Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Watch the Lady

Written by Elizabeth Fremantle

Published by Michael Joseph

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Watch the Lady

ELIZABETH FREMANTLE

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

First published 2015

001

Copyright © Elizabeth Fremantle, 2015

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Typeset in Garamond MT Std 13.5/15.25 pt by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17710–2

TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–17711–9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C018179
FSC
www.fsc.org

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Alice, who would have been Stella had I got my way

The Duel

Stella, star of heavenly fire,
Stella, lodestar of desire.

Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*

October 1589

Leicester House, the Strand

The wax sizzles as it drips, releasing an acrid whiff. Penelope presses in her seal, twisting it slightly to make it unreadable, wondering if it – this letter – is folly, if it could be construed as treason were it to fall into the wrong hands.

'Do you think . . .' she begins to say to Constable, who is standing at her shoulder.

'I think you risk too much.'

'I have to secure my family's future. You know as well as I that the Queen is not a young woman. Were she to –' She stops and flicks her gaze about the chamber, though they both know they are alone as they had searched, even behind the hangings, for lurking servants who might be persuaded to sell a snippet of information to the highest bidder. 'There have been attempts on the Queen's life and she has named no heir. If one were to strike its target.' Her voice is lowered to the quietest of whispers. She doesn't need to tell him that there are eyes all over Europe on Elizabeth's crown. 'The Devereuxs need an established allegiance.'

'And James of Scotland is the strongest claimant to the English throne,' he says.

'Some say so.' Penelope closes the discussion firmly. Constable is not aware that this has been discussed endlessly with her brother – and their mother, for that matter, who understands diplomacy better than all of them put together. 'I do it for Essex, not for myself. My brother is the one who needs powerful allies.' She hands him the letter, meeting his eyes briefly.

He runs his fingers over the paper as if it is a lover's skin. 'But should it fall into the wrong hands . . .'

He is surely thinking of Robert Cecil, son of Lord

Treasurer Burghley, the man who holds the reins of England. Cecil has a knife in every pie.

She meets his gaze with a half-smile. 'But this is merely a missive of friendship, an outstretched hand. And it comes from a woman.' She places her palm delicately to her breast and widens her eyes, as if to say a woman's words count for nothing. 'Secret communication with a foreign monarch might see Essex in trouble, but from one such as I . . .' She tilts her head in mock humility. 'Oh, I think I can get away with it.'

Constable laughs. 'From a mere woman? No one would even notice.'

She hopes to God this is true. 'You are sure you wish to accept this mission?'

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to serve you, My Lady.'

She doesn't doubt it. Constable has penned near on a hundred poems for her, and he is not the only one. Essex is a magnet for poets and thinkers who cluster round him like iron filings, hoping for his patronage, prepared to go to any lengths to gain his favour. By flattering his sister they think they help their cause. She wonders at the irony that, for all those lines of poetry written in celebration of her beauty, repeating incessantly the same figures of speech – her black starry eyes, her spun-gold hair, her nightingale's voice, her marble skin – the man she is wed to has never got beyond his disgust of her. Beauty may make for pretty lines in a sonnet but it is eggshell thin, and as friable; it does not speak of what lies within.

'You will give it straight into the hands of King James.' She is aware of the danger she might visit on Constable with this secret mission, but so is he, and she can almost hear him panting with eagerness. Besides, he is no stranger to espionage.

'But,' he begins, then hesitates. 'How can I be sure of admittance to the King?'

'You are a poet; use your velvet tongue. My seal will get you into the privy chamber.' She takes his hand and folds her signet ring into his palm. 'After all, I am the sister of England's most favoured earl, the Queen's great-niece; that counts for something, does it not?' Her tone is unintentionally sharp and he looks uncomfortable, as if admonished, so she offers him a smile.

'Keep the seal separate from the letter. And give him this, as further proof.' She opens a gilt box on the desk and takes out a limning, passing it to him. He inspects it a moment, his eyes swimming a little.

'Hilliard has not done you justice. Your beauty is greater than this.'

