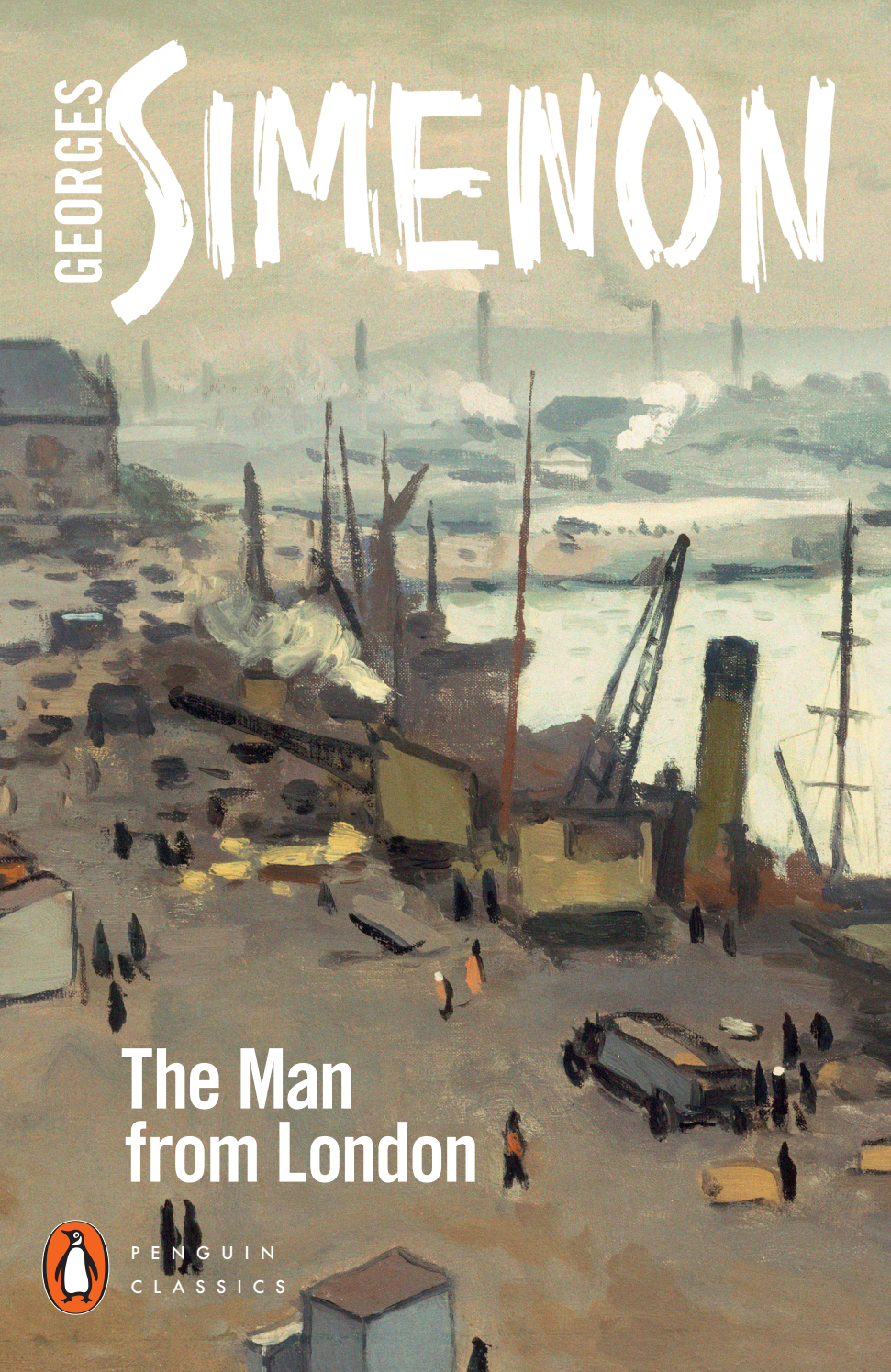
GEORGES

SIMENON



The Man from London

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903 and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. He wrote *The Man from London* in 1933, soon after the successful launch of his celebrated series of novels featuring Inspector Maigret.

GEORGES SIMENON

The Man from London

Translated by HOWARD CURTIS

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I

At the time, you think they are hours like any others. Only with hindsight do you realize how exceptional they were and then you do your damnedest to reconstruct the missing thread, to piece together the isolated minutes.

