Part XIII. 1. *Marie Corelli's Art*.
CHAPTER I.

Plotcraft in Marie Corelli's Novels.

Introductory Note:

An estimate of this part of Marie Corelli's work will be comparatively less interesting because Corelli was not a first-rate artist. She did not conceive of the novel as a pure work of art. She used it as a convenient literary form for the purpose of entertainment and reformation. However, though Corelli was not a great novelist, her melodramas and philosophic romances will keep her memory alive. She is good at melodramatic art, poetic description and philosophic writing. But she is very weak in characterisation.

Like Mrs. Radcliffe, Corelli is good at sensationalism, mystery and awe, in her novels like Vendetta, Thelma, Normwood and Temporal Power. Corelli spun her romantic stories, like Mrs. Radcliffe, out of her teeming imagination, dreaming over the thrilling works of her precursors, especially famous novelists like Scott and Dickens. Like Mrs. Radcliffe, Corelli gave vivid and poetic descriptions of landscapes and seascapes of foreign countries without visiting them in some of her
novels like *Thelma*. Her descriptive art has become the cult of an ideal. Her descriptive passages are remarkable for their variety, their wealth of colouring and their charm. The plots of Corelli's novels, like those of Mrs. Radcliffe, are artificial. But both could grip their readers by creating an atmosphere of vivid description of natural scenes and unique incidents. Corelli used like Mrs. Radcliffe mysterious music, awful and beautiful scenes of nature, gloomy and vast buildings, tombs and churches, corpses and vaults in her melodramatic and philosophic romances.

But Corelli differed from Mrs. Radcliffe in that she had a keen interest in metaphysical speculation. Mrs. Radcliffe's art differs from crude melodrama. It is restrained and it combines an amount of nobility. She transforms the common idea of terror into something higher and nobler and makes it acceptable to the feelings as well as to the moral scruples of her reading public. On the other hand Corelli's art is sheer melodrama. It is mechanical and is used deliberately for certain intended effects. It does not assume any mysterious spiritual significance. Some of Mrs. Radcliffe's personages like Madam Cheron in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* breathe life. But none of Corelli's characters are true to life. Corelli's chief interest, however, was in philosophic romance,—the novel of ideas. She used melodramatic art to make the propagation of her doctrines more successful.
ful and convincing.

Inspite of these artistic excellences of Corelli, she is not a great novelist but only 'popular' like Bulwer Lytton. Like Lytton she was an opportunist and used the novel according to the fashion of her day. Corelli was not only inclined to occult knowledge and Isis lore like Lytton, but she tried even to form a new creed of Christianity by mixing some doctrines of Isis lore with Christian principles. If Lytton introduced a form of energy embodying all the natural forces, called Vril, for a high degree of civilization, she introduced a form of 'Electricity' which worked for the high attainments of the spiritual progress of man. Corelli was a popular writer because her art is not organically presented in terms of human personalities.

For the creation of a great novel a writer needs the vision or outlook of a novelist. This determines the quality of a novel. But it is difficult to say whether Corelli had the vision of a novelist. She had a creed, a philosophy, which has been discussed in the foregoing survey of her metaphysical beliefs. And this presented with the help of such talents as she had as a novelist. All this will be clear in a detailed survey of her achievements in the various aspects of the novel, plotcraft, characterization, description and style.
Corelli deals with social, moral and religious problems in her novels. She denounces the hypocrite, his perverted existence and his view of life. Cuming Walters, in *A Romance of Personal Tribute*, mentions the main targets of Corelli’s campaigns. She protests against “luxury, selfishness, degeneracy, indolence, corruption, debasing customs, insidious vice. Drink, sensuality, unchastity, in thought as well as in deed, sordid aims, avarice, the worship of gold, hypocrisy in religion, false doctrines, and perverted ideals; these were among the problems she set herself resolutely to grapple with and, if possible, to solve.” In addition to these problems, she chose philosophic themes to the exposition of which she devoted some of her best romances.

A novel needs a plot. The plot may be compact or just a loose chain of events, a single story, or two or more stories, strung together. The worth of the novel depends on the ingenious handling of the plot and its lively representation through the medium of convincing and suitable, characters. What Aristotle says about the beginning, middle and end of the drama is also applicable to the novel. The plots of Marie Corelli’s novels are mainly discursive rather than compact.

