

Breaking a Spell

By W. W. Jacobs

“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 for’ty 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 prosprou-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 a fore 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 away charming warts 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 themselves. 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?"

"No, no," ses Joe, starting and turning pale; "unless you'd like to come and nurse my wife's mother," he ses, arter thinking a bit. "I was hoping that you'd know who'd been overlooking me and that you'd make 'em take the spell off."

Mrs. Prince got up from 'er chair and looked round for the broom she'd been sweeping with, but, not finding it, she set down agin and stared in a curious sort o' way at Joe Barlcomb.

"Oh, I see," she ses, nodding. "Fancy you guessing I was a witch."

"You can't deceive me," ses Joe; "I've 'ad too much experience; I knew it the fust time I saw you by the mole on your nose."

Mrs. Prince got up and went into her back-place, trying her 'ardest to remember wot she'd done with that broom. She couldn't find it anywhere, and at last she came back and sat staring at Joe for so long that 'e was 'arf frightened out of his life. And by-and-by she gave a 'orrible smile and sat rubbing the side of 'er nose with 'er finger.

"If I help you," she ses at last, "will you promise to keep it a dead secret and do exactly as I tell you? If you don't, dead pigs'll be nothing to the misfortunes that you will 'ave."

"I will," ses Joe Barlcomb, very pale.

"The spell," ses Mrs. Prince, holding up her 'ands and shutting 'er eyes, "was put upon you by a man. It is one out of six men as is jealous of you because you're so clever, but which one it is I can't tell without your assistance. Have you got any money?"

"A little," ses Joe, anxious-like—"a very little. Wot with the yellow jaundice and other things, I—"

"Fust thing to do," ses Mrs. Prince, still with her eyes shut, "you go up to the Cauliflower to-night; the six men'll all be there, and you must buy six ha'pennies off of them; one each."

"Buy six ha'pennies?" ses Joe, staring at her.

"Don't repeat wot I say," ses Mrs. Prince; "it's unlucky. You buy six ha'pennies for a shilling each, without saying wot it's for. You'll be able to buy 'em all right if you're civil."

"It seems to me it don't need much civility for that," ses Joe, pulling a long face.

“When you’ve got the ha’pennies,” ses Mrs. Prince, “bring ’em to me and I’ll tell you wot to do with ’em. Don’t lose no time, because I can see that something worse is going to ’appen if it ain’t prevented.”

“Is it anything to do with my wife’s mother getting worse?” ses Joe Barlcomb, who was a careful man and didn’t want to waste six shillings.

“No, something to you,” ses Mrs. Prince.

Joe Barlcomb went cold all over, and then he put down a couple of eggs he’d brought round for ’er and went off ’ome agin, and Mrs. Prince stood in the doorway with a cat on each shoulder and watched ’im till ’e was out of sight.

That night Joe Barlcomb came up to this ’ere Cauliflower public-house, same as he’d been told, and by-and-by, arter he ’ad ’ad a pint, he looked round, and taking a shilling out of ’is pocket put it on the table, and he ses, “Who’ll give me a ha’penny for that?” he ses.

None of ’em seemed to be in a hurry. Bill Jones took it up and bit it, and rang it on the table and squinted at it, and then he bit it agin, and turned round and asked Joe Barlcomb wot was wrong with it.

“Wrong?” ses Joe; “nothing.”

Bill Jones put it down agin. “You’re wide awake, Joe,” he ses, “but so am I.”

“Won’t nobody give me a ha’penny for it?” ses Joe, looking round.

Then Peter Lamb came up, and he looked at it and rang it, and at last he gave Joe a ha’penny for it and took it round, and everybody ’ad a look at it.

“It stands to reason it’s a bad ’un,” ses Bill Jones, “but it’s so well done I wish as I’d bought it.”

“H-s-h !” ses Peter Lamb; “don’t let the landlord ’ear you.”

