

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 18

Jurgis did not get out of the Bridewell quite as soon as he had expected. To his sentence there were added “court costs” of a dollar and a half—he was supposed to pay for the trouble of putting him in jail, and not having the money, was obliged to work it off by three days more of toil. Nobody had taken the trouble to tell him this—only after counting the days and looking forward to the end in an agony of impatience, when the hour came that he expected to be free he found himself still set at the stone heap, and laughed at when he ventured to protest. Then he concluded he must have counted wrong; but as another day passed, he gave up all hope—and was sunk in the depths of despair, when one morning after breakfast a keeper came to him with the word that his time was up at last. So he doffed his prison garb, and put on his old fertilizer clothing, and heard the door of the prison clang behind him.

He stood upon the steps, bewildered; he could hardly believe that it was true,—that the sky was above him again and the open street before him; that he was a free man. But then the cold began to strike through his clothes, and he started quickly away.

There had been a heavy snow, and now a thaw had set in; fine sleety rain was falling, driven by a wind that pierced Jurgis to the bone. He had not stopped for his overcoat when he set out to “do up” Connor, and so his rides in the patrol wagons had been cruel experiences; his clothing was old and worn thin, and it never had been very warm. Now as he trudged

on the rain soon wet it through; there were six inches of watery slush on the sidewalks, so that his feet would soon have been soaked, even had there been no holes in his shoes.

Jurgis had had enough to eat in the jail, and the work had been the least trying of any that he had done since he came to Chicago; but even so, he had not grown strong—the fear and grief that had preyed upon his mind had worn him thin. Now he shivered and shrunk from the rain, hiding his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders together. The Bridewell grounds were on the outskirts of the city and the country around them was unsettled and wild—on one side was the big drainage canal, and on the other a maze of railroad tracks, and so the wind had full sweep.

After walking a ways, Jurgis met a little ragamuffin whom he hailed: “Hey, sonny!” The boy cocked one eye at him—he knew that Jurgis was a “jailbird” by his shaven head. “Wot yer want?” he queried.

“How do you go to the stockyards?” Jurgis demanded.

“I don’t go,” replied the boy.

Jurgis hesitated a moment, nonplussed. Then he said, “I mean which is the way?”

“Why don’t yer say so then?” was the response, and the boy pointed to the northwest, across the tracks. “That way.”

“How far is it?” Jurgis asked. “I dunno,” said the other. “Mebbe twenty miles or so.”

“Twenty miles!” Jurgis echoed, and his face fell. He had to walk every foot of it, for they had turned him out of jail without a penny in his pockets.

Yet, when he once got started, and his blood had warmed with walking, he forgot everything in the fever of his thoughts. All the dreadful imaginations that had haunted him in his cell now rushed into his mind at once. The agony was almost over—he was going to find out; and he clenched his hands in his pockets as he strode, following his flying desire, almost at a run. Ona—the baby—the family—the house—he would know the truth about them all! And he was coming to the rescue—he was free again! His hands were his own, and he could help them, he could do battle for them against the world.

For an hour or so he walked thus, and then he began to look about him. He seemed to be leaving the city altogether. The street was turning into a country road, leading out to the westward; there were snow-covered fields on either side of him. Soon he met a farmer driving a two-horse wagon loaded with straw, and he stopped him.

“Is this the way to the stockyards?” he asked.

The farmer scratched his head. “I dunno jest where they be,” he said. “But they’re in the city somewhere, and you’re going dead away from it now.”

Jurgis looked dazed. “I was told this was the way,” he said.

“Who told you?”

“A boy.”

“Well, mebbe he was playing a joke on ye. The best thing ye kin do is to go back, and when ye git into town ask a policeman. I’d take ye in, only I’ve come a long ways an’ I’m loaded heavy. Git up!”

So Jurgis turned and followed, and toward the end of the morning he began to see Chicago again. Past endless blocks of two-story shanties he

walked, along wooden sidewalks and unpaved pathways treacherous with deep slush holes. Every few blocks there would be a railroad crossing on the level with the sidewalk, a deathtrap for the unwary; long freight trains would be passing, the cars clanking and crashing together, and Jurgis would pace about waiting, burning up with a fever of impatience. Occasionally the cars would stop for some minutes, and wagons and streetcars would crowd together waiting, the drivers swearing at each other, or hiding beneath umbrellas out of the rain; at such times Jurgis would dodge under the gates and run across the tracks and between the cars, taking his life into his hands.

He crossed a long bridge over a river frozen solid and covered with slush. Not even on the river bank was the snow white—the rain which fell was a diluted solution of smoke, and Jurgis' hands and face were streaked with black. Then he came into the business part of the city, where the streets were sewers of inky blackness, with horses sleeping and plunging, and women and children flying across in panic-stricken droves. These streets were huge canyons formed by towering black buildings, echoing with the clang of car gongs and the shouts of drivers; the people who swarmed in them were as busy as ants—all hurrying breathlessly, never stopping to look at anything nor at each other. The solitary trampish-looking foreigner, with water-soaked clothing and haggard face and anxious eyes, was as much alone as he hurried past them, as much unheeded and as lost, as if he had been a thousand miles deep in a wilderness.

