

THE CHRONICLE OF STOAT HALL

by W.C. Lumin

George Aarbuthnot was the first to arrive. It was ever thus. George Aarbuthnot was not known as Mister Early Bird for nothing. Or was it Mister Squirmy Worm? Early or Squirmy, it was taken as a given that George would be on the doorstep with a bottle and a smile before the appointed hour. Indeed, if it was said that if George Aarbuthnot was not on his third gin and tonic by the time the other guests arrived, the likelihood was that they had gone to the wrong address.

A bon viveur of some standing, George was legendary in literary circles as the man who told J.K. Rowling to stick to knitting as she would never make it as a writer, an opinion that he doggedly stands by to this day. A flash in the pan, he calls her. A passing fad. An unattractive man of little ability and no great industry, it is hardly surprising that for years his literary agency - Aarbuthnot and Co. - bumbled along from one financial crisis to the next. His business model was simple . . . go for quantity, not quality. And so, rather than expend time and effort reading submissions, he relied upon empirical methodology. In other words, he signed every one-hundredth wannabe author who emailed him, as long as they could use a spell-checker - artificial education he jokingly described it, not entirely tongue in cheek. Thanks in no small part to a wardrobe replete with old school ties and membership of the right golf clubs, he managed to foist enough literary drivel on publishers over drunken lunches to keep the wolf from the door of his Knightsbridge office, as he vaingloriously called his pokey basement flat in Pimlico. After all, most of what he acerbically referred to as his pot-luck clients

were no better or worse than the bulk of novelists whose work illumed the Amazonsphere before being pulped into toilet paper – a fitting end for the verbose pains in the butt, he maintained.

George's fortunes changed dramatically when - quite by chance - one of his random authors turned out to have talent. It was a little over twenty years ago that W.C. Lumin – now a household name to all but hermits, castaways and troglodytes – sent an unsolicited manuscript to Aarbuthnot and Co. seeking representation. The accompanying letter read, 'Dear Messers Aarbuthnot, I am seeking an agent for my debut novel, *Coronets, Corsets and Crinoline*. As you are the first entry in the Literary Agents section of *The Writer's Companion*, I take it that you are the crème de la literary crème so deemed it fitting that I grant you the opportunity of acquiring my exclusive services before I cast my net far and wide.'

Somewhat the worse for alcoholic wear, George was of the mistaken belief that Lumin was the one hundredth feeble fabulist to contact him that month so immediately wrote back with the offer of a contract. Had he checked his spam folder, he would have found that upward of two dozen other hopefuls had slipped through the digital net. And so it might be said that W.C Lumin became a client of Aarbuthnot and Co. under false pretences. Be that as it may, the alphabetic aberration proved serendipitous, as *Coronets, Corsets and Crinoline* triggered a frenzied bidding war from publishers on both sides of the Atlantic. After a no-hold barred auction at the nineteenth hole of Chiswick Golf Club, the rights were snapped up by Sherridan Slipshod of Spitpolish Press. George's commission on the deal enabled him to fulfil a longheld ambition to tell his other deadbeat clients to find a day job commensurate with their talents: street-

sweepers or refuse disposal operatives came to mind. The upshot was that Aarbuthnot and Co. cut their roster to the bone - to one, in fact - and thenceforth the streets of Hampstead and Islington were to all intents and purposes litter free.

It is now taken as a given that each and every Christmas, a new W.C. Lumin blockbuster will top the best-sellers lists in every nook and cranny of the English speaking firmament, as sure as eggs is eggs. Not since Stephen King has an author been so prolific. Or so revered. If it not enough that Lumin's novels fly off the shelves like bluebottles on a midsummer's morn, more often than not the film rights are snapped up before he even commits quill to parchment. It need hardly be said that part of his appeal is that each novel is a radical departure from the last, so his legion of fans are always on tenterhooks to see what lies in store. Classics such as *The Knight Templar's Paramour*, *Hullabaloo in Katmandu*, *Captain Kipper's Trampoline*, *My Darling Virgin Dromedary*, *Finland's Children*, *Mog The Dog* and *Skinny Dipping in The Algarve* have cemented his reputation as the most eclectic writer in the English language. What adds to his appeal is that next to nothing is known about the man. Despite seventeen best-selling novels, three novellas and several longwinded collections of short stories, he remains the greatest enigma of the age.

