The Jungle

By

Upton Sinclair

Chapter 23

Early in the fall Jurgis set out for Chicago again. All the joy went out of tramping as soon as a man could not keep warm in the hay; and, like many thousands of others, he deluded himself with the hope that by coming early he could avoid the rush. He brought fifteen dollars with him, hidden away in one of his shoes, a sum which had been saved from the saloon-keepers, not so much by his conscience, as by the fear which filled him at the thought of being out of work in the city in the winter time.

He traveled upon the railroad with several other men, hiding in freight cars at night, and liable to be thrown off at any time, regardless of the speed of the train. When he reached the city he left the rest, for he had money and they did not, and he meant to save himself in this fight. He would bring to it all the skill that practice had brought him, and he would stand, whoever fell. On fair nights he would sleep in the park or on a truck or an empty barrel or box, and when it was rainy or cold he would stow himself upon a shelf in a ten-cent lodginghouse, or pay three cents for the privileges of a "squatter" in a tenement hallway. He would eat at free lunches, five cents a meal, and never a cent more—so he might keep alive for two months and more, and in that time he would surely find a job. He would have to bid farewell to his summer cleanliness, of course, for he would come out of the first night's lodging with his clothes alive with vermin. There was no place in the city where

he could wash even his face, unless he went down to the lake front—and there it would soon be all ice.

First he went to the steel mill and the harvester works, and found that his places there had been filled long ago. He was careful to keep away from the stockyards—he was a single man now, he told himself, and he meant to stay one, to have his wages for his own when he got a job. He began the long, weary round of factories and warehouses, tramping all day, from one end of the city to the other, finding everywhere from ten to a hundred men ahead of him. He watched the newspapers, too—but no longer was he to be taken in by smooth-spoken agents. He had been told of all those tricks while "on the road."

In the end it was through a newspaper that he got a job, after nearly a month of seeking. It was a call for a hundred laborers, and though he thought it was a "fake," he went because the place was near by. He found a line of men a block long, but as a wagon chanced to come out of an alley and break the line, he saw his chance and sprang to seize a place. Men threatened him and tried to throw him out, but he cursed and made a disturbance to attract a policeman, upon which they subsided, knowing that if the latter interfered it would be to "fire" them all.

An hour or two later he entered a room and confronted a big Irishman behind a desk.

"Ever worked in Chicago before?" the man inquired; and whether it was a good angel that put it into Jurgis's mind, or an intuition of his sharpened wits, he was moved to answer, "No, sir."

"Where do you come from?"

"Kansas City, sir."

"Any references?"

"No, sir. I'm just an unskilled man. I've got good arms."

"I want men for hard work—it's all underground, digging tunnels for telephones. Maybe it won't suit you."

"I'm willing, sir—anything for me. What's the pay?"

"Fifteen cents an hour."

"I'm willing, sir."

"All right; go back there and give your name."

So within half an hour he was at work, far underneath the streets of the city. The tunnel was a peculiar one for telephone wires; it was about eight feet high, and with a level floor nearly as wide. It had innumerable branches—a perfect spider web beneath the city; Jurgis walked over half a mile with his gang to the place where they were to work. Stranger yet, the tunnel was lighted by electricity, and upon it was laid a double-tracked, narrow-gauge railroad!

But Jurgis was not there to ask questions, and he did not give the matter a thought. It was nearly a year afterward that he finally learned the meaning of this whole affair. The City Council had passed a quiet and innocent little bill allowing a company to construct telephone conduits under the city streets; and upon the strength of this, a great corporation had proceeded to tunnel all Chicago with a system of railway freight-subways. In the city there was a combination of employers, representing hundreds of millions of capital, and formed for the purpose of crushing the labor unions. The chief union which troubled it was the teamsters'; and when these freight tunnels were completed, connecting all the big factories and stores with the railroad depots, they would have the teamsters' union by the throat. Now and then there were rumors and

murmurs in the Board of Aldermen, and once there was a committee to investigate—but each time another small fortune was paid over, and the rumors died away; until at last the city woke up with a start to find the work completed. There was a tremendous scandal, of course; it was found that the city records had been falsified and other crimes committed, and some of Chicago's big capitalists got into jail—figuratively speaking. The aldermen declared that they had had no idea of it all, in spite of the fact that the main entrance to the work had been in the rear of the saloon of one of them.

