

Excerpts: *In Wonderland*

By Knut Hamsun

Translated by Sverre Lyngstad

Knut Hamsun's *In Wonderland* (1903) is an account of his traveling through Southern Russia and up into the Caucasus Mountains in 1899. It ends in Tiflis after he visits the oil fields of Baku. Of course, Hamsun, a Nobel laureate, is best known for his novel *Hunger* (1890). But fiction is not his only genre. *In Wonderland* is, on the one hand, a travelogue. On the other, it is very much a narra-descriptive account in the tradition of literary journalism, with the emphasis on narrative and descriptive modalities. It is not without its flaws from our contemporary perspective. Hamsun often reveals the kinds of bias we associate with European travelers of the late nineteenth century as they explored their perceptions of what constituted the “primitive” and ultimately the objectified Other—the Mohammedan, the Tatar, the Dervish—perceptions that resulted in European-inspired “Orientalism.” Moreover, he reveals how tenuous the boundary between invented fiction and nonfiction could be at the time. As Jo Bech-Karlsen notes in the previous article, there is evidence Hamsun invented scenes. In one of the excerpts that follow, his “companion,” his first wife Bergljot, read his account of the journey—this, while he suffers from a fever and sleeps. When he awakes, she accuses him of lying. As Bech-Karlsen notes, the original subtitle of *In Wonderland* was *Experienced and Dreamed in the Caucasus*. Was an account (not printed here) of a police officer and a journey by horse into the mountains a “dream” he had while he suffered from a continuing fever on the journey? Is this the “secret” in his “heart” to which he refers in the excerpt? Perhaps also fascinating to some is the American presence in the Russian oil fields in 1899.

The Editors

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1899: Traveling in Southern Russia

The door to our compartment opens onto the corridor. Here an Armenian has settled down. He has prepared a bed out of pillows. Under him he has an embroidered yellow silk mattress, and on top of him a red-and-brown silk coverlet. He lies full-length in these costly fineries, in a cloud of dust beneath a lowered window. He has pulled off his boots; his cotton stockings are full of holes, making his toes stick out. His head rests on two pillows, the cases of which are very dirty but made of pierced work; through the openings one can see the actual pillows, which are of silk with gold thread.

New people arrive and settle down in the corridor by the Armenian. They are Caucasian Tatars. Their women are veiled, dressed in solid-colored red cotton fabrics, and sit still and dumb on their pillows. The men are tall, dark-complexioned people with a gray cloak over their burnous and with a multicolored silk sash around their waist. In the sash they carry a sheathed dagger. They have long silver chains on their pocket watches.

Our locomotive is now stoked with crude oil from Baku, and the smell of this fuel is much more unpleasant than the reek of coal in the great heat.

We suddenly stop at a tiny little station out on the steppe. We are to meet the train from Vladikavkaz. While waiting, we get out and stretch. The sun is hot and it's calm, and a large crowd of passengers buzz around one another, chatting and singing. And there, once again, is the national guardsman. He's no longer grieving, those solitary hours in his closed compartment have set him up again; perhaps he has had a fortifying sleep during these hours, God knows. He's now walking with a cigarette-smoking young lady. Hatless, she lets the blazing sun shine on her rich hair. They are speaking French, and neither is ever at a loss for an answer. They go into peals of laughter. But the prince's daughter, the lady with the diamond rings, may right now be standing at the altar with someone else.

A man jumps off the train with a bundle in his hand. His face is yellowish brown, and he has glistening inky-black hair and beard. He's a Persian. Finding a little spot for himself, he unties his bundle and spreads two pieces of cloth on the ground. Then he takes off his shoes. My first thought tells me he is someone preparing to do tricks with knives and balls, but in that I'm

