
Opening Extract from...

The Sealed Letter

Written by Emma Donoghue

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Dedicated with love to my old friends
Gráinne Ní Dhúill and Debra Westgate

There are sealed pages in my heart,
Traced with illumined hand,
That none can see, and if they did,
Oh! who would understand?
But thou, by some strange sympathy,
Hast thrown a searching look,
And read at sight the hardest scroll
Indorsed within the book.

Eliza Cook,
"Stanzas, Addressed to Charlotte Cushman" (1851)

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I

Prima Facie

(Latin, "at first sight" or "on the face of it":
evidence presumed to be true unless rebutted)

Every woman should be free
to support herself by the use of
whatever faculties God has given her.

Emily Faithfull,
Letter to the *English Woman's Journal*
(September 1862)

The last day of August, and the sky is the colour of hot ash. Something rancid wafts on the air from Smithfield Market; the air glitters with stone dust. She's swept down Farringdon Street in the slipstream of bowlers, top hats, baskets on porters' heads. A hand lights on her arm, a small, ungloved hand; the brown silk of her sleeve is caught between plump pink fingertips. She staggers, clamps her pocketbook to her ribs, but even as she's jerking away she can't help recognizing that hand.

"Fido?"

One syllable dipping down, the next swooping up, a familiar and jaunty music; the word skips across the years like a skimmed stone. Almost everyone calls her that now, but Helen was the first. Fido's eyes flick up to Helen's face: sharp cheekbones, chignon still copper. An acid lemon dress, white lace gloves scrunched in the other hand, the one that's not gripping Fido's sleeve. The human river has washed Fido sideways, now, into a scarlet-chested, brass-buttoned officer, who begs her pardon.

"I knew it was you," cries Helen, holding her emerald parasol up to block the terrible sun. "Did you take me for a pickpocket?" she asks, a giggle in her throat.

"Only for half a moment, Mrs. Codrington," she manages to say, licking her gritty lips.

A flicker of pain across the pointed face. "Oh, Fido. Has it come to that?"

"Helen, then," says Fido, and smiles despite herself. Despite the skin-tightening sensation of encountering a friend who is no longer one. Despite

the memories that are billowing up like genii from smashed bottles. She wrenches a handkerchief from her jacket pocket and dabs at her forehead. The two women are blocking the traffic; an old man swerves around them, under a sandwich board that reads *No Home Should Be Without One.*

"But how you've grown," Helen is marvelling.

Fido looks down at the brown bulge of her bodice. "Too true."

Pink fingers clap to the coral mouth. "You monster! Still the same talent for mistaking my meaning, or letting on that you do. Of course I meant you've grown *up* so."

"It has been, what, seven years?" Her words are as stiff as tin soldiers. Checking her bonnet is straight, she becomes belatedly aware that the scarlet uniform she bumped into a minute ago is hovering, so she turns to see him off.

"Oh, my manners," says Helen. "Miss Emily Faithfull—if I may—Colonel David Anderson, a friend of the family's from Malta."

The colonel has dangling blond whiskers. Fido lets his fingers enclose hers. "Delighted," she says distractedly.

"*The* Miss Faithfull?"

She winces at the phrase. By his accent, he's a Scot.

"Printer and Publisher to the Queen?"

The man's well informed. Fido concedes a nod. "Her Majesty's been gracious enough to lend her name to our enterprise at the Victoria Press." She turns back to Helen. So much to say, and little of it speakable; words log-jam in her throat. "Are you and Captain Codrington home on leave, or—"

"Forever and ever, amen," says Helen.

That little twisted smile is so familiar to Fido that the years fall away like planks splintering under her feet. She feels dizzy; she fears she'll have to sink to her knees, right here in all the dusty clamour of London's City district.

"Matter of fact, it's Vice-Admiral Codrington now," remarks Colonel Anderson.

"Of course, of course, forgive me," Fido tells Helen. "I can't help thinking of him by the name he bore in the days . . ." *The days when I knew him? When I knew you?* But she's not that girl anymore. *It's 1864: I'm almost thirty years old*, she scolds herself.

"Harry's been immured in paperwork for weeks, ever since our vile crossing from Malta," complains Helen, "so I've press-ganged the colonel into service as my parcel carrier today."

"A keen volunteer, Mrs. C.," he corrects her, swinging two small packages on their strings. "I'll just pop across the road to pick up your whatsits, shall I?"

