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Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Aurora Floyd Revisited: an Experiment in Neovictorianism

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MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S *AURORA FLOYD* REVISITED:
AN EXPERIMENT IN NEOVICTORIANISM

by
Vivian Walker Lang

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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These are all the people who helped make this thesis possible in some way. To them, I say thank you again and again. Someone asked me what I would consider my greatest achievement at the university. I gave him an answer, and then said, “But ask me again when I have finished my senior thesis. I can’t wait for that to be my answer.”

Professor Emeritus Natalie Schroeder
Associate Professor Tom Franklin
Dr. John Samonds
My parents and friends
Mary Elizabeth Braddon
My AP English literature teacher—Barbara Downey
Sweet Briar Writing Conference workshop 2014
and Professor Colby Kullman, who has inspired and encouraged me in all that I have done.

ABSTRACT

My thesis is a combination of analysis and creativity. It is an exploration in the literary genre Neovictorianism, and specifically it explores a two-year period in the life of Aurora Floyd. Aurora Floyd is the protagonist of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel, *Aurora Floyd*. While many of the major themes, characters, and literary elements stem from Braddon's work, the following pages are my original work and have accumulated over the past year and a half of my time as an honors student.

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A Brief Introduction

I. The What and the Why

Instead of beginning with the “what,” let’s begin with the “why.” Why did I choose to do a project like this for my senior thesis? First, I have always enjoyed creative writing. In elementary school, I would come home and just write, making up characters like the Quimples, a family of eighteen with what I now realize to be the most unfortunate last name, and creating mystical worlds with homes that sat in the tops of trees, interweaving branches from neighboring trees serving as stairways and bridges. I remember reading series like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and being naively confident that I could create a space of Lewisian caliber.

My high school AP English Literature teacher gave me an appreciation for analysis, but the appreciation I had was paired with a frustrating trepidation. Reading and interpreting literature, much like the writing process, can be intimidating, especially when one tries to make a claim that disputes preexisting ones. Since my start at the university four years ago, that fear I had thankfully dwindled. I began to love the idea of challenging what others thought before me. I could go on and on about professors who have helped me develop analytic strategies and an admiration for the written word in its many forms, but for the sake of my time and that of my readers, I will leave it at this: the past four years have given me a certain confidence in my work and in my thinking, whether warranted or not. With any luck, it *is* warranted, at least somewhat, and the following pages are a cohesive body of work and effort.

Sophomore year, in my first creative writing workshop, I discovered a certain love I had for reading the creative work of my peers, and reading with the question of “what if?” in mind. What if this character did this? Or, what if this conversation was longer or this character was removed? Or, I want to see this scene played out. The writing process is challenging, to say the

least. A white page or a blinking cursor is daunting. That workshop and others after taught me how encouraging a room full of readers and writers can be, as well as how beneficial it can be to each person's work in his or her dual role as writer and reader. I learned the value of others' opinions. I learned the value of my own opinion.

What I seek to do with my honors college project is to combine the processes of creative writing and analysis, two areas that have challenged, provoked, and inspired me. I make additions to a story that has already been written, a Victorian novel by Mary Elizabeth Braddon entitled *Aurora Floyd*. I take existing themes, characters, rhetorical strategies, etc. in Braddon's work and incorporate them into over sixty pages of my own writing. I form an analysis of sorts, without directly stating I am doing so. It was an evolutionary process that led me here, and hopefully readers will find this culmination of my passions to be worthwhile.

II. What is the neo-Victorian genre and how did I prepare to write my thesis?

Neo-Victorian, simply put, means either that the work creatively engages with Victorian literature or culture in some way or that it takes a critical look at said creative work(s) (Cox; *Oxford Bibliographies*). In technical terms, the Victorian era ended in 1901, but the genre I am writing presents itself with novels like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which revisits Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Bertha, the mad woman in the attic. Other novels include, *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles, and *Fingersmith* by Sarah Waters. The list goes on.

I like to think I created a hybrid of the two ideas behind the above definition of neo-Victorianism. In order to accomplish this, I read about the genre in which I am writing, but I also refreshed myself on what Victorian literature entails. Having taken Professor Natalie Schroeder's

course on “Studies in the Victorian Novel” in the fall of 2012, I reviewed my notes on Braddon’s novel (expanded upon in the next section) and on the time period, in general.

Though bracketing literary time periods is a tricky business, it is fairly accurate to state that the Victorian era consists mostly of the nineteenth and the first year of the twentieth century (during Queen Victoria’s reign, which ended with her death in 1901). The novel took the literary stage during these years in terms of forms of writing. Many authors focused on themes like punishment for evildoers, eventual success and love for do-gooders, and all the melodramatics one pen could muster. There are secrets, layers upon layers of them, passion and romance, betrayal, dualities, and hidden agendas. Though Victorian literature questions certain aims of society, writers of these novels knew the importance of achieving a certain societal status and consequently, the importance of performing the roles that went along with that status. Thus, motifs like status, wealth, duty, and reputation are prominent in these novels; class and fortune were the true tellers of success. Gender roles, too, were significant. For instance, marriage was the goal of young women, and if not, then it was certainly the goal of the young women’s parents *for them*.

Braddon’s novel is, in many ways, similar to other novels in its genre. In other ways, however, it is not, but details of that will come a bit later. To prepare for *my* writing, I traced a timeline of *Aurora Floyd*, making a list of events that needed to happen during my pages and how those events had to mesh with Braddon’s overarching work. In addition, I read three neo-Victorian novels—Waters’ *Fingersmith*, *Drood* by Dan Simmons, and *The Crimson Petal and the White* by Michael Faber—noting how each author added his or her own flair to the *-ism* that is Victorianism.

A quick description of these novels might be helpful to better grasp the genre. Dan Simmons' book tells the story of Edwin Drood, the famous character in Charles Dickens' final, yet incomplete work, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Simmons narrates from the perspective of Dickens' real life friend and fellow author, Wilkie Collins. Drood is a mysterious figure, dark and nightmarish in the way he haunts Dickens. The novel addresses Victorian motifs of horror, secrecy, jealousy, and identity. Throughout, Simmons makes references—subtle and not-so—to Dickens' writing and rumors about Dickens' relationships and dramatic tendencies, neatly maintaining the historical context and language of the earlier work that served as his inspiration.

The title of Faber's novel derives from the Tennyson poem, "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal." Faber's work, like Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* plays with sexuality and with the role of 'doubles.' (A classic example of 'doubles' is in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* with Charles Darnay and Sidney Carton.) Faber's novel surrounds a gentleman, who wants nothing more than to move up the economic ladder. He does so with the help of a prostitute, ironically the smartest of the characters. Faber paints a prostitute as a heroine; Waters' paints a young thief, a 'fingersmith', as one. Faber incorporates infidelity, materialism, and trickery in his pages, and provides a commentary on 19th century England's obsession with social class. Waters uses similar motifs, while also including bold scenes of female homosexual affection and desire. Neovictorian literature works to push similar boundaries the original Victorian authors pushed, while at the same addressing contemporary issues.

III. Braddon's Novel

Mary Elizabeth Braddon published *Aurora Floyd* as a "serialization" in a magazine called *Temple Bar* from the years 1862 to 1863 (Nemesvari and Surridge 32). Closely trailing the

release of her most popular novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Aurora Floyd* was a great success. Within both books there are some stylistic elements to point out. Braddon was stuck, in a sense, between two conflicting sentiments—one that appreciated Victorian convention and one that rebelled against it. In the introduction to the Broadview edition of *Aurora Floyd*, Richard Nemesvari and Lisa Surridge say that Braddon “certainly questioned Victorian stereotypes of womanhood through her strong female characters, [yet] many of her novels were solidly conventional in their acceptance of duty and the class status quo” (11). They go on to note the backlash Braddon and several other (female) writers received for writing such strong female heroines and the criticism that pinned much of her writing as *too* fictitious. Critics thought the reality she created was too exaggerated to be the slightest bit credible (12, 15). Referring to her writing as “sensational,” they seemed to somehow side-step the fact that many of the crimes and murders and convictions Braddon mentions or describes in her writing were gathered from actual newspaper headlines and articles.

Braddon rebelled against assumptions of femininity, creating a “fast” young woman, or one who is not as accustomed and welcoming to studies and London’s delicacies as she is to straddling a horse and discussing races and gambling. Still, *Aurora Floyd* is not so simple a protagonist as to be labeled one extreme or the other. Braddon’s fictional character is complex, one who is loyal to her father and is, therefore, in many ways submissive, while simultaneously knocking down the doors of convention and societal expectation.

Braddon’s point of view is interesting. It is almost like it is a first-person narrator doing the job of a third-person omniscient narrator. The perspective follows Aurora closely, but then, so does it follow her father, Archibald Floyd, at moments and James Conyers and Lucy Floyd and Talbot Bulstrode and so on. There are a number of times when the narrator reveals herself,

such as when she says “I...” or addresses the audience directly with, “Reader, ...” I struggled with whether or not to imitate this particular detail in Braddon’s writing, as I felt it might be crossing some sort of invisible line. In the end, I crossed that line, and for better or worse, I attempt to assume this position of a sort of dual-narrative strategy.

In terms of plot, the novel can be summed up in a few sentences. Aurora Floyd, the heroine, marries John Mellish after Talbot Bulstrode breaks his own engagement to her due to a certain secret Aurora is unwilling to share. The secret is that she has been married before. She married the man who was once her father’s groom, and his name is James Conyers. This is the same man to whom Aurora apparently loses her virginity (out of wedlock), which essentially sets the rest of the novel in motion. Conyers, unfortunately but not surprisingly, turns out to be a villainous character. Despite his charm and his handsome features, he is obsessive, and not about Aurora, but about money and achieving a (false) sense of status. Braddon alludes to some kind of abuse on his end as well as an affinity for alcohol, both of which I include in my writing. The relationship between Aurora and James Conyers is the main focus of my installments. It is a destructive relationship, and the destruction it yields takes many forms. The fact that Aurora is so hesitant to reveal the details of her time spent in Paris with James was something I wanted to explore, a story I wanted to be a part of.

III. Where do I come in?

“Three days after this, upon the 14th of June 1856, Mr. Floyd and his daughter left Felden Woods for Paris, where Aurora was placed at a very expensive and exclusive Protestant finishing school, kept by the Demoiselles Lespard, in a stately mansion entre cour et jardin in the Rue Saint-Dominique, there to complete her very imperfect education . . .” (Braddon 65)

Enter: me. Clearly, Braddon knew what she was doing with her story. Her novel fits into the Victorian mold of suspense and secrecy. It fits into the puzzle-like mold of Victorian literature, in which pieces are given sporadically, and eventually the reader gets to nod and say, “Ahhhhh...”

So, perhaps it is bold of me to suggest that there are chapters missing from Braddon’s novel. Perhaps, that is subconsciously why I choose to call my sections “installments” rather than chapters. Installments are parts of a grander thing, given at different intervals or published at different times. Installments are necessary to keep something going, to keep something alive. What I have written is necessary, or so I argue. (An interesting note: *Aurora Floyd* was originally released in thirteen installments, so maybe *that* is subconsciously why I chose to call my portions installments. Or maybe, still, it is because that is what Professor Schroeder called them.)

Let’s start with the end. I chose to conclude my writing with an epilogue. I wanted the climax of my installments, which occurs in the section immediately preceding the epilogue, to be near the front of the reader’s mind. It is the biggest moment in terms of emotion, intensity, and sacrifice. I did not want to bog down the reader with excessive words and scenes after that. The epilogue is also where I mention that Francine has told Aurora about her husband’s affair with another woman, something Braddon mentions briefly in her novel. Aurora says to Talbot, “I discovered I had been wronged, deceived, and outraged by a wretch who laughed at my ignorant confidence in him . . . it was forced upon me by a woman who knew my story and pitied me” (Braddon 433-434).

Nemesvari and Surrige claim that “Aurora’s character not only creates action; she also represents, if not an ideal, then a new type of woman, whose worldly experience, Braddon [and thus, I] dare to argue, eventually makes her a mature and wise partner” (22). However, I had to

remember that the ending of my installments is not the true ending. In fact, it is arguably the beginning of Braddon's novel. Thus, I had to really consider how I left Aurora, in physical and in psychological terms.

Braddon describes Aurora's appearance upon her return in the following way: "A year had changed that girl to a woman—a woman with great hollow black eyes, and pale haggard cheeks" (66). So, she had to leave my pages and re-enter Braddon's as weak, as tired, and as noticeably changed from adolescent girl to woman. I had to show the progression of this change and make it run parallel to the story Aurora later tells Talbot Bulstrode. Later in the novel, Aurora reveals to him all the secrets that surrounded that fourteen-month period she spent away from Felden Woods. For the most part, I used this as a guideline for mapping out how my portion of the story would unfold. I do steer away from it in some regards, taking a few liberties. Nonetheless, she returns justifiably more mature, albeit weary and exhausted physically and mentally. In my pages, Aurora's heart gets broken in several ways. One of Kurt Vonnegut's rules for writing creative fiction is to "be a sadist" (Vonnegut 9). Though I am not going to spoil anything for potential readers (how Victorian-esque!), I will say that I strike Aurora where and when she is most vulnerable, in ways she could not have anticipated.

Again, tying into the notion of secrecy, something happens to Aurora during my pages that no other characters will ever know. It is a secret that will plague Aurora until her death, a piece of her life that no one, not even her precious John Mellish or dear cousin or father will hear of. And thus, a chasm remains forever between Aurora and the other characters. This is something Braddon does not even know!

Also, though she has somewhat been transformed into a woman while she has been away, more transforming, more maturing needs to occur. So, I leave her in a contemplative state, but it

is still a selfish one. With the conclusion of my pages, she has come to realize more about the world, but she is still in swimming in a pool of her own self-pity. She has been since she left over a year ago. After she returns to her previous life, she is unable to tell Talbot Bulstrode the truth because she is too humiliated, which results in Bulstrode's anger and the breaking of their engagement. Thus, Aurora arguably needs to still be self-centered when she sets foot again in Braddon's novel. For her to have had a complete turn around at the end of my section would be inaccurate.

IV. Recurring Characters, Symbols, and Motifs

Aurora Floyd is the heroine in Braddon's novel and likewise, throughout my installments. James Conyers, whom Aurora marries, is the antagonist. I have tried to stay true to what is said and what ought to be inferred about each of them in Braddon's novel. For instance, the two have an obvious attraction for each other, which is what gets Aurora into a compromising situation in the first place. For Aurora, the attraction is physical, but it is also something that cannot be described fully with words. She is attracted to what he offers—a break from the oppressive world of rules and manners and ladylike protocol. For James, and really, anyone who encounters Aurora, her presence is mesmerizing. There is something about her black, velvety hair and her dark eyes that catches the attention of not only men, but women as well.

Something I noticed when reading Victorian novels is the connection between characters. Everyone's story fits within the novel's overarching story; individual plotlines interweave with the rest; and in the end, they create a tapestry of secrets and emotion. I wanted to create characters that linked with those in Braddon's novel. Sometimes these characters came entirely from my own imagination, and other times they were rooted in Braddon's work. For instance,

Miss Brewer or Miss Brevier, as she likes to call herself, is a minor character in my early pages. She, coincidentally, is the sister of the Mrs. Powell, who is an important figure in Braddon's novel. Constance Trevyllian is Talbot Bulstrode's cousin, who is mentioned briefly in Braddon's work. Her role is more significant in my pages than in the other novel, as she is one of Aurora's fellow students at the Lespard Finishing School in Paris.

