

The Better Way

WRITTEN FOR THE ADVERTISER

BY GERDA GRASS.

Author of "Phil Hawcroft's Son," "The Colonel's Little Boy," "The Way of a Woman," Etc.

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"I wonder if this work of hers in the slums is more than a pose, a pretty affectation?" mused the Rev. Ambrose Power at his writing-desk. "Those soft brown eyes she has are the exact color of her father's, and a more selfish, more silly, more cold-blooded man, I'll venture, never trod shoe leather. And those sweet ways of hers, half shy, half trustful—of course, they're mere clever tricks of coquetry. We impecunious curates are considered fair game, I fancy, by these elegant young ladies. Not that I am so very impecunious, to be sure, but—with a shrug of his shoulders—"so far as the daughter of Mr. Delling is concerned I am a hopeless negligible indeed. It is perfectly safe to flirt with her. I could not have the effrontery to take it seriously."

But his scornful lips quivered suddenly and softened, his gray eyes darkened, his fine face grew infinitely tender. "Oh, why do I try to cure myself," he said, aloud, "by these disloyal thoughts? Because she is a star out of my sphere, must I try to blur her brightness? She is all she seems—a dear, sweet, unaffected, noble girl. But," he ended, taking up his quill abruptly, "she is more in my thoughts than is good for me. I will answer this letter of hers about the Play Guild, and then—think of something else."

The letter finished, he took it up, and looked it over, half amused, half dismayed.

"Looks a bit shaky, eh? Bah! What a fool I am! She'll never think of it. I've no time to write another. I must go and see old Widow Bell, poor broken creature, and, oh! as many of them as I can. What a Christmas scene of these poor souls will have! If there were a few more helpers like Miss Delling we might get some of these awful places cleaned up by the Day of Judgment. Well, well! This Play Guild idea of hers is very good. It has answered splendidly in some parts of London. I don't see why it shouldn't answer here. What a marvelous girl she is! She seems to be as much in the swim as anybody, and yet she has always time to think out schemes of this sort."

He pocketed his letter, and getting up, strode out of the room into the hall, snatched his hat from its peg, clapped it on, and, with more energy than grace, swung himself out into the street. At the corner he posted the letter.

His way took him into the town, and, walking rapidly along the electric-lighted pavement, he found himself suddenly face to face with Miss Linda Delling—the queen of his foolish heart! A shop-assistant was carrying small parcels into her carriage. With eyes beaming radiantly through her black chenille-spotted veil, she came towards Ambrose with outstretched hand.

"Oh, Mr. Power," she cried, delightedly, "I have been wishing to see you. I have something to show you." She took a folded paper from her muff and flourished it before him.

He took it and opened it. In sprawling hieroglyphics was written:

"I hereby certify that I will not tech strong lickers no more—Yours truly, Robert Jugg."

Ambrose handed back the document. "I am very glad for Jugg, Miss Delling," he said, a little sadly, "and very sorry for myself. What is it I am wanting in? Tell me the secret of your success. I have been at this same poor Jugg—oh, times without number. And Jugg has politely informed me—But I am keeping you?"

"No, no, indeed. I am most glad to have met you, if only to wish you a happy Christmas when it comes. And oh! would you mind giving this—a soft gloved hand stole into his and left a coin—"to poor Mrs. Jugg. Her husband was in all the time, and I'm afraid my faith in him has not got backbone yet. So I dared not give her anything before

him. Oh, did you get my letter? Have you found me any children for my Play Guild?"

"I have scores for you, Miss Delling." "Oh!" She gave a pretty start of assumed alarm. "I hope we shall be equal to them all, poor little things. Thank you very much for getting me such a nice large room, piano and all. It will do splendidly, and I have got a lovely Christmas tree for it already. I am going away tomorrow for a fortnight's visit to some friends, but I shall be at liberty at once when I come back. My father is going to Nice, by the way. He detests our English Christmas. Isn't it odd? I love it. And now, good-bye. I hope you will have a very happy holiday."

So with mutual good wishes they parted. "A happy Christmas for me!" said the Rev. Ambrose, gloomily, in the privacy of his heart. "Ah, that is very likely! Perhaps—if I had never met Linda Delling. But now the best will always be wanting. I hope she will meet her fate this holiday. I wish she would get married. I should have to forget her then. Jugg is more in her thoughts than I am."

