

BURKE THOMAS

OUT AND
ABOUT
LONDON

Thomas Burke
Out and About London

«Public Domain»

Burke T.

Out and About London / T. Burke — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

1916	5
ROUND THE TOWN, 1917	6
BACK TO DOCKLAND	15
CHINATOWN REVISITED	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

Thomas Burke

Out and About London

1916

Lady, the world is old, and we are young.
The world is old to-night and full of tears
And tumbled dreams, and all its songs are sung,
And echoes rise no more from the tombed years.
Lady, the world is old, but we are young.

Once only shines the mellow moon so fair;
One speck of Time is Love's Eternity.
Once only can the stars so light your hair,
And the night make your eyes my psaltery.
Lady, the world is old. Love still is young.

Let us take hand ere the swift moment end.
My heart is but a lamp to light your way.
My song your counsellor, my love your friend,
Your soul the shrine whereat I kneel and pray.
Lady, the world grows old. Let us be young.

T. B.

ROUND THE TOWN, 1917

It was a lucid, rain-washed morning – one of those rare mornings when London seems to laugh before you, disclosing her random beauties. In every park the trees were hung with adolescent tresses, green and white and yellow, and the sky was busy with scudding clouds. Even the solemn bricks had caught something of the sudden colour of the day, and London seemed to toss in its long, winter sleep and to take the heavy breaths of the awakening sluggard.

I turned from my Fleet Street window to my desk, took my pen, found it in good working order, and put it down. I was hoping that it would be damaged, or that the ink had run out; I like to deceive myself with some excuse for not working. But on this occasion none presented itself save the call of the streets and the happy aspect of things, and I made these serve my purpose. With me it is always thus. Let there come the first sharp taste of Spring in the February air and I am demoralized. Away with labour. The sun is shining. The sky is bland. There are seven hundred square miles of London in which Adventure is shyly lurking for those who will seek her out. What about it? So I drew five pounds from the cash-box, stuffed it into my waistcoat-pocket, and let myself loose, feeling, as the phrase goes, that I didn't care if it snowed. And as I walked, there rose in my heart a silly song, with no words and no tune; or, if any words, something like – how does it go? —

Boys and girls, come out to play —
Hi-ti-hiddley-hi-ti-hay!

But the fool is bent upon a twig. I found the boys preoccupied and the girls unwearied in war-work. One good comrade of the highways and byways had married a wife; and therefore he could not come. Another had bought a yoke of oxen, and must needs go and prove them – as though they were a problem of Euclid. Luckily, I ran against Caradoc Evans, disguised in a false beard, in order to escape the fury of the London Welshmen, and looking like the advance agent of a hard winter. Seeing my silly, hark-halloa face, he inquired what was up. I explained that I was out for a day's amusement – the first chance I had had since 1914. Whereupon, he ran me into a little place round the corner, and bought me an illicit drink at an hour when the minatory finger of Lord d'Abernon was still wagging; and informed me with tears in the voice, and many a "boy bach," and "old bloke," and "indeed," that this was the Year of Grace 1917, and that London was not amusing.

It was not until the third drink that I discovered how right he was. As a born Cockney, living close to London every minute of my life, I had not noticed the slow change in the face and soul of London. I had long been superficially aware that something was gone from the streets and the skies, but the feeling was no more definite than that of the gourmet whose palate hints that the cook has left something – it cannot say what – out of the soup. It was left for the swift perception of the immigrant Welshman to apprise me fully of the truth. But once it was presented to me, I saw it too clearly. My search for amusement, I knew then, was at an end, and what had promised to be an empurpling of the town seemed like to degenerate into a spelling-bee. Of course, I might have gone back to my desk; but the Spring had worked too far into my system to allow even a moment's consideration of that alternative. There remained nothing to do but to wander, and to pray for a glimpse of that tempestuous petticoat of youth that deserted us in 1914. It was a forlorn pursuit: I knew I would never touch its hem.

I never did. I wandered all day with Caradoc bach, and we did this and we did that, while I strove to shake from my shoulders the bundle of dismay that seemed fastened there. The young men having gone to war, the streets were filled with middle-aged women of thirty, in short skirts, trying to attract the aged satyrs, the only men that remained, by pretending to be little girls. At mid-day, that hour when, throughout London, you may hear the symphony of swinging gates and creaking bolts,

we paid hurried calls at the old haunts. They were either empty or filled with new faces. Rule's, in Maiden Lane, was deserted. The Bodega had been besieged by, and had capitulated to, the Colonial army. Mooney's had become the property of the London Irish. The vociferous rehearsal crowds had decamped from the Bedford Head, and left it to strayed and gloomy Service men, who cared nothing for its traditions; and Yates's Wine Lodge, the home of the blue-chinned laddies looking for a shop, was filled with women war-workers.

Truly, London was no more herself. The word carried no more the magical quality with which of old time it was endued. She was no more the intellectual centre, or the political centre, or the social centre of the world. She was not even an English city, like Leeds or Sheffield or Birmingham. She was a large city with a population of nondescript millions.

