

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 21

That was the way they did it! There was not half an hour's warning—the works were closed! It had happened that way before, said the men, and it would happen that way forever. They had made all the harvesting machines that the world needed, and now they had to wait till some wore out! It was nobody's fault—that was the way of it; and thousands of men and women were turned out in the dead of winter, to live upon their savings if they had any, and otherwise to die. So many tens of thousands already in the city, homeless and begging for work, and now several thousand more added to them!

Jurgis walked home—with his pittance of pay in his pocket, heartbroken, overwhelmed. One more bandage had been torn from his eyes, one more pitfall was revealed to him! Of what help was kindness and decency on the part of employers—when they could not keep a job for him, when there were more harvesting machines made than the world was able to buy! What a hellish mockery it was, anyway, that a man should slave to make harvesting machines for the country, only to be turned out to starve for doing his duty too well!

It took him two days to get over this heartsickening disappointment. He did not drink anything, because Elzbieta got his money for safekeeping, and knew him too well to be in the least frightened by his angry demands. He stayed up in the garret however, and sulked—what was the use of a man's hunting a job when it was taken from him before he had

time to learn the work? But then their money was going again, and little Antanas was hungry, and crying with the bitter cold of the garret. Also Madame Haupt, the midwife, was after him for some money. So he went out once more.

For another ten days he roamed the streets and alleys of the huge city, sick and hungry, begging for any work. He tried in stores and offices, in restaurants and hotels, along the docks and in the railroad yards, in warehouses and mills and factories where they made products that went to every corner of the world. There were often one or two chances—but there were always a hundred men for every chance, and his turn would not come. At night he crept into sheds and cellars and doorways—until there came a spell of belated winter weather, with a raging gale, and the thermometer five degrees below zero at sundown and falling all night. Then Jurgis fought like a wild beast to get into the big Harrison Street police station, and slept down in a corridor, crowded with two other men upon a single step.

He had to fight often in these days to fight for a place near the factory gates, and now and again with gangs on the street. He found, for instance, that the business of carrying satchels for railroad passengers was a pre-empted one—whenever he essayed it, eight or ten men and boys would fall upon him and force him to run for his life. They always had the policeman “squared,” and so there was no use in expecting protection.

That Jurgis did not starve to death was due solely to the pittance the children brought him. And even this was never certain. For one thing the cold was almost more than the children could bear; and then they, too, were in perpetual peril from rivals who plundered and beat them. The law was against them, too—little Vilimas, who was really eleven, but did not look to be eight, was stopped on the streets by a severe old lady in spectacles, who told him that he was too young to be working and that if he did not stop selling papers she would send a truant officer after him.

Also one night a strange man caught little Kotrina by the arm and tried to persuade her into a dark cellarway, an experience which filled her with such terror that she was hardly to be kept at work.

At last, on a Sunday, as there was no use looking for work, Jurgis went home by stealing rides on the cars. He found that they had been waiting for him for three days—there was a chance of a job for him.

It was quite a story. Little Juozapas, who was near crazy with hunger these days, had gone out on the street to beg for himself. Juozapas had only one leg, having been run over by a wagon when a little child, but he had got himself a broomstick, which he put under his arm for a crutch. He had fallen in with some other children and found the way to Mike Scully's dump, which lay three or four blocks away. To this place there came every day many hundreds of wagonloads of garbage and trash from the lake front, where the rich people lived; and in the heaps the children raked for food—there were hunks of bread and potato peelings and apple cores and meat bones, all of it half frozen and quite unspoiled. Little Juozapas gorged himself, and came home with a newspaper full, which he was feeding to Antanas when his mother came in. Elzbieta was horrified, for she did not believe that the food out of the dumps was fit to eat. The next day, however, when no harm came of it and Juozapas began to cry with hunger, she gave in and said that he might go again. And that afternoon he came home with a story of how while he had been digging away with a stick, a lady upon the street had called him. A real fine lady, the little boy explained, a beautiful lady; and she wanted to know all about him, and whether he got the garbage for chickens, and why he walked with a broomstick, and why Ona had died, and how Jurgis had come to go to jail, and what was the matter with Marija, and everything. In the end she had asked where he lived, and said that she was coming to see him, and bring him a new crutch to walk with. She had on a hat with a bird upon it, Juozapas added, and a long fur snake around her neck.

