

Aunt Jane's Nieces in Society

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CHAPTER I

UNCLE JOHN'S DUTY

"You'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."