

I WILL COME FOR YOU

by Inez Paskal

An evening at the opera - Vincent had actually experienced the opera. He lay in bed and listened once again as the music of *'La Boheme'* echoed through his ears. Gently closing his eyes, he could see each scene as rich and vibrant as it appeared on stage. He envisioned the street and the cafe, the garret and the courtyard; bright costumes mixed with flowers and colorful tablecloths. Puccini's poignant music had always brought tears to Vincent's eyes, and now he knew why. To actually *'feel'* each scene come alive in its totality, the story, the scenery and the music, was to live and die with the lovers; it is the music of love and the soul of desolation.

'How many times had he felt the shame of his poverty, knowing that Catherine should not have to suffer his lifestyle.' He could not permit that; and yet her love was steadfast, her eyes shining with love as they were when he had gently kissed the top of her head as he said goodnight. She then lifted her face, and the love-light almost blinded him. He knew what she wanted; he could feel her passion, and as always he sent her home.

Suddenly, Vincent sat up in a panic. *'Would he be held accountable for all those wasted moments? Would he ever feel; that it was right to tell her of his true feelings for her? Would he be punished for turning her away? Would she be taken from him?'* He tried to settle down, to dream once again of the opera, but this seemed impossible for he now had the cold, chilled feeling that someone had just walked upon his grave.

Tossing and turning in a light, restless sleep, Vincent kept hearing laughter. He was positive it was all mixed up with his dreams. *'Was he awake or asleep?'* Finally, he got up and stood in the entrance of his chamber, listening. There definitely was laughter coming from somewhere in the distance; and to make matters worse, it sounded like children's laughter. *'Which of the children could be up and playing at this hour of the night?'* He must put a stop to it; they should be in bed and asleep.

Vincent went to the Whispering Gallery, thinking that an unusually strong wind might be carrying the sound from Above through the tunnels Below. Listening, he tried to pick up the direction of the children's prattle. It was too consistent, too full of substance to be coming from Above. Vincent shut out all other sounds and thought, concentrating fully on that single strand of laughter. It led him to the Waterfall Cavern and then along the underground river. Finally, he came up short, not believing his eyes. There, playing on the bank of the river, were two small children, a boy and a girl. They couldn't be more than seven or eight, and they were tossing a ball as though they were playing in the park.

"Are you lost? Do you need help?" asked Vincent, quietly from the shadows; he then quickly added. "Please, don't be frightened," as he saw their alarm even though he had stayed behind a boulder.

"Don't come near us or I'll throw this," warned the little boy as he picked up a rock. He took a step forward, protectively guarding his sister.

'Poor little urchins, how long had they been down here,' thought Vincent. He knew he had to be gentle and win their confidence. Finally, he said, "It sounded like you were having a lot of fun. I just wanted to see what you were doing. Do you live down here? I do. We could be neighbors and help each other."

"Mother said that we shouldn't ever let anyone see us," the girl spoke up as she peered around her brother.

"Yes, well, I know what that is like; my father used to tell me that all the time. I still can't let just anyone see me," responded Vincent.

"Why?"

"I look different, my face looks like an animal's face and my fingers have claws. I must stay hidden because I scare people," came the answer.

"I'm not scared," the boy boasted.

"If you saw me, you would be."

There was a moment of silence and then the girl came forward toward the huge rock which was hiding Vincent. "But your voice is very kind, and you want to help us," she said as she held out her hand.

"Sarah, get back here! Remember what Mama said," warned the boy.

"But, Joshua, he sounds so sad. I think he needs a friend," replied Sarah. She looked in amazement as a very large, fur-covered hand came out of the darkness. It didn't grab for her; it just stayed there waiting, almost pleading. She took that one final step and placed her hand in Vincent's outstretched palm.

"See, it's all right, Joshua!"

"Thank you, Sarah," said the voice in the shadows. "You don't have to come any closer if you don't want to, you don't have to look at me."

"But I *want* to," came the quick reply with a bit of trepidation.

"Yeah, me too," said Joshua, not to be outdone by his sister. "What's your name, anyway?"

"I'm called Vincent."

"That's my grandfather's name!" exclaimed Sarah and seemed to be immediately at ease as she peeked around the corner of the boulder. She wrinkled up her nose and cocking her head to one side, she said, "You're not scary at all, you're beautiful."

Joshua, his curiosity piqued, came charging around the boulder, coming face to face with Vincent. All he could say was, " *Oh!*" as he staggered back in awe.

Vincent laughed, Sarah joined him and soon all three were enjoying the moment. "She's right, you know, you're not so bad to look at," admitted Joshua.

"Well, thank you for that, I think," replied Vincent, then continuing, "what are you doing here?"

"Mama left us back there in that room and told us she would come for us when she got through work. That's where we stay and we have to be very quiet. But, there was never a way out before, not before that door over there was opened," explained Joshua, pointing to the wall that led into this old opera house.

Vincent knew of that door in the wall, for he and Kanin were the ones who had forced it open. He began to wonder if it was as safe as he thought to use this entrance into the theatre. However, he was sure that he and Catherine had not been detected, and the children certainly hadn't seen him even though they were there.

