



*Re-Discovering
Horatio Alger, Jr.
1832-1899*

*The Most Popular Storyteller
Who Ever Lived —
And The Most Widely Read*

By Dorothy B. Gerlach

On July 13, 1983, the *Lancaster New Era* carried an article by Sam Taylor concerning the Horatio Alger correspondence that was on display at the Lancaster County Historical Society. In that article Historical Society Administrator John Aungst remarked that Horatio Alger had absolutely no connection with Lancaster other than the fact that a couple of generations of Lancaster boys undoubtedly grew up reading his books.

Mr. Aungst might also have added a number of Lancaster girls too because a friend and I spent many a summer vacation afternoon voraciously

reading every one of the Alger books that we could find. We often finished one in a few hours of afternoon reading. The stories were interesting and exciting, and they captivated us as they had earlier readers.

It is from the point of view of the influence of a book upon the reader that I want to discuss Horatio Alger and his writings. His literary status has already been determined, but there is little disagreement concerning his popularity and influence. He influenced American culture and American families in his time and in our own as well.

Alger's books (he wrote about one hundred twenty-three novels) were the best loved American juvenile books and were included in the list of 100 Influential American Books printed before 1900. His popularity was such that some 400 million copies were published and purchased. All of this helps support the statement that he was the most popular American storyteller who ever lived.

Today there is a growing interest in Alger's writings as Americans look to the past, seeking for and re-examining those ideals and traditions that helped make America the great nation that it is. Alger was the originator of the "strive and succeed, bound to rise and struggling upward" themes that many American people have believed in. As Ralph D. Gardner writes in his book *Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era*, Alger's name is a part of our language. It's a figure of speech — a synonym — for a spectacular rise to fame and fortune.

A "typical Alger hero" today means one who started from scratch and generally against great odds reached the top of the ladder. Alger's themes centered on the concept of free enterprise as offered under the American system. It was possible in Alger's day and is likewise possible today for an individual to rise from humble beginnings to a position of leadership where he can enjoy success in his chosen field. We learned from the Alger stories that if one wants to achieve success as an adult, he should work hard as a child.

Two Harvard researchers, Dr. George Vaillant and Caroline Vaillant reported recently in the "American Journal of Psychiatry" that success in adulthood is more related to a child's capacity to work than to his intelligence, social status, or family background. Alger heroes were boys who were willing to do any and all kinds of hard, but honest work.

The Horatio Alger hero was courteous, honest, considerate to elders and widowed mothers, and stouthearted in the face of all sorts of obstacles. But the writer did not always put a halo on his heroes; he added some flaws which the hero overcame. It was by no means the fatal flaw of the Greek tragic hero and its ultimate ending because Alger's writings were not of that genre. Contrary to what many may believe, Alger writings did not stress acquisition of great wealth but rather the attaining of respectability. Critics, many of whom may never have read the books carefully, or at all,

sometimes simply latched onto the common platitudes connected with the books and commented on these rather than on the actual intent of Alger's writings.

Unitarians from Harvard — Horatio's father and Horatio, Jr., were from this group — believed that "Nature spoke to man of God." They also believed that a "passion for easy money is a curse." For example, "speculation on Wall Street or in other stocks had a corrupting influence on the lives of men." However, if one just happened to attain wealth while seeking for respectability, that was entirely acceptable. This would represent a deserved reward for hard work and moral behavior.

The young girls in the Alger stories were always attractive, lovable, animated, high spirited, pleasing, flirtatious and well to do. They were usually the daughter of the hero's employer. No love or marriage in these stories, however. Those were always in the distant future. A sisterly relationship or a good sound friendship was the acceptable relationship. Even though Alger's books were primarily boys' books, two of his novels had female protagonists: In 1866 *Helen Ford*, which was his only attempt at fiction for girls, and in 1871 *Tattered Tom*, one of Alger's toughest characters, who was really a girl in boy's disguise.

The most popular American storyteller who ever lived was born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in that area around Boston, Concord, Cambridge, and Walden Pond and in the time frame that historians frequently refer to as the "cultural center" and "the golden days" in American literature. Names such as Hawthorne, Emerson, Lowell, Thoreau, and Alcott come to mind. Horatio Alger, Jr. was born in the same year as Louisa May Alcott.

His family was considered a patrician one on both sides. His father, Horatio Alger, Sr., was a Unitarian minister and a seventh generation descendant of Thomas Alger, a British immigrant. His mother was Hannah Bassett, a descendant of the Plymouth Pilgrims.