There is an important physical resemblance between Aurora and her deceased mother. Her mother came from a humble background of lower class. She was an actress, but tragically, not a very good one. Regardless of her actual talent, she charmed Archibald Floyd and even some members of her audiences, as well. In my pages, a man on the streets drunkenly mistakes Aurora for a woman he has seen on stage somewhere. Similarly, a rowdy sailor who comes to Paris on rare occasions—only when his ship makes port in the area—sees something oddly familiar in Aurora. Though his name is not stated, I meant for him to be Aurora's uncle, Samuel Prodder, who, like Mrs. Powell, plays an important role in Braddon's novel.

Felden Woods is Aurora's English childhood home. At the start of my installments, Aurora is conflicted. Felden Woods and her father, though both appreciated, are seen somewhat as prisons, gray walls surrounding Aurora, preventing her from seeking what the world and the woods really have to offer. Felden Woods also represents safety for Aurora, however, which ironically sounds oppressive and exactly what she was trying to escape. I think that is accurate and plays into the realm of duality that is so present in Victorian fiction. By the end of my writing, she desires that safety. It is a comfort that she has missed for months and months; it is a nearly forgotten embrace Aurora longs to feel and remember once more.

Letter writing and letters being sent or unsent, read or unread are significant devices in the Victorian genre that I attempt to use. There is a letter in the very first installment and several

more after this. The most significant one, of course, is the one that does not get sent, that stays with Aurora, serving almost as a diary or a private confessional. This leads to another important theme—Aurora’s dependency. As strong-willed and independent as she is, Aurora Floyd (or perhaps, Conyers), depends on her surroundings. She depends on her father and on her cousin, Lucy. She depends on James and on Francine, and she tries to depend on God, but nothing seems to work for her. At least, in my pages, nothing *can* work for her. For, again, this is not the ending.

The way I leave Aurora in Braddon’s hands is intentional. Although she has definitely left the realm of childhood and frivolity, she must learn more about herself and about the love she is, in fact, capable of sharing with someone. However, I leave all of that to the much more capable Mary Elizabeth Braddon.

V. And, so...

And so, after a year and a half of reading, writing, erasing, more reading, more writing, and more erasing, we have arrived at the start of my thesis. It is a combination of creativity and analysis, a combination of many aspects of being an Honors College, English major at the University of Mississippi. I believe I have been trained well by my professors and mentors to write these installments, and I must say, I am proud to see these pages bound. Thank you for taking the time to read it all.

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Installment I

The Lespard Finishing School Meets Aurora Floyd

Miss Batton began her teaching at the Lespard School for Young Women in the late summer of 1854, nearly two years before Aurora Floyd found herself the newest student at the Parisian finishing school. A third cousin of the family Lespard, she had been hired as the instructor for Latin and Grammar and other fields of study as needed, i.e. Conversation and Etiquette. The sisters who carried the school's name, having both received a proper education, had had high hopes of running the school entirely on their own. However, the younger sister had fallen into a sickly state not many years after the school's opening. For fear of losing enrollment and status within the pool of Parisian schools for young women, the elder Lespard sister had felt the best course of action was to request help, though the request came with neither the warmest nor the humblest of sentiments.

(Here, one ought to be aware that the Lespard women prided themselves on having established their school and enrolled students without the help of an outside party, particularly without aid from members of the opposite sex. They had even turned down the investment offer of a prominent businessman from Neuilly sur Seine. Looking back, this was a poor choice by the sisters, subjecting them to one of the very things they had been trying to avoid—negative commentary from the Parisian male community. Their rash decision resulted in evaluations like, “Their business tactics are quite poor, but what was one to expect?”).

Miss Batton described herself as a petite woman. Indeed, her height might fall under that category. Her width, though, might fall under another. She had never married. She had met a man around her age in Cassis, just east of Marseille a few years prior to beginning her work in Paris, where and when she had been visiting a great aunt. His name was Harold Barnard, and he

must have come from a family of seamen, as he smelled of the sea and knew all of the different sands of the Mediterranean. They spent mornings walking together along the streets, being accosted by the men and women pushing carts of fruits and vegetables and local grasses. He told her that he had lived near London for a time and that the costermongers¹ there spoke with an accent so thick and so full of particular argot, to this day he did not know what they were saying to him. She told him that she hated London; she much preferred the French language and food.

It was unfortunate timing, for their rendezvous had occurred at the far end of Miss Batton's four-month stay along the coast. Another unfortunate hole in this prenatal relationship was the nondisclosure of any future plans or travels between Miss Batton and the middle-aged man of Cassis. The former was called to Paris before the pair could birth a formal, promising beginning. She naturally had expected a letter of correspondence.

"I am certain," she thought, "he could easily find the 'great aunt' of whom I spoke often. I am certain he could easily come upon pen and paper and write me, asking of my arrival into Paris, of my return to Cassis."

Regrettably, a "could" is, on many occasions, quite different from reality. It was a miscarriage of sorts, and Miss Batton's blatant lack of interest, or perhaps, it might even be labeled as *resentment* towards the opposite sex hinted at her reluctance to let it pass. She had visited her great aunt once more since she had begun teaching at the Lespard School, but she had not seen her seaman, despite her best efforts to, as Miss Batton might put it, "casually, effortlessly, mindlessly" stroll their normal route twice a day for the two week duration of her visit.

¹ Costermongers—chiefly British pushers of fruits and vegetable carts

Most of the girls at the school took a liking for Miss Batton, or at least, they had found a tolerance for the portly woman. She was, however, strict in her tendencies and preferences. They quickly learned her favorite times were mealtimes, which translated, “Do not, under any circumstance pertaining to study, temperament, or minor sickness, be late for breakfast, luncheon, or dinner.” Tardiness was not a commendable characteristic, anyway. On occasion, the sisters Lespard would join them for the morning or evening meal, but more often than not, it was just Miss Batton and the students at the long table, picking at their morning staples of toast, ham, fruits, or possibly porridge, which was almost welcome in all its soft, steaming glory during the colder months.

There had been other teachers hired throughout the younger Mademoiselle Lespard’s battle with feebleness and doctor visits. One was Miss Ellen Brevier. Miss Brevier had an older sister, Miss Brewer, who then became the relatively happy Mrs. Walter Powell, who then became the stern widow of the late Mr. Walter Powell. (The reader might remember this brief detail, as he or she will be introduced to Mrs. Powell at a later time.)

At the ripe age of thirty and six, Miss Brevier had become the wife in watercolor² of an indecent German diplomat. Her actions—let the plurality imply that this was not an uncommon occurrence—were so disapproved by her sister, the latter would no longer claim immediate relation. And thus came the evolution of Ellen Brewer to Ellen Brevier (or after a few glasses of her favorite wine, perhaps, *Elaine* Brevier). This was all the better for that particular sister, for she had been looking to splash a little red paint on the stark walls of society’s dull construction. For, now her name sounded more exotic, more glamorous.

² A wife in watercolor in Victorian slang refers to a mistress.

Needless to say, Miss Brewer-Brevier, though surprisingly a well-equipped teacher of several subjects including French, German, Swedish and Dutch, did not stay long at the distinguished (and Protestant) Lespard School for Young Women. She felt she was “inclined to keep a different company” and left the Rue Saint-Dominique.

In a peculiar series of events soon to be laid out, Aurora Floyd, too, would take her premature leave of the school...

Mrs. Donald Fey of Cassis, the great aunt of Miss Batton, received this letter on September 2, 1856. By the time of the letter’s delivery, Aurora had already removed herself from the Lespardian grounds.

2 September 1856

Now, My Dear Aunt, I am going to relate the story of a certain student, Miss Aurora Floyd, who crossed the Lespard School’s threshold on the 24th day of June of this same year. “Student” is not quite an accurate description of the young Miss Floyd, for she remained not long enough for her to become such.

Her father is a widower living across the pond, quite near West Wickham. My dear cousins here, third and on my father’s side, say he was a good deal more protective of his daughter than the other parents or guardians. And still, there was tension between Mr. Floyd and the school’s newest occupant. Prior to his departure, the pair met in the garden. I happened upon the final piece of the interaction. There were mumbled words and disjunct emotions, and Mr. Floyd, sobbing and shaking his head, was holding his daughter, while the latter party stood like a guard outside of Buckingham, cold and distant.

Her dark eyes even that first day expressed a rebellious nature, a fast nature. She seemed unfit for school, if I may be frank. She was spoiled. Sitting in my classroom, she stared out the

window, unfortunately not uncommon among the poorly disciplined, but even consecutive scolding could not prevent those eyes, so black the iris indistinguishable from the pupil, from wandering. Pity, she saw little point in my lessons. What does it say of a lady who has the chance to acquire a bit of good knowledge, yet throws it away like an old cloth?

Now, Aunt, let me make known the strangeness in the young girl's disappearance not three weeks into her study. Miss Floyd was called upon by a young man one evening shortly before dinner. I remember because the usual heat and sunshine of a Parisian June was replaced this day and truthfully, for some days to come, with a thick grayness, the kind you might find on a despicable London morning.

I certainly am not sure from where this young rogue came, but I would be neglecting the truth if I said the other young ladies were not discomfited by his presence, however brief. Another student, Miss Constance Trevyllian, mentioned having seen him two or three nights before, calling outside Miss Floyd's bedroom window like some grand Romeus character calling for his sun or his moon, what have you. I suspect the nuisance caused a disruption in Miss Trevyllian's studies for her performance the mornings after Ms Floyd's friend's visits suggested such...but I lose myself.

I can recall his face and his stature from a few days before outside Paris's great musée. As my young ladies, having just seen ornaments of Christopher Dresser's exquisite collection, were finding artistic inspiration for their sketchbooks, the little fly pestered and flitted around Miss Floyd as if she were a freshly baked and buttered croissant, though she truthfully ought not be compared to something so golden and warm.

As I said, the young man came, unwelcomed, before dinner. Upon his discovery this side of the Lespadian gate, my cousin demanded his immediate departure. Miss Floyd's crown³ tilted down throughout the whole meal, as was her custom. She ate little. That night, they left together. By the thin sliver of light the crescent, dying moon had cut in the sky, Miss Trevyllian had seen Miss Floyd, carrying her suitcase, pale hand in pale hand with her prince of darkness. (That trunk, mind you, Aunt, was incompletely packed. The careless girl left quite a list behind. She could not even depart well!)

On another note, how have you been getting along in my absence? I plan on visiting again during the Christmas season. Have you seen any more of that Barnard fellow? My mind does not linger on him or our meetings, as I am kept busy here. The students always have questions for me, idolizing me as a sort of Apollo figure. And of course, that was so long ago; I have nearly forgotten his full name. I believe it is Harold Barnard, though, so if you happen to hear of his next arrival into Cassis, please include any information in your response.

With affection,

L.B.

³ Miss Batton is referring simply to Aurora Floyd's head but is insinuating the spoiled adolescent envisions a crown atop it.

Installment II An Unexpected Person in Paris

The Lespard School was a fine construction in terms of aesthetics. It had high walls and an ornate gate at its entrance. The edifice was so covered in *lierre de Russie*,⁴ at certain places one would not know it was built of red brick. The plant's strength and its obsessive grasp, unbeknownst to the Mademoiselles, would be the causes of several costly yet necessary repairs of cracks, splits, and crumbings. How interesting to be so beautiful and so dangerous, with consequences expensive and unforeseen.

A gold plaque proudly labeled the school. When the Lespards first opened its doors to “qualified” young women, it had been featured in the bottom corner of the final page of *Le Figaro*.⁵ The ladies Lespard saw this as a tremendous feat, despite the newspaper's reputation for sardonic commentary on the lives of the upper middle class, mocking their trivial concerns, their petty day-to-day. For, as long as the pursed lips of Paris had separated enough to begin talking about the newest, *female*-run institution of educational engagement, they had cause to keep the gold plaque polished and the hedges trimmed. The clipping (below) was, of course, framed and hung in the main hall.

⁴ *lierre de Russie* is Russian climbing ivy

⁵ *Le Figaro* was a Parisian newspaper best known for poking fun at the privileged.



Outside the school, though, is where this part of our heroine’s story takes place. Outside the school and its high walls and its ornate gate, outside Felden Woods, outside the required love of her father and aunt and cousin. Outside protection, Aurora’s nightmare was revisited. To be clear, *Aurora* did not see Paris as an answer to any problem she had, for she hated the city and its people and its smells. She detested it for not being London, and now, she detested London for all of the events that had taken place there that had led to her father’s decision to remove her in the first place.

It was the fourth day Aurora had been in Paris. She and her classmates were to go into the city for a field trip of sorts, being as much exposed to the art of the Louvre as was possible in so tight a formation. They were, of course, placed under the eye of Miss Batton, who served as a strict Miltiades to their phalanx.⁶

“Ladies, pay attention,” their commander said. “Keep your voices down. This is art. *This is art.*” Miss Batton’s eyes glistened with a hyperbolic admiration for the ceramics on display in

⁶ Miltiades was the Athenian commander at the Battle of Marathon, during which the Greek city-state tremendously defeated the Persian army by use of the phalanx—a tight military formation.

that particular section of the museum. She spoke with a feigned knowledge of the “Aestheticism”⁷ (though, Aurora would swear she heard the self-proclaimed art scholar pronounce it *asceticism*) revealed in Christopher Dresser’s work.”

A small teapot, cube-shaped, sat idle inside a case before them. The bigger cube was filled with smaller cubes, and the spout’s mouth was thin and rectangular, a feature Aurora imagined would not be conducive to precise pouring. The sharp edges were contrasted with delicate paintings of flowers and serpentine vines weaving their way over the teapot’s outer surface. Likewise, the whites and the greens and the lavenders tenderized the dark backdrop of the pot, properly balancing each harsh element, so that a certain gentleness, a finesse for which most persons, including several of the Lespardian ladies, had a sincere appreciation.

Aurora, however, felt more connected to the ascetic world than the aesthetic one represented on the small, white display columns before her. She had once heard of the church teachings of men who had removed themselves from society completely, living only by the most crucial of the bare necessities of life. They practiced self-control far beyond the capabilities of any normal man, especially of any man (or woman) Aurora had ever known. Though she had never felt a need to control her desires, seeing them more as guides rather than hindrances, she did feel a disconnect to persons around her. Only a handful truly knew her, and on occasion, Aurora did not place herself in that category.

Straying from the rest, the black-eyed rebel weakened the force at the students’ flank, offering space for intruders, room for outsiders, a breach in the Lespardian lines. Her mind wandered. Her eyes got lost in the curves of Dresser’s vases. The display was about texture, it was about feeling, and yet, she could not touch. None of them could touch. *This*, thought Aurora,

⁷This refers to the Aestheticism Movement that took place in 19th century Europe. Christopher Dresser’s artwork falls into this movement.

is how the people of Paris and of London with their timid hearts and ignorant minds “admire” things—from too far a distance.

A thin rope separated her from the vases. She extended her arm slightly, willing the art to come to her; she wanted to at least try to connect with it. But how was she supposed to feel if she could not feel?

“Miss Floyd, if you would kindly keep with the group.” Miss Batton had a way of hissing even when her words did not lend themselves to such a sound.

The different levels of the museum began to blend together for most of the girls. Aurora, at seventeen years of age, nearly eighteen, was one of the eldest at the school. To be constricted in lines was something she had not before experienced in all her years of living. And she did not care for it now. Lines and restrictions were hardly seen by the young maverick, and when they were, they were seen as nothing more than laughable or insulting, and therefore, incapable of creating any sort of reasonable or respectable limit.

After they had spent some three hours silent and appreciating the art Miss Batton so emphatically spoke of, the girls emerged from the museum, squinting as their eyes readjusted to the sunlight.

