



WE  
**WOMEN**  
HAVE **NO**  
**FATHER**  
LAND

**ILSE FRAPAN**

*Translated by James J. Conway*

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PREVIEW

*20 December.* Now the Christmas holidays are upon us, tomorrow is the last lecture, many students have left already. It is strange – I am so isolated here, like I always was in school. No one speaks to me, and I speak to no one. I am shy, I get embarrassed, when I talk to people I do not know whether they are glad of the fact. But at times I feel weighed down with loneliness, and if I dared I would probably ask someone for advice with my studies. If I dared! No, they all seem so confident and carefree, I cannot. And the only female student in the same lectures as me is always in such a hurry, she does not even spare the time to greet me. So it would be a sin to disturb her.

*Christmas Eve.* Is it really Christmas Eve? There is no sign of it other than the dark fir wreath that I have just wrapped around my beloved picture of you, Mother!

In the house it is a day like any other. In the kitchen the landlady is rattling about with the pots and lids; this morning she poured her heart out to me. Two years ago her husband took his life and, as she tells it, this was purely to annoy her; the fact of her husband having committed suicide meant that the insurance company would not pay out. Now there is a court case and she wants advice from me. It was such a curious discussion to have at Christmas; she seemed so horribly repugnant, this woman who is childless and not entirely impoverished, with her shining eyes, avarice made flesh, talking about the ‘lovely money’ and the ‘terrible man’ who had hanged himself so she would get nothing. ‘They still say I drove him to it, that I didn’t treat him well,’

she croaks, and her face, which is actually quite pretty, contorts into a grimace. I wish she had not told me that; she has become quite repellent to me and I should like to move out as soon as possible.

And now I am sitting here and reading about Roman law and about inheritance law! You might very well admire the subtleties of it all, these fine gradations in the conception of ownership, but to feel enthusiasm for it, to think it a fine and desirable basis for human relationships – no, that strikes me as impossible! Everywhere, between the pages, I see the glint of avaricious, selfish eyes, and fingers stretching forth, clawing to grab and to hold. Each letter curls into a claw. I want no more of it! Not this evening. I have to close the book and let my thoughts wander. It is the holidays, after all! The feast of love!

Oh, where is love?

‘Every man for himself! Every man for himself! Every man for himself!’ – the words hammer through my head. Every man for himself! Oh, sad world! That is precisely what it is, the world of today, a world of selfishness, a world of shoulder-shrugging criminal indifference, a world of yawning ennui on the one hand, and of domination, of spilt blood and brains on the other! The world as fashioned by those who have always ruled by harnessing the crudest beastly impulses.

‘Every man for all!’ – that is the world I wish to see! This is the fine, bright, willed existence I dream of, for the future happiness of humanity!

How ugly it is, catering for your own needs, demanding your own rights, struggling for yourself,

using all your forces, conferred and instilled, for yourself – so repellent and so dull! How wonderful it is to do everything in service of others, it inspires, it invests you with mighty powers. And – of this I am certain, I feel it deep inside – it is the only path to happiness.

*25 December.* A letter from Mama, but there is little of the festive in it. She writes that she hopes I will find happiness on the rough path I have chosen for myself. ‘There are people,’ she writes, ‘who seek their pleasures precisely where healthy and upright people, myself for instance, see only needless complication and inconvenience.’ Then she wishes me a ‘happy Christmas’, and there is a black lace handkerchief enclosed. ‘Your Papa is in an awful mood today, and we can expect a not entirely pleasant holiday season.’ Poor Mama! I know all too well how it will unfold. A Christmas tree reaching up to the ceiling and underneath it the faces with expressions of boredom or indifference or ill temper ... a pile of cakes, morning visits with port, guests at lunch, mock turtle soup, goose and carp, a lot of red wine, a toast to all the family members, to the ‘fair’ ladies, then sitting around in rocking chairs and corner sofas and never a word, never a good, cheerful word, a warm, sincere word that you might take to heart!

