

writers upon the subject, few have treated it with a wider knowledge of its details and a more systematic classification of its branches than Julian Magnus, in the current *North American Review*. "The causes," he says, "which have mainly contributed to bring about the present unsatisfactory condition of the American stage"—which, that is to say, have brought about the overwhelming success of low comedy, flashy melodrama, dazzling spectacular plays, the coarse "gag," and the degenerate ballet,—are

- "General mercantile depression ;
- "The lack of particularly good English or French plays ;
- "The want of encouragement of American authors ;
- "The rise and growth of acrobatic comedy ;
- "The prevalence of the combination system ;
- "The fact that management is so largely in the hands of mere speculators ;

"The flooding of the profession by novices from comic opera companies."

These seven suggestions of fact Julian Magnus proceeds to elaborate and explain in a manner so thoroughly satisfactory that we are perfectly willing to accept them from him as undeniable truths, even did not our own observation endorse them. Where we would disagree with the magazinist is in his statement of their relation to "the present unsatisfactory condition of the American stage." He puts them forward as causes ; we feel more inclined to accept some of them, at least, as results.

WE could understand "general mercantile depression" affecting this profession, as it affects all others whose members bring luxury to sell. We could understand managers being compelled by such depression to throw open their doors at lower prices, and to reduce their expenditure in stage setting ; but it has had no such effect. Prices remain the same, and the *mise en scene* is more gorgeous than ever. We could understand an effect of mercantile depression upon the financial position of members of the profession. Indeed, as managers are but middlemen, we should look for it there first. But salaries are higher than ever. Excellence is at a premium, as it always is. The only difference is the line of excellence, the deplorable line we have indicated. How has mercantile depression affected this ? Perhaps in this way, we are told—that stage expenses having grown so enormously to meet the modern requirements of consistent and harmonious setting, managers must ensure the support of a certain class of the community—a class below the level that is greatly affected by mercantile depression, that swaggeringly spends its half dollar on its vulgar pleasures without feeling the necessity for economy entailed upon those whose social expenses and responsibilities are greater. This is a species of flattering unction which we must regard with suspicion. The average audience of this season, by no means a season highly creditable to Toronto, has not been composed of people of this sort, but of apparently intelligent and well-educated, well-dressed citizens, whom a fluctuation in values of any sort might very easily be supposed to concern. But, we are gravely informed, in times of mercantile depression the depressed resort in great numbers to this kind of entertainment for diversion from their financial sorrows. The gentleman who, in periods of elation—or inflation—would take a box and his family to witness the sorrows of the hapless Prince of Denmark, betakes himself in times of sorrow and collapses to see "A Rag Baby." And thus, we are asked to believe, low comedy thrives during times of general commercial dismay. There is a certain plausibility about this statement, and but for the fact that a man of culture and refinement is not apt to lose these qualities in any state of the market, we might compel ourselves to the point of accepting it. But, in view of this and other facts, it is not easy to connect such mercantile depression as we have experienced with the degeneracy of the drama in any way.

THE "combination system" of management, the element of speculation, are matters neither of chance nor of predestination, but the result of circumstances which the public will dictate. If resident companies and the centralisation of talent could be made profitable, we would have them ; and if managers with a sincere desire for the elevation of the drama by legitimate means could bring that desire into paying competition with less praiseworthy motives, the speculators would become discouraged. The novices from the comic opera companies, and the introduction of acrobatic comedy, are clearly attributable to the same cause. We, who gave comparatively meagre houses to greet the fine, rare, and delicate comedy of Rhea, to be contrasted with the packed audiences that have applauded talent of the opposite sort, whenever it has appeared in Toronto this winter, should not be hard to convince of that.

As to the material, "the lack of particularly good English or French plays," certainly bears strongly upon the situation. But has the vitality

of the old master-playwrights spent itself, that their work is pardonably overshadowed by such productions as "Pop" and "Oh, What a Night?" American authors truly receive scant encouragement to direct their talent toward play-writing. But who is to be reproached for this? Not the managers, surely. For a scarcity of good literature we would not blame the publishers. They publish what profits them most, and if it be foolish, idle, vulgar work, it is simply an indication of the foolish, idle, vulgar taste of the people, who dictate, in these days, no more what they shall read than what they shall see and hear. The time is past when the drama was superior to its patrons, and taught them lofty ideas of itself. It is now the most subordinate of all the arts, thanks to its direct connection with the purse and the breadth of its power of pleasing. The sovereign people dictate nothing more absolutely than the conditions of those once more arbitrary influences that mould the taste and form the opinion.

SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN.

WITH STRUGGLE, STRENGTH.

I SET my face to the bitter wind,
And my heart to the freezing sky ;
The arrow drift of the sleet may blind
And sting as it hurtles by,

Yet with hot blood coursing to either cheek
From the strong red heart within,
I laugh aloud and sing as I seek
My onward way to win.

For the cold and wind and the pelt of rain
Are a whip to nerve and limb ;
And the harden'd frame is aglow again
In spite of their fury grim.

Then, hurrah ! for the leaden day so dark,
With its steely sleet and hail !
The cumber'd path and the tempest's wrath,
In the roaring wall of gale !

BOHÉMIEN.

NOT AMERICANISMS.

IN one of the stories in "Crowded Out," the new book by "Seranus," reference is made to the word "guess" as an Americanism. This statement has been often corrected, but it still appears every now and again with a strange persistence that almost discourages criticism. Yet the truth remains that "guess" is a good old word in common use in England before America was heard of. Wyclif, Chaucer, and Gower employed the word frequently, as for example :—

"And thei . . . seiden to eche other. Who gessist thou, is this?"—*Mark iv. 41.*

"And thei, as thei sygen him wandrynge on the see, gessiden [him] for to be a fantum."—*Mark vi. 49.*

"Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gessë."
—*Canterbury Tales, Prologue.*

"Now woldë som men waiten, as I gessë
That I shulde tellen . . . etc."
—*The Man of Lawes Tale, line 246.*

"They can not gessë
That she hath doon so gret a wikkednessë."
—*Ibid. line 622.*

"Thei sihen gret richesse
Wel more than thei couthen gesse."
—*Confessio Amantis, Book V.*

It would seem that at a period subsequent to that represented in these extracts the word "gesse," in the sense indicated, became obsolete in literary English, but continued to be used colloquially throughout England for many years. The Puritans evidently brought the word over to New England with them in the *Mayflower* ; and while it afterwards died out in the Old Land, a vigorous new life has been accorded to it in America. A similar observation is applicable to the word "reckon," which some misinformed English writers are also fond of calling an Americanism. The translators of the King James version of the Bible had surely no suspicion that they were committing a barbarism in using it. *Vide Romans viii. 18, et passim.*

It may not be out of place here to call attention to the spelling of the word "gesse" as employed by the writers quoted from. It has often been urged as an insuperable objection to any scheme for reforming our orthography that such a process would obscure the derivation of the altered words. But it is evident from this word, and from very many others that could be cited, that our spelling might be greatly simplified merely by returning to the old etymological forms. A. STEVENSON.