

MARY RAYMOND ANDREWS

THE COURAGE OF THE
COMMONPLACE

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The girl and her chaperon had been deposited early in the desirable second-story window in Durfee, looking down on the tree. Brant was a senior and a "Bones" man, and so had a leading part to play in the afternoon's drama. He must get the girl and the chaperon off his hands, and be at his business. This was "Tap Day." It is perhaps well to explain what "Tap Day" means; there are people who have not been at Yale or had sons or sweethearts there.

In New Haven, on the last Thursday of May, toward five in the afternoon, one becomes aware that the sea of boys which ripples always over the little city has condensed into a river flowing into the campus. There the flood divides and re-divides; the junior class is separating and gathering from all directions into a solid mass about the nucleus of a large, low-hanging oak tree inside the college fence in front of Durfee Hall. The three senior societies of Yale, Skull and Bones, Scroll and Key, and Wolf's Head, choose to-day fifteen members each from the junior class, the fifteen members of the outgoing senior class making the choice. Each senior is allotted his man of the juniors, and must find him in the crowd at the tree and tap him on the shoulder and give him the order to go to his room. Followed by his sponsor he obeys and what happens at the room no one but the men of the society know. With shining face the lad comes back later and is slapped on the shoulder and told, "good work, old man," cordially and whole-heartedly by every friend and acquaintance—by lads who have "made" every honor possible, by lads who have "made" nothing, just as heartily. For that is the spirit of Yale.

Only juniors room in Durfee Hall. On Tap Day an outsider is lucky who has a friend there, for a window is a proscenium box for the play—the play which is a tragedy to all but forty-five of the three hundred and odd juniors. The windows of every story of the gray stone facade are crowded with a deeply interested audience; grizzled heads of old graduates mix with flowery hats of women; every one is watching every detail, every arrival. In front of the Hall is a drive, and room for perhaps a dozen carriages next the fence—the famous fence of Yale—which rails the campus round. Just inside it, at the north-east corner, rises the tree. People stand up in the carriages, women and men; the fence is loaded with people, often standing, too, to see that tree.

All over the campus surges a crowd; students of the other classes, seniors who last year stood in the compact gathering at the tree and left it sore-hearted, not having been "taken"; sophomores who will stand there next year, who already are hoping for and dreading their Tap Day; little freshmen, each one sure that he, at least, will be of the elect; and again the iron-gray heads, the interested faces of old Yale men, and the gay spring hats like bouquets of flowers.

It is, perhaps, the most critical single day of the four years' course at the University. It shows to the world whether or no a boy, after three years of college life, has in the eyes of the student body "made good." It is a crucial test, a heart-rending test for a boy of twenty years.

The girl sitting in the window of Durfee understood thoroughly the character and the chances of the day. The seniors at the tree wear derby hats; the juniors none at all; it is easier by this sign to distinguish the classmen, and to keep track of the tapping. The girl knew of what society was each black-hatted man who twisted through the bareheaded throng; in that sea of tense faces she recognized many; she could find a familiar head almost anywhere in the mass and tell as much as an outsider might what hope was hovering over it. She came of Yale people; Brant, her brother, would graduate this year; she was staying at the house of a Yale professor; she was in the atmosphere.

There, near the edge of the pack, was Bob Floyd, captain of the crew, a fair, square face with quiet blue eyes, whose tranquil gaze was characteristic. To-day it was not tranquil; it flashed anxiously here and there, and the girl smiled. She knew as certainly as if the fifteen seniors had told her that Floyd would be "tapped for Bones." The crew captain and the foot-ball captain are almost inevitably taken for Skull and Bones. Yet five years before Jack Emmett, captain of the crew, had not been

taken; only two years back Bert Connolly, captain of the foot-ball team, had not been taken. The girl, watching the big chap's unconscious face, knew well what was in his mind. "What chance have I against all these bully fellows," he was saying to himself in his soul, "even if I do happen to be crew captain? Connolly was a mutt—couldn't take him—but Jack Emmett—there wasn't any reason to be seen for that. And it's just muscles I've got—I'm not clever—I don't hit it off with the crowd—I've done nothing for Yale, but just for the crew. Why the dickens should they take me?" But the girl knew.

