

THE GENTLE GRAFTER

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The Gentle Grafter by O. Henry

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O. HENRY

**THE GENTLE
GRAFTER**

THE GENTLE GRAFTER

BY
O. HENRY

*Author of "The Four Million," "The Voice of the
City," "The Trimmed Lamp," "Strictly
Business," "Whirligigs," Etc.*



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CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE OCTOPUS MARCOONED	3
JEFF PETERS AS A PERSONAL MAGNET	18
✓ MODERN RURAL SPORTS	33
✓ THE CHAIR OF PHILANTHROMATHEMATICS	45
✓ THE HAND THAT RULES THE WORLD	58
✓ THE EXACT SCIENCE OF MATRIMONY	71
A MIDSUMMER MASQUERADE	85
SHEARING THE WOLF	99
✓ INNOCENTS OF BROADWAY	112
CONSCIENCE IN ART	126
✓ THE MAN HIGHER UP	137
A TEMPERED WIND	160
HOSTAGES TO MOMUS	198
THE ETHICS OF PIG	223

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THE OCTOPUS MAROONED

"**A TRUST** is its weakest point," said Jeff Peters.

"That," said I, "sounds like one of those unintelligible remarks such as, 'Why is a policeman?'"

"It is not," said Jeff. "There are no relations between a trust and a policeman. My remark was an epitogram — an axis — a kind of mulct'em in parvo. What it means is that a trust is like an egg, and it is not like an egg. If you want to break an egg you have to do it from the outside. The only way to break up a trust is from the inside. Keep sitting on it until it hatches. Look at the brood of young colleges and libraries that's chirping and peeping all over the country. Yes, sir, every trust bears in its own bosom the seeds of its destruction like a rooster that crows near a Georgia colored Methodist camp meeting, or a Republican announcing himself a candidate for governor of Texas."

I asked Jeff, jestingly, if he had ever, during his checkered, plaided, mottled, pied and dappled career, conducted an enterprise of the class to which the

word "trust" had been applied. Somewhat to my surprise he acknowledged the corner.

"Once," said he. "And the state seal of New Jersey never bit into a charter that opened up a solidier and safer piece of legitimate octopusing. We had everything in our favor—wind, water, police, nerve, and a clean monopoly of an article indispensable to the public. There wasn't a trust buster on the globe that could have found a weak spot in our scheme. It made Rockefeller's little kerosene speculation look like a bucket shop. But we lost out."

"Some unforeseen opposition came up, I suppose," I said.

"No, sir, it was just as I said. We were self-curbed. It was a case of auto-suppression. There was a rift within the loot, as Albert Tennyson says.

"You remember I told you that me and Andy Tucker was partners for some years. That man was the most talented conniver at stratagems I ever saw. Whenever he saw a dollar in another man's hands he took it as a personal grudge, if he couldn't take it any other way. Andy was educated, too, besides having a lot of useful information. He had acquired a big amount of experience out of books, and could talk for hours on any subject connected with ideas and discourse. He had been in every line of graft

from lecturing on Palestine with a lot of magic lantern pictures of the annual Custom-made Clothiers' Association convention at Atlantic City to flooding Connecticut with bogus wood alcohol distilled from nutmegs.

"One Spring me and Andy had been over in Mexico on a flying trip during which a Philadelphia capitalist had paid us \$2,500 for a half interest in a silver mine in Chihuahua. Oh, yes, the mine was all right. The other half interest must have been worth two or three hundred thousand. I often wondered who owned that mine.

"In coming back to the United States me and Andy stubbed our toes against a little town in Texas on the bank of the Rio Grande. The name of it was Bird City; but it wasn't. The town had about 2,000 inhabitants, mostly men. I figured out that their principal means of existence was in living close to tall chaparral. Some of 'em were stockmen and some gamblers and some horse speculators and plenty were in the smuggling line. Me and Andy put up at a hotel that was built like something between a roof-garden and a sectional bookcase. It began to rain the day we got there. As the saying is, Juniper Aquarius was sure turning on the water plugs on Mount Amphibious.

"Now, there were three saloons in Bird City, though neither Andy nor me drank. But we could see the townspeople making a triangular procession from one to another all day and half the night. Everybody seemed to know what to do with as much money as they had.

"The third day of the rain it slacked up awhile in the afternoon, so me and Andy walked out to the edge of town to view the mudscape. Bird City was built between the Rio Grande and a deep wide arroyo that used to be the old bed of the river. The bank between the stream and its old bed was cracking and giving away, when we saw it, on account of the high water caused by the rain. Andy looks at it a long time. That man's intellects was never idle. And then he unfolds to me a instantaneous idea that has occurred to him. Right there was organized a trust; and we walked back into town and put it on the market.

"First we went to the main saloon in Bird City, called the Blue Snake, and bought it. It cost us \$1,200. And then we dropped in, casual, at Mexican Joe's place, referred to the rain, and bought him out for \$500. The other one came easy at \$400.

"The next morning Bird City woke up and found itself an island. The river had busted through its old