

DAS PIANO

BY BERNARD BECKETT



I've been at war with my teacher, Mrs Biggs, a long time. About as long as the Empire has been giving it to the Hun. I know this is true because the day our fathers marched through town on their way to war, my knuckles were red from Mrs Biggs's ruler. I remember it hurt to hold the flag I was waving as my dad and Rex's dad and Syd's dad and Jimmy Kitchener went past. We all knew Jimmy had lied about his age to get in. It made us proud.

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I'd invented a game called Catch the German. I don't have time to explain all the rules, but we played it every lunchtime. The day I'm talking about, the day the piano trouble started, I was being a German. Being a German meant I had to get to the gorse bushes behind the goalposts without being seen. That's why I was running crouched low, to make myself small and invisible ... and that's why I had my eyes on the ground instead of in front of me, where Mrs Biggs was standing.

Let's just say Mrs Biggs's name is about right. She's wider than a troopship, which is why I bounced off her. It knocked the wind right out of me when I hit the ground. Mrs Biggs wasn't hurt at all. If you ask me, she was waiting there, standing in my way on purpose. Setting a trap like enemies do.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked. Her breath smelt of tea and stale biscuits.

"Being a German," I whispered. I didn't mean to whisper. It's not like I was scared. I was just waiting for my breath to come back.

Mrs Biggs's eyes narrowed, and her eyebrows joined together. Her mouth looked like she'd accidentally chewed on something the dog left. "German?" she screamed. She was so loud that the whole playground went silent. "You're being a German?"

Everybody playing the game was made to stand outside the staffroom for half an hour. We waited in silence, imagining our punishments. When Mrs Biggs came back, she let all the boys who'd been Allied soldiers go back to class. But the Germans (there were six of us) had to stand beneath the flagpole and sing "God Save the King" ten times. She knows I hate singing and was trying to embarrass me.

By the end, Mrs Biggs was smiling again. She changes like the weather. She said our singing had given her an excellent idea. She would invite the mayor to school, and we would perform a concert of patriotic songs. She said it would raise everybody's spirits.





Then Betty said she could play the piano. So Mrs Biggs went on a piano hunt. In the end, she found one in the house of old Mrs Forbes who lived up on the hill and had died eating her dinner. Talk about bad luck.

The piano arrived on the back of McLeod's milk truck. We practised singing twice a day, under the flagpole, for the next week.

Betty's fingers danced over the keys like they were on fire. Mrs Biggs made me stand at the end of the line, right under her nose, so she could enjoy my pain.

The day of the concert, Mrs Biggs made sure I was in the same spot. The mayor and his wife came over to shake Mrs Biggs's hand. Because I was right next to them, I got to watch a drip of sweat run down the mayor's red nose and plop onto the dirt. It served him right for wearing a suit on such a hot day. Too full of himself, my mother says.



What happened next was an accident. Nobody who thought about it for more than a second could come to any other conclusion. Anyway, I sneezed – and you can't sneeze on purpose. It just isn't possible. And when you sneeze, sometimes tiny bits of bogie fly through the air. There's nothing a person can do about that, right?

So Mrs Biggs looked down at her arm, where the you-know-what had landed. Then she looked at me. Her eyes blazed.

"We will start with a solo, Mr Mayor," she said, fixing those blazing eyes on me. "Thomas here would like to sing 'God Save the King' to us – on his own."

I don't sing in front of an audience. I don't even sing for my grandmother. Betty sat at the piano and smiled prettily. My face burnt with shame.

"I can't sing," I said.

"Of course you can. I've heard you," said Mrs Biggs. "Come on, open your mouth."

I was desperate. And when I get desperate, the strangest things pop into my head.

"No, I can't sing," I said. "Not with a German piano."





I didn't know that the piano was German. It was just a guess. My grandad had been a piano tuner, and he'd told me that the Germans made some of the best pianos in the world. But this time, I got lucky. There was a little plaque on the inside: "Made in Dresden". It was the mayor himself who checked.

Mrs Biggs's face turned the same colour as her special-occasion jacket. A vein pulsed in her forehead. She was more furious than the time the ruler broke. Somewhere down the line, a brave student snorted.

Mrs Biggs stormed off, muttering. She returned with an axe from the caretaker's shed. She took the first swing. That sound again, wood splitting clean in two. Then came the saddest music I've ever heard ... like the piano was crying out.

When the mayor stepped up, I thought he was going to stop her. I thought he was going to say, "Mrs Biggs, you can't smash a beautiful piano. Not with all these children watching."

But adults are confusing. Every kid knows it. Instead, Mr Mayor took the axe and stood up straight.

"Boys and girls, your teacher is quite correct. We can't let the Germans into our school. It wouldn't be right, not when your fathers are off fighting them. We're at war – and we must never forget!"

Our teacher and the mayor took turns with the axe. In ten minutes, the piano was a pile of firewood.

Then Mrs Biggs made us sing our songs while she stood on top of the debris and conducted. Betty fingered the notes on her legs. We sang "God Save the King" last. We sang it with all our hearts, just in case.

Jimmy Kitchener once told me that King George is part German – but that can't be true. That would make no sense at all.

Das Piano

by Bernard Beckett

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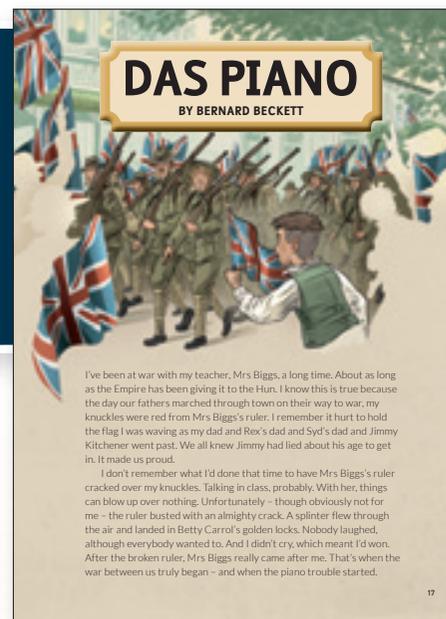
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