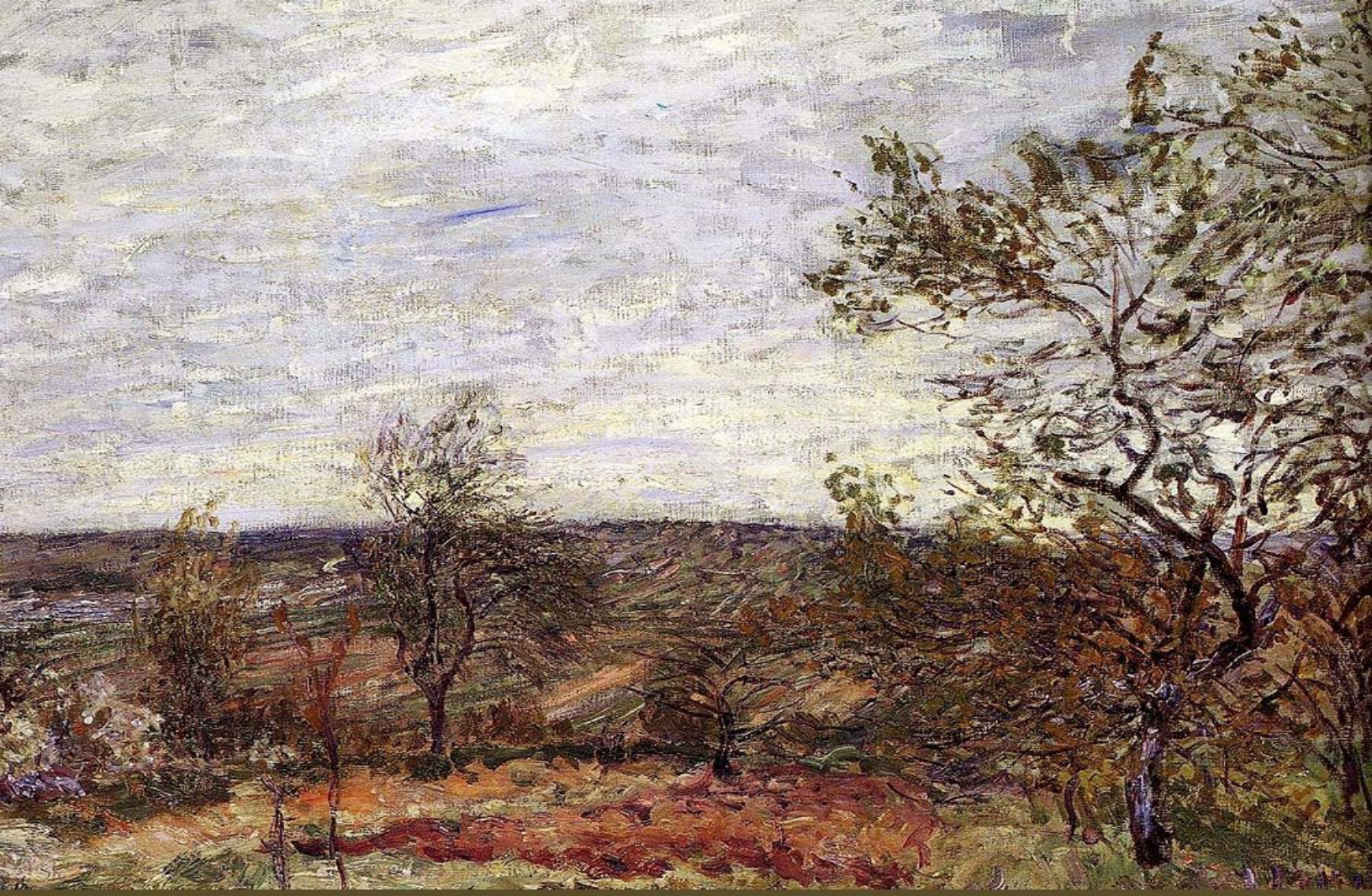

AURORA FLOYD

MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON

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Aurora Floyd

Chapter 1

How a Rich Banker Married an Actress.

Faint streaks of crimson glimmer here and there amid the rich darkness of the Kentish woods. Autumn’s red finger has been lightly laid upon the foliage — sparingly, as the artist puts the brighter tints into his picture; but the grandeur of an August sunset blazes upon the peaceful landscape, and lights all into glory.

The encircling woods and wide lawn-like meadows, the still ponds of limpid water, the trim hedges, and the smooth winding roads; undulating hill-tops, melting into the purple distance; laboring-men’s cottages, gleaming white from the surrounding foliage; solitary roadside inns with brown thatched roofs and moss-grown stacks of lop-sided chimneys; noble mansions hiding behind ancestral oaks; tiny Gothic edifices; Swiss and rustic lodges; pillared gates surmounted by escutcheons hewn in stone, and festooned with green wreaths of clustering ivy; village churches and prim school-houses — every object in the fair English prospect is steeped in a luminous haze, as the twilight shadows steal slowly upward from the dim recesses of shady woodland and winding lane, and every outline of the landscape darkens against the deepening crimson of the sky.

Upon the broad *façade* of a mighty redbrick mansion, built in the favorite style of the early Georgian era, the sinking sun lingers long, making gorgeous illumination. The long

rows of narrow windows are all aflame with the red light, and an honest homeward-tramping villager pauses once or twice in the roadway to glance across the smooth width of dewy lawn and tranquil lake, half fearful that there must be something more than natural in the glitter of those windows, and that may be Maister Floyd's house is afire.

