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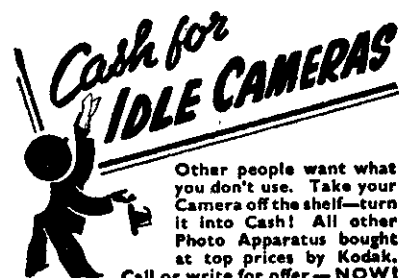
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LETTER TO A FRIEND

A SHORT STORY

Written for
"The Listener"
by

FRANK SARGESON

... You ask me whether I found any material for writing while I was down in that seaside place, so perhaps I'd better tell you about how I met a boy named Paul. Then I can leave you to judge for yourself.

I found Paul at my table one evening when I came in to dinner. He looked quite a nice sort of lad, thoughtful, rather shy, and quite good-looking with dark curly hair and a clear skin. I thought he couldn't be more than 17, though he looked older in his double-breasted suit. When our soup came, he crossed himself before he began to eat, and while we were eating, we told each other our Christian names, and he told me what school he went to. But apart from this, our appetites seemed to be too healthy to leave us much time to talk. After the meal I went out on the veranda with my pipe and he came with me. Somebody had left a copy of Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* on a chair, and he wanted to know if I'd read them. I told him yes, and he said he had, too, and his next question was a surprise. He wanted to know, did I agree that it was because the author was so very much interested in the problem of evil that he wrote horror stories?

I said yes, I thought so. But I asked him whether he'd thought that out for himself.

"Well, to be honest," he said, and he coloured rather, "I read it in a book."

So I tried to put things right by saying that was O.K., years ago I'd probably done the same myself. Then he went on to say the problem interested him very much, because he wanted to be a priest, but his father had decided to take him into his business. It was on the tip of my tongue to remark that in that case he might have splendid opportunities to study the problem first-hand. But I didn't. He was too nice a lad.

Anyhow, his next remark was another surprise. "Yes," he said, "when you think of the war you can't blame Edgar Allan Poe for writing those stories."

I agreed, but this type of New Zealand schoolboy was rather a new one on me, and I found myself too busy with my thoughts to pay much attention while he told me his father would be down the following evening, and was hoping to hire a launch so they could do some deep-sea fishing. . . *

NEXT morning he was down to breakfast before me, and just crossing himself before he began his porridge. He had on a silk shirt and white trousers that went well with his dark hair. This, I notice, is the second time I've mentioned his clothes, and I suppose it's because he was such a contrast to myself. I was making the most of my holiday, so I was going barefooted in knockabout trousers and an old shirt, and I used to get stared at in the dining-room. Everybody else would be all togged up, particularly for dinner in the evening. But unlike everybody else, Paul seemed to take no

notice at all of what I was wearing, and didn't make me feel the slightest bit self-conscious.

Anyhow, it was a wonderful morning, not a cloud to be seen, and a cool breeze just barely lifting the curtains. From where we sat we could look out and see the planes slowly rising and sinking above the trees that hid the aerodrome further down the coast. But none of them had so far come over our way, so the buzz was like something happening "off"—something important no doubt, but not yet claiming any serious attention.

It was certainly a day, and I told Paul that as it was my last, I was going for a last walk away along the ocean beach. He said he'd like to come too, so after breakfast I went out and bought some onions and a loaf of bread at the store. I put them in my rucksack, then we went down on the beach and found quite a crowd collected there already. Near where we jumped down off the breakwater there were a pair of Yanks and a girl. She had on a two-piece sun-suit, a big hat, big round, black sun-glasses and tons of make-up. She was sitting absolutely still, holding on to the shaft of a beach parasol, and the Yanks were one on each side of her, one with his arm around her and the other with his hand on her leg. But sitting there so still and silent she didn't seem alive. I thought she could easily have been a dummy figure in a set-up staged for the benefit of newspaper readers interested in the decay of morals.

I said to Paul, "I believe that's the way they do up a corpse for an American funeral." But, nice lad that he was, he said, "I beg your pardon." He didn't know what I was talking about, and it seemed to me that even if he'd noticed the tableau, he hadn't attached any point to it—which somehow seemed to me faintly surprising in view of what he'd said about the problem of evil. (Or is it, maybe, that my notions about the problem of evil are far too much tainted by my Puritan upbringing? I leave this question for you to decide).

However, we were soon round the point and away from the crowd, and there ahead of us was the long empty beach with the sea on one side and the sandhills on the other. The tide was going out, and black-backed gulls were walking on the wet sand, some of them taking off now and then to carry up pipis to drop and follow down to the sand again. The glitter on the sea was dazzling, and high up above the gannets were flying in great curves, sinking and rising, catching the sun in a flash of

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