

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 10

During the early part of the winter the family had had money enough to live and a little over to pay their debts with; but when the earnings of Jurgis fell from nine or ten dollars a week to five or six, there was no longer anything to spare. The winter went, and the spring came, and found them still living thus from hand to mouth, hanging on day by day, with literally not a month's wages between them and starvation. Marija was in despair, for there was still no word about the reopening of the canning factory, and her savings were almost entirely gone. She had had to give up all idea of marrying then; the family could not get along without her—though for that matter she was likely soon to become a burden even upon them, for when her money was all gone, they would have to pay back what they owed her in board. So Jurgis and Ona and Teta Elzbieta would hold anxious conferences until late at night, trying to figure how they could manage this too without starving.

Such were the cruel terms upon which their life was possible, that they might never have nor expect a single instant's respite from worry, a single instant in which they were not haunted by the thought of money. They would no sooner escape, as by a miracle, from one difficulty, than a new one would come into view. In addition to all their physical hardships, there was thus a constant strain upon their minds; they were harried all day and nearly all night by worry and fear. This was in truth not living; it was scarcely even existing, and they felt that it was too

little for the price they paid. They were willing to work all the time; and when people did their best, ought they not to be able to keep alive?

There seemed never to be an end to the things they had to buy and to the unforeseen contingencies. Once their water pipes froze and burst; and when, in their ignorance, they thawed them out, they had a terrifying flood in their house. It happened while the men were away, and poor Elzbieta rushed out into the street screaming for help, for she did not even know whether the flood could be stopped, or whether they were ruined for life. It was nearly as bad as the latter, they found in the end, for the plumber charged them seventy-five cents an hour, and seventy-five cents for another man who had stood and watched him, and included all the time the two had been going and coming, and also a charge for all sorts of material and extras. And then again, when they went to pay their January's installment on the house, the agent terrified them by asking them if they had had the insurance attended to yet. In answer to their inquiry he showed them a clause in the deed which provided that they were to keep the house insured for one thousand dollars, as soon as the present policy ran out, which would happen in a few days. Poor Elzbieta, upon whom again fell the blow, demanded how much it would cost them. Seven dollars, the man said; and that night came Jurgis, grim and determined, requesting that the agent would be good enough to inform him, once for all, as to all the expenses they were liable for. The deed was signed now, he said, with sarcasm proper to the new way of life he had learned—the deed was signed, and so the agent had no longer anything to gain by keeping quiet. And Jurgis looked the fellow squarely in the eye, and so the fellow wasted no time in conventional protests, but read him the deed. They would have to renew the insurance every year; they would have to pay the taxes, about ten dollars a year; they would have to pay the water tax, about six dollars a year—(Jurgis silently resolved to shut off the hydrant). This, besides the interest and the monthly installments, would be all—unless by chance the city should happen to decide to put in a sewer or to lay a sidewalk. Yes, said the agent, they would have to have these, whether they wanted them or not,

if the city said so. The sewer would cost them about twenty-two dollars, and the sidewalk fifteen if it were wood, twenty-five if it were cement.

So Jurgis went home again; it was a relief to know the worst, at any rate, so that he could no more be surprised by fresh demands. He saw now how they had been plundered; but they were in for it, there was no turning back. They could only go on and make the fight and win—for defeat was a thing that could not even be thought of.

When the springtime came, they were delivered from the dreadful cold, and that was a great deal; but in addition they had counted on the money they would not have to pay for coal—and it was just at this time that Marija's board began to fail. Then, too, the warm weather brought trials of its own; each season had its trials, as they found. In the spring there were cold rains, that turned the streets into canals and bogs; the mud would be so deep that wagons would sink up to the hubs, so that half a dozen horses could not move them. Then, of course, it was impossible for any one to get to work with dry feet; and this was bad for men that were poorly clad and shod, and still worse for women and children. Later came midsummer, with the stifling heat, when the dingy killing beds of Durham's became a very purgatory; one time, in a single day, three men fell dead from sunstroke. All day long the rivers of hot blood poured forth, until, with the sun beating down, and the air motionless, the stench was enough to knock a man over; all the old smells of a generation would be drawn out by this heat—for there was never any washing of the walls and rafters and pillars, and they were caked with the filth of a lifetime. The men who worked on the killing beds would come to reek with foulness, so that you could smell one of them fifty feet away; there was simply no such thing as keeping decent, the most careful man gave it up in the end, and wallowed in uncleanness. There was not even a place where a man could wash his hands, and the men ate as much raw blood as food at dinnertime. When they were at work they could not even wipe off their faces—they were as helpless as newly born babes in that respect; and it may seem like a small matter, but when the

