



## CHAPTER IV

### *Public Career and Social Principles*

IN 1901 it became desirable for Joseph to go to England to work up a branch of the business. For two or three years after his arrival he, with his close co-worker, Walter Coates, devoted his energies to the establishment of this branch. Owing to the keen competition and the general difficulty of securing custom, this work was for a time very arduous and required close and exclusive attention. In the course of a few years, however, the business became plainer sailing and he gradually relinquished the direction to Mr. Coates. During the last ten years of his life he gave only very occasional supervision to the conduct of business affairs.

Constituted as he was with ready sympathy for the oppressed and needy, combined with completely democratic conceptions, he was inevitably drawn into participation in public affairs and the kind of work that is generally described as social reform.

To understand clearly the direction of his interest

and activities, it is necessary to review briefly the chief features of the situation in Great Britain during the opening years of the century. The conclusion of the Boer War had left the British public with some serious practical problems and many grounds for discontent. The national conscience was already beginning to react after its somewhat extreme commitment to ideals of imperialistic enterprise. The war and the years immediately following disclosed to England many ugly conditions within her borders. She began to feel it necessary to be for a time, at any rate, a "little England" and to put in order some of the pressing affairs of her own household. With the trade depression that supervened, the problem of unemployment, acute at the time when the army returned from South Africa, began to assume portentous dimensions. From 1905 to 1908, the country was faced with a condition in its labour market that was truly appalling. Administrators seemed to have a dearth of means, and a greater dearth of ideas for dealing with the situation. Local resources were wholly inadequate, whether for relief or the provision of temporary relief works.

It appeared as if the country could not expand its trade to the point of absorbing the enormous labour surplus, or shoulder the terrible burden that began to fall upon its machinery for relief. Processions of the workless and hungry were for a time almost daily upon the streets of the principal cities demanding

work. The nation was, in short, having to pay the penalty of modern industrialism—millions of factory-trained and habituated workmen, always sufficiently numerous to ensure low wages in the best of times, and doomed, with the cyclical recurrence of depression, to unemployment and privation.

Added to this state of affairs was the more than disquieting realisation of national deterioration. The small percentage of recruits found acceptable for service abroad came as a shock to those who had previously taken for granted the superior quality of the nation's physique. Overcrowded and unhealthy urban districts where the workers had their homes, the cramped and mechanical nature of their occupations, the general disregard for life and health accorded the wage-earning population, and the lack of means of subsistence, had been found to have reached their natural consequence in a proletariat rapidly deteriorating in fitness. Nothing short of a national crisis ever makes the Englishman clearly recognise a defect in the national life, but it came home with striking force in the years following the Boer War. Every student of economic and social affairs, every reformer and even every politician, found his attention absorbed by these crying questions, unemployment and general deterioration. To put the matter briefly, the problem of the social reformer of that time was to ameliorate the condition of a huge population of industrial work-

ers, with precarious and scanty means of subsistence, who were rapidly becoming degenerate, through the evil effects of factory life and city slum.

The means then adopted for meeting the stress created by unemployment were naturally conditioned by the circumstances of the time. Lack of Government foresight was responsible for the failure to provide for such a contingency. Hasty endeavours were made to set up public relief works to absorb a portion of the surplus labour. But these efforts proved as inefficient as they were costly. Local efforts were aided by grants made by the Government, and were administered, in London, by the Central Unemployed Fund, which was established in 1904. Certain general works were carried out by this Committee, upon which representatives of various public bodies were selected to serve. In addition, a rudimentary kind of labour exchange activity was initiated to meet the needs of such employers as required workers.

These palliatives effected only a small fraction of the relief demanded. An important principle, however, was established, namely, that the Government should, in times of trade depression, become an employer for the purpose of utilising the labour surplus; a principle which later received application in the Development Act. The establishment of labour exchanges operative throughout the country, in the endeavour to equalise the demand upon the labour

market, was a further contribution to the solution of the problem.

On the whole something has been done legislatively since then to improve the general conditions of the worker. With increasingly efficient inspection of factory and of home, with workmen's compensation, and latterly, with sick and unemployed benefits provided under the National Insurance Act, it may be argued that Britain is on her way to establishing for the labouring population a set of more tolerable conditions of life. For the problem of unemployment, however, little has been, or can be, achieved so long as land monopoly exists.

Knowledge was not lacking during those years in which unemployment mounted to the highest point of its curve and gradually descended to its normal, of the one great remedy which is adequate to cure the greatest of economic diseases. Those whose prevision reaches beyond the screen of temporary prosperity have been well aware that the national life of Britain, as of other countries, can only conserve itself by an agriculture which grows concomitantly with, and balances, industry. It has remained for Professor Ashley, himself one of the greatest of commercial experts, to show the vital necessity of this relation, and for a great war to bring home the fact that it is a serious matter for a great nation to neglect the tillage of the soil.

