

complished my requirements. My wealth is, I need not tell you, Peter, enormous. I will keep on these City offices, but my chief object of interest in future will be **Hope Square**. It will be put into the most perfect order. The landlord, who is supposed to be a Mr. Griffiths, will repaint and re-paper all the houses. The garden in the centre will be gay with flowers and, I prophesy, that before a year is out not only Number 1 and Number 15, but every house in the square will be filled to overflowing. Griffiths, however, will make one bargain and one alone. Number 1 is to be the only boarding-house—the only house where paying guests will be received. Understand, old chap, or must I put your brains in soak?”

“Oh, yes, master, I follows—I follows. You are a wonder, master, you are a wonder.”

“**N**OW stop that ridiculous nonsense. Have you not before now clearly understood that I loathe flattery. Well, Peter, I have something more to say, Pen, Tabitha, and Sukey Croft will run Number 1, and your special object is carefully, slyly, and with no apparent effort, to secure for the said Number 1 two old ladies who will come to live there as paying guests. Now listen, Peter, they must be ladies, they must be elderly, they must be refined, they must have first-class references.”

“I know, master, I know,” said Peter Denton.

“I think you do. Now to proceed. I was not at the City office yesterday.”

“No, master, and I—I ventured to wonder—”

“You have no right to wonder, you old fool. I suppose I can stay away from my place of business when I please without consulting you. But don't be hurt, old chap. You are a good friend to me, and, in your way, clever, which means that you are unscrupulous. I adore unscrupulosity at times and I have secured it in you, Peter Denton.”

“I'm sure, master,” Peter began to rub his thin hands.

“Well,” continued Jasper John, “having always had you, you unscrupulous dog, in my confidence, I shall no more cast you out now, than I would ruin Miss Pen, Miss Tabitha, and Miss Sukey. They, as I have told you, are to move from Number 15, a comparatively small house, to Number 1, which, as you know, is very large.”

“Very large—enormous, master,” whispered Peter.

“It will be filled to the brim, Peter, to the brim. Those three old girls have agreed to put it into perfect order for me and you must get the two elderly ladies of respectable appearance and position, as paying guests.”

“Oh, yes, master, I can manage.”

“Now, you may well ask, I can see it in your eyes, why this change in my project—why do I at my age torture myself with a business which I know nothing about?”

Jasper John looked at Peter and Peter thought it best to remain silent.

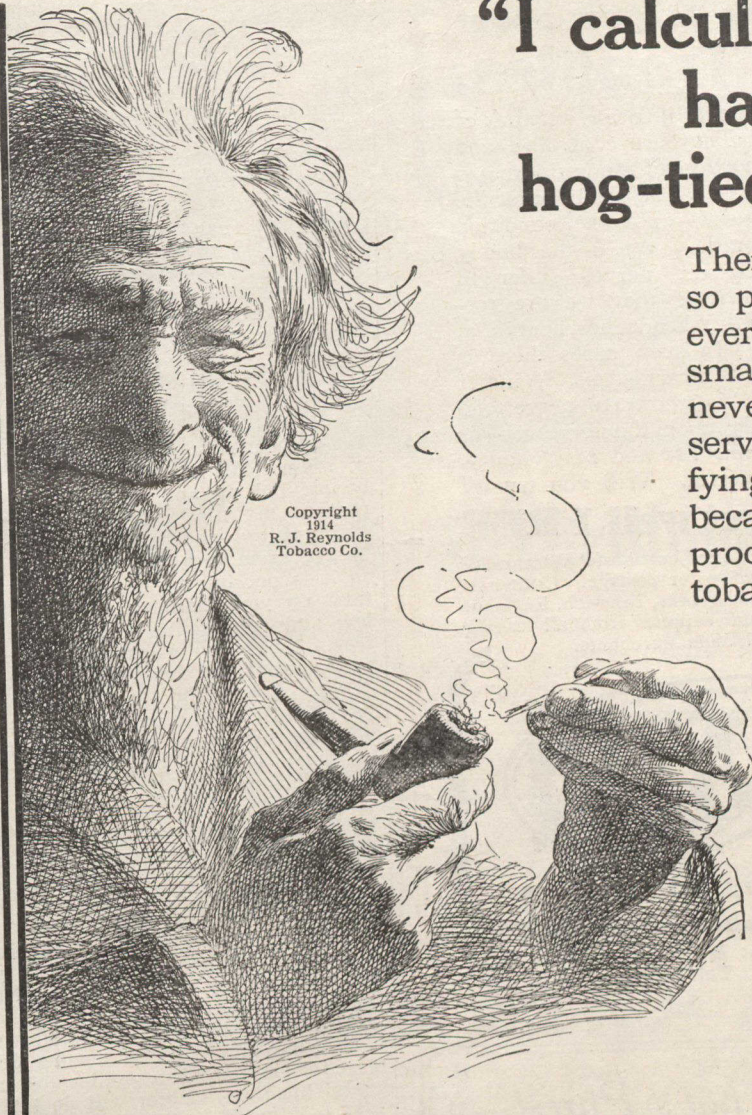
“Well, my friend, I'll tell you. I've had a shock, Peter, old man. My sister, Clementina—you used to help her find wild birds' eggs when she was a child. Well, she married a man called Dudley, and is dead. For goodness' sake don't let me see you shedding a tear.”

Peter suppressed the moisture which was rising to his eyes.

“Peter Denton, think of the horror—she is dead, her husband is dead, and she has left me without a yea or nay in the matter as guardian to her five children. Luckily, they are all girls. But think of the horror, Peter, think of the horror.”

“Yes, Master Jasper, yes.”

“Now, Peter, these five girls, varying in age from twenty-two to eighteen, are therefore grown up and marriageable, and I'm told horribly handsome, also they are practically penniless. I must feed them, entertain them, and marry off the whole five as fast as I can. Now, Peter, comes in your business again. There will be room enough in the house for the girls, the three Misses Croft, the two elderly, respectable paying guests of the female sex,



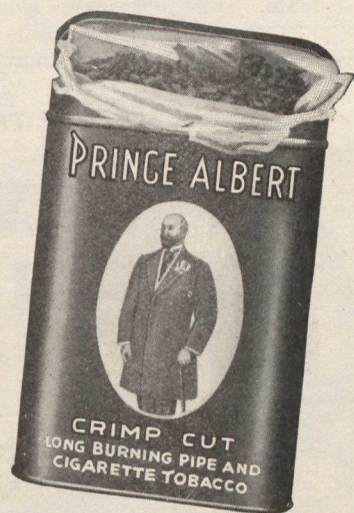
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