A WOMAN'S LIFE

Where Shall She Find It?

That there may be no misunderstanding between us - you the reader and me the writer - let me set down what I mean by the word on which this article turns like a wheel on a pin. It is a common enough word, blurred by being so common - that, and by the insistence of many on a personal definition, twisting it to mean what the user wants it to mean. Life - that's the word.

When I use it I do not mean that will-o'-the-wisp, the impulse of the hour - not something that is condensed into one or a half-dozen experiences, nor do I see it as something peculiar to youth - rather as an affair of the full three score and ten years and unfinished then - a big venture in full development - getting out of body, mind and spirit all that is in them.

Women will not accept this definition of course unless they see that it gives them a chance for satisfying their need of self-abnegation. There is a strange altruistic streak in a woman's compound which makes it impossible for her to find entire happiness in any existence unless she can persuade herself it is somehow feeding other existences. Her very vanities and selfishnesses are based on her conviction that they give pleasure to some one she loves or she wants to love her. This streak influences even a woman's debasement. If she is to accept a definition of life as rounding out all experience to the full she must see it as meaning something to
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others. She need not worry. As a matter of fact, nothing so hampers women in their service and their relations as under-development. How is the woman handicapped by her inner necessity of some form of self-abnegation - even if the form be grotesque or immoral - to get this fullness of life? by what paths, service, effort? It must be through a career or marriage. She does not save in the exception - see the two combined. She believes she must choose - a conclusion which I will debate later on - and she takes a career. This career usually begins in uncertainty and staggers along in haze and confusion for years. Take my own - modest as it has been, it has been followed with fair consistency long enough to give material for comparisons and reflections - the reason, I take it, that the editor of this magazine has asked me for this article. It was no consciously chosen way. My own experience as well as my rather wide familiarity with the experiences of others convinces me that women as a rule start out with a fine determination to go somewhere. They know what they want - freedom of action, their own funds, agreeable occupation, interesting associations - and a sense of serving somebody. They may start on a straight highway, but there are so many attractive side roads, cross roads, wood paths, as they go along! Here is a lane that goes, the Lord knows where, but it is too inviting to pass by, even though their judgment whispers that it will come out in a barren field or a tangle. A man is generally behind their zig-zagging - though few women admit it. I am not sure they always know it, so poor are they at frank
self-analysis, so given are they to self-deception and self-excuse. But the man is there, particularly in the earlier years. Behind the books I read as a girl, the college I chose, the specializing I did, the profession I finally was fixed in, was always a man - some of them hardly knew of my existence, those that did usually had no more than a friendly - and utilitarian! - thought of me!

That is, so far as I can see, the motives deciding a woman's career have been usually in the past a queer jumble. And this is still true to a large degree in spite of the multiplication of more or less efficient agencies for directing the stream of young women constantly pouring into the working world. Their choices are fortuitous. They still look for quick results, shirk the long straight road. The woman's nature may have something to do with this as well as her inheritance. She is made for motherhood, and its fruits are early fruits.

These reflections do not apply to women coming into the world endowed with an unmistakable gift. Nothing in Nature is more demanding that a definite talent. It is one of the imperative things in a human being, that must be satisfied. Otherwise you have all the unhappy effects of a suppressed function. If it is a voice, it must be heard. How many a great voice has been discovered accidentally - a laundry worker, a street cleaner, a woman with a broom, that could not keep still, and somebody passed who knew. And there is the itch to put down in words what goes on inside of you. And there are eyes that burn until they put on canvas or into clay the things they have seen.
There may be fewer women than men born with this burning talent – I am not sure it is so; but it is certain that with women the conditions of life are more apt to stifle the talent than with men. The great careers of women come, as a rule, not always, from those who have this imperative, inside demand, which will break through, knock down, insist until it gets its way. They are born to a career.

I was not one of these. Nor was I at the outset one of a large class who must work – work for bread and butter – work for other, those that cannot or will not work – the weak, the sick, the broken, who belong to you. There are thousands of women in this country – capable, steady, useful, bringing this or that activity to a high professional point, earning money, a great deal of money sometimes, putting through a career that to the outsider looks both attractive and significant – the kind that chatter-box women gather about and call a vindication of the sex – they have done what they have because they must or go under. I did not start out for that reason.