His attention was drawn back to them and their needs, saying, "I would like to take you with me to a place

where you can get some food and a bed for the night. It is very late, and your mother may have been detained. I'll bring you back here tomorrow, or better still, I'll have someone take you home. How does that sound?" he asked.

"Is the bed a *'for real'* bed? Is it comfortable?" asked Sarah.

"And does it have a cover to keep us warm?" added Joshua.

"Why, yes," answered Vincent, wondering about the kind of poverty from which these poor children must have come.

He looked at them carefully, noticing that their clothing was much like that of the children Below. It was certainly hand-me-downs for several generations, right down to the high-top shoes. They wouldn't feel the least bit out of place once they woke up in the morning, all the children wore patches and darnings.

"Come along, then, it is this way," said Vincent, holding out his lantern.

The children hesitated for a moment and then followed; *'they were anxious for a goodnight's sleep,'* or so Vincent thought.

An exasperated Mary faced Vincent at breakfast the next morning. "Are these two *'your'* doing?" she asked.

"Why, yes, Mary. Is there a problem?"

"I suppose *'you'* slept well last night after you deposited them in the nursery?"

"I thought they would be safe; they seemed to need a place to sleep," admitted Vincent.

"Ho, that's a laugh. 'Sleep?' They 'didn't' sleep and neither did anyone else in the near vicinity. They bounced on the beds and hid under the covers and laughed and squealed 'all' night," accused an exhausted Mary.

"I am sorry, Mary. They seemed so very weary when I brought them here," Vincent apologized. "Have they eaten, yet?" he continued.

"No, they haven't eaten either."

"All right, maybe we should just take them home. Would you like that?" Vincent asked Sarah and Joshua.

"Oh, yes, please! Mother always told us to be polite," answered Joshua.

Father cleared his throat, saying, "Do you think it is safe? I mean, Vincent, I'm surprised that you brought them here at all."

"Father, I found them by the underground river and brought them here in the middle of the night. I doubt that they know where they are. Mouse, could you bring them up top and take them where they tell you?" asked Vincent.

"Sure, when?"

"As soon as they're ready."

"And, Mouse, see to it that they can't find their way back down," added Father.

"No problem. I can even confuse me," bragged Mouse.

"We're ready. Maybe Momma will be waiting for us at home!" exclaimed an excited Sarah.

Vincent knelt down, giving each child a hug then he put a piece of bread in the little hand of each and sent them on their way. He then settled himself in a chair across the breakfast table from Father as Sarah ran back to find her ball.

"So, Vincent, tell me of the opera! I truly loved going to the opera," stated the older man.

"Ah. *'La Boheme.'* It was ... it was marvelous. I never would have dreamed how much emotion could be evoked from the mastery of all the arts. The acting, libretto, costuming, sets, all tied together with Puccini's incredible music. I was..." but Vincent didn't finish his sentence as both men stared in amazement after Sarah. The small child's voice echoed Mimi's aria as she followed Mouse and Joshua through the tunnels.

"I *'lost'* them; can't believe I *'lost'* them! Where'd they go! Father's going to be mad. Vincent!" Mouse called as he entered Vincent's chamber.

"What do you mean you *'lost'* them?"

"Heard, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard. What do you mean?"

"Well, you told me to take them where they told me," stated Mouse as if that explained it.

"*'And'?*"

"It was 71st and Amsterdam," continued Mouse.

"*That doesn't explain how you 'lost' them,*" growled an agitated Vincent.

"Well, we got to the corner, busy corner, lots of cars, three streets coming together."

"*I 'know' that, Mouse!*" What happened?"

"They ran across the street, against the light, both streets, really scared of all the traffic. They were screaming and just ran out between cars. They ran back toward the park down 71st street. I chased them, honest I did. Saw them as far as St. Agnes Church, saw them standing in front and looking at it. By the time I got there, they were gone. I went into the church and looked; then I went all around the church. Couldn't find them," explained Mouse. "Did my best. Sorry, Vincent."

"I know, Mouse, and thank you."

In the two weeks that followed, Vincent would think of these strange little children and hope they had indeed been close to home and had run to meet their mother. He was kept busy, as usual with the constant repairs which insured the safety of their underground home, his thoughts of Catherine and his visions of her as she enjoyed the opera. He had stolen moments from the spectacle on stage to stare at his beloved as she was enraptured by the music. When they were able to spend time together, it was as always too short and unfulfilled. In other words, life had settled back into its old routine with one more beautiful memory.

"Vincent, look! They are doing *'Lucia di Lammermoor'*," cried Catherine as she exploded into Vincent's chamber. She thrust a newspaper at him saying, "Can we go? It's opening Friday. I love *'Lucia'*;' it's so sad."

"It's sad, and you *'love'* it? Are you asking for a date, young lady?" teased Vincent.

"You know I am. I adore the opera and now, to share it with you is as if I have never seen it before. I feel it totally and anew through you."

"Is Friday night soon enough for you? Will you please do me the honor of accompanying me to the opera this Friday evening, Catherine?" invited Vincent with a deep bow.

