

There was a general smile as Bagehot ceased, but the smile ceased as Mr. Fitzjames Stephen—the present Sir James Stephen—took up the discussion by remarking, in a mighty bass that always exerted a sort of physical authority over us, that while the Society seemed to be pretty well agreed upon the main question, namely, that the uniformity of Nature could not be absolutely proved by experience, or, indeed, by any other method, there was a point in Dr. Ward's paper, namely, the challenge to examine seriously into the authenticity of miracles which had not been dealt with. For my part, he said, I am quite ready to examine into the evidence of any so-called miracle, that is, into the evidence of any unusual event which is offered to prove Divine interference in our affairs, when it comes before me with sufficient presumption of authority to render it worth my while to investigate it; though I probably should not agree with Dr. Ward as to what constitutes such a presumption. Certainly "a bare uncorroborated assertion by a person professing to be an eye-witness of an event is not sufficient evidence of that event to warrant action of an important kind based upon the supposition of its occurrence. When you are obliged to guess, such an assertion may be a reason for making one guess rather than another. Less evidence than this would make a banker hesitate as to a person's credit, or lead a customer to doubt whether his banker was solvent; but in such cases all that is possible is a guess more or less judicious, and a guess, however judicious, is a totally different thing from a settled rational belief. As regards all detailed matters of fact, I think there is a time, greater or less, during which the evidence connected with them may be collected, examined, and recorded. If this is done a judgment can be formed on the truth of allegations respecting them at any distance of time. Such judgments are rarely absolute; they ought always, or nearly always, to be tempered by some degree of doubt, but I do not think they need be affected by lapse of time. If, however, this opportunity is lost, if no complete examination is made at the time of an incident, or if being