

apples, bread, lettuces, and finally he whisks back to the door in Featherston Street, to which he has his own key. There he lays his purchases in his drab room, and hastens upstairs to the warehouse. If anyone is there still he pats them on the shoulder and asks how things are getting on. Occasionally the manager, working late, comes from behind the glass panels of his office to see him and says:

"Hullo, Willie, what did you think of the *Waldstein* the other night?"

And the seeker, closing his eyes, replies deliberately:

"It seemed good—very good. But I'll never know anything about music."

"Well, you ought to, by now," says the manager, and then after a few more words, he tells the old man about a window in the basement which requires screwing up—for during the hours of darkness Uncle Willie is this building's caretaker.

"Otherwise," the manager concludes, "you may have a robbery on your hands. So get it fixed as soon as you can, won't you?"

"Yes," the old man mumbles. "All right. To-night." The manager, satisfied, returns to his padded swivel chair, and Willie continues his rounds.

**B**UT the memories of old men are short, and after Uncle Willie had washed his few dishes, turned the gas off at the meter, and wiped his stained beard, he forgot that there was a task in store for him, and just sat on his ragged cane chair, his eyes half closed, his feet in torn green slippers crossed in front of an electric heater. How long he remained like that his dreams alone can tell, but he says that he woke with a feeling of guilt, to find the room stuffy and oppressive. He yawned and leaned forward to switch off a part of the heater, when his hand was suddenly arrested, as if caught by another invisible hand which held it stark in the air.

"God!" he said, "who is that?" Now he hears distinctly—feet scraping on the floor, boxes being shifted, the harsh squeak of nails on wood. It was so clear, coming down from the warehouse, that he wondered why it had not impressed itself on his sleep before.

Uncle Willie trembled; the hand that had stretched out to turn off the heater returned to its owner's side, shaking. A thought came to him. "Perhaps some of the boys have come back—some skylarking, or even overtime?"

"Are you mad?" he said to himself. "Don't you know all doors are locked and no one but you and the manager have keys?"

"But the manager? What about him?"

"The manager, you old coward, is at a concert. He said so, and he wouldn't miss it for all the warehouses in Wellington."

"Then it must be . . . can only be . . . thieves!"

Ah, the broken window. That word thieves brought it back. The window he had forgotten; the manager had said that he might have robbers on his hands. By some unbelievable callousness of the gods he did.

**T**HE scrapings, the padded sounds had not been interrupted during his silent self-communion. They were worse if

anything, because they appeared to be closer above his room. And his room faced one little cul-de-sac for trucks. That meant that they were taking things to the window and dumping them, for confederates, perhaps. It couldn't be allowed—they were not to do this! Was he to stand by and watch them, these . . . bandits.

But he was an old man and not a brave one. Besides what could he do against two or three strong, young chaps—perhaps more. Obviously he would be a fool, mad!

But the sounds went on. And now the thieves, with greater confidence by reason of their uninterrupted start, began to talk to one another, and the sharp sound of their whispers, and quickly smothered laughs all fell to the lower floor where Uncle Willie stood indecisively inside his door, tugging at his scraggy beard till it bruised, and muttering. "I can't allow it . . . I can't allow it . . ."

It was a bang louder than all the other noise put together that stirred the old man into action. A case, he thought with horror—perhaps even that case of English materials—worth hundreds. If they got away with that, he would lose his job!

But no—he could not bring himself to step outside his room, creep up the stairs, and confront them.

Searching round with his eyes, hungrily, he caught sight of his violin case standing in a corner. Elastic steps took him to the case. He opened it, whipped out the bow and fiddle, and feverishly tuned it. Then he placed his latest piece picked by his teacher open on the ledge by the door, and began to play "Santa Lucia."

He put his whole heart into it. The bow swept up and down, like a saw in the hands of a giant. One foot tapped the time, his eyes were closed. If he had been in a sound-proof room, the casual observer would have thought: "Ah, a Szigeti at his practice. What freedom, what ease!" To anyone who had ears to hear it was fantastic beyond belief. But not until he had played "Santa Lucia" three times, and "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" twice, did he dare to stop. Even then he imagined that the last echo of Bach would be exploded in a fatal shot. It was a long, lingering note on which the chorale ended, stretched to five times the written breve. But when it had died away, wailing in the furthest corners of the warehouse, not a sound was to be heard. The thieves had gone.

Uncle Willie waited for half-an-hour before he moved, but when there was still no sound, he went up and inspected the floor from which the footfalls had come. Yes, there were boxes opened, and new garments on the floor, but the box was still there, ten yards from where it should have been, certainly, and underneath a window—intact, with all the signs of a disordered retreat.

"**B**Y jove, I bet they ran when they heard that 'Santa Lucia,'" I said, when Uncle Willie told me the story, "and as for 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' . . ."

"Yes, they must have been a bit scared," he replied. "If my 'Jesu' is anything like as bad to others as it sounds to me, they're still running."

Wistfully he tugged at his beard. "No. I suppose I'll never know anything about music."

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