

The Angel and the Author

by

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CHAPTER I

I had a vexing dream one night, not long ago: it was about a fortnight after Christmas. I dreamt I flew out of the window in my nightshirt. I went up and up. I was glad that I was going up. "They have been noticing me," I thought to myself. "If anything, I have been a bit too good. A little less virtue and I might have lived longer. But one cannot have everything." The world grew smaller and smaller. The last I saw of London was the long line of electric lamps bordering the Embankment; later nothing remained but a faint luminosity buried beneath darkness. It was at this point of my journey that I heard behind me the slow, throbbing sound of wings.

I turned my head. It was the Recording Angel. He had a weary look; I judged him to be tired.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "it is a trying period for me, your Christmas time."

"I am sure it must be," I returned; "the wonder to me is how you get through it all. You see at Christmas time," I went on, "all we men and women become generous, quite suddenly. It is really a delightful sensation."

"You are to be envied," he agreed.

"It is the first Christmas number that starts me off," I told him; "those beautiful pictures--the sweet child looking so pretty in her furs, giving Bovril with her own dear little hands to the shivering street arab; the good old red-faced squire shovelling out plum pudding to the crowd of grateful villagers. It makes me yearn to borrow a collecting box and go round doing good myself."

"And it is not only me--I should say I," I continued; "I don't want you to run away with the idea that I am the only good man in the world. That's what I like about Christmas, it makes everybody good. The lovely sentiments we go about repeating! the noble deeds we do! from a little before Christmas up to, say, the end of January! why noting them down must be a comfort to you."

"Yes," he admitted, "noble deeds are always a great joy to me."

"They are to all of us," I said; "I love to think of all the good deeds I myself have done. I have often thought of keeping a diary-- jotting them down each day. It would be so nice for one's children."

He agreed there was an idea in this.

"That book of yours," I said, "I suppose, now, it contains all the good actions that we men and women have been doing during the last six weeks?" It was a bulky looking volume.

Yes, he answered, they were all recorded in the book.

[The Author tells of his Good Deeds.]

It was more for the sake of talking of his than anything else that I kept up with him. I did not really doubt his care and conscientiousness, but it is always pleasant to chat about one's self. "My five shillings subscription to the Daily Telegraph's Sixpenny Fund for the Unemployed--got that down all right?" I asked him.

Yes, he replied, it was entered.

"As a matter of fact, now I come to think of it," I added, "it was ten shillings altogether. They spelt my name wrong the first time."

Both subscriptions had been entered, he told me.

"Then I have been to four charity dinners," I reminded him; "I forget what the particular charity was about. I know I suffered the next morning. Champagne never does agree with me. But, then, if you don't order it people think you can't afford it. Not that I don't like it. It's my liver, if you understand. If I take more--"

He interrupted me with the assurance that my attendance had been noted.

"Last week I sent a dozen photographs of myself, signed, to a charity bazaar."

He said he remembered my doing so.

"Then let me see," I continued, "I have been to two ordinary balls. I don't care much about dancing, but a few of us generally play a little bridge; and to one fancy dress affair. I went as Sir Walter Raleigh. Some men cannot afford to show their leg. What I say is, if a man can, why not? It isn't often that one gets the opportunity of really looking one's best."

He told me all three balls had been duly entered: and commented upon.

"And, of course, you remember my performance of Talbot Champneys in Our Boys the week before last, in aid of the Fund for Poor Curates," I went on. "I don't know whether you saw the notice in the Morning Post, but--"

He again interrupted me to remark that what the Morning Post man said would be entered, one way or the other, to the critic of the Morning Post, and had nothing to do with me. "Of course not," I agreed; "and between ourselves, I don't think the charity got very much. Expenses, when you come to add refreshments and one thing and another, mount up. But I fancy they rather liked my Talbot Champneys."

He replied that he had been present at the performance, and had made his own report.

I also reminded him of the four balcony seats I had taken for the monster show at His Majesty's in aid of the Fund for the Destitute British in Johannesburg. Not all the celebrated actors and actresses announced on the posters had appeared, but all had sent letters full of kindly wishes; and the others--all the celebrities one had never heard of--had turned up to a man. Still, on the whole, the show was well worth the money. There was nothing to grumble at.

There were other noble deeds of mine. I could not remember them at the time in their entirety. I seemed to have done a good many. But I did remember the rummage sale to which I sent all my old clothes, including a coat that had got mixed up with them by accident, and that I believe I could have worn again.

And also the raffle I had joined for a motor-car.

The Angel said I really need not be alarmed, that everything had been noted, together with other matters I, may be, had forgotten.

[The Angel appears to have made a slight Mistake.]

I felt a certain curiosity. We had been getting on very well together--so it had seemed to me. I asked him if he would mind my seeing the book. He said there could be no objection. He opened it at the page devoted to myself, and I flew a little higher, and looked down over his shoulder. I can hardly believe it, even now--that I could have dreamt anything so foolish:

He had got it all down wrong!

