

How Vincent Came to Sherwood Forest

by Pam Smith

Lady Catherine lifted her skirts as she stepped over the mud-filled wagon ruts at the entrance to the madhouse. A high-pitched scream escaped from somewhere deep inside the granite stronghold, piercing the cold afternoon air, then stopped abruptly. An involuntary shudder crept over Catherine, but she set her teeth against it as she moved closer to the gate.

The unkempt gatekeeper nodded at her as she swept through, a look of puzzlement on his face. *'What was such an obviously well-born woman doing in this lunatic asylum?'* He shook his head slowly at her back, watching her move into the bedlam beyond. "That lady's too fine to be visitin' the likes o'them," he muttered to the iron gate, as he slammed it shut with a gratifying clang.

The sound was so final. *'why does it always sound like someone closing my coffin?'* Catherine thought. She shook herself slightly and pressed a lightly-scented linen handkerchief to her temple for a few steps. The faint lemon fragrance helped to mask the strong odors of disease and despair lingering in the air.

A filthy hand reached out, grabbing her shirt. She pulled away, leaving the madman on the floor, gibbering in a childish singsong voice, "pretty pie.... pretty try.... pretty die...."

Freed from his grasping hand, she absently smoothed her deep-green tunic dress and continued walking on into the bowels of the asylum.

Her feet led her down the well-known corridors, past the inmates' cells, cages and pens. She headed in the direction of the women's section. All attempts to provide the *'patients'* with a humane environment by *'do-gooders'* like Lady Catherine of Elwyn in this enlightened year of 1190 were rudely rejected by the wardens. While these moral battles raged on, Catherine visited this asylum near London as often as she could, trying to bring comfort to the afflicted inmates housed there. She never spoke of her reasons for doing so.

It was a cold and ugly building with no attempt made to disguise its former function as a prison. Catherine hardly glanced at the granite walls and straw-strewn stone walkways. She moved slowly, so as not to frighten anyone in the women's section. To see these pathetic women caged and chained was distressing but she squared her shoulders and moved on into the half-light. Small slits in the masonry near the ceiling glowed with slivers of grey light like ghost moons floating in the gloom.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust. She spoke to an old crone who didn't acknowledge her except to relax after Catherine's soft words. She moved over to a woman who lay sobbing on the floor and placed a soothing hand on the woman's head until her crying quieted. She went to one of the cells where a young woman had recently given birth. The filthy baby had just finished nursing and the young mother offered the baby to Catherine through the bars. She washed the child in the water from a rain barrel, drying the tiny thing as best she could with her handkerchief. Tenderly, Catherine wrapped the baby in her own warm, soft, knitted shawl, and handed both back through the bars to the mother. The young girl gave her a wordless look of gratitude as she slowly moved deeper into the interior, leaving the women behind.

She noted the occasional attendant wandering about, but didn't recognize any of the faces. Not everyone was suited to work in such bedlam and no one on the staff ever stayed long. She walked resolutely on, deeper into the heart of the misery. The guards paid her little attention and after a few yards down a sloping hallway, she could no longer see them.

Her footsteps echoed in the silence of the dark hall until she reached the lower areas, where dirt packed over the stones underfoot muffled even that small noise. The dank granite walls absorbed the moans and cries of the men held in this section for the violent and suicidal. Not even the burly guards came down here very often. Catherine paused, speaking softly into a cell. She handed in a piece of fresh fruit from the small basket she carried. After a moment, she moved on. After stopping at several cells to speak to the other poor wretches behind the bars, she found herself near the cellar steps leading to the cells where the most dangerous inmates were kept. She never ventured down there.

She turned to retrace her steps. Her thoughts drifted to the repast awaiting her at her father's manor house. No doubt the old Earl of Gamewall would be paying a call. She dreaded another afternoon of politely parrying his advances. *'I prefer the roadhouse over my father's choice of a suitable husband.'* The rebellious thought made her lips turn up in an ironic smile.