"Curtain tassels, a dozen of the magenta," she reminds him.

"That's the ticket."

Tactful of the officer to absent himself, Fido thinks. But once she and Helen are alone, the discomfort rises between them like a paper screen. "Such heat" is all she manages.

"It takes me back," says Helen pleasurably, twirling her fringed green parasol and tipping her chin up to catch the merciless light.

Watching that face, Fido finds it hard to believe that this woman must be—count the years—thirty-six. "To Italy? Or do you mean India?"

"Oh, both: my whole torrid youth!"

"Was it . . . was it generally hot in Malta?"

Helen's laugh comes out startlingly deep, like a sob. "So we're reduced to discussing the weather."

Irritation boils in Fido's veins. "As it happens, I'm pressed for time today—"

"Oh, yes, I was almost forgetting what a very important person you've become. *The* Miss Faithfull, philanthropist, pioneer!"

Fido wants to take her by the lemon-lace-edged shoulders and shake her like a doll. "I prefer to call myself a woman of business."

"I can quite see why I was dropped the moment I left the country," Helen rattles on, "considering how *pressed for time* you've been, what with all your valiant efforts on behalf of our downtrodden sex."

Her mouth, Fido finds, is hanging open. "Whatever can you mean, *dropped*?"

A pretty shrug. "It needn't have been done with such brutal efficiency, need it?" Helen's dropped the mocking tone. "Friendships have their seasons, that's understood. But you might have let me down rather more gently, I suppose, after all we'd been through."

Fido blinks dust out of her eyes.

"It wasn't kind, that's all I'll say. Or womanly. It wasn't like you, like what I knew of your heart, or thought I did."

"Stop." She holds up her white-gloved hand till it almost touches those rapid lips.

Helen only speeds up. "You'd had your fill of me and Harry by the time we embarked for Malta, was that it? All at once sick to death of us and our bickerings?" Her eyes have the wet blue sheen of rain. "I know, I know, I quite see that we'd worn you out between us. But I must confess, when I found myself tossed aside like yesterday's newspaper—"

"My dear." Fido almost barks it. "I find these accusations incongruous."

Helen stares at her like a baby.

"Must I remind you, I wrote twice to Admiralty House in Valetta and got not a word of reply to either?"

"Nonsense!"

Fido is bewildered. This is like one of those dreams in which one is caught up in an endless, illogical series of tasks.

"Of course I wrote back," cries Helen.

"From Malta?"

"Of course from Malta! I was a stranger in a strange land; I needed a bosom friend more than ever. Whyever would I have left off writing? I poured out all my worries—"

Fido breaks in. "When was this? What month?"

"How should I recall, all these years later?" asks Helen reasonably. "But I know I replied as soon as I got your letter—the one and only letter I received from you when I was in Malta. I sent several long screeds, but on your side the correspondence simply dried up. You can't imagine my nervous excitement when a packet of post would arrive from England, and I'd rip it open—"

Fido's chewing her lip; she tastes blood. "I did change my lodgings, that autumn," she concedes. "But still, your letters ought to have been sent on directly by the post office."

"Lost at sea?" suggests Helen, frowning.

"One of them, perhaps, but could the Continental mail really be so—"

"Things do go astray."

"What a very absurd—" Fido hears her voice rise pitifully, and breaks off. Scalding water behind her eyes. "I don't know what to say."

Helen's smile is miserable. "Oh heavens, I see it all now. I should have tried again; I should have kept on writing, despite my mortified feelings."

"No, *I* should! I thought—" She tries now to remember what she'd thought; what sense she'd made of it when Helen hadn't written back, that strange year when the Codringtons were posted abroad and Fido stayed alone in London, wondering what to make of herself. "I suppose I supposed . . . a chapter in your life had drawn to a close."

"Dearest Fido! You're not the stuff of a chapter," Helen protests. "Several volumes, at least."

Her brain's whirling under the hot, powdery sky. She doesn't want to cry, here on Farringdon Street, a matter of yards from her steam-printing office, where any passing clerk or hand might spot her. So Fido laughs instead. "Such an idiotic misunderstanding, like something out of Mozart. I couldn't be sorrier."

"Nor I. These seven years have been an eternity!"

What in another woman would strike Fido as hyperbole has in Helen Codrington always charmed her, somehow. The phrases are delivered with a sort of rueful merriment, as if by an actress who knows herself to be better than her part.

