

The First Two Pages: “Swan Club” by Anne Laughlin

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An Essay by Anne Laughlin

“Swan Club” is a short story set in 1929 London, largely taking place in a gentlemen’s club in the St. James area of the city. What makes the Swan Club unique is its membership, which is made up exclusively of high-society women who dress as men while in the club. Often their cross-dressing carries over outside the club when they escort society women to dinner or the opera. For most members, wearing men’s clothes is an expression of their true selves. If conditions allowed, they would live in men’s clothes. I chose this as the premise for my story because it touches on so many themes: trans issues, class issues, the zeitgeist of the late 1920s in London, and serial killers.

The story opens with the main character, Georgia, entering the Swan Club and engaging the valet, Stuart, to help her dress in her male attire. Here I wanted to show how gentlemen dressed in the late ’20s, and I list all the items of clothing she puts on. We see her kicking off her high heels as she prepares for the change, a nod to the generally uncomfortable way women dress. Changing into men’s clothes means both physical and psychological freedom. Georgia notes that it made her feel wholly herself. I wanted to make it clear that dressing as men wasn’t a lark, but a genuine attempt to honor who she and the other members really were.

After the wardrobe change, when Georgia becomes George, he descends to the main floor of the club. Here I want to show how perfectly Swan Club mimics the traditional gentlemen's clubs with its wooden walls, giant hearths, bar, parlor, billiards room, guest rooms, etc. The décor is aggressively masculine. Paintings of battles and hunting scenes dot the walls.

It's teatime, and George heads to the parlor where stewards are distributing tea service to the tables set up around the room. He sees his friend, Archie, waving him over. While normally Archie and George would exchange pleasantries and gossip, this day is different. Because this is a crime story, and short stories are, well, short, I needed to get to the crime plot rather quickly. Archie greets George with the news that a second member of the club has been murdered, immediately putting the reader in mind of a serial killer targeting members of the club.

Archie says that their friend Henry saw the body himself, and in that moment, Henry arrives in the parlor and makes his way to their table. Because this anthology asks us to mention a queer icon, I chose Henry as the male embodiment of Vita Sackville-West, the somewhat notorious raconteur of the time. Vita did engage in cross-dressing, going away on weekends with her lover, dressed as a soldier, and not breaking character the whole time. I gave Henry the same self-confidence and boldness I imagine Vita had.

That is the end of the two pages, unfortunately. What immediately follows is Henry's description of coming upon the murder scene and witnessing the gross disdain the police had for the victim once it was discovered he was a she underneath his clothing. Their indifference to finding the victim's killer is a major theme and a primary reason for Georgia and the others to have created a private space for themselves in the Swan Club. The choices I made in writing the first two pages were to set the stage for an exploration of that theme.

The First Two Pages of "Swan Club"

London
March 1929

The rain was falling steadily as I walked through the peaceful quiet of St. James Park to my club. Many famous gentlemen's clubs were found in the area—the Carleton, the Oxford and Cambridge—but the Swan Club was the only one that would accept me as a member, the only one I was interested in joining. My skirt was drenched by the time I got there, but I carried a change of clothes suitable for the club in a bag swinging at my side. I couldn't wait to get into them.

I was not allowed to enter the club by the front door in my feminine garb, so I climbed the metal stairs at the rear of the building. When I knocked on the door, an immaculately dressed man swung it open and stepped aside for me to enter. Stuart was new to the Swan Club, but he fit the role of valet as if born to it. He had a military posture and a voluptuous mustache that defied gravity.

"Hello, Stuart," I said, handing over the bag. "Do you have time for me now?"

"Certainly. If you'll follow me to dressing room two."

I followed his march down a long corridor, passing several closed doors along the way. I almost expected his heels to click when

he stopped to open the door to number two. When I stepped through, a feeling of relief swept through my body. Now I could get out of my skirt and high heels and step into the clothes that made me feel wholly myself.

Stuart handed me some boxers and an undershirt and pointed to the bathroom. When I returned in my skivvies, he began layering on the fine clothes that transformed me into a gentleman. He paid no more attention to my body than he would a post box. First, my bright, white shirt, made of the finest linen, followed by a waistcoat, cufflinks, garters and stockings, trousers and suit jacket. Then he wet my short wavy hair and combed it into a masculine style, using a scented oil to hold it in place. I looked at myself in the mirror. I could see how handsome I was. Georgia was gone and George had slipped into her place. I thanked Stuart with a generous tip and went to the top of the club's main staircase. The second floor held the dressing rooms and guest rooms where members slept when the nights grew too late. Downstairs was the heart of the club. I trotted down to the main level, where my friends waited.

The Swan Club was unique in its membership, which was made up of society women who dressed as gentlemen while in the club. Sometimes we went out of the club, escorting our ladies to events and dinners, but most of our time was spent inside where we could relax with like-minded people. Swan Club was fitted out the same as any gentlemen's club—wood-covered walls and ceilings, giant hearths in the bar and parlor, a billiards room, a library, a dining room, kitchens, guest rooms, and staff quarters. I went straight to the parlor for tea, just in time for the first pour.

The parlor was a large, square room where members were scattered in small groups. A tea trolley was making its way around the room, depositing small towers of pastries and tiny sandwiches on each table. The walls were lined with paper sporting the insignia of the Dragoons, or some other military unit—no one cared which, just that it looked masculine. Most of the chairs were occupied, but in the corner by the hearth my friend, Archie, waved me over. He pointed me to a club chair.

"Archie, old man. You look positively ill," I said, taking Archie's hand in a firm shake. "What's the matter?"

"We just got word from Henry that there's been another murder of one of our members."

"No. How is that possible?"

“He saw the body himself. Ask him. He’s on his way over.”

I looked toward the opposite side of the room and saw a tall figure walking toward us. As Henry approached, I poured a third cup of tea and put it in front of an empty chair.

Henry was the alter ego of Vita Sackville-West, a notorious womanizer in both London and the landed countryside. Whether in male or female garb, Vita always had several lovers going, all women of good birth. As Henry, he often went cruising in the lower-class lesbian bars in London, but those conquests were good for one night only. His long-time lover, Violet, would accompany Henry on weekends away where he never got out of male attire and played the role of gentleman throughout their trip. No one ever suspected a thing. Now he joined Archie and me and immediately took out a cigarette.

“What’s this I hear about another murder?” I noticed the other men in the parlor were leaving their seats to congregate and talk in the center of the room. Word had made its way around.

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Anne Laughlin is the author of seven crime novels, mostly set in her native Chicago. She has won four Goldie Awards and been nominated three times for Lammy Awards. In 2022, she was awarded the Alice B Medal for excellence in lesbian fiction. She currently serves on the national board of the Mystery Writers of America and reviews books for the *Gay & Lesbian Review*. In her other volunteer role, she teaches adults to read at Literacy Chicago. Anne lives in Chicago’s north side with her wife, Linda.