

The Gentle Grafter by O. Henry

JEFF PETERS AS A PERSONAL MAGNET

JEFF PETERS must be reminded. Whenever he is called upon, pointedly, for a story, he will maintain that his life has been as devoid of incident as the longest of Trollope's novels. But, lured, he will divulge. Therefore I cast many and divers flies upon the current of his thoughts before I feel a nibble.

"I notice," said I, "that the Western farmers, in spite of their prosperity, are running after their old Populistic idols again."

"It's the running season," said Jeff, "for farmers, shad, maple trees and the Conemaugh River. I know something about farmers. I thought I struck one once that had got out of the rut; but Andy Tucked proved I was mistaken. 'Once a farmer, always a snucker,' said Andy. 'He's the man that's shoved into the front row among bullets, ballots and the ballet. He's the funny-bone and gristle of the country,' said Andy, 'and I don't know who we would do without him.'

"One morning me and Andy wakes up with sixty-eight cents between us in a yellow pine hotel on the edge of the predigested hoeecake belt of Southern Indiana. How we got off the train there the night before I can't tell you; for she went through the village so fast that what looked like a saloon to us through the car window turned out to be a drugstore and a water tank two blocks apart. Why we got off at the first station we could belong to a little oroid gold watch and Alaska diamond deal we failed to pull off the day before, over the Kentucky line.

"When I woke up I heard roosters crowing, and smell something like the fumes of nitro-muriatic acid, and heard something heavy fall on the floor below us, and a man swearing.

"'Cheer up, Andy,' says I. 'We're in a rural community. Somebody has just tested a gold brick downstairs. We'll go out and get what's coming to us from a farmer; and then yoikeys! and away.'

"Farmers was always a kind of a reserve fund to me. Whenever I was in hard luck I'd go to the crossroads, hook a finger in a farmer's suspender, recite the prospectus of my swindle in a mechanical kind of a way, look over what he had, give him back his keys, whetstone and papers that was of no value except to owner, and stroll away without asking any questions. Farmers are not fair game to men as high up in our business as me and Andy was; but there was times when we found 'em useful, just as Wall street does the Secretary of the Treasury now and then.

"When we went downstairs we saw we was in the midst of the finest farming section we ever see. About two miles away on a hill was a big white house in a grove surrounded by a widespread agricultural agglomeration of fields and barns and pastures and outhouses.

"'Whose house is that?' we asked the landlord.

"'That,' says he, 'is the domicile and the arboreal, terrestrial and horticultural accessories of Farmer Ezra Plunkett, one of our county's most progressive citizens.'

"After breakfast me and Andy, with eight cents capital left, casts the horoscope of the rural potentate.

"'Let me go alone,' says I. 'Two of us against one farmer would look as one-sided as Roosevelt using both hands to kill a grizzly.'

"'All right,' says Andy. 'I like to be a true sport, even when I'm only collecting rebates from the rutabaga raisers. What bait are you going to use for this Ezra thing?' Andy asks me.

"'Oh,' says I, 'the first thing that comes to hand in the suitcase. I reckon I'll take along some of the new income tax receipts; and the recipe for making clover honey out of clabber and apple peelings; and the order blanks for the McGuffey's readers, which afterwards turn out to be McCormick reapers; and the pearl necklace found on the train; and a pocket-size goldbrick; and a—'

"'That'll be enough,' says Andy. 'Any one of the lot ought to land on Ezra. And, say, Jeff, make that snotch-fancier give you nice, clean, new bills. It's a disgrace to our Department of Agriculture, Civil Service and Pure Food law the kind of stuff some of these farmers hand out to us. I've had to take rolls from 'em that looked like bundles of microbe cultures captured out of a Red Cross ambulance.'

"So I goes to a livery stable and hires a buggy on my looks. I drove

out to the Plunkett farm and hitched. There was a man sitting on the front steps of the house. He had on a white flannel suit, a diamond ring, golf cap and a pink Ascot tie. 'Summer boarder,' says I to myself.

