

## Mrs Wenceslas was not pleased ...

She was not pleased at all.

She wrote to her sister on St Stephen's day, the day after Christmas Day, and this is what she wrote:

Dearest Trudi,

I do hope that your Christmas festivities have been less chaotic than ours. Well, it was all right until it started to snow hard. We were quite ready for the evening: the turkey and all the trimmings were nearly ready; the Christmas pudding was simmering away. We had a wood-store full of pine-logs. We were just about to start our feast when Wenceslas looked out of the window.

You know how he is about these things – he cannot resist a picturesque scene. If cameras had been invented, he'd be out photographing it, but they haven't, so he was just out. Men – once they get in the snow, they are like little boys, kicking it, throwing snowballs, and having fun with the dogs; and you know that when they all come in again, that wet-fur smell will be everywhere. Wenceslas' teenage nephew George is staying with us, and there the two of them were, playing like children.

Or at least they were, until they came to the edge of the wood. There they found a hut that an old tramp had made as a shelter, and he was in it, looking more like a snowman than a human being.

Well, you know Wenceslas. He has a kind heart, and he felt he had to do something. So he called everybody out, and started organising them all to take logs to the old man's hut, and when they had done that, they were to bring our Christmas dinner out too, complete with our best champagne.

This was too much. I put my foot down at that – in the cold, the champagne would turn to sorbet before you could drink it. Bring it all back, I said, food, wine, wood and all. And bring that old man in too. How can you dream of leaving him out there?

So they brought the old man in, and we put him by the fire, and we warmed him up, and when he felt a bit better, I arranged for him to have a bath and a shave and a haircut, and I gave him some of Wenceslas' clothes to wear, and he really looked like a human being again.

Then we all had a wonderful dinner together. After dinner, the old man, whose name was Kristof, said: "Thank you, you have all been so kind, and please may I repay you by singing a little song?" So he started, singing very sweetly, and he was obviously making it up as he went along. It started "Good King Wenceslas

looked out, on the feast of Stephen," – he had to say 'Stephen' to make it rhyme with 'deep and crisp and even', even though it was really Christmas day – and then it went on about George and Wenceslas arranging a feast for him out in the snow, with a bonfire blazing, except that he referred to George as our page. Of course, we don't run to such things in the economic downturn.

He even made up a bit about George's feet being warmed by walking in Wenceslas' footsteps, but I think it was as much a tippie or two of my home-made apricot brandy that they had taken in their hip-flasks.

Well, I suppose men will do anything for a good barbie, even in the middle of winter. But, of course, it wasn't like that at all, and there wasn't a word about me and Cook slaving away, baking that turkey, peeling brussels sprouts, making mince pies, and all the rest of it, even though between them they ate the whole lot. Men!

One thing *was* a little strange. The Christmas pudding tasted somehow special, and we all glowed with happiness when we were eating it together. I suppose that is what made the old man sing so well.

Then we all went to bed – I made up the old man a cot near the fire, and we left all the mess to clear up in the morning.

Next morning, guess what. I woke up, and Wenceslas was already up, but last night's chaos was still there. I looked out of the window, and there he was with George, the old man Kristof, and the dogs, all happy as Larry, playing in the snowy sunshine like little boys, tobogganing, throwing snowballs at each other,

and making snowmen.

It took me all morning to clear up last night's mess, and I wasn't pleased.

That's not quite right, really: I *was* pleased because we gave life back to that old man, and I hope that he will stay with us for a time. It's just that:

Men!!

Must finish now – Cook and I have a big lunch to prepare, and they'll all come in ravenous ...

Lots of love

Natasha

*This little story is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Andrew Rowe, who died on 21/11/08, and also to his beloved wife Sheila, who supported him so devotedly during his illness. Sheila herself died on 10/5/13, and she shares the dedication. Anthony Hodson*

