They were playing *belote* at one table. I pretended I'd been trailing about all night and was tired.'

'Did you notice a little dark man called Joseph Audiat?'

'Wait a minute! There was a man called Joseph. He said he'd been spending the afternoon with the Public Prosecutor. But you know what it's like when they're playing. "*Belote! Rebelote! You, Pierre.*" Then someone says something - Someone answers from the bar - "*Passé! - and repasse - You, Marcel!*" The proprietor was playing too, and there was a nigger as well.'

'A big dark man asked me to have a drink and pointed to a chair beside him.'

'I didn't say no. He showed me his hand.'

'"In any case," said the man they called Joseph, "I think it's dangerous to bring a *flic* into it. To-morrow I'll be called upon to identify him. I must say he looks a proper mug -"

'Then, "*Atout cœurs! Quatrième haute!*"'

Fernande broke off.

'Won't you join me in a cup of coffee?'

Already the aroma of coffee filled the three rooms.

'I couldn't start talking about Cagéot straight away, you know.'

'"Do you always come here in the evenings?" I asked.'

'"Looks like it -" said my neighbour.'

'"Did you hear anything last night?"'

Maigret had taken off his hat and coat and opened the window, letting in the noise of the street.

'Well,' Fernande continued, 'he gave me a funny look. He said:

"Are you interested in murders, you bad girl?"

'I could see he was getting intrigued. All the time he was playing he was stroking my knee.

"We all heard nothing, understand," he went on. "All except Joseph, who saw what he was meant to see -"

'Then they all burst out laughing. What could I do? I couldn't take my leg away.

"Spades again! *Tierce haute!* And *belote!*"

"All the same, he's a queer chap," Joseph said. He was drinking grog, but the man who was getting off with me gave a cough and muttered:

"I'd like it just as well if he wasn't so friendly with coppers."

Maigret could see the whole scene. He could almost have put a name to each face. He knew that the *patron* kept a brothel at Avignon. The big dark man was probably the owner of the *Cupidon* at Béziers and a house at Nîmes. The Negro played in some jazz-band near by.

"They mentioned no name?" Maigret asked Fernande as she stirred her coffee.

'No. Two or three times they mentioned the Lawyer. I thought that must be Cageot. He looks like a lawyer gone wrong.

'But wait! I haven't finished. Aren't you hungry? It must be three o'clock. They started putting up the shutters at the *Floria*. My neighbour, who was still massaging my knee, was beginning to get on my nerves. Then the door opened and Cageot came in, touched his hat, but didn't speak to anyone.

'No one looked up. You felt they were all watching him secretly. The *patron* hurried off behind the counter,

"Give me six cheroots and a box of matches," the Lawyer said.

Little Joseph didn't turn a hair. He just stared at the bottom of his glass. Cageot lit a cheroot, put the rest in his coat-pocket, and took a note out of his wallet. You could have heard a pin drop.

"I must say that the silence didn't seem to worry him. He looked coldly round, then quietly touched his hat again and went out."

Her pyjama jacket had parted company while she was dipping her roll and butter into her coffee, showing a glimpse of her pointed breasts.

She must have been twenty-seven or twenty-eight, but her body was that of a young girl and the nipples were pale pink and scarcely formed.

"Did they say anything after that?" asked Maigret, mechanically turning down the gas under the boiling kettle.

"They looked at each other and exchanged meaning glances. Then the *patron* went back to the table, saying with a sigh:

"And that's that."

Joseph looked a bit embarrassed and explained:

"It's not because he's stuck up, you know!"

At this time of day, the Rue Blanche was almost like the country. One could hear the sound of horses pulling a heavy dray along.

"The others sneered," Fernande went on. "Then the one who was mauling my leg said:

"No, no, he's not stuck up. But he's tough enough to put us all inside. I tell you, I'd prefer it if he didn't go every day to the Quai des Orfèvres!"

Fernande had come to the end of her recital. She tried hard to think whether she had forgotten anything.

"Did you go straight home?"

'No, I couldn't.'

Maigret didn't look too pleased.

'Oh,' she added hastily, 'I didn't bring him here. It's better not to let people like that see that you've got a few things of your own. He didn't let me go until five o'clock.'

She rose and went over to the window and stood breathing in the fresh air.

'What'll I do now?'

Maigret was walking up and down thoughtfully.

'What's your boy friend called?'

'Eugène. He's got E. B. in gold on his cigarette-case.'

'Will you go back to the *Tabac Fontaine* to-night?'

'If I must.'

'Pay special attention to the man they call Joseph, the little man who informed the police.'

'He didn't pay much attention to me.'

'I didn't ask you whether he did. Pay special attention to what he says.'

'And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got the housework to do,' said Fernande, knotting a handkerchief round her head.

They shook hands. On the way downstairs, Maigret was quite sure that that very night there would be a raid in Montmartre specially directed at the *Tabac Fontaine*, where plain-clothes men would come and take Fernande off to Headquarters.

Cageot would see to that.

'I must draw your attention to half a dozen women who are not registered,' he was probably saying that very moment to the head of the Public Morals Department.

And the place of honour in the Black Maria would be reserved for Fernande!

CHAPTER 4

THERE was a knock at the door. Maigret had just finished shaving and was cleaning his brush. He had been awake since eight, but he had stayed in bed, a rare occurrence for him, watching the sunlight and listening to the sounds of the city.

'Come in,' he called, and gulped down a mouthful of cold coffee that was left in the bottom of the cup. He heard Philippe's footsteps hesitating in his room, and finally he appeared round the bathroom door.

'Good morning, my lad.'

'Good morning, Uncle.'

Maigret could tell from the sound of his voice that things were going badly. He fastened his shirt and looked at his nephew. His eyes were red and his nose swollen like that of a child who has been crying.

'What's up?'

'They're arresting me.'

He said this as if he had been announcing that he was going to be shot in five minutes.

At the same time he handed over a newspaper, which Maigret glanced at while he went on dressing.

In spite of the denials of the detective Philippe Lauer, Monsieur Gastambide, the examining magistrate, decided this morning to place him under arrest.

'*Excelsior* has a picture of me on the front page,' Philippe added tragically.

His uncle said nothing. There was nothing to say. He walked about in the sunlight, his braces hanging down his

back, his feet in bedroom slippers, looking first for his pipe, then for his tobacco, and finally for a box of matches.

'Have you been at Headquarters this morning?'

'No, I've just come from the Rue des Dames. I saw this paper while I was having my coffee and rolls on the Boulevard des Batignolles.'

It was a wonderful morning. The air was keen. The sun shone. The stir and bustle of Paris was as feverish and gay as some wild ballet. Maigret opened the window, and the room was filled with the sounds of the quayside. The slow-running Seine sparkled with light.

'Well, you'll have to go, my lad! What do you expect me to say?'

He refused to be harrowed by the thought of this boy who had forsaken his fresh valley in the Vosges for the dreary corridors of the *Police Judiciaire*.

'They certainly won't spoil you there the way they do at home!'

Philippe's mother was Madame Maigret's sister, and that explained everything. His house was not so much a home as an incubator. It was: 'Philippe's coming home! - Philippe will be hungry! - Have Philippe's shirts been ironed? -'

And there were tempting little stews and custards and home-made liqueurs! And sprigs of lavender in the linen-chest!

'There's something else,' said Philippe while Maigret was putting on his collar. 'I went to the *Floria* last night.'

'Of course you did.'

'Why of course?'

'Because I advised you not to. What new idiocy did you perpetrate?'

'Nothing. I just chatted with that girl Fernande. She gave me to understand that she was working for you and that she had something to do at the *Tabac* at the corner of the Rue de Douai. When I came out I mechanically followed

her. She was stopped by men from the Public Morals squad and taken off in the Black Maria.'

'And you tried to interfere, I bet.'

Philippe looked downcast.

'What did they say?'

'That they knew what they were doing.'

'Get out now,' said Maigret, looking round for a tie.

He put his hands on his nephew's shoulders, kissed him on both cheeks, and, to cut the scene short, suddenly pretended to be very busy. Only when the door had closed behind the boy did he betray signs of dejection, and muttered a few unintelligible syllables.

His first act, when he got outside on the embankment, was to buy a copy of *Excelsior* at a kiosk. Sure enough, there was Philippe's photograph on the front page with the inscription:

Inspector Philippe Lauer, who is accused of having killed Pepito Palestrino while on surveillance duty.

Maigret walked slowly across the Pont-Neuf. He had not set foot in the *Floria* the night before, but had gone prowling round the Rue des Batignolles where Cageot lived. It was a block of flats about fifty years old, like most of the houses in the district. The lobby and the staircase were badly lit, and the flats looked dark and depressing, with dirty curtains and glimpses of faded plush furniture.

Cageot's flat was on the mezzanine floor. It was empty at that hour, and Maigret had walked into the building as if he belonged to the place, gone up to the fourth floor, and come down again.

There was a Yale lock on Cageot's door, or he might have been tempted to pay his flat a visit. As he passed the porter's lodge, the concierge pressed her face to the window and gave him a sharp look.

What was it all about? Maigret paced nearly the whole of Paris, his hands in his pockets, turning the same thoughts over in his mind.

Somewhere, in the *Tabac Fontaine* or some other place, there was a band of crooks quietly carrying on under the very eyes of the Law. Pepito was one. Barnabé had been another.

And Cageot, who was the big boss, killed them off, or had them murdered, one after another. By a simple process of elimination. The police would scarcely have noticed if it had not been for that fool Philippe.

In the meantime, Maigret had arrived at the Quai des Orfèvres. Two inspectors on their way out saluted him without attempting to conceal their surprise. He passed through the portico and across the courtyard.

Up above, it was the hour for reports. In the vast lobby about fifty detectives were standing about in groups, discussing things at the top of their voices and exchanging news and reports. Occasionally an office door would open. A name would be called out and someone would go in to make his report.

Maigret's appearance was the signal for silence and general embarrassment. But he passed the groups in such a natural manner that they were immediately put at their ease and continued their discussions.

On the right, furnished with red plush sofas, was the Director's waiting-room. One solitary visitor was sitting in a corner – it was Philippe, his chin in his hands, staring vacantly before him.

Maigret went off in the opposite direction, came to the end of the corridor, and knocked at the last door.

'Come in!' said a voice inside.

They all watched Maigret walking into Divisional Inspector Amadiou's office with his hat on.

'Good morning, Maigret.'

'Good morning, Amadieu.'

They just touched each other's hands as they used to do when they met daily. Amadieu signed to a young detective to leave the room, then murmured:

'You want to speak to me?'

Maigret sat down familiarly on the edge of the desk and took a box of matches off the table to light his pipe with.

Amadieu pushed his chair back and sat with it tilted up.

'Well, how are things in the country?'

'All right, thanks. How are things here?'

'The same as ever. I've got to see the Director in five minutes.'

Maigret pretended not to see what he was driving at, and started unbuttoning his coat in a leisurely fashion. He sat there as if he were making himself at home, and indeed this room had been his own for many years.

'I expect you're upset about your nephew,' Amadieu tackled him, unable to keep silence for long. 'Let me tell you, I'm much more upset than you are. I've been hauled over the coals about it. And you know, it's gone pretty far. The Minister himself sent a note to the Director. So now it's gone beyond me. The Public Prosecutor has taken it up. Gastambide was there in your time, wasn't he?'

The telephone bell rang. Amadieu answered it, murmured:

'Yes, Monsieur le Directeur - Right, Monsieur le Directeur - In a few minutes - I'm not alone at the moment - Yes - Exactly -'

Maigret knew what they were talking about. At the other end of the corridor, Philippe had just been admitted into the Director's room.

'You've something to ask me?' Amadieu enquired as he rose to his feet. 'That was the Chief. He wants to see me.'

'Just a few little questions. First, did Cageot know that Pepito was going to be arrested?'

'I don't know. Besides, I don't see that it's of any consequence.'

'Excuse me, I know Cageot. I know what rôle he plays here. I also know that informers occasionally get to know things. Was he here two or three days before the murder?'

'Yes, I believe so. Yes, I remember -'

'Another question. Do you know the address of Joseph Audiat, the café waiter who happened to be walking along the Rue Fontaine just at the right moment to bump into Philippe?'

'He lives at the *Hotel Rue Lepic*, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Have you checked up on Cageot's alibi?'

Amadieu gave a forced smile.

'Really, Maigret, I know my job, I hope!'

But Maigret had not finished. He had spotted a yellow file on the desk, from the Public Morals Department.

'Is that the report of Fernande Bosquet's arrest already?'

Amadieu looked the other way, and nearly spoke his mind, but instead he only murmured, 'It is hand on the door-knob:

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that Cageot got the Public Morals to bring her in. Where is she now?'

'I don't know.'

'Do you mind if I cast an eye over her record?'

It was impossible to refuse him. Maigret leaned over, read a few lines, and decided:

'She must be in the Anthropometric Department now.'

The telephone rang again. Amadieu threw up his arms.

'You must excuse me, but -'

'I know. The Chief is waiting.'

Maigret buttoned up his coat and left the office with Amadieu. Instead of making for the staircase, he walked

beside him as far as the ante-room with the plush arm-chairs.

'Will you ask the Chief if he'll see me?'

Amadieu pushed open the baize door. The office-boy also disappeared inside the office of the Director of the *Police Judiciaire*, where Philippe had just been admitted. Maigret stood waiting, hat in hand.

'Monsieur le Directeur is engaged, and asks you to come back during the course of the afternoon.'

Maigret went back through the groups of detectives. His expression was slightly harder, but he managed to smile. He did smile. But it was not a very cheerful smile.

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Instead of leaving the building, he plunged into the narrow corridors and twisting stairs that gave access to the top of the Palais de Justice. This brought him finally to the haunts of the Anthropometric Department. He pushed open the door. The women had already been dealt with. About fifteen men, who had been brought in during the night, were undressing in a grey-walled room and laying their clothes in heaps on the benches.

When they were stripped, they went one at a time into the next room, where clerks in black overalls took their finger-prints, seated them in the anthropometric chair, and called out their measurements to their colleagues just as assistants in stores call out amounts to the cashier.