His family was always financially insecure, and some feel, naturally, that these family circumstances may have influenced his writings which usually included a mortgaged property and other financial difficulties.

As a child Horatio did not enjoy good health, so much of his early learning took place in his own home. By age nine he was reading French, German, and Latin, having been introduced early to classical language and advanced mathematics. He had been well tutored for his studies at Harvard College from which he was graduated.

In 1860 Horatio also took his Divinity Degree from the Harvard Divinity School. Following this he took a seven month tour of Europe with two friends, and upon their return, they found that the Civil War was just beginning. Alger made two attempts to enlist but was rejected both times because of his asthma. It was at this time that he agreed to become an assistant to his father in the ministry. By the year 1864, he had been ordained

and accepted a pulpit of his own in Brewster, Mass. But Alger's desire to be a writer persisted, and after having served as a Unitarian minister, he left his charge at Brewster, Mass. There appears to have been much personal frustration in his career. He tried teaching which he disliked; he had served as a minister; he had tried writing adult fiction at which he failed; and he had written for publications such as the *New York Sun*, *Harper's*, *Graham's* and *Putnam's* and as yet had not attained success. His early writings followed the Dickensian style: i.e. they first appeared in serialized form in these publications.

In 1867, after moving to New York City where he had an opportunity to live among and observe the impoverished city boys working and wandering about the city, with the aid and encouragement of a publisher friend, his first book *Ragged Dick* or *Street Life In New York* was published. It became a sensational success, and Alger realized that he had found his vocation at last.

In spite of his success, Alger shunned publicity and wanted his private life to be shrouded in obscurity. Some regard this as a modest desire to be regarded as an unobtrusive moral teacher of boys. Alger's books afforded many opportunities for his heroes to act morally. What better way to let young people know that they can become effective and valuable people than by impressing upon them at an early age that they could be indispensable in the saving of a life, for example. Given a chance to act responsibly, a person most likely will. This is the way the Alger heroes behaved.

Alger's stories contain accurate descriptions of old New York City. He was well acquainted with the shabby tenements, the city sidewalks, the transportation system, Central Park, and the Bleeker Street boarding houses. There actually was a Newsboys' Lodging House where the boys could sleep for six cents a night. Alger also described the pawnshops and saloons, the ferries, the Astor House, one of New York's finest hotels, P.T. Barnum's Museum, and the aristocratic mansions. He had once lived in a New York mansion when he served as a tutor for a well-to-do family. A study of Alger's works is partly a study of the sociological and economic transition of America to where it is today.

On the economic side, however, no boy today could possibly do what Alger's heroes did at their early age — some as young as twelve. Dozens of ordinances would keep a boy from earning a living today as he might have done in Alger's day. Among these are the following:

- Minimum wage and hour legislation
- Compulsory education status
- City, state, federal labor acts
- Workmen's compensation
- Income taxes
- Social Security
- Medical and insurance deductions
- Union membership and dues

Working permits (vacation and full-time)
Street and outdoor employment regulations
Business zoning restrictions
Public contract laws

Today, Paul, the Peddler would be handed a summons at his corner!

An interesting comparison can be made between the borrowing of money in Alger's day and in our own today. The hero in an Alger story and his mother — most often a widowed mother — were often forced to borrow money. They would often be indebted to the local rich squire in the village who was generally a somewhat evil person, with a son the same age as the Alger hero. Contrast this economic situation with today's modern banking regulations, charge accounts, credit cards, lay-away plans, installment buying and even, at one time, low cost borrowing.

Many of today's successful business people, as well as those in leadership positions, have found America to be the land of opportunity just as the Alger hero regarded it. They believed in the Alger formula: "By honesty, cheerful perseverance and hard work, a virtuous lad would receive his just reward — though the reward was almost always precipitated by a stroke of good luck."

An article entitled "Still the Land of Opportunity?" in July 4, 1983, *U.S. News and World Report* says

"From its creation, the United States has taken a proud stance before the world as a symbol of freedom and riches, a land where ambition and merit may lift any individual to the highest station."

The Horatio Alger writings certainly reinforced these ideas!

What then has been Alger's contribution? He contributed the Horatio Alger Hero to American literature, language and life. His ideas are a part of the American tradition and are symbolic of the free enterprise system.

In later life Alger settled in Brooklyn, New York, with his widowed housekeeper, Kate Down, and her two sons, John and Tommy, whom he adopted in 1894.

Alger died in 1899, at age sixty-seven.

