

The Red Lily (Complete)

Anatole France



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She gave a glance at the armchairs placed before the chimney, at the tea-table, which shone in the shade, and at the tall, pale stems of flowers ascending above Chinese vases. She thrust her hand among the flowery branches of the guelder roses to make their silvery balls quiver. Then she looked at herself in a mirror with serious attention. She held herself sidewise, her neck turned over her shoulder, to follow with her eyes the spring of her fine form in its sheath-like black satin gown, around which floated a light tunic studded with pearls wherein sombre lights scintillated. She went nearer, curious to know her face of that day. The mirror returned her look with tranquillity, as if this amiable woman whom she examined, and who was not unpleasing to her, lived without either acute joy or profound sadness. On the walls of the large drawing-room, empty and silent, the figures of the tapestries, vague as shadows, showed pallid among their antique games and dying graces. Like them, the terra-cotta statuettes on slender columns, the groups of old Saxony, and the paintings of Sevres, spoke of past glories. On a pedestal ornamented with precious bronzes, the marble bust of some princess royal disguised as Diana appeared about to fly out of her turbulent drapery, while on the ceiling a figure of Night, powdered like a marquise and surrounded by cupids, sowed flowers. Everything was asleep, and only the crackling of the logs and the light rattle of Therese's pearls could be heard. Turning from the mirror, she lifted the corner of a curtain and saw through the window, beyond the dark trees of the quay, the Seine spreading its

yellow reflections. Weariness of the sky and of the water was reflected in her fine gray eyes. The boat passed, the Hironnelle, emerging from an arch of the Alma Bridge, and carrying humble travellers toward Grenelle and Billancourt. She followed it with her eyes, then let the curtain fall, and, seating herself under the flowers, took a book from the table. On the straw-colored linen cover shone the title in gold: Yseult la Blonde, by Vivian Bell. It was a collection of French verses composed by an Englishwoman, and printed in London. She read indifferently, waiting for visitors, and thinking less of the poetry than of the poetess, Miss Bell, who was perhaps her most agreeable friend, and whom she almost never saw; who, at every one of their meetings, which were so rare, kissed her, calling her darling, and babbled; who, plain yet seductive, almost ridiculous, yet wholly exquisite, lived at Fiesole like a philosopher, while England celebrated her as her most beloved poet. Like Vernon Lee and like Mary Robinson, she had fallen in love with the life and art of Tuscany; and, without even finishing her Tristan, the first part of which had inspired in Burne-Jones dreamy aquarelles, she wrote Provencal verses and French poems expressing Italian ideas. She had sent her Yseult la Blonde to Darling, with a letter inviting her to spend a month with her at Fiesole. She had written: Come; you will see the most beautiful things in the world, and you will embellish them.

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