

Pathfinder

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He Tried to Be Good

Novelists' villains often are more real and human than their heroes. The reason for this may be that most writers find goodness harder to dramatize than wickedness.

An exception to this rule is Graham Greene, an English writer best known for thrillers like *This Gun for Hire* and *The Confidential Agent*. In the second of these he made a disguised attempt to dramatize honesty and compassion; in a new novel, *The Heart of the Matter* (Viking, New York: \$3) he has wound his whole plot around a man's agonized and almost hopeless effort to be good.

Tribulation. The man is Major Scobie, an outwardly dull police official in British West Africa. Within him rages unceasing war between his irrepressible sympathy and feeling of responsibility for other people's troubles and his rigid, devout Catholicism.

His goodness is unmistakable but unconventional. He plays his wife false, but to give her the holiday she whines for, from the village's heat and loneliness, he asks a loan—a bribe, really—from the region's leading diamond smuggler. Thereafter he is forced to sacrifice one facet of his honesty after another.

Tragic. In the end Scobie commits suicide, fully convinced that in doing so he is putting himself beyond God's mercy, damning his soul for all eternity. But he does it without weakening. His sins are almost acts of humility; he gives up even *being* good in order to *do* good.

Greene's insight into this inner strife, one common to many souls, is keen, almost embarrassing. *The Heart of the Matter* deserves its choice as the Book of the Month Club's midsummer selection. But it is not light reading.