

THE YOUNG BRAHMS



BY SYBIL DEUCHER

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Zeezok
publishing

Elyria, OH

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978-1-933573-15-1 Paperback
978-1-933573-28-1 Casebound

Published by:
Zeezok Publishing
PO Box 1960
Elyria, OH 44036

www.Zeezok.com
1-800-749-1681

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Giotto Tended the Sheep
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MUSIC

Waltz	66
Waltz	69
Sister Mine	79
Intermezzo	106
Poland	121
The Smith	124
Cradle Song	135
The Nightingale	146
The Little Sandman	148
The Wild Rose	151



CHAPTER ONE

A DISMAL SUN was struggling to break through the thick, murky fog hovering over the old harbor city of Hamburg as Fritz, the barrel organ grinder, sauntered along the crooked streets, the clinking tones of his rusty instrument ringing clearly in the chill air.

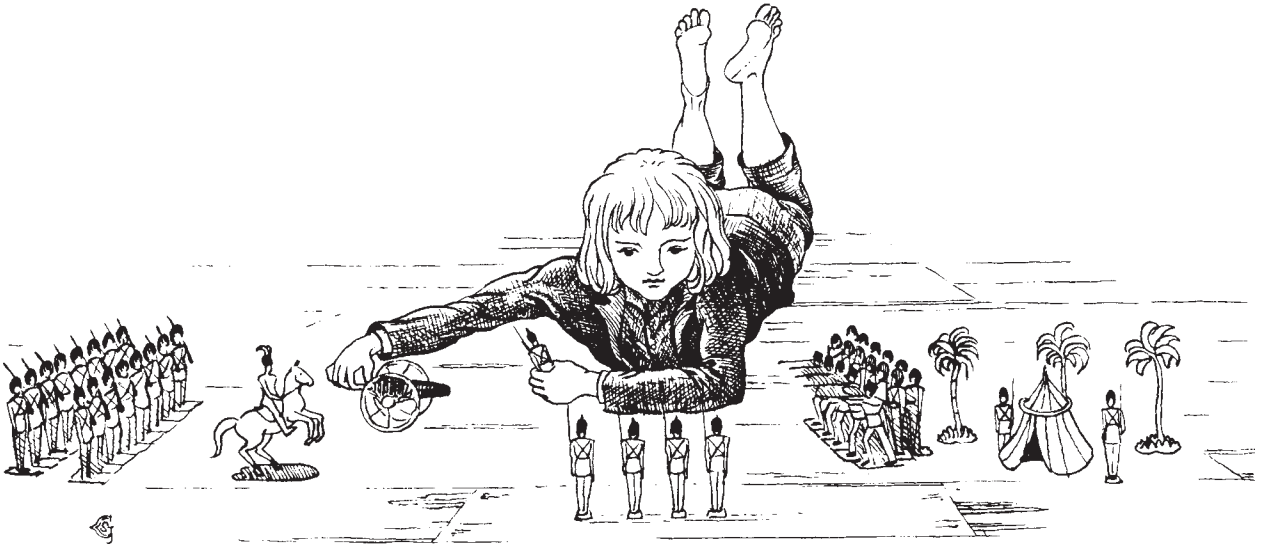
“Ah, Toni, my boy, what a day for us to be out of our snug little home!” said he to his lively monkey, as they gazed up at the windows of a shabby, tumble-down house just off of Bacon Alley.

To be sure, the families huddled together in the tall, timbered dwelling were very poor — yet kind-hearted, so a few coins were sure to be dropped on the cobblestones of the dingy courtyard.

One by one the windows of the crowded tenement house flew open; countless small heads peering out.

Quite likely it was Fritz’s frisky monkey in bright red coat, that the children wanted most to see.

But not so, little Hannes, son of Jakob Brahms. Sprawled on the kitchen floor with his beloved lead soldiers, he was the first to catch the sound of the tinkling tunes below.