'You are early,' Edith Lumin said as she took George Aarbuthnot's coat, turned up her nose and handed it to the maid to do with as she must. A spritely woman with a chiselled face, thin lips and haystack hair, her penchant for tweed suits, waistcoats, bow ties and brogues and a fondness for neat whisky and Cuban cigars meant that she was often mistaken for W.C.'s business manager rather than his dearly beloved wife.

‘Early? Well, blow me,’ George raised an eyebrow as he watched the maid waddle off holding his coat in one hand and pinching her nose with the other. ‘I’m sure you said three.’

‘The Hell I did,’ said Edith as she cast a jaundiced eye at the giftbottle. ‘Really, George. Is screwtop supermarket plonk the best you can do? You rake in millions from your commission on Willy’s books.’

‘Ah, but where would he be without me, eh? You tell me that.’

‘A good deal better off and probably twice as successful. As I understand it, you cream off fifteen percent of his earnings for . . . what is it exactly that you do, George, apart from getting pissed at book launches?’

‘Steady on, old girl. No need to be like that. I will have you know that I’m at W.C.’s constant beck and call. No rest for the wicked, what?’

‘Fiddlesticks. You haven’t seen him since goodness knows when. And as for telephoning . . . pigs might fly. As long as he keeps churning out dreary piffle, Willy might as well be six feet under for all you care. Come on, I’ll introduce you to the others.’

‘Others?’ George said, working hard to hide a note of panic in his voice. ‘I thought I was early.’

‘Well you thought wrong, George. I arranged for everyone else to be here at one. I told you the meeting was at three so you couldn’t get blotto and snaffle all the canapés before the others arrived.’

Despite having been Lumin's esteemed literary agent for the better part of twenty years, this was the first time that George Aarbutnot had been invited to visit the legendary recluse at his secluded country retreat. Regretting that he had missed luncheon, he ran an eye about the cavernous entrance hall and shuddered; gloomy was not the word. Or maybe it was. But Lumin's penchant for drab was well-known. Indeed, it dripped off the pages of his novels.

A dyed in the wool misanthrope, W.C. Lumin bought Stoa Hall with the proceeds of his first best-seller, *Inspector Pidgeon's Apothecary*, having fallen head over heels for the mock Gothic monstrosity the moment he slithered over the threshold. Whether or not it inspired the setting for *All The King's Stallions and All the Queen's Knaves* - his famous historical trilogy - is hotly debated by his legion of fans, but what is beyond doubt is that it mirrored Lumen's aesthetic much like the silvered tiles in the en-suite bathrooms. Although those of a romantic bent might describe Stoa Hall as a theatre of dreams, those with a grasp on reality dismissed it as a grotesque folly with pretensions of misplaced grandeur. To be blunt, like Lumen, Stoa Hall was more pomp than circumstance. The fact was that although the estate agent maintained that the mansion dated from before the mists time, the truth was that it had been built in the nineteen-thirties by Charlie 'Choo-Choo' Thomas, the legendary railway baron. But of course, Lumin believed the version he was sold. After all his stock in trade was outlandish fiction, was it not? It most certainly was.

Marooned in the remotest wilds of East Anglia, the pile of reconstituted rubble was twenty minutes' drive from the nearest shop. More suited to a latterday Dracula than a best-selling novelist, the only access was by means of a cobblestone bridge spanning a neglected moat teeming with anaemic carp. The

uninvited were kept at bay by a cast-iron portcullis set in mighty weathered walls topped by crenelated battlements, home to goggle-eyed gargoyles – monkey headed demons and leering gryphons with forked tongues and speared tails. Behind the leaded windows, the décor was in keeping with the bleak vista of uncultivated – uncultivable, it might be said - marshland that stretched as far as eye could see - frayed French tapestries, threadbare Persian rugs, clumpy oak furniture and dreary oil paintings of pompous ruffle-necked gentlemen with large noses and prissy ladies with pinched lips and powdered wigs. In short, from the outside to the in, Stroat Hall was the embodiment of tastelessness – a fitting home for a writer of florid prose who always used ten words where one would happily suffice.

