

# 3

## *Beginning in England*

Joseph and Mary Fels arrived in London in June 1901. At first, Fels promoted his sales and advertising from their hotel, and then from their flat, before finally taking offices for his firm on a long-term basis. The experience he had gained on exploratory trips abroad in 1897, 1898, and 1899 was an advantage to him, but the new enterprise nevertheless proved risky and hazardous and for many months demanded his close attention. Gradually, however, Fels-Naptha Soap gained popularity in England and throughout the British Isles and on the Continent. Sales rose, and Fels could devote more time to his other interests.

As his private secretary he engaged Walter Coates, a bluff and ready young Yorkshireman who was a brother of Marion Coates, a woman whose Whitmanian pilgrimage to Camden had earlier brought her to the Fels' notice and initiated a close connection between their families. As Fels' secretary, Walter rapidly became Joe's right-hand man in business matters and virtually an adopted son, both to him and to Mary. By the middle of 1903 Fels was able to relinquish most

of the everyday direction of Fels-Naptha Sales Company, Ltd., to Walter.

The minister of the West London Ethical Society in the early 1900's was Dr. Stanton Coit, the American who in New York City in 1887 had established the "Neighborhood Guild," the first settlement house in the United States. Coit had come to his position in London as the successor to Moncure Daniel Conway, the former Unitarian clergyman and latter-day transcendentalist from the United States who became Tom Paine's biographer. Dr. Coit was able to reintroduce the Fels to Margaret McMillan, a hot-tempered Highland Scot whose life was turning into a crusade on behalf of the underprivileged classes particularly the children of the poor. Russia's émigré anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin was also added to the Fels' list of friends at this time, as were the Americans Earl Barnes and his wife Anna, together with Edward Howard Griggs.<sup>1</sup>

Barnes and Griggs were widely traveled teachers and lecturers when the Fels had first met them in Philadelphia. The two men had been together at Indiana University in 1890, and the next year they served on the original faculty of Leland Stanford University, where Barnes, as the head of Stanford's Department of Education, embarked upon the statistical investigations into the psychology of children that he eventually compiled into *Studies in Education*. Griggs served as Assistant Professor of Ethics at Stanford for one year, then, after professorships in literature and in ethics at Indiana, he returned to Stanford to succeed Barnes as head of the combined departments of ethics and education, while Barnes went to England to continue his researches.

In England Earl Barnes offered several series of lec-

tures through the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching as well as through the Ethical societies, typically under such headings as "The Cultural Value of Daily Experience," "Promising Educational Experiments," and "The Psychology of Childhood and Youth." His interest in the social transformations being wrought by industry, his conviction that education was a concern of the whole life, and his efforts to reach the less privileged as well as men and women in business impelled Barnes toward England's intellectual and educational reformers, including Patrick Geddes, Graham Wallas, and Claude Montefiore. These men also became friends of Joseph and Mary Fels.

At the close of 1902, Barnes returned to the United States, where the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching gave him the opportunity to continue his public lectures. Earl and Anna Barnes took over the Fels' town house at 3640 Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, and Joe and Mary stayed with them whenever they visited Philadelphia, while from time to time the Barnes family occupied one or another of the Fels' households in England.

Griggs' career was similar to that of Barnes. He, too, left Stanford's classrooms for public lecture halls, though he maintained a connection with the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, giving two lectures there annually for 50 years. The titles of his collected lectures indicate his interests: *The New Humanism* (1900), *A Book of Meditations* (1902), *Moral Education* (1904), *The Use of the Margin* (1907), *Human Equipment* (1909), *The Philosophy of Art* (1913), and *Self-Culture through the Vocation* (1914).

Fels provided financial support for Barnes: "I am enclosing you \$2500 check which may be considered as on a/c, and have no doubt you can so deposit it as to

draw a fair interest until wanted for use. If you'd rather have the whole amount now, don't hesitate to tell me & it'll be promptly sent."

