



The Stone Prince

By Darragh Kempson

A piece of Historical fiction inspired by the Leech Family Collection, Chethams Library.

The Stone Prince

The Black Prince sits upon his horse, flanked by eight muses. Four sisters of morning, a bouquet of flowers clutched beneath one arm, the early breeze caught in their cloth. Four sisters of evening, chests bare to the light they hold, tired eyes dozing. Their bronze skin glows in the twilight. The man stands in the centre of the emptying square. He is almost home and yet he has never felt further away.

With one hand he reaches up and touches the cold stone, breathing in the early summer air. Whispers in a language so familiar and yet somehow foreign, break him from the reverie.

'Are you well sir?' The gentleman who spoke has a lady at his arm. The man stares at him a moment, as if tasting the words on his tongue and then doffs his hat.

'Good eve to you.' Then he turns from the pair and once more fixes his gaze on the statue. The couple hurry away, the sounds of their shoes blend into the background. He presses against the stone again. The statue is supposed to fill him with pride or hope for the future. He pushes harder, willing the bronze to work its magic. His hand comes away reddened, his wrist sore. He sighs once, letting the air rush from his nose and then walks towards a gap in the balustrades. He will come again tomorrow. Maybe then something will come of it.

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Frank was always an odd lad. Had a way about him that made most people uncomfortable. Always calm, distanced, somewhat slow and eternally lethargic. Even when doing something he seemed to enjoy it was a task to raise even the smallest amount of passion in him. As a child Miss Stone took a special interest in his education, she was almost besotted by the boy and was one of the few who seemed to get an actual response from him. Oak Mount was his original safe haven, somewhere the world could not intrude on his decisions.

He tended to avoid meat at meal times, preferring instead a healthy amount of vegetables. It was such that it became commented upon amongst the family, not that we complained, it was more meat on our plates.

It was surprise then when it came to pass that Frank had an aptitude for everything physical. He was a strong cyclist from a young age and outshone every other boy in the family at football. His quiet nature made him seem somewhat shy, though his personality in sports showed it more obviously as calculating.

When he was ten he was sent to St Edmund's school in Norfolk and we heard little of him. He barely ever wrote and when he did he mentioned nothing of school-friends or of favoured teachers. It was as if he had disconnected himself from us. I often found myself missing his odd pensive presence, always watching, always waiting.

- Ernest Leech

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The sounds of the trains soothe him. They're consistent, ordered; everything his life is not. The man lies in his bed staring at the ceiling. Is this what life is to be now? Will he grow old waiting for the world to return to the numbers that were so regular, so calculable?

Another train moves from the nearby platform and people run to and fro, desperate to reach their next destination. The man closes his eyes and sighs once, blowing air through his nose, then stands and walks to the mirror.

In practised motions he prepares to shave. Shaving mug, soap, brush. Lather and spread. He lifts the razor from its place and stares at the glinting metal in the light of the gas lamp. This much, at least, is ordered. Slow continuous careful movements. He was often told he has a strong chin, she had called it chiselled, asked him not to shave.

A nick. Blood stains the blade. He finishes more carefully and tends the cut. The line of red below his eye reminds him of an old stain. Draws him back to her lips. To the smell of her perfume and the sound of her voice. He blinks at the mirror. His hair grown slightly too thick, his eyes calm, his ears standing ever-so-slightly from his head. She called them his wings, giggling.

The man forces his eyes shut and wipes the lather from his face. The cut stings as he applies aftershave. The pain reminds him he is alive.

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Young Frank was always a unique child. When I was his school master at St Edmunds I found him to be so singularly reserved that I was unable to find my footing with him. On his father's request I did my best to direct his studies towards that of the practical engineer, something he had apparently shown a childhood fancy for back home in Timperley. His father had written to me to direct him as such if I found him to be interested. In truth it was rather difficult to tell

where his interests, if he had any, lay. He was so slow in his studies that he drove many a teacher mad in this fashion. It was as if he did not care about anything we put before him.

In one class, the study of mathematics, he seemed to show some level of interest. He moved more slowly than most of his peers and it quickly became clear to me that although he tried, his best was below the standard and speed expected of our students.

By his final year with us I found myself sad to be rid of him despite his difficult exterior. Many of the teachers would disagree however, having found his lethargic approach to school and to life in general rather strenuous and depressing. He was not the normal, buzzing schoolboy that we had grown to expect over the years and this left many of the staff bewildered as to how to approach him. I had a feeling however, that he would do better as he grew, merely needing the right hand to guide him. Sorry though I was that it was not mine, I was glad to hear of his successes in later schooling.

- C. Brown

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The man sits in the dining room of the Hallows Hotel and waits for his meal to be served. The weather outside is warm but wet. It reminds him of home, of his father and his brothers and sisters. He watches the people in the dining room and wonders at the lack of music. A smoky music hall invades his thoughts and wraps him another daylight reverie.