Instead of to the credit side of my account he had put the whole bag of tricks to my debit. He had mixed them up with my sins--with my acts of hypocrisy, vanity, self-indulgence. Under the head of Charity he had but one item to my credit for the past six months: my giving up my seat inside a tramcar, late one wet night, to a dismal- looking old woman, who had not had even the politeness to say "thank you," she seemed just half asleep. According to this idiot, all the time and money I had spent responding to these charitable appeals had been wasted.

I was not angry with him, at first. I was willing to regard what he had done as merely a clerical error.

"You have got the items down all right," I said (I spoke quite friendly), "but you have made a slight mistake--we all do now and again; you have put them down on the wrong side of the book. I only hope this sort of thing doesn't occur often."

What irritated me as much as anything was the grave, passionless face the Angel turned upon me.

"There is no mistake," he answered.

"No mistake!" I cried. "Why, you blundering--"

He closed the book with a weary sigh.

I felt so mad with him, I went to snatch it out of his hand. He did not do anything that I was aware of, but at once I began falling. The faint luminosity beneath me grew, and then the lights of London seemed shooting up to meet me. I was coming down on the clock tower at Westminster. I gave myself a convulsive twist, hoping to escape it, and fell into the river.

And then I awoke.

But it stays with me: the weary sadness of the Angel's face. I cannot shake remembrance from me. Would I have done better, had I taken the money I had spent upon these fooleries, gone down with it among the poor myself, asking nothing in return. Is this fraction of our superfluity, flung without further thought or care into the collection box, likely to satisfy the Impracticable Idealist, who actually suggested--one shrugs one's shoulders when one thinks of it--that one should sell all one had and give to the poor?

[The Author is troubled concerning his Investments.]

Or is our charity but a salve to conscience--an insurance, at decidedly moderate premium, in case, after all, there should happen to be another world? Is Charity lending to the Lord something we can so easily do without?

I remember a lady tidying up her house, clearing it of rubbish. She called it "Giving to the Fresh Air Fund." Into the heap of lumber one of her daughters flung a pair of crutches that for years had been knocking about the house. The lady picked them out again.

"We won't give those away," she said, "they might come in useful again. One never knows."

Another lady, I remember coming downstairs one evening dressed for a fancy ball. I forget the title of the charity, but I remember that every lady who sold more than ten tickets received an autograph letter of thanks from the Duchess who was the president. The tickets were twelve and sixpence each and included light refreshments and a very substantial supper. One presumes the odd sixpence reached the poor--or at least the noisier portion of them.

"A little décolletée, isn't it, my dear?" suggested a lady friend, as the charitable dancer entered the drawing-room.

"Perhaps it is--a little," she admitted, "but we all of us ought to do all we can for the Cause. Don't you think so, dear?"

Really, seeing the amount we give in charity, the wonder is there are any poor left. It is a comfort that there are. What should we do without them? Our fur-clad little girls! our jolly, red-faced squires! we should never know how good they were, but for the poor? Without the poor how could we be virtuous? We should have to go about giving to each other. And friends expect such expensive presents, while a shilling here and there among the poor brings to us all the sensations of a good Samaritan. Providence has been very thoughtful in providing us with poor.

Dear Lady Bountiful! does it not ever occur to you to thank God for the poor? The clean, grateful poor, who bob their heads and curtsy and assure you that heaven is going to repay you a thousandfold. One does hope you will not be disappointed.

An East-End curate once told me, with a twinkle in his eye, of a smart lady who called upon him in her carriage, and insisted on his going round with her to show her where the poor hid themselves. They went down many streets, and the lady distributed her parcels. Then they came to one of the worst, a very narrow street. The coachman gave it one glance.

"Sorry, my lady," said the coachman, "but the carriage won't go down."

The lady sighed.

"I am afraid we shall have to leave it," she said.

So the gallant greys dashed past.

Where the real poor creep I fear there is no room for Lady Bountiful's fine coach. The ways are very narrow--wide enough only for little Sister Pity, stealing softly.

I put it to my friend, the curate:

"But if all this charity is, as you say, so useless; if it touches but the fringe; if it makes the evil worse, what would you do?"

[And questions a Man of Thought]

"I would substitute Justice," he answered; "there would be no need for Charity."

"But it is so delightful to give," I answered.

"Yes," he agreed. "It is better to give than to receive. I was thinking of the receiver. And my ideal is a long way off. We shall have to work towards it slowly."

CHAPTER II

[Philosophy and the Daemon]

Philosophy, it has been said, is the art of bearing other people's troubles. The truest philosopher I ever heard of was a woman. She was brought into the London Hospital suffering from a poisoned leg. The house surgeon made a hurried examination. He was a man of blunt speech.

"It will have to come off," he told her.

"What, not all of it?"

"The whole of it, I am sorry to say," growled the house surgeon.

"Nothing else for it?"

"No other chance for you whatever," explained the house surgeon.

"Ah, well, thank Gawd it's not my 'ead," observed the lady.

