

ÉMILE LITTRÉ.

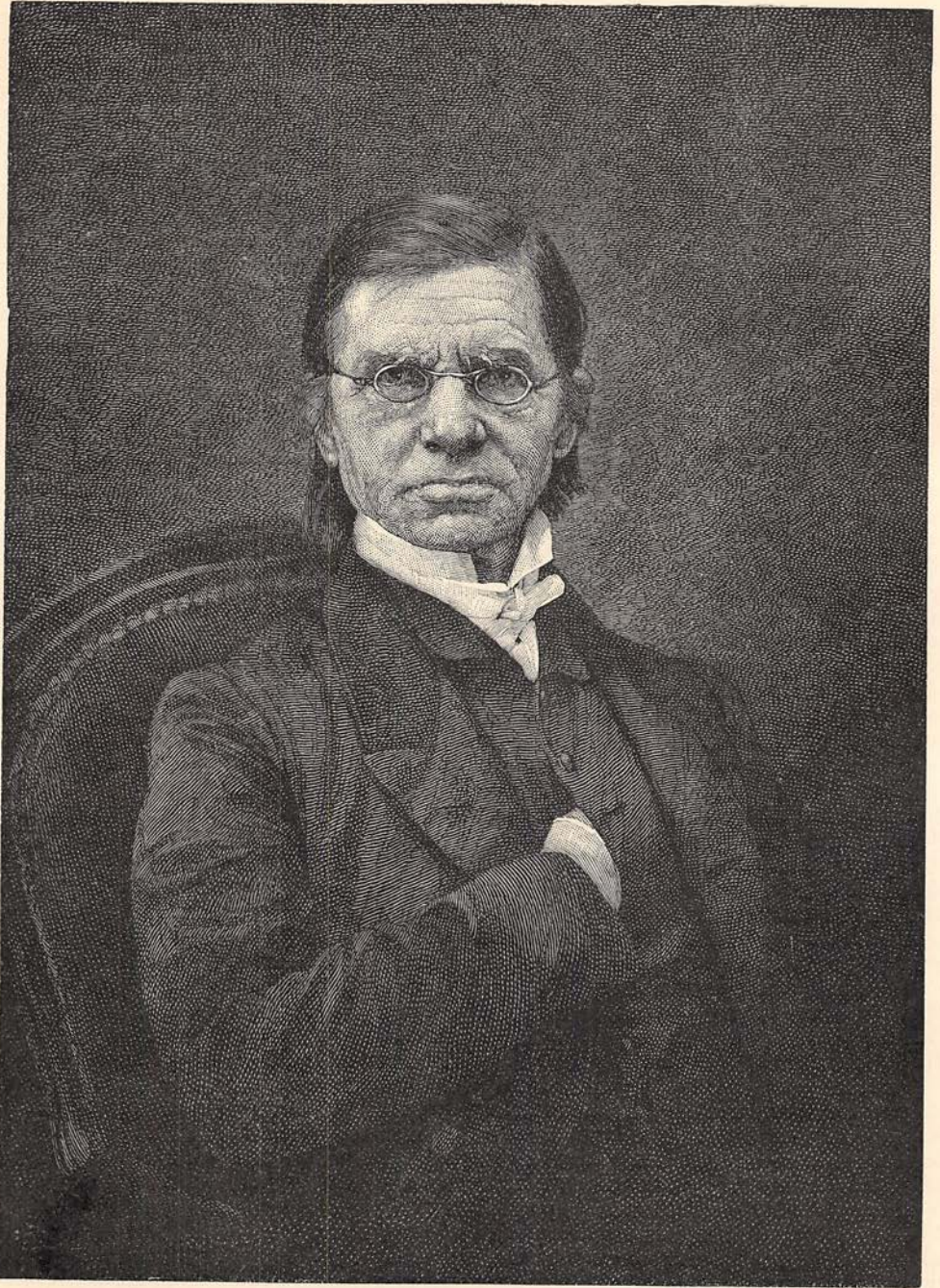
IN his own country Littré was never famous until Monseigneur Dupanloup began to attack him more than twenty years ago, and to denounce him as an atheist and the father of Darwinism. The Bishop's threat to retire from the French Academy if Littré was admitted to that body made the savant an object of public curiosity. Every one then wished to know exactly who Littré was, and tried to understand something about the Darwinian theory of the origin of species. Clerical journals spoke of the modest lexicographer, whose dictionary was then beginning to appear, as affording in his face and figure the one great argument in favor of Darwin's theory. Even professors of natural history were not wanting, who, to please elegant society, jocosely suggested that perhaps Littré was "the missing link." His unusually long arms and long sinewy hands were not lost sight of by clerical caricaturists. Another incident called public attention to the modest and gentle savant. It was the lawsuit about the will of Comte, the founder of the Positivist school of philosophy. Of the will Littré was an executor. Comte had started by declaring that nothing was to be received as a religious dogma unless it was susceptible of scientific proof; but he was later drawn by vanity, imagination, old habits, and his adoring love for Madame Clotilde de Vaux, to promulgate extravagant notions about religion. His scheme suppressed the Pope and set up a Pontiff-man (*Homme Pontife*), who was to be the highest incarnation of the generation from which he sprung. Comte, as might be expected, looked upon himself as the Pontiff-man, and Madame de Vaux was the celestial woman to complete *l'Homme Pontife*, and corresponded to the Virgin Mary.

