

Jane Austen's

Pride
and
Prejudice



ABRIDGED FOR YOUNG READERS BY

TANYA LANDMAN

Pride
and
Prejudice

A pair of wedding rings is positioned between the words 'Pride' and 'Prejudice'. The rings are interlocked, with the diamond ring on top and the plain band on the bottom. The top ring has a large diamond set in a four-pronged setting. The rings are rendered in a simple line-art style.

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Jane Austen's
Pride and *Prejudice*



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Introduction

by Tanya Landman

I first came across *Pride and Prejudice* when I was maybe twelve or thirteen and we studied it in English lessons at school.

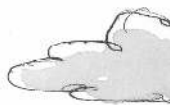
I grew up with brothers – climbing trees, riding bikes, falling over in the school playground. I was constantly covered in cuts and bruises. Our house was full of pets and it was noisy and messy and chaotic and a lot of fun. I didn't do girly. I didn't do pretty frocks or ballet or ballroom dancing. Romance? Ribbons? Roses? I wasn't interested in any of that stuff.

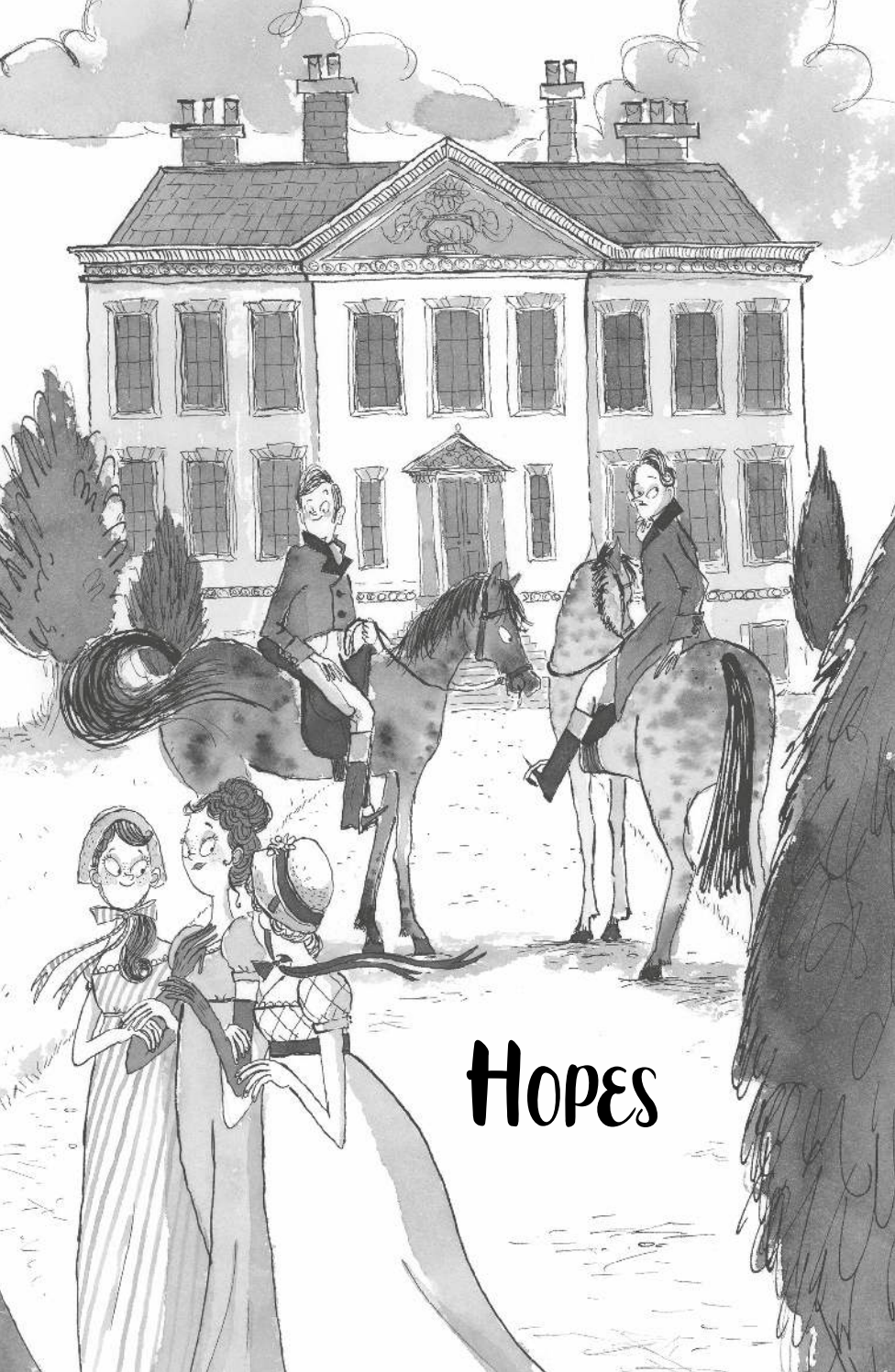
Pride and Prejudice was a window into a world that was so very different from my own. I was instantly fascinated by it; captivated by its elegance, awed by its sophistication and dazzled by the characters' witty repartee. Jane Austen's narrative voice and her sly,

razor-sharp observations made me laugh out loud. Her world wasn't a place that I'd actually want to live in myself, but as a reader? An observer? A tourist? I couldn't get enough of it.

