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Georges
Simenon
The Dancer
at the
Gai-Moulin

The Dancer at the Gai-Moulin

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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

*The Dancer at the
Gai-Moulin*

Translated by SIÂN REYNOLDS



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Penguin Random House UK

One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in French as *La danseuse du Gai-Moulin* by Fayard 1931

This translation first published 2014

Published in Penguin Classics 2025

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-39352-0

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1. *Adèle and her Friends*

‘Who’s that?’

‘No idea! It’s the first time he’s been in here,’ said Adèle, exhaling the smoke from her cigarette.

And she lazily uncrossed her legs, patted down a lock of hair on her temple, and looked carefully into one of the mirrors round the room, to check her makeup.

She was sitting on a banquette upholstered in crimson plush, in front of a table holding three glasses of port. One young man sat on her left, another on her right.

‘Do you mind, boys?’

She gave them a kindly, confidential smile, stood up, and swinging her hips, walked across the room towards the newcomer’s table.

At a nod from the club owner, the four musicians hired for the evening started crooning along to their instruments. Only one couple was dancing: a woman in pink and the professional dance-partner.

And as almost every night, it felt empty. The room was too large. The mirrors round the walls magnified even further its receding perspectives, punctuated only by the crimson seats and ghostly marble tabletops.

The two young men, now that Adèle no longer sat between them, moved closer together.

‘Charming, isn’t she!’ sighed Jean Chabot, the younger

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of the two, gazing affectedly towards the dance-floor with half-closed eyes.

'Plenty of zip, as well,' said his friend Delfosse enthusiastically, leaning on a cane with a gold top.

Chabot was perhaps sixteen and a half, and Delfosse, thinner, more sickly looking, with irregular features, no more than eighteen. But they would have protested indignantly if anyone had suggested that they were not blasé connoisseurs of all the pleasures of life.

'I say, Victor!'

Chabot spoke familiarly to the waiter who was passing nearby.

'Do you know the man who just came in?'

'No, but he's ordered champagne.'

And Victor winked.

'Adèle's looking after him.'

He moved off with his tray. The music stopped for a moment, then started up an American-style boston. The owner, standing at the table of the promising customer, was opening the champagne bottle himself, tucking a napkin round its neck.

'Do you think they'll stay open late?' whispered Chabot.

'Two, half past . . . as usual.'

'Shall we have another drink?'

They were on edge. The younger one particularly, who was looking at each person in turn with a fixed stare.

'How much do you think there is?'

But Delfosse simply shrugged and said impatiently:

'Shut up, can't you!'

They could see Adèle, almost opposite them, sitting

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beside the unknown customer, who had ordered champagne. He was a man of about forty, with jet-black hair and a dark complexion, Romanian, or Turkish perhaps, in appearance. He wore a pink silk shirt and a jewelled tie-pin.

He seemed untroubled by the dancer, who was laughing and chatting to him while leaning against his shoulder. When she asked for a smoke, he held out a gold cigarette-case, still looking straight ahead.

Delfosse and Chabot had stopped talking. They pretended to be looking with scorn at the newcomer. But they really admired him intensely! They missed not a detail, studying the way his tie was knotted, the cut of his suit, and even his casual way with a glass of champagne.

Chabot wore a cheap off-the-peg suit and shoes that had been mended more than once. His friend's clothes, although of better fabric, were ill-matched. Delfosse had the narrow shoulders, hollow chest and fragile silhouette of an adolescent who had clearly shot up too fast.

'Here comes someone else!'

The velvet curtain inside the door had been moved aside. A man was handing his bowler hat to the doorman, then standing still for a moment, surveying the room. He was tall, broad-shouldered and heavily built. He wore a placid expression, and did not even listen to the waiter who wanted to escort him to a table. He sat down at random.

'Got any beer?'

'We only have English beer – stout, pale ale?'

The man shrugged, indicating that he had no preference. The place was no busier than any other night. One couple on the dance-floor. The jazz music carried on,

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becoming a background noise one hardly noticed. At the bar, a well-dressed customer was playing poker dice with the owner. Adèle sat alongside her companion, who was still taking no notice of her. A typical scene in a small-town nightclub. At one point, three men, all slightly drunk, pushed aside the curtain over the door. The owner hurried across. The musicians played frantically. But the men left, and sounds of laughter came from outside.

As time passed, Chabot and Delfosse began to look more serious. It was as if fatigue had sharpened their features, darkened their skin to a sallow complexion, and drawn circles under their eyes.

‘OK now?’ asked Chabot, in such a low voice that his companion guessed rather than heard what he said.

No answer. Fingers drumming on the marble tabletop.

Leaning on the stranger’s shoulder, Adèle winked from time to time at her two young friends, while maintaining the flirtatious, smiling look she had adopted.

‘Victor!’

‘Going already? You’ve got a date?’

In the same way that Adèle was putting on a come-hither expression, he was pretending to look knowing and interested.

‘We’ll settle up tomorrow, Victor. Got no change tonight.’

‘Of course, gentlemen. Goodnight! You’re going out that way?’

The two young men were not drunk. But they made their way out as if in a nightmare, without seeing anything.

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The Gai-Moulin has two doors. The main entrance is on the street, Rue du Pot-d'Or. That is the way customers normally arrive and leave. But after two a.m., when according to police regulations the club should be closed, a small service entrance leads to an ill-lit and deserted alleyway.

Chabot and Delfosse crossed the dance-floor, passed in front of the stranger's table, replied to the owner's good-night, and pushed open the door of the washroom. They stopped there a few seconds, without looking at each other.

'I'm scared,' Chabot stammered.

He could see his reflection in the oval mirror. The muffled sounds of the jazz music had followed them in.

