

Conditions at the Slaughterhouse

Upton Sinclair

Introduction

During the 1860s, a group of railroad men bought a massive tract of marshland on the Southside of Chicago and built the Union Stockyards, a processing plant for cattle and other livestock. Chicago processed more meat than anywhere else in the world from the 1860s through the 1920s. The stockyards were almost 400 acres and employed 40,000 people. Philip Armour owned a small meat processing plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when the Union stockyards opened. He immediately opened a meatpacking plant next to the stockyards. Armour and Company quickly became the largest meatpacking plant in the world, and employed close to 30,000 people. Armour was the first company to produce canned meats, the first to use refrigerated train cars¹, and one of the first to adopt the assembly line for production. Neither the stockyards or meatpacking plant were subject to industry standards or regulations of any significance. The conditions were horrific for workers and animals. The quality of the meat was equally appalling.

In July 1904, 18,000 members of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union at Armour went on strike for higher wages. The company brought in unemployed African Americans to cross the picket lines and keep production moving. More than 4,000 union members rioted, assaulted the strikebreakers and destroyed property. The strike failed, and the company threatened to ban the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union until Jane Addams – who you will read shortly – met with J. Ogden Armour, son of Philip Ogden who died in 1901. Addams convinced Armour, Jr. to offer the union a “desultory contract,” which basically means everything in the contract is subject to change. While the terms of the contract were disappointing, Addams’ intervention saved the Union.

The same year as the meatpackers strike, writer and journalist Upton Sinclair received a five-hundred-dollar advance from “The Appeal to Reason,” the nation’s leading socialist newspaper to write a series an expose about the miserable working conditions in meatpacking industry. Sinclair decided to go undercover at Armour meat packing plant and expose the poverty and exploitation of industrial workers. In 1906, he published “The Jungle,” an account of the five weeks he spent in at Armour. Sinclair worked at the meatpacking plant and spent time at home with the immigrant workers. The main characters in the book – Jurgis, Ona, and Elzbieta – are composites characters based on the workers Sinclair met while undercover.

Sinclair hoped the book would show middle-class Americans the suffering of the laboring classes and increase support for the labor movement. Middle-class Americans were not moved by the plight of immigrant workers. They were concerned about the sanitary

¹ Philip Armour created the refrigerated train car in 1883. Armour owned the entire fleet of refrigerated cars, so much like George Rice and John Rockefeller, anyone who needed to use refrigerated had to deal with Armour.

conditions of the meat-packing houses. Sinclair himself said that he had taken aim at America's heart and hit instead its stomach. Evidently, the horrific living conditions of the workers mattered less to middle-class Americans than the condition of their meat. Initially, President Theodore Roosevelt dismissed Sinclair as a “socialist crackpot”- until he read the book. Roosevelt sent a copy to every member of Congress, who immediately passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and Meat Inspection Acts of 1906².

The excerpt contains a graphic description of the mutilation of animals in early packing houses – it is violent and inhumane, and difficult to read.

Primary Source

Entering one of the Durham buildings, they found a number of other visitors waiting; and before long there came a guide, to escort them through the place. They make a great feature of showing strangers through the packing plants, for it is a good advertisement. But Ponas' Jokubas³ whispered maliciously that the visitors did not see any more than the packers wanted them to. They climbed a long series of stairways outside of the building, to the top of its five or six stories. Here was the chute, with its river of hogs, all patiently toiling upward; there was a place for them to rest to cool off, and then through another passageway they went into a room from which there is no returning for hogs. It was a long, narrow room, with a gallery along it for visitors. At the head there was a great iron wheel, about twenty feet in circumference, with rings here and there along its edge. Upon both sides of this wheel there was a narrow space, into which came the hogs at the end of their journey; in the midst of them stood a great burly Negro, bare-armed and bare-chested. He was resting for the moment, for the wheel had stopped while men were cleaning up. In a minute or two, however, it began slowly to revolve, and then the men upon each side of it sprang to work.

They had chains which they fastened about the leg of the nearest hog, and the other end of the chain they hooked into one of the rings upon the wheel...neither squeals of hogs nor tears of visitors made any difference to the workers; one by one they hooked up the hogs, and one by one with a swift stroke they slit their throats. There was a long line of hogs, with squeals and lifeblood ebbing away together; until at last each started again, and vanished with a splash into a huge vat of boiling water. It was all so very businesslike that one watched it fascinated. It was pork- making by machinery, porkmaking by applied mathematics. And yet somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs...

One could not stand and watch very long without becoming philosophical, without beginning to deal in symbols and similes, and to hear the hog squeal of the universe. Was it permitted to believe that there was nowhere upon the earth, or above the earth, a heaven for hogs, where they were requited for all this suffering? Each one of these hogs was a separate creature. Some were white hogs, some were black; some were brown, some were spotted; some were old, some young; some were long and lean, some were monstrous. And each of them had an individuality

² Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 1906, is believed to be in the public domain.

³ Ponas means Mister in Lithuanian. Ponas Jukubas is a neighbor and fellow immigrant who helped Jurgis and Ona get jobs at the packing plant when they arrived in Chicago.

of his own, a will of his own, a hope and a heart's desire; each was full of self-confidence, of self-importance, and a sense of dignity and trusting and strong in faith he had gone about his business, the while a black shadow hung over him and a horrid Fate waited in his pathway.