The place smelt of dirt and sweat. Most of the men, dazed and embarrassed by their naked condition, let themselves be hustled about and were slow and stupid in obeying instructions. Many of them did not understand French.

Maigret shook the officials warmly by the hand and listened to the inevitable remarks.

'Come to have a look round? How's the country? It must be lovely at this time of year.'

The little room where the photographer was working was lit by a glaring neon-lamp.

'Were there many women in this morning?'

'Seven.'

'Have you got their records?'

They were lying on the table, as yet unclassified. The third was Fernande's, with her finger-prints, an untidy signature, and a terribly realistic photograph.

'Did she say anything? Or cry?'

'No, she was quite quiet.'

'Do you know where they took her?'

'I don't know whether she was discharged or whether she had to do a few days at Saint-Lazare.'

Maigret gazed at the naked men standing in line as if they were in a barracks. He took up his hat and said good-bye.

'Off already?'

But he was already on his way down those stairs, every step of which he had trodden a thousand times. Another staircase, to the left, narrower than the first, led to the laboratory, where he knew every cupboard and test-tube.

He found himself back on the second floor. The detectives had all gone. The influx of visitors had begun. They were lining up outside the doors, people who had been summoned or came of their own accord to lodge complaints or give information.

Maigret, who had passed the greater part of his life in those surroundings, suddenly looked round it all and felt faintly sick.

Was Philippe still in with the Director? Probably not. By this time he had probably been arrested and was being taken by two of his colleagues to the examining magistrate's office.

What had been said to him behind that baize door? Had they spoken quite frankly and openly to him?

'You've been unwise. There is so much evidence against

you that the public would not understand if you remained at liberty. But we're going to use you to find out the real truth. You'll remain in the Service."

No. It wouldn't have been that. Maigret could imagine the Director, waiting uneasily for Amadieu, clearing his throat and growling:

'Well, Inspector, I really can't say I congratulate you. You got in here more easily than most, thanks to your uncle's influence. Have you shown yourself worthy of that favour?'

And Amadieu himself would have gone one better:

'Henceforth you are in the hands of the examining magistrate. With the best will in the world, we can do nothing for you.'

Yet Amadieu, with his long pale face and the brown moustaches that he was perpetually twirling, was not a bad man. He had a wife and three children, among them a daughter, on whom he would settle a handsome dowry. But the whole time he fancied himself surrounded by conspiracies. He was convinced that everyone was working against him and only seeking to compromise him.

As for the Director, he was due to retire in two years' time and wanted to avoid any trouble until then.

This business was a case for the Department of Public Morals, purely a routine matter. Were they to risk complications for the sake of protecting a young detective who had made a fool of himself, and who was, moreover, a nephew of Maigret's?

Everyone knew that Cageot was a scoundrel. He himself made no effort to conceal it. He had a foot in both camps. When he gave anyone away to the police, it was because he had no further use for him.

But Cageot was a dangerous scoundrel. He had friends and connexions. Above all, he knew how to protect himself. They'd get him one day, of course. They had their

eye on him. They had even checked up on his alibi, and the case was being conducted quite fairly and honestly.

But there was no need for all this excessive zeal! Above all, there was no need for Maigret, with his passion for pushing his fingers into every pie.

He had come to the little paved courtyard, where poor people waited outside the Juvenile Court. It was chilly in spite of the sun, and in the shade, between the stones, there still lingered a sprinkling of hoar-frost.

"That damned fool Philippe!" Maigret groaned.

He was slowly getting sick of the whole thing.

He knew that he was going round in circles like a circus-pony. It wasn't a case of getting an inspiration. In police matters inspirations were no use. Nor was it a case of getting on to some sensational track or finding some clue that had evaded everyone.

It was simpler and more direct than that. Cageot had murdered Pepito or had had him murdered. What was needed was to make Cageot confess to it.

Maigret wandered along the embankment, past the boat wash-house, regretting that he had not the right to have Cageot brought up to his office and shut up with him for hours so that he could ask him the same question over and over again, and push him round a bit to shake his nerve.

Nor could he summon the café waiter, the owner of the *Tabac*, nor any of the others who played *belote* a hundred yards from the *Floria*.

Even Fernande had been literally snatched away from him as soon as he got hold of her.

He came to the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*, pushed open the door, and shook hands with Lucas, who was sitting near the bar.

"How's it going, Chief?"

He still called him Chief in memory of the times when they worked together.

'Badly!' said Maigret.

'Difficult, isn't it?'

It wasn't difficult. Only an inglorious muddle.

'I'm getting old. Perhaps it's the effect of living in the country.'

'What will you drink?'

'Oh, I'll have a *Pernod*.'

He said it as if he were uttering a challenge. He remembered he had promised to write to his wife, but he hadn't the heart.

'Can't I help you?'

Lucas was a strange chap, not only badly dressed, but badly made as well. He had neither wife nor family.

Maigret's eyes wandered round the café, which was beginning to fill up. He had to screw up his eyes when he looked at the sunny glass door.

'Have you ever worked with Philippe?'

'Two or three times.'

'How did you like him?'

'Some of them had a grudge against him because he didn't say much. He's a bit shy, you know. Have they locked him up?'

'Your health!'

Lucas was rather worried at finding Maigret so reticent.

'What are you going to do, Chief?'

'Well, I'll tell you. I'm going to do everything that's humanly possible. Do you understand? It's as well that someone should know. As it is, anything might happen -'

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and rapped on the table with a coin to call the waiter.

'Don't bother. That was on me.'

'All right. We'll have one on me when it's over. *Au revoir*, Lucas.'

'*Au revoir*, Chief.'

For a brief second, Lucas's hand grasped Maigret's rugged paw.

'Take care of yourself, you know.'

Maigret rose to his feet, saying in a loud voice:

'I have a horror of pimps.'

He set off alone, on foot. He had plenty of time, for he had not the least idea himself where he was going.

CHAPTER 5

WHEN Maigret pushed open the door of the *Tabac Fontaine*, at about half-past one, the *patron*, who had just got up, was slowly descending the spiral staircase which led up from the back room.

He was as broad and heavy as the ex-detective, but not so tall. At the moment he showed traces of a newly completed toilet. His hair was saturated with eau-de-Cologne, and there was still some talcum powder left under the lobes of his ears. He wore neither jacket nor collar. His slightly starched shirt was snowy-white and fastened by a swivel-stud.

He went behind the bar, negligently pushed the boy out of his way, took a bottle of white wine and a glass, mixed the wine with soda, threw back his head and gargled.

At that hour, the only customers were chance passers-by who wanted something to eat in a hurry. Maigret was the only one sitting at a table near the window, but the *patron* did not notice him. He fastened on a blue apron and turned to the blonde girl at the cash-desk.

He spoke neither to her nor to the bar-tender, but opened the cash-register, consulted a card, and finally stretched himself, definitely awake now. His day was just beginning, and the first thing he encountered as he surveyed his domain was Maigret's placid gaze.

They had not met before, but the *patron* knitted his thick black brows, obviously trying to place him, and failing. And that annoyed him. Little did he dream that this placid client was going to be there for twelve long hours.

Maigret's first action was to go over to the cash-desk, where he asked the girl for a telephone counter.

The call-box stood on the right-hand corner of the café.

There was a frosted-glass door, and Maigret, knowing that the *patron* had his eye on him, jerked the receiver-rest violently with one hand while with his pocket-knife he cut the wire where it passed through the boards, in such a way that it was impossible to see where the connexion was broken.

'Hello! - hello! - ' he shouted.

He came out with an expression of exasperation on his face.

'Do you know that your telephone is out of order?'

The *patron* turned to the cashier, who looked very surprised.

'It was all right a few minutes ago. Lucien phoned for some rolls, didn't you, Lucien?'

'Less than a quarter of an hour ago,' Lucien confirmed.

The *patron's* suspicions were not yet aroused, but he had his eye on Maigret. He went into the call-box, tried to get a connexion, and kept at it for at least ten minutes without noticing that the wire had been cut.

Maigret returned impassively to his seat, and ordered a pint of beer. He was laying up a store of patience. He knew that he would have to spend hours sitting in that same chair behind that imitation mahogany table with only the zinc bar-counter and the glass cash-desk, where the girl sold cigarettes and tobacco, in view.

The *patron* came out of the call-box, kicked the door to, marched up to the café door, and stood there sniffing the air of the street. He was quite near Maigret, whose eyes never left him, and finally, feeling that gaze fixed on him, he turned quickly.

Maigret did not blink. He had kept his hat and coat beside him, like a customer on the point of leaving.

'Lucien! Run across the road and ring up the repairs department.'

The boy ran out, with a dirty table-napkin in his hand,

and the *patron* served two stone-masons who had come in looking funereal under an almost solid coating of plaster. This state of uncertainty lasted another ten minutes. Then Lucien came back and announced that the engineer could not come until the next day. The *patron* again turned towards Maigret and muttered: 'Swine!' between his teeth.

It might have been meant for the absent engineer, but the epithet was mainly directed to this customer, whom the *patron* had at last recognized as a police officer.

By now it was past two, and this was the prologue to an interminable comedy which the general public missed altogether. The *patron's* name was Louis. Customers who knew him came and shook hands and exchanged a few words. He rarely served them himself. Most of the time he sat behind the bar between the bar-tender and the girl at the cash-desk.

And over all their heads he kept watching Maigret. He was no more troubled than was Maigret. There was something almost comic about those two big heavy men playing their game of bluff.

They were not annoyed about it either. Louis knew what he was doing when from time to time he glanced towards the glass door to see whether a certain person was coming in.

At that hour, life in the Rue Fontaine was the same as in any other street in Paris. Opposite the *Tabac* was an Italian grocer's shop, where the local housewives did their shopping.

'Waiter! Bring me a *Calvados*.'

The girl at the cash-desk was soft and blonde, and kept looking at Maigret with growing astonishment. The waiter had guessed that something was up, he was not quite sure what, and occasionally gave the *patron* a wink.

Shortly after three, a big flashy car stopped outside. A tall dark man, still fairly young, with a scar on his left

cheek, got out, came into the bar and shook hands over the counter.

'*Salut, Louis.*'

'*Salut, Eugène.*'

Maigret was facing Louis, but he could see the newcomer in the mirror.

'A mint-soda, Louis. Make it snappy.'

It was one of the *belote* players, probably the owner of the house at Béziers whom Fernande had talked about. He wore a well-cut suit and a silk shirt. He too was slightly perfumed.

'Have you seen the - ?'

He did not finish his sentence. Louis signalled that someone was listening, and suddenly Eugène looked up and saw Maigret in the mirror.

'H'm! Hurry with the iced soda, Louis!'

He took a cigarette from an initialled case and lit it at a lighter.

'Fine day, eh?'

It was the *patron* who spoke, still with his eyes on Maigret.

'Yes, it's a fine day. But there's a funny smell in here.'

'What kind of a smell?'

'A smell of rats.'

They both burst out laughing, while Maigret peacefully exhaled tobacco-smoke.

'See you later?' asked Eugène, holding out his hand again.

He wanted to know whether they would be meeting as usual.

'See you later,' said Louis.

This conversation seemed to have left him in fine form, for he snatched up a dirty cloth and came up to Maigret with a sly grin.

'Excuse me,' he said, and wiped the table so clumsily

that he spilt the contents of the glass over the ex-detective's trousers.

'Lucien!' he called, 'bring another glass for the gentleman.'

Then he added as sole apology:

'There'll be no extra charge.'

Maigret smiled vaguely back at him.

At five o'clock the lamps were lit, but outside it was still light enough to see the new arrivals as they crossed the pavement and put their hands to the door-handle.

When Joseph Audiart arrived in this way, Louis and Maigret looked at each other as if in mutual understanding, and from then onwards it was as if they had exchanged long confidences. There was no further need for them to talk about the *Floria* or Pepito or Cageot.

Maigret knew, and Louis knew that he knew.

'*Salut, Louis!*'

Audiart was a small man, entirely dressed in black, with a slightly crooked nose and restless eyes. When he came to the bar-counter he held out his hand to the girl at the cash-desk and said:

'Good day, lovely lady.'

Then, turning to Lucien:

'A small *Pernod*, young man.'

He talked a great deal. He looked as if he were constantly acting a part. But Maigret soon noticed signs of uneasiness beneath his outward calm. Added to which he had a tic. As soon as the smile faded from his lips, it was automatically and painfully replaced.

'Anyone else turn up?'

The café was empty. There were only two men standing at the counter.

'Eugène looked in.'

The *patron* repeated the signal to warn him of Maigret's presence, but Audiart was much less subtle than Eugène, turned quickly, looked Maigret in the eyes, and spat on the ground.

'Anything else?' he asked.

'Nothing. Any winners?'

'Nothing doing. I was given a tip that didn't come off. In the third race, where I had a chance, the horse didn't start. Give me a packet of *Cauloises*, lovely lady.'

He could not keep still, but kept crossing his legs and moving his arms and his head.

'Can I telephone?'

Louis gave Maigret another look.

'No, you can't. Monsieur there has disconnected us.'

That was a declaration of war. Audiart was not reassured. He seemed afraid of making a gaffe, for he had no idea what had happened before he came in.

'Are we meeting this evening?'

'Same as usual.'

He drank his *Pernod* and went out. Louis sat down at the table next to Maigret's, and the barman brought him a hot meal he had warmed up on the office stove.

'Waiter!' Maigret called.

'That'll be nine francs seventy-five - ' said the boy.

'Bring me two ham sandwiches and a pint of beer.'

Louis was eating hot sauerkraut, garnished with two appetizing-looking sausages.

'Have we any ham, Monsieur Louis?'

'You may find an old piece in the refrigerator.'

He ate noisily, with exaggerated vulgarity. Maigret was given a couple of desiccated ham sandwiches, but he pretended not to notice.

'Waiter! Bring me some mustard - '

'There isn't any.'

The two hours that followed went more quickly. The

bar filled up with passers-by who came in for *apéritifs*. The *patron* condescended to serve them himself. The door opened and closed incessantly and, every time, Maigret felt a blast of cold air.

