

MY FATHER, THE DOCTOR

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There are many frustrated young people today who want to be doctors but who would have trouble meeting the entrance requirements for medical school admission. It may be that present admission standards are unrealistic, with too much emphasis being placed on academic excellence and high test grades, and not enough searching for such immeasurable attributes as integrity, attitude, industriousness and personal ambition. Certainly, many of those turned down would make better physicians than many of those accepted.

My father always wanted to be a doctor. Seventy years ago, when he first applied for admission at Tulane, he was also turned down. His basic problems then were even more discouraging than those of today. He lacked all of the academic qualifications for admission. But by a combination of ambition, persistence and chance, he accomplished the impossible. In 1912, he graduated at the top of his class from the school, which had originally turned him down.

Dad was born in 1886 in a small village in the center of western Sicily. He was the youngest of seven children, and he was brought to this country at the age of six. His only recollection of his native island was the three-day trip with his mother and sister in a donkey-pulled, two-wheeled cart over the mountain roads to Palermo, the seaport where they boarded the ship (steerage class) for the long ocean crossing to New Orleans.

In 1900, when he was fourteen, his father died and he had to leave the Live Oak grammar school and find work to help support the family. He hadn't quite finished the sixth grade then. He worked for the next eight years, doing a little bit of everything, opening oysters, tending bar, hauling wood, ice and coal, baking bread, cleaning stables and delivering papers. For two years, when he was eighteen and nineteen and working as a part time clerk in Hansell's Book Store, he attended night classes at the old Soule Business College. He earned a certificate there. His ambition was to go to medical school and he saved his money and borrowed from his sisters toward that end. At the age of twenty-one, he applied to Tulane. He was refused because he lacked a grammar school, a high school and a college education. He went back to work and saved more money.

He had heard that a new medical school would be opening in Louisville. So in the fall of 1908, he took off alone for Kentucky. It was the time of the Flexner Report, and medical schools all over the country were in a state of change. In Louisville, four medical schools were being reorganized and consolidated into one institution. He presented a couple of letters and his business school "diploma" to the registrar and was told he would

be notified within a few days about acceptance.

He didn't wait to hear. He moved into a boarding house, bought textbooks and went to classes the next day. Fortunately, in the confusion of reorganization, his papers were misplaced. A couple of months later, when the registrar's office got around to notifying him that he wasn't eligible for admission, he had already won the Freshman Chemistry Prize and was leading his class. The school didn't have the heart to turn him out.

He returned to New Orleans at the end of his freshman year. This time, applying as an honor transfer, and was accepted into the sophomore year at Tulane. He made the Stars and Bars chapter of AOA, graduated with honors and began a two-year internship at Charity Hospital in 1912. Then he went out into private practice. His sisters and older brother were very proud of him. They always referred to him as "the Doctor."

In 1918, he was commissioned by the Army, but before he could be inducted, the influenza epidemic struck, and he became seriously ill. After a long convalescence, Dr. Sam Clark, then Professor of Gynecology at Tulane, urged him to return to Charity Hospital for more surgical training. He was there from 1920 through 1924, the last two years as Chief House Surgeon. He performed the first successful open-heart surgery in New Orleans in 1923. Later, he wrote the first American paper on epidural anesthesia. In 1925 he joined Dr. Clark in private practice and also as an Assistant Professor of Gynecology on Clark's Tulane staff. In 1931 when the Louisiana State University medical school opened on Charity Hospital grounds, he became the Professor of Gynecology in the new school and remained as the head of the joint department there until he retired twenty-five years later. He had all of the Alger books in his library. His was a success story in the old Horatio Alger tradition—the poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks who overcame all obstacles and made his way to the top.

It wasn't easy then, and it isn't easy now. But the problems today are different. All of today's medical school applicants are basically qualified academically, but they are being picked over and selected or turned down on the degree of measured excellence in their qualifications, and because of "quota" pressure. Many of the rejected ones, particularly those with ambition, are forced to seek medical education in foreign countries. It is a long road. The price is high—in money, in extra years and in the difficulties encountered on returning home. This generation has never heard of Horatio Alger. Dad might never have made it today.