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SIMENON

The Little Man  
from Archangel



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*The Little Man from Archangel*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. He is best known in Britain as the author of the Maigret novels, and his prolific output of over 400 novels and short stories has made him a household name in continental Europe. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

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*Translated by* SIÂN REYNOLDS



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## I. *Gina's Departure*

He made the mistake of telling a lie. He sensed this the moment he opened his mouth to answer Fernand Le Bouc, and it was really only from timidity and lack of self-confidence that he failed to change the words that rose to his lips.

So he said:

'She's gone to Bourges.'

Le Bouc, as he rinsed a glass behind the counter, asked:

'La Loute still there, is she?'

He replied without looking up:

'I suppose so.'

It was ten in the morning, and a Thursday, so the market was in full swing. In Fernand's narrow, glass-fronted café on the corner of Impasse des Trois-Rois, five or six men were standing at the counter. At that precise moment, it was not important who was present, but it would become so, and Jonas Milk would later try to identify every face.

Alongside him stood Gaston Ancel the butcher, with his highly coloured cheeks and bloodstained apron, a man who dropped in three or four times a morning for a quick glass of white wine, wiping his mouth afterwards in his own characteristic way. He had a booming voice, was always cracking jokes, and teased the housewives when

they were buying meat, while Madame Ancel, at the till, would apologize for her husband's ripe vocabulary.

Next to Ancel, a cup of coffee in his hand, was Benaiche, the policeman on market duty. Known to everyone as Julien.

There was also a little old man in a greenish jacket. His hands shook, and he must have spent the night on the streets, as he did most of the time. No one knew who he was, or where he came from, but they were used to him, and in the end he melted into the background.

Who else? An electrician, not known to Jonas, accompanied by another man whose pockets were stuffed full of pencils: a foreman perhaps, or the owner of a small business.

He never managed to recall who the sixth customer was, and yet he could have sworn there was a silhouette between himself and the window.

Seated at the tables behind the drinkers were three or four marketwomen clad in black: vegetable-sellers, snatching a bite to eat.

It was like any other market day on a Tuesday, Thursday or Saturday. This particular Thursday morning, the bright, warm June sunshine was striking full on to the façades around the square, while in the hazy blue shade of the covered market, shoppers made their way among the stalls and baskets.

Jonas had not wanted to disrupt his routine. At about ten o'clock, since he had no customers, he had walked the five metres along the pavement to reach Fernand's café,

from where he could keep an eye on the boxes of second-hand books displayed outside his shopfront.

He could have said nothing at all. Some people went up to the counter at Fernand's without opening their mouths, since they were regulars. And in his case, it was always an espresso coffee.

But he ordered it all the same, perhaps out of humility or the need to be clear:

'An espresso.'

Almost everyone there knew the others, and sometimes didn't even say good day, assuming they had already met earlier that morning.

Fernand Le Bouc, for instance, had been on his feet since three a.m., when the trucks arrived, and Ancel the butcher, up since five, had already paid at least two visits to the bar.

The shops ran continuously around the market, which had a slate roof but no walls; the gutter surrounding it was littered with boxes and cartons, rotten oranges and trampled wood shavings.

The housewives who stepped across the rubbish were unaware that before they had arrived, long before they were even awake, the marketplace had already been the scene of frenzied activity for hours, as the heavy lorries rumbled in, smelling of fuel-oil.

Jonas watched the coffee trickle, drop by drop, from the thin chrome tap into the brown cup, and he had another regular habit: before he was served, he would undo the transparent paper around his two lumps of sugar.

'Gina well?' Le Bouc had asked him.

At first, he had answered:

‘Yes, she’s fine.’

It was only because of what Fernand had said next that he felt obliged to lie.

‘I just wondered if she was ill. Didn’t see her this morning.’

The butcher broke off his conversation with the policeman to say:

‘No, come to think, I haven’t seen her either.’

As a rule, Gina, in bedroom slippers, often with her hair uncombed, and sometimes wrapped in a flowery dressing gown, would do her shopping early on market days, before the crowd.

Jonas opened his mouth and it was then that, in spite of every instinct telling him not to, he changed the words he was going to say.

‘She’s gone to Bourges.’

