



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Vera's Second Christmas Adventure

Arnold Bennett

I

Curious and strange things had a way of happening to Vera—perhaps because she was an extremely feminine woman. But of all the curious and strange things that ever did happen to Vera, this was certainly the strangest and the most curious. It makes a somewhat exasperating narrative, because the affair ended—or, rather, Vera caused it to end—on a note of interrogation. The reader may, however, draw consolation from the fact that, if he is tormented by an unanswerable query, Vera herself was much more tormented by precisely the same query.

Two days before Christmas, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, just when it was getting dusk and the distant smokepall of the Five Towns was merging in the general greyness of the northern sky, Vera was sitting in the bow-window of the drawing-room of Stephen Cheswardine's newly-acquired house at Sneyd; Sneyd being the fashionable suburb of the Five Towns, graced by the near presence of a countess. And as the slim, thirty-year-old Vera sat there, moody (for reasons which will soon appear), in her charming teagown, her husband drove up to the door in the dogcart, and he was not alone. He had with him a man of vigorous and dashing appearance, fair, far from ugly, and with a masterful face, keen eyes, and most magnificent furs round about him. At sight of the visitor Vera's heart did not exactly jump, but it nearly jumped.

Presently, Stephen brought his acquaintance into the drawing-room.

"My wife," said Stephen, rubbing his hands. "Vera, this is Mr Bittenger, of New York. He will give us the pleasure of spending the night here."

And now Vera's little heart really did jump.

She behaved with the delicious wayward grace which she could always command when she chose to command it. No one would have guessed that she had not spoken to Stephen for a week.

'I'm most happy—most happy,' said Mr Bittenger, with a marked accent and a fine complimentary air. And obviously he was most happy. Vera had impressed him. There was nothing surprising in that. She was in the fullness of her powers in that direction.

It is at this point—at the point of the first jumping of Vera's heart—that the tale begins to be uncanny and disturbing. Thus runs the explanation.

During the year Stephen had gradually grown more and more preoccupied with the subject of his own health. The earthenware business was very good, although, of course, manufacturers were complaining just as usual. Trade, indeed, flourished to such an extent that Stephen had pronounced himself to be suffering from nervous strain and overwork. The symptoms of his malady were chiefly connected with the assimilation of food; to be brief, it was dyspepsia. And as Stephen had previously been one of those favoured people who can eat anything at any hour, and arise in the best of health the next day, Stephen was troubled. At last—about August, when he was obliged to give up wine—he had suddenly decided that the grimy air of the Five Towns was bad for him, and that the household should be removed to Sneyd. And removed to Sneyd it accordingly was. The new house was larger and more splendid even than the Cheswardine abode at Bursley. But Vera did not like the change. Vera preferred the town. Nevertheless, she could not openly demur, since Stephen's health was supposed to be at stake.

During the autumn she was tremendously bored at Sneyd. She had practically no audience for her pretty dresses, and her friends would not flock over from Bursley because of the difficulty of getting home at night. Then it was that Vera had the beautiful idea of spending Christmas in Switzerland. Someone had told her about a certain hotel called The Bear, where, on Christmas Day, never less than a hundred well-dressed and wealthy English people sat down to an orthodox Christmas dinner. The notion enchanted her. She decided, definitely, that she and Stephen should do their Christmassing at The Bear, wherever the Bear was. And as she was fully aware of the power of her capricious charm over Stephen, she regarded the excursion as arranged before she had broached it to him.

Stephen refused. He remarked bitterly that the very thought of a mince-tart made him ill; and that he hated 'abroad'.

Vera took her defeat badly.

She pouted. She sulked. She announced that, if she was not to be allowed to do her Christmassing at The Bear, she would not do it anywhere. She indicated that she meant to perish miserably of ennui in the besotted dullness of Sneyd, and that no Christmas-party of any kind should occur in HER house. She ceased to show interest in Stephen's health. She would not speak. In fact, she went too far. One day, in reply to her rude silence, Stephen said: 'Very well, child, if that's your game, I'll play it with you. Except when other people are present, not a word do I speak to you until you have first spoken to me.'

She knew he would abide by that. He was a monster. She hated him. She loathed him (so she said to herself).

