

## CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor of *The Mathematical Gazette*

DEAR SIR,

*The late Professor Piaggio.*

I was a student under Piaggio from 1922 until 1925, and during the following 30 years or so I kept in touch with him, visiting him and corresponding with him on various topics. I feel that I knew him intimately as tutor, friend and (in a very small way) collaborator.

He was a man of outstanding ability as mathematician, lecturer and teacher (a rare combination of qualities), quiet and undemonstrative but keenly interested and happy in whatever he was doing, however trivial the task. In 1922, when General Relativity was to most people somewhat of a mystery, he was reputed to be one of the few men in the world who had mastered it.

I would not suggest that he made any outstanding original contribution to mathematics, but his ability in clarifying, simplifying, coordinating and inventing new proofs for these purposes was indeed remarkable. His 'Differential Equations' bears witness to this. A personal note here might be illuminating. When I studied under Piaggio, his book had been most carefully prepared and it seemed as though it must be free from error. However he offered his students 2s. 6d. for any new error detected, even if quite trivial. Long after I had left Nottingham I had occasion to go through the whole book once more, and in so doing I found a dozen more errors, some quite trivial. I naturally sent him a list of them so that he could correct them in the next edition, and a few days later I was much surprised to receive a cheque for 30s. together with his note of thanks. I had forgotten all about the reward, but he had not.

Although he was fully engaged with his university work, he would yet always find time to read and criticise any work of mine in which I thought he might be interested; and this did not simply amount to a cursory reading, for he would constantly suggest improvements in every detail, down to phrasing and punctuation.

His students received truly individual attention and their work was scrupulously criticised with just the appropriate amount of praise or blame. Of course this was easier in my student days when I was one in a class of 5 or 6 honours students. But his kindness and thoroughness never left him, and he took a sincere interest in his students as persons and not merely as potential mathematicians.

He had a certain simplicity and almost childish pleasure at times. I wonder if his Relativity Rhymes have been preserved? He had them typed and passed copies round to his students.

His chief hobby, as far as I know, was chess. He was extremely keen on this and for many years attended the Chess Congress at Southsea.

I hope this letter will help to pay tribute to a truly great man.

Yours sincerely,

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Brixton, Derbyshire.*

D. A. YOUNG