Autobiography 1932 - 38 CLR James

I had had writing as a profession ultimately in mind for many years. By the time I was aware of how writing and such like was renumerated in Trinidad I knew that if I wanted to be a writer I would eventually have to emigrate to England. I had been aware of that for a long time because there were no places in Trinidad where you could publish and make some money. I knew that I could be a writer - any of the papers would have taken me, but I did not want to do that kind of thing. Writing had been in my mind for many years.

I was writing a story when I was not yet eight years old - I know that. My mother told me: "What is this? You are just taking a Fenimore Cooper story and putting it in Trinidad." Why I was writing I don't know. Nobody had spoken to me about it. I simply must have picked it up somewhere.

People of every level of education were expecting me to leave Trinidad. The majority of the people, when I said I was going, asked: "Why did you stay so long?" It was obvious that I was going to be a writer. I had already been successful in sending material abroad. One of my stories that I published locally was reprinted in the Best Short Stories of 1928 which created a great sensation in the Caribbean. People knew that I would be going; they were expecting me to go because if you were going to do anything of that kind you had to go abroad.

My thoughts about Britain at that time were extraordinarily detailed, packed with facts. I had spent from the time I was about three to four years old reading books and most of these were, of course, about Britain.

I had bought a great number of books and subscribed to a number of periodicals which today astonishes me. I was very well acquainted with English literature. The civilisation in which I lived had nothing native about it. The ideals to which we aspired in those days were naturally British - we had no others.

The school I had gone to, Queen's Royal College, had seven or eight masters - seven of whom were Oxford or Cambridge graduates. That the British people had faults, that I knew. They were never very forthcoming. But that the British people represented the ideal of what I was doing, that was the Britain I knew - if I thought about it at all. By that I mean I did not think about it because it was there.

When I arrived in Britain I had what turned out to be an exceptional knowledge of English literature, history, Greek and Roman history, European history and literature, the classical writers and so on. I knew all of that when I went to Britain. As a matter of fact I was more acquainted with the British and European literature than many an English university man. That was me. I took it with me to England. I did not learn it there.

Learie Constantine, between the cricket seasons, went and came between the Caribbean and Britain. The phrase that I remember of his was: "Nello, they are no better than we." I knew that there were examples of erratic behaviour, lack of sportsmanship and things you just did not do on the sports field. That sort of thing you did in the Caribbean because we were backward colonials, but they did not do it in England which was the home of cricket.

Constantine would tell me: "They are no better than we." He said that the English played some sharp tricks at cricket too, but his idea was

that they were more restrained about it. They were more cautious. I got the impression afterwards, when I went and saw, that although there were not people who did everything right and according to order, they lived by and obeyed a more disciplined code. There were certain things that they would not do - not because it was morally or otherwise wrong but because they had agreed more or less that that was not the kind of thing. They had far more of that instinctive repulsion against sharp practices, "not cricket", than we had.

However, I had no real political interests to speak of when I left the Caribbean. I was, in general, for independence. I did not see why an Englishman should come to govern me and I shared that view with young people at the time. The only thing that I had done was that I had written The Life of Captain Cipriani. I brought the manuscript with me to England. I had written it but I could not publish it in Trinidad: I was a government servant, in those days such a publication invited dismissal, if not immediately, then after harassment, dismissal.

I landed in London in the spring of 1932 and I spent the first three months moving around in the great city. I went to concerts, visited historic buildings and art galleries, listened to meetings. Curiously enough I never went to the House of Commons but I think I was taken to the Tower of London by a friend. There was a lot for a West Indian to see in the metropolitan country, a great number of papers to read and bookshops to visit.

I also began to speak on the West Indies. There were one or two people who spoke and were called upon to deliver the message calling for freedom for the West Indies. But their freedom was very abstract and they did not have the basic facts of the situation. In my preparation for The Life of Captain Cipriani I had not only found, but I had collected, a great deal of material on the historical and economic life of the Caribbean. I would carry some of the material with me but I spoke fluently without any reference to it. A few people challenged my statistics but I always had the relevant official material at hand, pages marked.

Soon I was being asked to speak everywhere. I spoke quite naturally and many of my audience were astonished at my easy mastery of the English language. At first I explained that I knew no other language, though I was familiar with French - especially French literature and history. I had spoken English and had been taught it from childhood. What would have been miraculous was if I had not been able to speak it.

There was an old student of mine from Queen's Royal College in England in 1932 - a boy called Robero, quite elegant in his manners who spoke (English) very well: by that I mean he spoke much closer to the English rhythms and accents than the average West Indian. There were a few of us who did that; I not being one. Robero was asked so often

about his mastery of the English language that he devised a special answer: "I learnt it on the boat coming over," he used to say. Many English people used to nod their astonished heads and accept this outrageous fantasy for the truth.

My fluent speaking had one strange result. The secretary of the Labour Party sent me a message that he would like to see me. Wondering what it was all about I, of course, agreed to the request of this highly-placed gentleman and turned up at the Labour Party headquarters one morning at nine o'clock.

He was a little fellow but seemed very alert.
"Mr James," he said, "I hear you have been making quite an impression in your speeches on the colonial question, on the West Indies. Quite an impression."

I accepted the recognition with some vague words but continued to expect and, I believe, to look as if I expected, some statement or some proposal. I did not, for one moment, believe that the secretary of the Labour Party would ask me to speak on the Labour Party platform. I was naive but not dumb.

"Well, Mr James," he continued, "one of the sections of the Labour Party is very interested in the colonial question, in the emancipation of the West Indian people. We would be very glad, we would welcome a man of this ancient world, to work with us. You will only tell us what you want to do."

Still mystified I murmured my thanks and departed.

I spoke to certain friends about it and a few of them had no doubts whatever as to the meaning of the interview.

"They have heard," one of them said, "of the effects your speeches are having. They are scared that you, like so many others, would be snapped up by the Communist Party. He, the secretary of the Labour Party, would be happy to work with you. What he is telling you is to join them and not the Communists." I had no intention of joining anybody, least of all the Communists.

I do not at this stage intend to make observations about the character of British people or any of the various persons among whom I lived, but there were certain things that struck me during those first three months.

I was on my guard against being the object of racial prejudice and my usual lively personality quickly faded away as I assumed a kind of protective reserve. Nothing, however, of prejudice affected me then - but I was aware of the race question in quite personal, intimate ways.

Periodically I would pass on the street or in the Underground a man who was a mulatto or more than a mulatto, almost English. With my Caribbean experience I could often see that he was a man of coloured ancestry. What made the encounter notable was that if his eye caught mine, he looked away and turned down the nearest street or into some building. At that time people of colour were not at all anxious to acknowledge it.

On another occasion I went to hear the famous pianist, Schnabel, play in London. There was a particular woman around at that time who made it her habit to talk to black people. There was a small circle of black intellectuals and students in the capital in the early 1930s. She was a member of the aristocracy and was well known for making contact with us. I remember particularly that I had gone to hear Schnabel and when it was all over I was sitting there and she came

to me, very patronising as usual: "Well you came to the concert." I said, "Yes." "Did you enjoy it?" I replied, "Yes, did you?" And with that she faded away. She was to ask me questions but somehow when I said, "Did you?" she could not take it.

In those early days that was an indication to me of an attitude towards me as a black man and of a sort of liberalism.

It was in Nelson that I began to make my acquaintance with people in Lancashire and with provincial life in Britain. Nelson was known as Little Moscow. There was nothing traditional and old-fashioned about it. It was a new Lancashire town, but it was nevertheless a provincial town in a well-established part of England. People were very lively, very modern and unbothered by old-fashioned English ideas. They remained, however, a part of England - there was no question about that.

