

# *The Rose Red City*

**Beatrice Redpath**

**Illustrated by**

**Harold T. Denison**

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# The Rose Red City

*By* BEATRICE REDPATH

ILLUSTRATED BY HAROLD T. DENISON

**E**dward Lucas sighed, took off his glasses and polished them carefully with his handkerchief. The figures in the neat columns on the page before him appeared to become alive; to crawl away as though they were trying to escape. A vague understanding of those errant figures drifted through his tired mind. He understood them better than he understood some people.

Startled by a voice behind him, he laid his glasses down on the desk.

“Ah, Lucas, I’m glad you haven’t gone home. I want to talk to you about that new filing system.”

Edward Lucas rose awkwardly to his feet, his manner nervous and deprecating. When he was nervous his eyes blinked rapidly. Evans, with his loud, hearty manner, made him feel so aware of his own inferiority. He hated the man, hated those popping eyes fixed upon him. He felt as though he were visibly shrinking, as though his sleeves were drawing back from his wrists, his collar receding from his neck, leaving him bare and exposed.

He stood with his hand resting on the desk, listening to Evans, nodding occasionally to show that he was interested. He was wishing he could think of something to say that would show he had a wider grasp of the business than Evans ever credited him with possessing. But he could think of nothing that would give that impression.

Evans continued to talk, seeming to expand physically under the soothing influence of his own voice, Edward Lucas’s attention wandered. His eyes rested on the light oak desk where his papers were arranged with such neat precision, then lifted to the window where a cracked green blind was veined with lines of light. He noticed the buildings opposite, where he could make out men sitting at desks; desks like his own; and below again, more desks. The sight of them made him feel intolerably weary. He drew a

deep breath and turned his attention back to what Evans was saying, easily picking up the threads of the loose narrative.

After finishing what he had to say about the new filing system, Evans kept him listening to tales of his exploits at golf.

“You see, it was this way,” Evans continued, moving the ink bottle and the pens about on the desk to illustrate what he was saying, “My ball was just where this pen is and the green was over here . . .”

Edward Lucas tried to shut out the desks, tried to see instead green fields where the grass was so closely clipped as to appear polished, with little white figures dotted about every where. And suddenly it seemed to him that those small figures moving here and there over the clear green spaces pretending to follow a ball, were really only escaping from themselves.

**I**t was nearly six o'clock when he left the office. He felt more than usually depressed by Evans and his bombastic manner. At times he felt that he hated the man so intensely that he would like to do nothing better than to put his hands around Evan's thick throat and squeeze and squeeze until those popping eyes popped further and further. But then he would shrug his shoulders and consider that it really wasn't worth while hating the man like that. He wasn't worth it. And perhaps it wasn't Evans whom he was hating so much, as just the feeling that he was shackled to that office, and that he was obliged to listen whether he wanted to or not. Probably all those other men whom he saw sitting at endless rows of desks like his own, sometimes had that same feeling of quiet desperation.

It was not until he sat down to read the papers that evening that he found that he had forgotten his glasses. Methodically, he went through each pocket in turn. Yes, he had left them at the office. He had laid them down beside the ink bottle when Evans had come over to talk to him.

The newspaper slid from his knees to the floor, as he half started from his chair, looking at Hatty apologetically.

“I've forgotten my glasses,” he said weakly.

“Well, surely you can spend one evening without reading the papers.”

There was a chill of resentment in Hatty's tone. She so often used that tone when she spoke to him or to the children. He felt that the constant saying of the same things, day after day, had worn off all the color from her voice, had left it only a mechanical device for making sounds.

“I put them down,” he continued, blinking nervously, “when Evans came over to talk to me this afternoon.”

No one in that small, overcrowded sitting room was listening to what he was saying. How on earth was he to spend the whole long, interminable evening without his glasses? He couldn't manage to read a word without them. No one was taking the trouble to tell him; no one was even glancing in his direction. He blinked at a picture on the green wall opposite. It was a print of a man jumping over a fence on a spirited horse. He wondered what it would feel like to be that man. Would it feel any different than it felt being himself? He turned his attention back to the thought of his glasses.

Usually he read the papers until after nine, reading over even the advertisements, and then went lingeringly upstairs to bed, and undressed in the small front room with the brass bed that he shared with Hatty.

He glanced towards the fireplace, with its shining green tiles that had never been touched by soot or smoke. How nice it would be to have a fire there sometimes. Just to sit and watch the little blue and orange flames darting up the black hole of the chimney, rushing to escape from the imprisoning coal, would be amusing enough without the papers. He had suggested it to Hatty more than once, but she inevitably inquired in that resentful tone:

“Who's to clean out the ashes in the morning?”

