

Accepting the Universe

Ethel Puffer Howes (1922)

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(Return to [Classics index](#))

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An 'antinomy,' O my non-philosophical reader, is a contradiction between conclusions from two equally good premises. Thus, for example, did Kant the philosopher prove that space both is, and is not, infinite in extent; and that time both has, and cannot have, beginning and an end -- thereby getting a foothold, or excuse, for his world-shaking Critique of Pure Reason itself! And even so can be shown, I ween, the self-contradictions of woman's nature and her present predicament. Is it too much to hope that a way may thus be pointed to a critique of -- woman's world?

I

'The career open to talent' is now presupposed in our modern life; but 'the career open to women' is a condition sought, not yet attained. Women still greatly lack both opportunities and incentives, for the highest achievements, and are therefore still unable to bring their performance up to the level of their acknowledged abilities. And the basic inhibition still operating to suppress the powers of women is the persistent vicious alternative, marriage *or* career -- full personal life *versus* the way of achievement. [p. 445]

Thus might be paraphrased the uttered views of more than one leader, or counselor, of women to-day. 'Women have not yet been offered anything approaching a like opportunity to that put before men,' says Dr. Simon Flexner. 'The scientific career means too often for them, if consistently pursued, the denial of domestic companionships and compensations which men easily win and enjoy. In how far this condition alone will operate to bar women from the higher pursuits and greater rewards of a, scientific career only experience can show.'

Still more emphatically is it put by President M. Carey Thomas in a recent address: 'Everything leads us to believe that society cannot expect to benefit from the genius and ability of women as a sex until it gives its girls as well as its boys, its women as well as its men, the *same* opportunities and the *same* incentives to achieve distinction, and until all women of genius and talent, all women scholars and women teachers, and all women of every profession and every

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occupation ... are permitted by public opinion and social sanction to marry and go on with their job, instead of being found fault with, threatened and, in many cases, actually deprived of their bread and butter for doing so.'

It would be unbelievable if it were not the fact, that, in all the years of battling for women's right to be educated and to have a voice in public affairs, this question of the ultimate destination of all women's talents should never have been deliberately faced. Suffragists of course met it in the cry, 'Woman's place is in the home'; but this was so palpably absurd as an argument against women's voting, that they were content to show its irrelevance and to pass it by. But the question of the full professional career for women in its relation to marriage; the principle of the independence of work from status -- why was it ignored! Did the army of unquestioningly celibate women, standing ready to enter the few openings available, make argument unnecessary? Or were the odds against women so heavy that the basic problem was instinctively postponed, until vantage-ground at least should have been won? I am inclined to think that the question was, at first, not even formulated; it was tacitly assumed that marriage barred or terminated a career.

Whatever the reason, it has been an extraordinary unanimity of silence. Even the two most recent, practical, and detailed treatises on women's work, -- Filene's *Careers for Women* and Adams's *Women Professional Workers*, -- in their notes on the advantages and drawbacks of special professions, do not speak of their availability in relation to marriage, still less compare them on that basis. An occasional bit of undesigned testimony, like the phrase 'openings occur ... a woman editor marries and gives up her business career' (Filene), makes plain that the tacit reference is to 'unencumbered' women. In the last year or two, articles in women's magazines have been observable in a kind of pendular sequence: satires on people who think a woman can't combine a home and a job, alternating with fictional variations on the theme of Mrs. Jellyby and Borrioboola Gha.

The President of Bryn Mawr College seems to have been the first person in authority to take the bull by the horns -- to state the issue clearly, and not as an issue, but as a principle: to wit, that the ultimate employment of women's talents must be in the specific fields of those talents, irrespective of status; also the first to face the issue in action, inasmuch as the practice of the Bryn Mawr College administration has for years admirably squared with this principle [p. 446] by opening the way for its faculty women to continue their work after marriage. But that it is to-day the paramount -- nay, the only -- issue for women of ability and professional training -- none of *them*, at least, need be told! If ever there were a question that needed thinking through realistically, it is this one of the professional career as a universal consideration in the lives of trained and able women.

