



CHAPTER III

*Personal Traits**

THE STORY of the life-work of Joseph Fels cannot be told without an attempt to picture the man to the reader.

In stature he was short, five feet two, but so well proportioned that he never seemed small.

On his way home from business, he could be seen daily turning the corner of the street and covering the short intervening space with quick, decisive steps, his head turned slightly and a tendency to sway a bit to the left in walking. In his left hand he carried a small dispatch-case filled with letters, and under his right arm he invariably carried a mass of papers. While he walked he took out his door key, and the door was opened almost without stopping. Once in the hall, he laid all his things on the table, hung up his coat and hat, cleared his throat, and ran up the stairs to his study. A cheery "Howdy" to everyone, a quick peck of a kiss (after humorously rubbing his mouth with his coat sleeve) for every woman in the room—his

*Mrs. Earl Barnes has contributed helpfully to this chapter.

wife he kissed with infinite tenderness—a pretended fight with the little boys if any were around, had the effect of clearing the room of any dead air or thoughts—and you have his entrance into the place where he lived. If it is near the dinner-hour he tells you he is starved. He ate in moderation, and the simplest table was always a sumptuous one for him. If urged to take more of something he liked he would say, “Lordy, son, there’s no room, but I’ll take a little to fill in the cracks.” If he came late, as he did sometimes, his shy manner sent everyone eagerly hurrying to wait on him.

Joseph was a restless spirit, and could never sit quiet. If there was reading aloud he would write letters at his desk; if there was talk he would stand with his back to the fire or walk around the room. This cheerful, alert, joyous nature that loved to sing snatches of parodies or to quote “The bigger the rabbit the more whiter his tail,” could sometimes swing to the other extreme and bring into the room, or into the hearts of those who loved him, a gloom that was like the blackness of night. Then he scarcely ate, his smile was forced, and when he conquered these depressions he came out of them tired, with a quiet sadness that finally merged into his usual sunny, courageous nature.

Just as there were two sides to his disposition so there were two sides in his reaction to people. He

spared nothing of time, money or generous judgment in helping individuals. On the other hand, if he felt a lack in a friend's attitude toward him or toward the cause for which he worked he was so keenly hurt that no amount of reasoning could disperse it. In business relations he liked to feel out his man, often holding him up in some deal to the penny, and then turning around and giving the man, as a friend, much of everything he had to give. He always wanted to avoid killing the divine spark in any human being. One morning a friend, after having fed a succession of tramps, said to one, "I will give you your breakfast, but you must promise not to tell any of your friends about it." Joseph overheard the admonition, and, looking up timidly, ventured, "How can you ask him to keep from his friends the one thing he could be generous enough to share?"

This two-sided nature manifested itself in many small acts. He had a mischievous boy's attitude in watching a dog chase a cat, and quite enjoyed the perilous situation of the cat. On the other hand, when as happened one evening he came home very late to dinner with no excuse, it was found that he had taken a little dog to a friend and had spent an hour in the east side of London finding milk and making the dog comfortable for the night. Again, when a little five-year-old friend was ordered to ride on account of illness, he started off at a brisk walk to the home of a

neighbour and bought a donkey. The touching part of this story is that as Joseph came across the fields leading the donkey, followed by a tiny new-born one, he was greeted by shouts of laughter and asked, "But why did you buy two?" With a twinkle of his brown eyes and an attempt at raillery, but with a seriousness that refused to be hidden, he said, "I couldn't separate the mother and baby, and so I bought them both."

He loved children. For the son* of an Edinburgh friend he had a deep affection, and of him he wrote, "I never before wanted to steal a sixteen-year-old boy until this one came along. It is a pleasure to look at the great, stout, manly lad." When another friend named a son after him he was deeply touched. And while his love for the other children of the same family was equally strong, there was a peculiar quality in his affection for this child. The following is a letter to him:

London, October 1, 1907.

Dear Joseph B—,

Here's to you, my jolly little chap, and may your shadows be few with untold quantities of sunshine always on tap for at least a century. You are here, my little lad, to be rubbed and scrubbed a few short baby years, to be petted and kissed and thrashed . . . Then you'll be chucked on to your own responsibilities,

*This was Alistair Geddes, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Geddes. He was killed on the battlefield in France.

and you'll have to stand and take your lickings along with the pettings of a more or less careless world . . .