That night, in the agony of her distress, she had dreamed a dream. She dreamed that a stranger came to the house. The details were vague, but the stranger had travelled many miles over water. She could not see him distinctly, but she knew that he was quite bald. In spite of his baldness he inspired her with sympathy. He understood her, praised her costumes, and treated a woman as a woman ought to be treated. Then, somehow or other, he was making love to her, the monster Stephen being absent. She was shocked by his making love to her, and she moved a little farther off him on the sofa (he had sat down by her on a vague sort of sofa in a vague sort of room); but still she was thrilled, and she could not feel as wicked as she felt she ought to feel. Then the dream became hazy; it became hazy at the interesting point of her answer to the love-making. A later stage was very clear. Something was afoot between the monster Stephen and the stranger in the dining-room, and she was locked out of the dining-room. It was Christmas night. She knocked frantically at the door, and at last forced it open, and Stephen was lying in the middle of the floor; the table had been pushed into a corner. 'I killed him quite by accident,' said the stranger affably. And then he seized her by the hand and ruthlessly dragged her away, away, away; and they travelled in trains and ships and trains, and they came to a very noisy, clanging sort of city—and Vera woke up. It had been a highly realistic dream, and it made a deep impression on Vera.

Can one wonder that Vera's heart, being a superstitious little heart, like all our hearts, should leap when the very next day Stephen turned up with a completely unexpected stranger from New York? Of course, dreams are nonsense! Of course! Still—

She did not know whether to rejoice or mourn over the fact that Mr Bittenger was not bald. He was decidedly unbald; he had a glorious shock of chestnut hair. That hair of his naturally destroyed any possible connection with the dream. None the less the coincidence was bizarre.

II

That evening, before dinner, Vera, busy in her chamber beautifying her charms for the ravishment of men from New York, waited with secret anxiety for the arrival of Stephen in his dressing-room. And whereas she usually closed the door between the bedroom and the dressing-room, on this occasion she carefully left it wide open. Stephen came at last. And she waited, listening to his movements in the dressing-room. Not a word! She made brusque movements in the bedroom to attract his attention; she even dropped a brush on the floor. Not a word! After a few moments, she actually ventured into the dressing-room.

Stephen was wiping his face, and he glanced at her momentarily over the towel, which hid his nose and mouth. Not a word! And how hard was the monster's glance! She felt that Stephen was one of your absurd literal persons. He had said that he would not speak to her until she had first spoken to him—that was to say in private—public performances did not count. And he would stick to his text, no matter how deliciously she behaved.

She left the dressing-room in haste. Very well! Very well! If Stephen wished for war, he should have it. Her grievance against him grew into something immense. Before, it had been nothing but a kind of two-roomed cottage. She now erected it into a town hall, with imposing portals, and many windows and rich statuary, and suite after suite of enormous rooms, and marble staircases, and lifts that went up and down. She wished she had never married him. She wished that Mr Bittenger HAD been bald.

At dinner everything went with admirable smoothness. Mr Bittenger sat betwixt them. And utmost politeness reigned. In their quality of well-bred hosts, they both endeavoured to keep Mr Bittenger at his ease despite their desolating quarrel; and they entirely succeeded. As the champagne disappeared (and it was not Stephen that drank it), Mr Bittenger became more than at his ease. He was buyer for an important firm of earthenware dealers in New York (Vera had suspected as much—these hospitalities to American buyers are an essential part of business in the Five Towns), and he related very drolly the series of chances or mischances that had left him stranded in England at that season so unseasonable for buying. Vera reflected upon the series of chances or mischances, and upon her dream of the man from over the long miles of water. Of course, dreams are nonsense.... But still—

The conversation passed to the topic of Stephen's health, as conversations in Stephen's house had a habit of doing. Mr Bittenger listened with grave interest.

'I know, I know!' said Mr Bittenger. 'I used to be exactly the same. I guess I understand how you feel—SOME! Don't I?'

'And you are cured?' Stephen demanded, eagerly, as he nibbled at dry toast.

'You bet I'm cured!' said Mr Bittenger.

'You must tell me about that,' said Stephen, and added, 'some time tonight.' He did not care to discuss the bewildering internal economy of the human frame at his dinner-table. There were details...and Mr Bittenger was in a mood that it was no exaggeration to describe as gay.