sweat began to run down their necks and tickle them, or a fly to bother them, it was a torture like being burned alive. Whether it was the slaughterhouses or the dumps that were responsible, one could not say, but with the hot weather there descended upon Packingtown a veritable Egyptian plague of flies; there could be no describing this—the houses would be black with them. There was no escaping; you might provide all your doors and windows with screens, but their buzzing outside would be like the swarming of bees, and whenever you opened the door they would rush in as if a storm of wind were driving them.

Perhaps the summertime suggests to you thoughts of the country, visions of green fields and mountains and sparkling lakes. It had no such suggestion for the people in the yards. The great packing machine ground on remorselessly, without thinking of green fields; and the men and women and children who were part of it never saw any green thing, not even a flower. Four or five miles to the east of them lay the blue waters of Lake Michigan; but for all the good it did them it might have been as far away as the Pacific Ocean. They had only Sundays, and then they were too tired to walk. They were tied to the great packing machine, and tied to it for life. The managers and superintendents and clerks of Packingtown were all recruited from another class, and never from the workers; they scorned the workers, the very meanest of them. A poor devil of a bookkeeper who had been working in Durham's for twenty years at a salary of six dollars a week, and might work there for twenty more and do no better, would yet consider himself a gentleman, as far removed as the poles from the most skilled worker on the killing beds; he would dress differently, and live in another part of the town, and come to work at a different hour of the day, and in every way make sure that he never rubbed elbows with a laboring man. Perhaps this was due to the repulsiveness of the work; at any rate, the people who worked with their hands were a class apart, and were made to feel it.

In the late spring the canning factory started up again, and so once more Marija was heard to sing, and the love-music of Tamoszius took on a

less melancholy tone. It was not for long, however; for a month or two later a dreadful calamity fell upon Marija. Just one year and three days after she had begun work as a can-painter, she lost her job.

It was a long story. Marija insisted that it was because of her activity in the union. The packers, of course, had spies in all the unions, and in addition they made a practice of buying up a certain number of the union officials, as many as they thought they needed. So every week they received reports as to what was going on, and often they knew things before the members of the union knew them. Any one who was considered to be dangerous by them would find that he was not a favorite with his boss; and Marija had been a great hand for going after the foreign people and preaching to them. However that might be, the known facts were that a few weeks before the factory closed, Marija had been cheated out of her pay for three hundred cans. The girls worked at a long table, and behind them walked a woman with pencil and notebook, keeping count of the number they finished. This woman was, of course, only human, and sometimes made mistakes; when this happened, there was no redress—if on Saturday you got less money than you had earned, you had to make the best of it. But Marija did not understand this, and made a disturbance. Marija's disturbances did not mean anything, and while she had known only Lithuanian and Polish, they had done no harm, for people only laughed at her and made her cry. But now Marija was able to call names in English, and so she got the woman who made the mistake to disliking her. Probably, as Marija claimed, she made mistakes on purpose after that; at any rate, she made them, and the third time it happened Marija went on the warpath and took the matter first to the forelady, and when she got no satisfaction there, to the superintendent. This was unheard-of presumption, but the superintendent said he would see about it, which Marija took to mean that she was going to get her money; after waiting three days, she went to see the superintendent again. This time the man frowned, and said that he had not had time to attend to it; and when Marija, against the advice and warning of every one, tried it once more, he ordered her back to her

work in a passion. Just how things happened after that Marija was not sure, but that afternoon the forelady told her that her services would not be any longer required. Poor Marija could not have been more dumfounded had the woman knocked her over the head; at first she could not believe what she heard, and then she grew furious and swore that she would come anyway, that her place belonged to her. In the end she sat down in the middle of the floor and wept and wailed.

It was a cruel lesson; but then Marija was headstrong—she should have listened to those who had had experience. The next time she would know her place, as the forelady expressed it; and so Marija went out, and the family faced the problem of an existence again.

