

► *His rags-to-riches characters made
"Alger hero" an American cliché, but*

HORATIO ALGER WAS NO HERO

BY STEWART H. HOLBROOK

HORATIO ALGER, JR., author of the 118 rags-to-riches novels inspiring to the youth of a past day, was most indecently introduced to the Facts of Life one drowsy evening in the Cambridge of 1848. A freshman at Harvard, he had taken rooms at a Mrs. Curran's, and for a number of weeks his diary reveals what a fine landlady he had. She was a splendid cook; she kept him from oversleeping; she made a cake "with chocolate on top and in between," and a bit later he "found a new towel on bed embroidered with my initial by Mrs. C. I thanked her." Most Harvard freshmen of the day could have seen what was coming, but not Horatio. Then Mrs. Curran let him have it. Says the diary, tragically:

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.

Move he did, and apparently he kept his virtue until those four dangerous years under the elms

were past. When later he did stumble, the fall was mighty and it was all the king's horses and men, including his publishers and officials of the Newsboys Lodging House in New York City, could do to haul him off the path of Sin.

Horatio was born on Friday the 13th of January, 1832, in Revere, Massachusetts, the first son of a Unitarian minister who had marked the boy for the church. Schooling at Gates Academy was followed by Harvard, where Horatio stood high in his class. After the lusty Mrs. Curran's, he roomed at the home of Floyd Thurstone, an amiable old eccentric who lived in one of those ancient houses that used to surround Harvard Yard. Learning that Thurstone was about to lose his property by mortgage, Horatio wrote an essay that brought a \$40 prize. This he pressed on the harassed Thurstone, an act that soon had a bearing on Alger's life.

Alger Sr. gave his son the choice of studying for the ministry or going it alone with no parental aid. As he had no desire to preach — at

least, not from the pulpit — Horatio became an instructor in a private school in Boston. He almost starved at it, and also at editing a short-lived periodical. He gave up his contest with the hard world and told his father that he would attend Cambridge Theological School. At graduation time he was thunderstruck to learn that Thurstone had died and had left him a ring, a watch and \$2000.

Coincident with this bequest, two of Horatio's friends showed up. They were about to leave for Europe, there to see the sights and possibly to study Art. The divinity graduate thought about a pulpit; he thought about Paris; he went along with the boys.

After a brief pause in London the trio went on to Paris. His two pals immediately went in for a heavy course in wine and women, with a little Art on the side, but for a long time Horatio successfully wrestled with the Devil, remaining in his *pension* much of the time and keeping pure.

In those days the Paris morgue was a famous meeting place. While strolling there one day Horatio was accosted by a short, plump, good-looking girl who proved to be easy to get acquainted with. She was Elise Montselet, no streetwalker but an honest working girl who

sang in cafés. She liked Alger at once, finding him naïve and unspoiled. They hit it off famously, and soon Horatio was going to the café to hear her sing. He even tried to drink wine, but disliked it.

One night Elise persuaded him to take her to a ball. When he escorted her home afterwards she asked him to come in and stop awhile. The youth started to refuse, at which the French girl stamped her foot and gave him a terrific going over. He went in and stayed all night. Next day the diary reported as follows: "I was a fool to have waited so long. It is not so vile as I thought." Two days later, from the same volume: "... Elise makes fun of me. I am learning things from her." Another day and he asks the diary: "Should I go on, and is this right? What makes it wrong?" So it continued for many weeks until Horatio, in a fit of conscience, left her. But only briefly. "Genius has its own prerogatives," he wrote in a good round hand, then went back to Elise.

By now he had forgotten all about his two pals; he had learned to guzzle, to dance. Elise, who seems to have been highly literate, told him much more of French literature than he had learned at Harvard. The two were living

openly together, and having a whale of a good time, when one Charlotte Evans appeared. She was an English girl, a student of painting, and she seems to have been a woman who knew what she wanted. She wanted Horatio and she took him.

II

Now Horatio's troubles began. Charlotte ran the ménage and Horatio, too. She had him so frightened that the best he could do was submit and write in his diary that he would like to choke the English harpy. Finally she became so mean that the patient Alger could stand her no more. With all the secrecy in the world he slipped out the back door and took ship for New York. On the first day out of Havre, Charlotte Evans appeared on deck. Horatio was dumbfounded, and the woman had her way with him until the ship docked. Once on a New York street, Horatio excused himself, saying he wanted to see a man about a dog, and when he got out of Miss Evans' sight he ran like the wind. There is no record of his seeing her again.