It had started to freeze. For some time the passing buses had been packed, with people standing on the step. Then gradually the street emptied. The seven o'clock rush was followed by an unexpected calm which preceded the entirely different bustle of the evening.

The worst hour was between eight and nine. There was no one about. The waiter had his supper. The girl at the cash-desk was replaced by a woman of about forty, who began sorting out and stacking up the money in the cash-drawer. Louis went up to his room, and came back wearing a jacket and tie.

Joseph Audiat was the first to appear, shortly after nine. He gave Maigret a look and went across to Louis.

'Is it O.K.?'

'Yes. Why not?'

But Louis no longer had his afternoon's dash. He was tired, and when he looked at Maigret, it was not with the same assurance. Even Maigret was feeling slightly weary. He had had practically every kind of drink - beer, coffee, *Calvados*, mineral water. Seven or eight saucers were piled up on the table, and he would have to drink more.

'Look! Here's Eugène and his pal.'

The light-blue car again stopped outside, and two men came in, first Eugène in the same clothes as before, and then a rather shy younger man who smiled at everyone.

'Where's Oscar?'

'He'll be coming.'

Eugène gave a wink in Maigret's direction, put two tables together, and took out the red cloth and the box of counters.

'Shall we begin?'

They were all in the joke together, with Louis and Eugène taking the lead, especially Eugène, who was fresh to the fray. He had dazzling teeth and a genuine vivacity which must have made women mad about him.

'We'll see well this evening, at any rate!' he said.

'How?' asked Audiat, who was always a little slower than any of the others.

'Because we have such a high-light in our midst!'

The high-light was, of course, Maigret, smoking his pipe less than a yard away from the players.

Louis, with a ritual gesture, took up the slate and chalk. He was generally marker. He drew up columns and wrote in the initials of the players.

'What'll you have?' asked the waiter.

Eugène screwed up his eyes, looked at Maigret's glass of *Calrados*, and answered:

'The same as monsieur!'

'Mineral water,' said Audiat uneasily.

The fourth man spoke with a Marseilles accent and could not have been in Paris long. He modelled his behaviour on Eugène's, for whom he seemed to have a profound admiration.

'Tell me, Louis,' said Eugène, 'is the shooting-season over yet?'

This time even Louis did not follow.

'How do I know? Why do you ask?'

'I was just wondering about the rabbits.'

That was aimed at Maigret too. The explanation came immediately, while the cards were dealt and were being arranged in the players' left hands.

'I've just been to see the gentleman.'

That meant:

'I have warned Cageot.'

Audiat looked up quickly.

'What did he say?'

Louis frowned, thinking that this was perhaps going a little far.

'He doesn't care. He seems to know all about it and is preparing a little treat.'

'Diamonds - *Tierce haute* - All right?'

'*Quatrième?*'

It was plain that Eugène was excited and his mind was not on the game but was busy thinking up new sallies.

'Parisians,' he murmured suddenly, 'go to the country - to the Loire, for instance - for their holidays. And the funny thing is that the people of the Loire come to Paris for theirs.'

It was out at last! He could not resist the temptation to let Maigret know that he knew all about him. Maigret puffed away at his pipe, warming his *Calvados* in the palms of his hands before drinking it.

'Mind what you're playing,' replied Louis, who kept looking uneasily towards the door.

A man came in. He looked like a little Montmartre shop-keeper. He sat down without a word between Eugène and his friend from Marseilles, rather farther back, and, still without uttering a word, shook hands all round.

'How are you?' said Louis.'

The newcomer opened his mouth, and a thread of sound issued from it. He was voiceless.

'Fin!'

'Have you spotted him?' Eugène shouted in his ear, for he was deaf as well.

'Spotted what?' asked the reedy voice.

Someone kicked him under the table. At last his eyes reached Maigret and rested on him for a moment.

He gave a faint smile.

'I see.'

They continued the game.

Life had begun again in the Rue Fontaine. The electric

signs were lit up and the doormen were standing on the pavement. The doorman from the *Floria* came for cigarettes, but no one paid any attention to him.

Maigret was feeling warm. He was stiff all over but showed no signs of it, and the expression on his face was the same as when he took up his post at half-past one.

'I say!' Eugène suddenly launched at his neighbour, who was so hard of hearing, and whom Maigret had recognized as the proprietor of a brothel in the Rue de Provence. 'What do you call a locksmith who no longer makes locks?'

The cream of the joke was that Eugène had to shout, while the other man answered in an angelic voice.

'A locksmith? - I don't know -'

'Well, I call him nothing at all.'

He played, collected the cards, and played again.

'And a *flic* who isn't a *flic* any longer?'

His neighbour had caught on. His face brightened with pleasure, and in a voice reedier than ever he breathed:

'Nothing at all!'

Everyone burst out laughing, even Audiart, though his laugh was short-lived. Something was preventing him from joining in the general amusement. He was plainly uneasy, in spite of the presence of his friends. And it was not only because of Maigret.

'Léon!' he called to the night-waiter. 'Give me a brandy-and-soda.'

'Drinking brandy at this time of night?'

Eugène noticed that Audiart was on the verge of collapse and gave him a stern look.

'Better not overdo it.'

'Overdo what?'

'How many *Pernods* did you have before dinner?'

'Go to hell!' replied Audiart obstinately.

'Keep calm, *mes enfants!*' Louis intervened. 'I go a spade.'

At midnight their gaiety was more forced. Maigret still

sat motionless, with his coat on and his pipe between his teeth. He seemed to have become a part of the furniture, almost to have receded into the wall. Only his eyes were alive as they moved from one card-player to another.

Audiat had shown the first signs of strain, but it was not long before the deaf man became rather restless, and finally he rose.

'It's time I went to bed. I've got to go to a funeral to-morrow.'

'Go and hang yourself!' said Eugène softly, knowing that he would not hear.

He said it as if it had been something else - it was all part of his fun.

'Pass your cards.'

In spite of all their looks, Audiat had had three brandies. His face was pale and lined, and drops of sweat stood out on his brow.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm off,' he said, rising to his feet.

He obviously had a weak heart, and had drunk his third brandy to set him on his feet. It served its purpose. Louis and Eugène gave each other a look.

'You look like a dish-rag,' the latter said at length.

It was a little after one. Maigret counted out some money and put it on the table. Eugène took Audiat into a corner and spoke very firmly to him in a low voice. Audiat seemed to be resisting, but finally he was persuaded to yield.

'See you to-morrow!' he said, with his hand on the door-handle.

'Waiter, how much do I owe you?'

There was a clatter of saucers. Maigret buttoned up his overcoat, filled his pipe and lit it at the gas-burner on the counter.

'Good night, messieurs.'

He went out, following the sound of Audiat's footsteps.

Eugène went behind the counter as if he wanted to ask the *patron* something. Louis understood and opened a drawer. Eugène put his hand in, transferred it to his pocket, and went towards the door, accompanied by the man from Marseilles.

‘See you later!’ he said as he disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER 6

THE Rue Fontaine was a blaze of lights, doorkeepers stood in front of the various night-clubs, and chauffeurs beside the cars which lined the pavements. It was not until they had turned off to the right, past the Rue Blanche into the Boulevard Rochechouart, that the situation began to take shape.

In front walked Joseph Audiart, with a feverish and unsteady gait. He did not once look round.

Twenty yards behind, the solid figure of Maigret, his hands in his pockets, strode along calmly and relentlessly.

Their footsteps re-echoed through the still night - Audiart's the more rapid, Maigret's the more powerful and portentous.

Behind them purred the light-blue car with Eugène at the wheel and the man from Marseilles beside him. It crept along at a walking-pace, hugging the pavement and trying to keep its distance. Sometimes Eugène had to change gears to maintain the same speed, and occasionally he would suddenly advance a few yards and then wait until the men had got a certain distance away.

There was no need for Maigret to look round. He understood what was happening. He knew that the big blue car was there, and he knew whose faces were behind the wind-screen.

It was all very neat. He was following Audiart, because he had the impression that Audiart would be more easily intimidated than the rest, and they knew it too and were following him in their turn.

At first Maigret smiled faintly as he walked. Then his smile changed to a frown. Audiart was not making for the Rue Lepic, where he lived, nor for the centre of the city.

He kept along the boulevard, where the metro ran overhead, and at the Barbès crossroads he went towards La Chapelle.

It was highly improbable that he would have anything to do in that quarter at that time of night. Maigret was forced to the conclusion that he had arranged with the men in the car to lead him on towards more deserted districts.

There was no longer anyone about, except for an occasional woman lurking in the shadows and a man flitting from one to another of them making his choice.

But Maigret felt no undue excitement. He remained calm, and puffed steadily at his pipe, listening to his own footsteps, which were as steady as a metronome.

They crossed the railway line near the Gare du Nord, and Maigret got a glimpse of deserted platforms and an illuminated clock-face. It was half-past two. The car was still purring away behind them. Suddenly, for no reason, the klaxon gave a short blast. Audiart at once began to walk faster, so fast that it looked as if he were trying not to break into a run.

Also, for no apparent reason, he suddenly crossed the road. Maigret crossed too. For a moment he had a side-glimpse of the car, and at that moment he had a vague suspicion of what was in the wind.

The metro running overhead made the boulevard darker than any other street. A police patrol went by on bicycles, and one of them looked back at the car but could see nothing wrong and disappeared with the rest.

The tempo quickened. A hundred yards farther on, Audiart again crossed the road, but this time he lost his nerve slightly and ran the last few steps. Maigret stood stock-still, saw the car ready to accelerate, and understood. His forehead was slightly damp, for it was by the merest chance that he had escaped the accident.

It was as clear as day! Audiart had been instructed to lead

him on to deserted streets. And there, when Maigret was half-way across the road, the car would have swept down on him and left him a mangled heap on the roadway.

Suddenly it was like a nightmare – the thought of that smooth limousine gliding along, and its two occupants, particularly Eugène, with his flashing teeth and his spoilt-child smile, with his hands on the steering-wheel, waiting for the propitious moment.

Could it be called murder? Maigret was running the risk of being brutally killed at any moment; they would run him over and leave him lying in the dust, seriously injured or dying, and it might be hours before anyone came to his assistance.

But it was too late now to turn back. Nor had he any wish to do so. He had given up any idea of catching up Audiart and making him talk, but, out of sheer obstinate self-respect, he went on after him.

His only precaution was to take his gun out of his trouser-pocket and release the safety-catch.

Then he walked on a little faster. Instead of keeping twenty yards away, he came up so close that Audiart thought he wanted to stop him, and increased his pace in his turn. For a few seconds it was almost a comedy, and the men in the car must have noticed, for they too crept a little closer.

The trees on the boulevard and the pillars which carried the metro rushed past. Audiart was afraid, afraid of Maigret, and perhaps, too, of his accomplices. Another peremptory hoot of the klaxon instructed him to cross the street, and he stood panting on the edge of the pavement.

Maigret decided to keep quite close behind him. He could see Audiart's soft hat and restless eyes, and the headlights of the approaching car.

He was just stepping off the kerb behind the waiter, when he had a sudden intuition. Perhaps Audiart had too,

but it came to him too late. He started to cross the road. He went one yard – two yards –

Maigret opened his mouth to shout a warning. He realized that the two men in the car were tired of the chase and had suddenly decided to strike, even if it meant getting their accomplice as well as the detective.

He gave no cry. There was a rush of air, the sound of a car suddenly going at top speed, then a dull impact and perhaps an indistinct moan.

The rear light of the car dwindled and disappeared down a side-street. On the road, the little man in black was trying to raise himself on his hands, and gazing wildly at Maigret.

He looked like a child or a madman. His face was streaked with dust and blood. His nose was a different shape, and that altered the whole character of his face.

Finally he sat up, raised one hand limply to his forehead, as if he were dreaming, and gave a sort of smile.

Maigret lifted him up, set him down on the edge of the pavement, and went back mechanically for his hat, which was still in the middle of the road. Although he himself had not been touched, it took him a few seconds to recover his equilibrium.

There was nobody about. He could hear a taxi somewhere, but it must have been a long way off, down in the Barbès direction.

‘Well, that was a narrow squeak!’ he growled as he bent over the little waiter.

With his two thumbs he gently prodded his head to see whether the skull had been fractured. He moved the legs one after the other, for the trousers were ripped, or rather torn right off, up to the right knee, and he got a glimpse of a nasty wound.

Audiat seemed to have lost not only all power of speech, but his reason as well. He kept chewing away as if to get rid of some unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Suddenly Maigret raised his head. He heard the sound of a car, and he was quite sure it was Eugène's car in a street parallel to the boulevard. The noise grew louder, and the blue car shot across the boulevard a hundred yards away.

They could not stay there. Eugène and the man from Marseilles had evidently decided not to go away. They wanted to know what was happening. They were describing a wide circle round the spot, but in the quiet of the night the sound of the engine was quite distinct. The next time, they crossed the boulevard only a few yards away, and Maigret held his breath and waited for the shots.

'They'll be back again,' he thought. 'And this time -'

He lifted Audiart, crossed the road, and laid him down on the verge, behind a tree.

The car came back. Eugène could not see them. He stopped his car about a hundred yards away, and, after a short discussion with the other man, decided to abandon the pursuit.

Audiart groaned and stirred, and, by the light of a gas-lamp, Maigret could see a large pool of blood where he had fallen on the road.

There was nothing to do but wait. Maigret did not dare leave him alone while he went in search of a taxi. And he did not want to ring a door-bell and raise the alarm. They only had to wait ten minutes. Then a half-drunk Algerian came past, and Maigret explained that he must get them a taxi.

It was cold. The sky had the same frozen look as on the night he had left Meung. Occasionally a goods train whistled down by the Gare du Nord.

'I feel bad!' said Audiart at last in a doleful voice.

He raised his eyes to Maigret, as if he expected him to find a remedy for his suffering.

Luckily the Algerian had done his part and a taxi appeared. The driver took up a cautious attitude.

