

Their Child

BY
ROBERT HERRICK



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MR. ROBERT HERRICK, the author of "The Gospel of Freedom," "The Web of Life," and "The Real World," was born in Cambridge, Mass., April 26, 1868. His father was a lawyer, practising in Boston. His people on both sides were of New England stock, the Herricks running back in New England to 1632, and the Emerys, Mannings, Hales, and Peabodys, with whom among others his genealogy is connected, having much the same history. Mr. Herrick was educated at the Cambridge public schools, and at Harvard University, graduating in 1890. His freshman year and part of his sophomore year were spent in travelling in the West Indies, Mexico, California, Alaska, and other regions, in company with his classmate, Philip Stanley Abbot. While in college Mr. Herrick paid special attention to English studies, attending courses of lectures delivered by the late Professor Child, Professor James, and Professor Barrett Wendell, among others.

For a year he was one of the editors of the *Harvard Advocate*, and contributed several stories to that magazine. Later he was editor of the *Harvard Monthly*—the purely literary magazine of the University,—contributing frequently to its pages. One of his fellow-editors was Norman Hapgood, the author of "Abraham Lincoln: the Man of the People," and "George Washington."

After graduation Mr. Herrick began to teach English at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, under Professor George R. Carpenter (now of Columbia University), and continued to correct themes and to give an occasional course in literature until 1893, when he resigned his position in Boston to accept

an instructorship in English at the University of Chicago. In 1895 he was appointed Assistant Professor of Rhetoric in the University, and he has since taught chiefly Rhetoric and English Composition.

The summer of 1892 he spent in England and on the Continent. In 1895 he went abroad for fifteen months, for rest and literary work, living in Paris and Florence during most of the period. While in Europe he wrote the first draft of "The Man Who Wins," which was published two years later; also the first form of "The Gospel of Freedom," and various short stories, which were first published in the magazines and afterward reprinted in "Literary Love Letters and Other Stories," and in "Love's Dilemmas." In addition to his writing in the line of fiction, Mr. Herrick has done a great deal of work on more or less professional topics. Magazine articles about methods of teaching rhetoric, introductions and notes for school editions of classics, one or two text-books on rhetoric,—these items give an idea of the sort of work which has occupied Mr. Herrick's attention apart from fiction. He is one of the few modern American writers who have the courage and the strength to paint life exactly as they see it,—in its joy, its beauty, its sombreness, and its sorrow alike,—without making it seem happier or nearer the ideal than it is.

THEIR CHILD



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I

THERE he comes with Dora! I am so glad. I wanted you to see him so much—all of you.”

The company gathered in the drawing-room smiled sympathetically at the mother’s pride. They craned their necks about the window to get sight of the small boy. He was a white speck in the long green lawn.

“Comes rather reluctantly,” observed Dr. Vessinger, with a touch of irony. “Doesn’t seem to have his mother’s taste for society!”

“The little dear! How cunning! A perfect dear!” the women exclaimed with more or less animation.

“Why, he is in such a temper! Little Oscar! What is the matter with little Oscar?”

The child’s screams could be heard plainly, coming upward from the lawn, in shrill bursts of infantile passion. Mrs.

Simmons was troubled with a mother's confusion and distress. The nurse was holding little Oscar at arm's length, for safety, while the child circled about her, kicking and thrusting with legs and arms. Mrs. Simmons stepped through the open window to the terrace and called:

"Oscar! Oscar!" But neither nurse nor child paid any attention to her.

"He is occupied with a greater passion," the doctor laughed.

"Unconscious little animals, children," observed one of the women.

"He has temperament—"

"His mother's?" another woman suggested slyly. She was large, very blonde, very well preserved, and was known by her intimates as "the Magnificent Wreck."

The shrill cries penetrated at last even the room beyond the large drawing-room where the people were gathered, and aroused the father, who had been called on a matter of business into the study. He stepped briskly into the room,—a handsome man of forty, with black curling hair and crisp black beard cut to a point. His cheek-bones were high, and the skin of his upper face was ruddy, as from much living in the open air.

