

A MAD SAINT



FEW months since a certain Maria G. appeared at my *clinique*. She was forty years of age, her voice was masculine in character, her forehead was high and remarkably broad, her jaw and cheek-bones more massive than we usually find in women. Her head also was somewhat above the average in size. Touch was rather obtuse, but sensitiveness to pain almost normal. It was observed, however, that she blushed only on one side of her face and forehead, and on this side also there was abundant perspiration, while the other side was quite dry and pale. Her father had died in an asylum ; her mother was healthy, and so were four brothers and a sister. This last, however, was subject to fits. She herself suffered from various neuralgic pains, and from hysterical convulsions.

As a girl she wished to become a nun ; but, instead, she married, at eighteen, a man whom she respected, but for whom she had no love. She married him, against the wishes of her friends, solely to obey the will of God. She has had eight children, of whom five are living.

Ever since she was a child she has heard voices, and seen wonderful visions of the Madonna and the saints ; also of evil spirits in the likeness of beasts, monsters which inspired her with great terror, and she was thus regarded as mad. This recalls what Calmeil tells us concerning various nuns, especially Maddalena, whose hallucinations began at five. But it was not until the age of fourteen, after being unwell for three days, that she had an apparition, in a great flash of light that filled the room, of God Himself, clothed in garments so dazzling that she could not fix her eyes upon Him, and bearing in His hand a sword which He placed across the bed. She still has such visual and auditory hallucinations very frequently ; at these times she ceases speaking, bends her head very low, and weeps. She tells also that she has seen the eyes in a little picture of Jesus fixed upon her full of love, and following her all over the house, and she says that one day she saw them closed, as a reproof to an offence on her part.

To the commands she has thus received from the *Volere Supremo*, she refers the greater number of her acts, and frequently offers no further justifica-

tion of them ; thus she asserts that she was commanded by God to feign madness in order to enter an asylum, and there fulfil to the utmost her mission of fighting Satan, because there, she said, they whip people like beasts. Her acts were, in fact, so strange, that she was shut up in an asylum, where for some days she was the victim of further delirium, and she remained there for three years.

Now she lives at home, fairly tranquil, attending well to her domestic affairs, and to her occupation of straw-plaiting chairs. She dresses neatly, is devoted to her children, and weeps when she speaks of those who are dead. She weeps also when she tells of her mother's recent death, though latterly there had been no intercourse between them ; so that her affection towards her family appears to be normal. With her husband also she gets on fairly well, although he reproves her for the strange ideas she has in her head, and once turned her out of the house. On the other hand she hates her mother-in-law, who interferes with the pleasure she takes in writing ; thus she is not able to devote time to the laborious preparations of her very numerous manuscripts in verse and prose, except for a few hours after dawn, when she is alone. The verse, however, she composes in her head, not when she wishes to, but as it comes to her.

Her instincts appear to be chaste. She tells how, when she was a girl, she repelled the advances of a priest, and again, after she was married, of a canon, a monk, and an abbot. The education which she received as a child from her mother does not seem to have been very religious, at all events not sufficiently so to have determined her precocious inclinations. She only attended an elementary school, and cared little for reading afterwards ; but she read over and over again a book of religious devotion entitled, " L'Anima Desolata Confortata a patire cristianamente," to which title she has added in her own handwriting, " Per Amor di Dio," and also the following remark :— " This book is the greatest treasure I have had in this world." Certainly her own writings, however strange and incomprehensible they may be, always manifest an intelligence above her condition and the instruction she has received.

She believes that, although wholly unworthy, she has been charged by the *Gran Sovran del Cielo* with an illuminative and redemptive mission among men ; and regarding this mission she writes—in large and clear characters, with enormous capital letters and long strokes, in a fairly correct style—large pages of verse or long letters to alienists, to priests, to the King and Queen. The contents are uniformly the same ; she announces her mission to each,

always saying that she is writing by command of God, and promising honour and profit to those who follow her. Yet from all her very numerous writings and oral declarations it is impossible to ascertain the ideas that lie at the basis of this mission ; perhaps her mind is not able to form such ideas ; perhaps she possesses that unconscious consciousness of absurdity which Amadei has acutely noted in mattoids. Once only she refers in her writings to the constitution of a *Compagnia dei Fedeli Cristiani* beneath the protection of the *Gran Madre Maria Addolorata* ; and in conversation she alludes to certain (imaginary?) followers.

