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The Gamblers

John Pearson

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John Pearson’s Career as a biographer includes books on the Churchills, the Windsors, the Gettys and the Sitwells. He has also written an award-winning travel book on Timbuctoo, a bestselling biography of Ian Fleming and the authorised biography of James Bond. However, he is probably best known for his two in-depth studies of the Kray Twins, and is currently working on the final part of his Kray trilogy.

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JOHN PEARSON

THE GAMBLERS

arrow books

For Lynette,
Yet again – and for ever.

‘I have a notion that Gamblers are as happy as most people being always *excited*. Women, wine, fame, the table, even Ambition, *sate* now and then; but every turn of the card, and cast of the dice, keeps the gamester alive: besides, one can game ten times longer than one can do anything else’

Lord Byron

‘All of life is six–four against’

Damon Runyon

Acknowledgements

When I started working on this book, I saw it as a chronicle of the rise and fall of the so-called Clermont Set and, as such, a fascinating part of the social history of the Sixties and early Seventies. Certainly the last thing I foresaw was getting involved in the story of what did or didn't happen to Lord Lucan. But books have a strange way of asserting an existence of their own, and quite early on in my research I began to realise how profoundly that mysterious event came to dominate the lives of those around him. More than that it was obviously so bound up with the weird conclusion of my story that I had to take account of it. In the process, I reached what I believed to be the closest we will ever get to answering this enduring mystery.

But I must emphasize that the original purpose of this book remains, and I like to think that it is something more than a simple murder mystery. I can only say that in writing it I became fascinated by the lives and the obsessions of an extraordinary group bound so powerfully together by the everlasting force of gambling – and much besides.

In the process I was helped by many who have helped me. Among them I would like to thank Anthony Alfrey, Lady Sally Aspinall, Sir David Attenborough, Al Alvarez, Melissa Bakewell, John Burke, Mark Birley, Robin Birley, Richard Compton Miller, Sarah Carr, Willie Donaldson, Peter Elwes, James Fox, Walter Felgate, Michael Gillard, Anne Halsey, Roy Houghton, Sue Hunt, Max Hastings, Richard Ingrams, Tessa Kennedy, Louis Jebb, Sir Dai Llewellyn, Anthony Little, the late David Leitch, Dominick Midgley, the late Susie Maxwell-Scott, George Monbiot, Euan Macleod, Lord

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Lastly I must thank my wife, Lynette, who has helped, endured, and contributed more to the writing of this book than she will ever know.

1

Gone With the Wind

'YOU REMEMBER *GONE With the Wind*?' said Dai Llewellyn. He was in reminiscent mode, as he often is these days. I nodded.

'You may recall that following the opening credits, two sentences were flashed upon the screen explaining what the film was all about. "A civilisation vanished overnight. Everything gone with the wind." Since you ask, that's how I feel about the Clermont Club and the Lucky Lucan episode. It wasn't just the murder of the nanny Sandra Rivett and what did or didn't happen to Lucky afterwards. I knew him, of course. Quite well. Used to play backgammon with him. Good backgammon player, but I can't say I liked him. Never had. Dull dog. Drank too much, but that was not the point. Nor was it whether he had or hadn't killed the unfortunate nanny. For me what counted was that from the moment of the murder, everything that had made the Clermont Club unique vanished. Not just the gambling but the people, and a way of life, all suddenly swept away.

'I remember coming here in the afternoon after it occurred. The murder was already making front-page headlines in the early editions of the evening papers, and this whole place, which was normally buzzing with people after lunch, was empty as a sinking ship. Few of them returned. A society, and a very interesting one, had gone with the wind.'

*

When all this happened back in November 1974, the handsome young Dai Llewellyn was social secretary of the Clermont Club in Berkeley Square. The baronet son of the Olympic champion showjumper, Sir Harry Llewellyn, and brother of Roddy Llewellyn, Princess Margaret's lover, he remains a bon viveur, a confirmed gambler, and a great survivor. Now, thirty years later, he was taking me to see the club as it is today to watch the gambling.

