

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 20

But a big man cannot stay drunk very long on three dollars. That was Sunday morning, and Monday night Jurgis came home, sober and sick, realizing that he had spent every cent the family owned, and had not bought a single instant's forgetfulness with it.

Ona was not yet buried; but the police had been notified, and on the morrow they would put the body in a pine coffin and take it to the potter's field. Elzbieta was out begging now, a few pennies from each of the neighbors, to get enough to pay for a mass for her; and the children were upstairs starving to death, while he, good-for-nothing rascal, had been spending their money on drink. So spoke Aniele, scornfully, and when he started toward the fire she added the information that her kitchen was no longer for him to fill with his phosphate stinks. She had crowded all her boarders into one room on Ona's account, but now he could go up in the garret where he belonged—and not there much longer, either, if he did not pay her some rent.

Jurgis went without a word, and, stepping over half a dozen sleeping boarders in the next room, ascended the ladder. It was dark up above; they could not afford any light; also it was nearly as cold as outdoors. In a corner, as far away from the corpse as possible, sat Marija, holding little Antanas in her one good arm and trying to soothe him to sleep. In another corner crouched poor little Juozapas, wailing because he had had

nothing to eat all day. Marija said not a word to Jurgis; he crept in like a whipped cur, and went and sat down by the body.

Perhaps he ought to have meditated upon the hunger of the children, and upon his own baseness; but he thought only of Ona, he gave himself up again to the luxury of grief. He shed no tears, being ashamed to make a sound; he sat motionless and shuddering with his anguish. He had never dreamed how much he loved Ona, until now that she was gone; until now that he sat here, knowing that on the morrow they would take her away, and that he would never lay eyes upon her again—never all the days of his life. His old love, which had been starved to death, beaten to death, awoke in him again; the floodgates of memory were lifted—he saw all their life together, saw her as he had seen her in Lithuania, the first day at the fair, beautiful as the flowers, singing like a bird. He saw her as he had married her, with all her tenderness, with her heart of wonder; the very words she had spoken seemed to ring now in his ears, the tears she had shed to be wet upon his cheek. The long, cruel battle with misery and hunger had hardened and embittered him, but it had not changed her—she had been the same hungry soul to the end, stretching out her arms to him, pleading with him, begging him for love and tenderness. And she had suffered—so cruelly she had suffered, such agonies, such infamies—ah, God, the memory of them was not to be borne. What a monster of wickedness, of heartlessness, he had been! Every angry word that he had ever spoken came back to him and cut him like a knife; every selfish act that he had done—with what torments he paid for them now! And such devotion and awe as welled up in his soul—now that it could never be spoken, now that it was too late, too late! His bosom-was choking with it, bursting with it; he crouched here in the darkness beside her, stretching out his arms to her—and she was gone forever, she was dead! He could have screamed aloud with the horror and despair of it; a sweat of agony beaded his forehead, yet he dared not make a sound—he scarcely dared to breathe, because of his shame and loathing of himself.

Late at night came Elzbieta, having gotten the money for a mass, and paid for it in advance, lest she should be tempted too sorely at home. She brought also a bit of stale rye bread that some one had given her, and with that they quieted the children and got them to sleep. Then she came over to Jurgis and sat down beside him.

She said not a word of reproach—she and Marija had chosen that course before; she would only plead with him, here by the corpse of his dead wife. Already Elzbieta had choked down her tears, grief being crowded out of her soul by fear. She had to bury one of her children—but then she had done it three times before, and each time risen up and gone back to take up the battle for the rest. Elzbieta was one of the primitive creatures: like the angleworm, which goes on living though cut in half; like a hen, which, deprived of her chickens one by one, will mother the last that is left her. She did this because it was her nature—she asked no questions about the justice of it, nor the worth-whileness of life in which destruction and death ran riot.

And this old common-sense view she labored to impress upon Jurgis, pleading with him with tears in her eyes. Ona was dead, but the others were left and they must be saved. She did not ask for her own children. She and Marija could care for them somehow, but there was Antanas, his own son. Ona had given Antanas to him—the little fellow was the only remembrance of her that he had; he must treasure it and protect it, he must show himself a man. He knew what Ona would have had him do, what she would ask of him at this moment, if she could speak to him. It was a terrible thing that she should have died as she had; but the life had been too hard for her, and she had to go. It was terrible that they were not able to bury her, that he could not even have a day to mourn her—but so it was. Their fate was pressing; they had not a cent, and the children would perish—some money must be had. Could he not be a man for Ona's sake, and pull himself together? In a little while they would be out of danger—now that they had given up the house they could live more cheaply, and with all the children working they could

get along, if only he would not go to pieces. So Elzbieta went on, with feverish intensity. It was a struggle for life with her; she was not afraid that Jurgis would go on drinking, for he had no money for that, but she was wild with dread at the thought that he might desert them, might take to the road, as Jonas had done.

