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Signs and Portents

SIGNS AND PORTENTS: A CRICKET STORY

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*Etext by Dagny and
The Blandigns Group*

Of all the men who ever worried the captain of a touring team into an early grave, that maniac Sanderson is the worst. To be sheep-dog to a side on tour is bad enough in ordinary circumstances.

Under no conditions does the innate folly of man show up so luridly. You write half-a-dozen post-cards telling a man what train to catch at Waterloo, and you find later that he went and waited patiently for an hour and a quarter at Victoria. Or he forgets his cricket bag, or his aunt dies the day before you start, and there is no time to get a substitute — for him, not for his aunt. And when you have got the whole team to their destination, you must watch them like a hawk. Sharples, our fast bowler, will insist on sitting up to weird hours on the night before an important match, smoking strong tobacco and drinking whisky and soda; with the natural result that his pace on the next day lasts for a couple of overs, and then fizzles out, and he continues with slow medium. I have to hound the man to bed regularly, and superintend his undressing in person. After which I go and argue with Grake, our slow man, to prevent him experimenting with his latest head ball. He is always inventing a new ball, and it is a

safe four to the batsman every time. Against Sidmouth, last year, they made 23 off him in two overs.

He explained that he was luring the batsmen on and making them over-confident, and that in another over or two they would get themselves out. My hair is turning grey at the temples.

But the worst of them all is the man Sanderson.

He is one of the most beautiful bats in England. When he gets set, all you have to do is to lie back and applaud. He has strokes through the slips which words cannot describe. And his off-drive has to be seen to be appreciated. And he spoils it all by his wretched nerves. I have met nervous batsmen in the course of my career, men who turned a pale green when they had to go to the wickets, but they were recklessly confident compared with Sanderson. One would think that when a man had played for his county and made innumerable runs in club matches, he would begin to have the rudiments of a faith in himself; but not so Sanderson. If he played against a kindergarten he would palpitate.

He has brought the thing to a positive craze. He believes in omens. He has mascots and other futile aids to run-getting. He cannot begin to think of making a score, he says, unless he has his Zingari cap, his Rugby house-scarf, the bat with which he made fifty-seven for the county against the Australians, and some wretched mascot in his trouser-pocket. The mascots vary. At one time it was a midget photograph. But she married a stockbroker, and the photograph gave place to a bullet extracted from the shoulder of a man who got it at Spion Kop. When he joined us in the year of which I am writing he showed me a miniature Golliwog. It had been given to him, he explained, in romantic circumstances, and was morally certain to bring about a century on any wicket. In spite of this, however, I did not notice any increase of confidence in his batting. He had got out in his first over against Sidmouth, clean bowled by a ball which was simply

made to be put past cover in his inimitable way; and the thought that this might happen again in the match with Seaton, which was to be played on the morrow, was taking years off my life.

I was awakened early on the morning of the match by a bang on my door and a fumbling at the handle. Enter the man Sanderson in pyjamas and a dressing-gown.

"You awake, James?"

"I am now," I said.

"Something awful has happened."

I sat up in bed.

"That blackguard Sharples hasn't been smoking? But he couldn't, I've got his pipe."

"Sharples is all right as far as I know; in fact, I heard him snoring as I passed his door."

"Then what's the matter?"

"My Golliwog's gone!"

I made a long arm and possessed myself of a slipper. A man who can wake you up in the early morning simply because he can't find a Golliwog is not the sort of man at whom one should hesitate to throw slippers. It took him on the funny-bone. My second missile smashed the looking glass.

Sanderson gazed at the ruin, and blanched visibly.

"That settles it," he said gloomily, "I'm safe for an egg now; there was just a chance before that I might scratch up a few, even without my Golliwog; but one can't stand up against a lost mascot *and* a broken looking-glass on the morning of an important match. You've done it, dear feller, this time. Done it completely. It's a round 'un for me to-

day."

I pleaded with him, I appealed to his manhood, to his patriotism, I conjured him by everything which I imagined he held sacred to pull himself together. He only sat there looking like some dishevelled bird, and refused to be comforted.

It was a lovely morning — the sort of morning on which to win the toss and stay at the wicket all day.

Unfortunately, I lost the toss. It was then that I congratulated myself on having looked after my bowlers. Here was Sharples, bright-eyed and rosy, looking fit to bowl through the whole innings. Here was Grake, subdued with much argument, wearing the peaceful air of one who has never so much as heard of a head-ball in his life.

I looked round for Sanderson, and saw him staring in a sort of cold horror at one of the umpires, who was standing by the pavilion steps waiting for his colleague to join him.

I went up to him and hit him on the back.

"Hurry up, Sanderson," I said. "What's the matter now?"

"Look!"

I inspected the object of his scrutiny. The umpire was not a thing of aesthetic beauty, but there was nothing essentially repulsive in his appearance. He wore whiskers, and was wall-eyed; otherwise there was little to find fault with in him.

"Dear feller," said Sanderson, clutching my arm, "it's all over now; do you see that man?"

"The umpire? What's the matter with him?"

"You'll hardly believe me, but that's the very man who was umpiring in a match in Somersetshire last year, in which I took specs. It's an

omen. You'd better put me in last to-day, dear feller, I shan't make a run."

If anyone knows what is the proper treatment for a man of this kind, I should be glad if they would tell me.

"It's probably not the same man," I said, "and if it is, what does it matter, the umpire has got nothing to do with your making runs?"

"It's awfully kind of you, dear feller, to try and console me, but it's no use. That umpire on top of that looking-glass settles it."

We spent the early part of the afternoon outing them for two hundred and fifty, then went in. I took Sanderson with me to the wickets. He had on his Zingari cap and his Rugby house scarf, and carried the bat with which he had made 57 against the Australians. Also the Golliwog was in his pocket, that mascot presented to him in romantic circumstances. The only thing that militated against a large score was the sinister umpire, who was standing by the wickets waiting to give the batsman guard.

Sanderson gurgled something inarticulate. I conjectured rightly that he was asking me to take first ball. I did so, and made a single off it.

Sanderson trotted across the pitch with a wan expression on his face.

He took guard, and glanced round him with a parade of noting how the field was placed. As a matter of fact, I am prepared to give odds that he saw nothing.

What happened next I consider a direct intervention of Providence. The bowler, a medium pace man with a nice off-break, bowled, and Sanderson let go at it blindly. It was a purely speculative stroke. I am certain he did not see the ball. He hit out with all his strength at random. The ball came humming back down the pitch, a foot from the ground. I sprang to one side to avoid it, and heard a sudden sharp

howl from behind me. When I turned I saw the umpire in a heap on the ground. With one hand he held his ankle.

Fieldmen came up from all sides, and formed an interested group, while short-slip, who happened to be a doctor, felt the injured limb with professional gravity. Finally he delivered his verdict. The ankle was not broken, but very badly bruised, and ought to be rested. They must get a new umpire. I caught Sanderson's eye. The rest of his face was a mask, on every line of which was written remorse. But his eyes gleamed with a new light.

"Don't you see, dear feller," he whispered, "this smashes up the omen. Turns it round completely. It's a century now, old man, and nothing less."

And when the new umpire arrived, he proceeded without delay or preamble to cut the next three balls like forked lightning past third man to the boundary.

It was seven o'clock when we won, and Sanderson made his century off the last ball bowled. After taking off his pads, he went off to make inquiries after the injured umpire. As he went he fingered the Golliwog very tenderly.

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One of these days Sanderson will have to give up towing with the Weary Willies. They will not be able to spare him from the Colney Hatch team.