“Since then, you’ve passed through Paris several times and I’ll bet you’ve avoided mooring by the Pont de Bercy...”

“No, monsieur! I’ve moored there at least three times...”

“Because the dosser was no longer there...Dossers move around, too, and yours had settled underneath the Pont Marie...

“On Monday, he recognised the Zwarte Zwaan...He recognised you... I wonder...”

He appeared to be following out a fresh idea. “You wonder what?”

“I wonder if on the Quai de la Rapée, when Willems was pulled out of the water, you didn’t catch sight of him... Yes, you must almost certainly have seen him...He came close, but he said nothing...

“On Monday, when he began prowling round near your boat, you realised that he might talk...He may quite possibly have threatened to do so...”

Maigret did not believe that. The Doc was not that sort. But for the time being his story required it.

“And then I threw him into the water, eh?” “Let’s say you jostled him...”

Once again Jef was on his feet, calmer and more resolute than ever.

“No, monsieur! You'll never make me admit such a thing. It’s not the truth...”

“Then if I’ve been mistaken in any detail, tell me.”

“I’ve told you already...”

“What?”

“It’s been written down in black and white by the little man who came with the magistrate...”

“You stated that towards midnight you heard a noise...”

“If I said so, it’s true.”

“You added that two men, one of them wore a light- coloured raincoat, were just coming out from under the Pont Marie and hurrying towards a red car...”

“It was red...” “They must have passed alongside your barge...”

Van Houtte did not stir a muscle. Maigret went to the door and opened it.

“Come in, messieurs...”

Lapointe had gone to fetch the insurance agent and his stuttering friend from their homes. He had found them playing a three-handed game of be/ote with Madame Guillot, and they had followed him without demur. Guillot was wearing the same yellowish raincoat as on Monday night.

“Are these the two men who went off in the red car?”

“It’s a different matter seeing people at night on a dark quayside and seeing them in an office...”

“They answer to the description you gave...” Jef shook his head, still refusing to commit himself.

“They were, in fact, at the Port des Célestins that night. Monsieur Guillot, would you tell us what you did there? ”

“We drove down the ramp...”

“How far from the bridge was this ramp?”

“More than a hundred metres.”

“Did you stop the car just at the foot of the ramp?”

“Yes,”

“And then?”

“We took the dog out of the boot of the car.”

“Was it heavy?”

“Nestor weighed more than I do... Seventy-two kilos two months ago, last time we weighed him on the butcher’s scales...”

“Was there a barge beside the embankment?”

“Yes,”

“Did you then both go towards the Pont Marie, carrying your burden?”

Hardoin had opened his mouth to protest, but fortunately his friend broke in first.

“Why should we have gone to the Pont Marie?”

“Because this gentleman asserts that you did.”

“He saw us go towards the Pont Marie?”

“Not exactly. He saw you coming back from it...”

The two men stared at one another.

“He can’t have seen us walking alongside the barge, because we threw the dog into the river astern of it...l was even afraid the sack might get caught in the rudder...I waited a moment to make sure that the current was carrying him out into midstream...”

“Do you hear, Jef?”

And Jef, quite untroubled, replied: “That’s his story, isn’t it?...And you’ve told your story, too...And perhaps there'll be still more stories...It’s none of my fault...”

“What time was it, Monsieur Guillot?”

But Hardoin could not resign himself to play a silent role, and began: ‘Half pa...pa...past ele...le...”

“Half past eleven,” his friend interrupted. The proof is that we were in the café of the Rue de Turenne at twenty to twelve...”

“Is your car a red one?”

“A red 403, yes...”

“Does the number plate include two nines?”

“7949 LF 75...If you want to see the licence...”

“Monsieur Van Houtte, do you want to go down into the courtyard to identify the car?”

“I don’t want anything except to go back to my wife...”

“How do you explain these contradictions?”

“It’s up to you to explain things...It’s not my job...”

“You know where you went wrong?”

“Yes. In pulling the man out of these water...”

“That, to begin with...out you didn’t do it on purpose...” “What d’you mean, I didn’t do it on purpose?”...Was I walking in my sleep when I untied the punt and took the

boathook to try and...”