His wife did go to Bourges from time to time, to visit La Loute as they all called her, the daughter of the seed merchants opposite, who had gone to live there two years earlier. But almost always, and everyone must have known this, Gina took the eleven-thirty bus.

He was angry with himself for making this reply, not only because it was untrue, and he didn’t like lying, but because something told him it was the wrong thing to do. Yet he couldn’t tell them the truth, the less so since Palestri, Gina’s father, would be in at any minute, getting off his delivery three-wheeler for a glass of something.

It was the butcher who asked nobody in particular:

‘What does she do in Bourges anyway, La Loute?’

Fernand replied offhandedly:

‘On the streets, I dare say.’

And it was odd that the butcher should have been there, and joined in the talk, since his own daughter, Clémence, the older one, who was married, was indirectly involved in the affair.

Jonas took small sips of his coffee: it was scalding hot, so it misted up his spectacles, making him look a little different from usual.

‘See you later,’ he said, putting some coins down on the linoleum counter. No one had touched the two boxes of books. On market days, he rarely sold anything: those mornings, he handled little more than a few loans.

Automatically, he tidied the books, glanced at the window display and went back inside the shop with its mild smell of dust and mildewed paper.

He had not dared go to Clémence’s house during the night, but he had seen the butcher’s daughter earlier that day, on her way to market, pushing the baby in its pram. He had gone up to her on purpose.

‘Morning, Clémence.’

‘Morning, Monsieur Jonas.’

She called him ‘monsieur’ because she was twenty-two and he forty. She had been at school with Gina, both of them born here on Place du Vieux-Marché. Gina was the daughter of Palestri, the greengrocer, who went round on his three-wheeled carrier doing deliveries, while his wife minded the shop.

‘Nice day!’ he had said, peering at Clémence through his thick glasses.

‘Yes, going to be warm, I think.’

He leaned over to peer at the baby, Poupou, who was huge.

‘He’s getting bigger,’ he said seriously.

‘I think his first tooth’s coming through. Say hello to Gina for me.’

That had been at about nine o’clock. As she said the last words, Clémence had glanced towards the back of the shop, as if she expected to see her friend in the kitchen.

She hadn’t looked embarrassed. She had pushed her pram off towards the Chaignes’ grocery, and gone inside.

That meant that Gina had lied to him, something Jonas had been almost sure of since the previous day. He had shut up shop at seven that evening as usual, or rather closed the door without dropping the catch, since as long as he was up and about, there was no reason to miss a potential customer. Some of them came along quite late to exchange books they had borrowed. From the kitchen, you could hear the bell tinkle when the door opened. The house was narrow, one of the oldest on the Vieux-Marché, with the date still engraved on one of the stones, alongside a shield: 1596.

‘Dinner’s ready!’ Gina had called, and at the same time he could hear something sizzling in the frying pan.

‘Just coming.’

She was wearing a red cotton dress that clung to the curves of her body. He had never dared raise the subject with her. She had large breasts and ample hips, and made sure the dressmaker provided her with figure-hugging clothes, under which she wore only a bra and panties, so that as she moved, you could see the dimple of her navel.

She was cooking fish, and before that there was sorrel soup. They didn't lay a linen cloth, just ate off the everyday oilcloth, and Gina often did not bother to put food into serving dishes, but brought the saucepans directly to the table.

Outside the house, with other people, she was vivacious, with bright inviting eyes, always ready to laugh, the more so since she had dazzling white teeth.

Everyone agreed that she was the prettiest girl in the market, even if some people added comments or pursed their lips when they mentioned her.

When she was alone with Jonas, all the life went out of her face. Sometimes the transformation happened the moment she crossed the threshold of the bookshop. She would cheerfully pass a last remark to someone outside, and by the time she had turned round to enter the house her features had become expressionless, her movements were not the same, and if she still rolled her hips it was often with lassitude.

There were evenings when they ate their meal without exchanging a word, finishing quickly, as if it was an ordeal to be got through, and he would still be sitting at the table when she began washing the dishes in the sink behind his back.

Had they spoken at all last night? Since he hadn't known yet, he hadn't paid attention, but he couldn't remember their saying a single thing.

The marketplace, so busy in the mornings, was quiet in the evening, and the only sounds were cars passing on Rue de Bourges, about a hundred metres away, or from

time to time a mother calling her children home from playing under the great slate roof.