Even to me it was obvious at once that this was a very different world from the one that he remembered. The dinner-jacketed croupiers, most of them trained in France, had long since gone. In their place impassive girls in black silk dresses dealt out coloured gaming counters, paid the winners and raked back the losers' counters for the house. *Chemin de fer*, the trademark game of the old Clermont, which brought debt and misery to so many members of the English aristocracy, had long since disappeared. In place of the 'shoe', which held eight packs of playing cards and used to make its solemn way around the table under the eagle eye of the croupier, there was now the effortless rotation of the roulette wheel. Nor did one hear the cries of 'banco' or 'suivi', as the chemmy players bellowed out their bids. Modern high-stakes gambling is a silent and profoundly serious business.

The most noticeable feature of big, present-day gambling clubs like the modern Clermont is their extraordinary discretion. In the days that Dai remembered, the great gambling room at the Clermont was usually crammed with grandees and celebrities These days the true high rollers are so anonymous and self-effacing that it would be hard to pick them out. I mentioned this to Dai.

'I doubt you'd recognise them. Anyhow, when any serious gambling is going on these days, it usually takes place in a private room. Today the very rich don't advertise the fact.'

What hasn't changed at the Clermont is that it still inhabits one of the hidden architectural treasures of the

capital. The house at 44 Berkeley Square was built between 1741 and 1744 by the architect William Kent, who specialised in recreating the splendours of the palaces of Rome and the Veneto for the aristocracy of mid-eighteenth-century England. It was home to Lady Isabella 'Belle' Finch, daughter of the Earl of Winchilsea. The Earl happened to be extraordinarily rich, which was just as well, since he had six other daughters to provide for. Belle was a spinster and a lady-in-waiting to George II's daughter, Princess Amelia. As she was single, the house required only one main bedroom, and since there was no need to accommodate a family, Kent used the space as a setting for Lady Belle's passion for regal entertaining. The whole house remains pure and magnificent theatre.

Architectural historians get excited over the Clermont's unsupported staircase which is apparently a considerable technical achievement. I find it difficult to get too worked up about a staircase. But the great, first floor salon is something that will take the breath away from all but the most obsessional gambler. The fact that Kent created it within the compass of a London terraced house has served to concentrate its impact. Had one of Belle Finch's eighteenth-century noblemen, freshly returned from the Grand Tour, fallen into a drunken stupor and, on waking, gazed up at that great coffered ceiling with its painted and richly gilded panels high above him, one could imagine him thinking he was still in Rome, and wondering whose palazzo he was in.

*

The Club's name was taken from Belle Finch's immediate successor in the house, the 1st Earl of Clermont, whose only claim to fame was to win the Derby in 1785. The Club itself was the carefully devised creation of one of the most extraordinary characters of the sixties, high priest of

gamblers, showman of genius, close friend of tigers and gorillas, together with a refined taste in food, books and eighteenth-century architecture, who ended up angrily despairing of humanity. For good or ill he was a key figure in that multitudinous decade. His name was John Aspinall.

Thanks to a famous legal case in 1958 he had already done more than anyone in the previous century and a half to revolutionise the obsolete gaming laws of England. It was this, and the Gaming Act that ensued, that effectively legalised gambling clubs in Britain and turned sixties London into the gambling capital of Europe.

Within eighteen months of opening in November 1962, the Clermont's turnover was greater than that of any of the casinos in Monte Carlo, Deauville or Le Touquet, and was making John Aspinall a fortune. He ruled his club like a private fiefdom.

The secret of Aspinall's success was very simple, and not really a secret. Having seen how the easing of the gambling laws had created such a taste for gambling among the idle and richer members of society, he became the self-appointed Pied Piper of gambling to the English upper classes. He tailored the club precisely to their needs, and the Clermont soon appeared to be attracting half the members of the English aristocracy to its tables. Nothing quite like this had happened since the wild, high-rolling days of the Regency gamblers a century and a half before, and soon more dukes and earls and viscounts were visiting No. 44 than ever called on Lady Isabella Finch.

