



## *Storm in the Channel*

*Tempête sur La Manche*

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### I

It looked as if fate had taken advantage of Maigret's recent retirement to confront him, ironically, with the most glaring proof of the unreliability of human evidence. And this time the famous Superintendent, or rather the man who had borne that title only three months earlier, was on the wrong side of the counter, so to speak, facing a policeman's searching gaze and being asked the question:

"Are you sure it was half-past six, or a little earlier, and that you were sitting beside the fire?"

Now Maigret realised with appalling clarity how a small handful of human beings, half a dozen in this case, were suddenly going to be paralysed by this simple question:

"What exactly were you doing between six and seven o'clock?"

If only it had been a question of disorderly, or dramatic, or tragic incidents! But it was nothing of the sort; merely a matter of half a dozen people hanging about, waiting for dinner on a wet night in the two or three public sitting-rooms of a boarding-house!

And Maigret, when he was questioned, hesitated like a forgetful schoolboy or a false witness.

“A wet night” is putting it mildly. At the Gare Saint-Lazare there had been a notice: “Storm in the Channel. The Dieppe-Newhaven crossing may be delayed.”

And a good many English travellers turned around and went back to their hotels.

At Dieppe, in the main street, it looked as if the wind would tear down the street signs. You had to lean against the street doors to open them. The water came down in bucket-fuls, with a noise like waves crashing on shingle. Sometimes a figure would dart past, someone who had to go out, clinging close to the walls, his head covered with a coat.

It was November. The lights had had to be put on at four o'clock. At the harbour station, the boat which should have left at two lay alongside the fishing-smacks whose masts were clashing together.

Madame Maigret had resignedly fetched from her room a piece of knitting which she had started in the train. She was sitting close to the stove, while an unfamiliar ginger cat, the boarding-house cat, had come to nestle in her lap.

From time to time she raised her head and cast a woe-begone glance at Maigret, who was wandering about like a lost soul.

“We ought to have gone to the hotel,” she sighed. “You’d have found someone there to play cards with.”

Obviously! But Madame Maigret, ever thrifty, had got from some friend or other the address of this god-forsaken boarding-house at the end of the quay, amid the gloomy desolation of the summer visitors’ district, where in winter all the shutters were closed and all the doors barred.

And yet this was supposed to be a holiday trip, the first, really, that the pair of them had taken since their honeymoon.

Maigret was free at last! He had left the Quai des Orfèvres and he could go to bed at night secure in the knowledge that he would not be disturbed by a telephone call summoning him to examine a corpse that was not yet cold.

And so, as Madame Maigret had long wanted to visit England, he had made up his mind:

“We’ll go and spend a fortnight in London. I’ll take the opportunity to look up some of my colleagues at Scotland Yard with whom I worked during the war.”

“Just their luck! A storm in the Channel, the boat delayed, and this gloomy boarding-house, remembered on the spur of the moment by Madame Maigret, its very walls exuding meanness and boredom!

The landlady, Mademoiselle Otard, was a spinster of fifty who tried to disguise her sourness behind honeyed smiles. Her nostrils twitched involuntarily every time she came across the trail of tobacco-smoke that followed Maigret in his wanderings to and fro. Several times she had been on the point of commencing that it was not the thing to smoke a pipe incessantly in small overheated rooms where ladies were sitting. On these occasions Maigret, feeling a row imminent, looked her in the eyes so calmly that she preferred to turn her head away.

She was equally disgusted when she saw the Superintendent, who had never been able to break himself of the habit, hovering about the stoves, then seizing the poker and raking the coal so energetically that the chimneys roared like furnaces.

The house was not a large one. It was a two-storey villa converted into a boarding-house. There was a passage by way of entrance hall, but for economy's sake it was rarely lighted, nor was the staircase leading to the first and second floors, so that every now and then you would hear people stumbling up the stairs, or a hand groping for the door-knob.

The front room served as a lounge, with funny little arm-chairs of greenish velvet and tattered old magazines on the table.

Then there was the dining-room, where guests were also allowed to sit except at meal-times.

Madame Maigret was in the lounge. Maigret wandered from one room to the other, from one stove to the other, from one poker to the other.

At the back was the pantry where Irma, the fifteen-year-old maid, was busy that afternoon cleaning knives and plate with silver polish.

And finally there was the kitchen, the domain of Mademoiselle Otard and of Jeanne, the older of the two maids, a slattern in her late twenties, perpetually slipshod, unkempt and of dubious cleanliness, and moreover perpetually embittered, looking about her resentfully and suspiciously.

The only other member of the household was a bewildered little boy of four who was always being pushed around, scolded and slapped: Jeanne's son, as Maigret learned by questioning the younger servant.

Elsewhere, in such weather, time might not have passed very cheerfully. Here it dragged funereally, and there must have been far more seconds to the minute here than anywhere else, for the hands seemed not to move at all on the

face of the black marble clock standing under its glass case on the mantelpiece.

"Try to take advantage of a lull to go to the café. You're bound to find someone there to have a game with," suggested Madame Maigret.

"One couldn't even have a quiet chat in the place, for there was always somebody about. Mademoiselle Otard bustled from kitchen to lounge, opening drawers or cupboards, sitting down, going off again as if she had to keep an eye on everyone or a disaster would happen. As though if she stayed away for a quarter of an hour somebody would take the opportunity to pinch her old copies of *La Mode du Jour* or set fire to the sideboard!

From time to time Irma came in too, to put away knives, spoons and forks in that same sideboard and take others out.

As for the sad lady, as the Maigrets called her because they did not know her name, she sat bolt upright on a chair beside the dining-room stove, reading a book whose title could not be seen because it had lost its cover.

As far as they could discover, she had been there for several weeks. She seemed to be about thirty, and in poor health; perhaps she had come to convalesce after some operation? At any rate she moved about with the utmost caution, as if she were afraid of damaging herself. She ate little, and always sighed as she ate, doubtless regretting the minutes wasted in such a vulgar activity.

As for the other lady, the young bride as Maigret called her with a nice smile, she was quite the reverse, and she was forever making a draught as she swept from one armchair to another. The "young bride" was probably in her early forties.

She was short and stout and definitely not easy-going; the proof was that her husband came hurrying up at her slightest summons, assuming beforehand an obedient, sheepish air.

This husband was about thirty, and it was obvious from a glance that he had not married for love but had sacrificed his freedom in order to ensure for himself a comfortable old age.

Their name was Mosselet: Jules and Emilie Mosselet.

Though the clock hands did not move fast, they must have moved a bit for Maigret remembered afterwards having looked at the time when Jeanne brought the sad lady a peppermint tisane; it was a few minutes past five, and Jeanne was looking surlier than ever.

It was shortly after this that the young Englishman, Mr John, came in from outside, letting the cold wind and the rain into the house and bringing trickles of water into the lounge off his dripping raincoat.