mistaken; the Persian is about to do his devotions. He takes some pebbles out of the breast of his caftan and places them on top of the cloths, then turns toward the sun and begins his ceremony. First, he stands bolt upright. From now on he doesn't see a single individual in the whole crowd of bystanders, keeping his eyes upon the two pebbles and being absent in prayer. Then he throws himself on his knees and bends the upper part of his body to the ground several times; at the same time he makes the pebbles change places on the cloth, moving the one which was farthest away closer and to the left. Standing up, he holds out his palms before him and moves his lips. At this moment the train from Vladikavkaz roars past and our own locomotive signals, but the Persian doesn't let himself be disturbed. The train won't depart until he's finished, and if it does, that too was Allah's will. He again throws himself on the ground and makes the pebbles change places; indeed, he mixes them up so recklessly that I can no longer keep track of them. Now he's alone out there, all the passengers have boarded the train. Hurry up, man! I think to myself. But the Persian still takes the time to do some bows and to stretch his arms well out before him. The train starts moving, the Persian stands for a final moment bolt upright facing the sun—then he gathers his cloths, pebbles and shoes and boards the train. And there wasn't a trace of haste in his movements. Some of the spectators on the platform murmur a kind of bravo to him, but the imperturbable Mohammedan doesn't take notice of a single word spoken by those "infidel dogs" and stalks to his seat in the train.

At a station where we stop to take in water, I finally catch sight of the conductor who was supposed to remove the wax from my jacket. He's standing on the ground a few cars down. I say hello to him and smile so as not to frighten him away, because I intend to catch him, and when I've reached him I smile a little more broadly and act amiable. He nods and smiles in return, and when he sees the wax like a white trail down my jacket, he spreads both hands and says something, whereupon he rushes into his cabinet in the train. There he runs to pick up the fluids and the warm flatiron, I think to myself. I didn't understand what he said, but it probably was that he would be back in a moment, milord! And I waited. The locomotive drank, whistled and started to move—then I couldn't wait any longer.

I have several times met the officer from yesterday, our future traveling companion over the mountains. He doesn't know me at all anymore, I've offended him. Thank God. At a station where we had supper he sat right beside me. He put his thick wallet well into the light. It was hardly because he wanted to tempt me to steal the wallet, but to show me that it had a coronet in silver on it. But God only knows whether the coronet was of silver and whether he is entitled to have a coronet. When I paid he didn't say a word and

didn't interfere, but a gentleman on my other side pointed out to me that I'd received too little change. He corrects the waiter's mistake and I receive my money immediately. I get up and bow gratefully to the gentleman.

We have decided not to have the officer for our traveling companion and to avoid him in Vladikavkaz. . . .

A beautiful clear morning in the steppe; the tall grass, roasted brown, whistles softly in the wind. There is an immensely wide expanse wherever you look.²

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Ascending the Caucasus Mountains

Again we observe women mowing grain in a field. The older ones stoop shyly toward the ground and go on with their work, but a young girl stands straight up, looks at us and laughs. She's dressed in a blue sarafan and has tied a red kerchief around her hair; she has sparkling white teeth and dark eyes. When she no longer feels like watching us, she stops laughing, tosses her head nonchalantly and turns away. A brief exclamation escapes us travelers: that toss of the head was matchless.

Village after village. The road zigzags because of the rise, and Kornei, who wants to spare his horses, drives them gently and often waters them. At one watering hole we are overtaken by a foreign carriage that Kornei quietly lets slip past, causing the dust to become unbearable for us who are behind. We order him to stop a while, to allow time for the dust to drift away; on the whole, we do not appreciate his somnolent way of driving. Kornei, on the other hand, seems to think it's going very well now; he's humming.

Evening is upon us. It's getting dusky, and it's noticeably colder. We throw the blankets around our shoulders. I notice that the spot of wax on my jacket is congealing again and turning white, it's like a thermometer up here on the heights; we are at an altitude of 2,000 meters. We are still winding our way between the mountains. Kornei waters the horses yet once more, though it is so cold. All fields cease; we have nearly reached the timberline.

Then we rumble across another iron bridge and arrive at the Kobi station, where we will spend the night. Shortly before we get there, Kornei suddenly jumps down from the box and starts pulling on the tail of one of his horses. At the outset we didn't understand this odd behavior, but in a little while we noticed that the horse's belly was very bloated and that the animal could barely walk. . . .

A good place; interesting, too.

