

THE CHILDREN'S HOUR

by Barbara Gipson

(from *LIGHT AND CLOUDSHADOWS* 5)

From his vantage point on the overhead landing of the study, Father looked down on the tranquil scene below. Several children of varying ages were gathered around the large hexagonal table, the better to sort out bright-colored pieces and assemble a puzzle. Two young boys were setting up their checkerboard on a nearby chair.

Vincent sat in a high-backed chair, his feet propped up on the oak desk, as he read to three younger children. One child was nestled in his lap with fists clenched beneath her chin as she sat, engrossed in the story. Two others were leaning on the arms of the chair and listening intently, one held a favorite book for Vincent's next reading.

Only a short while before, Father and son had been enjoying a well-earned moment of quiet as they sat absorbed in the latest chess challenge. Father had been losing again. The only intrusion upon either of them had been the sound of sputtering candles, distant pipe messages, and the occasional overhead passing of a subway train. Such familiar sounds had passed unnoticed, as the two of them concentrated on the chessboard. Father smiled, as he recalled the moment so recently passed...

Vincent sensed suddenly, cocked his head to one side as a wry smile of amusement touched his mouth. Bowing his head, he returned his attention to the game in progress and startled Father as he softly began to recite.

*"I hear in the chamber above me the patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet."*

The richness of his voice didn't cover the stifled giggles and *shhh!*'s that suddenly seemed to float in the air around them, and Father began to notice the sounds that had alerted Vincent. Without lifting his head, Vincent moved a knight and continued the verses in his deep voice.

*"A whisper, and then a silence,
Yet I know by their merry eyes,
They are plotting and planning together
To take me by surprise."*

Father sighed. Preparing himself for the coming surprise attack, he clasped his hands on the top of the desk and peered warily over the rim of his spectacles. Vincent continued the poem, as children

of all sizes and ages burst from the tunnel entrances, slid down the iron staircase, and daringly jumped from the library balcony.

*"A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall!"*

Shouting to be heard above the clamoring melee, Vincent rose from his chair to receive the attackers. Whirling in place, he crouched at the ready.

*"By three doors left unguarded,
They enter my castle walls!"*

His voice was drowned in young shouts and whoops, as he was surrounded by the motley group. They clung to his arms, sat on his feet, and hugged his legs as though by the sheer weight of their amassed strength they could pull their golden-maned Gulliver to earth.

Staggering to the center of the study, Vincent picked off one giggling, clinging child only to have another leech in his place. Two small girls stood to one side, their hands clenched tightly in front of them. Not certain enough to join in the melee, they called encouragement to their friends, **"Get him! Get him!"**

Father's chair was surrounded as well, and a whooping Indian dropped a rope over the older man's arms to pin him to the chair. The autocrat of the tunnels took up the poem where Vincent left off.

*"They climb up into my turret,
O'er the arms and back of my chair,
If I try to escape,
They surround me..."*

Father raised an eyebrow at the grinning warrior beside him.

"They seem to be everywhere."

Childish laughter and mayhem filled the chamber as Vincent lurched towards a divan, with children clinging to his back and neck. He was growling a deep-throated growl - a sound he had made since childhood, whenever he was intent in his games. The growling didn't deter the children one bit, as they massed in a last effort to pull Vincent down onto the divan. He fell, with a grunt, atop two small bodies who squealed and struggled clear of a heavy torso and arms.

Kipper and Eric sat on their victim's stomach, beat their chests with whooping glee, while the others all climbed onto the divan to smother Vincent under large pillows.

"It's all right, Father..." His voice was muffled. "I've got them right where I want them!"

Father let the victory continue a moment more before calling, "Kipper! Eric! All of you - let Vincent up. Game's over."

Father lifted his bonds over his head, as Vincent came off the divan with a resounding snarl that scattered the remaining warriors. Two small girls raced for Father's lap and the security of his arms, as their eyes widened in alarm. Silence hung for a moment until Vincent's warm blue eyes gave away his true feelings. Sweeping up as many laughing children as he could, he dumped them on the divan. Looming fiercely over them, he snarled a bit more softly and continued the poem.

*"Do you think, O blue eyed bandits,
Because you have scaled the wall,*

*Such an old mustache as I am
Is not a match for you all?"*

Sweeping his arms, he stepped closer, snatched the nearest little ones close for a hug.

*"I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon,
In the round-tower of my heart."*

"More, Vincent! More!" the children on Father's lap called as Vincent's victims hugged him back. Turning, he stalked over to Father's chair as he recited the last verse. The girls on Father's lap squealed and squirmed, tried to hide under Father's loose robe. The older man grinned at them, as his son continued.

*"And there I will keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day.
Till the wall shall crumble to ruin,
And molder in dust away."*

He ended his recitation by poking the two hidden forms huddled against Father's chair. "Enough, Vincent!" Father laughed as he squeezed the girls tenderly and bent to settle them on the floor.

Seeking more entertainment for their pent-up energy, the children gathered around the desk. Until the snowstorm outside the tunnels lessened and they could exit with their sleds, they all looked to Vincent and Father for diversion. The chess game was forgotten. Games, books and puzzles were brought out and shared, as father and son devoted their time to the young tunnel inhabitants.

His memories complete, Father returned to the present, as he looked down on the calm scene. His world was continuing - a world of safety, warmth and contentment. A world being held now by father and son, to be passed to these young children, who would inherit its precious legacy.

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