

Why They Entered Annapolis

One "Thirsted for Power," Another Wanted to Dance and "Make a Hit With the Ladies,"
But Eagerness for Education and Patriotism Were Not Lacking



The Campus, Annapolis.

White Studio.

By HORACE JULES FENTON

THE members of the Plebe Class, United States Naval Academy, were recently asked in an English exercise to state their reasons for coming to the institution. The answers were varied, as, indeed, might be expected. Many revealed the fact that the writers were, after all, only boys, with boys' dreams, enthusiasm, and points of view. Others displayed a surprising clearness of judgment and a settled purpose that is father to success. All answers were penned in sweating seriousness, for Naval Academy regulations do not admit of joking, yet many glowed with that unconscious humor which sometimes relieves the tedium of the instructor's life.

It is gratifying to note that the educational advantages of the Naval Academy attracted these boys rather more than anything else. About 42 per cent. of the class gave as their reason for coming that they wanted to get an education. As one put it, "I wanted to get the best technical training I could get, and so I came to the Naval Academy." Another ended his essay with the sweeping statement that "the education one gets at the Academy is far superior to that of any other institution in the country." Very gratifying to the Naval Academy, I am sure, but, alas! for poor Harvard, Yale, Cornell, &c. Where in this asinine world do they stand?

Another would-be officer, badly afflicted with a common misfortune, put the same idea in a different way. "The subjects taught," he wrote, "are pracial, the instructors are among the best." If he was looking for marks, better spelling might have brought them. The fact that education at the Naval Academy, like salvation, is free, was not wholly overlooked, for a round dozen of young sailors offered that as the determining factor in their cases.

"The enemy of the place attracted me," said one; "if I had gone to a college it would have cost me a good bit of money." He, too, it is hoped, will improve in the gentle art of spelling before flying an Admiral's flag. One youth had learned, furthermore, that not only was education at this school free, but it was given to the students willy-nilly. "I was not getting on well at college," he wrote, "so I came here, where they make you get up in the morning. I am not very fond of the place, but I am profiting by it." Slug-a-beds are certainly not tolerated here.

Still another, regarding the money question from the paternal standpoint, wrote: "By entering this school I relieved my father of a burden that aided him in many ways." One feels like entering a demurrer to this allegation on the ground of ambiguity, but its mean-

ing is perhaps not beyond conjecture. Right here it may not be improper to remark that, judging from an experience of several years spent in wrestling with midshipmen's themes, there is no depth of ambiguity that midshipmen cannot reach. Like all other students of the refined art of English composition they move in a mysterious way their blunders to perform.

The call of the sea and a vague desire to see the world lured about half a hundred in this class to the Academy.

They that go down to the sea in ships,
That do business in great waters:
These see the works of the Lord,
And His wonders in the deep.

So sang the Psalmist centuries ago, and the truth of his song is still with us. "I want to see the world from the deck of a battleship," wrote several anxious young gentlemen. Well, who would not, particularly when that battleship represents a powerful navy and a rich country! But many a young naval officer has fully satisfied that desire before the end of his first cruise. After one has been for some time knocking about in foreign ports, sweating under tropic suns or freezing on polar seas, seeing the world from the deck of a warship ceases to be so alluring. Few naval officers continue to look upon that as a good and sufficient reason for remaining in the service.

A small percentage of the class blamed their parents for their present situation. "I myself was indifferent," confessed one. Our parents certainly are willful. They bring us into the world, they stuff us with Hornby's Oats and Solomon's Proverbs, and, whether or no, they top us off with an academic education. But, strange to say, most of us who survive the experience are inclined to be thankful.

"I came," wrote one, "because both my parents have been connected with the naval service, and I was born in a navy yard." He was an Irish lad who wrote that. Perhaps he is kindred to that Irishman who, moved by the same florid notion, exclaimed: "Begorra! If a cat should have kittens in the oven, would ye call 'em biscuits?" Truly, environment is everything. So intense was the desire of one parent to have his son embark on a naval career that his mind reverted to it on his deathbed. "Father's last words were," wrote one midshipman. "Don't let James lead any other life than that of a naval officer."

Naturally naval officers often desire their sons to follow in their wakes, so to speak, and usually the sons of naval officers are quite on fire to do so. In such cases parental desire, inheritance, and personal ambition combine to make a boy's career at the Academy successful. But where paternal wishes are alone responsible the issue is often dubious. To

complete the Academy course successfully requires effort and mental aptitude for the peculiar life and conditions that obtain here, and the young man who comes merely at the command of his father too frequently lacks the necessary enthusiasm for the work here and the natural fitness for the life to insure success.

The American boy is naturally patriotic. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that a large number in this class were urged to come to the Academy by love of country.

"I came," wrote one, "because of my patriotic instinct." "I yearned to defend my native land," wrote another, and we can imagine that his heart beat a mild tattoo against his manly ribs as he penned the words. But at this writing, when the air is filled not so much with rumors of war or the clash of arms but rather with the echoes thereof, what must his feelings be! Another young middy laid the blame to avuncular suggestion. He said: "The war stories of my uncle fired my enthusiasm, and I just had to come." A fourth asserted his belief that "no citizen can attain to greater honor than by enlisting as an officer in the United States Navy." He probably overlooked the fact that officers do not enlist, and that there are other lines of endeavor in the country quite as necessary to the welfare of the nation and quite as productive of honor.