It was in a newly opened cut that Jurgis worked, and so he knew that he had an all-winter job. He was so rejoiced that he treated himself to a spree that night, and with the balance of his money he hired himself a place in a tenement room, where he slept upon a big homemade straw mattress along with four other workingmen. This was one dollar a week, and for four more he got his food in a boardinghouse near his work. This would leave him four dollars extra each week, an unthinkable sum for him. At the outset he had to pay for his digging tools, and also to buy a pair of heavy boots, since his shoes were falling to pieces, and a flannel shirt, since the one he had worn all summer was in shreds. He spent a week meditating whether or not he should also buy an overcoat. There was one belonging to a Hebrew collar button peddler, who had died in the room next to him, and which the landlady was holding for her rent; in the end, however, Jurgis decided to do without it, as he was to be underground by day and in bed at night.

This was an unfortunate decision, however, for it drove him more quickly than ever into the saloons. From now on Jurgis worked from seven o'clock until half-past five, with half an hour for dinner; which meant that he never saw the sunlight on weekdays. In the evenings there was no place for him to go except a barroom; no place where there was light and warmth, where he could hear a little music or sit with a companion and talk. He had now no home to go to; he had no affection left in his life—only the pitiful mockery of it in the camaraderie of vice.

On Sundays the churches were open—but where was there a church in which an ill-smelling workingman, with vermin crawling upon his neck, could sit without seeing people edge away and look annoyed? He had, of course, his corner in a close though unheated room, with a window opening upon a blank wall two feet away; and also he had the bare streets, with the winter gales sweeping through them; besides this he had only the saloons—and, of course, he had to drink to stay in them. If he drank now and then he was free to make himself at home, to gamble with dice or a pack of greasy cards, to play at a dingy pool table for money, or to look at a beer-stained pink "sporting paper," with pictures of murderers and half-naked women. It was for such pleasures as these that he spent his money; and such was his life during the six weeks and a half that he toiled for the merchants of Chicago, to enable them to break the grip of their teamsters' union.

In a work thus carried out, not much thought was given to the welfare of the laborers. On an average, the tunneling cost a life a day and several manglings; it was seldom, however, that more than a dozen or two men heard of any one accident. The work was all done by the new boring machinery, with as little blasting as possible; but there would be falling rocks and crushed supports, and premature explosions—and in addition all the dangers of railroading. So it was that one night, as Jurgis was on his way out with his gang, an engine and a loaded car dashed round one of the innumerable right-angle branches and struck him upon the shoulder, hurling him against the concrete wall and knocking him senseless.

When he opened his eyes again it was to the clanging of the bell of an ambulance. He was lying in it, covered by a blanket, and it was threading its way slowly through the holiday-shopping crowds. They took him to the county hospital, where a young surgeon set his arm; then he was washed and laid upon a bed in a ward with a score or two more of maimed and mangled men.

Jurgis spent his Christmas in this hospital, and it was the pleasantest Christmas he had had in America. Every year there were scandals and investigations in this institution, the newspapers charging that doctors were allowed to try fantastic experiments upon the patients; but Jurgis knew nothing of this—his only complaint was that they used to feed him upon tinned meat, which no man who had ever worked in Packingtown would feed to his dog. Jurgis had often wondered just who ate the canned corned beef and "roast beef" of the stockyards; now he began to understand—that it was what you might call "graft meat," put up to be sold to public officials and contractors, and eaten by soldiers and sailors, prisoners and inmates of institutions, "shantymen" and gangs of railroad laborers.

Jurgis was ready to leave the hospital at the end of two weeks. This did not mean that his arm was strong and that he was able to go back to work, but simply that he could get along without further attention, and that his place was needed for some one worse off than he. That he was utterly helpless, and had no means of keeping himself alive in the meantime, was something which did not concern the hospital authorities, nor any one else in the city.

As it chanced, he had been hurt on a Monday, and had just paid for his last week's board and his room rent, and spent nearly all the balance of his Saturday's pay. He had less than seventy-five cents in his pockets, and a dollar and a half due him for the day's work he had done before he was hurt. He might possibly have sued the company, and got some damages for his injuries, but he did not know this, and it was not the company's business to tell him. He went and got his pay and his tools, which he left in a pawnshop for fifty cents. Then he went to his landlady, who had rented his place and had no other for him; and then to his boardinghouse keeper, who looked him over and questioned him. As he must certainly be helpless for a couple of months, and had boarded there only six weeks, she decided very quickly that it would not be worth the risk to keep him on trust.

