

Ratcliffe Highway (alt)

Ratcliffe Highway was a notorious dockland street in the East End of London (now The Highway). "There were public-houses here to which was attached a crew of infamous women; these bring Jack into the house to treat them, but while Jack drinks gin the landlord gives them, from another tap, water; and then against their sober villainy poor Jack has no chance. Jack is prone to grog and dancing, and here they meet him at every turn. Women, wild-eyed, boisterous, with cheeks red with rouge and flabby with intemperance, decked out with dresses and ribbons of the gayest hue, are met with by hundreds - all alike equally coarse, and insolent, and unlovely in manners and appearance, but all equally resolved on victimising poor Jack." from "The night side of London" by J. Ritchie (1857). This is a forebitter and one of two versions recorded by Stan Hugill. Doxy = prostitute. A guinea (21 shillings or £1.05 in decimal) was a solid gold coin equivalent to about £125 at current values. A bottle of London gin would have cost only a couple of shillings. Sailors paid off after a long voyage would be given their dues in large denominations - giving rise to the quandary faced by the poor Jack-tar in this song⁹. Roud 598.

Now as I was a-rolling through London
From Wapping to Ratcliffe Highway
I chanced to drop into a gin-shop
To spend a long night and long day
long day, long day, long day
To spend a long night and long day

A young floozy came swaying up to me
And axed if I'd money to sport
When I gave her a guinea for a bottle
She says: "Damn me eyes you're the sort"
the sort, the sort, the sort
She says: "Damn me eyes you're the sort"

Now the bottle was put on the table
Likewise glasses for everyone
When I axed for the change of my guinea
She tipped me a stave of her song
Chorus

<more>

⁹ <https://archives.vwml.org/records/GG/1/19/1200>

This young doxy flew into a passion
With her hands on both of her hip
Saying: "Sailor, don't you know our fashion?
Do you think you're on board of your ship?"

Chorus

Sez I "If your fashion is to rob me
Tis a fashion I ne'er can abide
So launch out the change for my guinea
Or else I'll give you a broadside"

Chorus

Now a gold watch hung over the mantel
For my guinea I took it as change
And down the back steps I ran nimbly
Saying: "Damn me but 'tis fair exchange"

Chorus

The night being dark in my favour
To the waterfront then I did slip
And stepped on a boat bound for Deptford
And got me aboard of me ship

Chorus

So come all you bold young sailors
That ramble down Ratcliffe Highway
If you chance to go into a gin-shop
Beware lads how long you do stay

Chorus

For the songs and the liquors invite you
And your heart will be all in a rage
If you tender a guinea for a bottle
You can go to the devil for change

Chorus