



Ririro

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Vera's First Christmas Adventure

Arnold Bennett

I

Five days before Christmas, Cheswardine came home to his wife from a week's sojourn in London on business. Vera, in her quality of the best-dressed woman in Bursley, met him on the doorstep (or thereabouts) of their charming but childless home, attired in a teagown that would have ravished a far less impressionable male than her husband; while he, in his quality of a prosaic and flourishing earthenware manufacturer, pretended to take the teagown as a matter of course, and gave her the sober, solid kiss of a man who has been married six years and is getting used to it.

Still, the teagown had pleased him, and by certain secret symptoms Vera knew that it had pleased him. She hoped much from that teagown. She hoped that he had come home in a more pacific temper than he had shown when he left her, and that she would carry her point after all.

Now, naturally, when a husband in easy circumstances, the possessor of a pretty and pampered wife, spends a week in London and returns five days before Christmas, certain things are rightly and properly to be expected from him. It would need an astounding courage, an amazing lack of a sense of the amenity of conjugal existence in such a husband to enable him to disappoint such reasonable expectations. And Cheswardine, though capable of pulling the curb very tight on the caprices of his wife, was a highly decent fellow. He had no intention to disappoint; he knew his duty.

So that during afternoon tea with the teagown in a cosy corner of the great Chippendale drawing-room he began to unfasten a small wooden case which he had brought into the house in his own hand, opened it with considerable precaution, making a fine mess of packing-stuff on the carpet, and gradually drew to light a pair of vases of Venetian glass. He put them on the mantelpiece.

'There!' he said, proudly, and with a virtuous air.

They were obviously costly antique vases, exquisite in form, exquisite in the graduated tints of their pale blue and rose.

'Seventeenth century!' he said.

'They're very nice,' Vera agreed, with a show of enthusiasm. 'What are they for?'

'Your Christmas present,' Cheswardine explained, and added 'my dear!'

'Oh, Stephen!' she murmured.

A kiss on these occasions is only just, and Cheswardine had one.

'Duveens told me they were quite unique,' he said, modestly; 'and I believe 'em.'

You might imagine that a pair of Venetian vases of the seventeenth century, stated by Duveens to be unique, would have satisfied a woman who had a generous dress allowance and lacked absolutely nothing that was essential. But Vera was not satisfied. She was, on the contrary, profoundly disappointed. For the presence of those vases proved that she had not carried her point. They deprived her of hope. The unpleasantness before Cheswardine went to London had been more or less a propos of a Christmas present. Vera had seen in Bostock's vast emporium in the neighbouring town of Hanbridge, a music-stool in the style known as art nouveau, which had enslaved her fancy. She had taken her husband to see it, and it had not enslaved her husband's fancy in the slightest degree. It was made in light woods, and the woods were curved and twisted as though they had recently spent seven years in a purgatory for sinful trees. Here and there in the design onyx-stones had been set in the wood. The seat itself was beautifully soft. What captured Vera was chiefly the fact that it did not open at the top, as most elaborate music-stools do, but at either side. You pressed a button (onyx) and the panel fell down displaying your music in little compartments ready to hand; and the eastern moiety of the music-stool was for piano pieces, and the western moiety for songs. In short, it was the last word of music-stools; nothing could possibly be newer.

But Cheswardine did not like it, and did not conceal his opinion. He argued that it would not 'go' with the Chippendale furniture, and Vera said that all beautiful things 'went' together, and Cheswardine admitted that they did, rather dryly. You see, they took the matter seriously because the house was their hobby; they were always changing its interior, which was more than they could have done for a child, even if they had had one; and Cheswardine's finer and soberer taste was always fighting against Vera's predilection for the novel and the bizarre. Apart from clothes, Vera had not much more than the taste of a mouse.

