

Knut Hamsun Made Hunger a Stepping-Stone on Road to Fame

Winner of the 1919 Nobel Prize for Literature Once a Chicago Streetcar Conductor

By Fred B. Pitney



HE belated award to Knut Hamsun of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1919 has just been announced. Thus, the prize goes for the second time to a Norwegian and for the first time to a former streetcar conductor. Björnsterne Björnson was the recipient in 1903, but no other captain of a Halstead Street night hawk has ever received the Swedish literary crown.

Of course, Hamsun did not begin life as a streetcar conductor, and it was, in fact, before he achieved literary fame that he got his job on the Halstead Street line in Chicago. There was, however, a direct connection between conducting the tram and the Nobel Prize, for it was because he could not persuade the publishers to take him seriously as an author that he went to work on the back platform.

Sent Him Back to Norway

The connection is, indeed, still more direct. It was after his Chicago experience that he went back to Norway and three years later, still as the direct result of working on the Halstead Street tram line, produced *Hunger*, the first book that brought him recognition as a writer.

Hamsun was born August 4, 1860, on a small farm near Lom, in Gudbrandsdal, one of the narrow valleys of central Norway. His parents were very poor and the family was large. When Knut (he was then Knud Pedersen) Hamsun was four he was sent to an uncle on the island of Lofoden, in the far North, where the year is evenly divided between light and darkness—six months of day and six of night. One of his critics has said of him:

"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."

Passing his boyhood and so great a part of his life in poverty and the "unearthly joys and abysmal despairs" of the North, it seems strange to find him described as "an idealistic romanticist and a highly subjective aristocrat." On the other hand, it is not strange to learn that his "foremost passion in life is violent, defiant deviation 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 border line of the eccentric."

A Writer at 17

Perhaps it was his boyhood in the Far North that made of Hamsun a writer, poet and dreamer. The long Arctic nights may have brought out the hereditary trait. For such a nature as his is described, "paradoxical and rebellious as it is poetic and picturesque," seems necessarily the final fruit of powerful hereditary tendencies, and his peasant forebears are said to have been marked out from their neighbors at least once in each generation by an artistic tendency that made of them skilled craftsmen. At any rate, from the time he learned to make his letters he was striving at literary creation, and when at seventeen he consented to be apprenticed to a shoemaker it was in order that he might earn the money to have printed at his own expense his first two completed works, a short novel and a long poem.

The next use he made of his apprenticeship was to jump the job with some more savings and go to Christiania, where he hoped to work his way through the university. But in that hope he failed. There were two reasons for this failure. The more important was that he had hoped to pay for his lectures by selling stuff to the Christiania publishers of newspapers and periodicals and he couldn't do it. They did not want his poetry, his fiction or his essays. This failure produced the second reason why he could not remain at the university. He became either an unbearable nuisance to his fellow students or the butt of their jokes. They did not understand him and he made no effort to be under-

stood. So he left the university and came on his first trip to America.

On that occasion he went to Dakota, where he worked first on a dairy farm and afterward in the logging camps. Just what were his peregrinations it is not possible to say, but they took him far and wide and always he was trying to write something that would sell and always his wanderings carried him back to Christiania for one more try at the Norwegian publishers. He has been a road mender, a coal heaver, a school teacher, a surveyor's chainman, a lecturer, a sailor and the Lord knows what. He got back to Christiania in 1884 and managed to stick out the struggle for nearly a year, but in 1886 he was back in America, and it was this time that he punched fares in Chicago. In one of his stories he has told something of this.

"I was a conductor on a streetcar in Chicago," he says. "At first I was appointed on the Halstead line, which ran from the center of the city to the cattle market. For those of us who worked at night that line was not at all safe, as a number of suspicious characters traveled there at night. Conductors had no right to shoot and kill people for the street railway company would have to pay a heavy fine in such cases.

"As for me, I did not even have a revolver, and I simply relied upon good luck. But, then, it is very seldom that a man is entirely unarmed. For instance, I had the iron wheel bar, which I could remove at a moment's notice and which could be of great service to me. I made use of it only once.

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AFTER Knut Hamsun had known successive periods of starvation because of his inability to sell his stories he wrote a book and called it *Hunger*. Now he has been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature

without food after weeks with almost nothing. The \$2 or \$3 he got for the sketch kept him for another week, and again he starved. In the end he had to give up and ship beef on the mast on a small freighter sailing for one of the French ports. The next three years took him to Paris, Russia, Finland.

But he wound up once more in

Christiania. This time he elaborated the sketch "Hunger" into a book by the same name that covered his last bitter struggle. It brought him success and fame, money, leisure to write and to enjoy the small farm in central Norway where he has since lived, and it led to the Nobel Prize he has now received.