This I realized more clearly when, a week or so after our tour, an American, whom I was conducting round London, asked me to show him something typically English. I couldn't. I tried to take him to an English restaurant. There was none. Even the old chop-houses, under prevailing restrictions, were offering manufactured food like spaghetti and disguised offal. I turned to the programmes of the music-halls. Here again England was frozen out. There were comedians from France, jugglers from Japan, conjurers from China, trick-cyclists from Belgium, weight-lifters from Australia, buck-dancers from America, and ... England, with all thy faults I love thee still; but do take a bit of interest in yourself. A stranger, arriving from overseas, might suppose that the war was over, and that London was in the hands of the conquerors. This impression he might receive from a single glance at our streets. The Strand at the moment of writing is blocked for pedestrian traffic by Australians and New Zealanders; Piccadilly Circus belongs to the Belgians and the French; and the Americans possess Belgravia. Canadian cafeterias are doing good business round Westminster; French coffee-bars are thriving in the Shaftesbury Avenue district; Belgian restaurants occupy the waste corners around Kingsway; and two more Chinese restaurants have lately been opened in the West End.

The common Cockney seemed to walk almost fearfully about his invaded streets, hardly daring to be himself or talk his own language. Apart from the foreign tongues, which always did annoy his ear, foul language now assailed him from every side: "no bon," "napoo," "gadget," "camouflaged," "buckshee," "bonza," and so on. This is not good slang. Good slang has a quality of its own – a bite and spit and fine expressiveness which do not belong to dictionary words. That is its justification – the supplying of a lacking shade of expression, not the supplanting of adequate forms. The old Cockney slang did justify itself, but this modern Army rubbish, besides being uncouth, is utterly meaningless, and might have been invented by some idiot schoolboy: probably was.

After some search, we found a quiet corner in a bar where the perverted stuff was not being talked, and there we gave ourselves to recalling the little joyous jags that marked the progress of other years. I was dipping the other night into a favourite bedside book of mine – here I'd like to put in a dozen pages on bedside books – a Social Calendar for 1909; a rich reliquary for the future historian; and was shocked on noting the number of simple festivals which are now ruled out of our monotonous year. Do you remember them? Chestnut Sunday at Bushey Park – City and Suburban – Derby and Oaks – Ascot Sunday at Maidenhead – Cup Tie at the Crystal Palace – Spring week-ends by the sea – evening taxi jaunts to Richmond and Staines – gay nights at the Empire and the adjoining bars – supper after the theatre – moonlight trips in the summer season down river to the Nore – polo at Ranelagh – cricket at Lord's and the Oval – the Boat Race – Henley week – Earl's Court and White City Exhibitions, where one could finish the evening on the wiggle-woggle, as a final flicker. And now they have just delivered the most brutal blow of all. Having robbed us of our motors and our cheap railways, they have stolen away from the working-man his (and my) chiefest delight – the beanfeast wagonette. (How I would have loved to take Henry James on one of these jags.) The disappearance of this delight of the summer season is, at the moment, so acute and so

personal a grief, that I cannot trust myself to speak of it. I must withdraw, and leave F. W. Thomas (of *The Star*) to deliver the valedictory address: —

This spells the death of yet another old English institution. One cannot go beanfeasting in traps and pony carts. There would be no room for the cornet man, and without his distended cheeks and dreadful harmony the picture would be incomplete.

That was a great day when we met at the works in the morning, all in our best clothes and squeaky boots, all sporting large buttonholes and cigars of the rifle-range brand.

With the yellow stone jars safely stowed under the seat and the cornet man perched at the driver's left hand, we started off. Usually the route lay through Shoreditch and Hackney to Clapton, and so to the green fields of the Lea Bridge Road.

For the first hour of the journey we were quiet, early-morningish, and a little reminiscent, recalling the glories of past beanfeasts. The cornet man tootled half-heartedly, with many rests and much licking of dry lips. Not until the "Greyhound" was passed did he get well under way, and then there was no stopping him. His face got redder and redder as he blasted his way through his repertoire; a feast of music covering the years between "Champagne Charlie" and Marie Lloyd.

At the end of the drive the horses were put up and baited, and the merry beanfeasters spread themselves and their melody through the glades of Loughton or High Beech, with cold roast beef and pickles at Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge or the "Robin Hood."

And who does not remember that joyful homeward journey, with the cornet man, now ruddier than the cherry, blaring "Little Brown Jug" from well-oiled lungs, while behind him the revellers sang "As your hair grows whiter," and an accordion in the back seats bleated "The Miner's Dream."

As Herbert Campbell used to sing in the old days: —

Then up I came with my little lot,
And the air went blue for miles;
The trees all shook and the copper took his hook,
And down came all the tiles.

That was the real tit-bit of the beanfeast, the rollicking homeward drive, with the brake embowered in branches of trees raped from the Forest, and lit by swaying Chinese lanterns and great bunches of dahlias bought from the cottagers of Loughton, and Chingford.

One always took home a bunch of flowers from a beanfeast, and maybe a pint of shrimps for the missus, and some acorns for the youngsters, or a gilded mug.

The defunct brake had other uses than this. Sometimes it took parties of solemn old ladies in beads and black to an orgy of tea and cake in the grounds of the "Leg of Mutton" at Chadwell Heath. These were prim affairs. Mothers' Meeting from the little red church round the corner. They had no cornet, and the smiling parson rode in the seat assigned to Orpheus.

The youngsters, too, had their days – riotous days shrill with song and gay with coloured streamers, air-balloons and trumpets. How merrily they would bellow that

they were "all a-going to Rye House, so 'Ip-ip-ip-ooray!'" though their destination was Burnham Beeches or Brickett Wood.

Rubber-neck parties of American tourists occasionally saw the sights of London from brakes and wagonettes; solemn people, who for all the signs of holiday they displayed might have been driving to Tyburn Tree.