Littré became Comte's disciple soon after 1840, when he first met him. But he refused to follow him in his vagaries, and after his death would not execute those clauses in the will, the object of which was to raise Madame de Vaux to a kind of celestial queenship. Who is this Littré? the unlearned *bourgeoisie* asked. The clerical press described him as a hideous pedant. M. Louis Veuillot abused him in the "Monde." Preachers attacked him in the pulpit. One of them told how he made war on the small birds in his garden, because two sparrows which had been bred in a hatching apparatus, and had received no sort of ornithological instruction, on being

let out in spring, proceeded to construct a nest without any scientific or experimental knowledge. But Littré was too much engaged in compiling his dictionary, and in other philological studies, to notice the small birds in his garden at Menil-le-Roi. Had he watched them, they might have taught him lessons analogous to those which Christian, in "The Pilgrim's Progress," learned at the Interpreter's House, and brought him to place his philosophy on a wider basis. Human instinct is not always able to give a reason for what it does. Nevertheless, it may be a surer guide than reason.

Littré was a year the senior of Victor Hugo, he having dated from the year 1801, famous for the pseudo-classic costumes which were so soon out of fashion. He was singularly fortunate in his hereditary antecedents. Temptation makes the sinner, and Littré was above the ordinary temptations of human nature. His virtues were inborn. His oldest surviving friend, Barthélemy St. Hilaire, said to me: "Littré sacrificed less than any one I ever knew to vanity, sensuousness, or falsehood. His leadings were all good." He was not so much governed by reason as by inherited virtue. Both father and mother were great characters—greater, perhaps, than their son, who lacked capacity for honest indignation and those militant qualities springing therefrom.

His father was a Norman of the picturesque old town of Avranches, where his ancestors had, time out of mind, been gold and silver smiths. Some of them worked in long ages past for the cathedrals and abbeys of their province, and one of them in the sixteenth century had a narrow escape from being burned as a heretic for denying the personality of the Devil. He was tried for the crime, and got off by recanting. Michael's Mount and Monastery are near Avranches, and all the glory of the archangel to which they were dedicated lay in the successful duel against Satan. The heretic had treated the Devil as a synthetic figure of speech in which all bad on earth was expressed. The last male Littré but one received a classical education, and might have followed the hereditary business if his mother had not died and his father taken for his second wife a person of sharp temper and unjust and covetous disposition. The young man left Avranches for Paris to get out of her way. Soon after he arrived there he heard that cred-



ÉMILE LITTRÉ.

