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# SUNDAY IN THE CITY



(Written for "The Listener" by DORIAN SAKER)

IT is a well-established fact that every seventh day in New Zealand is a Sunday. What is not so well known is that the other six days are of no account so far as estimating our mass-personality is concerned. You have to wait for the seventh before you discover New Zealanders as they really are. By our Sundays ye shall know us. On Sundays all our nakedness, our loneliness, our puritanical goodness, is laid bare.

I had been desecrating the day of rest by trying to write a play. At 12 o'clock the urge of creation having expended itself, and its place having been usurped by another, more primitive and more urgent, I looked in the cupboard—but found it as bare as that in the nursery rhyme. There was nothing for it but to immolate myself on the counter of some provider in the city. So I donned coat and scarf (all Sundays seem to require these accoutrements) and went in search of food.

But I found more than I had bargained for. I found New Zealand on the streets, as I had never seen it before. Perhaps it was the mood—hunger does strange things, I know, but it seemed that every figure I saw, every building propping up a corner, every senseless placard in a shop window, was typical of myself, of the country I have been brought up in, and for which I suddenly had conceived an almost romantic attachment.

On Sundays you see people. You see lovers, before marriage, clinging close as they walk and you see couples after twenty years walking only within speaking distance. You see the inhabitants of hotels escaping for a few barren minutes from the drugged boredom of their native lounges and dining saloons. You see pensioners and celibates exchanging the stale boarding-house smell for the listless freedom of the open air. You see sailors, alert and prying, ashore from ships.

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IT is not easy to find somewhere to lunch on a Sunday in this city of ours, and once you have found a place, it is

even more difficult to find enough food in it to satisfy. I turned into a milk-bar, a sub-division of a sub-division of what once might have been a shop, and asked for a pie and tea. The pretty, red-haired waitress thought for a moment and replied gently that there were no pies that day. So I asked what there was. Tomatoes, she said. I had just seen a hefty sailor making his way to a seat with a plate embosoming two isolated sausages. Could I have sausages? That was what I meant by tomatoes, she said. They're with tomatoes. The tomatoes on the plate had escaped my notice, but I said, *faute de mieux*, that tomatoes would do.

She looked at me sympathetically, because I obviously had a bad cold. Lemons are good for it, she said.

Yes, I said, I've been taking them.

My sausages came, and with them, I was pleased to observe, was the minutest fragment of a tomato. Also a miniature pot of tea which, I reflected, would do well for a doll's tea-set. Two shillings, she said.

\* \* \*

I SAT down. Then I ate, and watched others as they came in, bought their meal, and sat down. First there was an old woman, grey, stooped, entirely in black. Goodness knows where her grandchildren were, that she had to be out buying a ration of sausages, when all the rest of our population were sitting down to roast-beef, kumaras, onions, roast potatoes, thick brown gravy. When she sat down, her bones seemed, not to creak, but to remain stiff and rigid. She did not take her eyes off her plate, but ate with oblivious concentration, her black hat, like a monk's hood, shielding her lonely thoughts.

Then two schoolboys arrived, caps as far to the rear as gravity would allow. They wanted milk-shakes, and one of them stared with embarrassed interest at the waitress. This was not the same girl who had served me. This one had the features of a Greek goddess, and every movement, whether it was ringing the till, or pouring tea, was made like a ballet dancer. She smiled at the admiration of the two boys with that