
First Plays
A. A. Milne

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INTRODUCTION

These five plays were written, in the order in which they appear now, during the years 1916 and 1917. They would hardly have been written had it not been for the war, although only one of them is concerned with that subject. To his other responsibilities the Kaiser now adds this volume.

For these plays were not the work of a professional writer, but the recreation of a (temporary) professional soldier. Play-writing is a luxury to a journalist, as insidious as golf and much more expensive in time and money. When an article is written, the financial reward (and we may as well live as not) is a matter of certainty. A novelist, too, even if he is not in "the front rank"—but I never heard of one who wasn't—can at least be sure of publication. But when a play is written, there is no certainty of anything save disillusionment.

To write a play, then, while I was a journalist seemed to me a depraved proceeding, almost as bad as going to Lord's in the morning. I thought I could write one (we all think we can), but I could not afford so unpromising a gamble. But once in the Army the case was altered. No duty now urged me to write. My job was soldiering, and my spare time was my own affair. Other subalterns played bridge and golf; that was one way of amusing oneself. Another way was—why not?—to write plays.

So we began with Wurzel-Flummery. I say "we," because another is mixed up in this business even more seriously than the Kaiser. She wrote; I dictated. And if a particularly fine evening drew us out for a walk along the byways—where there was no saluting, and one could smoke a pipe without shocking the Duke of Cambridge—then it was to discuss the last scene and to wonder what would happen in the next. We did not estimate the money or publicity which might come from this new venture; there has never been any serious thought of making money by my bridge-playing, nor desire for publicity when I am trying to play golf. But secretly, of course, we hoped. It was that which made it so much more exciting than any other game.

Our hopes were realized to the following extent:

Wurzel-Flummery was produced by Mr. Dion Boucicault at the New Theatre in April, 1917. It was originally written in three acts, in which form it was shown to one or two managers. At the beginning of 1917 I was offered the chance of production in a triple bill if I cut it down into a two-act play. To cut even a line is painful, but to cut thirty pages of one's first comedy, slaughtering whole characters on the way, has at least a certain morbid fascination. It appeared, therefore, in two acts; and one kindly critic embarrassed us by saying that a lesser artist would have

written it in three acts, and most of the other critics annoyed us by saying that a greater artist would have written it in one act. However, I amused myself some months later by slaying another character—the office-boy, no less—thereby getting it down to one act, and was surprised to find that the one-act version was, after all, the best... At least I think it is.... At any rate, that is the version I am printing here; but, as can be imagined, I am rather tired of the whole business by now, and I am beginning to wonder if anyone ever did take the name of Wurzel-Flummery at all. Probably the whole thing is an invention.

The Lucky One was doomed from the start with a name like that. And the girl marries the wrong man. I see no hope of its being produced. But if any critic wishes to endear himself to me (though I don't see why he should) he will agree with me that it is the best play of the five.

The Boy Comes Home was produced by Mr. Owen Nares at the Victoria Palace in September, 1918, introduced afterwards into Hallo, America! at the Palace, and played by Mr. Godfrey Tearle at the Coliseum in the following April.

Belinda was produced by Mr. Dion Boucicault at the New Theatre in April, 1918, with Miss Irene Vanbrugh in the name-part. Miss Ethel Barrymore played it in New York. I hope it will read pleasantly, but I am quite incapable of judging it, for every speech of Belinda's comes to me now in Miss Vanbrugh's voice.

The Red Feathers has not yet been produced, one reason being (perhaps) that it has never been offered to anybody. It is difficult enough to find a manager, but when one has also to get hold of a composer, the business of production becomes terrifying. I suppose there is a way of negotiating these difficulties, but I suspect that most of the fun to be got out of this operetta we have already had in writing it.

In conclusion, I must distress my friend J. M. Barrie (who gave me a first chance) by acknowledging my great debt to him. It would be more polite to leave him out of it, but I cannot let him off. After all, these are only "First Plays." I can always hope that "Last Plays" will be more worthy of that early encouragement.

A. A. MILNE.

WURTZEL-FLUMMERY

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS.

ROBERT CRAWSHAW, M.P.
MARGARET CRAWSHAW (his wife).
VIOLA CRAWSHAW (his daughter).
RICHARD MERITON, M.P.
DENIS CLIFTON.

