

An Aim.

Give me a man with an aim,  
Whatever that aim may be,  
Whether it's wealth or weather it's fame,  
It matters not to me.  
Let him walk in the path of right,  
And keep his aim in sight,  
And walk and pray in faith alway,  
With his eye on the glittering height.

Give me a man who says,  
"I will do something well,  
And make the fleeting days,  
A story of labor tell."  
Though the aim he has be small,  
It is better than none at all;  
With something to do the whole year  
through,  
He will not stumble or fall.

But Satan weaves a snare  
For the feet of those who stray,  
With never a thought or care  
Where the path may lead away.  
The man who has no aim,  
Not only leaves no name  
When his life is done, but ten to one,  
He leaves a record of shame.

Give me the man whose heart  
Is filled with ambition's fire;  
Who sets his mark in the start,  
And keeps it moving higher and  
higher.

Better to die in the strife,  
The hands with labor rife,  
Than to glide with the stream in an idle  
dream  
And live a purposeless life.

Better to strive and fall,  
And never reach the goal,  
Than to drift along with time,  
An aimless, worthless soul.  
Ah, better to climb and fall,  
Or sow, though the yield be small,  
Than to throw away day after day,  
And never strive at all.

On False Pretences.

Chapter I.

There were three of us, Julia, Jane, and I, all married from our mother's house long years ago. Only half in jest, my mother would sometimes say that in her daughters' marriages she had quite run the round of matrimonial reasons; for Julia married rank, and Jane wealth, while Rose, silly child—that's I—married for love, and nothing more.

Now you must know that my mother's notion of rank and riches were not very lofty. Julia's husband was the third son of Sir Gideon Fobbs, whose father had been made baronet for something done to the jetty or at an election, when he was Mayor of Winklebeach. The wealth that won sister Jane was dear old John Dixon's—a prosperous grocer still, in Camden Town—who keeps a gig and a villa at Colney Hatch. My Roland was a banker's clerk, and I know my mother could not possibly exaggerate our motive. But dear mother's boast was only true in part. There are two to all bargains, and if my sisters married for rank and riches, their husbands had a little longing for old Aunt Stebbing's money. Roland loved me, and never thought of such a thing of course.

Old Aunt Stebbing (she is dead now, and all the money that so disturbed our sleep when it was hers has gone to an asylum for decayed paper-makers) was rich, penurious, and eccentric. My mother was not rich, but she was Aunt Stebbing's sister. Aunt Stebbing's wealth like a Summer cloud, might drop its blessings anywhere—we were Aunt Stebbing's nieces and she was childless.

My mother lived in fair style,—by dint of private pinching, in a somewhat showy style, I may say. We kept a brougham, hired a horse, and John, the gardener, was coachman too. We lived at Clapham—in a villa, small and pretty, like a magnified toy; and as two plants in green tubs stood on the tiny lawn, we gave as our address The Laurels.

My mother visited much in the brougham, and in return carriages and pair paid morning calls at The Laurels, exalting us among our neighbours. She gave evening parties in the season, dancing in the two parlours (with the folding doors taken off the hinges), the music (harp and fiddle) packed into poor papa's study—or sentry-box as she used to call it, and supper laid out in the large front kitchen. On such occasions, on all indeed, when occasion served, she talked of dear sister Stebbing, though she never visited us; and we girls, wickedly taking the hint, always wondered to our partners at the absence of Aunt Stebbing, and laughed at the dear old creature's oddities as if—as we did not—we knew all about them.