We ask for lodging, but all separate rooms are occupied. However, that

doesn't mean we'll be without a roof over our heads; my traveling companion is shown into a large common room for women and I into one for men. There are leather-covered benches along the walls, and I am to sleep on one of them. That's fine. We request some food and are served, without any waiting, an excellent filet, shchi and fruit. My fever has worsened again, so I'm exhorted to abstain from certain foods and drinks; but my satisfaction at having found this place in the mountains and its being so pleasant make me forget about the fever, and I order the following wrong diet: filet, shchi, fruit, beer, and afterward, coffee.

While we are eating, Kornei comes into the hallway and insists on talking with us. We can hear him very well out there; besides, we can see him every time someone walks through the door. But the waiter is on our side and won't have us summoned, to avoid disturbing us during our meal. Then Kornei sees his chance and slips into the dining room to us.

What does he want?

Kornei explains that we are leaving from here at six in the morning. Why? It goes against our agreement—we've already agreed on five o'clock in order to reach Ananuri tomorrow evening.

He then gives an extremely complicated answer, but we understand that he's asking us to come outside with him.

We follow him.

We put on neither hats nor outdoor things, thinking we're just going outside, but Kornei takes us far up the road. The moon is only slightly more than half, but it shines brightly, and besides, a multitude of stars have come out. At the edge of the road we see a dark point; Kornei leads the way to that dark point. A dead horse! It's one of Kornei's horses that has died. He has watered it to death. It lies there with a belly so swollen, it looks like a balloon. "It's a hundred rubles!" Kornei says. He is inconsolable; walking us back to the interrupted meal, he constantly repeats it's a hundred rubles.

Well, those hundred rubles have been lost; no one will give them back to Kornei, so there's no need to go on talking about it. And in order to dismiss him, I say something like this to Kornei: "Good night! We'll be off tomorrow morning at five."

"No, at six," Kornei replies.

We cannot reach an agreement. Kornei tries to say something, from which we understand that a hundred rubles have been lost and tomorrow he'll have only three horses.

The logic of this isn't clear to us. With only three horses, there is even more reason to begin our journey at five if we are to reach Ananuri. And after much negotiation, with straws and watches and loudly spoken Russian times

of day, Kornei finally nods and complies. Good night. . . .

The moon and the stars are out. The horse is still lying there, swollen and pagan and gross, with two dogs guarding it. Then a man comes with a farrier's pincers in his hand. A young man, he rolls the balloon around, makes jokes about the dead body, and says whoa to it to make it lie still. He might not have done that with a Christian body. He salvages the shoes of the fallen horse; shortly afterward Kornei comes, and they also prepare for saving the skin. Why not?

The two men slit the skin along the belly and the legs and begin flaying. Kornei is quiet and doesn't say a word, but the young man complains he cannot see very well, glancing up at the sky and grumbling, as if to say: he has forgotten to clean his lamp tonight, all right! Then he goes to get a lantern and returns, bringing several people with him, young and old; it's as though the smell they have picked up of a slaughtered animal has made them eager to follow him.

We are all looking on.

Suddenly more men unsheathe their knives and begin to skin. They seem to act out of sheer desire; feeling the naked flesh with their hands, they warm themselves on it and laugh with subdued excitement. Is their inner pagan awakening in them?

The skin is stripped off the animal in a trice, and another horse comes with a cart to pull the cadaver away. At that moment a lusty young man sticks the point of his knife into the animal's belly and opens it. They all let out a muffled exclamation as a modest expression of how good it makes them feel, and soon many of them run their hands around the intestines, speaking extremely loud, as if they were trying to shout one another. Kornei himself doesn't take part in this—he's too good a Christian for that; he has even tossed the pagan skin on the ground, wanting no truck with it. But he does watch the butchering, and a low fire seems to be kindled in his eyes as well.

A man comes up from the station. We cannot believe our own eyes: it's the innkeeper. Does he want to be part of it, too? He stops the mutilation of the dead body and seeks Kornei's permission to take portions of the carcass, some limbs. Kornei turns away, refusing him. The innkeeper slips some money into his hand, and Kornei also turns away when he accepts the money. Then the innkeeper points out the parts he wants, and several men take pleasure in dismembering the carcass. With the help of two men, the innkeeper takes the tenderloin and the legs away. Filet, I think to myself, filet and shchi for future travelers! If the innkeeper and his household are of the right sort, they may also taste the meat themselves tonight. For it's horseflesh.