She really came, the very next morning, and climbed the ladder to the garret, and stood and stared about her, turning pale at the sight of the blood stains on the floor where Ona had died. She was a “settlement worker,” she explained to Elzbieta—she lived around on Ashland Avenue. Elzbieta knew the place, over a feed store; somebody had wanted her to go there, but she had not cared to, for she thought that it must have something to do with religion, and the priest did not like her to have anything to do with strange religions. They were rich people who came to live there to find out about the poor people; but what good they expected it would do them to know, one could not imagine. So spoke Elzbieta, naively, and the young lady laughed and was rather at a loss for an answer—she stood and gazed about her, and thought of a cynical remark that had been made to her, that she was standing upon the brink of the pit of hell and throwing in snowballs to lower the temperature.

Elzbieta was glad to have somebody to listen, and she told all their woes—what had happened to Ona, and the jail, and the loss of their home, and Marija’s accident, and how Ona had died, and how Jurgis could get no work. As she listened the pretty young lady’s eyes filled with tears, and in the midst of it she burst into weeping and hid her face on Elzbieta’s shoulder, quite regardless of the fact that the woman had on a dirty old wrapper and that the garret was full of fleas. Poor Elzbieta was ashamed of herself for having told so woeful a tale, and the other had to beg and plead with her to get her to go on. The end of it was that the young lady sent them a basket of things to eat, and left a letter that Jurgis was to take to a gentleman who was superintendent in one of the mills of the great steelworks in South Chicago. “He will get Jurgis something to do,” the young lady had said, and added, smiling through her tears—“If he doesn’t, he will never marry me.”

The steel-works were fifteen miles away, and as usual it was so contrived that one had to pay two fares to get there. Far and wide the sky was flaring with the red glare that leaped from rows of towering

chimneys—for it was pitch dark when Jurgis arrived. The vast works, a city in themselves, were surrounded by a stockade; and already a full hundred men were waiting at the gate where new hands were taken on. Soon after daybreak whistles began to blow, and then suddenly thousands of men appeared, streaming from saloons and boardinghouses across the way, leaping from trolley cars that passed—it seemed as if they rose out of the ground, in the dim gray light. A river of them poured in through the gate—and then gradually ebbed away again, until there were only a few late ones running, and the watchman pacing up and down, and the hungry strangers stamping and shivering.

Jurgis presented his precious letter. The gatekeeper was surly, and put him through a catechism, but he insisted that he knew nothing, and as he had taken the precaution to seal his letter, there was nothing for the gatekeeper to do but send it to the person to whom it was addressed. A messenger came back to say that Jurgis should wait, and so he came inside of the gate, perhaps not sorry enough that there were others less fortunate watching him with greedy eyes. The great mills were getting under way—one could hear a vast stirring, a rolling and rumbling and hammering. Little by little the scene grew plain: towering, black buildings here and there, long rows of shops and sheds, little railways branching everywhere, bare gray cinders underfoot and oceans of billowing black smoke above. On one side of the grounds ran a railroad with a dozen tracks, and on the other side lay the lake, where steamers came to load.

Jurgis had time enough to stare and speculate, for it was two hours before he was summoned. He went into the office building, where a company timekeeper interviewed him. The superintendent was busy, he said, but he (the timekeeper) would try to find Jurgis a job. He had never worked in a steel mill before? But he was ready for anything? Well, then, they would go and see.

So they began a tour, among sights that made Jurgis stare amazed. He wondered if ever he could get used to working in a place like this, where the air shook with deafening thunder, and whistles shrieked warnings on all sides of him at once; where miniature steam engines came rushing upon him, and sizzling, quivering, white-hot masses of metal sped past him, and explosions of fire and flaming sparks dazzled him and scorched his face. Then men in these mills were all black with soot, and hollow-eyed and gaunt; they worked with fierce intensity, rushing here and there, and never lifting their eyes from their tasks. Jurgis clung to his guide like a scared child to its nurse, and while the latter hailed one foreman after another to ask if they could use another unskilled man, he stared about him and marveled.

