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FROM A LOG CABIN TO THE CABINET

Washington, D. C., Nov. 7, 1897.—
"My story! I doubt whether my story is worth the telling. I am certain it will interest few people, and there is nothing extraordinary in it."

The speaker was Gen. Russell A. Alger, secretary of war, ex-governor of the United States army, one of the largest lumber dealers of the country. We had been chatting of success in life and I had urged him to tell me the story of his boyhood, saying there were thousands of poor boys in the United States who were discouraged at the obstacles which they saw before them, and that a word from him as to his struggles might give them courage to continue the fight. It was some time before I could persuade the secretary to give me the story. He said it was not a public matter, and it was only after my urging the above that he went on. He said:

"I doubt whether any boy who is starting life today has a worse outlook than I had. I was born in a log cabin in Medina county, Ohio. My father was a poor pioneer farmer. He was an unlucky man, and for some reason or other nothing he touched seemed to prosper. When he settled in Ohio the state was an almost unbroken wilderness. He took up a tract of woodland and cleared a portion of it, but he did not do well. Afterward he had charge of a wooden mill. This did not succeed, and he finally died when I was about twelve years old, leaving four children and nothing to support them. At times, in 1847, we had but little to eat, and I remember one dreary period when both father and mother were sick for months in the same bed. Soon after this mother died, and it was not long before father followed her to the grave. I had a sister who was older than I, but there were two others who were younger, and I was, you know, but twelve. For a time I worked for a neighbor, receiving three teacups flour a day, and this formed the food of the family. We had a cow, and with the milk from this we made what we called thickened milk. We had, I remember, a little corn in the house. My sister and I shelled a bag of this, and I carried it on my back to a mill nine miles away, and there traded it for meal. I walked to the mill and back. It was eighteen miles, but I do not remember that I was worn out by the trip."

"A boy of twelve does not amount to much," said I. "What could you do?"

"I could not do much," replied General Alger, "but I was head of the family and felt I must do something. First I found homes for my younger brother and sister, and then arranged to work for my board and clothes and for three months' schooling during the winter. I did this until I was fourteen, when my older sister died. I then thought I ought to be worth more, and hired out to a farmer who paid me \$3 a month for the first month, \$4 for

the second and \$5 for the next four months. The next year he gave me \$6 a month, the next \$6, the third \$8, the fourth \$10, the fifth \$12, and the sixth and seventh years \$15 a month. These were great wages in those days for farm hands. We had no reapers or mowers then, and all work was done by hand.

"All of this time," the secretary continued, "I went to school a part of the year. I got the idea when I was very young that I must have an education if I expected to do anything in the world. So, after a time, I worked only six months of each year and went to school the other six. While at school I worked for my board mornings, evenings, and Saturdays. I remember I worked one winter in a blacksmith's shop, where I used the hammer and acted as a helper. I grew very rapidly, and when I was still a young boy I could do the work of a man. At nineteen I was six feet tall and weighed 160 pounds."

"Then you spent your vacations on a farm, General Alger," said I.

"Yes, I hired out, as I have said, for half of each year to a farmer, and kept this up seven years. That was my only 'vacation.' I have a little account book at home which contains all the payments which my employer made me. He charged me for every hour I lost during working days, and also for everything he gave me outside of my meals. I remember once I had two halters stolen while I was at a mill getting some grinding done. I was charged twelve shillings for them, and this was deducted from my wages. Not long ago one of my boys came into my office at Detroit with a bill for a dress suit. The bill amounted, I think, to \$70. As I paid it I told him how I had worked for two years when a boy for less than what he had paid for one suit."

"But, general, these wages seem to me very low. Were you a good workman? Did you receive as much as the average hand?"

The secretary of war looked at me rather curiously for a moment and then said: "I was considered a very good hand. Physically, I was very strong. I remember that there was a country store in the village of Richfield, where I was attending school. At the back of the store there was a room in which scrap iron was stored. One of our amusements was seeing which boy could lift the most. We would take a board about two feet wide by two and one-half long and lay it across a glass box. We would pile iron upon the board until we had as much as we thought a man could lift, and then one of us would bend over, and, catching hold of the opposite ends of the board, try to raise it. I could lift more than any of my fellows, and I have at times lifted 600 pounds in that way. I remember that I could mow faster with a scythe than anyone I knew, but this was more due to knack than to strength. It was all in the hanging of the scythe on the sneath."

"I remember," said Secretary Alger as a smile swept around the corners of his eyes, "when I first saw my name in the newspapers. It was in a description of my skill as a hay pitcher. There was a test one day as to who could unload hay the fastest, and I was one of the crack pitchers. The hay was hauled into a barn on a wagon. It had to be pitched from the wagon over the big beam. I stipulated that there should be two men to keep the hay back from the beam and went to work. I unloaded a ton of hay in less than five minutes. This was considered quite a feat and a description of it was published in the Cleveland newspapers. I can remember today how delighted I was when I saw my name there."

"school, general?" I asked.

"I taught school for two winters," replied General Alger. "After that I went into the office of Wolcott & Upson at Akron, Ohio, to study law. I had to borrow money to keep me while I was studying. After I was admitted to the bar, I went into the law office of Otis, Coffinberry & Wyman at Cleveland and soon earned enough to pay my debts. I found that the confinement of the law was injuring my health and I looked around for something else to do. I had heard of the profits that were to be made in the lumber business in Michigan and concluded to go there to try my fortune. A young man named Goddard went with me. We borrowed \$1,000 and started in the lumber business in Grand Rapids, under the name of Alger & Goddard. Our business was to buy lumber and ship it to Chicago."

"At this point General Alger stopped a moment. He has, you know, made a large fortune in lumber, and I thought that from this time on the story of his career would be one of prosperity. I said: 'I suppose you made a good deal of money in your lumber business, general?'"

"No, I did not," was the reply. "At least not at that time. We did well at first and soon built up such a good trade that I thought my prospects were good enough to allow me to marry. I had fallen in love with one of the young girls of Grand Rapids. The lady was willing and the wedding took place. We went east on our wedding trip. I taking for expenses \$150, which I got by a draft on the Chicago firm with which we were dealing. When I returned I found that our Chicago firm had failed and that my draft had gone to protest. This was in April, 1861. I saw at once that our firm was ruined by the failure, and I was in desperate straits. I had ordered furniture in Cleveland for the two rooms in which we were to begin our married life and knew that the bill would be along in a few days. All I had left was a gold watch which I had taken in trade. I went to the banker who held my draft, told him how I was situated and asked him to hold the gold watch as security until the time came when I could pay it. He refused to receive it, but I left it on his counter and went away. The