

THE PINK SHAWL By MARJORIE BOWEN

ILLUSTRATED BY R. M. BRINKERHOFF

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Marjorie Bowen—who in real life is Mrs. Arthur Long—can find romance, humor and pathos anywhere, even in the drabbest surroundings.

Rose Smith had never made any attempt to live up to her Christian name; she had never been anything like a rose; to hear her name and to see her was to suffer a dislocation of ideas; after that, “rose” would mean something else to you besides a flower.

The boundaries of her features were in as fluid a state as the frontiers of central Europe; emotion, the weather, or even a cup of hot tea, changed the whole map of her face, which appeared to shrink in one part, swell in another, and be one moment a whitish grey, and the next a bluish pink; indigestion, perhaps, or a sensitive soul, but poignantly unbecoming.

But Rose in the backwash of a remote town and the backwash of a remote faith, was not troubled by her plainness; there were a great many texts hanging about her simple home and they all inculcated a severe adherence to morals in preference to any outward adornments; it was tacitly understood that the clear complexions of the angels in the border of “Blessed are the pure in heart” were due to the fair air of heaven and not to the most modest dose of magnesia, and that the purity referred wholly to the heart and not to any other organ whatever—also “Cleanse your hearts and not your garments” meant just what it said, and under garments you might include a lot of things from wallpapers and carpets to window panes and saucepans; of course you had the laundry van calling, not that you were afraid your neighbors might think your cleanliness in question, but that you were afraid they might think you did your own “washing”—washing it was, not laundry, when you did it yourself.

For the same reason the steps received a daily mask of hearthstone, furtively, in the early morning that was Biblical too. Rose often thought of “whitened sepulchres.”



Once Rose found on a lodger's shelf a rather pretentious cookery book, with lots of engaging pictures of pies and cakes.

Rose's greatest mental adventure was the occasional examination of a row of rather battered novels, left precariously perched on a shelf, by a delinquent lodger. Once she found there a pretentious cookery book, with lots of pictures of engaging pies and cakes, which made her wonder—.

Mrs. Smith and Rose lived with, by, for, on, the lodgers, and as they were not above two miles from the sea, close to the shops, chapels and the cinema, they received in the summer, not the summer weather, the summer months, numbers of "guests" who came from similar houses, steps, texts, aspidistras, streets, shops and cinemas for a complete "change."

They had one lodger who, like the wreath on Father's sepulchre, was permanent.

And not only permanent but opulent; he was the manager of a store of more than local celebrity that had lately opened a branch near Malvern Terrace.

In the pall of fishy, greasy odor that rose from those secret regions below and gently settled on the whatnots, photos, bamboo and imitation leather furniture Mr. Minxton found an atmosphere of home, and often said so, gratefully; his refined features which looked as if they had once been melted and only rescued before they "ran" out of all semblance to humanity, his neat clothes, and his unfaltering courtesy, which branded him as firmly as the name of the maker branded on the biscuits he handled so deftly, made Mrs. Smith and Rose decide he was "quite the gentleman."

He did not disdain sometimes to descend to the inner mysteries and contemplate with a calm eye the aftermath of his last meal or the chaotic pie preparation for his next; custom had blunted his natural instincts; unflinchingly he praised the curious messes over which Mrs. Smith labored with a rather bitter pride, and earnestly he talked to Rose on a subject that he, at least found completely engrossing, himself.

He, too, went to the chapel and the elegance of his appearance and the brightness of his smile radiated the sodden melancholy of the provincial Sunday for Rose.

One day, Rose, walking back beside Mr. Minxton through the liverish looking streets from the stuffiness of the chapel to the stuffiness of her home, confided to her cavalier her Life Tragedy.

She had once been engaged; she could hardly believe it herself, she added frankly, but it had been during the war.

“That accounts,” said Mr. Minxton, soothingly.

Rose blushed beneath her faded pimples.

“He was billeted on us—seventeen and sixpence a week and expecting three meat meals a day, wanting the best of everything and getting it too, whether we was out of pocket or not.”

“Ah, I know the sort, too good to him, you were, of course,” said Mr. Minxton vaguely.

“Well, I don’t know. I wouldn’t say he hadn’t got a way with him, didn’t half make himself comfortable though. Mother couldn’t do enough for him, doing his bit, as they used to say; you know the fuss there was.”

