

Skin Writing.

BY JEREMY BROOME.



HE human skin possesses great pictorial possibilities, as tattooing shows. But this article has nothing to do with tattooing. I have seen a man with a map of Bulgaria on his back; another with the tortuous Danube printed as plainly between his shoulders as it is in an atlas; and still another with his name on the roof of his mouth. But there was no tattooing about it. Beautiful women have been known to have

back the stigma of a hated name. One shudders at the thought of a respectable person going through the world with such a mark, even though clothes are worn over it. But it is not a permanent mark, and it was made purely for purposes of experiment. Such effects can be obtained by the simple contact of certain skins with any blunt instrument—a pencil, the end of a pen, the tip of a finger-nail, or, indeed, with a broken match. The pressure varies, of course, in different cases, and the durability



From a Photo. by]

INSCRIPTION ON THE HUMAN BACK.

[P. Meheux, Paris.

the mark of the cross or the imprint of a hand upon them—signs that in the olden time would have placed them amongst the chosen of God or the slaves of the devil. Yet, no witchcraft. The method by which it was done was simplicity itself, and, granted a proper epidermis and a specially susceptible nervous system, you will be able to make upon your own or somebody else's body any signs, inscriptions, or marks which caprice or imagination may suggest.

Look, for a moment, at the peaceful woman on this page, who carries on her

of the mark is relative. In the majority of cases, the phenomenon lasts for about half an hour, so that the photographer has plenty of time to get a permanent record of the inscription. Sometimes the marks last for two or three hours, and there have been cases where slight traces have been visible at the end of twenty-four hours.

These marks do not appear the moment the instrument touches the skin. A noteworthy case of "dermographism"—a term that explains itself, although the lexicographers define it in long and heavy Latin

words—was reported at the Cleveland Medical Society on June 14th, 1895, and it was several minutes before the inscription began to appear. The man's back, as may be seen from the illustration, was too short to tell the whole story of the experiment. A wooden match was used and lightly laid on. A few minutes after the tracing was made, a distinct swelling was noticeable, caused, it was reported, by the undue excitement in the tiny nerves which control the capillary supply of blood to the skin. The skin soon turned red, and a white welt appeared where the match had made its path, the red holding its colour on each side of the ridge. In about ten minutes after the tracing was done, a photograph was taken, and the inscription soon began to subside and fade away. Other inscriptions were made on the back, also on the breast and arms, the writing standing out as plainly as on a sheet of paper. For a time the subject, whose name was John Miller, attracted considerable attention amongst the medical fraternity, and was locally known as "the man with the autographic skin."

All parts of the body are not equally susceptible to the touch of the marking instrument. The favourite spots for experiments are the breast and between the shoulders. Then comes the abdomen, then the face and arms. Such is the rule, but one experimenter has reported a case in which the writing was more pronounced on the face than on the rest of the body. I have already mentioned the man whose name was written on the roof of his

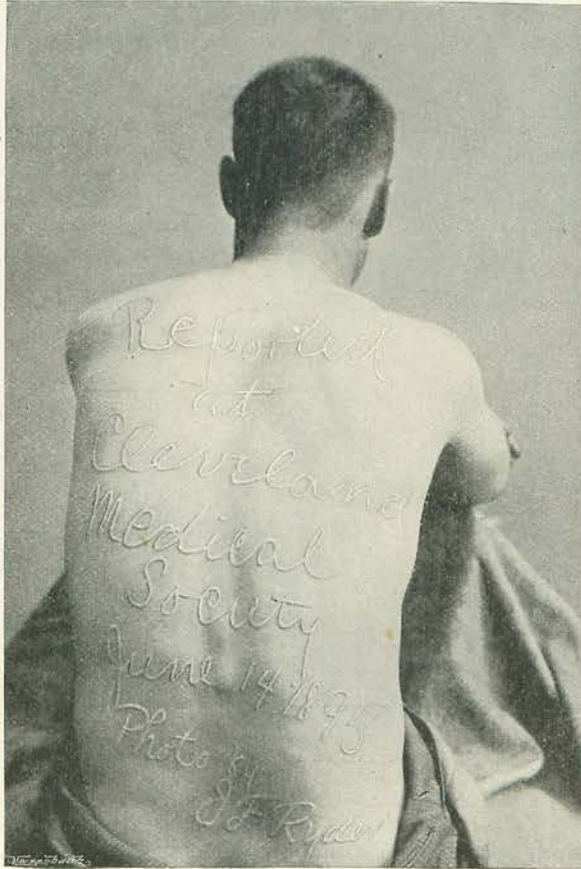
mouth—a case remarkable in itself, but, for certain reasons, unadapted for illustration in this article.