Four of his books have been trans-

lated into English. Three of them are his earliest, *Hunger*, *Victoria* and *Shallow Soil*. The fourth is his last book, *The Growth of the Soil*, written in 1918 and doubtless directly responsible for the award of the Nobel Prize. Edwin Bjorkman says of it:

"The scene is laid in his beloved Northland, but the old primitive life

The Norwegian's First Book Described His Sensations After Going Days Without Food

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 to-day. 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."

An English translation of *The Growth of the Soil* has been published in London, and we learn something of the plot of the story from a reviewer in *Land and Water*, who says:

"This is the story of Isak and his wife, Inger—not beautiful or romantic people, but rough and primitive—who till the virgin soil a day's march from the nearest village, and who, step by laborious step, fight their way, never finally dismayed by misfortune, improving, going on. He is the type of splendid, plodding, indefatigable husbandman, is Isak. Troubles come—dreadful troubles that would break a man less simple; but one must work. Good fortune, clement weather; still one must work. 'A large of a man, surging up through the forest.' So he remains, with only the strength of his body, the love of his wife and his faith in God. The cumulative effect of this wonderful book is one of a quiet happiness that comes of work and faith and love. Regarding the story in the common light of other novels, I should add that it is full of 'incident' as, indeed, is all life rightly interpreted. And there is a magic about the book that can only be compared to the magic of great music, a depth of understanding of humanity and of nature, full of genuine poetry, which to all readers will prove to be an abiding joy."

Christiania's Bohemians

Shallow Soil, published in 1903, was the result of Hamsun's life among the Bohemians of Christiania after his streetcar experience in Chicago. It does not seem to have been a pleasant period in his life. Evidently he was no better understood or liked by the Bohemians than he had been by the students at the university a dozen years before. Hamsun took his revenge by his violent attacks on the Bohemians in *Shallow Soil*. The same life has been described by Strindberg in a much more good-humored way.

Hamsun seems not to have been able to forgive Bohemia the wounds to his vanity. And yet the people

he describes are no different from their fellows all over the world. They are professional spongers, drones, lady-killers, ready to beg, borrow or steal, ready for anything except to earn their living honestly, and pretending to despise the hands that feed them. There is nothing peculiar or unusual about the type, and the book is chiefly interesting because it shows how deeply Hamsun was hurt by their failure to recognize his genius.

Probably they despised him because he had done honest work, and when his money was gone, when they could no longer eat and drink on his savings, they kicked him out of their society of ragged grafters. Hamsun, unfortunately, could not treat them with ridicule. He had to use a bludgeon on them.

Hunger, published in America by Alfred A. Knopf, is a much better book. There is no idea of revenge in it. It purports to be the record of the thoughts, feelings and actions of a man who has not eaten for three days and repeats the experience four times at brief intervals. To one who has gone through the experience of a three-day involuntary fast, coming on top of two or three months of insufficient food, the book does not ring true at all times, but there is a high percentage of it that will bear laboratory analysis.

How It Feels to Starve

For example, where he says: "The sun stood in the south; it was about twelve. The whole town began to get on its legs as it approached the fashionable hour for promenading. Bowing and laughing, folk walked up and down Carl Johann Street. I stuck my elbows closely to my sides, tried to make myself look small, and slipped unperceived past some acquaintances who had taken up their stand at the corner of University Street to gaze at the passers-by. I wandered up Castle Hill and fell into a reverie.

"How gaily and lightly these people I met carried their radiant heads, and swung themselves through life as through a ballroom! There was no sorrow in a single look I met, no burden on any shoulder, perhaps not even a clouded thought, not a little hidden pain in any of the happy souls. And I, walking in the very midst of these people, young and newly-fledged as I was, had already forgotten the very look of happiness. I hugged these thoughts to myself as I went on, and found that a great injustice had been done me. Why had the last months passed so strangely hard on me? I failed to recognize my own happy temperament, and I met with the most singular annoyances from all quarters. I could not sit down on a bench by myself or set my foot any place without being assailed by insignificant accidents, miserable details, that forced their way into my imagination and scattered my powers to all the four winds. A dog that dashed by me, a yellow rose in a man's button-hole, had the power to set my thoughts vibrating and occupy me for a length of time.

"What was it that allied me? Was the hand of the Lord turned against me? But why just against me? Why, for that matter, not just as well against a man in South America? When I considered the matter over, it grew more and more incomprehensible to me that I of all others should be selected as an experiment for a Creator's whims. It was, to say the least of it, a peculiar mode of procedure to pass over a whole world of other humans in order to reach me. Why not select just as well Bookseller Pascha, or Hennechen the steam agent?

