

The Second Son

John Gavin Writing Competition 2023 (Open) Entry by Stephen Scott

The rooster's crow slashed through my dream, as dawn's light snuck through our lean-to and stabbed my eyes open.

Startled, I looked at my hands. They were clean. The bloodied battle with Satan had been a dream. The unholy beast's attempt to drag mother down to hell thwarted by me and my axe.

A dream or a prophecy?

George called me to wash at the river. With father away it fell to the eldest son to take command. He sent Michael to collect the convict to join us. He knew I disapproved, but had father's blessing to continue this unnatural tradition.

Anything to keep his eldest son happy.

As usual it was I who applied the ash cross to our foreheads. With no local priest the family turned to me for guidance. Having memorised the gospels made me the ideal choice to lead the family in prayer.

Michael and I ate our Ash Wednesday meal of bread and milk before starting our chores. Luckily, Michael preferred working in the barn, allowing me to tend the cattle.

Mother and George had chosen dinner for their Ash Wednesday meal. Of course the convict would eat with them. He and George were inseparable.

They ate together, bathed together, they even sang songs to each other in the evenings. How could he treat that convict more like a brother than his own brothers?

No matter. Today was the beginning of Lent, a time to deny pleasures that lead to temptation. A time to repent one's sins.

It was God's will I was born the second child. I would not succumb to jealousy.

My good deeds for Lent began when I blessed the puny convict, as it is up to God to render judgement, not I.

I urged him to reconcile with the holy father 'ere returning to dust, and he wept. It was the first time I had seen a man cry, and I near felt compassion for his pathetic soul.

But he was a criminal, and an orphan. He had chosen a hard road to find salvation.

With no mother or father to guide him, it was our family's duty to set him on a sanctimonious road to forgiveness.

The honeymyrtle shrubs stopped rustling as the breeze ebbed. At least the ash trees provided shade enough to avoid sunburn.

I took the cattle down to the banks to drink. The day was not yet at full heat, and they were restless.

Why did George always get more than me or Michael? It was unfair.

George got a book of ballads at Christmas. Granted, I had my bible, but he always received more than me. He was already promised a prize selection when he came of age.

I dare not ask mother or father why his selection should have a spring, while mine would require carting water from the river.

But George is the firstborn son, and by the good lord's grace, I shall not succumb to jealousy.

A ballad floats on the air from the house. He fills my ears as well as my mind. Again, his sins will go unpunished.

I watch the convict leave the house for the carpenters. Jesus was a carpenter. Would he have forgiven this thief?

He had stolen and been sent here as punishment. And I see the way he looks at George, and how that fondness is returned. It is unnatural.

I rise to my feet and start for the house. The sun has burnt my neck, starting a headache.

Walking into the kitchen I drink the milk that has been left out. Realising I should be fasting I pray for forgiveness. But I blame the heat and what it is doing to my head.

"Mother?" I call out. She appears from her room.

"I have a terrible headache," I tell her.

"I think it's the heat," she says, "I'm starting to feel one as well."

"George shouldn't be singing. He promised to give up singing for Lent. It's not right." I say.

"I enjoy hearing his songs," she says.

"You will go to hell," I say.

"I can't help hearing him if he's singing nearby," she says. "God won't punish me for having ears."

"That is God's decision," I say.

"But I will protect you, mother. Go rest and I will tend watch over my herd. Satan will not harm you today. It has been prophesied. I will save you. I will save us all."