

The Courage of the Commonplace eBook

The Courage of the Commonplace

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Title: The Courage of the Commonplace

Author: Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

Release Date: June, 2004 [EBook #5825] [Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule] [This file was first posted on September 10, 2002] [Date last updated: July 7, 2004]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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The Courage of the Commonplace

by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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:

"Oh Dunderbeck, Oh Dunderbeck, how could you be so mean As even to have thought of such a terrible machine! For bob-tailed rats and pussy-cats shall never more be seen; They'll all be ground to sausage-meat in Dunderbeck's machine."

There are times when Camembert cheese is a steadying thing to think of—or golf balls. "Dunderbeck" answered for John McLean. It appeared difficult to sing, however—he harked back to whistling. Then the clear piping broke suddenly. He bit his lower lip and went and sat down before the desk again and turned on the electric reading-lamp. Now he had given in long enough; now he must face the situation; now was the time to find if there was any backbone in him to "buck up." To fool those chaps by amounting to something. There was good stuff in this boy that he applied this caustic and not a salve. His buoyant lightheartedness whispered that the fellows made mistakes; that he was only one of many good chaps left; that Dick Harding had a pull and Jim Stanton had an older brother—excuses came. But the boy checked them.

"That's not the point; I didn't make it; I didn't deserve it; I've been easy on myself; I've got to change; so some day my people won't be ashamed of me—maybe." Slowly, painfully, he fought his way to a tentative self-respect. He might not ever be anything big, a power as his father was, but he could be a hard worker, he could make a place. A few days

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before a famous speaker had given an address on an ethical subject at Yale. A sentence of it came to the boy's struggling mind. "The courage of the commonplace is greater than the courage of the crisis," the orator had said. That was his chance—"the courage of the commonplace." No fireworks for him, perhaps, ever, but, by Jove, work and will could do a lot, and he could prove himself worthy.

"I'm not through yet, but ginger," he said out loud. "I can do my best anyhow and I'll show if I'm not fit"—the energetic tone trailed off—he was only a boy of twenty—"not fit to be looked at," he finished brokenly.

It came to him in a vague, comforting way that probably the best game a man could play with his life would be to use it as a tool to do work with; to keep it at its brightest, cleanest, most efficient for the sake of the work. This boy, of no phenomenal sort, had one marked quality—when he had made a decision he acted on it. Tonight through the soreness of a bitter disappointment he put his finger on the highest note of his character and resolved. All unknown to himself it was a crisis.

It was long past dinner-time, but he dashed out now and got food, and when Baby Thomas came in he found his room-mate sleepy, but quite himself; quite steady in his congratulations as well as normal in his abuse for "keeping a decent white man awake to this hour."

Three years later the boy graduated from the Boston "Tech." As his class poured from Huntington Hall, he saw his father waiting for him. He noted with pride, as he always did, the tall figure, topped with a wonderful head—a mane of gray hair, a face carved in iron, squared and cut down to the marrow of brains and force—a man to be seen in any crowd. With that, as his own met the keen eyes behind the spectacles, he was aware of a look which startled him. The boy had graduated at the very head of his class; that light in his father's eyes all at once made two years of work a small thing.

"I didn't know you were coming, sir. That's mighty nice of you," he said, as they walked down Boylston Street together, and his father waited a moment and then spoke in his usual incisive tone.

"I wouldn't have liked to miss it, Johnny," he said. "I don't remember that anything in my life has ever made me as satisfied as you have to-day."

With a gasp of astonishment the young man looked at him, looked away, looked at the tops of the houses, and did not find a word anywhere. His father had never spoken to him so; never before, perhaps, had he said anything as intimate to any of his sons. They knew that the cold manner of the great engineer covered depths, but they never

expected to see the depths uncovered. But here he was, talking of what he felt, of character, and honor and effort.

