



A Thieving Chimney Sweep 1865

Wilts Lent Assizes

Matthew Mitten stood charged with stealing five plough irons and a bag, the property of Philip Norton at Bremhill on the 29th January.

Mr T W Saunders prosecuted.

The prosecutor is a carpenter living at Bremhill. On the 29th January he left the plough irons hung up in a bag in his chimney corner. The prisoner came to sweep the chimney on the 30th and two or three days afterwards the irons were missed. On the evening of the 30th prisoner offered the irons for sale to a wheelwright named Humphries at Chippenham. He said he had picked them out of the snow in the road coming from Bremhill. Humphries advanced 6d upon them on condition that if they were owned they were to be given up. Sergt White apprehended the prisoner on the 2nd February, and asked him if he knew anything about the missing irons. He replied, "I do not". Witness showed him the prosecutor's irons, and he then said, "Oh, I picked them up in the snow". Afterwards he said, "If I brought them from the cottage, they must have come down with the cloth, after I had swept the chimney".

Prisoner handed in a long written defence, addressed to "His Honour my Lord Judge and the gentlemen of the jury", asking them to well weigh the facts of the case. He declared his innocence of the robbery and adhered to the tale told to the police. He said he knew well the nature of an oath, and had therefore kissed the Testament while writing this letter, saying "So help me God" to the truth of what he asserted. If his statement was not true, he should, after this, have expected instant death. God almighty knew that he was innocent, but he thanked his Heavenly Father for having given him this opportunity of repenting of his past rebellious and wicked life. He was a widower and had had a confinement, a funeral and two robberies in his house within ten days; and as he was about to be married again, he appealed to the Judge an opportunity - for the sake of his dear children - of establishing another comfortable home. If they would do so, he would be careful in future to "exercise" his cloth before taking it away from a fire place.

The reading of the prisoner's statement excited considerable laughter in Court.

His Lordship having summed up, the jury at once returned a verdict of guilty.

A previous conviction for felony was then proved against the prisoner.

His lordship told the prisoner that his defence was one which no reasonable man could believe, and ordered him to be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for six months.

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