Patronage

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Bingley and Darcy meet for the first time.

The Bingleys had lived at St Luke’s Abbey since the Dissolution - and lost more of their wealth with every generation that passed. By Robert Bingley’s time, they had closed off half the manor, and could scarcely afford the upkeep up the rest. He certainly could do nothing for his numerous daughters and younger sons.

Charles, the youngest of these, left home in search of fortune. Against all expectation, he found it - in pottery, to be precise, though he had such a gift for making money that it hardly signified. He died early, but not before leaving behind three small children, careful instructions as to their education, and almost 140,000 l. All of the family’s expectations fell on his son, a sweet-natured, light-hearted boy who could scarcely have been less suited to his role.

This Charles, after years at home, was finally sent off to school. He was meant, he knew, to form useful acquaintance - to ingratiate himself with the sons of great and lesser gentlemen, to forge connections - but he froze into terrified silence any time he thought of it.

The other boys disliked him - or rather, they disliked his vast inheritance, and where it had come from. Those first few weeks were a misery. His sisters, their ambitions notwithstanding, fretted over his plaintive letters.

That all changed, however, about six weeks later. Charles was in the process of acquiring a cut lip to go with his swollen eye, crying as his head struck the wall.

"What the devil is happening here?"

Somebody dropped him, and they all looked up - and then further up - at the stranger. He was much older - fifteen or sixteen - and staring down at them in utter outrage. Charles quailed; the
older boys had all the grandeur of adults in his eyes, and this tall, imperious one even more so than usual.

"D-Darcy," one stammered, "w-we were just having a bit of fun. Weren't we, Bingley?"

"You might have been," said Charles, nursing his lip. "I wasn't."

"I suggest," said Darcy, very softly, "that you four return to your rooms. Now. I would hate to lose my temper."

They fled.

"As for you, Bingley, come with me. No doubt I can find something useful for you to do."

"Yes, sir," Charles said, hardly able to believe his luck. "Oh. They are going to be very angry with me, will not they?"

"You need not concern yourself with them." Darcy permitted himself a wry half-smile, his eyes crinkling up at the corners. "I shall be looking after you now."

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