'Are you sure it's an accident?' he asked, doubtful whether he should stop his car and help Maigret.

'If you're in any doubt, drive us to the police station,' was the reply.

With this reassurance he dropped them, a quarter of an hour later, at Maigret's hotel on the embankment.

Audiat did not close his eyes, but watched everything with such a docile expression that Maigret nearly smiled. The hotel porter was quite taken in.

'Looks a bit squiffy, your friend.'

'Perhaps he feels a bit squiffy. He's just been run over by a car.'

They took him up to Maigret's room, and Maigret ordered rum and towels. He did not require any help. While all around people lay sleeping, he quietly took off Audiat's shoes, his jacket and collar, and turned back his shirt-sleeves.

Half an hour later he started work on his thin body, which lay naked on the bed, with the marks of his garters still on his calves. The worst wound was on the knee. Maigret disinfected and bandaged it. Then he put sticking-plaster on some superficial cuts, and finally made him drink a large glass of rum.

The radiator was boiling. The window-curtains had not been drawn, and the moon was visible in a patch of sky.

'Well, your pals got you all right, the swine!' sighed Maigret at last.

Audiat pointed to his jacket and indicated that he wanted a cigarette.

'What made me guess something was up was that you looked so nervous yourself. You probably thought that they'd try to get you too.'

Audiat looked at Maigret with cold suspicion. But when he finally opened his mouth it was only to ask a question.

'What's it all got to do with you?'

'Don't worry about that. You're not very strong yet. I'll tell you what it's got to do with me. A certain rat, whom you know, did Pepito in, probably because he thought he would talk about the Barnabé affair. This same rat came and got you at the *Tabac Fontaine* about two in the morning.'

Audiat frowned and stared at the wall.

'You remember, don't you? Cageot called you out. He told you to go and bump into a chap who would be coming out of the *Floria* at any moment. Thanks to your evidence, this chap was arrested. Well, he happens to be a relation of mine.'

'You needn't think I'll help you!' Audiat murmured, his cheek in the pillow.

It was about four o'clock. Maigret sat down beside the bed, poured himself out a glassful of rum and lit a pipe.

'We've plenty of time to talk,' he said. 'I've just had a look at your papers. You've only four charges against you, and they're not bad ones - pickpocketing, fraud, and taking part in the burgling of a villa.'

Audiat pretended to be asleep.

'Only, unless I am mistaken, your next offence will mean transportation. What do you think?'

'Let me sleep.'

'I'm not stopping you. But you won't stop me talking. I know that your pals haven't been caught yet. At the present moment they're fixing it so that if I give the number of their car to-morrow, there'll be a garage man who'll testify that the car never left the garage all night.'

A beatific smile spread over Audiat's swollen lips.

'Only I'll tell you one thing: I'm going to get Cageot. And when I make up my mind to get someone, I always get him in the end. Now, on the day the "Lawyer" goes inside you go with him, and then there'll be no chance to discuss the matter.'

By five o'clock, Maigret had drunk two glasses of rum

and the room was blue with tobacco-smoke. Audiat tossed and turned in bed and finally sat up, his cheeks scarlet and his eyes blazing.

'Was it Cageot who arranged this trick to-night, do you think?' asked Maigret. 'Highly probable, eh? Eugène wouldn't have thought of it on his own. And if it was Cageot, you may be sure he wouldn't be a bit sorry to get rid of you.'

Maigret's monotonous soliloquy had awakened someone overhead, and there were knocks on the ceiling. It was so hot that Maigret took off his waistcoat.

'Give me some rum.'

There was only the one tooth-glass, and the two men took it in turn and hardly noticed the quantity of rum they were consuming. Maigret returned persistently to his theme.

'I'm not asking you much. Just say that immediately after Pepito was killed, Cageot came and got you out of the café.'

'I didn't know Pepito was dead.'

'You see! You were sitting in the *Tabac Fontaine* just as you were to-night, with Eugène and probably that deaf little pimp. Did Cageot come in?'

'No.'

'Very well, then, he knocked on the window. You probably had arranged some signal.'

'I won't tell you anything.'

At six the sky was growing pale. Trams started on the embankment and a tug gave a piercing hoot as if it had lost all its barges during the night.

Maigret's cheeks were nearly as flushed and his eyes as bright as Audiat's.

The bottle of rum was empty.

'I'm going to tell you in confidence what's going to happen now that they know you've been here talking to

me. As soon as possible they'll do the same thing again, but this time they won't slip up. What do you risk if you talk? Just for protection, you'll be kept inside for a couple of days. When the whole gang is run in, you'll be released, and that'll be the end.'

Audiat was listening. The proof that the idea was not unattractive to him *a priori* was that he murmured as if to himself:

'In the condition I'm in, I have a right to go to the infirmary.'

'Of course. And you know the infirmary at Fresnes. It's as good as a hospital.'

'Will you take a look and see whether my knee is swollen?'

Maigret obediently undid the bandage. The knee had undoubtedly swollen, and Audiat, who was terrified of illness, examined it with dread.

'Do you think they'll have to cut off my leg?'

'I can promise you you'll be better in a fortnight. You've just got a slight touch of synovitis.'

'Ah!'

He gazed at the ceiling for a few minutes. Somewhere an alarm-clock went off. The muffled tread of the hotel servants going on duty could be heard in the corridor. Then on the landing came the interminable sound of shoes being brushed.

'Well, have you decided?'

'I don't know.'

'You'd prefer to face a trial with Cageot?'

'I want a drink of water.'

His request was deliberate, and although he did not actually smile, his delight at having Maigret to wait on him was obvious.

'It's tepid.'

Maigret made no objection. He walked about, his braces

hanging down his back, and did everything the sick man wanted. The horizon grew pink. A ray of sun touched the window.

'Who's in charge of the case?'

'Inspector Amadiou and Judge Gastambide.'

'Are they decent chaps?'

'None better!'

'They nearly did for me, didn't they? What was it that knocked me down?'

'The left wing of the car.'

'And it was Eugène driving?'

'Yes, it was him all right. The man from Marseilles was beside him. Who is he, by the way?'

'A young chap who's only been here for three months. He was in Barcelona, but it seems there's nothing doing down there.'

'Listen, Audiat. No need to stall any more. I'm going to get a taxi. We'll both go to Headquarters. Amadiou will be there at eight and you'll do your stuff to him.'

Maigret yawned, so exhausted that he could scarcely get his tongue round certain words.

'What do you say to that?'

'Let's go, anyway.'

Maigret shaved quickly, tidied himself, and had two breakfasts sent up.

'You see, in the situation you're in, there's only one place where you'll be safe. And that's in gaol.'

'Is Amadiou that tall pale chap with long moustaches?'

'Yes.'

'I don't think much of him.'

The rising sun reminded Maigret of the little house on the Loire, with the fishing-rods waiting at the bottom of the punt. For a moment, perhaps as a result of his exhaustion, he had a mind to give the whole thing up. He looked at Audiat with wide eyes, as if he had forgotten what he

was doing there, then he passed a hand through his hair.

'What am I going to wear? My trousers are all torn,' said Audiat.

They called a servant, who consented to lend them an old pair of trousers. Audiat hobbled along, whined, and leaned his full weight on Maigret's arm.

A taxi took them across the Pont-Neuf, and as he breathed the keen morning air Maigret began to feel better. An empty Black Maria was just coming out of the *Dépôt*, having deposited its load of arrests.

'Will you be able to get upstairs?'

'Perhaps. Anyway, I won't go up on a stretcher.'

They had come to the end of their endurance. Maigret felt his chest bursting with impatience. The taxi stopped opposite No. 36. Before he got Audiat out, Maigret paid the fare and called to the policeman on duty at the door to come and help him.

The policeman was in the middle of a conversation with a man who had his back to the street but who turned round at the sound of Maigret's voice. It was Cageot, in a dark overcoat, a two-days' growth on his grey cheeks. Audiat did not see him until he was out of the taxi, and Cageot did not look at him, but went on talking to the policeman. Not a word was exchanged. Maigret supported Audiat, who pretended to be much worse than he actually was.

They crossed the courtyard, and Audiat collapsed on the bottom step of the stairs as if he could go no farther. Then, looking up, he said:

'Well, you've been nicely had, haven't you? I'm not going to say a word. I know nothing about it. But I wasn't going to stay in your room. I don't know you anyway. For all I know, it may have been you who pushed me under the car.'

Maigret's fist was clenched as hard as a stone, but it remained where it was, buried deep in the pocket of his overcoat.

CHAPTER 7

EUGÈNE was the first to arrive, shortly before eleven. Although it was not yet spring, he had dressed himself to harmonize with the bright sunshine. He wore a light-grey flannel suit, so soft that every movement of his muscles could be seen, a grey hat to match, and delicate buckskin shoes. When he pushed open the glass door of the *Police Judiciaire*, he brought a faint whiff of perfume with him.

It was not his first visit to the Quai des Orfèvres. He looked all round, like an old acquaintance, without taking his gold-tipped cigarette out of his mouth. The hour for reports was past. People were waiting mournfully outside office doors.

Eugène went up to the policeman on duty and touched a finger to his hat.

'I say, old man, Inspector Amadiou's expecting me.'

'Take a seat.'

He sat down airily, crossed his legs, lit a fresh cigarette, and opened a newspaper at the racing news. Outside the door, his long blue car looked longer than ever. Maigret, who had seen him from a window, went down to the street to look at the left wing, but there was no sign of a scratch on it.

A few hours before, Maigret had appeared in Amadiou's room with his hat on his head and a determined expression on his face.

'I've brought in a man who knows the truth.'

'That's a matter for the examining magistrate!' Amadiou had replied, and gone on rummaging among his papers.

So Maigret had knocked on the Director's door, and realized at the first glance that his visit was unwelcome.

'Good morning, Monsieur le Directeur.'

'Good morning, Maigret.'

They both found the situation awkward, and understood each other without any need of words.

'Monsieur le Directeur, I've been working all night, and I've come to ask you if you will arrange to have three or four persons examined here.'

'That's a matter for the examining magistrate,' said the Director.

'The magistrate will get nothing out of those people. You know what I mean.'

Maigret knew that he was making himself a general nuisance and that everyone was wishing him at the bottom of the sea, but still he persisted.

His bulky shadow loomed over the Director until he was gradually forced to yield, and ended by calling up an extension.

'Come in a moment, Amadiou.'

'Very well, Monsieur le Directeur.'

There was a short colloquy.

'Our friend Maigret tells me -'

By nine o'clock Amadiou had consented to go along the corridors to Monsieur Gastambide's room in the Palais de Justice, and twenty minutes later he returned with subpoenas in his pocket for Cageot, Audiat, the *patron* of the *Tabac Fontaine*, the man from Marseilles, and the little deaf man.

At half-past nine, five detectives went to bring them in, while Maigret, heavy with sleep, wandered about the building where he no longer belonged, opening doors, shaking hands with old colleagues, and emptying his pipe into the sawdust in the spittoons.

'How are you?'

'Finel' he would reply.

'They're furious, you know!' Lucas had whispered.

'Who?'

'Amadieu - and the Director -'

And still Maigret waited and took in the atmosphere of the place of which he had once been a part. Eugène, ensconced in a red-plush armchair, showed no signs of impatience, and even smiled brightly when he saw Maigret. He was a handsome creature, full of vitality and self-assurance. He exuded health and insouciance from every pore, and his least movement had an almost animal grace.

Maigret fell on one of the detectives who had just come in.

'You went to the garage?'

'Yes. The man swears that the car was not taken out all night, and the night-watchman confirms it.'

It was such a foregone conclusion that Eugène, who must have overheard, did not even trouble to be ironical.

The *patron* of the *Tabac* arrived shortly after, his eyes bleary with sleep, and ill-temper in every word and movement.

'Inspector Amadieu!' he snapped at the office-boy.

'Take a seat.'

He sat down three yards away from Eugène without any sign of recognition, and placed his hat on his knees.

Amadieu sent for Maigret, and once again they found themselves face to face in the little room that looked onto the Seine.

'Have your lot arrived yet?'

'Not all of them.'

'Will you tell me exactly what questions you want me to ask them?'

It sounded quite innocuous, this apparently friendly and deferential little remark. But it was a declaration of passive resistance. Amadieu knew just as well as Maigret that it was impossible to decide in advance what questions should be asked in a police interrogation.

Nevertheless, Maigret dictated a certain number of

questions for each witness. Amadiou took a note of them with the docility of a secretary, but at the same time with obvious satisfaction.

'Is that all?'

'That's all.'

'Would you like us to begin, then, with this man Audiat?'

Maigret implied that it was all the same to him, and Amadiou pressed a button and gave an order to the detective who answered it.

His secretary sat down at the far end of the room, with his back to the light, and Maigret took up his position in a dark corner.

'Sit down, Audiat, and tell us what you did last night.'

'I didn't do anything.'

The waiter had spotted Maigret, even though the sun was in his eyes, and managed to give him a malevolent look.

'Where were you at midnight?'

'I don't remember. I went to the cinema. Then I had a drink in a cafe in the Rue Fontaine.'

Amadiou gave Maigret a look that implied:

'Don't worry. I'm not forgetting your notes.'

Then, with his eyeglasses perched on his nose, he read slowly:

'What are the names of the friends whom you met at the bar?'

The whole business was doomed to failure right from the start. The Inspector spoke as if he were repeating a lesson. Audiat realized it and became increasingly self-confident.

'I didn't meet any friends.'

'You didn't even see anyone who is here now?'

Audiat turned to Maigret, looked at him, and nodded.

'Perhaps that gentleman there. But I couldn't be sure. I didn't take much notice of him.'

'And after that?'

'After that, I went out and walked along the outer boulevards because the cinema had given me a headache. As I was crossing the road I was knocked down by a car and found myself lying under a tree. This gentleman was there all right. He told me I'd been run over by a car. I asked him to take me home, but he wouldn't, and took me instead to a hotel room.'

A door opened, and the Director of the *Police Judiciaire* came in and stood leaning silently against a wall.

'What did you tell him?'

