

Caligraphy considered as affording an exhibition of character : read at the meeting of the Psychological Society of Great Britain, November 26th, 1875 / by George Harris.

Contributors

Harris, George, 1809-1890.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[London] : [Longman], [1875]

Persistent URL

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AS AFFORDING AN

EXHIBITION OF CHARACTER.

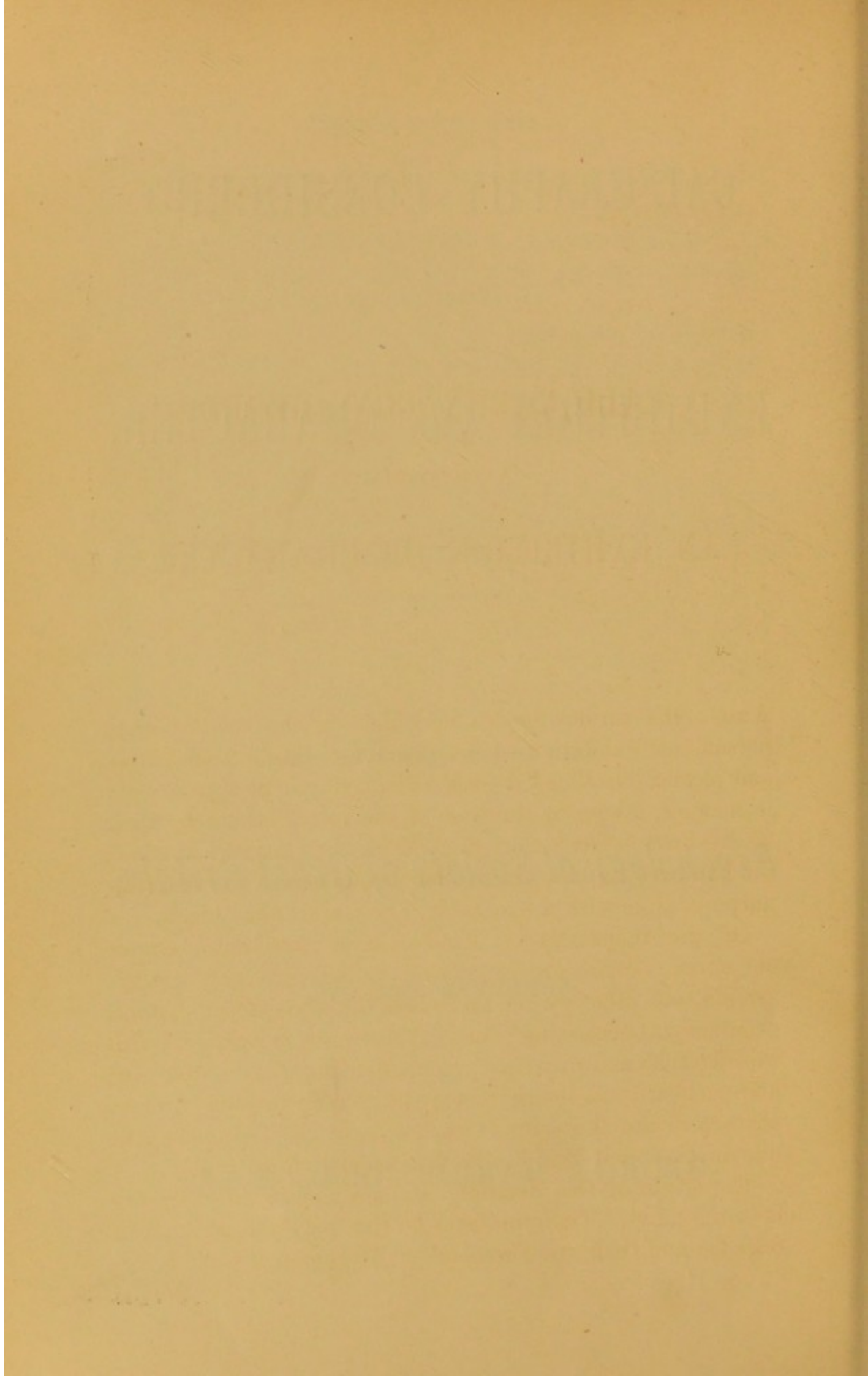
READ AT THE MEETING OF THE

Psychological Society of Great Britain,

NOVEMBER 26TH, 1875,

BY

GEORGE HARRIS, LL.D., F.S.A.