It was a cloudy night, with promise of snow. Not a star was to be seen. Coming out from the lively, brilliantly-lit streets straight into utter gloom and solitude, Ambrose Power crossed over, and, opening the railway gates, passed over the row of lines that divided prosperous, respectable Port Rushborough, with its glittering shops, its fine houses, its pretty ladies and elegant gentlemen, from the collection of slums known as Old Town.

Here, amid the murkiness and filth, amid the noise of coarse laughter and quarrelsome oaths, a barrel organ was grinding out the last strains of "Ora Pro Nobis." Close upon Piccolomini's solemn melody came the frolicsome trills and runs of a gay, new-fangled dance. Tattered little girls left their corners swiftly, chose other tattered little girls for partners, came out into the middle of the road, and there stood waiting with nodding heads to catch the time, and then began to dance. Merrily their legs danced, too. Ambrose stood and watched them with a tender pity, heedless of the whispered jeers about him, till suddenly a policeman sauntered up and waved a hand majestically. Without a murmur the crowd of little dancers melted away. "The 'bobby' was part of the programme."

"For its size," mused Ambrose, as he picked his way, "Port Rushborough has managed to collect a marvelous lot of vice and filth and—organ-grinders. One finds these dancing groups in every little street, and always an ogre in blue pouncing down on their fun. I suppose this is what has made her think of a Play Guild. Poor little souls! They need a refuge for their harmless frolics badly."

II.

Drumming his taper fingers impatiently upon a small table beside him, Mr. Delling looked out upon his spacious grounds, covered now with some inches of snow, and, with a rare moodiness in his snow, velvet brown eyes, awaited the home-coming of his only daughter, Linda, from her fortnight's Christmas visit in the country.

"It's odd!" he mused. "Linda and I have been the best of friends always, and yet—I don't know her in the least. I haven't the faintest notion how she will take it. H'm!"

He began to pace the beautiful room fretfully, and then, with a sudden return of his ordinary philosophical calm, he sat down at the keyboard of the grand piano and began to weave soft, dreamy melodies that were reminiscent of bits of Verdi and Mascagni, but which he was placidly convinced were quite his own.

Fascinating beyond description—for what pen could tell how mellow was his voice, how winning were his ways—galant with women, cordial with men, Geoffrey Delling was yet, in his sixtieth year, the idol of Port Rushborough's society. But little above the middle height, he was inclined, though quite becomingly, to the plumpness of good living and an indulgent conscience. Brows and mustache still wore their original hue, but his raven hair had rapidly turned snow-white. Thick and fine and wavy it had, however, suffered no loss of beauty from the change, and his soft brown eyes but shone the darker for the contrast. He had an effective tenor voice, was a delightful dancer, a very fair artist in water colors—behold his moonlight scenes and storm-tossed vessels here upon the richly-papered walls—he was devoted to horticulture; his orchids and Malmalson roses will never be surpassed, and, having traveled much, he had a marvelous store of anecdote and scenic description wherewith to employ his confident tongue. He was an ideal host, an idea guest. His father, a prosperous shipbuilder of humble origin, had seen with some disappointment that Nature had clearly intended his younger son for merely ornamental purposes; but, with the philosophy of a practical man, he had made the best of the matter and had helped him to make the most of his aptitude for drawing-room accomplishments. Dying, he had left Dellingholme, with a substantial income, to Geoffrey, and the shipbuilding business to his elder son, Bert, a beetle-browed, energetic, pushful young man, who, ere his fortieth year, had become the leading shipbuilder of the north, and a famous matador of finance. Lucky, plucky, determined and ambitious, Bert Delling was the idol of the workmen, as his brother was the idol of society, and had been literally thrust into Parliament by an admiring populace, and subsequently knighted.

The brothers were poles apart. The life of the one was work, work, work, with little thought of pleasure—of the other, pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, with never a thought of work. Even in his music, Geoffrey Delling was dreamy, sleepy, languid.

He paused now in his twilight melodies with his fingers on the keys, and for some moments sat lost in thought. Then, with a sudden feeling of triumphant confidence in his fortunes, he dashed abruptly into one of his rare bravuras.

So magnificent, so brilliant was the music that he did not hear the crunch of the long-expected wheels on the snow, did not hear the melodious, happy voice of his daughter, as she got out of the carriage with her maid, did not hear her hail the log-fires in the hall with a glad compliment:

"You dear, delightful, dancing flames! It's been a delicious fortnight—never a happier, but no fires are like our own, are they, Alice? East or west, home is best. Take my muff, please. I'm going straight in to my father. And, Alice, lay out my violet velvet. It's my father's favorite."

