The enigmatic and lonely woman novelist

"To be fascinating you should be enigmatical. When once man is allowed to understand your riddle thoroughly, the spell is broken. The placid, changeless, monotonously amiable woman has no power whatever over the masculine temperament. It is Cleopatra that makes a slave of Antony, not blameless Jane and simple Octavia."

---The Soul of Lilith p260.

The integrated personality of a writer is reflected in his artistic creation. "Poetry", said Shelley "is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." Corelli's life and her times are, in a way, obliquely reflected in her novels. She was one of those characters who puzzled the critics and whose entrancing works captivated the mind of the public. Corelli's birth was a 'mystery', her life was a 'curiosity' and her works are an 'enigma'. To-day, with the revival of public interest in her romances, there is search for a clue to her real personality. The recent biographies of Corelli by Eileen Bigland and of the Rev. W.J. Scott reveal this trend.

Corelli's birth was an mystery. When she died in 1924 at Stratford-on-Avon the newspapers, instead of expressing their heart-felt sorrow over the demise of the 'most popular woman-novelist of the past generation', published sensational
details about her birth and career. Corelli was the illegitimate child of Dr. Charles Mackay and Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Mills, a widow. She was born in 1855. Her parents were not united by the bonds of holy matrimony till 1861. But the year of her birth was not exactly known till the publication of Bertha Vyver's Memoirs of Marie Corelli in 1930. Literary histories and reference books like Baker's A Guide to Best Fiction, Modern English Writers by Harold Williams, The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature and The Encyclopaedia of Britannica recorded the year of her birth as 1864. Till the publication of Bertha Vyver's Memoirs, several fantastic stories about her birth and parentage were current in England. Michael Sadler quotes one of Corelli's letters to Bentley, the publisher, in his essay on "The Camel's Back", in which she wrote: "there are 'romances' in every life, though not till ten days ago did I know there was such a romance in mine." Dr. Mackay kept to himself the secret of her illegitimacy till his death, for in the Victorian period an illegitimate child was regarded as an outcast. Corelli came to know the fact after his death in 1889, when she was in the prime of her literary career. After that the fact of her illegitimate birth weighed on her mind. But as she was a good poseur in her life, she never made it public and wove mysterious tales around it in order to conceal it.

1. Marie Corelli - by Rileen Bigland. pg.16.
2. ---Ibid--- pg.20.
However, as years passed, her sadness and disillusionment found indirect expression in some of her later novels. She deals with the theme of an illegitimate girl in *Innocent*. The child Innocent also is a 'foundling' which reminds one of the stories of Dr. Mackay's discovery of a deserted infant in a basket. Again there is a slight suggestion of Diana's peculiar birth in the conversations of her parents Mr. and Mrs. James Polydore May, in *The Young Diana*. ¹

After his return to London in 1865 from America where he worked as a special correspondent to the 'New York Times' from 1862 to 1865, Dr. Mackay settled down with his second wife and their female child in Fern Dell - a 'charming old fashioned house', near the village of Mickleham. At the back of the house there was a "lovely garden, a beautiful lawn surrounded with syringa, lilac, laburnum roses". ² The view of 'Box Hill' and the surrounding countryside was magnificent and the whole atmosphere was romantic. Adjacent to 'Fern Dell' there was the garden of 'Flint Cottage' where George Meredith lived.

Minnie Corelli's name was about ten years old when she entered the country house. Even at this early age, she had a sense of superiority and a strong faith in herself. In her infancy, "she was being petted and admired by Mrs. Mackay's acquaintances."³ While the mother and child stayed

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¹ The Young Diana. pp.38.
³ Marie Corelli - by Eileen Bigland. pp.25.
In London till 1865, Minnie did not mix with other children of her age. She kept aloof.

Corelli's love of nature grew because of her country surroundings. She was a lonely child and had no companions. Nature became her playmate. She made friendship with the trees and plants. Putting her lovely face among the bunches of flowers, she looked at the twinkling sky. She dreamed of a host of imaginary beings and left, in the vision of her half closed eyes, the approaching steps of a 'Fairy Prince' towards a 'Sleeping Beauty' on earth, herself. While walking with her father among the surroundings of Fern Dell, she showed him her secret 'Dream Hole' — a "deep mossy hollow on the hillside into which she crawled"¹ and read Shelley and Keats.

