RAGGED DICK AND MARK, THE MATCH BOY

Two Novels by Horatio Alger

" 'I hope, my lad,' Mr. Whitney said, 'you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty is no bar to a man's advancement.' "—From *Ragged Dick*

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Ragged Dick
and
Mark, the Match Boy

HORATIO ALGER, JR.

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY RYCHARD FINK

COLLIER BOOKS, NEW YORK

COLLIER-MACMILLAN LIMITED, LONDON

 Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 62-21187.

First Collier Books Edition 1962

Fifth Printing 1968

The Macmillan Company, New York
Collier-Macmillan Canada Ltd., Toronto, Ontario
Printed in the United States of America

Horatio Alger as a Social Philosopher

TWO KINDS of general literature are available to the student of American society: on one hand, studies that examine the influences of "great," "thoughtful," "artistic," and "sober" men, and on the other hand, studies of popular culture in which ideas and attitudes that have a strange paternity are brought into focus. In many instances a student can read a great deal of American history before he becomes acquainted with the latter, and there is a danger that if he delays too long he will not really understand his heritage.

But in this far from best of all possible worlds, the virtuous often go unrewarded, truth is usually honored in the breach, joy is generally unrefined, crime often pays a lot, and national taste and sensitivity, look for them where you will, are typically deplorable. Is it the thinking of John Dewey that best explains our age—or the witless perversions of his arguments by uninspired school administrators? Is it the great novelists or poets like Thomas Wolfe or Robert Frost who represent our literary ideals—or the best-selling writers like Lloyd C. Douglas and Edgar Guest? Which newspaper reflects the opinions of the majority of Americans—the *New York Times* or the New York *Daily News*? Do the architectural ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright dot our landscape—or those of designers of look-alike split-level traps? Are more people satisfied by *I Love Lucy* than by *Death of a Salesman*?

Thus, to be valid a sample of a nation's values must be broad. It must include nonsense as well as sense, the vulgar as well as the tasteful, and the parochial as well as the universal. The great statement of an inspired thinker most often reaches the people through the work of a lesser breed. After all, many voices announce the dedications of a people, croakers along with warblers, and the heritage of Americans is tangled and diffuse. Until we understand that our creed is carried by a sad and glorious mixture of men who must be understood as we find them, it is not likely that we will acquire the reasons and the strength to sift out the tawdry in favor of the humane and the generous.

On this basis, a student of American culture should give far more attention to the novels and ideas of Horatio Alger than is usually the case. There is no doubt that what he wrote was bilge, but it was inspired. His novels, it can be argued, wove a far firmer strand in the American character than the work of men with sounder intellectual credentials.

Even today Alger remains a standard measuring rod for American life. For example, a 1962 *New York Times* obituary on Benjamin Fairless, ex-chairman of the board of U. S. Steel, began with a reference to his "Horatio Alger climb" to fame and fortune. A few days after that news item, Charles Luckman, former head of Lever Brothers, and presently a prominent architect, explained the alphabet of success in a New York *Herald-Tribune* article. He said, "A is for ability, B is for breaks, and C is for courage. Without any of these, no man can be continuously, truly successful." Mr. Luckman spoke almost one hundred years after the publication of Alger's first great success, *Ragged Dick,* and his advice supplemented that offered by a character in the novel: " 'I hope, my lad,' Mr. Whitney said, 'you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty is no bar to a man's advancement.' " In January 1962, James Reston wrote in a *New York Times* column that the Republican party wanted candidates with "an Horatio Alger image."

Alger elaborated on the theme of the self-made man in about one hundred twenty books that sold at least seventeen million copies, and perhaps more.[1] Countless boys read him during a period that stretched from the Reconstruction to World War I. Among them were Joyce Kilmer, Christy Mathewson, John Drew, William Wrigley, Jr., and John Dewey. There are many testimonials on Alger's influence. While Walter Lippmann reported that he was neither amused nor edified by Alger's message (which suggests that Lippmann's sobriety has a very long history), Edward W. Bok, the famous editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal,* claimed that the same ideas made his life productive. "They can laugh all they like at Alger now," Bok wrote, "but he pulled his weight in the world when he was with us."

