PRISCILLA WAKEFIELD

GEOFFREY B. RIDDEHOUGH

About the middle of 1951, readers of the daily press found some diversion in a news-item from Washington, D.C., where a certain woman legislator unsuccessfully tried to have a bill passed that would bar any member of the male sex from owning, operating, or working in any manicure-shop. The reason that she gave as justifying a feminine monopoly was that holding a woman's hand, for so long a period as manicuring requires, constituted an amorous temptation against which no man's moral resistance could be trusted to hold out.

It was a somewhat surprising stand to take in the middle of a century so fond of proclaiming its dislike of monopolies and of arbitrary discrimination and its scorn of all virtue of the fugitive and cloistered variety. It reminded one reader, at least, of a proposal brought forward with equal seriousness rather more than a century and a half earlier, for it was in the year 1798 that Mrs. Priscilla Wakefield, a Quakeress of the great Fry family, published in London her little book, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for its Improvement*. Deploring the difficulties confronting women who had to earn their own living, the authoress declared that one solution would be to have certain occupations reserved by law exclusively for females — a solution based on what she considered the laws of both economics and propriety. She looked forward, for instance, to the time when none but women would be teaching female youth: was it compatible with decency, she asked, that the persons of girls advancing toward maturity should be exposed to the wanton eye of a dancing-master? And even music, she sternly wrote, was a seductive art, instruction in which a girl could safely receive only from a member of her own sex. One might perhaps ask whether a virtuous young person ought to learn a seductive art at all, but this question did not bother Priscilla. She goes on to say that the entire exclusion of men from the teaching of girls would provide a new species of employment for the daughters of tradesmen. And still another kind of employment would be afforded to women if legislation similarly limited the making and fitting of shrouds for female corpses. "How shocking," she exclaims, "is the idea of our persons being exposed, even after death, to the observation of a parcel of undertaker's men!"

Less shocking, perhaps, but equally distasteful to her was the idea of men doing any work that she considered essentially feminine, such as designing needlework or making stays: men

who could so busy themselves she denounced as "a brood of effeminate beings in the garb of men," whom it was disgraceful for wealthy women to patronize at the expense of poorer members of their own sex. However, like many feminists, she was slow to admit that sauce for the gander should be accepted as a condiment for the goose. She saw no harm in women taking up masculine employment if it was within their strength and if they had reached mature years. She quotes with approval Sir Frederic Morton Eden's account of a certain Mrs. Sarah Spencer, who with her sister had gone in for practical farming in Sussex and made it pay. These two ladies, often in one and the same day, "divided their hours in helping to fill the dung-cart, and receiving company of the highest rank and distinction. . . . They even handled the dung-fork with an air of elegance."

Sometimes it is difficult to decide whether Mrs. Wakefield's words are dictated by feminist sentiment or by the class-consciousness of the well-to-do. Her feminism, it is true, can be decidedly pronounced when she is comparing male and female workers and their respective remuneration. For instance, among domestic servants, "a footman, especially of the higher kind, whose most laborious task is to wait at table, gains, including clothes, vails, and other perquisites, at least £50 per annum, whilst a cook-maid, who is mistress of her profession, does not obtain £20, though her office is laborious, unwholesome, and requires a much greater degree of skill than that of a valet." But Mrs. Wakefield is by no means a revolutionary. She asserts that there is absolutely no reason to fear that education will make women over-independent. "As their ideas are more developed, they will perceive that there can be but one head or chief in every family" — this, of course, being the man. In fact, an increase in real knowledge is more likely "to promote a diffidence of their own judgment in concerns of moment, and an habitual deference, on such occasions, to the more enlarged experience of mankind in their husbands."

However, where class-distinction between woman and woman is concerned, Mrs. Wakefield is still less of an anarchist. The highest ambition she will concede to the female worker is the attainment of independence, since nothing is so inimical to the preservation of female virtue as a state of poverty. Priscilla frowns upon attempts to disseminate the glamorous accomplishments below a certain social level. She holds that the daughters of tradesmen and mechanics "should not only be prohibited from learning the ornamental arts, such as music, dancing, drawing, foreign languages, and costly works of taste (unless they are

brought up for teachers), but they should never be placed at a school where these arts are taught. . . . A refined education is extremely improper for those, whose humble views confine them to the employments of an inferior fashion." Plays and novels "should be most carefully excluded from their sight, *as containing a baleful poison, destructive of every principle that is adapted to defend them from the allurements of vice.*" Far better that they should learn "the principal cities, rivers, and mountains of Europe, with the manners of the different nations, and the produce of each, both material and artificial."

