RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Walpole Orange

Frank Muir

About the Book

William Grundwick has a problem. As secretary of the Walpole Club he's duty-bound to arrange whatever function the Events Committee decides is appropriate to celebrate the Club's 250th birthday. It's just that what they have decided upon seems to William almost wholly inappropriate; worse still he's not sure he knows precisely what form such a function should take. And if that isn't bad enough, the whole business is supposed to be a deep secret, so he can't even discuss it with his lovely young wife Milly. Milly has her own problems. Is she going off William? His secretiveness is certainly disturbing. And now the Baroque Trio she runs has lost its viola and continuo player – Catriona has decamped to Los Angeles with a session guitarist called Trev.

Torn between the demands of the Events Committee, Milly, and an accountant in a diaphanous sari, spied on by a treacherous under-porter with a hotline to the tabloids and pressurized by the chairperson of the Golden Horn Ladies Belly-Dancing Ensemble, Catford, the harrassed William has some appallingly difficult decisions to make.

The Walpole Orange, astonishingly, is Frank Muir's first novel.
As one might expect from Britain's leading humorist, it is highly imaginative, wickedly witty and utterly irresistible.

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THE WALPOLE ORANGE

A ROMANCE

Frank Muir

For my grandchildren, Abigail and Isobel

CHAPTER ONE

TWO LETTERS

WILLIAM LOOKED AT his young, small wife across the breakfast table and thought how lovely she was. It was a particularly good moment to look at Milly because she had just decapitated her boiled egg with a neat horizontal swipe and was opening a letter with the eggy knife when a shaft of West Kensington sunshine came in through the kitchen window and backlit her. She began reading her letter.

With her head bowed, the sun shining through her cornflake-coloured hair, slender in her crumpled nightie, eyes still puffy from sleep, she seemed to William to be wondrously fragile, vulnerable.

'Well, bugger me to Bermondsey and back,' she said.

William sighed. He rarely swore and even the mild expletives which he did use had to be forced from him by some emotional shock, such as when he first met Milly's rather grand parents, nervously put soda water in his gin instead of tonic and took a deep swig; or when he dropped a hot cast-iron frying-pan, with omelette, into a sink full of virtually all their wedding-present crockery.

His first experience of Milly's casually devastating way of expressing herself in moments of stress happened during their wedding reception when a lumpish bridesmaid stood on Milly's wedding dress and tore it away from one shoulder. The bridesmaid's mother, who was within earshot of Milly, went a mottled colour and backed into a flower arrangement. William was now a little more used to Milly's

outbursts and understood that they were a symptom of some crisis.

‘Got egg on your letter?’ he asked, without much hope.

‘It’s Catriona!’ said his wife.

Physically, Catriona was the key member of Milly’s Baroque String Trio, the most sexy-looking; always pushed to the front by Milly when the trio was being interviewed for a booking by a heterosexual Festival organizer or hotel conference manager.

‘The great over-uddered cow!’

William thought that, in fairness, over-uddered was pitching it a bit strong. Catriona was of normal build mostly but she did have an important, impressively proportioned, Edwardian one-piece bosom. When she was dressed formally at recitals and turned sideways on, elderly gentlemen in the audience breathed heavily.

‘What’s Catriona done?’

‘Done a bunk!’

‘Oh, Milly, how rotten. Does she give a reason?’

‘I’m just getting to that bit.’ She glared down at the letter. William thought her face showed the kind of ferocious disbelief with which Goneril must have taken the news that her difficult old father King Lear had decided to retire and move in with her.

‘How *could* she!’

William waited. He knew by experience that this was the best thing to do when Milly had the swears. While he was waiting he cut a strip of bread and butter, wrapped it round his boiled egg to save his fingers from the agonizing heat which only an intact boiled egg can retain and very gently tapped the egg on the table, rotating it skilfully a little at a time until the whole shell was a mass of tiny cracks, like the crazed surface of an old porcelain plate. Then with the nail of his forefinger he painstakingly picked off the tiny flakes of shell one at a time.

It usually took him about four and a half minutes, or six if the egg was one of those portly ones over which the pulpy cardboard egg-box would not close properly. Milly went on reading her letter and seething.

‘Sex-mad, of course,’ she muttered. ‘She was peculiar as a child, drawing in the naughty bits on her dolls sort of thing. Well,’ tapping the letter, ‘she’s now a self-confessed pyromaniac.’

‘Nymphomaniac,’ said William, ‘unless her love-making sets her lovers alight.’ His boiled egg was now naked in its thin caul. He eased it into its cup, dug out a spoonful and gave his wife his full attention. ‘Just what has Catriona been up to?’

