

**DANIEL JACOBS**

From *Dartmoor Idylls* by Sabine Baring-Gould, Methuen and Co, 1896

Though the story of Daniel Jacobs is a piece of fiction, the description of the man is based upon a real person, Peter Isaacs. Baring-Gould was introduced to him by Miss Bertha Bidder of Stoke Fleming. Isaacs earned his living by repairing saddles and harness on the farms of South Devon. Though lame he lived on the road, sheltering in farm outbuildings as he made his rounds and picked up songs and tunes as he travelled. Baring-Gould described their meeting in a letter to Lucy Broadwood.

“I had a most interesting few days last week near Dartmouth. I made the acquaintance of a poor old ragged fiddler with white hair, a beautiful intelligent face, a man whose occupation is gone: he is somewhat of a dreamer and not a little given I fear to liquor, but a genuine musical enthusiast, and desperately poor. I have promised him 6d for every genuine old ballad air he can pick up for me and he is going round the country for that purpose.”

The arrangement does not appear to have been particularly successful since Baring-Gould's manuscripts only record two tunes as having been provided by Isaacs; a version of ‘General Wolfe’ and ‘Follow my Love’.

*In another letter to Broadwood, Baring-Gould said:*

> My poor old fiddler, Peter Isaacs of Stoke Fleming, has been in Exeter Gaol!
> Locked up because he slept in a barn and smoked there! The singing birds are not, I am sorry to say a very respectable lot - but I love them and I am sure they love me.

An old man with white hair, an intelligent face, finely cut features, and lustrous dark eyes; dressed in discarded garments of other folk that fitted him in no way, a cripple, with distorted leg, and a green baize bag under his arm.

Coat and trousers are like Joseph's garment, of divers colours; not that they were so originally, but have so become by spillings of ale, by the stain of peat water, by patching of incongruous stuff, by mendings with unsuitable thread.

Daniel Jacobs is a homeless man. He possesses not a hearth at which he can kindle his fire, nor a handful of thatch to cover his white head. He is wifeless, childless, utterly, hopelessly alone in this rough world. Is — do I say? Was — he has passed away. But as I write these words concerning him, the figure of the man with a wasted life and forlorn old age rises up so vividly before my mind's eye, that he seems to me to be still present, very real, and not a memory.

The face of Daniel Jacobs is not to be forgotten, with its aquiline nose, delicately moulded fine lips, and wondrous eyes.

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Daniel's face, pleasant enough in repose, may then call up the wish that a little more soap and water had been applied, a little bit of razor addressed to the jaws and chin, a little combing to the hair, that charity would bestow on him a little more and warmer clothing, clothing that, at least, is cleaner. But when Daniel pulls forth his old violin, as shabby as himself, places it under his chin, and draws his bow across the strings, then every defect is forgotten in the study of his eyes.

A far-off look comes into them. You speak to him; he does not hear you. He is away in spirit in the music world, seeking out some old country dance tune, or some minor ballad air.

Presently Daniel's eye lightens, as though the sun has shone into it, a smile breaks out on the worn features of the white face, and he rapidly fiddles the tune that he has found. Then — it is of no use attempting to speak. He neither sees, nor hears, nor feels anything, he is wrapped up in his cloud of music, carried off in a whirlwind of harmonious sound-like Elijah transported heavenward in the chariot of fire.

Fine strung, sensitive to a touch, is the soul of Daniel — again I write of the man as though he were before me. I cannot otherwise, so strongly has his personality impressed me.

I met him first in a garden. A lady had asked him to come and meet me, and play me some of his old-world music. He came, and sat himself down under a syringa bush. As it happened, there were afternoon callers — several ladies and children, and when told that he was fiddling, they came into the garden to see and hear Daniel.

As it happened, a little dog jumped about plucking at the sash worn by a young girl, and she laughed aloud. At once a shiver passed through Daniel, a look of distress came into his face, and he attempted to creep away.

"Why are you going, Daniel?"

"Please — know I'm an old man and ridiculous — I thought the ladies had had enough o' me."

He did not half believe it when assured that the laugh concerned the dog, and not himself.

