On Labor And Luxury

by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Isabel F. Hapgood

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I concluded, after having said every thing that concerned myself; but I cannot refrain, from a desire to say something more which concerns everybody, from verifying the deductions which I have drawn, by comparisons. I wish to say why it seems to me that a very large number of our social class ought to come to the same thing to which I have come; and also to state what will be the result if a number of people should come to the same conclusion.

I think that many will come to the point which I have attained: because if the people of our sphere, of our caste, will only take a serious look at themselves, then young persons, who are in search of personal happiness, will stand aghast at the ever-increasing wretchedness of their life, which is plainly leading them to destruction; conscientious people will be shocked at the cruelty and the illegality of their life; and timid people will be terrified by the danger of their mode of life.

The Wretchedness of our Life:—However much we rich people may reform, however much we may bolster up this delusive life of ours with the aid of our science and art, this life will become, with every year, both weaker and more diseased; with every year the number of suicides, and the refusals to bear children, will increase; with every year we shall feel the growing sadness of our life; with every generation, the new generations of people of this sphere of society will become more puny.

It is obvious that in this path of the augmentation of the comforts and the pleasures of life, in the path of every sort of cure, and of artificial preparations for the improvements of the sight, the hearing, the appetite, false teeth, false hair, respiration, massage, and so on, there can be no salvation. That people who do not make use of these perfected preparations are stronger and healthier, has become such a truism, that advertisements are printed in the newspapers of stomach-powders for the wealthy, under the heading, "Blessings for the poor,"[1] in which it is stated that only the poor are possessed of proper digestive powers, and that the rich require assistance, and, among other various sorts of assistance, these powders. It is impossible to set the matter right by any diversions, comforts, and powders, whatever; only a change of life can rectify it.

The Inconsistency of our Life with our Conscience:—However we may seek to justify our betrayal of humanity to ourselves, all our justifications will crumble into dust in the presence of the evidence. All around us, people are dying of excessive labor and of privation; we ruin the labor of others, the food and clothing which are indispensable to them, merely with the object of procuring diversion and variety for our wearisome lives. And, therefore, the conscience of a man of our circle, if even a spark of it be left in

him, cannot be lulled to sleep, and it poisons all these comforts and those pleasures of life which our brethren, suffering and perishing in their toil, procure for us. But not only does every conscientious man feel this himself,—he would be glad to forget it, but this he cannot do.

The new, ephemeral justifications of science for science, of art for art, do not exclude the light of a simple, healthy judgment. The conscience of man cannot be quieted by fresh devices; and it can only be calmed by a change of life, for which and in which no justification will be required.

Two causes prove to the people of the wealthy classes the necessity for a change of life: the requirements of their individual welfare, and of the welfare of those most nearly connected with them, which cannot be satisfied in the path in which they now stand; and the necessity of satisfying the voice of conscience, the impossibility of accomplishing which is obvious in their present course. These causes, taken together, should lead people of the wealthy classes to alter their mode of life, to such a change as shall satisfy their well-being and their conscience.

And there is only one such change possible: they must cease to deceive, they must repent, they must acknowledge that labor is not a curse, but the glad business of life. "But what will be the result if I do toil for ten, or eight, or five hours at physical work, which thousands of peasants will gladly perform for the money which I possess?" people say to this.

The first, simplest, and indubitable result will be, that you will become a more cheerful, a healthier, a more alert, and a better man, and that you will learn to know the real life, from which you have hidden yourself, or which has been hidden from you.

The second result will be, that, if you possess a conscience, it will not only cease to suffer as it now suffers when it gazes upon the toil of others, the significance of which we, through ignorance, either always exaggerate or depreciate, but you will constantly experience a glad consciousness that, with every day, you are doing more and more to satisfy the demands of your conscience, and you will escape from that fearful position of such an accumulation of evil heaped upon your life that there exists no possibility of doing good to people; you will experience the joy of living in freedom, with the possibility of good; you will break a window,—an opening into the domain of the moral world which has been closed to you.