Is it not sad that there are so few warm places in the world, and that most of us are constantly freezing, shivering within? The family home should be one of those warm places, but it is no longer. Now it is nothing more than a place where people come together to eat and to sleep. In their thoughts they are miles away

from each other; their dwelling together perceived as encumbrance rather than a source of enjoyment. The hearth is destroyed, profaned. I left, and every day I am glad of it. The convention, the moulds, the hypocrisy there would have suffocated me.

But it all has such a wonderful glow in the old pictures, it still captivates us, that old distant fire, yet it has no warmth!

*27 December.* But now I have had my own Christmas Day. I was up there in the forest in deep snow. Oh, it was so wonderful! Mysterious and twilit in the full light of day. On the high spruces that stand at the ridge like solemn guardians, the hoarfrost trimmings have fused together from branch to branch and hung in large, heavy, motionless masses, grave, silent, with not the slightest breath of air to stir them. A white sun stood sharply outlined like a pale full moon in the white sky, a large, blank disc with no rays which you could easily stare into. I stood at the edge of the forest and saw the beautiful Limmat Valley sink into twilight in the white mist, a world turned to stone overcome by melancholy and reverie. From unseen birds, invisible amid the snow-covered branches, came faint, dreamy, subdued song. The low shrubs stood like stiff coral on the slope, and suddenly I felt as though I were at the bottom of the sea watching the growth of fantastical, multifarious coral.

I walked and I walked and thought, yes, it is like the bottom of the sea – so isolated and forsaken, alone, barely alive! It has been so long since I have spoken to anyone. I have become a stranger to my own voice.

The mist around me climbed higher and higher, and it had already obscured the path that I had taken. But the feeling of solitude became delectable, a faint sense of dread notwithstanding. I felt my heart pounding and it was as though arms were drawing me deeper into the forest, now entirely swathed in mists which seemed to be veiling some mystery that dwelt amid the silent trees.

Something was being revealed to me, I could feel it.

I looked up at the sun, I looked for it between the white tangle of the branches – there, suddenly it glowed like a rose, the white misty haze took on warm hues, from the rose sprayed flickering sparks, flames cast across the sky, flaring and rising, transfigured and transfiguring. I was suffused with an indescribable bliss – words resounded around me, bold, incomprehensible, as if from a great distance, but with a bright, ravishing tone ... words that I must recall for as long as I live!

‘A new dawn for humanity’... ‘a new dawn for humanity’... oh, who could say these words without shivering; oh, whose lips are pure enough to utter them without apprehension!

*1 January 1888.* I am writing the new year for the first time. It has a good-natured cast, I feel. Oh, and I have need of it, I am so vexed and uncertain about what I should do! This encounter with Miss Bernburg and all of her reprimands – it seems I am on the wrong path entirely and have completely wasted this semester! Terrible! Terrible!

‘Are you planning to prepare for the secondary

school diploma in the holidays? You do not seem aware of all it entails. Could you, for instance, say anything coherent about the nervous system of ants, and then write it up on the blackboard? Well? And trigonometry? You have never studied it? So do you think you can just skip merrily off like that into the holidays – one, two, three? Are you a mathematical genius then? My advice to you: stop going to lectures, they will be of absolutely no use to you, take private lessons, put all your energy into it, and count yourself lucky if you can take your secondary school exam in a year, otherwise everything will get muddled up. I know how it is for me! So you have started university, but what for?’