CALIGRAPHY CONSIDERED

AS AFFORDING

AN EXHIBITION OF CHARACTER.

AMONG the various modes in which, in the case of each person, an exhibition of his character, intellectual, moral, and physical, is afforded—some displaying it by a peculiarity in manner, others by the tone of the voice, others by their walk—there is none more remarkable than the way in which the handwriting of every human being serves to effect this purpose, alike with distinctness, force, and individuality.

Of the thousands of handwritings that come under our notice, no two are exactly alike, and very few even resemble each other; while there is at the same time a distinct peculiarity appertaining to each. Precisely correspondent with this diversity and peculiarity in handwriting, is the diversity and peculiarity in the character of different persons; no two characters are the same, but few bear close similarity to one another, and each has its distinct individual type.

The origin of this diversity and peculiarity of character is in the mind. The mind acts on the body and its various organs; and their operations under its guidance serve to re-

flect or shadow forth the character of the active agent by which they are impelled. To the control of the mind are subjugated all the voluntary operations of the body, more especially of such of the material organs as serve for carrying out the purposes of the soul. Thus, the mind is the director of the voice in speaking and in singing, and of the hand, both in writing and in painting. Consequently, the character of the impress made by these material organs reflects, as it were, with more or less clearness, according to circumstances, the individual character of the particular soul which impelled them, and by whom they are in each case directed and disciplined. Hence, what is ordinarily regarded as the education of any particular material organ—as when the hand is trained to paint, or to write, or to play upon an instrument—is, in reality, simply, essentially, and solely, nothing more than the complete subjection and discipline of the bodily organ to the impulses of the soul. This is further evinced by the fact that the left hand, which is not so disciplined (although it fully admits of this application), is not able to perform the same achievements, whatever may be the cultivation which the mind has received. Hence the character of each person is accurately, forcibly, and unerringly evinced by the peculiar features displayed by his handwriting, the hand being guided by the nerves, which receive through the brain a direct impulse from the very soul itself. In the structure and style of the letters, the various qualities of the mind are, as it were, shadowed and reflected, according as they direct and influence the peculiar form of each of them; although the finer the texture of the material organs, the more accurate will be the mode in which they obey the intellectual impulses, which will therefore be in each case more or less modified by this circumstance. They will also be more or less affected by the bodily temperament of the individual frame. These

two facts require therefore to be borne in mind, in conjunction with the result produced by the influence of the intellect through the nerves and hand in the formation of the writing; although the mind itself is, after all, the leading and directing impulse, the mainspring from which the movement originates.

As a whole, it appears to me that the various agencies operating in the formation of the writing, serve well to illustrate how complex are the operations of the various powers, and energies, and impulses, in our constitution; and how many influences are simultaneously exerted in each case, which, although apparently counteracting each other, all at last become united, and result in one grand central effort and movement. Indeed, as already hinted, not only the handwriting, but every single motion and action in the gait and habit and manner of the individual, and even the very tones of his voice, more or less betoken his character and disposition, physical, moral and intellectual; whether this be caused by a peculiarity in his material texture or temperament, or by something existing in the very soul itself, as regards its qualities, or possibly its very essence.

Dress also serves pretty exactly in many cases to indicate the character of a person, in a manner corresponding with that of caligraphy, by its peculiarity in accordance with the taste and turn of mind of the individual adopting it. So national character is indicated by national costume. Shape, and colour, and variety, are the principal features here displayed. Some illustration of the mode in which national character is reflected by national handwriting, is afforded by the Chinese manuscript in the case on the table.

In the instance of handwriting, we may consider the copperplate letters—such as we were set to copy from when children—as the model form of the original writing, each

deviation from which in whatever direction, is caused by some peculiar impetus originating in the mind, and acting on the nerves, and through them on the hand of the individual. Those handwritings where this influence prevails the least, as in that of law writers and copying clerks, who are ordinarily persons of but little mental cultivation, and not very susceptible minds, follow pretty regularly the original copperplate type. This is also very much the case with children. In the case of either, as the hand becomes freer, and they deviate from the primitive type, the individual peculiarity and characteristic of each handwriting begins to display itself, and goes on increasing until it has acquired a fixed individual character, which it continues to retain through life. Thus, any nervous excitement in the system will produce irregularity in the handwriting, except, as when in the case of the persons of both classes to whom I have alluded, they are restrained from diverting from the model copy; in which case of course the type is not their own, but they are confined to the imitation of that set before them. In the case of ordinary persons, however, who are free to express this peculiarity in their constitution, the character of the handwriting will vary according to the character and feelings of the writer. The taste will moreover exercise considerable influence on the handwriting of each person; while the mental habits and operations must necessarily have an important bias here. The particular occupation of the individual will also affect the formation, but not the actual character, of his caligraphy. Boldness, steadiness, energy, decision, caution, firmness, openness, and the opposites of these qualities, are especially exhibited by it.

