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The Man Who Spoiled the Music

BY

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THE MAN WHO SPOILED THE MUSIC.

THERE was no doubt about it—he did. The faintest shadow of a doubt was gone. He was the man who spoiled the music.

And yet it was the last thing that he was likely to believe. He loved music. His voice was often heard ringing out a rollicking song in the tap-room, swelling above all the rest as they joined in the chorus, holding the unsteady voices together in a way that indicated much force and not a little skill. And yet he spoiled all the music! It was most certainly so. The more he turned it over the more he saw it. It was no good arguing; no good denying it. He might get as angry as he liked, there was the fact all the same. He was the man who spoiled the music.

It was a discovery that came as a great shock to him; for he had always been the first to drop upon any body else who got out
of tune. The slightest tendency astray, to sharp or flat, to fast or slow, was sure to rouse his anger, and all were pulled up with much ado that he might correct the offender. And now to think that it should keep coming to him in at least a score of different ways—he himself was the man who spoiled the music!

He was not in the brightest possible condition for an argument, and certainly not in a humor to be convinced of a truth that he did not want to believe; and yet convinced he was, and every minute added to the conviction. Every sight about him, and the silence, if not the sounds, forced it home upon him, so that there could not possibly be any mistake.

It was Sunday afternoon about four o'clock. He was standing leaning against the wall by the dirty fire-place, unwashed, and in his shirt-sleeves, with hands thrust deep into his pockets, and the great unlaced boots thrust far out on the floor. The dull eyes, the knitted brows, the mouth drawn sourly down at the corners, completed a picture of misery. The
room looked as wretched as the man himself, and as dirty; blackened and broken, with window-panes either plastered over with paper or stuffed out with rags. The rickety furniture was there simply because it could fetch nothing elsewhere. Seated on the other side of the fire-place was the white-faced and slatternly wife, holding a tiny bit of mortality at her breast, and breathing a heavy sigh that told of a burden there a great deal heavier than the baby.

One word summed up the whole reason of the wretchedness—Drink. Not a bad sort of a man but for this one thing; able to earn good wages and to have a comfortable home, yet no idle miscreant ever dwelt amid greater squalor, or kept all about him in greater misery. What was he the better for brains that had been the pride of his old mother, and which fitted him to get on as well as any body and better than most, so long as drink kept him on a level with the biggest numskulls of the parish? What was he the better for being a clever workman and earning good
wages, while drink made his pocket as empty, his family as starved, his home as wretched as if he had neither a straight eye nor a clever hand? And worse than that—many a bitter grief would never have been known there if that had been all. Poverty does not bring the heaviest or worst burden folks have to carry in God's world. The woman, who once found in him her joy, now sitting a broken-hearted wife; the home with its dainty bits of furniture, and all about it so bright and clean, gone for this; the children often wanting clothes and bread, yet dreading no want so much as they dreaded their father's presence: it was only the curse of drunkenness that could work such mischief.

So it came about that on this Sunday afternoon Jack stood, as cross as cross could be, ready to let out his misery upon the first victim he could find; as if any one were to be blamed for it sooner than himself. Then it was that the door opened suddenly with a bang, and in burst two little maidens singing merrily: eyes and faces, hands and feet, all
were full of music. They had come from the Mission Sunday-school, and the last hymn was in their ears and came cheerily ringing from their lips:

“I am so glad that our Father in heaven
Tells of his love in the Book he has given.”

They had just got to the line of the chorus, “I am so glad,” and it came in at the opened door with such a bounding gladness as they lifted the latch and felt that they were in the freedom of the home. “I am so glad”—then suddenly they came far enough to see their father. Instantly the voices were silenced, the sunshine died out of their eyes; with a frightened look filling their faces they shrank outside the door again, and shut it noiselessly.