A Two-Act version of this play was produced by Mr. Dion Boucicault at the New Theatre on April 7, 1917, with the following cast:

Robert Crawshaw—NIGEL PLAYFAIR.
Margaret Crawshaw—HELEN HAYE.
Viola Crawshaw—PEGGY KURTON.
Richard Meriton—MARTIN LEWIS.
Denis Clifton—DION BOUCICAULT.
Lancelot Dodd—BERTRAM SIEMS.

[SCENE.—ROBERT CRAWSHAW'S town house. Morning.]

[It is a June day before the war in the morning-room of ROBERT CRAWSHAW'S town house. Entering it with our friend the house-agent, our attention would first be called to the delightful club fender round the fireplace. On one side of this a Chesterfield sofa comes out at right angles. In a corner of the sofa MISS VIOLA CRAWSHAW is sitting, deep in "The Times." The house-agent would hesitate to catalogue her, but we notice for ourselves, before he points out the comfortable armchair opposite, that she is young and pretty. In the middle of the room and facing the fireplace is (observe) a solid knee-hole writing-table, covered with papers and books of reference, and supported by a chair at the middle and another at the side. The rest of the furniture, and the books and pictures round the walls, we must leave until another time, for at this moment the door behind the sofa opens and RICHARD MERITON comes in. He looks about thirty-five, has a clean-shaven intelligent face, and is dressed in a dark tweed suit. We withdraw hastily, as he comes behind VIOLA and puts his hands over her eyes.]

RICHARD. Three guesses who it is.

VIOLA (putting her hands over his). The Archbishop of Canterbury.

RICHARD. No.

VIOLA. The Archbishop of York.

RICHARD. Fortunately that exhausts the archbishops. Now, then, your last guess.

VIOLA. Richard Meriton, M.P.

RICHARD. Wonderful! (He kisses the top of her head lightly and goes round to the club fender, where he sits with his back to the fireplace.) How did you know? (He begins to fill a pipe.)

VIOLA (smiling). Well, it couldn't have been father.

RICHARD. N-no, I suppose not. Not just after breakfast anyway. Anything in the paper?

VIOLA. There's a letter from father pointing out that—

RICHARD. I never knew such a man as Robert for pointing out.

VIOLA. Anyhow, it's in big print.

RICHARD. It would be.

VIOLA. You are very cynical this morning, Dick.

RICHARD. The sausages were cold, dear.

VIOLA. Poor Dick! Oh, Dick, I wish you were on the same side as father.

RICHARD. But he's on the wrong side. Surely I've told you that before.... Viola, do you really think it would make a difference?

VIOLA. Well, you know what he said about you at Basingstoke the other day.

RICHARD. No, I don't, really.

VIOLA. He said that your intellectual arrogance was only equalled by your spiritual instability. I don't quite know what it means, but it doesn't sound the sort of thing you want in a son-in-law.

RICHARD. Still, it was friendly of him to go right away to Basingstoke to say it. Anyhow, you don't believe it.

VIOLA. Of course not.

RICHARD. And Robert doesn't really.

VIOLA. Then why does he say it?

RICHARD. Ah, now you're opening up very grave questions. The whole structure of the British Constitution rests upon Robert's right to say things like that at Basingstoke.... But really, darling, we're very good friends. He's always asking my advice about things—he doesn't take it, of course, but still he asks it; and it awfully good of him to insist on my staying here while my flat was being done up. (Seriously) I bless him for that. If it hadn't been for the last week I should never have known you. You were just "Viola"—the girl I'd seen at odd times since she was a child; now—oh, why won't you let me tell your father? I hate it like this.

VIOLA, Because I love you, Dick, and because I know father. He would, as they say in novels, show you the door. (Smiling) And I want you this side of the door for a little bit longer.

RICHARD (firmly). I shall tell him before I go.

VIOLA (pleadingly). But not till then; that gives us two more days. You see, darling, it's going to take me all I know to get round him. You see, apart from politics you're so poor—and father hates poor people.

RICHARD (viciously). Damn money!

VIOLA (thoughtfully). I think that's what father means by spiritual instability.

RICHARD. Viola! (He stands up and holds out his arms to her. She goes to him and—) Oh, Lord, look out!

