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-
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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 had been 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 Garnett," and my productions appeared in half-dozen 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 my interests, and were 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 a point below zero, and tried to get warm I set fire to my tent, and nearly ended my adventure there and then. A little later in the summer I was storm-bound for three days (I was on an island), and was almost beamed. Then toward the end I went short on money, and then I lived entirely on fish and molasses.

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 one to the other died away to pieces, and the publishers of the other were found out that something was wrong, and passed me by. I had all the burden and the toil of the future humanity in my soul, but I was powerless to express my visions of the joys of a new social order, and the sins 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 the old clothes oc-

rationally, 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 my tent. In tents about the woods, 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 learned to judge the effects of the human soul. 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 a 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 college, for the professors were trying to get warm I set fire to my tent, and nearly ended my adventure there and then. A little later in the summer I was storm-bound for three days (I was on an island), and was almost beamed. Then toward the end I went short on money, and then I lived entirely on fish and molasses.

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Perhaps you were surprised to be told that the facts, when you know all of the uproar about "The Jungle" has been creating. But that then upon you all is accidetal, and was due to an entirely different cause. I wish to frighten the country by a picture of what its industrial conditions are like, and make you think that it is not too much of an exaggeration; delay tires 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. While 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 man has no right to take his food which has been prepared under the direction of insoucious commercial pirates such as the Chicago packers, deserve 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 the way it looks at the picture of any murderer or pirate, and not, as a punishment, or as a warning, but, as a 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 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 lessons of widely different schools; to put the content of Shelley into the form of Zola—a method I believe will come more in favor as the revolutionary 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 extreme difficulty, and it is not 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 book. The proletarian writer is becoming 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 intense, 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 siege, holding out only on 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, "Why don't you be open with 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 who I am, but I am also perhaps to be rich; and I might go over to England if I chose, and meet with the kindred and holy, 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 those women and children whom I left behind me, to the fires in the social pit—from their wan and hungry faces, from their tears and cries of despair? Is there any way that I could escape from the face of these people that I climbed out; they made themselves into a ladder for me. It was their pénitence 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 truly noble people 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 hopeless and I am 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 the shows that have gone before since the human race began. And alas for you if you are one of those unfortunate 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 huddled together in masses, and killed the slaves of machines; it is a language of brotherhood and comradeship, of mutual service and of mutual escape from liberty and justice and humanity.

Perhaps you are one of those unfortunate 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 words 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 drew there are men like you and me, 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!