

Reflection

by J A Clarke

The figure stood alone in the middle of Central Park, looking up at the night sky; once again awed by the spectacle. He was merely a minuscule particle within the vastness of the universe—insignificant on that scale; but to those who knew him, he was a great and vital person. Unique, necessary and perhaps—most importantly—loved.

But at this precise moment however, it was not enough. He always felt like this after having done what was ‘necessary’ to keep their world safe. To those of his world he was again their saviour; their protector; their hero. To himself he felt base; vile... a monster.

The fact that it had been ‘necessary’ to take that course of action did not make it any easier to bear—it was nothing more than an excuse. He could have perhaps accepted the situation if only *she* had not been there to witness his appalling behaviour.

She had been a spectator to the unleashing of the dark side of his nature; wild, violent... animal-like; as in a blinding rage he had committed murder, using his incredible strength and the claw-like substitute for ‘normal’ nails to rip the intruders to pieces.

He had never known a greater shame as when he had recovered his senses and found Catherine trying to free his hands from around his latest victim’s throat. Her soft voice desperately trying to break through the red fog that clouded his vision and reason.

“Vincent! Vincent! It’s over! Stop, please stop!”

Slowly, his eyes had focused on her face and the realisation had hit him. Shocked, shamed and disgusted, he had wrenched himself away from her grasp as if burnt, unable to bear her near him; frightened that she would see him now for what he really was and reject him.

“Vincent, it’s all right,” Catherine had whispered softly. “Really, it is. Come.” She had reached out to him.

“No!” There had been near panic in his voice. The shame he felt clouded his judgement; he found himself misreading her actions. Suddenly, he felt closed in, trapped. He had to escape. “Go away.”

“Vincent, you don’t—”

“Go away!” It had sounded like a snarl and Catherine had physically jumped, unconsciously nervous at his sudden unknown aggression towards her. “Just leave me alone, do you hear! Leave me alone!”

With that, he had turned and run blindly down the corridors, not caring in which direction he went as long as it was away from everyone. Her voice echoed in vain after him, gradually fading as the distance between them increase, until it finally died away altogether.

On and on he had gone, until he was finally forced to stop, his lungs burning with the effort, his vision blurred with the tears that threatened to flow at any moment. Warily he had collapsed against the tunnel side to slide slowly to the floor, bruised and scratched from here his large frame had failed to avoid the jutting edges of the rock; his heart heavy and pounding, sending the blood coursing through his veins, seemingly in an effort to crush his skull with the pressure.

He had tried to make himself as small as possible, curling into a ball, his hands either side of his head, rubbing at his temples trying to relieve the pain. A half whimper, half howl forced its way

through his compressed lips.

The others really had no idea what it was like to be in his situation. He knew he was different—that was blatantly obvious—and although accepted by those of his world, it still put increased pressure on him. He was incredibly strong, and as had been proved; in a blinding animal rage could kill with little effort. It seemed as if Father was using him as a secret weapon, when all other action failed, as it had this time. They had tried every means possible to resolve the situation by peaceful means, but the intruders refused to cooperate through sheer greed, ignorance, and stupidity. Traits that seemed to govern the world Above.

Finally, following the hideous death of some of their own people, Father had turned to him almost apologetically.

“It seems we have no choice,” he had said softly. “I’m sorry Vincent, but we must be rid of these people. They threaten our very existence.”

“I know, Father.” There had been little else he could say; he had seen the efforts his friends had made to solve the situation, and he had witnessed the terrible results. “I will do what is necessary.”

And he had done so, but at a terrible price to himself.

Was it his imagination, or did the dark side of his nature seem to linger longer after each unleashing? Was it merely a trick of the mind, when time seemed to drag, or was it a fact? Only he could answer that, and he didn’t honestly know. Could it be, if it continued, to be set free, that it would take him over completely, and the gentle, kind Vincent they all knew and loved, would eventually disappear, never to be seen again, to be replaced by an...insane, sick...animal, whose only hope for peace would be in death?

It did not really bear thinking about, and yet he knew he had to. Somehow, he had to resolve the situation, or at least face the facts—if any. But the truth was, he was afraid. Afraid that it may be true. Afraid that perhaps he was gradually losing his mind!

