

The Convert eBook

The Convert by W. W. Jacobs

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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."

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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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"Glory! Glory!" ejaculated a long, thin youth, and, making a dash for the door, disappeared.

"He'll know me better in time," said Mr. Billing. "Why, I wouldn't hurt a fly. I want to do good to people; not to hurt 'em. I'll have a pint," he added, turning to the bar.

"Not here you won't," said the landlord, eyeing him coldly.

"Why not?" demanded the astonished Mr. Billing.

"You've had all you ought to have already," was the reply. "And there's one thing I'll swear to—you ain't had it 'ere."

"I haven't 'ad a drop pass my lips began the outraged Mr. Billing.

"Yes, I know," said the other, wearily, as he shifted one or two glasses and wiped the counter; "I've heard it all before, over and over again. Mind you, I've been in this business thirty years, and if I don't know when a man's had his whack, and a drop more, nobody does. You get off 'ome and ask your missis to make you a nice cup o' good strong tea, and then get up to bed and sleep it off."

"I dare say," said Mr. Billing, with cold dignity, as he paused at the door—"I dare say I may give up beer altogether."

He stood outside pondering over the unforeseen difficulties attendant upon his new career, moving a few inches to one side as Mr. Ricketts, a foe of long standing, came towards the public-house, and, halting a yard or two away, eyed him warily.

"Come along," said Mr. Billing, speaking somewhat loudly, for the benefit of the men in the bar; "I sha'n't hurt you; my fighting days are over."

"Yes, I dessay," replied the other, edging away.

"It's all right, Bill," said a mutual friend, through the half-open door; "he's got a new 'art."

Mr. Ricketts looked perplexed. "'Art disease, d'ye mean?" he inquired, hopefully. "Can't he fight no more?"

"A new 'art," said Mr. Billing. "It's as strong as ever it was, but it's changed—brother."

"If you call me 'brother' agin I'll give you something for yourself, and chance it," said Mr. Ricketts, ferociously. "I'm a pore man, but I've got my pride."

Mr. Billing, with a smile charged with brotherly love, leaned his left cheek towards him. "Hit it," he said, gently.

“Give it a smack and run, Bill,” said the voice of a well-wisher inside.

“There’d be no need for ’im to run,” said Mr. Billing. “I wouldn’t hit ’im back for anything. I should turn the other cheek.”

“Whaffor?” inquired the amazed Mr. Ricketts.

“For another swipe,” said Mr. Billing, radiantly.

In the fraction of a second he got the first, and reeled back staggering. The onlookers from the bar came out hastily. Mr. Ricketts, somewhat pale, stood his ground.

“You see, I don’t hit you,” said Mr. Billing, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

He stood rubbing his cheek gently, and, remembering Mr. Purnip’s statements, slowly, inch by inch, turned the other in the direction of his adversary. The circuit was still incomplete when Mr. Ricketts, balancing himself carefully, fetched it a smash that nearly burst it. Mr. Billing, somewhat jarred by his contact with the pavement, rose painfully and confronted him.

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"I've only got two cheeks, mind," he said, slowly.

Mr. Ricketts sighed. "I wish you'd got a blinking dozen," he said, wistfully. "Well, so long. Be good."

He walked into the Blue Lion absolutely free from that sense of shame which Mr. Purnip had predicted, and, accepting a pint from an admirer, boasted noisily of his exploit. Mr. Billing, suffering both mentally and physically, walked slowly home to his astonished wife.

"P'r'aps he'll be ashamed of hisself when 'e comes to think it over," he murmured, as Mrs. Billing, rendered almost perfect by practice, administered first aid.

"I s'pect he's crying his eyes out," she said, with a sniff. "Tell me if that 'urts."

Mr. Billing told her, then, suddenly remembering himself, issued an expurgated edition.

"I'm sorry for the next man that 'its you," said his wife, as she drew back and regarded her handiwork.

"Well, you needn't be," said Mr. Billing, with dignity. "It would take more than a couple o' props in the jaw to make me alter my mind when I've made it up. You ought to know that by this time. Hurry up and finish. I want you to go to the corner and fetch me a pot."

