

Kate Pullinger

*The Mistress of Nothing\**

*'The Mistress of Nothing' is based on the true story of Lady Lucie Duff Gordon and her maid, Sally Naldrett, who settled in Egypt in 1863. This extract contains the first two chapters of the novel. The novel was published in 2009; it went on to win Canada's Governor General's Award for Fiction that year.*

**One**

The truth is that, to her, I was not fully human. I was not a complete person and it was this thought, or rather, this lack of thought, that compelled her, allowed her, to act as she did. She loved me, there's no question of that, and I knew it, and had felt secure in it, but it transpired that she loved me like a favoured household pet. I was part of the background, the scenery; when she entertained, I was a useful stage prop. She treated her staff well and I was the closest to her; I did everything for her in those last years. I was chosen to accompany her on her final, long, journey. But I was not a real person to her, not a true soul with all the potential for grace and failure that implies. My error was not to recognise this, not to understand this from the very beginning. When I did wrong, I was dismissed, I was no longer of use to her. No, worse than that – I was excised, cut out, as though I'd become part of her dreadful disease, a rotting, malignant supernumerary limb that needed to be got rid of. So I was amputated. I was sent out into the world, a useless lump of flesh and bone cast off from the corporeal body.

But that's too much, that's too dramatic. I'm not given to drama, though my situation called for it. The truth is that she hated me for being happy. She hated me for finding love when love had deserted her. She hated me for creating a family when she had lost hers. She hated me for living when she herself faced death. And she could not admit to these feelings – how could anyone admit to feeling this way? So it suited her to treat me as though I was not worthy of the empathy, the considered compassion and generosity, the spirit and humour, she bestowed upon her fellow man. I was not worthy.

But that is not where my story starts. And, more importantly, that is not where my story ends either – she was not my ending. Once she cast me out, she could no longer control me. No. My story starts in England, in Esher, in 1862, a long time ago, and very far away from where I dwell today.

## Two

So. I am a plain-speaking woman, and I'll tell my story plainly. My Lady collapsed at dinner. All her favourite gentlemen were there – Mr George Meredith, Mr Alfred Tennyson, Mr Arthur Taylor. She looked beautiful, her hair black and glossy, the threads of grey shimmering like silver in the candlelight, one of her Persian shawls draped around her shoulders. But so pale, too pale, I should have known. When I entered her room earlier in the day, she was in the middle of a coughing fit; she turned away from me, and made me leave, insisting she was fine. Sir Duff Gordon will be angry that I played along with her deceit, but I knew she was looking forward to the evening; she hasn't been well enough for supper parties of late. She's been spitting blood almost continuously; when I enter her bedroom I can smell the tang of it.

But wait: this is not what she is like, my Lady, not really, not truly. She is not an invalid, translucent and tilting as though she might keel over and die at any moment. My Lady is robust, she is hale, she is learned and argumentative and adventurous and charming and entertaining and large-souled. People notice Lady Duff Gordon. People remember her. When she enters a room, that room is altered, the lamps shine more brightly, the fire snaps and pops and blows out sparks, ladies sit up straighter, men stand more crisply, and someone in the company always says, as though it has to be said: 'Here she is! Lucie!' My Lady is much loved, even by those she infuriates, even by those – her mother-in-law, for example – who feel that her hungry mind is too manly, that she can't possibly be a good wife.

And I knew that she wasn't well enough to host a supper party that day. But I kept quiet and stayed close by. When she began to cough halfway through the meal, I stepped into the room, right behind Cathy and her serving tray. My Lady, her eyes watering from the strain of containing the fit, gave me a small wave, a gesture I understood immediately. I helped her away from the table, not that any one of those great gentlemen would have understood she needed helping; my Lady stood, smiled, and said, 'Gentlemen, please excuse me for a few minutes,' as though she'd been called away to attend to some domestic duty. It was clear she couldn't manage the stairs, so I took her through to the kitchen – it wasn't the first time. I helped my Lady into a chair, Cook handed me a cloth, and I placed a steaming bowl in her lap.