The stately red-built mansion belongs to Maister Floyd, as he is called in the honest *patois* of the Kentish rustics; to Archibald Martin Floyd, of the great banking-house of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, Lombard street, City.

The Kentish rustics knew very little of this city banking-house, for Archibald Martin, the senior partner, has long retired from any active share in the business, which is carried on entirely by his nephews, Andrew and Alexander Floyd, both steady, middle-aged men, with families and country-houses; both owing their fortune to the rich uncle, who had found places in his counting-house for them some thirty years before, when they were tall, raw-boned, sandy-haired, red-complexioned Scottish youths, fresh from some unpronounceable village north of Aberdeen.

The young gentlemen signed their names M'Floyd when they first entered their uncle's counting-house; but they very soon followed that wise relative's example, and dropped the formidable prefix. "We've nae need to tell these Southeran bodies that we're Scotche," Alick remarked to his brother as he wrote his name for the first time A. Floyd, all short.

The Scottish banking-house had thriven wonderfully in the hospitable English capital. Unprecedented success had waited upon every enterprise undertaken by the old-established and respected firm of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd. It had been Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd for upward of a

century; for, as one member of the house dropped off, some greener branch shot out from the old tree; and there had never yet been any need to alter the treble repetition of the well-known name upon the brass plates that adorned the swinging mahogany doors of the banking-house. To this brass plate Archibald Martin Floyd pointed when, some thirty years before the August evening of which I write, he took his raw-boned nephews for the first time across the threshold of his house of business.

“See there, boys,” he said: “look at the three names upon that brass plate. Your uncle George is over fifty, and a bachelor — that’s the first name; our first cousin, Stephen Floyd, of Calcutta, is going to sell out of the business before long — that’s the second name; the third is mine, and I’m thirty-seven years of age, remember, boys, and not likely to make a fool of myself by marrying. Your names will be wanted by and by to fill the blanks; see that you keep them bright in the meantime; for, let so much as one speck rest upon them, and they’ll never be fit for that brass plate.”

Perhaps the rugged Scottish youths took this lesson to heart, or perhaps honesty was a natural and inborn virtue in the house of Floyd. Be it as it might, neither Alick nor Andrew disgraced their ancestry; and when Stephen Floyd, the East-Indian merchant, sold out, and Uncle George grew tired of business, and took to building, as an elderly, bachelor-like hobby, the young men stepped into their relatives’ shoes, and took the conduct of the business upon their broad Northern shoulders. Upon one point only Archibald Martin Floyd had misled his nephews, and that point regarded himself. Ten years after his address to the young men, at the sober age of seven-and-forty, the banker not only made a fool of himself by marrying, but, if indeed such things are foolish, sank still farther from the proud

elevation of worldly wisdom by falling desperately in love with a beautiful but penniless woman, whom he brought home with him after a business tour through the manufacturing districts, and with but little ceremony introduced to his relations and the county families round his Kentish estate as his newly-wedded wife.

The whole affair was so sudden, that these very county families had scarcely recovered from their surprise at reading a certain paragraph in the left-hand column of the *Times,* announcing the marriage of “Archibald Martin Floyd, Banker, of Lombard street and Felden Woods, to Eliza, only surviving daughter of Captain Prodder,” when the bridegroom’s travelling carriage dashed past the Gothic lodge at the gates, along the avenue and under the great stone portico at the side of the house, and Eliza Floyd entered the banker’s mansion, nodding good-naturedly to the bewildered servants, marshalled into the hall to receive their new mistress.

The banker’s wife was a tall young woman of about thirty, with a dark complexion, and great flashing black eyes that lit up a face which might otherwise have been unnoticeable into the splendor of absolute beauty.

Let the reader recall one of those faces whose sole loveliness lies in the glorious light of a pair of magnificent eyes, and remember how far they surpass all others in their power of fascination. The same amount of beauty frittered away upon a well-shaped nose, rosy, pouting lips, symmetrical forehead, and delicate complexion, would make an ordinarily lovely woman; but concentrated in one nucleus, in the wondrous lustre of the eyes, it makes a divinity, a Circe. You may meet the first any day of your life; the second, once in a lifetime.

Mr. Floyd introduced his wife to the neighboring gentry at a dinner-party, which he gave soon after the lady's arrival at Felden Woods, as his country seat was called; and this ceremony very briefly despatched, he said no more about his choice either to his neighbors or his relations, who would have been very glad to hear how this unlooked-for marriage had come about, and who hinted the same to the happy bridegroom, but without effect.

Of course this very reticence on the part of Archibald Floyd himself only set the thousand tongues of rumor more busily to work. Round Beckenham and West Wickham, near which villages Felden Woods was situated, there was scarcely any one debased and degraded station of life from which Mrs. Floyd was not reported to have sprung. She was a factory-girl, and the silly old banker had seen her in the streets of Manchester, with a colored handkerchief on her head, a coral necklace round her throat, and shoeless and stockingless feet tramping in the mud: he had seen her thus, and had fallen incontinently in love with her, and offered to marry her there and then. She was an actress, and he had seen her on the Manchester stage; nay, lower still, she was some poor performer, decked in dirty white muslin, red cotton velvet, and spangles, who acted in a canvas booth, with a pitiful set of wandering vagabonds and a learned pig. Sometimes they said she was an equestrian, and it was at Astley's, and not in the manufacturing districts, that the banker had first seen her; nay, some there were ready to swear that they themselves had beheld her leaping through gilded hoops, and dancing the cachuca upon six barebacked steeds in that sawdust-strewn arena. There were whispered rumors that went even farther than these — rumors which I dare not even set down here, for the busy tongues that dealt so mercilessly with the name and fame of Eliza Floyd were not unbarbed by malice. It may be that some of the ladies had personal

reasons for their spite against the bride, and that many a waning beauty, in those pleasant Kentish mansions, had speculated upon the banker's income, and the advantages attendant upon a union with the owner of Felden Woods.