II

Now, let it be admitted at once that equal or commensurate rewards and opportunities, incentives, and achievements of women are not to be expected in the present organization of society, until women do enter the field as fully and as freely as men do. Unmarried women, limited in numbers and in contacts with life, cannot charge the citadel of professional privilege in sufficient volume and momentum to carry it. Until all women of ability, in the sense in which it may be said of all men of ability, are in action, it is probable that few women will reach the highest, and the avenues will remain obstructed.

Secondly, let it be admitted that every woman should *have the right* to marry and go on with her job; 'the right' meaning a fair field and no disfavor from trustees, administrators, employers of whatever type, or from her social fellows. Not only the right, but the need, of every human being to live a normal, emotional life, as a general condition for full development of latent powers, is at least acknowledged. And the adjustment of any personal relations whatever to the requirements of a profession is as truly a right of the individual woman as it is a right of the individual man.

But when so much has been conceded, what does it amount to? Social and professional

sanction of 'the job after marriage' would be just so much watered stock. It has, and will have, no value until a vast amount of development work shall have given it value. I do not mean on account of the paucity of openings for women; but even if we suppose a perfectly fluid distribution or free trade in jobs, the gateways wide open -- the *vis a fronte*; even so, the *vis a tergo* is completely wanting. I may have the permission of the universe to wag my ears, but the mechanics therefor[*sic*] have not been provided.

In plain words, the 'job' of the kind we are envisaging is at present a physical and mechanical impossibility for the young married woman 'as a sex' -- for it is 'the sex' we are arguing about. For thirty years Mrs. Gilman has been inveighing against 'the wicked waste of housework,' without making, so far as I can see, a dent in the social mechanism. Nothing can be more absurd, to those actually at grips with the facts, than the usual references to labor-saving devices as making the professional work of married women possible. Hours of labor and physical fatigue of the house wife have indeed been reduced; but the *amount* of labor in the home is not the problem of the woman who, we are supposing, is entering on a professional career. It is the possibility of mental concentration, of long-sustained intensive application, of freedom from irrelevant cares and interruptions, which every professional *man* knows is a dire necessity, if he is to touch success. We did not need *Candida* to explain, what every woman knows, the amount of subterranean ordering, protecting, fending-off, which the ordinary career -- for men -- requires. This, the right to concentrate at need, no young married woman, who is making a home with her husband, can now command.

It may be theoretically possible; but an infinite deal of study, experiment, and social invention must precede. [p. 447] Household operation must be so organized that the young couple in the average community, just starting up the professional ladder, may both give to their work the best of which they are capable. There is, for instance, any amount of facile talk going about on the subject of cooked-food services. Every unmarried feminist refers to them brightly as about to solve the professional woman's household problems. But the bald fact is that no such arrangements now exist. A number have been initiated, and all have dropped off, for different reasons, all excellent ones. Two or three coöperative day-nurseries for college professors' wives (I *know* of only one), a coöperative laundry or two, make up the tale for our thousands of would-be professional women. A few commercial undertakings of the kind exist, but these are quite beyond the means of young people with money success still to achieve.

There is probably no service which women of experience and intellectual background, like the Association of American University Women, could do for the younger generation, greater than the research and organizing effort necessary to solve the problem of the basic domestic functions for women professional workers -- how a modest household can operate without the personal entanglement of the feminine member. 'Household Engineering,' so-called, contributes little here, for it deals only with the special technique of housework and assumes a resident engineer, the housewife herself; and it stops short of the self-propelling activity which alone can be useful to the woman we have in mind. Field-organization, not technique, is what is needed.