She seizes Fido's wrists, squeezing tight enough that her bones shift under the humid cotton gloves. "And what are the odds that I'd happen across you again, not a fortnight after my return? Like a rose in this urban wilderness," she cries, dropping Fido's wrists to gesture across the crowded City.

Fido catches sight of the straw-coloured curls of Colonel Anderson, making his way back across Farringdon Street, so she speaks fast. "I used to wonder if you had new, absorbing occupations—another child, even?"

Helen's giggle has half a shudder in it. "No, no, that's the one point on which Harry and I have always agreed."

"The little girls must be . . . what, ten or so?" The calculation discomfits her; she still pictures them spinning their tops on the nursery floorboards.

"Eleven and twelve. Oh, Nan and Nell are quite the sophisticated *demoiselles.* You won't know them."

Then the Scot is at her elbow. "Rather a nuisance, Mrs. C.," he reports. "They've only eight of the magenta in stock, so I've asked for them to be sent on to you in Eccleston Square when they're ready."

Fido's mind is suddenly filled with the tall white walls in Belgravia that she once called home. "The same house?" she asks Helen, under her breath. "Were you able to put the tenants out?"

"The same everything," she answers. "Harry and I have picked up our former life like some moth-eaten cloak from the floor of a wardrobe."

"Doesn't someone in Trollope tell a bride, 'Don't let him take you anywhere beyond Eccleston Square'?" asks Colonel Anderson.

Fido laughs. "Yes, it's still the last bastion of respectability."

"Are you a Belgravian too, Miss Faithfull?"

"Bloomsbury," she corrects him, with a touch of defiance. "I'm one of these 'new women'; they'd never have me in Eccleston Square."

"Even as '*Printer to Her Majesty*'?"

"Especially under that title, I suspect! No, I live snug and bachelor-style on Taviton Street. I read the *Times* over breakfast, which rather scandalizes my maid."

They all laugh at that.

"I was just setting off home after a morning at my steam-works, over there at Number 83," says Fido, gesturing up Farringdon Street. "The *Friend of the People*—a weekly paper—is in type, and goes to press tomorrow."

"How exciting," murmurs Helen.

"Hardly. Mulish apprentices, and paper curling in the heat!" Even as she's saying the words, this automatic disparagement irritates Fido. The fact is, it is exciting. Sometimes when she wakes in the morning, every muscle in her limbs tightens when she remembers that she's a publisher, and no longer just the youngest of Reverend Ferdinand Faithfull's enormous brood.

"I'll hail a cab at the stand, then, shall I," Anderson asks, "and drop you ladies home?"

"I have a better idea," cries Helen. "Ever since reading about the Underground Railway, I've been longing to descend into Hades."

Fido smiles, remembering what it's like to be sucked into this woman's

orbit: the festive whims and whirls of it. "I don't mean to disappoint you, but it's quite respectable."

"You've tried it?"

"Not yet. But as it happens," she adds on impulse, "my physician believes it might be beneficial."

"My friend's a martyr to asthma," Helen tells the colonel.

My friend: two simple words that make Fido's head reel.

"The Underground's uncommon convenient," he says, "and certainly faster than inching through all this traffic."

"Onwards, then: a journey into the bowels of the earth!" says Helen. Her hand—the bare one—is a warm snake sliding through the crook of Fido's elbow.

Yet another building site has opened up like an abscess since Fido was last on this street. Anderson helps the ladies across the makeshift plank bridge, Helen's yellow skirt swinging like a bell. The wasteland is littered with wheelbarrows and spades, and the caked foreheads of the navvies remind Fido of some detail about face painting from a tedious lecture she recently attended by a South Sea missionary.

"I barely recognize London—the way it's thrown out tendrils in all directions," remarks Helen.

"Yes, and the government refuses to make the developers consider the poor," Fido tells her, "who're being evicted in their tens of thousands—"

But Helen has stopped to brush something off a flounce, and Fido feels jarred, as if she's walked into a wall. The old Fido—meaning, the young Fido—knew nothing more of the state of the nation than she'd picked up on parish visits with her mother in Surrey. That girl never spouted statistics; she talked of novels, balls, matches, who had *dash* and *go.* The long hiatus, the seven years during which Fido and Helen have been unknown to each other, seems to gape like a tear in a stocking.