The thing that struck me very much, though it might seem commonplace - people in Nelson invited you to tea. In the Caribbean I had known, you were invited to dinner and in the few weeks I was in London, I had been invited to dinner. But in Nelson and thereabouts I was invited to tea. Tea meant ham or chicken, bread and butter and tea.

If a man had a son who was at university or at public school, when the boy came home the father would be sure to ask me to come round and "have a talk". Everybody who was anybody, who had pretensions to being above the average person working in the mill, they had me round.

People in Nelson accepted me because Constantine was a famous cricketer and local figure. I went around but I did not go around as much as I could have done or should have done. I was busy reading in English books and papers about the country to which I had come.

I was not doing all that reading with that in mind, it just came to me naturally.

Here was I in England - the newspapers came every day, in the Caribbean they came every two weeks, but here day after day I got my Times and my Manchester Guardian and the weekly papers. I was in the midst of it all. I read, I was always reading and I had this

exceptional memory. I remembered what I had read.

Quite early on I was introduced to a Mr Cartmell who was some kind of an editor and the owner of a small publishing firm in Nelson. Mr Cartmell was a lover of books. He used to buy the important books of the day and put them in his library intending to read them some time. He did read some, but he bought too many to keep in touch with them all.

He was very interested to find that I was as interested in books as he was and that I had read far more books than he had. We would talk and he would invite me up to his house to show me his books and talk. Mr Cartmell was one of those Englishmen who was very busy doing some material, official work but he really would have liked to have been a teacher or a scholar of some kind. At any rate we became very good friends.

Mr Cartmell revelled in the fact that at last he could talk to someone about the books he collected and he told me that whatever I wanted he would be glad to lend to me. I chose two books: The Decline of the West by Spengler and The History of the Russian Revolution Volume I by Leon Trotsky. This latter book had just appeared.

I read both these volumes and they fascinated me.

I knew nothing about Marxism at this time, though I had read the essay on Russia in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It had meant nothing to me. I had not read a single line of Marx. My knowledge was confined to three or four lines in the history books that I had read. They had stated that Karl Marx had written the Communist Manifesto in 1848. I had also read some reviews in various magazines about the Russian Revolution, the Second International, the Third International and so on. But it was all stuff in print.

Trotsky in The History of the Russian Revolution was not only giving details of the revolution itself, but he was expounding the Marxist theory of historical materialism. He referred to the Greeks and the Romans, to the Reformation, the Renaissance and the French Revolution - he made Marxism and the Communist Party the climax of many centuries of historical development. Trotsky referred not only to historical events and personalities, but he made references to literature as expressing social reality and social change. The History of the Russian Revolution gave me a sense of historical movement: the relation of historical periods to one another.

At the same time as I was reading volume one of Trotsky's work I was reading the second book that I had borrowed from Mr Cartmell, Spengler's The Decline of the West. I did not accept the decline that Spengler preached but I did absorb from him, too, the strong sense of historical movement, the relation between different historical periods and different classes. I particularly began to relate personally to class and period.

All the knowledge of history and literature that I had accumulated during my early days and in my days of teaching in the Caribbean now came to service. I was able to understand and follow the arguments - primarily those that Trotsky was making on page after page of The History of the Russian Revolution and afterwards in Spengler's The Decline of the West. These books made a tremendous impression upon me because their theory was based upon what I had been reading. I had not been reading casually but nevertheless I was without any proper sequence of ideas. Everything these philosophical writers referred to I was familiar with. I did not have to search for or read about their material - it was already in my mind, the history and the literature.

What happened to me at this time I was later to find only rarely among English Marxists I met. They had read the Marxist documents first and had then been prompted to read some of the classics of European literature and history. These latter works were thus filtered into the Marxist historical scheme. Not me. When I read Trotsky's book I was already familiar with all his references. I was able automatically and without difficulty to absorb his argument and grasp the logic which he pursued.

By the end of the summer of 1932 with these two books borrowed from Mr Cartmell's library and with all the other reading I had been doing, my mind was set and ready for the logical view of history which Marx was later to give me.

I am quite certain, however, that my reading of Spengler and still more my absorption of the historical framework of Trotsky's The History of the Russian Revolution could never have been done in the West Indies. In my walks and talks with my close Nelson friend, Harry Spencer, and the way we used to go over the books he had in his house and those that I had brought - through all this I was made aware not only of Europe of the twentieth century, but of all the past history of Britain which Marx had absorbed.

My relationship with Harry was my most important in Nelson, apart from the one I had with the Constantine household. Our friendship rapidly developed, and to Harry and his wife Elizabeth Spencer I dedicated the Black Jacobins.

Harry Spencer was one of the most extraordinary men I have met or could hope to meet. He was not extraordinary in any dramatic way but he was a man of sterling English character, an intellectual of the first

order and a man of great generosity. He was the proprietor and the manager of a bakery with a tea room upstairs. His father had begun it and he had continued the business. The bakery shop and tea room were in the centre of Nelson but Harry lived with his wife and three children in a detached cottage on the outskirts of the town with a wonderful view of the moor.

I got to know Harry early and quite by chance. We, at once, discovered our common interest in books and music and in our critique of society generally. Before long I spent many hours every day at the bakery talking to Harry or reading, and night after night and at week-ends I would be at his house where I became a member of the family.

He was a shortish, rather stout man and you had to watch him carefully to see the intelligence and alertness of his face. He was not interested in such things. He had a good library, not much but well chosen and a large collection of gramaphone records - Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert - classical, in which he and his whole family delighted.

Mrs Spencer was a very gracious woman, devoted to Harry and of course to me, as a friend as Harry had never had before. She gave me the first of my few appreciations of English cooking - potatoes, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and lamb. All sorts of vegetables which she grew herself in the back of the house, were done without French or foreign condiments. The material was so good and done with such precision that there for the first, and I regret for a long time, I found that English cooking in its own environment could stand up against much that I was to eat elsewhere. It has to be eaten at once and it needs an expert to choose the ingredients - but when it was done it was very well done.

There was one special delicacy I would gobble with greed and without shame. At the beginning of the year, from the Channel Islands, used to come some special new potatoes. They were unique and Harry and I used to eat them with butter in the evenings after eight or nine. This dish exceeded or at least matched all the dishes which I have eaten in France and in Italy.

Food, friendship, music, talk about books and gossip about friends, discussion in regard to the relations between me and the girls I knew - all these were quite subordinate to the hours I spent every day with Harry Spencer that Englishman of the shop-keeping class.

One day Harry and I were walking in Nelson when we passed a fish shop. It was late in the afternoon and the owner, a young fellow, seemed to be cleaning up and putting things in order. His greeting was most enthusiastic and somewhat strange: "How are you Harry?" he said. "I hope you are well." And then he added: "I see you have your friend, Mr James, with you. How are you, Mr James? Harry, take care of him. I hear that you and he are good friends."

I replied as warmly as I could and Harry seemed untroubled. He said: "That greeting was for me, not you." I sensed some mystery and Harry added casually: "I will tell you about it some day."

Harry was given to fits of silence, usually when he was preoccupied with business problems so I left it at that until one day he told me a typical north of England story.

"That young fellow," he said, "is the owner of that fish business. He is a Nelson boy. He is very young, still a long way under thirty, but his parents died. His older brothers went off to London and he was left alone. I knew him as a boy and then when he grew older, he opened this fish

business. He bought it by paying in instalments or something. One day he finally became the proprietor.

"Well that lasted for a year or two. My wife and I used to buy fish at his shop but I did not know him until one day he turned up and he said to me: "Harry, I want to talk to you." "Go ahead," I told him. He continued: "I want you to lend me a hundred pounds. The business needs it and I am sure that I will be able to pay you back in a year at twenty pounds a month." "Come along and see me tomorrow morning," I said.