"As I went my way I sifted this thing, and could not get quit of it. I found the most weighty arguments against the Creator's arbitrariness in letting me pay for all the other's sins. Even after I had found a seat and sat down, the query persisted in occupying me, and prevented me from thinking of aught else. From the day in May when my ill-luck began I could so clearly notice my gradually increasing debility; I had become, as it were, too languid to control or lead myself whither I would go. A swarm of tiny noxious animals had bored a way into my inner man and hollowed me out."

An Untrue Note

But the part where, dirty, ragged and starving, he follows a young girl for miles and continually obtrudes himself on her in a very offensive way—hunger has nothing to do with that. It is a purely manufactured incident in order that the girl may be brought in again later in the book as pitying him and seeking him out. And, by the way, the kind of succor she offers has nothing to do with the cravings of the stomach, nor would it arouse the faintest hint of ecstasy in a truly starving man. On the contrary, it is a well fed, full blooded succor that has looked on the wine when it was red. Silk stockings hold even less interest for starving men than for bus conductors.

Hunger is not all true by a long ways, but it is, nevertheless, an unusually good book of its kind and it holds in it the possibilities of a future Nobel Prize winner. In this case the promise made good,

New Book Contains Complete Record of Lincoln's Parentage

THE facts that the marriage of Abraham Lincoln's father and mother on June 12, 1806, is a matter of authentic record in the office of the County Clerk at Springfield, Washington, County, Kentucky; that the birth of his sister, Sarah, in 1807 is properly established and that the date of his own birth, February 12, 1809, three years after the marriage of his father and mother, is properly established, ought to be enough to satisfy any decent minded person of Lincoln's legitimate paternity. But there are people who question. Perhaps, it is because they have not taken the trouble to learn the authentic dates; perhaps they would rather believe ill than good. Whatever the reason, they do question.

At one time there seemed to be a reason for asking the question. It was during the Civil War period and for a few years thereafter. The records could not be found. It was simply that the search was not made in the right place. Lincoln himself looked for the record of the marriage of his father and mother and could not find it. Hence, a myth grew up ascribing the paternity of Lincoln to various men, among whom were John C. Calhoun and an adopted son of John Marshall.

To Bismirch or Explain

Some of those who believed in and circulated the myth in its different forms were inspired by hatred of Lincoln and welcomed anything that would bismirch him. Others thought it necessary to explain him. It seemed impossible to them that a man of his acknowledged parentage should attain the heights he reached. Therefore, to them it was necessary to give him a father and

ancestral connections from whom his great qualities could be inherited. Others by accepting and spreading the myth got credit for being related to the great man. Still others, and probably the greatest number, were the gossip kind who like a tang to their anecdotes.

At any rate, the myth grew and spread, and though the authentic record of the marriage of Lincoln's parents was discovered in 1878 the myth is still alive. This is the raison d'être for William E. Barton's book, *The Paternity of Abraham Lincoln*, published by the George H. Doran Company, comprising 414 pages with the appendix and index. It is a good deal like killing a flea with a sledgehammer, and the deeper one gets into the book the more one feels that way about it. Why waste so much effort killing a story that disregards dates? Why not merely set down the authentic dates and let the incident be closed?

Seven Men Named

Doubtless, there is an interest in collecting the several forms of the myth and making a permanent record of them, an antiquarian interest. They are a part of Lincoln's history, and that part might as well be accurately told as long as it is to be told at all. The useless part is the 200 or 300 pages spent in refutation, when all that is needed is the true chronology of events.

Dr. Barton enumerates in his book seven men besides Thomas Lincoln who have been credited with being the father of Abraham Lincoln. There is not a great deal of variation in the stories. Details, of course, are all that could vary, and the foundation of them all is the alleged laxity of Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, and this in turn is founded on the inability to trace positively

the Nancy Hanks who was his mother, while some of the many Nancy Hankses are admitted to have been pretty loose in their ways. Of all the legends, perhaps the most interesting is the one that makes John C. Calhoun Lincoln's father. It is better than most of the others because the details have been looked after and a lot of what looks like verification has been done.

To begin with Nancy Hanks is placed accurately. Her existence is proved by the records before Calhoun is brought into the story. This Nancy Hanks was the daughter of Luke Hanks, of Craytonville Cross Roads, Anderson County, South Carolina, who was the son of William Hanks, of Amelia County, Va., who was the son of Benjamin Hanks, of Plymouth, Mass. Thus, the Nancy Hanks of the Calhoun myth agrees with the accepted parentage of Lincoln's mother in having William and Benjamin Hanks as ancestors and being descended from the Hanks family of Plymouth. The difference lies in the immediate father chosen for Nancy.