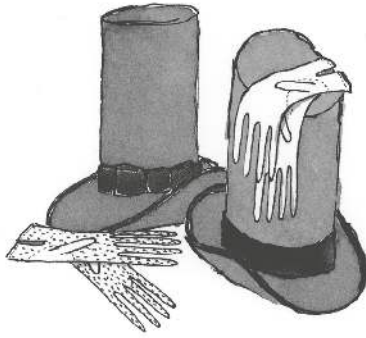
I went on to read all of Jane Austen's books and can honestly say I love each and every one of them, but *Pride and Prejudice* remains my firm favourite. I've lost count of the number of times I've re-read it – the book is an old friend that I return to over and over again. I never fail to be entranced by its heroine, Lizzy, who blows a breath of fresh air through all its stuffy drawing rooms and enchants a hero I defy any reader not to fall in love with.







HOPES



An Eligible Bachelor!

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

Whatever the man might or might not think is unimportant. If he moves into a new neighbourhood, the surrounding families consider him to be the rightful property of one or other of their daughters. He is a prize to be won, and so the race begins.

Mrs Bennet of Longbourn was a mother of five unmarried girls. When she heard that a wealthy young man was soon to move into the grandest house in the county, she acted swiftly.

Bursting into her husband's library she cried, "My dear Mr Bennet! Netherfield has a new tenant! His name is Mr Bingley and he moves in before the month is out. What a fine thing for our girls!"

Mr Bennet barely glanced up from his book.

“How can it affect them?” he said.

“My dear – naturally, I am thinking of his marrying one of them!”

Mr Bennet turned the page. “Is that his reason for settling here?”

“No...” Mrs Bennet confessed. “But he *may* fall in love with one of them. So you must visit him as soon as he comes. At once! Before Sir William Lucas or any of our neighbours. It will be impossible for our girls to make his acquaintance otherwise.”

But Mr Bennet, who took a curious pleasure in teasing his wife, refused. She persisted, saying he must call on Mr Bingley for the sake of their daughters! Mr Bennet promised only that he would write their new neighbour a note.

“I’ll say he’s welcome to marry whichever of them he chooses; though I must throw in a good word for Lizzy.”

Provoked, Mrs Bennet exclaimed, “Lizzy is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia! But you are always favouring her.”

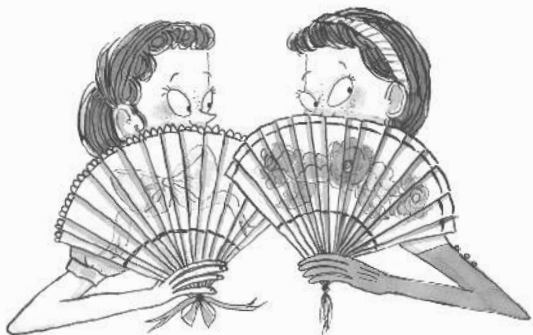
Mr Bennet, who considered at least two of his five daughters to be as silly and empty-headed as their mother, said, “Lizzy is quicker than the rest.”

“How can you insult your children in such a way?” wailed Mrs Bennet. “You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion for my poor nerves.”

“You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for them. Your nerves have been my old friends for more than twenty years.”

As a young man, Mr Bennet, captivated by her youth and beauty, had married a woman whose ignorance and folly soon put an end to any real affection for her. Though his wife’s silliness often amused him, he preferred the company of his books.

Mr Bennet’s character was a complex blend of sarcasm, reserve and odd, eccentric little quirks. Twenty-three years of marriage had not been enough to make Mrs Bennet understand him. Her own character was simpler: she was neither sensible nor well-informed and had an unreliable temper. The sole purpose of her life was to get her daughters married; her sole interests were fashion, finery and gossip.



First Impressions

Mr Bennet was, in fact, amongst the first to call on their new neighbour. He had always intended to go, despite assuring his wife that he would not. It wasn't until the evening after his visit that he shared his news, disclosing it in such a roundabout, teasing manner that it was some time before his wife and daughters understood him.

When Mrs Bennet realized her husband had made Mr Bingley's acquaintance she was in a tumult of joy. But no matter how hard she or her girls tried, they could not draw any information from Mr Bennet about Mr Bingley's appearance or character. For days they had to rely on local gossip, from which they learned that Mr Bingley was both young and handsome and so fond of dancing he was planning to attend the forthcoming ball in the Meryton Assembly Rooms. All

the neighbourhood's mothers agreed that to be fond of dancing was a certain step towards him falling in love! All the neighbourhood's daughters entertained high hopes of capturing Mr Bingley's heart.

When at last the day of the ball came and Mr Bingley entered the room, every female eye turned to him. To their horror, they saw that he had brought two fashionably dressed ladies with him. Horror turned to relief when they were discovered to be merely his sisters. He had also brought two gentlemen. The first, Mr Hurst, was the husband of Louisa, the eldest sister. The other was Bingley's friend Mr Darcy, a fine, tall man with handsome features and an air of nobility. The rumour that Mr Darcy had a larger fortune than Bingley's and a fine estate in Derbyshire flew around the room within five minutes of his arrival.

