

FUTURA

A COMPELLING NEW NOVEL FROM THE
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LARKSLEVE

PATRICIA WENDORF

Blanche



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Futura

A Futura Book

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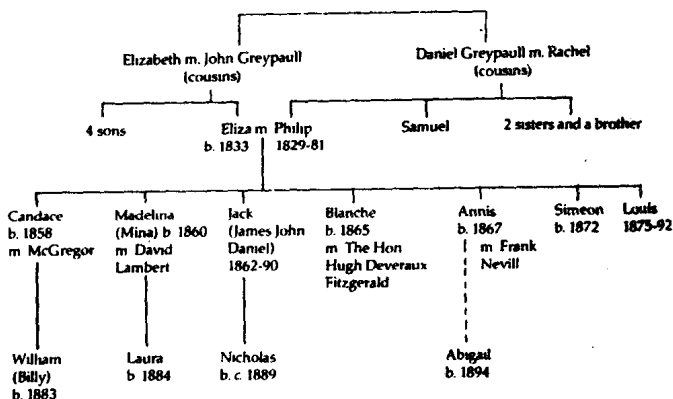
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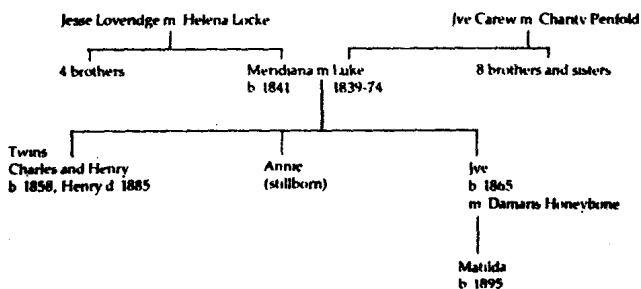
Glossary of gypsy words

<i>chavvie</i>	child
<i>chie</i>	gypsy girl or young woman
<i>diddecoi</i>	derogatory term for gypsy. Half-breed gypsy
<i>drom</i>	road
<i>gorgio gorgie</i>	non-gypsy
<i>rai</i>	young man
<i>Rom</i>	gypsy
<i>vardo</i>	caravan

Greypaull Family Tree



Carew Family Tree



JUST to be aboard the train and bound for London was so exciting that Blanche could hardly bear it. She pulled at the leather strap which secured the window, allowed it to open a hand's breadth, and fluttered her fingers to touch the billowing steam.

'Do close that window,' Candace said sharply, 'tis nothing but smuts and dirt flying from that engine.'

Blanche closed the window. She sat down and studied the compartment; bounced experimentally on the brown plush seat, and stood up again to peer at the pictures of Weymouth sands and Exeter Cathedral that flanked the tiny mirror. She examined her reflected image.

'Do you think I suit black?'

'Suit it or not, you've got to wear it.'

Blanche looked to the corner where Candace sat, bonnet ribbons tied neatly beneath her chin, knees clamped genteely together, her body rigid inside a whalebone corset. She noted with satisfaction how the black cotton dress, voluminous and made-up in haste by their sister, Madelina, sagged and drooped on the skinny figure of Candace, and how ill it contrasted with her sallow skin.

Blanche fingered the cheap black cotton of her own dress. Mama had sewed late into the night, but still the dress was not what Blanche had wanted. She accepted the dreariness of it, the lack of decoration; but why, she had demanded, such a

stiff high collar, such a loose and baggy waistline? Why could she not have had just the hint at least of a fashionable bustle? But mourning, Mama had said, was not intended to be stylish. The dress must be simple and hard-wearing since it would be worn for a full year as a token of respect for father.

Blanche had waited so long for Papa to die; sometimes she had despaired, and thought that it would never happen. How he had survived all her spells and incantations, and for so many years, she could not imagine. Desperation had driven her at last to steal candle-ends from unguarded church altars. These lumps of wax, melted down at the midnight hour and fashioned to the figure of a tall man, had then been pierced with Mama's best hat-pin.

Papa, his waxen head run through by the metal pin, had never really stood a chance. A stroke, the doctor had declared! But Blanche knew better.