"The next morning he turned up and I gave him a cheque for a hundred pounds.

"It might seem strange to you," Harry said as he concluded his account and it did indeed seem strange to me. "But I had known him since he was a boy in his teens. He was a Nelson boy. I had never heard anything against him. He was doing his business and he needed the money and he came to me as someone who would have confidence in him."

"Did it work out all right?" I asked. "Just as he told me," said Harry. "After a year he started to pay me twenty pounds a month and in five months the hundred pounds was returned." "And you and he are no better friends now than you used to be?" I enquired. "Not at all," said Harry. "When he said hello just now in that expansive way, he was really talking to me. He had told me to take care of you, but he was really showing his interest in me.

"One thing, however, that he always does: whenever Mrs Spencer goes into his shop to buy fish, it does not matter how many people are there, he stops attending them. He goes to her and tends to her and then returns to those who were waiting. Otherwise the situation

is as it was before he asked me to lend him money."

Harry not only knew characters in Nelson. He could tell me about all sorts of other people - often people from Manchester.

One afternoon I was around at the teashop as usual, when after a conversation on the telephone Harry told me to be sure to be there in the morning at nine thirty. I duly turned up, had a cup of beautiful personal coffee and waited.

At ten o'clock exactly a short, lively gentleman with a beard, obviously Jewish, arrived. He was introduced to me as "a merchant from Manchester".

"Glad to meet you Mr James. You are a black man, I am a Jew. Both of us are persecuted by everybody - except the British in England," he said with a nod to Harry. He shook hands and had a word or two with the girls who were serving in the teashop. He then went into the back to shake hands and to talk briefly with the cook. He seemed unable to keep still. Suddenly at about five minutes past ten the telephone rang.

"That is for me," he said to Harry. "Those girls always take five minutes to polish themselves when they are polishing me, even though I am as far away from them as the Red Sea."

"Hello," he said taking the phone. "Oh, that is you Margaret. You are five minutes late but I don't mind. How is the business? O.K.? Fine. Now for important things. Did the man who wanted a roll of our cotton turn up? Oh he did. Did he buy a roll? He bought two? Wonderful. Is he still there? Then why are you wasting the time of the business talking to me? Oh he asked you to, whilst he sorted out the things and examined the other rolls. O.K. O.K. What price did you arrange with him? Remember I said one shilling a yard. One shilling, not a penny less.

What in the name of Heaven . . . he offered you nine pence? The man obviously wants to bankrupt me. I don't care whether he is buying a hundred and two rolls. One shilling per yard is the price. I thought you would have made him pay one shilling and sixpence. That would be a fair price. Fair to him and fair to us. I told you not to go lower than one shilling. As soon as I leave the business you all go crazy. Nine pence! That will ruin me.

"No I am not angry with you, not at all. How can I be angry with a girl so beautiful and with one who has always my best interests at heart? Anyway nine pence a yard strikes me to the heart. When I am ruined I hope I can spend a pleasant day or at least half a day in Nelson with my friend Harry Spencer. Anyway I will recover. I will be in tomorrow morning early. All right, if you have agreed with him for nine pence, then nine pence it must be. Go on talking with him, see what you can do and above all, don't go lower than six pence."

He had had all the people in the teashop listening to him and laughing at his explosion and in particular at his final: "don't go lower than six pence", when his whole tone and attitude had been that nine pence a yard was outrageous.

"Yes," he said to Harry, "I will have tea and of course, although I don't like cake, I will eat a piece of your marvellous cake Harry - the best in Lancashire. That is its reputation. Did you know that?"

Harry Spencer and I were great walkers and he used to plan the strategy like Napoleon. On Sundays and public holidays we would set off in the morning at about nine o'clock and walk ten or fifteen miles, talking all the way about what we saw or the relation between the different parts of Lancashire. He would point out to me and talk with immense knowledge of farmhouses, mills, old castles, churches and cathedrals and

what had happened there some one hundred, two hundred or five hundred years before. At about five o'clock we would arrive at a central spot. There we would have dinner, usually a good steak and about six o'clock when we were finished eating (Harry would have timed it carefully) we could pick up a bus leaving for Nelson or to another Lancashire town where we would catch another bus to drop us at home.

In our travels we went as far as York Cathedral and we made journeys to Warwick Castle and I once persuaded Harry to come with me to Paris which I had learnt fairly well during my research for The Black Jacobins.

The research and writing of The Black Jacobins I will go into later but I used to talk to Harry about this book that I intended to write on the Haitian revolution and Toussaint L'Ouverture. I used to get quite excited about it, especially when books I had ordered from Paris turned up and gave me exciting information. One day I was telling him about the chapter I would write about the war of independence when he said to me:

"But why don't you write a book instead of only talking about it?" "I am only reading secondary literature," I said. "To write this book properly I have to go to France and examine the original documents." Although I think he must have known, he said: "Why don't you?" I replied that I had no money and that I was saving and when I had saved enough I would go.

"How much do you need to start off?" he asked. "A hundred pounds," I replied. "I would need that at least to begin." "I see," said Harry and turned away in his usual immediate manner to deal with a customer. Next morning, however, when I went into his teashop, after greetings,

he said to me: "Nello I have a cheque here for you. It is not a hundred pounds, only ninety. Go off to France and if you get short let me know."

"Much obliged, Harry," I said. "Much obliged." I had fallen into the English manner or rather the north of England manner that he would not have wanted me to say anything else.

So I went off to France as quickly as I could and there in addition to my work in the archives and French bookshops, I made the acquaintance of some French people - in particular a doctor called Frankel and his beautiful and charming wife, Ghita. Ghita and I became friendly and she was a great one for conversation about your personal, though not intimate, life: how did I live in England, who were my friends, what did we do and so on. In the course of talking to Ghita I very often mentioned Harry and more than once she said to me: "Nello, I would very much like to meet your friend Harry. He sounds to me like a nice man." I, as usual, went back to Nelson and talked to Harry about my adventures in Paris. I spoke of Ghita and on more than one occasion on my return I happened to say that Ghita had once again told me that she would like to meet him because he seemed to her a nice man.

"Well," said Harry, "the only thing to do is to let Ghita see Harry and decide by personal observation and acquaintance whether he is the nice man you make him out to be."

I was a little astonished but Harry was serious and on the first occasion that presented itself, he and I turned up in Paris - to spend a few days and for him to be vetted by Ghita.

The visit was a great success. It was many years since Harry had been in Paris but he knew the city pretty well and we not only sat and talked a great deal, but we went about looking at things. Above all Harry was a maestro in all the restaurants. We learnt that when we went

somewhere to eat we ought to leave it to him to order from the menu. Somewhat to my surprise Harry turned out to be a fluent conversationalist and a ladies' gentleman in the attention he always paid to any of Ghita's personal needs.

So it went - the three of us enjoying ourselves immensely and once or twice Ghita's husband came along.

Finally Ghita said one day that it would be nice for us to be in Vienna. She had been in Vienna as a child but was always hoping to return. She believed that the three of us would have had a wonderful time there. Then appeared Harry at his best. He had a bit of flesh around his neck almost amounting to a jowl, but at moments when he was taking unusual charge of a situation he would hold his head back, his face would lengthen, the jowl would disappear and with a wonderful smile he would say the unexpected: "You wish us to be in Vienna? Then Vienna it will be." We were not only delighted but we were startled at the grace and grandeur of his style.

It so happened that the war came and prevented our trip to Vienna. I will always remember when the morning came for us to leave Paris, Ghita came to the station early to see us off and not only shook Harry's hands warmly but kissed him on both cheeks. He was not ashamed to say or at least to indicate to me that he was very pleased. It was very different from what it had been.