'Nothing at all. It was he who did all the talking. He talked about people I'd never heard of, and he wanted me to come here and swear they were pals of mine.'

With a big blue pencil in his hand, Amadieu occasionally scribbled a word on his blotting-pad, while the secretary took down every word.

'Excuse me!' the Director interrupted. 'What you say sounds very nice. But tell us what you were doing in the Boulevard de La Chapelle at three in the morning.'

'I'd a headache.'

'You'd better not try to be smart. You have four charges against you -'

'Excuse me, the first three were dismissed. You've no right to bring them up.'

Maigret confined himself to watching and listening. The office was filled with the smell of his pipe, and the smoke rose to the ceiling.

'We'll see about that shortly.'

Audiat was made to go into an adjoining room.

'Bring in Eugène Berniard,' Amadieu ordered.

Eugène appeared, smiling and quite at his ease, gave a quick glance round, and extinguished his cigarette in an ash-tray.

'What did you do last night?' Amadieu enquired without conviction.

'Well, Monsieur le Commissaire, I had toothache, so I went early to bed. Ask the night-porter at the *Hôtel Alsina*.'

'What time was that?'

'Midnight.'

'You didn't look in at the *Tabac Fontaine*?'

'Where is that?'

'One minute. Do you know a man called Audiat?'

'What does he look like? One meets so many people in Montmartre.'

The effort of remaining inactive throughout all this was causing Maigret acute discomfort.

'Bring Audiat in!' Amadiou telephoned.

Audiat and Eugène regarded one another with curiosity.

'Do you know each other?'

'Never seen him in my life,' Eugène murmured.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Audiat facetiously.

But they were scarcely troubling even to keep up appearances, and their laughing eyes belied their words.

'So you didn't play a game of *belote* together at the *Tabac Fontaine* last night?'

The one stared. The other burst out laughing.

'There's been a slight mistake, Monsieur le Commissaire.'

They were confronted with the man from Marseilles, who had just arrived and who held out his hand to Eugène.

'So you know each other?'

'Well, we've met.'

'Where?'

'At the *Hôtel Alsina*. Our rooms are next to one another.'

The Director of the *Police Judiciaires* signed to Maigret to follow him out of the room.

Together they strode along the corridor, where Louis, the *patron* of the *Tabac*, was still waiting, quite near Germain Cageot.

'What are you going to do?' said the Director, glancing

rather anxiously at Maigret. 'Is it true they tried to get you?

Maigret made no reply. Cageot was watching them in the same ironical way as Audiat and Eugène.

'If only I could have conducted the enquiry myself!' he sighed at last.

'You know that would have been impossible. But we'll keep on with those examinations as long as you like.'

'Thank you, Monsieur le Directeur.'

Maigret knew it was no good. The five men had it all fixed up. They had taken every precaution. And no question that Amadieu could ask them in that melancholy voice would induce them to confess.

'I don't know whether you're right or wrong,' said the Director.

They passed Cageot, who took this opportunity to get up and bow to the Director.

'Was it you who wanted me here, Monsieur le Directeur?' he asked.

It was now noon. Most of the detectives had gone off to lunch or were away on some job. The long corridor was nearly empty. In front of his door the Director shook hands with Maigret.

'What do you want me to say? All I can do is to wish you luck.'

Maigret took his hat and coat, gave a last look at the room where the questioning was still going on, and set off down the stairs, giving Cageot a cold glance. He was fed up. He had never felt so frustrated and powerless.

Side by side, Cageot and Louis sat quietly and patiently, watching all the comings and goings with amusement.

From Amadieu's office came a level murmur of voices. Questions and answers followed in calm succession. True to his promise, Amadieu kept to the plan which Maigret had drawn up, but without adding anything or showing any interest.

Philippe was in prison! And Madame Maigret would be impatiently waiting for the post.

'Fine day, monsieur!' Cageot suddenly remarked to his neighbour.

'Fine day!' Louis replied. 'Wind's in the east.'

'You've got an appointment too?'

They were pulling Maigret's leg.

'Yes, I think they want some information.'

'Same here. Which Inspector summoned you?'

'The one called Amadieu.'

As Maigret went past him, Cageot opened his mouth and gave an insulting laugh, and suddenly Maigret reacted brutally and irresistibly. He struck the 'Lawyer' on the cheek.

It was a mistake, but a mistake induced by a sleepless night and a thousand cumulative humiliations. While Cageot sat stupefied by the brutality of the attack, Louis rose and seized Maigret's arm.

'Are you mad?'

Were they actually going to have a fight in the corridor of the *Police Judiciaire*?

'What's going on?'

Amadieu had just come out of his door. It was impossible to see the three panting men and not understand, but, as if he had noticed nothing, the Inspector went on calmly:

'Will you come in, Cageot?'

The other witnesses had been sent into the next room.

'Take a seat.'

Maigret went in too and stood at the door.

'I have asked you to come here because I want you to identify certain individuals.'

He pressed a button. Audiat came in.

'Do you know this man?'

At that point Maigret went out, banging the door and

swearing roundly. He could have cried. The whole thing disgusted him.

Audiat did not know Cageot. Cageot did not know Audiat. Neither of them knew Eugène. And so it would go on. And Louis wouldn't know any of them!

And every denial would be a point scored for Amadiou. So Maigret imagined that he could upset his methods and teach him his job. He would keep his temper because he was a perfect gentleman. But he would show him, all the same!

Maigret went down the drab staircase, out through the courtyard, and crossed the road in front of Eugène's powerful roadster.

The sun shone on Paris, on the sparkling Seine, on the Pont-Neuf. But it was still cold when one suddenly plunged into the shade.

Another quarter of an hour to an hour would see the end of the interrogation. Eugène would take his place at the wheel, with the man from Marseilles beside him. Cageot would hail a taxi. They would all go their own ways with an exchange of looks.

'That bloody fool, Philippel'

Maigret was talking to himself. The pavement slipped by under his feet. He did not notice where he was going. Suddenly it seemed to him that a woman he had just passed had turned away her head so as not to be recognized. He stopped and saw Fernande hurrying off. He caught her up and involuntarily seized her arm roughly.

'Where are you going?'

She looked desperate, but made no reply.

'When were you released?'

'Last night.'

He realized that the understanding between them was at an end. She was afraid of him. All she wanted was to get away as quickly as possible.

'Have they told you to come?' he asked, with a glance at the *Police Judiciaire*.

'No.'

She was wearing a black suit, which gave her a respectable appearance. Maigret was particularly annoyed because he had no reason to detain her.

'Why are you going along there?'

He followed Fernande's eyes, which had lighted on Eugène's blue car.

He understood now, and was just as annoyed as if he had been jealous.

'Do you know that he tried to kill me last night?'

'Who?'

'Eugène.'

She nearly said something, but suddenly bit her lips.

'What were you going to say?'

'Nothing.'

The man on duty at the door was watching them. Up there, behind the eighth window, Amadiou was still hearing the faked evidence of the five men. The car waited, supple and light like its owner, and Fernande, with an expressionless face, was waiting to be allowed to go.

'Do you think it was I who got you arrested?' he persisted.

She looked away, but made no answer.

'Who told you that Eugène was here?' he went on vainly.

She was in love! In love with Eugène, whom she had slept with to please Maigret.

'Oh, very well,' he growled at last. 'Off you go, my girl!'

He hoped she would turn back, but she hurried off to the car and waited beside the door.

Maigret was left alone on the pavement. He filled a pipe, but stuffed it so full that he could not get it to draw.

CHAPTER 8

As Maigret crossed the hotel vestibule his heart sank. A woman rose from a basket-chair, advanced towards him, kissed him on both cheeks with a sad smile, and took his hand in hers.

'This is terrible!' she groaned. 'I arrived this morning, and I've been running about so much ever since that I don't know whether I'm standing on my head or my heels.'

Maigret looked at this sister-in-law who had suddenly descended on him from Alsace. He had to accustom himself gradually to a species so different from any he had been seeing for the past few days, so alien to the sort of atmosphere in which he had been floundering that morning.

Philippe's mother was very like Madame Maigret, but had retained more of her provincial freshness. She was not so much fat as soft and plump. The face under the meticulously smooth hair was pink, and everything about her looked clean and fresh, her black-and-white clothes, her eyes, and her smile.

She carried the atmosphere of the country with her, and Maigret could almost see the little house that smelt of jam-cupboards and the little puddings and dainties she so loved to make.

'Do you think he will ever get another job after all this?'

The ex-Inspector collected her luggage, which was even more countrified than herself.

'Are you staying here?' he asked.

'Yes, if it's not too expensive -'

He took her off to the dining-room, which he never dared set foot in when he was by himself, because it looked so austere and no one ever spoke above a whisper.

'How did you find out my address?'

'I went to the Palais de Justice and saw the judge. He did not know that you were working on the case.'

Maigret made a slight grimace but said nothing. He could just imagine the long rigmaroles she told the judge - 'You know, Monsieur le Juge, my son's uncle, Divisional Inspector Maigret -'

'Well?' he said impatiently.

'He gave me the lawyer's address in the Rue de Grenelle. So I went along there.'

'Did you take your luggage round with you?'

'No. I left it at the cloakroom.'

It was shattering. She must have told everyone her story.

'Do you know, when Philippe's photograph appeared in the papers, Emile didn't dare go to his office!'

Emile was her husband, who had short-sighted eyes just like Philippe's.

'You know, it's not like Paris back at home. Prison is prison. People will say there's no smoke without a fire. Do you think they give them any blankets on their beds in prison?'

They ate sardines and sliced beetroot and drank mediocre red wine from a carafe. Again and again during lunch Maigret tried to escape from the feeling of nightmare that obsessed him.

'You know Emile. He's very down on you. He says that it's your fault that Philippe joined the police instead of trying for a good post in a bank. I told him that what must be, must be. By the way, how is your wife? Doesn't she find she's far too much to do with those animals?'

It went on for over an hour, because after lunch they had to have coffee and he had to explain to her how prisons were built and how people were treated there. They were in the drawing-room when the hall-porter came in and said that a gentleman wanted to speak to Maigret.

'Ask him to come in!'

Maigret wondered who it could be, and was considerably surprised when Amadieu walked in and bowed awkwardly to Madame Lauer.

'This is Philippe's mother,' Maigret introduced her. Then he added:

'Would you like to come up to my room?'

They climbed the stairs in silence. When they were in Maigret's room, Amadieu coughed slightly and put down his hat and the umbrella that he always carried.

'I thought I should see you after the interrogation this morning,' he began. 'But you went off without a word.'

Maigret looked at him in silence, realizing that Amadieu had come to make peace, but lacked the finer feelings that would have helped him over the first steps.

'Those people were a bit thick, you know! I realized that when they were all confronted with each other.'

He sat down to be more at ease, and crossed his legs.

'Listen, Maigret, I've come to tell you that I'm beginning to share your views. You see, I am speaking frankly and I bear no grudge.'

But his tone of voice was not quite convincing, and to Maigret it seemed as if he were repeating a lesson and that perhaps he had not made this move of his own accord. After the examining of the witnesses that morning there must have been a short conference between the Director of the *Police Judiciaire* and the Inspector, and it was the Director who had been in favour of Maigret's theory.

'And now I'm going to ask you what you think we should do,' Amadieu announced solemnly.

'I don't know!'

'Don't you need any of my men?'

He suddenly became voluble.

'I'll tell you what I think. I was doing a lot of thinking while I was questioning that crew. You know that when

Pepito was murdered he was just going to be served with a warrant. We had learnt that there was a considerable quantity of drugs in the *Floria*. And it was really to prevent those drugs being removed that I had detailed an Inspector to watch him until the moment we could arrest him, that is, at dawn. Well, the stuff has disappeared.'

Maigret did not seem to be listening.

'From this I deduce that when we lay hands on it we shall also lay hands on the murderer. I've a good mind to ask the magistrate for a search-warrant and go and have a look round friend Cageot's room.'

'It's no use,' sighed Maigret. 'The man who arranged the details of that identification parade this morning wouldn't keep anything so compromising in his house. The stuff won't be at Cageot's place, nor at Eugène's, nor at any of our friends. By the way, what did Louis have to say about his clientèle?'

'He swore he'd never even seen Eugène, much less played cards with him. He thought that Audiart had been in once or twice for cigarettes. As for Cageot, he'd heard his name, like everyone else in Montmartre, but he didn't know him personally.'

'There were no contradictions, I suppose?'

'Not a single one. They even gave each other amused looks as if the whole affair were a tea-party. The Chief was furious.'

Maigret made no attempt to conceal a faint smile, for Amadiou was confirming what he had guessed, that his change of front was due to the Director.

'We could always put a man on to Cageot,' Amadiou resumed, embarrassed by the silences. 'But he'd shake him off whenever he wanted to. Not to mention the fact that he's got influence and could lodge a complaint against us.'

Maigret took out his watch and looked pointedly at it.

'Have you an engagement?'

'Yes, quite soon. If you don't mind, we'll go down together.'

In the vestibule Maigret enquired as to the whereabouts of his sister-in-law.

'The lady went out a few minutes ago. She asked what bus she should take for the Rue Fontaine.'

She would! She would want to see for herself the place where her son was supposed to have murdered Pepito. And she would go in and tell the whole story to the waiters!

'Shall we have a drink at the *Cbope* on the way?' Maigret proposed.

They sat down in a corner and ordered two old *Armagnacs*.

'Admit,' said Amadieu, twirling his moustaches, 'that it is impossible to apply your methods in a case of this sort. We were just discussing this with the Director.'

The Director seemed to be decidedly interested in the case.

'What do you call my methods?'

'You know better than I do. Generally you mix in the lives of the people involved. You are more concerned with their mentality, and even with what happened twenty years before, than with material clues. Here we are dealing with people we know inside out. They don't even try to put us on a false scent. I don't believe that Cageot would deny to any one of us that he had done the murder.'

'He hasn't denied it.'

'Well, then, what are you going to do?'

'What are *you* going to do?'

