

THE SLAVERY OF OUR TIMES



CHAPTER I

GOODS-PORTERS WHO WORK THIRTY- SEVEN HOURS

AN acquaintance of mine, who serves on the Moscow-Kursk Railway as a weigher, in the course of conversation mentioned to me that the men who load the goods on to his scales work for thirty-six hours on end.

Though I had full confidence in the speaker's truthfulness, I was unable to believe him. I thought he was making a mistake, or exaggerating, or that I misunderstood something.

But the weigher narrated the conditions under which this work is done, so exactly that there was no room left for doubt. He told me that there are two hundred and fifty such goods-porters at the Kursk Station in Moscow. They were all divided into gangs of five men, and were on

piece-work, receiving from 1 rouble to R. 1.15 (say 2s. to 2s. 4d.) for one thousand poods (over sixteen tons) of goods received or despatched.

They come in the morning, work all day and all night at unloading the trucks, and, when the night is ended, they again begin to reload, and then work on for another day. So that in two days they get one night's sleep.

Their work consists of unloading and moving bales of seven, eight, and up to ten poods (say eighteen, twenty, and up to nearly twenty-six stone). Two men place the bales on the backs of the other three, who carry them. By such work they earn less than a rouble (2s.) a day. They work continually, without holidays.

The account given by the weigher was so circumstantial that it was impossible to doubt it; but, nevertheless, I decided to verify it with my own eyes, and I went to the Goods Station.

Finding my acquaintance at the Goods Station, I told him I had come to see what he had told me about.

"No one I mention it to believes it," said I.

Without replying to me, the weigher called to someone in a shed: "Nikíta, come here."

From the door appeared a tall, lean workman in a torn coat.

"When did you begin work?"

"When? Yesterday morning."

"And where were you last night?"

"I was unloading, of course."

"Did you work during the night?" asked I.

"Of course we worked."

"And when did you begin work to-day?"

"We began in the morning—when else should we begin?"

"And when will you finish working?"

"When they let us go; then we finish!"

The four other workmen of his gang came up to us. They all wore torn coats and were without overcoats, though there were about twenty degrees Réaumur of cold (thirteen degrees below zero, Fahrenheit).

I began to ask them about the conditions of their work, and evidently surprised them by taking an interest in such a simple and natural thing (as it seemed to them) as their thirty-six-hour work.

They were all villagers; for the most part fellow-countrymen of my own, from Tula. Some, however, were from Orlá, and some from Vorónesh. They lived in Moscow in lodgings; some of them with their families, but most of them without. Those who have come here alone send their earnings home to the village.

They board with contractors. Their food costs them Rs. 10 (say £1, 1s.) per month. They always eat meat, disregarding the fasts.

Their work always keeps them occupied more than thirty-six hours running, because it takes

more than half an hour to get to their lodgings and from their lodgings; and besides, they are often kept at work beyond the time fixed.

Paying for their own food, they earn by such thirty-seven-hour-on-end work about Rs. 25 (£2, 12s. 6d.) a month.

To my question, "Why they did such convict work?" they replied—

"Where is one to go to?"

"But why work thirty-six hours on end? Cannot the work be arranged in shifts?"

"We do what we're told to."

"Yes; but why do you agree to it?"

"We agree because we have to feed ourselves. 'If you don't like it, be off.' If one's even an hour late, one has one's ticket shied at one, and are told to march; and there are ten men ready to take the place."

The men were all young; only one was somewhat older, perhaps about forty. All their faces were lean, and had exhausted, weary eyes, as though the men were drunk. The lean workman to whom I first spoke struck me especially by the strange weariness of his look. I asked him whether he had not been drinking to-day?

"I don't drink," answered he, in the decided way in which men who really do not drink always reply to that question.

"And I do not smoke," added he.

"Do the others drink?" asked I.

"Yes, it's brought here."

"The work is not light, and a drink always adds to one strength," said the older workman.

This man had been drinking that day, but it was not in the least noticeable.

After some more talk with the workmen, I went to watch the work.

Passing long rows of all sorts of goods, I came to some workmen slowly pushing a loaded truck. I learned afterwards that the men have to shunt the trucks themselves, and to keep the platform clear of snow, without being paid for the work. It is so stated in the "Conditions of Pay." These workmen were just as tattered and emaciated as those with whom I had been talking. When they had moved the truck to its place, I went up to them and asked when they had begun work, and when they had dined.

I was told that they started work at seven o'clock, and had only just dined. The work had prevented their being let off sooner.

"And when do you get away?"

"As it happens; sometimes not till ten o'clock," replied the men, as if boasting of their endurance. Seeing my interest in their position, they surrounded me, and probably taking me for an inspector, several of them, speaking at once, informed me of what was evidently their chief subject of complaint, namely, that the apartment in which they could sometimes warm themselves,

and snatch an hour's sleep between the day-work and the night-work, was crowded. All of them expressed great dissatisfaction at this crowding.

"There may be one hundred men, and nowhere to lie down—even under the shelves it is crowded," said dissatisfied voices. "Have a look at it yourself—it is close here."

The room was certainly not large enough. In the thirty-six foot room, about forty men might find place to lie down on the shelves.

Some of the men entered the room with me, and they vied with each other in complaining of the scantiness of the accommodation.

"Even under the shelves there is nowhere to lie down," said they.

These men—who in twenty degrees of frost, without overcoats, carry on their backs twenty stone loads during thirty-six hours; who dine and sup, not when they need food, but when their overseer allows them to eat; who live altogether in conditions far worse than those of dray-horses—it seemed strange that these people only complained of insufficient accommodation in the room where they warm themselves. But though this seemed to me strange at first, yet, entering further into their position, I understood what a feeling of torture these men, who never get enough sleep and who are half-frozen, must experience when, instead of resting and being warmed, they have to creep on the dirty floor

under the shelves, and there, in stuffy and vitiated air, become yet weaker and more broken down.

Only, perhaps, in that miserable hour of vain attempt to get rest and sleep do they painfully realise all the horror of their life-destroying thirty-seven-hour work, and that is why they are specially agitated by such an apparently insignificant circumstance as the overcrowding of their room.

Having watched several gangs at work, and having talked with some more of the men, and heard the same story from them all, I drove home, convinced that what my acquaintance had told me was true.

It was true, that for a bare subsistence, people, considering themselves free men, thought it necessary to give themselves up to work such as, in the days of serfdom, not one slave-owner, however cruel, would have sent his slaves to. Let alone slave-owners, not one cab proprietor would send his horses to such work, for horses cost money, and it would be wasteful, by excessive thirty-seven-hour work, to shorten the life of an animal of value.