The great height and refined, supercilious face of another boy towered near—Lionel Arnold, a born litterateur, and an artist—he looked more confident than most. It seemed to the girl he felt sure of being taken; sure that his name and position and, more than all, his developed, finished personality must count as much as that. And the girl knew that in the direct, unsophisticated

judgments of the judges these things did not count at all.

So she gunned over the swarm which gathered to the oak tree as bees to a hive, able to tell often what was to happen. Even to her young eyes all these anxious, upturned faces, watching silently with throbbing pulses for this first vital decision of their lives, was a stirring sight.

"I can't bear it for the ones who aren't taken," she cried out, and the chaperon did not smile.

"I know," she said. "Each year I think I'll never come again—it's too heart-rending. It means so much to them, and only forty-five can go away happy. Numbers are just broken-hearted. I don't like it—it's brutal."

"Yes, but it's an incentive to the under-classmen—it holds them to the mark and gives them ambition, doesn't it?" the girl argued doubtfully.

The older woman agreed. "I suppose on the whole it's a good institution. And it's wonderful what wisdom the boys show. Of course, they make mistakes, but on the whole they pick the best men astonishingly. So many times they hit the ones who come to be distinguished."

"But so many times they don't," the girl followed her words. Her father and Brant were Bones men—why was the girl arguing against senior societies? "So many, Mrs. Anderson. Uncle Ted's friend, the President of Hardrington College, was in Yale in the '80's and made no senior society; Judge Marston of the Supreme Court dined with us the other night—he didn't make anything; Dr. Hamlin, who is certainly one of the great physicians of the country, wasn't taken. I know a lot more. And look at some who've made things. Look at my cousin, Gus Vanderpool—he made Keys twenty years ago and has never done a thing since. And that fat Mr. Hough, who's so rich and dull—he's Bones."

"You've got statistics at your fingers' ends, haven't you?" said Mrs. Anderson. "Anybody might think you had a brother among the juniors who you weren't hopeful about." She looked at the girl curiously. Then: "They must be about all there," she spoke, leaning out. "A full fifty feet square of dear frightened laddies. There's Brant, coming across the campus. He looks as if he was going to make some one president. I suppose he feels so. There's Johnny McLean. I hope he'll be taken—he's the nicest boy in the whole junior class—but I'm afraid. He hasn't done anything in particular."

With that, a thrill caught the most callous of the hundreds of spectators; a stillness fixed the shifting crowd; from the tower of Battell chapel, close by, the college bell clanged the stroke of five; before it stopped striking the first two juniors would be tapped.

The dominating, unhurried note rang, echoed, and began to die away as they saw Brant's hand fall on Bob Floyd's shoulder. The crew captain whirled and leaped, unseeing, through the crowd. A great shout rose; all over the campus the people surged like a wind-driven wave toward the two rushing figures, and everywhere some one cried, "Floyd has gone Bones!" and the exciting business had begun.

One looks at the smooth faces of boys of twenty and wonders what the sculptor Life is going to make of them. Those who have known his work know what sharp tools are in his kit; they know the tragic possibilities as well as the happy ones of those inevitable strokes; they shrink a bit as they look at the smooth faces of the boys and realize how that clay must be moulded in the workshop—

how the strong lines which ought to be there some day must come from the cutting of pain and the grinding of care and the push and weight of responsibility. Yet there is service and love, too, and happiness and the slippery bright blade of success in the kit of Life the sculptor; so they stand and watch, a bit pitifully but hopefully, as the work begins, and cannot guide the chisel but a little way, yet would not, if they could, stop it, for the finished job is going to be, they trust, a man, and only the sculptor Life can make such.

The boy called Johnny McLean glanced up at the window in Durfee; he met the girl's eyes, and the girl smiled back and made a gay motion with her hand as if to say, "Keep up your pluck; you'll be taken." And wished she felt sure of it. For, as Mrs. Anderson had said, he had done nothing in particular. His marks were good, he was a fair athlete; good at rowing, good at track work; he had "heeled" the News for a year, but had not made the board. A gift of music, which bubbled without effort, had put him on the Glee Club. Yet that had come to him; it was not a thing he had done; boys are critical of such distinctions. It is said that Skull and Bones aims at setting its seal above all else on character. This boy had sailed buoyantly from term to term delighted with the honors which came to his friends, friends with the men who carried off honors, with the best and strongest men in his class, yet never quite arriving for himself. As the bright, anxious young face looked up at the window where the women sat, the older one thought she could read the future in it, and she sighed. It was a face which attracted, broad-browed, clear-eyed, and honest, but not a strong face—yet. John McLean had only made beginnings; he had accomplished nothing. Mrs. Anderson, out of an older experience, sighed, because she had seen just such winning, lovable boys before, and had seen them grow into saddened, unsuccessful men. Yet he was full of possibility; the girl was hoping against hope that Brant and the fourteen other seniors of Skull and Bones would see it so and take him on that promise. She was not pretending to herself that anything but Johnny McLean's fate in it was the point of this Tap Day to her. She was very young, only twenty also, but there was a maturity in her to which the boy made an appeal. She felt a strength which others missed; she wanted him to find it; she wanted passionately to see him take his place where she felt he belonged, with the men who counted.