'Pah!' she says with a sweep of her arm. 'Beauty is as beauty does. It looks like me enough to serve its purpose.' She watches as he caches the miniature carefully inside his doublet with the letter.

Her spaniel, Spero, begins to bark, scratching at the door to get out, and they hear the clang of the courtyard gate, then the din of urgent hooves on the cobbles below and a frenzied bout of shouting. They move swiftly to the window just as the door is flung open and her companion Jeanne rushes into the chamber flushed and breathless, crying out, 'Come quickly, your brother is wounded.' Her French accent with its soft lisp delays the impact of her words.

'How?' Panic begins to rise in Penelope like milk in an unwatched pan, but she takes a deep breath to force it into submission.

'Meyrick said it was a duel.' Jeanne's face is ashen.

'How bad is it?' Jeanne simply shakes her head. Penelope takes the girl's elbow with one hand and, gathering her skirts

with the other, calls to Constable, who is already halfway down the stairs, 'Send for Doctor Lopez.'

'If he is wounded then surely a surgeon is what's needed,' says Constable.

'I trust Lopez. He will know what to do.'

They get to the hall as Essex is brought in, supported by two of his men, the broad bulk of loyal Meyrick striding ahead, concern written over his freckled face, eyes darting about beneath invisible eyelashes. He wipes a hand through his hair; it has a smear of dried blood on it.

'A basin of hot water,' she barks at the servants, who have gathered to gawp. Jeanne is shaking, she cannot bear the sight of blood, so Penelope sends her to tear bandages in the laundry.

Essex, his teeth gritted, is heaved on to the table, where he half lies, half sits propped up on his elbows, refusing to succumb to repose.

'Just a scratch,' he says, pulling his cape away from his leg so Penelope can see the slash across his thigh and the blood that has stained his white silk stockings, right down into his boot.

'Meyrick, your knife,' she says to her brother's man.

Meyrick looks at her askance.

'To cut off his stockings. What did you think?' She checks the sharp tone that has appeared from nowhere. 'Here, help me with his boots.' She gets both hands around a heel and gently prises one boot away, while Meyrick works on the other, then takes up the knife and, pinching the bloody silk between her fingers, gently peels his stocking away from the wound. It has stuck where the blood is congealing, which causes Essex to wince and turn away. She then touches the tip of the knife to the fabric, slitting it from thigh to knee, revealing the full extent of the damage.

'It is not as bad as I'd feared – not so deep. You will live.'

She kisses him lightly on his cheek, only now understanding how relieved she is.

A maid places a basin of steaming water beside her and hands her a clean muslin cloth.

'That varlet Blount,' Essex spits.

'Who challenged whom?' she asks, knowing it will have been her brother's rash temper that provoked the spat. She dabs gently at the wound. The blood is surprisingly bright and still flowing, but she can see that no serious damage has been done. An inch further towards his groin where the vessels cluster close to the surface and it might have been a different story.

'It was Blount's fault.' Her brother sounds surly. Penelope has seen Charles Blount at a distance once or twice at court. He gave the impression of being careful and measured. He is comely too, enough to give Essex some competition with the Queen's maids – and, most importantly, the Queen herself. She's heard that Blount has been attracting some favour and knows full well what her brother is like. He wants to be the only star in the Queen's firmament. 'He started it!'

'You are twenty-three, not thirteen, Robin.' Her voice is tender now. 'Your temper will get you into serious trouble.' Penelope is his senior by less than three years but she has always felt older by far. She can sense his indignation at having lost in this ill-advised duel, when he supposes himself the foremost swordsman in the country. She wants to point out he is lucky to have got off so lightly, but doesn't. 'The Queen will hear of it. She will not be happy.'

'Who will tell her?'

She doesn't answer. They both know it is impossible to sneeze anywhere in the whole of Europe without Robert Cecil finding out, and informing the Queen, before you've a chance to take out your handkerchief.

'You will need to rest a day or two,' she says, rinsing the cloth in the basin where the blood billows out pink into the

clean water. 'And your amorous intrigues will be curtailed for a week or so.'

Their eyes meet in silent amusement as he takes a pipe from inside his doublet and begins to stuff its bowl with tobacco.

