

# THE TWO ACRE LOT

1856

----- *Horatio Alger* -----

Horatio Alger (1832–1899) was a prolific writer who contributed stories and columns to a variety of national magazines. His name has come to signify equality of opportunity and the American ideal that with sufficient work and courage, any young man can pull himself out of poverty and achieve material success. The following, from *Ballou's Dollar Magazine*, was the first of Alger's stories to explore the theme that would define his career.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Hypothesizing**

Why do you think this story might have appealed to middle-class readers?

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When Andrew Merriam died, it was found that besides the little cottage in which he lived, and its simple furniture, he left absolutely nothing. His widow and only child Frank had but little time to indulge in grief. They were compelled to devise some plan by which they might be enabled to support themselves, without, if possible, being compelled to move from the cottage which, though far enough from being a sumptuous home, was endeared to them by many associations.

Frank was a fine, manly boy of twelve, with strong and generous impulses, and an affectionate disposition, which made him a universal favorite. He had been kept at school from an early age, and was more than usually advanced for his years.

The mother and son sat in the little sitting-room, a few days after Mr. Merriam died, discussing their prospects. "Mother," said Frank, earnestly, "I don't want you to feel troubled. You have labored so long for me that it is now my turn. I only want something to do."

"My dear child," said the mother, "I do not need to be assured of your willingness. But I am sorry you should be compelled to give up your studies on my account."

"That will not be necessary. I can study in the evening. But what do you think I can find to do?"

"I know so little about such things, Frank, that we must consult some one who is better qualified to advise—your Uncle Moses, for instance."

"What sort of a man is Uncle Moses, mother?" asked Frank. "He never comes to see us."

"No," said his mother, with some hesitation; "but you know he is a business

man, and has a great deal to attend to. Besides, he has married a lady who is fashionable, and I suppose he does not care to bring her to visit such unfashionable people as we are."

"Then," said Frank, indignantly, "I don't want to trouble him with any applications. If he doesn't think us good enough to visit, we won't force ourselves upon him."

"My dear child, you are too excitable. It may be that it is only his business engagements that have kept him away from us. Besides, you are only asking advice; it is quite different from asking assistance."

Finally, in the absence of other plans, it was thought best that Frank should go to his uncle's house the next day, and make known his wants.

Moses Merriam was an older brother of Frank's father. Early in life he had entered a counting-room, and had ever since been engaged in mercantile pursuits. At the age of twenty-eight he had married a dashing lady, who was more noted for the fashionable pretensions than for any attractive qualities of the heart. She was now at the head of a showy establishment, and did not fail to bring up her children in the same worldly manner in which she had herself been bred. She knew little and cared less about Mr. Merriam's relations. It was enough that they were not in a position to reflect credit upon the family. When Mr. Merriam had communicated to her at the dinner-table a week previous, that his brother Andrew was dead, she said, "Ah, indeed!" in the most indifferent manner, and that was all.

She had one son, Edgar, of the same age with Frank, but he was far from having the good qualities of the latter. His mother's indulgence and example made him selfish and arrogant, and in particular filled him with an unbounded contempt for the poor. The town of Clifton, where Frank and his mother lived, was six miles distant from the city in which his Uncle Moses did business.

Early one morning, Frank having dressed himself as neatly as his modest wardrobe would permit, started to walk to his uncle's place of residence. There was a communication by stage, but it was necessary to study economy, and Frank fortunately possessed a stout pair of legs which would answer the purpose quite as well.

Two hours found him knocking at the door of his uncle's residence. It was a tall, brick house, with a swell front, and to Frank's unpracticed eyes, looked magnificent enough for a nabob.

"Well, what's wanting?" asked the servant, who answered the bell, in rather a supercilious tone.

"Is Uncle Moses at home?"

"Who's Uncle Moses?"

"Mr. Merriam."

"No, he isn't."

"Where is he?"

"At the store, I expect."