For as long as she could remember Blanche Greypaull had known that her destiny lay among the rich and famous. The fourth child in a family of seven, she was quite unlike her brothers and sisters. Candace, Madelina and Jack were all small and dark haired. Annis, Simeon and Louis were tall and flaxen. Precisely in the centre of this family group stood Blanche, copper-haired, violet-eyed, a positive changeling.

She turned from her bored contemplation of the Somerset landscape. 'Tell me about London!' she demanded.

Candace shrugged. 'Tis just the same as Taunton, only bigger.'

'It can't be just the same. It's got to be more exciting.'

'You're not going there for excitement. You're going for a skivvy. You'll wear a shabby uniform what fits where it touches. You'll race to answer bells, you'll fill coal buckets, peel potatoes and scrub steps.'

'Well, you've bided there for five years!'

'I had small choice, Blanche. You knows as well as I do what happened to us. Father wagered Larksleve Farm and

lost it. We was forced by our Greypaull relations to move down to Taunton. 'Twas Jack and me what had to go away from home to work, and don't you imagine that we found it easy!'

Blanche scowled. 'It was harder for us what stayed behind in Taunton. Hunter's Court is like living in a prison compared with Larksleve. I hate that dark liddle hovel, all they smelly neighbours and their scabby children. At least you got away, Can, out into the wide world.'

Candace pursed her thin pink lips and nodded. "'Tis about the wide world, as you calls it, that I got to warn 'ee. I've heard all about your wild ways from Mama. Berkeley Square is not a bad place, as places go, but no contact is allowed between maids and man-servants.'

Blanche laughed. 'Why, whatever be you talking about, Candace Greypaull? I never wudden dream of soiling my hands on grooms and footmen.' She tilted her head at a provocative angle. 'You've been away from home too long. You don't know anything about me, do you? Let me tell you something.' Blanche leaned forward to gaze into her sister's face. She stretched out her hands and opened and closed her fingers with a grasping motion. 'I just want and want,' she said simply, 'more money than I can ever spend. More gowns than I can ever wear. More diamond rings than I've got fingers.' She smiled at the consternation in her sister's face. 'A rich husband,' she whispered, 'one what I can rule over. One that'll lie at my feet and beg. One that'll crawl like a beaten dog and howl for me to love him.' She sighed. 'I want a man what'll lay his neck underneath my heel, and I mean to get him, Candace!'

'Dear Jesus!' whispered Candace, 'whatever have Mama gone and landed me with? I promised her I'd look after you, keep you on the right path. I knowed you to be a wild and silly maiden, but I never guessed that you was raving mad.' She folded her black-gloved hands together. 'Oh well,' she said, 'there's nothing to be done about it now. But I warn

you, Blanche, this job in Berkeley Square means a lot to me. I got friends in London. One wrong move from you, one step away from the straight and narrow, and I'll ditch you right away! Don't come running to me when you burn your fingers.'

'Oh I won't, Can, don't you worry! It might be t'other way round, you never know do you?' Blanche looked smug. 'I won't forget you when I'm rich. You can always turn to me when you be on your uppers. Didden you hear what I said to Mama when we stood on Taunton station? "I'll see you go in silk before this year's out!" That's what I told her, and I always keeps a promise.' She frowned. 'I vowed to finish Pa off, and in the end I done it. You can laugh if you like, but it don't pay to get across me. There's fellers in Taunton what have tried to wrong me, and they won't never live long enough to be any girl's husband. Let me tell you, Candace, I don't never forgive nor forget!'

To leave the enclosed society of the family was never easy. So closely guarded had Blanche been by her Mama that her view of the world was wholly dependent upon the sparse information handed out by her sister Candace.

'What sort of skivvy is you, our Candace?'

'I be first-housemaid. It have took me five years to reach that position. I oversees the cleaning of rooms; I be in sole charge of four other housemaids.'

'Caw!' Blanche assumed an attitude of deep respect. 'That must make you a powerful person?'

Candace bridled. 'I got my pride to consider. I won't have my authority spoiled by the loose behaviour of a younger sister. You must always do exactly as I tell, Blanche. Don't try to take advantage of me because I be your sister!'

