

The PRESIDENT.—I am sure you will wish me to thank the gentlemen who have come here this afternoon for their very eloquent speeches. Our distinguished friend Sir James Crichton-Browne has said many things which must prove subjects for our consideration. I have pleasure in acknowledging how much obliged we are to him for the very able way in which he has dealt with the subject.

The Council of the Association have not been indifferent to this very serious question, and have prepared a resolution, which I am asked to bring before the meeting, viz.: "That it be referred to the Council of the Association to consider as to the appointment of a sub-committee for the investigation and collection of evidence, and for practical suggestions as to the isolation of phthisical patients in asylums."

The President having put the resolution to the meeting, it was unanimously accepted.

On the Mental State of Auguste Comte. By WILLIAM
W. IRELAND.

IN the *Revue Philosophique de la France*, tome xlv, 1898, there are three articles filling eighty-seven pages on this subject, by Dr. G. Dumas. In order to appreciate their importance it may be well to give a short review of what was previously made known of the mental aberrations of that philosopher by his friend and biographer, M. Littré.⁽¹⁾

Auguste Comte was born on the 19th January, 1798. His parents were Catholics, his mother especially was dominated by the beliefs of that church. Delicate in health, with a weak digestion, he was from the beginning fond of study. When no older than twenty-four, Auguste Comte had begun to plan that system of philosophy which embraced so wide a view of the sciences. On the 19th of February, 1825, when about twenty-seven years of age, he married Caroline Massin, who is described as a bookseller. M. Littré adds in a note the date of the trade licence of Mademoiselle Massin, October, 1822, and tells us that Comte became acquainted with her through M. Cerclet, a

man known amongst the innovators of the times, and who was one of the witnesses to the marriage. M. Comte's family objected, and Auguste Comte would have used the prescribed formalities to dispense with the parental consent had not the damsel been opposed to this. The required consent was at length accorded. As M. Comte admitted no theological belief, the marriage was purely civil. A few months after he took his wife to Montpellier, where she was well received. At this time he had nothing to depend upon save teaching mathematics and writing on scientific subjects. In April, 1826, he commenced a course of lectures in Paris to a distinguished audience, but after three lectures the course was interrupted by an attack of mania, said to be caused by excessive mental work and quarrels with the St. Simonians. This outburst was ushered in slowly by an unusual irritability and acts of violence to his wife. On the 14th April Comte made a determined attempt to drag his wife with him into a lake, and they were only saved from drowning by the strength and courage of the young woman.

On the 18th of April, 1826, Auguste Comte was placed under the charge of Esquirol. During this detention his mother made a formal effort to get her son withdrawn, in order to place him in a religious establishment. In the application she named Madame Auguste Comte as "the person with whom he lived," and attributed his derangement to her conduct. This irregularity was the cause of the failure of the application. After being under Esquirol's care for seven months and a half Comte was withdrawn by his wife, no way improved. She was confident that no treatment would succeed if the person directing it did not know the character of her husband. With some general medical directions from Esquirol, Madame Comte carried out her plan of treatment, which was to endeavour to procure whatever he desired, and to cross his wishes as little as possible. Living alone with him on a small allowance from his father, she indulged his whims and endured his threats. Once, when she was out on some message, he left the house and threw himself into the Seine. He was rescued with difficulty. Not recognising the validity of a civil marriage, Comte's mother got an order from the Archbishop of Paris that they should be married by a priest. After the ceremony Auguste Comte signed his name, adding the words "Brutus Bonaparte." At the end of the year 1828 Comte had completely recovered

his health and vigour. In 1832 he was made examiner in mathematics for the *École Polytechnique*, which assured him a competent income. This post required his travelling to different parts of France. To judge from his letters, the duties were by no means light. He complains that for six years he had not enjoyed entire leisure for twenty days at a time. As examiner he excited lively opposition with only a vague support. His anti-theological views, of which he made no secret, also caused irritation amongst the zealous Catholics. The uncertain nature of his tenure—for he required to be re-elected every year—kept up a feeling of insecurity and dependence. Though well qualified for his duties, he merely discharged them to gain an income in order that he might be able to go on writing the *Système de Philosophie Positive*. To this work Auguste Comte during twelve years devoted all his spare time, following a course of study and contemplation severely marked out, avoiding all distractions, seeking no side ways of popularity, and refusing to modify his views for either fear or favour. The last of the six volumes appeared in 1842, with a preface containing reflections upon Arago and others so displeasing to the Council of the Polytechnic School, that for 1844 he was not re-elected to his post of examiner, and thus, on the completion of the work which was to change the social condition of mankind, the author found he had lost the greater part of his income.

