

The Jungle

By

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Chapter 15

The beginning of these perplexing things was in the summer; and each time Ona would promise him with terror in her voice that it would not happen again—but in vain. Each crisis would leave Jurgis more and more frightened, more disposed to distrust Elzbieta's consolations, and to believe that there was some terrible thing about all this that he was not allowed to know. Once or twice in these outbreaks he caught Ona's eye, and it seemed to him like the eye of a hunted animal; there were broken phrases of anguish and despair now and then, amid her frantic weeping. It was only because he was so numb and beaten himself that Jurgis did not worry more about this. But he never thought of it, except when he was dragged to it—he lived like a dumb beast of burden, knowing only the moment in which he was.

The winter was coming on again, more menacing and cruel than ever. It was October, and the holiday rush had begun. It was necessary for the packing machines to grind till late at night to provide food that would be eaten at Christmas breakfasts; and Marija and Elzbieta and Ona, as part of the machine, began working fifteen or sixteen hours a day. There was no choice about this—whatever work there was to be done they had to do, if they wished to keep their places; besides that, it added another pittance to their incomes. So they staggered on with the awful load. They would start work every morning at seven, and eat their dinners at noon, and then work until ten or eleven at night without another mouthful of food. Jurgis wanted to wait for them, to help them home at

night, but they would not think of this; the fertilizer mill was not running overtime, and there was no place for him to wait save in a saloon. Each would stagger out into the darkness, and make her way to the corner, where they met; or if the others had already gone, would get into a car, and begin a painful struggle to keep awake. When they got home they were always too tired either to eat or to undress; they would crawl into bed with their shoes on, and lie like logs. If they should fail, they would certainly be lost; if they held out, they might have enough coal for the winter.

A day or two before Thanksgiving Day there came a snowstorm. It began in the afternoon, and by evening two inches had fallen. Jurgis tried to wait for the women, but went into a saloon to get warm, and took two drinks, and came out and ran home to escape from the demon; there he lay down to wait for them, and instantly fell asleep. When he opened his eyes again he was in the midst of a nightmare, and found Elzbieta shaking him and crying out. At first he could not realize what she was saying—Ona had not come home. What time was it, he asked. It was morning—time to be up. Ona had not been home that night! And it was bitter cold, and a foot of snow on the ground.

Jurgis sat up with a start. Marija was crying with fright and the children were wailing in sympathy—little Stanislovas in addition, because the terror of the snow was upon him. Jurgis had nothing to put on but his shoes and his coat, and in half a minute he was out of the door. Then, however, he realized that there was no need of haste, that he had no idea where to go. It was still dark as midnight, and the thick snowflakes were sifting down—everything was so silent that he could hear the rustle of them as they fell. In the few seconds that he stood there hesitating he was covered white.

He set off at a run for the yards, stopping by the way to inquire in the saloons that were open. Ona might have been overcome on the way; or else she might have met with an accident in the machines. When he got

to the place where she worked he inquired of one of the watchmen—there had not been any accident, so far as the man had heard. At the time office, which he found already open, the clerk told him that Ona's check had been turned in the night before, showing that she had left her work.

After that there was nothing for him to do but wait, pacing back and forth in the snow, meantime, to keep from freezing. Already the yards were full of activity; cattle were being unloaded from the cars in the distance, and across the way the "beef-luggers" were toiling in the darkness, carrying two-hundred-pound quarters of bullocks into the refrigerator cars. Before the first streaks of daylight there came the crowding throngs of workingmen, shivering, and swinging their dinner pails as they hurried by. Jurgis took up his stand by the time-office window, where alone there was light enough for him to see; the snow fell so quick that it was only by peering closely that he could make sure that Ona did not pass him.

Seven o'clock came, the hour when the great packing machine began to move. Jurgis ought to have been at his place in the fertilizer mill; but instead he was waiting, in an agony of fear, for Ona. It was fifteen minutes after the hour when he saw a form emerge from the snow mist, and sprang toward it with a cry. It was she, running swiftly; as she saw him, she staggered forward, and half fell into his outstretched arms.