It was terrible. It was one of those times when the coughing was so violent, it was as though her lungs were tearing themselves apart in their attempt to escape her breast. Phlegm and vomit – and thin streaks of bloody tissue with it. She coughed and coughed and then her breath became so ratty and weak I thought she must faint, surely, if only for a moment's

relief. She wouldn't let me treat her; instead, my Lady gasped her way through. After a time the fit ended and, with it, the wretched coughing. She sat for a while, shivering cold, her body's heat dissipated through fever. A few minutes and a sip of broth later, she was on her feet, adjusting her shawl. I accompanied her back into the dining room, where the guests had moved on to the sweet. She waved me away as though I'd been pestering her (I didn't mind), and said to Mr Meredith, 'Now, George, what have I been missing?' When he expressed his concern over her health – Mr Meredith was always observant of my Lady – she said, 'It was Rainey – she woke from a bad dream and the girl could not calm her.' I could see Mr Meredith did not believe her, but he kept this to himself, wisely.

Later, when I looked in once again, she was smoking a cigar and arguing her point with such animation that no guest new to the house would have believed my Lady was unwell. Her husband, Sir Alick, gave me a smile and winked, as though to say, 'Look at her. She is a marvel, isn't she?'

Our travels first started two years before. We spent that winter, 1860, in the Isle of Wight at the behest of Doctor Izod, who was adamant that the Esher climate was too harsh for my Lady to bear. It was a low time. I often wondered if Doctor Izod had ever been to the Isle of Wight as it was never dry, nor light, nor warm, nor in any way resembled a place that might effect a cure for my Lady. We crept about the corridors of that tawdry hotel – it was not completely sordid, but near enough – while my Lady lay in bed, all of us, my Lady included, feeling as though she was about to die.

The next winter we embarked on our very own odyssey, all the way to the southernmost tip of Africa and back again. Just the two of us this time, a Lady and her lady's maid. There was no money for any kind of entourage. The Duff Gordons are always hard-pressed financially, though since Sir Alick moved from the Treasury to the Inland Revenue in Somerset House, my Lady says things have become a little easier, and I can attest to that. My wages are almost always paid on time these days. And so, an adventure – a brilliant escapade in fact. I loved it on that ship, I loved the port cities, and the sights, ever more exotic as we travelled south. I loved it best when we were far out to sea: no sign of land, no trees, no buildings, no people; just water, the ship, my mistress, and me. 'Don't you miss the household?' she asked one day. 'The other servants. The companionship?'

I smiled. I could tell she was missing her family. 'Not one bit,' I said, 'I don't miss anything about England.'

My Lady laughed. 'Well then,' she said, 'you are a peculiar creature, Sally Naldrett, but you're perfect for me.'

I laughed too, but the truth was I was relieved to get away from Esher, to get away from the gossip and malice, the too-close proximity of other servants. I liked being on my own, I liked being in sole charge of my Lady, I liked being away from the younger female staff and their demands, the male staff and their unhelpful expectations. 'I'd happily stay at sea for ever,' I said.

But that trip, though immensely satisfying for me, had not suited Lady Duff Gordon's needs. All that sea-travel, all those thousands of miles of water, when what she wants is clear, dry air and hot, dry sunshine – she needs to parch her lungs, to set them out in the sun and warm their very roots, that's what I think, so she can cough out what ails her once and for ever.

And so we returned to England, yet again, after a full year aboard ship. For my Lady, the reunion was sweet. There they were on Victoria Dock, the whole of her family: Sir Alick, waving a white handkerchief; her eldest daughter, Miss Janet, Mrs Henry Ross now, heavily pregnant with her own first child; Master Maurice, grown tall, almost thirteen; and Miss Urania – Rainey – now all of three years of age. My Lady rushed off the ship as though she was one of the lions the captain was transporting below deck, freed from its cage. And I thought, oh, look how my Lady has missed her family! Why didn't I see how much she missed her family while we were away? At first it was as though Miss Rainey did not know her mother, this pale woman with the smell of sea-salt in her hair, but in the carriage the little girl stared and stared at her mother, who could not stop talking of Africa, of crocodiles and elephants and lions and all the wonders we had seen, and after a while she climbed down from where she was sitting on her father's knee and climbed up into her mother's lap. And my Lady stopped talking, and smiled very broadly.

That was this June past. My Lady kept smiling at Miss Rainey through all that transpired during the next few, short weeks. But I knew the doctor's verdict before it came: our year abroad had not effected a cure. Our year abroad had not changed anything. The illness has Lady Duff Gordon in its grip; it is shrinking her, it is draining her, and it is robbing us all of her in the process.