In the station, a train is waiting, the hazy sunlight that comes through the roof catching its gilt name: *Locust.* "But we're not underground at all," complains Helen.

"Patience is a virtue," murmurs Colonel Anderson, handing the ladies into the first-class compartment.

White walls, mahogany and mirrors, a good carpet; the carriage is an impersonation of a drawing-room, thinks Fido. The gas globes hanging from the ceiling give off a light that's wan but bright enough to read by, and a peculiar fume.

Helen leans against Fido and shivers pleasurably. "I should think it must be fearfully hazardous to combine fumes and sparks in an enclosed tunnel."

The tone amuses Fido; Helen's always delighted in even a slim possibility of danger. "I suppose one must trust in the scientists."

"If there should be an explosion, I'll carry you out in a trice," Anderson tells Helen. "Both of you," he corrects himself, "under my arms, like twin battering rams!"

Fido can't stop her eyebrows shooting up.

"Beg pardon, my imagination rather ran away with me there." His whiskers look more like a spaniel's ears than ever.

"You must excuse the colonel," murmurs Helen, laughing in Fido's ear. "We're a dreadfully lax lot on Malta; the sun evaporates all our Anglo proprieties."

But Helen, after childhood in Calcutta and adolescence in Florence, is the most un-English of Englishwomen; she's always waltzed her way around the rules of womanhood. It's a quality that Fido relished even when she was young, long before she ever did any hard thinking about the arbitrariness of those rules.

Helen is staring at a label on the window that bears a picture of a heart, and inside it, in Gothic lettering, *The Dead Heart.*

"It's a play," Fido tells her.

"Ah." A sigh. "I've been gone so long, I'm quite behind the times."

"The whole city's pockmarked with these irksome labels," Anderson mutters. "Really, advertising has had its day; the public can't be fooled anymore."

"At the theatre, by the by, don't you hate women who're afraid to laugh?" Helen asks Fido.

"Awfully," she says, grinning back at her. It's the surges of familiarity that she's finding strangest: as if the friends haven't been apart for a moment.

A piercing whistle makes Fido jump, and the carriage sways into move-

ment. All at once her dress feels soaked in the armpits and the small of the back. Her chest's a little tight; she makes herself take long breaths of the metallic air. The wheels start to thunder, the engine screams. The carriage is filling up with vapour, and she coughs violently; Anderson stands and wrestles with the window catch. "Breathe it in deeply," says Helen, one hand caressing Fido's shoulder blade.

The smoke feels poisonous, but then medicines often do; she does her best to fill her lungs and hold it in. The train's been swallowed up by darkness, and the gaslight flares up greenly. At this speed, there's a peculiar vibration, a sort of undulation of the thundering machine. Above them, she knows, there's more than twenty feet of packed London earth. How do the third-class passengers bear it in their open wagons? This isn't like a railway tunnel, because it shows no sign of coming to an end.

"More than a little oppressive, no?" she remarks, but the others show no sign of hearing her over the shrieking demons, and she shouldn't have spoken because now she's hacking so hard her lungs are on fire. Between the coughs, the wheezing is getting worse. She fumbles in her bag, claws the lining.

"Let me, let me," shouts Helen, taking the bag from her. "Is this little bottle—"

Fido undoes it with spasmodic fingers and puts it to her nose. The camphor and menthol make her eyes water, and she gasps. She takes a long drink that burns like vitriol. But already she can feel the laudanum calming her lungs a little. She finds a folded handkerchief and douses it in the mixture. Holding it to her face, she makes herself do nothing but breathe.

The train's stopped. Anderson is speaking in her ear, something about King's Cross, can she manage a little longer or should they alight here? She shakes her head, unable to speak. Her wretched lungs!

Another few minutes of jolting and shrieking, and then the train halts again: Euston. Anderson's helping her to her feet, and Helen's holding her other elbow. Up a long, twisting staircase—they all three stop whenever Fido's overtaken by a coughing fit. A male passenger's voice behind mutters a complaint, and Anderson turns to snap something about the lady's being unwell.

Finally they emerge on Gower Street. The sun's gone behind a thick veil of cloud, and it seems a little cooler. Fido's breathing has eased enough to let her speak: "I'm perfectly well now, really."

"All my fault," Helen is lamenting as they turn down Endsleigh Gardens. "My vagaries so often end in disaster . . ."