'I shall begin by spreading a net round them, of course. From this evening onwards, they'll all be shadowed. They'll have to go somewhere and talk to people. I'll have these people questioned, too, and -'

'And in six months Philippe will still be in prison.'

'His lawyer is going to ask whether he can be released on bail. As he's only charged with manslaughter through negligence, he's sure to get out.'

Maigret's fatigue had left him.

'Have another?' Amadiou proposed, pointing to the glasses.

'With pleasure.'

Poor Amadiou! He must have felt considerably embarrassed when he came into the hotel drawing-room! By now he had had time to pull himself together, and he affected an assurance he was far from feeling. He even talked quite airily about the whole affair.

'Anyway,' he added, taking a sip of his *Armagnac*, 'I have been wondering whether Cageot did the actual killing himself. I've been thinking over your hypothesis. Why shouldn't he have got Audiat to shoot? He could have been hidden somewhere in the street.'

'Audiat would never have gone back to bump into my nephew and raise the alarm. He'd get cold feet the moment he'd fired the shot. He's a dirty little rat with no guts.'

'What about Eugène?'

Maigret shrugged his shoulders, not because he thought Eugène was innocent, but because, for some obscure reason, it would embarrass him to catch him out. It was all very vague. There was Fernande, for one thing.

Besides, Maigret was paying scarcely any attention to the conversation. Pencil in hand, he was drawing meaningless lines on the marble table. It was warm. The *Armagnac* was filling him with drowsy contentment, as if all his accumulated fatigue were gradually melting away.

Lucas came in with a young detective, and fairly jumped at the sight of the two Inspectors sitting there together. Maigret winked at him across the room.

'Won't you come along to Headquarters?' Amadiou pro-

posed. 'I could show you the verbatim report of the interrogation.'

'What's the use?'

'What do you mean to do?'

That was what was worrying him. What was going on behind that obstinate forehead? Now he was a shade less friendly.

'Our efforts ought not to be mutually destructive. The Director is of the same opinion, and it was he who advised me to come to an agreement with you.'

'But aren't we in agreement?'

'About what?'

'The fact that Cageot killed Pepito, and that it was probably he who killed Barnabé too, a fortnight before.'

'But that doesn't give us sufficient grounds to arrest him.'

'That's obvious.'

'Well?'

'Nothing. Wait! I'll ask you for just one thing. I suppose you could easily get Gastambide to give you a warrant made out in Cageot's name?'

'Suppose I could?'

'Then I should like a man to be waiting night and day at Headquarters with this warrant in his pocket. When I telephoned, all he'd have to do would be to join me.'

'Where?'

'Wherever I might be. It would be even better if, instead of one warrant, he had several. You never know.'

Amadieu's long face became even longer.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll speak to the Director.'

He called the waiter and paid for his round of drinks. Then he spent a long time buttoning up his coat, in the hope that Maigret might finally decide to talk.

'Well, I wish you success.'

'Very kind of you. Thanks very much.'

'When are you likely to need the warrant?'

'Perhaps at once. Possibly not until to-morrow morning. Yes! I think it would be all right to-morrow morning.'

Just as Amadiou was going, Maigret relented.

'Thank you for coming,' he said.

'Oh, that was nothing.'

When he was alone, he paid for the second round and stopped a moment at Lucas's table.

'Any news, Chief?' Lucas asked.

'Maybe. Where could I get hold of you to-morrow morning at eight?'

'I'll be at Headquarters. Or I can come here if you like.'

'Good. To-morrow morning, here!'

Outside, Maigret hailed a taxi and drove to the Rue Fontaine. Night was falling and lights were beginning to show in the windows. He asked his driver to slow down as they passed the *Tabac*.

In the little bar the blonde girl was sitting at the cash-desk. The *patron* was behind the bar, and the boy was wiping the tables. But neither Audiat, Eugène, nor the man from Marseilles was there.

'They'll be in a fine state at having to miss their game to-night!'

A few seconds later, the taxi stopped outside the *Floria*. Maigret asked the driver to wait, and pushed the door ajar.

They were cleaning up. A single lamp cast a faint light on the hangings and the red and green walls. The tables had not been set, and on the platform the musical instruments were lying in their canvas covers.

The whole scene was dismal in the extreme. The door of the office at the other end of the room was open, and Maigret caught a partial glimpse of a feminine silhouette, pushed past a waiter who was sweeping up, and suddenly emerged into bright light.

'It's you, is it?' said his sister-in-law in amazement.

She blushed and seemed rather taken aback.

'I wanted to see the -'

A young man was leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. It was Monsieur Henry, the new owner of the *Floria* - in other words, Cageot's new stooge.

'This gentleman has been very kind,' Madame Lauer faltered.

'I only wish I could have done more,' the young man apologized. 'Madame has told me she is the mother of the young detective who killed - I mean who is accused of having killed Pepito. But I know nothing about it myself, as I only took possession the next day.'

'Thank you once again, monsieur. I see that you understand what it is to be a mother.'

She waited for Maigret to make a scene. When they got into the taxi she talked for the sake of talking.

'You took a taxi? - But there's an excellent bus - You can smoke your pipe if you want to - I'm accustomed to it -'

Maigret gave his hotel address, and on the way he said in an odd voice:

'I'll tell you what we'll do. We have a long evening ahead of us. To-morrow morning we'll have to be in good form, with our nerves calm and our minds fresh. So, if you care to, we'll go to the theatre.'

'What! Go to the theatre, with Philippe in prison?'

'Well, it's his last night there.'

'Have you found out anything?'

'Not yet. Don't bother me about it. But the hotel is dreary and we've nothing to do.'

'But I wanted to go and tidy Philippe's room!'

'He would be furious. No young man wants his mother to go poking into his affairs.'

'Do you think Philippe has an affair?'

There was the very essence of provincialism in her exclamation, and Maigret kissed her on both cheeks.

'No, old stupid! I'm afraid not. Philippe is his dear father all over again.'

'Well, I'm not so sure that before we were married Émile didn't -'

It was as good as a draught of pure water. At the hotel, Maigret booked seats for the Palais-Royal and wrote to his wife while they were waiting for dinner. He seemed to have forgotten all about the murder of Pepito, and his nephew in prison.

'We'll go on the binge, just the two of us!' he announced to his sister-in-law. 'And if you're very good, I'll even show you the *Floria* at full blast.'

'But I haven't got the proper clothes,' she protested.

He kept his word. After dinner in a restaurant on the Boulevard - he did not want to eat at the hotel - he took her to the theatre and had the satisfaction of seeing her laugh in spite of herself at the music-hall jokes.

'I'm ashamed to be here,' she sighed during the interval. 'What would Philippe think if he knew where his mother was?'

'And Émile too! Except that he's probably getting off with the maid at this time of night.'

'Oh, poor girl, she's fifty!'

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He had the greatest difficulty in persuading her to go into the *Floria*, for even the neon-lighting at the entrance overwhelmed her. Maigret piloted her to a table near the bar, brushing past Fernande, who was there with Eugène and the man from Marseilles.

As was to be expected, there were a few smiles at the sight of the good woman escorted by the ex-detective.

Maigret was delighted. It looked as if he had wanted to produce this effect. Like a good provincial on the spree, he ordered champagne.

'I warn you I'll get drunk!' Madame Lauer threatened him.

'All the better!'

'Do you know it's the first time I've ever set foot in a place like this?'

She really was as fresh as bread and butter – a miracle of moral and physical health!

'Who's that woman who keeps looking at you?'

'That's Fernande, a friend of mine.'

'Well, if I were my sister I should be quite worried. She looks as if she were in love with you.'

It was true and yet not true. Certainly Fernande kept looking oddly at Maigret, as if she regretted the end of their intimacy. But then she would hang on to Eugène's arm and tease him with exaggerated ostentation.

'That's a very handsome young man she's with.'

'Yes, but unfortunately the handsome young man will be in prison to-morrow.'

'What has he done?'

'He's one of the gang that got Philippe arrested.'

'That man?'

She couldn't get over it. It was even better when Cageot popped his head through the curtain, as he did every evening, to see how things were going.

'You see that man that looks like a solicitor?'

'With the grey hair?'

'Yes! Well, take a good look at him and don't scream. That's the murderer.'

Maigret's eyes twinkled as if he already had Cageot and the rest of them in his power. Then he laughed so much that Fernande looked round in amazement, frowned, and suddenly became thoughtful and uneasy.

Shortly after, she rose and went towards the cloakroom, giving Maigret a look as she passed his table. He rose and followed her.

'Any news?' she asked almost mechanically.

'What about you?'

'Nothing. As you see, we're having a night out.'

She looked searchingly at him and, after a pause, asked:

'Are you going to arrest him?'

'Not at the moment.'

She stamped impatiently with her high heels.

'Are you falling for him?' he asked.

But all she vouchsafed as she moved off was:

'I don't know yet.'

Madame Lauet was ashamed to be going to bed at two in the morning, but Maigret fell into a deep sleep almost before his head had touched the pillow, and snored, a thing he had not done for days.

CHAPTER 9

AT ten minutes to eight, Maigret came up to the hotel reception-desk. The proprietor had just come down and was examining the register with the night porter. A pail of dirty water was standing in the passage and a broom was leaning against the wall. With his most serious expression, Maigret took up the broom and examined the handle.

'May I use it?' he asked.

'Oh, please --' the proprietor stammered: then, struck by a sudden thought, he added nervously:

'Has your room not been cleaned to your satisfaction?'

Maigret was smoking the first pipe of the day with unadulterated pleasure.

'Oh, yes, I think so,' he replied calmly. 'It is not the broom that interests me. I should just like a small piece of the handle.'

The charwoman, who had come up wiping her hands on her apron, obviously thought he was quite mad.

'Have you got such a thing as a small saw?' Maigret went on, turning to the night-porter.

'Go on, Joseph!' the proprietor urged him. 'Get a saw for Monsieur Maigret --'

So the fateful day began in an atmosphere of joyous lunacy. It was another sunny morning. A chambermaid went past with a breakfast tray. The corridor floor had just been scrubbed. The postman came in and started rummaging in his leather bag.

Maigret stood with the broom in his hand, waiting for the saw.

'There is a telephone in the drawing-room, if I'm not mistaken?' he asked the proprietor.

'Yes, Monsieur Maigret. On the table to the left. I'll have you connected right away.'

'Don't trouble.'

'You don't want to use it?'

'No, thanks. It's not necessary.'

He disappeared into the hotel drawing-room with his broom, and the charwoman took the opportunity to declare that they would see that it wasn't her fault if she was held up with her work, and they needn't blame her if she didn't get the hall finished!

The night-porter came back with a rusty saw he had found in the cellar. Maigret reappeared with the broom, took the saw and started on the end of the handle. He rested the broom against the reception-desk. Sawdust fell on the newly washed floor. The other end rubbed against the register, and the proprietor looked on with some distress.

'Well, that's that! Thank you very much,' said Maigret, as he picked up the small piece of wood he had sawn off. He handed back the broom to the charwoman; it was now shorter by a few inches.

'Is that what you required?' asked the proprietor, managing to keep a straight face.

'Exactly.'

At the *Chope du Pont-Neuf* he found Lucas at the end of the room. Here, too, charwomen were at work with their brooms.

'The whole squad has been at it all night, Chief!' said Lucas. 'When Amadiou left you, he took it into his head that he ought to get in ahead of you, and he roped everyone in. I know, for instance, that you were at the Palais-Royal with a lady.'

'Then I went on to the *Floria*. Poor old Amadiou! What about the others?'

'Eugène was at the *Floria* too. You probably saw him. At a quartet to three he went out with a woman.'

'I know. Fernande. I bet he spent the night with her in the Rue Blanche.'

'That's right. He even left his car on the kerb outside all night. It's there still.'

Maigret was nettled. Not that he was in love. But the other morning it was he who had been there with her in her sunny room. She had drunk her morning coffee half undressed, and there had been a pleasant feeling of intimacy between them.

He was not jealous, but he did not like men of Eugène's type, and he imagined him lying there while Fernande busied herself getting him coffee and bringing it to him in bed. He would reward her with an exquisite smile.

'He'll make her do everything for him,' he sighed. 'Go on, Lucas.'

'The comrade from Marseilles went to a couple of night-clubs before he returned to the *Hôtel Altina*. He's probably still asleep, as he never gets up before eleven or twelve.'

'And the little deaf man?'

'Colin's his name. He lives with his wife - to whom he is legally married - in a flat in th. Ru. Caulaincourt. She blows him up when he comes home late. She was the assistant-manageress of one of his brothels.'

'What's he doing just now?'

'The shopping. He always goes out and does the marketing, with a big muffler round his neck and slippers on his feet.'

'And Audiat?'

'He did the round of a lot of night-clubs and got properly tight. He returned to his hotel in the Rue Lepic at about one in the morning, and the night-porter had to help him upstairs.'

'And I suppose Cageot is at home?'

They came out of the *Croque du Pont-Neuf*, and Maigret could almost see the various characters up there, scattered

round the Sacré-Cœur which rose pure and white above the haze of Paris.

For the next ten minutes he gave Lucas instructions in an undertone. Finally he shook hands with him and asked softly:

'You understand? You're sure you won't need more than half an hour?'

'Have you got a gun, Chief?'

Maigret patted his trouser-pocket and hailed a passing taxi.

'Rue des Batignolles!'

The door of the concierge's lodge was open, and the figure of a gas-inspector was visible inside.

'Who do you want?' asked a shrill voice as Maigret went past.

'Monsieur Cageot, please.'

'Mezzanine floor on the left.'

Maigret stopped on the frayed doormat to recover his breath, and tugged at the huge ornate bell-pull. A faint tinkle, as if from a child's toy, came from inside the flat.

Here too the floor was being swept, and occasionally a broom knocked against a piece of furniture. He heard a woman's voice say:

'Are you going to answer the door?'

Then he heard muffled footsteps. A chain was drawn. The key turned in the lock, and the door opened a couple of inches.

Cageot stood behind it, Cageot in a dressing-gown, his hair ruffled and his eyebrows bushier than ever. He showed no surprise. He looked at Maigret and said in a surly tone of voice:

'What do you want?'