Kornei is busy getting the remainder of the horse taken away in the cart,

but the butchers are still having fun with the leftovers; there are still some tasty pieces left and everyone takes his portion and carries it off, the shoulders, the liver, the lungs. And Kornei turns away and permits it. The part that was left and at long last hauled away in the cart was still big enough—namely, the bloated intestines.

I couldn't help recalling Hakon I during the sacrificial feast at Lade. The king struggled to avoid the horseflesh, but the people insisted he eat it. However, the king had been given a Christian education in England and refused to taste horseflesh. Then the yeomen requested that he drink the soup, but he refused to do that as well, turning away. Finally, they demanded only that he eat the fat, but no, the king stuck to his conviction. Then the yeomen threatened to go against him, and Earl Sigurd had to come forth and arbitrate. "Simply take the pot handle in your mouth," he told the king. But the handle was greasy with the steam from the pot, and the king placed a linen cloth over the pot handle before taking it in his mouth. Then he went ahead and closed his mouth over it. However, neither side was satisfied, the saga reports.³

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Hamsun's wife discovers he is inventing part of his account.

The heat was just too much last night, and my sleep was broken. I woke up any number of times, wiped myself, breathed and snorted, and slept again.

One time when I woke up, my traveling companion was reading a book by the lamp. I was too sleepy and wretched with fever to try to find out what that sort of extravagance was good for. Besides, had books been brought along on the sly, while I languished all the while over an old issue of *The New Press*? . . .

After a restless semi-slumber I wake again and look about me. It's fairly light, five o'clock. I jump up and get into my clothes. Then I tum to the room, direct a word to the other wall, and suggest it's impossible to sleep any longer.

At that point my travel companion asks, "Who is this police officer you ran into on our way?"

"Police officer?" So that was it! My diary had provided the night's reading! I had disclosed nothing about the police officer; indeed, I had spared everyone else and kept the secret in my heart. Didn't that deserve some appreciation?

"How can anybody lie so blatantly?" the voice from the wall goes on. "And I don't believe in your ride into the mountains from Kobi either."

I had kept mum about the ride, too. I had undertaken that ride in behalf of science, had gladly sacrificed a night's sleep to promote the work of the

Geographical Society, enduring all the hardships with a silent heart—that's how a true explorer comports himself.

"And besides," says my traveling companion, "and besides, I think you're writing down too many trifles."

That was the last straw. My good companion had used a quiet hour of the night when, through illness and fever, I was prevented from defending myself and my belongings, to poke her nose into my traveling archive. All right! But my good traveling companion also tried to make me feel uncertain of my ability to keep an excellent diary. That was the last straw.

"I'm going out," I said, leaving the room in an unforgiving mood. . . .

The hotel was still asleep, but when I came down into the vestibule, a doorman emerged, rubbing his eyes. He was one of those adventurers in the hotels of the Orient who know the fastest French you ever came across. I remain speechless because I cannot answer one word to a thousand; I merely wave the door open. When I'd gotten out into the street, I put together what the man had said: he had in one swoop wished me bonjour, remarked on the weather, inquired how I had slept, and offered his services as a city guide. That is only what I understood, but I missed out on a great deal. Oh yes, now I remember that he also wanted to shine my shoes.

However early in the morning it is, people sit in front of their doors chatting or wander about the streets; the Caucasians do not sleep. The sun hadn't risen, but it was a warm, clear morning. Directly opposite the hotel lies a large park; I enter, walk straight through it and come out on the other side. Most of the people I see wear Caucasian attire, with weapons; some wear European jackets and stiff felt hats. The officers sport Circassian uniforms. I see practically no women outdoors.

I had intended to study the city from one end to the other before breakfast, but I soon realized that this would be impossible. Feeling hungry, I got myself a bagful of grapes to fortify myself with, but as a Scandinavian, I needed, of course, to have meat and some slices of bread to be satisfied. I walked around the park and came back to the hotel.