Doctor Lopez arrives and, after a brief exchange of formalities, gets to work, tipping a measure of white powder into the gash 'to stem the blood flow', he says, offering Essex a length of wood to bite down on.

Essex refuses it, asking for Meyrick to light his pipe and saying he would rather be distracted by listening to his sister sing, so Penelope begins to hum as Lopez threads a length of catgut on to a needle. Essex blows strands of smoke from his nostrils and appears unperturbed as the needle weaves in and out, pulling together the mouth of the wound.

'Your gifts of stitching rival the Queen's embroiderers,' says Penelope, admiring the tidy sutures.

'It is a gift I learned on the battlefield.' He places an avuncular hand on her back and steps with her to one side. There is something honest about the close crop of his hair and beard, steely with age, and the way his smile reaches up to crease his eyes. 'Make sure he rests and keeps his leg up.'

'I will do my best,' she replies. 'You know what he is like.' She pauses. 'And . . .'

'It will go no further, My Lady,' Lopez says, as if reading her mind.

'I am grateful to you, Doctor.' It is not the first time she has felt gratitude for Lopez. If it were not for him she might have lost her first child.

Later they gather about the hearth, listening to Constable recite a new poem.

My Lady's presence makes the roses red
Because to see her lips they blush for shame

Penelope is thinking of the letter to King James tucked in the man's doublet, imagining him riding up the Great North Road to deliver it, feeling a shiver of fear-tinged excitement at the subterfuge.

The lily's leaves, for envy, pale became,
For her white hands in them this envy bred.

'But you change tense there, Constable,' says Essex, who is seated with his foot propped on a stool. 'It should be "become" and "breed".'

'Don't tease him,' says Penelope. 'He does it so the rhyme scans. It is lovely.' She winks the poet's way.

'It's charming,' adds Jeanne, looking up for a moment, needle held aloft, pinched between thumb and finger. Her hands are delicate, small as a child's, and she has a frame to match. The two women are embroidering a row of hollyhocks on to the border of a shift, had started one at each end and planned to meet in the middle, but Penelope's concentration has wandered off and her own needle hangs idly from its thread. Essex's teasing of the poet has silenced the poor fellow, who now stands awkwardly, not knowing whether to continue his recitation. Odd he has such thin skin, thinks Penelope, given he served as Walsingham's emissary for such a time. And to be part of that man's network of spies takes mettle.

'We'd love to hear the rest,' she says, distracted by Meyrick entering the chamber and handing Essex a letter with what appears to be the royal seal attached.

Constable clears his throat and glances at Essex, who is ripping open the missive.

The marigold the leaves abroad doth spread,
Because the sun's and her power is the same.

Penelope has stopped listening and is watching a flush take hold in her brother's cheeks. He screws up the paper

and hurls it into the fire, muttering under his breath, 'I am banned from court. Disobedience. Huh! She thinks it is time someone taught me better manners.'

'A few weeks away from court is probably a good thing,' says Meyrick. 'You wouldn't want to flaunt that wound. People might taunt you for it.'

How good Meyrick is with my brother, she thinks. But then they *have* been close since boyhood.

Essex expels a defeated sigh.

The violet of purple colour came,
Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.

A page has popped his head around the door, beckoning Meyrick, who approaches him, listening to something the boy says, before returning to Essex and passing the whispered message on.

'Blount!' exclaims Essex. 'What the devil does he think he's doing turning up here?'

Penelope holds up a hand to silence Constable and turns to her brother. 'I expect he has come to pay his compliments and see that you are recovered. It is only out of respect, I'm sure.'

'Respect? The man has none.'

Meyrick puts his large hand firmly on her brother's shoulder. 'Leave Blount to me.' Penelope can see the tightly packed muscles of the man's neck tighten and a flash of brutality in those invisibly lashed eyes.

'You *ought* to see him, Robin,' she says. Essex brushes Meyrick's hand off his shoulder and begins to heave himself out of his chair. 'What are you doing? You need to keep that leg up.'

