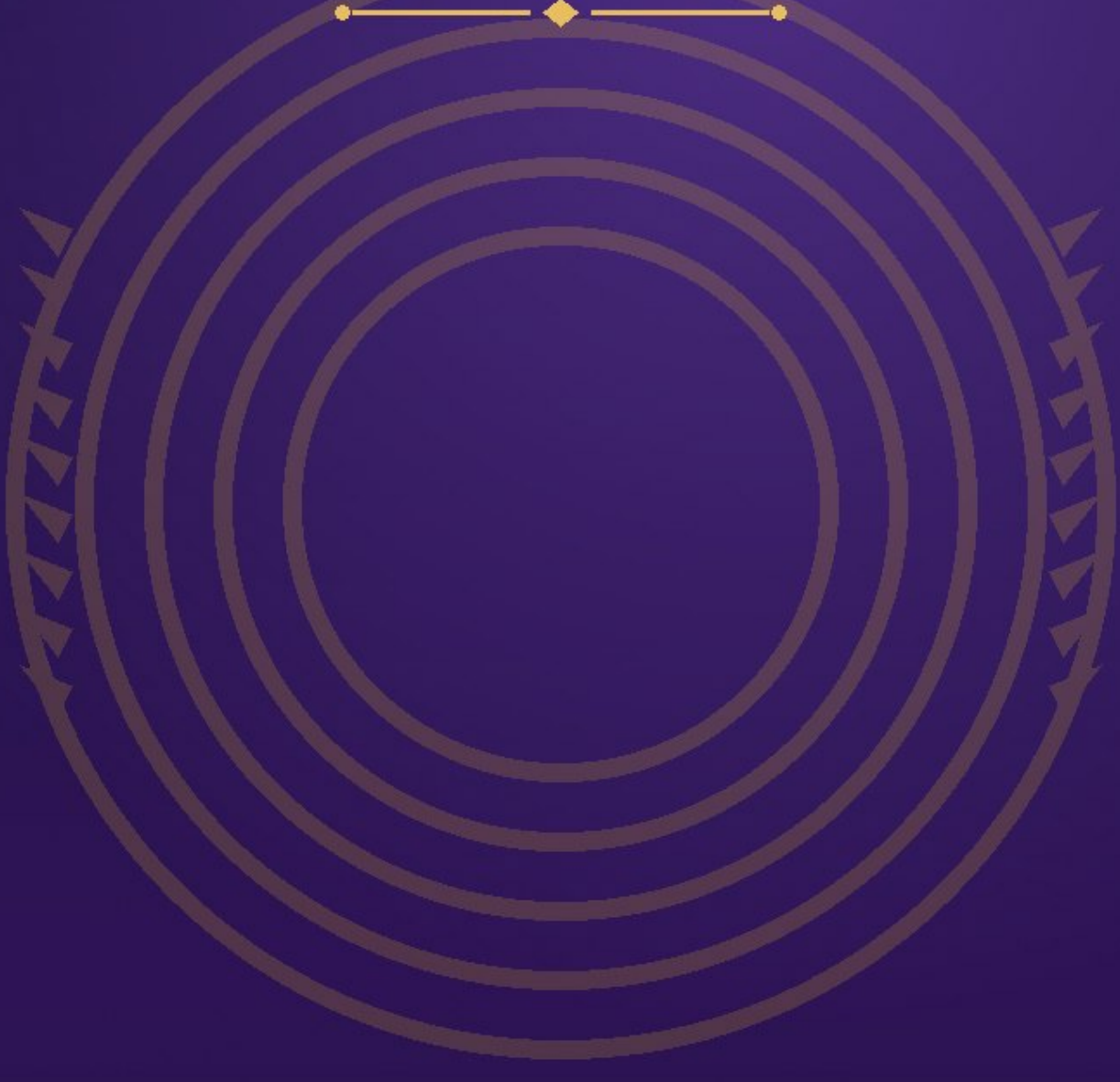
Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen



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Reading Jane’s Letters. _Chap 34._]

PRIDE.

and

PREJUDICE

by Jane Austen,

with a Preface by

George Saintsbury

and

Illustrations by

Hugh Thomson

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_To J. Comyns Carr

in acknowledgment of all I
owe to his friendship and
advice, these illustrations are
gratefully inscribed_

Hugh Thomson]

PREFACE.

