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A romanticized portrait done seven months before her death. By Berthe Noufflard, a companion of long standing and fellow-enthusiast in the pleasures of travel.
This issue marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Violet Paget (1856-1935), who wrote—under the name of Vernon Lee—more than two score volumes in an authorial career of over half a century. The most extensive accumulation of her books, letters and manuscripts is now housed in Colby College Library.

VERNON LEE

By Irene Cooper Willis

One of Robert Browning's last poems, published in 1889, ended with the lines:

“No, the book
Which noticed how the wall-growths wave,” said she,
“Was not by Ruskin.”
I said, “Vernon Lee.”

Vernon Lee, the nom de plume of a once distinguished writer, is hardly remembered now except by a few “lettered hearts,” to borrow from Dr. Johnson’s great lines on buried merit. Violet Paget made that name one to conjure with in 1880 with her first book, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy. It was a piece of literary archaeology; it brought to life a period of a remarkable blossoming of Italian art, music and drama of the eighteenth century. Vernon Lee had been fascinated by and absorbed in the period ever since she was a girl of fourteen living in Rome. Her Italian teachers had awakened her interest in old music scores but the match that set light to her imagination was her own discovery of the derelict pavilion of the once famous Academy of the Arcadians outside Rome on the Janiculum. In the Preface to a new edition of her book in 1907 she wrote:
My eighteenth century lore was acquired at an age when most of us are still the creatures of an unconscious play instinct. And the Italy of the eighteenth century accidentally opened to me became, so to speak, the remote lumber room full of discarded mysteries and of lurking ghosts where a half-grown young prig might satisfy in unsuspicious gravity mere child-like instincts of make believe and romance. These essays are the inventory of my enchanted garret.

The eighteenth-century book was soon followed by a series of Renaissance studies and brilliant short stories whose themes came out of her early research. Then there were Dialogues and Essays on social psychology and ethics and the delightful Genius Loci essays that she wrote regularly for the Saturday Westminster Gazette, invocations of the spirit of places she had visited, rich in historical associations and the harvest of that noticing eye to which Browning paid tribute. She also wrote a three-volume novel, Miss Brown, severely criticizing the “fleshly school” of art. This got her into hot water. She was too intellectual a writer to be a good novelist, too indifferent to natural human instincts. She once said to me: “From my friends’ matrimonial adventures I avert my eyes and say: ‘There goes something primeval.’ ”

That she did not add to the reputation won by her first books was due, I think, to the switching of her interest into a direction where the majority of general readers were not disposed or able to follow her. Her intensely inquisitive mind became absorbed in psychological esthetics and her two books, Beauty and Ugliness (1912) and Music and Its Lovers (1932), fell on stony ground. Another reason for her loss of readers was possibly her pacifist opinions in the first World War, during which time she lived in London. Her book, Satan the Waster, was a veritable arsenal of pacifist doctrine. She was a born internationalist, at home in England, France, Germany and Italy. She lived for years at a time in all these countries. During her youth her family—mother, father and half-brother—roamed about Europe and did not settle in Florence until the late seventies when they did so for the sake of the half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, who had auto-suggested himself into a paralyzed condition in which he remained for twenty years, writing poetry which gained him romantic attention, and waited on devotedly by his adoring mother. Eugene’s illness and her mother’s slavery to
her son dominated Vernon Lee's life for many years and explains, I think, a good deal of her perpetual anxiety about her own health and her often explosive disposition.

Vernon left home whenever she could conscientiously do so. She visited England yearly to make literary contacts for her brother as well as herself. She had many friends not only among writers but in politics. She was no mere esthete; she was an ardent Liberal. Her interest in politics was not casual or intermittent, it lasted over a wide span of years, from the days when as a girl in Paris in 1870 she had seen the opening stages of the Commune until her death in 1935. She was highly critical of political propaganda and, for one of her generation, surprisingly alive to the inevitability of change. In her little book in the To-Day and To-Morrow Series in 1925, she took Proteus as a symbol of the everchanging nature of reality, and apropos of people, exclaiming: “But if you abolish this or that, what are you going to put in its place?” She pointed out that there might be no place for it to be put into. She was also skeptical of elaborate political planning for an unknown future. “We know what we do not want so much better than we know what we do want,” she used to insist. “Get rid of the things that we do not want before we embark on positive planning.”

She was very critical of people. “I like people as I like things,” she once said. “That is to say, my likings are preferences for the qualities which I can enjoy.” At times she was unkindly discriminating but, after all, you cannot hit a nail on the head as well as she did without being unkind to the nail! “I respect So-and-So,” she said. “I occasionally like her. But when she tells me that she is miserable about the war, it bores me. I can stand the war, but So-and-So on the war I cannot stand.”

She was very witty, though not humorous. At her best her talk was fascinating. She was a tremendous talker.

There is a brilliant portrait of her by Sargent, who was a lifelong friend, in the London Tate Gallery, also a sketch by Sargent in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. But I see her best in my mind’s eye, standing by some old building, wrapped in her homespun cloak (which I now have and call “the mantle of
Elijah”), waiting, entranced, for the spirit of the place to take possession of her.

VERNON LEE AND THE OLD YELLOW BOOK
By BEATRICE CORRIGAN

IN a letter dated January 31, 1887, Robert Browning wrote to the English essayist and novelist Violet Paget, who had adopted the pseudonym of Vernon Lee: “Dear Vernon-Lee—Violet-Paget treats poor R.B. as if he were the Philistine he is not, when she plays at supposing he forgets her existence, and fearing he will detect an impertinence in her kindly taking the trouble to copy out for him a choice and characteristic bit of history, — and moreover bidding him not trouble himself to say ‘thank you’ — when the veriest pig does as much for the acorn he grunts over. I do thank you, dear Miss Paget, — as you know I ought and must, — for both the extract and the letter that brings it this morning.”1 The editors of Browning’s letters do not suggest what this bit of history may have been, or why Vernon Lee should have thought it of sufficient interest to Browning to be worth the copying. But a possible explanation may exist in her own letters and in a passage from one of her books.

On Easter Sunday, 1886, she had written to Browning from Florence telling him that she was sending him a present of her newly published volume of essays, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London, 1886), because it contained references to the character of Caponsacchi in *The Ring and the Book*.2 On May 13 of the same year Browning thanked her for the gift, saying that he had read it carefully, had found it “very subtle, very beautiful,” and intended to read it through again in a day or two (*New Letters*, 327-8).

The passage in *Baldwin* which she specially indicated to him is a long conversation which the eponymous character holds