

BE MY VALENTINE
by Christine Cunningham

St. Valentine's day was fast approaching and Catherine had come up with a wonderful surprise for Vincent. She had discovered that the community celebrated most of the holidays, but this was one of the few that held little significance. Until now that is.

She needed help keeping Vincent out of the way of his chamber and so she recruited some of the children for the purpose. Apparently, some time ago, he had promised them a journey back through time to show them where Father had began their world, and to show them all the places he had played as a child.

"Please, Vincent. You promised you would take us when you had time." All of the younger children crowded around Vincent, refusing to let him go until he agreed to their request. He had quite forgotten his promise but how could he deny them.

"Very well. When shall we go?"

Samantha, who considered herself one of the older ones, suggested Friday, which of course just happened to be Valentine's day.

Vincent agreed without realizing what day Friday was. "It will take us all day and we will not return until very late, so I want you to go to bed without argument. You will need a good night's sleep. Is that agreed?"

A chorus of "yes, Vincent," was heard and off they went, chattering amongst themselves.

Father wanted to know what Vincent had planned for the children. "They are very excited. Where are you taking them?"

"They reminded me of a promise I made to show them where you started our world and where I grew up. Apart from having a good time, it will be a history lesson for them." Father thought it was a splendid idea.

Bright and early on Friday morning Vincent left with the children, quite unaware of what would be waiting for him on his return. Catherine was going to fill his chamber with hundreds of heart shaped balloons. She'd hired a cylinder of helium and transported it through the tunnels to Vincent's chamber.

Father saw her struggling with her burden and hurried to help. "What on earth are you doing, Catherine? Vincent isn't here right now."

She winked impishly. "I know exactly where he is, Father. A conspiracy on my part, as I had to keep him away from his chamber. Do you know what today is?"

Father was nonplussed. What the devil was she up to this time? "I'm not in my dotage yet I'll have you know. It's Friday."

Catherine heaved an exasperated sigh. "The date, Father. What's the date?"

The light suddenly dawned and he roared with laughter. "Oh my! Valentine's Day. I'd forgotten. What are you going to do?"

She explained her surprise. "Do you think he will like it?"

Father assured her he most definitely would. What a good person she was. No one had ever done anything like it for Vincent, and he was looking forward to seeing his reaction when he returned tonight.

"Let me help, Catherine. It's a wonderful idea."

While they were filling the balloons, Vincent was miles away telling the children of the beginning. They asked many questions and he was gratified to know that they were so interested in their history. He showed them the places he had played as a child with Devin, and as he related his story, so his mind went back over the years and he could see himself as he was then.

"I had a happy childhood, just as you have now. There were not so many of us then and life was much harder, but we all worked together to make it the best we could."

All the children sat around him, listening intently. He was a good teacher, the best, and not even Father could tell stories like Vincent. It had been a long day and was not time to return home. None of them wanted the day to end, but Samantha reminded them quietly what awaited Vincent on their return. When they remembered that they were more than ready to leave. Vincent caught them whispering and wondered what they were up to.

"Come now. Time to go home."

As they walked, Samantha started to sing a song which Catherine had taught them. "This old man, he played one," and so it went on, all the way home.

Vincent followed, smiling to himself. It had been a good day and he was glad he had brought them. Remembering the beginning always brought back happy memories and he hoped this generation would feel the same in the years to come.

It had taken hours to fill the balloons, even when all the others came to help. Elizabeth and Mary were reduced to tears when they realized what Catherine was doing for Vincent and they kept looking at each other and sniffing. Vincent deserved a wonderful gesture such as this and who better than Catherine to give it to him. They finished at last and stood back to survey their handiwork. His chamber had been transformed. Hearts were floating every where, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. Coloured streamers were attached to each heart and danced in the cool air.

Catherine was worn out from her exertions but very happy. "I'm going to leave now, Father." He was surprised and it showed.

She caught his look and shook her head.

"He should be alone when he sees this. It's a personal thing, Father, and I wouldn't want him to be embarrassed."

After she had gone Father decided she was right. Vincent might not wish others to see what he was feeling at that moment, so he advised everyone to leave so Vincent could have some privacy.

"We will hear about it soon enough."

Not long after Vincent returned with the children, who were tired after their outing. They thanked him for taking him and Samantha led them off to bed. To Vincent, everything in the communal chamber looked normal. Friends were playing chess or simply talking with each other. Father was reading a book. All normal and yet he sensed something. He shrugged it away and walked across the room to Father's table. Elizabeth and Mary sat together, their knitting needles the only sound between them. They didn't dare look at him, otherwise they would start crying again, and that would never do.

Father looked up from his book. "Ah! Vincent. I heard you all returned. Was it a good day?"

"Yes, we had a wonderful time and the children were very attentive to my stories of our beginnings. It was a long day though and I think I shall follow their example and go to bed. Sleep well, Father. Goodnight."

Father hid behind his book. "You too, Vincent. You too." He could barely keep a straight face.

Vincent left the communal chamber and walked to his own, still with the feeling that something was not as

it should be. Before he could get to grips with that something was, he rounded the corner which led to his chamber entrance and was met by the most amazing spectacle he had ever beheld. The heart shaped balloons danced before his eyes, everywhere he looked. On the wall there was an enormous card bearing the words; *'For my Valentine; Roses are red, Violets are blue, We are one and our dreams will come true.'*

Vincent stared at the balloons and reached out for a streamer to pull one closer. There was no way in the world he could describe what he was feeling in that moment. All the love he held for Catherine threatened to engulf him. It robbed him of his very breath. What did he ever do to deserve someone so giving? It must have been something very good and he thought there couldn't be another man living who was as fortunate as he.

He felt like laughing out loud because the whole thing looked so ridiculous and he felt like crying because she had done something so beautiful for him....*'FOR HIM.'*

Catherine stood on the balcony, shivering in the night air. She knew he would come tonight. Valentine's Day was for lovers and they were surely lovers in spirit, weren't they?

Then suddenly, he was there, touching her as though he couldn't bear not to.

"Catherine. Thank you. No one has ever...." He couldn't continue. How could he when there were no words? Catherine felt his tension, felt the very air around them charged with expectancy. "I wanted to show you, on this day especially, just how much I love you."

Vincent instinctively tilted his head and leaned closer, just as Catherine instinctively raised her face to his. They moved as one, nearer and nearer, until they were a whisper away.

"I love you, Catherine." And as he breathed her name, their lips met in a kiss which held all the love in the world.

'And St. Valentine looked on and smiled.'

Vincent and Catherine - Some would say this is the end but it's only now beginning.