‘Listen to this.’ Milly read loudly: ‘“Desperately sorry darling but it’s bye-bye Baroque Trio for me. Met Trev at the Rudolf Steiner Hall last Thursday at the Stravinsky thingy. Trev is truly beautiful. A bit too much hair around the bald bit on top but a neat bum and he’s a musician. Plays lead guitar in a group. Well, most groups actually because he is a session musician for a recording studio and sits in for all the pop musicians who can’t really play their guitars. His daddy bought a disused tram factory in the Toxteth area of Liverpool where he manufactures organic farmhouse cheese and health-shop yoghurt and is v.rich, though of course with granny’s money that is not a factor with me. Trev is a mighty man ’neath duvet and it’s true love for ever this time, Mill. On Tuesday we are flying off to Bolivia (I think it’s Bolivia) where me and Trev and a soul-singer I’ve never heard of are going to save something. Mahogany trees or children or whatever. I’ll write.” Oh, William, with Catriona gone my lovely trio is now just a trio!’

‘I thought your trio *was* a trio.’

‘It’s complicated. They were called trios but composers liked the fuller sound of two violins so baroque trio sonatas were often written for harpsichord, cello, and two violins.

And now I've only got Estelle's violin, which means a thinner noise. And visually, too, Estelle, pretty girl that she is, is no Catriona in shape.'

'You have a problem,' said William. 'Even in the soft light of the Ritz at teatime, Lovely-but-Thin Estelle's hardly what Arab princes are going to charter Concorde to fly over and ogle.'

'So what's left?' wailed Milly. 'Six reasonable legs, particularly Pippa's sexy knees and feet, but not a bold titty among the three of us. Oh, soddy-soddy-soddy!'

William was about to protest that Milly was beautifully formed in all directions and indeed he knew that Lovely-but-Thin Estelle had a figure like a roll of kitchen foil, but she was a very beautiful girl in all other ways, and that the loss of Catriona did not mean that the all-girl trio (quartet) would never be booked again. But warning bells tinkled. This was a serious crisis for Milly and any comment he made would almost certainly only exacerbate things. William thought he understood his wife quite well. That is to say he reckoned he understood about 30 per cent of her character and qualities which, looking around, seemed to him an above-average husbandly achievement.

The four girls in Milly's original Baroque String Trio (quartet) were Milly (harpsichord), the Hon. Pippa (cello), Catriona (violin), and Estelle (violin). William got on well enough with Lovely-but-Thin Estelle and top-heavy Catriona but found the tubby Hon. Pippa (of the sexy knees and feet) a curiously shy girl who seemed to prefer her cello to people. Rather frightening. But she was a good cellist. And Catriona and Estelle were very good violinists and Milly really was a most promising harpsichordist.

Milly's group had met and formed when they shared a bedroom at their dour and damp boarding school in Sussex and discovered they were all mad about classical music. Irksome disciplines such as restricting photographs of ponies and Labradors to five per animal per girl, posters of

Gary Glitter restricted to one per room and a complete ban on Sunday-lunch pork crackling being wrapped in a hanky and stored up knicker legs for chewing during Sunday-afternoon letter-writing, had been imposed with vigilance. The only opportunity the four small music-lovers had to express individuality was in the privacy of their pale pink bedroom where they developed an innocent but inventive use of foul language.

Sex education had yet to arrive and embarrass everybody so the girls did not know exactly what the words they were using meant but they knew that they were taboo words which no lady or gentleman would utter and that was good enough for them. The swears, as they called them, were initiated one evening by Milly when she locked the bedroom door, turned to the others and snorted: 'Those two Irish nuns confiscated my chocolate cake before I'd even eaten it – well, sod 'em and begorrah!'

'Who's your letter from?' asked Milly in a small, ordinary voice. 'Hope yours is better news than mine.'

'Ah' said William. 'I'll look.' He laid the envelope flat on the table face down, produced his Swiss Army penknife and carefully slit along the top edge of the envelope. He then swivelled the envelope round and slit along the first narrow side, then the other narrow side, then he slid the knife blade under the envelope top and opened it up like the lid of a suitcase. He always opened his morning letters this way because when he was a schoolboy he had carelessly ripped open an envelope and torn in half a birthday cheque for five pounds from his rich aunt.

As he extricated the letter he heard a slight sound and guessed that Milly was crying. He listened more carefully. Could be laughter but he reckoned it was crying all right. He did not look up because he had a feeling that Milly wanted to have a private cry. Oddly enough, Milly appeared to be crying when they first met. At the time William was running a very temporary second-hand bookshop in Lewes,

Sussex, an ex-fried-fish takeaway driven into liquidation by hygiene bye-laws which a quick-footed local entrepreneur had rented on a very short lease and hired William to manage. The shop, smelling faintly of haddock, was filled with stacks of grubby second-hand, out-of-print and incomplete volumes which the entrepreneur had clearly either bought by weight or stolen.

William saw this pale, thin young woman sitting on the floor between piles of books, head bowed, shoulders heaving. He thought she had probably hit the sad bit in *Black Beauty*. But then she looked up and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears of laughter which she was trying to suppress as un-bookshop-like merriment. Not trusting herself to speak, she handed William the book, which was open at a photograph.

William glanced first at the title page. It read:

MARRIED LOVE-MAKING
What Every Bride-to-be should Brace Herself to Endure

By A Lady. 1912.