For the first half of the evening Mr Darcy was regarded with great admiration. But then the tide of his popularity turned, for he seemed to think himself superior to everyone there, and to be incapable of enjoying himself. Indeed, he was so much the opposite of Mr Bingley it was a wonder that they were friends at all. Mr Bingley was not only handsome but also lively and amiable. He danced every dance and talked eagerly of giving a ball himself soon at Netherfield. Mr Darcy, on the other hand, only took to the floor twice, once with each of Mr Bingley's sisters, and declined to be introduced to any

other lady in the room. The neighbourhood's mothers and daughters agreed: Mr Darcy was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world and they all passionately hoped they would never see him again.

The most violently opposed to him was Mrs Bennet, whose dislike of his general behaviour was sharpened into particular resentment by his having slighted one of her daughters. Jane, her eldest, was dancing with Mr Bingley, but because there were fewer gentlemen than ladies at the ball, her second daughter – Elizabeth – had been compelled to sit this dance out. When Mr Bingley had tried to persuade his friend to join in, Elizabeth chanced to overhear their conversation.

“Darcy!” said Bingley. “I hate to see you standing about. You had much better dance.”

“I certainly shall not,” replied his friend. “I detest it, unless I know my partner well. Your sisters are both taken and there is not another woman in the room with whom it would not be a punishment for me to dance.”

“You are wrong!” cried Mr Bingley. “I have never met with so many pleasant girls in my life. And several of them are uncommonly pretty!”

“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” said Mr Darcy, looking at Jane.

“She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld,” agreed Bingley warmly. “But there is one of her sisters just behind you, who is also very pretty and I daresay very

agreeable. Do let me ask Miss Bennet to introduce you.”

Mr Darcy glanced at Elizabeth.

“Tolerable,” he pronounced. “But not handsome enough to tempt me.”

Mr Darcy had then walked off, leaving Elizabeth sitting alone feeling distinctly chilly towards him. She related the incident with great spirit, however, to her close friend Charlotte Lucas, for Elizabeth had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous.

The evening passed off pleasantly for the whole family. Mrs Bennet saw her eldest daughter much admired by Mr Bingley and his sisters. In a quieter way, Jane was as pleased by their attention as her mother, and Elizabeth was delighted for her sister. Mary heard herself mentioned as the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood and the two youngest sisters, Kitty and Lydia, were lucky enough to never be without dance partners, which was all they cared for in a ball.

When they returned home to Longbourn they found Mr Bennet still up, reading.

“Oh my dear!” his wife exclaimed. “We have had the most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired! Mr Bingley danced with her twice. Twice! Think of that! She was the only creature in the room he asked a second time. First he asked Charlotte Lucas, and I was so vexed! But he caught sight of Jane and asked who she was and got

introduced and asked her for the next dance. Then he danced the third with Miss King and the fourth with Maria Lucas, the fifth with Jane again, the sixth with Lizzy and—”

“For God’s sake, say no more!” replied Mr Bennet. “If only he had sprained his ankle in the first!”

“My dear, I am delighted with him. So handsome. And his sisters are so elegant. I daresay the lace on Mrs Hurst’s gown—”

She was interrupted again, Mr Bennet refusing to hear any descriptions of fashions or finery. And so Mrs Bennet moved onto the subject of Mr Darcy’s shocking rudeness.

“Lizzy does not lose much by not appealing to him. He is a most disagreeable, horrid man, fancying himself so very great. Our Lizzy, not handsome enough to dance with? I detest the man.”



As soon as they were alone, Jane, who had been very cautious in her praise of Mr Bingley, confessed to her sister how much she liked him.

“He is just what a young man ought to be,” she said. “Sensible, good-humoured, lively. And he has such an easy manner.”

“He is also handsome,” Elizabeth teased. “And therefore must be declared perfect.”

“I was very much flattered by his asking me to dance a second time,” Jane admitted. “I did not expect such an honour.”

“I did,” said Elizabeth. “What could be more natural? You were five times prettier than any other woman in the room. No thanks to his gallantry for noticing that. But I admit he is very agreeable and I will therefore permit you to like him. You have liked many a stupider person.”

“Lizzy!”

“Oh, you are a great deal too ready to like everyone. I never heard you speak ill of anyone in your life.”

“I always speak what I think,” Jane said earnestly.

“I know you do! And that is what makes you such a wonder. You see only the good in people and none of the bad.” Elizabeth paused for a moment, and then asked, “Did you like his sisters, too? They do not seem to have their brother’s easy manner.”

Jane hesitated a fraction. “No ... not at first, perhaps. But they are very pleasing women when you talk to them. Miss Bingley is to live at Netherfield and I’m sure she will prove to be a charming neighbour.”

Elizabeth remained silent. With a sharper eye and more critical judgement, she had thought Mr Bingley’s sisters both proud and conceited. Time, she supposed, would reveal whether she or Jane was right.



Second Thoughts

A few days after the Meryton ball, the ladies of Longbourn called on the ladies of Netherfield. Their visit was then politely returned. Though Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley found Mrs Bennet intolerable and the younger sisters not worth speaking to, they wished to become better acquainted with Jane and Elizabeth. For two weeks Jane received their attention with the greatest pleasure, but Elizabeth could not bring herself to like or trust them. Their kindness to Jane, she suspected, was the result of their brother's admiration and not their own.

For it was evident whenever they saw him that Mr Bingley admired Jane. It was equally evident to Elizabeth that Jane was on the way to falling in love with him. Yet she knew Jane's calm and composed manner would protect her from the wagging tongues

of gossips. It pleased Elizabeth to think that her sister's feelings were not known by the world in general. Yet when she mentioned this to Charlotte, she was startled by her friend's response.