Wasting no time, Edith led George down a draughty corridor, as wide as it was tall. Dim-lit by Perspex candelabras - the candles now replaced by penny-pinching neon facsimiles - it hosted, or better said, it boasted, an embarrassment of armour-suited mannequins and taxidermied stoats. Prominently displayed in alcoves were glittering prizes; an Oscar for the screenplay of *Topsy Taylor and The Peppermint Tree*; three Mann-Bookers for *Stallions and Knaves* as Lumin's classic trilogy was commonly known, and a lifetime achievement award from The Royal Society of Apocalyptic Apothecaries for *Inspector Pidgeon*. 'Trash,' Edith scoffed dismissively as she strode past a Diamond Microphone award for Dame Shirley Bassey's Audiobook rendition of Lumin's Lord Peter Wimsey tribute novel, *Nuns, Chums and Gattling Guns*. As she walked, she explained, 'Willy keeps his Nobel Prize for Literature in the downstairs loo with his framed fan letters from Kate Bush and Barak Obama. I ask you . . . they need to get a life, those two.' She drew to a halt by a panelled door, turned to Aarbuthnot, said,

‘get a bloody move-on, man. Willy does *not* like to be kept waiting,’ lit up a cigar and followed him in.

Rectangular with high vaulted ceilings, arched quarter-paned windows and a chequerboarded marble floor, the sitting room, or The Great Hall, as Lumin chose to call it, was intimidating in its vastness. It reminded George of an Errol Flynn movie, no accident as Charlie ‘Choo-Choo’ Thomas, in whose lurid imagination Stoa Hall had been confected, had instructed his architect to construct a tribute to the golden age of Hollywood chivalry and buccaneering derring-do. Hence the crossed cutlasses on the oak-panelled walls; hence the coat of arms – back to back escutcheoned stoats bedecked in ermine gowns; hence the garish oil painting of W.C. Lumin in the guise of William Shakespeare - a feathered quill in one hand, a stoat in the other - on the chimneybreast.

Dominating the room was an enormous oak table capable of accommodating a score of guests. Today, though, it hosted a mere half dozen. George recognised the dissolute figure of Sherriden Slipshod sipping wine, an old school chum and partly – or largely – for that reason, Lumin’s publisher. Bespectacled with shoulder length grey hair, his crumpled beige suit and silk cravat granted him a bohemian air, carefully cultivated, no doubt, to impress the impressionable in the arty circles he aspired to. Beside him sat a busty woman in an indecently short dress, perilously high heels, ruby-red lips and a luxurious mane of glossy auburn hair. Early twenties, George suspected, or he did until he put on his spectacles. A shiver ran down his spine as he realised that her petit nose, full lips and pneumatic breasts owed more to a surgeon’s knife than mother nature’s nurture. To her left sat a dog-collared man sporting a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and corduroy trousers deep in conversation

with a frilly blonde. With her kitten heels, silk blouse, pink designer skirt-suit, pearl necklace earrings and broach, she could have been plucked from the pages of a celebrity magazine. Opposite her sat a portly chap in a pin-stripe suit with a balding rug of mousy brown hair and a walrus moustache. He was chatting to a fellow half his age. Tall, good looking and confident, the young man's suntan, polo shirt, chinos and twinkle-eyes suggested that he would be more at home in Monte Carlo than the Norfolk Broads.

In a rickety wheelchair at the far end of the table sat a frail W.C. Lumin - cotton nightshirt, silk dressing gown and leather slippers. He scowled when Aarbutnot walked through the door, gave his watch a tetchy tap and snapped, 'you are late, George, but I suppose there has to be a first time for everything. Not to worry – you haven't missed anything. This is not a social occasion. Take a seat.'

