



## The Emperor's Bird's NEST

1 This poem features the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who was the King of Spain from 1516 until 1556. He was actually born in Flanders, which is a northern territory in the modern country of Belgium. While he ruled from Spain, Charles always had a fond place in his heart for his homeland, and so focused a lot of his attention on this part of the world. Through his life he led many campaigns against the French, who occupied parts of Flanders. By 1549 he had claimed all of the Low Countries for his royal line.

2 The Flemish campaign was risky for Charles. He was not a native Spaniard, and actually came to power in Spain without any knowledge of their language. What made the situation even more

difficult was that Charles had brought his army out of their homeland of Spain and into a foreign country, fighting for lands that were not theirs to begin with. As one can imagine, the threat of desertion would have been very high. If enough of Charles' men deserted, his campaign against the French would collapse, plunging him into a very dangerous situation.

3 This is a small story about how a swallow's nest is found attached to Emperor Charles' tent. Rather than kill the bird and destroy the nest, the Emperor demands that it be spared and that, indeed, the bird is his guest. His display of good humour comes at a critical moment and boosts his army's morale.

4 Once the Emperor Charles of Spain,  
With his *swarthy*, grave commanders,  
I forget in what campaign,  
Long besieged, in mud and rain,  
Some old frontier town of Flanders.

5 Up and down the dreary camp,  
In great boots of Spanish leather,  
Striding with a measured tramp,  
These *Hidalgos*, dull and damp,  
Cursed the Frenchmen, cursed  
the weather.

6 Thus as to and fro they went,  
Over upland and through hollow,  
Giving their impatience vent,  
Perched upon the Emperor's tent,  
In her nest, they spied a swallow.

7 Yes, it was a swallow's nest,  
Built of clay and hair of horses,  
Mane, or tail, or *dragoon's* crest,  
Found on hedge-rows east and west,  
After skirmish of the forces.

8 Then an old Hidalgo said,  
As he twirled his gray mustachio,  
"Sure this swallow overhead  
Thinks the Emperor's tent a shed,  
And the Emperor but a *Macho!*"

9 Hearing his imperial name  
Coupled with those words of malice,  
Half in anger, half in shame,  
Forth the great campaigner came  
Slowly from his canvas palace.

10 "Let no hand the bird molest,"  
Said he solemnly, "nor hurt her!"  
Adding then, by way of jest,  
"*Golondrina* is my guest,  
'Tis the wife of some deserter!"

11 Swift as bowstring speeds a shaft,  
Through the camp was spread the rumor,  
And the soldiers, as they *quaffed*  
*Flemish* beer at dinner, laughed  
At the Emperor's pleasant humor.

12 So unharmed and unafraid  
Sat the swallow still and brooded,  
Till the constant *cannonade*  
Through the walls a breach had made  
And the siege was thus concluded.

13 Then the army, elsewhere bent,  
Struck its tents as if disbanding,  
Only not the Emperor's tent,  
For he ordered, ere he went,  
Very curtly, "Leave it standing!"

14 So it stood there all alone,  
Loosely flapping, torn and tattered,  
Till the brood was fledged and flown,  
Singing o'er those walls of stone  
Which the cannon-shot had shattered.

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)



## Glossary

**Swarthy** — an adjective, meaning “dark-skinned”.

**Hidalgo** — a low-ranking Spanish aristocrat. Hidalgos could be poor; this title only meant that they didn't have to pay taxes.

**Dragoon** — foot soldiers, the main force of an army. A dragoon's crest would be the feather attached to their helmet.

**Macho** — a man. Using it here, the soldiers are joking that the swallow might think that the Emperor is just an ordinary man and not a great leader.

**Golondrina** — this is the Spanish word for swallow birds. Keep in mind that Charles was not Spanish, although his troops were, so using this word might have been a display of companionship with his men.

**Quaff** — to drink a liquid in big gulps. The soldiers would have drunk their beer very quickly.

**Flemish** — this is an adjective, which means “from the region of Flanders”.

**Cannonade** — continuous, heavy fire from cannons. This was a very good way to destroy a village's wall.

## Questions

- 1 What was “long besieged”?
  - a Emperor Charles' army
  - b a frontier town in Flanders
  - c the mud and rain
- 2 How were the Hidalgos venting their impatience?
  - a by walking
  - b by bird-hunting
  - c by cursing
- 3 Where had the nest's materials come from?
  - a The bird collected them from the town.
  - b The bird stole them from the soldiers.
  - c The bird gathered them after each battle.
- 4 How did the siege come to an end?
  - a The Spanish blew a hole in the town's walls.
  - b The Spanish camp disbanded.
  - c The Spaniards and French made a truce.
- 5 What word tells us that the swallow had children?
  - a brood
  - b fledged
  - c flown
- 6 Based upon the introduction before this poem, what do you think the Emperor was trying to achieve by making his joke about “Golondrina, the deserter's wife”?
  - a He actually believed that she was the wife of a deserting soldier.
  - b He wanted to cheer up his soldiers to stop them from deserting him.
  - c He wanted someone to get rid of the bird, so made a cruel joke about it looking like a soldier's wife.

## Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section or stanza shown in brackets.

- 7 Inhabited or resided in (1)
- 8 Abandoned (2)
- 9 Swore at someone (5)
- 10 A desire to cause harm to others (9)
- 11 To speak rudely and briefly (13)

## Grammar

Find an **adjective** (a word to describe a noun) in these phrases from the text.

- 12 Up and down the dreary camp
- 13 Till the constant cannonade
- 14 Then an old Hidalgo said
- 15 Hearing his imperial name

## Back To The Text...

- 16 Where do we learn that the Emperor was born in Belgium?
  - a in the introduction
  - b in the poem
- 17 Where do we learn the meaning of unfamiliar words?
  - a in the introduction
  - b in the Glossary

- 18 The word *cannonade* in stanza 12 means
  - a cannon noise.
  - b barrage.

## Sequencing

Look back through the poem to find what we are told first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- 19
  - a One of the men saw the swallow.
  - b The Emperor saw the swallow.
- 20
  - a The weather was poor.
  - b The soldiers wore boots.
- 21
  - a The soldiers drank Flemish beer.
  - b The Emperor lived in a tent.

## Think About This

- 22 The word *solemnly* in stanza 10 could be replaced with
  - a lightly.
  - b clearly.
  - c seriously.
  - d jokingly.
- 23 Which of the following lines rhyme in each verse?
  - a 1st with 2nd and 3rd - 4th with 5th.
  - b 1st with 3rd and 4th - 2nd with 5th.
  - c 1st with 2nd and 4th - 3rd with 5th.

## Challenge Option

Drawing: Sketch a picture of the Spanish boots.

