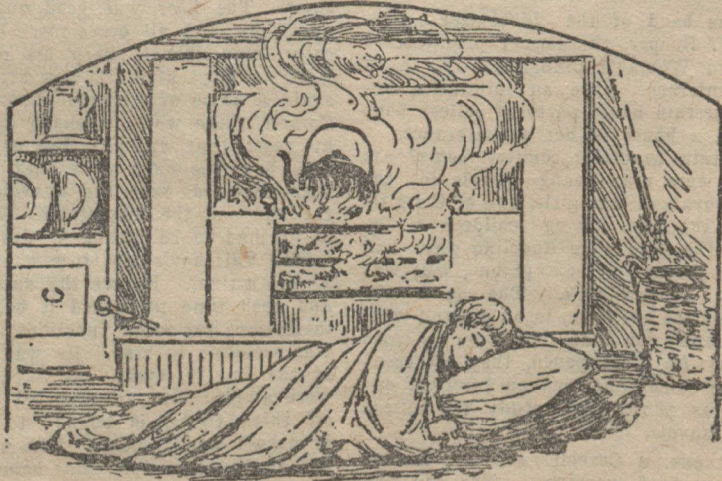


The Christmas Stocking.

By Elizabeth Wetherell, (author of 'The Wide, Wide World'.)

(Continued)

'She had hardly turned her back to see to something at the fire, when there he was behind her, standing in the middle of the floor; in no Sunday dress, but in his everyday rags, and those wet through and dripping. How glad and how sorry both mother and daughter looked! They brought him to the fire and wiped his feet, and wrung the water from his clothes as well as they could, but they didn't know what to do; for the fire would not have dried him all the day; and sit down to breakfast dry with him soaking wet at her side, Mrs. Meadow could not. What to put on him was the trouble; she had no children's clothes at all in the house. But she managed. She stripped off his rags and tacked two or three



towels about him, and then over them wound a large old shawl, in some mysterious way, fastening it over his shoulders, in such a manner that it fell round him like a loose straight frock, leaving his arms quite free. Then, when his jacket and trousers had been put to dry, they sat down to breakfast.

'After breakfast, Mrs. Meadow left Silky to take care of the things; and, drawing her chair up on the hearth, she took the little boy on her lap and wound her arms about him.

'Little Norman,' said she kindly, 'you won't see Long Ears to-day.'

'No,' said Norman, with a sigh, in spite of breakfast and fire; 'he will have to go without me.'

'Isn't it good that there is one day in the week when the poor little tired pin-boy can rest?'

'Yes—it is good,' said Norman quietly, but as if he was too accustomed to being tired to take the good of it.

'Can you read the Bible, Norman?'

'No, I can't read,' said Norman. 'Mother can.'

'You know the Bible is God's book, written to tell us how to be good, and whatever the Bible says we should mind. Now, the Bible says, "Thou shalt not steal." Do you know what that means?'

'Yes,' said Norman, swinging one little foot back and forward in the warm shine of the fire; 'I've heard it.'

'It is to take what does not belong to us. Now, since God has said that, is it quite right for you to take that money of your mother's to buy milk for Long Ears?'

'It isn't her money,' said Norman, his face changing; and Long Ears can't starve!

'It is her money, Norman; all the money you earn belongs to her, or to your father, which is the same thing. You know it does.'

'But Curly must have something to eat,' said Norman, bursting into tears.

'Hush, dear. Do you know who Jesus Christ is?' asked Mrs. Meadow's kind voice, and her kind hand on his head.

'No.'

'Poor little thing!' said Silky, and the tears fell from her face as she went from the fire to the table. Norman looked at her, and so did her mother, and then they looked at each other.

'Jesus Christ is your best friend, little Norman.'

'It's all told about in God's book, dear.

Little Norman Finch, like everybody else, hasn't loved God, nor minded His commandments as he ought to do; and God would have punished us all, if Jesus Christ hadn't come down from heaven on purpose to take our punishment on Himself, so that we might be saved.'

'What did He do that for?' said Norman.

'Because He is so good. He loved us, and wanted to save us and bring us back to be His children, and to be good and happy.'

'Does He love me?' said Norman.

'Yes, indeed,' said Mrs. Meadow. 'Do you think He came to die for you and doesn't love you? If you will love and obey Him, He will love you for ever, and take care of you; better care than any one else can.'

'There isn't anybody else to take care of me,' said Norman. 'Mother can't, and father don't much. I wish I knew about that.'

With a look of wonder and interest at her daughter, Mrs. Meadow reached after her

it over again when He was on earth.'

'Norman stood a quarter of a minute, and then went out and closed the door.'

The next morning they looked eagerly for him. But he did not come. He stopped at evening, as usual, but Silky was busy and did not speak to him beyond a word. Tuesday morning he did not come. At night he was there again with his jug.

'How do you do, Norman?' said Mrs. Meadow, when she filled it, 'and how is Long Ears?'

But Norman did not answer, and turned to go.

'Come here in the morning, Norman,' Mrs. Meadow called after him.

Whether he heard her or not, he did not show himself on his way to the factory next morning. That was Wednesday.

'Norman hasn't been here these three days, mother,' said Silky. 'Can it be he has made up his mind to do without his half-penny-worth of milk for the dog?'

'Little fellow!' said Mrs. Meadow, 'I meant to have given it to him; skim milk would do, I dare say; but I forgot to tell him Sunday; and I told him last night to stop, but he hasn't done it. We'll go up to the factory, Silky, and see how he is, after dinner.'

After dinner they went, and I went in Silky's pocket. Mrs. Meadow asked for Mr. Swift, and presently he came.

'Is little Norman Finch at work to-day, Mr. Swift?'

'Norman Finch? well yes, ma'am, he's to work,' said the overseer; 'he don't do much work this day or so. He hasn't hard work neither; but he's a poor little billet of a boy.'

'Is he a good boy, sir?'

'I don't know any harm of him,' said Mr. Swift. 'He's about like the common. Not particularly strong in the head, nor anywhere else, for that matter; but he is a good-feeling child. Yes—now I remember. It's as much as a year ago, that I was mad with him one day, and was going to give the careless little rascal a strapping for something, and a bold brave fellow in the same room, about twice as big and six times as strong as Norman, offered to take it and spare him. I didn't care; it answered my purpose of keeping order just as well as that Bill Bollings should have it as Norman Finch, if he had a mind; and ever since that time Finch has been ready to lay down his body and soul for Bollings, if it could do him any service. He's a good-hearted boy, I do suppose.'

'What a noble boy, the other one!' said Mrs. Meadow.

'Ha! well—that was noble enough,' said Mr. Swift; 'but he's a kind of harum-scarum fellow—just as likely to get himself into a scrape to-morrow as to get somebody else out of one to-day.'

'That was noble,' repeated Mrs. Meadow.

'Norman has never forgotten it. As I said, he'd lay down body and soul for him. There's a little pet dog he has, too,' Mr. Swift went on, 'that I believe he'd do as much for.'



ready to set out he paused at the door, and looking up at Mrs. Meadows, said:

'Does He say we musn't steal?'

'Yes, to be sure. The Bible says it, and the Bible is God's Word; and Jesus said

A pretty creature! I would have bought it of him, and given a good price for it, but he seemed frightened at the proposal. I believe he keeps the creature here partly for fear he would lose him home.'