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Pride and Prejudice



JANE AUSTEN

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*With an Introduction by M. Edmund Speare,
and an Afterword by W. Somerset Maugham*

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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Probably no other novelist has as many loyal and vociferous fans as Jane Austen. They claim for her a greatness second to none. And, we might add, their claims are difficult to argue. For Jane Austen is one of the supreme artists of the novel, a woman who could write with grace, spirit, and uncanny observation of the world around her. Her books never fail to delight the reader. Here, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is her masterpiece.

INTRODUCTION

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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE is a kindly satire upon, and a gentle analysis of, life in a small village in southern England at the close of the 18th century—in the days when people danced the minuet and loved charades. Each of the characters is an exponent of certain “humors.” Mr. Bennet’s principal quality is cynicism; Mary Bennet is naturally a pedant; Lydia Bennet is a flirt; Mr. Collins is pretentiously conceited; Sir William Lucas is a feeble dullard. Or, to put it in other words, this novel is the history of the gradual union of two people, one of them held back by unconquerable *pride*, and the other blinded by unreasonable *prejudice*. “Let other pens,” Jane Austen once wrote, “dwell on guilt and misery.” Hence the greatest disgust the author has to show is with the unladylike methods of one young woman, and the stupidities of one man, and the overbearing conceit and pride of another man; her greatest admiration and praise is for the honest English good sense and common decency of another young woman. Her swiftest means of revealing character is by conversation, and sometimes Jane Austen’s art exposes a quality of that character by the use of a single phrase or a sentence. Her greatest skill as an artist lies in developing a carefully-planned story, stripped of all unnecessary details, in which plot is the main interest. Hers is the art of cameo-drawing, rather than painting

in huge brush-strokes. Staying within the range of her own little world, we are presented with an interesting group of people who, once we forget the passing fashions of their day, might be—for their feelings, intrigues, prides, and prejudices—persons of our own time.

This symmetry of form and structure was combined, in Jane Austen's art, with a subtle wit and a keen sense of humor which got inside her character creations—especially where the game of matrimony was being played, and life in Miss Austen's novels was frequently a "man hunt." The nostalgic remembrance for us of that earlier day, when these novels dealt with the domestic life of a rural England and a simple and genteel society whose daily round brings up no violent political discussions, theories about literary or social life, class problems, and least of all sex violences, comes as a relief to us today in our infinitely more complicated world.

For two other reasons—one, historic, the other, critical—Jane Austen did something remarkable when she completed *Pride and Prejudice* at the age of 21. Historically the book was important because its appearance marked a reaction on the one hand to the blood-and-thunder thrillers of her time: romances filled with castles possessed of double doors, secret chambers, underground passages haunted by ghosts, murderers, bloody victims, and echoing with sighs and groans; and resentment on the other hand against the gushy and sentimental novels creeping in at the close of her century which were filled with passions, sighs, tears, and heartaches. Jane Austen chose a sane middle ground: hers are ordinary, reasonable, normal people, set against a believable everyday background, living through commonplace events. Critically this novel of

rural England was important because in evolving her gentle art which dealt with the middle classes living in and around a typical English village, with its young gentlemen of good incomes, matchmaking aunts and mothers, young ladies who had to get married, country clergymen, and the moods and humors of a simple folk, she uncovered an immense new field to the future realistic novelist. She showed how that field might be cultivated, and was cultivated, throughout the 19th century, by writers that followed after her, and to the delight thereafter of millions of readers. It is safe to say that the realistic novels of Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot of a later England would have been impossible had Jane Austen not shown them the way, decades earlier, in her *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. The debt to Jane Austen of America's principal exponent of native realism—William Dean Howells—who, as Carl Van Doren puts it, "civilized American fiction by bringing it home from the frontier to the daily life of the settlements," was a debt incalculable. And with him and after him came our Bret Harte, Robert Herrick, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and then the flood.

M. EDMUND SPEARE

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CHAPTER 1

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IT is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise-and-four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before

Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.”

“What is his name?”

“Bingley.”

“Is he married or single?”

“Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!”

“How so? how can it affect them?”

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” replied his wife, “how can you be so tiresome! you must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.”

“Is that his design in settling here?”

“Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.”

“I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party.”

“My dear, you flatter me. I certainly *have* had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.”

“In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.”

“But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighborhood.”

“It is more than I engage for, I assure you.”

“But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that

account, for in general, you know, they visit no newcomers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for *us* to visit him if you do not."

"You are over-scrupulous, surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls: though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy."

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humored as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference."

"They have none of them much to recommend them," replied he; "they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls: but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters."

"Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way! You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves."

"You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

"Ah! you do not know what I suffer."

"But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighborhood."

"It will be no use to us, if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them."

"Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all."

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sar-

castic humor, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented, she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

CHAPTER 2

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MR. BENNET was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr. Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner:—Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with,

“I hope Mr. Bingley will like it, Lizzy.”

“We are not in a way to know *what* Mr. Bingley likes,” said her mother resentfully, “since we are not to visit.”