"Yes, my love," answered Catherine as she threw herself into his arms.

The week seemed interminable for both of them. Catherine was full of little secret plans. She was going to make this more than the opera, a nuzzle on the head and goodnight. After all, if they were Above, they would go out for coffee and sweets when the theatre had emptied, so she would bring *'l'apres-opera petite repas'* to Vincent's chamber. Little did she know!

There was a special glow about Cathy that Friday. Joe knew what that meant by this time.

"Hot date, huh, Radcliffe? Let me guess, a special concert in the park," commented Joe.

"No, tonight it is the opera and if I'm lucky, a little bit more," Catherine answered dreamily.

"A guy would have to be *'nuts'* not to give you more of anything you wanted, including uh, uh...", stammered Joe, as his mind raced ahead of his mouth.

"Somehow, Joe, I don't think I can *'get'* that lucky," teased Cathy.

"Then the guy *'is'* nuts. I mean, if it were me..."

"It's *'not'* you and he's not nuts and it's just fine with me, most of the time," she cut him off.

Cathy hummed a lot and made notes and then phone calls. When the lunch cart came around the office, there was a special surprise for her. The young man handed Cathy a red rose and read from a scroll.

It was obvious that he had been well-rehearsed as he bowed deeply and started, "My beloved. It is only time but so is eternity. It is only distance but so is infinity. Until our time and distance allow us to be together, it is eternity and infinity. It is only my heart but it is love. Until tonight."

Both she and the young vendor were a bit embarrassed as everyone in the office clapped, including Joe.

"I *'think'* you're going to get your wish, Radcliffe," he said.

Cathy stopped at the sweet shop and grocery on the way home. Her special picnic hamper was already waiting to be filled, as she carefully placed her lace and damask tablecloth and embroidered napkins aside to be put in last along with her silver tea service and china cups and plates.

Because of the tight squeeze and climbing that had to be done to reach their secluded perch, Catherine could not *'dress'* for the opera, but she had plans for after. She had noticed many wonderful costumes in the storeroom; she was sure she could *'borrow'* one without it ever being missed. She giggled at the thought of being *'Aida,'* or *'Violetta'* or *'Tosca'* and of course, why not *'Lucia.'* All of these wonderful plans were to please the love of her life.

Making her way to the kitchen Below, she left her hamper with some special instructions for William. He was only too happy to oblige and spent the rest of the evening remembering a time he spent in Europe while he had served in the army.

Vincent had just missed Catherine in the tunnels and arrived in the kitchen a bit puzzled. "You avoided me on purpose, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes!" Catherine teased as she hid things behind her back. Then with a coy smile, maneuvered him around and back out into the tunnels.

"You think you're smart. A surprise - later, that's what you are planning," said Vincent, as he tried to look omniscient.

Giving his chest a little shove, she shouted over her shoulder as she ran from him. ***"You don't need to be a mind reader to figure 'that' one out."***

Vincent grinned as he chased his Catherine, letting her lead him to his chamber where he caught her up and tossed her on his bed. She laughed and pulled him down next to her.

"This will be a night to remember, my love," she whispered in his ear.

As they walked hand-in-hand toward the underground river and their doorway into the realm of opera, Catherine related the story of *'Lucia di Lammermoor.'*

"It takes place in Scotland and Lucia loved Edgar, only her brother Sir Henry and Edgar's father, whom Henry killed, were bitter enemies. So, of course, this makes Edgar and Henry enemies. Right there you can see the problem. What are the lovers to do? Well, Lucia arranges to meet Edgar daily as she visits her mother's grave. They only have this time together, and no matter how she is warned that this love can only bring her pain, she continues the visits for that is the only recourse they have."

"Does this seem to have a *'familiar'* ring to it, Catherine?" asked Vincent.

"I must admit that the world has constantly put obstacles in the way of star-crossed lovers. I don't know that we should continue on if you are going to take this personally, for it is a great tragedy."

"Please, continue. I am drawn to their pain."

"Okay, but remember, I warned you. Let's see, where was I? They continue to meet until one day Edgar must tell Lucia the sad news that he is ordered to France. He does not want to leave Lucia and so he offers to go to her brother and forgive Henry because he wants to ask permission to marry her. Lucia knows how much her brother hates Edgar and fears for his life. She convinces him to leave her. This is a very passionate scene and the aria is full of their love and grief.

"In Act 2, Henry gets himself into more trouble and the only way out is to marry Lucia to Lord Arthur. He convinces Lucia that Edgar has betrayed her love and has no intention of returning. This feeds the madness in Lucia that started at her mother's death, and was sustained by her separation from Edgar. Henry has already arranged the marriage, and Lucia, without the hope of a life with Edgar, consents to what she considers a sacrifice of her soul, her body and her sanity.

"A hasty ceremony is scheduled to take place in the Great Hall of the castle and all the guests are assembled. There is great merriment and the bells ring out the joy. However, the now sick Lucia has to be held up on both sides and led to the table. After much time, she finally manages to sign the wedding agreement. As she puts the pen down, Edgar enters the Hall and accuses her of being unfaithful to their vows of love. He tears up the wedding agreement and rushes from the castle, leaving a horror-stricken Lucia who stares after him with unseeing eyes, for by now she has been totally given over to madness.

