

## TWENTY THOUSAND STREETS UNDER THE SKY

A London Trilogy

PATRICK HAMILTON

Introduction by
SUSANNA MOORE

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS 1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019 www.nyrb.com

Copyright © 1987 by the Estate of Patrick Hamilton Introduction copyright © 2008 by Susanna Moore All rights reserved.

First published in Great Britain by Constable & Co. Ltd, 1935

Hamilton, Patrick, 1904 Mar. 17-1962.

Twenty thousand streets under the sky : a London trilogy / by Patrick Hamilton ; introduction by Susanna Moore.

p. cm. — (New York Review Books classics)

ISBN-13: 978-1-59017-256-8 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59017-256-6 (alk. paper)

r. City and town life—Fiction. 2. London (England)—Fiction. I. Title. II.

Title: 20,000 streets under the sky. PR6015.A4644T8 2008

823'.912—dc22

2007038826

ISBN 978-1-59017-256-8

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CONTENTS

Introduction · 3

THE MIDNIGHT BELL Bob · II

THE SIEGE OF PLEASURE
Jenny · 222

THE PLAINS OF CEMENT Ella · 333

## CONTENTS

Introduction · 3

THE MIDNIGHT BELL Bob · II

THE SIEGE OF PLEASURE
Jenny · 222

THE PLAINS OF CEMENT Ella · 333



### INTRODUCTION

Patrick Hamilton's novels "The Midnight Bell," "The Siege of Pleasure," and "The Plains of Cement," entwined stories of longing and disappointment, were published under the ironic title Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky in 1935. (It is the tale of an underworld, if not underwater, company of adventurers.) Hamilton was thirty years old. His life was already marked by addiction and obsession, not unlike the lives of many of his characters. His middle-class childhood near Brighton had been fraught (his father a tyrannical alcoholic with literary pretensions) and his adolescence tumultuous (his brother, Bruce, remembered Hamilton's first experience of love as "instant, absolute and agonizing...her mere appearance made him almost faint with longing"). Critical and financial success was to come with the writing of eight novels and several plays, but it did little to alleviate the chaos that he seemed to require—if not for his happiness, at least for his writing. Although there were royalties from his plays and a small inheritance, Hamilton was often in financial distress. He continued to drink heavily (Bruce Hamilton claimed that throughout the Forties, his brother drank three bottles of black-market whiskey a day), and in 1962, at age fifty-eight, he died of cirrhosis of the liver.

"The Midnight Bell," first published in 1929, is the story of Bob, a waiter, and his infatuation with the elusive and devious prostitute, Jenny Maples. Bob's obsession resembles Hamilton's own hapless pursuit of a prostitute named Lily Connolly. In 1932, newly married and recovering from his passion for Connolly, Hamilton was hit by a car while walking in Earl's Court. He was fortunate to survive. Despite numerous operations, he was left with a maimed arm and badly scarred face. "The Siege of Pleasure," the story of Jenny Maples,

was published later that year. "The Plains of Cement," written in 1934, tells the story of Ella, the barmaid who loves Bob.

