

SILENT NIGHT

Narrator: Christmas Eve, in the year 1818, in the little Alpine village of Arnsdorf in Northern Austria. Snow covered the tops of the trees, a cool white blanket of calm. It is hard to imagine that a world with all the suffering that we see today could ever have had a scene of such pristine beauty, but it was there all the same. The branches of the pine trees bent low under their heavy white mantle. The stillness in the surrounding forests was awe-inspiring. The people of this little village were busy getting ready for Christmas Eve service. One of them was a man by the name of Franz Gruber.

(Enter Gruber)

A young schoolteacher, he lived in a small apartment over his schoolhouse. He was also doubly gifted as a musician. He was just getting ready for church that evening, like most everyone else in the village, when there was a knock on his door, from his old friend Joseph Mohr.

(Enter Mohr, knocks on a door)

Gruber: What the – who is that at this time? *(Opens door)*

Mohr: Franz? It's me, Joseph.

Gruber: Joseph! This is a surprise! How are you doing, old friend? Come on in, come on in.

Mohr: Thanks.

Gruber: Make yourself at home. Hang on, shouldn't you be getting ready for service tonight? I mean, it's great to see you and everything, but it's pretty hard to have a Christmas service without a priest, wouldn't you say?

Mohr: Can't say I totally agree with that. In my experience once people know where to stand and when to sit down I'm more or less redundant. Some things, however, aren't. How's your work going?

Gruber: Oh, school's great — the kids are great, the parents are another matter, but then —

Mohr: No, no — sorry, I meant, your music. How's the music. Still composing?

Gruber: Oh, that. Well, work's been really busy — you know how it is — though I still pull the old guitar out from time to time, and

Mohr: Good. I want you to write me a song.



Gruber: What? Uh. When?

Mohr: Right now.

Gruber: Huh?

Mohr: For guitar and choir, to play at Midnight Mass. *(Pulls out some pieces of paper)* I've already got the words here, I just need you to add a melody and guitar accompaniment so that it can be sung. Look, I've got no option, the organ's packed it in and we can't have a service without music.

Gruber: Wah?

Mohr: I actually wrote this back in Mariapfarr when they assigned me to that pilgrimage church. About ... two years ago.

Gruber: Two years ago.

Mohr: That's right.

Gruber: You've had the words for the last two years, and now, you suddenly want me to write music? For it to be performed in *(checks watch)* four hours?

Mohr: It doesn't need to be that great.

Gruber: Look, Joseph, you're my friend and everything, but you have to understand that it takes me at the very least a couple of days to do something like this. Why do you want to do this anyway?

Mohr: Because I want the voice to be heard.

Gruber: I'm sorry?

Mohr: I wrote this poem, a long time ago, when I was early on in my training. I'm not quite sure where the words came from, but, well, I want to at least have some control over where they're going to go. They're words come from a time at the edge of memory.

Gruber: Not quite sure I get you, but let me have a look at them. *(Reads)* Hmm. Not bad. Nice to see words in proper German. Well. I could probably put something together, if I had more time, but,

Mohr: Great, I'll help you,

Gruber: You're serious, aren't you? I'm sorry, Joseph, I really am, but these things take a lot more than enthusiasm. It takes time, and dedication, and, and. And. *(Falters while noticing how disappointed Mohr is)*

Mohr: I understand. Sorry. It just felt – felt right. I just wanted the voice to be heard.

Gruber: *(Puts hand on his shoulder)* A voice that wants to be heard, should be heard. Let's start work, old friend. It won't be much, but let's see what happens.

Mohr: Thank you. It's ... it's an important message. I just want it to be heard ...

Narrator: So they toiled through the night, and later that same day, a humble guitar picked out the first few notes of perhaps the most iconic song in Christian history. It was a simple tune, but it delivered a powerful message of hope, and of peace.

Sadly, it is a message that many ignore. Whilst we continue to revel in our differences, the ugly reality of war has repeatedly dotted the centuries. And even when one skirmish ceases, the lessons are not learned. The world has been plunged into pointless war — well, let's say more than once ...

(Mohr and Gruber leave)

Narrator: We go forward to the year 1914, just under one hundred years since Silent Night was written. World War 1 had broken out. Its origins were confused, its course pointless, and there were many thousands of casualties. It was the first time the entire world felt the threat of the reality of war.

