

Mary Blackwell's Forgotten Diary

Thomas had bought her a diary. Similar to his own, but the cover was faded red leather rather than his inky black. He'd suggested she keep a diary as he did, recording each day to preserve it in memory. She placed it on the desk and stroked its smooth cover. It seemed trivial to record her life in this way, what was the point of it? But he had told her he would like to read it someday, once they were married and after the baby was born. When they were living together as man and wife.

Mary walked away from the diary, waddling uncomfortably, her baby bump protruding in front of her. She struggled to sit on her bed.

They were to be married next week in Deansgate. Mother and Father had arranged it all.

Mary didn't love Thomas Leech, she knew that, but she could not escape this. She had to marry him, for the baby and for the rest of her family. It would be an escape, she supposed, a way out of the family home.

Mary covered her face with her hands. Tears had started dripping from her eyes.

'Miss?' Sarah poked her head through the open doorway.

Mary rubbed her face and pretended to yawn.

'Yes, yes, Sarah. What is it?' As she spoke, Mary tried to stand, but the weight of the baby made it difficult and she fell back onto the bed. The baby must be coming soon. She groaned, frustrated.

Sarah rushed to her side, taking her arm gently and pulling her up. 'Your mother wishes to see you in her dressing room,' she said. Sarah smoothed down Mary's hair, tucking the fly-away strands behind her ear, murmuring sweetly as her fingers trailed over

'Thank you, Sarah,' Mary said. She smoothed her dress over her bump and shoed the maid away.

Her mother was sitting at the dressing table. The room was dark. The curtains were still drawn, only a few thin ribbons of light escaping around the edges of the fabric. A candle illuminated her mother and the jewels which were laid in front of her.

Mary knocked on the open door.

‘Come in.’

‘Mother, why is the room so dark?’

‘Come in, Mary. I have something for you.’

Panic spiked her chest. She couldn’t go in. That’s what he had said once. She gripped the door harder, heard the wood crack.

Her mother’s head snapped up. Her eyebrows were drawn together, lips pursed. ‘Mary,’ she said. ‘I told you to come here.’

Mary closed her eyes. She could do it. It was her mother.

She let go of the door and felt a small splinter in the tip of her finger. She took a step into the dark room.



March 24th1820

On this day Thomas Leech and I were married at St Johns Church, Deansgate, at two o’clock in the afternoon. Father, Mother, and Mr John Leech were witness to our marriage. Mother had me wear my best dress. It is a blue dress. My mother also wore a blue dress when she wedded Father. She gave me her best necklace of pearls to wear and I must return them to her tomorrow.

March 25th1820

I returned the pearl necklace to Mother today. She said she gave it to me to wear as it means I will have a happy marriage, one without tears.

April 5th1820

Mr and Mrs Galloway visited for tea around three o'clock this afternoon. Poorly as I was today, I resigned to the bedroom at 5 P.M once they had taken their leave. Thomas says it is the baby that is making me feel this way and tells me not to worry as the baby will come soon.

April 10th1820

The household received a letter from Mr Galloway today. We were also visited by Mr Smith from Manchester.

April 23rd1820

I am very unwell. Doctor Edwards has ordered me to rest until the baby comes and has asked for us to send for him once I begin to labour.

April 26th1820

In the morning our child was born. I laboured for about 7 hours and she came about 9 A.M. Thomas and I have named her Elizabeth. She is ever so small.



Mary held the baby in her arms. *Little Elizabeth Leech.* She fit neatly against her mother, her head in Mary's palm, her thin body along her arm.

A few minutes ago, Mary had felt her tiny heartbeat and her soft but struggled breaths. Now, she felt nothing.

Thomas had said she had looked almost identical to Mary. The same bright blue eyes, the same nose – although Elizabeth's was smaller and slightly flat – and the same brown curls.

She looked too much like her.

The doctor knew Elizabeth's fate and had told Thomas last night. Mary had overheard. The baby had been taken away from her and she'd wanted to know why. She'd opened the bedroom door carefully, so it wouldn't make a sound. They were down the hall, she could hear them whispering in Thomas's dressing room. Slowly she made her way to the room, her feet

light on the floorboards. The door was ajar, and she peered in. She covered her mouth so that they wouldn't hear her breathing.

'She will not survive the night,' the doctor said.

'And how is Mary?' Thomas asked. Mary could see his face, the twinkle of the candlelight in his eyes, the wrinkles beginning to show around his mouth and on his forehead.

'She is well, as well as a woman can be after such a birth. I expect she will make a recovery to full health in a matter of weeks. It is the baby –'

'Yes, yes,' Thomas snapped. 'I know.' He turned towards the door with his head hung. He didn't see Mary prying, but she scooted to the side anyway, pressing herself flat against the wall. The door slammed shut.

