

EXT. A THICK FOG. DAY.

A ship at sea. It is calm. TITLE: "1842".

EXT. FOG-BOUND SHIP. DAY.

A YOUNG WOMAN (AURORA LEIGH, 16) is at the rail. She wears a hooded cape. The fog, and the hood, keep us from seeing her features. Her VOICE has a decidedly Italian accent.

AURORA

(V/O)

My name is Aurora Leigh. My mother was a Florentine, whose rare blue eyes were shut from seeing me when I was scarcely four years old. My father was an Englishman. He had spent a dry lifetime at home in college-learning and parish-talk.

DISSOLVE TO

EXT. A STREET IN FLORENCE. BRILLIANT DAY. *The Past.*

A MAN in typically English-abroad attire is intently writing into a book. HE continues writing, unaffected, as PASSERS-BY jostle him.

AURORA (CONT'D)

(V/O)

He had come to Florence to spend a month studying the secret of DaVinci's drains.

HE is pushed aside by a CROWD making way for a religious procession of priests, banners, a cross, and a group of white-veiled, rose-crowned MAIDENS holding tall candles. The candles drip wax upon the unflinching girls.

AURORA (CONT'D)

(V/O cont.)

When, unexpectedly, he was flooded with a passion that drowned his provisioned and complacent past.

HE catches a glimpse of one of the maidens. SHE notes him. She is strikingly beautiful, shy, and has a smile subtle and beguiling. His book drops to the street.

AURORA (CONT'D)

(V/O cont.)

....and he loved. They married. Lived fully. And thus beloved, she died.

EXT. MOUNTAIN CABIN. SNOWING. NIGHT. *THE PAST.*

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN. BOOK-LINED MAIN ROOM. NIGHT. *THE PAST.*

A fire is blazing. AURORA (12) stands before her FATHER reading. HE coughs ominously, causing her to halt.

FATHER

I do not recognize this. Continue....

AURORA

"...shall I hope To speak my poems
in mysterious tune With man and
nature? ---

With summer days in this That scarce dare breathe they are
so beautiful?"

FATHER

(savoring)

"Summer days that scarce dare
breathe...." You are sly. Come ----

HE motions for her to approach. HE takes the book from her.
She has been reading from a hand-written scrap of paper.

FATHER (CONT'D)

What's this?

AURORA

I write, father.

HE examines the scrap of paper. He motions for her to retrieve
a volume from the shelf. SHE goes to hand it to him but HE
refuses it. SHE opens it. IT is blank.

FATHER

Such words need a proper home. Dear
Aurora, flood its pages with your
passions.

SHE hugs him as HE looks up at a Portrait of his wife.

EXT. FOG-BOUND SHIP. DAY. THE PRESENT.

AURORA standing at the rail. A SAILOR is playing a mournful
ballad on a concertina. An OFFICER on his watch, passes.

AURORA

Is it day or night?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

OFFICER
 (touching his cap)
 'Tis England, miss....

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN. ENTRANCE DOOR. DAY. *THE PAST*.

AURORA (now 16) rushes in. Her blond hair is longer. She is barefoot, dressed as any of the local peasantry. Her face is filled with concern and foreboding.

AURORA
 Assunta ---!

ASSUNTA takes Aurora up in an embrace. They speak hurriedly in Italian. Aurora is calmed.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN. BEDROOM. DAY. *THE PAST*.

AURORA enters. ASSUNTA follows. FATHER is on his death-bed. There is sun streaming through the opened window.

FATHER
 (to Assunta, in Italian)
 Help me to sit up.

FATHER lovingly caresses Aurora's hair. HE glances at the picture of his wife, propped against the wall on top a dresser.

FATHER (CONT'D)
 Sweet child of nature! Love ----
 Love, my child.... Love. . . .

AURORA goes to her knees at the bedside. HE peacefully passes. ASSUNTA crosses herself.

INT. MOUNTAIN CABIN. MAIN ROOM. DAY. *THE PAST*.

AURORA is passing her hand over the books, lightly touching each with the tips of her fingers.

EXT. A STREAM NEAR THE CABIN. DAY. *THE PAST*.

A spring day. AURORA is wading in the stream. ASSUNTA is doing wash nearby. TWO MEN (A PRIEST and JOHN, 50, manservant/butler to Aurora's Aunt) come riding up to the cabin. There is conversation between the PRIEST and ASSUNTA.