(*Photographs by H. Meredith Punt ARPS, Frith St W1*)
(3/6d: Post Free, in plain wrapper)

The greyish photograph showed a sizeable bride in a bullet-proof corset seated at her dressing-table brushing rather a lot of hair. Behind her a thin man with very shiny black hair, a worried expression and no trousers was removing his stiff collar from his back collar-stud with evident difficulty. He was wearing sock suspenders.

The totally unerotic effect of the photograph caught William on the hop and he laughed and laughed in an uncontrollable, honking, way.

Eventually he managed to gasp, ‘I thought you were reading *Black Beauty*!’ Which set the two of them off again. He sat down beside her on the floor and they talked.

‘My name’s Milly,’ she said. ‘I play the harpsichord and will be leaving the Royal College this year and I want to form a Baroque String Trio with my three best friends and I’m terrified.’

‘Milly as in Millicent?’

‘As in Millamant. My father played the female lead, Millamant, in a wig when his school dramatic society did *The Way of the World*, during which he discovered that he enjoyed being applauded more than anything else in life. Which is why, I suppose, he named me after Millamant. In shops they say, “Filament? Could you spell it, luv?”’

‘Your father an actor?’

‘No, an MP. It wasn’t a very good wig. The school couldn’t afford to hire one, it was donated by a bald parent who decided to come out. A photograph of father wearing the wig was in the school magazine. He didn’t look like Millamant at all to me, more like a young Rod Stewart at a Glasgow gig.’

‘Should I have heard of your father?’

‘He’s Sir Garnett Bracewell, Ex-Chairman of the Investment Manager and Stockbrokers Association, Ex-Chairman of the Tory Backbenchers 1894 Committee or something. I’ve never really known him. He sits on about fifty committees and boards of directors and is never home. If we do meet he doesn’t like the way I’ve done my hair and can’t understand why I’m not still aged twelve. Mother doesn’t mind his being away all the time. Means she can get on with her projects.’

‘Charities?’

‘My mother’s contribution to world happiness is making enough money to buy silk suits in Rome and start thinking about organizing herself a toyboy. I’m exaggerating a bit – sorry. She makes quite a bit of money setting up these

awful agencies. Agencies for anything saleable: second-hand wrapping paper; memorabilia of the Sex Pistols; young butlers for gracious homes in Florida; refilled throwaway ballpoint pens; first-night tickets to see Pavarotti in concert at the Birmingham Exhibition Centre. I don't see a lot of her, well I'm a bit of an embarrassment because I haven't got a career or a husband or anything for her to boast about. She's all right, of course. Well, I suppose. So's father. I suppose. It's just that we don't – we don't get along too smoothly. All three of us. Or any two of us for that matter.'

Darkness fell as they talked on but they didn't notice. After some thought, William kissed her gently and she clung very tightly to his arm. It was an unbelievably short time in which to fall in love but they managed it.

Milly got on with her private cry and her egg. She was undismayed by her little manifestations of all-is-not-well-with-me, which to William and most men meant the end of the world, like being sick or fainting or crying in public, and Milly was quite enjoying her cry.

She stirred her egg with her knife. I did so love William at first, she thought. Instead of those pink, shiny, overweight young dealers in copper futures whom her mother kept manoeuvring in her path, she had found William. Calm, reliable, decent, lots of humour.

'What's his name? What does he *do*, darling? Is he PLU – People Like Us?' A caring mother's anxious questions tumbled out.

'His name is William Grundwick and at the moment he's got a job in a Railway Lost Property Office but it's only a temporary…'

'*William*?' shrieked her mother. 'You'd be Milly and Willy! Just wait until I tell your father about this!'

'I wouldn't bother,' said Milly. 'He won't remember who I am.'

‘Of course he will, silly. But he does have rather a lot on his mind. He’s very fond of you in his own funny old way. But what’s this – this William’s – background? Grundwick? Get the *Who’s Who*.’

‘They’re not in it. Grundwick is not the family name. It’s Anson.’

‘I suppose it was changed in the hope that a rich aunt named Grundwick would leave him money.’

‘That’s right. He was her favourite nephew and the legend in the family was that her jobbing-builder husband had left her a row of houses in Carshalton.’

‘How gullible can you get!’

‘But it was true. His aunt paid for William’s education and left him a tiny freehold house in Peel Street. He lets the upper half as a flat so he’s got a bit of money coming in. Quite enough for us to get by on.’

Her mother slumped into the sofa, all her plans of a brilliant, society marriage for her problem daughter shattered. The notice in *The Times* announcing ‘The engagement of Millamant Bracewell to the Hon. Adrian Constable-Devereux-DeWitt’; the four-page spread with photographs in *Hello!* magazine – ‘The bride’s mother, the ever-youthful and soignée Lady Bracewell, enjoying a joke in the tack-room with the Lord Lieutenant’ – all now dreams down the drain.

She arranged her skirt into more attractive folds and said: ‘You won’t make this stupid marriage work, you know. You’ll fail as you always fail at everything.’

