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Queen Victoria and the Pains of Women

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Queen Victoria relied on "blessed chloroform" during the birth of Prince Leopold.

Ever since Adam and Eve rejected nudity as a lifestyle choice, women have wondered how it is that men always wriggle out of doing the laundry. Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook and author of "Lean In," has done the world a favor by telling men to be "a real partner" in family life and not just the BBQ guy on weekends. Whether they will heed her call and actually do an entire laundry cycle on their own remains to be seen.

In the eyes of Procter & Gamble, though, the "Laundry Spring" has already taken place. Last year P&G turned its back on 66 years of cheerful stereotyping and approved a Tide commercial that featured (gasp) a male actor, albeit a gorgeous, hunky one who caressed his laundry like a pro.

Before Ms. Sandberg gets all the credit for pointing out the obvious, it's worth recalling the lessons offered by Blanche Ebbutt in her popular marriage manual "Don'ts for Husbands," published in 1913. At the beginning of chapter 2, Ebbutt warns, "Don't think that if you married merely to get an unpaid housekeeper that position is going to satisfy your wife. She could have obtained a good salary as a professional housekeeper to any other man if she had wanted to: she married for other reasons."

Returning to this theme in chapter 3, Ebbutt seems to be speaking from the heart when she declares: "Don't be unsympathetic if your wife's worries seem to you to be trivial. You haven't tried to run a house with tiresome servants and ailing children, and you don't realize what a

strain it is at times, and how molehills become mountains, because there are so many of them piled on to each other."

Ebbutt's splendid book clearly never reached the attention of Paul Caldwell Wilson, who married Frances Perkins in the same year that "Don'ts for Husbands" was published. Perkins was secretary of labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the first woman to sit in the U.S. cabinet.

But life in the Perkins household can be judged by a letter that she wrote to her 11-year-old daughter in the winter of 1927, during her stint as the head of New York state's labor department: "I am so sorry the gas went out. I suppose I had forgotten to pay the bill. Aren't they mean to shut it just for that! So glad father got it fixed... The ice in N.Y. must be wonderful. Don't fall and break your nose...I love you dearly."

Like millions of other women before and after, Perkins juggled a flying circus of irreconcilable responsibilities because there was no alternative.

For students of social change, an interesting study lies in asking what does happen after an alternative presents itself. When chloroform became widely available in the 19th century, there was a furious debate over its use in childbirth. Clerics thundered that it was a woman's God-given duty to suffer the pain of labor.

The first American woman to obtain a pain-free birth, Fanny Longfellow, the wife of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was severely criticized for her choice. Even members of her own family thought her behavior beyond the pale.

The controversy lost some of its heat after Queen Victoria let it be known that she had relied on "blessed chloroform" during the birth of Prince Leopold. Still, it took over 50 years for the practice to be accepted as a woman's right.

With a growing number of modern households that consist of two fathers and with many wives out-earning their husbands, perhaps the idea that the woman does it all, all the time, will go the way of the anti-chloroform argument and one day seem quaintly old-fashioned.

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