Why, that evening, had Maloin left home in a foul mood? They had had dinner at seven, as usual. There were grilled herrings, because they were in season. Ernest, his young son, had eaten without making a mess.

Now Maloin remembered his wife saying:

'Henriette dropped by earlier.'

'Again?'

Just because his daughter was a maid in the same town, almost in the same neighbourhood, was no reason for her to come running home on any pretext. Not to mention that it was always to complain. Monsieur Laîné had said this, or Madame Laîné had said that.

'There may be a vacancy coming up at the pharmacist's. At least it'll be cleaner than the butcher's.'

It wasn't anything serious, and yet Maloin had left in a foul mood. His foul mood wasn't serious either. It didn't stop him taking his blue enamel can full of coffee with him, or the bread and butter and sausage his wife had made ready for him.

He left at the same time every evening, at exactly six

minutes to eight. His house was up on the cliff, along with two or three others, and when he walked out he saw the sea below him, with the long jetty of the harbour, and, further to the left, the dock and the town of Dieppe. As it was the middle of winter, the landscape at this hour was nothing but lights: the reds and the greens of the jetties, the white lights of the quays doubled by their reflection in the water, and finally all the teeming lights of the town.

'It's not too foggy,' he observed.

They had only just emerged from a fog that had lasted four days, a fog so thick that people had been bumping into one another in the streets.

Maloin descended the steep path, turned left and headed for the harbour. By two minutes to eight, he was opposite the station. By a minute to eight, he had started climbing the iron ladder to his cabin.

He was a signalman. Unlike other signalmen, whose cabins are on the margins of normal life, surrounded by railway tracks, embankments and signals, his was in town, right in the middle of town, in fact. That was because his station wasn't a real station, but a ferry terminal. The boats that arrived from England twice a day, at one in the afternoon and at midnight, moored alongside the platform. The express from Paris, leaving the main station at the other end of town, would cut through the streets like a tram and stop a few metres from the ferry.

There were five tracks in all, and no fences, no embankments, nothing separating the world of rail from the world as a whole.

Maloin had thirty-two steps to climb, and at the top of

the ladder was the glass-walled cabin, where his day-shift colleague was already buttoning up his overcoat.

'Everything all right?'

'Everything's fine. Four refrigerated wagons are coming through on track two.'

He wasn't really listening. And yet he was never to forget the slightest detail of that night. His colleague was wearing a woollen muffler, and it occurred to Maloin that he should get his wife to knit him one, though a darker, more discreet one. He filled his first pipe of the night and put his tobacco pouch down on the table, next to the bottle of purple ink.

It really was a pleasant place, the best vantage point over the whole town. You could see the lights of two stranded trawlers that would return to harbour with the tide. On the land side, close to the covered market, were the bright lights of the Café Suisse, and beyond them, in a swarm, all the shop windows of the town.

Nearer to him, everything was dark and silent, with closed windows and locked doors, except for the colourful door of the Moulin Rouge, through which the musicians had just entered. Maloin knew they would play by themselves until about ten – the first customers didn't arrive until then. But they played all the same, and the waiters were at their posts.

The cast-iron stove was red. Maloin put his can of coffee down on it, opened his cupboard and got out his bottle of brandy.

He had been doing the same thing, at the same time and in the same place, for nearly thirty years. At nine

o'clock, he let four refrigerated wagons through, then the out-of-service locomotive returning to the main station. At ten, he saw the lights go out in his house on the cliff, though they stayed on at the Bernards', who didn't go to bed before eleven.

As always, he was the first to spot the lights of the Newhaven ferry through the darkness of the horizon, just as things were starting to come to life down below his cabin. The four customs officers on duty slowly arrived, followed by the porters, the waiter from the refreshment room and a taxi. The lights came on one by one in the terminal building, and, at the first hoot of the siren from the ferry, the whole platform lit up as if for a party.

Maloin knew that the train would leave the main station in Dieppe well before the ferry enveloped the dock in smoke.

Obviously, his focus was on the train, but unconsciously, while still keeping his eye on what was happening elsewhere, for example Camélia walking towards the Moulin Rouge, coughing before she went in and then again as she closed the door behind her.

The shortest hour of the night was starting. While the doors of the luggage vans were being opened, the ferry advanced between the jetties, turned in the middle of the dock and threw out its hawsers. And as the only people on the platform were staff, everyone had already counted five first-class and twelve second-class passengers.

