
Opening Extract from...

Hangover Square

Written by Patrick Hamilton

Published by Penguin Classics

PATRICK HAMILTON

Hangover Square

A story of darkest Earl's Court

with an Introduction by J. B. Priestley

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Constable 1941
Published in Penguin Books 1956
Reprinted with an Introduction 1974
Reprinted in Penguin Classics 2001

15

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc
Set in Linotype Pilgrim

ISBN-13: 978–0–141–18589–7

The First Part

CHRISTMAS TRAVEL

Why so pale and wan, fond lover,
Prythee, why so pale?
Will, if looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
Prythee, why so pale?

Why so dull and mute, young sinner?
Prythee, why so mute?
Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't?
Prythee, why so mute?

SIR J. SUCKLING

Chapter One

Click! ... Here it was again! He was walking along the cliff at Hunstanton and it had come again ... *Click!* ...

Or would the word *'snap'* or *'crack'* describe it better?

It was a noise inside his head, and yet it was not a noise. It was the sound which a noise makes when it abruptly ceases: it had a temporarily deafening effect. It was as though one had blown one's nose too hard and the outer world had suddenly become dim and dead. And yet he was not physically deaf: it was merely that in this physical way alone could he think of what had happened in his head.

It was as though a shutter had fallen. It had fallen noiselessly, but the thing had been so quick that he could only think of it as a crack or a snap. It had come over his brain as a sudden film, induced by a foreign body, might come over the eye. He felt that if only he could 'blink' his brain it would at once be dispelled. A film. Yes, it was like the other sort of film, too – a 'talkie'. It was as though he had been watching a talking film, and all at once the sound-track had failed. The figures on the screen continued to move, to behave more or less logically; but they were figures in a new, silent, indescribably eerie world. Life, in fact, which had been for him a moment ago a 'talkie', had all at once become a silent film. And there was no music.

He was not frightened, because by now he was used to it. This had been happening for the last year, the last two years – in fact he could trace it back as far as his early boyhood. Then it had been nothing so sharply defined, but how well he could remember what he called his 'dead' moods, in which he could do nothing ordinarily, think of nothing ordinarily, could not attend to his lessons, could not play, could not even listen to his

rowdy companions. They used to rag him for it until it at last became an accepted thing. 'Old Bone' was said to be in one of his 'dotty' moods. Mr Thorne used to be sarcastic. 'Or is this one of your – ah – delightfully convenient periods of amnesia, my dear Bone?' But even Mr Thorne came to accept it. 'Extraordinary boy,' he once heard Mr Thorne say (not knowing that he was overheard), 'I really believe it's perfectly genuine.' And often, instead of making him look a fool in front of the class, he would stop, give him a curious, sympathetic look, and, telling him to sit down, would without any ironic comment ask the next boy to do what he had failed to do.

'Dead' moods – yes, all his life he had had 'dead' moods, but in those days he had slowly slipped into and out of them – they had not been so frequent, so sudden, so dead, so completely dividing him from his other life. They did not arrive with this extraordinary 'snap' – that had only been happening in the last year or so. At first he had been somewhat disturbed about it; had thought at moments of consulting a doctor even. But he had never done so, and now he knew he never would. He was well enough; the thing did not seriously inconvenience him; and there were too many other things to worry about – my God, there were too many other things to worry about!

And now he was walking along the cliff at Hunstanton, on Christmas afternoon, and the thing had happened again. He had had Christmas dinner with his aunt, and he had gone out, as he had told her, to 'walk it off'. He wore a light raincoat. He was thirty-four, and had a tall, strong, beefy, ungainly figure. He had a fresh, red complexion and a small moustache. His eyes were big and blue and sad and slightly bloodshot with beer and smoke. He looked as though he had been to an inferior public school and would be pleased to sell you a second-hand car. Just as certain people look unmistakably 'horsey', bear the stamp of Newmarket, he bore the stamp of Great Portland Street. He made you think of road houses, and there are thousands of his sort frequenting the saloon bars of public-houses all over England. His full mouth was weak, however, rather than cruel. His name was George Harvey Bone.

It was, actually, only in the few moments following the

sudden transition – the breaking down of the sound-track, the change from the talkie to the silent film – that he now ever thought about, or indeed was conscious of – this extraordinary change which took place in his mind. Soon enough he was watching the silent film – the silent film without music – as though there had never been any talkie – as though what he saw had always been like this.

A silent film without music – he could have found no better way of describing the weird world in which he now moved. He looked at passing objects and people, but they had no colour, vivacity, meaning – he was mentally deaf to them. They moved like automatons, without motive, without volition of their own. He could hear what they said, he could understand their words, he could answer them, even; but he did this automatically, without having to think of what they had said or what he was saying in return. Therefore, though they spoke it was as though they had not spoken, as though they had moved their lips but remained silent. They had no valid existence; they were not creatures experiencing pleasure or pain. There was, in fact, no sensation, no pleasure or pain at all in this world: there was only himself – his dreary, numbed, dead self.