“Is Mrs. Merriam at home?”

“I don’t know, I’ll see. Who shall I say wants to see her?”

“Frank Merriam.”

Frank was shown into the drawing-room, which displayed an amount of splendor that quite dazzled him.

He was mentally comparing it with his mother’s quiet sitting-room, and thinking that in spite of its simplicity, it was far more pleasant and comfortable than his aunt’s drawing-room, when his meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a showily-dressed lady, who sailed into the room with a majestic air, and fixed a cold stare upon Frank.

“Are you my aunt?” asked he, somewhat disconcerted.

“Really I couldn’t say,” she returned, “never having seen you before.”

“My name is Frank Merriam,” he replied; “and I live at Clifton. My father,” here his voice faltered, “died lately. He was Mr. Merriam’s brother.”

“Ah, yes, I believe Mr. Merriam mentioned something about it.”

Mrs. Merriam said nothing more, but seemed to wait further communications.

Frank sat in silent embarrassment. His aunt’s coldness repelled him, and he easily perceived that he was not a welcome visitor. But a touch of pride came to his aid, and he resolved that he would be as unsociable as his aunt.

Finding that her visitor was not disposed to break the silence, Mrs. Merriam, growing tired of the stillness, and wishing to put an end to the interview, rose with the careless remark:

“You must excuse me, this morning, as I am particularly engaged. I suppose you know where your uncle’s store is? You will probably find him there.”

Mrs. Merriam went up stairs and resumed the novel whose reading had been interrupted by Frank’s call—that being the important engagement which she had alleged to excuse her withdrawal from the room.

Frank, his warm heart considerably chilled by his cool reception, and a little indignant also, descended the front steps and inquired the most direct way to his uncle’s store. He was not long in finding it. Entering, he looked about him to see if he could not recognize his uncle, whom he had never seen, by his resemblance to his father.

Mr. Moses Merriam stood behind a tall desk at the extreme end of the store, with a pen behind his ear. He looked up as Frank approached.

“Are you Mr. Merriam?” asked our hero.

“That’s my name,” was the reply.

“Then you are my Uncle Moses?”

“And you, I suppose, are my brother Andrew’s child?” said Mr. Merriam. “Have you any brothers and sisters?”

“No, sir, I am the only child.”

“You may be surprised that I should ask, but we have not met as frequently as brothers should. I am so occupied by my business that I have little time for

other things. Were you named after my brother?"

"No, my name is Frank."

"Your mother is still living, I believe? I hope my brother left her well off?"

"My father left us the house we live in, and that is all."

"And I suppose you have come to ask help? I am sorry, but my family expenses are very great, and trade is dull. If I were able—"

"You are mistaken," said Frank, a flush rising to his brow—"I do not come for assistance. I am old enough to work, if I only knew what to do. Mother told me that I had better consult you."

Mr. Merriam looked relieved when he ascertained that his nephew's visit threatened no demand on his purse, and regarded Frank more favorably than he had done.

"Ah, that's well. I like your independence. Just what I like to see. I suppose I could get you into a store in the city, if you would like."

"How much could I earn?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"Well, ahem! as to that, they are not in the habit of paying anything the first year, as the knowledge of business obtained is considered a sufficient recompense."

"Then it won't do for me," said Frank. "It is necessary for me to earn something at once, to support my mother."

"Then I don't know," said his uncle, "what can be done. There are very few things that boys of your age can do, and it is so easy to obtain them, that people are not willing to pay them wages."

Frank looked crestfallen, and his uncle embarrassed. He feared after all that he might be compelled by fear of the world's opinion to extend pecuniary assistance. At length an idea struck him.

"Do you know anything about farming?" he inquired of Frank.

"Yes, sir," said Frank, "a little."

"I asked for this reason," pursued Mr. Merriam. "When your grandfather, and my father died, he left me a two acre lot in Clifton, which has always been used as a pasture, when at all. The land was not very good, and I have been so much occupied with other things, that I could not look after it. Perhaps you may know something of it?"