In the *Système de Philosophie Positive* Comte exposed a new arrangement of the sciences, clearer and more comprehensive than any hitherto attempted. He traced the genealogy of knowledge, beginning with the most simple and general, and descending to the more complex and special, and showed that it was in this way that the sciences had been successively evolved. It was at once a lucid arrangement, a useful method, and a history of the growth of human knowledge. His method is of service in all the sciences together, and in each of the particular sciences. Beginning with mathematics, astronomy, and physics, he descended to chemistry, biology, and history, and sought to construct a new science of sociology. In the execution of this great plan, covering the whole field of human knowledge, Comte shows prodigious and sustained powers of mind. Few are even able to follow him all the way.

His method of literary work is explained by M. Littré. In composing a volume of his *System* Comte thought over the

outlines without putting anything to paper. He then passed to the division, and on to the details. After the general plan came the special plan of every part. When this was accomplished Comte said his volume was made. When he sat down to write he found without fail all the ideas which formed the weft of his work, and introduced them in their order and connection. His memory sufficed for all. When he had a certain number of leaves written out he sent them to the press, and kept up with the printing, making scarcely any change in his proofs, of which he never saw more than one. Though such a proceeding might be favourable to unity of conception, it was fatal to compactness of expression and polish of style; hence his books are prolix, diffuse, and full of repetitions. Students of his philosophy generally prefer the versions which have been made by his disciples and admirers. The best exposition for English readers is the book of John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*.

In France the work attracted little notice and sold slowly. A few copies got to England. A well-merited recognition of the first two volumes was given by Sir David Brewster in the *Edinburgh Review* (July, 1838), and a digest of the whole work was published by Miss Harriet Martineau.

Comte was saved from pecuniary distress through Stuart Mill, who got three of his friends, Grote the historian, Sir William Molesworth, and Mr. Raikes Currie, to contribute 5000 francs, the equivalent of the salary which he had lost. Comte benignly accepted this subsidy, and made a dignified remonstrance when it was not continued the next year. To the end of his days his disciples contributed enough to provide for his wants, which, though whimsical, were scarcely extravagant. Comte thought he had a right, in doing a work for the benefit of the whole human race, that he should be kept above destitution. He made little endeavour to disguise the very high opinion he had formed of his own merits. He regarded it as no compliment to be compared to Bacon, and deemed himself the equal, if not the superior, of Descartes and Leibnitz, and to this valuation Stuart Mill and Littré give their adhesion. It is not thought in good taste that a man should proclaim his own mental superiority save by guarded implications, yet it is important that one should accurately gauge his own capacity, and he who undertakes great tasks must know that he possesses

