

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 17

At seven o'clock the next morning Jurgis was let out to get water to wash his cell—a duty which he performed faithfully, but which most of the prisoners were accustomed to shirk, until their cells became so filthy that the guards interposed. Then he had more “duffers and dope,” and afterward was allowed three hours for exercise, in a long, cement-walked court roofed with glass. Here were all the inmates of the jail crowded together. At one side of the court was a place for visitors, cut off by two heavy wire screens, a foot apart, so that nothing could be passed in to the prisoners; here Jurgis watched anxiously, but there came no one to see him.

Soon after he went back to his cell, a keeper opened the door to let in another prisoner. He was a dapper young fellow, with a light brown mustache and blue eyes, and a graceful figure. He nodded to Jurgis, and then, as the keeper closed the door upon him, began gazing critically about him.

“Well, pal,” he said, as his glance encountered Jurgis again, “good morning.”

“Good morning,” said Jurgis.

“A rum go for Christmas, eh?” added the other.

Jurgis nodded.

The newcomer went to the bunks and inspected the blankets; he lifted up the mattress, and then dropped it with an exclamation. "My God!" he said, "that's the worst yet."

He glanced at Jurgis again. "Looks as if it hadn't been slept in last night. Couldn't stand it, eh?"

"I didn't want to sleep last night," said Jurgis.

"When did you come in?"

"Yesterday."

The other had another look around, and then wrinkled up his nose. "There's the devil of a stink in here," he said, suddenly. "What is it?"

"It's me," said Jurgis.

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"Didn't they make you wash?"

"Yes, but this don't wash."

"What is it?"

"Fertilizer."

"Fertilizer! The deuce! What are you?"

“I work in the stockyards—at least I did until the other day. It’s in my clothes.”

“That’s a new one on me,” said the newcomer. “I thought I’d been up against ‘em all. What are you in for?”

“I hit my boss.” “Oh—that’s it. What did he do?”

“He—he treated me mean.”

“I see. You’re what’s called an honest workingman!”

“What are you?” Jurgis asked.

“I?” The other laughed. “They say I’m a cracksman,” he said.

“What’s that?” asked Jurgis.

“Safes, and such things,” answered the other.

“Oh,” said Jurgis, wonderingly, and stared at the speaker in awe. “You mean you break into them—you—you—”

“Yes,” laughed the other, “that’s what they say.”

He did not look to be over twenty-two or three, though, as Jurgis found afterward, he was thirty. He spoke like a man of education, like what the world calls a “gentleman.”

“Is that what you’re here for?” Jurgis inquired.

“No,” was the answer. “I’m here for disorderly conduct. They were mad because they couldn’t get any evidence.”

“What’s your name?” the young fellow continued after a pause. “My name’s Duane—Jack Duane. I’ve more than a dozen, but that’s my company one.” He seated himself on the floor with his back to the wall and his legs crossed, and went on talking easily; he soon put Jurgis on a friendly footing—he was evidently a man of the world, used to getting on, and not too proud to hold conversation with a mere laboring man. He drew Jurgis out, and heard all about his life all but the one unmentionable thing; and then he told stories about his own life. He was a great one for stories, not always of the choicest. Being sent to jail had apparently not disturbed his cheerfulness; he had “done time” twice before, it seemed, and he took it all with a frolic welcome. What with women and wine and the excitement of his vocation, a man could afford to rest now and then.

Naturally, the aspect of prison life was changed for Jurgis by the arrival of a cell mate. He could not turn his face to the wall and sulk, he had to speak when he was spoken to; nor could he help being interested in the conversation of Duane—the first educated man with whom he had ever talked. How could he help listening with wonder while the other told of midnight ventures and perilous escapes, of feasting and orgies, of fortunes squandered in a night? The young fellow had an amused contempt for Jurgis, as a sort of working mule; he, too, had felt the world’s injustice, but instead of bearing it patiently, he had struck back, and struck hard. He was striking all the time—there was war between him and society. He was a genial freebooter, living off the enemy, without fear or shame. He was not always victorious, but then defeat did not mean annihilation, and need not break his spirit.