But the real reason for the brake was the beanfeast with its attendant cornet man and its rubicund driver with his white topper and the little boys running behind and stealing rides on the back step. Until the war is over Epping will know them no more, and the nightingales of Fairlop Plain will sing to the moon undisturbed.

We lunched at the "Trocadero," where a friend on the staff put us in the right place and put before us the right food and the right wine. The rooms looked like a Service mess-room. Every guest looked like every other guest. Men and women alike had fallen victims to that devastating plague of uniforms, and all charm, all significance, had been obliterated by this murrain of khaki and blue serge. The suave curves of feminine dress had been ironed out by the harsh hand of the standardizer, and in their place we saw only the sullen lines of the Land Girls' rig making juts and points with the rigidities of the Women's Army Corps and Women's Police garb. The Vorticists ought to be thankful for the war. It accomplished in one stroke what, in 1914, they were feverishly attempting: it turned life into a wilderness of angles.

"Clothes," said Carlyle, "gave us individuality, distinction, social polity." He ought to see us now. Standard Bread, Standard Suits, Standard This, and Standard That... The very word "standard" must now be so universally loathed by men who have managed to conceal from the controllers some remnants of character, that I wonder the *Evening Standard* manages to retain its popularity without a change of title. If standardizing really helped matters, nobody could complain; but can Dogberry aver that it does? Does it not, in practice, rather hinder than help? In railway carriages the bottled citizen girds against all this aimless interference with his daily life; but his protests are no more considerable than that of the victim in the melodrama: "Have a care, Sir Aubrey, have a care. You have ruined me sister. You have murdered me wife. You have cast me aged father into prison. You have seduced me son. You have sold up me home. But beware, Sir Aubrey, beware. I am a man of quick temper. *Don't go too far.*"

When we looked round the Trocadero, and we remembered the bright company it once held, and then noted the tart aspect of the place under organization, we felt a little unwell, and dared to wonder why efficiency cannot walk with beauty and the zeal for victory go with grace and gladness. Had the marriage, we wondered, been tried by the authorities, and the parties proved to be so palpably incompatible? Or was it that they had been for ever sundered by some one who mistakes dullness for earnestness and ugliness for strength?

However, the rich scents of well-cooked offal, mingled with those of wine and Oriental tobacco, soothed us a little, and we achieved a brief loosening of the prevailing restraint, and allowed our thoughts to run without the chain. Our friend had dug from the depths of the cellar a fragrant Southern wine, true liquid sunshine, tinct with the odour of green seas; a rare bottle to which I made a chant-royal on the back of the menu, and, luckily for you, mislaid the thing, or it would be printed here. We talked freely; not brilliantly, but with just that touch of piquancy that stimulants and narcotics, rightly used, bestow upon the brain.

We lounged over coffee and liqueurs, and then strolled up the Avenue and called at the establishment of "Mr. Francis Downman," that most discriminating and charming of wine-merchants – discriminating because he has given his life to the study of wines; charming because, away from his wine-cellars and in his true name, he is a novelist whose books, so lit with sparkle and *espièglerie*, have carried fair breezes into many a dusty heart. If you have ever visited that old Queen Anne House in Dean Street and glanced at "Mr. Downman's" Bulletins, you will realize at once that here is no ordinary vendor of wines. Wine to "Mr. Downman" is a serious matter. Opening a bottle is an

exquisite ceremony; drinking is a sacrament. I once lunched with "Mr. Downman" in his cool Dutch kitchen "over the shop," and each course was lovingly cooked and served by his own hands, with suitable wines and liqueurs. It was a lesson in simple and courtly living. How pleasant the homes of England might be if our housewives would pay a little attention to correct kitchen and table amenities. "Mr. Downman" would be a public benefactor if he would open a School of Kitchen Wisdom where the little suburban wife might sit at his feet and learn of him. Yes, I know that there are many schools of cookery and housewifery, but these places are managed by people who only know how to cook. "Mr. Downman" would bring to the task all those little elegancies which make a dinner not merely satisfactory, but a refinement of joy. Feeding, like all functions of the human body, is a vulgar business anyway, but here is a man who can raise it to the dignity of a rite.

Further, he has shown us, in those "Bulletins," how to turn advertising into one of the minor arts. Perhaps of all the enormities which the nineteenth century perpetrated in its efforts to make life unbearable, the greatest was the debasing of trade. In the eighteenth century trade was a serene occupation, as you may see by glancing at the files of the old *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Mirror*, *Spectator*, where announcements of goods and merchandise were made in fine flowing English. Advertisement was then a matter of grace, of flourish and address; for people had leisure in which to receive gradual impressions. The merchants of that day did not scream at you; they sat with you over the fire, and held you in pleasant converse, sometimes, in their talk, throwing off some persiflage or apothegm that has become immortal. There was a Mr. George Farr, a grocer, *circa* 1750, who issued some excellent trade tickets from the "Beehive and Three Sugar Loaves"; little cards, embellished with dainty woodcuts that bring to mind an Elzevir bookplate; the pictures a sheer joy to look upon, the prose a delicate pomp of words that delights the ear. Then there were the trade cards of the Goldsmiths' and Silversmiths' Company of the eighteenth century, each one the production of a true artist (Hogarth did several), as well as the tobacco advertisements of the same period. In the latter case, not only were the cards works of art, but poetry was wooed and won for the cause. Near the old Surrey Theatre lived one John Mackey, who sang the praise of his wares in rhyme and issued playbills purporting to announce new tragedies under such titles as *My Snuff-Box*, *The Indian Weed*, *The True Friend*, or *Arrivals from Havannah*, *The Last Pinch*, and so on. The cabinet-makers of the eighteenth century also found time to indite delicious morsels of prose and prepare quaint and harmonious pictures for the delight of their patrons. Mr. Chippendale and Mr. Heppelwhite were most industrious in this direction, and the Society of Upholsterers and Cabinet Makers issued, in 1765, a work now very much sought after: *The Cabinet and Chair Makers' Real Friend and Companion*.