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"I've appreciated what you've been doing," the even voice went on. "I talk little about personal affairs. But I'm not uninterested; I watch. I was anxious about you. You were a more uncertain quantity than Ted and Harry. Your first three years at Yale were not satisfactory. I was afraid you lacked manliness. Then came—a disappointment. It was a blow to us—to family pride. I watched you more closely, and I saw before that year ended that you were taking your medicine rightly. I wanted to tell you of my contentment, but being slow of speech I—couldn't. So"—the iron face broke for a second into a whimsical grin—"so I offered you a motor. And you wouldn't take it. I knew, though you didn't explain, that you feared it would interfere with your studies. I was right?" Johnny nodded. "Yes. And your last year at college was—was all I could wish. I see now that you needed a blow in the face to wake you up—and you got it. And you waked." The great engineer smiled with clean pleasure. "I have had"—he hesitated—"I have had always a feeling of responsibility to your mother for you—more than for the others. You were so young when she died that you seem more her child. I was afraid I had not treated you well—that it was my fault if you failed." The boy made a gesture—he could not very well speak. His father went on: "So when you refused the motor, when you went into engineer's camp that first summer instead of going abroad, I was pleased. Your course here has been a satisfaction, without a drawback—keener, certainly, because I am an engineer, and could appreciate, step by step, how well you were doing, how much you were giving up to do it, how much power you were gaining by that long sacrifice. I've respected you through these years of commonplace, and I've known how much more courage it meant in a pleasure-loving lad such as you than it would have meant in a serious person such as I am—such as Ted and Harry are, to an extent, also." The older man, proud and strong and reserved, turned on his son such a shining face as the boy had never seen. "That boyish failure isn't wiped out, Johnny, for I shall remember it as the corner-stone of your career, already built over with an honorable record. You've made good. I congratulate you and I honor you."

The boy never knew how he got home. He knocked his shins badly on a quite visible railing and it was out of the question to say a single word. But if he staggered it was with an overload of happiness, and if he was speechless and blind the stricken faculties were paralyzed with joy. His father walked beside him and they understood each other. He reeled up the streets contented.

That night there was a family dinner, and with the coffee his father turned and ordered fresh champagne opened.

"We must have a new explosion to drink to the new superintendent of the Oriel mine," he said. Johnny looked at him surprised, and then at the others, and the faces were bright with the same look of something which they knew and he did not.

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"What's up?" asked Johnny. "Who's the superintendent of the Oriel mine? Why do we drink to him? What are you all grinning about, anyway?" The cork flew up to the ceiling, and the butler poured gold bubbles into the glasses, all but his own.

"Can't I drink to the beggar, too, whoever he is?" asked Johnny, and moved his glass and glanced up at Mullins. But his father was beaming at Mullins in a most unusual way and Johnny got no wine. With that Ted, the oldest brother, pushed back his chair and stood and lifted his glass.

"We'll drink," he said, and bowed formally to Johnny, "to the gentleman who is covering us all with glory, to the new superintendent of the Oriel mine, Mr. John Archer McLean," and they stood and drank the toast. Johnny, more or less dizzy, more or less scarlet, crammed his hands in his pockets and started and turned redder, and brought out interrogations in the nervous English which is acquired at our great institutions of learning.

"Gosh! are you all gone dotty?" he asked. And "Is this a merry jape?" And "Why, for cat's sake, can't you tell a fellow what's up your sleeve?" While the family sipped champagne and regarded him.

"Now, if I've squirmed for you enough, I wish you'd explain— father, tell me!" the boy begged.

And the tale was told by the family, in chorus, without politeness, interrupting freely. It seemed that the president of the big mine needed a superintendent, and wishing young blood and the latest ideas had written to the head of the Mining Department in the School of Technology to ask if he would give him the name of the ablest man in the graduating class—a man to be relied on for character as much as brains, he specified, for the rough army of miners needed a general at their head almost more than a scientist. Was there such a combination to be found, he asked, in a youngster of twenty-three or twenty-four, such as would be graduating from the "Tech"? If possible, he wanted a very young man—he wanted the enthusiasm, he wanted the athletic tendency, he wanted the plus-strength, he wanted the unmade reputation which would look for its making to hard work in the mine. The letter was produced and read to the shamefaced Johnny. "Gosh!" he remarked at intervals and remarked practically nothing else. There was no need. They were so proud and so glad that it was almost too much for the boy who had been a failure three years ago.

On the urgent insistence of every one he made a speech. He got to his six-feet-two slowly, and his hands went into his trousers pockets as usual. "Holy mackerel," he began—"I don't call it decent to knock the wind out of a man and then hold him up for remarks. They all said in college that I talked the darnedest hash in the class, anyway. But you will have it, will you? I haven't got anything to say, so's you'd notice it, except that I'll be blamed if I see how this is true. Of course I'm keen for

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it—Keen! I should say I was! And what makes me keenest, I believe, is that I know it's satisfactory to Henry McLean.” He turned his bright face to his father. “Any little plugging I've done seems like thirty cents compared to that. You're all peaches to take such an interest, and I thank you a lot. Me, the superintendent of the Oriel mine! Holy mackerel!” gasped Johnny, and sat down.