A policeman gave him his direction and told him that he had five miles to go. He came again to the slum districts, to avenues of saloons and cheap stores, with long dingy red factory buildings, and coalyards and railroad tracks; and then Jurgis lifted up his head and began to sniff the air like a startled animal—scenting the far-off odor of home. It was late afternoon then, and he was hungry, but the dinner invitations hung out of the saloons were not for him.

So he came at last to the stockyards, to the black volcanoes of smoke and the lowing cattle and the stench. Then, seeing a crowded car, his impatience got the better of him and he jumped aboard, hiding behind another man, unnoticed by the conductor. In ten minutes more he had reached his street, and home.

He was half running as he came round the corner. There was the house, at any rate—and then suddenly he stopped and stared. What was the matter with the house?

Jurgis looked twice, bewildered; then he glanced at the house next door and at the one beyond—then at the saloon on the corner. Yes, it was the right place, quite certainly—he had not made any mistake. But the house—the house was a different color!

He came a couple of steps nearer. Yes; it had been gray and now it was yellow! The trimmings around the windows had been red, and now they were green! It was all newly painted! How strange it made it seem!

Jurgis went closer yet, but keeping on the other side of the street. A sudden and horrible spasm of fear had come over him. His knees were shaking beneath him, and his mind was in a whirl. New paint on the house, and new weatherboards, where the old had begun to rot off, and the agent had got after them! New shingles over the hole in the roof, too, the hole that had for six months been the bane of his soul—he having no money to have it fixed and no time to fix it himself, and the rain leaking in, and overflowing the pots and pans he put to catch it, and flooding the attic and loosening the plaster. And now it was fixed! And the broken windowpane replaced! And curtains in the windows! New, white curtains, stiff and shiny!

Then suddenly the front door opened. Jurgis stood, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. A boy had come out, a stranger to him; a

big, fat, rosy-cheeked youngster, such as had never been seen in his home before.

Jurgis stared at the boy, fascinated. He came down the steps whistling, kicking off the snow. He stopped at the foot, and picked up some, and then leaned against the railing, making a snowball. A moment later he looked around and saw Jurgis, and their eyes met; it was a hostile glance, the boy evidently thinking that the other had suspicions of the snowball. When Jurgis started slowly across the street toward him, he gave a quick glance about, meditating retreat, but then he concluded to stand his ground.

Jurgis took hold of the railing of the steps, for he was a little unsteady. “What—what are you doing here?” he managed to gasp.

“Go on!” said the boy.

“You—” Jurgis tried again. “What do you want here?”

“Me?” answered the boy, angrily. “I live here.”

“You live here!” Jurgis panted. He turned white and clung more tightly to the railing. “You live here! Then where’s my family?”

The boy looked surprised. “Your family!” he echoed.

And Jurgis started toward him. “I—this is my house!” he cried.

“Come off!” said the boy; then suddenly the door upstairs opened, and he called: “Hey, ma! Here’s a fellow says he owns this house.”

A stout Irishwoman came to the top of the steps. “What’s that?” she demanded.

Jurgis turned toward her. “Where is my family?” he cried, wildly. “I left them here! This is my home! What are you doing in my home?”

The woman stared at him in frightened wonder, she must have thought she was dealing with a maniac — Jurgis looked like one. “Your home!” she echoed.

“My home!” he half shrieked. “I lived here, I tell you.”

“You must be mistaken,” she answered him. “No one ever lived here. This is a new house. They told us so. They —”

“What have they done with my family?” shouted Jurgis, frantically.

A light had begun to break upon the woman; perhaps she had had doubts of what “they” had told her. “I don’t know where your family is,” she said. “I bought the house only three days ago, and there was nobody here, and they told me it was all new. Do you really mean you had ever rented it?”

“Rented it!” panted Jurgis. “I bought it! I paid for it! I own it! And they — my God, can’t you tell me where my people went?”

She made him understand at last that she knew nothing. Jurgis’ brain was so confused that he could not grasp the situation. It was as if his family had been wiped out of existence; as if they were proving to be dream people, who never had existed at all. He was quite lost — but then suddenly he thought of Grandmother Majauszkiene, who lived in the next block. She would know! He turned and started at a run.