Certain men write in an effeminate hand, which generally, if not always, indicates an effeminate mind. On the other hand, when women, as occasionally happens,

write in a masculine hand, this betokens their character in this respect. I have known, however, several exceptions to this rule, which might be accounted for by other traits in their character. Although various and complicated influences unite in the formation of the character of the handwriting of each person; yet, on the whole, the moral disposition, rather than mental endowments or physical qualities, appear to be mainly indicated by it. Not improbably, indeed, qualities, arising from our physical constitution, such as temper, pride, appetite, courage, emotion, and passion, are principally evinced by the peculiarity of manner; moral qualifications and character, by the peculiarity of the handwriting; and mental endowment and capacity, by the peculiarity of style in speaking and writing. Each of these performances is, however, more or less influenced by character of each kind.

It seems to me that of the various characteristics forcibly exhibited by handwriting, that of steadiness or unchangeableness of character, and its opposite, fickleness, are the most so. Some persons are always the same, and never appear to vary from day to day. Others are always changing, and do not seem like the same persons for two days, or perhaps two hours together. In the case of such persons I have observed that the handwriting closely corresponds with the character. In certain handwritings I have not been able to detect the slightest variation. The handwritings of other persons seem never to be on two occasions alike, and on opening the letter you fail to recognise the writing, although it is one to which you are well accustomed. Another character which I think the handwriting will often serve to display, is that of duplicity. I mean the case of a person acting in an assumed character, and pretending to be that which he is not. How often do we find a feigned manner resorted to

to conceal a false heart. So is it also in the case of caligraphy. A disguised hand is not difficult to detect. Here and there the real hand will unawares display itself, as the real character will suddenly come out when the wearer of the false one is off his guard. The fable of the cat, whom Jupiter in a frolicsome fit changed into the form of a young lady, and who sprang out of bed the moment that a mouse was astir, is a good illustration of the truth of what I have been saying.

Occasional absence of mind is another quality which appears to be directly and plainly indicated by caligraphy.

When the writing, although of a grown-up person, deviates but little from the copper plate form, and assumes no peculiar type of its own, this may be taken as an indication that the individual is deficient in force of character, and possesses no marked or peculiar features in this respect. It betokens, too, a want of energy. But a bold hand by no means indicates a bold person. And the character of the writing of great generals—as we shall presently see in the case of those of NAPOLEON and WELLINGTON—often widely differs. Plain writing is by no means always indicative of a plain straightforward character; nor is an obscure hand a proof of the reverse. Sometimes, indeed, the character of the handwriting seems to be the opposite of that of the writer. That great orator and genius, Lord BOLINGBROKE, wrote in a peculiarly formal, cramped, and pedantic hand, square small letters, squeezed together as though by some process of machinery, very unlike what we should expect from the intellectual character and acts of the man. But, as I said before, I believe that moral rather than intellectual character is what handwriting displays, and in this respect BOLINGBROKE'S writing was highly indicative of the intriguing, insidious, double-dealing conduct of the man. In this case, the handwriting,

like the character, was evidently assumed. I wish I had the autographs of TALLEYRAND and of RICHELIEU to submit to your scrutiny on this point. But perhaps that of the great NAPOLEON may suffice, who was, I believe, a more complete, adroit, and successful dissembler than both of them together.

Some handwritings are remarkable for the regularity with which the letters are formed. Others for the reverse of this. Some writers are very particular in crossing the "t's" and dotting the "i's," while others as regularly leave this duty unperformed. Some are noticeable for the plain simple way in which they shape their letters; others for the abundant display of flourishes with which they liberally adorn them. All these peculiarities indicate a corresponding peculiarity in the character of the writer; but in cases of this sort we must be careful to bear in mind that in different persons very different circumstances may conduce to the same result. Dean SWIFT, when describing in "Gulliver's Travels" an epistle from a Brobdingnag lady, says that they write from corner to corner, "after the fashion of ladies in England." This custom has, I believe, in our own country, whatever may be the present mode in Brobdingnag, gone out of fashion, although, perhaps, to give place to a worse, that of crossing the letters as well as—perhaps I might say, instead of—the "t's;" the effect of which I fear is often to make the reader cross as well.