The daring, disreputable creature, with not even beauty to recommend her — for the Kentish damsels scrupulously ignored Eliza's wonderful eyes, and were sternly critical with her low forehead, doubtful nose, and rather wide mouth — the artful, designing minx, who, at the mature age of nine-and-twenty, with her hair growing nearly down to her eyebrows, had contrived to secure to herself the hand and fortune of the richest man in Kent — the man who had been hitherto so impregnable to every assault from bright eyes and rosy lips, that the most indefatigable of manoeuvring mothers had given him up in despair, and ceased to make visionary and Alnaschar-like arrangements of the furniture in Mr. Floyd's great red-brick palace.

The female portion of the community wondered indignantly at the supineness of the two Scotch nephews, and the old bachelor brother, George Floyd. Why did not these people show a little spirit — institute a commission of lunacy, and shut their crazy relative in a mad-house? He deserved it.

The ruined *noblesse* of the Faubourg St. Germain, the faded *duchesses* and wornout *vidames,* could not have abused a wealthy Bonapartist with more vigorous rancor than these people employed in their ceaseless babble about the banker's wife. Whatever she did was a new subject for criticism; even at that first dinner-party, though Eliza had no more ventured to interfere with the arrangements of the man-cook and housekeeper than if she had been a visitor at Buckingham Palace, the angry guests found that everything had degenerated since "that woman" had entered the house. They hated the successful adventuress — hated her

for her beautiful eyes and her gorgeous jewels, the extravagant gifts of an adoring husband — hated her for her stately figure and graceful movements, which never betrayed the rumored obscurity of her origin — hated her, above all, for her insolence in not appearing in the least afraid of the lofty members of that new circle in which she found herself.

If she had meekly eaten the ample dish of humble-pie which these county families were prepared to set before her — if she had licked the dust from their aristocratic shoes, courted their patronage, and submitted to be “taken up” by them — they might, perhaps, in time, have forgiven her. But she did none of this. If they called upon her, well and good; she was frankly and cheerfully glad to see them. They might find her in her gardening-gloves, with rumpled hair and a watering-pot in her hands, busy among her conservatories; and she would receive them as serenely as if she had been born in a palace, and used to homage from her very babyhood. Let them be as frigidly polite as they pleased, she was always easy, candid, gay, and good-natured. She would rattle away about her “dear old Archy,” as she presumed to call her benefactor and husband; or she would show her guests some new picture he had bought, and would dare — the impudent, ignorant, pretentious creature! — to talk about Art, as if all the high-sounding jargon with which they tried to crush her was as familiar to her as to a Royal Academician. When etiquette demanded her returning these stately visits, she would drive boldly up to her neighbors’ doors in a tiny basket carriage, drawn by one rough pony; for it was an affectation of this designing woman to affect simplicity in her tastes, and to abjure all display. She would take all the grandeur she met with as a thing of course, and chatter and laugh, with her flaunting theatrical animation, much to the admiration of misguided young men, who could not see the high-bred charms of her

detractors, but who were never tired of talking of Mrs. Floyd's jolly manners and glorious eyes.

I wonder whether poor Eliza Floyd knew all or half the cruel things that were said of her. I shrewdly suspect that she contrived somehow or other to hear them all, and that she rather enjoyed the fun. She had been used to a life of excitement, and Felden Woods might have seemed dull to her but for these ever-fresh scandals. She took a malicious delight in the discomfiture of her enemies.

"How badly they must have wanted you for a husband, Archy," she said, "when they hate me so ferociously. Poor, portionless old maids, to think I should snatch their prey from them! I know they think it a hard thing that they can't have me hung for marrying a rich man."

But the banker was so deeply wounded when his adored wife repeated to him the gossip which she had heard from her maid, who was a stanch adherent to a kind, easy mistress, that Eliza ever after withheld these reports from him. They amused her, but they stung him to the quick. Proud and sensitive, like almost all very honest and conscientious men, he could not endure that any creature should dare to befoul the name of the woman he loved so tenderly. What was the obscurity from which he had taken her to him? Is a star less bright because it shines on a gutter as well as upon the purple bosom of the midnight sea? Is a virtuous and generous-hearted woman less worthy because you find her making a scanty living out of the only industry she can exercise, and acting Juliet to an audience of factory hands, who gave threepence apiece for the privilege of admiring and applauding her?

Yes, the murder must out; the malicious were not altogether wrong in their conjectures: Eliza Prodder was an

actress; and it was on the dirty boards of a second-rate theatre in Lancashire that the wealthy banker had first beheld her. Archibald Floyd nourished a traditional, passive, but sincere admiration for the British Drama. Yes, the *British* Drama; for he had lived in a day when the drama was British, and when *George Barnwell* and *Jane Shore* were among the favorite works of art of a play-going public. How sad that we should have degenerated since those classic days, and that the graceful story of Milwood and her apprentice-admirer is now so rarely set before us! Imbued, therefore, with the solemnity of Shakespeare and the drama, Mr. Floyd, stopping for a night at this second-rate Lancashire town, dropped into the dusty boxes of the theatre to witness the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*—the heiress of the Capulets being represented by Miss Eliza Percival, *alias* Prodder.