A large party had gathered at Lucas Lodge that night. Charlotte's father, Sir William Lucas, was an affable man who had been in business, made a reasonable fortune and then risen to the honour of knighthood. His wife, Lady Lucas, was a good and kind neighbour to Mrs Bennet. Of the several Lucas children, Charlotte was the oldest.

"Jane must help Bingley on!" Charlotte told Elizabeth. "She must make the most of every moment she has his attention. Few of us have heart enough to be in love unless we receive some encouragement. In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show *more* affection than she feels. If your sister does not demonstrate that she is in love, Bingley may never do more than simply like her."

"They have known each other barely a fortnight!" protested Elizabeth. "She cannot even be certain of her own feelings."

"Her feelings are irrelevant. Let her catch him first. Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of luck. There will be time enough after the wedding for her to fall in love, if she wishes to."

Elizabeth, convinced that her friend was joking,

laughed aloud. "You cannot be serious, Charlotte! You know you would never act in such a way yourself."



For the past two weeks Elizabeth had been so occupied in observing Mr Bingley and her sister, she was unaware that she herself had become an object of interest to his friend. Mr Darcy had at first barely thought her pretty. But no sooner had he decided that, than he began to notice that the beautiful expression of her dark eyes rendered her face uncommonly intelligent. To this discovery were added others. That her figure was light and pleasing. That her manners, though perhaps not those of the fashionable world, had an easy playfulness.

In short, Mr Darcy wished to know more about her and, as a step towards talking to her himself, had listened in on her conversations with others. Elizabeth had not noticed until, at the Lucas's party, she observed him edging towards where she was conversing with Charlotte. She was determined not to be intimidated by him, so when Charlotte opened the piano and begged Elizabeth to entertain everyone with a song, she obliged.

Before long her sister Mary insisted on taking her place, and Elizabeth let her. Although Mary had spent many an hour practising the piano, she played with a smug and pedantic manner and Elizabeth, easy and

unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure. After a long dreary concerto, Lydia and Kitty demanded that Mary play something more lively, and soon they had found partners and were engaged in a rowdy dance at the far end of the room.

If Mr Darcy looked irritated by their noise, Sir William Lucas did not notice.

“What a charming amusement for young people! There is nothing like dancing.” Catching sight of Elizabeth, he suddenly called out, “My dear Miss Eliza, why are you not joining in? Mr Darcy, you must allow me to suggest this young lady as a partner. You cannot refuse to dance when so much beauty is before you.”

Sir William took Elizabeth’s hand and would have passed it to Mr Darcy, but she drew back, saying stiffly, “Sir, I have no intention of dancing!”

Mr Darcy surprised her then by asking with grave courtesy to be allowed the honour of her hand, but Elizabeth stood firm.

Her refusal neither upset nor angered Mr Darcy. After she walked away, he was thinking again how much he admired Elizabeth when Miss Bingley accosted him.

“I can guess what you’re thinking,” she said with a weary sigh. “The stupidity, yet the self-importance of these people! What a dreadful evening!”

“You are quite wrong,” Mr Darcy replied. “My mind was more agreeably occupied. I have been meditating

on the very great pleasure a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can give.”

Miss Bingley observed him closely. Which lady had inspired such thoughts in him? she asked, lightly. And he replied boldly, “Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” she repeated. “I am all astonishment. How long has she been a favourite? And when am I to wish you joy?”

“That is exactly the question I expected you to ask,” he said drily. “A lady’s imagination is very rapid. It jumps from admiration to love and from love to matrimony in an instant.”

“I consider the matter absolutely settled. You will have a charming mother-in-law. And, of course, she will always be staying with you,” she said cattily.

Mr Darcy listened with perfect composure as Miss Bingley continued to entertain herself in this manner for some time. His calmness reassured her that she had nothing to fear.



An Invitation

Longbourn was only a mile from the small town of Meryton and so the Bennet girls were inclined to walk there three or four times a week. The two youngest, Kitty and Lydia, whose minds were more vacant than their sisters', went more frequently to glean gossip from their aunt, who very conveniently lived opposite a delightful little hat shop.

One afternoon the pair returned home with wonderful news. A militia regiment had not only arrived in the neighbourhood but was to remain there the whole winter!

Very soon, Kitty and Lydia's walks to Meryton became a daily occurrence. They could neither think nor talk of anything but officers, which only confirmed Mr Bennet's opinion that his two youngest daughters were the silliest girls in the county. He voiced this

aloud one day and his wife responded by expressing her own partiality for a smart red uniform.

Their conversation was interrupted by the footman who came in with a note from Netherfield for Jane.

“Who is it from?” demanded her mother. “What is it about? What does Mr Bingley say? Make haste and tell us. Make haste, my love.”

“It is from Miss Bingley,” said Jane, and read the note aloud.

My dear friend, if you do not agree to dine with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives. A whole day's conversation between two women can never end without a quarrel. Come as soon as you can. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers.

Yours ever, Caroline Bingley

“The gentlemen dining out?” said Mrs Bennet. “That’s unlucky.” She frowned for a moment and then said, with a cunning glint in her eye, “You must go on horseback, Jane dear. For it seems very likely to rain, and then they will surely ask you to stay the night as well.”