"Not at all," says Fido hoarsely; "my own doctor recommended the experiment."

Helen's face brightens. "It is rather a thrill, though, isn't it, to cross the capital in a matter of minutes?"

She nods, coughing explosively again.

At the entrance to Taviton Street, the top-hatted gatekeeper expresses such concern for Miss Faithfull's health that Anderson's obliged to tip him.

"If you please," says Fido, on her steps, loosening herself from her friends' arms, "I'm quite recovered now." Embarrassment makes her voice almost surly. "You've been awfully kind, Colonel."

"Fortunate to be of any assistance to such a celebrated lady," says Anderson with a neat bow.

"Will you solemnly swear to rest now?" breathes Helen in her ear. "And a line tomorrow."

"A paragraph, at the least."

They part laughing; their hot hands come away reluctantly, like ivy. It's all very strange, Fido thinks; seven years of silence cracked open like a windowpane.

She uses her own key; she's never seen the need for interrupting the servants' work to make them let her in.

It's these small, rational reforms that make the Reverend and Mrs. Faithfull shudder so, on their rare visits from Headley. Her father's a clergyman of the old, well-bred, moderate school; he preaches in tailored black, and has equal scorn for genuflecting Tractarians and Low ranters. Fido still feels bad about the enormous expense she put him to by her coming out: all those unflattering flounces, and for what? At twenty-two, finding herself alone in London after the Codringtons' departure, she had a quiet tussle with her parents that ended with her winning their cautious agreement that she was to be treated as a sensible spinster of thirty, with her own modest household, trying to

make her way in the literary world. But two years later, when Fido broke it to them that she had taken up the cause of rights for women, and was setting up a printing house as a demonstration of female capacity for skilled labour, Mrs. Faithfull got two red spots very high in her cheeks and asked whether it wasn't generally held that a lady who engaged in trade, even with the highest of motives, lost caste. Fido countered with some sharp remarks about *idle femininity* that make her wince to remember, especially considering that her mother has never known an idle hour in her life.

What about these days? Do the Faithfulls consider the youngest daughter of their eight to be still a lady? Best not to ask. Officially they condone her life in the capital—*your mission*, her mother called it once, which must be how she describes it to her neighbours in Surrey—but Fido can sense the strain. They'd so much rather she were settled in some country town and producing a child a year, like her sisters.

Upstairs, in her bedroom, Fido catches sight of herself in the mirror. Intelligent eyes in the long, upholstered face of—well, there's no other way to put it—a well-fed dog. Her limp brown hair, cropped to her neck, is pulled back by a plain band. The flesh sags softly under her chin where white lace, grubby from her morning in the City, meets the brown cloth. No corsets, no crinoline: it cost her only a little pang to give them up, and she never misses them now. (They didn't make her look any prettier, only more conventional, another harmless frilled sheep drifting along with the herd.) Walking arm in arm with Helen this afternoon, it strikes her that the two of them must have looked like characters from quite different sorts of book. Well, Fido's as God made her. And as she's chosen to be. At least the way she dresses now is clear, uncompromising—and not eccentric enough to demand attention. It announces, *I have more pressing business than to wonder who's looking at me.*

She prises off her shoes before lying down. She hopes she isn't marking the counterpane. A shower-bath would be delicious, but the company only turns the water on in the mornings. Well, that's the last time she'll let herself be dragged through the vaporous sewers of the Underground. Some days this city is too much for her: a clanging machine that threatens to crush and swallow her. Some days she doubts her lungs will hold out till she's forty. But if she led the kind of quiet provincial days the Reverend and Mrs. Faithfull

would prefer for their youngest daughter, it wouldn't be asthma that would choke off her life force in the end, but ennui. The fact is that for all its infinite varieties of filth, London is the thumping heart of everything that interests her, the only place she can imagine living.

She reaches into the bedside drawer for her tin of Sweet Threes and the little box of safety matches. (Fido has a standing order for her cigarettes; they're delivered straight from the factory in Peckham, so she doesn't have to push her way into a tobacconist's once a week, running the gauntlet of smirking men.) The Turkish tobacco in its tube of yellow tissue smells sweetly spiced and nutty—though when she first tried a cigarette, five years ago, it seemed to stink like used horse bedding. She draws the smoke deep into her raw lungs now, and feels her breathing ease at once.