To complete the process, barely a year after opening, a gambling friend of Aspinall's, a former advertising man called Mark Birley, turned the cellars into a nightclub. Having married Lady Annabel Vane-Tempest-Stewart, the daughter of the Marquess of Londonderry, he saw no harm in reminding people of the fact, and called it Annabel's. After a slow start, Annabel's began to share in the success of the Clermont, and became the smartest and the most

exclusive night club in the capital and was packing in the fashionable and famous (and the would-be fashionable and the would-be famous) from dusk till dawn. With high-stakes gambling upstairs and disco dancing down below, 44 Berkeley Square was at the forefront of a social movement that soon spread out across Swinging London.

In Downing Street, Harold Macmillan, the Scottish crofter's grandson who became son-in-law to a duke, had recently appointed more aristocrats to his cabinet than any prime minister since the war, and in Berkeley Square the rich were unashamedly proclaiming that they'd do whatever they felt like doing with their money – and their women. This blatant mix of high-stakes gambling, sophisticated sex, and the antics of what were taken to be the British upper classes was inevitably picked on by the media as proof that the British aristocracy was alive and flourishing. After years of slow decline, wealth and privilege were on the march, and this combined gaming club and nightclub in Berkeley Square, where the nightingale once sang, was their headquarters.

This alone gives 44 Berkeley Square a place in the social history of the sixties. But as well as this, there lies a story that still haunts this house. It involves the so-called Clermont Set and the five friends most closely involved in it from the beginning. Gambling had become their way of life. They lived by taking risks, and shared a code of loyalty to each other. They pretended to despise dull middle-class society, and it seemed as if through gambling they had attained everything they wanted – the smartest friends, the most beautiful women and the entrée to some of the grandest houses in the land.

In their private lives these friends had all been playing for the highest stakes for years. And as with all serious gamblers, some enjoyed enormous luck while others met with terrible disasters. The most catastrophic gamble, which finally affected all of them and destroyed the

Clermont Set for ever, was that embarked on by one of the original members, Lucky Lucan. It was a gamble that not only ended in a murder, but led indirectly to the suicide of another member. In the fallout from this second death, a third important member of the group became so discredited that he left the country, moved permanently abroad, and made himself the richest gambler in the world.

As for the two key members of the Set, John Aspinall and Mark Birley, they had already fallen out and rarely spoke to one another, but in the aftermath of the murder, other unconnected events meant that by the time of Aspinall's own death any hope of eventual reconciliation had become slim. So in spite of the high hopes with which the five friends started out, and despite their original loyalty to each other, Dai Llewellyn's words rang true. After that November night, it was all gone, gone with the wind.

2

A Gambling Man from Oxford

WHEN JOHN ASPINALL opened the Clermont Club in 1962, he claimed to have five dukes, eight viscounts and seventeen earls on its membership list. But although he seemed entirely at home among the aristocracy, and made sure that humbler gamblers were blackballed from his club – unless they were remarkably rich – in social terms it would have been extremely hard to 'place' John Aspinall himself.

Socially speaking, he emerged from nowhere, having been born in Delhi in 1926. His father was a Maltese doctor called Stivala who changed his name to Robert Aspinall on joining the Indian Medical Service. But Dr Aspinall was not his real father. That privilege had been usurped by a young lieutenant from the Lincolnshire Regiment who according to Aspinall 'seduced my mother under a tamarisk tree beside the banks of a stream in Naimital.'

