

The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 22

Jurgis took the news in a peculiar way. He turned deadly pale, but he caught himself, and for half a minute stood in the middle of the room, clenching his hands tightly and setting his teeth. Then he pushed Aniele aside and strode into the next room and climbed the ladder.

In the corner was a blanket, with a form half showing beneath it; and beside it lay Elzbieta, whether crying or in a faint, Jurgis could not tell. Marija was pacing the room, screaming and wringing her hands. He clenched his hands tighter yet, and his voice was hard as he spoke.

“How did it happen?” he asked.

Marija scarcely heard him in her agony. He repeated the question, louder and yet more harshly. “He fell off the sidewalk!” she wailed. The sidewalk in front of the house was a platform made of half-rotten boards, about five feet above the level of the sunken street.

“How did he come to be there?” he demanded.

“He went—he went out to play,” Marija sobbed, her voice choking her. “We couldn’t make him stay in. He must have got caught in the mud!”

“Are you sure that he is dead?” he demanded.

“Ai! ai!” she wailed. “Yes; we had the doctor.”

Then Jurgis stood a few seconds, wavering. He did not shed a tear. He took one glance more at the blanket with the little form beneath it, and then turned suddenly to the ladder and climbed down again. A silence fell once more in the room as he entered. He went straight to the door, passed out, and started down the street.

When his wife had died, Jurgis made for the nearest saloon, but he did not do that now, though he had his week’s wages in his pocket. He walked and walked, seeing nothing, splashing through mud and water. Later on he sat down upon a step and hid his face in his hands and for half an hour or so he did not move. Now and then he would whisper to himself: “Dead! Dead!”

Finally, he got up and walked on again. It was about sunset, and he went on and on until it was dark, when he was stopped by a railroad crossing. The gates were down, and a long train of freight cars was thundering by. He stood and watched it; and all at once a wild impulse seized him, a thought that had been lurking within him, unspoken, unrecognized, leaped into sudden life. He started down the track, and when he was past the gate-keeper’s shanty he sprang forward and swung himself on to one of the cars.

By and by the train stopped again, and Jurgis sprang down and ran under the car, and hid himself upon the truck. Here he sat, and when the train started again, he fought a battle with his soul. He gripped his hands and set his teeth together—he had not wept, and he would not—not a tear! It was past and over, and he was done with it—he would fling it off his shoulders, be free of it, the whole business, that night. It should go like a black, hateful nightmare, and in the morning he would be a new man. And every time that a thought of it assailed him—a tender memory, a trace of a tear—he rose up, cursing with rage, and pounded it down.

He was fighting for his life; he gnashed his teeth together in his desperation. He had been a fool, a fool! He had wasted his life, he had wrecked himself, with his accursed weakness; and now he was done with it—he would tear it out of him, root and branch! There should be no more tears and no more tenderness; he had had enough of them—they had sold him into slavery! Now he was going to be free, to tear off his shackles, to rise up and fight. He was glad that the end had come—it had to come some time, and it was just as well now. This was no world for women and children, and the sooner they got out of it the better for them. Whatever Antanas might suffer where he was, he could suffer no more than he would have had he stayed upon earth. And meantime his father had thought the last thought about him that he meant to; he was going to think of himself, he was going to fight for himself, against the world that had baffled him and tortured him!

So he went on, tearing up all the flowers from the garden of his soul, and setting his heel upon them. The train thundered deafeningly, and a storm of dust blew in his face; but though it stopped now and then through the night, he clung where he was—he would cling there until he was driven off, for every mile that he got from Pakingtown meant another load from his mind.

Whenever the cars stopped a warm breeze blew upon him, a breeze laden with the perfume of fresh fields, of honeysuckle and clover. He snuffed it, and it made his heart beat wildly—he was out in the country again! He was going to live in the country! When the dawn came he was peering out with hungry eyes, getting glimpses of meadows and woods and rivers. At last he could stand it no longer, and when the train stopped again he crawled out. Upon the top of the car was a brakeman, who shook his fist and swore; Jurgis waved his hand derisively, and started across the country.

