

The Country of God

Part V



by A. A. A. Hartvisen

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The Country of God

Part V

Except for his regular chores, Misael spent most of Saturday helping his father clean farm equipment.

“Human error,” said Balaam, during a particularly tedious lubrication, “is a terrible thing. But there is nowhere on earth to hide from it.”

Misael thought constantly about asking his father’s permission to go to church tomorrow, but the time was always wrong. And then it was supper time, and his opportunities were reduced to zero. He thought about changing his mind and not going. It would save him a lot of trouble. He could just go ahead and tell Prester Malasar, if he came around again:

“Father said, ‘No.’”

Nadab and Mother were starting to clean things up when the opening appeared. Once again, Misael was belabouring his meal. Father hung up the telephone and walked up to the table. Misael’s heart beat against his chest. It was trying to get out. Balaam had a mouthful of biscuit and his eyes met Misael’s. The boy could not turn away, and his father stopped chewing.

They locked gazes for only a few seconds, before Misael swallowed and turned away. His father washed the biscuit down his throat with a glassful of water.

“What is it?” he asked.

Misael looked back into his father’s piercing blue eyes. He could feel Father reading all the sins of his life through his forehead.

“Well?” asked Balaam, and, at the same instant, Misael said:

“Father.”

Balaam took up the carving knife and cut a big slab of flesh from the roast. He threw this, and another couple biscuits, onto his plate.

“Come on,” he said, picking up his plate and leaving the room.

Misael rose quickly and followed.

Balaam led his son out onto the porch. He gestured toward the steps. Misael went down. When he looked back up, he saw Father had sat down on the top step.

“What is it?” Father asked. “Tell me.”

Balaam went back to eating, but he kept his eye on Misael.

“Prester Malasar,” said Misael. “He asked me to attend services at the Quazzy church, tomorrow. I’d like to go.”

Balaam finished chewing and swallowed. He sat perfectly still for several seconds, and then leapt to his feet. He hurled the plate of food down the steps. Misael jumped back, and the dish shattered on the stones at his feet.

“No!” said Balaam. “You will not!”

And he just stood there, at the top of the stairs, watching the boy. Misael knew there was nothing to be had in arguing. He also knew from experience that if he just stood there motionless, it would only increase his father’s rage. And if he walked away, it would be the same. His only choice was to return into the house, walking past his Father on the steps.

“Yes, Father,” he said, looking downward.

He climbed the steps. Balaam took hold of the boy and shook him violently.

“*Why?*” he demanded.

“I, uh, I, uh,” Misael stuttered.

Father cast Misael to the side. The boy lost his balance and fell into the railing. The thin rails, older than Misael and half-rotten, burst apart, and Misael fell down into Mother’s flowerbed. Laying there in the crushed petunias, Misael looked up and saw his father watching him from above. Father’s countenance was fierce and terrible in a way that Misael had never known before.

What is it? he asked himself. Father turned and ran down the steps. He ran

across the yard toward the woodshed. Then Misael knew the answer. Father was afraid.

Misael got up and brushed the dirt and flowers from his clothes. His shoulder was sore where it struck the railing, and his thigh had bruised itself against the decorative rock. Nadab was peering timidly out the window at him. When his eyes met Nadab's, the older boy left the window. *Weak, thought Misael, and stupid. As usual.*

Now Misael considered his choices. Suddenly it seemed inconceivable that he *not* go to church with Malasar tomorrow. His fear of Father was drowned in this determination, and he drew strength from the fear he saw in his father's eyes. He started walking toward the woodshed.

Nadab would not interfere, he knew, and neither would Mother. Not only was Nadab stupid and afraid, but it had been made clear over the years that he took some pleasure in those times when Father's disapproval fell on Misael instead of himself. Mother likewise felt that Nadab was punished too much and Misael, by comparison, too little. Punishment, it seemed, in her mind, was not something to be meted out according to one's need of correction, but rather an expression of the natural order to which each person was deserving of the same allotment, regardless of merit.

The sound of Balaam's weeping was clearly heard several feet from the shed, but Misael persisted anyway. He found his father huddled on a stump of wood moaning horribly. His sharp blue eyes did not flinch from Misael, but met his gaze firmly. The fear was still there, behind them. And they were wet and shining.

Misael stood in the doorway and said, "Father, I will not disobey you. You *must* allow me."

Balaam covered his face and shook violently. When he looked up again, he had regained much of his composure.

"Yes, Son," he said. "I can not do otherwise."

Balaam found his handkerchief and blew his nose.

"Leave me," he said.

"Yes, Father," said Misael and turned away.

Misael heard Mother and Nadab speaking about him and Father in fast words when he past by the kitchen. But he ignored them and found his way to his room under the house.

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