

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **New York Without Gold Paving (1929-36)**

I went to New York, where the streets were paved with gold, to become a millionaire, to restore the bankrupt family fortunes and to donate money to Zionism. Fortunately I chose the wrong time. I arrived in February, 1929, and the stock market crashed in October. The sidewalks of Wall Street instead of glittering with gold were bespattered with the blood of unsuccessful speculators jumping from skyscrapers.

I arrived with a job lined up, and a fine home to stay in. A year or more before Jack Woolf, a New York fur merchant, had done business with my father in London. He had also taken my mother to the opera at Covent Garden. Dad did not go, thinking Covent Garden too snooty. But the Royal Opera House was just to Mother's taste. She accompanied Woolf there more than once. With Dad's business long since in decline she foresaw a future for me as an employee of the wealthy Woolf and he readily agreed to give me a job. That was about 1927. When I was old enough to accept his offer he tried to go back on his promise. Perhaps he saw the writing on the Wall Street wall; perhaps his wife, with whom he was not in love, objected to the arrangement. But my mother was a determined woman and even the wealthy Woolf found he could not back out of his promise and he finally fulfilled it with good grace. He and his wife met me at the New York docks and put

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me up in their luxurious flat overlooking Central Park.

Woolf had been born in a musical Jewish family in Poland; he was a patron of poor musicians and gave soirees in his home. I am indebted to him, among others for opening my ears to a wider range of music than I had been brought up on. He also had a good library, and it was on Central Park West that I first read Darwin and tried to tackle Spinoza (probably because he was one of my Jewish role models). So my first weeks in New York, staying with the Woolfs, were pleasant - except for the presence of Mrs Woolf. Jack had confided bitterly to my mother: "She loves me like she loves the furniture." I soon found that remark understandable, especially after she forced me to play bridge. My attitude to such games has always been that they are tolerable as a setting for conversation, not for serious mental exercise. After I had trumped my partner's ace or committed some such criminal blunder Mrs Woolf said loudly in my presence: "He's not just dumb, he's stoopid". After beginning to find my feet in the new world of New York I moved out of the Woolfs' lavish flat into the Y.M.C.A., rejecting the suggestion of teh Y.M.H.A. (the H standing for Hebrew) because it would brand me as Jewish. I preferred to "remain an Englishman", even in this half Jewish city. My British public school education had sunk deep roots.

The Y was a fine place for me to live and I still have a soft spot in my heart for it. One minor inconvenience, however, was that in those days, as a rosy-cheeked eighteen year-old Englishman I attracted homosexuals, many of whom

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lived there. They were on the whole more artistically and intellectually alive and sensitive than the general run of roomers, and as such I liked them and went around with them. But their sexual inclinations I did not understand and certainly did not care for. I was fascinated by pretty girls and had the usual heterosexuals' fantasies about them, though I was never sexually aggressive. Once I had made my inclinations clear I was willing and able to maintain a purely platonic friendship with would-be male wooers. Looking back I am surprised and proud that I had the maturity to do that, for those were days when gay liberation was unheard of and homosexuals were the common butt of crude humour on and off the stage.

At the Y I roomed at first with Nicholas, a White Russian, who claimed that his father was a czarist cavalry general. He introduced me to vodka, as well as to his White Russian friends, princes and princesses one and all, whom I played tennis with in Central Park before breakfast or danced with at night. With time I changed room-mates and made friends in the real world, particularly among the Y secretaries, liberally-minded young men concerned with social problems as well as Christian morality. They guided my reading from Spinoza and Darwin to psychology then, as the economic depression deepened, to books about the Soviet Union by Maurice Hindus and Louis Fischer. My mind was ready for the onrush of the new ideas in these books. Those that had the most immediate effect were on religion: Harry Elmer Barnes' *The Twilight of Christianity*, and Rabbi Lewis

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Browne's Why (or What) I Believe, a book on comparative religion, sympathetically expounding the creeds and practices of many religions. But instead of making me more religious the latter tilted me over into atheism. If there were so many credos contradicting each other, they couldn't all be true, in fact none of them could be true. So the sacrilegious seeds planted two or three years before by Bernard Shaw's prefaces to Back to Methusaleh and Man and Superman, bore fruit. When the holy fast of the Day of Atonement came round I had a day off from the Jewish fur business - and went skating. That was the second milestone on my road to atheism, following the inadvertent eating of ham and eggs in Hanover in 1927.

My intellectual growth was a sideline to the fur business, which dominated my life. Jack Woolf's prosperous company was on West 30th Street, between 7th and 8th Avenues. Besides doing import and export business in furs and skins, mostly raw and undressed, Woolf collected skins from trappers and hunters by mail from all over USA and Canada. The packages ranged from one weasel in an envelope to crates and bales containing hundreds of pelts. These were dealt with down in the basement. On the main floor were dressed and dyed skins; on the mezzanine was the office. There were the "Addressograph" machines listing the thousands of hunters and trappers and the usual office equipment, handled by a staff of ten to twenty women, mostly young and attractive. As they came off shift at the end of the day they would be waylaid and manhandled by the more macho of the male staff, who demonstrated their "manhood" with fondling and stolen

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kisses. I envied but dared not emulate them.

The work was seasonal. The summer was closed season for hunting and trapping, so the working day lasted only from 8.30 to 6, with a break for lunch and Saturday and Sunday off. In the height of the winter season the day started at 8 and ended often at 11 p.m., with half a day's work on Sunday. Saturday, thanks to Jehovah, was free. During this rush season we workers had to punch time and I, along with the rest, whenever possible "earned" a few hours extra overtime by pulling the hands of the clock back in the morning and pushing them forward at night.