itors had seized on the paternal home, and in order to aid his parent in his distress Littré, who was himself penniless and unemployed, enlisted in the marines, and sent home the premium he had received from the recruiting officer. There was no conscription then, and blood-money was high in the branch of the King's service which he entered. France and England were at war, and English naval captains had been giving much trouble to France. This son, who was the lexicographer's father, took part in many engagements, and rose to the rank of sergeant-major. It was the highest grade to which a person of non-aristocratic blood could rise. He was in the combat of the Cybele with an English man-of-war off the coast of the Mauritius. The former had forty-four guns, and the latter, which was captured and taken into Port Louis as a prize, had fifty guns. Sergeant-major Littré so distinguished himself that the Governor and notables of the island treated him as the real victor, and presented him with a sword and ordered a public fête in his honor. He stayed eleven years in the Indian Ocean. Barthélemy St. Hilaire, who owes to him his thorough knowledge of Greek, and was helped by him in the first volume of his translation of Aristotle, gave me the following rude portrait of him: "He was just and wise, and had a sound mind in a strong body. Though disfigured by small-pox, he was a man of grand presence, finely proportioned, athletic, active, daring, proud, independent, and a deep well of human kindness. He had a pronounced taste for botany, which the flora of the Mauritius called out. When there he learned with transport of the Revolution; but long before that event he was a Republican. He returned home, expecting to see the reign of justice, but arrived just in time to witness the *coup d'état* of Brumaire. He hated its author, and transmitted his sentiment to Émile, who was the meekest of men—kind except when the Bonapartes were presented to his mind. To hear of any of them was enough to throw him (Émile) in a passion, to make him, who was usually silent, loquacious and violent in speech."

I may here state that M. Wyruboff, a disciple of Littré and co-editor with him of "La Revue Positiviste," has also spoken to me of Littré's hatred of Napoleon and all his family. It was so ungovernable that one day, hearing the Bonapartes mentioned as he was stepping into an omnibus, he inveighed against them during a ride of several miles, regardless of the possible feelings of those who were in the vehicle with him. The lexicographer's mother was worthy of her husband. Though she dressed like a servant in her humble home

near the College of France, she looked one of nature's noblewomen. Boissy d'Anglas and Montgolfier, of balloon celebrity, were related to her. Her nearest kindred were Cévennes Protestants named Johannot, and lived at Annonay, where she was born. In 1797 her father, a paper manufacturer, was mayor of St. Etienne. Being an admirer of Greek philosophy, he called his daughter Sophia. He chanced to be at Lyons when that city rose against the Republic, and was cast into prison. Sophia went to stay with him, and not only exhorted him and his friends to be of good courage, but worked to liberate them. On learning that the national troops which invested Lyons formed but a small corps, she went into the Loire mountains to recruit peasants, and came back with her mother at the head of a large body of volunteers, which she led into the camp of Dubois Crancé. There she learned of the fall of the city, and with Madame Johannot hastened to the prison. Meeting friends on the road who told them all the captives had been massacred, the mother was paralyzed with grief and sank down. The daughter took her into a forsaken house, and leaving her there went to seek for the corpse of her father. She met him as she flew along the road. He was doomed, however, to be a martyr to his Republican faith. In the Thermidor reaction, he was again seized and finally massacred by a gang of Royalists, known as "The Company of Jesus and the Sun." His body was pierced with seventeen poignards and riddled with bullets. The daughter rushed to save him. Finding he was dead, she knelt beside his remains calling for vengeance, and so stirred the hearts of the people that the authorities ordered her arrest. How she met her husband I have not heard.

The present Madame Littré is a fervid Roman Catholic, and avoids speaking of her mother-in-law. M. Barthélemy St. Hilaire knew the latter, venerates her memory, and ranks her with the heroines of Corneille. But he is unable to say under what circumstances she married. He heard in a general way that Littré the elder met her on the way from Toulon, where he was discharged, to Paris, and fell in love with her and she with him. Both were poor. M. Barthélemy St. Hilaire knew when a boy the Littré family in their small house in the Rue Maçons-Sorbonne. It stood in a garden, where the table used to be spread for dinner in fine weather. Father and mother were hospitable, and welcomed the class-fellows of their sons. The garden was like the Academy at Athens. Old Littré's passion for study increased with age. His was a master mind treated with the sacred fire of enthusiasm, which he communicated to

the youngsters, among whom were Burnouf, who grew up to be the first Orientalist in Europe, Barthélemy St. Hilaire, and Hachette the publisher.