Withal he was a goodhearted fellow—too much so, it appeared. His story came out, not in the first day, nor the second, but in the long hours that dragged by, in which they had nothing to do but talk and nothing to talk of but themselves. Jack Duane was from the East; he was a college-bred man—had been studying electrical engineering. Then his father had met with misfortune in business and killed himself; and there had been

his mother and a younger brother and sister. Also, there was an invention of Duane's; Jurgis could not understand it clearly, but it had to do with telegraphing, and it was a very important thing—there were fortunes in it, millions upon millions of dollars. And Duane had been robbed of it by a great company, and got tangled up in lawsuits and lost all his money. Then somebody had given him a tip on a horse race, and he had tried to retrieve his fortune with another person's money, and had to run away, and all the rest had come from that. The other asked him what had led him to safebreaking—to Jurgis a wild and appalling occupation to think about. A man he had met, his cell mate had replied—one thing leads to another. Didn't he ever wonder about his family, Jurgis asked. Sometimes, the other answered, but not often—he didn't allow it. Thinking about it would make it no better. This wasn't a world in which a man had any business with a family; sooner or later Jurgis would find that out also, and give up the fight and shift for himself.

Jurgis was so transparently what he pretended to be that his cell mate was as open with him as a child; it was pleasant to tell him adventures, he was so full of wonder and admiration, he was so new to the ways of the country. Duane did not even bother to keep back names and places—he told all his triumphs and his failures, his loves and his griefs. Also he introduced Jurgis to many of the other prisoners, nearly half of whom he knew by name. The crowd had already given Jurgis a name—they called him “he stinker.” This was cruel, but they meant no harm by it, and he took it with a goodnatured grin.

Our friend had caught now and then a whiff from the sewers over which he lived, but this was the first time that he had ever been splashed by their filth. This jail was a Noah's ark of the city's crime—there were murderers, “hold-up men” and burglars, embezzlers, counterfeiters and forgers, bigamists, “shoplifters,” “confidence men,” petty thieves and pickpockets, gamblers and procurers, brawlers, beggars, tramps and drunkards; they were black and white, old and young, Americans and natives of every nation under the sun. There were hardened criminals

and innocent men too poor to give bail; old men, and boys literally not yet in their teens. They were the drainage of the great festering ulcer of society; they were hideous to look upon, sickening to talk to. All life had turned to rottenness and stench in them—love was a beastliness, joy was a snare, and God was an imprecation. They strolled here and there about the courtyard, and Jurgis listened to them. He was ignorant and they were wise; they had been everywhere and tried everything. They could tell the whole hateful story of it, set forth the inner soul of a city in which justice and honor, women's bodies and men's souls, were for sale in the marketplace, and human beings writhed and fought and fell upon each other like wolves in a pit; in which lusts were raging fires, and men were fuel, and humanity was festering and stewing and wallowing in its own corruption. Into this wild-beast tangle these men had been born without their consent, they had taken part in it because they could not help it; that they were in jail was no disgrace to them, for the game had never been fair, the dice were loaded. They were swindlers and thieves of pennies and dimes, and they had been trapped and put out of the way by the swindlers and thieves of millions of dollars.

To most of this Jurgis tried not to listen. They frightened him with their savage mockery; and all the while his heart was far away, where his loved ones were calling. Now and then in the midst of it his thoughts would take flight; and then the tears would come into his eyes—and he would be called back by the jeering laughter of his companions.

He spent a week in this company, and during all that time he had no word from his home. He paid one of his fifteen cents for a postal card, and his companion wrote a note to the family, telling them where he was and when he would be tried. There came no answer to it, however, and at last, the day before New Year's, Jurgis bade good-by to Jack Duane. The latter gave him his address, or rather the address of his mistress, and

made Jurgis promise to look him up. “Maybe I could help you out of a hole some day,” he said, and added that he was sorry to have him go. Jurgis rode in the patrol wagon back to Justice Callahan’s court for trial.

One of the first things he made out as he entered the room was Teta Elzbieta and little Kotrina, looking pale and frightened, seated far in the rear. His heart began to pound, but he did not dare to try to signal to them, and neither did Elzbieta. He took his seat in the prisoners’ pen and sat gazing at them in helpless agony. He saw that Ona was not with them, and was full of foreboding as to what that might mean. He spent half an hour brooding over this—and then suddenly he straightened up and the blood rushed into his face. A man had come in—Jurgis could not see his features for the bandages that swathed him, but he knew the burly figure. It was Connor! A trembling seized him, and his limbs bent as if for a spring. Then suddenly he felt a hand on his collar, and heard a voice behind him: “Sit down, you son of a—!”

He subsided, but he never took his eyes off his enemy. The fellow was still alive, which was a disappointment, in one way; and yet it was pleasant to see him, all in penitential plasters. He and the company lawyer, who was with him, came and took seats within the judge’s railing; and a minute later the clerk called Jurgis’ name, and the policeman jerked him to his feet and led him before the bar, gripping him tightly by the arm, lest he should spring upon the boss.

