



It is a truth **universally**  
**acknowledged** that girls  
just wanna **have fun.**

# REPUTATION

'As if  
*Bridgerton* and  
*Fleabag* had a  
book baby'  
SARRA  
MANNING

LEX CROUCHER

# **REPUTATION**

LEX CROUCHER

ZAFFRE

*For Jane Austen. Sorry, Jane.*

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## Chapter One

*I*t all began at a party, as almost everything of interest does.

This particular party was by no means a grand affair. Dinner had been distinctly lacking. The man tasked with playing the viola seemed to be hurting it a little. A scar-city of candles – entirely due to poor planning on the host’s part, rather than a lack of monetary means to produce light – meant that whole rooms were so dark as to be hazardous.

‘It’s romantic!’ Mrs Burton had said generously as they were given the grand tour a few hours earlier, narrowly avoiding a headlong collision with a serving girl carrying a tray of diluted punch, who stepped deftly out of the way and was immediately swallowed into the shadows.

It was not romantic. Her aunt had promised a night of skilful dancing, delicately blossoming friendships, and a wealth of eligible bachelors with shiny coat buttons and dashing moustaches. Instead, Georgiana was reclining in a gloomy alcove in the empty hallway, tying and untying little knots in her second-best ribbon and thinking wistfully of Viking funerals.

Norse warriors were often burned on pyres with their boats, along with a great many of their personal effects. She had read about the custom in one of her uncle’s books, and had talked about it animatedly and at length earlier in the week at the Burtons’ dinner table while eating her potatoes. She was just getting to the part about wives and thralls following their masters into death when her aunt had slammed her hand down onto the table in an out-of-character display of force and cried, ‘Are you *quite finished*, Georgiana?’

Georgiana had looked up from the potatoes to find her aunt’s face the very picture of horror.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Burton, but if you’d only let me finish, I don’t think the wives and thralls *minded* following the Vikings into death. The Norse believed in a sort of heaven. If Mr Burton were to fall on his morning walk tomorrow and dash his brains out on a rock, wouldn’t you want to go with him? If Heaven is as lovely as everyone says it is, it would be like a holiday. You’re so looking forward to St Ives in September – it would be like getting to go early. Wouldn’t you throw yourself upon a flaming pyre if you could be in St Ives tomorrow?’

Evidently, Mrs Burton would not. The subject of Vikings had been banned from polite conversation.



In the thirteen days since Georgiana had come to stay with her aunt and uncle, she had come to know them far better than she ever had in the past twenty years of her life. It had become clear to her rather quickly that while the Burtons were very kind and accommodating people, they were also particularly skilled at filling whole days and weeks with the kinds of monotonous minutiae that Georgiana could take no pleasure in. Any suggestion of an outing or an activity that bore even the slightest resemblance to a thrill or a caper had been tuted down with the proclamation that they were still ‘getting her settled’.

Georgiana already felt so settled that if she were forced to settle any further, she might lose sentience altogether and become an integral part of the structure of the house – the human equivalent of a load-bearing beam. She had recently spent an entire afternoon in her new and rather small bedroom being forced to try on every item of clothing she owned, while Mrs Burton and her shy maid Emmeline checked for required fixes or alterations. By the time they were appraising her last gown, Georgiana had become itchy, quarrelsome and alarmingly wild-eyed with irritation.

Clearly, in Mrs Burton’s eyes, the process of becoming properly ‘settled’ required a period of boredom and loneliness so excruciating that it rendered its subject broken in spirit, and therefore far less likely to rebel against the usual rituals of the house. There were only so many times a person could read the local advertisements, or arrange hundreds of embroidery needles by size, or discuss upcoming meals for three people as



if they were feeding the five thousand. The morning when a neighbour's horse had escaped and circled the garden, incoherent with freedom, was such a bright spot of excitement that she clung to the memory of it for days afterwards.

This was not how fresh starts began in stories – and Georgiana had read a lot of them. A fortnight ago, she had dragged a trunk twice her weight to her aunt and uncle's house, full of the tomes she had been unable to part with from home. In all the books she'd read in which a heroine started over in a new town or village or castle, she had immediately stumbled upon a series of daring adventures, or got dramatically lost on the moors, or swooned into the arms of a passing (and very handsome) gentleman.

In absolutely none of them did the heroine spend two weeks staring at a patch of damp on a parlour ceiling, wondering if it looked more like a man falling over a stool or an owl playing billiards.

