

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 6

Jurgis and Ona were very much in love; they had waited a long time— it was now well into the second year, and Jurgis judged everything by the criterion of its helping or hindering their union. All his thoughts were there; he accepted the family because it was a part of Ona. And he was interested in the house because it was to be Ona's home. Even the tricks and cruelties he saw at Durham's had little meaning for him just then, save as they might happen to affect his future with Ona.

The marriage would have been at once, if they had had their way; but this would mean that they would have to do without any wedding feast, and when they suggested this they came into conflict with the old people. To Teta Elzbieta especially the very suggestion was an affliction. What! she would cry. To be married on the roadside like a parcel of beggars! No! No!—Elzbieta had some traditions behind her; she had been a person of importance in her girlhood—had lived on a big estate and had servants, and might have married well and been a lady, but for the fact that there had been nine daughters and no sons in the family. Even so, however, she knew what was decent, and clung to her traditions with desperation. They were not going to lose all caste, even if they had come to be unskilled laborers in Packingtown; and that Ona had even talked of omitting a Yeselija was enough to keep her stepmother lying awake all night. It was in vain for them to say that they had so few friends; they were bound to have friends in time, and then the friends would talk about it. They must not give up what was right for a little

money—if they did, the money would never do them any good, they could depend upon that. And Elzbieta would call upon Dede Antanas to support her; there was a fear in the souls of these two, lest this journey to a new country might somehow undermine the old home virtues of their children. The very first Sunday they had all been taken to mass; and poor as they were, Elzbieta had felt it advisable to invest a little of her resources in a representation of the babe of Bethlehem, made in plaster, and painted in brilliant colors. Though it was only a foot high, there was a shrine with four snow-white steeples, and the Virgin standing with her child in her arms, and the kings and shepherds and wise men bowing down before him. It had cost fifty cents; but Elzbieta had a feeling that money spent for such things was not to be counted too closely, it would come back in hidden ways. The piece was beautiful on the parlor mantel, and one could not have a home without some sort of ornament.

The cost of the wedding feast would, of course, be returned to them; but the problem was to raise it even temporarily. They had been in the neighborhood so short a time that they could not get much credit, and there was no one except Szedvilas from whom they could borrow even a little. Evening after evening Jurgis and Ona would sit and figure the expenses, calculating the term of their separation. They could not possibly manage it decently for less than two hundred dollars, and even though they were welcome to count in the whole of the earnings of Marija and Jonas, as a loan, they could not hope to raise this sum in less than four or five months. So Ona began thinking of seeking employment herself, saying that if she had even ordinarily good luck, she might be able to take two months off the time. They were just beginning to adjust themselves to this necessity, when out of the clear sky there fell a thunderbolt upon them—a calamity that scattered all their hopes to the four winds.

About a block away from them there lived another Lithuanian family, consisting of an elderly widow and one grown son; their name was Majauszkis, and our friends struck up an acquaintance with them before

long. One evening they came over for a visit, and naturally the first subject upon which the conversation turned was the neighborhood and its history; and then Grandmother Majauszkiene, as the old lady was called, proceeded to recite to them a string of horrors that fairly froze their blood. She was a wrinkled-up and wizened personage—she must have been eighty—and as she mumbled the grim story through her toothless gums, she seemed a very old witch to them. Grandmother Majauszkiene had lived in the midst of misfortune so long that it had come to be her element, and she talked about starvation, sickness, and death as other people might about weddings and holidays.

The thing came gradually. In the first place as to the house they had bought, it was not new at all, as they had supposed; it was about fifteen years old, and there was nothing new upon it but the paint, which was so bad that it needed to be put on new every year or two. The house was one of a whole row that was built by a company which existed to make money by swindling poor people. The family had paid fifteen hundred dollars for it, and it had not cost the builders five hundred, when it was new. Grandmother Majauszkiene knew that because her son belonged to a political organization with a contractor who put up exactly such houses. They used the very flimsiest and cheapest material; they built the houses a dozen at a time, and they cared about nothing at all except the outside shine. The family could take her word as to the trouble they would have, for she had been through it all—she and her son had bought their house in exactly the same way. They had fooled the company, however, for her son was a skilled man, who made as high as a hundred dollars a month, and as he had had sense enough not to marry, they had been able to pay for the house.