So she does not have it either, and yet she is already studying. If only I were not so shy, or foolish, I would have asked her why she counsels me thus and conducts herself differently; but it makes no difference, I find her advice to be reasonable. If only it had come earlier! To lose time – and money, when I have so little of either! No, I shall continue to attend lectures, there is no danger that I will forget it all ... I don't think. Private lessons are so expensive; I will only be able to take them later! No, I must prepare alone. But I have wholly ignored the issue, neglected it, and I specifically promised the rector that I would gain my diploma soon. How did this happen? I am so ashamed! No, I know next to nothing about the nervous system of ants ... oh God! But one can read, one can learn. And it is highly interesting, too! But it is not as though they will ask about ants alone – there is such a frightful amount of other animals! And ... plant physiology, did she say? I haven't a clue! And all of



that would be manageable were it not for mathematics. I have absolutely no fear of Latin, history is fine as well, but trigonometry! Where do I begin? Lord, all the time I have lost! And the nervous systems of all the animals? All of them? But there are so many! No, it is too awful! There was precious little natural history required for the teacher's exam. We learnt so little in our stupid girls' school.

One year! One whole year for this preparation! Added to this lost semester that makes one and a half! It is enough to make you despair. And then there is poor Mama, who will scarcely be able to stop Papa finding out that she is sending me money. One day he will find out, and then it will all be over! What will I do then? No, I do not want to think about that yet, it is a waste of energy. This is a sad beginning to the new year.

So why is it that we do not have schools like the boys? Why do they palm us unfortunate girls off with preliminary training which is not enough to live or die on? All the great grammar schools with their countless rooms, and not a single place for a girl who wishes to learn! All the mighty academic institutions, all the famous ancient universities, and not a single place for us poor souls!

Only here, only here! Oh how I love you, you wonderful, dear, just, fair land of the Swiss! I should like to kiss the hospitable soil that extends its welcome to us poor girls! Here I am alive! Here I can be a real person! All the triumphs of science, all the new, ingenious discoveries and inventions that are barred to us women at home – here I can be a part of it all, mere girl though

I am. Here we count for something. Oh, how thankful I am!

Even as a child I felt how unjustly we are treated. And with what scorn. Our composition teacher had a phrase: 'Women are children, they cannot learn a thing!' When I heard it for the first time, I felt hot, my heart started beating with rage and shame, I had to stare deep into my book – and my astonishment was boundless. 'Why does he say that? Children? Children, forever? But why? All women?' We had just read *Iphigenie*; everywhere I went I saw a majestic white priestess before me, all bathed in light, so great and good. So was Iphigenie just a child who couldn't learn a thing? And the Princess in *Tasso*? And Dorothea? That day at lunch – I remember it like it was yesterday – Papa was mad because I was giving all the wrong answers.

'Are you asleep?' he yelled, right in my ear.

'No,' I said, utterly terrified.

'What is going on inside that head of yours? Out with it, what is it you are pondering so deeply?'

'Iphigenie,' I said, my terror increasing. Then he shook his head, threw down his fork and uttered a horrible sigh. It was a mournful lunch. Mama was also highly indignant, I know not why. But really, I could not help it, and for a long time before I went to bed I thought about Doctor Reinsdorf and about Iphigenie.

Before long he repeated his statement. I watched his face as he did. It was completely pinched, there was something like an evil flame dancing in his eyes. He says it to annoy us, I thought, he does not actually believe it. We were fourteen years old and could not defend

ourselves. We did not speak about it in class, but the other must have felt it too, the way he treated us.

I dreamed that the next time I would say to him, 'If we cannot learn anything, why do you struggle so with us?' But I would sooner have died than say that.

Then unexpectedly I received money from Uncle Wilhelm for Christmas, and I secretly bought a book of Shakespeare with it. Papa and Mama were to know nothing about it, only you, my sweet Mother – I told you everything, and you did not scold me. Do you remember how I wrote to you about Cordelia and Desdemona, about Imogen and Beatrice? How blissful I was, how exultant when I said to you, 'Doctor Reinsdorf knows nothing at all about girls – Goethe and Shakespeare, they know!' Later I would find out just how many men thought and spoke as our composition teacher did, and that their actions corresponded with their words. They wish to retain everything for themselves, so they say, 'Women are children, they cannot learn a thing! No school for them! No universities for them!' And their faces are pinched, and their eyes flash with evil and scorn.

END OF PREVIEW

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