

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 16

When Jurgis got up again he went quietly enough. He was exhausted and half-dazed, and besides he saw the blue uniforms of the policemen. He drove in a patrol wagon with half a dozen of them watching him; keeping as far away as possible, however, on account of the fertilizer. Then he stood before the sergeant's desk and gave his name and address, and saw a charge of assault and battery entered against him. On his way to his cell a burly policeman cursed him because he started down the wrong corridor, and then added a kick when he was not quick enough; nevertheless, Jurgis did not even lift his eyes—he had lived two years and a half in Packingtown, and he knew what the police were. It was as much as a man's very life was worth to anger them, here in their inmost lair; like as not a dozen would pile on to him at once, and pound his face into a pulp. It would be nothing unusual if he got his skull cracked in the melee—in which case they would report that he had been drunk and had fallen down, and there would be no one to know the difference or to care.

So a barred door clanged upon Jurgis and he sat down upon a bench and buried his face in his hands. He was alone; he had the afternoon and all of the night to himself.

At first he was like a wild beast that has glutted itself; he was in a dull stupor of satisfaction. He had done up the scoundrel pretty well—not as well as he would have if they had given him a minute more, but pretty

well, all the same; the ends of his fingers were still tingling from their contact with the fellow's throat. But then, little by little, as his strength came back and his senses cleared, he began to see beyond his momentary gratification; that he had nearly killed the boss would not help Ona—not the horrors that she had borne, nor the memory that would haunt her all her days. It would not help to feed her and her child; she would certainly lose her place, while he—what was to happen to him God only knew.

Half the night he paced the floor, wrestling with this nightmare; and when he was exhausted he lay down, trying to sleep, but finding instead, for the first time in his life, that his brain was too much for him. In the cell next to him was a drunken wife-beater and in the one beyond a yelling maniac. At midnight they opened the station house to the homeless wanderers who were crowded about the door, shivering in the winter blast, and they thronged into the corridor outside of the cells. Some of them stretched themselves out on the bare stone floor and fell to snoring, others sat up, laughing and talking, cursing and quarreling. The air was fetid with their breath, yet in spite of this some of them smelled Jurgis and called down the torments of hell upon him, while he lay in a far corner of his cell, counting the throbbings of the blood in his forehead.

They had brought him his supper, which was “duffers and dope”—being hunks of dry bread on a tin plate, and coffee, called “dope” because it was drugged to keep the prisoners quiet. Jurgis had not known this, or he would have swallowed the stuff in desperation; as it was, every nerve of him was aquiver with shame and rage. Toward morning the place fell silent, and he got up and began to pace his cell; and then within the soul of him there rose up a fiend, red-eyed and cruel, and tore out the strings of his heart.

It was not for himself that he suffered—what did a man who worked in Durham's fertilizer mill care about anything that the world might do to

him! What was any tyranny of prison compared with the tyranny of the past, of the thing that had happened and could not be recalled, of the memory that could never be effaced! The horror of it drove him mad; he stretched out his arms to heaven, crying out for deliverance from it—and there was no deliverance, there was no power even in heaven that could undo the past. It was a ghost that would not drown; it followed him, it seized upon him and beat him to the ground. Ah, if only he could have foreseen it—but then, he would have foreseen it, if he had not been a fool! He smote his hands upon his forehead, cursing himself because he had ever allowed Ona to work where she had, because he had not stood between her and a fate which every one knew to be so common. He should have taken her away, even if it were to lie down and die of starvation in the gutters of Chicago's streets! And now—oh, it could not be true; it was too monstrous, too horrible.

It was a thing that could not be faced; a new shuddering seized him every time he tried to think of it. No, there was no bearing the load of it, there was no living under it. There would be none for her—he knew that he might pardon her, might plead with her on his knees, but she would never look him in the face again, she would never be his wife again. The shame of it would kill her—there could be no other deliverance, and it was best that she should die.