But then, snorting and hustling like a provincial alderman, in came the nineteenth century, with its gospel of Speed-up; and the result was that fair fields and stately streets scream harshly in your ears at every turn: —

Drink Bingo

It is the Best

Eat Dinkydux

You'll hate it at First

This sort of thing continued for many decades, when, happily, its potency became attenuated, and some genius discovered that people were not always responsive to screams; that, after all, the old way was better.

Thus literature returned and linked arms once again with trade. Partly, the circularizing dodge was responsible for this, since, in the circular, the bald statement was hardly good enough. It was found that subtle means must be employed if you are striving to catch a man's attention at the breakfast-table, when sleep still crawls like a slug about the brain and temper is uncertain. Nothing is so riling to the educated person as to have ungrammatical circulars dropped in his letter-box. Their effect is that he heartily detests the article advertised, not because he has tried it and found it wanting, but because of the split infinitive or the infirm phrase. So the whoop and the yell gave place to the full-flowered essay sprigged with the considered phrase. And to my mind the best of all contemporary efforts in this direction are "Mr. Downman's" "Bulletins," of which I have a complete set. Here a fastidious pen is delightfully employed; and not the pen only, but the taste of the book-lover. Indeed, they are lovable productions, having all the gracious response to the eye and the touch of Mr. Arthur Humphreys' anthologies of seventeenth-century poetry. Everything – format, type, paper, and Elian style – breathes an air of serendipity.

The first part of each "Bulletin" consists of a number of essays on questions pertaining to wine and wine-drinking; the second half is a catalogue of "Mr. Downman's" wines and their current prices, with specimen labels, which are such gentle harmonies of line and colour that one is tempted to start collecting them. "Mr. Downman" opens his addresses in the grand manner: —

My Lords, Reverend Fathers, Ladies and Gentlemen

And if you love your Elia, then you must read "Mr. Downman" on Decanters and Decanting, On Corkscrews, On How to Drink Wine, On Bottling, On Patriotism and Wines, On the Suiting of Food to Wine, On Wines at Picnics. His sharp-flavoured prose, full of sly nuances and coquettish conceits, has all the tone of the best claret. Hear him on salads: —

This is the time of salads. And a good salad means good oil. It also means good vinegar, or a fresh and juicy lime or lemon. Now the Almighty has given us better tools for salad-making than any wooden fork or spoon. In conditions of homely intimacy, a salad-maker, when all is ready, will wash his hands well and long as the moment approaches for serving the bowl. He will shun common or perfumed soaps, and will use nothing but a soap made from olive oil. Having dried his hands perfectly on a warm, clean towel, he will finally whisk the cup of dressing into homogeneity, will pour its contents over the salad, and will immediately proceed to wring the

leaves in the liquid as a washerwoman wrings clothes in soapy water. (How horrid!) In doing this he will spoil the appearance of some of the leaves, but he will have a salad fit for the gods.

After sampling a noble Madeira in his cellar cool, in William and Mary Yard, we resumed our crawl, and in the black evening made a tour of other of the old places. At the Café de l'Europe, Mr. Jacobs, leader of the band, played for us a few old waltzes and morceaux reeking of the spirit of 1912; but even he did not handle the fiddle, or seem to care to handle it, in his old happy manner. Like the rest of us, I suppose, he felt that it wasn't worth while; it didn't matter. We called at the "Gambrinus," now owned by a Belgian; at the old "Sceptre," for a coupon's worth of boiled beef; and so to the Café Royal.

Here we received a touch or two from the old times. War has killed many lovely things, but, though it maim and break, it cannot wholly kill the things of the spirit, and in the "Royal" we found that art was still a living thing; ideas were still being discussed as though they mattered. Epstein and Augustus John, both in uniform, were there, and Austin Harrison had his usual group of poets. It was reassuring to see the old domino-playing Frenchmen, who seem part of the fixtures of the place, in their accustomed corner. The girls seemed to have packed away their affrighting futurist gowns, and were arrayed more soberly. That night they seemed to be more like human creatures, and less like deliberate Bohemians.

I am not overfond of the Café Royal, but it is one of the West End shows which visitors feel they must see; and when any provincial visitors wonder: "Why is the Café Royal?" I have one answer for them: "Henri Murger."

It is certain that, but for Murger, there would be no Chelsea and no Café Royal. That man has a lot to answer for. I doubt if any one man (I'm not including kings) has wrought so much havoc in young lives. He meant to warn youth of danger; he actually drove youth towards it.

Any discussion which seeks to name the most dangerous book in the world is certain to bring mention of Rousseau's *Confessions*, of Paine's *Age of Reason*, of Artzibashef's *Sanine*, of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, and other works of subversive tendency. The one book which has really done more harm to young people than any other is seldom remembered in this connection. That book is *Scènes de la Vie de Bohême*; and it is dangerous, not that it contains a line of obscenity or blasphemy, not that it teaches evil as higher than good, but because it founded a cult and taught young people how to ruin their lives. Bohemianism has, of course, existed since the world began; rebels have always been; but it remained for Murger to find a name for it and make a cult of it.

