

### **Mary Leech, née Blackwall, on returning to her parental home**

Thomas' brother lets his jaw hang low in disbelief. I had never met his brother until today's exchange of glances across the floor of Chester Town Hall<sup>1</sup> and I find myself wondering at his mouth. It's a mouth most unlike my husband's, for the teeth are neat and straight, his tongue small. I would not have believed their kinship, let alone their being brothers, and his face tells of horror at the verdict. I am saddened that I've not had the opportunity to meet my husband's wider family; Thomas so rarely mentioned them that I was surprised to learn of their correspondence. My husband has often proved a mystery to me, and now, in his two-year incarceration at the Castle of Chester, I suppose that's how he shall remain.

The men take his arms and wrists, and Thomas is led away. Though I have come to love him in our two years of marriage,<sup>2</sup> and have told him so, I don't say goodbye; we aren't given that opportunity, and I'm not certain he would take it if we were.

I wonder at my countenance as I, too, am led away, down the steps of the dock into Mama's arms who waits at the bottom. She is weeping, though she attempts to disguise it by smudging her tears into my shoulder and breathing slowly, evenly, until she has regained control. When she pulls her face from me, she is, to a stranger, composed, but I can see her cheeks remain red and blotchy. I wonder at her tears; whether they're shed for Thomas, for my return to the family home, or for Father and our very public hearing. Ella stands behind her, eyes downcast and holding Mama's bag.

'Father is waiting for us,' Mother says out of the corner of her mouth, and I slip my arm through hers to steady my nerves. Without her, I fear I will faint; my mind is slippery, my vision blurred, and the air seems to feel both close and cool. My tremors become increasingly violent and snatch at my breath as we walk in his direction. But Mama does not

---

<sup>1</sup> The case was tried at the Quarter Sessions in Chester. 'Defamation', *The Chester Courant*, 23 April 1822, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas and Mary married on 24 March 1820 at St. John's, Deansgate. Gwyneth Wilkie, *Notes on Leech Family Chronology* (unpublished), p. 4.

offer much in the way of stability. Her arm is weak and we walk slowly, our elbows clashing. I hear Ella's tentative footsteps behind us. Perhaps she and Mama dread what is to face us as much as I.

Father stands beyond the heavy doors near to where the coaches leave, his head held high. His eyes do not find mine. He gives slight nods to those passers-by who offer their congratulations. He does not take their proffered hands, but grips his cane and waits.

It is late Friday evening<sup>3</sup> when we arrive home in Manchester. Father tells Mama we will walk the last stretch to Chorlton Row<sup>4</sup> and she nods a weary acquiescence. Father strides like a statesman; his hands, gloved in the finest kid, hold his cane and his case of papers. The late hour does not prevent there being a quantity of men on the streets, and, as I look closer, women and children, too. Our fame precedes us: barefooted boys pass us open-mouthed, girls point until their mothers grasp at their dirty hands to conceal them out of a semblance of respectability. I cannot return their stares so I watch my feet falter, one in front of the other, one in front of the other, on the blackened pavement to Boundary Street. I must go there, after all; it is the Chairman's desire, a sentence passed to me despite my acquittal.<sup>5</sup>

A face at next door's window disappears, the curtain swished then righted with an accustomed hand. Father pretends not to notice, and waits at the bottom step as Ella runs to the back entrance, lets herself in and, after a silence punctuated by the striking clock of St Luke's,<sup>6</sup> opens the front door to receive us.

The house I grew up in smells of polish, the parquet made treacherous with it. Father and Mama drape Ella's arms and shoulders with their coats and shawls, and slip away, Father

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Defamation', p.3.

<sup>4</sup> George Blackwall and his family lived at Boundary Street, Chorlton Row. Gwyneth Wilkie, *Mary Blackwall's Child* (unpublished), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mary was found not guilty and ordered to return to her parental home. 'Defamation', p.3.