Milly gulped, but as she went through this every time she tried to do anything at all, she was bitterly used to it. When she told her mother she wanted to go on from school to the Royal College of Music and become a professional harpsichordist, her mother almost hit her with a bottle of Campari.

‘Oh, Millamant!’ she said. ‘After all that I, and to a certain extent your father, have done for you; expensive

convent education, holidays in the better parts of Spain, and that damned pony. And all you want to be is a musician! Playing *music*! Nobody in our family – or even in your father's as far as I know – has ever been mixed up in that sort of thing. There's no money in it, you know.'

Milly tried to explain her idea of the musician friends from school staying together and getting jobs playing in hotels and at conferences as a well-dressed and very feminine trio but her mother just snorted and said, 'Huh!'

Perhaps her mother had been right all along, thought Milly, still stirring her now tepid egg. She had been so happy with William to begin with. Trying to furnish the ground floor of William's tiny house in Peel Street from local junk shops. Their first bed was a stained and ancient futon they bought from a barrow in the North End Road. William said it was like trying to get a good night's sleep on a Jiffybag.

So they moved wildly up-market and bought a second-hand sofa bed, one of the early models made before the designers had got the hang of the problem. The discomfort and danger to the spine of sitting on it as a sofa was only surpassed by the agony of trying to sleep on it as a bed. There was no instruction book so they had a Jacques Tati-like struggle every night trying to open the thing up. Fingers were trapped in moving metal bits. Springs fell off and would not go back on. One side of the bed would unwrap peacefully and lie flat whilst the other side would put up a fight and stick half-open pointing towards the ceiling. When they did get to bed William said it was like trying to sleep on a wrought-iron gate which had been struck by lightning.

But they were happy together. She and William had approached love-making with innocence and trepidation and found that they were both rather good at it. Even on the sofa bed. William was unselfish and physically reliable and Milly proved to be endlessly inventive, notably in the

preliminary warming-up activities. Whose most sensitive, central place was to be worked upon first by the other became such a delightful decision to make that Milly took to sliding up to William at parties or in the car and whispering in his ear, ‘My place or yours?’ It was their code. After which, pleasure apportioned, they would wilfully drift home, savouring the anticipation, only to find themselves steadily accelerating as passion welled.

Milly reflected that she had not said the code words to William for quite a while now. Well, his new job had awkward hours and she was deeply concerned with the Trio’s rehearsal schedules, indeed its survival. William’s ritualistic destructuring of his boiled egg and his obsessive method of opening his letters, endearing when she was getting to know him, had become just a little bit irritating. And his transparent devotion to her, which had been so comforting at first, had somehow taken away a little of the excitement.

Milly pondered whether her lessening passion might have been caused by the difference in their ages. She was now just twenty-three. In four years’ time William would be thirty. Really getting on. And yet. When William had taken a temporary job in Leicester teaching some sad children to swim, she missed him dreadfully, egg and envelope-opening and all. Perhaps because she had got used to being married, to being one of two. So she went to her great-uncle, the distinguished Judge of Appeal Lord Sidmonton, and asked him to help her find William a job in London.

As it happened this came as a godsend to Uncle Sid, as she called him: His Lordship was the Master of one of London’s oldest gentlemen’s clubs, the Walpole, and the Club was in urgent need of a Club Secretary. The previous Secretary, Flight-Lieutenant Giles Dundas-McHugh, RAF (retd) was caught by a member making athletic love to a New Zealand waitress on the billiard table. Of course the House Committee had no option but to dismiss the

Secretary. Not only because he was wearing studded golf shoes at the time and the billiard table had only recently been re-covered – the cost of repairing the gashes could have been deducted down through the years from his salary – but because New Zealand girls working their way round Europe were strong, sunny, popular waitresses and for the Secretary to risk losing one through being overwhelmed by a wave of lust was judged to be behaviour not in the members' best interests.

Being a club secretary was a job notorious for long hours, pressure from the committee, abuse from members and poor pay. But after a few weeks William, to his surprise, grew to like it.

'Oh *damn*!' cried William suddenly and very loudly. Milly came out of her sad reverie with a bump to see William staring at his letter.

'What's the matter?' asked Milly. 'Damn' was an unusually strong word for William to use at any time let alone at breakfast. 'Is it from Uncle Sid? Has the committee decided to do something barmy for the birthday treat?' The Walpole Club was about to celebrate its two hundred and fiftieth birthday and what form the celebration should take had been under hot debate amongst members for months. 'What excitement have they plumped for? Actor-members reading from their autobiographies? Talk on the Golden Age of Great Estates by the Duke of Whatsit? Do show me.' She held out her hand.

William hastily crammed the letter into his inside coat pocket. 'I'm terribly sorry, darling,' he said, 'I can't say what's in it.'

'Is it from Uncle Sid?'

'I can't say.'

'Then who is it from?'