Grandmother Majauszkiene came to the door herself. She cried out when she saw Jurgis, wild-eyed and shaking. Yes, yes, she could tell him. The family had moved; they had not been able to pay the rent and they had been turned out into the snow, and the house had been repainted and sold

again the next week. No, she had not heard how they were, but she could tell him that they had gone back to Aniele Jukniene, with whom they had stayed when they first came to the yards. Wouldn't Jurgis come in and rest? It was certainly too bad—if only he had not got into jail—

And so Jurgis turned and staggered away. He did not go very far round the corner he gave out completely, and sat down on the steps of a saloon, and hid his face in his hands, and shook all over with dry, racking sobs.

Their home! Their home! They had lost it! Grief, despair, rage, overwhelmed him—what was any imagination of the thing to this heartbreaking, crushing reality of it—to the sight of strange people living in his house, hanging their curtains to his windows, staring at him with hostile eyes! It was monstrous, it was unthinkable—they could not do it—it could not be true! Only think what he had suffered for that house—what miseries they had all suffered for it—the price they had paid for it!

The whole long agony came back to him. Their sacrifices in the beginning, their three hundred dollars that they had scraped together, all they owned in the world, all that stood between them and starvation! And then their toil, month by month, to get together the twelve dollars, and the interest as well, and now and then the taxes, and the other charges, and the repairs, and what not! Why, they had put their very souls into their payments on that house, they had paid for it with their sweat and tears—yes, more, with their very lifeblood. Dede Antanas had died of the struggle to earn that money—he would have been alive and strong today if he had not had to work in Durham's dark cellars to earn his share. And Ona, too, had given her health and strength to pay for it—she was wrecked and ruined because of it; and so was he, who had been a big, strong man three years ago, and now sat here shivering, broken, cowed, weeping like a hysterical child. Ah! they had cast their all into the fight; and they had lost, they had lost! All that they had paid was

gone—every cent of it. And their house was gone—they were back where they had started from, flung out into the cold to starve and freeze!

Jurgis could see all the truth now—could see himself, through the whole long course of events, the victim of ravenous vultures that had torn into his vitals and devoured him; of fiends that had racked and tortured him, mocking him, meantime, jeering in his face. Ah, God, the horror of it, the monstrous, hideous, demoniacal wickedness of it! He and his family, helpless women and children, struggling to live, ignorant and defenseless and forlorn as they were—and the enemies that had been lurking for them, crouching upon their trail and thirsting for their blood! That first lying circular, that smooth-tongued slippery agent! That trap of the extra payments, the interest, and all the other charges that they had not the means to pay, and would never have attempted to pay! And then all the tricks of the packers, their masters, the tyrants who ruled them—the shutdowns and the scarcity of work, the irregular hours and the cruel speeding-up, the lowering of wages, the raising of prices! The mercilessness of nature about them, of heat and cold, rain and snow; the mercilessness of the city, of the country in which they lived, of its laws and customs that they did not understand! All of these things had worked together for the company that had marked them for its prey and was waiting for its chance. And now, with this last hideous injustice, its time had come, and it had turned them out bag and baggage, and taken their house and sold it again! And they could do nothing, they were tied hand and foot—the law was against them, the whole machinery of society was at their oppressors' command! If Jurgis so much as raised a hand against them, back he would go into that wild-beast pen from which he had just escaped!

To get up and go away was to give up, to acknowledge defeat, to leave the strange family in possession; and Jurgis might have sat shivering in the rain for hours before he could do that, had it not been for the thought of his family. It might be that he had worse things yet to learn—and so he got to his feet and started away, walking on, wearily, half-dazed.

To Aniele's house, in back of the yards, was a good two miles; the distance had never seemed longer to Jurgis, and when he saw the familiar dingy-gray shanty his heart was beating fast. He ran up the steps and began to hammer upon the door.

The old woman herself came to open it. She had shrunk all up with her rheumatism since Jurgis had seen her last, and her yellow parchment face stared up at him from a little above the level of the doorknob. She gave a start when she saw him. "Is Ona here?" he cried, breathlessly.

"Yes," was the answer, "she's here."

"How—" Jurgis began, and then stopped short, clutching convulsively at the side of the door. From somewhere within the house had come a sudden cry, a wild, horrible scream of anguish. And the voice was Ona's. For a moment Jurgis stood half-paralyzed with fright; then he bounded past the old woman and into the room.

It was Aniele's kitchen, and huddled round the stove were half a dozen women, pale and frightened. One of them started to her feet as Jurgis entered; she was haggard and frightfully thin, with one arm tied up in bandages—he hardly realized that it was Marija. He looked first for Ona; then, not seeing her, he stared at the women, expecting them to speak. But they sat dumb, gazing back at him, panic-stricken; and a second later came another piercing scream.

It was from the rear of the house, and upstairs. Jurgis bounded to a door of the room and flung it open; there was a ladder leading through a trap door to the garret, and he was at the foot of it when suddenly he heard a voice behind him, and saw Marija at his heels. She seized him by the sleeve with her good hand, panting wildly, "No, no, Jurgis! Stop!"