He knew the fire would be no pleasure to Hatty, for she wouldn't be able to get her mind off the ashes. Hatty was like that; she never seemed able to enjoy anything very much, because she was forever considering who was to pay for it.

Ronald, the eldest boy, was lying flat on his stomach on the floor, reading an annual, which Dora was trying to read over his shoulder. Soon there would be a quarrel between the two. He felt himself shrinking already in anticipation of the loud, angry voices that would break out at any moment.

The younger boy was sitting at the table doing his lessons. He was dragging a sharp pen across the fuzzy red material of the table cover. Edward Lucas had an impulse to tell him to stop. The sound set his teeth on edge. But he restrained the impulse to do so. It would only mean a wordy conflict between them, and nothing would be gained by it. He tried to shut out the sound instead.

Hatty had pushed her chair under the centre lights, the lights with little red ballet-skirts of tissue paper around them. The glow streamed down on her fair hair, that was twisted into a handle at the back of her head. She was reading out loud to the youngest, while she darned a stocking at the same time. Her sing-song voice filled the little room. The voice stopped each time she leaned over the side of her chair to pick up another stocking from the overflowing basket on the floor, and each time she received a tug at her arm.

“Go on . . . go on . . . don’t stop.”

Dora, by this time, had leaned too far over her brother’s shoulder. There was a sharp slap, like the report of a pistol. A jangling scream. The sing-song tone changed to one of harsh remonstrance.

“Children, do stop making that noise. Edward, can’t you make the children behave? They are always worse when you’re at home.”

He half rose from his chair. A whole evening listening to this without being able to read. He blinked nervously at the green paper with its gilt scrolls.

“Why don’t you play some game with your father, Dora, instead of teasing Ronald?”

“I don’t want to. It’s no fun playing with him. I always win.”

“I think, Hatty,” he knew that his tone was unduly apologetic, “I really think that I’ll run down town and get my glasses.”

“Get your glasses to-night?”

“It won’t take me very long.”

“I never heard anything so absurd in my life. Going all the way to the office to get your glasses at this hour. Why, it’s nearly eight o’clock.”

“I’ll need them in the morning,” he said, nervously straightening his tie. “I’d like to make sure they were on my desk. I might have left them somewhere else.”

“Well, if you’re going you’d better hurry.”

Again that tone that he so much disliked. Hatty’s eyes were like chips of blue glass as she looked at him. He had a sudden impulse to ask her not to look at him like that; not to speak to him in that tone. He was sure that she would be surprised if he told her that she treated him at times as though she hated him. He knew that she didn’t hate him. It was the daily contact, that was all. Rubbing and rubbing until feelings were worn thin. He knew

exactly how it was. He knew, too, that if he were to die to-morrow, Hatty would feel it terribly. He could almost see her clumsy body shaken with horrible sobs, could almost see her big face quivering, her eyes swollen and reddened from weeping.

Yes, that was how it would be. And as far as he was concerned, if anything were to happen to Hatty . . . well, he simply didn't allow himself to think about it, that was all. And yet, just as long as he was there, she would speak to him at times in that tone; look at him with eyes that were like bits of blue glass.

**H**e went out into the hall to get his hat and coat, with a sensation of release. He had been afraid for a moment that he was going to have to sit all evening and listen to the fights going on between the children, and hear Hatty's querulous tones admonishing them; have to listen without the saving shield of the newspaper to screen himself away from it all.

Sometimes he didn't blame the children so much either, for fighting as they did. The house was small, and there were so many of them. They were always getting in one another's way, jogging one another's elbows, kicking each other in bed at night. Their feelings, too, had been worn thin by that constant contact.

He was glad to get out into the quiet street. Some of the blinds of the houses were pulled only half way down the windows, and he could get glimpses of rooms that reminded him of the room he had just left. Sometimes he wondered about all the people who lived in Rosedale Crescent, in houses that were identical with his own. Did any of those people living in those narrow houses, ever feel that blind hunger that he so often knew?

Frequently, he watched the faces of the men who sat opposite to him in the street cars, as he went to and from the city. He wanted to know if there was anything different in their faces from what was in his own. In some faces he seemed to find an intangible something that he could not name, but in most of them he saw only the same dull sameness that was himself.