This was simple and clear, and yet, with cruel inconsistency, whenever he escaped from this nightmare it was to suffer and cry out at the vision of Ona starving. They had put him in jail, and they would keep him here a long time, years maybe. And Ona would surely not go to work again, broken and crushed as she was. And Elzbieta and Marija, too, might lose their places—if that hell fiend Connor chose to set to work to ruin them, they would all be turned out. And even if he did not, they could not live—even if the boys left school again, they could surely not pay all the bills without him and Ona. They had only a few dollars now—they had just paid the rent of the house a week ago, and that after it was two weeks overdue. So it would be due again in a week! They would have no

money to pay it then—and they would lose the house, after all their long, heartbreaking struggle. Three times now the agent had warned him that he would not tolerate another delay. Perhaps it was very base of Jurgis to be thinking about the house when he had the other unspeakable thing to fill his mind; yet, how much he had suffered for this house, how much they had all of them suffered! It was their one hope of respite, as long as they lived; they had put all their money into it—and they were working people, poor people, whose money was their strength, the very substance of them, body and soul, the thing by which they lived and for lack of which they died.

And they would lose it all; they would be turned out into the streets, and have to hide in some icy garret, and live or die as best they could! Jurgis had all the night—and all of many more nights—to think about this, and he saw the thing in its details; he lived it all, as if he were there. They would sell their furniture, and then run into debt at the stores, and then be refused credit; they would borrow a little from the Szedvilases, whose delicatessen store was tottering on the brink of ruin; the neighbors would come and help them a little—poor, sick Jadvyga would bring a few spare pennies, as she always did when people were starving, and Tamoszius Kuszleika would bring them the proceeds of a night's fiddling. So they would struggle to hang on until he got out of jail—or would they know that he was in jail, would they be able to find out anything about him? Would they be allowed to see him—or was it to be part of his punishment to be kept in ignorance about their fate?

His mind would hang upon the worst possibilities; he saw Ona ill and tortured, Marija out of her place, little Stanislovas unable to get to work for the snow, the whole family turned out on the street. God Almighty! would they actually let them lie down in the street and die? Would there be no help even then—would they wander about in the snow till they froze? Jurgis had never seen any dead bodies in the streets, but he had seen people evicted and disappear, no one knew where; and though the city had a relief bureau, though there was a charity organization society

in the stockyards district, in all his life there he had never heard of either of them. They did not advertise their activities, having more calls than they could attend to without that.

—So on until morning. Then he had another ride in the patrol wagon, along with the drunken wife-beater and the maniac, several “plain drunks” and “saloon fighters,” a burglar, and two men who had been arrested for stealing meat from the packing houses. Along with them he was driven into a large, white-walled room, stale-smelling and crowded. In front, upon a raised platform behind a rail, sat a stout, florid-faced personage, with a nose broken out in purple blotches.

Our friend realized vaguely that he was about to be tried. He wondered what for—whether or not his victim might be dead, and if so, what they would do with him. Hang him, perhaps, or beat him to death—nothing would have surprised Jurgis, who knew little of the laws. Yet he had picked up gossip enough to have it occur to him that the loud-voiced man upon the bench might be the notorious Justice Callahan, about whom the people of Packingtown spoke with bated breath.

“Pat” Callahan—“Growler” Pat, as he had been known before he ascended the bench—had begun life as a butcher boy and a bruiser of local reputation; he had gone into politics almost as soon as he had learned to talk, and had held two offices at once before he was old enough to vote. If Scully was the thumb, Pat Callahan was the first finger of the unseen hand whereby the packers held down the people of the district. No politician in Chicago ranked higher in their confidence; he had been at it a long time—had been the business agent in the city council of old Durham, the self-made merchant, way back in the early days, when the whole city of Chicago had been up at auction. “Growler” Pat had given up holding city offices very early in his career—caring only for party power, and giving the rest of his time to superintending his dives and brothels. Of late years, however, since his children were growing up, he had begun to value respectability, and had had himself

made a magistrate; a position for which he was admirably fitted, because of his strong conservatism and his contempt for “foreigners.”