"What is the matter with the boy?" he demanded abruptly.

"Just a case of 'I don't want to,'" observed Dr. Vessinger. "When we are young and feel that way, we let the world know it all of a sudden."

“And when we are grown,” joined in the large, blonde woman, smiling at the doctor, “we say nothing, but do as we like.”

“If we can,” added a young woman, with nervous anxiety to be in the conversation.

Mrs. Simmons had disappeared through the French window that opened to the terrace. Her husband followed, and the others lounged, after bandying words on the occasion. They could see below them on the slope of the lawn the young mother, the nurse, the child.

“Why, Dora! What is the matter?” they could hear her say. “Oscar, be still. Be quiet and come to me.”

She must have spoken reprovingly to the nurse, for next came in injured Irish tones:

“What have *I* done, mum? The boy was pounding the breath of life out of the Vance child. I could not keep his fists from his face. What have I done? Indeed!”

“There, don’t answer any more. Take Oscar to the nursery, and wash his face, and bring him down. I want these ladies and gentlemen to see him.”

Little Oscar, who had much the same coloring and shape of head as his father, listened quietly while his mother spoke to the nurse. When she had finished and Dora tugged at his hand, he shouted:

“I won’t! Do you hear? I won’t! Don’t you touch me! I say, don’t you touch me!”

He enunciated with great distinctness, with mature deliberation. When the nurse tried to take his arm, she received a well-aimed blow in the pit of her stomach, delivered with all the vigor of a lusty five years.

“Oscar! Why, my little man!” the mother exclaimed helplessly.

Mr. Simmons, who had been watching the group, vaulted over the terrace wall and strode rapidly down the slope. Little Oscar, at the apparition of his long-legged father, turned and fled around the wing of the house. His nurse followed grumblingly.

“Bravo!” exclaimed Dr. Vessinger, satirically. “Young Hercules needs the chastening hand of his sire.”

“We shall have to call *you* in, I guess, Vessinger, if the kid’s temper gets worse. It’s too much for his mother now, and he is only afraid of me because I am home so little he doesn’t exactly realize I am his father. When he does, he will be boxing *me*.”

“Yes,” sighed Mrs. Simmons, red with annoyance. “It has come all of a sudden, too. He was so gentle as a baby, so sweet. I think it must be the nurse, Dora.”

The company looked sympathetic, and she continued apologetically: “She is a good woman, but she is so tactless. She doesn’t know how to manage the little fellow. She should appeal to his reason, I think.”

“It is sometimes difficult to get a quiet hearing,” observed the doctor.

“Tiresome creatures, nurses,” the Magnificent Wreck added sympathetically. “I can remember how I hated *mine*.”

“Can you?” the younger woman put in inadvertently, as though called upon to applaud a triumph of memory.

“But what a beautiful child!” exclaimed the Magnificent one, declining issue with the other. “So like his father, as he stood there, his head thrown back. When he whirled past us just now, there was the gleam of the Viking in his eyes!”

“Yes, all he needed was a carving-knife to be a first-class pirate,” Vessinger added lightly.

The father laughed, but not heartily; and Vessinger, feeling the topic exhausted, turned to his blonde neighbor:

“Mrs. Bellflower, there are real clouds in the sky out there. What do you think of our chances with the rain?”

“You mustn’t go!” their host and hostess protested. Mrs. Simmons added in an undertone: “I wonder if it *could* be the thunder-storm that upset poor little Oscar so completely? Thunder affects me, always.”

Dr. Vessinger was at her elbow to say good-by.

“It is charming to find you again,” he said, taking her hand and looking boldly into her face. “To find you in this—this splendid scene, with your charming child and your husband. You are looking so young that, if it were not for us others, I might shut my eyes and believe I was in Sicily!”

He spoke deliberately, as though he wished to give two meanings to every word he uttered. The young woman’s color changed, and her hands played with the leaves of a book she had taken at random from the table.

