

FICTION

Ellis Parker Butler

The Great American Pie Company

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE GREAT AMERICAN PIE COMPANY

By Ellis Parker Butler

Author Of "Pigs Is Pigs"

Illustrated By Will Crawford

New York McClure, Phillips & Co. MCMVII

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*“Ephraim Deacon was a deep thinker and
philosopher”*

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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)



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.



“Ephraim Deacon was a deep thinker and philosopher”

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.

"Cakes an' bread an' doughnuts an' buns an' everything," said Phineas, with enthusiasm. "We'll git one big bake-shop an' save on expenses, an' shove up the price of stuff a little, an' just coin money."

"We'd ought to git at it quick," said Eph. "We'd oughtn't to waste no time. What do you reckon would be a good name fer the company?"

"I've fixed that all up," said Phineas. "We'll call it the American Pie Company, Incorporated; an' bein' as only you an' me will be in it, we'll each have to be officers."

"I'm goin' to be president," exclaimed Eph, with all the eagerness of a boy.

"All right, Eph," said Phineas. "We don't want to have no more fights, an' I want to do what's right, so you can be president. I'll be treasurer."

Eph thought for a minute. He knew Phineas well.

"I want to do what's right, too," he said at last. "You can be president. I'll be treasurer."

"I guess mebbly we'd better take turns bein' treasurer," suggested Phineas.



“ I guess mebbly we ’d better take turns bein’ treasurer,’ suggested Phineas ”

"All right," said Eph; "I want my turn first."

CHAPTER FOUR

When the two men had settled the treasurer question, they smoked awhile in silence, each lost in thought; and as they thought their brows clouded.

"Say, Eph," said Phineas at length, "what be you thinkin' that makes you look so glum?" Eph shook his head sadly.

"I been lookin' ahead, Phin," he said--"way ahead. An' I see a snag. I don't hold it ag'in' you, Phin; but the thing won't pan out." "What--what you run up ag'in', Eph?" asked Phineas, solicitously.

"Fruit," said Eph, dolefully. "Loads of it. Phin, what if we *do* gather in all the fruit that comes to town? Ain't there just dead loads an' loads o' fruit in these here United States? An' the minute we git to puttin' up the price, it'll git noised about, an' Dagos an' Guinnies'll pile in here with fruit an' cut under us." He sighed. "'Twas a good business while it lasted, Phin; but it didn't last long." Phineas lay back on the grass and laughed long and squeakily.

"Is *that* all the farther ahead you looked, Eph Deacon?" he asked when he had recovered his breath. "Any old fool ought to know that the second year we was in business we'd buy up all the fruit in the United States."

Eph's face cleared and he smiled again, but Phineas's face clouded.

"What worried me, Eph," he said, "was 'bout payin' sich high prices for fruit as them blame farmers would likely ask. Ner I won't stand it, neither. Will you?"

"Not by a blame sight, Phin," said Eph. "I won't let nobody downtrod me. But," he asked anxiously, "how you goin' to stop it?"

Phineas dug his heel in the soft turf.

"We got to buy out the farms," he announced decisively, "an' hire the farmers to run 'em."

"Think we can afford it, Phin?" asked Eph. "We don't want to go puttin' our money into nothin' losin'?"

"We got to afford it," said Phin. "We're in this thing so deep now we can't go back. An' we'll need part o' the farms, anyhow, fer our wheat."

"Our wheat?" said Eph, puzzled. "Be we goin' to sell wheat, Phin?"

"Sell wheat?" said Phin, with disgust. "No such fools. Won't we need all the wheat this country can grow to keep our big flourmills rannin'? When we own all the flour-mills in the country, it stands to reason we'll have to own all the wheat, don't it?"

Eph looked at his companion with open mouth.

"Mills!" he ejaculated. "What fer do we want to own all the mills?"

Phineas waved his hand in the air.