Jane duly set out, sent on her way with her mother’s cheerful prayers for bad weather. And Mrs Bennet’s

hopes and wishes were answered for it rained hard and continued raining all evening: Jane could certainly not come back home that night.



The next morning a servant from Netherfield brought a note for Elizabeth, which she read aloud.

My dearest Lizzy, I find myself very unwell this morning as a result of getting wet through yesterday. My kind friends will not hear of me returning until I am better. They also insist on my seeing the doctor, so do not be alarmed if you hear he has been. Excepting a sore throat and a headache there is not much the matter with me.

“Well, my dear,” Mr Bennet said to his wife. “If Jane should die, it will be a comfort for you to know it was all in pursuit of Mr Bingley.”

“It is only a cold,” she replied. “People do not die of such trifles. And she will be taken good care of.”

Nevertheless, Elizabeth was determined to walk to Netherfield to see for herself how her sister fared.

“How can you be so silly?” cried her mother. “In all this dirt? You will not be fit to be seen.”

“I shall be fit to see Jane, which is all I want.”

“We will go with you!” Lydia and Kitty said in unison. “As far as Meryton, at least.”

The three set off together and parted in Meryton, the two youngest going to visit one of their new friends, an officer’s wife. Elizabeth continued alone, crossing fields, climbing stiles, springing over puddles and arriving at Netherfield at last with weary ankles, dirty stockings and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise. She was shown into the breakfast parlour, where her appearance created a great deal of surprise.

Walking three miles, in such weather, and all alone! Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley looked appalled but received her politely. In their brother’s manner there was something better: good humour and kindness. Mr Darcy said little and Mr Hurst nothing. Mr Darcy was thinking what a gloriously healthy glow exercise had given her complexion. Mr Hurst was thinking only of his breakfast.

Elizabeth was taken up to see Jane immediately. Jane, who had longed for her sister but feared alarming her by asking for a visit, was delighted but remained in bed and could not manage much conversation.

Elizabeth sat silently with Jane until breakfast was over and then they were joined by Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, who showed so much concern for her sister that Elizabeth almost began to like them.

Elizabeth stayed by her sister’s side all day, but

when the clock struck three she felt that she must go. With icy politeness Miss Bingley offered to send for the carriage to take her home. But Jane, feverish and suffering from a terrible headache, became so anxious that Miss Bingley felt compelled to invite Elizabeth to stay at Netherfield too.

Elizabeth gratefully accepted, and a servant was dispatched to Longbourn to bring back a supply of clothes.



Cheap Tricks

At half past six, Elizabeth was summoned to dinner. When asked about the patient's progress, she informed the household that Jane was no better. Bingley's anxiety was obvious. His sisters sighed and shook their heads and said three or four times how much they felt for Jane, how dreadful it was to have such a bad cold, how much they hated being ill themselves, and then thought no more of the matter. All of Elizabeth's former dislike of them was restored.

When dinner was over Elizabeth returned to Jane, and Miss Bingley began criticizing her as soon as she was out of the room. Elizabeth's manners were very bad indeed, she said. Elizabeth was proud and impertinent, and had no wit, no style, no beauty.

Mrs Hurst agreed, adding, "She has nothing to recommend her other than being an excellent walker.

I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She looked almost wild.”

“She did indeed, Louisa! It was nonsensical to come at all. Scampering about the county because her sister has a cold? Her hair so untidy!”

“And her petticoat! Six inches deep in mud.”

“I did not notice,” said Mr Bingley. “I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennet looked remarkably well when she arrived this morning.”

“But you, Mr Darcy,” said Miss Bingley. “You would not wish to see your sister making such an exhibition of herself, I am sure.”

Mr Darcy agreed that he would not, and Miss Bingley continued, “To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt all alone! It shows an absolute indifference to decorum.”

“It shows an affection for her sister that is very pleasing,” said Mr Bingley.

“I am afraid, Mr Darcy,” said Miss Bingley in a half-whisper, “that this has rather affected your admiration of her fine eyes.”

“Not at all,” he replied. “They were brightened by the exercise.”

There was a pause, and then Mrs Hurst declared that Jane was a sweet girl, but with such a mother and such low family connections, Jane was unlikely to marry well. Why, she had an uncle in *trade*! Who

lived in Cheapside! The two sisters laughed long and hard about their very dear friend's frightfully vulgar relations.



Upstairs, Elizabeth sat with her sister until Jane fell asleep, and then, deeming it polite more than pleasant, returned to the company in the drawing room.

They were playing cards and invited her to join them, but she said she would read instead.

"You prefer reading to cards?" Mr Hurst looked at her in astonishment. "How odd."

"Miss Eliza Bennet," proclaimed Miss Bingley, "despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else."

Elizabeth defended herself from this attack. "I am not a great reader," she said. "And I have pleasure in many things."

"Including nursing your sister, I am sure," said Mr Bingley with a smile. "And I hope you will soon be rewarded by seeing her well."

Elizabeth thanked him with all her heart and walked towards a table where a few books were lying. Taking one up, she settled herself in a chair.

She was soon distracted, however, by a conversation between Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley, who were speaking of his sister, Georgiana.

“How I long to see her again! Such a countenance! Such manners! And so very accomplished for her age. Her performance on the piano is exquisite.”

“How do all young ladies manage it?” Mr Bingley interrupted. “I never heard a single one spoken of for the first time without being informed she was very accomplished!”