The landlord ’ad just that moment come in, and Peter walked up and ordered a pint, and took his ten-pence change as bold as brass. Arter that Joe Barlcomb bought five more ha’pennies afore you could wink a’most, and every man wot sold one went up to the bar and ’ad a pint and got tenpence change, and drank Joe Barlcomb’s health.

“There seems to be a lot o’ money knocking about to-night,” ses the landlord, as Sam Martin, the last of ’em, was drinking ’is pint.

Sam Martin choked and put ’is pot down on the counter with a bang, and him and the other five was out o’ that door and sailing up the road with their tenpences afore the landlord could get his breath. He stood in the bar scratching his ’ead and staring, but he couldn’t understand it a bit till a man wot was too late to sell his ha’penny up and told ’im all about it. The fuss ’e made was terrible. The shillings was in a little heap on a shelf at the back o’ the bar, and he did all sorts o’ things to ’em to prove that they was bad, and threatened Joe Barlcomb with the police. At last, however, ’e saw wot a fool he was making of himself, and arter nearly breaking his teeth ’e dropped them into a drawer and stirred ’em up with the others.

Joe Barlcomb went round the next night to see Mrs. Prince, and she asked ’im a lot o’ questions about the men as ’ad sold ’im the ha’pennies.

“The fust part ’as been done very well,” she ses, nodding her ’ead at ’im; “if you do the second part as well, you’ll soon know who your enemy is.”

“Nothing’ll bring the pig back,” ses Joe.

“There’s worse misfortunes than that, as I’ve told you,” ses Mrs. Prince, sharply. “Now, listen to wot I’m going to say to you. When the clock strikes twelve to-night—”

“Our clock don’t strike,” ses Joe.

“Then you must borrow one that does,” ses Mrs. Prince, “and when it strikes twelve you must go round to each o’ them six men and sell them a ha’penny for a shilling.”

Joe Barlcomb looked at ’er. “Ow?” he ses, short-like.

“Same way as you sold ’em a shilling for a ha’-penny,” ses Mrs. Prince; “it don’t matter whether they buy the ha’pennies or not. All you’ve got to do is to go and ask ’em, and the man as makes the most fuss is the man that ’as put the trouble on you.”

“It seems a roundabout way o’ going to work,” ses Joe.

“Wot!” screams Mrs. Prince, jumping up and waving her arms about. “Wot! Go your own way; I’ll have nothing more to do with you. And don’t blame me for anything that happens. It’s a very bad thing to come to a witch for advice and then not to do as she tells you. You ought to know that.”

“I’ll do it, ma’am,” ses Joe Barlcomb, trembling.

“You’d better,” ses Mrs. Prince; “and mind—not a word to anybody.”

Joe promised her agin, and ’e went off and borrowed a clock from Albert Price, and at twelve o’clock that night he jumped up out of bed and began to dress ’imself and pretend not to ’ear his wife when she asked ’im where he was going.

It was a dark, nasty sort o’ night, blowing and raining, and, o’ course, everybody ’ad gone to bed long since. The fust cottage Joe came to was Bill Jones’s, and, knowing Bill’s temper, he stood for some time afore he could make up ’is mind to knock; but at last he up with ’is stick and banged away at the door.

A minute arterward he ’eard the bedroom winder pushed open, and then Bill Jones popped his ’ead out and called to know wot was the matter and who it was.

“It’s me—Joe Barlcomb,” ses Joe, “and I want to speak to you very partikler.”

“Well, speak away,” ses Bill. “You go into the back room,” he ses, turning to his wife.

“Whaffor?” ses Mrs. Jones.

“Cos I don’t know wot Joe is going to say,” ses Bill. “You go in now, afore I make you.”

His wife went off grumbling, and then Bill told Joe Barlcomb to hurry up wot he’d got to say as ’e ’adn’t got much on and the weather wasn’t as warm as it might be.

“I sold you a shilling for a ha’penny last night, Bill,” ses Joe.

“Do you want to sell any more?” ses Bill Jones, putting his ’and down to where ’is trouser pocket ought to be.