Rose sighed.

“He was a milkman in real life, somewhere in London. Well, he made up to me, took us both to the movies one night and a fish supper afterwards. I don’t know half he said, me teeth were that bad and I’d got cotton wool in me left ear, the side he sat, and what with that and his cracking of nuts and Mother nudging me to take notice how badly them bits of girls was behaving with the other soldiers in front, I didn’t catch it all proper, but Mother said, coming home, ‘take it from me you’re engaged, Rose,’ and we bought a bottle of whisky and sat in the firelight, and he said he liked them plain and good with a bit at the bank, and I was never a looker and I had the bit all right, then.”

“Where has it gone? The bit?” asked Mr. Minxton with a sudden keen interest. “Did he borrow it?”

“I don’t know about borrowed,” replied Rose drearily. “He had it—”

“But you’ve had time since to get some more together.”

“Time, but not the heart,” said Rose. “You see, he went away next day and broke it off, the engagement, on a postcard written in the train. No stamp and twopence to pay.”

Mr. Minxton looked at her as if he was considering something and Rose thought she saw a gleam of tenderness in those boot button eyes.

“Of course it was a lucky escape,” she said. “I don’t know where I’d be now if I’d married him—I don’t know where I am now,” she added despondently. “It’s a poor sort of life, come to look at it.”

Mr. Minxton pressed her arm.

“Now, don’t you get downhearted; what you’ve got is that Sunday feeling, nothing to do but employ your mind, worrying what’s no use worrying for. Now suppose we were to take a walk on the front, just to stretch our shoes a bit? What you put on once a week is hard on the corns, I always say; sitting in chapel won’t ease footleather.”

A faint goldenness clothed Rose’s mental outline; she pressed coquettishly against Mr. Minxton so that they stumbled at the crossing.

“I don’t say I haven’t something put by, and the house is ours. Father built that row and the one next is ours too, a tidy bit of rent—but what’s the good? I don’t get much fun out of it.”

“You don’t want fun,” said Mr. Minxton, sternly. “Worst thing in the world—fun.”

Glib self defence animated Rose.

“Of course I know that, Mr. Minxton; isn’t likely I’d be forgetting, with the bringing up I’ve had, and as for young Ed—”

“I don’t think,” Mr. Minxton interrupted firmly, “you acted right there—letting him have the money.”

“I was took off me feet,” apologized Rose. “You know—the war—”

“I *know*, right enough, but I don’t approve—sensible woman like your mother.”

“Mother wasn’t herself—bothered, as you might say, and Ed had such a way of putting things, talked of them Germans—or the Huns—one of them lot landing and taking it all—the money, I mean.”

“Well,” Mr. Minxton contrived some show of tenderness for feminine folly, “I don’t say there aren’t excuses—”

“And he didn’t have so much,” said Rose eagerly, “not all, Mr. Minxton. Mother stood out there, ‘for who knows, Rose,’ she used to say, ‘that there won’t be Mr. Right popping along some day.’”

And Rose, whose features seemed to have spread and become vague under the action of the east wind nipping up from the sea, giggled and snuggled coyly.

“Well, who knows,” conceded Mr. Minxton. “I’m, mind you, not saying that he *won’t*—”

A delicious sensation of warmth crept round Rose's rather chilled members; she felt a faint reflection of those emotions that had intoxicated her as she had sat before the fire with the soldier and the whisky, and the cocaine in her tooth and ear—a kind of painful delirium.

Mr. Minxton remained calm; he surveyed, with a professional glance, the belt of new shops on the front; shops so carelessly refined that there were no shutters or blinds to hide the “novelties” within.

“Well, we are getting chick,” he remarked, and stopped before the plate glass that enshrined “Poppe—modes *et robes*.”

There was nothing in this window but one shawl.

Pale pink silk with a huge rose in deeper shades of pink embroidered in one corner and a fringe a foot deep.

This shawl broke on Rose as a sort of apotheosis of her daring thoughts—marriage—new clothes—a bottom drawer—Mr. Minxton—sitting hand in hand—in the Pink Shawl.

