THE BEGINNINGS OF THE "PROBLEM NOVEL"

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PERHAPS *The Interesting Story of Edwin and Julia, being a rational and philosophical Enquiry into the Nature of Things. In a Series of Letters. By a Doctor of Philosophy,* published in 1790, is the first of these problem novels that we still have with us. *The Interesting Story of Edwin and Julia* is one of the queer concomitants of the doctrine of "Rights" that strode rampant through the latter days of the eighteenth century. In England, Godwin, Imlay, Wolstonecraft, Montagu, and other of the strong-minded rebels against things as they were, were writing at top speed, though Godwin's *Caleb William or Things as They Are,* Mary Wolstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman or Maria,* and Imlay's divorce novel, *The Emigrants,* were yet to be. But the hatching period was on, and Edwin and Julia were the first of the heroes and heroines to lift their piping voices in the demand for abstract "rights," and more pliant conventions. *The Interesting Story* is not worth much except as wind-blown straws hold interesting stories for the road-wise, but it casts one of the first fictional shots in the cause of the New Philosophy of Human Rights, and Julia voices the kernel of it in the following address to Edwin:

> Sir, let me know if your father and mother are still alive, and tell me why you left them; I know I can make free with you. You are the first man I ever loved, and I trust you will be the last. My heart pants secretly after the happiness of one day becoming yours; and, I am sure, were we both in the city of Paris, you should soon have my hand as you had my heart, long ago. We should ask neither priest nor father to be present at the ceremony; we would leave that bondage to those who are afraid of each other. Our sincere and unfeigned vows to Heaven would be our witnesses and a continual observance to please one another, should be the only proofs of our matrimony.

This, clearly, is very French, and for a time faced the English moralists and critics alone. But in 1792 Mary Wolstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women,* strange enough to be fiction, appeared, to be followed quickly by Imlay's *The Emigrants,* the first English "divorce" novel; and when Godwin's *Caleb Williams or Things as They Are* was followed by Bage's enthusiastic *Hermsprong or Things as They are Not,* and the antidote to Wolstonecraft's poisonous *Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* was offered in Mrs. Opie's rather remarkable *Adeline Mowbray, or, Mother and Daughter,* the wars of theories in fiction were fairly on. Indeed a long list might be compiled of novels that fall under the captions of Godwinian and anti-Godwinian novels. In 1796 Mary Hays published *The Memoirs of Emma Courtnay,* and followed it two years later with *The Victim of Prejudice.* For these two novels, offering as heroines women who thought a little, Miss Hays was flayed alive by the reviewers. Charlotte Smith suffered great loss of prestige with her *Desmond,* appearing about this time, whose heroine dares to leave her husband: of this novel, more later. Several French novels on divorce were translated during this period: *Emily de Varmont, or, Divorce Dictated by Necessity,* by Louvet; *Le Divorce,* by Fievée; *The Picture of the Age,* anonymous; *The Force of Prejudice,* by "Mr. Wildman," are others born of the theorising day and the Godwinian school.

The answers to them, as has been indicated, were not long in coming. Mrs. Opie intended with her *Adeline Mow-*

bray, or, Mother and Daughter, the total annihilation of Mary Wolstonecraft's pernicious preachings, but she missed fire curiously, for, though the mother was a fool, Adeline was an admirably poised young woman who rather comes out ahead in the game of life. *Dorothea or A Ray of Light; Robert and Adela, or, The Rights of Women best Maintained by Sentiments of Nature; Waldorf, or, The Dangers of Philosophy;* and Genlis's *The Depraved Husband and the Philosophical Wife,* are among the bright and shining antis of that shrieking day.

Imlay's *The Emigrants, or, the History of an Expatriated Family, being the Delineation of English Manners, Drawn from Real Characters. Written in America,* is a novel whose principal design, as one of the eighteenth century reviewers stated it, was

> . . . to turn the public attention to the present state of society with regard to marriage. It is an opinion, which this writer seems to think of great importance to communicate and support, that the female world is at present, in consequence of the rigour of matrimonial institutions, in a state of comparative vassalage; and that it would greatly increase the happiness of society, if divorces could be more easily obtained.