Griggs' letters to Fels likewise reveal a close relationship. Early in February 1902, Griggs wrote acknowledging a gift of two paintings and a large sum of money: "I found your letter with its overwhelming contents on coming home yesterday morning. I accept this trust in the spirit in which it is given, and I will use the opportunity sacredly for human life."<sup>2</sup>

Fels uncovered new outlets for his energy and resources wherever he chanced to be. From England he dispatched instructions and money, while telephone calls, tours of inspection, and more instructions and inquiries occupied much of his time whenever his business affairs brought him back to Philadelphia. An employee who joined Fels-Naptha in 1903 recalled that when Fels visited the Philadelphia office on his return from abroad he "would sign papers which had accumulated in his absence, dictate furiously, and shout loudly over the telephone so that the whole office could hear." Once the employee overheard "You can tell him to go to hell!" before Joe hung up with a bang. But the visits grew fewer and fewer as the years passed, and Philadelphians came in time to assume not only that Samuel S. Fels had always headed Fels and Company but that he had also invented the famous yellow laundry soap bearing his family's name. And Mary Fels confirmed that, after 1904, during the last ten years of his life, Joseph Fels "gave only very occasional supervision to the conduct of business affairs." This, she explained, was a necessary condition of his social work.<sup>3</sup>

One of Joe Fels' connections with Philadelphia was the Public Baths Association, which had been organized in 1895 "for the purpose of establishing and maintaining

public baths and affording to the poor facilities for bathing and the promotion of health, and cleanliness" in the older neighborhoods of the city. Fels donated almost no money to this endeavor; instead, he supplied it with free Fels-Naptha Soap.

In 1902 Fels and his wife made their West Philadelphia house available to the Young Women's Union as a summertime retreat. "La Grange," as their large, gray stone homestead was known, was set back from Kingsessing Avenue, providing a cool refuge from Philadelphia's summer heat and filth. The house was annually transformed into The Vacation Home for Jewish Working Girls.<sup>4</sup>

On a trip to the United States in 1904, Fels spent ten days inspecting the single-tax colony at Fairhope, then went to Columbus, Ohio. "Going there to try my hand at getting a long-sentenced prisoner out of Ohio State prison—believe he wasn't guilty as charged & freedom's better for him anyway," he wrote to Earl Barnes. "If you or Griggs know of any prominent people send me note of introduction—I've a pile of letters to the Governor already & hope to get my man out of jail."

The man in jail was William Broomfield. In July 1897, the cowboy Gyp Cortez, as Broomfield called himself, had journeyed northward from Texas with two companions, selling wild horses. After disposing of the last 25 horses at Chillicothe, Ohio, Gyp Cortez left his partners and took the night train for Cincinnati. Mistakenly he got off the train several miles short of his destination about four o'clock Sunday morning, September 12, and an altercation erupted with a local resident when Cortez asked directions. "I told him to call in his dog," Cortez wrote long afterward. "He said he was in no way alarmed of me doing anything to the dog, so in as much as he was so cool & contemptible about it I just

shot the dog." The dog's owner rushed inside and "came out with shot gun and shot me." Cortez related. "I now have a scar in the right jaw to show for it, also sum shot in back. I of course shot too, which proved fatal to him."

Gyp's plea of self-defense produced a verdict of guilty from the jury and Cortez began serving a sentence of 16 years. One day he read an account of Stella Dolores Cortez, Queen of the Gonzalez tribe of gypsies, in a furtively circulated newspaper. Sneaking a letter out of the prison to his half-sister, as she miraculously proved to be, was managed through a friendly guard. Time passed, but the prisoner and his long-lost sister kept in touch with each other by letters. One Sunday in 1904 Queen Stella Dolores Cortez, whose occupations included speaking on the mysteries of gypsy life before ladies' clubs around the country, arrived to address the prisoners at the state prison at Columbus where her brother was held. She told him that she "had a friend who would probe into the ways of doing things of the guards at that institution."