great mental powers. During the intense application of mind required for the composition of his great work, he was several times subject to crises threatening a return of the cerebral excitement of 1826. Madame Comte showed her anxiety by repeatedly consulting physicians about symptoms which she had observed in her husband, principally sleeplessness and irritability of temper. One of these nervous crises was noted in 1838, another in 1842, and a third in 1845. Aware of the danger of a relapse, Comte had what he called his system of cerebral hygiene. He abstained from coffee, tobacco, wine, and all excitants; was careful of his diet, and tried to avoid painful emotions. He found too many chagrins in his own house. Madame Comte was evidently a woman possessing great literary talents, and took a deep interest in her husband's pursuits. He was solicitous to have her opinion upon his writings, and was angry when, instead of compliments, she proposed improvements or gave criticisms. In a letter to Stuart Mill the philosopher complains that his works have been prepared and accomplished under the heavy weight of material embarrassments, and in the midst of painful and absorbing troubles resulting from the *quasi*-continuity of civil war, the domestic duel,—that is to say, he had long been quarrelling with his wife, which ended in August, 1842, in a complete separation. In such disputes the woman generally gains the sympathy of those who take a gossiping interest in the affair, as she is more willing to state her grievances. There is no question that Madame Comte did this to M. Littré, who interceded for her and remained her defender to the last. M. Comte confided the departure of his wife to Stuart Mill in a letter in which he says, "Married for more than seventeen years, through a fatal inclination, to a woman gifted with a rare elevation of mind both moral and intellectual, but brought up in vicious principles and following a false appreciation of the necessary condition of her sex in the human economy, her total want of inclination for me has never permitted her affectionate disposition to compensate for her unruly and overbearing tendencies." When we consider that M. Littré was an admirer and a disciple of Auguste Comte, and was, moreover, a man who led a worthy life, we are naturally disposed to follow him in taking the part of Madame. Nevertheless the information given by Dr. Dumas leads us to think that M. Littré has misled his readers by

leaving out some facts and bringing others into prominence. Dumas roundly asserts that the causes of Comte's insanity in 1826 were excess of work and domestic chagrins, Madame Comte having quitted the house to live with a lover. Dumas tells us, "His wife deceived him; four times she quitted his house, and she made his home life hard and jangling." "During seventeen years of cohabitation," wrote Comte to Littré, "I have often conceived thoughts of suicide, to which I should probably have yielded had the bitterness of my domestic situation not been neutralised by the increasing sentiment of my social mission." Comte feared the combination of intellectual strain with painful emotions. This occurred in 1842, the date of the fourth departure of his wife, the result being another nervous crisis. This time he refused to allow her to return, although he continued for eight years to correspond with her by letters, in which he showed an interest in her welfare and took for granted her sympathy in his fortunes. He paid her an annuity of 3000 francs, which in two years he reduced to 2000. In a letter to Littré he writes that, though her conduct was very licentious, she never showed a real attachment to any one.

Two years after this final separation Comte met with Clotilde de Vaux, then about thirty years of age. She is described as a lady of amiable manners, with fair silky hair, languid blue eyes, and soft and delicate beauty. Her husband was in prison for some infamous crime, and she was living with her parents. She had literary tastes and wrote weak stories and verses. Acquaintance began by the lending of books, and æsthetic conversation soon ripened into a deep passion on Comte's part. There was a "crise d'amour," during which he kept his bed for eight days. The lady managed so to balance her attractions and repulsions as to keep the philosopher hovering round her. Her love, if warmer than friendship, was Platonic; not so his. Comte had much in his nature both of *l'amour gout* and *l'amour passion*. To the first Madame de Vaux accorded no indulgence. To quote M. Dumas, "elle lui conseillait de chercher ailleurs des soulagements, et Comte répondait en termes précis: 'Vous exagérez, Clotilde, la grossièreté masculine, du moins chez les nobles types. Elle nous permet en effet le plaisir sans amour, mais seulement quand notre cœur est libre; lorsqu'il se sent vraiment pris, cette brutalité nous devient impossible. J'ai dû longtemps

recourir, comme tant d'autres, à ces ignobles satisfactions puisque toutes relations sexuelles avaient déjà cessé dans mon triste ménage, un an avant votre propre mariage. Mais depuis que je suis à vous, ma continence, quoique parfois douloureuse, est toujours peu méritoire parce que je ne pourrais pas vivre autrement.'” The weak state of Madame de Vaux's health gave a sober colouring to her fancies. “For a year,” wrote she to her impassioned admirer, “I ask every evening if I have the strength to live till the morning. It is not with such thoughts that one can do inconsiderate acts.” Another time she seemed more yielding. “Since my misfortunes,” she wrote, “my sole dream has been maternity, but I have never thought of associating in this rôle save with a man who was distinguished and worthy to understand it. If you believe that you can accept all the responsibilities attached to family life, say so, and I will decide my lot.” Comte lost no time in accepting the responsibilities, only to find that the aspirant to maternity had changed her mind. This caused him deep distress. Six weeks after he wrote, “Although the convulsive agitation has almost disappeared, my sleep remains insufficient,—if not as to its total duration, already about normal, at least for its depth and continuousness.” Truly the philosopher knew little of woman's heart. During a year of intimacy, which was always becoming closer, Clotilde was wasting away from consumption, and in 1846, at the commencement of her thirty-second year, she died in the arms of Auguste Comte, after having received extreme unction.

