

WHEN ALGY WAS IN LINE

BY SEWELL FORD



"Come, Deary, Fix Your Side Combs and Trot Into the Private Office."

WE'D had Algy much as five or six weeks, and he'd come to be a reg'lar standin' joke here at the Corrugated. You know. Every big office has one that's as much a part of the fixtures as the copy press or the spring water tank. They come in handy, too, keepin' the force cheered up on dull days, and actin' as sort of escape valves for all the cheap humor that can't be unloaded on anyone else.

How Algy ever dodged bein' a man milliner or a floor walker in the cloak and suit department, I couldn't figure out; for he had all the points. One of these mushy lookin', soft spoken, biscuit haired, white livered, young wrist slappers, Algy was; with a complexion as ruddy as a pail of lard, skim-milk blue eyes, and a set of parlor manners that was as good as a correspondence course in etiquette just to watch.

Up and down there was quite a lot to Algy; but he was thickest through at about the point where his throat apple bulged through his white wings collar. And in his long sack coat and narrow patent leather shoes he certainly was ornamental to have around the office.

It was Old Hickory's idea of havin' a man stenographer added to the staff. As he explains careful to Piddie, there was times when he just naturally had to cuss durin' business hours, and, while some of the lady typists was fairly well broke in, he couldn't always do justice to his feelin's with them takin' dictation. So he gives orders to take on a man shorthand expert, that wouldn't turn pink and swallow his gum when he really cut loose.

And Piddie, who's got a head on him like a lima bean—well, he picks Algy for the job. First mornin' he shows up at the gate and announces who he is I could hardly believe it.

"Honest?" says I. "Why, you bold thing! Sure you ain't mistook this for a mother's help 'sit'?"

Algy, he only smiles kind of weary and asks where he shall hang up his hat and coat.

"Ladies' cloakroom to the right, men's to the left," says I. "Take your choice, Algy."

But there's no gettin' a rise out of him, though. I tried him out good and plenty that first week without rufflin' a feather, and you can bet if the jabs I sent in didn't get home, nothin' Izzie Budheimer and them other flatheads could think up would have any effect.

For, in spite of his meek ways, Algy had a hide like a sole leather trunk. Seemed like he was used to that sort of joshin' and didn't mind it any more. Algernon Rogers Pratt was the name he registered with the cashier; but he'd answer to Miss Pratt, or Algy dear, just as cheerful as he would to anything else.

"Come, Deary," I'd say to him, "fix your side combs and trot into the private office: Mr. Ellins is ready for you."

And I wouldn't get so much as a pout from him. So of course as a joke he got a little tame to me.

HE wa'n't a joke to Old Hickory, though. He was just a disappointment. I didn't tumble to how the boss was takin' Algy for near a week, either, and then one day I happened to be in at the desk just as Algy gathers up his notebook and glides out. Old Hickory turns and glares after him savage, and then rips out a few atmosphere scorchers that almost blisters the varnish.

"Phew!" says he, stoppin' for breath. "I've been keeping all that bottled up for the last hour. Torchy, where in the merry Mithridates did Mr. Piddie ever find such a limp spined specimen?"

"Who, Algy?" says I. "Why, that's his idea of a man stenographer, I guess."

"Huh!" snorts Mr. Ellins. "That isn't a man; that's a parody. He ought to be wearing a tube skirt and doing fancywork. Why, when he's in here I don't feel that I can even say darn, and it's getting on my nerves."

Old Hickory must have let out some of this in other quarters too, judgin' by the way Piddie proceeds to rub it into Algy every chance he gets. Course, the thing to do was to give him the chuck first payday; but, as I understands it, Mr. Ellins won't have that. He sticks out for a straight deal towards the help, Old Hickory does, and one of the red ink rules of the Corrugated is that nobody gets the can tied to 'em unless they've earned it good and proper. Personal grouches don't count with him, and he follows his own dope.

But, say, between Piddie goin' sour on him that way, and all the rest of us usin' him as a comic feeder, Algy's workin' hours couldn't have been a dream of delight.