"This is how I came to meet & know the grandest and noblest gentlman I ever met or heard of," Gypsy Bill wrote. "This gentleman was the Hon. Joseph Fels." (Fels knew Stella Cortez through another acquaintance, Dr. Thomas J. Downs.) Joseph Fels later wrote to Ohio's Governor Judson Harmon that "as Mrs. Fels and I were greatly interested in Queen Stella I set myself to have the young man freed."

"He came personally to the prison to see me," Cortez continued. "He began to make an investigation. He soon found 'to believe a guard was to believe anything there was to be said,' he told me personally, and he was an outspoken little fellow. . . ."

"He went to see my lawyer, who defended me when

I was sent up," Cortez stated, and Fels "said he was a cur unfit to talk to." So Fels employed another lawyer. "He too came, as I understand from London, England to see me." Eventually these efforts induced the Ohio Board of Pardons to agree to release Cortez, and Fels returned to England, having rectified, he believed, a crime against a criminal, and having perhaps demonstrated the influence Robert Ingersoll's "Crimes against Criminals" had had on him.<sup>5</sup>

In 1904 the Fels' domestic circle was enlarged by Elizabeth Kite, Mary's Philadelphia friend, who joined their household in England as companion to Mrs. Fels. "As it turned out," Miss Kite wrote of the two years she spent at Elmwood, the Fels' country home at Bickley in Kent, "we were to be a family of four persons." The fourth was Walter Coates.

Inscribed over the drawing-room fireplace of the country home was the epitaph of Holman Hunt's "Crusader":

What I spent, I had—  
What I saved, I lost—  
What I gave, I have.

Nevertheless "the atmosphere of spiritual coldness" dismayed Miss Kite, an ex-Quaker belatedly converted to Catholicism. She was shocked to discover that neither Mary nor Joseph Fels adhered formally to any religion. "Had she and her husband . . . kept strictly to the Mosaic Law and practices, it would have commanded my interest as well as my respect," she confided.

Miss Kite regarded Walter Coates warmly, however. "His father," she remembered, "was a pronounced radical, and he, altogether quiet and gentlemanly, fell easily

into the total disregard of worship, Sundays or any other day."<sup>6</sup>

Fels meanwhile was defining Great Britain's problems in familiar terms. The headquarters of Fels-Naptha Sales Company, Ltd., at 39 Wilson Street, Finsbury, in London's East End, afforded him a vantage point on the fringe of the largest unbroken area of poverty in Europe. Stretching eastward along the banks of the Thames from his offices were the dreary wastelands of Bow and Bromley, Poplar and Deptford, and all of East London. Unemployment statistics were scaling extraordinary heights; private charities were exhausting their limited resources; and the ancient system of public relief administered under Great Britain's Poor Law had quickly revealed its inadequacy against the hard times following the Boer War. Conditions resembled those etched half a century earlier by Henry Mayhew in his *London Labour and the London Poor*. A pandemonium hovered above the stench and noise echoing the pathos of personal tragedies. One might almost sniff the sulfur in the air. Agitations among the poor were provoking intense excitements. Tempers grew sullen and explosive.

Fels had sought out George Lansbury early in the summer of 1903 to see what could be done for London's poor. "We came across each other through a speech I made at the Poplar Board of Guardians," Lansbury remembered. "Joe rang up the Guardians to find out something about me, and then rang up Keir Hardie. I had very little who or what he was. I had merely been told that he was interested in land, made soap, and was American." Fels had met Hardie in 1895 in Philadelphia. A miner himself, Hardie had organized the coal miners of Ayrshire, and had won a seat in the House of Commons as the Labour Party's first M.P. In 1897, shortly



after Henry George's sudden death while campaigning for the mayoralty of New York, Fels had written eulogistically of George to Hardie, who replied: "I entirely endorse your estimate of Henry George. . . . I did not at all agree with him in many of his views, but a strong healthy, honest man is what counts for most in the making of a people. And George was that." Hardie and Fels became quite close friends after Fels' move to England and it was natural, then, that Fels should call Hardie to check on Lansbury.