They did not quarrel in Bostock's. Indeed, they did not quarrel anywhere; but after Vera had suggested that he might at any rate humour her by giving her the music-stool for a Christmas present (she seemed to think this would somehow help it to 'go' with the Chippendale), and Cheswardine had politely but firmly declined, there had been a certain coolness and quite six tears. Vera had caused it to be understood that even if Cheswardine was NOT interested in music, even if he did hate music and did call the Broadwood ebony grand ugly, that was no reason why she should be deprived of a pretty and original music-stool that

would keep her music tidy and that would be HERS. As for it not going with the Chippendale, that was simply an excuse ... etc.

Hence it is not surprising that the Venetian vases of the seventeenth century left Vera cold, and that the domestic prospects for Christmas were a little cold.

However, Vera, with wifely and submissive tact made the best of things; and that evening she began to decorate the hall, dining-room, and drawing-room with holly and mistletoe. Before the pair retired to rest, the true Christmas feeling, slightly tinged with a tender melancholy, permeated the house, and the servants were growing excited in advance. The servants weren't going to have a dinner-party, with crackers and port and a table-centre unmatched in the Five Towns; the servants weren't going to invite their friends to an evening's jollity. The servants were merely going to work somewhat harder and have somewhat less sleep; but such is the magical effect of holly and mistletoe twined round picture-cords and hung under chandeliers that the excitement of the servants was entirely pleasurable.

And as Vera shut the bedroom door, she said, with a delightful, forgiving smile—

'I saw a lovely cigar-cabinet at Bostock's yesterday.'

'Oh!' said Cheswardine, touched. He had no cigar-cabinet, and he wanted one, and Vera knew that he wanted one.

And Vera slept in the sweet consciousness of her thoughtful wifeliness.

The next morning, at breakfast, Cheswardine demanded—

'Getting pretty hard up, aren't you, Maria?'

He called her Maria when he wished to be arch.

Well,' she said, 'as a matter of fact, I am. What with the—'

And he gave her a five-pound note.

It happened so every year. He provided her with the money to buy him a Christmas present. But it is, I hope, unnecessary to say that the connection between her present to him and the money he furnished was never crudely mentioned.

She made an opportunity, before he left for the works, to praise the Venetian vases, and she insisted that he should wrap up well, because he was showing signs of one of his bad colds.

II

In the early afternoon she went to Bostock's emporium, at Hanbridge, to buy the

cigar-cabinet and a few domestic trifles. Bostock's is a good shop. I do not say that it has the classic and serene dignity of Brunt's, over the way, where one orders one's dining-room suites and one's frocks for the January dances. But it is a good shop, and one of the chief glories of the Paris of the Five Towns. It has frontages in three streets, and it might be called the shop of the hundred windows. You can buy pretty nearly anything at Bostock's, from an art nouveau music-stool up to the highest cheese—for there is a provision department. (You can't get cheese at Brunt's.)

Vera made her uninteresting purchases first, in the basement, and then she went up-stairs to the special Christmas department, which certainly was wonderful: a blaze and splendour of electric light; a glitter of gilded iridescent toys and knick-knacks; a smiling, excited, pushing multitude of faces, young and old; and the cashiers in their cages gathering in money as fast as they could lay their tired hands on it! A joyous, brilliant scene, calculated to bring soft tears of satisfaction to the board of directors that presided over Bostock's. It was a record Christmas for Bostock's. The electric cars were thundering over the frozen streets of all the Five Towns to bring customers to Bostock's. Children dreamt of Bostock's. Fathers went to scoff and remained to pay. Brunt's was not exactly alarmed, for nothing could alarm Brunt's; but there was just a sort of suspicion of something in the air at Brunt's that did not make for odious self-conceit. People seemed to become intoxicated when they went into Bostock's, to close their heads in a frenzy of buying.

And there the art nouveau music-stool stood in the corner, where Vera had originally seen it! She approached it, not thinking of the terrible danger. The compartments for music lay invitingly open.

'Four pounds, nine and six, Mrs Cheswardine,' said a shop-walker, who knew her. She stopped to finger it.