Grandmother Majauszkiene saw that her friends were puzzled at this remark; they did not quite see how paying for the house was “fooling the company.” Evidently they were very inexperienced. Cheap as the houses were, they were sold with the idea that the people who bought them would not be able to pay for them. When they failed—if it were only by

a single month— they would lose the house and all that they had paid on it, and then the company would sell it over again. And did they often get a chance to do that? Dieve! (Grandmother Majauszkiene raised her hands.) They did it—how often no one could say, but certainly more than half of the time. They might ask any one who knew anything at all about Packingtown as to that; she had been living here ever since this house was built, and she could tell them all about it. And had it ever been sold before? Susimilkie! Why, since it had been built, no less than four families that their informant could name had tried to buy it and failed. She would tell them a little about it.

The first family had been Germans. The families had all been of different nationalities—there had been a representative of several races that had displaced each other in the stockyards. Grandmother Majauszkiene had come to America with her son at a time when so far as she knew there was only one other Lithuanian family in the district; the workers had all been Germans then—skilled cattle butchers that the packers had brought from abroad to start the business. Afterward, as cheaper labor had come, these Germans had moved away. The next were the Irish—there had been six or eight years when Packingtown had been a regular Irish city. There were a few colonies of them still here, enough to run all the unions and the police force and get all the graft; but most of those who were working in the packing houses had gone away at the next drop in wages—after the big strike. The Bohemians had come then, and after them the Poles. People said that old man Durham himself was responsible for these immigrations; he had sworn that he would fix the people of Packingtown so that they would never again call a strike on him, and so he had sent his agents into every city and village in Europe to spread the tale of the chances of work and high wages at the stockyards. The people had come in hordes; and old Durham had squeezed them tighter and tighter, speeding them up and grinding them to pieces and sending for new ones. The Poles, who had come by tens of thousands, had been driven to the wall by the Lithuanians, and now the Lithuanians were giving way to the Slovaks. Who there was poorer and

more miserable than the Slovaks, Grandmother Majauszkiene had no idea, but the packers would find them, never fear. It was easy to bring them, for wages were really much higher, and it was only when it was too late that the poor people found out that everything else was higher too. They were like rats in a trap, that was the truth; and more of them were piling in every day. By and by they would have their revenge, though, for the thing was getting beyond human endurance, and the people would rise and murder the packers. Grandmother Majauszkiene was a socialist, or some such strange thing; another son of hers was working in the mines of Siberia, and the old lady herself had made speeches in her time—which made her seem all the more terrible to her present auditors.

They called her back to the story of the house. The German family had been a good sort. To be sure there had been a great many of them, which was a common failing in Packingtown; but they had worked hard, and the father had been a steady man, and they had a good deal more than half paid for the house. But he had been killed in an elevator accident in Durham's.

Then there had come the Irish, and there had been lots of them, too; the husband drank and beat the children—the neighbors could hear them shrieking any night. They were behind with their rent all the time, but the company was good to them; there was some politics back of that, Grandmother Majauszkiene could not say just what, but the Laffertys had belonged to the “War Whoop League,” which was a sort of political club of all the thugs and rowdies in the district; and if you belonged to that, you could never be arrested for anything. Once upon a time old Lafferty had been caught with a gang that had stolen cows from several of the poor people of the neighborhood and butchered them in an old shanty back of the yards and sold them. He had been in jail only three days for it, and had come out laughing, and had not even lost his place in the packing house. He had gone all to ruin with the drink, however, and lost his power; one of his sons, who was a good man, had kept him and

the family up for a year or two, but then he had got sick with consumption.

That was another thing, Grandmother Majauszkiene interrupted herself — this house was unlucky. Every family that lived in it, some one was sure to get consumption. Nobody could tell why that was; there must be something about the house, or the way it was built — some folks said it was because the building had been begun in the dark of the moon. There were dozens of houses that way in Packingtown. Sometimes there would be a particular room that you could point out — if anybody slept in that room he was just as good as dead. With this house it had been the Irish first; and then a Bohemian family had lost a child of it — though, to be sure, that was uncertain, since it was hard to tell what was the matter with children who worked in the yards. In those days there had been no law about the age of children — the packers had worked all but the babies. At this remark the family looked puzzled, and Grandmother Majauszkiene again had to make an explanation — that it was against the law for children to work before they were sixteen. What was the sense of that? they asked. They had been thinking of letting little Stanislovas go to work. Well, there was no need to worry, Grandmother Majauszkiene said — the law made no difference except that it forced people to lie about the ages of their children. One would like to know what the lawmakers expected them to do; there were families that had no possible means of support except the children, and the law provided them no other way of getting a living. Very often a man could get no work in Packingtown for months, while a child could go and get a place easily; there was always some new machine, by which the packers could get as much work out of a child as they had been able to get out of a man, and for a third of the pay.

