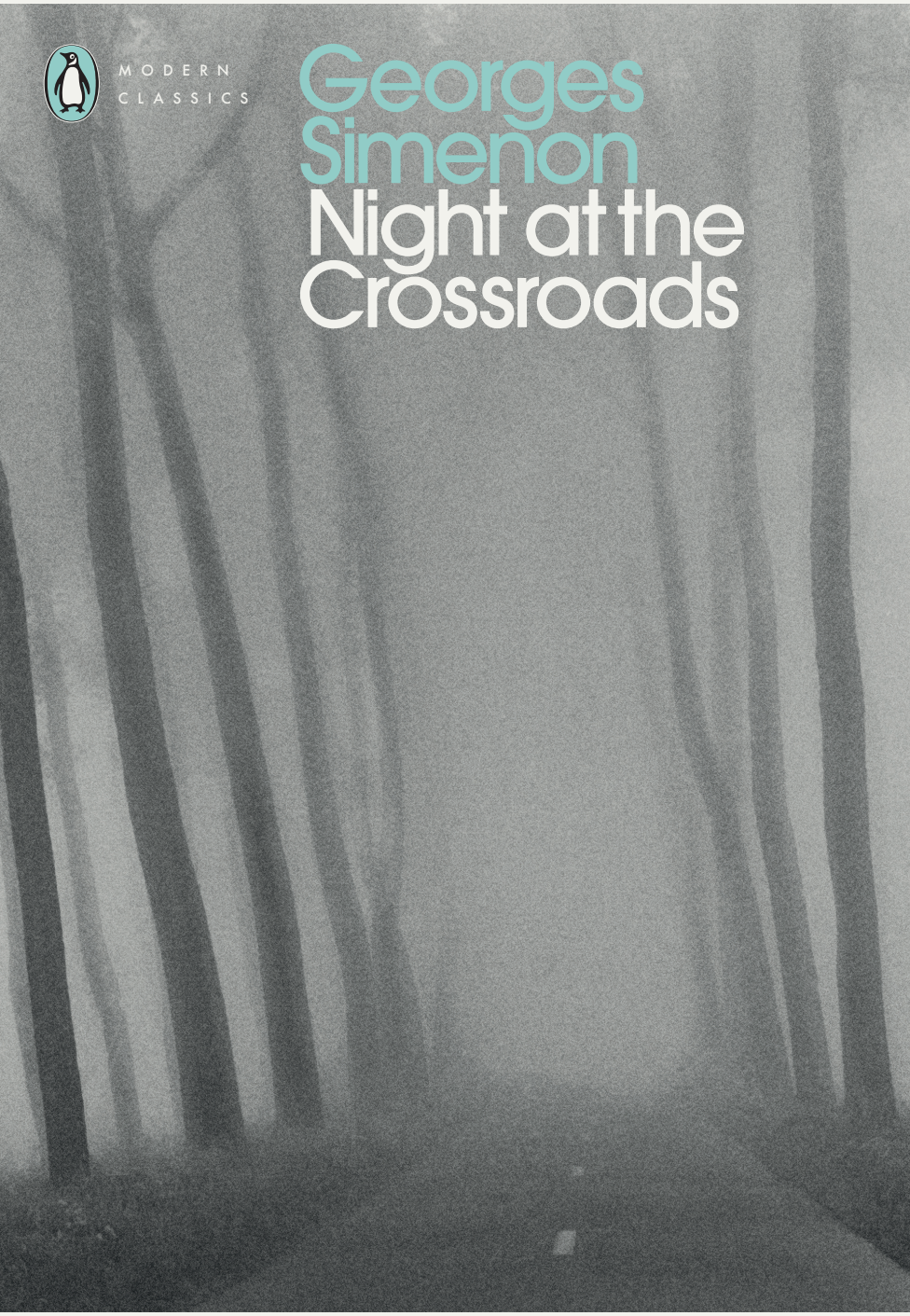
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Georges
Simenon
Night at the
Crossroads

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Night at the Crossroads

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points . . . 'understand and judge not'.

GEORGES SIMENON

Night at the Crossroads

Translated by LINDA COVERDALE

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Contents

1. *The Black Monocle*

Detective Chief Inspector Maigret was sitting with his elbows on the desk, and when he pushed his chair back with a tired sigh, the interrogation of Carl Andersen had been going on for exactly seventeen hours.

Through the bare windows he had observed at first the throng of salesgirls and office workers storming the little restaurants of Place Saint-Michel at noon, then the afternoon lull, the mad six o'clock rush to the Métro and train stations, the relaxed pace of the aperitif hour . . .

The Seine was now shrouded in mist. One last tug had gone past with red and green lights, towing three barges. Last bus. Last Métro. At the cinema they'd taken in the film-poster sandwich boards and were closing the metal gates.

And the stove in Maigret's office seemed to growl all the louder. On the table, empty beer bottles and the remains of some sandwiches.