“But you forget, mamma,” said Elizabeth, “that we shall meet him at the assemblies, and that Mrs. Long has promised to introduce him.”

“I do not believe Mrs. Long will do any such thing. She has two nieces of her own. She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion of her.”

"No more have I," said Mr. Bennet; "and I am glad to find that you do not depend on her serving you."

Mrs. Bennet deigned not to make any reply, but unable to contain herself, began scolding one of her daughters.

"Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for Heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces."

"Kitty has no discretion in her coughs," said her father; "she times them ill."

"I do not cough for my own amusement," replied Kitty fretfully. "When is your next ball to be, Lizzy?"

"To-morrow fortnight."

"Aye, so it is," cried her mother, "and Mrs. Long does not come back till the day before; so it will be impossible for her to introduce him, for she will not know him herself."

"Then, my dear, you may have the advantage of your friend, and introduce Mr. Bingley to *her*."

"Impossible, Mr. Bennet, impossible, when I am not acquainted with him myself; how can you be so teasing?"

"I honor your circumspection. A fortnight's acquaintance is certainly very little. One cannot know what a man really is by the end of a fortnight. But if *we* do not venture somebody else will; and after all, Mrs. Long and her nieces must stand their chance; and, therefore, as she will think it an act of kindness, if you decline the office, I will take it on myself."

The girls stared at their father. Mrs. Bennet said only, "Nonsense, nonsense!"

"What can be the meaning of that emphatic exclamation?" cried he. "Do you consider the forms of introduction, and the stress that is laid on them, as non-

sense? I cannot quite agree with you *there*. What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books and make extracts."

Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

"While Mary is adjusting her ideas," he continued, "let us return to Mr. Bingley."

"I am sick of Mr. Bingley," cried his wife.

"I am sorry to hear *that*; but why did not you tell me so before? If I had known as much this morning I certainly would not have called on him. It is very unlucky; but as I have actually paid the visit, we cannot escape the acquaintance now."

The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished; that of Mrs. Bennet perhaps surpassing the rest; though, when the first tumult of joy was over, she began to declare that it was what she had expected all the while.

"How good it was in you, my dear Mr. Bennet! But I knew I should persuade you at last. I was sure you loved your girls too well to neglect such an acquaintance. Well, how pleased I am! and it is such a good joke, too, that you should have gone this morning and never said a word about it till now."

"Now, Kitty, you may cough as much as you choose," said Mr. Bennet; and, as he spoke, he left the room, fatigued with the raptures of his wife.

"What an excellent father you have, girls!" said she, when the door was shut. "I do not know how you will ever make him amends for his kindness; or me either, for that matter. At our time of life it is not so pleasant, I can tell you, to be making new acquaintance every day; but for your sakes, we would do anything. Lydia,

my love, though you *are* the youngest, I dare say Mr. Bingley will dance with you at the next ball."

"Oh!" said Lydia stoutly, "I am not afraid; for though I *am* the youngest, I'm the tallest."

The rest of the evening was spent in conjecturing how soon he would return Mr. Bennet's visit, and determining when they should ask him to dinner.

CHAPTER 3

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NOT all that Mrs. Bennet, however, with the assistance of her five daughters, could ask on the subject, was sufficient to draw from her husband any satisfactory description of Mr. Bingley. They attacked him in various ways—with barefaced questions, ingenious suppositions, and distant surmises; but he eluded the skill of them all, and they were at last obliged to accept the second-hand intelligence of their neighbor, Lady Lucas. Her report was highly favorable. Sir William had been delighted with him. He was quite young, wonderfully handsome, extremely agreeable, and, to crown the whole, he meant to be at the next assembly with a large party. Nothing could be more delightful! To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love; and very lively hopes of Mr. Bingley's heart were entertained.

"If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield," said Mrs. Bennet to her husband, "and

all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for."

In a few days Mr. Bingley returned Mr. Bennet's visit, and sat about ten minutes with him in his library. He had entertained hopes of being admitted to a sight of the young ladies, of whose beauty he had heard much; but he saw only the father. The ladies were somewhat more fortunate, for they had the advantage of ascertaining from an upper window that he wore a blue coat, and rode a black horse.

An invitation to dinner was soon afterwards dispatched; and already had Mrs. Bennet planned the courses that were to do credit to her housekeeping, when an answer arrived which deferred it all. Mr. Bingley was obliged to be in town the following day, and, consequently, unable to accept the honor of their invitation, &c. Mrs. Bennet was quite disconcerted. She could not imagine what business he could have in town so soon after his arrival in Hertfordshire; and she began to fear that he might be always flying about from one place to another, and never settled at Netherfield as he ought to be. Lady Lucas quieted her fears a little by starting the idea of his being gone to London only to get a large party for the ball; and a report soon followed, that Mr. Bingley was to bring twelve ladies and seven gentlemen with him to the assembly. The girls grieved over such a number of ladies, but were comforted the day before the ball by hearing, that instead of twelve he had brought only six with him from London,—his five sisters and a cousin. And when the party entered the assembly room it consisted only of five altogether,—Mr. Bingley, his two sisters, the husband of the eldest, and another young man.

Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike; he