The streets of London, in particular the area around Shaftesbury Avenue, Marylebone and Euston roads, the neighborhood of Chiswick, and the paths of Regent's Park, are the boundaries of Hamilton's melancholy world. The Prince of Wales Feathers on Warren Street, known to have been one of Hamilton's favorite pubs, is said to be the model for The Midnight Bell. The pub serves as the emotional as well as geographical center of the trilogy, and its regulars are vivid in their absurd and often humorous posturing; comic figures in comparison to the heartrending characters who serve them. Bob, a twenty-five-year-old former sailor, has ambitions to write a book, even if he cannot finish the Gibbon on his bedside table: "He was the first to apprehend his own naïveté....he knew also how dear it was to him: and because it was a secret, and his own, he took it to his bosom like a lover, and walked with it on his walks." Bob's savings of eighty pounds, accrued through endless bar tips and scrupulous scrimping, give him more happiness than anything in the world. "Bob believed that one day his dreams would come true. This was an enormous assumption for one such as Bob, for his dreams amounted to little less than this-to govern his own life, to subdue the terrific disadvantages to which he had been born, and to become eminent amongst men." His small room above the bar is next to that of Ella, Ella-plain, kind, forthrightlistens longingly each night as Bob washes his face and opens his window in preparation for sleep. It is the closest that she will ever come to him. Bob is captivated by the prostitute, Jenny Maples. He does the unthinkable in his wooing of her-he begins to spend his savings, giving her money for her rent on the night that they meet, and buying a smart blue suit to impress her. Charmed by her beauty, benumbed by loneliness, he is no match for the dreamless Jenny. As in his once solitary walks with his dream of becoming a writer, he now roams the streets of Soho searching for Jenny as she makes her rounds. The one thing that she does not want from him is sex, and he is too honorable, too much in love to ask her to sleep with him. It is not sex that Bob needs anywayor even love (he has that from Ella). He needs the gratification of fantasy.

The second book, "The Siege of Pleasure," is Jenny's story. She has yet to meet Bob. A too-pretty servant girl to elderly sisters in Chiswick, Jenny allows an odious stranger to buy her drinks in a pub, impressed, despite her pride and a pert sense of her own physical if not social worth, that he has acquaintances in the army and owns a car:

Who the devil did this apeish little man think he was? If such a one owned a car and consorted with Majors, what were the standards of to-day? She knew how odd the protest was, coming from one in her own lowly situation, but she was unable to curb it. Jenny's soul, if she but knew it, was charged through and through with a vigilant snobbery and awareness of class, and now it rebelled hotly against so uncouth an offshoot of democracy.

That night, she discovers drunkenness. Hamilton describes it lovingly: "A permeating coma, a warm haze of noises and conversation, wrapped her comfortably around—together with something more.... She sat there and let it flow through her. It was a glow, and a kind of premonition.... It was like the effect on the body of good news, without the good news." The next morning, she is surprised to find herself in the bed of yet another gentleman, stripped to her underwear. Late for work, her head throbbing, she easily convinces herself to abandon the two old ladies waiting for breakfast in Chiswick. She accepts her dissolute gentleman friend's offer of a curative whiskey, and spends the night with him, seduced by his elegance: "There was no doubt that he was a 'gentleman' all right.... She divined that he had been an 'officer' in the war, ever since which, with money of his own, he had devoted himself in a singleminded way to drunkenness." In a few weeks' time, Jenny is picking up strangers on Shaftesbury Avenue.

In the third book, "The Plains of Cement," the point of view belongs to Ella, the barmaid who loves Bob so faithfully. Courted by an elderly, snaggle-toothed patron of The Midnight Bell named Mr. Eccles, Ella in her terrible loneliness allows him to convince her for a moment of her true worth, even if she perceives that the wildly irritating Mr. Eccles is a fool beneath her notice. Ella, conscious that she is not a lady, is grateful for his attention. She goes to the theater with him, and to dinner, and accepts his flowers, and his kisses against the railings. With his shameless self-regard, Mr. Eccles manages to talk her into a betrothal, tempting her with his wealth and superiority of position.

As she served that night in the crowded bar, and laughingly rebuked the insincere compliments of the men... she wondered what they would all think if they knew that there was a gentleman with a rich private income behind her, who really did think she was beautiful, and was prepared to support his opinion with fur coats and legality. It was not a chance which came the way of many barmaids, and there were few who would not rush at it.

Ella comes alarmingly close to marrying her unlikely suitor. "She almost felt she could marry Mr. Eccles... if only to solve her puzzles, and get away for good and all from the slow, mournful influence of Bob." One evening after a solitary visit to the cinema, Ella sees Bob in the street and they have a cup of tea together.