The Board of Guardians of Poplar Union in the East End of London was one of the numerous local bodies throughout Great Britain whose function was to administer the Poor Law. Lansbury was a leading member of Poplar's Board at that time, with Will Crooks, M.P., its chairman. The Guardians stood apart from British local government, maintaining themselves by their own systems of elections and rates or taxes, together with a separate connection to the Local Government Board. Their members were unsalaried. They usually sought election either out of a sense of responsibility to the community or for the self-advancement in politics or business afforded by local prestige. Each board's function was to maintain a workhouse and to administer outdoor relief. The basic principle of relief administered under the Poor Law rested upon an axiomatic test of destitution. It followed that the condition of any person seeking public assistance should be kept lower than that of the poorest-paid laborer. As Mary Fels noted: "The boards are, therefore, not guardians of the poor but of the funds intended to relieve them."<sup>7</sup>

Fels' purpose in looking up George Lansbury was to propose putting London's unemployed to work at cultivating vacant lots. But Lansbury objected that he "couldn't see how this would help the men in whom

I was interested at the moment, for my men were in the workhouse and had no homes." Lansbury sought Fels' support instead to establish labor colonies for the unemployed. "In the meantime, however," added Lansbury, "he went over the business in which I am interested [his wife's father's sawmill and veneer works in Whitecapel], turned us all inside out, found out all there was to be known about each one of us, and left saying that if we wanted to redeem the place from the bank in whose hands the business was held, I was to go and see him."

"I walked to the station with him," Lansbury recalled, "and before he left I came to feel that there was a kinship between us. During our conversation he impressed the fact on me that, if he was to help the Poplar Board of Guardians, his name was to be kept quiet. This was so unusual for a rich man who was doing something philanthropic that it attached me to him right away." On the station platform another remarkable incident occurred. "When the train came in I asked him which class he was travelling," Lansbury noted, "and like a shot from a gun came the reply, 'Third, because there isn't any fourth.'"

Lansbury would spend nearly half a century of his life agitating for socialism and would become known to multitudes as a friend of the needy, editor of the *Daily Herald*, Member of Parliament and Cabinet minister. His association with Fels, which lasted until Fels' death, with almost daily contact for considerable periods, constituted a unique relationship for him. "The fact that I was a clear-cut socialist putting socialism forward as the final and complete system of life which would abolish poverty made no difference to our friendship," he wrote in his autobiography. "He did not object to Socialism or any other 'ism,' but did insist that free

access to the land and all that therein is was a condition precedent to all measures, either of reform or even revolution." And: "Unlike many rich people, he was never able to accept the pleasant doctrine so beloved by Samuel Smiles, which describes rich men as self made. He knew the accidental happenings which open the road to wealth. . . . This made him one of the most unselfish, understandable men I ever met."

When they first met, Lansbury was endeavoring to develop a program to provide gainful employment for the jobless, an effort to provide work, not charity. "Unite idle men with idle land," he was pleading to all who would listen. His days were filled with the turmoil of a traveling agitator, and his family learned to watch for the fast train from Liverpool Street Station, which ran within 50 yards of their bedroom window, while Lansbury, ignoring his fellow-passengers, would wave out of the compartment window to his children with the red flag of socialism he carried everywhere. As soon as Fels reached home after their meeting, he called up Lansbury on the telephone and arranged another. "I went the next day," wrote Lansbury. "For the next four months hardly a day passed without our meeting somewhere or the other."<sup>8</sup>

Lansbury's pressing concern was unemployment in his own borough of Poplar, where conditions were overwhelming the measures intended to cope with them. "We were finding the workhouse too small to accommodate all those who wanted to come in," he said. He appealed to his new friend from the United States to give money enough for "a vigorous agitation," and Fels did so at once. Some of the money was used in organizing a "deputation" of 1,000 women who were to be sent from Mile End to Westminster. Lansbury hoped to publicize the plight of East London's unemployed by

manipulating these women into interviews with the leaders of Britain's political parties, so Fels assumed responsibility for the women's fares from Bow Road Underground Station to Westminster, and for refreshments at Caxton Hall.