The Emigrants bears the hall-mark of Imlay's golden hours with Mary Wolstonecraft, for his strictures on marriage and his philosophical speculations are stamped with the seal of woman's as well as man's psychology, designs of civilisation that in those days were far apart indeed.

Caleb Williams, Godwin's story of a man at war with law and false ideas of honour and property; and Wolstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* (this novel has been discussed at length in the first paper of this series) made up, with *The Emigrants,* an interesting trinity that did not fail of receiving the bitterest condemnation. What with Caleb in jail and Maria uttering sapiencies in a madhouse, critics and readers alike were turned by the ears.

Another curious old novel on divorce is an anonymous, two-volume one, called *The Picture of the Age,* whose heroine had been hurried into marriage with one man while she loved another. The lover returns and lives with them, and what the author terms "a guilty connection" is established between the wife and the lover, secretly connived at—as it later develops—by the husband, who had fallen in love with another lady, and wishes to be rid of his wife. There is a divorce and a double marriage, and the moral of the story seems to be that a more elastic divorce law would prevent the degradations of collusion. This novel also came in for scoring at the hands of the critics who accuse the characters of having "the most accommodating sympathy for each other's frailties," and say of the author that his is "truly the spirit of some modern novelists who delight in palliating error, and in reconciling their readers to false and extravagant delineations of character and conduct. Hence," adds the critic, "we are taught to seek for virtue among felons in jail, and for wisdom in Bedlam."

Mary Hays did not hesitate to go far in her *Memoirs of Emma Courtnay,* a novel that appeared in 1796; far, that is, for a lady of that day writing of a lady of that day. She makes Emma say of herself:

> My desires were impetuous and brooked no delay; my affections were warm, and my temper irascible; opposition would always make me vehement, and coercion irritated me to violence; never but once do I recall having received a blow, but the boiling rage, the cruel tempest, the deadly vengeance it excited in my mind, I now remember with shuddering.

Emma, in a day when ladies were expected to read no further than safe, well-expurgated comments on the Scriptures, perused Plutarch, with, as she says, "my mind pervaded with republican ardour, my sentiments elevated by a high-toned philosophy, and my bosom glowing with the virtues of patriotism."

Later she developed other literary passions:

In the course of my researches the Heloise of Rousseau fell into my hands—ah, with what transport, with what enthusiasm did I peruse this dangerous, enchanting work. How shall I paint the sensations that were excited in my mind! The pleasure I experienced approached the limits of pain—it was tumult—all the ardour of my character was excited.

Again, in a philosophic mood, Emma exposes her soul to the British critics in the following passages:

The wildest speculations are less mischievous than the torpid state of error. He who tamely resigns his understanding to the guidance of another sinks at once from the dignity of a rational being to a mechanical puppet moved at pleasure on the wires of the artful operator. Imposition is the principle and support of every varied description of tyranny, whether civic or ecclesiastical, moral or mental; its baneful consequence is to degrade both him who is imposed on, and him who imposes—*obedience* is a word which ought *never to have had existence.*

Emma writes a frank letter to her lover, proposing several solutions for their love problems, all of them unconventional; and in another long letter to "an intimate female friend," to lapse into the terminology of Emma's day, she writes down the longings and resentments of an imprisoned and shackled soul and body. Miss Hays herself stated openly that her novel was intended to act as a warning and deterrent rather than an example, but it is clear that her ardent sympathies are with her Emma. It is impossible, in this day, to understand fully the reaction of the eighteenth century readers and critics against "such filthy labour," as one critic calls it. Another one makes this comment:

Setting aside this slang of modern philosophy the plain question is—Whether it is for the advantage of society that women should be so brought up as to make them dutiful daughters, affectionate wives, tender mothers, and good Christians, or by a corrupt and vicious system of education, fit them for revolutionary agents, for Staëls, for Talliens, for Stones, setting aside all the softness, the gentleness of the female character, and enjoying indiscriminately every envied privilege of man?

