

William Plomer (1903-73)

10 *Slightly Foxed: or, the Widower of Bayswater*

Decades ago wits, poets and dukes
Circled like planets round Gloria Jukes,
Bluestocking, tuft-hunter, *grande amoureuse*—
Was ever a *salon* brilliant as hers?

Her name still turns up though she's turned up her toes, 5
You meet her in memoirs, they still quote her *mots*,
And old crones remember her faults and her furs—
Such foibles, my dear, such sables were hers!

A wrecker of homes and a breaker of hearts
She talked like a book and encouraged the arts, 10
Political hostesses envied her poise,
And said they preferred conversation to noise.

Her cook was a dream, her pearls were in ropes,
She furthered ambitions, she realized hopes,
Lent Dowson a fiver, put rouge on her eyebrows, 15
Enchanted grandees and reconciled highbrows,

Acclimatized novel Bohemian behaviour
In the stuffiest house in Victorian Belgravia,
And when St John's Wood was abandoned to orgies
Behaved like a dignified bride at St George's. 20

A Personage paid to her regal *poitrine*
A compliment royal, and she looked like a queen—
But of some Ruritanian kingdom, maybe—
All plastered with gifts like a Christmas tree.

When her guests were awash with champagne and with gin 25
She was recklessly sober, as sharp as a pin:
An abstemious man would reel at her look
As she rolled a bright eye and praised his last book.

She twitted George Moore, she flirted with Tree,
Gave dear Rider Haggard material for *She*, 30
Talked scansion with Bridges and scandal with Wilde,
To Drinkwater drank and at Crackanthorpe smiled.

Brzeska and Brooke were among those she knew,
And she lived long enough to meet Lawrences too,
D. H. and T. E.– she, who'd known R. L. S., 35
Talked to Hardy of *Kim*, and to Kipling of *Tess*!

Now she's been dead for more than ten years
We look round in vain to discover her peers;
The Gloria (it has often been said) is departed
And a new, and inferior period has started . . . 40

But tucked right away in a Bayswater attic,
Arthritic, ignoble, stone-deaf and rheumatic,
There still lingers on, by the strangest of flukes,
Yes, Gloria's husband– Plantagenet Jukes!

Ignored in her lifetime, he paid for her fun, 45
And enjoyed all the fuss. When she died he was done.
He sold up the house and retired from the scene
Where nobody noticed that he'd ever been.

His memoirs unwritten (though once he began 'em)
He lives on a hundred and fifty per annum 50
And once in the day totters out for a stroll
To purchase two eggs, *The Times*, and a roll.

Up to now he has paid for his pleasures and needs
With books he had saved and that everyone reads,
Signed copies presented by authors to Gloria 55
In the reigns of King Edward and good Queen Victoria.

They brought in fair prices but came to an end,
Then Jukes was reduced to one book-loving friend,
A girl of the streets with a smatter of culture
And the genial ways of an African vulture. 60

To this bird he offered the last of the lot,

A volume of Flecker beginning to rot.
She opened it, stormed: 'Cor blimey, you're potty!
D'you think I can't see that the pages are spotty!

'Your Flecker is foxed, you old fool, and I'm through!' 65
Then out of the door in a tantrum she flew,
Leaving poor Jukes, in the black-out, in bed
With his past, and the book, and a bruise on his head.

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)