

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

by Elizabeth Hyslop

(from CRYSTAL CAVERN TEN)

Father looked over the top of his glasses, inspecting the unseasonably dour expression on Vincent's unique face.

"Vincent, I've noticed you moping about lately, aren't you feeling well?"

Vincent's shifted in his chair, responding in a tone of annoyance. "Father, I am well. And I am not moping!" He then leaned deliberately forward in his chair, pretending to study the chess board for his next move.

The older man continued to observe his son. Vincent brusquely placed his Bishop into a square taking the White King's Knight, simultaneously placing Father's King in potential jeopardy.

Once it was his turn to make a counter chess move, Father frowned at the board, hoping, in vain, to see a marginally helpful defense. Then as Vincent pointedly continued avoiding eye contact. Father broached the question.

"Vincent, won't you tell me what has been troubling you these past few weeks?"

Vincent released a heavy sigh and turned his gaze reticently away from the scrutiny of his ever-observant guardian.

Father asked with a sense of concern. "Vincent, you know I don't mean to intrude upon your privacy," then after a brief pause, he inquired gingerly. "Is everything all right between you and Catherine?"

Father observed as Vincent shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Turning around to face Father, Vincent sighed ominously. "Father, I've been sensing an upsetting metamorphosis of feelings plaguing Catherine's heart."

Father's grey eyebrows rose in silent surprise. He leaned forward in his seat and gasped.

"You're not saying, I mean, you're not trying to say that she.....?" He left the remainder of this question unspoken. The thought that this special young woman who has brought light into Vincent's life, would even consider withdrawing her love. This would be too painful for Vincent to bear.

But Vincent's gaze was distant and unreadable. He drew in a contemplative breath, not reacting to what his Father had intimated, he revealed what he had been sensing within his beloved's heart.

"I feel that the 'True Spirit of Christmas', within Catherine's world, has been lost."

Father sat back in his chair with a reflective expression, steepling his fingers, he rested them against his lips.

A month ago, during one of her forays to the world Above, Catherine gazed in amazement and sadness at the bustling sights around her and shook her head ruefully. Stores had started displaying

Halloween paraphernalia toward the end of September, and by the beginning of October, nearly every shop had their limited Thanksgiving items displayed for sale.

Catherine reflected on how Thanksgiving seemed to have become less 'commercially valued' as a holiday than Halloween. Many stores would simultaneously sell Halloween trappings along with the few traditional Thanksgiving decorations.

Then, on towards the end of October, stores began gradually displaying some of the early Christmas decorations. As Thanksgiving arrived and passed, and the store displays increased their efforts to include a 'Christmas spirit' for the next upcoming gift giving season. Suddenly, all of the store windows 'screamed 'come inside and buy for Christmas'.

Now, a couple weeks after Thanksgiving, the New York city streets, sidewalks and stores were teeming with pre-Christmas shoppers. These were otherwise intelligent people, who had been brainwashed with a 'manufactured' spirit of goodwill by the hypnotic Siren's song of commercialisation. Everyone seemed to be transfixed into an inevitable Christmas gift shopping frenzy, each wearing a familiar stressed-out expression. And each year, the feeling of renewed goodwill coupled with the dazzling transformation of the city decorated in its Christmas splendour, Catherine Chandler experienced a childlike excitement by the spirit of the season. But since she had met Vincent, she had come to understand and appreciate the priceless value of giving from the heart.

Four weeks before Christmas, everyone acutely felt an increasing pressure of the approaching deadline of December 25th. Catherine stopped short suddenly in front of a shop, while endless streams of intense, impatient-looking Christmas shoppers flowed around her, some attempting to walk intently through her as they went into and left the store. She found herself buffed about as the holiday shoppers roughly pushed past her in their great haste to get the best of the gifts before someone else got them first.

Her green/grey eyes glistened with stupefied anger, as she suddenly pronounced aloud, to herself. "Why am I participating in this insanity?"

