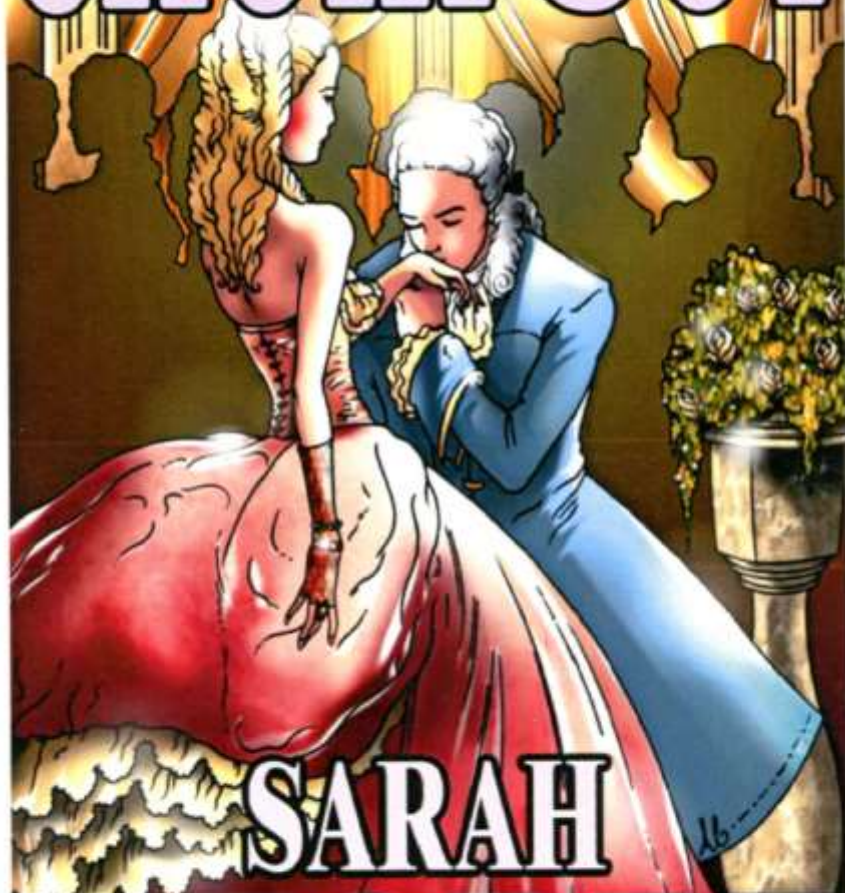


The
CHOIR BOY



**SARAH
THORPE**



Copyright (c) 2008

Published by Mags, Inc
All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without the
written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotes
contained within a critical review.

For information address
Mags, Inc.
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

www.magsinc.com

MAGS, INC
COPYRIGHT (c) 2008

The Choir Boy

by Sarah Thorpe

Chapter 1

It was a cold, snowy day in mid-February. A lonesome rider was struggling to find his way through the forest. The year was 1647 and the rider was Count Johann von Lippl. He was riding a large, black stallion with the name Hannibal. The forest was located in the central region of what is now Germany and it was part of a large hilly and tree filled region in the Duchy of Wittgenstein. Count Johan was on a mission from the Duke of Wittgenstein and he was on his way to a town named Krumbach. He had tried to make a shortcut, but ended up nearly getting lost in a very bad weather. He didn't know precisely where he was, but he had a general idea of the lay of the land. By his reckoning it should be a small village not too far away from where he was. He hoped to reach it before it became too dark, He was equipped and trained to spend a night outside in such weather, but hoped he wouldn't have to.

Outside in Central Europe a war was raging. It had been raging for almost 29 years and would later be known in history as the 30-year war. You see, in the beginning of the 17th century Europe was divided into a protestant north and a catholic south. The result was that Germany was split in half. Many heads of states wanted a divided Germany, but the German emperor wouldn't bend. His official title was German-Roman Emperor and reported only to the Pope in Rome. He wanted a united and strong Germany. Many of the Dukes and Counts around Germany didn't like the thought of being ruled by a catholic emperor so they rebelled.

