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opening extract from

Honesty Wart: Witch Hunter!

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Chapter 1

Worry Wart

'For all your good and gracious gifts we thank thee, O Lord.'

'Amen,' said Honesty Wart, opening his eyes.

'Amen,' chorused his sisters, Mercy and Patience, whose prayers always went on longer than anyone else's.

Honesty's mum removed the lid of the dish on the table. Inside was a mess of dull brown splodge. It didn't look like meat, it looked like . . . well,

Honesty tried not to think what it looked like.

'Turnip mash,' said Mum. 'Pass your bowl.'

Honesty watched as she dolloped a spoonful into his bowl and banged it down in front of him. He stared at the splodge, watching the steam slowly rising from it.

'Something the matter?'

'No,' said Honesty. 'It looks . . . um . . . nice.'

'He doesn't like it,' said Mercy.

'I do!' said Honesty.



'He doesn't. We like it, don't we, Patience?'

'We like everything,' said Patience.

'I think turnip's delicious,' said Mercy.

Honesty glared at his two little sisters. In their dull grey dresses and white caps they looked like identical twins.

'Eat up, lad,' said Dad, giving him a friendly nudge. 'Turnip's good for you. Make you big and strong.'

'Better get used to it,' warned Mum. 'It's all you'll be getting for the next two weeks.'

'Why?' asked Honesty.

'Ask your father.'

'Why, Dad? Didn't you get paid again?'

''Course I got paid,' Dad replied, not looking at him. 'Just not in shillings and pence.'

'A sack of turnips!' Mum snorted. 'For two weeks' labour.'

'Not any old turnips,' said Dad. 'Samuels said they're the best turnips you'll ever taste. He was doing me a favour.'

Mum shook her head at him. 'You're a simpleton, William Wart. I should have seen that when I married you.'

Dad caught Honesty's eye and turned his mouth

down at the corners. Honesty tried not to laugh. His mum didn't approve of laughter. Not at the table, not in the house. There were a lot of things Mum didn't approve of. A verse hung on the wall to remind them of their Christian duty. It said:

'Let me do my work this day
Waste no time on fun and play,
Speak no ill and tell no lie,
Pray and toil until I die.'

Honesty felt depressed every time he looked at it. He chewed on his mashed turnip. It tasted disgusting. Two weeks of turnips for breakfast, lunch and dinner, he thought. Boiled turnip, stewed turnip, mashed turnip – he'd probably get turnip to take to school.

At least there was Christmas to look forward to. People in the village of Little Snorley didn't get excited about much. Most of them were Puritans like Honesty's family, so excitement was frowned upon. They read their Bible, said their prayers and went to church twice on the Sabbath. They didn't sing, dance or gamble, and kept away from ungodly places such

as taverns or theatres. But Christmas was different. Christmas was the one day of the year when everyone in the village came together to celebrate. There would be a log blazing in the hearth and holly and ivy hanging from the rafters. Best of all, thought Honesty, there would be Christmas dinner: mince pies, plum pudding and, if he was lucky, a roast goose as big as a football.

'When are we getting the goose?' he asked.

Mum frowned at him. 'What?'

'For Christmas dinner. The goose.'

His mum and dad exchanged looks. 'Haven't you told them yet?' asked Mum.

Dad looked sheepish. 'I was going to. I just . . . well, haven't got round to it.'

Honesty could tell that bad news was coming. Even Mercy and Patience had stopped eating their supper. Had somebody died? Were they having boiled turnip for Christmas dinner?

'What?' he asked. 'Tell us what?'

'Honesty, lad.' Dad laid a hand gently on his shoulder. 'Don't take it too hard, but well . . . there isn't going to be any Christmas this year.'

'No . . . Christmas?' Honesty thought his dad must

be joking, except Mum didn't approve of jokes.

Mum pursed her lips. 'Parliament passed a law. Christmas is banned – and a good thing too if you ask me.'

'But we always have Christmas! It's the best day of the year! The only day we're allowed to have fun!' Honesty knew he was raising his voice, but he couldn't help it.

His mother glared and pointed her spoon at him. 'Fun? Playing at cards and dice? You call that fun? Drinking and brawling in the streets?'

'But Mum, we don't do any of that,' protested Honesty.

'We don't but that won't stop other folk. In London I hear they go to the theatre on Christmas Day. Some of the actors are *women*!' Mum gave a shudder.

Dad shook his head sadly. 'Surely it can't do any harm to give the children a little present, Agnes.'

'I don't mind not getting a present,' said Mercy nobly.

'No,' said Patience. 'It's better to give than to receive.'

'Presents?' said Mum, going red in the face. 'You



sit there and talk about presents when all we have to eat is *turnip*?'

'I know,' said Dad, 'but –'

'What does it say in Scripture? "Go to thy work, thou sluggard."'

'What's a sluggard?' asked Patience.

'It's a very big slug,' answered Mercy.

Honesty tried to get back to the point. 'But Mum, if we don't have Christmas, what will we do all day?'

'The same as we do any other day,' snapped Mum. 'We'll work and pray and go to bed. Now, are you eating that turnip or letting it go cold?'

Honesty ate the rest of his meal in silence. Never in his life had he felt so utterly miserable. He was used to disappointment but he had been looking forward to Christmas for weeks and weeks, crossing off the days on the calendar. Now 25th December would be like any other day of the year – deathly dull. Life couldn't get any worse. Or so he thought.

'Honesty,' said his mum, 'take some supper up to your gran.'