I do not believe that Miss Percival was a good actress, or that she would ever become distinguished in her profession; but she had a deep, melodious voice, which rolled out the words of her author in a certain rich though rather monotonous music, pleasant to hear; and upon the stage she was very beautiful to look at, for her face lighted up the little theatre better than all the gas that the manager grudged to his scanty audiences.

It was not the fashion in those days to make “sensation” dramas of Shakespeare’s plays. There was no *Hamlet* with the celebrated water-scene, and the Danish prince taking a “header” to save poor weak-witted Ophelia. In the little Lancashire theatre it would have been thought a terrible sin against all canons of dramatic art had Othello or his Ancient attempted to sit down during any part of the solemn performance. The hope of Denmark was no long-robed Norseman with flowing flaxen hair, but an individual who wore a short, rusty black cotton velvet garment,

shaped like a child’s frock and trimmed with bugles, which dropped off and were trodden upon at intervals throughout the performance. The simple actors held, that tragedy, to be tragedy, must be utterly unlike anything that ever happened beneath the sun. And Eliza Prodder patiently trod the old and beaten track, far too good-natured, light-hearted, and easy-going a creature to attempt any foolish interference with the crookedness of the times, which she was not born to set right.

What can I say, then, about her performance of the impassioned Italian girl? She wore white satin and spangles, the spangles sewn upon the dirty hem of her dress, in the firm belief, common to all provincial actresses, that spangles are an antidote to dirt. She was laughing and talking in the whitewashed little green-room the very minute before she ran on to the stage to wail for her murdered kinsman and her banished lover. They tell us that Macready began to be Richelieu at three o’clock in the afternoon, and that it was dangerous to approach or to speak to him between that hour and the close of the performance. So dangerous, indeed, that surely none but the daring and misguided gentleman who once met the great tragedian in a dark passage, and gave him “Good-morrow, ‘Mac,’ “ would have had the temerity to attempt it. But Miss Percival did not take her profession very deeply to heart; the Lancashire salaries barely paid for the physical wear and tear of early rehearsals and long performances; how, then, for that mental exhaustion of the true artist who lives in the character he represents?

The easy-going comedians with whom Eliza acted made friendly remarks to each other on their private affairs in the intervals of the most vengeful discourse; speculated upon the amount of money in the house in audible undertones during the pauses of the scene; and when Hamlet wanted

Horatio down at the foot-lights to ask him if he “marked that,” it was likely enough that the prince’s confidant was up the stage telling Polonius of the shameful way in which his landlady stole the tea and sugar.

It was not, therefore, Miss Percival’s acting that fascinated the banker. Archibald Floyd knew that she was as bad an actress as ever played the leading tragedy and comedy for five-and-twenty shillings a week. He had seen Miss O’Neil in that very character, and it moved him to a pitying smile as the factory hands applauded poor Eliza’s poison-scene. But, for all this, he fell in love with her. It was a repetition of the old story. It was Arthur Pendennis at the little Chatteris Theatre bewitched and bewildered by Miss Fotheringay all over again — only that instead of a feeble, impressionable boy, it was a sober, steady-going business-man of seven-and-forty, who had never felt one thrill of emotion in looking on a woman’s face until that night — until that night — and from that night to him the world only held one being, and life only had one object. He went the next evening, and the next, and then contrived to scrape acquaintance with some of the actors at a tavern next the theatre. They sponged upon him cruelly, these seedy comedians, and allowed him to pay for unlimited glasses of brandy and water, and flattered and cajoled him, and plucked out the heart of his mystery; and then went back to Eliza Percival, and told her that she had dropped into a good thing, for that an old chap with no end of money had fallen over head and ears in love with her, and that if she played her cards well, he would marry her to-morrow. They pointed him out to her through a hole in the green curtain, sitting almost alone in the shabby boxes, waiting for the play to begin and her black eyes to shine upon him once more.

Eliza laughed at her conquest; it was only one among many such, which had all ended alike — leading to nothing better than the purchase of a box on her benefit night, or a bouquet left for her at the stage-door. She did not know the power of first love upon a man of seven-and-forty. Before the week was out, Archibald Floyd had made her a solemn offer of his hand and fortune.

He had heard a great deal about her from her fellow-performers, and had heard nothing but good. Temptations resisted; diamond bracelets indignantly declined; graceful acts of gentle womanly charity done in secret; independence preserved through all poverty and trial — they told him a hundred stories of her goodness, that brought the blood to his face with proud and generous emotion. And she herself told him the simple history of her life — told him that she was the daughter of a merchant-captain called Prodder; that she was born at Liverpool; that she remembered little of her father, who was almost always at sea; nor of a brother, three years older than herself, who quarrelled with his father, the merchant-captain, and ran away, and was never heard of again; nor of her mother, who died when she, Eliza, was ten years old. The rest was told in a few words. She was taken into the family of an aunt who kept a grocer’s shop in Miss Prodder’s native town. She learned artificial flower-making, and did not take to the business. She went often to the Liverpool theatres, and thought she would like to go upon the stage. Being a daring and energetic young person, she left her aunt’s house one day, walked straight to the stage-manager of one of the minor theatres, and asked him to let her appear as Lady Macbeth. The man laughed at her, but told her that, in consideration of her fine figure and black eyes, he would give her fifteen shillings a week to “walk on,” as he technically called the business of the ladies who wander on to the stage, sometimes dressed as villagers, sometimes in

court costume of calico trimmed with gold, and stare vaguely at whatever may be taking place in the scene. From “walking on” Eliza came to play minor parts, indignantly refused by her superiors; from these she plunged ambitiously into the tragic lead, and thus, for nine years, pursued the even tenor of her way, until, close upon her nine-and-twentieth birthday, Fate threw the wealthy banker across her pathway, and in the parish church of a small town in the Potteries the black-eyed actress exchanged the name of Prodder for that of Floyd.

