

# Aurora Leigh by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Edited to playform by Dr. Temi Rose

## *Main Characters:*

Romney

Aurora and Narrator Aurora

Lady Waldemar

Marian

## *Minor Characters:*

Aunt Leigh

Woman in ally

Seamstress 1

Seamstress 2

Man in church

Woman in church

Mr. Smith

Sir Blaise

Member of the Academy

Parisian lady

Vincent Carrington

Act One.....	3
Act One Scene 1: Candlelight (both Auroras).....	3
Act One Scene 2: Awakening (Two Auroras) (music bkgd) (from Movement Two).....	7
Act One Scene 3: My 20 <sup>th</sup> Birthday (Two Auroras, Romney) (green and white lights, sounds of birds) (from Book Two).....	9
Act One Scene 4 You Misconceive the Question (Two Auroras, Romney, Aunt Leigh).....	13
Act One Scene 5 Dance Interlude (Aurora).....	15
Act One Scene 6 You Sing the Song you Choose (Two Auroras) (from Book Three).....	15
Act One Scene 7 Film Interlude Revolutions in Art and Politics.....	16
Act One Scene 8 Lady Waldemar (Two Auroras, Lady Waldemar, Romney).....	16
Act One Scene 9 Marian (Two Auroras, Marian, Woman in ally).....	18
Act One Scene 10 Pale Conspirators (Two Auroras, Two Seamstresses, Romney, Man and Woman in church) (from Book Four).....	22
Act One Scene 11 Film Interlude showing Conditions for the poor and workers in nineteenth century Europe.....	25
Act Two.....	26
Act Two Scene 1 Lord Howe's Party (Two Auroras, Sir Blaise, Mr. Smith, Lady Waldemar) (from Book Five).....	26
Act Two Scene 2 Buried Alive (Two Auroras).....	28
Act Two Scene 3 Paris (Two Auroras) (from Book Six).....	29
Act Two Scene 4 Marian's Secret (Two Auroras, Marian, Parisian lady).....	31
Act Two Scene 5 Dear Lady Waldemar (Two Auroras).....	34
Act Two Scene 6 Film Interlude focusing on Italy in the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century.....	35
Act Two Scene 7 Dawn (Two Auroras, Vincent Carrington, Lady Waldemar).....	35
Act Two Scene 8 New Moon (Two Auroras, Romney, Marian, Lady Waldemar) (from Book Eight)..	37

## Act One

The play begins in darkness. Aurora's voice is heard coming from a short film of the revolutions in intellectual thought in Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Narrator Aurora (NA) (*from Book One*): of writing many books there is no end  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others' uses, will write now for mine  
Will write my story for my better self  
As when you paint your portrait for a friend  
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it  
Long after he has ceased to love you just  
To hold together what he was and is

### *Act One Scene 1: Candlelight (both Auroras)*

*Aurora lights a candle centerstage. Narrator Aurora watches her younger self from stage left.*

Aurora (A): I write. My mother was a Florentine whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me when I was scarcely four years old.

NA: She could not bear the joy of giving life, the mother's rapture slew her.

A: I, Aurora Leigh, was born to make my father sadder and myself not overjoyous, truly.

NA: Women know the way to rear up children. They have a simple, merry, tender knack of tying sashes, fitting baby shoes and stringing pretty words that make no sense and kissing full sense into empty words.

A: Children learn by such - love's whole earnest in a pretty play - and get not overearly solemnized.

NA: Seeing love is divine, they become aware and unafraid of love.

A: Fathers love as well. Mine did, I know. But with heavier brains and wills more consciously responsible.

NA: And not as wisely, since less foolishly.

A: So mothers have God's license to be missed. My father was an austere Englishman who, after a lifetime spent at home in college, learning law and parish talk, was flooded with a passion unaware. His whole provisioned, complacent life drowned out from him in a moment, as he stood in Florence where he had come to spend a month and note the secret of Da Vinci's drains, he, musing somewhat absently,

NA: perhaps some English question, whether men should pay the unpopular tax with left or right hand,

A: in the alien sun, in the great square of Santissima, there drifted past him a train of priestly banners.

NA: Among the white-veiled, rose-crowned maidens holding up tall tapers weighty for such wrists...

A: a face flashed like a cymbal on his face and shook with silent clangor his brain and heart, transfiguring him to music.

NA: And thus beloved, she died.

A: He made haste to hide himself, his prattling child, and silent grief among the mountains.

NA: Because he thought, unmothered babes have need of mother nature.

A: We lived among the mountains many years.

NA: We had old Assunta to make up the fire, crossing herself whenever a sudden flame from the firewood made alive the picture of my mother hanging on the wall.

A: I was just thirteen, still growing like the plants, from unseen roots, when suddenly I awoke to life's needs and agonies with an intense, strong, struggling heart beside a stone dead father. His last word was love,

NA: *Love, my child. Love. Love.*

A: Before I answered, he was gone.

A & NA (*together*): And none was left to love in all the world.

A: There ended childhood. Then smooth endless days notched here and there with knives. Til a stranger came with authority who caught me up from old Assunta's neck.

NA: With a shriek, she let me go while I, my ears too full of my father's silence to shriek back a word, stared at the wharf edge where she stood and moaned. The white walls, the blue hills, my Italy.

A: Then the bitter sea inexorably pushed between us both and sweeping up the ship with my despair, threw us out as a pasture to the stars.

NA: Then England.

A: Oh the frosty cliffs looked cold upon me. Could I find a home among those mean red houses through the fog?

NA: When I first heard my father's language from alien lips which had no kiss for mine...

A: I wept aloud.

NA: Someone said,

A: "The child is mad."

NA: The train swept us on. Was this the great isle?

A: The ground seemed cut up from the fellowship of verdure, field from field, as man from man. The skies themselves looked low. All things blurred and dull and vague.

NA: Did Shakespeare and his mates absorb all the light here?

*As Aurora lights another candle, lights come gently on the stage. We are in the light of deep night, perhaps three or four a.m.*

A: I see my aunt standing on the hall step of her country house. To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm. Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight as if for taming accidental thoughts from possible pulses. Brown hair pricked with grey by frigid use of life. A nose sharply drawn. Yet in delicate lines. A close, mild mouth, a little soured at the ends through speaking unrequited loves or perhaps niggardly half truths.

NA: Eyes of no color. Once they might have smiled but never, ever lost themselves in smiling.

A: She lived a harmless life.

NA: She called a virtuous life, a quiet life,

A: which was no life at all but rather a caged bird sort of life: born in a cage,

NA: accounting that to leap from perch to perch was act and joy enough for any bird.

A: I, alas, was a wild bird. Brought to her cage. She was there to meet me. Very kind.

NA: Bring the clean water. Give out the fresh seed.

A: She stood upon her steps to welcome me.

NA: Calm, in black garb.

A: I clung around her neck.

NA: In my ears, my father's words,

A: *Love. Love my child, love.*

NA: She was his sister. I clung to her.

A: For a moment she seemed moved. Then she kissed me with cold lips, wrung loose my hands and held me at arms' length. Then, with two grey naked-bladed eyes, searched through my face.

NA: Stabbed it through and through as if to find a wicked murderer in my innocence.

A: Then, drawing breath, she told me not to lie or swear. She who loved my father would love me.

NA: As long as I deserved it.

A: Very kind. From that day she did her duty for me, well-pressed out but measured always.

NA: And I?

A: I was a good child. On the whole.

NA: Why not? I did not live, to have the faults of life.

A: I learned the catechism, the creeds and various popular inhuman doctrines.

NA: My aunt liked instructed piety.

A: I read a score of books on womanhood to prove, if women do not think at all, they may teach thinking. Books that demonstrate women's right of comprehending men's talk, husband's talk, when not too deep.

NA: Books that delineate women's right of rapid insight as long as they keep quiet by they fire and never say no when the rest of the world is saying yes.

A: That is fatal. Books which demonstrate women's potential faculty for abdicating power in absolutely everything,

NA: My aunt liked a woman to be womanly.

A: And I?

NA: I had relations with the unseen, derived elemental nutriment and heat from nature.

A: As the earth feels the sun at night. As a babe sucks surely in the dark. God, I thank thee for that grace of thine. At first I felt no life in me which was not patience. *The child thrives ill in England: She will die.* Some said.

NA: My cousin Romney was angry with me -

Romney: You're wicked now? You want to die and leave the world adusk for others with your naughty light blown out?

A: He slammed out the door. He left so suddenly, he shut his dog in with me.

NA: Ah, Romney. Romney Leigh.

A: My cousin, elder by a few years. Cold and shy and absent. Tender when he thought of it which was scarcely often.

NA: Always Romney was looking for the worms, I for the Gods.

A: A godlike nature his: Gods look down incurious of themselves.

NA: And certainly I must remember that in those days, I was a worm and he had time to look on me.