Émile and his brother followed the classes at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, which they had entered on scholarships won at public examinations. There was a sister, the darling of the group, who died in her teens. Boys and girl out of school hours aided their mother in her household tasks. She took a lively interest in their studies. Their father brushed up his classics to help them, and learned Sanskrit to know Greek better. Republicanism was the religious faith of all. One of Émile's names was Maximilien after Robespierre, who his mother would never admit was a monster, or a whit more severe than the Royalists deserved. A characteristic of the father was kindness to the poor. He held it a crime to pass by a starving man without giving him bread or money; and to teach his children to be pitiful, he related to them how he himself lacked food when his eldest son was an infant. Until 1871 the lexicographer was always poor. His wife kept what money he earned, so that he never had small change to give away. But he remembered his father's humane precepts and example, and when in the country practiced medicine for the exclusive benefit of poverty-stricken neighbors.

Littré was the greatest winner of prizes ever known at the high school where he was educated. He was first in every branch of learning taught to his class. At the last prize distribution that he attended as a pupil, he was given one hundred and seventeen volumes. He had then an athlete's muscles, and could lift from the floor, with outstretched arm and one leg, a chair on which a man was seated. In racing, walking, and swimming his staying powers were no less remarkable. At that time his mind appeared to suffer from a congestion of ideas. Littré in youth sometimes apprehended that he would die a lunatic. He threw himself into mathematics to drill his intellect, and prepared to enter the Polytechnic School. An accident changed the course of his life. In diving he hit his right shoulder against a sunken boat, and put it out of joint as well as broke it. When it was quite recovered he became the private secretary of Comte Daru, an ex-minister of Napoleon. The pain he suffered in writing lowered vitality, and brought on a gastric attack which lasted many years. Strength deserted nerves and muscles to concentrate itself in the brain. Will and memory acquired phenomenal tenacity. Though in miserable health from 1821 to 1831, in that decade he studied medicine, and learned all the lan-

guages and dialects with which he was familiar. The plan of the dictionary was already in his head. He had translated poems of Schiller and begun his translation of Hippocrates and "La Dictionnaire de Médecine et de Chirurgie."

In his twenty-sixth year he lost his father, and began to provide for his mother by giving lessons in Greek and Latin. He was abreast at the medical school with those students who have since won fame and fortune as surgeons and physicians, and had gone through all the courses needed to qualify for a diploma. But he had not ready money to pay the ultimate fees, and he would not borrow it or seek to obtain credit for what furniture he needed to set up as a doctor. In France a professional man thinks it *infra dig.* to live in a hotel or in lodgings. Littré was neither eager nor enterprising. He was always letting chances to get on slip through his fingers; and it was not in his nature to lament about them.

What Littré had above everything else was a strong and ever-active principle of growth that brought him steadily on and up. In the days of July he shook off his inertia, because he thought if his father were alive he would have handed him his old firelock, and told him to descend into the street and use it in defense of liberty and justice. Littré on that occasion fought manfully. The National Guard was dissolved. He put on its uniform, but, not being able to find his képi, donned a melon hat, and went to fight where resistance to the insurgents was hottest. For a whole day he was exposed to fire in the Cité and on the Quai Napoléon. One of his old and intimate schoolmates was shot beside him. His mother turned her house into a hospital, and her youngest son, until Émile returned home, attended to the wounded insurgents. Those who died were buried with civic honors at Père Lachaise. After the Revolution of 1830 the flush of physical courage forever subsided in him. He henceforth threw himself exclusively into science and literature.