John Aspinall's strong-willed mother, Mary, was a member of an old Anglo-Indian family. She was born near Nagpur in the hot and dusty Central Provinces, and her father, a civil engineer called Horn, built bridges. At eighteen she escaped from life in provincial India by eloping with the reinvented Dr Aspinall a few weeks after meeting him. Determined young woman that she was, she made her new husband apply at once for a medical posting in Delhi, but although the doctor had a distinguished medical career in India and ended up as Surgeon General and doctor to the Viceroy, she ultimately tired of him and

life in Delhi, and decided that she wanted to return to England.

Her fling with the lieutenant from the Lincolnshires ended with his posting to West Africa, but she did not repine. She was a risk-taker and, as she showed later, an inveterate gambler. She was also very tough and a great survivor. When her marriage ended in divorce, she chanced her luck with a sympathetic colonel who had consoled her on the ship that brought her back to England. Once again her luck did not desert her. Colonel Osborne was a gentleman. He loved her, married her and would give her three more children.

Like many determined women, Mary Osborne was possessed of a cheerful manner and a homely figure. She was a devoted mother, but her favourite child was not one of her growing brood of little Osbornes. Nor was it her first-born, Dr Aspinall's one legitimate child who had been christened Robert after his father. Her love was showered on her love child, whose thick blond hair and powerful physique must have brought back memories of her lost lieutenant and romantic nights in Delhi.

Colonel and Mrs Osborne took a house near Uckfield in the heart of Sussex, and automatically assumed their place among the local gentry. By now the Colonel had discovered that, for him at any rate, the secret of a happy life lay in following the dictates of his strong-willed wife, and when she decided John must go to an English public school, he readily agreed. Some of her relations had gone to Tom Brown's alma mater, Rugby, and Dr Aspinall agreed to pay the fees. Rugby was originally set up to turn out solid citizens who would help to rule the Empire. The idea of the Empire did not particularly appeal to the young John Aspinall.

He had become a tall, good-looking boy with very pale blue eyes. A girl who saw him for the first time at a point-to-point near Steyning at around this time remembers him

‘looking like the young Apollo with a halo of thick gold hair.’

Like most young gods, he was congenitally idle and, like his mother, he was sufficiently strong-willed to do exactly as he pleased. Although he was something of a loner, other boys were wary of him. So were the masters, for he had little patience with authority and, when punished, endured beatings with cool indifference. Until the age of seventeen, he managed to survive on a minimum of schoolwork. Competitive sport bored him, but in spite of this, his strength and aggressiveness earned him a place in the First XV, playing the game his school invented and to which it gave its name.

He was at an age where nothing seemed to satisfy him. To alleviate the tedium of school life, he turned to the popular adventure novels of Sir Henry Rider Haggard. Today few adolescents read Rider Haggard, but in books like his *Nada the Lily*, Aspinall found what he was seeking in this stirring tale of Shaka, king of the Zulus. Shaka was someone he could identify with – physically courageous, proudly unconcerned with what others thought of him, tough with women, mighty in battle and unflinching in the face of disaster. Hoping to become some sort of Rider Haggard hero, John dropped what he felt to be the unexciting name he had been given, and gave himself the more exciting appellation of Jonas V. Aspinall.

By now it was becoming clear that Rugby School and Jonas V. Aspinall had little further use for one another, and when the school suggested that at seventeen the time had come for them to part, he raised no objections. He volunteered for the Royal Marines, but found army life as tedious as life at school. The war in Europe was ending, and he served nearly three years as a private in the Marines without promotion or particular distinction. Demobilised in 1948, he had no idea about his future, apart from having formed a vague desire to be a writer.

A cousin suggested that there might be worse fates for an aspiring writer than studying English Literature at Oxford. He added that, should he wish to do so, Jesus College might accept him, since its current Principal was an Old Rugbeian. For want of anything more enticing, Aspinall followed his advice, and when he applied to the college, whatever love he had for English Literature proved less important than his status as a returning serviceman who had played in Rugby's First XV.

In the autumn term of 1949, Jesus College opened its four-hundred-year-old gates to twenty-one-year-old Jonas V. Aspinall. The college and the freshman took an instantaneous dislike to one another.