Mrs. Gilman took a shot at the idea in her *What Diantha Did*. She imagined, for the average small town, an establishment for visiting workers, the commercial undertaking of an educated and intelligent woman. The Woman's Land Army of America in its brief career actually set up a type of organization something like what is needed. This was a real social invention, deserving the serious attention of students -- which, by the way, in spite of a wide *réclame*, it never received. That the particular kind of service supplied was confined to the land does not affect the value of the object-lesson. The Woman's Land Army put into the field units for service which were economically self-sustaining, democratic, and within the means of the farmer. The technique of unit-management and feasible economical operation were being scientifically studied at the Wellesley College Training Camp for Land Army leaders in the summer of 1918. The pressing need of the farmer passed with the war; many of the early units failed, others were maintained by wealthy patrons; but of the hundred or more organized, a sufficient number survived, and were successful, to show that the idea was a sound one, and capable of creating a revolution in the status of land-workers. Something like this, in method of approach and in type of organization, could be done for the basic household services -- food, laundry, nursing,

general housework. The economically feasible standards of size, of units, methods, costs, could be determined. Coöperative organization could bring further economy. But just as technique was, after all, the minor problem of the Land Army, so, for the household, the actual bringing into being of the needed groups is the *crux*. There would have to be established, in actual operation, units for such service in every community harboring women professional workers.

It cannot, however, be too earnestly affirmed that, until this veritable revolution has taken place, and not in a few large cities, but generally, -- a [p. 448] revolution comparable to the introduction of the telephone, -- it is premature to urge professional work on married women. Even though doors may be opened, they cannot go through them. More, it is unfair to the talented girl to offer her all the kinds of professional advice and information except the kind she is most in need of -- a clear view of the actual 'state of the art' for married women.

'What is the Mission of the American University Woman?' was a question publicly put, with perhaps more sense of duty than sense of humor. I would answer as seriously, 'To work to clear the way, where it is now most obstructed, for every woman's full use of her university training.'

Is there an antinomy here? Women have learned the alphabet; the necessary and actual consequence is that they press to use to the utmost their natural talents. Yet their present disability is so complete that it amounts to a contradiction in principle. The forms of household mechanics, to which they themselves blindly cling, render that full use as yet impossible.

III

Imagine, however, this great work of research and organization done; suppose the mechanical conditions for women's professional work supplied. What of the personal element in marriage as it affects a career? Well, for the sake of the argument, we may assume that, with good-will and mutual accommodation, two separate careers are mentally and morally compatible in marriage. But two careers are often not physically compatible. Just as two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, so one entity, the married pair, is not; to be imagined as occupying two quarters of the globe continuously. The editor of a magazine in New York might conceivably, let us say, be the wife of a college professor in New England; but suppose he gets a call to Tokyo? The institution head who moved on from chair to chair -- such things have happened -- would not be an eligible husband for a corporation lawyer who was building up a practice in a great city. Yet a relative mobility, freedom to make the best adjustments of location, is the *sine qua non* of success in a profession; and the force of this requirement increases, the higher in the scale we get.

Clearly, all those professions which require continuous operation in the same place would be extra-hazardous risks for the double-career marriage. And these, the static occupations, are beyond all comparison in possession of the field. Authors, artists, inventors, sailors -- all the tribe of free lances of whatever kind -- are indeed not affected, or only measurably affected, by the argument. If the feminine partner wants to set up a jungle laboratory, or a mountain observatory, we can imagine the author, though not the actor, as a husband for her.

But how many such foot-loose individuals are there against the millions bound to institutions: colleges, hospitals, libraries, laboratories; city, state, and federal administrations; fixed points like mines, railroads, publishers' offices, or clienteles it has taken years to establish?

No artificial sex-restriction need be invoked to explain the inhibitions of achievement, when two able individuals seek to build separate careers on a partnership of affection alone. The limitations of space and time are enough. Women ought to be able to marry and go on with their job -- admitted as a principle; but the space-forms of their universe seem to contradict it. And this is the second antinomy. [p. 449]

Assuming, nevertheless, as we must assume, women's right and need to develop their powers,

and their ability to apply common sense to the inevitable, we may at least expect a very marked limitation in the range of romantic possibilities. Marriage will have to become much more an affair of arrangement, with an eye to the exigencies of occupations, than we in America like to think it is now. It will become more and more necessary to marry 'in the profession,' as most actors, singers, and circus performers already do. A limited partnership in work will become desirable, and necessary, where the work is spatially conditioned. Thus, the chemist may take for mate another chemist, or a free lance, like a painter; but not a mining engineer, or a ranchman, on penalty of stultification for one of the pair.

