

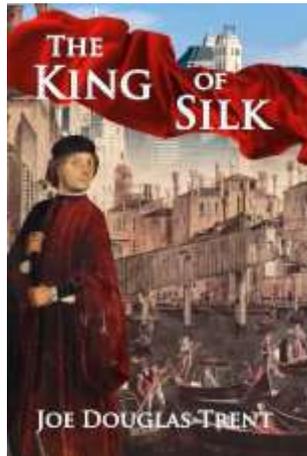
The Country Picnic, A Michael Patriate Story

By

Joe Douglas Trent

Author of

The King of Silk



Michael reaches for the light switch and chides himself, again. There's no electricity in the 15th century. *But there could be.*

A midnight attack on a Manhattan street transports rising corporate finance star, Michael Patriate, to the backwoods of Renaissance Italy. Fearing the brand "witch," he conceals his identity and his understanding of 21st century business and technology. But he can't check his ambition, the drive which cost him love in the past and threatens to do it again.

He goes from laborer to successful provincial merchant, even moves down the coast to military and trade powerhouse Venice. And the knowledge in his head keeps nagging him.

When he takes shortcuts by introducing new concepts into the silk industry, he hits opposition from powerful elements of a culture which ruthlessly guards the status quo. And when he faces the ultimate adversary, he just may see himself.

Historical Fiction

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Michael Patriate reined the horse through the narrow streets of Caorle, attention divided between the beast he distrusted and the beauty sitting beside him on the wagon.

“How did you talk Rizzo into giving you the day off and lending you the horse?” Cecile glanced over at him with those chocolate brown eyes that had captivated him when they met. “Blackmail, maybe?”

Michael smiled at the thought. Rizzo was so straight it must hurt him to bend over and tie his shoes. “No, I only saved him some money yesterday and caught him in a generous mood.”

Cecile smirked. “It must have been bad.”

He could only shake his head. Rizzo indeed was notorious for being thrifty with all his assets, employees included. Michael couldn't believe his good luck. And he hoped his luck didn't end with the day off.

They passed the last little house on the outskirts, out into the countryside, and still Michael had no idea of their destination. “So, where is this *picnic* spot you went on about?” He grinned, remembering coining a word in Italian for a practice that wouldn't catch on for a couple hundred more years.

Cecile pointed toward the left fork in the road ahead. “That way. I'll tell you when we're there.” Her countenance sagged, just a bit. “Johannes took me there once. His uncle's farm.” She turned to him, smile fading. “You don't mind that he...”

“That you went with your husband?” Michael finished for her. He patted her fair hands, folded neatly in her lap. “You know I wish he hadn't, uhm, died, and that you were with him and happy. I'm sure he and I would have been friends. But, well...”

He flailed for words. *His loss, my gain?* He tugged the reins and guided the horse to the trail on the left. “If he took you there, it must be a special place.”

She said nothing, but for a moment fixed her gaze on the horizon with an expression he knew

meant careful consideration of her next words.

“Thank you,” she said. And then she was silent for a while.

Michael didn't let Cecile's lapse bother him. She had been sad when he met her, in mourning. But she rented him a room even though he looked like an escapee from a medieval debtors prison. This reflection wasn't a bad thing, she just had to work through it.

The cobblestone streets had changed into a rutted dirt road, turning the merely rough ride of the delivery wagon into a near bone-jarring experience and slowing them to a crawl. But Michael hardly noticed. He was alone with Cecile, away from the noise of town and the stream of demands from boarders at the Red Lion, away from the smell of the city. Thanks to Rizzo's generosity and Cecile's cousin watching the hostel, he was alone in the country with a woman he liked for the first time since he and Sheila...

Michael became aware of the Rolex hanging on a sash under his shirt, hidden there to prevent the charge of “witch.” Sheila gave him the watch—was it years ago, or centuries ahead? Thinking about the time paradox always made him irritable, and he didn't want that now.

“The grass sure is green.” He had to say something. “Good rains this spring, I guess.”

Cecile roused herself, and scanned the scenery. “Yes, it's pretty out here.” She gave him a smile that let him know she was past the sadness, for now.

He let slip a sigh of relief, and noticed the clouds had taken a darkish hue off to the west on his left. They might have to break out the tarp if this place they were going to didn't have any shelter.

Around them, he saw only some low hills, scattered stands of scrubby brush, grass, and a distant grove of trees. Pasture, he thought. Like the day a year or so ago, when he arrived here in this land, this century. He fought back the memory, the panic of waking lost, with a lump on his head.

Easy. Michael took a deep breath and focused on the situation. It wasn't raining, not even threatening. And if it did start, they passed a farm house only a mile or so back. They could go back there if they didn't find another place. His hands hurt. He had clutched the reins so tightly his fingers

were white, and now forced himself to ease his grip.

