ALIEN SON

by

JUDAH L. WATEN

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TO A COUNTRY TOWN

FATHER said we should have to leave the city. It was soon after we came to the new land that he had been told of a town where he was sure to make money if he opened a drapery shop. He had tried to find something in the city but failed, and he was anxious to make money. The possession of money, he said, would compensate us for the trials of living in a strange land. He had ambitious plans and to have listened to him one might have believed that nature had cut him out to be a millionaire.

But Mother said that he was a cripple when it came to the real job, though others with lesser flights of fancy who had come out with us on the same boat were now well on the way to making their fortunes.

"Talk, talk," she said.

No, Mother wouldn't go into the wilderness; she wouldn't leave the coast. Ever since we had come to this country she had lived with her bags packed. This was no country for us. She saw nothing but sorrow ahead. We should lose everything we possessed; our customs, our traditions; we should be swallowed up in this strange, foreign land. She had often wheeled my sister and me to shipping offices to inquire for ships leaving for home. And once she almost bought passages for us but she didn't have quite enough money.

Father roared and stamped out of the house, slamming each door as he strode down the long, dark passage. But soon he came back, his arms laden with fruit and other foodstuffs. His pale-blue eyes blinked innocently and his

stiff, red moustache shook with good humour. He was very subdued and remained uncommunicative for quite a while. Then he began to talk as if to himself.

"The country would do the children a lot of good, now wouldn't it? Say only for a year or two. The children would grow strong and healthy there."

He saw a little smile flutter on Mother's lips and then disappear into the creases round her mouth. Her sallow face was serious again and her dark-brown eyes troubled. For as long as I remembered she had always looked as if she expected nothing but sorrow and hardship from life. I somehow imagined that Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, must have looked just like my mother, with her long, straight nose and her mass of jet-black hair combed back above her hollow cheeks, deep-set eyes and high forehead.

When she spoke Father knew we were going to the country. For a little while it would be good for the children, she agreed. It was always like this; she wanted nothing for herself, only a great future for us. We were to serve our oppressed people. I was to be at least another David and my sister a modern Esther. But how could those plans be furthered out there in the wilderness? Well, after all, a year would pass quickly.

One day a covered wagon drew up outside our house. Mother stared in amazement when she saw Father perched in the driver's seat. She had never expected to see him like this. What would he be doing next? How much better would it be if we were on our way from this country.

But Father was far too busy to listen to any talk. He was piling our few belongings on to the wagon until it looked like a second-hand shop on wheels. There were rust-coloured iron Russian beds with pictures embossed in gold, boxes of

kitchen utensils with large silver spoons and knives engraved with the name of their Russian maker, a four-wheeled baby carriage with a large black hood, enlarged pictures of grandfathers and grandmothers, and even a green faded samovar from Tula. All lay in a disorderly pile on top of the boxes of dresses, skirts, and coats that were to bring us that fortune which my father was so certain was surely our lot in this new land.

Mother sat next to Father on the driver's seat and we sat on boxes covered with pillows stuffed with goose feathers just behind them. Immediately next to Mother rested a polished wooden box and a large black bag. Of Mother's black bag there is little to be said. Food for the journey, a purse, all sorts of knick-knacks for my little sister, a bottle of castor oil, and a thermometer were all stuffed in there.

But the red, silk-lined box was my father's treasure chest which he had clung to all his life. All the written history of the pair, the marriage certificate, passport, birth certificates, letters from Father's parents, photos, even gold links and studs and an old-fashioned pocket watch with a blue cover studded with small pink stones, a prayer shawl, and phylacteries reposed in neat order between the silk lining around which clung the smell of moth-balls. Father said there would always be something in that box to fall back on.

Father was then a young man of twenty-seven, with light-brown hair and a fine red moustache. He had been tall and slim, but he was beginning to grow fat round the stomach. But even while driving the horses he looked neat and smart. By contrast Mother always looked ragged and even her long association with Father never made her interested in her appearance.

Father bellowed and cursed at the horses as we drove along the grey, sandy road. He was in a terrible rage, but he was really shouting at his own helplessness. It was one of my first impressions of Father that whenever he was in a tight corner, in a muddle, he would shout angrily at the top of his voice. When I was very little I had looked for something to happen when Father shouted, as the walls of the city fell at the blast of the ram's horn blown at Jericho. But now I knew better; Father's rages came on swiftly and disappeared just as suddenly.

While he was roaring at the horses, his greyish, pale face a deep crimson, Father shook a long whip that flicked the air menacingly. If the expression on his face meant anything he was about to thrash the horses to within an inch of their lives. But the whip never fell on their broad haunches; he just held it aloft, his hand paralysed by uncertainty. Mother settled the matter. She snatched the whip out of his hand and threw it under the seat. What was he trying to do? Kill us?