It was especially hard this time, for Ona was to be confined before long, and Jurgis was trying hard to save up money for this. He had heard dreadful stories of the midwives, who grow as thick as fleas in Packingtown; and he had made up his mind that Ona must have a man-doctor. Jurgis could be very obstinate when he wanted to, and he was in this case, much to the dismay of the women, who felt that a man-doctor was an impropriety, and that the matter really belonged to them. The cheapest doctor they could find would charge them fifteen dollars, and perhaps more when the bill came in; and here was Jurgis, declaring that he would pay it, even if he had to stop eating in the meantime!

Marija had only about twenty-five dollars left. Day after day she wandered about the yards begging a job, but this time without hope of finding it. Marija could do the work of an able-bodied man, when she was cheerful, but discouragement wore her out easily, and she would come home at night a pitiable object. She learned her lesson this time, poor creature; she learned it ten times over. All the family learned it along with her—that when you have once got a job in Packingtown, you hang on to it, come what will.

Four weeks Marija hunted, and half of a fifth week. Of course she stopped paying her dues to the union. She lost all interest in the union, and cursed herself for a fool that she had ever been dragged into one. She had about made up her mind that she was a lost soul, when somebody told her of an opening, and she went and got a place as a “beef-trimmer.” She got this because the boss saw that she had the muscles of a man, and so he discharged a man and put Marija to do his work, paying her a little more than half what he had been paying before.

When she first came to Packingtown, Marija would have scorned such work as this. She was in another canning factory, and her work was to trim the meat of those diseased cattle that Jurgis had been told about not long before. She was shut up in one of the rooms where the people seldom saw the daylight; beneath her were the chilling rooms, where the meat was frozen, and above her were the cooking rooms; and so she stood on an ice-cold floor, while her head was often so hot that she could scarcely breathe. Trimming beef off the bones by the hundred-weight, while standing up from early morning till late at night, with heavy boots on and the floor always damp and full of puddles, liable to be thrown out of work indefinitely because of a slackening in the trade, liable again to be kept overtime in rush seasons, and be worked till she trembled in every nerve and lost her grip on her slimy knife, and gave herself a poisoned wound—that was the new life that unfolded itself before Marija. But because Marija was a human horse she merely laughed and went at it; it would enable her to pay her board again, and keep the family going. And as for Tamoszius—well, they had waited a long time, and they could wait a little longer. They could not possibly get along upon his wages alone, and the family could not live without hers. He could come and visit her, and sit in the kitchen and hold her hand, and he must manage to be content with that. But day by day the music of Tamoszius’ violin became more passionate and heartbreaking; and Marija would sit with her hands clasped and her cheeks wet and all her

body atremble, hearing in the wailing melodies the voices of the unborn generations which cried out in her for life.

Marija's lesson came just in time to save Ona from a similar fate. Ona, too, was dissatisfied with her place, and had far more reason than Marija. She did not tell half of her story at home, because she saw it was a torment to Jurgis, and she was afraid of what he might do. For a long time Ona had seen that Miss Henderson, the forelady in her department, did not like her. At first she thought it was the old-time mistake she had made in asking for a holiday to get married. Then she concluded it must be because she did not give the forelady a present occasionally—she was the kind that took presents from the girls, Ona learned, and made all sorts of discriminations in favor of those who gave them. In the end, however, Ona discovered that it was even worse than that. Miss Henderson was a newcomer, and it was some time before rumor made her out; but finally it transpired that she was a kept woman, the former mistress of the superintendent of a department in the same building. He had put her there to keep her quiet, it seemed—and that not altogether with success, for once or twice they had been heard quarreling. She had the temper of a hyena, and soon the place she ran was a witch's caldron. There were some of the girls who were of her own sort, who were willing to toady to her and flatter her; and these would carry tales about the rest, and so the furies were unchained in the place. Worse than this, the woman lived in a bawdyhouse downtown, with a coarse, red-faced Irishman named Connor, who was the boss of the loading-gang outside, and would make free with the girls as they went to and from their work. In the slack seasons some of them would go with Miss Henderson to this house downtown—in fact, it would not be too much to say that she managed her department at Brown's in conjunction with it. Sometimes women from the house would be given places alongside of decent girls, and after other decent girls had been turned off to make room for them. When you worked in this woman's department the house downtown was never out of your thoughts all day—there were always whiffs of it to be caught, like the odor of the Packingtown rendering plants at night, when

the wind shifted suddenly. There would be stories about it going the rounds; the girls opposite you would be telling them and winking at you. In such a place Ona would not have stayed a day, but for starvation; and, as it was, she was never sure that she could stay the next day. She understood now that the real reason that Miss Henderson hated her was that she was a decent married girl; and she knew that the talebearers and the toadies hated her for the same reason, and were doing their best to make her life miserable.