In *The Victim of Prejudice,* Mary, the heroine, is educated according to the plan of Rousseau, to freedom of research, unchecked impulses, and joy of life. The book abounds with quotations from Godwin, Mary Wolstonecraft, Holcroft, and its references to God are carefully hedged about with definitions of the Almighty identifying Him with Nature and Reason. That Mary herself makes these apostrophes does not add to her already scanty garments cut from eighteenth century womanliness. At the end of the tale: "Almighty Nature!" cries Mary, "mysterious are thy decrees! The vigourous promise of my youth has failed; the victim of a barbarous prejudice (that she was not allowed to marry the son of a man of high rank) society has cast me out of its bosom!" Mary was the daughter of a mother who was both a prostitute and a murderess and who was hanged. "Must not William Pelham himself," asks one horrified reviewer of those days, "had he been permitted to marry the lovely and amiable Mary, have had cause to blush when the children who might have been the fruit of their union came to inquire into the history of their mother? According to the fixed laws of nature we suffer from the vices of our parents."

Thus the female world of that day was guarded sedulously against the mischievousness of rebeldom.

Two novels on divorce, translated from the French, were given to English readers about this time: *Emily de Varmont* by Louvet, and *Le Divorce* by Fievée. *Emily de Varmont* presents the evils of ill-suited marriages, and favours facile divorce laws. The plot is of ancient complications: a mother puts her daughters into a convent; one of them marries, in order to escape the final vows of nunhood, an unknown man; a hus-

band, supposedly a widower, marries a second wife; a brother of this second wife loves distractedly the supposed widow. Everybody loves another whose body is in legal possession of a third Divorce by the courts is manifestly the only way out.

Le Divorce takes cognizance of the divorce laws of the new régime—this book appeared about 1800—and it, too, worries with a many-bone plot. Madame Dormeuil, beautiful and refined, was married to Monsieur Dormeuil, handsome and cultured. After six years, owing to a soul that yearned for change, Monsieur Dormeuil sought scenes of depravity, and soon became enamoured of a moralless lady whom he wished to marry. He therefore availed himself of the new laws and was divorced from his affectionate wife. Madame Dormeuil declined to believe herself divorced, kept the name and arms of Dormeuil, and bore herself as a wife of the Old Regime. This, however, was merely action based on personal conviction and not law; for Monsieur Dormeuil obtained his divorce and married his love.

Pass a few years: Monsieur Dormeuil is become disengaged in his allegiance to his second wife, and finds himself desperately in love with his first wife, who, after his second divorce, bears herself with that patient, sweet, but inflexible morality without which life would be swept bare of most of its problems: She loves him; he loves her; but there stands the divorce between them! It seems simple to run through a marriage ceremony again, as the State requires; but no! To be married to Monsieur Dormeuil a second time would be an acknowledgment on Madame Dormeuil's part that *the divorce was legal:* to live with Monsieur Dormeuil without remarriage—impossible! The caprices of destiny, divorce, and Madame Dormeuil's distraught mind, are as dusty gusts of the variable winds!

The Force of Prejudice, "published (in 1800) and sold by the author, Mr. Wildman," is not to be had to-day. But a critic in the *Monthly Review* sums it up for the ages in terms of cogent reserve:

> To administer to the necessities of a distressed parent, we are informed in a preface, was the motive which produced the novel before us. . . . In the attempt to combat prejudice, the writer has designed to show that, without offence to morality or decency, and without injury to human happiness, a female who has erred, who has repented of her errors, and who strictly perseveres in her recovered rectitude, may be again admitted to the full benefits of civilised society.