But with Ona's dead body beneath his eyes, Jurgis could not well think of treason to his child. Yes, he said, he would try, for the sake of Antanas. He would give the little fellow his chance—would get to work at once, yes, tomorrow, without even waiting for Ona to be buried. They might trust him, he would keep his word, come what might.

And so he was out before daylight the next morning, headache, heartache, and all. He went straight to Graham's fertilizer mill, to see if he could get back his job. But the boss shook his head when he saw him—no, his place had been filled long ago, and there was no room for him.

“Do you think there will be?” Jurgis asked. “I may have to wait.”

“No,” said the other, “it will not be worth your while to wait—there will be nothing for you here.”

Jurgis stood gazing at him in perplexity. “What is the matter?” he asked. “Didn't I do my work?”

The other met his look with one of cold indifference, and answered, “There will be nothing for you here, I said.”

Jurgis had his suspicions as to the dreadful meaning of that incident, and he went away with a sinking at the heart. He went and took his stand with the mob of hungry wretches who were standing about in the snow before the time station. Here he stayed, breakfastless, for two hours, until the throng was driven away by the clubs of the police. There was no work for him that day.

Jurgis had made a good many acquaintances in his long services at the yards—there were saloonkeepers who would trust him for a drink and a sandwich, and members of his old union who would lend him a dime at a pinch. It was not a question of life and death for him, therefore; he might hunt all day, and come again on the morrow, and try hanging on thus for weeks, like hundreds and thousands of others. Meantime, Teta Elzbieta would go and beg, over in the Hyde Park district, and the children would bring home enough to pacify Aniele, and keep them all alive.

It was at the end of a week of this sort of waiting, roaming about in the bitter winds or loafing in saloons, that Jurgis stumbled on a chance in one of the cellars of Jones's big packing plant. He saw a foreman passing the open doorway, and hailed him for a job.

“Push a truck?” inquired the man, and Jurgis answered, “Yes, sir!” before the words were well out of his mouth.

“What's your name?” demanded the other.

“Jurgis Rudkus.”

“Worked in the yards before?”

“Yes.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Two places—Brown's killing beds and Durham's fertilizer mill.”

“Why did you leave there?”

“The first time I had an accident, and the last time I was sent up for a month.”

“I see. Well, I’ll give you a trial. Come early tomorrow and ask for Mr. Thomas.”

So Jurgis rushed home with the wild tidings that he had a job—that the terrible siege was over. The remnants of the family had quite a celebration that night; and in the morning Jurgis was at the place half an hour before the time of opening. The foreman came in shortly afterward, and when he saw Jurgis he frowned.

“Oh,” he said, “I promised you a job, didn’t I?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jurgis.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I made a mistake. I can’t use you.”

Jurgis stared, dumfounded. “What’s the matter?” he gasped.

“Nothing,” said the man, “only I can’t use you.”

There was the same cold, hostile stare that he had had from the boss of the fertilizer mill. He knew that there was no use in saying a word, and he turned and went away.

Out in the saloons the men could tell him all about the meaning of it; they gazed at him with pitying eyes—poor devil, he was blacklisted! What had he done? they asked—knocked down his boss? Good heavens, then he might have known! Why, he stood as much chance of getting a job in Packingtown as of being chosen mayor of Chicago. Why had he wasted his time hunting? They had him on a secret list in every office, big and little, in the place. They had his name by this time in St. Louis and New York, in Omaha and Boston, in Kansas City and St. Joseph. He

was condemned and sentenced, without trial and without appeal; he could never work for the packers again—he could not even clean cattle pens or drive a truck in any place where they controlled. He might try it, if he chose, as hundreds had tried it, and found out for themselves. He would never be told anything about it; he would never get any more satisfaction than he had gotten just now; but he would always find when the time came that he was not needed. It would not do for him to give any other name, either—they had company “spotters” for just that purpose, and he wouldn’t keep a job in Packingtown three days. It was worth a fortune to the packers to keep their blacklist effective, as a warning to the men and a means of keeping down union agitation and political discontent.