"Catherine....." The soft voice whispered her name. It was a man's voice, calling her from the deepest recesses of the lower level. She stood for a moment unsure of what to do. "Help me...." She felt an irresistible pull toward the voice.

She moved down the steps into the cellar as if in a trance. The stones under her feet felt cool through the soles of her shoes. The air was black and foul. A torch jammed into a brass holder flickered sullenly at the far end of the corridor. Resolutely she walked toward the flame.

At the end of the corridor, she stopped before a heavy wooden door. The barred window at eye level allowed a glimpse into the cramped chamber beyond. Something shifted slightly - a flutter of gold. Her eyes weren't yet adjusted to the perpetual night of these cells. Someone was inside; she could see a large form seated, back against one wall.

"Catherine.... you came...." That gentle voice did not belong to a madman.

"How do you know my name?" Suddenly she wanted more than anything to hear his voice again.

"Everyone here knows of Lady Catherine." She was able to see more clearly now. A golden-haired man was chained to the wall of the cell. "But I know you.... I know Catherine...."

She leaned forward, her hands pressing against the door, when suddenly it gave way, causing her to take a few stumbling steps into the gloom. Regaining her balance, she crossed the few feet of the cell and knelt down beside him. She reached out with fingers that did not tremble, lightly touching his disheveled hair. "Who are you?.... Why are you here?"

He lifted his head in response to her question, allowing her to see his face for the first time. "People fear me."

She could hear the sting of bitterness behind those soft words. The flickering torchlight played over his extraordinary face. Her breath caught momentarily. For one brief instant she felt the terror of the situation wash over her. She was inside the cell of a madhouse, kneeling before a man with the fearsome countenance of a beast. But he wasn't a beast! Of that much she was certain.

Deep within her she felt connected to this man and his fate. Drawn to him - heart to heart, soul to soul - connected. In that instant, she knew her life had changed irrevocably; knew that nothing would ever be the same. There was a bond between them now; she would rather die than go from this cell and leave this man behind. There were no words to express the lightning bolt of love she felt, but it filled her whole being and she knew it touched him, too. She felt his eyes on her face and knew he could see the emotions that were written there.

"My name is Vincent."

"You're hurt...." She reached into her basket for a napkin and, folding it, she bound the areas of his wrists where the heavy manacles had rubbed raw wounds. The injuries looked painful, as though inflicted by a great struggle, but he did not flinch when she touched him and his eyes never left her face as she ministered to him.

"What are we to do?" Her voice was full of anguish. He knew her question asked more than what task needed doing next.

Vincent marveled at the woman before him. Her immediate acceptance of his appearance was an experience unknown to him. Her courage to come into his cell - and his life - without fear left him astonished and gave him hope for the first time in a very long while. Vincent drew in a breath to answer.

The noise of keys jangling came from the hallway. Cursing the patients as he made his way down the corridor, the guard stopped at Vincent's open door.

"What's this, then?" His bulky form moved into the cell, his torch illuminating the scene before him. His eyes took in the well-bred lady on her knees before the monster chained to the wall.

Misreading the fear that had suddenly appeared in Catherine's eyes, he lunged into action. Kicking Vincent hard in the ribs, he grabbed Catherine's upper arm and began to drag her out of the cell. Catherine cried out as the man's beefy fingers clamped around her upper arm, bruising the tender skin. He began to drag her out of the cell.

"Please, don't...."

"You must stay away from this brute, Miss."

Vincent strained at the chains, causing fresh blood to stain his bandages. A low, angry rumbling came from his chest.

"He's a fearsome one, all right." Pulling Catherine through the doors despite her struggles, he slammed it shut and threw the iron bolt into place with a thud.

"Vincent, I'll come back...." She managed to call out as she was half-dragged, half-pushed down the corridor. She could only hope he had heard her. There was only silence from his cell.