The first uprising was in Prague. Since the Emperor also held the title of King of Bohemia he challenged the rebels and had no problems crushing the rebellion. The crushing of the rebellion enraged many Dukes and Counts and soon there was a war going on, mainly between Protestants and Catholics in Germany. Soon other countries joined in, and the war raged all over Central Europe.

The former Duke of Wittgenstein, Wilhelm II, had joined the war on the Catholic side, but since very many in his Duchy now were Protestants he had met with great opposition within his own ranks. He had himself participated in several battles and was killed in one of them in 1632. His son Wilhelm III took over the throne, 18 years old. One of the first things he did was to withdraw all his soldiers from foreign soil and instead left them to protect the Duchy's borders. Since that day there had been a sort of peace inside the Duchy of Wittgenstein.

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

Count Johann was just the same age - 33 years old, as the Duke, and they were best of friends. In fact they were first cousins, the Count's mother was the sister of the Duke's father. They had grown up together and had shared everything. They were both married, the Duke to Duchess Victoria and the Count to Countess Maria. Maria and Victoria were also best of friends. Both families had children. Maria had given birth to twins, a girl named Johanne and a boy named Johann, while Victoria had given birth to a boy named Heinrich.

After half an hour Johann finally saw light in the distance. He was relieved. Finally he found a place where he probably could get shelter for the night. He rode into a village he believed to be Zinse. He had heard about it, but never been there. The place had a very bad reputation. He really regretted the shortcut he had taken. The normal route would have taken him through Hemschlar and that would have been much better. In Zinse he was definitely out of character and had to be very careful.

The village was very small, but it had a tavern. He found it right away. His experience told him that taverns also could offer a bed for the night. He left his horse outside and stepped inside.

He saw right away that this might be a big mistake. Spending the night outside might have been better. But he didn't turn back and walked up to the bar and faced the man standing there looking at him. "Is it possible for a lost stranger to get a bed and some food around here?"

The man behind the bar looked him up and down and said: "I can see that you're a gentleman and can pay for yourself. I have a room you can have for the night, and food and beer are always available."

"Fine. Is there someplace I can put my horse for the night?"

"There's a stable in the back. Please help yourself."

Johann stepped out and took Hannibal by the reins and took him to the stable. It wasn't much, but it had to do for the night. Just in case he had to leave in a hurry he left the horse with all saddling gear still in place. He knew Hannibal understood. He whispered something in the horse's ear and left him to himself. He felt relatively safe for the horse. If anybody wanted to steal him they would be in for a big surprise.

Back inside he accepted a plate with some kind of stew. It tasted bad, but it was food and it was warm so he ate it without saying a word. The beer was good though. After the meal he was taken to his room for the night. It was small and not very clean. Once again Johann had to settle with what he got. He took off his outer clothes and lay down on the bed. He loaded his pistols and hid them under his clothes. He laid his knife and sword within easy reach and was ready for the worst. From what he saw of the scoundrels downstairs, he was sure that some of them would try to steal his horse and money and maybe kill him as well. He knew people like that; if they saw an easy prey they took the

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

opportunity to get hold of some money and other valuables. He laid down with his eyes half open, trying to get some sleep.

Johann must have been half asleep for about two hours when he heard some noise outside his door. He was awake in an instant. He also heard faint noise from the stable. This meant that Hannibal was being disturbed. He wasn't worried about the horse, so he focused his attention on the people outside. Slowly he could see the door opening. It was a faint light in the corridor and soon he realized that two men were in his room. He took a good hold on one of his pistols and pointed in the direction of one of the men in the doorway. His left hand grabbed hold of his sword, ready for anything. All this he had managed without making a sound.