He looked flushed with the keen air and the news he was bringing. He announced in a strong English accent:

“The boat’s going to sail... My luggage can be taken out, Mademoiselle.”

He had been restless ever since the morning, for he was eager to get back to England, and now he had just come from the harbour station where he had learnt that the Channel steamer was going to attempt the crossing.

“Have you got my bill ready?”

Maigret hesitated for a moment. He was on the point of following his wife’s advice, at the risk of a soaking, and running down the street as far as the Brasserie des Suisses, where at least there would be some life and activity.

He even went as far as the coat-stand in the hall, and noticed in the semi-darkness the Englishman’s three big suitcases. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went into the lounge.

“Why don’t you go? You’re just getting irritable unnecessarily,” said Madame Maigret.

This remark was enough to make him subside heavily into an armchair, pick up the first magazine he saw and begin to turn over its pages.

The remarkable thing was that he had strictly nothing to do and nothing to preoccupy him. Logically, he should have been in a state of perfect relaxation.

The house was not large. From any point in it you could hear the slightest sounds; in fact in the evening, when the Mosselet couple retired to their bedroom, it became quite embarrassing.

But Maigret saw nothing, heard nothing, had not the faintest presentiment.

He was vaguely aware of Mr John paying his bill and going into the pantry to tip Irma. He made some vague reply to the Englishman’s vague goodbye and realized that Jeanne, being heftier than the young man, was going to carry two of the cases to the boat.

But he did not see her go. It didn’t interest him. He happened to be reading a long article in tiny print on the habits of field-mice — the magazine he had picked up at random being an agricultural journal — and he had ended up by becoming absurdly fascinated by it.

After that, the minute hand could creep forward on the grey-green clock-face without anybody noticing. Madame Maigret, counting the stitches in her knitting, was moving

her lips in silence. From time to time a lump of coal crackled in one of the stoves or a gust of wind howled in the chimney.

The clink of china indicated that Irma was laying the table. There was a vague smell of frying that heralded the traditional evening dish of whiting.

And suddenly voices rang out in the night, excited voices that seemed to spring from the storm itself and that drew nearer, sounded right up against the shutters, stopped at the door and were brought to a noisy close by the most violent ring of the bell ever heard in that house.

Even then Maigret did not give a start. For hours he had been longing for a break in the day's monotony. Now that it had come, far more sensational than anything he could have expected, he sat absorbed in stories about field-mice.

"Yes, this is the house..." Mademoiselle Otard's voice was heard saying.

She ushered in air and wetness and damp clothes, and red excited faces. Maigret was obliged to raise his head. He caught sight of a policeman's uniform and the black overcoat of a little man with an unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"I think this is where a certain Jeanne Fénard was in service?" said the man with the cigar.

Maigret noticed that the little boy was there, having crept in from heaven knows where, probably from the depths of the kitchen.

"She has just been shot dead with a revolver as she was going along the Rue de la Digue."

Mademoiselle Otard's immediate reaction was one of incredulity and suspicion. She was patently not the sort of per-

son to be taken in easily and, tight-lipped, she let fall the magnificent comment:

"Really?"

But the sequel left her in no doubt, for the man with the unlighted cigar went on:

"I am the police inspector. I want you to come with me to identify the body... And I want nobody else to leave the house."

Maigret's eyes were twinkling mischievously. His wife looked at him as if to say:

"Why don't you tell them who you are?"

But Maigret had retired such a short time ago that he was still savouring the delights of anonymity. He sank back into his armchair with real enjoyment. He scrutinized the inspector with a critical eye.

"Kindly put on your coat and follow me..."

"Where to?" Mademoiselle Otard protested again.

"To the morgue..."

There followed loud screams, a genuine or else a well-simulated fit of hysterics, with a moan from the sad lady visitor, whom Maigret had forgotten.

Irma darted in from her pantry, holding a plate in her hand.

"Is Jeanne dead?"

"It's none of your business," declared Mademoiselle Otard. "I shall be back presently. You can serve dinner in the meantime."

She glanced at the little boy, who had not understood what was going on and was wandering about among the grown-ups' legs.

“Shut him up in his room... Put him to bed.”

Where was Madame Mosselet at that moment? The question would seem an easy one and yet Maigret couldn't have answered it. On the other hand Mosselet, who wore ridiculous red felt slippers indoors, was standing there somewhere near the hall. He must have heard the noise from his room and come down.

“What's happening?” he asked.

But the local inspector was in a hurry. He said a few words in a whisper to the uniformed policeman, who took off his cape and cap and settled down by the fire, like someone who has come to stay.

Meanwhile Mademoiselle Otard was being hurried out, wearing a yellow waterproof coat and rubber boots. She turned round once more to call out to Irma:

“Hurry up and serve dinner! The fish'll be burnt!”

Irma was weeping mechanically, as though out of politeness, because somebody had died. She wept as she handed round the dishes, turning her head away so that her tears should not fall into the food.

Here, Maigret noticed that Madame Mosselet was at table, showing no other emotion than curiosity.

“I wonder how it can have happened... Was it in the street? ... Are there gangsters in Dieppe?”

Maigret was eating hungrily. Madame Maigret could not understand how her husband could seem so uninterested in this affair, when his whole life had been spent investigating crimes.

The sad lady was staring at her whiting and the whiting was staring back at her. From time to time she opened her

mouth, not to eat but to breathe out a little air by way of a sigh.

As for the policeman, he had taken a chair and was sitting astride it, watching the others eat and longing for a chance to show off.

“It was I that found her,” he said with pride to Madame Mosselet, who seemed the most interested.

“How?”

“Quite by chance... I live in the Rue de la Digue, a little street that runs from the quay to the far end of the harbour, beyond the tobacco factory. That's as good as saying that nobody ever goes down it. I was walking fast with my head bent and I saw something dark...”

“How dreadful!” said Madame Mosselet, without conviction.

“At first I thought it might be a drunk, for there's always some of them lying about the pavement...”

“Even in winter?”

“Particularly in winter, because people begin drinking to get warm...”

“While in summer they drink to get cool!” Jules Mosselet said jokingly, with a sly glance at his wife.

“That's about it... I touched the body... I found it was a woman... I called for help, and when she had been carried into a pharmacy, the one on the corner of the Rue de Paris, we saw that she was dead... And that was when I recognized her, because I know all the faces in the neighbourhood. I told the Chief: ‘That's the maid from the Pension Otard...’”

Then Maigret inquired hesitantly, as if reluctant to interfere in what did not concern him:

“Were there any suitcases beside her?”

“Why should there have been suitcases?”

“I don’t know... I wonder, too, if she was facing towards the harbour or in this direction...”

The policeman scratched his head.

“Wait a minute... I believe, the way she was lying, she must have been coming this way when it happened.”