It all sounds very humorous, does it not? Perhaps this is why no effort has ever been made to meet the issue intelligently and consciously, and may hundreds and thousands of talented women, who have married for love, 'with the world well lost,' have found the world of work lost to them, indeed. It should not be forgotten that the greatest scientist among women, Madame Curie, was one of just such a married partnership in work.

IV

And now, when we have come so far, I am ready to throw all my arguments away as irrelevant, impertinent, and incompetent! These be but minor antinomies, to be resolved by a critique, first, of Idols of the House; second, of Idols of Romance. But the supreme self-contradiction is in the intrinsic nature of the woman herself, as everyone knows after all. We have been rightly demanding the life of normal emotional activity and development as a necessary condition of the full growth of women's powers. But we have spoken only of marriage; and marriage -- so far as the argument is concerned -- is meaningless without motherhood. Of course, there have been happy marriages without children, as there have been full lives without marriage. Nevertheless, any theory or regimen of life, which shall be relevant for able women as a sex, must have motherhood as an integral part.

The argument on which our discussion opened referred to a career for women in its intrinsic sense, in the sense in which women should compete with men -- a sustained, intensive, creative or constructive effort, 'a permanent and serious business' (Adams). No one supposes that *men* expect to achieve without the most intense and most ruthless concentration. Are mothers capable of this?

Tolstoy has somewhere -- in *Anna Karénina*, I believe -- the picture of a man who is carrying a burden up a mountain. His arms and hands are occupied with the burden, and he cannot use them to help himself up. He stumbles, breathless and suffering. At last, he places the burden on his back and binds it safely. Now that his hands are free, he can help himself; he goes on and up stoutly.

Now, a man's forbidden love, says Tolstoy, is in the first case. He must carry it always in his arms, it prevents his normal activities, it prevents his helping himself. That is how I see the love of children. The mother always carries her children in her arms. It is not possible for her to shift the burden, even if she would. The father can carry them like a burden safely stowed away; he is free to forget them. The mother -- never!

Leaving for the moment all that physical care for the child which no mother can or will entirely delegate; all [p. 450] those household responsibilities which she needs of children infinitely multiply, and which, I repeat, are years away from being organized to allow real freedom; looking only at the mental conditions -- I do not believe (subject to certain exceptions) that the highest order of achievement in any field requiring sustained, intensive, continuous thought or effort is possible to a woman who is a mother.

And there is no profession or high-grade occupation which does not require just this. Remember that we are considering, on our first supposition, not the mother whose children are out of the fold, but the young woman -- the woman who is to marry relatively early, and 'go on with her job.' On that supposition, she is at once in the formative stages of her career, and the lower grades of her income, and the early years of her children.

It is not primarily a matter of the will, but a direct psychological disability. Physicians have noted that, for months after childbirth, the mother suffers from what is sometimes an even painful inconsecutiveness of mind -- a felt inability for sustained attention for anything but the child itself. I should like to see detailed studies made for a period covering the early years of motherhood. I believe the results would show -- what introspection certainly indicates -- a relative failure in sustained attention.

But; whether or no this is true as regards the elementary forms of mental activity, there is much testimony to the lapse of that spontaneous and ruthless absorption which preëminent achievement involves. The mother has suffered a transmutation of values; self-absorption in a task apart has become less possible to her.

I do not believe that the conditions are greatly different for the average able woman who has a job and is keeping it. 'A job' means responsibility to hours, places, duties; a certain kind of concentrated effort which must be for times, or periods, -- at the call of the work, -- intense and protracted. Every executive or 'executive secretary' knows what I mean. The business or professional woman who is taking money for her work must be 'on call' for it. Innumerable must be the mental conflicts between preoccupation with her children and duty to her performance. Whether the children suffer or not, the quality of her work must suffer.

