

THE JUNGLE

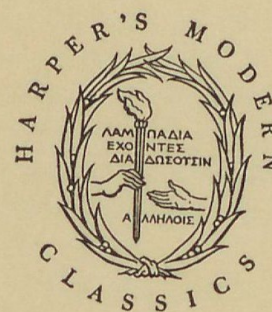
Laura Lilli
Smith College, 1961

The JUNGLE

By
UPTON SINCLAIR

With an Introduction by
JOHN FISCHER

Fondo
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Introduction to the Viking Press Edition

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ON THE twentieth of September, 1904, which happened to be a young writer's twenty-sixth birthday, he arrived in Chicago and put up in a small room of the Stockyards Hotel. He presented a letter of introduction to the University Settlement in the Stockyards district, then presided over by a wise and kindly lady named Mary MacDowell. He arranged to have his meals there for a modest sum, and spent the next seven weeks observing the life of the people in "Back of the Yards." He made the discovery that he could go anywhere in the immense packing plants by the simple device of wearing old clothes—he possessed no others—and carrying a workman's dinner-pail. In the evenings he sat in the workers' homes, asking questions and filling notebooks with what they told him.

Toward the end of his stay, walking on a Sunday afternoon through the unpaved streets of this vast depressing slum, he saw a bridal couple alight from a hack and enter the rear room of a beer saloon. Other persons followed, and the writer joined them. No one appeared to have any objection to his presence, so he sat on a bench by the wall and watched a Lithuanian wedding supper and dance. Several who spoke English explained to him what was going on, and gradually he realized that this was the family he needed for his story. From four o'clock until nearly midnight he sat, making note of every detail and composing in his mind the opening chapter of a novel. By ten years of practice he had learned to go over a scene and fix it verbatim in his mind. This opening chapter was not put on paper until the following Christmas, but it varied little from the mentally recorded version.

The author had come from "the South," a part of the country impoverished by the Civil War. He had learned to hate poverty, and the limitations it put on his desire for learning, as well as its crushing effect on the dignity of men and women. He had discovered the Socialist party and ardently championed its program as the way to

end poverty everywhere on earth. Now here it was in its ugliest aspects, the worst of which was the ignorance of its victims themselves. With the exception of a very small minority, they had no idea that they had the right to a better way of life. It was moral, spiritual, and physical degradation, a "jungle" in which humans lived barely above the level of animals.

The speech which concludes this novel reproduces one which the young writer himself delivered at a mass meeting in Chicago just before leaving for his home. It was the day on which Theodore Roosevelt was re-elected to the presidency; the speech was delivered in support of an unsuccessful candidate named Eugene V. Debs. If you get so far as the closing words of the speech you will see that the young author was far too optimistic. Chicago is still not "ours"; Chicago still belongs to the great vested interests. The dreadful sequence of world wars and counterrevolutions was mercifully veiled from the foresight of a young idealist.

The Jungle was written in a board cabin, eight feet by ten, set on a hillside north of Princeton, New Jersey. The cabin had been built in part by the writer's hands, as were the table and bookshelf it contained; it was painted black, because that happened to be the cheapest kind of paint obtainable. The physical and mental sufferings about which you read in the story were those not merely of the Stockyards workers, but of a youth who had supported himself through nine years of college and university study, and was determined to survive as a writer or not at all.

Through a winter, spring, and summer he worked on the story, sometimes blinded by his own tears. It began appearing serially in the *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist weekly which had a circulation of close to half a million, and the reaction was immediate. David Graham Phillips wrote: "I am reading *The Jungle*, and I should be afraid to trust myself to tell you how it affects me. It is so simple, so true, so tragic, and so human. I have a feeling that you yourself will be dazed some day by the excitement about it." The book was completed in September and offered to the author's last publishers, the Macmillan Company. The late George P. Brett said that he would publish it if some of the painful details were cut out. This was refused; and when four other publishers declined the book, the writer became impatient and invited the readers of the *Appeal to Reason* to make possible the publication by ordering copies and paying in advance.

Jack London wrote a broadside:

Here it is at last! The book we have been waiting for these many years! The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of wage slavery! Comrade Sinclair's book, *The Jungle*! And what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for black slaves, *The Jungle* has a large chance to do for the white slaves of today. . . .

It is alive and warm. It is brutal with life. It is written of sweat and blood, and groans and tears. It depicts, not what man ought to be, but what man is compelled to be in this, our world, in the Twentieth Century. . . .

All you have to do is to give this book a start. Once it gets its start, it will run away from you. The printers will be worked to death getting out larger and larger editions. It will go out by the hundreds of thousands. It will be read by every workingman. It will open countless ears that have been deaf to Socialism. It will plough the soil for the seed of our propaganda. It will make thousands of converts to our cause. Comrades, it is up to you!

