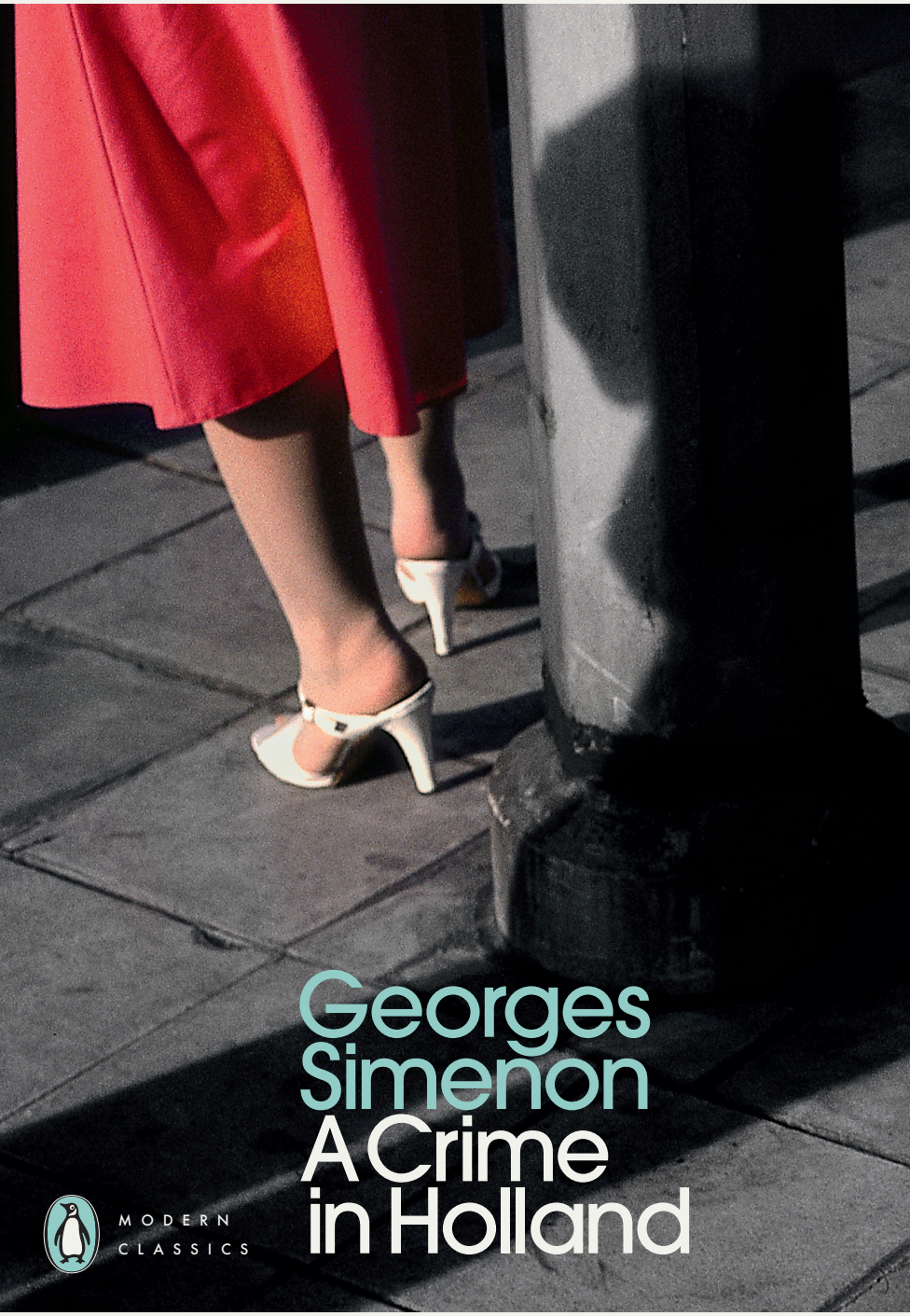
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A Crime in Holland

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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

A Crime in Holland

Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS

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A Crime in Holland

1. The Girl with the Cow

When Detective Chief Inspector Maigret arrived in Delfzijl, one afternoon in May, he had only the sketchiest notions about the case taking him to this small town located in the northernmost corner of Holland.

A certain Jean Duclos, professor at the University of Nancy in eastern France, was on a lecture tour of the northern countries. At Delfzijl, he was the guest of a teacher at the Naval College, Conrad Popinga. But Popinga had been murdered, and while no one was formally charging the French professor, he was being requested not to leave the town and to remain answerable to the Dutch authorities.

And that was all, or almost. Jean Duclos had contacted the University of Nancy, which had asked Police Headquarters in Paris to send someone to Delfzijl to investigate.

The task had fallen to Maigret. It was more unofficial than official, and he had made it less official still by omitting to alert his Dutch colleagues on his arrival.

On the initiative of Jean Duclos, he had received a rather confused report, followed by a list of people more or less closely involved in the case.

This was the list which he consulted, shortly before arriving at Delfzijl station:

Conrad Popinga (the victim), aged 42, former long-haul captain, latterly a lecturer at the Delfzijl Naval College. Married. No children. Had spoken English and German fluently and French quite well.