Their structure is often elementary that of straightway arrangement of events along a single strand of causation. Although they have got a pattern of their own, they appear almost to fail in their organic unity. They are not usually complicated by the interaction of subplots. Most of her novels deal only with a single story, the story of a hero or heroine or both. The complication and suspense in the novel are created by the various events in the lives of those characters. But the interest of her novels lies mainly in the gripping narration of incidents and settings rather than in characterization. In some of her novels the hero or the heroine herself narrates the history of his or her past life. Such novels are therefore cast in the assumed form of autobiography. In A Romance of Two Worlds, the heroine herself narrates the course of her psychical training. Incidentally, an episode of misplaced love - that of prince Ivan - is introduced in a few scenes as an illustration of the varied measure of spiritual attainment by every human being. Verridee contains the story of the revenge of a betrayed husband, Romani, on his wife, Nina, and it is narrated by himself. A keener interest is aroused by introducing a lover of Nina, and thus creating a 'triangular' arena of love. Wormwood is the dark history of its hero's past life and it is narrated by the hero himself, Gaston Beauvais. The complication and the crisis in
the plot arise out of the accidental intrusion of a rival, Silvion Guidel, who wins the heart of the bride. The occasional appearances of Guidel are eventful. Although they do not occupy much space in the novel, they provoke the hero to increase his vindictive atrocities. Tempest, the hero, tells the story of his past life in *The Sorrows of Satan*. Tempest himself stands as a foil to prince Lucio. In contrast to the vile Sibyl there appears the woman-novelist, Mavis Clare. In *The Life Everlasting*, as in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, the heroine herself describes the way of her attainment of spiritual knowledge. In all these novels the narrators are like tools in the invisible hands of fate and circumstance. But eventhough these novels embody a single plot, they have a breadth and complexity of their own. Corelli has an immense power of imagination. It works intensely and melodramatically. In the dreadful and gruesome environment of thrillers like *Vendetta* and *Wormwood*, incidents of a ghastly or adventurous nature take place one after another in swift succession. Suspense is kept up to the end.

It is difficult to distinguish the characters from the incidents and events in Corelli's novels, because both are interdependent. When the situations are arranged in contrast, the characters also naturally seem to have been placed in contrast.
Corelli does not seem to have attached any importance to the unities of place and time. But she has taken care to preserve the unity of main action and consequently the unity of effect. Through a dramatic movement and by means of scenic alterations she combines the incidents of the past, the present and the future in her novels in order to produce certain calculated effects on the reader. In contrast to the simplicity and nobility of Thelma, Corelli sets the picture of the sordid and vain life of upper class English society in Thelma. Hence the action of the novel shifts from Norway to England and England to Norway. In Ardath, in order to convince the sceptic hero about the superiority of the spiritual life, the novelist unfolds to him the horrible picture of the hero's gross, materialistic life in his former birth, a few thousand years ago, in the perished city called Al-Kyris. In The Murder of Delicin, Corelli depicts the conflict between the ideal notions of woman and the beastly instincts of man. In the tragic tension of the action in Vendetta horror is afoot from the very beginning. Fabio Romani has been buried alive in his family vault. When he comes out of the grave, he is already a changed man. His hair has become snow-white. Incidents follow one another in rapid succession. The novel contains some brilliant descriptions of social parties, amorous scenes and fights. A tragic gloom pervades the story from beginning to end, relieved
only by occasional sardonic flashes. The novel covers a period of some months and the incidents happen in different places. But the unity of action has been maintained throughout the novel. *Wormwood* is also a popular sensational novel. It deals with the vengeance of a dreadful absintheur, Gaston Beauvais, upon his betrayed fiancée, Pauline. The novel is crowded with fearful incidents in the sinful life of the vindictive man. Some incidents strike one as improbable and inconsistent occasionally in these novels. Corelli seems to have been indifferent, now and then, to the causality and motivation of the action and the incidents that she imagined. She appears always to concentrate her attention on the intended effect rather than on its adequate motivation. Thelma leaves England all of a sudden and goes secretly to her native land in the latter part of the novel. But this stop does not seem to have been prompted by any other reason except that Corelli desired to change the scene of action from England to Norway so that she could depict the natural beauty of Norway in winter and the pagan rites of the cremation of Thelma's father. In Arddeth Corelli describes the marriage of Theo and Edris as taking place before the altar of the Cologne Cathedral on the banks of the Rhine, simply because she wants to describe the superb structure of the Cathedral which had fascinated her when she saw it first.