And, dear little boy, you've got my name as part of yours. You are beginning its use. I've got a considerable distance on the way to finishing with it, so take care that you are good to Joseph and love people. Just lov'em as much as I do.

Your

Uncle Joe.

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For one to think that Joseph took up the work of shaping the social mind to the doctrines of Single Tax easily and lightly is a mistake. No one ever put more labour, more heartache, or more courage into preparing himself for propagandist work. Not trained to speak and coming to it late in life, he found it, indeed, uphill work. He was never unconscious of the struggle before him to influence opinion through personal appeal; he took it seriously but with a humorous sense of his dependence upon others for help. In writing to a friend who had many times given him assistance, he said, "The Lord knows how I wish you were here. I want you, 'ma honey,' and I want you bad; the wherefore at this particular juncture being that I am invited to talk to a meeting about farm colonies and small holdings to be convened by the Lord Provost at Glasgow Friday of next week. I will press Mollie and Walt into service, though they are just common

garden folk. They can't help me to lie with the same smoothness of diction as you."

His emotions were those of a child. Criticism hurt him only when it was personal. It usually stirred the fight in him, and in wordy conflicts he was rarely unsuccessful because he was fortified by an idea. His egoism was a delight to those who were big enough to understand him; it was simply the honesty of the child nature of the man. His was a natural reaction to the forces with which the conventional world brought him into conflict. To those most intimately connected with him credit must be given for affording free play to his striking personality. His little mannerisms in speech, whether merely ungrammatical or verging on explosive abuse, were by-products of his nature, and were not tampered with by those who practised correct grammar and elegant diction. He was surrounded by friends who appreciated and loved his individual traits as parts of his big personality. He was not the kind of man who could be made over into the polite, urbane, self-effacing man who operates from behind breastworks. He was dynamic, out in the open, fighting with every emotion that caught him, but always with a heart tender, true, and direct.

One night at the dinner table a lady, a stranger to him, in describing someone, said, "He is not of our kind." Joseph had not, up to that moment, taken part in the conversation, but from the other end of a long

table he quietly inquired, "Isn't everyone of our kind?" It is creditable to the woman that this gentle rebuff made her his friend. Totally unconscious of convention, he cut straight through to the hearts of people. If he conversed with the butler at his friend's dinner table it was because he felt intuitively that he was doing that man an injustice in being served by him, and unconsciously he tried to undo this injustice by talking with him on terms of equality. Even when giving directions to those serving him he would do it with almost an air of apology, often adding, "if you don't mind."

When on a visit to Denmark he heard that the Crown Prince was interested in land reform; he therefore endeavored to secure an interview. Owing to the red tape of the Chamberlain's office he had not succeeded before he left Denmark; but it happened, in the course of the journey away, that he and Prince Hako were on the same boat. Seeing the Crown Prince on the deck surrounded by those in attendance, Joseph, not thinking of himself either brazenly or modestly, but thinking only of the work to help humanity, and knowing that the Prince had expressed an interest in that work, left his own group, walked straight through the royal party up to the Crown Prince, held out his hand, and with a smile so winning that no one could see it and be unmoved, said, "How do you do? I sent you a letter requesting the favour of

an interview, but have not received any reply. I am Joseph Fels, interested in bringing the land and the people together." Amazement on the part of some of his own friends, which, of course, knowing him so well his wife did not share, consternation and surprise on the part of the Crown Prince's suite, had no effect on either. Man met man, and those who knew Joseph were glad that the Crown Prince rose to his level, held out his hand, walked away with him for a two hours' conversation on problems bigger than the breaking of conventional forms.

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Mr. George Lansbury, who was so intimately associated with him, gives an interesting illustration of the influence he exercised over others; he says:

"I met Joseph Fels in the summer of 1903. He came to my house like a breath of fresh air, his transparent honesty of purpose, his love of humanity, were clear and manifest to all. I had heard very little of him, and confess I was somewhat prejudiced against him because he was a rich American. Five minutes' talk with him dispelled my doubts and fears, and we then commenced a close and intimate friendship that will never really end. He made me realise as never before that it was worth while to struggle and fight for great causes, and inspired me with faith in my fellows. Especially did he make me realise how much the future depends upon the efforts of individual men and women.

“My young manhood had been spent among the Social Democrats, and I had come to believe it was almost impossible for a rich man or woman to be sincere in their professed desires to espouse the cause of the toiling masses. Joseph Fels broke down this prejudice, for here he was, asking nothing, seeking nothing but the opportunity to serve, and all the time wanting to stand, not in the limelight, but in the background. During my whole connection with him we never ‘fell out’ about anything. We did at times disagree about non-essentials, but we were united on the things that really matter.