"But this is absurd," people usually say to you, for people of our sphere, with profound problems standing before us,—problems philosophical, scientific, artistic, ecclesiastical and social. It would be absurd for us ministers, senators, academicians professors, artists, a quarter of an hour of whose time is so prized by people, to waste our time on any thing of that sort, would it not?—on the cleaning of our boots, the washing of our shirts, in hoeing, in planting potatoes, or in feeding our chickens and our cows, and so

on; in those things which are gladly done for us, not only by our porter or our cook, but by thousands of people who value our time?

But why should we dress ourselves, wash and comb our hair? why should we hand chairs to ladies, to guests? why should we open and shut doors, hand ladies, into carriages, and do a hundred other things which serfs formerly did for us? Because we think that it is necessary so to do; that human dignity demands it; that it is the duty, the obligation, of man.

And the same is the case with physical labor. The dignity of man, his sacred duty and obligation, consists in using the hands and feet which have been given to him, for that for which they were given to him, and that which consumes food on the labor which produces that food; and that they should be used, not on that which shall cause them to pine away, not as objects to wash and clean, and merely for the purpose of stuffing into one's mouth food, drink, and cigarettes. This is the significance that physical labor possesses for man in every community; but in our community, where the avoidance of this law of labor has occasioned the unhappiness of a whole class of people, employment in physical labor acquires still another significance,--the significance of a sermon, and of an occupation which removes a terrible misfortune that is threatening mankind.

To say that physical labor is an insignificant occupation for a man of education, is equivalent to saying, in connection with the erection of a temple: "What does it matter whether one stone is laid accurately in its place?" Surely, it is precisely under conditions of modesty, simplicity, and imperceptibleness, that every magnificent thing is accomplished; it is impossible to plough, to build, to pasture cattle, or even to think, amid glare, thunder, and illumination. Grand and genuine deeds are always simple and modest. And such is the grandest of all deeds which we have to deal with,--the reconciliation of those fearful contradictions amid which we are living. And the deeds which will reconcile these contradictions are those modest, imperceptible, apparently ridiculous ones, the serving one's self, physical labor for one's self, and, if possible, for others also, which we rich people must do, if we understand the wretchedness, the unscrupulousness, and the danger of the position into which we have drifted.

What will be the result if I, or some other man, or a handful of men, do not despise physical labor, but regard it as indispensable to our happiness and to the appeasement of our conscience? This will be the result, that there will be one man, two men, or a handful of men, who, coming into conflict with no one, without governmental or revolutionary violence, will decide for ourselves the terrible question which stands before all the world, and which sets people at variance, and that we shall settle it in such wise that life will be better to them, that their conscience will be more at peace, and that they will have nothing to fear; the result will be, that other people will see that the happiness which they are seeking everywhere, lies there around them; that the apparently

unreconcilable contradictions of conscience and of the constitution of this world will be reconciled in the easiest and most joyful manner; and that, instead of fearing the people who surround us, it will become necessary for us to draw near to them and to love them.

The apparently insoluble economical and social problem is merely the problem of Kriloff's casket.[2] The casket will simply open. And it will not open, so long as people do not do simply that first and simple thing--open it.

A man sets up what he imagines to be his own peculiar library, his own private picture-gallery, his own apartments and clothing, he accumulates his own money in order therewith to purchase every thing that he needs; and the end of it all is, that engaged with this fancied property of his, as though it were real, he utterly loses his sense of that which actually constitutes his property, on which he can really labor, which can really serve him, and which will always remain in his power, and of that which is not and cannot be his own property, whatever he may call it, and which cannot serve as the object of his occupation.

Words always possess a clear significance until we deliberately attribute to them a false sense.

What does property signify?

Property signifies that which has been given to me, which belongs to me exclusively; that with which I can always do any thing I like; that which no one can take away from me; that which will remain mine to the end of my life, and precisely that which I am bound to use, increase, and improve. Now, there exists but one such piece of property for any man,--himself.

Hence it results that half a score of men may till the soil, hew wood, and make shoes, not from necessity, but in consequence of an acknowledgment of the fact that man should work, and that the more he works the better it will be for him. It results, that half a score of men,--or even one man, may demonstrate to people, both by his confession and by his actions, that the terrible evil from which they are suffering is not a law of fate, the will of God, or any historical necessity; but that it is merely a superstition, which is not in the least powerful or terrible, but weak and insignificant, in which we must simply cease to believe, as in idols, in order to rid ourselves of it, and in order to rend it like a paltry spider's web. Men who will labor to fulfil the glad law of their existence, that is to say, those who work in order to fulfil the law of toil, will rid themselves of that frightful superstition of property for themselves.