ASSUNTA
 (in Italian)
 NO!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JOHN turns his horse and approaches the stream. AURORA backs deeper into the stream.

JOHN
Aurora Leigh? Are you Aurora Leigh?

AURORA is frightened but defiant. The PRIEST rides up. ASSUNTA arrives. ASSUNTA splashes into the water. SHE embraces Aurora.

PRIEST
(in Italian)
Aurora, you must go with this man.

EXT. DOCKS. FLORENCE. DAY. *THE PAST.*

It is raining. ASSUNTA bids Aurora farewell. JOHN is waiting. Aurora clutches a book.

ASSUNTA
(in Italian)
Farewell, Aurora! It is time to return
to your father's family.

AURORA
(in Italian)
I know them not!

ASSUNTA
(in English)
She is your father's sister. Blood
of his blood.

AURORA
(in English)
Dearest Assunta!

THEY embrace then part. AURORA follows JOHN on board the ship.

EXT. FOG-BOUND SHIP. DAY. *THE PRESENT.*

AURORA is standing at the rail.

AURORA
(V/O)
I watched the white walls, the blue
hills --- my Italy drawn backward
from the shuddering steamer-deck.
Then the sea pushed between us both,
sweeping up the ship with my despair,
throwing us out as a pasture to the
stars....

EXT. AURORA'S AUNT'S CARRIAGE. COUNTRY LANE. DAY.

An overcast day. JOHN is driving a modest carriage at a leisurely pace.

INT. AUNT'S CARRIAGE. DAY

AURORA is in wonderment at the countryside.

EXT. LEIGH HALL. DAY.

Establishing shot. A modest stone country-house of two stories on a large tract of park land. A large lime tree dominates the front lawn. Not far down the lane is the house of Aurora's Aunt's cousin, Vane Leigh.

A WOMAN (Aurora's AUNT, RUTH, 45) in black, stands in the doorway as the carriage comes into view.

EXT. AUNT'S CARRIAGE. DAY.

AURORA at the opened window. Her excitement has now given way to thoughts of what her future holds, with this scowling woman.

INT. LEIGH HALL. AURORA'S BEDROOM. DAY.

A large and comfortable room with a huge set of windows which overlook the rear of the property. SUSANNAH (in her late 20's) is ushering Aurora in. There is a dress of bombazine laid out upon the bed.

AURORA
(in Italian)
What's she like? My aunt?
(in English)
Excuse me --- What is my aunt like?

SUSANNAH is bewildered, does not know how to answer.

SUSANNAH
Your mourning clothes, miss....

SHE curtseys and leaves. AURORA, puzzled, removes her cloak. Her dress is a splash of color.

INT. LEIGH HALL. PARLOR. DAY.

AURORA sits uncomfortably in the bombazine dress. The room is unassuming, plain, and comfortable. Her eyes linger on an abandoned pianoforte in a corner.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Her AUNT enters. She wears black. She is a cold, rigid, unsmiling woman. It is a great effort for her to accept AURORA'S embrace, which is heartfelt though too long for the Aunt.

RUTH
(not warmly)
My brother's daughter....

AURORA
(as though correcting)
Aurora.

RUTH surveys Aurora and for a moment is genuinely moved. Perhaps it is Aurora's youth and innocence, perhaps a glimpse of something of her brother in Aurora Ruth kisses her. Just as quickly, Ruth's face resumes its usual rigidity. THEY sit.

RUTH
Your father named this place Leigh Hall. It hasn't a hall. It was typical of him.

AURORA
He was being --- ambitious?

RUTH
---Foolish. But I loved your father. As I will love you, as long as you deserve it.

AURORA
Thank you....

RUTH
I will not mince words with you. Am I speaking too fast?

AURORA
No! Pray speak faster.

RUTH
I despised your mother. She fooled away a wise man from a useful life.

SUSANNAH enters with tea. We vainly try to detect any warmth and love in Ruth as SHE pours and prepares their tea and cake.

AURORA
(V/O)
She wears her hair so tightly, as though to tame any accidental thoughts from escaping her brain.

INT. INSERT. HAND WRITING IN A BOOK.

AURORA
 (V/O cont.)
 She has her yearly glass of port at
 the Vicar's New Year's Ball.