The shoppers who had happened to overhear her only glared at her with annoyance and raised impatient eyebrows as if to answer. *"Because, this is what people do at Christmas time, lady, either come into the store with the rest of us, or stay out of our way!"*

Catherine finally got sore from endless elbows and sharp corners of wrapped packages gouging into her from all sides, and stepped out of the general flow of pedestrian traffic. The three wise men who brought their gifts to honour the Christ child in the very beginning, could never have anticipated the madness that has become such a highly commercialized industry!

While she continued to observe the steady stream of harassed-looking people going into and leaving the store, she remembered the excitement as a little girl of getting a Christmas tree to decorate in brightly-coloured ornaments and lights. A smile crept over her lips as she sensually recalled the wonderful fresh pine smell which filled the house when the tree was first brought inside. *'Vincent would enjoy that smell,'* she thought, as her reverie continued.

On the night before Christmas, the young Catherine would curl up contentedly in her warm patchwork quilt, seated on her father's lap, as he read her a bedtime story about the birth of the Christ child. Then after the story, just before going up to bed, she'd go over to peer out through the ice-frosted windows into the night sky to see if she could catch a glimpse of that especially beautiful, bright Eastern star. Her father would stand beside her to watch for a while, then he would lovingly encourage her up to bed.

"I promise you the star will rise and guide the wise men to the cradle of the Christ child." Her father would smile and tuck her snugly into bed, wishing her pleasant dreams with a kiss on her forehead. Then upon lighting the little candle at her bedside, he would walk softly from her bedroom. Sometimes she slipped out of bed again to creep back to her bedroom window, just to wait a little

longer to see that beautiful star.

Catherine sighed. Maybe Vincent would enjoy watching for the Eastern star with her on this Christmas eve. Her heart beat contentedly within her breast.

On Christmas morning, the young girl tiptoed, wide-eyed with anticipation, into the living room to find what Santa Claus (who, by the time she was six, Catherine had discovered was really her father) had left for her underneath the tree. Then there was the childhood joy of tearing open each of her gifts to find something she had wanted, and sometimes she got things she hadn't thought of.

In retrospect, Catherine recognized how she had come to view Christmas as a time when she would be receiving (and giving) purchased gifts. She gasped softly and frowned as a guilty feeling tugged at her heart. '*What am I going to give Vincent for Christmas?*' She pondered this question, then knew that what she wanted was to give him all of herself. And Catherine smiled warmly, and her cheeks developed a pleasurable glow at this prospect.

Far Below the city streets, during this time, Vincent had been constantly aware of his love's turbulent fluctuating emotions. At their modest Thanksgiving gathering, he noticed that Catherine's general mood seemed to be changing from her heartfelt joy over the coming season of only several weeks ago, to a feeling of dispirited agitation. He then wondered whether her work had been the cause of her heart's disturbance?

Catherine smiled bravely. "No, there's nothing particularly upsetting about any of my current cases." Then she would attempt to change the subject.

But Vincent knew in his own heart that something was causing her gentle and caring heart to be in distress. He wanted desperately to do something to help ease her anguish.

Only a week and a half away from December 25th, the Tunnels were humbly 'Decked' with sprigs of holly, and there was an excited spirit throughout the community. Within the Main chamber Father patiently conducted choruses of Christmas carols.

Then in the evening just before Christmas, at bedtime, the children gathered in his chamber to hear him read or tell Yuletide stories. Their favourites of course were, Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, and *The Night Before Christmas*. Vincent would also sit perched on a table to listen to his Father tell the familiar and well-loved stories.

From time to time, Father, the ever-devoted scholar, would edify the children by sharing with them his knowledge of the many differing historical and religious Christmas celebration customs practiced around the world.

"For example, in Holland, the children put out their wooden shoes by the hearth at night."

He was ever hopeful that his vast knowledge of the world would be taken to heart by at least some of the children. The children of course listened respectfully and quietly to the Patriarch's lesson, but then they insisted plaintively upon their choice of a more entertaining bedtime Christmas story. Smiling, he would consent understandingly.

