



The Victorians

Up the chimneys - Climbing boys

By Nigel Bryant

TRADER: 'Ere's anuvver one! 'Ow many kids are there sleepin' 'ere? Shift, will yer?

CHARLIE: All right, all right.

There's loads of us kids sleep 'ere at the fish market at Billingsgate. But this ain't the first place I've slept: last week I was down Covent Garden – the market for fruit and veg. An' yer get more laughs down there an' all, cos of all the showmen – jugglers an' sword-swallowers an' that – an' me Dad was the same. 'E was a strong man. 'And 'is special trick was breakin' stones on 'is chest. 'E'd lie on the ground and get two men to lay a big stone on 'is chest – a big fmg like you get on a grave. Then 'e'd get any man who reckoned 'e was strong enough to come an' smash the stone on 'is chest wiv a sledgehammer.

There was a trick to it – 'e puffed 'is chest right up, then let all 'is breath out when 'e saw the blow comin', sumfin like that... Anyhow, one day it all went wrong.

MAN: Gimme that hammer – give it 'ere!

CHARLIE: A big fella, took the hammer and smashed it down afore me Dad was ready...an' it bust sumfin inside 'im. 'E just lay there, dead still, moanin'...and then after a minute he went quiet an' that was it.





- CHARLIE: I went back to the lodging house where me Dad an' me had been stayin'. There was about thirty people – men an' women, boys an' girls – all crammed in the one room –an' their breaths all togevvver was like a stinkin' fog...
- Near mornin' a boy wiv most of 'is teeth missin' asked me why I was cryin'. He said 'e 'ad a job at the market sweepin', and did I want to come out wiv 'im. So I did.
- THE BOY: 'Ere's where I work – I 'ave to sweep out the 'ole place. Tell yer what, though – I can't sweep wivout takin' off me coat – I gets too 'ot, see? – and it'll look queer if I ain't got a shirt...which I ain't. So lend me yours, an' I'll interduce yer to a man what'll give you a job an' all. You'd like that, wouldn't yer?
- CHARLIE: I need sumfin to eat.
- THE BOY: Well there you are, then. Whip off yer shirt – yer boots as well, make me look the business – and then we'll be sorted.
- CHARLIE: So I did.
- THE BOY: Good lad!
- CHARLIE: I took off me shirt an' me boots, an' 'e put 'em on an' said:
- BOY Now you just wait there, Charlie mate, an' I'll go an' get us some grub – can't work on an empty belly now, can I?





- CHARLIE: An' that was the last I saw of 'im! Cheatin' ras-cal! Any'ow, there was a bloke goin' past wiv a cart full o' poles an' brushes, an' 'e saw me standin' there and 'e stops and says to me:
- GEORGE: Ah! Here's a likely lad! Got any work?
- CHARLIE: No, sir, I don't live nowhere an' me Dad's just died.
- GEORGE: Well, you're small and you look fit enough. Any good at climbing?
- CHARLIE: What, trees an' that?
- GEORGE: Yes...trees and that. And exploring dark passages.
- CHARLIE: Dunno. Never done it.
- GEORGE: Like to try?
- CHARLIE: And so I went. I shoulda guessed what 'e did, cos all 'is brushes an' that was black wiv soot. 'E was a sweep, an' 'e wanted me to climb up the chimneys. We musta done ten, twelve chimneys that first day I was wiv 'im. You wouldn't believe 'ow much I got: George – that was 'is name – paid me threepence for the day's work. I soon learned 'ow to do it...
- GEORGE: You need to go wiv yer elbows an yer legs spread out –
- CHARLIE: What like this?





- GEORGE: Yeah that's it – and now press yer feet 'gainst the insides o' the chimney...that's it good lad! Now you can 'eave yerself up no trouble – go on – an' get in all the bits that the brushes can't reach. Ain't so bad, is it?
- CHARLIE: No, it's a good laugh! Oh my life! All the soot, though! Soon as you start brushin'...it ain't got nowhere to go 'cept down me froat!
- GEORGE: You'll get used to it.
- CHARLIE: Yeah, but...I've 'eard o' lads gettin' stuck in the chimneys an' left for dead, left there forever...
- GEORGE: You don't wanna believe all you 'ear. Get on with it.
- CHARLIE: So I did. An' I worked wi' George for years. Was I right to believe 'im? Was it safe? I 'spect you're thinkin', if it was so good bein' a sweep, 'ow come I'm 'ere now, sleepin' rough? If you want to know, I'll tell yer 'ow it 'appened.