My first job was to sort the incoming parcels geographically into half a dozen regions: the north-east, generally speaking, producing the best furs and the south and south-west the worst. The contents of the packages, raw and often bloody, stinking and greasy pelts were placed in piles on a long, metal-topped counter. There they were sorted and valued by the graders, the most highly paid workers. The price offered was entered on a form which was sent to the trapper for acceptance, rejection or bargaining. I soon overcame my squeamishness though it took a little time to get used to seeing bugs and insects squashed by the graders with their bare hands. All the more so since during the busiest time we workers did not go out for lunch but ate our sandwiches, purchased from the Jewish delicatessen across the road, at the work bench, after rubbing our greasy hands on our smocks. Such experience helped me overcome my middle-class

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Jewish pampering and my British public school snobbery.

Another job was counting pelts purchased by customers. Musk rat skins for instance, were stripped off the animal's corpse as one peeled off a glove, turning it inside out. So the fur was inside, the leather outside. The pelts had been stretched on a frame and dried, ending up in the shape of a snow-shoe. I counted them in tens, placing the first two piles of ten side by side, then placing another pair crosswise on top, until there was a five-tier pile of a hundred. One might have to count thousands for one order, at the end of which the skin on one's finger tips had worn paper thin and blood would ooze out at the slightest scratch. After a time I was taught to put plaster or rubber "thimbles" on my fingers. In the springtime the muskrats secreted their fragrant scent from which perfume is manufactured. The skunks were another matter. One day I watched Fred, the cockney, one of the few non-Jewish workers, skinning a skunk. His knife slipped and he punctured the stink-bearing sac, from which the animal sprays his attackers. The acrid aroma was overwhelming.

My fellow workers were the sons of Jewish immigrant families from Russia and Poland. Their parents had settled in the East Side slums until they made enough to move to Brooklyn or the Bronx. They were good-hearted but tough, as they had to be in order to survive. My rosy cheeks and English accent made me a natural butt of their humour and practical jokes. To their credit, down in the basement they were not worried by my being a protegé, of the boss, and they

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called me "Limey" - slang for Englishman - or often enough "goddamned Limey bastard" - all in a spirit of good-natured fun. I got along well enough so long as I stood up to the kidding and the pranks - one of which was to force castor-oil down my throat, ... la Mussolini. When I fought back they were pleased, got hold of boxing gloves and matched me against a lad of my own age, a bit of a braggart, called Sam Schwartz. They cheered when I held my own.

While winning acceptance from my fellow workers I still cherished illusions of social superiority. I bought a manicurist's brush with a head an eighth of an inch across to clean my nails for social forays in the evening with my White Russian room-mate who took me dancing with his princesses. I had my shoes shined by little black boys on 8th Avenue for a nickel. When newsboys on 7th Avenue, peddling their wares, shouted at me "waddy read" my silent response was "Shakespeare and Shaw". And when, on the very rare occasions I took a taxi and the driver asked "Where to, bud?", I resented the familiarity. Once I wrote to my mother: "In spite of all the filth and crudeness around me I feel that at heart I am an aristocrat" - an odd feeling for one only a generation removed from London's East End and two generations from a Polish ghetto. Such thoughts, no doubt were a subconscious attempt to maintain my self-respect as I wallowed in the grease and the stink of the skunks, made bales or pushed trolleys round the block delivering goods. Now that I've sloughed off the aristocratic illusions I feel the experience did me good. Not so at the time. My disgruntlement was

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accentuated by the length of the working day even in summertime. It left too little time to play tennis! Gradually my discontent took maturer form. So did a number of my new friends. I met a woman named Ruth, who belonged to the Socialist Labor Party, a small sectarian organization, inspired by Daniel De Leon. She gave me S.L.P. pamphlets to read. They were above my head, but they set me thinking.

Another woman friend helped develop my thought further. Kate was an Irish-American girl from poverty-stricken Connemara in western Ireland. She was not the pretty blond type I usually fell for. But she had clear grey eyes behind her ugly steel-rimmed specs and a clear mind. She was a student at Hunter College and well-read in social science and economics. She took my social thinking in hand, making me read Beatrice Webb and Stuart Chase, whose critiques of capitalism helped me understand the current American depression. But Kate was no boring blue-stocking. She was gay and laughter-loving, a true Irishwoman. We got on well but I was too immature to fall for her. I still fell for pretty little girls.

New York was in the throes of the Great Depression. There were breadlines on the street as I went to work and apple sellers on every block. They sold shiny red apples for a nickel apiece under the slogan "An apple a day keeps the doctor away". Some economic genius had decided that it would do more. It would put money in circulation and end the economic crisis. At the time the apple growers in the rural areas couldn't afford petrol to fuel their trucks and were forced back



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to the transport of their fathers, mule-drawn waggons. These came to be known as "Hoover buggies", named after the President. The socially conscious secretaries of the Y.M.C.A. told me about the Bowery, the down-and-out section of New York. There I visited flophouses where the unemployed sang hymns for a supper of soup. In some joints they could sleep for the night, standing up, leaning on a rope stretched across the room. When it was time for them to go in the morning, the rope was unhitched and they fell down and woke up. On an enormous unused pier jutting out into the East River was a dormitory, with free bunk beds for 1,700 people. The air was murky as the river water. Where, I wondered, were those gold-paved streets?

