

# Hunger

Translated from the Norwegian of  
**Knut Hamsun**  
by George Egerton

With an Introduction  
by Edwin Björkman

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## Knut Hamsun

*Since the death of Ibsen and Strindberg, Hamsun is undoubtedly the foremost creative writer of the Scandinavian countries. Those approaching most nearly to his position are probably Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden and Henrik Pontoppidan in Denmark. Both these, however, seem to have less than he of that width of outlook, validity of interpretation and authority of tone that made the greater masters what they were.*

*His reputation is not confined to his own country or the two Scandinavian sister nations. It spread long ago over the rest of Europe, taking deepest roots in Russia, where several editions of his collected works have already appeared, and where he is spoken of as the equal of Tolstoy and Dostoyevski. The enthusiasm of this approval is a characteristic symptom that throws interesting light on Russia as well as on Hamsun.*

*Hearing of it, one might expect him to prove a man of the masses, full of keen social consciousness. Instead, he must be classed as an individualistic romanticist and a highly subjective aristocrat, whose foremost passion in life is violent, defiant deviation*

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*from everything average and ordinary. He fears and flouts the dominance of the many, and his heroes, who are nothing but slightly varied images of himself, are invariably marked by an originality of speech and action that brings them close to, if not across, the borderline of the eccentric.*

*In all the literature known to me, there is no writer who appears more ruthlessly and fearlessly himself, and the self thus presented to us is as paradoxical and rebellious as it is poetic and picturesque. Such a nature, one would think, must be the final blossoming of powerful hereditary tendencies, converging silently through numerous generations to its predestined climax. All we know is that Hamsun's forebears were sturdy Norwegian peasant folk, said only to be differentiated from their neighbours by certain artistic preoccupations that turned one or two of them into skilled craftsmen. More certain it is that what may or may not have been innate was favoured and fostered and exaggerated by physical environment and early social experiences.*

*Hamsun was born on Aug. 4, 1860, in one of the sunny valleys of central Norway. From there his parents moved when he was only four to settle in the far northern district of Lofoden — that land of extremes, where the year, and not the day, is evenly divided between darkness and light; where winter is a long dreamless sleep, and summer a passionate dream without sleep; where land and sea meet and*

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*intermingle so gigantically that man is all but crushed between the two — or else raised to titanic measures by the spectacle of their struggle.*

*The Northland, with its glaring lights and black shadows, its unearthly joys and abysmal despairs, is present and dominant in every line that Hamsun ever wrote. In that country his best tales and dramas are laid. By that country his heroes are stamped wherever they roam. Out of that country they draw their principal claims to probability. Only in that country do they seem quite at home. Today we know, however, that the pathological case represents nothing but an extension of perfectly normal tendencies. In the same way we know that the miraculous atmosphere of the Northland serves merely to develop and emphasize traits that lie slumbering in men and women everywhere. And on this basis the fantastic figures created by Hamsun relate themselves to ordinary humanity as the microscopic enlargement of a cross section to the living tissues. What we see is true in everything but proportion.*

*The artist and the vagabond seem equally to have been in the blood of Hamsun from the very start. Apprenticed to a shoemaker, he used his scant savings to arrange for the private printing of a long poem and a short novel produced at the age of eighteen, when he was still signing himself Knud Pedersen Hamsund. This done, he abruptly quit his apprenticeship and entered on that period of*

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*restless roving through trades and continents which lasted until his first real artistic achievement with "Hunger," in 1888-90. It has often been noted that practically every one of Hamsun's heroes is of the same age as he was then, and that their creator takes particular pain to accentuate this fact. It is almost as if, during those days of feverish literary struggle, he had risen to heights where he saw things so clearly that no subsequent experience could add anything but occasional details.*