Jurgis went home, carrying these new tidings to the family council. It was a most cruel thing; here in this district was his home, such as it was, the place he was used to and the friends he knew—and now every possibility of employment in it was closed to him. There was nothing in Packingtown but packing houses; and so it was the same thing as evicting him from his home.

He and the two women spent all day and half the night discussing it. It would be convenient, downtown, to the children’s place of work; but then Marija was on the road to recovery, and had hopes of getting a job in the yards; and though she did not see her old-time lover once a month, because of the misery of their state, yet she could not make up her mind to go away and give him up forever. Then, too, Elzbieta had heard something about a chance to scrub floors in Durham’s offices and was waiting every day for word. In the end it was decided that Jurgis should go downtown to strike out for himself, and they would decide after he got a job. As there was no one from whom he could borrow there, and he dared not beg for fear of being arrested, it was arranged that every day he should meet one of the children and be given fifteen cents of their earnings, upon which he could keep going. Then all day he was to pace the streets with hundreds and thousands of other homeless wretches

inquiring at stores, warehouses, and factories for a chance; and at night he was to crawl into some doorway or underneath a truck, and hide there until midnight, when he might get into one of the station houses, and spread a newspaper upon the floor, and lie down in the midst of a throng of “bums” and beggars, reeking with alcohol and tobacco, and filthy with vermin and disease.

So for two weeks more Jurgis fought with the demon of despair. Once he got a chance to load a truck for half a day, and again he carried an old woman’s valise and was given a quarter. This let him into a lodginghouse on several nights when he might otherwise have frozen to death; and it also gave him a chance now and then to buy a newspaper in the morning and hunt up jobs while his rivals were watching and waiting for a paper to be thrown away. This, however, was really not the advantage it seemed, for the newspaper advertisements were a cause of much loss of precious time and of many weary journeys. A full half of these were “fakes,” put in by the endless variety of establishments which preyed upon the helpless ignorance of the unemployed. If Jurgis lost only his time, it was because he had nothing else to lose; whenever a smooth-tongued agent would tell him of the wonderful positions he had on hand, he could only shake his head sorrowfully and say that he had not the necessary dollar to deposit; when it was explained to him what “big money” he and all his family could make by coloring photographs, he could only promise to come in again when he had two dollars to invest in the outfit.

In the end Jurgis got a chance through an accidental meeting with an old-time acquaintance of his union days. He met this man on his way to work in the giant factories of the Harvester Trust; and his friend told him to come along and he would speak a good word for him to his boss, whom he knew well. So Jurgis trudged four or five miles, and passed through a waiting throng of unemployed at the gate under the escort of his friend. His knees nearly gave way beneath him when the foreman,

after looking him over and questioning him, told him that he could find an opening for him.

How much this accident meant to Jurgis he realized only by stages; for he found that the harvester works were the sort of place to which philanthropists and reformers pointed with pride. It had some thought for its employees; its workshops were big and roomy, it provided a restaurant where the workmen could buy good food at cost, it had even a reading room, and decent places where its girl-hands could rest; also the work was free from many of the elements of filth and repulsiveness that prevailed at the stockyards. Day after day Jurgis discovered these things—things never expected nor dreamed of by him—until this new place came to seem a kind of a heaven to him.

It was an enormous establishment, covering a hundred and sixty acres of ground, employing five thousand people, and turning out over three hundred thousand machines every year—a good part of all the harvesting and mowing machines used in the country. Jurgis saw very little of it, of course—it was all specialized work, the same as at the stockyards; each one of the hundreds of parts of a mowing machine was made separately, and sometimes handled by hundreds of men. Where Jurgis worked there was a machine which cut and stamped a certain piece of steel about two square inches in size; the pieces came tumbling out upon a tray, and all that human hands had to do was to pile them in regular rows, and change the trays at intervals. This was done by a single boy, who stood with eyes and thought centered upon it, and fingers flying so fast that the sounds of the bits of steel striking upon each other was like the music of an express train as one hears it in a sleeping car at night. This was “piece-work,” of course; and besides it was made certain that the boy did not idle, by setting the machine to match the highest possible speed of human hands. Thirty thousand of these pieces he handled every day, nine or ten million every year—how many in a lifetime it rested with the gods to say. Near by him men sat bending over whirling grindstones, putting the finishing touches to the steel knives of

the reaper; picking them out of a basket with the right hand, pressing first one side and then the other against the stone and finally dropping them with the left hand into another basket. One of these men told Jurgis that he had sharpened three thousand pieces of steel a day for thirteen years. In the next room were wonderful machines that ate up long steel rods by slow stages, cutting them off, seizing the pieces, stamping heads upon them, grinding them and polishing them, threading them, and finally dropping them into a basket, all ready to bolt the harvesters together. From yet another machine came tens of thousands of steel burs to fit upon these bolts. In other places all these various parts were dipped into troughs of paint and hung up to dry, and then slid along on trolleys to a room where men streaked them with red and yellow, so that they might look cheerful in the harvest fields.