The silence that followed was unbroken by a sound. The wife sat mournfully looking at the blackened ashes of the fire-place, with the little one asleep in her arms. That abrupt and sudden silence smote Jack’s heart; those changed faces, and the little frightened maidens hushed like that! He felt that he had done No. 230.
it all. He seemed to hear again the happy burst—"I am so glad"—and then that dreadful stopping. He was going to ask with an oath why they didn’t go on singing, but they weren’t there, and so it was no use to do that; besides, he knew well enough—too well—why they had stopped; so it came about that he lifted himself from the wall and thrust himself fiercely into his jacket, and went slouching toward the door. He strode out of the court and away on, anywhere, until he got outside the streets and into the more quiet and pleasant roads; then he slackened his pace. The fierceness had turned to grief, and at last there came the words muttered to himself: "That’s what I am always doing—I spoil all the music."

Now when once he admitted the truth to himself, there stood, as we have intimated, at least a hundred witnesses that took up the matter and confirmed it in many ways, until Jack was ready to declare with an oath that he didn’t do any thing of the sort, and that they had better not repeat the statement.
But then, no sooner were all these witnesses driven out of court, than again he heard those bright little voices, and again he saw their sunny faces, and again there came the burst of singing—"I am so glad"—and then there came again that dreadful silence and fear; and immediately the evidence rose up and clamored against him more loudly than ever. So it went on until at last poor Jack gave right in and let them go on as they would. "Yes, 'tis true, I spoil all the music," said Jack.

And the more he thought of it the worse it grew, until it spread itself in all directions. Slowly, and one after another, came the long procession of witnesses, who pointed at him and gave their evidence against him as the man who spoiled their music. The first was enough, if there had been no other. It was the dear old mother who had toiled and scraped and saved for him, her only son; and so proud of him as she was, too! And he remembered how proudly he used to think that in her old age he would keep the roof over No. 230.
her head, and make her glad for all that she had done. And she, needing many a comfort that he could have given her, had gone down sorrowing over him to her grave. An old saint, she had learned the new song in heaven, but it was little comfort to think that but for him she might have been singing still upon earth.

"I spoiled her music," Jack sighed, very sadly.

Then there came the poor wife, so white-faced and wretched, with that little bit of a baby at her breast. Away behind her, ever so far, Jack saw other times when they had sung together. What a sweet voice she had then! He could hear it still as she kept singing about the farm-house all day long. He could hear it again—when it seemed best of all—on the still summer evening as she came home from milking. How often his path used to lie that way! and what happy days they were—she with the bright face and the roses in it a deeper red for his coming. And now to think of her sitting there in that mis-
erable room, so white and still. She never sang the baby off to sleep now. "Anyhow, not when I am there," Jack sighed again; "I spoil all the music."

Then out of the past there came another Jack—a decent fellow who wouldn't have looked at this dirty and ragged loungers; a man with his head up and a cheery voice that rang out in the lanes as he went to work in the early morning, and that kept time with the plane as he sent the shavings flying from the bench; who whistled the tune as he held up the bit of work and let his eye run along it to see if it were true, taking a pride in it, and then ringing on again. And on Sundays—no wonder poor Jack sighed again—it was hard to believe that it was he who sang in the choir and used to take such a delight in it all.

"I spoil all the music," said Jack again, "every-where." And at every pause and interval there came again the sight of those merry faces darkened, and those glad voices silenced at the sight of him. "And I their..."
own father,” sighed Jack again. “Poor little dears, to go spoiling their music too!”

Jack’s trouble seemed to grow bigger every minute, until at last things began to get des­perate. Dark and awful temptations flew about him. He would end it all; the wife and little ones couldn’t be worse off than they were, and he, at any rate, would not be spoiling other people’s music when he was dead. But before the grim thought had well got hold of him, he seemed to see again the sunny faces, and to hear the merry voices singing their song—“I am so glad.” And with the thought of them this time there came a softer feeling and a gentler tone. “Poor little things,” he sighed again; “it wouldn’t mend their music either if I was gone. Nor hers either,” he said to himself a little while afterward, as he thought of the white-faced wife and the little bit of mortality at home there.