Georgiana had begged her aunt rather doggedly for some form of social outing, and she supposed this party was her penance. She had been hiding in her alcove for almost an hour, wishing she'd had the presence of mind to bring a book. From here, she was perfectly placed to observe the comings and goings of guests as they shuffled from dining room to drawing room, and to eavesdrop on them in passing. Unfortunately, their hosts, the Gadforths, seemed to only know men and women above the age of five-and-forty without a shred of personality between them. Georgiana had eavesdropped on the exact same conversation twice, between two entirely different groups of people, about whether the drapes in the dining room were red or purple, and which constituted the more garish choice. All involved on both occasions were in agreement that either would be unseemly, but that as it was too dark to settle the matter presently, they'd revisit the subject at a later and more convenient date.

'They're plum,' Georgiana muttered to herself, reaching for her drink as the latest group of soft furnishings experts ambled away out of earshot.

'Nonsense. They're sort of wine-coloured.'

The reply came from so close to her ear that Georgiana immediately knocked her glass over in shock. She felt Mrs Gadforth's undrinkable punch soaking rapidly through her dress and petticoat as she twisted around to find the source of the voice.

The ledge Georgiana had situated herself on was tucked behind one of many mock-Grecian plaster pillars; clearly somebody else had been making similar use of one of the others for some time without her notice. She heard a rustle of skirts, saw a slender hand alight on the plaster, and then without conscious thought she was moving over so that the like-minded intruder could slide in next to her.

In the low light Georgiana made out a slight figure, with a dark complexion and a lot of black, curly hair swept up intricately on top of her head. She was perfumed with something heady and floral, and as the stranger held out an elegant hand for her to clasp, Georgiana caught a glimpse of bright stones and flashing gold.

‘Frances Campbell,’ the woman said in a polished voice, and then before Georgiana could reply, ‘This is without a doubt the worst party I’ve ever been to. If anything remotely stimulating happened I think they’d all keel over from the shock.’

‘I’m Georgiana,’ said Georgiana. ‘Ellers.’

‘Oh? I wouldn’t be here at all, only my father sold a painting to these dreadful people, the Godforths. They were just beside themselves, carrying on about what a *triumph* it would be and what great *friends* they hoped we’d all become. It was a hideous painting – Father couldn’t wait to be rid of it; he inherited it, for his sins. I suppose it’ll fit in just fine here, though, with all of . . . *this*.’ She waved a hand at the offensive pillars.

‘They’re called Gadforth,’ said Georgiana, wondering why she was suddenly only capable of announcing names.

Frances Campbell didn’t seem to notice; she had put a hand down on the ledge between them, and then quickly removed it again.

‘But what on *earth* has happened to your dress?’ Georgiana had somehow entirely forgotten about the spillage, but Frances must have put her fingers directly into it. ‘I hope it wasn’t a favourite. Another tragic casualty of this vile punch. Here, don’t fret – have some of this.’

She passed Georgiana a small flask, which Georgiana accepted and brought to her lips without question in a sort of daze, spluttering as something much stronger than punch burned in her throat.

‘It’s Cognac. Dreadful, isn’t it?’ Frances said delightedly as Georgiana coughed. ‘Have some more.’

Georgiana did.

She had never before met somebody capable of making such a bold impression in such a short period of time. She had known Frances Campbell for perhaps fifty or sixty seconds, and was already dreading the moment she'd slip off the ledge and abandon Georgiana to the rest of her solitary evening. She was certainly no swashbuckling adventurer or windswept nobleman, but Georgiana knew at once that she was in the presence of a Main Character.

'I can't believe they have the audacity to call *this* a party,' Frances was saying, gesticulating violently with her free hand as she took the Cognac back with the other. 'It has all the joy and charm of a dog's funeral. And why is it so *dark*? I almost tripped on my hem and fell through a window earlier, and then I thought, actually, on the whole, that might be preferable. We are on the ground floor, after all.'

Georgiana snorted with laughter, and then felt immediately embarrassed to have made such a repulsive noise.

'Who dragged you here, anyway?'

'Oh.' Georgiana cleared her throat, her voice croaky and disused from an evening where she had mostly communicated via the humble nod. 'I'm staying with my aunt and uncle, the Burtons. I believe they've been friends with the Gadforths for quite some time. They're lovely, the Burtons,' she said hurriedly, seeing Frances's dark eyebrow twitch, 'but I cannot account for their taste in parties. Believe me, if I had thought of the window I would be but a distant dot to you now, gathering speed as I rolled down the hill.'