*Before he reached those heights, he had tried life as coal-heaver and school teacher, as road-mender and surveyor's attendant, as farm hand and street-car conductor, as lecturer and free-lance journalist, as tourist and emigrant. Twice he visited this country during the middle eighties, working chiefly on the plains of North Dakota and in the streets of Chicago. Twice during that time he returned to his own country and passed through the experiences pictured in "Hunger," before, at last, he found his own literary self and thus also a hearing from the world at large. While here, he failed utterly to establish any sympathetic contact between himself and the new world, and his first book after his return in 1888 was a volume of studies named "The Spiritual Life of Modern America," which a prominent Norwegian critic once described as "a masterpiece of distorted criticism." But I own a copy of this book, the fly-leaf of which bears the following inscription in the author's autograph:*

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*"A youthful work. It has ceased to represent my opinion of America. May 28, 1903. Knut Hamsun."*

*In its original form, "Hunger" was merely a sketch, and as such it appeared in 1888 in a Danish literary periodical, "New Earth." It attracted immediate widespread attention to the author, both on account of its unusual theme and striking form. It was a new kind of realism that had nothing to do with photographic reproduction of details. It was a professedly psychological study that had about as much in common with the old-fashioned conceptions of man's mental activities as the delirious utterances of a fever patient. It was life, but presented in the impressionistic temper of a Gauguin or Cezanne. On the appearance of the completed novel in 1890, Hamsun was greeted as one of the chief heralds of the neo-romantic movement then spreading rapidly through the Scandinavian north and finding typical expressions not only in the works of theretofore unknown writers, but in the changed moods of masters like Ibsen and Björnson and Strindberg.*

*It was followed two years later by "Mysteries," which pretends to be a novel, but which may be better described as a delightfully irresponsible and defiantly subjective roaming through any highway or byway of life or letters that happened to take the author's fancy at the moment of writing. Some one has said of that book that in its abrupt swingings from laughter to tears, from irreverence to awe,*

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*from the ridiculous to the sublime, one finds the spirits of Dostoyevski and Mark Twain blended.*

*The novels "Editor Lyng" and "New Earth," both published in 1893, were social studies of Christiania's Bohemia and chiefly characterized by their violent attacks on the men and women exercising the profession which Hamsun had just made his own. Then came "Pan" in 1894, and the real Hamsun, the Hamsun who ever since has moved logically and with increasing authority to "The Growth of the Soil," stood finally revealed. It is a novel of the Northland, almost without a plot, and having its chief interest in a primitively spontaneous man's reactions to a nature so overwhelming that it makes mere purposeless existence seem a sufficient end in itself. One may well question whether Hamsun has ever surpassed the purely lyrical mood of that book, into which he poured the ecstatic dreams of the little boy from the south as, for the first time, he saw the forestclad northern mountains bathing their feet in the ocean and their crowns in the light of a never-setting sun. It is a wonderful paean to untamed nature and to the forces let loose by it within the soul of man.*

*Like most of the great writers over there, Hamsun has not confined himself to one poetic mood or form, but has tried all of them. From the line of novels culminating in "Pan," he turned suddenly to the drama, and in 1895 appeared his first play, "At the Gates of the Kingdom." It was the opening*

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*drama of a trilogy and was followed by "The Game of Life" in 1896 and "Sunset Glow" in 1898. The first play is laid in Christiania, the second in the Northland, and the third in Christiania again. The hero of all three is Ivar Kareno, a student and thinker who is first presented to us at the age of 29, then at 39, and finally at 50. His wife and several other characters accompany the central figure through the trilogy, of which the lesson seems to be that every one is a rebel at 30 and a renegade at 50. But when Kareno, the irreconcilable rebel of "At the Gates of the Kingdom," the heaven-storming truth-seeker of "The Game of Life," and the acclaimed radical leader in the first acts of "Sunset Glow," surrenders at last to the powers that be in order to gain a safe and sheltered harbor for his declining years, then another man of 29 stands ready to denounce him and to take up the rebel cry of youth to which he has become a traitor. Hamsun's ironical humor and whimsical manner of expression do more than the plot itself to knit the plays into an organic unit, and several of the characters are delightfully drawn, particularly the two women who play the greatest part in Kareno's life: his wife Eline, and Teresita, who is one more of his many feminine embodiments of the passionate and changeable Northland nature. Any attempt to give a political tendency to the trilogy must be held wasted. Characteristically, Kareno is a sort of Nietzschean rebel against the victorious majority, and Hamsun's*

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seemingly cynical conclusions stress man's capacity for action rather than the purposes toward which that capacity may be directed.

