

THE GREAT AMERICAN PIE COMPANY

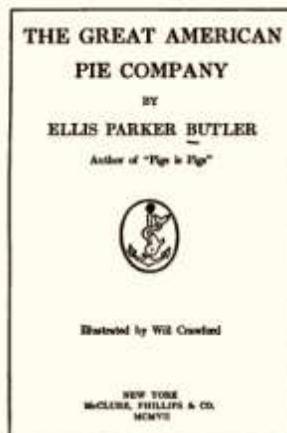
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CHAPTER ONE

If you take a pie and cut it in two, the track of your knife will represent the course of Mud River through the town of Gloning, and that part of the pie to the left of your knife will be the East Side, while the part to the right will be the West Side. Away out on the edge of the pie, where the town fritters away into the fields and shanties on the East Side, dwells Mrs. Deacon, and a fatter, better-natured creature never trod the crust of the earth or made the crust of a pie. Being in reduced circumstances, owing to the inability of Mr. Deacon to appreciate the beneficial effects of work, Mrs. Deacon turned her famous baking ability to account, and in a small way began selling her excellent homemade pies to those who liked a superior article. In time Mrs. Deacon established a considerable trade among the people of Gloning, and Mr. Deacon was wrested from his customary seat on the back steps to make daily delivery trips with the Deacon home-made pies.

Ephraim Deacon was a deep thinker and philosopher. He was above his environment, or at least he felt so, and while waiting for opportunity to approach and give his talents full vent he scorned labor. So he sat around a good deal, and jawed a good deal, and smoked.



But if you will return to your plate of Gloning you will see on the pie, far over on the West Side, where the scallops lap over the edge of the plate, a little spot that is burned a bit too brown. This is the home of Mrs. Phineas Doolittle, as base and

servile an imitator as ever infringed on another person's monopoly. For, seeing and hearing of the success of Mrs. Deacon's pies, Mrs. Doolittle put a few extra pieces of hickory in her stove, got out her rolling-pin, and became a competitor, even to making Mr. Doolittle deliver her pies. The Deacon pies had sold readily at ten cents; three for a quarter. The Doolittle pie entered the field at eight cents; three for twenty cents.

Mrs. Deacon stood this as long as possible, and then she decided to stand it no longer—unless she had to. "Eph, you good-for-nothin' lazy animal," she remarked to her husband one morning, as she started him on his rounds, "if you was a man, I'd send you over to talk to that Doolittle woman; but you ain't, so it ain't no use sendin' you. But if you meet up with that lazy, good-for-nothin' husband of hers, you give him a piece o' my mind, an' let him know what I think o' them what comes stealin' away my business, an' breakin' down prices, which I don't wonder at, her pies not bein' in the same class as mine, as everybody knows. If you was any good, you'd mash his head in for him, just to show her what I think of them. But there! Like as not, if you do catch up with him, you two will sit an' gossip like two old grannies, which is all you are good for, either of you."

Being thus admonished, Eph Deacon set forth to deliver his pies.

As he reached the bridge over Mud River, Phinny Doolittle, with a basket of pies on each arm, started to cross the bridge from the opposite side, and the two men—if Mrs. Deacon will allow me—met in the middle of the bridge, and with a common impulse put down their baskets and wiped their brows.

"Howdy, Phin! Blame hot day to-day, hey?" remarked Eph.

"Howdy! Howdy, Eph!" replied Phineas; "'tis so—some smatterin' o' warmth in the air, ain't it?"

"Dunno as I know if I ever knew one much hotter," said Eph. "How's the pie business over your way?"

"Well, now," said Phin, "'t ain't what you'd call good, nor't ain't what you'd call bad. I dunno what I *would* call it, unless I'd call it 'bout fair to middlin'. How's it over your way?"

"Well," Eph said, "I dunno. I ain't got no real cause to complain, I reckon; but it does seem as if prices on pies was gittin' too low to make it worth while fer a man to keep his woman over a hot stove a day like this. It don't seem right fer folks to break into business an' cut the liver out of prices."

"Oh, now, Eph!" Phin expostulated, "you ain't got no just cause fer to say that. A man's got to do something to git started, ain't he?"

"If we're goin' to fight this out," said Eph, calmly, "I move we adjourn over yon into the shade an' set down to it. This ain't no question fer to settle in no two shakes of a ram's tail, Phineas, an' we mought as well settle it right now an' git shet of it."

"I dassay you're right in that, Eph," Phineas agreed; "an' we'll jest kite over yonder an' set down an' figure the whole blame business out, so 's we won't have to bother about it no more."

CHAPTER TWO

When the two men were comfortably settled in the shade and had lighted their pipes, Eph, as the senior in the trade and the party with a complaint, opened his mouth to speak; but before the words came forth, Phineas outflanked him and let fly a thunderbolt.

"Eph," he said, "you got to lower down your pie prices to even up with what mine are."

Eph looked at his companion in astonishment.

