

Little Gretchen and the Wooden Shoe

by Elizabeth Harrison

Once upon a time - so long ago that everybody has forgotten the date - in a city in the north of Europe - with such a hard name that nobody can ever remember it - there was a little seven-year-old boy named Wolff, whose parents were dead, who lived with a cross and stingy old aunt, who never thought of kissing him more than once a year and who sighed deeply whenever she gave him a bowlful of soup.

But the poor little fellow had such a sweet nature that in spite of everything, he loved the old woman, although he was terribly afraid of her and could never look at her ugly old face without shivering.

As this aunt of little Wolff was known to have a house of her own and an old woollen stocking full of gold, she had not dared to send the boy to a charity school; but, in order to get a reduction in the price, she had so wrangled with the master of the school, to which little Wolff finally went, that this bad man, vexed at having a pupil so poorly dressed and paying so little, often punished him unjustly, and even prejudiced his companions against him, so that the three boys, all sons of rich parents, made a drudge and laughing stock of the little fellow.

The poor little one was thus as wretched as a child could be and used to hide himself in corners to weep whenever Christmas time came.

It was the schoolmaster's custom to take all his pupils to the midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and to bring them home again afterward.

Now, as the winter this year was very bitter, and as heavy snow had been falling for several days, all the boys came well bundled up in warm clothes, with fur caps pulled over their ears, padded jackets, gloves and knitted mittens, and strong, thick-soled boots. Only little Wolff presented himself shivering in the poor clothes he used to wear both weekdays and Sundays and having on his feet only thin socks in heavy wooden shoes.

His naughty companions noticing his sad face and awkward appearance, made many jokes at his expense; but the little fellow was so busy blowing on his fingers, and was suffering so much with chilblains, that he took no notice of them. So the band of youngsters, walking two and two behind the master, started for the church.

It was pleasant in the church which was brilliant with lighted candles; and the boys excited by the warmth took advantage of the music of the choir and the organ to chatter among themselves in low tones. They bragged about the fun that was awaiting them at home. The mayor's son had seen, just before starting off, an immense goose ready stuffed and dressed for cooking. At the alderman's home there was a little pine-tree with branches laden down with oranges, sweets, and toys. And the lawyer's cook had put on

her cap with such care as she never thought of taking unless she was expecting something very good!

Then they talked, too, of all that the Christ-Child was going to bring them, of all he was going to put in their shoes which, you might be sure, they would take good care to leave in the chimney place before going to bed; and the eyes of these little urchins, as lively as a cage of mice, were sparkling in advance over the joy they would have when they awoke in the morning and saw the pink bag full of sugar-plums, the little lead soldiers ranged in companies in their boxes, the menageries smelling of varnished wood, and the magnificent jumping-jacks in purple and tinsel.

Alas! Little Wolff knew by experience that his old miser of an aunt would send him to bed supperless, but, with childlike faith and certain of having been, all the year, as good and industrious as possible, he hoped that the Christ-Child would not forget him, and so he, too, planned to place his wooden shoes in good time in the fireplace.

Midnight mass over, the worshippers departed, eager for their fun, and the band of pupils always walking two and two, and following the teacher, left the church.

Now, in the porch and seated on a stone bench set in the niche of a painted arch, a child was sleeping - a child in a white woollen garment, but with his little feet bare, in spite of the cold. He was not a beggar, for his garment was white and new, and near him on the floor was a bundle of carpenter's tools.

In the clear light of the stars, his face, with its closed eyes, shone with an expression of divine sweetness, and his long, curling, blond locks seemed to form a halo about his brow. But his little child's feet, made blue by the cold of this bitter December night, were pitiful to see!

The boys so well clothed for the winter weather passed by quite indifferent to the unknown child; several of them, sons of the notables of the town, however, cast on the vagabond looks in which could be read all the scorn of the rich for the poor, of the well-fed for the hungry.

But little Wolff, coming last out of the church, stopped, deeply touched, before the beautiful sleeping child.

"Oh, dear!" said the little fellow to himself, "this is frightful! This poor little one has no shoes and stockings in this bad weather - and, what is still worse, he has not even a wooden shoe to leave near him to-night while he sleeps, into which the little Christ-Child can put something good to soothe his misery."

And carried away by his loving heart, Wolff drew the wooden shoe from his right foot, laid it down before the sleeping child, and, as best he could, sometimes hopping, sometimes limping with his sock wet by the snow, he went home to his aunt.

"Look at the good-for-nothing!" cried the old woman, full of wrath at the sight of the shoeless boy. "What have you done with your shoe, you little villain?"

Little Wolff did not know how to lie, so, although trembling with terror when he saw the rage of the old shrew, he tried to relate his adventure.

But the miserly old creature only burst into a frightful fit of laughter.

"Aha! So my young gentleman strips himself for the beggars. Aha! My young gentleman breaks his pair of shoes for a bare-foot! Here is something new, forsooth. Very well, since it is this way, I shall put the only shoe that is left into the chimney-place, and I'll answer for it that the Christ-Child will put in something to-night to beat you with in the morning! And you will have only a crust of bread and water to-morrow. And we shall see if the next time, you will be giving your shoes to the first vagabond that happens along."

And the wicked woman having boxed the ears of the poor little fellow, made him climb up into the loft where he had his wretched cubbyhole.

Desolate, the child went to bed in the dark and soon fell asleep, but his pillow was wet with tears.

But behold! the next morning when the old woman, awakened early by the cold, went downstairs - oh, wonder of wonders - she saw the big chimney filled with shining toys, bags of magnificent bonbons, and riches of every sort, and standing out in front of all this treasure, was the right wooden shoe which the boy had given to the little vagabond, yes, and beside it, the one which she had placed in the chimney to hold the bunch of switches.

As little Wolff, attracted by the cries of his aunt, stood in an ecstasy of childish delight before the splendid Christmas gifts, shouts of laughter were heard outside. The woman and child ran out to see what all this meant, and behold! all the gossips of the town were standing around the public fountain. What could have happened? Oh, a most ridiculous and extraordinary thing! The children of the richest men in the town, whom their parents had planned to surprise with the most beautiful presents had found only switches in their shoes!

Then the old woman and the child thinking of all the riches in their chimney were filled with fear. But suddenly they saw the priest appear, his countenance full of astonishment. Just above the bench placed near the door of the church, in the very spot where, the night before, a child in a white garment and with bare feet, in spite of the cold, had rested his lovely head, the priest had found a circlet of gold imbedded in the old stones.

Then, they all crossed themselves devoutly, perceiving that this beautiful sleeping child with the carpenter's tools had been Jesus of Nazareth himself, who had come back for one hour just as he had been when he used to work in the home of his parents; and

reverently they bowed before this miracle, which the good God had done to reward the faith and the love of a little child.