


# What Life Means to Me


By UPTON SINCLAIR

*Decorations by John Boyd*



I WAS born in what is called the upper middle-class; my parents were members of the ruined aristocracy of the South. I was brought up in a very secluded way, with high traditions and delicate sensibilities, and then turned loose in our modern commercial inferno to shift for myself. I went to college, but I did not take many degrees, because I did not fit into the molds. But I loved the libraries, and I would begin all the courses, find out what the professors had to give me, and then quit. I did this for nine years, in the meantime reading the world's literature and practicing the violin sometimes fourteen hours a day.

I was enabled to do this because of a happy knack which I possessed—that of composing (and marketing) boys' adventure stories. For a considerable period I used to talk these off to a stenographer, grinding them out at the rate of six or eight thousand words a day; in which manner I took care of myself from the age of sixteen. I have fre-



quently walked all the way around Central Park, in New York, "thinking story." It was just after the Spanish War, and the scenes of my heroes' adventures were laid in Cuba; so I used to call the work of composition "killing Spaniards." In those days I wrote under the name of "Ensign Clark Fitch," and "Lieutenant Frederick Garrison"; and my productions appeared in brilliant red, blue, green, and yellow-colored periodicals, known as the "True Blue Library" and the "Starry Flag Weekly."

During all this time, I lived with three intimate friends who loved me very dearly, had the molding of my character, and are responsible for my fundamentally revolutionary attitude toward the world. Their names are Jesus, Hamlet, and Shelley.

At the age of twenty, I received a conviction of inspiration, and went away into the woods to write the "great American novel." I was so anxious to begin that I went in the month of April. I was in a tent, and the second night the thermometer dropped to seventeen; in trying to get warm I set fire to my tent, and nearly ended my adventure then and there. A little later in the summer I was storm-bound for three days (I was on an island), and lived on fried crow. Toward the end I went short on money, and then I lived entirely on fish and moldy salsibiscuit.

At the conclusion of the summer, having finished the novel, and considering that I had secured myself a place in literature, and was assured of an income thereby, I was married—my earthly possessions at that moment amounting to eight dollars. I soon made the appalling discovery that my novel was not wanted, that my inspiration was not believed in, and that I was out of touch with the entire civilized world—an outcast and a tramp. I could no longer write entertaining dime-novels—the effort to do so simply tore me to pieces, and the publishers of the dime-novels soon found out that something was wrong, and passed me by. I had all the burden and the travail of the future humanity in my soul, but I was powerless to express my vision; I had only incoherent protests and cries of despair. I had no friends; I had no one to advise me or help me or guide me to the light. My rich relations did no more than send me their old clothes oc-

asionally, and offer me a position in the family banking establishment.

Not caring for this, I had no alternative but to go away into the woods, and live in tents and shanties, and wash the dishes, and tend the baby, and nurse an invalid wife, and write literature. Some of the rage and bitterness of this experience I put into a book called "The Journal of Arthur Stirling," which was the diary of a young poet who starved in a garret, and finally committed suicide. It created something of a sensation in England, as well as in America; but it was a book about my own soul—and the world has not yet time to pay any attention to individual souls. My nightmare experience had to continue until I discovered the Socialist movement, until I had learned to identify my own struggle for life with the struggle for life of humanity.

That was not a thing which I could learn in the literature of the world, it was only beginning to get into literature; it was not a thing which I could learn in colleges, for the colleges have never heard of it; it is a thing which the working-class is learning through the discipline of grim and merciless experience. Of course I had known of Utopian socialism, of socialism as a theory of government, as a dream of a perfect society; but of socialism as an act of will I was ignorant—of socialism as the world-wide rebellion of the proletariat against the rule of organized and predatory capital.

It was a wonderful discovery when I made it, for it gave me the key to all my problems. I discovered that I did not have to carry the whole burden of the world's woe upon my own shoulders; that I had comrades and allies in the fight. I was no longer obliged to think of civilization as a place where wild beasts fought and tore one another without purpose and without end; I saw the anguish of the hour as the first pang of the great world-birth that is coming.