So Jurgis went out into the streets, in a most dreadful plight. It was bitterly cold, and a heavy snow was falling, beating into his face. He had no overcoat, and no place to go, and two dollars and sixty-five cents in his pocket, with the certainty that he could not earn another cent for months. The snow meant no chance to him now; he must walk along and see others shoveling, vigorous and active—and he with his left arm bound to his side! He could not hope to tide himself over by odd jobs of loading trucks; he could not even sell newspapers or carry satchels, because he was now at the mercy of any rival. Words could not paint the terror that came over him as he realized all this. He was like a wounded animal in the forest; he was forced to compete with his enemies upon unequal terms. There would be no consideration for him because of his weakness—it was no one's business to help him in such distress, to make the fight the least bit easier for him. Even if he took to begging, he would be at a disadvantage, for reasons which he was to discover in good time.

In the beginning he could not think of anything except getting out of the awful cold. He went into one of the saloons he had been wont to frequent and bought a drink, and then stood by the fire shivering and waiting to be ordered out. According to an unwritten law, the buying a drink included the privilege of loafing for just so long; then one had to buy another drink or move on. That Jurgis was an old customer entitled him to a somewhat longer stop; but then he had been away two weeks, and was evidently "on the bum." He might plead and tell his "hard luck story," but that would not help him much; a saloon-keeper who was to be moved by such means would soon have his place jammed to the doors with "hoboes" on a day like this.

So Jurgis went out into another place, and paid another nickel. He was so hungry this time that he could not resist the hot beef stew, an indulgence which cut short his stay by a considerable time. When he was again told to move on, he made his way to a "tough" place in the

"Levee" district, where now and then he had gone with a certain rat-eyed Bohemian workingman of his acquaintance, seeking a woman. It was Jurgis's vain hope that here the proprietor would let him remain as a "sitter." In low-class places, in the dead of winter, saloon-keepers would often allow one or two forlorn-looking bums who came in covered with snow or soaked with rain to sit by the fire and look miserable to attract custom. A workingman would come in, feeling cheerful after his day's work was over, and it would trouble him to have to take his glass with such a sight under his nose; and so he would call out: "Hello, Bub, what's the matter? You look as if you'd been up against it!" And then the other would begin to pour out some tale of misery, and the man would say, "Come have a glass, and maybe that'll brace you up." And so they would drink together, and if the tramp was sufficiently wretched-looking, or good enough at the "gab," they might have two; and if they were to discover that they were from the same country, or had lived in the same city or worked at the same trade, they might sit down at a table and spend an hour or two in talk—and before they got through the saloon-keeper would have taken in a dollar. All of this might seem diabolical, but the saloon-keeper was in no wise to blame for it. He was in the same plight as the manufacturer who has to adulterate and misrepresent his product. If he does not, some one else will; and the saloon-keeper, unless he is also an alderman, is apt to be in debt to the big brewers, and on the verge of being sold out.

The market for "sitters" was glutted that afternoon, however, and there was no place for Jurgis. In all he had to spend six nickels in keeping a shelter over him that frightful day, and then it was just dark, and the station houses would not open until midnight! At the last place, however, there was a bartender who knew him and liked him, and let him doze at one of the tables until the boss came back; and also, as he was going out, the man gave him a tip—on the next block there was a religious revival of some sort, with preaching and singing, and hundreds of hoboes would go there for the shelter and warmth.

Jurgis went straightway, and saw a sign hung out, saying that the door would open at seven-thirty; then he walked, or half ran, a block, and hid awhile in a doorway and then ran again, and so on until the hour. At the end he was all but frozen, and fought his way in with the rest of the throng (at the risk of having his arm broken again), and got close to the big stove.

By eight o'clock the place was so crowded that the speakers ought to have been flattered; the aisles were filled halfway up, and at the door men were packed tight enough to walk upon. There were three elderly gentlemen in black upon the platform, and a young lady who played the piano in front. First they sang a hymn, and then one of the three, a tall, smooth-shaven man, very thin, and wearing black spectacles, began an address. Jurgis heard smatterings of it, for the reason that terror kept him awake—he knew that he snored abominably, and to have been put out just then would have been like a sentence of death to him.

The evangelist was preaching "sin and redemption," the infinite grace of God and His pardon for human frailty. He was very much in earnest, and he meant well, but Jurgis, as he listened, found his soul filled with hatred. What did he know about sin and suffering—with his smooth, black coat and his neatly starched collar, his body warm, and his belly full, and money in his pocket—and lecturing men who were struggling for their lives, men at the death grapple with the demon powers of hunger and cold!—This, of course, was unfair; but Jurgis felt that these men were out of touch with the life they discussed, that they were unfitted to solve its problems; nay, they themselves were part of the problem—they were part of the order established that was crushing men down and beating them! They were of the triumphant and insolent possessors; they had a hall, and a fire, and food and clothing and money, and so they might preach to hungry men, and the hungry men must be humble and listen! They were trying to save their souls—and who but a fool could fail to see that all that was the matter with their souls was that they had not been able to get a decent existence for their bodies?

