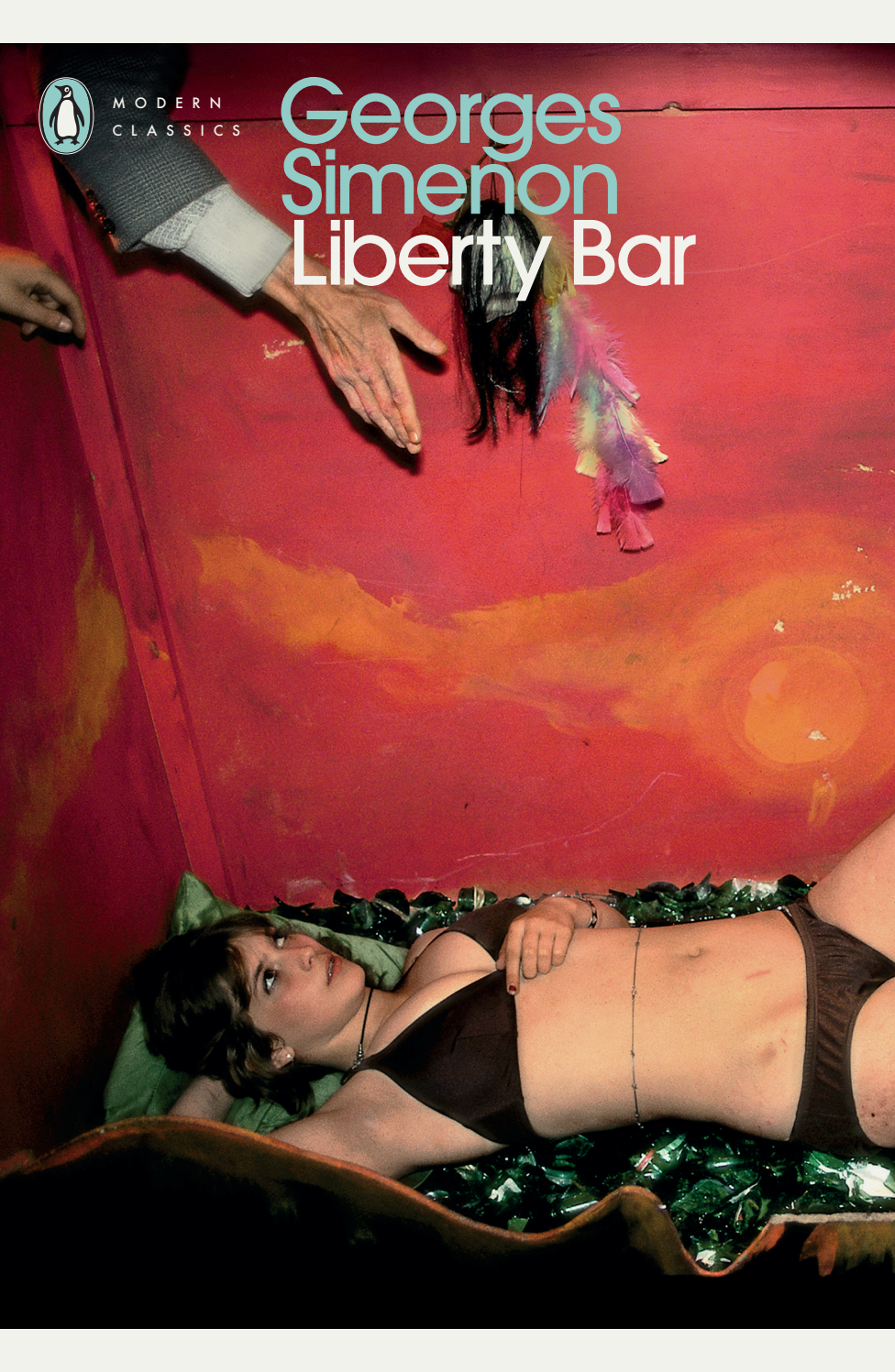




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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Liberty Bar

Translated by DAVID WATSON



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1. *The Dead Man and His Two Women*

It all began with a holiday feeling. When Maigret stepped off the train, half of the railway station at Antibes was bathed in sunlight so intense that the people coming and going were reduced to shadows. Shadows in straw hats and white trousers, carrying tennis racquets. The air was humming. There were palm trees and cactuses along the quayside, a strip of blue sea beyond the street-lamps.

Someone was running to meet him.

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, I believe? I recognized you from a photo that was in the papers . . . Inspector Boutigues . . .’

Boutigues! Even the name was comical! Boutigues had already picked up Maigret’s suitcases and was dragging them towards the subway. He was wearing a pearl-grey suit with a red carnation in his buttonhole and shoes with fabric uppers.

‘Is this your first visit to Antibes?’

Maigret mopped his brow and tried to keep up with his cicerone as he threaded his way between the groups of people, overtaking everyone. Eventually, he found himself standing before a horse-drawn carriage with a cream-coloured canvas roof, its small tassels bobbing about. Another forgotten sensation: the bounce of the

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springs, the coachman's crack of the whip, the muffled sound of hoofs on softened bitumen.