The play was in full action. Grave and responsible seniors worked swiftly here and there through the tight mass, searching each one his man; every two or three minutes a man was found and felt that thrilling touch and heard the order, "Go to your room." Each time there was a shout of applause; each time the campus rushed in a wave. And still the three hundred stood packed, waiting—thinning a little, but so little. About thirty had been taken now, and the black senior hats were visibly fewer, but the upturned boy faces seemed exactly the same. Only they grew more anxious minute by minute; minute by minute they turned more nervously this way and that as the seniors worked through the mass. And as another and another crashed from among them blind and solemn and happy with his guardian senior close after, the ones who were left seemed to drop into deeper quiet. And now there were only two black hats in the throng; the girl looking down saw John McLean standing stiffly, his gray eyes fixed, his face pale and set; at that moment the two seniors found their men together. It was all over. He had not been taken.

Slowly the two hundred and fifty odd men who had not been good enough dispersed, pluckily laughing and talking together—all of them, it is safe to say, with heavy hearts; for Tap Day counts as much as that at Yale.

John McLean swung across the diagonal of the campus toward Welch Hall where he lived. He saw the girl and her chaperon come out of Durfee; and he lingered to meet them. Two days ago he had met the girl here with Brant, and she had stopped and shaken hands. It seemed to him it would help if that should happen today. She might say a word; anything at all to show that she was friends all the same with a fellow who wasn't good enough. He longed for that. With a sick chaos of pain pounding at what seemed to be his lungs he met her. Mrs. Anderson was between them, putting out a quick hand; the boy hardly saw her as he took it. He saw the girl, and the girl did not look at him. With her head up and her brown eyes fixed on Phelps gate-way she hurried along—and did not look

at him. He could not believe it—that girl—the girl. But she was gone; she had not looked at him. Like a shot animal he suddenly began to run. He got to his rooms; they were empty; Baby Thomas, his "wife," known as Archibald Babington Thomas on the catalogue, but not elsewhere, had been taken for Scroll and Key; he was off with the others who were worth while. This boy went into his tiny bedroom and threw himself down with his face in his pillow and lay still. Men and women learn—sometimes—as they grow older, how to shut the doors against disappointments so that only the vital ones cut through, but at twenty all doors are open; the iron had come into his soul, and the girl had given it a twist which had taken his last ounce of courage. He lay still a long time, enduring—all he could manage at first. It might have been an hour later that he got up and went to his desk and sat down in the fading light, his hands deep in his trousers pockets; his athletic young figure dropped together listlessly; his eyes staring at the desk where had worked away so many cheerful hours. Pictures hung around it; there was a group taken last summer of girls and boys at his home in the country, the girl was in it—he did not look at her. His father's portrait stood on the desk, and a painting of his long-dead mother. He thought to himself hotly that it was good she was dead rather than see him shamed. For the wound was throbbing with a fever, and the boy had not got to a sense of proportion; his future seemed blackened. His father's picture stabbed him; he was a "Bones" man—all of his family—his grandfather, and the older brothers who had graduated four and six years ago—all of them. Except himself. The girl had thought it such a disgrace that she would not look at him! Then he grew angry. It wasn't decent, to hit a man when he was down. A woman ought to be gentle—if his mother had been alive—but then he was glad she wasn't. With that a sob shook him—startled him. Angrily he stood up and glared about the place. This wouldn't do; he must pull himself together. He walked up and down the little living room, bright with boys' belongings, with fraternity shields and flags and fencing foils and paddles and pictures; he walked up and down and he whistled "Dunderbeck," which somehow was in his head. Then he was singing it:

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