Even the upper-class female, who is allowed contact with the polite and poisonous arts, must be made to realise that life is not all pleasure. Girlhood, under Priscilla's conscientious eye, does not sound exuberantly gay: "Domestic economy, tender offices to the sick, the management of infants, and other occupations of a similar nature, may furnish amusement as well as instruction to girls above ten years of age, during their hours of recreation, both from the novelty of the employments, and the consequence annexed to the exercise of them."

It must be admitted that the authoress is not very helpful in her suggestions as to lucrative employment for women of the upper classes. She owns herself that such desirable jobs are hard to find, since "they must be such as are neither laborious nor servile, and they must of course be productive, without requiring a capital." One such occupation, it appears, is the colouring of prints. A few years before the book was published, a certain Frenchwoman in London had developed a peculiar method of applying water-colours to prints, "by which she might have gained a very liberal income, had her industry and morals been equal to her ingenuity." They evidently were not, and poor Frenchy falls soundlessly into the vasty deep of Mrs. Wakefield's disapproval.

The authoress's educational views are revealed in several other books wherein, according to the fashion of her time, she uses a fictitious family to convey useful and serious information to youthful readers. One book of this sort, *Domestic Information*, consists of conversations between a formidably well-informed lady named Mrs. Dimsdale and her two daughters, Lucy and Emily. The mother's zeal for her children's mental improvement is never daunted. We see her getting out a solar microscope that projects images against a white sheet on the wall, and hear Lucy asking hopefully, "Shall we see Punch and his wife, and all those comical figures that diverted us so much, when we saw the magic lanthorn at the fair?" Mrs. D. retorts that they are now too old

to be amused with such nonsense and that she will show them objects much more worthy of their attention. When she casts upon the screen a mass of reticulated rootlets, Emily remarks that these are extremely beautiful but that she personally longs for novelty, whereupon her mother reveals a new wonder with the words, "Behold the wing of an earwig!"

Lucy, it may here be observed, is rather more of a prig than her sister. When the latter, after considering primitive society, asks the awkward question, "If the land was divided into equal parts, how came some people to be rich and others poor?" Lucy has the orthodox answer ready: "Do you not know, that in all countries, some are more virtuous and wiser than others? Of course they would succeed better than their neighbours." On another occasion, when the girls have risen early, as soon as called, and dressed themselves neatly in a quarter of an hour, and their mother has, as a reward, let them look through a high-powered microscope, it is Lucy who declares, "You could not have rewarded us more agreeably." On the other hand, when the mother, after one of these instructive talks, suddenly demands a résumé of the lesson, it is poor Emily who is the victim.

Mrs. D's lectures have a range that is nothing short of stupendous. The reader never quite knows when some startling bit of information will be presented: he learns, for instance, that hog-lice are used in medicine; that monkeys on some occasions have shown signs of modesty, and also strong attachment to members of their own species; that the Aurora Borealis may be esteemed one of the favours of Heaven, to console the inhabitants of the dreary northern regions for their long deprivation of the light of the sun; and that the ancient Britons, doubtless because of their ignorance of manufactures, supplemented their scanty garb of furs by staining themselves all over with a deep blue colour, "perhaps for warmth." There is something impressive in the unchecked sweep of Mrs. D's earnest curiosity, as when she bids the girls compare the thick hide of the rhinoceros, the impenetrable coat of mail of the crocodile, and the delicate, fair skin of a European lady. (Nowadays it is a Hollywood star that furnishes the standard of dermal comparison: *nous avons changé tout cela*.)

In an earlier book, *Mental Improvement*, the family depicted is larger. We have Sophia Harcourt, aged 16, Charles, 15, Cecilia, 12, and Henry, 9; there is also an occasional visitor named Augusta, aged 12, who has no mamma and whose governess rarely goes beyond the ordinary lessons of the day, but who presumably profits from the intellectual crumbs that fall