Within a few minutes she was back outside the asylum, blinking in the bright summer sun, the admonitions of the head attendant *'to stay away from places that don't concern you'* ringing in her ears. Her command to be taken immediately to the administrator had fallen on deaf ears. He was on a sabbatical in Bath for the season. Perhaps, given the fact of Vincent's appearance, it would be better put to alert the high authorities. There was no way she could predict what they might do to such a creature but the choices were not comforting - public display, medical experiments or religious persecution; all too terrifying to contemplate.

Her driver helped her into the carriage for the trip home. She had to send messages, make preparations, contact friends - there was another way to set him free. The carriage raced through the countryside, but Catherine noticed little out the window except the sky. The blue echoed the color of Vincent's eyes....

Catherine returned to the asylum late the next afternoon. She carried gifts - bribes, really - for the attendants and guards in a large, covered hamper. She distributed twisted breads and ripe figs and honey cakes; anything to distract the men. Casually, she mentioned going down to the women's section for a brief visit. She left them behind, her heartbeat pounding in her ears, as they busily consumed the treats. No one seemed interested in her departure.

She worked her way down to the lower sections, avoiding guards along the way. Once she stopped to speak to one of her regulars, patiently waiting for an attendant to stop eyeing her and move on. When he did, she rushed down the steps and into the darkness beyond.

"I'm here, Vincent." She stopped to light a thick candle from the hall torch, struggled with the bolt briefly before it gave way, entered his cell and pushed the door shut behind her. Only then did she turn toward him. She looked into his eyes. Caught in the glow of a candle, they seemed to see straight into her heart. There was no flinching from them, no turning back no more life without

them. *'How had this happened, this feeling of instantaneously knowing this man, accepting him.... loving him?'* She moved toward him, placing the candle on the stone floor. They gazed silently at each other for a moment, his blue eyes into her green, acknowledging the other's courage.

"You should not have come back...."

I could not leave you here.... alone...."

"I am glad you came." At this his lower lip curved into the start of a smile; his hand reached out to touch her hair. The shackles stopped his hand short. His smile hardened into an expression of anger, mixed with frustration.

"Let me help you." She rummaged in the basket and pulled out a variety of articles.

"Catherine, it is dangerous for you to be here." Concern filled his face and voice.

"We're safe for now. Arrangements are being made to free you from this dreadful place. In the meantime, let me take care of those wounds." She held a hand out, smiling sweetly. With a faint sigh, he placed his wrist in her upturned palm. "How did you come to be in this place?" She gently removed the old bandages, cleansed his wounds, applied a tingling poultice and redressed the wrists. All the while, he spoke.

"As you can see, when I was born, I was.... different. No one ever told me how I came to be this way. My mother, who was never very strong, weakened under the strain of my birth. Before she died, she left me with a friend of hers - a man who I learned to think of as my father had been at court as the King's advisor. But, while our good King Richard is away at the Crusades and his brother sits upon the throne, the men loyal to the King - -like my father and his small group of supporters - had been living below the Lion's Head Theatre as a way to avoid unjust persecution.

We began to help the performers behind the scenes, then became actors ourselves. No one would suspect us of being loyal King's men behind the costumes and props in such a setting. Life was difficult, but we survived.... until the plague arrived. My friends.... my family.... All died horribly. First one by one, then several in a day, until even my father lay dying in my arms."

She tenderly bathed his hands with cool, lemon-scented water, reaching up to wipe away the tears as they fell unashamedly as he remembered the tragedy.

"I must have had the fever then, I don't remember.... I do remember running at night down an alley - fighting - trying to escape - being surrounded by constables, but why they brought me to his madhouse instead of a prison, I don't know. Perhaps because they feared the plague, or my appearance. I woke up here a fortnight ago, chained to this wall and alone." He broke off, his eyes looking on an inner landscape she could only guess at.

"Alone no longer."