Well, of course everybody is acquainted with that peculiar ecstasy that undoubtedly does overtake you in good shops, sometimes, especially at Christmas. I prefer to call it ecstasy rather than intoxication, but I have heard it called even drunkenness. It is a magnificent and overwhelming experience, like a good wine. A blind instinct seizes your reason and throws her out of the window of your soul, and then assumes entire control of the volitional machinery. You listen to no arguments, you care for no consequences. You want a thing; you must have it; you do have it.

Vera was caught unawares by this magnificent and overwhelming experience, just as she stooped to finger the music-stool. A fig for the cigar-cabinet! A fig for her husband's objections! After all she was a grown-up woman (twenty-nine or thirty), and entitled to a certain freedom. She was not and would not be a slave.

It would look perfect in the drawing-room.

'I'll take it,' she said.

'Yes, Mrs Cheswardine. A unique thing, quite unique. Penkethman!'

And Vera followed Penkethman to a cash desk and received half-a-guinea out of a five-pound note.

'I want it carefully packed,' said Vera.

'Yes, ma'am. It will be delivered in the morning.'

She was just beginning to realize that she had been under the sinister influence of the ecstasy, and that she had not bought the cigar-cabinet, and that she had practically no more money, and that Stephen's rule against credit was the strictest of all his rules, when she caught sight of Mr Charles Woodruff buying toys, doubtless for his nephews and nieces.

Mr Woodruff was the bachelor friend of the family. He had loved Vera before Stephen loved her, and he was still attached to her. Stephen and he were chums of the most advanced kind. Why! Stephen and Vera thought nothing of bickering in front of Mr Woodruff, who rated them both and sided with neither.

'Hello!' said Woodruff, flushing, and moving his long, clumsy limbs when she touched him on the shoulder. 'I'm just buying a few toys.'

She helped him to buy toys, and then he asked her to go and have tea with him at the newly-opened Sub Rosa Tea Rooms, in Machin Street. She agreed, and, in passing the music-stool, gave a small parcel which she was carrying to Penkethman, and told him he might as well put it in the music-stool. She was glad to have tea with Charlie Woodruff. It would distract her, prevent her from thinking. The ecstasy had almost died out, and she had a violent desire not to think.

III

A terrible blow fell upon her the next morning. Stephen had one of his bad colds, one of his worst. The mere cold she could have supported with fortitude, but he was forced to remain indoors, and his presence in the house she could not support with fortitude. The music-stool would be sure to arrive before lunch, and he would be there to see it arrive. The ecstasy had fully expired now, and she had more leisure to think than she wanted. She could not imagine what mad instinct had compelled her to buy the music-stool. (Once out of the shop these instincts always are difficult to imagine.) She knew that Stephen would be angry. He might perhaps go to the length of returning the music-stool whence it came. For, though she was a pretty and pampered woman, Stephen had a way, in the

last resort, of being master of his own house. And she could not even placate him with the gift of a cigar-cabinet. She could not buy a five-guinea cigar-cabinet with ten and six. She had no other money in the world. She never had money, yet money was always running through her fingers. Stephen treated her generously, gave her an ample allowance, but he would under no circumstances permit credit, nor would he pay her allowance in advance. She had nothing to expect till the New Year.

She attended to his cold, and telephoned to the works for a clerk to come up, and she refrained from telling Stephen that he must have been very careless while in London, to catch a cold like that. Her self-denial in this respect surprised Stephen, but he put it down to the beneficent influence of Christmas and the Venetian vases.

Bostock's pair-horse van arrived before the garden gate earlier than her worse fears had anticipated, and Bostock's men were evidently in a tremendous hurry that morning. In quite an abnormally small number of seconds the wooden case containing the fragile music-stool was lying in the inner hall, waiting to be unpacked. Having signed the delivery-book Vera stood staring at the accusatory package. Stephen was lounging over the dining-room fire, perhaps dozing. She would have the thing swiftly transported up-stairs and hidden in an attic for a time.