Politics in Nelson in the 1930s were an important part of my general intellectual development. They were not only an education but quite frequently a revelation to me.

First of all, the Mayor used to deliver newspapers to houses every morning. He ran a little store for years. He had begun by giving out papers and as the years went by he had been promoted and had become Mayor. Nelson claimed to be a revolutionary town and it was Labour of the extreme left. I have already referred to the fact that all over Lancashire it was known as Little Moscow. This did not mean that there were many Stalinists around. I knew only three - three young women with jobs in the Municipality who with typical British moderation promoted the Stalinists' policies and pamphlets. Nobody bothered them. The Moscow quality of Nelson emerged from those members who had been elected to the Municipality when the King or the Prince of Wales (or some princess) had proposed to include Nelson in a visit to the north of England. Nelson declined the honour, claiming that they did not have the money to entertain such distinguished guests.

They, however, had always enough money to entertain the poor of the town. They were prohibited by law from giving out food free. They were not prohibited by law though from giving banquets for themselves. Periodically then the Municipality gave itself a banquet to celebrate some important episode in the history of the British labour movement. They filled the large Municipal Hall with legs of pork, massive pieces of beef, chicken, vegetables and all sorts of puddings. The members sat down at the tables and took only a mouthful whilst the invited poor not only ate, but they were able to carry home lots of food that would last for a few days.

The Municipality was run by a man of about seventy - an old Labour stalwart who was not even a member of the Council. He lived in Nelson modestly in a two-room house, but everybody knew that the members of the Council went regularly to him for advice as to what they should do and still keep within the law. I expressed a wish to meet him and he talked to me about local politics and the disappointment that was inherent in the official Labour Party. I talked about West Indian people and after a time he began to invite me around, especially when I had begun to write in The Guardian. He was not only sceptical of the promises of self government for the West Indies that had been made by the Government. He was quite certain that they would do nothing. Not only he, but Harry and all the Labour Party members or supporters with whom I became friendly, always made it clear to me that they expected nothing serious from Ramsay MacDonald, Herbert Morrison, Philip Snowden and all the leaders of the Labour Party. "What if they come to power?" I would ask in my innocence. "They will not do anything," was the general reply. None of them was hostile about it, they simply accepted it as the nature of things.

But nobody had any doubts that the Labour Party had made a tremendous difference to the life of the British people. The Labour Party had been founded only in 1900 and in the 1930s I met an increasing number of men of about fifty who told me how it was in the old days before Labour. They said that Lancashire got on well as long as it was close to cotton. But everyone was not close to cotton and often in the towns of the great Empire people did not have enough food to eat. Some of them told me that they had lived regularly on "porridge and stock". "Porridge and stock" was a combination of porridge flavoured with a liquid that had been boiled from beef and some other meat which had been eaten some days before.

The whole thing was very strange to me. Nelson at that time was prosperous and most of the people ate well, particularly at weekends when they had a lamb roast or other pieces of meat. But the consciousness of from what they had emerged was very strong. I began rapidly to get a conception of the Labour Party, the people who were in it and its leadership and an understanding of the attitude of the majority who voted for it in elections. Long before I left Nelson I had been educated by the local Labour leaders to understand what to expect from the Labour leadership. Despite all my readings in the New Statesman and books on Labour and politics I had a different conception of what they, the Labour Party in Parliament, meant. After a few months in Nelson I had been educated and warned that the Labour leadership would do nothing - either for the independence of the colonies or for any serious change in the British system.

By the time that Jenny Lee, the wife of Aneurin Bevan, came to Nelson to speak, I was already putting forward the position that revolution was the only way out for Labour and the great mass of the population. The local Labour Party had put me up against her in a debate. She argued that the Labour Party should be assisted to win the elections, and then, if anyone attempted to prevent the establishment of socialism, the Labour Party with the power in its hands would be able to deal with them. She did not exude conviction.

While I was involved in the Labour Party and reading seriously, I was also observing the people of Nelson. One thing in particular struck me with great force. It concerned a play, a local play called Maria Martin and the Red Barn. It was a story of a young aristocrat, a member of the Tory aristocracy, who had got himself entangled with a Lancashire mill girl or, at any rate, with someone of a distinctly lower class to his own. She

became pregnant and then to escape the consequences he killed her in the red barn or he killed her and then hid her body in the red barn. The crime was discovered and he was punished.

Now to me that was not a very interesting melodrama but for the people of Lancashire, at least to the people of Nelson, it was a picture of the old relations between the aristocracy and the common people. It represented something. Maria Martin and the Red Barn remained in Nelson for about a week and then went on to other towns in Lancashire. While the play was in town attendance at the cinemas dropped away considerably and people crowded to see the play.

Constantine often heard me speaking about the manuscript The Life of Captain Cipriani whilst I was staying with him in Nelson. I had brought it, completed, with me from the Caribbean. People would come to see me and would want to talk about different issues - particularly the question of independence for the colonies. I would talk about my manuscript as it was very much in my mind. Constantine said to me one morning: "But why are you always talking about that book? Why don't you print it, publish it?" I told him that I hadn't got the money - that was the only reason and that I was hoping to publish it as soon as I had. He said: "Go ahead. I will pay. You will pay me back how you can." That is how The Life of Captain Cipriani was published. I had it printed at once by my friend Mr Cartmell in Nelson and I packed copies off to the Caribbean where they were rapidly sold.

Not many people read it in Nelson, but I remember Constantine's attitude towards it. He was very friendly with some of the local Labour bureaucrats - they were not reactionary but they were not revolutionary. They were typical left wing Labour. I remember him more than once telling one or two people: "Those are Mr James's views, they are not

necessarily mine." And he would explain that there were things I said with which he quite agreed, but there were also things that I said there which he was not against but which were not his views. Constantine took care to explain because a great number of people were inviting me to speak and I was expressing myself openly, talking often with indiscretion. From that manuscript you could see quite clearly that in general I was against - and not only in the Caribbean.

I had been in Nelson for some months, staying in Constantine's house, when Sidney Barnes came to the town to play in a cricket match. He was a very striking person - the greatest bowler of his day. I watched him and then wrote an article about him for no particular reason at all. I showed it to Constantine. He said: "Send it to The Manchester Guardian, tell them that I told you to send it. Send it to Neville Cardus." So my letter to Cardus enclosed this article and asked him if heknew any papers around that would want to publish it.

Cardus sent back to say that The Guardian would publish it and that they would like to see me when I was next coming into Manchester. I made it my business to be in Manchester the next week. Cardus offered me a job to write for the paper.

I soon learnt that if they had not offered me a job and if I had had to make money as a freelance writer, it would have been as difficult as I had been warned before I left the Caribbean. I had at that time refused to listen.

The Guardian paid me so much a day, my expenses and my fares for travelling to the different grounds to report cricket matches.

I travelled around a great deal in the summer of 1932 but by the end of the cricket season in September I had nothing in particular to do except now and then give a lecture. I had gained some reputation because my articles were appearing in the newspapers in my own name

and word quickly passed around that I was an effective public speaker.

I moved from Lancashire down to London once I became established in my cricket writing. I had earned a small amount of money from my writing which enabled me to continue my reading.

I want to now go back briefly to what I had written in Trinidad. This will make clear what it was I brought with me to western Europe and enabled me to absorb so rapidly what Marxism was teaching, its foundations and its rapid incorporation into my views of the world.

It is now in order to show how the essentials of Marxism got into my head; also things which were wrong and which plagued my life for many years. I will go into some detail concerning the pieces of writing which I had done before I had heard a single word about Marxism. My early work I found, had been preparing me for Marx.