“You must come again, often—I want to see you,” she said abruptly, looking at him honestly. “I know you have done some things since that time, and I am glad of it!”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, come! This is nonsense. You aren’t going to slip away on any such easy excuse as that,” burst in Simmons. “See, your storm is passing around. And if it comes, what could be finer than a gallop back in the clear air after the rain has washed the dirt out? It will lay the dust, too.”

“No, no!” delivered Mrs. Bellflower. “We don’t want to go yet, doctor. Maybe we can stay to dinner if it rains. Let’s go out to the terrace.”

They stepped out of the open windows to the broad brick terrace that completed the east side of the house. Beneath them in the distance, to the eastward, lay the great city, and beyond they knew there was the sea. Over the lofty chimneys and massy ramparts of houses lowered the storm, which was spreading in two forks about the horizon. Slowly it was climbing up the dome of the sky toward them. An edging of gold fired the black mass from time to time.

“Grand place you have here, Simmons,” Dr. Vessinger observed. “The top of a hill not too high,—that’s the right place for a country house.”

“If Olaf were only here oftener,” the wife remarked. “He’s just come home, and he says he must leave soon again.”

“Yes, those Jews I work for, the Techheimer Brothers, mean that I shall earn my salary. They are dickering for some new mines in Mexico, and want me to look them over.”

“But you are promised to me for the tenth,” Mrs. Bellflower protested.

“What are the Techheimers to that?” commented the doctor.

“Nothing! I shall put them off until the eleventh,” Simmons responded heartily. “It’s going to be a fierce jaunt, and I am not keen to start.”

“Take us! We would all go, wouldn’t we, Mrs. Simmons?” the younger woman put in.

“I am afraid the hotels wouldn’t please you down there. And queer things happen sometimes. The last time I was there—it was ticklish. I never wanted to go back. You wouldn’t have liked it, not you women.”

“Tell it! Tell us!” they chorused. Vessinger lit a cigarette and resigned himself to watching the assembling clouds. Imperceptibly he drew away from the group, as if declining to be one where he was not first.

“I *adore* adventures!” the Magnificent Wreck added sentimentally, encouragingly. Simmons folded his arms across his breast. His eyes flashed pleasantly. The story interested him, too:—

“Well, it was in ’91, for the Techheimer Brothers. One of the first jobs I did for them. They wired me from St. Louis that a certain old Don from whom I had bought several car-loads of

ore, which had been forwarded to their smelter, had done us very prettily. He had salted his cars very cleverly. The ore ran short of the assay by several thousand dollars, all told. I had made the assay—you understand?

“It was my duty to take the three days’ journey from the City of Mexico to Don Herara’s headquarters in the little town of Los Puertos, see the old rascal, and without having a quarrel, induce him to refund the money he had cheated us out of.

“Los Puertos is almost the loneliest spot I ever got into, for a town. It is at the end of a two days’ stage-ride from the railroad. It is hell! Just peons, a great adobe barracks where my old thief lived, a swift river rushing down from the mountains behind the town—nothing more.

“You should have seen us the afternoon of my arrival, sitting in the old Don’s office, drinking *petits verres* and swapping compliments. ‘Your honorable excellency,’ said I; ‘Your noble courtesy,’ said he. And so on. The Don had white hair, a hawk nose, brown eyes, that had slunk deep under his brows, and the long white beard of a patriarch. He was a most respectable sinner!

“Every time some one stepped across the room above I wanted to jump. I thought he must have a dozen or so of his peons hidden up there to slice me with their great *machetes* when he gave the signal. As the afternoon grew mellow, I began to suggest in ten-foot sentences that some rascally servant of his honorable right-mindedness had been deceiving his grace, and had caused my poor masters the loss of some thousands of dollars, the loss of which was nothing to them compared with

the sorrow they felt that his honorable good name was thus sullied by an unworthy servant.