The proportion of fighting in the battle of life outweighs the “beer and skittles”; as does the interest. Johnny McLean found interest in masses, in the drab-and-dun village on the prairie. He found pleasure, too, and as far as he could reach he tried to share it; buoyancy and generosity were born in him; strenuousness he had painfully acquired, and like most converts was a fanatic about it. He was splendidly fit; he was the best and last output of the best institution in the country; he went at his work like a joyful locomotive. Yet more goes to explain what he was and what he did. He developed a faculty for leading men. The cold bath of failure, the fire of success had tempered the young steel of him to an excellent quality; bright and sharp, it cut cobwebs in the Oriel mine where cobwebs had been thickening for months. The boy, normal enough, quite unphenomenal, was growing strong by virtue of his one strong quality: he did what he resolved to do. For such a character to make a vital decision rightly is a career. On the night of the Tap Day which had so shaken him, he had struck the key-note. He had resolved to use his life as if it were a tool in his hand to do work, and he had so used it. The habit of bigness, once caught, possesses one as quickly as the habit of drink; Johnny McLean was as unhampered by the net of smallnesses which tangle most of us as a hermit; the freedom gave him a power which was fast making a marked man of him.

There was dissatisfaction among the miners; a strike was probable; the popularity of the new superintendent warded it off from month to month, which counted unto him for righteousness in the mind of the president, of which Johnny himself was unaware. Yet the cobwebs grew; there was an element not reached by, resentful of, the atmosphere of Johnny's friendliness—“Terence O'Hara's gang.” By the old road of music he had found his way to the hearts of many. There were good voices among the thousand odd workmen, and Johnny McLean could not well live without music. He heard Dennis Mulligan's lovely baritone and Jack Dennison's rolling bass, as they sang at work in the dim tunnels of the coal-mine, and it seemed quite simple to him that they and he and others should meet when work hours were over and do some singing. Soon it was a club—then a big club; it kept men out of saloons, which Johnny was glad of, but had not planned. A small kindness seems often to be watered and fertilized by magic. Johnny's music-club grew to be a spell to quiet wild beasts. Yet Terence O'Hara and his gang had a strong hold; there was storm in the air and the distant thunder was heard almost continually.

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Johnny, as he swung up the main street of the flat little town, the brick school-house and the two churches at one end, many saloons en route, and the gray rock dump and the chimneys and shaft-towers of the mine at the other, carried a ribbon of brightness through the sordid place. Women came to the doors to smile at the handsome young gentleman who took his hat off as if they were ladies; children ran by his side, and he knocked their caps over their eyes and talked nonsense to them, and swung on whistling. But at night, alone in his room, he was serious. How to keep the men patient; how to use his influence with them; how to advise the president—for young as he was he had to do this because of the hold he had gained on the situation; what concessions were wise—the young face fell into grave lines as he sat, hands deep in his pockets as usual, and considered these questions. Already the sculptor Life was chiselling away the easy curves with the tool of responsibility.

He thought of other things sometimes as he sat before the wood fire in his old Morris chair. His college desk was in the corner by the window, and around it hung photographs ordered much as they had been in New Haven. The portrait of his father on the desk, the painting of his mother, and above them, among the boys' faces, the group of boys and girls of whom she was one, the girl whom he had not forgotten. He had not seen her since that Tap Day. She had written him soon after—an invitation for a week-end at her mother's camp in the woods. But he would not go. He sat in the big chair staring at the fire, this small room in the West, and thought about it. No, he could not have gone to her house party—how could he? He had thought, poor lunatic, that there was an unspoken word between them; that she was different to him from what she was to the others. Then she had failed him at the moment of need. He would not be taken back half-way, with the crowd. He could not. So he had civilly ignored the hand which had held out several times, in several ways. Hurt and proud, yet without conceit, he believed that she kept him at a distance, and would not risk coming too near, and so stayed altogether away. It happens at times that a big, attractive, self-possessed man is secretly as shy, as fanciful, as the shyest girl—if he cares. Once and again indeed the idea flashed into the mind of Johnny McLean—that perhaps she had been so sorry that she did not dare look at him. But he flung that aside with a savage half-thought.

"What rot! It's probable that I was important enough for that, isn't it? You fool!" And about then he was likely to get up with a spring and attack a new book on pillar and shaft versus the block system of mining coal.

The busy days went on, and the work grew more absorbing, the atmosphere more charged with an electricity which foretold tempest. The president knew that the personality of the young superintendent almost alone held the electricity in solution that for months he and his little musical club and his large popularity had kept off the strike. Till at last a day came in early May.