There is a song that was composed about the time of the death of General Wolfe., 759; it begins thus —

"Bold General Wolfe to his men did say,  
Come, lads, and follow me without delay,  
To yonder mountain that is so high;  
Don't be downhearted, but gain the victory.  
There stand the French on the summit high,  
While we poor lads in the valley lie;  
I see them falling, as motes in the sun,  
Through smoke and fire, all from the British gun."

It concludes with —

"When to Old England you do return,  
Tell all my friends I am dead and gone;  
And bid my mother, so kind and dear,  
No tears to shed for me, a hero's grave awaits me here."

Both rhyme and metre are faulty, but there is a certain pathos in the words, and a great deal in the very charming, tender air that accompanies them.
I had often heard this song of "Bold General Wolfe," and had heard many variants and some grievous corruptions of the melody. I asked Daniel if he knew "Bold General Wolfe."

He did not answer in words. The far-off look came into his eyes, he remained with bow poised in air waiting, calling. I hummed to him the opening strain. He heard me not, he had gone off in memory to an old tavern where men sat about the worm-eaten table wet with ale slops, and with little piles of tobacco-ash heaped up, and he paused listening to these old comrades singing in the far-away past. Then the sun came into Daniel's countenance, he drew his bow across the strings, and prayed the tune till he reached the "Don't be downhearted;" when a cloud came over his face, his eyes became dull he faltered and broke down. He had forgotten.

Again he essayed "Bold General Wolfe," and again he failed. The old man was distressed; he would not be able to relish any meat, not drink his drop of ale, not sleep a wink of sleep till he had recovered "Don't be downhearted."

Presently a sigh of relief came from his bosom.

"I reckon," said he, "there's Tailor Vanstone can zing he. But he ain't a right tailor neither, for he don't sit cross-legged, for as he hav'n't got but one leg to cross. T'other's lost somehow."

"Come along," said I, "we'll go visit Mr. Vanstone."

So away we went together, the poor limping fiddler and myself, in quest of the one-legged tailor. We found him, and he was ready enough to supply the missing strain. Vanstone had a stentorian voice, and he bellowed as a bull — "Don't be downhearted! Don't be downhearted."

"A minute!" pleaded Daniel, as he set his fiddle under his chin and twanged the strings to get the key in which Vanstone was roaring.

Vanstone swelled his lungs and began again —

"Don't be downhearted! Don't be down-hearted! Don't be downhearted!

A smile on old Daniel's face, and with his bow he ran on, and sang, "But ga-a-a-a-ain the victory!

Daniel Jacobs' life has been a wasted one. His is a wrecked career. He told me one day how this came about. When he was a boy he had made for himself a little fiddle, and had acquired some skill on it. It produced but a feeble noise, much like the twittering of the toys that amuse children, when a quill strikes a cord.

One day a gentleman heard him play, and was struck by his skill and ingenuity.

"Dan'l, would you like to become a musician?"

It was as though a sunbeam shot into his heart and filled it with glory. I can conceive the answer of the boy — not in words, but with a blaze of thankfulness out of his handsome full brown eyes.

"Well," said the gentleman I do not mind finding the money for your training. Run home, Daniel, and get your father's consent, and we will make a great man of you."

The boy ran, nay, bounded home. He did not feel the earth under his feet.

The father was a Methodist, of a severe school. Make a fiddler of you? " he exclaimed. "The Lord forbid that I should have a son turn out such a worthless scamp. Come along, you rascal, with me."

He caught the boy by the arm, dragged him to a saddler, and then and there apprenticed him to that man. The boy became ill with disappointment; he could not eat nor sleep. He cried over
his work and did it badly. He was ashamed to go back to the gentleman and tell him that he had not been allowed to accept his generous offer.

"That wor a mistake," said Daniel; "I ought to ha' done it, but I wor part shy, part ashamed. I didn't know how to put it to the gentleman — 'twas Squire Stoodly — that was like as if I threw his offer back in his face, and so I let it alone. And I nerr easy i' my mind about that, and I took on cruel about myself, for I didn't fancy the saddling trade, and I knowed I'd never get on in that. Well, your Honour, next winter were a green winter as made a fat church-yard. It took off my father wi' a brownkitties (bronchitis), and Squire Stoodly wi' an ulster (ulcer) in his stomick. My master he sed he niver could make nothing raysonable out o' me, but I bided on my time, and when that was up, he sed he couldn't afford to keep me on, as I weren't worth the thread and needles I broke! So — I've been ever since."

