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## THOUGHTS ON HAND-WRITING.

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I have had reasons for meditating much on the mystery of hand-writings, though my reflections have resulted in no new discoveries; and I have neither solved any of the paradoxes, nor come to a definite conclusion on any of the doubtful points with which the subject is pregnant. The first difficulty which was suggested to my mind about it, occurred in early childhood. I could not discover how the rapping me over the knuckles with a long, round, lignumvitæ ruler, until those articulations were discolored and lame, was to assist me in using my fingers with ease and grace, in copying the pithy scraps of morality which were set before me. My master, however, seemed to think it was good for me. The poor man took a world of pains, and gave me a great many, to very little purpose. He was very fond of quoting to me a passage from Horace, in an English version he had picked up somewhere, of the fidelity of which I have since had my doubts:

'In wisdom and sound knowledge to excel  
Is the chief cause and source of writing well:  
The manuscripts of Socrates were writ  
So fairly, because he had so much wit.'

I certainly never became a proficient in calligraphy. I have, however, in the course of my life, been consoled for my own imperfections on this score, by observing scholars, statesmen, and gentlemen at large, who passed very well in the world, and obtained professorships, outfits, and salaries, and the entree into polite society, whose signs manual were hieroglyphics, which Champollion himself would give up in despair. Their whole manipulation (as the learned would say,) with pen, ink, and paper, produced a result so utterly undecipherable, that, instead of its 'painting thought, and speaking to the eyes,' if their secretaries or correspondents had not known what they wanted, they would have said for them, 'persons interested in their despatches might as well have been in the innocent situation of John Lump and Looney Mactwoler, when they had 'mixed the billy-duckses.'

I have known lawyers and doctors, whose autographic outpourings the solicitor and apothecary alone understood, by professional instinct; and yet the bills in chancery of the former, fairly engrossed, produced suits which are not yet decided; and the prescriptions of the latter found their way into the patient's system, and caused a great effect.

There is one thing, however, on which I have made up my mind decidedly; which is, that a person who writes so detestable a hand that he cannot read it himself, acts in an improper manner, and abuses the gift which Cadmus was good enough to introduce into Europe.

The character of my own writing seems somewhat amended, since time has laid his frosty hand upon my head, and cramped the joints of my fingers. It is less capricious in the variety of directions in which the letters run, and less luxuriant in gratuitous additions to their tops, and bottoms, and natural terminations. They look more like a platoon of regular troops, and less like a militia-training; more like an arrangement produced by the agency of human intellect, and less like the irregular scratches made by the brute creation in the surface of the soil. So that I get along without any material difficulty; and have, indeed, been sometimes complimented on the elegance of my writing.

One thing which has always been unaccountable to me, is the nice acquaintance some persons acquire with the signatures of particular individuals, so that they can detect a forgery at first sight, however well it may be executed, and can swear to the spuriousness of the sophisticated writing. Neither, for the life of me, can I understand the wisdom of the rule of evidence, which makes the question important, whether a witness has ever seen the person write, about whose autography he is interrogated. I am sure it would puzzle the twelve judges of England to explain why our having seen a man write, should enable us to distinguish the character of his hand, any more than we should be enabled to identify his clothes, by having seen him put them on.

That the intellectual and moral character of a person may be ascertained from his hand-writing, is a theory in which many are fond of believing. It seems, certainly, a more plausible one than those of chiromancy or phrenology; but beyond a certain extent, I think it can be shown to be as visionary as either. Up to a certain point, however, it may be far more rational.

The sex of the writer may be conjectured with more infallibility than any other attribute:

'The bridegroom's letters stand in row above,  
Tapering, yet straight, like pine trees in his grove;  
While free and fine, the bride's appear below,  
As light and slender as her jasmines grow.'

Still, you cannot always tell, from the appearance of a manuscript, whether a lady or a gentleman has held the pen. I had a female relative, who was a strong, stout-built woman, to be sure; but she wrote a hand so formidably masculine, that the only suitor who ever made her an offer, was terrified out of his negotiation by the first billet-doux he had the honor of receiving from her. He was a slender and delicately made man, and wrote a fine Italian hand.

Next to the sex, the age of a writer may be guessed at with most certainty from the chirograph. If the gods had made me poetical, I would paraphrase the seven ages of Shakspeare, (omitting, of course, the infant in his nurse's arms,) with reference to this theme. But I must 'leave it to some fitter minstrel.' There are, however, more exceptions to this than to the former proposition. Some people write a puerile hand all their lives: and the gravest maxims, the profoundest thoughts, the most abstruse reasonings, have sometimes been originally embodied in signs as fantastical as the scrawl made in sport by a child. On the other hand, men of regular temperament, and methodical habits of business, will acquire a formal and deliberate character in their hand-writing, which is often not impaired until extreme age.

The nation, profession, and other accidental properties of a person, may also, perhaps, be discovered in a majority of instances, from his chirograph. But it is obvious that there is no mystery in this, which philosophy need be invoked to elucidate. Mr. Owen's doctrine of circumstances will explain it very satisfactorily. I am only disposed to deny that the bent of natural inclination, or the predominance or deficiency of any intellectual quality, can be ascertained by this test. I have never met with any one who possessed the art of divination in this way; nor, as the theory cannot be proved by any process of reasoning from first principles, can it be supported by a fair examination of any miscellaneous collection of autographs. Imagination may carry us a great way, and suggest resemblances of its own creation, between the characters of men known in history and fac-similes of their autographs. But, divesting ourselves of its influence, let us look at the signatures to the death-warrant of Charles I., or the Declaration of American Independence; which instruments I do not bring into juxtaposition irreverently, but because every one has seen them. I believe it will be impossible, without the aid of fancy, from recorded facts in the lives of those who subscribed these documents, compared with the peculiarities of their signs manual, to found an honest induction in support of this hypothesis.

