

The Secret of the Bullfinch

by Barbara Craig

At a quaint German inn near the Austrian border, the bullfinch perched in its cage in the dining room, where it regularly serenaded customers.

One spring morning in 1854, only one guest sat in the dining room, but he was an impressive personage indeed. His name was Ludwig Eck, the concertmaster of the Berlin Cathedral Choir.

Eck had been enjoying a quiet breakfast, at least, until the bird chirped its song. As the melody filled the air, a bewildered expression covered his face.

"Shall I remove the bird cage?" asked the waiter, who had noticed Eck's puzzled look.

"No," said the concertmaster, and in an effort to explain, he continued, "It's the song the bird is singing. That song has been on my mind for so long, I thought for a moment I was humming it to myself."

Seven years earlier, Eck had been asked by officials of his celebrated choral group to find the composer of the tune.

"The emperor himself has requested that the person who wrote the song be found." explained the concertmaster. "The song has no name above it in our hymn book, but it has become a great favorite of the emperor. He wants to meet the person who wrote it."

For seven long years, Eck had searched for the composer of the emperor's favorite hymn. He had traveled to all corners of Germany and to nearby countries in his quest. He had investigated every rumor and even rumors of rumors about the song. His search had caused him to neglect his work as concertmaster, but he had never yet come close to finding who wrote the tune.

"Where did you get that bird?" Eck asked the waiter. He did not know but offered to check with the owner of the inn. The waiter was gone no more than five minutes, but to Eck it seemed an eternity. The concertmaster impatiently strummed his fingers on the table and ignored the breakfast in front of him. Deep down, he sensed his search would soon be over.

The bullfinch came from a Felix Gruber, a student at St. Peter's Abbey across the border in Austria, the waiter told Eck when he returned. "Felix trained it to sing the song. Students at the abbey often train birds to sing and then sell them."

Within the hour, Eck was on his way to the abbey, which was located near Salzburg.

The abbot at St. Peter's couldn't believe that one of his students trained the bird. "We have disciplined students for doing such a thing. Here, we feel it is a cruel practice to cage a bird and deprive one of God's creatures of its freedom."

Nevertheless, the concertmaster insisted on speaking to Felix Gruber. "I am on my emperor's business," he said.

A few minutes later, the youth, who was about fifteen, stood in the abbot's office. "Yes sir," he said with reluctance, eyeing the abbot nervously as he did, "I trained the bullfinch to sing the song."

"Who taught you the song?"

"My father," said the youth.

"And where did he learn it?" Eck asked. The distinguished concertmaster almost leapt for joy when he heard the answer.

"My father," said the young man with a trace of pride, "wrote the music, and his friend wrote the words."

Felix was not disciplined for training the bullfinch, even though he had violated the school's rules. The abbot was in a forgiving mood. After all, it wasn't every day he had an emissary of the Emperor of Germany in his office.

The following week, Eck, accompanied by young Gruber, arrived in the village of Hallein, where the student's father was the organist at the local church.

Franz Gruber acknowledged his part in the creation of the song. "It happened many years ago--on Christmas Eve in 1818, to be exact. At the time I was the organist at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf. The organ broke down, and for a while it seemed we would not have any music at our Christmas service.

"Father Joseph Mohr, who is dead now, had composed a poem about the birth of Christ. At his request, I put music to the words and preformed it on my guitar at the Christmas mass.

"We never expected to play the song again, but it became quite popular. People began singing it at Christmas in villages all over the Tyrolean Mountains."

Gruber didn't realize how far the popularity of their song had spread. "Father Mohr and I knew it was a great favorite where we lived. We were unaware our music had traveled to distant lands."

The church organist was invited to meet the emperor of Germany. "He's been waiting a long time to meet the person who created 'The Song from Heaven,'" Eck said to Gruber.

"'The Song of Heaven'?" Gruber was puzzled.

"That is what we call your song in Germany," said the concertmaster. "What do you call your song here?"

"We call it what Father Mohr called it when he wrote his poem," said Gruber. "'Silent Night.'"