M. Wyruboff, in analyzing for me Littré's odd disposition, said: "I never knew him to say no. Silence is generally held to give consent. If he was asked to do a thing, and made no answer, but turned the conversation to another subject, nothing was to be got out of him, and those who knew him felt that it would be loss of time to ask again." The same intimate friend and disciple told me that Littré was indifferent to applause or blame. He did not want to shine in the world, and would as lief have been obscure as famous, until in his sixty-sixth year he began to taste the pecuniary sweets of celebrity. He then

sold the copyright of his dictionary for two hundred and fifty thousand francs, and reserved for himself the price of every thirteenth impression of the work. His share in the "Dictionary of Medical Science" was mismanaged. The other works that he published brought him little profit. "Conservation, Révolution et Positivism," which may be regarded as the finest fruit of twenty years of deep thought, meditation, and study, was brought out at the price of a franc and a half, or thirty cents, in an edition of two thousand impressions, which it took ten years to sell. There was a good part of the stock on the booksellers' hands when the Bishop of Orleans began to attack the author. Scientists and eminent doctors bought his translation of Hippocrates, which he dedicated, in admiring and affectionate terms, to the memory of his father, Michel Littré.

Those monuments of erudition which he wrote for the "Journal des Savants" on the tongues and dialects of the Latin stock were hardly noticed by the public. They were the germ of his great dictionary. He explained in them the laws of accent, and showed how ancient Latin degenerated successively into the lower Latin of the peasants and artisans, and then into French, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, and Provençal. The southern Europeans have a sing-song mode of speech. The Latins did not pronounce as they wrote. When the barbarians overflowed them, the unaccustomed ears of the barbarians only heard the accented syllable, and cast aside the others. Local and pre-existing idioms were also grafted on the Roman tongue. Gallic ears had a predilection for sounds to which their mouths were accustomed. So had the Moors who invaded Spain, and the Franks and Normans who swept down on France north of the Loire. Littré reduced a Babel of confusion to perfect order.

He was encouraged by a small group of philologists, but the rest of the world was indifferent to his labors. While following his vocation, he kept himself for some time in bread and cheese by translating articles from foreign journals for the famous "National," which Thiers started, and Armand Carrel subsequently directed. He was five years a sub-translator. An article which a bookseller asked him to write upon an essay by Herschel on the Newtonian Philosophy revealed his superior attainments to Carrel, who then asked him to write leaders for the "Journal." The "Revue des Deux Mondes" paid him miserably for his scientific contributions, and nothing at all for the first of the series, which was a masterpiece of thought and medical research. It was headed "Les Grandes Épidémies." Be-

ing less hampered by editorial supervision in the "Revue Républicaine," his best work was done for that short-lived periodical. In his review for it of Cuvier's book, "Recherches sur les Ossements Fossiles," and in an essay headed "Nouvelles Recherches des Géomètres sur la Chaleur de la Terre," all his scientific knowledge, speculative power, and poetic feeling were brought into play.

Littré was a poet as well as a book-worm and scientist. The contrast presented by his own littleness as compared with the vast shadows of the past, the endless perspectives of the future, and the infinity of space, oppressed him. The world and the beings on its surface appeared to him as if moving in a cloud of other worlds that were like dust driven on by a whirlwind. Science enabled man to cast a grave and longing look into the depths of the abyss which surrounds him. His stanzas "On Light" show how he longed to penetrate the mysteries of creation. I sometimes fancied he did not dare give the rein to speculation because he thought it his besetting intellectual sin, and might, if not kept down, lead him further than he wanted to go. He was tortured in early life by a desire to understand what is unknowable, but what may yet be partly divined.

His brother's premature death from a scalpel wound in a dissecting room plunged him into a state of gloom in which he remained stultified until he met Auguste Comte. What did he or could he know, he cried to his mother and his intimate friends, of God and the alleged eternity of the soul? He had not the power to believe in them. When his mother was dying she professed, he holding her in his arms, her deistical faith, and got him to promise that he would never examine a religious question unless in a spirit of candor and humility. She died in 1842.