A fire must have broken out somewhere: they heard the racket of fire engines speeding by. And there was a raid, too. The Black Maria emerged from the Préfecture at around two o'clock, returning later to drop off its catch at the central lock-up.

The interrogation was still going on. Every hour – or every two hours, depending on how tired he was – Maigret

would push a button. Sergeant Lucas would awaken from his nap in a nearby office and arrive to take over, glancing briefly at his boss's notes. Maigret would then go and stretch out on a cot to recharge his batteries for a fresh attack.

The Préfecture was deserted. A few comings and goings at the Vice Squad. Towards four in the morning, an inspector hauled in a drug pusher and immediately began grilling him.

The Seine wreathed itself in a pale fog that turned white with the breaking day, lighting up the empty quays. Footsteps pattered in the corridors. Telephones rang. Voices called. Doors slammed. Charwomen's brooms swished by.

And Maigret, setting his overheated pipe on the table, rose and looked the prisoner up and down with an ill humour not unmixed with admiration. Seventeen hours of relentless questioning! Before tackling him, they had taken away his shoelaces, detachable collar, tie and everything in his pockets. For the first four hours they had left him standing in the centre of the office and bombarded him with questions.

'Thirsty?'

Maigret was on his fourth beer, and the prisoner had managed a faint smile. He had drunk avidly.

'Hungry?'

They'd asked him to sit down – and stand up again. He'd gone seven hours without anything to eat and then they had harassed him while he devoured a sandwich.

The two of them took turns questioning him. Between

sessions, they could each doze, stretch, escape the grip of this monotonous interrogation.

Yet they were the ones giving up! Maigret shrugged, rummaged in a drawer for a cold pipe and wiped his damp brow.

Perhaps what impressed him the most was not the man's physical and psychological resistance, but his disturbing elegance, the air of distinction he'd maintained throughout the interrogation.

A gentleman who has been searched, stripped of his tie and obliged to spend an hour completely naked with a hundred malefactors in the Criminal Records Office, where he is photographed, weighed, measured, jostled and cruelly mocked by other detainees, will rarely retain the self-confidence that informs his personality in private life.

And when he has endured a few hours of questioning, it's a miracle if there's anything left to distinguish him from any old tramp.

Carl Andersen had not changed. Despite his wrinkled suit, he still possessed an elegance the Police Judiciaire rarely have occasion to appreciate, an aristocratic grace with that hint of reserve and discretion, that touch of arrogance so characteristic of diplomatic circles.

He was taller than Maigret, broad-shouldered but slender, lithe and slim-hipped. His long face was pale, his lips rather colourless.

He wore a black monocle in his left eye.

Ordered to remove the monocle, he had obeyed with the faintest of smiles, uncovering a glass eye with a disconcerting stare.

'An accident?'

'A flying accident, yes.'

'So you were in the war?'

'I'm Danish. I did not have to fight. But I had a private aeroplane, back home.'

The artificial eye was so disturbing in this young face with pleasant features that Maigret had muttered, 'You can put your monocle back.'

Andersen had not made a single complaint, either about them leaving him standing or their forgetting for so long to give him anything to eat or drink. He could see the street traffic out of the window, the trams and buses crossing the bridge, the reddish sunlight as evening had fallen and now the bustle of a bright April morning.

And he held himself as straight as ever, as if it were only natural, and the sole sign of fatigue was the thin dark shadow underlining his right eye.

'You stand by everything you've said?' Maigret asked.

'I do.'

'You realize how improbable this all sounds?'

'Yes, but I cannot lie.'

'You're expecting to be released, for lack of conclusive evidence?'

'I'm not expecting anything.'

A trace of an accent, more noticeable now that he was tired.

'Do you wish me to read you the official record of your interrogation before I have you sign it?'

He gestured vaguely, like a gentleman declining a cup of tea.

'I will summarize the main points. You arrived in France three years ago, accompanied by your sister, Else. You spent a month in Paris. Then you rented a country house on the main road from Paris to Étampes, three kilometres from Arpajon, at the place called Three Widows Crossroads.'

Carl Andersen nodded slightly in agreement.

'For the last three years, you have lived there in isolation so complete that the local people have seen your sister only a few times. No contact with your neighbours. You bought an old 5CV that you use to do your own shopping at the market in Arpajon. Every month, in this same car, you come to Paris.'

'To deliver my work to the firm of Dumas and Son, Rue du Quatre-Septembre, that's correct.'

'You work designing patterns for upholstery fabrics. You are paid five hundred francs for each pattern. You produce on average four patterns a month, earning two thousand francs . . .'

Another nod.

'You have no male friends. Your sister has no female friends. On Saturday evening, you both went to bed as usual at around ten o'clock. And, as usual, you also locked your sister in her bedroom, which is near yours. You claim this is because she is nervous and easily frightened . . . We'll let that pass for the moment! At seven o'clock on Sunday morning, Monsieur Émile Michonnet, an insurance agent who lives in a house almost a hundred metres from your place, enters his garage to find that his car, a new six-cylinder model of a well-known make, has vanished and been replaced by your rattletrap . . .'