Shortly afterwards, there arose a discussion as to their respective ages. They coquetted for a few moments, as men invariably will, each diffident about giving away the secret, each asserting that the other was younger than himself.

'Well,' said Mr Bittenger to Vera, at length, 'what age should you give me?'

'I—I should give you five years less than Stephen,' Vera replied.

'And may I ask just how old you are?' Mr Bittenger put the question at close range to Stephen, and hit him full in the face with it.

'I'm forty,' said Stephen.

'So am I!' said Mr Bittenger.

'Well, you don't look it,' said Stephen.

'Sure!' Mr Bittenger admitted, pleased.

'My husband's hair is turning grey,' said Vera, 'while yours—'

'Turning grey!' exclaimed Mr Bittenger. 'I wish mine was. I'd give five thousand dollars today if mine was.'

'But why—?' Vera smiled.

'Look here, my dear lady,' said Mr Bittenger, in a peculiar voice, putting down his glass.

And with a swift movement he lifted a wig of glorious chestnut hair from his head—just lifted it for an instant, and dropped it. The man was utterly and completely bald.

III

Vera did nothing foolish. She neither cried, screamed, turned deadly pale, clenched her fragile hands, bit her lips till the blood came, smashed a wine-glass, nor fell with a dull thud senseless to the floor. Nevertheless, she was extremely perturbed by this astounding revelation of Mr Bittenger's. Of course, dreams are nonsense. But still—The truth is, one tries to believe that dreams are nonsense, and up to a certain point one may succeed in believing. But it seemed to Vera that circumstances had passed that point. She could not but admit, also, that if the dream went on being fulfilled, within forty-eight hours Mr Bittenger would have made love to her, and would have killed her husband.

She was so incensed against Stephen that she really could not decide whether she wanted the dream to be fulfilled or not. No one would have imagined that that soft breast could conceal a homicidal thought. Yet so it was. That pretty and delightful woman, wandering about in the edifice of her terrific grievance against Stephen, could not say positively to herself that she would not care to have Stephen killed as a punishment for his sins.

After dinner, she found an excuse for retiring. She must think the puzzle out in

solitude. Matters were really going too far. She allowed it to be understood that she was indisposed. Mr Bittenger was full of sorrow and sympathy. But did Stephen show the slightest concern? Stephen did not. She went upstairs, and she meditated, stretched on the sofa at the foot of the bed, a rug over her knees and the fire glinting on her face. Yes, it was her duty as a Christian, if not as an outraged wife, to warn Stephen that the shadow of death was creeping up behind him. He ought at least to be warned. But how could she warn him? Clearly she could not warn him in the presence of Mr Bittenger, the prospective murderer. She would, therefore, have to warn him when they were alone. And that meant that she would have to give way in the great conjugal sulking match. No, never! It was impossible that she should give way there! She frowned desperately at the leaping flames, and did ultimately decide that Stephen's death was preferable to her defeat in that contest. Of such is human nature.

After all, dreams were nonsense.

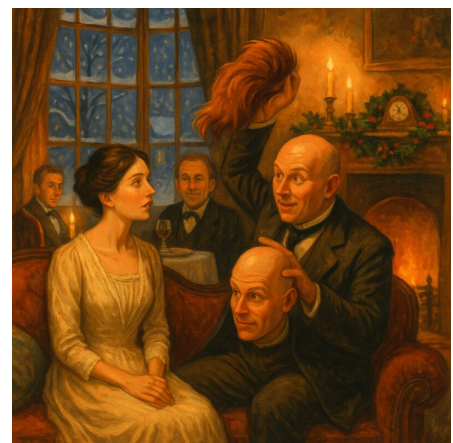
Surely Stephen would come upstairs to inquire about her health, her indisposition? But no! He came not. And, as he continued not to come, she went downstairs again and proclaimed that she was better.

And then she learned that she had been worrying herself to no purpose whatever. Mr Bittenger was leaving on the morrow, the morrow being Christmas Eve. Stephen would drive him to Bursley in the morning. He would go to the Five Towns Hotel to get his baggage, and catch the Liverpool express at noon. He had booked a passage on the Saxonia, which sailed at threethirty o'clock. Thus he would spend his Christmas at sea; and, spending his Christmas at sea, he could not possibly kill Stephen in the village of Sneyd on Christmas night.