Jurgis sat gazing about the room for an hour or two; he was in hopes that some one of the family would come, but in this he was disappointed. Finally, he was led before the bar, and a lawyer for the company appeared against him. Connor was under the doctor’s care, the lawyer explained briefly, and if his Honor would hold the prisoner for a week — “Three hundred dollars,” said his Honor, promptly.

Jurgis was staring from the judge to the lawyer in perplexity. “Have you any one to go on your bond?” demanded the judge, and then a clerk who stood at Jurgis’ elbow explained to him what this meant. The latter shook his head, and before he realized what had happened the policemen were leading him away again. They took him to a room where other prisoners were waiting and here he stayed until court adjourned, when he had another long and bitterly cold ride in a patrol wagon to the county jail, which is on the north side of the city, and nine or ten miles from the stockyards.

Here they searched Jurgis, leaving him only his money, which consisted of fifteen cents. Then they led him to a room and told him to strip for a bath; after which he had to walk down a long gallery, past the grated cell doors of the inmates of the jail. This was a great event to the latter—the daily review of the new arrivals, all stark naked, and many and diverting were the comments. Jurgis was required to stay in the bath longer than any one, in the vain hope of getting out of him a few of his phosphates and acids. The prisoners roomed two in a cell, but that day there was one left over, and he was the one.

The cells were in tiers, opening upon galleries. His cell was about five feet by seven in size, with a stone floor and a heavy wooden bench built into it. There was no window—the only light came from windows near the roof at one end of the court outside. There were two bunks, one

above the other, each with a straw mattress and a pair of gray blankets—the latter stiff as boards with filth, and alive with fleas, bedbugs, and lice. When Jurgis lifted up the mattress he discovered beneath it a layer of scurrying roaches, almost as badly frightened as himself.

Here they brought him more “duffers and dope,” with the addition of a bowl of soup. Many of the prisoners had their meals brought in from a restaurant, but Jurgis had no money for that. Some had books to read and cards to play, with candles to burn by night, but Jurgis was all alone in darkness and silence. He could not sleep again; there was the same maddening procession of thoughts that lashed him like whips upon his naked back. When night fell he was pacing up and down his cell like a wild beast that breaks its teeth upon the bars of its cage. Now and then in his frenzy he would fling himself against the walls of the place, beating his hands upon them. They cut him and bruised him—they were cold and merciless as the men who had built them.

In the distance there was a church-tower bell that tolled the hours one by one. When it came to midnight Jurgis was lying upon the floor with his head in his arms, listening. Instead of falling silent at the end, the bell broke into a sudden clangor. Jurgis raised his head; what could that mean—a fire? God! Suppose there were to be a fire in this jail! But then he made out a melody in the ringing; there were chimes. And they seemed to waken the city—all around, far and near, there were bells, ringing wild music; for fully a minute Jurgis lay lost in wonder, before, all at once, the meaning of it broke over him—that this was Christmas Eve!

Christmas Eve—he had forgotten it entirely! There was a breaking of floodgates, a whirl of new memories and new griefs rushing into his mind. In far Lithuania they had celebrated Christmas; and it came to him as if it had been yesterday—himself a little child, with his lost brother and his dead father in the cabin—in the deep black forest, where the snow fell all day and all night and buried them from the world. It was too far off for Santa Claus in Lithuania, but it was not too far for peace