But just then Stephen popped out of the dining-room. Stephen's masculine curiosity had been aroused by the advent of Bostock's van. He had observed the incoming of the package from the window, and he had ventured to the hall to inspect it. The event had roused him wonderfully from the heavy torpor which a cold induces. He wore a dressing-gown, the pockets of which bulged with handkerchiefs.

'You oughtn't to be out here, Stephen,' said his wife.

'Nonsense!' he said. 'Why, upon my soul, this steam heat is warmer than the dining-room fire.' Vera, silenced by the voice of truth, could not reply.

Stephen bent his great height to inspect the package. It was an appetizing Christmas package; straw escaped from between its ribs, and it had an air of being filled with something at once large and delicate.

'Oh!' observed Stephen, humorously. 'Ah! So this is it, is it? Ah! Oh! Very good!'

And he walked round it.

How on earth had he learnt that she had bought it? She had not mentioned the purchase to Mr Woodruff.

'Yes, Stephen,' she said timidly. 'That's it, and I hope—'

'It ought to hold a tidy few cigars, that ought,' remarked Stephen complacently.

He took it for the cigar-cabinet!

She paused, struck. She had to make up her mind in an instant.

'Oh yes,' she murmured.

'A thousand?'

'Yes, a thousand,' she said.

'I thought so,' murmured Stephen. 'I mustn't kiss you, because I've got a cold,' said he. 'But, all the same I'm awfully obliged, Vera. Suppose we have it opened now, eh? Then we could decide where it is to go, and I could put my cigars in it.'

'Oh no,' she protested. 'Oh no, Stephen! That's not fair! It mustn't be opened before Christmas morning.'

'But I gave you my vases yesterday.'

'That's different,' she said. 'Christmas is Christmas.' 'Oh, very well,' he yielded. 'That's all right, my dear.'

Then he began to sniff.

'There's a deuced odd smell from it,' he said.

'Perhaps it's the wood!' she faltered.

'I hope it isn't,' he said. 'I expect it's the straw. A deuced odd smell. We'll have the thing put in the side hall, next to the clock. It will be out of the way there. And I can come and gaze at it when I feel depressed. Eh, Maria?' He was undoubtedly charmed at the prospect of owning so large and precious a cigar-cabinet.

Considering that the parcel which she had given to Penkethman to put in the music-stool comprised a half-a-pound of Bostock's very ripest Gorgonzola cheese, bought at the cook's special request, the smell which proceeded from the mysterious inwards of the packing-case did not surprise Vera at all. But it disconcerted her none the less. And she wondered how she could get the cheese out.

For thirty hours the smell from the unopened packing-case waxed in vigour and strength. Stephen's cold grew worse and prevented him from appreciating its full beauty, but he savoured enough of it to induce him to compare it facetiously to the effluvium of a dead rat, and he said several times that Bostock's really ought



to use better straw. He was frequently to be seen in the hall, gloating over his cigar-cabinet. Once he urged Vera to have it opened and so get rid of the straw, but she refused, and found the nerve to tell him that he was exaggerating the odour.

She was at a loss what to do. She could not get up in the middle of the night and unpack the package and hide its guilty secret. Indeed, to unpack the package would bring about her ruin instantly; for, the package unpacked, Stephen would naturally expect to see the cigar-cabinet. And so the hours crept on to Christmas and Vera's undoing. She gave herself a headache.

It was just thirty hours after the arrival of the package when Mr Woodruff dropped in for tea. Stephen was asleep in the dining-room, which apartment he particularly affected during his colds. Woodruff was shown into the drawing-room, where Vera was having her headache. Vera brightened. In fact, she suddenly grew very bright. And she gave Woodruff tea, and took some herself, and Woodruff passed an enjoyable twenty minutes.

The two Venetian vases were on the mantelpiece. Vera rose into ecstasies about them, and called upon Charlie Woodruff to rise too. He got up from his chair to examine the vases, which Vera had placed close together side by side at the corner of the mantelpiece nearest to him. Vera and Woodruff also stood close together side by side. And just as Woodruff was about to handle the vases, Vera knocked his arm; his arm collided with one vase; that vase collided with the next, and both fell to earth—to the hard, unfeeling, unyielding tiles of the hearth.

