THE KING WHO WISHED TO BE GOOD; BY
WALTER A. DYER

ONCE upon a time there lived a king who desired to be good. His father had been so wicked that his people hated him, and when the old King died and the young King ascended the throne, the kingdom was in a sorry state and almost on the point of rebellion. Now the old King's sins were too numerous to catalogue. His infidelity broke the Queen's heart, and in a drunken rage he slew his only brother. In discovering novel forms of wickedness he showed an ingenuity worthy of a better cause.

Being a very bad old King, he paid little attention to the upbringing of his son, who consequently grew up entirely under his mother's influence. The Queen was not a prodigiously wise woman, but experience had taught her the baneful effects of wickedness, and her teachings consisted largely in telling the young Prince what not to do. She made him see to what condition the kingdom had come because of his father's wickedness. She showed him the ugliness of sin. She made him desire to shun it; she made him want to be good, but she taught him only how not to be bad.

So when the old King died and the young King reigned in his stead, he let it be known that he wished to be a good King. The people were very glad, for they were weary of royal vice, and they acclaimed the new King joyfully. "Now," said they, "we shall be a happy people again."

The King married a Princess from a neighboring realm, and when the people saw that he bade fair to be an exemplary husband, they rejoiced. He banished all the designing women and reckless roysterers from his court, and established good men and ladies in their places. He caused extortion to cease and made peace with his neighbors. Then he seated himself quietly on his throne and devoted himself to the task of being a just and honorable monarch.

Years went by, and the King did no evil. He devoted himself exclusively to the avoidance of sin. But somehow he warmed not the people's hearts. There had been some who loved the old King in spite of his wickedness, for he could be a jolly good fellow when he would; but few there were who really loved his son. Both court and kingdom sank into a sort of righteous lethargy.

By and by a famine came. The rains fell not, and blight ruined the corn. The crops failed, and there was much misery when winter came.

The King ordered certain sanitary measures to be taken, and saw to it that the police redoubled their vigilance to prevent
A NEW YEAR'S ALLEGORY

thieving, and any other crime which the hard times might encourage.

But murmurs and grumblings arose among the people, and when they reached the ears of the King in his comfortable palace, he was surprised and grieved.

"The people must be patient," said he. "They should remember how much worse was their plight under a wicked King."

But the murmurs grew louder, until one day a delegation of citizens came to the gates of the royal castle and demanded that something be done for their relief.

The King was alarmed and hastily summoned his council, but they gave him no consolation.

"Hunger and suffering have wrought the people to a frenzy," they said. "Nothing can be done till another harvest."

At his wit's end the King at last sent for Fra Dominique, an old hermit who was reputed to be very wise.

"What shall I do?" cried the King in despair. "The people are turning against me—me, who have always been called Rudolph the Good."

"What hast thou done?" asked Fra Dominique.

"Done?" cried the King, mistaking his meaning; "I have done nothing. I have never ground down the people as my father did, but now they turn against me."

"But what hast thou done to make them love thee?" asked the sage. "Hast gone among them, taking bread to the hungry and comfort to the sick? Hast ever spoken a kind word to old men or young mothers?"

"Ah," broke in King Rudolph, with a smile, "thou dost not understand. Those are not kingly tasks. Thou hast lived so long in thy mountain hut that thou hast forgotten how the affairs of men are conducted. It is for the King to rule, not to act as almoner or physician."

"Nay," replied Fra Dominique, "then I cannot help thee," and shaking his hoary old head, he hobbled out of the audience room, while the courtiers tittered behind their hands.

The discontent grew apace as winter advanced, and suffering increased. The royal palace was practically in a state of siege, and the King slept in a coat of mail for fear of his own people.

But the young Queen, who had been born in a happier kingdom, heard the words of the old hermit and pondered them in her heart. And after the sun had set she slipped out to the cottage of Simon the gardener, whose wife lay sick of the fever. There she learned much that gave her food for thought, and on the following day she
took bread and wine and went forth into the town, trembling and afraid, but steadfast in her purpose. She called at the old cobbler's shop and left food for his starving little ones, for there were no shoes to be made in those lean days. She visited the crusty old miller and gave him gold for flour which she left at the homes of the needy.

The next day she went forth again, and the next, and the next.

The people at first received her coldly and with suspicion, but soon they began to doff their caps and curtsy when she approached, and finally to follow her in the streets to kiss the hem of her robe. Her heart went out to the stricken and forlorn, and they blessed her and called her Madeline the Kind.

The Queen saw that she was doing but little to alleviate the sufferings of the people, so at last she sent her jewels by a trusty courier to her father, and in the early Spring great wains came over the mountains laden with grain, and flocks of sheep were driven into the valley to provide food and raiment for the stricken people.

