

maticians themselves have been generally convinced of it seems very far from true. It is only necessary to think of the seventeenth century, when mathematicians had the time of their lives; though it took them another century before they realized it.

We have only to think of Des Cartes, Pascal, Barrow, Wren, Newton and Leibniz to see that there have been mathematicians, and eminently serious ones too, who have not thought it necessary, and have even thought it wrong, to devote the whole of their lives to the pursuit of mathematics. In fact, in the seventeenth century, John Wallis was an exception; he seems to approach nearest to the modern type of a professional mathematician.

The question naturally arises whether it is better to seek fame as a mathematician or to serve one's day and generation in some other way. Whether it is better to rectify the cycloid or to build St. Paul's Cathedral? The choice comes to few, but Professor Hardy's answer is not altogether convincing. If to-day the choice seems to be made easily the explanation lies near at hand in two facts. In the first place, given the requisite ability of a special kind, the path of the mathematician through scholarships and fellowships is ridiculous in its simplicity and it leads automatically to its end. In the second place, before we are impressed by the small number of desertions it may be well to ask, what are the opportunities and the temptations to desert? At the present day they seem to be negligible, and it is possible that great talents capable of serving the interests of society in manifold ways are confined within too narrow a track. Probably Professor Hardy is right about the greatest mathematicians; they serve their age best by being great mathematicians. But there are others not quite on that exalted level, yet possessing gifts by no means contemptible. That all of them should be caught up and retained in the academic machine may be neither fair to them nor good for the community at large.

The state of things which Professor Hardy complacently regards as normal is really the artificial product of a peculiar social system. The real mathematician needs no apology. But there is another side to the question. Mathematical talent (setting aside genius) is a gift by no means too common. Is society wise in its own interest to encourage a system which absorbs all those who possess this valuable gift of general utility and treats them as so much academic fodder to be made into specialized mathematicians? This is the present tendency and the community definitely suffers by it.

Yours, etc., H. C. PLUMMER.

1381. "But it's my job to weigh evidence," said Harriet, "and I can't help seeing the strength of the police case. It's a matter of $a + b$, you know. Only there happens to be an unknown factor."

"Like that thing that keeps cropping up in the new kind of physics," said the Dean. "Planck's constant, or whatever they call it."

An hour later they were still at it. Finally the Bursar was heard to quote: "God made the integers; all else is the work of man."

"Oh, bother!" cried the Dean. "Do let's keep mathematics out of it. And physics. I cannot cope with them."

"Who mentioned Planck's constant a little time ago?"

"I did, and I'm sorry for it. I call it a revolting little object."—D. L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 37 and 40. [Per Mr. F. W. Kellaway.]