In *Desmond* Charlotte Smith, that notable creator of respectable thrillers, almost lost her prestige in the British mind and heart. For *Desmond* is permeated with French Revolutionary phraseology. Geraldine Vernay was married in her early youth to a spendthrift who hoped to retrieve his wasted fortunes by forcing his wife to become the mistress of the very wealthy Duc de Romagnecourt. "To preserve her honour," Geraldine flies from her wicked husband's house to her mother's, from which supposed refuge, to her unclarified dismay, she is turned by the sturdy and impregnable British matron who bore her and married her off; in England of the eighteenth century a runaway wife, run away from whatever cause, had no place in a parent's home. Geraldine fears to return to the enraged husband and certain dishonour, and, penniless and distraught, like all the unfortunate Geraldines and Amandas of her day, accepts the thrice-over tendered and insistently honourable protection of Desmond, another Grandison with a half century more of Anglicised French theory in his mind, who asks no reward "but to serve her." This state of things endures for a year; then Geraldine's husband falls ill and requires a nurse, so Geraldine goes back to her husband's home and nurses him for many months. Then, after a year of respectable mourning, she marries the devoted Desmond. To some of that age Desmond's vicious ideas of Rights, confined though they

were to pure theory, were overshadowed by the portrait of Geraldine; "one of Mrs. Smith's very best female characters, a meek and patient sufferer under the brutality of a reckless, vicious husband." But to many others *Desmond* was "detestable": one reviewer feared horribly that Geraldine's "lack of fortitude and her unfaith in the Most High might encourage wives generally to desert their husbands."

Waldorf, or, The Dangers of Philosophy, by Sophia King, published in 1798, is one of the first of the anti-Godwinian novels, and led the procession of fictional refutations of the New Philosophy. Miss King advanced with virtue and valour "to combat the modern vindicators of atheism and libertinism." Waldorf is a splendid young man of many talents led astray by a "modern sceptic" into paths that soon lost him the narrow ways of virtue and morality. He seduces a young woman "of ardent imagination and warm temperament" by the "trite adage" that morality is a personal and not a state's concern. "He likewise by his doubts and sophistries, deranges the minds of two other female friends whose insanity terminates in early graves." His latter unrest is an appalling thing to contemplate, and was undoubtedly born solely of Miss King's avid imagination as a state of mind that should be, and therefore must be.

Robert and Adela, or, The Rights of Woman Best Maintained by the Sentiments of Nature, is an anonymous product of 1795, and is probably a reply to *Edwin and Julia*. Adela, according to her interpreter, is the victim of "natural sensibility suppressed by the affectation of equality and independence." For many moons she torments her lover and herself "by an obstinate perseverance in the haughty reserve which her system (of philosophy) prompted," and finally loses his affections and interest. "In vexation" she then casts herself away upon "a vulgar Welsh squire who possessed no qualities congenial with her disposition," and her end is a pertinent warning to all recalcitrant females of like tendencies. French characters abound who discourse of French politics and morals, and Mary Wolstonecraft is freely analysed and interpreted by the anonymous author, who lays Adela's chiefest woes at the Wolstonecraft-Godwin threshold of thought.

A few years later *Dorothea, or, A Ray of the New Light*, was pronounced by a reviewer, "an anti-Godwinian production, exhibiting a story so constructed as to place sometimes in a ridiculous, but mostly in an odious point of view certain strange principles laid down by Mr. Godwin in his *Political Justice*, and to induce mankind to regard with suspicion and hatred the disciples of what is pompously and sarcastically called the New Philosophy."

Dorothea is supposed to project "the folly of making a regard for the general good the motive of individual action," a mixed set of motives that show the author's state of mind. She is a pleasant young lady, the daughter of a rich merchant, and her mind early becomes inflamed "with the enthusiastic idea of living *for the general good.*" She is therefore easily the victim of a *philosopher*, who *professes* the same disinterested point of view, but who in the end, without dragging her from the paths of rectitude, proves himself in time "a mean, unfeeling, selfish villain." Reacting against such a temperament, Dorothea marries, in haste, Sir Charles Euston, and still full of various opinions upon her rights and others' wrongs, creates a deal of disturbance in an otherwise peaceful English home. "At last, however, she saw her folly. The *New Light* became extinguished, and Sir Charles and Lady Euston passed the remainder of their days in the duties and pleasures of domestic life."

