

LONDON'S WINE VAULTS.

(Continued from page 329.)

The sailor having signed the paper, is again pulled with rum until he is nearly paralyzed, then he is taken aboard the ship, allowed to sober up, and the next morning he is going down the channel before a spanking breeze, bound for some Australian port or a six months' cruise. The main entrance to the London Docks is through a wide massive stone archway, on each side of which are great iron barred gates, whose locks and bolts could resist any attempt of a mob to break them. On either side are smaller entrances, where the Dock police have their offices, station house, lock-up, ambulance and fire engine. Both outside the gates and inside are policemen stationed night and day. Unless known to one is allowed to enter those gates without a pass. The thousands of laborers employed around the Docks assemble outside every morning, and have to show the tickets given them by the stevedores or bosses who employ them. These are examined by the Dock Inspectors, and none but those actually employed are entitled to enter them. Armed with a tasting order obtained from a leading London wine merchant, which is equivalent to a pass to the Docks, the writer, on presenting it at the entrance to a police officer on duty, was directed to the station, where an inspector, after examining the pass, courteously directed the bearer to the particular wine vault indicated on the order—that being the only one which the bearer was entitled to visit.

A walk through the London Docks is akin to entering a crowded, busy thoroughfare.

Great, tall, soot-begrimed, massive stone warehouses rise on every side. They form entire streets, increasing and receding like each other, all having large numbers painted black on white squares at the corners of each warehouse. From the top of the buildings project large iron cranes, with chains and pulleys, and wheels that are continually hoisting up bales of cotton or wool, hogheads of sugar or tobacco, chests of tea or bags and cases of merchandise.

In the Docks rises a forest of masts, with flags of all nations and from every port in the world flying at their peaks. Some vessels are weighted down so low that the gang-planks run down, while others, having their cargoes emptied, rise like the hulls of hulks, and you have to clamber up the gang-planks to reach their decks.

Here are coolies from China, Lascars from India in their strange but not picturesque costume, seafaring Portuguese, Spaniards and Italians; black-haired Swedes, Germans and Russians; broad-shouldered, blue-skinned English, and little, active Yankee sailors, running hither and thither. The clanking of the sailing forms not an unpleasant melody to the pipings of the boat-woman's whistle.

Proceeding down the dockyard, you see before you a large area literally paved with wine casks, all full of the most excellent wines. Further, the air is permeated with the fumes of rum; then you are nearly sickened with the stench of hides and huge bins of horns, and shortly afterwards the atmosphere is redolent of coffee, spice and nut. Nearly everywhere you meet stacks of cork, or else yellow bins of sulphur, or lead-colored copper ore.

On these Docks are employed from three to five thousand men. Many are known to permanent laborers, while there is quite an army of coopers, smiths, caulkers, carpenters and other mechanics.

Way at the farthest end of this great dockyard is situated the East Wine Vault, on which the tasting order is made, and there this alone covers eight acres, and there

are fourteen of them, several of which are larger still.

Entering the office of the Eastern Docks, where numerous clerks are busily engaged working on ledgers and account books, making and entering orders, the odor arising from the wine vaults below is strongly perceptible.

In one large room are hundreds of long, thin sample bottles, bearing labels on corks, the wines, whose they come from, the date of arrival, the number of the cask in which the wine is contained, as also the vault or bin in which it is.

The superintendent having examined the tasting order, made a record of it, calls for a cooper. From behind comes a smart, active-looking man, to whom is handed the order, with instructions to accompany the bearer through the vaults, and allow him to taste the wine contained in the cask enumerated in the order.