A: A little by his looking perhaps but more by something in me, not my will, I did not die but gradually awoke, and rose up. Where was I?

NA: In the world.

A: For uses, therefor, I must count worthwhile.

*Act One Scene 2: Awakening  
(Two Auroras) (music bkgd) (from Movement Two)*

*Aurora puts on some rock and roll (music that gradually becomes more and more mellow as the movement progresses). She turns on lights. Pools of orange incandescence lie like islands softly on the floor in a sea of darkness. Aurora moves around her studio. There is a bay window along the back wall. There are piles and piles of books. There are plants scattered about. A rag rug. A tattered couch. A*

*typical writer's garret. Through the window we see the London skyline under moon and stars. A streetlight shines at an angle through the window.*

NA: I awoke more slowly than I tell it now.

A: But at last I opened wide the window of my soul. I let the air penetrate, regenerate what I was. Oh life, how often we throw it off and say, *Enough!* Enough of life. We must break with life. Here we are wronged. Here we are maimed, spoiled for aspiration. Farewell, life. Then life calls to us in some transformed, apocalyptic voice above us or below us or around. Perhaps we name it nature's voice. Or love's. Tricking ourselves because we are more ashamed to own our compensations than our griefs.

NA: Still, life's voice. We make our peace with life. And I, so young then, was not sullen.

A: I used to get up early just to sit and watch the morning quicken, hear the silence open like a flower. I read books. Bad and good. Some good and bad at once.

NA: Good aims do not always make good books.

A: From error to error, every turn still brought me nearer to the central truth.

NA: I thought.

A: There is anguish in the thick of our opinions. Press and counterpress. Now up, now down. This throws us back upon a noble trust to use our own instincts.

NA: Try it. Fix against heaven's wall the ladder of school logic. You won't get far. Now look up with that still ray which strikes from your heart to God and you will see Heaven.

*Aurora helps herself to a glass of something lovely.*

A: Books. Books. Books. My books.

NA: At last because the time was right I came across the poets.

A: As the earth plunges when her internal fires have reached and pricked her heart and throwing flat the markets and temples, the triumphal gates and towers of observation, clears herself, returns to elemental freedom. Thus my soul at poetry's divine first finger touch let go conventions and sprang up surprised, convicted of the great eternities between two worlds.

NA: What's this, Aurora Leigh? You speak so of poets and not laugh? Those virtuous liars, dreamers after dark, those exaggerators of the sun and moon, those soothsayers reading tea cups.

A: I speak so of truth tellers, speakers of essential truth, teachers who instruct humankind to recognize our stature, erect, sublime, the measure of ourselves, the measure of an angel.

NA: Yes. And while men and women lay railroads, reign, reap, dine and dust the flaunty carpets of the world for kings to walk on or presidents, the poet will suddenly catch you with her voice like thunder - *This is soul. This is life. This word is being said in heaven. Here's God. What are you about?* Then men and women start, look up from their work and feel that carpet dusting though a useful trade, is perhaps not the imperative labor after all.

A: I wrote false poems like the rest and thought them true because I myself was true in writing them.

NA: Maybe I write truer ones now with less complacence.

A: But I could not hide my quickening inner life. My aunt was suspicious when she caught my soul ablaze in my eyes.

NA: She could not bring herself to say that I had no business with a soul.

A: But plainly she objected.

NA: *Aurora, have you done your tasks this morning?*

A: As if to say, I know there's something wrong.

NA: I know I have not ground you down enough to flatten and bake you to a wholesome crust for household uses and proprieties.

A: You almost grow?

NA: We'll live, Aurora, said my soul.

A: The dogs are on us but we will not die.

NA: Whoever lives true life will love true love.

A: I learned to love that England.

*Act One Scene 3: My 20<sup>th</sup> Birthday*  
*(Two Auroras, Romney) (green and white lights, sounds of birds) (from Book Two)*

A: Not infrequently I walked the third with Romney and his friend, the well-known painter, Vincent Carrington,

NA: whom men judge harshly because he holds that, to paint a body well, you paint a soul by implication.

A: Pleasant walks.

NA: Often we walked only two if Romney pleased to walk with me.

A: We read or talked or quarrelled.

NA: We were not lovers nor even friends well matched. Say rather scholars upon different tracks, thinkers disagreed. He overfull of what is and I overbold for what might be.

A: Then, when thrushes sang, I made him mark that however much the world went ill, as he believed, certainly the thrushes still sing in it. And his brow would soften with melancholy patience while I breaking into ecstasy flattered the skies, the clouds, the fields. *Is not God here on earth?* I said... ankle-deep in grass I leaped and clapped my hands.

NA: In the beginning, when God called all good, even then was evil with us and those of us who call all things good and fair, evil is upon us also.

*Aurora picks up a white dress. It comes on easily, buttons like a coat, more or less covering her more androgynous original outfit and trousers and a shirt.*

NA: Came a morn I stood upon the brink of twenty years and looked before and after. As I stood, woman and artist, both incomplete, both credulous of completion. I was glad that day.

A: The June was in me, with its multitudes of nightingales all singing in the dark and rosebuds reddening where the calyx split.

NA: I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God. In which fantastic mood I bounded forth at early morning, brushing a green trail across the lawn with my gown in the dew.

A: Took will and way to fly my fancies in the open air and keep my birthday.

*She has moved gradually to a sort of platform stage right or she's stepped slightly off the stage onto a sculptural alcove-like platform. Perhaps she is standing on an old wooden chest in her studio.*

A: Meanwhile I murmured as honeyed bees hum to themselves, *The worthiest poets have remained uncrowned til death has bleached their foreheads to the bone.* And so with me it must be unless I prove

unworthy of the grand adversity and certainly I could not fail so much. What if I crown myself today? To learn the feel of it before my brows be numbed.

NA: Thus speaking to myself half singing it because some thoughts are fashioned like a bell to ring.

A: I drew a wreath of ivy drenched blinding me with dew; and fastening it behind, turning to face my imaginary public. There he was.

NA: Romney with a mouth twice graver than his eyes.

A: I stood there fixed. My arms up like the caryatid, sole of some abolished temple helplessly persistent in a gesture which derides a former purpose yet my blush was flame as if from flax not stone.

Romney: Aurora Leigh, here's a book I found, no name on it. Poems. No. I did not read it. Not a word. I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in it, calls up dangerous spirits. I rather bring it to the witch.

A: My book. You found it.

NA: He touched the ivy on my hair.

Romney: These wreaths bring headaches and defile clean white morning dresses. Men and still less women do not need to be poets.

A: You judge that because I love the beautiful, I must love pleasure chiefly. Well, learn this cousin - I would choose to walk at all risks. If heads that hold a rhythmic thought must ache, I choose headaches. And today's my birthday.

Romney: Dear Aurora, choose instead to cure, you have balsams.

NA: Oh, I see. The headache is too noble for my sex. You think heartache would suit me better. Since that's woman's special, proper ache. And altogether tolerable. Except to a woman.

A: I untangled the wreath from my hair.

NA: Silently both of us disappointed, both of us wary, we walked back into sight of the house.

Romney: Aurora, let's be serious and throw by this game of head and heart. Life means to be sure both head and heart. Both active, both complete. And both in earnest. Men and women make the world as head and heart make human life. There is work for men and women in this beleaguered earth. And thought can never do the work of love. The chances are that, being a woman, young and pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes, you write as well and ill upon the whole as other women. If as well, what then? If even a little better still, what then?

NA, A & Romney (*together*): We want the best in art now or no art.

Romney: The world is half blind with intellectual light, half brutalised with civilization. Having caught the plague we shriek east to west along a thousand railroads, mad with pain and sin. Does one woman who weeps so easily grow pale to see this? Does one of you stand still from dancing, stop from stringing pearls and pine and die because of universal anguish? Show me a tear wet as Cordelia's in eyes bright as yours because the world is mad. You cannot. You weep for what you know. But, for a million sick you remain unmoved; you would as soon weep for an isosceles triangle. The same world uncomprehended by you, must remain uninfluenced by you. Women, personal and passionate, give us doting mothers and chaste wives, sublime madonnas, enduring saints.

NA, A & Romney (*together*): We get no Christ from you.

NA & Romney (*together*): And truly we will not get a poet.

Romney: Not to my mind.

A: With which conclusion you conclude?

Romney: That you, Aurora, cannot condescend to play at art as children play at swords, to show a pretty spirit chiefly admired because true action is impossible. You will not be satisfied with the praise that men give women when they judge a book as mere women's work, expressing the comparative respect which means absolute scorn.

Aurora: Stop. Better to pursue a frivolous trade by serious means than a sublime art frivolously.