Ever since a wandering fiddler, homeless, almost friendless. Alas! the fiddle took him to the tavern, and there he was treated to ale for the sake of his fiddle, and was given by the taverner a shake-down in a corner of the stable or shed.

What little money he earned was through his needle. He travelled from farm to farm to mend broken harness, patch up torn saddles; his work was coarse, uncouth, but strong, and on the Moor, who cares much for the appearance of his horse gear?

Always with the old fiddle in its green case under his arm, he trudged about, and was given work where there was work to be done, and never was denied a meal. Perhaps he might have done better had he been able to settle down and open a little saddler's shop, but the violin interfered, that drew him to the public-house, where he expended his little earnings, and therefore he was never able to accumulate sufficient to take a shop and stock it.

One Sunday, the curate in charge of one of the chapels on the Moor met ragged David hobbling along, with the sweat-drops on his brow, for to walk was painful to him. Said the curate —

"Mr. Jacobs, do you ever go to a place of worship?"

Daniel halted, looked vacantly around at the brown moor with the grey rocks crowning the heights, drew his fiddle from the cover, and passing the bow across the strings, played "The Old Hundredth." That was his sole answer.

He put back the fiddle, and hobbled on. But the look of his eyes said, "My work is in the farm, my entertainment is in the tavern, my worship-when my heart rises to God-is here."

Trouble came to Daniel Jacobs. One blustering night, when the snow fell in flakes., he had applied for work, and was told there was none, and he was not offered shelter or food. To proceed over the moors was impossible. He was spent with weariness, and in his crippled condition lie could not get along in the snow.

So the old man sought out a barn, in which was straw, and there he lit his pipe, and began to tune his instrument.

Now the farmer suspected that Daniel had not gone far, so he went to look for him, before he shut up for the night, and found him smoking and fiddling among the straw. This was too much for his endurance, and Daniel was summoned before the magistrates and sent to prison for a calendar month.

I saw the old man somewhat later — in the summer. I had invited him to come and see me and bring me a budget of folk melodies I had set him to collect. He appeared, ragged, forlorn, with
his sweet, engaging smile, that, however, almost brought tears into the eyes of those who saw him.

"I beg your Honour's pardon if I haven ot done what your Honour set me. There was a little circumstance was against my doing what I had undertaken — with the particulars o' which I needn't trouble your Honour; they wouldn't interest none but me " (that meant his having been in gaol). "I'm very sorry to have to disappoint you — but since then I've had the in-flow-in-sir (influenza)."

The summer was fine, promised to be unusually dry; so I encouraged the old man to employ himself through it in collecting airs for me, in addition to his usual work of going round the farms mending harness.

The summer passed, and I heard nothing of him. Then I thought to inquire after the fiddler at some of the farms to which he was wont to resort. At each I was told, "Yes, Dan'l, he's been here. Gettin' terrible frail and uncertain."

Where could he be?

No one was responsible for him. His home was nowhere. He was but a bird of passage everywhere. He had been here, been there, walking with more difficulty than usual, looking whiter in face than usual., complaining that "this here in-flow-in-sir had left him cruel weak." It was surmised that it had affected his mind. He never had been a good workman; now his work was done worse than ever, and he seemed to have no satisfaction in anything save playing his violin.

"And what has he been performing?"

"Nothin' particular, just a bit here and a bit there — but the poor old chap, he'd sit as one lost in a sort o' dream, and then take out his fiddle, and begin playing and singing-

"Don't be downhearted, Don't be downhearted,
But ga-a-a-a-ain the victory."

"You do not think he has got into trouble again? "

"N-no. You see there's no depending on him. He don't seem to think o'nothing but his fiddle. If he'd been setting fire to anything, we'd have heard. But bless y' there's no more malice in the ou'd man than in a lamb or dove."