Of three subsequent plays, "*Vendt the Monk*," (1903), "*Queen Tamara*" (1903) and "*At the Mercy of Life*" (1910), the first mentioned is by far the most remarkable. It is a verse drama in eight acts, centred about one of Hamsun's most typical vagabond heroes. The monk Vendt has much in common with Peer Gynt without being in any way an imitation or a duplicate. He is a dreamer in revolt against the world's alleged injustice, a rebel against the very powers that invisibly move the universe, and a passionate lover of life who in the end accepts it as a joyful battle and then dreams of the long peace to come. The vigor and charm of the verse proved a surprise to the critics when the play was published, as Hamsun until then had given no proof of any poetic gift in the narrower sense.

From 1897 to 1912 Hamsun produced a series of volumes that simply marked a further development of the tendencies shown in his first novels: "*Siesta*," short stories, 1897; "*Victoria*," a novel with a charming love story that embodies the tenderest note in his production, 1898; "*In Wonderland*," travelling sketches from the Caucasus, 1903; "*Brushwood*," short stories, 1903; "*The Wild Choir*," a collection of poems, 1904; "*Dreamers*," a novel, 1904; "*Struggling Life*," short stories and

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travelling sketches, 1905; "*Beneath the Autumn Star*," a novel, 1906; "*Benoni*," and "*Rosa*," two novels forming to some extent sequels to "*Pan*," 1908; "*A Wanderer Plays with Muted Strings*," a novel, 1909; and "*The Last Joy*," a shapeless work, half novel and half mere uncoördinated reflections, 1912.

The later part of this output seemed to indicate a lack of development, a failure to open up new vistas, that caused many to fear that the principal contributions of Hamsun already lay behind him. Then appeared in 1913 a big novel, "*Children of the Time*," which in many ways struck a new note, although led up to by "*Rosa*" and "*Benoni*." The horizon is now wider, the picture broader. There is still a central figure, and still he possesses many of the old Hamsun traits, but he has crossed the meridian at last and become an observer rather than a fighter and doer. Nor is he the central figure to the same extent as Lieutenant Glahn in "*Pan*" or Kareno in the trilogy. The life pictured is the life of a certain spot of ground — Segelfoss manor, and later the town of Segelfoss — rather than that of one or two isolated individuals. One might almost say that Hamsun's vision has become social at last, were it not for his continued accentuation of the irreconcilable conflict between the individual and the group.

"*Segelfoss Town*" in 1915 and "*The Growth of the Soil*" — the title ought to be "*The Earth's In-*

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crease"—in 1918 continue along the path Hamsun entered by "Children of the Time." The scene is laid in his beloved Northland, but the old primitive life is going—going even in the outlying districts, where the pioneers are already breaking ground for new permanent settlements. Business of a modern type has arrived, and much of the quiet humor displayed in these the latest and maturest of Hamsun's works springs from the spectacle of its influence on the natives, whose hands used always to be in their pockets, and whose credulity in face of the improbable was only surpassed by their unwillingness to believe anything reasonable. Still the life he pictures is largely primitive, with nature as man's chief antagonist, and to us of the crowded cities it brings a charm of novelty rarely found in books today. With it goes an understanding of human nature which is no less deep-reaching because it is apt to find expression in whimsical or flagrantly paradoxical forms.

