

CORRESPONDENCE.

AUTHORSHIP OF THE TREATISE ON PROBABILITY PUBLISHED
BY THE SOCIETY FOR THE DIFFUSION OF USEFUL KNOW-
LEDGE.

To the Editor of the Assurance Magazine.

DEAR SIR,—In your last Number (p. 143) my friend Sir John Lubbock says, in a note relative to the Useful Knowledge treatise on probability by himself and the late Mr. Drinkwater Bethune, that “if anyone shall pretend that this work was written by De Morgan, I can produce the letter of my lamented friend with which he furnished our manuscript to Mr. Coates.” This is a sly joke about the state of things which I shall describe; but to those who are not in the secret there will be something mysterious about it. I am glad of the opportunity of once more setting right a mistake which has now lasted at least fifteen years.

When anything anonymous on mathematics turns up in the Useful Knowledge publications, it was written by me: this is one of the fundamental laws of thought. Bacon says that the mind delights in springing up to general maxims, that it may find rest; and the mind of the catalogue-maker finds rest in the maxim that I am the author of all the anonymous mathematics published by the Useful Knowledge Society. About 1845, a binder, in obedience to the general law, stamped an issue of Lubbock and Drinkwater (Bethune) on *Probability* with the title “De Morgan on Probabilities,” in gold letters. In the *Arabian Nights*, when a traveller tells the Sultan some particularly veracious story, it is ordered to be written in letters of gold and deposited in the archives of the kingdom. The story above is as well entitled to the bright alphabet as any which the Princess Schehezerade (or Scheherezade, I forget which) ever told for one day more of life; but our manners, though not wholly averse from lying, properly gilt, do not absolutely require us to perpetuate false titles; I therefore printed one correction of this mistake in my “Arithmetical Books” (1847), and others in other places. But what can a sober black-and-white statement, shut up inside a book, do against a brilliant misstatement on the outside? The only chance is to make the statement long enough to attract attention, and I have spun this letter out accordingly.

Yours truly,

November 8, 1860.

A. DE MORGAN.