'I can't say. It's from – it's from a friend. No, not really a friend, let's say somebody I know. I really am most sorry, Milly, but I'm not able to tell you anything more than that.'

‘You won’t even tell me who your damned letter’s *from*?’ asked Milly. ‘Me?’ William felt awful.

‘Look, I fervently wish I wasn’t in this position – but there it is. I can only ask you, well, to trust me.’ He realized immediately that this was for some reason the wrong thing to have said. Milly just sat there looking chilly and un-Millyish. He glanced at his watch. ‘Must get moving, it’s going to be quite a day,’ he said and tried to give Milly the usual casual peck on the cheek on his way past her, but she turned her head and the kiss landed on the back of her neck.

Now what? thought Milly miserably, as William went. Is he having a ding-dong at the Club? Is it Mrs Hardcastle the young accountant? Uncle Sid says she’s dazzlingly beautiful. Oh shitty-shitty-bang-bang!

In the hallway William took out the letter from Lord Sidmonton and read it through again swiftly to double-check that this home-wrecking degree of security was essential. The brief letter, written in Uncle Sid’s own hand, was explicit.

‘Dear William,’ it began. ‘This letter has to be most secret. Its contents must not be revealed or discussed or even hinted at to anybody. Not even, I am so sorry about this, to Milly. Secrecy is absolutely vital on such a sensitive issue as this and I cannot overestimate its importance, particularly to your good self as you will, of course, be responsible for the entire thing. You and I, as Master and Secretary, must meet as soon as possible to consider the implications of the Events Committee’s decision, which is I am afraid, according to Club rules, irrevocable.

‘I have to tell you that the unanimous decision of the Events Committee, and I can see no legal retreat from it, is that the Club’s two hundredth and fiftieth birthday be celebrated with an orgy.’

CHAPTER TWO

THE WALPOLE CLUB

WILLIAM, HIS THOUGHTS chasing one another in a confused and miserable stream, dragged his bicycle from under the stairs, trundled it down the stone steps into Peel Street and cycled off to the Club.

The bike was no modern feather-weight job with nobbly tyres and forty-eight gears. It had belonged to his father who, every working day, rain or shine, had ridden it slowly and steadily the six miles from his home to the Public Library where he was Borough Librarian.

The ancient sit-up-and-beg machine was a dull black with nickel-plated, pre-chromium handlebars and a Sturmey-Archer 3-speed gear-change clamped to the crossbar. The second-gear position had been broken for years and disconnected the pedals, so any change from top-gear to bottom gear, or from bottom to top, had to be made with a practised lunge of the lever and hardly ever worked. The bike weighed about half a ton.

Originally, the machine had sported a headlamp worked by fumes from wet carbide but this had been replaced between the wars by a dynamo, one of the first bicycle dynamos marketed. It was about the size of a teapot and when clicked into service against the tyre put such a load on the front wheel that William had to stand on the pedals and heave to keep the bike moving and upright.

But it was all worth it. The bike was so robust that only a very foolish cabby indeed would try to edge his taxi close to William and force him into the kerb. The old bike’s

handlebars, of good pre-war steel, were bereft of rubber grips and could be relied upon to score a deep and expensive furrow along the side of any aggressive vehicle. And cycling was the cheapest and probably the quickest way of getting from Peel Street to the Walpole Club in St James's. Taxis were definitely out. Not only could he not afford them but no cabby knew where the Walpole Club was.

William did a skilful slow-bicycle-race weave, alternately pedalling and braking between the BMWs and buses and Volvos and vans motionless in Kensington Church Street. He tacked towards Kensington High Street because it was downhill practically all the way from there to St James's: the heavy old bike was the devil to pedal uphill even when the slope was only about one in a thousand but it dearly loved going downhill and would immediately accelerate into a kind of fast, lumbering canter, like an old war-horse hearing a bugle.

That morning William's mind was fixed on more serious matters than avoiding being run over. He had left Milly at home worried and upset and he was facing a difficult and delicate job of work. He went through undamaged because the traffic in Kensington High Street was locked in a motionless mass, most of it with engines switched off and radios switched on to cheery local radio telling them to avoid Kensington High Street at all costs.

The Walpole Club was off St James's Street, where members of the grand clubs like White's and Brooks's and Boodle's once used to enjoy themselves sitting in their bow-windows gazing down upon the common people walking to work in the rain. William pedalled along Piccadilly, turned right at Fortnum's, sailed round St James's Square and along Pall Mall and then pedalled strongly to get up St James's Street. A left turn into a quiet road and then a short run beneath a brick archway and through a mews brought him to a tiny cul-de-sac dwarfed by the Walpole

Club's massive dark stone frontage. The cul-de-sac was named Petherbridge Court and as this was far too long a name for its size it was not to be found on any London street map.

William steered round to the back of the Club and taking advantage of one of the perks of being Club Secretary, humped his bike down the area steps and padlocked it to a huge steel bin of kitchen waste. Whisking off his cycle-clips, he climbed back up the iron staircase and made his way round to the Club's front door.

