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"VERNON LEE"

THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY

Lovers of literature, and especially students of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century in Italy, will receive with regret the news of the death of Miss Violet Paget, long known to the world as "Vernon Lee," which occurred yesterday at 11 Palmirino, San Gervasio, Florence, at the age of 78.

If this gifted and learned writer never quite fulfilled her brilliant promise, and if much of her later work is ephemeral and some of it not a little obscure, still the best of her writings should survive among the most interesting of the literature of aesthetic criticism of the last 50 years.

Caught up British gothicism, Vernon Lee was Gothicism from her birth, without any single element of sympathy. Her father was not a true convert to the management of a college at St. Peterburg where the Imperial places were trained. Her mother, whose maiden name was Adeline, was White, and at the time of her marriage with Mr. Paget was the widow of Mr. Lee-Hamilton. Vernon Lee was born at Bologna on Mar. 10, October, 1856. The family seems to have wandered up and down Europe during all her early years, settling finally at Florence, which became her permanent home. Her half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, a poet of charm, was her constant companion, and had much to do with shaping her powerful intellect and encouraging her literary work; her mother, too, was a woman of ability and learning. Thus she lived from her earliest years in a highly stimulating intellectual atmosphere, to which her personality, versatility, and, perhaps, the tendency to dissociation that runs through much of her writings owe in some measure be attributed.

It is with the advent of Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds that much of Vernon Lee's critical and historical work will always be associated, though her first (and perhaps her best) book, "Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy," published in 1880, stands alone as the first attempt in England to explore the intellectual life of that hitherto period. She introduced to many English readers for the first time the names of musical composers, whose (a long generation has devoted time something of a cult), and in a series of striking and picturesque essays depicted the drama of the period in a similar style. But the book is much more than a collection of aesthetic exercises, for we feel that we are actually living in the quiet, pretty-day world of the Italy of that day. An amusing book for a girl of 24 to have written, and still more so when we learn from her that the materials for it were collected between the ages of 17 and 20. It intelligently attracted great attention, and should, especially in Italy,

the use of the word "aesthetic" in her pen-name. The *Academy* described it as "a very fine study of the life of the Italian and German, but never, throughout, of the mind." The severity of his studies and the nature of his remarks are evident in every line, and another learned Roman review described the author as a "subtle and beautiful intellect" who has profoundly studied a subject to which he takes passionate interest and who has written of Italy and Italian art with a wonderful artistic intuition comparable only with that shown in some of Robert Browning's Italian subjects.

The author came to England for the first time on a visit in 1881, and her remarkable conversational gifts and casual power of reportage made her welcome in circles where one could hold her own with such a master of good talk as Whistler. Three years later aesthetic society found themselves not very kindly entertained under thin disguises in "Miss Rivers," Vernon Lee's first effort in fiction, now the long end of prose and almost forgotten, but for the students of the various writers of that day are somewhat

The author came to England for the first time on a visit in 1883, and her remarkable conversational gifts and caustic power of repartee made her welcome in circles where she could hold her own with such a master of good talk as Whistler. Three years later aesthetic society found themselves not very kindly caricatured under this disguise in "Miss Brown," Vernon Lee's first effort in fiction, now far long out of print and almost forgotten, but for the student of the artistic society of that day not unworthy to be remembered with *Patience*. The book was much resented by some of her friends, but she could afford to be indifferent, as she remained throughout her life, to what people might think or say about her. The same year in which "Miss Brown" appeared "Euphorion" was published, described as "Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance," and dedicated to Peter. Though striking less new ground than "Eighteenth Century Studies in Italy," it contains some of Vernon Lee's best work and will survive when much of her later books will be forgotten. Shortly afterwards appeared "The Countess of Albany" in Allen's "Imaginal Women Series," a sympathetic though critical study of the life of the unhappy wife of the Young Pretender and her lover, Albany. She herself described this book as a sort of sequel to "Eighteenth Century Studies," and the picture of society in Italy that it contains is just as brilliant and, as it deals more with individuals, more definite.

Vernon Lee's later work is of less value. Over 30 volumes of criticism, fiction, and essays stand to her credit, most of which are redolent of the colour and sentiment of Italy, and all of which reveal a mind steeped in the learning of the past and the beauty of the present. "Renaissance Fancies and Studies," "Genius Loci," "The Enchanted Woods," "Limbo and Other Essays," "The Spirit of Rome" (which captures its very breath), among her volumes of essays and travel scenes, and "Hauntings" and "Vantias," among her volumes of stories, have long been familiar to most lovers of literature, and the exquisite little play, *Arlecchino in Mantua*, and some of her less attractive pseudo-political and sociological writings, such as "Gospels of Anarchy" and "Salim the Warrior," reveal her versatility of mind.

In 1924 she contributed to *The Times* a long letter, suggested by a criticism of Mr. Walkley's, on the vital sense of the artist. "The Golden Keys" which came out in 1925, contained admirable studies of the penitents. In 1932 appeared "Music and its Lovers," an empirical study of emotion and the imaginative responses to music. Last spring she was able to be present at a performance in Florence of the Italian version of *Arlecchino in Mantua*, which obtained great success, and she was honoured enthusiastically by her many Florentine admirers.

During the Italian-Turkish War she gave herself very unpopulably by her strong and openly expressed sympathy with the Turks; and during the Great War, at the outbreak of which she was in England, she estranged most of her friends by writing articles against this country in the American Press, as a result of which she was refused a passport by the authorities. She was a prominent member of the Union of Democratic Control, and was the author of more than two of their polemical pamphlets. It must be remembered that nationalities, and in consequence patriotism, were completely outside her understanding. Anatole France is usually credited with having drawn the character of "Miss Hell" in "Le Cyn Rouge" from Vernon Lee, but it is more truly a combination of her personality with that of another lady well known in England and France who was at one time an intimate friend of hers. She is mentioned by name in Browning's "Anselmo":—

"No, the book
Which noticed how the wall-
grows the weeds," said she,
"Was not by Ruskin."
I said, "Vernon Lee."

The close of her long literary career breaks a link with an age that now seems a long way off, and her death removes a mighty lumina from the world of letters.