"What has been the matter?" he cried, anxiously. "Where have you been?"

It was several seconds before she could get breath to answer him. "I couldn't get home," she exclaimed. "The snow—the cars had stopped."

"But where were you then?" he demanded.

"I had to go home with a friend," she panted—"with Jadvyga."

Jurgis drew a deep breath; but then he noticed that she was sobbing and trembling—as if in one of those nervous crises that he dreaded so. “But what’s the matter?” he cried. “What has happened?”

“Oh, Jurgis, I was so frightened!” she said, clinging to him wildly. “I have been so worried!”

They were near the time station window, and people were staring at them. Jurgis led her away. “How do you mean?” he asked, in perplexity.

“I was afraid—I was just afraid!” sobbed Ona. “I knew you wouldn’t know where I was, and I didn’t know what you might do. I tried to get home, but I was so tired. Oh, Jurgis, Jurgis!”

He was so glad to get her back that he could not think clearly about anything else. It did not seem strange to him that she should be so very much upset; all her fright and incoherent protestations did not matter since he had her back. He let her cry away her tears; and then, because it was nearly eight o’clock, and they would lose another hour if they delayed, he left her at the packing house door, with her ghastly white face and her haunted eyes of terror.

There was another brief interval. Christmas was almost come; and because the snow still held, and the searching cold, morning after morning Jurgis had carried his wife to her post, staggering with her through the darkness; until at last, one night, came the end.

It lacked but three days of the holidays. About midnight Marija and Elzbieta came home, exclaiming in alarm when they found that Ona had not come. The two had agreed to meet her; and, after waiting, had gone to the room where she worked; only to find that the ham-wrapping girls had quit work an hour before, and left. There was no snow that night, nor was it especially cold; and still Ona had not come! Something more serious must be wrong this time.

They aroused Jurgis, and he sat up and listened crossly to the story. She must have gone home again with Jadvyga, he said; Jadvyga lived only two blocks from the yards, and perhaps she had been tired. Nothing could have happened to her—and even if there had, there was nothing could be done about it until morning. Jurgis turned over in his bed, and was snoring again before the two had closed the door.

In the morning, however, he was up and out nearly an hour before the usual time. Jadvyga Marcinkus lived on the other side of the yards, beyond Halsted Street, with her mother and sisters, in a single basement room—for Mikolas had recently lost one hand from blood poisoning, and their marriage had been put off forever. The door of the room was in the rear, reached by a narrow court, and Jurgis saw a light in the window and heard something frying as he passed; he knocked, half expecting that Ona would answer.

Instead there was one of Jadvyga's little sisters, who gazed at him through a crack in the door. "Where's Ona?" he demanded; and the child looked at him in perplexity. "Ona?" she said.

"Yes," said Jurgis. "isn't she here?"

"No," said the child, and Jurgis gave a start. A moment later came Jadvyga, peering over the child's head. When she saw who it was, she slid around out of sight, for she was not quite dressed. Jurgis must excuse her, she began, her mother was very ill—

"Ona isn't here?" Jurgis demanded, too alarmed to wait for her to finish.

"Why, no," said Jadvyga. "What made you think she would be here? Had she said she was coming?"

“No,” he answered. “But she hasn’t come home—and I thought she would be here the same as before.”

“As before?” echoed Jadvyga, in perplexity.

“The time she spent the night here,” said Jurgis.

“There must be some mistake,” she answered, quickly. “Ona has never spent the night here.”

He was only half able to realize the words. “Why—why—” he exclaimed. “Two weeks ago. Jadvyga! She told me so the night it snowed, and she could not get home.”

“There must be some mistake,” declared the girl, again; “she didn’t come here.”

