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UNCLE WILLIE AND THE THIEVES

(A Short Story, written for "The Listener" by DORIAN SAKER)

WE New Zealanders are a plain, matter-of-fact people, even—dare I say it?—verging on the dull. We have taken root in the ordinary, and we cannot understand any person who steps, no matter how cannily, off the road we are all treading. So we lack the most radiant, the most changeable, the most satisfying of all Pandora's gifts to men—colour: and, even worse, we are totally lacking in that sane and gentle madness, that capacity for doing the poetical when surroundings are ineffably sordid, which is characteristic of such races as the Russians, the Jews, and the Irish.

So this story I am going to write, of which the events happened in this very town, under your eyes and mine (but we were blinded by the road), were better handled, would be endowed with more grace, and nuance, by a Chekhov, or a J. M. Synge. But the fact that it is so incongruous, and strange to us, who are matter-of-fact people, is the stronger reason for telling it.

Uncle Willie (he would be offended if I told his real name) is no longer young. You could easily infer this from the grey dinginess of his beard, and its coarseness, so characteristic of old men. For twenty years now he has worn this beard, mainly for religious reasons, and also, perhaps, because by it he becomes conspicuous, whether at a concert, a lecture, or merely when in the streets. Even behind this beard, you can tell that Uncle Willie is a kind man, a truthful man, and a seeker.

SOME of us are like that. In this gargantuan, tri-dimensional jig-saw puzzle of a world, into which we have arrived like travellers at a deserted station, we remain always on the lookout for a piece of the puzzle we recognise, and sometimes, finding two pieces and joining

them, we think that the whole confusion will fall into place. But as it never does, we keep on searching; until we get old, and the desire to master the puzzle recedes, and we give in—dozing by the fire.

But not everyone. Some are obsessed by the puzzle for a lifetime, never cease the grapple, always search for that spiritual or that cultural philosopher's stone which will turn their problems to whitewashed simplicity. Such a man is Uncle Willie, and perhaps that is why he has just started to learn the violin. Anyhow it stood him in good stead, as you will see.

EVERY morning of the week Uncle Willie emerges from a side door of a large building in Featherston Street, and walks leisurely to the other end of the town, where he unlocks another door—he is always first—hangs up his coat, puts on a leather apron, and starts his work, which is cutting leather for gloves. And he has become such an adept after twenty years, that it is quite clear, as his knife runs smoothly—a panel of light—up and down the leather, that his thoughts are nowhere near the making of gloves, but are probably trying to recall a theme of Mozart, or to understand what someone (to whom these things come naturally) said in a lecture on Ganguin. For to Uncle Willie these priceless things, this love of beauty, this thrill in response to the creator's emotions, do not come easily—he has only the sad, nameless yearning, like that of a mother for a child she has never seen. And something of this shows in this bearded face, as it looks up from the work, and its kindness is clouded with wistfulness.

The day passes. At five Uncle Willie takes off his apron, puts on his coat, and leaves the factory. He walks through the town, buying here and there some food, his favourite sausages,