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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 Viola Peper, long known to the world as "Vernon Lee," which occurred yesterday at B. Palmerino, San Gervasio, Florence, at the age of 78.

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

Caught up from position, Vernon Lee was destined from her early days to a single-minded or at any rate. Her father was not a man concerned in the management of a college at Princeton where the Imperial power was trained. Her mother, whose maiden name was Adeline, was Welsh, and at the time of her marriage with Mr. Peper was the widow of Mr. Lee-Hasthorne. Vernon Lee was born at Boulougour-Mer on October 3, 1856. The family soon left, having wound up and crossed Europe during all her early years, settling finally in Florence, which became her permanent home. Her half-brother, Augustus East-Hasthorne, a poet, died, was her constant companion, and had much to do with helping her powers of writing 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 dissidence, that gave though much of her energies to some measure be attributed.

It is with the death of Walter Peper and John Adelina, however, 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 the little-known period. She intended to many English readers for the first time the names of mutual sympathies, while a later generation has elevated into something of a cult and a series of striking and picturesque events, unbroken the theme of the period for a century review. But the book is much more than a collection of aesthetic criticism, for we find there many records of the poet, philosopher, and world of the Italy of that day. An amateur book for a girl of 24 to have written, and still more so when we now know that the materials for it were collected between the ages of 17 and 20. It immediately attracted great notice, and was especially popular in Italy, France, and Germany. The author, however, did not live up to her promise, and was never occupied entirely with her work. The severity of her illness and the nature of her research are evident in every page, and another started Italian review described her author as a "weak and fragile invalid," who has probably written a chapter in which no other national author and who has written of Italy and Italian life with a wonderful artistic instinct composed only with that vision of some of Robert Browning's Italian subjects.

The author came to England for the first time on a visit in 1882, 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 small talk as Whistler. Three years later aesthetic socialists found themselves not very kindly welcomed to their discussions in "Miss Brown." Vernon Lee's best effort in fiction, however, long out of print and almost forgotten, but for the studies of the active writers of that day, was *Novelties*.

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 thin disguises in "Miss Brown," Vernon Lee's first effort in fiction, now for long out of print and almost forgotten, but for the student of the artistic society of that day not unworthy to be remembered with *Julius*. 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, "Empherton" was published, described as "Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance," and dedicated to Peter. Through 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 Allix's "Feminist 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 distinct.

Vernon Lee's brief work is of high 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 Pictures and Studies," "Ghosts Lee," "The Enchanted Woods," "Limbo and Other Essays," "The Spirit of Rome" (which captures in very breadth, among her volumes of essays and travel scenes, and "Hauntings" and "Visions" among her volumes of stories, have long been familiar to most lovers of literature, and the exquisite little play, *Asolando* or *Moschea*, and some of her less attractive pseudo-political and sociological writings, such as "Ghosts of Anatolia" and "Salem the Wazir," reveal her versatility of mind.

In 1924 she contributed to *The Flips* a long letter, suggested by a criticism of Mr. Walkley's, on the real nature of the artist. "The Golden Keys," which came out in 1925, contained admirable studies of the geniuses. In 1927 appeared "Music and its Lovers," an empirical study of emotion and the imaginative response to music. Last spring she was able to present at a performance in Florence of the Italian version of *Asolando* in *Moschea*, which obtained great success, and she was honoured enthusiastically by her many Florentine friends.

During the Italian-Turkish War she gave herself no opportunity by her strong and open expression of sympathy with the Turks, and during the Great War, at the outbreak of which she was in England, she exasperated most of her friends by writing articles against the 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 one of their polemical pamphlets. It must be remembered that nationality, and in consequence patriotism, were completely outside her understanding. Anatole France is usually credited with having drawn the character of "Miss Bell" in "Le Livre Rouge" from Vernon Lee, but it is more likely 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 "Asolando":

No, the book  
Which noticed how the willow-  
growth weave," 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 unique link from the world of letters.