VIOLA (reaching across to the mantelpiece). Matches?

RICHARD. Thanks very much. (He lights his pipe as ROBERT CRAWSHAW comes in.)

(CRAWSHAW is forty-five, but his closely-trimmed moustache and whiskers, his inclination to stoutness, and the loud old-gentlemanly style in trousers which he affects with his morning-coat, make him look older, and, what is more important, the Pillar of the State which he undoubtedly is.)

CRAWSHAW. Good-morning, Richard. Down at last?

RICHARD. Good morning. I did warn you, didn't I, that I was bad at breakfasts?

CRAWSHAW. Viola, where's your mother?

VIOLA (making for the door). I don't know, father; do you want her?

CRAWSHAW. I wish to speak to her.

VIOLA. All right, I'll tell her. [She goes out.]

(RICHARD Picks up "The Times" and sits down again.)

CRAWSHAW (sitting down in a business-like way at his desk). Richard, why don't you get something to do?

RICHARD. My dear fellow, I've only just finished breakfast.

CRAWSHAW. I mean generally. And apart, of course, from your—ah—work in the House.

RICHARD (a trifle cool). I have something to do.

CRAWSHAW. Oh, reviewing. I mean something serious. You should get a directorship or something in the City.

RICHARD. I hate the City.

CRAWSHAW. Ah! there, my dear Richard, is that intellectual arrogance to which I had to call attention the other day at Basingstoke.

RICHARD (drily). Yes, so Viola was telling me.

CRAWSHAW. You understood, my dear fellow, that I meant nothing personal. (Clearing his throat) It is justly one of the proudest boasts of the Englishman that his political enmities are not allowed to interfere with his private friendships.

RICHARD (carelessly). Oh, I shall go to Basingstoke myself one day.

[Enter MARGARET. MARGARET has been in love with ROBERT CRAWSHAW for twenty-five years, the last twenty four years from habit. She is small, comfortable, and rather foolish; you would certainly call her a dear, but you might sometimes call her a poor dear.]

MARGARET. Good-morning, Mr. Meriton. I do hope your breakfast was all right.

RICHARD. Excellent, thank you.

MARGARET. That's right. Did you want me, Robert?

CRAWSHAW. (obviously uncomfortable). Yes—er—h'rm—Richard—er—what are your—er—plans?

RICHARD. Is he trying to get rid of me, Mrs. Crawshaw?

MARGARET. Of course not. (TO ROBERT) Are you, dear?

CRAWSHAW. Perhaps we had better come into my room, Margaret. We can leave Richard here with the paper.

RICHARD. No, no; I'm going.

CRAWSHAW (going to the door with him). I have some particular business to discuss. If you aren't going out, I should like to consult you in the matter afterwards.

RICHARD. Right! [He goes out.]

CRAWSHAW. Sit down, Margaret. I have some extraordinary news for you.

MARGARET (sitting down). Yes, Robert?

CRAWSHAW. This letter has just come by hand. (He reads it) "199, Lincoln's Inn Fields. Dear Sir, I have pleasure to inform you that under the will of the late Mr. Antony Clifton you are a beneficiary to the extent of £50,000."

MARGARET. Robert!

CRAWSHAW. Wait! "A trifling condition is attached—namely, that you should take the name of—Wurzel-Flummery."

MARGARET. Robert!

CRAWSHAW. "I have the honour to be, your obedient servant, Denis Clifton." (He folds the letter up and puts it away.)

MARGARET. Robert, whoever is he? I mean the one who's left you the money?—

CRAWSHAW (calmly). I have not the slightest idea, Margaret. Doubtless we shall find out before long. I have asked Mr. Denis Clifton to come and see me.

MARGARET. Leaving you fifty thousand pounds! Just fancy!

CRAWSHAW. Wurzel-Flummery!

MARGARET. We can have the second car now, dear, can't we? And what about moving? You know you always said you ought to be in a more central part. Mr. Robert Crawshaw, M.P., of Curzon Street sounds so much more—more Cabinety.

CRAWSHAW. Mr. Robert Wurzel-Flummery, M.P., of Curzon Street—I don't know what *that* sounds like.