I never found them. All I found were gold plates on a dining table in an elegant apartment uptown. The first invitation, for Thanksgiving, came in November, 1930. via the Y.M.C.A. secretaries. It was for two English residents of the Y and was extended in appreciation of hospitality shown to the son of the family while he was in England. "Dinner jacket", or in American parlance, "tuxedo". In those days I still possessed one. My companion, several years older than I, and myself went along to the address on fashionable Sutton Place, overlooking the East River and surrounded by slums. The door was opened by a dignified Swedish butler. We introduced ourselves and met the family, a typical example of a well-to-do American household: the father, a Mr. Currie, director of the Continental Can Corporation, evidently a self-made man, a rough diamond,

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down to earth; Mrs C., a fashionable lady, proud of her Southern ancestry but with social rather than intellectual pretensions. (English accents such as my companion and I had were admired in her circles.) Their son was at Harvard but clearly more of a playboy than a student. And finally the daughter, Mabel, twenty-six, tastefully attired "Not bad looking", I thought, "but on the plump side." She was the custodian of the family culture, an admirer of Jane Austen and herself a writer of stories which were published at her own expense.

The family, on the initiative of the ladies, entertained in a stylish and fashionable way. They were lion-hunters and I became their "cub". During the couple of years that I accepted their invitations I met, among other celebrities, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, the eminent Labrador missionary physician; the sophisticated "society" comedienne Beatrice Lillie (Lady Peel); the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia and others. What on earth was I doing among this crowd, wearing my dinnerjacket, eating off gold plates, waited on by a butler and making small talk in my English accent - while the unemployed slept in Bowery flop-houses? The answer, I must ungallantly confess, is that Mabel had a crush on me. One might go so far as to call it an infatuation. She even wanted to marry me, penniless and Jewish as I was. I had "confessed" to both these shortcomings after a time. It made no difference. Mabel took me to the fashionable St Thomas's Episcopalian Church on Lower Fifth Avenue, where I enjoyed the organ music. We went to the Biltmore and the St Regis Roof, where we danced, in the style of the times, cheek-

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to-cheek. Finally I was put through my paces at some fashionable country club, where they certainly did not knowingly accept Jews. There was nothing to be done about it. I passed every test, largely, no doubt, because Mabel and her mother found my English accent and Cheltonian schooling attractive and fashionable enough in their social circle to outweigh my disadvantages. Of course they never saw me handling skunk skins or pushing opossum-laden trolleys along Eighth Avenue. In the course of time, as I learnt more of contemporary society and became more questioning of unemployment in U.S. and the spread of fascism abroad, dining off gold plates at Sutton Place seemed like fiddling while Rome burned, and I drifted out of the Currie orbit.

During those first few years in New York, I was being pulled in different directions. As fate would have it, I eventually came across Lee Stark, a man who changed the course of my life. We met at a party of yet another affluent family friend of my mother's. Lee was ten years older than I, in his late twenties. It turned out that we both played tennis and we exchanged addresses, both giving our places of work. We were astonished to find them within a block of each other. Like my employer Jack Woolf, Lee Stark was in the fur business. But their personalities were poles apart, Woolf being forceful, aggressive almost boisterous, like most of the fur merchants; Lee was quiet, soft-spoken and subtle. He was astonished to find such a gentlemanly type as I then was engaged in the skin game, a dirty business in more ways than one. In fact Lee himself was out of place

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in it. He didn't cheat, he didn't bargain. His word was his bond. He was known and grudgingly respected for this in the trade.

Perhaps the fact that we were both mavericks drew us together. It was an unequal relationship. Lee had much to offer, I little or nothing except that he evidently found me an appealing personality. He introduced me to his friends who like himself lived in Greenwich Village: artists and writers. Lee dabbled in writing himself though so far as I know he never got anything published. For this I am thankful, for one of his later works was a highly critical biographical sketch of me. Probably written in the late sixties, he titled it self-critically "I Manufactured a Communist". At my request he sent me a copy just before he died.

In it, Lee rightfully credits himself for sending me to university. He had never gone himself, and when he learnt of my desire to escape from the skunks and minks of West 30th Street and go to the Columbia University School of Journalism, he generously offered to pay my first year's tuition. After that I'd have to depend on my own efforts and work my way through, which I did. I still nurtured my adolescent ambition to be a journalist and I even had a couple of juvenile pieces of my first impressions of New York published in the right-wing (London) Morning Post while I was still interred in Jack Woolf's basement. But Lee wisely talked me out of specialising too soon and persuaded me to aim at a broad, general education at Columbia College.

### **Columbia University - Political Awakening (1931-1935)**

I entered Columbia in September 1931 in the depths of the depression. Although Lee paid for my tuition, I needed to find a part-time job to support myself. The university employment agency found me work coaching French. During the next four years my jobs during term time and vacations included working in the university cafeteria, handing out and shelving books in the college library, and nurse-maiding the young sons of a banker's family. During term time this last job meant guarding the boys in Central Park, across the road from their Fifth Avenue home. It also included elegant lunches on squab, quail, fresh salmon and other dishes not served in the cafeterias where I normally ate three meals for a dollar a day. In the summer the family took me as a "tutor" to their summer home in Manhasset, on Long Island Sound, where afternoon "work" involved handling the boys' outboard motor-boat. This employment I attribute largely to my English accent, which was highly valued in banking circles. Not all my jobs were such sinecures. One of them was really hard work, mental not physical. It was copy-reading for the Wall Street law firm of Root, Clark and Buckner. This was done in teams of two, one of whom read aloud the copy while the other checked its accuracy against the original. We had been warned that a slip, of even a comma, might cost the firm thousands of dollars and needless to say would cost the copy-reader his job. So we struggled against sleep, the hours being 9 p.m. to 3

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a.m. three nights a week, often followed by lectures on philosophy at Columbia next morning. Perhaps the oddest job of all was acting as a guinea pig for an unfortunate researcher who was investigating whether or how the flow of blood to the head affected the range of human hearing. I was strapped to a seesaw, wearing a pair of earphones over which sounds of gradually rising pitch were transmitted. Meanwhile the seesaw and I were tilted at an angle of 45°, first head up, then head down. When I could no longer hear any sound because the pitch was inhumanly high I pressed a button which flashed on a red light. It was an interesting experience but it did not take into account the human propensity for falling asleep, which I often did after long hours of study or activity in the student movement. This must have extended the range of human hearing to unprecedented heights.