Frances laughed. She took Georgiana's empty glass and filled it with Cognac, handing it back to her and then raising the flask as if to make a toast.

'Cheers – to our monstrous families, and to the infinite number of far better parties we're missing this very instant! May our friends wreak sensational havoc in our stead.'

Georgiana did not think the Burtons particularly monstrous, and due to her current and miserable lack of connections she had absolutely nowhere better to be, but it seemed rude to bring that up at the minute, so she clinked her glass against the flask and drank deeply. Frances sighed wearily, wilting against the pillar as if there were truly no agony in this world greater than enduring a below-par social occasion.

‘The only consolation in all of this is that the lady of the house is truly a *character*. Have you seen her dress? It’s all pink satin and questionable corseting. She looks like a strawberry blancmange that somebody’s grabbed hold of and squeezed. I imagine Mr Gadforth will have to rub her down with goose fat to slide her out of it later.’

Georgiana giggled, flushed and giddy from the attention and the Cognac, which seemed to spur Frances on. She was just describing Mr Gadforth’s moustache – ‘have you ever seen a squirrel that’s been trampled by a horse?’ – when they heard the tapping of metal on glass, followed by a lapse in the hubbub from the drawing room that indicated somebody was about to make a speech. Rolling her eyes, Frances got to her feet and smoothed the folds of her dress, tucking the flask neatly away in her reticule.

‘Come on. Mr Gadforth is about to cry with joy and offer his earthly body and immortal soul to my father in thanks for that damned painting, and I should be there to smile and curtsy – or at least to restrain him, when he goes in for an open-mouthed kiss.’

She offered an arm to Georgiana, and they walked back into the party looking to all the world like dear old friends and closest confidantes.



Mr and Mrs Gadforth were, in fact, standing directly in front of what must have been That Damned Painting, beaming at their guests and clutching overfilled glasses in their somewhat sweaty hands. She now couldn’t help but see poor Mrs Gadforth exactly as Frances had described her, and bit down on a snort of laughter as their hostess clumsily adjusted her bodice, heaving her bosoms optimistically skyward. Frances laughed, too, making absolutely no effort to conceal her mirth, and then unlinked her arm from Georgiana’s and gave a brief, sarcastic bow of farewell before crossing the room to stand with two people Georgiana assumed must be Mr and Mrs Campbell.

Suddenly feeling exposed without a new friend or relative to hide behind, Georgiana stepped to the back of the room as Mr Gadforth cleared his throat and began to speak. She didn’t hear a word of what she was sure was an excruciating monologue; instead, she was looking at the Campbells.

Frances's father was a handsome man: tall, pale and broad-shouldered, dark hair and moustache neatly combed. He looked imposing and almost military in his bearing, and had fixed a small smile upon his lips that, though it may have wavered a little as Mr Gadforth got louder and more enthusiastic, never faltered. His wife was also tall and striking, but she was slender where he was well-built, and her skin was very dark; Georgiana thought she must have originated from Africa, or perhaps the West Indies – undoubtedly somewhere far less grey than England. Upon first glance nobody seemed to be paying her any mind, but when Georgiana looked again, she noticed that the gentleman standing a few feet away couldn't stop his eyes from returning to Mrs Campbell every few seconds; a servant, passing by with a tray of drinks, stared openly. She was dressed in sumptuous navy silk, with thick, tight black curls expertly shaped and pinned in place; the necklace at her throat was unmistakably frosted with real diamonds.

Impressive as her parents were, neither compared to Frances.

Georgiana could see her clearly now, for Mrs Gadforth had obviously concentrated her candle budget in this room and this room alone. Frances's dress was cut simply but meticulously bejewelled, so that she seemed to shimmer whenever she caught the light. Her cheeks had a certain lustre, which probably gave the impression of a lively, youthful glow to all those unaware that the effect had been achieved through copious quantities of French brandy. There was something about her eyes – gold-brown, startlingly bright against the dark amber of her skin – that implied she had just thought of something extraordinarily funny. Everything from the ribbons in her hair to the way she held herself spoke of unimaginable wealth, and the unpractised elegance that went with it. Georgiana felt instantly unworthy of such company, coupled with a much more urgent and desperate desire to somehow woo Frances and win her as a friend.

Mr Gadforth, meanwhile, was clearly reaching the climax of his speech.