When William's nose came to within eighteen inches of the massive door it swung open swiftly as though operated by an electronic eye. Inside, saluting with the fine flourish which he had invented and of which he was rightly proud, stood the enormous Sergeant Chidding, probably the most loyal and devoted servant the Club had ever had; willing, uncomplaining, kindly and, as William had to admit to Milly, as dim as a nun's nightlight.

Chidding had never been a sergeant, it was only a courtesy title, but he had been in the army during the war as a Lance Corporal in some odd, forgotten unit which had something to do with mules. Senior military members of the Club and even a distinguished war historian, fascinated, had tried to interrogate Sergeant Chidding at various times as to what his unit was supposed to accomplish with mules in the Second World War, but the sergeant could never understand their questions.

'Morning, Chidders,' said William cheerfully.

'*SAH!*' roared the sergeant, and the glass windows of his cubby-hole rattled. 'Now you've arrived, Mr Secretary, let our day's work commence!' Sergeant Chidding made his amusing little welcoming speech every morning when opening the door to William.

'I must talk to the Master urgently. Is he up yet?' The judge usually slept in one of the Club bedrooms when he was on an Appeal, which he was reputed to be at the

moment. Sergeant Chidding's brow corrugated. His eyes glazed with mental effort.

'The Master,' said William loudly and carefully. 'Lord Sidmonton. Is he up yet?'

'Up where?' asked the sergeant cautiously.

'Excuse me, Mr Seckertree, sir,' said a smooth, whiney voice behind William. 'I think I might be of some assistance in regard to this one.'

William sighed. It was the Club's under-porter and telephone operator, Stanley Tozer. However much William tried to be liberal-minded, Christian, tolerant of all God's creatures, Tozer defeated him. William found Stanley Tozer to be at all times a pain in the sphincter.

Tozer sidled round William and stood in front of the sergeant. William thought it significant that Chidders, as the porter was affectionately addressed by members, wore his ancient plum-coloured club livery with dignity whereas the under-porter, addressed by members without any affection at all as Tozer, looked like an understudy in the chorus of *White Horse Inn* wearing the borrowed costume of a fatter, taller baritone.

'G'mornin', Mr Seckertree, sir,' said Tozer with probably the most insincere smile outside the catering industry. 'Madam well, I trust?'

'Thank you, yes,' said William.

'And the kiddies?'

William ground his teeth. The Unspeakable Tozer had been told repeatedly that there were as yet no children.

'Growing pains, I shouldn't wonder,' said Tozer. 'Most kiddies get 'em, take it from me. Nothing to worry about. Now, sir, in reference to your enquiry about the whereabouts of the Master. Is it a matter of some urgency in a manner of speaking as you might say and that?'

'Yes,' said William. 'I want to see to him as soon as possible.'

‘Then, Mr Seckertree, sir, I am able to help information-wise, viz, the Master ain’t here. He didn’t sleep here last night as per he was supposed to because I heard a press gentleman in the bar say that the Master had adjourned his case for two days. But then I heard Mrs Baxter, head waitress, inform the coffee-room manager that the Master would definitely be in after lunch today because a Club crisis had arose.’

It dawned upon William that Mr Tozer’s information came entirely from listening in to other people’s conversation.

‘Rest assured, Mr Seckertree, sir,’ said Mr Tozer, ‘that as soon as the Master sets foot in the Club you will be informed by my good self. Whether you’re having your lunch or in your office or on the toilet, I’ll come and fetch you.’

William felt a sudden and desperate need to escape from Mr Tozer. He swiftly turned on his heel and strode back out of the front door. He gave Tozer a couple of minutes to return to his telephone exchange downstairs and then rapped discreetly on the great door. It swung open instantly.

‘*SAH!*’ roared Sergeant Chidding, and glass rattled again. ‘Now you’ve arrived, Mr Secretary, let our day’s work commence!’

For a fleeting moment William was tempted to go out and come in again to see whether Sergeant Chidding was good for a third display of welcome but decided that he had wasted enough time. He began his Monday morning stroll through his fiefdom.

William particularly enjoyed the Walpole in the mornings when the old building was still dozing and not yet quite awake. Standing in the morning-room he savoured the feel of the place. The furniture was very old but still comfortable. The Club décor, the wallpaper, pictures, were dignified and sombrely agreeable. As somebody once said,

‘The atmosphere is like that of a Duke’s house – with the Duke lying dead upstairs.’

The great curtains were still drawn across in the dining-room and it was dark and smelled of cigar smoke and cold chops. Overhead he could hear the surging whine of a vacuum cleaner as Mrs Addington went at the library carpet with vigour, punctuated at intervals by a bump or a splintering crack as the vacuum cleaner was driven into a late eighteenth-century Davenport or took the leg off a Hepplewhite chair.

One of the first things William did when he moved in was to read up on the Club’s past. In the library he found the official history, an enormous volume penned by a member, Bartholomew Usher, MD, retired physician, in 1872. Dr Usher’s prose style was so soporific that a paragraph read aloud would have put a swallow to sleep in mid-flight, but William thought the information was probably accurate enough.