"'Tain't 'want to,'" he said decisively, "it's 'have to.' I didn't say we'd buy all the mills, because I thought you'd surely see fer yourself that we'd have to buy them."

"Now, I ain't kickin', Phin," said Eph, in a conciliating tone; "if you say buy the mills, we'll buy 'em. I'm ready an' willin' any time you are. All I ask is, Why? That's all I ask--Why?"

"Well, sir," explained Phineas, "if our bakery here puts up the price of bread, the outside bakeries will ship in bread, if we don't buy out the outside bakeries. An' once we start, we've got to buy out every bakery in the country. An' when we do that we've got to own all the mills, so no one else can get any flour to start bakin'. An' to keep anybody else from startin' mills, we've got to own all the wheat-belt. It's only right to be on the safe side, Eph." Eph crossed his knees and smoked silently, nodding his head slowly the while.

"I dassay you're right, Phin," he admitted at length; "but you ain't far-seein' enough. S'pose--just s'pose, fer instance--it come time to ship a lot o' flour from our mills to our bakeries, an' them lumber fellers up North wouldn't furnish timber to supply our barrel-factories."

Phineas laughed.

"We'd use sacks," he said shortly.

"Well," said Eph, "s'pose--just s'pose, fer instance--that 'bout the time we needed cotton to run our cloth-mills to make sacks fer our flour--" He paused. "We would run our own cloth-mills, wouldn't we, Phin?" he asked.

"Surely, surely," replied Phineas.

"All right," continued Eph. "S'pose them cotton-growers down South an' them timber-growers up North wouldn't let us have no cotton or no timber. What then?"

Phineas nodded that he comprehended the wisdom of the deduction.

"You're right, Eph," he said. "American Pie has got to buy out the timber-belt an' the cotton-belt. I'm glad you

thought of it. It shows you take an interest in the business, even if you did interrupt me when I was thinkin' on a mighty important point."

"What's that?" asked Eph. "We got to buy out the railroads," said Phineas. "Once we own them, we can get proper freight rates."

"Ain't you afraid mebby some of them foreign countries 'll ship in flour or fruit or crackers?" asked Eph.

"How can they when we put the tariff up, like we will?" asked Phineas. "Course, while we're buyin' up these other things, we've got to buy up Congress."

"Phin!" exclaimed Eph, suddenly, "we'll have a dickens of a tax-bill to pay."

"We'll swear off our taxes," said Phineas, shortly.

Eph relapsed into meditation. "Why, Phin," he said at length, "we'll be as good as bosses of these United States, won't we?"

"Surely we will," Phin replied.

"Do you suppose I'm doin' all this work an' takin' all this worry just fer the money? What do I care fer a few millions more or less, Eph, when I've got millions an' millions? What I want is power. I want to have this here nation so that when I say, 'Come!' it will come, an' when I say, 'Go!' it will go, an' when I say, 'Dance!' it will dance."

He stood up and inflated his thin breast, and tapped it with his forefinger.

"Eph," he said, "with this here American Pie Company goin', you an' me can go an' say to them big trust men, 'Eat dirt,' an' they'll eat it an' be glad to git off so easy. We can--"

He paused and glanced up the road uneasily. He shaded his eyes and looked closely at the distant figure of a stout woman who was waddling in their direction.

"Skip!" he exclaimed; "here comes your wife!"



“Skip!” he exclaimed; “here comes your wife!”

Eph rolled over and made a dash on his hands and knees for his basket of pies. Phineas was already walking rapidly up the road.

CHAPTER FIVE

The stout woman was not Mrs. Deacon. She turned off the street before the truant pie-men had gone many steps, and they returned to the grass beside the bridge. For some reason they were not so jubilantly hopeful.

"Dog it!" said Eph, as they seated themselves in the shade, "I wish t' goodness I hadn't mashed that pie on you, Phin. I don't know what on earth I'm goin' to say to her about it. She's pesky stingy with her pies these days."

