

by Antonia Hoyle

BY HIS own admission, Philip Thomas leads a charmed life. He takes holidays in far-flung locations and frequents art galleries and expensive restaurants at the weekends. His career is rewarding and his relationship a source of great joy.

However, Philip is not entirely fulfilled. Why? Because he is childless and knows that, at 45, the family he yearns for is unlikely to materialise.

If his inability to become a father was due to fertility problems, he would receive sympathy. But the real reason is something no amount of medical intervention can remedy: his partner Sophie Reed's unwillingness to have children.

An ambitious career woman, Sophie, 42, is adamant that motherhood holds no place in her life, and no amount of pleading from Philip has been able to persuade her otherwise.

And Sophie is not alone. A recent survey revealed that 43 per cent of university-educated women born between 1965 and 1978 are childless, with an increasing number sacrificing the joys of motherhood for the sake of their careers and freedom.

But little has been heard from the partners affected by their decisions.

So how do these men deal with their enforced childlessness?

Well, in Philip's case, it is with a profound

'I wanted my life to have a deeper meaning'

sense of loss. 'I was desperate for the sense of purpose and achievement that fatherhood brings,' he says. 'I was torn between staying with the woman I loved and leaving in the hope of starting a family with someone new.'

'It was the most painful decision I've ever had to make.' Yet Philip represents a growing breed of men.

Occupational health psychologist Gail Kinman of the University of Bedfordshire explains: 'It is all too common for couples with two professional careers to disagree on the best time to start a family, and the woman may decide that children are not on the agenda at all.'

'But men are often as keen to have children as women are. If their partner doesn't feel the same way, this may lead to conflict which, sadly, can be strong enough to break up the relationship altogether.'

When Philip first met Sophie on a course run by the housing association they both worked for, he was 29 and fatherhood was the last thing on his mind. 'Sophie and I shared the same sense of fun and zest for adventure,' he says.

After six months they moved into a flat in Bromley, Kent.

And within weeks, the subject of children came up.

'We were discussing a friend who had just announced her pregnancy when Sophie suddenly said she never wanted children,' he recalls.

'I was taken aback, but parenthood was an abstract idea for me at that stage and I assumed at some point her biological clock would tick and she would change her mind.'

It wasn't until Philip reached his early 30s that he felt the pull of parenthood in earnest.

'Two of my friends had had children and I realised that I was ready to do the same.'

'I wanted someone to read bedtime

The broody men left bereft by high-flying wives who refuse to have babies



stories to the way my father had done with me, and a deeper meaning to my life. I wanted a reason for working as hard as I did and I knew Sophie was the woman I wanted to have children with.'

When Philip broached the subject of babies again, however, Sophie was unequivocal.

'Her exact words were: "Don't make me laugh",' he recalls. 'I was upset and confused.'

'Sophie seemed to love children. At family gatherings, they gravitated towards her. It didn't make sense.'

Philip tried to understand her reasons. 'We'd both been promoted at work,' he says. 'Sixty-hour weeks weren't unusual. Sophie was determined to be financially independent and didn't want to take her foot off the career ladder.'

'She felt children would be restrictive, a barrier to both her professional and personal life.'

Philip tried in vain to persuade her otherwise. 'I told her we could make it work, that I would still support her career,' he says.

'Her drive was one of the things I loved, but it would have been easier if she was less ambitious and more of a home body.'

For years, Philip silently seethed as he deliberated over whether to remain in the relationship.

'At times, my foot was half out of

the door,' he says. 'But I've never known anyone as suited to me as Sophie. I knew no other relationship would be anywhere near as fulfilling. I gave up trying to persuade her. She knew I was hurt and was apologetic, but she was clear in her decision.'

Such is the taboo subject of male childlessness that Philip felt unable to discuss his situation openly.

'It didn't feel "normal" to tell people that I was the one in the relationship who wanted children,' he says. 'I only confided in a couple of friends.'

'One suggested I become a sperm donor to a lesbian couple, but having

'Giving up on my dream was very painful'

no say in my child's future would have been unbearable.'