“That is true,” replied Mr Darcy. “And I believe the word is applied to many a woman who does not truly deserve it. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen who are really accomplished.”

“Nor I,” agreed Miss Bingley.

“Then,” observed Elizabeth, “you must expect a great deal from your idea of an accomplished woman.”

“Yes, I do,” said Mr Darcy.

“Oh certainly,” cried Miss Bingley, Darcy’s faithful assistant. “A truly accomplished woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages. And besides, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner and her tone of voice.”

“All this and more,” added Darcy. “She must be constantly improving her mind by extensive reading.”

“I am no longer surprised at you knowing only six accomplished women,” laughed Elizabeth. “I rather wonder that you know any!”

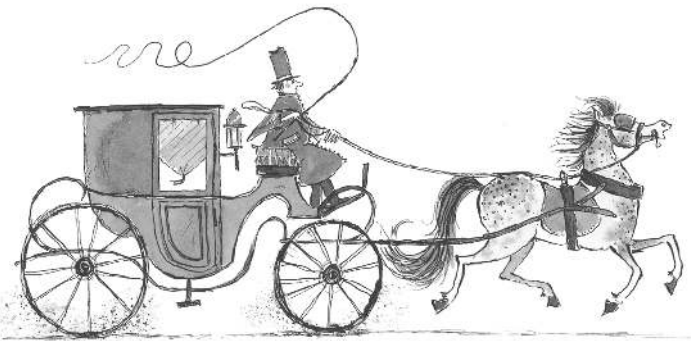
Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley began noisily protesting

that they knew many such women. But then Mr Hurst called their attention back to the card game and Elizabeth soon left the room to look in on Jane.

“Elizabeth Bennet,” said Miss Bingley, “seeks to recommend herself to the opposite sex by undermining her own. It is a very cheap, low trick.”

Darcy, to whom the remark was addressed, said only, “All the methods ladies sometimes employ to captivate men are cheap and low. Anything that borders on cunning is despicable.”

Miss Bingley dropped the subject.



An Awkward Visit

Elizabeth spent most of the night in her sister's room and in the morning was pleased to see Jane looking a little better. Even so, she sent a note to their mother asking her to visit and make her own assessment of Jane's situation.

Mrs Bennet, accompanied by her two youngest girls, arrived soon after breakfast. Satisfied that Jane's illness was not serious, Mrs Bennet had no wish for her daughter's immediate recovery. Good health would remove Jane from Netherfield and from Mr Bingley.

"She is a great deal too ill to be carried home today," Mrs Bennet told Mr Bingley when she returned to the breakfast parlour.

"We would not hear of it!" he cried.

"Jane suffers a great deal," Mrs Bennet continued. "Though with the greatest patience in the world, which



is always the way with her. She has, without exception, the sweetest temper I have ever met. I often tell my other girls they are nothing compared with her.”

An awkward conversation followed, in which Mrs Bennet smiled upon Mr Bingley and frowned at his friend. Indeed, her manner towards Mr Darcy was so cold that Elizabeth, for the sake of saying something that might turn her mother’s thoughts, asked if Charlotte Lucas had called at Longbourn yesterday.

“Yes, she did, with her father.” Looking pointedly at Mr Darcy she added, “What an agreeable man Sir William is! So genteel and easy! *That* is my idea of good breeding.” She turned back to Bingley. “The Lucases are very good sort of girls but they are not handsome. Not that I think Charlotte is very plain, but then she is our particular friend.”

“She seems a very pleasant young woman,” said Mr Bingley.

“Oh! Yes, but you must confess she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so and envied me Jane’s beauty. I do not like to boast of my own child, but one does not often see anybody better looking. When she was only fifteen there was a man in town so much in love with her that we were sure he would make her an offer of marriage. But he did not. Perhaps he thought her too young. However, he wrote some very pretty verses about her.”

“And so ended his affection,” said Elizabeth impatiently. “I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”

“I have always considered poetry as the food of love,” said Darcy.

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may be. But a thin, slight one? I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.”

Darcy smiled. A general pause ensued. Elizabeth could think of nothing to say, and after a short silence, Mrs Bennet repeated thanks to Mr Bingley for his kindness to Jane. Soon after, the carriage was ordered.

Lydia, who had been whispering with Kitty during the whole visit, now put herself forward and reminded Mr Bingley of the promise he'd made when he first arrived in the neighbourhood: that he would host a ball at Netherfield. Lydia was a well-grown girl of fifteen who had high spirits and a natural self-assurance. She absolutely insisted that Mr Bingley keep his word.

“I am perfectly ready to,” he replied. “When your sister is fully recovered you shall name the day.”

And so Mrs Bennet and her two youngest daughters departed. Elizabeth returned upstairs to Jane, leaving her family's behaviour and her own to the scrutiny of Mr Darcy and Bingley's two sisters. Darcy, however, could not be persuaded to join in their criticisms of Elizabeth, in spite of all Miss Bingley's witticisms on “fine eyes”.



Danger Looms for Darcy

The rest of the day passed much the same as the one before. The invalid continued slowly to mend and in the evening Elizabeth joined the party in the drawing room. Mr Hurst and Mr Bingley were playing cards and Mrs Hurst was observing their game. Mr Darcy was writing a letter to his sister. Miss Bingley, seated near him, was constantly interrupting. Elizabeth took up some needlework and watched, amused, at what passed between Darcy and his companion. The constant compliments of the lady on his handwriting, or on the evenness of his lines, were met by the gentleman's perfect indifference. It was a curious dialogue, yet each of them behaved exactly as she would have expected.