Romney: We are young. The world is swollen hard with perished generations and their sins. All success proves partial failure. All advance implies what's left behind. All triumph something crushed at the chariot's wheels. All government, some wrong. Rich men make the poor who curse the rich, who agonize together, rich and poor under and over, in the social spasm and crisis of the ages. Who, being man and human can stand by and view these things and never tease his soul for some great cure? I think I was a man chiefly for this; I sympathize with man not with God. And when I stand by a death bed. It is my death. And I, a man, feel with men in the agonizing present.

A: Is the world so bad? The world was always evil. But so bad?

Romney: So bad, Aurora.

A: I have not stood long on the strand of life and these salt waters have barely had time to wet my feet. I cannot judge these tides. I shall perhaps. A woman is always younger than a man because she is not

allowed to mature. Ah, I know men judge otherwise. You think a woman ripens like a peach, chiefly in the cheeks. I can applaud your compassion. Accept my reverence.

Romney: No other help?

A: What help? You'd scorn my help as nature has scorned to put her music in my mouth. Do you now ask me for what you say I cannot give?

Romney: I ask for love. For life in fellowship through bitter duties. For wifehood. Will you?

A: Am I proved too weak to stand alone yet strong enough to bear such leaners on my shoulder? Incapable of thought yet able to sympathize with such a complicated philosophy? I cannot sing as even blackbirds can but I can love as selflessly as Christ himself? It's always so. Anything does for a wife.

Romney: You translate me ill. If your sex is weak for art it is strong for life and duty.

A: What you love, Romney is not a woman but a cause. You want a helpmate, not a mistress. A wife to help your ends, in her no end. Your cause is noble, your aims are excellent. But I do otherwise conceive of love.

Romney: You reject me?

A: Sir, you were married long ago. You have a wife you already love, your social theory.

Romney: Was I so wrong then to say bluntly, honestly, *Come, human creature, love and work with me?* Should I have wooed you with, *Lady, thou art wondrous fair and where the graces walk before the muse will follow and turn round and see me or I die of love.*

*Aurora leaves her perch and roams free on the stage.*

*Act One Scene 4 You Misconceive the Question  
(Two Auroras, Romney, Aunt Leigh)*

NA: You misconceive the question like a man who sees a woman as the complement of his sex only.

A: You forget too much that every creature, female as well as the male stands single in responsible act and thought.

NA: As also in birth and death.

A: Whoever says to a loyal woman, *Love and work with me*, will get fair answers if the work and love are good for her, the best that she was born for. Women in a softer mood may sometimes only hear the first

word, love, and catch up with it any kind of work, just so dear love go with it. I do not blame such women.

NA: Earth's fanatics often make heaven's saints.

A: But me, your work is not the best for. Nor your love the best. Ah, you force me, sir, to be overbold in speaking of myself. I too have a vocation - work to do - the heavens and earth have set me. And, even if the world were twice as wretched as you represent, my work is as important as any economist's. Unless artists keep open the road between the seen and the unseen, bursting through the best conventions with the best God bids us speak, to prove what lies beyond both speech and imagination. We'll not barter, sir, the beautiful for barley. It takes a soul to move a body. It takes a high-souled man to move the masses, even to a cleaner sty. It takes the ideal to blow the dust off the actual. Your politicians fail because not poets enough to understand that life develops from within. Perhaps I am worthy, as you say. Perhaps a woman's soul aspires and not creates. Yet we aspire. And if I fail, well, burn me up with everything else that is false. I'll not ask for grace. I who love my art would not wish it lower to suit my stature. You grant that I may love my art. Wasting true love on anything is womanly, past question.

*Romney exits*

NA: I retain every word that was said that day.

A: His eyes were fiery points, fixed in my mind, forever after.

NA: And yet I know I did not love him, nor he me.

A: And what I said is unrepented, as truth is always.

NA: Yet, a princely man. He bears down on me though the slanting years, the stronger for the distance.

A: My aunt was not pleased with me.

Aunt Leigh: You turned him down? You have got a fever. You love him. I have watched you when he came and when he went and when we've talked of him. I am not old for nothing. Your mother must have been a pretty thing. Your father threw his inheritance to the wind when he married her. Oh yes, she must have been beautiful to make your father forget his duty. Marry him and claim your Leigh fortune.

Romney is a fine man.

*Act One Scene 5 Dance Interlude  
(Aurora)*

*Aurora turns off all the lights and changes the music again. She dances a bit, looks at her papers, opens letters, generally does the sort of things one does in one's studio late at night when for all the world we cannot sleep. After some fierce activity, she collapses on the couch.*

*Act One Scene 6 You Sing the Song you Choose  
(Two Auroras) (from Book Three)*

NA: I bear on my broken tale.

A: Having thrown away my inheritance, for three years I lived and worked.

NA: Get leave to work in this world, it's the best you get at all. For God in cursing gives us better gifts than men with their benedictions. God says sweat for foreheads. Men say crowns. And so we are crowned, yes, gashed by some tormenting circle which snaps with secret spring. Get work. And be sure that the work you get is better than what you work to get. Serene and unafraid of solitude I worked the short days out and watched the sun on lurid mornings or monstrous afternoons push out through the fog with its dilated disk to startle the distant roofs and chimney pots with splashes of color.

A: Or I saw fog only. The great tawny weltering fog involve the passive city, strangle it alive. And draw it off into the void. Spires, bridges, streets and squares. As if a sponge had wiped out London.

NA: Or as noon and night had clapped together and utterly struck out the intermediate time -

A: undoing themselves in the act. Your city poets see such things as not despicable.

NA: Mountains of the south when drunk and mad with elemental wines rend the seamless mist and stand up bare, forests chant their anthems and leave you dumb.

A: But sit in London at the day's decline and view the city perish in the mist. Like pharaoh's armaments in the deep Red Sea: the chariots, horsemen, all the host, sucked down and choked to silence. Then, surprised by a sudden sense of vision and of tune, you feel as conquerors, though you did not fight.

NA & A: And you sing the song you choose.

NA: I worked with patience. Which means almost power. I did some excellent things indifferently some bad things excellently. Both were praised. The latter loudest. Of course.

A: Day and night I worked my rhythmic thought. The rose fell from either cheek, my eyes globed luminous through orbits of blue shadow. And my pulse would shudder along the purple veined wrist like

a shot bird. I worked on. On through the bristling fence of nights and days which hedges time in from the eternities.

NA: The midnight oil would stink sometimes. There came some vulgar needs. I had to live so I could work.

A: And, being poor, I was constrained to work with one hand for the booksellers, while working with the other for myself and art.

NA: You swim with feet as well as hands or make small way. I understood that, in England, no one lives by verse that lives. And, apprehending this, I resolved by prose to make a space to sphere my living verse.

A: I wrote for encyclopaedias, magazines and weekly papers. Holding up my name to keep it from the mud. Having bread for just so many days, just breathing room for body and soul,

NA: I stood up straight and worked my veritable work.

A: And as the soul which grows within a child makes the child grow, or as the fiery sap, careering through a tree, dilates the summer foliage out, in green flame - so life, in deepening in me, deepened all: the course I took, the work I did.

NA: Indeed, academic law, convinced of sin, instructed the critics to cry out on my falling off, regret the passing of the first manner.

A: But I felt my heart's life throbbing in my verse to show how it lived. It also, certainly incomplete, disordered, all human in blood, but even its very tumors, still organized by and implying life.

*Act One Scene 7 Film Interlude Revolutions in Art and Politics*

*Act One Scene 8 Lady Waldemar  
(Two Auroras, Lady Waldemar, Romney)*

*The night sky becomes a dazzling light show of video and computer generated images. The music is louder but not discordant, perhaps a synthesized lushness. This light interlude lasts about three minutes while the sky gradually returns to night. The white moon outside the window, a waxing crescent, has moved further along her wanderings.*

Lady Waldemar (LW): Is this

NA: she said

LW: the muse?

A: No sibyl, even since she fails to guess the cause which taxed you with this visit, Madam.

LW: Well, naturally you think I've come here as the lion hunters go to deserts to secure you with a trap for exhibition in my drawing room? Not in the least. Roar softly at me, I am frivolous. And at your mercy. I think you have a cousin, Romney Leigh.

A: You bring word from him?

LW: I bring word from him. But first: You're not in love with him?

A: You're frank in putting questions, Madam. I love my relative relatively, no more.

LW: I guessed as much. Yes, I am frank. You stand outside, you artist women. You starve your hearts to make your heads. So run the old traditions of you. I will therefore speak without fear. I love Romney Leigh. My first husband left me young, pretty enough and rich enough. I am mad to love Romney. I have not come here without a struggle. I have so many accomplishments. But, love. We eat of love and do as vile a thing as if we ate garlic. Then whatever else we eat tastes uniformly acrid til your peach tastes like an onion. Dear, be kind with me. Let us two be friends. I'm a mere woman; the more weak perhaps through being so proud. You're better. As for him, he's best. Indeed he builds his goodness up so high that it topples down to the other side and makes a sort of badness. There. That's the worst I have to say about your cousin. And here's the point we come to -

A: Pardon me, Lady Waldemar, but the point's the thing we never come to.

