

# The Victorians

## Street children - Mudlarking

By Nigel Bryant

ELIZA:

My name's Eliza. Reckon I must be about twelve. If you want to know how I come to be 'ere, sleepin' rough wiv other kids in the ish market at Billingsgate, I'll tell yer.

I started on the river. Me Dad worked on the coal boats but 'e took too much of the ale one night and he fell atween two barges. Never seen 'im again. And never knew me mum – she died o' fever when I was...dunno. So me uncle Dick an' me went down to the river to pick up coals an' sell 'em for what we could get. Used to pick it up out the mud we did...

I didn't mind the mud in the summer, but in the winter it's so cold, standin' in mud with no shoes. The sludge drips off yer, and yer clothes stiffen up like boards and then rot. But then me uncle Dick fell in with this cove called Tosher who worked the sewers; an' later, Dick comes back for me and says it's a new life for us...

DICK:

There's all sorts down these sewer tunnels. Tosher here's bin showin' me.

TOSHER:

You take this lantern, missy. Dick an' me'll dig away with these.





- ELIZA: They'd each got a pole with a pointed thing on top. I 'eld the lantern so they could see what they was doin' as they dug.
- TOSHER: There's places in the sewers where the brick-work's worn away – by the stuff that's washed down from the toilets an' the drains. If you dig careful, you find all manner o' things stuck in the gaps.
- ELIZA: Like what?
- DICK: Iron, nails, coins – copper money speshly.
- TOSHER: But if your luck's in it'll be shillin's! Oi oi - there's sumfin 'ere!
- ELIZA: He'd been proddin' away with 'is pole and felt sumfin. He bent down and shoved 'is arm into the slime and ooze in the sewer floor – right up to 'is elbow 'e went – an' 'e fetched out...
- TOSHER: A spoon! Silver, that is! I found a ladle once last year, an' a silver-'andled knife and fork!
- DICK: Amazin' what the rich don't need.
- TOSHER: Thrown out with the washin' up water, I s'pose.
- DICK: Let's go up 'ere.
- TOSHER: No, not down the side tunnels. Stick to the main sewer.
- DICK: Looks like no-one's bin up 'ere in years. Rich pickin's!





- TOSHER: They ain't bin up there cos it ain't safe. You get foul air that gathers in clouds – it'll kill yer in seconds.
- DICK: Can't we just go a bit of a way?
- TOSHER: Well...a bit. But if I says get out you get out – right?
- DICK: Yeah, all right.
- DICK: Do a lot o' people do this – 'unt the sewers?
- ELIZA: Hundreds, girl. But never alone. You need to hunt in packs. Even if you've done it for years you can miss a step and drown in the filth.
- TOSHER: Ughh!
- ELIZA: There's holes, see, where the floor's caved in and the sewage builds up in deep pits. You can use yer pole to try an' heave yerself out, but it's best to 'ave a pal or you'll likely drown. Any case, in the older tunnels like this'un, you need to hunt in gangs for safety's sake.
- TOSHER: Who'd attack yer down 'ere?
- ELIZA: The rats. And sewer rats is big vermin – and ferocious. They'll fly at yer. I've 'eard o' men knocked down in the sewage by an 'oard o' rats and not able to get up again. Couldn't beat 'em off. Their bodies was found picked clean. Oi!
- TOSHER: What is it? Rats?
- ELIZA:





- TOSHER: Keep yer mouth shut.
- DICK: Whassup?
- TOSHER: There's people over'ead! Street level.
- LADY: Constable! I heard voices down below. I heard them distinctly through the drain here, through the grating.
- CONSTABLE: I hope you're wrong, ma'am, for their sake. The sluice'll be open in a minute.
- TOSHER: Oh, my life!
- ELIZA: What's wrong?
- TOSHER: We've gone up one o' the sluice-ways!
- DICK: What's that mean?
- TOSHER: We've got to get out, quick!
- DICK /LIZA: Why? What's up?
- TOSHER: Just do what I tell yer – shift!
- GYP: So we shifted. Yer see, at high tide the river floods up into the sewer, and gets held in behind big gates called sluices. Then at low tide they open the gates to let the water rush back down the tunnels to flush 'em clean. And that, o' course, is when the sewer-hunters are in 'em!
- DICK: It's comin'!
- TOSHER: Oh, God 'elp us!





ELIZA:

Me uncle Dick an' Tosher, they never got out. Don't even know how I got out meself...I remember hittin' the sides of the tunnel, turned upside-down...thrown all over...and endin' up in the mud right where I'd started, down by the river. I was battered black and blue. But I was alive. Well, I s'pose I was just born lucky.

