

**MIMMA
BELLA; PP.1-63**

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Mimma Bella; pp.1-63 by Eugene Lee-Hamilton

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EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

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Eugene Lee-Hamilton.

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MIMMA BELLA
BY EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

WITH PORTRAIT OF AUTHOR

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MCMIX

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Preface.

IN 1894 a volume entitled "Sonnets of the Wingless Hours" placed Eugene Lee-Hamilton indisputably among the masters of the sonnet.

Not until this book had captured the critics was it known that the writer of so many distinguished volumes of verse had been lying for twenty years in the twilight of a cruel and mysterious malady.

The sonnets were a cry from the living grave in which his youth had been buried.

He had written :

"And now my manhood goes where goes the song
Of captive birds, the cry of crippled things ;
It goes where goes the day that unused dies.
The cage is narrow, and the bars are strong,
In which my restless spirit beats its wings ;
And round me stretch unfathomable skies."

Thus it seemed no less than miraculous when, after twenty years, Eugene Lee-Hamilton rose from that living grave to take his place again in the world of men.

Youth was gone beyond recall ; but hope came to him, and, after a while, love ; and still later the promise of a bright young life to retrieve the lost years.

The promise ended in denial, the pain of which called forth a more poignant cry, the sonnet sequence "Mimma Bella ; In Memory of a Little Life."

Eugene Lee-Hamilton was born in London in 1845. He lost his father early, and his mother, a woman of marked



force and individuality, superintended his education under tutors in France and Germany.

At nineteen he went to Oriel College, Oxford, where he took the Taylorian Scholarship for Modern Languages and Literature.

He entered the Diplomatic Service in 1869, and after a term in the Foreign Office was attached to the British Embassy at Paris.

He served three years under Lord Lyons, and in 1871 went to Geneva as interpreter for the Alabama Arbitration.

During the changes necessitated by the Franco-German War and the Commune he accompanied the Embassy to Tours, Bordeaux, and Versailles.

He was appointed to the Legation at Lisbon in 1873; and here illness shattered an always delicate constitution. Anæmia and alarming disturbances of the circulation showed themselves; and he left Lisbon in a semi-paralysed condition that gave no hope of recovery. His brief and distinguished diplomatic career was ended.

They took him to Florence, to the wheeled bed on which he was to lie night and day for twenty years.

The heavy gloom of those wingless hours was lightened by his mother's devotion, and the loving companionship of his brilliant young half-sister, later to be known in literature as Vernon Lee.

After a while friends could be seen; and soon names distinguished in literature, art, politics, gathered round the brother and sister. The room where he spent the afternoon in the intervals of suffering became in those days one of the most notable centres in the intellectual life of Florence.

Then, little by little, he could bear to be read to; he could dictate a fragment of verse, the sextet of a sonnet,