Blowing out the candle at bed time, the girl saw the night sky through the window. "The moon and stars had a wonderful fascination for her."² She had a strong faith in God and Christ and thought of them as her guardian spirits. All this is what Corelli herself has told us about her girlhood, though the glamour of reminiscence may have given a touch of exaggeration to these recollections. She was essentially a romantic soul.

¹ Marie Corelli - by Eileen Bigland. p.27.
² Memoirs of Marie Corelli - by Bertha Vyver. p.12.
"I roamed through the wild wood,
Belov'd in childhood,
And sought for the fairy,
With whom I used to play."

Corelli had no university education. Even her school life extended only over a short period. She received all her training at home and was largely self-taught. Minnie was schooled, during her early stay in London, by her mother. She learnt to 'read, write and do simple sums.' No body influenced Corelli in her training as did Dr. Mackay. He saw in her a bright mind, a vivid imagination and an unusual gift of expression. He "crammed her retentive brain with everything he saw fit, from long lectures on politics and literature to the practising of Chopin's Waltzes." He praised her recitations of Byron; he taught her French till she could 'read Voltaire in the original'.

The Doctor's extensive library was always open to her; she read whatever she picked up and thought was interesting; her learning was thus unmethodical. Dr. Mackay's "Library was an 'olla-podrida' of random things, good, bad and indifferent—there were 'standard' histories and classics, poets and novelists and dramatists; there were many volumes of old, forgotten essays and political 'squibs'. Voltaire jostled

with Plutarch, and Shakespeare with 'The Tatler' and 'Rambler' — and a large number of dictionaries, old and new, lumbered the shelves. Such a heterogeneous collection of books made Minnie's head a "little library full of odd volumes."

Corelli was a precocious child; she had a good memory. When she was such an odd mixture of knowledge, some governesses were appointed for her home lessons. But they came and went unable to handle the abnormal growth of her mind. One conscientious governess Miss Knox, perhaps, correctly diagnosed her mind. She saw in her pupil a pretentious character with the evil influence of unselected reading. She noticed Minnie's 'flirting eyelashes', 'tossing ringlets' and affected nature at the age of thirteen. Corelli in her girlhood reminiscences says that Miss Knox did not understand her extraordinarily dainty character, "especially a child who is showing signs of ambition." But Knox observed her as a sane, clever governess. She complained about her talking too much of love, and told Dr. Mackey that "she reads without method or discernment — not always the right kind of books, I fear! she was poring over Moore's Life of Byron." She referred even to her unmethodical practice of music. Corelli's dramatic outbursts before

the governess showed her 'eccentric' character from the beginning. 

"I must talk or I shall choke!" said once Minnie to Knox, "I feel it all bubbling here," and she tapped her little bosom dramatically. These early ambitious, hysterical and odd characteristics of her personality developed to excess in her later life. Rebecca West summed up her character in these lines. "Marie Corelli had a mind like any milliner's apprentice; but she was something much more than a milliner's apprentice."2

There was already the profound influence of Byron's Don Juan on the girl; the woman's feelings of love and revenge were roused in her by these lines:

"Alas the love of women! ...
For all of theirs upon that death is thrown,
And if 'tis lost, life hath no more to bring...
And their revenge is as the tiger's spring."...3

In a way, Corelli's future life was a tussle between love and revenge; it ended in disillusionment.

After her home-lessons Minnie was sent to a convent school. But whether it was a 'convent in France' or 'French convent in England' is not clear. According to Corelli's own statement to W.S. Scott she seems to have been sent to a convent

1. Marie Corelli - by Bigland, pp. 38.
3. Byron's Don Juan, Canto the Second, Stanza cxix.
in France.¹ For the first time, Corelli was surrounded by
children of her own age. For the first time, she felt that
her coquettish, affectations, behaviour which she had shown
before her father and Meredith, would not be tolerated by
her companions. "The prattling sprite with the bobbing ringlets
disappeared; in her place was a school girl with a touch
of the hoyden about her who delighted in midnight feasts."²
She stayed at the convent only for a short period of one or
two years; and during that period she developed her individualistic
personality. By starting a dramatic society and
playing a leading role in a school play, she was convinced
of her dramatic ability, which is obvious in all her future
novels.³ She asked her father to give a 'dreadful plot of
love and murder' to stage at the convent function,— a predilection
which clearly reveals her original preference for
melodramatic themes. Thrilled by the success of her convent
play, Corelli during the Easter Holidays, staged a more ambitious
entertainment at Fern Dell. In the programme it was
noted that "No critics or Great Geniuses" were admitted.