To come back to the house again, it was the woman of the next family that had died. That was after they had been there nearly four years, and this woman had had twins regularly every year — and there had been more than you could count when they moved in. After she died the man

would go to work all day and leave them to shift for themselves—the neighbors would help them now and then, for they would almost freeze to death. At the end there were three days that they were alone, before it was found out that the father was dead. He was a “floorsman” at Jones’s, and a wounded steer had broken loose and mashed him against a pillar. Then the children had been taken away, and the company had sold the house that very same week to a party of emigrants.

So this grim old woman went on with her tale of horrors. How much of it was exaggeration—who could tell? It was only too plausible. There was that about consumption, for instance. They knew nothing about consumption whatever, except that it made people cough; and for two weeks they had been worrying about a coughing-spell of Antanas. It seemed to shake him all over, and it never stopped; you could see a red stain wherever he had spit upon the floor.

And yet all these things were as nothing to what came a little later. They had begun to question the old lady as to why one family had been unable to pay, trying to show her by figures that it ought to have been possible; and Grandmother Majauszkiene had disputed their figures— “You say twelve dollars a month; but that does not include the interest.”

Then they stared at her. “Interest!” they cried.

“Interest on the money you still owe,” she answered.

“But we don’t have to pay any interest!” they exclaimed, three or four at once. “We only have to pay twelve dollars each month.” And for this she laughed at them. “You are like all the rest,” she said; “they trick you and eat you alive. They never sell the houses without interest. Get your deed, and see.”

Then, with a horrible sinking of the heart, Teta Elzbieta unlocked her bureau and brought out the paper that had already caused them so many

agonies. Now they sat round, scarcely breathing, while the old lady, who could read English, ran over it. “Yes,” she said, finally, “here it is, of course: ‘With interest thereon monthly, at the rate of seven per cent per annum.’”

And there followed a dead silence. “What does that mean?” asked Jurgis finally, almost in a whisper.

“That means,” replied the other, “that you have to pay them seven dollars next month, as well as the twelve dollars.”

Then again there was not a sound. It was sickening, like a nightmare, in which suddenly something gives way beneath you, and you feel yourself sinking, sinking, down into bottomless abysses. As if in a flash of lightning they saw themselves—victims of a relentless fate, cornered, trapped, in the grip of destruction. All the fair structure of their hopes came crashing about their ears.—And all the time the old woman was going on talking. They wished that she would be still; her voice sounded like the croaking of some dismal raven. Jurgis sat with his hands clenched and beads of perspiration on his forehead, and there was a great lump in Ona’s throat, choking her. Then suddenly Teta Elzbieta broke the silence with a wail, and Marija began to wring her hands and sob, “Ai! Ai! Beda man!”

All their outcry did them no good, of course. There sat Grandmother Majauszkiene, unrelenting, typifying fate. No, of course it was not fair, but then fairness had nothing to do with it. And of course they had not known it. They had not been intended to know it. But it was in the deed, and that was all that was necessary, as they would find when the time came.

Somehow or other they got rid of their guest, and then they passed a night of lamentation. The children woke up and found out that something was wrong, and they wailed and would not be comforted. In

the morning, of course, most of them had to go to work, the packing houses would not stop for their sorrows; but by seven o'clock Ona and her stepmother were standing at the door of the office of the agent. Yes, he told them, when he came, it was quite true that they would have to pay interest. And then Teta Elzbieta broke forth into protestations and reproaches, so that the people outside stopped and peered in at the window. The agent was as bland as ever. He was deeply pained, he said. He had not told them, simply because he had supposed they would understand that they had to pay interest upon their debt, as a matter of course.