'Quick!' said Delfosse, opening another door on to a dark staircase, where the air was damp and cold.

It led to the cellar. The steps were made of brick. From below arose a sickening smell of beer and wine.

'What if someone comes!'

Chabot almost stumbled, as the door swung to behind them, cutting out all the light. His hands moved along the walls covered with saltpetre crystals. He felt someone touch him and gave a start, but it was only his friend.

'Don't move!' the other said.

They could not exactly hear the music. They could guess at it. What could be sensed above all was the beat from the drummer. A rhythm throbbing through the air and bringing back the image of the club's interior with its red velvet seats, the tinkle of glasses and the woman in pink dancing with a man in a tuxedo.

It was cold. Chabot felt the damp penetrating him, and had to make an effort not to sneeze. He put his hand to

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the nape of his neck, which was freezing. He could hear Delfosse's breathing. Each breath smelled of tobacco.

Someone came into the washroom. The taps ran. A coin clinked into a saucer.

Then just the ticking of Delfosse's pocket watch.

'Do you think it's safe to open the door?'

The other youth pinched his arm to make him be quiet. His fingers were cold.

Upstairs, the owner of the club would be starting to look impatiently at the clock. When there were plenty of customers and a lively atmosphere, he did not greatly object to staying open past closing time and risking the attentions of the police. But when the club was almost empty, he suddenly became mindful of the regulations.

'Gentlemen, we are about to close! It's two o'clock.'

The young men on the staircase could not hear this. But they could guess what was happening, minute by minute. Victor would be cashing up, then coming over to the bar to check the takings with the boss, while the musicians put away their instruments in their cases and covered the big drum with a green baize cloth.

The other waiter, Joseph, would be piling the chairs on the tables and picking up the ashtrays.

'Come along please, gentlemen, we're closing. Adèle, get a move on, hurry up.'

The boss was a thickset Italian, who had been a hotel barman in Cannes, Nice, Biarritz and Paris.

Footsteps in the washroom. Now, he's coming to bolt the back door leading out to the alleyway. And he turns the key but leaves it in the lock. Won't he automatically

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come to close the cellar too, or at least glance inside? He stops for a moment. He must be checking his parting in the mirror. He coughs. The washroom door creaks.

Another five minutes and it will all be done. The Italian, who is always the last to leave, will have pulled down the shutters on the street front, and he'll be locking up the last door from outside.

And he never pockets all the day's takings. He just puts the thousand-franc notes in his wallet. The rest stays in the drawer behind the bar, a drawer with such a flimsy lock that a stout penknife can force it.

All the lights are out.

'Come on!' whispers Delfosse.

'Not yet, wait a bit.'

Now they are alone in the building, but they continue to speak in low voices. They cannot see one another. Each of them feels his face go pale, his skin tighten and his lips turn dry.

'What if someone's stayed behind?'

'Was I scared when we did my father's safe?'

Delfosse is truculent, almost threatening.

'Perhaps there won't be anything in the drawer.'

It's a kind of vertigo. Chabot feels more nauseated than when he has drunk too much. Now that he has ventured into the dark space above the cellar, he hasn't the courage to come out. He's on the verge of collapsing in tears on the steps.

'Let's go!'

'No, wait, he might come back.'

Five minutes pass. Then another five, because Chabot

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wants at all costs to gain some time. His shoelace is undone. He ties it up in the dark, blindly, because he's afraid of tripping over and making a noise.

'I didn't think you were such a coward. Come on, in you go.'

Because Delfosse doesn't want to go first. He pushes his companion in front of him with trembling hands. The door from the cellar steps opens. A tap is dripping into a basin. There is a smell of soap and disinfectant.

Chabot knows that the second door, the one leading inside the club, will squeak. He's expecting the sound. But still it makes a cold shiver run down his spine.

In the darkness, the club seems vast, like a cathedral: a great empty space. There is still a little warmth seeping from the radiators.

'Let's have some light,' Chabot whispers.

Delfosse strikes a match. They stop a moment to catch their breath, and work out how far they still have to go. And suddenly the match falls to the ground, as Delfosse gives a sharp cry and rushes back towards the washroom door. In the dark, he loses his way, returns and bumps into Chabot.

'Quick, let's get out!'

His words sound hoarse, inarticulate.

Chabot too has seen something. But it was hard to make it out. A body lying on the floor by the bar? Jet-black hair.

They don't dare move. The matchbox is on the floor, but they can't see it.

'Your matches!'

'I've lost them.'

One of them stumbles into a chair. The other asks:

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'Is that you?'

'This way! I'm holding the door.'

The tap is still dripping. That helps calm them down, a first step towards escape.

'Shall we switch on the light?'

'Are you crazy?'

Their hands search for the bolt on the back door.

'It's hard to shift.'

Footsteps outside in the street. They freeze. And wait. They catch a few words:

'... well, I think if England hadn't . . .'

The voices move away. Perhaps the police, talking about politics.

'Can you open it?'

But Delfosse is incapable of moving. He leans up against the door and puts his hands to his heaving chest.

'His mouth was open,' he stammers.

The key finally turns. Fresh air. Light from the street lamp glistens on the cobbles in the alleyway. They both want to run. They don't even think of closing the door behind them. But down there at the corner is the main street, Rue du Pont-d'Avroy, where there are people. They don't look at each other. It seems to Chabot that his body is hollow, that he's making vague movements in a world made of cotton-wool. Even the sounds seem to come from a long way off.

'Do you think he's dead? Was it the Turk?'

'It *was* him. I recognized him. His mouth was open . . . And one eye.'

'What do you mean?'

'One eye was open and the other closed.'

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