There was no sensation, but there was something to be done. Emphatically, most emphatically there was something to be done. So soon as he had recovered from the surprise – but nowadays it was hardly a surprise – of that snap in his head, that break in the sound-track, that sudden burst into a new, silent world – so soon as he had recovered from this he was aware that something had to be done. He could not think what it was at first, but this did not worry him. He could never think of it at first, but it would come: if he didn't nag at it, but relaxed mentally, it would come.

For two or three minutes he walked along in a dream, barely conscious of anything. The motion of his body caused his raincoat to make a small thundering noise: his big sports shoes creaked and rustled on the grass of the cliff-top. On his left, down below, lay the vast grey sweep of the Wash under the sombre sky of Christmas afternoon: on his right the scrappy villas in the unfinished muddy roads. A few couples were about,

cold, despairing, bowed down by the hopeless emptiness and misery of the season and time of day. He passed a shelter, around which some children were running, firing toy pistols at each other. Then he remembered, without any difficulty, what it was he had to do: he had to kill Netta Longdon.

He was going to kill her, and then he was going to Maidenhead, where he would be happy.

It was a relief to him to have remembered, for now he could think it all out. He liked thinking it out: the opportunity to do so was like lighting up a pipe, something to get at, to get his teeth into.

Why must he kill Netta? Because things had been going on too long, and he must get to Maidenhead and be peaceful and contented again. And why Maidenhead? Because he had been happy there with his sister, Ellen. They had had a splendid fortnight, and she had died a year or so later. He would go on the river again, and be at peace. He liked the High Street, too. He would not drink any more – or only an occasional beer. But first of all he had to kill Netta.

This Netta business had been going on too long. When was he going to kill her? Soon – this year certainly. At once would be best – as soon as he got back to London – he was going back tomorrow, Boxing Day. But these things had to be planned: he had so many plans: too many. The thing was so incredibly, absurdly easy. That was why it was so difficult to choose the right plan. You had only to hit her over the head when she was not looking. You had only to ask her to turn her back to you because you had a surprise for her, and then strike her down. You had only to invite her to a window, to ask her to look down at something, and then thrown her out. You had only to put a scarf playfully round her neck, and fondle it admiringly, and then strangle her. You had only to surprise her in her bath. lift up her legs and hold her head down. All so easy: all so silent. Only there would be meddling from the police – 'questions asked' – that had to be remembered: he wasn't going to have any questioning or meddling. But then of course the police couldn't find him in Maidenhead, or if they did they couldn't touch him there. No, there was no difficulty anywhere: it was a

'cinch', as they said: but it had got to be planned, and he must do the planning now. It had all been going on too long.

When was it to be then? Tomorrow – Boxing Day – as soon as he saw her again. If he could get her alone – why not? No – there was something wrong with that. What was it? What on earth was it? ... Oh yes – of course – the ten pounds. His aunt had given him ten pounds. She had given him a cheque this morning as a Christmas present. He must wait till he had spent the ten pounds – get the benefit of the ten pounds – before killing Netta. Obviously. What about the New Year, then – January the first? That seemed a good idea – starting the New Year – 1939. The New Year – the turn of the year – that meant spring before long. Then it would be warmer, Maidenhead would be warmer. He didn't want to have to go to Maidenhead in the cold. He wanted to go on the river. Then he must wait for the Spring. It was too cold to kill Netta yet. That sounded silly, but it was a fact.

Or was all this shilly-shallying on his part? Was he putting it off again? He was always putting it off. In some mysterious way it seemed to go right out of his head, and it had all been going on too long. Perhaps he ought to take himself in hand, and kill her while it was cold. Perhaps he ought not even to wait until he had had the benefit of his ten pounds. He had put it off such a long while now, and if he went on like this would it ever get done?

By now he had reached the edge of the Town Golf Course and he turned round and retraced his steps. A light wind struck him in the face and roared in his ears, and he looked at the feeble sun, in the nacreous sky, declining behind the bleak little winter resort of an aunt who had come up to scratch. Strange aunts, strange Hunstantons! – how did they stand it? He had had three days of it, and he'd have a fit if he didn't get back tomorrow. And yet Aunt Mary was a good sort, trying to do her duty by him as his nearest of kin, trying to be 'modern', a 'sport' as she called it, pretending that she liked 'cocktails' though she was nearly seventy. My God – *'cocktails!'* – if she only knew! But she was a good sort. She would be cheerful at tea, and then when she saw he didn't want to talk she would leave him alone

and let him sit in his chair and read *The Bar 20 Rides Again*, by Clarence Mulford. But of course he wouldn't be reading – he would be thinking of Netta and how and when he was going to kill her.

The Christmas Day children were still playing with their Christmas Day toy pistols around the Christmas Day shelter. The wet grass glowed in the diffused afternoon light. The little pier, completely deserted, jutted out into the sea, its silhouette shaking against the grey waves, as though it trembled with cold but intended to stay where it was to demonstrate some principle. On his left he passed the Boys' School, and then the row of boarding-houses, one after another, with their mad names; on his right the putting course and tennis courts. But no boys, and no boarders, and no putters, and no tennis players in the seaside town of his aunt on Christmas Day.

