

## CHAPTER II

### SOCIETY'S INDIFFERENCE WHILE MEN PERISH

To oblige men to work for thirty-seven hours continuously without sleep, besides being cruel, is also uneconomical. And yet such uneconomical expenditure of human lives continually goes on around us.

Opposite the house in which I live<sup>1</sup> is a silk-factory, built with the latest technical improvements. About three thousand women and seven hundred men work and live there. As I sit in my room now, I hear the unceasing din of the machinery, and know—for I have been there—what that din means. Three thousand women stand, for twelve hours a day, at the looms, amid a deafening roar; winding, unwinding, arranging the silk threads to make silk stuffs. All the women (except those who have just come from the villages) have an unhealthy appearance. Most of them lead a most intemperate and immoral life. Almost all,

<sup>1</sup> This evidently relates to his wife's house in Moscow, where Tolstoy spends the winter months.—(Trans.).

whether married or unmarried, as soon as a child is born to them, send it off either to the village or to the Foundlings' Hospital—where 80 per cent. of these children perish. For fear of losing their places, the mothers resume work the next day, or on the third day, after their confinement.

So that during twenty years, to my knowledge, tens of thousands of young, healthy women—mothers—have ruined, and are now ruining, their lives, and the lives of their children, in order to produce velvets and silk stuffs.

I met a beggar yesterday, a young man on crutches, sturdily built, but crippled. He used to work as a navvy, with a wheelbarrow, but slipped and injured himself internally. He spent all he had on peasant women healers and on doctors, and has now for eight years been homeless, begging his bread, and complaining that God does not send him death.

How many such sacrifices of life there are, that we either know nothing of, or know of, but hardly notice—considering them inevitable.

I know men working at the blast furnaces of the Túla Iron Foundry, who, to have one Sunday free each fortnight, will work for twenty-four hours; that is, after working all day, they will go on working all night. I have seen these men. They all drink *vodka* to keep up their energy; and, obviously, like those goods-porters on

the railway, they quickly expend not the interest, but the capital of their lives.

And what of the waste of lives among those who are employed on admittedly harmful work : in looking-glass, card, match, sugar, tobacco, and glass factories ; in mines, or as cesspool cleaners.

There are English statistics showing that the average length of life among people of the upper classes is fifty-five years, and the average of life among working people in unhealthy occupations is twenty-nine years.

Knowing this (and we cannot help knowing it), we, who take advantage of labour that thus costs human lives—should, one would think (unless we are beasts), not be able to enjoy a moment's peace. But the fact is that we—well-to-do people, Liberals and Humanitarians, very sensitive to the sufferings not of people only but also of animals—unceasingly make use of such labour, and try to become more and more rich, *i.e.* to take more and more advantage of such work. And we remain perfectly tranquil.

For instance, having learned of the thirty-seven-hour labour of the goods-porters and of their bad room, we at once send there an inspector (who receives a good salary), and we forbid people to work more than twelve hours, leaving the workmen (who are thus deprived of one-third of their earnings) to feed themselves as best they can ; and we compel the Railway Company to

erect a large and convenient room for the workmen. Then with perfectly quiet consciences we continue to receive and despatch goods by that railway, and we ourselves continue to receive salaries, dividends, rents from houses or from land, etc. Having learned that the women and girls at the silk factory, living far from their families, ruin their own lives and those of their children; and that a large half of the washerwomen who iron our starched shirts, and of the type-setters who print the books and papers that wile away our time, get consumption—we only shrug our shoulders and say that we are very sorry things should be so, but that we can do nothing to alter it; and we continue with tranquil consciences to buy silk stuffs, to wear starched shirts, and to read our morning paper. We are much concerned about the hours of the shop assistants, and still more about the long hours of our own children at school; we strictly forbid carters to make their horses drag heavy loads, and we even organise the killing of cattle in slaughter-houses so that the animals may feel it as little as possible. But how wonderfully blind we become as soon as the question concerns those millions of workers who perish slowly, and often painfully, all around us, at labours the fruits of which we use for our convenience and pleasure.