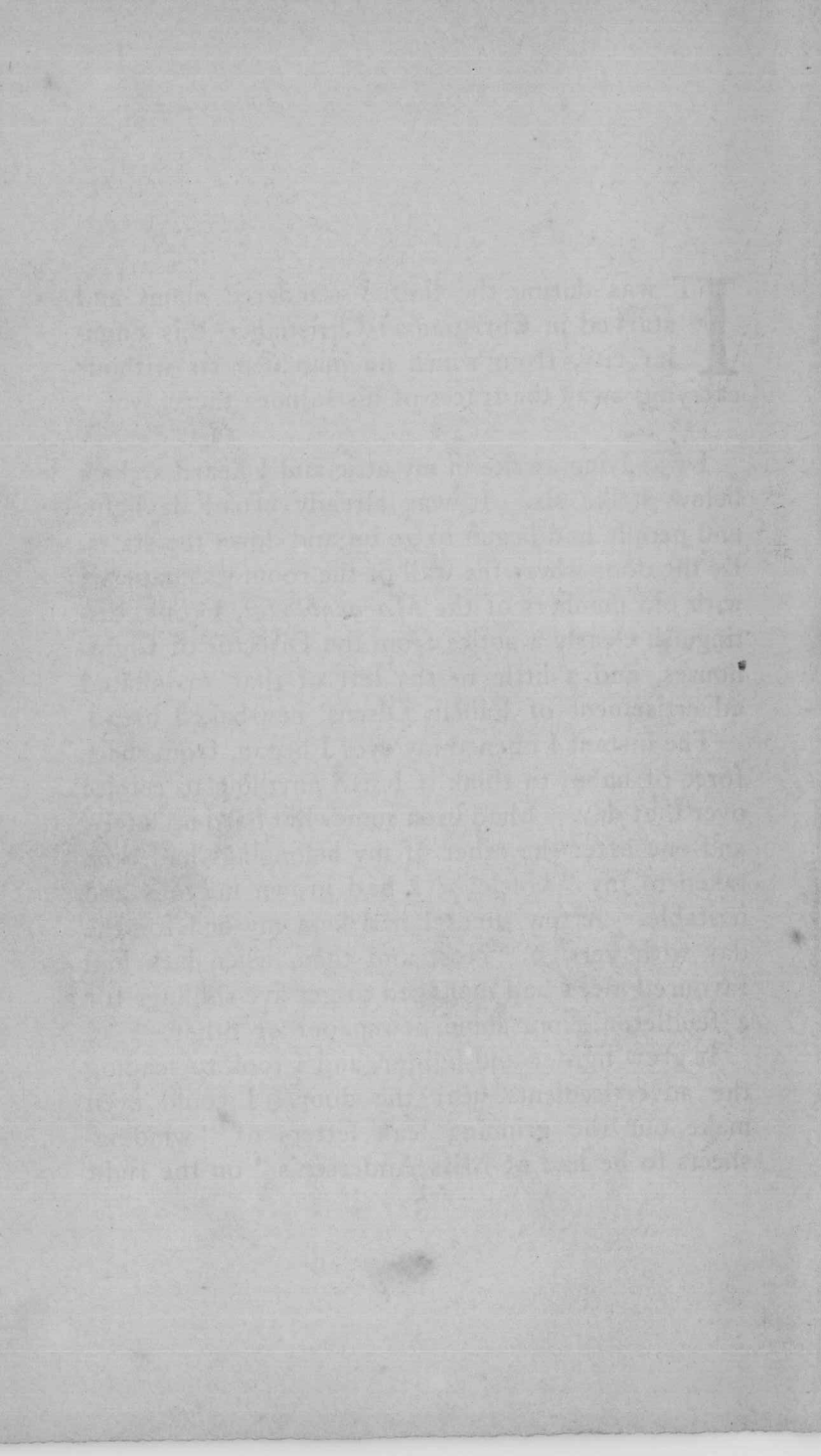
Hamsun has just celebrated his sixtieth birthday anniversary. He is as strong and active as ever, burying himself most of the time on his little estate in the heart of the country that has become to such a peculiar extent his own. There is every reason to expect from him works that may not only equal but surpass the best of his production so far. But even if such expectations should prove false, the body of his work already accomplished is such, both in quantity and quality, that he must perforce be placed