“Music! Music, Mother! It’s the barrel organ!” he cried, his blue eyes shining.

In a flash the six-year-old boy stepped into his wooden shoes, and Mother Brahms smiled to hear him clattering down the creaky, outside stairway. My — how her young son loved music!

“Now, Toni, a dance for your breakfast,” said old Fritz turning the crank of his instrument to a catchy tune, as the children began swarming into the courtyard.

With shouts of delight they watched as the little monkey jumped down from his master’s shoulder and began to hop about, first on one foot, then the other, waving his tiny green cap in the air in almost perfect time to the music.

Reaching in his pocket, Hannes took the small coin his father had given him the night before. Longingly he looked at the beautiful shiny piece. What a fine new lead soldier it would buy! Oh, but he must hear more of the lovely tunes!

“Here, Toni,” he called gently, bending down to the little animal.

Quickly the perky monkey snatched the precious coin, and tipping his jaunty green cap, danced merrily on, over the cobblestones.

Joyously Hannes listened to the tinkling tunes until at last the old man went on his way, his lively monkey hopping beside him down the winding street.

“The tunes were beautiful, Mother! Now I will play them, too!” cried the small boy when he reached the landing to the three dark rooms where Mother and Father Brahms lived with their little family.

Running to the narrow alcove, that served as a bedroom, Hannes took the slender flute he kept under his pillow. Crouched on the narrow bed, he began to blow softly into the silver pipe and a sprightly tune suddenly went ringing through the low-ceilinged rooms.

“Just listen to the boy, Jakob! He hears a tune but once,



and can play it straight off!” declared Mother Brahms as she bent her tired back over the kitchen stove.

“Yes, good wife,” her tall husband answered, smiling, “Hannes’s ears are sharp. And so quickly he learns each new piece that I give him! Before long, Johanna, he may be able to play his flute and violin in the taverns with me.”

At once a troubled frown swept across Mother Brahm's kindly face. "In the taverns, Jakob!" she exclaimed distressed. "But surely you would not have the child play in those dreary places!"

"Ah yes," her husband said firmly, nodding. "The boy could earn a little money to add to our family purse. It is badly needed, Johanna."

Alas — how true it was!

Mother Brahm's sighed. Indeed, although Jakob was a good, hard-working musician, he found it very difficult to keep his family clothed and fed. Many a night he had played his horn on street corners, to earn a few extra coins, and now, even though times were a little better, Mother Brahm's often poured water into the soup-kettle so that there would be enough of the tasteless broth to go around.

Every day in the week Father Brahm's took his horn to play in the sailors' inns along the waterfront and, in the evenings, too, he journeyed far across the city, and bowed his double-bass at the Alster Pavilion Restaurant. Sometimes he allowed Hannes to go along with him to hear the music. Glancing up from his notes now and then, Jakob would smile to see his small son, whose fair hair reached almost to his shoulders, sitting so still in the crowded restaurant,

listening enchanted to every note of the music. Ah yes, smiled Father Brahms — how fine it would be when the boy could play his flute in the orchestra, and help in the family earnings!

“Well, Hannes!” Jakob called, when the sweet tones of the delicate instrument faded away, “that was well done, my son! And now, how would you like to play your flute — some day, for my friend of the Musical Union?”

Instantly the little pipe fell on the pillow, and Hannes ran into the kitchen.

“Our friend who has the pianoforte, Father!” he exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“Yes, child, I have been telling him how much you have progressed with your flute. Sometime he would like to hear you play.”

Hannes’s wistful face broke into smiles.

“And then — then could I try the beautiful instrument?” he asked, his eyes glowing.

At this, Jakob threw back his head, laughing. “The piano, son! That miserable box of rattles? It’s no instrument for you, Hannes — only for rich people to play for pleasure.”

But at the same time, Jakob was a little annoyed. Would the child never stop begging for the piano!

