

William Plomer (1903-73)

9 *A Shot in the Park*

[Based upon an incident in the memoirs of the Edwardian hostess, Mrs Hwfa Williams.]

1

In the light beneath the leafage
In the afternoon in May
In the Park and near the Row
Gracefully from Hwfa
Mrs Hwfa Williams turned away, 5
Saying 'Hwfa, I must go,
I expect a mob for tea;
Such fun, but I must fly—
You dine, I think with me?
Till then, my dear, good-bye!' 10

Mrs Hwfa Williams
Twirled and furled her parasol,
Lightly stepped into her carriage,
Thinking it was all such fun—
Life, and May, and marriage. 15
Such a pretty moment—
How were they to figure
Fate in ambush, taking aim,
Finger on the trigger?

Later in a tea-gown talking 20
Over twinkling tea-things on a tray
(Hwfa in the Park still walking)
She was heard to say:

'When my husband and I gave it out
We should move to Great Cumberland Place 25
My sister-in-law gave a shriek—
"My dears, you'll be lost without trace!"
And she said it with such a grimace!

“It’s so utterly out of the world!
So fearfully wide of the mark! 30
A Robinson Crusoe existence will pall
On that unexplored side of the Park—
Not a soul will be likely to call!”

‘Disparaging all one adores,
Relations are such a disgrace; 35
They gossip, as bluebottles buzz,
They deplore what one is and one does—
But they call at Great Cumberland Place!’

2

At home the tea-time tittle-tattle; in the Mall
Two different orbits about to intersect: 40
That a poor clerk and Mr Hwfa Williams
Should there converge nobody could expect
And only a clairvoyant could foretell.

Gravely conferring with a crony, Hwfa
On one side saunters; on the other glares 45
A young man, seemingly a loafer,
Whose small brain, infinitely busier than theirs,
Has been inflamed by Post Office affairs.

He sends the telegrams that other people write;
From overwork a breakdown now impends; 50
Abrupt, elliptic phrases day and night he sends,
Recurring in his fevered brain all day
To be reiterated in his brain all night.

Now all’s confused, things are not what they seem,
He stands bemused, as if he had been drinking; 55
Life is a cryptic, an intolerable dream—
RETURN TONIGHT AUNT HENRIETTA SINKING:
CONGRATULATIONS DEAR FROM ALL AT CHEAM.

GLOXINIA WILTING ORDER PINK GERANIUM:
TEN THOUSAND OFFERED SILLY NOT TO SELL: 60
Telegraphese tattoos upon his eardrums,
Like red-hot tintacks drives into his cranium

The public syntax of his private hell-

THANK YOU BOTH ENCHANTED:
OIL CONCESSION GRANTED: 65
HOPE ARRIVE NUNEATON TEN TO EIGHT:
ARRIVING SEVEN MABEL STOP:
DON'T SELL REFECTORY TABLE STOP:
CAT OUT OF BAG YOUR TELEGRAM TOO LATE.

Suddenly he sees two frock-coats passing, 70
Two top-hats tilted in tête-à-tête-
These are to blame! Revenge upon the senders
Of countless telegrams! He feels the uprush
Of a delayed explosive charge of hate.

He draws and points a pistol, then he shoots. 75
'Ouch!' cried Hwfa. Something has distressed him.
He stumbles, mutters 'Somebody has shot me!'
He falls. Blood falls upon his patent-leather boots,
And cries go up, 'A murderer! Arrest him!'

3

In the light beneath the leafage 80
Late that afternoon in May,
In the Mall and on the ground
Mr Hwfa Williams lay,
Happily not dead, but wounded.

'How do you feel?' they asked. 85
'Injured,' he said, 'and quite astounded.'
Mr Hwfa Williams
Was attended by a Dr Fletcher,
And vexed, but bravely bland,
Was carried home upon a stretcher; 90

And
On Mr Hwfa Williams' forehead
Mrs Hwfa Williams laid a
Ministering angel's hand.

Later 'Hwfa,' Mrs Hwfa Williams said, 95
'Do you prefer the sofa to your bed?'

'My dear, I don't mind *where* I lie;
What *does* it signify
When not a living soul can tell me why,
About to cross St James's Park 100
I'm picked on like a sitting pheasant
By, so they tell me, a demented clerk,
A truant from the G.P.O., Mount Pleasant?
Too many wires, they say, had turned his brain—
But why he turned on *me*—no, *that* they can't explain.' 105

4

'Good morning, have you heard the news?
You'll be amazed!' 'Well, what?'
'I nearly fainted when I read
That Hwfa Williams has been shot.'

'My dear, your coffee's getting cold—' 110
'Well, does it matter in the least?'
All over London in the morning
Breakfast was a headline feast.

'Now here is what the paper says:
A dastardly assault . . . the crime 115
Seems without motive . . . an arrest was made . . .
Alleged . . . admitted . . . passing at the time . . .

'A grudge . . . dispatch of telegrams . . .
Pistol discarded, lying in the mud . . .
Enquiries made at Mr Williams' home . . . 120
Life not in danger . . . shock and loss of blood.

'No one is safe, it seems, these days:
To stroll across St James's Park
Is to receive a bullet in the leg
From some unhinged, ferocious clerk: 125

'A little learning, as our fathers knew,
Is certainly a dangerous thing;
The lower orders have been spoilt,
And now they mean to have their fling;

‘But though the world’s all upside down 130
And England hastening to decay,
Ring for the carriage; we’ll enquire
How Hwfa Williams is today.’

5

‘Crikey!’ said the butler, Crichton,
‘Blocking up the blooming street 135
All these callers keep on calling—
No one thinks of my poor feet!’

‘All the toffs with all their questions,
Leaving cards you can’t refuse;
These reporters, nosy parkers, 140
Proper sharks they are for news.

‘I was not engaged to answer
Bells that jangle all the time,
These enquiries well might drive a
Better man than me to crime: 145

*‘How’s your master? Is he better?
Is his life in danger still?
Is it true a gang attacked him?
Do you think they shot to kill?’*

*‘Can you tell us why they did it? 150
Anarchists? A Fenian plot?
More of this and I’ll go barmy,
Like the lad that fired the shot.’*

Carriage after carriage crowding,
Kind enquirers choke the street: 155
How is Mr Hwfa Williams?
‘No one thinks of MY POOR FEET!’

6

‘And so,’ said Mrs Hwfa Williams,
Telling the story after years had passed,
‘It seemed that half of London came to call. 160

Fruit, game and flowers came crowding thick and fast,
Cards like confetti rained into the hall—
Such a great fuss, poor Hwfa was aghast
Yet pleased, I think, at such extreme concern,
More pleased than our old butler with it all— 165
Poor Crichton hardly knew which way to turn.

‘The street was jammed, the knocker and the bell
Clamoured together like two fiends in hell—
And where was Crichton? Nobody could tell!
At twelve o’clock my maid rushed in and said 170
“Oh, ma’am, he’s drinking quarts of brandy neat—
Crichton’s gone mad! I’ll see to the front door!”
Not mad but drunk I found him. Bursting into song
With “Home Sweet Home”, he lurched and hit the floor.

‘Abject when sober, Crichton said his feet 175
Had driven him off his head, nor had he known
That Hwfa’s best old brandy was so strong . . .
Hwfa forgave him, he had been with us so long.

‘He stayed for years . . . Poor man, his race is run . . .
I also soon shall hear the sunset gun— 180
But in between times life has been *such fun!*’

1953

(From *Collected Poems*. London, 1960)