He was taken to the Bessemer furnace, where they made billets of steel—a domelike building, the size of a big theater. Jurgis stood where the balcony of the theater would have been, and opposite, by the stage, he saw three giant caldrons, big enough for all the devils of hell to brew their broth in, full of something white and blinding, bubbling and splashing, roaring as if volcanoes were blowing through it—one had to shout to be heard in the place. Liquid fire would leap from these caldrons and scatter like bombs below—and men were working there, seeming careless, so that Jurgis caught his breath with fright. Then a whistle would toot, and across the curtain of the theater would come a little engine with a carload of something to be dumped into one of the receptacles; and then another whistle would toot, down by the stage, and another train would back up—and suddenly, without an instant's warning, one of the giant kettles began to tilt and topple, flinging out a jet of hissing, roaring flame. Jurgis shrank back appalled, for he thought it was an accident; there fell a pillar of white flame, dazzling as the sun, swishing like a huge tree falling in the forest. A torrent of sparks swept all the way across the building, overwhelming everything, hiding it from sight; and then Jurgis looked through the fingers of his hands, and saw pouring out of the caldron a cascade of living, leaping fire, white with a whiteness not of earth, scorching the eyeballs. Incandescent rainbows

shone above it, blue, red, and golden lights played about it; but the stream itself was white, ineffable. Out of regions of wonder it streamed, the very river of life; and the soul leaped up at the sight of it, fled back upon it, swift and resistless, back into far-off lands, where beauty and terror dwell. Then the great caldron tilted back again, empty, and Jurgis saw to his relief that no one was hurt, and turned and followed his guide out into the sunlight.

They went through the blast furnaces, through rolling mills where bars of steel were tossed about and chopped like bits of cheese. All around and above giant machine arms were flying, giant wheels were turning, great hammers crashing; traveling cranes creaked and groaned overhead, reaching down iron hands and seizing iron prey—it was like standing in the center of the earth, where the machinery of time was revolving.

By and by they came to the place where steel rails were made; and Jurgis heard a toot behind him, and jumped out of the way of a car with a white-hot ingot upon it, the size of a man's body. There was a sudden crash and the car came to a halt, and the ingot toppled out upon a moving platform, where steel fingers and arms seized hold of it, punching it and prodding it into place, and hurrying it into the grip of huge rollers. Then it came out upon the other side, and there were more crashings and clatterings, and over it was flopped, like a pancake on a gridiron, and seized again and rushed back at you through another squeezer. So amid deafening uproar it clattered to and fro, growing thinner and flatter and longer. The ingot seemed almost a living thing; it did not want to run this mad course, but it was in the grip of fate, it was tumbled on, screeching and clanking and shivering in protest. By and by it was long and thin, a great red snake escaped from purgatory; and then, as it slid through the rollers, you would have sworn that it was alive—it writhed and squirmed, and wriggles and shudders passed out through its tail, all but flinging it off by their violence. There was no rest for it until it was cold and black—and then it needed only to be cut and straightened to be ready for a railroad.

It was at the end of this rail's progress that Jurgis got his chance. They had to be moved by men with crowbars, and the boss here could use another man. So he took off his coat and set to work on the spot.

It took him two hours to get to this place every day and cost him a dollar and twenty cents a week. As this was out of the question, he wrapped his bedding in a bundle and took it with him, and one of his fellow workingmen introduced him to a Polish lodginghouse, where he might have the privilege of sleeping upon the floor for ten cents a night. He got his meals at free-lunch counters, and every Saturday night he went home—bedding and all—and took the greater part of his money to the family. Elzbieta was sorry for this arrangement, for she feared that it would get him into the habit of living without them, and once a week was not very often for him to see his baby; but there was no other way of arranging it. There was no chance for a woman at the steelworks, and Marija was now ready for work again, and lured on from day to day by the hope of finding it at the yards.

In a week Jurgis got over his sense of helplessness and bewilderment in the rail mill. He learned to find his way about and to take all the miracles and terrors for granted, to work without hearing the rumbling and crashing. From blind fear he went to the other extreme; he became reckless and indifferent, like all the rest of the men, who took but little thought of themselves in the ardor of their work. It was wonderful, when one came to think of it, that these men should have taken an interest in the work they did—they had no share in it—they were paid by the hour, and paid no more for being interested. Also they knew that if they were hurt they would be flung aside and forgotten—and still they would hurry to their task by dangerous short cuts, would use methods that were quicker and more effective in spite of the fact that they were also risky. His fourth day at his work Jurgis saw a man stumble while running in front of a car, and have his foot mashed off, and before he had been there three weeks he was witness of a yet more dreadful accident. There was a

row of brick furnaces, shining white through every crack with the molten steel inside. Some of these were bulging dangerously, yet men worked before them, wearing blue glasses when they opened and shut the doors. One morning as Jurgis was passing, a furnace blew out, spraying two men with a shower of liquid fire. As they lay screaming and rolling upon the ground in agony, Jurgis rushed to help them, and as a result he lost a good part of the skin from the inside of one of his hands. The company doctor bandaged it up, but he got no other thanks from any one, and was laid up for eight working days without any pay.

