

The Story of the Trapp Family Singers

By Maria Von Trapp

Chapter One

Just Loaned

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up from the workbooks of my fifth graders, which I was just correcting, into the lined, old face of a little lay sister, every wrinkle radiating kindness.

"Reverend Mother Abbess expects you in her private parlor," she whispered.

Before I could close my mouth, which had opened in astonishment, the door shut behind the small figure. Lay sisters were not supposed to converse with candidates for the novitiate.

I could hardly believe my ears. We candidates saw Reverend Mother Abbess only from afar in choir. We were the lowest of the low, living on the outskirts of the novitiate, wearing our black mantillas, waiting with eager anticipation for our reception into the sacred walls of the novitiate. I had just finished the State Teachers' College for Progressive Education in Vienna and had to get my Master of Education degree before the heavy doors of the enclosure would shut behind me -- forever.

It was unheard of that Reverend Mother Abbess should call for a candidate. What might this mean? Her private parlor was far at the other end of the old Abbey, and I chose the longest detour to go there, in order to gain time for examining my conscience. I was the black sheep of the community; there was no doubt about that. I never meant anything bad, but my upbringing had been more that of a wild boy than that of a young lady. Time and again I had been warned by the Mistress of Novices that I could not race over the staircase like that, taking two and three steps at a time, that I definitely could not slide down the banister; that whistling, even the whistling of sacred tunes, had never been heard in these venerable rooms before; that jumping over the chimneys on the flat roof of the school wing was not fitting for an aspirant to the novitiate of the holy Order of Saint Benedict. I agreed wholeheartedly each time, but the trouble was, there were so many new trespasses occurring every day.

What was the matter now, I thought, slowly winding my way down the two flights of old, worn steps, through the ancient cobblestoned kitchen yard, where the huge Crucifix greets one from the wall, and where the statue of Saint Erentrudis, founder of our dear old Abbey, rises above a fountain. Slowly I entered the cloister walk on the other side of the kitchen court.

Troubled as I was, searching through my laden conscience, I still felt again the magic of the supernatural beauty of this most beautiful place on earth. Twelve hundred years had worked and helped to make Nonnberg, the first Abbey of Benedictine Nuns north of the Alps, a place of unearthly beauty. For a moment I had to pause and glance again over the gray, eighth-century cloister wall before I ascended the spiral stairway leading to the quarters of Reverend Mother Abbess.

Shyly I knocked on the heavy oaken door, which was so thick that I could hear only faintly the "Ave," Benedictine equivalent of the American, "Hello, come in."

It was the first time I had been in this part of the Abbey. The massive door opened into a big room with an arched ceiling; the one column in the middle had beautifully simple lines. Almost all the rooms in this wonderful Abbey were arched, the ceilings carried by columns; the windows were made of stained glass, even in the school wing. Near this window there was a large desk, from which rose a delicate, small figure, wearing a golden cross on a golden chain around her neck.

"Maria dear, how are you, darling?"

Oh this kind, kind voice! Not only stones, but big rocks fell from my heart when I heard that tone. How could I ever have worried? No, Reverend Mother was not like that -- making a fuss about little things like whistling -- and so a faint hope rose in my heart that she might perhaps talk to me now about the definite date of my reception.

"Sit down, my child. No, right here near me."

After a minute's pause she took both my hands in hers, looked inquiringly into my eyes, and said: "Tell me, Maria, which is the most important lesson our old Nonnberg has taught you?"

Without a moment's hesitation I answered, looking fully into the beautiful, dark eyes: "The only important thing on earth for us is to find out what is the Will of God and to do it."

"Even if it is not pleasant, or if it is hard, perhaps very hard?" The hands tightened on mine.

Well now, she means leaving the world and giving up everything and all that, I thought to myself.

"Yes, Reverend Mother, even then, and wholeheartedly, too."

Releasing my hands, Reverend Mother sat back in her chair.

"All right then, Maria, it seems to be the Will of God that you leave us -- for a while only," she continued hastily when she saw my speechless horror.

"L-I-leave Nonnberg," I stuttered, and tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't help it. The motherly woman was very near now, her arms around my shoulders, which were shaking with sobs.

"Your headaches, you know, growing worse from week to week. The doctor feels that you have made too quick a change from mountain climbing to our cloistered life, and he suggests we send you away, for less than one short year, to some place where you can have normal exercise. Then it will all settle down, and next June you will come back, never to leave again."

Next June -- my goodness, now it was only October!

"It just so happened that a certain Baron von Trapp, retired Captain in the Austrian Navy, called on us today. He needs a teacher for his little daughter, who is of delicate health. You will go to his house this afternoon. And now..."