She had accepted the rich man partly because, moved by a sentiment of gratitude for the generous ardor of his affection, she was inclined to like him better than any one else she knew, and partly in accordance with the advice of her theatrical friends, who told her, with more candor than elegance, that she would be a jolly fool to let such a chance escape her; but at the time she gave her hand to Archibald Martin Floyd she had no idea whatever of the magnitude of the fortune he had invited her to share. He told her that he was a banker, and her active mind immediately evoked the image of the only banker’s wife she had ever known — a portly lady, who wore silk gowns, lived in a square, stuccoed house with green blinds, kept a cook and house-maid, and took three box tickets for Miss Percival’s benefit.

When, therefore, the doting husband loaded his handsome bride with diamond bracelets and necklaces, and with silks and brocades that were stiff and unmanageable from their very richness — when he carried her straight from the Potteries to the Isle of Wight, and lodged her in spacious apartments at the best hotel in Ryde, and flung his money here and there as if he had carried the lamp of Aladdin in his coat-pocket — Eliza remonstrated with her new master, fearing that his love had driven him mad, and that this alarming extravagance was the first outburst of insanity.

It seemed a repetition of the dear old Burleigh story when Archibald Floyd took his wife into the long picture-gallery at Felden Woods. She clasped her hands for frank, womanly joy, as she looked at the magnificence about her. She compared herself to the humble bride of the marquis, and fell on her knees, and did theatrical homage to her lord. “Oh, Archy,” she said, “it is all too good for me. I am afraid I shall die of my grandeur, as the poor girl pined away at Burleigh House.”

In the full maturity of womanly loveliness, rich in health, freshness, and high spirits, how little could Eliza dream that she would hold even a briefer lease of these costly splendors than the Bride of Burleigh had done before her.

Now the reader, being acquainted with Eliza’s antecedents, may perhaps find in them some clew to the insolent ease and well-bred audacity with which Mrs. Floyd treated the second-rate county families who were bent upon putting her to confusion. She was an actress; for nine years she had lived in that ideal world in which dukes and marquises are as common as butchers and bakers in work-a-day life, in which, indeed, a nobleman is generally a poor, mean-spirited individual, who gets the worst of it on every hand, and is contemptuously entreated by the audience on account of his rank. How should she be abashed on entering the drawing-rooms of these Kentish mansions, when for nine years she had walked nightly on to a stage to be the focus for every eye, and to entertain her guests the evening through? Was it likely she was to be overawed by the Lenfields, who were coach-builders in Park Lane, or the Miss Manderlys, whose father had made his money by a patent for starch — she, who had received King Duncan at the gates of her castle, and had sat on her throne dispensing condescending hospitality to the obsequious

Thanes at Dunsinane? So, do what they would, they were unable to subdue this base intruder; while, to add to their mortification, it every day became more obvious that Mr. and Mrs. Floyd made one of the happiest couples who had ever worn the bonds of matrimony, and changed them into garlands of roses. If this were a very romantic story, it would be perhaps only proper for Eliza Floyd to pine in her gilded bower, and misapply her energies in weeping for some abandoned lover, deserted in an evil hour of ambitious madness. But as my story is a true one — not only true in a general sense, but strictly true as to the leading facts which I am about to relate — and as I could point out, in a certain county, far northward of the lovely Kentish woods, the very house in which the events I shall describe took place, I am bound also to be truthful here, and to set down as a fact that the love which Eliza Floyd bore for her husband was as pure and sincere an affection as ever man need hope to win from the generous heart of a good woman. What share gratitude may have had in that love I can not tell. If she lived in a handsome house, and was waited on by attentive and deferential servants; if she ate of delicate dishes, and drank costly wines; if she wore rich dresses and splendid jewels, and lolled on the downy cushions of a carriage, drawn by high-mettled horses, and driven by a coachman with powdered hair; if, wherever she went, all outward semblance of homage was paid to her; if she had but to utter a wish, and, swift as the stroke of some enchanter’s wand, that wish was gratified, she knew that she owed all to her husband, Archibald Floyd; and it may be that she grew, not unnaturally, to associate him with every advantage she enjoyed, and to love him for the sake of these things. Such a love as this may appear a low and despicable affection when compared to the noble sentiment entertained by the Nancys of modern romance for the Bill Sykeses of their choice; and no doubt Eliza Floyd ought to have felt a sovereign contempt for the man who watched

her every whim, who gratified her every whim, and who loved and honored her as much, *ci-devant* provincial actress as she was, as he could have done had she descended the steps of the loftiest throne in Christendom to give him her hand.

She was grateful to him, she loved him, she made him perfectly happy — so happy that the strong-hearted Scotchman was sometimes almost panic stricken at the contemplation of his own prosperity, and would fall down on his knees and pray that this blessing might not be taken from him; that, if it pleased Providence to afflict him, he might be stripped of every shilling of his wealth, and left penniless, to begin the world anew — but with her. Alas! it was this blessing, of all others, that he was to lose.

