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BREAKING A SPELL

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Breaking a Spell

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Содержание

BREAKING A SPELL	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

Breaking a Spell / Odd Craft, Part 6

BREAKING A SPELL

"Witchcraft?" said the old man, thoughtfully, as he scratched his scanty whiskers. No, I ain't heard o' none in these parts for a long time. There used to be a little of it about when I was a boy, and there was some talk of it arter I'd growed up, but Claybury folk never took much count of it. The last bit of it I remember was about forty years ago, and that wasn't so much witchcraft as foolishness.

There was a man in this place then—Joe Barlcomb by name—who was a firm believer in it, and 'e used to do all sorts of things to save hissself from it. He was a new-comer in Claybury, and there was such a lot of it about in the parts he came from that the people thought o' nothing else hardly.

He was a man as got 'imself very much liked at fust, especially by the old ladies, owing to his being so perlite to them, that they used to 'old 'im up for an example to the other men, and say wot nice, pretty ways he 'ad. Joe Barlcomb was everything at fust, but when they got to 'ear that his perliteness was because 'e thought 'arf of 'em was witches, and didn't know which 'arf, they altered their minds.

In a month or two he was the laughing-stock of the place; but wot was worse to 'im than that was that he'd made enemies of all the old ladies. Some of 'em was free-spoken women, and 'e couldn't sleep for thinking of the 'arm they might do 'im.

He was terrible uneasy about it at fust, but, as nothing 'appened and he seemed to go on very prosperous-like, 'e began to forget 'is fears, when all of a sudden 'e went 'ome one day and found 'is wife in bed with a broken leg.

She was standing on a broken chair to reach something down from the dresser when it 'appened, and it was pointed out to Joe Barlcomb that it was a thing anybody might ha' done without being bewitched; but he said 'e knew better, and that they'd kept that broken chair for standing on for years and years to save the others, and nothing 'ad ever 'appened afore.

In less than a week arter that three of his young 'uns was down with the measles, and, 'is wife being laid up, he sent for 'er mother to come and nurse 'em. It's as true as I sit 'ere, but that pore old lady 'adn't been in the house two hours afore she went to bed with the yellow jaundice.

Joe Barlcomb went out of 'is mind a'most. He'd never liked 'is wife's mother, and he wouldn't 'ave had 'er in the house on'y 'e wanted her to nurse 'is wife and children, and when she came and laid up and wanted waiting on 'e couldn't dislike her enough.

He was quite certain all along that somebody was putting a spell on 'im, and when 'e went out a morning or two arterward and found 'is best pig lying dead in a corner of the sty he gave up and, going into the 'ouse, told 'em all that they'd 'ave to die 'cause he couldn't do anything more for 'em. His wife's mother and 'is wife and the children all started crying together, and Joe Barlcomb, when 'e thought of 'is pig, he sat down and cried too.

He sat up late that night thinking it over, and, arter looking at it all ways, he made up 'is mind to go and see Mrs. Prince, an old lady that lived all alone by 'erself in a cottage near Smith's farm. He'd set 'er down for wot he called a white witch, which is the best kind and on'y do useful things, such as charming warts away or telling gals about their future 'usbands; and the next arternoon, arter telling 'is wife's mother that fresh air and travelling was the best cure for the yellow jaundice, he set off to see 'er.

Mrs. Prince was sitting at 'er front door nursing 'er three cats when 'e got there. She was an ugly, little old woman with piercing black eyes and a hook nose, and she 'ad a quiet, artful sort of a way with 'er that made 'er very much disliked. One thing was she was always making fun of people,

and for another she seemed to be able to tell their thoughts, and that don't get anybody liked much, especially when they don't keep it to theirselves. She'd been a lady's maid all 'er young days, and it was very 'ard to be taken for a witch just because she was old.

"Fine day, ma'am," ses Joe Barlcomb.

"Very fine," ses Mrs. Prince.

"Being as I was passing, I just thought I'd look in," ses Joe Barlcomb, eyeing the cats.

"Take a chair," ses Mrs. Prince, getting up and dusting one down with 'er apron.

Joe sat down. "I'm in a bit o' trouble, ma'am," he ses, "and I thought p'r'aps as you could help me out of it. My pore pig's been bewitched, and it's dead."

"Bewitched?" ses Mrs. Prince, who'd 'eard of 'is ideas. "Rubbish. Don't talk to me."

"It ain't rubbish, ma'am," ses Joe Barlcomb; "three o' my children is down with the measles, my wife's broke 'er leg, 'er mother is laid up in my little place with the yellow jaundice, and the pig's dead."

"Wot, another one?" ses Mrs. Prince.

"No; the same one," ses Joe.

"Well, 'ow am I to help you?" ses Mrs. Prince. "Do you want me to come and nurse 'em?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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