So they came away, and Ona went down to the yards, and at noontime saw Jurgis and told him. Jurgis took it stolidly—he had made up his mind to it by this time. It was part of fate; they would manage it somehow—he made his usual answer, “I will work harder.” It would upset their plans for a time; and it would perhaps be necessary for Ona to get work after all. Then Ona added that Teta Elzbieta had decided that little Stanislovas would have to work too. It was not fair to let Jurgis and her support the family—the family would have to help as it could. Previously Jurgis had scouted this idea, but now knit his brows and nodded his head slowly—yes, perhaps it would be best; they would all have to make some sacrifices now.

So Ona set out that day to hunt for work; and at night Marija came home saying that she had met a girl named Jasaityte who had a friend that worked in one of the wrapping rooms in Brown's, and might get a place for Ona there; only the forelady was the kind that takes presents—it was no use for any one to ask her for a place unless at the same time they slipped a ten-dollar bill into her hand. Jurgis was not in the least surprised at this now—he merely asked what the wages of the place would be. So negotiations were opened, and after an interview Ona came home and reported that the forelady seemed to like her, and had said that, while she was not sure, she thought she might be able to put her at work sewing covers on hams, a job at which she would earn as much as

eight or ten dollars a week. That was a bid, so Marija reported, after consulting her friend; and then there was an anxious conference at home. The work was done in one of the cellars, and Jurgis did not want Ona to work in such a place; but then it was easy work, and one could not have everything. So in the end Ona, with a ten-dollar bill burning a hole in her palm, had another interview with the forelady.

Meantime Teta Elzbieta had taken Stanislovas to the priest and gotten a certificate to the effect that he was two years older than he was; and with it the little boy now sallied forth to make his fortune in the world. It chanced that Durham had just put in a wonderful new lard machine, and when the special policeman in front of the time station saw Stanislovas and his document, he smiled to himself and told him to go—”Czia! Czia!” pointing. And so Stanislovas went down a long stone corridor, and up a flight of stairs, which took him into a room lighted by electricity, with the new machines for filling lard cans at work in it. The lard was finished on the floor above, and it came in little jets, like beautiful, wriggling, snow-white snakes of unpleasant odor. There were several kinds and sizes of jets, and after a certain precise quantity had come out, each stopped automatically, and the wonderful machine made a turn, and took the can under another jet, and so on, until it was filled neatly to the brim, and pressed tightly, and smoothed off. To attend to all this and fill several hundred cans of lard per hour, there were necessary two human creatures, one of whom knew how to place an empty lard can on a certain spot every few seconds, and the other of whom knew how to take a full lard can off a certain spot every few seconds and set it upon a tray.

And so, after little Stanislovas had stood gazing timidly about him for a few minutes, a man approached him, and asked what he wanted, to which Stanislovas said, “Job.” Then the man said “How old?” and Stanislovas answered, “Sixtin.” Once or twice every year a state inspector would come wandering through the packing plants, asking a child here and there how old he was; and so the packers were very

careful to comply with the law, which cost them as much trouble as was now involved in the boss's taking the document from the little boy, and glancing at it, and then sending it to the office to be filed away. Then he set some one else at a different job, and showed the lad how to place a lard can every time the empty arm of the remorseless machine came to him; and so was decided the place in the universe of little Stanislovas, and his destiny till the end of his days. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, it was fated that he should stand upon a certain square foot of floor from seven in the morning until noon, and again from half-past twelve till half-past five, making never a motion and thinking never a thought, save for the setting of lard cans. In summer the stench of the warm lard would be nauseating, and in winter the cans would all but freeze to his naked little fingers in the unheated cellar. Half the year it would be dark as night when he went in to work, and dark as night again when he came out, and so he would never know what the sun looked like on weekdays. And for this, at the end of the week, he would carry home three dollars to his family, being his pay at the rate of five cents per hour —just about his proper share of the total earnings of the million and three-quarters of children who are now engaged in earning their livings in the United States.

And meantime, because they were young, and hope is not to be stifled before its time, Jurgis and Ona were again calculating; for they had discovered that the wages of Stanislovas would a little more than pay the interest, which left them just about as they had been before! It would be but fair to them to say that the little boy was delighted with his work, and at the idea of earning a lot of money; and also that the two were very much in love with each other.