MARGARET. I expect that's only a legal way of putting it, dear. They can't really expect us to change our name to—Wurzley-Fothergill.

CRAWSHAW. Wurzel-Flummery.

MARGARET. Yes, dear, didn't I say that? I am sure you could talk the solicitor round—this Mr. Denis Clifton. After all, it doesn't matter to him what we call ourselves. Write him one of your letters, dear.

CRAWSHAW. You don't seem to apprehend the situation, Margaret.

MARGARET. Yes, I do, dear. This Mr.—Mr.—

CRAWSHAW. Antony Clifton.

MARGARET. Yes, he's left you fifty thousand pounds, together with the name of Wurzley-Fothergill—

CRAWSHAW. Wurzel—oh, well, never mind.

MARGARET. Yes, well, you tell the solicitor that you will take the fifty thousand pounds, but you don't want the name. It's too absurd, when everybody knows of Robert Crawshaw, M.P., to expect you to call yourself Wurzley-Fothergill.

CRAWSHAW (impatiently). Yes, yes. The point is that this Mr. Clifton has left me the money on *condition* that I change my name. If I don't take the name, I don't take the money.

MARGARET. But is that legal?

CRAWSHAW. Perfectly. It is often done. People change their names on succeeding to some property.

MARGARET. I thought it was only when your name was Moses and you changed it to Talbot.

CRAWSHAW (to himself). Wurzel-Flummery!

MARGARET. I wonder why he left you the money at all. Of course it was very nice of him, but if you didn't know him—Why do you think he did, dear?

CRAWSHAW. I know no more than this letter. I suppose he had—ah—followed my career, and was—ah—interested in it, and being a man with no relations, felt that he could—ah—safely leave this money to me. No doubt Wurzel-Flummery was his mother's maiden name, or the name of some other friend even dearer to him; he wished the name—ah—perpetuated, perhaps even recorded not unworthily in the history of our country, and—ah—made this will accordingly. In a way it is a kind of—ah—sacred trust.

MARGARET. Then, of course, you'll accept it, dear?

CRAWSHAW. It requires some consideration. I have my career to think about, my duty to my country.

MARGARET. Of course, dear. Money is a great help in politics, isn't it?

CRAWSHAW. Money wisely spent is a help in any profession. The view of riches which socialists and suchlike people profess to take is entirely ill-considered. A rich man, who spends his money thoughtfully, is serving his country as nobly as anybody.

MARGARET. Yes, dear. Then you think we *could* have that second car and the house in Curzon Street?

CRAWSHAW. We must not be led away. Fifty thousand pounds, properly invested, is only two thousand a year. When you have deducted the income-tax—and the tax on unearned income is extremely high just now—

MARGARET. Oh, but surely if we have to call ourselves Wurzel-Flummery it would count as *earned* income.

CRAWSHAW. I fear not. Strictly speaking, all money is earned. Even if it is left to you by another, it is presumably left to you in recognition of

certain outstanding qualities which you possess. But Parliament takes a different view. I do not for a moment say that fifty thousand pounds would not be welcome. Fifty pounds is certainly not to be sneezed at—

MARGARET. I should think not, indeed!

CRAWSHAW (unconsciously rising from his chair). And without this preposterous condition attached I should be pleased to accept this trust, and I would endeavour, Mr. Speaker—(He sits down again suddenly.) I would, Margaret, to, carry it out to the best of my poor ability. But—Wurtzel-Flummery!

MARGARET. You would soon get used to it, dear. I had to get used to the name of Crawshaw after I had been Debenham for twenty-five years. It is surprising how quickly it comes to you. I think I only signed my name Margaret Debenham once after I was married.

CRAWSHAW (kindly). The cases are rather different, Margaret. Naturally a woman, who from her cradle looks forward to the day when she will change her name, cannot have this feeling for the—ah—honour of his name, which every man—ah—feels. Such a feeling is naturally more present in my own case since I have been privileged to make the name of Crawshaw in some degree—ah—well-known, I might almost say famous.

MARGARET (wistfully). I used to be called "the beautiful Miss Debenham of Leamington." Everybody in Leamington knew of me. Of course, I am very proud to be Mrs. Robert Crawshaw.