Her convent career was suddenly disturbed,— whether
it was on account of her physical break down, or for some
other reason is not clear. When she returned to Fern Dell,
"She could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen years
old."³

   --Ibid--
3. Ibid — pp.44.
Corelli had a sweet voice and a 'good musical ear too'. From her early girlhood she played on the drawing room piano and sang her father's songs "in a sweet bird-like soprano voice." Her neighbour George Meredith often listened to her music and asserted that she had 'a divine fire'. But Miss Knox remarked that Corelli had no technical knowledge and her music was unmethoical. It was the final verdict on her musical career. During her convent days, instead of playing 'games of croquet, tennis and archery' with other girls, she played on the chapel-organ. In a letter to her father from the convent she expressed her 'fervent desire to become a playwright or an actress- or both'. Dr. Mackay, being a Victorian, opined that "No lady would demean herself by association with the theatrical profession." He did not encourage age, at this time, her wish to take up a musical career which 'could only lead, like the headlong rush of the Gadarene swine to disaster'. But she was allowed to spend all her available time at the drawing-room piano. In her convent days with her dramatic and musical talents, she was already busy in writing an opera called "Ginevra da Siena."

When Minnie returned home from the convent school, she found Fern Dell disorderly, and melancholy. "Dr. Mackay was in poor health and even in poorer spirits, his two main topics

1. Marie Corelli by Bigland. pg.27.
2. Ibid. pg.43.
of conversation being his lack of money and the disgraceful
Italian escapades of George Eric, who was his youngest son
by his first wife. Mrs. Mackay was also ill. But she was
an ungrudging endurer. Corelli assumed full control of the
situation. She had never forgotten the practical side; she
prepared herself to set everything right.

The Doctor's finances were becoming day by day more
tightened; poverty gnawed at the door of Fern Dell. He thought
again of her musical career; he insisted that she should
practice the piano and earn by that. Corelli respected her
father and had faith in his wisdom. She sat at the piano and
spent hours at her 'improvisations' as a 'heaven born musical
genius', without arriving at any technical knowledge of it.
She read aloud to him, listened to his monologues on his past
glories and took him out for walks. The girl's inner sorrow
during this period is expressed in her 'effusions' which she
composed after the day's labour at night, secretly. She had
become lonely again. Her childhood memories of angels and
fairies floated again before her eyes. Till her twenty first
year, Corelli seldom moved outside the Fern Dell garden. She
was dutiful and devoted to her parents. Mrs. Mackay was a
self-sacrificing stone-hearted woman. She remained silently in
her room, feeling all the time for her own lack of artistic
knowledge and for the unrewarded brilliance of her husband and

and daughter. She did not speak about her self-consuming illness. The woman suffered silently. In the summer of 1876 she died and was buried in Kickleham Churchyard.

However, Corelli got as a compensation within a year, a sincere friend, a life-long companion, Bertha Vyver, who came to their household as a gift of God. They were of the same age, and developed for each other a deep affection which knit them together to the end of Corelli’s life. She could now confide her innermost feelings to her. Bertha managed the household affairs and attended to Dr. Mackay and she gave full scope to her friend’s progress in music and in writing literary articles.

In 1883, an incident occurred which necessitated a change of place. Dr. Mackay had a stroke from which the local doctor said there was no hope of recovery. London was the only possible place for adequate medical treatment. With tears in their eyes, Bertha and Minnie secured a small furnished house in Kensington and left Fern Dell in a hired carriage for London. Both the women attended the doctor who had become a ‘veritable holy terror.’ And thinking it as their duty, they summoned the errant George Eric to his father’s bedside. But he arrived late and penniless after the immediate danger had been averted.

Sorrows came thick and fast. Minnie was compelled to take up the burden of her family; it was the most critical period of her life. Her passionate, ambitious soul shrank and
was crippled by the hunting terror of poverty and encroaching misery. "Fapa's health was worsening; a first story of her own had been rejected with the brusque remark that fiction writing 'was not her forte'; doctors' bills were assuming alarming proportions." Eric was a disappointment. But Corelli had taken a 'romantic adoration for him' and tolerated him.