“You're forgetting that somebody else had heard the dosser’s shouts...Willems had not called out, probably, owing to shock at contact with the cold water...

“In the case of the Doc, you took care to knock him out beforehand. You thought he was dead, or as good as dead, and that in any case he would be unable to resist the current and the eddies...

“You were unpleasantly surprised when you heard him shouting for help... And you’d have let him go on shouting if you had not heard another voice, that of the skipper of the Poitou...He could see you standing on the deck of your barge.

“Then you thought it would be clever to play the rescuer...”

Jef merely shrugged his shoulders.

“When I told you a moment ago that you’d gone wrong, this is not what I was referring to...I was thinking of your story...For you chose to tell a story in order to avert any suspicion...And you worked it out elaborately...”

The insurance agent and his friend, much impressed, looked at the Superintendent and the bargee in turn, realising at last that a man’s life was at stake.

“At half past eleven you were not busy working at your engine, as you claimed, but you were at some spot from which you could see the embankment, either in the cabin or somewhere on deck... Otherwise you could not have seen the red car...

“You witnessed the dog being thrown into the water...You remembered that when the police asked you what had

happened...

“You felt sure the car would not be traced and you spoke of two men coming back from under the Pont Marie...”

“I’m not stopping you talking, am I? They tell what stories they like and you can tell what stories you like...”

Maigret went to the door again.

“Come in, Monsieur Goulet...” This was the skipper of the Poitou, which was still unloading sand on the Quai des Célestin; he, too, had been brought in by Lapointe.

“What time was it when you heard someone calling out from the river?”

“About midnight.”

“You can’t be more specific?”

“No.”

“It was later than half past eleven?”

“It must have been. When it was all over, I mean when we’d hoisted the body on to the bank and the policeman had come, it was half past twelve...! believe the officer noted the time in his book... And not more than half an hour had gone by since...”

“What d’you say to that, Van Houtte?”

“Me? Nothing, see? He’s telling a story...”

“And the policeman?”

“The policeman’s telling a story too...”

By ten p.m. the three witnesses had left and a new tray of sandwiches and beer had been sent up from the Brasserie Dauphine. Maigret went into the next room and told Lapointe:

“It’s your turn now...”

“What am I to ask him?”

“Anything you like...”

This was a routine practice. Sometimes three or four of them would take it on in relays during the night, putting roughly the same questions in a fresh way so as gradually to wear down the suspect’s resistance.

“Hullo! Put me through to my wife, would you?”

Madame Maigret had not yet gone to bed.

“You'd better not wait up for me.”

“You sound tired...Is it being difficult?”

She had sensed discouragement in his voice.

“He’ll go on denying to the end, without giving us the least handle...He’s the finest specimen of an obstinate idiot that I’ve ever been confronted with...”

“And the Doc?”

“I’m going to enquire about him...”

He next rang the Hdtel-Dieu and spoke to the nurse on night duty in the surgical ward.

“He’s asleep...No, he’s in no pain... The Professor came to see him after dinner and considers him to be out of danger...”

“Has he spoken?”

“Before going to sleep he asked me for a drink...”

“He’s said nothing else?”

“No. He took his sedative and closed his eyes...”

Maigret paced up and down the passage for half an hour, giving Lapointe his opportunity; he could hear the murmur of the Inspector’s voice behind the closed door. Then he went back into his office, to find Jef Van Houtte seated ona chair at last, with his big hands folded on his knees.

The inspector’s expression told him clearly enough that he had got no results, while there was a look of mockery on the face of the bargee.

“Is it going on much longer?” he enquired, watching Maigret resume his seat. “Don’t forget that you promised

me you’d send for the consul. I shall tell him everything you've done and it'll be in all the Belgian newspapers...”

“Listen to me, Van Houtte...”

“I’ve been listening to you for hours and you've kept on repeating the same thing...”

He pointed to Lapointe: “So has he...Are there some more of them, behind that door, coming to ask me questions?”

“Perhaps there are...” “I shall give them the same answers...” “You've contradicted yourself several times...”

“And what if I did contradict myself? Wouldn’t you contradict yourself, if you were in my shoes?”