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*in the very front rank of the world's living writers. To the English-speaking world he has so far been made known only through the casual publication at long intervals of a few of his books: "Hunger," "Victoria" and "Shallow Soil" (rendered in the list above as "New Earth"). There is now reason to believe that this negligence will be remedied, and that soon the best of Hamsun's work will be available in English. To the American and English publics it ought to prove a welcome tonic because of its very divergence from what they commonly feed on. And they may safely look to Hamsun as a thinker as well as a poet and laughing dreamer, provided they realize from the start that his thinking is suggestive rather than conclusive, and that he never meant it to be anything else.*

EDWIN BJÖRKMAN.

# Part I



IT was during the time I wandered about and starved in Christiania: Christiania, this singular city, from which no man departs without carrying away the traces of his sojourn there.

I was lying awake in my attic and I heard a clock below strike six. It was already broad daylight, and people had begun to go up and down the stairs. By the door where the wall of the room was papered with old numbers of the *Morgenbladet*, I could distinguish clearly a notice from the Director of Lighthouses, and a little to the left of that an inflated advertisement of Fabian Olsens' new-baked bread.

The instant I opened my eyes I began, from sheer force of habit, to think if I had anything to rejoice over that day. I had been somewhat hard-up lately, and one after the other of my belongings had been taken to my "Uncle." I had grown nervous and irritable. A few times I had kept my bed for the day with vertigo. Now and then, when luck had favoured me, I had managed to get five shillings for a feuilleton from some newspaper or other.

It grew lighter and lighter, and I took to reading the advertisements near the door. I could even make out the grinning lean letters of "winding-sheets to be had at Miss Andersen's" on the right

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of it. That occupied me for a long while. I heard the clock below strike eight as I got up and put on my clothes.

I opened the window and looked out. From where I was standing I had a view of a clothes-line and an open field. Farther away lay the ruins of a burnt-out smithy, which some labourers were busy clearing away. I leant with my elbows resting on the window-frame and gazed into open space. It promised to be a clear day — autumn, that tender, cool time of the year, when all things change their colour, and die, had come to us. The ever-increasing noise in the streets lured me out. The bare room, the floor of which rocked up and down with every step I took across it, seemed like a gasping, sinister coffin. There was no proper fastening to the door, either, and no stove. I used to lie on my socks at night to dry them a little by the morning. The only thing I had to divert myself with was a little red rocking-chair, in which I used to sit in the evenings and doze and muse on all manner of things. When it blew hard, and the door below stood open, all kinds of eerie sounds moaned up through the floor and from out the walls, and the *Morgenbladet* near the door was rent in strips a span long.

I stood up and searched through a bundle in the corner by the bed for a bite for breakfast, but finding nothing, went back to the window.

God knows, thought I, if looking for employment will ever again avail me aught. The frequent re-

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pulses, half-promises, and curt noes, the cherished, deluded hopes, and fresh endeavours that always resulted in nothing had done my courage to death. As a last resource, I had applied for a place as debt collector, but I was too late, and, besides, I could not have found the fifty shillings demanded as security. There was always something or another in my way. I had even offered to enlist in the Fire Brigade. There we stood and waited in the vestibule, some half-hundred men, thrusting our chests out to give an idea of strength and bravery, whilst an inspector walked up and down and scanned the applicants, felt their arms, and put one question or another to them. Me, he passed by, merely shaking his head, saying I was rejected on account of my sight. I applied again without my glasses, stood there with knitted brows, and made my eyes as sharp as needles, but the man passed me by again with a smile; he had recognized me. And, worse than all, I could no longer apply for a situation in the garb of a respectable man.

How regularly and steadily things had gone downhill with me for a long time, till, in the end, I was so curiously bared of every conceivable thing. I had not even a comb left, not even a book to read, when things grew all too sad with me. All through the summer, up in the churchyards or parks, where I used to sit and write my articles for the newspapers, I had thought out column after column on the most miscellaneous subjects. Strange ideas,