

Young Wisdom

Approx. 1000 words

F.B.S.R

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With a professional career spanning an amazing 61 years, much as been written about Sir Norman Wisdom, the man who stood tall by falling over a lot. His 21 films and countless theatre and television shows have been well documented and in the annals of British Comedy, where so many of the greats have taken their final curtain call, he is a living legend and like all legends there is a beginning.

Sir Norman Wisdom was born in February 1914 in Paddington, London and his early childhood in the family home he shared with his mother, father and elder brother Fred, was tough. At the age of nine, his mother, Maude, a dressmaker by trade, who once made a dress for Queen Mary, fed up with her husband's constant drinking and violent behaviour, walked out. Fredrick Wisdom, a chauffer, was left with two sons to raise and resented it, ruling the house with a clenched fist and no tolerance. Norman tells of a time when his father fuelled with booze and anger picked him up by the collar and threw him bodily across the kitchen. Norman's head hit the ceiling before he crashed into the corner of the room. Norman once said that it was this constant physical abuse that helped him learn how to fall with the minimum of injury. Perhaps it had, but though the pain was eased through years of hindsight, for a nine year boy, it must have been terrifying.

Fredrick's work took him away for long period of times, coming as a relief to both parties, but for Norman and Fred this meant they had to fend for themselves, for weeks on end sometimes. With no social service to turn to and a father whose retaliation they feared should his lack of parenting be discovered, the boys took on an almost Dickensian existence. That part of West London at the time was an area of poverty and deprivation and the two young lads with nothing but the clothes they stood up in and a youthful resilience, survived the best they could. Going to school barefoot was almost commonplace, as was the 'steal or starve' attitude of the street urchins that re-emerged like ghosts from a Victorian past. Norman and Fred's hunting ground was the Harrow Road where displays of goods from carpets to fruits festooned the pavements. Carpets didn't feed hungry bellies, but fruit and eggs did and soon the Wisdoms were practiced pilferers. Norman claims he was never caught, but that was probably down to the trader's leniency as opposed to the boy's dodgy dexterity.

The only good to come out of their father's long spells away from home was that the boys got to see their mother occasionally. She had moved to Willesden, but would turn up at the gates of St Luke's School and reassure the boys that she still loved them. What she couldn't explain to them was that because she had moved in with another man, their father had granted her a divorce but ironically refused her custody of her sons. Words of comfort and kisses of love were always followed with a heartfelt 'Don't tell your Dad.' Norman forgot one day. It was his tenth birthday and his mum had brought him his first pedal cycle. That

afternoon, Fredrick, on one of the rare occasions he was at home, returned from the pub and wanted to know where the bike had come from. Norman told him. In a drunken rage, Fredrick, in front of a crying Norman, stamped on the bike repeatedly until it was nothing more than a mangled wreck. As Fredrick slept off the effects of the alcohol, young Norman tried to repair his present, badly cutting a finger as he did. While washing the blood away in the kitchen sink, his father awoke, asked what he was doing and when his youngest son told him, he punched him in the face and the bike was never seen again.

For two years the brothers existed as Norman liked to say as 'Guttersnipes', a rather whimsical and less threatening term than 'vagrants,' before Fredrick decided to put the boys into care. Neither seemed upset with the arrangement, especially Norman and Fred when the grey unforgiving streets of Paddington gave way to the green fields and country lanes of rural Hertfordshire and then to the fresh sea air of Deal on the Kent coast.

The adage about taking the boy out of the city but not the city out of the boy proved true, as not surprisingly, behaviour wise, both boys were a bit of a handful, Norman more than Fred. So much so that the brothers were split up and Norman went on to learn better manners with a more tolerant family.

It was while he was living in Deal, that Norman was first introduced to a world that was to make him his fortune and global reputation. One afternoon he came

across a small film unit shooting a scene around the local lifeboat. This fascinated the fourteen year old, so much so, that he returned that night to what he saw as a fantasy world of cameras, lights and actors, in turn worrying his foster parents who had refused his request to go and found his bed empty and a weary but excited Norman sneaking back into the house at 7:30 the next morning. .

Deservedly chastise and punished, Norman reverted back to reality, but a seed had been sown, showbusiness was to be his calling even though it was to take a further 17 years before he appeared professionally on stage and another 8 years on top of that before he appeared in front of a movie camera.

Even today at the age of 94, from his nursing home on the Isle of Man, were his mind is cruelly being erased by dementia, carers say that he cannot recall the films he made or the laughter he's given, but those early, barefoot, hungry memories still remain.

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