<sup>6</sup> Mary and her father were both later buried at St Luke's, Chorlton-on-Medlock. Ernest Bosdin Leech, Chetham's Library MS, Mun. A.8.72, *Yellow Book*, (Genealogical notes on the Leech family), vol. 5, p. 151.

to his study, Mama to her parlour. I hear their doors close with clicks I had not realised had such distinctive sounds. Ella stands in the hallway, waiting patiently for my own shawl. I peel it from my shoulders, my fingers sticky with sweat. She receives it, but looks at me, searching my face for something. She is unsure what to say.

‘That will be all,’ I say, and she turns quickly on her heel as though I have chastised her.

At our marital home in Altrincham,<sup>7</sup> I could run my hand across any surface I chose; I could change the wallpaper if I wanted, or order a different fire be lit. But here, in this house, I am confined to the room in which I had been captive as a child. These four walls of lavender blue, the chipped washstand in the corner, will become my only sanctuary; the remainder of the house is under Father’s jurisdiction. I draw the curtains, stumble to the bed recently made, its sheets starched stiff. I lie back, my boots still laced. I must inform Mama that the paper on the ceiling has begun to droop at the edges. I spread my arms and touch the wall, the edge of the eiderdown. The bed that once seemed so vast is narrow. I have not slept alone for eighteen months.

I close my eyes. There is nothing I can do, I tell myself, it is done. God’s will is done, and the court has made it so.

But Thomas, I think. Thomas. He is imprisoned at my word.<sup>8</sup> I wonder if I should be permitted to see him. I wonder who to ask.

There is a soft knock, a knuckle that truly doesn’t wish to graze my door.

I rise. ‘Yes?’

Ella appears. ‘Your Father wants you in his study, Miss.’ She corrects herself.

‘Mistress.’

---

<sup>7</sup> Once married, Thomas and Mary Leech took a house in Norman Place, Altrincham. Leech, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Apparently in Dec 1821 Blackwall brought an action against Thomas Leech for slander’. Leech, p. 150.

I feel the blood in the veins at my wrists flutter, then surge.

Am I to break the silence between Father and I, since I left this house? I fear what I might say if I give myself permission to speak.

I follow her down the stairs and knock at the study.

He is seated behind his desk. It is a desk I know well, for it is on this fine wood that he would plant my hands, kick aside his chair and raise my skirts.

Today, the desk is crowded with papers, his briefcase open and brimming. It is paperwork from his solicitor, I presume, and ripe for filing and forgetting.

He looks up, his lips secreted behind thick black bristles. The brim from his hat has branded his forehead with a faint red line. He can afford a bigger size.

‘Your hands,’ he says, and I raise them, open to the ceiling. We both look at them: palms white, shaking. The hands of a ghost, a spectre. ‘Turn them over,’ he says and I do. He pinches the wedding band between thumb and forefinger and draws it over my knuckle. I watch it as it comes easily and he puts it in the top drawer of his desk. I can hear him lock it with the key I know he keeps in his pocket. I don’t know what else he keeps in the drawer.

My hands remain poised in the air, as though I am to set them to an imaginary pianoforte. He takes up the metal ruler from his desk but pauses, sets it down again. The bruises would bloom most publicly.

He sets his spectacles on his nose and cranes his head towards a paper. I understand that I am dismissed. I have not said a word.

Ella has set a tray on the dressing table. There is tea in a pot, slices of bread, cold mutton, a wedge of cheese. I pick at the mutton and my stomach growls. I have not eaten since yesterday afternoon, and that only a currant bun. I spread the butter thickly across a slice of bread but I cannot bring myself to bite. Instead, I pour the tea into the cup, add milk, and take large, scalding mouthfuls until the cup is drained and my eyes water.

I forfeit undressing and pull the eiderdown to my chin, clamp my eyes shut until I fall asleep.

I sleep late for the bedroom is bathed in the yellowish light that only afternoons in Manchester yield, when the sunlight is caught in the smog. I look at the pocketwatch that Thomas bought me for a wedding gift, slight and pewter, and, I thought at the time, extraordinarily generous given how scarcely we knew of each other's tastes.<sup>9</sup>

It is a little after noon. There is a miniature of Mama on the bedside table – I cannot remember whether it was Father who placed it there originally, or Mama herself – and I turn it face down. I permit myself a yawn.