LW: Caustic, insolent. I like you. And now, my lioness, help Androcles, for all your roaring. Help me. He'll fall into the pit. And I will lose him. And he will be lost when he is married to a girl of doubtful life.

A: Married.

LW: Oh. You're moved at last. He has been mad. You must know your cousin. If you not starve or sin, you're nothing to him.

A: You speak too bitterly for the literal truth.

LW: Truth is bitter. Had I any chance with Romney, I, Lady Waldemar, who have never committed a felony?

A: You jest.

LW: As martyr's jest, my dear, upon the axe which kills them. Yesterday, I said to him, *I can scarce admit the cogency of a marriage where you do not love, except the class. Yet marry and throw your name down into the gutter as a fire escape for future generations. I imagine even your kin, Aurora, would*

*conceive this act less sacrifice than fantasy.* At which he grew so pale to the lips that I knew I had touched him.

Romney: Do you know her?

LW: Yes, I said, and lied. But truly, we all know you by your books. And so I offered to take you to see this miracle, this seamstress upon whose finger exquisitely pricked by a hundred needles, we are to hang the tie between class and class next week. He promised to put off his marriage long enough for you to meet his betrothed.

A: How this serves your ends, I cannot see.

LW: Then, despite Aurora, that most radiant morning name, you're as dull as any London afternoon. Be good to me, Aurora, scorn me less, I have kept the iron rule of womanly reserve and wept a week before I came here. Come and see the girl.

A: Who tells you he wants a wife to love? He gets a horse to use, not love, I think. There's work for wives as well, and after, straw, when men are liberal. For myself, you err in supposing me able to break this match. I could not. I love love. Truth's no cleaner thing than love. I comprehend a love so fiery hot it burns through veils, will burn through masks and shrivel up treachery. No. Go to the opera: your love is curable.

*Act One Scene 9 Marian  
(Two Auroras, Marian, Woman in ally)*

*Sudden blackout. In the blackout there is a musical crash which slides slowly into a sweet quiet lushness. As the lights come up, Aurora is ascending to a platform reminiscent of a catwalk or the monorail at Disneyland. Aurora can more or less circumambulate the upper theatrical space. Constantly moving like a lion in a cage.*

A: Two hours later I stood alone in the square.

Woman: What brings you here milady? Is it to find the gentleman who visits his tame pigeon in the eaves? Our cholera will catch you with its cramps and spasms and turn your whiteness dead blue.

A: I think I could have walked through hell that day and never flinched. *The dear Christ comfort you, I said. You must be the most miserable to be so cruel.*

*Aurora empties out her pockets. Her change rains down through the light.*

NA: Up so high lived Romney's bride to be.

A: Marian Erle was not beautiful.

NA: We talked.

A: She was born upon a ledge, in a hut built up at night to evade the landlord. Marian's father earned his life by random jobs, keeping swine on commons, picking hops or hurrying on the harvest at wet seasons. In between the gaps of such irregular work, he drank and slept and cursed his wife because the pence being out she could not buy more drink.

NA: At which she turned, the worm, and beat her baby in revenge for her own broken heart.

A: There's not a crime but takes its proper change out still in crime, if once rung on the counter of this world.

NA: The outcast child learned early to cry low and walk alone.

A: Thus, at three, she would run off and creep through the golden walls of gorse, find some keyhole toward the secrecy of heaven's high blue and nestling down peer out. Oh, not to catch the angels at their games,

NA: she had never heard of angels,

A: but to gaze she knew not why to see she knew not what -

NA: a hungering outward from the barren earth for something like a joy.

A: She liked, she said, to dazzle black her sight against the sky.

NA: For then it seemed like some grand blind love came down and groped her out and clasped her with a kiss.

A: She learnt God that way.

NA: And was beat for it whenever she went home. Yet she came again. This great blind love, she said,

A: this skyeye father and mother both in one, instructed her and civilized her more than even Sunday school did afterward. To which a kind lady sent her to learn books and sit upon a long bench in a row with other children.

Marian: One day,

NA: said Marian,

Marian: the sun shone that day, my mother had been badly beaten and feeling the bruises sore about her wretched soul, came in suddenly and snatching in a sort of breathless rage her daughter's headgear comb, let down the hair upon her like a waterfall. Then drew me drenched and passive by the arm outside the hut we lived in.

A: When the child could clear her blinded face from all that stream of tresses,

Marian: there a man stood with eyes that seemed to swallow me alive; body, spirit, hair and all. God free me from my mother,

NA: she cried and ran.

Marian: Famished hounds at a hare,

A: the man and her mother ran after her.

NA: She heard them yell.

Marian: I felt my name like shot from guns.

NA: Mad fear was running in her feet and killing the ground.

Marian: The white roads curled

A: as if she burnt them up.

Marian: the green fields melted,

A: trees fell to make room for her.

Marian: Then my head grew vexed.

A: Trees, fields, turned on her and ran after her.

NA: She lost her feet,

Marian: could run no more.

A: Yet somehow went as fast.

Marian: The horizon, red, so sucked me forward, forward while my heart kept swelling, swelling til it swelled so big it seemed to fill my body then it burst and overflowed the world and swamped the light. And now I am dead and safe,

NA: thought Marian Erle.

A: She had dropped and fainted.

NA: As the sense returned, she was aware of heavy tumbling motions, creaking wheels. A wagoner had found her in a ditch beneath the moon as white as moonshine save for the oozing blood. At first he thought her dead.

A: But when he heard her sigh, he raised her up, laid her in his wagon and brought her to the hospital. She stirred.

Marian: The place seemed new and strange as death. The white, straight bed with others straight and white, like graves dug side by side at measured lengths and quiet people walking in and out with wonderful low voices and soft steps. And apparitional equal care for each, astonished me with order, silence, law. And when a gentle hand held out a cup, I took it as you do a sacrament, half awed, half melted not being used indeed to so much love.

NA: Oh my God, how sick we must be ere we make men just.

A: I think it frets the saints in heaven to see how many desolate creatures on earth have learned the simple dues of fellowship and social comfort in a hospital, as Marian did.

Marian: I lay there stunned, half tranced and wished at intervals of growing sense that I might be sicker yet, if sickness made the world so marvelous kind, the air so hushed and all my wake time quiet as sleep.

NA: She lay and seethed in fever many weeks.

A: Revolted soul and flesh were reconciled and fetched back to the necessary day and daylight duties.

Marian: I could creep along the bare rooms and stare out drearily from any narrow window on the street. Then someone said I had to go next week being well enough. *Go next week,*

A: she thought,

Marian: *next week. Let out into that terrible street alone, among the pushing people. To go where? One day, the last before the dreaded last, a visitor was ushered through the wards. When he looked, it was as if he spoke. And when he spoke, it was as if he sang,*

NA: He who came and spoke was Romney Leigh.

A: He sent her to a famous seamstress' house, far off in London, there to work and hope. Through the days and through the nights she sewed, struck new thread into her needle's eye, drew her stitch and mused on Romney's face.

*Act One Scene 10 Pale Conspirators  
(Two Auroras, Two Seamstresses, Romney, Man and Woman in church) (from Book Four)*

Seamstress 1: You know the news? Who's dying do you think? Our Lucy.

Seamstress 2: I expected it.

Seamstress 1: Lucy swooned last night, dropped sudden in the street. The baker took her and laid her by her grandmother in bed. He says he gives her a week.

Seamstress 2: Pass the silk. Let's hope he gave her a loaf within reach otherwise she'll starve before she dies.

Seamstress 1: Why Marian Erle, you piece of pity, your tears will spoil Lady Waldemar's new dress.

A: Marian rose up, went to Lucy's home to nurse her back to life or down to death.

Marian: When Lucy slid away so gently, like the light when none can name the moment that it goes though all see when it's gone, a man came in. It was the hour for angels.

NA: There stood hers.

A: Romney.

NA: He had been standing in the room listening to us talking.

A: Lady Waldemar has sent me.

Romney: Lady Waldemar is good.

A: Here is one who is good. I give you thanks for such a cousin.

Romney: You accept at last a gift from me, Aurora? Without scorn? At last I please you? You cannot please a woman against her will and once I vexed you. Let us not speak of that. For myself, I comprehend your choice.

A: You cannot comprehend me.

NA: He was a wall of bricks, each feeling boxed in and stuffed and sacked.

A: He followed me down the stairs. The night came drizzling downward in dark rain and as we walked, the color of the time, the act, the presence, my hand upon his arm, his voice in my ear and mine to myself seemed unnatural.

NA: We talked of modern books and daily papers, marriage schemes, the English climate.

Romney: Was it this cold last year?