The dangers of this cult to young people lay not in its being an evil cult, but in its being perhaps as fine a cult as any of the world's great creeds: the cult of human sympathy and generosity. The Bohemian makes friends with all kinds and all creeds – sinners and saints, rich and poor; he cares nothing so long as they be kindly. And there lay the danger, for the blood of youth, freed from all restraint, was certain to overdo it. It became a cult of excess. Murger died, but he left behind him a very bitter legacy to the coming generation. As that legacy passed through the years it gathered various adhesions – such as Wilde's "In order to be an artist it is first necessary to ruin one's health," and Flaubert's "Nothing succeeds like excess"; so that very soon art colonies became things discredited, unpleasant to the nostrils of the righteous.

Murger himself saw the life very clearly, for he described it as "Vie gai et terrible"; and he takes no pains to present to us only the lighter, warmer side of it. He shows us everything; yet, so diabolical is his manner, that, even after passing the tragedy of the closing pages, the book and the life it pictures call to every one of us with song in his blood and the spirit of April in his heart.

It first appeared as a feuilleton in a Paris daily, and Murger, with characteristic insouciance, wrote his instalments only a few hours before the time when they were due for the printer; and when he was stumped for material, he invented a little story. Hence that singularly beautiful tale, slammed into the middle of the book – the Story of Francine's Muff – which forms the opening scene of

Puccini's opera founded on the novel. The book has neither balance nor cohesion, and in this it catches its note from its theme. It is a cinematographic succession of scenes, tender and passionate and gay; swift and hectic. He invented and employed the picture-palace manner in literature before the picture-palace was even conceived. The very style is feverish, and from it one visualizes the desperately merry Bohemian slaving with pen and paper in his high garret, and whipping his flagging brain with fierce stimulant, while the printer's boy sits on the doorstep.

It stands alone. There is no book in the literature of the world quite like it. It is the challenge of youth and beauty to the world; and if we – grown wise and weary in the struggle – find a note of ferocity and extravagance in the challenge, then let us judge with understanding, and remember that it is a case of the fine and the weak against the brutal and the ignorant. Murger's voice is the voice of protesting youth. He is illogical; so is youth. He is furious; so is youth. He is heroic; so is youth. He is half-mad with indignation and half-mad with the joy of living; so is youth. It is by its very waywardness and disregard of values that the book captures us.

There is no other book in which the spirit of Paris breathes more easily. Here we have the essential Paris, just as in Thomas Dekker we have the essential London. Poets, novelists and essayists have set themselves again and again to ensnare the elusive Paris between the covers of a book; but Murger alone – though he writes of Paris in 1830 – has succeeded. Those who have never been to Paris should first read his book; then, when they do go, they will experience the sense of coming back to some known place.

It was this insidious book that first tempted youth to escape from a hidebound world; showed it the way out – a way beset by delightful hazards. It offered to all the golden boys and girls a new Utopia, and they were fain to visit it. That it was a false world troubled them not at all. The green glass, the delirious midnight hours, and the pale loveliness of Mimi and Musette were, perhaps, shackles as binding and as fearful as those of Convention. But anything to escape from the irk and thrall of their narrow realities; so away they went, and the end of the story is written in the archives of the Morgue.

After seventy years, however, the middle way has been found. There are few tragedies to-day in the Quartier Latin, and very little gaiety or kindliness; none of the old adventurous spirit. Things are going too well in the studio-world these days. Chelsea and Montmartre have been invaded by the American dilettanti, whose lives are one long struggle to be Bohemians on a thousand a year. If, however, there be those who regard this state of things as an improvement on the old, then let it be remembered that this way was only found after Murger had wrecked his own life and the lives of those who followed so gaily the unkind path down which he led them. It is a pitiful catalogue; the more pitiful since so many of the young dead are anonymous – the young men who might, had they lived, have given the world so much of beauty, but who were unable to pull up short of the precipice. Some of them, of course, we know: Gerard de Nerval, Barbey d'Aureville, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Ernest Dowson; and their London monument is the Café Royal.

* * * * *

At half-past nine all fun ceased, but we had picked up a bunch from Fleet Street, one of whom was taking home two bottles of whisky. So we moved to "another place," and ordered black coffees which drank tolerably well – after some swift surreptitious business with a corkscrew. Later, we strolled across Oxford Street to what remained of the German Quarter. We visited various coffee-bars, where our genial comrade with the bottles again did his duty; did it beautifully, did it splendidly, did it with Vine Street at his ear. And in a grey street off Tottenham Court Road we found a poor man's cabaret. In the back room of a coffee-bar an entertainment was proceeding. Two schonk boys, in straw hats, were at a piano, assisted by an anæmic girl and a real coal-black coon, who gave us the essential rag-times of the South. The place was packed with the finest collection of cosmopolitan toughs I had ever seen in one room. The air, physical and moral, was hardly breathable, and as the

boys were spoiling for a row, one misinterpreted glance would have brought trouble – and lots of it. At different tables, voices were raised in altercation, when not in lusty song, and the general impression the place gave me was that it was a squalid, dirty model of the old Criterion Long Bar. All the meaner, more desperate citizens of the law-breaking world were gathered here; and, though we had broken a few by-laws ourselves that night, we were not anxious to be led into any more shattering of the Doraic tables. So at midnight we adjourned to "another place," and drank dry gingers until three o'clock in the morning. Then, to a Turkish Bath, and so to bed; not very merry, but as cheered in the spirit as the humble, useless citizen is allowed to be in a miserable, hole-and-corner way in war-time.

