

Chapter 25

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**Diary of Lady Blanche**

**VAUDOOISM—MARRIAGE OF THE CHEVALIER AND LADY BLANCHE—  
BLANCHE'S WORDS OF LOVE—FAREWELL TO LOUIS.**

**I**t was just nine years from the time when I parted with the excellent friend whom I still delight to call by the familiar name of John Cavendish Dudley, that I became the husband of his most beloved and cherished youngest daughter. I knew that this event would fulfill the dearest wishes of himself and his amiable wife, but when I parted from him and listened to his pathetic lamentation that he might never hope to call me his son, little did I think that I should return to him in the very character he so earnestly desired me to fill.

I had resolved to spend the year which succeeded my marriage in closing up every engagement that could bind me to the land of my birth. For eight months I spent my time partly in these arrangements and partly in the effort to embellish the life of the sweet and loving creature I had taken to my arms, if not entirely to my heart. Heaven knows how completely she deserved the devotion of heart, life, and all that life could give, in return for the sinless nature and undivided affection she laid upon the altar of her young heart's idolatry!

I had planned our departure for the close of our marriage year. It was all one to Blanche—anywhere with me. To follow the movement of my finger, or anticipate the glance of my eye, made up the sum of her life's occupation; yet she was no mere automatic companion. Her bright intellect and vivid imagination might have far eclipsed her wayward husband's, had not her passionate admiration for him and her modest diffidence of herself, kept her own brilliant powers of mind in abeyance.

Eight months had passed away, when duties of an urgent and personal nature demanded my presence in a distant province. My fair bride had scarcely quitted my sight since our marriage, yet now it was impossible for me to escape this journey, equally impossible that she should accompany me. The hated enemies to whom, if I owed them anything but abhorrence, I owed the precious boon of my little girl's companionship, had never appeared on the panorama of our lives since the momentous night described in the last chapter; indeed, I had not even heard of them, save a report that Madame Helene had become a devotee to a new sect of religionists just arisen in the land, and that her scoundrel brother had succeeded in worming himself into a good official position. The very names of these people were tabooed in my household and amongst all who visited us; indeed, we saw but few persons who could remind us of them, for the circle in which my own and my Blanche's relatives moved were closed

against them. No cloud dimmed the lustre of those sweet blue eyes, ever fixed on me with an expression of mute adoration.

No sorrow had ever stained that blooming face with one tear, since the night when I called Blanche my own. Her uncle and aunt were very proud of her, and constantly urged us to spend our time with them, but she loved her husband's home better than any place on earth; and to care for the flowers I admired, arrange my books, statues, paintings, or make the old ruinous villa I rented, ring with the music of her delightful voice or the thrilling chords of her plaintive harp, was happiness enough for Blanche.

My fakirs often entertained her with their wondrous feats of incomprehensible art, and even those apathetic ascetics would raise their dull heads and smile, or their veiled eyes would light up with gleams of pleasure, as they heard the ringing laugh of the bright fairy, or the merry sound of her little hands as she clapped them in wondering admiration at their tours de force.

She had many living pets also amongst odd birds and stray animals whom she coaxed into companionship with her. She took great delight in "educating" them, as she called it, and talked to them as if they understood her. I think they did, and listened to her childish wisdom and womanly play with as much solemn admiration as did any or all the dependents who approached her.

But what did all this lead to? Let me turn again the pages of the only record that remains to tell how the last act was played out. That record is her own journal, written evidently with a prophetic view of how it would some day be needed, and how it would become a silent witness of the tale no human lips have ever spoken. I found it in the loneliness of a cold and empty room from which the life had fled and the sunshine died out; when the ringing laugh was hushed, the wonderful voice silent, and the harpstrings run down or snapped forever. The extracts that relate to the crisis of which I am now writing ran thus:

"Jan. 10, 18—. O mother, mother, how I wish you could see me now! Dearest sisters, would you not almost envy me? I do believe you would, just a little—though all the time you would rejoice for me, for I am sure you used to admire that 'magnificent Chevalier,' as we were accustomed to call him, almost as much as I did when he was amongst us at N\_\_\_\_\_. But O my mother and sisters! what is the admiration which you and I and every one else must feel for my Louis, compared to the love which moves my heart, not because he is so handsome, but because he is himself, and O heaven! because he is so good and kind and dear to me! How could I fail to love him? And yet I think you would laugh to see what a little creature I am, when I take his arm and try to look dignified and keep pace with him as we enter Uncle Frederick's salon, or go to the numerous receptions we have to attend. Louis is so tall and stately and splendid, whilst as to me, I am—no matter what. He says I am a "little sprig of summer and winter; a snow-flake and a rose-bud in one," and only just fit to stick in his button-hole. But ah, my mother! I wish you were near me just now. Shall I ever see you more—ever, ever tell you how much better I have understood what mother's love is within the last few months? I know not.