He would catch a glimpse of himself often in passing a shop window or mirror, and would stare back at the reflection, as though he were looking at a stranger. What he saw was a bleak-faced man with small features, and near-sighted blue eyes; a man of any age, although he was just forty-two.

There was nothing at all significant about him; no reason on earth why he should have that curious feeling of desperation with his work, with Hatty, with the children. He was a clerk because it was all that he was fitted for. He wasn't kept down by any tragic hazard of fortune; he couldn't have been anything different. Anyway, he knew that wasn't why he felt as he did. If he had had twice the salary things would have been the same. Only he might have been able to dull that hunger with games, with travel, and the buying of luxuries. But something told him that that hunger would still have been there, though lulled and stupefied, until he had learned in some way to escape from himself. Always, there would be something within him, something formless and vague, that was struggling to reach the surface, always fighting upwards, and perhaps never quite managing to escape.

He decided to walk down town instead of taking the street cars which were so crowded at this hour. He very seldom went out in the evenings, but it wasn't because there was anything to keep him at home. Hatty didn't really notice whether he were there or not. She was always busy in the evenings, seeing that the children went to bed each at the right time, calling out directions about who was to take a bath first, running upstairs to see that Ronald wasn't reading after he had got into bed. There were a thousand things she felt that she must do for which she didn't require him.

There was still a deep, rich glow in the sky. Layers and layers of tiny clouds were suffused with delicate pink, until they were like the petals of a gigantic rose, slowly wilting, fading, until each petal had little curled back edges of gray or brown. Against that tender sky the buildings were straight black columns of onyx, pricked here and there with light.

Motors rushed past him with a screech of horns, and the crowds moved along the sidewalks in a great human mass, on their way to the theatres or to the moving picture houses, where the lights spouted like fountains, or ran around in varied colors on the huge illuminated signs.

Here and there he heard a sentence dropped from the lips of a passer-by, little words that were like windows opening into strangers' lives, giving him a brief, arresting glimpse. It amused him to listen to people's conversation on the street or on the street cars, for he was always so curious about other people's lives, always wondering in what way they were different to his own.

**H**e found his glasses just where he had left them, beside the ink bottle on his desk. A bored looking elevator man took him down the six



flights. He left the great dim office building where only a few charwomen were at work, and stood outside on the pavement for a moment, considering whether he should walk up town or take a street car. Across the street a great electric sign signified that a noted violinist was giving a recital that evening. Motors kept stopping, and women in light colored capes and men with white shirt fronts kept entering in a steady stream.

Edward Lucas stood watching the crowds going in, and fingering some money in his pocket. Why shouldn't he drop in there for an hour or so? He was fond of music, but he had never had an opportunity to develop that fondness. Hatty disliked it intensely. At one time he had saved up money to buy a gramophone, but Hatty had insisted upon sending it back to the store. She said it made her head ache, and that there was enough racket in the house as it was. With a sudden impulse he crossed the street.



*After all, it was only the amount that he would have paid for a record, if Hatty had allowed him to keep the gramophone.*

He was slightly surprised at the price of the ticket. But he put the money down without a qualm. After all, it was only the amount that he would have paid for a record, if Hatty, had allowed him to keep the gramophone. He went into the huge crowded hall, blinking nervously as an usher showed him to his seat.

So many lights winking and dancing in enormous glass chandeliers that swung from the high vaulted ceiling, so many people talking, talking, talking, until their voices were just a confused murmur, continually rising and falling.

A young girl came across the stage, and seated herself at the piano, a young formless creature in white. She was half hidden by the lifted lid of the piano. The lights were dimmed and the voices hushed. There was the restless movement of people settling down to listen; the flutter of programmes; an occasional cough.

Then a tall dark man, with black hair sweeping back from his forehead like a plume, came leisurely out to the edge of the platform, a violin under his arm, and bowed several times to the thunder of applause that greeted him. He continued bowing and bowing, while it seemed as though the people would never weary of clapping. He appeared to be slightly bored with it all.

The tall dark man turned and said a few words to the formless young thing at the piano, and then he lifted his violin to his shoulder. The clapping ceased instantly, and a taut silence filled the great hall. Even the coughing had stopped. Edward Lucas took off his glasses, settled back in his seat, and closed his eyes.

He caught his breath sharply and a little shiver went through him as the bow swept the strings of the violin. A long, thin shaft of light flickered before him. Each time the bow swept the strings that shaft widened, grew brighter, until it encompassed everything.

It was before him, and around him, and he in the midst of it, was being carried away from that crowded hall; away from the tight little room with the gilt scrolls on the wall paper; away from the neat precision of his desk; away from feelings that were worn thin: from voices of resentment; away, to where he could see towers lifting minarets and spires; to where a rose red city was rising out of a rose pale mist. Stone by stone . . . stone by stone . . . it was being builded around him . . . until its towers leapt to the sky.

And he knew himself to be part of it all, as it was part of him . . . and where there had been dark and seething struggle within, where something had been fighting, fighting upwards to escape, now there was a deep sweet fullness, a happiness too forceful to be borne . . .

For as he walked through the gates of that rose red city, he heard voices, and the laughter of women. And he was walking between rich creamy

orchards, where every tree was singing; and the shining wings of birds beat upon sunny air . . .

He was passing by little houses, where bees boomed in ripe gardens; by hooded windows, traced with marigolds, that children's hands were plucking; he could hear temple bells calling; and as he went by gilded altars, he could hear the murmur of prayer going up through centuries of time . . .

And at whiles, when silence fell around him, he could hear the wistful, crying spirit of the rain; the strong spirit of wind; and the silver spirit of the tides on far off beaches; he could hear the hum of the stars as they wheeled in their courses; he knew the spirit of all growing things . . .

And stone by stone . . . stone by stone . . . the rose red city grew around him . . . and he could see apple blossoms whitening in dusk lit places; and the green tipped arrows of the spring. He could see hills thickened with gold from the ripening wheat fields; he knew the warm reds of harvest; he could see earth sleeping beneath coverlets of crystal; he knew the full pale glamour of the moon. . . .

And stone by stone . . . stone by stone . . . the rose red city grew around him, its minarets and towers leaping to the sky. And he, walking the streets of that city, knew pity, and the taste of tears; the splendour of suffering; and the sharpness of wisdom; the bounty of passion; and the aching tenderness of love . . .

O, wonderfully he knew now, life in its fullness; life in its purpose; life in its richness and strength. And suddenly like the cry of a child, as it leaves the womb of its mother, it was as though there were wrenched from his pitiful earthly body a loud, clear shout of thanksgiving.

**H**atty was still sitting beside the basket of mending when he let himself quietly in soon after eleven o'clock. She looked up as he stood uncertainly in the doorway, blinking at her with his short-sighted, blue eyes.

"Where on earth have you been all this time?" she inquired, with a note of sharp curiosity in her voice. "I thought you said you were just going to the office to get your glasses."

"So I was . . . so I did get them," he faltered. "But I . . . I . . ."

No, he couldn't possibly tell her where he had been. He couldn't explain, for she wouldn't understand. And then there was the price of the ticket to be

considered as well. She would never forgive him for spending so much upon himself.

“Well, you might see that the back door is locked,” she said, getting up and picking the threads carefully off her dark skirt. “I’m going up to bed.”

He took a long, slow breath. Then he wasn’t going to have to explain; she wasn’t going to insist upon knowing just where he had been. He went to see that the back door was locked, as he had always done for fifteen years, knowing quite well that Hatty had locked it.

All the next day he wondered whether he could possibly go again that evening. He changed his mind a dozen times, and then finally, he decided just before dinner that it was quite impossible. But when they were all settling themselves for the evening in the green room, he suddenly made a dart towards the door. At Hatty’s look of inquiry, he faltered stumbingly.

“I’m just going out for a time . . . my head aches . . . I think the air . . .”

He retreated hastily before that curious stare that she turned upon him. He had the money in his pocket for his ticket . . . the ticket that would let him inside the gates of the rose red city.

And the next night he went again, and again the next night. Hatty had scarcely spoken to him during the last two days. He knew that she was watching him closely. Several times he attempted to tell her where he had been, but something stopped him. If he told her, she would make a scene because he had spent so much money and he wouldn’t be able to go again. There would only be one more night anyway. After that he could tell her and it wouldn’t matter then what she said; it wouldn’t matter that she could never understand.

For she wouldn’t be able to understand, any more than she could understand if he were to tell her how he hated his work at the office, had hated it for twenty years; how he hated the atmosphere of their tight little house that was always so filled with noise. No, she wouldn’t understand that either. If he didn’t like his work, if he didn’t like his home, she would conclude that there was something very wrong with him. But now, neither the office nor his home seemed to have quite the same importance any more. Backgrounds, that was all they were. They couldn’t shut him in, not in the same way they had done before. He felt that, positively.

Saturday night. He could scarcely eat his dinner he was so fearfully anxious not to lose a minute of this, the last night. He ate quickly, hurrying over his food, and then he had to sit and wait writhing with impatience, while Hatty and the children finished, and the plates were changed, and the children scolded for their bad manners.