I was one of those who fell under the spell of the Woman's Rights Movement. It began with a determination to free myself from the economic tangle in which the usual American family bumbles along. My strong distaste for that came, I suspect, from what I heard the strong minded women of our circle saying. About the time that my distaste for that situation – I know now that I thought it intolerable largely because I did not know enough of the world as it is and the
things that happen in other households - there came over me at
times a searching, vague, overwhelming desire to do something - the
geistgeist again! - What it was to be I had no idea. As far as I
can see there was not the hint of a special talent in my nature.
I might have done several things probably if I had worked hard
enough, but there was not a chance of my doing any special thing.
And yet there was that bursting desire, something so strong that at
times it brought me to my knees praying that I might avoid marriage.
I shall have to confess, however, that it was only when this strange
emotion engulfed me that I sought to evade the institution which
I had been taught was woman's duty, end and refuge.

My spasmodic revolts against marriage as the true path
for a woman's life sprang from the alarming picture of the institu-
tion painted by the advanced women of the day under whose influence
I came. Most of these women I remember now were blessed with wonder-
ful husbands for whom they would have died at any time. When there
was a family crisis in finances, in health, trouble of any kind,
they were great persons, steadily loyal; but let everybody be well
and behaving themselves, the family pocketbook full, their minds
relieved of anxiety and at once they became much concerned with
the status of women. My early notion of marriage, picked up from
them was confused in my own mind with the Bastile about which I was
then reading with avidity. Marriage was a place where women were
imprisoned, trapped, and the great object of a woman should be to
tear down the walls as the Revolutionists had done in France.
Curiously enough, there never was a time, I think, when I would have been deterred by this conception from marrying if there had been the time and the place and the love all together. No matter what went on inside of my head, I know perfectly well that it was pure accident that I was not married by the time I was eighteen. And I might say that it was pure accident that I have not been married since.

But to go back to the time when I was on my knees praying that I should escape this state which was associated in my mind with the Bastile, to whose fall I was in part committed and which always I would have entered—a curious mix up in the mind of a young girl. In my time there was something in the air that cried that the first step towards taking the Bastile was to get an education, and though going to college was still rare, my mother backed me, and my father who had a large and beautiful conception of the rights of the individual, put me through—I am quite convinced he thought it was foolish to waste time on books instead of creating a family—backing me sometimes when it took more out of his pocket than was easy for him.

College awakened a taste which I started out to develop. Necessity, accident, circumstances set me on another track, and gradually I worked up what the editor of this magazine calls a career. And now he asks me to balance this thing which I have with that which I did not get, and to give as mature a judgment as I can from my personal experience and my observation of what is in them both. Where does a woman come off with her career? And where with marriage?—following the notion that the two are incompatible.
What does a woman get out of what may be called a successful career?

One thing that she gets that is exceeding good for her is steady occupation - something that forces her to give her attention to objective matters, takes her mind off herself, as we say. The continued introspection and nursing of vague and little understood impulses are inconsistent with the serious concentration which trade, business, a profession require. You must think about all sorts of things outside of yourself - about training, technique, performance. You must learn to take criticism, to stand up to competition, to estimate praise, to learn that although your first audience was pleased, your first picture well hung, your first book received with approval by those who count, your first venture netted handsome returns, that is but the start, that one success does not make a career any more than one swallow makes a summer. There is no more pathetic failure than the failure of one who attempts to live on a first and only success.

A career is the result of carrying on, carrying on through the failures that almost inevitably come, through the days when the new work that the world is always looking for appears and obscures yours, of forcing yourself on through thick and thin to the point of mastery.

There is no question of the inner satisfaction in the mastery of the thing that you set out to do. First, it brings
material security. If you reach the point where those who handle your product are sure of you, know that when they turn to you they will get a certain something, you can be said to have your feet on the ground. You have that which the world wants and is willing to pay for. You have "economic independence."

If you are willing to go on, this independence goes on; and if you are wise in handling it will carry you to the end. Of course the fatal mistake that many women make—though probably not a greater number of women than men—is forgetting that there may be a day when their handsome returns will not come in, that a hundred things may happen to interfere with their productivity or their market. The only really successful career, from the material standpoint, is that in which there is wisdom enough to recognize this and to prepare for what may happen. If she does this then this problem is settled. She is secure in an insecure world.

With material security comes physical security—very precious to the woman who has been swept by emotion, sentimentalism, the vagaries of self-abnegation. She has learned to work her controls and she enjoys the peace and power it gives her. She no longer wavers in her course under the magnet of man. She no longer dissolves in tears when her nerves are rasped, her body fagged. She is disciplined, sure of herself. There are few periods in the working life of a woman of greater satisfaction than that in which she
concludes that she has mastered her soul. It is well for her now to
pin on her dressing table an old bit of wisdom: "Let him who thinketh
he standeth take heed lest he fall!"

