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## THE SON \*

*Horacio Quiroga*

(URUGUAY)

Translated by Rachel Loughridge

**I**N MISIONES it is a powerful summer day, with all the sun, the heat, and the calm which the season can provide. Nature, quite unrestrained, is satisfied with herself.

Like the sun, the heat, and the surrounding calm, the father opens his heart to Nature.

"Be careful, Child," he says to his son, shortening into that one sentence all pertinent observations, as his son understands perfectly.

"Yes, Father," answers the child, picking up his gun and filling the pockets of his shirt with cartridges, buttoning them tightly afterwards.

"Be back by lunch time," adds his father.

"Yes, Father," answers the boy again.

He balances the gun on his arm, smiles at his father, kisses him on the forehead, and leaves.

For a moment the father follows him with his eyes; then he returns to his work for the day, thinking happily of his son's joy. He knows that his son, educated from his earliest years in the habit of precautions against danger, can handle a gun and hunt anything. Although he is very tall, he is only thirteen years old. And if one were to judge by the innocence of his blue eyes, still glowing with childlike surprise, the boy might seem even younger. The father does not need to raise his eyes from his work to follow in his mind his son's course. He has already crossed the red rocks and is walking straight toward the mountain through the valley covered with espartillo grass.

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To hunt in the mountain, that is, for big game, requires more patience than his young son has. After crossing that island between mountains, his son will follow the border of cactus as far as the marsh, in search of doves, toucans, or a pair of herons, like those his friend Juan came upon a few days ago.

Only now does the outline of a smile appear on the father's face at the memory of the two boys' passion for hunting. Sometimes they find only a *yacútoro* or a *surucudá*, or even less, and return triumphantly, Juan to his ranch with the 9-millimeter gun which he himself has given him, and his own son back to the prairie, with the large 16-caliber Saint-Etienne.

He had been the same. At thirteen he would have given his life to own a gun. His son, at the same age, now owns one, and his father smiles. Nevertheless, it is not easy for a father, a widower, with no hope or faith except in his son's life, to rear a child as he has reared his, free within his small radius of action, sure of his own little feet and hands since he was four years old, conscious of the immensity of certain dangers and of the inadequacy of his own strength.

The father must have struggled hard against what he considers his own selfishness. It is so easy for a child to calculate wrongly, to step with one foot out into space, and then a son is lost!

Danger always exists for man at any age, but its threat is lessened if from his childhood he is trained to rely only on his own strength. In such a way has this father reared his son. And to do so, he has had to fight not only against his heart, but against his mental tortures, because that father, with stomach and eyesight both weakened, has been suffering for some time from hallucinations.

He has seen, reduced to the most painful illusion, memories of a happiness which would never again rise from the nothingness into which it had disappeared. The image of his own son has not escaped this torture. Once he saw him fall down streaming with blood when the boy touched a bullet in the workroom, although in reality the boy was filing the buckle of his hunting belt. Horrible things. . . . But today in the glowing vitality of the summer day, from which the son seems to have inherited love, the father feels happy, tranquil, and certain of the future.

At that same moment, not very far away, there sounds a gun. "The Saint-Etienne," thinks the father, recognizing the explosion. "Two doves less in the mountains."

Without paying more attention to the slight incident, the man loses himself again in his work. The sun, already high, keeps climbing. Wherever one looks, stones, earth, trees, the air, rarefied as if in an oven, are vibrating with heat. A deep humming which fills the entire being and saturates the surroundings as far as sight can reach, at that hour encloses all tropical life. The father glances at his wrist . . . twelve o'clock! He raises his eyes toward the mountain. His son should be back now. The father with silvering temples and the boy thirteen years old have never been deceived in the mutual confidence they have in each other. When the son replies, "Yes, Father," he will do what he says. He said that he would return by twelve, and the father smiled as he watched him leave. And he has not returned.

The man turns again to his work, forcing himself to concentrate on his task. It is so easy, so easy to lose all sense of time in the mountains, and to sit down on the ground a moment to rest without moving. . . . Suddenly, the noonday light, the tropical humming, and the father's heart stop at what he has just thought: his son resting without moving! Time has passed; it is now twelve-thirty. The father goes out of his workroom and as he leans his hand on the machine bench, there rises from the depths of his memory the report of a bullet, and at once for the first time in the three hours just passed, he thinks that since the explosion of the Saint-Etienne he has heard nothing more. He has not heard the pebbles on the path rolling beneath a familiar footstep. His son has not returned, and Nature is stopped at the edge of the woods, waiting for him.