Jurgis listened while the man entered the witness chair, took the oath, and told his story. The wife of the prisoner had been employed in a department near him, and had been discharged for impudence to him. Half an hour later he had been violently attacked, knocked down, and almost choked to death. He had brought witnesses—

“They will probably not be necessary,” observed the judge and he turned to Jurgis. “You admit attacking the plaintiff?” he asked.

“Him?” inquired Jurgis, pointing at the boss.

“Yes,” said the judge. “I hit him, sir,” said Jurgis.

“Say ‘your Honor,’” said the officer, pinching his arm hard.

“Your Honor,” said Jurgis, obediently.

“You tried to choke him?”

“Yes, sir, your Honor.”

“Ever been arrested before?”

“No, sir, your Honor.”

“What have you to say for yourself?”

Jurgis hesitated. What had he to say? In two years and a half he had learned to speak English for practical purposes, but these had never included the statement that some one had intimidated and seduced his wife. He tried once or twice, stammering and balking, to the annoyance of the judge, who was gasping from the odor of fertilizer. Finally, the prisoner made it understood that his vocabulary was inadequate, and there stepped up a dapper young man with waxed mustaches, bidding him speak in any language he knew.

Jurgis began; supposing that he would be given time, he explained how the boss had taken advantage of his wife’s position to make advances to her and had threatened her with the loss of her place. When the interpreter had translated this, the judge, whose calendar was crowded, and whose automobile was ordered for a certain hour, interrupted with the remark: “Oh, I see. Well, if he made love to your wife, why didn’t she complain to the superintendent or leave the place?”

Jurgis hesitated, somewhat taken aback; he began to explain that they were very poor—that work was hard to get—

“I see,” said Justice Callahan; “so instead you thought you would knock him down.” He turned to the plaintiff, inquiring, “Is there any truth in this story, Mr. Connor?”

“Not a particle, your Honor,” said the boss. “It is very unpleasant—they tell some such tale every time you have to discharge a woman—”

“Yes, I know,” said the judge. “I hear it often enough. The fellow seems to have handled you pretty roughly. Thirty days and costs. Next case.”

Jurgis had been listening in perplexity. It was only when the policeman who had him by the arm turned and started to lead him away that he realized that sentence had been passed. He gazed round him wildly. “Thirty days!” he panted and then he whirled upon the judge. “What will my family do?” he cried frantically. “I have a wife and baby, sir, and they have no money—my God, they will starve to death!”

“You would have done well to think about them before you committed the assault,” said the judge dryly, as he turned to look at the next prisoner.

Jurgis would have spoken again, but the policeman had seized him by the collar and was twisting it, and a second policeman was making for him with evidently hostile intentions. So he let them lead him away. Far down the room he saw Elzbieta and Kotrina, risen from their seats, staring in fright; he made one effort to go to them, and then, brought back by another twist at his throat, he bowed his head and gave up the struggle. They thrust him into a cell room, where other prisoners were waiting; and as soon as court had adjourned they led him down with them into the “Black Maria,” and drove him away.

This time Jurgis was bound for the “Bridewell,” a petty jail where Cook County prisoners serve their time. It was even filthier and more crowded than the county jail; all the smaller fry out of the latter had been sifted into it—the petty thieves and swindlers, the brawlers and vagrants. For his cell mate Jurgis had an Italian fruit seller who had refused to pay his graft to the policeman, and been arrested for carrying a large pocketknife; as he did not understand a word of English our friend was glad when he left. He gave place to a Norwegian sailor, who had lost half an ear in a drunken brawl, and who proved to be quarrelsome, cursing Jurgis because he moved in his bunk and caused the roaches to drop upon the lower one. It would have been quite intolerable, staying in a cell with this wild beast, but for the fact that all day long the prisoners were put at work breaking stone.

Ten days of his thirty Jurgis spent thus, without hearing a word from his family; then one day a keeper came and informed him that there was a visitor to see him. Jurgis turned white, and so weak at the knees that he could hardly leave his cell.

The man led him down the corridor and a flight of steps to the visitors’ room, which was barred like a cell. Through the grating Jurgis could see some one sitting in a chair; and as he came into the room the person started up, and he saw that it was little Stanislovas. At the sight of some one from home the big fellow nearly went to pieces—he had to steady himself by a chair, and he put his other hand to his forehead, as if to clear away a mist. “Well?” he said, weakly.

Little Stanislovas was also trembling, and all but too frightened to speak. “They—they sent me to tell you—” he said, with a gulp.

“Well?” Jurgis repeated. He followed the boy’s glance to where the keeper was standing watching them. “Never mind that,” Jurgis cried, wildly. “How are they?”

“Ona is very sick,” Stanislovas said; “and we are almost starving. We can’t get along; we thought you might be able to help us.”