These evenings at "The Laurels" never failed in numbers at least, and brought us many invitations. I have known the rout seats in the hall so full that gentlemen have obligingly sat upon the stairs. But though we never spoke our thoughts we all felt (I'm sure I did) that, with some little allowance for personal attractions (my sisters were very pretty girls and I was thought to be like the younger), we still shone in the light of Aunt Stebbing's money. We knew that it, and not we, was the loadstone of the small parties at The Laurels. We never disturbed my mother's complacent

happiness by whispering what we knew; that rude men called our villa 'a hutch' and our parties 'vapour baths,' and spoke of us as 'good catches,' not for our merits, but for the stingy old woman's wealth's sake. Keenly I felt this humiliation, once when, at the Artillery Company's Ball, Captain Hople said to Major Sholto, who's she? Oh, Grayling's youngest—Grayling's of Clapham, you know—pretty, but poor as a mouse. But she's Chelsea Stebbing's niece though. It's strange that one never overhears a pleasant thing about one's self.

Chelsea Stebbing!—her name was Mary Ann, but she lived at Chelsea and the number of gentlemen who knew it was wonderful. Quite among our good society, too, were these military young gentlemen. Somerset House young gentlemen—indeed most men of fashion whom we met, knew my aunt, and called her Chelsea Stebbing. What these could have to do with, or how they came to know, the odd old lady, whom we so seldom saw, whom I had never seen, was puzzling enough. Her husband had been great in stocks, and so made his widow's reputation, perhaps. At all events, her reputation made ours, and without admitting it to our consciences, I fear we traded upon it too. Aunt Stebbing's money created great expectations, and we did nothing to discourage them. Our attentions to her were acknowledged in crabbled and curt style enough, yet we courted her with little flatteries. We affected to regard her as the family head and providence, without any reason, and made it understood that no family event, from christening to wedding, could have prosperous ending without her consent and blessing; in short, we lived on false pretences.

When, therefore, my marriage with Roland Rare was a settled thing, the day appointed, and the bridal dresses were ordered, my mother and I waited upon Aunt Stebbing. A strange, dread old lady she seemed to me on this my first meeting with her. Her hard, abrupt manner, in keeping with a face whose hard wrinkles might have been carved in antique ivory, eyes gray and keen, that cut through the veil of one's thoughts, though they kept hers close enough, frightened me. She wore, though she received us in her parlour, a Quaker bonnet, and a sombre dress, hanging straight upon her angular figure.

The room of the Chelsea mansion was cold and faded as herself, the paint worn yellow, the carpet patternless. It looked into a courtyard, where a strip of moss-grown flagstones made a path through a wilderness of nettles to the rusty gates. In one corner stood a desk, and at it sat an old clerk, worn threadbare and gray, to match the furniture. As we walked he sat turning the leaves of a great book, running his finger down each page as regularly as a machine, and making odd faces at it, not looking at us once.

You need not mind Barker, said my aunt; he's as deaf as a post; and I'd trust him with your business if he wasn't. You see, said my mother, after stating the business she came on, and introducing me to aunt, whose cheek under my trembling kiss felt like a billiard ball, we could do nothing further before asking your advice, sister Stebbing.

As your plans are settled before you ask it, sister Grayling, returned my aunt, you set a higher value on your own discretion.

My mother reddened, my ears tingled, an unpleasant beginning,—but my mother avaded the blunt truth.

I think, she replied, I may take credit for providing for your brother's children, sister. Few mothers have married three daughters in four years so well.

The 'well,' retorted my aunt, might have been worse if I hadn't found that Excise berth for your man of rank, and helped that Dixon out of his mess with his creditors. The 'well' of this business is to be seen. Who is this Roland Rare, child?

My aunt, sitting bolt upright on an office-stool, turned sharply round, and shot the question at me, as it were.

I'm sure, aunt, I stammered, in confusion, he's the best and the dearest, and the noblest, and—

Stuff, child! exclaimed my aunt, I mean, how will he get your bread?

He is, said my mother, interposing, a clerk,—junior, certainly,—but in Bullion and Bonder's, sister Stebbing.

I saw aunt's eyebrows lift a little.

Bonder's, said she, are no great paymasters. What may the young fellow's income be?

