

EXTRACT

Believe-It-Or-Not and Stories about Musical Instruments

Once there lived, in a big house in a city, a little man.

But it was neither an ordinary house nor an ordinary man! Actually, this man wasn't visible at all. At least, no grown-up had ever seen him before...

The big house, on the other hand, was both easy to see and easy to hear, in the city. Every passer-by stopped beside it for a moment and listened to the sounds of singers' voices and various instruments coming through the open window. Sometimes you could hear each of these alone, but often – they all played beautiful music together.

In the evenings, the house's huge doors opened and people all dressed up in fancy clothes went through them, into vast, well-lit rooms. It had a cashier by a little window, slender ticket collectors in neat black suits and smiling ushers. There was even a polite doorman, who held the heavy doors so it would be easier to come in. Only no one saw any little man anywhere!

But if children dropped in at the house, the little man was there right away! He was a man like any other, only small. And for some reason, he had a big suitcase with him.

He started talking to the children at once:

“Do you know where you've arrived today? Look around – maybe at a factory? Maybe at a castle? Maybe at a big store?” The youngest children's mouths fell open, and they looked all around, but the older ones, who already knew and had seen a lot, promptly gave a bold answer:

“No, we’re at the Opera!”

On hearing that reply, the little man jumped higher than his suitcase for joy.

“Believe it or not, but the answer’s right! Shows take place here, music plays, soloists sing and the orchestra performs, but the audience listens carefully and applauds!” And yet worry suddenly crept onto the little man’s face, and he studied the children, with a suspicious look. “Do you all already know how to applaud well? It’s advisable for children to applaud loudly every day starting from the age of three months! Believe it or not – those who applaud hard always have warm palms and never get a sore throat! Try it, and see how you do!”

The children started clapping. The ones who were already going to school had rather big palms, and others had smaller ones, but even the very youngest industriously patted their tiny hands together. Yet the little man wasn’t satisfied. He wrinkled his eyebrows and asked:

“But how do you applaud if you really like something?”

The children now undertook to clap even harder, and yet the little man still wasn’t satisfied. He climbed up onto his suitcase and called:

“But what if you really, really, like it very much?”

The children applauded as hard as they could, and a tremendous noise arose! Now just about everyone’s palms really had become warm and entirely rosy, even for the very youngest children. The little man smiled a wide smile and, standing on top of the big suitcase, gave a stately bow to his audience.

“Thank you, thank you, for applauding me so heartily! I really have earned it. I’ve been working at the Opera for a long time. A few hundred years already, it seems. Do you believe it, or not?

Do you know who I am?”

The children started guessing who he could possibly be, yet none of the guesses were to the little man’s liking. He truly was acting cranky.

“Oh no, oh no, I’m not an ordinary little man,” he protested. “No, no, I’m not a ticket collector. I’m not the conductor either; I’m neither a violinist nor a trumpet player. I’m not even the manager of the Opera!” Hearing what an especially smart boy said, the little man stamped his foot crossly: “And I’m not a music critic, who writes angry articles about concerts for newspapers!” He sat down on the corner of the suitcase, pretended to be reading a newspaper, and squeaked in a dainty little voice: “Once again, our meritorious artist Horn Blower blew his big horn too loudly!”

Then he became quite polite again and, laughing, called out:

“I’m not the cleaning lady! Ha, ha, ha! But what am I then, really? I’m simply the storyteller Believe-It-Or-Not. I tell children stories and all kinds of unbelievable events. And they all believe me! Do you believe me, or not? You can believe me if you want; if you don’t want to, you don’t have to. See for yourselves!”

Believe-It-Or-Not suddenly spun into a whirlwind, like a colourful carousel. His short, stubby arms folded outward like the branches of a great tree which reached all the way to the house roof. All of a sudden, several doors opened, and musical instruments rushed towards the little man from all sides – violins, trumpets, kettledrums, and even the big black piano!

Believe-It-Or-Not greeted the instruments and embraced them like old friends. He shook hands importantly with a few, but thumped the kettledrum's big, flat stomach in a friendly way. It wasn't easy for the little man to reach all of them, yet the most sizable instruments bent down politely. The piano even crouched a bit, so it could greet him properly. The children didn't know whether to believe their eyes or not, because they'd never seen living instruments before.