A: Is London full?

Romney: Is trade competitive?

NA: Which way is the wind tonight?

Romney: Has Dickens turned his hinge a pinch too tight upon the great?

A: Will the apple die out?

Romney: Are potatoes to grow mythical?

NA: We tore up greedily all the silence, all the innocent breathing points. As if, like pale conspirators, in haste we tore up papers where our signatures imperiled us to an ugly shame or death. I cannot tell you why it was.

A: And then a month passed. Let me tell it at once. I have been wrong.

NA: We are always wrong when we think too much of what we think or are. Though our thoughts be bitter and full of self sacrifice, we're no less selfish.

A: This I say against myself. I had done my duty in the visit I paid Marian. Why did I not tell Romney of Lady Waldemar's designs?

NA: Had I any right, with womanly compassion and reserve, to stand aside knowing that she intended to come between them; and hear him call her good?

A: Distrust that word. There is none good save God. If he once, in the first creation week, called creatures good, forever afterward only the devil has done it.

NA: A good neighbor is fatal sometimes, cuts your morning into mincemeat of the very smallest talk. I have known good wives, chaste or nearly so, and good, good mothers who would use their child to better an intrigue.

LW: Good friends, very good, who hung around your neck and sucked your breath as cats do to sleeping infants.

A: We have all known good critics who have stamped out a poet's hope.

Romney: Good statesmen who pulled ruin on the state.

Marian: Good Christians who sat still in easy chairs and damned the general world for standing up.

NA: Now -

All: may the good lord pardon all good men.

NA: And women. I should have thought a woman of the world like Lady Waldemar center to herself, who has wheeled on her own pivot half a life in isolated self love and self will as a windmill seen at a distance, radiating its delicate white wings against the sky so soft and soundless, simply beautiful. Seen nearer, what a roar and tear it makes. How it grinds and bruises. If she loves, her love's a readjustment of self love, no more. A need felt of another's use for her own advantage. As a mill wants grain. The fire wants fuel. The wolf wants prey and none of these is more unscrupulous than such a charming woman when she loves. She'll not be thwarted by an obstacle as trifling as her soul. Much less your soul, sir, she loves you, with passion, to lunacy. She loves you like her diamonds. Almost.

A: Well, a month passed so. And the notice came, on such and such a day, the marriage. We were bid to meet at Saint James and after contract at the altar pass to eat a marriage feast at Hamstead Heath. Of course people came in uncompelled. What a sight. A holiday of misery clogged the streets, oozed into the church in a dark slow stream like blood. The noble ladies stood up in their pews some pale with fear, a few red with hate.

NA: I've waked and slept through many nights and days since then but to think of that day still will catch my breath like a nightmare.

A: We waited for the bride. People stirred, impatient. Romney stood and tried to speak. He held a letter in his hand. Silence was in the church. I heard a baby sucking in its sleep.

NA: Then spoke a man,

Man: Best look to the food before it all be filched from us like the other fun.

NA: Then a woman:

Woman: I'm a tender soul. I never beat a child of two and drew blood from him but I cried the next moment. I tell you, I'm tender. I've no stomach ever for beef until I know about the girl that's lost. That's killed mayhaps. Disappear? I ask you, would a girl go off instead of staying to be married? A fine tale from a wicked man. I say he's a wicked man.

A: From end to end the church rocked like the sea in a storm and then broke like the earth in an earthquake. Men cried out. Police were crushed. Women swooned. People madly fled or blindly fell. The last sight left me was Romney's terrible, calm face. The last sound,

NA: *Pull him down!*

*Aurora takes a ragged piece of folded up paper from her pocket.*

A: Here's Marian's letter. He sent the letter to me by our friend, Lord Howe.

*Aurora unfolds the letter, opens it but does not need to read it as she knows it by heart.*

Marian: Noble friend, be patient with me. Never think me vile who might tomorrow morning be your wife but that once I loved more than your name. Farewell my Romney, let me write it once, my Romney.

*Act One Scene 11 Film Interlude showing Conditions for the poor and workers in nineteenth century Europe.*

INTERMISSION

## Act Two

*Act Two Scene 1 Lord Howe's Party  
(Two Auroras, Sir Blaise, Mr. Smith, Lady Waldemar) (from Book Five)*

*Opens in early dawn (gradually increasing) light. The sun coming through partially closed curtains, through the window at a low angle, on a beam, creating a silhouette of the study. Aurora is at her desk answering her correspondence.*

NA: Aurora Leigh, be humble. See the earth. The body of our soul. The green earth, indubitably human like this flesh and these articulated veins, through which our heart drives blood. There's not a flower of spring that dies but vaunts itself allied by issue and symbol, by significance and correspondence to that spirit world outside the limits of our space and time whereto we are bound. Let poets give it voice. Critics say that epics died out with Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods. I don't believe it. Homer's hair turned grey like any plain Miss Smith's. Hector's infant cried. All actual heroes are human beings. And everyone a possible hero. Yes, and every age appears to the souls who live in it, most unheroic. Ours for instance: the poets abound who scorn to touch it with a fingertip. Our age is scum. Spoon off the richer past. We are merely an age of transition. That's wrong thinking to my mind. And wrong thoughts make poor poems. Exert a double vision: Have eyes to see near things comprehensively and distant things as intimately as if you touched them. I distrust the poet who discerns no character or glory in her times. No, if there's room for poets in this world, their soul work is to represent their age, not Charlemagne's.

A: This live, throbbing age that brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires and spends more passion, more heroic heat in hip hop than King Arthur with Guinevere. To flinch from modern decadence,

NA: to long for togas and picturesque drama is foolish.

A: Perhaps Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat as Green Peace does to our poets. Never flinch but be unscrupulously epic. Catch upon the burning lava of a song, the full-veined heaving double-breasted time.

NA: So that, when the next age shall come, the poets of that time may touch our impress with reverent hand.

A: And say, behold, behold the paps we all have sucked: the bosom seems to beat still. Or at least it sets our beating.

A & NA: This is living art, which thus presents and thus records true life.

*The following questions come from the letters that Aurora opens.*

NA: What form is best for poems?

A: Trust the spirit to make the form, for otherwise we only imprison spirit, and not embody. Inward, evermore, to outward. So in life and so in art. Which is still life.

NA: Five acts to a play? And why not fifteen? Why not ten? Or seven? What matter for the number of the leaves supposing the tree lives and grows. Exact the literal unities of time and place when it is the essence of passion to ignore both time and place? Absurd. Keep up the fire and leave the generous flames to shape themselves.

A: Whoever writes good poetry looks just to art. She does not write for you and me.

NA: She will not suffer the best critic known to step into her sunshine of free thought and self-absorbed conception and exact an inch-long swerving of the holy lines.

A: Can art for praise or hire still keep its splendour and remain pure art?

NA: Serfdom. What the poet writes, she writes. Mankind accepts it if it suits and that's success.

A: If not, the poem's passed from hand to hand and yet from hand to hand until the unborn snatch it, crying out in pity on their elders being so dull.

NA: And that's success too.

A: The artist's part is both to be and do. Transfixing with special central power the flat experiences of the common man and turning outward with a sudden wrench, half agony, half ecstasy, the thing she feels the inmost, never felt the less because she sings it. Does a torch burn less for burning next to reflectors of blue steel?

NA: O sorrowful great gift conferred on poets of a twofold life. When one life has been found enough for pain.

A: We, staggering beneath our burden, support the intolerable strain and stress of the universal and send clearly up, with voices broken by the human sob, our poems to find rhymes among the stars. I am sad. I have not seen Romney for two years.

NA: They say he's very busy with good works. He has parted Leigh Hall into an almshouse. He made one day an almshouse of his heart.

A: It always makes me sad to go to parties. I went tonight among the lights and talkers to Lord Howe's whose wife is gracious with her glossy black braids, her even voice, and gorgeous eyeballs, calm as her other jewels. I like him, he's my friend. The rooms were filled with crinkling silks sweeping about the fine dust of most subtle courtesies. Lady Waldemar is very pretty. her maid must use both hands to twist that

coil of tresses. She missed though, a grey hair, a single one, I say it, otherwise the woman looked immortal.

Mr. Smith: Look! There's Lady Waldemar, to the left, in red, whom Romney Leigh, our ablest man is about to marry.

Sir Blaise: Is Leigh our ablest man? The same, I think, once jilted by a recreant pretty maid adopted from the people? He seems to have plucked a flower from the other side of the social hedge.

Mr. Smith: Mark how she stirs. Just waves her head as if a flower indeed, touched far off by the vain breath of our talk.

Sir Blaise: A flower, of course. She neither sews nor spins and takes no thought of her garments falling off.