Along with physical security comes a growing freedom from
early prejudices and conventions which flatters her pride. She has
become "broad-minded" - "tolerant." She can smile at the restrictions
of her "small town" - her family, school, church. She has balance,
can judge, place values, in a fashion which gives her a sense of
bigness, which she has never before enjoyed. This is intellectual
emancipation. True, it may happen that she has simply transferred
tolerance from one shoulder to the other, but she will see that, too,
and correct it - give her time.

When her career is carried to the point where the general
public takes account of it, recognizes it as a contribution, there
is further satisfaction. If you have turned in something that
helps build up, stimulate, beautify, refine, make more comfortable
the panting mass of life on earth, why you know that as well. If
it is something particularly good, you get in a hundred ways the
spoken or unspoken gratitude of that mass. If it is something very,
very fine, you get applause; and if your primary motive has been,
as it so often, perhaps unconsciously to you, is, the need of
applause, why, that is satisfied. So that in the end, whatever
motive power was behind - necessity, vanity, the urge of the
zeitgeist - of an inborn talent - those cries have been answered.
You have arrived, you have done the thing that men do, that so many women long to do, and you have got a definite set of satisfactions. But how about the things that you have not got? How about that freedom of action you sought in a career?

You have not gone far in your effort if you have not learned that there is nothing more dominating than a profession, and that the idea of carrying it on and being free in the sense that most women talk about freedom, is laughable. If you are to have a career, the thing that you must give up is freedom — freedom to get up when you want to in the morning, to go to bed when you want to at night, to cultivate your tastes, your friends. A career means that time and strength and thought and emotion must be directed to that central point, that you cannot go when you will or come when you will, you cannot read the books you want or see the pictures you want or hear the music that you want at the time that you want it — in fact everything must be subordinated to this particular occupation to which you have set yourself. It is a domineering, greedy master. It may give you money to have better clothes than your married sister wears, but you wear them chiefly for business purposes. It may give you a living place more quiet, orderly, beautiful, not littered by children, or run on a man's schedule and according to a man's needs; but it is a home without flesh and blood of your own, little more than a tool to keep you fit for your master.

And as you go on you find more and more that this particular
thing that you have sought as a way to life is a lonely thing, incompatible with time-taking friendships, incompatible with family service, incompatible with love - the career demands all these things from you and leaves you in the years when for its sake you must rest, stripped of that natural daily companionship, so expensive in time and thought and feeling, but so precious in itself.

Something else you will learn finally, that a career does not go on forever. If your hand does not lose its cunning, it does its strength - you cannot meet that full demand, even if the demand stays, as you once did. The chances are, however, that the demand dwindles. Sooner or later your career becomes a back number. A career grows old as a body grows old. This world to which you have been contributing may be grateful, but it wants something new - wants it because it is a new world; it is not the world to which you were contributing - that world is old, too, and dying off. So you find yourself, having given everything to a career, with a dead thing in your hands, and the consciousness that much as you thought it counted, it is at a point where it counts little. You contributed to the period to which you belonged - that period is past, and your contribution goes on only as ripples from a stone thrown into water go on. You see them - distinct, beautiful, spreading, lost. And you say that have passed into the universe. But what an infinitesimal stir they make in the universe! Sooner or later you know that the career is a great
deal like that. You come to the realization that you have stopped as a vital force. You do not see your talent or your personality going on. And about that time you are very apt to look at marriage in a way that you have never done before, to ask yourself if, after all, it may not be that there is more in it than you have thought.

Here I must set down what I have in mind when I use the word marriage. I am not thinking of the shallow experiment so easily made and so easily dropped that so many of our contemporaries attempt to dignify by the word. These experiments may be legalized by a ceremony, but they never touch more than the rim of the reality. Marriage in any dignified and imaginative sense is a progressive companionship, based on love. The possibilities in it are never fully realized; it is only when two people are willing to go through the successive stages, with their disillusionments, possibly their agonies of hanging on, that the more intimate and subtile physical as well as intellectual and spiritual relations are ever reached. Marriage is the only relation in which the full possibilities of human companionship are possible; but these are only possible by going through to the end, taking heartily the special experiences which belong to the successive periods - youth, middle age, old age.

Those who have watched with sympathetic reflection the love of two old people who have stuck it out, made the adjustments, stood up to the storms, and have mellowed and ripened under the process, cannot but get a new sense of the possibilities of marriage. There is no other relation in which the inner life can be so fully and
beautifully developed, and the reflective woman who has given herself to a career understands this. She knows she has missed the possibility of the fullest companionship.

