A megrim began its assault that morning, shortly after Georgiana awoke. She should have expected it given an unusual confluence of factors present.

Her courses were due soon, and she often suffered severe headaches within a day or two of their onset. The weather also increased the pressure inside her head. What she wouldn’t give for a sudden torrential downpour right now; if only one could order the weather to heart’s desire. A brief stroll around the gardens failed to soothe her, that day’s mounting summer heat making her head feel like an overfilled wine skin ready to burst.

Truth be told, this megrim had been building up for days. Though an improvement over his gloominess of the preceding months, her brother’s new nervousness had set her on edge. His obsessive attention to detail yesterday combined with his frenetic pacing worked its way under her skin—well, more like a frantic tattoo beat under her scalp.

The servants fretted, exacerbating the situation. Junior staff sought validation more frequently out of an unusual insecurity. They also appeared to be quite anxious that Mr. Darcy’s nerves were due to Miss Bingley’s presence. Footmen and maids alike hovered apprehensively while either Darcy or Miss Bingley were nearby.

No! She thought, wanting to shout at the staff. Miss Bingley deserved no more concern than she
received during past visits to Pemberley. Georgiana would take drastic measures if Darcy slipped a cog and showed any interest in linking himself maritally to that wretched shrew.

The idea of Miss Bingley becoming her sister-in-law set Georgiana’s jaws tightly. She resembled her brother during his moments of cold hauteur, masking panic beneath the skin. Of course the locking of her face and grinding of her teeth only increased the tension on her poor, aching head. The taunting bitchery Miss Bingley had unleashed during Miss Elizabeth’s visit had been stressful enough for an inexperienced hostess. Georgiana couldn’t imagine living with that nastiness every day, day in and day out. It would be hell on earth.

But the last straw was the unexpected departure of her brother shortly after he’d attempted to call on Miss Elizabeth and the Gardiners at the inn in Lambton. Urgent business, my foot, she thought. He’s left me here to deal with that orange horror while he chases his beloved to London.

Sitting in the quiet of her favorite sitting room situated along the north side of the manse, she tried to relax. The windows opened out over the coolest part of the lawn, beneath sheltering oaks, a tickle of breeze threading through the shade and into the room. Thinking about her brother’s apparent attraction to amiable Miss Elizabeth helped as much as the room's peace. She really didn’t begrudge him the opportunity to follow his bliss. He’d made so many sacrifices for her since their parents had died, especially after Ramsgate. Darcy had been very caring, consoling her the best he could given his rather reclusive nature and lack of experience dealing with strong emotions, let alone heartbroken young women. Besides, Miss Elizabeth would make a lovely sister, so outgoing and generous of spirit. Georgiana felt her headache ease just the tiniest bit as she thought of the possibility of having heart-to-heart chats with Miss Elizabeth, just as she used to do with her friends at school.

But her relaxation was shattered, the room’s calm ruptured as Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst burst in, entering like a florid gust of hot summer wind.

“Georgiana! There you are! We have been looking all over for you, dear girl! Fancy finding you in the last place we would look. Whatever are you doing in this cheerless room alone?” Miss Bingley’s nasal voice cleaved the poor girl’s brainpan, each word like a rose thorn pushed into her eardrum.

Egads—her attire was as painful as her voice, the brilliant canary yellow day dress trimmed with mandarin too bright too look at for more than a second at a time. Georgiana felt a piercing pain behind her eyes each time she glanced at Miss Bingley.

“Yes, Georgiana, we’ve missed you this morning. Why it’s nearly time for tea! Shouldn’t you order some now?” Mrs. Hurst was a pallid imitation of her raucous sister, painful to hear and see but akin to a blunt persistent thumping rather than her sibling’s sharply insistent auditory and visual stabbing.

Stay calm, she told herself. Breathe easy. Where oh where was Mrs. Annesley? Her companion helped her regulate herself when Georgiana was in stressful situations, but the older woman had personal errands to run and must not have returned yet from Lambton. And Mr. Bingley—where the devil was he? Was he shirking his duty as head of his family, hiding from his own sisters?

The girl redirected her attention and focused on calling for tea service. A skittery maid bobbed, took her instructions, dashed a curtsey and fled down the hall.

“Georgie dear, wouldn’t you rather take tea in the main sitting room? This one is so dark and airless, the colors so dreary and passé. Why I’ll change this room immediately when I have, I mean, if I have the chance—”
Georgiana’s jaw tightened. She summoned a footman to track down the poor maid and change the order, dismissing him as she led the Bingley sisters to the main sitting room.

“Ah, it’s so much brighter and warmer in here. Though it does need the freshening of a woman’s touch. This room must not have been updated since, oh, ten years ago, yes?” Miss Bingley rattled on, loving the sound of her own voice.

“Yes, Caro, this print would have been popular at least ten years ago,” noted the older sister as she ran her hand along the fine silk damask of the settee on which she sat. “I’m sure you could do marvelous things in here with au courant wallpaper and upholstery.”

“Certainly. I could see a sunny yellow in here instead of this washed out ivory, something like my day dress. Oh, and a Chinoiserie tea house silk print in a matching yellow with orange and green chrysanthemums, yes?” Beady eyes worked their way across the room’s accessories, inventorying her wishes. With each pass of the gaudy woman’s gaze, Georgiana’s teeth gritted harder, her hands clenching tighter beneath the folds of her skirt.