from the table of the Harcourt family. Sophia arouses our interest at the very beginning by thus addressing Cecilia: "How happy are we, my dear sister, to be blessed with kind parents, who devote so much time to our instruction and amusement, with what tenderness do they listen to our conversation, and improve every subject that arises to our advantage!" Cecilia, who obviously has a bad case of parent-fixation, demurely responds, "I am never so happy in any other company; they have the art of rendering instruction and study agreeable." The poor lassie, however, overdoes her admiration a bit. She rashly calls one of these improving evenings *delightful*, whereupon Mrs. Harcourt comes down upon her heavily: "Learn to moderate your expressions, suit your terms to the occasion; or you will be at a loss to raise your language in proportion to your feelings, when important events excite your liveliest emotions." As one might expect, Cecilia soon learns to make more acceptable comments on the lectures that her mother delivers. For example, when the latter has spoken thus: "Let us make a comparison of the most inferior orders of animals, such as oysters, &c., which seem only to possess bare existence, void of faculties or enjoyment, with man, a creature endowed with the noble quality of reason, capable of exercising very extensive intellectual powers, and enabled to understand, admire, and investigate the works of his great Creator," Cecilia exclaims, "I never was so sensible of my own dignity before." And she herself bids fair to carry on the family tradition when she is called upon to give a talk on tea. Her sister has already observed that the sugar-cane is "a genus of the *triandria digynia* class," so that it is only fair that Cecilia should remark that "the germin of the pestil [sic] is globose and trigonal."

The Harcourt natural history introduces us to animals that every so often strike us as a ludicrous avatar of the Harcourts themselves, as when we learn that beavers sometimes wander in the woods "and regale their young with a fresh collation." At other times animals are looked upon as having been created expressly to be exploited by diligent human beings. When tea-trees grow on steep declivities, where tea-gathering would be difficult or dangerous, the Chinese, we are told, "make use of the large monkeys, that dwell among the cliffs, to assist them in obtaining the valuable leaves of the tea-trees: they irritate these animals, and, in revenge, they climb the trees, and break off the branches, and throw them down the precipice, which gives the gatherers an opportunity of reaching them."

It must be admitted, however, that where the marvellous is concerned Mrs. Wakefield is painfully conscientious. It is true that she lets Charles Harcourt talk for two whole pages on the balefulness of the Upas tree, but at the end of the American edition she adds a note declaring that this highly poetical description rests on no basis of fact.

One may laugh at Mrs. Wakefield, but every now and then one is reminded that she is more than just a pedant or an easily-shocked snob. She recognizes that strength, agility, and health are important for girls as well as for boys. and denounces the contemporary education of the upper-class English girl as being (it is a curious word here, perhaps, but not ill-chosen) "effeminate." There speaks the typical Englishwoman! Priscilla, it is true, scarcely belonged to the social class most devoted to the ideal of sportsmanship, but it is plain that such an ideal, even if she did not call it sportsmanship, appealed to her as an element in a girl's character. Charity, she tells us, "never shines with more distinguished lustre, than in a contest with a rival, over whom it forbids to triumph, even in the moment of victory."

And in spite of her formidable seriousness and her tireless pursuit of intellectual improvement, Mrs. Wakefield does give the impression of wishing to be at all times truthful and just, and, when she can make concessions without a surrender of principle, even tolerant. Her Mr. Harcourt will not allow his children to look down on negroes as possessing an inherently lower intelligence. "There is no reason to suppose," he says, "that they differ from us in any thing but colour, which distinction arises from the intense heat of their climate."

As might be expected, this quality of charitable tolerance has its best opportunity to display itself in the books that this author wrote on the manners and customs of foreign nations, such as *The Juvenile Travellers* (London, 1801). Here we are shown an English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Seymour, travelling on the Continent with their two children. All four are, on the whole, remarkably free from prejudice: they approve of the spirit of the Norwegian peasants, who "speak, even to gentlemen, in a manly, open manner, and offer their hands, though without disrespect, instead of cringing and bowing." Though the family are fervent Protestants, they do not condemn the people of Romanist countries for crossing themselves after Mass, but declare that we should not judge harshly of others merely because of outward observances in which they may chance to differ from us; Mr. Seymour bids his family remember that "the errors of our fellow creatures, especially with respect to the different

forms of religious worship, are not an object of ridicule," and that the truly sincere of all denominations "will be accepted in the sight of our Heavenly Father."

Such tolerance meets with the tolerance it deserves. When the Seymours are returning from Portugal to England their ship is captured by a French frigate, but as they are merely peaceful folk travelling abroad for curiosity, the intercession of the American Ambassador procures their liberty and they continue sightseeing as before.

Priscilla Wakefield never dreamed what a hundred and fifty years of progress and education would do to her tidy, serious, respectable, unsuspicious little world.