In a letter to Madame Comte he announced his *liaison* with Madame de Vaux, and recounted the death of that lady who had become his eternal colleague and his veritable spouse. This attachment had brought out the affective and sentimental side of his character. We have frequently occasion to notice how simple people give to general ideas a particular application, but one requires to converse with philosophers to observe particular impressions being generalised into doctrines. Although much of Comte's system of *Politique Positive* had been formed in his mind before he met with Madame de Vaux, the influence of this passion modified in many respects the character of his speculation. His political philosophy showed a great falling off, which his enemies ridiculed, his more critical admirers deplored, and scarcely any of his disciples entirely

followed. No man can be master of all the sciences. Even in Comte's first work when he came to biology there was a falling off; his remarks on psychology were of little depth; his interpretations of history, though much admired by some, were, in my opinion, superficial and often incorrect, and he showed an ill-grounded contempt for political economy. Nevertheless M. Comte firmly believed that his studies in the exact sciences were but a prelude to his scheme for reorganising society, for changing the face of the world. For proposing changes in the social constitution he lacked the essential qualification that he should know something of human nature, yet he knew nothing of the nature of the ordinary man, and indeed little of the nature even of the philosopher; hence his scheme for the reorganisation of society was absurd, and even if it could be carried out there is no reason to believe that it would make mankind any happier. For about twenty years he abstained from reading the newspapers, even from scientific periodicals. He only read a few favourite poets. Thus, while preparing schemes for the salvation of society, he would not feel the pulse of the world. Unlike other social reformers, Comte did not propose to level ranks or to divide property. The proletaires were to be deprived of all political power, and their destinies determined by an intellectual bureaucracy who would classify them like specimens in a museum. Labour was to be directed by chosen captains of industry. France was to be divided into seventeen small republics. He had regulations for the smallest particulars of daily life, for he had no sense of the ridiculous. There were prayers and an elaborate ritual with no God. Men were to be taught to love others better than themselves, and, as a reward for labours in the cause of humanity, seven years after a man's death it was to be solemnly adjudged whether his remains should be disinhumed, to be buried in the sacred wood which was to surround every temple, where the living should pay a make-believe worship to the *Grand Être*,—he might rather have said the *Grand Néant*.

One of his fancies was that our earth, before man came upon it, once possessed intelligence and will, and may have used its physico-chemical activity, so as to render its orbit less eccentric, and have modified its own shape by a judiciously planned series of explosions. Our benevolent planet may also have rendered the inclination of its axis better fitted to the wants of

the Grand Être. This, at first proposed as a fiction, was in the end nourished into a belief as perfecting the unity of his system, and making up the Trinity which his disciples were enjoined to glorify, *i. e.* Humanity, the Grand Être ; Space, the Grand Medium ; and the Earth, the Grand Fetish.

If Comte had gone on studying biology, psychology, and sociology with the same mental power and application which he had brought to the exact sciences treated in the *Système de Philosophie Positive*, he had written his name much higher in the history of philosophy ; but intoxicated with self-conceit, he fancied that he had reached such a height of wisdom through his studies in the exact sciences and his perfection of method, that a few easy deductions were sufficient to enable him to prescribe solutions for any remaining question in the complicated subjects of psychology, morals, and sociology. Thus, after recommending as a part of his system the refuted localisations of Gall, he set himself to construct a cerebral topography. He assumed *a priori* eighteen mental faculties to exist in given regions of the brain, and founded upon this assumption without waiting for any confirmation from anatomy or physiology. He regarded all his previous studies as but a preparation for his social scheme, and declared that all scientific pursuits should be treated as an idle waste of time if they could not be proved to have a direct bearing upon the welfare of humanity. "All books were to be destroyed save about a hundred, and all animals and plants thought useless to man were to be extirpated." There is no doubt that if Comte had held the power, he would have carried all these absurdities into practice. Indeed, he believed that the world's acceptance of his doctrine was so near, that if he lived to be as old as Fontenelle or Hobbes he would enjoy the dignity of being recognised as the grand high priest of a regenerated humanity. A few disciples gathered round him, who regarded him with veneration. Auguste Comte died in 1857, of an internal cancer, at the age of sixty. He left a long testament, with his usual attention to minute details. The disposal of his estate could not be carried out without the consent of his wife.

