



Escaping The Workhouse

My first memory of anything is the cold, wooden floor of the poor-house. I can't have been any older than two maybe three-years-old at the time. I remember waking up in the middle of the night, so hungry I was worried Master would hear my belly moaning. Even then, I knew he wasn't to be trusted.

We'd had a measure of gruel that night, but it just wasn't enough, not as much as we usually had. Speaking to my father later on, there'd been a swell of people pouring into the house over the days before and there just wasn't enough to go around. It was about that time we lost Timothy. He'd been weak since he was born, a workhouse is no place for a new baby. My mother followed soon after. The doctor said it was consumption but I think it was heartbreak. It's horrible how this country grinds you down until you're nothing more than the muck you walk on. We're stepped on in life and trampled in death. That's Queen Victoria for you.

I knew I couldn't stay there. As soon as I was old enough to understand instructions, I was sent to pick rope. Hours spent bent over lengths of old rope, picking apart the threads ready to be made good again. My fingertips are still covered in scars now, a dozen years later. I was about ten when I decided I'd had enough and felt brave enough to risk it on my own, though in truth I'd pretty much lost count of the years by then.

In the end, it wasn't hard to escape. Under the cover of a moonless night, I slipped through the barred windows on the factory floor and disappeared into the shadows; another lost stray in the East End. I sold flowers for a while, under the watch of a lovely old lady called Miss Sidney but I soon grew bored of that. I had to watch as one of her other protégés was taken in by a gruff older chap who trained her up to be a proper lady. What I wouldn't have given for such an outcome.

For a while, I floated around doing this and that. Mostly outside the law; simple card tricks to fool gullible passers-by and a touch of light pickpocketing. Nothing too wretched.

But then, maybe a month ago, I landed on my feet as my old father used to say. I was wandering down Bethnal Green Road, taking no interest in those around me except for those with loose pockets, when an old chap tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I knew much about the area. As soon as I had reassured myself that he wasn't a peeler, I made it clear that nobody else knew the streets better than myself.

He quickly introduced himself as a Mr Mayhew and told me that he is writing a book of some sort about the poor people of London. "You've come to the right place," I told him in no uncertain terms, "there's nowhere as poor, even in London, as Shoreditch."

That is how, with a little help from Lady Luck, I've come to be helping a fine gentleman tell the world just how downtrodden us Londoners really are.



INFERENCE FOCUS

1. Find a word that tells you how much gruel they had.
2. When it says, "My mother followed soon after," what does it mean?
3. What is a "lost stray"?
4. Which word or phrase tells you that the things the girl did were illegal?
5. Which word or phrase tells you that she told Mr Mayhew firmly?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

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| I | What impression do you get of how the poor were treated? Why? |
| S | What did she do first once she had escaped? |
| R | Name two things that she did that were illegal. |
| R | Where was the poorest part of London? |
| E | Explain how the author uses language to give the girl emotion. |

Answers:

1. Measure
2. She died
3. Somebody without a home to go to
4. Outside the law
5. In no uncertain terms

I: They were treated badly. They had workhouses, were forced to work with little food and the girl talks about being stepped on.

S: Sold flowers

R: Card tricks and pickpocketing

R: Shoreditch

E: Use of powerful emotive words like “brave”, “grinds you down”. Personal language such as “What I wouldn’t give” etc