"What, ain't you going out agin?" demanded his astonished wife.

Mr. Billing shook his head. "Somebody else might want to give me one," he said, resignedly, "and I've 'ad about all I want to-night."

His face was still painful next morning, but as he sat at breakfast in the small kitchen he was able to refer to Mr. Ricketts in terms which were an eloquent testimony to Mr. Purnip's teaching. Mrs. Billing, unable to contain herself, wandered off into the front room with a duster.

"Are you nearly ready to go?" she inquired, returning after a short interval.

"Five minutes," said Mr. Billing, nodding. "I'll just light my pipe and then I'm off."

"Cos there's two or three waiting outside for you," added his wife.

Mr. Billing rose. "Ho, is there?" he said, grimly, as he removed his coat and proceeded to roll up his shirt-sleeves. "I'll learn 'em. I'll give 'em something to wait for. I'll——"

His voice died away as he saw the triumph in his wife's face, and, drawing down his sleeves again, he took up his coat and stood eyeing her in genuine perplexity.

"Tell 'em I've gorn," he said, at last.

"And what about telling lies?" demanded his wife. "What would your Mr. Purnip say to that?"

"You do as you're told," exclaimed the harassed Mr. Billing. "I'm not going to tell 'em; it's you."

Mrs. Billing returned to the parlour, and, with Mr. Billing lurking in the background, busied herself over a china flower-pot that stood in the window, and turned an anxious eye upon three men waiting outside. After a glance or two she went to the door.

"Did you want to see my husband?" she inquired.

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The biggest of the three nodded. "Yus," he said, shortly.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Billing, "but he 'ad to go early this morning. Was it anything partikler?"

"Gorn?" said the other, in disappointed tones. "Well, you tell 'im I'll see 'im later on."

He turned away, and, followed by the other two, walked slowly up the road. Mr. Billing, after waiting till the coast was clear, went off in the other direction.

He sought counsel of his friend and mentor that afternoon, and stood beaming with pride at the praise lavished upon him. Mr. Purnip's co-workers were no less enthusiastic than their chief; and various suggestions were made to Mr. Billing as to his behaviour in the unlikely event of further attacks upon his noble person.

He tried to remember the suggestions in the harassing days that followed; baiting Joe Billing becoming popular as a pastime from which no evil results need be feared. It was creditable to his fellow-citizens that most of them refrained from violence with a man who declined to hit back, but as a butt his success was assured. The night when a gawky lad of eighteen drank up his beer, and then invited him to step outside if he didn't like it, dwelt long in his memory. And Elk Street thrilled one evening at the sight of their erstwhile champion flying up the road hotly pursued by a foeman half his size. His explanation to his indignant wife that, having turned the other cheek the night before, he was in no mood for further punishment, was received in chilling silence.

"They'll soon get tired of it," he said, hopefully; "and I ain't going to be beat by a lot of chaps wot I could lick with one 'and tied behind me. They'll get to understand in time; Mr. Purnip says so. It's a pity that you don't try and do some good yourself."

Mrs. Billing received the suggestion with a sniff; but the seed was sown. She thought the matter over in private, and came to the conclusion that, if her husband wished her to participate in good works, it was not for her to deny him. Hitherto her efforts in that direction had been promptly suppressed; Mr. Billing's idea being that if a woman looked after her home and her husband properly there should be neither time nor desire for anything else. His surprise on arriving home to tea on Saturday afternoon, and finding a couple of hard-working neighbours devouring his substance, almost deprived him of speech.

"Poor things," said his wife, after the guests had gone; "they did enjoy it. It's cheered 'em up wonderful. You and Mr. Purnip are quite right. I can see that now. You can tell him that it was you what put it into my 'art."

"Me? Why, I never dreamt o' such a thing," declared the surprised Mr. Billing. "And there's other ways of doing good besides asking a pack of old women in to tea."

"I know there is," said his wife. "All in good time," she added, with a far-away look in her eyes.

