THEATRES AND PLAYS.

Two Contributions That Are Vigorous and Timely.

Rev. John Talbot Smith and Rev. Thomas P. McLaughlin Criticize Modern Stage Productions The Part the Church Assumed in Dealing With the Impure Drama in the Past.

The prevalence of the impure drama in New York has drawn forth a vigorous protest from a number of true friends of the stage. The New York Journal publishes letters from prominent clergymen and laymen whose voices are unanimous for a reform of the present debauchery. Rev. John Talbot Smith, the well-known novelist, who has just entered the ranks of dramatists himself, writes:—Whoever takes an interest in the stage as a factor in our social development, or as one form of popular amusements, cannot but feel alarmed and grieved at the signs of degeneracy which have set in for the Broadway stage. It has long been a matter of keen regret that New York managers, with a single exception, banished Shakesperare and classical comedy from the metropolis, depriving the lovers of the best dramatic literature of a high form of entertainment, which the country at large is able to enjoy. Such actors as Keene James, Warde, Whiteside, Marlowe and Rhea find little favor in New York, but receive enthusiastic and profitable attention in the provinces with their Shakesperian plays. That managers have little use for them in this city is misfortune enough; that the same managers now find it more profitable

TO EXPLOIT THE INDECENT THAN THE WHOLESOME

on such a stage as that of the Empire is a calamity. Mr. Charles Frohman is an old offender in this respect. "The Conquerors" is not his first attempt to popularize the indecent drama. Not many years ago he brought out on the stage of the Academy a melodrama, "The Sporting Duchess," in which for the first time was seen on a respectable stage a precise, well understood and loathsome attempt to outrage a woman.

His offences have multiplied with the years, and in "The Conquerors" he has attained that point of indecency which drives from his theatre the young, the modest and the respectable. Hoyt's, the Herald Square and the Casino have surrendered themselves bodily to the work of debauching the tastes and the consciences of the theatre goers. Mr. Oscar Hammerstein attained notoriety in his enterprise at the Olympia for attempting to do for the music hall what his brother managers have done for the legitimate stage. Financially he failed Nevertheless he did much to promote the success of the nasty in vaudeville.

THE GENERAL IMPRESSION

is that the stage is degenerating and that these are the signs. Certainly within ten years the stage has changed very much for the worse in certain directions; but I am inclined to think from long and close observation of the American theatre that its general constitution is still sound, and the present in ications of debility may yet disappear. It is the custom in speaking of the stage to confound three things—the drama, the players and the theatres. These three factors make up what is called the stage In discussing the fortunes of the stage it is well to keep in mind these factors to avoid confusion of thought and expression. Now, it is a matter of fact that we can have a clean drama morally and very unclean actors and theatres at the same time. Twenty five years ago the actor was a social nondescript, and the theatre very often a place in which the vicious plied their trades; yet the drama, though of a rough kind, was very clean. To-day the actor holds a respectable and

DISTINGUISHED PLACE IN SOCIETY,

and the theatres are as safe as any public institution, while in many ways drama has lost its original cleanliness. It is very far from having lost it altogether. Mr. Charles Frohman himself has done very good work in promoting some forms of the drama, which have delighted the hearts of all who are interested in the moral strength of the stage His success of last year, "Under the Red Robe," and his present success, "The Little Minister," are instances to the point.

While we have managers like Mr. Daly, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Dan Frohman and Mr. Pitou, and stars of the temper of Mansfield, Warde and others, not to mention the host of clever minor actors whose plays and companies are irreproachable, there is no need to say that the stage has begun to degenerate. While vaudeville is managed by such men as Keith there will be

A BULWARK AGAINST CORRUPTION

on that side; and while such successes in light opera can be achieved as those made by the Bostonians, the Castle Square Company and Francis Wilson, the purveyors of the indecent need not be feared. A survey of the whole field leads me to believe that the stage keeps the upward movement of the past quarter century, and that a downward movement has not begun However, indecency is making a strong effort to obtain a financial foothold, and "The Conquerors" is the entering wedge. The question is, in what manner shall the interested proceed to form a successful opposition to its further progress. If it were possible to subject the head of each offending manager to a sincere bumping, or the soles of his feet to the bamboo rod, there would be an end to difficulty. The manager's pocket, however, is the point of attack, and also the respectability of his theatre. How can we reach them? From time immemorial the virtuous have had a curious way of

DEALING WITH THE STAGE.