When Corelli was battling with such household tasks Dr. Tanner arranged for her a concert, in his drawing room. It was the first concert and Bertha and Marie enthusiastically prepared themselves for the occasion. Dr. Mackay, who had recovered, wrote several letters to editors and reviewers requesting their presence at his daughter's concert. The programme was performed on 4th December, 1884. "Signorina Marie Corelli" played 'no fewer than fifteen original pieces of music, composing them as she played'. The function was a success. Critics praised her 'pianoforte playing' and wished for her a successful future. Corelli also gave some concerts at 'St. James's Hall' and other places. The public commended her improvisations but disliked her vocal music which seemed to them an amateur, drawing-room variety. Her musical career had a swift growth. But it did not last for a long time. Dr. Mackay blamed the 'dunder-headed British Public' as it blocked his daughter's musical career.

Circumstances were unknowingly leading Corelli to her proper sphere of literary work. On account of Dr. Mackay's earnest letter, Mr. George Bentley, the head of the distinguished firm of Richard and Son, accepted Mile. Marie Corelli's sonnets and wrote an encouraging letter to her. The publisher did not know that he was favouring his future best-seller novelist of the day. The delighted Minnie, forgetting all her former rejected pieces, posted him an article entitled "One of the World's Wonders". To her great surprise, Bentley published it in the July (1885) issue of his magazine 'Temple Bar' and sent her a cheque for ten guineas. It was the dawn of a new life and Minnie and Bertha must have danced in ecstasy. Corelli now retired to her dark, little, back drawing-room to retouch and complete her first Romance with which she was 'wrestling' for not less than eight years.

Corelli had been a writer since her girlhood. She had written four sonnets on Shakespeare's women characters when she was still in her teens. While she was practising for her musical career, Dr. Mackay, in order to encourage her, had sent them to Clement Scott, who published three of those sonnets, etc., in his "The Theatre".

With the publication of "A Romance of Two Worlds" in 1886, Dr. Mackay's daughter, Minnie, stepped into a new land of fame and material prosperity, from which she never returned to the home of her childhood, Fern Dell. Corelli was thirty one years old when her first book was published. She
wrote novel after novel and almost magnetised the entire public. Her melodramatic, sensational and dogmatic romances satisfied the curiosity and the bewildered brain of the common man. Her former Christian name 'Minnie Mackay' was changed to her magic Italian pen-name 'Marie Corelli'. The 'metamorphosis' was now complete. A huge quantity of correspondence flowed in from different countries like India, Africa, Australia and America. England was not an exception. Corelli to these correspondents a thinker, a moralist and a tonic. Her world-wide popularity gave to the disappointed, ambitious soul of Corelli brimming satisfaction. On the other hand, her sudden social success made her more conceited and pompous. She attended parties and public functions. Her sense of prestige as a famous writer, blinded her to the feelings of others. "She developed a gracious Lady Bountiful air" in her house. She played the 'Contessa Marie Corelli' before the public. Consciously or unconsciously a shadow of vain glory covered her sincerity.

She knew the charm of her personal beauty well. She had impressed her father and Meredith by her coquettish manners. She tried to win the governesses by her 'flirting eyes and affected behaviour. She was mediocre in her height and was not dumpy in her youth. "Despite her years her

1. Marie Corelli - by Bigland. pg. 82.
appearance was amazingly youthful and her rose leaf complexion
which was the envy of many. She dressed well according to
the occasion. Here is a description of the twenty eight year
old Minnie, on the day of her first concert. "With her fair
curls piled on top of her head and the lumpiness of her body
concealed by her flowing dress, Minnie's appearance was certainly
teenty appealing. True, her solemn blue grey eyes and pink
and white complexion belied her Italian name."

'Thelma' enchanted all the over of 'romance'. It
increased her social prestige beyond her dreams. The leading
hostesses of London vied with one another to entertain its
author. 'She sailed in and out of drawing rooms', appearing
in decorated silks or muslins, 'surveying the world pensive
from above the fan'. Corelli was a born actress; she took
full advantage of her opportunities. People talked of her
child-like appearance. She overheard their talk and behaved
more like a child. "In a day when people expected a woman
writer to be plain, middle aged and a blue-stocking she created
a furore." Once while on tour, "two dashing German officers"
kar kar at Bonn, clicked their heels, and saluted her. She
knew well that this was a tribute to her personal charm.

Corelli enjoyed the social whirl. She found an immense
pleasure in dinner parties, surrounded by attentive
and praising males. Whether Corelli deliberately entered into

2. Ibid. pp.63.
3. Ibid. pp.98.
the social crush or she thought of her duty to satisfy the receptionists by accepting their invitations is difficult to judge. But it is evident that, when the social wind blew, she was carried away along with it. When Dr. Mackay died in 1889, she strictly observed mourning in a conventional manner. But when "Eric reminded her solemnly that she was not a private individual but a famous writer with a duty to her public," Corelli yielded to his opinion and entered the social arena.