Careful not to make a noise, Mary pushed her ear against the door. Nothing. Mumbling. Then a baby's cry. Elizabeth was still fine, perhaps the doctor was wrong.

Mary went back to her bedroom and closed the door gently behind her.

The maid had removed the bloody sheets from the bed, but the smell of the blood hung in the air. The floors had been scrubbed, too, but small stains of deep red still clung to the wood.

She felt heavy as she got back into bed. What would they have said if they had seen her? She shouldn't have spied like that. It was shameful and deceitful.

Her baby was growing cold.

Mary counted Elizabeth's toes. She had eight in total. She counted Elizabeth's fingers, nine. Elizabeth could not have been Thomas's child.

Elizabeth was stiff now, but Mary couldn't let go.

Throughout the day, people had tried to pry the baby from her. Even Thomas came and tried to take the baby away. Mary would not let them take her. She paid no attention to their grasping hands or sympathetic sighs.



April 28th 1820

Elizabeth passed at 10 A.M this morning. I held her until Doctor Edwards took her away. I am unwell from the labour and birth, however the doctor has said I will make a full recovery soon and that I may return to my duties in two weeks. He has arranged a visit for next Monday to ensure I am recovering. Letters have been sent to inform Father and Mother, and Mr John Leech, of the birth and death of Elizabeth.

April 30th 1820

Thomas has told me that the death of Elizabeth has been registered. I asked him if I was required to do anything, to which he patted my head and told me not to worry myself. Thomas has been ever so kind. Each day since Elizabeth's passing, Thomas has arranged for Helen to bring me my tea in the bedroom but has ordered that I must not eat in bed. I must make my way to the chair and take it there. It is for my health that I move a little each day, he says. I have not eaten much. Helen has noticed but she would not tell Thomas.

May 7th 1820

Doctor Edwards visited at 5 P.M today. He told Thomas that I was well and no longer on bed rest, however I must eat more to keep up my health. Helen the maid was given permission to go to Blackpool for two days, she is to return on Wednesday by 3 P.M. The household received a letter from Mr John Leech.

May 10th 1820

The postman brought a letter from Father and Mother today. Mr and Mrs Blackwell stated they were disappointed in the loss of the baby but wish us well. They enquired about visiting soon. I shall write back to them tomorrow.



April 24th 1821

The anniversary of Elizabeth's death approaches. I feel I must tell Thomas the truth as I have grown to love him. Since Elizabeth's passing he has been ever so kind. We have had a wonderful year of marriage. If the marriage is to continue this way, I must tell him about Elizabeth's true father.

April 25th 1821

The household received a letter stating that Mr Gladstone will be visiting in three days' time.



Lunch was served in the garden. It was the first good day of the spring and the daffodils had just come into bloom. The sky was clear and as the wind blew in from the north, the smog had dissipated, leaving behind it fresh air. The rosebushes were beginning to bud and the lavender was showing signs of life. Soon the garden would be filled with their heavy scents. A few scattered bees buzzed around the plants. Mary was joined for lunch by Thomas and Mr Henry Gladstone. They had eaten the bread and cheese which Henry had brought up from Birmingham. The maid had cleared their empty plates and served scones with clotted cream and the jam Mary had made last summer.

‘You see, Thomas, the issue is, he hasn't the money he needs to start up the factory!’

Henry laughed as he smothered his scone in cream and jam.

‘Where will Mr Brown find the money?’ Thomas asked.

Mary watched Henry bite into his scone. The cake crumbled as his teeth sank through it and nearly half of it fell back onto his plate, globs of jam falling from between his fingers. He chuckled as he tried to catch it all with his hands.

‘He has asked for loans,’ Henry replied after he’d swallowed his mouthful. ‘But it is doubtful he’ll be successful. Brilliant jam, Mary.’

‘Thank you, Mr Gladstone,’ said Mary. ‘Helen and I made it last year, from the plums that grow further down the garden.’

‘It is excellent.’ Henry spooned more jam onto the crumbs of his scone.

Thomas and Henry talked some more about Mr Brown’s circumstance while Mary watched the bees lazily searching for pollen. It was still too early in the year for them to be out, she thought, but after the long winter, they must have been desperate for nectar. Mr Gladstone soon made excuses to leave, something about an afternoon appointment with an acquaintance, and Thomas escorted him out.

Thomas re-joined Mary in the garden after their guest had left. Mary sipped her tea and watched the idle bees while Thomas flicked through the newspaper. She felt the words on her lips, she had to confess, it had been a year since Elizabeth’s death and soon she would feel unable to tell the truth.

‘Thomas,’ she began.

‘Yes, Mary?’