"'I'd like to see Farmer Ezra Plunkett,' says I to him.

"'You see him,' says he. 'What seems to be on your mind?'

"'I never answered a word. I stood still, repeating to myself the rollicking lines of that merry jingle, 'The Man With the Hoe.' When I looked at this farmer, the little device I had in my pocket for buncoing the pushed-back brows seemed as hopeless as trying to shake down the Beef Trust with a mittimus and a parlor rifle.

"'Well,' says he, looking at me

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"Just then a telephone bell rings in the house.

"'Come in, Bunk,' says the farmer, 'and look at my place. It's kind of lonesome here sometimes. I think that's New York calling.'

"'We went inside. The room looked like a Broadway stockbroker's—light-oak desk, two phones, Spanish-leather upholstered chairs and couches, oil paintings in gilt frames a foot deep and a ticker hitting off the news in one corner.

"'Hello, hello,' says this funny

tions in which, heretofore, I have reposed confidence.

"'Sure, Bunk,' says he. 'The yellow primrose on the river's brim is getting to look to us Reubs like a holiday edition de luxe of the Language of Flowers with deckle edges and frontispiece.'

"'Just then the telephone calls him again.

"'Hello, hello!' says he. 'Oh, that's Perkins, at Milldale. I told you \$800 was too much for that horse. Have you got him there? Good. Let me see him. Keep the receiver down. Now make him trot in a circle. Faster. Yes, I can hear him. Now lead him up to the phone. Closer. Get his nose nearer the transmitter. There. Now wait. * * No; I don't want that horse. What? No; not at any price. He interferes; and he's windbroken. Good-bye.'

"'Now, Bunk,' says the farmer, 'do you begin to realize that agriculture has had a hair-cut? You belong in a bygone era. Why, Tom Lawson himself knows better than to try to catch an up-to-date agriculturist napping. It's Saturday, the 14th, on the farm, you bet. Now, look here, and see how we keep up with the day's doings.'

"'He shows me a machine on a table with two things for your ears like the penny-in-the-slot affairs. I puts it on and listens. A female voice starts up reading headlines of murders, accidents and other political casualties.

"'What you hear,' says the farmer, 'is a synopsis of today's news in the New York, Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco papers. It is wired in to our Rural News Bureau and served hot to subscribers. On this table you see the principal dailies and weeklies of the country. Also a special service of advance sheets of the monthly magazines.'

"'I picks up one sheet and sees that it's headed: 'Special Advance Proofs. In July, 1909, the Century will say'—and so forth.

"'The farmer rings up somebody—his manager, I reckon—and tells him to let that herd of 15 Jerseys go to \$600 a head; and to sow the 900-acre field in wheat; and to have 200 extra cans ready at the station for the milk trolley car. Then he passes the Henry Clays and sets out a bottle of green chartreuse, and goes over and looks at the ticker tape.

"'Consolidated Gas up two points,' says he. 'Oh, very well.'

"'Ever monkey with copper?' I asks.

"'Stand back!' says he, raising his hand, 'or I'll call the dog. I told you not to waste your time.'

"'After a while he says: 'Bunk, if you don't mind my telling you, your company begins to cloy slightly. I've got to write an article on the Chimera of Communism for a magazine, and attend a meeting of the Race Track Association this afternoon. Of course,

you understand by now that you can't get my proxy for your Remedy, whatever it may be.'

"'Well, sir, all I could think of to do was to go out and get in the buggy. The horse turned round and took me back to the hotel. I hitched him and went in to see Andy. In his room I told him about this farmer, word for word; and I sat picking at the table-cover like one bereft of conscientiousness.

"'I don't understand it, says I, humming a sad and foolish little song to cover my humiliation.

an ultimatum design of Providence. Farmers was made for a purpose; and that was to furnish a livelihood to men like me and you. Else why was we given brains? It is my belief that the manna that the Israelites lived on for 40 years in the wilderness was only a figurative word for farmers; and they keep up the practice to this day. And now, says Andy, 'I am going to test my theory. 'Once a farmer, always a come-on,' in spite of the venerable and the orifices that a spurious civilization has brought to him.