“Are you all right?” Cecile's concern showed in the light lines around her eyes.

Michael relaxed, smiled, and nodded. “I had a really bad day out here last year. I'm fine now.”

Cecile scanned his face for a moment, then gave him an exasperated look. “I know you men don't like to talk about things that bother you.” Then with something short of an evil grin, she turned forward. “I'll get it out of you someday.”

He searched for a good retort. “I'll have you know—“

The wagon lurched with a loud crack, lifted a foot or so in the air, and crashed to the ground.

Michael gathered his wits and turned to Cecile, aware of the snorting horse nervously shuffling a couple of feet away. “Are you hurt?”

She blinked a few times, looked at him with a disoriented expression, and finally shook her head. “No, I think not.” Still gripping the side rails, she looked behind them, at their cargo. “Our meal has suffered, though.”

He followed her gaze. The basket had ejected its contents of bread, chicken, and drink in the crash. A purple spot spread across a plank in the wagon bed amid shards of dark glass. “That was some of Rizzo's best wine.” He drew a deep breath. “Well, we're not injured. I'd better check the wagon.”

Michael laid the reins on the seat and eased to the ground. The left wheels looked intact, but when he crossed behind and saw the right rear cracked and folded under, he slumped.

“What is it?” Cecile called.

“My driving.” He shook his head and cursed under his breath so she wouldn't hear. “I wasn't paying attention and got up out of the rut.” He knelt and assessed the damage. “Ran over a rock and broke the wheel.” He bowed his head and rubbed his hands across his face, wishing away the accident.

“Can you fix it?” Cecile swiveled in her seat and swung her legs over the side.

From his crouch, Michael looked up to catch her profile against the blue sky. Beautiful as the day he first saw her. He turned back to the solid wooden wheel cracked along the grain. “I don't have any

tools. Maybe the farmer back the road a way could nail a patch onto it.” He cursed to himself again. Even repaired, they would have to turn around and ease it home, and their holiday would be over.

“I’m going with you,” she said. “I don’t want to wait by myself.”

He reached for the wagon to pull himself up. “All right. Let me help you down.”

“I can do it.” She hopped down from the seat.

Michael watched her foot land on a loose stone and turn sharply.

Cecile hit the ground and fell to her back on the incline toward the wagon. She screamed and grabbed her ankle. The horse reared and jerked the wagon forward, striking the obstruction again.

Michael leaped to his feet and reached for her arm, pulling her away from danger.

The horse bolted, for good this time, vaulting the damaged wheel over the rock. The rim fell where Cecile’s head had come to rest only seconds before. Another crack and the wheel split in two, but the horse didn’t stop. The wheel splintered, and the axle dug into the earth and broke away.

Michael could only stare in disbelief as the wagon disintegrated, board by board, down the road toward the trees. The last he saw, only the harness traces remained, snapping and intermittently slapping the horse’s legs.

The horse disappeared into the copse; a flock of black birds exploded out of the trees and circled.

Michael snapped out of his fixation and remembered Cecile.

She sat holding her leg and looking to the trees with a lost expression on her face. A tear escaped, and then she began to cry. “I’m sorry.”

He knelt beside her. “Why?”

She turned loose now. “Because....” She sobbed. “I, I scared the horse away.”

“No, no. It’s not your fault.” He cupped her chin and raised her face to look in her eyes. “I’m no good at driving a horse. I didn’t set the brake, or even tie off the reins. How is your ankle?”

“I don’t know.” She sniffed and wiped her face, then took and released a deep breath, composed again. “Maybe not too bad. Here, help me up.”

He stood, offered his hand, and pulled her to her feet.

Cecile lifted her long dress enough to see the foot. She tested it, and then walked in a little circle, wincing a little, but putting weight on it.

I guess those shoes are good for something. The high top lace-ups might not be the prettiest, but in this case they were practical. Their support had minimized the damage.

She glanced up and caught him staring at her leg. “Like the view?” She grinned and let the dress fall back around her ankles.

Refusing to be embarrassed, he responded. “Very much, thank you.”

“Mmm, hmm. All right *Signor* horse driver, which way?”

Michael considered. A farm lay on their way back toward town, but it wasn't like they could call Triple A. And Rizzo surely wouldn't be happy about the loss of the wagon *and* the animal.

“Sure you can walk?”

She nodded. “I think so.”

“Well, let's find that horse.”

He supported her arm for the first few yards, then she waved him off and walked on her own.

Wreckage from the wagon greeted them: the broken wheel and axle, splintered wood, an intact seat, a baked chicken the ants had already found.

Michael picked up a rope and began to coil it.