The sound of laughter, glasses clinking, music from a band in the corner. The lights are dim. Just bright enough to see the tables of patrons; smoking, chatting, humming along. Spatters of German, English, French. A true multicultural establishment. He laughs at his own joke quietly. He feels out of place here, an odd number amongst a set of evens. He looks down into his drink and stares at the dark yellow as it bubbles slightly. A good German ale. He misses home.

'A man out of place, are you? Now is that as an Englishman or someone unfamiliar to the arts?'

Her hand is on his shoulder. He can smell the smoke and perfume on her skin. Her eyes are strikingly green, even in the half-light. A bemused smile settles on her face as he struggles to answer.

'And speechless too. I think our winner is... both. Well *Sir*, does that face have a name? Sir... Sir-'

The waitress snaps him back to reality, she holds his plate. He lifts his hands from the table where they had balled into fists. He blinks and squeezes his eyes shut before giving her a slight smile. She places the plate down and nods to him before walking away. He uncurls his fingers and begins to eat, taking small careful bites. He looks out the window again and watches the men and women huddle together under umbrellas.

He dabs his lips with his handkerchief and smells the sweet scent of violet and rose. He barely stops himself biting his tongue. Even now she sticks to him. He sighs once, breathing through his nose and folds the handkerchief, returning it to his pocket. Then he continues his meal, best to eat before it gets cold.

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He was Fourteen when he first came to us at Tonbridge School in the Summer of 1897. I was the Housemaster for Ferox Hall at the time and when I first came into contact with young Mr Leech I was unable to quite place him. He had this way about him that seemed to tell everyone else that there was more beneath the surface than one would initially find. I was glad of this sense however as he came across as abysmally slow on first meeting, a child whose mind was far below the standard of most his age. I knew however, that with time and attention, this boy could grow into a rather fine young man. There was a brain in him that could be moulded and shaped into a strong, impressive personality.

He seemed to get on rather well with the other boys of the house. That is to say there were no issues that come to mind when looking back on his time with us. While not excelling at the game he was rather good at Football, showing an aptitude for the sport that was seldom seen in any of his school teachings.

In one conversation with the headmaster it was confided in me that the boy was immovable. He was convinced that no teaching got through the child's thick skull and that nothing any school master could do, would give rise to even the most modest reaction. It was as if the boy were carved from the very same northern stone as his Father's canals. Made to weather anything.

At meal times he ate as the other boys did and had no complaint or otherwise showed distaste at the food served to him. This was later brought to my attention as being rather odd by his brother, Ernest, who was insistent that he would avoid all meat when eating at home. I cannot fathom why this was such an important detail, but will swear to the fact that the boy did not once complain or ask for alternative meals whilst in my care.

His conduct and manners throughout his entire time with us were praiseworthy and highly satisfactory. He excelled in that much. When it came time for him to leave us it seemed to be just as some of his teachers were beginning to make progress. I found that he held himself well and that my initial ideas about him were somewhat incorrect. His personality was already strongly formed, set in stone, one might say. He remained hard to get at but seemed to be very sure of where he wanted to go. His further studies in German and engineering were such good fits for the young man that left us, that I was unsurprised to hear of them.

- Mr. B.H, Housemaster of Ferox Hall

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The man sits in his hotel room and turns over the letter again. He has read it over one hundred times since it was first slipped to him inside the pages of a music hall playbill. The paper is already beginning to yellow from the sweat of his hands and the tears.

The handwriting is so familiar to him that he can almost trace every letter onto a separate sheet. The wax seal he has kept as whole as one can. A year of his life warranted two sides, an expensive seal and gun to his back. He takes the handkerchief from his pocket and breathes in her scent. Sweet violet and rose. He smiles to himself as the past bleeds into the present once more.

She holds the whole room in rapt attention as she sings, Miss Kitty, the angel of Hamburg. Her pale skin almost white under the lights, cheeks rouged to a soft pink, her lips scarlet, her hair midnight black. She holds herself as a woman who knows that the world is watching and revels in it. Her voice only adds to the effect. Its subtle layers vibrate in every chest in the room. Then she looks to him and her eyes catch his, as green as the moment they first met. He lets a small smile creep onto his face. He is hers and she is his.

When she finishes he quickly makes his way backstage and meets her in her dressing room. Ten months and fourteen days. He is a convert, a true patron of the arts. They are leaving Hamburg tonight, a trip for both of them to be alone without any commitments. To see central Germany together. He plans to ask her to return to England with him. He will make her Mrs. Kitty Leech if she will have him.

