CHAPTER XIX.

Description: the Scenes and Settings in Corelli's Novels.

Description is an essential feature of fiction. It finds a unique place in romance because in romance, the characters are placed in an imaginary setting—a world which is strange and often remote from the world around us. Corelli weaves romantic settings into her novels. The scenes and situations strike us as strange and remote. But they are, nevertheless, significant and attractive. She aims at an imaginative correspondence between her settings and her characters. Her romantic characters find themselves at home in these settings.

Verisimilitude with the realist lies in resemblance to actuality, verisimilitude with the romantic lies rather in artistic fitness. A correlation is also aimed at between setting and action.

Corelli's descriptive method is objective. She gives visual accounts of the objects and actions. Her method of imaginative and elaborate description resembles the technique of scenic effects on the stage. There is either harmony or contrast between the characters and the settings in her novels.

The settings in her novels influence and determine the characters' scenes and incidents. The settings create the atmosphere of a definite locality in novels like *Thelma*. Corelli uses colourful words and phrases in her description. Her descriptive passages, like those about the Norwegian scenes in *Thelma*, have epic dignity. Like Mrs. Radcliffe and Hardy, Corelli uses unique landscapes and natural scenes to create appropriate and fascinating settings. Corelli's descriptive power is one of the main literary gifts which made her novels popular.

Corelli's descriptions centre round the following topics in her novels—and they serve to give an idea of the range of her descriptive power: art and architecture; cosmic space and the planets; mountains; seashores; the sky; moonlight; night; sunrise and sunset; fire, storm and rain; flowers and gardens; pyramids, caves, vaults and monasteries; voyages; slum streets, ghosts, corpses and duels; the human body and its movement and appearance; social parties and ball rooms; lovers and enemies; wealth and poverty; serpents, dogs and doves.

There is no definite locality either in *A Romance of Two Worlds* or in *The Life Everlasting*. The main characters in these novels are philosophical. They discuss some religious and philosophical problems. The characters are almost abstract figures. As these are usually monks or disciples of monks, some of the scenes take place in monasteries or churches. The action
of A Romance of Two Worlds covers both earth and heaven. In The Life Everlasting, the sea and the house of the monk, Aselion, serve as the main background of the action. Nevertheless, Corelli tries to introduce some local colour even in her philosophic stories. She introduces the studio of an Italian artist and the house of the monk Heliobas which is equipped with some oriental utensils and decorations, in A Romance of Two Worlds. Descriptions of Nature, as in colourful pictures of the sky, mist or moonrise, help to suggest the feelings of the characters.

But in many of her novels, Corelli arranges settings for special artistic effects. This is so particularly in Thelma. This simple love story has the picturesque settings of Norway in summer and winter. The descriptions of landscapes in the first and the third part of this novel not only decorate but even seem to become the motive power of the action. The would-be lovers in the story appear to meet in some dream land of Cupid. It is the land of the midnight sun: "Midnight, without darkness, without stars! Midnight, and the unwearyed sun stood, yet visible in the heavens, like a victorious king throned on a dais of royal purple bordered with gold. The sky above him, his canopy, gleamed with a cold yet lustrous blue, while across it slowly flitted a few wandering clouds of paler amber, deepening as they sailed along, to a tawny
orange. A broad stream of light, falling, as it were, from the centre of the magnificent orb, shot lengthwise across the Altenfjord, turning its waters to a mass of quivering and shifting colour that alternated from bronze to copper,—from copper to silver and azure. The surrounding hills glowed with a warm, deep violet tint, flecked here and there with touches of bright red, as though fairies were lighting tiny bonfires on their summits. The entire action of the first part of Thelma is set in the region of mountains, waterfalls, seashores and forests. This suite the simple but adventurous characters like Thelma, Guldmar and Errington and the rustic and wicked characters like Dyecworthy and Sigurd. The entire action of the third part of the novel takes place in the frozen land of Norway under a changeless wintry night. The estranged couple, Thelma and Errington, are reconciled to each other in this setting. The frozen landscape symbolises their estrangement. But the setting also serves a decorative purpose, giving as it does a vivid picture of Norway in winter. It creates the proper background for episodes like the reunion of Thelma and Errington, the death of Guldmar and the vindictive story of Ulrika.

Apart from being an aid to action setting can be even more significant and generate action. The vault of his family...
becomes a source of action for Romani in *Vendetta*. It prompts him to his liberation. Later it becomes for him the secret spot in which he conceives his plan for vengeance. Theos in *Ardath* turns the romantic field of Ardath into a stage set for his adventures. He meets there his angel lover, Edris, who consequently makes him turn to religion and to God. Corelli brings the two lovers, Theos and Edris, to a sacred spot, the Cologne Cathedral on the Rhine for their sacred union at the end. The dark designs of the drunkard, Gaston in *Wormwood* are carried out in the neighbourhood of the gloomy slums in Paris. The environment of the family of the sophisticated and irreligious man, Mr. Valliscourt, becomes the cause of the death of his lovely boy, Lionel, in *The Mighty Atom*. The vicious influence of a poor family consisting of a father who is a drunkard and a lowbred mother ruin the bright career of a bright child in *Boy*. Sometimes the setting even seems to determine the future life of a character. Against the sombre background of a Pyramid in Egypt, Ziska in the novel of her name, takes vengeance on her betrayer, Gervase. In *Temporal Power* gloom envelopes most of the action. The King does his diplomatic and adventurous work under the cover of night. In *The Master Christian*, the religious setting gives light and shade to the ugly picture of clerical life. It also becomes a field of action for Manuel for the propagation of what he
regards as the true principles of Jesus Christ.