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Mr. Billing cleared his throat, but nothing came of it. He cleared it again.

"I couldn't let you do all the good," said his wife, hastily. "It wouldn't be fair. I must help."

Mr. Billing lit his pipe noisily, and then took it out into the back-yard and sat down to think over the situation. The ungenerous idea that his wife was making goodness serve her own ends was the first that occurred to him.

His suspicions increased with time. Mrs. Billing's good works seemed to be almost entirely connected with hospitality. True, she had entertained Mr. Purnip and one of the ladies from the Settlement to tea, but that only riveted his bonds more firmly. Other visitors included his sister-in-law, for whom he had a great distaste, and some of the worst-behaved children in the street.

"It's only high spirits," said Mrs. Billing; "all children are like that. And I do it to help the mothers."

"And 'cos you like children," said her husband, preserving his good-humour with an effort.

There was a touch of monotony about the new life, and the good deeds that accompanied it, which, to a man of ardent temperament, was apt to pall. And Elk Street, instead of giving him the credit which was his due, preferred to ascribe the change in his behaviour to what they called being "a bit barmy on the crumpet."

He came home one evening somewhat dejected, brightening up as he stood in the passage and inhaled the ravishing odours from the kitchen. Mrs. Billing, with a trace of nervousness somewhat unaccountable in view of the excellent quality of the repast provided, poured him out a glass of beer, and passed flattering comment upon his appearance.

"Wot's the game?" he inquired.

"Game?" repeated his wife, in a trembling voice. "Nothing. 'Ow do you find that steak-pudding? I thought of giving you one every Wednesday."

Mr. Billing put down his knife and fork and sat regarding her thoughtfully. Then he pushed back his chair suddenly, and, a picture of consternation and wrath, held up his hand for silence.

"W-w-wot is it?" he demanded. "A cat?"

Mrs. Billing made no reply, and her husband sprang to his feet as a long, thin wailing sounded through the house. A note of temper crept into it and strengthened it.

“Wot is it?” demanded Mr. Billing again. “It’s—it’s Mrs. Smith’s Charlie,” stammered his wife.

“In—in my bedroom?” exclaimed her husband, in incredulous accents. “Wot’s it doing there?”

“I took it for the night,” said his wife hurriedly. “Poor thing, what with the others being ill she’s ’ad a dreadful time, and she said if I’d take Charlie for a few—for a night, she might be able to get some sleep.”

Mr. Billing choked. “And what about my sleep?” he shouted. “Chuck it outside at once. D’ye hear me?”

His words fell on empty air, his wife having already sped upstairs to pacify Master Smith by a rhythmical and monotonous thumping on the back. Also she lifted up a thin and not particularly sweet voice and sang to him. Mr. Billing, finishing his supper in indignant silence, told himself grimly that he was “beginning to have enough of it.”

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He spent the evening at the Charlton Arms, and, returning late, went slowly and heavily up to bed. In the light of a shaded candle he saw a small, objectionable-looking infant fast asleep on two chairs by the side of the bed.

“H’sh!” said his wife, in a thrilling whisper. “He’s just gone off.”

“D’ye mean I mustn’t open my mouth in my own bedroom?” demanded the indignant man, loudly.

“H’sh!” said his wife again.

It was too late. Master Smith, opening first one eye and then the other, finished by opening his mouth. The noise was appalling.

“H’sh! H’sh!” repeated Mrs. Billing, as her husband began to add to the noise. “Don’t wake ’im right up.”

“Right up?” repeated the astonished man. “Right up? Why, is he doing this in ’is sleep?”

He subsided into silence, and, undressing with stealthy care, crept into bed and lay there, marvelling at his self-control. He was a sound sleeper, but six times at least he was awakened by Mrs. Billing slipping out of bed—regardless of draughts to her liege lord—and marching up and down the room with the visitor in her arms. He rose in the morning and dressed in ominous silence.

“I ’ope he didn’t disturb you,” said his wife, anxiously.

