

RAGGED DICK

HORATIO ALGER, JR.



EDITED BY HILDEGARD HOELLER

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Horatio Alger, Jr.
RAGGED DICK
or, Street Life in New York
with Boot Blacks



AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

Edited by

HILDEGARD HOELLER
COLLEGE OF STATEN ISLAND

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Preface

"Only fools laugh at Horatio Alger, and his poor boys who make good. The wiser man who thinks twice about that sterling author will realize that Alger is to Americans what Homer was to the Greeks," wrote Nathaneal West and Boris Ingster in 1940 (quoted by Scharnhorst, epigraph to *The Lost Life*). In his 1962 introduction to *Ragged Dick* and *Mark, the Match Boy* Rychard Fink warns in a similar fashion: "Anyone who wants to know his country should get acquainted with Horatio Alger. It is dangerous to ignore a man whose ideas hang on so stubbornly" (31). This Norton Critical Edition presents Alger's quintessential rags-to-riches story in the way these writers suggest: it hopes to illuminate the cultural context and centrality of Alger's novel, showing how and why this juvenile work resonated so strongly when published and remained a central American text. Alger, like the master of entertainment P. T. Barnum, had his finger on the pulse of America and was able to offer a version of its central myth, the American dream, that his readers could—for a long time—embrace. How and why was that so? What was it about Alger's narratives about New York bootblacks that captured America's imagination?

Alger was a rather unlikely candidate to become such a central American voice. Born in 1832 to Reverend Horatio Alger and Olive Fenno, he grew up in a financially struggling middle-class home. In 1844 Alger's father was bankrupt, and the family moved from Boston to Marlborough. Alger began to attend Harvard University in 1848, and he started publishing early works such as essays and poems in the Boston *Pictorial National Library*. After graduation he was unable to make a living as a writer and returned home. He continued to write, began to teach and tutor, and also entered theological school. He went back and forth between writing under various pseudonyms and aspiring to become a minister. In 1860 Alger graduated from Cambridge Theological School and started to work as a minister and continued employment as a private tutor. In 1863 due to his unusual height (5 feet 2 inches) and his near-sightedness he was not enlisted in the war and therefore remained a minister and published with increasing success as a writer of juvenile fiction. For example, his first novel *Frank's Campaign* (1864) was well received. By 1866, however, his life took a serious turn when rumors emerged that Alger had been

sexually abusing boys in his parish. When charges were brought against him, he did not deny them and was dismissed as a minister. Now exclusively a writer, Alger moved to New York to study the “street arabs,” young homeless urban boys, and in them he found *his* subject. Only a year later, in 1867, *Ragged Dick* appeared in serialized form, the novel that made Horatio Alger a household name in America and that remained his greatest success.

From its beginning, the novel captured something readers wanted to read. After a successful serialized run, the 1868 book edition was victorious. According to Gary Scharnhorst, “The first edition of several thousand copies was sold out within a few weeks of its publication on May 5, 1868, and a second edition appeared in August. It was the most successful story Alger ever wrote, technically his only best-seller” (*Lost Life*, 86). Alger himself could never replicate the hit of this particular novel, even though he certainly tried writing more than a hundred books for young readers in his career (Scharnhorst, “Demythologizing Alger,” 20). But there was something about *Ragged Dick* that sounded particularly right to a lot of readers at the time and that later made it an iconic American text. This Norton Critical Edition is interested in accounting for this success and for delineating the strange centrality the novel acquired. It begins by looking at the book’s immediate context—both Alger’s life and the literature about New York City in the 1860s—and then moves to the larger context of its later reception and the many responses it has elicited. If Alger’s story, and the story of the novel, is not exactly a rags-to-riches story of the kind Alger tells, it is a story of a voice from an unlikely source becoming utterly central. Not all people, however, who use the Horatio Alger name and the myth they associate with it, know about its historical references, the context of its author’s life, or even the novel’s actual content. That Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick* would become a central American text that for many would remain a shorthand for America itself and the opportunities it offered to all is one of the most amazing elements of the story of *Ragged Dick*, which this Norton Critical Edition tries to tell.

As troubling and ironic as it may today appear in light of his past as a pederast, Alger’s liking for and affiliation with New York City street boys was probably one factor that accounted for the novel’s popularity. Certainly Alger cited his immersion in the boys’ lives and his extraordinary sympathy for them as one reason for his novel’s particular success. Alger had become involved with the Children’s Aid Society and other reform organizations trying to help homeless children, and, throughout his life, he also invited young boys into his home, adopted them, and took care of them. The section on “Alger on His Art and Life” includes Alger’s own statements about his writing and his relation to his subjects; I am also including amongst

Alger's writings about himself his poem "Friar Anselmo," written shortly after he left the ministry because he had been accused of—and did not deny—having had performed "unnatural acts" with boys.