Helen's back. Fido still can't quite believe it.

After her second cigarette she sleeps, a little, and then rings for Johnson to bring up some cold mutton and pickles. She always reads at meals, to make the most of her time and to keep her mental pistons firing. Over her dinner tray she skims the Social Science Association's latest pamphlet on *Friendless Girls and How to Help Them.* She clucks with irritation when she finds a misspelling she should have spotted in the galleys.

Her attention keeps wandering. What are the odds of running into someone in London? Three and a half million to one, according to the last census. It's not as if the two former friends ran into each other at one of their old Belgravia haunts, or the home of some mutual acquaintance. To happen to glimpse each other on Farringdon Street, in a mob of bankers and porters, only a fortnight after the Codringtons' return to England, with Helen in search of magenta tassels and Fido's head full of printing schedules—it can't be an accident. Such astonishing luck, after the awful mischance of the lost letters that ended their friendship so needlessly. Fido likes to think of her life as self-made, an ingenious machine held in her own two hands . . . but there's something so fortuitous about today's reunion, she can only attribute it to providence.

Friendless Girls has fallen onto the counterpane. She's back in Kent, all at once, at the spot on Walmer Beach where she first laid eyes on Helen Codrington in 1854. A lady with russet hair, perched like a mermaid on the rocks, those salty blue eyes staring out to sea. Fido was only nineteen, on a

visit to help her sister Esther with the new baby, and green with inexperience. Green enough, for instance, to assume that a weeping wife must be grieving the lack of her brave captain (recently posted to the Crimea) rather than the fact of him.

The Reverend and Mrs. Faithfull's union was such a solid edifice, so proper in its manners and substantial in its comforts: what did Fido, at nineteen, understand of the darker games husbands and wives could play? How little she knew of marriage—of anything, she corrects herself now—before she became acquainted with the Codringtons. Before she found herself drawn into the absorbing misery of a principled man and a warm woman who had nothing in common. Nothing to bind them except two little daughters, and the full force of law.

The strange thing was, Fido liked them both. She felt drawn to Helen at once, by instinct, as a bloom opens to a bee. But to tall, bearded Captain Codrington too, as soon as he sailed home that November—when the Crimean winter shut down all possibility of what he called "decent action." She was drawn to his earnestness, his zeal for the Navy, his tenderness with the children; she found him manly in the best sense. And as for him, he took to his wife's new companion at once, paid her the compliment of serious conversation, as if she were something more interesting than a second-season debutante. Within a month she'd picked up his wife's un-English habit of calling him Harry. One afternoon, when Helen had had a tantrum over caraway cake and rushed off to her room, Harry confided in Fido how valuable he thought her influence; how much the children treasured their "Aunt Fido"; how he hoped she'd consider Eccleston Square as her home whenever her parents could spare her from the Rectory in Headley. And little by little, without it ever receiving any further discussion, Fido found herself one of the family.

She began with a fount of optimism, not just as Helen's friend but also as a friend to the marriage. Surely the fact that this man and this woman were by nature alien to each other needn't mean that happiness would always be beyond their grasp? If Harry only mellowed a little, approaching his fifties . . . if he came to appreciate that his young wife's qualities were those of the singing grasshopper more than the industrious ant . . . if Helen, for her part,

could be persuaded to accept the real life she'd chosen, rather than hankering for those chimerical ones she found between yellow paper covers . . . That was how Fido used to think, in the first years at Eccleston Square.

It embarrasses her to realize that she pictured herself as a sort of Miss Nightingale, lifting her lamp in dark passages. She tried not to take sides, but it was a vain attempt, she sees that now. Harry was away serving his sovereign for long stretches of the mid-1850s, and even when home between campaigns, he couldn't help but stand awkwardly outside the magic circle of the women's intimacy. *I used to call her Madre,* she thinks now. *And sometimes, Little One.* It's quite mysterious to Fido, that electric chain of feeling that can link two women of different ages, backgrounds, temperaments; that throb of sympathetic mutuality, that chiming note outside the range of men's hearing. Without understanding it, she's always responded to it as a diviner to the call of water deep underground.