As I move my feet under the quilt, I hear a rustle. I discover a newspaper lying at the foot of my bed. It has been folded back to the second or third page, then folded again so it is plain I am to see an article at the top of the page. I draw it to me. I trust it is not the return price of grain, peas and beans that my family wishes me to see.

'Defamation,' I read.

*A case of a very singular nature came on at these Sessions, on Thursday, in which G Blackwall, of Manchester, was plaintiff, and John Leech, and Thomas Leech, his brother, and Mary, the wife of Thomas, were defendants.*<sup>10</sup>

The broadsheet rattles in my weak grip. I read on, and I am surprised at the accuracy with which the Chairman's closing remarks have been noted. There is no omission from the speech, to account for the speed at which the note-taking took place, nor is there any journalistic flourish to amuse the reader. I am as impressed with the speech in print as I was when it occurred. The Chairman is correct: it is 'a crime for which he found language

---

<sup>9</sup> It is thought that Mary and Thomas married when she was 15 years old and pregnant. Wilkie, *Mary Blackwall's Child*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> 'Defamation', p.3.

inadequate to express his abhorrence’,<sup>11</sup> for the crime itself is only explained as ‘a criminal connexion with his own daughter’.<sup>12</sup> Any reader, unfamiliar with our case, could only guess at what this connexion might be.

It is a concise piece, for which I ought to be grateful. It doesn’t speculate on the honour and reputation of my husband; it doesn’t reveal anything more about my father, beyond that my husband and his brother ‘attempted to deprive an honest and aged man of that which was more dear to him than life itself – his good name.’<sup>13</sup> I am mentioned only twice – ‘Mary Leech, the wife’ – and one of these occasions is succeeded by the phrase ‘*not guilty*’<sup>14</sup>. The sentence passed to Thomas and his brother closes the business perfunctorily. I tear the page from the broadsheet and rip it into small strips which I stuff hastily into the grate.

I search the drawers of the bedside table and find a key that I try in the door. It fits neatly and I am surprised at my family’s oversight. No one shall leave newspapers nor tea trays for me now.

‘Are you awake, daughter?’ Mama whispers into the keyhole. I tell her yes and throw the remainder of the newspaper beneath my bed.

‘Your hair is uncombed,’ she says.

We are alike in the face, I see then, the same lines at the corners of our eyes and mouths, the same heavy brow and thin lips. I have a cleft in my chin that comes from my father, while hers is perfectly round. She was young when she gave birth to me, perhaps as young as I when my Elizabeth was born to us, then lost. Mother is young still, probably, though the dark circles beneath her eyes age her.

‘You’re thin,’ she observes, but I make no response. After all, how is one to respond? To agree? To deny it?

---

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

She doesn't seem perturbed by my silence for she speaks again.

'I have arranged for Alice Smiley to come to tea this afternoon.'

Mama always visits on a Saturday afternoon, or takes guests in the drawing room.

Until I married Thomas, I was required to accompany her, to participate in the mindless conversations about the births, deaths and marriages of the parish. Alice and her mother are renowned for their talk. Alice remains one of few in her circle still unmarried and has become insufferable with it, but I decide that even Alice will prove welcome respite from the deafening thump of my heart and the rush in my ears; from the repeated clearing of Father's throat that carries from the study; from the relentless ticking of the hallway clock. I can sit at her side, nod when she looks up, add an encouraging 'yes' when she pauses for breath. It will while away time. I wonder how Thomas will while away time in the Castle of Chester. Perhaps he, too, will be forced to listen to the droning of naïve youth.

'Thank you, Mama,' I say, pinning a lock of hair to my scalp.

'Mother,' she corrects, 'if you please. You are no longer a child; you have proven that enough. Your father will see you in his study.'

She turns then, and closes the door.