Most fortunately, at this juncture, Elzbieta got the long-awaited chance to go at five o'clock in the morning and help scrub the office floors of one of the packers. Jurgis came home and covered himself with blankets to keep warm, and divided his time between sleeping and playing with little Antanas. Juozapas was away raking in the dump a good part of the time, and Elzbieta and Marija were hunting for more work.

Antanas was now over a year and a half old, and was a perfect talking machine. He learned so fast that every week when Jurgis came home it seemed to him as if he had a new child. He would sit down and listen and stare at him, and give vent to delighted exclamations—"Palauk! Muma! Tu mano szirdele!" The little fellow was now really the one delight that Jurgis had in the world—his one hope, his one victory. Thank God, Antanas was a boy! And he was as tough as a pine knot, and with the appetite of a wolf. Nothing had hurt him, and nothing could hurt him; he had come through all the suffering and deprivation unscathed—only shriller-voiced and more determined in his grip upon life. He was a terrible child to manage, was Antanas, but his father did not mind that—he would watch him and smile to himself with satisfaction. The more of a fighter he was the better—he would need to fight before he got through.

Jurgis had got the habit of buying the Sunday paper whenever he had the money; a most wonderful paper could be had for only five cents, a whole

armful, with all the news of the world set forth in big headlines, that Jurgis could spell out slowly, with the children to help him at the long words. There was battle and murder and sudden death—it was marvelous how they ever heard about so many entertaining and thrilling happenings; the stories must be all true, for surely no man could have made such things up, and besides, there were pictures of them all, as real as life. One of these papers was as good as a circus, and nearly as good as a spree—certainly a most wonderful treat for a workingman, who was tired out and stupefied, and had never had any education, and whose work was one dull, sordid grind, day after day, and year after year, with never a sight of a green field nor an hour’s entertainment, nor anything but liquor to stimulate his imagination. Among other things, these papers had pages full of comical pictures, and these were the main joy in life to little Antanas. He treasured them up, and would drag them out and make his father tell him about them; there were all sorts of animals among them, and Antanas could tell the names of all of them, lying upon the floor for hours and pointing them out with his chubby little fingers. Whenever the story was plain enough for Jurgis to make out, Antanas would have it repeated to him, and then he would remember it, prattling funny little sentences and mixing it up with other stories in an irresistible fashion. Also his quaint pronunciation of words was such a delight—and the phrases he would pick up and remember, the most outlandish and impossible things! The first time that the little rascal burst out with “God damn,” his father nearly rolled off the chair with glee; but in the end he was sorry for this, for Antanas was soon “God-damning” everything and everybody.

And then, when he was able to use his hands, Jurgis took his bedding again and went back to his task of shifting rails. It was now April, and the snow had given place to cold rains, and the unpaved street in front of Aniele’s house was turned into a canal. Jurgis would have to wade through it to get home, and if it was late he might easily get stuck to his waist in the mire. But he did not mind this much—it was a promise that summer was coming. Marija had now gotten a place as beef-trimmer in

one of the smaller packing plants; and he told himself that he had learned his lesson now, and would meet with no more accidents—so that at last there was prospect of an end to their long agony. They could save money again, and when another winter came they would have a comfortable place; and the children would be off the streets and in school again, and they might set to work to nurse back into life their habits of decency and kindness. So once more Jurgis began to make plans and dream dreams.

And then one Saturday night he jumped off the car and started home, with the sun shining low under the edge of a bank of clouds that had been pouring floods of water into the mud-soaked street. There was a rainbow in the sky, and another in his breast—for he had thirty-six hours' rest before him, and a chance to see his family. Then suddenly he came in sight of the house, and noticed that there was a crowd before the door. He ran up the steps and pushed his way in, and saw Aniele's kitchen crowded with excited women. It reminded him so vividly of the time when he had come home from jail and found Ona dying, that his heart almost stood still. "What's the matter?" he cried.

A dead silence had fallen in the room, and he saw that every one was staring at him. "What's the matter?" he exclaimed again.

And then, up in the garret, he heard sounds of wailing, in Marija's voice. He started for the ladder—and Aniele seized him by the arm. "No, no!" she exclaimed. "Don't go up there!"

"What is it?" he shouted.

And the old woman answered him weakly: "It's Antanas. He's dead. He was drowned out in the street!"