“Now, having experienced the best that Paris has to offer, you ought to be inspired!” Miss Batton assigned each of the young ladies a place to work on their sketching. Though never having sketched a day in her life, she felt quite confident in telling the girls to do so. She gave instructions and then proceeded to lounge on a bench outside the museum, shooting pigeons and every now and then, more out of habit than anything else, she hushed her already quiet students.

Several of the students drew what they saw—the architecture of the Louvre with its combination of Renaissance and Neo-Baroque styles, the Tuileries Gardens full of fresh greenery

and new and exotic plants, marble statues of past and present French royalty trying to concretize an eternal picture of fortitude and respectability. Two students drew each other—a trading of portraits, or more truthfully, a trading of unintentional caricatures. Aurora, with what little practice she had had at drawing, attempted a different picture. She drew a large, oak table with tall chairs all around it. It was the table in the dining room at Felden Woods, but in her sketchbook, it was situated outdoors, in a meadow she recalled as lush and quiet and safe. She drew plates overflowing with mutton, pudding, biscuits, and steaming vegetables and glasses filled to the brim with wine. At one end of the table, she had begun to draw a horse, her horse. At the other end would sit Archibald Floyd, smiling and accepting the honored guest and offering him dishes of hay and other types of fodder, and in between her two loves, Aurora lightly began an outline of her own self, her hair, long and black, being swept behind her by the playful, imaginary wind in that utopian setting. It was a place and a time of which she often dreamed, though she knew the futility in the dreams.

A shadow suddenly covered the lined pages of Aurora's sketchbook.

“Not completely terrible. I guess I lost my wager.”

Aurora kept her eyes down. The shadow shifted slightly, but it was not a shift from lack of confidence or from doubt or discomfort. That voice, she recognized it as belonging to a man she had known and who had known her not six months ago. He was handsome, captivating; he had been the first man to know her in her entirety. His voice was like the sound of madness in her ears, and she did, indeed, feel mad as a rush of heated emotion followed by a chilling sadness penetrated her. She could see her father, who, though presently knew nothing of this visitor, would be worried. For, Archibald Floyd worried day after day, hour after hour over his daughter, his precious jewel, his reason for breath.

“I didn’t think you would be so talented.” The expressionless face of the shadow spoke again.

“I’ve barely begun.”

“Still, you’ve got more of a knack than I anticipated. Like I said, I lost, and frankly, I hate losing, you know.” It was not a question looking for affirmation; it was an affirmation daring to be denied. This figure, this dark shadow dared Aurora, by his very presence, to deny him.

“You’ve been well?”

Aurora did not answer.

“Making friends at the school? Have they taught you the right way to curtsy yet, or when is the appropriate time to yawn in public?” He paused and leaned closer, placing his hand on the lower part of Aurora’s back. Her back curled under his palm. “It’s a trick question,” he said. “As a lady, you should never yawn in public.”

“I’d turn this pen into a martingale⁸ if I were able,” she said, ignited by his touch and vexed by his mockery.

“She speaks! And she’s an equestrian!”

“Her father disapproves.” The words burst from her dry lips like a racing horse from its stall at the sound of the gun. The words were a form of self-defense, willing the man to leave before she no longer had the power or the want to demand him do so. Aurora had not once looked at him since he had squatted beside her. She could feel his breath, like a fog moving over her shoulder and onto the page of her open book, staying too long in that idyllic world she had constructed, lingering as a bodily infection lingers, hidden beneath the disguise of improvement or remission. “That is why she—*I* am here.”

⁸ A martingale is a form of horse tack used for driving.

“You should draw me at that table,” he said.

Before Aurora could answer, Miss Batton called from her bench-post. “Miss Floyd!”

Even as the authoritative woman looked on, the young man began again whispering in Aurora’s ear the riveting details of his life since he had last seen his black-eyed inamorata. Aurora had once thought him a wonder, a gift sent to her from Heaven, if only to tear down the walls of boredom and monotony. He was handsome and strong. It was not only his physical features that attracted her, though; it was his world, his world that consisted of manes and speed and freedom.

“I rode him bare back the other day. The buckle on the billet strap had come off somehow, but I just needed to ride. I trusted him.” He knew he was baiting her, talking about horses and riding. He could sense her swimming closer, circling the hook like an inveigled and hungry damselfish.⁹ He continued, “To ride that way is a rush like none other, Aurora.”

Hearing her name drip from his lips felt to Aurora like getting splashed with boiling water. The sound of her name was a bee sting. She had been waiting for it, expecting it and the feelings and passions that it would arouse deep within her. But unlike the bee, who foolishly over-commits and stings but once and then, dies, never to sting or to fly or to buzz again, this man had come back. The shadow he cast over Aurora had not yet dissolved, nor would it for some unfortunate length of time to come.

“Miss Floyd!” Miss Batton had removed herself from her perch and was marching toward Aurora and her most-unwelcome guest. In Miss Batton’s far from humble opinion, if ever there were reason for a red mark in a student’s behavioral records, it was for unfavorable conduct with members of the opposite sex, and one ought to note that she considered eye contact held for

⁹ A damselfish is a small, black fish.

but a second longer than was necessary to be “unfavorable conduct.” Whether this sentiment had something to do with her own situation or rather, lack thereof, she certainly would never admit.

Reaching her destination, Miss Batton said nothing. She glowered at Aurora, this enigma of a young girl, who looked back at her temporary guardian with a hint of—what was it exactly? Brooding? Apathy? Her eyes said everything; yet, they gave no hint to Miss Batton what she was thinking. The man had fled with the approach of the schoolteacher. Aurora had not even seen whence he had come.

She tried to continue sketching. Though never a masterpiece, the drawing fell further outside the realm of good art. The lines of her table and chairs were reinforced with an unsteady hand. The version of her father’s face in front of her did not resemble the original in the slightest, and she could not determine why or how to fix it.

She felt the heavy eyes of her nearest classmate, Constance Trevyllian. The others had resumed their working, knowing in just the short time since they had met the newest student of the Lespard School that she was different, that she was trouble. Perhaps, though, Aurora was not trouble. Perhaps, she just carried trouble, or trouble followed her, clinging to her clothing like a moth, eating its way noiselessly first through the most superficial layer, creating one miniscule hole at a time until soon nothing would be left but pale skin, bared and vulnerable.

A rough hand grabbed her wrist as she gathered her things to return to the school. Aurora’s pulse skipped as the man rubbed his fingers over the charm bracelet her cousin had given her before leaving. She looked upon him for the first time. He *was* real. The light reflecting off the ornament hit his eyes, making him even more dangerously intoxicating. It hit her eyes too; rather it should have, but it seemed to be swallowed into those two black seas, drowned and sunk. There was nothing but blackness, a bottomless blackness.

“Tomorrow?”

Aurora again kept silent. The other students had turned to follow Miss Batton, unaware of this final exchange.

“Tomorrow.” He was not asking a question.

Installment III Confrontation in the Lavatory

Later that evening, they were served hot bowls of *bouillabaisse*, a dish personally requested by Miss Batton. The yellowed stew with its leeks and onions and carrots would itself have tasted just fine, and several of the girls less fond of the meal scooped up the vegetables so as to appease their superior and to satisfy their stomachs, at least to some extent. The main ingredient, however, and seemingly the most sentimental for Miss Batton, was a bony rockfish most commonly found in the port of Marseille. She informed the young ladies of all the different types of *bouillabaisse* and recommended they visit the “beautiful” Mediterranean port if they wished to taste the authentic version of the dish.

“Customarily, it comes with several more fish than just the one we have here—the *congre*, the *grondin*, the *merlan*. Our Catherine used what was the most readily available, the red rescasse, and of course, that will do just fine for our meal.” The rest of the table nodded in concurrence. In their lessons, they had been taught to show gratitude to whoever cooked and served them their meals, but the girls were genuinely thankful they needed only to dodge the red rescasse that evening.

Perhaps knowing the aforementioned vegetable-scoopers had attended the finishing school for longer and thus, had more familiarity with the mechanics of manners and politeness, a merciful reader will find the spoiled Miss Floyd inculpable for her actions during the dinner. She had been served a particularly generous helping of the putrid stew. Scrunching her nose at the smell, she pushed the bowl as far from her as was possible. Even her bread and thin square of sweet cream butter remained untouched.

She had not intended to draw any more attention from Miss Batton that evening. If ever she had had any trust or been shown a particular kindness from the woman, that was over. The episode outside of the Louvre had run its destructive course. Aurora could plead innocence with a guilt-free conscience, though it would do little good. She knew for certain that she stood in utter opposition to Miss Batton and the others, but mostly, she did not mind. Not from the minute she had said good-bye to her dear father, the only person who, for Aurora, carried any potentiality of true comfort or ties to a real home, had she welcomed her situation. She could push the people of the Lespard School away, like they themselves were plates of *bouillabaisse*, boiling in a runny broth, fetid and full of someone else's happy memories.

“Be mindful. She who chooses not to eat to her fill at this table will have to wait until the morning to mollify her hunger of its pains,” Miss Batton said.

The person for whom the bullet was intended did nothing. Like stone, Aurora did not even flinch. She wondered if she would even be hungry in the morning. Food seemed as unnecessary as eyeglasses for a famished hawk. All she could think about was that James Conyers was there, in Paris; he had come to her, for her, *with* her, in a sense. Aurora could not decide if she felt she were being protected or haunted. She certainly felt less lonely knowing that she had a deeper connection with at least one person in the foreign city. Yet, she did not need protection. She was her own citadel, and furthermore, she intended to return having learned at least enough at the finishing school to mitigate the preexisting tensions between her and her father.

James Conyers' presence suggested the difficulty partnered with this hopeful reconciliation. For, everything came with conditions. Nothing was free. And thus, her past, her

transgressions, and the literal and metaphorical distance from her father, aunt, cousin, and all that was cheerful about the Woods were incarnated in the handsome ex-groom.

Miss Batton's bidding and its associated justification upon the girls' dismissal were for the girls to spend their time wisely, "for no one likes an idler." For most of the young ladies this meant doing their readings. These, apart from workbooks on proper grammar, French or Latin, and the art of artful rhetoric, most significantly included "the finest books on etiquette a lady could hope to find in Paris." (One such book of particular disgust to Aurora, for example, was *Cultivating Elegance*, which, for ten pages, chastised and denounced any "sport" a lady might *claim*—for it could not possibly be a genuine affinity—interest.) This had been one of the main selling points of the Lespard School when the sisters were recruiting their first *étudiants* from among families of considerable financial standing in society. They were well aware, of course, that every mother and father wanted their daughter to be educated in the ways of womanhood.

For two obsequious students, Misses Hannah Green and Elsie Riopelle, time well spent was time spent playing the Mademoiselles' wide-eyed pets. They took it upon themselves to pamper and compliment one and to nurse the other back into her good health, but, to be sure, the Mademoiselle's "ill-health" was probably not best tended to by the likes of two seventeen year olds studying articulation and how to be good hostesses.

Constance Trevyllian was of the former type of student. She sat on her single bed, the second from the end of the row in Room A, cross-legged in her ankle-length, pale pink nightgown, reading a copy of *The Art of Conversation, Vol. II*. Hailing from a family of persons who took pride in discipline and erudition, Constance's study habits were of an impressive nature, which highly contrasted the habits of Aurora Floyd. In grammar school, Constance had been the head of every subject with the regrettable exception of geography. On her final

examination, she had confused the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers that parenthesized Mesopotamia, causing a fellow student to score two points higher than she. It was a gaffe she would never again make.

Apart from her books and her diligence in the classroom, Miss Trevyllian had taken an interest in the newest resident of Room A. Aurora Floyd spoke little and seemed to care even less. She was indeed capable of learning. That much was clear to Constance. Yet, she had been present at the finishing school for less than a week and already she had been reprimanded for a lack of apposite attention to the teacher and learning material. On the same note, Constance had inadvertently glanced at the final mark on Aurora's paper after her first short examination in Latin. A score that would have disquieted Constance much more so than the misstep of the two Middle Eastern bodies of water had done did not shake its actual recipient in the slightest fashion.

There was something more, something indefinable in words, that intrigued Constance about the girl from London, who had a rare type of beauty that was both dark and electrifying. Who had been that mysterious acquaintance outside of the museum? Why had she come to the finishing school in the first place? It had only been four days since Aurora's arrival, and no student nor teacher that side of the golden gate of Lespard had any doubts as to whether or not she wanted to be there. It was clearly the negative. Constance knew she could never ask her questions aloud, so she watched and waited for Aurora to come to her, seeking solace in this place that would serve as her domicile, however much unwanted, for the next year.

Having seen Edith Pruet follow Aurora into the lavatory, Miss Trevyllian put down her reading material and uncrossed her legs. She hesitated but a minute, and then pursued them.

There were two floors dedicated to the students' residential space. Unlike the lavishly decorated powder room provided for guests and visitors of the school, the girls' lavatories were cheaply lit, rectangular rooms located at either end of the upper hallways. They consisted of three sinks and two showers each with little shelves underneath the sinks for the girls' toothbrushes and towelettes.

Aurora noticed Edith but paid her little attention.

"How nice of your friend to join us at the museum today." Edith stood with her back against the wall, in the small corner to the right of the lavatory doorframe. She, much like James Conyers had been, was like an unwelcome shadow, not belonging to Aurora's person but hovering, following, lurking nonetheless. Unlike James, however, Edith offered not the slightest comfort or connection to Felden Woods.

"Did he disturb you?" Aurora said.

"Only by his words, his smell, and his presence," Edith rejoined, her pointer finger and thumb of each hand played with the split-ends of her auburn hair as if climbing the rungs of a ladder, sliding down, and then, repeating the process.

Aurora said, "Was that him, that odor? I will have to tell him to be more thoughtful next time. Everyone ought make time for bathing."

It was strange, Constance thought. Using the mirror as a sort of medium, Aurora's eyes pierced Edith's, so that her tone did not have to. Aurora pulled her blue-black hair off her shoulders and back and wrapped it in a loose bun at the nape of her neck.

"I saw the way he whispered in your ear."

Aurora did not answer this time. Instead, she wet her washcloth with warm water and began gently wiping it across her pale face. She pressed the cloth over her face as if she shielding

herself from the other girl's pointed words, but when the cloth came down, Aurora looked back in the mirror, her face expressionless, her eyes now almost absent from the conversation altogether.

"We all saw it." Edith said, digging deeper. She peeled herself from her corner, moving forward as if her victim's silence had given her confidence.

She continued, louder, "You are a right *putain*.¹⁰"

"Edith!" Constance Trevyllian's cheeks crimsoned as she gave away her vigilance. Her eyes pleaded with Aurora for forgiveness and dissociation from her classmate. She had come in Aurora's defense, not in advocacy of Edith Pruet.

"A right *putain*, aren't you?" Edith repeated.

Aurora again did not answer. One less perceptive than Constance Trevyllian would have thought she had not even heard the insult, that it had ricocheted off her ears like skittles¹¹ ricochet off one another when hit. To the common outsider, the petty words of Miss Batton and the young "ladies" appeared as trivial as winning or losing a children's game to Aurora. But Constance felt she knew better. She could see the hurt, however minute, in the white face, like a tear in a black window-curtain, the faintest ray of light peaking through, a hint of what may lie behind the otherwise perfectly stitched and opaque covering. The new student, with all her outward antipathy for Paris and for the finishing school, *did* feel.