While Alger's liking for New York City's poor boys was personal, this Norton Critical Edition suggests in the next section on "The New York City Background" that the reading public had also become fascinated with these boys and the city. The immediate success of *Ragged Dick* thus also had to do with the way in which Alger's novel tapped into an already existing market of books representing the "lures" and "snares" of the city to an American middle-class readership. America's eyes, particularly its middle-class eyes, were focused on New York and its rapidly growing population and poverty. Many urban poor were immigrants, and anti-foreign sentiments were one response to their presence. Perhaps because they were easier to romanticize than adults, street children began to be a popular subject for books about the city. In them, the so-called "street arabs," audiences found a way to look at this new New York population and find both hope and danger in it. Alger's novel *Ragged Dick* fits remarkably neatly into this new literature about urban poverty, and particularly its children. It spoke to a common fear of and fascination with New York City's poor children, and Alger's invented character "Ragged Dick" was a most ingenious and charming version of a "street arab" everyone could embrace, love, and enjoy.

But despite *Ragged Dick*'s topicality in 1868, it has also had remarkable staying power. Indeed, as Gary Scharnhorst delineates, the novel's greatest success came much later, in the early twentieth century ("Demythologizing Alger," 20). The remainder of this Norton Critical Edition is devoted to considering the ways in which Alger has been read and re-read and in which *Ragged Dick* has become an iconic American text. The "Criticism" section begins with contemporary reviews of the novel and then moves to a conversation by librarians in the 1880s about the merits and dangers of Alger's novels. In these debates, the reception and fate of Alger's books get discussed. Who should read them and for what reason? Then, I offer a selection of parodies and responses to Alger that exemplify his lasting influence; that he was ridiculed and parodied speaks to his enduring presence and to the ways in which he offered a central argument about American culture that seemed again and again worthy of a response. Gary Scharnhorst's essay "Demythologizing Alger" caps this section on Alger's legacy because it traces the ways in which Alger's work was read and made into a household word in American ideology.

The final section "Critical Essays" includes literary scholarship on Alger, showcasing four different critical approaches to his work as a way of representing the scope of the ongoing critical conversation

about Alger's novel. Mary Roth Walsh's essay is particularly useful in engendering discussions about the masculine nature of the American dream as told by Alger. Gender and masculinity are also at the center of Michael Moon's essay, which discusses Alger's fiction in light of the homosocial strains in American market culture. "Pandering in the Public Sphere" by Glenn Hendler contemplates Alger's fiction in the context of reading practices and definitions of public and private spheres. Following up on Alger's allusions to Barnum's museum, my own essay compares Ragged Dick to Tom Thumb and Alger's narrative techniques to P. T. Barnum's exhibition strategies in his freak shows in order to account for the novel's success.

This Norton Critical Edition could not have come into being without the faith and support of my editor, Carol Bemis. This work was supported by a grant from the City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program; furthermore, the College of Staten Island gave me a Dean's Award in support of my writing the essay "Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P. T. Barnum, and the Art of Humbug," included in this volume. I give many thanks to the City University of New York. My dear thanks go to my friend Laura Saltz who read my work on Alger and made many helpful suggestions, and I am grateful to all my other friends who were willing to listen to me talking about Alger in the last few years. Also, I am indebted to Cindy VandenBosch and my other colleagues at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum for making me part of their marvelous enterprise of representing later nineteenth-century life on the Lower East Side to the public. The knowledge I gained from offering tours at the museum and hearing many stories from our visitors has given me the kind of detailed insight into the background of *Ragged Dick* I could not have gathered in any other fashion. Finally, I thank the librarians at the College of Staten Island and the New York Public Library for their generous help.

