

William Plomer (1903-73)

4 *French Lisette: a Ballad of Maida Vale*

Who strolls so late, for mugs a bait,  
In the mists of Maida Vale,  
Sauntering past a stucco gate  
Fallen, but hardly frail?

You can safely bet that it's French Lisette, 5  
The pearl of Portsdown Square,  
On the game she has made her name  
And rather more than her share.

In a coat of cony with her passport phony  
She left her native haunts, 10  
For an English surname exchanging *her* name  
And then took up with a ponce.

Now a meaning look conceals the hook  
Some innocent fish will swallow,  
Chirping 'Hullo, Darling!' like a cheeky starling 15  
She'll turn, and he will follow,

For her eyes are blue and her eyelids too  
And her smile's by no means cryptic,  
Her perm's as firm as if waved with glue,  
She plies an orange lipstick, 20

And orange-red is her perky head  
Under a hat like a tiny pie—  
A pie on a tart, it might be said,  
Is redundant, but oh, how spry!

From the distant tundra to snuggle under her 25  
Chin a white fox was conveyed,  
And with winks and leerings and Woolworth earrings  
She's all set up for trade.

Now who comes here replete with beer?  
A quinquagenarian clerk 30  
Who in search of Life has left 'the wife'  
And 'the kiddies' in Tufnell Park.

Dear sir, beware! for sex is a snare  
And all is not true that allures.  
Good sir, come off it! She means to profit 35  
By this little weakness of yours:

Too late for alarm! Exotic charm  
Has caught in his gills like a gaff,  
He goes to his fate with a hypnotized gait,  
The slave of her silvery laugh, 40

And follows her in to her suite of sin,  
Her self-contained bower of bliss,  
They enter her flat, she takes his hat,  
And he hastens to take a kiss.

Ah, if only he knew that concealed from view 45  
Behind a 'folk-weave' curtain  
Is her fancy man, called Dublin Dan,  
His manner would be less certain,

His bedroom eyes would express surprise,  
His attitude less languor, 50  
He would watch his money, not call her 'Honey',  
And be seized with fear or anger.

Of the old technique one need scarcely speak,  
But oh, in the quest for Romance  
'Tis folly abounding in a strange surrounding 55  
To be divorced from one's pants.

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)