Some conceited people try to write as badly as they can, because they have heard and believe that it is a proof of genius. While all will admit that this notion is very absurd, it is still generally believed that men of genius do write in a very obscure, infirm, or eccentric character: and we are told of a thousand familiar instances; such as Byron, and Chalmers, and Jeffrey, and Bonaparte, etc. A goodly assortment in the same lot! One thing is very certain, that those who write a great deal for the press, will soon write very badly: without its being necessary to ascribe that circumstance to intellectual organization. Bonaparte had no time, when dictating to six clerks at once, or signing treaties on horseback, to cultivate a clear running hand. Distinguished as he was above other men, in his fame and in his fortunes, I believe we may also concede to him the honor of having written the worst possible hand, decipherable by human ingenuity. And when we find, from the fac-similes of some of his early despatches, how abominably he spelled, as well as wrote, we are led to infer that a defective education, and an eagle-eyed ambition, which soon began to gaze too steadily at the sun to regard the motes in the atmosphere, will sufficiently account for a matter of such small importance to so great a man, without resorting to 'metaphysical aid' to account for his bad writing.

The hand-writing of an individual is not as much connected with the machinery of his mind, as is the effect of any other personal habit. Neat people do not always write neatly; and some very slovenly persons, whom I have known, were distinguished for a remarkably elegant formation of their letters. Affectation, on the contrary, being out of nature, will always betray itself in this particular, as in every other.

I am disposed also to treat, as a fond chimera, a notion I have

often heard expressed, that there is a natural gentility appertaining to the chirographs of nature's aristocracy; supposing such a phrase to be proper. Every thing else about a gentleman's letter will furnish better hints as to his breeding and quality, than the character of his hand-writing. Set a well-taught boot-black and a gentleman down to copy the same sentence on pieces of paper of like shape and texture, and few of your connoisseurs in autographs will be able to guess, from the specimens, which is the gentleman and which is the boot-black.

But to leave this drouthy and prosing disquisition, I am minded to illustrate both the evils and the advantages of bad or illegible writing, by incidents which have occurred, or are easily supposable, in real life. My poor old master, against whose memory I cherish no malice, notwithstanding his frequent fustigation of my youthful knuckles, when he despaired of my profiting either by the unction of his precepts, or the sore application of his ruler, endeavoured to frighten me into amendment by examples. He composed for my use a digested chronicle of casualties which had befallen those who perpetrated unseemly scrawls; and, after the manner of Swift, entitled his tract, 'God's revenge against Cacography.' I have long since lost the precious gift; but I have not forgotten all the legends it contained.

The tale is old, of the English gentleman, who had procured for his friend a situation in the service of the East India Company, and was put to unprofitable expense by misreading an epistle, in which the latter endeavored to express his gratitude. 'Having,' said the absentee, 'been thus placed in a post, where I am sure of a regular salary, have it in my power, while I enjoy health, to lay up something every year to provide for the future, I am not unmindful of my benefactor, and mean soon to send you an equivalent. Such a rascally hand did this grateful Indian write, that the gentleman thought he meant soon to send him an elephant. He erected a large out-house for the unwieldy pet; but he forgot my thing to put in it, except a little pet of several months, and an additional bundle of compliments.

Few who read the newspapers, have not seen an anecdote of an amateur of queer animals, who sent an order to Africa for two monkeys. The word two, as he wrote it, so much resembled the figures one hundred, that his literal and single-minded agent was somewhat perplexed in executing this commission, which compelled him to make war on the whole nation. And great was the naturalist's surprise and perplexity, when he received a letter informing him, in mercantile phraseology, that eighty monkeys had been shipped, as per copy of the bill of lading enclosed, and that his correspondent hoped to be able to execute the rest of the order in time for the next vessel!

Many, too, must have read a story which appeared in the English newspapers, a few years since, of the distressful predicament into which a poor fisherman's wife was thrown, by the receipt of a letter from her husband, who had been absent from home, with several of his brethren, beyond the ordinary time. The honest man stated, in piscatorial phrase, the causes of his detention, and what luck he had met with in his fishing. But the conclusion of his bulletin, as spelled by his loving amphibious helpmate, was as follows: 'I AM NO MORE!' The poor woman gazed awhile on this fatal official intelligence of her husband's demise, and then on her eleven now fatherless infants; and then she burst into a paroxysm of clamorous sorrow, which drew around her the consorts of seventeen other fishermen, who had departed in company with the deceased man. None of them could read; but they caught from the widow's broken lamentations the contents of the supernatural postscript; and taking it for granted that they had all been served in the same manner by the treacherous element, they all lifted up their voices, and the corners of their aprons, and made an ululation worthy of so many forsaken mermaids. In the words of the poet, they made 'high water in the sea,' on whose margin they stood; when one of the overseers of the poor, who came to the spot, alarmed by the rumour that the parish was like to be burthened with eighteen new widows and an hundred and odd parcel orphans, snatched the letter from the weeping Thetis, and silenced the grief of the company, by making out its conclusion correctly, which was, 'I add no more.'

There is a memorable passage in our annals, which must be familiar to those who have read the old chronicles and records of our early colonial history. I allude to the consternation into which the General Courts of the Massachusetts and their associated settlements were thrown, when their clerk read to them a letter from a worthy divine, purporting that he addressed them, not as magistrates, but as a set of Indian devils. The horror-