'We'll go and have a drink first . . . No, no, I insist . . . The Café Glacier, coachman . . .'

It was nearby. Boutigues explained:

'Place Macé . . . In the centre of Antibes . . .'

A pretty square with a garden, and cream or orange canopies on all the houses. They simply had to sit out on a terrace and drink a Pernod. Opposite was a shop window full of sports outfits, swimming-costumes, beach robes . . . To the left, a photographer's studio . . . A few smart cars parked along the pavement . . . That holiday feeling again!

'Would you like to see the prisoners first or visit the scene of the crime?'

And Maigret replied without really knowing what he was saying, as if someone had asked him what he was drinking:

'The crime scene.'

The holiday continued. Maigret smoked a cigar that his colleague had offered him. The horse trotted along the promenade. To the right, villas hidden away among the pines; to the left, a few rocks, then the blue of the sea dotted here and there with white sails.

'Have you got your bearings yet? Behind us is Antibes . . . Where we are is the start of Cap d'Antibes, which is nothing but villas, some very expensive villas at that . . .'

Maigret nodded, blissfully. His head was befuddled by all this sunshine, and he squinted at Boutigues' red flower.

'Boutigues, wasn't it?'

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‘Yes, I’m a Niçois. Or rather, I’m Nicene . . .’

In other words, pure Niçois, Niçois squared, cubed!

‘Over here. Can you see that white villa? That one there.’

It wasn’t intentional, but Maigret observed all this in disbelief. He just couldn’t get into work mode, couldn’t convince himself that he was here to investigate a crime.

He had, however, received some very particular instructions:

‘A man called Brown has been killed in Cap d’Antibes. It’s all over the papers. Best if you avoid any dramas.’

‘Understood.’

‘During the war, Brown worked for military intelligence.’

‘Ditto.’

And here they were. The carriage drew to a halt. Boutigues took a small key from his pocket and opened the gate, then crunched along the gravel of the path.

‘It’s one of the least attractive villas on the cape!’

However, it wasn’t that bad either. The mimosas filled the air with a sickly scent. There were still a few golden oranges hanging on the miniature trees. Then there were some odd-looking flowers that Maigret didn’t even know.

‘The property opposite belongs to a maharajah . . . He’s probably in residence right now . . . Five hundred metres further along, on the left, there is a member of the Academy . . . Then there is that famous dancer who lives with an English lord . . .’

Yes! And so what? Maigret wanted to settle down on the bench next to the house and sleep for an hour. He had, after all, been travelling all night.

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'I'll fill you in on the bare bones of the situation.'

Boutigues had opened the door, and they found themselves in a cool hallway whose picture windows looked out over the sea.

'Brown lived here for about ten years . . .'

'Did he work?'

'No . . . he must have had a private income . . . People used to call them Brown and his two women . . .'

'Two?'

'Only one of them was actually his mistress: the daughter . . . Her name is Gina Martini.'

'She's in prison?'

'Her mother too . . . The three of them lived together without a maid . . .'

That much was evident from the state of the house, which was far from clean. There were maybe one or two beautiful things, some valuable items of furniture, some objects that had seen better days.

Everything was dirty and in a mess. There were too many rugs, hangings and throws spread out over the arm-chairs, too many things impregnated with dust . . .

'These are the facts: Brown had a garage just next to the villa . . . He kept an old-fashioned car which he drove himself . . . He used it mainly to get to the market in Antibes . . .'

'Yes,' sighed Maigret, as he watched a man fishing for sea-urchins, probing the bed of the clear sea with his split reed.

'Someone noticed that the car had been left by the roadside for three days and nights . . . The people around here

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don't poke their noses into each other's business . . . No one was unduly worried . . . On Monday . . .'

'Really? And today's Thursday? . . . OK.'

'On Monday evening, the butcher was driving back from his rounds when he saw the car pull away . . . You'll see his statement later . . . He saw it from behind . . . At first he thought Brown must be drunk, as he was swerving around so much . . . Then the car drove in a straight line . . . So straight a line, in fact, that it crashed into a rock about three hundred metres down the road . . . Before the butcher could intervene, two women got out and, hearing the sound of his engine, started running towards the town . . .'

'Were they carrying baggage?'

'Three suitcases . . . It was dusk . . . The butcher didn't know what to do . . . He came to Place Macé, where, as you can see, there is a police officer on duty . . . The officer set off to look for the two women, and in the end he found them not heading for the station at Antibes, but rather the one at Golfe-Juan, three kilometres away . . .'

'Still carrying the three cases?'

'They'd left one behind along the way. It was discovered yesterday in a tamarisk wood . . . They were a bit flustered . . . They said they were on their way to see a sick relative in Lyon . . . The officer was smart enough to open the cases and inside he found a batch of bearer bonds, a few hundred-pound notes and a number of other objects . . . A crowd had gathered by now . . . It was aperitif time . . . Everyone was out and about, and they escorted the two women to the police station and then on to the prison . . .'

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‘Did you search the villa?’