Blanche sighed. Commandments, both divine and parental, had ruled her life and she was not naturally submissive. The caustic comment, the witty rejoinder came

easily to her. That such talents had not endeared her to her brothers and sisters caused her no concern. But even Blanche had learned early in life that simple affection in her family was never given lightly. Love had to be earned, proof given of devotion. 'If you love me', was the rule, 'then you will keep my commandments.' It was only the gentle, submissive child who earned their Mama's lean and rare approval. Blanche had truly tried to subdue her riotous spirit, to bend her neck low and accept the yoke. But those postures and attitudes of meekness, so easily adopted by the rest of her family, sat incongruously on Blanche. Her head would tilt of its own volition, her chin jut and point in anger. The laughter and scorn would well up inside her and demand a voice.

'Do it help, Can, that you went to school? That you can read and write?'

Candace frowned. 'Now you keep your mouth shut about all that! The gentry don't hold with educated skivvys. I never lets on in London that I be any sort of a scholar. When letters come from Mama I acts all stupid and gets the butler to read 'em to me.' She grinned. 'You won't need to pretend, will you? I offered to show you, but you wudden even learn to write your own name.'

'With looks like mine,' Blanche said simply, 'I don't need to know reading and writing. My face and figure is going to make me my fortune!'



A lady should never remove her bonnet when travelling on the steam-locomotive railway. Neither should she sit with one leg crossed above the other, since this pose would be bound to raise her skirts and reveal her ankles. Mama, who had only once in her life travelled on a train, had warned Blanche not to speak to strangers, or flaunt herself in public places. Modesty, her mother had insisted, was a sure sign of

gentility in a young woman. In the dangerous year of 1881, said Eliza Greypaull, in this decade, which was already being referred to as the 'Roaring Eighties', it behoved a young girl to control her mischievous nature, and reveal no more of her person to an evil world than a face of strict and sober virtue, and two helpful, willing hands.

They changed trains in Bristol, and Blanche was impressed by her sister's confident movement from one platform to another. They found a safe compartment in which sat a middle-aged woman and a young man, who must be her son. Blanche, who was several inches taller than Candace, lifted the luggage up onto the rack. A deft wriggle and the upward movement of her arms caused the heavy shawl to slip back from her shoulders. A swift glance sideways confirmed that she had captured the young man's complete attention. Blanche toyed with the leather strap which secured the baggage; she maintained her tantalising pose until Candace said sharply, 'You'd better sit down, Blanche. The train is beginning to move.'

Blanche had thought that just to be aboard the train, and bound for Mayfair, would be excitement enough. But now, she was keenly aware of the young man's presence, and the disapproving face of his Mama. He was a quiet boy, pale and romantic-looking. Blanche began to fidget with the ribbons underneath her chin and, ignoring her sister's scandalised expression, she removed her bonnet. She patted the coils of auburn hair that wound about her head. "'Tis so stuffy in here,' she murmured, 'I do seem to be getting quite a headache.' She began to pull the shawl back from her shoulders.

'Keep it on,' warned Candace, 'you might take a chill.'

'A chill? In June, with all the windows shut fast? I might likely faint away! In fact, I think I -'

'Don't you dare,' whispered Candace. 'If you faint I shall slap your face.'

The young man, mindful of his mother's presence, had turned his face towards the window. Blanche wriggled in her seat; she leaned slightly forward and coughed politely. She began to stare at his shiny boots and trousered legs. When his knees twitched beneath her gaze, she was sure of his complete attention. A leisurely inspection of his trouser buttons brought her gaze up towards his jacket and then his starched white collar. Gleefully, she followed the tide of crimson colour that flooded his neck and mounted to his eyebrows. Beads of perspiration sprang up across his forehead, and in the neat centre-parting of his dark hair.

Only then did Blanche relax in her seat. She sighed deeply, so that her remarkable bosom rose and fell. She raised one languid hand to her forehead, and from the concealment of her outstretched fingers, she shot the embarrassed young man a slow and outrageous wink.



Blanche knew that she was beautiful; how could she not know when men admired her, and women were spiteful? At the age of eleven, her Mama had dressed her in loose white pinafores, and bound her developing body to conceal its contours. But still, the vulgar men and boys who lived in Hunter's Court had ogled and whistled.