He hesitated a moment, then made up his mind to take hold of the bottle of red wine and pour himself a glass, murmuring:

“May I?”

This action had brought him close to the table. There were still two whiting lying flat on the dish. He hesitated once more, took one of them, ate it without knife or fork and went over to throw the backbone into the coal scuttle.

Then he looked questioningly round the table, made sure that nobody wanted the second whiting and ate it like the first, took another drink and sighed:

“It must have been a crime of passion... That girl was a really fast one. She was always hanging around the dance-hall at the far end of the harbour...”

“Well, that makes it different,” murmured Madame Mosselet, who seemed to think that if passion was involved the whole thing was quite natural.

“What surprises me,” went on the policeman, while Maigret never took his eyes off him, “is that it was done with a gun. Sailors, you know, are more likely to use knives.”

At that moment Mademoiselle Otard reappeared, and the wind, which had given a flush to other people’s faces, had

made hers pale. The incident, moreover, had given her a sense of her own importance, and her whole attitude proclaimed:

“I know certain things, but don’t expect me to tell you...”

Her glance swept round the table, the diners and their plates, taking stock of the fish-bones. She said severely to Irma, who stood glued to the doorway, snivelling:

“Why don’t you get on with serving the veal?”

Finally she turned to the policeman:

“I hope they’ve given you something to drink?...Your chief will be here in a few minutes. He’s telephoning to Newhaven.”

Maigret gave a start and she noticed it. It struck her as odd, and an obvious look of suspicion crossed her face. Consequently she felt bound to add:

“At least I suppose so...”

She did not suppose so; she knew. So the local inspector had heard about Mr John and his hurried departure.

For the time being, then, the official line followed the trail of the young Englishman.

“All this is going to make me ill again!” the sad lady murmured plaintively. She opened her lips scarcely three times a day except to sigh.

“And what about me?” asked Mademoiselle Otard indignantly, for she could not endure that anyone else should be more affected by the event than herself. “You think this is going to be convenient for me? A girl I spent months training after a fashion... Irma! When are you going to bring that gravy?”

The most obvious result of these comings and goings was to let wafts of cold air into the house; instead of merging in

the surrounding warmth, it formed little fluttering draughts that crept round the back of your neck and aroused a shiver between your shoulder blades.

So much so that Maigret got up and, disregarding the empty coalscuttle, went to poke the stove. Then he filled his pipe, lit it with a paper spill held close to the flame and automatically took up his favourite attitude, in which Headquarters at the Quai des Orfèvres had so often seen him, pipe between his teeth, back to the fire, hands clasped behind his back, with that indefinable air of stubbornness that he assumed when apparently unrelated facts began to group themselves in his mind and form, as it were, a still unsubstantial germ of truth.

The arrival of the Dieppe inspector did not rouse him from his immobility. He heard:

“The boat hasn’t got there yet... They’re going to let me know...”

And one could readily imagine the steamer tossed in the darkness of the Channel, where nothing could be seen but the pale crests of huge waves. And the seasick passengers, the deserted buffet, anxious shadows on the darkened deck, with no other guide than the flash of the Newhaven lighthouse.

“I shall be obliged to question all of these ladies and gentlemen in turn,” said the inspector.

Mademoiselle Otard understood, and decided:

“We can shut the communicating doors. You can sit in the lounge and...”

The inspector had had no dinner, but there were no more whiting left on the table and he did not like to thrust his fingers into the dish where slices of veal were congealing.

It happened by chance. The policeman had looked round to decide whom he should begin with. His glance had met that of Madame Maigret, who seemed calm enough to set an example.

“Come in,” he had said to her, opening the door of the lounge and then closing it behind her, while a faint smile flitted across the lips of the former Superintendent her husband.

Although the door was shut you could hear practically everything that was being said on the other side, and Maigret’s smile grew more marked when his colleague in the next room asked:

“Spelt *ai* or *é*?”

“*Ai*.”

“Like the famous detective?”

And the admirable wife merely replied:

“Yes!”

“You’re not related to him?”

“I’m his wife.”

“But then... In that case... It’s your husband who’s here with you?”

And a minute later Maigret was in the lounge, facing the little fellow who looked radiant and at the same time a trifle anxious.

“Now admit that you were trying to have me on!... When I think that I was going to question you like all the rest... I must point out that what I’m doing now is just to carry out normal procedure and also in a way to kill time till I get news from Newhaven... But you were on the spot. You must have seen the whole thing coming in a way — surely you’ve got more definite ideas and I’d be grateful if you...”



"I assure you that I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, who knew that the murdered girl was going out?"

"The people in the house, of course. But this is where I realize how hard it is to be a witness; I'm quite incapable of stating definitely who was in the house at that moment."

"You were busy?"

"I was reading..."

He did not care to add that he had been reading an article on the life of moles and field-mice.

"I was vaguely aware of noise and bustle...Then..."

"Madame Mosselet, for instance! Was she downstairs or wasn't she? And if she was, which room was she in? What was she doing?"

The Dieppe inspector was not satisfied. He was almost convinced that his illustrious colleague was enjoying letting him struggle on his own, and no doubt he promised himself secretly to show Maigret how he, a provincial detective, could conduct an inquiry.

The sad lady was sent for; her name was Germaine Moulineau and she was a schoolteacher on convalescent leave.

"I was in the dining-room," she mumbled. "I remember thinking it was unfair to let that poor girl carry the Englishman's cases when there were strong men sitting about killing time."

This was aimed at Maigret, as was proved by the glance she cast at his broad shoulders when she referred to "strong men".

"After that you didn't leave the dining-room?"

"I went up to my bedroom."

"Did you stay there long?"

About a quarter of an hour... I took a tablet and waited for it to take effect..."

"Forgive the question I'm going to ask you, but I'm asking all the guests in the house the same thing and I consider it a mere formality. I suppose you have not been out today, so that your clothes must be dry?"

"No... About the middle of the afternoon I went out for a moment."

Yet another proof of the unreliability of evidence! Maigret had not noticed that she had gone out, nor that she had left the dining-room for a quarter of an hour.

"Perhaps you went to the chemist's to fetch your tablets?"

"No... I wanted to look at the harbour in the wind and rain..."

"Thank you...Next, please!"

The next was Irma, the young maid, still sniffing and crumpling the corner of her apron between her fingers.

"Do you know if your friend Jeanne had any enemies?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Had you noticed any change in her behaviour, suggesting that she was afraid because of some threat?"

"Only that she told me this morning she wasn't going to stick in this hole much longer. That's what she said..."

"You're not treated well here?"

"I didn't say that," Irma declared hastily, with a glance at the door.

"Well, then, do you know if Jeanne had any lovers?"

"She must have done."

"Why d'you say she must have done?"

