

**PHIL, THE FIDDLER; OR,
THE STORY OF A YOUNG
STREET MUSICIAN**

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Phil, the fiddler; or, The story of a young street musician by Horatio Alger

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HORATIO ALGER

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A NAUTILUS FACSIMILE FIRST EDITION

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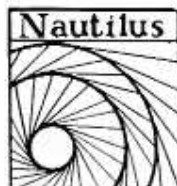
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INTRODUCTION

Every American has heard of "the Horatio Alger success story." But what do people really think of when they hear Alger's name?

You might be a person who rose from the ranks to a far more satisfying and successful life than your parents. It is likely you accept the proposition that effort and a little luck will usually take a man pretty far in America. You connect Alger with the notion of rags to riches. You believe with Alger that a large part of a man's destiny is the product of his character and his choices.

You might be one of the new antiquarians, a refugee from the dirt and turmoil of the present who yearns for what appear to be the dear, departed days of yore. You are familiar enough with the Alger tradition to know that it presents a process of simple justice by which decency and cheerfulness are rewarded and all degrees of villainy are punished. The innocence and charm of that equation appeal to you.

Whoever you are and whatever you think about

Alger, consider this book you now hold in your hand as a magic door to an American man and an American past. Read with sympathy and imagination and you will find that the shy, unhappy man named Horatio Alger Jr. once mounted his Rosinante, charged his windmills and prevailed.

Horatio Alger Jr. was born in 1834 at Revere, Massachusetts, the son of a dour and pious Unitarian minister who planned to maintain his relationship to God through his son. The boy was seldom able to enjoy his mother's love. He was known in childhood as "Holy Horatio" and measured out his life at secondary school and later at Harvard in response to pressures from his ever-present father. A college love affair that might have given Alger emotional gratification was ended when his father intruded. Alger graduated from Harvard in 1852. For five years thereafter he drifted in and out of teaching and journalism in Boston. These efforts to escape the ministry and his father were not successful, and Alger became a student again at the Harvard Divinity School in 1857. He graduated three years later and used a small inheritance to flee abroad to Paris. The year he spent there was filled, surprisingly enough, with traditional Parisian indiscretions. From 1861 to 1864, during the war years, Alger was a tutor and tried unsuccessfully to go to war. At thirty, there was no more peace in Alger than in his country, and in 1864, under pressure from his father, the young man accepted ordination as the pastor of the Unitarian Church in

Brewster, Massachusetts. In spring, April 1866, Alger left his congregation for New York to write for a living.

This move into the life of letters was not sudden. Alger had been writing for some years, and by 1866 was the author of four books. The escape to New York was triggered by an invitation from William T. Adams (he edited a boys' magazine, *Student & Schoolmate* and wrote as the well-known "Oliver Optic") to do some writing on a steady basis. Alger's serial sketches in the magazine became *Ragged Dick*, a novel that changed the man into a tradition. Through this book, Alger was also brought into contact with the boys of the Newsboys' Lodging House and a lifelong friendship with its superintendent, Charles O'Connor.

Alger's huge output of titles sold millions of copies. He was popular, influential, and earned fortunes for his publishers. He dreamed of writing serious literature, but never did. In 1896, alone, his friends dead, disappointed with his writing, and still without much experience of love and ordinary tenderness, Horatio Alger Jr. went back to New England where, on July 18, 1899, he died at the home of his sister in Natick, Massachusetts.

What you just read is not a maudlin rendering of biographical information. Alger Sr. did turn Alger Jr. into an emotional cripple. One biographer, for example, believes the damage to the boy was severe enough to leave him with homosexual drives; for another writer, the way a typical Alger

hero relates to his mother and defies various threatening male figures suggests a father-eliminating fantasy that deserves Freudian analysis. Everybody who has bothered to consider Alger the man agrees that he worked earnestly and sympathetically, quite personally, to help the boys who were victims of post-Civil War industrial society.

Phil the Fiddler is a social tract. With respect to the matter of child welfare, it is a kind of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel was written in order to keep children from being hurt, by a man who quite probably felt hurt as long as he lived. In its day, the novel was read as a portrait of evil and injustice, and the response it stirred left America a better country to live in.

The book's hero, Phil, or Filippo, is a twelve year old boy from Calabria, southern Italy. His father sold him into a form of chattel slavery. Phil was brought to America to live in New York with a padrone, a boss, and to work for this man as a street musician. Every day Phil wanders the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn, playing tunes on a cheap violin, collecting whatever is offered from people in the streets, stores, bars, and ferries. Phil must earn at least two dollars a day for the padrone or be beaten at night.

Phil looks out for another boy, Giacomo, who is seldom able to meet the daily quota of money. It is obvious from the relationship that Phil is a survivor and Giacomo a victim. Winter comes and it is hard

for the boys to make two dollars a day. They are caught by the padrone's bully spending thirty cents apiece for a decent meal and both are beaten that night. It becomes clear to Phil that he must run away if he is to survive. As for Giacomo, the beating weakens him, he becomes ill, and later in the story, dies.

Phil goes to a friend, a traditional Alger hero named Paul Hoffman (the main character of Alger's *Paul the Peddler*), and together the boys plan Phil's escape. He is to cross the Hudson and run away to Newark to begin another life for himself. The escape takes place and there is a chase. The padrone and his bully corner Phil in an Irish neighborhood in Newark where he is rescued by the McGuires, Bridget and Patrick. They whip the Italian villains and have the padrone arrested, reprimanded and fined.

Phil, free at last, fiddles for himself. But he is caught in a terrible snowstorm in a New Jersey suburb and found, half frozen to death, by Dr. Drayton. Phil is saved, and the doctor and his wife, who have just lost a son, adopt the handsome Italian boy.

At the end of the book, Dr. Drayton and Phil visit New York. They meet the bully, Pietro, and vanquish him. We learn that the padrone will go to Sing Sing for knifing someone, but that the evil system will continue as Pietro takes over.

In Alger's early days in New York, the mistreat-