"She is taken by her bridegroom to the wedding chamber to claim his right, and the guests continue on with the celebration. Suddenly, they hear this sweet voice singing of love and passion for Edgar. All eyes are on

the top of the staircase, as Lucia appears in her wedding nightgown which is stained with blood. She continues her song of love and pathos for her separation from Edgar. Suddenly, the mood changes to happiness as she sings of their nuptial vows. This incredible coloratura acts as a backdrop as it is discovered that she has stabbed her husband.

"Oh, Vincent, this is one of the most beautiful and tragic arias ever written. To hear this young girl's song of sweet love in contrast to her madness and violent deed, captures the essence of her suffering. It is a masterpiece of understatement. Anyway, to make a long story short, she dies and Edgar kills himself. The end."

"Just like that?" asked an affected Vincent.

"Well, yeah. With Lucia dead, the only way Edgar could be with her was to die. They did that a lot in classical literature, you know that."

"I also know that if you were no longer in my life, I would not want to live. I can honestly say that there would be no reason for me to go on living," a somber Vincent replied.

"Then I'll just have to give you a reason to live," answered Catherine.

"What do you mean by that?" puzzled Vincent.

"I don't know. I don't know why I said that." Catherine felt strange, as though a premonition had taken shape. Trying to lighten the mood she added, "We haven't even seen the opera, and we're depressed. Good heavens, I can just imagine you afterwards, drooping mouth, teary eyes and a pathetic voice." She was mimicking him and soon Vincent showed a grin and then a laugh.

They had finally reached the hidden door and made their way to their own private '*opera box*.' The music and story were every bit as compelling as Catherine warned it would be, and had a profound effect on Vincent. He was terribly distracted as they made their way down to the sub-basement storage room. Catherine was a little worried that she would not be able to lift his spirits for the rest of the evening, but she continued with her plans just the same.

"Now, Vincent, I want you to do just as I say and don't ask any questions, okay?"

"I don't know..."

"*Please!* I'm going to light this lantern and then I'd like you to wait for me outside."

Vincent looked around the dusty storage room. There were old sets leaning up against the walls, large sections of walls, staircases and window frames. Costumes were hung on free-standing pipe racks, some were covered, some were half off the hangers and some had already fallen to the floor. A strange assortment of props lined row upon row of shelves, everything imaginable. The door on the other side of the room, the one leading to the theatre, seemed to have been locked and bolted for years; this was a forgotten room. Vincent wasn't so sure that he wanted to leave Catherine in there alone, but she pleaded.

When he was out of sight, Catherine started hunting for a costume to give just the right effect. She didn't have far to look, for laying over the back of a chair was a white gown. When she lifted it, it flowed as only silk chiffon could. The gown itself had thin shoulder straps and a daring décolletage. '*Should she be that bold?*' But then she held up the negligee, she smiled for it had a high lace neckline and flowing cape which gave the appearance of being demure. Of course, silk chiffon by essence is anything '*but*' demure, but at least the style might be acceptable.

As Catherine undressed, she thought she heard a sound, a faint whimpering. Quickly getting into the gown

and throwing her denim jacket over it, she started looking around. An animal might be caught down there. The whimpering turned into crying and then sobbing, and an alarmed Catherine threw open the door and called to Vincent.

He was right there waiting, for he could feel her apprehension. "What is it?" he asked.

"Listen! What do you make of that?"

Vincent seemed drawn to the sound and soon found the source. It came from behind a huge flat surface that had been part of a set. With all of his considerable strength, he moved it just enough to see behind.

He peered into the darkness and then stood up, shaking his head. **"Okay, come out of there,"** he ordered.

Catherine rushed over to find two very frightened children sitting on top of an old trunk. "Who are they?" she asked.

"Catherine, I want you to meet Joshua and Sarah. Their mother leaves them down here while she works upstairs in the theatre. How in the world did you get caught back there?"

Joshua came out first and then Sarah. They looked up at Catherine apologetically, and Joshua said, "We were good, we hid when we heard the noise."

"What is he talking about, Vincent?" asked Catherine.

"Apparently, they aren't supposed to be down here and their mother has told them not to let anyone see them," explained Vincent.

"And she just 'leaves' you here alone. She shouldn't do that!" expounded a very annoyed Catherine.

"Oh, but she has to, and she said she will come for us, and she always has," explained Sarah.

"Vincent, we 'can't' leave them here alone. Come on, kids, you're coming with us," ordered Catherine, as she realized that nothing was going according to her plans for this evening; she hoped she could pull off 'some' of the festivities.

The children objected, but Vincent took Joshua and Catherine grabbed a squirming Sarah and the group headed back toward the tunnels.

Feeling a bit dejected, Catherine pouted a little. Vincent smiled and lifted her lowered head, saying, "Don't worry. I'll put them to bed, and then we can have our '*special*' date."