Broke, and weighing 110 pounds as a result of his various Art studies, Horatio went directly home. He

still didn't want to be a minister, and after getting the wrinkles ironed out of his stomach, went to Boston with the intention of seeking a literary career. The Civil War put a stop to that. Horatio decided to enlist. On the way to do so he fell and broke an arm. They put him to work in a recruiting office. Off and on for three years he talked of enlisting, but never got around to it. On December 8, 1864, he broke down and was ordained pastor of the Unitarian church at Brewster, Massachusetts.

It was here, according to Herbert R. Mayes, Alger's only serious biographer, that the urge to write became strong enough for action. On the margins of his sermons he took to scribbling plots for stories. He tried out the plots on William T. Adams (Oliver Optic), editor of *Student & Schoolmate*, who encouraged him. In 1866 Alger resigned his pulpit and went to New York City, with an outline of *Ragged Dick* in his pocket. *Ragged Dick* was an immediate success, a veritable wow that Horatio was to rewrite a hundred times in the years to come, changing only the title and the names of characters. It told the story of the rise to riches of a street urchin, and for the next half century every boot-black in the United States was be-

lieved to be a potential capitalist.

Officials of the New York Newsboys Lodging House on Fulton Street saw the Ragged Dick story. It was a new type of literature, one that should inculcate in poor youths a desire and a determination to get ahead in the world. The Lodging House officials sought Alger out and invited him to make use of the place as a source for background material. Superintendent Charles O'Connor, an able man in his work, took a strong liking to Alger.

From this time almost to the end of his career Alger spent much of his time in the newsboys' home. He followed *Dick* with *Fame & Fortune*. The boys of New York and elsewhere ate it up and demanded more. They got it with *Mark, the Match Boy*. Endorsements of these fine serials, which were then put into book form, came from men in all walks of life. They became a flood that continued for thirty years. So did royalty checks. The boy from Harvard had hit his stride.

His working habits, while eccentric, ran to a pattern. He outlined his simple plots in advance, always the same basically, and selected names for his characters. Choosing a title came first of all. And when he once sat down to write, he was a

demon. Writing swiftly, and with almost no revisions, he would sit at his desk ten, fifteen hours at a stretch, brewing strong coffee to keep him awake. He wrote so carelessly that in time his publishers tried to correct the more glaring inconsistencies. As fame reached him he took to writing absurd prefaces, some of them 5000 words long, but his publishers usually managed to forget to include them.

A. K. Loring, who published many of the Alger serials in book form, advised Horatio to make a trip to the Coast with the idea of writing a series of books with Midwestern and Far Western backgrounds. Alger crossed the continent, getting ideas that soon became *The Young Miner*, *Both Sides of the Continent*, and other stories. On his return East he took lodgings in rural Peekskill, New York, there to write his Westerns. Horatio couldn't know it, of course, but Drama, and Romance, too, were about to close in on him.

Shortly after his arrival in Peekskill, one Jeremiah Hardy was found brutally murdered. His widow was arrested. She went into a hysterical turn during which she told police she had seen a strange man in the neighborhood previous to the murder. The local sleuths looked around for the man. They

found him in the person of a drab, pudgy little fellow who wore a moustache but was getting bald on top. Questioned by police, the pudgy man said he was Horatio Alger, Jr. The cops laughed. Great writers like Alger, they said, didn't live in country towns. They threw him into the lockup. Horatio knew how Ragged Dick felt when arrested for a crime he didn't commit.

Within a few hours the police let Alger loose. They wanted room to jail a man who had confessed the Hardy murder. The cops apologized, and so did Mrs. Hardy. She invited Horatio to call, which he did, and things were going along swimmingly when Mrs. Hardy's sister, Una, showed up.

Una G was about forty — slim no more, but pleasingly plump and blessed with fair looks and an ardent nature. She also had a husband. She smiled so bewitchingly at Horatio that he forthwith bought a new suit and a fine necktie. He showed up the second night lugging a bunch of flowers for Una which he said he had picked himself. One thing led to another, and Mr. G didn't like it. He announced that he and his wife were moving into New York City. They moved, and so did Horatio — taking up quarters not far from them. Here the two lovers held clandestine

meetings. Business called Mr. G to Chicago. The meetings in Horatio's flat came oftener and lasted longer.