One way or another I managed to work my way through Columbia mostly on an income of fifteen dollars a week, which covered room, board, fares, entertainment, and a generally wonderful time. Still, I had to adapt myself to the alien but not unpleasant environment of an American university, as different from the fur business as from my previous schools, Cheltenham and the London Polytechnic. At first I didn't fully understand the mild form of hazing which existed on the campus. Freshmen were required to wear little round skull caps. I knew nothing about this and at first wondered whether I had fallen into a community of orthodox Jews wearing their traditional "yamulkas. Out of curiosity

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I one day asked a young student who was not wearing one, "What about those little caps?" He must have been about seventeen years old and I, having entered college late, had just turned twenty-one. He mistook me for an upper class man, apologised profusely for having forgotten to wear his cap and dashed back to the dorm to get it.

Not wearing a "frosh cap" was the least of my advantages in going to college late. My knowledge of life was limited but it was greater than that of the average freshman. I knew, more or less, why I was at college and what I wanted to get out of it and found the courses more meaningful and enjoyable than I would have done without my apprenticeship at Jack Woolf's.

Adapting to the American way of life provided an additional dimension to my education. From the beginning, my British upbringing needed attuning to a new society. In the summer of 1929, just six months after my arrival, I was given a week's holiday. I missed England and thought that a trip to Canada would at least take me to part of the Empire, where I could see the Union Jack flying. I had little money, but I had heard of a strange American practice known as hitch-hiking, which I assumed had something to do with hiking. That, in turn, I associated with wearing shorts. Shorts were not worn by grown men in the United States in those days, nor even by small boys.

I knew nothing of these sartorial restrictions. So I mailed a suit to the Y.M.C.A. in Montreal, 450 miles due north, to await my arrival. Then I put on my

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shorts, took the subway to the northern end of the line, walked to a likely spot - the crest of a hill, where motorists slowed down to change gear and could give the hopeful hitch-hiker the once-over. I got laughs as well as lifts, especially from the girls, who giggled at the sight of my bare knees. Walking through one small town in up-state New York, I was followed by a crowd of children, shouting derisively: "Hey, mister, where's your pants?" With the magic flute of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, whom I felt like, I'd gladly have led them into the mountain as he did. Still, despite giggles and jeers I eventually reached Montreal. There I rescued my trousers, revelled in the sight of the Union Jack, was revolted by the commercialized "miracles" at the mountain-top cathedral and returned to my muskrats in New York with my knees decently covered.

By the time I reached Columbia College, I was sufficiently Americanized to partake in its local politics. My four years there were a time of turbulence on the college campus. Student strikes occurred once a year on one issue or another. The first of these was over the expulsion of Reed Harris the editor of the college paper, "The Columbia Spectator". It erupted in April, 1932. There were meetings on the library steps and at the Sundial, the two political foci of Columbia's campus. The biggest crowds amounted to about 1,500, with students from City College a mile uptown, a public and free institution, more proletarian and radical than Columbia. The fight pitted liberals and left-wingers against fraternity men and athletes. Reed Harris had editorially denounced the granting of "football scholarships" to



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students who had not passed the college entrance exam or were kept on two or three years after their graduation time so that they could stay on the team. This explained the athlete's violent opposition to The Spectator and its liberal editorial policy. The editor's expulsion had been the decision of the Dean, Herbert Hawkes, who was outraged by the paper's personal "insults" to himself and the President of the University, Nicholas Murray Butler, which he evidently considered libelous. No doubt Harris' inclusion of political and economic issues in the "Spectator", such as sympathetic reports on the unemployed, and the city breadlines, support for the Socialist Party candidate for mayor of New York, all played a part. So did the paper's complaints about the college dining-rooms. But the economic depression, then at its lowest point, set the stage. And the energy and organizational skill of the campus communists in the small Social Problems Club sparked the explosion.

Reed Harris himself played no prominent part in the strike, which raged for a couple of weeks. In the end a compromise was reached. By then Reed's term as editor had ended. So he was re-instated as a student. He left college without a stain on his record and wrote a book called King Football, on the very subject which had helped provoke the strike.

In a sense that was the end of the affair. But for me it was the beginning of my political activity. I joined the Social Problems Club, not knowing that it was directed by communists, though I did know that it was supported by Don Henderson, a young economics instructor, a known communist, who had spoken at

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a Reed Harris strike meeting.

The club was small, its meetings usually being attended by only a couple of dozen students out of close on 1,600 at Columbia College (the undergraduate college for men) and tens of thousands at the University. My earliest memories of its meetings revolve around discussions of proletarian literature and, more vividly, a beautiful student from Barnard (the undergraduate women's college) called Vera whom I dated for years, even after graduation, until she married a marine. But a more significant memory is of a report on the coal miners' strike in Harlan, County Kentucky. That strike, which had started only the year before, in 1931, lasted on and off for decades and became known through song and film among progressives in many lands. But in 1932 there was a media blackout of the reign of terror by the mine owners, with murder of National Miners Union organizers, dynamiting of its soup kitchens, withholding of supplies from the company stores which were the miners' main source of food. The Communist Party organized, through Social Problems Clubs in a number of New York and New England Colleges, a student delegation to go to the coalfields to investigate and publicise what was going on. I was one of seventy who signed up, partly I must confess, to see a bit of the country. The trip turned out to be more than tourism.

