

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Byron Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Hall
Baum Henry Kipling Doyle Willis
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman
Darwin Thoreau Twain
Potter Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato Scott
Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Burton Harte
London Descartes Cervantes Wells Hesse
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Aunt Jane's Nieces in Society

Lyman Frank Baum

Imprint

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AUNT JANE'S NIECES IN SOCIETY

BY

EDITH VAN DYNE

1910

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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 school-boy'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."

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 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.

"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 exclusive 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.

CHAPTER III

DIANA

Diana Von Taer can not be called a type. She was individual. Aristocratic to her finger tips, she was unlike all other aristocrats. An admitted queen of society, her subjects were few and indifferent. She possessed ancient lineage, was highly accomplished, had been born to the purple, as the saying is; but none of these things conspired to make her the curious creature she was.

As we make her acquaintance she is twenty-three years of age—and looks eighteen. She is tall and slender and carries her handsome form with exquisite grace. Diana is never abrupt; her voice is ever modulated to soft, even tones; she rises from a chair or couch with the lithe, sinuous motion of a serpent uncoiling.

Her face, critically regarded, is not so admirable as her form. The features are a trifle too elongated, and their delicacy is marred by a nose a bit broad and unshapely and a mouth with thin lips primly set. Her dark eyes might be magnificent if wide open: but through the narrow slits of their lids, half hidden by long curling lashes, the eyes peer at you with a cold, watchful, intent gaze that carries a certain uncanny and disconcerting fascination.

Yet the girl is essentially feminine. If you refrain from meeting that discomfiting gaze—and her familiars have learned to avoid it—Diana impresses you as being graceful, dainty and possessed of charming manners. Her taste in dress is perfect. She converses fluently on many topics. It is her custom to rise at ten o'clock, whatever time she may have retired the night before; to read until luncheon; to devote the remainder of her day to the requirements of society.

Eligible young men of admitted social standing call upon Diana at such intervals as the proprieties require. They chatter "small talk" and are careful to address her with deference. With an exception to be referred to later these young men have no more thought of "flirting" with Miss Von Taer than they would with the statue of the goddess, her namesake. Her dinner parties and entertainments are

very successful. She is greatly admired, *per se*, but has no intimate friends.

When her mother died, some years before, an aunt had come to live with Diana, and now posed as her chaperon. Mrs. Cameron was a stolid, corpulent lady, with a countenance perpetually placid and an habitual aversion to displaying intellect. Her presence in the establishment, although necessary, was frankly ignored. Fortunately she never obtruded herself.

Hedrik Von Taer was passionately devoted to his daughter. He alone, perhaps, of all the world, thoroughly understood her and appreciated her talents. She may have frightened him at times, but that only added to his admiration. In return Diana displayed a calm, but affectionate regard for her father.

Often after dinner these two would pass an hour together in a corner of the drawing-room, where the cold gray eyes of the man met the intent, half-veiled glance of the girl with perfect understanding. They talked of many things, including business. Hedrik had no secrets from his daughter.

The desperate condition of his finances, when he had been caught in a "corner" on wheat and nearly crushed, had not dismayed her in the least. It was she who had counseled him to appeal to John Merrick, since the name and fame of the eccentric millionaire were familiar to her as to him.

He related to Diana his interview with Mr. Merrick on his return home. He was saved. The three hundred thousand were now in the bank to his credit and he could weather the coming storm easily—perhaps with profit. In a tone half amused, half serious, he told her of the little millionaire's desire to secure *entrée* into good society for his three nieces.

Diana laughed with her lips; her eyes never laughed. Then she took in her hand the paper containing the addresses of the three girls and regarded it thoughtfully.

"It is a curious request, *mon pere*," she said, in her soft, even tones; "but one we cannot diplomatically disregard. Provided, however—"

"Yes, Diana;" as she paused.

"Provided these prospective *debutantes* are not wholly impossible."

"I realize that," returned her father. "John Merrick is a great power in the city. He has been useful to me, and may be again. I have this chance to win him. But the man is very common clay, despite his wealth, and his three nieces are likely to be made of the same material. Should they prove impossible you cannot well descend to introducing them to our set."

"I am not certain of that, sir," said the girl, with a pretty shrug. "My position is too secure to be jeopardized by any error of this sort. I believe I may introduce these girls without risk. I shall not vouch for them too strongly, and after their debut they must stand or fall on their own merits."

"It is something a Von Taer has never yet done," remarked the man, gravely.

"To commercialize his social position? But, father dear, the age is fast commercializing everything. I think our especial set is as yet comparatively free from contamination by the 'lately rich'; but even among us money has glossed many offenses that a generation ago would have meant social ostracism."

He nodded.

"That is true, Diana."

"Life with me is a bit dull, as well. Everlasting routine, however admirable, is tiresome. I scent amusement in this adventure, which I have decided to undertake. With your permission I will see these girls and quickly decide their fate. Should they prove not too dreadfully *outré* you may look to see them my especial *protégés*."

"I leave all to your discretion, Diana," returned Von Taer, with a sigh. "If, in the end, some of the more particular venture to reproach them."

"It will not matter," interrupted the daughter, lightly, as her dark eyes narrowed to a hair's breadth. "Any who dares reproach Diana Von Taer will afford her interesting occupation. And to offset that remote contingency we shall permanently enslave the powerful John Merrick. I understand he is hard as nails in financial matters;

but to us the man has disclosed his one weakness —ambition to promote his three nieces. Since we have discovered this vulnerable point, let us take advantage of it. I am satisfied the loan of three hundred thousand was but a lure—and how cleverly the man gauged us!"

Von Taer scowled.

"Get your wraps, Diana. The carriage is waiting, and we are due at Mrs. Doldringham's crush."