As if on cue, two large men dressed all in black entered the cell without a sound. Vincent, startled by their sudden arrival, struggled to stand. Catherine placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, feeling the coiled strength of his body under her fingers. The men nodded curtly, first to Catherine, then to Vincent. They knelt beside Vincent and began to remove his manacles with hammer and chisel. Catherine smiled inwardly at her accomplices' studied lack of reaction to Vincent's unorthodox appearance.

"These men are my friends, Guy and Raynold.... your friends now, too."

His arms free, the men gingerly helped him stand, then moved to the door to keep watch. She could see him gather his strength. His hands reached down for her, lifting her to her feet. He held her hands in his as if he would never let them go. They stood poised thus, fingers entwined, eyes seeing only each other.

"Go on, then - time to leave." Guy, the smaller man with the pale face and dark shiny hair, motioned them out of the cell. The spell broken, Vincent and Catherine moved out. Raynold, a

smiling red-headed giant, placed a dark, hooded cloak over Vincent's shoulders as they moved down the corridor. In front, Guy's small torch led them through twisting tunnels. They had gone on so long that Catherine feared they would run through this underground labyrinth forever, but at last they came to an old iron door that screamed on its hinges when Guy and Raynold forced it open.

Breathlessly they ran to Catherine's carriage, the men bounding to the top to drive. Vincent and Catherine tumbling inside. The horses pounded away into the night, leaving the madhouse far behind. The whole escape had taken less than an hour. Vincent took a deep breath of the clean, fresh air.

They rode for several hours. Exhausted, Vincent had fallen asleep after only a few minutes, and Catherine did not awaken him. *'It's probably the first healing sleep he has had since all this began,'* she thought. She wondered what events had conspired to create him and marveled at how completely he had possessed her heart. The jolting of the carriage never woke him.

Soon they stopped at the private entrance to a small, expensive inn. Catherine waved farewell to her friends as the carriage departed. Eager as a child at Christmas, she led Vincent into the large room aglow with candles. The warm odor of beeswax and lilacs filled the room. The large copper tub in front of the fireplace's dancing flames looked particularly inviting to Vincent. His eyes widened in anticipation and he turned to Catherine with a small smile.

"May I?" he indicated the bath.

"Of course." She turned to the bed and began to rearrange the sleeping garments there, giving him a moment of privacy.

He slipped out of the begrimed clothes and tossed them into a corner. The black cloak he laid over a chair. He stepped into the soapy water, sinking down until it came to his mid-chest. An involuntary sigh escaped his lips. The small sound spoke of great suffering endured and momentarily released.

The breath caused Catherine's head to drop in sorrow. She moved over to the tub to stand behind him. "Here, let me help you." She began to pour clean water over his hair from a china pitcher. He lay back and closed his eyes.

As she worked the fragrant soap into his hair, she said. "There is something you must know about me - about why I was drawn to that madhouse."

The faint odor of lilacs had taken her thoughts back to a time when she was much younger... a happier time. "My mother was the center of my world. She was small and beautiful and very happy. She drew us all to her and encircled us with love - her family, her friends, but most of all, her daughter, me. One day, my father found her in the garden - she had cut the heads off all the flowers - they carpeted the path. When he asked her why, her only answer was that they were too beautiful. Their fragile beauty caused her eyes such pain. But her pain did not cease when the flowers were dead. Her actions became more erratic - her moods more labile - until my father feared for her safety... and mine. Physicians were brought in from all over England but when they could find no cure, they declared her mad. One day, as I stood crying in the yard, they led her out to a carriage. The last thing she said to me was *'don't touch the roses, Catherine.... don't touch the roses....'* When I was older, I began to try to locate her in that madhouse where I found you, but it was too late. Father says she died there... but I still look for her."

Her eyes were dry with a sorrow deeper than tears. Vincent wrapped a Turkish towel around himself, as he stepped out of the tub, and enfolded her in his arms. The warmth of his skin under her cheek reassuring. Small, scented rivulets of water ran down both of them from Vincent's hair.