The woman professional worker will 'reserve time' for her children, we are told, and 'provide expert care for the rest of their waking and working hours' (quoted from a recent newspaper article by a well-known woman). Now, it ought not to be necessary, in these days of general knowledge of the mental hygiene of the child, to show what mother-love *in presence* means for his mental and moral health. The physical care may perhaps be 'organized'; though Dorothy Canfield never said a truer word than that the important times in a little child's life are when things are happening to him: baths, meals, walks, the putting-on of over-shoes.

Recent studies in infant psychology suggest that the shocks of even the first year may be permanently impressed upon the growing child, determining his responses, modifying his vocational future. 'Expert care' is a weasel word; it means simply trained nurses and teachers. But the high type of person, who, as nurse or individual teacher, can to any degree replace the mother in 'the rest of his waking and working hours,' is certainly not to be provided (in addition to other house-service) by young-professional salaries -- even if she were to be had, one to every professional family; which is not [p. 451] the case, even in the largest cities or the most superior neighborhoods.

There is no mental or moral understudy for mother-love. Even if the mother could summon her whole energy of mind to outside work, the child whose mother is not *on call* is bound to lose. Shall we pity the tenement child, shut out on the streets by its working mother, for its lack of a warm shelter and hot dinner, and not see that the real deprivation for any child is of the mother herself, direct refuge and confidante and comforter.

I am not writing an anti-governess essay. I am simply showing that the requirements of successful work in a profession are just those which conflict with the deepest needs of children -- and mothers.

This is where the average women professional workers fare worst in the argument. Their hours of work -- eight-hour desk-jobs, appointments in business hours, daylight trips, the commuter's day -- are precisely the worst possible, as assessed by children's needs.

It is far from being merely another practiced difficulty: it is, on the contrary, symbolic of the whole situation, that the hour of getting off for school -- the hour on whose adequacy, from the mother's side, the mental and physical health of the young child's *whole* day depends -- is the hour which, by every other possible criterion, should be free from nervous tension for the professional.

As to this 'time reserved' -- ask the professional mother, at the end of her commuter's day, how

well able she is to enjoy, counsel, or correct her young children!

Nor is part-time work for married women at all the panacea, it is heralded as being. For 'a career' in any full sense it is impossible. Miss Filene is right -- 'anyone who wishes to succeed in any line of work keeps irregular hours.' The critical periods which spell preëminence or failure are those of effort without stint or limit. Part-time, for anything but a routine job, is an aggravation. For a routine job, it is subject to nearly all the disadvantages for the mother herself of the full-time job.

It is, of course, often said that the so-called 'woman of society' spends as many hours away from her children as the professional woman. But it should be noted that she has no engagement that is not revocable on the instant; she has no 'duty to her public,' no contract obligation of any kind. Moreover, the children's day falls largely without the hours of 'society'; so that the gayest young mother may, by a little effort, be with her children at all their strategic moments.

It all comes down to the paramount duty; and it seems to me that clients' or employers' recognition of what call must be paramount accounts for nearly all the alleged discrimination against women in the professions.

V

I said that there were exceptions to the principle of motherhood as an inhibiting influence on a career. The exceptions occur, I believe, when the work is of a naturally intermittent or inspirational type, -- even the scientific imagination works in flashes! -- and when the children are demonstrably safe and near. The woman writer, painter, sculptor, musician, home-teacher, private investigator, student, or consultant of whatever kind, who can work always within call of her children, is in the happiest case. What a heartening incident is that of George Sand, writing her first novel in a Paris garret, with her boy and girl playing about her feet!

The actress, the woman physician, [p. 452] the farmer, the occasional lecturer -- all those who absent themselves by appointments adjusted to children's hours, or on a light and flexible schedule, like the college teacher -- come next among the exceptions.

But beyond these, of the two hundred or so 'Careers for Women' listed, all but two or three would indeed be unavailable for mothers.

