

## SHORT STORY

(Continued from previous page)

white, hovering with beating wings before they dive-bombed that glittering surface. I thought of Blake's lines, "... the starry floor, the watery shore, is given thee till break of day. . . ." But away over at the back of the sandhills, above the trees, you could still see the planes. . . .

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WELL, as far as we could see into the distance there was nothing ahead of us but that empty beach. Yet we took all day over it and it wasn't half long enough. Paul soon lost his shyness and was quite keen to tell me his ideas about this and that. Then when we got hungry we lit a fire, grilled pipis on hot stones until they opened, and ate them with the bread and onions. Paul said he had no idea that such a meal could taste so good. He ate heartily, but not, I thought, so heartily as I did—as you know my insatiable interest in concrete things has always included things you can eat. But Paul at the age of 17 has developed a remarkable talent for the abstract. For instance, while we were lying stretched out after the meal, a cicada flew on to my arm and sat there, stridulating and clicking its wings with tremendous gusto. I caught it and got Paul to look at the three extraordinary rubies they have in their heads, and he was interested, but not so very interested. He was much more interested in what he'd been telling me about the difficulties you get into if you separate philosophy from religion—God is liable to become an absolute, he said, quite remote from a world in which everything that we experience is relative.

"Yes," I said, as I let the cicada go, "I see what you mean. As relative beings everything depends on our viewpoint. But an absolute being would have no viewpoint at all."

He seemed pleased that I was capable of showing some intelligence in the matter, and he went on, quite eagerly, to tell me some more. And I listened until a plane came over very suddenly, flying low over the sandhills, and passing right over us before it went out to sea. As always, I was fascinated by the thing, and only became conscious that Paul had gone on talking when the noise had died away enough for me to hear his voice again. But somehow the plane had killed my interest in his theorising. It was brutal of me, no doubt, but I said that immediate things had always interested me most. And I quoted Blake, "Turn away no more; why wilt thou turn away? the starry floor. . . ." But, I went on to say that up in the sky was the sort of immediate thing you were faced with these days, and you just couldn't turn away.

So he thought this over for a moment or two, then he said nearly all the boys at school wanted to be airmen, but he didn't. He said that if he had to go to the war he'd try to get into the ambulance. As he'd done the previous evening, he coloured a little as he said this, and I thought perhaps it was something he'd never said to anyone before. It affected me, anyhow, but I could only bring myself to say I thought it a fine

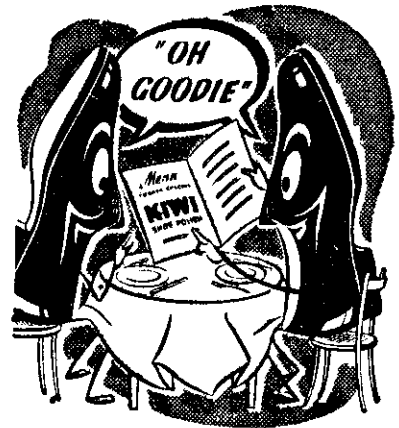
idea, and then I suggested we go further along the beach. . . .

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IT was close on dinnertime when we got back, and Paul's father had arrived and was sitting on the veranda. Paul introduced us (he had to ask me for my name, and up till then I hadn't known his) then he was told he'd better go and tidy himself up for dinner. I sat down for a rest, and his father talked to me. I don't intend to tell you his conversation though, you know the sort of thing off by heart. There was nothing at all special about him. He sprang the usual awkward question on me—what line was I in?

And he said that after the war property down in those parts should be valuable. He thought the place was wasted as it was, but perhaps the Yanks might help us to make it more attractive—he could see no reason why it shouldn't become one of the most popular playgrounds of the Pacific. . . .

Listening to him I'd now and then catch myself feeling sorry for him. Or Paul would flash across my mind and I'd feel even sorrier for him. And maybe all the time it was myself I was feeling sorriest for. There's just one last point, though. There was salad for dinner, and round the edge of the dish were chunks of raw carrot. Paul's father used his fork to eat one of these. I was quite cheered up when I noticed Paul follow my example and use his fingers. . . .

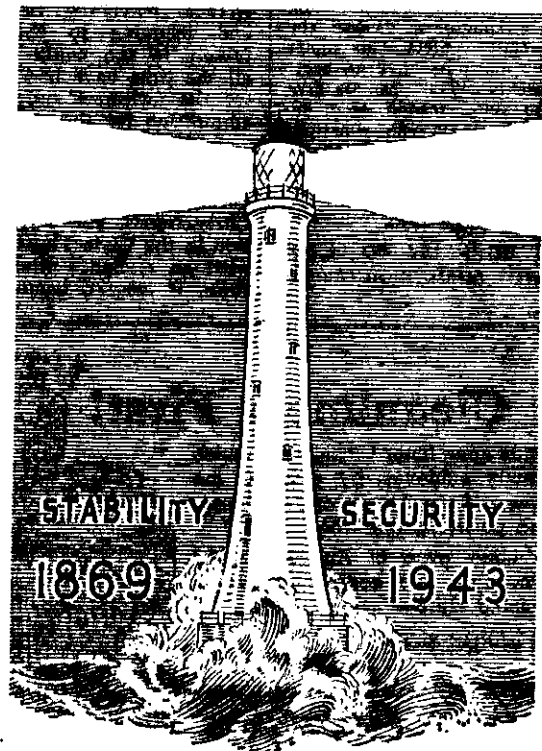


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