

# Mini Exam 19th Century Text - Mouse Traps

This is an extract from a collection of newspaper stories published in 1861. Henry Mayhew was a reporter for the Morning Chronicle. He interviewed and observed the poor people of London and then published his findings in what were ground breaking articles as they gave the poor a 'voice'. These articles were later published as a book called 'London Labour and the London Poor'.

In this extract, a trained tailor tells of how he has had to change his occupation owing to losing some of his sight.

## 'London Labour and the London Poor'

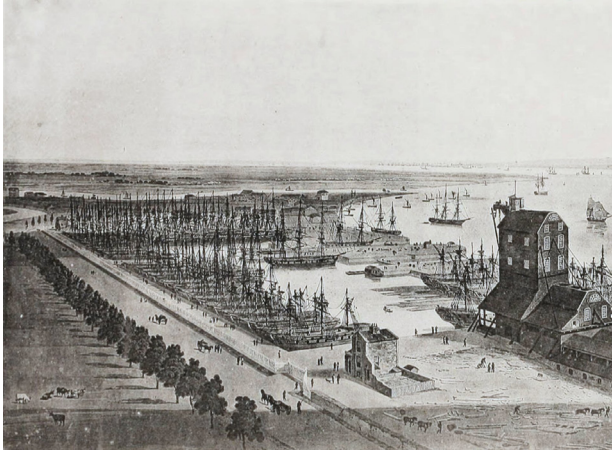
by Henry Mayhew

After I took to bird-cage making, I found the employment at it so casual that I could not support my family at it. This led my mind to toy making, for I found that cheap toys were articles of more general sale. Then I got my children and my wife to help me, and we managed to get along somehow, for you see they were learning the business, and I myself was not in much of a condition to teach them, being almost as inexperienced at the trade as they were; and, besides that, we were continually changing the description of toy that we manufactured, so we had no time to perfect ourselves. One day we were all at work on garden-rollers; the next, perhaps, we should be upon little carts; then, may-be, we should have to go to dolls' tables or wheel-barrows: so that with the continual changing the description of toy that we manufactured from one thing to another, we had a great difficulty in getting practised in anything. While we were all learning you may imagine that, not being so quick then as we are now, we found a great difficulty in making a living at the penny-toy business: often we had merely dry bread for breakfast, tea and supper, but we ate it with a light heart for I knew repining we shouldn't mend it, and I always taught myself and those about me to bear our trials with fortitude. At last I got to work regularly at the mouse-traps, and having less changing we learnt to turn them out of hand quicker, and to make more money at the business: that was about four years ago, and then I was laid up with a strumous abscess on the thigh. This caused necrosis, or decay of the thigh-bone, to take place and it was necessary that I should be confined to my bed until such time as a new thigh-bone was formed, and the old decayed one had sloughed away. Before I lay up I stood at the bench until I was ready to drop for I had no one who could plane the boards for me; and what could I do? If I didn't keep up I thought we should all starve. The pain was dreadful, and the anxiety of mind I suffered for my wife and children made it a thousand times worse. I couldn't bear the idea of going to the workhouse, and I kept on my feet until I could stand no longer. My daughter was only sixteen then, and I saw no means of escape. It was at that time my office to prepare boards for my family, and without that they could do nothing. Well, sir, I saw utter ruin and starvation before us. The doctor told me it would take four years before a new bone would be formed, and that I must lay up all the while.



Photo courtesy of Cornell University Library (@flickr.com) - granted under creative commons licence - attribution

What was to become of us all in the meantime I could not tell. Then it was that my daughter, seeing the pain I suffered both in body and mind, came to me and told me not to grieve, for that she would do all the heavy work for me, and plane up the boards and cut out the work as I had done; but I thought it was impossible for her to get through such hard work, even for my sake. I knew she could do almost anything she set her mind to, but I little dreamt that she would be



able to compass that. However, with the instinct of her affection – I don't call it anything else (for she learnt at once what it had taken me months to acquire), she planed and shaped the boards as well as I myself could have done after years of practice. The first board she did was as cleanly done as she can do it now, and when you think of the difficulties she had to overcome, what a mere child she was, and that she had never handled a plane before, how she had the grain of the wood to find out, to learn right the handling of her tools, and a many little niceties of touch that workmen

only can understand, it does seem to me as if some superior Power had inspired her to aid me. I have often heard of birds building their nests of the most beautiful structure, without ever having seen one built before, and my daughter's handiwork seemed to me exactly like that. It was a thing not learnt by practice, but done in an instant, without teaching or experience of any kind. She is the best creature I ever knew or ever heard tell of on earth – at least, so she has been to me all my life; aye, without a single exception. If it hadn't been for her devotion I must have gone to the workhouse, and perhaps never been able to have got away from it, and had my children brought up as paupers. Where she got the strength to do it is as much a mystery to me as how she did it. Though she was but a mere child, so to speak, she did the work of a grown man, and I assure you that the labour of working at the bench all day is heavy, even for the strongest workman, and my girl is not over-strong now; indeed she was always delicate from a baby: nevertheless she went through the labour, and would stand to the bench the whole of the day, and with such cheerful good humour too that I cannot but see the hand of the Almighty in it all. I never knew her to complain of fatigue, or ever go to her work without a smile on her face. Her only anxiety was to get done, and to afford me every comfort in my affliction that she could. For three years and two months I have been confined to my bed and a half of that time I have not left it, even to breathe the fresh open air. Almost all that period I have been suffering intense and continued pain from the formation of abscesses in my thigh previous to the sloughing away of the decayed bones. I have taken out of the sores at least two hundred pieces, some as small as needles and some not less than an inch and a half long, which required to be pulled out by tweezers from the wound.



# Mini Exam 19th Century Text - Mouse Traps Questions

Top Tip: Don't forget to use quotes from the text to support ALL your answers.

1. Explain why the man changed from making bird cages to toys. **2 marks**
2. Why was the family slow at toy making? **4 marks**
3. What was the man's attitude to the fact that they only had dry bread to eat at times? **2 marks**
4. Why was making mouse traps more successful? **2 marks**
5. What misfortune affected the man? **5 marks**
6. a) What did the man believe the consequences would be for his family if he stopped working? **2 marks**  
b) What effect did this have on his pain? **2 marks**
7. What was the doctor's prognosis on his leg? **2 marks**
8. What difficulties did the daughter have to overcome in order to do her father's job? **5 marks**
9. Give three reasons why it was surprising that the daughter managed to do the work. **5 marks**
10. Describe the man's ordeal while he was confined to his bed. **6 marks**

## Writing Task

Choose one of the questions below:

1. Write about a time when someone unexpectedly helped you out.
2. Describe the worst illness you have ever had and how it made you feel.
3. Use the photo as inspiration for a short story.



These questions are worth **25 marks**:

**15 marks** content, structure and ideas

**10 marks** spelling, punctuation and grammar.