Alger was both popular and enormously influential. A majority of the men who were adults during the 1930's probably were more familiar with his name than those of Tolstoy, Balzac, and Melville. Although he is barely read today, American culture still carries his message, and most men seem to find it true, good, and reasonable. In treating Alger seriously, we do justice to part of our living conviction.

Horatio Alger was born January 13, 1832, in Revere, Massachusetts.[2] He was named after his father, a Unitarian minister of that righteous breed who knew himself and God, and usually spoke for both. The father was determined that his own purposes would live on in the boy, and set about shaping him into another holy vessel. Like Samuel Butler's Mr. Pontifex, he thrust stupidity from the boy, even at the expense of boxing his ears, and the child was raised within a rigid pattern of unfeeling expectations. Only when the Reverend was away on church business did Mrs. Alger dare show affection to Horatio. He grew up, grave and solemn, dubbed Holy Horatio by the other children. When his father ordered him to tell what he was going to be when he reached manhood, Horatio answered, "A teacher of God's ways and a preacher of His Will." But to his mother, he con-

fessed that he did not want to be anything, not anything at all.

When Horatio was fourteen he went away to Gates Academy, a secondary boarding school, and two years later he entered Harvard. There he started a diary the day he was enrolled and for the first entry wrote, "I promise to do my best in every subject and uphold the learning of this place." Horatio never had many academic problems as an undergraduate. He loved foreign languages, becoming proficient in French, Greek, Latin, and Italian. At graduation he ranked tenth in a class of sixty-two.

But finding a home away from home was not easy. First he roomed at Mrs. Curran's. The good woman baked him a chocolate cake each Sunday, but unfortunately moved too swiftly to serve up other of the sweets of life. As he noted in his diary, "She stood in the doorway as I passed to my room and had on very little and I might have seen her bare but I did not look. I shall move to where there is greater respect for decency." Horatio then moved to the home of a Miss Mullins, but left after three days with the ambiguous comment, "I must be more careful where I go." He finally settled in the home of Lloyd Thurstone, an elderly gentleman with whom he ate cookies and talked of philosophy.

It was here that Horatio lived part of the basic plot he was to use in his books. There was a large mortgage on the Thurstone house; because of a bad investment, Mr. Thurstone fell behind in his payments and was threatened with foreclosure proceedings. Aware of the problem, Horatio entered an essay, "Athens at the Time of Socrates," in a contest sponsored by the college, won the first prize of $40, and gave it to Mr. Thurstone. In 1860, as Horatio was completing his work at Harvard Divinity School, Mr. Thurstone died and bequeathed him two thousand dollars.

At college Horatio fell in love with Patience Stires when he was only seventeen. The Reverend Alger acted quickly when he received his son's letter announcing an

impending wedding. He made a hurried trip to Harvard and put the stamp of his iron will on the matter, and Horatio turned away from his love. However, it had been first and best love for the young man, and he never forgot the girl. Thirty years later, he raced to her bedside as she was dying. But it was the first loss that did the damage. Because he lacked the courage to choose love when it was at hand, Horatio never found the strength in later life to search and choose again. The emotions of childhood and of youth were stunted; as a man he was a case of arrested development, unhappy despite success and fame.

Horatio tried to break free of his father when he graduated from Harvard in 1852. He had already considered a literary career, and he thought over its possibilities when he first read *Moby Dick*. "What a thrilling life the literary must be!" he wrote in his diary. "Imagination and observation—these I take to be the important requisites. Would it be desirable for me to take up writing as a life work?" Instead of entering divinity school, he worked for a while on a magazine. But it failed, and Horatio lost the first flush of his rebellious spirit. He finally entered Harvard Divinity School and worked well during the first few years. But the closer he came to graduation—to becoming the person his father wished for—the harder it was to swallow his fate. ". . . I will receive my degree as something to carry through the years to remind me of my folly," he wrote in his diary. However, when his parents arrived for the graduation ceremonies, Horatio was not there. The famous Alger plot was at work; two devil-may-care school friends, on their way to Europe, had dropped in just after Horatio received his two-thousand-dollar legacy. And Horatio had gone off with them to Paris to learn about Literature and Life.

