

JAMES DERRICK CARDIN M.B.E

by Kenneth Martin,

based on a paper written by Basil Samuel and an interview with D. L. Matheson C.B.E

“Look out Alma!” This timely warning came from a neighbour, who with the aid of a hurricane lantern saved young Jim Cardin and his mother from plunging into a deep gully dug by the flood waters on the night of the 11th January 1880 when their little house at McKnight near to the “Ivy Cottage” was wrecked.



James Derrick Cardin, affectionately known as Jim Cardin, and also Johnnie Bull, was born on November 13th 1871. He was one of the several children of Alma Demming, a street sweeper. His father was the Manager of Canada Estate, and his paternal grandfather was an English builder, whose name is inscribed on the chimney at Wingfield Estate.

At age eleven Cardin was taken into the household of three English ladies, the Misses Auld. Their parents had settled in St. Kitts during the early part of the nineteenth century and carried on business in the Circus, Basseterre; but disaster had overtaken them in the great fire of July 3 1867, when all but their house in Fort Street was destroyed.

Wandering down Fort Street, one day, young Jim could not resist the temptation to pluck a few roses from the Auld's garden. He was caught in the act and after a frightened apology and explanation of his mother's poverty, was chastised and sent on his way with the roses. Later on, however, the Auld's sought out his mother and asked her to allow Jim to live with them.

Alma quickly and gratefully acceded to the request. Up to that time he received little education, but as his guardians kept a school it took a mere three years for Cardin to assimilate sufficient general education to enable him to find employment.

At the age fifteen Jim signed on as a sailor to the southern islands for one year. After his mother's death, the Aulds sent Cardin on to the United States of America where, for the most part, he worked as a Pullman porter on the Hartford Newhaven railroad. To enable him to keep fit in his spare time Jim learned to box and became a sparring partner to the renowned heavyweight John Jeffries.

Working on the train brought Cardin into contact with many wealthy and influential people, such as the Vanderbilts, the Roosevelts, Bishop Deane of Albany, and a Mr. Gene Stratton Porter. His last years in the U.S.A were spent as personal valet to Mr. Porter, a millionaire. Here all the good manners taught him by the Misses Auld served him in good stead.

President Theodore Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt visited and had lunch here in St.Kitts with Jim Cardin. In the course of conversation the President happily informed his luncheon guests that Jim Cardin could be regarded as a prophet, having told him many years before that he would one day become President of the United States of America.

One day the train which Jim worked collided with another train. When the news spread that 'Johnnie Bull' was dead, the station master was happy to inform the very many distressed callers that Cardin was indeed alive as he had transferred to another train before the collision.

Jim Cardin invested his savings wisely, sufficient to enable him to return to St.Kitts to look after his guardians- who each in turn died in his grateful arms- and also to open a book store in West Fort Street, adjacent to the premises now occupied by Skerritts's Drug Store.

The sight of the stream of beggars every Saturday morning in the streets of Basseterre was a great source of grief to Jim Cardin, and worked assiduously year after year to impress the authorities to build a home for them.

It must be remembered that the Government of the day was colonial, with an administrator, and a legislative council comprised for the most part of planters. There were sharp social divisions. James Cardin, by virtue of his birth, was able to move relatively easily throughout the society.

In 1927 the Infirmary (poor house) was opened, and day after day one could see Cardin going through the wards giving words of cheer and distributing gifts for the comforts of the inmates.

The Infirmary was later renamed the Cardin home by the Administrator Hugh Burrowes, to honour this selfless man who lived for the benefit of his fellowmen. Cardin even bequeathed to the inmates of the Home a sum of money to provide two treats for ten years after his death. This humanitarian gesture is now carried on by the Brethren of the Mount Olive Masonic Lodge of which Cardin was an outstanding member, who provide an annual luncheon.

Cardin's unbounded generosity was extended into other areas. He assisted many who found themselves in financial difficulty, settled family disputes, assisted many to obtain good schooling and afterwards helped them to secure employment. He also appeared in court as a voluntary Probation Officer.

Jim Cardin never married and had no children, but took an active interest in the education and welfare of those with whom he came into contact. He was always immaculately dressed and cut an elegant and dignified figure wherever he went.

During the reign of King George the fifth, James Derrick Cardin received the insignia of M.B.E Member of the Order of the British Empire in recognition of his services to the community. He died on Saturday 15th May 1954 at age 82 and was interred at the Springfield Cemetery beside his beloved guardians.

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