"Yes," said Frank, "it is only half a mile from our house, and is called the two acre lot. But I didn't know that it belonged to you."

"Yes," said his uncle. "What I was going to say is, that although I am unable to give you such assistance as I should like, I will, if you like, give you the use of this lot rent free, so long as you like. Perhaps you can put it to some use."

Frank's face lighted up, and he thanked his uncle, giving him credit for much more benevolence than he really possessed. He was already building castles in the air, and was anxious to return to his mother to communicate his good fortune.

His uncle congratulated himself on getting off so well, and invited Frank to

dine with him; but the latter was not tempted by his morning's reception to go again, and accordingly set out homewards.

Early the next morning Frank went out to inspect his "lot." He had passed it hundreds of times with indifference, but it was with an entirely different feeling that he regarded it now.

It was pasture land naturally good, but had been much neglected. Frank decided that it would be a good plan to have it ploughed up, and planted with potatoes and other vegetables, which would not only give their small family a sufficient supply, but enable him to sell a large quantity at market.

These plans he unfolded to his mother, who approved them, but feared the labor would be too severe for Frank's strength.

He only laughed, stretching out his stout arms in playful menace towards his mother.

"But," said she, a doubt occurring to her mind, "you will have to get it ploughed, and buy seed. That will cost something."

"I have thought of that," said Frank; "but although we have no money to pay for these things, people will be willing to wait till the harvest, and then I can pay them easily."

During the day Frank called on Farmer Norcross, who had two pair of oxen, and asked him if he could come the next day and plough up his two acre lot.

"Your lot!" exclaimed the farmer, surprised. "Why, you don't mean to say you are going to farming? It's a good idea," he said, heartily. "I'm glad to find you've got so much spunk, and I'll help you all I can."

"I don't know," said Frank, hesitatingly, "as I shall be able to pay you until autumn. But the first money I get for the potatoes I'm going to plant, I'll pay you."

"Never trouble yourself about that, Frank," said the farmer, kindly. "I shan't charge you a cent for ploughing the land."

"But," said Frank, "I don't want you to take so much trouble for nothing."

"It won't be for nothing," said Farmer Norcross. "Your father has done me more than one good turn, and it's a pity if I can't do something to help his son, especially when he's such a good boy as you have always been, Frank."

Frank walked home with a glow of pleasure lighting up his face. He was more fortunate than he had hoped. The favor to be conferred was, he knew, no trifling one, and would tend materially to increase the profit of his crop.

Farmer Norcross was true to his promise. The next day he appeared on the ground, and by sunset the two acre lot was ploughed. He did not stop there, but gave Frank much useful advice as to how he should apportion the land to different purposes, and also supplied him with seed, consenting at Frank's request to take pay in kind when the harvest time should come.

One day as he was at work in the field, his attention was drawn to a man, who after watching him for a while, climbed over the wall, and approached the place where he was standing.

"Pretty hot work, isn't it?" he inquired, with a pleasant smile.

"Yes, sir, rather," said Frank, wiping his brow.

"Who are you at work for?" continued he.

"Myself," said Frank.

"You are quite a young farmer. Does the land belong to you?"

"No, sir. To my Uncle, Moses Merriam."

"Then your name is—?"

"Frank Merriam. My father was Andrew Merriam."

"You say was," said the stranger, with some emotion. "Is your father dead?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank, sadly.

"And where does your mother live?"

"In a little cottage about half a mile distant," was the reply.

"My name is Thompson," explained the stranger—"Edward Thompson, and I used to know your father many years since. I have been in foreign parts for twenty years past, and have just returned. I am intending to pass some time in this village, and if you think your mother would be willing, should like to board with her."

"I'm afraid," said Frank, hesitating, "that—that we live too plainly to satisfy a gentleman like you."