But Father's rage had disappeared and the horses continued in their own sweet, plodding way. They were the masters and Father was the man who held the reins. I think the horses must have been laughing at him on that journey. They stopped when they wanted to and drank at the trough outside every hotel. And the white mare kept moving to the centre of the road, which was one cause of Father's rage.

The wagon trundled on through low, scraggy, dry scrub and dejected gums while the sun, now directly overhead, seemed like a fiery disk suspended from the high, pale sky. It was very hot for all of us and the light on the sandy road was hard for Father's eyes. Suddenly low blue hills appeared

above the horizon and Father said we'd be there before night fell.

We kept well to the edge of the shadeless, sandy road and often the wagon threatened to turn turtle as the wheels dropped into a culvert. Mother was afraid of the road and, secretly, so was Father. The sight of a sulky drawn by a speedy horse and coming towards us would throw her into a paroxysm of fear and she would clutch Father's arm. He ineffectively tried to steer the white mare away from the centre of the road, and finally with a great effort he stopped the horses altogether while the sulky whisked by with yards between us. Then to celebrate our deliverance from such danger Mother produced fruit and sweets from the black bag.

We arrived at our new home long after the sun had sunk beneath the hills, which had become mysteriously black with odd lights that blinked forlornly as if signalling messages of distress.

In the dying light Mother stood gazing at the dingy, brown wooden cottage and while she stood she seemed to age and her narrow shoulders to grow more stooped. Her sad eyes wandered hopelessly over the broken picket fence and the neglected fruit-trees with their naked limbs outstretched.

Suddenly Mother was startled out of her deep musing by a merry clamour that sprang round us like a wind springing up from nowhere. The street which had been deserted was now alive. Men in shirt-sleeves and women in aprons stood behind fences and from open doorways flickered the yellow light of kerosene lamps. Children appeared from all the dark corners of the street, clustering round the wagon, chattering in a language of which we understood not a word. Mother seized my sister and me by our hands and bundled us into

the house. And, disconsolate and weary, we sat on chairs in a room that smelt musty with dampness and disuse. By the light of a spluttering candle our parents walked silently to and fro and emptied the bulging wagon.

Early next morning I ran into the street while Mother was scrubbing one of the rooms. I was impatient to join the children whom I had seen the previous night. But as soon as they saw me they burst out laughing and pointed to my buttoned-up shoes and white silk socks. I was overcome with shame and ran back into the house where I removed my shoes and socks and threw them into one of the empty rooms. I would walk barefooted like the other boys. And when I heard Mother calling to me from the kitchen to play in the back-yard and not to go into the street, I pretended I didn't hear.

I tacked myself on to the tail end of a group of boys who were prancing down the street. It was really more a track than a street, petering out a few yards from our gate in a gentle rise that merged with the horizon so that Mother could be pardoned for thinking we lived on the very edge of the world.

I could barely stand the gravel and the hot sand on my bare feet and the short, dry grass of the paddock gave little relief. But I was proud of my own courage and of the attention the boys paid me, though I didn't know a word of what they were saying.

We came to a shed at the back of the general store that was almost directly opposite the railway station and next to a group of wooden, ramshackle buildings that housed a baker, a bootmaker and a newsagent. Farther down the street stood, in solitary splendour, a two-storied wooden hotel with a wide veranda running the width of the building.

I clambered up a high, picket fence with the rest of the boys and held on for dear life while they chattered and screeched like magpies. We were watching a short, elderly man backing a black horse into a cart.

To my surprise the man kept looking at me curiously from under heavy lids which sagged and were covered in a maze of creases. He carried a big leather bag slung over his shoulder like a Sam Browne belt and he wore a marine dealer's badge on his arm. His broad-brimmed hat with its sweat-stained band sat as flat as a pancake on his head. The boys mimicked him in a childish gibberish as he mumbled to his horse in the only language I knew.

But the old man wasn't angry with the boys. He smiled back at them like a deaf and dumb uncle and his eyes lingered a little longer over me. As he jumped up on the cart he nodded his head and stroked his little straggly brown beard and waved his long whip at me. Then with a loud cry he drove out of the yard.

Late that afternoon we were playing on the railway station. It was deserted, although a train was expected within an hour, so that we had the run of some empty trucks. A solitary cart appeared on the horizon and soon we recognized the old man perched on top of a heap of bags. We ran to meet him. He was urging his horse on and the sweaty, velvety hide of the animal quivered as the old man flicked his long whip over its mane. We chased the cart and the boys called loudly, "Bottle-oh! Bottle-oh! Any bottles today?"