Another title that cannot be passed over is Genlis's *The Depraved Husband and the Philosophic Wife*. This novel appeared about 1800, and essays to depict "the wild theories and abandoned maxims of certain Philosophies of France in the wild days of her Republican *energy*." Julia is slated, with her

"vain deceits" for complete victimising at the hands of depravity which, the author does not fail to point out, is but increased by the seeking by frail women after such mad, abandoned freedoms and individual codes.

Through all this tottering time Miss Maria Edgeworth's firm pen, wielded by an unwavering hand, stood ever for Virtue, Propriety, Modesty, and true Sensibility without excess. Her *Leonora* is definitely anti-Godwinian, and deals in no uncertain terms with the evils attendant upon the discarding of sobriety, meekness, and husbands, by women. She reprobates with superhuman courage that greater attention by females to *rights* than *duties;* their calling of matrimony *a barbarous institution;* and their dismissal of prudence as *coldness,* of fortitude as *insensibility,* and of modesty, as *hypocrisy;* their growing preference for the graces to the virtues; and their glossing over of their forfeiture of innocence and reputation as *"emancipation from the tyranny of custom."*

Mary Wolstonecraft's posthumous and only novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria,* has been treated earlier in this series, and with it, but more briefly, the fictionised reply to it and its author's life; Mrs. Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray, or, The Mother and Daughter. The Wrongs of Women,* it may be remembered, dealt primarily with the distaff side of the marriage-bondage, and the necessity, as Mary Wolstonecraft saw it, for the economic freeing of women. *Adeline Mowbray* is the story of the dynamic daughter of a theoretical mother. Adeline, loving her mother and accepting the accompanying parental aura of theories, born of "French Revolutionary doctrines," as true, vows herself to live the doctrines of freedom. Meeting a young and ardent male theoriser, one Glenmurray, Adeline out-Herods him in decision, and enters upon a union with him, "unsanctioned by God or society." Needless to say Mrs. Mowbray and Glenmurray himself are aghast at such translation of theory into action.

"I have convinced myself that to leave home and commit myself to your protection was the most proper and virtuous step that I could take; I have not obeyed the dictates of love, but of reason."

"I am very sorry to hear it," said Glenmurray mournfully.

"It seems to me so very rational to love you, that what seems to be the dictates of reason may be those of love only" (said Adeline).

Later Glenmurray insisted on legal marriage, and Adeline says with a logic quaint enough in these books of protest: "If you are still convinced that your theory is good, why let your practice be bad! I am out of the question; you are to be governed by no other law but your desire to promote the general utility and are not to think at all of the interest of an individual." The peculiar honesty of this old novel lies in the fact that Mrs. Opie, making her hero no villain and her heroine a woman of understanding as well as emotion, yielded to her growing interest in them and her sympathy for a situation that she had created in puritanic protest, and says at last: "Adeline was the victim neither of her weakness nor of his seduction, but was compelled by circumstances suddenly to act on her principles." Mrs. Opie calls up all the social bogies; has Adeline insulted time and again, by husbands, unattached gentlemen, servants, little boys at play in the streets, and then, logically, suddenly, almost against her will, feels Adeline's comment and honestly writes it down: "Surely there must be something radically wrong in a situation that exposes one to such a variety of degradation." And Adeline is here speaking of the social state and not her own.

These are only glancing facets of the jewel of protest that latter eighteenth century thought, and early seventeenth, for the matter of that, thrust into the setting of fiction. Paste it has been proved to be by test of time, but it is an interesting thing to bring to light again after long immersement in one of the stagnant ponds of forgotten letters.