The poor have a great advantage over us better-off folk. Providence provides them with many opportunities for the practice of philosophy. I was present at a "high tea" given last winter by charitable folk to a party of char-women. After the tables were cleared we sought to amuse them. One young lady, who was proud of herself as a palmist, set out to study their "lines." At sight of the first toil-worn hand she took hold of her sympathetic face grew sad.

"There is a great trouble coming to you," she informed the ancient dame.

The placid-featured dame looked up and smiled:

"What, only one, my dear?"

"Yes, only one," asserted the kind fortune-teller, much pleased, "after that all goes smoothly."

"Ah," murmured the old dame, quite cheerfully, "we was all of us a short-lived family."

Our skins harden to the blows of Fate. I was lunching one Wednesday with a friend in the country. His son and heir, aged twelve, entered and took his seat at the table.

"Well," said his father, "and how did we get on at school today?"

"Oh, all right," answered the youngster, settling himself down to his dinner with evident appetite.

"Nobody caned?" demanded his father, with--as I noticed--a sly twinkle in his eye.

"No," replied young hopeful, after reflection; "no, I don't think so," adding as an afterthought, as he tucked into beef and potatoes, "'cepting, o' course, me."

[When the Daemon will not work]

It is a simple science, philosophy. The idea is that it never matters what happens to you provided you don't mind it. The weak point in the argument is that nine times out of ten you can't help minding it.

"No misfortune can harm me," says Marcus Aurelius, "without the consent of the daemon within me."

The trouble is our daemon cannot always be relied upon. So often he does not seem up to his work.

"You've been a naughty boy, and I'm going to whip you," said nurse to a four-year-old criminal.

"You tant," retorted the young ruffian, gripping with both hands the chair that he was occupying, "I'se sittin' on it."

His daemon was, no doubt, resolved that misfortune, as personified by nurse, should not hurt him. The misfortune, alas! proved stronger than the daemon, and misfortune, he found did hurt him.

The toothache cannot hurt us so long as the daemon within us (that is to say, our will power) holds on to the chair and says it can't. But, sooner or later, the daemon lets go, and then we howl. One sees the idea: in theory it is excellent. One makes believe. Your bank has suddenly stopped payment. You say to yourself.

"This does not really matter."

Your butcher and your baker say it does, and insist on making a row in the passage.

You fill yourself up with gooseberry wine. You tell yourself it is seasoned champagne. Your liver next morning says it is not.

The daemon within us means well, but forgets it is not the only thing there. A man I knew was an enthusiast on vegetarianism. He argued that if the poor would adopt a vegetarian diet the problem of existence would be simpler for them, and maybe he was right. So one day he assembled some twenty poor lads for the purpose of introducing to them a

vegetarian lunch. He begged them to believe that lentil beans were steaks, that cauliflowers were chops. As a third course he placed before them a mixture of carrots and savoury herbs, and urged them to imagine they were eating saveloys.

"Now, you all like saveloys," he said, addressing them, "and the palate is but the creature of the imagination. Say to yourselves, 'I am eating saveloys,' and for all practical purposes these things will be saveloys."

Some of the lads professed to have done it, but one disappointed-looking youth confessed to failure.

"But how can you be sure it was not a saveloy?" the host persisted.

"Because," explained the boy, "I haven't got the stomach-ache."

It appeared that saveloys, although a dish of which he was fond, invariably and immediately disagreed with him. If only we were all daemon and nothing else philosophy would be easier. Unfortunately, there is more of us.

Another argument much approved by philosophy is that nothing matters, because a hundred years hence, say, at the outside, we shall be dead. What we really want is a philosophy that will enable us to get along while we are still alive. I am not worrying about my centenary; I am worrying about next quarter-day. I feel that if other people would only go away, and leave me--income-tax collectors, critics, men who come round about the gas, all those sort of people--I could be a philosopher myself. I am willing enough to make believe that nothing matters, but they are not. They say it is going to be cut off, and talk about judgment summonses. I tell them it won't trouble any of us a hundred years hence. They answer they are not talking of a hundred years hence, but of this thing that was due last April twelvemonth. They won't listen to my daemon. He does not interest them. Nor, to be candid, does it comfort myself very much, this philosophical reflection that a hundred years later on I'll be sure to be dead--that is, with ordinary luck. What bucks me up much more is the hope that they will be dead. Besides, in a hundred years things may have improved. I may not want to be dead. If I were sure of being dead next morning, before their threat of cutting off that water or that gas could by any possibility be carried out, before that judgment summons they are bragging about could be made returnable, I might--I don't say I should--be amused, thinking how I was going to dish them. The wife of a very wicked man visited him one evening in prison, and found him enjoying a supper of toasted cheese.

"How foolish of you, Edward," argued the fond lady, "to be eating toasted cheese for supper. You know it always affects your liver. All day long to-morrow you will be complaining."

"No, I shan't," interrupted Edward; "not so foolish as you think me. They are going to hang me to-morrow--early."

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