Liesbeth Popinga, his wife, daughter of a high school headmaster in Amsterdam. A very cultured woman. Excellent knowledge of French.

Any Van Elst, Liesbeth Popinga's younger sister, visiting Delfzijl for a few weeks. Recently completed her doctorate in law. Aged 25. Understands French a little but speaks it badly.

The Wienands family: they live in the villa next door to the Popingas. Carl Wienands teaches mathematics at the Naval College. Wife and two children. No knowledge of French.

Beetje Liewens, aged 18, daughter of a farmer specializing in breeding pedigree cattle for export. Has stayed twice in Paris. Speaks perfect French.

Not very eloquent. Names that suggested nothing, at least to Maigret as he arrived from Paris, after spending a night and a half the following day on the train.

Delfzijl disconcerted him as soon as he reached it. At first light, he had travelled through the traditional Holland of tulips, and then through Amsterdam, which he already knew. The Drenthe, a heath-covered wasteland crisscrossed with canals, its horizons, stretching thirty kilometres into the distance, had surprised him.

Here was a landscape that had little in common with picture-postcard Holland, and was a hundred times more Nordic in character than he had imagined.

Just a little town: ten to fifteen streets at most, paved with handsome red bricks, laid down as regularly as tiles on a kitchen floor. Low-rise houses, also built of brick, and copiously decorated with woodwork, in bright cheerful colours.

It looked like a toy town. All the more so since around this toy town ran a dyke, encircling it completely. Some of the stretches of water within the dyke could be closed off when the sea ran high, by means of heavy gates like those of a lock.

Beyond lay the mouth of the Ems. The North Sea. A long strip of silver water. Cargo vessels unloading under the cranes on a quayside. Canals and an infinity of sailing vessels the size of barges and just as heavy, but built to withstand ocean swells.

The sun was shining. The station master wore a smart orange cap, with which he unaffectedly greeted the unknown traveller.

Opposite the station, a café. Maigret went inside and hardly dared sit down. Not only was it as highly polished as a bourgeois dining room, it had the same intimate feeling.

A single table, with all the daily papers set out on brass rods. The proprietor, who was drinking beer with two customers, stood up to welcome the newcomer.

'Do you speak French?' Maigret asked.

A negative gesture. Slight embarrassment.

'Can you give me a beer . . . *bier*?'

Once he was seated, he took the slip of paper from his pocket. The last name on the list was the one that his eyes lighted on. He showed it, pronouncing the name two or three times.

'Liewens.'

The three men began conferring together. Then one of them, a big fellow wearing a sailor's cap, got up and beckoned to Maigret to follow him. Since the inspector had no Dutch currency yet, and offered to pay with a hundred-franc note, he was told repeatedly:

'*Morgen! Morgen!*'

Tomorrow would do! He could just come back.

It was homely. There was something very simple, naive even, about it. Without a word, his guide led Maigret through the streets of the little town. On their left was a shed full of ancient anchors, rigging, chains, buoys and compasses, spilling out on to the pavement. Further along, a sail-maker was working in his doorway.

And the window of the confectioner's shop displayed a bewildering choice of chocolates and elaborate sweetmeats.

'No speak English?'

Maigret shook his head.

'*Deutsch?*'

Same reply, and the man resigned himself to silence. At the end of one street, they were already in the countryside: green fields, a canal in which floating logs from Scandinavia took up almost the whole width, ready to be hauled through Holland.

At some distance appeared a large roof of varnished tiles.

'Liewens . . . *Dag, mijnheer!*'

And Maigret went on, alone, after vainly trying to thank this man who, without knowing him from Adam, had walked with him for a quarter of an hour to do him a favour.

The sky was clear, the air of astonishing limpidity. The inspector walked past a timber yard where planks of oak, mahogany and teak were stacked in piles as tall as houses.

A boat was moored alongside. Some children were playing. Then came a kilometre with no outstanding features. Floating tree trunks covered the surface of the canal, all the way. White fences surrounded fields dotted with magnificent cows.

Another clash between reality and his preconceived ideas. The word 'farm' for Maigret conjured up a thatched roof, a dunghill, a bustle of barnyard fowls.

And he found himself facing a fine newly built structure, surrounded by a garden full of flowers. Moored in the canal in front of the house was an elegant mahogany skiff. And propped against the gate, a lady's bicycle, gleaming with nickel.

He looked in vain for a bell. He called, without getting any reply. A dog came and rubbed against his legs.

To the left of the house ran a long low building with regularly spaced windows but no curtains, which could have been an ordinary shed but for the quality of the materials and especially its bright fresh paintwork.

A sound of lowing came from that direction, and Maigret went on, round the flowerbeds, to find himself in front of a wide open door.

The building was a cowshed, but a cowshed as immaculate as a dwelling. Red brick everywhere, giving a warm, almost sumptuous luminosity to the atmosphere. Runnels for water to run off. A mechanical system for distributing feed to the mangers, and a pulley behind each stall, whose purpose

Maigret discovered only later: to lift up the tails of the cows during milking so that the milk wouldn't be contaminated.