Only think that he had been a countryman all his life; and for three long years he had never seen a country sight nor heard a country sound!

Excepting for that one walk when he left jail, when he was too much worried to notice anything, and for a few times that he had rested in the city parks in the winter time when he was out of work, he had literally never seen a tree! And now he felt like a bird lifted up and borne away upon a gale; he stopped and stared at each new sight of wonder—at a herd of cows, and a meadow full of daisies, at hedgerows set thick with June roses, at little birds singing in the trees.

Then he came to a farm-house, and after getting himself a stick for protection, he approached it. The farmer was greasing a wagon in front of the barn, and Jurgis went to him. “I would like to get some breakfast, please,” he said.

“Do you want to work?” said the farmer.

“No,” said Jurgis. “I don’t.”

“Then you can’t get anything here,” snapped the other.

“I meant to pay for it,” said Jurgis.

“Oh,” said the farmer; and then added sarcastically, “We don’t serve breakfast after 7 A.M.”

“I am very hungry,” said Jurgis gravely; “I would like to buy some food.”

“Ask the woman,” said the farmer, nodding over his shoulder. The “woman” was more tractable, and for a dime Jurgis secured two thick sandwiches and a piece of pie and two apples. He walked off eating the pie, as the least convenient thing to carry. In a few minutes he came to a stream, and he climbed a fence and walked down the bank, along a woodland path. By and by he found a comfortable spot, and there he devoured his meal, slaking his thirst at the stream. Then he lay for hours,

just gazing and drinking in joy; until at last he felt sleepy, and lay down in the shade of a bush.

When he awoke the sun was shining hot in his face. He sat up and stretched his arms, and then gazed at the water sliding by. There was a deep pool, sheltered and silent, below him, and a sudden wonderful idea rushed upon him. He might have a bath! The water was free, and he might get into it—all the way into it! It would be the first time that he had been all the way into the water since he left Lithuania!

When Jurgis had first come to the stockyards he had been as clean as any workingman could well be. But later on, what with sickness and cold and hunger and discouragement, and the filthiness of his work, and the vermin in his home, he had given up washing in winter, and in summer only as much of him as would go into a basin. He had had a shower bath in jail, but nothing since—and now he would have a swim!

The water was warm, and he splashed about like a very boy in his glee. Afterward he sat down in the water near the bank, and proceeded to scrub himself—soberly and methodically, scouring every inch of him with sand. While he was doing it he would do it thoroughly, and see how it felt to be clean. He even scrubbed his head with sand, and combed what the men called “crumbs” out of his long, black hair, holding his head under water as long as he could, to see if he could not kill them all. Then, seeing that the sun was still hot, he took his clothes from the bank and proceeded to wash them, piece by piece; as the dirt and grease went floating off downstream he grunted with satisfaction and soused the clothes again, venturing even to dream that he might get rid of the fertilizer.

He hung them all up, and while they were drying he lay down in the sun and had another long sleep. They were hot and stiff as boards on top, and a little damp on the underside, when he awakened; but being hungry, he put them on and set out again. He had no knife, but with some labor he

broke himself a good stout club, and, armed with this, he marched down the road again.

Before long he came to a big farmhouse, and turned up the lane that led to it. It was just suppertime, and the farmer was washing his hands at the kitchen door. "Please, sir," said Jurgis, "can I have something to eat? I can pay." To which the farmer responded promptly, "We don't feed tramps here. Get out!"

Jurgis went without a word; but as he passed round the barn he came to a freshly ploughed and harrowed field, in which the farmer had set out some young peach trees; and as he walked he jerked up a row of them by the roots, more than a hundred trees in all, before he reached the end of the field. That was his answer, and it showed his mood; from now on he was fighting, and the man who hit him would get all that he gave, every time.