So it came about that poor Jack, so bur­dened and helpless, stopped there and then and put his face into his hands and said:
"God help me." He had gone on, never thinking where he was going, until now he found himself outside the long stretch of the houses, and was under the green trees, and in the midst of the fields. The lark sang overhead, the thrush and the blackbird rang out their richest notes; in the branches above him a crowd of sparrows met, and chirped the very loudest, merriest music they had ever learnt.

He stood leaning on a gate while the sunset fell full upon him. His hands hung over the bar and the tears glistened in the ruddy glow of the setting sun. Was there any help for him? Down so low, could he ever get up again? All about him was calm and still and beautiful, and seemed to condemn him as he stood there, so ragged and wretched, making such misery in the world. He looked away to the setting sun. "If I could only get right off and begin again," he sighed, "right out of the reach of the old ways." But this seemed only to mock him: "Begin again?" he muttered; "I have got nothing to begin on!"
For awhile despair came on him once more. It was no use his trying; not a bit. He must just go on to the end.

So, burdened and sorrowing, Jack leaned still over the gate. He had given up thinking, and now just let the thoughts come and go, scarcely heeding them. The sun had set. The music of the birds was hushed. Here and there a silver star shone overhead. Then it was that once more Jack seemed to hear the two little voices and their glad song:

"I am so glad that our Father in heaven
Tells of his love in the Book he has given."

The words sang themselves over and over again in his soul, soothing by the flow of the words rather than by their meaning. They lulled to sleep the fierce feelings that had filled him.

But as the words went sinking down within him, they began to speak to his heart.

"Our Father in heaven," he whispered, and there came back the story of one who had wasted his substance in riotous living; and
how he arose and came to his father, and how, when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and ran and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and put about him the best robe and the ring on his finger and the shoes on his feet. But then Jack sighed again and shook his head sadly, "He only spoiled his own music—I've spoiled so many other people's." But still the voices sang on in his soul,

"I am so glad that our Father in heaven
    Tells of his love in the Book he has given."

As they sang on they seemed to gather strength until his heart heard them again, and took hold of them once more. "Our Father in heaven," he whispered, and there came, distinct and living, the memory of how he had kneeled long ago at his mother's knee; he felt again that gentle hand laid upon his head, and heard that voice teaching him the words—"Our Father who art in heaven." Might he not say those words? Ah, if he could only go back again, and be the little child at the mother's knee!
Then Jack buried his face in his hands and just let his heart flow out with the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Slowly he went through the petitions until he reached the last. “Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.” He stopped and spoke them over to himself slowly three or four times. Then his soul took hold of them. They came as new life to a dying man. Here was all he needed; if he got that help he need fear nothing: companions, habits, any thing, any body. What were all these if only this Power was on his side! And it was; he knew it; he was sure of it. “Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory—what for?” he asked himself with all the fierceness turned now into a defiant triumph. Not only to set stars in the heavens, and to make glorious sunsets, and to grow great trees—and to let a man go down all helpless to hell! “Thine is the kingdom and the power.” Then surely it was on purpose for such as he was.

As for love, the poor fellow found himself No. 230.
utterly unworthy of that; it did not come anywhere within the range of his hopes. But a father who was as strong as "our Father in heaven" would help a man though he might not be able to love him. "Thine is the kingdom and the power," said Jack, as he lifted himself up from the gate, and he laid hold of the truth like a sword with which he could defy all enemies. "I don't want to get away now," he said, and he longed that he could go right there and then and fight the drink and all its surroundings.

It was quite dark as he passed into the squalid court in which he lived. He turned into the wretched house; but he could look at it all now without fear. It should all come right, "Thine is the kingdom and the power," said Jack, and he said it with a feeling like that with which a soldier grips his sword at the footsteps of an enemy.