Our two hired busses and one borrowed car drove more than six hundred miles south, to the mountain-ringed river port of Knoxville, Tennessee just south of the Kentucky coal-fields. We were a mixed crowd of young men and women,

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communists, socialists, liberals and one or two non-aligned but socially questioning characters like myself. I craned my neck as we passed through the historic cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington and drank in the scenery of the Alleghenies. But in Knoxville, where we stayed a day or so, any trace of tourism gave way to intimidation. The lobby of our little hotel was packed with paunchy men with pistols in their belts. Whenever we went out, if only to buy a newspaper, we were followed. Meanwhile contact was being made with the strikers over the state line in Kentucky. One of the leaders of the delegation was a frail, intense woman of thirty, the wife of the Columbia instructor Don Henderson. Another was a big, calm, pipe-smoking senior student from Alabama, Rob Hall. I had no idea at the time that they were members of the Communist Party nor that the Party had organized the entire expedition. Finally two miners arrived to guide us over the mountains through Cumberland Gap, to our destination of Harlan, Kentucky.

Our trail had been blazed in the 18th century when Daniel Boone opened the frontier to the West. Now, as we drove along cement highways cars whizzed past us at furious speed. Peering into them through our bus windows we saw they were packed with characters resembling those who had tailed us in Knoxville; but now, besides toting pistols, they held rifles between their knees. As we slowed down at the foot of the mountain one of these cars took the lead and others sandwiched themselves between the vehicles of our cavalcade. They set a snail's

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pace up and round the twists and turns of the mountain road, which put great strain on the busses' engines but gave us wonderful views of the wooded slopes with rushing streams in the ravines. Across one valley stretched a giant streamer inscribed with the words: "Get Right with God". We were in the Bible Belt. At last the road opened out onto a little plateau where the borders of three states met: Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia.

Here we found a reception committee. A couple of hundred Deputy Sheriffs toting rifles and evidently loaded with liquor. They were immediately joined by our unsolicited escort, now also flashing Deputies' badges. Rising sharply from the road was a towering crag (could this have been Pinnacle Rock from which Daniel Boone first looked down on old Kentucky?). On top of it bunched a band of teenaged boys with bulging "Saturday Evening Post" bags slung over their shoulders. The bags were not filled with magazines but with stones to sling at us when the time came. Meanwhile, they shouted "String 'em up, the goddam Yankees". An official approached our lead bus. He turned out to be the local District Attorney, a Mr Smith. Mr Smith asked, in a strong Southern accent, what we were intent on doing in these parts. We were linguistically well-prepared, our spokesman being Rob Hall, who came from several states further south than Mr Smith. We were law-abiding citizens, said Rob, in a drawl matching Smith's. We had heard that certain things were going on in these parts which were not in accordance with the American Constitution, so we had come to find out for

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ourselves whether this was true or not. Mr Smith considered this statement for a time, while the threatening chorus from the crag continued. Then he pronounced that we would have to go down to the Court House in Four Mile, just inside Kentucky territory for questioning. The Deputy Sheriffs then took over our vehicles and drove them at breakneck speed round the twists and turns of the descent.

We filed into the packed little Court House where we were lined up in front before the bench. Mr Smith asked us our names, one by one. When he came to one which sounded East European or Jewish, and as with any group from New York there were many of them, he stopped. His hearing seemed to weaken. "What's that?" he'd asked. "Say it again. How do you spell it?" He was creating the atmosphere for his coming rabble rousing, jingoistic speech. There was a dark-haired, flashing-eyed girl of Hungarian background among us, Helen Nogrady. Smith heard her name in mock disappointment. "I'm sorry to find a nice Irish girl like you with this bunch", he said. The pronunciation and spelling of my name presented no problem. At last the interrogation was over and Mr Smith launched into his denunciation of this crowd of foreign troublemakers. In his mind, clearly, anyone from north of the Mason and Dixon Line was a foreigner. His views were expressed in the caption under a photo of our group in the southern press:

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There is not an American countenance in the group. All of the students have the stamp of Eastern Europe upon their faces. They are Slavic, Jewish or Russian. They seem strangely out of place, pictured with the blue Kentucky Hills as a background and the open-faced Anglo-Saxons about them. Some of them have Asiatic features.

They are the sort of students to whom Communists could appeal. And they have gone down to Kentucky to "investigate people" whose ancestors have been Americans for three hundred years!

Finally Mr. Smith proclaimed that we would have to post peace bonds of a thousand dollars each as guarantee that we would cause no trouble. We could not have produced a thousand among the lot of us. So we were to be transported back across the state line into Tennessee - without the two miners who had acted as our guides and meanwhile had been locked up in cells. Fortunately the politically mature members of our group - which did not include me - insisted that without the miners none of us would leave. The seventy of us agreed. Our continued presence would have embarrassed Mr Smith, especially since a liberal-minded reporter for the New York Herald Tribune was with us, covering the whole trip. The miners were released and we left together, once more with Deputy Sheriffs driving and filling the busses to bursting point. At Cumberland Gap Rob Hall pointed out that the Kentucky Deputies had no jurisdiction in Tennessee and

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should leave the crowded busses. "Is that so?", asked the leader of the Tennessee sheriffs sarcastically. He then turned to his Kentucky colleagues and loudly proclaimed: "I hereby pronounce you Deputy Sheriffs of the State of Tennessee" and on we drove to Knoxville.

Actually there were two foreigners in our crowd, myself and another Englishman, Gabriel ("Bill") Carritt. He came from a distinguished Oxbridge academic family but later became a Communist and was for years Foreign Editor of the Daily Worker. This, however, was for him as for me a political baptism and he broke his journey to New York at Washington to lodge a protest with the British Ambassador against District Attorney Smith's rude treatment of one of His Majesty's subjects.