My mother blushed again,—she did not know. I knew, and blushed,—but it was from fear that this hard woman should charge Roland with poverty, and I become broken-hearted in consequence. What was his salary to me?—it sounded so mercenary, so worldly. Had we not agreed that love was quite beyond pounds, shillings and pence, and that affection could create a palace out of a back attic? I knew Roland only sought me as a catch at first; but he loved me now, though he knew I was no catch at all. How I hated that old Aunt Stebbing!

I can't say, replied my mother,—at

least, not exactly. Bullion's is a good firm. Mr. Dare is in good society,—he makes dear Rosa very beautiful presents. Show aunt your bracelet, dear. One has a certain dislike—a delicacy—a—

In acting fairly and above board, interrupted my aunt. You don't inquire, because you can't stand inquiry. Don't frown, sister,—don't cry, girl; you know it's true. Don't you move in good society?—don't you make a show above your means, and, catching good matches, as you think, do it under false pretences? This young fellow seems well to do—he may be poor. He thinks your daughter is, or may be rich; you know her to be poor. You are speculating with your child's future, sister Grayling—cheating each other. You dare not be sure of this man's circumstances, but he should know your own.

My mother trembled with the anger she dared not show, the more because, even to my ears, aunt's words had the ring of truth in them. There was a dead silence for a minute. We sat looking on the threadbare carpet, and the old clerk still checked the columns of the ledger, and made mouths at it.

However, resumed Aunt Stebbing, in a softer tone, the thing is done, I suppose; and matches of this sort are as happy sometimes as others made on squarer principles. The child loves the young man, of course?

I assured my aunt that to say how much was as impossible as it would be for him to express all his love for me.

Ah well child, if it is genuine, that is no bad capital to start on. I wish you happiness. Perhaps, however, Barker here may tell us what your mother can't. He knows most things. Barker! bawled my aunt.

Ma'am, said the old clerk, looking up. Roland Rare, Bullion and Bonder's? she asked.

The old machine fell to work again, running its finger down the columns of the great ledger, but this time murmuring as it worked; presently it stopped.

Yes, ma'am, said he; Dare, Roland. Well? said my aunt.

Three hundred at nine—seven to run; on Aaron Isaacs. Humph! said my aunt; a bright beginning.

What could this mean? The old woman, with her head bowed and her hands clasped behind, took two or three strides up and down the room, as her husband the stock-jobber might have done before her. My mother looked as blank as I did. What did it mean?

However, said my aunt, stopping short, hard lessons are best learned early. I wish you joy. I hope your Roland expects nothing from me, for he won't get it. I give nothing,—not even my advice,—which you pretend to ask. Good-bye.

With such indifferent greeting, and another cold kiss upon her hard cheek bone, she led us to the door. The iron gate at the other side of the wilderness of nettles opened, when the gray old clerk inside pulled a string, and we walked out alone. As we went out, a little dazed by the interview, a man coming in stood aside to let us pass—a queer little man, a dreadful old man in later days, with a purple, drunken face and watery eyes, in a shabby hat and coat, speckled with fluff, as if he had been sleeping inside a feather bed.

Beg pardon, ladies, said the little man, overtaking us before we had got to the street corner, a message. Mrs. Stebbing will call on the young lady, May twenty-seventh, at five p.m.

Eight months, said I, and, I declare, my birthday!

So it is, cried my mother, her face brightening out of the gloom of chagrin it had worn at the iron gate. Dear me, Rosa, only think: depend upon it that means something.

The old man, who heard this, watching us with his watery eyes, gave an audible chuckle as he lifted his battered hat and shuffled back again.

Chapter II.