It was with royal personages, titled men and women, high military officers, and literary and political men and women that Corelli enjoyed her social life. At a dinner party the Contessa Fenzi brought her a personal message from the Queen of Italy. "A Major Mills entertained her to a most luxurious dinner, at which her partner was to have been the son of the Duke of Cambridge;...there were luncheons and teas innumerable; there was a grand reception given by Mrs. Antoinette Sterling, the contralto ballad singer; there was a second studio call upon a German painter who had done a portrait of Mme. Blavatsky and made a speciality of executing pictures while in a trance."[2]

What seems strange and incongruous is that, with all this multicoloured social life, Corelli asserts "I do love peace and rest; I shall never be a follower of society".[3]

1. Marie Corelli - by Bigland, pp.119.
2. Ibid, pp.119.
Her popularity was immense. From the members of royal families to common men everyone was eager to see her and to know her. She created a sensation both in the West and East. On one of her last visits to England, the Empress Frederick received Corelli at Buckingham palace. She told her that "Theleme in its German translation was her husband's novel at the time of his illness." The late premier of England, Gladstone, recognized "a power working for good" in her novels. This popularity and praise raised the facile Corelli to such a height of conceit that she did not understand the solidity of her own character. It seems that she was puffed up by public praise. She developed her literary work and personality on their opinions and did not analyse her own self. She was essentially the child of her generation. The excess of her fame passed away with the passing of her generation.

Corelli was an emotional woman. She clung to an ideal conception of love. Byron's words on the love of women had impressed her to the core. In her girlhood the "bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald" of Scottish folk-lore were her idols. She longed for a 'fairy prince' for her husband. But years passed and no person claimed her. She was a lonely girl and was brought up in strict Victorian morals. In her youth she was accompanied by Bertha Vyver. Her ambitions and the

strict religious atmosphere of the house undermined her 'passion.' After knowing her illegitimacy, she must have become more sensitive towards sex. However Corelli was rather sentimental; she had flirted sometimes. She loved mediaeval chivalry and liked chivalric gallants. She went for a change to Scotland while she was writing 'Thelma'. "At staffa she had quite a flirtation with the first mate who gallantly helped her climb up the rocks to Fingal's 'Wishing Chair'. In a letter to Bertha she wrote about her flirtation with a very handsome young fellow; he wore her little 'done up silk with velvet sleeves'. Her crowning flirtation was perhaps with the Prince of Wales, the later Edward the Seventh. At Hamburg at a dinner party the Prince "fixed his eyes full upon me. He continued to look much to the satisfaction of my host."

On another occasion Corelli was invited to dine with His Royal Highness. Under the battery of envious eyes she entered the Kursal on the Prince's arm! At the party, he took her hand and addressed others; "Out of small things what wonders rise!" The Prince is charming, extremely courtly manners, a winning smile, and a peculiar way of doing things which is very taking." She was almost uncrowned queen at Hamburg. But in a confidential letter to Bertha Corelli wrote: "The world seems to me to be going all immoral...True, I used to be a

1. Marie Corelli - by Bigland, pp.91.
2. Memoirs of M. Corelli, pp.120.
flirt but I think I never was a bad flirt— it was all play with me, all on the surface. Her love was pent up; it was volcanic and all the while was waiting for an opportunity to express itself. It may appear laughable but it is true that Corelli, fell deeply in love with the painter, Arthur Severn, at the age of fifty one! Severn was sixty and was happy with his wife for nearly forty years. His wife was Ruskin’s niece. While Corelli was their guest for a short period, she saw in the gallant, Severn, her ideal man. Neglecting altogether the existence of Mrs. Severn, she decided to win him for her soul-mate. This attachment was so intense that she slung to him just as a creeper clings to a tree. Severn was made a butt of ridicule in society by his wife. One day in blunt terms Severn warned Corelli to stop her foolishness. In her "Open confession" Corelli expressed her ethereal love and hatred for Severn. Her unrequited love was changed to severe scorn.

Corelli worked “everyday from ten in the morning till two in the afternoon, alone and undisturbed.” She had also the habit of burning midnight oil. Often during her ‘painful toil’ she went on tours and returned with renewed energy and with new material for her ‘plots’. Her tours on the continent were for a change of atmosphere and for refreshment.

"During her travels she was never idle, but always at work recording notes of scenes, seasons and events. Afterwards she used them in her novels for her settings and themes.

