



# The Victorians

## Up the chimneys - The grand London house

By Nigel Bryant

- CHARLIE: Me name's Charlie – 'ere to tell yer about me time as a climbing boy. Most of the 'ouses we went to was nuffin special. But one day we go down this street all lined wiv trees, and George – that's the man I work for- stops at a door wiv thick black paint on it, so shiny that I could see me face in it like a mirror.
- GEORGE: Now mind your manners, Charlie – remember who you are.
- CHARLIE: What?
- GEORGE: Sshh! And you can stop that coughin'.
- CHARLIE: Can't 'elp it, you know I can't.
- GEORGE: Sshhh!!
- CHARLIE: It's the soot.
- GEORGE: An' stand up straight.
- George Hopkiss, if you please, come to sweep your chimneys.
- CHARLIE: When we go in I hardly dare walk 'cos o' the soot fallin' off me trousers every step. Anyhow, this bloke in a uniform leads us in – George keeps doffin' his cap an' thankin' 'im – an' we gets ready to do the first chimney.





- CHARLIE: There musta bin about twelve in all – and when we'd done all 'cept one, George sends me on with the brushes into the last room. I goes in an' there's this girl in there, playin'. Her hair's all done up in bows an' ribbons, an' she's got all these amazin' toys all over the floor. I just stood there, lookin'.
- GIRL: Who are you?
- CHARLIE: I couldn't speak.
- GIRL: Don't just stand there with your mouth open. Who are you?
- CHARLIE: Um – I've er...
- GIRL: Oh, you've come to sweep the chimneys. Well, don't come near me and don't touch my dolls – you're filthy.
- CHARLIE: She didn't have just one or two dolls, she had about ten. They was all sittin' down in a line on tiny chairs, facin' towards a little toy theatre.
- GIRL: When you're finished I'll be able to show my dolls the play. I'm going to give them Jack the Giant-Killer. That's my favourite. What's yours?
- CHARLIE: Um...
- GIRL: But I don't suppose you've ever seen a play, have you? Your sort don't go to the theatre. Good thing, too – you'd stink the place out.
- GEORGE: I'm terrible sorry to trouble you, miss, but we need to sweep your chimney, if you'd be so kind.





- GIRL: Oh, very well, but be quick about it and don't make any mess or I'll see Papa doesn't pay you a penny.
- CHARLIE: And she held 'er nose between 'er fingers, an' went out of the room.
- I'm glad she's not my sister.
- GEORGE: Hush your mouth, boy – you mustn't speak of your betters like that. Now get yourself ready.
- CHARLIE: And a minute later I was scramblin' up to clear the soot out the corners where the chimney bent.
- GEORGE: All right, boy?
- CHARLIE: Yeah.
- GEORGE: What's it like up there?
- CHARLIE: Real narrow. I'm not sure I can get up the last bit.
- GEORGE: D'you need to buff it?
- CHARLIE: What?
- GEORGE: Buff it – do it in the buff. If you take your clothes off you make yerself smaller.
- CHARLIE: I can't do that – not with that girl 'ere.
- GEORGE: I'll shut the door an' tell 'er not to come in.
- CHARLIE: No, I –





GEORGE: You'll have to buff it.

CHARLIE: I ain't buffin' it – I'll 'ave anuvver go.

So I `slanted' it – went with me hips in the angles, cos it's widest that way – an' put one arm tight to me side and threw the other over me 'ead and then shoved meself upwards. But it was only about nine inches wide and suddenly I felt meself jam.

CHARLIE: Oh!

GEORGE: You all right?

CHARLIE: No, I'm stuck.

GEORGE: Well come back down, then.

CHARLIE: Right, I can't move. I'm stuck fast!

GEORGE: If you could get up you can get down!

CHARLIE: I can't! I really can't! It's me trousers – the waist's twisted over and it's jammin' me in!

GEORGE: Then take yer belt off!

CHARLIE: I ain't got no belt! It's the trousers theirselves – they're jammin' – I'm stuck!

GEORGE: Stop yellin' or you'll frighten the house!

CHARLIE: I don't care about the 'ouse! I'm gonna die here!!! I'm gonna die!!!

I could 'ear the master of the 'ouse and the little girl in the room below, getting fretted, like...





- GENTLEMAN: He's not stuck up there, is he? You haven't got your boy stuck up there?
- GIRL: Oh, how frightful! I shan't be able to have another fire! I can't abide the nursery when it's cold!
- GEORGE: Now stay calm if you please, and I'll see what I can do.
- CHARLIE: And 'e asked 'em to leave 'im alone in the room again. Then 'e buffed it 'isself – took 'is clothes off to make 'isself small – and shinned right on up the chimney after me, forced hisself up till 'e was just below the narrow bit...
- GEORGE: Ready yerself, Charlie, this might hurt some...
- CHARLIE: An' somehow 'e shoved me upwards...and I carried on up an' come out on the roof. I could see right over the rooftops an' right over London. So many chimneys, an' so much smoke. Plenty o' work for sweeps...but not for me no more. When I come down off the roof George just says to me:
- GEORGE: You've done yer time, boy. You're too big for the chimneys now. Good luck to yer.
- CHARLIE: An' that was it. I'd worked wiv 'im for four years an' now 'e didn't want me no more. 'E give me three pence as me last day's pay and left me there. So I tramped back into the city the way we'd come, an'...well...'ere I am at the fish market, sleepin' rough with all the others.

