

# Rose Rose

By Barry Pain

Sefton stepped back from his picture. 'Rest now, please,' he said.

Miss Rose Rose, his model, threw the striped blanket around her, stepped down from the throne, and crossed the studio. She seated herself on the floor near the big stove. For a few moments Sefton stood motionless, looking critically at his work. Then he laid down his palette and brushes and began to roll a cigarette. He was a man of forty, thick-set, round-faced, with a reddish moustache turned fiercely upwards. He flung himself down in an easy-chair, and smoked in silence till silence seemed ungracious.

'Well,' he said, 'I've got the place hot enough for you today, Miss Rose.'

'You 'ave indeed,' said Miss Rose.

'I bet it's nearer eighty than seventy.'

The cigarette-smoke made a blue haze in the hot, heavy air. He watched it undulating, curving, melting.

As he watched it Miss Rose continued her observations. The trouble with these studios was the draughts. With a strong east wind, same as yesterday, you might have the stove red-hot, and yet never get the place, so to speak, warm. It is possible to talk commonly without talking like a coster, and Miss Rose achieved it. She did not always neglect the aspirate. She never quite substituted the third vowel for the first. She rather enjoyed long words.

She was beautiful from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot; and few models have good feet. Every pose she took was graceful. She was the daughter of a model, and had been herself a model from childhood. In consequence, she knew her work well and did it well. On one occasion, when sitting for the great Merion, she had kept the same pose, without a rest, for three consecutive hours. She was proud of that. Naturally she stood in the first rank among models, was most in demand, and made the most money. Her fault was that she was slightly capricious; you could not absolutely depend upon her. On a wintry morning when every hour of daylight was precious, she might keep her appointment, she might be an hour or two late, or she might stay away altogether. Merion himself had suffered from her, had sworn never to employ her again, and had gone back to her.

Sefton, as he watched the blue smoke, found that her common accent jarred on him. It even seemed to make it more difficult for him to get the right presentation of the 'Aphrodite' that she was helping him to paint. One seemed to demand a poetical and cultured soul in so beautiful a body. Rose Rose was not poetical nor cultured; she was not even business-like and educated.

Half an hour of silent and strenuous work followed. Then Sefton growled that he could not see any longer.

'We'll stop for today,' he said. Miss Rose Rose retired behind the screen. Sefton opened a window and both ventilators, and rolled another cigarette. The studio became rapidly cooler.

'Tomorrow, at nine?' he called out.

'I've got some way to come,' came the voice of Miss Rose from behind the screen. 'I could be here by a quarter past.'

'Right,' said Sefton, as he slipped on his coat.

When Rose Rose emerged from the screen she was dressed in a blue serge costume, with a picture-hat. As it was her business in life to be beautiful, she never wore corsets, high heels, nor pointed toes. Such abnegation is rare among models.

‘I say, Mr Sefton,’ said Rose, ‘you were to settle at the end of the sittings, but—’

‘Oh, you don’t want any money, Miss Rose. You’re known to be rich.’

‘Well, what I’ve got is in the Post Office, and I don’t want to touch it. And I’ve got some shopping I must do before I go home.’

Sefton pulled out his sovereign-case hesitatingly.

‘This is all very well, you know,’ he said.

‘I know what you are thinking, Mr Sefton. You think I don’t mean to come tomorrow. That’s all Mr Merion, now, isn’t it? He’s always saying things about me. I’m not going to stick it. I’m going to ’ave it out with ’im.’

‘He recommended you to me. And I’ll tell you what he said, if you won’t repeat it. He said that I should be lucky if I got you, and that I’d better chain you to the studio.’

‘And all because I was once late—with a good reason for it, too. Besides, what’s once? I suppose he didn’t ’appen to tell you how often he’s kept me waiting.’

‘Well, here you are, Miss Rose. But you’ll really be here in time tomorrow, won’t you? Otherwise the thing will have got too tacky to work into.’

‘You needn’t worry about that,’ said Miss Rose, eagerly. ‘I’ll be here, whatever happens, by a quarter past nine. I’ll be here if I die first! There, is that good enough for you? Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr Sefton.’

‘Good afternoon, Miss Rose. Let me manage that door for you—the key goes a bit stiffly.’

Sefton came back to his picture. In spite of Miss Rose’s vehement assurances he felt by no means sure of her, but it was difficult for him to refuse any woman anything, and impossible for him to refuse to pay her what he really owed. He scrawled in charcoal some directions to the charwoman who would come in the morning. She was, from his point of view, a prize charwoman—one who could, and did, wash brushes properly, one who understood the stove, and would, when required, refrain from sweeping. He picked up his hat and went out. He walked the short distance from his studio to his bachelor flat, looked over an evening paper as he drank his tea, and then changed his clothes and took a cab to the club for dinner. He played one game of billiards after dinner, and then went home. His picture was very much in his mind. He wanted to be up fairly early in the morning, and he went to bed early.

He was at his studio by half-past eight. The stove was lighted, and he piled more coke on it. His ‘Aphrodite’ seemed to have a somewhat mocking expression. It was a little, technical thing, to be corrected easily. He set his palette and selected his brushes. An attempt to roll a cigarette revealed the fact that his pouch was empty. It still wanted a few minutes to nine. He would have time to go tip to the tobacconist at the corner. In case Rose Rose arrived while he was away, he left the studio door open. The tobacconist was also a newsagent, and he bought a morning paper. Rose would probably be twenty minutes late at the least, and this would be something to occupy him.

But on his return he found his model already stepping on to the throne.