“He was a Jew, not orthodox; I was a Churchman, yet, somehow, we understood that in our religion there was neither Jew nor Gentile but simply men and women. Although he would never admit it in my sense, I shall ever think of him as the finest example of a Christian I have ever known. He was a simple, kindly, loving soul, and I experienced at his hands all that comes from fellowship with such a character. He poured out money like water on schemes which I put before him, and never hesitated to help anyone who needed assistance although he hated what is termed ‘Charity.’ Yet he was full of charity in the sense that true charity typifies love. He gave not only money, which was comparatively easy, but gave himself, and that was his great charm for me.

“When I first went to the home his wife and he

had made at Bickley, in Kent, it seemed like a new world; a world from which all the cheap and nasty things of life had been banished, where the outstanding thought of each was how to serve God by serving man. Before my wife and I met him we had seldom visited the homes of very rich persons, but a visit to 'Elmwood' was to us just like going home. This experience was not ours only, it was that of all who visited them. How could it be otherwise? The first thing the visitor saw when crossing the threshold was the wording on the panel of a door:

What I spent I had
What I saved I lost
What I gave I have

"Both Joseph and Mary Fels did their best to live up to this creed. Business and money-making must have compelled much of his attention, but it never entered into his conversation round their table, or by their fireside. Usually we just talked of how the lot of the toiling masses might be brightened and bettered. Our talks ranged from Single Tax and Anarchy, to Landlordism and Bureaucracy. To listen to him was like listening to one who had seen a great light, to one for whom the small and mean things of life had no meaning. The freeing of land did not mean simply more potatoes or more strawberries, to him it represented the means by which the whole human race

could be made free. Consequently it was for him a great inspiration to enable him to spend himself, as well as his money, ungrudgingly.

“People who did not know him cannot realise his personal magnetism, and how little self-consciousness there was in his make-up. I have been in his company under varying circumstances; when interviewing Cabinet Ministers, Bishops, Boards of Guardians and Town Councils. At all times he was the same—keen, full of enthusiasm, and dominated by the grand ideal that all men and women might be happy, and have enough, simply by determining to do justice to each other. Sometimes clever people thought he was simply a well-meaning crank, but they soon found that they were dealing with a man who had a reason for the faith that was in him.

“In the purchase of the Hollesley Bay Estate, with its £30,000 risk, and also the purchase of the Laindon Estate, his one anxiety was to prevent the appearance of personal advertisement. It was therefore impossible not to see that he was a public-spirited man acting for others' good.

“His persistence was wonderful. I often thought this was the secret of his success in life, he could not be beaten. When told that Boards of Guardians were difficult to deal with, he asked to see them, and he seldom left them without having won them to his view. When we talked to him of the ignorance of

social conditions, of the hidebound obstinacy of Government Departments, and of their objection to dealing with pressing social problems, he was not discouraged. He just, so to speak, went and sat on the step of the Local Government Board Offices until first Colonel Lockwood, then Mr. Walter Long, and afterwards Mr. Gerald Balfour, were won over to his side. When at times landlords refused to loan vacant land for cultivation in connection with the society he had formed for this purpose, he never accepted the refusal as final. Personally, I felt when he passed on that I had lost a friend and a brother. All I owe to him it is impossible to say or put on record, or the proofs of love he showered upon my wife and myself.

“One great joy in our lives was our journey to America with Joseph and Mary Fels. We had often talked of going, and at last, a few months before he passed from us, the opportunity came. That journey was a further revelation of his loving care and forethought. A fine memory also is that of the meeting he addressed in the great saloon of the steamship where he expounded his social and religious faith. I had been accustomed to meetings of all kinds for many years, but here was an unusual gathering of millionaires and multi-millionaires, together with their wives and daughters, all gathered to listen to one of their own class telling them the truth in plain language. He made us all, rich and poor alike, feel very small indeed,

for his words rang so true. When he invited those present to put questions to him regarding his statements we were, so to speak, all struck dumb. We wanted to go away and quietly think.

“While we were in America he cleared away all kinds of obstacles and made it easy for me to meet literary people, politicians, and leaders of thought, and in a thousand ways served us in a manner we shall never forget.