The next day he was up and off at daylight. Vexed and desperate as he was, he went at his work with a grim fierceness, without a word for any body. His mates were
used to his moods, and did not care to interfere with him at times like these. "Jack is out again about some'at," said they, with a jerk of the thumb in his direction. They might stop for dinner, but Jack snatched at a bit of bread and worked on; they might pack up at the strike of the clock, but so long as the light lasted Jack would stick to it. "This is not spoiling any body's music, anyhow," said he fiercely to one man who ventured to hint that he had done enough for that day. He came home and sat at his supper, with wife and children creeping noiselessly and frightened about the house. Poor Jack! a tear came gathering in the corner of his eye and fell down his cheek. "I do wish they'd sing a bit, but I expect I've spoiled all the music for ever," he muttered to himself. He longed to get them about him, wife and little ones, and to take the sleeping babe from its poor little rags, and to tell them all that was in his heart; but somehow he couldn't manage it, and so he just crept off to bed.

"Not yet," he muttered, "but some time
soon, by God’s help. ‘Thine is the kingdom and the power.’”

Jack’s fit was on the next day, much to the surprise of his mates; the brow knit and the lips tight, and the work flying on at a tremendous pace. “Why, Jack, lad,” cried one, “art thou putting a week o’ work into a day, that thou mayst go on and spree all the rest of it?”

“No,” said Jack so gruffly that nobody had a word for him again; and so it lasted, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. All that was strange enough, and set his workmates wondering; but strangest of all was it when that Saturday afternoon came, and Jack took up his wages without a word and just walked right away from them all, and home. “Jack’s mad,” said they. “Never knew his fit last so long as this.”

“Now,” said Jack, taking a stride just double the usual length, and putting his foot down as if he meant to get through to the other side of the earth, “I’ll try and get the music back again,” and Jack meant to smile,
but he had to put his mouth tight and to knit his brows to keep back a tear. "By God's help," Jack added devoutly.

When he came home he evidently was not expected; indeed, was scarcely wanted. There was not very much to be tidied up, and his wife, poor thing! had not much heart to do that little. But, much or little, she was now in the middle of the process, and so the "bits of sticks," as they were called, were put on one side, while the good wife kneeled and scrubbed away at the floor with the handle of a brush on which a few straggling hairs remained as if to keep up the name. The wife lifted her face in surprise, and then just went on again with her scrubbing. Whatever this coming home meant, nothing ever brought her any good.

Poor Jack, he seemed to hear it all. "Spoilt her music, too," he sighed. He hung up his bag of tools on their peg, and took off the apron that was rolled about his waist; and then he caught sight of that venerable and hairless scrubbing brush. "It will help to
bring back the music,” said Jack to himself, purposing to buy his wife there and then a new one. But the purpose was somewhat delayed. Just then, from some corner of the room, there came the cry of the baby. The wife was rising up to get at it when Jack dived in after the little bundle of rags and fetched it out.

“I’ll hold her a bit,” said Jack, rather shyly.

Jack’s wife would like to have said, “Thank you,” but she felt shy, too. “Now, Jack, try and mend the music,” said he to himself, and this time he really did smile; for the baby was unused to strangers, and none was a greater stranger to it than its own father, so it just cried out lustily. The good wife scrubbed on. There were times when she had to let it cry a bit, and this should be one of them. Jack took the little one tenderly into his arms and leaned against the wall. He put his lips tightly together and chirped to it—just a tiny little chirp like a young sparrow having its first music lesson. But
the baby cried louder than ever. Then Jack put forth his strength and chirped to it louder and faster. Not a bit of use was that, still it cried. It was wonderful how such a poor little wizened frame could make such a noise. Then Jack put the baby on the other arm and he set his tongue against his teeth and clicked to it. "Click, click, click," went Jack, quite loud enough to start a good coach-and-four. Bless you, he might as well have winked at the baby. Jack changed sides again, and then he whistled. Now Jack prided himself on his whistling. He might not be much of a hand at chirping, and at clicking he was willing to give in; but as for whistling, Jack could whistle, and so he whistled shrill and loud, fast and wild, a whistle loud enough for a drum-and-fife band, and fast enough for the wildest Irish jig. But the baby cried on just as loud as ever.

Jack was in no humor to give in; the spirit of grim defiance with which he had met everything about him through all the week could not afford to be conquered by a little thing
like this. Jack took it up in his hands and held the baby aloft and danced it to and fro. But still the baby cried.

