

CHAPTER XXIII

LITERARY GENIUS

(A FRAGMENT)

*Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.**

THE evidence that genius has some relation to moral weakness is certainly very large. Not only in English literature, but in the literature of all European countries, we find that the names of the great poets are generally associated with stories of unhappy lives and bad morals. In our own lectures upon modern English, you will have noticed that such men as Coleridge and Byron and Shelley were very weak characters, and quite out of harmony with their surroundings. And these great three are examples of hundreds of lesser men who were equally open to reproach, but who were possessed of remarkable literary abilities. Even in the history of English drama, we find that a large proportion of the great names were names of men who could not be considered moral in any sense of the word—Shakespeare being a remarkable exception. French literature tells pretty much the same story, from the time of Villon, who narrowly escaped being hanged, to the time of Baudelaire and of De Nerval, both of whom were partly insane. But probably the proportion of men of genius who have been either insane or bad is not so large as has been supposed. Prejudice must always be taken into consideration where we deal with such criticism. But you will find criticism without prejudice accumulated upon this subject by a Mr. Galton; and the evidence is very strong against the literary men.

The controversy was begun by the work of an Italian man of science, Cesare Lombroso, a professor at Milan.

* John Dryden *Absalom and Achitophel*, I, 163.—Editor.

Lombroso is an evolutionist, and all his lectures are based upon the evolutionary philosophy. In his book, "The Man of Genius," he accumulated a great number of facts about the morals of the men of genius; and he inferred from these facts that genius means a kind of insanity, and that it is usually accompanied with physical and moral weakness. He argues, with a great show of reason, that men of genius exhibit in the general character of their acts, not an advance upon the morals of their time, but a reversion to the morals of a former age. He thinks that the criminal in society represents the original savage man, the survival of instincts and tendencies older than civilization. On this subject his evidence and arguments are very strong indeed. But he also regards the man of genius as being in some degree related to the criminal rather than to the moral type of mankind. His book at once inspired a German writer, Max Nordau, to compose a popular work on the same topic. Nordau's object would seem to have been to please the great middle class, the conventional class *par excellence*, who are usually incapable of understanding genius, but are quite delighted to find something bad to say about anybody who, while disobeying conventions, yet manages to attract the attention of superior men. When you find that a person whom you dislike is undeniably clever—is able to do something which you cannot possibly do, you have a certain satisfaction in knowing or believing that his higher ability is the result of some miserable disease. Nothing flatters and pleases mediocrity more than to be able to disparage superiority. In other words, Nordau's book was an appeal to all the prejudices and meannesses of the half-educated; and it had an immense sale. It is still popular; the dullards of society have been fully convinced by it that men of genius are very contemptible persons, in most cases, probably immoral, and usually degenerate.

Nordau is not a man of science; he is simply a clever and cunning journalist, who knew how to make money by a misuse of Lombroso's facts. What about the facts them-

selves? How much truth are we to allow them? I think that a reference to Spencer's "Psychology" would have settled the whole question so far as the evolution matter is concerned. The "eccentricity of genius," as Spencer calls it, really represents two things; the opinions of Lombroso err chiefly in the direction of one-sidedness. The two things represented by the eccentricity of genius are likely to be higher developments and degeneration—two opposites. The average man of genius is likely to be superior to other men in one faculty, and inferior to other men in other faculties. The reason is that genius can only be produced at a tremendous cost to the vital energy of the being in whom it exists. There are for this several reasons, which I shall try to explain in the easiest way possible.

Let us first take it for granted, as we must do scientifically, that every being starts into existence with a certain quantity of what I may call life-force. The force may differ considerably in different men, but there must be a general average. Let us say that this average force would under ordinary circumstances enable a man weighing a hundred and fifty pounds, standing five feet and eight inches, possessing good blood and faculties, to live under comfortable circumstances to the age of eighty. This fact you will perceive is quite easy to understand. The life-force, however, is influenced by tendencies that we know very little about, hereditary tendencies. According to these, it may act more in one direction than in another. It has only so much material to work with; it may make out of that material a great many different things or differences in things.