The cooper leads the way down a wide, stone staircase until he reaches the outer office leading directly to the vaults. Here gas is kept burning night and day. In a corner of the vaults, the cooper stands before whom are numerous oil lamps made of metal, which are nailed to the end of polished, brown, flat laths about two feet long. He hands the visitor and the cooper one apiece, and explains the system. Inquiring as to the necessity of carrying these, the cooper states that no one, not even the workmen in the vaults, is permitted to enter them without a lamp. Prior to the enforcement of this rule men had frequently been mised, necessitating a search, only to find them senseless and overpowered by the fumes of the wine. On two occasions death had supervened, and the bodies had only been discovered days after they were found. The cooper sent down being attracted by the smell of the rapidly decomposing bodies.

It is the duty of the lamp-man to count his lamps, which are all numbered, every night before leaving vaults. If an alarm is given, and men armed with lanterns make a thorough search of the vaults until the bearer of the missing lamp is found.

Opening the massive door leading directly to the vaults, the cooper leads the way.

To one unaccustomed to the place, especially coming directly from the fresh air, a strange feeling of dizziness and faintness comes. The cooper notices this and says to the visitor, "Keep on walking, sir; it will soon pass away."

Although the vaults are lighted by gas, so intense is the darkness that it is difficult, even with the lantern, to pick one's way at first. The vaults have to be equal in the world; they are arched, built of specially made fire-brick, with iron girders and massive stone columns, and what seem but slender, iron pillars, which admit of a view, by the light of the gas, of the vaults placed at right angles. The floors are thickly strewn with sawdust, and long, flat steel rails run the entire length and breadth of the vaults, crossing and recrossing each other: upon these the barrels, pipes and hogheads are rolled, and they slide with a brilliant polish.

There are 16,000 casks, pipes and barrels of wine in this vault alone, and in no single spot of London, not even at the Bank of England, could one view an intimation of the vast wealth of England be obtained as at the Docks. Here are casks of Burgundy of the reign of Edward III. of the year 1350, while others contain wines of priceless value and historic vintage. Here are wines valued at from ten to five guineas a bottle. In the ten vaults alone, on the day the writer visited them, the superintendent stated that there were over 70,000 pipes of wine in storage, or nearly 9,000,000 gallons of wine; besides these there were two vaults exclusively used for brandy, one for rum, and one containing bottled wines and

spirits amounting to so many more thousands of hogheads.

Following the cooper through these endless rows of casks piled one on the top of the other, you are struck with the weirdness of the place. Sometimes the lights are so dim as to be almost imperceptible, and the lanterns flicker. It is in such places that the most extraordinary scenes are witnessed. Hanging from the ceilings like silver stalactites are beautiful sheets of fungi. They assume the acrobat and most fantastic shapes. Some are of the purest white, like silk cushions of swan-down, spreading many yards along the arched ceilings and dripping the blackened walls; others are of a soft dove color. Then suddenly we come upon what would seem to be folding upon fold of the richest and most shining black velvet. The cooper, who has been twenty-five years employed in these vaults, takes special pleasure in pointing out the beauties of this wonderful and unexplainable growth.

Naturalists, botanists, architects and men well known to science have come specially to study the causes that have led to this creation. None, however, have been able to solve its mystery. In no other vaults in the world has there ever been witnessed such an extraordinary growth, and jealously and carefully it is watched, the visitors being specially requested not to touch it.

The imagination fails to describe the real beauty of this ever-growing substance, which is ever in darkness and in an atmosphere where fresh air is never admitted, and which is oppressive in its humidity surcharged with vinous exhalations.

Here we find a seeming beautiful picture of a forest, great and small, covered branches drop all around us, and what seems a bed of the purest white flowers appears. Some look like soft white silk veils thrown over the most fanciful shining black pictures. You assume the most delicate and beautiful images. Touch but one drooping spray, and on opening your hand you find nothing in it but an almost imperceptible stickiness adhering to the tips of the fingers. "That mass you see," said the cooper, "that mass you see, is the result of the wine which has been in the vaults for so long a time, and it is so delicate and beautiful. It is left no trace behind it, entirely; it has the touch, the sight or smell."