Catherine watched him disappear with his two charges and decided to make the most of the time that was left to them. She went to the kitchen, and was pleased to find that William had followed her instructions exactly. It took three trips, but she managed to get everything to Vincent's chamber. Taking off the denim jacket, she combed her hair and checked as much of herself as she could see in the mirror from her handbag. All was ready; and she waited in the shadows.

She had but five minutes to wait before her pounding heart told her that Vincent was coming. She felt strange, lightheaded with expectation; everything around her seemed heightened as though she were seeing and feeling for the very first time.

Vincent stopped at the entrance to his chamber and smiled. He walked over to the beautifully set table and bent over so he could get a better look. Then sitting on his bed he lowered his head to smell the sweet aroma.

"All right, where are you?" he asked. As Catherine stepped from the shadows, Vincent took in every seductive nuance of her movement. The white, flowing gown showed every curve of her body and her lips were parted, begging to be kissed. He noticed an aura about her; she seemed to shimmer, surrounded by a mist. *'She doesn't look to have physical substance, as though from another world,'* thought Vincent. This vision excited him as never before; he backed away from it.

Catherine slowly moved into the little chamber, toward the round table set before Vincent's bed. Her beautiful hands gracefully reached for a china up and the silver server, pouring out thick, rich, hot chocolate. Next she made a ceremony of taking the small, shell-shaped, silver spoon and stirring the clouds of white whipped cream then heaping it into the cup. While doing all of this, she never let her gaze leave Vincent's face. Every movement said *'I love you.'*

Gliding to the side of the bed, she held the cup and saucer out. Vincent didn't take it immediately as he was fighting his emotions, taking control of his passions. But Catherine would have no mercy. She sat on the edge of the bed, reached for a miniature cream puff and softly rubbed it over Vincent's lips before popping it impishly into his mouth.

It was delicious and Vincent reacted to the taste, so Catherine repeated the sensual rite. He sat up, sipping the hot chocolate, hoping to give himself a small reprieve. As he looked up, he noticed Catherine staring at him with a devilish grin.

"Oh, I *'can't'* resist that," she said as she knelt next to him and slowly licked the whipped cream from around the velvety, soft cleft of his top lip.

The nearness of her became unbearable for him and he gently pushed on her shoulders, but Catherine ducked under his arms and draped herself over him.

"Catherine, please," he pleaded, putting down the cup.

But she was lost in kissing him. Finally, succumbing to their passion, Vincent gathered Catherine in his arms and laid her down under him, gently, ever remembering his weight. They kissed and caressed each other, fulfilling years of desire. Throughout this rush of sensation, Vincent fought for one lucid moment, one incredible show of restraint.

Pushing himself away, he looked down at Catherine. This was not the Catherine he knew; her eyes were glazed with desire, her arms kept reaching for him as her lips pleaded. It would be so easy to make passionate love to this incredible creature, to satisfy his innermost needs, but he could feel that something was very wrong.

He said, "Catherine, we must end this now. Do you understand me?"

There was no response as Catherine continued her unseeing stare. Vincent moved to the far corner of the chamber and watched as she slowly, as if in a dream, slid off the bed and began walking aimlessly. And then in a sweet voice, she began,

*" 'I hear the breathing of his tender voice,
That voice beloved sounds in my heart forever.
My love, why were we parted?
Let me not mourn thee;
See, for thy sake, I've all forsaken!
What shudder do I feel thro' my veins?"*

My heart is trembling, my senses fail'!"

The beauty of these words and the poignancy of Catherine's voice almost made Vincent relent and rush to her, but he stopped short as she suddenly started gleefully turning in circles and smiling. Little giggling ripples escaped as she continued,

*" 'Come to the fountain;
There let us rest together,
Ah me! See where yon spectre arises,
Stand between us! Alas! My love!
See yon phantom rise to part us'!"*

Catherine's mood had once again changed to one of desperation, and just as quickly became joyous and hopeful. It was then that Vincent realized that he was witnessing Lucia's mad scene. Before he could stop her, the next verse began,

*" 'Yet shall we meet, dear love, before the altar.
Hark to those strains celestial!
Ah! 'Tis the hymn for our nuptials!
For us they are singing!
The altar for us is decked thus,
Oh, joy unbounded!
'Round us the brilliant tapers are shining.
The priest awaits us,
O, day of gladness!
Thine am I ever, thou mine forever'!"*

Vincent ran for Catherine as she was turning in a tight circle with outstretched arms while finishing the scene. He did not reach her in time; she slumped to the floor. Looking up at him as he knelt beside her, she smiled sweetly and lost consciousness. He called to her, then still on his knees backed away slightly, horrified for he knew too well that Lucia never recovered from her coma.

'Was this all an aberration of his, brought about by the intense struggle to control his passion? He hoped this was the case, he hoped he was going mad and not his beloved Catherine.' Laying his head on her bosom, he wept.

