

CHAPTER VII

CULTURE OR FREEDOM

JUST what happened when serfdom existed is now being repeated. Then, the majority of the serf-owners and of people of the well-to-do classes, if they acknowledged the serfs' position to be not quite satisfactory, yet recommended only such alterations as would not deprive the owners of what was essential to their profit. Now, people of the well-to-do classes, admitting that the position of the workers is not altogether satisfactory, propose for its amendment only such measures as will not deprive the well-to-do classes of their advantages. As well-disposed owners then spoke of "paternal authority," and, like Gógol,¹ advised owners to be kind to their serfs and to take care of them, but would not tolerate the idea of emancipation,² considering it harmful and dangerous, just so,

¹ N. V. Gógol (1809-52), an admirable writer and a most worthy man.—(Trans.).

² Tolstoy himself set an example by voluntarily emancipating all his serfs.—(Trans.).

the majority of well-to-do people to-day advise employers to look after the well-being of their workpeople, but do not admit the thought of any such alteration of the economic structure of life as would set the labourers quite free.

And just as advanced Liberals then, while considering serfdom to be an immutable arrangement, demanded that the Government should limit the power of the owners, and sympathised with the serfs' agitation, so the Liberals of to-day, while considering the existing order immutable, demand that Government should limit the powers of capitalists and manufacturers, and they sympathise with unions, and strikes, and, in general, with the workers' agitation. And just as the most advanced men then demanded the emancipation of the serfs, but drew up a Project which left the serfs dependent on private landowners, or fettered them with tributes and land-taxes—so now the most advanced people demand the emancipation of the workmen from the power of the capitalists, the communalisation of the means of production, but yet would leave the workers dependent on the present apportionment and division of labour, which, in their opinion, must remain unaltered. The teachings of economic science, which are adopted (though without close examination of their details) by all those of the well-to-do classes who consider

themselves enlightened and advanced,¹ seem on a superficial examination to be liberal and even radical, containing as they do attacks on the wealthy classes of society ; but, essentially, that teaching is in the highest degree conservative, gross, and cruel. One way or another the men of science, and in their train all the well-to-do classes, wish at all cost to maintain the present system of distribution and division of labour, which makes possible the production of that great quantity of goods which they make use of. The existing economic order is—by the men of science, and following them by all the well-to-do classes—called culture ; and in this culture : railways, telegraphs, telephones, photographs, Röntgen rays, clinical hospitals, exhibitions, and, chiefly, all the appliances of comfort—they see something so sacrosanct that they will not allow even a thought of alterations which might destroy it all, or but endanger a small part of these acquisitions. Everything may, according to the teachings of that science, be changed,

¹ It should be borne in mind that educated Russians, though politically much less free, are intellectually far more free than the corresponding section of the English population. Views on economics, and on religion, which are here held only by very “advanced” people, have been popular among Russian university students for a generation past. In particular, the doctrines of Karl Marx, and of German scientific socialism in general, have had a much wider acceptance there than here. —(Trans.).

except what it calls culture. But it becomes more and more evident that this culture can only exist while the workers are compelled to work. Yet men of science are so sure that this culture is the greatest of blessings, that they boldly proclaim the contrary of what the jurists once said: *fiat justitia, pereat mundus*.¹ They now say: *fiat cultura, pereat justitia*.² And they not only say it, but act accordingly. Everything may be changed, in practice and in theory, except culture, except all that is going on in workshops and factories, and especially what is being sold in the shops.

But I think that enlightened people, professing the Christian law of brotherhood and love to one's neighbour, should say just the contrary.

Electric lights and telephones and exhibitions are excellent, and so are all the pleasure-gardens with concerts and performances, and all the cigars, and match-boxes, and braces, and motor-cars—but may they all go to perdition, and not they alone but the railways, and all the factory-made chintz-stuffs and cloths in the world, if to produce them it is necessary that 99 per cent. of the people should remain in slavery, and perish by thousands in factories needed for the production of these articles. If in order that

¹ Let justice be done, though the world perish.

² Let culture be preserved, though justice perishes.

London or Petersburg may be lighted by electricity, or in order to construct exhibition buildings, or in order that there may be beautiful paints, or in order to weave beautiful stuffs quickly and abundantly, it is necessary that even a very few lives should be destroyed, or ruined, or shortened—and statistics show us how many are destroyed—let London and Petersburg rather be lit by gas, or oil; let there rather be no exhibition, no paints, or materials—only let there be no slavery, and no destruction of human lives resulting from it. Truly enlightened people will always agree to go back to riding on horses and using pack-horses, or even to tilling the earth with sticks and with their own hands, rather than to travel on railways which regularly every year crush a number of people, as is done in Chicago,¹ merely because the proprietors of the railway find it more profitable to compensate the families of those killed, than to build the line so that it should not kill people. The motto for truly enlightened people is not *fiat cultura, pereat justitia*, but *fiat justitia, pereat cultura*.

But culture, useful culture, will not be destroyed. It will certainly not be necessary for

¹ We have a somewhat similar case nearer home. In 1899 the number of railway servants killed in the United Kingdom was 1085, besides nearly 5000 injured, yet Companies wish to defer the introduction of such a precaution as automatic couplings till yet more have been killed.—(Trans.).

people to revert to tillage of the land with sticks, or to lighting-up with torches. It is not for nothing that mankind, in their slavery, have achieved such great progress in technical matters. If only it is understood that we must not sacrifice the lives of our brother-men for our own pleasure, it will be possible to apply technical improvements without destroying men's lives; and to arrange life so as to profit by all those methods giving us control of nature, that have been devised, and that can be applied without keeping our brother-men in slavery.