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On Being a Chimney Sweep

(A Talk by FRANK MILES in the Third Programme of the BBC)

I DON'T advise anyone to take up sweeping nowadays—it's a gradually dying out job. People don't entertain in the big country houses like they used to. Look at me. I've got more customers now than I've ever had before but I do less work. In the old days they'd send for you to a big house and you might have fifteen chimneys to do; now you're lucky if you get five. I don't know how I came to take it up really. I used to be a window cleaner and then a chap came to me and said, "I'm leaving the district. How about buying my brushes? I'll let you have them for ten bob." I said, "I don't want that filthy job," but in the end I took them just to get rid of him. Then one day my own chimney wanted sweeping, so I got cracking. The woman next door said, "Will you do mine, too, Mr. Miles?" Then the landlord in the next road, he got on to it. I lost the blinking brush up his chimney and that sort of put me on my mettle, and that's how it all started.

I've been dreaming of a white Christmas, but I've never had one since then. Everyone wants their chimneys swept round about Christmas time, then and when the stork's coming. You can't have a smoky chimney when he's around. I know all the usual symptoms. Pop, he's usually hopping around painting and decorating—smartening up the place for the happy event. When the stork came to my home it was twins, so you see what you get for keeping your chimney swept! The nurse shouted out to me, "Here you are, Mr. Miles, one of them's a future sweep." Anyway, they're lovely kiddies now, and I don't mind sweeping a few extra chimneys to keep them. It's like any other job, it gets in your bones. It's no good doing just one or two; that's the way to get fed up. But if you do a full day's work it's a good job and very interesting, going to different homes and seeing different types of chimneys, boilers and heating arrangements. You get inside the boilers and see all the new ideas. I look at it the same as I would the innards of a car. You're always learning. And you find some funny things, too.

"That's Shifted It"

During the war I was sweeping a chimney: it was one I'd done dozens of times before, but this particular day I found I couldn't push the brush through, there seemed to be a brick or something out of place. It made me sweat, so I stopped for a minute and had a cup of tea to put new strength into me, and then I gave a good hard tug. I heard something drop, but I didn't take much notice. I thought, "That's shifted it, whatever it was." Then when I started to clean up and pick up the soot I found a blooming incendiary bomb, unexploded. I can tell you I helped him outside a bit smart in case he should go off, see. But he seemed all right, so I cleaned him off and handed him in at the local police station.

Once I was doing a woman's chimney and I swept out the soot from a ledge just inside it. As I was picking up the soot I saw a lot of bones in there. I thought perhaps some Ancient Britons had been there and died inside the chimney or something. I shouted to the woman, "Have you lost some chickens

or a turkey or anything? There are a lot of bones here." She said, "Do you know, I bought six dozen chickens and I've only got five left." The rats had picked up the chickens and went up on to this ledge inside the chimney and ate them. Another time I was just starting in a chimney—I was doing the kitchen range—and I put the cloth over the fireplace and just put one length of rod on and something moved behind the cloth and put the wind up me. In the end a young kitten dashed out. It didn't half give be a shock.

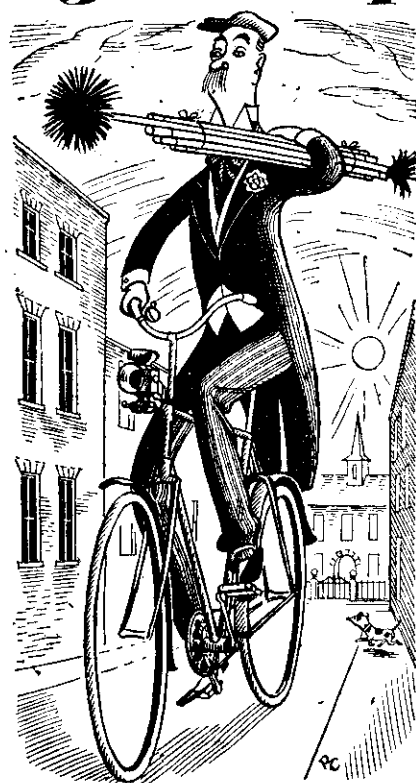
A good deal of my work is done in and around the New Forest, where most people burn wood fires and where there are a good many birds. It's nothing unusual to find a jackdaw's nest in a chimney pot. They usually go down a depth of from two to twelve feet, and, like human beings, they like a nice clean bed so they choose a chimney pot that's rarely used—a bedroom chimney, for example. They collect a nice lot of twigs for the outer cover of their home and then bind them up with bits of string, dry grass, horse manure, leaves and so on. For the centre of the nest they use bits of old cloth and feathers, and of course if you were to light a fire while this was going on the smoke would come down the chimney.

"Oh, the Mess!"

The best way to move them if you haven't a nest hook available is to take the brush off one of your rods and run the rods up the chimney. If you pierce the centre of the nest, well and good. And when you start picking up the rubbish you may find as much as a bushel to three bushels of wood and muck. I once found a half of a pound note in a bird's nest that way, and you often find tram tickets, bootlaces, skeletons of dead birds and all kinds of things you don't expect to see. Sometimes owls, pigeons and blackbirds get into chimneys. They eventually become exhausted and drop down into the grate. They may fly out into the room and oh, the mess they cause!

The best kind of wood to burn in a fire is really oak or beech. Most of the fir family of trees have a lot of resin which gets up the chimney and coats the walls so that the chimney closes up and the smoke comes down. You can always tell when that happens because it breaks off and falls down the chimney in great lumps, and if you break up these lumps they're just like granulated sugar. If a chimney becomes pretty thick with soot it needs sweeping. Behind all this soot there are a lot of grooves and cracks in the brickwork. When that chimney becomes thick all types of gases collect in those grooves and when you light the fire there are small explosions, and the chimney catches fire. In some of the big country houses I visit where they have these great wide chimneys the resin is as hard as tarmac and it takes some shifting.

It isn't the chimney that's always to blame for a fire, though. One day I was sweeping all the chimneys in one street. I went down one side of the road one day and the next day a woman came running out of one of the houses I'd just done and said the chimney was on fire. I thought it was funny, and I dashed over and asked her to open the oven door, and there were all the baby's



"Early in the morning most of us look a bit respectable-like"

nappies she'd put in to dry and lit the fire and forgotten all about them, and there they were all smouldering away.

Something Healthy About Soot

They say sweeps live to a ripe old age. I know two who are turned eighty. Perhaps there's something healthy about soot. I used to meet one old chap on his rounds quite often, and the thing that struck me about him was that early in the morning he was always as black as the ace of spades. Well, at that time of day most of us look a bit respectable-like, and I used to wonder however he came to be as black as a pot so early on. I found out later he used to get up from bed first thing Monday morning, put on his working gear, climb on to his old freewheeler, 1898 vintage—he used to cover a very wide area on that old car—and when he came home nights he used to sit down and have his tea. Perhaps he'd got up to the local and drink his beer like an ordinary sweep. The landlord had a chair and table stuck in a corner for him to sit down on. When the pub chucked him out he went back home as black as ever and he wouldn't have a bath that evening. His wife fixed him up to sleep on the sofa downstairs and so he carried on right through the week.

On Saturday night his old wife would light the copper for him and he'd have a bath in front of the fire, and I reckon he needed one. Then he'd dress up, go to the local and have his beer, go up to bed and stop there for the week-end. When asked why he did not wash himself from Monday to Saturday he replied, "Well, it's just a waste of time." If I'd gone on like that my wife would have called me something, and it wouldn't have been darling!

But this washing business is a problem. We've no hot water in our house except for the copper and a portable

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