While it was comparatively clean, they patronized it. When it fell into disorder they stayed at home, ostracised it and barred it with statutes. The Christian bodies have often anathematized it. This conduct is in curious contrast with their behavior toward other public institutions needing reform. When the government of a city has fallen into evil ways the reformers leave their firesides, fall upon the wayward officials, drive them into jail and the general outer darkness and administer the government themselves.

The evil influence of bad literature and depraved journalism has been met by the Christian leaders with Christian literature and clean journalism, the clergy themselves taking the editorial chair and wielding the pen of poet, novelist, dramatist. Such public nuisances as the saloon have been opposed by the parish clubs. But the stage in its decadence is cast off by all and allowed to do what damage it may.

St. Gregory's Plan.

Who can account for such inconsistencies? When St. Gregory of Nazianzen found the stage of the fourth century worthless and vile, he not only denounced it from his pulpit, but he proceeded to compose dramas of a religious and moral characthr that would edify, instruct and please the people, where the ordinary drama degraded them. So popular did these dramas become that the writers of the East went into them extensively, and the clergy acted them before the people, at least such of them as related to the life of Christ and the deeds of the saints. In fact, the acting of them became the sole privilege of the priests, and laymen would as soon have thought of saying Mass as playing one of their characters. It was the presentation of these plays at the council of Constance, between the sessions, that brought them to the notice of the English bishops, who imported them to England; and thus began the miracle play, which gave birth to the English drama. St Gregory found, as every leader has found in each age since, that the people desire the drama as an entertainment, and will attend the theatre in spite of all prohibition. Therefore he attempted to give them a clean stage, being too shrewd and resourceful a man to adopt the stand-off policy of modern times.

There is no need to describe the popularity of the drama as a social amusement. It is as firmly rooted in the hearts of the people as the novel. Mark the phenomenal

PROGRESS OF THE AMATEUR STAGE.

Although it is the outcome of the national life, and carries the marks of the national character, the stage can be made a tremendous force for good directly. Indirectly it always portrays the triumph of virtue and the defeat of vice. It is a school in which millions get an education of a kind. What a splendid view of the court of Nero and the persecution of the early Christians was provided in "The Sign of the Cross!" How near to us does Mr. Daly bring ancient England in his presentation of "The Merry Wives of Windsor!" What superb glimpses into the past history of men and into their present nature does such an actor as Mansfield give his audience in his round of plays! What sermon could speak more powerfully of a wretched death than his portrayal of the Baron de Chevrial? And apart from the educational value of the clean and purposeful drama, what pleasant, stimulating, healthful recreation does not the well-ordered stage provide? The memories of a fine play, finely acted, are lifelong. With the multitude, whose lives are purely objective, this fact is significant. Therefore, leaders of the people, both religious and civil, cannot afford to neglect

THE STAGE IN ITS DECADENCE,

or to refuse it help in trying times, or to deny it their countenance in its prosperity. Because they did these things in earlier days the stage became an outlaw and attacked all travellers on the highway—religion, morality, public decency and public order. We may need another St Gregory to prevent a repetition of that blunder, The present situation demands a power which rests in no man and in no organization. There is no censor to call Charles Frohman to account and to fling "The Conquerors" back into the mud out of which Paul Potter fished it. There are no statutes which would open the penitentiary to authors, managers and actors of the modern extravaganza. The powerful journal and the honest critic are the only weapons which can stand for decency against the attacks of obscenity on the stage. I have heard the clergy denounce particular journals, authors and books from the pulpit, but they draw the line at the bad play. I have heard them denounce the saloon in general, and a particular saloon and its owner, but they are not supposed to know a dangerous play, an unscrupulous manager or a disreputable theatre. The journal and the critic must make the protest against indecency on the stage. It must be said that in this case they have done their duty well. It would have raised Charles Frohman very high in the general esteem had he headed the protest against "The Conquerors" and withdrawn it at once. He must be classed with the managers who are doing their best to defile the Broadway theatres. Fortunately that important highway, as far as the stage is concerned, does not mean the country, not even indicate the general state of morality on the stage.

