

A WOMAN'S TEARS

by Janet M Aspinall

Vincent entered the chamber silently; for all his great size, he moved with a lithe athleticism. Father was asleep in his favourite chair, looking so peaceful that his son decided not to wake him - even though he had hoped to talk to him. Instead, he bent and softly rubbed his cheek against the older man's brow - an affectionate gesture delivered with a tenderness that, to those who did not know him, seemed strangely at variance with his fierce appearance.

"Sweet dreams, Father," he whispered. "Always."

"Vincent?" Father's eyes fluttered open.

"I'm sorry." Again, the stroke of the cheek to the care-worn face. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's all right. I was waiting for you." Father well knew how Vincent frequently needed a friendly ear, a comforting arm about him, after a precious few hours spent in company with his Catherine; their obligatory partings so often left him bereft. "Sit down with me a while. Tell me about the concert."

Vincent pulled up a chair, lowering his muscular frame wearily into it. "It was.... very beautiful," he said quietly.

"And Catherine enjoyed it?" Father prompted gently.

There was a long silence. Then; "She cried," Vincent replied, his eyes mirroring the sweet sorrow that lay at the root of the statement - and filled his own heart.

Father said nothing. He could picture the scene; Vincent and Catherine, dressed in all their finery, forced to listen to the concert from the safety of a cold and clammy tunnel. The incongruousness of the situation was both tragic and a shaming indictment of mankind; that two such inherently good people should be reduced to such behaviour, should be denied so many simple pleasures that other, far less deserving people, took for granted.

"It was the '*Grieg Piano Concerto*'," Vincent went on to explain, smiling sadly (*The smile was all the sadder because his features were so incompatible with the concept of a smile*) "It's one of our favourite compositions. And it always makes Catherine cry."

"Ah," Father nodded slowly. "I can think of one or two operatic arias that affected Margaret in the same way."

"A woman's tears," Vincent mused softly. "Mere droplets of moisture - and yet with the power to touch a man's very soul."

"Yes." Father reached out to squeeze his hand. "I, too, have felt that touch on my soul. And I'm richer for having known it. Your Catherine weeps for you, Vincent; for all that you are to one another. Those tears are the price she pays for loving you. And she pays that price gladly, I know. I've watched her with you - and I know."

"I would our love should cost her nothing," Vincent's voice rose with angry despair. "Even now I feel her pain." He rose swiftly from his seat to prowl the room, as if hoping to escape from the sense of sorrow that threatened to engulf him. "I feel her sadness, her aloneness, and can do nothing to alleviate them. Nothing."

"You can, Vincent."

"What?" he cried, holding out his hands imploringly. "What can I do?"

"You can go to her," Father replied simply.

Vincent stared askance at him; because of the danger of discovery. Father had always done all he could to discourage his son from going Above.

"Go to her, Vincent," Father repeated the suggestion. "Neither God nor man has the right to keep the two of you apart."

Without another word, Vincent scooped up the cloak he had discarded on entering the chamber, exchanged a last, long look with the other man, then loped from the room.

Catherine stood looking out at the lights of the city; the illuminations, as seen through her tear-filled eyes, seemed to shift and shimmer in the darkness. Music from the concert echoed in her head; the reverberations a reflection of her tumultuous evening; with Vincent at his most attentive and charming. And how magnificent he had looked! Strange how the most handsome of men now paled into insignificance in comparison. How had she ever thought him less than gorgeous? And how could she spoil such an evening with hopeless regret? She wiped her eyes once more, took a deep breath, and willed him - wherever he was, whatever he was doing - to know that she loved him.

Below the city, Vincent's sure tread through the darkened tunnel faltered. He paused, lifting his head to test the atmosphere. A great feeling of joyous warmth rushed through him.

"Catherine," he berated. Then again, softer, lower; "Catherine." He began to walk on, broke into a trot, then pushed his powerful limbs into a run.

Leaving the balcony windows open, Catherine returned inside her apartment. She had already made all her preparations for bed, but was in no frame of mind for sleep. Perhaps reading would help her relax? Loosening the belt of her silk robe, she settled comfortably against the pillows on her bed---her knees drawn up to support her chosen book. It was a volume of love poems; a gift from Vincent. She turned to the fly-leaf to read, and savour, the hand written inscription;

'For you, Catherine, because your love is the truest poetry of all.'