One has but to cite the exponents of successful careers, as quoted in Miss Filene's book: publicity -- 'not confining but intensive'; public stenographer -- 'one must be ready to work continuously thirty-six hours if it becomes necessary in some special case'; private secretary - 'irregular hours'; executive secretary (irregular hours) -- 'should be a member of every committee of the organization'; community-centre work -- 'are n't[sic] enough hours in the twenty-four'; supervisor of physical education- no limit to the amount of time required for making plans, holding meetings, attending games, meets, demonstrations, etc.'; employment-management consultant -- 'traveling, all kinds of sacrifice of personal life and comfort'; political organizer -- 'no eight-hour day'; 'the good Sunday editor never thinks of clocks'; 'the lawyer controls her own hours; but, if she is going to make her profession worth while, her hours will be long and her perseverance never ending'; dean of women -- 'longer hours, shorter vacations, nervous strain.'

There are eminent women who have actually combined happy families with high professional achievement outside the home. But these cases present, on analysis, a fortunate combination, say, of flexible working hours with independent income, or with a partnership of affectionate and self-devoted female relatives -- a kind of happy chance which is not an intrinsic condition of normal family life, or one on which it is possible to base a philosophy of women's work. If no *man* without an active mother or unmarried sister could become a geologist or a court-pleader, or the field secretary of a welfare organization, we should have a situation some what analogous.

The normal family, professional or not, must stand on its own feet. The paradox is that the only universally possible assistance is paid assistance. That certainly does not offer the emotional insight with children, responsibility, *and continuity*, which alone can free mothers effectively. Family affection and assistance does sometimes give it. But the possibility of such assistance is pure chance.

It would seem then, that, while women are forced by a normal principle of growth to seek to use fully the abilities which their education has set free, a natural and original principle in turn saps their effort at its spring. Women are both inevitably impelled to, and interdicted from, marriage, children, and careers.

What can one say but that Woman, like Space and Time, being subject to so complete an antinomy, requires like them to have the conditions of her world somehow transcended!

'I accept the Universe!' cried Margaret Fuller. 'Gad! she'd better,' was Carlyle's retort, so much acclaimed (by men). But I think she was, for women, o'erhasty.

VI

The only solution I can now see of the problem of a career for a creature with a natural paramount interest else where is quite in the line of Kant's denial of space (already overpassed by Einstein).

Why not deny, erase, transcend the whole notion of a career, with its connotations of competition, success, [p. 453] rewards, honors, titles? Might it not have an epochal effect on the progress of science, if one half of the able people in the world should consciously, explicitly, and proudly refuse to compete? What an illuminating phrase dropped by Madame Curie: her husband 'had been so deep in science that he had not paid the necessary attention to his career'!

Is it then to this vague, utopian precept that our promised realistic analysis has brought us? Certainly, it is only by greater vagueness that the myth of women's equal competence (not ability) has been maintained.

The woman's antinomy will be thrown up ever more clearly as increasing numbers seek careers. Perhaps to try the other way will hasten the day when 'the method of contest and survival' will disappear.

For the present, the practical application of the principle would be in a deliberate, purposeful making-over of the conditions of women's work. Many desk-jobs, much appointment and consultation work can be adjusted to family life. Piece-work, emergency, substitute, overseers', directors', and allied jobs will increase, and will take the place of office-work.

I think that the possibilities open here to a recognized intention would surprise us. But the great transformation would be through the marriage partnerships in work already forecast. The flexible schedule and mutual replacements of such a partnership would open up nearly all lines of work to a mother. How much it would make for companionship in marriage is clear enough, but beyond the scope of this argument.

The chance to work, and learn, and earn, would still remain if married women were explicitly to forego 'the career.' It is not to be expected or desired that women should now stifle the energies they have at last discovered and proved.

But this I know, that, unless we are to have as our next generation a race of dry, cold, warped, inhibited little creatures, we have got to make some such changes as I have suggested in the lines of women's actual occupation. The philosophy of the whole thing has got to be changed.

Suppose all women of ability could plan for love and children and 'each for the joy of the working'! But then women would have all the really desirable things!

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