Aurora walked past Edith and Constance, down the hallway and into Room A. The small bed creaked under her weight until she found that one comfortable niche it offered its occupant. She turned on her side. It had started to rain. The window was barred on the outside like a prison cell, and the soft summer rain dripping between the bars seemed to offer a refreshing drink to a

¹⁰ *Putain* is a foul name for females. One might say the slang term for a female dog in English.

¹¹ Skittles refers to the game from which modern-day bowling originated.

girl thirsting for a change or a way to go back in time, in place, or to bound forward in it, though could she know what damning occurrences lay ahead, she may have not so craved that particular aspect of time-travelling capability. As she looked out, that tantalizing drink was so close and yet, unreachable.

Hannah and Elsie left the Mademoiselles to their nighttime rituals of ointments and creams and soothing cups of lavender tea. The other girls took turns bathing and brushing their teeth and each other's hair. Constance sat on her bed, glancing by the half-minute in the direction of her enigmatic bed neighbor. The room was warm, and Aurora lay atop her covers, her back to the rest of Room A. She did not think of Edith Pruet or her foul mouth. She did not think of cultivating etiquette. She did not think of rockfish or food or her unfilled belly. She did not even dwell on the past or on the happenings of that particular day. Instead, with her soft cheek pressed against the hard pillow, she prayed her father might forgive her as she dreamed, even whilst awake, of the tomorrow she had been promised.

* * *

On the corner, outside the school's gate, stood James Conyers. His hands stuffed in his pockets, he looked upon the golden plaque that proclaimed the school's proud dates of establishment. The rain fell softly on his brown coat, which at first may have been seen as a decent garment, but upon closer inspection, it became tattered and worn. He sniggered reading the description of the "fine, societal women" said to be produced within the walls of the brick edifice. A lady of society? Not this Aurora Floyd, not *his* Aurora Floyd. She had chosen *him*. She had permitted him to know her and her fast affections. Therefore, he knew on which societal tier

her throne belonged, regardless of what sum her father's transactions and investments had mustered. And now, at least for the moment, he and she, both of that same currish tier, resided miles and miles from the house north of the Kentish Woods.¹²

¹² "The house...Kentish Woods" refers to Felden Woods. See Braddon's novel.

Installment IV
“She did not once look back.”

The tomorrow had come, and so had several tomorrows after, and for Aurora, all of those included James Conyers. The seventeen-year-old mind is a puzzling matter; it seems to be always in conflict with itself and with the body’s humors. Reason fights passion. Logos brawl with pathos, one wrestling the other until it is either triumphant or forced to yield.

Aurora looked upon her closest tomorrows with hope and fear. Certainly, she longed to be with the one person who tied her to Felden Woods. In the afternoons, when the girls were released from their group studies to continue the individual practice of their lessons and *savoir-vivre*,¹³ Aurora made her way to the window at the end of Room A, and upon looking out at the light post across the street from the school grounds, she saw his striking figure leaned against the post, anticipating her silhouette in the pane. Day after day, she sneaked out the back door in the kitchen to meet him, careful to be sure that Catherine’s back was turned or perhaps, that the woman had left on some errand pertaining to the last of the day’s victuals. Occasionally, she was careless. She heard scolds and reprimands as she ran to the Lespadian gate, having been tattled on by a classmate or spotted by Warden Batton.

Aurora was, in a sense, grateful for her—what might she call him? Her guardian? Her angel? Her shadow? Dare she call him her love? When he touched her, all that was underneath her outermost layer of skin melted, accumulating into a puddle at her very core, a concoction of bones and tendons and blood and of love and hate and anger. When he spoke confidently of their coming days together, Aurora got lost in fantasy. If one had asked her whether her actions at that particular time were brought about by her nostalgia for home or her dangerously evocative

¹³ *Savoir-vivre* means manners.

fondness for James Conyers, it is doubtful to which she would attribute them. Her loathing for the finishing school, with its daily lot of condescension and distrustful stares, served as a pre-constructed platform for James Conyers's campaign for Aurora's affection and willingness.

Still, for all this, she feared him and his self-propaganda. Each time she looked down at him from her window, she could not decide if she felt more like the prisoner or the guard of some disguised panopticon.¹⁴ She felt watched both inside the walls of the brick edifice and out, as if she were a dubious spy nearly caught in a second act of treason.¹⁵ Her attraction to the ex-stable hand made her anxious as it worked to break down the artificial barricade around her heart. Her father had set out to build that internal wall, protecting her from those loves he deemed strange and unacceptable by sending her to the finishing school in Paris. But she could not deny James's agreeable appearance. Despite what Edith Pruet had said regarding his smells and his tatty presence, Aurora knew when her gaze crossed his person that she looked upon a man, pleasing to all eyes, and even more so to her own.

She recalled their fateful day together a few weeks before, when they had ridden off nearly an hour's distance from her home and its wary occupants. The day was hot. Her stomach was empty for she had scarcely touched her luncheon, but her heart was full as she straddled her brown, majestic horse, content and unafraid. She felt sitting side-straddle betrayed her capabilities.

"Your father does not like me much," James said.

"My father," Aurora said, "does not like that I am keen to sport."

¹⁴ The Panopticon was designed and constructed in the late 18th century. The basic structure is a circular prison with a guardhouse in the center, so that the guard was able to supposedly watch all inmates at all times. The inmates were not able to tell where the guard was looking, so theoretically, this kept the inmates in line.

¹⁵ The first act of treason would be her disobedience to her father and the company she kept with James Conyers that got her sent to the Lespard School in the first place.

She loosened her hold on the reins and arched her back. The afternoon sun shone on her bared neck, nearly reflecting off of its velvety surface as she closed her eyes to its glare, soaking in freedom and nature. Her hair fanned out across the animal's back as if someone had knocked over a pail of black ink onto an oak table.

James slid off his own horse and tied the mare to a tree, letting her graze on the meadow's wildflowers and grasses. They were far out of sight of the Floyd mansion and its stables.

She remembered how he walked over to her, quiet, each step intentional and meticulous, and how his lips were moist when they touched hers as he gently pulled her down. She closed her eyes, those two tools she used most frequently for defense, for inquisition, for judgment. She relied only on feeling.

She remembered the way the grass had felt as she lay down. It was soft and warm through the fabric of her clothing, welcoming her as a settee welcomes a weary traveler or a trough a thirsty horse. Time passed, and as the sun stepped down from its throne, her bed turned back into its true self—a flat plain of grass and dirt. It became stiff and cool, naturally and unnaturally shaded by the trees and the clouds and what had been lost there.

And now, there he was again, but a stone's throw away. The only person who had come between Archibald and Aurora Floyd now stood between her and the gates that enclosed the Lespard School.

James faced her. "It's time you've left, Rora," he said.

Aurora looked at him, seemingly unafraid, though her heart rattled inside her chest like a great ape imprisoned in a common dog's kennel. She could count on one hand the number of times he had called her that. It was something no one else said to her, something that fell from no

one else's lips... *Rora*. Each time he said it she at once felt calm and at ease. But that feeling was fleeting, scurrying away as quickly as it came, as if being chased or haunted by a ghost or reality.

"Come with me," he said. His body was silhouetted by the glow from the lampposts outside the gate, and he asked her again to leave the school-masked prison. "Aurora, come with me."

She had known that it would come to this. When she had felt his warm breath grazing her shoulder outside the Louvre, when his shadow had consumed her space and his memory had intruded her thoughts, she had known. He proffered his world to her, enticing her as if she was his horse and in his actually empty hand, he seemed to hold treasures of grain and apples. *It's time*, he had said. Like a thief in the night, he had come for her. What ought she do? What would her father say? What would she herself have said if her black eyes were not so attached to his at this very moment? She could not deny that since her departure from London she had been praying for an early exodus from the oppressive finishing school. Why could James Conyers, with his patched coat and his hard stare, not be a blessing, even though he was not of the perfect, divine form for which a desperate Grecian of the Antiquity might have dreamt?

Aurora just did not know how far from that form *her* hero was. She looked beyond him to the empty window of Room A. Within the school's premises, she was like a lone Queen of the Night Tulip in a bouquet of Valley Lilies¹⁶—alluring to some, misplaced to others, and mystifying to all. They were all around her, small, delicate, and unassuming in their false purity and poise, yet all the while, they were trying to plant their poison deep within her roots, killing her from the

¹⁶ These are two types of flowers. The first is a flower of deep burgundy, nearly black, and the second (the actual name being Lily of the Valley), refers to small white flowers that are actually toxic.

bottom up. The Lespard body politic was quick to liken her to distasteful debauchery, and she likened them to mind-numbing monotony.

She shifted her dark eyes to him, her face unmoved. If she were to go, to leave, what would happen? She could not know the horrifying consequences her decision would birth. Standing there, a closed-off schoolyard before and the open world behind, she nodded. He took a step toward her and put his arm around her waist, pulling her body closer to his, and Aurora, melting inside, allowed this propinquity.

She went inside. She bowed her head in unified prayer with her classmates for the final time, took her last meal in the dining hall, grabbed nearly nothing of her belongings, save the most important, and left that night, presuming all other eyes to be shut and all minds entranced by the fictitious images of their possessor's dreams.

The following morning, Constance Trevyllian would tell Miss Batton, "She did not once look over her shoulder."

Installment V
James and Aurora Conyers, Paris

The following is a (very uncharacteristic) letter our heroine wrote but did not send to her cousin, Lucy Floyd.

September 15th, 1856

Dear Cousin,

I hope this letter finds you better than it finds its writer. I must be frank with you, and the sooner I get to the point, the better. Yet, I fear what you might think. You are the purer of us, the more tranquil, the more docile, and still, the more fragile, and for that, I worry about disclosing all of what has happened since I have been away.

I nearly cannot bring myself to confess to you in written words what has happened between James Conyers, my father's groom, and myself. When my father sent me away, and oh, but it does seem ages since, he made me promise to never see James again, not even in my uncontrollable dreams and mindless fantasies.

I could not promise him, Lucy. Not then. To give my word on that which I could not control would be like a person who is prone to having mad fits giving her word not to ever have a mad fit. Can we control our internal person? A mad person is mad. A person in love is a person in love. Father held me close, and even as I felt his tears, hot and sure on my shoulder, I could not promise him, for I knew in my heart, and still I wish that I had been right! that James was safe.

The existence of this letter tells you that I was wrong.

To be sure, Lucy, I do not know what I expected. I think I expected to always feel the way I had once felt—a comfort, a mixture of feelings—both excitement and security. When I first met

James he encompassed all of the “other” that I wanted. Do not misread what I am writing, for I falsify that which is doubtlessly true if I said I do not love first and foremost my father. My relationship with him is different than any other I will find whilst on this earth... But James released me like a bird from my father’s well-intended cage, even when I did not realize just how enclosed I had always been. England’s rules have always seemed to me vile and petty and dull. James pressed against me each time I was told that wretched word, “No,” providing just enough force behind me to say, “Yes.” And that is what I said to him.

Yes, it was a comfort like a dog might feel once his master has come home after an extended stay elsewhere. He brought warmth like the beginnings of spring, like a bowl of soup to a dry and scratchy throat. Where is that affection he promised now? Where is that surety?

He seems so disinterested in me now, but I am not at fault. I have not changed. Oh, but perhaps, I am changed! He seems angry all the time. Lucy, lovely and sweet, in my prayers I pray that in yours you remember me...

What a pitiable sight to see Aurora once-Floyd, now-Conyers sitting outside a small Parisian café, pen to paper, madly scribbling, as if she were afraid she would forget something before putting it in writing. Aurora was never one for much weeping, and yet, if ever a time the misfortunes of her young life (though, quite few) had called for but a natural moment of lament and self-pity, it would have been so then. (For the girl did not know anything of her mother—not of the rags from which she was birthed nor of how great a love Archibald had felt for her. She had not known enough of her youngest days to pity herself over them.)

So, today was a day justified in its sadness and distress. Now, she sat alone, on the day of her own birth, neither joyful of the sun nor thankful in the least for the air she breathed. She found the air wretched and foul, and the sun, invasive and either naïve or deceitful in its

auspicious rays. Her black eyes normally so enticing, so full of mystery and of some sort of secret knowledge, now looked like those of an infant swallow having fallen out of the comfort of its own nest, resigned to the ground and to a state of helplessness.

A drunk in the street stumbled up to Aurora and grabbed her upper arm. She jerked.

“Ey. ‘Asn’t I seen you?”

He was so near in proximity that a more seasoned drinker than Aurora Conyers could have distinguished the make and year of his preferred poison. His accent suggested a descent not Parisian, or even French. It was English, perhaps of London, but of the eastern side. Aurora, her arm still within its in stubby confinements, held her pen as if it were a weapon of self-defense, however futile in its actuality.

“I seen you.” He nearly spat in Aurora’s pale face. “I’s seen you in that play wif the boy and the madam in love, and they’re tryin’ to run away together, but they’s ends up dying ‘fore they can.”

“No.” Aurora answered as calmly and reservedly as she could.

“A poor story, ‘swas.” He stood up, still holding Aurora’s appendage hostage. “They’s ends up dying.” He repeated and then, paused. “The ol’ family I’s used to work for took me once, to the theater. ’Swears I saw’s...” The man’s sentence rested in the air, incomplete, while his gaze seemed to pass clean through Aurora, projecting across his field of vision sad memories, of work, of a family who treated him with the kind of love and care only an idealistic or even, foolish laborer prays for. He loosened his grip and stumbled on, leaving Aurora alone again, like a helpless cub too soon separated from its mother.

She looked down at her unfinished letter. The man had startled her so much that her hands had begun to shake. She felt chills snaking up her back as if a thousand small needles were

prodding her all at the same time, reminding her of her uneasiness with the stranger and with James and with all that Paris had become for her. She let her dark hair fall in front of her shoulders. She reread her letter, folded it, and tucked it in her pocket.

This was not the Aurora she knew. It was not the Aurora who had grown at Felden Woods wild like a weed that is disguised as a flower fit for one of those ironic crowns young girls so oft make, both angelic and made of earth. Had it been any other year, the day's celebrations might have included a generous breakfast, enjoyed in the shade of Aurora and Archibald's favorite tree outside the main gardens. There might have been a short, afternoon play put on in her honor by the stable-hands and servants of the Woods. Hours of jollity might the happy company have passed, and presents and more presents would have made their way to Aurora's lap, all wrapped in patterned paper pulled smooth and tight over the boxes of treasures underneath, tied with bows of gold and red ribbon. Her aunt might have prepared Aurora's favorite dessert—small, crescent shaped cookies made with confectioner's sugar and lemon curd. Baked kisses, her aunt called them. Had it been any other year, Aurora, her father, aunt, and cousin might presently have found themselves seated in the parlor after supping, Lucy Floyd at the piano bench, playing something as sweet and cheerful as the person whose fingers swept delicately over the keys.

But this year, her eighteenth year, she was given the unwanted gift of fearful solitude wrapped in a cold resentment. James Conyers had promised her. He had made a vow to her and for that matter, she had made one to him, repudiating the effects and the powers of aging and of sickness and of any other mundane thing to stop up her well of love for him, and he had already betrayed her.

It would be untrue to deny the existence of moments in which one might find James attempting to keep his promise. When he saw horses or affluent men he knew must own horses, he took the time to offer his services. He boasted of his riding talents and his knowledge of the beasts, their temperaments and how they showed affection or distaste for a rider. James told Aurora that she could come to work with him once he found steady employment.

“One day, I shall take you to the races. We will sit so near the track, you’ll feel the breath coming from the horses’ nostrils,” he said.

