

CHAPTER VIII

SLAVERY EXISTS AMONG US

IMAGINE a man from a country quite different to our own, with no idea of our history or of our laws, and suppose that, after showing him the various aspects of our life, we were to ask him what was the chief difference he noticed in the lives of people of our world? The chief difference which such a man would notice in the way people live is that some people—a small number—who have clean white hands, and are well nourished and clothed and lodged, do very little and very light work, or even do not work at all but only amuse themselves, spending on these amusements the results of millions of days devoted by other people to severe labour; but other people, always dirty, poorly clothed and lodged and fed—with dirty, horny hands—toil unceasingly from morning to night, and sometimes all night long, working for those who do not work, but who continually amuse themselves.

If between the slaves and slave-owners of to-day it is difficult to draw as sharp a dividing

line as that which separated the former slaves from their masters, and if among the slaves of to-day there are some who are only temporarily slaves and then become slave-owners, or some who, at one and the same time, are slaves and slave-owners, this blending of the two classes at their points of contact does not upset the fact that the people of our time are divided into slaves and slave-owners as definitely as, in spite of the twilight, each twenty-four hours is divided into day and night.

If the slave-owner of our times has no slave John, whom he can send to the cesspool to clear out his excrements, he has five shillings of which hundreds of Johns are in such need that the slave-owner of our times may choose anyone out of hundreds of Johns and be a benefactor to him by giving him the preference, and allowing him, rather than another, to climb down into the cesspool.¹

The slaves of our times are not only all those factory and workshop hands, who must sell themselves completely into the power of the factory and foundry owners in order to exist; but nearly all the agricultural labourers are slaves, working as they do unceasingly to grow

¹ Moscow has a very defective system of drainage, and a large number of people are engaged, every night, pumping and baling the contents of the cesspools into huge barrels, and carting it away from the city.—(Trans.).

another's corn on another's field, and gathering it into another's barn; or tilling their own fields only in order to pay to bankers the interest on debts they cannot get rid of. And slaves also are all the innumerable footmen, cooks, housemaids, porters, coachmen, bath-men, waiters, etc., who all their life long perform duties most unnatural to a human being, and which they themselves dislike.

Slavery exists in full vigour, but we do not perceive it; just as in Europe, at the end of the eighteenth century, the slavery of serfdom was not perceived.

People of that day thought that the position of men obliged to till the land for their lords, and to obey them, was a natural, inevitable economic condition of life, and they did not call it slavery.

It is the same among us. People of our day consider the position of the labourers to be a natural, inevitable economic condition, and they do not call it slavery.

And as, at the end of the eighteenth century, the people of Europe began little by little to understand that what had seemed a natural and inevitable form of economic life, namely, the position of peasants who were completely in the power of their lords, was wrong, unjust, and immoral, and demanded alteration; so now people to-day are beginning to understand that

the position of hired workmen, and of the working classes in general, which formerly seemed quite right and quite normal, is not what it should be, and demands alteration.

The question of the slavery of our times is just in the same phase now in which the question of serfdom stood in Europe¹ towards the end of the eighteenth century, and in which the questions of serfdom among us, and of slavery in America, stood in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

The slavery of the workers in our time is only beginning to be admitted by advanced people in our society; the majority as yet are convinced that among us no slavery exists.

A thing that helps people to-day to misunderstand their position in this matter, is the fact that we have, in Russia and in America, only recently abolished slavery. But in reality the abolition of serfdom and of slavery was only the abolition of an obsolete form of slavery that had become unnecessary, and the substitution for it of a firmer form of slavery, and one that holds a greater number of people in bondage. The abolition of serfdom and of slavery was like what the Tartars of the Crimea did with their prisoners. They invented the plan of slitting

¹ I have left the distinction between Europe and Russia (quite natural and customary to a Russian writer) as it stands in the original.—(Trans.).

the soles of the prisoners' feet and sprinkling chopped-up bristles into the wounds. Having performed that operation, they released them from their weights and chains. The abolition of serfdom in Russia and of slavery in America, though it abolished the former method of slavery, not only did not abolish what was essential in it, but was only accomplished when the bristles had formed sores on the soles, and one could be quite sure that without chains or weights the prisoners would not run away, but would have to work. (The Northerners in America boldly demanded the abolition of the former slavery because, among them, the new monetary slavery had already shown its power to shackle the people. The Southerners did not yet perceive the plain signs of the new slavery, and therefore did not consent to abolish the old form.)

Among us in Russia serfdom was only abolished when all the land had been appropriated. When land was granted to the peasants, it was burdened with payments which took the place of the land slavery. In Europe, taxes that kept the people in bondage began to be abolished only when the people had lost their land, were disaccustomed to agricultural work, and, having acquired town tastes, were quite dependent on the capitalists. Only then were the taxes on corn abolished in England. And they are now beginning, in Germany and in other countries, to abolish the

taxes that fall on the workers, and to shift them on to the rich—only because the majority of the people are already in the hands of the capitalists. One form of slavery is not abolished until another has already replaced it. There are several such forms. And if not one then another (and sometimes several of these means together) keeps a people in slavery, *i.e.* places it in such a position that one small part of the people has full power over the labour and the life of a larger number. In this enslavement of the larger part of the people by a smaller part lies the chief cause of the miserable condition of the people. And therefore the means of improving the position of the workers must consist in this: First, in admitting that among us slavery exists, not in some figurative, metaphorical sense, but in the simplest and plainest sense; slavery which keeps some people—the majority, in the power of others—the minority; secondly, having admitted this, in finding the causes of the enslavement of some people by others; and thirdly, having found these causes, in destroying them.