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix

The Text of <i>Ragged Dick</i>	I
---------------------------------------	----------

Contexts	117
ALGER ON HIS ART AND LIFE	121
Horatio Alger, Jr. • Friar Anselmo	121
• Are My Boys Real?	122
Edward G. Alcorn • Advice from Horatio Alger, Jr.	124
Horatio Alger, Jr. • Writing Stories for Boys	125
THE NEW YORK CITY BACKGROUND	129
F. J. Ottarson • New York and Its People	129
MAP: Dick's tour through the New York City of the 1860s	132
James D. McCabe, Jr. • Street Children	139
Edward Crapsey • Outcast Children	141
Charles Loring Brace • Homeless Boys	143
Clark Kidder • <i>From Orphan Trains and Their</i> Precious Cargo	145

Criticism	151
CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS	153
Tangled Threads	153
Putnam's Magazine	156
WHO SHOULD READ ALGER? ALGER AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY	157
Charles C. Cutter • The Public Library, and Its Choice of Books	157
S. S. Green • Sensational Fiction in Public Libraries	158
Peccator • As to Novel-reading—A Confession	160
S. S. Green • Class Adaptation in the Selection of Books—The Fiction Question	161
Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont • Annual Report	162
Young Men's Association, Buffalo • Annual Report	162
Unsigned Review • Books for Young People	163

ALGER'S LEGACY: PARODIES AND RESPONSES	165
Stephen Crane • A Self-Made Man	165
Gilbert W. Gabriel • The Alger Complex	169
James Thurber • Tom the Young Kidnapper, or, Pay Up and Live	172
Amiri Baraka • The Death of Horatio Alger	176
Victor Wilson • Legendary Alger Was a Homosexual	180
Gary Scharnhorst • Demythologizing Alger	182
CRITICAL ESSAYS	199
Mary Roth Walsh • Selling the Self-Made Woman	199
Michael Moon • "The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes": Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger	209
Glenn Hendler • Pandering in the Public Sphere: Masculinity and the Market in Horatio Alger	233
Hildegard Hoeller • Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P. T. Barnum, and the Art of Humbug	254
Horatio Alger, Jr.: A Chronology	277
Selected Bibliography	281

Illustrations

Frontispiece of First Book Edition (1868)	119
Map: Dick's tour through New York City of the 1860s	132
Map: The Five Points in the 1800s	134
Illustration used by the Children's Aid Society	146
Jacob Riis's photograph of two "street arabs"	147
Jacob Riis's photograph of boys sleeping	147
Cartoon from the <i>Irish World</i> newspaper (1874)	148

Preface

by Horatio Alger, Jr.

"Ragged Dick" was contributed as a serial story to the pages of the *Schoolmate*, a well-known juvenile magazine, during the year 1867. While in course of publication, it was received with so many evidences of favor that it has been rewritten and considerably enlarged, and is now presented to the public as the first volume of a series intended to illustrate the life and experiences of the friendless and vagrant children who are now numbered by thousands in New York and other cities.

Several characters in the story are sketched from life. The necessary information has been gathered mainly from personal observation and conversations with the boys themselves. The author is indebted also to the excellent superintendent of the Newsboys' Lodging House, in Fulton Street, for some facts of which he has been able to make use. Some anachronisms may be noted. Wherever they occur, they have been admitted, as aiding in the development of the story, and will probably be considered as of little importance in an unpretending volume, which does not aspire to strict historical accuracy.

The author hopes that, while the volumes in this series may prove interesting as stories, they may also have the effect of enlisting the sympathies of his readers in behalf of the unfortunate children whose life is described, and of leading them to co-operate with the praiseworthy efforts now making [sic] by the Children's Aid Society and other organizations to ameliorate their condition.

New York, April, 1868

Chapter 1

Ragged Dick Is Introduced to the Reader

"Wake up there, youngster," said a rough voice.

Ragged Dick opened his eyes slowly, and stared stupidly in the face of the speaker, but did not offer to get up.

"Wake up, you young vagabond!" said the man, a little impatiently; "I suppose you'd lay there all day, if I hadn't called you."

"What time is it?" asked Dick.

"Seven o'clock."

"Seven o'clock! I oughter 've been up an hour ago. I know what 'twas made me so precious sleepy. I went to the Old Bowery¹ last night, and didn't turn in till past twelve."

"You went to the Old Bowery? Where'd you get your money?" asked the man, who was a porter in the employ of a firm doing business on Spruce Street.

"Made it by shins, in course. My guardian don't allow me no money for theatres, so I have to earn it."

"Some boys get it easier than that," said the porter significantly.

"You don't catch me stealin', if that's what you mean," said Dick.

"Don't you ever steal, then?"

"No, and I wouldn't. Lots of boys does it, but I wouldn't."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say that. I believe there's some good in you, Dick, after all."

"Oh, I'm a rough customer!" said Dick. "But I wouldn't steal. It's mean."

"I'm glad you think so, Dick," and the rough voice sounded gentler than at first. "Have you got any money to buy your breakfast?"

"No, but I'll soon get some."