Beyond the orchard Jurgis struck through a patch of woods, and then a field of winter grain, and came at last to another road. Before long he saw another farmhouse, and, as it was beginning to cloud over a little, he asked here for shelter as well as food. Seeing the farmer eyeing him dubiously, he added, "I'll be glad to sleep in the barn."

"Well, I dunno," said the other. "Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes," said Jurgis, "but I'll do it out of doors." When the man had assented, he inquired, "How much will it cost me? I haven't very much money."

"I reckon about twenty cents for supper," replied the farmer. "I won't charge ye for the barn."

So Jurgis went in, and sat down at the table with the farmer's wife and half a dozen children. It was a bountiful meal—there were baked beans

and mashed potatoes and asparagus chopped and stewed, and a dish of strawberries, and great, thick slices of bread, and a pitcher of milk. Jurgis had not had such a feast since his wedding day, and he made a mighty effort to put in his twenty cents' worth.

They were all of them too hungry to talk; but afterward they sat upon the steps and smoked, and the farmer questioned his guest. When Jurgis had explained that he was a workingman from Chicago, and that he did not know just whither he was bound, the other said, "Why don't you stay here and work for me?"

"I'm not looking for work just now," Jurgis answered.

"I'll pay ye good," said the other, eyeing his big form—"a dollar a day and board ye. Help's terrible scarce round here."

"Is that winter as well as summer?" Jurgis demanded quickly.

"N—no," said the farmer; "I couldn't keep ye after November—I ain't got a big enough place for that."

"I see," said the other, "that's what I thought. When you get through working your horses this fall, will you turn them out in the snow?" (Jurgis was beginning to think for himself nowadays.)

"It ain't quite the same," the farmer answered, seeing the point. "There ought to be work a strong fellow like you can find to do, in the cities, or some place, in the winter time."

"Yes," said Jurgis, "that's what they all think; and so they crowd into the cities, and when they have to beg or steal to live, then people ask 'em why they don't go into the country, where help is scarce." The farmer meditated awhile.

“How about when your money’s gone?” he inquired, finally. “You’ll have to, then, won’t you?”

“Wait till she’s gone,” said Jurgis; “then I’ll see.”

He had a long sleep in the barn and then a big breakfast of coffee and bread and oatmeal and stewed cherries, for which the man charged him only fifteen cents, perhaps having been influenced by his arguments. Then Jurgis bade farewell, and went on his way.

Such was the beginning of his life as a tramp. It was seldom he got as fair treatment as from this last farmer, and so as time went on he learned to shun the houses and to prefer sleeping in the fields. When it rained he would find a deserted building, if he could, and if not, he would wait until after dark and then, with his stick ready, begin a stealthy approach upon a barn. Generally he could get in before the dog got scent of him, and then he would hide in the hay and be safe until morning; if not, and the dog attacked him, he would rise up and make a retreat in battle order. Jurgis was not the mighty man he had once been, but his arms were still good, and there were few farm dogs he needed to hit more than once.

Before long there came raspberries, and then blackberries, to help him save his money; and there were apples in the orchards and potatoes in the ground—he learned to note the places and fill his pockets after dark. Twice he even managed to capture a chicken, and had a feast, once in a deserted barn and the other time in a lonely spot alongside of a stream. When all of these things failed him he used his money carefully, but without worry — for he saw that he could earn more whenever he chose. Half an hour’s chopping wood in his lively fashion was enough to bring him a meal, and when the farmer had seen him working he would sometimes try to bribe him to stay.

But Jurgis was not staying. He was a free man now, a buccaneer. The old wanderlust had got into his blood, the joy of the unbound life, the joy of

seeking, of hoping without limit. There were mishaps and discomforts—but at least there was always something new; and only think what it meant to a man who for years had been penned up in one place, seeing nothing but one dreary prospect of shanties and factories, to be suddenly set loose beneath the open sky, to behold new landscapes, new places, and new people every hour! To a man whose whole life had consisted of doing one certain thing all day, until he was so exhausted that he could only lie down and sleep until the next day—and to be now his own master, working as he pleased and when he pleased, and facing a new adventure every hour!