'First I want to come in.'

'Are you here in an official capacity, with a warrant?'

'No.'

Cageot tried to shut the door, but Maigret's foot was in the way.

'Don't you think we ought to have a talk?' he asked.

Cageot realized that it would be impossible to close the door, and his face darkened.

'I could call the police -'

'Of course you could. Only, I don't think it would do much good, and I think a conversation between the two of us would be preferable.'

Behind the 'Lawyer', a woman in a black dress had stopped working to listen. All the doors in the flat were open for the rooms to be cleaned. On the right of the corridor, Maigret caught a glimpse of a well-lit room facing the street.

'Come in.'

Cageot locked the door behind him, drew the chain, and said to his visitor:

'The room on the right is my office.'

It was a typical *petit-bourgeois*. Montmartre flat, with a kitchen about a yard square looking onto the courtyard, a bamboo coat-stand in the entrance-hall, and a dark dining-room with dark curtains and a faded floral wallpaper.

What Cageot called his office was the room intended by the architect as the drawing-room, and the only one in the flat with windows admitting any light.

The floor was waxed. Right in the middle was a worn rug, and three tapestry armchairs had taken on the same indefinite colouring as the rug.

The walls were dark red and covered with photographs in gilt frames. Every corner and table was littered with cheap knick-knacks.

In the place of honour beside the window was a mahogany desk covered in shabby morocco, and behind

this Cageot ensconced himself and began collecting some papers which were lying about.

'Marthe, bring my chocolate in here!'

He did not look at Maigret, but sat there waiting for him to take the initiative.

Maigret sat down in a chair that looked as if it would collapse under his weight, unbuttoned his coat and filled his pipe, pushing the tobacco down with his thumb and looking about him. A window had been opened, probably while the room was being cleaned, and when the woman appeared with the chocolate, he said to Cageot:

'Would you mind if we had the window shut? I caught cold a couple of days ago and I don't want it to get any worse.'

'Shut the window, Marthe.'

Marthe had no sympathy for the visitor. That was obvious from the way she kept walking in front of him and knocking against him without a word of apology.

The aroma of chocolate filled the whole room. Cageot held the cup in his two hands, as if he wanted to warm them. Delivery vans, their roofs almost level with the windows, went by, and now and then the silvery top of a bus.

The woman went out, leaving the door ajar, and went on cleaning the hall.

'I'm not offering you any chocolate,' said Cageot, 'as I presume you've had your breakfast.'

'Yes, I've had it. But if you were to offer me a glass of wine -'

Everything, even the least little word, was significant. Cageot frowned and tried to think why his visitor should be asking for a drink.

Maigret read his thoughts and smiled.

'I'm in the habit of working outside. In winter I find it very cold and in summer very hot. In both cases, don't you think, one is tempted to have a drink -'

'Marthe, bring some white wine and a glass.'

'Table wine?' asked Marthe.

'Yes, that's what I like,' Maigret replied.

He had deposited his bowler on the desk beside the telephone.

Cageot sipped his chocolate without taking his eyes off him. He looked even paler by day than by night, or rather his skin was colourless and his eyes the same leaden grey as his hair and his eyebrows. His head was long and bony. He was the kind of man whom it is impossible to imagine as other than middle-aged. It was difficult to believe that he could ever have been a baby or a schoolboy or a young lover. He could never have held a woman in his arms or murmured words of love.

But those hairy, well-kept hands had always known how to manipulate a pen. The drawer of that desk must be stuffed with papers of all kinds, bills, accounts, balance-sheets, memoranda.

'You're a comparatively late riser,' said Maigret, glancing at his watch.

'I never sleep more than three hours.'

So that was it! One could not have said what it was one felt about the man, but feel something one did.

'Do you read, then?'

'I read or I work.'

They were allowing each other a slight respite. There was a tacit agreement not to begin any serious conversation until Marthe had brought the wine.

There were no books to be seen except some bound volumes on a side-table next the desk, the statute book and some other legal volumes.

'Leave us, Marthe,' said Cageot when she had set the wine on the table.

When she had reached the kitchen, he was on the point of calling her back to shut the door, but changed his mind.

'I'll leave you to help yourself.'

Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he opened a drawer in his desk, took out a gun and placed it beside him. It was not done at all provocatively, but rather as if it were his usual habit. Then he pushed away his empty cup and leant his elbows on the arms of his chair.

'I'm ready to listen to your proposition,' he remarked, like a business man receiving a client.

'What makes you think I've got a proposition to lay before you?'

'Why otherwise would you come here? You're not in the Force any longer, so you haven't come to arrest me. You can't even have come to question me, as you're no longer sworn in and anything you might say afterwards would be of no value.'

Maigret gave an approving smile and lit his pipe, which he had allowed to go out.

He had placed his box of matches beside his hat, and three times in as many seconds he had to pick it up to get a match, as the tobacco, perhaps too closely packed, went out as soon as he had lit it.

'So,' Cageot concluded, 'you need me and I need you. Just now I'm listening to you.'

His voice was as negative and lifeless as his personality. With a head and a voice like his, he would have made a terrifying President of the Assize Court.

'Very well!' said Maigret with decision. He rose and took a few steps up and down the room. 'What'll you take to get my nephew out of this mess?'

'Me? How do you propose I should do that?'

Maigret gave a good-natured smile.

'Come now, don't be modest. One can always undo what one has done. How much?'

Cageot was silent for a moment, as if he were thinking over the proposition.

'It doesn't interest me,' he said at length.

'Why?'

'Because there's no reason why I should trouble myself about the young man. He's done enough to get him into prison. I don't know him.'

Now and again Maigret stopped in front of a photograph or stood at a window and gazed intently into the street, where housewives were hovering busily round the little carts.

'For instance,' he murmured gently, as he lit his pipe again, 'if my nephew were out of this case, there would be no reason for me to go on with it. As you yourself said, I'm no longer in the police force. Quite frankly, I should take the first train back to Orléans, and two hours later I should be sitting in my boat fishing.'

'You're not drinking!'

Maigret poured out a glassful of wine and swallowed it at a gulp.

'As for the means at your disposal,' he went on, sitting down and placing the matchbox on the edge of his hat, 'there are several possibilities. Aumont, of course, could be less positive in his mind at a second identification, less ready to swear that it was Philippe. That happens every day.'

Cageot seemed to be reflecting, but, from his absent look, Maigret guessed that he was scarcely listening, if he was listening at all. He was probably wondering:

'Now what the devil has he come here for?'

From then on, Maigret deliberately avoided giving a single glance in the direction of his hat and the telephone. He tried, too, to sound as if he were thinking of what he was saying. Actually he was talking at random. To give himself fresh eloquence he poured out another glassful and drank it off.

'Is it all right?'

'The wine? Not bad. I know what you're going to say. Once Philippe is out of the case, it will all blow up again, because the police must find a culprit.'

Cageot imperceptibly pricked up his ears, interested in what was to follow. At that moment Maigret broke into a sweat at a thought which had suddenly occurred to him.

What would happen if, at that very moment, Eugène or the man from Marseilles or the *patron* of the *Tabac* or anyone else should ask for Cageot on the telephone? It was possible - even probable. The gang had met on the Quai des Orfèvres the previous day, and there must be a certain uneasiness among the members. Wasn't Cageot in the habit of giving his orders and getting his reports by telephone?

At the moment the telephone was not working, and would be unlikely to work for quite a long time, perhaps for as much as an hour.

For Maigret had placed his hat on the table so that, from where he was sitting, Cageot could not see the base of the instrument, and while he was playing about with the match-box, he was also slipping under the receiver the round piece of wood he had sawn off that morning. He had, in fact, connected it with the Exchange, where Lucas was installed with two stenographers as witnesses.

'I quite understand that you must have a culprit,' Maigret murmured, gazing at the rug.

What would happen if Eugène, for instance, tried to telephone, couldn't get through, and hurried round to see what had happened? He would have to begin all over again! Or rather, it would be impossible ever to begin again, for after this Cageot would necessarily be on his guard.

'It's not difficult,' he went on in a voice he strove to keep indifferent. 'It would do to find a boy fairly like my nephew. There are plenty about in Montmartre. And there must be at least one you wouldn't mind seeing in prison.'

A couple of witnesses, and the whole thing would be fixed up.'

Maigret was so warm that he took off his coat and hung it on the back of a chair.

'You'll excuse me?'

'We could have the window open,' Cageot suggested.

Heaven forbid! The sounds from the street might cause the stenographers at the other end of the line to lose half the conversation.

'No, thank you. It's my cold that makes me sweat. Fresh air would make it worse. As I was saying -'

He emptied his glass and filled a fresh pipe.

'I hope you don't mind my smoking.'

The housekeeper was still moving about, but now and again she would stop and listen.

'It would be enough to name a price. What would be the price of a deal like that?'

'Prison,' Cageot replied tersely.

Maigret smiled, but he was beginning to have doubts about the success of this method.

'In that case, if you're afraid, suggest something else.'

'I've no need to propose anything. The police have arrested a man whom they accuse of having murdered Pepito. That's his business. Occasionally, it's true, I render trifling services to the Rue des Saussaies or the Quai des Orfèvres, but I know nothing of this occurrence. For your sake I'm sorry -'

He showed signs of rising to put an end to the conversation. Something had to be done quickly.

'Would you like me to tell you exactly what is going to happen?' Maigret said slowly.

He took his time, uttering each syllable distinctly.

'Within two days,' he continued, 'you will be obliged to kill your little friend Audiat.'

That struck home, it was quite evident. Cageot avoided

his glance, and he went on, fearful of losing his advantage.

'You know as well as I do that Audiat is a squealer. I suspect he takes drugs, and that makes him highly impressionable. Since he's known I'm on his track, he has made one gaffe after another, and has become desperate. The other night in my room he was quite ready to talk. It was very long-sighted of you to be on the doorstep of the *Police Judiciaires* to prevent him from repeating what he had told me. But, though you managed it once, you can't go on indefinitely. Last night Audiat went round getting drunk. He'll do the same to-night. There'll always be someone trailing him -'

Cageot sat motionless, his eyes fixed on the red wall.

'Go on,' he said in a level voice.

'Is it necessary? How are you going to get rid of a man who is watched day and night by the police? If you don't kill him, Audiat will talk. That's logic! And if you do kill him you'll be caught, because it's too difficult to commit a murder under these circumstances.'

A ray of sun filtered through the dirty window. In a few minutes it would reach the telephone.

Maigret was smoking in quick puffs.

'What have you to say to that?'

Without raising his voice, Cageot called:

'Shut the door, Marthe.'

She obeyed, grumbling. Then Cageot said in an undertone so low that Maigret wondered whether it would carry as far as the telephone:

'Suppose Audiat is already dead?'

Not a feature moved as he said it. Maigret recalled his talk with Lucas at the *Chope*. Hadn't the sergeant said that Audiat, followed by a detective, had returned to his hotel about one in the morning? And that the detective was to stay on guard for the rest of the night?

His hand on the worn morocco desk, six inches away from the gun, Cageot went on:

'You see, your proposition doesn't work. I thought you'd something better up your sleeve.'

And he added, while Maigret froze:

'If you want to know more, ring up the police station of the eighteenth district.'

He might easily have stretched out his hand to the receiver while he was talking, and unhooked it to pass it over to Maigret. But he didn't, and Maigret breathed again and said hastily:

'I believe you. But I still have something to say.'

He didn't know what it was going to be. But he must hang on at all costs. Whatever happened, he had to lead Cageot on until he said certain words he seemed to be avoiding like the plague.

So far he had not denied the crime. But neither had he said anything which might be considered as a formal admission.

Maigret could imagine Lucas listening impatiently at the other end - poor Lucas, passing from hope to despair and saying to the stenographers:

'Don't bother to take down that.'

And suppose Eugène or one of the others telephoned?

'Are you sure you've something worth while to say to me?' Cageot persisted. 'It's time I got dressed.'

'Give me five more minutes,' was the reply.

Maigret poured himself out some wine and rose to his feet like a man keyed-up to make a speech.

CHAPTER 10

CAGEOT neither smoked nor fidgeted. In fact, he had no idiosyncrasy that might suggest a safety-valve for his nerves.

Maigret had not realized that it was this very immobility which troubled him, until he saw him stretch out his hand towards a sweet-box on his desk and take a sweet.

It was a small thing, but Maigret's eyes gleamed at finding what might be the weak joint in his armour. Cageot, non-drinker, non-smoker, enemy of women, was a sweet-eater, sucked bonbons, shifting them slowly from one cheek to another.

'I might almost say that we belong to the same profession,' said Maigret at last. 'And, as one expert to another, I'm going to tell you why you're dead sure to be caught.'

Cageot shifted his sweet to the other cheek.

'Take the first murder. I'm talking of the first of this series, because it's possible that you have others to your credit. Didn't the solicitor you worked with die of poisoning?'

'It was never proved,' said Cageot simply.

He was trying hard to think what Maigret was getting at, and Maigret's mind, too, was working at top pressure.

'It doesn't matter! Two weeks ago you decided to get rid of Barnabé. As I understand it, Barnabé acted as liaison between Paris and Marseilles, that is, between you and the Levantines who shipped the drugs to France. I suppose he wanted too big a cut. You invited him into your car. It was night. Suddenly he felt a knife in his back, and a few seconds later his body was thrown out onto the pavement. Do you see your mistake?'

Maigret took another match, to make sure that the piece

of wood was still in place, and also to hide an irrepressible smile at the sight of Cageot trying to think, like a conscientious schoolboy, what his mistake could have been.

'I'll tell you in a minute!' Maigret broke in on his speculations. 'But in the meantime I will continue. By some chance or other, the police were on Pepito's track. The drugs were in the *Floria*, and the *Floria* was being watched. So the situation was dangerous. Pepito had an idea he was going to be arrested. He threatened that, if you didn't get him out of it, he'd talk. So you shot him when you thought you were alone in the empty night-club. Here you made no mistake.'

Cageot stopped sucking his sweet and looked up.