Aunt Emily tells me all young creatures, when they hover on the wonderful verge of the new path, the path that reaches heaven through the life of a new-born being, all tremble and shrink, and fear to enter upon that awful responsibility, and think they cannot live to go through with the mighty change. I have no fear; on the contrary, I have sometimes a hope, a strange, unnatural hope perhaps; it is that my good and noble Louis, my generous husband, who never was my lover, only my friend and protector—that he will be released

again, and become free to follow the lead of his towering mind and lofty inspirations. I know not!

I have written these words before, and feel now as if they were not true, for I do know; I know that in the midst of all my great joy, there is ever a strange dimness upon me. Even when my Louis hides me away in his heart—there where I am safest and strongest, or when I am looking up into his splendid eyes, so kind, so true, that everything false or unholy quails beneath them, even then the dimness comes, comes between me and the light that sparkles in the dark eyes of my Louis."

"Jan. 20. There is a great secret constantly pressing upon my mind and ever urging me to confide in him; yet just as I am on the point of doing so, I see upon his face that sad, appealing look I have before referred to, that look which pierces my heart like the eye of Fate, and seems to plead with me to spare him further sorrow.

"No, I have not the heart to tell him, and don't know that I shall ever be able to do so, though I think I ought. Would I could banish the remembrance of it! Perhaps, if I write about it, it will fade away like the ghost of a haunting air, which only needs singing to chase it away. Yes, I will write it down; perhaps it may some day explain away what is mysterious when—when—I know not what. That doubt of the future again! God's future. Why, then, should I fear it? But to my secret.

Just before I met my Louis for the first time in India, Helene, she whom I so loved once, and alas! so tenderly think of still, that Helene who was then so very dear to me, so kind, so wise, so strong—she asked me for a long curl of my hair. She said it would serve to bring us together at any time, and I knew it would, for she proved it and taught me how. When I gave her leave to cut off that curl, how I shivered, and felt as if a part of my life had gone out from me; but I did not mind it then. She asked me afterwards to give her a locket or something I had worn, to enclose a piece of the hair in. She was quite particular in asking for something that I had worn, so I gave her a small gold locket that my dearest sister Edith had given me for a keepsake when we were both children. Edith and I have exchanged many presents since then, so I didn't mind parting with this trifle to Helene, especially as she preferred it to all the other rich jewels I offered her. She had her name engraved upon it, and when she had enclosed a piece of my hair in it, she said my curl outshone the gold it was enclosed in.

"That was a compliment worthy of my Chevalier, it was so like the sweet things he says to me; but what he says is always true and like his own noble self, whilst as to Helene—ah me! I wish she were as true and pure and good as he is. But that unfortunate lock of hair! Oh, how I wish it were back on my head again or in my Louis's keeping! What would he say if he knew that lady still possessed it, besides having another piece in the locket I gave her? But then again she may have lost all interest in me, and forgot that she has such things in her possession, or, having them, the desire to use them may—nay, must have passed away. I am nothing to her now, only a memory; perhaps not even that. Poor Helene! she had no female friend except me. I do think she loved me once, and sometimes I believe she must miss me. Oh, why could she not continue to love me even though she did love Louis? That is nothing strange—every one must love him; and as to her, she was so fascinating and in everything so far superior to me, that I should never have been surprised if he had preferred her to me."

"Feb. 12. Alas, alas! I know too well now that Helene remembers that dreadful lock of hair. I fear me, too, she has been tempted to use it for—O heaven! how I shudder when I think of it—last night I was gone, I know not where. I am confident I was not sleeping, for I distinctly remember seeing the palm-trees waving in the breeze, and listening to the mid-

night songs of the boatmen as they floated down the river; and yet I was away somewhere—away where my Louis could not reach me, away in some terrible imprisonment, in some place where I saw the form of Helene. I saw, too, that she wore a beautiful India muslin dress embroidered with gold, and that she stood somewhere near me, like a priestess of Valhalla, with her long, waving tresses of raven hair falling around her, crowned with a wreath of bay leaves. I know this scene was not a mere dream. I think it took place in some old temple where I have never been; but O heaven! this may not be the end of it! Would that I had told Louis, but I could not, I could not! Perhaps I shall have courage to do so to-morrow."