IV

They were smashed to atoms.

Vera screamed. She screamed twice, and ran out of the room.

'Stephen, Stephen!' she cried hysterically. 'Charlie has broken my vases, both of them. It IS too bad of him. He's really too clumsy!'

There was a terrific pother. Stephen wakened violently, and in a moment all three were staring ineffectually at the thousand crystal fragments on the hearth.

'But—' began Charlie Woodruff.

And that was all he did say.

He and Vera and Stephen had been friends since infancy, so she had the right not to conceal her feelings before him; Stephen had the same right. They both exercised it.

'But—' began Charlie again.

'Oh, never mind,' Stephen stopped him curtly. 'Accidents can't be helped.'

'I shall get another pair,' said Woodruff.

'No, you won't,' replied Stephen. 'You can't. There isn't another pair in the world. See?'

The two men simultaneously perceived that Vera was weeping. She was very pretty in tears, but that did not prevent the masculine world from feeling awkward and self-conscious. Charlie had notions about going out and burying himself.

'Come, Vera, come,' her husband enjoined, blowing his nose with unnecessary energy, bad as his cold was.

'I—I liked those vases more than anything you've—you've ever given me,' Vera blubbered, charmingly, patting her eyes.

Stephen glanced at Woodruff, as who should say: 'Well, my boy, you uncorked those tears, I'll leave you to deal with 'em. You see, I'm an invalid in a dressing-gown. I leave you.'

And went.

'No-but-look-here-I-say,' Charlie Woodruff expostulated to Vera when he was alone with her—he often started an expostulation with that singular phrase. 'I'm awfully sorry. I don't know how it happened. You must let me give you something else.'

Vera shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I wanted Stephen awfully to give me that music-stool that I told you about a fortnight ago. But he gave me the vases instead, and I liked them ever so much better.'

'I shall give you the music-stool. If you wanted it a fortnight ago, you want it now. It won't make up for the vases, of course, but—'

'No, no,' said Vera, positively.

'Why not?'

'I do not wish you to give me anything. It wouldn't be quite nice,' Vera insisted.

'But I give you something every Christmas.'

'Do you?' asked Vera, innocently.

'Yes, and you and Stephen give me something.'

'Besides, Stephen doesn't quite like the music-stool.'

'What's that got to do with it? You like it. I'm giving it to you, not to him. I shall go over to Bostock's tomorrow morning and get it.'

'I forbid you to.'

'I shall.'

Woodruff departed.

Within five minutes the Cheswardine coachman was driving off in the dogcart to Hanbridge, with the packing-case in the back of the cart, and a note. He brought back the cigar-cabinet. Stephen had not stirred from the dining-room, afraid to encounter a tearful wife. Presently his wife came into the dining-room bearing the vast load of the cigar-cabinet in her delicate arms.

'I thought it might amuse you to fill it with your cigars—just to pass the time,' she said.

Stephen's thought was: 'Well, women take the cake.' It was a thought that occurs frequently to the husbands of Veras.

There was ripe Gorgonzola at dinner. Stephen met it as one meets a person whom one fancies one has met somewhere but cannot remember where.

The next afternoon the music-stool came, for the second time, into the house. Charlie brought it in HIS dogcart. It was unpacked ostentatiously by the radiant Vera. What could Stephen say in depreciation of this gift from their oldest and best friend? As a fact he could and did say a great deal. But he said it when he happened to be all alone in the drawing-room, and had observed the appalling way in which the music-stool did not 'go' with the Chippendale.

'Look at the d—thing!' he exclaimed to himself. 'Look at it!'

However, the Christmas dinner-party was a brilliant success, and after it Vera sat on the art nouveau music-stool and twittered songs, and what with her being so attractive and birdlike, and what with the Christmas feeling in the air... well, Stephen resigned himself to the music-stool.

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