Her eyelashes tangled in the softly curling hairs of his chest. For several moments they stood that way, breathing as one, her small head tucked under his chin.

"I love you, Catherine." His soft voice seemed to have been created to say those words. "I have waited for you for a very long time. We were destined to be together - somehow it was fated that we should meet - in this lifetime or any other. And I will hold you close to me forever...."

"Then we shall both be very wet." She looked up at him with a smile, unable to resist the sudden urge to laugh for joy.

He bent his head to kiss her softly while she laughed. It was the first time he had seen her laugh, and after the sorrow she had endured, he was glad to be the source of her amusement.

She reached her arms up and placed them on his shoulders. Hugging him until her feet only brushed the ground, she whispered into his hair, "I love you, Vincent, more than my own life.... now get dried, please, before you catch a draft."

They busied themselves with slipping into soft linen sleeping tunics and pulled some pillows in front of the fire. Vincent half-reclined, propping his head up with one arm. Catherine sat back against his chest and pulled her knees up under her chin. They sat, unmoving, silently watching until the fire died into embers. Once Vincent pressed his lips softly against her ribs beneath a shoulder blade, then pressed his cheek into the same place.

Catherine, exhausted, began to nod a bit, finally drifting off to sleep. Her weight shifted slightly to be more firmly against him. He dared not move to wake her and wished that this moment might last forever. When the room began to grow chilled, he lifted her in his arms. She was small and light as a child in his grasp and he carried her to the bed. Gently, he put her down, then crawled in beside her and pulled the comforter over them both. He watched her sleep until dawn.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her - not staring, really, but looking at her as though his eyes had been empty for a very long time and were only now being filled.

"Good morning." She smiled at him and stretched a little with contentment. Lying here in this bed with Vincent propped up beside her, she marveled at how easy it had been to flout society's rules of conduct. It seemed as though the proper manners and morals demanded of polite men and women of the gentry did not apply to them somehow.

'How could those mundane rituals have any meaning when she was in his presence, could inhale his scent, or gaze into his eyes. He was more dear to her than a friend, more precious than a brother, more cherished than any lover. He was the innermost part of her heart, brought to full, breathing life.'

The moment she had first seen him in that cell, alone, she had known it. Nothing that he did or that she did for him, or that they did together could ever seem wrong, or a breaking of society's rule, because from the moment they met, there were no more rules.

"You are beautiful in the morning." He said it to her, not as a compliment, but as a statement of truth.

"As much as I would like to stay and discuss this with you further - we must continue our journey, for our home is at the end." She smiled at his puzzled expression. She had the look of someone who is bursting with a great secret.

"Wherever you lead, my lady, there I will follow." He inclined his head in mock obedience, causing her to laugh out loud. The thought that this great and powerful man would willingly follow anyone had a certain humor to it.

"Your clothes are laid out for you." She indicated a small partitioned changing area in a far corner where he caught a glimpse of fabric and leather. "And mine are there -" She indicated the other corner, behind a folding screen where the tub was stored.

They reluctantly arose from the bed to exchange the loosely-woven sleeping garments for travel clothes. Both changed hurriedly but Vincent was waiting in the middle of the room when Catherine stepped from behind her screen. She stopped for a moment to take him in as he posed for her in his new finery. A close-fitting hunter green shirt with long sleeves covered his torso; over it was tied a doeskin leather tunic. Snug hunter-green pants tucked into the top of fringed buckskin boots just below the knees. Over all of this, the black cloak from the previous night was tied at the neck. The hood was ready to shadow his face if the need arose.

They were plain clothes that seemed to suit him well. He would look at home in any casual hunting party on a country estate. He pulled on black leather gloves while Catherine finished her toilette.

Catherine also wore a soft skirt in dove grey, belted at the waist with a leather thong, and tight-fitting pants of charcoal black disappeared into ankle-high boots. Over her arm she carried a short cape of brown leather which matched her gloves. She began to push her hair up into a small, boat-shaped cap with a pointed bill and a small, red feather standing jauntily aslant.