It seems that like many of the early clubs, social, literary and political, the Walpole was founded in the middle of the eighteenth century. It started as a political club, a gathering of rich and noble Whig landowners who were staunch admirers of their late Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole, reputed to have studied his gamekeeper’s reports each morning before applying himself to the less interesting task of running the nation.

Originally, the noblemen and gentlemen assembled once a week in a tavern whose keeper let them have a private room upstairs without charge so long as they drank themselves senseless. As heavy drinking was the *raison d’être* of the Club the arrangement worked well enough until the turn of the century.

In the early 1800s middle-class values intruded and the tavern-keepers ceased being toss-pots and poets and began to turn businessmen. By then, getting beastly drunk was less popular a hobby even with Dukes and so the profit per

square yard of an upstairs room no longer warranted the tavern-keeper providing the room free. So he began charging a reasonable rental to new customers such as the burgeoning nonconformist religious clubs; he found that this gave him an even bigger profit although most of the religious clubmen did not drink at all, even in moments of zeal and fervency.

So in the early nineteenth century, clubs had to look for premises of their own. One thing which most of Sir Robert Walpole's admirers did not lack was money. Most were rich and many immensely rich landowners, though some of them became immensely poor suddenly on the wrong turn of a card or throw of dice.

Rich noblemen bet wildly on anything, ate and drank prodigiously and spent fortunes keeping whores. In the Club they behaved arrogantly and abominably because they were aristocrats and reckoned themselves above having to behave like gentlemen. As Henry James later remarked, 'There are bad manners everywhere, but an aristocracy is bad manners organized.'

Money, to noble members, was ample compensation for appalling behaviour. At luncheon one day the Duke of Sheffield threw a waiter out of the first-floor window. The Club porter hurried up and informed the Duke that the waiter was lying moaning on the pavement outside with a broken leg.

'Put him on the bill,' said the Duke.

As the century progressed the social pattern changed; the madness of heavy gambling abated somewhat and Dukes tended to live in their Dukeries and only attend their St James's clubs when they had to come to London to buy new guns or boots. But the restrictions on admitting into membership only aristocratic friends, or relations, was applied so strictly at the Walpole that during the year 1822 the noble committee blackballed the entire list of

applicants; at the end of the year the Club had fifteen members, eleven of them over seventy.

But the Walpole survived, by gradually relaxing the traditional aristocratic loathing of new members and allowing in some clubbable men who were in professions formerly hopelessly beyond the pale as far as the nobility was concerned, for example, ‘filthy pen-pushers with dirty fingers’ (Lord Tennyson, Anthony Trollope), ‘greasy Levantine Jews’ (the Governor of the Bank of England, the Chairman of the Stock Exchange), ‘vulgar clowns and face-pullers’ (Charles Kean, William Macready) and ‘untrustworthy, venal liars’ (the Solicitor-General and the Master of the Rolls).

The freehold of a small plot of land in Petherbridge Court occupied by wobbly lodging-houses was negotiated with help from the immensely influential Marquess of Westminster, the rickety houses and taverns were pulled down and the Walpole Club arose in their place, a substantial stone-faced mansion with four floors and a noble façade in the fashionable neo-classical style of pillars and rustication and Venetian windows, impossible to view properly because the street was too narrow. The architect, a Mr Anabona, immediately disappeared from Britain and architectural history.

William, walking through the coffee-room with his mind preoccupied with the task ahead, was suddenly stopped in his tracks by the realization of a great and horrible truth: he had no idea what exactly an orgy *was*. He hurried up the grand staircase towards his office at the top of the building to look up ‘orgy’ in his encyclopedia.

The stairs were designed to be wide enough to carry four clubmen abreast, however unsteady on their feet, from the billiard-room on the third floor down to the ground-floor lavatories. These facilities were ice-cold even in summer but were spacious; the wash-basins, some without plugs, held small pieces of cracked soap and a useful

assortment of ancient and none too clean hairbrushes and combs and on the wall was a newly installed automatic roller-towel machine.

Members could weigh themselves on a mahogany and brass sit-upon weighing scale, of the kind used years ago by small, beady-eyed men on Brighton pier dressed as jockeys who bet sixpence they could guess a punter's weight within two ounces. The Walpole's weighing machine went out of use in 1932 when a temporarily unhinged member of the House of Lords, in wine, took all the weights off the balance arm, staggered upstairs with them and tried to murder a political opponent by bombing him down the stairwell. The modern concern with bulging stomachs caused new weights to be bought and the machine was made serviceable again.

William enjoyed the non-twentieth-century other-worldliness of the Walpole. On the tiny table at the bend of the stairs stood a cabinet displaying a monogrammed silver snuffbox squashed flat by a musket ball at the battle of Malplaquet. Or so it said in beautiful brown writing on a card.

