

A Modern Knight Errant

By J. HUNTER

CHAPTER XVI.



HE weather was splendid—the London season was at its height. Winter with its fogs and east winds had gone out of view for the time being. People forgot all the disagreeable and only remembered that the fresh spring and the time of the singing of birds had come. Those who thoroughly understand what a London season means, know that it has its variations and degrees almost as surely as the weather which governs it. There is as vast a difference between a gay season and a dull one as there is between winter and summer. The season which is enhanced by many drawing-rooms, which numbers amongst its attractions several marriages in fashionable life—the season during which money flows freely, during which the shops are crowded—the park full of gay horses, luxurious carriages, lovely ladies, and smart men, is as different from that dull time which yet goes by the name of a season in town, as night is from day.

It so happened that the season when Phyllis Martindale came out, was one of the gay ones. It was not quite as gay as the celebrated Jubilee year, but it approached that time in its splendor and its fun. All over the Metropolis its influence was felt. The shopkeepers were in supreme good-humor; trade generally wore a smiling face.

"I am reviving," said Trade. "I am becoming strong and vigorous and lusty and young once more. My feeble years of decrepitude have suddenly left me—I have done with awful crises and appalling crashes. Hurrah! hurrah! I am hastening to be rich once more. Those who belong to me will make colossal fortunes. Away with beggary and starvation! I am here, in the full power of my youth! Let those who love me make hay while the sun shines."

The whole world is in a good-humor when trade smiles, and this was the state of affairs when Phyllis Martindale, heiress and beauty, showed her shining and radiant face on the surface of the waters of society. It did not take long to make any one so uncommon, so rich, so beautiful, the fashion, and it took a still shorter time to turn a young head never too strong, and never too humble.

Nancy Browne and John Smith's sisters were having a pleasant season down in the country. For the London weather was not confined to London—the sun shone on the fields, and made the hay ripe, and brought the flowers into bloom. Even in the country trade was good, and the farmers were satisfied. Mrs. Smith was quite well and strong again, and John Smith, the elder, had only one cause for grumbling; why didn't his son take the farm off his hands instead of wasting his time writing books in London?

"There are more books in the world already than we can possibly read," he remarked, "but I never heard yet that there was an overstock of potatoes, or of loaves of bread. Don't talk to me, girls, I know what I'm about. Your poor mother thinks it is a grand thing to write a book, but I'm told that authors are like the dirt under your feet now. There's John—he's well educated—we spared him nothing. He knows the musty tongues and the modern tongues, and a good bit of the Queen's English into the bargain. All the better say I. If he has worked his brains he can devote them to finding out what's good for clay soil and what for gravel, and how to keep the smut out of wheat, and the blight from the potato crop.

To discover any of these things would be to bless mankind; but to write a book! Now, Nancy, my girl, what are you glowering at me for? You know perfectly well that you'd rather make a good pat of butter than trim the daintiest bonnet that ever was seen—you have sense, whoever else has not."

"And I always thought you had sense, Uncle John, until to-day," retorted Nancy, in her clear tones. She was standing by the open window, filling a great glass bowl with mignonette and sweet-pea. She looked dainty and fair and fresh and good in her pretty pink dress. Her frank eyes were raised now with a pleasant smile to the perturbed old father.

"I always thought you were the most sensible old man I knew until you began to abuse books," she said. "What would the world be without books? The thoughts of the dead who lived before us are preserved in their books. Suppose John did discover a cure for smut, or for the blight, he'd have to get his cure printed, wouldn't he? so that all men should take advantage of it. I'm surprised at you, uncle—surprised and disappointed; but now, to show that I'm forgiving also, I'll tell you all a bit of good news. The post has come in, bringing me a letter from John—from John the author; from John the journalist. He's coming down here to-night—he's coming to see us all."

This news was received with general rejoicing. When a hero is about to put in an appearance, preparations of different sorts must be made. Even though he is a brother, girls, if they are young and pretty, will like to look their best before him. John's sisters would have done anything in reason for the man who connected them with the world of Light and Leading—with that world of which they knew so little, but about which they thought so much.

So when the hero arrived at the Priory, in time for the seven o'clock tea, he found that meal extra abundant and extra appetizing. His mother was seated in her own place at the head of the board. Like all good men, John thought his mother the best and noblest woman in the world. He sat near her to-night, and cheered her heart with some affectionate squeezes of the hand and some smiling looks of love. His witty and brilliant remarks, his sarcasm, his knowledge, his anecdotes of the "on dits" of fashionable life, were for others, but his hand-squeeze was for his mother. She felt rich beyond the riches of most when he squeezed her hand, and looked down the well-filled board with eyes which were a little misty, as well as bright with happiness.

The farmer ceased to abuse books while John talked. Gradually there fell a silence over all the others, and the voice of the hero alone filled the room. It was an interesting and manly voice, and he said many things worth listening to. Nancy now and then ventured to criticise him, but the others gave him only silent admiration.

"And now, John," said this young lady, an hour or two afterwards, "you have got to tell me about yourself."

They were walking round the hayfield—the new-mown hay smelt delicious—the moon was lifting its crescent face above the hill.

"Now, John, tell me about yourself," said Nancy.

"I have been talking about myself ever since I came home," he replied.

"Your 'outer' self," she answered. "I want the inner man. What about her, John? Have you seen her, and

does she make you happy? Have you failed to see her, and are you consumed with misery?"

"I am too busy to be consumed with misery, Nancy; besides, hope is not dead—I may see her any day. I told the whole story to Daintree, and he is looking for her—he will be successful in his search before long."

