



# The Victorians

## Street Life - Finding the 'pure'

By Nigel Bryant

MADDY:

Those sounds you can 'ear – they're the same every mornin' at Billingsgate. They're the first sounds I 'ear when I wake up. Cos this – the fish market – is where I sleep. There's loads of us kids sleeps 'ere. There's Jacko, Gyp, and Charlie-boy...and dozens more. Me name's Mad-dy. I'm eleven...sumfin' like that – I ain't sure. But I do know where my story starts – in anu-ver place in London: outside Newgate prison, where they 'old the executions. It's where me Dad - Billy - liked to work. Not that 'e was the 'angman. 'E was on the uvver side - 'e was a thief...

BILLY:

Best place, this. They're all so busy watchin' they don't feel nuffin'. You can dip 'em dead easy, Maddy.

MADDY:

'Dip 'em'?

BILLY:

Nick, swipe, filch...pick their pockets. Look, 'ere she comes now – Mrs Manning. Bein' hanged for murder, she is. There she goes. Up the ladder. Any minute now the hangman'll turn 'er off an' 'er feet'll be dancin' in thin air.

MADDY:

And that's when we pick the pockets?





- BILLY: Right - when the crowd get really excited. Watch and learn, girl. Just follow in yer old man's foot-steps an' you'll make yer fortune. That one there's a likely bet - I reckon that's a purse in there...
- MADDY: But...you can't steal from her. She looks as poor as anyfin'.
- BILLY: You're right - I'd rather 'ave a shillin' from a rich man than two from a poor, but I ain't eaten since Wednesday an' neither've you. Any second now...stand by. Now!
- WOMAN: 'Ere... 'Ere - what you doin'? Stop, thief! Stop 'im! The man in the black coat - grab 'im!
- BILLY: Scarper, Maddy! Leg it!
- MADDY: What!
- CRIES IN THE CROWD: Stop him! / Thief!
- BILLY: Get off me! It weren't me, it was that girl - Maddy - that's 'er name. 'Ere, get off, will yer?
- MADDY: Me own Dad tried to lay it on me! But it didn't work - they nabbed 'im and it was the last I ever seen of 'im. I 'adn't no 'ome to go to - me muvver died when I was born - so I went an' found me granpa...
- GRANPA: Stirred his stumps too slow, did 'e? Never was the quickest on his feet, your father. Good at pickin' pockets, not so good at runnin'.
- MADDY: What'll happen to 'im? Will they 'ang 'im?





- GRANPA: Nah. He'll get seven years across the herring pond.
- MADDY: The herring pond?
- GRANPA: The sea. 'E'll be transported. Sent to Australia. That's where all 'is sort end up. If you 'ave real luck you could carry on maybe five, six years at the thievin' game. But transportation's what you're sure to come to in the end.
- MADDY: Wouldn't mind Australia meself.
- GRANPA: What! It takes eight months to get there! Eight months in the stinkin' hold of a ship, chained together with hundreds more.
- MADDY: Yeah, but it can't be worse than 'ere, can it?
- GRANPA: What d'you mean?
- MADDY: Well, what is there for us 'ere? What's London done for you? If you're so well off 'ere, what're you doin' with no shoes, no shirt? Got a job, 'ave yer?
- GRANPA: I get by. And you're goin' to 'ave to 'elp me. If you want a crust o'bread in yer mouth you're goin' to 'ave to earn it same as me.
- MADDY: Don't mind. What is it you do?
- GRANPA: You can come out wi' me an' find the pure.
- MADDY: Find the pure? What's that?
- GRANPA: You'll see.





- MADDY: And right enuff I did find out...that very evenin', as we walked the filthy streets, bucket and stick in hand...
- GRANPA: Good place, this. 'Eres the bucket.
- MADDY: All right. What now?
- GRANPA: Go up that alley an' pick up the dogs' mess.
- MADDY: You what?!
- GRANPA: Go an' pick up all the old dogs' mess you can find.
- MADDY: What for?!
- GRANPA: Cos that's the pure. There's money in it. You get about eightpence a bucketful, or sometimes a shillin' – depends on the type. The dry, limy-lookin' sort – you know, when it's gone all white – that fetches the best price.
- MADDY: Who from? Who'd buy dog-poo?
- GRANPA: The tanners – people who make leather. They rub it into the cow-skins to dry 'em out and turn 'em into good leather. Come on, get started.
- MADDY: But...'ow do I...pick it up? Wiv a stick?
- GRANPA: I sometimes use a stick, if it's stuck between the cobblestones and such. But it's best to use yer 'and.
- MADDY: You what?! I ain't doin' that! Ain't yer got a glove?!





- GRANPA: Nah - it's no use wiv a glove. It's easier to wash yer 'and hand than keep a glove clean. Now get on wiv it or you won't eat nuffin tonight.
- MADDY: Oh...no, I can't!
- GRANPA: I ain't listenin' to yer moaning all right! You get on wiv it or I'll give you a stick good an' proper!
- MADDY: Err...it's disgustin'...
- GRANPA: That's it. Good girl...
- MADDY: So I started. I done it for...don't know how long. But in the end the price went right down 'cos there was so many people doin' it. Then - gran-pa died. Just died in the street. I saw 'im do it...
- He took ill just as 'e was stoopin' down to pick up the pure, an' 'e fell on 'is face. I didn't fancy doin' that job no more. So I left...an' that's 'ow I come to be sleepin' 'ere at the market. An' the other kids 'ere...well, they'll tell you their stories for theirselves, if you wanna listen.