He steadied himself by the doorsill; and Jadvyga in her anxiety—for she was fond of Ona—opened the door wide, holding her jacket across her throat. “Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand her?” she cried. “She must have meant somewhere else. She—”

“She said here,” insisted Jurgis. “She told me all about you, and how you were, and what you said. Are you sure? You haven’t forgotten? You weren’t away?”

“No, no!” she exclaimed—and then came a peevish voice—”Jadvyga, you are giving the baby a cold. Shut the door!” Jurgis stood for half a minute more, stammering his perplexity through an eighth of an inch of crack; and then, as there was really nothing more to be said, he excused himself and went away.

He walked on half dazed, without knowing where he went. Ona had deceived him! She had lied to him! And what could it mean—where had

she been? Where was she now? He could hardly grasp the thing—much less try to solve it; but a hundred wild surmises came to him, a sense of impending calamity overwhelmed him.

Because there was nothing else to do, he went back to the time office to watch again. He waited until nearly an hour after seven, and then went to the room where Ona worked to make inquiries of Ona's "forelady." The "forelady," he found, had not yet come; all the lines of cars that came from downtown were stalled—there had been an accident in the powerhouse, and no cars had been running since last night. Meantime, however, the ham-wrappers were working away, with some one else in charge of them. The girl who answered Jurgis was busy, and as she talked she looked to see if she were being watched. Then a man came up, wheeling a truck; he knew Jurgis for Ona's husband, and was curious about the mystery.

"Maybe the cars had something to do with it," he suggested—"maybe she had gone down-town."

"No," said Jurgis. "she never went down-town."

"Perhaps not," said the man. Jurgis thought he saw him exchange a swift glance with the girl as he spoke, and he demanded quickly. "What do you know about it?"

But the man had seen that the boss was watching him; he started on again, pushing his truck. "I don't know anything about it," he said, over his shoulder. "How should I know where your wife goes?"

Then Jurgis went out again and paced up and down before the building. All the morning he stayed there, with no thought of his work. About noon he went to the police station to make inquiries, and then came back again for another anxious vigil. Finally, toward the middle of the afternoon, he set out for home once more.

He was walking out Ashland Avenue. The streetcars had begun running again, and several passed him, packed to the steps with people. The sight of them set Jurgis to thinking again of the man's sarcastic remark; and half involuntarily he found himself watching the cars—with the result that he gave a sudden startled exclamation, and stopped short in his tracks.

Then he broke into a run. For a whole block he tore after the car, only a little ways behind. That rusty black hat with the drooping red flower, it might not be Ona's, but there was very little likelihood of it. He would know for certain very soon, for she would get out two blocks ahead. He slowed down, and let the car go on.

She got out: and as soon as she was out of sight on the side street Jurgis broke into a run. Suspicion was rife in him now, and he was not ashamed to shadow her: he saw her turn the corner near their home, and then he ran again, and saw her as she went up the porch steps of the house. After that he turned back, and for five minutes paced up and down, his hands clenched tightly and his lips set, his mind in a turmoil. Then he went home and entered.

As he opened the door, he saw Elzbieta, who had also been looking for Ona, and had come home again. She was now on tiptoe, and had a finger on her lips. Jurgis waited until she was close to him.

“Don't make any noise,” she whispered, hurriedly.

“What's the matter'?” he asked. “Ona is asleep,” she panted. “She's been very ill. I'm afraid her mind's been wandering, Jurgis. She was lost on the street all night, and I've only just succeeded in getting her quiet.”

“When did she come in?” he asked.

“Soon after you left this morning,” said Elzbieta.

“And has she been out since?” “No, of course not. She’s so weak, Jurgis, she—”

And he set his teeth hard together. “You are lying to me,” he said.

Elzbieta started, and turned pale. “Why!” she gasped. “What do you mean?”

But Jurgis did not answer. He pushed her aside, and strode to the bedroom door and opened it.

Ona was sitting on the bed. She turned a startled look upon him as he entered. He closed the door in Elzbieta’s face, and went toward his wife. “Where have you been?” he demanded.