For the rest, she declares that she is inspired by the Virgin, although she is working for the Saviour ; she hates those who are outside the truth, and wishes to correct them and spiritualize them ; she would cut off the heads of the unfaithful with the tremendous sword of God, though this is only a spiritual weapon. She uses such ferocious metaphors frequently. She justified herself by saying that if any of the students who heard her declarations should go and repeat what they had heard to priests, it would be to these latter like the blow of a dagger.

She accepts Christian dogma, but with modifications. Thus when the *Gran Dio del Cielo* had driven Adam and Eve out of Paradise, He told them that He would send a woman to purify and "mend" the world. "And with all my demerits I am that woman, the servant of the great God, the queen of the whole world ; for in myself I am nothing, but in the name of the great God I am everything ; and if I accomplish any good thing here, the merit will be His." And in connection with this she calls herself, and often signs herself, "Regina Salviati," that is to say, "Queen of the Saved."

Repeatedly and insistently asked to expound to us her doctrines, she formulated them thus : If you want to be happy you have to learn how to thoroughly concentrate yourself in the great God of heaven and earth, and then to recognize in her the saviour, not as the supreme judge but as His representative, and she only recognizes those disciples who believe in Christ who died on the cross and in St. Joseph.

She respects the Christian Church, but wishes to pull up the evil weeds, that is to say, bad priests, whom she considers responsible for the wickedness of the world, but with strange want of logic she carries out all religious practices.

The Madonna cannot be the mother of God who is uncreated, because otherwise she would be the supreme principle ; only as the handmaid of His

spirit has God permitted her to be worshipped. The spirit of Christ will reappear in the world in the person of a certain priest, a brother of hers, and then there will be a general day of judgment, which she announces as near, and the justice of God having assured the triumph of the just on earth, the world will live a better life, and will not end in a shower of fire, as the priests say. This idea of the reform of the world is certainly the same as that of Christ, who, as Renan says in his "Vie de Jésus," when seated as judge of the world in the midst of His apostles, is the exact representation of that conception of the Son of man, the first lines of which are already to be seen so strongly drawn in the Book of Daniel. But she lessens and abuses the conception by, for instance, apportioning the duties we are each to have in the reformed world. She naturally promises a different future to the good and those who respect her sayings from that ordained for the bad, "because God has not made Heaven for traitors, and Hell to be kept empty;" she will pardon if God will pardon; if not, she is ready to put a dagger (probably always a spiritual weapon) into the hearts of those traitors.

Of all this she speaks confusedly, as if she did not wish to be interrupted in her discourse, but she converses much and willingly. She distributes her numerous manuscripts, nearly all in verse, to the students. She frequently sings the Psalms in Latin with passionate animation and large movements of the arms, explaining the significance of what she sings. There is a notable tendency to musical intonation in her replies to the questions put to her, which she sometimes sings, always adapting the same air to her various poems. The metre of these is, however, nearly always the same, very sonorous, in rhymed quatrains of ten syllables; but the rhymes are often only assonances, and the last line of each stanza is cut short. Sometimes while singing she falls into a condition of true ecstasy; the eyeballs are turned upwards, the eyelids become fixed, the arms extended, and she is able to support a much stronger electric current than that which gives her pain under normal conditions.

This persistent use of melody and rhythm certainly represents an atavistic return to primitive musical methods of expression which commonly accompanied emotional states among our ancestors. It is a kind of mental palæontology, as Letourneau also has noted;¹ and it corresponds exactly to the vague, uniform, undifferentiated condition of her ideas.

¹ "Revue de l'École d'Anthropologie," Nov. 15th, 1892.

The whole of this attitude, the convinced and absolute fashion in which she enunciates her dogmas, the security with which in every great contingency of life she trusts to the voice of the *Volere Supremo*, not only recall and in part repeat what all the saints of religious history have done, but they explain the force of attraction, and the suggestive power, which such phenomena exerted on popular masses under other conditions of culture and feeling.