And so overwhelming was the brilliant noise that Linda, standing on the threshold of the drawing-room, now wrapped in darkness save for the flickering firelight, fell back in sheer alarm.

"What! All in darkness, father?" "Here at last, then! Touch the button, Linda."

A flood of electric light, rose-shaded, dispelled the darkness and revealed to the one his lovely daughter, elegantly clad in crimson gown and sea-queen coat, with smart fur toque lit up with crimson quills, and to the other her handsome father, wearing now his usual indulgent smile. She had only come in for his kiss of welcome, and, having received it on red, happy lips, went out at once to dress for dinner. He did not like to be kept waiting.

A little later she came into the dining-room, looking exquisite in the violet velvet that showed up her milk-white skin with its peachy tints on cheek and chin, and her mass of wavy red-gold hair.

"What a winter, father!" she exclaimed, as she seated herself. "We got snowed up at a little junction, though not so badly but that we soon were on our way again. How the poor will suffer if this lasts, with coals at their present price! I never sit down to a feast of good things—her eyes grew grave as their gaze traveled over the flower-decked, glittering table—but I almost feel ashamed. So many have barely a crust of bread, and we have—everything. Often I am checked in the very midst of enjoyment, in the very midst of thinking how good life is, by a swift remembrance of the other side of the medal."

"My love," returned her father, with his pleasant smile, "you are quite Egyptian in your lugubrious dark sentiments. There is a very pretty skull in some corner or other of the library which perhaps you would like to have before you as you eat. Shall I send for it?"

Linda blushed a little, but laughed good-naturedly.

"How you tease me, father! But, indeed, I quite deserve it for my stupidity in regaling you with such doleful talk."

She could not expect him, she thought, to feel as she did for the hardships and sorrows of the poorest poor. He had never seen one of these hideous, joyless hovels. He was a man of fashion. Solitude for the submerged tenth was left, she mused a little sadly, to women and curates. So she dismissed her somber thoughts and applied herself to the pleasant task of amusing her father with descriptions of the people she had met and of the pleasures she had shared.

Dinner over, Mr. Delling passed his arm affectionately round his daughter's slender waist, and, leading her to a palm-decked alcove in the drawing-room stood silent till she had settled herself among the silk cushions. Then he seated himself before her, and, with eyes fixed gravely upon her face, took her slender fingers in his own.

"My love," he said, slowly, "I did not want to spoil your appetite, and mine—by referring to the matter earlier, but—I have bad news for you."

"Bad—news!"

"My dear, compose yourself, I beg. To agitate oneself has never yet been of the slightest use. Yes—bad news! I am in low water, Linda, in very low water, indeed. My means are exhausted. Dellingholme is mortgaged for every penny of its worth, and the fellows are dunning me right and left. They will give me no more time. There is nothing for it now, my girl, but—the bankruptcy court."

"Father!"

In spite of his philosophical advice, she was agitated beyond measure. She had risen; her face was utterly bereft of color; she was trembling from head to foot.

"Father! Father! How has this happened?"

He shrugged his shoulders, half impatiently.

"What is the use of going into details, Linda? You have no head for such things. Indeed, I have none myself, which is partly the reason, I suppose, for this—misfortune. We have been living above our means, of course, and then, too, a couple of years ago I made some unfortunate speculations."

It was not necessary to explain that the unfortunate speculations had been made on the roulette table of Monte Carlo out of sheer caprice.

His daughter stood motionless, like a statue of despair.

"And I—I have been playing the Lady Bountiful in the slums," she said, blankly, "on money that belonged to other people. I have been giving the children living above our means, of course, and then, too, a couple of years ago I made some unfortunate speculations."

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"Dellingholme is ours no longer," she almost whispered. "Grandfather's house! And he must have been so proud of it! Father, why did you let me go to this great party—get all these expensive gowns?"

"Because, my dear child," he answered in his smooth, mellow tones, "I wanted my daughter to have as much amusement as well dressed—as any other. Because I am a weak father, I daresay. Perhaps, also," his voice for a moment took a harder ring, "because I hoped you would make some use of your splendid opportunities. Sir Everest Hardy's son is no—"

"Don't, father," she broke in, clapping her hands to her ears. "He has never been a moment in my thoughts—never will be. But, oh," she looked at him with searching curiosity, "how strong you are, father. How calmly, philosophically you can take this horrible calamity. I—I am heart-broken."

