

7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY **THOMAS BURKE**

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 *best*
short stories by
Thomas Burke



EDITED BY
August Nemo

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

The Author

THOMAS BURKE WAS BORN Sydney Thomas Burke on 29 November 1886 in Clapham, a southern suburb of London that by the turn of the century had fallen out of favour with the middle-classes. Burke's father died when he was barely a few months old and he was eventually sent to live with his uncle in Poplar. At the age of ten he was removed to a home for middle class boys who were "[r]espectably descended but without adequate means to their support." When Burke turned sixteen he started working as an office boy, a job that he deeply detested. In 1901, he published his first professional written work entitled "The Bellamy Diamonds" in the magazine Spare Moments. He also edited some anthologies of children's poetry that were published in 1910-1913.

In 1915, Burke published *Nights in Town: A London Autobiography*, which featured his descriptions of working-class London nightlife including the essay, 'A Chinese Night, Limehouse' However, it was not until the publication of *Limehouse Nights* in 1916 that he obtained any substantial acclaim as an author. This collection of melodramatic short stories, set in a lower-class environment populated by Chinese immigrants, was published in three British periodicals, *The English Review*, *Colour* and *The New Witness*, and received marked attention from literary reviewers. *Limehouse Nights* helped to earn Burke a reputation as "the laureate of London's Chinatown". Burke's writing also influenced contemporary popular forms of entertainment, such as the nascent film industry. Indeed, D. W. Griffith used the short story "The Chink and the Child"

from Limehouse Nights as the basis for his popular silent film Broken Blossoms (1919).

Burke continued to develop his descriptions of London life throughout his later literary works. He gradually expanded his range with novels such as *The Sun in Splendor*, which was published in 1926. He also continued to publish essays on the London environment, including pieces such as "The Real East End" and "London in My Times". Burke died in the Homeopathic Hospital in Queens Square, Bloomsbury on 22 September 1945. His short story "The Hands of Ottermole" was later voted the best mystery of all time by critics in 1949.

The Chink and the Child

IT IS A TALE OF LOVE and lovers that they tell in the low-lit Causeway that slinks from West India Dock Road to the dark waste of waters beyond. In Pennyfields, too, you may hear it; and I do not doubt that it is told in far-away Tai-Ping, in Singapore, in Tokio, in Shanghai, and those other gay-lamped haunts of wonder whither the wandering people of Limehouse go and whence they return so casually. It is a tale for tears, and should you hear it in the lilled tongue of the yellow men, it would awaken in you all your pity. In our bald speech it must, unhappily, lose its essential fragrance, that quality that will lift an affair of squalor into the loftier spheres of passion and imagination, beauty and sorrow. It will sound unconvincing, a little . . . you know . . . the kind of thing that is best forgotten. Perhaps . . .

But listen.

It is Battling Burrows, the lightning welterweight of Shadwell, the box o' tricks, the Tetrarch of the ring, who enters first. Battling Burrows, the pride of Ratcliff, Poplar and Limehouse, and the despair of his manager and backers. For he loved wine, woman and song; and the boxing world held that he couldn't last long on that. There was any amount of money in him for his parasites if only the damned women could be cut out; but again and again would he disappear from his training quarters on the eve of a big fight, to consort with Molly and Dolly, and to drink other things than barley-water and lemon-juice. Wherefore Chuck Lightfoot, his manager, forced him to fight on any and every occasion while he was good and a money-maker; for at any moment the collapse might come, and Chuck would be

called upon by his creditors to strip off that “shirt” which at every contest he laid upon his man.

Battling was of a type that is too common in the eastern districts of London; a type that upsets all accepted classifications. He wouldn’t be classed. He was a curious mixture of athleticism and degeneracy. He could run like a deer, leap like a greyhound, fight like a machine, and drink like a suction-hose. He was a bully; he had the courage of the high hero. He was an open-air sport; he had the vices of a French decadent.

It was one of his love adventures that properly begins this tale; for the girl had come to Battling one night with a recital of terrible happenings, of an angered parent, of a slammed door. . . . In her arms was a bundle of white rags. Now Battling, like so many sensualists, was also a sentimentalist. He took that bundle of white rags; he paid the girl money to get into the country; and the bundle of white rags had existed in and about his domicile in Pekin Street, Limehouse, for some eleven years. Her position was nondescript; to the casual observer it would seem that she was Battling’s relief punch-ball — an unpleasant post for any human creature to occupy, especially if you are a little girl of twelve, and the place be the one-room household of the lightning welter-weight. When Battling was cross with his manager . . . well, it is indefensible to strike your manager or to throw chairs at him, if he is a good manager; but to use a dog-whip on a small child is permissible and quite as satisfying; at least, he found it so. On these occasions, then, when very cross with his sparring partners, or over-flushed with victory and juice of the grape, he would flog Lucy. But he was reputed by the boys to be a good fellow. He only whipped the child when he was drunk; and he was only drunk for eight months of the year.