



THE REIGN OF ERIC THE TERRIBLE

BY HIS MOTHER, ROLLIE HOCHSTEIN

I'M not altogether an unnatural mother. I agree with the others that it's sad to see the children growing up. It seems only a minute or so ago that my Eric was crawling and all I had to do was keep knives, poisons, and the dog's dinner off the floor.

But Eric will never see two again, and two-and-a-half-year-olds abound in traits that make a mother nostalgic about the good old days when mush in jars, djsapers in droves, and an occasional dunk in the kitchen sink were baby's only needs. In my one or two idle moments a week I rock and reminisce on the time when I was allowed free run of my household. Now I've got a severest critic who isn't my friend at all. He's all motion and a yard long and he doesn't like the way I do anything.

Today, for a recent example, Eric and I had a fight over breakfast. Around here in the mornings, we have our own version of Shock Theater—me. I was blindly and painfully leaning on the stove, stirring up a mess of pottage when Esau—I mean Eric—hurtled in. The boy has no sympathy with my morning sickness (not pregnancy, just torpor) and he trebled. "What are you making—hot cereal? I don't want that cereal. I want that cereal."

"Please stop talking, Eric," I groaned. "Mommy isn't up yet. Go iron the rug till breakfast." He pulled up a chair and climbed into the cupboard.

"I want this cereal," he said, snowing a blanket of cornflakes over the floor.

My blood wasn't too tired to boil and I got him down from there fast. He threw himself on the linoleum, rolled around in

the crumbs and shrieked for cornflakes till I put his hot cereal on the table and he rushed over, ate it up and clamored for more. When he was one and speechless, we had no arguments about the menu. He simply spat out what he didn't want and that—with a few wipes here and there—was that. Nowadays, I have to cover everything up with twice its weight in sugar and butter so he won't find out what it really tastes like.

WHAT bothers me most about arguments with Eric is that he always wins. If I end it all with a forehead to the fanny his tear-brimmed eyes make it clear that I could teach Madame de Farge a thing or two about cold blood. If I reason with him, he reasons with me and I lose out to his superior logic. I'm still on edge from yesterday's stunning defeat:

Eric: "May I go downtown with grandma?"

Mommy: "She said she'd take you on Saturday."

Eric: "I wanna go now."

Mommy: "Saturday won't be here for two more days."

Eric: "No, today is Saturday. Today is Saturday, Mommy."

Mommy (glancing uncertainly at a calendar): "Today is Thursday."

Eric: "Why?"

You figure it out. I just told him to go paint some pictures on the wall.

All the best baby books refer to the "terrible twos." They tell you to channel the terror's energy into constructive occupations. I try. But it calls for top level creative thinking and I'm seldom up to it. Let him plan his own activities and take his punishment like a man.

Sometimes, say for five minutes after I get back from a day downtown, I'm full of patience and good will toward Eric. The rest of the time I prefer to go my way while he goes his—till he dismantles the hi-fi or throws his baby sister's overalls into the washing machine while she's wearing them. And then I go his way—hard. Eric himself is anti-corporal punishment. He's taken to asking me in crises: "May I stand in the corner, Mommy?"

Never mind the corner, buddy. I want satisfaction.

It isn't even safe to entertain with a two-plus terror in the house. First thing you know, he's grabbed star billing. Like at my midnight supper party. I throw an elegant party once an era and this was it. So naturally I'd asked the most distinguished people we knew: my husband's boss, a couple from the city, our income tax analyst, and others also. We were just sitting down to seafood a la chafing dish when Eric toddled into our candle-lit midst, naked from the waist down, to announce: "I maked two big wee-wees, eddy-body! Wanna see?"

One guest was editor of a baby magazine to whom I had just described my gentle approach to child care: "We plant the seed, give it plenty of room to grow in, and then just let it grow." So I had to go along. A blossoming Eric danced us a few cha-chas, gave a song recital with toy guitar accompaniment, ate a man-sized portion (mine) of seafood melange and was about to play the piano when I pulled him up by his roots and dragged him, screaming, back to his bedroom. After all, a garden needs weeding.

So that's the mother business. You can't please everybody. Excuse me—I mean you can't please anybody. I vowed, for instance, that my children would never worship at the feet of the

TV set, ruining their eyes and atrophying their muscles. Well, they don't. They sit halfway across the room ruining their eyes and atrophying their muscles. I still don't approve of this vicarious living, but it's those hours of spectating that stand between me and a participating membership in a psychopathic ward.

Kate, lacking seniority, watches anything Eric turns on. Eric, lacking taste, favors a program (which he calls "children dancing") called Something-Or-Other-Bandstand, a disc jockey show featuring scores of juveniles pouncing on one another

in time to such cacophonies as "Rock that Conga," "Lucky Lady-bug" and "Bim Bom Bay," presided over by a young man named Dick Clark. Dick Clark is Eric's hero.

One day my father called up while "children dancing" was on, and Eric spun pitifully between the two magnets. After yo-yoing for a few seconds, he walked resolutely to the screen and said: "Excuse me, Mr. Clark. I have to talk to my grandpa."

The child has never shown me such consideration. But I take it as a sign that he's growing up, and maybe that's not so bad. Soon I can start pushing for an early marriage. Say, at four-and-a-half.

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