Then, five years ago, Philip finally resolved his inner conflict. I knew I had to make a decision one way or the other and I decided to stay and give up my dreams of being a father,' he says.

'It was painful, but in some ways it

was a relief. I felt clearer-headed than I had for a long time. A lot of the tension in our relationship dissolved.'

However, Philip is frequently reminded of what he is missing.

'When I watch friends take their children to school for the first time, or dads playing football in the park with their sons, I still feel a sense of loss,' he says.

Psychotherapist Ann Dazell was so moved by the experience of one of her childless male patients that in 2004 she began doctoral research at the University of Bristol in the field of enforced childlessness.

She says men often feel that not having a child reflects on their masculinity and virility, but the greatest frustration is that their loss is not acknowledged.

'There is an expectation that not having children is hard for women to live with but there are few, if any, public spaces for men to talk about their feelings,' she says.

Martin Stent is certainly familiar with the sacrifice involved in dating a successful career woman.

His wife, Carla, is the chief operating manager for Virgin Management.

Her career entails 12-hour days and frequent overseas travel.

Now 41, she made the decision a decade ago that her job wasn't compatible with motherhood.

'I don't doubt Carla would have been a great mother, and being a father would have been nice, but her job has always demanded a lot of her time and we both felt we didn't have any surplus to give a child the love they deserved,' says Martin, 46.

Carla's ambition was one of the qualities that first attracted Martin to her — they met in 1988 when they were studying to be accountants.

'Carla was more driven than me,' says Martin, who has himself pursued a high-pressure career for an investment bank.

They married in December 1995 and settled in London the following

year. 'We both loved life and work, and the years seemed to blur into each other,' says Martin. He says he can pinpoint the exact moment Carla decided not to have children.

'She had just been made operations director of Thomas Cook,' he says.

'She was doing brilliantly. I was working in banking by then and we knew it would have been incredibly difficult for both of us to maintain a serious career and start a family.'

'Still, fatherhood appealed to me.'

He felt torn, but eventually he accepted her decision.

'I loved Carla dearly and wanted to support her,' he says. 'Women have to work harder than men to get anywhere in their career as it is.'

'With a child, it would have been almost impossible.'

As for Carla, she admits it hasn't been easy and says: 'It was a tough decision, especially for Martin, as I think he would make the most fantastic father.'

'He is extraordinarily patient, empathetic and empowering. We talked about it at length. It wasn't something we got to overnight.'

Of course, Martin could have given up his own career — a decision he says he is thankful he didn't make.

'I've got a good friend who is a house husband, and as much as he loves his children he gets bored and frustrated,' he says.

He says part of him wonders what might have been.

'Sometimes there are moments — when we're surrounded by the children of friends and relatives — that we think it would have been nice,' he says. 'Whether Carla will regret the decision later in life is something I don't know.'

'But I love Carla and respect her decision.'

While Philip and Martin may have reluctantly accepted their wives' decisions, it's a dilemma an increasing number of men is likely to face. And many may not be so selfless.

*SOME names have been changed.

AN ELEPHANT with a big ear for music has turned her enclosure into a concert venue.

At 11am each day, Shanthi — a 36-year-old Asian elephant at Washington's Smithsonian National Zoo — uses her trunk to tootle a tune on a harmonica which is strapped to the bars of her cage. She finishes each performance with a crescendo, created by a huge exhalation of wind through her trunk.

Shanthi, right, a gift from Sri Lanka in 1976, was given her harmonica after incessantly tapping her trunk, ears and feet on anything

within her reach to make noise. But she is not the pioneer of 'trunk-punk'.

In Thailand, a group of 16 elephants called the Elephonic Rhapsodies are now on their third album. They stand in line and improvise, like jazz musicians, while a conductor leads them.

It is doubtful whether Shanthi will follow them into the charts. Her keeper, Debbie Finkman, admitted that a recent performance 'sounded like she was strangling a goose'.