As I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed reading the Alger books as a child, and I had the opportunity to re-read them as an adult when I introduced several of them to my grandsons during the summer vacations they spend with us. They enjoy hearing me read aloud these stories from the past, and one of them was so caught up in the language of the author that he remarked upon the completion of the book, "That was a bully story, Grandma!"

My husband and I enjoy collecting the Alger books, and we are continuing to add to our collection. Alger wrote about one hundred twenty-three novels, so we still have a way to go before we collect all the titles. Of those I have read and those in the collection, my favorite is *Phil, the Fiddler* which discusses the padrone system and the plight of Italian children who were brought to this country to beg and to sing, and play their violins and

hand organs in the streets. Their parents were supposedly paid to let the children come to this country. The children spoke no English and were often very cruelly treated. Although officials knew of this outrage, as Gardner writes, nothing was done until Alger wrote his powerful indictment *Phil, the Fiddler* in 1872. Within six months Alger aroused sufficient public indignation to force the New York State Legislature to pass the first measures outlawing cruelty to children.

In this case Horatio Alger's book was effective and influential in bringing about desirable changes.

In addition to writing under his own name Alger used pseudonyms, and books carrying his pen name Arthur Lee Putnam are very hard to find — and priced accordingly. Another pen name was Arthur Hamilton and these are even rarer, and a third name, Julian Starr, is the rarest of all.

In 1947, concerned with the trend among young people toward the mind-poisoning belief that economic opportunity was a thing of the past, Dr. Kenneth Beebe of the American Schools and Colleges Association, developed a new approach to solving this problem. He founded the Horatio Alger Award. Awards are presented to outstanding men and women in their fields — those who typify the results of individual initiative, hard work, honesty, and adherence to traditional ideals — thus exemplifying The American Way.

Formerly known as the Horatio Alger Awards Committee, the organization has now become the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, Inc. in order to encompass its ever-growing educational programs which include student and teacher seminars, a speaker's bureau, modern-day Horatio Alger heroes, and assorted aids for classroom use to further the understanding of the American enterprise system.

A long list of outstanding American men and women have been selected as Horatio Alger Award winners. Locally, J. Paul Lyet, a former Lancaster man who rose from control of what was the New Holland Machine Co. to chairman of Sperry Corporation, was so honored on May 14, 1983.

Another local man honored by the association in 1983 is Dr. John O. Hershey, Chairman of the Board, and President (retired), Milton Hershey School, Hershey, Pa. Others honored over the years include President Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Willie Stargell, Dave Thomas, Mary Kay Ash, Hank Aaron, Dr. Jessie Ternberg, James Reston, John Galbreath, Norman Vincent Peale, William E.C. Dearden, Billy Graham, Rafer L. Johnson, and many others.

On April 30, 1982, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Horatio Alger's birth, the U.S. Postmaster General issued a 20 cent stamp to honor this man. President Ronald Reagan, Horatio Alger class of '69, was presented the first stamp. The Association and the Horatio Alger Society

(of book collectors) had joined forces in 1978 to lobby for the stamp and persisted until it was finally approved late in 1981.*

American Dreamers, an hour long program, produced for the Public Broadcasting Service by WITF/Hershey, profiles some of our present-day heroes and heroines who exemplify the Alger approach to life. Through interviews with former award winners and historical sequences on Alger the program reveals how contemporary men and women have applied Alger's philosophy in their own lives. They offer living proof that the American dream of success is still a reality!

WITF also produced the *American Dreamers* Instructional Series to be used in classroom discussion, and I am happy to say that our collection of Horatio Alger originals was used in the filming of this production.

"Horatio Alger's stories are winning new popularity," says Ralph Gardner, "and young readers are re-discovering Alger. This kindly son of a New England parson has shown us that any spunky lad can whip the town bully, that he can rise from newsboy to banker, from farm boy to senator, from rail splitter to President."

Horatio Alger Association members (quoting directly from the Association Creed). . .advance the concept of private enterprise offered under the American system.

. . .emphasize the importance of honesty, morality, integrity, individual initiative. . .

. . .inculcate patriotism and love of country and help conserve America as the land of opportunity for all, regardless of race, religion, or economic status.

. . .perpetuate the American Way by meeting human needs. . .through assisting others with professional and monetary support; through projects and through religion and civic involvement.

*The foregoing was a review of the book **Horatio Alger, or the American Hero Era** by Ralph D. Gardner, a frequent writer on Nineteenth Century American Literature, for the Village Book Club, Millersville, Pennsylvania, on September 26, 1983.*

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