There was a snaffle which had once had the honour of snaffling the great eighteenth-century racehorse Eclipse. Or so it said on the card. And a pair of handcuffs used by the suffragette wife of a member to chain herself to the Club railings. She nearly starved to death as nobody at all passed by, but her name was printed in the *Morning Post* and her husband, a colossal bore, had to resign from the Walpole, so some good came from it all.

Beside the handcuffs was a single china false tooth on an ancient dark brown, vulcanized-rubber dental plate which an old member had probably removed for comfort and then forgotten. Soon after he became Secretary, William propped a card against it reading 'Property of Her late Majesty, Queen Victoria. *Not to be used as a bottle-opener*.' Nobody noticed.

Higher up, opposite the billiard-room, there was a gap where two bannister supports were missing. It seems, according to Dr Usher's book, and William felt the good doctor would not lie to him, that in the old days new Club members were not welcome although their subscriptions were. One evening a new member stopped the old but burly Duke of Rattray on the stairs and asked him where he might find the library.

'And who the devil are you?' snapped the Duke.

'A newly elected member, sir.'

'Oh, are you!' said the Duke and with a tremendous uppercut knocked the new member downstairs. Unhappily the new member was a war hero from the Peninsular campaign and had a wooden leg which caught in the bannisters and broke off two of the supports. When the House Committee asked the Duke to pay for repairs to the staircase he resigned in protest at the Club's insolence in demanding money from a Duke. His subscription was, at the time, fourteen years in arrears.

As William hurried higher up the staircase, now leading only to the attic rooms which housed the accountancy department and William's office, it became dramatically less grand; the stairs, a third of their previous width, were clad in coconut matting and rose steeply. The comforting wallpaper ceased and serviceable dark green and beige gloss paint took over.

As William's face rose above landing-level he glanced anxiously at the accountant's door, which he had to pass to get to his own office. The door was usually wide open and presented a problem. How to close the door and slip past it without being seen and talked to by the Club's accountant, the beautiful but disturbingly scented (and believed to be predatory) Mrs Hardcastle? He should have remembered to take an umbrella up with him. Not that he owned an umbrella but he could have asked Sergeant Chidding to find him one.

A week or two earlier William had borrowed a member's umbrella from the downstairs cloakroom and it had done the job well. He had lain prone on the landing, hooked the edge of the door with the brolly handle and slowly and smoothly closed the door. He had then got up and strolled safely past Mrs Hardcastle to the haven of his own office.

But he failed to return the member's brolly to the cloakroom. A day later a card appeared on the notice board:

I would be grateful if the nobleman who stole my umbrella from whence it has always been left, beneath hook No.3 on the west wall of the cloakroom, would kindly return it. I say 'nobleman' because I understand this to be a club for noblemen and gentlemen; as no gentleman would steal another gentleman's umbrella it follows that the member responsible must be a nobleman.

Next day there was a new card pinned to the board, written in a vigorous hand:

Noblemen do not steal umbrellas because noblemen do not use umbrellas. Only 'gentlemen' such as city clerks, golfers and Japanese policemen use the beastly things which resemble dead bats. Noblemen are able to shoot deer over moors in heavy snow and fish icy rivers in driving rain because the British aristocracy happens to be, by and large, waterproof.

William discovered the vital umbrella under his desk, quickly slipped it back beneath hook Number 3 and that was that. But now he had no umbrella and he was prone on the landing with no means of getting past Mrs Hardcastle's open door unseen.

He wriggled out of his jacket and tried casting it like a gladiator's cloak in the hope of it settling over the doorknob but it was too difficult and a mouth-organ flew out of the top pocket of his jacket and hit the wall with a dangerously loud clatter. William, breathing heavily, lay still for a moment getting his breath back and wondering what a mouth-organ was doing in his jacket pocket. He did not own a mouth-organ.

A sudden wave of common sense surged over him as he lay there face down on the landing, jacket off, reaching out to pick up a mystery mouth-organ.

Why am I doing this? Why cannot I walk past the open door, wave cheerfully to Mrs Hardcastle and so reach the safety of my office? Because, he thought grimly. Because Mrs Hardcastle is a beautiful woman. Really beautiful. And desirable. I acknowledge this honestly. But as it happens I do not desire her. I desire my wife. My admiration for Mrs Hardcastle's physical attractions is completely objective. But I find her flirtatious attentions so embarrassing that I will crawl along the landing floor and shut her door with an umbrella rather than face her. But no, today I will be courageous. I will get up now and walk briskly past Mrs Hardcastle's open door and establish a sensible precedent.

Hardly had he even begun to rise up than a waft of subtle oriental scent drifted across his nostrils and his toes tingled.

'Good morning, dear Mr Secretary,' said the soft and lilting voice of Mrs Hardcastle as she reached the head of the stairs and stood above him. 'And how are you this goodly British morning?'

William could think of nothing better to do for the time being than just lie there on the coconut matting. Clearly the traffic had delayed Mrs Hardcastle way past her usual time of arrival. Out of the corner of his eye he noted the mauve-sandalled foot and the edge of the sari which this morning was the near-transparent gold and green number.