A fifth expressed the same idea a little more ecstatically by writing: "The life of a naval officer is the highest attainment a man can reach." It is, we admit, a high calling, but are there not others quite as high? A sixth midshipman soared to the loftiest realms of fancy mixed with patriotism when he brought a half-page of heart outpourings to a close with the following peroration: "When serving one's country one is an honor to three beings: himself, his country, and his God!" An utterance worthy indeed of Patriotic Henry. We smile perhaps at these florid sentiments, but in spite of their boyishness we cannot but entertain a certain respect for the enthusiasm and zeal portrayed. The fire of that undaunted spirit who shouted from the blood-stained deck of his sinking ship those immortal words of defiance, "I have not yet begun to fight," still burns undimmed in the souls of American youth.

The glamour of military life had, of course, its attractions for many. The romance and trappings of war have yet a compelling force in spite of peace societies and their propaganda. What boy, if he is good for anything at all, does not at some time become enamoured of a uniform—a policeman's at first, perhaps, but sooner or later a soldier's or a sail-

or's? Many get over this desire by the time they reach the age of discretion, but not all.

"I wanted to wear a blue uniform," was the simple reason one young gentleman gave for wishing to enter the Naval Academy. That ambition is now satisfied. Another wrote very optimistically: "I always thought how nice it would be to become an Admiral." Well, he is now on the high way to become one. Another chose his life career for reasons that, if not so ambitious, still are admittedly compelling. "My first impressions of the naval service were good," he wrote. "I saw many naval officers at Charleston. They attended all the balls there and made great hits with the ladies."

To make "hits with the ladies" is undoubtedly one of the flattering possibilities of a naval officer's career. Another admitted that he had come because he thought that "life here must be one continual round of hops, entertainments, fights, escapades, and every other wildly romantic thing not to be found in Iowa." How "flat, stale, and unprofitable," alas, must life in Iowa be!

Another, more plainly filled with militarism, closed by saying: "Ever since I became a better boy I always thought I would like to drill in the hot sun." What speculation does not this open up as to the possible previous career of this youth? If, furthermore, after a single two-hour dress parade on a June afternoon he still dotes on drilling in the hot sun he should make an unusual officer.

These seem to be the main causes that inveigle boys to enter the Naval Academy—education, love for the sea, the desire to see the world, patriotism, and military glamour. But there are various other reasons quite as human, if not so idealistic. Thus, in this particular group of midshipmen the assurance of being well taken care of by a benevolent Government was a prime factor with a few. Said one canny youth: "I came because I am sure of my bread and butter when my four years here are over." "I won't be laid off in hard times," wrote another. One ambitiously penned the following: "I want to be something out of the ordinary, not just a plain workingman."

Whether being out of the ordinary avails more for salvation than being a plain workingman, he did not say. The world would like to know. Social prestige as a reason was not overlooked. "Now I can move in the best society," spelled one with customary inaccuracy. One came for the rather vague reason that "it sounded interesting." Still another steered his course hither to fill a

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gap in the Construction Corps. Wrote he naïvely, "It occurred to me one day that the United States needed more naval constructors for her ships. Hence," &c. No doubt the suffering Government will avail itself of his services.

Another, after vainly beating about for some time in a mental fog, finally anchored his ship of thought to the following lucid proposition: "Being unable to financially go to any excellent college, I became finally at last convinced that the Naval Academy was the place for me." It is to be hoped that before this youth becomes a grizzled Admiral he will be able to express himself with more conciseness.

"As for me, I thirsted for power," declared one; and, indeed, the possibility of enjoying at some future time the relation of superior to inferior was a delectable notion to several. One came because he could find nothing better to do. He has probably found something to do and plenty of it by this time, for Virgil's phrase *ferret opus* aptly describes the midshipman's daily life. One member of the class confessed to the

thing that undid Caesar: "I came," he said, "because I was ambitious." Let him beware the Ides of Februarys. Another, evidently speaking from experience, for he has twice fallen back into the entering class, acknowledged that "he liked the life and the opportunity offered." Surely there is nothing like being satisfied with one's lot in life. Another came as a last resort. "I had tried several other things without success," he wrote, "and so I thought I would try this." His examination paper, be it remarked in passing, seemed

to indicate a leaning toward his usual fatality.

Rivalry with a friend stirred another, for he wrote: "I came here mainly to beat out a friend at West Point." Perhaps he will do so, but unless his friend at West Point is uncommonly slow it is likely to be a stern chase. One who seemed to take an aristocratic view of the situation blandly wrote: "I came because I wanted to become an officer and a gentleman. It is an established fact that the best men in the country are in the army and the navy." Alas for those luckless millions who are not!

Alas, too, for the narrow and selfish reasons that move so many young men in the choice of their life work! Money, power, self-aggrandizement, passing whims—these seem to be compelling motives. Accordingly, it is refreshing to read on the paper of one quiet, studious boy the following simple statement: "I came to help my mother." It is safe to assume that a boy who comes to the Naval Academy for any such reason will, after graduation, become an ornament to the naval service.

What, now, is the end of all this? Nothing very definite. We cannot prove anything by statistics, we are sometimes told, and we cannot change human nature much by pointing a moral in public print. All that might be written on this subject from now until the crack of doom would not much affect those anxious youth who year after year steer their courses toward this institution. They will continue to come for motives just as frivolous, with ideals just as noble, as those found in this set of examination papers. How was it the poet so finely expressed it years ago?

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

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