

A Question of Humanity

by CM Henley

(from *A Ray of Hope*)

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The regular weekly Council session had degenerated into a shouting match. And, unfortunately, the arguing had nothing to do with the original agenda for the meeting.

Jacob Wells, as nominal head of the Council, banged his cane on the table to demand attention. "Please!" he insisted. "There are important matters to be discussed today! Several of the upper levels have been infiltrated by outsiders....."

All too quickly, the agenda at hand was completed, and the other topic was taken up once again.

"It's just not normal," said Rose, who kept the community kitchen and spent much of her time with children underfoot. "A child says something at nineteen months-----but not this one. He looks so different... Perhaps his mind is not normal."

"He understands," Jacob countered. "He follows instructions... And he already shows signs of being ready to start toilet training. Peter assured me when Vincent first came to us that his intelligence was not impaired."

"But he doesn't talk!" exclaimed Warren, another of the community's founders. "At his age, my son said 'dada' and 'mama' and 'cookie,' and a dozen other words, besides babbling in his own baby-talk. Vincent doesn't even talk baby-talk."

"He's physically capable of speech," insisted Jacob. "Some children begin later than others, that's all."

"I think his intelligence should be tested," said Mary. The young woman was not assigned to the Council this year, but her presence had not been protested, especially since she spent the most time with the children.

"There are all sorts of tests I've been reading about, that don't require a child to speak in order to be tested. Can't one of our Helpers borrow a testing set to use for Vincent?"

"I'll look into it," Jacob promised.

At that moment, several small boys erupted into the chamber, all shouting "**Father!**" at various decibel levels.

Jacob halted them with a glance. "Devin - Barney - Robert - settle down. You simply cannot come bursting into Council meetings!"

Several people snickered or chuckled; the boys ranged in age from five down to not-quite-three, their coloration from pure Caucasian to light Negro to Oriental - but they all regarded Jacob as their 'Father' and accorded him the respect and obedience due a parent.

The meeting was breaking up, at any rate; people had things to do. Jacob went to his desk to compose a note to his old friend Peter Alcott. He had no doubts about Vincent's intelligence; the child had already grasped complex concepts such as the knight's move on the chessboard, even if no one had seen it but the man called Father. Now, why hadn't he mentioned that in Council? Never mind; he'd no proof to sway doubters like Warren. Very well - if a test was needed, a test would be obtained. Vincent must not be outcast; the thought of the precious child in the hands of researchers - or worse, exploiters - was painful. Even a person as different as Vincent must be given the opportunity for a life as close to 'normal' as could be managed. Even in hiding,

even in secrecy, Vincent would have far more freedom than in a lab or sideshow.

And, who was to know? His speechlessness could be a sign of genius, at that. Jacob had heard and read of many children who began, at age three or later, in full sentences. Ah well. He sealed the note with a great glob of sealing-wax and called for a messenger.

As ten-year-old Pascal scampered off to deliver the message, Vincent toddled in. Well, perhaps *'toddled'* was imprecise. He had first walked, holding on, at seven months; a year later, he was already developing grace in his large-muscle coordination. He appeared to waddle only because of the bulky diaper and plastic pants which always slipped from his slender hips and bunched fore and aft in his pint-sized overalls. In fact, he was most often dressed in overalls, as his shoulders were needed to hold his pants up.

Today he brought a book to have read to him; *'Faerie Tales.'* He clambered into the waiting lap and proffered the book expectantly.

Father sighed as he opened the book. "Very well. Once upon a time....."

"Her name is Consuela Ramirez," Dr. Alcott explained. "She's a resident in pediatric psychiatry. I trust her; so can you."

"With Vincent?" Jacob prodded, his grey eyes piercing.

"Absolutely. She'll make a splendid Helper - and you know you can use another source for drugs and supplies."

Jacob nodded; Peter continued, "She'll be off duty for a straight thirty-six Wednesday and Thursday. I'll bring her then, if it's all right."

"If you're absolutely certain she can be trusted ---"

"Stop worrying, Jacob. I trust Connie. Her only concern is to be a good doctor, to help people. She won't upset what you've built here."

Jacob had no choice but to trust his old friend.

He met with the young woman when she was brought to his chamber, before he would allow her to see Vincent.

"Dr. Ramirez," he addressed her.

"Please, call me Connie." She began to set up the testing kit as she spoke.

"Connie," he conceded. "Vincent is a very, um, unusual little boy," Father tried to explain.

"Peter told me."

"Some people are frightened by Vincent's unusual appearance," he tried again.

"I'm a doctor," she smiled. "Children are children. They're all special. I've worked with disfigured children, retarded children, geniuses, beautiful, ugly - it doesn't matter. They're all wonderful. I have three of my own," she admitted. "And I still can't get enough of everyone else's." She leaned forward intensely. "Why don't you bring Vincent to me, and let us become friends?"

Jacob cleared his throat. "Ah, ahem. Ah, Connie ... because Vincent doesn't speak yet, there has been some question as to whether he is, ah, human."

Her eyes widened, but she merely - politely - repeated her request.

Vincent did not, at first, want to let go Father's hand. Still clinging tightly, he climbed into the chair beside Connie's and stared at her curiously.

"Hello, Vincent." Connie smiled, a genuine warm smile. Not human? He was precious! A mutant, perhaps? "My name is Connie. I've come to visit you, and play some games." Was he truly almost two? So small for his age! And those blue eyes! Surely he understood her every word, for he looked over the testing pieces with interest.

Father extricated his hand. "Vincent, I have some things to do. I want you to stay here with Connie, and cooperate with her in every way."

The so-different child raised those trusting blue eyes to his foster-father. "Why?" he asked.

Non-verbal? Connie could only laugh quietly to herself.

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