Seen from a distance, she might have been mistaken for a boy, perhaps a squire, in these clothes. She held out a hand to him and led him through a secret doorway that only moments before had been a panel in the wall, down a short flight of steps and onto a small, thatched porch. Blocking their way were two saddled horses. She mounted a small Arabian gelding whose coat was black as a starless night.

She looked down at Vincent. "You *'do'* ride?"

He had lived under the streets of London; perhaps he didn't know how to ride. *'Why hadn't she thought of that?'* She could lead his horse, if nothing else.

Vincent approached his horse's head, murmuring a few soft words, stroking the delicate skin of the creature's nose. The dilated nostrils took in Vincent's scent and the swiveling ears picked up the calm authority in his voice. Both beings seemed lost in each other, communing, somehow, beyond Catherine's knowledge to understand.

After a moment, Vincent looked up at Catherine. "We're ready now."

The horse, a stallion the color of mist at dawn, stood calmly when Vincent mounted. In a moment, Catherine had tied her cape under her chin and Vincent had pulled up his hood. The horses turned as one animal and entered the forest at a brisk canter. Vincent rode as if born to the saddle - a fusing of man and horse.

"His name is Merlin," Catherine tossed back to him. "My fine fellow here is Saracen; I've had him since I was a girl. We have spent many long-ranging hours together in the forest. He is my best friend."

The little horse perked up at his name and ran ahead of Merlin, arching his neck as he went by. Both horses then broke into a full gallop and both riders settled in for the journey.

After several hours of riding, they paused deep in the forest under a large, spreading oak. The path they had been following had almost disappeared. They made the horses comfortable, then Catherine arranged a small picnic lunch for them of crusty brown bread, thick slabs of yellow cheese, and a flagon of ginger-flavored water taken from her saddle bag. They sat in the shade, silently eating.

Vincent was fascinated by these deep woods with their cavern-like foliage and saturated colors. He knew he had never inhaled air quite so crystal clear. Just the short time he had been in this forest, he had begun to feel at home.... at peace.

"There is so much I want to tell you, Vincent. So much I want to explain." She pushed her food aside to look at him. "I have friends where we are going. Friends who will accept us and help us. A place where we can have a life."

He watched her face as she gestured helplessly, unable to tell him everything at once.

"Catherine, this I know, wherever you go, there also, will I be. Explanations are not necessary." She turned her body to lay her head in his lap as he leaned against the trunk of the tree. She settled in comfortably, as though she could remain this way forever. Very gently, he reached down and traced the line of her brow to her cheek and around her jaw to her chin, with the tip of his finger. The exquisite touch of his gentle hand caused her to shiver slightly in delight. He bent his head and, looking into her eyes, raised her gently with his other arm. Slowly.... softly, they kissed. Eternity stopped for one brief moment. She felt their souls merge, unable to distinguish where she ended where she ended and he began. She lifted her free arm and used it to pull him more firmly toward her.

A magpie chose this moment to drop down from an overhanging branch to steal a piece of bread. His squeak of annoyance at seeing intruders in his forest startled Catherine and Vincent, causing them to laugh.

"We'd better move on." Catherine reluctantly disengaged herself with a small sigh. After repacking the saddlebags, they mounted and rode deeper into the woods.

The horses moved at a calmer pace now, beneath the green forest canopy. The path was wide enough for them to travel side by side, the horses occasionally swinging their head together to touch noses, inhaling each others' scent.

Catherine and Vincent were content to allow the horses to go along in silence.

Ahead was a densely packed grove of trees and the horses moved into single-file positions. The tree limbs plucked at Catherine's and Vincent's clothes and aimed branches at their eyes, causing many readjustments of their positions.

"Once we get through here, our new home is just ahead," Catherine called encouragingly to him as she ducked another branch.