There is a great deal to be learned in those vaults. It is not all wines that improve by age, some, in fact, like port, losing their entire body unless properly attended to. Port wine is at its best at fifteen years of age, for after that it begins rapidly to fail. It loses first its strength, then taste, and lastly color, changing from the rich and ruby red to a pale and sickly yellow. To preserve the choicest old ports the utmost care, study and attention are necessary. Some from the rarest and most costly vintages begin to be injured by the light of the only the choicest old brandies are given, and the greatest care has to be exercised in the treatment, or an entire pipe of wine may be destroyed irrevocably.

To others new but choice wines are added, and it is upon these wines that the old feed, and the sickly-looking wine in a short time resumes its rich and beautiful color, its delightful bouquet and seductive flavor. Wine doctors—for such they are—may only be called—men in receipt of large salaries. They are not only experts but regular students of wine, who have been born and brought up in the wine trade, and have traveled extensively. There are but a few who ever attain the art to perfection. They regularly visit the vaults, keeping a close watch over every pipe, cask or barrel of wine under their care. They keep a careful register of the wines, of the vintages, of their arrival at the vaults, of the quantities taken out, and, in fact, of everything appertaining to their charge.

In their offices adjoining the vaults they have innumerable test-bottles

These are tall, thin vials, made of the finest and clearest glass. A wine that has reached a certain age is drawn from the cask, and a sample poured into one of these bottles. This is tightly corked and duly labeled. After a time it is submitted to a searching examination, which consists of the microscope and a thorough analysis. Should the first signs of weakness be detected a second vial is drawn, and the contents are treated with whatever strengthening matter the expert decides upon. This, again, is set out and in due time examined, when, if it is found that a weakness still exists in the amount is drawn and a stronger tincture used, until the wine has recovered its natural healthy and perfect tone. The contents of the barrel are measured and in proportion to that remaining, added the amount of brandy or new wine upon which the old will feed and gradually gain in strength.

The cooper showed the writer a cask of port wine of no choice vintage, a vintage about the very droppings are saved. These are put into bottles of young, healthy choice wines, and soon give them a new strength and bouquet that is highly prized. It was from this cask that the King of Portugal, when he was a young prince and members of his age was invited to taste.

When the wine was poured into small glass the King would not notice that the yellowish, red-tinted, sludgy stuff was of that famous vintage of wine so little remained. He, however, tasted it, and was so surprised at its strength and flavor that he would not permit the prince to touch it.

"And it was," he did not," said the cooper, laughing, "for His Majesty showed the effects of the wine upon his health. He had already tasted several rare ports, and when this got mixed up with the King's own wine, it was the result of the working of the wine upon him, it was some time before he could recover his equilibrium."

So with port wine, so with other wines. There are maderes, burgundies, sherry, hock, and champagne. That mass you see, fill volumes of interesting reading, and the values of which are inestimable.

"Who have been the visitors to the vaults?" answered the cooper. "Well, have you heard of a certain American, Mr. Gladstone has been here; so were Charles Dickens, Mr. Thackeray, Poets Browning and Tennyson; many of the most prominent churchmen of all creeds and nationalities, eminent scientists, journalists, and a part of the world have been here. Indeed, it would be hard to say who has not been here."

Some of the leading wine merchants have their own special vaults, for they pay an annual rental, and every wine merchant and importer who has wines and spirits kept in these vaults for which they pay rental.

At four o'clock the vaults are deserted. The coopers and workmen assembled outside, and only the cooper and lamp-man, and none are permitted to leave until every lamp is accounted for. Should one be missing, then a search is immediately instituted, and it is not until the missing lamp is found that the vaults are again opened.

At night special watchmen make long tours through the vaults, and a cat is continually on duty in case a fire is discovered.

On leaving the vaults and ascending into the fresh air one is seized with a sense of weakness and sickness, which, however, quickly pass away after inhaling a breath of air. "By Wine and Spirit Cellars."

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