She felt all her need of him, which she had fought so hard to dispel, return with a vengeance. The choice of book had been a mistake. How could she read those words and not want him with her? How could she think of him and not feel the ache of desire? She snapped the book shut.

'Don't do this to yourself, Cathy,' she warned, having spent too many nights being tortured by her waking dreams. But a moment later, she re-opened the book, touching her fingertips to his boldly written signature. Even his writing had a sensuality all of its own; like his voice, it conveyed so much more than mere words.

"Catherine," the voice caressed her name.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to the window; afraid that she had imagined hearing him. But he was there. And the thrill of it took her breath away.

"Did I startle you, Catherine?" He took a hesitant step towards her, his concern overcoming his usual reluctance to enter her apartment.

"No," she quickly assured him, scrambling up from the bed. "I was just thinking of you and.... Oh, Vincent," she finished on a whimper, throwing herself into his arms. He held her tightly against himself, then tighter still.

"I'm here," he soothed. "I'm here." The two words were a vow, a declaration, a promise to fail her never.

"Not a dream?" She turned her face up to him, her eyes luminous pools of joy, her arms snaking about his neck.

"Not a dream." His gaze welded to hers, her heart melting from the heat of what burned in his eyes. His hands moved with tantalizing slowness down her back, coming to rest at her waist. For a moment he continued to hold her, then with great gentleness - and infinite regret - he began to push her from him. She understood instantly, knowing how deeply so intimate an embrace could disturb him. She immediately stepped back, smiling to try and lessen his pain - and her own.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said. Her voice as shaky as her smile.

"I just...." He averted his face. "I could think of no reason why we shouldn't be together."

"Vincent...." She made to reach for him, but the anguished look he threw her stilled the movement. She held her breath, watching and waiting.

"But there are reasons, Catherine," the words spilled forth. "Reasons that lie within me, in what I feel for you. And in what I am." His voice dropped so low she had to strain to hear him. "What I am is the greatest reason of all." Again his eyes slid away from hers as he retreated to the balcony. Once there, he turned to stare out at the city.

About to follow him, it occurred to her that her state of dress was doing little to alleviate his distress; the open robe revealing her sheer silk nightgown, which - with its plunging neckline - moulded itself to her every curve. She pulled the robe close around herself and knotted the belt. When she joined him on the balcony, he made no acknowledgement of her presence - though his hands tightened their grip on the rail. They stood, side by side, silent, looking out at her world. A world that had no place for him in it.

"I came here," he began finally, "to try to.... erase your sadness." His breath expelled noisily; a poignant expression of self-derision.

"Vincent...." she moved to face him. "There's something I want you to know." He gave no sign that he was listening. "I want you to know how.... complete you make me feel."

She saw his body stiffen; his tenseness an almost tangible impediment to her efforts to console him.

"Our love is the most fulfilling thing in my life. You meet needs in me that no other man could even touch." At that he swung to face her, his eyes searching hers for the truth. "You satisfy my soul, Vincent. And no woman ever felt a greater joy than that."

Tears welled unashamedly in his enthralling eyes. He clutched at her roughly, pulling her hard against him. Murmuring; "Catherine," over and over again, his beautiful voice made a hymn of adoration of her name.

Her tears met his, uniting; become one heartfelt expression of all they could never hope to find the words to say.

"You love me," she whispered, her lips brushing his. "And as long as you love me, nothing else matters."

He felt the glorious vibrancy that surged within her - and knew that she spoke the truth. Her truth. He kissed her then, full on the mouth, and with slow deliberateness. And he did it easily, with no trace of his usual questioning diffidence. He had found a new belief in himself, in his ability to be all that she asked of him -- all she needed him to be. And that belief was her gift of love to him. They still shared a sorrow whose solution continued to evade them; a sadness they had yet to resolve.

But they were learning; moving ever closer to the only possible conclusion. And they were reminded that their journey was not without end. With the mingling of their tears, and the meeting of their mouths, came the unshakable conviction that the realization of their dream was waiting, somewhere very close, somewhere within themselves.

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