It was always painful for Vincent to recall the memories of his breakdown after Lisa had left Below, the hallucinations, the blackouts, the blank spaces in time; this felt very much like the beginning of that dark struggle. What he had just witnessed could not be real; it had to be his imaginings; from the moment he broke away from the intensity of passion and walked to that far corner of his chamber, he could feel reality slipping away. And so, when the next aberration occurred, he merely sat back and watched, numb and helpless to do anything to stop it.

There was much joy and squealing coming from the tunnels outside Vincent's chamber. He lifted his head as Sarah and Joshua came running in.

"You've come, you've finally come for us!" exclaimed Joshua happily, as he and Sarah rushed in to the fallen

Catherine.

"Mommy, Mommy, are you going to take us home?" asked Sarah, nuzzling her head into Catherine's chest.

A translucent form then sat up from the still body and reached out loving arms to embrace the two little waifs.

"Yes, my loves. I am sorry it has been so long."

Then the three of them walked hand in hand out of the chamber and disappeared into the tunnels. Vincent had just witnessed Catherine's soul leave her body and it was much too painful to bear. He let out a mighty roar and collapsed over his love.

The entire underground community was roused by the sound of that roar. They knew only too well that it usually meant trouble. Father and William met in the tunnel outside of Vincent's chamber and cautiously entered not knowing what they would find. They were horrified at the sight of the lovers lying on the floor, dead from all appearances. Father's worst nightmare had been realized. Vincent had killed Catherine in a passionate rage and could not live with the pain and guilt.

"Oh, my God! No!" he exclaimed as he staggered for a chair.

William rushed to Vincent and lifted his friend, holding him tenderly. "Father, he is alive! I don't know what is wrong, but he *'is'* breathing," he said.

Father rushed to the pair and to his relief found that they both were alive, Catherine just barely breathing but alive. "Let's get them to the Hospital Chamber," he advised.

Vincent returned to reality rather quickly but remained confused, speaking of Sarah and Joshua and their mother. While Father was examining him and making sure that all was well, Mary was preparing Catherine for examination. She lovingly removed the exquisite costume and carefully put it on one of the beds; she had never in her life seen anything so fine.

"How is she doing, Mary?" asked Father.

"She seems to be breathing deeper, see for yourself," said Mary as she offered him her seat next to the bed. After his examination, he was more puzzled, if that were possible.

"How is she, Father? I was sure that she was dead; she was so very still," said Vincent.

"My God, Vincent! What happened?"

"I don't know; I can honestly say that I don't know," came the confused reply.

Father went to Vincent and rubbed his shoulder. "She seems fine. I can find nothing wrong with her, except that she is in a deep coma. Did she witness something that would cause her terror?" asked the older man, trying to be as delicate as possible about his suspicions.

"No. Are you thinking of something specific?" asked Vincent and then he realized the meaning of Father's words. *'Will this haunt me forever? Am I never to love her fully?'* "I am sorry to disappoint you, Father, but she was very much the aggressor this evening. It was my turning from her that caused this for both of us, not our loving," admitted Vincent.

"Ah, yes," said Father with a knowing nod.

Vincent stayed in the Hospital Chamber all night, sleeping on the cot next to Catherine. By morning she was

showing signs of regaining consciousness and by mid-morning she was sitting up and eating breakfast.

When they were finally alone, she asked, "What happened? The last thing I remember was waiting for you to come back to your chamber and I think I saw you standing by the entrance."

"You don't remember *'any'* of what happened?" Vincent waited for her to shake her head and then told her the whole strange tale, the children, their mother and their disappearance.

They both sat in silence, deep in their own thoughts until Catherine realized that she had better go home and at least call into the office. She promised to return to spend the night; neither thought it a good idea for her to be alone. He walked her to the apartment entrance and held her tightly.

"After what we have been through, I don't want to waste even one moment," crooned Vincent, as he lightly kissed her waiting lips.

Catherine walked toward the ladder and then turned with a puzzled look to study the face of her love. He had done that so easily and naturally, it made her wonder just what it was they had been through. Making her way to her apartment door, she picked up the paper and let herself in, then called the office with the excuse that she was out of town for the night and couldn't make it back to the city. By this time it was four in the afternoon. After she took a shower and had time for a cup of coffee, she started leafing through the newspaper.

It was the Entertainment section that caused her to stare unbelieving at the headline and the picture on the front page. She started shaking as she read the article. *This wasn't possible*. She had always maintained that this sort of thing was impossible. She knew she had to get Below quickly; this needed to be shared. Running to the elevator as she clutched that newspaper, she kept hoping that Vincent would be there to meet her.

Needing to put some reality into the events of the previous night, Vincent decided to visit the storage room. He walked slowly, trying to put pieces together. Just as he reached the door, he felt Catherine's panic and raced to his chamber to find her on his bed. Her hands were trembling as they held out the newspaper. Vincent was as spellbound as Catherine.

Paris

'Yvonne de Treville, world famous opera singer, died last evening at her home in Nice. She had lived on the French Riviera since 1936 and was instrumental in establishing the Residence de la Musique for retired musicians.'

'Madame de Treville was much in demand throughout Europe from 1922 to 1950 at which time she went into semi-retirement. She continued singing concerts and character roles well into her sixties.'