"Because she was always afraid of having a baby."

“Do you know any of their names?”

“There was one fisherman who sometimes came and whistled in the alley, a chap called Gustave...”

“What alley’s that?”

“The alley behind the house. You can get out that way, across the courtyard behind the kitchen.”

“Did you go out this evening?”

She hesitated, nearly said no, hesitated again and then admitted:

“Just for a second. I went to the baker’s to get a croissant.”

“What time was that?”

“I don’t know... I suppose about five.”

“Why did you have to get a croissant?”

“We don’t get a lot to eat,” she muttered in a barely audible voice.

“Thank you.”

“You won’t tell on me?”

“You needn’t worry...Next, please!...”

This time Jules Mosselet made his appearance, looking completely self-possessed.

“All yours, Inspector!”

“Did you get out this afternoon?”

“Yes, Inspector... I went to get some cigarettes.”

“At what time?”

“It must have been five or ten minutes to five... I came back almost immediately. The weather was shocking.”

“You didn’t know the dead woman?”

“I didn’t know her at all, Inspector.”

He was thanked, as the others had been, and his wife took his place and was asked the question that had now become a ritual:

“Did you go out this afternoon?”

“I suppose I’ve got to answer?”

“You’d be well advised to do so.”

“In that case I only beg you not to mention it to Jules. You’ll see why. He’s very attractive to women and because he’s a weak character, I don’t trust him. When I heard him go out I followed him to find out where he was going...”

“And where did he go?” asked the Inspector with a wink at Maigret.

The answer was somewhat unexpected.

“I don’t know...”

“What d’you mean, you don’t know? You’ve just admitted that you followed him...”

“That’s just it! I thought I was following him. Don’t you understand? By the time I had put on my coat and opened my umbrella he had already got to the corner of the first street. And when I got there myself I saw a figure in a brown raincoat in the distance and I followed it. It wasn’t until five minutes later, when the person went past a lighted shop window, that I realized it wasn’t Jules... So I came back and behaved as if nothing had happened...”

“How long after you did he come back?”

“I don’t know... I was upstairs. He may have stayed downstairs for a while.”

Just then there was a sharp ring of the bell and a policeman in uniform handed a note to the inspector, who opened it and presently handed it over to Maigret:

*Nobody answering to the name or description of John Miller landed from the Dieppe boat at Newhaven.*

The police inspector had politely invited Maigret to accompany him on his investigation if he was interested, but did not seem particularly enthusiastic, in view of his colleague's apparently unhelpful attitude.

However, as they walked together along the street, in constant danger of tiles falling on their heads — there were broken pieces lying here and there on the pavements — he explained to Maigret:

"I don't want to leave anything to chance, as you'll have noticed. I shall be very surprised if there isn't something fishy about that John Miller. The landlady tells me he had been at her pension for several days, but that he had never given anything but evasive answers to her questions. He paid his bill in French money and — this is interesting — with an unusual quantity of small change. He went out very seldom, and only in the mornings. On two consecutive days Mademoiselle Otard met him in the market place, taking an apparent interest in butter, eggs and vegetables..."

"Or perhaps in the housewives' purses!" cut in Maigret.

"You think he's a pickpocket?"

"At any rate, that would explain how he might have got into England under a different name and in different clothes from those you had described to the English authorities."

"That won't stop me from keeping on trying to get hold of him. And now we're going to Victor's, the café close to the fish market. I should like to meet that Gustave the little maid told us about, and to know whether he's the same as a certain

Gustave Broken-Tooth with whom I've had a lot of dealings..."

"According to your man, the men hereabouts use knives rather than guns," Maigret objected again, as he jumped over a deep puddle of water and got splashed nonetheless.

A few minutes later they went into Victor's, where the floor was thick with grease and a dozen or so tables were occupied by sailors in jerseys and clogs. The café was glaringly lit, and a juke-box was dispensing shrill music, while the proprietor and two slovenly waitresses bustled about.

It was obvious from the men's glances that they had recognized the local inspector, who went to sit with Maigret in a corner and ordered a beer. When one of the girls served him, he caught hold of her apron and asked her in a low voice:

"What time did Jeanne come in this afternoon?"

"What Jeanne?"

"Gustave's girl..."

The waitress hesitated, glanced at one of the groups of men, and then pondered:

"I don't think I saw her!" she said at last.

"She often comes, doesn't she?"

"Sometimes. But she doesn't come in. She opens the door a crack to see if he's there and, if he is, he goes to join her outside."

"Did Gustave spend the evening here?"

"You'll have to ask my friend Berthe... I had to go out."

Maigret was smiling to himself. He seemed delighted to find that he was not the only person who could not provide definite evidence.

Berthe was the other waitress. She squinted; possibly that was what gave her such a disagreeable air.

"If you want to know," she told the inspector, "you'll have to ask him yourself. I'm not paid to do police work."

By now the first waitress had already spoken to a red-headed fellow in rubber boots, who stood up, hitched up his duck trousers, which were fastened with a piece of string, spat on the floor, walked up to the inspector and, when he opened his mouth, revealed a broken tooth right in the middle.

"Is it me you're talking about?"

"I want to know whether you've seen Jeanne this evening..."

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

"Jeanne is dead."

"It's not true..."

"I tell you she's dead. She was shot dead in the street."

The man was genuinely surprised. He looked round at the others and shouted:

"Here, what's all this about? Is Jeanne really dead?"

"Answer my question. Did you see her?"

"Oh well, can't be helped. I'd sooner tell the truth. She came here..."

"At what time?"

"I don't know... I was playing for drinks with Big Joe."

"Was it after five?"

"Must have been!"

"Did she come in?"

"I don't allow her to come into the cafés I go to. I saw her face in the doorway. I went and told her to leave me alone."

"Why?"

"Because!"

The proprietor had stopped the juke-box and silence reigned in the room. The other customers were trying to overhear snatches of the conversation.

"Had you been quarrelling?"

Broken-Tooth shrugged his shoulders, like someone who knows he's going to have a hard time making himself understood.

"We had and we hadn't..."

"Explain yourself!"

"Let's say that I had my eye on another girl and she was jealous."

"What other girl?"

"One who came to the dance-hall with Jeanne once..."

"What's her name?"

"I don't even know it... Well, can't be helped, if you really want to know... I've never even touched her, so I can't get into trouble for that, in spite of her age... It's the kid that works at the boarding-house with Jeanne... That's all! When Jeanne came, I just went outside and told her that if she didn't leave me alone I'd hit her."

"And after that? You went straight back into the café?"

"Not right away. I went to watch the Newhaven boat leaving... I thought it might get into difficulties on account of the current... Are you going to arrest me?"

"Not yet..."

"You needn't stand on ceremony, you know! We're getting used to always taking the rap for other people... And so Jeanne's dead! I hope she didn't suffer?"