Then the forest erupted with noise. There was a flurry of the branches, men's arms and hands, horses lunging, and the momentary confusion of an attack from ambush. One man grabbed the bridle at Merlin's head while several others fell upon his back, attempting unsuccessfully to unseat Vincent. Another man tried to grab Saracen's head but was kicked in the shoulder instead when the horse screamed and reared.

Catherine would have been able to retain her seat except for the two men who dragged her off, causing her to fall painfully on the back of her head and neck, leaving her stunned on the ground. Saracen stepped carefully to avoid her crumpled form behind him while he continued to strike out at the several men now at his head.

Vincent swung his powerful arms wide, easily throwing both men off and to the ground. He dismounted and moved back toward Catherine. Men who tried to bar his way were quickly dispatched - they had not attacked with weapons, so Vincent didn't try to kill them. He just wanted them out of the way before Catherine was hurt any further.

Then several things happened at once; a large man bent over Catherine and lifted her up, her feet dangling toward the ground like a doll in his beefy arms. Her hat was knocked off her head, causing her hair to swing in front of her face. Several ambushers rushed Vincent, pinning his arms just a few steps before he reached Catherine, and a man appeared in a tree above them, standing on a low limb.

"By my faith, you men, unhand that curious-looking fellow. He will think us mere highway robbers." His voice was not loud but it had a transforming affect on the ambushers. They stopped in their tracks and looked up toward the man who was obviously their leader. The stout man holding Catherine let go of her and she would have fallen, but Vincent took a step toward her and caught her, lifting her into his arms. Vincent turned and gazed up into the trees, looking at the man

dressed in hunter green.

"By Saint George and the dragon - you are quite a fearsome fellow." He chuckled softly to himself as he took in his scattered men, nursing bruised ribs and dislocated shoulders. He dropped easily from the tree and strode straight toward Vincent. He was tall, almost as tall as Vincent, with a handsome, boyish face topped with light brown hair. His dark blue eyes looked amused and slightly suspicious.

The horses stood calmly now. As he approached, he looked at the face of the woman in Vincent's arms. "God's wounds! Lady Catherine!"

When he spoke her name, she lifted her head and gazed groggily at the approaching figure.

"Robin?" She struggled to hold her head up. "Is that you?"

"Lady Catherine!" I certainly hope you are not injured." He glared about at his band of men. "Could not you oafs see who this was?"

"We thought her a squire, Robin." The big man looked and sounded sheepish, at mistaking Lady Catherine for a boy.

"Well, I think you can see she is not." He moved to touch her shoulder and spoke just to her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Robin. Vincent, you can put me down now." He placed her on her feet where she swayed slightly. "Robin Hood, this is my special friend, Vincent. We have come to join you, if you will have us."

Robin paced a few steps back and forth before them, rubbing his finger on his upper lip. He looked wary, much as he had the first time Marian had brought Catherine along to meet him, deep in the forest. He had accepted her then as Marian's friend, and soon had become her friend as well. She had sometimes envied Robin and Marian their deep love and regard for each other until she met Vincent. She was glad Robin had accepted his appearance so well.

He swung around, throwing his arms wide. "God's blessing on your heart!" He strode up to them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. "I would have travelled a hundred miles to come to your aid, Lady Catherine, and the only thing you ask of me is to join my merry band. Of course you are both welcome to make Sherwood Forest your home." He beamed into their now smiling faces. He clasped Vincent's hand firmly. "Welcome to the greenwood, Vincent. We need such a man as you in our good company."

"Aye! Welcome to the greenwood!" Robin's men called out the greeting to the pair.

Vincent and Catherine turned to each other and smiled. Very softly, she spoke for his ears alone.

"Welcome to your new home, my love."

And that is the true story of how Vincent and Catherine joined with Robin Hood's outlaw band. Late that night they swore him in with a solemn oath, while they feasted about a ruddy blaze, under the greenwood tree.

END