"'You'll fail, same as I did,' says I. 'This one's shook off the shackles of the sheepfold. He's entrenched behind the advantages of electricity, education, literature and intelligence.'

"'I'll try,' says Andy. 'There are

"Eight hundred and sixty dollars,' says he. 'Let me tell you. He was in. He looked me over and began to guy me. I didn't say a word, but got out the walnut shells and began to roll the little ball on the table. I whistled a tune or two, and then I started up the old formula.

"'Step up lively, gentlemen,' says I, 'and watch the little ball. It costs you nothing to look. There you see it, and there you don't. Guess where the little joker is. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye.'

"'I steals a look at the farmer man. I see the sweat coming out on his forehead. He goes over and closes the front door and watches me some more. Directly he says: 'I'll bet you twenty I can pick the shell the ball's under now.'

"'After that,' goes on Andy,



"THE LEAD IN IT IS WORTH MORE THAN THAT"

close, 'speak up. I see the left pocket of your coat sags a good deal. Out with the goldbrick first. I'm rather more interested in the bricks than I am in the trick 60-day notes, and the lost silver mine story.'

"'I had a kind of cerebral sensation of foolishness in my ideas of rationing; but I pulled out the little brick and unwrapped my handkerchief off it.

"'One dollar and eighty cents,' says the farmer, hefting it in his hand. 'Is it a trade?'

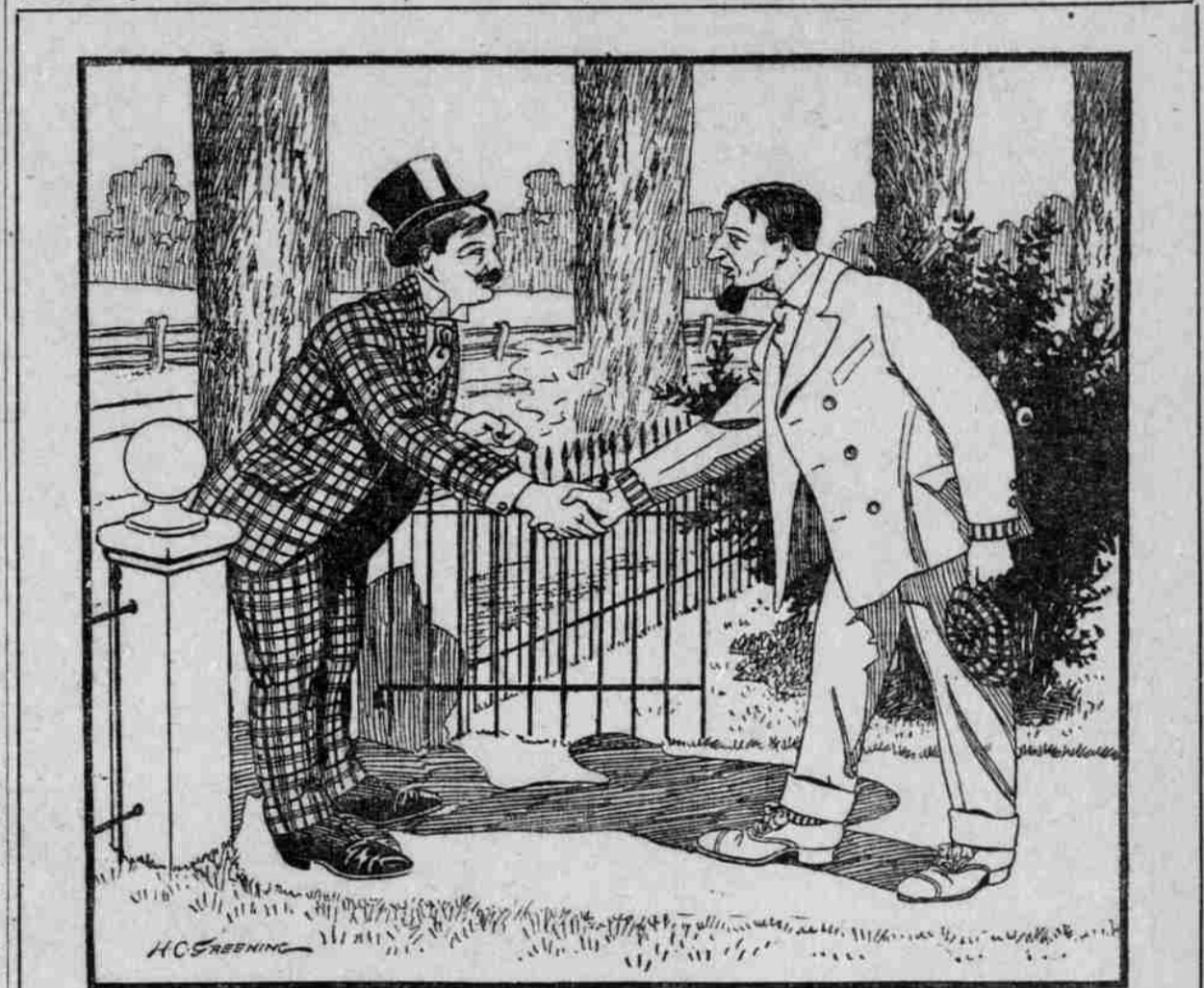
"'The lead in it is worth more than that,' says I, dignified. I put it back in my pocket.