A volunteer had been required on Sunday evenings to watch over the handicapped Louis; and it had always been Blanche who begged to be left at home, so that Mama and the rest of the family might attend evening service. Hunter's Court was crowded on summer evenings; people sat outside their houses, on chairs and doorsteps. Alone in the house but for Louis, who could tell no tales, Blanche had removed her constricting bonds and, wearing no more than her cotton nightgown, she had leaned from the upstairs window and pulled the nit-comb seductively through her long red hair. The watching men and boys had stamped their feet and

whistled. The women had hissed, and called her 'hussy'. Mama, on hearing about the performance, had been very angry. But no punishment could take away the knowledge that it was possible, even easy for Blanche to gain maximum attention, to be the envy of, and target for all eyes.

A few years later, and she had played other games. Last summer had been devoted to the enslavement of three brothers. It had been her duty to fetch water from the standpipe at the top of the Court. She had dallied across the water-buckets, first with one brother, and then with another. What could have been more natural than the unbuttoning of her high-necked blouse and the loosening of her bindings in the August heat? She had grown to be a very tall girl, and had needed to stoop quite low in order to pick up the buckets. The brothers, who seemed to spend all their time leaning up against the wall, looked forward quite obviously to her evening performance; and Blanche had re-entered her mother's cottage, bonds in position, blouse neatly fastened, and Mama had never once become suspicious.

Blanche had pleaded to be allowed to go with Mina, to work in the collar factory. But Mama had said, 'No! You have a tendency to flaunt yourself.' And so she had stayed inside the dark little cottage, and stitched at shirt collars for twelve hours of every day, save Sunday. She had gone to fetch water at that time of the evening when the misty light of October had made Hunter's Court look less ugly, and Mama had dozed beside the fire. The three brothers, separately, and sometimes together, had whispered wicked suggestions in her ear. They would contrive to brush close against her whenever she met them in the narrow alley. Those moments of absolute power beside the standpipe had been the glory of her dreary day. She had leaned close, without actually touching, had teased and enticed them, watched their hot eyes and eager faces, and then she had

stooped low, allowed them to glimpse her remarkable cleavage, snatched up the buckets, and strolled demurely away.

The gaslights which illuminated Taunton's main streets had not reached as far as Hunter's Court. Her mother had forbidden her to leave the house once darkness had fallen, but on a December night of hard frost, Blanche had disobeyed. She had pulled on a thick shawl, taken a bucket, and started up towards the standpipe. She had never reached it.

The three brothers, no longer flattering and teasing, had been waiting for her. The bucket snatched and spun away into the darkness. She had smelt gin, had been reminded of her drunken father, and felt revulsion. She had felt their punishing hands upon her body, and she had almost swooned from fear. They had ripped off her shawl and dress, torn her petticoats, found and stripped away her mother's bindings. It was then that she had begun to scream, quite loudly.

The drama had been discovered just in time by Mama and Annis; and Blanche had been revealed in the light of her mother's lamp, spread-eagled up against the wall, wearing only her chemise, and suddenly, and belatedly, weeping. Mama had thrown a coal-hammer at one brother, and used Father's whip on the backs of the others. The brothers had called Blanche 'a bitch'. They had said that she 'had been asking for it'.

She had expected that she might also be whipped, but her mother had not even scolded. 'When you are sixteen,' Mama had said, 'you shall go to London. You shall go into service with your sister, Candace.' Blanche had studied Candace, already five years in service, and still dressed in cotton. She remembered how Madelina had once run away from this same mansion in Mayfair, to return to Taunton and a job in a collar factory. For Blanche there would be no

more mistakes; no dallying with drunken youths in shabby alleys; no running back to Taunton and Mama.

She supposed that her sisters could be considered pretty. They were tiny, dark haired girls, who wore high-buttoned blouses, and laced themselves tightly into whalebone corsets. With their pink pursed mouths, unpainted faces, and kiss-curls plastered low across their foreheads they attracted the attentions of Sunday-school teachers and counting-house clerks.

