THE "PONS ASINORUM."

WHAT EVERY COLLEGE MAN KNOWS AND WHAT

EVERY DICTIONARY SAYS.

To the Editor of The Tribune.

Sir: One of the strangest mistakes ever made in an authoritative work has appeared in the latest section of the "Century Dictionary."

Every college or university man knows that the "Pons Asinorum" is that proposition in Euclid which declares that "the square of the hypothenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides."

It is authoritatively stated that the Hon. Caleb Cushing, of Massachusetts, the eminent scholar and master of jurisprudence, and whose fame reached over the world from his home on the shores where the wild waves lash the Massachusetts rocks, was once asked his opinion of Webster's Dictionary. He was presented with a copy and the request was made that he would criticise it. He did criticise it, and notified the publishers that he had marked over 6,000 mistakes. The errors he noted were principally in letters, punctuation, derivation and classification, although some more serious ones were recorded. In a work of such magnitude there was ample room and margin for forgiveness, owing to the complexity of the work, and the difficulty at all times to control the necessary brain power in the various departments, preparatory to the grand centralization of the various meanings of a given word.

Yet the whole of the 6,000 errors marked by Caleb Cushing sink into insignificance, into the background of nowhere, compared with the strange blunder perpetrated by that magnificent creature of the nineteenth century brain-work, the "Century Dictionary," now undergoing the throes of publication. No work ever went out from the press which had more gold, more glory, more prestige, more gilt, more brain, more backing, than the "Century Dictionary," yet any collegian or university man will look in horror upon the definition given to the expression "Pons Asinorum." The "Century Dictionary" says it is:

A name given to the fifth proposition of the first book of Euclid, which sets forth that if a triangle has two of its sides equal, the angles opposite to these

sides are also equal. This proposition affords a difficulty to the learner, because it is the first one involving any mathematical puzzle.

What is there here even to suggest a difficulty, except that it is a very poor statement of a proposition dealing with the isosceles triangle. It is not the "Pons Asinorum" by any means.

As the celebrated proposition is usually drawn the right angle is at the top, and on each side a square is constructed, subdivided into equal and smaller squares. Thus there is a faint resemblance to a bridge in the two lines enclosing the right angle. Hence the name, owing doubtless to the difficulty usually experienced in getting asses or donkeys to cross a strange or a new bridge. This diagram is the "Pons Asinorum," and has been thus known for ages. The term is a cant one used in college and university circles, and refers to this proposition alone. It has no bearing whatever on anything connected with an isosceles triangle, as given in the "Century Dictionary," and how the builders of that magnificent pile of words and definitions were drawn into such an error is beyond my comprehension.   A. B. C.

New-York, Dec. 8, 1800.

(Webster, Worcester, the Imperial, Stormonth and all the authorities The Tribune has had time to consult are with the Century Dictionary in its definition of "Pons Asinorum" as the fifth proposition of the first book of Euclid: that is, that "the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, and if the equal sides be produced the exterior angles will also be equal." On drawing the figure you will find a certain resemblance to the framework of a bridge far closer than anything to be seen in the diagram of the other proposition. This will undoubtedly surprise many (no, not all) university men; yet of fallacies of the learned this is by no means the first--or the last. Moral for all: Verify references. --Ed.)