

# The Story of Silent Night'

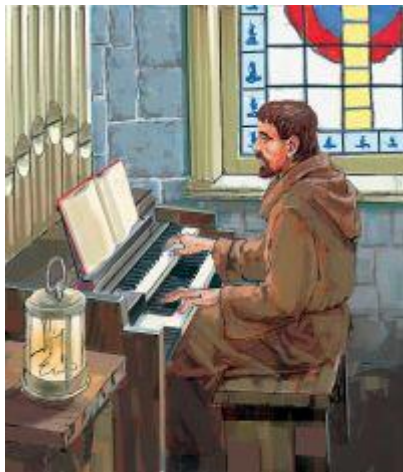
Father Joseph Mohr sat at the old organ. His fingers stretched over the keys, forming the notes of a chord. He took a deep breath and pressed down. Nothing. He lifted his fingers and tried again. Silence echoed through the church.

Father Joseph shook his head. It was no use. The pipes were rusted, the bellows mildewed. The organ had been wheezing and growing quieter for months, and Father Joseph had been hoping it would hold together until the organ builder arrived to repair it in the spring. But now, on December 23, 1818, the organ had finally given out. St. Nicholas Church would have no music for Christmas.

Father Joseph sighed. Maybe a brisk walk would make him feel better. He pulled on his overcoat and stepped out into the night. His white breath puffed out before him.

Moonlight sparkled off the snow-custed trees and houses in the village of Oberndorf. Father Joseph crunched through the snowy streets to the edge of the little Austrian town and climbed the path leading up the mountain.

From high above Oberndorf, Father Joseph watched the Salzach River ripple past St. Nicholas Church. In the spring, when melting snow flowed down the mountains and the river swelled in its banks, water lapped at the foundation of



the church. It was moisture from the flooding river that had caused the organ to mildew and rust.

Father Joseph looked out over the Austrian Alps. Stars shone above in the still and silent night.

Silent night? Father Joseph stopped. Of course! "Silent Night!" He had written a poem a few years before, when he had first become a priest, and he had given it that very title. "Silent Night."

Father Joseph scrambled down the mountain. Suddenly he knew how to bring music to the church.

The next morning, Father Joseph set out on another walk. This time he carried his poem. And this time he knew exactly where he was going -- to see his friend Franz Gruber, the organist for St. Nicholas, who lived in the next village.

Franz Gruber was surprised to see the priest so far from home on Christmas Eve, and even more surprised when Father Joseph handed him the poem.

That night Father Joseph and Franz Gruber stood at the altar of St. Nicholas Church. Father Joseph held his guitar. He could see members of the congregation giving each other puzzled looks. They had never heard a guitar played in church before, and certainly not during midnight mass on Christmas Eve, the holiest night of the year.

Father Joseph picked out a few notes on the guitar, and he and Franz Gruber began to sing. Their two voices rang out, joined by the church choir on the chorus. Franz

Gruber's melody matched the simplicity and honesty of Father Joseph's words.

When the last notes faded into the night, the congregation remained still for a moment, then began to clap their hands. Applause filled the church. The villagers of Oberndorf loved the song! Father Joseph's plan to bring music to St. Nicholas Church had worked.

A few months later, the organ builder arrived in Oberndorf and found the words and music to "Silent Night" lying on the organ. The song enchanted him, and when he left, he took a copy of it with him.

The organ builder gave the song to two families of travelling singers who lived near his home. The travelling singers performed "Silent Night" in concerts all over Europe, and soon the song spread throughout the world.

Today, cathedral choirs and carollers from New York to New Zealand sing the simple song that was first played in a mountain church in Austria on Christmas Eve nearly 200 years ago. -- *By Dick Smolinski*

*Silent night, holy night  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round yon Virgin Mother and  
Child  
Holy Infant so tender and mild  
Sleep in heavenly peace  
Sleep in heavenly peace*

*Silent night, holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight  
Glories stream from heaven  
afar  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!  
Christ, the Saviour is born  
Christ, the Saviour is born*

*Silent night, holy night  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from Thy holy  
face  
With the dawn of redeeming  
grace  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth  
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth "*