

ROSE AND ROSE

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Rose and Rose by E. V. Lucas

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E. V. LUCAS

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BY

E. V. LUCAS

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ROSE AND ROSE

FIFTY years ago, when I was a young medical student, I was in the habit of spending as many week-ends as possible at home with my father, to whose practice I was one day to succeed.

On a certain Saturday the only other occupants of the railway compartment were an artist and his wife. I knew him to be an artist from certain scraps of his conversation that I overheard, but I should have guessed it also on the evidence of his hands and dress. I don't mean that he wore a black velvet tam-o'-shanter and trousers tight at the ankles, as in plays; but his hands were eloquent, and there was a general careless ease about his tweeds that suggested the antipodes of any commercial or anxious calling.

After a while he turned to me and asked if I knew the town of Lowcester.

I said that I had lived in the neighbourhood—at Bullingham, five miles away—all my life.

"We are going to spend a few days at the Crown at Lowcester," he said, "looking about to try and find a house."

"There's a very good house at Bullingham," I said: "just empty. Jolly garden too. As a matter of fact it adjoins ours. My father's the doctor."

"Next door to the doctor," said the lady, speaking now for the first time. "That would be a great convenience."

One result of this chance meeting was that they took the house and we became friends; another was the general shaping of my life; and a third is this narrative, the fruit of an old man's egoism and leisure.

I don't put my own case as an example to the medical profession, but you can't deny there is a kind of fitness in it: it is surely more proper than not that the doctor who presides at the birth of a child should continue to take an interest in that child throughout its life. Being born is, after all, something of an event, and he who assists in that adventure and helps to introduce a new soul (not to mention a new body) to this already overcrowded and over-complicated planet of ours, ought to be counted as something a little more important than a jobbing gardener, say, or any other useful ally that the householder calls in. For no matter how mechanical his services, he is also an instrument of destiny.

None the less, if accoucheurs were expected to

follow the fortunes of every new arrival from the cradle to the grave one of two things would happen : either the medical profession would disappear for want of recruits, or home life (with the addition of the semi-parental doctor intervening between father and mother) would become more difficult than it already is. Perhaps then it is as well that the man-with-the-black-bag remains the piano-tuner that he more or less appears to be. But I shall continue to believe that so tremendous an affair as a birth should carry more fatefulness with it ; although for the well-being of patients I can see that it is better that doctors should be machines rather than sympathetic temperaments. Good Heavens ! if we were not so mechanical into what sentimental morasses should we land ourselves !

All this, however, is more or less irrelevant and too much concerned with myself. But you will find that preoccupation, I fear, throughout this story, such as it is. I commenced author, you see, at a time of life when it is not easy to keep to the point or exclude garrulity. When one does not take to writing until one is over seventy—I shall be seventy-one this year, 1920—readers must expect a certain want of business-like adroitness. Had you known me in the days when I was in practice, before I was established on the shelf, you would have found me, I hope, direct and forcible and relevant enough. The stethoscope was mightier than the pen.

Still, there is more relevance than perhaps you would think, for I am coming to a case where the doctor and the newly-born established an intimacy that was destined to grow and to endure through life. For, as it chanced, my father died very soon after I was qualified, and when our new neighbours, the Allinsons, became parents, it was I who was called in to assist. I was then twenty-seven. Circumstances of personal friendship and contiguity alone might have promoted a closer association than is customary between the babe and the intermediary; but the controlling factors were the death of the mother, after which many of the decisions which a mother would have to make devolved on me; and Rose's delicate little body, which caused her during her early years to need fairly constant watching. The result was that until a certain unexpected event happened she moved about almost exclusively between her father's house and mine, and was equally at home in both. But even with such a beginning it never crossed my mind that the strands of our fate were to be so interwoven.

Rose's father was a landscape painter of rather more than independent means: sufficient at any rate to make it possible for him to seek loveliness in no matter how distant a land. He had sketches which he had made all over Europe, in Morocco,