Comte left the furniture in the Rue Monsieur le Prince and all his books and manuscripts to thirteen executors, who were to keep the rooms as a museum and to publish the manuscripts. The annuity of 2000 francs was to be offered to Madame

Comte, and in the event of his widow refusing her consent to the conditions of the will, he left in the power of the executors a sealed paper, which, he declared, contained a secret so grave that if it were divulged his unworthy spouse would be abandoned even by her principal defender (M. Littré). Not heeding this threat, Madame Comte refused her consent to the will, and declared herself heiress. The executors recoiled at making use of the secret, and proceeded by legal methods; they declared themselves the creditors of M. Comte, and thus brought the furniture and books to a sale. These were bought up by the Positivists. Madame Comte, who, according to Littré, could have entered a preferential claim to most of the money, waived her rights that her late husband's debts should be paid; but the struggle was for the possession of the manuscripts. Apparently Madame Comte wished to prevent the publication of the testament, which was injurious to her, and of the amorous correspondence of her husband with Clotilde de Vaux. She demanded that the will should be annulled on the grounds that M. Comte was insane,—in fact, had never entirely recovered from the attack of 1826. This ground was afterwards abandoned; but she pleaded that he was mad when he made the will.

The matter was not called before the tribunal of the Seine before the end of 1869, and it was a year ere it was decided. The advocate employed by Madame Comte made much use of the philosopher's writings for facts indicating insanity. He recounted the theatrical performances by which Comte sought to keep fresh the memory of his sweetheart. By his passion for Clotilde he had learned to subordinate to the heart the whole of human life. Sentiment ought always to dominate the intelligence. "To become a perfect philosopher," he wrote, "I wanted especially a passion at once deep and pure, which made me sufficiently appreciate the affective side of humanity. Such emotions exercise an admirable philosophic action in placing the mind at once at the true point of view, which by the scientific way one can only attain by a long and difficult elaboration." Five days after the death of Clotilde he instituted prayers, which he recited three times a day before the couch on which the adored one used to be seated. He recalled her memory, and gave her thanks for ennobling his life. Once a week he went to her tomb, to which he also made

an annual confession of what he had done during the year. He recommended every disciple to fix his thoughts upon the three forms of womanhood—the mother, the daughter, and the wife. If one or other were not adorable enough, the votary might put some other woman in the place. Comte himself had for his three guardian angels Madame de Vaux, his mother, and a young woman who acted as cook.

Dr. Dumas observes that the mystic has need of images, sometimes of very vivid ones, and often this persistent image becomes transformed during an ecstasy into an hallucination. It seems to have been so with Auguste Comte. Longchamps tells us⁽²⁾ that one day Comte had his eyes fixed upon the memento of Clotilde, when he beheld her lying deadly pale as he had seen her for the last time. Comte falls on his knees, calls her and blesses her, speaks of his grief, of his despair. He implores her to help him, for she alone could make life supportable to him and give him courage. After a time he rose, calmer and more resigned. From that day Comte endeavoured to reproduce by his will the beloved vision. Every morning and evening he saw Clotilde. He knelt before her altar, and renewed his resolution to live for her and for humanity. It appears from the testament that this hallucination was sometimes auditory as well as visual. Dumas adds it is evident that Comte was never the dupe of his hallucination, that he led up to it and made use of it in order to sustain his mystic passion.