While this conversation had been going on, Dick had got up. His bedchamber had been a wooden box half full of straw, on which the young bootblack² had reposed his weary limbs, and slept as soundly as if it had been a bed of down. He dumped down into the straw without taking the trouble of undressing. Getting up too was an equally short process. He jumped out of the box, shook himself, picked out one or two straws that had found their way into the rents of his clothes, and, drawing a well-worn cap over his uncombed locks, he was all ready for the business of the day.

Dick's appearance as he stood beside the box was rather peculiar. His pants were torn in several places, and had apparently belonged in the first instance to a boy two sizes larger than himself. He wore a

1. Popular theatre, mostly frequented by working-class audiences.

2. Boy who polishes shoes for a living.

vest, all the buttons of which were gone except two, out of which peeped a shirt which looked as if it had been worn a month. To complete his costume he wore a coat too long for him, dating back, if one might judge from its general appearance, to a remote antiquity.

Washing the face and hands is usually considered proper in commencing the day, but Dick was above such refinement. He had no particular dislike to dirt, and did not think it necessary to remove several dark streaks on his face and hands. But in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly, and their faces inspired distrust; but Dick had a frank, straight-forward manner that made him a favorite.

Dick's business hours had commenced. He had no office to open. His little blacking-box was ready for use, and he looked sharply in the faces of all who passed, addressing each with, "Shine yer boots, sir?"

"How much?" asked a gentleman on his way to his office.

"Ten cents," said Dick, dropping his box, and sinking upon his knees on the sidewalk, flourishing his brush with the air of one skilled in his profession.

"Ten cents! Isn't that a little steep?"

"Well, you know 'taint all clear profit," said Dick, who had already set to work. "There's the *blacking* costs something, and I have to get a new brush pretty often."

"And you have a large rent too," said the gentleman quizzically, with a glance at a large hole in Dick's coat.

"Yes, sir," said Dick, always ready to joke; "I have to pay such a big rent for my manshun up on Fifth Avenoo, that I can't afford to take less than ten cents a shine. I'll give you a bully shine, sir."

"Be quick about it, for I am in a hurry. So your house is on Fifth Avenue, is it?"

"It isn't anywhere else," said Dick, and Dick spoke the truth there.

"What tailor do you patronize?" asked the gentleman, surveying Dick's attire.

"Would you like to go to the same one?" asked Dick, shrewdly.

"Well, no; it strikes me that he didn't give you a very good fit."

"This coat once belonged to General Washington," said Dick comically. "He wore it all through the Revolution, and it got torn some, 'cause he fit so hard. When he died he told his widdler to give it to some smart young feller that hadn't got none of his own; so she gave it to me. But if you'd like it, sir, to remember General Washington by, I'll let you have it reasonable."

"Thank you, but I wouldn't want to deprive you of it. And did your pants come from General Washington too?"

"No, they was a gift from Lewis Napoleon.³ Lewis had outgrown 'em and sent 'em to me,—he's bigger than me, and that's why they don't fit."

"It seems you have distinguished friends. Now, my lad, I suppose you would like your money."

"I shouldn't have any objection," said Dick.

"I believe," said the gentleman, examining his pocket-book, "I haven't got anything short of twenty-five cents. Have you got any change?"

"Not a cent," said Dick. "All my money's invested in the Erie Railroad."⁴

"That's unfortunate."

"Shall I get the money changed, sir?"

"I can't wait; I've got to meet an appointment immediately. I'll hand you twenty-five cents, and you can leave the change at my office any time during the day."

"All right, sir. Where is it?"

"No. 125 Fulton Street. Shall you remember?"

"Yes, sir. What name?"

"Greyson,—office on second floor."

"All right, sir; I'll bring it."

"I wonder whether the little scamp will prove honest," said Mr. Greyson to himself, as he walked away. "If he does, I'll give him my custom regularly. If he don't, as is most likely, I shan't mind the loss of fifteen cents."

Mr. Greyson didn't understand Dick. Our ragged hero wasn't a model boy in all respects. I am afraid he swore sometimes, and now and then he played tricks upon unsophisticated boys from the country or gave a wrong direction to honest old gentlemen unused to the city. A clergyman in search of the Cooper Institute⁵ he once directed to the Tombs Prison,⁶ and, following him unobserved, was highly delighted when the unsuspecting stranger walked up the front steps of the great stone building on Centre Street, and tried to obtain admission.

"I guess he wouldn't want to stay long if he did get in," thought Ragged Dick, hitching up his pants. "Leastways I shouldn't. They're so precious glad to see you that they won't let you go, but board you gratooitous, and never send in no bills."

3. Allusion to famous performer Tom Thumb, a "miniature man" whose early performances in P. T. Barnum's freak show included Napoleon.