Suddenly one of the men launched an attack at him. Johann raised his sword quietly and the man ran straight into it. He died instantly. The other man was on the move as well and he was met by a bullet from Johann's pistol. The gunshot didn't kill the man, but it injured him severely. Blood was coming from his stomach region and he fell to the floor. He held his hand over the wound and screamed in pain.

At the same time he heard lots of noise from the stable. It was obvious that someone was trying to steal Hannibal. It soon became clear that he didn't succeed. A sound from Hannibal told Johann that the horse was safe and its attacker either dead or on the run.

Two minutes later the landlord came running down the corridor and into Johann's room. "What's happened here?" he asked.

"Somebody tried to rob and kill me! Now get this scum out of here! One of them is dead and the other needs medical help. Get moving!"

"Yes, my Lord," the landlord said stuttering and shivering, "I just need someone to help me." He yelled at his wife to give the wounded man some medical help and dragged the dead body outside into the snow. He was back a few minutes later with some water in a bucket trying to clean out the blood on the floor. He wasn't very successful.

In the meantime Johann had run to the stable to check on his horse. But he had nothing to fear. Hannibal was standing there triumphing over his victim. A man lay on the stable floor with his skull crushed in. He was dead.

Johann took Hannibal to another chute and took off his gear. He laid it neatly at the horse's side, gave Hannibal some extra hay and went back to the house. He was sure no one would try to steal that horse now that they knew what the horse was capable of.

Back in his room Johann saw that the landlord was almost finished cleaning it up. As soon as he was finished, Johann closed the door and went back to sleep. He knew that he would be safe for the rest of the night.

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

Johann awoke just as it was getting light. It seemed to be a fine winter's day. It was cold, but that didn't bother him. He had enough clothes to keep him warm on his ride to Krumbach.

Down in the bar area the Landlord had done his best to make a good, solid breakfast for his distinguished guest. The breakfast was good, and Johann said so. After the meal he went to the stable to prepare Hannibal for the ride in the cold. The horse didn't mind much, he just had to be a little extra careful. Before he left the place, Johann paid for the night. He emphasized that he didn't blame the landlord for what had happened; he just told him to be more selective when stray folks came along. As Johann was about to leave the landlord had worked up enough courage and asked: "Please Sir, can you tell me your name?"

"I will do that. My name is Count Johann von Lippl, special envoy to Duke Wilhelm III. I'm on my way to Krumbach on a very special mission for his majesty. You just keep this village of yours in order, maybe you will get guests from my class in the future as well." With these words Johann stepped out the door, mounted his horse and was on his way.

The Landlord stood there in awe. Count Johann von Lippl! No wonder the culprits had done so badly. Count Johann was probably the best fighting man in the whole Duchy of Wittgenstein. No one, not even the Duke himself could match him. He felt really honored to have such a distinguished visitor.

Johann and Hannibal made good pace through the snow. Since the weather was nice they both enjoyed the ride. After about one hour they were on the main road again and knew that they only had a few hours before they reached Krumbach. Johann knew the town well and had a favorite place where he always stayed. The landlord there was a good friend of his and he knew everything that went on in the town. He really looked forward to spend a few days there.

It was noon when Johann rode into the town of Krumbach. The town was a thriving town, most because it's very good beer. It was after all the main supplier of beer all over Wittgenstein. Even other Duchies had discovered the beer, and it was served several other places in Germany as well.

Johann knew his way around town and he rode up to a gasthaus named "Gasthaus bei der Breuerei". That's because it was located almost next door to the brewery. At the moment Johann stopped outside the gasthaus, two men stepped out. It was Hans Knauss, the owner and his son Günther. They knew Johann from several visits in the past. "Welcome to my place, Sir," Hans said as he bowed and took off his hat. "What brings you to town this time?"

"Thank you, Hans," Johann replied, "I'll tell you about my mission later. First of all I want Hannibal to have the best care he can get. I know Günther can take care of that, but just let me follow him to the stable so I can be sure I get all I need to settle in. See you in a little while."

