

**BELCARO; BEING ESSAYS
ON SUNDRY
AESTHETICAL QUESTIONS**

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Belcaro; Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions by Vernon Lee

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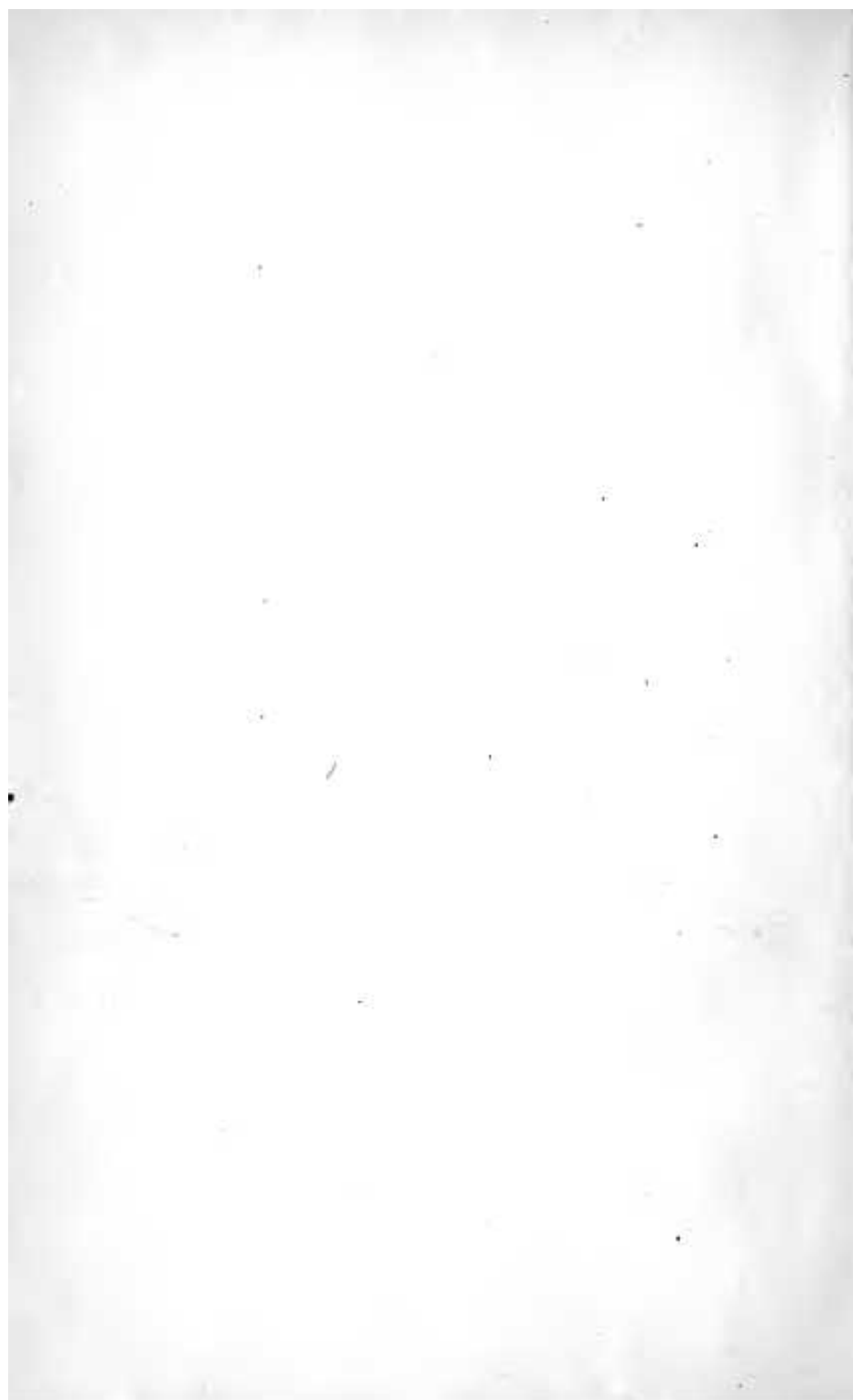
VERNON LEE

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TO

A. MARY F. ROBINSON.



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I HAVE to thank the Editors of the *Cornhill* and of *Fraser's Magazines*, and of the *Contemporary Review*, for kind permission to republish such of these studies as have previously appeared in print.