III

At this juncture, Charles O'Connor of the Newsboys Lodging House became worried about his good friend. He noted that Alger had all but ceased to write, that he showed little interest in the boys at the House. Alger's publishers were worried, too. They were making fabulous money from the Alger stories and wanted more.

Having met Mrs. G and sensing what was up, the pious O'Connor set about breaking up the romance. He suggested to Horatio that he buy a farm O'Connor knew of in Arlington and go there to write a series about farm boys. Alger agreed. He bought the farm. Then he went and asked Una if she'd live with him. She not only said she would, but went ahead to help her lover select furniture. Horatio already had his eye on a couple of nice beds when Una breathed an undying line: "But why two, Horatio?" she asked.

They lived together at the farm until word came that Mr. G was coming back from Chicago. Una hurriedly returned to New York. Whether or not Mr. G sensed what

had been going on isn't known; anyway, he told Una to pack up — they were going to Paris.

Horatio was desolate. Day after day he sat with blank paper in front of him and wrote not a line. Finally he gave up even the attempt. "I'm going to Paris," he told O'Connor desperately. But he found his bank account too low. Una and the farm had cost a heap of money. Alger sat down again, and this time the deathless prose of *Frank & Fearless* flowed from his heated pen, 80,000 words of it in fourteen days. He took the copy to his publishers who, without troubling to read the story — they knew it anyway — gave Alger advance royalty checks amounting to several thousand dollars. Alger took a long breath, then turned out *Walter Sherwood's Probation*, another 80,000 words. Time: thirteen days. Collecting advance royalties on this work, Horatio packed.

Direct to Paris went the panting lover, but things weren't what they had been. Una had tired of him, yet his dog-like devotion appealed to her. She met him now and again, when Mr. G was out of town, but the meetings grew fewer. Horatio brooded. He tried to write and could not. Months flew by and his publishers were getting anxious. They wrote, then cabled, for copy.

With a superhuman effort Alger sat down and in a few days *Struggling Upward* was on its way to New York. Then the writer brooded again, and his brooding turned into some sort of violent mental attack. One night neighbors heard terrific screaming. They called police who carried away to a hospital a short, chubby man who fought like a trapped raccoon.

When Alger had somewhat recovered he returned to New York. His old friend O'Connor didn't recognize him. Thin and haggard now, pale as a sheet, he had aged twenty years. When he had recovered from the shock, O'Connor took his friend to his own home and cared for him through an illness that lasted close to two years.

Alger resumed writing. One evening, as he was reading what was to be *Adrift in New York*, O'Connor died quietly. It all but finished Alger, for O'Connor was apparently the only male friend he ever knew. He hid himself away for more than a year, and when he emerged he seemed not to know what to do. He went up to New England and revisited the scenes of his boyhood and youth. He tarried at South Natick, Massachusetts, and there he started coughing. His heart pained him terribly. Old-timers in Natick recall that often

when Alger went out for a stroll he would sink to the ground and have to be carried home.

When word of the Master's illness reached the Newsboys Lodging House, the lads drew up a resolution of cheer and appreciation and sent a committee to deliver it in person to the dying man. It was possibly the greatest moment in Alger's life, and he wept tears of joy. A few days later he turned his face to the wall and died. He was buried July 18, 1899, from the

Unitarian church in South Natick.

Prior to 1900 the Alger books sold for \$1.25. New publishers put out reprints at 10¢, then 15¢. Sales continued fairly but diminishingly brisk until about World War time, then died away. Libraries began removing the books from their shelves, calling them trash. The Alger era was over. Only the Master's name survives to describe an incredible rise to fortune of some lad who once sold papers or blacked boots.

MOON OVER EUROPE

BY RALPH FRIEDRICH

MOON that will rise to look upon this place
Without compassion and without despair,
Pour down your light upon the broken stair,
The ravaged roof that for a little space
Held off destruction. To no lifted face
Will you be more than menace. Cities wear
Your light disastrously. The shimmering air
Enfolds them in a perilous embrace.

Far up in heaven, gleaming in their flight,
The birds of death go over. And the sky
Flows ever westward. Down the face of night
The seeds of doom rush earthward. Cities die
Beneath your stare, and they who loved you lie
Shattered to silence in the rain of light.