

The Jungle, by Upton Sinclair (1906)

Chapter 14

WITH one member trimming beef in a cannery, and another working in a sausage factory, the family had a first-hand knowledge of the great majority of Packingtown swindles. For it was the custom, as they found, whenever meat was so spoiled that it could not be used for anything else, either to can it or else to chop it up into sausages. With what had been told them by Jonas, who had worked in the pickle rooms, they could now study the whole of the spoiled-meat industry on the inside, and read a new and grim meaning into that old Packingtown jest – that they use everything of the pig except the squeal.

Jonas had told them how the meat that was taken out of pickle would often be found sour, and how they would rub it up with soda to take away the smell, and sell it to be eaten on free-lunch counters; also of all the miracles of chemistry which they performed, giving to any sort of meat, fresh or salted, whole or chopped, any colour and any flavour, and any odour they chose. In the pickling of hams they had an ingenious apparatus by which they saved time and increased the capacity of the plant – a machine consisting of a hollow needle attached to a pump; by plunging this needle into the meat and working with his foot, a man could fill a ham with pickle in a few seconds. And yet, in spite of this, there would be hams found spoiled, some of them with an odour so bad that a man could hardly bear to be in the room with them. To pump into these the packers had a second and much stronger pickle which destroyed the odour – a process known to the workers as ‘giving them thirty per cent’. Also, after the hams had been smoked, there would be found some that had gone to the bad. Formerly these had been sold as ‘Number Three Grade’, but later on some ingenious person had hit upon a new device, and now they would extract the bone, about which the bad part generally lay, and insert in the hole a white-hot iron. After

this invention there was no longer Number One, Two, and Three Grade – there was only Number One Grade. The packers were always originating such schemes – they had what they called ‘boneless hams’, which were all the odds and ends of pork stuffed into casings; and ‘California hams’, which were the shoulders, with big knuckle-joints, and nearly all the meat cut out; and fancy ‘skinned hams’, which were made of the oldest hogs, whose skins were so heavy and coarse that no one would buy them – that is, until they had been cooked and chopped fine and labelled ‘head cheese’!

It was only when the whole ham was spoiled that it came into the department of Elzbieta. Cut up by the two-thousand-revolutions-a-minute flyers, and mixed with half a ton of other meat, no odour that ever was in a ham could make any difference. There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausages; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and that was mouldy 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 shovelled into carts, and the man who did the shovelling 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. Under the system of rigid economy which the packers enforced, there were some jobs that it only paid to do once in a long time, and among these was the cleaning out of the waste barrels. Every spring they did it; and in the barrels would be dirt and rust, and old nails and stale water – and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and dumped into the hoppers with fresh meat, and sent out to the public's breakfast. Some of it they would make into 'smoked' sausage – but as the smoking took time, and was therefore expensive, they would call upon their chemistry department, and preserve it with borax and colour it with gelatine to make it brown. All of their sausage came out of the same bowl, but when they came to wrap it they would stamp some of it 'special', and for this they would charge two cents more a pound.

Questions for *The Jungle*

List five unsanitary practices that were commonly practiced in Chicago meat packing factories.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How do you think readers reacted to passages like this?