

PLEASANT QUESTIONS AND WONDERFUL
EFFECTS.

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BY PROFESSOR FRANK MORLEY.

This is for me a day of reckoning. For us mathematicians most of our days are days of reckoning. But usually, to revive an old phrase, we reckon without our host, without consideration of what we owe and to whom we owe it. I feel that I ought at least to thank the host and to contemplate the question of payment. And at once one sees various hosts.

First and foremost the host is this Society, one of the strongholds of idealism in this country. It was a most happy thought when Columbia men formed the scattered pools of mathematical activity into this important organization. No pool suffered a loss of what may be called potential, many gained enormously. The price must have been paid in the increasing work and sacrifice of the early officers. We took what they provided in the cheerful way of youth. And the youthfulness of the mathematician outlives that of most men, at least if he attends a fair number of meetings of this Society. For he can unload his mind if it is overburdened with a problem too hard for him. And he is sure to go away with some idea, grandiose or neat, obtained in that way of chalk and talk which is the easiest way of getting ideas, to a first approximation.

Or, secondly, the host to whom gratitude should be expressed may be the Engelschaar of great men to whom one owes the science as it stands. But this is obviously too big a field. An interesting point here is the effect of unreasoning veneration on elementary teaching, for example the effect of Euclid on elementary geometry or of Euler on elementary algebra. The adjustment of the properly conservative tradition of teaching to admit important applications is no easy matter. But a good guide in the elementary teaching of any subject is the consideration of its immediate usefulness in neighboring regions, its power of trespass.

Thus arithmetic is rightly taught commercially. Algebra