Jurgis gripped the chair tighter; there were beads of perspiration on his forehead, and his hand shook. “I—can’t help you,” he said.

“Ona lies in her room all day,” the boy went on, breathlessly. “She won’t eat anything, and she cries all the time. She won’t tell what is the matter and she won’t go to work at all. Then a long time ago the man came for the rent. He was very cross. He came again last week. He said he would turn us out of the house. And then Marija—”

A sob choked Stanislovas, and he stopped. “What’s the matter with Marija?” cried Jurgis.

“She’s cut her hand!” said the boy. “She’s cut it bad, this time, worse than before. She can’t work and it’s all turning green, and the company doctor says she may—she may have to have it cut off. And Marija cries all the time—her money is nearly all gone, too, and we can’t pay the rent and the interest on the house; and we have no coal and nothing more to eat, and the man at the store, he says—”

The little fellow stopped again, beginning to whimper. “Go on!” the other panted in frenzy—“Go on!”

“I—I will,” sobbed Stanislovas. “It’s so—so cold all the time. And last Sunday it snowed again—a deep, deep snow—and I couldn’t—couldn’t get to work.”

“God!” Jurgis half shouted, and he took a step toward the child. There was an old hatred between them because of the snow—ever since that dreadful morning when the boy had had his fingers frozen and Jurgis had had to beat him to send him to work. Now he clenched his hands,

looking as if he would try to break through the grating. “You little villain,” he cried, “you didn’t try!”

“I did—I did!” wailed Stanislovas, shrinking from him in terror. “I tried all day—two days. Elzbieta was with me, and she couldn’t either. We couldn’t walk at all, it was so deep. And we had nothing to eat, and oh, it was so cold! I tried, and then the third day Ona went with me—”

“Ona!”

“Yes. She tried to get to work, too. She had to. We were all starving. But she had lost her place—”

Jurgis reeled, and gave a gasp. “She went back to that place?” he screamed. “She tried to,” said Stanislovas, gazing at him in perplexity. “Why not, Jurgis?”

The man breathed hard, three or four times. “Go—on,” he panted, finally.

“I went with her,” said Stanislovas, “but Miss Henderson wouldn’t take her back. And Connor saw her and cursed her. He was still bandaged up—why did you hit him, Jurgis?” (There was some fascinating mystery about this, the little fellow knew; but he could get no satisfaction.)

Jurgis could not speak; he could only stare, his eyes starting out. “She has been trying to get other work,” the boy went on; “but she’s so weak she can’t keep up. And my boss would not take me back, either—Ona says he knows Connor, and that’s the reason; they’ve all got a grudge against us now. So I’ve got to go downtown and sell papers with the rest of the boys and Kotrina—”

“Kotrina!”

“Yes, she’s been selling papers, too. She does best, because she’s a girl. Only the cold is so bad—it’s terrible coming home at night, Jurgis. Sometimes they can’t come home at all—I’m going to try to find them tonight and sleep where they do, it’s so late and it’s such a long ways home. I’ve had to walk, and I didn’t know where it was—I don’t know how to get back, either. Only mother said I must come, because you would want to know, and maybe somebody would help your family when they had put you in jail so you couldn’t work. And I walked all day to get here—and I only had a piece of bread for breakfast, Jurgis. Mother hasn’t any work either, because the sausage department is shut down; and she goes and begs at houses with a basket, and people give her food. Only she didn’t get much yesterday; it was too cold for her fingers, and today she was crying—”

So little Stanislovas went on, sobbing as he talked; and Jurgis stood, gripping the table tightly, saying not a word, but feeling that his head would burst; it was like having weights piled upon him, one after another, crushing the life out of him. He struggled and fought within himself—as if in some terrible nightmare, in which a man suffers an agony, and cannot lift his hand, nor cry out, but feels that he is going mad, that his brain is on fire—

Just when it seemed to him that another turn of the screw would kill him, little Stanislovas stopped. “You cannot help us?” he said weakly.

Jurgis shook his head.

“They won’t give you anything here?”

He shook it again.

“When are you coming out?”

“Three weeks yet,” Jurgis answered.

And the boy gazed around him uncertainly. "Then I might as well go," he said.

Jurgis nodded. Then, suddenly recollecting, he put his hand into his pocket and drew it out, shaking. "Here," he said, holding out the fourteen cents. "Take this to them."

And Stanislovas took it, and after a little more hesitation, started for the door. "Good-by, Jurgis," he said, and the other noticed that he walked unsteadily as he passed out of sight.

For a minute or so Jurgis stood clinging to his chair, reeling and swaying; then the keeper touched him on the arm, and he turned and went back to breaking stone.