Still, Aurora indeed felt distant from James as she sat and wrote her thoughts. Something, rather numerous *some things*, wedged between them, and sixty-second daydreams of bliss and togetherness were not enough to drive out whatever those *some things* were. She compared her new marriage to her relationship with her father. The only wedge that had ever situated between father and daughter was in the form of a man on horseback. The table she had begun to draw outside the Louvre weeks before was a table that could not ever exist. It was an illusion. Archibald Floyd loved his Aurora, loved her for the way she reminded him of his first and only wife, loved her despite her unyielding and curious nature, despite her unlikeness to his gentle niece. He had sent Aurora to Paris because of this love, awaiting her return. For him, seeing his daughter set free from her destructive and inquisitive habits, those habits that had constantly tugged her from his well-meaning arms, was worth any temporary separation from her he would have to endure.

Inside the café sat a man with broad shoulders and a short, strong neck. He sat alone, but talked to everyone around him, as if they were all his comrades or childhood friends. He spoke with a fervor that seemed to have no origin other than the fact that he was alive and surrounded by others who were of the same blood-pumping condition. Once he had polished off a few

glasses, his mouth became filthier than the bottom of pair of old balmorals¹⁷ that walked the Parisian streets and parks.

He tapped the counter playfully.

“How about a shandy-gaff,¹⁸ if you would be so kind.”

“Mm?” The barman raised his brows.

He smiled good-naturedly and said again, more loudly, “A bloody shandy-gaff, man! S’all I want. I have just been to South America, carrying only the finest leather back with me, mind you, and do you think on those American shores they drink any of the good stuff we do here? No! I tell you, as rich a company as I have met and kept there, not in a one of the taverns I visited could I find a decent glass of that fine stuff right there.”

The French barman placed his drink in front of him.

The receiver of the glass held it up in gratitude. “Glad to be here. Didn’t think I’d ever make it to this city in my life. Much too fancy for my fancy. Ha!”

“Anything to eat?” The barman said.

“Give me the best thing you’ve got. That’ll do just fine for me. Make it two! M’only in this city for a night before I head back to the coast, so might as well have a nice meal now that I can.” He took a long drink. “And I’ll trust you to do me right. I have been around a time or two, been on these waters and those, and you can trust me, friend, that I have had my fair share of strange dishes. And certainly, I’ve passed a day or two without the pleasure of a good and hearty meal. On one trading trip, from the East Indies to the West, the boys and I toughed two days on just bread and coffee. We’d been given a nasty batch of rum off a man, who seeming honest

¹⁷ Balmorals—a type of shoe Queen Victoria was said to have made popular. She wore them on her walks through the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park.

¹⁸ Shandy-gaff—a drink of ginger ale (or something nonalcoholic) and beer. It is most likely that the French bartender did not know what exactly Samuel Prodder meant by this.

enough, smiled and waved as we left the dock, the bastard,” he shook his head once, “and our ship, having a generous crew, prone to sharing what we had whilst on the water, shared the entire lot and a run of stomach issues dispersed its unfriendly self throughout the ship.”

He turned to survey the rest of the nearly empty café, what he presumed to be his audience for the hour, while he waited for his victuals. His eyes fell on a young woman, sitting on one of the chairs outside, her back to him. Her hair was a waterfall of black and blue, half of it draping over her shoulder and the other half falling down her long back. Soft curls ran through it like the seemingly innocent waves on the sea after an angry storm. She stood and turned to the side.

“My sweet Eliza? Could it—?” He stopped. There was only one thing that averted his being fully convinced that the young woman was his dear little sister back in Liverpool, whom not for four decades had he seen or heard from—it was the young woman’s look, and by that, it is not meant her fashion or which shoe or dress she had decided to put on that day; rather, it was her eyes. Indeed they were dark like those tracing through his family line, but they were missing the charm, the pleasure in life that sparked a light in the otherwise complete darkness. And then, it was in her person, as well. She was elegant, of that he could not deny; yet, she looked stiff and closed-off from the vivacity around her, like a figure made of black marble, impenetrable and either thinking of nothing or thinking of far too much, and thus, she had separated herself from the commoners who passed her by.

“Ah,” the man inside sighed, watching the unknowing doppelganger cross the street and round the corner. “I was almost fooled. Sister would be well over that age by now.”

He took another swig of his drink and turned back to the barman. “I must get back to Liverpool soon.”

Installment VI The Pension and Its Inhabitants

The envelope read *Aurora*, and nothing more. Aurora recognized Archibald's handwriting, faithful in its slant and timing. As always, she said a silent prayer of gratitude when she broke the seal. Her gratitude was not attributed to the tangible contents but to the mere presence of the letter, to the fact that she held in her hand evidence that her father's devotion had not begun to dwindle and that her life in England *had* existed, that she had had a life prior to marrying James Conyers, prior to saying, "I do" and sealing her fate and her lips against his. For this, she was grateful. Her father had done as she requested, and she knew he sent the money happily, or at least, not begrudgingly, when, after all, there would be justification in a grudge or hesitation to help Aurora and her new husband.

It had been months since she had left the Lespard School. Once, she thought she had seen Miss Batton's porkish self, walking as briskly as her tubby legs could manage—probably, thought Aurora, running about for the younger Lespard sister. Another morning, Aurora could have sworn she had passed Catherine, the school's cook, carrying several long, braided loaves of bread from Monsieur Gaston's *boulangerie-pâtisserie*. Aurora slowed down as she passed the bakery and lingered in the smells of baking bread, cinnamon, and butter. Autumn had arrived in Paris. The new season changed the colors of the leaves and the clothing of the people on the street, making the latter thicker and warmer, and the former worthy of the attention of the country's most notable artists. Aurora Floyd's alteration, however, had gone in a different direction—one colder and harsher than its natural counterparts.

She didn't move when the supposed Miss Batton passed by, but had watched the woman, wondering what might have circumstanced if she had remained within the gates of the Protestant

finishing school. No one had come looking for her. This neither concerned nor surprised Aurora. Since she had only stayed at the finishing school for a countable number of days, she did not fear Catherine recognizing her. Most likely, the cook, with her generally unperceiving nature and her hands, prematurely wrinkled from their constant contact with hot, soapy water, full of victuals, did not know the names or faces of any of the mouths she fed. She simply did her job, just as Miss Batton did hers and the Lespard sisters did theirs, or at least, gave the illusion of doing so. Not one of their jobs included watching over an incomprehensible, ill-focused student, who had come into her ladyship training at an age far from the ideal.

Aurora and James had stayed in Paris, in a large house that accommodated seven other persons. There were two other couples in the seven, one of which was a suspicious, Irish¹⁹ duo, whose usually adept French vocabulary was conveniently forgotten whenever there arose a problem, such as the occasional missing item from a fellow tenant's space or the mail with the noticeably re-sealed envelope flaps. The other couple was younger and offered more pleasant company. Their station in life resembled that of Aurora and James, at least from an exterior perspective. They were not a year married and though both appeared to have come from humble beginnings, the young lady's uncle in the south of France had acquired quite the sum of money and, fortuitously for the couple, had no heirs and a fondness for his niece.

The other dwellers included a middle-aged woman and her grandfather, and in the only room on the third floor, an old man by the name of Sergeant Armistead, who rarely ventured from his billet.²⁰ Aurora could not be certain that Sergeant Armistead had once, in actuality, been a sergeant, but she admired the man nonetheless for his fidelity to privacy and quiet. There had

¹⁹ The Victorians had a particular dislike of the Irish. There was much prejudice, pinning the Irish as feminine and in possession of those negative qualities often associated with femininity.

²⁰ A billet refers to nonmilitary living quarters that happen to house soldiers or military personnel.

been an instance years ago when Monsieur Armistead had not opened his door for sixteen days. The landlord, an Englishman by the name of Henley, presumed him dead and nearly had the door broken down until the man quietly left mid-morning of day seventeen and returned with a bottle of milk.

It had been fairly easy to find a place to live, and the living space was comfortable enough. Still, it was no Felden Woods; there was no tree under which Aurora might sit with her tea and her biscuit, drizzled with the sweet honey her aunt and cousin always brought with them in small, glass jars. There was no horse for her to ride whenever she fancied, no beckoning pasture, oceanic and exciting in its vastness. There were no young grasses or wildflowers dancing their jovial dance as the wind rippled across the landscape, no piano melody pacifying her moments of doubt and worry. There was no freedom in Paris. Aurora's days consisted of bricks and stone and Monsieurs and Madames and a sardonic clock, mocking her with its slow tick-tocking.

Though finding a residence had proven manageable, her marriage was proving itself a dissimilar situation. James Conyers, for all his inexplicable allure and adventurous talk, fell short of anything near a Lancelot figure, though, of course, our heroine would be inadequate for the role of Guinevere. Aurora found herself sitting in their small home, though the place did not merit such a title, wondering if she was experiencing what lonely people felt. All her life, Aurora and those who knew her best never dreamt that within her person was the capacity to feel anything like loneliness. She had never claimed to need someone, other than perhaps her father and her horse, and she had never wanted for anything, other than to never be fixed to anyone or any place.

Now, she was legally knotted to a man, who seemed every day to be becoming less and less of just that. At times, he was even monstrous in his nature, like a vampire who bit and sucked at the neck only in the silent shadows of the night where no other beings could hear or see. Aurora suffered from her time with him, but she neither could nor would put this into words. Her eyes had become darker. Her skin, paler. Reader, you must not presume that she was not still the beautiful siren of the previous years and pages; certainly, there would not be a time in Aurora Floyd's existence during which she would not make women envious or turn men's heads and stop their hearts with her mysterious, black stare and divinely sculpted figure. Yet, day after day, she grew wearier and more cynical, thinner and even more reserved than before.

Every two weeks, Aurora's father sent her the same sum of money as the one she held in her palm. She gave three-fourths of the money to James, feigning that she had given him the gift in its entirety, all the while stashing the other fourth in a small decorative box the other young woman of the *pension*²¹ had given her when she and James had first moved in.

"You are far from home, yes?" the young woman asked. "I can tell."

"Yes," Aurora said.

"You come from England? My uncle oft has some business in London, and he has taken me with him several times. It is nice." She paused. "Of course, it is nothing like Paris for me. I could not be anywhere else in the world."

Aurora looked at the young woman, who could not have been but a year or two older than she. She reminded her of Lucy Floyd. She had long yellow hair, smooth as silk and a smile tender and innocent. She never cowered or faltered when Aurora's impenetrable eyes met her own light blues.

²¹ *Pension* is a French word referring to a boardinghouse type of lodging.

“Have this,” the young woman said to Aurora, handing her the small box. “It was a gift to me years ago when I left Toulouse for Paris. It is nice. A good place for jewelry and pretty, little things. Pretty things your husband gives you!” She touched Aurora’s arm, a gesture of such genuine kindness and gaiety, Aurora could not help but to curl the sides of her mouth in a moment of hopeful forgetfulness. But pretty things did not come to her by way of James Conyers. He did not bring her flowers and adornments of gold or lace. That was not his fashion. He brought her stories and promises of a future, mental pictures of what their life would be, riding off, together and yet each aback his or her own beast, careless and always going somewhere, never returning to Paris with its gates and plaques and ideas of proper society.

Yet, this was what Aurora had desired. For this, she had twice crossed those invisible lines of femininity and decency—first, in the Kentish Woods and second, the night she left the Lespard School. What cruel, karmic irony was thrust upon the girl who always got what she wanted.

Aurora hid the money in the box, under a cream-colored handkerchief that could stand to be washed. She was saving it. For what she did not exactly know, but out of instinct, she took an equal amount each time her father’s letter came so that James would not think himself cheated and grow suspect. At a young age, Aurora had mastered the art of secrecy. While perhaps she subconsciously took pride in this feat, it was a trait that would one day encumber her, hindering relationships and instilling a creeping doubt within those who presumed themselves closest to her. (Further down the road of our heroine’s life, certain secrets will be revealed, allegiances tested, and lies brought to truth. Yet, that is for a later time, reader! I must not detour. There is still more to tell of Aurora’s story in Paris).

Aurora's head hurt, mainly in the mornings. She felt nauseated and woke hungry but did not feel like eating. James told her to be happy they were together. He told her that she should at least *act* as if she wanted their marriage to proceed in a harmonious fashion, which was advice that he ought to have considered himself. Aurora heard him curse under his breath. The truth was that the queasiness and strained appetite at their breakfast table had nothing to do with her homesickness or whatever psychological regret or disdain she may have had growing inside her like some invisible force pushing against her body's internal chambers. No, this somatic ailment was a separate thing entirely.

After having the morning meal in their small kitchen together, James often left. Aurora, then, felt a sort of freedom to feel sickly, to moan and grumble about her newfound illness. Sometimes she blamed the city for the way she felt, sometimes James, and on a rare occasion, herself. She was not sure where James went when the door closed behind him. He would come back hours later, well into the afternoon, smelling like alcohol and cigar smoke. Once in a while, Aurora prodded him about his whereabouts, but the answers always came back aloof and vague.

Francine, the strong-willed grisette,²² and her grandfather lived on the same floor as Aurora and James. In the second half of her forties, she was tall and big-boned and not altogether unattractive. Her demeanor indicated little, if any, softness, and unlike some of her neighbors, she was not particularly privy to discretionary living, quietness, or privacy. She served as her grandfather's caretaker. As a milliner's assistant, she earned a meager salary but managed to support the living expenses of both parties with it, nonetheless. Her husband had left her over a decade ago because he was "interested in *finer* things," and Aurora believed her when she said that she did not miss him.

²² A grisette refers to a 17th-18th century workingwoman, often independent and working as an assistant to a seamstress or milliner.

“Miss him?” Francine scoffed. “Does it look like I need him? Does it look like there would be enough room for another person in that minuscule space? Ha! I think not. When we were together, Charles was as thin as a rake, but I highly doubt even *his* small *derrière* could be squeezed in comfortably.” She paused. “Does it look like I am incapable of handling mine and my grandfather’s affairs?” She began to shake her head. “I stopped missing him when I realized I had lost him. If I want a male in my life, I can have one. And I can have another next week, for that matter!”

Francine’s grandfather regularly took a nap after waking early to eat his slightly charred toast and two eggs. Francine had taken to walking across the hall at this time, finding interesting enough company in the young, dark-eyed tenant from England. Aurora seldom locked the door when James left. Maybe she forgot, but more than absentmindedness, this seemed a haughty challenge to Paris. It was as if she were saying, “Do your worst or your best. I have already settled my mind about you.”

“Drinking your hot water again this morning?” Francine entered, finding Aurora Floyd at the table, sitting up with her eyes closed. It was a chilling image, really—the severe posture, the black hair and eyebrows the same, painted perfectly on the white canvas of her face, the eyes shut without the faintest trace of a crease.

“It’s tea,” Aurora said, opening her eyes and relaxing her stance. She rested her elbow on the table and her chin in her open palm, “And it makes me feel better.”

“Mhm,” Francine said, smiling coyly. “How long have you and your husband been married? You’ll have to get to used to answering questions more than once with me.”

“A couple of months,” Aurora said.

“Mmhm. Eventually that will stick.” Francine plopped herself in the chair across the table. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. I just have my father.”

“Just your father, “ Francine said. “Did you know I had two children? Twin girls.” Aurora waited, knowing there was more. “The little sweets passed away before they even reached a year.”

She hadn’t known. From the first day of their acquaintance, the older woman had exuded confidence and control, qualities one might not expect from a divorcee and a mother who lost two children in a single year, or worse and more likely, in a single hour.

“I’m so sorry, Francine,” Aurora said. “I had no idea...”