Then came the work of sowing and cultivating, and with the prospect of good crops the people ceased their murmurings, and the King rested in peace. He rode forth again on his big roan mare, and the people saluted him as of yore.

"There rides Rudolph the Good," said some.

"Yes," said others, "but wait, and thou may'st have a glimpse of his Queen, Madeline the Kind."

At the head of his glittering cavalcade King Rudolph passed on beyond the town and out among the greening fields, and his heart swelled with pride.

"Ah," he cried, "see what it is to be a good King!"

Then he bethought himself of old Fra Dominique, and being in the mood, he urged his good mare up the winding path to the hermit's hut. There he found the old sage poring over an ancient manuscript.

"Good morrow, Fra Dominique," he cried, leaping from his horse. "And how is the gay world using thee?"

"Better than I deserve," replied the hermit.

"Why sayest thou so?" asked the King. "Thou art a good man."

"A man may be as good as a saint," quoth the hermit, "but he is an old man who has lived long enough to do all the good that the world deserves of him."

"Thou speakest in riddles," laughed the King. "See yonder fields with their growing corn, and the men singing at their work. They are happy because they have a good King, Fra Dominique."

"Nay," answered the hermit, "it is because they have a good
Queen. Listen, and I will give thee the truth of it. There is but one amulet that will ward off woe—one talisman that brings sleep to the pillow of King or peasant. It is the talisman Goodness. On one side of it is written the word Morality, and on the other, Kindness. It is incomplete and useless without both. To do no evil is not all of goodness. My stool does no evil. To be kind is not enough. My dog is kind to me, but he worries Goodwife Gretchen’s cat. Wear this talisman and thou wilt be indeed a good King.”

But Rudolph was already weary of good counsel, and leaping on his mare he dashed down the hill with his merry cavaliers; while Fra Dominique bethought him of a certain very rich young man who had kept the law from his youth up, but when the Master bade him sell all he had and distribute unto the poor, he was very sorrowful, for he was very rich.

According to the comic papers, at least, the New Year is the time for the making of good resolutions. Why do we do it? What is the object of this annual turning over of the new leaf? What is that impulse in men and women that makes them feel that they have not been good enough? This being good is an odd thing, when you come to think of it. And the oddest thing about it is that we don’t think about it—at least not to reason it out at all. We take it for granted that being good is at once a desirable and a difficult thing, and its difficulty is the chief thing that bothers us.

When we resolve to take more exercise, we do it with a distinct purpose; our livers are torpid or our belts too tight. When we resolve to read more literature and less newspaper, we do it because some one has made us feel ashamed of our ignorance. We say “I will eat less,” or “I will save money,” but we do not often say “I will be a good person,” any more than we say “I will wear shoes,” or, “Heaven helping me, I will breathe.” We may not be good as easily as we breathe, but we do not question its desirability.

The fact remains that plenty of people are not good, and may even possess a subconscious doubt as to the sense of it. Still, it is usually rather a matter of temperament; it comes more natural to some than to others.

But it isn’t easy for anyone to be good, and since it is so very hard for some, it is worth while raising the question as to the value of goodness. If it isn’t really worth while, why bother with New-Year resolutions and all that sort of thing? Why not be wicked and have a good time?

Old saws are mostly wrong, and we know it. “Be good and
you’ll be happy” convinces no one. “The wicked flourish as a green bay tree” no longer seems to contain a vital truth. The attitude of the naturally virtuous, that it is right to be good, simply begs the question. And so certain ultra-radicals arise and say it is right to be bad, and we are hard put to it for an answer. They shock us, Elbert Hubbard-wise, with brilliant and subversive epigrams, and we are not prepared with an adequate rejoinder.

Leaving piety aside—for that, it seems to me, is a manifestation of an entirely different impulse—let us consider of what goodness actually consists. I suppose we would all work it out in different ways, but to me it seems possible to divide goodness into two main elements: morality, which is negative and passive, and kindness, which is positive and active.

Morality is comprehended in the observation of the “Thou shalt not” portion of the Decalogue. I need not enumerate the Commandments. The moral man is the one who not only commits none of these sins, but avoids actions which border on them. Thus, the strictly moral man does not misrepresent, cheat, bribe, flirt with his neighbor’s wife, or get drunk.

Good people have made a religion of morality, when what it needs is a reasonable philosophy. Morality has actually a secure, logical basis, only we have lost sight of that and have taken as an axiom what is actually a Q. E. D. If we were only familiar with the steps of the demonstration we would be armed against scoffers and against doubts. I actually heard a man, accused of immoral action, ask, “Why not?” and no satisfactory answer was forthcoming. To have said “Because it is wrong” would have been merely absurd.