"Feb. 15. Louis has gone away for three weeks. Louis is gone, and the sunlight has all gone with him. He has explained to me the urgency of the affairs that called him hence, and I knew he ought to go, so I never opposed him or tried to detain him. I knew I ought not to do so. He wished me to go and stay with my aunt, who was very urgent that I should do so; but I pleaded to be allowed to remain here in my happy, happy home, with all my pets around me, and the tracery of my dearest love's presence on every side of me. Oh, I could not go away! I could not leave such a scene for my aunt's gay home, with so many visitors coming and going all day, and nothing there of Louis except that splendid portrait of him my uncle has had painted, just for every one that comes in to admire, as of course every one does.

I know my kind Louis feared to hurt me by opposing my wishes, so he consented to let me stay, but I heard him charging my aunt so earnestly to come and see me every day, and besides that he has filled the house with so many attendants, and left so many persons in charge of me, that I am never alone. This would trouble me a little if I did not perceive in it fresh evidences of his tender care. I dare not trust myself to write anything about his absence, but it is a wonderful joy to me to know that he will be home again in three weeks. Three weeks! Ah me! the sun will shine upon me then, though all is so dark and desolate now."

"Feb. 19. Heaven have mercy on me! The worst has come at last. O misery unutterable! Where shall I go, what shall I do to escape this awful fate? O Louis, Louis! where are you and why can you not realize the shipwreck and woe that has befallen your unhappy `fairy?'

"Last night Helene called me away, dragged my spirit forth, though she mercifully left my helpless, woeful body sleeping in my bed.. Alas, alas! what an afflicted captive soul was mine as I stood in her presence, with her dark and dreadful brother by her side, and all around them a crowd of awful shapes, demons, or elementaries, I know not which or what! O cruel, remorseless woman! What have I ever done to deserve such a dreadful doom? She mocked and taunted me, told me she could control me, body and soul, and I felt too well she could.

"I saw my fatal lock of hair, half consumed and crisped by fire, laying on an altar that might have been dedicated to the dark god, Juggernaut. I knew when I was called; I knew that I must go, for I felt the sharp sting of the burning lock upon my forehead, and ere I had time to pray, or call upon thee, my Louis, lo! I was there. O heaven, pity me! Angels of mercy, help me! There is still so much left of that fatal lock of hair that I know not how many more times she may summon me, nor when, nor how, those fiendish rites may be exercised again. I have prayed all night and day since then, and believe I am at last a little stronger. Today a fresh calamity has befallen me. My uncle, who has been so very kind to me, my poor uncle, who seems to, have become so fond of me, went up the country some forty miles on official business, and has been seized with malarious fever.

My dear, good aunt has been obliged to join him, and I have lent her my best ayah to help her nurse him. I fear Louis would not be pleased if he knew my nurse was gone, because she

is so good, so much better a physician than poor, stupid Dr. S\_\_\_\_\_. Why could he not see this morning how worn and sad I was? Alas, no one knows me but Louis, and he is so far away! How lonely and deserted this place appears to be, and oh, the dimness! it has now become quite a thick cloud.

"I believe I could summon Louis if I were to try, and send out this trembling soul of mine to fetch him home, but I know how fearfully sensitive he is, and what terrible pangs he would suffer before he could reach me. No, no! I cannot brave the consequences.

"He has been gone ten days now. A little more than another week, and he will return. I will tell him all then, and I know he will and can save me, at least before my time of trial comes."

"Feb. 22. Again, again! Another fearful ordeal! Last night they called me again, and there was none to save me. Surely, surely, God has forgotten me, and good angels have deserted me!"

"Feb. 25. Oh, joy, joy! The lock of hair has been restored to me, and now it is burned, consumed in the fire my Louis calls so sacred, and I am saved, at least till my Louis returns, and then what power can harm me? Still, he shall know it all, and I will write it down just as it happened, so that he may know everything correctly. Early yesterday morning whilst I was absorbed in lamentation, wringing my hands, and praying that heaven would send me help, who should I see crossing the veranda and stopping opposite my couch, with low obeisances, but that dear, good, droll little fakir, Nazir, the little sprite whom my Louis likes so well and who made such pleasant entertainment for us when we were first married.

"I had not seen him for a long time because he has been away on a pilgrimage, he said; but he had now returned, and brought with him a pair of those sweet birds we call in England, 'love birds.' He brought them as a present to me, the precious little ones! He said they were not half good enough for me. Poor little Nazir! but I answered him that I thought it was just like his fatherly care to bring me such a present. Then the good little fakir asked if he could do nothing else for me; was I quite sure? no commission that he could execute—nothing that madame could think of which Sahib could do to beguile her loneliness? It seemed strange that he should linger so; stranger still that just then I could think of nothing for him to do, though I knew it would please him so much to be of use to me—the kind heart!