If the life of a man is filled with toil, and if he knows the delights of rest, he requires no chambers, furniture, and rich and varied clothing; he requires less costly food; he needs no means of locomotion, or of diversion. But the principal thing is, that the man who regards labor as the business and the joy of his life will

not seek that relief from his labor which the labors of others might afford him. The man who regards life as a matter of labor will propose to himself as his object, in proportion as he acquires understanding, skill, and endurance, greater and greater toil, which shall constantly fill his life to a greater and greater degree. For such a man, who sees the meaning of his life in work itself, and not in its results, for the acquisition of property, there can be no question as to the implements of labor. Although such a man will always select the most suitable implements, that man will receive the same satisfaction from work and rest, when he employs the most unsuitable implements. If there be a steam-plough, he will use it; if there is none, he will till the soil with a horse-plough, and, if there is none, with a primitive curved bit of wood shod with iron, or he will use a rake; and, under all conditions, he will equally attain his object. He will pass his life in work that is useful to men, and he will therefore win complete satisfaction.

And the position of such a man, both in his external and internal conditions, will be more happy than that of the man who devotes his life to the acquisition of property. Such a man will never suffer need in his outward circumstances, because people, perceiving his desire to work, will always try to provide him with the most productive work, as they proportion a mill to the water-power. And they will render his material existence free from care, which they will not do for people who are striving to acquire property. And freedom from anxiety in his material conditions is all that a man needs. Such a man will always be happier in his internal conditions, than the one who seeks wealth, because the first will never gain that which he is striving for, while the latter always will, in proportion to his powers. The feeble, the aged, the dying, according to the proverb, "With the written absolution in his hands," will receive full satisfaction, and the love and sympathy of men.

What, then, will be the outcome of a few eccentric individuals, or madmen, tilling the soil, making shoes, and so on, instead of smoking cigarettes, playing whist, and roaming about everywhere to relieve their tedium, during the space of the ten leisure hours a day which every intellectual worker enjoys? This will be the outcome: that these madmen will show in action, that that imaginary property for which men suffer, and for which they torment themselves and others, is not necessary for happiness; that it is oppressive, and that it is mere superstition; that property, true property, consists only in one's own head and hands; and that, in order to actually exploit this real property with profit and pleasure, it is necessary to reject the false conception of property outside one's own body, upon which we expend the best efforts of our lives. The outcome us, that these men will show, that only when a man ceases to believe in imaginary property, only when he brings into play his real property, his capacities, his body, so that they will yield him fruit a hundred- fold, and happiness of which we have no idea,--only then will he be so strong, useful, and good a man, that, wherever you may fling him, he will always land on his feet; that he will everywhere and always be a brother to everybody; that he will be intelligible to everybody, and necessary, and good. And men looking

on one, on ten such madmen, will understand what they must all do in order to loose that terrible knot in which the superstition regarding property has entangled them, in order to free themselves from the unfortunate position in which they are all now groaning with one voice, not knowing whence to find an issue from it.

But what can one man do amid a throng which does not agree with him? There is no argument which could more clearly demonstrate the terror of those who make use of it than this. The burlaki[3] drag their bark against the current. There cannot be found a burlak so stupid that he will refuse to pull away at his towing-rope because he alone is not able to drag the bark against the current. He who, in addition to his rights to an animal life, to eat and sleep, recognizes any sort of human obligation, knows very well in what that human obligation lies, just as the boatman knows it when the tow-rope is attached to him. The boatman knows very well that all he has to do is to pull at the rope, and proceed in the given direction. He will seek what he is to do, and how he is to do it, only when the tow-rope is removed from him. And as it is with these boatmen and with all people who perform ordinary work, so it is with the affairs of all humanity. All that each man needs is not to remove the tow- rope, but to pull away on it in the direction which his master orders. And, for this purpose, one sort of reason is bestowed on all men, in order that the direction may be always the same. And this direction has obviously been so plainly indicated, that both in the life of all the people about us, and in the conscience of each individual man, only he who does not wish to work can say that he does not see it. Then, what is the outcome of this?