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We sit at the ends of the earth and sew on buttons and play cards while fate wipes from existence the thing dearest to us. Johnny's father that afternoon mounted his new saddle-horse and rode through the afternoon lights and shadows of spring. The girl, who had not forgotten, either, went to a luncheon and the theatre after. And it was not till next morning that Brant, her brother, called to her, as she went upstairs after breakfast, in a voice which brought her running back. He had a paper in his hand, and he held it to her.

"What is it, Brant? Something bad?"

"Yes," he said, breathing fast. "Awful. It's going to make you feel badly, for you liked him—poor old Johnny McLean."

"Johnny McLean?" she repeated. Brant went on.

"Yesterday—a mine accident. He went down after the entombed men. Not a chance." Brant's mouth worked. "He died—like a hero—you know." The girl stared.

"Died? Is Johnny McLean dead?"

She did fall down, or cry out, but then Brant knew. Swiftly he came up and put his big, brotherly arm around her.

"Wait, my dear," he said. "There's a ray of hope. Not really hope, you know—it was certain death he went to—but yet they haven't found—they don't know, absolutely, that he's dead."

Five minutes later the girl was locked in her room with the paper. His name was in large letters in the head-lines. She read the account over many times, with painstaking effort to understand that this meant Johnny McLean. That he was down there now, while she breathed pure air. Many times she read it, dazed. Suddenly she flashed to the window and threw it open and beat on the stone sill and dragged her hands across it. Then in a turn she felt this to be worse than useless and dropped on her knees and found out what prayer is. She read the paper again, then, and faced things.

It was the oft-repeated, incredible story of men so accustomed to danger that they throw away their lives in sheer carelessness. A fire down in the third level, five hundred feet underground; delay in putting it out; shifting of responsibility of one to another, mistakes and stupidity; then the sudden discovering that they were all but cut off; the panic and the crowding for the shaft, and scenes of terror and selfishness and heroism down in the darkness and smothering smoke.

The newspaper story told how McLean, the young superintendent, had come running down the street, bare-headed, with his light, great pace of an athlete. How, just as he got there, the cage of six men, which had gone to the third level, had been drawn up



after vague, wild signalling, filled with six corpses. How, when the crowd had seen that he meant to go down, a storm of appeal had broken that he should not throw his life away; how the very women whose husbands and sons were below had clung to him. Then the paper told of how he had turned at the mouth of the shaft—the

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girl could see him standing there tall and broad, with the light on his boyish blond head. He had snatched a paper from his pocket and waved it at arm's-length so that everyone could see. The map of the mine. Gallery 57, on the second level, where the men now below had been working, was close to gallery 9, entered from the other shaft a quarter of a mile away. The two galleries did not communicate, but only six feet of earth divided them. The men might chop through to 9 and reach the other shaft and be saved. But the men did not know it. He explained shortly that he must get to them and tell them. He would go to the second level and with an oxygen helmet would reach possible air before he was caught. Quickly, with an unhesitating decision, he talked, and his buoyancy put courage in to the stricken crowd. With that a woman's voice lifted.

"Don't go—don't ye go, darlin'," it screamed. "'Tis no frinds down there. 'Tis Terence O'Hara and his gang—'tis the strike-makers. Don't be throwin' away your sweet young life for thim."

The boy laughed. "That's all right. Terence has a right to his chance." He went on rapidly. "I want five volunteers—quick. A one-man chance isn't enough to take help. Quick—five."

And twenty men pushed to the boy to follow him into hell. Swiftly he picked five; they put on the heavy oxygen helmets; there was a deep silence as the six stepped into the cage and McLean rang the bell that signaled the engineer to let them down. That was all. They were the last rescuers to go down, and the cage had been drawn up empty. That was all, the newspaper said. The girl read it. All! And his father racing across the continent, to stand with the shawled women at the head of the shaft. And she, in the far-off city, going through the motions of living.

The papers told of the crowds gathering, of the Red Cross, of the experts come to consider the situation, of the line of patient women, with shawls over their heads, waiting always, there at the first gray light, there when night fell; the girl, gasping at her window, would have given years of her life to have stood with those women. The second day she read that they had closed the mouth of the shaft; it was considered that the one chance for life below lay in smothering the flames. When the girl read that, a madness came on her. The shawled women felt that same madness; if the inspectors and the company officials had insisted they could not have kept the mine closed long—the people would have opened it by force; it was felt unendurable to seal their men below; the shaft was unsealed in twenty-four hours. But the smoke came out, and then the watchers realized that a wall of flame was worse than a wall of planks and sand, and the shaft was closed again.