He needed to talk openly to someone about it, but it was a subject that had been taboo since the earliest civilised man; everyone denied the existence of their inner dark self—the mindless primitive—and as man had become more advanced, more cultured, the denial became stronger.

Yet, was it not he who had stated that the only way to conquer a fear was to face it? Was it not also the fear that should the civilised man come face to face with his inner self, he would be driven insane by the experience? He would need the assistance of a strong-willed person to aid him through the nightmare, and there was only one person who he would willingly trust if only...

Eventually, he had returned to his chamber and found Catherine waiting. He could not bring himself to meet her eyes, such was his shame, yet still she came to him; placed her arms around him. No words were spoken, none were needed, the warmth Catherine sent through the bond said it all. It helped soothe his soul, but the worry still lurked in the background and returned when she had left him.

Just as he had feared, it did not end there. Fed by self-doubt and the increased awareness of his darker side, hideous nightmares haunted his dreams, keeping him awake. He was tired, yet he dared not sleep, lest that creature from within consumed him.

Vincent wondered if the others had noticed any change in him. He knew he was more sharp—had he not reprimanded Mouse severely, earlier that day for something so trivial as to have been ridiculous? He had seen the hurt in the young man’s eyes and knew he should have apologised. Instead, his foolishness had made him walk out as if in a huff, making him seem petty.

He knew it was the lack of sleep, but it was no excuse. He spent his nights prowling the tunnels and dark alleyways to chase the sleep away. Just how much longer he could continue like this, he

didn't know.

What he would have to do eventually, was face Catherine, who he had not seen since that last contact over three weeks ago.

Vincent was aware of her constantly changing emotions; concern over him; worry; even hurt, because she thought she was to blame. Now she was on her way and he was out here in the park, plucking up the courage to go and face her.

He took a deep breath and sighed heavily. He would have to return. Reluctantly he turned around and walked slowly towards the tunnel entrance.

For three weeks Catherine had not set eyes on her beloved Vincent. She knew he was alive, for she could feel the bond between them, yet she was loathe to use the word 'well'; for he was so very deeply troubled. It wrenched her heart to know he was suffering and she felt deep concern and worry over him.

Yet part of her was hurt—perhaps even angry—that he had not come to her for help. She had waited long enough and so, tonight being Friday, and the beginning of the weekend, she had decided to go to him instead.

Catherine had hoped to find Vincent in his chamber when she got there, but it was empty. Through the bond they shared, she could feel the turmoil within him, the shame, the humiliation, and she longed for him to appear so she could reassure him that she understood and that she loved him for what he was.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on sending all the love she felt for him down that slender link, hoping to break through his confusion and give him the confidence to return, his head held high and back straight.

Catherine was not sure how long she had stood there motionless, or how long someone else had been near, she just suddenly became aware of a slight movement behind her. She whirled round, relief all over her face, expecting to see Vincent, but instead, found Father staring curiously at her, his hand resting on that ever present silver handled walking stick.

"I—I was hoping to find Vincent here, in his chamber," she found herself blurting out, as if guilty of some misdemeanour.

"Vincent is so often out these days," Father replied with a large sigh. "He is troubled, Catherine."

"I know. I can feel it. That's why I have come, to see if I can help him."

"Have you any idea what it is that troubles him?"

Catherine was not sure whether Father knew, and was testing her to see if she did, or whether he himself had no clue either, and was desperate for information.

"I think so. I think Vincent is afraid he is losing control of himself—of his dark side. The shame I feel emanating from him is almost overwhelming. I know he is restless; that he walks the tunnels endlessly, as if searching for an answer. I know that he is so very tired, and afraid to sleep because of what lurks in his subconscious. It has affected me too. But now I'm here, and together we can see it through... successfully."

"I commend you for your convictions, Catherine, but Vincent is such a private person, are you sure you—"

“Yes, I am.”

Father relaxed slightly. He cared so very deeply for his son, that it sometimes clouded his judgement. It took courage for him to admit that he felt his position was threatened by Catherine, when it concerned the well-being of Vincent. It was foolish of him to think this, but he was only human after all, and until she had entered their lives, Vincent had always confided in him. Now that there was someone else, he was afraid of losing his son completely to this beautiful woman. He knew she cared—loved—Vincent very much and he turned and loved her, and thus Father could not help but feel a little jealous, although he did his best to conceal it.