It was darker and colder than ever outside, and they had to walk into Regent Street, where he was going to see her on to her bus. He took her arm as they walked along, and they had very little to say. She was only just keeping her teeth from chattering and she had an extraordinary feeling as though he was leading her along in the crowd not to her bus but to her execution, silently sympathetic with her bravery, himself moved by her ordeal. Perhaps he knew after all. And, indeed, it was a form of execution, for her farewell to him was going into the darkness for ever from the shining yet unattainable world she had glimpsed.

The world she has glimpsed is the world of love—Ella loves Bob, and Bob loves Jenny, and Jenny loves no one at all.

Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky is about unrequited love, loneliness, money, alcohol, and class. Hamilton's characters are servants, barmaids, clerks, thieves, publicans in an England in the years of economic depression following the Great War. The men and women of Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky live in rooming houses, take the bus, save their pay. The crush of poverty, the beguilement of drink, and the imprisoning strictures of the class system render their lives arduous and solitary. When the world and its ways are too much for them despite the valor of their struggle, they fall into depression, crime, and madness. It is thanks to Hamilton's furious sympathy for these assertively ordinary people (we know from the first page that it will all go wrong) that we read on, filled with our own dread and longing.

And we read on because the writing is sublime. There is vivacity, sensitivity, mordancy. Hamilton's sense of the rhythm and the eccentricity of language is sharp and subtle; his wit both dry and exaggerated. This Dickensian passage describes Bob's first visit to the filthy flat in Bolsover Street that Jenny shares with the prostitute, Prunella:

The house was of four stories, and seemed to be untenanted. At least, you could only hope that that was what accounted for the evil and deliberate stagnation with which it confronted the world. She let herself in with a large key, and they found themselves in a dark passage which chilled Bob's soul, but which had no such effect upon Prunella, whose dainty high heels went clock-clocking up the bare wooden stairs. He followed. On each landing three different doors led into three different rooms containing three different families. All the doors were closed, but the awful belligerence of the poor was to be heard and sensed. On the first floor a man was reviling a woman, and a child, in another room, screaming. It did this

not as though it was being beaten (which it possibly was) but as though it was being put to death. On the second floor someone was playing a harmonica, but in the front room an old woman groaned. You could not imagine what at, unless it was the harmonica. On the third floor two other children were being put to death.

Despite Hamilton's background and wealth, his interest was not in his own class, but in those men and women on the periphery of society; the poor, the sick, and the dispossessed. Position, like drink and the blindness of passion, is never far from his mind. Jenny, Bob, and Ella are astutely mindful of their place, and that of everyone around them—it is often the only thing that they get right, even when it is not to their advantage.

Hamilton, as gloomy and obsessive a fellow as some of his characters, was given to a determined dissolution, if not plain unhappiness. It is as painful to imagine Hamilton walking the dark London streets in the hope of coming upon Lily Connolly seemingly by chance, as it is to read of Bob's humiliating pursuit of Jenny Maples. Painful to imagine Hamilton, with his ruined face, lying drunk in the gutters of Soho. His compassion for his characters, even when he gently mocks them—even when he dislikes them—is so just, so full of understanding, that one cannot but wish that he had spared some of it for himself.

-Susanna Moore

# TWENTY THOUSAND STREETS UNDER THE SKY

### THE MIDNIGHT BELL

#### BOB

### CHAPTER I

CLEEPING, just before five, on a dark October's afternoon, The had a singularly vivid and audible dream. He dreamed that he was on a ship, which was bound upon some far, lovely, and momentous voyage, but which had left the coast less than an hour ago. The coast, implicitly and strangely, was that of Spain. He was leaning over the side and peacefully savouring the phase of the journey—a phase which he knew well. It was that curiously dreamlike and uninspiring phase in which the familiarity and proximity of the coast yet steals all venturesomeness from the undertaking, and in which the climax of departure is dying down, to the level tune of winds and waves and motion, into the throbbing humdrum of voyage. throbbing would continue for weeks and weeks. . . . A strong wind was blowing, buffeting his ears, roaring over the green waves, and rendering utterly silent and unreal the land he had just left. He was extraordinarily cold, and a trifle sick. But he did not want to move-indeed he could not move. He was lulled by the mighty swish of the water beneath him, as it went seething out into the wake, and he could not, under any circumstances, move. . . .