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For days there was no news; then the first fruitless descent; then men went down and brought up heavy shapes rolled in canvas and bore them to the women; and “each morning the Red Cross president, lifting the curtain of the car where he slept, would see at first light the still rows of those muffled figures waiting in the hopeless daybreak.” Not yet had the body of the young superintendent been found; yet one might not hope because of that. But when one afternoon the head-lines of the papers blazed with a huge “Rescued,” she could not read it, and she knew that she had hoped.

It was true. Eighteen men had been brought up alive, and Johnny McLean was one. Johnny McLean carried out senseless, with an arm broken, with a gash in his forehead done by a falling beam as he crawled to hail the rescuers—but Johnny McLean alive. He was very ill, yet the girl had not a minute’s doubt that he would get well.

And while he lay unconscious, the papers of the country rang with the story of what he had done, and his father sitting by his bed read it, through unashamed tears, but Johnny took no interest. Breathing satisfied him pretty well for a while. There is no need to tell over what the papers told—how he had taken the leadership of the demoralized band; how when he found them cut off from the escape which he had planned he had set them to work building a barrier across a passage where the air was fresher; how behind this barrier they had lived for six days, by the faith and courage of Johnny McLean. How he had kept them busy playing games, telling stories; had taught them music and put heart into them to sing glees, down in their tomb; how he had stood guard over the pitiful supply of water which dripped from the rock walls, and found ways of saving every drop and made each man take his turn; how when Tom Steele went mad and tried to break out of the barrier on the fifth day, it was McLean who fought him and kept him from the act which would have let in the black damp to kill all of them; how it was the fall in the slippery darkness of that struggle which had broken his arm. The eighteen told the story, but by bit, as the men grew strong enough to talk, and the record rounded out, of life and reason saved by a boy who had risen out of the gray of commonplace into the red light of heroism. The men who came out of that burial spoke afterward of McLean as of an inspired being.

At all events the strike question was settled in that week below, and Johnny McLean held the ringleaders now in the hollow of his hand. Terence O’Hara opened his eyes and delivered a dictum two hours after he was carried home. “Tell thim byes,” he growled in weak jerks, “that if any wan of thim says shtrike till that McLean child drops the hat, they’ll fight—O’Hara.”

Day after day, while the country was in an uproar of enthusiasm, Johnny lay unconscious, breathing, and doing no more. And large engineering affairs were allowed to go and rack and ruin while Henry McLean watched his son.

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On a hot morning such as comes in May, a veteran fly of the year before buzzed about the dim window of the sick-room and banged against the half-closed shutters. Half-conscious of the sound the boy's father read near it, when another sound made his pulse jump.

"Chase him out," came from the bed in a weak, cheerful voice. "Don't want any more things shut up for a spell."

An hour later the older man stood over the boy. "Do you know your next job, Johnny?" he said. "You've got to get well in three weeks. Your triennial in New Haven is then."

"Holy—mackerel!" exploded the feeble tones. "All right, Henry, I'll do it."

* * *

Somewhere in the last days of June, New England is at its loveliest and it is commencement time at Yale. Under the tall elms stretch the shady streets, alive eternally with the ever-new youth of ever-coming hundreds of boys. But at commencement the pleasant, drowsy ways take on an astonishing character; it is as if the little city had gone joyfully mad. Hordes of men of all ages, in startling clothes, appear in all quarters. Under Phelps Gate-way one meets pirates with long hair, with ear-rings, with red sashes; crossing the campus comes a band of Highlanders, in front of the New Haven House are stray Dutchmen and Japanese and Punchinellos and other flotsam not expected in a decorous town; down College Street a group of men in gowns of white swing away through the dappled shadows.

The atmosphere is enchanted; it is full of greetings and reunions and new beginnings and of old friendship; with the every-day clothes the boys of old have shed responsibilities and dignities and are once more irresponsibly the boys of old. From California and Florida, even from China and France, they come swarming into the Puritan place, while in and out through the light-hearted kaleidoscopic crowd hurry slim youngsters in floating black gown and scholar's cap—the text of all this celebration, the graduating class. Because of them it is commencement, it is they who step now over the threshold and carry Yale's honor in their young hands into the world. But small attention do they get, the graduating class, at commencement. The classic note of their grave youthfulness is drowned in the joyful uproar; in the clamor of a thousand greetings one does not listen to these voices which say farewell. From the nucleus of these busy, black-clad young fellows, the folds of their gowns billowing about light, strong figures, the stern lines of the Oxford cap graciously at odds with the fresh modelling of their faces—down from these lads in black, the largest class of all, taper the classes,—fewer, grayer, as the date is older, till a placard on a tree in the campus tells that the class of '51, it may be, has its head-quarters at such a place; a handful of men with white hair are lunching together—and that is a reunion.