There were four pieces of writing: (1) a short story called La Divina Pastora which won the distinction, being printed in the United States by Edward O'Brien in the lists he used to publish every year, as one of the Best Short Stories of 1928; (2) a story was published in Trinidad in one of the magazines that my friend Mendes and I used to publish. In the next year Edward O'Brien did not reprint Triumph (which I think he should have done) in his list, but he did see it as one of the most remarkable short stories of the day; (3) a novel I wrote in about 1929 called Minty Alley and it was published in England in 1936; (4) The Life of Captain Cipriani which later became The Case for West Indian Self Government.

These four pieces of writing, to the last comma, I had done before I left the Caribbean. I want to go through them to indicate my intellectual life in the Caribbean before I stepped out of it.

La Divina Pastora was a story that my grandmother told me and she took about five minutes to relate it. It was just a casual story, she had told me others, but there was something about this one that held me. I set out to make a literary short story out of it. The essence of the

story and its general outline were very clear, but it reveals much about my political stance, although I had no specific ideas about politics, at the time.

A young woman living in the country wanted to make a friendly man propose marriage. To help this along she sent to La Divina Pastora, a Roman Catholic image to which you offered money and prayer. The legend was, if you prayed well and gave sufficient of what you had, you would be rewarded by the fulfilment of your request. This young woman took all that she owned, a gold chain, and prayed that the young man would ask her to marry him. As soon as she returned to her house the young man's attitude changed. When going out to a dance one night he asked her to marry him. There followed an official engagement and the engaged couple used to go out together to parties and to dances. One evening she was getting ready to go to a dance. She was wearing a fine new dress and as she was about to leave she had a last look at herself in the glass. Undoubtedly she looked beautiful and fine. But - "I wish I still had my little gold chain". When she returned from the dance the gold chain lay on her dresser. La Divina Pastora had returned it.

At the beginning of this story I gave a picture of the economic and social existence of a certain type of person in Trinidad. I was describing something I knew, something that I was aware of with great accuracy but I did not at that time grasp its political significance.

I want now to go on to my other short story, Triumph. I am fond of this piece because it shows that I understood certain types of life in the island which did not reveal itself in my historical and literary work or in my critical examination of West Indian society. This story deals with

life in the lower class Caribbean barrack yard. The writing was indicative of my own position as an educated person, aware of European literature and of my detachment from what I described. But if I was detached I was also fascinated by the life of the barrack yard.

I realised later why I was interested in them. They were living passionate independent lives, individual but all tangled up with one another. Triumph and my novel Minty Alley explored these lives. The characters in both understood one another. They had at the back some idea of God, some kind of philosophy that they believed to be African in origin (that is a mixture of folklore with Roman Catholic traditions). They formed a collective grouping. They lived their life independently of the kind of pretence or desire to imitate the British style which so preoccupied the middle classes. It was the vitality and collectivity of that life which fascinated me. I cannot be sure from where my interest originated. In retrospect, however, I see that the next generation of those characters in the barrack yards was the one that made the political activity which resulted in West Indian independence.

With this very clear idea of the importance of the class division between the educated and the uneducated I began to explore politics in 1931 through the activities of Captain Cipriani. Cipriani was a white man mobilising a labour movement in the Caribbean. The circumstances were such that the moderate beginning rapidly posed a serious threat to a colonial government.

From my voracious reading (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Thackeray, Dickens, Moliere, etc.) and from my careful observation I had developed a conception of human character and human personality. The plain fact of the matter was that the black middle class people in the Caribbean,

to whom I belonged and amongst whom I lived, were busy trying to shape their lives according to the British ideas of principles and behaviour. They were not very interesting. I dare say that in time I could have penetrated into something about them. But the people who had human passion, human energy, anger, violence and generosity were the common people whom I saw around me. They shaped my political outlook and from that time to this day, abroad and at home, those are the people with whom I have been most concerned.

That is why I was able to understand Marx very easily and particularly Lenin who never for one single moment failed to see them as the moving force of history and as his primary political concern. I want to make clear that I did not learn <u>everything</u> from Marxism; when I went to Marxism I was already well prepared. Even in my early days of fiction I had the instinct which enabled me to grasp the fundamentals of Marxism easily and I was able to work subsequently at Marxism with Marx's basic element - the common people.

In the winter of 1932 I continued my reading. I bought volumes two and three of Trotsky's The History of the Russian Revolution. I spent the next four or five months reading these books and learning a great deal from Trotsky's account and interpretation of history.

But Trotsky referred in his work repeatedly to the fact that Stalin had done this or had said that and he also referred to Lenin and to Marx. I knew nothing at all about these people. For me the only thing to do was to make a serious and concentrated study of the Russian Revolution and the Marxism which was indissolubly associated with it. In order to make the issues clear I had to do the sort of work which I had done much earlier in the Caribbean on the question of Christianity. Primarily I was and remained a student, one who studied. I was for years immersed in practical politics, chiefly for and with the common people - but a student, always.

My relations with a man called Charlie Lahr are most intimately related to this particular stage in my development. Charlie did not know that, at least not to any extent, but it was from his Red Lion bookshop that I made serious explorations into Marxist thinking.

I lived in Heathcote Street which was close to his bookshop and I rapidly got into the habit of dropping round to pick up, if possible, second-hand copies of the books I wanted. Not only did I find many of the books in Charlie's shop but he himself became interested in what I was doing and he would put aside books and pamphlets which he thought would interest me. There was no political alliance between Charlie and me, but he could see where I was heading, sympathised and obtained the necessary documents.

After completing Trotsky's The History of the Russian Revolution I realised that if Stalin had done all those things that Trotsky said he ought not to have done, I should read Stalin as well. So I went and I bought two volumes of Stalin on Leninism. I read them avidly. It was obvious that there was a sharp contradiction between Stalin's account of Leninism and Trotsky's.

Through Charlie I was made acquainted with pamphlets and publications of the American Trotskyist movement and with similar publications in French. There was at that time an Englishman called Geoffrey Bagott who was much interested in Trotskyism and he spoke to me about it. Bagott was not particularly interested in political theory, his main concern was history. He lent me some Trotskyist material in French and he indicated others that were to come.

In this way I began to be clear about the conflicts between Stalin and Trotsky. Both of them, however, were referring to Lenin. I went and bought about ten or twelve volumes of Lenin and read them through. I read them through not only in general, but with reference to the particular points that Stalin and Trotsky were debating. I came more and more to the conclusion that the Stalinists were beyond all previous liars and falsifiers on an incredible scale. I have not changed that view.

The Stalinists referred constantly to Marx and so in accordance with my ingrained habits, brought from the Caribbean, I bought Marx. I was seeking as usual what Othello called "the ocular truth". I gobbled up volume one of Capital and for quite a while I tackled volumes two and three but at that time I did not get very far with them. I read and re-read The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, the Communist Manifesto and other early pamphlets of Marx as were available.

By the end of 1933 and the beginning of 1934 I had read a great deal about Trotsky, I had read a great deal of what Stalin had had to say, I had read what Lenin had had to say about these issues, I had read what Marx had had to say, I had had some general information and I came to the conclusion, as I had come in regard to Christianity, that it was absolutely impossible to accept the Stalinists as purveyors of truth. In fact I used to say that they were the greatest historical liars that I had ever met or ever heard of. And I dropped them. To this day I have had nothing whatever to do with Stalinism in the same way that I had worked my way through Christianity and had left the doctrines of organised Christianity behind me. The doctrines of Christianity were at least of historical importance having influenced the minds of generations of scholars.

