

Extract from:

## **Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War**

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### 3. Vernon Lee's Theatre of the West – from chapter 5

Though named 'No Place, Nowhere', the setting is immediately recognizable as a European town square, across which stands a prominent building inscribed 'The World; a Theatre of Varieties, Lessee and Manager, SATAN'. The houses of the SLEEPY VIRTUES stretch out to form a crescent on either side. TRUTHFULNESS, JUSTICE, TEMPERANCE, EQUANIMITY and others can be seen yawning behind their windows or wearily stepping out into the square to gaze on as the orchestra's players arrive.

Dressed in 'appropriate allegorical garments' these HUMAN PASSIONS are identified by silver badges around their necks: GREED, LOYALTY, DISCIPLINE, COMRADESHIP, JEALOUSY, EGOTISM, BULLYING, ENNUI . . . . Alarming energetic by comparison with the SLEEPY VIRTUES, they arrive with hand-carts containing diverse musical instruments, which they carry into the theatre through a stage-door to the rear. They also unload the balustrade that will separate them from the audience in the stalls. This suggestive device is inscribed: 'Patriotism; reserved for members of the Orchestra'.

A small earthquake suddenly interrupts the preparations and then, as the rumbling subsides, SATAN arises from a chasm opened at the foot of the theatre steps. Infusing the abruptly darkened world with his own dingy luminosity, he raises his attendants out of the depths – first the MUSE OF HISTORY, and then 'the classic and unsubstantial chorus of AGES-TO-COME'.

A 'long, lank figure' in a black evening coat, BALLET MASTER DEATH now turns for the first time, revealing himself to be a grinning skeleton lifted from a sixteenth century woodcut by Hans Holbein the Younger. Greeting SATAN, with whom he has collaborated on so many 'joint shows' in the past, he regrets that Mankind has 'coddled its Passions up of late years', feeding them on 'humanitarian water-gruel' that has left them lackadaisical and anaemic. Satan declares this situation 'quite easily mended'. 'It is time,' he pronounces, 'to reopen the Theatre of the West. The Politicians and Armament Shareholders have long got all the stage-property in readiness, and the Scene-Shifters of the Press are only waiting for the signal.'

Such are the opening scenes of 'The Ballet of the Nations', an allegorical (as well as heavily capitalized) work written by Vernon Lee during the Great War. Lee was in her late fifties when the fighting began. Born as Violet Paget she had been raised in continental Europe, the child of expatriate British parents whose habit of moving every six months is said to have been motivated at least partly by her father's passion for shooting and fishing.

Twenty four years old when she made her first visit to Britain in 1881, Lee was, as an obituarist would eventually declare, 'cosmopolitan from her birth, without any single national tie or sympathy.' She had lived in Germany, France, Switzerland and also Italy, where she had grown up alongside the American artist-to-be, John Singer Sargent. She had made her home in Florence for many years before 1914, when she found herself stranded in England by the war that broke out during her annual summer visit. Financially independent (her maternal grandfather had accumulated a since dwindled fortune in the West Indies), multi-lingual and privately educated to a high if also eccentric degree, she had been a prominent exemplar of the 'New Woman' since the late nineteenth century: a cosmopolitan author, aesthete and literary intellectual, whose circle of acquaintance had included Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Robert Browning, Henry James and Edith

Wharton; and who appeared, as George Bernard Shaw observed in one of the few reviews of this unusual work, to have 'the whole European situation in the hollow of her hand'.

Inspired by the example of medieval masques, Lee's ballet started out as, in her own words, 'an extemporized shadow play'. It was the 'grotesque embodiment' of a war that seemed to be 'about nothing at all; gigantically cruel, but at the same time needless and senseless like some ghastly "Grand Guignol" performance.' She wrote the first version while staying with radical suffragist friends (Bessie and Isabella Ford) at Adel Grange, near Leeds, over Whitsuntide in 1915: a time when Britain was convulsed with patriotic hatred of all things German following the torpedoing of the *Lusitania* off the Irish coast. A slim twenty-page volume with a deceptively attractive 'pictorial commentary' by the Quaker-educated artist Maxwell Armfield, it was published, to very little effect, in time for Christmas 1915. As representatives of Lee's morbidly curious AGES-TO-COME, we might suspect that every aspect of the Great War has since been dramatized, re-enacted or otherwise worked over. Yet despite ongoing attempts to project Lee into the pantheon of lesbian writers, 'The Ballet of the Nations' has hardly detained the historians: a faint rumour, if anything at all, echoing in an off-road oubliette labeled 'Pacifism'.

*Christmas Eve, 1914*

Vernon Lee's emblematic 'theatre of varieties' betrays no sign of an iron curtain of the kind earlier demanded by Captain Eyre Wallis Shaw of the London Fire Brigade. Yet there is good reason for this omission. By spring 1915, when 'The Ballet of the Nations' was first drafted, she had already removed the device and installed it in the warring European world – Satan's 'theatre of the West' – her allegorical playhouse could only inadequately represent . . .