She will be conscious, too, that she has missed the experience which, intelligently taken, I am inclined to believe is the most extraordinary in human life, — an experience more interesting in its mystery, more poignant not only in suffering but in joy, more developing than all others — that is, the experience of motherhood. Any woman looking at a family of children with an honest purpose of finding out what the mother is getting out of them cannot but be conscious — whatever may be the irritations, overwork, anxieties, the atmosphere of warm affection and honor and respect in which she lives. She is the centre of an adoring group of young life and nothing in the world is of course so full of beauty, of mystery, nothing so challenging to the imagination as young life — it is the future. The woman who looks into this fertile human field, looks on it from the point of her sterility, cannot but know that here is something, whatever its disadvantages, that is infinitely beyond anything that she has ever touched.

There are not a few advanced women in different countries today who recognize that by giving up marriage and devoting themselves to a career they put behind them this most amazing of human experiences; and they solve their problem by proclaiming, and in certain countries practicing the right to bear a child — to bear a child for the sake of the experience of motherhood.
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beautifully developed, and the reflective woman who has given herself to a career understands this. She knows she has missed the possibility of the fullest companionship. These serene old souls know what life is - she suspects that they with Tasso count all time lost in which they did not love. She does not know what that means. Can it be that there was wisdom and truth in Doffand's declaration that it is better to be dead than not in love?

There are other sides to this, which, if honest, she must face. She has denied herself a natural physical life, to satisfy her own sense of dignity and honor, she has been obliged to stifle her nature. There you have atrophy, dangerous suppression - made less dangerous, it is true, and probably largely overcome by absorption in work, but, nevertheless, something in the nature undeveloped, and so, just to that extent, an incomplete result. She may know that for herself there was no other way, and she may be a happy woman, but the point is that, after all, she feels she is not altogether the woman she might have been, that there is a great deal that has slipped away from her that she ought to have had, a great deal which, if she had had, would have brought a riper, more mellowed, larger nature to her. She cannot but wonder, too, as she looks about if it may not be that a certain hardness of spirit, slowness of sympathy which she finds in many highly successful women is due to this suppression of natural instincts.

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It doesn't do the work. Motherhood is something more than a physical experience. It carries with it a responsibility for the life and happiness of the new being. It is part of the adventure to create a home for the child, and the home without the father - the father recognized by the institutions of the world, becomes more or less of a pariah in the community.

A woman who has acted on her theory that she has a right to a child will be probably able to adjust herself, but she has no assurance that the child will ever be able to do so. She may believe herself to be quite free of what she considers the prejudices of human society, she may do her utmost to train the child to this same contempt of world experience - the chances are that she will not be able to do it. There is something more gone into the making of that child than her theory. There is something of the personality and conventions and temperaments of all that were behind her and behind the father of the child, and the chances are that one of the strongest things that has passed into the new being will be a desire to fit himself into the world as it is. He will want to be one with his fellows, to be welcome in the groups that he touches. He finds himself with a bar. The woman sees herself finally cut off from that complete and unquestioning sympathy and loyalty which is one of the beauties of the relation of mother and child. That is, this thing of going out on your own to bear a child for the sake of experience does not give the results that you are after. You have an atrophied experience for your trouble; never get the full
meaning out of it. I have yet to see personally an experiment of this kind that worked out in what, it seemed to me, would be a satisfactory fashion for myself.