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

Johann and Günther took the horse to a nice and warm stable in the back. They took off the saddle and all other gear the horse was carrying. Johann took what he needed and left the horse with Günther. Hannibal was in very good hands.

Once inside Hans took Johann to his room. He always had the best equipped and largest room in the gasthaus. That was the privilege of his rank in society. It had even happened once that an ambassador had been thrown out of that room just so that Johann could have it. This time, however, Johann was expected so there were no problems. He normally sent a courier out some days ahead to announce his arrival. Things were easier that way. The only problem this time was that he was one day late.

It took about 45 minutes before Johann was fully settled in his room. He had some procedures he always went through and that took some time to finish. In addition it was winter and that also helped to make his procedure longer. When ready he stepped into the main room to meet Hans and his family. It was in addition to Hans and his son Günther, his wife Maria, one other son named Karl and two daughters named Gretchen and Sara. They all looked good, which meant that business was good for Hans and his family.

Johann sat down at his regular table and Maria served him the best meal she could make. She knew what Johann liked, one of his favorites was venison, and she had made just that. A large mug of beer followed the meal. Hans and his family let Johann eat in peace. At the end of the meal Johann invited Hans and Maria to his table. "Sit down, my friends," he said, "and don't be so formal when we're together. We're friends and can skip the titles. Just remember to use them while other persons are present. Now Hans, how's business?"

"Very good. We make a good living running this gasthaus. The vicinity to the brewery helps a lot, though."

"I can believe that."

"One thing, Sir. We expected you yesterday. What's the reason for the delay? And what is your errand this time?"

"One question at a time, my dear friend. The reason I'm late is first of all that I left Berleburg later than expected. To compensate for that I tried a shortcut, but the weather was so bad that I had to spend the night in Zinse." He told them briefly what had happened there and went on. "The reason I'm here this time is that I'm looking for candidates to the Duke's all-boy choir. We've heard rumors that there is one boy here in Krumbach that has a voice that is just out of this world and I want to recruit him to the choir. Do you know which boy I'm talking about?"

"We do. It must be Stephan Schneider, the tailor's middle son. I've heard that rumors about him has reached as far as Vienna. We're expecting someone from there any time now.."

"Can you take me to the Schneider family?"

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

“Any time. When do you want to go?”

“What about right now. I just have to put on some more clothes.”

Ten minutes later Johann and Hans were on their way to the Schneider family. They lived only two blocks away so it wouldn't take them long. As they exited the door they noticed three men on horseback coming down the street. They looked tired after a long ride. They stopped in front of Johann and Hans and asked if there were rooms available in the gasthaus. Hans confirmed that he had rooms and told them to talk to his wife Maria. She would take good care of them. The three men dismounted their horses and stepped inside.

“That was the Austrians,” Johann said, “I could hear it in their dialect. I have to watch out for them. The duke wouldn't take it lightly if a young boy from Wittgenstein disappeared to Austria. In fact he would be very angry. He might even blame me for that to happen. I hope you folks can help me keep the boy in the Duchy.”

“We will help. Vienna is no place for little Stephan. It's too far away from his home.”

“I agree. How old is the boy?”

“He just turned eight. He has two brothers and two sisters and he is number three in line. The sequence in the family is boy-girl-boy-girl-boy. The oldest is twelve and the youngest is four. They're good kids and will all become fine tailors one day. They also go to school to learn how to read and write.”

At this time they came to the tailor's door and knocked. After a short while a woman came and opened the door. It was the tailor's wife Angela who opened the door. “Hello Hans,” she said, “please come in. And who is the gentleman standing next to you.”

“My name is Count Johann von Lippl, special envoy from Duke Wilhelm III,” Johann said, “and I have a very special request for you and your family.”

“We never had so distinguished guests before, but please come in to our humble house.”

Angela was shivering as she followed the two men into the workshop. The tailor sat there, deep concentrated in his work. One boy and one girl was playing on the floor next to him.

