

Upton Sinclair: The Jungle (1906)

Muckraking (investigative) journalists and novelists were the shock troops of progressive efforts to promote government regulation of corporate America. One of the most powerful of these reform-minded writers was Upton Sinclair. In 1906 he published The Jungle, a novel set in Chicago's horrific meat-packing district. With graphic detail, it tells the story of Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant, and his travails in Dunham's, a fictional meat-packing plant. Soon after the book appeared Congress passed the Meat Inspection Act in an effort to address the abuses cited by Sinclair and others.

From Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906; New York: Signet, 1960), pp. 100-102.

There was another interesting set of statistics that a person might have gathered in Packingtown – those of the various afflictions of the workers. When Jurgis had first inspected the packing plants ... he had marveled while he listened to the tale of all the things that were made out of the carcasses of animals, and of all the lesser industries that were maintained there; now he found that each one of these lesser industries was a separate little inferno, in its way as horrible as the killing-beds, the source and fountain of them all. The workers in each of them had their own peculiar diseases. And the wandering visitor might be skeptical about all the swindles, but he could not be skeptical about these, for the worker bore the evidences of them about his own person—generally he had only to hold out his hand.

There were the men in the pickle rooms, for instance, where old Antanas had gotten his death; scarce a one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers would be eaten by the acid one by one. Of the butchers and floorsmen, the beef boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be crisscrossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or trace them. They would have no nails,—they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan. There were men who had worked in the cooking rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. There were the beef luggers, who carried two-hundred-pound quarters into the refrigerator cars, a fearful kind of work, that began at four O'clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in two years. There were those who worked in the chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism, the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off. There were those who made tile tins for the canned meat, and their hands, too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood poisoning. Some worked at the stamping machines, and it was very seldom that one could work long there at the pace that was set, and not give out and forget himself, and have a part of his hand chopped off. There were the "hoisters," as they were called, whose task it was to press the level which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp and the steam, and as old Dunham's architects had not built the killing room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on, which got them into the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they were walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer men, and those who served in the cooking rooms. These men could not be shown to the visitor—for the odor of a fertilizer man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in the tank rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting. Sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Dunham's Pure Beef Lard!

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why would such a description of working conditions prompt calls for regulation?
2. Why did workers have to endure such working conditions?