"As you have hope, you are, of course, all right. It is a good thing to be on the look-out for the princess, and to be working for her. I liked the tone of your letters very much since you went away. Let me see, you left us the end of October, and it is now the middle of June. In that time you have done wonders. I read that article of yours in the 'Budget,' and thought it good. How could you take up such a subject as bi-metallism?"

"Because it is one of the topics of the day. A journalist whatever he is, must be up to date; he must be fresh, and in harmony with the topics of the times."

"Well," retorted Nancy, "you made your subject interesting, which is the main thing. And now, tell me about Mr. Daintree. Is his journal going to be a success?"

"The biggest that was ever made. Daintree is a wonderful man, Nancy. He has got the best cleverness, the only cleverness that can be of use in the present day—he can gauge the public taste."

"Well, all that sounds very interesting; and, of course, when the journal comes out, they will have an early copy ordered to be sent to the Priory, and I shall have my own special copy, that I may find out for myself the bits you have written; but beyond your share in the concern, we country folks don't know anything about 'gauging' the public taste. That sort of speech sounds to us ignorant people silly, for there are so many tastes. Your father, for instance, is principally concerned in matters agricultural; he wishes to combat the diseases of the vegetable world, and he would like to control the elements, as regards sunshine, and rain, and heat, and cold. Then my aunt thinks a great deal of preserving jam and bleaching linen, and would like to know a recipe for making servants do their work properly, and laundresses wash the dirt out of clothes; and the girls have the usual tastes which come into the lives of frank, nice, pleasant, country girls. This is only one household, John, but if 'The Eagle,' your friend's new paper, 'gauges' the taste of this one household alone, it will find its pages very full. I don't see, therefore, how it can take up such a very wide scope as the gauging of universal tastes."

"This house is only a sample of thousands of others," said John. "In every house each person has a special line, which is the most interesting of all, but each person also has minuter tastes and whims, and these can be appealed to in a general way by a clever paper like 'The Eagle.'"

"I see," replied Nancy. "Such an idea is clever, but it is not great—a paper which will appeal to our littleness. Such a journal does not seem worthy of the best a man can do."

"You don't understand; it is impossible," said Smith, fretfully.

"I know I don't," she replied; "so I won't annoy you any more by showing my ignorance. That was a delightful story you wrote in 'The Messenger.' It made the girls cry, and gave your mother and me a glow round the heart. We both felt proud of you after reading that simple little sketch—it touched the best in us; it was noble."

"I took a pleasure in writing it," said John, his eyes sparkling with delight at the sweetness of her genuine praise. "But of course," he added, "the best of my time is given to 'The Eagle.'"

"When will the first number appear?"

"Not before September. Such a

colossal enterprise takes months and months to bring to perfection. Our great bomb is for September, when the world's book fair begins to open its great doors. We rush foremost into the fray. Oh, Nancy, if we conquer—if only we succeed, how much, how very much this will mean to me."

"Are you to receive a share of the profits?" she asked.

"No! I wish I could, but Daintree promises me all kinds of things if we succeed."

"You ought to have a share of the profits—promises are pie-crust, they are made to be broken; but if you have ever so small a share of the profits then you begin to put by capital—then you begin to secure to yourself an independence."

"Daintree gives me £300 a year—a very large income for a man like me. He will also pay me at the usual rate for all the articles which I write for 'The Eagle.'"

"Yes, yes; and I suppose you think you will be able to marry your Phyllis on £300 a year? Poor John!"

Smith's face changed; the sparkle of hope left his eyes at Nancy's words.

"You would marry a fellow on that sum," he said, after a pause.

"I don't think so. It is too little. It would mean too great a strain both on love and prudence. These are not days of cheap things, and £300 is less than I could do with. John, you must remember that you have told me about Phyllis—her beauty, her enthusiasm, her impulsive nature. She is young and—and ignorant."

"How can you possibly say that—how can you know?"

"My woman's wit tells me that she knows nothing at all of the practical world. She could not, by any possibility, marry on £300 or even £600 a year."

"Besides, Nancy," said John, "she is, I fear—I greatly fear—rich. Daintree has a suspicion that my Phyllis is identical with a certain girl who lately came in for a fortune. I have a great fear on this point, for if it is the case she is removed, very, very far above me."

"How can you say so? What girl living is above a good man? When you talk like that I think you are putting on false humility, and I don't like you."

At that moment one of John's sisters came out. It was Polly, the merriest and prettiest of the girls. She slipped her hand through her tall brother's arm, and said with a laugh that she was jealous of Nancy, and meant to share John with her for the remainder of the evening.

"How long can you stay with us, Jack?" she asked. "If you can make up your mind to remain at the Priory until over Sunday we could get up a picnic for Saturday. The Johnsons would come and the Merrymans, and Mr. and Mrs. Dyce-Jones. We might go to Garrett's Hall and—what is it, John?"

"I am so sorry, Polly, but I must run away. I must be back in town to-morrow night."

Polly pouted and instantly began to grumble.

"It's too bad," she exclaimed. "Other girls see something of their brothers. What can you possibly do with yourself during this hot weather in town?"

"I have no time to think of the weather, Polly. I am busy from morning till night. I have no time to think of anything but my business."

"Good gracious! Just listen to him, Nancy. Such a life must be frightfully exhausting, and where's the use of it? I mean what's going to come of it? I can't make out why people kill themselves with work when they needn't. You are no good to us at all since you went to London; we three girls might just as well have no brother."

"Some day, Polly, when through hard work I have secured a nice happy little home of my own, you shall come