But as soon as we followed him into the yard he jumped off the cart and chased us out, cracking his whip over our heads. Again he was looking closely at me, but this time there was a sly expression in his beady, half-closed eyes

that made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. It was as though he had caught me out.

From the high picket fence we watched him unload his cart, stacking bottles in pyramids according to their size and shape. Then he carried a great bundle of bags piled high on his strong shoulders into a shed, where dark doors opened like the mouth of a cave. He curried and brushed his horse and carefully mixed chaff and bran into a bin, gently pushing its soft nose aside. Then he disappeared into the shed and closed the door.

When I returned home Mother complained bitterly that I had run away twice in one day; that I had thrown my shoes and socks away and would catch cold. I would get lost; all her gloomiest premonitions would come true. Father was always blunt-spoken and he said that if I disobeyed Mother again he would take to me in no uncertain way.

It was at that stage that I judged it wise to bring out my bit of news. I said that in the afternoon I had only gone to the shed to find out if the old man was really a Jew. Mother was overwhelmed.

"There you are, you find our people in the farthest corners of the world. Perhaps this place is after all not the end of everything. We might have a community here yet."

All my misdeeds were forgotten and even Father smiled.

"Bring him home," he said, cheerfully. "Let's have a look at him."

It was not until sundown the next day that I saw the old man again. I was in the street with the neighbour's boy looking into shop windows and watching the men go into the hotel, when I saw the old man pacing up and down on the opposite side of the street outside the railway

station. The train had just gone and was climbing into the hills that rose beyond the township. Escaping smoke still hung in grey masses against a purple sky, blotting out the stars which had just appeared.

When he caught sight of me the old man hurried towards me. Spacing his words slowly he asked me in a wheedling, high-pitched, sing-song voice if I was a Jewish boy. Immediately I spoke in Yiddish his voice changed; every trace of hesitancy disappeared. He pinched my cheeks and rumpled my hair with his strong, calloused palms.

"Why haven't I seen your father and mother? Where are they hiding? I'll have someone to talk to at last. I'll be able to free my heart."

Then his voice changed and in a wheedling tone, his half-closed eyes blinking innocently, he asked, "And for instance, what does your father do?"

He seemed relieved when I answered that he was a draper.

From that day old Hirsh was a regular visitor to our house. Mother's hope had been realized and we had the beginnings of a community. Every day at six we would see the old man hastening towards the house, his short body erect and his quick stride soldierly. His appearance never altered except on wet days when he wore a long shabby overcoat over his faded blue waistcoat and the bulging leather bag that he never parted from. He no longer lingered over his horse of an evening; he made the horse comfortable and left without even an affectionate glance.

Even after we had sat down to our meal he remained standing with his back to the fire, often without speaking, his hat still on his head, his eyes almost closed.

Father, drinking his soup noisily, would grunt, "And how is business, Hirsh?"

And Hirsh invariably answered with the same words, "No good."

"Always no good! What sort of a business is this?" Father would retort sceptically breaking great hunks of bread off the loaf for all of us.

Mother, to hide her embarrassment, would invite Hirsh to take a bite with us. But he would pretend that he hadn't heard her until Father would lean towards him and say in an emphatic tone, "Sit down."

When he sat down, always at the corner of the table, Hirsh would decline the soup and meat, contenting himself with great quantities of bread and grated radish or cucumber. His manner was apologetic and he noiselessly nibbled the bread in contrast with Father's eager, noisy performance at the table.

After the meal Hirsh would push his chair into the corner, a glass of tea in his hand, and for a long while he would stare silently at the fire, until he rose with an apologetic good night and disappeared into the night. But if Father was in good talking form Hirsh would join in the conversation, respectfully waiting for Father to finish, and then telling long stories of the past that drove Father to distraction by their disjointed loquacity. He had been a coachman for a wealthy man in Russia, but he had fled to evade military service. He heartily cursed Czar Alexander III, who was now rotting in the ground. He had come a long, hard way and his dearest wish was to be buried in the Holy Land. All his family had gone to Palestine after the death of his wife, and he was going to join them there soon, he hoped, with his younger son.

Father tried hard to bring the conversation around to business.

"Never mind the past, we live in the present. Tell me something about the bottles. How, for instance, do you sell them?"

Father was anxious to try his hand at something new. He hadn't yet opened the drapery shop which was to make our fortune. He was still selling drapery to scattered houses in the near-by hills and his faith in drapery was waning. Father looked almost accusingly at Hirsh.

"You would think from what we heard in the city that everyone in the country bathed in gold. What rubbish! I have seen such poverty in the hills and even in this town that it would make your hair stand on end."