“Oh, don’t be sorry! That was long ago, and I am not one to dwell in the past. We must always be moving forward. And anyway, they were just sickly little things from the first breath. Besides, it was probably all the more fortunate for them to get to skip this part of living. I don’t know that I was much made to be the mother of two little *girls*. The first thing I did when they were born was to laugh at His cruel joke,” she said, looking skyward. “I think Charles would have made the better mother.”

Aurora sipped her tea.

“I was sick most every day before they were born, at least for a good bit of the early months, waking at the same time each morning, right before the sun made its daily debut.” She watched as Aurora slowly put down her cup.

“Your husband has left again for the day, I see.”

“Yes,” Aurora affirmed. “Again.”

Francine shook her head. The two sat in silence for what seemed like minutes. Aurora could sense her neighbor's stare. She felt it creeping across the table, the same judgmental heat that had been radiating from her classmates outside the museum that day on which James Conyers resurfaced in her life. It merely added to her nausea, another intangible pressure pushing her into a reality she was not ready to accept.

"Well, I must be going." Francine stood up to leave. "You'll tell him tonight?"

Aurora looked at the older woman, standing in the doorway, her shoulder propped smugly against the doorframe. "I'll tell him what?" she said.

Francine turned. It was about the time her grandfather awoke from his morning *somme*²³ and he would be expecting her. She called over her back, "You are foolish to pretend you are so ignorant."

²³ *Somme* is French for a nap.

Installment VII

Lies and Truth Exposed

After Francine had left, Aurora contemplated the worst. She lay on the floor, her left hand across her abdomen, feeling her stomach expand and fall back to normalcy. It was like a wave, cresting and coming back down to a trough. Was this trough higher than it had been a few weeks ago? Did she notice the difference in its height? She thought of writing to Lucy, which reminded her of the letter she still had not sent, tucked in the pages of an old book left behind by the previous residents. The book was written in German, its pages were yellow and brittle, irrelevant except to house the small note.

Yet, what might she say to her cousin? What new developments could she add to the vague plea and desperate confession? She would have to decide between more obscurity and the truth. The truth was so dark that Aurora dared not tread its forests alone, though she had nowhere else to turn and no one in whom she could confide. She could not bring herself to write it all down. Merely thinking about it, letting it swim around in her head like a curious fish timidly exploring the waters around its reef, that was hard enough.

“Oh, Lucy! Lucy!” she screamed aloud.

She felt as if she would be sick. Was it the same nausea as before or was this from somewhere else, somewhere deeper? The few times she had addressed God of late were moments of selfish weakness, anger, and fear. Now, she added to that repertoire. She prayed to God that He had created Francine mad. She prayed this with one breath, and with the next, she was repulsed at herself for wishing the woman’s lunacy. What a horrible curse—lunacy. If only, though, Francine was wrong! If only her insinuations were incorrect. Aurora knew better. Knowing her neighbor even so short a time, she knew that the advice and stories of the past that

burst forth from Francine's mouth might be somewhat convoluted; nonetheless, her words were unfiltered and true. She spoke from experience, the most genuine form of knowledge, a kind of knowledge Aurora had not really known all those years spent sheltered by the awnings of Felden Woods, awnings carefully constructed by Archibald Floyd.

She felt the wooden boards behind her back. Her hair tucked underneath her head, providing a sort of cushion for her heavy thoughts. In that instant, she was both rest and pillow, both tilted head and shoulder, in need of comfort and the comforter. A few strands of hair got caught in one of the cracks on the floor. Aurora felt their tug pulling her back down.

She imagined how she would tell James and what his reaction might be. For a moment, light seemed to fill the shadows on her face. She envisioned James smiling, taking his wife into his arms, and celebrating the life they were going to share together, the challenges and the rewards they would face as young parents. She imagined the conversations that would ensue—if they were to have a little boy or little girl, what would his or her name be, if they would move back to London or just go for visits several times each year. Her lips almost curled pleasantly as she thought of what it might be like to introduce the child to his or her grandfather, great aunt, and angelic second cousin. Could this really be a beautiful thing? A “gift,” as she had oft heard it referenced?

Aurora shuddered to think of the much more feasible reality. The thought that her circumstance was as serious as she feared crashed into her world like a shot fired from the cannon of a concealed adversary. Her heart began to pound. The life growing inside her could be the very thing that would kill her. It was the seed of a vampire. It was her lasting connection to James, more severe than even the verbal vow she made months ago. The room grew dark again. She did not know if the sun had really retreated or if she had just imagined it doing so.

What seemed to the young girl as days later, she heard James Conyers's footsteps outside the door. Days later, and yet still too soon. Aurora heard the door open and close as he walked in.

She remembered when she used to think his presence disarming, and now, she just felt unarmed, unprepared for a battle that had been quietly building, quietly warming and steaming like tea in its kettle, ready to come alive and scream. It was as inevitable and horrific to Aurora as aging. Now that Francine had pointed her in the direction of the truth, she knew that she had no choice but to press on like a foot soldier fighting in the winter, who was already weary from the cold and struggle. She shut her eyes, squeezing them tight so that the black behind her lids couldn't possibly escape. If she could not flee, neither could it.

James found his wife lying on the floor.

"Aurora?" he said. Bending down beside her, his voice suggested sincere worry. Many an occasion, he had seen his wife pale and unreadable. This was different. "Rora, what is this?"

"James," she said, her voice soft. She was frustrated with herself for being afraid.

"Why are you on the floor?" He touched her. Aurora felt the hesitancy in his touch.

"I am comfortable here."

"Well," he said. "I'd like you to get up from the floor." His tone was harsh and had an edge like a pocketknife in an unsteady hand. James did not know what else to say. Aurora thought back to that fateful day outside the Louvre, when she had been made aware of James Conyers's presence in France. *Tomorrow*, he had said with such surety. For months and months, Aurora wrestled with the uncertainty of whom to blame for her current situation. Now, she approached the conclusion that it was herself. She chose to walk the crooked path, albeit she may not have been fully cognizant of just how warped it really was. She had been lured as a senseless pet, chasing the imaginary biscuit supposedly enclosed in its master's fist. She remembered how

intoxicating he had been. His breath grazed the nape of her neck. She had felt it dancing softly along her skin; she melted underneath it, unable to resist its gentle but potent seduction.

On the kitchen floor, Aurora did not feel his breath, but she could smell the faint traces of his choice diversion in it. She opened her eyes and looked through her husband. So much had changed since she had gone with him through the woods, galloping into what she thought was a life of wild freedom. She looked beyond him and into a framed picture of the past that was nothing more than the invention of a young girl's mind.

“Aur—”

“I have something to tell you, James.” Aurora had never interrupted him before. Lucy would have gasped, or perhaps, reacted in an involuntarily action, extending her small hand to try and restrain her cousin, reminding Aurora Floyd of her anatomy and societal condition.

James looked at his wife, vexed. What game was she playing? He stood up fully then, casting a shadow over her, overpowering her with his stature. “What is it?”

Aurora focused her eyes, finally ready to look directly at the opposing force. What slight sunlight that had managed to push through the clouds and into the apartment wrapped its arms around James's body, pinning him in a silhouette.

“I'm sick.” The words came out of her before she even realized what she was saying. Her aim had been honesty, and that is truly how she felt. Her pregnancy was a disease, eating away at her from the inside out. Tempted and tried, she had tasted the forbidden fruit that was James Conyers, been infected by its poison, and now, she lay in her bed, the Cholera slowing her blood,

turning her skin from milky white to blue.²⁴ She felt small and shrunken in, in spite of the physicality of her belly.

“You’re sick?” James said. “I think there is a doctor down the street. No, a few blocks down.”

“I *feel* sick,” Aurora tried again. “I feel sick because I may be with child.”

She could see the alteration in his shadowed expression. His brow raised; his mouth fell open. He stood still over her. Their bodies met in the form of perpendicularity, two vectors who collided at one, exact point, one perfect moment in time, and then continued on their respective trajectories.

Aurora did not know if she needed to repeat her words. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” said James.

“That is why I feel sick,” she said. “I may be.” She did not finish. She thought saying the words once would have released her from the bondage of their severity, but she had been wrong.

“*May*,” James said. “When will you know for sure?”

“I suppose when I go see a doctor,” Aurora said, turning her head. She felt the hardness of the floor on her cheek. It forced her to recognize what was real and what was not. “Francine was telling me that she had felt this way once before, and that was when.”

“Francine?” James said. “Francine told you this? You’ve spoken with her about this?”

“She knew I wasn’t feeling well,” Aurora said.

He bent down slowly, as if he were going to caress the exposed side of her delicate face. She looked vulnerable, almost in the fetal position, like an infant in need of holding. Instead, he rose again, quickly. He could not touch her. He possessed neither the funds nor the sense of

²⁴ Cholera was a commonly feared disease in Victorian England. One of the beliefs was that it could be contracted from eating spoiled fruit.

selflessness necessary to bring into this world another life. He faulted Aurora for not having the wisdom to discern those realities and to keep herself yet pure and empty.

“I do not understand your anger in that, James.” Aurora said. “Francine came over this morning after you left. You are always leaving; it did not take our neighbor long to notice that. Her grandfather naps after taking his breakfast, so she comes to visit with me awhile, and we will have tea or perchance, a small slice of one of her cakes or some hazelnuts, maybe, and I listen to her stories. She’s quite,” Aurora searched for a word, “garrulous, but I enjoy the company.” She felt as if she were letting her husband in on the events of her days, happenings of which he would not have otherwise known. Pointedly, she said these things. She wanted to stab him with her existence, a life that she led when he left her each day to partake in whatever games he played.

Aurora waited for him to say something. When she turned to him, he was looking away.

“May,” he laughed cruelly as he said again her chosen word. “Why don’t you get a little more certain, dear, and then, we shall discuss what is to be done.”

It was when the door closed behind him that the solitary tear slid off the side of Aurora Conyers’s cheek, down the curvature of her neck and fell to the floor. Though no sound was emitted, her heart cried out in agony. She felt the ache in her bones, a gnawing, grinding pain, whittling her down to a figurine of some unrecognizable shape.

“I do not want this,” she whispered, though no one was there to hear. “I never wanted this.”

* * *

James Conyers found himself on the same barstool on which he had sat only hours before. He ignored the bartender when he asked if there were something he wanted. He pushed from his mind what his wife—that vile, imbecile of a creature, that vortex of a woman, black in her demeanor and in her stare—had been so foolish to do. That she would be selfish enough to bring another life into *his* world! She was maddening. She had held back her tears, though he had seen them outlining the cradle of her eyes; nothing else about her looked penitent or remorseful. Her face was as unmoving as a rock sitting in the bed of the Armancon.²⁵

Then, his thoughts shifted. He sat up straighter.

“*Oui?* Can I get you something, sir?” The bartender asked a second time, noticing the movement.

James Conyers had not been so graciously blessed with a brimming bank account as had been Archibald Floyd and then, consequently, his well-born daughter. His life had been run and consumed by other men’s pastures and the creatures that fed on them. But he had planted a seed and fertilized it, and though perhaps, he had not fully realized his enterprise before, now he would assiduously tend to his garden and to his prize flower. Thoughts of his father-in-law’s wealth flooded his mind. He smiled; his mouth stretched wide. The day’s alcohol consumption had rouged his cheeks and the color bled into the upward-turned corners of his lips.

A false sobriety pumped through his bloodstream and with it, a plan to begin, at last, his climb to the aristocratic sun whose light he always wanted to bask in. From Icarus to Helios²⁶ he would brilliantly evolve! He wanted Aurora to write a letter to her father immediately to share *la*

²⁵ Armancon River in the Burgundy region of France.

²⁶ Icarus was the son of the Athenian craftsman Daedalus, who had warned Icarus not to fly too near the sun or his wings of wax would melt. Icarus did not listen, according to Greek mythology. Helios is the Greek god of the sun.

bonne nouvelle.²⁷ Perhaps, the news would be better delivered in person! Oh, the look in dear Archibald Floyd's face to see his ex-stable hand beside his daughter, planning a life with her and their *child*. He lingered in this reverie a bit longer as he crossed the street, returning to the large house.

Aurora was standing in the bedroom, looking into the small, ovular wall mirror. In the mornings she gazed absent-mindedly at her fair reflection, her index finger and thumb pinching together to rose her cheeks. The pinkness offered a false sense of life and warmth.

Now, her back to her the doorframe, she saw the reflected image of James Conyers. She wasn't touching her face or her hair. She was just staring blankly at the poor mirror's contents.

"Aurora!" He looked at her with fire in his eyes, but this fire was a different kind than the one that had been in his eyes earlier. The flames suggested fraudulence and strategy. Aurora's eyes, in comparison, were drained and black. They suggested a sense of surrender, and this picture of our heroine slowly waving a white flag, fully succumbing to the dominance of James Conyers, is, dear reader, a picture I am sad to have to paint.

He kissed her on the lips, hard, and then, gripping her shoulders he pulled her away from his body. The smile on his face was not the one Aurora had pictured when she naively tried to convince herself of the potential beauty of her current state. It was as she feared. Their unborn child was the anchor that would keep her bound to this man, this place. She was like the *Lady of the Lake*,²⁸ set forth from England, from her home, never to return, or at least, never to return as the Aurora Floyd who had left but one year ago.

²⁷ *La bonne nouvelle* is French for "the good news."

²⁸ *Lady of the Lake* was a ship bound from England in late spring of 1811. She hit an iceberg and sank. Over 200 persons perished.

Installment VIII More “Tomorrows”

Aurora told James that she would go to the doctor to “make certain her condition.” His intention was that she go that afternoon. Aurora managed to convince him that tomorrow morning would be best. So that he would not feel obliged to accompany her, she told him that she knew the location of the physician’s office he had spoken of. She did not want James there when she was given the fateful affirmative or the much less likely negative news. It distressed her to think of seeing his face at that moment, of feeling like she ought to play the role of elated wife, faithful and sated that she would please her husband with a child. She imagined the force of an unseen pressure to act out a love like that of Desdemona, who had shown devotion and trust to her husband even when in his stare she could see anger, hurt, and the corrupted nature of the moor’s soul.²⁹

“I will just go in the morning,” she said. “It will be good for me to walk.”

The night was long and restless. Aurora spent the hours counting the minutes, almost hearing them trickle by as if they were water droplets falling from a leaky faucet. James had kissed her once more before turning on his side to sleep. To accuse those kisses of emptiness would be dishonest. For, they were not empty. They were not void of feeling or emotion; rather, they were overflowing with perilous passion. His lips were wet, engrossing hers. She felt as if she were suffocating, or rather, drowning. When he kissed her, he held her face tenderly at first, stroking her soft cheeks, but his hands seemed to callous the longer he touched her. The fingers of his right hand came under her chin and lifted it up, baring her breakable, swan-like neck.

²⁹ Taken from *Othello*, Desdemona is the devoted and almost too innocent wife of Othello. Othello, being deceived by his own eyes and the manipulative words of Iago, believes his wife is unfaithful to him. He strangles her in their bed. Desdemona never falters, even then, in the love she has for the man she married.

The young woman in the pension who had given Aurora the quaint jewelry box described kisses from her new husband as small, whispered confessions of how much he loved her. She told Aurora that it was as if each time he kissed her, he wanted to recite to her the three words of the lover's promise, *I and love and you*, over and over again but in a new, hitherto unheard of language. Her body felt delightfully full with feeling and emotion.