Then, too, his health came back to him, all his lost youthful vigor, his joy and power that he had mourned and forgotten! It came with a sudden rush, bewildering him, startling him; it was as if his dead childhood had come back to him, laughing and calling! What with plenty to eat and fresh air and exercise that was taken as it pleased him, he would waken from his sleep and start off not knowing what to do with his energy, stretching his arms, laughing, singing old songs of home that came back to him. Now and then, of course, he could not help but think of little Antanas, whom he should never see again, whose little voice he should never hear; and then he would have to battle with himself. Sometimes at night he would waken dreaming of Ona, and stretch out his arms to her, and wet the ground with his tears. But in the morning he would get up and shake himself, and stride away again to battle with the world.

He never asked where he was nor where he was going; the country was big enough, he knew, and there was no danger of his coming to the end of it. And of course he could always have company for the asking—everywhere he went there were men living just as he lived, and whom he was welcome to join. He was a stranger at the business, but they were not clannish, and they taught him all their tricks—what towns and villages it was best to keep away from, and how to read the secret signs upon the fences, and when to beg and when to steal, and just how to do both. They laughed at his ideas of paying for anything with money or

with work—for they got all they wanted without either. Now and then Jurgis camped out with a gang of them in some woodland haunt, and foraged with them in the neighborhood at night. And then among them some one would “take a shine” to him, and they would go off together and travel for a week, exchanging reminiscences.

Of these professional tramps a great many had, of course, been shiftless and vicious all their lives. But the vast majority of them had been workingmen, had fought the long fight as Jurgis had, and found that it was a losing fight, and given up. Later on he encountered yet another sort of men, those from whose ranks the tramps were recruited, men who were homeless and wandering, but still seeking work—seeking it in the harvest fields. Of these there was an army, the huge surplus labor army of society; called into being under the stern system of nature, to do the casual work of the world, the tasks which were transient and irregular, and yet which had to be done. They did not know that they were such, of course; they only knew that they sought the job, and that the job was fleeting. In the early summer they would be in Texas, and as the crops were ready they would follow north with the season, ending with the fall in Manitoba. Then they would seek out the big lumber camps, where there was winter work; or failing in this, would drift to the cities, and live upon what they had managed to save, with the help of such transient work as was there the loading and unloading of steamships and drays, the digging of ditches and the shoveling of snow. If there were more of them on hand than chanced to be needed, the weaker ones died off of cold and hunger, again according to the stern system of nature.

It was in the latter part of July, when Jurgis was in Missouri, that he came upon the harvest work. Here were crops that men had worked for three or four months to prepare, and of which they would lose nearly all unless they could find others to help them for a week or two. So all over the land there was a cry for labor—agencies were set up and all the cities were drained of men, even college boys were brought by the carload, and hordes of frantic farmers would hold up trains and carry off

wagonloads of men by main force. Not that they did not pay them well —any man could get two dollars a day and his board, and the best men could get two dollars and a half or three.

The harvest-fever was in the very air, and no man with any spirit in him could be in that region and not catch it. Jurgis joined a gang and worked from dawn till dark, eighteen hours a day, for two weeks without a break. Then he had a sum of money that would have been a fortune to him in the old days of misery—but what could he do with it now? To be sure he might have put it in a bank, and, if he were fortunate, get it back again when he wanted it. But Jurgis was now a homeless man, wandering over a continent; and what did he know about banking and drafts and letters of credit? If he carried the money about with him, he would surely be robbed in the end; and so what was there for him to do but enjoy it while he could? On a Saturday night he drifted into a town with his fellows; and because it was raining, and there was no other place provided for him, he went to a saloon. And there were some who treated him and whom he had to treat, and there was laughter and singing and good cheer; and then out of the rear part of the saloon a girl's face, red-cheeked and merry, smiled at Jurgis, and his heart thumped suddenly in his throat. He nodded to her, and she came and sat by him, and they had more drink, and then he went upstairs into a room with her, and the wild beast rose up within him and screamed, as it has screamed in the Jungle from the dawn of time. And then because of his memories and his shame, he was glad when others joined them, men and women; and they had more drink and spent the night in wild rioting and debauchery. In the van of the surplus-labor army, there followed another, an army of women, they also struggling for life under the stern system of nature. Because there were rich men who sought pleasure, there had been ease and plenty for them so long as they were young and beautiful; and later on, when they were crowded out by others younger and more beautiful, they went out to follow upon the trail of the workingmen. Sometimes they came of themselves, and the saloon-keepers shared with them; or sometimes they were handled by agencies, the same as the