"At last I remembered that fatal lock of hair. The memory of it came upon me like a thunder-cloud just as I was making friends with my little birds. Then as it all came back to me, I told Nazir the whole story, and asked him what I could do until my husband returned to help me. Good Nazir! he is a man after all, though he is a fakir, and has a heart though he has studied how to encase it in a crust of seeming apathy. He frowned darkly when I mentioned Helene's name, but when I told him how they had treated me I thought the sparks of fire emitted by his glittering black eyes would have consumed Helene had she beheld their lurid glare.

"When all was told, he said, literally hissing between his clenched teeth, 'Madame shall have her golden lock again; the sun of my lord's existence shall have the shorn beam restored to her.'

"Oh, how glad I was when I heard these words! I knew that Nazir had done more wonderful things than spiriting away a little lock of hair. At one of my husband's dinner parties, three fakirs caused a whole set of china to walk across the floor, and wait on each member of the company separately; they brought jewels through the air from my aunt's dressing-room, seven miles away, and caused my uncle's cane to leave our house, fly through the air, I sup-

pose, and drop down before the family, as they sat at dinner two miles distant. Oh, I felt sure Nazir could restore my lock of hair. Why did I not think of that before?

"Just one hour ago I went into my dressing-room, and there I saw Granger, my English maid, standing like a statue of fright, bending over something that lay upon the ground just inside the French window. 'Look there, my lady,' she cried, 'what can that be on the ground?'

"I looked and saw what it was in a moment, and requested her quite calmly to pick it up and hand it to me. It was indeed my poor lock of hair, tumbled, soiled, and half-burned; still it was mine, and that was all I cared for; but that was not the only thing there; by the side of the hair lay Helene's locket! O Nazir! that was quite wrong, and far exceeded your commission. I never meant that he should have taken that locket away. Why, that is stealing, and a very ugly way of stealing, too! I must have the hair taken out, and Nazir must just spirit the locket back again in the same manner that he abstracted it. I shall be perfectly miserable until it is returned. What an error to commit! I hope he will come to-morrow and enable me to return it before she discovers her loss. If she still perseveres in her wicked designs against me, and finds the hair gone, as hair I know is a very essential part of the dreadful invocation, of course she will resort to the little piece in the locket, and if that is missing too, I don't know what she may think."

"Feb. 24. The whole day has passed, and that tiresome Nazir has not made his appearance. I feel so safe and composed now that I have my lock of hair again, that I can afford to be a little troubled about the locket. Still I wish my good, kind little fakir would come. I cannot rest till that fatal jewel is out of my possession. It seems to cast such an evil spell upon me that I cannot shake off its effects. No! not though I am holding in my hand another precious letter from the star of my existence. Sweet, fragrant leaves are between the pages, but oh, how much more fragrant is the aroma of goodness and protective care and kindest sympathy that breathes through these precious lines! He is coming home soon, and says, home is where I am. Oh, thank heaven he is coming! Would he were here now! How coldly the stars gleam upon me to-night; and I have a strange fancy, as I look at them, that they seem to be calling me away. This old house is full of sounds, but I never feared them till to-night. Hark! there's another string of my poor harp gone. No, surely it is a hand wandering amidst the strings! Can it be a hand? Perhaps it is only the night breezes. How they sigh and moan amongst the tall palms! They sound like the rushing winds of our own Scottish moors rather than the balmy breathings of a tropic land. If there are spirits of the air abroad this night, they are calling me hence, for surely I hear my name sounding amongst the tree-tops. There it is again! Blanche, Blanche! come home! Who is it that calls? Home is where my Louis is. Oh, will they take me from him? . . . Granger has just been here to inquire whose voices were singing in my chamber. Poor girl! how terrified she was when I could not answer her.

My people creep about the house and look so strangely upon me. There is a mortal fear upon them all to-night, and I cannot now sustain and cheer them as I used to do when I was a gay girl at home. How calm I was when my Louis slept so long, that all around thought him dead but me, and I crept up to his side and gazed upon him, and thought how beautiful he looked. I wish I could recall the courage of those days now. Hark! some one is pacing my chamber. Who can it be? Now the footsteps die away, and—now some hand is on my harp again. That is not the wind; those chords mantra resound beneath a master's touch. O heaven! what a sad and mournful strain that was. Who could the player be? O spirits of the solemn stars; bright planetary angels! You who know so well, and love my Louis—oh, protect and guard him! And if it is thy will, Father of spirits, return him to this sad and lonely heart of mine ere I go hence! Louis, my Louis, star-beam of my soul! would thou wert with me now! Good-night, dear love, good-night."