Aurora, however, did not wholly welcome her husband's renewed passion. There must be some point to all of this. But, what? Unsure of his motives, she felt a shudder deep in her bones. Her fear was multifaceted. She feared the uncertainty that crept into all areas of her life. She feared the mornings, when the dawn's tranquility tricked her, when its light shone a soft pink through her closed eyelids, whispering, "Wake up, wake up, join me." She hated its mockery. She hated how her fear had taken the bird's joyous song and turned it into sardonic laughter. More than anything, though, she feared her feelings toward James Conyers; his hands awakened memories of a more innocent time, well before Paris. His handsomeness allowed him to remain not fully tainted in Aurora's mind. It allowed him clemency. Underneath the stench of the bar, she could almost smell grass and wildflowers and dirt, a mixture of fragrances that aroused Aurora and took her back to a state of satisfaction and carelessness. In her mind she was almost there, back on the floor of the Kentish Woods.

Still, James Conyers was not *loving* his wife in his actions; he was hurting her. Though never as blameless and as sweet as her aunt or cousin, Aurora was ignorant of a man's capability to devise a plan in which his wife and unborn child would be tools for a scheme of such selfishness. Aside from the portion of her father's gift she kept hidden, she did not think of money. She did not think of her own room in England, filled with her lovely things, her bed, and the window that overlooked the acres of the Kentish Woods, serving as a portal to another world

entirely. Instead, she thought of how it would wrench Archibald Floyd's heart to see his daughter's face now. With each hour, distress carved lines across her forehead and on either side of her mouth. Woe's hired hand painted under and around her eyes with brushes dipped in purple wine. Aurora was still undeniably beautiful. Each time she left the boardinghouse, men and women could not help but notice her. But she could tell the difference in her face, and she knew if her father could see her, his heart would ache.

The next day Aurora walked along the sidewalk, wandering in the direction of the physician's. A ragged woman sat on a street corner with her knobby hands tightly clutching a shawl that hugged her shoulders. Beggars did not warrant sympathy in Paris. They were seen as *lazzarones*,³⁰ too miserable and forlorn in their appearance and nature that they were not even worthy of being considered *citoyens de Paris*.

She had once heard a man say something, presumably foul, to a beggar outside of a café one early afternoon. Aurora could not tell the age of the *monsieur*, but he exuded wealth and status. She watched as he spat in the direction of the beggar, and then, with miniscule beads of sprayed spit still glistening in his black moustache, he strode towards the bank or his office or perhaps, to the large house of a young, voluptuous mistress.

Aurora almost said to the poor vagrant, "I have nothing left to give you."

The office itself was tall and thin, so thin it seemed to Aurora that the doctor or whoever paid the tenant could not afford an entire, properly sized space, so one was split vertically in half and wedged in between two standard quarters. The plaque on the outside of the wooden door read:

³⁰ Lazzarone refers to a person of the absolute lowest class.

Private Office
M. Jacques Clément Chevalier, M.D.
Combined Practices of Medicine and Midwifery

Aurora stood outside, dithering, her hand resting on her thumping chest. The doorknob looked cold to the touch. There were no windows, only the heavy door and its hanging plaque.

She gasped as the knob shook. Aurora walked a few paces past the building, stopped and turned, watching in her peripheral vision as a woman closed the door behind her. She was petite with short, mousy brown hair. Aurora saw through her yellow dress the distention of her stomach, much rounder and fuller than her own. Her lips were a natural pink, and her face looked as if someone were holding a candle beneath her chin. A soft light rested on her high cheekbones, like the day's earliest sunlight on a still lake. She smiled and tilted her head down bashfully as she passed Aurora.

Aurora did not return the cordial gesture. She let the woman pass and then walked back down to the door, her arms at her sides. She felt the weight of them as they hung limp halfway down the length of her thighs. They were too heavy to lift. She looked at the door, entranced by its opacity. She was unable to see anything beyond the wooden barrier in front of her. She could not see a man in a white coat or nurses flitting about or patients waiting with their hands clasped in their laps, or perhaps, reading their copies of *Le Siècle*.³¹ Aurora only knew that when she closed the door behind her, exiting just as the woman had done but a minute ago, she would know once and for all the truth.

She could not see her next steps or any part of her future. It all seemed to her as impenetrable as a brick wall or a wooden door. Did she even want to know what Chevalier

³¹ Newspaper in France that ran from 1836-1932. Originally, it supported absolute monarchism, but its focus changed with the end of the July Monarchy.

would say? Aurora could easily tell James that it was too early to have any certitude. That Dr. Chevalier had told her to return in a week or two. James's knowledge on the subject of pregnancy was certainly lacking enough for him to believe anything she reported.

She needed time and a clear space. She needed the pasture of Felden Woods, as it was before she had contaminated its freshness and purity with her adolescent and brash act of defiance.

Aurora's arms never rose. She slowly walked back the way she had come, passing once more the lonely beggar on the corner.

* * *

Nearly a week had gone by. At times, mainly when she and James were in the same vicinity, the days stretched to their elasticity; at other times, though, it was as if someone had placed the whole concept of time on the back of a runaway horse, shot a Lancaster³² in the air, and watched the wild beast disappear. Aurora Conyers felt like she had barely taken ten breaths before morning was gone and then, it was evening, and her husband had returned. He was frustrated that another day escaped without any affirmation on the pregnancy.

Aurora continued to tell him that the waiting would last for just a little longer. She feigned wellness in the mornings, trying to convince not only James but also herself of the possibility that it had all been a mistake, a paranoid thought planted by the words of a loquacious neighbor.

³² This simply refers to a Lancaster pistol.

One morning, she awoke to a knocking on her door. James was not in the bed beside her. The sheets, thin and of a hue somewhere in between beige and cream, were tousled and falling off his side of the bed. Aurora's blanket lay rumpled by her feet. It looked as if it had been kicked and beaten to lifelessness after an exhausting fight. Her hair felt matted and hard, dried from a night of turning and perspiring, and heat radiated from her skin; she felt feverish and tired, worn out from the physical altercation with her bedding sometime before.

The knocking continued.

Aurora opened the door sheepishly. Having yet to change out of her bedclothes, she was not even certain of the time. Was it morning? Was it night? Where was James, and how long had she been alone?

"Mmm... And good afternoon to you, too!" Francine, wide-eyed, stepped through the half-opened doorway.

"Good afternoon?" Aurora ran barefoot to the window, letting the movement on the street and the locality of the sun confirm the hour.

"Yes, *afternoon*," Francine said. "My grandfather has an appointment today, and the doctor is making his way over now, I presume. I came by to see if it would meet your fancy to join me for a cup of tea at that little café just around the corner or so. I used to enjoy the afternoons there. If one is fortunate enough, she might even get to pose, unknowingly, for one of the city's artistes. I have oft seen a lady or man, palette and brush in hand, stealing an hour at that cafe and solidifying it to hang in some musée."

Aurora, still standing by the window, turned.

Francine continued, laughing good-naturedly, “Of course, you will have to run a brush through your hair and put yourself together if we are to unintentionally have our portraits done. You are a sight this morning, Madame Conyers!”

“I would love some tea,” Aurora said, “I—I will just be a moment.” Her feet pattered against the wooden floor as she hurried back into the bedroom. She threw blouses and bodices onto bed and floor. She pulled her petticoat around her waist and chose a blue, satin blouse. A glance at her reflection distracted her. She began patting and smoothing her hair with her palms, sweeping strays and wisps from her face, and running her fingers through its tangled, black web.

Francine came in a few minutes after, to find a half-dressed Aurora, still trying to gather herself. She shook her head slowly and let out a long, audibly breath.

“Dear, you are a mess.” She took the engraved brush from the small table beside the unmade bed. Aurora let the Frenchwoman comb through her hair, tugging at its knots neither gently nor harshly.

“Well you have missed regular breakfast, but I imagine you are hungry all the same.”

“Only a little,” Aurora said.

“Well, you must try one of their spiced pastries,” Francine said. “It has been far too long since I have indulged in one, so I shall just have to join you.”

“A pastry sounds lovely.”

“How are you feeling?” Francine said after a time. She was still wrestling with the girl’s mane, having exchanged the brush for her hands. Crossing one-third of Aurora’s hair over another, Francine wet her fingers so that once finished, the braid would be smooth and perfectly held together. Calculated and fluid, her fingers’ movements made it look as if she were playing

an instrument, one that emitted a melody quiet and ambiguous so as to make half the audience smile whilst the other half cried.

“I am all right,” Aurora said. She and Francine both knew the words were false. Nonetheless, she could not contain her chortle as she spoke again, “I must have put up quite a fight last night. I even frightened James off!”

* * *

James returned more often than before. Sometimes, he would come and go four or five times before settling in, or out, for the night. When he came back this day, he found the small apartment empty. He hoped for the sake of his financial endeavor, if one could even name it so, that his wife’s absence meant she had ventured once more to the physician’s. He tried to sit, but his knees would not stay angled for long. He paced, anxious to ignite his plan, to send a letter to Archibald Floyd, announcing the anticipated arrival of Little Boy or Little Girl Conyers. His original thought had been to have Aurora write the letter. He would linger over her hunched figure as she scribbled away, reading her words, caring, not of their authenticity or lack thereof, but only of the aged face and the pale heart that received the message.

He changed his mind, however. *He* would write to Felden Woods. The letter’s contents already occupied his mind.

July 1857

Mr. Archibald Floyd,

It is with great pleasure that I write to you today. Aurora and I are exultant to send to London news of our most recent blessing: Aurora is with child. We are unable to contain our joy

and therefore, did not wish to delay in reporting this. I am not sure when we will next see you face to face. I expect it should be soon, but in case not, I am writing to you now. As I have already stated, our ecstasy is nearly unbearable, and we wanted you to share in this overpowering emotion . . .

James snickered. Truly, he wanted Archibald to feel an unbearable heaviness. Remembering, first, the man's aversion and distrust as he sent his young stable hand so ungraciously away and second, his despondency and loneliness as he sent his daughter off to France, James continued his imaginary letter-writing.

In the meantime, however, as we make the necessary preparations for the child's arrival, there will be certain items we will need to obtain, certain changes to be made in terms of living arrangements. I am sure you understand, as you yourself helped bring my wife into this world...

He wanted to depict the world as "forsaken" and "twisted." He wanted Archibald Floyd to taste the irony and the mockery dripping from the page like ink on the tip of his son-in-law's pen. All he needed was the doctor's confirmation.

Aurora came in, nearly running into James, who had made his way to the door for his precedential leave. Her sudden presence disrupted his thoughts.

"Oh!" Aurora said. Both were startled; their bodies almost collided, like the collision between God and man, only a collision of this sort does not result in a savior, in the embodiment of perfection. From it, emerges two distinct individuals, one nailed to his cross, and the other nailed to hers. They do not rise from the dead, but rather are locked forever in their respective tombs. Had their flesh touched, it would have been the most candid and authentic encounter the two had had in weeks.

“Where have you been?” His arm rested on the wall beside the doorframe. Aurora could see the muscles in it—taut, like one of those wires she had seen people hang their clothes on. She could smell him. How different he smelled from when she first met him! He had smelled of spontaneity and freedom, horses, and grass in the heavy sunlight that follows a sudden, summer rainfall. It was a fresh and genuine scent, one that hid nothing, and she had welcomed it like the smell of fresh bread baking in the morning. Now, he smelled of drink and Parisian crowds and another scent Aurora could not quite place.

“Francine and I went to tea,” she finally said.

“When will you visit the doctor again, Aurora?” James said. “When will you know?” Their bodies still close, he searched her face for something. He did not know what he expected or even wanted to find. She aggravated him with her cool beauty and her casual answer to his initial question.

Averting her eyes, Aurora moved out of his path, coiling around the side of his fixed, strong figure. She, then, spoke to him over her left shoulder, mustering what energy she had left to simulate an easy tone.

“I will know tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” His eyebrows rose, forcing wrinkles on his otherwise smooth forehead. Despite all the days he had spent plotting and scheming and lusting over the prospect of having Archibald Floyd’s money in his own pocket, he had begun to grow anxious of its actuality.

He said again, “Tomorrow?”

She turned and forced a smile “Yes,” she said. “I’m going to retire for a while now.” Aurora returned to the place where she had already spent most of her day.

Installment IX
“There is no baby?”

For all of the indirect warnings, her wary intuition, her learning of alcohol’s seduction and power over man, Aurora could never have anticipated how the following evening would culminate.

James Conyers had worked himself into a panic at the bar. His doubts had been growing, fermenting as the days, the hours, the minutes went by, and he was still just as far from Archibald Floyd’s banknotes as he had been a year ago. He had thought his scheme infallible. The child’s growing presence would be his direct line to the wealth residing at Felden Woods, would be the seed from which would grow James’ own prosperity. He would own horses—ten, no, twenty of them—and more land than Archibald himself had ever possessed. The size of his apartment in Paris would be risible in comparison to the size of his future estate. Citizens of a far lesser status than he would ride or pass by it in gaping stares; stories of his extravagance and luxuries would jump from mouth to mouth and city to city.

For the most part, avarice and glasses of alcohol had kept these thoughts in constant circulation. At some point, though, the adrenaline’s initial effects had worn off, and his confidence dwindled. The fear that something was not right stormed to the front of his brain like an angry tumor awoken from its latency. This night, the rum disillusioned him fully. The liquid first singed, and then chilled his throat, the same feeling that occurs when one submerges himself in a bathtub of scalding water in the dead of winter, the water so hot that the body seems to melt and stiffen at the same instant.

“Liar,” he murmured.

“Uhm?” The man sitting two seats down grunted.

“My wife is a liar.”

“The whole lot of them are,” the man said. With his elbows on the bar top, he shook his head and tilted his glass back. He turned to face James and slurred, “She told me once, my *petite amie*, that I spent too much of my time *bourré*, that I had a—” a pause while he cleared his throat “—a ‘deadly camaraderie with the bottle,’ and I told her that it is poison not for killing but for coping, and she told me another time, I spent too much of my money on the wrong things. Who,” his eyes lost focus and his fingers hugged his glass affectionately, “Who is calling us wrong or right or true or false or the Christian best or the damned worst? My money is mine, and I have spent quite the figure of francs on her and *that* is a poison of a different trade.”

James was not entirely certain what the man was saying, but he figured that he more or less agreed with him. He raised his glass, saluting the man and his words of some kind of wisdom.

The man grunted again, this time at the bartender. “I’ll buy him another,” he said. “Uhm, and top me off, as well.”

“*Oui.*”

James took the drink and the company. “I’ve got the poison, too,” he said.

“Worse things have ended men,” said the other.

James, swallowing another swig of his rum, felt his tongue relax fully as words seemed to roll out of his mouth and onto the bar. “She told me,” he said, “that she was going to be the mother of my child.”

“And she is not?”

“I think not.”

“Uhm.” The man cleared his throat again.

“A child!” James laughed a drunken laugh. Mostly, he was seen as a handsome man, and laughter only increased his attractiveness, but being more than just slightly intoxicated, his chin rested too close to his neck, and his head rocked back and forth lazily. “Aurora *said* she was going to have a child, but that she had to wait to hear the verdict from the doctor.”

“Verdict. Sounds like a trial,” the man said.

James pointed a lax index finger at him. “It is *quite* the trial.” He leaned back so far the bartender feared his falling. “It has been days!”

“Days!” The man echoed in commiseration.

“Near to a week, Monsieur, and still, there is no definite answer. And all the while his money sits idly in his pocket in London, his perfectly stitched pocket in London, and I am to wait patiently for confirmation on Aurora’s,” he paused, “*condition*.”

The man mumbled something unintelligible, but James ignored him.

“I am his *son* now!” His tone was layered in contradiction, as if he smelled both the triumphant sweat of conquest, pleasing in its connotation, and the stench of a dog that had chosen to catch his forty winks in a puddle of week-old stagnant water. The balding, middle-aged man sitting not ten feet from the obstreperous duo looked over his spectacles, his thick eyebrows furrowed. Unappreciative of the disturbance, he folded his newspaper and took his half-empty drink to a farther table.