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In the afternoon of commencement day there is a base-ball game at Yale Field. To that the returning classes go in costume, mostly marching out afoot, each with its band of music, through the gay, dusty street, by the side of the gay, dusty street, by the side of the gay, crowded trolley-cars loaded to the last inch of the last step with a holiday crowd, good-natured, sympathetic, full of humor as an American crowd is always. The men march laughing, talking, nodding to friends in the cars, in the motors, in the carriages which fly past them; the bands play; the houses are faced with people come to see the show.

The amphitheatre of Yale Field is packed with more than ten thousand. The seniors are there with their mothers and fathers, their pretty little sisters and their proud little brothers—the flower of the country. One looks about and sees everywhere high-bred faces, strong faces, open-eyed, drinking in this extraordinary scene. For there is nothing just like it elsewhere. Across the field where hundreds of automobiles and carriages are drawn close—beyond that is a gate-way, and through this, at three o'clock or so, comes pouring a rainbow. A gigantic, light-filled, motion-swept rainbow of men. The first rays of vivid color resolve into a hundred Japanese geishas; they come dancing, waving paper umbrellas down Yale Field; on their heels press Dutch kiddie, wooden-shod, in scarlet and white, with wigs of peroxide hair. Then sailors, some of them twirling oars—the famous victorious crew of fifteen years back; with these march a dozen lads from fourteen to eight, the sons of the class, sailor-clad too; up from their midst as they reach the centre of the field drifts a flight of blue balloons of all sizes. Then come the men of twenty years ago stately in white gowns and mortar-boards; then the Triennials, with a class boy of two years, costumed in miniature and trundled in a go-cart by a nervous father. The Highlanders stalk by to the skirl of bagpipes with their contingent of tall boys, the coming sons of Alma Mater. The thirty-five-year graduates, eighty strong, the men who are handling the nation, wear a unanimous sudden growth of rolling gray beard. Class after class they come, till over a thousand men have marched out to the music of bands, down Yale Field and past the great circle of the seats, and have settled in brilliant masses of color on the “bleachers.” Then from across the field rise men’s voices singing. They sing the college songs which their fathers sang, which their sons and great-grandsons will sing. The rhythm rolls forward steadily in all those deep voices:

“Nor time nor change can aught avail,” the words come,

“To break the friendships formed at Yale.”

There is many a breath caught in the crowded multitude to hear the men sing that.

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Then the game—and Yale wins. The classes pour on the field in a stormy sea of color, and dance quadrilles, and form long lines hand in hand which sway and cross and play fantastically in a dizzying, tremendous jubilation which fills all of Yale Field. The people standing up to go cannot go, but stay and watch them, these thousand children of many ages, this marvellous show of light-heartedness and loyalty. Till at last the costumes drift together in platoons and disappear slowly; and the crowd thins and the last and most stirring act of the commencement-day drama is at hand.

It has come to be an institution that after the game the old graduates should go, class by class, to the house of the president of Yale, to renew allegiance. It has come to be an institution that he, standing on the steps of his house, should make a short speech to each class. The rainbow of men, sweeping gloriously down the city streets with their bands, dissolves into a whirlwind at the sight of that well-known, slight, dignified figure on the doorstep of the modest house—this is a thing which one who has seen it does not forget; the three-minute speeches, each apt to its audience, each pointed with a dart straight to the heart of class pride and sentiment, these are a marvel. Few men living could come out of a such a test creditably; only this master of men and of boys could do it as he does. For each class goes away confident that the president at least shares its conviction that it is the best class ever graduated. Life might well be worth living, it would seem, to a man who should hear every year hundreds of men's voices thundering his name as these men behind the class banners.

Six weeks after the disaster of the Oriel mine it was commencement day in New Haven and Johnny McLean, his broken arm in a sling, a square of adhesive plaster on his forehead, was back for his Triennial. He was mightily astonished at the greeting he got. Classmates came up to him and shook his hand and said half a sentence and stopped, with an arm around his shoulder; people treated him in a remarkable way, as if he had done something unheard of.

It gratified him, after a fashion, yet it more than half annoyed him. He mentioned over and over again in protest that he had done nothing which "every one of you fellows wouldn't have done just the same," but they laughed at that and stood staring in a most embarrassing way.