THE BOOK AND ITS TITLE.

TO ONE OF MY READERS—THE FIRST AND EARLIEST.

A LITTLE while ago I told you that I wished this collection of studies to be more especially yours: so now I send it you, a bundle of proofs and of MS., to know whether you will have it. I wish I could give you what I have written in the same complete way that a painter would give you one of his sketches; that a singer, singing for you alone, might give you his voice and his art; for a dedication is but a drop of ink on a large white sheet, and conveys but a sorry notion of property. Now, this book is intended to be really yours; yours in the sense that, were it impossible for more than one copy of it to exist, that one copy I should certainly give to you. Because these studies represent the ideas I have so far been able to work out for myself about art, considered not historically, but in its double relation to the artist and the world for whom he works; ideas which it is my highest ambition should influence those young enough and powerful enough to act upon them; and, this being the case, my first thought is to place them before you: it is, you see, a matter of conversion,

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and the nearest, most difficult, most desired convert, is yourself.

To you, therefore, before any one else, must I explain what manner of book this is, what are its origin and its aims. And first, the meaning of its title. Logically, this title means nothing; it is a mere negation, a mere arbitrary combination of letters chosen from sheer despair to find any name which should tell, what this title certainly does not, what is the contents of the volume. Yet, a meaning the name has: a meaning of association. For, even as a snatch of melody will sometimes, for no apparent reason, haunt us while we are about any particular work, follow us while we are travelling through a definite tract of country (as, two years since, Wagner's Spinning Chorus travelled with me from Mantua to Verona, and from Verona to Venice) in such a way that the piece of work, the tract of country, bring with their recollection the haunting tune to our mind; so, also, during the time of making up this volume, I have been haunted by the remembrance of that winter afternoon, when last we were together, on the battlements of Belcaro. Perhaps (if we must seek a reason), because, while driving to the strange, isolated villa castle, up and down, and round and round the hills of ploughed-up russet earth, and pale pink leafless brushwood, and bright green pine-woods, where every sharp road-turning surprises one with a sudden glimpse of Siena, astride, with towers and walls and cupolas, on her high, solitary ridge; while dashing up the narrow hedged lanes whose sere oak and ilex branches brushed across our faces; or, while looking down from the half-fortified old place on to the endless, vague, undulating Sienese fields

and oak-woods ; perhaps, because at that moment I may, unconscious to myself, have had a vague first desire to put together more of the helter-skelter contents of the notes over which we had been looking, and give it you in some intelligible shape. Perhaps this may have served to set up the association ; or perhaps it was something wholly different, unguessed, trumpery, inscrutable. Be this as it may, the fact remains that during the dull months of planning and putting together this book, I have been haunted, as by a melody, by the remembrance, the vision, the consciousness of that afternoon, warm and hazy, of early December, on the battlements of Belcaro castle, when we looked down over the top of the dense mural crown of sprouting pale green acorned ilex on to the hills and ravines, with the sere oak-woods reddened with the faint flush of sun-light, and the vague, white thinned olives and isolated golden-leaved oaks, and distant solitary belfries and castles ; away towards Siena, grey on the horizon, beneath the grey, pinked, wet cloud masses, lurid and mysterious like Beccafumi's frescos, as if the clouds, if one looked at them long, might gather into clustered angels with palm-shaped wings and flushed faces and reddened pale locks. Thus have I been haunted by this remembrance, this inner sight, this single moment continuing, in a way, to exist alongside of so many and various other moments ; so that, when it has come to giving a name to this book, I find that there is already indissolubly associated with it, the name of Belcaro.

So far of the title : now of the book itself, of what it is, and why it is such. When, two summers since, I wrote the last pages of my first book, it was, in a way,