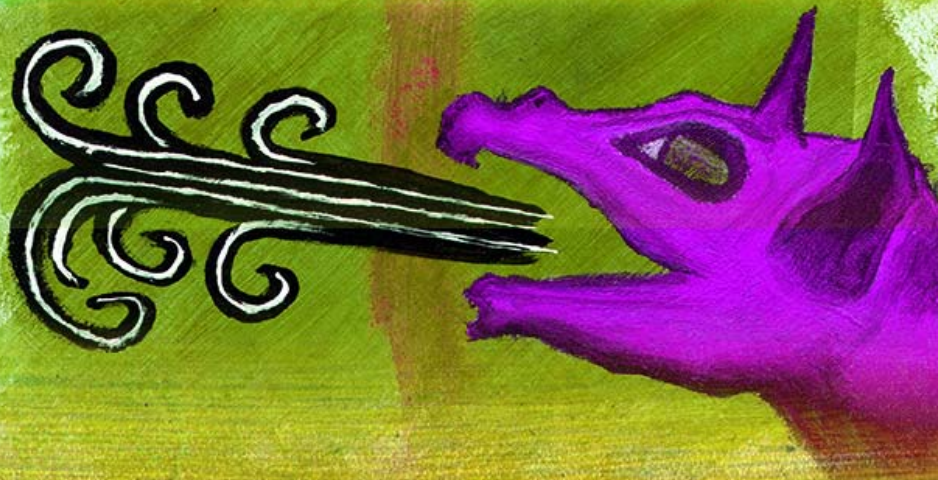




The Country of God

Part II



by A. A. A. Hartvisen

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Cover art by A. A. A. Hartvisen

Genre: Fiction—Religion/Faith/Family.

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Burns, Oregon

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The Country of God, Part I

The Country of God

Part II

Prester Malasar came to visit Misael's community four months ago. He was a specially trained proselyte, or *prester*, of the Quasifactorians. He was only eighteen years old, which was remarkable, since most presters did not complete their training until the age of twenty-five or later. Church members insisted on referring to themselves as *Quasifactorians* and to the church generally as *the Quasifactorian Free Ministry* or, casually, *Q. F. M.* Outsiders called them simply *Quazzies*, or worse. This in turn provoked an over-precise pronunciation of the word by members; in particular, a careful pronunciation of the first two syllables as quā-zī.

Up until recently, the sect was considered nothing more than a borderline cult,

gobbling up the handfuls of malcontents that formed naturally on the cool, outer surfaces of more conservative faiths. They were vaguely Christian, although there were rumours of Jewish, Muslim, and even Newage Quazzie churches existing in areas where those religions dominated, but the sources of these rumours were heavily biassed against the church to begin with. Many depreciating tales about the church were told by those malcontents that even the Quasifactorian Free Ministry was unable to placate—disgruntled ex-Quazzies.

The primary purpose of Malasar's visit to Misael's community was the conversion of sinners. Already, a significant segment of the population were members of the Quasifactorian Free Ministry. And so Malasar was sent out among those who had already rejected the counsel of their Quasifactorian neighbours.

Malasar roomed with the patriarch's family at night and attended services at the patriarch's church on the Sabbath, but the rest of the time he spent wandering around the area, speaking to sinners. That was how he first met Misael. Misael was out helping his father in the field when Malasar wandered up.

Balaam wasted no time on the evangelist but told him at once to go draw a different sheep from the ditch. Pleasantly, Malasar turned and went. And so the next time that Misael came across the proselyte, Prester Malasar was not as strange as he might have been had they not met, however briefly, in the field, before.

Misael sneaked down to the river while his mother was at a Bible meeting. He was sitting on a rock, bathing his feet in the water, when Malasar walked up out of the

trees.

“Howdy,” said the prester.

“Hey,” said the boy. “What’s up?”

Misael could not help being a little curious about this spokesman for the strange sect his father characterised as “devil-worshippers”.

“I just come out for a little peace and quiet,” said Malasar. “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“It’s okay,” said Misael. “I don’t come here much.”

“If you’ll excuse me a moment, Misael, I need to consult with the Lord.”

Malasar held up a bible.

“I’ll only be a moment,” he said.

