



A typical Victorian Bedroom

Singular Case of Arson by a Servant

Rhoda Gale (16) was indicted on the capital charge of setting fire to the house of Mary Garlick, at Westport, on the 2nd March, Mary Garlick and other persons being at that time therein. There was a second count, charging her with setting fire to the house with intent to injure Mary Garlick: and by a third count she was charged with setting fire to the beds, bedding, and furniture of two bedsteads. Mr. Cole prosecuted; the prisoner was undefended.

The evidence in this case was purely circumstantial. Mrs. Garlick is a widow residing at Thornhill Farm, Westport, near Malmsbury. Her niece, Mrs. Walker, resides with her, and her niece's husband, who is manager of a bank in Malmsbury. The prisoner was her dairymaid, and she also kept a nurse-girl and a seamstress.

In the afternoon one of the servants had put some baby clothes to dry on a chair in front of the fire in the parlour; she was absent a few minutes, and on her return, found the prisoner near the parlour door, and the clothes burning; and the chair was charred in such a manner as to excite great doubts as to whether it could have been accidental. There was no fire up-stairs; at about half past six in the evening Mrs. Walker went up to her aunt's bedroom, without a light, to turn down the bedclothes, and all was then safe; no one had gone up with a candle. She then returned to the parlour, where the rest of the family was sitting, with the exception of the prisoner, who was scrubbing the kitchen.

All the outer doors were fastened, except the one that led into the kitchen. About a quarter of an hour afterwards there was a great smell of fire, and a volume of smoke coming from the upper part of the house; notwithstanding this, however, the prisoner took no notice, but went on with her scrubbing. Mr. Walker at this time came home, and he and others went up stairs, and found that the fire originated in the bedclothes of one of the rooms, which had been set fire to, the flames communicating to the floor, the skirting-board, and the window blinds.

The fire was extinguished, when they soon found a similar state of things in the adjoining room. Mr. Walker stated that this must have been separately set fire too; that there was nothing in the flues which could have caused the mischief; and that there was a back staircase by which the upper part of the house could be reached from the kitchen without the knowledge of the persons in the parlour. It was contended, from the combination of circumstance, that the furniture must have been willfully set fire to, and that it could only have been done by the prisoner.

On being apprehended and searched, a wax vesta match was produced from her pocket, and it was stated that many of these had been missed from a box in the kitchen. She afterwards said to the policeman, "I don't care whether they give me a twelve month, or seven years, or 10 years." The only motive suggested for the crime – a very insufficient one – was that she had shortly before been accused of stealing whiskey and this might have excited her malice.

The prisoner, in her defence, simply said that she knew nothing about it. She was found guilty on the third count, and sentenced to 6 years' penal servitude.

Wiltshire Independent, Thursday, 17 March 1869