A Dickensian figure with a hawk nose, monk's peak, bad teeth and the permanent scowl of a sufferer from haemorrhoids, Lumin looked slowly around the table and nodded at each of the guests in turn. 'Gentlemen. Ladies. I thank you for coming,' said he in a gruff voice, devoid of any measure of civility or charm. 'Although this is the first time most of you have met, It may surprise you to know that you have much in common. To cut to the chase, you have all been leeching off me for years.' He took a sip of brandy to lubricate his tonsils, and said, 'let me not waste time I can no longer spare and make the introductions.' He flicked a limp wrist at the woman to his right. 'This construct of vanity is my ex-wife, Hermione, the inspiration for my novella, *Under The Milkman's Wood*.' He ran a disparaging eye over her immodest dress, coiffured hair and bee-sting lips. 'You would not think to look at her,' he said, 'but she is several decades

closer to the grave than the cradle. Behind her surgical mask, she is as ugly as sin and twice as reprehensible. If rumour is to be believed, she has bedded more men than the YMCA.' He turned to Edith, tapped his chin and asked, 'tell me, my dear, how much alimony do I pay the tramp to fund her quest for eternal youth, or should I say, to finance her quest for eternal youths?'

Edith consulted her notes and winced. 'According to last year's accounts, she rakes in one hundred and fifty thousand a year.'

'That much, eh? And how about Spencer?'

'Much the same,' Edith said with a disparaging shake of the head.

A portly man with a ruddy complexion in a pin-stripe suit, Spencer Lumin avoided his brother's eyes. 'Got to keep up appearances, Willy. Wouldn't do to turn up at chambers on a bicycle. We barristers are expected to exhibit a certain style. You are no one in the circles I move in if you don't drive a Bentley and have a second home in the Dordogne. The trappings of success matter in my line of business.'

'Business? Is that what you call twiddling your thumbs waiting for the phone to ring. You know as well as I do that you haven't had a client for years,' Lumin grunted, somewhat uncharitably in Spencer's opinion if his hangdog expression was anything to go by. 'And if by some strange quirk of fate you were to get a brief, I'm sure the case would be thrown out the moment you opened your mouth - assuming the judge was sober,' Lumin said with a hollow laugh. 'If it wasn't for my handouts, you would be living on the street. And as for you, Rupert . . .' He scowled at the human gadfly with a suntan and chinos beside his brother. 'I have been paying off your gambling debts since you were knee high

to a pole-dancer. You are as despicable as your pathetic excuse for a mother. A playboy and a wastrel. If you weren't my only son, I would cut you off without a penny.' Having minced no words, he jabbed a finger at the dog-collared man. 'Why my dimwitted daughter married a bounder like you, DeMoncey, is beyond me. Still, I suppose you have made quite a name for yourself for your charitable work. But lest you forget, your refuge for fallen women costs one hundred thousand pounds a year to run – one hundred thousand pounds of my hard-earned money. I will have you know, that is the best part of a day's writing.'

'That is so unfair, Daddy.' The twinset and pearls woman reached for the Reverend DeMoncey's hand and gave it a supportive squeeze. 'You have no idea the sacrifices Cuthbert has made to follow his calling.'

'Calling? I believe you mean call girls. Not for nothing is your husband's mission known as the Sodom and Gomorrah of Peckham Rye - with the emphasis on Sodom.' Lumin railed. 'And let me tell you, you are the only vicar's wife in these fair isles who drives a Mercedes Benz sports coupe and shops in New Bond Street. You are lazy, extravagant, spendthrift and vain, Felicity, just like your mother. If it wasn't for your allowance . . .'

'One-twenty,' Edith said as she flicked cigar ash onto the floor and ground it into the Persian rug with a size four brogue.

'One hundred and twenty thousand pounds a year to hob-nob with the glitterati and curry favour with your dissolute husband's creepy friends. Filthy rich paedophiles and perverts, the lot of them,' Lumin growled. 'And you can take that smirk off you face, Sherriden,' he told Slipshod. 'You would have been out of business years ago if it wasn't for me. None of your other authors has

written a paragraph worth reading for years. If you weren't so obsessed with publishing high-brow effluent in a desperate bid for kudos, you might have a business worthy of the name. My sales have been subsidising your tinpot company since *Corsets* became a best-seller. When will you accept the fact that what the public wants are ripping yarns, steamy romance, sexy potboilers and fantasy fiction, not arty-farty dross with the entertainment value of the Unabridged Oxford Dictionary.' Veins throbbing like pneumatic cannulas, he broke into a hacking cough and slumped back in his wheelchair. After a few deep breaths, he brushed Edith's hand aside with, 'don't fuss, woman,' and cleared his throat. 'And what about the genius who discovered me, eh, George?' He turned to Aarbuthnot and narrowed his eyes. 'Had you been sober when my manuscript landed on your desk, *Coronets, Corsets and Crinoline* would still be in your slush pile with the first draft of *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*.'