It is also instructive to note her method of action, which is described as by divine impulse, working through an automaton. "Under spiritual influence," she says, "a person is not free, and I am even compelled to act for my own temporal disadvantage, without any reserve, ready to undergo martyrdom, even if the gibbet were standing ready; and if the least act on my part, even the slightest word, would save me from martyrdom, I would not try to save myself, not for the whole world." "Pushed on," she writes, "by a supreme spiritual power, I set down these things, writing all that the supreme spirit suggests to me to write." She declared, also, that she "was driven" by God to come to the *clinique*, although she doubted if she would find anyone there.

Thus her own personality occupies nearly the whole of her mind, her conversation, her writings; and, as if to accentuate this characteristic, she always writes the personal pronouns referring to herself with an initial capital. And yet amid the chaos and simplicity of her ideas, the uniformity and commonplace of their manifestation, a stroke of genius here and there flashes across the insanity. One day she improvised a logical and excellent discourse to the university students who were late in their attendance, lamenting the recent disorders among them as not only evil in themselves, but as bringing grief and shame to the professors, etc. Among her very numerous writings in verse, slovenly and full of errors as they often are, some are really beautiful, and contain phrases and passages marked by fine feeling and insight. "The justice of the great God of Heaven," she writes, "is not paid by gold or silver." "My mind," she writes again (in words that, in the original, tend to run into rhyme), "will only ally itself with reverence and justice; and my heart is not caught save by reverence and gentleness." And in verse: "But the sorrowing servant—Of our Lord—Possesses new hopes.—Already his heart opens.—O you who live—In a deceitful world,—Open your eyes—To the true light." And again: "I am no woman of proud ways—I am the handmaid of our Lord;—On my head there is a crown—All adorned with laurel and honour.—I am faithful to the everlasting Lord—And no deceit can make

me waver :—And though I am but a lowly flower—I am queen of the great deep sea.¹”

Yet these fugitive gleams of mental brilliancy not only heighten the general vacuity, but accentuate strange references and hints, sudden falls into the commonplace, and often the comic, which, with their painful contrasts, characterize the psychic contents of such unbalanced brains. For example: “I will take him up into the train and conduct him to eternal life;” “I will give myself up to the *Gran Voler Supremo* and leave to his lordship to consider with the telescope of the Just and Supreme Divine Justice this my deposition.”

Nor are there also lacking in her writings and her discourse those frequent and insistent repetitions of words, the strange metaphorical appellations, the emphatic air, which give a special imprint of solemnity to the religious style of every epoch. Here also these characters are due to analogous conditions, that is to say, that all effort is applied to the task of impressing the imagination of the hearers by vaporous and solemn phrases, rather than to that of convincing them by the force of reason; it is as though the evidence of the proclaimed truths disdained—and with good reason—all human arguments. “Tell me, my children,” she writes, “what have you done for me to acquire the strongest affection of my heart? Nothing: then it is God who deigns to bind my heart to a lofty and supernatural affection towards you.” “To write of my Lord I have detached myself from all the things of the world, and they who would follow me must also detach themselves from the things of the world . . . with the sole thought of serving God faithfully in order to win the great prize of honour for eternal life.” “Oh, this miserable and unworthy creature that I am, Thy miserable and unworthy servant, Thy miserable and unworthy daughter . . . and I will say it again and again.”

To the same unfailing elements of every religious movement belong the prophecies which M. makes concerning the coming of God on earth, the approaching universal judgment, and the glorious and fruitful future which awaits the good cause, as well as certain miracles which she has already accom-

¹ “Non son donna di vani costumi,
 Son l' ancella del nostro Signor;
 Sul mio capo ci sta una corona
 Tutta guarnita di lauro e d' onor.
 Io son costante all' eterno Signore,
 E niun inganno puo farmi tremar:
 E bench' Io sia un misero fiore . . .
 Son Regina dell' alto gran mar.”

plished, professing that she has prevented an outbreak of war between Africa and Italy.

To this now well-defined form of religious insanity are associated, as often happens, though usually in a more accentuated degree, erotic insanity and the insanity of persecution. This last, however, is very slight and is directed in part against the priests, in part against the attendants and sisters at the asylum, and especially the doctor under whose care she was placed, and against whom, with much abusive language, she brings the usual vague accusations of offences against her spirit and body.

