

## Maigret et le corps sans tête

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The 'policiers' featuring Maigret are always pleasant to read. As I probably have already remarked I would never read them except in French, when they provide excellent reading practice. They are pleasant but never memorable. Non-memorable in the sense that I can never in retrospect recall what they are all about, plots are clearly subsidiary and resolutions of the same tend to be anti-climactic. Their charm lies elsewhere in its depiction of low-level quotidian life in Paris. It is the world of small bars, bistros and occasionally night-clubs which are masterly evoked by the author by a few deft strokes of his pen. The center of attention is of course Maigret himself. I must have at some time seen some footage of some filmed versions as the image of an older French actor - possibly Jean Gabin<sup>1</sup> - comes unbidden to my mind. He is always putting tobacco in his pipe, or enjoying a glass of wine. He is a calm presence, never losing his 'sang-froid' nor his composure. His method is not logical and reasoning, instead he is driven by his desire to understand the actors drawing on sympathy and intuition. He spends time mulling over things, asking seemingly irrelevant questions, slowly getting the picture. Those stories are definitely not of the 'whodunit' type, often it is clear from the start who has committed the crime, what we are witnessing is the crystallization of the process. But of all this is but an excuse to depict the milieu of Paris, the geography of the city with its landmarks and major thoroughfares and boulevards, during night and day, during different seasons and during the changing weather. The life of Maigret, in spite of being on the interface between law and crime, is strangely bourgeois. We get glimpses of his long-suffering and patient wife providing meals, which he often has to skip as duty, or maybe rather, curiosity exercises its irresistible pull. The stories are always independent of each other there are few if any cross references, but as they were written during an extended period, in fact between 1931 and 1972, they should, if read in chronological order give you a panorama of Paris changing from the early thirties into the late sixties. Through those forty years the Maigret character manages to stay between forty-five and sixty, and I doubt that there is any development of personality. In the narratives he is also occasionally presented as a public figure, (which I believe must be an actual disadvantage for his work), due to the fact that crime stories tended to get large public exposure in the news journals at the time.

The present book starts with the discovery of a dismembered and headless body retrieved from a Parisian canal. Maigret does not find a phone in the closest bistro which allows privacy but seeks out one within a cabin and finds one close by. He is struck by the proprietress and her languid indifferent manners. She serves them excellent white wine, and it transpires that it is bought out in the country close to Poitiers by her husband who makes regular trips there. Her husband is away at the moment, she does not really no

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<sup>1</sup> This could be true as Gabin played Magritte in a 1958 movie titled *Maigret tend un piège* and later on in two others *Maigret et l'Affaire Saint-Fiacre*, *Maigret voit rouge* from 1959 and 1963 respectively

where and does not care. It transpires that she has been at the bistro for twenty-four years arriving pregnant with her husband at the age of seventeen. More precisely they were not married at the time but would do so later. Magritte is intrigued by her and the fact that they have stayed at the same place for so long settled in a routine not having much to do with each other. In fact it transpires that she has a series of lovers, including a teenage boy and more seriously a red-haired guy who works close by. It does not take long before Maigret gets an idea of connecting the absent husband with the headless cadaver. This hunch turns out to be correct, so not much of suspense here, or at least not of the surprising kind. A forensic investigation is made of the premises, fingerprints are secured confirming the hunch, and at the very end Maigret meets up with the notary of the small village the patroness and her husband came from and he gets some useful, but not crucial information, to satisfy his curiosity. It turns out that the woman is the daughter of a rich local landholder, in fact the only child and also heiress, as he, contrary to expectations did not disinherit her when she eloped with a married man (it turns out that he had also made another woman pregnant at the same time and legalized that relation). In fact her father died recently and the notary had traveled to her and reveal the happy news of her inheritance, which she, contrary to the wishes of her husband wanted nothing of. Things fall into place and the couple confess, and there is the end, with a few loose threads cleared up. I must admit to a certain suspense in the last thirty pages, but as usual it ended up anti-climactically. But of course this is a fate his books share with most detective stories centered on the detective, who, like in the pioneering case of Sherlock Holmes, is more interesting than the actual cases.

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