Oh! A temperate character and a blind confidence in a son's education are not enough to drive away the specter of fate which a father with bad eyesight sees rising from the edge of the mountain. Heedlessness, forgetfulness, an unexpected happening, none of these slight motives which might delay the arrival of his son finds any room in his heart.

One shot, only one shot has sounded, and that a long time ago. Since then the father has not heard a noise, he has not seen a bird, and not one person has crossed the valley of espartillo grass to tell him that while climbing a barbed wire fence, a great misfortune. . . .

His head high and without his machete, the father goes out. He cuts across the valley of espartillo grass, goes into the mountains, follows the border of cactus without finding the slightest trace of his son. But Nature remains unmoving. And when the father has followed the

familiar hunting paths and has explored the marsh in vain, he is overwhelmed by the certainty that each step forward bears him, fatally and inexorably, to the body of his dead son.

Not a reproach for himself, the unhappy man! Only cold reality, terrible and complete! His son has died while climbing. . . .

But where? In what spot? There is so much barbed wire and the mountain is so treacherous! Very treacherous! Not quite careful enough while climbing the wires with the gun in his hand. . . .

The father stifles a scream. He has seen rising in the air . . . not his son, Oh no! . . . And he turns in another direction, and another, and another. . . .

Nothing would be gained by seeing the color of his skin and the anguish in his eyes. That man has not yet called his son. Although his heart calls for him with shouts, his mouth remains silent. He well knows that the mere act of pronouncing his name, of calling him aloud, will be to admit his death.

"My child!" suddenly escapes him. And if the voice of a strong man is capable of weeping, let us close our eyes in pity before the anguish crying in that voice.

No one, nothing has answered. Over the rocks red in the sun, the father, looking ten years older, goes searching for his son who has just died.

"My son! My little one!" he cries with a love that rises from the depths of his being.

Once before, in the midst of happiness and peace, that father suffered from the vision of his son falling, his forehead torn open by a bullet. Now in every shady corner of the woods he sees gleaming points of wire, and at the foot of a post, with his discharged gun lying at his side, he sees his . . . .

"Little one! My son!"

The strength which could hand a poor deluded father over to the most frightful nightmare must also come to an end. And our father feels that his strength is leaving him when he sees his son coming from around a side path.

A boy of thirteen years needs only to see his father, fifty yards away, in the mountain without his machete, to hasten toward him and to feel his eyes growing wet.

"Little one!" murmurs the man. And exhausted he drops on the white sand, throwing his arms around his son's knees. The boy, thus

clasped, remains standing, and as he understands his father's grief, he slowly caresses his head: "Poor father!"

The time has passed. It will soon be three o'clock. Together now, father and son begin their return to the house.

"How does it happen that you did not look at the sun to know what time it was?" asks the father.

"I did look, Father. . . . But as I was about to come back, I saw Juan's herons and followed them."

"What you have made me go through, Son! . . ."

"Poor papa!" murmurs the boy.

After a long silence, "And the herons, you killed them?" asked the father.

"No. . . ."

A slight detail after all. Beneath the burning sky and air, through the open valley of espartillo grass, the man returns home with his son, about whose shoulders, nearly the height of his own, the father rests his happy arm. He goes home drenched with sweat, and although battered in body and soul, he smiles with happiness.

His smile of happiness is an hallucination. . . . For that father is going alone. He has met no one and his arm rests on emptiness. Behind him, at the foot of a post, with his legs in the air, caught in the barbed wire, his beloved son lies in the sunlight, dead since ten o'clock in the morning.

#### NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

The Uruguayan, Horacio Quiroga, outstanding among short story writers of Spanish America, spent several years in Misiones, sparsely settled province of northeastern Argentina, bordering the Chaco area. He was happiest when living in this region of solitude, of lush growth and exotic jungle life, and used it as the locale of many of his best stories. Notable among these are the various stories which present the peon, the foreigner, the adventurer, and other types as Quiroga observed them in Misiones, and the charming stories for children, of equal interest to adults, translated into English under the title *Tales from a South American Jungle*.

The abnormal and the troubled mental condition attracted Quiroga, as they had Edgar Allan Poe, an author he greatly admired. Quiroga's own life was troubled by tragic accidents and suicides among the members of his family, and in 1937 he too committed suicide.

His numerous short stories (he was almost entirely unsuccessful in other literary forms) have been published in several volumes by Claudio García in Montevideo. More recently a selected edition with a biographical account, selection and biography both by John A. Crow, was published in Mexico City. Unfortunately, aside from the collection of children's stories, a bare half-dozen of Quiroga's stories have appeared in English translation.—Rachel Loughridge.