Corelli had three relatives — her two parents, and a step-brother, Eric Mackay, who joined them at the time of Dr. Mackay's illness, in 1883. The Doctor belonged to a noble family. He was educated in London and at Brussels: he was an LL.D. of Glasgow University. He was a reputed man in his days and he was known as a poet of ditties and as a journalist. He was a staff member of "The Illustrated London News". During the American Civil War he served as a correspondent of "The New York Times". He knew some European languages. He was acquainted with some of the great figures of the day; he knew President Lincoln personally; Dickens and Thackeray were his former friends. He had besides a fascinating personality. If the lonely child, Minnie had taken him as her God-father it is no wonder. He was her 'dear Papa', a great man of wisdom. She was his dear 'Rosebud'. Dr. Mackay trained her in the strict Victorian way. He instilled in her mind from her childhood, a reverence for sacred things and faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ. He saw his own brilliance in his daughter. But though he filled in her a spirit of high ambition, he did not educate her methodically.

1. Marie Corelli — by Coates and Bell. p.314.
Dr. Mackay was not so great as he thought himself to be. He had developed an egoistic character. His literary output was ephemeral. His highbrow conduct made him an outcast even in his later life. Corelli was influenced both by his merits and demerits. When she learnt about her illegitimacy after his death, she did not express any bitterness towards him though she stopped talking about him in public. He remained kind for her a 'dear old man' to the last. Mrs. Mackay, being aware of her own imperfect education, did not interfere in her daughter's affairs. She was Corelli's "dear sweet, beautiful full Venetian mother."

Eric Mackay played a considerable part in her popular, literary career. Corelli had no male company beside her father, till her womanhood. Her strong desire for a 'perfect romance' did not become fruitful. Her imaginative life seems to have found in Eric the presence of her 'ideal lover'. Eric was middle aged when he returned home. He was thorough in social etiquette and he knew how to win the attention of facile persons. The narration of his varied Italian life enthralled Corelli. She was glad to possess a brother who had worked in various capacities as an "actor, professional singer, newspaper correspondent, editor, poet and secretary". But Corelli did not think of his unsuccessful life and his irreparable,
worthless character. She used her influence to make him a great, perhaps the greatest poet of her day; for "Over the Poet Laureate business she made herself a laughing-stock". The rumour of their incestuous relationship seems baseless; for Corelli did not hesitate to drag the dead Eric out of his grave before the public for his shameless 'perfidy' about the authorship of her novels. At the most in her 'too-vivid imagination' she might have seen "her step brother and herself as sublimated versions of Augusta Leigh and Byron".

Corelli was obsessed with love. Eric had gained a strong hold on her emotional life. When she was writing Ziska - a novel of passionate love, she whispered to Bertha that she should be sent outside, on tour, for a change, as she could not face the constant presence of Eric in her room.

Among her friends, Bertha Vyver was the nearest to her heart. The Countess Vyver, Bertha's mother, and Dr. Mackay knew each other for many years. The Countess had taken an interest in Minnie and had given her a tiny golden gondola as a present. Both the girls had developed an affection for each other during the periods of their acquaintance. The Countess allowed her daughter, Bertha, to stay with Dr. Mackay and Minnie after Mrs. Mackay's death. Bertha came to Mackay's household as their guardian angel. "She was the ideal companion to the over-emotional Minnie and exercised a most

1. Marie Corelli by Bigland. pp.166.
2. —Ibid— pp.172
smoothing effect upon the querulous Doctor. She was calm
and efficient, unswervingly loyal to her friends.\textsuperscript{1} The success
ess of Corelli's literary career was promoted in a great
measure, by her attending care. She was Corelli's life-long
companion. She was her 'dearest Ber' and in her ears Corelli
poured all her longings and secrets. Bertha was a woman of
great integrity. She was a terror to the nasty Eric. Corelli
quite depended on her friend and even at the time of her death,
hers last words were for Bertha's tender touch.