“We didn't lose everything,” Cecile said. She held one intact cup and the loaf of bread, still wrapped in a towel, just as she had packed it early this morning.

He had to grin. “Well, at least we won't starve.”

They forged on and came to a lump spread across a rut. The tarp.

Michael considered passing it by. The piece of canvas was heavy, but those clouds to the west worried him. He spread the tarp out flat, folded it several times, and then fashioned it into a short carpet-roll form and tied it with an end of the rope. They would at least have shelter. He threw the roll over his

shoulder and they continued toward the trees.

After a while, Cecile broke the silence. "So is this the way you court all your ladies?"

He glanced at her and caught a sly smile, then turned his gaze back to their destination. "Only the ones who show some promise." The weight on his shoulder made it ache. He stopped and set the tarp on the ground for a moment, and started to make a smart remark about her dates, but thought better of it in light of her dead husband. He only smiled at her, threw the tarp on the other shoulder, and stepped to the other side of the road so he could still see her. "You have to pass a test, you see. And it could be worse. At least I'm carrying the tarp." He struck out again, leaving her to gape.

She caught up, struggling to match his stride. "I guess you think you are very smart."

"You started it."

"Humph."

She tried to cross her arms in mock disgust, but the bread in one hand and cup in the other made her look kind of like a crippled scarecrow.

Michael could only grin at her and keep walking.

They soon arrived at the stand of trees where Michael had last seen the retreating horse and stood under its green canopy. A spring on the side of a little hill created a bubbling little creek that ran away from them alongside the road. Still-muddy tracks across the creek bed indicated the horse had veered off the road while negotiating the gentle curve at the creek's edge and continued across an open field.

Michael let the tarp slide from his shoulder and plop onto the road. He stretched his aching back and gazed toward the animal's escape route. "I sure hoped he'd be here."

Cecile looked to the spring and to the cup in her hand. "Do you think you could get us some water?"

He became aware of his own thirst. "Sure." He took the cup, more like a mug, and stepped over brush to get to the spring. One had to be careful with drinking water in town. Many wells were contaminated by waste created by a human population crammed into a small area. The spring, though,

should be all right this far from civilization. He leaned over, braced himself on the cool mossy rock from which the water issued, and scooped the cup full of cold, clear water.

“Thank you.” Cecile accepted the mug and drank deeply.

“You're welcome.” Michael waited for her to finish and then returned to the spring for his own drink.

Thirst sated, he handed the cup back to Cecile and turned his attention west, to the clouds turning an ugly blue and black. “I think we better set up some shelter.”

He scanned the area, chose an elevated space between two trees, and dragged the tarp to it.

“What do you need?” Cecile stood in the road, still holding her burden of bread and dish.

Michael smiled at her no-nonsense attitude. She wasn't asking to help, but letting him know she wouldn't stand around and watch, helpless.

“How about some good-sized rocks or maybe tree limbs? Something kind of heavy.”

She placed her load on a log and set about her search.

He untied and uncoiled the rope and fastened it between the two trees, about four feet high and about the same wide. Over the rope went the tarp, with enough extra for flaps folded under.

Cecile, meanwhile, had made a small pile of rocks she gathered along the creek bed.

Michael weighted down the ends of the tarp inside the improvised pup tent with the rocks and dragged in a couple of short tree limbs for seats.

“Might as well eat something while we wait.” He sat on the log, by the loaf of bread, and motioned for Cecile to sit as well. This wasn't what he had in mind when they started out this morning.

She unwrapped the bread and broke off a piece for each. “How long, do you think?” She handed him his share.

“Hmm. I've never been a weather expert. Five or ten minutes, maybe.”

They ate their meal and watched the approaching storm in silence.

The wind picked up and a fresh scent of rain mixed with dust tinged the air.

Michael addressed the question he knew they both were asking themselves. “Are we going to be all right in there together?” He appraised her noncommittal expression. “It's kind of small.”

Without pause, she replied. “You *could* be a gentleman and wait outside.”

He stumbled over his words. “Ah, well, if you want me to.” Was that what she really wanted?

Then she smiled and inclined her head. “If you drown, who will take me home?” She stood and looked once more to the west. “We had better go.”

Michael ducked and half-crawled in behind her and sat on a log on his side of the tent. Hunched over in the narrow enclosure, their upraised knees touched, and he came face to face with this lovely creature, with only the light from the open tent flap to illuminate her fair skin. Her eyes were hidden in the shadows, but he could feel them inspecting his features. “It's going to be dark in here when I shut that flap.”

“I expect it will.”

He felt her warm breath on his face. This wasn't going to be easy.

A blast of wind shook the tent. Scattered heavy raindrops slapped against the thin walls.