“Why that would suit you perfectly, dear! I can see it now! I wonder which warehouse would have the best selection of draperies a la dernier cri to match such a color scheme? We’ll have to look during the little season, Caro.” Mrs. Hurst had apparently forgotten Georgiana was even in the room, let alone that Caroline was not Mrs. Darcy.

The idea of Miss Bingley thoughtlessly discarding Darcy family heirlooms for the sake of fashion brought on a wave of nausea.

“Well, such tasteful accoutrement wouldn’t suit that brown-skinned Miss Eliza Bennet. I suppose if she ever has the opportunity to decorate a room she would select something as drab and lacking in features as she is. Thank goodness we’ll never have to experience such failure—although it would be amusing to see it just for a laugh.”

Georgiana hoped she did not look as green as she felt, her stomach roiling in sync with the throbbing in her head. At any moment that wretched Miss Bingley could slip and make similarly insulting comments about her now-bilious complexion...

The two older women shrieked with laughter like jackdaws, continuing their screeching even after the tea service had been delivered. Georgiana poured each of them a cup, praying that she could hurry through tea and escape to her room.

Fitzwilliam, why did you leave these termagants here with me to malinger and nest? She couldn’t help the sense of abandonment that settled about her shoulders as she fought the urge to retch.

Miss Bingley snorted indelicately into her tea cup, too caught up in her backbiting humour to restrain herself. “Lud, Louisa, couldn’t you see it? Miss Eliza would probably insist on upholstery with mud-coloured skirtings and grass-shaded carpetings! Oh, and perhaps a stile to climb over at the door’s jamb!”

They brayed. There was no other word for it. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst had devolved into donkeys in dresses, hee-hawing over their own ridiculous and rude imagery.

All the tea and a little biscuit Georgiana had choked down now rose at the back of her throat. The pounding in her head had reached a feverish tempo, the pain blinding her senses. She set down her tea cup and saucer on the serving table a bit too firmly, drawing the attention of the two older women.

“Georgiana!” Miss Bingley barked in surprise, finally noting the girl’s greenish pallor.
Georgiana rose slowly, swallowing hard as she fought back bile, closing her eyes to the effulgently exotic bird perched across the table from her.

“Whatever is the matter with you?” cawed the flashy feathered female, suddenly panicked at the thought the girl might be ill with something catching.

Georgiana’s hands flew to her head to press palm-flat against her temples, as if to hold her brains in place. But it didn’t work. The pent-up pressure found relief through her mouth.

“AAAH! YOU ARE WHAT IS THE MATTER! YOUR ILL-MANNERED, LOWBRED, DUNDERHEADED CHATTER IS HURTING MY HEAD AND OFFENDING MY SENSIBILITIES! WHY YOU BELIEVE FOR A MOMENT THAT YOU ARE FIT TO BE A GENTLEWOMAN LET ALONE THE MISTRESS OF PEMBERLEY IS BEYOND ME, YOU PATTERING PIECE! YOU’VE MADE ME ILL TO THE POINT OF CASTING MY ACCOUNTS! YOU AND YOUR SISTER ARE DRIVING ME TO BEDLAM!”

With that the poor green-gilled girl ran to a large oriental jardiniere that stood in front of the south window, grasped it by the rim and vomited her tea into the ceramic vessel. She heaved once, twice, and a third time for good measure.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst sat stunned into silence, their mouths slack. Tea dribbled down the front of Miss Bingley’s dress as she had inadvertently tipped her too-full cup off level. A morsel of cake dropped from the corner of Mrs. Hurst’s unmoving mouth, falling into her lap.

Georgiana took a big gulp of air, collected herself, then walked to the tea service to grab a napkin. She wiped her mouth as she tugged on the bell pull for a servant.

“Please see to it the jardiniere is cleaned, John. I’m afraid I’ve taken ill and must go to my room. Thank you.” The footman bowed, straining to keep a straight face. He’d heard everything from his station in the hallway.

Georgiana paused by the door, donning her very best Miss Darcy decorum. “Ladies, please accept my apologies. I’m afraid I must excuse myself as I am suffering from a megrim. The staff will serve dinner as scheduled this evening. Good day.” She offered the briefest of curtseys.

Pulling the sitting room door behind her, the girl turned to walk toward the family wing. She heard the muffled clattering of china behind her.

A worried Mrs. Reynolds emerged from the mistress’ study just as Georgiana walked by. “Dearie, Polly said you looked like you weren’t feeling well while you were taking tea with the—um, Bingley sisters. Are you alright? You don’t look quite like yourself. Do I need to call for the apothecary?” The older woman gently felt the girl’s forehead, then took her hand to check her wrist for a racing pulse. Neither a fever nor rapid heartbeat was detected.

Georgiana paused for a moment, looking into the motherly housekeeper’s eyes. “I’ve had a megrim all day. I’m going to go and rest for a while.” She tilted her head in thought for a moment. “I don’t feel like myself at the moment, Mrs. Reynolds, at all.”

She paused again, then surprised the older woman with a quick hug, whispering in her ear, “Actually, I feel much better—after my tea.”

Her blonde curls bobbing, the girl skipped away with a smirk on her face toward the sanctuary of her room.
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