“You've heard the witnesses...”

“The witnesses say one thing. I say another...That doesn’t mean that it’s me that’s lying...I’ve worked hard all my life... Ask any bargee what he thinks of Jef Van Houtte. Not one of them’'Il have a thing to say against me...”

And Maigret started again from the beginning, determined to keep on trying, remembering one case where the man opposite him, as tough as the Fleming, had suddenly yielded after sixteen hours, just as the Superintendent had been about to give up.

It was one of the most exhausting nights he had ever spent. Twice he withdrew into the next room and let Lapointe take over. By the end there were no more sandwiches, no more beer, and they felt as if the three of them were alone, like ghosts, in the deserted building of Police Headquarters, where charwomen had begun sweeping the corridors.

“It’s impossible that you should have seen the two men walking alongside the barge...”

“The difference between us is that I was there and you weren't...”

“You heard what they said...”

“Anyone can say anything...”

“Note that I’m not accusing you of premeditation...” “What does that mean?”

“I’m not saying that you knew beforehand that you were going to kill him...”

“Who? Willems or the fellow I pulled out of the water? Because by now there are two of them, aren’t there? And by tomorrow there maybe three, or four, or five...It’s easy enough for you to add some more...”

By three o’clock Maigret, exhausted, decided to call a halt. For once it was he, and not his interlocutor, who had had enough of it. He got up.

“That'll do for today,” he muttered.

“Can I go back to my wife, then?”

“Not yet...”

“Are you going to make me spend the night in jail?”

“You can go to bed here, in a room where there’s a camp bed...”

Lapointe took him there. Maigret, meanwhile, left Police Headquarters and walked, his hands in his pockets, through the deserted streets. It was only at Chatelet that he found a taxi.

He entered the bedroom noiselessly. Madame Maigret stirred in her bed and muttered sleepily: “Is that you?”

As though it could have been anyone else! “What time is it?”

“Four o'clock...”

“Has he confessed?”

“No.”

“You believe it’s him?”

“I’m morally convinced of it...”

“Have you had to let him go?”

“Not yet...”

“Wouldn't you like me to get you something to eat?”

He was not hungry, but he poured himself a glass of spirit

before going to bed, which did not prevent him from lying awake for a good half-hour more.

He would not forget that Belgian boatman in a hurry!

**CHAPTER 8**

Torrence went along with them that morning, for Lapointe had spent the night at Headquarters. Maigret had had a longish telephone conversation beforehand with Professor Magnin.

“I’m convinced that he has been fully conscious since yesterday evening,” the Professor had declared. “I must just ask you not to tire him. Don’t forget that he’s had a severe shock and it'll take him some weeks to recover from it completely.”

The three of them walked along the embankment in the sunshine, Van Houtte between the Superintendent and Torrence, and they might well have been mistaken for strollers enjoying a fine spring morning.

Van Houtte had not shaved, for lack of a razor, and the fair bristles on his face glistened in the sunlight.

Opposite the Palais de Justice they had stopped in a bar to drink coffee and eat croissants. The Fleming had devoured seven with the utmost calm.

He must have thought they were taking him to the Pont Marie for some sort of reconstruction, and was surprised at being led into the grey courtyard of the Hétel-Dieu, and then into the hospital corridors.

Although he gave a slight frown, he seemed unperturbed. “May we go in?” Maigret asked the Ward Sister.

She scrutinised his companion with some curiosity, and eventually shrugged her shoulders. It was beyond her; she gave up trying to understand.

This, the Superintendent thought, was his last chance. He led the way into the ward, where as on the previous day the patients stared at him; Jef followed, partially concealed by Maigret, while Torrence brought up the rear.

The Doc watched him coming without apparent curiosity, and when he noticed the bargee his attitude did not change.

As for Jef, he remained as unconcerned as he had been during the night. With dangling arms and an expression of indifference on his face, he surveyed the unfamiliar scene of a hospital ward.

The hoped-for shock did not occur.

“Come forward, Jef...”

“What have I got to do now?”

“Come here...”

“All right...what next?”

“Do you recognise him?”

“I suppose he’s the chap that was in the water, isn’t he? Only that night he had a beard...”

