

The Rose Garden

Holy Terrors

by Arthur Llewelyn Machen, 1863-1947

Published: 1908
in »The Neolith«



And afterwards she went very softly, and opened the window and looked out. Behind her the room was in a mystical semi-darkness; chairs and tables were hovering, ill-defined shapes, there was but the faintest illusory glitter from the talc moons in the rich Indian curtain which she had drawn across the door. The yellow silk draperies of the bed were but suggestions of colour, and the pillow and the white sheets glimmered as a white cloud in a far sky at twilight.

She turned from the dusky room, and with dewy tender eyes gazed out across the garden towards the lake. She could not rest nor lay herself down to sleep;

though it was late, and half the night had passed, she could not rest. A sickle moon was slowly drawing upwards through certain filmy clouds that stretched in a long band from east to west, and a pallid light began to flow from the dark water, as if there also some vague star were rising. She looked with eyes insatiable for wonder; and she found a strange Eastern effect in the bordering of reeds, in their spear-like shapes, in the liquid ebony that they shadowed, in the fine inlay of pearl and silver as the moon shone free; a bright symbol in the steadfast calm of the sky.

There were faint stirring sounds heard from the fringe of reeds, and now and then the drowsy broken cry of water-fowl, for they knew that the dawn was not far off. In the centre of the lake was a carved white pedestal, and on it shone a white boy holding the double flute to his lips.

Beyond the lake the park began, and sloped gently to the verge of the wood, now but a dark cloud beneath the sickle moon. And then beyond and farther still, undiscovered hills, grey bands of cloud, and the steep pale height of the heaven. She gazed on with her tender eyes, bathing herself as it were in the deep rest of the night, veiling her soul with the half-light and the half-shadow, stretching out her delicate hands into the coolness of the misty silvered air, wondering at her hands.

And then she turned from the window, and made herself a divan of cushion on the Persian carpet, and half sat, half lay there, as motionless, as ecstatic as a poet dreaming under roses, far in Ispahan. She gazed out, after all, to assure herself that sight and the eyes showed nothing but a glimmering veil, a gauze of curious lights and figures, that in it there was no reality or substance. He had always told her that there was only one existence, one science, one religion, that the external world was but a variegated shadow, which might either conceal or reveal the truth; and now she believed.

He had shown her that bodily rapture might be the ritual and expression of the ineffable mysteries, of the world beyond sense, that must be entered by the way of sense; and now she believed. She had never much doubted any of his words, from the moment of their meeting a month before. She had looked up as she sat in the arbour, and her father was walking down between the avenue of roses bringing to her the stranger, thin and dark with a pointed beard and melancholy eyes. He murmured something to himself as they shook hands; she could hear the rich unknown words that sounded as the echo of far music. Afterwards he had told her what the lines were:

*How say ye that I was lost?
I wandered among roses.
Can he go astray who enters the rose garden?
The lover in the house of his Darling is not forlorn.
I wandered among roses.
How say ye that I was lost?*

His voice, murmuring the strange words, had persuaded her, and now she had the rapture of the perfect knowledge. She had looked out into the silvery uncertain night in order that she might experience the sense that for her these things no

longer existed. She was not any more a part of the garden, or of the lake, or of the wood, or of the life that she had led hitherto. Another line that he had quoted came to her:

The kingdom of I and We forsake, and your home in annihilation make.

It had seemed at first almost nonsense, if it had been possible for him to talk nonsense; but now she was thrilled and filled with the meaning of it. Herself was annihilated; at his bidding she had destroyed all her old feelings, and emotions, her likes and dislikes, all the inherited loves and hates that her father and mother had given her; the old life had been thrown utterly away.

It grew light, and when the dawn burned she fell asleep, murmuring:
“How say ye that I was lost?”