He sampled the food, the company and the amenities, all of which struck him as inferior to what he had endured in the Marines. Food in Hall, still rationed at the time, was grim, and he was expected to share rooms in college with an earnest Welshman on a teacher-training course. Worse still, he soon discovered that in terms of class, Jesus College lay somewhere near the bottom of the University pecking order. Jonas V. Aspinall, who was becoming aware of such things, decided there and then to have as little as possible to do with this shameful institution or its boring undergraduates. (A little hasty in his judgement, he never realised that among his contemporaries at nearby Lincoln College was an undergraduate called David Cornwell who, under the pseudonym John le Carré, became a greater thriller writer in his day than Rider Haggard was in his.)

In spite of this it would be in post-war Oxford that he would discover the first great interest in his life, and it is here that the origins of the Clermont Club began. It is hard to see how this could have happened anywhere but Oxford.

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There is something so astonishing about Oxford in the early fifties that it is hard to credit that it ever quite existed.

The war had ended, and despite the austerity and the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation, there was a sense of freedom and euphoria in the air. Some undergraduates of course were very serious. At Somerville there had recently been a chemistry student called Margaret Roberts who thirty-five years later would become prime minister under her married name, Margaret Thatcher. And some of her near contemporaries, like Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin had already started writing. But, unlike Cambridge, and most other universities where students were examined at the end of every year, at Oxford this particular treat was saved until Finals, at the conclusion of the three-year course. Thus, for many Oxford undergraduates during this stress-free interlude, lectures could appear irrelevant, work largely optional, and the ancient city was a stately playground where they could make the most of what was left of their adolescence before entering a duller world of grown-ups outside.

'I had not gone to Oxford to study,' the poet Louis MacNeice had written some years earlier. 'That was what boys from grammar schools did.' Jonas V. Aspinall felt the same.

What he did do was to reveal something of the showman in his nature, as he responded to Oxford's precocious cult of youthful celebrity with a sense of urgency to make his name before the golden city's magic spell was broken. Still strongly influenced by Rider Haggard, he would have made a splendid Zulu prince himself, but his provenance and pigmentation were against him. Instead, he tried imitating Oscar Wilde. Even today some of his contemporaries remember Jonas V. Aspinall, strolling down the High in a pink suit and gold waistcoat with an ebony cane and the poems of Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, underneath

his arm. But he soon realised that imitating Oscar Wilde was not for him. Although he was keeping clear of women, which in the predominantly male university wasn't difficult, he wasn't gay. Nor, as he showed in the one poem he published in a university magazine, was he a poet. Nor, for that matter, would he ever be a wit, like Oxford contemporaries such as Ken Tynan and the still genuinely funny Norman St John Stevas.

While Jonas V. was wondering where his university career was heading, something happened which has a bearing on this story. His step-father, Colonel Osborne, inherited a baronetcy created in 1629, and overnight the one-time Mrs Aspinall, who had come a long way from the plains of Central India, discovered she was Lady Osborne. Along with the baronetcy went a larger, grander house than the one at Uckfield. This was in the nearby village of Framfield, and once in residence the new Lady Osborne enjoyed the role of lady of the manor.

Her son enjoyed having a titled mother. For somebody like him, Oxford could be uncomfortably snobbish, and until now he had had little real success in scaling the higher reaches of undergraduate society, which in those days could appear forbidding. In this particular world, along with the pleasure of being able to refer to one's mother as 'Lady Osborne', having a baronet for a step-father was not a disadvantage either.

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No one seems to know exactly when Aspinall first laid hands upon a pack of playing cards. His biographer, Brian Masters, says it occurred one evening while attending a friendly game of poker between some Oxford friends. He became fascinated and after watching long enough to absorb the basic rules, he took a hand himself.