“How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!” exclaimed Miss Bingley.

Darcy made no answer.

“You write uncommonly fast!”

“You are mistaken,” he said, without looking up. “I write rather slowly.”

“How many letters you must have to write in the course of a year! Letters of business, too! How odious I should think them.”

“It is fortunate then that they fall to my lot instead of yours.”

“Pray tell your sister that I long to see her.”

“I have already told her so once, as you desired.”

“I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well.”

“Thank you – but I always mend my own.”

“How can you contrive to write so evenly?”

Silence.

“Tell your sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp; and pray let her know that I am quite in raptures with her beautiful little design for a table.”

“Will you give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again?” asked Mr Darcy drily. “At present I have not room to do them justice.”

“It is of no consequence. I shall see her in January.”

When at last Mr Darcy finished his letter he asked if Miss Bingley and Elizabeth might indulge the company with some music.

Miss Bingley moved eagerly to the piano. After a polite request that Elizabeth would lead the way, which was equally politely declined, Miss Bingley seated herself and began to play. Mrs Hurst sang with her sister and, as she watched, Elizabeth could not help observing how frequently Mr Darcy's eyes were fixed on herself. Surely she could not be an object of admiration to so proud a man! And yet to look at her because he disliked her would be still more strange. She could only imagine that she drew his attention because he thought her manner somehow terribly wrong and reprehensible. The thought didn't pain her. She liked him too little to care.

After some Italian songs, Miss Bingley played a lively Scottish air. Mr Darcy, drawing near Elizabeth, said to her, "Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize the opportunity of dancing a reel?"

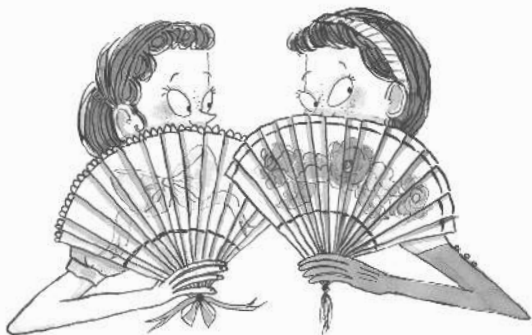
She smiled but gave no answer. Surprised, he repeated the question.

"Oh I heard you," said she. "I could not decide how to reply. You wanted me to say yes so you could have the pleasure of despising my taste. But I delight in confounding such schemes. So no – I do not want to dance a reel. Despise me now, if you dare."

"Indeed," he said graciously, "I do not dare."

Elizabeth, who had expected to offend him, was amazed at his gallantry. But there was a sweet

playfulness in her manner that made it difficult for her to offend anybody. Darcy had never been so bewitched by a woman as he was by her. He really believed that, were it not for the inferiority of her family connections, his heart would be in some danger.



Danger Creeps Closer

The following evening Jane was well enough to venture downstairs. Elizabeth, seeing her sister well wrapped up against the cold, escorted her into the drawing room, where Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley welcomed her with warmth. Elizabeth had never seen them so agreeable as they were for the hour that passed before the gentlemen joined them. After that, Miss Bingley's eyes were only on Darcy.

Mr Bingley was plainly delighted to see Jane. Full of joy and attention he piled up the fire lest she should suffer from the change of room, and insisted she sit the other side of the fireplace, further from the door and any draught that might blow through it. He then sat down by her and talked scarcely to anyone else. The pair took such evident delight in each other's company, Elizabeth watched them with great pleasure.

Mr Hurst wished for a card game, but when no one would oblige him he stretched himself out on a sofa and fell asleep. Darcy took up a book; Miss Bingley did the same. Mrs Hurst, principally occupied in playing with her bracelets and rings, commented now and then on whatever her brother and Miss Bennet talked about.

Miss Bingley watched Mr Darcy's progress through his book, perpetually making enquiries or looking at his page. She could not win him, however, to any conversation. At last, exhausted by the attempt to be amused by her own book – which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his – gave a great yawn and said, “I declare there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than a book!”

No one replied. She yawned again and then, hearing her brother mention a ball, turned to him and said, “Are you serious in wishing for a ball at Netherfield? There are some among us for whom that would be more punishment than pleasure.”

“If you mean Darcy,” replied her brother, “he may go to bed if he chooses. As for the ball, it is a settled thing.”

“I should like balls better if they were conducted in a different manner,” replied Miss Bingley. “It would be more rational if intelligent conversation was the purpose of the evening, not dancing.”

“It may be more rational, my dear Caroline, but it would not then be a ball,” smiled her brother.

Miss Bingley did not reply. Instead she rose to her feet and walked about the room, hoping to catch Mr Darcy’s eye, but his attention was steadfastly fixed upon his book. In desperation, she turned to Elizabeth and said, “Miss Eliza Bennet, won’t you join me? A walk around the room after sitting so long is wonderfully refreshing.”

Elizabeth, caught by surprise, agreed. Mr Darcy, equally surprised, looked up and closed his book. Miss Bingley invited him to join them but he declined.

“There can be but two reasons the pair of you wish to walk,” he said. “You either have secret matters you wish to discuss, in which case I shall be in the way. Or you are aware that your figures are best displayed by walking, in which case I can admire you much better as I sit here by the fire.”

