

To Women

by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Isabel F. Hapgood

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As stated in the Bible, a law was given to the man and the woman,—to the man, the law of labor; to the woman, the law of bearing children. Although we, with our science, avons change tout ca, the law for the man, as for woman, remains as unalterable as the liver in its place, and departure from it is equally punished with inevitable death. The only difference lies in this, that departure from the law, in the case of the man, is punished so immediately in the future, that it may be designated as present punishment; but departure from the law, in the case of the woman, receives its chastisement in a more distant future.

The general departure of all men from the law exterminates people immediately; the departure from it of all women annihilates it in the succeeding generation. But the evasion by some men and some women does not exterminate the human race, and only deprives those who evade it of the rational nature of man. The departure of men from this law began long ago, among those classes who were in a position to subject others, and, constantly spreading, it has continued down to our own times; and in our own day it has reached folly, the ideal consisting in evasion of the law,—the ideal expressed by Prince Blokhin, and shared in by Renan and by the whole cultivated world: "Machines will work, and people will be bundles of nerves devoted to enjoyment."

There was hardly any departure from the law in the part of women, it was expressed only in prostitution, and in the refusal to bear children—in private cases. The women belonging to the wealthy classes fulfilled their law, while the men did not comply with theirs; and therefore the women became stronger, and continued to rule, and must rule, over men who have evaded the law, and who have, therefore, lost their senses. It is generally stated that woman (the woman of Paris in particular is childless) has become so bewitching, through making use of all the means of civilization, that she has gained the upper hand over man by this fascination of hers. This is not only unjust, but precisely the reverse of the truth. It is not the childless woman who has conquered man, but the mother, that woman who has fulfilled her law, while the man has not fulfilled his. That woman who deliberately remains childless, and who entrances man with her shoulders and her locks, is not the woman who rules over men, but the one who has been corrupted by man, who has descended to his level,—to the level of the vicious man,—who has evaded the law equally with himself, and who has lost, in company with him, every rational idea of life.

From this error springs that remarkable piece of stupidity which is called the rights of women. The formula of these rights of women is as follows: "Here! you man," says the woman, "you have departed from your law of real labor, and you want us to bear the burden of our real labor. No, if this is to be so, we understand, as well as you

do, how to perform those semblances of labor which you exercise in banks, ministries, universities, and academies; we desire, like yourselves, under the pretext of the division of labor, to make use of the labor of others, and to live for the gratification of our caprices alone." They say this, and prove by their action that they understand no worse, if not better, than men, how to exercise this semblance of labor.

This so-called woman question has come up, and could only come up, among men who have departed from the law of actual labor. All that is required is, to return to that, and this question cannot exist. Woman, having her own inevitable task, will never demand the right to share the toil of men in the mines and in the fields. She could only demand to share in the fictitious labors of the men of the wealthy classes.

The woman of our circle has been, and still is, stronger than the man, not by virtue of her fascinations, not through her cleverness in performing the same pharisaical semblance of work as man, but because she has not stepped out from under the law that she should undergo that real labor, with danger to her life, with exertion to the last degree, from which the man of the wealthy classes has excused himself.

But, within my memory, a departure from this law on the part of woman, that is to say, her fall, has begun; and, within my memory, it has become more and more the case. Woman, having lost the law, has acquired the belief that her strength lies in the witchery of her charms, or in her skill in pharisaical pretences at intellectual work. And both things are bad for the children. And, within my memory, women of the wealthy classes have come to refuse to bear children. And so mothers who hold the power in their hands let it escape them, in order to make way for the dissolute women, and to put themselves on a level with them. The evil is already widespread, and is extending farther and farther every day; and soon it will lay hold on all the women of the wealthy classes, and then they will compare themselves with men: and in company with them, they will lose the rational meaning of life. But there is still time.

If women would but comprehend their destiny, their power, and use it for the salvation of their husbands, brothers, and children,—for the salvation of all men!

Women of the wealthy classes who are mothers, the salvation of the men of our world from the evils from which they are suffering, lies in your hands.

Not those women who are occupied with their dainty figures, with their bustles, their hair-dressing, and their attraction for men, and who bear children against their will, with despair, and hand them over to nurses; nor those who attend various courses of lectures, and discourse of psychometric centres and differentiation, and who also endeavor to escape bearing children, in order that it may not interfere with their folly which they call culture: but

those women and mothers, who, possessing the power to refuse to bear children, consciously and in a straightforward way submit to this eternal, unchangeable law, knowing that the burden and the difficulty of such submission is their appointed lot in life,—these are the women and mothers of our wealthy classes, in whose hands, more than in those of any one else, lies the salvation of the men of our sphere in society from the miseries that oppress them.