I am desperate for a solution. Everyone is desperate for a solution because, in our hearts, we know there is no cure. They are all saying it, saying it more loudly this time: Lady Duff Gordon will not survive another winter in England. Mr Meredith and Doctor Izod have both told her, and Doctor Quail travelled down from London to instruct my Lady himself: if she is to live, she must leave. She must leave her beloved home yet again, her expansive household with its warm and embracing fug of books, pamphlets, papers and endless loud

and good-humoured debate; she must leave her steadfast husband, and her precious children, and travel to a place where it actually is warm, and light, and dry, in the dread, dark months of November, December, January, February, March; even April can be bitterly cold and wet in England. I would never have thought that one could die from the weather, no matter how miserable and grey it might be, but another winter will murder my Lady.

And so she must go. Her course is set. And I am to accompany her on her travels once again. My Lady and I are going to Egypt. I'll whisper it again, that wonderful word: Egypt. I am Lady Duff Gordon's maid; I am thirty years old, a very great age for a single woman. I reckon I became a spinster some years ago although the precise moment it happened passed me by. I have been in the Duff Gordon household for more than a decade, and those dozen years have been good years for me. Before then, penury. My sister Ellen and I were orphaned when we were very young; our parents, Battersea shopkeepers, were killed in a train derailment at Clapham. We were staying with our Aunt Clara in Esher at the time – our parents were on their way to fetch us home – and that is where we remained. But Aunt Clara could not afford, or was not inclined – I never knew which was more true, though I have my suspicions – to keep two extra children and so we went into service, me that same year, and then Ellen one year later. My first post was scullery maid in a lowly Esher household; I made my bed on the floor of the pantry while Mrs Hartnell, the housekeeper (she was also the cook), slept on the kitchen table, 'Just like the Queen!' she used to proclaim, laughing. Mrs Hartnell was jolly and kind and knew how to do good work at speed, and I did well in that house; I was quick to learn. And so I moved to another house, up another rung on the sturdy service ladder, and then, when the Duff Gordons came to Esher and took up residence in the house Lady Duff Gordon called 'The Gordon Arms', I was able to apply for a position in that much more illustrious household. Applied and was accepted, and here I remain.

I work hard but my Lady is a most rewarding employer; everything I do for her is exactly right, or so she would have me believe. On my day off – one per month, when we're at home, unless my Lady is too unwell for me to leave her – I put on my bonnet and take the train up to London: my Lady always says that a woman my age has a right to travel up to London by herself and I couldn't agree more. The train up to London, a walk through the city – just saying those words makes me smile with pleasure – the noise, the smells, the people. Up the steps of the Museum in Bloomsbury, through the exhibition rooms, the corridors lined with glass cases, past the giraffe whose neck is so long you injure your own neck looking up at it, past the knives and coins and cups and urns in their crowded display

cases, until I reach the room that is my destination: the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery. I take a seat and close my eyes before I've seen too much – I don't want to spoil my anticipation by seeing it all too quickly. I've come all this way to look and yet, once I'm there, I can hardly bear to see. I open my eyes and there they are: the Pharaohs, their gods, and the hieroglyphs – the secrets of that ancient land encrypted in stone.

I have my favourite. The first time I saw his shapely long face I thought he was a woman. But no, he's a man, a colossal Pharaoh. Almond eyes, kohl-rimmed like a cat's; I would run my hand along his cheek if I could reach that high, over his lips, down to his great chin, feeling the stone bones beneath the smooth cool stone skin. I stare at him, and he stares back at me. I laugh at myself: he's the man of my dreams.

I've been coming here for a long time. I don't know why. The other maids ask me – they think it's very odd, why go all the way up to town to sit in the Museum? Most of them have never been, will end their days having never been – I can't think how to reply. I tried once, with Cook; I said, 'Because I like the mystery.' She looked at me as though I'd forgotten how to speak English. And it's a coincidence, my visits to this room over the years, and the fact that we are now going to Egypt. A wonderful coincidence that has, for once, gone in my favour.

After the Sculpture Gallery, I go to view the mummies in their cases. This room is disturbing, though I am drawn to it. Part of me feels it can't be decent to remove the dead from their tombs and put them on display, but I can't stop myself from looking. I'm as excited and curious as the nearest schoolboy, and there's almost always a crowd of jostling schoolboys. I stand still, like a palm tree in the flooding Nile, while they eddy around me. I peer at the display case labels and try to decipher the information: Thebes, female, aged about twenty-eight. Oh, I think, only a little bit younger than me.

