

## WILLIAM ELWOOD BYERLY—IN MEMORIAM

William Elwood Byerly was born in Philadelphia, December 13, 1849. At the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 he met his contemporary Professor Felix Klein. Klein remarked that this was an excellent birth year for a mathematician as it was the only year in the nineteenth century which was a perfect square. Had Byerly lived two weeks longer, he would have died in the only year of the twentieth century that has the same peculiarity.

His parents early moved to Orange, New Jersey, where he was brought up and prepared for college by private tutors. He entered Harvard in September, 1867, graduating with distinction in 1871, a classmate of Charles Jerome Bonaparte, Henry Cabot Lodge, and William Lawrence, long Bishop of Massachusetts. As an undergraduate he was interested in gymnastics and all his life he was essentially an out-of-doors man devoted to horseback riding, camping, and especially golf. He played his last few holes at the age of eighty-five.

Returning to the graduate school he studied two years and in 1873 received, contemporaneously with another student, one of the first two degrees of doctor of philosophy ever granted by the University. His thesis, which was never published, dealt with the heat of the sun. It was based on the changes of energy induced by the sun's substance coming in from infinity. It is interesting to note that this first doctor's thesis consisted of twenty-five pages longhand. On leaving Harvard he was appointed assistant professor of mathematics at Cornell, where he stayed for three years. He returned to Cambridge as assistant professor in 1876. He was promoted to a full professorship in 1881 and made Perkins Professor at the death of J. M. Peirce in 1905.

In 1913 Professor Byerly resigned his position at Harvard. He was told by his oculist that if he continued working he would become blind within two years, whereas he might enjoy many years of health if he severed his academic ties. This prediction proved absolutely accurate, for, although he tried a certain amount of writing after giving up his professorship, it turned out to be too exacting for his eyesight, but he enjoyed reasonable health for the next twenty-two years. Perhaps it was a bitter time to hand in his resignation. On the one hand, he was in excellent general health; on the other hand, he was distinctly critical of the new policies inaugurated by the Lowell administration and he was far from seeing eye to eye with some of his younger colleagues. But he retained no bitterness and remained a loyal Harvard man till the day of his death from cerebral hemorrhage, December 20, 1935.

Byerly's professional life is largely explained by the influence of two unusual men. The first and greater of these was Benjamin Peirce, who towered above his mathematical contemporaries as a mountain peak in a level plain. He was Byerly's teacher both in college and in the graduate school and undoubtedly settled his pupil's career. Byerly summed up his attitude towards Peirce by saying, "Although we rarely could follow him, we sat up and took notice." We may credit Peirce with deciding Byerly to give his life to mathematical teaching, although the special branches which interested the pupil were not those favored by the teacher. The other man who influenced him similarly was