She turns from the mirror with a wide smile on her face and pulls him into a deep kiss. Then she moves back having slipped his handkerchief from his pocket and dabs the sweat from her brow and neck. She presses it back in his hand with a kiss on the cheek. He spots himself smiling stupidly in the mirror, a scarlet lipstick stain just below his eye.

She moves behind him and whispers in his ear. 'This will be an adventure you'll never forget.' He turns his head and she kisses him deeply once more.

'I'll never forget you.'

His own voice snaps him back to the hotel room. He sighs, feeling the air flow from his nose and drops the letter on the table next to the gas lamp. The light flickers, some fault in the mantle no doubt. The sun has gone down, it's too late now to go back to the Prince. The man prepares himself for bed. He turns off the lamp.

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My Dearest Frank,

I wish it were that I could whisper this in your ear, that I could show you one last time, just how much you mean to me. But time is not our friend and we have been running on borrowed amounts. A year, a whole year with the man I love, far more than I could have ever dared to dream of. I have written and rewritten this letter, struggling to find the right way to show you that this is what must happen, despite what we wish.

I cannot accept your proposal my darling. Though I feel my heart tearing to shreds as I write these words, I cannot be your bride. I do not have the freedom to choose. You must understand my love, women in my position are often sought out by men who... want us. They have money to burn and a want to burn it in possessing and keeping anything or anyone that catches their attention.

He has decided that I am worth keeping; 'The Angel of Hamburg', a smiling trophy on his arm. His grip holds me tight and I fear what he might do. I spend nights staring into the gas lamp wondering how things would be if I had erased my name from the playbill that night. If I had agreed to go with you on the earlier train and left the theatre to fend for itself without me. But I was too much myself and you too much yourself, and now we must accept the cruel hand fate has dealt us.

For my sake, my stone prince, if not for yours, I ask that you take your place on the next ship to England and leave me. There are men in the crowd tonight, men watching for you, the person I love most in this world, ready to shoot you dead. The intense calm that drew me to you, will be your greatest asset my love. Hold face, do not for an instant give yourself away. I can accept my fate, but I cannot accept losing you.

I will stay and you will go. You will return to your family and your fortune in Manchester. You will take the Leech name and raise it to greater heights of engineering than

the world has ever known. Your beautiful mind will finally be seen for what it is, and you will find someone else to share your nights with.

I love you Frank Leech. I will always love you. Nothing in this world can truly tear us apart and when the time comes, we will see each other again. Happy once more amongst the clouds.

Eternally yours,

Kitty Grey

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The man wakes. In the light of the moon his pocket watch reads forty minutes past the one. He has not truly been sleeping, merely calculating. It is the 22nd of May 1908, he will be twenty-five in 19 days. He will start another year of his life. He will grow another year older. He will still be alone.

He stands from the bed and walks over to the table. The letter and lamp sit side by side. He lights the lamp and reads the letter again. He traces the lipstick stain she marked her signature with. She has asked too much of him. He cannot move on without her. 365 days, 8760 hours, 525600 minutes. A year of his life with her and she has left a stain on him forever.

He lays the letter on the table and watches light in the lamp as it flickers. The mantle has cracked and fallen into the cradle, leaving the fishtail burner open in the glass. He watches the flame as it dances across the metal surface, the slight dip in the middle making the fire move in the most peculiar way. The past grips him by the shoulder and turns him to face it.

She has just finished her set. They last one he will ever see. She caught his eyes once, only barely long enough for it to register. He can see the bruise forming beneath her makeup, the red marks on her arms, the way she moves with a slight limp. Anger bubbles in the back of his throat.

'Don't move.' He can feel the cold barrel of the pistol through his shirt. The whisper is insistent. 'She thought you might have some fancy ideas so she asked me to keep an eye on you. Take your coat, stand and leave.'

He tries to turn his head but the barrel is only pressed harder. 'Please.'

The man stands, takes his coat and downs the remains of his drink. The lamp on the table keeps flickering as he takes the playbill with the letter inside.

The fire splutters and the past fades. The man lifts the letter to the flame and watches it burn.

'I'm sorry my love. I cannot calculate my life without you.'

When the flame dies the man turns off the lamp, settles himself comfortably into the chair and turns the gas on once more.

He sighs once, pushing the air through his nose for a final time and closes his eyes. The man slips into eternal sleep.

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A wreath of violets and roses is placed in the grave of Mr. Frank Irwell Leech, unlabelled. The dedication card read 'Love Eternally, Kitty Grey.' The family deemed it inappropriate and wanted to draw no undue attention.

'I do not for a moment think he was insane; he had just reasoned things out... But the verdict was suicide while of unsound mind.' - Ernest B. Leech¹

¹Ernest Bosdin Leech, *Yellow Book* (Genealogical notes on the Leech family), vol. 5 (Chetham's Library MS, Mun. A.8.72), p. 357