FOR TWO REASONS I knew that this was going to be an important night in my life. The first reason was that I had just been told I had got to leave the house in which I had lived for fifty-eight years. The whole of Westmoreland Road, Walworth, was to be demolished under a slum clearance order, and I was to be 'rehoused' somewhere else. The second reason was that I was going that very evening to Park Lane for my first visit to a gambling club.

I was born in the next street to Westmoreland Road, and came to live here at the age of two. Although I have published over two thousand articles and fifteen books, addressed countless literary gatherings, given 120 broadcasts, appeared on TV, contributed to each of the last twenty-two issues of The Saturday Book, and even got myself into the pages of Who's Who, I have never moved away from the district where I was born. I have remained a Cockney, a working-class lad, a man of Walworth.

But tonight I was going to sample the pleasures of 'Swinging London'. I was going to visit that playground of the rich, the Playboy Club in Park Lane. In my pocket I had a letter from the Public Relations Officer for Playboy Enterprises inviting me to visit the club and record my impressions.

It was no good sitting in misery at the thought of being turned out of hearth and home. The immediate job was to decide what clothes I was going to wear for my night out. Years ago I had given my evening jacket with the satin lapels to a chap who was seeking work with a jazz band. The black trousers I had lent to a man to go to a funeral, and he’d never returned them. I hadn’t anything in the way of evening wear, and I had only one day in which to get it. I had to look presentable, if not for my own sake then for the sake of The Saturday Book.
A NIGHT IN SWINGING LONDON

To begin with I obtained for two-and-sixpence a nice white shirt, with a semi-stiff front and cuffs. For ninepence I got a neat black bow tie. I knew I had a pair of dark blue trousers that were only a little frayed at the turn-ups. I found in a drawer a black waistcoat that I had forgotten about and the moths had ignored. I also had a smart blue tailor-made sports jacket with brass buttons, which had been given to me some five years ago by the manager of the Swallow Raincoat Company because he had enjoyed my book The Last Bassoon. I had no evening dress shoes, so I polished my ordinary black shoes to an extra shine. I had no black socks, so I compromised with a pair of deep red ones given to me for my birthday by my friend Clara in Michigan. They were at least real silk.

Would I look presentable in this rag-bag of bits and pieces? I'd try them on. The white shirt was really very thin, so I put a wool jumper over my vest. (Why should I get bronchitis?) The shirt-sleeves were at least three inches too long, so I put three narrow rubber bands round each arm to keep the sleeves up. Then I put on the bow tie. It seemed rather grey, so I gave it a wipe with a wet flannel to get out the dust. It then looked nearly new. There were no buttons at all down the front of the shirt, so I had to use two black evening dress studs (with glass instead of diamonds inserted in them) that my father had given me thirty years ago. The studs looked really nice. I tried to mend the frayed bottoms of the trousers, but made rather a mess, so I just cut the frayed parts off with scissors. The evening dress waistcoat was a tight fit but looked natty and I made up my mind not to undo my jacket unless it was really necessary. I ironed the lapels of my jacket and polished the brass buttons.

My appointment with the Public Relations Officer, whose name was Miss Mollie McKellar, was for 8.30. In order to get to Park Lane on time I should have to leave Walworth at 7.30. I was washed, shaved, dressed, brushed and polished at six! While I was waiting to start I got on to the kitchen table and surveyed myself in the mirror. I looked really dapper, even if I said it myself. At 7.30 I put on my cap and set off.

The first thing I noticed when I got to the Playboy Club was that hardly any of the men present were wearing evening dress of any kind. They were in their ordinary working clothes! I was far better dressed than any of them. Only two other guests were wearing black bow ties. I must confess I was disappointed. I've seen far better dressed men in the dance halls at Walworth.

As for the women—well, take the Bunnies. Yes, you take them. I don't want to be rude about these charming ladies, but I don't want them. I've no doubt they serve a useful purpose, and ten thousand other men may find them attractive. But a bust is a bust, and when you've seen one you've seen the lot. These girls are just sex in cellophane. You can't touch them. You can't make a date with them. You can hardly hold a conversation with them, as the dear girls seem so frightfully busy all the time.