“Not exactly that,” ses Joe Barlcomb. “This time I want you to sell me a shilling for a ha’penny.”

Bill leaned out of the winder and stared down at Joe Barlcomb, and then he ses, in a choking voice, “Is that wot you’ve come disturbing my sleep for at this time o’ night?” he ses.

“I must ’ave it, Bill,” ses Joe.

“Well, if you’ll wait a moment,” ses Bill, trying to speak perlitely, “I’ll come down and give it to you.”

Joe didn’t like ’is tone of voice, but he waited, and all of a sudden Bill Jones came out o’ that door like a gun going off and threw ’imself on Joe Barlcomb. Both of ’em was strong men, and by the time they’d finished they was so tired they could ’ardly stand. Then Bill Jones went back to bed, and Joe Barlcomb, arter sitting down on the doorstep to rest ’imself, went off and knocked up Peter Lamb.

Peter Lamb was a little man and no good as a fighter, but the things he said to Joe Barlcomb as he leaned out o’ the winder and shook ’is fist at him was ’arder to bear than blows. He screamed

away at the top of 'is voice for ten minutes, and then 'e pulled the winder to with a bang and went back to lied.

Joe Barlcomb was very tired, but he walked on to Jasper Potts's 'ouse, trying 'ard as he walked to decide which o' the fust two 'ad made the most fuss. Arter he 'ad left Jasper Potts 'e got more puzzled than ever, Jasper being just as bad as the other two, and Joe leaving 'im at last in the middle of loading 'is gun.

By the time he'd made 'is last call—at Sam Martin's—it was past three o'clock, and he could no more tell Mrs. Prince which 'ad made the most fuss than 'e could fly. There didn't seem to be a pin to choose between 'em, and, 'arf worried out of 'is life, he went straight on to Mrs. Prince and knocked 'er up to tell 'er. She thought the 'ouse was afire at fust, and came screaming out o' the front door in 'er bedgown, and when she found out who it was she was worse to deal with than the men 'ad been.

She 'ad quieted down by the time Joe went round to see 'er the next evening, and asked 'im to describe exactly wot the six men 'ad done and said. She sat listening quite quiet at fust, but arter a time she scared Joe by making a odd, croupy sort o' noise in 'er throat, and at last she got up and walked into the back-place. She was there a long time making funny noises, and at last Joe walked toward the door on tiptoe and peeped through the crack and saw 'er in a sort o' fit, sitting in a chair with 'er arms folded acrost her bodice and rocking 'erself up and down and moaning. Joe stood as if 'e'd been frozen a'most, and then 'e crept back to 'is seat and waited, and when she came into the room agin she said as the trouble 'ad all been caused by Bill Jones. She sat still for nearly 'arf an hour, thinking 'ard, and then she turned to Joe and ses:

“Can you read?” she ses.

“No,” ses Joe, wondering wot was coming next.

“That's all right, then,” she ses, “because if you could I couldn't do wot I'm going to do.”

“That shows the 'arm of eddication,” ses Joe. “I never did believe in it.”

Mrs. Prince nodded, and then she went and got a bottle with something in it which looked to Joe like gin, and arter getting out 'er pen and ink and printing some words on a piece o' paper she stuck it on the bottle, and sat looking at Joe and thinking.

“Take this up to the Cauliflower,” she ses, “make friends with Bill Jones, and give him as much beer as he'll drink, and give 'im a little o' this gin in each mug. If he drinks it the spell will be broken, and you'll be luckier than you 'ave ever been in your life a fore. When 'e's drunk some, and not before, leave the bottle standing on the table.”

Joe Barlcomb thanked 'er, and with the bottle in 'is pocket went off to the Cauliflower, whistling. Bill Jones was there, and Peter Lamb, and two or three more of 'em, and at fust they said some pretty 'ard things to him about being woke up in the night.

“Don't bear malice, Bill,” ses Joe Barlcomb; “'ave a pint with me.”