“And he has the gall to send me such a meager sum every fortnight. Well, that is to change, Monsieur,” James said. “*That* is to...” He interrupted himself, shaking his head and bringing the rim of his glass to his lips. He finished the remainder of his drink then continued. “If Aurora were to have my son or—or my daughter, I would be rich and satisfied and—and—and rich.” Listeners in, in optimistic naivety, may have thought he was talking about the riches and

the satisfaction of becoming a father, of carrying his name to another generation, of nourishing and properly educating another person on the fashions and mannerisms of society.

He leaned over, his elbows digging into the counter's surface. "But if she is not, then, it is for naught that I have a plan. My vision, my success, it all exists in some alternate, mad, universe."

The man laughed, not understanding. "You *are* a mad!"³³

"She has made me so."

"They all do," he said.

"She is pulling me as if by strings."

"A puppeteer!"

"She'll be at it till the dizzy-age."³⁴ James said.

"*Bon sang!*" The man hiccupped. "She is making a *crétin* of you."

James's eyes narrowed. "She is making a cretin of me." His voice sounded like thunder in the infancy of a storm, rolling miles and miles away, but nonetheless heard and imminent.

A group of sailors walked in as he stood to leave. His first steps unsteady, James jostled a few of the bunch. The first of the group smelled of sweat and fish, which mixed with James' own reek of rum and arousal.

"A shandy-gaff for your prodigal customer!" The sailor yelled. Cheers from the rowdy and malodorous others followed James into the street.

* * *

³³ A mad is the shortened version of a society maddist, who is someone not born into society, but one who desperately works to be an accepted part of it.

³⁴ Dizzy-age is a Victorian term referring to old age, particularly in reference to women.

It was after dinner when he stumbled home. The door closed behind him. Clumsily, he leaned against the wall, scraping the pieces where the white paint chipped. Flakes of wallpaper fell willingly to the floor by his feet, tired of holding on to a surface that was not holding back.

When he spoke, his voice was cold. “Liar.”

Aurora, already in her nightclothes, was in the bedroom. She thought she had heard James come in, but when, after some moments, he had neither entered nor made another sound, she became fearful.

“James?” She said. She had never before feared the likelihood of nightly burglars, but then again, much had changed since she had left Felden Woods. The world tended to look different, dangerous outside the limits of her London home.

Tonight, she was uneasy. Her steps to the kitchen were slow and careful.

“James?” She said again, recognizing the outline of his body leaning near the door. When he shifted his stance, the moonlight’s silver glow illuminated a sliver of his face. His outline was the only part of him Aurora recognized. His eyes were far away, lost in a place outside of this world’s dimensions; James Conyers was not in front of her. He was not in Paris, not in Europe.

“Is everything all right?” Her question, soft almost to the point of inaudibility, was rhetorical. Nothing had been right in months.

“There is no baby,” he said.

She waited for him to say more. When he did not, she said, “I don’t understand.”

“There—” He stopped, inhaling harshly through the small space between the rows of his teeth. “There is no baby?” He looked back at the wall, as if asking for its input in the matter, as if behind the peeling wallpaper, there would be the answer for which he had been looking.

“There is,” Aurora whispered.

“No,” he said, convinced. “There is no baby, Aurora.” With his shoulder, he pushed himself off the wall and moved toward her.

“I never said that,” Aurora said.

James hit the side of his clenched fist on the table.

“James, I never said there isn’t a baby!” She said again, pleading.

“Of course there’s not!” Reaching her, James grabbed her wrist, his fingers overlapping his thumb. White and fragile, her wrist was caught in a literal handcuff without any place for the turn of a key. Aurora felt small and helpless. Again, she felt she had never seen the man she was looking at. There had been flashes of him in recent times, brief moments that had caused her to worry about her well being, but never before had she been exposed to the true villainy that had been haunting their small portion of the boardinghouse.

“You are hurting me, James.” His name even sounded foreign to her.

He squeezed harder, pulling her closer to him and then whipping her away again, as if expecting to hear a *snap!* If one had been playing music, the two would have looked like they were beginning rehearsals for an up-and-coming romantic ballet. Aurora could have been Marie Taglioni or perhaps, even a passionate Fanny Tessler, with James as Jules-Joseph Perrot.³⁵ *And one, two, three, pointe. One, two, three, pointe.*

“Why are you doing this?” she screamed. “Stop it, James, stop it!”

“*Why?*” He shouted. Suddenly, he threw her. Her slender frame hit the floor. Bones thudded against wood. The charm bracelet Aurora wore on her wrist broke off into little silver

³⁵ Taglioni, Tessler, and Perrot were all highly acclaimed dancers in the romantic ballets of the 19th century. Tessler was known as fiery and passionate in her dancing, and interestingly enough, was in constant competition with Taglioni.

pieces. The soft ringing of the pieces as they met the floor and rolled down its cracks was like the bells in an orchestra playing something subdued and sweet for the dancers.

She breathed. *One, two, three, pointe.* Feeling her abdomen instinctively, she whispered, “No.” She could almost hear the small life inside her gasping, its unformed ribs broken, its fragile heart failing. Had she wanted the child after all?

James pulled her up only to throw her down again. In his inebriation, he felt strong, powerful, and she was weak and weightless but for the sound of her body hitting the floorboard. The back of his hand met her cheek with a sound like that of the beginning of applause. His expression was cruel, something in between snarl and smile.

Clutching her belly, small but yet still full, she rose shakily to her knees. Blood trapped underneath her skin began to bracelet her wrist in purple rings, an ironic token from her husband to replace the broken gift from Lucy. Aurora realized *this* was the gift for which she had been wishing and praying. James had cried that there was no child. How wrong his accusation had been at the time.

She stood and stepped closer to him, challenging her own nerves just as much as she was challenging his. Hot breath puffed out of his open mouth; he was an animal feeding on his dying prey. Yet, he did not know his prey, gentle as a lamb, cunning as a fox, was not only accepting this brutality, she was welcoming it. Tempted to stretch her arms away from their sockets as if expecting to feel iron nails pierce her hands, she closed her eyes and let a piece of her die, taking a piece of James Conyers with it.

It was a performance worthy of the stage at the Adelphi.³⁶ She allowed several more blows, endured the pushing and the shoving, pretending the wall and the floor were cushioned

³⁶ Adelphi Theater in West London.

with goose feathers, and after one hit and before the next she had a moment to rest and to dream of another time and another place, a Heaven-like place where she would be reunited with her lost child, finally getting the chance to meet him or her and to apologize for everything that happened in the brief time they were one.

When the slaughter ended, James stood over her, breathless. Aurora could not look into his eyes. She was neither Marie nor Fanny, but Clara Webster,³⁷ a flower precious and delicate, snipped while still budding. She crawled on her hands and her knees into the corner of the bedroom, huddling and shivering like she imagined the homeless must do in lonely alleys on cold nights.

“I will have your father’s money, Aurora,” he called from the other room. “I will.”

She heard the door close behind him. The truth, at last, struck Aurora. She propped her aching head against the side of the small table beside the empty bed and dreamed of her Heaven.

* * *

James had not returned that night. Aurora knocked on Francine’s door the next morning, her face still wet, splotchy, and striped with tears. As if a painter years ago had neglected to come back to finish his job of painting a white house red, blood had dried on her skin and looked now like chips of paint of a color between carmine and damson.

Aurora heard a voice she assumed belonged to Francine’s grandfather.

“Uh? *Qi est lá?*”

³⁷ Clara Webster was supposed to be England’s prodigy in terms of romantic ballerinas. Tragically, Webster died at a young age when her costume caught fire during a performance.

“*La voisine,*” Francine called over her shoulder. Her mouth hung ajar as she ran her eyes over Aurora’s face and neck.

“Uh?”

“*La voisine!*”

Hurt and afraid, Aurora now felt foolish, too, for having run next door as if the woman who answered her knock would offer her a something so close to a mother’s love Aurora would understand that maternal bond she had never felt with her own mother. Francine was not her mother; she was a *voisine*, a neighbor, a door down the hall just on the same landing in a large house. Aurora remembered this, but she was desperate for companionship.

Aurora had never acknowledged the extent of her loneliness and her fear. She called out as if this woman were her god.

“Oh, Francine!” She said. Francine pulled the girl into her arms and shut the door.

Installment X

Epilogue

Aurora had not told Archibald about the baby. She had sent no letter to Lucy, no word to her aunt. To them, the pieces of James and Aurora Conyers never formed together with the potentiality of another human life. And though the rum had muddled in his mind the events of that tumultuous night, James, too, thought it had all been a mistake, that Aurora never had been carrying his child or anyone's, for that matter. It had been wishful thinking, perpetuated by uncertainty and hunger for a life of wealth from which he had always been excluded.

It pains me to write how wrong he was. There had indeed been a child, one of which no one would whisper, no one would hear, no one would ask. And what became of him or her was what becomes of all children lost in the life that exists before this one. It is an existence forever innocent and groundless, with feet still white and soft, having never touched this earth's soiled floor. Somewhere "out there," above the mountains' crowns and highest cluster of clouds, Aurora was convinced there was a place where the unborn children all danced and waited to meet their brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers. She never wanted to share with anyone the way she pictured this perfect place, for she did not think her heart capable of hearing she were wrong.

And she would not have to. Only one other person besides Aurora Conyers knew the truth and that is how everything would stay. Although Aurora despised the thought of lying to her family, particularly her father, she knew there was no other option. The truth would hurt him too much.

Francine had walked with Aurora to the doctor's office, the same building Aurora had been unable to enter before. She waited for her young neighbor for hours in the small space

reserved for patients and family members. Absentmindedly glancing at the newspaper headlines—**LABOR DISTURBANCE CONTINUES, LES ÉGOUTS DE PARIS—CONSTRUCTION ANTICIPATED, BUSINESS TYCOON BUYS SIXTH COMPANY**—she surveyed the others as they coughed and cleared their throats. They fidgeted in the stiff, cream-colored chairs, reading or pretending to read so as to keep from staring at other patients or to avoid questions about what brought them in to see Dr. Chevalier.

When, at last, they left the office, Aurora felt emptier than she had in months. She felt incomplete, missing a piece of her make-up, a piece of a size and shape unknown. Attempting to fill it would be strenuous and futile. As she and Francine walked in silence back to the pension, Francine instinctively grabbed Aurora's hand and pulled her closer, as if the former were leading the two in a partner dance. What a different performance than Aurora and James' the other night! The two women waltzed down the sidewalk, passing clothing shops, offices, and the small café they had treated themselves to on occasion. Outside the familiar venue, an elderly *fleuriste* held small bouquets of sea hollies, some of which were so startling in their blue they appeared inauthentic. Francine mentioned that it might not be too late for tea or a shared treat.

But Aurora was silent, unable to utter a sound; She could easily have been hired to stand coffin-side at the funeral of a stranger, like a statue in black, wordlessly mourning some soul she had never know.³⁸ She wondered what a different place her world would be without sound. What if she had been mute or deaf? What if she had been blind? Then, she never would never have seen the beauty of the fields behind her home, never have seen the way the horses' manes whipped through the air like weapons of Olympus, never have seen the way James Conyers looked with his sun-kissed complexion and the adventurous romance he offered in his very

³⁸ At this time, it was a common practice to hire a "mute" for funerals, whose job was to stand beside the coffin and mourn for the deceased person.

nature, the way he looked at her, as if she were a goddess, created only for his eyes and his hands.

Aurora had been thankful for the silent companionship of Francine that day, for the presence of another being so close to her, yet not asking the questions she never wanted to answer. They just walked along, their footsteps tapping the pavement at the same time, and then, briefly, Aurora had not felt entirely alone.

James Conyers' ultimate desire for her father's money had pierced her heart more than she cared to admit. She knew that he *had* loved her, he must have. That day in London when she rode off with him, the wind catching her black hair, painting waves in the air with it as she cantered by, the sunlight hitting the soft edges of her long body, shadows forming underneath her highlighted curves; he must have loved her.

But when Aurora told Francine that she was leaving, the older woman said, "It's all the better. I've seen him out and about with a woman, who is..." Her hands moved like turning wheels, as if the word she was looking for would suddenly be stirred up in the air, "Mm... *vulgaire*, if I were to be frank. I didn't want to add to your troubles. Things have been pretty pitiful enough for you as it is, girl."

James was in deep sleep when she finally left. The two had not spoken since the violent night. How quickly had a marriage crumbled, a vow broken, a love dissolved. How quickly had an adolescent girl become a hardened woman, aware of the world's cruelty and the dangers that lurked outside the iron gates surrounding her previous life. She sent a letter to her father, requesting more money than he normally sent. She explained that she needed the extra amount so that she could pay for her travels home, which would begin as soon as she received his letter. She told him it was urgent and that he ought to send it without hesitation or delay, and she knew that

he would comply with the letter's request. She, then, left a note to James saying that another portion of her father's sums would be arriving in a few days. The sum would be far larger than before, copious so that he could leave Paris and find a new home and career. Her written words warned him not to pursue her again, her unwritten ones begged him not to.

She took the money she had been saving from the small box, but she left the handkerchief, with its stains and its musk. She separated the sum into two categories—one, enough for a few nights sleeping elsewhere and the other, for travel expenses back to London. Aurora spent a week in a hotel south of Paris, tending to her body and mind. She bathed twice a day, pouring hot water from above and letting it run the length of her slender skeleton. It hurt at first as the temperature of the water stung her tender wounds, but there was necessity in the pain. Healing would not be a simple process.

At week's end, she began her return home to the Kentish Woods. She was still weak when she finally departed France. Despite her height, she seemed smaller than when she left nearly fourteen months ago. With the exception of the bruises fading to yellow on her arms and knees, both of which were covered by her clothes, her skin looked paler, like white porcelain next to her black hair and eyes. She had a likeness to a doll that had been passed from one sister to the next, worn and fragile; tugs and tears and the overall indelicate treatment of child's play had taken much of the youthful light that had once framed Aurora's face.

She did not yet know what she would tell her father, what lie she would conjure up to appease his questions and worries. She had time to think on the way. Awaiting the carriage to take her the final stretch of the journey home, she contemplated her time away—all that had transpired. She recalled her first hours at the Lespard Finishing School, recalled the exclusivity and the unkindness of the girls there. Leaving the Lespard School had been a test like none other

she had known. She realized as she revisited these thoughts that she had failed that test. She recalled seeing James as a hero who had come to steal her away from the oppressive stares of her peers and the condescension of her instructors. Remembering how much she had trusted him, admired him, and given to him physically and emotionally made the hair on her arms prickle and rise.

Francine she would perhaps miss, with her sangfroid and unabashed words, her take on life and its transitory nature. But she would not miss Paris. No, she would not miss its noise and its bustle and the way it seemed so large but once inside its walls it became a trap, a cage, everywhere she turned mustachioed men and overly dressed women with large hats and half-true smiles. As she waited, exhausted and starving for a kind of provision not to be found in a marketplace or kitchen, Aurora longed to be as far from the still painfully close memory of James Conyers, far from the time she spent as his lover and wife.

Aurora Floyd had never been a saintly child, but she could start over in London. It would be a new place, a new time. "I shall never see him again," she thought, "I shall never be reminded of my heartache or how I let my child die under the force of his blows. I shall live my days happily by my father's side, obedient to him and only him, skeptical of anyone else's affections. I shall finally have my tomorrow." Aurora almost smiled at this thought, yearning for it all to be true.