

would only give a grating creak that made Jack shiver—it obstinately refused to turn. With a wrench that almost put his wrists out of joint, Jack twisted it round. A moment afterwards he had lifted the latch, and was running down to the great gates, leaping over the shadows of the trees that stretched out gaunt black arms, as if they wanted to trip him up or catch him by the ankle. Jack had expected that he would have to clamber over the great gates, but—hooray!—the little door in one of them had been left unlocked, and was idly swinging backwards and forwards in the breeze. Jack had time to turn round and shake his fist at the rusty old bell that wouldn't ring *him* up to work before breakfast; and then he plunged into the outside moonlight and felt *free*, although he still ran on as if the whole pack of his tormentors were after him.

It was easy enough for him to find his way into London—he had only to follow his nose—but it was a good while before he could find his way to “the Docks.” When he asked his way to them, people said, “*What docks, you young silly?*” and others told him to go to such-a-street, and turn down such-another-street, and anybody would tell him there; but Jack didn't know where such-a-street and such-another-street were, any more than he knew where the Docks were.

When he reached Ratcliff Highway at last, and threaded his way through the throng of greasy, ragged, unshaven labourers still waiting to be hired outside the gates, the London Docks were in full swing of business. The bustle pleased Jack at first. Men were hewing sugar hogsheads open with great axes, white coopers were hammering away at casks, blue custom-house officers were gauging casks, men were trundling casks, casks in thousands stood along the quays. Dangling from top-floors of the tall warehouses, and over the mine-like holds of the ships, boxes, barrels, crates, bales, hogsheads, and huge bundles of hides and sheepskins, and skeins of jangling iron bars, were everywhere going up or down. Tea-chests were being shot into lighters, like boys sliding down a hill. There was a smell, too, here of sugar, there of tobacco, and yonder of vinegar, or drugs, or brandy—and everywhere of tar—that somehow sharpened Jack's desire to be a sailor. But he soon felt half disappointed; nobody in the Docks looked jolly. The men who were crying “*Heave—heave—heave altogether!*” as they strained at the winches, looked far more like depressed dustmen than dashing mariners. Even the real sailors had nothing rollicking about them. They hadn't broad turr-over collars to their

shirts, low-waisted breeches, and long-quartered pumps. Some of them had their trowsers braced up almost to their arm-pits, and—worse still—instead of hailing him with a “*What cheer, messmate?*” some of them gave Jack a shove, and swore at him, if he happened to stumble against them, as he caught his foot in the great iron mooring-rings, or groped his way under and over the gangways, chains, and hawsers that everywhere stopped the way. Some of the mates, to be sure, had gilt bands round their caps, and gilt buttons on their blue coats, but the greasy, white-seamed uniforms had a very shabby-genteel look, and Jack did not like to see sailors quill-driving on the other side of the little tables at which the cargoes were being checked off.

However, there were the ships, at any rate, some of them with bunting flying, or a loose sail bellying out, or sailors' clothes hung up to dry—real big ships from all parts of the world. When Jack thought of the pure sea to which they were accustomed, he wondered that they did not fidget in the stagnant, muddy-green dock-water. But some of the ships did not smell very sweet; unpleasant whiffs came from them of bilge-water, perspiring sheepskins, and putrid horns and hides.

“*But I needn't go in a ship that carries nasty things like those,*” thought Jack; “*I've plenty to pick from.*”

He made up his mind, for one thing, that he wouldn't go in a steamer, or in a blistered, rusty, old-fashioned sailing tub, with a bow as broad as its stern, and its gray, ragged rigging all in a tangle. At last he found a craft just to his taste, with a clipper-bow, and raking masts, and gilt stars on the catheads, and bright brass belaying pins, and deck as white as milk, and ropes coiled down on it like Catherine-wheels. A placard lashed on to her shrouds announced that she was bound for Hong Kong, and “the East” was just where Jack wanted to go to. So he went up to some men who were swinging on a stage, painting the clipper's sides, and said, as knowingly as he could, “*Can you tell me if this ship is in want of a hand?*”

“*Can't say, sir,*” answered one of the men with a grin; “*better ask the mate. There he stands by the gangway.*”

“*If you please, sir, I want to go to sea,*” said Jack to the mate, very respectfully.

“*Do you? Go back home, you little fool.*”

Ship after ship he tried with no better success, and what *that* mate said was quite polite compared with the answers Jack got from some of the mates and captains. Where there were men on board, too, they made fun