My mother, who could build a false position upon little, was able to build false hopes upon nothing. The castles she managed to rear upon that shabby man's message were huge fortifications of Fortune. Depend upon it, aunt means something,—a vigorous imagination supplied the rest. She even departed from her cautious habit of hinting, rather than expressing, our expectations from her sister, and darkly assured dear Roland that her Rosa was indeed the prize of the family. More than that, she gave proof of faith in the fortune to come, by launching into extravagance far beyond her ordinary measure. She fired my married sisters with jealousy by announcing that her last daughter's wedding was to be emphatically 'a wedding' and grided herself to the determination of starting Clapham by its magnificence. Such dresses Miss Quiller never made before; such a bevy of bridesmaids were never before marshalled to issue from The Laurels; such an order for the breakfast Mr. Boulanger had not had for years. As for us—Roland and me—we were too rapt in the daze of the present and dreams of the future to waste thoughts on milliners and pastry-

cooks. Nay, excepting that I was to live with my Roland for ever and ever, I had no thought of even where we were to live when my mother's was my home no longer. We positively forgot the humble cottage, with which pure love is supposed to be satisfied, and, as far as I was concerned, might on our wedding day have walked from the church door homeless. My careful mother had not however, forgotten that house and rent belong to the matrimonial state.

My dear Mr. Dare, she said one evening, very near the day, what arrangements have you made for my daughter's future home.—her residence I mean?

It was such a lovely twilight,—so pleasant to hear the clicking of my mother's knitting-needles, and to strike soft chords on the piano, while Roland whispered softer music!—such a bore to be roused from dreams to such gross realities!

Upon my word, Mrs. Grayling, replied Roland doubtfully, it has hardly occurred to me, except that I have capital rooms at—

My mother gave a little scream.

Apartments, Mr. Dare!—my daughter in apartments! Impossible! What would her sisters say?—what would people say?

I saw trouble in Roland's face, and answered for him, poor fellow!

I don't care what they think, mamma, said I. Why should we care what people say?

For shame, Rosa! Those are not the principles on which you were brought to the position in society that you occupy, returned my mother, severely. Mr. Dare is too much a man of the world to agree with such silly, I may say sinful, sentiments. Apartments! What would be the result of a visit from Aunt Stebbing to my daughter, in apartments?

That argument was conclusive.

What do you suggest? asked Roland. We are inexperienced, you see.

Now you are practical and business-like, Mr. Dare, replied my mother. All your business habits will be required to guide our little girl, I promise you. I thought of you, knowing young people are naturally preoccupied, careless and so forth. There's a villa, 'The Thorns,' Rosa, to let. We can take it at once, and get it comfortably furnished by your return. It's small indeed, only eight rooms—

Eight rooms! cried poor Roland, looking at me open-eyed, as if he had made some mistake with regard to my magnitude.

It is small, no doubt, continued my mother, complacently; but you must make shift until you see what, well, how things turn out; and it's only eighty pounds a year.

Poor Roland! what a coward love made him. He winced as if a bad tooth had given a sudden twinge. I knew why, that awful eighty pounds was nearly half his income. But I dared not say anything, and could not help clinging to the vision of old Aunt Stebbing and her money. She might come and turn all our pumpkins into chariots, and all our mice into steeds, like the good fairy in the story; besides, silence saved a bother, when we only wanted to be happy.

I am afraid, Mrs. Grayling, began Roland, you will find your trouble—

Not at all, not at all, interrupted my mother, too eager with her scheme to hear an objection, and imagining only one possible. I don't mind the trouble. Poor dear papa's executors will pay Rosa's two hundred pounds to-morrow, and I will see to the furniture at once. You silly children don't care for any such unromantic business, she continued, tapping Roland on the shoulder with her knitting-needles; and it's my duty, Mr. Dare, the last I can do for my dearest child.

Here my mother dropped tears on her wool-work, and had to be kissed and comforted.