The development of this conviction was intimately tied up with Charlie, his bookshop, his pamphlets and his concern to secure for me what he thought would be of use in my searches. It was a curious partnership. Whenever I wanted to know something I would drop round to the Red Lion bookshop. For by this time history was no longer for me an abstract question. Quite often Charlie and I talked about what was taking place in politics in general and in the British political movement in particular. It was usually from him I would hear: "Have you heard about . . . ?" or: "Have you seen this?" or frequently: "Here is a pamphlet (or an article) which I told you about the other day", or maybe: "Hey, you don't know about him? He is one of the most notorious scoundrels in the Labour Party . . . Let me tell you about him". I would ask him about the juicy rumours of political scandal in the Labour Party. It was obvious that I was particularly ignorant of the political personalities, even of some of their names and especially of the trades union leaders. Charlie would regularly inform me of some betrayal which all the political persons of

the Left knew and talked about.

The reader should bear in mind that I arrived in England knowing a great deal and at the same time ignorant of much. In my first year it was usually from Charlie Lahr that I acquired the necessary foundations. It is impossible for me to think of those early days and that period without thinking of him. In addition he was, in thought and deed, a socialist - peerless.

In time some of my political friends began to buy their pamphlets, periodicals and books from Charlie's shop. Charlie did not so much argue a political issue; he disseminated information - "Have you seen what those scoundrels have written about the United Front?" or: "Have you read the lies they are telling about Rosa Luxembourg and Carl Liebnecht? Here it is." That was the main point about Charlie - his anger at political lies and dishonesty, not only of Stalinism but of Social Democracy. At the same time as he denounced it he would give you the material where you could read it or alert you to be on the lookout for certain publications.

Charlie in time developed a new method of disseminating information. Every now and then an important but expensive book would be published. "You want it?" Charlie would ask. "I could get it for you." Being a bookseller he would get 33% or some reasonable percentage off the published price. If you were friendly with him he would give you the book at only a small additional price to what he had paid for it. With expensive books and special friends and regular buyers, like me, he would let me have it at the price he had paid.

Strangely enough the memories I have of Charlie's personality are still the same: Charlie standing with a pamphlet or a periodical in his hand, open at a certain page and saying: "Have you seen what these

scoundrels have written?" I have remembered Charlie for nearly forty years in much the same way.

He was over six feet tall and well built, but he did not carry himself well. He looked at you straight in the eyes absorbed in politics - as much as any man I have known politically. He had, however, a never failing background of goodwill, good nature and a great interest in your personal stance. On the rarest of occasions, once or twice a year perhaps, if you looked or gave the impression of being very depressed or overwhelmed by difficulty, Charlied would ask in a voice more gentle than that of his usual political queries or denunciations: "Is something wrong?" and if you said: "No," he would leave the matter alone. Perhaps you may just see him having an oblique glance at you later - oblique, never intrusive.

Charlie was not a distinct personality but he knew what he wanted in life - egalitarian socialism. He was a born fighter, but he was one who accepted without complaint or regret the circumstances in which the modern world had put him.

He had one peculiarity, not really as a characteristic but as an idiosyncracy. He could not stand the ticket inspectors who suddenly jumped on to trams or buses and asked to see your ticket. I was periodically in trouble with my ticket. Often when the conductor had given me my ticket, for which I always paid, I would put it somewhere, drop it on the floor or carefully arrange it in some purse or pocket where it was difficult to find while the inspector waited. The ticket was the proof that you had paid, how much you had paid and of the length of the journey you were making. I expect it was as much as a check on the conductor as on me. While I searched frantically Charlie would become angry at this invasion of our democratic rights. He would say: "What right do they have on the bus checking on people? People ought to be

checking on them." That was as angry as I had ever seen him.

One last thing about Charlie. He spoke English perfectly. In his style and manner he was not notably different from an educated Englishman. But even in London of the political Left, he was unique. Ideas, history, politics, pamphlets, paragraphs - they were the substance and details of his life; yet he never spoke German or referred particularly to politics in Germany.

At the end of the cricket season in early September of 1934 my job as a reporter finished, I was ready again to take up my political explorations. I had read all the necessary books - Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin and I had absorbed Marxist doctrines. Following out what I was reading, I decided that reading politics was not enough. A socialist had to become active.

I went around asking: "Where are the Trotskyists?" After some time I made the acquaintance of one or two of them and they invited me to a meeting. It was understood that this meeting would officially sanction my membership. There were about half a dozen people at the session. An Englishman like myself came to join but he had some difficulties with a part of the doctrines (he had been poisoned, as so many people were, by the Stalinist fabrications). Finally he was invited to state his views. He had problems with some of Trotsky's theories and he wanted clarification of their application to concrete politics. He was a man in his thirties, a serious man who spoke well.

The official Trotskyists present made no attempt to answer his questions: all they did was to repeat the writings of Trotsky.

In the course of this discussion it became perfectly obvious to me, being an exceptional reader with a tenacious memory, that I knew more about the essentials of Trotskyism than they did. I intervened in the discussion, pointed out the Stalinist perversions and I showed the relationship of Trotskyism to these fabrications of Stalinism.

I shall say nothing about the British Trotskyists in the thirties, except that they were not nasty, not brutish, not short. I believed, in fact I am quite sure that I shared with them, the idea that the dozen or so of us were the seminal core of the party without which the revolution in Britain could not take place. We believed that if the people should attempt any revolu-

tionary action without our leadership they were certain to fail. I did not actually believe that; I never thought about it - that was what Trotskyism stood for in general and I mentally subscribed to it. But what I was really interested in was first, the Marxist theory, expounding Trotskyism and denouncing other versions. But along with my preoccupation with theory I had a special concern to spread the theory around.

I began to go periodically to Paris for meetings of the European Trotskyist movement. Paris was the centre and every three or four months we had a plenum and I would attend as the representative of the British section. We would discuss the latest events in the areas from which we came. Delegates came from all over Europe - I did not know them and I saw some of them for the first and last time. We were united by the writings of Trotsky.

We had to take great care when travelling to Paris to attend meetings. The Stalinists had killed one or two of our members. Very important among them was the secretary of one of the organisations, a tall German who had been found dead in the Seine. He was secretary of our organisation, was known as such, went to all meetings, put our case and in particular the devastating case against Stalinist theory and Stalinist lies. We were great rivals of the Stalinists and some of us, like our secretary, were very active. Trotsky warned us that we must understand that we could be killed by the Stalinists. In Russia that was known but in the West, where we believed in democracy, we had not thought about it too much. Trotsky warned that if we were very active and prominent they would kill us. We were not afraid of that in England but in Paris with people coming from all over Europe - Czechoslavakia, Russia, Spain and so on, it was a real danger. The French police had little interest: if

Stalinists were killing Trotskyists, so what did it matter?

Whenever I travelled to Paris there was always someone from the movement there to meet me. If I took the train from London the Stalinists would know. They had their information. We did not know that, but they had learnt it all in Moscow.

When I joined the Trotskyists in 1934 many members were also in the Independent Labour Party. I joined that too. We tried to spread our ideas among the people in the ILP and many were not unsympathetic to them. This was an attempt to win as many as possible into the Trotskyist movement. There were about sixty or seventy of us, split into two or three groupings. We managed to come together for a conference on unity but continued thereafter as divided as possible.

Our activity at that time was not altogether useless, though today it is very hard to see what political good we were doing. One thing was certain - we had as clear an idea of the attitude of the British people as any other group in the country. This came from the fact that we were members of an organisation, small maybe, but widely dispersed over the country. It had split from the Labour Party in 1932 and had thereby hoped to become the nucleus of a new and independent Marxist party which the Communist Party of Great Britain most certainly was not.