Then suddenly Mr. Delling rose, whipped from an inner pocket a large blue envelope, and, taking from it a letter, flourished this before her.

"Dry your eyes, my daughter," he said, with dramatic solemnity, choking back a sob of emotion. "It is your unfortunate father only who is poor—is bankrupt. You, my Linda, are an heiress!"

"What?" She stared at him incredulously. "I? An heiress? Whose heiress?"

"Read this," he said. "It came two days ago, and as I saw it was a lawyer's letter, I took the liberty of opening it. Your grandmother, Mrs. Tempest, has been true to her threat, has disowned that foolish nephew of hers for his insane marriage, and has made you, my dear, the heiress to a very pretty fortune."

She took the letter and slowly read it through. Yes, it was there in black and white, she was an heiress! Her father's eyes, fixed searchingly upon her face, saw the color return. He held out his arms.

"Come, my love," he said, with a coaxing smile, "and let your poor father have a kiss from his lucky daughter."

Somewhat coldly she suffered herself to be embraced, then freed herself.

"Why have you frightened me so, father?" she asked, indignantly. "What was your reason? How could you do it? What fear is there now of the bankruptcy court? Dellingholme will be ours again, and every debt be paid."

"Nonsense, child," he answered, testily. "My affairs must take their course. With my debts you have nothing to do at all. Certainly, you may pay off the mortgage on Dellingholme—it would be a very sensible investment; but as for the other matters—nonsense! There is no law—"

"Law?" He had never thought of law. The law of right is enough for me. Do you mean that, having actually the money with which to pay them, we are to cheat these people who have trusted us?"

He halted in his fretful pacing, and his fine eyes were aflame.

"You use pleasant words to your father, Linda. What I want to ask you is this: Do you imagine for a moment that if you spend this fortune of yours—a happy windfall, I must say—on paying debts, which need not concern you in the least, there will be anything left on which to keep up Dellingholme?"

"Oh, no!" she answered, a little sadly.

"I have some small notion of arithmetic, father. Dellingholme, when I have paid off the mortgage, must be let, and we must take a smaller house and try to be as happy there. Or, perhaps, for its name's sake, Uncle Bert would buy Dellingholme. It would leave me a little more money."

"A little more money?" cried her father scornfully. "Do you know what you are contemplating? These debts, if you are fool enough to pay them, will swallow more than three-fourths of your fortune! You will leave us paupers, Linda!"

"Come, come, dear father," she answered, gently. "Not paupers, dearest. It

is not so bad as that. What should we have done if no fortune had been left us?"

"Don't worry me with your 'ifs'!" he retorted, fiercely. "Do you think I have not had enough of worry?"

He had thrown himself into an easy chair, and with head thrown back stared up with angry eyes at the magnificent ceiling with its Cupids and roses. Softly his daughter came towards him, and, dropping on a knee beside him, laid loving hands about his neck.

"Dear father," she said, "you have not thought over this calmly and kindly. This misfortune must not be misused. The fact that Lance Tempest is most wicked with his money convinces me that it is meant for nobler ends. Honestly to pay the debts we have brought on ourselves—aye, though it brought us to the workhouse!—and afterwards to try to profit by the bad scare we have had, this is the better way. We shall be at peace with ourselves, and true friends will not—"

He released himself abruptly from her arms and rose.

"You talk," he said, with icy coldness, "like a most excellent copy-book, Linda, or like a sentimental, frightened school-girl. I had hoped you were a woman of the world. When you find you have made a considerable drop in the social scale—for bankruptcies are forgotten when you get on your feet again, but poverty that lasts is not—when you find yourself refusing brilliant entertainments because you can give none yourself, when you have had brought home to you all the losses that it means, you will regret this absurd ultra-consciousness of yours. I advise you, think it over. Not every day does a fortune drop from the clouds. Be a woman of sense. You are as fond of luxury and pleasure as ever I have been."

With dignified scorn he strode to the door, but there the dignity vanished, and Linda Delling standing rooted to the spot with consternation in her eyes, heard, for the first time in her life, her father slam the door.

Gone now was the glamor of his beauty, his mellow voice, his polished geniality. She felt herself orphaned, desolate, utterly forsaken.

Then out of the misty emptiness rose another face—a kind, earnest, sincere face—the face of Ambrose Power.

