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Opening Extract from...

Pietr the Latvian

Written by Georges Simenon

Translated by David Bellos

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GEORGES SIMENON

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Translated by DAVID BELLOS



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1. *Apparent age 32, height 169 . . .*

ICPC to PJ Paris Xvzust Krakow vimontra m ghks triv psot uv Pietr-le-Letton Bremen vs tyz btolem.

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Flying Squad raised his eyes. It seemed to him that the cast-iron stove in the middle of his office with its chimney tube rising to the ceiling wasn't roaring properly. He pushed the telegram away, rose ponderously to his feet, adjusted the flue and thrust three shovels of coal into the firebox.

Then he stood with his back to the stove, filled his pipe and adjusted his stud collar, which was irritating his neck even though it wasn't set very high.

He glanced at his watch. Four p.m. His jacket was hanging on a hook on the back of the door.

Slowly he returned to his desk, mouthing a translation as he went:

> International Criminal Police Commission to Police Judiciaire in Paris: Krakow police report sighting Pietr the Latvian en route to Bremen.

The International Criminal Police Commission, or ICPC, is based in Vienna. Broadly speaking, it oversees the struggle against organized crime in Europe, with a particular responsibility for liaison between the various national police forces on the Continent.

Maigret pulled up another telegram that was similarly written in IPC, the secret international police code used for communication between all the world's police forces. He translated at sight:

> Polizei-Präsidium Bremen to PJ Paris: Pietr the Latvian reported en route Amsterdam and Brussels.

Another telegram from the Nederlandsche Centrale in Zake Internationale Misdadigers, the Dutch police HQ, reported:

> At 11 a.m. Pietr the Latvian boarded Étoile du Nord, compartment G. 263, car 5, destination Paris.

The final message in IPC had been sent from Brussels and said:

> Confirm Pietr the Latvian on board Étoile du Nord via Brussels 2 a.m. in compartment reported by Amsterdam.

Behind Maigret's desk there was a huge map pinned to the wall. The inspector was a broad and heavy man. He stood staring at the map with his hands in his pockets and his pipe sticking out the side of his mouth.

His eyes travelled from the dot representing Krakow to the other dot showing the port of Bremen and from there to Amsterdam and Paris.

He checked the time once again. Four-twenty. The Étoile du Nord should now be hurtling along at sixty miles an hour between Saint-Quentin and Compiègne.

It wouldn't stop at the border. It wouldn't be slowing down.

In car 5, compartment G. 263, Pietr the Latvian was presumably spending his time reading or looking at the scenery.

Maigret went over to a door that opened onto a closet,

washed his hands in an enamel basin, ran a comb through thick dark-brown hair flecked with only a few silver strands around the temple, and did his best to straighten out his tie – he'd never learned how to do a proper knot.

It was November and it was getting dark. Through the window he could see a branch of the Seine, Place Saint-Michel, and a floating wash-house, all in a blue shroud speckled by gas lamps lighting up one after the other.

He opened a drawer and glanced at a dispatch from the International Identification Bureau in Copenhagen.

> Paris PJ Pietr-le-Letton 32 169 01512 0224 0255 02732 03116 03233 03243 03325 03415 03522 04115 04144 04147 05221 . . .

This time he made an effort to speak the translation aloud and even went over it several times, like a schoolchild reciting a lesson:

> Description Pietr the Latvian: apparent age 32 years, height 169 cm, sinus top straight line, bottom flat, extension large max, special feature septum not visible, ear unmarked rim, lobe large, max cross and dimension small max, protuberant antitragus, vex edge lower fold, edge shape straight line edge feature separate lines, orthognathous upper, long face, biconcave, eyebrows thin fair light, lower lip jutting max thick lower droop, light.

This 'word-picture' of Pietr was as clear as a photograph to Inspector Maigret. The principal features were the first to emerge: the man was short, slim, young and fair-haired, with sparse blond eyebrows, greenish eyes and a long neck.

Maigret now also knew the shape of his ear in the minutest detail. This would enable him to make a positive

identification in a milling crowd even if the suspect was in disguise.

He took his jacket off the hook and slipped his arms into it, then put on a heavy black overcoat and a bowler hat.

One last glance at the stove, which seemed on the verge of exploding.

At the end of the corridor, on the stair landing that was used as a waiting room, he reminded Jean:

'You won't forget to keep my stove going, will you?'

The wind swirling up the stairs took him by surprise, and he had to shelter from the draught in a corner to get his pipe to light.

Wind and rain blew in squalls over the platforms of Gare du Nord despite the monumental glass canopy overhead. Several panes had blown out and lay in shards on the railway tracks. The lighting wasn't working properly. People huddled up inside their clothes.

Outside one of the ticket windows an alarming travel notice had been posted:

Channel forecast: gale-force winds.

One woman, whose son was to catch the Folkestone boat train, looked upset; her eyes were red. She kept on telling the boy what he should do, right up to the last minute. In his embarrassment he had no choice but to promise not to go out on deck.

Maigret stood near platform 11 where people were awaiting the arrival of the Étoile du Nord. All the leading hotels, as well as Thomas Cook, had their agents standing by.

He stood still. Other people were agitated. A young

woman clad in mink yet wearing only sheer silk stockings walked up and down, stamping her heels.

He just stood there: a hulk of a man, with shoulders so broad as to cast a wide shadow. When people bumped into him he stayed as firm as a brick wall.

The yellow speck of the train's headlamp appeared in the distance. Then came the usual hubbub, with porters shouting and passengers tramping and jostling their way towards the station exit.