'This fine painting – this *exquisite* work of art – has completed our home, and I shall think fondly of my extraordinarily kind friend, the most highly esteemed Lord Campbell, whenever I look upon it.'

Georgiana startled, almost spilling her drink for the second time that night, then stole another awed glance at Frances's parents – not Mr and Mrs Campbell after all, but *Lord and Lady* Campbell. She looked back at

Frances, who was positively smirking at Mr Gadforth now; he was smiling back benignly as he raised his glass, as if he were in on the jest rather than the unfortunate subject of it.

The speech concluded to polite applause, and Georgiana's stomach clenched uncomfortably. If Frances and her parents were to escape now, it would put an abrupt end to this brief and sparkling recess from the monotony of her life with the Burtons. If she had to endure another week consisting solely of conversations about the thread counts of shawls, or the right conditions to grow turnips, she knew she'd lose control of her rational mind. Frances held promise of future witty conversations, esteemed company and parties one did not dream of escaping by rolling down a steep hill and landing in a stagnant ditch. Frances felt like the beginning of something – a story Georgiana desperately wanted to follow through to the end.

As voices rose all around the room and general socialising resumed, she didn't dare look up to see whether the Campbells had made a graceful exit; she felt light-headed with relief when a cool hand touched her arm.

'You look terribly lonely back here,' said Frances. 'Like you've just suffered a jilting. Come and meet my parents instead.' She steered Georgiana across the room to make introductions.

'Are you summering here, Miss Ellers?' Lady Campbell asked, once formalities had been exchanged.

'In a sense I am, Lady Campbell, although I may outlast the summer,' Georgiana said, affecting what she hoped was a light and jocular tone, as if her circumstances only faintly amused her. 'My mother has been unwell, so she and my father have moved to the coast, for the air. They thought it best that I remained closer to civilisation. My aunt and uncle – the Burtons – have been most kind as to take me in. They live just over the west bridge.'

The location of the Burtons' house – too close to town to constitute a grand domain, yet too far away to be fashionable – revealed enough about their means (or lack thereof) that Georgiana thought she might be received a little less warmly. She needn't have worried; the Campbells seemed like the sort her aunt would describe as 'fine, upstanding people' – this meaning 'people who do not openly mock others for the state of their financial affairs' – and they simply asked politely after the Burtons' health.

Standing a little way across the room behind the Campbells, unaware that she was the precise subject currently being discussed, Mrs Burton looked up and saw who Georgiana was conversing with. She gave her niece a small, stiff smile and then urgently muttered something in her husband's ear, looking concerned.

Georgiana rather suspected she was recalling Viking funerals.

'Frances, my love – could you speak to Mrs Gadforth and help Miss Ellers find something to complement her dress?' Lady Campbell was saying quietly, with a hand on Frances's arm and a quick glance down at the large, blotchy punch stain that Georgiana had quite forgotten in all the excitement.

'Of course!' said Frances. 'Goodness, and I was just standing here with you all sad and sodden. Come with me.'

Georgiana curtseyed and then allowed herself to be whisked from the room, pointing out to Frances as they began to climb the darkened stairs that they were travelling in the exact opposite direction from Mrs Gadforth's heaving bosom.

'Oh, you are a sweet little thing – nobody will notice,' said Frances consolingly. 'And besides, I'm just *dying* to see the rest of her wardrobe. My money's on endless gold brocade and some sort of festive hat topped with fruit.'

The Cognac seemed to be working its magic; Georgiana really felt she ought to protest but somehow ended up willingly following Frances instead, their arms linked once again, as they searched for the dressing room. It was easier said than done in the near-dark, but eventually Frances wrenched open the right door and clapped her hands together in gleeful celebration.

Georgiana took a seat on Mrs Gadforth's pink velvet footstool, watching as Frances pulled out more and more outrageous items of clothing from the wardrobe – a shawl of peacock feathers, a mask that seemed to be made of leather, a grey dress so low-cut it could never be expected to contain the human nipple – until they were both beside themselves with helpless laughter. Frances gestured for help unbuttoning the back of her dress, and Georgiana paused uncertainly for a second before assisting her with fumbling fingers, and then watched as Frances explored the wardrobe with renewed purpose.

‘Here,’ she said eventually, swiping the flask from Georgiana, who hadn’t remembered taking it in the first place. ‘Try this on.’