"'All right,' says he. 'But I sort of wanted it for the collection I'm starting. I got a \$5000 one last week for \$210.'

farmer. 'Is this the Regent Theater? Yes; this is Plunkett, of Woodbine Center. Reserve four orchestra seats for Friday evening—my usual ones. Yes, Friday—good-bye.'

"'I run over to New York every two weeks to see a show,' says the farmer, hanging up the receiver. 'I catch the 18-hour flyer at Indianapolis, spend ten hours in the heyday of night on the Yappian Way, and get home in time to see the chickens go to roost 48 hours later. Oh, the pristine Hubbard squasherino of the cave-dwelling period is getting geared up some for the annual meeting of the Don't-Blow-Out-the-Gas Association, don't you think, Mr. Bunk?'

"'I seem to perceive,' I says, 'a kind of hiatus in the agrarian tradi-



"GOD BLESS YOU"

"Andy walks up and down the room for a long time, biting the left end of his mustache as he does when in the act of thinking.

"'Jeff,' says he, finally; 'I believe your story of this expurgated rustic, but I am not convinced. It looks incredulous to me that he could have inoculated himself against all the pre-ordained systems of bucolic bunco. Now, you never regarded me as a man of special religious proclivities, did you, Jeff?' says Andy.

"'Well,' says I, 'No. But,' says I, 'not to wound his feelings, I have also observed many church members whose said proclivities were not so outwardly developed that they would shoo on a white handkerchief if you rubbed 'em with it.'

"'I have always been a deep student of human nature, from creation down,' says Andy, 'and I believe in

certain Laws of Nature that Free Rural Delivery can't overcome.'

"'Andy fumbles around a while in the closet and comes out dressed in a suit with brown and yellow checks as big as your hand. His vest is red with blue dots, and he wears a high silk hat. I noticed he'd soaked his sandy mustache in a kind of blue ink.

"'Great Barnums!' says I. 'You're a ringer for a curcis thimberling man.'

"'Right,' says Andy. 'Is the buggy outside? Wait here till I come back. I won't be long.'

"Two hours afterward Andy sjeeps in the room and lays a wad of money on the table.

'there was nothing new to relate. He only had \$800 in cash in the house. When I left he followed me to the gate. There were tears in his eyes when he shook hands.