Mr. Smith: If that fairest fair is talked of as the future wife of Leigh, she's talked of too as Leigh's disciple. You may find her name on all his missions and commissions, schools, asylums, hospitals. He had her down with other ladies whom her starry lead persuaded from their spheres to his country place. And there, they say, she has tarried half a week and milked the cows and churned the butter and pressed the curd and said My sister, to the lowest drab of all the assembled castaways, worked beside them at the washing tub. Conceive, Sir Blaise, those naked perfect arms, round glittering arms, plunged elbow deep in suds like wild swans hid in lilies all ashake.

LW: Miss Leigh, I have a world to speak about your cousin's place in Shropshire where I've been to see his work, our work. You heard I went? You'll like to hear that your last book lies in the schoolroom, judged innocuous for the girls who still care for books. We all must read, you see, before we live, til slowly the ineffable light comes up and, as it deepens, drowns the written word. So said your cousin while we stood and felt a sunset from his favorite beech tree seat. I think he looks well now, has quite got over that unfortunate creature. Ah I know it moved you, tender heart. You took a liking to the wretched girl. Perhaps you thought the marriage suitable? A poet hankers for romance and so on.. As for Romney, it's sure he never loved her. Never. By the way, you have not heard from her? Quite out of sight? Lost in every sense?

*Act Two Scene 2 Buried Alive  
(Two Auroras)*

*Aurora goes to throw open the curtains at the back.*

A: I breathe large at home.

NA: We are buried alive in this close world and want more room.

A: How she talked to pain me, a woman's spite. You wear steel mail. A woman plucks a delicate needle out as if it were a rose and pricks you carefully beneath your nails, your eyelids, in your nostrils. A beast would roar so tortured but a human creature must not, shall not, no, not for shame. What vexes, after all, is just that such as she with such as I knows how to vex. Sweet heaven, she takes me up as if she had fingered and dogeared me and spelled me by the fireside half a life.

NA: And why should I be pained that Romney should marry the Lady Waldemar?

A: She held her newly blossomed gladness in my face, it was natural, if not generous, considering how, when winter held her fast, I helped the frost and pained her more than she pains me. Clearly Romney wants a wife. So, good.

NA: The man's need of woman is greater than the woman's of man.

A: And easier served.

NA: Where we yearn to lose ourselves and melt like white pearls in another's wine. He seeks to double himself by what he loves and make his drink more costly by our pearls.

A: Romney wants a wife. After all, why not?

NA: If I could ride with naked soul and make no noise and pay no price, I would have seen thee sooner, my Italy. For I have heard thee crying to me through my life, through the piercing silence of exstatic graves.

A: But even a witch these days must melt down gold pieces to anoint her broomstick ere she rides.

NA: And poets are ever scant of gold.

A: I wonder if the manuscript of my long poem, sold outright, would fetch enough to buy me shoes to walk there?

NA: I will sell my father's books. And so be almost rich.

A: Tomorrow, no delay.

*Act Two Scene 3 Paris  
(Two Auroras) (from Book Six)*

*Aurora is packing. A background film is showing scenes from 19<sup>th</sup> Century France)*

NA: The English have a scornful, insular way of calling the French light.

A: Is the bullet light that dashes from the gun-mouth while the eye winks and the heart beats to flatten itself to a wafer on the wall a hundred paces off?

NA: Even so direct and sternly undivertible of aim is this French people. All idealists, too absolute and earnest, with them the idea of a knife cuts real flesh.

A: I am strong to love this noble France, this poet of the nations who dreams on forever after some ideal good, some equal poise of sex, some un vowed love inviolate, some spontaneous brotherhood, some wealth that leaves none poor and finds none tired, some freedom of the many that respects the wisdom of the few.

NA: Heroic dreams.

A: Sublime to dream so,

NA: natural to wake.

A: And sad to use such lofty scaffoldings erected for the building of a church, to build instead a brothel or a prison.

NA: So I mused up and down, up and down the terraced streets, the glittering boulevards, past the white colonnades of fair fantastic Paris.

A: The city who wears trees like plumes, as if man made them, spire and tower as if they had grown by nature tossing up her fountains in the sunshine of the squares

NA: as if in beauty's game she tossed the dice or blew the silver down-balls of her dreams to sow futurity with seeds of thought and count the passage of the festive hours.

A: Here the air thronged with statues poised upon their columns as if to stand a moment were a feat against the blue.

NA: what breathing room for a nation that runs fast. Paris has such flowers! But England also... there was a yellow rose by the south window of the little house that Romney gathered in his hand on all my birthdays save that last when I shook the tree too rough, too rough for roses to stay after. I must not linger here. I must on to Italy, my home.

A: I walked the day out, musing on life and art and whether after all, a larger metaphysics might not help our physics, a completer poetry adjust our daily life and vulgar wants more fully than -

NA: A gentleman, as abstracted as myself, came full against me then resolved the clash in voluble excuses. Obviously some learned member of the academy.

Man: Madame, your pardon.

A: Then he swerved from me as confounded as if he had heard that Dumas had been called to the academy to teach.

NA: Since when was genius found respectable?

A: It passes in its place, which means the seventh floor back or else the hospital. Pistols are ingenious things but prudent men, which academicians are, scarce keep them in the cupboard with the prunes.

NA: Onward, we play a dreary game of hide and seek. We shape a figure of our fantasy, call nothing something and run after it and lose it and lose ourselves too in the search til clash against us comes a somebody who also has lost something and is lost.

A: Academician vs. poet.

NA: Philosopher vs. philanthropist.

A: Man against woman.

NA: Against the living, the dead.

A: What face is that? It was a real face. Perhaps a real Marian? I ought to write to Romney: Marian's here. Can I write him a half truth? Truly that was Marian's face and just as truly the arms of that same Marian, clasped a child. I cannot write to Romney, *Here she is, I saw her in Paris, she's not dead, she's damned.* Stop. I go too fast. I'm cruel like the rest. Suppose a neighbor is sick and asked her, *Marian, carry out my child in this spring air.* I punish her for that? I brand her therefor?

NA: Tired of hard thoughts I went to wander through the market and make sure that there were still roses in the world.

*Act Two Scene 4 Marian's Secret  
(Two Auroras, Marian, Parisian lady)*

*The stage is very bare. All that is left is stacked and boxed or covered over. The set has become a series of geometric objects. The light through the window is coming from higher, the stage is getting brighter.*

A: I saw her again, asking the price of a branch of mountain gorse. She had been expecting me. Had seen me the day before. She led the way and I,

NA: as by a narrow plank across devouring waters, followed her. Stepping by her footsteps. Breathing by her breath. And holding her with eyes that would not slip.

A: And so, without a word we walked a mile and so another mile, without a word. I saw her room.

NA: Twas scarce larger than a grave, a mouse could find no shelter in it much less a greater secret.

A: Curtainless, the window fixed us with its torturing eye. There he lay upon his back, the yearling creature, warm and moist with life. Everything so soft and tender.

NA: And love was there.

A: She leaned above him (drinking him like wine)

NA: in that extremity of love that will pass for agony or rapture. Seeing that love includes the whole of nature. Since more can never be than just love.

A: I thought her wicked, unclean, a kidnapper or worse. She faced my accusations, those I spoke and those I did not.

Marian: He is mine. I am as proud as any mother in the world. I found him. I found him where I found my curse, in the gutter with my shame. What have you to say to that? Those who are happy, who sit safe and high and never speak against my right to suffer, might think me seduced. Do wolves seduce the wandering fawn? Do eagles, having grasped a lamb with their claws, seduce it to carrion? I was not ever, as you say, seduced, but simply murdered. There is nothing to do when people are dead. If you are pious, sing a hymn and go. Go by all means. Leave me. Let me rest. I'm dead, I say. And if to save my child from death, the mother in me has survived the rest. That is God's miracle, I'm not less dead for that. I'm nothing more than just a mother. For my child I'm warm and cold and hungry and afraid, and smell the flowers a little and see the sun and speak and am silent. Just for him. I pray you therefore, mistake me not. Do not treat me as if I were alive. And he? How is it with him? Tell me. It was always Lady Waldemar that he loved. No, don't be surprised. I knew. You see, I loved on my knees as others pray. I was his for his uses, not my own, his stool to sit upon, his cup to fill with wine or vinegar, whichever drink might please him. For that was my pleasure. Until Lady Waldemar came.

At first I felt distrust. But still she came. She bade me never tell him that she had come. She liked to love me better than he knew. So very kind she was. And every time she came she brought more light. And her light made my sorrow clearer. Well, I cannot blame her for that. It would be the same if an angel came, whose right should prove my wrong. And every time the lady came she looked more beautiful and spoke more like a flute among green trees. Until at last as one whose heart being sad on hearing lovely music suddenly dissolves in weeping, I broke into tears and asked her counsel. Had I erred in being too happy?