However, what I did like, what I found charming, adorable, a real sweetie, was the Public Relations Officer. And it wasn't merely because she was dressed in a flowered dress with a lace collar—though that was certainly part of the attraction. Perhaps I'm getting old, but I don't care much for beauty unadorned. Mollie McKellar, in her elegant but conventional clothes, was very much easier on my eye than anything out of the rabbit hutch. She made my evening.

I asked Miss McKellar to arrange for one of the bunnies to talk to me for a few minutes. She brought me a Bunny named Tynna, who was born in Australia. That, of course, is where the rabbits come from. She was a sweet little thing, young enough to be my daughter. I asked her: 'What is your ambition in life?' She started off by saying that she wanted to be good in every job she had, but dancing was her love. She hoped to earn enough money to go back to Australia and have dancing lessons. She seemed quite scared of me, scared although Miss McKellar sat at my side and there were hefty he-men attendants close by. Perhaps no one had ever interviewed her before. So I let her off the hook, and back she scammed to the Bunny hole.

Miss McKellar then took me to a small quiet room, with quiet lights and sweet music, and we had supper. I had a well-done steak, and I was surprised, as I finished it, to find a green plastic toothpick sticking in the middle of the steak with the word well written on it. At first I took this as an enquiry about my state of health, but then Miss McKellar told me it was the in-
A NIGHT IN SWINGING LONDON

The Elephant and Castle, close to where I live. Mayfair and Soho are polite apart, he said. I agreed. My two hours in the club were an interesting and enjoyable novel. But I'm evidently not a funny fellow. The greatest pleasure for me was an interesting and enjoyable novel. And I'm evidently not a funny fellow.

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The greatest pleasure for me was the nightly uniformed porter on the door telling me that I was the first man he'd seen coming out of the Playboy Club being.

So that was swinging London! Maybe I'm just swing as much as might have done because of my artist.

Walking home I felt increasingly depressed as I thought about the demolition of Westminster Road, the loss of the home to which I really belonged, and the horrible prospect of being rehoused. I went into a pub and bought myself a bottle of sherry.

By the time I reached the Elephant and Castle I felt very sorry for myself. I turned off behind the railway station to a derelict building. They all wore dirty raincoats. None had a cap or a hat. They were sitting round bottles in circulation. Playing the cards.

But those, I knew, were their usual drinks.

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plexion, shivering, jittery, his teeth decayed. He stank horribly. When he had finished drinking he staggered back to his corner of the newspaper and play was resumed.

They were playing pontoon for walnuts! And they played with the same intensity as though the walnuts were piles of banknotes. Less than an hour before I’d seen ten pounds lost on the turn of a card. Now I watched men playing for walnuts.

I sat with them for about forty minutes, not playing myself as I said I didn’t understand the game (though in fact I did, and once won forty pounds in Ostend playing for higher stakes than walnuts). By this time all the bottles, including mine, were empty. The voices of all the gamblers were slurred. I knew they’d soon pack up the game and try to get some kip, sleeping in their clothes in some corner of the empty building.

I tried to get some conversation out of them. ‘What do you think of women?’ I said.

‘Women? What d’yer mean?’

‘Just women,’ I said.

‘Women!’ said Chamber Pot. ‘Bleedin’ cows!’

‘Yer right,’ said the meths drinker. ‘Found that out ten years ago. Took everything I had, she did . . .’ and he flopped forward.

Another man joined in. ‘Love ’em and leave ’em.’ And he lurched to the doorway where he was horribly sick.

Meanwhile Chamber Pot had got out from the pocket of his raincoat a crust of bread and a broken knife and was spreading the bread with shoe polish out of a tin.

The last man in the group looked at me maliciously. ‘Get out,’ he said. I said I was doing no harm; I’d paid my whack. ‘Get out,’ he said, with a gleam in his evil eyes. ‘We don’t want yer. You can’t kip ’ere. You don’t belong ’ere.’

‘I do, you know,’ I said. ‘I was born a few hundred yards from here.’ I got up, edged round the man who was still vomiting in the doorway, and went out.

Within a few minutes I was walking along Westmoreland Road. I was glad to be home. I had had a Basonful of Swing- ing London—both kinds. If only I could stay put somewhere in my beloved Walworth!