"Gosh, Johnny McLean," Tim Erwin remarked finally, "wake up and hear the birdies sing. Do you mean to tell me you don't know you're the hero of the whole blamed nation?"

And Johnny McLean turned scarlet and replied that he didn't think it so particularly funny to guy a man who had attended strictly to his business, and walked off. While Erwin and the others regarded him astounded.

"Well, if that isn't too much!" gasped Tim. "He actually doesn't know!"

“He’s likely to find out before we get through,” Neddy Haines, of Denver, jerked out nasally and they laughed as if at a secret known together.

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So Johnny pursued his way through the two or three days before commencement, absorbed in meeting friends, embarrassed at times by their manner, but taking obstinately the modest place in the class which he had filled in college. It did not enter his mind that anything he had done could alter his standing with the “fellows.” Moreover, he did not spend time considering that. So he was one of two hundred Buster Browns who marched to Yale Field in white Russian blouses with shiny blue belts, in sailor hats with blue ribbons, and when the Triennials rushed tempestuously down Trumbull Street in the tracks of the gray-beards of thirty-five years before, Johnny found himself carried forward so that he stood close to the iron fence which guards the little yard from the street. There is always an afternoon tea at the president’s house after the game, to let people see the classes make their call on the head of the University. The house was full of people; the yard was filled with gay dresses and men gathered to see the parade.

On the high stone steps under the arch of the doorway stood the president and close by him the white, light figure of a little girl, her black hair tied with a big blue bow. Clustered in the shadow behind them were other figures. Johnny McLean saw the little maid and then his gaze was riveted on the president. It surely was good to see him again; this man who knew how to make them all swear by him.

“What will he have to say to us,” Johnny wondered. “Something that will please the whole bunch, I’ll bet. He always hits it.”

“Men of the class of -,” the president began, in his deep, characteristic intonations, “I know that there is only one name you want to hear me speak; only one thought in all the minds of your class.”

A hoarse murmur which a second’s growth would have made into a wild shout started in the throats of the massed men behind the class banner. The president held up his hand.

“Wait a minute. We want that cheer; we’ll have it; but I’ve got a word first. A great speaker who talked to you boys in your college course said a thing that came to my mind to-day. ‘The courage of the commonplace,’ he said, ‘is greater than the courage of the crisis.’”

Again that throaty, threatening growl, and again the president’s hand went up—the boys were hard to hold.

“I see a man among you whose life has added a line to that saying, who has shown to the world that it is the courage of the commonplace which trains for the courage of the crisis. And that’s all I’ve got to say, for the nation is saying the rest—except three times three for the glory of the class of -, the newest name on the honor roll of Yale, McLean of the Oriel mine.”

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It is probably a dizzying thing to be snatched into the seventh heaven. Johnny McLean standing, scarlet, stunned, his eyes glued on the iron fence between him and the president, knew nothing except a whirling of his brain and an earnest prayer that he might not make a fool of himself. With that, even as the thunder of voices began, he felt himself lifted, swung to men's shoulders, carried forward. And there he sat in his foolish Buster Brown costume, with his broken arm in its sling, with the white patch on his forehead, above his roaring classmates. There he sat perspiring and ashamed, and faced the head of the University, who, it must be said, appeared not to miss the humor of the situation, for he laughed consumedly. And still they cheered and still his name rang again and again. Johnny, hot and squirming under the merry presidential eye, wondered if they were going to cheer all night. And suddenly everything—class-mates, president, roaring voices—died away. There was just one thing on earth. In the doorway, in the group behind the president, a girl stood with her head against the wall and cried as if her heart would break. Cried frankly, openly, mopping away tears with a whole-hearted pocket-handkerchief, and cried more to mop away. As if there were no afternoon tea, no mob of Yale men in the streets, no world full of people who might, if they pleased, see those tears and understand. The girl. Herself. Crying. In a flash, by the light of the happiness that was overwhelming, he found this other happiness. He understood. The mad idea which had come back and back to him out there in the West, which he had put down firmly, the idea that she had cared too much and not too little on that Tap Day four years ago—that idea was true. She did care. She cared still. He knew it without a doubt. He sat on the men's shoulders in his ridiculous clothes, and the heavens opened. Then the tumult and the shouting died and they let the hero down, and to the rapid succession of strong emotions came as a relief another emotion—enthusiasm. They were cheering the president, on the point of bursting themselves into fragments to do it, it seemed. There were two hundred men behind the class banner, and each one was converting what was convertible of his being into noise. Johnny McLean turned to with a will and thundered into the volume of tone which sounded over and over the two short syllables of a name which to a Yale man's idea fits a cheer better than most. The president stood quiet, under the heaped-up honors of a brilliant career, smiling and steady under that delirious music of his own name rising, winged with men's hearts, to the skies. Then the band was playing again and they were marching off down the street together, this wonderful class that knew how to turn earth into heaven for a fellow who hadn't done much of a stunt anyhow, this grand, glorious, big-hearted lot of chaps who would have done much more in his place, every soul of them—so