Littré was already married and a father. His marriage was not preceded by any courtship. One day he said to his mother: "I have made up my mind to do one of two things—marry or commit suicide." His mother inferred that he had fallen in love with a girl of low station and meant to do an act of justice; but she wronged him, for he had never been in love, and his conduct had been blameless. Her daughter had been twelve years dead, and she was not acquainted with any family at once respectable enough to provide her with a daughter-in-law, well-reared and yet poor enough to be satisfied with a man who had no fixed income and no talent for making money. She spoke to a Norman doctor, who recommended a young lady from his province. The young lady was prosaic and a Roman Catholic. Her fanati-

cism was cold and inflexible. But as Littré was tolerant and gentle, and she relieved him from the material cares of home life, eking out well the small sums of money that he earned, they suited each other. They were able in 1848 to buy a peasant's cottage and garden ten miles from Paris, where they passed the hot months of the year. A centime was never spent in repairing it until after Littré entered the National Assembly, when his income rose to 25,000 francs a year. The furniture was rustic, and there was not much of it. Their Paris flat was in a third-story near the Luxembourg Garden, and small and meanly furnished, but very clean. A white table-cloth appeared on the board only when a woman relative or old friend of Madame Littré came to dine.

Littré's daughter received her religious training from her mother and her literary and scientific instruction from her father. She inherited his peaceable temper, and being intelligent was a satisfactory pupil. The hours reserved for pedagogy were in the forenoon. His dark, somber face, as he strove to stoop to the child's head, wore an expression of angelic benevolence. But he was not quite at ease. The wife listened too, not to learn, but to prepare an antidote for any false religious doctrine that he might instill into the girl's mind in speaking to her of moral obligations. The rest of the day was spent in collecting materials for literary and scientific works, and when he was in the country in attending to poor patients, or in strolling, book in hand, in the forest near which his cottage lay. If Madame Littré had allowed him, he would have followed the paternal example in being hospitable with simplicity. It pleased him to see friendly faces at his table. At meals he was amiable, and with old acquaintances almost gay. In his mother's time he used to propose healths, and sing short songs of his own composing. One of them ran thus:

"Hippocrates a dit qu'on s'enivre
Pour le moins une fois par mois,
Et ses fils qui devraient le suivre
Ne boivent par an qu'une fois."

It gave him pleasure to oblige, and he disliked to be thanked; but nothing could induce him to solicit the patronage of a man in high position for the benefit of himself or any other person. He was firmly attached to the elective principle, and would accept no office that was a gift. In 1840 he was a husband, father, and the prop of his widowed mother, and only earned a small and preca-

rious income. M. Cousin was Minister of Public Instruction. At the instance of Barthélemy St. Hilaire he proposed to found a chair at the School of Medicine for the history of medical art and science, and to ask Littré to fill it. The *savant* did not answer for himself yes or no, but recommended a Doctor Dezeimeris. When pressed he refused. His mother was set on to try to make him change his mind. The answer she received was: "If my father, who taught us to stand by the elective principle, were alive, would he ask me to take a chair as a gift? No. The matter is therefore decided, and for good." Both father and son also hated decorations and titles. M. de Villemain, on succeeding Cousin, sent Littré the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor and the violet one of the Academy. Littré refused them on the ground of principle. Gambetta was not more successful when he asked him to fill the chair of history at the Polytechnique. Membership in the Academy of Berlin was declined because it would render obligatory the wearing of the cross of the Order of Merit. Being an enemy of charlatanism, Littré never mentioned the offered honors, and newspapers were not informed of the sacrifices made to principle.

Littré had not a refined palate. He liked plain food best, and ate in moderation. He was generally through his dinner at half-past six, and at seven went to work, remaining at his desk until three in the morning. Then he walked up and down his parlor for half an hour, and went to bed toward four. He rose at eight in town, and often earlier when in the country. At the sea-side he liked to go to a boarding-house belonging to a convent. The quiet regularity and absence of luxury pleased him; and as prices were low and a chapel was in the house, his wife was always in good humor. When very poor they used to go to St. Quay for sea-bathing, and there they were lodged and boarded for a very small price, and cheaper than other families, partly because Littré gave medical advice to the community. He caught a bad cold at the Versailles Assembly, which stuck to him six years and finally killed him. A nun attended him. Her attention gave him an interest in the Christian faith which he never before experienced. But he never was converted to Roman Catholicism. His life for the last half-year of his existence was completely vegetative. The mind was gone, and he had no knowledge of what the priest who was called in was doing, when he administered to him baptism and the eucharist and the extreme unction.