

The Story of Silent Night and Little Peppino

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by

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*T*oday, when we celebrate Christmas—a rather long season beginning in October—city shops hurry to decorate with their festive lights, and music blares from the mikes. One listens to “Jingle Bells,” “Joy to the World,” and “White Christmas”—all, it seems, what Christmas demands . . . and always tucked in between the musical chaos is “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

Many singers and bands bring this legendary song to the public. Because we constantly hear it from late October to Christmas Eve, most cannot wait until after the holiday when all nights truly become silent again, if not necessarily holy. Still, surely it remains our most beautiful Christmas carol. That no one knows exactly how the song originated and why it is so popular, I will recount a little story today. It happened once upon a time . . .

It was once upon a time in the year 1818 in the small community of Oberndorf on the Salzach River near the Bavarian border. At that time, there were no dot-coms, no DVD’s, no railroads, cell phones, and no central heating—nothing, actually, what we today have in abundance. Of course, there were no automobiles. If one wanted to go somewhere, he had to harness his horse—if he had a horse. If he had none, he walked. The populace heated its homes with wood ovens and when it was dark, they burned candles or went to bed early because candles were expensive.

Now also in Oberndorf lived a small mouse named Peppino. His parents, Carlo and Christina, were the famous dancing mice—stars in the “Venerdi” Circus which, at that time, traveled about the country with its entourage of animals. Peppino actually had been named *Christoforo* after the Saint who protected travelers, but St. Christopher had been a giant and his name did not fit our small hero. When one noticed *how* small, he was simply called Peppino—except for his tail which was too *long* and apt to get in his way. Peppino just remained small and no one, not even his parents who stepped out of the situation, knew what to do. Finally they consulted a psychologist but Freud was too expensive and the overprotective substitute would, whenever Peppino began a project, say: “That won’t work for you—you are much too small,” constant comments that dripped into his vulnerable psyche, which grew smaller and smaller, comment by comment. He decided to run away.

Now someone had once explained to him that the church was sympathetic to the poor and the small. Qualifying on both counts, there he went. Shyly, he slipped in the door and immediately found himself in a large room in which the air was fragrant with incense. Right inside the entrance there was a large, peaked wooden house into which he looked. *He* had, accidentally, entered the Confessional. To his astonishment, he found a piece of bread and bacon.

Now the priest of Oberndorf was a genial, elderly man, somewhat rotund, who lived by the motto “eating and drinking hold body and soul together,” a maxim which he took very seriously. When he went into the Confessional, he always brought a piece of bacon bread and, in winter, a bit of liquor with which to commune with God. Since repentant sinners seldom patronized the Confessional, especially in winter, he had time for snacks between holy visits. For Peppino, it began a wonderful interlude because although he did not confess, he followed the priest’s motto and took stray morsels very seriously.

One day, however, the priest from Oberndorf was named dean of a retirement home. His successor was a young assistant named Joseph Mohr who always had much to do and no time in the Confessional to snack. Peppino, therefore, was obliged to look for a new nibbling site. He tried a wax candle but its taste was much too une after bacon and, in an attempt to eat the Host, tipped the knife over which almost hit him in the collar. In hunting for something else edible, Peppino arrived in due time in the choir loft and, after a long search, discovered the bellows made of fine leather behind the organ. That did please his palate and Peppino began to dine regularly on this diet. For a long time, no one noticed anything unusual. The organ was seldom played and it takes quite awhile for a bellows to give up the ghost—especially a holy ghost.

On December 22, 1818, however, it was like this. On that day the teacher and organist, Franz Gruber, came to try out a festive prelude, for every Christmas must be the height of ceremony. Because there was no electric motor, they brought in old Vinzenz to pump the bellows. Vinzenz, a pensioned groom from the retirement home, liked to do this because he earned a little money for his Christmas treat—a package of snuff. Gruber always began with *pleno*, all stops out, consequently, Vinzenz began to pump furiously but, because there was no resistance from the bellows, the cross beam crashed to the floor, Vinzenz with it. And the organ—and music—expired with an explosive hiss!

Vinzenz picked himself up and came running and shouting: “Master Gruber, Master Gruber, I believe the bellows are broken.”

“God Almighty,” exclaimed Gruber—but he crossed himself immediately as one must not swear in church—“Holy Peartree,” he began again, “what will we do now?” He did one thing immediately: took off his robe, pushed up his sleeves and crawled behind the organ. There he saw the problem: the bellows which had innumerable holes—it could no longer be used. They must get a new one, he thought. But where? It would be impossible to find an organ builder to make such a complicated repair before Christmas. The nearest master builder, Mauracher, was in Tirol and by the time he could get to Oberndorf, Christmas would be long past.