The orders poured in—twelve thousand in all—and the book was put into type. At this point Doubleday, Page and Co. offered to publish the book, provided they could be satisfied as to its truth. They consulted a "friend" in Chicago, James Keeley, editor of the *Tribune*, who sent them what he said was "an impartial report" by his "best reporter," declaring that about everything in the book was false; it later turned out that the report had been composed by the publicity man of the Armour's. That was the beginning of a long series of attacks upon the book and its author, all of which have been narrated in *The Brass Check*, and which need not be repeated in this place. Suffice it to say that the publishers sent their lawyer to investigate, and he justified the work.

The Jungle appeared and became a sensation overnight, not merely in the United States, but in other countries. President Roosevelt sent for me, heard my story, and turned me over to two commissioners whom he ordered to make an investigation of Stockyards conditions. This was supposed to be secret, and I said not a word, but the packers knew all about it in a few hours and started their cleanup. Even so, the commission, after several weeks on the ground, turned in a report which sustained the book's charges. The commissioners told me that the only point on which they could get no proof was my statement that men had fallen into the lard vats and gone out to the world as pure leaf lard. Naturally this was a hard matter to prove, since in

each case the families had been paid off and shipped to other parts of the world.

Meantime *The Jungle* had become a best seller, and remained that for about six months. It was published in England, where it had the same success; the Hon. Winston Spencer Churchill wrote a two-part review of it. A German translation appeared quickly; it was probably the only book ever promoted by both Socialists and Junkers—the latter being the great landowners of Prussia, who were doing their best to obtain a tariff on imported meat. To date *The Jungle* has been translated into twenty-seven languages. It led to the quick passage of new meat-inspection laws, and this was some satisfaction to me, but was not my main interest. I wrote at the time that “I aimed at the public’s heart and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” This, I believe, has been the most widely quoted remark of my lifetime.

Forty years have passed, and the workers throughout America have fought a bitter war for a share of control over their own destinies. The workers of the Stockyards district have shared in this struggle and its benefits; they now have the Wagner Act, and a strong union to speak for them. Also there has started in “Back of the Yards” a movement for democratic action which you may read about in Saul Alinsky’s recent book, *Reveille for Radicals*. The labor of slaughtering animals is still hard and often dangerous; it is ill-paid and uncertain, as all labor must be so long as it is carried on under the profit system; but it is not so bad as it was forty years ago, and that much comfort can be offered to present-day readers of *The Jungle*.

One of the pleasures which a twenty-six-year-old author enjoyed in Chicago was being invited to Hull House and sitting next to Jane Addams at dinner. In the course of this occasion the ardent young Socialist delivered speeches such as you will find near the end of this book. He was told later that the saintly Jane had remarked to one of her associates, “That young man has a great deal to learn.” Ten or twelve years later he met this high-hearted lady again, and reminded her of the remark. We agreed upon the statement that we had both had a great deal to learn, and that we had learned some of it and hoped to learn more. Man-made calamities have taught the author of *The Jungle* that he had placed far too high an estimate upon the intelligence of the human race, and its moral qualities. But he sees democracy spreading both in industry and politics, and he still hopes to witness its victory, at least in his native land. The cry for social justice which

echoes from these pages has been heard around the world, and leaders of the people’s cause, both here and in other lands, have acknowledged that their first impulse toward social service came from the story which you are about to read. May it be so with you!

UPTON SINCLAIR

INTRODUCTION

John Fischer, Oklahoma-born, was graduated from the University of Oklahoma and later studied economics at Oxford University. During vacations from Oxford, he worked for the United Press in England and Germany, and later for the Associated Press in Washington. He has also been with the Department of Agriculture, the Board of Economic Warfare, and the Foreign Economic Administration, serving the latter in India as chief representative. He traveled extensively in Russia in 1946, with others, as observer and supervisor of the distribution of UNRRA supplies to that country. His book, Why They Behave Like Russians (1947), was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. He has contributed articles to several leading national magazines. Formerly an associate editor of Harper's Magazine, Mr. Fischer is now editor-in-chief of the General Book Department of Harper & Brothers.

✓ The Jungle was designed as a weapon. The author hoped it would serve The Revolution—which seemed to him in 1906 to be marching just around the corner. He did not intend it to be a work of art, and any attempt to consider it as a specimen of *belles lettres* would be preposterous. As things turned out, his novel became a useful tool in a moderate but long-sustained drive for reform. ✓

(This dismayed the author, a hot-eyed young man who had no time for slow remedies. In the forty-five years since, he apparently has grown a good deal more philosophic; but at this writing he is still trying his level best to make the world over into something tidier and more humane. He still regards the novel not primarily as an art form, but as an instrument for reshaping the minds of men. He still has little patience with the niceties of literary composition.)