“Just about your size,” remarked Mr. Minxton. “Rose for Rose—sweets to the sweet, as they say at the refreshment stall.”

Rose could have fainted with joy; was he going to buy her the Shawl?

“It's my color to a turn,” she confessed.

Mr. Minxton scattered a superior smile over her yielding mood, then remarked that there was pork for dinner and if they didn't want the crackling spoiled there was urgent need to hurry home.

From that delicious moment the Pink Shawl consolidated the misty chaotic dreams of Rose; it became to her what America was to Columbus, unexpected, unlikely, but full of dazzling hope.

She told Mrs. Smith about it, in the same breath as she spoke of Mr. Minxton's probable “intentions.”

“Oh, Mother, I'm so happy!”

Mr. Minxton continued his attentions, but he did not buy the shawl; Rose, with an impulse of exhilarated recklessness, went in and priced it; a creature who seemed to belong to another sex from Rose,—she was so polished, neat and suave—said, “Only five guineas” with a wonderful indifference that both awed and stimulated Rose.

“Why shouldn’t I buy it for myself, Mother? We’ve got a bit put by, and I must begin to get my things together, you know, what them papers call the bottom drawer—”

“Well, if you were sure of Mr. Minxton,” said Mrs. Smith, tenderly, inspired by feminine frivolity but remembering Ed; but Rose thought she was sure; Mr. Minxton’s “attentions” were unmistakable.

The struggling watering place (they would call it that, which made it sound like a cattle pool) moribund in the winter, and hysterically alive in the summer, possessed a struggling newspaper that Rose read carefully every Wednesday. Most carefully the weddings; the editor was lavish about the weddings; the most wonderful weddings; almost every week there was one, an orgy of compliments, beauty, crepe de chine, lucky horse shoes, white heather, wedding marches—and presents.

Father of Bride—Cheque.

Father of Bridegroom—Another cheque.

Mother of Bride—Crochet set.

Mother of Bridegroom—Silver handled umbrella.

Annie, Willie, Katie, Sally, Muriel, Gladys and Baby Bob—A pen wiper.

Staff of Messrs. Robem—Rose bowl (electro).

Grannie Mitchem and Grannie Dale—A wool winder.

And so on; Rose could read for hours, up one column and down another, and then back again.

She had it all planned out; the hymns, the march, the going away dress, the bridesmaids (carrying bouquets of sweet peas and wearing horse shoe brooches, the gift of the bridegroom), Mother’s grey gown and white kids. . .

And then she bought the Shawl.

Drew five pounds, five shillings from the Savings Bank and bought the Shawl, which was still there wilting in a slightly wilted shop which had proved slightly too modern for the neighborhood.

Rose’s emotion, till then in crescendo, had a climax; it was when she brought the Shawl home and draped it round herself, standing in the

piled up, darkish kitchen; the pink silk slipped gracefully from the tissue paper, and hung in luxurious folds round her stumpy figure.

Mrs. Smith was awed; everything in the room looked dirty, old and sad; Rose's face looked "funny," a "funny" colour; it was a merciless pink, clear and hard, like nothing in nature, but putting nature to shame.

It was then Mr. Minxton entered; they, in their excitement, had forgotten his dinner; he came in, jovially, to remind them; but at the sight of the Pink Shawl his humour changed.

"It don't suit you," he remarked, coldly.

Rose took it off.

"I liked it," she quavered, then, with a fatal attempt to imitate the "insouciance" of the shop damsel, she added, "It was only five pounds five shillings."

Mr. Minxton's glance was withering.

"Only! Well, I never, no wonder they talk of the nation going to pieces when talk like that is going on! Wicked, I call it."

"It's her own money, what she's worked hard for," stammered Mrs. Smith, paling, however, before the dreaded masculine judgment.

Rose was wrapping the Shawl up in the tissue paper; her glance was supplicant, but Mr. Minxton was too outraged to respond.

"First that soldier, and now this," he said. "You're pretty flighty, aren't you? Well, I hope you'll find a husband who can keep you in luxury, that's what I hope—"

The next day he left for other rooms; the next month he married the only daughter of a "warm" man with a tidy little business.

In the list of wedding presents figured: "Mrs. Smith and Rose—A Pink Shawl!"

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Pink Shawl* by Marjorie Bowen]