On the long journey back to New York our drivers drove day and night. The rest of us sang, anything from the Internationale to Gilbert and Sullivan, but mostly we talked of our experience and thought of the strikers and how the mine-owners ruled them with the law and against the law. For Bill and me, the only two real foreigners in the group, the short shrift the group had received revealed something of American life we had known nothing about. For Helen Nogrady and other offspring of immigrants it was not so surprising. For Rob Hall and Eleanor Henderson it was no surprise at all. Nor for Joe Lash, already a leader of the Socialist Party's Student League for Industrial Democracy and later a political confidant of Eleanor Roosevelt. His presence underlined the non-sectarian

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composition of the group, organised though it was by the Communist Party. And his warm personality humane outlook on life as well as political acumen were inspiring to a novice like me.

But after we reached New York it was the Communist-led National Student League that I joined, not the Socialist Party's Student League for Industrial Democracy. I cannot tell now why I made that choice. Perhaps it was the natural sequel to attending meetings of the Social Problems Club, through which I had been recruited for the trip. Perhaps it was the energetic and efficient follow-up work of the Communists which I unconsciously accepted. Whatever the case, the Harlan County trip was a leap forward for me in feeling as well as thought. Those few exciting days had drawn the seventy of us together, in a relationship which I had never before experienced. I began for the first time to feel comfortable with the word comrade. I had never before felt towards other people, family, fellow workers or college classmates as I felt towards these new friends. As to my thoughts about the whole experience, they fell into place with greater clarity after I had read a pamphlet thrust on me by a member of the National Student League. It was Lenin's *On the State and Revolution*.

A few words of it have stayed with me for over half a century. They shattered the image held in my youth of the kindly London bobby helping old ladies across the street, to say nothing of the noble sheriffs of wild westerns:



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"...the State is an organ of class domination, an organ of oppression of one class by another; its aim is the creation of `order' which legalises and perpetuates this oppression..." ..... "A standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power...."

On returning to Columbia from Harlan, an Irish-American renegade Catholic classmate and I helped found an extra-curricular group to read and discuss Utopias, from Plato's Republic to More's and Robert Owen's ideal societies. At the same time I buckled down to academic studies and to earning a living. That was the three-way stretch of my four years at college: work, study and the student movement - plus the romantic distractions of youth.

As the years rolled by I became more and more of a rebel and made the undergraduate's customary complaints about the college courses. But for all their faults I loved them still.

My thinking was now moving along Marxist lines and I was soon taking courses in economic history and economics, which included some Lenin and some Marx. What impelled me, the once orthodox Jew, then secular Zionist, then would-be millionaire, towards Marxism? As Marx said, "Social being determines social consciousness." The depression-ridden New York of the early thirties, with its "brother can you spare a dime" panhandlers and sky-scraper suicides of bankrupt financiers, had cut into my consciousness. And Hitler's racism and

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American anti-Semitism had pierced the shell of this un-Jewish Jew. All this combined with my Columbia courses. The course for which I feel most indebted to Columbia, which I regard as the mainstay of my academic education, was the Colloquium. This was based on "the world's great books" approach to education of Robert Maynard Hutchins, President of Chicago University. It was a two year cultural and intellectual adventure open only to juniors and seniors who had a good academic record in their first two years. Despite the demands of earning a living and increasing involvement in the student movement I managed to be accepted. The list of required readings looks like a table of contents of the Harvard Classics - and we actually plowed through it, though I may have skipped certain passages of the Early Church Fathers. We read into the small hours, held seminars every fortnight attended lectures by the Columbia University expert on the current author and held "bull sessions" with or without faculty members. The seminar leaders were in those days junior instructors but some of them have since become famous: the erudite and elegant Jacques Barzun, the then left-inclined, later right-inclined literary critic Lionel Trilling, the communist economist Addison Cutler, who became a personal friend, and others. The reading ranged from the Greeks: dramatists, historians, poets and philosophers, through the Bible to Saint Augustine, from Shakespeare to Cervantes, Fielding to Tolstoy to Marx and Freud. (Asian and African literature was conspicuous by its absence). I had entered college late, in 1931, at the advanced age of twenty-one, old enough to

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appreciate but young enough to digest this intellectual feast. Not that I was free from "left infantilism". We leftists would meet for our evening meal before each seminar at the Brass Rail pub on Broadway near 110th Street, to work out our "line" for the coming discussion. I remember we correctly analyzed Homer as a spokesman of the aristocracy but even Trotsky would hardly have gone so far left as we went in singling out Thersites - probably the least admirable character of The Iliad - as the representative of the poor and the oppressed.

I still think of the Colloquium nostalgically. It introduced me to the Bible as literature instead of sacred dogma. It led me marvellously astray into the New Testament, which in my orthodox Jewish upbringing had been taboo. It forced me to read thousands of pages, the weekly assignments being impossible to read in a week but occupying the vacations. The Colloquium broadened my mind as much as a young mind can be broadened by books, though of course minds are not broadened by books alone.

Classroom courses and politics were not my sole intellectual activity. Although I had accepted Lee's wise advice to get a general education at Columbia College and not enter the School of Journalism, I still hoped to be a writer some day and did occasional columns of a more or less political nature for The Spectator. I have a couple before me. My attempts at irony and satire resulted in a style so abstruse that today I have difficulty in understanding them. One of them (in the issue of December 14, 1933) is a review of a play, Peace on Earth by

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George Sklar and Albert Maltz, being performed at the Civic Repertory. In it, I took issue with the city's established drama critics, who had panned it for being indecent. I wrote:

Manners makyth man is the critics' creed; good form the foundation of his faith. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that "Peace on Earth" offended their sense of decency... Now everyone knows that this is no time for pessimistic criticism; we must be cheerful, hopeful and... have faith in those great American institutions which it is the duty of the undergraduate to "hand down intact to the succeeding generation". (This must have been a quotation from Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler.)

