

Sheba Blake Publishing

AUNT
JANE'S
NIECES IN SOCIETY

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Aunt Jane's Nieces in Society

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Edith van Dyne asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Sheba Blake Publishing Corp.

2288 Crossrail Dr

Atlanta, GA 30349

support@shebablake.com

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About the Author

One

Uncle John's Duty



“**Y**ou’re not doing your duty by those girls, John Merrick!”

The gentleman at whom this assertion was flung in a rather angry tone did not answer his sister-in-law. He sat gazing reflectively at the pattern in the rug and seemed neither startled nor annoyed. Mrs. Merrick, a pink-cheeked middle-aged lady attired in an elaborate morning gown, knitted her brows severely as she regarded the chubby little man opposite; then, suddenly remembering that the wrinkles might leave their dreadful mark on her carefully rolled and massaged features, she banished them with a pass of her ringed hand and sighed dismally.

“It would not have mattered especially had the poor children been left in their original condition of friendless poverty,” she said. “They were then like a million other girls, content to struggle for a respectable livelihood and a doubtful position in the lower stratas of social communion. But you interfered. You came into their lives abruptly, appearing from those horrid Western wilds with an amazing accumulation of money and a demand that your three nieces become your special _protégées_. And what is the result?”

The little man looked up with a charming smile of good humored raillery. His keen gray eyes sparkled as mischievously as a schoolboy's. Softly he rubbed the palms of his hands together, as if enjoying the situation.

"What is it, Martha, my dear? What is the result?" he asked.

"You've raised them from their lowly condition to a sphere in which they reign as queens, the envy of all who know them. You've lavished your millions upon them unsparingly; they are not only presumptive heiresses but already possessed of independent fortunes. Ah, you think you've been generous to these girls; don't you, John Merrick?" "Go on, Martha; go on."

"You've taken them abroad—you took my own daughter, John Merrick, and left *me* at home!—you've lugged your three nieces to the mountains and carried them to the seashore. You even encouraged them to enlist in an unseemly campaign to elect that young imbecile, Kenneth Forbes, and—"

"Oh, Martha, Martha! Get to the point, if you can. I'm going, presently."

"Not until you've heard me out. You've given your nieces every advantage in your power save one, and the neglect of that one thing renders futile all else you have accomplished."

Now, indeed, her listener seemed perplexed. He passed a hand over his shiny bald head as if to stimulate thought and exorcise bewilderment.

"What is it, then? What have I neglected?" was his mild enquiry.

"To give those girls their proper standing in society."

He started; smiled; then looked grave.

"You're talking foolishly," he said. "Why, confound it, Martha, they're as good girls as ever lived! They're highly respected, and—" "Sir, I refer to Fashionable Society." The capitals indicate the impressive manner in which Mrs. Merrick pronounced those words.

"I guess money makes folks fashionable; don't it, Martha?"

"No, indeed. How ignorant you are, John. Can you not understand that there is a cultured, aristocratic and exclusive Society in New York that millions will not enable one to gain _entrée_ to?"

"Oh, is there? Then I'm helpless."

"You are not, sir."

"Eh? I thought you said—"

"Listen, John; and for heaven's sake try for once to be receptive. I am speaking not only for the welfare of my daughter Louise but for Beth and Patricia. Your nieces are charming girls, all three. With the advantages you have given them they may well become social celebrities."

"H-m-m. Would they be happier so?"

"Of course. Every true woman longs for social distinction, especially if it seems difficult to acquire. Nothing is dearer to a girl's heart than to win acceptance by the right social set. And New York society is the most exclusive in America."

"I'm afraid it will continue to exclude our girls, Martha."

"Not if you do your duty, John."

"That reminds me. What is your idea of my duty, Martha? You've been talking in riddles, so far," he protested, shifting uneasily in his chair.

"Let me explain more concisely, then. Your millions, John Merrick, have made you really famous, even in this wealthy metropolis. In the city and at your club you must meet with men who have the _entrée_ to the most desirable social circles: men who might be induced to introduce your nieces to their families, whose endorsement would effect their proper presentation."

"Nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense at all."

"Then blamed if I know what you're driving at."

“You’re very obtuse.”

“I won’t agree to that till I know what ‘obtuse’ means. See here, Martha; you say this social position, that the girls are so crazy for—but they’ve never said anything to *me* about it—can’t be bought. In the next breath you urge me to buy it. Phoo! You’re a thoughtless, silly woman, Martha, and let your wild ambitions run away with your common sense.”

Mrs. Merrick sighed, but stubbornly maintained her position.

“I don’t suggest ‘buying’ such people; not at all, John. It’s what is called—ah—ah—‘influence’; or, or—”

“Or ‘pull.’ ‘Pull’ is a better word, Martha. Do you imagine there’s any value in social position that can be acquired by ‘pull’?”

“Of course. It has to be acquired some way—if one is not born to it. As a matter of fact, Louise is entitled, through her connection with *my* family—”

“Pshaw, I knew *your* family, Martha,” he interrupted. “An arrant lot of humbugs.”

“John Merrick!”

“Don’t get riled. It’s the truth. I *knew* ‘em. On her father’s side Louise has just as much to brag about—an’ no more. We Merricks never amounted to much, an’ didn’t hanker to trip the light fantastic in swell society. Once, though, when I was a boy, I had a cousin who spelled down the whole crowd at a spellin’-bee. We were quite proud of him then; but he went wrong after his triumph, poor fellow! and became a book agent. Now, Martha, I imagine this talk of yours is all hot air, and worked off on me not because the girls want society, but because you want it for ‘em. It’s all *your* ambition, I’ll bet a peanut.”

“You misjudge me, as usual, John. I am urging a matter of simple justice. Your nieces are lovely girls, fitted to shine in any sphere of life,” she continued, knowing his weak point and diplomatically fostering it. “Our girls have youth,

accomplishments, money—everything to fit them for social triumphs. The winter season is now approaching; the people are flocking back to town from their country homes; fashionable gaieties and notable events will soon hold full sway. The dear girls are surely entitled to enjoy these things, don't you think? Aren't they *worthy* the best that life has to offer? And why shouldn't they enter society, if you do your full duty? Once get them properly introduced and they will be able to hold their own with perfect ease. Give me the credit for knowing these things, John, and try to help your nieces to attain their ambition."

"But *is* it their ambition?" he asked, doubtfully.

"They have not said so in words; but I can assure you it *is* their ambition, because all three are sensible, spirited, young women, who live in this age and not the one you yourself knew a half century or so ago."

Mr. Merrick sighed and rubbed his head again. Then he slowly rose.

"Mornin', Martha," he said, with a somewhat abstracted nod at his sister-in-law. "This is a new idea to me. I'll think it over."

Two

A Question of "Pull"



John Merrick's face was not so cheery as usual as he made his way into the city. This suggestion of Martha Merrick's regarding his inattention to duty to his beloved nieces was no easy nut to crack.

He knew his sister-in-law to be a wordly-minded, frivolous woman, with many trivial ambitions; but in this instance he had misgivings that she might be right. What did he, John Merrick, know of select society? A poor man, of humble origin, he had wandered into the infantile, embryo West years ago and there amassed a fortune. When he retired and returned to "civilization" he found his greatest reward in the discovery of three charming nieces, all "as poor as Job's turkey" but struggling along bravely, each in her individual characteristic way, and well worthy their doting uncle's affectionate admiration. Mrs. Merrick had recited some of the advantages they had derived from the advent of this rich relative; but even she could not guess how devoted the man was to the welfare of these three fortunate girls, nor how his kindly, simple heart resented the insinuation that he was neglecting anything that might contribute to their happiness.

Possession of money had never altered John Merrick's native simplicity. He had no extravagant tastes, dressed quietly and lived the life of the people. On this eventful morning the man of millions took a cross-town car to the elevated station and climbed the stairs to his train. Once seated and headed cityward he took out his memorandum book to see what engagements he had for the day. There were three for the afternoon. At twelve o'clock he had promised to meet Von Taer.