The elderly Vinzenz went sadly home; he would no longer be needed and the hope of the package of snuff was also gone.

Franz Gruber hurried to the priest: “Joseph, have you heard the latest? Our organ is *kaput*. The mice have eaten the bellows. We can’t possibly secure a new pair before Christmas and, and . . .” in a crescendo of anxiety, “we’ll be without music!”

Mohr thought for a moment—then said, “Franz, then we must get a hold of an idea, whatever happens.”

“Yes, but what?”

Mohr paused: “Strangely enough, some lyrics were given to me during the night. They would be quite good for Christmas. You must only write the music?”

“What! I should compose the music?”

“Yes, and then we could have a duet. We’ll rehearse—with *your* guitar.”

“So . . . (laughing a little). “Then what will the rhythm be?”

“Oh, I think maybe 6/8 time, like the Italians use—the Sicilian mode, you know. See, here are the lyrics—I wrote them down. Something will inspire you.”

In such a manner the poor Gruber was dismissed—not laughing at all. He went home in a quandary. There he sat down and thought. But the only inspiration that came to him was to go to the cellar for a bottle of wine, a bottle his cousin had given him for his birthday. But it, too, had no effect; it only made him tired and, finally, he fell asleep. But Mohr had been praying for God to inspire Gruber. Was it not customary to ask God for favors if the shoe was tight? And the Christmas festival near?

Up in heaven, God had known already for a long time what the problem was (as he wanted a new song) and he had thought how he could give the villagers below (and their other constituents) genuine joy. That’s why he had given the lyrics to Mohr in a dream, one of his favorite communication methods. He had known the melody eternally—but how should he convey it to the people without a dot.com? For Mozart, it was not at all difficult to compose. The wind gave it to him and he caught it. But Gruber? Gruber was a school teacher and with teachers it takes a little longer.

Then God decided on his solution. He would use another wireless communication system. Gruber was now sleeping peacefully and God summoned his archangels, Michael and Gabriel. “My dear ones,” he said. “Tonight, I am sending you down to Earth—to Oberndorf—that lies near the Salzbach River. Look at it carefully, here on Mapquest! There, go to Gruber’s house, and sing the song, *Silent Night*, to him in his dream.”

“But . . . but” spluttered Michael.

God winked at him. “I know, I’ll watch your sword while you’re gone. Now, go and borrow King David’s harp, the beautiful one made of jacaranda wood—with the ivory filigree. Be certain to tune it. You will play the harp and sing the harmony.”

“And you, Gabriel, start practicing now so the countertenor tones are exquisite. And when you get to ‘Sleep in heavenly peace,’ sing pianissimo . . . ah, I see you know that already.” Gabriel was humming as he stood up; he sang the melody once or twice. By the third time, his voice was even more beautiful than the three famous tenors together (of course, they had not yet been on TV then). And meanwhile, Michael had polished and tuned the harp and down they went to Earth.

Both were detained and could not immediately return because they had to sing all six verses of *Silent Night* so Gruber would be certain to recall the melody when he awoke. Michael and Gabriel were so enthused with the adventure that, on reentry, they completed the assignment by serenading the saints. St. Cecelia had her hands full trying to control the heavenly choir which did not want to sing *Hosanna* any longer, only *Silent Night*.

When Gruber awakened, he did not know precisely what had happened, only that he had a captivating melody that suited the lyrics and tempo of Mohr’s exactly. He hastily wrote it down and went to the rectory to rehearse. And this is how, on Christmas Eve in 1818 two men sang a song that came from heaven.

Vinzenz, sitting among the parishioners, had seen the order written for the new set of bellows and, bolstered by job security, indulged in a few vicarious sniffs. He decided he could delay gratification when necessary with such a favorable prognosis.

And about all of this the small Peppino naturally knew nothing. He listened rapturously with everyone to the new melody and thought it extraordinary. And because he was a born dancer, he waltzed in 6/8 time right up the stairs to the choir loft. There he found his peers—mice from all the surrounding woodpiles who had come to celebrate the Christmas mass and any other condiments that might be found. Peppino, in ecstasy, gripped his tail as a baton, and directed his colleagues in the last two verses of the song. *Pleno!* And when Mohr raised the Host, the mice took their final licks on the leather of the old bellows still lying vulnerably on the floor. They chewed most reverently as the communion progressed; it tasted like the finest *Panetone*. And when, finally, the bells peeled, then rustled to whispers, when the feast was over and congregants gone, it again became a *Silent Night* . . . and for Peppino, a most *holey* night.

Elmar Breneis, a former Vienna Choir Boy knows all about angelic conspiracies.

and

Peppino spends most of his time shuttling between Vienna and Oberndorf waiting for the new bellows. Otherwise, he auditions at Holeywood.