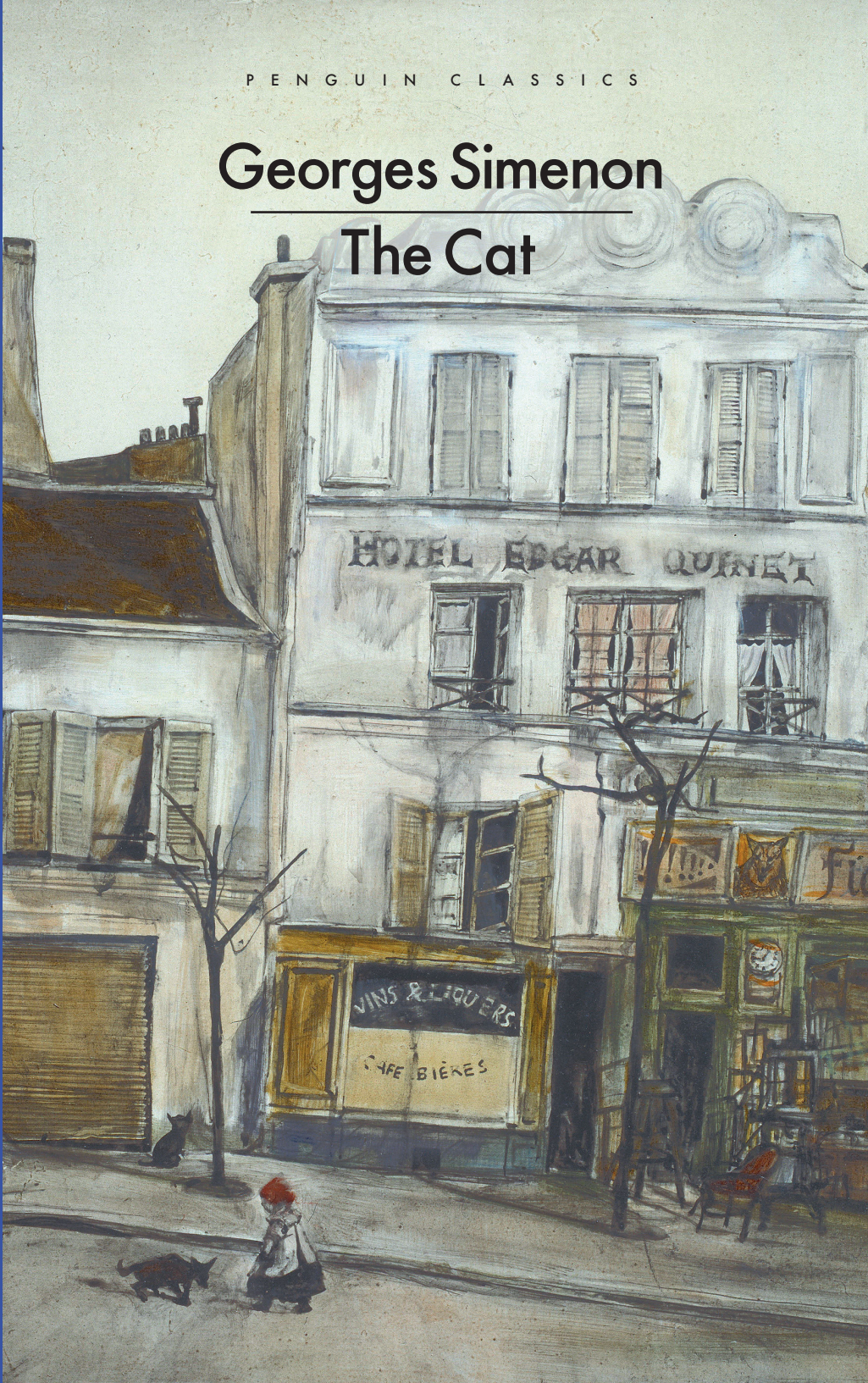
PENGUIN CLASSICS

Georges Simenon

The Cat



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

The Cat

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. An intrepid traveller with a profound interest in people, Simenon strove on and off the page to understand, rather than to judge, the human condition in all its shades. His novels include the Inspector Maigret series and a richly varied body of wider work united by its evocative power, its economy of means, and its penetrating psychological insight. He is among the most widely read writers in the global canon. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

GEORGES SIMENON

The Cat

Translated by Ros Schwartz

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The Cat

I

The newspaper had slipped from his hands, first unfolding in his lap and then sliding slowly onto the polished-wood floor. He looked as if he had dozed off, except that every now and again a thin slit was visible between his eyelids.