“Siegfried, we have visitors,” Angela said, “and quite distinguished ones as well.” She presented the count to her husband.

Siegfried stood up and looked in awe. A Count in his humble workshop! He bowed his head, not daring to look Johann in the eyes.

“Look up my friend,” Johann said. “It's nothing to be afraid of. I just want to talk with you and your family about a matter that is very urgent to the Duke. It's about your son Stephan.”

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

"I guess the Duke has heard about his voice then," Siegfried answered meekly.

"Yes it is. Can we talk about the matter?"

"I believe I have no choice. The Duke's word is my command. If he wants Stephan, he can just take him. His word is the law here in Wittgenstein."

"It's not as easy as that," Johann said, "let's find a table and talk things over in a decent manner. There's a lot more to it than just taking your son away from you."

It was Angela that first regained her senses and led them all to a table in her living room. Whatever Siegfried was working on had to wait as long as the Count was there.

Johann went straight to the point. "I'm here on a special mission," he said, "and my task is to bring your son Stephan to Berleburg so he can be one of the members of the Duke's Church Choir. We have all heard about his voice and we all want him to be in the Duke's choir for everybody to hear."

"The Duke's word is the law," Siegfried said, "and we will obey. It will be a sad day for us to see Stephan leave, but that's the way of life here in the village."

"Calm down a little," Johann continued, "it's not as bad as you think. The duke offers the whole Schneider family a home in Berleburg where they can work as tailors for him and his court. Good tailors are hard to come by, and from what I have seen, you are very good. The Duke also offers full schooling for all your children. Even the girls will receive adequate schooling for their future life. They might become tailors as well, if they like. They might even be part of the Duke's court. Rest assured that everything will be taken care of, and that all of you will live a good life in Berleburg. How does this sound?"

"It sounds fine to me. The only thing that worries me a little is that the two other tailors in town will get a lot more to do."

"They will manage and adjust. When can I hear Stephan sing?"

"He will soon be home from school, and he will sing at five o'clock during afternoon mass."

At this moment Johann looked out the window and saw the three Austrians lurking around. They were obviously searching for Stephan already. He saw the danger and said to Hans: "Hans, go find the commander of the garrison in town. I want to see him here right away. Just tell him who's looking for him."

Hans hurried out the door. He was back in 15 minutes with the commander of the garrison. The moment he saw Johann he bowed his head and said: "I'm at your service, your grace."

"Look me in the eyes. I want you and your men to keep a constant watch on young Stephan, the second son in this house. There are three Austrians in town and they are most surely looking for him. They know they're not welcome, so

The Choir Boy by Sarah Thorpe

they might even try to abduct him by force. This must be avoided at all costs. Understood?"

"Perfectly Sir. I even have an idea. I have a son the same age and he looks a little like Stephan. We might use him as a decoy. He's a brave young man and knows how to act in situations like this."

"I accept your offer. We will all make sure that your son will be safe. And we will teach the Austrians a lesson. Just keep your men on alert and out of sight. I don't want the Austrians to know they are watched. You even have my permission to dress your men in civilian clothes for the occasion.

"Let's talk a little about tactics. I don't think it's very likely that they try anything before mass. They have no idea who the boy is and will wait 'til they see him. First chance they have to abduct him, is when the choir boys leave the church. Next time will be when the boy leaves for school tomorrow. I consider that to be the most likely time. I don't think they dare to enter a house and grab the kid and run. That's too risky. But be prepared for it anyway. If something happens I want to know immediately. I live in Hans' gasthaus.

"So what I want you to do now, is that as soon mass is over, and the boys are still in church, to let your son take Stephan's place and go home as normal. Stephan will be escorted here to his own parents and stay with them all the time. I expect the Austrians to attack while the kids are on their way to school. Then they will most probably grab the boy and get the hell out of this place'. And remember, they must not succeed. If they do your son's life will be at risk."