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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PRIDE AND PREJUDICE \*\*\*

[Illustration:

GEORGE ALLEN

PUBLISHER

156 CHARING CROSS ROAD

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RUSKIN HOUSE

]

[Illustration:

\_Reading Jane’s Letters.\_ \_Chap 34.\_

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PRIDE.

and

PREJUDICE

by

Jane Austen,

with a Preface by

George Saintsbury

and

Illustrations by

Hugh Thomson

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[Illustration:

\_To J. Comyns Carr

in acknowledgment of all I

owe to his friendship and

advice, these illustrations are

gratefully inscribed\_

\_Hugh Thomson\_

]

PREFACE.

[Illustration]

\_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

stirred the fire), when Mr. Darcy “brought his coffee-cup back\_

himself,” \_the touch in each case is like that of Swift--“taller by the

breadth of my nail”--which impressed the half-reluctant Thackeray with

just and outspoken admiration. Indeed, fantastic as it may seem, I

should put Miss Austen as near to Swift in some ways, as I have put her

to Addison in others.\_