“My wife and I said ‘good-bye’ to him rather sadly at the great station of the Pennsylvania Railway. We were both so strong and big, compared with him. There was a look in his eyes which somehow made us feel we were parting with a great big loving brother, and as we parted there came over us ‘a something’ we shall never be able to define. It seemed to be a parting different from any previous parting, and when, a few weeks later, we heard that he was ill, and, in a day or two, of his passing on, our thoughts flew back to that railway station and the far-away look in his eyes.

“Now that he has gone away we are all the poorer. His inspiring presence is no longer with us, but there is with us, for all time, the memory and influence of his loving personality, and, therefore, he can never die.

“‘His is the glory of going on.’ For his work is written large on the public life of America and Europe; it is also written deeply in the lives of the hundreds of men and women who, like myself, were

privileged to know him. It is for us who were thus privileged to take up and press forward his work, which, when he laid it down, he entrusted to his wife, and which she has so bravely made her work too. We must help her to carry it forward to a successful issue.

“The European war to some extent turned men’s minds from social questions, but it has made us understand how vital and permanent the land question is, how great a part it will play in the question of peace. Now that peace has come, men’s minds naturally turn to the land which they and theirs have fought and died for, and the slogan cry of ‘The land for the people’ is again heard.

“All of us then who wish to raise a lasting tribute to the memory of our dear friend must do our utmost to see that the next British Campaign is one that will achieve permanent good, and result in the passage through Parliament of a measure securing to the people, all the people, the entire land values which they, the people, have created.”

The following is an interesting description, written by Miss Margaret McMillan, of a visit Joseph paid to Oxford, and a speech he delivered at Balliol College. It was a dramatic moment in which the most progressive of moderns stated his case in the home and atmosphere of age-long conservatism. Miss McMillan says:

“He arrived in a motor car—an eager, imperious little man in a soft felt hat and rather worn overcoat.

But I did not see the arrival, and caught my first glimpse of him at the end of shadowy cloisters; and in a soft cool twilight that seemed remote indeed from the outer street in the heat of late August noon.

"Dim was the old College, and peopled with shades. Here walked the dead: luminous-eyed men who wrote saintly hymns, scholars and statesmen and at least one immortal poet. The winding corridors and stairs, the doorways with their worn steps, and the long aisles under heavy roofs of darkened stone, were haunted by these. And what stillness everywhere, a busy kind of hush as if the air was full of mysteries.

"Suddenly at the end of a corridor the small, eager figure of Joseph Fels appeared, his coat swinging wide, his soft hat drawn down over his face with a defiant tilt. It was a surprise. For though it was known that he was coming to address the summer students of the University Extension Movement, the news had not reached me. Few of the men and women now busy and happy with their tutors knew anything of Joseph Fels, save that he was a rich man who spent his money freely in rather unusual ways. Later they would gather for tea in the grounds of Balliol College and hear what he had to say.

"Still, Oxford is hospitable in its way. Who would not wish to do the honours of such a place as this world-famed centre of life and learning? A young undergraduate chaperoned the guest. We walked

through many halls, went into the vast kitchens of Wolsey's College, looked down Addison's Walk and peered into stately rooms hung with portraits, and smaller chambers where the great ones of the world had lived. As the sun sank low in the west we went back to the grounds of Balliol College, where the ghosts gave place to the work-a-day life of the world.

"A large number of men and women were gathered from every part of England. They represented almost every class—engineers, wagon-makers, factory hands from Lancashire, 'waivers' from Bradford, arsenal workers, and at least one navy. Casual labourers too, railway men, clerks, one or two titled women, and mingled with these, scholars, tutors, and literary stars. A brilliant young leader writer of the *Morning Post*, an Archbishop's son in a 'blazer' and one dean of College. A very motley gathering, certainly. It included some of the best of England's scholars and leaders of thought. There was also a sprinkling of elementary school teachers. A clever, robust-looking Yorkshire mill-girl who wrote very good essays sat in the foreground with a group of her girl friends, talking to a brilliant young tutor.

"The little American was the focus of all attention and interest for a moment as he came in, his face pale, with the strange pallor of the East. His manner was nervous, though rather jocular, for he was not at all unconscious of the elements of power as well as pres-

tige in the men and women before him, as well as of the historic site. As he took off his hat he showed a typically Jewish head, wide and rounded. Time and again that figure has appeared in gatherings at critical moments. Modern? No. The old colleges were modern now. He stood in the midst of the big crowd scattered around the lawn and on the slopes, under the dark walls, the type of the wandering race that has suffered in many lands ere there was any thought of Balliol College, and had heard the law given on Sinai.