“You recognise him all the same?”

“I think so...”

“And you, Monsieur Keller?”

Maigret almost held his breath, and kept his eyes fixed on the dosser, who was gazing at him and who, slowly, made up his mind to look at the bargee.

“Do you recognise him?”

Did Keller hesitate? The Superintendent could have sworn to it. There was a long, expectant pause, until the doctor

from Mulhouse turned his gaze on Maigret again without any sign of emotion.

“Do you recognise him?”

He had to control himself, suddenly feeling an almost furious resentment against the man who, as he now knew, had decided to say nothing.

The proof was that the ghost of a smile flitted over the dosser’s face and a mischievous gleam came into his eyes.

His lips parted and he muttered: “No...”

“This is one of the two boatmen who pulled you out of the Seine...”

“Thank you,” whispered a barely audible voice.

“And it’s also he, I’m practically certain, who gave you a knock on the head before throwing you into the water...”

Silence. The Doc remained quite still, only his eyes showing any sign of life.

“Do you still not recognise him?”

What made the scene particularly impressive was that everything was said in hushed tones, while two rows of patients, lying in bed, watched and listened intently.

“Aren't you going to say anything?”

Keller still did not move.

“And yet you know why he attacked you...”

The man’s gaze betrayed a certain curiosity. He seemed surprised that Maigret had found out so much.

“It goes back to two years ago, when you were still living under the Pont de Bercy...One night...Can you hear me?”

He nodded.

“One night in December you witnessed a scene in which this man was involved...”

Keller seemed, once again, to be wondering what decision to take.

“Another man, the skipper of the barge close to which you were lying, was pushed into the river...And hedid not Survive...”

There was still the same silence, and finally a look of complete indifference came over the injured man’s face.

“Isn't that true?...On seeing you again on Monday on the Quai des Célestins, the murderer was afraid of your Speaking...”

The head moved slightly, with an effort, just enough to enable Keller to catch sight of Jef Van Houtte.

There was no hatred or resentment in his gaze, nothing but a certain curiosity.

Maigret realised then that he would extract nothing further from the dosser, and when the Ward Sister came to tell them they had stayed long enough, he did not protest.

In the corridor, the bargee held his head high.

“You're none the wiser, are you?”

He was quite right. It was he who had won the game.

“I can make up stories, too,” he remarked triumphantly.

And Maigret could not resist muttering between his teeth:

“To hell with you!”

While Jef waited at Police Headquarters with Torrence, Maigret spent nearly two hours in Judge Dantziger’s chambers. The latter had rung up Deputy Public Prosecutor Parrain and asked him to join them, and the Superintendent told his story from beginning to end, down to the smallest detail.

The magistrate made notes in pencil, and when the story was ended he sighed:

“In a word, we haven’t the least proof against him...”

“No proof, no...”

“Apart from the question of the times which don’t tally... Any good lawyer would tear that argument to shreds...”

“I know...”

“Have you still any hope of getting a confession?”

“None at all,” admitted the Superintendent.

“Will the vagrant persist in keeping silent?”

“I’m convinced of it. ”

“What reason can you suggest for his attitude?”

That was harder to explain, particularly to people who were unacquainted with that small social group that lives under bridges.

“Yes, what reason?” put in the Deputy Public Prosecutor. “After all, it was nearly the end of him...In my opinion, he ought to...”

In the opinion of the Deputy Public Prosecutor, of course, who lived in a flat in Passy with his wife and children, held weekly bridge-parties and was concerned with his own promotion and the scale of salaries.

But not in the opinion of a dosser.

“There’s such a thing as justice, after all...”

Yes, indeed. But in fact people who were not afraid of Sleeping under bridges in midwinter, wrapped in old newspapers to keep themselves warm, were not interested in that sort of justice.

“Can you understand, yourself?”

Maigret was reluctant to say yes, for they would certainly have looked askance at him.

“You see, he doesn’t think that a trial in the Assize Court, or counsels’ speeches, or juries’ decisions, or prisons are terribly important things...”