(Soldiers set up behind Narrator)

Narrator: We shall tell you now, what happened on the night of December 24th, 1914, at the trenches separating France and Germany. The British Armies and the German armies were staring down each other, with no more than a couple of miles of trenches separating the two.

This was what trench warfare was like. There could be no movement, no action, only a deathly stillness. If any sign was given to the enemy that there was a unit there, they could immediately be devastated. No one's voice was raised. Everyone moved silently, perfectly aware that their next step could be their last.

(David is seated front left, cupping his hands as though he's trying to light a cigarette. Richard walks in stage right)

Richard: Lieutenant! What on earth do you think you're doing?

David: Sorry, sergeant, I was, just, having a cigarette. We've been sitting at this spot here for days, sarge.

Richard: I know, David, I know. But we can't have any lights on. The first cigarette that goes up makes the snipers set their sites. The second cigarette, this area could be shelled. The Huns seem to be focusing their mortars on the Northern sector for now, so we're safe.

David: Safe.

Richard: Yes. (Pause) Sorry, do you know anyone on the Northern sector?

David: Only Gerald. We're old schoolmates. But he's a smart one, I'm sure he's safe.

Richard: We'll get out of this, don't you worry. We just have to find one weak spot, then we can dive in. But we have to be patient. We've been here four months, it could be another four months, maybe another year, but we'll get there.

David: Do you know what day it is today, sarge?

Richard: What?

David: It's Christmas Eve.

Richard: *(Pause)* My word, you're right. I don't believe it. I must have lost track of time.

David: The big boys all said we'd be home for Christmas.

Richard: Now, David, look,

David: At what? What do you expect from me? We've been stuck in this ditch for months. Then we lost Daniel, Simon, and Peterson we haven't even found, and

Richard: It just doesn't help to think of it that way, David, you know that. Pull yourself together.

David: I don't think I'm asking for much. I'm not expecting this war to be over tomorrow. I'd just like — a break. Just a break. To stop this madness for one night. Remember when we went through that German camp we shelled, to look for supplies to loot?

Richard: *(Sighs)* Yes, David, I remember. I don't want to, and neither should you.

David: The body of that German soldier we met. He died clutching a cross, Richard. He died holding onto a little cross that he'd fashioned out of two bits of wood. They die just like us, Richard. *(pause)* I signed up for this because I thought it would be glorious, that I'd be fighting The Good Fight. Precisely what are we fighting for here? Why are we fighting people ... who are just like us?

Richard: I probably shouldn't say this but. *(changes his mind, shakes his head)* ... anyway. There's nothing we can do, it's out of our hands. We just have to sit tight and hope for the —

David: Who's that?

Richard: What?

David: There's — O my God — there's someone standing up.

Richard: Standing up!?! He'll be shot to ribbons! That's — he's not of our division — is that Michael? I can't tell.

David: He's one of us, though. Poor fool. He must have snapped — pressure must have been too much for him.

Richard: Wait a second — I can hear something.

Voice: Silent night! Holy Night!

David: He's ... singing?!

Richard: More like shouting, actually. Doesn't sound like his normal voice is strong enough to carry it.

You recognise it?

Voice: Shepherds quake! At the sight ... Round yon Virgin Mother and child ... Holy Infant so Tender and Mild

Richard: "Silent night"? He's singing "Silent night" at them?

David: He's stopped. He must have just sung the first verse ... If we run we can

Richard: *(Restrains him)* There's no hope.

David: We've got to try!

Richard: There's no hope.

David: We can't just leave him

Richard: Listen to me, David, there is no hope! There is no —

Voice2: Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!

David: I can hear something else.

Richard: It's ... it's a different voice, though.

David: It's in German! But the tune, it's

Richard: They're singing back Silent Night to him.

(Pause)

David: What's happening now?

Richard: One of them from the other side is walking over here. He's got a flag. It's a flag of truce. They're declaring a truce.

David: It can't be true, no, this can't be true.

Richard: But it is, David. *(Smiles)* It is.

Narrator: Unarmed, with neither gun nor bayonet, a German soldier crossed the line to declare a truce. December 24th, 1914 marked a Christmas Truce on the Western and Eastern Fronts. That night, no shots were fired. In some places, they were even able to have football matches between the German and English sides. Quite a few lives were saved that night, because of one simple song. Commanders on both sides warned this was never to happen again, but it did the next year, on Christmas Day, near the village of Laventie, in France.

In the midst of adversity, God delivered. He changed the hearts of man. The two sides were united, if for one night only, in their praise of God.