Was his wife fooled? She sat knitting in her low armchair on the opposite side of the fireplace. She never appeared to be watching him, but he had long known that nothing escaped her, not even the almost imperceptible twitching of a muscle.

Across the street, the metal crusher bucket with steel jaws clattered down from the top of the crane and crashed heavily onto the ground close to the cement mixer with a resounding clang. Each time, the building shook from the impact, and each time the woman gave a start and raised her hand to her chest as if the noise, even though it had become habitual, had struck her in the heart.

They each watched the other. They had no need to look at one another. For years, they'd been covertly eyeing each other like this, constantly introducing new subtleties into this little game.

He smiled. The black marble clock with bronze ornaments showed five to five and he seemed to be counting the minutes, the seconds. In truth, he counted them automatically, he too waiting for the big hand to be vertical. Then, the din of the mixer and the crane came to a sudden stop. The men in oilskins, their faces and hands dripping with rain, would stand still for a

moment before heading for the wooden hut in a corner of the vacant site.

It was November. From four o'clock in the afternoon, they worked under floodlights that would soon be switched off and then all would immediately be dark and silent, and the only light in the cul-de-sac would be the single gas lamp.

Émile Bouin's legs were numbed from the heat. When he half-opened his eyes, he saw the flames leaping up from the logs in the hearth, some yellow, others blue-tinged at the base. The fireplace was of black marble, like the clock, like the four-armed candelabras either side of it.

In the house, apart from Marguerite's fast-moving hands and the gentle clicking of her knitting needles, everything was silent and still, as in a photograph or a painting.

Three minutes to five. Two minutes to. Workers were beginning to plod slowly towards the hut to change their clothes, but the crane was still operating and one last bucket with its load of concrete was being hoisted up to the formwork for the first floor of the building.

One minute to. Five o'clock. The big hand trembled hesitantly on the pale clock face and five strokes rang out at intervals, as if everything had to be slow in this household. Marguerite sighed, listening out for the abrupt silence outside which would last until the following morning.

Émile Bouin was thinking. Smiling absently, he was watching the flames through the slit in his eyelids.

One of the logs, the one on top, was no more than a charred skeleton giving off wisps of smoke. The other two were still glowing red, but crackling sounds signalled that they would soon disintegrate.

Marguerite wondered whether he was going to get up, grab some fresh logs from the basket and put them on the fire. They were both used to the warmth of the hearth, which they

relished until the skin on their faces tingled and they had to move their armchairs back.

His smile broadened. He wasn't smiling at her. Nor at the fire. Simply at an idea that had just occurred to him.

He was in no hurry to translate it into action. They both had time, all the time between the present and the moment when one of them would die. How could they know who would go first? Marguerite undoubtedly also thought about it. They'd been thinking about it for several years, several times a day. It had become their fundamental problem.

He eventually gave a sigh too, and he raised his right hand from the arm of his leather chair and groped for the pocket of his dressing gown. He took out a small notebook, which played an important part in the couple's life. The slim pages had perforation lines, making it easy to tear off three-centimetre strips.

The cover was red. A thin pencil was slipped inside a leather loop. Had Marguerite shuddered? Was she wondering what the message would be this time?

She was accustomed to it, of course, but she could never know what words he was going to write and he deliberately sat there for a long time, pencil in hand, without moving, as if pondering.

He had nothing special to convey to her. He simply wanted to disconcert her, keep her on tenterhooks, just at the point when the racket from the building site ceased, giving her some relief.