Relief! And yet a certain vague regret in the superstitious little heart! The little heart went to bed again. And Stephen and the stranger stayed up talking very late—doubtless about the famous cure.

The leave-taking the next morning increased the vague regret. Mr Bittenger was the possessor of an attractive individuality, and Vera pondered upon its attractiveness far into the afternoon. How nicely Mr Bittenger had thanked her for her gracious hospitality—with what meaning he had charged the expression of his deep regret at leaving her!

After all, dreams WERE nonsense.



She was sitting in the bow-window of the drawing-room, precisely as she had been sitting twenty-four hours previously, when whom should she see, striding

masculinely along the drive towards the house, but Mr Bittenger?

This time she was much more perturbed even than she had been by the revelation of Mr Bittenger's baldness.

After all—

She uprose, the blood having rushed to her head, and retreated she knew not whither, blindly, without a purpose. And found herself in a little morning-room which was scarcely ever used, at the end of the hall. She had not shut the door. And Mr Bittenger, having been admitted by a servant, caught sight of her, and breezily entered her retreat, clad in his magnificent furs.

And as he doffed the furs, he gaily told her what had happened. Owing to difficulties with the Cheswardine mare on the frosty, undulating road between Sneyd and Bursley, and owing to delays with his baggage at the Five Towns Hotel, he had just missed the Liverpool express, and, therefore, the steamer also. He had returned to Stephen's manufactory. Stephen had insisted that he should spend his Christmas with them. And, in brief, there he was. He had walked from Bursley. Stephen, kept by business, was coming later, and so was some of the baggage.

Mr Bittenger's face radiated joy. The loss of his twenty-guinea passage on the Saxonia did not appear to cause him the least regret.

And he sat down by the side of Vera.

And Vera suddenly noticed that they were on a sofa—the sofa of her dream—and she fancied she recognized the room.

'You know, my dear lady,' said Mr Bittenger, looking her straight in the eyes, 'I'm just GLAD I missed my steamer. It gives me a chance to spend a Christmas in England, and in your delightful society—your delightful society—' He gazed at her, without adding to the sentence.

If this was not love-making on a sofa, what could be?

Mr Bittenger had certainly missed the Liverpool express on purpose. Of that Vera was convinced. Or, if he had not missed it on purpose, he had missed it under the dictates of the mysterious power of the dream. Those people who chose to believe that dreams are nonsense were at liberty to do so.

IV

So that in spite of Vera's definite proclamation that there should be no Christmassing in her house that year, Christmassing there emphatically was. Impossible to deny anything to Mr Bittenger! Mr Bittenger wanted holly, the gardener supplied it. Mr Bittenger wanted mistletoe, a bunch of it was brought

home by Stephen in the dogcart. Mr Bittenger could not conceive an English Christmas without turkey, mince-pies, plum-pudding, and all the usual indigestiveness. Vera, speaking in a voice which seemed somehow not to be hers, stated that these necessities of Christmas life would be produced, and Stephen did not say that the very thought of a mince-tart made him ill. Even the English weather, which, it is notorious, has of late shown a sad disposition to imitate, and even to surpass, in mildness the weather of the Riviera at Christmas, decided to oblige Mr Bittenger. At nightfall on Christmas Eve it began to snow gently, but steadily—fine, frozen snow. And the waits, consisting of boys and girls from the Countess of Chell's celebrated institute close by, came and sang in the garden in the falling snow, by the light of a lantern. And Mr Bittenger's heart was as full as it could hold of English Christmas.

As for Vera's heart, it was full of she knew not what. Mr Bittenger's attitude towards her grew more and more chivalrous. He contrived to indicate that he regarded all the years he had spent before making the acquaintance of Vera as so many years absolutely wasted. And Stephen did not seem to care.

They retired to rest that evening up a staircase whose banisters the industrious hands of Mr Bittenger had entwined with holly and paper festoons, and bade each other a merry Christmas with immense fervour; but in the conjugal chamber Stephen maintained his policy of implacable silence. And, naturally, Vera maintained hers. Could it be expected of her that she should yield? The fault was all Stephen's. He ought to have taken her to The Bear, Switzerland. Then there would have been no dream, no Mr Bittenger, and no danger. But as things were, within twenty-four hours he would be a dead man.