For a year Eliza and her husband lived this happy life at Felden Woods. He wished to take her on the Continent, or to London for the season; but she could not bear to leave her lovely Kentish home. She was happier than the day was long among her gardens, and pineries, and graperies, her dogs and horses, and her poor. To these last she seemed an angel, descended from the skies to comfort them. There were cottages from which the prim daughters of the second-rate county families fled, tract in hand, discomfited and abashed by the black looks of the half-starved inmates, but upon whose doorways the shadow of Mrs. Floyd was as the shadow of a priest in a Catholic country — always sacred, yet ever welcome and familiar. She had the trick of making these people like her before she set to work to reform their evil habits. At an early stage of her acquaintance with them, she was as blind to the dirt and disorder of their cottages as she would have been to a shabby carpet in the drawing-room of a poor duchess; but by and by she would artfully hint at this and that little improvement in the *ménages* of her pensioners, until, in

less than a month, without having either lectured or offended, she had worked an entire transformation. Mrs. Floyd was frightfully artful in her dealings with these erring peasants. Instead of telling them at once in a candid and Christian-like manner that they were all dirty, degraded, ungrateful, and irreligious, she diplomatized and finessed with them as if she had been canvassing the county. She made the girls regular in their attendance at church by means of new bonnets; she kept married men out of the public houses by bribes of tobacco to smoke at home, and once (oh, horror!) by the gift of a bottle of gin. She cured a dirty chimney-piece by the present of a gaudy china vase to its proprietress, and a slovenly hearth by means of a brass fender. She repaired a shrewish temper with a new gown, and patched up a family breach of long standing with a chintz waistcoat. But one brief year after her marriage — while busy landscape-gardeners were working at the improvements she had planned; while the steady process of reformation was slowly but surely progressing among the grateful recipients of her bounty; while the eager tongues of her detractors were still waging war upon her fair fame; while Archibald Floyd rejoiced as he held a baby-daughter in his arms — without one forewarning symptom to break the force of the blow, the light slowly faded out of those glorious eyes, never to shine again on this side of eternity, and Archibald Martin Floyd was a widower.

Chapter 2

Aurora.

The child which Eliza Floyd left behind her, when she was so suddenly taken away from all earthly prosperity and happiness, was christened Aurora. The romantic-sounding

name had been a fancy of poor Eliza's; and there was no caprice of hers, however trifling, that had not always been sacred with her adoring husband, and that was not doubly sacred now. The actual intensity of the widower's grief was known to no creature in this lower world. His nephews and his nephews' wives paid him pertinacious visits of condolence; nay, one of these nieces by marriage, a good, motherly creature, devoted to her husband, insisted on seeing and comforting the stricken man. Heaven knows whether her tenderness did convey any comfort to that shipwrecked soul. She found him like a man who had suffered from a stroke of paralysis, torpid, almost imbecile. Perhaps she took the wisest course that could possibly be taken. She said little to him upon the subject of his affliction, but visited him frequently, patiently sitting opposite to him for hours at a time, he and she talking of all manner of easy conventional topics — the state of the country, the weather, a change in the ministry, and such subjects as were so far remote from the grief of his life that a less careful hand than Mrs. Alexander Floyd's could have scarcely touched upon the broken chords of that ruined instrument, the widower's heart.

It was not until six months after Eliza's death that Mrs. Alexander ventured to utter her name; but when she did speak of her, it was with no solemn hesitation, but tenderly and familiarly, as if she had been accustomed to talk of the dead. She saw at once that she had done right. The time had come for the widower to feel relief in speaking of the lost one; and from that hour Mrs. Alexander became a favorite with her uncle. Years after, he told her that, even in the sullen torpor of his grief, he had had a dim consciousness that she pitied him, and that she was "a good woman." This good woman came that very evening into the big room, where the banker sat by his lonely hearth, with a baby in her arms — a pale-faced child, with

great wondering black eyes, which stared at the rich man in sombre astonishment; a solemn-faced, ugly baby, which was to grow by and by into Aurora Floyd, the heroine of my story.

That pale, black-eyed baby became henceforth the idol of Archibald Martin Floyd, the one object in all this wide universe for which it seemed worth his while to endure life. From the day of his wife's death he had abandoned all active share in the Lombard-street business, and he had now neither occupation nor delight save in waiting upon the prattlings and humoring the caprices of this infant daughter. His love for her was a weakness, almost verging upon a madness. Had his nephews been very designing men, they might perhaps have entertained some vague ideas of that commission of lunacy for which the outraged neighbors were so anxious. He grudged the hired nurses their offices of love about the person of his child. He watched them furtively, fearful lest they should be harsh with her. All the ponderous doors in the great house at Felden Woods could not drown the feeblest murmur of that infant voice to those ever-anxious, loving ears.

He watched her growth as a child watches an acorn it hopes to rear to an oak. He repeated her broken baby-syllables till people grew weary of his babble about the child. Of course the end of all this was, that, in the common acceptation of the term, Aurora was spoiled. We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and pruned by the gardener's merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature. She said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; learned what she pleased; and she grew into a bright, impetuous being,

affectionate and generous-hearted as her mother, but with some touch of native fire blended in her mould that stamped her as original. It is the common habit of ugly babies to grow into handsome women, and so it was with Aurora Floyd. At seventeen she was twice as beautiful as her mother had been at nine-and-twenty, but with much the same irregular features, lighted up by a pair of eyes that were like the stars of heaven, and by two rows of peerlessly white teeth. You rarely, in looking at her face, could get beyond these eyes and teeth; for they so dazzled and blinded you that they defied you to criticise the doubtful little nose, or the width of the smiling mouth. What if those masses of blue-black hair were brushed away from a forehead too low for the common standard of beauty? A phrenologist would have told you that the head was a noble one; and a sculptor would have added that it was set upon the throat of a Cleopatra.