A couple of hundred passengers paraded past Maigret before he picked out in the crowd a short man wearing a broad-checked green travelling cape of a distinctly Nordic cut and colour.

The man wasn't in a hurry. He had three porters behind him. Bowing and scraping, an agent from one of the grand hotels on the Champs-Élysées cleared the way in front of him.

Apparent age 32, height 169 . . . sinus top . . .

Maigret kept calm. He looked hard at the man's ear. That was all he needed.

The man in green passed close by. One of his porters bumped Maigret with one of the suitcases.

At exactly the same moment a railway employee began to run, shouting out something to his colleague standing at the station end of the platform, next to the barrier.

The chain was drawn closed. Protests erupted.

The man in the travelling cape was already out of the station.

Maigret puffed away at his pipe in quick short bursts. He went up to the official who had closed the barrier.

'Police! What's happened?'

'A crime . . . They've just found . . .'

'Carriage 5? . . .'

'I think so . . .'

The station went about its regular business; only platform 11 looked abnormal. There were fifty passengers still waiting to get out, but their path was blocked. They were getting excited.

'Let them go . . .' Maigret said.

'But . . .'

'Let them go . . .'

He watched the last cluster move away. The station loudspeaker announced the departure of a local train. Somebody was running somewhere. Beside one of the carriages of the Étoile du Nord there was a small group waiting for something. Three of them, in railway company livery.

The stationmaster got to them first. He was a large man and had a worried look on his face. Then a hospital stretcher was wheeled through the main hall, past clumps of people who looked at it uneasily, especially those about to depart.

Maigret walked up the side of the train with his usual heavy tread, smoking as he went. Carriage 1, carriage 2 . . . He came to carriage 5.

That's where the group was standing at the door. The stretcher came to a halt. The stationmaster tried to listen to the three men, who were all speaking at the same time.

'Police! Where is he?'

Maigret's presence provided obvious relief. He propelled his placid mass towards the centre of the frantic group. The other men instantly became his satellites.

'In the toilet . . .'

Maigret hauled himself up onto the train and saw that

the toilet door on his right was open. On the floor, in a heap, was a body, bent double in a strangely contorted posture.

The conductor was giving orders from the platform.

'Shunt the carriage to the yard . . . Hang on! . . . Track 62 . . . Let the railway police know . . .'

At first he could only see the back of the man's neck. But when he tipped his cap off its oblique angle, he could see the man's left ear. Maigret mumbled to himself: *lobe large, max cross and dimension small max, protuberant antitragus . . .*

There were a few drops of blood on the linoleum. Maigret looked around. The railway staff were standing on the platform or on the running board. The stationmaster was still talking.

So Maigret clenched his pipe between his teeth even harder and turned the man's head over.

If he hadn't seen the traveller in the green cloak leave the station, if he hadn't seen him taken to a car by an interpreter from the Majestic, he could have had doubts.

It was the same physiognomy. The same fair toothbrush moustache under a sharply defined nose. The same sparse blond eyebrows. The same grey-green eyes.

In other words: Pietr the Latvian!

Maigret could hardly turn around in the tiny washroom, where the tap was still running and a jet of steam was seeping from some poorly sealed joint.

He was standing right next to the corpse. He pulled the man's upper body upright and saw on his chest, on his jacket and shirt, the burn-marks made by gunshot from point-blank range.

It was a big blackish stain tinged with the dark red of coagulating blood.

⋆

One detail struck the inspector. He happened to notice one of the man's feet. It was twisted on its side, as was the whole body, which must have been squashed into a corner so as to allow the door to close.

The shoe was black and happened to be of a very cheap and common kind. Apparently it had been re-soled. The heel was worn on one side, and a coin-shaped gap had opened up in the middle of the sole.

The local chief of the railway police had now reached the carriage and was calling up from the platform. He was a self-confident man wearing a uniform with epaulettes.

'So what is it, then? Murder? Suicide? Don't touch anything until the law gets here, OK? Be careful! I'm the one who's in charge. OK?'

Maigret had a tough time disentangling his own feet from the dead man's legs to extricate himself from the toilet. With swift, professional movements he patted the man's pockets. Clean as a whistle. Nothing in them at all.

He got out of the carriage, His pipe had gone out, his hat was askew and he had a bloodstain on his cuff.

'Well, if it isn't Maigret! . . . What do you make of it, then?'

'Not much. Go have a look yourself . . .'

'It's suicide, right?'

'If you say so . . . Did you call the prosecutor's office?'

'As soon as I heard . . .'

The loudspeaker crackled with some message or other. A few people had noticed there was something unusual going on and stood in the distance, watching the empty train and the group of people standing next to the running board of carriage 5.

Maigret strode off without saying a word. He left the station and hailed a cab.

'Hôtel Majestic! . . .'

The storm had got even worse. Gusts swept down the streets and made pedestrians totter about like drunks. A roof tile smashed onto the pavement. Buses, and more buses.

The Champs-Élysées was almost entirely deserted. Drops of rain had begun to fall. The porter at the Majestic dashed out to the taxi with a huge red umbrella.

'Police! . . . Has someone from the Étoile du Nord just checked in?'

That prompted the porter to fold his umbrella.

'Yes, sir, that true.'

'Green cape . . . Fair moustache . . .'

'That right. Sir go reception.'

People were scrambling to shelter from the rain. Maigret got inside the hotel just in time to avoid drops as big as walnuts and cold as ice.

Despite this, the receptionists and interpreters behind the polished wood counter were as elegant and efficient as ever.

'Police . . . A guest in a green cape . . . Small fair mousta—'

'Room 17, sir. His bags are on their way up right now . . .'