Walt Whitman has somewhere a fine and just distinction between "loving by allowance" and "loving with personal love." This distinction applies to books as well as to men and women; and in the case of the not very numerous authors who are the objects of the personal affection, it brings a curious consequence with it. There is much more difference as to their best work than in the case of those others who are loved "by allowance" by convention, and because it is felt to be the right and proper thing to love them. And in the sect--fairly large and yet unusually choice--of Austenians or Janites, there would probably be found partisans of the claim to primacy of almost every one of the novels. To some the delightful freshness and humour of Northanger Abbey, _its completeness, finish, and_ entrain, _obscure the undoubted critical facts that its scale is small, and its scheme, after all, that of burlesque or parody, a kind in which the first rank is reached with difficulty._ Persuasion, _relatively faint in tone, and not enthralling in interest, has devotees who exalt above all the others its exquisite delicacy and keeping. The catastrophe of_ Mansfield Park _is admittedly theatrical, the hero and heroine are insipid, and the author has almost wickedly destroyed all romantic interest by expressly admitting that Edmund only took Fanny because

Mary shocked him, and that Fanny might very likely have taken Crawford if he had been a little more assiduous; yet the matchless rehearsal-scenes and the characters of Mrs. Norris and others have secured, I believe, a considerable party for it._ Sense and Sensibility _has perhaps the fewest out-and-out admirers; but it does not want them._

I suppose, however, that the majority of at least competent votes would, all things considered, be divided between Emma _and the present book; and perhaps the vulgar verdict (if indeed a fondness for Miss Austen be not of itself a patent of exemption from any possible charge of vulgarity) would go for_ Emma. _It is the larger, the more varied, the more popular; the author had by the time of its composition seen rather more of the world, and had improved her general, though not her most peculiar and characteristic dialogue; such figures as Miss Bates, as the Eltons, cannot but unite the suffrages of everybody. On the other hand, I, for my part, declare for_ Pride and Prejudice _unhesitatingly. It seems to me the most perfect, the most characteristic, the most eminently quintessential of its author's works; and for this contention in such narrow space as is permitted to me, I propose here to show cause._

_In the first place, the book (it may be barely necessary to remind the reader) was in its first shape written very early, somewhere about 1796, when Miss Austen was barely twenty-one; though it was revised and finished at Chawton some fifteen years later, and was not published till 1813, only four years before her death. I do not know whether, in this combination of the fresh and vigorous projection of youth, and the critical revision of middle life, there may be traced the distinct superiority in point of construction, which, as it seems to me,

it possesses over all the others. The plot, though not elaborate, is almost regular enough for Fielding; hardly a character, hardly an incident could be retrenched without loss to the story. The elopement of Lydia and Wickham is not, like that of Crawford and Mrs. Rushworth, a_ coup de théâtre; _it connects itself in the strictest way with the course of the story earlier, and brings about the denouement with complete propriety. All the minor passages--the loves of Jane and Bingley, the advent of Mr. Collins, the visit to Hunsford, the Derbyshire tour--fit in after the same unostentatious, but masterly fashion. There is no attempt at the hide-and-seek, in-and-out business, which in the transactions between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax contributes no doubt a good deal to the intrigue of_ Emma, _but contributes it in a fashion which I do not think the best feature of that otherwise admirable book. Although Miss Austen always liked something of the misunderstanding kind, which afforded her opportunities for the display of the peculiar and incomparable talent to be noticed presently, she has been satisfied here with the perfectly natural occasions provided by the false account of Darcy's conduct given by Wickham, and by the awkwardness (arising with equal naturalness) from the gradual transformation of Elizabeth's own feelings from positive aversion to actual love. I do not know whether the all-grasping hand of the playwright has ever been laid upon_ Pride and Prejudice; _and I dare say that, if it were, the situations would prove not startling or garish enough for the footlights, the character-scheme too subtle and delicate for pit and gallery. But if the attempt were made, it would certainly not be hampered by any of those loosenesses of construction, which, sometimes disguised by the conveniences of which the novelist can avail himself, appear at once

on the stage._

I think, however, though the thought will doubtless seem heretical to more than one school of critics, that construction is not the highest merit, the choicest gift, of the novelist. It sets off his other gifts and graces most advantageously to the critical eye; and the want of it will sometimes mar those graces--appreciably, though not quite consciously--to eyes by no means ultra-critical. But a very badly-built novel which excelled in pathetic or humorous character, or which displayed consummate command of dialogue--perhaps the rarest of all faculties--would be an infinitely better thing than a faultless plot acted and told by puppets with pebbles in their mouths. And despite the ability which Miss Austen has shown in working out the story, I for one should put Pride and Prejudice _far lower if it did not contain what seem to me the very masterpieces of Miss Austen's humour and of her faculty of character-creation--masterpieces who may indeed admit John Thorpe, the Eltons, Mrs. Norris, and one or two others to their company, but who, in one instance certainly, and perhaps in others, are still superior to them._