It had been a sorry experience, this round of visits, in 1917, to quarters last seen in 1914; and it made me curious to know how other familiar nooks had received the wanton assault of kings. In the haphazard sketches that follow I have tried to catch the external war-time atmosphere of a few of the old haunts, so far as a poor reporter may. Later, perhaps, a better hand than mine will discover for us the essential soul of London under siege; and these rough notes may be of some service, since all remembrance of that time was blown away from most minds by the maroons of Armistice Day.

BACK TO DOCKLAND

From my earliest perceiving moments, docks and railway stations have been, for me, the most romantic spots of the city in which I was born and bred. Quays and wharves, cuts, basins, reaches, steel tracks and passenger trains, and all that belonged to the life of the waterside and the railway, spoke to me of illimitable travel and distant, therefore desirable, things.

This feeling I share, I suppose, with millions of other men and children who have been reared in coast cities, and whose minds respond to the large invitations offered by sooty smoke-stacks or the dim outline of a station roof. And if these things pierced the complacency of one's days in the past, how much deeper and more significant their message in those four dreadful years, when men fared forth in ships and trains to new perils unimagined in the quieter years.

That apart, I see docks and railway stations not in their economic or historic aspect, but in the picturesque light, as, perhaps, the most emphatic glory of London. For London's major architectural beauties I care little. Abbeys, cathedrals, old churches, museums, leave me cold; the fine shudder about the shoulders I suffer most sharply before those haphazard wizardries of brick and iron flung together by the exigencies of modern commerce. Their fortuitous ugliness achieves a new beauty. A random eye-full of such townscapes may yield only an impression of squalor, but many acres of squalor produce, by their very vastness, something of the sublime. Belching chimneys, flaring furnaces, the solemn smell of wet coal mingled with that of tar and bilge-water, and the sight of brown sails and surly funnels and swinging cranes – in these misshapen masses I find that delight that others receive from contemplation of Salisbury Cathedral or a spire of Wren's.

The docks of London lie closely in a group – Wapping, Shadwell, Rotherhithe, Poplar, Limehouse, Isle of Dogs, Blackwall, and North Woolwich, and each possesses its own fine-flavoured character. You may know at once, without other evidence than that afforded by the sense of smell, whether you stand in London Docks, Surrey Commercial Docks, West India Docks, Millwall Docks, or Victoria and Albert Docks. To me, the West and East India Docks are soaked in the bright odour and placid clamour of the East, with something of feminine allure in the quality of their appeal. Victoria and Albert Docks I find gaunt and colourless. Surrey Commercial Docks remind me of some coarse merchant from the Royal Exchange, stupidly vulgar in speech, clothes and character.

The East and West India Docks I have treated elsewhere. Of the others, the most exciting are Millwall and London Docks – though of the latter I fear one must now speak in the past tense. Shadwell High Street and St. George's, which border the London Docks, are no longer themselves. All is now charged with gloom, broken only by the anæmic lights of a few miserable mission-halls and coffee-bars for the use of Scandinavian seamen. Awhile back, before this monstrous jest of war, there was a certain raw gaiety about the place brought thither by these same blond vikings; but, since the frenetic agitations of certain timorous people against "all aliens" – as though none but an alien can be a spy – these men are not now allowed to land from their boats, and Shadwell is the poorer of a touch of colour. One might often meet them and fraternize with them in the coffee-bars and beer-shops (there are few "public-houses" in these streets), and hear their view of things. Bearded giants they were, absurdly out of the picture in these tiny, sawdusted rooms, against the hideous bedizenment of the London house of refreshment. They would engage in rich, confused, interminable conversations, using a language which, to the stranger, sounded like a medley of hiccoughs and snorts; and there would be vehement arguments and a large fanning of the breeze. In the upper rooms, on Saturday evenings, one might have singing and dancing to a cracked piano and a superannuated banjo, and there the girls of the quarter would appear, and would do themselves well on seafarers' hospitality.

But the free-and-easy atmosphere is gone. You enter any bar and are at once under a cloud. Suspicion has been bred in all these docks men by the cheap Press. The patriotic stevedores regard you as a disguised alien. The landlord wonders whether you are one of those blasted newspaper men

or are from the Yard. The visitors to the bars are in every case insipid; none of the ripe character that once lit such places to sudden life. Abrupt acquaintance and casual conversation are not to be had. The beer is filthy. The good Burton is gone, and in its place you have a foul concoction which has not the mellowing effect of honest British beer or the exhilarating effect of the light continental brews. Shadwell High Street is now a dirty lane of poor lodging-houses, foul courts, waste tracts of land, mission halls exuding a stale air of diseased hospitality, and those nondescript establishments, ships' chandlers, with their miscellanies of apparently useless lumber, stored in such a heap that it would seem impossible to find any article immediately required. In short, social life here is as it should be, according to the unwearied in war-work.

Still, there are some adorable morsels of domestic architecture to be found up narrow alleys: old cottages and tumbling buildings, mellowed by centuries of association with many weathers and with men and ships from the green and golden seas that lie beyond the muddy waters of London River; and these supply one touch of animation to the prevailing moribundity.