'If I am to receive the miscreant I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me reposed like a milk-livered clotpole.' He limps over to stand beside the great memorial portrait of the Earl of Leicester, as if to gain strength

from his illustrious stepfather. He positions himself, one hand aloft, fingers touching the gilded frame. His eyes are ablaze, which causes Penelope concern; she has seen that look before many times and it often signifies the onset of a bout of deep melancholy. That is Essex: wild fire or leaden heart but nothing in between. 'Send the villain in, then.'

As Meyrick leaves the chamber to fetch Blount, Penelope sees he has not yet washed the smear of blood from his hand.

Blount enters, dropping immediately to his knee and removing his hat. 'Forgive me, My Lord, if I interrupt your peace but I come to salute you and to return your sword.'

'My sword?'

'It was left at the scene, My Lord.'

'So where is it?'

'My man has it outside. I did not think it proper to enter your presence armed.'

'Feared it might provoke another spat?' says Essex, then adds grudgingly, 'You did right, Blount.'

'Of the duel, My Lord,' says Blount. 'It was naught but fluke that my blade caught you. It was you who had the upper hand. It should have been I who took the cut.'

Penelope catches herself staring and quickly pulls her gaze away, picking up her redundant needle, making busy with it.

'Get up, man,' says Essex. 'No need to stay on your knee on my account.'

Penelope thinks she can see the hint of a smile play at the edge of her brother's mouth. She knows only too well how he likes a show of humility. 'Get our guest a drink, and I'll have one too.'

Meyrick pours two cups from the flagon of wine on the table, handing one to his master, the other to Blount, who raises his cup saying, 'Pax?'

'Pax,' replies Essex and they drink back, he a little more

reluctantly than the other man. But etiquette demands that to rebuff Blount's chivalry would occasion another duel.

Penelope's eyes have wandered back to Blount, taking in his halo of hair, dark as an Arab's, and the fine proportions of his face and the warm dark eyes. He is better looking than she'd thought. He doesn't wear a ruff, just a flat lacework collar and a notched satin doublet, quite beautifully understated. He has clearly chosen his garb carefully so as not to outshine Essex. So he is a diplomat too. But a single earring hanging from his left ear adds an appealing touch of dash. She is thinking this man might be a good ally for her brother, makes a mental note to talk to Essex about it later, to make him understand that it is not men like this who are his enemies. It is men like Cecil and Ralegh, who have powerful allegiances and the Queen's ear, men who would see him ousted, that he must be wary of. Besides, she would like to see more of Blount at Essex House. He glances towards her at that moment and she feels herself blush as if he can divine what she is thinking.

'Do you know my sister?' asks Essex.

'I am honoured to make the acquaintance of one who has inspired such poetry.' He is back on his knee now, and reaching out for her hand.

She wonders if he isn't spreading it a little too thickly, the charm, which he clearly has in abundance. She can see why the Queen has favoured this one. But he looks up at her and she can find nothing but sincerity in those eyes of his.

'Sidney's sonnets are unparalleled, My Lady. They have transported me at times.'

'And what makes you suppose me to be the subject of Sir Philip's poems?' She has wondered often at the fame that arose from being the muse of a great poet, how it seemed to have so little to do with her and so much more to do with Sidney. What is a muse anyway, she has asked herself many times – no more than a cipher.

Her brother laughs. 'Everyone knows that you and Stella are one and the same.'

"'When Nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes, / In colour black why wrapped she beams so bright?'" recites Blount quietly. 'I recognize your likeness from his words, My Lady.'

'Now there is *real* poetry,' says Essex, causing poor Constable to shuffle uncomfortably.

'None surpasses Sidney,' exclaims the embarrassed poet.

'Enough of this,' declares Essex. 'Meyrick, fetch me my sword. Indeed, it is the very blade Sidney gave me.'

'And I'm sure he didn't intend that you use it for duelling,' says Penelope, trying to remain light-hearted, but all this talk of Sidney is churning up painful memories, forcing her thoughts back to the girl she was eight years ago. She remembers arriving at court, imagining it to be nothing but romance and cheerful intrigue. The woman she is now, restrained, secretive, political, is as different from that girl as an egg from an oyster.