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"Mr. Wells and Vernon Lee"

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Robertson, Miss “Frankey”  Symonds, J. Addington
Ruffini, Giovanni  Taylor, Mrs. Mona
Russell, Elizabeth  Turner, Alfred
Sargent, Emily  Turton, Miss Amy
Sargent, Mary N.  Vesci, Lady de
Satchell, Th.  Villari, Mme
Sellers, Eugenie (Mrs. Arthur Strong)  Ward, Mrs. Humphry
Sharp, E.  Welby, Lady
Sharp, W.  Wells, H. G.
Shorthouse, H.  Wells, Mrs.
Smillie, Mrs. E. J.  Wharton, Mrs. Edith
Smyth, Dame Ethel  Wilson, C. Heath
Stilleman, Mrs.  Willis, Miss Eleanor
Sturgis, Cousin Nena (?)  Wimbush, Evelyn
Wolseley, Lady Louisa

There are also a few “stray” letters from correspondents who have thus far defied identification.

“MR. WELLS AND VERNON LEE”

The Vernon Lee correspondence files are too extensive for any quick or thorough appraisal, but the list of names just given of those who wrote letters to Violet Paget will serve to show the ramifications of her interests and connections. To pursue any one correspondent further will call for leisure not now available. An inspection of one or two of the files serves, however, to suggest the important uses they will serve for future students and investigators, and the letters of H. G. Wells may be cited as a good illustration of this point.

The quotation marks around the words in the heading of this note are used to indicate that this title is not original with us. It is quoted from the New York Nation for
October 22, 1914. Readers whose adult memories go back fifty years or more will perhaps recall the heated exchanges which filled the correspondence columns of the Nation in the early weeks of World War One, when Vernon Lee and Wells crossed swords. Younger readers who do not remember the stormy days of 1914 may find it helpful if we recall a few facts.

On August 24, 1914, in the London Daily Chronicle, H. G. Wells addressed an "Appeal to the American People," urging them not to aid the Germans by supplying them with food. On September 17, 1914, The Nation printed "Vernon Lee's Message to Americans," in which she took issue with Wells. "What Mr. Wells is asking of America is... in plain English: let neutral America... show her neutrality by starving Germany." Miss Paget went on to claim that "thousands of English men and women feel only shame and disgust at the proposal Mr. Wells has ventured to make" and she expressed the hope that America would pay no attention to "such idealistic utopistic mythopoetic self-righteousness as has led Mr. Wells to ask America to deprive Germany of food."

The response was immediate. Frank J. Mather, of Princeton, exclaimed (in the issue of The Nation for September 24): "Vernon Lee surely abuses the wit that has made her famous." Dr. F. C. Conybeare wrote from Oxford (in the issue for October 22) that, in spite of the fact that Vernon Lee had professed "to address a 'Message to Americans' in behalf of English Liberals, ... Americans may rest assured that she represents no section of English opinion whatever, least of all English Liberalism." And in this same issue of The Nation H. G. Wells fired his own salvo. "I will not trouble your readers," he said, "with a lengthy reply to the remarkable 'message' apropos of myself which Miss Paget has written you... As for the 'thousands of English men and women' who share my former
friend's 'shame and disgust' at my proposals I ask you not to believe in their existence. ... I am indeed puzzled and distressed by these onslaughts of hers upon me. ... She even accuses me of flattering America, in spite of the fact that I sent her my little book upon *The Future in America* when it appeared.”

These remarks about “my former friend” and about the gift of a book indicate more than a passing acquaintance between H. G. Wells and Vernon Lee, but any interested reader who looks into Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography* for further light on this friendship will be disappointed. In all the 718 pages of that book, Vernon Lee is mentioned only once, and then in a passing reference to her as if she were a total stranger.