In the Calhoun myth Nancy Hanks's father, Luke, kept a tavern at Craytonville crossroads. He died and his widow, Mrs. Ann Hanks, continued to keep the tavern, and was keeping it in 1907, when Calhoun was admitted to the practice of law and began to ride circuit in South Carolina. His office was at Abbeville Courthouse, and he attended court at Pendleton. The Hanks tavern was eighteen miles from Abbeville Courthouse, on the way to Pendleton, and twenty miles from Pendleton. Consequently, Calhoun, going from Abbeville to Pendleton and returning to Abbeville, always stayed over night at the Hanks tavern. Nancy Hanks was helping her mother in the tavern,

so goes the story, fell in love with Nancy and became the father of her child.

More of the Myth

At this time, the myth continues, Abraham Enlow, of Swain County, North Carolina, was traveling between Kentucky and South Carolina, dealing in mules. He had with him as a helper a young man named Thomas Lincoln. Enlow and Lincoln stopped regularly at the Hanks tavern, and Calhoun used Thomas Lincoln to escape the burden of Nancy Hanks and her child. For \$500 Lincoln married Nancy Hanks and took her and Calhoun's son to Kentucky, assuming the parentage of the boy.

Some versions of the story say that Lincoln was born at the Hanks tavern, at Craytonville crossroads; some that he was born at Abraham Enlow's farm in Swain County, North Carolina; some that he was born in Kentucky, some that he was born on the road from North Carolina to Kentucky and some that he was born on the farm of Thomas Lincoln's uncle, Isaac Lincoln, on Watauga Creek, Tennessee, or on the road to Watauga Creek. They all agree that he was named Abraham for Abraham Enlow, in recognition of Enlow's kindness to Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks.

There are several points of this story that will bear investigation. Authentic records show that there was a Luke Hanks who kept a tavern at Craytonville crossroads, Anderson County, South Carolina. His widow, Ann Hanks, kept the tavern after his death, and he had a daughter, Nancy Hanks. John C. Calhoun rode circuit in South Carolina in 1807. His office was at Abbeville Courthouse, and he traveled frequently between Abbeville and Pen-

nothing is left of the Calhoun myth. All of the others fail in the same way. Authentic records leave nothing to them and it is really a pity that Dr. Barton should have taken them so seriously. A more grateful task would be to settle indubitably the parentage of Nancy Hanks, Lincoln's mother. Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitecock and Miss Ida M. Farbell have satisfied themselves by their researches of the legitimate birth of Nancy Hanks and have published their conclusions and the material on which they are founded.

Facts Versus Gossip

Going into the realm of possibility, there is nothing to show that Luke Hanks, of Anderson County, South Carolina, was not the son of William Hanks, of Amelia County, Virginia. There is nothing to show that Calhoun did not stay frequently at the Hanks tavern at Craytonville crossroads. The probability is that he did. There is nothing to show that Calhoun did not know Nancy Hanks, daughter of Luke Hanks. Thomas Lincoln visited his uncle, Isaac Lincoln, on Watauga Creek, Tennessee.

Taking up once more authentic records: Nancy Hanks, mother of Abraham Lincoln, died in Indiana, October 5, 1818. Nancy Hanks, daughter of Luke Hanks, married and became Nancy Hanks South. She was still living in 1833, for she is noted on the records of South Carolina in that year as one of the living heirs of Luke Hanks. Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks were married June 12, 1806, in Washington County, Kentucky. Their first child, Sarah, was born February 10, 1807, in Hardin County, Kentucky. With the exception of one year, probably 1811, they lived continuously in Hardin County, Kentucky, from 1806 to 1816, when they went to Indiana. Abraham Lincoln was born in Hardin County, Kentucky, February 12, 1809. Thomas Lincoln visited his Uncle Isaac on Watauga Creek, Tennessee, between 1795 and 1800, probably in 1797. When these corrections are made

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Still it remains true that the documentary evidence in the case of Nancy Hanks is much less complete than in that of her son, while some of her own relatives were more than willing to discredit her; and if the testimony of Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, can be accepted, Lincoln himself believed his mother to be illegitimate. Nancy was a frequent name for the girls of the Hanks family, and both tradition and such documentary evidence as there is seem to present several Nancy Hankses who might have been Lincoln's mother.

More than one Nancy Hanks had children born out of wedlock and others of the Hanks girls erred in the same way. Tradition insists upon a Lucy Hanks who became the mother, while still unmarried, of a girl who was brought up as Nancy Hanks and became the wife of Thomas Lincoln and the mother of Abraham Lincoln.

This tradition was evidently the one Lincoln himself believed. On the other hand, there is a Nancy Hanks, daughter of Joseph Hanks and Nancy Shipley Hanks, whose authentic record, so far as it exists, answers all the requirements for the Nancy Hanks who was the mother of Lincoln.