He ordered two pints, and then sat down alongside o' Bill, and in five minutes they was like brothers.

“'Ave a drop o' gin in it, Bill,” he ses, taking the bottle out of 'is pocket.

Bill thanked 'im and had a drop, and then, thoughtful-like, he wanted Joe to 'ave some in his too, but Joe said no, he'd got a touch o' toothache, and it was bad for it.

“I don't mind 'aving a drop in my beer, Joe,” ses Peter Lamb.

“Not to-night, mate,” ses Joe; “it's all for Bill. I bought it on purpose for 'im.”

Bill shook 'ands with him, and when Joe called for another pint and put some more gin in it he said that 'e was the noblest-'arted man that ever lived.

“You wasn't saying so 'arf an hour ago,” ses Peter Lamb.

“‘Cos I didn’t know ’im so well then,” ses Bill Jones.

“You soon change your mind, don’t you?” ses Peter.

Bill didn’t answer ’im. He was leaning back on the bench and staring at the bottle as if ’e couldn’t believe his eyesight. His face was all white and shining, and ’is hair as wet as if it ’ad just been dipped in a bucket o’ water.

“See a ghost, Bill?” ses Peter, looking at ’im.

Bill made a ’orrible noise in his throat, and kept on staring at the bottle till they thought ’e’d gone crazy. Then Jasper Potts bent his ’ead down and began to read out loud wot was on the bottle. “P-o-i—Poison for BILL JONES,” he ses, in a voice as if ’e couldn’t believe it.

You might ’ave heard a pin drop. Everybody turned and looked at Bill Jones, as he sat there trembling all over. Then those that could read took up the bottle and read it out loud all over agin.

“Pore Bill,” ses Peter Lamb. “I ’ad a feeling come over me that something was wrong.”

“You’re a murderer,” ses Sam Martin, catching ’old of Joe Barlcomb. “You’ll be ’ung for this. Look at pore Bill, cut off in ’is prime.

“Run for the doctor,” ses someone.

Two of ’em ran off as ’ard as they could go, and then the landlord came round the bar and asked Bill to go and die outside, because ’e didn’t want to be brought into it. Jasper Potts told ’im to clear off, and then he bent down and asked Bill where the pain was.

“I don’t think he’ll ’ave much pain,” ses Peter Lamb, who always pretended to know a lot more than other people. “It’ll soon be over, Bill.”

“We’ve all got to go some day,” ses Sam Martin.

“Better to die young than live to be a trouble to yourself,” ses Bob Harris.

To ’ear them talk everybody seemed to think that Bill Jones was in luck; everybody but Bill Jones ’imself, that is.

“I ain’t fit to die,” he ses, shivering. “You don’t know ’ow bad I’ve been.”

“Wot ’ave you done, Bill?” ses Peter Lamb, in a soft voice. “If it’ll ease your feelings afore you go to make a clean breast of it, we’re all friends here.”

Bill groaned.

“And it’s too late for you to be punished for anything,” ses Peter, arter a moment.

Bill Jones groaned agin, and then, shaking ’is ’ead, began to w’isper ’is wrong-doings. When the doctor came in ’arf an hour arterward all the men was as quiet as mice, and pore Bill was still w’ispering as ’ard as he could w’isper.

The doctor pushed ’em out of the way in a moment, and then ’e bent over Bill and felt ’is pulse and looked at ’is tongue. Then he listened to his ’art, and in a puzzled way smelt at the bottle, which Jasper Potts was a-minding of, and wetted ’is finger and tasted it.

“Somebody’s been making a fool of you and me too,” he ses, in an angry voice. “It’s only gin, and very good gin at that. Get up and go home.”

It all came out next morning, and Joe Barlcomb was the laughing-stock of the place. Most people said that Mrs. Prince ’ad done quite right, and ’oped that it ud be a lesson to him, but nobody talked much of witchcraft in Claybury agin. One thing was that Bill Jones wouldn’t ’ave the word in ’is hearing.