And at the same time I discovered my own place in the world, and the purpose and meaning of my experience. Down in the bottom of the social pit were millions of human beings, rotting in squalor and vice, and spreading a slow contagion that was infecting the whole of civilization. But these wretches were ignorant; they did not know what was the matter with

them. They were also voiceless, and could not have told even had they known. On the other hand those who had voices—they did not know! They were sitting at ease and speculating about it; they had been born to success themselves, and were prattling that the individual was to blame for failure. I, alone of all men who had education and a voice, had been down into the social pit, and had lived the life of the proletariat; so that I, a boy of twenty-five or six, knew, of my own experience, things of which all the doctors and wise men, the scholars and statesmen of the world, were ignorant. I had tested upon my own person the effects of cold and hunger, of misery and disease and despair. I had tried to the full the power of the individual will, and had found its impotence; I had watched the beginning and the swift progress of degeneration—in body and mind and soul—in myself, and, more horrible yet, in those I loved; I had "fronted the blood-red eyes of the old primeval terror of life." And so I knew, with a knowledge that no man could impeach, the cause and the meaning of all the evils that are raging in modern society—of neurasthenia, melancholia, and hysteria; of drunkenness, insanity, and suicide; of prostitution, war, and crime.

The immediate cause of the writing of "The Jungle" was a request from a Socialist paper, the "Appeal to Reason," that I write them a serial. I had on hand a trilogy which I was anxious to complete—an American historical series, which America did not seem to want very anxiously. I saw that I was at the end of my tether, and had better give the world the lesson of my experience while I could.

I began to plan a novel which should portray modern industrial conditions, and show how they were driving the working-man into socialism. It was just after the big strike in Packingtown, and the newspapers had contained some account of the situation, which had attracted my attention to it. I knew that this was a place where modern commercial forces held complete sway, and had the making of the entire environment. I went out there and lived among the people for seven weeks; I being a socialist, they took me in and told me all they knew. I would sit in their homes at night, and talk with them, and then in the daytime they would lay

off their work, and take me around, and show me whatever I wished to see. I studied every detail of their lives, and took notes enough to fill a volume. I talked, not merely with workmen and their families, but with bosses and superintendents, with night-watchmen and saloon-keepers and policemen, with doctors and lawyers and merchants, with politicians and clergymen and settlement-workers. I spared no pains to get every detail exact, and I know that in this respect "The Jungle" will stand the severest test—it is as authoritative as if it were a statistical compilation.

In many respects I had "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in mind as a model of what I wished to do. First of all I was an artist, and I wished to write a piece of literature; but I wished also if possible to make a popular book, one that would be read by the people and would shake the country out of its slumber. In this I am afraid that I failed. I might have succeeded if I had had as good an opportunity as Mrs. Stowe had; but my task was so much harder—the life of the modern wage-slave is so much more mechanical and so much less picturesque than that of the chattel-slave of fifty years ago. The black slave was a scarce article; he was worth three hundred dollars the day he was born, and if he were taken care of he would be worth five times as much when he had attained his full growth. As a consequence he had a bright and happy childhood. On the other hand, there is a superfluity of unskilled labor all over the world, and it is nobody's business whether the child of the modern industrial slum ever attains its full growth or not. Also the black slave generally lived in the country, and might be loved by his master; while the wage-slave knows nothing but a tenement-room and a factory, and his master is a machine.

All of which made it infinitely harder for a novelist; it gave him so much less opportunity for color and brightness, for humor and adventure, such as a popular book must have. I was warned by my friends that the sheer horror of "The Jungle" would kill it; but I could only answer that I had to make it true. I had spent seven weeks in Packingtown, and had been able to find no ray of sunshine in the lives of the people, save such as they were able to get out of drunkenness.

Perhaps you will be surprised to be told that I failed in my purpose, when you know of all the uproar that "The Jungle" has been creating. But then that uproar is all accidental, and was due to an entirely different cause. I wished to frighten the country by a picture of what its industrial masters were doing to their victims; entirely by chance I had stumbled on another discovery—what they were doing to the meat-supply of the civilized world. In other words, I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.

I smile whenever I think of it now; I was so unpractical that I did not realize the bearing of this discovery. I really paid very little attention to the meat-question while I was in Chicago. When I had once studied out the universal system of graft which prevails in the place, the meat-graft seemed to me simply a natural and obvious part of it. I saw a great deal of it, of course; but I did not see half as much as I might have seen had I tried harder. I do not eat much meat myself, and my general attitude toward the matter was one of indifference; I was of the opinion (and I am still of the opinion) that any man who takes into his stomach food which has been prepared under the direction of unscrupulous commercial pirates such as the Chicago packers, deserves all the poisoning he gets.

Just now "The Jungle" is the sensation of the hour; its publishers got rid of seven thousand copies in one day of June. And I have no particular objection to that—the public might as well be looking at my picture in the newspapers as at the picture of any murderer or prize-fighter. But I protest mildly to those academic critics who think that the book is nothing but the sensation of a moment. I do not think that we have any book in American literature, with the possible exception of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," into the making of which more human anguish has entered. Its publication marks the beginning of a proletarian literature in America; we have had nothing before it excepting sugar-coated sentimentality like "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch."