She had her hands clasped tightly in her lap, and he saw that her face was as white as paper, and drawn with pain. She gasped once or twice as she tried to answer him, and then began, speaking low, and swiftly. “Jurgis, I—I think I have been out of my mind. I started to come last night, and I could not find the way. I walked—I walked all night, I think, and—and I only got home—this morning.”

“You needed a rest,” he said, in a hard tone. “Why did you go out again?”

He was looking her fairly in the face, and he could read the sudden fear and wild uncertainty that leaped into her eyes. “I—I had to go to—to the store,” she gasped, almost in a whisper, “I had to go—”

“You are lying to me,” said Jurgis. Then he clenched his hands and took a step toward her. “Why do you lie to me?” he cried, fiercely. “What are you doing that you have to lie to me?”

“Jurgis!” she exclaimed, starting up in fright. “Oh, Jurgis, how can you?”

“You have lied to me, I say!” he cried. “You told me you had been to Jadvyga’s house that other night, and you hadn’t. You had been where you were last night—somewheres downtown, for I saw you get off the car. Where were you?”

It was as if he had struck a knife into her. She seemed to go all to pieces. For half a second she stood, reeling and swaying, staring at him with horror in her eyes; then, with a cry of anguish, she tottered forward, stretching out her arms to him. But he stepped aside, deliberately, and let her fall. She caught herself at the side of the bed, and then sank down, burying her face in her hands and bursting into frantic weeping.

There came one of those hysterical crises that had so often dismayed him. Ona sobbed and wept, her fear and anguish building themselves up into long climaxes. Furious gusts of emotion would come sweeping over her, shaking her as the tempest shakes the trees upon the hills; all her frame would quiver and throb with them—it was as if some dreadful thing rose up within her and took possession of her, torturing her, tearing her. This thing had been wont to set Jurgis quite beside himself; but now he stood with his lips set tightly and his hands clenched—she might weep till she killed herself, but she should not move him this time—not an inch, not an inch. Because the sounds she made set his blood to running cold and his lips to quivering in spite of himself, he was glad of the diversion when Teta Elzbieta, pale with fright, opened the door and rushed in; yet he turned upon her with an oath. “Go out!” he cried, “go out!” And then, as she stood hesitating, about to speak, he seized her by the arm, and half flung her from the room, slamming the door and barring it with a table. Then he turned again and faced Ona, crying — “Now, answer me!”

Yet she did not hear him—she was still in the grip of the fiend. Jurgis could see her outstretched hands, shaking and twitching, roaming here and there over the bed at will, like living things; he could see convulsive shudderings start in her body and run through her limbs. She was sobbing and choking—it was as if there were too many sounds for one throat, they came chasing each other, like waves upon the sea. Then her voice would begin to rise into screams, louder and louder until it broke in wild, horrible peals of laughter. Jurgis bore it until he could bear it no longer, and then he sprang at her, seizing her by the shoulders and shaking her, shouting into her ear: “Stop it, I say! Stop it!”

She looked up at him, out of her agony; then she fell forward at his feet. She caught them in her hands, in spite of his efforts to step aside, and with her face upon the floor lay writhing. It made a choking in Jurgis’ throat to hear her, and he cried again, more savagely than before: “Stop it, I say!”

This time she heeded him, and caught her breath and lay silent, save for the gasping sobs that wrenched all her frame. For a long minute she lay there, perfectly motionless, until a cold fear seized her husband, thinking that she was dying. Suddenly, however, he heard her voice, faintly: “Jurgis! Jurgis!”

“What is it?” he said.

He had to bend down to her, she was so weak. She was pleading with him, in broken phrases, painfully uttered: “Have faith in me! Believe me!”

“Believe what?” he cried.

“Believe that I—that I know best—that I love you! And do not ask me—what you did. Oh, Jurgis, please, please! It is for the best—it is—”

He started to speak again, but she rushed on frantically, heading him off. “If you will only do it! If you will only—only believe me! It wasn’t my fault—I couldn’t help it—it will be all right—it is nothing—it is no harm. Oh, Jurgis—please, please!”