The good wife rose from her scrubbing and began to wipe her hands in the apron; she must take it.

But Jack would try once more; it really was not pleasant to be beaten like this. So setting himself resolutely against the wall Jack began to sing.

At first it was soft and low, like a man who was feeling his way. But gathering courage as he went, presently he was rolling out an old song of long ago with all the force of his voice.

The effect was magical. The baby stopped as if it were charmed. It opened its eyes to their widest. Then it opened its mouth in imitation of the father's. It put out tiny hands and laid hold firmly of his whiskers as if it would keep him at it. Then it laughed and crowed with delight.

"Eh, Jack, it is good to hear thy music again," his wife said very quietly.

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Poor Jack, it almost put him out. He did stop for a moment, but instantly the little face puckered and wrinkled into all sorts of lines; the eyes closed, the nose was squeezed together, and the lips began to quiver with the coming cry. Then Jack had to strike off again, only to find the effect as magical as before, and to hear the baby laughing and crowing once more. And in the midst of it all there came in the two little maidens, to find the father leaning against the wall making music like this.

"Why, we couldn't think who ever it was, father," said they wondering, and without the merriment fading from their eyes this time.

They sat at tea, silent and shy; every one of them wondering except the baby, that kept stretching out its arms to the father, and found a new delight in pulling at his whiskers.

Poor Jack! He wanted all his thoughts about him to say what he found it so hard to say, but words wouldn't come; and the most eloquent would find it hard to talk when a
tiny hand was being thrust in one's mouth, and another tugged at the beard. So Jack had to content himself with putting his hand into his pocket, and, taking out one sovereign and one half-sovereign, he gave them to his wife.

"What's this, Jack?" she asked, going to the window, for it was getting darkish, and she feared the first glance had deceived her.

"Wages," said Jack, getting it out as well as he could.

The poor wife looked at the money, and then she looked at him. She bit each of the coins, and then looked as if she would like to apply at least her lips to Jack's. But she put the money in her pocket, or rather, we should have said, pockets; for Jack's wife had two. One of them was a very easily reached affair; there, in the thin and tattered dress that she wore, you could not help seeing its somewhat obtrusive opening, for long use had kept its mouth widely agape. Into this went common things of all kinds for which no other resting-place might be handy, and its contents
bulged prominently as the good wife moved about the house. But the other—where it was it is not for us to know; away and underneath somewhere, to get at it involving much turning and searching. Here, alas! was the only safe place for the little that the good wife could scrape together to put by for the children’s shoes and such occasional expenditure. And, not always sacred here in these depths, the hard-earned little bits of silver would sometimes have to go in a scrap of meat for Sunday’s dinner, and even for a loaf of bread. Now it was within and away in the more secret pocket that she had put the sovereign that might perhaps be hers. But the half-sovereign was in the outer common pocket. Jack would be sure to want that before long, and it should be ready for him, since he had trusted her like this, and she felt that if this kind of thing went on she would have to sing too.

“I’ll stay and take care of the little ones if you want to go out, wife,” said Jack. True, it was spoken with some interruption, and more
than one word was bobbed back into his mouth by that little hand. But it went down into the good wife's heart and stirred music that she had not heard for many a long day.

"Bless thee, lad! it is good of thee," said the wife, and then she blushed like a maiden that she should have said so much.

"'Tis all thine, wife, so don't be afraid," said Jack, as the wife went out at the door.

She turned back with a great stare. "All this?" said she. "What must I do with it?"

"Buy thyself a new scrubbing brush, and get the baby a new frock for Sunday," and this time Jack did smile.

The wife came nearer; she couldn't help it; she stood for a moment plucking up courage, then she put her hand on his shoulder, and stooped down and kissed the baby.

"I should like to give thee one, too," she said as shyly as possible; and she did it splendidly, and then hurried away.