She wrapped me in her generous arms at once and let me dream a moment how it feels to have a real mother and when I looked her face was so bright, too bright not to be a little hard. Though she was kind, Lady Waldemar hurt me. She told me that Romney could not love me. A man like Romney Leigh needs a wife more level to himself. She promised to provide me the means for passage to Australia. Her maid who knew the customs of the world would travel with me. I never liked the woman's face. Or voice. Or ways. It made me blush to look at her. Every time she came my veins ran cold. She spoke too familiarly, touched me. At last I asked Lady Waldemar if such a one could be trusted. She called me silly until I left it. The rest is short. I was obedient. I wrote my letter to Romney. And followed that bad guide.

A woman, hear me, let me make it plain, a woman not a monster, both her breasts made to suckle babes, betrayed me. I, a woman also, young and ignorant, and heavy with grief, my two eyes near washed away with weeping. I was so dull, so blind, only half alive, not seeing by what road, nor by what ship, not toward what place, nor to what end. You understand? I had the swooning sickness on the shifting ship. No need for her friends to bring their damnable drugged cup and yet they brought it. And waking, I told you, I woke up in a grave. How many weeks, I know not. Many weeks. They let me go when they saw I was mad. They feared my eyes and loosed me, as boys might a mad dog which they had tortured. Up and down I went, through a foreign country crossed everywhere by long thin poplar lines like fingers of some ghastly skeleton hand. Through sunlight and moonlight, pushed out from hell. Some charitable peasants gave me bread and Mary's image to wear around my neck. How heavy it seemed. A woman could be strangled with less weight. I threw it in a ditch to keep it clean. I did not need her protection. Brutal men were stopped short when they saw me. I must have had an awful look.

I lived in a dream until my brain cleared and I found myself on the road one evening. I, Marian Erle, myself alone. Undone. Facing a sunset low upon the flats as if it were the finish of all time. The great red stone upon my grave which angels were too weak to roll away. A miller's wife took me in and spent her pity on me. Made me calm and merely very reasonably sad. She found me a servant's place in Paris. I was quiet as a beaten ass who, having fallen through overloads, stands up to let them charge her with another pack. My Parisian mistress was young and light. She was easy with me, not so much for kindness but because she led such an easy life between her lover and her looking glass, scarce knowing which way she was praised the most. She felt so pretty and so pleased all day she could not take the trouble to be cross. But sometimes as I stopped to tie her shoe, she would tap me softly with her slender foot, still restless with last night's dancing and say,

Woman: Fie, pale face, are you English all pale and silent?

Marian: Then came an hour when all went otherwise.

Woman: I think thou mocks't me and my house. Confess, thou will be a mother in a month.

Marian: I could not answer her. So that was the meaning then? I had not realized in all my thoughts. Through all the cold numb aching, through all the up-break of the fountains of my heart, the rains had

swelled too large. God could make mothers out of victims. Why not? He overgrows a grave with violets. I would be a mother in a month. I hoped it was not wicked to be glad. I wept and laughed.

Woman: Confess! Confess!

Marian: What was there to confess? Man's cruelty? This anguish? Or this exstasy? This shame or this glory? She could not take it in. An acorn could sooner take in the sea. I left. The rest is here.

*Act Two Scene 5 Dear Lady Waldemar  
(Two Auroras)*

NA: O, Romney, I have your debts to pay. And I'll be just and pay them. My head aches. I cannot see my road along this dark. Nor can I creep or grope, as fits the dark, for these foot-catching robes of womanhood. A man might walk a little... but I! I cannot write to him, stop his marriage to Lady Waldemar. My letter would be too late. No, I will not let thy hideous secret out to agonize the man I love - I mean, the friend I love.. as friends love. It is strange, to day while marian told h er story, how I listened chiefly to a voice not hers, one that mixed with mine long years ago among the garden trees, and said to me, to me too, Be my wife, Aurora. It is strange with what a swell of yearning passion, as a snow of ghosts might beat againt the impervious door of heaven, I thought, Now if I had been a woman such as god made women, to save men by love - by just my love I might have saved this man, and made a nobler poem for the world than all I have failed in. But I failed and now he's lost.

A: O Romney, my friend.

NA: The world's male chivalry has perished but women are knights errant to the last.

A: And if Cervantes had been Shakespeare too, he would have made Don Quixote a woman. I wrote a letter to Lady Waldemar.

NA: Lady Waldemar, I am very glad I never liked you. You spared me in your turn to like me much. Your liking surely had done worse for me than has your loathing, though the last appears sufficiently unscrupulous to hurt. But now you may be Romney's wife. You've gambled deep as Lucifer and won the morning star. In that case the noble house of Leigh must henceforth with its good roof, shelter you.

A: I cannot speak and burn you up between those rafters so you're safe.

NA: You two must grow together til God's great fire. But make the best of time. Hide this letter. Let it speak no more than I shall. How you tricked Marian and set her love digging its own grave within her green hope's pretty garden ground.

A: I spare you common curses. Ponder this, if haply you're the wife of Romney Leigh, for which inheritance beyond your birth you sold that poisonous porridge you call your soul. I charge you be his

faithful and true wife, keep warm his house and clean his board and when he speaks be quick with your obedience.

NA: Grind your paltry wants and low desires to dust beneath his heel though even thus the ground must hurt him. You shall not vex him. You shall not jar him when he's sad nor cross him when he's eager, nor let him see thee too near and unlearn thy sweet seeming. Pay the price of lies by being constrained to lie on still.

A: A million more will scarcely damn thee deeper.

NA: We'll breathe softly and stir no dangerous embers. Fail a point and show our Romney wounded,

A: ill content,

NA: tormented in his home,

A: we open mouth and such a noise will follow, the last trumpet will scarcely seem more dreadful, even to you.

NA: Romney will push you forth, all other men declaring it well done while women, even the worst, your like, will draw their skirts back to brush you in the street. Then I wrote another letter.

A: Dear Lord Howe, Marian lives, is found and will find a home with me.

*Act Two Scene 6  
Film Interlude focusing on Italy in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

*Act Two Scene 7 Dawn  
(Two Auroras, Vincent Carrington, Lady Waldemar)*

*The stone terrace of an Italian villa has replaced the London bay window.*

NA: I found a house in Florence on the hills of Bellosguardo. It's a tower which keeps a post of double observation over that valley of Arno, holding as a hand the outspread city, straight toward the setting sun, the mountains which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups turned red to the brim because their wine is red.

A: No sun could die nor yet be born unseen by dwellers of my villa.

NA: Morn and eve were magnified before us in the pure illimitable space and pause of sky.

A: Intense as angels' garments blanched with God, less blue than radiant.

NA: A letter came from Vincent Carrington. The painter who used to walk with us in the green.

Vincent: My dear Aurora, you've been as silent as a poet should when any other is sure to speak. Meantime your book is as eloquent as if you were not dumb. Even common critics ordinarily deaf and loath to seem deaf, pronounce for once aright. You'd think they really heard. And so they do. We think here you have written a good book, and you a woman. I read your book and loved it. Will you love my wife too? Here is my secret I might keep more but I yield it up because I know you'll write the sooner for it. Are you put to wonder by my marriage like poor Leigh? When the fever took him first they tell me that Lady Waldemar mixed drinks and counted grains like any salaried nurse, excepting that she wept also.

NA: This room stifles. Better burn than choke. Best have air. Air. Although it come with fire.

A: Throw open the blinds and window to the noon and take a blister on my brow instead of this dead weight.

NA: Insufferable crickets, sick and hoarse with rapture of the summer heat, sing like poets til your hearts break, sing. Books succeed and lives fail.

A: Do I feel it so at last?

NA: Hush, Aurora Leigh, learn to reverence, even this poor myself.

A: The book has some truth in it. And truth outlives pain as the soul does life. I have written truth

NA: and I a woman,

A: feebly,

NA: partially,

A: inaptly in presentation Romney will add, because a woman.

NA: The truth in my book is the truth which draws through all things upwards, that a two-fold world must go to a perfect cosmos, natural things and spiritual. She who separates the natural and the spiritual in art, in morals or in the social drift, tears up the bond of nature and brings death.

Vincent: Paints futile pictures.

A: Writes unreal verse.

LW: Leads vulgar days.

A: Deals ignorantly with men.

NA: Is wrong, in short, at all points.

A: We divided the apple of life and cut it through the pips.

NA: Without the spiritual, observe, the natural's impossible, no form, no motion. Without the sensuous, spiritual is inappreciable, no beauty or power.

A: Art is the witness of what is behind this show. If this world were all, then imitation would be all in art.