She had hold of him, and was trying to raise herself to look at him; he could feel the palsied shaking of her hands and the heaving of the bosom she pressed against him. She managed to catch one of his hands and gripped it convulsively, drawing it to her face, and bathing it in her tears. “Oh, believe me, believe me!” she wailed again; and he shouted in fury, “I will not!”

But still she clung to him, wailing aloud in her despair: “Oh, Jurgis, think what you are doing! It will ruin us—it will ruin us! Oh, no, you must not do it! No, don’t, don’t do it. You must not do it! It will drive me mad—it will kill me—no, no, Jurgis, I am crazy—it is nothing. You do not really need to know. We can be happy—we can love each other just the same. Oh, please, please, believe me!”

Her words fairly drove him wild. He tore his hands loose, and flung her off. “Answer me,” he cried. “God damn it, I say—answer me!”

She sank down upon the floor, beginning to cry again. It was like listening to the moan of a damned soul, and Jurgis could not stand it. He smote his fist upon the table by his side, and shouted again at her, “Answer me!”

She began to scream aloud, her voice like the voice of some wild beast: “Ah! Ah! I can’t! I can’t do it!”

“Why can’t you do it?” he shouted.

“I don’t know how!”

He sprang and caught her by the arm, lifting her up, and glaring into her face. “Tell me where you were last night!” he panted. “Quick, out with it!”

Then she began to whisper, one word at a time: “I—was in—a house—downtown—”

“What house? What do you mean?”

She tried to hide her eyes away, but he held her. “Miss Henderson’s house,” she gasped. He did not understand at first. “Miss Henderson’s house,” he echoed. And then suddenly, as in an explosion, the horrible truth burst over him, and he reeled and staggered back with a scream. He caught himself against the wall, and put his hand to his forehead, staring about him, and whispering, “Jesus! Jesus!”

An instant later he leaped at her, as she lay groveling at his feet. He seized her by the throat. “Tell me!” he gasped, hoarsely. Quick! Who took you to that place?”

She tried to get away, making him furious; he thought it was fear, of the pain of his clutch—he did not understand that it was the agony of her shame. Still she answered him, “Connor.”

“Connor,” he gasped. “Who is Connor?”

“The boss,” she answered. “The man—”

He tightened his grip, in his frenzy, and only when he saw her eyes closing did he realize that he was choking her. Then he relaxed his fingers, and crouched, waiting, until she opened her lids again. His breath beat hot into her face.

“Tell me,” he whispered, at last, “tell me about it.”

She lay perfectly motionless, and he had to hold his breath to catch her words. “I did not want—to do it,” she said; “I tried—I tried not to do it. I only did it—to save us. It was our only chance.”

Again, for a space, there was no sound but his panting. Ona’s eyes closed and when she spoke again she did not open them. “He told me—he would have me turned off. He told me he would—we would all of us lose our places. We could never get anything to do—here—again. He—he meant it—he would have ruined us.”

Jurgis’ arms were shaking so that he could scarcely hold himself up, and lurched forward now and then as he listened. “When—when did this begin?” he gasped.

“At the very first,” she said. She spoke as if in a trance. “It was all—it was their plot—Miss Henderson’s plot. She hated me. And he—he wanted me. He used to speak to me—out on the platform. Then he began to—to make love to me. He offered me money. He begged me—he said he loved me. Then he threatened me. He knew all about us, he knew we would starve. He knew your boss—he knew Marija’s. He would hound us to death, he said—then he said if I would—if I—we would all of us be sure of work—always. Then one day he caught hold of me—he would not let go—he—he—”

“Where was this?”

“In the hallway—at night—after every one had gone. I could not help it. I thought of you—of the baby—of mother and the children. I was afraid of him—afraid to cry out.”

A moment ago her face had been ashen gray, now it was scarlet. She was beginning to breathe hard again. Jurgis made not a sound.