The Communist Party especially between 1932-34, when I became acquainted with its policies and some of its organisation, was preaching the doctrine of the Communist International. This was that capitalism was in mortal decay and that the workers everywhere were only waiting for the word to make the revolution. I have myself heard Harry Pollitt, the leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain, addressing an audience say: "Well, boys, the time is near. It can come now, at any

time all over Europe as well as here in Britain". That was the slogan and the programme that they put forward on every occasion - the socialist revolution was everywhere, near and ready in Britain no less than elsewhere. It is sobering and instructive to recall how regularly and enthusiastically they put it forward and how far it was removed from the attitude and thinking of the British public and proletariat.

That was one stupidity. Another stupidity was that of the Independent Labour Party. Some of its members were in Parliament, headed by James Maxton, and it called upon the British people to leave the Labour Party and to join the ILP so as to be ready for the revolution. The revolution this time was not so near as the one that the British Communist Party was preparing for, but nevertheless was near enough to require the formation of a movement to which the ILP offered itself as the indispensible leader.

The prize for stupidity, however, should go to the Trotskyist movement. We were saying that the revolution was near, not quite so near as the British Communist Party was saying but nearer than the forecast of the ILP. The surest way, in fact, the only way, to the success of the revolution was to leave the Labour Party and the Communist Party and to join the Trotskyist movement. The latter would give the British proletariat the leadership without which defeat was inevitable.

I look back to those days not with horror or regret but at the evident lack of common sense. To be more precise I see the stupidities of which a whole section of experienced, educated people can be guilty. I cannot plead immunity or blame it on my West Indian backwardness as I continued to do much the same thing in the United States until 1951. It was some ten years before I realised the folly of it: my collaborators and I began to work out a more reasonable approach.

That was the basic crisis and we were not conscious of it, but continued, each of us, to seek the leadership of the British revolution. I, however, was particularly affected by the fact that I was so often in Paris attending meetings of the central committee of the Trotskyist movement and the revolution was there in France - quite obviously there. Although the Trotskyists preached revolution as the essential doctrine of Marxism, the movement made very little progress in England where there was no hint of an imminent revolution. In France where the revolution walked the street, Trotskyism was equally impotent. Something was wrong and the revolution is never wrong.

In about 1935 a political event occurred which was to have very important practical consequences for me and also for Charlie Lahr. The Communist International for years (and with it the British Communist Party) had been printing and advocating the political impossibility of any unity or serious understanding between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Then in 1935 came their new doctrine of the Popular Front. There it was proclaimed that not only was there a possibility of an alliance but a good revolutionary should work for it as relevant to the particular period of history which had now arrived.

In central London was the Communist Party bookshop and there they had for years sold, or placed in the basement, copies of journals, pamphlets, manifestoes printed in Moscow or in other parts of Europe (many by the Communist Party of Great Britain) - all of them stated in the most unambiguous, and usually violent language, the impossibility or at any rate the extreme danger of any attempt at collaboration between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Infected with the new virus, the Communist Party bookshop dug down into its basement and raked up all these old books,

pamphlets and documents which had not been sold. They could have destroyed them but as we shall see in good time, they do not do things as ordinary people. They placed these books out in front of their bookshop, selling them, by the dozen if need be, in order to get rid of them and clear the way for the uninhibited propagation of the Popular Front.

I believe it was there that Charlie and I got number one of the famous Stalinist organ, the International Press Correspondence. It contained articles by Lenin and Stalin denouncing what had become the new doctrine of the Communist Parties. Both Charlie and I bought freely. I was an unsuspicious buyer and we compared what we had and had now become important. We also spread the news to our friends. This change in Communist theory and practice, and our sharpness in being able to get what we were missing resulted in my having a collection of material published by the Stalinists such as no one whom I knew had. What I did not have Charlie had on his shelves for sale. He was, as always, willing to point out to me a special copy with a useful article for exposing those scoundrels, rogues, rascals . . .

I became a member of the Student Union House, an official society for students from abroad. Many of them were believers in Marxism but for the most part they were supporters of Stalin and the Communist Party. They read their documents.

I got into the habit of going along to the Stalinists' meetings with my pockets stuffed full of their pamphlets and writings. I would regularly get up and expose their fabrications and dishonesties from the floor. I could expose their fundamental shifts in position by producing the necessary documents from my pocket. My method was to make a statement. As usual the Stalinists, some of them well known pundits

or officials, would deny, denounce; even hinting at falsification. Then out of my pocket would come two copies of a pamphlet - one for the chairman to check what I was reading.

Talking about Charlie and our collection of Stalinist documents brings forcibly to my mind the memory of B. K. Gupta, a man I met at the Student Movement House who became one of my closest friends. He was an Indian - I believe from somewhere around Calcutta and he was studying at London University. He was one of the most striking, and at the same time most attractive men that I have met.

He educated me in Marxism despite the fact that when we met though he was not a Stalinist he was nevertheless Stalinist oriented, as nearly all the students were in 1932. First of all he had read the Marxist classics and understood them. He was, I believe, studying economics and later did law, but I have rarely met anyone who, although not a professional, to be so well acquainted with all the topics of the day.

There was a room in the central unit of London University where there were placed copies of all newspapers that came to the university. With unfailing regularity they came from Madras, from Calcutta, from the Caribbean, from Singapore, from the United States - from all parts of the world and they were changed regularly. Every morning there were two or three new ones and every morning Gupta began by looking through and reading what interested him in the papers. He did not do it from any sense of duty. He just wanted to know all that was happening everywhere and he went through all those papers daily. To this international activity he added an even stronger determination - to be well informed with the latest information possible.

When you met him in the morning at about ten o'clock he had not only read The Times, The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph, he had

them in his possession. He did more. He bought the eleven o'clock copy of the Evening Standard and the Evening News. Later on in the afternoon he bought their second and third editions. Not only from his general Marxist position was he able to point out the tendencies and even blunders in his daily reading of the press in the university collection. He could also expose the often ridiculous stupidities and lies of the daily English press. He was particularly good and effective at pointing out in the second and third editions changes made to statements which had appeared in earlier editions. He would inform me with an emphatic forefinger that the first one had been read by people in the government who had instructed the newspaper editors either to take out certain offending passages, take out the article altogether or write a completely new one. Over and over again he would be pointing out to me or whoever was listening an article that had appeared in the national press as having been reproduced from "a local paper". Two weeks later he would have found the original article in the local paper and then he would show me how it had been changed so as to give an absolutely new impression in its reprinting for national circulation. As he pointed out these things his temper would flare but very soon he would once more be the observant, good tempered, witty and generous person that he was.

"Gup", as we used to call him, had visited Russia, Mussolini's Italy, France and he used to make return trips to India by land: he took some sort of bus train across southern Europe and made his way to India either by way of Afghanistan or Balchistan or Kashmir or some such area that was to us only a spot on the map. But he saved a lot of money this way. These journeys enabled "Gup" to bring back actual first-hand information from different countries and allowed him to enjoy himself exposing the lies of publications and the capitalist press.

A great number of the practical intricacies of Marxism I learnt from "Gup". His extraordinary facility of applying Marxism to vastly different areas of the world, he explained to me, was due to the fact that in India you only had to glance at Marx to understand the meaning of primitive communism, handicraft, feudal society, commercial capitalism and so on - they were all there visible in many areas of that vast continent.

"Gup" was a wonderful man with young women of the English middle class. He performed continuous miracles. He and I may be walking along the road and see a handsome young woman waiting for the bus. "Excuse me," "Gup" would say and with all his books and papers he would leave me and go up to her. His strongly accented greeting was always: "Good evening. How are you?" The girl would look up at him and his confident smile. In nine cases out of ten the next thing would be that she and "Gup" would be taking the bus together. I do not mean either to suggest or insinuate anything except that he seemed to be able to make the acquaintance of anyone who attracted his attention, and many did.