Self-consciously, he cleared his throat. “Catherine, I—I know I may seem rather offhand, perhaps even hostile towards you, but it’s because I care so deeply, and don’t want either of you to be hurt.”

Catherine recognised the courage it had taken for Father to speak those words. She walked up to him and gave him a hug to show her full understanding. Father was rather taken aback for an instant, but quickly overcame this and returned the embrace.

As they parted, Vincent arrived. He stopped in the doorway, looking guarded and unsure whether to enter his chamber or turn and flee.

“Vincent, Catherine has come to visit you,” Father said spotting him, and then kicked himself for stating such an obvious fact. “I’ll get some tea sent to you.” With that he exited and left the two staring uncertainly at one another.

It seemed an age before a word was spoken, and then the atmosphere seemed tense.

“How are you, Catherine?”

“I’m fine, Vincent. I’ve been worried about you.”

Vincent shrugged non-committedly. This was ridiculous! They were acting like almost total strangers!

Catherine took the initiative and moved towards him to place her arms around him. “Oh, I’ve missed you so much! Please, let me help; tell me what’s wrong.”

He stood rigid in her embrace, but slowly began to relax as the love and concern enveloped him.

“You look so tired, Vincent. What you need is a good night’s sleep.”

“If only—,” the words slipped out wistfully.

Catherine withdrew slightly, but still holding his arms, looked at him quizzically.

“Come, let’s at least sit down.” She led him to his bed and they sat side-by-side, holding hands. Catherine waited for him to start.

“This is...difficult for me,” he said almost inaudibly. He looked down, took a deep breath, then let it out heavily. Catherine squeezed his hand encouragingly.

“When...danger is near, the beast within me is set free and I do hideous things. It’s...it’s like a great red fog; it clouds my judgement, my reasoning; blinding me, allowing me to thrash out at whatever surrounds me. I know—understand—that it’s part of what I am, but I try to keep it under a tight rein—perhaps even try to deny it—until the next time I am lost to its insanity...”

“...Perhaps that’s the key word. I feel great fear, partly for myself, I will admit, but mainly for those around me that I love, for I feel the length of time I am lost in these attacks is growing and that one day, the Vincent you all know and love, will lose his battle and the beast will consume him; win the battle and harm the people I love.

“This fear haunts me night and day. Since that attack three weeks ago, I’ve hardly slept. When I close my eyes, darkness surrounds me and I feel ‘his’ presence; the beast laying, waiting, ready to

pounce, and I am afraid. Afraid that if I face him in battle, I will lose and be lost—consumed—by the darkness; never to return. I know that in the end I must face this nightmare I am living, but I know he is stronger—that he will win and those around me will be lost also. I don't think I can face him alone, and I don't want you to see—”

He paused for a long moment.

“Catherine, I feel I am losing my mind!”

There were tears in Catherine's eyes, but he did not see them because he would not look at her; such was the shame of his fear and weakness.

“Oh Vincent. When times were dark for me, you were there. You were my strength and courage until I was able to fend for myself again. Time after time, you have done this for me. Now let me do this for you. Let me be your strength, your courage. Let us join forces, face this beast and drive him back to his rightful place.”

She too paused, searching for the right words. “All of us have a beast within—an alter ego—it's what gives us our strength and courage. Without it, we would not be able to survive; we would have no will to live, there would be no fight for survival. It is the primitive within us and we need it. The beast must not be destroyed, but put in its place and held there until required. Together Vincent, we can do **anything!**”

As she paused once again to let these words sink in, there was a respectful knock on the frame supporting the curtain, and a voice asked: “May I come in? I've brought you some tea.”

“Please enter, Jamie,” Catherine said.

The young woman came in, and Catherine stood up to take the tray from her.

“Thank you so much.”

She smiled and waited for Jamie to leave before turning to Vincent. She placed the tray on the small table before moving back to the bed to fuss with the blankets on his bed.