Misael expected the proselyte to consult a relevant bible verse, but instead Malasar did one of the strangest things Misael ever saw. Prester Malasar knelt down on the ground before a midsize round rock that projected a little bit out of the ground. He laid the book carefully down on the stone, and squared it up so that it rested perpendicular to the direction in which he faced. Then he placed his hands together and stared silently at the book.

The prester’s manner was reverent and hopeful. It was as though he expected the book to sit up and speak. The character of his action was such that Misael would have seen nothing odd in Malasar addressing the book directly and asking his question. But Malasar kept silent. After about half a minute, he shut his eyes.

A strange feeling came slowly over the boy as he watched the prester's prayer. He felt strangely comfortable and unhurried, as if he would be glad to sit here and watch the kneeling man until he fell dead from exhaustion. He was even a little euphoric after a minute. And somehow these strange feelings provoked a sort of compensatory uneasiness from within. And so he felt peaceful and restless at the same time, carelessly at conflict with himself. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. It was creepy. The prester opened his eyes, regarded the book lovingly for a moment, picked it up, and stood.

The strange feelings dissipated quickly as the situation became more normal.

"What's the matter, Misael? My Askin' didn't upset you, did it?"

"No, Sir," said Misael. "I just never seen prayin' like that. It made me feel kind of strange."

"What you were feelin', Misael, was the spirit of God, answerin' my question."

"But it was the way you put the book before you, Sir, that struck me funny. I've seen people read the Book for guidance, but you never opened it."

"That's right, Misael, I didn't."

Idolatry! Misael's father's voice cried out in his mind. Along with the various biblical tales of idolatry, Misael knew from his father of the modern-day idolaters. The Papists of course were foremost among these, but the Quasifactorians were also mentioned.

"The Bible, Misael," Balaam said. "Is an imperfect account of the mysteries of

faith. God gave the prophets perfect knowledge, which they wrote down in Holy Scriptures, but the sins of man have corrupted the Word of God. And that, Misael, is why we now must muddle through fifteen thousand defective translations of the Bible.

“The Quasifactorians,” Balaam continued. “Foolishly deny this reality and instead worship this fruit of human sin, this impediment to perfect knowledge. It is their golden calf, and they pray to it just as you, Misael, pray to the Creator!”

And, now Misael himself was witness to the Quasifactorian idolatry and found himself in the presence of one of their apostles.

“How do you know my name?” Misael asked the prester.

Malasar rubbed the dust from his bible and answered.

“Why, you’d been pointed out by the patriarch,” he said.

Why me? thought Misael.

The prester went on.

“He has taken notice of you, Misael. ‘It’s very unfitting,’ he said to me. ‘That a lad like Misael should stand outside the flock. A youth of such character and intelligence should not have to remain lost in moral confusion.’”

“I’m not lost!” said Misael, forcing a quick chuckle from his chest.

Malasar did not acknowledge Misael’s answer, but instead scrutinised his bible, apparently dissatisfied by a stubborn spot which would not be so easily brushed off. He dug out his handkerchief, moistened it with spit, and worked at the spot vigorously. He grimaced as he gave it two more quick strokes, then put his handkerchief back in

his pocket and returned his attention to Misael.

“Anyway, Misael, it was nice to meet you directly,” said Malasar, holding out his hand.

Misael took it and shook. *What’s it like to shake hands with an idolater?* he asked himself. Prester Malasar turned away and went off through the trees.

“Bye!” said Misael after him.

The proselyte waved a hand in acknowledgment without turning around and disappeared into the underbrush.

Misael walked down to a sandbar that he sometimes frequented and paced around there for a while, thinking about the encounter. It was a little scary that he had been the object of the thoughts of the patriarch of the Quasifactorians. Of course he knew the patriarch as Ecclesiastes, an elderly farmer who often helped Balaam contact buyers for his old machinery. Ecclesiastes was jolly, wholesome, and generally inoffensive, at least insofar as Misael knew him. But before he ran off through the trees toward home, he could not help but feel a little elation at having been noticed by someone of importance, however familiar and strange he may be.

It was the next day that Nathan was attacked, and Misael was not able to go down to the river, except for excursions with his brother to the swimhole, for two months.

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