“My old Don gulped my compliments without a wink: he had known what I was after all along, of course. When I had turned the corner of the last Spanish sentence, he nodded at me pleasantly, but his brows were stretched like catgut. He cleared his throat and spat, and I seemed to hear all sorts of things going on over my head. That little room was the loneliest place on the earth just then.”

“Had you a pistol?” broke in Mrs. Bellflower, breathlessly.

“I carefully left that behind me in the City of Mexico. For if it should come to that, it would only have complicated matters. I rarely travel with a revolver.”

Mrs. Bellflower regretted this lack of picturesqueness.

“Well, my Don looked at me for a few minutes. Then he said, ‘Shall we enjoy the cool of the evening in a gentle stroll?’ We went out on the stony trail up toward the black mountains. They looked cold and bare.

“‘Los Puertos,’ he remarked philosophically, ‘is a very small place. It is very far away from your home, Señor Simmons.’ ‘I have been in places farther away, sir, and got back, too.’ ‘I own it all, Señor Americano; every soul of these people is mine.’ ‘So,’ I answered, as stiff for the boast as he, ‘the Techheimers are great people.’ And I blew a lot about my bosses, how they watched their men and took an eye for an eye, every time. Finally, we turned back toward the town and came through a patch of cactus to the river, which was brawling along over big

stones. There was a narrow foot-bridge across. 'After you,' says the Don. I looked him in the eye, and thought I saw the twinkle of mischief.

"I never wanted to do murder before or since. But there in the dusk, beside that dirty river of mud and stones from the mountains, where he meant to drown me, I came near wringing his neck. I guess my nerves had got tired of expecting things to happen. I walked up to him, and I must have looked fierce, for he whistled, and one or two men who were skulking about joined us. I was so mad that a moment more and I should have had my hands about his windpipe, no matter whether they cut me into mince-meat the next minute. Do you know what it is to feel like doing murder? It's the drunkest kind of feeling you can have—you don't know yourself at all—"

"I should like to try that!" sighed Mrs. Bellflower.

At this point there seemed to come somewhere from the rooms above a frightened cry.

"Mercy!" exclaimed the young woman, "what's that?"

Mrs. Simmons sprang up, and stood listening. Then they could all hear distinctly in a woman's voice:

"Oh, oh! He has killed me! Oh, oh!" Then silence.

Before the last groans reached their ears Mrs. Simmons had darted into the dark drawing-room, calling as she sped, "Oscar! my little Oscar!"

On the terrace they could hear again more faintly the "Oh, oh, oh!" from above.

“And what *did* happen to your old Don?” Mrs. Bellflower asked with a show of unconcern.

“Why, nothing much. I—”

“Oh, Olaf! Come, Olaf!”

It was Mrs. Simmons’s voice this time. Simmons bounded from the terrace, calling:

“Yes, Evelyn! Coming, Evelyn!”

The others jumped from their chairs.

“Come, Dr. Vessinger!” exclaimed the Magnificent Wreck. “I think it is time you and I and Miss Flower were gone. Where are the horses?”

“Do you think we should leave quite yet?” the doctor asked, somewhat cynically. “It seems to me the story has just begun.”

“Well, you may stay for the end. But I am going!”



II

SIMMONS stumbled across the hall and up the dark staircase. The coming storm had suddenly blackened all the house. The open doors of the bedrooms sucked out the swaying air that came in puffs from the windows. In the eastern room, above the terrace where they had been sitting, Simmons found his wife, clasping their child in a hysterical embrace.

“What have you done? My darling—my one—my Oscar!” A dry sob ended the broken exclamations.

They were huddled in a heap upon the floor beside the window. The child’s face had a look of intense wonder, of concentrated thought upon some difficult idea which eluded his baby mind. Across the iron cot at one side of the room was stretched the inert form of the nurse.

“Look at her, Olaf,” said Mrs. Simmons. “He has—cut her—stabbed her with the knife.”

As Simmons approached the bed, he kicked something with his foot. It fell upon the tiled fireplace with the tinkle of steel. The woman on the bed groaned. Simmons turned on the electric light, and hastily examined the nurse.

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