"Everyone expected him to be modern, however. The chairman introduced him briefly as an American, a business man who lived in England during part of every year, and announced his subject (though everyone knew it and smiled a little over it) as 'The Land.' 'You're quite right there,' said Mr. Fels, 'I've only one subject, I've only one lecture. The Gospel isn't long, it's short. But you can say it over a great many times without getting to the end of it. Yes, I'm going to talk to you about the land—this earth you're standing on. Who does it belong to? Who made it? Who's got a right to it? That's what I am going to talk about here, that's what I am talking about all the time.'

"The whole company looked a little bored, a little amused. The smart factory girl smiled, becoming conscious of the speaker's deficiencies, his accent, and his unceremonious way of speaking. The students in the Economics classes (there were a great many of them)

fresh from their books turned to the living page of a man's face. Did they read well? A chill wind went round the whole assembly. Very courteous and intent were the Balliol men's faces. Did they understand? Who knows? I cannot tell. A great many young students thought they knew what their teachers were thinking, and threw them half-apologetic and deferential glances. The Jew, under his well-defined surface manners, was perfectly conscious of all this and it angered him. He began to speak rapidly, with new emphasis. He also used the unscholarly word 'damn.' The Yorkshire girl, fresh from studies that rendered her a little tolerant, could hardly hide her indignation. Then suddenly the speaker, fighting thus for a moment with his audience, appeared to transfer his scene of operations. It was as if a rider dragged at his horse's heels vaulted into the saddle. He got hold of the reins of his own anger, his own ruffled temper. He vaulted into a new attitude and found his place. All was shown somehow at once in his face, in his voice, which lost its fretted tones, and very soon, in his speech. 'Learning itself—I make claim to none and am an ignorant man by comparison with many of you—must flourish best at last on a soil that is free from evil undergrowths. But are these conditions secured here or even in new countries? You know very well that the poor come to these colleges only by reason of an agitation raised in very modern days, and even now by the will

of those who have secured every privilege by the initial privilege of land-owning. Below every movement that calls itself progressive but puts off the consideration of the evil of private monopoly in land values, there is a moral evil that poisons everything. To postpone the removal of this is to postpone every other reform or vitiate it. Yes, this is what I have come here to say.' He paused for a moment, and a look of infinite gentleness, sympathy and humility came to his face.

"The audience was graver now though a movement of resentment flowed into it.

"Now the voice gathered strength, but it was a new kind of strength. Ever more detached, it seemed yet nearer and more intimate. It took no account of the differences of those before him, still less of their feeling or relation to him. Where, now, was the rich man, the millionaire? Through the calm, sun-bathed space between the college walls, and over the green shaven mound, it rose and fell—the Voice as of one crying in the wilderness. 'Begin your work by an act of justice—the simplest justice. Give back the earth to your brother. Then your light shall come forth like the morning.' Ah! here was the Jew again touching the perfect chord. He had touched it. The new John the Baptist was here. With passionate faith, in perfect self-surrender, in quiet acceptance of all labour and loss and all suffering, and with a hope that bore up the

soul to fair and cloudless heights, it beat against every heart. And when the speaker ended at last—falling back in his rôle of diffident, half-jocular millionaire philanthropist, as suddenly as a bird falls into its nest on the earth there was deep silence for a moment, a silence far more charged with meaning than was the so-called debate that followed. Looking spent, and very white and small, he sat down.

“Did one hear that Voice again? Yes, indeed, though not on that day nor for a few months later. In the evening, he was, I remember, a little subdued, and had nothing to say about the University, nothing about his critics and antagonists in the debate. Nothing.

“But I did hear the Voice again. It was after the news came of his death in Philadelphia. They say he was carried into a great hall and lay in the midst of a great multitude. Many wept, and they praised him. Love was round him in death like a sun-lit sea about a broken raft. Silent he lay, yet not silent. Again we saw the dim cloisters, the smooth lawn of Balliol, and the modern students of many social orders. And his words rang out now, but like a strain of music. Strong words and brave, words that will not die, nor be forgotten. For they tell of that which abides amid all passing shadows, of something that does not yield to doubt, or fear, or earthly powers, and which, however baffled or delayed, cannot fail at last.”