Miss Floyd knew very little of her poor mother's history. There was a picture in crayons hanging in the banker's *sanctum sanctorum* which represented Eliza in the full flush of her beauty and prosperity, but the portrait told nothing of the history of the original, and Aurora had never heard of the merchant-captain, the poor Liverpool lodging, the grim aunt who kept a chandler's shop, the artificial flower-making, and the provincial stage. She had never been told that her maternal grandfather's name was Prodder, and that her mother had played Juliet to an audience of factory hands for the moderate and sometimes uncertain stipend of four and twopence a night. The county families accepted and made much of the rich banker's heiress; but they were not slow to say that Aurora was her mother's own daughter, and had the taint of the play-acting and horse-riding, the spangles and the sawdust, strong in her nature. The truth of the matter is, that before Miss Floyd emerged from the nursery she evinced a very

decided tendency to become what is called “fast.” At six years of age she rejected a doll and asked for a rocking-horse. At ten she could converse fluently upon the subject of pointers, setters, fox-hounds, harriers, and beagles, though she drove her governess to the verge of despair by persistently forgetting under what Roman emperor Jerusalem was destroyed, and who was legate to the Pope at the time of Catharine of Aragon’s divorce. At eleven she talked unreservedly of the horses in the Lenfield stables as a pack of screws; at twelve she contributed her half-crown to a Derby sweepstakes among her father’s servants, and triumphantly drew the winning horse; and at thirteen she rode across country with her uncle Andrew, who was a member of the Croydon hunt. It was not without grief that the banker watched his daughter’s progress in these doubtful accomplishments; but she was so beautiful, so frank and fearless, so generous, affectionate, and true, that he could not bring himself to tell her that she was not all he could desire her to be. If he could have governed or directed that impetuous nature, he would have had her the most refined and elegant, the most perfect and accomplished of her sex; but he could not do this, and he was fain to thank God for her as she was, and to indulge her every whim.

Alexander Floyd’s eldest daughter, Lucy, first cousin, once removed to Aurora, was that young lady’s friend and confidante, and came now and then from her father’s villa at Fulham to spend a month at Felden Woods. But Lucy Floyd had half a dozen brothers and sisters, and was brought up in a very different manner from the heiress. She was a fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired little girl, who thought Felden Woods a paradise upon earth, and Aurora more fortunate than the Princess Royal of England, or Titania, Queen of the Fairies. She was direfully afraid of her cousin’s ponies and Newfoundland dogs, and had a firm

conviction that sudden death held his throne within a certain radius of a horse's heels; but she loved and admired Aurora, after the manner common to these weaker natures, and accepted Miss Floyd's superb patronage and protection as a thing of course.

The day came when some dark but undefined cloud hovered about the narrow home circle at Felden Woods. There was a coolness between the banker and his beloved child. The young lady spent half her time on horseback, scouring the shady lanes round Beckenham, attended only by her groom — a dashing young fellow, chosen by Mr. Floyd on account of his good looks for Aurora's especial service. She dined in her own room after these long, lonely rides, leaving her father to eat his solitary meal in the vast dining-room, which seemed to be fully occupied when she sat in it, and desolately empty without her. The household at Felden Woods long remembered one particular June evening on which the storm burst forth between the father and daughter.

Aurora had been absent from two o'clock in the afternoon until sunset, and the banker paced the long stone terrace with his watch in his hand, the figures on the dial-plate barely distinguishable in the twilight, waiting for his daughter's coming home. He had sent his dinner away untouched; his newspapers lay uncut upon the table, and the household spies we call servants told each other how his hand had shaken so violently that he had spilled half a decanter of wine over the polished mahogany in attempting to fill his glass. The housekeeper and her satellites crept into the hall, and looked through the half-glass doors at the anxious watcher on the terrace. The men in the stables talked of "the row," as they called this terrible breach between father and child; and when at last horses' hoofs were heard in the long avenue, and Miss Floyd reined in

her thorough-bred chestnut at the foot of the terrace-steps, there was a lurking audience hidden here and there in the evening shadow eager to hear and see.

But there was very little to gratify these prying eyes and ears. Aurora sprang lightly to the ground before the groom could dismount to assist her, and the chestnut, with heaving and foam-flecked sides, was led off to the stable.

Mr. Floyd watched the groom and the two horses as they disappeared through the great gates leading to the stable-yard, and then said very quietly, “You don’t use that animal well, Aurora. A six hours ride is neither good for her nor for you. Your groom should have known better than to allow it.” He led the way into his study, telling his daughter to follow him, and they were closeted together for upward of an hour.

Early the next morning Miss Floyd’s governess departed from Felden Woods, and between breakfast and luncheon the banker paid a visit to the stables, and examined his daughter’s favorite chestnut mare, a beautiful filly, all bone and muscle, that had been trained for a racer. The animal had strained a sinew, and walked lame. Mr. Floyd sent for his daughter’s groom, and paid and dismissed him on the spot. The young fellow made no remonstrance, but went quietly to his quarters, took off his livery, packed a carpet-bag, and walked away from the house without bidding good-by to his fellow-servants, who resented the affront, and pronounced him a surly brute, whose absence was no loss to the household.