He awoke, with jarring abruptness, into the obliterating darkness of his own room. The swishing was his own breath, and the disinclination to move traceable to his snuggled, though cold and stiff position, on the bed. His dream sickness was a waking sickness. The thundering of the wind in his dream was the passing of a lorry in the Euston Road outside.

The burden of cold and ever-recurring existence weighed down his spirit. Here he was again.

He took stock of his miserable predicament. He was in his little hovel of a room—on his bed. He was not in bed, though.

Save for his coat and shoes he was fully dressed, and he was protected from the cold by his rough quilt alone. He apprehended that his clothes were wrinkled and frowsy from his heavy recumbence. . . .

It was pitch dark—but it was not yet five o'clock. His alarm would have gone, if it had been. He need not yet stir. There were no sounds of life in the house below.

Why had he slept? He remembered coming up here, a happy man, at half-past three. It had been bright daylight then. Now the dark was uncanny.

He turned over with a sigh and a fresh spasm of sickness swept over him. He waited motionlessly and submissively until it passed. Then he cursed himself softly and vindictively. He faced facts. He had got drunk at lunch again.

At last he sprang from bed and lit the gas.

He poured out all the water from his jug into his basin, and plunged in his head, holding his breath and keeping down. He gasped into his towel and rubbed madly.

Braced by the friction he returned to normal and all but unrepentant humanity again. Horror fled. For a moment he had been a racked soul contemplating itself in a pitch-dark and irrevocable Universe. Now he was reinstated as the waiter of "The Midnight Bell" dressing in his room a quarter of an hour before opening time.

Nevertheless, the gas-lit walls and objects around him were heavy with his own depression—the depression of one who awakes from the excess in the late afternoon. Only at dawn should a man awake from excess—at dawn agleam with red and sorrowful resolve. The late, dark afternoon, with an evening's toil ahead, affords no such palliation.

In the house below—"The Midnight Bell"—the silence was creepy. Creepy in a perfectly literal sense—the silence of things creeping. It was the silence of malignant things lurking in passages, and softly creeping up a little, and lurking again. . . .

There came, however, the welcome and dispelling sound of light women's footsteps on the bare wooden stairs: and a humming, buoyant body swept past his door, and slammed itself into the room adjoining his.

That was Ella—his pert companion in toil—the barmaid of "The Midnight Bell."

She always hummed when she passed his door. In some respects, he reflected, she was a very self-conscious girl. He believed also that the brusque bumpings, the lively jug-and-basin sounds, which now came through the wall, were similarly subtly challenging and alluding to himself. A rather mystifying creature, of whom he knew, really, nothing—for all their chaff and friendliness. Her afternoon had been spent in goodness. She had been over to see her sick "Auntie" (as she so naïvely and characteristically called her) at Clapham.

By and by she called out to him, through the wall, chanting his name in two distinct syllables.

- "Bo-ob!"
- " Ullo ! "
- "What's the time, Bob?"
- "Five To!"

Ella's retort was a mumble and a bump.

- "What?"
- " Nuth-thing!"

Silence.

They had five more minutes. They did not speak again. The hush in the house beneath them once more asserted itself. It was the hush of behind-scenes just before the show. These two, high up here, quietly preparing and making themselves decent, were aware of the part they played, and of their shared distinction from the besieging many.

He was now all but ready. He put on his white coat, and fixed his white apron. He then went over to his mirror, in front of which he crouched eagerly to brush his hair—a soothing and reviving operation in itself.

His own reflection gave little dissatisfaction. The clear, clean skin; the clear, clean teeth; the firm clean-shaven features; the nous, efficiency, and yet frankness of his face; the dark, well-kept hair; the dark brown eyes, set rather far back—all these collectively were as bracing to a remorseful spirit as you could wish. He was, however, not an Englishman. His American and Irish parentage gleamed from him—most particularly his American. His father had been (and it was his