The interior was in semi-darkness. The cattle were all outside, except for one cow lying on its side in the first stall.

And a girl in her late teens was approaching the visitor, speaking to him at first in Dutch.

'Mademoiselle Liewens?'

'Yes. You're French?'

As she spoke, she kept her eyes on the cow. She had an ironic smile which Maigret did not at first understand.

Here again, his preconceived ideas were turning out to be wrong. Beetje Liewens was wearing black rubber boots, which gave her the look of a stable-girl. Her green silk dress was almost entirely covered up by a white overall.

A rosy face, too rosy perhaps. A healthy, happy smile, but one lacking any subtlety. Large china-blue eyes. Red-gold hair.

She had to search to find her first words in French, which she spoke with a strong accent. But she quickly re-acquainted herself with the language.

'Did you want to speak to my father?'

'To you.'

She almost pouted.

'Excuse me, please. My father has gone to Groningen. He won't be back until later. The two farmhands are on the canal, unloading coal. The maidservant is out shopping. And this cow has picked this moment to start calving! We weren't expecting it. And I'm all on my own.'

She was leaning against a winch, which she had prepared in case the birth needed assistance. She was smiling broadly.

It was sunny outside. Her boots shone as if polished. She had plump pink hands with well-kept nails.

'It's about Conrad Popinga that I . . .'

But she gave a start. The cow had tried to stand up with a painful movement and had fallen back again.

'Look out! Can you give me a hand?'

She picked up the rubber gloves lying ready for duty.

And that was how Maigret began his investigation by helping bring a pure-bred Friesian calf into the world, in the company of a girl whose confident movements revealed her physical training.

Half an hour later, with the newborn calf already nuzzling its mother's udder, Maigret was stooping alongside Beetje, soaping his hands up to the elbow under a brass tap.

'Is it the first time you've done anything like this?' she asked with a smile.

'Yes, the first time . . .'

She was eighteen years old. When she took off her white overall, the silk dress moulded her generous curves, which, perhaps because of the sunny day, looked extremely fetching.

'We can talk over a cup of tea. Come into the house.'

The maidservant was back. The parlour was austere and rather dark, but spoke of refined comfort. The small panes in the windows were of a scarcely perceptible rose tint, which Maigret had never before encountered.

Shelves full of books. Many works on cattle breeding and veterinary science. On the walls hung farming diplomas and gold medals won at international exhibitions.

In the middle of all that, the latest publications by Claudel, André Gide and Paul Valéry . . .

Beetje's smile was flirtatious.

'Would you like to see my room?'

She was watching for his reaction. No bed, but a divan covered with a blue velvet spread. Walls papered with Jouy prints. Some dark-stained book shelves with more books and a doll bought in Paris, clad in a frou-frou dress.

One might almost have called it a boudoir, and yet there was a rather solid, serious and down-to-earth feel about it.

'Like a room in Paris, don't you think?'

'I'd like you to tell me what happened last week.'

Beetje's face clouded, but not over much, not enough to suggest that she was taking the events too tragically.

Otherwise, would she have given him that beaming smile of pride as she showed him her room?

'Let's go and have our tea.'

And they sat down facing each other, in front of a teapot covered with a sort of crinoline tea cosy to keep it warm.

Beetje had to search for the right words. She did more than that. She fetched a French dictionary, and sometimes broke off for quite a long time to find the exact word.

A boat with a large grey sail was gliding along the canal, propelled by a pole for want of wind. It manoeuvred its way through the tree trunks in mid-stream.

'You haven't been to the Popingas' house yet?'

'I arrived an hour ago, and all I've had time to do is help you to deliver the calf.'

'Yes . . . Conrad was so nice, a really lovely man . . . He

went all over the world as second lieutenant and then first . . . Is that what you say in French? Then once he had his master's certificate, he got married, and because of his wife he took a job at the Naval College. That wasn't so exciting. He used to have a little sailing boat too. But Madame Popinga is afraid of the water. He had to sell it. He just had a rowing boat on the canal after that. You saw mine? Well, almost the same kind! In the evenings, he tutored pupils. He worked very hard.'

'What was he like?'

At first she didn't understand the question. She ended up going to fetch a photograph of a strapping, youngish man, with cropped hair, rosy cheeks and light-coloured eyes, who seemed to radiate bonhomie and good health.

'That's Conrad. You wouldn't think he was forty, would you? His wife is older . . . About forty-five. You haven't seen her? And very different . . . For instance, here everyone's Protestant of course . . . I go to the Dutch Reformed Church, which has more modern views. But Liesbeth Popinga goes to the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, which is stricter . . . more, what's the word? Conserving?'

'Conservative.'

'Yes. And she is the chairwoman of all the local charities . . .'

'You don't like her?'

'Oh yes . . . but it's not the same. She's the daughter of a headmaster, you must understand. My father's just a farmer . . . But she's very nice, kind . . .'

'What happened?'

'There are lots of lectures here . . . It's just a small town,