

A Conversion

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>A Conversion</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	1

A Conversion

George Gissing

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Ninety-one was Klimper's calamitous year. For a time he had lived very comfortably in Belgium, making a larger income than ever before, and with much less exertion; at five-and-forty he began to look forward to a peaceful retirement in one of the genteel English towns, such as Bath or Leamington, which had always attracted him. Then, of a sudden, Belgium cast him forth: he, and others like him, were forbidden to practise their profession on the hitherto hospitable soil. Flurried by this catastrophe, Klimper made a precipitate 'deal' in booming shares, the end of which was again disastrous. And just upon the close of the year, when he felt himself very cruelly hit, came the illness which kept him on his back for months.

While in hospital, he doubtless meditated not a little on the aspects of life; probably this time of suffering and forced inactivity must be taken into account when one comes to the events of a year or two later. But Klimper was at no time a thoughtless or vulgar-minded man; blackguard, gambler, bookmaker, he never typified his class. As he drew towards middle age a certain gravity appeared in his speech, countenance, and manners—a placid, almost benevolent decorum, strangely at variance with his ways of making a living. Possibly the traits of some very respectable ancestor slowly worked to the surface, transforming him alike in body and in mind. It is no uncommon thing for a man to develop in this way long after the period of ordinary growth. Klimper at five-and-forty had so notably changed from the Klimper of ten years before that an old acquaintance, suddenly coming across him, would with difficulty have recognised the man.

However, when he rose from his sick-bed, he evinced no anxiety to begin a reformed life. It was even with a certain gusto that he returned to the turf and the gaming-table. But accident put in his way an opportunity of blending old experience and dexterity with an honourable function not at all distasteful to that side of his character which hitherto had been obscured. Happening to watch a game of cards at a certain proprietary club, he became aware that one of the players was cheating, and doing it so cleverly that no one else even suspected the fraud. The club proprietor being a friend of his, Klimper spoke to him in private of this matter, and was thanked for his pains. More than that, it was suggested to him that he should become, by secret appointment, protector of fair play in his friend's interest. The club had a good name; its founder was resolved to keep it 'respectable'; and who more competent than Klimper to keep an eye on suspicious persons, to play discreet detective in the card-room? Terms were agreed upon, and Klimper assumed his office.

He discharged it with wonderful zeal and success. A score of years spent among gamblers of every species, in many parts of the world, had rendered him familiar with all the refinements of blackleg ingenuity; he had but to watch and to spot his man. At the same time, his dignity of person, his sober speech, his admirable tact in delicate situations, safeguarded him against unfavourable notice from the members of the club. At this time he allowed his beard to grow, and it assumed a grizzled amplitude sufficient in itself to inspire respect and confidence. It might well be that a sense of judicial authority, of power exercised in defence of truth and honour, subtly affected his whole being. He was still a betting-man, but not as formerly; his transactions were performed in strict privacy, and he never spoke of them. At the club, though facilities of gain constantly appealed to him he played very little, and never exerted himself to win. Disreputable habits lost their savour for him; he found it comparatively easy to live on a modest income, and grew indifferent to his aims of only a year or two ago.

A Conversion

Naturally, he had no sinecure. Respectability and gaming for coin are not very congruous characteristics of a proprietary club. Again and again the bland detective smiled at his prescient skill when some gentleman whom no one else would have mistrusted condemned himself under that remorseless scrutiny. And there was never any scandal; a great part of Klimper's office consisted in the avoidance of such unpleasant necessity. He waited his occasion, perhaps for a few minutes, perhaps for some days. Then the gentleman whose proceedings could not be tolerated found himself; he scarce knew how, in pleasant, frank colloquy, of the most private nature, with the other gentleman so honourably distinguished by his grizzled beard. Such conversations were never long, and they always had a satisfactory issue. In general, the fraudulent gambler disappeared. If another chance were granted him, he very rarely abused Mr. Klimper's lenience.

In one member of the club Klimper felt a strong interest. This was a good-looking and gay young fellow, supposed to be very well off and to have excellent prospects. He played a good deal, and with a proficiency which made Klimper uneasy. He drank, too, and club-gossip associated his name with that of a lady whose influence over him could hardly be maternal. Klimper tried now and then to put himself on terms of closer acquaintance with this young man, but unsuccessfully. Feeling, in a strange way, that his experience, his character, might be invaluable as a protection to one whom he instinctively liked, and who was in obvious need of guidance, the ex-gambler, ex-blackguard, had no choice but to keep aloof and anxiously observe the course of things. Before long he knew that the case professionally concerned him. Yet he did not act; for the first time he had a difficulty in deciding how he should proceed. Again the young man betrayed himself to the unsuspected observer, and now duty called aloud. After five minutes' troubled reflection, Klimper took his measures. With unusual difficulty he procured a private interview. It was more painful than he had foreseen, and it lasted for an hour.

The evening papers of next day announced that this young man had committed suicide. He must have done it as soon as possible after leaving the club. Klimper did not allow it to be known that the poor fellow went away, for good reasons, in a mood of shame and desperation; nor did he like to remember what had passed in that private room.

A few weeks later, the grave gentleman with the long beard chanced to pass by a public hall where, as was announced by posters at the door, someone or other would that evening address young men on the subject of betting. He stood a while in meditation. When the hour came, he had returned; he sat among the audience (or congregation, for the proceedings had a religious character), and listened very attentively. This occasion marked the turning-point towards which Klimper's life had insensibly been directing itself. He resigned his office at the club: he abandoned for ever his old haunts, his old practices. And nowadays he is well known in a certain part of London (where he supports himself by a monotonous pursuit) as an ardent lay preacher who is never so impressive as when he denounces the vice of gambling.