We ourselves are as strongly opposed to war as anyone... but one really must draw the line somewhere. If it comes to a choice between war and good manners our stand is unequivocal. We must safeguard our principles from the undermining influence of misguided agitators...

Peace on Earth is a play about workers, professors...and war...a simple story of everyday life about which no one with the poise and restraint of the well-bred would ever lose equanimity...to descend to the level of what Brooks Atkinson of the Times terms with justifiable and well-mannered indignation "freshman propaganda" ...to prostitute the theatre, the home of pure art, to this utilitarian practice, is most unbecoming...

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That is but a fraction of the article. For all its convolutions it expressed not only my political position but the ongoing debate about art and propaganda, sparked no doubt by the left-wing theatre movement of the depression as well as our courses at Columbia.

In spite of my involved literary style I was proposed for membership on the editorial board of Columbia's humorous magazine *The Jester*. The outgoing board, however, vetoed my nomination, perhaps because I had offended the university president, Nicholas Murray Butler. He was an opponent of the then pending Child Labor Amendment Act and I proposed to my friend, Ad Reinhardt, who designed *Jester* covers, that he draw Butler, in cap and gown, whip in hand, flailing a line of naked infants working on a factory conveyor belt. He executed the idea so brilliantly that the picture after being rejected by the *Jester* as too hot to handle was re-produced in the *Spectator* and subsequently in the national press, including *Time Magazine*. Eventually *Jester* did accept a series of articles from me. They were in the form of parodies of Gilbert and Sullivan, love of whose operas I had inherited from my father.

A more serious and significant contribution was to *The Spectator* of November 28, 1933. The German Ambassador, Hans Luther, had been invited by Columbia authorities to speak at the university's McMillin Theatre. I wrote:

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"...There must be some basis of discrimination ...in inviting speakers:...intellectual qualification; an appropriate subject; an acceptable individual. Any one of these attributes without the other two is quite useless. Al Capone, for example, is a man of indisputable intellectual ability. In his own particular field of endeavour his success equals, if it does not surpass, that of President Butler in his... Yet we cautiously venture to suggest that the enthusiastic proponents of the highly abstract principle of unqualified free speech would not consider appropriate the offering (to him) of the McMillin Theatre...Not, surely on the grounds of an inadequate grasp of (his) subject matter...

But somewhere the line must be drawn. The accredited representative of a sadistic band of lunatics and perverts so far from being entitled to receive the 'greatest courtesy and respect' is automatically persona non grata on the Columbia campus. Luther in his own right may be the most acceptable individual...but Luther the official Ambassador of Nazi Germany is the most reprehensible. By virtue of his office he becomes odious not only to radicals but to anyone with a sincere claim to civilization...

Here we encounter the fundamental anomaly of Liberalism...

The American school, which admittedly is... idealistic, tries to regard civil liberty as an end in itself; but the time comes when the idealist is either forced to forego his ideals for self-interest (witness the wholesale suspension of freedom of speech by the Liberal Wilson administration during the (First) World War or, true to

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the end, he politely offers perfect freedom to those who demand only this in order to exterminate him. This was the fate of the moderate center parties of Germany. ...they tried tolerantly to laugh the Nazis out of court. To-day they are paying the price of toleration in concentration camps.

If academic freedom means anything it must be as a means to an end, not an end in itself, and if Columbia's tradition of Liberal Learning is to mean anything the University must change its tactics.

On this occasion it must take an attitude of more than refined disapproval of the suppression of the principles which it professes to uphold; it must voice a vigorous protest and take concerted action against the Nazi regime of barbarous atavism, rampant nationalism and, if the expression be not redundant, Capitalism gone mad. It must do all in its power to prevent the spread of Nazi principles in this country. If Luther wishes to expatiate upon the glories of the New Germany, let him get his own soap-box; we don't want to lend him ours.

Columbia did lend its soap-box after all. Luther spoke in its auditorium while 1,000 or so students demonstrated outside in the freezing cold. I was one of them.

One major component of America's growing student movement was the anti-war movement. This included campus opposition to the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (R.O.T.C.) There was also a response by American students to British

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students' pledge, first taken at the Oxford Union, "under no circumstances to fight for king or country". At Columbia in the spring of 1933 over three thousand students took the pledge, supported by several faculty members. These included Dr. J.H. Randall, author of *The Making of the Modern Mind*, which had done much to start me thinking in my freshman year, as well as the communist economics instructor Don Henderson. Randall had a great reputation both as writer and lecturer, Henderson had not; but he was popular with students who knew him personally, including myself. In the spring of 1933, my sophomore year, Henderson's contract for the next academic year was not renewed. The college authorities justified this on the grounds of lack of academic distinction; Henderson's supporters maintained that there were plenty of others retained on the staff who were no more and perhaps less academically distinguished and that the real reason for dropping him was his known membership in the Communist Party. Mass protest meetings were held on the library steps and at the sun dial, with the usual scuffles, in which I took part, between liberals and left wingers on one side and football fans and fraternity men on the other. The affair climaxed in a torchlight parade followed by a strike. Considering that Henderson was a communist and, in fact, not academically distinguished, he received surprising support from the students and even in the New York press. But the strike was ineffective, Henderson's contract was not renewed and he later took a trade union job with the Agricultural And Cannery Workers' Union.



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Student movement activities in which I took part were not limited to campus matters. In the spring of 1934 students protested against the destruction of workers model apartment buildings in Vienna set up by the Social Democrats and bombarded by the pro-fascist Dolfuss government. In 1935 there were denunciations of Mussolini and demonstrations against his invasion of Ethiopia. There was interaction between these events and others directly concerning the college.