‘Thomas, I – I feel I must make a confession. I – I must confess – ’ The words spilled out of her mouth, unstoppable. ‘It is a terrible, terrible thing I have done. I had resolved not to tell you, however this year has been so wonderful, and I feel that I now love you, and so must, I must confess.’

‘Dear, whatever is the matter?’ He folded the newspaper and placed it on the table.

‘I must confess my misconduct. Elizabeth –’ she felt flustered, her skin was hot, and she stumbled over her words.

‘Please, Mary, you are starting to worry me, what is the matter?’

‘Thomas, I fear Elizabeth was not – I fear she was not your child.’

He stood and laughed nervously. ‘Not my child?’

‘I was seduced –’

‘Who?’

She shook her head. ‘I –’

‘Tell me, Mary,’ Thomas said as he took a step towards her.

In the distance, Mary could see dark clouds looming, the haze of rain pouring from them in the distance. The bees had disappeared, and the daffodil’s bright yellow had dulled. She had to tell the truth. ‘My father.’



April 28th 1822

I have not written for some time. In the week after I confessed my misconduct to Thomas, he wrote to John Leech, telling him of my confession. This letter was found, and Thomas and John have both been charged with conspiring to injure the character and reputation of George Blackwell, my father. They have been sentenced to spend two years in the Castle of Chester. Although I was accused, I was acquitted of all charges. The court heard the case on April 18th 1822.

Thomas and John Leech have been convicted wrongfully. I had admitted the truth. I am to return to Manchester to live with Mother and Father next week.

May 3rd 1822

I am now in Manchester with Mother and Father. Mother has said I must be happy to be home and to be parted from my malicious husband. She is wrong.

May 5th 1822

Helen found an excellent joint of beef for dinner. Mother had ordered her to make pudding to celebrate my homecoming. Mother is concerned that I am growing thin. I told her it was the stress of the past. I must eat more.

May 14th 1822

Mr and Mrs Darley visited for Lunch today at about 1 P.M. Father spoke about his success in court. We ate soup and bread.

May 18th 1822

The postman brought a letter from Mr Toon today. It is for Mother. She said he sends his well wishes and would like to visit in a few weeks' time.



‘If you weren’t in such disgrace, I dare say Ernest would wish to court you,’ Mary’s mother said once Mr Toon had left.

‘Ernest?’ Mary asked as she looked up from the dairy she was reading.

‘Mr Ernest Toon, dear. Such a pity.’

Mary’s mother sat in the chair across from her. Mary looked out the window. It was June now, and the sun shone brightly above. There were no real clouds in the sky, just little tufts of white cotton which barely moved in the still air.

Her mother picked up her crochet set and began picking away. ‘Would you like me to show you how to crochet, Mary? I say it’ll catch on soon enough, you best learn now to be with the fashions.’

‘No, Mother, that’s quite alright.’

‘You should stop reading that silly diary of yours, it does no good to dwell on the past.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Mary stroked the inky black leather cover of the diary. Her mother didn’t know that it wasn’t hers; it was Thomas’. She had taken it from his desk and hidden it away for the past year.

The entries in his diary were factual, times and dates with specific details on what had happened that day. They were very different from her own, where Mary recorded her feelings and sometimes omitted simple facts (unless nothing else of interest had happened that day). He had written about her, about their wedding day and Elizabeth’s birth and death. He’d written small, silly details like what time they had had lunch every day, he’d recorded whether the maid had done her duties correctly, and whenever the staff of the household had been paid, he had marked exactly how much he had paid them.

Mary had read the diary at least twice since she’d returned home. She flicked through the pages, savouring every time he had written her name. As her Mother focused on her crochet, Mary opened the diary to the entry about their wedding and traced Thomas’ writing with her fingertip.

She remembered that day. The dread of marrying someone she didn’t love. The tension of escape. She remembered the soft blue fabric of her best dress and the heavy pearls she wore around her neck. They represented tears, her mother had told her, and were a token for a happy marriage.

Lies.

Mary snapped the diary shut. ‘I am feeling rather unwell, I’m going to lie down for a few hours before dinner,’ she said. Not waiting for her mother’s reply, she tucked the diary under her arm and headed to bed.

Later that night, Mary awoke to the noise of her bedroom door opening. Footsteps on the floor boards. Heavy breathing.

Her head began to spin. She was locked in her bed, unable to move. The warm sheets that had been a comfort as she was falling asleep were now a prison.

She couldn't breathe.

Slowly, a hand felt its way up her body. It slipped down to hold her neck. A sharp squeeze.

She heard herself cry out.

It was happening again.

She wasn't lying. She wasn't lying.

The hand moved from her throat and the bed sheet was snatched away from her body. A man's body pushed down on her. Rough breath scratched at her ear.