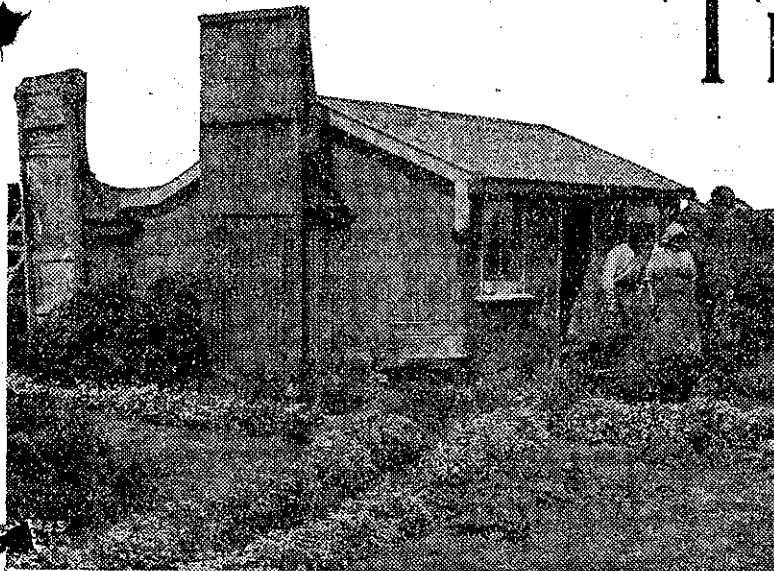


THE SIGNAL

PRIZE WINNER IN PLAY COMPETITION



IN making his award, Mr. Victor Lloyd writes: One very striking fact has emerged from a close study of the plays submitted, and that is that there is plenty of material available in the backblocks of New Zealand for the dramatist. Quite an appreciable number of the plays had as a motif the snobbery of the townsfolk as opposed to the inherent gentility of the people who live in the backblocks. Whether this is a state of affairs which exists in fact is, fortunately, no purpose of mine to discover. My particular task was to decide which of the large number of plays submitted was the best play. And a very difficult task it has been.

It has been very well said that if one is to avoid criticism one should state one's opinions, but never give one's reasons. I am going to ignore that most excellent dictum and indicate the features of the various plays which have impressed me most.

Every play, be it a one-act or two or three or four, should have certain qualities, and they are these: Idea (or plot); effective or convincing characterisation; crescendo (or the rapidly increasing pace at which the action moves); quality of dialogue (literary quality if you prefer); sound dramatic construction; and, finally, climax. Added to which there is that elusive quality so hard to define, yet so very easy to recognise, called "actability," meaning that the play will act well. Some plays act well and read poorly, others read well and act badly. The most experienced managers and producers often fail to recognise a good play when they read it; which may be some consolation to those competitors who have failed to secure a prize. I would like to say at this point that quite a number of the plays would have been considerably improved had they been rewritten. Arnold Bennett once told me that he never finished writing a play until the first night of the show itself; he was continually seeing places where it could be improved; and Tolstoy is said to have rewritten "Anna Karenina" thirty times over. So many of the plays submitted had an air of "just being dashed off." However, perhaps I am trespassing on ground on which I have no right, and had better get on with my job.

Having regard, therefore, to the points which I have enumerated above, I have awarded the first prize to "The Signal," by Helen Gordon. In this excellent play a fine sense of theatre and clever characterisation are displayed. The story moves progressively and logically; the dialogue has good literary qualities and is, to me, reminiscent of that great Irish playwright, J. M. Synge. Moreover, the story is worth telling and has been told well; the action does not flag, and the interest is upheld until the climax, which is very dramatic, is reached. I have only one fault to find with it, and that is that the characters of Moira and Clive (who does not appear) are perhaps just a little exaggerated. Moira is, however, Irish, and this is

probably sufficient justification for her hysterical nature, while Clive has been painted rather blacker than was dramatically necessary. But this, of course is hypercriticism. "The Signal" is a very good play, and the author of it may well feel proud of having written it. I hope she will write many more plays equally as good. "The Signal," by the way, is essentially a New Zealand play in setting.

MY second choice is "The Interlude," by Constance Merritt, which is as different from "The Signal" in plot, in feeling, and in construction, as it could be. It is what G. Bernard Shaw would describe as a disquisitory play; that is, a play which has as its object a careful inquiry into any subject by means of dramatised argument. "The Interlude" is a very fine example of this type of play, and it is, if anything, of higher literary quality than any play submitted. Its principal fault lies in the fact that in action it is slow and the individual speeches are rather long. The writer of this play has an unusual ability to present the various viewpoints on a problem through the mouths of the characters. It is a difficult subject she has tackled, but she has come through with flying colours. Her dialogue is forceful, crisp and apt. Her two main characters are very ably outlined and a fine sense of the theatre is shown in the very artistic curtain, which is quite in character with the woman in the play.

Third place has been awarded to "Aunt Lizzie's Friend." This is a clever little farce, and its dialogue is bright, and in places really very funny. It should act splendidly, and would probably be as good fun to act as to see. The characterisation has that touch of caricature without which a farce becomes low in quality. The only fault I have to find is that the plot is not quite novel, but this need not worry the author, for critics of Shakespeare never tire of telling us that his plots were not his own.

"The Impostor" has a typical New Zealand setting and a good plot. It carries a neat surprise at the end, and is certainly well worth rewriting. It would act well in my opinion.

"So This is Earth" is another play which interested me very much. The plot is new and interesting, but it lacks conviction, particularly the volte face of the modern mother and daughter at the end of the play. The dialogue, however, has quite a professional and finished quality.

"Little Paradise" is a charming little fantasy, poetically and rhythmically phrased. It would give amateur producers plenty of scope for demonstrating their ability to stage an artistic production. What it lacks in drama it makes up for in careful and, in places, beautiful writing.

"Better Luck Next Time" is set in London. The plot is good and the writing of the dialogue is well done, but the principal character is not a very pleasant



VICTOR S. LLOYD,
a prominent dramatist and
playwright, who acted as judge
in the play competition.