One such was the Spectator strike. On the whole the student paper was popular despite being politically to the left of the majority of the student body. But its radical editorial policy had enough opponents for the college administration to propose a change in the regulations under which the paper was published. The editorial board interpreted this as a step towards censorship and demanded a student body referendum. Meanwhile it published one issue whose pages were blank except for an editorial of protest. The paper was then suspended by the college authorities. Next day it came out as a privately-funded publication and the total number of copies sold was over a thousand. Finally a referendum was agreed to, the result being a small majority in favour of the constitution proposed by the administration. This furore reflected the students' growing interest in freedom of the press and in democratic procedures as opposed to anything that smacked of fascism.

Another protest about this time was against the raising of tuition fees. By

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now I was in my junior year and as usual threw myself into the activity led by the Social Problems Club now affiliated to the National Student League. I took part in discussing, drafting and mimeographing leaflets setting forth the issues and announcing protest meetings. Then I helped distribute them, generally at the entrance of the subway station at 116th Street and Broadway. At first I felt embarrassed at performing this "menial" task in public, fumbled with the sheets and mumbled inaudibly about their content. But gradually I overcame these vestiges of my Cheltonian education, did the job with reasonable skill and dispatch, after which I would attend and even speak at the meeting I had been advertising.

I had won scholarships for tuition during my second and third years, following my friend Lee's advance of money to cover the first year. Now, as my fourth and last year approached I applied, as was customary, not for a scholarship but for a loan from the college. By now I had become known as one of the more active campus radicals and not surprisingly Dr Hawkes, Dean of the college, learned I had taken part in the protest against fee raising. He called me in. "For the last two years you have been receiving a scholarship," he stated with mild indignation. "Now you are distributing scurrilous leaflets and making slanderous statements against the authorities who have provided you with an education. Furthermore, you are applying to us for a loan in your fourth year. Do you consider such behaviour justifiable?" I denied the charges of scurrility and libel

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and said I thought that in such a rich country as America everyone who was willing to study should be provided with a college education, whether he could afford to pay for it or not. And it was the raising of fees at this time of economic depression that was unjust. The debate continued and indignation gradually gave way to a twinkle in the Dean's eye. My application for a loan to cover tuition in my senior year was granted. Why? Partly, I think, because Dean Hawkes was the liberal he claimed to be. Partly because he didn't want still another student strike. For I bargained from a position of strength, having just been elected to the seven-man Student Governing Board.

The N.S.L. had persuaded me to run as a candidate for Student Board not because of my grasp of campus politics, which was limited or because I was a silver-tongued orator, which I was not. I suppose it was because I was widely considered "a pretty decent guy in spite of being a bit of a red" and of having a sense of humour in spite of being British. I cannot recall what, if anything, I helped the Board to accomplish. On one issue, I remember, I was in a minority of one, by voting against providing each board member at public expense with an elegant gold-plated tie-pin. I gave mine to Vivien, a Barnard blonde from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The acceptance of my senior year tuition loan involved unforeseen moral complications. I doubt if I thought at all carefully at the time how I was ever going to pay back that four hundred dollars, the cost in those days of one year's

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tuition. All I had to do at the time was to get a guarantor, which proved to be no problem. My employer at the time, a Mr. Clark, cheerfully signed on the dotted line, perhaps also giving little thought as to how or when I would repay the loan, for which he took responsibility. He was a well-to-do liberal with a lovely old brownstone house in the eighties near Fifth Avenue. He was divorced and had besides a teen-aged daughter who lived with her mother, a son of twelve. My job was to live in and keep an eye on the lad, who was pleasant, precocious and sophisticated in the way that twelve year-old American boys were even then. In Clark's home I lived a lush life, while studying and agitating at Columbia. It was the only time in my life that I wore a white tie and tails and even an opera hat - all provided by my employer for the purpose of squiring his daughter to a party.

In such luxurious surroundings, I settled down to my studies, and managed to pass my finals. I cut Commencement, partly out of a dislike for such ceremonies, and more importantly, because of a pressing need for money. Through an old friend in the fur business I had been offered a job as a "bus boy" - an assistant waiter - at a Jewish vacation camp in the Catskill Mountains, north of New York.

On returning to the city after a summer in the "borscht belt," I collected my B.A. diploma from Columbia. There, in the Colloquium, we had refuted as vulgar materialism Feuerbach's contention that "man is what he eats" (Mann ist was er isst). We agreed with Jesus' "Man shall not live by bread alone". Still bread was

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necessary. I had to find a job.

I got one at the Intercollegiate Council on Public Affairs . The name was more impressive than the organization, which had a cubicle of an office on Broadway near Columbia and a staff of two - after I joined it. The salary was low, but I was used to living on fifteen dollars a week, and the work was appealing. I was to travel around the Eastern and Middle Western states lecturing to students in their clubs, classrooms and assemblies, on "Public Affairs". That gave me freedom of speech and I focused on war and fascism, maintaining that "fascism means war". John Strachey's books, *The Menace of Fascism*, *The Coming Struggle for Power* and *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* were all the rage in the Columbia Social Problems Club and I drew heavily on them, as well as, discreetly, on the more orthodox Marxist Palme Dutt's *Fascism and Social Revolution*. My English accent helped to render my heretical views acceptable even at morning assemblies in middle western college chapels. All except one, somewhere in Indiana. Returning to the office in New York early one morning I opened the mail as usual. Comments from the colleges usually ranged from neutral to favourable, but this one denounced me as a "Red". In the interests of the cause I destroyed it before the arrival of "the boss", a gentlemanly liberal not much older than myself.

I scrimped and saved enough of my small salary to eventually buy a return ticket to England. I had spent seven years in the Land of Opportunity. Yet in my

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luggage there was not a single sliver of those golden paving stones I had dreamed of before setting forth to seek by fortune in 1929.

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Notes

5.(p.50) note on merging of Communist, Socialist and Liberal student organizations???