Several ideas crossed Émile's mind and he discarded them one after the other. The rhythm of the knitting needles had changed slightly. He'd managed to rattle her, or at any rate to pique her curiosity.

He prolonged the pleasure for another five minutes and the sound of the workers' footsteps heading for the end of the street could be heard.

Eventually he wrote, in stick letters:

The cat.

Then he sat absolutely still for a while before putting the notebook from which he'd torn a strip of paper back in his pocket.

Finally, he folded it up very small, as children do with a pellet they shoot from an elastic band. He didn't need an elastic band. He had become amazingly adept, almost Machiavellian, at this game.

He rolled the paper between his thumb and index finger. He curled back his thumb and released it rapidly, flicking the message into Marguerite's lap. He never missed his target, as it were, inwardly jubilant each time.

He knew that Marguerite wouldn't bat an eyelid, that she'd pretend not to have seen anything and would carry on knitting, her lips moving as if in prayer as she silently counted the stitches.

On some occasions, she'd wait for him to leave the room, or for him to turn his back as he put more logs on the fire.

At other times, after a few minutes of outward indifference, she would let her right hand drop to her apron and retrieve the message.

Although their actions were always more or less the same, they did introduce variations. Today, for example, she waited until all the noises from the construction site had died down, until silence had invaded the cul-de-sac at the end of which they lived. She put her knitting down on a stool as if she'd finished her work and, her eyes half-closed, she too looked as if she were about to doze off in the warmth of the fire.

Much later, she pretended to notice the folded paper in her apron and picked it up in her fingers covered in fine wrinkles.

She seemed poised to throw it into the fireplace, as if she

were hesitating, but he knew that this was part of the daily rigmarole. He was no longer deceived.

For quite a long time, children play the same game every day at a particular hour, without losing their apparent enthusiasm. They act 'as if'.

The difference is that Émile Bouin was seventy-three years old and Marguerite seventy-one. Another difference is that their game had been going on for four years and they didn't seem to be tiring of it.

In the oppressive silence of the sitting room, the woman finally smoothed out the paper and, without putting on her glasses, read the two words her husband had written:

The cat.

She remained unperturbed, didn't move a muscle. There had been longer, more unexpected, more dramatic notes, some of which were truly puzzling.

This note was the most mundane, the one that Émile Bouin sent the most frequently, when he couldn't think up any other mischief.

She threw the paper into the fire where it went up in a thin flame that fizzled out at once. With both hands on her stomach, she sat absolutely still, so that the only life in the sitting room was that of the hearth.

The clock juddered and chimed once. As if it were a signal, Marguerite stood up, small and slight.

Her woollen dress was a pale pink, the pink of her cheeks, and her checked apron a pastel blue. There were still a few blonde strands in her white hair.

With the years, her features had become sharp. For people who didn't know her, they expressed gentleness, sadness, resignation.

'Such a worthy woman!'

Émile Bouin did not snigger. Neither of them engaged any longer in such overt expressions of their mood. A shiver, a curling of the lip or a fleeting glimmer in their eyes was sufficient.

She looked about her as if unsure of what she was going to do. He guessed it the way a draughts player predicts which piece their partner is about to move. He wasn't wrong. She went over to the cage, a large cage on a stand, white and blue with gold mouldings.

A parrot with brightly coloured feathers was perched motionless, its eyes staring fixedly, and it took one a while to realize that they were glass eyes and that the parrot was stuffed.

Even so, she gazed at it tenderly as if it were still alive and, reaching out her hand, she poked a finger between the bars.

Her lips moved as they had done earlier when she was counting her stitches. She spoke to the bird. She might almost have been about to feed it.

He had written:

The cat.

She answered him wordlessly:

The parrot.

The classic reply. He accused his wife of having poisoned his cat, *his* cat, which he'd loved even before meeting her.

Whenever he was sitting by the fireside, drowsy from the warmth given off by the logs, he was tempted to reach out a hand to stroke the animal with soft, black-striped fur that used to come and nestle in his lap the moment he sat down.