Rev. Thomas P. McLaughlin,

rector of the Church of the Transfiguration, New York, the "poet priest," writes:

If the play called "The Conquerors" is as shockingly indecent as some of my friends have painted it, then, indeed, indecency on the stage has reached its climax. It is deplorable that the tendency of some managers seems to be to give entertainments which attract only the vicious and immoral.

No one can deny that the stage has deteriorated during the past few years. It is hard to account for this degeneracy unless the moral conscience of the people has also degenerated. I cordially welcome any movement which will make the stage purer and better. I recognize, and every minister of the gospel recognizes, what an effective moulder of the minds of the masses the stage is. It preaches, whether for good or for evil, with as much force and efficiency as the pulpit. But alas! in these days it is used as a power for evil rather than an instrument to accomplish good. Take up the newspapers and read the character of the plays now on the boards, and you will find with few exceptions that their tendency is bad, and that they demoralize rather than elevate the moral life of the community. In early times the church was the supporter of the drama, and it was then recognized as a powerful educator. Does the church to-day support the theatre? No. The reason is obvious. Daily we witness examples of harm wrought

BY THE TRASHY PRODUCTIONS

which are given at many of the so-called reputable houses. They vitiate the moral sense of the young; they inspire lessons of sensuality, and young men and young women learn from them to scoff at some of the purest sentiments taught at the mother's knee. I deplore this state of affairs. A good, healthy play is a delight and a comfort to see, and it should afford healthy recreation, and not leave bad impressions. No play which shocks the modesty or tends to arouse the baser passions should be tolerated. I heartily favor any outcry against such monstrous productions as are given at some of the theatres in this city. The moral sense of the community should be so thoroughly aroused that their withdrawal would be an immediate necessity.

Frederic R. Coudert,

the distinguished lawyer, writes:—I earnestly believe that some effort should be made to stop the production of indecent and immoral plays. I have not been to the theatre lately, but from what I hear some of the plays now running are worse than those given at the Theatre Royale in Paris. I have seen some of them there, and if those here are worse we have indeed reached a limit to our endurance. It is hard to suggest a way to remedy this evil. A censorship would meet with legal objections. It could be construed as an abridgement of the liberties of the people. It seems to me that the Society for the Prevention of Vice might have jurisdiction in such matters. The officers of that organization might give the subject their attention and see if they have not the legal right to interfere with the production of immoral or indecent plays Then, too, it seems to me that the police have a right to interfere. And we should see that they do their duty in this connection. Surely, these forces should be strong enough to restrain the presentation of plays that debauch the morality of the young. I do not believe in giving too much publicity to these nauseous plays. For a time they will thrive on publicity Compel the police to do their duty, and then let the people keep away from the the places where the obscene prevails and we will soon drive out the vicious in the theatrical business. Anything which debauches the moral sentiment of the people is a grievous wrong, and should not be tolerated. The toleration of indecency on the stage is a police regulation, I think, and their attention should be promptly called to the offenders. If the police fail to do their duty, then the people must themselves force the police to action.