In order to judge with any degree of accuracy or certainty of the character of a person by caligraphy, we ought to have not merely a single signature or a single letter, but a number of letters written at different times and under different circumstances, to compare one with another. On the other hand, each word—perhaps each letter—contains more or less of character in itself, and is more or less indicative of the qualities of the writer; like a single

bone in an animal frame, from which naturalists are able at once to determine the genus of the species to which it belongs.

In a brief paper of this description, it is necessarily impossible to lay down any particular directions for deciding on character by caligraphy—which would require a volume (and a pretty big one) satisfactorily and safely to effect. The most, indeed, that I can hope to accomplish this evening, is to demonstrate at least the possibility of caligraphy being applied to serve for this purpose at all. Indeed, to pretend to attempt to teach the art practically in one short address, would be little short of imposture.

Not only do the handwritings of different persons differ extensively from each other, but those of the people of different nations do so also; and in the case of each there is a marked, peculiar, and individual feature—indicative of some corresponding national character.

In the good old times, some five hundred years ago, the greatest people, such as emperors and kings, were seldom able to write, and only made their mark, as uneducated people do now. It is recorded of the Emperor CHARLEMAGNE that he was so anxious to learn to write, that he always carried a bottle of ink and a pen about with him to practise with when he had a moment's leisure, which was not often the case; and so at last he only got so far as to be able to write, or rather scrawl, his own signature, which was probably not unlike what COBBETT said of that of a worthy alderman of the city of London, "the mark made by a mad spider dipped in ink, and dropped on the paper!"

King RICHARD III., of not very fragrant memory, appears to have been a little more successful, and perhaps gave more attention to the subject; though, if history records truly, he must have had plenty on his hands. An enlarged facsimile of his signature when Duke of Gloucester is

before you. The hand appears somewhat crooked and cramped, corresponding with what we are told was the material form of the man; yet on the whole the letters are regular, and the writing is plain and straightforward, regard being had to the style of caligraphy at the time. But without knowing what was the model, form, or character of writing of that period, it is impossible to analyse the character of any particular hand. Singular it is that the autograph in question is inscribed in a book containing drawings of instruments of torture of every variety, preserved in the British Museum.

In the autograph of the great NAPOLEON, the first emperor, in his signature to an order, we fail to detect any marked character in the man. And perhaps the leading feature in NAPOLEON himself was the concealment of his own character. There was indeed in his case such an opposition of qualities, such a contradiction of attributes, that it is not more difficult to determine what peculiar character the handwriting indicates, than that which was indicated by his whole career. Both alike are a mystery and a mixture; a rare combination indeed of generosity and meanness, of nobleness and littleness, of honour and baseness, of humanity and cruelty, of pride and humility, of kindness and harshness.

The DUKE OF WELLINGTON'S, as you will see, is free, and apparently frank. He varied but very little in the character of the writing in his different letters, corresponding with the steady, consistent, unvarying character of the man.

The handwriting of Lord NELSON, of which I possess only the autograph signature, is free and bold, frank and fearless,—so far characteristic of the man. There is a certain degree of care and regularity in the entire structure of the words, with a certain degree of minor irregularity in

the details of the letters. The character appears to be a mixed one,—great qualities and great failings, eminent virtues and unfortunate weaknesses, conjoined together.

One of the most remarkable handwritings as indicative of character is that of Lord BROUGHAM. His caligraphy is very obscure, very irregular, very loose, very changeable, hardly two words alike ; now and then, but not often, a “t” gets a cross, but the “i’s” do not come off so well. The eccentric, uncertain, irregular, erratic career of this wonderful man, versatile genius, and great benefactor to our race, whose name ought always to be held in veneration for the many grand measures with which it will ever be inseparably associated, is surely not inaccurately reflected by his handwriting.

Compare with that of Lord BROUGHAM the handwriting of one of his contemporaries, Lord St. LEONARDS,—who was also a Lord Chancellor, a very able lawyer, and a very estimable man, but in all respects a great contrast, the very opposite, I might say, to Lord BROUGHAM ; and their handwritings were as unlike as possible. The writing of Lord St. LEONARD’S is clear, regular, precise, never varying in character ; it is a round, running, business-like hand, well suited for drawing law documents, but not at all such as one would expect to see employed in scribbling hurried dissertations on philosophical or political topics.