The end of the eighteen nineties was also the beginning
of the end of Corelli's literary and social triumph. Her
vindictive pamphlet on the dead Eric for his perfidy, stumped
her as a dangerous woman. The rumors about their incest, and
the aspersions cast on her authorship brought about a decline
in her reputation. Invitations grew fewer and guests stopped
attending her Sunday 'At Homes'. She was no longer the guest
of honour of London Society. Society folk were a trifle
tired of her eccentricities, her pose of girlishness, her
dictatorial way of monopolising conversations and being sarcastic
with anyone who attempted to argue with her.\textsuperscript{2}

Corelli left London in 1899 and lived to the end of
her life, at Stratford-upon-Avon. But her coming into the
Shakespearean town was not happy. Her unusual love for the

\textsuperscript{1} Mario Corelli by Bigland. p. 53.
\textsuperscript{2} Marie Corelli - by Eileen Bigland. p. 184.
poet and for sixteenth century buildings forced her to interfere in the town's life, and to this her domineering presence in all the social functions of the town was added. She did not co-operate with the public. She appeared to them, day by day a boater, an upstart. Her sense of her high social status and of her literary kinship with Shakespeare blinded her to the reality of the situation. She paid off the debt of the church of Stratford, maintained a victoria with a couple of Shetland ponies; and caused a 'terrific sensation by buying a gondola from Venice'. But the people turned their faces aside when she passed in her victoria, and they did not respect her. One Protestant minister, Mr. J. Harvey Bloom, hinted at her illegitimacy. To her ill-luck the rationing of sugar at the time of the First World War dragged her to the court. The officers in charge of food control urged house-holders to grow their own fruit and make as much of it into jam as possible. There was no rationing of sugar for this purpose. Corelli preserved sugar for jam making. The local Bench fined her 50 pounds for hoarding sugar. The public forgot her generous help towards the war effort and the prosperity of the town. The next day, newspapers proclaimed her guilt in head lines. But Corelli seems to have been quite innocent in the matter. It was more the indirect revenge of the public "who had suffered from her tongue or her pen in the past."

Corelli possessed the gift of oratory. At the annual function of the 'White Friars Club', in 1901, Corelli spoke for fifteen minutes, unprepared, in defence of her sex. Winston Churchill presided over the function. Congratulating her afterwards, he said: "its excellence had almost disarmed his opposition to woman's suffrage."¹ Her first public lecture was at the philosophical society of Edinburgh, where she spoke on "The Vanishing Gift" or Imagination. The Edinburgh Philosophical Institution, in grateful recognition of her brilliant address, presented her 'a massive silver bowl'.² Once she lectured on "The Sign of the Times" at the Scottish Society of Literature and Art in Glasgow. In 1903 she delivered "A Little Talk on Literature" in Manchester. The Vice-Chancellor of the Leeds University, Dr. Michael Sadleir remarked while thanking her: "her hearers were charmed by her eloquence and by the extraordinary beauty of her enunciation."³ Her power of rhetoric is clearly seen in her 'Vendetta', 'Wormwood', 'Barabbas' and other novels.

Corelli once published a long list of her pet dislikes in the "Lady's Realm". They are expressed in her novels also. She disliked the godless man, the fickle minded woman, women bicyclists, American millionaires, Ibsen, Society noodles,

¹ Memoirs of Maria Corelli -by B.Vyver. p161.
² Ibid. p173.
³ Ibid. p185.
cynics, pessimists and materialists. She loved animals.

Dogs and doves were her favourites. A black and white, rough
haired terrier named 'Tiny' was her companion in her girlhood.
The later Yorkshire Terrier 'Czar' was a unique dog.

When Lucio and Tempest entered the cottage of Mavis Clare,
two dogs roared and growled at them. Berthe mentions a reared
dove flying to Corelli's garden hat. Mavis Clare had a
flock of doves. She nicknamed them after the magazines which
reviewed her novels critically, which is a very good example
of how Corelli satisfied her wounded feelings.

Before burning up her life, it is necessary to consider
her 'new creed'. Corelli, in her later recollections of her
convent days, said: "I became for a time so absorbed in the
mysteries of the religious life, that I had some vague ideas
of founding a 'New Order' and of being the leader of an entirely
original community of Christian workers, who should indeed
deed follow Christ in spirit and in truth." This statement was
not made by the fourteen year old Minnie but by the middle
aged and immensely successful woman, Marie Corelli, who was
determined to be regarded as a mystic." It is by such false
statements and affected behaviour that she made her life an

2. The Sorrows of Satan.
'enigma' and a 'legend'. Corelli was not "absorbed in the mysteries of the religious life" in her school days. She was 'delighted in midnight feasts' and had formed a dramatic society and was the leading actress in staging a dreadful drama of 'love and murder'. Her 'Electric Theory of Christianity' is a blending of Christian and non-Christian doctrines. But she maintained throughout her life that her creed was based on the New Testament only. On the other hand, she never stated clearly where she found the doctrine of reincarnation and the law of Karma ('compensation') in the New Testament. She drew an 'original clock' on her roughly jointed creed. She called herself its prophet. But her mystical experience seems to have been negligible. Her philosophical doctrines belonged to the ancient philosophers of East and West.