Nobody had yet gotten up. In the vestibule the doorman began again to parleyvoo, so I pushed a door open to escape and found myself in the hotel's reading room. Here, on a table, I found a Baedeker of Russia and Caucasia; I looked up Tiflis and started reading. . . .⁴

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At the Baku oil fields on the Caspian Sea. Among its developers were the three Swedish Nobel brothers, including Alfred, founder of the Nobel Prizes.

A steamship from Nobel's fleet is placed at our disposal for an excursion to the oil wells in Balakhany. It was not the first and only time that the ships of the great firm carried visitors out there; it is undertaken with alacrity year in and year out and is nothing special. A good many of the Scandinavians were kind enough to come along and explain everything to us.

It was a quiet, moonlit evening. After half an hour's ride outside Baku, the water is seen to boil in black swirls. The swirls change, move, and merge with other swirls; the incessant movement makes you think of the northern lights. A handful of cotton waste is kindled and tossed down into the swirls, and at once the sea in that spot is ablaze. The sea bums. The black swirls are natural gas. Then we have to ride back and forth in the flames, letting the propeller wipe the fire out.

We arrive and step ashore. The ground is damp and fatty with oil, the sand feels like soap when you walk on it, and there is a sharp smell of petroleum and kerosene that gives us foreigners a headache. The petroleum area is divided into basins, lakes, surrounded by sand banks. But it's not much use trying to block out the oil, which seeps into the banks, making them fatty and damp along with the rest.

Crude oil was known by the ancient Jews and Greeks, and out here, on the Apsheron peninsula, it has been used by the population for fuel and lighting for a very long time. But only during the last thirty years have they been making kerosene from it. Not to mention the "13 varieties in vials," which are still more recent products. Now a city of derricks extends as far as the eye can see, the world's most unpleasant and incredible city of black, greasy, crudely built derricks. Inside, there is a roar of machinery day and night; the workers shout to one another to drown out the noise, and the derricks shake from the huge drills that are sunk into the ground. The workers are Persians and Tatars.

We go inside one of the derricks. My hat bumps against a beam and looks ruined for life, it's that greasy and black; but they assure me that in the Baku factories it won't take a minute to get the oil out again by chemical means. The noise is terrible. Swarthy Tatars and yellow Persians stand each at their machines, minding their work. Here the crude oil is drawn up; a contrivance goes down into the ground and returns after fifty seconds with 1,200 pounds of oil, then goes down again, is away for fifty seconds and returns with another 1,200 pounds of oil—around the clock, all the time. But the hole has cost money; it's five hundred meters deep. They used a year to drill it and it cost 60,000 rubles.

We go to another derrick, where they are drilling. The hole is still dry, the drill is working night and day in sand and stone, in rock. This hole is a

capricious hole, it's known for its viciousness throughout the city of derricks. The place was discovered last year, when it showed clear signs of oil like all places around here, and drilling was started. Fifty meters down, almost no distance at all, that is, the oil suddenly shoots up in a mighty fountain, killing people as it gushes forth and shattering the derrick. The fountain is without order and moderation, it's wild, forcing up oil in such excessive amounts that it creates lakes around itself and floods the earth. They make dams and throw up banks, but the dams are too narrow and fresh banks have to be thrown up outside the initial ones—the fountain spewed oil to the tune of one and a half million rubles in twenty-four hours. For two days and nights. Then it stopped. And no earthly power has managed to make it yield another liter of oil since. It corked the hole. It has probably found a rock in the earth's entrails down there and hurled it before the opening. Since then they have drilled and drilled without interruption, but to no avail; they have now got down as far as 650 meters, all in vain. And they are still drilling; some day, I suppose, they will get through the rock. The yellow Persians and the swarthy Tatars stand there with their hearts in their mouths; if this madcap begins to lash out like the last time, Allah will squeeze them all through the derrick's roof and tear them to pieces in a second. But then Allah would have ordained it that way. *La illaha il Allah.*

The noise of machinery wasn't originally part of this place; America has desecrated it and brought its roar into the sanctuary. For here is the seat of the "eternal fire" of antiquity. There is no place hereabouts where one can escape America: the drilling method, the lamps, even the distillate gasoline—it's all America. The Maccabees burned "the thick water" only for the purification of the temple. And when we have become tired of the noise and half blinded by the natural gas and prepare to leave the place, we go back in a Robert Fulton kind of boat.