Let us turn to another character, of a very different stamp to those of the two last mentioned,—that of the poet COWPER. His hand is round and regular, his “i’s” are all dotted, but most of his “t’s” are uncrossed. The general style of the hand is not unlike that of a copying clerk, to which his official employment may have conduced ; but there is quite enough of character infused into it, to render it an essential deviation from the mere mechanical type.

SHERIDAN wrote a running, dashing, irregular hand, certainly very unlike COWPER's, but very much like the character of SHERIDAN, as you will see from the two specimens before you of his caligraphy. There are no two words, hardly two letters, formed alike. No disguise is discernible in the handwriting; and I think that everybody will so far do him justice as to say that there was none in the man!

HORNE TOOKE's was a very different hand to SHERIDAN's, a round clerk-like hand, but with sufficient character in it to cause it to diverge from the copper plate type. The letters are irregular, as is also the punctuation.

CANNING's was a bold, free, running hand. The specimen of it produced is a note taken by him during a debate.

LORD ERSKINE's was a free small hand, not appearing to display much character. ADDISON's, on the contrary, appears full of marked character. It is a small round hand, each letter, as you will see, exhibiting a special feature in the formation, full of individual peculiarity, and without disguise.

COBBETT's was an irregular small hand, varying much in the different words, plain and simple, free from flourishes and high finish; very like COBBETT himself.

I shall conclude by calling your attention to two autographs of men, both remarkable in their way, both writers of fiction, and perhaps most remarkable of all in the contrast of their characters, and correspondingly in the contrast of their handwriting. I allude to the late Lord LYTTON and CHARLES DICKENS.

The writing of Lord LYTTON is that of a man of refinement, and of one used to much and hasty composition. The character appears uncertain, and there is a degree of wildness and irregularity in the style, not unsuitable to a writer of

romance. In CHARLES DICKENS'S hand there is none of the refinement evinced by Lord LYTTON'S. It is more the hand of a man of middle rank. The writing is free and clear, with a certain degree of carelessness in the construction of the letters. The words vary extensively, but the variation is singularly uniform. Frankness and sincerity are prominent traits in his caligraphy.

In the remarks which I have made, and in the specimens of caligraphy which I have exhibited before you, I have endeavoured as far as practical, in the very short space allowed, to enunciate some general principles which may serve as a guide in the discernment of character by this means. As I said before, it appears to me that moral rather than intellectual character is that which is generally indicated; although some traits in the writing undoubtedly serve to display also the mental endowments and habits. The study is a difficult one as regards obtaining skill on which you can safely rely. And it is undoubtedly a very dangerous one on which to rely, when you have not sufficient data whereon to proceed. The disguises by which we are liable to be misled are many and deep laid; and the greater the need of disguise, the more artful and insidious will probably be the disguises. How often is a dishonest character concealed under an apparently frank, and, perhaps, blustering manner; as a bold handwriting may be thought to indicate openness, and straight forward dealing, in the writer. Some characters are natural, and appear as they really are; others are assumed, and appear, not as they are, but as they wish to be thought. So it is with their caligraphy also. Some persons appear always in feigned characters, others are always real. In most cases I suspect that the character is mixed, part feigned and part real. Correspondent with this is their caligraphy also. NAPOLEON, and TALLEYRAND, and BOLINGBROKE, were far more feigned

than real. WELLINGTON, BROUGHAM, and NELSON, were far more real than feigned. There was but very little which was not genuine about them. The force of circumstances may in every case cause a slight adulteration of the spurious with the real.

All persons are more or less physiognomists, and judges of character by countenance and manner. And there is no reason, if due attention and care were bestowed on the subject, why they should not be able to decide upon character by caligraphy also. I even venture to assert that the art may be carried so far that a person well experienced and practically skilled in it, may be able to say not only, "show me the handwriting of such a person, and I will tell you his character;" but further than this, he may also say, "tell me his character, and I will show you what style of writing he uses." Be this as it may, the pursuit is an interesting and an attractive one, and is intimately connected with the science of Psychology. It is one also which each person has the opportunity of following up. As the study of man is that which is most proper for mankind, so a discernment of character is the richest fruit which that study can produce.