The image of Madame de Vaux transfigured and magnified appears everywhere in his later speculations. Through this shallow and sickly Frenchwoman all women were to be glorified and held up for men's adoration. In obedience to a fancy, which he did not favour during Clotilde's life, her sentimental admirer proposed a theory which should free the whole sex from the selfish brutalities of instinct, and render husbands superfluous. To use Comte's own words, "si l'appareil masculin ne contribue à notre génération que d'après une simple excitation, dérivée de sa destination organique, on conçoit la possibilité de remplacer ce stimulant par un ou plusieurs autres dont la femme disposera librement."

It may be said that one could make a case against the sanity of many a speculative philosopher by collecting his whimsical theories and leaving out his sensible ones. Moreover much of what men in modern Europe write to or about

their sweethearts is mere inflation of style, though men in love often do commit sillinesses which they may come to smile at themselves. Comte's admirers advance that Descartes and Leibnitz, in their readiness to follow the principles which they had laid down to logical consequences against common sense, were guilty of absurdities as great, or nearly as great, as Auguste Comte; they do not say as many absurdities. We have no time to consider this serious accusation against these two philosophers.

Dumas observes that Comte's pride differs from that of the megalomaniac—that it was justified by his achievements in philosophy, and no doubt these were great; but his pride was extravagant, though whether it passed the limits of sanity may be a question between his admirers and his critics. One of his disciples, M. Allou, has published a certificate signed by seven medical men, amongst whom is Dr. Congreve of London, and Dr. Robinet of Paris. These physicians state that “they all having known Auguste Comte during the last years of his life, from 1850 to 1857, and having all seen him during this time, some daily and others at intervals, certify that they have never perceived in him, in his conversation, in his actions, nor in any of his writings, the least trace of intellectual or moral derangement, of mental alienation, nor of monomania of any kind whatsoever; that they have never observed anything amiss about him, nor had the least suspicion of such; and that, on the contrary, Auguste Comte had always appeared to them as enjoying, and having enjoyed till the last moment of his life (without speaking of his incontestable genius), the most complete lucidity, a most extensive and well-balanced memory, a perfectly sane judgment, and a correct reason, steady calmness, strong perseverance, and the most generous disinterestedness, which are the mental and moral characteristics most opposed to those of insanity.”

In 1870 the tribunal before which the case was pleaded rejected the accusation of insanity, and declared the testament valid so far as it did not prejudice the rights of Madame Comte. They decreed that the manuscripts of M. Comte should be restored to the executors of the will. The court also ordered that the sealed paper should be destroyed, and some passages injurious to Madame Comte should be suppressed in publishing the testament. Dr. Dumas lets us know

that the purport of the sealed paper is now no longer a secret. The revelation which Auguste Comte held over his wife was, that before her marriage Caroline Massin had been a prostitute, and that her name was inscribed in the register of the Préfeture. We are not told whether Comte became aware of this before or after his marriage. At any rate it did not cause Littré to abandon her; on the contrary, he always speaks highly of her solicitude for her husband's welfare and her devotion to his memory. It is to be hoped that this attempt to strike at the woman who bore his name was the worst act of a life otherwise honourable.

Without questioning the justice of the court's decision it may be said that during the last years of his life the fine intellect of Auguste was deranged to a notable degree. Even warm admirers like J. S. Mill and E. Littré mourn the decadence of a great genius. In the words of Dr. Dumas, after the mania in 1826 *il cotoya la folie*; though by his system of hygiene and mental regimen he escaped such another attack, he was subject to severe nervous crises, and remained for the rest of his life a "neuropath."

(¹) *Auguste Comte et la Philosophie Positive*, par E. Littré, Paris, 1864. (²) *Revue Philosophique*, p. 178.

Comparative Lunacy Law. By A. WOOD RENTON, Esq.,
Barrister-at-Law.

CONSIDERING the closeness of the ties which the existence of such bodies as the Medico-Psychological Association have created between alienists throughout the world, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the comparative side of the medical jurisprudence of insanity. In the spring of 1898 there was published in New York a treatise by Dr. Clevenger and Mr. Bowlby, an American barrister (*Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity, or Forensic Psychiatry*, 1898, Lawyers' Co-operating Publishing Company, 2 vols., pp. 1356), in which excellent work in this direction, so far as England and the United States are concerned, was done. The book is a monument of labour. Every conceivable branch of forensic