Tomorrow we shall visit Surakhany. Thank goodness, it's said to have a Parsee temple.⁵

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Hamsun encounters a "Persian dervish."

Now and then there appeared at the door of the hotel a Persian dervish, a monk and student of theology. He was wrapped in a motley rag rug, walked barefoot and bareheaded, and had long hair and a full beard. Occasionally he would gaze fixedly at a stranger and begin to say something. In the hotel he passed for a lunatic; Allah had touched him and therefore he was thrice holy. Unless his lunacy was just an act. He seemed to have acquired a

taste for displaying himself, for popping up, strange and holy, to be observed and remembered with alms. Moreover, his portrait was for sale at the photographer's, which shows what a remarkable person he was. It was as though he had become accustomed to the veneration he inspired everywhere, and he felt good about its continuing to come his way. He was a handsome man with exceptionally fair skin, ash-blond hair and smoldering eyes. Even the servants at the hotel, who were Tatars, left everything to look at him, and they treated him with veneration when he came. What was he talking about?

"Get him to say something," I said, "and then tell me what it was."

The doorman asked what he could do for him. The dervish replies, "You all walk with your heads down, and I walk with my head up. I see everything, all the depths."

"How long has it been since he began to see all the depths?"

"It's been very long."

"How did it happen?"

"I saw another world, that's how it happened. I see the only one."

"Who is the only one?"

"I don't know. He tires me. I'm often on the mountain."

"Which mountain?"

"The birds fly toward me."

"On the mountain?"

"No, here on earth.... "

I, of course, had to be clever and know all about it, and since I felt suspicious of him I snorted rather scornfully at his simulated lunacy and went off without giving him anything. But when I saw that he didn't, for that reason, send me a dissatisfied glance, which I had expected, I grew less confident, turned around and gave him something. If this man was playacting, he did so brilliantly. But there was, of course, this matter of the portrait, in which he seemed to pose for effect. And those staring hypnotic eyes of his, which I thought were somewhat affected. And this matter of the attention he seemed to expect because he was mad. This was the man I would have liked to observe as he climbed the stairs in his shed and lay down in solitude. . . .

The fever is draining my strength. The watchmaker's medicine, which I've acquired more of, doesn't help me anymore. I shall probably have to leave this place before I've seen everything, and before I've been in the forest and inspected a Kurd's house. Last night, when the fever was at its worst and I didn't want to awaken anyone in the hotel, I dragged myself across the street to a shop where I saw some bottles in the window. A man was standing behind a small counter, and some swarthy men sat on the floor drinking from tin cups.

I walk up to the counter and ask for cognac. The man at the counter understands and plunks down a bottle. It has a label I'm not familiar with, and it says Odessa on it. "Pfuui!" I say, doesn't he have something else? He doesn't understand. I reach up into the shelf myself and pick out another bottle of cognac. It proves to be the same Odessa label but has five stars. I look at it, scrutinize it, and find it to be common. Doesn't he have something better? He doesn't understand. I count the stars for him, five of them, and add a couple more with a pencil myself. That he understands. He actually brings an Odessa bottle with six stars. "How much does it cost?"—"Four and a half rubles."—"And the previous one?" "Three and a half." So one star was a ruble. Well, I took the one with five stars, and it turned out to be a smashingly strong cognac that enabled me to sleep.

And today, in defiance of the sage counsels of all wise women and all tourists, my fever is better, although I drank cognac last night. . . .

It's late afternoon. I sit at the open window watching some naked men water their horses in the Black Sea. Their bodies show dark against the blue sea. And the sun still shines upon the ruins of Tamar's castle, which rise above the shaggy woods.⁶

NOTES

1. Knut Hamsun, *In Wonderland*, trans. Sverre Lyngstad (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2003).
2. *Ibid.*, 40–43
3. *Ibid.*, 74–79
4. *Ibid.*, 132–33
5. *Ibid.*, 161–163.
6. *Ibid.*, 183–84.