‘First thing the next morning. We didn’t find anything at first. The two women claimed to know nothing about what had happened to Brown. Finally, around midday, a gardener noticed some earth that had been disturbed. Buried under a layer of soil less than five centimetres deep we discovered Brown’s body, still fully dressed.’

‘And the two women?’

‘They changed their tune. They claimed that they had seen the car pull up three days earlier and that they were surprised that Brown hadn’t parked it in the garage . . . He staggered across the garden . . . Gina swore at him through the window, thinking he was drunk . . . He fell on the front steps . . .’

‘Dead, of course!’

‘As dead as can be! He had been stabbed from behind, right between the shoulder-blades.’

‘And they kept him in the house for three days?’

‘Yes! And they couldn’t provide a plausible explanation! They claimed that Brown had a horror of the police and the like . . .’

‘They buried him and made off with the money and the most valuable objects! . . . I can understand the car being parked on the road for three days . . . Gina was not a good driver, and she was nervous about backing it into the garage . . . But here’s a thing – do you think there was blood inside the car?’

‘Not a drop! They swear that they cleaned it all up . . .’

‘Is that all?’

‘That’s all! They were furious! They asked us to let them go . . .’

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The horse whinnied outside. Maigret couldn't smoke his cigar to the end but didn't dare throw it away.

'A whisky?' suggested Boutigues, spotting a drinks cabinet.

It all seemed terribly undramatic. Maigret was trying in vain to take it all seriously. Was it because of the sun, the mimosas, the oranges, the fisherman looking for sea-urchins in three metres of limpid water?

'Could you give me the keys to the house?'

'Of course! Once you take on the case officially . . .'

Maigret drained the glass of whisky that was offered to him, looked at the record on the gramophone, fiddled with the buttons on a wireless. A voice emerged:

' . . . fully grown wheat . . . November . . .'

At that moment he noticed a portrait hanging behind the radio set, which he took down to inspect more closely.

'Is that him?'

'Yes! I've never seen him alive, but I recognize him . . .'

Maigret switched the wireless off with a hint of nervous excitement. Something had been sparked inside him. Interest? More than that!

A confused feeling, and not a pleasant one. Up to that point, Brown had just been Brown, a stranger, almost certainly a foreigner, who had died in somewhat mysterious circumstances. No one had taken an interest in his thoughts and emotions when he was alive, or wondered what he had suffered . . . And now, looking at the portrait, Maigret was troubled, because he felt as if he knew this man . . . Although not in the sense of having seen him before . . .

No! He wasn't concerned about his features . . . The

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broad face of a man in good, indeed robust, health, with thinning red hair, a pencil moustache, large, clear eyes . . .

But there was something about his general bearing, his expression, that reminded Maigret of himself. That way of holding the shoulders slightly pulled in . . . That exaggeratedly calm gaze . . . That good-natured but ironic curl of the lips . . . This wasn't Brown the corpse . . . He was someone that the inspector wanted to know and who intrigued him.

'Another whisky? It's not bad . . .'

Boutigues was enjoying himself! He was astonished when Maigret didn't respond to his quips but continued to look around him with an absent air.

'Shall we offer the coachman one?'

'No! Let's go . . .'

'You're not going to inspect the house?'

'Another time!'

Oh, to be alone! Not to have his head buzzing with the sunshine. As they returned to town, he didn't speak, and only acknowledged Boutigues' remarks with a nod of the head. The latter wondered what he had done to deserve this treatment from his companion.

'You'll see the old town . . . The prison is right next to the market . . . Morning's the best time . . .'

'Which hotel?' the coachman asked, turning round.

'Do you want one right in the centre?' Boutigues asked.

'Drop me here! I'll sort it out . . .'

There was a small family-run pension-style hotel half-way between the Cap and the town.

'Are you not coming to the prison this evening?'

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‘Tomorrow, I’ll see . . .’

‘Want me to come and pick you up? By the way, if you fancy going to the casino at Juan-les-Pins after dinner, I’ll . . .’

‘No, thank you. I’m tired.’

He wasn’t tired. But he wasn’t in good form. He felt hot. He was sweaty. In his room, which looked out to sea, he poured some water into the bath, then changed his mind and went outside, with his pipe between his teeth and his hands in his pockets. He caught a glimpse of the small white tables in the dining room, the napkins displayed like fans in the glasses, the bottles of wine and mineral water, the maid sweeping up . . .

‘Brown was killed by a knife in the back, and his two women tried to escape with the money . . .’

But this was all rather vague. And, in spite of himself, he looked at the sun, which was slowly sinking into the sea, picking out the thin white line of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice.

Then he stared at the mountains, whose summits were still white with snow.

‘In other words, Nice to the left, twenty-five kilometres, Cannes to the right, twelve kilometres . . . The mountains behind and the sea in front.’

He was already constructing a world centred on the villa of Brown and his women.

A world sticky with sunshine, the scent of mimosas and sickly sweet flowers, drunken flies, cars gliding over softened asphalt . . .

He didn’t have the strength to walk into the centre of

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