He turned left, and went upwards and away from the sea – the Wash in which King John had lost his jewels – towards the street which contained the semi-detached villa in which tea, with Christmas cake and cold turkey (in front of an electric fire at eight o'clock), awaited him.

Chapter Two

Click! . . .

Hullo, hullo – here we are! – here we are again!

He was on Hunstanton station and it had happened again. Click, snap, pop – whatever you like – and it all came flooding back!

The sound-track had been resumed with a sudden switch; the grim, dreary, mysterious silent film had vanished utterly away, and all things were bright, clear, vivacious, sane, colourful and logical around him, as he carried his bag, at three o'clock on Boxing Day, along the platform of the little seaside terminus.

It had happened at the barrier, as he offered his ticket to be clipped by the man. You might have thought that the click of the man's implement as he punctured the ticket had been the

click inside his head, but actually it had happened a fraction of a second later – a fraction of a fraction of a second, for the man still held his ticket, and he was still looking into the man's grey eyes, when he heard the shutter go up in his head, and everything came flooding back.

It was like bursting up into fresh air after swimming gravely for a long time in silent, green depths: the first thing of which he was aware was the terrific sustained hissing noise coming from the engine which was to take him back to London. While he yet looked into the man's eyes he was aware of this noise. He knew, too, perfectly well, that this noise had been going on ever since he had entered the station, while he was buying his ticket, while he was dragging his bag to the barrier. But it was only now, now that his brain had clicked back again, that he heard it. And with it every other sort of noise which had been going on before – the rolling of a station trolley, the clanking of milk-cans, the slamming of compartment doors – was heard by him for the first time. And all this in the brief moment while he still looked into the eyes of the man who had punctured his ticket. Perhaps, because of his surprise at what had happened, he had looked into the eyes of the man too long. Perhaps the man had only caught his eye, had only looked at him because he had subconsciously wondered why this passenger was not getting a 'move on'. However that might be, he had only betrayed himself for a fraction of a second, and now he was walking up the platform.

What a noise that engine made! And yet it exhilarated him. He always had these few moments of exhilaration after his brain had 'blinked' and he found himself hearing and understanding sounds and sights once again. After that first tremendous rush of noise and comprehension – exactly like the roar of clarification which would accompany the snatching away, from a man's two ears, of two oily blobs of cotton wool which he had worn for twenty-four hours – he took a simple elated pleasure in hearing and looking at everything he passed.

Then there was the pleasure of knowing exactly what he was doing. He knew where he was, and he knew what he was doing. It was Boxing Day, and he was taking the train back to London.

He had spent the Christmas holiday with his aunt who had given him ten pounds. This was a station – Hunstanton station – where he had arrived. Only it had been night when he arrived. Now he was catching the 3.4 in the afternoon. He must find a third-class compartment. Other people were going back to London, too. The engine was letting out steam, as engines will, as engines presumably have to before they start. That was a porter, whose business it was to carry luggage, and who collected a tip for doing so. There was the sea. This was a seaside town on the east coast. It was all right: it was all clear in his head again.

What, then, had been happening in his head a few moments before – and in the long hours before that? What? ... Well, never mind now. There was plenty of time to think about that when he had found a compartment. He must find an empty one so that he could be by himself. If he had any luck, he might be alone all the way to London – there oughtn't to be many people travelling on Boxing Day.

He walked up to the far end of the train, and selected an empty compartment. As he turned the handle of this, the hissing of the engine abruptly stopped. The station seemed to reel at the impact of the sudden hush, and then, a moment later, began to carry on its activities again in a more subdued, in an almost furtive way. That, he realized, was exactly like what happened in his head – his head, that was to say, when it went the other way, the nasty way, the bad, dead way. It had just gone the right way, and he was back in life again.

He put his suit-case on the rack, clicked it open, and stood on the seat to see if he had packed his yellow-covered *The Bar 20 Rides Again*. He had. It was on the top. It was wonderful how he did things when he didn't know what he was doing. (Or did he, at the time, in some way know what he was doing? Presumably he did.) Anyway, here was his *Bar 20*. He clicked the bag shut again, sat down, pulled his overcoat over his legs, put the book on his lap, and looked out of the window.

He was back in life again. It was good to be back in life. And yet how quiet and dismal it was in this part of the world. The trolley was still being rolled about the platform at the barrier

end of the station: two porters were shouting to each other in the distance; another porter came along trying all the doors, reaching and climactically trying his own handle, and fading away again in a series of receding jabs: he could hear two people talking to each other through the wooden walls of the train, two compartments away; and if he listened he could hear, through the open window, the rhythmic purring of the mud-coloured sea, which he could see from here a hundred yards or so beyond the concrete front which was so near the station as to seem to be almost part of it. Not a soul on the front. Cold and quiet. And the sea purred gently. Dismal, dismal, dismal.

He listened to the gentle purring of the sea, and waited for the train to start, his red face and beer-shot eyes assuming an expression of innocent vacancy and misery.