And throughout Christmas Day Vera, beneath the gaiety with which she met the vivacious sallies of Mr Bittenger, waited in horrible suspense for the dream to fulfil itself. Stephen alone observed her agitated condition. Stephen said to himself: 'The quarrel is getting on her nerves. She'll yield before she's a day older. It will do her good. Then I'll make it up to her handsomely. But she must yield first.'

He little knew he was standing on the edge of the precipice of death.

The Christmas dinner succeeded admirably; and Stephen, in whom courage was seldom lacking, ate half a mince-pie. The day was almost over. No premature decease had so far occurred. And when both the men said that, if Vera permitted, they would come with her at once to the drawing-room and smoke there, Vera decided that after all dreams were nonsense. She entered the drawing-room first, and Mr Bittenger followed her, with Stephen behind; but just as Stephen was crossing the mat the gardener, holding a parcel in his hands and looking rather strange there in the hall, spoke to him. And Stephen stopped and called to Mr Bittenger. And the drawing-room door was closed upon Vera.

She waited, solitary, for an incredible space of time, and then, having heard unaccustomed and violent sounds in the distance, she could contain herself no longer, and she rang the bell.

'Louisa,' she demanded of the parlourmaid, 'where is your master?'

'Oh, ma'am,' replied Louisa, giggling—a little licence was surely permissible to the girl on Christmas night—'Oh, ma'am, there's such a to-do! Tinsley has just brought some boxing-gloves, and master and Mr Bittenger have got their coats off in the dining-room. And they've had the table pushed up by the door, and you never saw such a set-out in all your life ma'am.'

Vera dismissed Louisa.

There it was—the dream! They were going to box. Mr Bittenger was doubtless an expert, and she knew that Stephen was not. A chance blow by Mr Bittenger in some vital part, and Stephen would be lying stretched in eternal stillness in the middle of the dining-room floor where the table ought to be! The life of the monster was at stake! The life of the brute was in her hands! The dream was fulfilling itself to the point of tragedy!

She jumped up and rushed to the dining-room door. It would not open. Again, the dream!

'You can't come in,' cried Stephen, laughing. 'Wait a bit.'

She pushed against the door, working the handle.

She was about to insist upon the door being opened, when the idea of the danger of such a proceeding occurred to her. In the dream, when she got the door opened, her husband's death had already happened!

Frantically she ran to the kitchen.

'Louisa,' she ordered. 'Go into the garden and tap at the dining-room window, and tell your master that I must speak to him at once in the drawing-room.'

And in a pitiable state of excitation, she returned to the drawing-room.

After another interminable period of suspense, her ear caught the sound of the opening of doors, and then Stephen came into the drawing-room. A singular apparition! He was coatless, as Louisa had said, and the extremities of his long arms were bulged out with cream-coloured boxing-gloves.

She sprang at him and kissed him.

'Steve,' she said, 'are we friends?'

'I should think we were!' he replied, returning her kiss heartily. He had won.

'What are you doing?' she asked him.

'Bittenger and I are just going to have a real round with the gloves. It's part of his cure for my indigestion, you know. He says there's nothing like it. I've only just been able to get gloves. Tinsley brought them up just now. And so we sort of thought we'd like to have a go at once.'

'Why wouldn't you let me into the dining-room?'

'My child, the table was up against the door. And I fancied, perhaps, you wouldn't be exactly charmed, so I—'

'Stephen,' she said, in her most persuasive voice, 'will you do something to please me?'

'What is it?'

'Will you?'

A pause.

'Yes, certainly.'

'Don't box tonight.'

'Oh—well! What will Bittenger think?'

Another pause.

'Never mind! You don't want me to box, really?'

'I don't want you to box—not tonight.' 'Agreed, my chuck!' And he kissed her again. He could well afford to be magnanimous.

Mr Bittenger ploughed the seas alone to New York.

But supposing that Vera had not interfered, what would have happened? That is the unanswerable query which torments the superstitious little brain of Vera.

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