CRAWSHAW (getting up and walking over to the fireplace). In a way it would mean beginning all over again. It is half the battle in politics to get your name before the public. "Whoever is this man Wurzel-Flummery?" people will say.

MARGARET. Anyhow, dear, let us look on the bright side. Fifty thousand pounds is fifty thousand pounds.

CRAWSHAW. It is, Margaret. And no doubt it is my duty to accept it. But—well, all I say is that a *gentleman* would have left it without any conditions. Or at least he would merely have expressed his *wish* that I should take the name, without going so far as to enforce it. Then I could have looked at the matter all round in an impartial spirit.

MARGARET (pursuing her thoughts). The linen is marked R. M. C. now. Of course, we should have to have that altered. Do you think R. M. F. would do, or would it have to be R. M. W. hyphen F.?

CRAWSHAW. What? Oh—yes, there will be a good deal of that to attend to. (Going up to her) I think, Margaret, I had better talk to Richard about this. Of course, it would be absurd to refuse the money, but—well, I should like to have his opinion.

MARGARET (getting up). Do you think he would be very sympathetic, dear? He makes jokes about serious things—like bishops and hunting just as if they weren't at all serious.

CRAWSHAW. I wish to talk to him just to obtain a new—ah—point of view. I do not hold myself in the least bound to act on anything he says. I regard him as a constituent, Margaret.

MARGARET. Then I will send him to you.

CRAWSHAW (putting his hands on her shoulders). Margaret, what do you really feel about it?

MARGARET. Just whatever you feel, Robert.

CRAWSHAW (kissing her). Thank you, Margaret; you are a good wife to me. [She goes out]

(CRAWSHAW goes to his desk and selects a "Who's Who" from a little pile of reference-books on it. He walks round to his chair, sits down in it and begins to turn the pages, murmuring names beginning with "C" to himself as he gets near the place. When he finds it, he murmurs "Clifton —that's funny," and closes the book. Evidently the publishers have failed him.)

[Enter RICHARD.]

RICHARD. Well, what's the news? (He goes to his old seat on the fender.) Been left a fortune?

CRAWSHAW (simply). Yes.... By a Mr. Antony Clifton. I never met him and I know nothing about him.

RICHARD (surprised). Not really? Well, I congratulate you. (He sighs.) To them that hath—But what on earth do you want my advice about?

CRAWSHAW. There is a slight condition attached.

RICHARD. Oho!

CRAWSHAW. The condition is that with this money—fifty thousand pounds—I take the name of—ah—Wurzel-Flummery.

RICHARD (jumping up). What!

CRAWSHAW (sulkily). I said it quite distinctly—Wurzel-Flummery.

(RICHARD in an awed silence walks over to the desk and stands looking down at the unhappy CRAWSHAW. He throws out his left hand as if introducing him.)

RICHARD (reverently). Mr. Robert Wurzel-Flummery, M. P., one of the most prominent of our younger Parliamentarians. Oh, you...oh!... oh, how too heavenly! (He goes back to his seat, looks up and catches CRAWSHAW'S eye, and breaks down altogether.)

CRAWSHAW (rising with dignity). Shall we discuss it seriously, or shall we leave it?

RICHARD. How can we discuss a name like Wurzel-Flummery seriously? "Mr. Wurzel-Flummery in a few well-chosen words seconded the motion."... "'Sir,' went on Mr. Wurzel-Flummery"—Oh, poor Robert!

CRAWSHAW (sitting down sulkily). You seem quite certain that I shall take the money.

RICHARD. I am quite certain.

CRAWSHAW. Would you take it?

RICHARD (hesitating). Well—I wonder.

CRAWSHAW. After all, as William Shakespeare says, "What's in a name?"

RICHARD. I can tell you something else that Shakespeare—*William* Shakespeare—said. (Dramatically rising) Who steals my purse with fifty thousand in it—steals trash. (In his natural voice) Trash, Robert: (Dramatically again) But he who filches from me my good name of Crawshaw (lightly) and substitutes the rotten one of Wurzel—

CRAWSHAW (annoyed). As a matter of fact, Wurzel-Flummery is a very good old name. I seem to remember some—ah—Hampshire Wurzel-Flummeries. It is a very laudable spirit on the part of a dying man to wish to—ah—perpetuate these old English names. It all seems to me quite natural and straightforward. If I take this money I shall have nothing to be ashamed of.

