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JACOBS**

THE CONVERT

William Wymark Jacobs

The Convert

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Содержание

THE CONVERT	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

The Convert / Deep Waters, Part 5

THE CONVERT

Mr. Purnip took the arm of the new recruit and hung over him almost tenderly as they walked along; Mr. Billing, with a look of conscious virtue on his jolly face, listened with much satisfaction to his friend's compliments.

"It's such an example," said the latter. "Now we've got you the others will follow like sheep. You will be a bright lamp in the darkness."

"Wot's good enough for me ought to be good enough for them," said Mr. Billing, modestly. "They'd better not let me catch—"

"H'sh! H'sh!" breathed Mr. Purnip, tilting his hat and wiping his bald, benevolent head.

"I forgot," said the other, with something like a sigh. "No more fighting; but suppose somebody hits me?"

"Turn the other cheek," replied Mr. Purnip.

"They won't hit that; and when they see you standing there smiling at them—"

"After being hit?" interrupted Mr. Billing.

"After being hit," assented the other, "they'll be ashamed of themselves, and it'll hurt them more than if you struck them."

"Let's 'ope so," said the convert; "but it don't sound reasonable. I can hit a man pretty 'ard. Not that I'm bad-tempered, mind you; a bit quick, p'r'aps. And, after all, a good smack in the jaw saves any amount of argufying."

Mr. Purnip smiled, and, as they walked along, painted a glowing picture of the influence to be wielded by a first-class fighting-man who refused to fight. It was a rough neighbourhood, and he recognized with sorrow that more respect was paid to a heavy fist than to a noble intellect or a loving heart.

"And you combine them all," he said, patting his companion's arm.

Mr. Billing smiled. "You ought to know best," he said, modestly.

"You'll be surprised to find how easy it is," continued Mr. Purnip. "You will go from strength to strength. Old habits will disappear, and you will hardly know you have lost them. In a few months' time you will probably be wondering what you could ever have seen in beer, for example."

"I thought you said you didn't want me to give up beer?" said the other.

"We don't," said Mr. Purnip. "I mean that as you grow in stature you will simply lose the taste for it."

Mr. Billing came to a sudden full stop. "D'ye mean I shall lose my liking for a drop o' beer without being able to help myself?" he demanded, in an anxious voice.

"Of course, it doesn't happen in every case," he said, hastily.

Mr. Billing's features relaxed. "Well, let's 'ope I shall be one of the fortunate ones," he said, simply. "I can put up with a good deal, but when it comes to beer—"

"We shall see," said the other, smiling.

"We don't want to interfere with anybody's comfort; we want to make them happier, that's all. A little more kindness between man and man; a little more consideration for each other; a little more brightness in dull lives."

He paused at the corner of the street, and, with a hearty handshake, went off. Mr. Billing, a prey to somewhat mixed emotions, continued on his way home. The little knot of earnest men and

women who had settled in the district to spread light and culture had been angling for him for some time. He wondered, as he walked, what particular bait it was that had done the mischief.

"They've got me at last," he remarked, as he opened the house-door and walked into his small kitchen. "I couldn't say 'no' to Mr. Purnip."

"Wish 'em joy," said Mrs. Billing, briefly. "Did you wipe your boots?"

Her husband turned without a word, and, retreating to the mat, executed a prolonged double-shuffle.

"You needn't wear it out," said the surprised Mrs. Billing.

"We've got to make people 'appier," said her husband, seriously; "be kinder to 'em, and brighten up their dull lives a bit. That's wot Mr. Purnip says."

"You'll brighten 'em up all right," declared Mrs. Billing, with a sniff. "I sha'n't forget last Tuesday week—no, not if I live to be a hundred. You'd ha' brightened up the police-station if I 'adn't got you home just in the nick of time."

Her husband, who was by this time busy under the scullery-tap, made no reply. He came from it spluttering, and, seizing a small towel, stood in the door-way burnishing his face and regarding his wife with a smile which Mr. Purnip himself could not have surpassed. He sat down to supper, and between bites explained in some detail the lines on which his future life was to be run. As an earnest of good faith, he consented, after a short struggle, to a slip of oil-cloth for the passage; a pair of vases for the front room; and a new and somewhat expensive corn-cure for Mrs. Billing.

"And let's 'ope you go on as you've begun," said that gratified lady. "There's something in old Purnip after all. I've been worrying you for months for that oilcloth. Are you going to help me wash up? Mr. Purnip would."

Mr. Billing appeared not to hear, and, taking up his cap, strolled slowly in the direction of the Blue Lion. It was a beautiful summer evening, and his bosom swelled as he thought of the improvements that a little brotherliness might effect in Elk Street. Engrossed in such ideas, it almost hurt him to find that, as he entered one door of the Blue Lion, two gentlemen, forgetting all about their beer, disappeared through the other.

"Wot 'ave they run away like that for?" he demanded, looking round. "I wouldn't hurt 'em."

"Depends on wot you call hurting, Joe," said a friend.

Mr. Billing shook his head. "They've no call to be afraid of me," he said, gravely. "I wouldn't hurt a fly; I've got a new 'art."

"A new wot?" inquired his friend, staring.

"A new 'art," repeated the other. "I've given up fighting and swearing, and drinking too much. I'm going to lead a new life and do all the good I can; I'm going—"

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