This: that one, perhaps two men, will pull; a third will look on, and will join them; and in this manner the best people will unite until the affair begins to start, and make progress, as though itself inspiring and bidding thereto even those who do not understand what is being done, and why it is being done. First, to the contingent of men who are consciously laboring in order to comply with the law of God, there will be added the people who only half understand and who only half confess the faith; then a still greater number of people who admit the same doctrine will join them, merely on the faith of the originators; and finally the majority of mankind will recognize this, and then it will come to pass, that men will cease to ruin themselves, and will find happiness.

This will happen,--and it will be very speedily,--when people of our set, and after them a vast majority, shall cease to think it disgraceful to pay visits in untanned boots, and not disgraceful to walk in overshoes past people who have no shoes at all; that it is disgraceful not to understand French, and not disgraceful to eat bread and not to know how to set it; that it is disgraceful not to have a starched shirt and clean clothes, and not disgraceful to go about in clean garments thereby showing one's idleness; that it is disgraceful to have dirty hands, and not disgraceful not to have hands with callouses.

All this will come to pass when the sense of the community shall

demand it. But the sense of the community will demand this when those delusions in the imagination of men, which have concealed the truth from them, shall have been abolished. Within my own recollection, great changes have taken place in this respect. And these changes have taken place only because the general opinion has undergone an alteration. Within my memory, it has come to pass, that whereas it used to be disgraceful for wealthy people not to drive out with four horses and two footmen, and not to keep a valet or a maid to dress them, wash them, put on their shoes, and so forth; it has now suddenly become discreditable for one not to put on one's own clothes and shoes for one's self, and to drive with footmen. Public opinion has effected all these changes. Are not the changes which public opinion is now preparing clear?

All that was necessary five and twenty years ago was to abolish the delusion which justified the right of serfdom, and public opinion as to what was praiseworthy and what was discreditable changed, and life changed also. All that is now requisite is to annihilate the delusion which justifies the power of money over men, and public opinion will undergo a change as to what is creditable and what is disgraceful, and life will be changed also; and the annihilation of the delusion, of the justification of the moneyed power, and the change in public opinion in this respect, will be promptly accomplished. This delusion is already flickering, and the truth will very shortly be disclosed. All that is required is to gaze steadfastly, in order to perceive clearly that change in public opinion which has already taken place, and which is simply not recognized, not fitted with a word. The educated man of our day has but to reflect ever so little on what will be the outcome of those views of the world which he professes, in order to convince himself that the estimate of good and bad, by which, by virtue of his inertia, he is guided in life, directly contradict his views of the world.

All that the man of our century has to do is to break away for a moment from the life which runs on by force of inertia, to survey it from the one side, and subject it to that same standard which arises from his whole view of the world, in order to be horrified at the definition of his whole life, which follows from his views of the world. Let us take, for instance, a young man (the energy of life is greater in the young, and self-consciousness is more obscured). Let us take, for instance, a young man belonging to the wealthy classes, whatever his tendencies may chance to be.

Every good young man considers it disgraceful not to help an old man, a child, or a woman; he thinks, in a general way, that it is a shame to subject the life or health of another person to danger, or to shun it himself. Every one considers that shameful and brutal which Schuyler relates of the Kirghiz in times of tempest,--to send out the women and the aged females to hold fast the corners of the kibitka [tent] during the storm, while they themselves continue to sit within the tent, over their kumis [fermented mare's-milk]. Every one thinks it shameful to make a week man work for one; that it is still more disgraceful in time of danger--on a burning ship, for

example,--being strong, to be the first to seat one's self in the lifeboat,--to thrust aside the weak and leave them in danger, and so on.

All men regard this as disgraceful, and would not do it upon any account, in certain exceptional circumstances; but in every-day life, the very same a ctions, and others still worse, are concealed from them by delusions, and they perpetrate them incessantly. The establishment of this new view of life is the business of public opinion. Public opinion, supporting such a view, will speedily be formed.

Women form public opinion, and women are especially powerful in our day.

Footnotes
 In English in the text.
 An excellent translation of Kriloff's Fables, by Mr. W. R. S. Ralston, is published in London.
 Burlak, pl. burlaki, is a boatman on the River Volga.
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