"Gup" was a man of many parts. There was much discussion amongst some of us on a question which preoccupied many of the young men and women at London University. This was the question of the superior sexual capacity of black men in general and of Africans in particular.

One day to my astonishment "Gup" told me that the question had been settled. I asked him how such a question could be settled. He said that certain of the young English women at the university had carried out a series of scientific but practical experiments on the question. They had repeated to one another and to "Gup" (he was never left out of anything) that there was nothing to it: Africans were more tender and

appreciative but as to superior sexual capacity that was fiction. The very next moment, "Gup" was on about some betrayal of the British government in Bombay, the Malaya states or in a part of Africa: this he supported by one of the number of papers in his hand and with a reference to what he told me he had read in his local newspaper ten days or two weeks before.

Nevertheless I discovered to my surprise one serious weakness in "Gup". On the Ethiopian question we had taken the position that we would not subscribe to the collective security of support for Ethiopia which was being propagated by Britain and France. Long before this I had switched "Gup" to support the Trotskyist doctrine, but on this particular evening he turned to me, his face not glowing as usual but somewhat serious, even gloomy. "James," he said, "Mussolini is swallowing up Abyssinia. We have to do something about it."

I put aside my papers at once because I knew what was happening: the idea of supporting collective security was widespread in England and only a few of us knew it for the hypocrisy that it was. "Gup" knew very well, too, but he knew what was happening to a backward country dominated by modern soldiers. Despite the good revolutionary that he was he had weakened and was looking towards collective security as some sort of modification at least of what he knew Ethiopia was going through.

One by one from the very beginning of Lenin's analysis of imperialism I went through the points with him - chiefly that a Marxist saw capitalism in a new stage, the stage of imperialism. For us Leninists of that period, you began with imperialism, a system which by controlling banks, and leaders of labour organisations and colonial functionaries exercised a predominant influence on the great mass of the population.

I remember repeating all this to make "Gup" recognise the error (if not betrayal) of his ways. But even while I repeated it I lost energy. "Gup" too felt that I was merely talking and he was merely listening. So one begins not unconsciously but instinctively to query a doctrine and before long to work at documents.

"Gup" listened without interruption and when I was finished he rose sadly and before he left he said: "James, I know you are right, I know we were right, but the idea of what Abyssinia is going through ....."

I got my first glimpse on that occasion of how a genuinely well educated and sincere revolutionary could be tempted and fall under the pressure of the ideas around him. I learnt in time to recognise and deal with these promptings in myself and in other people.

I want to end my recollection of "Gup" by telling one of the many stories he was always ready to repeat.

The Russians or, as we automatically called them, the Stalinists, had built a radio mechanism which embraced the whole of the world, or one half at least. On the day the sending out of information was to begin, in addition to Stalin, Molotov and other dignitaries, the Stalinists decided that one of the peasants who had helped in the work should be given the opportunity to speak to the world to show that in Russia there was true democracy. They invited a peasant up to the platform and told him to speak into the telephone and what he said would be heard by the world or at least by half of it, as the case might be. The peasant was mystified: "But what shall I say?" The Stalinist authorities told him: "Say whatever you like." "Anything I want to say?" asked the peasant. "Anything," was the reply. He was introduced by a long speech praising democracy in Stalinist Russia and then he was brought to the telephone. "I have only one word to say," he said. "Help!"

Frederick Warburg of the Secker and Warburg publishing house was watching carefully the shift in political thought against Stalinism. He wanted to publish books which would be Marxist but not Stalinist. He talked to one of his friends, Fenner Brockway, and Fenner recommended me to him as someone who could write effectively on political and historical subjects. Warburg sent for me and suggested that I do a book on socialism in Africa. This was some time at the beginning of 1936 or late in 1935. I had been involved in the Trotskyist movement for about a year and a half. I told Warburg that although I looked forward to socialism as the future of Africa I knew nothing about it and had no particular ideas about it. What I saw was the need for a book on the disorder in Russia; this seemed to me certain to break out in violence before very long.

Warburg seemed surprised at my suggestion but I was very confident of what I was talking about and he told me to prepare an outline of a book for him to see.

I remember that in little more than a week I handed to him an outline of 20,000 words, fortified by ample quotations from the collection I had built up and from the International Trotskyist Press. No publisher could resist such a barrage of information and Warburg told me to go ahead with the book.

I started to write World Revolution 1917-1936 with the subtitle which appeared on the title page: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International. The book is 429 pages long including an appendix. I spent the greater part of 1936 writing it with great speed as I knew the subject thoroughly and I had so much of the original material in the house. I continued, however, to collect clippings from all sorts of papers - my room was one third full of newspapers, clipped or to be clipped and periodically

some of my friends would come in to clip and organise. I completed the book in nine months, if not less.

Not only did I whenever necessary ask my old friend Charlie Lahr about relevant literature or material, but he was of inestimable value to me in another very important sphere.

I had studied the history and literature of France during my school days. I had visited France frequently to prepare for my study of the Haitian revolution and to discuss with my Trotskyist colleagues the movement for a Fourth International. But of Germany I knew nothing concrete except the music of Haydn, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven and the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. I had never visited Germany. I had arrived in Europe in 1932 and after Hitler came into power in January 1933 I had no cause or any desire to visit the country. In fact I had every reason not to go. You cannot write history merely by reading pamphlets, resolutions and manifestoes. I knew nothing of the attitudes of the different German parties or of the social relations.

I believed at the time, and more than ever to this day, that the most important chapter in World Revolution was chapter twelve describing Hitler's road to victory. He was aided, in fact assured, by the Stalinist doctrine entitled "After Hitler Our Turn". This quotation I placed at the head of my chapter. I did not hesitate in showing that the Communist International deliberately manoeuvred Hitler into power. It was here that Charlie was critical.

A great deal of what went into that chapter and made its foundations so secure came from my conversations, and often intricate discussions with Charlie. I could question him endlessly about what certain events meant, who were the leaders, who was the chief traitor and who

was Mr Inbetween in the tangled political history of Germany and the coming to power of Hitler. There is one aspect in particular of the work on Germany with which I associate Charlie. Here is a quotation:

> On October 14 1931 Remmele, one of the three official leaders of the Communist Party, with Stalinist effrontery announced the policy in the Reichstag. "Herr Bruening has put it very plainly; once they (the Fascists) are in power, then the united front of the proletariat will be established and it will make a clean sweep of everything. (Violent applause from the Communists.) We are the victors of the coming day; and the question is no longer one of who shall vanquish whom. The question is already answered. (Applause from the Communists.) The question now reads only, 'At what moment shall we overthrow the bourgeoisie' . . . We are not afraid of the Fascist gentlemen. They will shoot their bolt quicker than any other government. ("Right you are" from the Communists.) . . the Fascists so ran the argument, would introduce inflation, there would be financial chaos, and then the proletariat victory would follow. The speech was printed with a form asking for membership of the party attached, and distributed in great numbers all over Germany.
>
> (page 334 World Revolution)

Charlie's replies to my questions were always immediate and vivid. When I asked him who and what Breitschied was Charlie's reply was instantaneous: "Breitschied? A kind of Stafford-Cripps" (a social democrat who at one time seemed to be proposing a militant struggle against fascism).

World Revolution was published in 1937 and created a sensation. No book so far had exposed the Stalinists - the Stalinist history and the Stalinist lies with such irrefutable evidence with which my book was crammed.

Charlie advertised it, told everybody about it and was always telling people to get a copy or he would get one for them. He was delighted with it. His response to me was typical: "Good. We got those rascals at last."