"None of us had thought about the law, which kept processions outside a mile limit while Parliament was sitting," Lansbury wrote. "So when we arrived, we found superintendents and inspectors of police waiting for us." Lansbury suggested that his female petitioners be permitted to leave the Westminster Underground Station by its eastern exit, away from the Houses of Parliament and back toward the direction from which they had come, proceed along the street alongside to Whitehall, and then go to Caxton Hall, and the authorities agreed to this plan. Once inside Caxton Hall, Emmeline Pankhurst, the fiery suffragette, exhorted the women to join her cause to win votes for themselves in order to acquire the political power essential to relieve their destitution, but Lansbury urged them on to their immediate business. Delegations were chosen, and the women descended upon the House of Commons, assisted by Keir Hardie and Will Crooks, both Members. Hardie was the Labour Party's spokesman, and he and Crooks sought out Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, while other delegates waited upon Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the head of the Liberal Party's opposition, who was destined to lead his party into power in December 1905, and also upon John Redmond of the Irish Independent Nationalists.

Redmond was sympathetic, but told the delegates theirs was an English problem essentially and that he was involved fully enough in fighting for poor people in Ireland. Campbell-Bannerman was "kindness itself," in Lansbury's eyes, believing as he did that unemploy-

ment was in fact a national question and the jobless a proper concern of the state, but unfortunately, the Liberals were not in power.

The Prime Minister listened to the delegates' appeals, expressed sympathy but described the difficulty of the problems facing him. Reportedly he exclaimed, "What can I do?" His question was intended to be a rhetorical appeal, but the delegates took Balfour's words away with them triumphantly and placarded them throughout the country as the Government's confession of its incompetence.

"It is interesting to remember," ran Lansbury's written recollection to Mary Fels, "that this really was the first deputation of its kind which ever entered the House of Commons, and I am certain that it was this deputation which gave Mrs. Pankhurst and her friends the idea of deputising the House of Commons for the vote."

Before long, and again with money from Fels, Lansbury organized a still larger deputation of women to Arthur Balfour. Contingents gathered on the Embankment from Battersea, Vauxhall, Bermondsey, Walworth, and all East London. Thousands were to proceed down Whitehall, sending deputations into Downing Street, while the marchers continued to Church House, Westminster Chapel, and to schools opened to them by the Archbishop of Canterbury and other school and church authorities. Balfour received these women from working-class London, along with a deputation of unionists from the London Trades Council, and promised to do whatever he could. This confrontation resulted in the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, to which Lansbury and Beatrice Webb would be appointed among others. It also led to the Unemployed Workmen Act. Another demonstration by

tens of thousands of women and children dredged from the slums followed. As Lansbury explained to Mary Fels: "We wanted the rich to see the condition of the children as well as of the women. There was no question of riot and disorder, and could be none." The police resisted with force this time, however. "We were not allowed to go our route, but were piloted through back streets where the well-to-do could not see us. Worst of all," Lansbury complained, "the long, circuitous march imposed on the women caused almost unbearable suffering and misery which was heroically endured." Agitations of this sort helped to produce more enlightened attitudes and new policies toward Britain's unemployed.<sup>9</sup>