During the next few weeks he continued playing regularly and it soon appeared that he had a genuine affinity with cards and games of chance. This is actually rarer than generally supposed, and casinos make fortunes out of people who imagine they possess it. But it seems that, just as some are born with a knack for languages or writing lyric poetry, so there genuinely exists a small minority with a built-in aptitude for games of chance. Aspinall was one of them, and the more he played, the more it developed.

His skill came from a combination of qualities. He had unusual powers of concentration and a photographic memory for a run of cards. He possessed stamina, nerves of steel, and a precisely calibrated sense of risk. Once play began his face became inscrutable. At the same time his mere presence, coupled with an instinct for the psychology of the game, intimidated many opponents, and gave him what appeared like an extrasensory knowledge of their cards and how they would play them.

For him perhaps the most important thing of all was that he truly loved to gamble. As he said later, ‘from the first time I settled down to play I felt at home as I never had before.’ The excitement invigorated him, the risk challenged him, and he relished the company of gamblers, which came as a relief from those earnest Welshmen back in college.

Later he used to claim that gamblers formed a superior race to passive, tedious humanity, and he rather shocked the journalist Compton Miller by telling him that he ‘regarded people who don’t gamble as emotional cripples.’

To be able to count himself among the emotionally elect must have been more satisfying than dressing up as Oscar Wilde or studying *Beowulf* or Chaucer, and nobody could doubt his dedication to his chosen field of studies. Soon, most of his waking hours were spent gambling in one way or another.

In his early days his playing was confined to a few old friends for stakes that rarely exceeded ten shillings a game. But as his play improved, he became more ambitious. The stakes rose. Some of his early partners, like John Lawrence, the future Lord Oaksey, became worried and dropped out. ‘It was getting too hot for me to handle, and it was obvious that John was heading for the dangerous world of big-time gambling.’

That he reached it faster than he might have done was due to the influence of an undergraduate at Balliol College called Ian Maxwell-Scott. Supposedly the cream of Oxford intellect, Balliol men were not overly given to fraternising with members of humbler foundations such as Jesus College, so the two young men met more or less by chance at one of Oxford’s illicit off-course bookmakers. Once they began discussing horses, they realised that they had much in common.

Maxwell-Scott was already something of a university character, a slender, nervous-seeming boy with a very pale face and the appearance of a mad professor. His elderly father, Admiral Maxwell-Scott, had died a few years earlier, leaving his younger son with a trust fund and an indulgent Irish mother. With several serious gamblers already in the family this was a dangerous combination, and while still at school, Ian was already placing bets on horses and running poker sessions in the dormitory. Once at Oxford, he spent his waking hours gambling – and little else.

He was the first addicted gambler Aspinall encountered. Like most habitual gamblers, Ian had grown dependent on the regular stimulus of risk, which he satisfied by pitting himself against the greatest odds, the more impossible the better. Given the chance he would, and often did, gamble on anything with anyone: horses, dogs, baccarat, backgammon, poker, and roulette – he had tried them all. He gambled for the love of it – and for the hell of it. His greatest love was horse racing and for him nothing ever

equalled the adrenalin rush of putting every penny he possessed on some rank outsider at the longest odds, and waiting on tenterhooks for the result. If he couldn't bet on horses, he would take a bet on almost anything around – whether the next train from London arrived on time, or whether a crow would settle on the College spire in the next ten minutes. He was known to have taken bets on two drops of rain running down a windowpane.

What particularly impressed Aspinall was the extraordinary equanimity with which Maxwell-Scott bore his losses. Whenever he was totally cleaned out, as he often was, he never seemed downhearted. Quite the contrary. Just as a serious alcoholic returns to the bottle the morning after in order to relieve his hangover, so the confirmed gambler offsets the memory of losing by embarking on another bet. While there's a bet there's hope, and Maxwell-Scott's private antidote to losing was to borrow from any source at hand and go on gambling. A devout Catholic, he even borrowed, so the story goes, from the collection plate during high mass at Brompton Oratory, replaced the cash with a cheque, and put the money on a no-hoper in the 3.30 at Sandown Park. Yet again he lost. What happened to his cheque is not recorded.