The most useful way to look at *The Jungle*, then, is on its own grounds: as propaganda rather than literature. By this yardstick it measures high. Except for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is probably the most effective propaganda novel yet written in this country. It will continue for a long time to interest everyone who wants to see what a single

angry man can accomplish with the naked word. Moreover, as we shall note a little later, it has still other title-deeds to a lasting place in the history of American writing.

✓ *The Jungle* was a by-product of the ugliest period in the adolescence of American capitalism. By the turn of the century, large-scale industry—born at the close of the Civil War—had grown up just enough to be exuberant, crude, and unmanageable. It had begun to dominate the nation's way of life, to set the tone (a low one) for its culture, and to corrupt its politics. There were of course a few businessmen with traces of social conscience, but their rivals dismissed them as ineffectual dreamers. The typical plutocrat was too busy looting the country's resources and squeezing the last ounce of labor out of his immigrant hired help to think much about consequences. Perhaps he never actually said "The public be damned," but he often acted as if that were his motto. To thousands of lesser citizens, Big Business had come to mean something arrogant, evil, and irresponsible.

✓ One of these disgruntled citizens was Upton Sinclair, a youthful idealist who had been raised in the genteel and slightly bitter tradition of an impoverished Southern aristocracy. He was born in 1878 in Baltimore, where the better people had always looked down on tradesmen, especially if they were Yankees. Sinclair had gone to New York City for an education, and everything he saw of Northern industrial life revolted him. He saw it from the rough side, because he worked his way through both City College and four years of graduate study at Columbia University. Living in grinding poverty, he quickly identified himself with the underprivileged and oppressed. While still a student he became both a Socialist and a novelist.

✓ Sinclair's conversion to Socialism seems to have been more of a religious than a political experience. Neither his career nor his writings indicate that he ever understood the essential nature of American politics, and he never seemed to be greatly interested in the day-to-day processes of government. His politics were apocalyptic, rather than practical. Sinclair was much too intent on building the New Jerusalem to worry about repairing the streets in the Fourteenth Precinct.

✓ The creed he embraced was a blend of Marx and the Christian ethic; and in it he found The Answer to all the grievous wrongs of

society. It provided a magnificently simple explanation for his own sufferings and for the misery all about him, plus an equally simple and splendid remedy. In those days many other conscientious and troubled people were turning to the same faith, for Socialism was then approaching the high point of its influence and membership in America. Later, most of them fell away; but for Sinclair, Socialism provided the light that was to guide his whole life.

Throughout his years at the university, Sinclair had earned a little money by selling fiction to the pulps, and he had acquired facility in popular storytelling. In 1901 he published his first novel, *King Midas*. Three others followed in hasty succession. All were failures. They didn't sell well enough to make many converts, and their total earnings came to less than a thousand dollars.

Then in 1904 his luck changed. A Socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, sent him to Chicago to study the meat-packing industry, already known in radical circles as one of the grisliest examples of Big Business. What happened is described by Sinclair himself in his preface to this volume. His findings—published first as a serial in *Appeal to Reason* and then in book form—made him famous literally almost overnight. For the first time in his life he had enough money to free him from constant anxiety. He also had an established audience. Most important of all, he was making things happen in the world of politics.

Sinclair's stomach-turning account of the way meat was handled in the Chicago slaughterhouses churned up one of those rare surges of public indignation which no politician can ignore. Long before his book appeared a good many voters had suspected that something was wrong in the packing industry, because hundreds of American soldiers had sickened on embalmed beef during the Spanish-American War. Now *The Jungle* confirmed their suspicions, and worse. They looked with horror at the corned beef on their dinner tables and promptly wrote to their Congressmen. Before the year was out Congress passed its first law to regulate the meat, food, and drug industries. No other American novel, before or since, has ever produced such fast action.

This legislation was of course only one segment of the great reform movement which began to gather headway in the first decade of the twentieth century. Many people besides the Socialists were getting

impatient with the abuses of an undomesticated capitalism; and in the traditional American fashion, both major parties stole whatever they thought might be useful from the Socialist program. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and eventually the New Dealers all rode into office on the wave of protest—intermittent but never entirely checked—which got its start in the early nineteen hundreds. By 1940 nearly every plank in the Socialist platform of 1904 had been enacted into law—by Republicans and Democrats.

Much of the initial impetus for this drive toward reform came from a select band of writers who were labeled the Muckrakers. About the same time Sinclair was setting out for Chicago, Lincoln Steffens was exposing the corrupt boss system in city politics, Ida M. Tarbell was digging out some embarrassing facts about Standard Oil, and Ray Stannard Baker was examining Big Business's dealings with the labor unions. A dozen or more kindred journalists—most of them contributors to *McClure's Magazine*—were probing at other sore spots all over American society. The success of *The Jungle* inevitably made Upton Sinclair a leading member of their group. He found a new career by serving—in the words of E. H. Eby—as a “revolutionary sleuth spying upon the indecencies of the capitalist system.”