She threw an unidentifiable mass of fabric at Georgiana and then disappeared from the room. Georgiana considered it for a moment – it looked both too large and tastelessly frilly – before pulling it over her head. Left alone, the entire thing suddenly felt beyond ridiculous, but she found herself grinning foolishly into the vanity mirror anyway. Her hair was coming unpinned, and there was a general drunken *messiness* about her that she had never seen in her reflection before. It didn’t seem to matter very much; it all paled in comparison to how wonderful it felt to have a silly, easy moment of friendship after weeks of loneliness – even if so far that short-lived friendship did seem to entirely revolve around bullying a portly, middle-aged couple.

‘Mrs Gadforth, you look simply ravishing,’ Frances said in a comically deep voice as she re-entered the room.

A fresh shout of laughter burst out of Georgiana when she saw that Frances was doing her best impression of their hostess’s unfortunate husband; she had somehow procured a morning suit and top hat that were far too large for her, and she had to hold them up as she walked or risk becoming suddenly unclothed.

‘Oh, Mr Gadforth, you *rogue*,’ Georgiana replied in a ridiculous falsetto. ‘Eat me like one of your French puddings!’

Frances cackled with glee as she shuffled towards Georgiana and then collapsed onto the footstool next to her. They kept laughing, somewhat hysterically, as Georgiana helped Frances decorate herself with a wonky moustache drawn in Mrs Gadforth’s kohl liner; once properly moustachioed, Frances took off one of her own rings and pushed it on to Georgiana’s finger in place of a wedding band.

It was in this state – both sitting astride the footstool professing their deep, matrimonial feelings for each other (‘Mr Gadforth, next to this painting you’re a veritable work of art!’ ‘Oh, *thank you*, Mrs Gadforth, and might I say I did admire the vaguely pornographic topiaries you’ve commissioned on the back lawn.’) – that Lady Campbell discovered them.

Georgiana froze in place as soon as the door opened, suddenly so ashamed and horrified that she felt she might combust on the spot. To her surprise, Lady Campbell didn’t look angry; she just looked tired.



‘Wash your face and fetch your cloak, Frances,’ she said quietly. ‘Your father says we’re leaving.’ She turned on her heel and exited without another word.

Georgiana was overcome with mortification, and turned to Frances, expecting to see the same emotion reflected in her expression; on the contrary, Frances simply looked exasperated.

‘Right on cue. The slightest hope for some fun, and there she is to throttle the life out of it. She’s a *dreadful* bore.’

She stripped down to her slip and began to dress as Georgiana, red in the face, pulled Mrs Gadforth’s frilly gown off over her head and placed it carefully back in the wardrobe. Frances left Mr Gadforth’s suit pooled on the floor, stepping away from it as if it were absolutely nothing to do with her, and then reclaimed her ring.

‘Hopefully I’ll see you at the next one, at any rate.’ She saluted Georgiana with a flick of her wrist before turning to leave the room. ‘It’s been a pleasure, Miss Ellers.’

Suddenly alone again, Georgiana picked up the pile of discarded clothing and started hurriedly putting everything back in its rightful place. She returned Mr Gadforth’s suit and was just rushing downstairs, wondering what exactly Frances had meant by ‘the next one’, when she bumped into the Burtons.

‘What on earth have you been doing, Georgiana?’ exclaimed Mrs Burton. ‘Why are you so red? Have you fallen? Are you ill?’

‘Not at all, I’m fine,’ said Georgiana, feeling her face with the back of her hand and finding it hot to the touch.

‘Well, come along then,’ said Mrs Burton, eyeing her with utmost suspicion. ‘Your uncle ate a funny grape and isn’t feeling at all himself. We’re going home.’

## *Chapter Two*

*T*here weren't a great many rooms in the Burtons' house, and they weren't very finely decorated, but they made up for this deficit – in Georgiana's opinion – by having a well-stocked and cosy library, which faced west and enjoyed the benefits of the last of the evening sun. There was a general shabbiness about the place that Mrs Burton seemed constantly at war with, bubbles in the wallpaper and knocks in the furniture that could not be polished away, and although this extended into the library, Georgiana did not think the room suffered because of it. She made a habit of retiring there after dinner each night, settling into her uncle's cracked leather armchair for hours of reading, and although Mrs Burton frequently entreated her to join her in the drawing room to do ghastly things like embroider fat little kittens on to cushions, generally she was left alone.