Such dedication, and the psychology behind it, fascinated Aspinall, but there were other lessons to be learned from Ian Maxwell-Scott, whose upper-class credentials, though not extravagant, were genuine. The Scott in the name went back in a direct line to his great-great-grandfather, the novelist, Sir Walter. His family was also linked by marriage to a network of catholic aristocrats, headed by a fairly distant cousin, the Duke of Norfolk. Educated, like all the best Catholics, at Ampleforth, he had floated almost as effortlessly into Balliol as Aspinall had into Jesus College.

At this time, the novels of Evelyn Waugh were very much in vogue in Oxford, particularly *Brideshead Revisited*, with its nostalgic atmosphere of impossibly effete young

noblemen with impeccable pedigrees facing disaster on the eve of war. Maxwell-Scott could have stepped out of the pages of *Brideshead*, as a kinsman of the doomed grandee, Lord Marchmain.

What fitted Maxwell-Scott so neatly for the part was that, not only did he have the requisite pedigree, but in post-war Oxford he managed to live so completely in the past. As a gun dog knows instinctively how to work the field from centuries of careful breeding, so Maxwell-Scott's entire way of life seemed ruled by an instinctive sense of how a gentleman behaved. It goes without saying that none of his behaviour was remotely tainted with tedious concerns of middle-class morality. In the world of *Brideshead*, unconcern for money was one of the touchstones of authentic aristocracy. Similarly Maxwell-Scott showed his effortless disdain for vulgar wealth by running up large bills for food and wine and good champagne in the college buttery. He ran up yet more bills with his London tailor. He had little hope of paying either – except from a gambling windfall, which he was convinced would come (it would be many years before it did). But he never let this trouble him unduly. If he couldn't pay the tradesmen at the time, someone would pay them in the end. This financial attitude impressed Aspinall and confirmed his gathering distaste for what he believed to be middle-class behaviour, which would continue all his life.

But one should emphasise that Maxwell-Scott was not unintelligent, and along with the curious upper-class behaviour went many other things that Aspinall learned from him during their long and somewhat bumpy time together. Maxwell-Scott was, in fact, a precociously civilised young man. Somehow he had acquired an extraordinary knowledge of food and wine and *recherché* restaurants which was unusual among undergraduates in the early fifties. Aspinall would prove to be a ready learner here as well.

But the true basis of their friendship was always gambling. Maxwell-Scott was rated a good bridge player and a more than adequate poker player, but although as a gambler he wasn't technically outstanding, this never stopped him placing bets with what at times appeared like lunatic abandon. So overwhelming was this passion that he seemed like a throwback to some of the crazily addicted noble gamblers among his eighteenth-century ancestors.

This too caught Aspinall's imagination and he became fascinated by stories of those legendary Whig aristocrats, who had gambled with such apparent recklessness and style. It was a highly romanticised image of a vital, carefree attitude to life embodied in the nonchalance with which great Regency gamblers like Charles James Fox or the Duchess of Devonshire were said to have placed their bets, disdained their winnings and shrugged off their losses. It also involved something of what he had admired in Rider Haggard's Zulu chieftain, Shaka – courage, and a willingness to risk all and damn the consequences.

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At Oxford in the early fifties there was a thriving group of serious young gamblers among the undergraduates whose days were spent exclusively in games of chance. There was no equivalent in puritan Cambridge, still less in any other English university. With Maxwell-Scott as mentor, Aspinall soon found his way into the most exclusive gambling circle in the city.

This particular group met every day in a now legendary lodging house at 167 Walton Street, kept by a former vaudeville artiste called Maxie. Maxie played, and sometimes overplayed, the role of student landlady as if she were still on stage. The house in Walton Street was, and had been for some time, the perfect place for rich young men to spend their time at Oxford going to the devil. Here