



## CHAPTER II

### *Social and Home Life*

THE YEAR that he was twenty an event occurred which was destined to have a profound influence on all Joseph's after life. He fell in love with a girl who was still a child, and vowed himself to her service; a vow which held with growing power for the forty succeeding years of his life.

I was living with my parents, also named Fels, in Keokuk, Iowa. One day, in 1873, Joseph, while pursuing his work as travelling salesman, found himself in our little town. During casual conversation with one of his customers, mention was made of the fact that a family named Fels resided there. Joseph thought that he had no relatives in that part of the country, and felt interested in seeking them out and making their acquaintance. Upon his approach to the house on his very first call, I, then a little girl of nine, was standing in the doorway, and I ushered the stranger into the home of my parents. Here we get an illustration of Joseph's intuitiveness and decisiveness, for as he loved to tell in after years, he then and there decided

that "that little girl must be my wife," and that no sacrifice would be too great to win her.

The next seven years were years of watching, mostly from afar, the development of that child. He took not only a keen, deep interest, but an active interest as well. He came when he could—at rare intervals; wrote to her constantly; sent enlightening books. She, all unsuspecting as to his ultimate purpose, looked on him as a wonderfully kind brother, or even as Prince Charming come to lift her out of commonplace life. When, at the end of these seven years, he told her of his love, and desired to marry her, she was literally lifted off her feet. She felt herself walking on air and heard sound as of music. There came at once outstanding conviction that she *must* marry him. After two years of strenuous inner inquiry and outer observation, on her part, as to marriage, they were married—with reservations as to the conduct of their united life. They were lived up to, those reservations, and he remained her lover, inspired thereby, to the last.

To our home came artists, business men, dreamers, poets, socialists, and reformers of every kind. Most of these found in him quick understanding and generous sympathy; from them he came in turn to feel the irresistible charm of thinking new thoughts, dreaming new dreams, and the working toward their realisation. In later years several became members of

our household: Robert Coates for a year or two; Walter Coates for thirteen years; John Willis Slaughter for two years; Efrem Zimbalist from 1908 until his marriage from there in 1914. Zimbalist tells of it thus: "I came to spend a week-end and remained many years." He might have added: "Ever since the tie has grown closer and greater, in deep, rare friendship." That tells its own story of the quality of the relationship.

It is difficult to trace with any exactness his social ideas in these years. It was a period in which he was content to mitigate rather than construct. He helped people constantly. He gave freely even when his own income was small and needed in the business; but underneath the satisfaction he felt in affording relief, there was an unshaped but imperative desire to destroy the need for giving. His mind was like an intricate mass of loose threads that needed a plan to weave them into a definite design. This plan had its beginning in his extreme individualism, his desire that each man should stand on his own feet, and make the most of his manhood. The business travels were to him a kind of education. Men were always his books; and on the road he met variety enough even for so persistent an enquirer. He was all the time probing his fellow salesmen on social problems. He adopted little in these years, but there were few men so alert to examine.

The conservative temperament was entirely alien to him in young manhood, as in later years. There was little in the social order that commanded his reverence. The men who awakened his interest were those who seemed to herald a change. It was not that he had any special point of contact with their social philosophy. He had simply a general sympathy with their vague flavour of modernity.

Joseph had never been strongly drawn to the service of the synagogue. He respected it as a conservator of a magnificent tradition, but it seemed to him a force for the maintenance of dogma. What he wanted, what his nature needed, was real religion, one that stood apart from race and class, from creed and time, and asserted the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. For a short time he was a member of the Ethical Society, but his religion was not a matter of institutions, and throughout his life his friends were chosen regardless of creed or race. He was a man, and in every other man he saw a brother.

No one who would understand the life of Joseph Fels can afford to neglect what he gained from his experience in business. His shrewd practicality was everywhere evident in what he later undertook in political affairs. He was anxious to prevent mis-directed energy. He was angered at the waste of things, particularly the waste of Nature's resources, acutely conscious that this, more than anything else,

lies at the bottom of human misery. He was always talking of the things lying idle that might be used; this was the keynote of his public activity. He believed that exactly the same kind of talent which was applied to the direction of private enterprise could be successfully applied to the conduct of national affairs.

He knew that the success of a great business depends upon making it appeal to the imagination of the crowd. It was by such methods, in addition to the soap's inherent qualities, that the Fels-Naptha success had been built up. An eloquent claim had been skilfully and picturesquely made. People had been interested in the claim; they had bought the new product and had been satisfied in the testing. Not otherwise did he conceive that great political movements should be carried on. He wanted to capture the popular imagination. "All great movements," he would have said with Disraeli, "spring from the passions." It is the stimulated prejudice, a judgment before thought, that sets the minds of men to work in common. This point of view, he held, was equally valuable to a man who wishes to sell a commodity as to a reformer who wishes to change social conditions.

