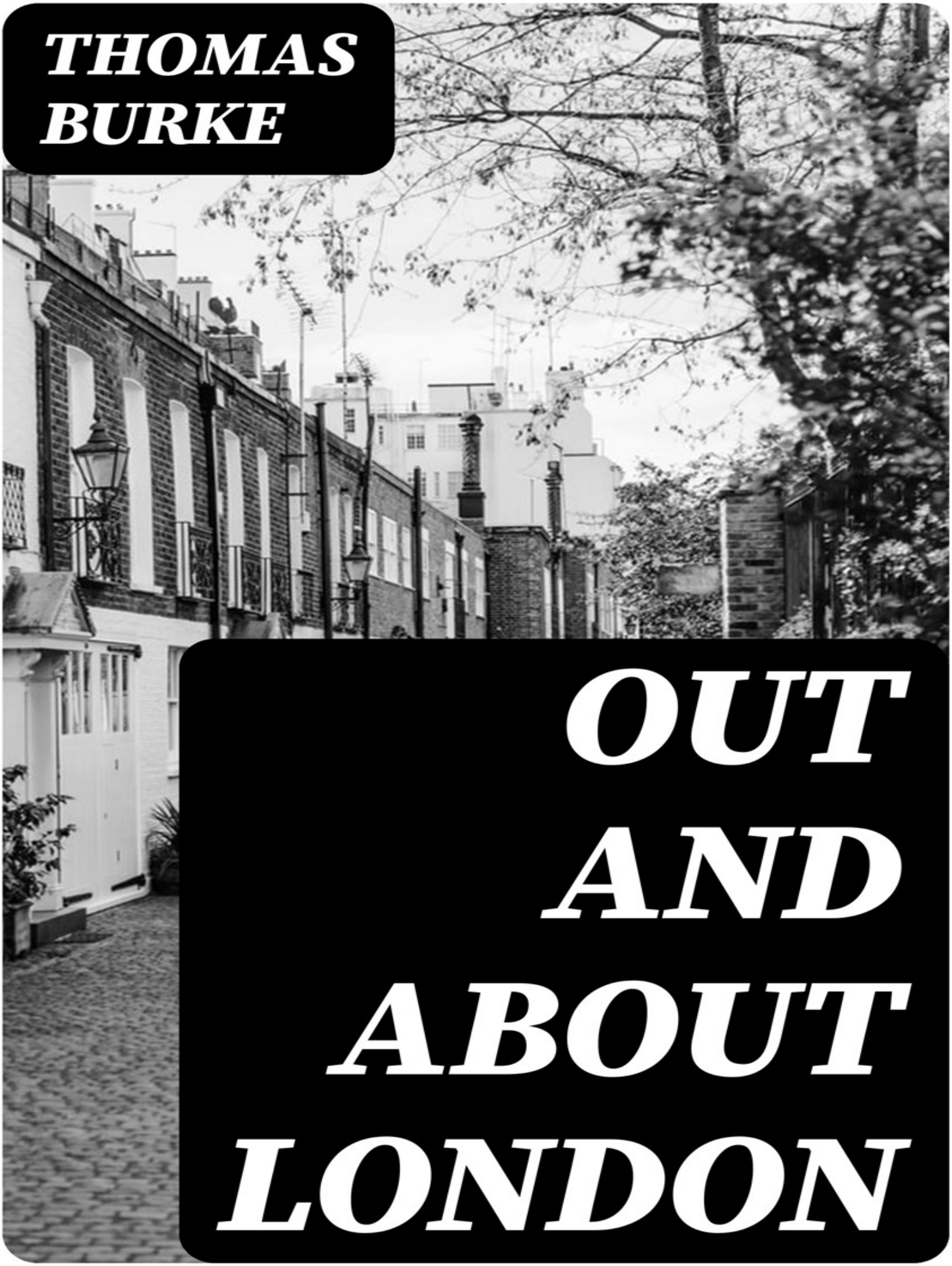
THOMAS BURKE



OUT AND ABOUT LONDON

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ROUND THE TOWN, 1917

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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 bottlefed 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.