"The Jungle" differs from most of the work of the realists in that it is written from the inside. It is the result of an attempt to combine the best of two widely different schools; to put the content of

Shelley into the form of Zola—a method which I believe will come more into favor as the revolutionary Socialist movement finds its voice. The realists of the French school, of which George Moore is the English representative, are middle-class writers. They assemble their material with infinite skill, and are expert psychologists; but it is no part of their programme to live the life which they portray, and they do not feel obliged to share in the emotions of their characters. They do their work from the outside, and they resemble a doctor who is too much absorbed in his study of the case to sympathize with the patient's desire to escape from his agony.

But now there is a stirring of life within the masses themselves. The proletarian writer is beginning to find a voice, and also an audience and a means of support. And he does not find the life of his fellows a fascinating opportunity for feats of artistry; he finds it a nightmare inferno, a thing whose one conceivable excellence is that it drives men to rebellion and to mutual aid in escaping. The proletarian writer is a writer with a purpose; he thinks no more of "art for art's sake" than a man on a sinking ship thinks of painting a beautiful picture in the cabin; he thinks of getting ashore, and of getting his brothers and comrades ashore—and then there will be time enough for art.

And that is what life means to me. So far as I myself am concerned, the well-springs of joy and beauty have been dried up in me—the flowers no longer sing to me as they used to, nor the sunrise, nor the stars; I have become like a soldier upon a hard campaign—I am thinking only of the enemy. The experiences of my life have been such that I cannot think of them without turning sick; there is no way that I can face the thought of them at all, save as being practice for the writing of "The Jungle." I see that it was necessary that some one should have had such experiences, in order that it might become impossible for any man to have them again.

People say to me, "You won't be quite such a vigorous socialist now that you have made some money." I do not try to tell them what I think of such a remark; I simply answer that I do not happen to be that sort of person. It is true that I am what the world calls famous, and shall also perhaps be rich; and I might

go over to England if I chose, and meet with duchesses and lords, and be a "personality." But is there any place in the world where I could escape from the memory of my nights of fire and anguish? of the tears that I shed, and the vows that I took? Is there any way that I could escape from the memory of the men and women and children whom I left behind me, down there in the social pit—from their wan and hungry faces, from their tears and cries of despair? It is upon the faces of these people that I climbed out; they made themselves into a ladder for me. It was their pennies which kept me alive while I wrote my book; it was their words which cheered me on; when it was a question of allowing a publisher to mutilate it, they came forward—literally by the thousands—and saw me through. And now life means to me a chance to prove to them that they were not mistaken.

It means to me a chance to be a trusty leader in the most wonderful adventure that the world has ever seen. If you do not understand it, take my advice and find out about it, for otherwise life is hardly worth living just now. The curtain is going up on a world-drama the like of which history has never shown before; and it is your privilege to be a spectator—it is a privilege that I would not exchange for a ticket of admission to all that has gone before since the human race began. And alas for you if you are one of those unfortunates who sit cold and inattentive, because they do not understand the language in which the great drama is played!

The name of the language is Socialism. It is a world-language; it is spoken in Russia and Japan, in Germany and Argentina, in America and Australia. It is

spoken wherever men are herded together in masses, and made the slaves of machines; it is a language of brotherhood and comradeship, of mutual service and of mutual escape, of liberty and justice and humanity.

Perhaps you are one of those unfortunates who live shut up in a little class of their own, and do not think that there is anything interesting in the world outside of it. You think that men who tend machines are dirty and stupid and all alike, and that what they suffer does not matter, nor whether they live or die. And just now they are dreaming the mightiest dream and fighting the mightiest battle that history has ever told; and you know and care nothing about it! But I have been down into the workshop where the swords are being forged; I have seen the troops being marshaled, and heard the trumpets calling—and I am a captain in the fight!

What, for instance, does the great Russian upheaval mean to you, if you do not understand the Socialist movement? What can you do but watch it in perplexity and dismay, and marvel that men should be so perverse as to do something which you had declared they could not do? And when the same birth-pangs seize upon France and Germany, when the same crisis comes to England and to America—what will you do but run about, crying out in fright like children in a burning house? And this when you might have played the part of thinking men, and have understood and guided the change; and all for lack of taking the trouble to look into the social pit, and realize that they down there are men like yourself, and that the life they live is not to be endured by men, and that it is only a question of the time it takes them to find out the way of deliverance!