Note and Comment

At a meeting of the New England Sabbath Protective League, held in Boston last week, one of the preachers present gave utterance to the falsehood that "the Catholic Church is not in sympathy with the observance of the Sabbath." Catholics are all taught to "keep holy the Sabbath Day;" but they believe with the Divine Founder of their Church that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

* * *

A bill that should become law has been introduced into the New York State Legislature by Senator Ellsworth. It provides that any person who, as principal or agent, conducts or engages in the business of editing, publishing, printing, selling, distributing, or circulating any licentious, indecent, corrupt, depraved, or libelous paper, or a paper which corrupts, depraves, or injures the minds or morals of the public, or of its readers, or of the people among whom it circulates, is guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction of any such offense shall be punished by a fine of not more than $1 000, or by imprisonment for not more than one year, or by both such fine and imprisonment for the first offense. Upon conviction of any subsequent offense such person shall be punished by imprisonment of not less than one year or more than five years, and in addition thereto the defendant and his agents and employés shall be prohibited from thereafter publishing, printing, selling, or distributing such paper or any paper of the same name. If the defendant is a domestic corporation its charter shall be forfeited, and if a foreign corporation it shall be prohibited from further doing business in this State.

A similar bill ought to be introduced into the Quebec Legislature, where it would stand a good chance of passing.

* * *

The general scope of the amendments to the jury laws to be offered in the present session of the New York Legislature has been agreed on by the legislative committee of the Citizen Jurors' Committee, although the formal draft has not yet been made. The fundamental purpose of the proposed amendments is to have every citizen competent for jury duty do six days of such duty once every three years, whether by attendance or actual jury work. To promote this purpose it is proposed to abolish the property qualification of $250, to reduce the number of jurors in some of the inferior courts from twelve to six, and to reduce panels from 100 to 50 It is stated that the lawyers are cordially in sympathy with the suggested amendments. The draft of the amendments when prepared by the committee will be submitted to the Association of the Bar, which has officially offered its aid in the work. The members of the committee are anxious to consult the wishes of the lawyers and judges.

* * *

The overtures for peace and unity which have been passing between Mr John Dillon and Mr. John E. Redmond are producing good fruit. The night before the recent elections in the Stephen's Green Division of Dublin, John Dillon appeared on the same platform with the Parnellite candidate and made a strong appeal to all his supporters to sink their differences in a patriotic effort to wrest the seat from the Unionists.

This was the first time since the split that any member of the Irish party has spoken for a Parnellite candidate, and it may prove the first real step toward ultimate reunion of the Irish Nationalists and the Parnellites.

The Dillonites worked manfully in unison throughout the contest.

Count Plunkett intends to petition against the validity of the return of his opponent on the grounds of fraud and forgery of voters' claims.

* * *

There are few Irishmen who have not read of the tradition that St. Brendan, the famous Irish navigator of the sixth century, discovered America. Commenting upon a circular issued by a clergyman for funds to restore the Cathedral of Clonfert, where the saint's body reposes, a writer in a New York journal, who had never heard of the tale before, thus comments on it, under a large sensational heading:—"Columbus must take a back seat. John Cabot's fame is dimmed Even the roving Norsemen, who are supposed to have left traces of their early visit to the Western continent in the shape of round towers and such like, must surrender their glory."

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Ask the Rev. Robert McLarney, B A., Canon of Clonfert Protestant Episcopal Cathedral, Banagher, Ireland, You've heard of Banagher, perhaps, in connection with the familiar Irish saying, 'That bates Banagher, and Banagher bates the divil!'

"That's what you'll say when you learn that Canon McLarney, in a circular which he is scattering over the face of the earth, calling attention to the restoration fund for the renovation of his church, announces in all seriousness that the honor of discovering America, instead of being credited to Italy, Spain, the British or the Norsemen, should rightfully belong to St. Brendan, the founder of the very church in which the good Canon holds forth every Sunday, and an adventurous son of the Emerald Isle, who, as far back as the sixth century, set a pace which his fellow countrymen have kept up ever since."

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The Queen has decided to throw open the State rooms at Kensington Palace, where she was born. They have been closed since 1780 and have lately undergone elaborate repairs and careful restoration The Palace at Kew is also to be opened as a museum and the grounds attached are to be used as Botanical Gardens These are considered valuable additions to the historical treasures of the country.

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(ORGANIZED, 13th November, 1883.)

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Applicants for membership or any one desirous of information regarding the Branch may communicate with the following officers:

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