"H-m-m. Von Taer."

Gazing reflectively from the window he remembered a conversation with a prominent banker some month or so before. "Von Taer," the banker had said, "is an aristocrat with an independent fortune, who clings to the brokerage business because he inherited it from his father and grandfather. I hold that such a man has no moral right to continue in business. He should retire and give the other fellow a chance."

"Why do you call him an aristocrat?" Mr. Merrick had enquired.

"Because his family is so ancient that it shames the ark itself. I imagine his ancestors might have furnished Noah the lumber to build his ship. In New York the '400' all kowtow to Von Taer."

"Seems to me he has the right to be a broker if he wants to," asserted Mr. Merrick.

"The right; yes. But, between us, Mr. Merrick, this society swell has no mental capacity to handle such an uncertain business. He's noted for doing unwarranted things. To me it's a marvel that Von Taer hasn't shipwrecked the family fortunes long ago. Luck has saved him, not foresight."

That speech of a few weeks ago now seemed prophetic to John Merrick. Within a few days the aristocratic broker had encountered financial difficulties and been forced to appeal to Mr. Merrick, to whom he obtained an

introduction through a mutual friend. Von Taer was doubtless solvent, for he controlled large means; but unless a saving hand was extended at this juncture his losses were sure to be severe, and might even cripple him seriously.

All this Mr. Merrick shrewdly considered in the space of a few moments. As he left the train he looked at his watch and found it was barely eleven. He decided not to await the hour of appointment. With his usual brisk stride he walked to Von Taer's offices and was promptly admitted to the broker's sanctum.

Hedrik Von Taer was a fine looking man, tall, grave, of dignified demeanor and courteous manners. He stood until his visitor was seated and with a gesture of deference invited him to open the conversation.

"I've decided to make you the loan, Von Taer," began Mr. Merrick, in his practical, matter-of-fact way. "Three hundred thousand, wasn't it? Call on Major Doyle at my office this afternoon and he'll arrange it for you."

An expression of relief crossed the broker's face.

"You are very kind, sir," he answered. "I assure you I fully appreciate the accommodation."

"Glad to help you," responded the millionaire, briskly. Then he paused with marked abruptness. It occurred to him he had a difficult proposition to make to this man. To avoid the cold, enquiring eyes now fixed upon him he pulled out a cigar and deliberately cut the end. Von Taer furnished him a match. He smoked a while in silence.

"This loan, sir," he finally began, "is freely made. There are no strings tied to it. I don't want you to feel I'm demanding any sort of return. But the truth is, you have it in your power to grant me a favor."

Von Taer bowed.

“Mr. Merrick has generously placed me under an obligation it will afford me pleasure to repay,” said he. But his eyes held an uneasy look, nevertheless.

“It’s this way,” explained the other: “I’ve three nieces—fine girls, Von Taer—who will some day inherit my money. They are already independent, financially, and they’re educated, well-bred and amiable young women. Take my word for it.”

“I am sure your statements are justified, Mr. Merrick.” Yet Hedrik Von Taer’s face, usually unexpressive, denoted blank mystification. What connection could these girls have with the favor to be demanded?

“Got any girls yourself, Von Taer?”

“A daughter, sir. My only child.

“Grown up?”

“A young lady now, sir.”

“Then you’ll understand. I’m a plain uneducated man myself. Never been any nearer swell society than a Fifth Avenue stage. My money has given me commercial position, but no social one worth mentioning. Your ‘400’s’ a bunch I can’t break into, nohow.”

A slight smile hovered over the other’s lips, but he quickly controlled it.

“They tell me, though,” continued the speaker, “that *your* family has long ago climbed into the top notch of society. You’re one o’ the big guns in the battery, an’ hold the fort against all comers.”

Von Taer merely bowed. It was scarcely necessary to either admit or contradict the statement. Uncle John was a little indignant that his companion showed no disposition to assist him in his explanation, which a clear head might now easily comprehend. So, with his usual frankness, he went directly to the point.