“That was two months ago. Then he wanted me to come—to that house. He wanted me to stay there. He said all of us—that we would not have to work. He made me come there—in the evenings. I told you—you thought I was at the factory. Then—one night it snowed, and I couldn’t get back. And last night—the cars were stopped. It was such a little thing—to ruin us all. I tried to walk, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want you to know. It would have—it would have been all right. We could have gone on—just the same—you need never have known about it. He was getting tired of me—he would have let me alone soon. I am going to have a baby—I am getting ugly. He told me that—twice, he told me, last night. He kicked me—last night—too. And now you will kill him—you—you will kill him—and we shall die.”

All this she had said without a quiver; she lay still as death, not an eyelid moving. And Jurgis, too, said not a word. He lifted himself by the bed, and stood up. He did not stop for another glance at her, but went to the door and opened it. He did not see Elzbieta, crouching terrified in the corner. He went out, hatless, leaving the street door open behind him. The instant his feet were on the sidewalk he broke into a run.

He ran like one possessed, blindly, furiously, looking neither to the right nor left. He was on Ashland Avenue before exhaustion compelled him to slow down, and then, noticing a car, he made a dart for it and drew himself aboard. His eyes were wild and his hair flying, and he was breathing hoarsely, like a wounded bull; but the people on the car did not notice this particularly—perhaps it seemed natural to them that a man who smelled as Jurgis smelled should exhibit an aspect to correspond. They began to give way before him as usual. The conductor took his nickel gingerly, with the tips of his fingers, and then left him with the platform to himself. Jurgis did not even notice it—his thoughts were far away. Within his soul it was like a roaring furnace; he stood waiting, waiting, crouching as if for a spring.

He had some of his breath back when the car came to the entrance of the yards, and so he leaped off and started again, racing at full speed. People turned and stared at him, but he saw no one—there was the factory, and he bounded through the doorway and down the corridor. He knew the room where Ona worked, and he knew Connor, the boss of the loading-gang outside. He looked for the man as he sprang into the room.

The truckmen were hard at work, loading the freshly packed boxes and barrels upon the cars. Jurgis shot one swift glance up and down the platform—the man was not on it. But then suddenly he heard a voice in the corridor, and started for it with a bound. In an instant more he fronted the boss.

He was a big, red-faced Irishman, coarse-featured, and smelling of liquor. He saw Jurgis as he crossed the threshold, and turned white. He hesitated one second, as if meaning to run; and in the next his assailant was upon him. He put up his hands to protect his face, but Jurgis, lunging with all the power of his arm and body, struck him fairly between the eyes and knocked him backward. The next moment he was on top of him, burying his fingers in his throat.

To Jurgis this man's whole presence reeked of the crime he had committed; the touch of his body was madness to him—it set every nerve of him atremble, it aroused all the demon in his soul. It had worked its will upon Ona, this great beast—and now he had it, he had it! It was his turn now! Things swam blood before him, and he screamed aloud in his fury, lifting his victim and smashing his head upon the floor.

The place, of course, was in an uproar; women fainting and shrieking, and men rushing in. Jurgis was so bent upon his task that he knew nothing of this, and scarcely realized that people were trying to interfere with him; it was only when half a dozen men had seized him by the legs and shoulders and were pulling at him, that he understood that he was losing his prey. In a flash he had bent down and sunk his teeth into the

man's cheek; and when they tore him away he was dripping with blood, and little ribbons of skin were hanging in his mouth.

They got him down upon the floor, clinging to him by his arms and legs, and still they could hardly hold him. He fought like a tiger, writhing and twisting, half flinging them off, and starting toward his unconscious enemy. But yet others rushed in, until there was a little mountain of twisted limbs and bodies, heaving and tossing, and working its way about the room. In the end, by their sheer weight, they choked the breath out of him, and then they carried him to the company police station, where he lay still until they had summoned a patrol wagon to take him away.