When she first arrived at the house she had tried to ask her uncle about his collection of the written word, which he now seemed to have eschewed completely in favour of the endless newspapers he resided behind, and had received the rather unsatisfactory reply, 'Ah, yes. Books.' Mr Burton had been a lawyer before his early retirement, and Georgiana often wondered if he had used up an entire lifetime's worth of words during his career, leaving him with very few left for his twilight years.

She therefore endeavoured to explore the contents of the library alone.

At home she had kept her own carefully curated collection, which paled in comparison to the shelves and shelves inhabiting almost every wall in the rest of the house, and to the study, which housed her father's personal library. Her father was the master of a rather self-important boarding school, and their small house was situated in its grounds, so if Georgiana ever found her own bookshelves wanting, she had only to provide him with

a list and he would return from the school library with a fresh stack for her to peruse. Her parents were great readers themselves, and could often be found of an evening still sitting at the dinner table long after their plates were empty, engaged in rousing debates about literary styles or a particular author's over-fondness for hyphenation or run-on sentences. Georgiana was not authorised to borrow books without express permission; there had been a particular incident with ink-stained fingerprints on a priceless first edition that had never been quite forgiven, even though she had been four years old at the time.

It pained Georgiana to think about any of this now: the house, the study, the books. Their home was gone, and her parents were likely arguing about punctuation without her, while enjoying a brisk, coastal, child-free breeze.

She had decided not long after conversations about moving had begun in earnest that she would certainly not feel sorry for herself, or entertain thoughts of being abandoned, mislaid, or left behind. Her parents had always been enormously practical people, and her mother had been experiencing regular headaches for so long without improvement that a drastic change was the next logical step. Any rational person could understand their reasons for not wanting to take their adult daughter with them as they entered a new phase of their lives. Her father was to take up a new post, and the lodgings provided by this new school could hardly be expected to house both Georgiana *and* her father's books.

Georgiana had cried just once, when they signed the documents that handed the house and her entire life so far over to the new schoolmaster – a man with a smiling wife and three happy, chubby children in tow – and then resolved to never cry again. In the dark recesses of her mind, she imagined prostrating herself at their feet, begging them to take her on and make her their fourth child; she would offer to confine herself to her father's study and have meals delivered through the door, haunting them like a sorrowful, literary ghost. In reality, she knew she was a child no more, and that she was very lucky indeed that her aunt and uncle had agreed to take her on when her lack of marital prospects so far indicated that she was a very poor investment. She had pulled herself together, her cheeks dry when her parents shook her hand in farewell, experiencing the ever-so-slightly discomfoting feeling that something inside her was dying a painful, permanent death.

Her father had promised to write once they were settled, but they were far away with many affairs to get in order, and Georgiana had heard no news as of yet. Mrs Burton had raised the subject a few times, but had displayed an unusual amount of tact in dropping it when it had not been well received. Georgiana knew that her aunt would be entirely baffled by her sister's rather hands-off approach to parenting; she had always been treated as an equal at home, an adult in miniature even during childhood, whereas Mrs Burton – new to the office of guardian and having had no children of her own – constantly wanted to bake Georgiana pies, fuss over her hair, and rebuke her soundly for the crimes of 'staying up too late' and 'walking too briskly'.

Unfortunately the absence of correspondence from her parents was often at the forefront of Georgiana's mind, as there wasn't much else *to* dwell on. Her few friends from home had not written either, likely caught up in summer excursions of their own, or perhaps already forgetting Georgiana now she was not sitting right in front of them at every dinner party and card game. Her parents had often had fellow academics over for evenings of lively scholastic debate, and their children had been Georgiana's constant companions; they had been quiet, literary types, all cut from similarly sombre cloth. Some of them were blessed with a little conversational wit, but it was mostly wasted on extensive, vicious debates about particular subsections of Roman history, or trying to distract each other into making unforgivable mistakes during long, terse games of chess. On one particularly memorable occasion, a boy had crudely split an infinitive during conversation and they had all talked of nothing else for a week.

Nevertheless, she had known these people since childhood, and their silence hurt. When Georgiana was not conjuring up elaborate and biblical punishments for them for ignoring her, all she could do for entertainment was to eat an excess of bread, walk the nearby lanes and woods in fair weather, and then upon her return sequester herself in the library with a well-worn copy of *Robinson Crusoe* or a volume of Mrs Radcliffe's.

While her books did provide some comfort and distraction, Georgiana soon found herself reaching a hitherto untouched limit to her joy of the written word; she would cast a book aside after long hours of reading, look around for some other source of entertainment, then sigh and pick it back