1. Memoirs of Marie Corelli - by B. Vyver, p. 80.
The philosophic or moral pose which Corelli intends to inculcate in her novel usually moulds the plot of the novel instead of the plot revealing her philosophic or moral purpose. Corelli did not possess the technical craftsmanship of a master novelist. The nature of her plotcraft can be clearly seen in an analysis of the four types of fiction which she attempted.

A Romance of Two Worlds is typical of her art in her philosophic romances. Corelli's in purpose in this novel is the propagation of her 'electric' creed of Christianity. But she introduces the creed through thinly woven story. The structure of T W r d includes, as its title suggests, the two regions of earth and heaven. All the incidents in the novel, which run to about three hundred and twentyfive pages, happen in the course of the heroine's life. The plot of the story is so loose that many of the incidents in the novel do not depend organically on one another and they can be read separately almost without missing any artistic effect. Nearly seventyfive page in the first section of the novel are devoted to an exposition of the acquaintance of the heroine with an artist called Cellini, a disciple of the monk Heliobas. The artist directs the heroine to Heliobas for getting rid of her 'terrible insomnia' cure. Cellini does not appear at all in the remaining parts of the novel. In the second
section of the novel, before preaching his electric creed of Christianity, Heliobas liberates the soul of the heroine from her body so that she can experience the heavenly regions of the universe. Along with a guiding angel the soul of the heroine visits Saturn, Venus, Jupiter and other planets and at the end of their journey, Heaven wherein God lived with Christ and other pure spirits. The description of this experience of the heroine, with some minor incidents, covers about one hundred and fifty three pages of the novel. In the third and last section of the novel, which covers about ninety seven pages, Corelli explains the electric creed of Christianity and the completion of the spiritual training of the heroine. Along with this main story is introduced the love episode of Heliobas's sister Zara and Prince Ivan, in the second and the third sections of the novel, in order to preach and illustrate the greatness and superiority of spiritual love over the physical. Corelli still does not preserve the unities of place and time nor even the organic unity of plot in the novel. She is satisfied merely with the propagation of her creed through the loosely connected incidents and scenes.

*Thelma* is a melodrama of more than six hundred pages and it depicts Coralli's conception of an ideal woman. It can be said to be typical of her melodramatic novels. Coralli divides the novel into three parts and concentrates her artistic
skill on the thrilling and exciting scenes and incidents which the lovers, Thelma and Errington, come across in the course of their courtship and early married life. Corelli reaches the zenith of her descriptive art in this novel. She arranges the first meeting of the lovers on a coastal scene in Norway at midnight on a summer day, with the sun creating a magnificent atmosphere of enchantment. This picturesque scene takes the reader at once to a dream land of romance. The novel is less a love story than a story of descriptive grandeur. Corelli devotes the first part of the novel to a description of the seas, landscapes, mountain regions and caves, and excites the curiosity of the readers. The characters, Guldmar, Lovisa, Sigurd and Dyceworthy, are typical and provocative. The second part of the novel shifts from Norway to England. In contrast with the natural grandeur and simplicity of life in Norway Corelli depicts the perverted life of glamorous upper class London Society. She concentrates here on the presentation of exciting and immoral 'social crushes' and 'at homes' of upper class London society. In the third part of the novel Corelli again shifts the action of the story from England to Norway in winter. She gets another opportunity here to describe the romantic landscape and the life of the people in Norway. Incidents like Lovisa's vindictive story and the pagan pomp of Guldmar's death on a burning ship are awe-inspiring. The action of the
main story is overshadowed by other multifarious incidents and scenes. Thelma is a good example of her melodramatic art.