As she finished the dishes, she had announced:

‘I’m going round to Clémence’s.’

Two years earlier, the butcher’s elder daughter had married a man who worked for the Water Board: it had been a big wedding, attended by everyone from the market-place. Her married name was Reverdi, and the young couple lived in an apartment on Rue des Deux-Ponts.

Although he had not asked his wife for details, she had added, turning her back to him:

‘There’s a film on they want to see.’

When this happened, Gina would go round to sit with the baby, who was only eight months old. She would take a book with her, pick up a key, and would not be home until midnight, since the Reverdis went to the late showing.

The lamp was not yet lit: enough light was coming through the window and the door on to the courtyard. The air was blueish, impressively still, as so often at the end of long summer days. Birds were twittering in the lime tree behind the Chaignes’ grocery store, the only tree on the block: it stood in the middle of the large backyard cluttered with barrels and boxes.

Gina had gone upstairs. The staircase did not start from the kitchen, but from the little cubbyhole leading off the shop that Jonas called his office.

When she came down, she was not wearing a hat or coat. In any case, she only ever wore a hat to go to mass on Sundays. Other days, she went out bare-headed, her dark hair tousled, flicking it back if it fell on to her cheek.

‘See you later.’

He had noticed she was clutching the large, rectangular patent leather handbag he had given her for her last birthday. He almost called her back to say:

‘You’ve forgotten to take a book.’

But she was already away down the pavement, walking briskly, almost running, towards Rue des Prémontrés. He had remained for a while on the threshold, following her with his eyes, then breathing in the warm evening air and watching the lights start to go on to his left, along Rue de Bourges.

What had he done until midnight? The boxes of books that he wheeled out every morning had been brought inside. He had moved some volumes round for no special reason, just matching the colours of their covers. He had switched on the electric light. There were books everywhere, on shelves reaching up to the ceiling, or in piles on the counter and in corners on the floor. Second-hand books, almost all shabby, dog-eared, repaired with sticky tape, and he lent out more than he sold.

Only on one wall of the shop were there some ancient bindings: volumes from the seventeenth or eighteenth century, an old copy of La Fontaine’s fables published in Belgium, a Latin Bible with curious engravings, Bourdaloue’s sermons, five different editions of Fontenelle’s *Télémaque*, then lower down more recent collected sets, such as the *History of the Consulate and Empire*, bound in dark green.

Jonas didn’t smoke. Apart from coffee, he didn’t drink either. He only went to the cinema from time to time to

please Gina. And did it really please her anyway? He wasn't sure. She was keen for them to go, though, the same way she was keen for them to sit in one of the boxes, which to her mind told the world she was a married woman.

He didn't blame her. He didn't blame her for anything, even now. What right did he have to ask anything of her?

His office, or rather cubbyhole, between the shop and the kitchen, had no window, with the only air coming through the two outer doors – and here too, there were books up to the ceiling. But above all, what it held, in a desk at which he always sat down with a satisfied sigh, were his reference works on philately, and his stamps.

For he wasn't just a bookseller. He was a dealer in postage stamps. And if his shop, amid all the grocers and butchers of the Vieux-Marché, wasn't much to look at, the local shopkeepers would have been surprised to learn that the name of Jonas Milk was known by stamp collectors and dealers throughout the world.

In a drawer, within reach, were stored the precision tools that he used to measure the perforations of the stamps, study the paper quality, or the watermark, identifying faults in the printing or in the postmark, detecting forgeries. Unlike most of his colleagues in the trade, he bought anything he could lay hands on, receiving from abroad envelopes of five hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand stamps, the kind that are sold to beginners, theoretically worth nothing at all.

Although they had already been through the hands of experienced dealers, he nevertheless examined these

stamps one by one, without throwing anything away first. And occasionally he made a find.

For example, one stamp issue, of no interest in its normal state, would become a rarity if the image came from a defective plate; another might have been printed during tests in a colour slightly different from the final choice, and these examples were very rare items.

Almost all dealers, like almost all collectors, like to specialize in a period, a type of stamp. Jonas Milk had specialized in monsters, in stamps that for one reason or another broke the rules.

Magnifying glass in hand, he had worked until half past eleven that evening. For a moment, he considered locking up and going to meet his wife. Clémence and her husband lived only ten minutes away, in a quiet street overlooking the canal.