Maloin poured himself some coffee, added a drop of brandy and filled a third pipe, which he smoked standing up, looking down at the moving figures. Why did he

home in on one particular man? As usual, barriers had been set up to stop the passengers from getting away without going through customs. But the man in question had come from town and was standing outside the barriers, just below the signal box, so close that Maloin could have spat on him.

He was wearing a grey overcoat, a grey felt hat and kidskin gloves and was smoking a cigarette. That was all Maloin could make out. The ferry crew, the customs officers and the railway employees were all busy with the travellers coming across the gangway. Maloin was the only person to notice, apart from his man in grey, a shadowy figure standing in the bow of the ferry, and at that very moment this figure threw something onto the platform.

It was as dazzling in its precision as a piece of acrobatics. Fifty metres from the crowd, a suitcase had just passed to the other side of the barriers, and now the man from town was holding it in his hand, quite naturally, smoking all the while.

He could have left. Nobody would have dreamed of stopping him. But he stayed where he was, a few metres from the express, like any traveller waiting for a friend. The suitcase appeared to be light. It was one of those little fabric cases designed to contain a suit and a little underwear. Henriette had one just like it.

'What can they possibly have smuggled in?' Maloin wondered.

Not for a moment did it occur to him to report the two unknown men, one of whom was still invisible. It was

none of his business. If he had gone to England, he, too, would have smuggled tobacco or alcohol, it was the done thing.

A young woman was the first to come out of the customs hall and head for a first-class compartment. A fairly elderly man, followed by two porters, took his place in a sleeping car. Almost every day there were wealthy travellers, especially on the night ferry, and from his cabin Maloin had glimpsed ministers, delegates to the League of Nations, actors, film stars. Occasionally photographers turned up and waited for them on the platform.

The man with the suitcase hadn't moved. He looked more like an Englishman than a Frenchman, though you couldn't be sure. A traveller emerged at last from the customs hall, a tall, thin man in a beige raincoat, and walked straight towards the waiting man. It was simple. They were in cahoots. The man from London had thrown the suitcase to his accomplice, and now they were shaking hands.

Would they get on the train? Maloin wondered that when he saw them cross the road and go into the Moulin Rouge, from which a brief snatch of music emerged.

The stationmaster blew his whistle. The bell rang in the signal box. Maloin pushed the second lever all the way down, and a few moments later the train set off for the other station, the real one, from where it would leave for Paris.

The lights were switched off and the doors closed. The customs officers walked off in a group. Two of them went into the Café Suisse. On board the ferry, too, the lights

went off one by one, except in the stern, where a hoist was noisily extracting crates from the gaping hold.

The ritual was the same every night. For two or three hours you would hear the grating sound of the capstan and see the harsh floodlight aimed at the hold.

Ignoring all that, Maloin took a greater interest in the Moulin Rouge and its multi-coloured windows, behind which the silhouettes of dancers moved.

'Maybe Camélia will come out with one of the two,' he told himself.

Because from time to time you would see Camélia leave the place with a companion, turn the first corner, and a moment later you would hear the doorbell of a small hotel. Maloin had gone with her like everyone else, out of curiosity. She was a good girl, always in a good mood, and she always said hello to him when he passed.

'No, they're coming out without her,' he murmured.

He often talked to himself in his cabin. It was almost as if he had company.

'I bet they're going to divide it up!'

Instead of heading for the town, the two men crossed the road and then the tracks, until they reached the darkest, most deserted spot, at the edge of the dock, and Maloin smiled, because nobody ever thought of him. Nobody imagined that up there, in that glass cage with its reddish light, there was a man watching! Loving couples were the least likely to think of it, and Maloin had some amusing memories.

He turned away for a moment, picked up his cup of coffee and swallowed a mouthful. He might have missed

one or two of the strangers' moves, but no more than that. When he looked again, the tall, thin man was abruptly, and with amazing speed, hitting his companion's face.

He was hitting him with his right hand, while still holding the suitcase in his left. His fist was too dark to be bare, as if he had equipped himself with a bludgeon. The capstan was still making its noise.

His face glued to the window pane, Maloin saw the wounded man stagger to the very edge of the dock. He was bound to fall in, and the other man knew that, had calculated his move with that in mind. What he presumably hadn't foreseen was that his victim, in a gesture that might have been instinctive, would grab hold of the suitcase and tear it from his hands.