What would these two have said if he had told them how he had slipped that marble into the injured man’s hand? And indeed if he had told them that Keller, sometime doctor, whose wife lived on the Ile Saint-Louis and whose daughter had married an important manufacturer of pharmaceutical

products kept glass marbles in his pockets like a ten-year- old schoolboy?

“Is he still asking to see his consul?”

They were talking about Jef now.

And the magistrate, after a glance at the Deputy Public Prosecutor, muttered with some hesitation:

“In the present state of the enquiry, I don’t think I can sign a warrant for his arrest...From what you tell me, there would be no point in my having a turn at questioning him...”

It was certainly unlikely that the magistrate would succeed where Maigret had failed.

“Well then?”

Well then, as Maigret had already known when he got there, the game was lost. There was nothing for it but to release Van Houtte, who might perhaps demand an apology.

“I’m sorry, Maigret. But as things now stand...”

“I know...”

It was always a difficult moment to live through. This was not the first time it had happened to him—and always with half-wits.

“I apologise, gentlemen,” he muttered as he left them.

Back in his office, a little later, he had to say the same thing:

“I apologise, Monsieur Van Houtte... That’s to say I apologise formally...l’d have you know, however, that I’ve not changed my mind, that I’m still convinced that you killed your skipper, Louis Willems, and that you did all you could to get rid of the tramp, who was an awkward witness...

“Having said this, I’ll add that there’s nothing to prevent you from returning to your barge and getting back to your wife and child...Goodbye, Monsieur Van Houtte...”

What happened next, however, was that the bargee made no protest, but merely looked at the Superintendent in some

surprise, and as he stood in the doorway stretched out his long arm and offered his hand, mumbling:

“Anyone can make a mistake, n’est-ce-pas?”

Maigret avoided looking at the hand, and five minutes later he had immersed himself frenziedly in current problems.

During the weeks that followed, and arduous series of checks were carried out both in the neighbourhood of the Quai de Bercy and in that of the Pont Marie, and numbers of people were questioned, while the Belgian police sent reports which were added, all in vain, to other reports.

As for the Superintendent, for three months he was often to be seen hanging about near the Port des Célestins, with his pipe between his teeth and his hands in his pockets, as if he had nothing better to do. The Doc had finally been discharged from hospital. He had gone back to his nook under the bridge and his belongings had been restored to him.

Sometimes Maigret would stop beside him, as though by chance. Their conversation was always brief.

“You all right?”

“I’m all right...”

“None the worse for your injury?”

“Just a touch of dizziness from time to time...”

Although they avoided talking about the matter, Keller knew quite well what Maigret was after and Maigret knew that Keller knew. It had become a sort of game they played together.

A little game that went on until one morning in the full heat of summer, when the Superintendent halted beside the dosser, who was eating a chunk of bread and drinking some red wine.

“You all right?”

“lm all right!”

Had Francois Keller decided that his interlocutor had waited long enough? He was watching a barge moored nearby, a Belgian barge which was not the Zwarte Zwaan, but which looked like it.

“Those people have a good life,” he commented.

And pointing to two fair-haired children playing on the deck, he added:

“Particularly those...”

Maigret looked him in the eyes, gravely, with a presentiment that there was something more to come.

“Life’s not easy for anyone...” the dosser went on. “Nor is death...”

“What’s impossible is to pass judgement.”

They understood one another.

“Thank you,” murmured the Superintendent, who knew the truth at last.

“ For nothing... I’ve said nothing...”

And the Doc added, like the Fleming: “N’est-ce-pas?”

“N’est-ce-pas?”

And indeed he had said nothing. He refused to pass judgement. He would not give evidence.

Nevertheless Maigret felt able to announce to his wife, casually, while they were having lunch:

“You remember the bargee and the dosser?” “Yes. Anything new?”

“I wasn’t mistaken...”

“Have you arrested the man, then?”

He shook his head.

“No! Unless he does something rash, which would surprise

me in his case, he’ll never be arrested.” “Has the Doc spoken to you?”

“In a sort of way, yes...”

With his eyes, rather than with words. They had understood one another, and Maigret smiled on remembering the sort of understanding that had been established between them, for a brief moment, under the Pont Marie.

Noland, May 2, 1962 [scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]