Showing no reaction, Andersen reached automatically for the empty pocket in which he must ordinarily have kept his cigarettes.

'Monsieur Michonnet, who has talked of nothing but his new car ever since he bought it, believes he is the victim of an unpleasant prank. He goes to your house, finds the gate closed and rings the bell in vain. Half an hour later he describes his predicament to the local police, who go to your house, where they find neither you nor your sister. They do, however, discover Monsieur Michonnet's car in your garage and in the front seat, draped over the steering wheel, a dead man, shot point-blank in the chest. His identity papers have not been stolen. His name is Isaac Goldberg, a diamond merchant from Antwerp.'

Still talking, Maigret put more fuel in the stove.

'The police promptly question the employees of the station at Arpajon, who saw you and your sister take the first train for Paris . . . You are both picked up when you arrive at Gare d'Orsay . . . You deny everything . . .'

'I deny having killed anyone at all.'

'You also deny knowing Isaac Goldberg . . .'

'I saw him for the first time, dead, at the wheel of a car that does not belong to me, in my garage.'

'And instead of phoning the police, you made a run for it with your sister.'

'I was afraid . . .'

'You have nothing to add?'

'Nothing!'

'And you insist that you never heard anything that Saturday night?'

'I'm a heavy sleeper.'

It was the fiftieth time that he had given precisely the same answers and Maigret, exasperated, rang for Sergeant Lucas, who swiftly appeared.

'I'll be back in a moment!'

The discussion between Maigret and Coméliau, the examining magistrate to whom the matter had been referred, lasted about fifteen minutes. The magistrate had essentially given up in advance.

'You'll see, this will be one of those cases we get only once in ten years, luckily, and which are never completely solved! And it lands in my lap! Nothing about it makes any sense . . . Why this switching of cars? And why didn't Andersen use the one in his garage to flee instead of walking to Arpajon to take the train? What was that diamond merchant doing at Three Widows Crossroads? Believe me, Maigret – this is the beginning of a whole string of headaches, for you as well as me . . . Let him go if you want. Perhaps you're right to feel that if he can withstand seventeen hours of interrogation, we'll get nothing more out of him.'

The inspector's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

'Have you seen the sister?'

'No. When they brought me Andersen, the young woman had already been taken back to her house by the local police, who wished to question her at the scene of the incident. She's still there. Under surveillance.'

They shook hands. Maigret returned to his office, where

Lucas was idly watching the prisoner, who stood with his forehead pressed against the windowpane, waiting patiently.

'You're free to go!' announced Maigret from the doorway.

Calmly, Andersen gestured towards his bare neck and unlaced shoes.

'Your personal effects will be returned to you at the clerk's office. You remain, of course, at the disposition of the authorities. At the slightest attempt to flee, I'll have you sent to La Santé Prison.'

'My sister?'

'You will find her at home.'

The Dane must have felt some emotion after all as he left the room, for he removed his monocle to pass his hand over what had once been his left eye.

'Thank you, chief inspector.'

'You're welcome.'

'I give you my word of honour that I'm innocent . . .'

'Don't mention it!'

Andersen bowed, then waited for Lucas to take him along to the clerk's office.

After witnessing this scene with astonished indignation, a man in the waiting room rushed over to Maigret.

'What? So you're letting him go? That's not possible, chief inspector . . .'

It was Monsieur Michonnet, the insurance agent, the owner of the new six-cylinder car. He walked into Maigret's office as if he owned the place and set his hat down on a table.

'I am here, above all, about the matter of my car.'

A small fellow going grey, carefully but unprepossessingly dressed, constantly turning up the ends of his waxed moustache.

He spoke with pursed lips, weighing his words and trying to appear imposing.

He was the plaintiff! He was the one whom the forces of justice had to protect! Was he not in some way a hero? No one was going to intimidate him, oh no! The entire Préfecture was at his personal service.

'I had a long talk last night with Madame Michonnet, whose acquaintance you will soon make, I trust . . . She agrees with me . . . Mind you, her father was a teacher at the Lycée de Montpellier and her mother gave piano lessons . . . I mention this so that . . . In short . . .'

That was his favourite expression, which he pronounced in a manner both cutting and condescending.

'In short, a decision must be made with all possible speed. Like everyone, even the richest among us, including the Comte d'Avrainville, I bought my new car on the instalment plan. I must make eighteen payments. Mind you, I could have paid cash, but there is no point in tying up one's capital. The Comte d'Avrainville, of whom I just spoke, purchased his Hispano-Suiza in the same fashion. In short . . .'

Breathing heavily, Maigret did not move.

'I cannot do without a car, which is absolutely necessary for me in the exercise of my profession. When you consider that my territory covers everywhere within a thirty-kilometre radius of Arpajon . . . Now, Madame