Yes, Father's fortune seemed to be swimming farther and farther away. Perhaps bottles were better than dresses? But Hirsh, in a whining voice, insisted that this bottle business was terrible. Nothing but hard work and no return to show for it.

"Believe me, this is a very hard, foreign, inhospitable land for a Jew to live in."

Mother looked up from her sewing. Hirsh was right, it was a foreign country. How could we ever learn to know the people here? At least in Russia we knew where we stood, pogroms and all. The devil you know is better than the devil you don't.

Father rose suddenly from the table. Pointing to Mother, he said that when we were in Russia it was she who pestered him to leave. He had never wanted to shift in all his life. Now it was starting all over again. He was going to bed; it was late.

Several days later, very early in the morning before sunrise, I climbed the high picket fence and, creeping softly towards Hirsh's shed, opened the door and peered into the murkiness within. Through cracks and holes in the wall the grey light cast strange shadows over the mountain of bags, neatly sorted according to their size, which in places reached to the corrugated-iron ceiling. A smell of damp earth pervaded the shed. On one of the lower layers of bags nearest to the door old Hirsh had made his bed. Later I was to discover that his bed went up and down in the most remarkable fashion. Sometimes he slept on the ground and at other times almost touching the ceiling. It depended on the stacks in the shed.

As soon as he saw my head he jumped up, blinking his eyes in amazement and yawning deeply. He had cast aside the ragged overcoats that had covered him and they now lay in a heap at the foot of his bed of bags. To my surprise he was still wearing his faded waistcoat, and he looked very old in his thick, creamy underpants that enclosed his withered backside and legs.

With a growl he quickly ran to the wall where his trousers and leggings hung from a nail, not forgetting to pick up his leather bag, which he had used as his pillow.

There was a row of big nails in the wall from which hung stiff, white, flour bags, old coats, an old horse collar, harness and a whip.

"How did you get in, you young urchin?"

I had never seen him so severe, but as soon as he had hitched his trousers up and put his leggings and boots on he softened.

"Eat something with me. You will see how a poor old Jew has his morning meal."

He walked to the tap outside the shed, washed his face and spattered some drops of water over his short, brown hair like parched, dry grass and then he went to a flour bag on the wall. He extracted a lump of bread and several onions which he peeled, passing one to me. He chewed his food slowly and after each morsel opened his mouth with satisfaction, revealing a row of strong little yellowish teeth. He slowly picked the crumbs out of his beard and rolling them into a ball thrust them back into his mouth.

"What an urchin!" He shook his finger at me. "He has to hear and know everything."

But never mind. When his youngest son was my age he was just as curious and cheeky. What a clever boy he was then! He, Hirsh, hadn't always lived like this. When his boy was my age they lived in a big house and they ate white bread, herrings, and olives for breakfast every morning. But now he had to save every penny. Suddenly he pointed to several butter boxes that stood apart from the bags and were close to an array of weirdly shaped green bottles. There he kept silk shirts and many, many other good things for his son. He would give them to him soon when they left for Palestine together.

I was depressed by the thought of Hirsh's departure and I ran all the way home. I was fairly bursting with information and as soon as I reached the kitchen where Father was sitting, a solitary figure at the table, and Mother was crouching over the fire cooking scrambled eggs for him, I began to relate my adventure with Hirsh.

Mother became very gloomy.

"What a terrible life for a Jew in his old age! So far from his homeland and his family."

Father was blunt and testy.

"Not so terrible! You can rest assured that he's got more than we have. A hoarder is a hoarder, a miser is a miser, and that is all there is to it."

Father smiled smugly as if he had settled the matter beyond all doubt.

"Let's see if he ever brings anything to our children," he added.

But Mother was afraid at the thought that Hirsh might leave. Apart from him she hardly ever saw another strange person. With him she talked in Yiddish of Russia and the life they had left. She could still not understand one word of English and she said she had no intention of ever learning the language; she would not become a part of the new land. And when she heard me chattering in the new language, or Father breaking his tongue over strange words she became alarmed as if both of us had made our peace with enemies and were about to desert our faith.

Mother hardly ever peered out of the house. But whenever she walked into the back-yard Mrs McDougall, a Scotch widow who lived next door, would begin to talk to her in a deep, booming voice. No matter how friendly our stout, high-bosomed neighbour tried to be, Mother became more suspicious and said that Mrs McDougall merely wanted to patronize her. Mother tried to avoid going out into the yard in the daytime and only my prolonged absence would tempt her to go on to the veranda to call for me.

Father tried to reason with her, but she only replied that she could see where we were going and that she would remain what she was even in this desolate spot. There was tension in the house and Mother kept on urging Father to return to the city. Often I heard them talking angrily in bed in the next room.