Not having been able to hear tidings of Daniel Jacobs at the farms, I inquired at the inns — not at temperance taverns, they were not likely to be frequented by the fiddler. What a strange thing it was — here was this poor, wrecked life, wrecked and poor through one fatal mistake, and that not his own. Had his father suffered him to accept the offer made him as a boy, Daniel might have been a prosperous as well as a happy man. Allowed to follow his natural bent, to develop the genius that was in him, to live in his proper artistic world, he would have been able to do more than maintain himself; he would in all likelihood have had a home, with wife and children, perhaps at this age even grandchildren, climbing on his knee and kissing the old man, as they played with his snowy locks.

It was infinitely sad to think that a father, well-intentioned, generally right-minded, should have marred his son's life by one act of wrong judgment. The life of this man was wreckage from end to end; he knew it, he traced it back to that fatal mistake, but never said a harsh word against the father who had spoiled his life. "You see, your Honour, he were a terrible strict man in his idees, and a taytotaller." So this was the result of principles carried out to exaggeration.
No doubt the old man felt that he himself was too full of fault to cast a stone against his father, even had not filial reverence held him back from so doing.

Now I was constrained to inquire at the public-houses for the lost son of the "taytotaller." I heard he had been seen, but no one knew where lie was. No publican was responsible for him.

"Well, sir, said one landlord, "I was sorry for the old chap, but you see I really could not keep him for nothing. He wouldn't even play through a lively bit of a dance for the men, he went rambling about from one tune to another. He'd rayther suit his own fancy than ours, and so at last he went away-fiddling as he went."

"Fiddling as he went?"

"Yes, sir, and singing —

"Don't be downhearted, Don't be downhearted, But ga-a-a-ain the victory."

"When was that?"

"Only yesterday."

"And which way did he go?"

The publican indicated the direction.

It was clear to me that Daniel had intended to cross a portion of moorland to a farm that lay some miles to the north. The way was not easy—there intervened some rock-strewn slopes and several rather troublesome bogs.

I thought of following in the direction taken by him, and making inquiry at the farm. In all probability I would find him there.

A friend was with me. We agreed to walk thither together, and on the way to measure an avenue of upright stones that had not hitherto been planned. We had a good walk, the wind was cold, and there was no sun; the sky overcast, the moor plum colour from the shadows of the burdened clouds. After we had gone some distance my friend said, "I pity your old cripple over such a ragged moor as this. Could he have done it?"

"That we shall soon learn. Yonder is the farm."

We reached the settlement,—a house surrounded by fields and "new-takes."

Daniel Jacobs had not been there. The innkeeper must have been mistaken as to his purpose.

We started to return, and had walked nearly half-way back, when we came on an old ruined cottage in a coombe; it had not been tenanted within the memory of man. No trees sheltered it, but the rotten stumps of some remained. Not a particle of roof was in position.

My friend cast himself down outside, where the wall sheltered him from the cold blast. "I vote for grub," said he, and he unslung his bottle of cold tea, and began to unbuckle the bag that contained sandwiches and cake, and hard-boiled eggs. Nothing loth,' I cast myself beside him, and soon conversation ceased, as both were engaged in eating.

Whilst we took our lunch, at intervals a strange and inexplicable sound reached our ears. Both noticed it, but neither spoke about it for some time. Presently, when it had been repeated for half-a-dozen times, my friend said, "Old chap, what the dickens is that?"

I shrugged my shoulders.
The sound was peculiar, musical, as of a harp twanged, and then came an interval of silence, then the twang again long drawn.

"Where does it come from?" asked my friend.

"I'll go see — it is somewhat uncanny," said I, jumping up, leaving my flask and sandwiches, and entering the ruin by the broken-down doorway. Then I started.

Near the long-disused hearth and the granite chimney-piece, supported against the jamb was Daniel Jacobs, dead, in a sitting posture, and beside him, fallen from his hand—the violin. I stood silent,' amazed, doubtful whether the old man really was dead—then I heard the plaintive sound again. A heather bush grew among the fallen stones beside the fiddle, and the wind, driving in in gusts through the broken door, carried the harsh branches with a sweep across the exposed strings; it drew forth a vibration—ceased then swept like mystic fingers over the strings again, and again brought out that weird, mournful note. I looked again at the old man. There was no longer the old far off look in the eyes, but a look further still. He was looking, not into the tone-world here, but into the world of harmony beyond.

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