4. Ironic allusion to the very well-known Erie Railroad stock scandal, which would have left Dick, like many investors, penniless.

5. Private New York City trade school, founded in 1859 by Peter Cooper; it initially offered evening engineering and arts classes and was free for U.S. residents.

6. New York City prison completed in 1838 and named for its structure, which was based on an illustration of an Egyptian tomb.

Another of Dick's faults was his extravagance. Being always wide-awake and ready for business, he earned enough to have supported him comfortably and respectably. There were not a few young clerks who employed Dick from time to time in his professional capacity, who scarcely earned as much as he, greatly as their style and dress exceeded his. Dick was careless of his earnings. Where they went he could hardly have told himself. However much he managed to earn during the day, all was generally spent before morning. He was fond of going to the Old Bowery Theatre, and to Tony Pastor's,⁷ and if he had any money left afterwards, he would invite some of his friends in somewhere to have an oyster stew; so it seldom happened that he commenced the day with a penny.

Then I am sorry to add that Dick had formed the habit of smoking. This cost him considerable, for Dick was rather fastidious about his cigars, and wouldn't smoke the cheapest. Besides, having a liberal nature, he was generally ready to treat his companions. But of course the expense was the smallest objection. No boy of fourteen can smoke without being affected injuriously. Men are frequently injured by smoking, and boys always. But large numbers of the newsboys and boot-blacks form the habit. Exposed to the cold and wet they find that it warms them up, and the self-indulgence grows upon them. It is not uncommon to see a little boy, too young to be out of his mother's sight, smoking with all the apparent satisfaction of a veteran smoker.

There was another way in which Dick sometimes lost money. There was a noted gambling-house on Baxter Street, which in the evening was sometimes crowded with these juvenile gamblers, who staked their hard earnings, generally losing of course, and refreshing themselves from time to time with a vile mixture of liquor at two cents a glass. Sometimes Dick strayed in here, and played with the rest.

I have mentioned Dick's faults and defects, because I want it understood, to begin with, that I don't consider him a model boy. But there were some good points about him nevertheless. He was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults. I hope my young readers will like him as I do, without being blind to his faults. Perhaps, although he was only a bootblack, they may find something in him to imitate.

And now, having fairly introduced Ragged Dick to my young readers, I must refer them to the next chapter for his further adventures.

7. Another popular theatre on the Bowery named after its director, Tony Pastor, a former clown and entertainer.

Chapter 2

Johnny Nolan

After Dick had finished polishing Mr. Greyson's boots he was fortunate enough to secure three other customers, two of them reporters in the Tribune establishment, which occupies the corner of Spruce Street and Printing House Square.

When Dick had got through with his last customer the City Hall clock indicated eight o'clock. He had been up an hour, and hard at work, and naturally began to think of breakfast. He went up to the head of Spruce Street, and turned into Nassau. Two blocks further, and he reached Ann Street. On this street was a small, cheap restaurant, where for five cents Dick could get a cup of coffee, and for ten cents more, a plate of beef-steak with a plate of bread thrown in. These Dick ordered, and sat down at a table.

It was a small apartment with a few plain tables unprovided with cloths, for the class of customers who patronized it were not very particular. Our hero's breakfast was soon before him. Neither the coffee nor the steak were as good as can be bought at Delmonico's;¹ but then it is very doubtful whether, in the present state of his wardrobe, Dick would have been received at that aristocratic restaurant, even if his means had admitted of paying the high prices there charged.

Dick had scarcely been served when he espied a boy about his own size standing at the door, looking wistfully into the restaurant. This was Johnny Nolan, a boy of fourteen, who was engaged in the same profession as Ragged Dick. His wardrobe was in very much the same condition as Dick's.

"Had your breakfast, Johnny?" inquired Dick, cutting off a piece of steak.

"No."

"Come in, then. Here's room for you."

"I ain't got no money," said Johnny, looking a little enviously at his more fortunate friend.

"Haven't you had any shines?"

"Yes, I had one, but I shan't get any pay till tomorrow."

"Are you hungry?"

"Try me, and see."

"Come in. I'll stand treat this morning."

Johnny Nolan was nowise slow to accept this invitation, and was soon seated beside Dick.

1. Restaurant that opened in 1830 as an expansion of a pastry shop owned by Swiss immigrants Giovanni and Pietro Del-Monico. It is generally considered the first restaurant in America where customers could order from a menu rather than eat a fixed meal. By 1865 the Delmonico brothers had four restaurants in New York City, at 14th Street, Chambers Street, South William Street, and Broad Street.