Women who have believed that they could find life in its fullness in a career often suffer greatly in the end from the sense of having been slackers in the world. The paramount, natural function of men and women is to pass on life as life is passed on to them. Life stops if those who make it up now do not continue it. Here is something marriage gives which the career denies; the thing she has created is trickling out, ceasing to be a force. Fine as it may have been, unusual as it may have been, it is over. But the woman with a child, why, she was never so much a vital force as at the end. She has fulfilled the greatest order of Nature, to increase and multiply life, she can see herself going on in her child, grandchild, great-grandchild, can trace herself down through time. There are Pilgrim mothers of the early 17th Century whose life has spread itself over this land, in literally thousands of living creatures. When a woman looks at her song, her picture, her book, and reflects how much will be left of herself two hundred and fifty years from now, it is not to be wondered at if she cries out, "Slacker!" that she asks herself if she has not chosen the lesser way - after all, missed the fullness of life.
But why should she have missed it? Why should she have made a choice? Is the almost universal opinion of woman that a career cannot be coupled with marriage sensible and sound? I believe myself it is not, it is mistaken. That a woman should have the opportunity to develop any capacity or talent which she may have seems to me quite as necessary as that she should have marriage and children for a full life; that she should be free of those economic fetters which so many women have had to wear is certainly true. They are an absurd and unnecessary irritation in the economy of things and women are less and less willing to endure them. They are finding, as they say, that they "don't have to," they can go "on their own." What we lack is a proper technique for carrying on the two, a perfectly possible thing to work out if women will agree to changing or modifying their precious "ways" and men will cooperate. It is largely a matter of management, as many women are finding, out. Unquestionably housekeeping in the old sense is incompatible with the career, but there is nothing sacred about housekeeping in the old sense. Much of it is a slavish waste of time which scientific methods are doing away with. Even the very competent of old-time house-keepers who raised vegetables, fruits, poultry, made butter and cheese for their families - had, under the system of New England management, an amazing amount of time for sewing and visiting. To be sure, they were not hampered by the complication of service which we insist on today, but they did secure time which, under modern conditions and with equal system would give a good part at least of the leisure which
a career requires. I repeat, it is a matter largely of technique, of adjustment, of cooperation.

Three years ago in Paris I talked with a successful woman physician, with a large practice, a lecturer at the Hotel Dieu, a contributor on her specialty to the great medical journals of France - talked with her in her apartment. She was the mother of four children, her means had been modest, her husband's - a professor - equally modest. How did you manage it? How did you do it?

"Why," she said, "it is only a matter of management, and an agreement of course with your husband. No French woman would think of denying herself a husband and an interior. Nor would the more thoughtful deny themselves children. It is only economic necessity that limits children in France. Great numbers of our people feel too poor to have them, particularly in Paris, but certainly no one of my class would think of refusing to bear children. She would not miss the joy of it, and she has, too, too great a sense of the needs of her country. My problem is to arrange that my children are properly cared for, my home properly run, and that I can command a certain number of free hours every day for my professional work. I separate absolutely my professional and my home work. Neither my husband, my children nor my servants ever intrude on my professional hours. Why should they? It is arranged that they shall all be occupied at the same time. They are attending to their
business and I am attending to mine. We would only interfere with one another. When our working hours are over we come together, and always the reunion towards the end of the day is a kind of family fete. I sometimes think that we enter into closer relations, my husband and children and I because we are all so busy for a good part of the day with our duties. We have so much to tell one another when we come back. We were even able through the War to keep up our home circle. Nearly all of my time was of course occupied as a physician in the military hospitals. There might be days when I did not see my children — but it was War. My husband was in the army, but that was War; he came through, and now we believe that we shall be able to go on with a normal life. I cannot understand at all the point of view of the American women that I meet; who believe that a profession and a family are necessarily incompatible.

Sooner or later, I am convinced we are coming around to that point of view in cultivated America. Indeed there are not a few women who have come to it and are successfully realizing it. One who has not tried it should not be too positive that she would succeed if she had! Certainly she would not succeed without cooperation, and certainly she would not succeed without a sense of management.
I could tell her that I and not a few of the American women I know who had shaped our lives on the theory that we could not drive a double team were asking ourselves if we had not come out with a half life when we might have had a whole one. To be sure one who has not tried should not be too positive that she would have succeeded if she had. But what is there in the problem, after all, that the combined brains, understanding and sympathy of a man and woman who love each other cannot work out? My judgment is that many women would today venture to drive the two horses if they felt confident that they had the backing of their mate and the friendliness of their group, for observant women are less and less satisfied with the type of life and of character that comes from concentrating on an occupation, a craft, a profession. They don’t like the woman the career produces. She lacks in warmth, bigness, usefulness. They revolt against the immolations of business as they once did those of the family. I am thoroughly convinced that women are coming to look on the matter much as men do — they want and need both for rounded living. Certainly, if this spirit and idea had been abroad in the day when my choice was made and there had been the opportunity to combine the two demands I should be today a riper, happier woman.

A last confession! If I were at the start of life again and the opportunity to merge the two paths was denied me, I should choose a mate, children, a home. I should not make this choice
because of bitterness or regret over what has come to me on the route I have traveled - that has been more than I ever dreamed or ever consciously sought. My work has interested me profoundly; it brought me stimulating associations, recognition,--all I deserve and perhaps more - of material return. In my way I am a happy woman. But I count my gains small beside my losses. I have no mate, no child, no home - only substitutes for them.

Every normal woman knows that she does not reach that full development which alone is worthy to be called life on sub-stitutes.