He sits as he did yesterday, behind his desk, facing the door. I enter when his voice commands and he takes off his spectacles and smooths his dark whiskers. He has dressed formally though it is Saturday, his collar white and stiff in the gloom.

His eyes begin at my ears, wander along my jawline, but jump then to my elbows and hands, omitting my bosom, my hips, the tops of my legs. I no longer hold interest or intrigue for him, I realise; that where my stomach has swelled and emptied, where my skin has stretched and scarred, he is repulsed. He thinks of my waist in the hands of another man. Sullied.

He will not touch me now, as he has not touched my mother for years.

‘I will prevent you from idleness,’ Father begins, his eyes again at my lobe. I have hung there a pearl, a gift that Thomas once pawned and I bought back. ‘Your mother tells me you will have a visitor this afternoon. Before then, you will help Ella with the shopping. This you will do as often as Ella needs. And you will do it quickly and listen for Ella’s instructions. Do I make myself clear?’

He doesn’t like thin women, ladies light in the frame, like Mother and me. He liked me at my most girlish, when his hands could grab at folds of new skin, at soft hair, at fat browned from play.

I shall continue in my fast, I decide. I shall take my meals in my room, empty my plate from my window. Let the birds grow fat in my honour. I shall wither from his touch, disappear. I’m comforted by my plan, strengthened. I’m pleased to have my own secret purpose.<sup>15</sup>

‘Yes,’ I say, and he raises his eyebrows. ‘Yes, Father.’

Ella grows red each time she gathers the courage to direct me, and speaks so low that others, on the street or in the shops, may not hear. I don’t know whether it’s for my benefit or hers. She’s patient when I retrieve the wrong type of fat; flustered when I take down a bar of soap and has to tell me that it’s too expensive. Apparently she has ashes at home which will perform just as well. On leaving the greengrocer, pungent leeks in the crook of my arm, I stand and stare after a man walking away, along Oxford Road. His jacket is blue amongst the threadbare rags of the other men present, and his hair curls at his nape. A little girl, no older than six, trots at his heels.

---

<sup>15</sup> Mary Leech died at her parents’ home only six years after the court case, in 1828. Leech, p. 151.

‘What is it, Mistress?’ I hear Ella ask, close by, and I want to laugh at my silliness. He’s taller than Thomas, broader in the shoulder, and besides, Thomas is imprisoned in the Castle of Chester.

But the blue of that jacket, the tenderness with which he reaches his hand down to his daughter who looks up at him in admiration.

‘Nothing,’ I reply. ‘I thought I saw someone, that’s all.’

Ella ushers me into the stationers, for I am to buy parchment and ink for Father.

## **Bibliography**

Davidson, Caroline, *A Woman’s Work is Never Done: A history of housework in the British Isles 1650-1950*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982; repr. London: Chatto & Windus, 1986)

‘Defamation’, *The Chester Courant*, 23 April 1822, p. 3

Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, (London: Penguin, 1997)

Herman, Judith and Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981)

Herman, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery*, (London: Pandora, 2001)

*The Historical Thesaurus of English* [online]. University of Glasgow, 2018, updated XXXX. Available from <<https://ht.ac.uk/>>

Hulme, Michala, *A Grim Almanac of Manchester*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2015)

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

Lyons, Shoshanah, and others, *Developmental Trauma Close Up*, (Cardiff: Beacon

House, 2015)

Michael, Olivia, 'Approaches to the Historical Novel', in *The Art of the Novel*, ed. by Nicholas Royle, (Cromer: Salt, 2015), pp. 112-120

Rogers, Jane, *Mr. Wroe's Virgins*, (London: Faber, 1991)

*Quarter Sessions*. In Cheshire Archives and Local Studies [online]. 2018, updated xxxx [cited 14 August 2018]. Available from <<http://archives.cheshire.gov.uk/what-we-hold/quarter-sessions.aspx>>

Wilkie, Gwyneth, *Mary Blackwall's Child* (unpublished)

Wilkie, Gwyneth, *Notes on Leech Family Chronology* (unpublished)