"I think the music is coming back again," said Jack to himself.
Later that night, after his wife came back, Jack went marketing, and a couple of chairs were set by the fire. "Good kind of musical boxes," said Jack to himself as he took them in at the door and set each in its place. And there, about the fire, they sat, side by side, silent for awhile, the baby asleep and the little maidens at his side.

"Come, little ones, you must sing to mother and me," said he at last. "I am so glad," you know."

And they looked at each other with a wonder that soon passed into sunshine and joy; and before they knew it Jack and his wife joined with them. But poor Jack broke down before he had gone on long; then the others broke down too, and all was still for awhile, until Jack wiped away his tears and looked up cheerily.

"Eh, but I mustn't spoil the music like this; sing on, little ones;" and they did sing, and Jack sang, and his wife. And then Jack did as he hadn't done for many a day; he knelt down with wife and children, and asked God

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to help them and bless them, to forgive the past, and to strengthen him for the future.

On the Sunday there they sat together at the little Mission-room, and from that day to this no voice is clearer or louder than Jack’s. And now, whenever he talks about clumsy work, or faults in any thing, Jack always calls it “Spoiling the music.”

Jack soon found out that the power that helped him thus was the power of God’s great love, and the grim spirit gave place to gentleness. It was some weeks afterward that one night in the Mission-room Jack stood up to say a few words. “I can sing, mates, better than I can talk; but I should be ashamed if I could not tell you something about what ‘Our Father in heaven’ has done for me. I used to think that religion was no good but to die with. There never was a bigger mistake than that. I find it just the grandest thing that ever was for to live with. Talking about going to heaven when you die—why, when Christ was born didn’t heaven come down to earth? And I believe that wherever
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Christ comes he brings heaven with him if we’ll only open the door wide enough. Ask the wife here; she knows if I’m speaking truth or no. Ask the little ones here. Why, bless you, that there baby, though it ain’t more than a few months old, is old enough to know the difference.”

Then Jack’s eyes filled with tears and he found it rather hard work to get on. “Bless ye, lads, my heart is a-singing, though my eyes be a bit waterish, but it is only the joy running over. I tell ye, it’s enough to keep a man singing all the day long, and sometimes it’s more than you can let out with your tongue. I know now, mates, what the blessed Lord Jesus Christ came into the world for, and what he died for, and what he is living to do for us every one, and I do bless him for it. ’Tis that he may bring back the music and keep us from spoiling it.”

Then Jack’s voice got a bit husky again. “I used to go boozing and soaking in the public-house every night, and here was the dear missis crying her eyes out, and a-breaking
her heart about it. Here was the little ones, ragged and almost barefoot, afraid of their father’s footstep more than of any thing else in the world. Here was the house stripped of every thing comfortable and decent; and here was me a plague and a nuisance to everybody. That was spoiling the music, if you like. But now, lads—I should like you to hear the concerts and lovely tunes I’ve got now all day long! Bless ye, there’s no need to pay a big price for a ticket, you can have it very cheap, and it’s a sort of music that don’t get hoarse in damp weather. To go home when the work’s done and see the light dancing in the little ones’ eyes because father’s come; to see the wife looking happy enough for a princess, and the baby laugh for joy, ah, that’s music that the angels in heaven might envy. To get about the fire and sing a hymn together with the kettle a-keeping time, and then to read a chapter out of the blessed Book, and to kneel down and get a fresh stock of God’s love in the heart, that’s something like music. Then to go out to

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your work along with the blessed Lord Jesus—why I reckon he was a carpenter on purpose to teach us that he had come to help us to do our work as well as ever it could be done. To have a clear eye and a steady hand, and a throat that isn’t all parched up with the drink; to find your work going like a merry tune of music all day long; and to feel that you can keep a clean tongue in your head, and be patient with them that make a bit of mistake, and that you want to help everybody else a bit because the blessed Lord has helped you so much. What do you call that, lads? That’s what I call music! and, thank God, that is what the Lord has done for me.”

Jack’s prayer every morning is: “Lord, keep us in tune all day long;” a prayer that has been blessedly answered now for many months.

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