“My dear friends!” said Believe-It-Or-Not. “How happy I am to see you all! Will you help me a bit? Will you help the children and me tell a story? Oh, please!...I know how busy you all are, you have to hurry to rehearsal...For a very short while!” He wrinkled his eyebrows mysteriously and squinted his eyes into narrow, cunning little slits. “I'll tell you a secret; maybe then you'll agree! It will be a story about musical instruments!”

Believe-It-Or-Not tiptoed closer now to one instrument, now to another, and started whispering secretively with them. The children wanted to hear too, and they pressed into a tighter circle around the instruments. The whole orchestra had come together here! And Believe-It-Or-Not truly was a real storyteller, because he understood everything the instruments said.

He carefully drew the bow across the violin's strings.

“Believe it or not, the violin very quietly whispered ‘Yes!’ to me. Even though she’s so famous and has seen the world, she likes stories too.” Believe-It-Or-Not touched the keys of the big, shiny concert grand and listened attentively: “But what does the piano say? Hmm, the honourable concert grand wants to know whether the piano will be a hero or a villain, in our story. Well, see for yourselves – a piano has both black and white keys...Maybe we’ll do it this way...in the beginning it will be a little bad...but after that, it might even become very good! Are you willing? All right then, excellent.”

After thumping the kettledrum's stomach again, Believe-It-Or-Not jangled the cymbals and explained:

“We can't possibly get along without percussion instruments! That's because this story will have...” He whispered something into the cymbals' round ears. “Yes, yes, yes, with swords! Believe it or not!” And the little man sighed with relief: “There, now, the percussion instruments agreed to help too. But what about you, children? Do you want to tell the story of the Kingdom of Musical Instruments with me? Then quickly come this way, the story's already starting!”

Believe-It-Or-Not opened his big suitcase and the children caught sight of a small stage, which had a tiny doll in a little red dress standing on it.

“Once there lived a conductor's daughter, who always went to work with her father, because she loved her father and music very much. She sat in the auditorium and watched

rehearsals. The little girl knew all the musical instruments, and played with them in her mind like dolls. The musical instruments were so beautiful! To her, they seemed just like long-ago princes and kings. There were also a queen and princesses, who were guarded by knights in shining armour. And in the most mysterious corner of the kingdom, there lived a wizard...”

Here Believe-It-Or-Not suddenly grew quiet, as though he’d remembered something important. “Now why am I talking all by myself?! You come on and help me too, we’ll tell the story all together! We could use a few birds, who know how to chirp well. We’ll need wind too, which can hiss and howl in the treetops.”

In the blink of an eye, such a wind and chirping arose that it was just like a real forest! It seemed as though there were no more children; on the other hand, a whole host of trees grew there, with a large variety of birds perching in their branches. “Bravo!” said the storyteller, and silenced the forest voices with a wave of his hand. “Now let’s have a look inside the big suitcase of stories. See, here are my magic tools! Believe it or not, here’s snow and moonlight! Horses and swords! Castle carpets and mirrors! Here’s everything we need for the story.”

And he conjured up out of his suitcase:

several flashlights,

paper bags full of torn-up paper snow,

little mirrors,

sticks that sound like horses’ hooves when you bang them together,

several pairs of table knives and forks –

probably we'll have to eat too, in this story, thought the children. Then he also pulled out:

little chimes and sleigh bells, and

long, brightly coloured paper streamers, coiled into small, neat rolls. And the storyteller passed out all these fascinating things to the children.

“You’re so clever, and you know so many stories,” said Believe-It-Or-Not. “Believe it or not, you’ll understand what to do yourselves, straight away, so that everything turns out right.”

He turned towards the musical instruments.

“My friends, it’s time!”

Music began to play softly. The little man, believe it or not, had disappeared again, as though he’d never been. The story, however, had come out of the magic suitcase and become real, visible and audible...