“Please — please, Father!” came the pleading cry. “May I try the instrument, *someday*?”

Jakob puckered his lips, frowning. But perhaps, he thought suddenly — if he took the boy along once to see the tinkling instrument, he would be satisfied, and soon forget all about it.

“Very well, Hannes,” he decided, “tomorrow after school, you may take your flute and go along with me. And,” he added with a wry smile, “it’s just possible that my friend will allow you to try his instrument.”

Hannes was breathless.

“Tomorrow, Father! We will go tomorrow!” he cried, throwing his arms around his father’s broad shoulders.

“Yes, my son — but now remember,” cautioned Jakob, “the piano is not for you, young man. That clinking clatter-box will never help you, to earn your living.”

That night, when Hannes climbed into bed, he could not go to sleep at once. Quietly he lay in his narrow bed, thinking about the beautiful instrument he would see the very next day. But at last the shy, wistful boy fell fast asleep

— dreaming of little pianos, *big pianos*, *hundreds* and *hundreds* of pianos, tinkling out the most lovely tunes.

The next morning, with the first clatter of the neighbors' ash cans and barrels in Bacon Alley, Hannes sprang out of bed, and dressing quickly, went to the kitchen to help his mother and sister prepare the breakfast.

Mother Brahms was very lame, and even Hannes's tiny brother liked to find ways to help her with the housework. But what an excellent housekeeper she was — and so clever with her needle, too! Always she kept the small, dark rooms just as neat as a pin.

All morning Hannes was as happy as could be. But how difficult it was to do his sums — and learn the new words in the spelling book at the Primary School, close by. Soon he would see the beautiful piano!

At last, noon-time came, and the small boy hurried back to the humble little home. As soon as the soup bowls were cleared away, Father Brahms reached in the tall cupboard for his cape.

“We're off now, son! Lead the way!” he exclaimed, clapping on his hat.

Hannes ran for his little flute, and tucking the case under

his arm, whistled a gay tune as he led the way down the stairs.

Walking quickly to keep up with the long stride of his father, Hannes followed Father Brahms along the narrow streets — past the musty old harbor. Often he liked to watch the great ships from far-away lands unloading their cargoes along the water-front. But *this* afternoon — there was no time to lose. He was on his way to a piano!

In a short while they came to a small stone house. Father Brahms knocked sharply on the door, and presently a short, stocky gentleman stood before them.

“Ah, good-day, Jakob! So — at last you have brought your young son to play for me!” he greeted them, smiling warmly and ushering them inside.

Breathlessly Hannes looked around the spacious room. Yes — there at the far end, was the large black instrument he had so longed to play. Quietly he stole across the room — gazing down at the shiny white keys. Oh — if only he would be allowed to touch them!

“Now, Johannes,” Father Brahms said abruptly, “show our friend what you can do on your flute.”

Struggling to keep his eyes away from the shiny piano,



Hannes took the slender instrument from its case, and blew gently into the little flute. A bright, lilting tune filled the room. Jakob's friend stared in sheer astonishment. Such a small boy to play with so sweet and pure a tone!

“Bravo, little musician!” he exclaimed, patting Hannes's fair head when the sprightly melody faded away. “Your father has taught you to play well, young man!”

Jakob smiled proudly. “And Hannes can draw a good smooth tone on his violin, too!” he added delightedly. “Some day he'll be playing with us in an orchestra!”

But Hannes was not listening. Slowly he edged closer to the shiny black instrument.

“Please, sir, may I try the piano?” he asked shyly.

Father Brahms quickly interrupted. “You see, my friend,” he explained, “Johannes has hardly been able to wait to hear your instrument — the clatter-box, I call it,” he laughed.

“Tush, tush, Jakob — it has a fine tone!” chided his friend. “Come — listen to this now!” and striding to the piano, he let his strong hands sweep over the keys.

Hannes stood, scarcely breathing. Never — never before had he heard such a beautiful sound! With wonder he