It was a strange sensation, for Maigret, to be there and to have nothing to do. He was not used to being merely a member of the public. He heard a voice that was not his own asking the questions, and he had to make an effort not to break in, approving or disapproving.

Sometimes a question was on the tip of his tongue and it was a real torment to have to keep silent.

“Are you coming along?” the inspector asked Maigret, as he stood up and laid some money on the table.

“Where are you going?”

“To the police station. I’ve got to make out my report. Afterwards, I might as well go to bed. There’s nothing more I can do today...”

Out on the pavement, however, he murmured as he turned up the collar of his overcoat:

“Of course I shall put a man on to tail Broken-Tooth. That’s my method, and I think it used to be yours too... It’s a mistake to try to get immediate results at all costs; one only gets tired and flustered. Tomorrow I shall have to deal with the Public Prosecutor’s lot.”

Maigret chose to part company with him under the red light at the police station. There was nothing for him to do in the office where his colleague was going to settle down quietly to writing a meticulous report.

The wind had dropped a little, but the rain was still falling, seeming even wetter because it was falling vertically. Few people were passing in front of the shop windows, which were still lighted up.

“As he always used to do when a case was starting badly, Maigret began by wasting time. He went to the Brasserie des

Suisses and spent a quarter of an hour uninterestedly watching a game of backgammon at the next table.

His shoes had let in water and he felt he was catching a cold. That decided him, after finishing his glass of beer, to order a rum toddy that sent the blood racing to his head.

“Oh, well,” he sighed as he got up.

It was none of his business! It was rather sickening, but he had looked forward to his retirement for so long that he wasn’t going to grumble now it had come.

Out of doors, at the end of the quay beyond the harbour station, which was deserted and lit only by a single arc-lamp, Maigret caught sight of a blur of violet light on the wet pavement and remembered a certain dance-hall that had been mentioned.

Without having really made up his mind to go there, and although he was still resolved to keep out of this business, he found himself in front of a garish façade, vulgarly painted and lit by coloured lamps. When he opened the door a waft of dance music hit him, but he was disappointed to find the place almost empty.

Two women were dancing together, two working girls probably, out to get their money’s worth, and the three musicians were playing for them alone.

“By the way, what day is it?” he asked the proprietor as he sat down at the bar.

“Monday. Today, of course, we shan’t get a big crowd. Here, it’s chiefly Saturdays and Sundays, and a bit on Thursdays. There’ll be a few couples presently, when the cinema shuts down, although in this weather...What’ll you drink?”

“A toddy...”

Maigret regretted his choice on seeing his toddy concocted from an unknown brand of rum and water boiled in a dubious-looking kettle.

"You haven't been here before, have you? Are you passing through Dieppe?"

"Just passing through, yes..."

And the man, misinterpreting his intentions, explained:

"You know, you won't find anything of that kind here. You can dance with these young ladies and offer them a drink, but as for anything else, well... Specially today!"

"Because there's nobody here?"

"Not only that... Look, you see those kids dancing? D'you know why they're dancing?"

"No."

"To get rid of the blues. A little while ago one of them was crying and the other sat staring straight in front of her. I stood them a drink to cheer them up... It's not very pleasant to hear suddenly that one of your friends has been killed..."

"Oh, has there been an accident?"

"There's been a crime! In a little street not a hundred metres from here. A servant girl was picked up with a bullet in her head..."

And Maigret reflected:

"And it never occurred to me to ask if she'd been shot in the head or in the chest!"

Then he said aloud:

"So the shot was fired at close quarters?"

"Very close, I'd say. In this darkness and in such stormy weather it would have been hard to aim from as much as three steps away. All the same I'll bet it wasn't a local man.

They're ready enough with their fists, of course. Every Saturday I have to chuck somebody out before they get to fighting. Look, ever since I heard about it I haven't felt quite myself..."

He poured himself a little drink, and smacked his lips.

"Would you like me to introduce you?"

Maigret did not refuse quickly enough, and the proprietor had already summoned the two girls with a friendly wave.

"This gentleman's feeling lonely and would like to offer you a drink... Come over here. You'll be more comfortable in this corner..."

He winked at Maigret, as though authorizing him to take a few liberties unseen.

"What shall I bring you? Hot toddies?"

"That'll do..."

It was awkward. Maigret couldn't think how to handle this. The two girls were scrutinizing him stealthily and trying to make conversation.

"Won't you dance?"

"I can't dance..."

"Wouldn't you like us to teach you?"

No! There were limits, after all! He couldn't see himself gliding about the floor under the amused gaze of the three-man band!

"Are you a commercial traveller?"

"Yes. I'm just passing through. The boss has just told me that your friend... I mean, that there's been a tragedy..."

"She wasn't a friend of ours!" retorted one of the girls.

"Oh? I understood..."

"If she'd been a friend of ours we shouldn't be here! But we knew her, same as we know all the girls that come here. Now

she's dead we don't want to say anything against her. It's quite sad enough without that..."

"Of course..."

He had to agree with them. Above all he had to wait patiently without scaring his companions.

"Was she not very respectable?" he ventured at last.

"That's putting it mildly..."

"Shut up, Marie! Now she's dead..."

A few customers appeared. One of the girls danced several times with strangers. Then Maigret caught sight of Gustave Broken-Tooth, dead drunk, leaning against the bar.

The drunken man stared at Maigret as though he were on the point of recognizing him, and Maigret anticipated an unpleasant scene. But nothing happened. The man was too tipsy to see anything clearly and the proprietor was only waiting for a chance to throw him out.

In exchange for the favour he had done Maigret by introducing him to a couple of local beauties, he expected him to stand a round of toddies every quarter of an hour.

Consequently when the former Superintendent left the place at one o'clock in the morning, he lurched through the doorway, had some difficulty in fastening his overcoat, and splashed in all the puddles.

He forgot that the boarding-house guests who came in after eleven at night were supposed to ring a special bell which sounded in Mademoiselle Otard's room. He rang the front door bell violently, woke everybody up, and was given a most unfriendly welcome by the landlady, who had thrown on a coat over her nightgown.

"Today of all days!" he heard her muttering.

Madame Maigret had gone to bed, but she switched on the light when she heard steps on the stairs and gazed in astonishment at her husband, who seemed to be walking with exaggerated clumsiness and who tore off his collar with unwanted violence.

"Where on earth have you been?" she murmured, turning over towards the wall.

And he echoed her:

"Where have I been?"

Then he repeated, with a peculiar smile:

"Where have I been?... Supposing I've been to Villecomtois?"

She frowned, searched her memory, and felt sure she had never heard the name before.

"Is that near here?"

"It's in the Cher...Villecomtois!"

Better wait till next morning before bothering him with questions, she thought.

