



CHAPTER VIII

Political Interests

EVERY MAN OF WEALTH who desires to achieve something in the direction of social betterment finds his chief difficulty to be the practical one of making personal adjustments. There is the ever-present army of sycophants; there is a multitude with ideas of greater or less value that make their appeal to be supported and set going; and there is the ever-present spectacle of human suffering to be alleviated. The path of least resistance is undoubtedly to join the brigade of philanthropists, because charity provides a means of spending unlimited money without responsibility. Its activities are systematised. There are societies for the "organisation" of charity, by whose aid wealthy persons are enabled to soothe their consciences and "do something to help the poor" without personal effort; a method which Joseph considered useless and harmful. To be known to give freely is a certain road to popularity and a crown of glory. And some strength of character is needed to resist the personal insistence as well as the inherent temptation to sink one's self in

the dissipation of giving. For Joseph, palliation and tinkering with poverty were not enough. He conceived it to be fundamentally mistaken policy to use the surplus good of each generation to repair the wastage that it wrought. His ambition was to make unnecessary the activities of charity which in course of time he came to hate. They left, he was accustomed to say, nothing but evil on both sides. "I hate to give," he told an audience once, "and most men are ashamed to receive as long as charity allows them to remain men." Here was a fundamental count in the indictment. Charity cut at the root of that personal initiative and independence which constitute the very essence of manhood.

Not that he was unresponsive to individual appeals; far from it. Scarcely a day passed without needy applicants seeking him at his office. Many incidents could be recorded of his unwillingness to turn away, empty-handed, any who had a story of real necessity to tell. As an illustration the following incident may be mentioned: To one whose calls and needs were frequent and pressing, and who, it was felt, was not over-burdened with initiative, he one day said, "Look here, brother, if I find you a job will you do it?" "Certainly," was the reply. "Come on then," said Joseph, and leaving important business affairs he took the man by the arm and went out to try and hunt up work for him. When he returned he was asked,

"Well, what is the result?" "Oh!" replied Joseph, "I had to give him another sovereign at the finish." Nevertheless, he did not believe that by simply handing out sovereigns anything permanent was to be effected.

He perceived that it was in the political field and through political agencies that his cause must advance. He determined, therefore, to put his personal services and his financial resources into the effort to place the Taxation of Land Values upon the Statute Book.

As a distinct non-party organisation, the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values was formed in London on March 23, 1907. The Committee at once commenced active co-operation with those members of the House of Commons who had already formed a Land Values group there. Joseph became a member of the United Committee, but while at all times taking the deepest interest in the work he refused to take any part in discussing questions of political party policy.

The Parliamentary programme, or political Charter, of the Committee was set forth in a Land and Taxation Memorial which was presented to representatives of the Liberal Government on the 18th of May, 1911. It was signed by one hundred and seventy-six Members of Parliament. The signatories did not include members of the Irish Nationalist Party, which did not, as a party, memorialise any Gov-

ernment, and could not agree to make an exception in this case. It is only right, however, to say that the question of the Taxation of Land Values has had no more faithful or consistent supporters in Parliament than the Irish Nationalists.

Many politicians at this time believed that the Taxation of Land Values would be brought about only through the Liberal Party. Joseph saw in this a danger. He did not consider it should be treated as a party question, but dealt with it on its merits as fundamentally just and right. And it was hardly consistent with his character and methods to allow what he conceived to be a matter of prime importance to suffer from this narrow conception. He did not, therefore, join the Liberal ranks. His discernment had been too well trained in business affairs not to make it clear to him that the official Liberal policy would give no large place to the taxation of land values. Notwithstanding the declarations of faith by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister when receiving the memorial, the slow progress made with the Budget valuation made it clear to Joseph that the Liberal leaders did not mean what he meant. Their proposals might be very useful for fighting the Conservatives, pre-eminently a party of landlords, but as soon as the fruits of the new land policy should begin to show themselves in the world of industry the mag-

nates who constitute the backbone of Liberalism would give it their unflinching opposition.

These considerations led Joseph to turn more hopefully to the cause of Labour, not as a partisan, but because it was the working people who held his sympathy and whom he desired chiefly to benefit. Only the workers, he felt, would find it to their interest to carry through the reform in its full and effective measure. It might take long for the common people to see the advantage of land reform, but they in the end would find it their most certain means to the attainment of freedom and justice. He was, therefore, more and more drawn to support the cause of Labour, and whenever his aid was asked in connection with a Labour candidature he never refused it.

But there were, and are, many difficulties to overcome even in the Labour ranks. The working man, however intelligent, who has been bred to town life, who by apprenticeship or otherwise has been trained to the exercise of a particular craft, is unable to see, at first view, how land reform can solve his special problem—that problem being the simple one of securing a due proportion of the earnings of the industry in which he participates. This to the worker is the all-absorbing question that lies between himself and the capitalist who employs him. Around this central question group the minor ones pertaining to the conditions of labour. It is with regard to these matters that he

joins his fellow-workmen in order to bring united action to bear upon the employer. His ultimate recourse is the strike, which periodically faces the employer with the alternative of advancing wages or seeing his employees leave their work in a body. This self-protective outlook is the essential purpose of trade unionism. The practice of Joseph's own firm, as large employers of labour, had always been to advance wages to as high a point as possible on their own initiative, because they found it to be good business policy. He knew that any struggle over wages was for the workers an unequal and losing one. However much the employer may suffer, he is nearly always in a better position to carry on a protracted conflict than his employees, who, in most cases, have few resources and can only undertake a strike at the risk of the most terrible consequences. He knew also that, union or no union, so long as the labour market carries a large surplus, wages can be held almost at the limit of subsistence. Whatever might or should be the price of labour, it is in fact determined, like that of other commodities, by the supply on the market. If the supply can be reduced, the demand, and therefore the price, will rise just as with coal, corn, or anything else; but experience goes to show that wherever an increase in wages takes place there is very quickly a decided upward movement in the cost of food, clothing, rents, etc.