Very different are the Millwall Docks. Little material beauty here, but something much better – good company, and plenty of it. The docks lie at the south of the Isle of Dogs, amid a flat stretch of dreary warehouses and factories, and you approach them by a long curving street of poor cottages and "general" shops. The island is a place of harsh discords, for Cubitt's works are established here, and the ring of hammers rises above the roar of furnaces, and the vociferous life of the canals above the scream of the siren and the moan of the hooter, and the concerted voices of the island seem to cry the accumulated agony of the East End. Great arc lights, suspended from above, when cargoes are being unloaded by night, fling into sudden illumination or shadow the faces and figures of the groups of workers as they stagger up the gangways with their loads, and lend to the whole scene an air of theatrical illusion. In the bars you find sweaty engineers and grimy stokers. Here is a prolific field of character; mostly British, though a few Lascars may be found, drinking solitary drinks or parading the streets with their customary air of bewilderment. Here are nut-brown toilers of the sea, whose complexions suggest that they have been trapped by that advertiser in the popular Press who offers his toilet wares with the oracular pronouncement that "Handsome Men Are Slightly Sunburnt." Here are men who have circled the seven seas. Here, calm and taciturn, is a man who knows Pitcairn Islanders to speak to; who produces from one pocket a carved ivory god, presented to him by some native of Java, and from the other Old Timothy's One-Horse Snip for the Big Race.

Under the meagre daylight and the opulent shadows of these docks you may drink beer and listen to casual chit-chat that carries you round the world and into magical hidden places, and brings you back with a jerk to the Isle of Dogs.

"Yerce. Two bob a pound the 'Ome an' Colonial was arstin' the missus for the stuff. I soon went round an' told 'em where they could put it. Well, 'sI was sayin', after we left Rangoon, we –"

The land in this district consists, for the most part, of oozing marsh, so that, when a gale sweeps from the mouth of the river, it reaches the island with unexpended force. Then the sky seems to scream in harmony with the rattling windows. Saloon signs swing grotesquely. The river assumes a steely hue, heaving and rushing, sucking against staples, wharves and barges, and rising in ineffectual splashes against the gates of the docks, until you seek the public bar of the "Dog and Thunderstorm" as a sanctuary. There, amid the babble of pewter and glass and the punctuation of the cash register, you forget any London gale in listening to stories of typhoons, cyclones, and other freaks of the elements common to the Pacific and the meeting of the waters round the Horn.

Many hours have I squandered on the ridiculous bridge of the Isle of Dogs, in sunlight or twilight, grey mist or velvet darkness, building my dreams about the boats as they dropped downstream to the oceans of the world and their ports with honey-syllabled names – Swatow, Rangoon, Manila, Mozambique, Amoy – returning in normal times, with fantastic cargoes of cornelian and jade, malachite and onyx, fine shapes of ivory and coral, sharp spices of betel-nut and bhang, and a secret tin or two of li-un – perhaps not returning at all. There I would stand, giving

to each ship some name and destination born of my own fancy, and endowing it with a marvellous meed of adventure.

It is an exciting experience for the landsman Cockney, strolling the streets about the docks, to rub shoulders with other little Cockneys, in blue serge and cotton scarves, who have accepted the non-committal invitation offered by the funnel and the rigging over the walls of Limehouse Basin. One remembers the story of the pale curate at the church concert, at which one of the entertainers had sung a setting of Kipling's "Rolling Down to Rio." "Ah, God!" he said, wringing his thin hands, "that's what I often feel like... Rolling down to Rio." And in these streets one meets insignificant little men who have done it; who have rolled down to Rio and gone back to Mandalay, and seen the dawn come up like thunder outer China 'cross the Bay.

And I am proud to have nodding acquaintance with them. I am glad they have drunk beer with me. I am glad I have clicked the chopsticks in Limehouse Causeway with the yellow boys who can talk of Canton and Siam and North Borneo and San Francisco. I am glad I have salaamed noble men of India at the Asiatics' Home, and heard their stories of odourous villages in the hills and of the seas about India, and of strange islands which mere Cockneys pick out on the map with an uncertain forefinger – Andamans, Nicobars, Solomons, and so forth. I am glad from having met men who know Java as I know London; who know the best places in Tokio for tea and the most picturesque spots in Formosa; who can direct me to a good hotel in Singapore, should I ever go there, and who know where Irish whisky can be bought in Sarawak. Why study guidebooks, or consult with the omniscient Mr. Cook, when you may find about the great ornamental gates of the docks of London natives of all corners of the world who can provide you with a hundred exclusive tips which will make smooth the traveller's way over every obstacle or untoward incident? Indeed, why travel at all, when you may travel by proxy; when, by hanging round the docks of London, you may travel, on the lips of these men, through jungle, ocean, white town, palm grove, desert island, and suffer all the sharp sensations of standing silent upon a peak in Darien, the while you are taking heartening draughts of mild and bitter in the saloon bar of the "Star of the East"?

CHINATOWN REVISITED

"Chinatown, my Chinatown, where the lights are low" – a fragment of a music-hall song in praise of Chinatown which sticks ironically in my memory. The fact that the lights are low applies at the time of writing to the whole of London; and as for the word "Chinatown," which once carried a perfume of delight, it is now empty of meaning save as indicating a district of London where Chinamen live. To-day Limehouse is without salt or savour; flat and unprofitable; and of all that it once held of colour and mystery and the macabre, one must write in the past tense. The missionaries and the Defence of the Realm Act have together stripped it of all that furtive adventure that formerly held such lure for the Westerner.