## II

Whether at home or on her travels, whether she had gone to bed early or late (which seldom happened), Madame Maigret had a mania for getting up at an impossibly early hour. Maigret had already had an argument with her on the subject the day before, when he found her up and dressed at seven o'clock in the morning with nothing to do.

"I can't get used to staying in bed," she had replied. "I always feel I've got the housework to do."

And the same thing happened that morning. He opened an eye, at one moment, because the yellow glare of the elec-

tric light was shining into it. It was not yet daylight and already his wife was making timid splashing noises in the room.

“What was that name?” Maigret wondered, half asleep, realizing to his annoyance that he was getting a headache.

The name he had triumphantly announced to his wife the night before, the name of some village or small town, had obsessed him so much that, as often happens, he had forgotten it by dint of thinking of it.

He thought he had only half fallen asleep, for he was still conscious of certain small facts; thus he noticed that the electric light had been switched off and that a bleary daylight replaced it. Then he heard an alarm clock ring somewhere in the house, somebody’s footsteps on the stairs and the front door bell ringing twice.

He would have liked to know if it was still raining and whether the storm had died down, but he could not bring himself to open his mouth and ask. Then suddenly he sat up, for his wife was shaking him by the shoulder; it was broad daylight; his watch, on the bedside table, showed half past nine.

“What’s up?”

“The local police inspector is downstairs...”

“What’s that to do with me?”

“He’s asking to see you...”

Of course, because the night before he had maybe drunk a toddy too many — and that quite unintentionally! — Madame Maigret felt bound to assume a protective and maternal air.

“Drink your coffee while it’s hot...”

On such mornings it’s always a bore getting dressed, and Maigret almost put off the task of shaving to another day.

“What was the name I told you last night?” he asked.

“What name?”

“I mentioned a village...”

“Oh yes, I remember vaguely; it was somewhere in the Cantal...”

“No, no, in the Cher...”

“D’you think so?... I believe it ended in *on*...”

So she couldn’t remember either! Well, it was no good worrying. He went downstairs still only half awake, his head heavy, and his pipe had not the same taste as on other mornings. He was surprised to find nobody in the kitchen or in the pantry; however, when he opened the dining-room door he discovered all the inmates of the house, sitting frozen into stillness as if for some ceremony, or to have a group photograph taken.

Mademoiselle Otard gave him a nasty reproachful look, doubtless because of his noisy entrance last night. The sad lady, in her armchair, was as remote as a dying woman who has lost touch with this world. As for the Mosselets, they must have quarrelled for the first time that day, for they avoided looking at each other and seemed to be blaming the whole world for their row.

Even little Irma was not the same, and seemed to have been steeped in vinegar.

“Good morning!” said Maigret, as cheerfully as possible.

Nobody answered, or made the slightest gesture in acknowledgement of his greeting. Meanwhile, however, the lounge door opened, and the police inspector, looking



pleased with himself, held out his hand to his illustrious colleague.

“Please come in here... I had an idea I should find you still in bed...”

The door had closed again. They were alone in the lounge, where the fire had only just been lit and was still smoking. Through the window Maigret could see the grey quayside, still windswept, with clouds of spray flying from every big wave.

“Yes, I was tired,” he grunted.

And seeing the inspector’s smile, he chose to show right away that he knew what the man was hinting at. He had not thought of one point last night, but now it recurred to him.

“Of course, your Gustave Broken-Tooth was there! So there was a policeman at his heels. And this policeman told you...”

“I assure you I had no intention of making the slightest reference to it...”

Idiot! So he thought that if Maigret had spent the evening at the dance-hall with those two girls, it was because...

“I’ve taken the liberty of disturbing you this morning because the Dieppe police have made a discovery which, if I may say so, is of a somewhat sensational character...”

Maigret poked the fire, out of habit. He would have liked a drink, something refreshing, lemon juice for instance.

“Didn’t you notice anything when you came downstairs?” went on the inspector, who was in the seventh heaven, like an actor who has just been applauded tumultuously and who is about to deliver his best speech.

“Do you mean the people waiting in the dining-room?”

“Yes. I was anxious to get them all together in one room and prevent them from coming and going... I’ve got a piece of news which may perhaps surprise you: the man or woman who murdered Jeanne Fénard is one of them!”

It would have taken more than that to stir up Maigret on a morning like this, and he merely stared at his colleague with a heavy, almost listless gaze. And the local detective would have been greatly surprised if he had known that at that precise moment what was worrying Maigret was to remember the name of a village ending in ois.

“Look at this... Don’t be afraid of touching it... The fingerprints, if there were any, have been washed away hours ago by the rain.”

*This* was a small card with which Maigret was already familiar, an oblong, greyish card bearing the printed word *Menu* surrounded by decorative scrolls.

The letters written in ink had been almost obliterated by the rain, but it was still possible to make out: Sorrel soup... Mackerel with mustard sauce...

“That was the menu for the day before yesterday’s dinner,” he commented, still showing no surprise.

“So I have just been told. One thing is certain, then: this is a menu from the Otard boarding-house, and a menu which was used the day before yesterday, namely the day before the crime. Let me tell you now that it was picked up this morning, by the merest chance, on the pavement in the Rue de la Digue, less than three metres away from the place where Jeanne was killed...”

“Evidently!...” grunted Maigret.

“You agree with me, don’t you? You noticed that last night I was in no hurry to arrest Broken-Tooth, in spite of his past record, as some might have felt bound to do. My method, as I’ve told you, is not to hurry things at any price. The presence of this menu on the scene of the crime proves, in my opinion, that the murderer is staying in this house. And I’ll go farther! In the midst of the storm that’s still raging this morning, I tried to reconstruct his actions. Imagine that your hands are wet with rain and that you’ve got to shoot straight. What do you do? You take out your handkerchief and wipe your fingers. As he took out his handkerchief, the murderer dropped...”

“I understand...” sighed Maigret, lighting his second pipe of the day. “And have you also worked out the meaning of the figures written on the back of the card?”

“Not yet, I must confess. Somebody who was here the night before last must have used this menu to make a note of something. I can read the pencilled figures: 79 x 140. And underneath that: 160 x 80. I thought at first that it might be the score of some game, but then I gave up that explanation. Nor can it be the time of a train or a boat, as had occurred to me. As far as that goes, the thing is still a complete mystery, but it is nonetheless evident that the murderer is one of the people in the boarding-house. That is why I have collected everybody in the dining-room under the eye of one of my officers. I wanted, before going any further, to ask you one question:

“Since you were here the night before last, did you at any time during the evening notice anybody using a pencil to make notes on a menu-card?...”

No! Maigret had noticed nothing of the sort. He remembered that Monsieur and Madame Mosselet had played draughts on a small table in the lounge, but he had already forgotten where the rest were. He himself had read the paper and gone to bed early.

