

# A Chimney-Sweep in Lancaster

By WILLIAM FREDERIC WORNER

ONE hundred years ago and more it was the custom to employ a chimney-sweeper to remove the soot that had collected in the chimneys of the town. Wood was largely used as fuel. Anthracite coal had not been discovered. Cleaning chimneys became a regular business. The construction of the flues was, in some instances, so narrow, angular and tortuous that only small boys could ascend them and they had to be employed as apprentices. Many are the stories told of alleged cruelties inflicted upon these "white slaves." Most people have at some time or other read that interesting story of Charles Kingsley, "The Water Babies." In it is graphically described the life of a chimney-sweeper's apprentice. Charles Lamb, in his delightful "Essays of Elia," writes of the chimney-sweep as follows: "I reverence those young Africans of our own growth, who, from their little pulpits (the tops of chimneys), in the nipping air of a December morning, preach a lesson of patience to mankind."

These youthful apprentices were obliged to climb chimneys so dilapidated that frequently in the performance of their duties, they were crushed to death. Many cases were reported of soot in the flues igniting and the chimney-sweep suffocating. Truly, as Langhorne has written, he was "the child of misery, baptized with tears." His body often became covered with sores; he suffered with weak eyes, and the soot and heat impaired his vision. If he remained at the trade long not infrequently he developed the "chimney-sweep's cancer."

In England, the people became indignant at the treatment of these apprentices. On February 4th, 1803, a society was formed for abolishing the use of climbing boys in sweeping chimneys. This humane organization did a good work. It was known as the "Society for superseding the necessity of climbing boys, by encouraging a new method of sweeping chimneys, and for improving the condition of children and others employed by chimney-sweepers."

Eventually, through the efforts of this organization, the custom of employing small boys to sweep chimneys was abolished in England. Chimneys were constructed on scientific lines, and mechanical devices were invented for the purpose of keeping them clean.

Our own fair town of Lancaster also had its problem in connection with keeping its chimneys clean, as is evidenced by the following article, which appeared in the Lancaster Journal of Friday, November 1st, 1811:

"The inhabitants of the borough of Lancaster are subjected to very great difficulties in procuring their chimneys to be swept; and the season has now arrived when this inconvenience is not only seriously felt but may be soon attended with alarming consequences. There is, at present, but one chimney-sweeper in this large town, and he is a full grown man; but many of the chimneys are too small to admit of being swept by any other than boys. Two boys, one small and the other pretty well grown, will meet with good encouragement in this town and the neighborhood, as sweeps; provided they come hither immediately and conduct themselves properly.

"The editors of newspapers in Philadelphia and Baltimore, will oblige their Lancastrian brethren, by republishing this article, at least once."

It is interesting to note in this quotation that three large towns—Lancaster, Philadelphia and Baltimore—are called upon in the effort to secure the services of **two** boys. This very clearly indicates that the position was not a particularly desirable one.

Many of the most destructive fires were due to what were known as "foul" chimneys—that is, chimneys which had become clogged with soot.