RICHARD. I see.... Look here, may I ask you a few questions? I should like to know just how you feel about the whole business?

CRAWSHAW (complacently folding his hands). Go ahead.

RICHARD. Suppose a stranger came up in the street to you and said, "My poor man, here's five pounds for you," what would you do? Tell him to go to the devil, I suppose, wouldn't you?

CRAWSHAW (humorously). In more parliamentary language, perhaps, Richard. I should tell him I never took money from strangers.

RICHARD. Quite so; but that if it were ten thousand pounds, you would take it?

CRAWSHAW. I most certainly shouldn't.

RICHARD. But if he died and left it to you, *then* you would?

CRAWSHAW (blandly). Ah, I thought you were leading up to that. That, of course, is entirely different.

RICHARD. Why?

CRAWSHAW. Well—ah—wouldn't *you* take ten thousand pounds if it were left to you by a stranger?

RICHARD. I daresay I should. But I should like to know why it would seem different.

CRAWSHAW (professionally). Ha-hum! Well—in the first place, when a man is dead he wants his money no longer. You can therefore be certain that you are not taking anything from him which he cannot spare. And in the neat place, it is the man's dying wish that you should have the money. To refuse would be to refuse the dead. To accept becomes almost a sacred duty.

RICHARD. It really comes to this, doesn't it? You won't take it from him when he's alive, because if you did, you couldn't decently refuse him a little gratitude; but you know that it doesn't matter a damn to him what happens to his money after he's dead, and therefore you can take it without feeling any gratitude at all.

CRAWSHAW. No, I shouldn't put it like that.

RICHARD (smiling). I'm sure you wouldn't, Robert.

CRAWSHAW No doubt you can twist it about so that—

RICHARD. All right, we'll leave that and go on to the next point. Suppose a perfect stranger offered you five pounds to part your hair down the middle, shave off your moustache, and wear only one whisker—if he met you suddenly in the street, seemed to dislike your appearance, took out a fiver and begged you to hurry off and alter yourself—of course you'd pocket the money and go straight to your barber's?

CRAWSHAW. Now you are merely being offensive.

RICHARD. I beg your pardon. I should have said that if he had left you five pounds in his will?—well, then twenty pounds? a hundred pounds?—a thousand pounds?—fifty thousand pounds?—(Jumping up excitedly) It's only a question of price—fifty thousand pounds, Robert—a pink tie with purple spots, hair across the back, trousers with a patch in the fall myself Wurzel-Flummery—any old thing you like, you can't insult me—anything you like, gentlemen, for fifty thousand pounds. (Lowering his voice) Only you must leave it in your will, and then I can feel that it is a sacred duty—a sacred duty, my lords and gentlemen. (He sinks back into the sofa and relights his pipe.)

CRAWSHAW. (rising with dignity). It is evidently useless to prolong this conversation.

RICHARD (waving him dorm again). No, no, Robert; I've finished. I just took the other side—and I got carried away. I ought to have been at the Bar.

CRAWSHAW. You take such extraordinary views of things. You must look facts in the face, Richard. This is a modern world, and we are modern people living in it. Take the matter-of-fact view. You may like or dislike the name of—ah—Wurzel-Flummery, but you can't get away from the fact that fifty thousand pounds is not to be sneezed at.

RICHARD (wistfully). I don't know why people shouldn't sneeze at money sometimes. I should like to start a society for sneezing at fifty thousand pounds. We'd have to begin in a small way, of course; we'd begin by sneezing at five pounds—and work up. The trouble is that we're all inoculated in our cradles against that kind of cold.

CRAWSHAW (pleasantly). You will have your little joke. But you know as well as I do that it is only a joke. There can be no serious reason why I should not take this money. And I—ah—gather that you don't think it will affect my career?

RICHARD (carelessly). Not a bit. It'll help it. It'll get you into all the comic papers.

[MARGARET comes in at this moment, to the relief of CRAWSHAW, who is not quite certain if he is being flattered or insulted again.]

MARGARET. Well, have you told him?

RICHARD (making way for her on the sofa). I have heard the news, Mrs. Crawshaw. And I have told Robert my opinion that he should have