Once there was the Kingdom of Musical Instruments. It was ruled by King Double Bass and Queen Cello. They were both so big and grand! Even together at the breakfast table, where the king flipped through the sheet music brought by the postman to find out the kingdom’s news, they sat in just as dignified a way as though they were receiving a whole host of foreign ambassadors in the throne room.

But in truth, both large string instruments had soft hearts. They loved their sons, Prince Violin and Prince Viola, very much, and never scolded them or yelled at them. Not even when the playful Prince Violin, fooling around, snapped one of King Double Bass's strings, or when the absent-minded Prince Viola, coming home from school, lost his new bow somewhere...

When Princes Violin and Viola grew up, they saddled their horses and went out into the world, to find themselves brides. The two brothers' path led through a great forest. There trees rustled in the wind, and birds chirped in the trees. The whole forest sounded like real music. They stopped at a crossroads and listened. It seemed to the brothers that in the rustle of the forest, they heard a girl's voice. *It's probably a fair princess*, thought both princes.

"It seems to me that this song came from the west. To find the princess, we have to ride right," said Prince Violin.

"No, the voice came from the east. We have to look for the princess by going left," said Prince Viola. And so the brothers decided to split up at the crossroads, and ride each in his own direction. But if one of them got into trouble, the other promised to go look for his brother, and to help him. You could still hear the drumming of hooves, which thundered off eastward and westward, at the crossroads for a long time, but the girl's voice had gone quiet.

Prince Viola went steadily deeper and deeper into the forest, until he got completely lost. Weary, he sat down under a fir tree and fell asleep. Night came, and the moon started shining

over the firs. In the moonlight, the forest began to sway to wonderful sounds. Prince Viola opened his eyes and saw a dazzling girl.

“Who are you? Am I seeing you in a dream?” he asked.

“My name is Harp,” answered the girl.

“How can you play so sublimely? I’ve never heard sounds like that before,” said the prince.

“I play when there’s moonlight outside. I play on the moon’s rays,” said Harp.

But just at that moment, a black cloud covered the moon, everything went quiet and Harp vanished. Prince Viola tried to call to the girl in the dark forest, but it was useless. She’d disappeared.

In the morning the prince mounted his horse, traveled onward and reached an unheard-of castle. He went into the castle, and there he met an aged, grey-haired man, who had two dogs lying at his feet – a black one and a white one.

“Hello! Have you seen a dazzling girl who can play on strings of moonlight?” asked the prince. “I met her in the forest as moonlight was shining, but a black cloud covered the moon, and I couldn’t find the girl anymore.”

“Of course I’ve seen her,” said the grey-haired man. “That’s my daughter Harp. I am the great wizard Grand Piano. And that was no black cloud at all, but my dog Black Key, who I send to run across the sky at night. Those who wander the forest after dark should beware of him.”

But the prince ignored the wizard’s advice and cautions.

“I want to meet Harp and ask her to become my bride!” cried the prince. “Where is she?”

“Hold your horses,” the wizard growled. “If you want to propose to my daughter, you’ll have to carry out the task I give you first.”

“Yes, I’m ready,” replied Prince Viola. “What do I have to do?”

“You have to go to the tournament and defeat the very strongest knight; then you can marry Harp,” said the wizard Grand Piano. Prince Viola bowed and went on his way. The wizard saw him off with a secretive smile, which was, perhaps, only understood by the two dogs at his feet – Black Key and White Key.

Prince Violin, allured by the beautiful singing, had ridden along the western road all night. During the night, it snowed. But in the morning, he heard hunting horns in the forest, because deer tracks were now clearly visible in the fresh snow. Soon enough, a whole crowd of galloping riders crossed his path.

A commanding old man rode in front of everyone, with plump game already hanging from his saddle and a hawk on his shoulder. It was the old Duke French Horn, who was known far and wide as the best hunter in the kingdom. The duke had spent his whole life hunting. His

son, the young Lord Trombone, and three strapping grandsons, Clarinet, Trumpet and Oboe, raced on his heels. Prince Violin appealed to the swift riders to stop. The duke's servant sounded a halt, and the whole crowd of riders gathered around Violin.