He would have liked to walk back slowly with Gina along the empty pavement, even if they had nothing to say to each other.

But, afraid she might be annoyed, he decided against it. She would have thought he had come out to spy on her, to check that she really had gone to Clémence's, or that she was returning home on her own.

He went into the kitchen and lit the gas to make himself a cup of coffee. It wouldn't stop him sleeping. He filled in the time tidying up, since his wife had not even put the pans away.

And he didn't blame her for that either. Since his marriage, the house had been less well kept than when he had lived alone and done almost everything himself. He dared

not tidy or polish in front of her, for fear she would take it as a reproach, but when she was out he always found something to clean.

Today, for instance, it was the frying pan, which she had not taken the time to wash, and which still smelled of herring.

Midnight struck from St Cécile's church, behind the market, on the corner of Rue de Bourges. He calculated, as he had already done at other times, that the film would have finished at half past eleven, that the Reverdis would have taken hardly more than twenty minutes to get back to Rue des Deux-Ponts, and then they might have chatted a little with Gina.

So she would not be home before half past midnight, and after leaving a single light on on the ground floor, he went upstairs, wondering whether his wife had taken the key. He couldn't remember seeing it in her hand. Usually it was an almost ritual gesture of hers to slip it into her handbag at the last moment.

He would have to go downstairs to let her in, since he wouldn't be asleep yet. Their bedroom had a low ceiling, with a large white-painted overhead beam down the middle, a walnut frame bed, and a wardrobe with a mirror and two doors, which he had bought at auction.

Even up here, there was a smell of old books, combined with the kitchen smells: tonight that was the herring.

He undressed, put on pyjamas and brushed his teeth. From one of the two windows giving on to the courtyard, he could see, across the backyard of the Chaignes' house, the windows of the Palestris, Gina's parents. They must

be in bed. Like everyone in the market, they got up before daybreak, and the only light was in the window belonging to Frédo, Gina's brother. Perhaps he was just back from the cinema too. He was an odd young man, with a low forehead and thick eyebrows, who always looked at Jonas as if he could never forgive him for marrying his sister.

At half past twelve, she had still not returned, and Milk, lying down but still wearing his glasses, was gazing at the ceiling with melancholy patience.

He was not worried yet. He might have been, because there had been times before when she had not come home, and once she had been absent for three days.

On her return, she had given him no explanation. She was probably not feeling proud of herself, truth be told. Her features were strained, her eyes weary, and an unfamiliar smell seemed to linger about her, but as she walked in past him, she had nevertheless drawn herself up and confronted him defiantly.

He had said nothing to her. What would be the point? What could he have said? On the contrary, he had acted more kindly and attentively than usual, and a couple of evenings later, she had herself suggested they should take a walk along the canal, and had linked arms with him.

She was not malicious. She didn't hate him, as her brother Frédo did. He was sure she was doing her best to be a good wife, and that she was grateful to him for marrying her.

Twice or three times, he started, hearing a noise, but it was just mice, downstairs: he had given up trying to get rid of them. All round the market, with its enticing smells

and quantities of tasty foodstuffs, the walls were full of tunnels, making a secret city for rodents. Luckily, the mice and rats found enough to eat elsewhere not to be tempted to attack the books, so Jonas no longer worried about them. Sometimes mice even scampered about the room when he and Gina were in bed, coming up close, as if they were curious to see humans asleep, and voices no longer frightened them off.

A motorbike roared to a stop on the other side of the marketplace; it must be the Chenu boy, the fishmonger's son. There was silence again and the church clock struck a quarter to, and eventually the hour. Only then did Jonas get up and go over to the cane-seated chair where he had put his clothes.

The first time this had happened, he had run about all over town, feeling ashamed, looking into dark corners, and peering through the window of the only bar open at that hour, in a street near the factory.

Tonight, there was a possible explanation. Perhaps Clémence's baby, Poupou, had been taken ill, and Gina had stayed on to help?

He got dressed, still hoping, went downstairs, glanced into the kitchen just in case; it was empty and smelled of cold herring. He picked up his hat on the way through the office and left the house, closing the door behind him. But what if Gina didn't have a key? And then got back while he was out? What if she was coming from Clémence's a different way?

He thought it best to unlock the door again, so that she could let herself in.