'Strangely, she was discovered in New York City when she understudied the role of Lucia for Amelita Galli-Curci, her mentor. This important twist of fate happened in 1921 exactly 60 years before her death to the day. Madame de Treville then returned to France and continued performing Lucia to great acclaim.'

'It was rumored at the time that a great tragedy had befallen her in New York on that night she first sang Lucia. She had never returned there to perform. Madame Yvonne de Treville was 92 years old at the time of her death.'

New York City

'The world lost a beautiful voice last night and a great humanitarian. Yvonne de Treville had a tragic connection to this city as well as her triumphant success.'

'Madame de Treville was only fifteen years old when she was discovered while singing in a country church by tenor Henri Journet. He was captivated by her beauty as well as her voice and offered to become her teacher. They were married a year later and had two children. Journet died shortly after and Amelita Galli-Curci, Journet's sometime mistress, took pity on the little family and continued Yvonne's lessons and hired her as a companion.

'While Galli-Curci was on tour in the United States, de Treville started singing in the chorus of various productions. The tour ended with an extended season contract at the American Theatre, fore-runner of City Opera. She was a studio singer for that season, however, Galli-Curci took ill on the last night of Lucia and insisted that her protegee, de Treville, sing the role. She was an instant success.

'This was a very different time and a woman who sought a career should not have children. It was unacceptable, so de Treville had promised Galli-Curci that she would keep her children hidden at all times during the tour. The following is an excerpt from a 1921 New York Times.'

New York Times

'Last night the New York City police department was busy in the search for two children, Joshua and Sarah Journet. They are the children of Yvonne de Treville who stunned the audience with her magnificent portrayal of Lucia in last evening's opera. After the performance there were many producers, well-wishers, photographers and reporters gathered around, detaining her well into the night. It was after all was quiet that she went to get her children from the costume room. where she had brought them each night since beginning the run at the theater. They were nowhere to be found, either by the distraught mother or the police. Madame de Treville tearfully explained that she would never have been given the opportunity to sing at the American Theater if they knew she had children. Joshua and Sarah Journet were never found. This still remains one of New York City's unsolved mysteries.'

Shaking his head in disbelief, Vincent finished reading the article.

"And look at the picture; look at that costume! It is the one I wore last night!" exclaimed Catherine, calling Vincent's attention to the photograph which accompanied the article.

"Yes," he answered in that long, slow drawl he had when especially engrossed.

"What does it all mean? What happened to us last night?"

"She came for her children. They always said she would come," answered Vincent.

"But she's 'dead' and the children probably died sixty years ago. Wait a minute, are you trying to tell me that that squirming, arguing, very real feeling little girl I carried last night was a 'ghost'?" asked Catherine.

"I know you don't like to admit to that possibility, but do you have a better explanation?"

Catherine jutted out her lower lip and scowled a bit, then after some thought said, "No." Shuddering she looked up into Vincent's eyes, saying, "Then that also means that I could have been possessed. Oh! Hold me, please hold me!"

Vincent tenderly wrapped his arms around her and they stood silently, each lost in their own thoughts. Finally Catherine spoke, "Vincent, there has to be an answer; somewhere in that room, there has to be an answer."

"Yes, that is what I thought. I was on my way there when I felt you here."

"I think we have to find that answer or there will not be peace for any of us. You, me, Sarah, Joshua or

Yvonne," said Catherine.

"I believe you are right. And the truth shall set them free," quoted Vincent then continued, "Are you prepared to return to that storage room?"

"I can't say that I like the idea, but something inside of me tells me we must," Catherine answered.

"Now?"

"The sooner, the better," came her quick reply.

Leaving Vincent's chamber, he headed for the underground river, but Catherine turned the other way.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I need to get the costume; I want to return it."

"Yes, I think you should," Vincent agreed.

They stood before the closed door to the storage room and Catherine took a deep breath.

"Ready?" asked Vincent. She nodded her head and grabbed his hand.

Opening the door slowly, Vincent raised the lantern so that the shafts of light preceded them into the room. Somehow this room that was their gateway to the opera had become ominous and sinister. The lantern-glow cast strange shadows and the collection of props and sets created grotesque shapes. They entered and Vincent lit some of the prop candelabras which had been unused for more than half a century. Afraid to move, they stood still and listened to the dead silence.

"Where do we start?" asked Vincent.

"First, I must take care of this," said Catherine indicating the costume. But instead of leaving it where she found it, she very carefully wrapped it in some soft tissue paper which was lying on one of the shelves. Then she placed it on top of some other folder costumes in an open trunk.

"The trunk, where is that trunk?" exploded Catherine as she turned toward Vincent.

"What trunk?"

"The one on which the children were sitting last night," replied Catherine. "Remember, they were caught behind that wall," she reminded Vincent.

"This one, this wall. It is a very heavy flat, looks like the whole back wall of a set," said Vincent.

Catherine stood back and stared at the flat then said, "It looks like the back wall of the Great Hall from Lammermoor. That night sixty years ago was the final performance of that opera for a number of years. If they struck the set and stored the flats while Yvonne was being detained, this could have been put here, and no one would ever have known that there was anything behind it," she observed.