A man once spoke to me in the Mummy Room; he had a face like a cadaver himself and I was so startled by his appearance that I neither heard his words nor was able to make a reply. He must have thought me an imbecile, a foreigner, or both. I'm not accustomed to having men speak to me directly, at least not men I do not know already. Perhaps he himself was foreign – a homesick Egyptian come to gaze upon his fellow countrymen. Perhaps he was after something. I don't know: I walked away.

When I've finished looking in the Egyptian rooms in the Museum – oh, I'll never be done looking – I walk back through Covent Garden to Charing Cross Station and I return to Esher once again. Back to The Gordon Arms. Back to my Lady. Lady Duff Gordon. Lucie. Although, of course, I don't call her by her Christian name. But it's a sweet name, Lucie,

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sweet and grand, the very opposite of my own name: Sally. Bald. Plain. Like a dog's name, I used to say to my sister Ellen when we were little, and she would giggle. A maid's name.

There's a portrait of my Lady. It's a true likeness. Not of her today, now that she is thin and grey, but of how she used to be – the real Lady Duff Gordon. When Mr Henry Phillips painted it, he was staying with us in The Gordon Arms. He had broken his knee falling downstairs at Waterloo Station and was housebound while he recovered. 'Henry's bored,' I heard my Lady declare to Sir Alick; he had written her a note to complain (my Lady's friends always wrote to her with their complaints; 'You have the confidence of half of London,' Sir Alick used to say). 'Let's invite him down to stay.'

Mr Phillips rigged up his canvas on pulleys and ropes so he could paint my Lady while he reclined on the sofa, his bound leg elevated; he rang a little bell whenever they needed their tea and cakes replenished, which was frequently. The house resounded with their gossip and laughter and the other maids and I argued over whose turn it was to take in the tray. When the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy, my Lady and Sir Alick travelled up from Esher to see it and they laughed, my Lady told me later, they both laughed to see her thus immortalised. 'But I was shocked as well, Sally,' my Lady said at breakfast the next day, 'it was as though Mr Phillips had seen right inside me.' She paused.

'You are a masterpiece,' Sir Alick said.

'I'm jolly and fat. It was embarrassing to be seen gawping at myself, like staring in a mirror in a public gallery. The vanity of it.' But everyone could see she was pleased. And now it hangs in the drawing room, and we look up at it when we pass by, and from time to time I see my Lady looking at it, and it is as though she is thinking – yes, that's me. The real me. Healthy and young and greedy for life and living.

This time no one is pretending that the departure from home will be temporary. My Lady's only son, Maurice, is off to Eton, the baby, Miss Rainey, to my Lady's Aunt Charlotte, and Sir Alick to board with Mr Taylor in London where he will be nearer to his office. With everyone dispersed, The Gordon Arms will no longer be necessary, and they have let the lease go. Departure is an altogether different undertaking when your home will no longer be there to return to. There is much to do with closing the house, and packing for the children. My Lady and I are both grateful for the work; it keeps our thoughts away from the goodbyes which draw closer every day.

Mrs Henry Ross – Miss Janet – I'm not quite used to her new name yet, though 'Mrs' suits her very well indeed – my Lady's eldest child, is here, helping. This is an accident of timing; Cook is always grumbling that Miss Janet doesn't approve of my Lady, 'Never has and

never will,' she says. 'Ever since she was tiny, daughter has been disappointed by mother – as if my Lady has failed to live up to her expectations. I never saw such a thing!' Cook says, shaking her head and tutting. And it's true, Mrs Ross would prefer my Lady to be more conventional. For mother and daughter to have as little as possible to do with each other seems sensible to me; they have little enough in common anyway.

My Lady directs traffic from the settee, but she is weakened again, and I try to prevent her from working. Mrs Ross is very good at throwing things away; and now that we are packing it has become clear to us that the house is jammed to the rafters with things no one wants. 'Why are you harbouring such rubbish, Mummy?' Miss Janet asks. Cupboards full of cracked and broken crockery, linen worn so thin it is beyond repairing. And my mistress nods and waves her hand, as though to say, throw it all away. It is a shock to see such a solid household reduced like this; it turns out we spend our days surrounded by junk and detritus, all of which we were somehow convinced we needed. Even the books no longer seem worth keeping, though we parcelled up my Lady's own work, the fourteen French and German novels and histories she has made her career translating, and placed the boxes among the possessions to go with Sir Alick; it was typical of my Lady to decide against taking these volumes to Egypt. 'New broom,' she said to me, 'clean sweep.'