"'Bunk,' says he, 'thank you for the only real pleasure I've had in years. It brings up happy old days when I was only a farmer and not an agriculturist. God bless you.'

Here Jeff Peters ceased, and I inferred that his story was done.

"'Then you think—' I began. "Yes," said Jeff. "Something like that. You let the farmers go ahead and amuse themselves with politics. Farming's a lonesome life; and they've been against the shell game before."

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PRESIDENCY SEEKERS WOE

Persons Against Whom Destiny Has Been Waging a Vendetta.

Fate has a feud with the persons who seek the Presidency too early and too often. This is a truth which some of the present Republican and Democratic aspirants, especially Mr. Bryan, should grasp. "I am the most unfortunate man in the whole history of American politics," said Clay to Henry A. Wise, just after the nomination of "Tippecanoe" Harrison for the campaign of 1840. "I am always put up in the years when no Whig can carry the country, but whenever any Whig can win, the candidacy always goes to somebody else." Clay received electoral votes in the quadrangular contest of 1824, when the victory went to John Quincy Adams. In 1832 he was the Whig candidate, and Jackson swept the country. In 1844, when he was once more the Whig nominee, Polk won. Had he been nominated instead of Harrison in 1840—and a large majority of the Whig voters wanted him for the candidacy—he would have been overwhelmingly victorious at the polls.

Webster's and Calhoun's long and futile endeavors to reach the Presidency are well known to the country. So are the persistent efforts and failures of Seward, Chase, Cass, Douglas, Blaine, Sherman and others. When the Republican convention of 1860 met a large majority of the country, Lincoln included, believed that Seward, instead of Lincoln, would be nominated. The candidacy came to Lincoln, Grant, and all their successors, including Cleveland, without much preliminary working for it by themselves or by any of their supporters. The candidacy came to Bryan in 1896 unexpectedly to himself and to everybody else, but he has been a Presidency-seeker ever since that time, and now, after 11 years of office-seeking, he has placed himself in the category of persons waging a vendetta from the beginning. No persistent Presidency-seeker ever reached the Presidency except Van Buren and Buchanan. Van Buren won through the idiocy of his Democratic rivals and because of the stupidity of his and Jackson's Democratic and

Whig enemies. Buchanan got the Presidency because, being on duty abroad (he was Minister to England) when Douglas, in 1854, flung his dynamite bomb of a Kansas-Nebraska bill into Congress, he saved himself from the necessity of taking sides on that disruptive issue, and thus was the only availability in 1856. When the Presidency came to him in that year he had ceased to expect it or to aspire to it, and he was too old to enjoy it or to rise adequately to its duties and responsibilities.

Peeled Off.
The wise doctor had been explaining to his little daughter about skeletons.

"Now can you tell me what a skeleton is, Mary?" said he when through.

Mary tried hard to remember all she had been told. It was hard work.

"A skeleton," said the tot, "is a man who has his insides outside, and his outside off."

The Modern Milkmaid.
"Where are you going, my pretty maid?" "I'm going to milk 'em," she said.

"May I go with you, my pretty maid?" "Get a doctor's certificate first," she said.

"Can't bring bacteria on any terms. Cows are so apt, sir, at picking up germs. Take a carbolic plunge and peroxide spray. Don't sterilize rubber clothes—then, sir, you may."

If you can prove that your germs are all dead.

Go with the milking, sir," she said.

"Might I assist you, my pretty maid?" "Get a bacteriologist's license," she said.

"Then will let you help clean up my stable. Polish the floors just as bright as you're able. Bed them well down with sterilized straw. Germs have such fondness for milk in the hay!"

Ten billion more germs'll be born ere you're through. Get sterilized milk pails and stools for 'em. Put a sterile seal on the sterilized door. Spray the whole place with carbolic once more. Then we'll be sure that the germs are all dead.

Yes, you may go with me, sir," she said. —Garret Smith in Hartford Times



"AGRICULTURE HAS HAD A HAIR CUT"