Nietzsche says, “Morality is the herd instinct in the individual.” He needn’t have been so scornful about it, for his definition expresses a perfectly valid reason why. When analyzed, it means that we inherit from the experience of countless generations of human beings the consciousness that the only way to live comfortably together is morally. Among these far-off ancestors were those who robbed, murdered and took other liberties with each other, and that manner of living proved disastrous. It has therefore become a part of our human instinct to regard immoral living as upsetting and entangling, and when this ancient truth is applied to the individual it works out just as completely as with the race.

We are trying for a little broadening of the mental horizon—you and I—for a little soul expansion and spiritual growth. We are after the richer life, and wickedness is bound to retard us in our quest. Wickedness complicates life. The simple, straightforward
way of living is what gives our souls a chance to grow and so to become of some value to us. Uprightness, morality, truth and decency give a clear, clean foundation for the richer life, while vice is a smothering force.

So, for that matter, is Puritanism. Puritanism has done a great deal to strengthen our love for virtue, but it is an unreasoning, dogmatic thing—a blind leader of the blind. It builds a pontoon bridge across the morass; it does not touch bottom.

Moreover, Puritanism is most annoying to certain minds, and stirs up a harmful antagonism to the good that is in it. We must see clearly if we are to advance.

Truth, be it said in passing, is much misunderstood. There are those radicals who make a fetish of truth without understanding it. Because truth is naked, they seem to consider all nakedness truth. I have little patience with them.

Finally, there is the semi-moral man who believes that honesty is the best policy. It is; only the man who is honest for policy’s sake misses the point. He is thinking of the opinion of his neighbors, and not of his own soul. One can get away from one’s neighbors, glory be, but one must live a lifetime with one’s own soul.

Morality, therefore, is the avoidance of the entanglements of vice, and I contend that it is essential to the richer life, even for men of genius, who, by the way, are often conspicuously immoral and conspicuously unhappy. They live on jagged mountain peaks; the average man is better off on a plateau.

Morality is essential, but I contend that it is merely negative and passive. It clears the way and makes soul-growth possible, but it does not make the soul grow. Something active must be added. The cultivator must be used after the plow. Christian ethics teaches us that faith without works is void, and the good King was only half good, after all.

If we are to bother at all with good resolutions this year, I would suggest taking a little thought on the subject of kindness. Kindness—or charity—is the active force of Christianity. Buddhist, Brahmin, Mohammedan, Confucian—all are moral, but only the Master taught the great truth of kindness. Kindness added to morality completes goodness. Kindness makes the world a better place to live in. Kindness dries up tears, heals wounds, feeds the hungry, comforts the distressed.

The followers of Nietzsche would have none of this. Their Superman should climb to lonely heights on the necks of his less fortunate fellows. I would not be that Superman for worlds. I believe that when he reaches that sublime height he will own a soul as shriveled
A NEW YEAR'S ALLEGORY

as a last year's pear, and will enjoy it about as much. Nietzsche has missed the whole point of the Sermon on the Mount. Kindness is something he cannot understand, and I pity him.

It takes a man-sized mind to comprehend the full meaning of kindness. Only one great Teacher understood it perfectly. I can remember how utterly beyond my grasp it was when I was a child. If I could bring myself to live one day without committing some serious childish sin, I was puffed with pride. Kindness was, I felt, a virtue reserved for mothers and other untempted persons. And I can't say truthfully that I have fully outgrown that feeling.

It is not easy to be kind. It is much more difficult than to be moral. It requires the strength of a grown man. It means more than mere forbearance and amiability. Gentleness is a mark of power, not of weakness.

But oh, how kindness helps the soul to grow! How it enriches life! How it extends the personality to include other people, and broadens the outlook of life! It gives us purpose, poise, direction. It gives groundwork and foundation to life. It provides something to live for when all else crashes in ruins about our ears. I fancy a really kind man would not think of suicide. And it furnishes one of the most interesting, alluring occupations imaginable.

And the best of it is that anyone can be kind. It requires no special talent, no unusual advantages of training. It is harder for some men to be kind than to get rich, but kindness can be achieved by many, riches by a few.

Yes, I think it is worth trying—this being good. I don't know what or where Heaven is; I don't much believe in Hell. But I do know that I would hate to enter Eternity—whatever Eternity may be—with the soul of a Machiavelli. Wherever our souls go, if they go anywhere when we die, they will be bare souls. They will be exposed to the full glare of the great white light that beats about the Throne, and there will be no covering those souls with fine raiment—no excusing their condition with clever sophistries. We cannot look into the future, but it is in our power to prepare our souls for whatever may happen, and I should prefer to take my chances with a soul that had not been choked with wickedness or stunted for lack of exercise. And if nothing happens at all—if annihilation is the end of life—at least goodness will not have done us a bit of harm.
"PRIMITIVE MAN": A DETAIL.
AUGUSTE RODIN, SCULPTOR.
Reproduced from Die Kunst.