“Shocking!” cried Miss Bingley, turning to Elizabeth. “How shall we punish him for such a speech?”

“Tease him,” Elizabeth replied. “You are well acquainted; you must know how it is to be done.”

“But I do not. Really, Miss Bennet, there is nothing in Mr Darcy that can be laughed at.”

“What a pity,” smiled Elizabeth. “I dearly love a laugh.”

“The wisest and best of men may be rendered

ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke,” Mr Darcy observed.

“Certainly, but I am not one of those people,” replied Elizabeth. “I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do amuse me, I admit. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without.”

“Perhaps that is not possible. But it has been the aim of my life to avoid such weaknesses.”

“Such as vanity and pride?”

“Yes,” said he. “Vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride – where there is real superiority – will always be justified.”

Elizabeth turned away to hide another smile.

“Your examination of Mr Darcy is over, I presume?” said Miss Bingley. “Pray what is the result?”

“I am perfectly convinced that Mr Darcy has no defect,” declared Elizabeth.

“I have faults enough,” he admitted. “My temper would perhaps be called resentful. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others, nor their offences against myself. My good opinion, once lost, is lost for ever.”

“Implacable resentment!” cried Elizabeth. “That is a failing indeed. But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it.”

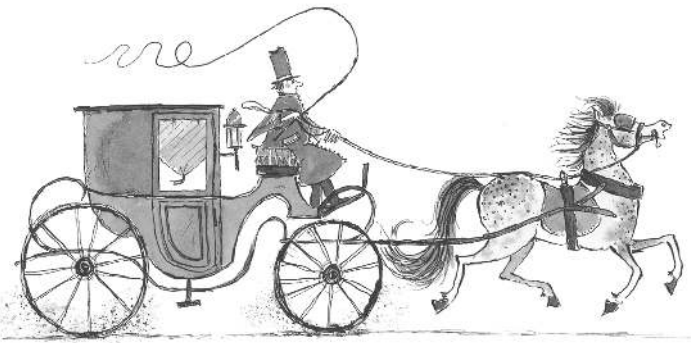
“There is, I believe, in everybody a defect or two that not even the best education can overcome.”

“And your defect is to hate everybody.”

“And yours,” he replied with a smile, “is to wilfully misunderstand them.”

“Music!” cried Miss Bingley, tired of a conversation in which she had no part. “Music! Louisa, you will not mind my waking Mr Hurst?”

Her sister made no objection. The piano was opened and Darcy was not sorry for it. He began to feel the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention.



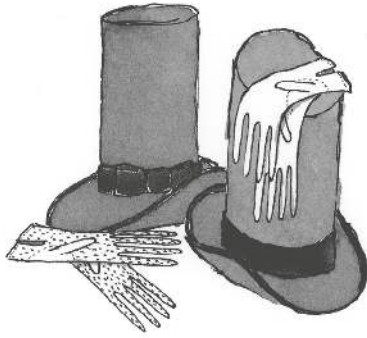
Homecoming

The Bennet sisters had agreed that Elizabeth would write to their mother the next morning asking that the carriage be sent to collect them. Mrs Bennet, however, had calculated on her daughters remaining at Netherfield for a full week and therefore replied that the carriage could not be spared before Tuesday. The sisters were compelled to ask Mr Bingley for the use of his, and he – reluctantly – agreed that it would carry them home on the morrow.

Mr Bingley felt real sorrow that the young ladies were to leave, but to Mr Darcy the news was a welcome relief. Elizabeth had attracted him much more than he liked and he resolved now that no sign of admiration should escape him. He scarcely spoke ten words to her through the whole of Saturday, and when they were at one time left by themselves for half an hour he adhered

to his book and would not even look at her.

On Sunday morning the separation finally took place, and Jane and Elizabeth were welcomed home with ill grace by their mother. Their father, though laconic in his expressions of pleasure, was really very glad to see his two eldest daughters. He had felt their lack in the family circle. The evening conversation had lost much of its animation and all its sense in the absence of Jane and Elizabeth.



A Distant Relation

At breakfast the following morning, Mr Bennet informed his wife that a gentleman would be dining with them that evening.

“Mr Bingley?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” said her husband. “It is a person whom I have never met in the whole course of my life.”

This roused a general astonishment and he had the pleasure of being eagerly questioned by his wife and five daughters all at once.

After amusing himself some time with their curiosity he explained, “About a month ago I received this letter, and a fortnight ago I answered it. It is from Mr Collins, a clergyman who writes from the parsonage of Hunsford in Kent and who, when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases.”

At once Mrs Bennet began to wail bitterly against

the injustice of it. Why should Longbourn be taken away from her five daughters when her husband died? Why should it be given to a man whom nobody knew or cared about?

Elizabeth and Jane had often tried to explain to their mother that the Longbourn estate was entailed and could only legally be passed on to a male heir. Their father's distant cousin Mr Collins would inherit their home and there was nothing that could be done about it. But Mrs Bennet was beyond the reach of reason. She continued to grumble until Mr Bennet said, "Listen to his letter, my dear. You may perhaps be a little soothed by it." He read aloud.

Dear Sir,

Having received ordination at Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who has bestowed on me the rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to conduct myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.

As a clergyman, I feel it my duty to promote the blessing of peace in all families and on these grounds I flatter myself that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of the Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side. I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your