Blanche intended to create her own style in London. Once away from Mama, the detested corset would be burned along with all her other constrictions. In London she would carry herself like a duchess, head and bosom lifted, stomach flat, legs sinuous and gliding beneath her long skirts. The glorious auburn hair would be worn coiled low in her neck; she would paint her lips and cheeks just sufficiently to indicate that she was no prude.



Blanche had expected grandeur, and Berkeley Square did not disappoint her. She halted beneath the plane trees, set down her bag, and looked slowly about her. Her eyes opened wide at the sight of the splendid Georgian mansions with their wrought-iron lampholders and railings; the very air smelled expensive. Even the old man who swept the street-crossing wore a fine red coat with gold-facings.

'You never said it was like this, Can.'

'Like what?'

'Why, so - so fine!' She pointed towards the crossing-sweeper. 'Horse-droppings picked up straightaway, and trees and flowers everywhere.'

'You'll find no trees and flowers in London's back streets.'

'I might see the Prince of Wales. They say he goes about a great deal.'

'Not in the places you're likely to visit. He's not known for coming to the kitchen quarters.'

'You mean he comes here? To this very house?'

'It's been known to happen.'

Blanche followed her sister down the area steps and into a huge and gloomy kitchen. Girls in soiled aprons ran from range to table, fulfilling the shouted orders of a fat man who wore a tall white hat.

'Why does he talk so funny?' whispered Blanche.

'Because he's French. That's M'sieu Armand.'

They walked through a maze of passages and came to a closed brown door upon which Candace tapped, very softly.

'So you're back,' said the housekeeper.

Candace curtsied and nudged Blanche to do likewise.

'Yes, ma'am,' she murmured.

'Did your father die?'

'He did, ma'am.'

Mrs Chumley looked up into the face of Blanche. 'Is this the sister you mentioned?'

'It is, ma'am.'

'She's very tall. How old are you, girl?'

'Just sixteen - ma'am.'

'What's your name?'

'Blanche - Blanche Greypaull.'

'Well, that won't do! We can't have a scullery maid who's got the same Christian name as M'Lady!' The housekeeper turned to Candace. 'Well, Alice, she's your sister, what do you suggest we call her?'

Candace said, 'What about Mary? We haven't got a Mary at the moment.'

'Right you are, then! Mary it shall be. You'll find a double bed in your room, Alice. I thought you'd rather be in together. Get your suppers, and then to bed. I want you up and fit for work in the morning.' She turned back to Blanche. 'I hope you're not going to give me trouble. Your

other sister only stayed a fortnight, and then she ran away. Said she was homesick.'

'Oh, I'll never do that, ma'am. I've waited too long already to get to London.'

The staircase was narrow, uncarpeted and badly lit; it rose meanly through the tall house; Blanche tried to hush the clatter of her newly-soled boots on the wooden treads. Already she was disappointed; the area steps, the gloomy kitchen, the frowsty little sitting-room where Mrs Chumley presided, were not at all what she had expected. They came at last to a floor where the staircase ended. 'This is it,' said Candace. 'Top of the house. Us can't rise no higher.' She pushed open a door and Blanche saw an iron bedstead, a clean white bedspread, a wash-hand-stand pushed into a corner on which stood a chipped enamel ewer and bowl.

'This is ours?' she demanded. Candace nodded. 'Why 'tis no better than a good-sized cupboard!'

'What did you expect? A canopied bed, mahogany wardrobes? 'Tis I what should be doing the complaining. There was only a single bed in this room before you come here.'

Blanche hung her few clothes on hooks in a curtained recess. She pushed at the stump of candle in its cheap tin holder. 'Not even a lamp,' she complained.

'By the time you get back to this room each night,' Candice told her, 'all you'll want to do is sleep.'

Blanche sat on the edge of the bed and surveyed her sister. 'Why,' she said softly, 'whatever have happened to you, Candace? You was born a Miss Greypaull of Larksleve. These people have put a harness on you. They have even took away your given name. You didden never dare to tell Mama that, did you?'

Colour rose painfully in the sallow face. Candace said, 'And neither must you, Blanche! 'Tis no consequence what they calls us; not worth making a din about it.'