'A flash in the pan,' Aarbuthnot muttered under his breath. And then, hackles on the rise, he rallied to his defence. 'Be fair, old chap,' he said. 'If I hadn't suggested all those edits, *Corsets* would never have seen the light of day.'

'Ah yes. Your edits.' Lumin gripped the armrest of his wheelchair and spat out the words. 'Inappropriate, unnecessary and illiterate, each and every one. Needless to say, I ignored your advice to change the title to *The Beaver*, but did you notice? The devil you did. Shows how carefully you read the second draft. Or rather, it goes to show that you didn't. If you had, you would have realised that I hadn't changed a word, apart from correcting the spelling of swoon, damson, enema and blaggard. Well, enough is enough.' He raised a hand to preempt George's attempt to justify his editorial prowess. 'You are the most

despicable bunch of rogues a man could have the misfortune to cross paths with. If I wasn't at death's door, I would be done with the lot of you for good and all.'

'My God, Willy. What's wrong?' Hermione asked, not so much concerned by his predicament as alarmed that she might have to find an honest job – perish the thought.

'How kind of you to ask,' George said, his voice oozing insincerity. He took a deep breath, said, 'I have Montague's Syndrome,' and forced a feeble smile. 'You will no doubt be delighted to know that there is no cure . . . yet.'

A stunned silence fell. Eyes met eyes and looked away. Backsides shuffled in seats. After an awkward silence, Felicity ventured a hesitant, 'poor Daddy.' She looked around the table and cleared her throat. 'So it that why you asked to see us - to discuss your will?'

'Before you pop open the champagne,' Lumin said with a hint of irony in his voice. 'My consultant tells me that there has recently been a medical breakthrough involving stem-cell transplants. A cure should be available to those who can afford it within three years, he says. Five years at the most. In the meantime, he has referred me to a pioneering organisation called Cryonicom. Funded by NASA, they have perfected a procedure to put astronauts into suspended animation for the purposes of interplanetary travel. As I understand it, by freezing a body in liquid helium they can induce a state of hibernation and suspend the ageing process. Ask yourselves, have you ever seen an squirrel with grey hair, a walking stick and a beard? No. Thought not,' he said in response to the bemused expressions. 'Well, I have agreed to be a guinea pig. Patient 001.'

He turned to Edith, said, 'if you would be so kind, my dear,' and slumped down in his wheelchair with his eyes closed and his hands in his lap.

'Willie signed the contract last week. As his loving wife and business manager, I witnessed it to confirm that he was of sound mind,' Edith announced, then mumbled, 'fat chance,' under her breath. 'In a little over six weeks, Willie will be put into suspended animation at the Cryonicom Laboratory in Cambridge. Assuming all goes to plan, when he is brought out of suspended animation in four or five years' time, the cure for Montague's Syndrome will be tried, tested and licensed for use. There is every reason to believe that he may then enjoy a long, a healthy and a productive life. But needless to say, cryogenics is an horrendously expensive procedure. And that will have implications for every one of you.' The silence became deafening as Edith announced, 'not only must Willy invest his fortune in the procedure, he will have to generate a sufficiently large income stream to pay Cryonicom's extortionate fees, maintain Stoa Hall and keep me in the manner to which I have become accustomed.' A glint lit up her eyes as she added, 'and believe you me, I don't come cheap.'

George Aarbuthnot cast a panicky glance around the table. 'But . . . but . . . what about us?'

'Ah yes. The blood-suckers.' Edith helped herself to a double whisky from the drinks' cabinet, lit a cigar and leant against the fireplace with a calculating smile on her thin lips. 'Well, Willy has decided that it is high time that you kept him, rather than him keeping you.'