labor army. They were in the towns in harvest time, near the lumber camps in the winter, in the cities when the men came there; if a regiment were encamped, or a railroad or canal being made, or a great exposition getting ready, the crowd of women were on hand, living in shanties or saloons or tenement rooms, sometimes eight or ten of them together.

In the morning Jurgis had not a cent, and he went out upon the road again. He was sick and disgusted, but after the new plan of his life, he crushed his feelings down. He had made a fool of himself, but he could not help it now—all he could do was to see that it did not happen again. So he tramped on until exercise and fresh air banished his headache, and his strength and joy returned. This happened to him every time, for Jurgis was still a creature of impulse, and his pleasures had not yet become business. It would be a long time before he could be like the majority of these men of the road, who roamed until the hunger for drink and for women mastered them, and then went to work with a purpose in mind, and stopped when they had the price of a spree.

On the contrary, try as he would, Jurgis could not help being made miserable by his conscience. It was the ghost that would not down. It would come upon him in the most unexpected places—sometimes it fairly drove him to drink.

One night he was caught by a thunderstorm, and he sought shelter in a little house just outside of a town. It was a working-man's home, and the owner was a Slav like himself, a new emigrant from White Russia; he bade Jurgis welcome in his home language, and told him to come to the kitchen-fire and dry himself. He had no bed for him, but there was straw in the garret, and he could make out. The man's wife was cooking the supper, and their children were playing about on the floor. Jurgis sat and exchanged thoughts with him about the old country, and the places where they had been and the work they had done. Then they ate, and afterward sat and smoked and talked more about America, and how they found it. In the middle of a sentence, however, Jurgis stopped, seeing

that the woman had brought a big basin of water and was proceeding to undress her youngest baby. The rest had crawled into the closet where they slept, but the baby was to have a bath, the workingman explained. The nights had begun to be chilly, and his mother, ignorant as to the climate in America, had sewed him up for the winter; then it had turned warm again, and some kind of a rash had broken out on the child. The doctor had said she must bathe him every night, and she, foolish woman, believed him.

Jurgis scarcely heard the explanation; he was watching the baby. He was about a year old, and a sturdy little fellow, with soft fat legs, and a round ball of a stomach, and eyes as black as coals. His pimples did not seem to bother him much, and he was wild with glee over the bath, kicking and squirming and chuckling with delight, pulling at his mother's face and then at his own little toes. When she put him into the basin he sat in the midst of it and grinned, splashing the water over himself and squealing like a little pig. He spoke in Russian, of which Jurgis knew some; he spoke it with the quaintest of baby accents—and every word of it brought back to Jurgis some word of his own dead little one, and stabbed him like a knife. He sat perfectly motionless, silent, but gripping his hands tightly, while a storm gathered in his bosom and a flood heaped itself up behind his eyes. And in the end he could bear it no more, but buried his face in his hands and burst into tears, to the alarm and amazement of his hosts. Between the shame of this and his woe Jurgis could not stand it, and got up and rushed out into the rain.

He went on and on down the road, finally coming to a black woods, where he hid and wept as if his heart would break. Ah, what agony was that, what despair, when the tomb of memory was rent open and the ghosts of his old life came forth to scourge him! What terror to see what he had been and now could never be—to see Ona and his child and his own dead self stretching out their arms to him, calling to him across a bottomless abyss—and to know that they were gone from him forever, and he writhing and suffocating in the mire of his own vileness!