It was in 1917 that I returned to it, after an absence of some years. In that year I received an invitation that is rightly accepted as a compliment: I was asked by Alvin Langdon Coburn to meet him at his studio, and let him make from my face one of those ecstatic muddles of grey and brown that have won for him the world's acknowledgment as the first artist of the camera. Our meeting discovered a mutual enthusiasm for Limehouse, and we arranged an excursion. There, we said to ourselves, we shall find yet a taste of the pleasant things that the world has forgotten: soft movement, solitude, little courtesies, as well as wonderful things to buy. There we shall find sharp-flavoured things to eat and drink, and josses and chaste carvings, and sharp knives. Oh, and the tea, too – the little two-ounce packets of suey-sen at sevenpence, that clothe the hour of five o'clock with delicate scents and dreams.

But the suey-sen was gone, done to death by the tea-rationing order. Gone, too, was the bland iniquity of the place. Our saunter through Pennyfields and the Causeway was a succession of disillusionments. The spirit of the commercial and controlled West breathed on us from every side. All the dusky delicacies were suppressed. Dora had stepped in and khyboshed the little haunts that once invited to curious amusement. Opium, li-un, and other essences of the white poppy, secretly hoarded, were fetching £30 per pound. The hop-hoads had got it in the neck, and the odour of gin-seng floated seldom upon the air. The old tong feuds had been suppressed by stern policing, and Thames Police Court had become almost as suave and seemly as Rumpelmayer's. Even that joyous festival, the Feast of the Lanterns, kept at the Chinese New Year, had fallen out of the calendar. The Asiatic seamen had been made good by an Order in Council. All for the best, no doubt; yet how one missed the bizarre flame and salt of the old Quarter.

We found Pennyfields and the Causeway uncomfortably crowded, for the outward mail sailings were reduced, and the men who landed in the early days had been unable to get away. So the streets and lodging-houses were thronged with Arabs, Malays, Hindoos, South Sea Islanders, and East Africans; and the Asiatics' Home for Destitute Orientals was having the time of its life. Every cubicle in the hotel was engaged, and many wanderers were sleeping where they could. Those with money paid for their accommodation; for the others, a small grant from the India Office secured them board and bed until such time as proper arrangements could be made. The kitchens were working overtime, for each race or creed has its own inexorable laws in the matter of food. Some eat this and some eat that, and others will eat anything – save pork – provided that prayers are spoken over it by an appointed priest.

At half-past nine an occasional tipsy Malay might be seen about the streets, but the old riots and mêlées were things of the past. In the little public-house at the corner of Pennyfields we found the usual crowd of Chinks and white girls, and the electric piano was gurgling its old sorry melodies, and beer and whisky were flowing; but the whole thing was very decorous and war-timish.

We did, however, find one splash of colour. A new and very gaudy restaurant had lately been opened in a narrow by-street, and here we took a meal of noodle, chow-chow and awabi, and some tea that was a mocking echo of the old suey-sen. The room was crowded with yellow boys and a few white girls. Suddenly, from a corner table, occupied by two of the ladies, came a sharp stir. A few

heated words rattled on the air, and then one rose, caught the other a resounding biff in the neck, and screamed at her: —

"You dare say I'm not respectable! I *am* respectable. I come from Manchester."

This evidence the assaulted one refused to regard as final. She rose, reached over the table, and clawed madly at her opponent's face and clothes. Then they broke from the table, and fought, and fell, and screamed, and delivered the hideous animal noises made by those who see red. At once the place boiled. I've never been in a Chinese rebellion, but if the clamour and the antics of the twenty or so yellow boys in that café be taken as a faint record of such an affair, it is a good thing for the sensitive to be out of. To the corner dashed waiters and some customers, and there they rolled one another to the floor in their efforts to separate the girls, while others stood about and screamed advice in the various dialects of the Celestial Empire. At last the girls were torn apart, and struggled insanely in half a dozen grips as they hurled inspired thoughts at one another, or returned to the old chorus of "Dirty prostitute." "I ain't a prostitute. I come from Manchester. Lemme gettater."

And with a final wrench the respectable one did get at her. She broke away, turned to a table, and with three swift gestures flung cup, saucer and sauce-boat into the face of her traducer. That finished it. The proprietor had stood aloof while the girls tore each other's faces and bit at uncovered breasts. But the sight of his broken crockery acted as a remover of gravity. He dashed down the steps, pushed aside assistants and advisers, grabbed the nearest girl – the respectable one – round the waist, wrestled her to the top of the marble stairs that lead from the door to the upper restaurant, and then, with a sharp knee-kick, sent her headlong to the bottom, where she lay quiet.

Whereupon her opponent crashed across a table in hysterics, kicking, moaning, laughing and sobbing: "You've killed 'er – yeh beast. You've killed 'er. She's my pal. Oo. Oo. Oooooowh!"

This lasted about a minute. Then, suddenly, she arose, pulled herself together, ran madly down the stairs, picked up her pal, and staggered with her to the street. At once, without a word of comment, the company returned placidly to its eating and drinking; and this affair – an event in the otherwise dull life of Limehouse – was over.

Years ago, such affairs were of daily occurrence, and the West India Dock Road became a legend to frighten children with at night. But the times change. Chinatown is a back number, and there now remains no corner to which one may take the curious visitor thirsting for exotic excitement – unless it be the wilds of Tottenham.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.