“You’ve done it,” replied Mr. Billing. “You’ve upset everything now. Since I joined the Purnip lot everybody’s took advantage of me; now I’m going to get some of my own back. You wouldn’t ha’ dreamt of behaving like this a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, Joe!” said his wife, entreatingly; “and everybody’s been so happy!”

“Except me,” retorted Joe Billing. “You come down and get my breakfast ready. If I start early I shall catch Mr. Bill Ricketts on ’is way to work. And mind, if I find that steam-organ ’ere when I come ’ome to-night you’ll hear of it.”

He left the house with head erect and the light of battle in his eyes, and, meeting Mr. Ricketts at the corner, gave that justly aggrieved gentleman the surprise of his life. Elk Street thrilled to the fact that Mr. Billing had broken out again, and spoke darkly of what the evening might bring forth. Curious eyes followed his progress as he returned home from work, and a little later on the news was spread abroad that he was out and paying off old scores with an ardour that nothing could withstand.

“And wot about your change of 'art?” demanded one indignant matron, as her husband reached home five seconds ahead of Mr. Billing and hid in the scullery.

“It's changed agin,” said Mr. Billing, simply.

He finished the evening in the Blue Lion, where he had one bar almost to himself, and, avoiding his wife's reproachful glance when he arrived home, procured some warm water and began to bathe his honourable scars.

“Mr. Purnip 'as been round with another gentleman,” said his wife.

Mr. Billing said, “Oh!”

“Very much upset they was, and 'ope you'll go and see them,” she continued.

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Mr. Billing said “Oh!” again; and, after thinking the matter over, called next day at the Settlement and explained his position.

“It’s all right for gentlemen like you,” he said civilly. “But a man. like me can’t call his soul ’is own—or even ’is bedroom. Everybody takes advantage of ’im. Nobody ever gives you a punch, and, as for putting babies in your bedroom, they wouldn’t dream of it.”

He left amid expressions of general regret, turning a deaf ear to all suggestions about making another start, and went off exulting in his freedom.

His one trouble was Mr. Purnip, that estimable gentleman, who seemed to have a weird gift of meeting him at all sorts of times and places, never making any allusion to his desertion, but showing quite clearly by his manner that he still hoped for the return of the wanderer. It was awkward for a man of sensitive disposition, and Mr. Billing, before entering a street, got into the habit of peering round the corner first.

He pulled up suddenly one evening as he saw his tenacious friend, accompanied by a lady-member, some little distance ahead. Then he sprang forward with fists clenched as a passer-by, after scowling at Mr. Purnip, leaned forward and deliberately blew a mouthful of smoke into the face of his companion.

Mr. Billing stopped again and stood gaping with astonishment. The aggressor was getting up from the pavement, while Mr. Purnip, in an absolutely correct attitude, stood waiting for him. Mr. Billing in a glow of delight edged forward, and, with a few other fortunates, stood by watching one of the best fights that had ever been seen in the district. Mr. Purnip’s foot-work was excellent, and the way he timed his blows made Mr. Billing’s eyes moist with admiration.

It was over at last. The aggressor went limping off, and Mr. Purnip, wiping his bald head, picked up his battered and dusty hat from the roadway and brushed it on his sleeve. He turned with a start and a blush to meet the delighted gaze of Mr. Billing.

“I’m ashamed of myself,” he murmured, brokenly—“ashamed.”

“Ashamed !” exclaimed the amazed Mr. Billing. “Why, a pro couldn’t ha’ done better.”

“Such an awful example,” moaned the other. “All my good work here thrown away.”

“Don’t you believe it, sir,” said Mr. Billing, earnestly. “As soon as this gets about you’ll get more members than you want a’most. I’m coming back, for one.”

Mr. Purnip turned and grasped his hand.

“I understand things now,” said Mr. Billing, nodding sagely. “Turning the other cheek’s all right so long as you don’t do it always. If you don’t let ’em know whether you are going to turn the other cheek or knock their blessed heads off, it’s all right. ’Arf the trouble in the world is caused by letting people know too much.”