

CHAPTER II

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 worldly-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, embryonic 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 dotting 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.

"I'd like my girls to get into the best--the most select--circles," he announced. "They're good and pretty and well-mannered, so it strikes me they're entitled to the best there is a-going. I don't want to mix with your swell crowd myself, because I ain't fit; likewise the outfit ain't much to my taste, askin' your pardon; but with women it's different. They need to stand high an' shine bright to make 'em really happy, and if any special lot is particularly ex-clusive an' high-falutin', that's the crowd they long to swarm with. It's human nature--female human nature, anyhow. You catch my idea, Von Taer, don't you?"

"I think so, Mr. Merrick. Yet I fail to see how I can be of service to you in gratifying the ambition of your charming nieces." "Then I'll go, and you may forget what I've said." The visitor arose and took his hat from the table. "It was only a fool notion, anyway; just a thought, badly expressed, to help my girls to a toy that money can't buy."

Hedrik Von Taer gazed steadily into the man's face. There was something in the simple, honest self-abnegation of this wealthy and important person that won the respect of all he met. The broker's stern eyes softened a bit as he gazed and he allowed a fugitive smile, due to his

own change of attitude, to wreath his thin lips again--just for an instant.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Merrick," he requested, and rather reluctantly Uncle John resumed his seat. "You may not have an especially clear idea of New York society, and I want to explain my recent remark so that you will understand it. What is called 'the 400' may or may not exist; but certainly it is no distinct league or association. It may perhaps be regarded as a figure of speech, to indicate how few are really admitted to the most exclusive circles. Moreover, there can be no dominant 'leader of society' here, for the reason that not all grades of society would recognize the supremacy of any one set, or clique. These cliques exist for various reasons. They fraternize generally, but keep well within their own circles. Kindred tastes attract some; ancient lineage others. There is an ultra-fashionable set, a sporting set, a literary set, an aristocratic set, a rather 'fast' set, a theatrical set--and so on. These may all lay claim with certain justice to membership in good society. Their circles are to an extent exclusive, because some distinction must mark the eligibility of members. And outside each luminous sphere hovers a multitude eager to pass the charmed circle and so acquire recognition. Often it is hard to separate the initiate from the uninitiate, even by those most expert. Is it difficult to comprehend such a condition as I have described, Mr. Merrick?"

"Somewhat, Mr. Von Taer. The wonder to me is why people waste time in such foolishness."

"It is the legitimate occupation of many; the folly of unwise ambition impels others. There is a fascination about social life that appeals to the majority of natures. Let us compare society to a mountain whose sides are a steep incline, difficult to mount. To stand upon the summit, to become the cynosure of all eyes, is a desire inherent, seemingly, in all humanity; for humanity loves distinction. In the scramble toward the peak many fall by the wayside; others deceive themselves by imagining they have attained the apex when they are far from it. It is a game, Mr. Merrick, just as business is a game, politics a game, and war a game. You know how few really win."

"Here," said Uncle John, musingly, "is a philosophy I did not expect from you, Von Taer. They tell me you're one who stands on top the peak. And you were born that way, and didn't have to climb. Seems to me you rather scorn the crowd that's trying to climb to an eminence you never had to win. That wouldn't be my way. And I suspect that if the crowd wasn't trying to climb to you, your own position wouldn't be worth a cotton hat."

Von Taer had no answer to this criticism. Perhaps he scarcely heard it, for he appeared lost in a brown study. Finally he said: "Will you permit my daughter to call upon your nieces, Mr. Merrick?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then kindly give me their addresses."

Uncle John wrote them on a slip of paper.

"You may now dismiss the subject from your mind, sir, as you lately advised me to do. Whatever may be accomplished in the direction you have suggested I will gladly undertake. If I succeed it will be exceedingly gratifying to us all, I am sure."

Mr. Merrick left the office in a rather humbled and testy mood. He disliked to ask favors at any time and now felt that he had confided himself to the mercy of this callous aristocrat and met with a distinct rebuff.

But he had done it for the sake of his beloved nieces--and they would never know what humiliation this unsatisfactory interview had cost him.