He don't squeal, though, or even so much as run out his tongue by way of gettin' back at us; and I don't know as you can blame us much if we kind of got into the habit of treatin' him as if he wa'n't exactly human. You know how it is? All I could see to Algy was a sort of livin' machine that could take dictation like a streak and thump a typewriter until he almost had the bearin's hot. That he might have a home somewhere, and relations, and private ideas of his own about things, never struck me until—

WELL, it was one afternoon here a week or so ago. I'd jumped out on the stroke of five and was two blocks away before I remembers about an extra bunch of letters Piddie had told me special to dump in the substation. So it was a case of beatin' it back and gettin' 'em. The scrubwoman was already on the job as I got off at our floor; but there wa'n't anyone else in sight.

That is, I didn't see anyone as I dashed in, and I'd grabbed the letters and was turnin' to rush out again, when over in the corner I spots this grief spectacle. It's Algy, slumped forward on his little typewriter table, his head between his arms, and his shoulders heavin' up and down from deep emotion. Course, I couldn't resist a good chance like that.

"Well, well!" says I. "Workin' the sprinkler, eh? How harrowin'!"

Algy, he straightens up for a second at that, and when he's seen who it is he caves in again. But it's long enough for me to see I was wrong on the sprinkler guess. However bad he felt, he wa'n't leakin' any brine over it.

"Enjoyin' a dry one, eh?" says I. "Well, what's happened now? Some of the lady typists been actin' catty?"

"Please, Torchy!" says he, shakin' his head sad. "I—I don't wish to talk about it."

"Ah, it'll do you good to get it out of your system," says I. "Come on, now, who's behaved horrid to you? Piddie been naggin' again?"

"Oh, I don't mind Mr. Piddie," says Algy. "He—he isn't fair, that's all. But Mr. Ellins—well, he had no right to say it."

"Old Hickory, eh?" says I. "Oh, I can guess. Something went wrong, I expect, and he turned on the lund language. Tore off some real naughty words, did he?"

Algy nods. "Never in all my life," he begins, "did I ever hear such—"

"Well, you stick around the Corrugated awhile longer," I breaks in, "and you'll hear more. But don't you care. He don't mean anything by it."

"But I didn't care," says Algy. "It was his apologizing afterward that hurt."

"Whe-e-e-ew!" says I. "Old Hickory apologized, did he?"

"Not in fun, either," complains Algy. "He—he meant it. Apologized to me just as if I was—was— But I'm not going to stand it. I'm going to quit, that's all!"

"Stop your kiddin', Algy," says I. "You wouldn't want to break his heart that way."

"Oh, I know," says Algy, real bitter. "I'm a joke. I've always been a joke. But I'm through being one. I'll show him, and everyone else! They'll see! I'm going to clear out now and do what I've always wanted to do—Aunt Hattie or no Aunt Hattie."

"Eh?" says I. "Hadn't heard of her before."

"She's the one I've been living with since Mother died," says Algy. "It's on her account I've been staying and putting up with all this. She didn't want me to go. She always cries and takes on every time I speak of starting West and being a cowboy."

"Wha-a-a-at!" I gasps. "Say, Algy, put that last across once more, so I'll be sure my ears ain't members of the Anaxias Club. Cowboy, did you say?"

"Why not?" demands Algy, stiffenin' up.

AND when I'd caught my breath once more and smoothed my face out, I made him give me the details. And, say, folks get queer quirks, don't they? I expect lots of us has some sneakin' idea that sometime or other we'll be this or that; an idea that we keep tucked away private and don't often talk about. But Algy as a cowboy! Can you surround it?

"How long you been feedin' this bug?" says I.

"Why, a long time," says Algy. "I began thinking about it when I was clerking in the store."

"Aha!" says I. "I knew! Ribbon counter, wa'n't it?"

"Why, all over," says Algy. "You see, Father used to have a little fancy goods store on 125th-st. Then when he died Mother kept it on, with Auntie to help. I was brought up in the store, as you might say. I didn't want to be a clerk; but there was no escape. A boy of ten can't say what he'll do. I had rather have been out playing with the other fellows, of course; but they wouldn't let me. Besides, they needed me to help in the store. Yes, I've sold ribbon, miles of it; and lace, and corsets, and hosiery, and embroidery silks. And I've been days almost without speaking to a boy or a man—just women. But I couldn't help it, I tell you! I hated it, hated it!"

I wouldn't have thought, either, that Algy could look so fierce, or that he had such a deep voice.

"I used to read and think and dream about being something different," he goes on. "I wanted to live out in the open air, out in the sun and wind and rain,



"Well, Fire Him, Fire Him!"