Mrs Ross is married to Mr Henry Ross, a banker, 'a man of commerce', as Mrs Ross herself says, and they live in Egypt, in Alexandria, a great city at the mouth of the Nile, and this has helped my Lady with the decision to go to Egypt herself. However, Alexandria, with its Mediterranean sea air, is not dry enough for my Lady's purposes, so we will not be settling there. 'Alexandria is too damp for you,' says Mrs Ross, 'too mouldering,' and I feel sure she is relieved. My sister, Ellen, is Mrs Ross's maid, and she is here with Mrs Ross in Esher, working alongside me, emptying the house. 'Alex is, well, a *passable* city,' Ellen says, 'a little like Marseilles except even more filthy. There are other English people there, and other English ladies' maids.' She says this to reassure me, but I don't need reassuring. Ellen is summering in England with the Rosses; Mrs Ross will have her child here in the autumn, so my Lady and I will reach Egypt long before they do. But, even so, I am heartened by the knowledge that there will be two Naldretts in Egypt at the same time, eventually. My sister and I lived together in the Duff Gordon household for several years and, since Miss Janet married, I have missed having her close by.

It is not for me to remark upon my Lady's innermost feelings. But I can see that she is brought very low by this dispersal of her household, her family. The doctors have declared that two years in Egypt – two years! – might see some restoration of her health. Each farewell



is as painful as the last, and for my Lady, the pain is physical as well as emotional; it preys on her condition, worsening her cough. ‘When will I see my babies again?’ she sighs, more to herself than to me, as we are making an inventory of the great, teetering stacks of cases and trunks we are getting ready. ‘How will Rainey know me?’ I have no idea of how to reply, so I speak softly, ‘Don’t fret, don’t worry.’ But the words sound hollow, even to me.

There is no one here for me to bid farewell, apart from the rest of the household staff, and we are equally weighed down by our sorrow, so there is no need, nor desire, for leave-taking. They are losing their employer, and thus, their employment. But not me. I have a secret: for me, this departure is a joyful thing. I’m leaving Esher. I’m leaving the house and the people who live and work in it. It’s almost as though I am leaving myself, my old familiar self, behind.

Nothing holds me here. Oh, I am fond of Esher, I am fond of Cook, and Cathy, and Esther, who works in the grand house down the street. As everyone says, England in spring is a sight to behold; and, yes, I will miss my trips into town to visit the Museum. But my travels with my Lady have given me a taste for the world.

My life in The Gordon Arms is very narrow. My main preoccupation is avoiding people; avoiding talk. Not that I’m awkward and shy – far from it. Avoiding people: to be more specific – avoiding men. Men want things, they make demands, they make themselves obvious, like the man in the Mummy Room of the Museum in Bloomsbury, they put themselves in my way. But a lady’s maid’s loyalty must be to her Lady; ladies’ maids do not marry. At least, they do not marry and carry on being ladies’ maids. And I have no desire to leave my Lady.

I was working on my Lady’s travel trousseau earlier today; I want to have her clothes in perfect order before we leave. She has continued to lose weight over the summer – Cook’s efforts in that department have failed – so there is a great deal of taking in and remaking to be done. Laura, a young maid, was helping me. She’d been in the household only a few months but was already the subject of much gossip and speculation, the kind of talk I’ve spent my life avoiding, the kind of talk I will not miss once I leave. She was a chatty girl and I was barely listening to her.

‘Aren’t you frightened?’

‘Hmm,’ I said. ‘Pardon?’

‘Aren’t you afraid?’

‘We’ve travelled before, my Lady and I.’

‘But not to live. Not to live in such a foreign place,’ Laura said.

‘I’m not afraid.’

‘I wouldn’t care to go.’

‘You prefer your adventures,’ I said, ‘in the back alley.’ I meant it lightly, but the girl gave me a shocked look and, much to my shame, burst into tears.

‘I didn’t know,’ she said.

‘Didn’t know what?’

‘It was only a bit of fun, I didn’t know it would have such...’ she struggled to find the right word, ‘consequences.’