Michael reached for the flap and extinguished the remaining light.

Once, when traveling with the country merchant who had rescued him, a rain storm not too different from this one forced them into their canvas shelter. Baldo had been a good friend to Michael, but the company Michael kept that day could not compare with this.

Another gust and a downpour of rain assaulted their position. Cecile said something over the din.

“What?” Michael shouted.

“I said, I think it's here.”

Michael nodded, and then felt silly for it, but had no answer for her.

A flash of light outside gave a dim illumination inside the tent, and an instant later a deafening boom rattled his bones. Cecile's hand sought his; he returned her frantic grasp, careful not to hurt her delicate hand.

The wind howled. A crack overhead signaled breaking branches. The canvas pressed at Michael's back, making him feel he bore the gusting force of the storm. Their weight should hold the tent down, but he worried about the ends weighted only by Cecile's batch of stones. A drip of water ran down his neck.

Michael realized he now held his arms around Cecile, in a protective embrace. In snatches of quiet, he heard her pray. He wished he could do the same.

At length, the rain and wind eased into a steady shower, but he kept his arms around her, his head bowed beside hers.

“Michael.” She spoke softly.

“I'm here.”

“I was so afraid.”

“Me too.”

She raised her head and whispered in his ear. “Thank you.”

Michael's heart had pounded during the hard part of the storm. Now it raced. He patted her back and straightened a bit. He needed to see her.

Reluctantly, he pulled back from their embrace and opened the flap enough to allow some light.

Only inches away, Cecile chewed on her lip, a tendency when she was nervous. She moved toward him, almost imperceptibly. “Michael, it's been so...”

His mind whirled. His desire was at the breaking point. He didn't want to hurt her, and wasn't sure he wanted to make this kind of commitment. He had plans that required him to stay free of encumbrances. And yet, they were here, and so close.

She lifted her hand and touched his cheek.

He reached for her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Some part of his mind registered a twig snapping outside. He pulled her closer.

“Hellooo.”

No. Not now. She was so near and so...

“Anyone in there? Hello?”

Michael shivered from the conflicting signals coursing through his body.

Cecile jerked away and sat stiffly back on her perch.

Michael called to the stranger. “Yes, we’re in here.” He threw back the flap and peered out.

“Seems the storm’s over.” He crawled out of the tent onto the wet grass, still vying for control of his emotions and appearance. Rain dripped from the leaves. He got to his feet, wiping his wet hands on his pants, and located the source of their interruption.

A tall, thin man bordering on middle age, farmer by the look of him, with mud on his soggy clothing and a bemused expression on his weathered face peered back at him. “We?”

Michael smiled. “My traveling companion and I. Come on out Cecile.”

She crawled out of the tent, stood, and smoothed her dress, looking as comfortable as Michael felt.

“We had a little accident, and then the storm caught up with us.” Michael gestured toward the tent. “We were fortunate to have a shelter.”

The man looked to Cecile and then back to Michael. Then he grinned. “Pretty fortunate, I’d say. Me, I had to hide under the wagon.” He pointed down the roadway twenty or thirty feet.

Tied to a tree stood a horse connected to a wooden-wheeled cart. And tied to the back of the wagon—Rizzo’s horse, with his harness still trailing.

“Wouldn’t be yours, would it?” The stranger asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Michael managed. “Well, my employer’s, anyway.” What kind of claim did this fellow have on a lost horse?

“Thought it must have come from this way. Barely made it here before the sky opened. Say, where’s your wagon?”

Michael pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Spread over quite an area, I’m afraid. A total loss.

Rizzo's not going to be happy.”

The man's head popped up. “Rizzo, you say. Rizzo's Mercantile in Caorle?”

Michael nodded.

“I know him. Tell you what. I'll give you and your, uhm, traveling companion there a ride back, and maybe Rizzo will give me a break on a new plow I've been admiring.”

Michael wasn't sure how much of a break Rizzo would be willing to allow, but he smiled and nodded. “That would be wonderful. We can't thank you enough.”

He took down their wet tent, folded it, and packed it in the wagon, and then it was time to go.

“Didn't introduce myself. Zacharia Carbun.” Zacharia stuck out his hand.

Michael shook it and made introductions for him and Cecile, who finally came down to the wagon, picking her way along the muddy trail.

She nodded at Zacharia but kept silent, clearly embarrassed at what he had almost caught them doing.

“Guess you'll want the lady to ride up front.” Zacharia headed around the horse for the other side.

Michael smiled at Cecile while he wiped beads of water from the seat with his hand. “Yes, the lady rides in front. I'll make a spot in back.”

He reached for her hand to help her up and their eyes met. Their relationship wouldn't be the same again.

He squeezed her hand. “Let's go home.”