The Mighty Atom, which consists of about two hundred and forty-four pages, is a good example of her novels with a purpose. The novel is written to condemn the theory of education which gives no place to religion. The plot deals with the life of a boy, Lionel Valliscourt, aged eleven, who is gorged to the full with voluminous works in science, literature and philosophy. Lionel studies theological problems with meticulous care. His regimented study, the absence of playmates and above all the absence of parental affection make his life bitter and barren. He commits suicide in order to find out the mystery of the Atom. Corelli tries to impress on the reader the disastrous effects of an education which is bankrupt of religious faith on a boy of promising career. She makes the father of the boy highly sophisticated and irreligious and the mother frail and disillusioned in her married life. Corelli arouses pity in the readers for the tragic fate of the boy by introducing characters like the sexton, Reuben Dale, and the maidservant, Lucy, who love the boy and pity his fate. Lionel desires the close companionship of little Jessamine, the Sexton's daughter, but who is unfortunately snatched away from him by Fate. The novel is full of melodramatic scenes and excessive sentimentality.
The Young Diana shows what Corelli could do in pseudo-scientific romance. Diana, a spinster, becomes a Venus in bloom after taking for a few days regular doses of the elixir of life prepared by a mysterious scientist, Dr. Dimitrius. The romance covers about two hundred and eighty pages. Corelli tries to make the story life-like by narrating the early life and circumstances and the later changes in the life of Diana. In the first fifty pages of the novel the slavish and neglected life of Diana in the house of her own self-indulgent parents is narrated. With the information and the assistance of her friend Sophy, Diana escapes to Geneva from England to become an object of experiment for the test of the elixir of life in the laboratory of Dr. Dimitrius. Corelli devotes about a hundred and fifty-five pages to describe Diana's acquaintance with Dr. Dimitrius and the effect of the elixir on her physical appearance. In the remaining forty-five pages of the novel Corelli narrates the sensational effect produced by Diana's beauty in England after her arrival from Geneva. Corelli's scientific knowledge was meagre. Her description of Dr. Dimitrius's laboratory and her presentation of his experimentation and his philosophic discussion is, therefore, unconvincing. The Young Diana only serves to show that Corelli wished to exploit the predilection of the times for scientific romances.
Corelli makes use of the device of subplots in some of her novels. They run almost parallel with the main plot. They make the main plot more complex either by hindering its development or by stimulating its action. The main theme of Holy Orders is woven round the sincere and noble parson of a village church. While trying to reform the wine-soaked village he sacrifices his wife to the brutal instinct of a drunkard and himself becomes an isolated priest in the end. The episode of a fallen village girl, Jacynth Miller, and her rustic lover, Don Kiernon, is introduced as an ignoble contrast to the story of this idealist. The parson tries to redeem Jacynth but actually becomes a victim to the rage of her lover. Kiernon also murders the wife of the parson. The main plot of Temporal Power is concerned with the King and his Cabinet. But the story is complicated by the introduction of two subplots. One of them is connected with a revolutionary party consisting of some desperate men and a woman with an extraordinary personality. The king and the woman Lotys become lovers and dedicate their lives to each other's honour at the end. As a challenge to royal decorum is introduced the episode of Prince Humphry and his beautiful wife, Gloria, who comes from a low family.

Corelli's novels have invariably a definite purpose. But they make absorbing reading. The didactic tone varies according to the nature of her themes. Her philosophical
and argumentative. But she could tell a love-story beautifully and she introduces love stories skilfully in one way or the other even in her philosophical novels and makes them interesting even to the common reader. In Ardath Corelli uses the marriage of a man and an angel as a broad narrative framework for the contents of her creed. She devotes the second part of the novel to a vivid description of the pagan life of a Nagaya priestess in the mythical city of Al-Kyris so that the attention of the non-philosophical reader could be gripped by the novel. The novel has an epic breadth but no organic unity. It is interesting in a few of its scenes and incidents. It does not make a profound impression on the reader as an organic whole. The hero who appears in all the three parts of the novel links them up in a superficial manner. The Soul of Lilith also is loosely knit. It is discursive but is made interesting by the object of an experiment, Lilith, a young girl growing to womanhood. A new interpretation of the Biblical character of Satan is given in The Sorrows of Satan. But his field of action is the degenerate upper class society of London. Though the degeneracy of the English upper classes seems to have been presented in exaggerated colours, this second aspect of the theme naturally fascinates the common reader. The Master Christian is mainly a satire on the Roman Catholic Church. But its argumentative theme is made lively and charming by the description of the love affairs of some of the -
leading personages introduced into the novel. The pseudo-scientific themes of *The Young Diana* and *The Secret Power* are also intermingled with the sentimental relationships of the main characters.