Joseph's instincts were all profoundly democratic, but there can be no doubt that his constant association with working people, through his factory and through

his business relations, served to strengthen and perfect his belief in human equality. With his own workers he lived on the frankest terms of good-fellowship. Their lives were their own, and he always looked with suspicion upon attempts to regulate the social life of working people. It was his duty, and it was also, as he frequently explained, to his advantage, to provide for their physical comfort, and to pay them, as he put it, "the best wage that he could screw up his courage to give them." He had no sympathy with the policy of drive; he did not believe in making the worker the accessory of the machine. He treated him as an equal, but insisted that the employee should recognise his responsibility, and he won his reward. His men felt it was worth while to work for a firm which was no corporate fiction, but a living group of men who had regard for the bodies and souls of those with whom they came in contact.

By 1895 Joseph's business career had achieved a solution of its most pressing problems and had opened the road to undoubted success. The varied associations of "the road" and home, the close contact with men and sharp clash with their opinions, had served in the work of shaping and maturing his character. That year may, therefore, be regarded as the point at which the formative elements in his life gathered themselves into an instrumentality which could be consciously used towards the constructive work of the world. This

new period quickly asserted itself in a definite product.

One of the circumstances most commonly attendant upon private exploitation of land values is the existence in every town and city of vacant spaces not intended for use, but held in anticipation of increased prices. These plots, usually acquired with old buildings, show in most cases the results of house-wrecking activities, and the public often tolerates an unsightly rubbish heap or unspeakable hoardings on main thoroughfares, side by side with the best results of public improvement. Though economically and aesthetically undesirable, the speculator may hold them as long as he likes, safely protected by the rule that private property is inviolable. It is the same everywhere. It is many years since Governor Pingree, of Michigan, for example, seeing the multitude of unsightly vacant spaces in the city of Detroit, originated the plan of securing their temporary use for gardening purposes. Potatoes were produced by the poor of Detroit on vacant building land, and thus "Pingree's potato patch" became famous. Joseph was struck by the applicability of the plan to his own City of Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia Vacant Land Cultivation Society began in the most modest way with a meeting of a few business men and social workers in the City, and a committee was formed to start the experiment. A few landowners were found willing to lend their unoccupied sites to be cultivated by working men with taste

for gardening. The plan was advertised; and applicants from the first were more numerous than was anticipated. Once started, this Society has never looked back, and has grown steadily in strength and usefulness. Similar organisations for the cultivation of vacant lots were also established in Chicago, Cleveland, and New York.

Even in its tenth year, with an income of only about 1300 dollars, the Philadelphia Society was able to provide gardens for 800 families, representing approximately 4,000 men, women and children, who produced vegetables to the value of \$10,400. That is to say, every quarter subscribed produced an eight-fold return in food-stuffs. Many of the workers employed on these vacant lots were able, after providing themselves and their families with vegetables for their own consumption, to sell the surplus and thus earn a little ready money. Work was found for the unemployed in preparing land for allotment holders, and later many of the unemployed themselves took allotments. As soon as the funds of the society permitted, the workers were instructed and guided by an experienced superintendent.

These results, it must be remembered, were obtained not from rich soil, but from old, unused building sites locally regarded as eyesores and dumping grounds. The workers, too, were for the most part people without previous agricultural or gardening



knowledge, who were recruited at random from the working-class population of Philadelphia. To the material benefit which the cultivation of these vacant lots brought to the people who worked them must be added the blessing of improved health, together with restored manhood and new possibilities of life. "How many men," Mr. Fels once said in a meeting of the society, "have we lost simply through lack of the medicine nature provides, fresh air and vigorous exercise?" The educational value of this work was seen in the establishment of school gardens, which with his eager encouragement were usually made a feature of the scheme. School gardens may now be found in great numbers almost everywhere.

These experiments meant much in Joseph's life. They gave point and direction to certain ideas which had for some years been uppermost in his mind. He had always been impressed by the possibilities inherent in the cultivation of land. He had before this helped men, broken by the struggle of life in the city, to establish themselves as farmers. The experiment with the City lots had shown that there was a real hunger for the land; the society from the start had always more applicants than it could supply. Meantime there was no dearth of land. There was no scarcity even of unused land. There was almost a plethora of land deliberately withheld from cultivation or from other improvements, merely for the purposes of spec-

ulation. At that time only the problem existed for him. He had probably no kind of solution to suggest for it; but the experience must undoubtedly have exercised no small influence on his mind.