At eleven the meeting closed, and the desolate audience filed out into the snow, muttering curses upon the few traitors who had got repentance and gone up on the platform. It was yet an hour before the station house would open, and Jurgis had no overcoat—and was weak from a long illness. During that hour he nearly perished. He was obliged to run hard to keep his blood moving at all—and then he came back to the station house and found a crowd blocking the street before the door! This was in the month of January, 1904, when the country was on the verge of "hard times," and the newspapers were reporting the shutting down of factories every day—it was estimated that a million and a half men were thrown out of work before the spring. So all the hiding places of the city were crowded, and before that station house door men fought and tore each other like savage beasts. When at last the place was jammed and they shut the doors, half the crowd was still outside; and Jurgis, with his helpless arm, was among them. There was no choice then but to go to a lodginghouse and spend another dime. It really broke his heart to do this, at half-past twelve o'clock, after he had wasted the night at the meeting and on the street. He would be turned out of the lodginghouse promptly at seven they had the shelves which served as bunks so contrived that they could be dropped, and any man who was slow about obeying orders could be tumbled to the floor.

This was one day, and the cold spell lasted for fourteen of them. At the end of six days every cent of Jurgis' money was gone; and then he went out on the streets to beg for his life.

He would begin as soon as the business of the city was moving. He would sally forth from a saloon, and, after making sure there was no policeman in sight, would approach every likely-looking person who passed him, telling his woeful story and pleading for a nickel or a dime. Then when he got one, he would dart round the corner and return to his base to get warm; and his victim, seeing him do this, would go away, vowing that he would never give a cent to a beggar again. The victim

never paused to ask where else Jurgis could have gone under the circumstances—where he, the victim, would have gone. At the saloon Jurgis could not only get more food and better food than he could buy in any restaurant for the same money, but a drink in the bargain to warm him up. Also he could find a comfortable seat by a fire, and could chat with a companion until he was as warm as toast. At the saloon, too, he felt at home. Part of the saloon-keeper's business was to offer a home and refreshments to beggars in exchange for the proceeds of their foragings; and was there any one else in the whole city who would do this—would the victim have done it himself?

Poor Jurgis might have been expected to make a successful beggar. He was just out of the hospital, and desperately sick-looking, and with a helpless arm; also he had no overcoat, and shivered pitifully. But, alas, it was again the case of the honest merchant, who finds that the genuine and unadulterated article is driven to the wall by the artistic counterfeit. Jurgis, as a beggar, was simply a blundering amateur in competition with organized and scientific professionalism. He was just out of the hospital—but the story was worn threadbare, and how could he prove it? He had his arm in a sling—and it was a device a regular beggar's little boy would have scorned. He was pale and shivering—but they were made up with cosmetics, and had studied the art of chattering their teeth. As to his being without an overcoat, among them you would meet men you could swear had on nothing but a ragged linen duster and a pair of cotton trousers—so cleverly had they concealed the several suits of all-wool underwear beneath. Many of these professional mendicants had comfortable homes, and families, and thousands of dollars in the bank; some of them had retired upon their earnings, and gone into the business of fitting out and doctoring others, or working children at the trade. There were some who had both their arms bound tightly to their sides, and padded stumps in their sleeves, and a sick child hired to carry a cup for them. There were some who had no legs, and pushed themselves upon a wheeled platform—some who had been favored with blindness, and were led by pretty little dogs. Some less fortunate had mutilated

themselves or burned themselves, or had brought horrible sores upon themselves with chemicals; you might suddenly encounter upon the street a man holding out to you a finger rotting and discolored with gangrene—or one with livid scarlet wounds half escaped from their filthy bandages. These desperate ones were the dregs of the city's cesspools, wretches who hid at night in the rain-soaked cellars of old ramshackle tenements, in "stale-beer dives" and opium joints, with abandoned women in the last stages of the harlot's progress—women who had been kept by Chinamen and turned away at last to die. Every day the police net would drag hundreds of them off the streets, and in the detention hospital you might see them, herded together in a miniature inferno, with hideous, beastly faces, bloated and leprous with disease, laughing, shouting, screaming in all stages of drunkenness, barking like dogs, gibbering like apes, raving and tearing themselves in delirium.