...Looking down this room, one saw, creeping slowly, a line of dangling hogs a hundred yards in length; and for every yard there was a man, working as if a demon were after him. At the end of this hog's progress every inch of the carcass had been gone over several times; and then it was rolled into the chilling room, where it stayed for twenty-four hours, and where a stranger might lose himself in a forest of freezing hogs. Before the carcass was admitted here, however, it had to pass a government inspector, who sat in the doorway and felt of the glands in the neck for tuberculosis. This government inspector did not have the manner of a man who was worked to death; he was apparently not haunted by a fear that the hog might get by him before he had finished his testing. If you were a sociable person, he was quite willing to enter into conversation with you, and to explain to you the deadly nature of the ptomaines⁴ which are found in tubercular pork; and while he was talking with you, you could hardly be so ungrateful as to notice that a dozen carcasses were passing him untouched. This inspector wore a blue uniform, with brass buttons, and he gave an atmosphere of authority to the scene, and, as it were, put the stamp of official approval upon the things which were done in Durham's.

Jurgis went down the line with the rest of the visitors, staring open-mouthed, lost in wonder. He had dressed hogs himself in the forest of Lithuania; but he had never expected to live to see one hog dressed by several hundred men. It was like a wonderful poem to him, and he took it all in guilelessly- even to the conspicuous signs demanding immaculate cleanliness of the employees. Jurgis was vexed when the cynical Jokubas translated these signs with sarcastic comments, offering to take them to the secret rooms where the spoiled meats went to be doctored. The party descended to the next floor, where the various waste materials were treated. Here came the entrails, to be scraped and washed clean for sausage casings; men and women worked here in the midst of a sickening stench, which caused the visitors to hasten by, gasping.

The visitors were taken there and shown them, all neatly hung in rows, labeled conspicuously with the tags of the government inspectors - and some, which had been killed by a special process, marked with the sign of the kosher rabbi, certifying that it was fit for sale to the orthodox. And then the visitors were taken to the other parts of the building, to see what became of each particle of the waste material that had vanished through the floor; and to the pickling rooms, and the salting rooms, the canning rooms, and the packing rooms, where choice meat was prepared for shipping in refrigerator cars, destined to be eaten in all the four corners of civilization. Afterward they went out-side, wandering about among the mazes of buildings in which was done the work auxiliary to this great industry.

...It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta⁵. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odor that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid

⁴ Ptomaines are bacteria that cause food poisoning.

⁵ Elzbieta was Ona's step-mother. She immigrated from Lithuania with Ona and her (then) fiancé Jurgis, bringing Ona's six half-siblings with her. They all lived together, along with Jurgis' father, in a two-room tenement apartment (a "kitchenette," as they were known in Chicago) on the West-and-Southside of Chicago.

to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was moldy and white-it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had tramped and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it.

It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one-there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit. There was no place for the men to wash their hands before they ate their dinner, and so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage. There were the butt-ends of smoked meat, and the scraps of corned beef, and all the odds and ends of the waste of the plants, that would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there.

Such were the new surroundings in which Elzbieta was placed, and such was the work she was compelled to do. It was stupefying, brutalizing work; it left her no time to think, no strength for anything. She was part of the machine she tended, and every faculty that was not needed for the machine was doomed to be crushed out of existence. There was only one mercy about the cruel grind-that it gave her the gift of insensibility. Little by little she sank into a torpor-she fell silent.

She would meet Jurgis and Ona in the evening, and the three would walk home together, often without saying a word. Ona, too, was falling into a habit of silence. Ona, who had once gone about singing like a bird. She was sick and miserable, and often she would barely have strength enough to drag herself home. And there they would eat what they had to eat, and afterward, because there was only their misery to talk of, they would crawl into bed and fall into a stupor and never stir until it was time to get up again, and dress by candlelight, and go back to the machines. They were so numbed that they did not even suffer much from hunger, now; only the children continued to fret when the food ran short. Yet the soul of Ona was not dead - the souls of none of them were dead, but only sleeping; and now and then they would waken, and these were cruel times.

The gates of memory would roll open - old joys would stretch out their arms to them, old hopes and dreams would call to them, and they would stir beneath the burden that lay upon them, and feel its forever immeasurable weight. They could not even cry out beneath it; but anguish would seize them, more dreadful than the agony of death. It was a thing scarcely to be spoken-a thing never spoken by all the world, that will not know its own defeat. They were beaten; they had lost the game, they were swept aside. It was not less tragic because it was so sordid, because it had to do with wages and grocery bills and rents. They had dreamed of freedom; of a chance to look about, them and learn something; to be decent and clean, to see their child grow up to be strong. And now it was all gone-it would never be! They had played the game and they had lost. Six

years more of toil they had to face before they could expect the least respite, the cessation of the payments upon the house; and how cruelly certain it was that they could never stand six years of such a life as they were living!

They were lost, they were going down - and there was no deliverance for them, no hope; for all the help it gave them the vast city in which they lived might have been an ocean waste, a wilderness, a desert, a tomb. So often this mood would come to Ona, in the nighttime, when something wakened her; she would lie, afraid of the beating of her own heart, fronting the blood-red eyes of the old primeval terror of life. Once she cried aloud, and woke Jurgis, who was tired and cross. After that she learned to weep silently-their moods so seldom came together now! It was as if their hopes were buried in separate graves. Jurgis, being a man, had troubles of his own. There was another specter following him. He had never spoken of it, nor would he allow anyone else to speak of it - he had never acknowledged its existence to himself. Yet the battle with it took all the manhood that he had-and once or twice, alas, a little more. Jurgis had discovered drink.

He was working in the steaming pit of hell; day after day, week after week-until now there was not an organ of his body that did its work without pain, until the sound of ocean breakers echoed in his head day and night, and the buildings swayed and danced before him as he went down the street. And from all the unending horror of this there was a respite, a deliverance-he could drink! He could forget the pain, he could slip off the burden; he would see clearly again, he would be master of his brain, of his thoughts, of his will. His dead self would stir in him, and he would find himself laughing and cracking jokes with his companions-he would be a man again, and master of his life.