7. THE CHIMNEY BOY

Summary: A child from a wealthy family is kidnapped and later returns to the family while cleaning their chimney. Earliest Attestation: 1807 (England). Motif: N/A. Secondary Literature: N/A.

Victorians loved stories about lost sons and daughters being restored to their wealthy families. Such stories appeared in novels—Dickens's *Oliver* is perhaps the most famous example—but "factual" reports, most obvious farragoes, frequently appeared in the newspapers too. There was, for instance, a baby deserted at the door of an Irish workhouse who was, it transpired, the heir of an English baronet ("A Strange Story" 1883); an unnamed Russian nobleman who went to heroic efforts to track down a love child in Paris ("Curious Story" 1851); and several young women lost in the Indian Mutiny (see "**Harem Prisoner**"). One of these lost-and-found stories repeated in a formulaic fashion was that of the chimney-sweeper's boy coming down his mother's chimney. The story depended on the fact that chimney sweepers had, in the earlier 1800s, a reputation for trafficking in stolen children ("The Lost Found" 1885; Mayhew 1851, II, 393–95). Indeed, in some parts of the English countryside, naughty children were warned: "The sweeps will get you!" (Mayhew 1851, II, 394).

In "the Chimney Boy," a son from a well-to-do family is stolen and eventually ends up in the hands of a chimney sweeper. This cruel man sends the boy up chimneys.

> After serving his master for some time, one day [the child] was employed upon a large house. While cleaning out one of the flues, he dropped down into a large chamber. It was a very pleasant room. The sun shining between the curtains, gave a wonderful glory to the figures in the carpet. There was a bed on one side of the room, and a little crib upon the other. Beautiful pictures hung upon the walls. The crib looked as if no child had slept in it of late; the pillow was without a stain or wrinkle, and the linen sheet looked as if it had not been moved since it was laid upon the little bed. The little sweep glanced around the room, and feelings that he could not understand came over him. Dim recollections like a dream came into his mind. What could it mean? Tears came into his eyes. He trembled and fell to the floor. The lady of the house hearing the noise hurried to the room. Had he fallen? Was he injured? she hastily asked. He had not fallen, he assured her through his tears. He did not know what had happened to him, he said. When he looked around the room, it seemed so natural to him, as if he had some time been there and slept in the crib, that he could not help crying. Much affected, and trembling in her turn, the lady sent for her servant, and had the little

Figure 4 Chimney Sweep from Mayhew (1851, II, 173).

> sweep taken to the bath, and clean clothes placed upon him. By his face, or by some well-remembered mark upon his form, the lady discovered that by this wonderful providence of God, she had found again her long-lost son. ("The Lost Found" 1867)

This is a generic Christian version of the narrative—much is made, afterwards, of God's lost children in the world. However, other versions were grounded in times, places, and families. Consider a French version from 1868: in England—the correspondent writes airily—"it would hardly be credible, but in France it is not unlikely" ("A Strange Story" 1868; a comment that suggests that the story was not extremely well known in the United Kingdom at that date).

> The Countess de X____ was reading alone in her boudoir when she was surprised by the sudden apparition of a little chimney-sweep, who had slipped down into the fireplace and that stood up in the room, wonder-stricken at the elegance he saw around him. ("A Strange Story" 1868)

The little boy is identified by a tuft of hair (!) as a lost son from her first marriage, and he is adopted back into the class to which he properly belongs: "As for the boy, he has now changed his dry bread and hard blows to a comfortable home and a fond mother's tenderness, and is fast forgetting his *patois*" ("A Strange Story" 1868).

The story stretches back, in some form, into the early nineteenth century, perhaps even into the later eighteenth century. In 1807 a poem, "The Chimney Sweeper's Boy," was published, in which the stolen son of Nerina falls into the hands of the cruel sweep. One day, while working near his parents' house, the lost boy gives the traditional sweep's cry, and his voice is recognized by his mother in an adjacent house. The child is joyfully recovered (the relevant passage is quoted in "Review" 1807). In a discussion of the verses, one London author wrote:

> As to the poem itself, it suffers by having been written in the country: for had the author been informed of the fact of a discovery of a child, by the late Mrs. Montague of Portland Place, among the chimney-sweeping boys, he could not have failed of deriving much additional interest to his story from that circumstance. It is sufficiently well known, that this incident was commemorated during many years, by an annual dinner given on the first of May, to as many of the sooty tribe as chose to attend. ("Review" 1807)

This tradition of an annual dinner certainly existed, although there is confusion between two different Mrs. Montagues. There is Mrs. Montague of Portland Place (1718–1800), who gave the feast, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), whose son Edward had a habit of running away from home and school and allegedly worked for a time as a sweep.[2] The same author can be taken to imply—the poem "resembles the adventures of Mrs. Montague's child"—that the younger Montague was also found by his voice. But other traditions were current. Dickens knew the Montague/Montagu story and in 1836 wrote:

> Stories were related of a young boy who having been stolen from his parents in his infancy, and devoted to the occupation of chimney-sweeping, was sent, in the course of his professional career, to sweep the chimney of his mother's bedroom; and how, being hot and tired when he came out of the chimney, he got into the

> bed he had so often slept in as an infant, and was discovered and recognised therein by his mother. (1839 [1836], 95; the mother gave food yearly to sweeps on May 1; the young Dickens himself met a sweep, 1839 [1836] 95–96: "whom we devoutly and sincerely believed to be the lost son and heir of some illustrious personage")

Consider, too, Mayhew's words in 1851:

> The lady referred to, at the time a widow, lost her son, then a boy of tender years. Inquiries were set on foot, and all London heard of the mysterious disappearance of the child, but no clue could be found to trace him out. It was supposed that he was kidnapped, and the search at length was given up in despair. A long time afterwards a sweeper was employed to cleanse the chimneys of Mrs. Montagus' house, by Portman-square, and for this purpose, as was usual at the time, he sent a climbing-boy up the chimney, who from that moment was lost to him. The child did not return the way he went up, but it is supposed that in his descent he got into a wrong flue, and found himself, on getting out of the chimney, in one of the bedrooms. Wearied with his labour, it is said that he mechanically crept between the sheets, all black and sooty as he was. In this state he was found fast asleep by the housekeeper. The delicacy of his features and the soft tones of his voice interested the woman. She acquainted the family with the strange circumstance, and, when introduced to them with a clean face, his voice and appearance reminded them of their lost child. It may have been that the hardships he endured at so early an age had impaired his memory, for he could give no account of himself; but it was evident, from his manners and from the ease which he exhibited, that he was no stranger to such places, and at length, it is said, the Hon. Mrs. Montagu recognised in him her long-lost son. The identity, it was understood, was proved beyond doubt. He was restored to his rank in society, and in order the better to commemorate this singular restoration, and the fact of his having been a climbing-boy, his mother annually provided an entertainment on the 1st of May at White Conduit House, for all the climbing-boys of London who thought proper to partake of it. (Mayhew 1851, II, 421)

In one of Mayhew's interviews with an aged sweep, the sweep states: "I don't know much about the story of Mrs. Montague; it was afore my time. I heard of it though. I heard my mother talk about it; she used to read it out of books" (Mayhew 1851, II, 417). Any expectations of this tradition being the preserve of sweep oral tradition is nicely confounded here! A similar but rather different story was known to Charles Lamb in 1824 and concerned a chimney sweep who arrived in a bedroom in Arundel Castle and climbed into bed.