That villa! Oh, that villa! Well named The Thorns. What thorns it sprinkled on our path of roses! Its very name so stung and worried poor Roland and me for the weeks that followed, that we were obliged to leave it to despair and my mother. That poor two hundred, dear father's legacy to each of his three girls, was to have been my starting fund in life, and in the squadron of painters and decorators who took possession of The Thorns we saw it melting into air. If we passed it in our evening walk, a horror fell upon us at the sight of the big vans discharging their freight of bran-new furniture and bales of expensive wares, with Roland Dare, Esq., upon them, threatening bills to come. And while we tumbled in the shadow of our false pretences, and fearfully calculated how small a shred of the two hundred would escape The Thorns, my mother, serene in her villa, took high credit to herself for untrusting rigid economy with what was due to her child's true position. I did think of a piano, Rosa dear, she said, when the last waggon had discharged its last load, only sixty guineas; but until, well, until we see how things turn out, you can have mine, and save that expense, dear.

Then came the day. Giddy with pride, my mother gathered around her

every presentable relative to contemplate her magnificence, and secretly to sneer at it. I know the spiteful Fobbses did. They tell me that the six bridesmaids made a picture never equalled in St. Mary's church, that the curate felt the occasion, and read beautifully. I know nothing, except that there was breakfast in the two parlours, so easily made one—some one brought that into his speech beautifully—that old John Dixon made a speech that was funny, and young Fobbs one that was intended to make us cry, and so we did. Then there was a great clatter of glasses and china when some one proposed the health of Aunt Stebbing, our family head, though absent, ever dear, and every gentleman stood up to drink that toast as if he meant it, though every man there knew he did not as well as his neighbour.

Then it was over; and with some heartfelt kisses and some genuine tears, things that will fall at parting from any place called home; and mine, false in its show to the outside world, had still been a happy one within, we went away.

There was the usual crowd of idle people at the gate, lagging errand boys and nursery-maids to see the sight, and the poor old man one sometimes sees with a little piece of carpet to spread upon the pavement, and a dirty white shoe to throw at the departing carriage, the same old man who bawls for the carriage and bothers you with a lantern at a ball. I caught the old man's eye as I stepped into the carriage, wonderful! It was the same, the little fluffy man who brought Aunt Stebbing's message. Bang came the white shoe at the carriage; friends waved their hands; small boys cheered, led by the fluffy man, Aunt Stebbing's messenger; that must mean something surely.

Chapter III.

Four weeks of forgetfulness of all mortal cares, four weeks of golden sands and emerald sea, of walks beneath the moonlit cliffs and breezy rides across the sunlit downs, four weeks in Hastings, a fairland Hastings, not the Hastings I knew before; then home to The Thorns, to start up wide-awake to life's realities. They closed upon us on the threshold, like a damp November fog. The secret dread of troubles that must come hung over me; a gloom lowered upon Roland's face that never wholly lifted while we stayed there. My mother received us, to exhibit the villa's magnificence, and extol her care for our comfort, and the perfect fitness of the place to her dear child's position. But there was a little shade of nervousness about my mother, too, as if the fringe of the cloud of doubt was on her also. However, she organised our "at homes," kindly supplied her experience at one or two family gatherings, at the extravagance of which poor Roland shrank and shuddered; and fairly, as she said, fixed us in our nests.

How I hated that place! How I abhor its memory! If my feet sunk into the pile of the rich carpet, I shrank within myself, was it paid for? If I saw my face in a mirror, it reproached me, was the thing mine? The chimes of our marble timepiece, too, measured out the time that kept out the tradesmen's bills.

Trouble peeped out from the damask curtains and crouched under every chair. Yet, as we had shunned if not concealed the truth before our marriage, we dreaded to face it now. The reality might be worse than the suspicion. We dared not ask my mother the cost of all our magnificence, we dreaded the unpleasant explanation. We must wait and worry ourselves until the truth came of its own accord. One slender hope was left me yet. There had been my poor two hundred pounds, but there might be, oh there might be something in Aunt Stebbing's Message!

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

"I came for the saw, sir." "What saucer?" "Why, the saw, sir, that you borrowed." "I borrowed no saucer." "Sure you did, sir; you borrowed a saw, sir." "I never saw your saucer." "But you did; there's the saw now, sir." "Oh, you want the saw. Why didn't you say so?"

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