

NEW ZEALAND NOVELS

What A Competition Revealed

LAST year the Progressive Publishing Society offered a prize of £100 for a New Zealand novel, and asked Professor G. W. von Zedlitz and Dr. G. H. Scholefield, both of Wellington, to judge the entries. There were 96 entries, nearly all of them full-sized novels ranging from 60,000 to more than 200,000 words.

The judges have now announced their award, the prize going to Mrs. Jess Whitworth, of Auckland, for a novel called "Otago Interval."

We are permitted to make these extracts from their comments on the competition as a whole:

"IN the opinion of the judges, the competition, regarded as a means of encouraging talent and discovering promise, has been a success. Fully half of the entries, for many diverse reasons, deserved to be read with some care; and, more surprising still, there were a dozen or so that somewhat hypercritical and certainly novel-weary judges actually enjoyed reading, without wanting to skip. Of the novels carefully examined, some were the work of experienced authors, whose identity was easily recognisable; others were contributed by very young writers, full of promise and ingenious enough to disarm a misogynist; some came from clever foreigners still handicapped by the less familiar language; many were distinguished by some gift, imagination or humour or power of observation or some form of accurate knowledge; not a few would leave readers with a feeling of affectionate respect for the personality revealed; nearly all were marred by faults that might be cured by further experience, or by taking greater pains. Half-a-dozen are publishable as they stand, with the prospect of favourable reception by critics and tolerable sales; many others are suitable as press serials; some would make film scenarios of a popular type; a few might be best sellers in the invidious sense of the words. The worst of them is no worse than many a book that kind friends are sure one will like.

Dictionaries Would Have Helped

"On the other hand, it must be admitted that nine-tenths of the writers cannot punctuate, and that almost as many seem to make little or no use of a dictionary. Few avoid the solecisms—or neologisms—current in New Zealand, such as "He sent for my brother and I, but only me could go." Well, *l'usage est roi*; the judges did not account these errors as hopeless defects; it is more deadly to be boring than to be illiterate, and pretentiousness is uglier than ignorance. Besides, a publisher's proof reader can make great improvements. One case may be quoted as typical: in one novel certain excellences so impressed the judge that he read it a second time, aloud, to a listener; then regretfully came to the conclusion that to make it fit for publication the writer would need not a proof reader but a literary collaborator willing to recast it sentence by sentence.

Whose the Fault?

"Employers and teachers often complain that the standard of English in New Zealand is low and getting lower.

Here we have a number of eager, ambitious, intelligent writers, with such good natural gifts, whose style is poor, who misuse words and repeat hackneyed phrases, who stumble from tautology to tautology. Is it somebody's fault? Is it possible for mistaken ideas or mistaken methods to be corrected in a country that is still very young, and has shown that it can do well sometimes? The English language is not the least noble part of our national heritage; whatever others may do, writers at least should endeavour to treat it with respect. A study of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* or Wall's *New Zealand English* would help them to avoid nearly all the pitfalls. Apart from such generalities, in order to give useful advice one would have to consider each novel by itself. These are however, a few points that apply to more or less numerous groups.

"First: if you have an axe to grind, don't make it screech as you turn the wheel. Some writers—and not the least deserving—were rather too earnest in their determination to put across their views on social problems (what Professor Gordon calls the New Zealand passion for reforming the world). It requires great judgment and self-restraint on the part of the author to avoid spoiling the story for the sake of the opinions he favours. Suggestion is much more potent than bald reiteration; the greatest pacifist novel ever written contains no word of pacifist propaganda.

"Secondly: when characters in a novel speak, they should speak as they would speak. Easy to say, very difficult to carry out consistently. A considerable number of these writers make all their characters, old or young, high and low, talk exactly alike in the English of the self-conscious high school pupil or undergraduate; others make the early settlers use colloquial slang of recent origin; an anachronism that a reference to Partridge's Dictionary of Slang or to Murray's Dictionary would enable them to avoid.

"It all seems to come back to the infinite capacity for taking pains. The talent is there—it's only a case of doing without the napkin."

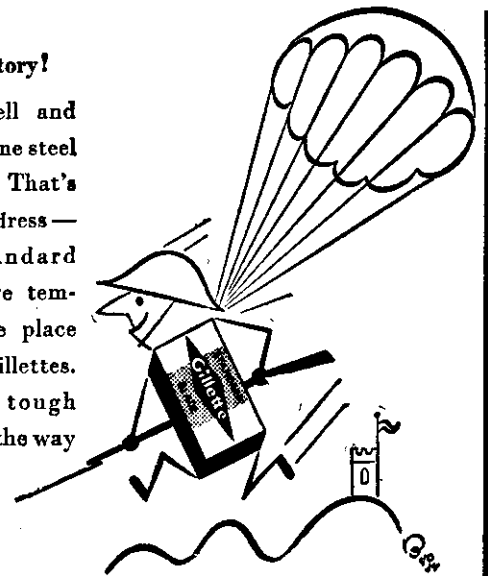
"Life Begins Anew"

PABLO CASALS, Spanish 'cellist, recently gave his first concert in London since the war. With the BBC Symphony Orchestra he played the Elgar and Schumann Concertos to an audience of 6,000 in the Royal Albert Hall. After the concert, says *London Calling*, Casals, obviously moved by the fact of being in England again, and by the warmth of his welcome by the orchestral players, said, "Life begins anew. I do not feel that it is a long time since I was with the orchestra. It has been with me all through the war, when I have secretly listened to its broadcasts, and it is a joy to see again old friends among the players."

Quiet, unassuming, yet with an unmistakable force of personality, Casals looked at the friends who had gathered round him, and remarked, almost as if to himself, "you know how I love England. . . ."

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