‘Good morning, Miss Rose. You’re a lady of your word.’ He hardly heeded the murmur which came to him as a reply. He threw his cigarette into the stove, picked up his palette, and got on excellently. The work was absorbing. For some time he thought of nothing else. There was no relaxing on the part of the model—no sign of fatigue. He had been working for over an hour, when his conscience smote him. ‘We’ll have a rest now, Miss Rose,’ he said cheerily. At the

same moment he felt human fingers drawn lightly across the back of his neck, just above the collar. He turned round with a sudden start. There was nobody there. He turned back again to the throne. Rose Rose had vanished.

With the utmost care and deliberation he put down his palette and brushes. He said in a loud voice, 'Where are you, Miss Rose?' For a moment or two silence hung in the hot air of the studio.

He repeated his question and got no answer. Then he stepped behind the screen, and suddenly the most terrible thing in his life happened to him. He knew that his model had never been there at all.

There was only one door out to the back street in which his studio was placed, and that door was now locked. He unlocked it, put on his hat, and went out. For a minute or two he paced the street, but he had got to go back to the studio.

He went back, sat down in the easy-chair, lit a cigarette, and tried for a plausible explanation. Undoubtedly he had been working very hard lately. When he had come back from the tobacconist's to the studio he had been in the state of expectant attention, and he was enough of a psychologist to know that in that state you are especially likely to see what you expect to see. He was not conscious of anything abnormal in himself. He did not feel ill, or even nervous. Nothing of the kind had ever happened to him before. The more he considered the matter, the more definite became his state. He was thoroughly frightened. With a great effort he pulled himself together and picked up the newspaper. It was certain that he could do no more work for that day, anyhow. An ordinary, commonplace newspaper would restore him. Yes, that was it. He had been too much wrapped up in the picture. He had simply supposed the model to be there.

He was quite unconvinced, of course, and merely trying to convince himself. As an artist, he knew that for the last hour or more he had been getting the most delicate modelling right from the living form before him. But he did his best, and read the newspaper assiduously. He read of tariff, protection, and of a new music-hall star. Then his eye fell on a paragraph headed 'Motor Fatalities'.

He read that Miss Rose, an artist's model, had been knocked down by a car in the Fulham Road about seven o'clock on the previous evening; that the owner of the car had stopped and taken her to the hospital, and that she had expired within a few minutes of admission.

He rose from his place and opened a large pocket-knife. There was a strong impulse upon him, and he felt it to be a mad impulse, to slash the canvas to rags. He stopped before the picture. The face smiled at him with a sweetness that was scarcely earthly.

He went back to his chair again. 'I'm not used to this kind of thing,' he said aloud. A board creaked at the far end of the studio. He jumped up with a start of horror. A few minutes later he had left the studio, and locked the door behind him. His common sense was still with him. He ought to go to a specialist. But the picture— 'What's the matter with Sefton?' said Devigne one night at the club after dinner.

'Don't know that anything's the matter with him,' said Merion. 'He hasn't been here lately.'

'I saw him the last time he was here, and he seemed pretty queer. Wanted to let me his studio.'

'It's not a bad studio,' said Merion, dispassionately.

'He's got rid of it now, anyhow. He's got a studio out at Richmond, and the deuce of a lot of time he must waste getting there and back. Besides, what does he do about models?'

'That's a point I've been wondering about myself,' said Merion. 'He'd got Rose Rose for his "Aphrodite," and it looked as if it might be a pretty good thing when I saw it. But, as you know,

she died. She was troublesome in some ways, but, taking her all round, I don't know where to find anybody as good today. What's Sefton doing about it?

'He hasn't got a model at all at present. I know that for a fact, because I asked him.'

'Well,' said Merion, 'he may have got the thing on further than I thought he would in the time. Some chaps can work from memory all right, though I can't do it myself. He's not chucked the picture, I suppose?'

'No; he's not done that. In fact, the picture's his excuse now, if you want him to go anywhere and do anything. But that's not it: the chap's altogether changed. He used to be a genial sort of bounder—bit tyrannical in his manner, perhaps—thought he knew everything. Still, you could talk to him. He was sociable. As a matter of fact, he did know a good deal. Now it's quite different. If you ever do see him—and that's not often—he's got nothing to say to you. He's just going back to his work. That sort of thing.'

'You're too imaginative,' said Merion. 'I never knew a man who varied less than Sefton. Give me his address, will you? I mean his studio. I'll go and look him up one morning. I should like to see how that "Aphrodite's" getting on. I tell you it was promising; no nonsense about it.'

One sunny morning Merion knocked at the door of the studio at Richmond. He heard the sound of footsteps crossing the studio, then Sefton's voice rang out.

'Who's there?'

'Merion. I've travelled miles to see the thing you call a picture.'

'I've got a model.'

'And what does that matter?' asked Merion.

'Well, I'd be awfully glad if you'd come back in an hour. We'd have lunch together somewhere.'

'Right,' said Merion, sardonically. 'I'll come back in about seven million hours. Wait for me.'

He went back to London and his own studio in a state of fury. Sefton had never been a man to pose. He had never put on side about his work. He was always willing to show it to old and intimate friends whose judgment he could trust; and now, when the oldest of his friends had travelled down to Richmond to see him, he was told to come back in an hour, and that they might then lunch together!

'This lets me out,' said Merion, savagely.

But he always speaks well of Sefton nowadays. He maintains that Sefton's 'Aphrodite' would have been a success anyhow. The suicide made a good deal of talk at the time, and a special attendant was necessary to regulate the crowds round it, when, as directed by his will, the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy. He was found in his studio many hours after his death; and he had scrawled on a blank canvas, much as he left his directions to his charwoman: 'I have finished it, but I can't stand any more.'