For the next twenty-five years Sinclair's most effective writing appeared in the muckraking periodicals, and in a series of nonfiction books which were in fact extended propaganda pamphlets. One by one, he took up the central institutions of American culture and attempted to demonstrate that they were all tools of a domineering and corrupt capitalism. In *The Profits of Religion* he attacked the churches. *The Brass Check* presented his jaundiced view of journalism and the ways in which accurate reporting is distorted by the pressure of advertisers. *The Goose-Step* and *The Goslings* were critiques of American universities and the lower schools. The arts and literature were worked over in similar fashion in *Mammonart* and *Money Writes*.

In each of these books Sinclair employed the techniques of Marxian analysis, which make little pretense of objectivity. He selected those facts which fitted his case and ignored most of the others; and his underlying concept of the American political process was almost childishly oversimplified. Yet he made some painful hits, and his pamphlet-

earing had a considerable effect on the climate of opinion for the next two decades.

Sinclair's occasional novels during this period lacked the force of *The Jungle* and none of them approached its impact on the public mind. Several of them—notably *Oil!*—showed a marked advance in the craft of fiction, but not until Sinclair launched the Lanny Budd series during World War II did his novels again find a mass audience. By that time he was writing in quite a different vein. His purpose in the Lanny Budd stories was to sketch a panoramic view of world history throughout the era of the great wars, well spiced with melodrama and focused through Marxian (though not strictly Stalinist) lenses. Many people have found these novels readable enough; but in all of them the fiery strength that distinguished *The Jungle* is plainly missing.

To readers accustomed to strictly contemporary fiction, *The Jungle* may at first appear naïve and even a little quaint. It is written in a serviceable but flat-footed style, almost entirely innocent of humor or literary grace-notes. The plot is as melodramatic as a radio soap-opera. Sinclair never hesitated to use every tear jerker he could possibly conceive of, and his hero, Jurgis Rudkus, before he reaches a final haven in the bosom of the Socialist party, suffers more indignities and disasters than an early Christian martyr. The structure of the narrative can most charitably be described as rambling; and it is interrupted from time to time for exhortations and political speeches. One of these—as the author himself has explained—is simply a reproduction of an oration Sinclair delivered in Chicago during the 1904 presidential campaign.

Yet in spite of all its obvious faults, few readers have ever complained that *The Jungle* is dull. For Sinclair had an abundant supply of the one great talent which is indispensable to the novelist: he could tell a good story. *The Jungle* keeps moving, from the very first page, and even the most cynical capitalist is likely to go on turning the pages just to find out what happens to Jurgis and his star-crossed family.

Moreover, Sinclair had the precious ability to persuade his readers that what he told them was true. For all its melodrama, the novel carries a conviction that everyone of its injustices actually happened—

if not to Jurgis, then to some other maltreated Lithuanian working in The Yards. The slums described here are clearly places where flesh-and-blood people had to live; the gruesome details of the slaughterhouse sound indisputably real.

One explanation is that the story was true. If for no other reason, *The Jungle* would be memorable because it is one of the earliest examples of a peculiarly American form of fiction: the reportorial novel. It is only in small part a work of the imagination; the great bulk of it consists of facts—detailed, specific, and noted down with meticulous care. In the succeeding years this tradition of the reporter-novelist has produced some of our most characteristic fiction—Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Hersey's *The Wall*, to mention only three. Each of them, and hundreds of their lesser relatives, owe an unconscious debt to *The Jungle*.

Another reason for the air of truth in this tract-novel is the tremendous urgency and conviction with which it was written. Sinclair, in effect, grabbed his readers by the lapels and said: "Listen. What I am telling you is true, and terrible, and somebody has got to put a stop to it right away." He set down every word with a sincerity that cannot be counterfeited. If the result was hardly a work of art, certainly it was great writing of another kind. The people who read *The Jungle* as it came fresh from the press were moved to action; and its power to move the heart lasts to this day.

Perhaps the best account of the muckrakers and their effect on American society can be found in *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (Harcourt, Brace, 1931). An excellent appraisal of their role in the nation's literature and of Sinclair's own work is contained in *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, and Canby (Macmillan, 1948). Other biographical material and critical comment on Sinclair is available in Hubbell's *American Life in Literature*, (Harper, 1949), Millett's *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt, Brace, 1940), Leary's *Articles on American Literature* (Duke University Press, 1947), and Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (Harcourt, Brace, 1930).

JOHN FISCHER