_The characteristics of Miss Austen's humour are so subtle and delicate that they are, perhaps, at all times easier to apprehend than to express, and at any particular time likely to be differently apprehended by different persons. To me this humour seems to possess a greater affinity, on the whole, to that of Addison than to any other of the numerous species of this great British genus. The differences of scheme, of time, of subject, of literary convention, are, of course, obvious enough; the difference of sex does not, perhaps, count for much, for there was a distinctly feminine element in "Mr. Spectator," and in Jane Austen's genius there was, though nothing

mannish, much that was masculine. But the likeness of quality consists in a great number of common subdivisions of quality--demureness, extreme minuteness of touch, avoidance of loud tones and glaring effects. Also there is in both a certain not inhuman or unamiable cruelty. It is the custom with those who judge grossly to contrast the good nature of Addison with the savagery of Swift, the mildness of Miss Austen with the boisterousness of Fielding and Smollett, even with the ferocious practical jokes that her immediate predecessor, Miss Burney, allowed without very much protest. Yet, both in Mr. Addison and in Miss Austen there is, though a restrained and well-mannered, an insatiable and ruthless delight in roasting and cutting up a fool. A man in the early eighteenth century, of course, could push this taste further than a lady in the early nineteenth; and no doubt Miss Austen's principles, as well as her heart, would have shrunk from such things as the letter from the unfortunate husband in the_ Spectator, _who describes, with all the gusto and all the innocence in the world, how his wife and his friend induce him to play at blind-man's-buff. But another_ Spectator _letter--that of the damsel of fourteen who wishes to marry Mr. Shapely, and assures her selected Mentor that "he admires your_ Spectators _mightily"--might have been written by a rather more ladylike and intelligent Lydia Bennet in the days of Lydia's great-grandmother; while, on the other hand, some (I think unreasonably) have found "cynicism" in touches of Miss Austen's own, such as her satire of Mrs. Musgrove's self-deceiving regrets over her son. But this word "cynical" is one of the most misused in the English language, especially when, by a glaring and gratuitous falsification of its original sense, it is applied, not to rough and snarling invective, but to gentle and oblique satire. If

cynicism means the perception of “the other side,” the sense of “the accepted hells beneath,” the consciousness that motives are nearly always mixed, and that to seem is not identical with to be--if this be cynicism, then every man and woman who is not a fool, who does not care to live in a fool’s paradise, who has knowledge of nature and the world and life, is a cynic. And in that sense Miss Austen certainly was one. She may even have been one in the further sense that, like her own Mr. Bennet, she took an epicurean delight in dissecting, in displaying, in setting at work her fools and her mean persons. I think she did take this delight, and I do not think at all the worse of her for it as a woman, while she was immensely the better for it as an artist._

_In respect of her art generally, Mr. Goldwin Smith has truly observed that “metaphor has been exhausted in depicting the perfection of it, combined with the narrowness of her field;” and he has justly added that we need not go beyond her own comparison to the art of a miniature painter. To make this latter observation quite exact we must not use the term miniature in its restricted sense, and must think rather of Memling at one end of the history of painting and Meissonier at the other, than of Cosway or any of his kind. And I am not so certain that I should myself use the word “narrow” in connection with her. If her world is a microcosm, the cosmic quality of it is at least as eminent as the littleness. She does not touch what she did not feel herself called to paint; I am not so sure that she could not have painted what she did not feel herself called to touch. It is at least remarkable that in two very short periods of writing--one of about three years, and another of not much more than five--she executed six capital works, and has not left a single failure. It is possible that the romantic paste in her composition was defective: we

must always remember that hardly anybody born in her decade--that of the eighteenth-century seventies--independently exhibited the full romantic quality. Even Scott required hill and mountain and ballad, even Coleridge metaphysics and German to enable them to chip the classical shell. Miss Austen was an English girl, brought up in a country retirement, at the time when ladies went back into the house if there was a white frost which might pierce their kid shoes, when a sudden cold was the subject of the gravest fears, when their studies, their ways, their conduct were subject to all those fantastic limits and restrictions against which Mary Wollstonecraft protested with better general sense than particular taste or judgment. Miss Austen, too, drew back when the white frost touched her shoes; but I think she would have made a pretty good journey even in a black one._

For if her knowledge was not very extended, she knew two things which only genius knows. The one was humanity, and the other was art. On the first head she could not make a mistake; her men, though limited, are true, and her women are, in the old sense, “absolute.” As to art, if she has never tried idealism, her realism is real to a degree which makes the false realism of our own day look merely dead-alive. Take almost any Frenchman, except the late M. de Maupassant, and watch him laboriously piling up strokes in the hope of giving a complete impression. You get none; you are lucky if, discarding two-thirds of what he gives, you can shape a real impression out of the rest. But with Miss Austen the myriad, trivial, unforced strokes build up the picture like magic. Nothing is false; nothing is superfluous. When (to take the present book only) Mr. Collins changed his mind from Jane to Elizabeth “while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire” (and we know how _Mrs. Bennet would have

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