“You shouldn’t gobble your food,” Hatty nagged, from her end of the table.

He saw the children’s eyes turned upon him. He knew that in a moment they were going to say that he had gobbled his. He pushed back his chair.

“I won’t wait for the dessert, Hatty. I don’t want any to-night.”

Hatty’s eyes were chips of blue glass as she stared at him across the tiny dusty artificial fern in the centre of the table, but Hatty said nothing. Her mouth closed as though there were a spring concealed somewhere inside it. He went awkwardly out into the hall and took down his hat and coat. He wondered what she was thinking. His face felt hot and feverish, with the intensity of his longing to leave the house. He was so afraid that he might still be prevented. Well, after to-night he would tell Hatty, he said to himself as he thrust his arms through the sleeves of his coat, and jammed his hat on his head. He couldn’t tell her now or she would stop him. He knew that he couldn’t risk it.

And again the rose red city rose around him . . . stone by stone . . . stone by stone . . .

**H**e was walking through the lobby on his way out, when he felt a touch on his arm. He turned, and stared into Hatty’s face. For a moment he couldn’t grasp the fact that she was there beside him. She said nothing, but pushed on ahead of him, and he followed, feeling strangely dazed by Hatty’s appearance.

As they left the crowds that were pouring out of the lobby she said slowly, without looking at him:

“I followed you this evening. I wanted to see where it was you were going every night. I imagined that it was something of the sort.”

He swallowed hard. He wasn’t ready to talk to Hatty about it just yet; anyway, he didn’t know what he was to say. There was no resentment in her voice, but there was something else he couldn’t quite make out; something that hurt him intolerably; hurt him as no tone of resentment could ever have

hurt him. It was as though there were a little lonely child somewhere, crying, crying, bitterly . . .

“I’m not blaming you,” she said in response to his silence, “she’s so pretty, and she’s so young. She’s got the loveliest face I ever saw.”

What was Hatty saying; what on earth was she saying?

“I thought I was going to be angry. I was angry. But somehow, I don’t feel like that any more.”

“Hatty,” he cried in bewilderment, “why Hatty . . .”

His voice strangled him. Wouldn’t that little child that was somehow so strangely Hatty, stop crying. He couldn’t bear it. And what was she saying anyway? He couldn’t make it out.

“I sat just behind you so that I could watch you. I saw you staring and staring at her, all the time that man was making that terrible music with his fiddle.”

Staring? At whom had he been staring?



*“There was a man in the drug store once . . . he had the loveliest smile.  
Every time I went to buy anything, why, why . . .”*

“I know what it’s like,” she went on insistently, “sometimes I’ve wanted to get away from it all myself. The awful sameness of everything. There was a man in the drug store once . . . he had the loveliest smile. Every time I went in to buy anything, why . . . why . . .”

She broke off, while an odd expression flitted across her broad face.

“Hatty,” was all that he could manage to say.

Oh, he must tell her that it was not what she had been imagining it to be. Nothing like that at all. Why, he didn’t know that there had been a girl on the stage. Now that she spoke of it, he did remember a young, formless creature in white at the piano. Poor Hatty; the man in the drug store. Hatty, escaping into a poor, mean little romance like that. Could he tell her . . . could he explain to her about the rose red city where he had been?

He started, flounderingly.

“But Hatty, it wasn’t . . .”

She slipped her hand through his with all the awkwardness of an unaccustomed caress.

“I’m not blaming you at all,” she insisted. “I know there are times when you long to get away into something different. I guess there are lots of us who feel that way.”

So Hatty, too, knew that blind hunger, that longing to escape, that had led him straight to the gates of his rose red city.

“I used to feel sometimes,” she went on dreamily, “that if that man in the drug store had ever said a word . . . and it wasn’t because I didn’t care about you and the children, either. It was just . . . just . . .”

She paused to allow someone to push past them on the sidewalk.

“But he never said anything at all,” she ended lamely.

The crowd separated them again for a moment. Hatty was looking in the shop windows when he rejoined her. They walked up the street in silence, Hatty occasionally breaking out into a remark about something that she saw.

She didn’t want him to tell her anything. As he walked beside her he heard her voice speaking to him from a long way off . . . for he was listening to an echo. And while he heard that echo around him was rising again that rose red city . . . stone by stone . . . stone by stone . . . until its towers swept the sky.



## 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.

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[The end of *The Rose Red City* by Beatrice Redpath]