“You hunt in these forests, and know every path here. Have you seen a girl with a very beautiful voice nearby?” inquired the prince. The duke's grandsons Clarinet, Trumpet and Oboe looked at each other and started to laugh:

“It seems like he's talking about our baby sister Flute, who sings every single minute of the day.”

“Flute? How can I meet her?” questioned Prince Violin. “I'd like her to become my bride. No other girl in the world has a voice as beautiful as hers...”

Lord Trombone drew his long sword out of its sheath and said:

“Everyone who longs for my daughter's hand must take their weapons and come to the tournament tomorrow, to test their skills. If you're the very strongest and most skilfull, Lady Tuba and I won't deny you the princess's hand.” With that, he re-sheathed his long sword. Then old Duke French Horn ordered his servant to sound the signal for the hunt, and the riders galloped away. Once again, there was only wind rustling in the forest, and birds chirping in the trees.

The next day, starting early in the morning, two radiantly lovely girls sat at two mirrors in two castles. They were both getting ready for the tournament, but their hearts were uneasy. Only

the wizard Grand Piano was completely calm and, stroking both his dogs, smiled his secretive smile...

Bells rang in the towers. Long red carpets were unrolled, along which the king, queen and their noble guests arrived, then took their seats. Many of the kingdom's ordinary citizens were there too; the whole of the tournament grounds echoed with chatter and songs, the sounds of pipes, tambourines and sleigh bells. Everyone tried to find a spot from which to see and hear everything!

Famous heroes from all corners of the world arrived at the tournament. The first to compete against each other were the Kettledrum brothers and the Cymbal brothers, whose armour gleamed so brightly in the sun that it could even be seen on the opposite shore of the sea. They drew their swords and the fight began. All that clanging and rumbling sounded like a masterful percussion solo.

The tournament went on all day. King Double Bass and Queen Cello, who always sympathised with the losers and wiped away more than one heart-felt tear, were watching. Duke French Horn, Lord Trombone and Lady Tuba were also watching the fighters. Right there next to them sat a delicate, slender, pale-haired maiden with a nightingale's voice – Princess Flute. She so badly wanted to see Prince Violin as soon as possible; her loud brothers had already managed to fill their sister's ears with his falling in love with Flute! Even though she hadn't seen the prince yet, it seemed like Flute was also already in love with him...

Every now and then, Lord Trombone drew his own long sword and, along with Tuba, encouraged their sons Clarinet, Trumpet and Oboe, who were defending the honour of the wind instrument family in this tournament, in sonorous voices. In one corner of the grounds, the wizard Grand Piano's black overcoat flashed mysteriously; both of his dogs, Black Key and White Key, lay at his feet. Beside him, wrapped in a veil, sat the dazzling Harp.

The two string princes were already fighting as hard as they could. Either they were encouraged by hope, or Fortune had decided to smile on each of the princes that day, but they managed to defeat both the Kettledrum brothers and the Cymbal brothers, along with many, many other excellent knights. And, when the end of the tournament came, who else competed against each other but the two string brothers – Violin and Viola.

“My dear brother, I must overcome you in order to prove that I love Harp,” said Prince Viola.

“My dear brother, I will need to beat you to prove that I love Flute. How can we help each other now?” said Prince Violin.

The brothers began their fight. Queen Cello embraced King Double Bass and wailed poignantly... Almost an hour passed, but neither of the brothers gave in. Their strings were tightened – a few had even snapped! Still bows flashed in the air, and the melody stubbornly went on playing.

Suddenly, the wizard Grand Piano's dogs appeared in the lists. Black Key chased White Key, frolicking around, but the white dog, tricking the black one with an unexpected leap sideways, ran right in between the two brothers! Violin tripped, Viola's arm bent, their armour rang, their swords lightly touched their opponent's strings one last time and fell to the ground.

Every sound fell silent.

Who could now say which brother had won? King Double Bass, Lord Trombone, and even the old Duke French Horn, who had experienced so many tournaments, were quite confused! Silence reigned for a while.

But then Flute's voice, which was like a nightingale's song, rang out. Harp played too - not on moonlight any more, but on the rays of the bright sun:

“In music, let love conquer all!”