NA: We stand here, genuine artists, witnessing for God's complete undivided work. That every natural flower which grows on earth implies a flower on the spiritual side, substantial, archetypal, all aglow, with blossoming causes. Thus is art self-magnified in magnifying a truth which, if fully recognized, would change the world and shift its morals. If a man could feel not one day in the artist's exstasy but every day, feast, fast or working day, the spiritual significance burn through the hieroglyphic of material shows,

A: henceforward he would paint the globe with wings and reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree and even his very body as a man which now he counts so vile that all the towns use their daughters on summer nights

NA: when God is sad in heaven to think what goes on in his recreant world he made quite other

A: while that moon he made to shine there at the first love's covenant shines still,

NA: convictive as a marriage ring before adulterous eyes.

A: Well my father was an Englishman.

NA: My mother's blood in me is not so strong that I could bear the stress of this Tuscan noon and keep my wits.

*Lights go to a bright white out.*

*Act Two Scene 8 New Moon  
(Two Auroras, Romney, Marian, Lady Waldemar) (from Book Eight)*

*Night. The moon is new.*

A: one evening as I sat alone on the terrace of my tower. A book upon my knee to counterfeit reading. The heavens were making room to hold the night.

NA: The sevenfold heavens unfolding all their gates to let the stars out slowly, gradually the purple and transparent shadows had filled up the whole valley to the brim and flooded all the city. A drowned city in some enchanted sea, cut off from nature, drawing those who gaze with passionate desire to leap and plunge and find a sea king with a voice of waves and treacherous soft eyes and slippery locks you cannot kiss but you shall bring away his salt upon your lips.

A: The duomo bells strike ten.

NA: Methinks I have plunged. I see it all so clear.

A: I felt him rather than beheld him.

NA: And oh my heart,

A: my sea king,

NA: in my ears the sound of waters.

A: Up I rose as if he were my king indeed.

NA: Have you brought Lady Waldemar with you?

Romney: I brought a letter from her.

LW: Aurora Leigh, I prayed your cousin take you this. He says he'll do it. After years of love, or what is called so, when a woman frets and fools upon one string of a man's name and fingers it forever til it breaks, he may perhaps do for her such a thing. And she accept it without detriment. Although she does not love him anymore. Nor you, I do not love you, muse, who shall repent your most ungracious letter. You've wronged me foully. Are you made so ill, you woman, to impute such ill to me? We both had mothers. Lay in their bosoms once. And, after all, I thank you, Aurora, for proving to me that there are things I would not do, not for my life nor for him. Though some things I have somewhat overdone. For instance, when I went to see a Goddess one morning on Olympus with a step that shook the thunder from a certain cloud. Committing myself vilely. Could I think the muse I pulled my heart out from my breast to soften had herself a sort of heart and loved my mortal? He at least loved her. I heard him say so. It was my recompense when watching by his bedside for fourteen days,

Romney & LW: Is it thou? Breathe closer, sweetest mouth.

LW: And then, when he was able,

Romney & LW: I have loved her well. Although she could not love me.

LW: Say instead, I answered, she does love you.

Romney: No, no. No she loves me not. Aurora does better. Bring her book and read it softly.

LW: So I read your book, Aurora. For an hour that day, I kept its pauses and marked its emphasis. My voice impaled upon its hooks of rhyme. I read on calmly. Calmly shut it up, observing, There's some merit in the book and yet the merit in it is thrown away as chances still with women if we write or write not. *Goodbye, Mister Leigh, you'll find another reader next time.* A woman who does better than to love, I hate. She will do nothing very well. Male poets are preferable, tiring less and teaching more. I triumphed over both of you and left. When I saw him afterward, I had read your shameful letter and my heart. He came with health recovered, strong, though pale. Lord Howe and he. A courteous pair. I told them, as I tell you now, that I took some trouble for his sake because I knew he did not love the girl, to spoil my hands with working in the stream of that poor babbling nature til she went, consigned to one I trusted, my own maid, who once had lived full five months in my house, dressed hair superbly, with a lavish purse to carry to Australia where she had left a husband she said. If the creature lied, the mission failed, we all do fail and lie more or less and I'm sorry which is all that is expected of us when we fail the most and go to church to own it.

What I meant was just the best for him and me and her. Yes, best even for Marian. I am sorry for it. Very sorry. Poor child. I would have mended it with gold but he nipped the bud of such a thought with that cold Leigh look which I fancied once and broke in, henceforth she would be called his wife. His wife required no help from me. He was bound to Florence to resume this broken bond. I asked him to carry a letter from me to you. Yes, he said, if such a letter were prepared in time. He's just. He'll wash his hands in blood to keep them clean. And so cold, courteous, he bowed. We parted. Parted. Face no more. Voice no more. Love no more. Wiped wholly out. Like some scholar's scrawl on heart and slate. Spit on and wiped out utterly. I have been too human. Have we business in our rank with blood in the veins? I will henceforth have none. Not even to keep the color at my lip. A rose is pink and pretty without blood. Why not a woman? When we've played in vain the game to adore, we have resources still and can play on at leisure being adored.

I wish you joy, Miss Leigh. You've made a happy marriage for Romney and Marian. You need not wish me joy. I have so much. Observe, Aurora Leigh - your eyes are the same as his, but for you I might have won his love, and to you I have shown my naked heart for which three things I hate, hate, hate you. Ah. Suppose a fourth: I cannot choose but think that with him I were more virtuous than you without him. So I hate you from this gulf and hollow of my soul which opens out to what, except for you, had been my heaven and is instead a place to curse by - love.

NA: We sat in stillness.

Romney: Is Marian here?

NA: Yes.

Romney: Is she well?

NA: Yes.

A: And there she was. Marian Erle. And he, so very gentle, asking her to marry him. And she so very kind, spoke to him of her love, of her child, of her life, of her self. And I watched and I listened. Scarce knowing my own feelings. Scarce daring to breathe.

Marian: Romney, I love your work. I will gladly do your work. I do not want your hand. I do not love you.

A: And then she disappeared back to her sleeping angel.

NA: I spoke to him of the wonder of a summer's night, of the beauty of the stars.

A: I asked him to wish with me upon a shooting star.

Romney: I have read your book. It rests in my heart. It lives in me. Wakes and dreams in me.

NA: I am thinking of a far off June when you and I discoursed on life and art, with both untried. I was thinking how it was morning then and now it is night. If I had known that morning in the dew that you would say such words to me at the close of many years when speaking of a book of mine, it would have pleased me.

Romney: This night is softer than an English day. I was heavy then and stupid and distracted with the cries of tortured prisoners in the polished brass of a phalarian bull society, which though it seems to bellow bravely like ten bulls if you listen, moans and cries despairingly, its victims tossed and gored and trampled by the hooves of other victims. I heard the cries too close. I could not hear the angels lift a fold of rustling air. I could not hear what they said to help me. I saw the world as one great famishing carnivorous mouth. A huge deserted callow black bird thing with a piteous open beak that hurt my heart til down upon the filthy ground I dropped and tore the violets to get the worms. How dark it was that morning in the sun. Oh I recollect the sound. And how you lifted your small hand and how your white dress and your burnished curls went greatening around you in the still blue air as if an inspiration from within had blown them all out when you spoke the words,

Romney & A: It takes a soul to move a body. It takes a high-souled man to move the masses, even to a cleaner sty. It takes the ideal to blow an inch inside the dust of the actual and your revolutionaries fail because not poets enough to understand that life develops from within.

Romney: I yield; you have conquered.

NA: Softly sir, I had a friend once I held in reverence. If he strained too wide it was not to take honor but to give help. The gesture was heroic. Pray you then, for my sake, use less bitterness when speaking of my friend. I have failed too. You have read my book but not my heart. For you recollect my heart is writ in Sanskrit which you bungle at. I've surely failed, I know, if failure means to look back sadly on work gladly done. I can remember a friend's words as well as you can, sir. Well, no matter - I say so much to keep you from saying more. I am not so high that I can bear to have you at my foot. That June day, too deeply sunk in craterous sunsets now for you or me to dig it up alive, I hold that if I, that day, had shown a gentler spirit, less arrogance, it would not have hurt me. I think, you see, more humbly of myself than when I crowned myself with ivy and supposed yes, laugh, sir, I'll laugh with you. Pray do laugh. I've had so many birthdays since that day, I've learned to prize mirth's opportunities which come too seldom. Look, I was right upon the whole that birthday morning. It is impossible to get at men excepting through their souls however open their carnivorous jaws. And poets get directlier at the soul than any of your economists. For which you must not overlook the poet's work when scheming for the world's necessities. We both were wrong that day. I who talked of art and you who grieved for all men's griefs. We surely made too small a part for God in these things.

Romney: Poet, doubt yourself but never doubt that you're a poet to me. You have written poems sweet which moved me in secret as the sap is moved in still March branches signless as a stone. You have shown me truths that help me. Truths set within my reach by means of you, presented by your voice and verse the way to take them clearest.

NA: I wish that you could see me bare to the soul. I love you.

*Romney and NA kiss.*

A: Art is much but love is more. Art symbolizes heaven

NA: - but love is god and makes heaven.

*White out to sudden black*

FIN