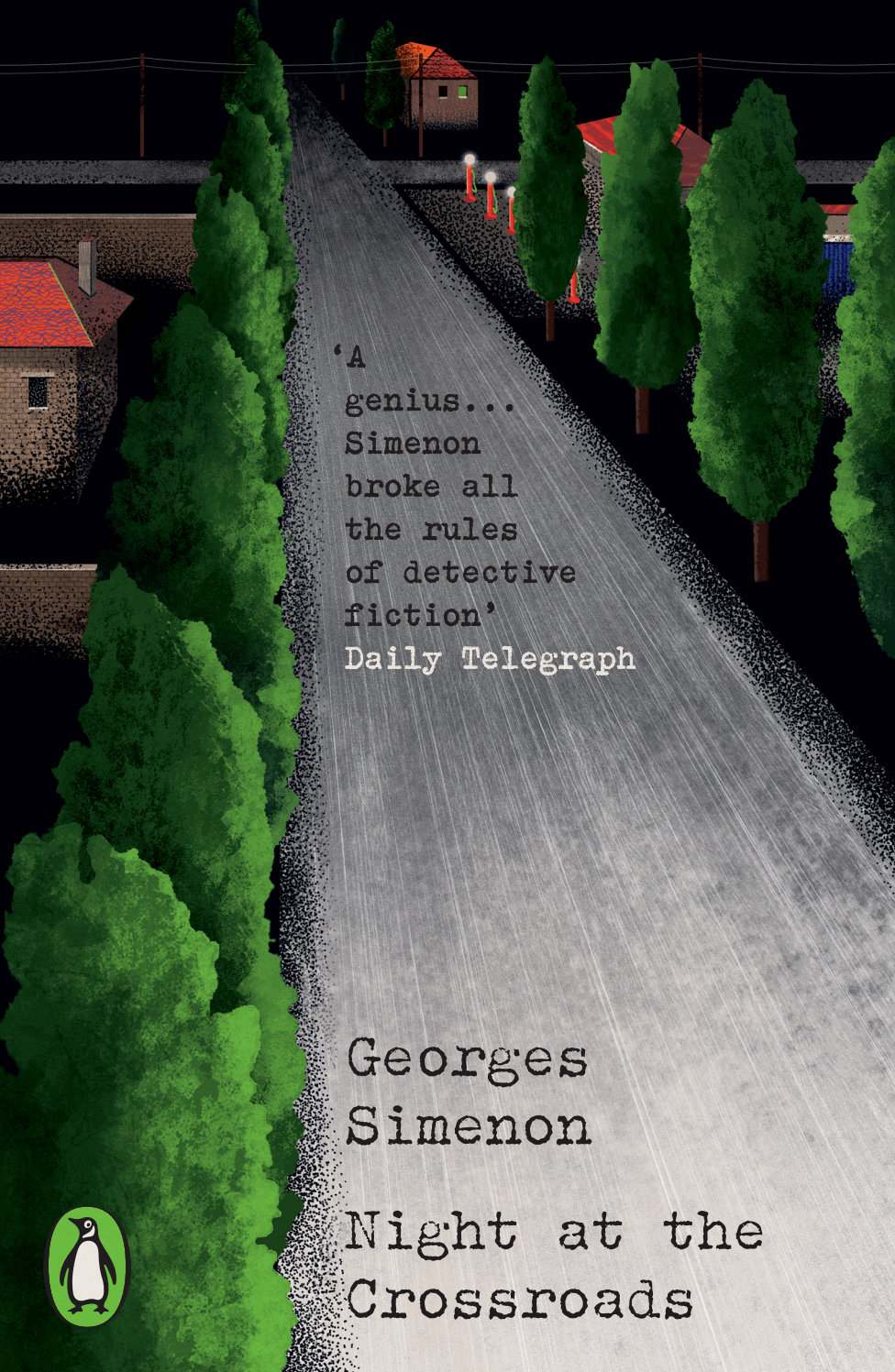

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Georges Simenon

Night at the Crossroads

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GEORGES SIMENON

Night at the Crossroads

Translated by Linda Coverdale

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Contents

Night at the Crossroads

I

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.'