“I think,” went on the inspector, pleased with his little sensation, “that we can now examine our people one after the other.”

And Maigret was still hunting for that wretched name, growing thirstier and thirstier, and sighing:

“Not until I’ve had something to drink, please!”

He opened the communicating door and saw Madame Maigret, who had virtuously come to sit with all the rest. In the grey light, the atmosphere was that of a small-town dentist’s waiting room. They sat behind half-drawn curtains, with sullen faces, not daring to stretch out their legs, surreptitiously exchanging cautious or mistrustful glances.

Madame Maigret could obviously have avoided this ordeal. But it was just like her to want to behave like everybody else, to take her place in the line, having armed herself with her knitting, which kept her lips moving in silence as she counted her stitches.

Out of politeness, the inspector had brought her in first, had apologized for bothering her again, and had shown her the menu without attempting to catch her out.

“Does this remind you of anything?”

Madame Maigret glanced at her husband, shook her head, then reread the figures and frowned, as if reluctant to admit to a fantastic idea.

“Absolutely nothing!” she said at last.

“The evening before last, did you see anybody scribbling on a menu?”

“I must admit that as I never stopped knitting I didn’t notice what was going on around me.”

While she was saying this she made a little sign to her husband. And he, realizing that she had something to add but that she would have liked to do so confidentially, said out loud nevertheless:

“What is it?”

She felt annoyed with him. She was always afraid of making a blunder. Now she blushed, feeling intimidated; she hunted for words and apologised profusely.

“I don’t know... I’m very sorry... Perhaps I’m wrong... But I immediately thought, when I saw those figures...”

Her husband sighed, reflecting that she was incorrigible in her touching humility!

“You’ll probably laugh at me... A hundred and forty centimetres is the width of some dress materials. Eighty centimetres is the width of some others. And the first figure, seventy-nine, is the length you’d need for a skirt...”

She felt quite proud as she caught a gleam in Maigret’s eyes, and now she went on volubly:

“The first two numbers, 79 x 140, represent exactly the amount of material needed for, say, a pleated skirt. But you can’t get all materials in that width. For stuff that’s eighty centimetres wide you’d need double the length to get in the pleats... I don’t know if I’m making myself clear...”

And turning to her husband, she exclaimed:

“D’you think it could have ended in *ard*?”

For she was still hunting for that wretched name which she blamed herself for having forgotten.

“Yes, that’s one of my house menus. But I didn’t write those figures,” Mademoiselle Otard replied to the inspector’s questions. “And I’d like to say that if my house is to be kept in a state of siege I shall be obliged to...”

“Please forgive me, Madame...”

“Mademoiselle!”

“Forgive me, Mademoiselle, and I will do my best to cut this state of siege, as you call it, as short as possible. But let me tell you that we are certain that the murderer is a guest in this house and that in the circumstances we are entitled to stay...”

“I’d like to know who!” she retorted.

“So should I, and I hope that it won’t be long before we find out. Meanwhile I have a few questions to ask you which did not occur to me during yesterday’s upheaval. How long had the Fénard girl been in your service?”

“Six months!” Mademoiselle Otard replied, curtly and reluctantly.

“Will you kindly tell me how she came into your house?”

And the woman, perhaps because she felt Maigret’s sardonic gaze on her, retorted:

“Like anybody else: through the door!”

“I didn’t expect a wisecrack at a time like this. Did the Fénard girl come to you through an employment agency?”

“No!”

“She came on her own initiative?”

“Yes!”

“You didn’t know her, did you?”

“I did!”

Deliberately, she now answered with only the barely essential syllables.

“Where did you know her?”

“At home.”

“Meaning?”

“She worked for some years at the Anneau d’Or, where I was cashier.”

“Is that a restaurant?”

“A hotel-restaurant.”

“Whereabouts?”

“I’ve told you; at home, in Villecomtois...”

Maigret had to restrain himself not to give a start. So that was the crucial name, rediscovered at last: Villecomtois, in the Cher! And at this point he forgot the promise he had made himself to stay in the background.

“Did Jeanne come from Villecomtois?” he asked.

“No. She just happened to turn up there, as a maid-of-all-work...”

“Had she a child then?”

She retorted contemptuously:

“That was seven years ago, and Ernest is four...”

“Seven years since when?”

“Since I left to settle down here.”

“But what about her?”

“I don’t know...”

“If I understand you rightly, she stayed there after you had left?”

“I suppose so.”

“Thank you!” said Maigret in the threatening tone of a lawyer who has just been cross-examining a recalcitrant witness in court.

For form’s sake, the Dieppe inspector added:

“So in fact, she turned up here this summer and you engaged her on recognizing a girl from your part of the world, or more exactly a girl whom you had known at home? I understand your action. And it was all the more generous in that, for one thing, this Jeanne had a child, and for another, her manners and her behaviour were not exactly in keeping with the reputation of your boarding-house...”

“I did what I could!” was all Mademoiselle Otard would say.

A minute later it was Mosselet’s turn to come in, a cigarette between his lips, his expression sly and condescending.

“Still at it?” he asked, perching on the corner of the table. “You must admit that for a honeymoon trip...”

“Did you write this?”

He turned the menu over and over between his fingers, and inquired:

“Why should I be drawing up menus?”

“I’m talking about the pencil notes on the back...”

“I hadn’t noticed... Sorry... No! It wasn’t me. What’s this all about?”

“Oh, nothing... I suppose you didn’t see anybody writing on one of the menu cards the evening before last?”

“I must admit that I wasn’t watching...”

“And you didn’t know Jeanne?”

Then Jules Mosselet raised his head and said simply:

“How d’you mean I didn’t know her?”

“I mean you didn’t know her before you came here?”

“I had seen her before.”

“In Dieppe?”

“No! At home...”

The name was going to recur! Maigret, although a silent actor in this scene, was as jubilant as though he had been its hero.

“Where is your home?”

“Villecomtois!”

“You are from Villecomtois? Do you still live there?”

“Of course!”

“And you knew Jeanne Fénard there?”

“Everybody knew her, seeing she was the maid at the Anneau d’Or. I knew Mademoiselle Otard too, when she was cashier there. And that was why, when we came through Dieppe, my wife and I, we thought we’d be better off staying with somebody from our own part of the world...”

“Your wife is from Villecomtois too?”

“From Herbemont, a village five miles away. Comes to the same thing! When you’re travelling you may as well do a good turn to people you know... And so when Mademoiselle Moulineau was ill...”

Maigret had to turn his head away not to smile, and this movement, as he realized, offended the inspector, who could not understand it. So all the characters involved in this Dieppe affair were from Villecomtois, a remote village of which nobody had heard tell until now!

Maigret reflected:

“It’s pretty sure that the friend who gave my wife this address must come from Villecomtois too!”