A moment later, both string princes were playing along. The others joined them: both all the string instruments – including the happy King Double Bass and Queen Cello, who wasn't even thinking of wailing anymore, but had a single tear of joy rolling down her cheek like a quiet melody – and the wind and percussion instruments. Soon a real orchestra was making music in the courtyard of the royal castle! Farmers' pipes, Roma tambourines and the bells on jesters' caps all chimed in too.

But at the very front, the wizard Grand Piano, his black overcoat waving, let both his dogs streak by in music too - black and white, back and forth, back and forth!

And even accidental passers-by, surprised by and enthusiastic about the dreamlike sounds, stopped on the street by the open window ...

Was the story really already over?

“Oh yes,” said Believe-It-Or-Not. Having appeared again from who knows where, he tiptoed quietly down the red-carpet-covered steps. “And you want to go home now, don’t you?”

But the children didn’t even want to hear about it.

“Pleeease, tell us another story. Just one teeny-tiny story!” they whined and bargained.

“What should I tell you about?” wondered the little man. “A dragon? A dwarf? No, that won’t be interesting. I’d better tell you...about myself!”

“All right, tell about yourself,” agreed the children. Believe it or not, the boastful little man had really grown on them.

“There are a lot of famous doctors in stories,” began Believe-It-Or-Not. “Some treat people, others treat birds and animals. I, however, am the very best of them, even though I’m not a doctor at all! Believe it or not, I treat absolutely everyone who’s hurting. Yesterday, in the

forest, I cured a whole anthill – all the ants had colds, and I had to give each one nose drops! After that I cured a teacher who had bad eyesight. She needed glasses – the teacher couldn't make out children in the classroom, and thought nobody had come to school! And then I also cured a very long train, whose very last car was hurting! Oh, how long I had to examine it before I understood where it was hurting, poor thing! But after that I... after that I..."

The little man climbed up onto the suitcase, so the children could see him better.

"After that, I cured a whole orchestra! Do you believe it? Or not?"

"Of course we believe it!" cried the children. "Please, tell us more!"

"Once, the musical instruments in the Opera's orchestra got sick. Violin's head hurt... Kettledrum's stomach hurt... Clarinet's throat hurt... Piano's teeth hurt... And the orchestra couldn't play, because the instruments were so very sick! The conductor called the manager of the Opera right away, and the manager sent a message to..."

"Believe-It-Or-Not!" the children understood immediately.

"But that day, the storyteller had gotten lost far away at the other edge of the story, where he didn't need to be at all.

"Have all the instruments stay in bed!" he said. "And please wrap a scarf around Clarinet's neck! I'll be right there!" Then he quickly put a lot of medicines and the very nicest band-aids into the big suitcase and marched to the train station, whistling.

Cat on Vacation by Inese Zandere
Translated by Mārta Ziemelis

At the station, Believe-It-Or-Not spoke to the train he'd treated once:

“Hello, my friend! Could you take me to the city? All the instruments have gotten sick in the Opera orchestra there, and I have to hurry and help!” The train replied:

“Woo woo! I'm transporting

logs and gasoline,

sand and bricks,

salt and paper,

sausage and potatoes,

shoes and trousers,

cars and washing machines,

a lion and an elephant,

and also a thousand dolls all the way from America –

but there will always be a spot for Believe-It-Or-Not! Let's go!”

The train immediately coupled up all its cars into a long, long row, called out “Woo woo!” and set off, with Believe-It-Or-Not riding in the last car along with his big suitcase full of medicines and band-aids. The train dashed across fields and mountains, across big bridges and through long tunnels – both in a straight line and around lots of bends. It traveled for a long time, such a long time that the last car, which had only recently gotten better, got tired, fell asleep and stopped. The train dashed on, but Believe-It-Or-Not and the sleeping car were left in the middle of a big forest.

