

A Christmas Cracker

It was during a snowy afternoon on the day before Christmas some time during the late 1870s, as far as I can ascertain, that a post-chaise drew up before the door of a substantial house in the village of Brandeston, in Suffolk. It bore only one passenger, a gentleman in his later years, who alighted slowly from the carriage, waited for his portmanteau and paused to look around him.

He saw the village much unchanged from the place he recalled from some years before, when he had held a position here. The house itself he remembered, though he had not known it well. Chance alone had brought him back here. Friends of some long standing had happened to move to the village and take this house, and knowing the gentleman – who we will call Mr Sanderson – had no immediate family with whom to spend the festivities they had thought to invite him to share their Christmas.

Mr Sanderson was not generally a sociable man, but he had nothing better to do and in truth several days alone during the most maundering part of the year did not appeal to him, so he was pleased to accept. Now, the last of the day's sunlight shone on the windows of the house and made them glow, and scorched the snow with its light. It gave a pleasant impression, though tinged with the sort of melancholy which inevitably attends the coming of a midwinter's dusk.

Mr Sanderson rang the bell and was quickly ushered inside by a maid, her mistress was called, and soon he was making himself comfortable in a room warmed by an open fire in the grate and which otherwise showed evidence of the most decorous hospitality. The maid was about to draw the curtains upon the remains of the day when he stopped her and walked to the window. It was a most pleasing sight from what Mr Sanderson could make of it in what little light remained. A few houses showed dark against the snow, with here and there a soft light at a window to show occupation. Behind the house and its grounds was a slight rise at the top of which sat another building, though this showed no lights. Mr Sanderson knew it well. It had been the workhouse and he had been master there these many years since, though the Poor Law Commissioners had since become aware of the dilemma posed by the establishments under their charge and this establishment, like many others, had fallen into disuse.

The question of the workhouse came up during conversation with his hosts and their other guests over dinner that evening. Some interest was expressed in Mr Sanderson's experiences of the establishment and one of the guests, a young woman, ventured to suggest that the lot of its inmates had of necessity been hard. She

wondered whether it were all to the better that workhouses were not the institutions they had once been.

But Mr Sanderson had decided views on the subject.

‘Poverty is a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, ma’am,’ he assured her. ‘Without poverty, nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilisation. It is the lot of man, ma’am. It is the source of wealth, since without poverty there would be no labour, and without labour there could be no riches, no refinement, no comfort, and no benefit to those who may be possessed of wealth.’

‘But surely there must have been suffering among some of those poor wretches?’ claimed the young woman, whose name was Eleanor. ‘Was there not hunger?’

‘There was hunger,’ admitted Mr Sanderson. ‘On occasion there were deaths of a result, but it was their lot, ma’am. We only serve in the station allotted us by providence.’

The subject was not deemed seemly by their hostess for discussion at length over dinner, and she delicately redirected the interest of her guests towards other and more pleasantly trivial matters such as might be expected to add to the humour of the occasion. So it was that the party enjoyed the rest of their dinner and the evening beyond. Indeed, the mood of the party was somewhat heightened by the snugness of their surroundings compared to the weather outside, which appeared to be growing more wild with the onset of night.

When eventually Mr Sanderson bade his thanks and goodnight to his hosts and made his way up to his room, the night had become noisy and the wind filled the house with a restless impression and for a time robbed him of sleep. But in the morning he woke refreshed and set about the day in such a means as would be expected of Christmas. His hosts and their guests were good company and even the usually solitary Mr Sanderson was quite taken with the jollity. In the morning they exchanged small gifts, then later came the highlight of the day, the Christmas dinner.

Their hostess and her servants had been to great trouble to prepare a table fit for such an occasion, and being dressed in crimson and gold and with candles twinkling and cutlery catching their light the meal itself could hardly do other than prove a success. Over the dessert their hostess brought out her special pleasure, crackers for each guest. There was the usual hilarity at pulling them and hearing them snap, then scrambling for their contents which spilled over the table and floor. And as always it was necessary for each guest to retrieve his or her motto and read it aloud for the amusement of the others.

For the most part they were the usual poor attempts at jokes, most of which of course were already well known to all those present.

‘Now surely it must be your turn Mr Sanderson,’ their hostess declared. ‘Read us your motto.’

But Mr Sanderson found himself unable to do so. For a long moment he sat with eyes transfixed on the slip of paper in his hand.

‘Oh do tell us, Mr Sanderson,’ Eleanor now urged him. ‘If it is so profound then I am sure we should all benefit by hearing it.’

But Mr Sanderson stood and looked wildly at his hostess almost as though in an accusing manner and, with only the slightest pretence at excusing himself, he hurried out of the room.

His companions sat dumbfounded and in silence for a while before the young woman reached across the table to retrieve the slip of paper which their companion had cast aside as he left so hurriedly.

‘What can have upset Mr Sanderson so?’ their hostess fretted. ‘Eleanor, what does it say?’

The young woman scrutinized the motto and shrugged.