As for the local inspector, completely baffled, he tried to maintain his dignity as he mumbled:

“Thank you. I shall probably need you again. Please ask your wife to come in.”

As soon as Mosselet’s back was turned, Maigret picked up from the table the menu which provided such crucial evidence, slipped it into his pocket and laid a finger on his lips as though to tell his colleague:

“Don’t mention this to her...”

Madame Mosselet took her husband’s place with the dignified air of a woman for whom the law holds no terrors.

“What is it now?” she asked.

The Dieppe detective, deprived of the menu card, was at a loss what to say. He began:

“Do you live at Villecomtois?”

“Villecomtois, in the Cher, yes. My father bought the Anneau d’Or hotel there. He died, and I was left on my own and needed a man to run the house, so I got married... We closed down for a week for our honeymoon, but if this sort of thing is going on...”

“Excuse me!” interrupted Maigret. “You were married at Villecomtois?”

“Of course...”

“How far is it from the nearest large town?”

“It’s forty-three kilometres from Bourges...”

“Was it at Bourges, then, that you bought your trousseau?”

She stared at him for a moment in amazement. She must have been wondering:

“What business is it of his?”

Then, with an imperceptible shrug, she replied:

"No! I'm going to buy my trousseau in Paris."

"Oh! So you're going to finish your honeymoon in Paris?"

"We were going to start it there. But I wanted to see the sea. So did Jules. We had never seen the sea, either of us. If it hadn't been for the rate of exchange we might have gone on to London..."

"So you brought as little luggage as possible with you. I see your point... In Paris, you'll have plenty of time to fit yourself out..."

She could not understand why this man, who was as broad and solid as a wardrobe, insisted on talking about such futile things. And yet he went on, puffing gently at his pipe:

"It'll be particularly convenient since you've practically got a model's figure. I bet you're size twelve."

"A biggish twelve. Only as I'm rather short I have to have my dresses taken up..."

"You don't make them yourself?"

"I've got a little dressmaker whose work is as good as anybody's, and who only charges..."

At last she was struck by the abnormal character of this interview, and stared at the two men; she saw Maigret smiling and the other, rather ill at ease, seeming to wash his hands of the business.

"But what's all this about?" she suddenly asked.

"How much material would you need, one metre forty wide, to make a skirt?"

She was unwilling to answer. She did not know whether to laugh or to be angry.

"For a single skirt-length, seventy-eight or seventy-nine centimetres, wouldn't you?"

"So what?"

"Nothing... Don't worry... Just an idea of mine... We were talking about dresses, my wife and I, and I said you'd be easier to dress than she is..."

"What else do you want to know?"

She was glancing towards the door, as if afraid that her husband might take advantage of her absence to be off on some escapade.

"You are absolutely free to leave... The inspector is much obliged to you."

She went out, still uneasy and anxious, with the suspicious look of some women who are so convinced of human perfidy that they cannot imagine they've been told the truth, even by chance.

"Can I go into the town?"

"If you want to..."

When the door had closed again the inspector got up, intending to rush into the dining-room and order a policeman to follow her.

"What are you doing?" asked Maigret, going over to the stove which he had not poked for a long time.

"But I assume..."

"You assume what?"

"You're not going to tell me... Remember, she was the one who gave us the weakest evidence yesterday... According to her, she went out to follow her husband, but she asserts that she mistook a stranger's figure for his and, after following it, came home disappointed... All this business about dress materials..."

"Exactly!"

“Exactly what?”

“I tell you these notes on the menu card prove that she is not guilty, that no woman in the house is guilty and that’s why it’s unnecessary to interview the “sad lady“ — that’s what my wife and I call the schoolteacher. Remember that a woman carries her own measurements in her head and knows the width of materials well enough not to need to note them down. If, on the other hand, she has asked a man to buy something of the sort for her, or if that man wants to give her a surprise...”

He pointed to the old copies of *La Mode du Jour* lying on the table.

“I’m willing to bet,” he said, “that we should find in here the pattern that took Madame Mosselet’s fancy. She and her husband must have discussed dress materials... The husband made notes, with the intention of making her a present. It’s specially important for him to be nice to her because, as we’ve been told, she’s got the money, that’s to say the Anneau d’Or hotel. He was picked because she needed a man about the house... and also, no doubt, because Madame Mosselet belatedly developed some romantic feelings. But she must keep a tight hold on him. She watches him. He comes here to stay with an old acquaintance without suspecting that Mademoiselle Otard has taken in an unfortunate creature who also once lived at Villecomtois...”

It was still raining. Transparent drops chased one another down the panes. From time to time a black mackintosh went past on the pavement, hugging the wall.

“It’s none of my business, is it?” went on Maigret. “But I didn’t get an entirely favourable report on this woman Jeanne

from those girls last night. She wasn’t a nice type of girl. She was cantankerous, embittered by her misfortunes. She hated men, blaming them for her downfall, and she always managed to make them pay. For she was one of the rare habituées of the dance-hall who was willing to spend the rest of the night out... Rum toddies may stupefy one, but not as much as you seem to think...”

The other man felt ill at ease, remembering his behaviour that morning, his mocking, supercilious smile when Maigret had appeared.

“You can see the course of events for yourself... You’ll discover that Jeanne, back home, was the mistress of this Mosselet, who’s quite nasty himself. You’ll find out that he was the father of her kid and that she has had more cuffs from him than thousand-franc or even hundred-franc notes... Then she suddenly sees him turn up here with a wife rolling in money and jealous as a tigress... What does she do?”

“Blackmails him,” the local inspector sighed regretfully.

And Maigret lit a fresh pipe, his third, muttering:

“It’s as simple as that. She blackmails him, and as he’s scared of losing not his love but his bread-and-butter...”

At that moment he opened the dining-room door and saw them all still sitting in their places, as if they were at the dentist’s.

“Come here, you!” he said in a changed voice to Jules Mosselet, who was rolling a cigarette.

“But...”

“Come on, now!”

Then to the policeman, who was nearly six foot tall:

“You come in too...”

And finally he gave the local inspector a look which meant:

“With that sort of fellow, you know...”

Mosselet was less bumptious than he had been earlier, and seemed almost ready to hold up his arms to ward off blows.

Maigret was anxious to keep out of it. The women, on the other side of the door, jumped as they heard voices raised, vehement protests, and then strange bumping noises.

As for Maigret, he was looking out of the window. He was thinking that perhaps the Newhaven boat would leave at two. Then, by a curious association of ideas, he reflected that he'd have to go and have a look at Villecomtois one of these days.

When he felt a tap on the shoulder he did not even turn round.

“Is it okay?” he asked.

“He's confessed.”

Maigret was obliged to stay a minute longer looking out of the window so as not to let the local inspector see his smile.

Sometimes it's better not to seem too clever...

—*Neuilly-sur-Seine*, Winter 1937-38