"He is one of the truest men in all the world," she said. "And he would say I have done right!"

IV.

Yes, her father was right. She loved luxury and pleasure—loved glitter and gladness; loved to go yachting with a troop of friends; loved to see new scenes, wonderful landscapes, magnificent cities. So much the more could she feel for lives unchangeably sordid, bare and dull. So much more did the sights and sounds and smells of slumdom offend her pampered senses. But her heart was brave and generous, and paid no heed to their protests.

From a schoolroom not far from the Old Town sounded a very happy noise composed of the merry tinkle of a piano, the rhythmic stamp of some scores of little feet, the bee-like hum of half-loud voices.

Softly the Rev. Ambrose opened the door and looked in. Yes! The Old Town had also its brutal men, its frowny women still; but here, at least, was a goodly portion of its children, their faces scrubbed by half-scorful, yet not unwilling mothers till now they shone like glass, save where the "tide-mark" parted clean face from dirty throat. Some of them with prouder parents wore gay ribbons in their hair and gaudy beads about their necks. But all of them were fastened to their heads bright paper flowers that deft and dainty hands had fashioned. And all of them were happy.

For these were living flowers—forget-me-nots, violets, buttercups, daisies and primroses. There were garden flowers, too—roses, lilies, pansies, pinks and gorgeous sunflowers. But wild flowers and

garden flowers were quite at peace together, and, hand-in-hand, with quite wondrous grace, they danced towards each other, and swinging round with now and then a rhythmic click of heel and toss of toe, blew merry kisses each to each at pauses in their song.

Ambrose Power seated himself unmarked on a bench beside the door.

"It goes extremely well," he commented, pleased. "What an angel she is!" The melodies, too, were hers. Like snow-white butterflies her twinkling fingers chased each other across the keys. She had all her father's musical skill, and a more original fancy. And this pantomime of song and dance was called "The Meeting of the Flowers."

But now one of the Queens of the Guild caught sight of Ambrose, and the music happening to end just then, came rapturous towards him.

"How sweet of you to come and see us. Have you been here long? Don't they dance well? If only they were properly washed!"

"I don't think it matters, does it?" said Ambrose, smiling. "The aim so far is just to make them happy for an hour and teach them gentler games. And you have admirably succeeded."

"Oh, here is Mr. Power! How dear of him! Have you been here long? Did you suppose them dance? Don't they have the gift of sympathy, and children are quick to find it out. But let me offer you my warmest congratulations, Miss Delling, on the fortune which I understand you have inherited. That it will be nobly used, I know."

She looked into his ardent eyes with a little smile.

"Remark on Mr. Power. You are good to me. But the fortune will be mine a few days only. Let me tell you the truth. I have been helping my father to be very extravagant, and most of my money will be swallowed up by the appalling debts we have incurred. It is a shameful confession, but the truth is, I am not a rich woman any longer. Mr. Power, indeed, almost a poor one. But you may congratulate me all the same, for I feel that God has been most good to me in sending me this fortune that I never dreamed I needed."

But Ambrose Power stood mute. A sudden flush rose to his brow. The barrier, then, was gone!

"The carriage is coming for you, I suppose, Miss Delling," he asked, in a hoarse voice that he scarcely knew himself.

"Oh, no! My father does not like—I mean, we never have the horses out in snowy weather."

"I see," Ambrose smiled a little. How careful he was of the horses, and how loyal to his duty to him. Her debts, indeed! "Then I may have the pleasure of seeing you home? I see the others are getting ready."

She would be very pleased. None of the others were going her way. The flowers had been put away, the children had donned their battered hats and tattered capes, the ladies their cosy furs. In a dream Ambrose heard their voices. They were gone. The caretaker had come in and was sitting by the bench Ambrose had vacated. A moment later and the lights were out, and they two were crunching along the white streets together.

They were more silent than was the wont of either, and so it came to pass that it was at the very doors of Dellingholme, that had once so awed his love, that Ambrose Power told Linda the secret that he had kept so long. And at the very doors of Dellingholme he was made happy.

The pretty wedding has just taken place, and the presents Sir Bertram Delling, M. P. for Coleborough, made to his "dear niece" were not only a very substantial check indeed, but also the seeds of Dellingholme.

THE AX of toughest steel by constant use and must have a new edge if it is to do good work. Constant work dulls a man as it does an ax, makes him sluggish of body and dull of mind. He needs a tonic, something that will restore the keenness of mind and activity of body.

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