

THE "PONS ASINORUM."

To the Editor of The Tribune.

Sir: I agree most fully with your correspondent "A. B. C." in to-day's Tribune in regard to the problem to which has been given the name of the Pons Asinorum. If every collegian and university man on both hemispheres were asked to-day which problem is thus called, the reply probably would be universally "What a foolish question! Why, that proposition in Euclid, of course, that the square of the hypotenuse of a right angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides!" So far as regards your editorial comment, pardon me for saying that because Webster (notoriously inexact, by the way, in definitions), Worcester, etc., give a certain definition, it by no means follows that it is correct, especially when placed in opposition to the general sense of students. Suppose, forsooth, that those authorities should assert that the stripes were inserted in our National flag in allusion to slavery, would that ridiculous explanation be accepted by those familiar with the origin of the "Stars and Stripes"? I trow not!

But in order not to trust to my own preconceived impressions, before writing this letter I asked eight of my acquaintances (whom I chanced to meet, and all cultivated men) what was their idea of the Pons Asinorum?--giving them no hint why I asked--and they all, without any hesitation, said, "Why, of course, that one about the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle." One of these eight, moreover, added, "My little daughter this morning said, 'Papa, I am going over the Pons Asinorum,' meaning this same problem."

Again, if the "Century Dictionary" is designed to be such an original authority ought its editor not to have investigated the matter for himself independently of other works in the same line--or, at least, have made an allusion to the fact that there was another explanation which obtains among collegiates?

I disagree, however, with your correspondent, "A. B. C." in his explanation of the origin of the name Pons Asinorum. Imagination must surely greatly be strained or one must be "hypnotized" to see any resemblance in the lines drawn to demonstrate this problem and a bridge! It was always understood at "Brown"--my alma mater--and I think it is the almost universally accepted explanation

of the name, that, as that particular problem is one of the easiest for a beginner to solve, so if he failed in crossing it (i. e., in solving it) he must indeed be an ass!

W. L. S.

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