"I don't think I would have noticed if the children weren't crying," remarked Vincent.

Neither one seemed anxious to investigate. "We don't have to do this, Catherine," said Vincent, observing that she was turning pale.

"Yes, we do," she answered and the tears began to well up in her eyes.

Taking large steps, Vincent finally stood before the large flat. He placed his palm on it and rubbed gently as if

it had a tale to tell. Then he walked to the edge and with a mighty heave, pushed until it moved three feet. He stopped to regain his strength, but he could already see the trunk.

"Can you pull it out?" asked Catherine.

"Maybe." And Vincent reached in, yanking on the leather handle until it was out far enough to open the latch. It wasn't locked, but with the flat lying against it, there was no way that the lid could be opened. He pulled it out a little further and pushed the flat a little more and the trunk was free. He stepped back next to Catherine and they just stared down.

"We both know what we are going to find, don't we?" asked Vincent.

"Yes. I was just thinking how like a little coffin that is," wept Catherine.

He reverently moved a large hand to the latch, lifted it and opened the trunk. Giving a quick affirmative nod, he bowed his head.

"**'Oh'**," cried Catherine as she looked at the remains of two small children. "They are wearing the same clothes."

Closing the lid, Vincent said, "That's enough, we don't need to torture ourselves."

"What do you think happened?" asked Catherine.

"From the little they said, I gathered that they were to stay out of sight. If anyone were to come near, they would probably hide. Maybe this trunk was a favorite hiding place for them. The lock is broken and they could usually get out but not that night, not with that flat against it. By the time Yvonne got down here, it was too late, the flat was in place and they were probably already dead."

"I think my heart is breaking. How sad!" exclaimed Catherine.

"Let's go. I'll come back with Kanin and we will have a burial," suggested Vincent.

They started to leave, when Catherine stopped Vincent. "Can you put everything back the way it was? I have an idea!"

"What do you have in mind?" asked Vincent.

"I don't want to say anything in case I can't do it. Let me find out first," said Catherine.

So Vincent put everything back the way it had been for sixty years.

Vincent was sitting in the big chair in his chamber, reading. His thoughts were not entirely on the text for he had seen little of Catherine since they returned from that storage room. She had said nothing, except that she thought her idea was possible and she was working on it. As he closed the book, Samantha came running into the chamber, holding out a note.

"For you, Vincent," she said breathlessly.

"Thank you, Samantha. Walk!" he admonished as she darted off again.

Without opening it, he knew it was from Catherine. He just stared at it for a time as a lost feeling crept over him. Finally, he read;

'Dear Vincent,

*I am going to have to leave the city for
Three days. Be waiting for me when I come
Home. No matter where I go, no matter
How far, my heart remains with you.
Love,
Catherine'*

Pacing didn't help, reading didn't help, chess didn't help and neither did walking at midnight in the cold rain. *'How did he ever live before Catherine? What kind of life was it before Catherine? There 'was' no life without Catherine.'* Vincent waited for his heart, for their bond to tell him that she was coming home. At last he knew.

The balcony outside Catherine's apartment never seemed so inviting as it did on that night; she was on her way home. Settling himself comfortably on the floor in the corner, Vincent relived the wonderful moments they shared in this magical place. Then his thoughts turned to her strange behavior of late.

"What has she been up to?" he murmured. But he didn't have long to wait, for he felt that she was close, very close. The door to the apartment flew open and the next thing he knew she was in his arms, warm and soft in his arms. Before either realized, they were sharing a long, deep, passionate kiss. *How wonderful and easy it was, how right and uncomplicated.*

"Indeed, something wonderful also happened that fateful night," whispered Catherine. again reaching for Vincent's lips.

"Yes," he confirmed. "I was mesmerized by the sight of you in that gown. I held you and kissed you and felt the heat of your passions, yet I also felt a certain control of the moment. I was given a gift, a gift that I intend to take advantage of often."

They stood in a lover's embrace watching the moon trace the sky; listening to some far off music, when Vincent finally asked where she had been.

Catherine whispered, "I took them home; I took Sarah and Joshua home." Vincent looked amazed as she continued. "First, I reopened the investigation on the missing children and convinced the police to once again look for them. Of course, I led them to the trunk. Once that was done, I applied for permission to take the remains to France. I accompanied the two little coffins to the graveyard in Nice where a lovely ceremony placed them beside their mother."

"No wonder I haven't seen much of you. I never cease to marvel at your generous heart. That was the perfect thing to do," said Vincent, kissing the top of her head.

"I said a prayer for you, Vincent. I carried you with me, always beside me, my love," said Catherine as she turned in his arms. She placed her head on his chest then held him tightly. His embrace was tender and she shuddered, needing to be engulfed by him.

"I have something for you," she said and with that she went to her suitcases.

Remaining, as always on the balcony, Vincent was not prepared for Catherine's scream. Racing into the bedroom, it took him two strides to reach her side. He stopped in his tracks, for lying on the bed was Lucia's bridal nightgown and negligee, Yvonne de Treville's costume.

The End