Setting her tray aside, on impulse she gets out of bed, and goes to unlock a little drawer in her bureau. At the very back, rolled up in a piece of linen, she finds the choker. A cheap thing, but nicely made: mother-of-pearl, shells, pebbles of amber, all the small treasures of the Kentish shore, sewn onto a band of black velvet. Helen gave it to her to mark the first anniversary of their meeting, and Fido wore it for the best part of three years. *The Codrington years*, as she's called them ever since, in the privacy of her head.

She blamed herself at the time; of course she did. The fact is that for all Fido's sensible advice, her loving counsel, the Codrington marriage disintegrated on her watch. She did her best, and her best did no good at all.

Worse than that: by stepping in as a wide-eyed go-between, she became an obstacle. That awful last year, 1857, when Helen shut her bedroom door against her husband, and finally—having wilfully misunderstood a paragraph in the *Telegraph* about the new Matrimonial Causes Act—made a wild demand for a separation on the basis of *incompatibility* (as if any such thing existed in law) . . . Fido still can't sort out the pieces of that puzzle. All she knows is that the more she tried to help, the more entangled she got, the more she tangled matters that she'd have been better off not meddling with in the first place.

All this remembering is hard work, like using a muscle that's gone stiff and sore. There are things she can't look at directly yet; passages in her long

history with the Codringtons over which she skips. Those strange, terrible months of quarrels and illnesses towards the end, for instance.

It still makes her blush to the throat to remember that Harry had to ask her to move out. (She ought to have left months before that, but Helen needed her so desperately, and the wound-up, wailing little girls . . .) He did it in a gentlemanly manner; assured her, "No third party should be obliged to witness such scenes." But Fido stumbled away from Eccleston Square like a child with scorched fingers.

And then in a matter of months, news came that Captain Codrington was to be elevated to the rank of rear admiral and made superintendent of the dockyards at Valetta. His wife and children would accompany him on his first land posting, that was understood; Admiralty House had dozens of rooms, and Helen was one of these rare Englishwomen raised in the tropics for whom the heat held no dangers. So off they went, the whole Codrington ménage. "It'll be a fresh start," Fido remembers telling a tear-stained Helen that summer of '57. "A heaven-sent second chance." She wanted to believe it herself; she was holding out for something like a happy ending.

And now? she wonders, as she stands fingering the seashell choker. Helen sounded no worse than rueful today on Farringdon Street, when she mentioned Harry being buried in paperwork. Perhaps seven years have dulled her weapons, and his. Have the spouses somehow muddled through their old antipathies, Fido wonders, and reached an *entente cordiale*?

On the verge of their departure, in '57, Fido imagined herself writing twice a week, and going out to Malta for long visits. She was still wearing the choker then; she wore it till long after the letters stopped arriving. She wasn't to know that the friendship had slipped through her fingers, by what she's only learned today—it still chokes her to realize it—was the most trivial of happenstance. The inefficiency of the Maltese post!

Fido rolls up the velvet necklace and puts it back in the drawer. It probably wouldn't go around her throat anymore. She's solider, these days, not just in flesh but also in mind. Being stranded seven years ago, left to her own devices, did her good. It doesn't matter why; it doesn't matter that it was all a mistake. Fido had to grow up and make a life for herself: a full one, useful and satisfying, an important life (if she says so herself).

But to feel the grey ashes of friendship reddening to life again—

Enough. At this rate she won't sleep tonight.

Fido puts the tray outside her door for Johnson. She returns *Friendless Girls* to the pile of pamphlets on the bedside cabinet, and unlocks the lower drawer in which she keeps her fiction. Not that she has anything indecent; the spines all bear the Pegasus motif of Mudie's Library. Ridiculous things are said of Miss Braddon's novels, or Mr. Collins's—that they harrow the nervous system and drive readers to drink or insanity. Fido finds them enlivening, in the small doses she allows herself; as with any stimulus, it's a matter of moderate use. Appalling secrets, deaths, bigamies, doppelgangers: there's nothing like a taste of the sensational at the end of a hard day. She takes out *The Notting Hill Mystery* now, and finds her place.

Two pages on, she finds herself staring into space. This is ridiculous. For seven years, she's been getting along perfectly well on her own. *But we met again on Farringdon Street, by purest chance. In the multitudinous city, Helen laid her hand on mine.*

At any rate, these are pointless speculations, because it's too late to turn back. There's no one—has never been anyone—whose company Fido relishes as much as Helen Codrington's. Despite the woman's excesses and flaws; despite all the complications of their shared history. The grave is open and the dead friendship walks.