







THE MAN WHO SPOILED THE MUSIC.

There is no doubt about it, he did, and yet it was the last thing he was likely to believe. He loved music; his voice was often heard ringing out a rollicking song in the tap-room. And now it kept coming to him, in at least a score of different ways—his 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 that every night 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 leaning against the wall by the dirty fireplace, unwashed and in his shirt sleeves. The room looked as wretched as the man himself and as blackened and broken, and window-panes either plastered over with paper or stuffed out with rags. Seated on the other side of the fire-place was a 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 her wretchedness—drunk. Not a bad sort of man but for this one thing; able to earn good wages and to have a comfortable home; yet no greater misfortune ever dwelt amid greater splendor or kept about him in greater misery; 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.

So it was 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 one were to be blamed for the wrong done to 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 their hymn was in their ears and came cheerily ringing from their lips.

"I am glad that our Father in heaven has forgiven us," they sang. "I am glad that our Father in heaven has forgiven us," they sang. "I am glad that our Father in heaven has forgiven us," they sang. "I am glad that our Father in heaven has forgiven us," they sang.

Poor Jack, he seemed to hear it all. "Spoiled 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 very venerable and hairless scrubbing brush.

"It will help to bring back the music," said Jack to himself, purposing to lay his wife there and then a new one, but the purpose was somewhat delayed. Just then, from some corner of the room, 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. "It'll hold her a bit," said Jack rather shyly.

"Thank you," but she felt shy too. "Now Jack, try and mend the music," said he to himself, and that time he really did smile, for the baby was unused to strangers, and no one 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 those times. Jack took it tenderly into his arms and chirped to it, and chirped louder, but still it cried.

It was wonderful that such a wizened frame could make such a noise. Then Jack put the baby on the other arm and whistled, whistled fast and shrill. No, it just cried out as loud as ever. Then Jack took it up in his hands and held the little one aloft, and danced to it and fro and began to sing, soft and low at first as a man who was feeling his way. But the baby cried. And the good wife rose from her scrubbing to take it herself. Jack would try once more; it really was not pleasant to be beaten like this, so he set himself resolutely, and then rang 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 mouth in imitation of the father's, it laid hold firmly of the whiskers with little tangled fingers as if it would keep him at it, and then it laughed and crowed with delight. The poor wife looked on and smiled; it was a strange smile, as if she had got out of the way of it, but it stayed longer than you might have thought.

"Eh, Jack, its good to hear thy music again," she said very quietly. 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 eye 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'er it was, father," said they, wondering, and without the merriest 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 their mouths and another tugging 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 dark, and she feared the first glance had

General Business.

"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 away as if she would like to apply her lips at least to Jack's. But she put the money in her pocket and felt that if this thing went on she would have to sing too.

"I'll stay and take care of the little one if you want to go out, wife," said Jack. "True, it was spoken with some interruption, and more than one word was bobbed into the mouth by that little hand. But it went down into the good wife's heart and stirred music. He had not heard for many a long day. "Bliss these, lad! 't is good of thee," said the wife, and then she blushed like a maiden, that she should have said so much.

"'Tis all mine, wife, so don't be afraid," said Jack, as she went out to the door. She turned back with a great stare. She had taken one half-sovereign and put the other in the mysterious depths of her dress. "All this," said she. "Why, Jack, 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 it stopped down and kissed the baby, and took a long time over it too. "I should like to give thee one too," she said as she gave it to her, and she did it splendidly, and then she looked 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," they knew. 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 a while, until Jack wiped away his tears and looked up cheerily.

"Eh, but I wasn't 'tired the music like this. Sing on, little ones; and they did sing, and Jack sang and his wife and children and then asked God 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 Sunday work or faults in anything, Jack always calls it 'spoiling the music.'

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