‘If it is a joke then I do not pretend to understand it,’ she said. ‘All it says is: ‘Remember the starving paupers’.

The guests looked at each other around the table.

‘It hardly seems an appropriate motto for Christmas,’ declared their hostess. ‘I shall write to the manufacturers to complain. Poor Mr Sanderson, I wonder why he took against it so though.’

After a discreet interval she left her guests to seek out her missing guest, who she found in a thoughtful and fretful mood and seemingly unwilling to discuss with her what had upset him so. But she was able to persuade him to return to the party and after some minutes he did so with some mumbled apologies about being taken unwell. His hostess had seen fit meanwhile to retrieve the offending motto lest its presence should upset her guest again. She found what she thought was the correct slip, though clearly she was mistaken because, when she looked at it, the paper was blank. There was no writing on it at all.

As is usual after Christmas dinner, the party fell to playing games and of course inevitably the most popular was charades. By this time Mr Sanderson had quite recovered his senses and even joined in at some of the guessing.

Then it came to Eleanor's turn. By this time in the evening the guests, though still decorous, had all imbibed of rum punch and any attempt at mimicry, whatever the intended subject, brought forth titters and badinage.

The young woman began a series of manoeuvres which kept her audience in puzzlement but seemed increasingly to focus upon Mr Sanderson. Her hostess assumed this was an attempt by her guest to help put him at ease once more and forget his earlier experience. Eleanor's husband led the party in shouting out suggestions but it was clear eventually that they had no understanding of the meaning of her dumb show and, in good humoured exasperation, her husband implored his wife to tell them the subject of her charade.

Turning to Mr Sanderson she said, in a strained voice: '*Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te.*'

Mr Sanderson made an odd sort of noise in his throat and staggered to his feet. His face had grown ashen and to the alarm of his companions he seemed on the point of taking a seizure, before he collected himself and rushed out of the room.

That two such incidents should occur of a single evening quite put out his hostess, who generally deprecated such displays during one of her occasions. But this time Mr Sanderson really did look ill. Naturally the event dampened the hilarity of the evening and the game was abandoned. This time and after charging his glass more than once their host decided it should fall to him to approach Mr Sanderson and ask after his well-being. But he returned shortly, saying that their guest was in a distemper and had locked himself in his room, refusing to come out. And so the party went to bed, brooding naturally over the evening's events. They were not to know that they would never see Mr Sanderson again.

Afterwards when they discussed the mystery it appeared that all those present had suffered a restless night. One of the maids claimed that she was woken by a cry, as of an animal in terror, and afterwards was too upset to sleep. The police were called, of course, and they showed interest in tracks through the snow which seemed to lead away from the house towards the old workhouse, though they were not footprints exactly. They were too churned up to be sure they were made by humans, and as the police constable remarked they looked rather as though 'two animals had been set about each other and went on at it all the way to the old 'ome.' The tracks were followed nevertheless, but become even more confused when they reached the workhouse and petered out in a welter of flattened snow and broken undergrowth.

They seemed to end in the vicinity of an old well by the paupers' cemetery, but the well was deep and there was no enthusiasm about fetching ladders and men and sending somebody down there.

There was no other clue as to Mr Sanderson's disappearance.

You may imagine the pall which the mystery had on the rest of the household. It was a subject to which they kept returning however determinedly their hostess tried to turn their conversation to other things. They were all puzzled at Eleanor's charades impersonation, and what she had meant by it.

'I really couldn't tell you,' she protested. 'I don't know what it meant. That's the funny part. It just came into my head and I began trying to demonstrate it.'

'But darling, you must know what it meant if you enacted it,' her husband insisted. 'And in Latin too. I didn't even know you had Latin.'

'Latin you say?' she queried, shaking her head. 'But darling, I don't. Not a word!'

Her husband turned to their host.

'You have Latin I know, sir. Can you enlighten us?'

Their host looked uncomfortable and lit his pipe, protesting that he could not recall the words Eleanor had uttered. Nor could she, though by this time she was feeling alarmed at a threat to her sanity and would not let it rest. She attempted a few words that she thought she recalled and the others joined in, until their host was forced to come to their assistance.

'Yes, very well,' he said. 'I may recall the words, though they signify no more to me when translated into English than they do in Latin. It's all rot and I'd just as soon let it rest.'

But they pressed him, and Eleanor being so persistent he had no recourse in the end but to explain to them. He drew on his pipe and walked to the window, looking off towards the old workhouse.

'*Si tu non veneris ad me, ego veniam ad te.* It means, though it makes no sense at all, 'If you don't come to me, I'll come to you.'

Sense or not, it was a subdued party which broke up later that day, and in truth though the hospitality had been all that could be hoped for at Christmas, the guests were not unhappy to be leaving that house. Their hosts continued to entertain at Christmas over following years, though no mention was ever made of Mr Sanderson's mysterious disappearance. The lady of the house lost her fancy for

Christmas stockings and though party games were expected after dinner, nobody ever played charades again.