'No mistake so far. Are you beginning to understand?'

'Then you realized that there was a policeman in the place. You went out, but you couldn't resist the temptation to get him arrested. At first sight it seemed like a stroke of genius. Yet that was the mistake, your second one.'

Maigret had the whip-hand. He had only to continue without trying to precipitate matters. Cageot was listening, thinking, and a great uneasiness was gradually undermining his calm front.

'Your third murder - Audiat, who was also going to talk. The police were shadowing him. Impossible to use a knife or a gun. Now I should say Audiat was in the habit of drinking water during the night. This time he drank more water than usual, because he was drunk. And he never woke again, because the water in the carafe had been poisoned. That was the third mistake.'

Maigret was going all out - he was so sure of himself. Things could not have happened any other way.

'I'm waiting to hear what the three mistakes were!' said Cageot at last, reaching for another sweet.

Maigret thought of the *Hôtel Rue Lepic*, with its clientèle of musicians, fashionable dancers, and prostitutes.

'In the Audiat affair, the mistake was that someone put poison in the carafe!'

Still Cageot did not understand. He started on another sweet, exhaling a faint sugary smell and a whiff of vanilla.

'To kill Barnabé,' Maigret continued, pouring out a drink for himself, 'you took two people with you, Pepito and the driver of the car, probably Eugène. Subsequently, Pepito threatened to betray you. Do you follow me? So you had to get rid of Pepito. You only meant to shoot him, but, as an added subtlety, you got Audiat to bump into the detective. What followed automatically? Eugène, Louis, the *belote*-player called Colin, and Audiat were all involved.'

'But Audiat was the one who was going to rat. So you were obliged to get rid of him. Yesterday afternoon you yourself were nowhere near the Rue Lepic. You must have used someone who lives at the hotel, and got hold of him by telephone. Another accomplice. Another person who might talk. D'you get me now?'

Cageot was still thinking. The sun had reached the nickel-plated receiver. It was late. The crowds were thicker round the little carts, and the street noises penetrated through the closed windows.

'You're powerful, of course. But why handicap yourself every time with unnecessary accomplices liable to betray you? You could have polished off Barnabé anywhere you liked. He had no suspicions. You didn't need Audiat in the Pepito affair. And yesterday, before you were under surveillance, you could have gone to the Rue Lepic yourself. Anyone can go in and out of those rabbit-warrens of hotels that have no hall-porter.'

Occasionally there was a step on the stairs, and Maigret had to force himself to appear calm and go on with his harangue.

'At present there are at least five people who could put

you in gaol. Now, five people have never been able to keep a secret of this sort.'

'I didn't knife Barnabé,' said Cageot slowly. He seemed more lifeless than ever.

Maigret seized the opportunity.

'I know,' he declared confidently.

Cageot looked surprised. He narrowed his eyes.

'A knife in the back is more a matter for an Italian like Pepito.'

Just one more little effort! Suddenly the housekeeper opened the door, and Maigret saw the collapse of his carefully built up edifice.

'I'm going to market,' she announced. 'What vegetables shall I get?'

'Anything you like.'

'Have you any money?'

Cageot took out a solid, well-worn purse with a metal clasp, a real miser's purse. He took out two ten-franc pieces. The bottle of wine stood empty on the table, and he handed it to the woman.

'Look, you can take this back. You've got the ticket.'

But his thoughts were elsewhere. Marthe went out, leaving the door open, but she closed the door onto the landing, and they could hear the sound of water bubbling away on the kitchen stove.

Maigret had been watching every gesture of the man opposite him. He had quite forgotten the telephone and the stenographers waiting at the other end of the line.

Something had just clicked inside him. He couldn't exactly have said when. He had talked a great deal without thinking of what he was saying, and his improvised reasoning had brought him within a hair's breadth of the truth. Then there were the sweets, the purse, and even the word 'vegetable'.

'I'll wager you're on diet!'

'I have been for the last twenty years.'

There was no more question of Cageot turning him out. It was almost as if he needed him. Noticing that his glass was empty, he said:

'Marthe's bringing wine. I never keep more than one bottle in the house.'

'I know.'

'How?'

Because it fitted in with everything else, of course. Because now Cageot had ceased to be an abstract problem and had become a man. A man whom he was getting to know better every second, whom he could feel living, breathing, thinking, hoping, feeling, even crunching a sweet between his teeth.

The surroundings came to life too, the desk, the furniture and the pictures, slightly sugary like the sweets.

'Do you know what I am thinking, Cageot?'

It was no empty phrase, but the conclusion of a long sequence of thought.

'I am just wondering whether you actually did kill Pepito. At present, I am practically convinced that you didn't.'

His tone was quite different from the tone of his previous speech. He was excited. He leant over to look more closely at Cageot.

'I'll tell you right away. If you had been capable of shooting Pepito yourself, you wouldn't have needed anyone to get rid of Barnabé and Audiat. The truth is that you're a coward.'

Cageot's lips were dry. He attempted to give an ironical smile.

'Can you tell me that you have ever killed a hen or a rabbit? Or whether you can bear the sight of shed blood?'

Maigret had no more doubts. He knew now, and he forged straight ahead.

'Let's get this quite clear! You're afraid to kill with your own hands, but you don't mind getting someone else to do the killing. On the contrary! You're afraid to kill and you're afraid to die. But all your passion goes into planning murders. Isn't that so, Cageot?'

Maigret's voice was devoid of hatred as of pity. He was examining the 'Lawyer' with the passionate interest he brought to bear on the study of anything human. And in his eyes the 'Lawyer' was terribly human. Even the choice of lawyer's clerk he had made in his youth had not been a chance one.

Cageot was, and always had been, a man shut up in himself. Quite alone, his eyes closed, he must have evolved wonderful schemes - schemes of all sorts, financial, criminal, erotic.

He had never been seen with a woman - and naturally, for women could not have satisfied his feverish imagination.

Cageot retreated into himself, into the closed cage of his own thoughts, his own dreams, his own emanations.

And when he looked out of his window and saw the crowd swarming round the stalls in the sunny street, the buses sailing by loaded with human lives, he felt no desire to mingle with their living mass, but only to use them as so much material for his subtle schemes.

'You are a coward, Cageot!' Maigret thundered. 'A coward, like all people who live only on their wits. You trade in women and cocaine, and God knows what else, for you're capable of anything. But at the same time you act as an informer to the police!'

Cageot's grey eyes were fixed on Maigret, whom nothing could stop now.

'You got Pepito to kill Barnabé. And now I am going to tell you who you got to kill Pepito. In your gang there's a fine-looking fellow who has everything - women, money, success, charm, and a total lack of conscience.'

'Do you mean to tell me that on the night Pepito was murdered you were not at the *Tabac Fontaine*? The *patron* was there, and then that brothel-keeper who calls himself Colin and who is a worse rat than you are, and Audiat and the Marseilles fellow, and finally Eugène.

'It was Eugène you sent to the *Floria*. Then, when he came back, the job done, and told you that there was someone in the place, you put Audiat on to it.'

'And what then?' asked Cageot. 'What good is all this to you?' He leaned both hands on the arms of his chair as if he were going to rise. His head was slightly lowered in an attitude of defiance.

'What use is it to me? To show you that I have got you, just because you are a rat and keep too many people hanging round you.'

'And I swear that you will never get me.'

He smiled mirthlessly. His pupils were contracted. He added slowly:

'There's never been an intelligent man yet in the police. You mentioned poisoning just now. As you used to be at Headquarters, you can probably tell me how many cases of poisoning are discovered in Paris every year?'

He left Maigret no time to answer.

'Not one! Do you hear? Now, you're not so simple as to believe that, among four million inhabitants, there is not an occasional one who succumbs to an overdose of arsenic or strychnine?'

He got up at last. Maigret had been waiting a long time for this to happen. It was the reaction after a suppression that had lasted too long, and it translated itself fatally into words.

'This very day, for example, I could have got rid of you. I even thought of it. It would have been sufficient to have put some poison in your wine. The bottle, you will note, has already disappeared. I would only have had to wash the

glass. You would leave here and die somewhere or other - '

For a fraction of a second Maigret had a doubt.

'You're right. I didn't kill Barnabé. I did not kill Pepito. I didn't even kill that fool Audiat!'

With his sweet-box in his hand, Cageot talked softly but coherently. There was something ridiculous about his appearance; his dressing-gown was too short and his unbrushed hair made a strange aureole round his head. If it hadn't been for the telephone, Maigret would have opened the window to get rid of the oppressive stuffy atmosphere.

'What I am telling you is of no importance, because you're not sworn in, and there's no witness.'

As if seized with doubt, he looked into the corridor and even opened his bedroom door for a moment.

'What you've never understood, you see, is that they would never give me away even if they wanted to, because legally they are more guilty than I am! Eugène did the murder. Louis supplied the gun and the key to the *Floria*. And do you realize what would happen to Eugène if he tried to get smart? One of those evenings at *belote*, while the game was in full swing, our friend Monsieur Colin, that half-dead and stammering abortion as you call him, would be instructed to put something in his glass. I assure you, it is less necessary than you'd think to go to the length of knocking a rabbit on the head.'

Maigret went up to the desk to take his hat and his matches. His knees were shaking slightly. It was all over! He had got what he had come for! He only had to get out now! The detective who was waiting in the street had a warrant for arrest in his pocket. At the Quai des Orfèvres they were waiting for news and probably playing guessing games.

He had been there two hours. Eugène, in silk pyjamas, was probably taking a belated breakfast, *tête-à-tête* with

Fernande. And where on earth would Philippe's brave mother have got to?

There were steps on the stairs, and then a loud knock on the door. Cagot looked Maigret in the eyes and picked up the revolver which had been on the desk all this time.

While he went to open the door, Maigret with his hand in his gun-pocket took up a position in the middle of the room.

'What's up?' came the voice of Eugène from the hall.

Then the two men met at the door of the office. There was a step behind them. It was Fernande, who looked at Maigret with surprise.

'What's - ?' began Fernande.

But at that moment a taxi stopped noisily in front of the house, with a grinding of brakes.

Eugène ran to the window.

'I thought as much!' he muttered.

The police who had been shadowing Fernande and had followed them both, were getting out.

Cagot did not move. He stood thinking, revolver in hand.

'Why did you come here?' he asked Eugène, who at the same moment exclaimed:

'I telephoned four times and -'

Maigret had slowly retreated to get his back to the wall.

At the mention of the telephone, Cagot glanced quickly at the instrument. At the same moment a shot rang out and the smell of burnt powder filled the room. A cloud of bluish smoke trailed across the rays of the sun.

Maigret had fired. The bullet had got Cagot's hand and his revolver had fallen to the floor.

'Don't move,' said Maigret, still pointing his gun towards them.

Cagot seemed transfixed. He still had a sweet in his

mouth, which made a bulge in his left cheek. But he dared not make a move.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

'Open the door, Fernande,' Maigret commanded.

She looked at Eugène to see whether she ought to obey, but he stared obstinately at the floor. So with a shrug she crossed the lobby, drew the chain, and turned the key.

Blood was dripping from Cageot's hand. Each drop made a faint plop as it fell on the floor, where a brownish stain was slowly spreading.

Suddenly, before Maigret could prevent him, Eugène sprang towards the window, opened it, breaking a pane in the process, and leapt into space.

There were cries from the street below. He had fallen onto the roof of a stationary taxi, jumped off onto the ground, and made off in the direction of the Rue des Dames.

At the same moment two detectives appeared in the doorway.

'What's been happening?' they asked Maigret.

'Nothing. Arrest Cageot. There's a warrant out for him. Are there any more of you down below?'

'No.'

Fernande did not understand. She stood looking at the open window in a sort of daze.

'Oh well, he'll have a good run for his money!'

While he was speaking, Maigret took the piece of wood and slipped it into his pocket. He had a feeling that something was wrong with Cageot, but nothing very serious. The 'Lawyer' swayed and fell in an inert heap.

He had fainted, probably at the sound of his own blood dripping onto the floor.

'Wait until he comes round. Call a doctor if you like. The telephone is working now.'

Maigret pushed Fernande out onto the landing and made

her go downstairs in front of him. A crowd was collecting in front of the house, and a policeman was trying to move it on.

Maigret managed to slip through and found himself with Fernande outside the butcher's shop at the corner of the street.

'Well, have you fallen for him?' he asked.

Then he noticed that she was wearing a brand-new fur coat. He felt it between his fingers.

'Is this from him?'

'Yes, this morning.'

'Tell me, do you know that it was he who killed Pepito?'

'Ah.' She didn't move a muscle. He smiled.

'He told you?'

She just lowered her lids.

'When?'

'This morning.'

And then she added, suddenly serious, with a lover's blind faith:

'You'll never get him!'

And she was right. A month later she rejoined Eugène at Stamboul, where he had opened a big night-club in the chief street.

As for Cageot, he was given a life-sentence.

*

I am sending you by express the six plum-trees you asked for, like the ones we have in our walled garden (Madame Lauer wrote to her sister). I think they ought to do well in the Loire district. But tell your husband that, in my opinion, he doesn't prune his fruit-trees enough.

Philippe is much better since he came back to the country. He's a good boy and hardly ever goes out. But the last few days he's been banging round the Scheffers' house (the gas-works people, you know), and I shouldn't be surprised if it ended up in a wedding.

Tell your husband, too, that they gave the show here yesterday that I saw with him at the Palais-Royal. But I didn't enjoy it as much as I did in Paris ~

Maigret had just come in in his gumboots, with three pike in his hand.

'But we're not going to eat them!' said his wife.

'Evidently not!'

He said it in such an odd way that she looked up. But he had already gone off to the shed to hang up his rods and take off his boots.

'If one had to eat everything one killed!'

The sentence stuck in his mind. He suddenly had the ridiculous vision of a pale perplexed Cagnot confronted with the corpses of Pepito and Audiat. It did not even make him smile.

'What's the soup to-night?' he asked as he sat down on nacking-case.

'Tomato!'

'Good!'

And he heaved a sigh of relief as one after the other, his boots fell on the floor of beaten earth.