'I don't understand,' Hermione said.

‘Of course you don’t, you dumb trout. Understanding is not in your nature,’ Lumin grunted.

‘Temper, temper, Willy, dear. Think of your blood pressure.’ Edith laid a hand on her husband’s arm. ‘Let me explain,’ she said. ‘There is no reason why W.C. Lumin should not continue to publish a new book every year during his . . . well, let’s just call it his enforced sojourn, shall we?’

‘How?’ Six voices asked in unison.

‘Simple. You will write them. And before you protest that you wouldn’t know where to start, I should point out that to all intents and purposes, I have been ghost writing W. C. Lumin novels for years. As his secretary, I used to type up his handwritten texts. After a year or two, he had me edit them and then, at his bidding, I fleshed them out into full length novels from his notes. Of course, I charged him a fortune. That is why he married me after Hermione ran off with that rugby team. Word has it, they needed a new hooker . . . just my little joke, sweetie,’ she said as Hermione’s face went bright red. ‘Willy reasoned that if he married me, he would get my services on the cheap, plus a few bedroom perks thrown in for good measure, not that he has ever made good use of them.’ She glanced at Lumen from the corner of an eye and shook her head. ‘The critics might say that *Bosom Baddies* is the most sexually explicit novel since *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, but believe you me, I wrote all the salacious passages. For heaven’s sake, Willy thinks Libido is an Italian beach resort and cunnilingus is an East European language. And that brings me to the nub of the matter. You see, character and plot are not my department. Like a cordon blue chef transforming the blandest ingredients into a gourmet meal, for over a decade I have been transforming Willy’s half-baked ideas into gripping yarns. I see no reason why I

should not do the same for you. Stylistically, no one will ever know that he didn't write them as if truth be told, he hasn't written a book for years.'

Lumin sat up, rubbed his hands and cackled, 'so here is the deal, you shower of dolts. While I am snoozing like Rip van Winkle, Edith will turn your stories into W.C. Lumin novels to keep the cash tills ringing. This is not negotiable. Anyone who fails to deliver will have the taps of my generosity turned off. I have given Edith power of attorney to stop your allowances and terminate the contracts with my useless publisher and agent if needs be.' He splayed his hands and shrugged. 'So cooperate or starve.'

As Jaws dropped, eyes popped and hearts raced, Edith took a pack of Tarot cards from the inside pocket of her tweed jacket. As she shuffled them, she explained, 'you will each choose a card to inspire you. We will meet again in four weeks' time, when you will read your stories to Willy and myself. I will then turn your drivel into W.C. Lumin novels to fund Willy's treatment and keep you in the luxury you ill deserve. But if any of you fail to pass muster . . .' She drew a finger across her throat, demanded, 'do I make myself clear?' and thrust the pack under George Aarbuthnot's nose.

'Clear as mud on a foggy day,' George Aarbuthnot grumbled as he chose a card. 'Temperance,' he said as he examined it with a puzzled frown. 'And what the devil am I supposed to do with that?'

'Use your imagination. Mind you, that will be a stretch,' Edith said with a crooked smile as she offered the pack to Felicity DeMoncey. 'Ah, the Fool,' she said as Felicity drew a card. 'How appropriate for a dumb blonde. Sherriden?' She held the cards out to Sherriden Slipshod. 'Well I never. The Emperor. Have

fun with that.’ And so she circulated the guests, chuckling as each chose a card and stared at it, nonplussed . . . The Wheel of Fortune, Rupert . . . Judgement, Spencer . . . The Lovers, Reverend Cuthbert DeMoncey, and . . .

‘Dear God – The Devil.’ The blood drained from Hermione’s cheeks as she stared at her card.

‘Takes one to know one,’ Edith quipped. Then she cleared her throat, said, ‘righty-ho,’ and clapped her hands. ‘We will meet again in exactly one month. You will read Willy your masterpieces and he will decide which, if any, will be worthy of his name . . . and who of you, if any, will be cast into the financial wilderness. Now off you pop, and don’t forget . . . if word of this leaks out, whoever blabs will be staring destitution in the face . . . and then I’ll feed them to the carp.’