"Oh very well, but then it's off to bed."

The Tunnel community's Patriarch placed an emphasis on the spiritual significance of Christmas.

"The truest meaning of Christmas is to care and give from our hearts." Even so, Father knew full well that the children each hoped to receive some special gift on Christmas morning, which was more in accordance with the practices of the world Above.

The people living in the Tunnel community, having little money for necessities, and could not consider 'splurging' on expensive gifts. Each resident made use of his skills and talents to produce gifts to give. Mary had sequestered herself within her chamber for the past several months, and whenever gently asked as to the reason, she would modestly decline to give any explanations. The other younger women helped guard her special secret by taking on some of Mary's normal duties. Vincent and Pascal also assisted with 'innocently' steering Father away from Mary's chamber.

But eventually, Father became concerned that Mary might not be feeling well, and so one evening he decided to make a surprise stop by her chamber. As he appeared around the corner within the entrance of her chamber, Mary gasped, wide-eyed, fearing that her surprise was now spoiled. She just managed to ball up the nearly finished quilt, tossing it hastily into a nearby blanket chest as her well-meaning long-time friend entered.

"Mary, I thought I would stop by to see how you are doing," he explained awkwardly.

Mary had seated herself now on top of the blanket chest.

"Father, please, come in, won't you sit down?" She sounded suspiciously breathless and appeared slightly flushed, as she indicated the hastily-vacated chair. With a furrowed brow, Father seated himself and smiled solicitously.

"With all of the preparations for Christmas, I've had little opportunity to see you." Father paused awkwardly before revealing his main intent for his visit.

"I wanted to make certain that you are not ill."

Mary, of course, smiled. "I'm fine, I've been busy, but I'm well."

So, moderately satisfied, Father stood, leaning heavily on his cane and wished her a 'goodnight' and left.

Mary waited with bated breath for several minutes before she cautiously removed the quilt from its hiding place. Sighing deeply, she resumed her sewing while attempting to console herself that, with his aging eyesight, and the dimmed lighting, Father may not have actually seen what she was working on when he arrived. At any rate, she thought, he would be a gentleman and not say anything. And quite possibly by Christmas morning, he will have forgotten all about it.

Mary had completed putting together the beautiful, warm, new patchwork quilt for Father which was carefully wrapped, she worked tirelessly to prepare the clothes for dolls, which were being brought down by Helpers to give to the little girls for Christmas.

Catherine moved discretely back to the safe, candle-glowing cheer of her Tunnel home. Over her head, spanning into eternity, was a crisp, cold starry December night sky. Dispirited, she sighed, sending a cloud of warm breath into the air. As she neared the barred, outer Tunnel entrance, thoughts of her beloved Vincent warmed her soul.

He has more to give of real worth from his heart, than can be found in any of the stores, she mused. Then, gazing back wistfully toward the glittering city, she chuckled guiltily to herself. *'Of course there was that absolutely gorgeous, hand-fashioned ruby and diamond rose brooch, I saw in the window of an Upper Manhattan jewelry store which gave my heart a tug or two,'* she thought, as she entered into the welcomed golden glow of the Tunnels!

Releasing another deep breath, Catherine moved silently along the tunnel passage, her smile faded and was replaced once again with a sinking spirit, as she reviewed the day's turbulent feelings, ranging from the depths of despair, to an abundance of happiness.

Since her first memory of Christmas, one of the expressed adages she remembered was; 'Tis better to give, then it is to receive.' However, during her years of knowing Vincent and Father, Catherine had come to embrace a more purified form of this particular adage. 'Tis best to give from the heart.' These two, commercially contrasting beliefs battled within her throughout the day.

Catherine had, however, allowed herself eventually to be siphoned into the store along with the other frantic, stressed out holiday shoppers. Packed, body-to-body, all around her was an almost complete absence of the brotherly love which is suppose to be an important part of the Christmas season.