Ye women and mothers who deliberately submit yourselves to the law of God, you alone in our wretched, deformed circle, which has lost the semblance of humanity, you alone know the whole of the real meaning of life, according to the law of God; and you alone, by your example, can demonstrate to people that happiness in life, in submission to the will of God, of which they are depriving themselves. You alone know those raptures and those joys which invade the whole being, that bliss which is appointed for the man who does not depart from the law of God. You know the happiness of love for your husbands,—a happiness which does not come to an end, which does not break off short, like all other forms of happiness, and which constitutes the beginning of a new happiness,—of love for your child. You alone, when you are simple and obedient to the will of God, know not that farcical pretence of labor which the men of our circle call work, and know that the labor imposed by God on men, and know its true rewards, the bliss which it confers. You know this, when, after the raptures of love, you await with emotion, fear, and terror that torturing state of pregnancy which renders you ailing for nine months, which brings you to the verge of death, and to intolerable suffering and pain. You know the conditions of true labor, when, with joy, you await the approach and the increase of the most terrible torture, after which to you alone comes the bliss which you well know. You know this, when, immediately after this torture, without respite, without a break, you undertake another series of toils and sufferings,—nursing,—in which process you at one and the same time deny yourselves, and subdue to your feelings the very strongest human need, that of sleep, which, as the proverb says, is dearer than father or mother; and for months and years you never get a single sound, unbroken night's rest, and sometimes, nay, often, you do not sleep at all for a period of several nights in succession, but with failing arms you walk alone, punishing the sick child who is breaking your heart. And when you do all this, applauded by no one, and expecting no praises for it from any one, nor any reward,—when you do this, not as an heroic deed, but like the laborer in the Gospel when he came from the field, considering that you have done only that which was your duty, then you know what the false, pretentious labor of men performed for glory really is, and that true labor is fulfilling the will of God, whose command you feel in your heart. You know that if you are a true mother it makes no difference that no one has seen your toil, that no one has praised you for it, but that it has only been looked upon as what must needs be so, and that even those for whom you have labored not only do not thank you, but often torture and reproach you. And with the next child you do the same: again you suffer, again you undergo the fearful, invisible labor; and again you expect no reward from any one, and yet you feel the sane satisfaction.

If you are like this, you will not say after two children, or after twenty, that you have done enough, just as the laboring man fifty years of age will not say that he has worked enough, while he still continues to eat and to sleep, and while his muscles still demand work; if you are like this, you will not cast the task of nursing and care-taking upon some other mother, just as a laboring man will not give another man the work which he has begun, and almost completed, to finish: because into this work you will throw your life. And therefore the more there is of this work, the fuller and the happier is your life.

And when you are like this, for the good fortune of men, you will apply that law of fulfilling God's will, by which you guide your life, to the lives of your husband, of your children, and of those most nearly connected with you. If you are like this, and know from your own experience, that only self-sacrificing, unseen, unrewarded labor, accompanied with danger to life and to the extreme bounds of endurance, for the lives of others, is the appointed lot of man, which affords him satisfaction, then you will announce these demands to others; you will urge your husband to the same toil; and you will measure and value the dignity of men acceding to this toil; and for this toil you will also prepare your children.

Only that mother who looks upon children as a disagreeable accident, and upon love, the comforts of life, costume, and society, as the object of life, will rear her children in such a manner that they shall have as much enjoyment as possible out of life, and that they shall make the greatest possible use of it; only she will feed them luxuriously, deck them out, amuse them artificially; only she will teach them, not that which will fit them for self-sacrificing masculine or feminine labor with danger of their lives, and to the last limits of endurance, but that which will deliver them from this labor. Only such a woman, who has lost the meaning of her life, will sympathize with that delusive and false male labor, by means of which her husband, having rid himself of the obligations of a man, is enabled to enjoy, in her company, the work of others. Only such a woman will choose a similar man for the husband of her daughter, and will estimate men, not by what they are personally, but by that which is connected with them,--position, money, or their ability to take advantage of the labor of others.

But the true mother, who actually knows the will of God, will fit her children to fulfil it also. For such a mother, to see her child overfed, enervated, decked out, will mean suffering; for all this, as she well knows, will render difficult for him the fulfilment of the law of God in which she has instructed him. Such a mother will teach, not that which will enable her son and her daughter to rid themselves of labor, but that which will help them to endure the toils of life. She will have no need to inquire what she shall teach her children, for what she shall prepare them. Such a woman will not only not encourage her husband to false and delusive labor, which has but one object, that of using the labors of others; but she will bear herself with disgust and horror towards such an employment,

which serves as a double temptation to her children. Such a woman will not choose a husband for her daughter on account of the whiteness of his hands and the refinement of manner; but, well aware that labor and deceit will exist always and everywhere, she will, beginning with her husband, respect and value in men, and will require from them, real labor, with expenditure and risk of life, and she will despise that deceptive labor which has for its object the ridding one's self of all true toil.

Such a mother, who brings forth children and nurses them, and will herself, rather than any other, feed her offspring and prepare their food, and sew, and wash, and teach her children, and sleep and talk with them, because in this she grounds the business of her life,-- only such a mother will not seek for her children external guaranties in the form of her husband's money, and the children's diplomas; but she will rear them to that same capacity for the self-sacrificing fulfilment of the will of God which she is conscious of herself possessing,--a capacity for enduring toil with expenditure and risk of life,--because she knows that in this lies the sole guaranty, and the only well-being in life. Such a mother will not ask other people what she ought to do; she will know every thing, and will fear nothing.

If there can exist any doubt for the man and for the childless woman, as to the path in which the fulfilment of the will of God lies, this path is firmly and clearly defined for the woman who is a mother; and if she has complied with it in submissiveness and in simplicity of spirit, she, standing on that loftiest height of bliss which the human being is permitted to attain, will become a guiding-star for all men who are seeking good. Only the mother can calmly say before her death, to Him who sent her into this world, and to Him whom she has served by bearing and rearing children more dear than herself,-- only she can say calmly, having served Him who has imposed this service upon her: "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace." And this is the highest perfection, towards which, as towards the highest bliss, men are striving.

Such are the women, who, having fulfilled their destiny, reign over powerful men; such are the women who prepare the new generations of people, and fix public opinion: and, therefore, in the hands of these women lies the highest power of saving men from the prevailing and threatening evils of our times.

Yes, ye women and mothers, in your hands, more than in those of all others, lies the salvation of the world!