'A common alley cat,' she claimed.

At least when they were still talking to one another, nearly

always to start a row. The cat might not have been a pedigree breed, but it wasn't an alley cat either. Its long, supple body stretched along the walls and furniture like the body of a tiger.

Its head was smaller and more triangular than domestic cats and it had a fixed, mysterious gaze.

Émile Bouin claimed that it was a wild cat that had ventured into Paris. He'd found it very young, at the far end of a construction site, in the days when he was working for the Paris highways department. A widower, he lived alone. The cat had become his companion. There had still been houses on the other side of the cul-de-sac where now a huge apartment block was being built.

When he'd crossed the street to marry Marguerite, the cat had followed him.

The cat.

The cat that he'd discovered, one morning, in the darkest corner of the cellar. The cat that had been poisoned when it ate the food that Marguerite had made for it.

The creature had never got used to Marguerite. For the four years that it had lived in the house opposite, it would only take its food from Bouin's hands.

Twice or three times a day, at a simple click of the tongue that was the signal, it would follow its master down the street like a trained dog.

He was the only person to have stroked that cat until the day when they both entered a new home filled with strange smells.

'He's a bit nervous but he'll get used to you . . .'

It hadn't got used to Marguerite. Wary, it never went close to her, or to the cage of the parrot, a big macaw with brilliant colours that didn't speak but let out ear-splitting screeches when it was angry.

Your cat . . .

Your parrot . . .

Marguerite was gentle, almost sweet. One could imagine her young and slender, dressed in pastel tones even then, strolling poetically beside a river wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and holding a parasol.

Indeed, there was a photograph of her looking like that in the dining room. She had remained quite slim. Only her legs had swollen a little. She still had the same dulcet smile in the face of life as she had in the past in front of the photographer.

The cat and the parrot, each as wary as the other, were content to eye one another from a distance, not without a certain respect. When the cat began to purr in its master's lap, the parrot would freeze and watch it with its great round eyes, as if puzzled by the regular, monotonous sound.

Was the cat aware of the power it had over the macaw? Did it not spy on the bird through half-closed eyes with a faint smugness?

It wasn't in a cage. It shared the lovely warmth with its master, who protected it.

A time would come when, tired of dwelling on an insoluble problem, the irritated parrot would grow angry. Its feathers would quiver, its neck would stretch, as if it weren't surrounded by bars, as if it were going to hurl itself at its enemy, and the house would ring with its screeching.

Marguerite would then say:

'It would be best if you left us for a moment . . .'

'Us' meant her and her pet. The cat would quiver too, knowing that it was going to be picked up and carried into the cold dining room, where Bouin would sit in another armchair. Marguerite would open the cage, speaking softly, as if to a lover or a son. She didn't need to put out her hand. She'd go and sit back down in her chair. The macaw looked at the closed door of the

sitting room, listened to reassure itself that it was not in any danger, that the two outsiders, the man and his animal, were no longer there to threaten or mock it.

Then, with a giant leap, it would launch itself at the back of a chair, because it didn't fly. In two or three hops, it reached its mistress and sat on her shoulder.

She'd carry on knitting. The movement of the shiny needles fascinated the bird. When it had had enough, it would rub its huge beak against the woman's cheek, then against the softer skin behind her ear.

Your cat.

Your parrot.

The minutes ticked by, Émile in the dining room, Marguerite in the sitting room, until the marble clock struck the time to start making dinner.

At that point, she was still the one who cooked for both of them.

Initially, Émile had insisted on preparing his cat's food himself. One week, when he had flu and had been confined to bed for three days, she had taken it upon herself to buy lung from the butcher, which she had cut into pieces, cooked and mixed with rice and vegetables.

'Did he eat?'

She'd hesitated.

'Not straight away.'

'Did he eat eventually?'

'Yes.'

He was convinced she was lying. The next day he'd had a temperature of thirty-nine and she'd told him the same thing. The following day, while she was out shopping in Rue Saint-Jacques,