"No fear of that," said Mr. Thompson. "I am somewhat dyspeptic, and my physician orders me to live simply. Come, I'll wait till you have hoed through this row, and then you shall go home and introduce me to your mother."

Mrs. Merriam, although she had no remembrance of Mr. Thompson as one of her husband's friends, was pleased with his appearance—and agreed to take him as a boarder, at his urgent request.

"As to the price of board," said she, "we live so simply that it will not be worth very much—perhaps two dollars."

"Two dollars!" interrupted Mr. Thompson.

"Or if you think that too much—"

"Too much, my dear madam! Far too little, rather! Do you know I have always been accustomed to pay seven, and I am sure they did not give me such a pleasant room as this. As to the living, I shall live just as well as the doctor will let me, and that is enough. So it's agreed, and I will pay you seven dollars a week."

Mrs. Merriam objected, that this was enormous, but her new boarder insisted that he should be a great deal of trouble (a mere fiction, as it proved), and, saying that it was customary to pay in advance, placed twenty-eight dollars in her hands.

The bright sun of prosperity seemed all at once to rest upon the widow's cottage. Mr. Thompson proved to be not only a profitable but an agreeable boarder. He would often go out and assist Frank in his labor, and in the evening when the three were gathered about the table in the little sitting-room, would entertain Frank and his mother with accounts of what he had seen in his travels.

The summer passed away, and autumn filled the fields with plenty. Frank's lot exceeded his anticipations. After reserving a sufficient quantity of vegetables to keep them through the winter, he sold enough to bring him fifty dollars. In addition to this, Mr. Thompson had now been with them fourteen weeks, and his board, of which the greater part remained untouched, amounted to ninety-eight dollars. Actually, Frank began to feel rich.

One evening, Mr. Thompson announced abruptly that he had purchased one of the finest estates in the village, and that he intended soon removing there.

Frank and his mother looked disappointed. "Then you will leave us?"

"No, I hope not. I mean to have you come and live with me. I haven't the least idea of keeping bachelor's hall. Had too much of that in India. Well, will you go?"

There could be but one answer to this generous proposal. After a pause, Mr. Thompson said:

"For whom was Frank named?"

"For a brother of Mr. Merriam—who disappeared many years since, and who is presumed to be dead."

"And yet I have the fullest assurance that he still lives."

Mrs. Merriam looked at him in astonishment. "It cannot be that—"

"That I am he? Yet it is so. My dear boy," said he, addressing Frank, "you must learn to look upon me as your Uncle Frank, who having been tossed about the world for many years, has at length returned to his native country, to enjoy the competency which he has accumulated, and to bestow a portion upon those of his relatives who need it."

Little more need be said.

Before winter set in, Mr. Frank Merriam, as we must now call him, with his sister-in-law and nephew, were established on the estate he had purchased. Frank has resumed his studies, and will enter college next fall. He always meets with a flattering reception now from Mrs. Moses Merriam. It is strange how much prosperity changes one for the better. His Uncle Moses has even generously bestowed upon him the two acre lot. Frank never regrets his brief season of adversity. It has strengthened in him the conviction that "God never fails to help those who help themselves."

Source: "The Two Acre Lot" by Horatio Alger, in *Ballou's Dollar Magazine*, February 1856. Reprinted in *The Lost Tales of Horatio Alger*, edited by Gary Scharnhorst (Bar Harbor, Maine: Acadia Press, 1989), pp. 3–11.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Students may answer that Alger's story appealed to middle-class readers because of its positive message about the rewards of hard work. Students may note that the story celebrates Frank and his mother's elevation out of poverty through "honest" work such as farming and taking in boarders. Students may also note the role that fate or uncontrollable circumstances play in advancing the story's plot and its characters' fortunes. For example, the death of Frank's father begins the story and the unexpected return of Frank's long-lost uncle ends it. Students may also argue that middle-class readers would have enjoyed the story because it poked fun at rich people in the form of Frank's aunt.