I put my arm around her narrow shoulders and we sat down on the bed. It was my Lady’s bed, but I knew she wouldn’t mind, given the circumstances. I let Laura cry and I patted her on the back. ‘What has happened?’ I asked, but I knew already.

‘I’m—oh.’ She looked at me; her face was very red.

‘Will he marry you?’ I spared her further humiliation by not asking who he was.

She shook her head. ‘He’s gone.’

‘Gone? Where?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘It’s too late. And now the house is closing. He won’t know where to find me.’

I suppressed a shudder as I realised the extent of her predicament. Predicament is too mild a word – disaster. How will she secure a place in another household? And if she finds a place, how will she keep it once the baby comes along? How will she live? I looked at her and saw myself: this is why I am glad to leave Esher; this is why I’m glad to leave England. ‘Let’s go and speak to my Lady,’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ said the girl, ‘I couldn’t, I—’

‘You must tell Lady Duff Gordon everything. She’ll help you. She won’t leave you to fend for yourself. Come on.’ I pulled her up off the bed. ‘Come with me.’ I gave Laura one of my Lady’s clean linen handkerchiefs and took her downstairs.

It’s not that I object to men. It’s not that I object to marriage. I have had offers, too many to detail. And a few were from men into whose arms I could well imagine falling. ‘You are lovely,’ they say, and then they describe my skin, my hair, my figure, as though I’ve never looked in a mirror. And there have been handsome men of decent means among them: George Dawson the cooper and Robert Smith from the brewery. But I turned them away. I couldn’t leave her; she needs me more than they do. I couldn’t leave my Lady. And if I married George Dawson and had his sweet babies, would I see the world, as I will with my Lady?

And so, one by one, it is goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. For my Lady, there is her beloved mother, Sarah Austin, and the other Lady Duff Gordon, Sir Alick's mother. Mr Meredith, Mr Tennyson, Mr Taylor and all my Lady's good, true friends. Her children. How can she say goodbye to Maurice and Rainey without knowing when she will see them again? As always, she wears her grief lightly. Sir Alick will accompany us on the first leg of our journey, and his will be my Lady's last goodbye, as well as, no doubt, the most difficult.

We set off for Eaux Bonnes on 20 August. We had hoped for a warm sunny spell in the French Pyrenees, but it was already cool by the time we arrived and, worse, raining. My Lady wrote to her mother: *The 'good waters' of Eaux Bonnes are all pouring from the sky.* She fell ill almost immediately; she was weak, and travel served to weaken her further, the wet weather unwelcome, damaging. I did all I could to make her comfortable but the fever, and the blood-spitting, returned. I did my best to make sure that my Lady and Sir Duff Gordon had plenty of time on their own, knowing as I did that they would not be together again for a long while, but Sir Alick was restless and anxious, due back at work in London, worried about his wife and the journey that lay ahead for her. My Lady had been ill for a long time, but there was a part of Sir Alick that still expected her to return to her extravagant old self any day. I could see this in him, and I felt it in myself; everyone who knew her felt the same. And when she didn't get better, continued to not get better, Sir Alick reacted with a kind of subdued and baffled horror, a horror he endeavoured to keep hidden from his wife, but that was nonetheless in plain view to me and anyone else who cared to see.

Finally, my Lady was well enough to move from Eaux Bonnes on to Marseilles where she and Sir Alick at last made their farewells. At the station I tried not to listen, tried to fold myself into myself, far away from the scene, but there was little for me to overhear:

'Goodbye, Alick,' my Lady said.

'Goodbye, my love,' Sir Alick replied.

And then he was gone, on to his train, waving, and I watched my Lady pull herself together as she had done so many times before. We moved on to the port of Leghorn in Italy, where the weather was considerably warmer and my Lady was able to stretch her limbs under the sun. We had a few days' wait before the steamer on which we had booked passage to Alexandria, *Byzantine*, was due to leave. By then my Lady was feeling better once again. She is like no other invalid I have ever known; when feeling well she appears full of vigour and youth and I can't believe, no one can believe, that the illness will cut her down, push her into her chair, her bed, once again. But it does, it always does. Yet in Leghorn she was fine and happy, which was a good thing: my Lady and I both knew that the Italians believe,

mistakenly, that the complaint from which she suffers is contagious. Sufferers are banned from their spa towns and havens. So she must look well and pretend to be well, even if she is not.

\* © Kate Pullinger 2009. *Mistress of Nothing* is published by Serpent's Tail.