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.

For a year and two months Miss Floyd has been away at this Parisian finishing school; it is late in the August of 1857, and again the banker walks upon the long stone terrace in front of the narrow windows of his red-brick mansion, this time waiting for Aurora's arrival from Paris. The servants have expressed considerable wonder at his not crossing the Channel to fetch his daughter, and they think the dignity of the house somewhat lowered by Miss Floyd's travelling unattended.

"A poor, dear young thing, that knows no more of this wicked world than a blessed baby," said the housekeeper, "all alone among a pack of mustached Frenchmen."

Archibald Martin Floyd had grown an old man in one day — that terrible and unexpected day of his wife's death; but even the grief of that bereavement had scarcely seemed to affect him so strongly as the loss of his Aurora during the fourteen months of her absence from Felden Woods.

Perhaps it was that at sixty-five years of age he was less able to bear even a lesser grief; but those who watched him closely declared that he seemed as much dejected by his daughter's absence as he could well have been by her death. Even now, that he paces up and down the broad terrace, with the landscape stretching wide before him, and melting vaguely away under that veil of crimson glory shed upon all things by the sinking sun — even now that he hourly, nay, almost momentarily, expects to clasp his only child in his arms, Archibald Floyd seems rather nervously anxious than joyfully expectant.

He looks again and again at his watch, and pauses in his walk to listen to Beckenham church-clock striking eight; his ears are preternaturally alert to every sound, and give him instant warning of carriage-wheels far off upon the wide high-road. All the agitation and anxiety he has felt for the last week has been less than the concentrated fever of this moment. Will it pass on, that carriage, or stop at the lodge-gates? Surely his heart could never beat so loud save by some wondrous magnetism of fatherly love and hope. The carriage stops. He hears the clanking of the gates; the crimson-tinted landscape grows dim and blurred before his eyes, and he knows no more till a pair of impetuous arms are twined about his neck, and Aurora's face is hidden on his shoulder.

It was a paltry hired carriage which Miss Floyd arrived in, and it drove away as soon as she had alighted, and the small amount of luggage she brought had been handed to the eager servants. The banker led his child into the study, where they had held that long conference fourteen months before. A lamp burned upon the library table, and it was to this light that Archibald Floyd led his daughter.

A year had changed the girl to a woman — a woman with great hollow black eyes, and pale, haggard cheeks. The course of study at the Parisian finishing school had evidently been too hard for the spoiled heiress.

"Aurora, Aurora," the old man cried piteously, "how ill you look! how altered, how —"

She laid her hand lightly yet imperiously upon his lips.

"Don't speak of me," she said, "I shall recover; but you — you, father — you too are changed."

She was as tall as her father, and, resting her hands upon his shoulders, she looked at him long and earnestly. As she looked, the tears welled slowly up to her eyes, which had been dry before, and poured silently down her haggard cheeks.

“My father, my devoted father,” she said, in a broken voice, “if my heart was made of adamant I think it might break when I see the change in this beloved face.”

The old man checked her with a nervous gesture — a gesture almost of terror.

“Not one word — not one word, Aurora,” he said, hurriedly; “at least, only one. That person — he is dead?”

“He is.”

Chapter 3

What Became of the Diamond Bracelet.

Aurora’s aunts, uncles, and cousins were not slow to exclaim upon the change for the worse which a twelvemonth in Paris had made in their young kinswoman. I fear that the Demoiselles Lespard suffered considerably in reputation among the circle round Felden Woods from Miss Floyd’s impaired good looks. She was out of spirits too, had no appetite, slept badly, was nervous and hysterical, no longer took any interest in her dogs and horses, and was altogether an altered creature. Mrs. Alexander Floyd declared it was perfectly clear that these cruel Frenchwomen had worked poor Aurora to a shadow: the girl was not used to study, she said; she had been

accustomed to exercise and open air, and no doubt pined sadly in the close atmosphere of a school-room.

But Aurora's was one of those impressionable natures which quickly recover from any depressing influence. Early in September Lucy Floyd came to Felden Woods, and found her handsome cousin almost entirely recovered from the drudgery of the Parisian *pension,* but still very loath to talk much of that seminary. She answered Lucy's eager questions very curtly; said that she hated the Demoiselles Lespard and the Rue Saint Dominique, and that the very memory of Paris was disagreeable to her. Like most young ladies with black eyes and blue-black hair, Miss Floyd was a good hater; so Lucy forbore to ask for more information upon what was so evidently an unpleasant subject to her cousin. Poor Lucy had been mercilessly well educated; she spoke half a dozen languages, knew all about the natural sciences, had read Gibbon, Niebuhr, and Arnold from the title-page to the printer's name, and looked upon the heiress as a big brilliant dunce; so she quietly set down Aurora's dislike to Paris to that young lady's distate for tuition, and thought little more about it. Any other reasons for Miss Floyd's almost shuddering horror of her Parisian associations lay far beyond Lucy's simple power of penetration.

The fifteenth of September was Aurora's birthday, and Archibald Floyd determined, upon this, the nineteenth anniversary of his daughter's first appearance on this mortal scene, to give an entertainment, whereat his country neighbors and town acquaintance might alike behold and admire the beautiful heiress.

Mrs. Alexander came to Felden Woods to superintend the preparations for this birthday ball. She drove Aurora and Lucy into town to order the supper and the band, and to