The immediate problem for Fels and Lansbury remained unemployment, and for Lansbury the joblessness within his home district of Poplar Union. Poplar was "Dockland," where people depended on the traffic of the sea, and in good times it could be a lively place along the thoroughfare from Aldgate to Charrington's Brewery. Lansbury himself had grown up in Bethnal Green and along Whitechapel Road. But Poplar Union could be a dead place when trade languished. Then emigration to Britain's colonies or the United States would be in the air, energetically promoted by local authorities anxious to be relieved of the increasing numbers of unemployed persons in their midst. (Lansbury, with his wife, three tiny children, only the eldest of whom could yet walk, and his younger brother, twelve years of age, had emigrated to Australia in 1884 only to return the following year owing to illness among his children.) Between 1894 and 1904 a sharp increase in pauperism was recorded for Poplar Union, while the population remained constant. Poplar was losing its share of the country's prosperity in good times,

becoming less of a port than a manufacturing town. The large iron works and shipbuilding moved to new locations, while the shipping trade changed sufficiently to harm the dock workers. Numerous trades relying on casual labor sprang up within the district. Most oppressed were the irregularly employed dockers, who could be summoned for an hour's labor, paid four pence, then laid off.<sup>10</sup>

Lansbury had already sponsored a request in the early summer of 1903 to the Local Government Board, the supervisory power for all local authorities in Great Britain, to consider establishing a work farm in the country for the able-bodied unemployed of Poplar. In 1892 it had been ruled that it was within the authority of Poor Law Guardians to lease and work land if they desired, but the ruling had lain almost unnoticed until Lansbury's request. It was at this earlier time, while the Local Government Board was debating its response, that Joseph Fels had appeared with his proposal to Lansbury for cultivating vacant lands. He agreed to help promote Lansbury's program for a farm colony, and while Lansbury staged agitations outside, "threatening murder and sudden death" as he put it, Fels was badgering Walter Long of the Local Government Board "to sanction the use of some land he was ready to buy and lend to the Poplar Board of Guardians."<sup>11</sup>

On March 21, 1904, the Poplar Guardians, agreed to lease the Fels-owned Sumpner's Farm, Dunton, near Laindon, Essex, about 101 acres, for a term of three years at a symbolic peppercorn rent, with the option of purchase at any time during the term for the sum of £2,125-15-0. (Note that \$5 United States of America money serves as a rough equivalent for £1 British sterling at this date, with an American laborer's daily

wage averaging \$2 or less.) A contract was let at the same time for the erection of corrugated iron buildings, with an accommodation for 100 men at an estimated cost of £1,200. "Both the Poplar Board and Joseph Fels were rather done in the eye over the price paid for the farm at Laindon," Lansbury admitted. "Somehow it got out that we were after it, and I think there is no doubt somebody made several hundreds of pounds out of the deal."

Laindon Farm Colony got under way during June and July of 1904. Fels sent packages of literature for the colonists, and promised a regular supply of periodicals. He and Walter Coates also sent a piano, and arranged a first concert for the inmates in November.

"Some eight or nine years ago," *The Daily Telegraph* quoted Mr. Fels as saying, "I became interested in what was known in America as the Pingree scheme for getting the loan of vacant lands within easy distance of large cities, for the purpose of creating allotments and placing the unemployed upon them. I found this scheme impracticable in England, however, on account of the difficulty of getting people to loan land until the project commanded their confidence." His collaboration with Lansbury and the Poplar Guardians was the outcome.

It was in no sense my idea to confine this work to the inmates of workhouses. I made the experiment in this direction to begin with. The Guardians can only treat the colony as a workhouse. They cannot remunerate the men according to the work they do. But we have, at any rate proved that 100 men, from twenty-five to sixty years of age, some of them old inmates, can be bodily transferred into the country under poor-law conditions, save perhaps that they get slightly stronger food, and that in the free air of heaven, and with an eight-hour day, they prefer to



work in the labour colony, rather than go back to the workhouse, or take their chance in the street. We have proved, in fact, that given fairly sanitary conditions, and even without wages, the average man prefers to work rather than to loaf.

“What of the cost?” Fels was asked.