"Lower down my prices!" he ejaculated. "You be crazy, Phin; plum crazy! Don't I give a bigger pie an' a better pie than what you do?"

"Well, then," remarked Phineas, with a sly twinkle in his eye, "how do you reckon I can h'ist my prices up any? Mebby you think I can git ten cents fer a small, mean pie whiles you ask ten cents fer a big, good one? My idee is that if we want to run along nice an' smooth, an' not have no trouble, what we want to do is to git together an' go in cahoots, an' then it don't make no difference what we sell at."

"I'm ag'in' trusts," said Eph, coldly.

"So'm I," said Phineas. "Who said anything about trusts? All we want is to even things up a bit. Fust thing you know, you'll git mad an' cut your prices down to eight cents, an' I'll have to drop to six; an' you'll come to six, an' I'll go to four; an' you'll go to four, an' I'll sell pies at two; an' you'll put your pies down to two cents, an' blame my hide if I don't give pies away. Dog me if I don't!"

Eph looked worried. "Oh, come now, Phin," he said anxiously, "you won't up an' do that, will you?"

"Dog me if I don't!" Phin repeated stubbornly.

Eph arose and shook his fist at Phineas.

"You old ijit!" he yelled. "I'll teach ye!" And bending over, he seized a large, soft pie and slapped it down over the head of the seated Phineas. In a moment the two men were standing face to face, fists clenched, and breath coming short and fast, each waiting for the other to strike the first blow.

But neither struck. Eph's eyes fell to Phineas's shoulder, where a large fragment of pie had lodged. Phineas moved slightly and the pie fragment wavered, tottered, and—Eph reached out his hand quickly to catch it, and Phineas dodged and, closing in, grasped him around the waist and pulled down. Eph sank upon his knees and Phineas followed him, and the two men, nose to nose, eye to eye, looked at each other and grinned.

"If we're goin' to fight this thing out," said Eph, "let's go over in the shade an' set down. It's too blame hot fer wrastlin'."

CHAPTER THREE

"I reckon you see now how your plan would work out," said Phineas; "we'd give away nigh on to a thousand pies, an' all because we didn't use hoss sense. I'm ag'in' trusts, same as you. I'd vote any day to down any o' them big fellers, but a little private agreement between gentlemen don't hurt nobody. What I say is, git together an' fix on a fair price an' stick to it."

"Jest what I say," said Eph. "You lift your price up to ten cents—"

"Never in this green world," said Phineas. "Contrariwise, you drop your grade of pie down equal to mine, an' put your price down to eight cents."

"Not so long as I live!" said Eph.

"Well, then," said Phineas, "it stands this way. If we leave our prices as they be, it means fight an' loss to us both, an' we won't change em, so what's to be done?" Eph looked out over the river gloomily.

"Dog me if I know," he sighed. "There's just one thing," said Phineas. "We got to form a stock company, you an' me, an' put all our earnings together, an' then, every so often, divide up even. Then if I sell more pies because mine are eight cents, you'll git your half of all I sell; an' if you sell more because your pies are bigger an' better, I'll get my share of what you sell. An' when things git goin' all right, we'll raise up the price all around—say, my pies to ten cents an' yours to twelve; an' bein' in cahoots, there won't be nobody to say we sha'n't do it, an' we'll lay aside that extra profit to build up the business."

"Phineas," said Eph, solemnly, "it's a wonder I didn't think o' that myself."

"Ain't it, now?" asked Phineas. "But I 've give this thing some thought, an' I ain't begun to tell you where it ends. I wanted to see how you took to it before I let it all out on you."

Eph leaned forward eagerly. "Go on," he said. "Let it out on me now."

"When the only two homemade pie-makers git together like we'll be," said Phineas, triumphantly, "I'd like to know who'll stop us from liftin' up the price. Huh! Them that don't like to pay our prices, they can eat bakers' pies an' welcome."

"I know some folks in this town," Eph said, "that wouldn't eat bakers' pies if they had to pay twenty-five cents apiece for homemade." He paused to consider this pregnant statement, and then added: "But I reckon the bakers would git away a heap of our trade if we begun liftin' our prices much." Phineas's eyes snapped.

"They would, hey?" he said, laughing. "Mebby they would an' mebbly they wouldn't. What do you suppose we'd be doin' with that surplus we'd accumulate? Come strawberry season, we'd up an' buy every strawberry that come to Gloning. We'd pay more than anybody could afford to, an' add the difference to our strawberry-pie price, because we'd have the only strawberry pies in town. An' what strawberries we couldn't use right off we'd can for winter pies. An' as other fruits come in, we'd buy them up the same way. But we wouldn't be mean. We'd open a fruit-store an' sell folks fruit at a good high price if they'd sign an agreement not to use any fer pie. An' in a little while the bakers would git sick an' sell out their shops to us fer almost nothin'. An' then we'd go into the bakin' business big."

"We'd bake cakes an' bread then," said Eph, eagerly.

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