It is evident that such a phenomenon is nothing more or less than a cutaneous affection—which accounts for the attention given to it by medical men. One of the greatest authorities on the subject is Doctor Toussaint Barthélemy, of the Saint Lazare Prison in Paris, to whom we are indebted for the use of our illustrations. Dr. Barthélemy has made hundreds of experiments on all sorts and conditions of men and women, and has reached the conclusion that no social condition is free from cases of dermatographism.

Hysterical persons are particularly sensitive, and upon them some of the best results have been obtained.

Strange to say, although "skin writing" has not become widely known to the public, there are a few people who turn their knowledge of it to a mean end. The French call these people "*simulateurs*," which is only another name for "fakirs." The fakirs, knowing that they possess the ability of exciting their own skins in the manner already described, try to deceive the doctors in order to get free entry to the hospitals, and a delightful rest in bed. They have also

tried to palm themselves off as "wonders," "mysterious skin men," etc., etc. But the doctors are now too clever to allow themselves to be deceived by any such means. Dr. Barthélemy told me of a case in which a "sick man" had come to grief, after having deceived several hospitals. By means



JOHN MILLER, "THE AUTOGRAPHIC SKIN MAN."
From a Photo. by J. F. Ryder, Cleveland, Ohio.

of the open end of a penholder and the end of a key he had been able to simulate several cutaneous diseases, and was so sharp at the practice that he knew in every case the best instrument with which to imitate the special symptoms of certain diseases. In fact, he ran the gamut of eruptions in order to get into the hospital beds, and when he was found out the doctors utilized him for experiments. Thus was evil turned into good.

To return, however, to your own skin. If you cannot write upon that, it is very probable that you will be able to do it on your horse. Hysteria, so the doctors say, is common amongst members of the animal kingdom, particularly horses, dogs, cats, hares, deer, etc. An interesting experiment

The word "bar" was then inscribed on the other flank, as shown in the illustration on this page. It took ten minutes for the mark to appear, and it lasted for half an hour. Nothing could more clearly show the reality of dermatographism among horses than this photograph, although it was taken during a rain-storm.

The most remarkable thing, however, about "skin writing" is its analogy to the so-called "stigmatization" of the Middle Ages. This is a term applied to marks tattooed or branded on the person, and it is used with special reference to the infliction of wounds like those of Christ. We are all familiar with the story of St. Francis of Assisi, who, while meditating on the sufferings of our Saviour, was marked by Him with the five



From a Photo. by]

ON A HORSE.

[Dr. H. Cain, Paris.

took place on a horse in 1892. A horse was chosen possessing a smooth skin and short hair. A finely meshed whip was snapped against his breast, and five minutes later a heavy mark, about the width of the thumb, was noticeable—a mark that could not be confounded with the veins of the animal. The word "Satan"—a favourite inscription, the reason of which will be shown later—was inscribed on the horse's flank. In nine minutes the inscription began to appear, and in forty minutes it had attained its intensity.

wounds. St. Catherine of Siena, who was subject to hystero epileptic attacks, was likewise stigmatized. She was said to have received from Christ Himself the mark of the Divine wounds, and on her forehead was the imprint of the crown of thorns. Since her time, more than ninety cases of stigmatization have been reported, the indispensable condition of such phenomena being, it seems, a profound penetration into the sufferings of Christ.

These stigmatizations are now explained by

hypnotic suggestion. Charcot and others in Paris have obtained by means of suggestion the effect of burning on the skin of hypnotic subjects, and it is no longer open to doubt that the severe mental sufferings which the devotees of religion passed through in olden days brought about these "miraculous" skin phenomena. The study of dermatographism has also brought about a remarkable change in our knowledge of the sorcery marks of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was then supposed that our hated enemy, the devil, was able to mark his own, and that the sign of the devil ("*sigillum diaboli*") was a sufficient reason for pitiless condemnation to the stake. One looks back with horror at the number of poor suffering mortals who met violent death in this way. The mark of the devil was usually a hand,



THE HAND OF THE DEVIL AND THE SIGN OF THE CROSS.

and from an old book on the subject we reproduce a cut of such a hand, with a cross beneath. Exorcists sprang up, who were supposed to have power to combat the devil's work and to drive away the hated symbols of satanic possession. Sometimes, however, the exorcists laboured in vain, and the afflicted one was put to death.

To-day it is easy for any hypnotist to make the devil's stigma on the skin. You yourself may try it on your brother. Strike him on the back between his shoulders with the palm and open fingers of the hand. It needs a sharp, strong slap, and it may hurt. But in a few minutes, under dermatographic conditions, the mark of the hand will be beautifully shown. It was by such methods that the remarkable photograph with which we close this article was made possible.



From a Photo. by]

THE SIGN OF THE DEVIL.

[P. Meheux, Paris.