But there was no place a girl could go in Packingtown, if she was particular about things of this sort; there was no place in it where a prostitute could not get along better than a decent girl. Here was a population, low-class and mostly foreign, hanging always on the verge of starvation, and dependent for its opportunities of life upon the whim of men every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers; under such circumstances immorality was exactly as inevitable, and as prevalent, as it was under the system of chattel slavery. Things that were quite unspeakable went on there in the packing houses all the time, and were taken for granted by everybody; only they did not show, as in the old slavery times, because there was no difference in color between master and slave.

One morning Ona stayed home, and Jurgis had the man-doctor, according to his whim, and she was safely delivered of a fine baby. It was an enormous big boy, and Ona was such a tiny creature herself, that it seemed quite incredible. Jurgis would stand and gaze at the stranger by the hour, unable to believe that it had really happened.

The coming of this boy was a decisive event with Jurgis. It made him irrevocably a family man; it killed the last lingering impulse that he might have had to go out in the evenings and sit and talk with the men in the saloons. There was nothing he cared for now so much as to sit and look at the baby. This was very curious, for Jurgis had never been interested in babies before. But then, this was a very unusual sort of a

baby. He had the brightest little black eyes, and little black ringlets all over his head; he was the living image of his father, everybody said—and Jurgis found this a fascinating circumstance. It was sufficiently perplexing that this tiny mite of life should have come into the world at all in the manner that it had; that it should have come with a comical imitation of its father's nose was simply uncanny.

Perhaps, Jurgis thought, this was intended to signify that it was his baby; that it was his and Ona's, to care for all its life. Jurgis had never possessed anything nearly so interesting—a baby was, when you came to think about it, assuredly a marvelous possession. It would grow up to be a man, a human soul, with a personality all its own, a will of its own! Such thoughts would keep haunting Jurgis, filling him with all sorts of strange and almost painful excitements. He was wonderfully proud of little Antanas; he was curious about all the details of him—the washing and the dressing and the eating and the sleeping of him, and asked all sorts of absurd questions. It took him quite a while to get over his alarm at the incredible shortness of the little creature's legs.

Jurgis had, alas, very little time to see his baby; he never felt the chains about him more than just then. When he came home at night, the baby would be asleep, and it would be the merest chance if he awoke before Jurgis had to go to sleep himself. Then in the morning there was no time to look at him, so really the only chance the father had was on Sundays. This was more cruel yet for Ona, who ought to have stayed home and nursed him, the doctor said, for her own health as well as the baby's; but Ona had to go to work, and leave him for Teta Elzbieta to feed upon the pale blue poison that was called milk at the corner grocery. Ona's confinement lost her only a week's wages—she would go to the factory the second Monday, and the best that Jurgis could persuade her was to ride in the car, and let him run along behind and help her to Brown's when she alighted. After that it would be all right, said Ona, it was no strain sitting still sewing hams all day; and if she waited longer she might find that her dreadful forelady had put some one else in her place.

That would be a greater calamity than ever now, Ona continued, on account of the baby. They would all have to work harder now on his account. It was such a responsibility—they must not have the baby grow up to suffer as they had. And this indeed had been the first thing that Jurgis had thought of himself—he had clenched his hands and braced himself anew for the struggle, for the sake of that tiny mite of human possibility.

And so Ona went back to Brown's and saved her place and a week's wages; and so she gave herself some one of the thousand ailments that women group under the title of "womb trouble," and was never again a well person as long as she lived. It is difficult to convey in words all that this meant to Ona; it seemed such a slight offense, and the punishment was so out of all proportion, that neither she nor any one else ever connected the two. "Womb trouble" to Ona did not mean a specialist's diagnosis, and a course of treatment, and perhaps an operation or two; it meant simply headaches and pains in the back, and depression and heartsickness, and neuralgia when she had to go to work in the rain. The great majority of the women who worked in Packingtown suffered in the same way, and from the same cause, so it was not deemed a thing to see the doctor about; instead Ona would try patent medicines, one after another, as her friends told her about them. As these all contained alcohol, or some other stimulant, she found that they all did her good while she took them; and so she was always chasing the phantom of good health, and losing it because she was too poor to continue.