



CHAPTER I

Business Career and Private Life

JOSEPH, the fifth, and fourth surviving, child of Lazarus and Susannah Fels, was born in Halifax County, Virginia, 1854. While he was still an infant the family moved to Yanceyville, North Carolina, where they remained until Joseph was twelve.

His life as a boy was largely confined to the well-regulated activities of a conservative Jewish family, tempered by the influences characteristic of a small Southern town during the Civil War and the period of reconstruction. Yanceyville lay aside from the track of the war, and consequently the events which devastated the South and brought the resources of the North to breaking-point did not directly affect the family fortunes. Although a member of a Jewish household, the boy found most of his associates among Gentiles. A large portion of the population was coloured, and Joseph always retained a tender place in his heart for the negro race. These varied human elements in the North Carolina village, where the boy lived during his impressionable years, must

have helped to shape that cosmopolitanism which was so marked a characteristic of the man in later life.

In Yanceyville, and later in Richmond, Joseph went to school, but it may be said that he profited little from his schooling. He was a mischievous boy, and there are tales of frequent conflicts with pedagogical authority; tales, too, that he did not suffer without retort the weight of pedagogical disapproval. We hear of his readiness to stand up for his rights, of his determination that neither boy nor teacher should do him injustice.

Lazarus Fels was an energetic man of good judgment and a fair measure of business ability. Although alert, he did not possess the rapid foresight which later distinguished his son. His general background of ideas was that of the time. He was too conservative by instinct to examine his beliefs, a characteristic his son did not inherit. His active industry commanded the respect of his neighbours, and he possessed a very noticeable power of making friends. When many years later a son visited Yanceyville, where Joseph spent his early years, a number of the old residents remembered Lazarus Fels, and spoke of him in terms of high esteem.

Susannah Fels, the mother, was typical of the Jewish woman whose domestic genius would have commended her to the writer of Proverbs. An admirably efficient housewife, she rendered her hus-

band yeoman service in the difficult days of their early sojourn in the United States. She showed a quiet courage and a determination to make possible her husband's success for which the ordinary words of praise are inadequate. It was no easy burden she had to carry. There remains with her children the vivid recollection of her gentleness, her refinement, and her quiet yet resolute determination. Joseph used to say in after years that it was through women such as his mother that the Jewish race had been able to endure.

In 1866 the family moved to Baltimore, where he continued his studies. Even in these early days he seems to have been endowed with a keen business sense. At fourteen he, with the aid of a younger brother, established a flourishing kite business in a cellar. Joseph was the Managing Director, and seems to have displayed considerable ability in securing profitable trade. His stock was always ready at the right season, and repairs were efficiently carried out. That small business was already a foretaste of his commercial tendency.

By fifteen years of age he was thoroughly tired of school life. He rebelled against the constant discipline and the monotonous routine. He felt the need of more intimate contact with life, and desired urgently the realisation of its colour and its activities. His father, then a manufacturer of toilet-soap, gave the lad the desire of his heart to leave school and enter

business, and doubtless a boy so energetic and masterful as Joe was of no small service to him. But circumstances became such as to interfere with his continuing uninterruptedly.

The business was fairly prosperous, and maintained the family in comfort; but in 1870, through causes for which he was not responsible, the father lost the business, and found it necessary to make a new beginning. It was a serious misfortune, but new plans were soon on foot.

Joseph entered the employment of a Commission Agency in Coffees, and was successful. Within a year he and his father had accepted a position as representatives in Baltimore of a Philadelphia soap house, and a definite district was assigned to them. The connection lasted a few years and provided them a fair living; but its prospects were too limited, and in 1873 father and son felt justified in moving to Philadelphia, where they took a commission from a larger house under more favourable terms.

Still, work such as this required some subordination, and to a nature like that of Joseph Fels nothing was more galling than a sense of restraint or authority. From the very beginning it was his ambition to be master of his own career. Consequently in the autumn of 1875 he went into partnership with a Philadelphia soap manufacturer. The business was small, although it had long been established. By the end of 1876 he

was in a position to buy out the partner and take over the business. In view of the dimensions of his fortune later, it is interesting to note that the purchase price was \$4,000, and that this cheque was the largest he had ever drawn.

So was established Fels & Company. And now that he was master of his own actions he threw himself the more into the work. His one thought and his one hope was to make it a success, and it was rarely indeed in these years that he allowed his mind to deviate from this single endeavour. He travelled everywhere, his easy, confident manner and his good humour making him an excellent salesman. It is safe to say that in the fifteen years from 1875 the business was never out of his mind. At home and in his office, day and night, he schemed and planned and organised. The company prospered continuously, despite keen and able competition, and from the year of its establishment never showed any decline. About the time of the formation of the new firm of Fels & Company his brother Samuel entered the business, and in 1881 was made a partner.

Competition in the manufacture of toilet-soap is incessant; the salesman has also to study every shift and current of popular whim. He must have many varieties in quality, colour, perfume; he must choose pleasing wrappers, right boxes, the right advertisements. His goods must not become stereotyped, while

at the same time they must always retain a sufficient identity to be borne in mind. It will be clear how great a strain all this imposes on the manufacturer. The fear of waste is continually before his eyes; he knows that a new variety may be unsuccessful, that the wrapper may be wrong, the box insufficiently attractive, the price too high or too low. He must also be able to convince the middleman that he, and he only, has the varieties that the former requires. In no other field of industry, in fact, is the margin on the market so narrow and insecure. The young manufacturer had long been aware of these difficulties, and had perceived the wisdom of specialising on some one variety that would render unnecessary the constant attention to such a multitude of details. In 1890 it seemed to Fels & Company that so keen a competition entailed too great a strain.

It was in the search of a specialty that Joseph came across the soap that is associated with the name of Fels. A Philadelphia company had for some time been applying the naptha process to a laundry soap; but the business was badly managed both on the manufacturing side and in salesmanship, and serious losses had been incurred. He was certain the process was an excellent one, and that it only needed patience and ability to make it a commercial success. Once so convinced, he did not hesitate. In 1893 the interests of this company were purchased by Fels & Company.

Another brother, Maurice, although pursuing independent interests, was closely connected with the business, helpful in various ways, paying special attention to perfecting the new soap on the technical side.

At first the manufacture of the new soap was carried on coincidentally with that of toilet-soap. It naturally took some time for the "Fels-Naptha" to become known, and still longer for it to become firmly established; but in two or three years the success of their experiment was certain. It had come to stay. So large was the demand for the new product that later the partners felt justified in discontinuing the manufacture of toilet-soaps and in concentrating the entire attention of the firm on the new article. A large manufacturing plant grew up in Philadelphia, efficiently equipped and organised. From this time Joseph Fels' financial success was assured.

So told, the story seems simple enough. Tireless effort and a wise patience allied to ability proved successful, as always. He was compelled in the early stages of his business career to rely upon himself; he had also to make others rely upon him, and his confidence brought him through to remarkable success. In spite of the fact that, when the occasion demanded, he could hold his own in the most hard-driven bargain, he was able to humanise all his business relations.

Such is the way in which Joseph Fels made himself a successful business man. But in achieving financial prosperity he also shaped his own life to larger issues. Courage brought success, and success brought more courage. The mastery of difficulties strengthened an optimism which always expected the best. An open mind and daily association with men enabled him to see the evils of our present social organisation. The constant attempt to make men live to their best, as employees or business associates, showed him how to use suggestion and how to develop leadership. The facing of new problems as they arose in the building of a great business trained him in foresight and gave him confidence in his ability to judge plans not yet tried. But, meantime, Joseph Fels, the business man, was also being shaped by various personal experiences.