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Johnny McLean's thoughts leaped in time with his steps as they marched away. And once or twice a terror seized him—for he was weak yet from his illness—that he was going to make “a fool of himself.” He remembered how the girl had cried; he thought of the way the boys had loaded him with honor and affection; he heard the president's voice speaking those impossible words about him— about him—and he would have given a large sum of money at one or two junctures to bolt and get behind a locked door alone where he might cry as the girl had. But the unsentimental hilarity all around saved him and brought him through without a stain on his behavior. Only he could not bolt—he could not get a moment to himself for love or money. It was for love he wanted it. He must find her—he could not wait now. But he had to wait. He had to go into the country to dinner with them all and be lionized and made speeches at, and made fun of, and treated as the darling child and the pride and joy and—what was harder to bear—as the hero and the great man of the class. All the time growing madder with restlessness, for who could tell if she might not be leaving town! A remnant of the class ahead crossed them— and there was Brant, her brother. Diplomacy was not for Johnny McLean—he was much too anxious.

“Brant, look here,” and he drew him into a comparative corner.

“Where is she?” Brant did not pretend not to understand, but he grinned.

“At the Andersons’, of course.”

“Now?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Fellows,” said Johnny McLean, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to sneak. I’m going back to town.”

Sentences and scraps of sentences came flying at him from all over.

“Hold him down”—“Chain him up”—“Going—tommy-rot—can’t go!”

“You’ll be game for the roundup at eleven—you’ve got to be.”

“Our darling boy—he’s got to be,” and more language.

“All right for eleven,” Johnny agreed. “I’ll be at head-quarters then—but I’m going now,” and he went.

He found her in a garden, which is the best place to make love. Each place is the best. And in some mystical manner all the doubt and unhappiness which had been gone over in labored volumes of thoughts by each alone, melted to nothing, at two or three broken sentences. There seemed to be nothing to say, for everything was said in a wordless, clear mode of understanding, which lovers and saints know. There was little plot to it,



yet there was no lack of interest. In fact so light-footed were the swift moments in the rose-scented dark garden that Johnny McLean forgot, as others have forgotten before him, that time was. He forgot that magnificent lot of fellows, his classmates; there was not a circumstance outside of the shadowy garden which he did not whole-heartedly forget. Till a shock brought him to.

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The town was alive with bands and cheers and shouts and marching; the distinct noises rose and fell and fused and separated, but kept their distance. When one body of sound, which unnoticed by the lovers had been growing less vague, more compact, broke all at once into loud proximity—men marching, men shouting, men singing. The two, hand tight in hand, started, looked at each other, listened—and then a name came in a dozen sonorous voices, as they used to shout it in college days, across the Berkeley Oval.

“McLean! McLean!” they called.

“Oh, Johnny McLean!” and “Come out there, oh, Johnny McLean!” That was Baby Thomas.

“By Jove, they’ve trapped me,” he said, smiling in the dark and holding the hand tighter as the swinging steps stopped in front of the house of the garden. “Brant must have told.”

“They’ve certainly found you,” the girl said. Her arms, lifted slowly, went about his neck swiftly. “You’re mine— but you’re theirs to-night. I haven’t a right to so much of you even. You’re theirs. Go.” And she held him. But in a second she had pushed him away. “Go,” she said. “You’re theirs, bless every one of them.”

She was standing alone in the dark, sweet garden and there was a roar in the street which meant that he had opened the door and they had seen him. And with that there were shouts of “Put him up”—“Carry him”—“Carry the boy,” and laughter and shouting and then again the measured tread of many men retreating down the street, and men’s voices singing together. The girl in the dark garden stood laughing, crying, and listened.

“Mother of men!”—

the deep voices sang—

“Mother of men grown strong in giving—
Honor to him thy light have led;
Rich in the toil of thousands living,
Proud of the deeds of thousands dead!
We who have felt thy power, and known thee,
We in whose lives thy lights avail,
High, in our hearts enshrined, enthrone thee,
Mother of men, old Yale!”

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