The dwarf Sigurd and Olaf Goldmar are the typical products of the coastal and rural setting in *Thelma*. Sergius chord, Lotys and their party can only be seen in a circle of blood-thirsty revolutionaries such as are depicted in the novel. The environment of her household drudgery and her selfish parents helps the conscientious Diana in *The Young Diana* to start a new life of adventure in a different part of the globe. Corelli also introduces numerous perverted characters which are the typical products of a decadent society. Tempest and Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan*, Lady Winsleigh and Sir Francis Lennox in *Thelma*, Mrs. Maddenhaw in *Jane*, Gifford Carlyon in *The Murder of Delicia* and many others are the popular models of sordid life of a decadent period. The following description of a social gathering in *Thelma* gives a glimpse of the environment which produces such fallen men and women: "- Gentlemen of serious demeanour, who are leaning, as though exhausted, against banisters with a universal air of profound weariness and dissatisfaction. Some of these are young fledglings of manhood, callow birds who, though by no means innocent, are more or less inexperienced, and who have fluttered hither to the snare of Lady Winsleigh's 'at home,' half expecting to be allowed to make love to their hostess, and so have something to boast of afterwards; others are of the middle-aged complacent type, who,
through infinitely bored, have condescended to 'look in' for ten minutes or so, to see if there are any pretty women worth the honour of their criticism — others again (and these are the most unfortunate) are the 'nobodies' — or husbands, fathers, and brothers of 'beauties,' whom they have dutifully escorted to the scene of triumph, in which they, unlucky wights! are certainly not expected to share. A little desultory conversation goes on among these stair-loungers, — conversation mingled with much dreary yawning, — a trained opera-singer is shaking forth chromatic roulades and trills in the great drawing-room above, — there is an incessant stream of people coming and going — there is the rustle of silk and satin, — perfume shaken out of lace kerchiefs and bouquets oppresses the warm air, — the heat is excessive, — and there is a never-ending monotonous hum of voices, only broken at rare intervals by the 'society laugh' — that unmeaning giggle on the part of the women, — that strained 'ha, ha, ha!' on the part of the men, which is but the faint ghostly echo of the farewell voice of true mirth. Some women — novelists, Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan*, Irene Vassilitskii in *The Soul of Lilith* and Delicia in *The Murder of Delicia*, belong to the same kind of affected upper-class society, though they may not have fallen like the rest. Corelli arranges rural settings in some of her novels like *Holy Orders*, *God's Good Man* —

and Innocent. But they take generally a secondary place in her novels.

Some of Corelli’s settings echo the feeling of joy or sorrow in her characters. Nature sympathises with the characters. At the time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Barabbas the earth heaves up and a dense darkness falls on the land, a description which reminds us of the touching picture in the Old English Lyric, The Dream of the Road. The rural setting for his journey seems to harmonise with the feelings of David Heamsley in The Treasure of Heaven. Nature seems to express the feelings of the broken heart of Innocent while she returns hurriedly to Briar Farm after her disillusionment in the city. The five trees, called ‘Five Sisters,’ in the village of St. Rest, in God’s Good Man, are closely related to the life of the villagers. The destruction of the trees betokens to them their own fall. The heroine in The Life Everlasting finds her own joy reflected in Nature at the end of the novel.

Settings can also be so devised as to suggest a contrast to the feeling burdening the heart of a character. After getting out of his family vault, Romani in Vendetta is anxious to see his wife at night. But the first thing that he sees in his villa is the amorous scene between his wife and her lover.

Delicate ball dance on the eve of Nina's death. Thelma is a living contrast to the decadent society.

The enthusiastic experimentation of Dr. Kremlin on the heavens and lightning contrast strangely with death at the end of it, in *The Soul of Lilith* while Barabbas, p.6.

lying chained in a dark Jewish prison, there is a picture which contrasts with his own misery. Outside the heavens were putting on their majesty; the pleiades into the purple sky, appearing to open and shone a cluster of lilies on a lake, — in the east a bar of silvery cloud, where the moon would shortly rise. While the herd of *Life Everlasting* is on a cruise she could see through the astrolabe the sinking moon showing through it like the sorrows of love in the main characters in *God's Good Man*, p.269-270.

Well written novel, setting is an integral part of the structure. Character, action and setting are interrelated. One seems to depend on the other. But as Corelli did not bring about that imaginative fusion, which is the sure sign of genius, the reader feels that, frequently, character, action

and as setting lie apart in her novels and that they are not fused together. But settings play an important part in Corelli's novels. Sometimes they seem even to dominate the main action. They sometimes even divert the attention of the reader from the main action and the characters. On the whole, her settings are vivid and they contribute in a large measure to the gripping power of her narratives.