Well, so far it has been no more than that of maintaining these self-same men in idleness in the regular workhouse. But it is confidently expected that Poplar farm colony will show 100 acres under as good cultivation as any like tract of land in the district, and that what the farm brings forth next year will be clear profit. If such results can be contemplated at the end of four months, how much more could be done with the unemployed if, in all districts where land can be had in sufficient quantities, the public authorities made an effort in the same direction to reduce the rates, and at the same time to place men in a better position for getting back to the land? What I say is that if this experiment will succeed in the case of a workhouse it has infinitely greater chances under county and borough councils, where you are dealing with what I may call the free unemployed, who have every incentive to earn their own living.

Fels reminded his interrogators that he was offering to provide up to 1,000 acres of land for farm colonies to represent the whole of London's unemployed. “Indeed I am quite willing to go to the depth of my pocket, if thereby the whole country can be awakened to the great importance of providing land for cultivation by the unemployed.”

“We were all so pleased with ourselves,” Lansbury wrote of Laindon's auspicious start, “that within a few weeks we were taking trips around and across England inspecting land of all kinds.” Lansbury also noted that

“land agents got on Joe’s track to such an extent that every post brought news of estates of all sizes up for sale.”<sup>12</sup>

Mary Fels and Elizabeth Kite enrolled for a series of university extension lectures in London for the fall term of 1904, taking up their studies together again long after leaving off in Philadelphia. The ladies became enraptured by Dr. Emil Reich’s presentation of the subject of history as a “scientific” body of theories and facts in keeping with the positivism of his day, with every event from past to present linked by causal relationships to every other. Reich was a Hungarian from whom Mary had taken a course of studies earlier. She had written to Elizabeth enthusiastically about her impressions of Reich’s erudition. “As we spoke of him and his lectures at the table one day,” Miss Kite wrote, “Mary’s husband said: ‘I’ll go with you tonight and hear that man for myself.’ Next morning at breakfast he said: ‘I suspected it from the first—now I know it. That man is a Jew.’” Miss Kite added that “In a matter of that kind, Mary’s husband was too astute an observer to be mistaken.” And, she revealed: “Although at the time there was no anti-Jewish sentiment apparent in England, yet both men [Reich and Fels, presumably] found it advisable to have non-Jewish secretaries.”

Early in 1905 Joseph took his wife, Elizabeth Kite, and Walter Coates to North Africa. At Marseilles, the voyagers were delayed 36 hours by a howling mistral, and the Mediterranean Sea was still rough when they embarked. Only Fels and Miss Kite of their party showed up for dinner. Fels appeared to be uninterested in the meal, though not because of the vessel’s pitching and rolling. He was ignoring his food to fol-

low a conversation between the only other passengers in the dining salon, a tall Englishman and a small Frenchman.

"I watched with keen interest," Miss Kite reported, "as, with left hand in pocket, eyes fixed on the speaker, he [Mr. Fels] shoved himself along until he came within speaking distance. Then to my amazement, I heard the following question put in a quick, tense voice, 'So you're one of those bloated English landowners, are you?'"

Fels had put his rude question to Sir Edmund Verney, who replied, "I am." Fels went on to lecture Verney, a nephew of Florence Nightingale, on the evils of landlordism. (Months later Mary and Joseph Fels were invited by Verney to visit his estate, which they did, so whatever feelings Fels may have ruffled must have been soothed.)

In North Africa, after penetrating the crowded streets of Algiers and Constantine, the travelers were enchanted by the caravansary at Biskra. They went on to Tunis, where their dragoman guided them into the bazaars. Mary led the way into a splendid second-floor establishment. Two picturesquely garbed Ethiopians appeared, one carrying taborets and the other distributing cups of Moorish coffee for the prospective customers, and then a third Ethiopian began bringing forth objects as requested from their concealment behind the swaying curtains. "Mary at once sat up keenly alert," Miss Kite observed. "It was her moment of supreme satisfaction. As . . . the beautiful fabrics . . . were displayed, she indicated what she wished to keep as well as what she discarded. Two piles thus began to form themselves one to the left, the other to the right behind us." Then Mary Fels indicated that she wished nothing more, and named the amount

she would pay for the lot. Instantly the atmosphere darkened in the shop, while Mary sat erect and serene in the face of the approaching storm.