and good will to men, for the wonder-bearing vision of the Christ Child. And even in Packingtown they had not forgotten it—some gleam of it had never failed to break their darkness. Last Christmas Eve and all Christmas Day Jurgis had toiled on the killing beds, and Ona at wrapping hams, and still they had found strength enough to take the children for a walk upon the avenue, to see the store windows all decorated with Christmas trees and ablaze with electric lights. In one window there would be live geese, in another marvels in sugar—pink and white canes big enough for ogres, and cakes with cherubs upon them; in a third there would be rows of fat yellow turkeys, decorated with rosettes, and rabbits and squirrels hanging; in a fourth would be a fairyland of toys—lovely dolls with pink dresses, and woolly sheep and drums and soldier hats. Nor did they have to go without their share of all this, either. The last time they had had a big basket with them and all their Christmas marketing to do—a roast of pork and a cabbage and some rye bread, and a pair of mittens for Ona, and a rubber doll that squeaked, and a little green cornucopia full of candy to be hung from the gas jet and gazed at by half a dozen pairs of longing eyes.

Even half a year of the sausage machines and the fertilizer mill had not been able to kill the thought of Christmas in them; there was a choking in Jurgis' throat as he recalled that the very night Ona had not come home Teta Elzbieta had taken him aside and shown him an old valentine that she had picked up in a paper store for three cents—dingy and shopworn, but with bright colors, and figures of angels and doves. She had wiped all the specks off this, and was going to set it on the mantel, where the children could see it. Great sobs shook Jurgis at this memory—they would spend their Christmas in misery and despair, with him in prison and Ona ill and their home in desolation. Ah, it was too cruel! Why at least had they not left him alone—why, after they had shut him in jail, must they be ringing Christmas chimes in his ears!

But no, their bells were not ringing for him—their Christmas was not meant for him, they were simply not counting him at all. He was of no

consequence—he was flung aside, like a bit of trash, the carcass of some animal. It was horrible, horrible! His wife might be dying, his baby might be starving, his whole family might be perishing in the cold—and all the while they were ringing their Christmas chimes! And the bitter mockery of it—all this was punishment for him! They put him in a place where the snow could not beat in, where the cold could not eat through his bones; they brought him food and drink—why, in the name of heaven, if they must punish him, did they not put his family in jail and leave him outside—why could they find no better way to punish him than to leave three weak women and six helpless children to starve and freeze? That was their law, that was their justice!

Jurgis stood upright; trembling with passion, his hands clenched and his arms upraised, his whole soul ablaze with hatred and defiance. Ten thousand curses upon them and their law! Their justice—it was a lie, it was a lie, a hideous, brutal lie, a thing too black and hateful for any world but a world of nightmares. It was a sham and a loathsome mockery. There was no justice, there was no right, anywhere in it—it was only force, it was tyranny, the will and the power, reckless and unrestrained! They had ground him beneath their heel, they had devoured all his substance; they had murdered his old father, they had broken and wrecked his wife, they had crushed and cowed his whole family; and now they were through with him, they had no further use for him—and because he had interfered with them, had gotten in their way, this was what they had done to him! They had put him behind bars, as if he had been a wild beast, a thing without sense or reason, without rights, without affections, without feelings. Nay, they would not even have treated a beast as they had treated him! Would any man in his senses have trapped a wild thing in its lair, and left its young behind to die?

These midnight hours were fateful ones to Jurgis; in them was the beginning of his rebellion, of his outlawry and his unbelief. He had no wit to trace back the social crime to its far sources—he could not say that it was the thing men have called “the system” that was crushing him

to the earth that it was the packers, his masters, who had bought up the law of the land, and had dealt out their brutal will to him from the seat of justice. He only knew that he was wronged, and that the world had wronged him; that the law, that society, with all its powers, had declared itself his foe. And every hour his soul grew blacker, every hour he dreamed new dreams of vengeance, of defiance, of raging, frenzied hate.

The vilest deeds, like poison weeds,
 Bloom well in prison air;
It is only what is good in Man
 That wastes and withers there;
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
 And the Warder is Despair.

So wrote a poet, to whom the world had dealt its justice—

I know not whether Laws be right,
 Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
 Is that the wall is strong.
And they do well to hide their hell,
 For in it things are done
That Son of God nor son of Man
 Ever should look upon!