INT. LEIGH HALL. AURORA'S CHAMBERS. DAY.

AURORA is seated at her desk, writing.

AURORA
 Is this my father's England? the
 great isle? The skies so low and
 grey. A nature tamed and grown
 domestic....

INT. AUNT'S CARRIAGE. DAY.

AURORA and RUTH are in their mourning dress.

EXT. VANE LEIGH'S HOME: LEIGH MANOR. DAY.

Establishing shot. Much larger than Leigh Hall, and on a grander scale. It is a working concern with several buildings including a stable, animal pens, and a small cottage.

RUTH
 (V/O)
 He is our cousin. His name is Vane
 Leigh. He is old. He has a son --
 your cousin -- Romney

AURORA
 (V/O)
 Does this house have a hall?

INT. LEIGH MANOR. ENTRANCE ROOM.

A grand stairway of stone and marble. AURORA is overwhelmed by ancestral portraits. Her eyes stop upon one portrait in particular, which is strikingly like her.

RUTH
 Lady Maude Leigh. Our great-great
 Aunt.

AURORA glimpses ROMNEY LEIGH, her cousin, handsome, and several years older than her. HE stands at the top of the stairs. RUTH, just as their eyes meet, spirits Aurora into...

INT. LEIGH MANOR. STUDY. DAY.

VANE LEIGH sits near the window, smoking a pipe. The window looks out over a small parterre.

RUTH
You're looking well, cousin.

VANE
I'll be dead in a fortnight. Please!
Ruth, leave us.

RUTH has no intention of leaving but she notices ROMNEY, who has come into the next room.

RUTH
As you wish....

RUTH leaves the study. VANE stands, grasping her about the shoulders, tears almost in his eyes.

VANE
Dear girl --- ! (noticing the dress)
Is this her doing?

AURORA
Yes.

VANE
(mock serious)
Ah, she draws the light out of
whichever room she is in. She causes
candles to die out.

THEY laugh.

VANE (CONT'D)
Sit with me.

THEY sit on a sofa. In the parterre, Ruth catches up to ROMNEY. THEY become immediately engrossed in conversation.

VANE (CONT'D)
The last I heard from your father
was a letter he wrote the day you
were born. No doubt Ruth has expressed
an opinion of your father's
indiscretion of marrying the woman
he loved.

AURORA
She is bitter.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

VANE

Child, your father's choice of wife
disinherited both you and your aunt.
When Ruth dies, all will go to my
son.

AURORA

Not to you?

VANE

(cheerily)

I will be dead in a fortnight.

HE gets up, AURORA helping. HE studies her face.

VANE (CONT'D)

Your mother must have been a pretty
thing.

AURORA

(In Italian)

She was a beautiful lady.

VANE

(offering his arm)

Come.

THEY go out.

EXT. LEIGH MANOR. PARTERRE. DAY.

AURORA has Vane's arm.

AURORA

His last word to me was "love".

VANE

Aurora, you must learn to love
England.

AURORA bristles at this. Lets go his arm.

VANE (CONT'D)

This too was Shakespeare's land. Our
mountains are, well, not quite so;
and our valleys --- it is as if God's
finger touched but did not press in
making England.... Here -- Romney!

ROMNEY and RUTH have approached.

VANE (CONT'D)

Romney. Your cousin, Aurora.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ROMNEY takes AURORA'S hand.

ROMNEY
Cousin....

AURORA
....Cousin.

ROMNEY kisses AURORA'S hand.

RUTH
(sarcastically)
Kissed by a socialist!

ROMNEY
Ruth... and myself, are politically ---
incompatible.

VANE
Blood is thicker than politics.

RUTH
Blood means nothing these days.

ROMNEY
Tell me, cousin: How do you like our
garden?

AURORA
(not a compliment)
....Quaint.

ROMNEY
(though taking it so)
Ah, thank you.

It begins to drizzle. THEY start in to the house. VANE offering his arm to Aurora.

VANE
(under his breath to
Aurora)
"Tomorrow and tomorrow and
tomorrow...."

INT. AUNT'S CARRIAGE. RAINING. DAY.

AURORA and RUTH sit facing each other.

RUTH
You must be educated in the proper
English manner. You will learn to
live an English woman's life.

(CONTINUED)