

THE ALIEN

SIR JOHN WILLISON

A youth there was who loved the forest paths,
And had rare confidences with the birds,
And knew the secrets of the solemn pools
And all sweet mysteries of running streams.
He took his vagrant way among the flowers,
As soft of footstep as though sleeping babes
Were rocked between the ridges of the wood.
And he had curious but familiar speech
For all the wild things that beset his path;
The squirrels were his playmates, and the deer
Looked with compassion on him, unafraid.
They seemed to know his language and to know
That he was alien from the tribes of men,
Instinct with reverence for earth and sky,
For steadfast hills and smiling plains outspread,
For patient herds and things that creep or fly,
For whispering winds and brook and branch and bud,
And all that God had made and said was good.

In the log schoolhouse he would sit apart,
Shrinking but friendly, quiet but remote,
Towards the window turning oft and happy if
A flash of sunlight fell across his face.
But while he dreamed, the secrets of the books
Opened in beauty to his eager mind,
And forms of speech were fashioned on his tongue
Which even he but dimly understood,
And he had curious words of prophecy
That sounded strangely on the lips of youth.

The schoolyard was a torment, for he had
No mind for the rough tests of brutal strength.
He shrank from violence, from taunt and gibe.
His meekness tempted bullying insolence,
His cheeks shone white when rude hands buffeted
And whispers of contempt ran at his heels.

But once there came an hour of fierce revolt,
 A flame of madness leaped into his eyes,
 A scourge of burning words fell from his tongue,
 And rough companions shrank in trembling awe
 Before the fury of a soul in arms;
 And he was shamed at what he saw within,
 But still was glad that he had cast out fear.
 For gentleness hath courage manifold,
 And none may know what strength repose conceals.

A score or more of years he lived and toiled
 At the appointed tasks his fathers knew.
 But while he swung the axe or held the plow,
 Or drove the oxen o'er the stubborn land,
 Or read his books far through the solemn night,
 He schooled himself to high companionship
 With the immortals of the ancient world.
 Their names beat in his soul and filled his days
 With affluence and a fugitive unrest.
 The common drudgeries of menial toil
 Provoked distress and impotent mutiny.
 He was not idle, but was elsewhere
 In intimate touch with influences divine,
 And living on the uplands with the gods.

But there were few who loved or understood.
 Even to the mother who had borne him last
 He was the fruit of a reluctant womb,
 A thing too futile to ride out the storms
 That drive for ever o'er the plains of life.
 They shrugged and whispered as he dreamed apart,
 They thrust hard tasks upon him, and they mocked
 When the hot sweat ran down his quivering limbs
 And he was wearied to the very bone,
 For there be those whose test of skill or worth
 Is only strength to build or to destroy.
 Dear God, how we do crucify Thy sons !

But there was one old man who loved the youth,
 And saw far on the fabric of his dreams
 Fashioned and finished in a great renown.
 Rough was the old man, slow of speech, unlearned,

Blind to all knowledge that is hid in books,
Remote from all the teachings of the wise,
For threescore years a worker in the fields,
A neighbour of the woods and streams and hills,
Yet with strange skill to read the soul of man,
And in the youth obscure and impotent
He saw the image of a puissant god.

Together they would watch the sun go down,
They saw the wide sky fill with gleaming stars,
The shrinking moon flirt with a vagrant cloud,
The trees and hills fade slowly into night;
But still they sat and whispered out their dreams
Or grew together in long silences.
The old man talked of things of long ago.
He once had seen strange cities and the sea,
A King ride by, an army march away.
And he had seen upon a village green
A figure stand in solid majesty,
With luminous eye and head and arm upraised,
Bold and tempestuous, but yet pitiful.
He spoke of Freedom and the Rights of Man,
And swept an eager, mutinous multitude
Into a very tempest of revolt,
Then soothed it into gentleness and peace.

And the youth listened with his soul aflame,
And eyes that looked far out across the years;
He knew that he would cross the farther seas,
He felt the immanence of the older world,
He saw its temples, tombs and palaces,
The laborious hoarding of the centuries
Ripened by time and leaning towards decay,
He knew that he would see with open eyes,
And seeing would revere and understand,
And knew that he would bear a name of power,
A bond between the new world and the old.

In after years the tongue of rumor told
Among the gossips of his native fields
Strange stories of the youth who fled away
From the stark loneliness of fallow minds,
And the dull tasks of uncreative hands.

He seized upon the learning of the schools
As one whose mind had neither verge nor bound,
From height to height along the way of life
He conquered all the peaks and distances,
And rose with curious ease and certainty
To the great places whence he could command
The love and faith of patient multitudes,
And shape the paths of human destiny.
But through the great adventure he was still
As lonely as when from his father's door
He saw the rugged fields fade into night;
As lonely as the shaft that at the cross-road
Stands in memory of a youth obscure,
Who challenged fate, and won the heights, and died.