Jurgis's friend worked upstairs in the casting rooms, and his task was to make the molds of a certain part. He shoveled black sand into an iron receptacle and pounded it tight and set it aside to harden; then it would be taken out, and molten iron poured into it. This man, too, was paid by the mold—or rather for perfect castings, nearly half his work going for naught. You might see him, along with dozens of others, toiling like one possessed by a whole community of demons; his arms working like the driving rods of an engine, his long, black hair flying wild, his eyes starting out, the sweat rolling in rivers down his face. When he had shoveled the mold full of sand, and reached for the pounder to pound it with, it was after the manner of a canoeist running rapids and seizing a pole at sight of a submerged rock. All day long this man would toil thus, his whole being centered upon the purpose of making twenty-three instead of twenty-two and a half cents an hour; and then his product would be reckoned up by the census taker, and jubilant captains of industry would boast of it in their banquet halls, telling how our workers are nearly twice as efficient as those of any other country. If we are the greatest nation the sun ever shone upon, it would seem to be mainly because we have been able to goad our wage-earners to this pitch of frenzy; though there are a few other things that are great among us

including our drink-bill, which is a billion and a quarter of dollars a year, and doubling itself every decade.

There was a machine which stamped out the iron plates, and then another which, with a mighty thud, mashed them to the shape of the sitting-down portion of the American farmer. Then they were piled upon a truck, and it was Jurgis's task to wheel them to the room where the machines were "assembled." This was child's play for him, and he got a dollar and seventy-five cents a day for it; on Saturday he paid Aniele the seventy-five cents a week he owed her for the use of her garret, and also redeemed his overcoat, which Elzbieta had put in pawn when he was in jail.

This last was a great blessing. A man cannot go about in midwinter in Chicago with no overcoat and not pay for it, and Jurgis had to walk or ride five or six miles back and forth to his work. It so happened that half of this was in one direction and half in another, necessitating a change of cars; the law required that transfers be given at all intersecting points, but the railway corporation had gotten round this by arranging a pretense at separate ownership. So whenever he wished to ride, he had to pay ten cents each way, or over ten per cent of his income to this power, which had gotten its franchises long ago by buying up the city council, in the face of popular clamor amounting almost to a rebellion. Tired as he felt at night, and dark and bitter cold as it was in the morning, Jurgis generally chose to walk; at the hours other workmen were traveling, the streetcar monopoly saw fit to put on so few cars that there would be men hanging to every foot of the backs of them and often crouching upon the snow-covered roof. Of course the doors could never be closed, and so the cars were as cold as outdoors; Jurgis, like many others, found it better to spend his fare for a drink and a free lunch, to give him strength to walk.

These, however, were all slight matters to a man who had escaped from Durham's fertilizer mill. Jurgis began to pick up heart again and to make

plans. He had lost his house but then the awful load of the rent and interest was off his shoulders, and when Marija was well again they could start over and save. In the shop where he worked was a man, a Lithuanian like himself, whom the others spoke of in admiring whispers, because of the mighty feats he was performing. All day he sat at a machine turning bolts; and then in the evening he went to the public school to study English and learn to read. In addition, because he had a family of eight children to support and his earnings were not enough, on Saturdays and Sundays he served as a watchman; he was required to press two buttons at opposite ends of a building every five minutes, and as the walk only took him two minutes, he had three minutes to study between each trip. Jurgis felt jealous of this fellow; for that was the sort of thing he himself had dreamed of, two or three years ago. He might do it even yet, if he had a fair chance—he might attract attention and become a skilled man or a boss, as some had done in this place. Suppose that Marija could get a job in the big mill where they made binder twine—then they would move into this neighborhood, and he would really have a chance. With a hope like that, there was some use in living; to find a place where you were treated like a human being—by God! he would show them how he could appreciate it. He laughed to himself as he thought how he would hang on to this job!

And then one afternoon, the ninth of his work in the place, when he went to get his overcoat he saw a group of men crowded before a placard on the door, and when he went over and asked what it was, they told him that beginning with the morrow his department of the harvester works would be closed until further notice!