In the almost loosely constructed plots of Corelli's novels one of the major interests is the beauty of particular scenes. Some of the natural descriptions used for setting, as in Thelma, are beautiful and vivid in themselves. But there are some scenes besides these in her melodramatic works which can be read separately for their own sake. Lucio makes preparations for a grand party in honour of his friend's fiancée, Sibyl, in The Sorrows of Satan. Numerous spirits work as waiters and musicians at this party. Two spirits in the form of two tiny pages appear suddenly and empty "two baskets of pink and white rose-leaves." When Sibyl enters the house of Tempest. Some spirits play music and some of them "clad as tiny foresters, in doublets of green, with pink caps on their curly locks" play the game of the Maypole. The whole scene is filled with scenic effects. The vile priestess, Lysia of the Nagyans

1. The Sorrows of Satan. p.263.
temple, in Ardath arranges the tempting dance of a nude girl for a big gathering of her admirers and adorers. Corelli gives a detailed description of the dancer, how her "figure was in perfect harmony with the seductive grace of her gesture."

Physical charm reaches its apotheosis in this description:
"Round and round she floated wildly, like an opal-winged butterfly in a net of sun beams, now seemingly shaken by delicate tremors as aspen leaves are shaken by the faintest wind." There is also the fascinating scene of a pagan funeral at the end of Thelma, when Guldmar dies and is borne away on his burning ship. There is the horrible scene of the death of Varillo Florian in The Master Christian. The vindictive pursuit by Ziska of her betrayer Gervase in the interior of a pyramid in the novel of her name is a ghastly and unforgettable scene. Nino's death in the Romani vault in Vendetta is both terrible and pathetic. There is a crude grandeur in the death of the passionate dwarfs in Thelma leaping from the peak of a mountain. The dark scene in which the 'Vow of Fealty' for criminal deeds is taken by the revolutionary party and the scene in which the disguised King offers himself to the members of the revolutionary party as a victim to their 'Red Cross Signal' in Temporal Power are thrilling and unforgettable. Besides these scenes,
there are sensational events like duels in *Vendetta* and *The Master Christian* and combats in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *Temporal Power*. The trial scene of the heroine in *The Life Everlasting* in the monastery of Aselsion is a melodramatic incident. In some of her descriptions Corelli seems often to attain epic grandeur. There is the powerful description of the destruction of the Nagaya temple with some ignoble persons like Lysia and the King in it, in *Ardath*. Sudden blazes of fire rise and encounter them. Here is a part of the description of the scene. Lysia has become desperate, seeing the encroaching flames: "Shuddering half-laughing, half-weeping, she clasped her hands round the monarch's throat, and hid her wild eyes in his breast, while he, unnerved by her distraction and his own inward torture, glared about him on all sides for some glimmering chance of rescue, but could see none. The flames were now attacking the shrine on every side like a besieging army... Lysia, the captor was made captive at last! Bound, helpless, imprisoned and hopelessly doomed, Nagaya had claimed his own! The huge Snake, terrified beyond all control at the bursting breadth of fire environing the Shrine, had turned in its brute fear to the mistress it had for years been accustomed to obey, and had now, with one stealthy, noiseless spring, twisted its uppermost coil close about her waist, where its restless head, alarmed eyes and darting fangs all
glistened together like a blazing cluster of gem! The more she struggled to release herself from its deathful embrace, the tighter its body contracted and the more maddened with fright it became. Shriek upon shriek broke from her lips and pierced the suffocating air, while with all his great muscular force Zephoranim the King strove in desperate agony to tear her from the awful clutch of the monster he had but lately knelt to as divine.¹ At the end of Temporal Power there is the funeral of Lotys which resembles to some extent the funeral of Guldmar in Thelma. Her corpse is laid on a ship and the ship is set sail on the sea. Corelli describes the scene as "the sailing of Lotys to the Infinite." She narrates it with seriousness and dignity and with a strain of sadness: "Some five days later, a strange and solemn spectacle was witnessed by thousands of spectators from all the shores and quays of the sea-girt city. A ship set sail for the Land of the Infinite! - a silent passenger went forth on a voyage to the borders of the unknown! Coffined in state, - with a purple velvet pall training its rich folds over the casket which enshrined her perished mortality, and with flowers of every imaginable rareness, or wildness, scattered about it, - the body of Lotys was, with no religious or formal ceremony, placed on the deck of a sailing barge and sent out to the waves for burial... Eager crowds watched

the unique ceremony, unknown save in old Viking days, of sending forth a dead voyager to sail the pitiless seas; and countless numbers of small boats attended the funeral vessel in a long flotilla, escorting it out to that verge where the ocean opened widely to the wider horizon, and spread its highroad of silver waves invitingly out to the approaching silent advent of...

It will be noticed that these scenes stand out partly because of the magnificent description which is used to bring out the significance of a situation. Setting, situation or scene,—it is Corelli's capacity for marvellous description that transfigures even a commonplace setting into a thing of remarkable loveliness or serves to fix a scene constantly in our memory.

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