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

“You mustn’t go up,” she cried.

Jurgis was half-crazed with bewilderment and fright. “What’s the matter?” he shouted. “What is it?”

Marija clung to him tightly; he could hear Ona sobbing and moaning above, and he fought to get away and climb up, without waiting for her reply. “No, no,” she rushed on. “Jurgis! You mustn’t go up! It’s—it’s the child!”

“The child?” he echoed in perplexity. “Antanas?”

Marija answered him, in a whisper: “The new one!”

And then Jurgis went limp, and caught himself on the ladder. He stared at her as if she were a ghost. “The new one!” he gasped. “But it isn’t time,” he added, wildly.

Marija nodded. “I know,” she said; “but it’s come.”

And then again came Ona’s scream, smiting him like a blow in the face, making him wince and turn white. Her voice died away into a wail—then he heard her sobbing again, “My God—let me die, let me die!” And Marija hung her arms about him, crying: “Come out! Come away!”

She dragged him back into the kitchen, half carrying him, for he had gone all to pieces. It was as if the pillars of his soul had fallen in—he was blasted with horror. In the room he sank into a chair, trembling like a leaf, Marija still holding him, and the women staring at him in dumb, helpless fright.

And then again Ona cried out; he could hear it nearly as plainly here, and he staggered to his feet. “How long has this been going on?” he panted.

“Not very long,” Marija answered, and then, at a signal from Aniele, she rushed on: “You go away, Jurgis you can’t help—go away and come back later. It’s all right—it’s—”

“Who’s with her?” Jurgis demanded; and then, seeing Marija hesitating, he cried again, “Who’s with her?”

“She’s—she’s all right,” she answered. “Elzbieta’s with her.”

“But the doctor!” he panted. “Some one who knows!”

He seized Marija by the arm; she trembled, and her voice sank beneath a whisper as she replied, “We—we have no money.” Then, frightened at the look on his face, she exclaimed: “It’s all right, Jurgis! You don’t understand—go away—go away! Ah, if you only had waited!”

Above her protests Jurgis heard Ona again; he was almost out of his mind. It was all new to him, raw and horrible—it had fallen upon him like a lightning stroke. When little Antanas was born he had been at work, and had known nothing about it until it was over; and now he was not to be controlled. The frightened women were at their wits’ end; one after another they tried to reason with him, to make him understand that this was the lot of woman. In the end they half drove him out into the rain, where he began to pace up and down, bareheaded and frantic. Because he could hear Ona from the street, he would first go away to escape the sounds, and then come back because he could not help it. At the end of a quarter of an hour he rushed up the steps again, and for fear that he would break in the door they had to open it and let him in.

There was no arguing with him. They could not tell him that all was going well—how could they know, he cried—why, she was dying, she was being torn to pieces! Listen to her—listen! Why, it was monstrous—it could not be allowed—there must be some help for it! Had they tried to get a doctor? They might pay him afterward—they could promise—

“We couldn’t promise, Jurgis,” protested Marija. “We had no money—we have scarcely been able to keep alive.”

“But I can work,” Jurgis exclaimed. “I can earn money!”

“Yes,” she answered—”but we thought you were in jail. How could we know when you would return? They will not work for nothing.”

Marija went on to tell how she had tried to find a midwife, and how they had demanded ten, fifteen, even twenty-five dollars, and that in cash.

“And I had only a quarter,” she said. “I have spent every cent of my money—all that I had in the bank; and I owe the doctor who has been coming to see me, and he has stopped because he thinks I don’t mean to pay him. And we owe Aniele for two weeks’ rent, and she is nearly starving, and is afraid of being turned out. We have been borrowing and begging to keep alive, and there is nothing more we can do—”

“And the children?” cried Jurgis.

“The children have not been home for three days, the weather has been so bad. They could not know what is happening—it came suddenly, two months before we expected it.”

Jurgis was standing by the table, and he caught himself with his hand; his head sank and his arms shook—it looked as if he were going to collapse. Then suddenly Aniele got up and came hobbling toward him, fumbling in her skirt pocket. She drew out a dirty rag, in one corner of which she had something tied.

“Here, Jurgis!” she said, “I have some money. Palauk! See!”

She unwrapped it and counted it out—thirty-four cents. “You go, now,” she said, “and try and get somebody yourself. And maybe the rest can help—give him some money, you; he will pay you back some day, and it will do him good to have something to think about, even if he doesn’t succeed. When he comes back, maybe it will be over.”

And so the other women turned out the contents of their pocketbooks; most of them had only pennies and nickels, but they gave him all. Mrs. Olszewski, who lived next door, and had a husband who was a skilled cattle butcher, but a drinking man, gave nearly half a dollar, enough to raise the whole sum to a dollar and a quarter. Then Jurgis thrust it into his pocket, still holding it tightly in his fist, and started away at a run.