"Same way up to my house," said Phineas; "but that'll all be different when we get the American Pie Company goin'. I guess we'll likely have pie every day then, hey? An' not have nobody's nails in our hair, neither."

"Speakin' of nails," said Eph, but not enthusiastically, "think we'd better make our own nails. We'll need a lot of 'em, to crate up pies an' bread to ship."

"Yes," said Phineas; "an' we'll just take over the steel business while we're about. We'll have a department to do buildin'; there ain't any use payin' other folks a big profit to build our mills, an' we might as well do buildin' fer other folks. An' we'll need steel rails fer our railroads."

Eph began to grow enthusiastic again.

"We'd ought to build our own mines, too," he suggested.

"An' run our own stores to sell our bread an' pies in every town," said Phin.

"An' our own cannin' factories to can our fruit," said Eph.

"An' our own can-factories to make the cans," added Phin.

"We'll have our own tin-an' iron-mines, of course," said Eph. "An' our own printin'-shops fer labels an' advertisin' an' showbills."

"Better buy out the magazines an' newspapers. We can use 'em," said Phin.

"Yes," agreed Eph, "an' have our own paper-mills."

"Certainly," said Phineas, "there's good money in all them. We'll make more than them that's runnin' of 'em now. We'll economize on help."

"That's right," said Eph. "By consolidatin' we can do away with one-third of the help. We'll have a whoppin' big payroll as it is."

"Well," said Phineas, "you've got to pay fair wages where you have to depend on your help."

"Fair wages is all right," said Eph; "but nowadays they want the whole hog. You don't hear of nothin' but labor unions an' strikes. If you an' me put our money into a big thing like American Pie, we take all the risk and then the laborin' men want all the profits. It ain't square."

"No, it ain't," said Phineas. "An' if you don't pay them more than you can afford they strike right at your busiest time. They could put us out of business in one year. First the farmers would strike at harvest, an' all our fruit an' wheat would go to rot. Then the flour-mill hands would strike an' the wheat get wormy an' no good. Then the bakers would strike, an' no bread in the country--we'd most likely be lynched by the mobs."

Eph thought deeply for a while, and the more he thought the more doleful he became.

"Phineas," he said, at length, "I don't know how you feel about it, but I think this American Pie business is 'most too risky to put our money into."

Phineas had also been thinking, and his face offered no encouragement.

"Eph," he said, "you're right there. If our farmers an' millers an' bakers did strike, an' folks starved to death, we'd like as not be impeached an' tried for treason or something, an' put in jail fer life, if our necks wasn't broke by a rope. I like money, but not so much as to have that happen."

"Neither do I," said Eph; "an' I been thinkin' of another thing. Could we get our old women to go into this thing? My wife ain't so far-sighted as I be; an' just at first, until we made a million or two, we'd have to sort o' depend on them to do the bakin'."

"Well, now that you put it right at me," said Phineas, "I dunno as my wife would take right up with it, either. She seems bound to do just the contrary to what I want her to do. But I dunno as I'd care to put money into anything while these here labor unions keep actin' up."

"I dunno as I would, either," said Eph. "I guess mebbe we'd better let this thing lay over till the labor unions sort of play out. What say?"

"I reckon you're right," agreed Phineas. "I guess we'd better mosey along with these here pies, too." The two men arose from their shady seats, and Phineas swung his baskets upon his arms, but Eph seemed to be considering a delicate question.

"That their pie I mashed," he said at length--"I dunno what to say to my wife about it. She'll like to take my scalp off

when she finds out I'm ten cents shy."

"Dog me, if I ain't glad it wasn't my pic," said Phin, heartily.

Eph coughed.

"You don't reckon as mebbby you could give me the loan of a dime till to-morrow, could you, Phin?" he asked.

Phineas grinned.

"Well, now, Eph," he said, "I'd give it you in a minute if so be I had it; but I swan t' gracious, I ain't got a cent to my name."

THE END