The plots of Corelli's novels may not be organic or intensive. But they are extensive. The incidents she describes are imagined as happening in different parts of the world. Many of the incidents are memorable. They are placed in picturesque settings. Corelli does not hesitate to bring in as many characters as the events of the novels necessitate. Sometimes they appear to be even incidental and superfluous. Corelli frequently concentrates on the external environment and on the scenes of nature and huge gatherings of men and women for making her themes attractive and effective. She does not analyze her themes. She does not probe into the facts to search for their true causation. She is sometimes retrospective and metaphysical but never psycho-analytical. Her plots are mainly melodramatic and superficial. She develops her themes on some hypothetical assumptions and generalizations. In *Boy*, Corelli depicts how a lovely boy was ruined by the vicious environment of his house. She tells us about his drunkard father and low bred mother and their shabby life. But she does not ponder over the reasons which were responsible for the creation of such an environment. She introduces in the novel a benevolent wealthy
lady, Miss Letty, who, having taken a fancy for the boy, wants to train him herself and make him her worthy heir. But Miss Letty does not care to understand the chief cause that brought a discord between the boy and his parents. She does not convince them regarding the prosperity of the boy which may be his in future if he is allowed to stay with her. She behaves like a superior being and her attitude is one of condescension rather than of sympathy. Hence she returns without the boy since the mother refuses to send him with the lady. Miss Letty feels sorry for the boy. No loving mother desires to part with her child; but Miss Letty does not seem to understand the affection that binds a mother to her son. In order to attract the attention of her readers, Corelli concentrates always on sensational incidents. Like the plots of the heroic tragedies, many of the plots of her novels are rich in scenic effects, grim environment and ghastly influences. They have epic magnitude. But they are deficient in intensity, in the clear vision of the reality of life and in their organic unity.

The beginnings in Marie Corelli's novels vary according to her themes. Some novels begin with descriptions of nature or with some startling incidents. The openings seem to suggest the nature of the plots—whether they are philosophical or melodramatic. Ardatia begins with a description of the
Caucasus mountains in the midst of which the monastery of Hellobas is situated. In order to suggest the serenity and mystery of the life of the monks in the monastery, Corelli introduces a sweeping storm and clouded skies. Such incidents help naturally to reveal her power of elaborate narration: "Deep in the heart of the Caucasus mountains a wild storm was gathering. Drearm shadows drooped and thickened above the pass of Dariel... clouds, fringed ominously with lurid green and white, drifted heavily yet swiftly across the jagged peaks." The Soul of Lilith begins with the soliloquy of Hsealot, "To be or not to be," in an overcrowded theatre. It prepares us for the sceptic hero of the novel, El-Rami. The Master Christian opens with the ringing of bells in the church of Roven. Thelma opens with a magnificent description of the midnight sun. Vendetta and Ziska have sensational beginnings. But Wormwood, The Sorrows of Satan, Temporal Power and The Life Everlasting begin in a discursive and retrospective manner. Corelli's method of writing was laboured and elaborate. Some of the expositions in her novels may therefore appear to be dull and conventional.

The endings in her novels are also frequently conventional. Her novels end usually in the marriage or death of important characters. Ardath ends the marriage of Theos and Ardath. p.3.
Edris. The Life Everlasting also closes with the union of the heroine and Santoris. Thelma closes with the reconciliation of the estranged pair. In Vendetta and Wormwood Corelli makes the heroes the narrators of their past histories. These sinners survive up to the end. But their underground life is worse than death. Sometimes Corelli does not end her novels with the death or marriage of the main characters. She goes on to narrate in brief passages what happens to the other characters in the novels. For instance, Lorimer, the friend of Errington, secretly desired to marry Thelma. But as he did not succeed in his desire, he consoled himself with marrying the daughter of Thelma, though she is very junior to him.

There seems to be hardly any dramatic skill employed in the development of the stories. The dialogues serve more the purpose of narration, of description or of argumentation rather than of an acceleration of the action. In the following passage from The Soul of Lilith, for instance, El-Nemi asks the Soul of Lilith about the other worlds and the nature of good and evil:

"'Lilith!' he commanded - 'Speak plainly, that I may fully understand your words. You say there is no hell?'

The answer came steadily.

'None!'

'Then must evil go unpunished?'
'Evil wreaks punishment upon itself. Evil destroys itself. That is the Law.'

'And the Prophets! ' muttered El-Rami scornfully -

'Well! Go on, strange sprite! Why— for such things are known — why does goodness suffer for being good?'

'Impossible?' queried El-Rami incredulously.

'Impossible,' repeated the soft voice firmly. 'Goodness seems to suffer, but it does not. Evil seems to prosper, but it does not. '

'And God exists?'

'God exists.'

The tone of these dialogues is superficially colloquial. But there is no dramatic surprise or intensity in the dialogues. We are carried along by the tide of narration mainly by Corelli's gift of story-telling and by her capacity for marvellous description.