With all her world-wide popularity, was Corelli happy in her life? She was successful, materially. She appears to have led a contented life. But she was not happy. The main reason for her disillusionment in life was that she did not understand herself or her own mental constitution. This was perhaps beyond her scope. Her beliefs, her dogmatic writing and her attitude towards others were abnormal, domineering, conceited and sometimes mean. She blamed the public and their narrow-mindedness for every thing. She was incapable of introspection. She was a bundle of extreme loves and hates, likes and dislikes. She was facile and egoistic in her nature
She adored her step-brother, Brie, when he was living and when she was convinced of his abominable actions, she did not mind taking revenge on him even when he was dead. She professed her hatred for fashionable society, but in the eighteen nineties, she was herself immersed in social gatherings. She dressed well and liked fineries. With her rosy face and grey-blue eyes, she attracted the attention of distinguished folk. Vanity was in her blood; but she did not know it. However much she tried to keep up her high status, she could not hoodwink the public who are always conservative and keen-eyed. They marked the glaring superficiality, both in her character and writing.

Women dominate Corelli's novels. Her heroines reveal her own traits in one way or the other. 'Innocent' is an illegitimate girl. The heroines of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* are spinsters and their parentage is not mentioned. They narrate their own stories. Women novelists and literary minded women appear in *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *The Murder of Delicia*, *Treasure of Heaven* and *Innocent* and many of them are spinsters. They have an ideal conception of love and life. They usually lead an independent life on their own earnings. They are sentimental dreamers, dreaming of 'Fairy Princes' like Corelli. Her themes are almost melodramatic. Her predilection for 'dreadful plots of love and murder', was apparent in her 'home-lessons'
and convent days. Her broad painting of fashionable society was the result of her own first hand experience, her dislike for it an after thought. Her love of music is seen in her introduction of songs in her novels. She hated the press. Critics are condemned in most of her novels. *The Silver Domino* consisted of "truly lengthy, candid sallies at the expense of men eminent in politics, literature, and journalism." The sincere missionary zeal and the seemingly affected tone of her novels are two sides of her own character.

Corelli was disillusioned in her love. Since her girlhood days she yearned for an ideal love, a Fairy Prince of her heart's choice. Byron's verdict on women's love impressed her deeply. She thought of herself as 'raven-haired Claire Clairmont for her coming Lord Byron. She longed for a perfect romance, like that of Romeo and Juliet:

"Lost in the passion of a long embrace,
Warm rapture flights each love-transfigured face,
Entwin'd in one another's arms they cling"

In her supposed love-affair with Arthur Severn, she made herself ridiculous. "Clever Women are always fools on one point" - love. Her novel *Tha Devil's Motor* was published

1. Marie Corelli by Bigland. pp.143.
2. Corelli's sonnet -N.Corelli by Bigland. pp.48
In her childhood, a gypsy woman prophesied at the gate of Fern Dell: "Lonely child, lonely woman". It was a true prophecy. Loneliness ever haunted her mind. "Many tears did I shed in this little nook [Dream Hole] many prayers I offer up for release from my loneliness... I was indeed a very lonely child."\(^1\) Except Bertha Vyver, there was no other relative or companion with her in her last days. She clung to her devoted friend like a child and relied upon her for everything. She collapsed in January, 1924 and from that time onwards she never recovered. Her death was a quiet one. She died on the twenty-first of April 1924. As she believed in rebirth and in the life hereafter, she did not feel the horror of death. But it is sad to read that Corelli's request 'with tears in her eyes' to the nurse to send for Bertha to be beside her, on the last night of her death, was denied. The well trained nurse did not realize that Corelli's death was imminent.

With all the shortcomings of her affected nature and superficial knowledge, Marie Corelli has a secure place in the history of English literature as a philosophical thinker, a story-teller and as a woman of "extraordinary vitality and

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1. Marie Corelli - by Bigland. p.31.
and courage. She tried to be 'enigmatical' in her creed, in order to be 'fascinating'. She talked as if she was an 'authority' on English literature in her later days, though her literary knowledge was mediocre. But as Hugh Walpole said "she is not to be laughed at any more." She crusaded for the good of the world and some of her novels are sure to keep her memory alive.

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