“Come on Vincent, bed.” She knelt down, loosened the fastenings on his long boots and pulled them off. Then she placed her arms under the calves of his legs and swung them up and onto the bed. There was little resistance from him as she pulled the blankets up and over him, and proceeded to tuck him in.

That done, she handed him his tea and waited whilst he drunk it.

“Now sleep, Vincent; sleep well.”

“You—you won't leave, will you?”

“No Vincent, I won't. I'll be right here, and for as long as it takes.” She smoothed a hand across his brow and watched as his eyes slowly closed, for the first time in days.

Catherine made herself comfortable on the huge chair and picked up a nearby book. She expected things to be quiet, at least for a little while, until Vincent's subconscious really took hold. What would happen after that, was anyone's guess.

It was a low growling sound that jerked Catherine's head up, causing her neck to protest loudly at the sudden movement. She realised she must have dozed off, and quickly glanced at her watch to confirm her suspicions.

Vincent was beginning to fidget restlessly in the beginnings of a nightmare. Carefully, Catherine got up and eased herself onto the bed beside him. She wrapped her arms around him and whispered soothingly, hoping to reach him through the caverns of his mind...

He was in a dark alley, a place familiar, yet unfamiliar. It felt wrong in this alley; there were many dark shadows, places where *it* could hide; waiting for him to pass; ready to pounce at any given time. Nervously he glanced about him, trying to pierce the blackness, trying to see if anything was in them, but he saw nothing.

“Where are you?” he called uncertainly. “I know you’re here, I know!”

There came a deep echoing laugh from somewhere in the blackness. Vincent swung round sharply; his mouth dry, the palms of his hands damp.

“But where am I?” a deep voice whispered back. It sounded like his own voice, but without the familiar gentleness. It was harsh, hard, menacing, and even sarcastic. “Am I here... or here?” The voice came from different directions, causing Vincent to whirl around in an attempt to locate it.

“Face me! Come out and face me!” Vincent yelled.

“Are you sure you can cope with this? I am here to consume you, Vincent! I will win; I am stronger; you cannot defeat me. I am the inner self that you fear above anything else. You cannot face me and survive!” The voice seemed to be almost whispering in his ear.

The hairs on the back of Vincent’s neck stood on end and a growl began at the back of his throat.

His darker self, began to laugh—a deep, hollow, evil laugh.

Vincent knew he couldn’t do it alone, he needed help; he needed Catherine!

The voice laughed even more. “Even she cannot help you! You fool! Did you think her goodness would help you defeat me?”

A growl sounded, developing into a snarl of pure menace. Vincent swallowed convulsively and felt panic begin to rise within him. Where was Catherine? He needed her, now!

“Catherine! Catherine!”

The panic grew and grew, then suddenly halted, withdrew and was gone. He turned slowly and she was there. A great calm came over him and she reached out and took his hand.

“Remember Vincent, together we are invincible!” her soft voice whispered. She squeezed his hand tightly and together they turned and faced the darkness.

The snarling grew in volume and in hostility, and something began to emerge from the darkness. Something hideous and evil, with blood-engorged eyes and saliva dripping from long sharp fangs. It walked round and round them, waiting for an opportunity, then suddenly, it leapt.

As it started its downward descent, Catherine, still holding Vincent’s hand, raised hers high, making him do the same. As the end seemed imminent, Vincent shut his eyes, and the deafening roar abruptly stopped.

The beast was gone, there was just the two of them, alone in the alley, and there was nothing whatsoever to fear.

“See, I told you, together, we are invincible!”

Vincent awoke with a start. He’d had such a strange dream, but he felt better than he had for weeks—and he’d slept! A new kind of peace had settled over him, and he was conscious of a weight near him. He turned and saw Catherine, snuggled up beside him, fast asleep. It was true then, they had won. The beast was back where it belonged, and he was once again in control of himself. And his beloved Catherine had helped him achieve this.

Gently, he stroked her hair, careful not to disturb her, but she still stirred, and opened her eyes.

“Vincent?” she queried.

“We won, Catherine. We won! Thank you.”

“See, I told you we would. Now, you have nothing to fear.”

They cuddled closer still, and each looked forward to a brighter future.

END