The proprietor started up in anguish. "Madam wishes me *de me couper ta tête comme ça?*" he asked, making a sweeping gesture of cutting his own throat. Mary's dragoman entered the fray in her behalf, kicking the pile of fabrics to signify his contempt for their quality. A pantomime of pseudo-wrestling erupted between the guide and the merchant. Then, unexpectedly, the merchant smiled. Pointing to the fabrics, he said in French, "Since Madam was so nice, and since he and she were such friends, Madam could have them." At her price!

As they made their way out of the shop and down the narrow stairs, Joe Fels said to his wife, "I wish I had you to sell soap!"<sup>13</sup>

Back in London, Mary Fels urged her husband to give gradualist socialism a trial by joining the Fabian Society. What had happened was that Beatrice and Sidney Webb, appreciating the possibility that a potential patron might be hovering in their orbit, one who might insure solvency for the Fabian socialist movement for some time to come, had invited the Fels to lunch. Next they broke their self-imposed rules against evening parties and against leaving their country retreat at Bramdean after the winter's season had ended by reopening their London house to give a dinner for Mr. and Mrs. Fels before taking them to a reception for foreign academicians. But Fels did not succumb to the Webbs' blandishments. He had by 1905 become so involved with various land projects, and was so convinced that the remedy for poverty lay

in an answer to the land question that he could collaborate with socialists only on the land question.

Elizabeth Kite ventured to Mary, "Well, at least it was an honor," to have been entertained by the Webbs. Mary's terse rejoinder, "It's Joe's money they want," veiled her own chagrin at being cast down abruptly after having been uplifted for a moment to the peak of London's intellectual society.

But a different kind of disappointment was confided by Beatrice Webb to her diary in recounting the affair:

Dowdy little Americans to look at—he a decidedly vulgar little Jew with much push, little else on the surface, she a really refined and intellectual and public-spirited little body who, by mere force of character, has dragged her husband and his partner into the Fabian Society and other advanced movements. The partner, Coates who lives with them, is a mild-mannered and dowdy Yorkshireman—a refined and gentle-spirited young clerk who has been made by Fels a partner in his concern—the concern being *Fels-Naptha Soap*. Perhaps, after all it was to the soap that we gave the dinner. Certainly, if it could have been demonstrated to us that the soap was a lie that would be found out—that dinner would not have been given. But a subscription of £100 [for Mary and Joseph and Walter] and the report of golden soap-suds, set us thinking of the Fels as possible founders yet uncaptured, while the lunch made us take a genuine fancy to her, and not finding him repulsive, so we speculated an evening on them—more than that a journey up to London!

It may be noted that when the Webb's monumental *Minority Report* on Britain's Poor Law appeared in 1909, and Fels sent them £1000 to propagandize its conclusions, Beatrice Webb accepted Fels' donation "with grateful gladness."

Fels had soothed any twinge of guilt he may have

felt for rejecting socialism by a gift of money to his friend, Keir Hardie. Replied Hardie to Fels, June 7, 1905:

I have just looked at your gift, and know not what to make of it. I am quite unfitted by nature to take charge of such a sum & so am sending it to Mrs. Hardie. This is our silver wedding year & I feel often now that my years are rapidly drawing to a close & whilst she is very, very capable I will pass away more contented if I know she is beyond the reach of immediate wants. God bless her; I would have been a poor creature without her. As for you I have no words. I never have when deeply moved, but the world would be a veritable heaven if you could be multiplied an hundred thousand fold.<sup>14</sup>