Once inside the claustrophobic crowd of shopping-frenzied bodies, Catherine tried focusing her thoughts on the task at hand. Stopping in the middle of an aisle intersection, people were bumping rudely passed her as she pondered, '*So, what do I want to give to my good friend Jenny Aronson?*'

Buffeted about like a billiard ball, Catherine made her way gradually toward 'Accessories' which was several counters away.

Along the way, she merged through a marginal opening in the constant stream of people stopping at a perfume counter. Catherine tentatively sniffed a few of the currently 'commercially promoted' perfume scents, silently wondering why a woman would want to have her perfume be so 'heavily odorous' that it seemed to enter a room before she did?! And, then cling to the atmosphere within a room long after she'd left?! Her own idea of a seductive fragrance was one requiring your man to be up close and personal to enjoy it. '*The closer the better!*' Catherine experienced a sensual chill as she remembered how Vincent's fur-covered nose tickled whenever he nuzzled her neck where she'd strategically placed small dabs of her own favourite perfume. Well, everyone had their own special scent preference, and she wasn't aware of Jenny's current 'scent' favourites.

So, she continued her search for just the right gift for her friend. But, merging back into the flow of store pedestrian 'traffic' seemed to be as problematic as getting out into rush hour car traffic! Catherine finally managed to find an opening to squeeze into, and proceeded on down the crowded aisle toward the scarves, hats and gloves. '*Jenny and I share the same basic style of clothing. A scarf goes with everything, and can be worn all year round!*'

Catherine smiled to herself. '*If for some reason she doesn't like the scarf I've chosen, maybe I'll get it back again as a birthday gift!*' She chuckled and aimed her sights toward and rummaged through a pile of lovely silk scarves. Ignoring the crowds of fellow shoppers, she proceeded to weed through the slithering pile of luscious coloured silken neck adornments.

Her jaw set firmly, Catherine picked through the scarves remaining until she found one which would go well with a number of basic work outfits. She then tried to think whether Jenny's wardrobe would accommodate the scarf. '*Well, if she likes it, but has nothing to wear with it, this will give her an excuse for going out to buy a new outfit,*' she reasoned.

Just then a loud, angry-sounding commotion drew her attention away from the scarf and she turned to watch as a pair of large, muscular security men 'ushered' an tattered looking homeless woman out of the store. The poor woman may have merely been inside where it was warm. Or, she just wanted to join in and feel a part of what we all come to know and blithely accept as the Christmas spirit.

Wearing a hard looking scowl, Catherine's green/grey eyes shone, possessed by a deeply felt anger, which had her previous preoccupation with the scarf which she now clutched tightly. She experienced a spectrum of 'ugly' emotions within her ranging from guilt that she had the financial wherewithall to even be considering the purchase of an expensive silk scarf, to shame that this time of year seemed to unwittingly revert her priorities back to the time before she met Vincent, when buying clothes and maintaining her outward appearance dominated her thinking.

"Excuse me, Miss! Are you going to get that scarf?" A woman's impatient sharp voice suddenly intruded upon Catherine's private thoughts.

Turning, Catherine glared angrily at her shopping competition, then shifted her glance downward at

the wadded up and wrinkling piece of silk in her hands.

"Here, you can have the scarf. It costs more than its worth, to me." Tossing it at the woman, Catherine turned on her heels to battle her way back out of the store. "We are turning into a nation of 'Gimme-Get Me's'!" Her thoughts fumed as she cut a path through the crowds out of the store.

Her attention was suddenly diverted as she heard the deep, harsh sounds of the Security officer's reprimanding voice resounding over the constant din of shoppers. This brought the image of the wretched-looking homeless woman flashing back into her mind. Her mood shifted to a painful sadness as she wiped a tear from her eye. Her heart ached for the lost soul as she thought, '*All we really need is to feel that we are cared about.*' As Catherine went back out into the bitter cold, she saw the same homeless woman who stood shivering on the corner. Walking up to her, Catherine removed the woolen scarf she been wearing around her own neck and, smiling, she handed her the gift.

"Merry Christmas."