The erotic element is more distinctly marked ; in her writings and discourses M. frequently recalls the name of a young gentleman who "because of his religious wanderings" had to suffer grave danger in Africa, from which danger she and no other could deliver him, or, as she says, "repair him in body and mind from that terrible exile, offering her life to the Great God of Heaven to expiate the faults accounted for guilt to Christians." In the same way, but more explicitly, she expresses herself in her verses, which reflect her thoughts more faithfully and unconsciously. In these are many expressions of affection and praise concerning this youth, whom she invokes as the imaginary head of armies, a dear companion and man of pure faith ; as well as in the replies, strangely veiled in spiritual mysticism, which she makes to questions on this subject. She confesses also that she recalls seeing some of her visions of God under the aspect of this gentleman. Yet she only appears to have seen him occasionally, and it is not possible to guess the circumstances which may have caused, if they have not justified, the direction which M.'s erotic affections have taken.

Altruism, which is the highest and noblest human note in the doctrines and works of nearly all great religious reformers—as though from the mystic contemplation of the superhuman, and man's annihilation before it, grew a more vivid feeling of the equality and fraternity of all human creatures—shows itself, though only by brief hints, in the writings of M. In several places she affirms that she would do nothing to avoid martyrdom, not fearing prisons, nor kings, nor anything else, but only the Virgin. And in alluding to the poor she exclaims: "O you miserable of the earth, oppressed by pain," offering them guidance and help ; and again, when she asserts she had feigned madness, so that she had almost voluntarily entered an asylum because the *Volere Supremo* had laid on her the burden of a mission to men. In this way she often declares herself mad, and signs her name as the poor Maria of the mad people—"povere Maria dei pazzi"—as a title that the Lord had given

her. All this, however, contrasts with her rebellion against the doctors and attendants on entering the asylum ; this was indeed so violent that it rendered necessary the application of the strait-jacket.

Apart from this, it is certain that her mind is not able to appreciate, and still less to conceive, the whole sublimity of the idea of altruism. Such incapacity is revealed in the poverty and individualism of all her conceptions, as well as by the strangeness and inco-ordination into which any informing idea, any trace of system, rapidly falls. Yet the neuropathic foundation, certain analogies of expression, certain other psychic affinities, render her a crude and rudimental example of a saint, a religious reformer.

I have presented this case in all its details, excluding the more technical, because it really constitutes a valuable document which shows us, in the first place, how genius often arises from a matrix of insanity. Here is an ordinary uneducated woman who suddenly becomes a poet, in a rude fashion, and an inventor of musical rhythms. But perhaps the phenomenon is more interesting from the point of view of hagiology, because of the light it throws on sanctity. This workwoman who thought more of others than of herself, who troubled herself all day long over public morality, who justly reproves the university students, who robs herself of her due nightly rest, after fulfilling all her family duties, in order to devote herself to her religious writings, presents a manifestation of sanctity, also breaking forth from the matrix of paranoia, in evidence of the effect of hereditary insanity.

It is true that such cases are very rare : among thousands of mad people I have only met with this case : whether it is that in such persons the accompanying delusions of persecution, ambition, etc., too greatly preoccupy the mind to leave any care for the hagiological form, or that it here assumes a more prominent form by virtue of greater intelligence and greater energy.

But perhaps the cause of this rarity may be of a very different order. It is probable that the prevalence of saints in past ages, as compared with our own days, may be first of all due to the fact that religious preoccupations being to-day less intense, men are driven mad in quite other pursuits, their diseases arising from other pretexts and taking on a different veneer. And, again, the public among us being indifferent to such ideas, even when they do arise, these mad saints find none to listen to them ; and if they insist, like this woman, they are at last secluded in an asylum. Three or four centuries ago she would have attracted followers, founded monasteries, carried away crowds ; she would have become a historical event. It is sad to reflect on the

fate of so many men of genius, born before their time, or in lands incapable of understanding them, and dying sterilized, when they were not killed as rebels or heretics. Even among ourselves to-day, indeed, it is only after death that such men are admired and honoured.

The germ of holiness, as well as that of genius, must be sought among the insane.

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(Translated by Havelock Ellis.)