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ON THE UNCERTAINTY OF CONCLUSIONS.[1]

BY T. C. MENDENHALL.

ABOUT seven years ago, on the morning of a cold day in winter, a rough-looking, scantily-dressed man was observed to leave a freight car, which was standing upon a side-track near a small country town, and make his way rapidly into the fields and woods beyond.

From his appearance it was evident that he belonged to that vast army of tramps which is never in need of mobilization and which carries upon its muster-rolls many who possess most of the virtues of the good and none of the vices of the bad, having lost only the power of further resistance against continued antagonism and unfriendly environment.

The behavior of this man excited no comment, and his existence was remembered a few hours later only because of the discovery of the body of a stranger, who had evidently been murdered, on the floor of the car which he had been seen to leave. Pursuit followed immediately, and capture within a day or two. One or two clever detectives interested themselves in finding evidence of his guilt, and within a few days had prepared a case which lacked little in the detail of its elaboration or in its artistic finish.

It was proved that two strangers were seen in the suburbs of the town at a late hour on the previous night, although they were not together. The prisoner was identified beyond doubt as the man who hastily left the car in the morning. The murderer had left no means of identification except a small piece of muslin, evidently torn from the sleeve of his shirt, and which was stained with the blood of his victim. On the arrest of the prisoner one or two blood stains were found upon his clothing, and, what was more convincing than all else, the bit of sleeve found in the car fitted exactly into the place in his own garment, from which it must have been torn in the struggle which preceded the crime.

[1] Address as retiring president, delivered Jan. 20, 1892, before the Philosophical Society of Washington.

While all of this evidence might be classified as "circumstantial," it was so complete and satisfactory that no jury could be expected to entertain serious doubt as to the guilt of the prisoner, and, in spite of his protestations of innocence, a sentence to life imprisonment was in accord with the judgment of the general public.

Only a few weeks since this man was set free and declared to be innocent of the crime for which he had already served seven years at hard labor, the misleading character of the evidence on which he was convicted having been exposed through the voluntary confession of the real criminal. The facts thus brought out were, briefly, as follows:—

There were three men in the case. The first, who was afterward murdered, slept upon the floor of the car when the second, the real murderer, entered it. In the dark he stumbled over the sleeping man, who awoke and immediately attacked him. The quarrel did not last long, the original occupant being left dead upon the floor of the car while the murderer quickly made his escape, leaving the village and neighborhood behind him as far and as fast as possible. An hour or two later the third man, seeking shelter and sleep, finds his way into the car, and dropping on the floor, is soon in a deep slumber. He awakes at break of day to find that a dead man has been his companion, and to see that his own sleeve is smeared with the blood of the victim. Alarmed by this discovery, and realizing in some degree the perilous position in which he is thus placed, he tears off the stained portion of his garment, and, hastily leaving the car, he flees from the scene as rapidly as possible.

Nothing can be more simple or more satisfactory than this account of the affair, and yet nothing is more natural than that he should be accused of the crime and brought to trial. The evidence against him was convincing, and it was all absolutely true. It was not strange, therefore, that his conviction and imprisonment should follow.

It will doubtless appear to many that the foregoing is too closely allied to the sensational to serve fitly as an introduction to an address prepared for a society of philosophers, and I am ready to acknowledge the apparent validity of the criticism. I am led to its selection, however, because it is an account of an actual occurrence, which illustrates in a manner not to be misunderstood a not unrecognized proposition to a brief exposition and partial development of which I ask your attention this evening. This proposition is that, in the treatment of many questions with which we are confronted in this world, our premises may be absolutely true and our logical processes apparently unassailable and yet our conclusions very much in error.

No department of human knowledge or region of mental activity will fail to yield ample illustration and proof of this proposition. An astonishingly large number of debatable questions present themselves to the human intellect. Many of them are conceded to be of such a nature that differences of opinion concerning them must continue, perhaps, indefinitely.

But there is a very large and a very important class of problems, the solution of which is apparently not impossible and often seemingly easy, regarding which the most diverse views are most persistently held by persons not differing greatly in intelligence or intellectual training.

Men whose business it is to weigh evidence and to reach correct conclusions, in spite of inadequacy of information and perversion of logic, constitute no exception to this statement, but, on the contrary, furnish many of its most notable illustrations.