At the Opera, in the meantime, things weren't going well for the instruments. Cello's side hurt... Trumpet's ears hurt... Harp's fingers hurt... And the conductor's heart ached a lot for all his beloved friends... *Where can the invisible storyteller Believe-It-Or-Not be?* thought the conductor. *Why isn't he hurrying to help the orchestra?*

But meanwhile, Believe-It-Or-Not was pushing through a forest thicket, to find the straightest way to the city. He tripped over a lumpy root, his hat got caught in a tree branch, his suitcase fell on the ground and all the medicines and band-aids poured out of it, into the moss! The whole forest suddenly smelled!"

"Like medicine?" the children asked, making disgusted faces.

"Hmm," the little man reconsidered. "No, if I remember right, it smelled as though someone were selling cotton candy nearby..."

"Mmm...", the children nodded appreciatively, and wanted to know what happened next.

" "Oh! Oh no!," cried Believe-It-Or-Not, looking at the empty suitcase. But from all sides, the ants whose colds he'd cured streamed in. It was likely that they'd immediately sensed the pleasant, sweet smell! And the hard-working little ants quickly gathered everything back into the suitcase, so fast that their tiny legs practically flickered!

"Thank you, dear friends!", said Believe-It-Or-Not, and hurried on to the city along the straightest path.

But once he'd arrived in the city, the little man was suddenly puzzled. All around rose many large and small buildings, many different streets stretched out on all sides, along them drove many different cars, and finding his way was much harder than in the forest!

At that moment, a whole throng of children was hurrying past him on the street. There were both boys, who hopped along and sometimes even hopped on one leg, and prettily dressed girls, holding hands carefully. But leading them all was the teacher with the new glasses. She saw Believe-It-Or-Not right away."

At this point, a small girl wearing glasses of her own interrupted the storyteller and announced in a smart-sounding voice:

"I don't believe it! Grownups can't see the storyteller, only children see him!" Believe-It-Or-Not scratched the back of his head.

"Some girls aren't clever at all," he said angrily. "Didn't I tell you that I cured this teacher? I gave the teacher glasses that would grant her children's sight myself! Hasn't someone put grownups' glasses on you by mistake?"

The little girl took off her glasses and furtively stuck out her tongue at everyone, so that nobody would imagine she was grown up. But the storyteller went on talking.

“Hello!” said the teacher. “Look how many children there actually are in my class! Children, say hello, this is the storyteller Believe-It-Or-Not!” She looked carefully through her glasses, kissed Believe-It-Or-Not precisely on the tip of his nose and laughed: “Look how well I see now!”

“Then help me find the Opera house!” Believe-It-Or-Not pleaded, and shyly added, ‘I’ve gotten a little lost in this story...’

“We’re going exactly there at the moment,” said the teacher. “We’re going to a show! But now I can see everything that happens onstage, I can look into the orchestra pit and see even the very tiniest piccolo! I didn’t like taking the children to the Opera, earlier, but now we go there every day!”

“You’re going to a show? But then I have to hurry just as fast as I can! If the instruments aren’t cured, the orchestra won’t be able to play and these delightful children won’t hear any music!” fretted Believe-It-Or-Not. As soon as the bespectacled teacher showed him the right way to go, he hurried off to the Opera house before everyone and got right to treatment.

The storyteller gave medicine to practically all the instruments! No doubt you suspect that they weren’t in the least the kind of medicines other doctors give, but sugary and delicious, like sweets and cotton candy. It might be that they actually were sweets and cotton candy... That’s why none of the instruments misbehaved, and took their medicine at once, to get better.

Cat on Vacation by Inese Zandere

Translated by Mārta Ziemelis

But the little man stuck his very nicest band-aid over the conductor's heart – a bright green one with little blue elephants on it.

And soon enough, Harp's fingers didn't hurt anymore, Cello's side didn't hurt anymore, Trumpet's ears didn't hurt anymore, Piano's teeth didn't hurt anymore, Clarinet's throat didn't hurt anymore, Kettledrum's stomach didn't hurt anymore, Violin's head didn't hurt anymore and the conductor's heart didn't ache anymore for his beloved friends, so he could get to conducting again. When the children arrived at the Opera, the orchestra was already in place, the curtain rose immediately, the singers came onstage and the show could begin.

But in the first row, along with the children, sat the storyteller Believe-It-Or-Not, completely invisible, and applauded louder than anyone else.”