It is well known that the suppression of any industry will throw those who practise it into other channels. Joseph saw that the suppression of agriculture carried on continuously over nearly a century had caused the rural population to migrate to the towns, and had given a steady stream of applicants for industrial occupations. How could the tide be swept the other way, and what would be its consequences? It was clear to him that agriculture, in countries where the common people prosper, is not merely one occupation amongst many others, but the great alternative to all industry. Let the conditions for its practice be advantageous as compared with the trades, let the land demand workers and pay them adequately for their work; the consequence would be seen immediately in the withdrawal of the labour surplus in the industrial market. And that desirable state of affairs would be reached in which employers would compete for labourers, instead of labourers competing for the privilege of obtaining a job at rates that barely keep them and their families from the verge of starvation. Moreover, he saw that the taxation of land values would relieve the working population of that unfair incidence of rates and taxes which under the existing system they have to bear.

The way in which adjustment as between agricultural and industrial pursuits would take place is precisely the same as is found in the adjustment of

the trades. When a young man is faced with the necessity of choosing a means of livelihood, his choice is determined partly by inclination, partly by opportunity, but in the main by the economic advantage which one trade manifests as compared with the others. There is a perpetual selection going on of men by trades so that the benefits are equalised by reason of numbers entering. Agriculture would, therefore, not only stop the constant migration from country to town to swell the ranks of industry, but if permitted to exercise the advantages and attractions that belong to it, would undoubtedly produce a current in the opposite direction and reduce the supply of labour.

But a more important difficulty that Joseph had to face in endeavouring to secure the assent of the workers to his reform was due to the fact that they had to a large extent committed themselves to the tenets of Socialism. One of the chief of these is the nationalisation of land by state purchase, which conflicts very sharply with the idea of transferring taxes from productive capital to land values. It is a curious fact that reformers in so many cases keep their ideas within a closed system of principles, thus preventing co-operation in practical political activity; and it must be said that many Socialists would rather sit still contemplating the joys and the advantages of a Socialist State that is to spring full-fledged out of a moment's

intervening revolution than set themselves laboriously, little by little, to shape the trend of social evolution. Joseph, always of practical bent, and basing his programme on existing conditions, was unable to give his assent to proposals which involved State ownership of all industry and the nationalisation of land by legislation or purchase.

The Socialistic principle as applied to the great public services of distribution and communication had his complete support. He conceived the object of revenue to be the extension and betterment of such services, and saw also that these services were the instruments that conferred value in a great degree upon the land. It was with reference to the socialisation of these land values as a source of revenue for the public services that differences arose. He endeavoured to make his Socialist friends see that whereas the nationalisation of land by legislation was not likely to be carried by a House of Commons dominated by landlords and lawyers, and whereas acquisition by purchase would throw an intolerable burden upon the people, the taxation of land values would accomplish what they wanted, and possessed the superior advantage of being within the sphere of practical politics. Moreover, it was not clear that nationalised land would prove the remedy for present-day evils. There must in the last analysis be individual tenure of some kind, and he urged that the State, as ultimate landlord,

might not prevent the existence of a host of sub-landlords who would exploit rental values more or less as at present. And, further, he did not believe that the control of industry and land by an army of bureaucrats would produce a condition of liberty in the best sense of the word.

In addition to the foregoing, Joseph could see that the full utilisation of land would go far toward the abolition of industry for profit, which lies at the heart of the Socialist contention. There is a distinction as regards the capital employed in industry which is not sufficiently taken into account. It is a simple distinction between debenture and preferred stock on the one hand, and common share issues on the other. Everyone knows that the initiatory and working provision for a new industry is supplied as capital bearing a fixed charge and constituting a mortgage on the business. This supply is necessary whoever owns the business, State or individual, and it would have to bear a charge either as interest or sinking fund for redemption. Exploitation for profit comes in connection with that large world of common share issues, the Mecca of promoters and jobbers, in which values are capitalised dividends, and which is firmly established upon the backs of the toilers. If it is admitted that the proceeds of any industry should go as a reward to those who supply the actual and legitimate capital, and to the workers who carry it on, then

clearly there is no room for fluctuating share values. The greater part of the City of London would be in search of means of livelihood. The difficulty is that the worker has no way of collecting his proportion. He does not even trouble to understand that while he toils for his sovereign per week, the well-dressed individual whom he sees on his way to the City, and for whom he feels so much respect, has merely pocketed the other sovereign that he, the worker, has earned. The problem, after all, is simply how to place the worker in a position to collect the due return of his labour. Antecedent to the millennium, there appears to be only one way—namely, to make him free to give his services to, or withdraw them from, any employer. When the owners of land clamour for men to help them earn the rent which the State inexorably collects, the workers, Joseph felt, will have achieved their freedom.

(It is unfortunate that many who argue against the Taxation of Land Values think that it is merely an agricultural reform. That is not so. While it is true that it would have a most important influence in turning a great flow of labour back to the land it would exercise great influence, say, for instance, on such industries as the building and kindred trades. It would also provide what is urgently required, the fundamental basis which is needed before the housing problem can be solved and slumdom destroyed.)