Anyone called Holy Horatio who goes to Paris as a rebel is bound to meet that city on its own terms. What happened to Horatio was bound to happen, a triumph of circumstances and coincidence. He met a singer in a cafe,

Elise Monselet, who had grown bored with Frenchmen. No one can or should say more about the inevitable seduction than Horatio did in his diary.

> Feb. 4th. I was a fool to have waited so long. It is not vile as I thought. Without question I will be better off physically, anyhow I have sometimes thought so. She is more passionate than me. . . .
>
> Feb. 6th. I ought to know more. Elise makes fun of me. She says she knows I wanted to. . . . I am learning things from her.
>
> Feb. 7th. Should I go on and is it right? What makes it wrong? She doesn't think it is wrong and nobody else does, only I.
>
> Feb. 10th. I won't do it again. If nothing else, from now on I will be clean. I *shall*. They may laugh but I will leave if anything they say to me. I want to be alone and I don't want to see Elise. She must leave me alone. I want to get away somewhere anywhere. My head aches.

Horatio thought it over. But he thought it over as someone who had come to Paris to learn about Literature and Life. What else could he conclude? A few days later he wrote:

> I want to live to be great. Suppose it is vain—all great men are vain. What have they got that I need to be like them? Whatever it is I will see. If I insist with myself why shouldn't I be, as well as the rest of them? It is just something that grows inside and I can feel it just as surely as I am writing. It seems to depend on doing what you want because all of them are that way. I will do *what I want* hereafter, least I can do is try. They say true genius has no bounds as to conventions. Genius has prerogatives. Then I will have prerogatives too.

Horatio went back to Elise that day. Shortly after, with genius and prerogatives in full bloom, he allowed himself to be stolen from her by Charlotte Evans, an English girl studying art in Paris. That relationship did

not go well. Charlotte was a bit of a shrew and enough of a nag to make Horatio pay attention to a letter from his mother begging him to return home. He went as quietly as he could, but Charlotte chased him onto the boat. They landed in New York, Horatio excused himself for a moment to buy a newspaper, and ducked for home without her.

After the outbreak of the Civil War, Horatio made several unsuccessful attempts to enlist in the army. First he broke his arm, then he was in a train accident, and finally he came down with pneumonia. In 1864, he was ordained pastor of the Unitarian Church in Brewster, Massachusetts, but in early 1866 he left there for New York with the outline of *Ragged Dick* in his luggage.

The man responsible for this move was William T. Adams, editor of a children's monthly, *Student & Schoolmate,* and the author of many juvenile books under the pseudonym of Oliver Optic. He had attended a service at Alger's church and invited the pastor to send him a manuscript. The mail brought, first, "Squire Pitman's Peaches," and then, "Deacon Baxter's Cow," and both were published in the magazine. Adams asked for more, and when the first chapters of *Ragged Dick* were submitted, he urged Alger to commit himself more fully to writing. Alger's dream of a life of letters could not be rejected.

Adams introduced Alger to New York, and pointed out to him the literary possibilities in the adventures and problems of boys who came to the city to make their way. When A. K. Loring, a Boston publisher, offered to issue *Ragged Dick* as a novel, Alger signed a contract for six books. Like his own creation, Ragged Dick, Alger was on his way to Fame and Fortune.

As the Ragged Dick episodes began to appear, they came to the attention of Charles O'Connor, superintendent of the Newsboys' Lodging House. Founded in 1853, the lodging house was a haven for many of the boys who had left home during and immediately after the Civil War. Here, newsboys, bootblacks, and messengers could live decently for only a few pennies a day, and be

protected from many of the temptations and dangers of the city. O'Connor found the values in Alger's stories made-to-order for his purposes, searched the author out, and introduced himself. The lodging house, he said, could be an unending source of inspiration for Alger's writing, which, in turn, would continue to encourage struggling and ambitious boys. This was the beginning of a lifelong association between the two men, and between Alger and the Newsboys' Lodging House.

Now the pattern of Alger's life was set. His books catapulted him into fame and success. He haunted the streets of New York, coming to know them well, and used them for much of the background description and incident in his books. Various mayors, as early as 1871, appointed him to numerous commissions and committees on vice, the elimination of crime, and other urban problems.