Wide-eyed and confused, the woman reached out with cold, weather-beaten hands covered only by tattered, finger-less gloves, and uncertainly accepted the offered gift.

"Thank you," she murmured shyly.

Catherine then reached into her purse and drew out a crisp, new twenty dollar bill. Offering the money, she spoke gently, "Here, also treat yourself to a good hot meal."

The shivering, tattered, shyly smiling woman stared with a stunned expression, at this finely dressed young woman, reluctant at first to accept her most generous gift.

Catherine nodded, gently urging her that it was okay. She hesitated, timidly smiled and took the donation. Then as Catherine was walking away, the homeless woman, now warmly wrapped in her new scarf, her face beaming, called out, "Merry Christmas."

With this, Catherine's heart overflowed with the true meaning of Christmas Spirit.

Lost within her reverie, Catherine was startled as a familiar, furred finger reached quietly up to wipe away a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Oh Vincent, I'm so glad I have you in my life!" She then threw herself into his embrace.

Vincent held her in his arms, experiencing her warmth and sensing the easing of the deeply felt ache within her heart. The fragrance of her delicately-scented hair along with the crisp, invigorating cold of the night, were overwhelmingly intoxicating.

"Catherine, I have sensed your heaviness of spirit." Gazing down into her tear-streaked face, he asked softly, "What has caused your heart so much pain?"

Catherine shifted her position in his arms and considered the question. Looking up into his loving gaze, she responded, "I've been visited by my own Three Spirits of Christmas."

Vincent looked down at her quizzically, there was a confused expression in his deep blue eyes.

"Do you mean like in Charles Dickens' '*Christmas Carol*'?"

She smiled softly, and shook her head. "Not exactly, but similar."

Vincent lifted his head to one side waiting to hear more.

Pursing her lips, Catherine sighed deeply. "My Spirit of Christmas Past allowed me to revisit the feelings I had as a child at this time of year. My innocent visions of Christmas then followed me into

my adulthood, where the Second Spirit of Christmas now has guided me toward the truest meaning of Christmas."

"And what did you find?" Vincent asked hesitantly.

Catherine studied her own hands now intertwined with his. "People have different ideas of what Christmas is all about."

His brow furrowed, as Vincent nodded at this stated truth.

She then resumed her thoughts. "However, as we're each deciding on what the spirit of this time of year means, I feel that few people actually stop to ask themselves one very important question."

Vincent stood silently waiting to hear what that 'very important question' could possibly be.

Gazing resolutely up at him, Catherine simply asked, "Whose Birthday are we supposedly celebrating during this holiday?"

Vincent frowned thoughtfully. The answer was as obvious to him as the furry nose on his face!

"We are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ," he responded reverently.

Catherine smiled triumphantly. "That's right!" Satisfied she'd got her point across, she then nestled herself contentedly back into his warm, strong arms.

Still frowning, Vincent glanced down at her and sighed softly. "Catherine, you must always follow your heart regardless of what those around you are doing; for it is within your heart that you will always find the truth."

On Christmas morning, the tunnels buzzed with excitement as all of the children gathered around their Christmas tree. Father played Santa and happily distributed all of the lovingly donated, and handmade gifts.

Then Mary presented Father with her gift, initiating a suspenseful silence as he, with deliberate care, slowly opened his gift to reveal the beautifully coloured, lush, warm, new patchwork quilt.

"Ah, Mary, this is exactly what I've been needed on these cold nights!" he exclaimed appreciatively. Mary beamed happily and blushed slightly with modesty.

Much, much later on Christmas evening, Vincent and Catherine got together for their own private celebration. They met within the tunnels, and upon reaching his chamber, they at least gave each other gifts borne of their love for each other.

"You've been the guiding star of my life." Smiling up at him, Catherine softly declared.

"And you have been the hope of my life." Vincent purred. They kissed gently, and caressed. After which, Vincent escorted his love back to her apartment's basement entrance.

Then with a reluctant, but completely satisfied sigh, she turned and headed homeward.

END