

## A Glutton for London

*The London Spy: A Book of Town Travels, by Thomas Burke. New York: The George H. Doran Company. \$2.00.*

IF for nothing else, we must at least give Thomas Burke credit for intensive and assiduous cultivation of his field. I think Christopher Morley once pointed out Mr. Burke's habit of repeating himself; certainly, now, that habit is reaching alarming proportions. Mr. Burke has rewritten his most popular book, Limehouse Nights, three times: as verse in *The Song Book of Quong Lee of Limehouse*, as a novel in *Twinkletoes* and as additional short stories in *More Limehouse Nights*. And the material of Mr. Burke's first and best book, *Nights in Town*, has been worked over into four other volumes: *London Lamps*, *Out and About*, *The Outer Circle* and now *The London Spy*. I fancy that Mr. Burke must think of his London as a large and somewhat juicy sponge: the first squeeze, when the sponge was fairly dripping and aching for friendly fingers, brought forth *Limehouse Nights* and *Nights in London*; the second series of squeezes, with the sponge continually drier, came off not so successfully; now, in *The London Spy*, Mr. Burke hurts his fingers and produces very little juice indeed. His sponge has become a residue. *The London Spy*, in short, is thin stuff. Mr. Burke devotes himself once again to a casual appraisal of various phases of London life; he rambles and wanders, mostly at night, and sets down what he finds. He visits a movie studio in Islington, buys pipes at Dunhill's in Duke Street, discovers pubs and eating places in remote corners, investigates Berwick Street Market, listens to Cockney confessions at the Thames Police Court, drinks vermouth in Canning Town, discovers a streetful of beautiful children in White Horse Lane, smokes opium near the Dock Road, and finds out, after all, that "Bloomsbury was never so bad as it has been painted." Only Westminster and the night clubs are neglected. And even the chimes of Big Ben are duly noted down.

It may be true that London is big enough to stand nine books about her from one hand. But that hand should be a bigger one than Thomas Burke's. JOHN GUNTHER.

## Just Nerves

*Just Nerves, by Austen Fox Riggs, with an introduction by Henry Van Dyke. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 90c.*

THIS book is a little eighty-seven page affair of sound practical advice from the physician to the nervous layman and the parent of the nervous child. Dr. Riggs is, as Henry Van Dyke in introducing him assures us, "sane, modest, helpful and encouraging." He is also dogmatic as becomes the good physician upon whom all rely for encouragement. He is familiar with modern psychological belief, and garnishes the book with a chapter on psychology. Moreover this chapter is presumably part of his treatment: since scientific knowledge is power, the nervous reader gains confidence if he is taught to understand the mind, even though he be taught in but eleven pages. A jolly little example of correspondence school psychology, by a successful physician, sincerely motivated, and probably as right as the necessity of an assured manner permits.

Such books always raise the dilemma of the two-fold function of language. Do we talk and write to influence our fellow-men or to tell the truth? What are we to do when the two functions are incompatible, as they are when the proper verbal spur to action is gained only by the pre-

tense that we are uttering facts? Dr. Riggs proceeds on the thesis that "self-knowledge, psychologically and ethically, is the best assurance against nervous breakdown," but his book is better understood as a psychological stimulus than as a psychological text. One wonders nevertheless whether the majority of nervous laymen are such muddy thinkers as to receive the assurance of power that knowledge gives from his vague account of the "spiritual" element in mental life.

The last two chapters give common sense rules for the child and the adult: four symptoms to be avoided with the child, ten rules for the adult. They are all good advice, and they are true to common sense in that they involve an inconsistency. You never could tell from reading this book whether man is a free agent or a pawn on the chessboard of life. Of course not, for the nervous man needs to adhere to both positions. He needs confidence and confidence comes both when he is relieved of responsibility by being told that his mental life is dependent on external factors and also when he is made responsible by being assured that his cure lies within his own power. But then no one ever maintained that the knowledge that is power is always self-consistent.

The best thing about the book is its insistence on the reality of the mental life: nervousness and all the other mental goods and ills are just as real as the broken leg or the strong arm. There are very few of us but need this advice

EDWIN G. BORING.

## Pio Baroja

*The Quest, by Pio Baroja. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.*

THE realism of this new novel of Baroja's will disappoint whatever portion reads it of that now famous average, the American reading public. For these devotees of the modern genre of clutter in art, there is in this book neither the sordid clap-trap of *Gopher Prairie's* thoroughfare, nor any of the sentimental ecstasies of Mark Sabre's story. Rather is it an almost diabolical selection of life's constituents pared to the quick. A tale told in essentials only, and these as elemental as grit.

With such terms—cruel, bitter, but beautiful in their lucid brutality—is told this story of Madrid's underworld; of the struggle of Manuel, son of the unimaginative and consumptive drudge Petra, a youth forecursed with sensitiveness and spirit in this world of brothel, beggars' court and gutter; of Roberto's romantic search—ever held in by the set pattern of the author—for a woman and the way to a hundred million reales; of Leandro and Milagros's tragic adolescent passion. A sinister tale, perhaps, but not a sordid one. Its terms are too true for that, and it is sinister only in the sense that all such elemental living is sinister.

For Baroja is too much of an artist to falsify his matter in any interest. He knows that even in the squalid boarding house on Mesonero Romanos Street there is room for an occasional kindness; that there is the haven of Senor Custodio's home among the wretched huts of the rag-pickers; that the spark of at least one gutter-rat's life is at some diviner fire. And he knows that the city is itself a harsh loveliness—whether in the full glare of the southern sun, among its transparent mists, or through slants of metallic rain. With such has he builded, and his art—so firmly and truly grounded—attains the vitality and beauty of hard things, things that endure.

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