The letters in the Colby Library now make it clear that “Mr. Wells and Vernon Lee” began their friendship early in 1904, that not only one book but many books were exchanged between them in the course of the decade that followed, that Vernon Lee visited Mr. and Mrs. Wells at their home near Folkestone—Spade House, Sandgate, Kent—on various occasions, and that he once made a trip to Florence to call on her at her Italian villa. The friendship was apparently begun by her writing to him. Wells answered on March 26, 1904:

*Dear Miss Paget*

I was very glad indeed to have your letter and to learn that you read my books and find them interesting. I know your work very well indeed and it is a very pleasant surprise for me to find that with your nice sense of finish you can stand my crude and floundering efforts to reason out my difficulties. ...  

*Yours very sincerely*  

H. G. Wells

On April 11, 1904, he wrote again. Then began the exchange of books, and of comment on them, and of criticism—at least from her. Wells's *The Time Machine* had been published back in 1895. His *Love and Mr. Lewisham*,

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*et al.: "Mr. Wells and Vernon Lee"*
132 Colby Library Quarterly

which he describes in his Experiment in Autobiography as “a novel... about just such a Grammar School teacher as I was,” was published in 1900. And The Sea Lady: A Tissue of Moonshine had appeared in 1902. These dates and titles will help the reader to follow Wells’s next letter to Vernon Lee:

Spade House, Sandgate, 6 August 1904

Dear Miss Paget

I’m glad of your letter and your excellent criticisms, though I’m sorry you cannot forgive the beginning of The Sea Lady for the end. All that you say of the Time Machine is after my heart. But that book like all my earlier work was written against time, amidst a frantic output of “humorous” journalistic matter. It took perhaps three weeks. It’s only in quite recent years I’ve had any leisure to think, and I still can’t afford time to read and the idea of any sort of travel—except to recuperate for fresh work—is beyond dreaming. Consequently you will always miss in me, certain qualities that you particularly admire. I shall send you a little novel called Love and Mr. Lewisham in a few days time.

Yours very sincerely

H. G. Wells

Vernon Lee in turn sent him copies of her own books. In 1906, when Grant Richards published her Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child, she sent Wells a copy. On October 17, 1906, he replied: “I’ve got your delightful little book. I hadn’t read the story before [when it appeared in the Christmas supplement of the Fortnightly Review, December, 1905] and I read it [now] with extraordinary delight and that feeling behind the eyes which is like a phantom self weeping....”

In June, 1908, Vernon Lee received a letter from Wells in which he said that he wanted to talk with her about “two books of yours I have read—one of which your publisher says you have sent me. As for [my own] New Worlds for Old [Macmillan, 1908], I doubt if much will come between us out of that.” Later that year, he sent her a copy of his First and Last Things, which she reviewed in the
Westminster Gazette under the heading "Mr. Wells's Philosophy." Her obvious disapproval of his philosophical views, and particularly of his way of presenting them to the public, resulted in—or at least was followed by—a period of silence. Then, in 1910, when Wells's The New Machiavelli was published by John Lane, the correspondence was resumed. Vernon Lee wrote to say that she didn't like the book. Wells replied:

My dear Vernon Lee,

17, Church Row, Hampstead [n.d.]

I knew you wouldn't like The New Machiavelli or, for a time after you've read it, me. I don't repent or apologize for the book, which I'm proud of, but my affections run on different lines I think from yours, and it makes no difference to my very warm regard for you that you should not see it as I would like you to see it. Don't come to us while there is any strained feeling on your part toward us. There's none on ours to you. I think a day will come when you will forgive me The New Machiavelli, and anyhow dear Vernon Lee, I am Yours very warmly and admiringly and affectionately

H. G. Wells

Four years later came the First World War, after which Wells wrote no more letters to Vernon Lee.

THE DATE OF MISS JEWETT'S LETTER TO VERNON LEE

On page 107 of our August, 1952, issue we printed a letter written by Sarah Orne Jewett to "Dear Miss Paget." The letter was dated simply "3d Jan'y" and we conjecturally assigned 1907 as the year in which the letter was written. This was done on the strength of Miss Jewett's reference to the fact that "The Atlantic is just now printing some French sketches by Mrs. Wharton"—a statement which we took to refer to Edith Wharton's "A Motor-Flight through France," one installment of which ap-