One of Alger's crusades is worth noting, for it places him within the humanitarian tradition. While exploring New York, Alger stumbled across one of the most vicious practices of the time. This was the padrone or contract labor system, one aspect of which involved young street musicians from Calabria who were imported and sent out to beg. The boys were treated brutally, many of them dying because of privation, cruelty, and disease. In 1871, Alger depicted their plight in *Phil, the Fiddler,* and began a public campaign to free them, during which period his life was threatened many times. Failing to secure help from the Children's Aid Society, which was fighting for child labor laws in industry, Alger and several other people organized meetings in parks and rented halls. The commotion they stirred up was given broad coverage in the press. Finally, when a particularly brutal example of mistreatment came to light, a court case on behalf of the injured child was filed by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. An explosion of public indignation followed and in 1874 the state legislature passed a law for the prevention of cruelty to children, the first of its kind in the nation. A major part of that triumph belonged to Horatio Alger.

Three to five books a year poured from Alger's pen, and the more he wrote for boys the stronger became his desire to write at least one serious book—"One Great Book," as he called it in his diary—one that would merit critical acclaim. Although Alger was hurt by those who mocked his juvenile prose, he was under no illusions at this time of his life about its literary value. He knew that he stood for decency, for the best that was in the idea of America and for his version of Protestant ethics. The boys who read his books and took their preachments seriously would be much the better for what he had to say. But he believed there was another kind of book in him, and thought more soberly as time went on of trying to bring it to life. However, nothing seemed to come of the matter.

Toward the end of the 1880's Alger's publisher suggested that he take an extended trip to California. Alger's newest books were not selling as well as the earlier ones, and Loring believed it would be wise for his most successful author to put his plot into Midwestern and Far Western settings. The journey brought Alger eventually to San Francisco, where he was lionized by a pair of literary sisters from the Friday Afternoon Club, until he was dispossessed by the club's next speaker, who happened to be Bret Harte.

Back East again, ill and unhappy, Alger settled temporarily in Peekskill, N.Y. A particularly brutal murder occurred shortly after he arrived, and the victim's widow muttered something about seeing a prowler in the vicinity. Alger, a stranger in town, was picked up as a suspect and jailed despite his protests that he was the famous writer. By the time the mess was untangled, the widow had made profuse apologies to Alger and sent a pleading cablegram to a married sister in Europe to come and help her. During the following weeks Alger and the widow had tea together almost every day, and he listened with growing eagerness to the descriptions of the sister, Una Garth, who was to arrive. She came, and in a matter of days Alger was courting her. The presence of Mr. Garth, a foreign sales representative for a Chicago concern,

did not deter Alger. Mr. Garth, a bit taken aback by this unconventional situation, soon moved his family to New York. Alger followed, and in order to be alone with Una during her husband's many business trips, Alger bought a farm outside the city. Una helped him furnish it, even chiding him for wanting to buy two beds. There is no doubt that a scandal was brewing, but Mr. Garth saved the day by whisking Una back to Paris.

Alger was miserable. He wanted to follow, but did not have enough money. As he calmed down, he saw his plight clearly; he wanted to be with Una and only his pen could take him to her. He was still too disturbed by the whole chain of events to write, and only managed at first to get off a daily letter to Una. He paid little attention to her replies which indicated quite plainly that distance had bred disenchantment. Slowly he regained control of himself and then exploded with energy. Within a month he wrote *Frank and Fearless* and *Walter Sherwood's Probation*, and received a large advance from his delighted publisher. It was a prosperous and eager Alger who took off for Paris.

Alger did everything he could to rekindle a flame in Una, but she was too circumspect and Mr. Garth too watchful. She was flooded with messengers, sometimes as many as three a day, and it was out of sheer self-protection that she agreed to visit Alger occasionally. On these occasions they talked only of literature. Once more Alger was dreaming of writing "One Great Book." He had a title, *Tomorrow,* and told Una that all he needed was a story good enough to go with it. At one point he thought he had the idea he had been waiting for, but under Una's questioning soon discovered he had lifted the plot from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Then, while reading *The Three Musketeers,* Alger considered writing a version that would follow a group of American boys to fame and fortune. Next he thought of outlining the history of the world in a style that ordinary men could understand. His work would be in three volumes, *Yesterday, Today* and *Tomorrow*. When he finally started writing again, he read the first pages of a novel to Una. Noting the even