There was a splash, then another, weaker one. The man had fallen first, followed by the suitcase. The tall, thin man quickly glanced around, then bent over the water.

It wasn't until several days later that Maloin wondered why he hadn't called for help.

The fact was, he just hadn't thought of it. When you imagine something dramatic, you think you'll do this or that. But when you're there, it's different. In reality, he watched as he would have watched any scene in the street, with curiosity, and it was only when the man straightened up again that he muttered:

'The other one must be dead!'

He had let his pipe go out and he relit it as he looked down at the platform – bad-humouredly, because it was his duty to go down, and he was scared. Does a man who has just killed someone think twice about killing someone

else? All the same, he opened his door. Below him, the murderer heard the noise, looked up and quickly strode off in the direction of town.

Heavily, Maloin descended the steps. As he had expected, the water in the dock was still, without the slightest trace of the body or the suitcase. Fifty metres away was the stern of the Newhaven ferry, from which crates were still being unloaded.

Would he go all the way to the Café Suisse, where a policeman was on duty? He hesitated, remembered that he was out of brandy, walked into the Moulin Rouge and sat down at the bar, not far from the door.

'Everything OK?' Camélia asked.

'Everything's fine! I'll have a calvados.'

The band was at the far end, in a pink light, and a few people were dancing. Camélia waited for Maloin to give her a sign, and for a moment he felt like it, then had another calvados and forgot all about it.

He was in a foul mood and he remembered that he had left home in a foul mood, too. This time, it was serious. He hadn't immediately called for help, and he was sure to be blamed for keeping quiet. Not that it was his fault. He simply hadn't thought of it!

'Are you leaving?' Camélia said.

'Yes, I am.'

He looked again at the water in the dock, then climbed back up to his cage, deep in thought. There wouldn't be any point in looking for the body anyway – the man was well and truly dead. As for the other man, he must be a long way away by now.

Maloin checked the board and cleared track three for more goods wagons. A taxi stopped outside the Moulin Rouge, and two men got out, looking for a good time.

'After all, it's none of my business!' Maloin said out loud.

He stoked the stove and drank the last drop of coffee. It was the worst part of the night, the coldest. The winds were in the east, the sky was clear, and in an hour there would be an unpleasant little frost. There was nothing to do, nothing to look at until the opening of the fish market, which began in darkness and ended in broad daylight.

'He killed him to keep the suitcase for himself!' Maloin thought. 'Now he's in a real mess!'

What could possibly be in the suitcase? You don't kill a man for nothing.

It was low tide. In an hour, the water would be no more than three metres deep at the edge of the dock. Or even less – it could be quite deceptive. Maloin frowned, screwed up his nose, scratched his temple and heaved a sigh. There are habits you get into when you live alone for hours on end: you make grimaces and gestures, you grunt, you say a few words from time to time.

'Why not?'

Obviously, it was cold. But if it was worth it . . .

He walked up and down his cabin, still debating with himself. Then he made up his mind, descended the iron ladder and headed for the edge of the platform.

'Too bad!' he muttered again.

He took off his shoes and jacket, glanced at the ferry, which was silent now, and dived in. Until his military

service he had fished on board a trawler, and then had spent five years in the navy.

He disappeared twice, three times, and each time his hands stirred the warm silt at the bottom. The fourth time, he came across an old steel cable. Only on the fifth attempt, when he was starting to get scared, did he bring up the suitcase.

From one moment to the next, his fear turned to panic. He regretted what he had done. He wondered what would happen if someone caught him and he started running, his jacket over his arm, leaving his shoes on the platform.

He had never climbed the iron ladder so quickly. Water was pouring from the suitcase. He himself was dripping wet. But he had work clothes in his cupboard and was able to change. He still hadn't opened the suitcase and he looked at it warily. He still had to go and get his shoes. He got back to his cage just as the Moulin Rouge was closing.

Camélia was the last out, and she glanced over in his direction to make sure he didn't want her tonight. Meanwhile, he was muttering:

'What am I going to do now?'

Open the suitcase, obviously! It was unavoidable!

If he took it to the police station, they wouldn't understand why he'd acted the way he had, and besides, there might be nothing in the suitcase but contraband tobacco.

It wasn't even locked, and the first thing he saw when he lifted the lid was something soft and wet, a heap of formless cloths. He shook it to see if there was anything else there, and that was when he discovered the banknotes.