The "back to the land" cry, however, had made itself heard for nearly a generation. Social reformers in England have for many years contemplated with envy the rural development of Continental countries, the conservation of a strong and resourceful peasantry, the evolution of intensive culture with skilful and scientific methods of tillage, the spectacle of nations that in emergency would be self-supporting. Increasing alarm has been felt that the population of England should be dragged from its last roots in the soil and placed in the urban and industrial atmosphere to wither and decay. The small holders of Denmark, Belgium, and France undoubtedly constitute an element of national strength that is lacking in England. Great wealth certainly belongs to an industrial nation with a world's trade, but is a doubtful compensation for the drain on human quality, when this industrial system finds itself in normal times with a surplus of workers, which at recurring intervals increases to the point of being an alarming problem.

An industrial proletariat has seemingly become a part of the order of things. Consciously or unconsciously many employers of labour aid that conspiracy of circumstances which has made Britain urban and industrial. They accept the erroneous view that high profits naturally derive from low wages, and, as the scale of wages is determined more or less by the state

of the labour market, the tendency is inevitably to that low wage limit which just prevents starvation. So long as this view is accepted it is in the interests of payers of low wages to depopulate the rural districts and herd the population in cities, to provide manual training for children and technical education for youth, to make it, if possible, less profitable to cultivate the soil, and, in addition, easier to secure possession for members of their own class of large sections of land for merely residential and sporting purposes. Wise employers, however, are beginning to see that high profits more naturally derive from high wages, plus efficient organisation. Everyone knows now that "back to the land" is impossible in England so long as the fundamental monopoly (land monopoly) continues, because there is no land available for use, except under conditions which make its use unprofitable. The long struggle to open the gate of the industrial prison has made this abundantly clear.

With the introduction of the Small Holdings Act there appeared to be dawning a new day for the people of England, but the light glimmered and went out when the attempt was made to apply its provisions. The Garden City movement seemed to promise something, but whatever its benefits it has had no effect upon the labour market; indeed, this market is brought under closer control. To Joseph it was clear that the

key to the whole problem was simply that the worker, to have any advantageous position, must in the last resort be able to leave industry and secure a comfortable livelihood by the pursuit of agriculture. He saw that it was as a great alternative occupation that agriculture could supplement and balance industry, and play its appropriate rôle in the life of a nation. Allow the land to be available for use, give the children as much instruction in natural occupations as in the crafts, and the rights of the workers would not be long in establishing themselves.

Only a few years ago many thought that the Small Holdings Act would constitute an avenue to rural repopulation. The greatest difficulty apparently was that of training members of a city-bred population for work on the soil. The best method seemed to be the establishment of colonies, which would serve as intermediate stations between town and country. The experiments of Dr. Paton and General Booth had made the idea in some degree familiar. Their underlying intention was to provide healthful employment through which workers could earn a part of their maintenance.

Modifications toward betterment in the British social economy are proverbially slow, and at the same time so vague that their general bearing is indeterminate and unconscious. To clarify its meaning is to check any tendency towards improvement because



notice involves a disproportionate degree of suspicion and criticism, and consequent reaction. In England to label is to damn. The social region, bounded on one side by the fixed doctrine of the economics of employment, supply and demand in the labour market, and, on the other, by the equally hard-and-fast principle of the Poor Law—the region occupied by the unemployed, so long barren of ideas and accessible only to the sterile seeds of charity—this field Joseph Fels chose for his labours. Just as his efforts changed many a London rubbish-heap into a garden full of living things for the further support of life, so he hoped to see the human rubbish-heap flowering and producing.

The conditions were present for some successful work to be undertaken. There was the idea of returning to the land as an outlet for unemployed labour, and the idea of colonising as the means of providing the necessary training, but no practical movement could be got under way. Authorities, both national and local, were landlocked either by convention or regulation, and charity was wholly inadequate to deal with the issue. Some sort of impetus was necessary, and this Joseph supplied. His simple, practical directness set matters moving. If it were a good thing to put the unemployed upon the land, then get land. If it were a good thing to train in colonies for agricultural work, then form colonies. If it were a labour too great for philanthropy to accomplish and required legisla-

tion and administration by State and local authorities, then proceed to secure such legislation and administration. If someone were needed to take the initiative in all these matters, he was quite willing to offer himself.

It was clear to him that whatever was done should not be a matter of capricious charity, but of definite action on the part of public authority; that the foundations should be laid for a permanent rather than a temporary structure; that whatever existing machinery could be adapted to this new purpose should be utilised. It was not so much a lack of instrumentalities as the limitations placed upon their use that formed the chief obstacle. The administration of relief was bound to a narrow course by the principles and regulations of the Poor Law. The Guardians of the Poor with the strict interpretation of their duties, backed by official pressure, found it easier to force all the needy into the groove of utterly destitute paupers—that is, to subject them to workhouse treatment—rather than to tide them over their times of difficulty.

The idea that relief could be administered in a way which might lead to the permanent betterment of those relieved, either by providing healthful occupation or by training for a new sphere of activities, was so contrary to the intention of the Poor Law that Boards of Guardians could not see their way to broaden their activities by including a farm colony. Joseph thought that a new spirit might be introduced

into Poor Law methods if the use of a farm colony were offered to guardians to relieve the congestion in the workhouse, or the strain upon outdoor relief. And evidence speedily developed in a way that enabled him to give effect to this view.