



## CHAPTER IX

### *Home Colonisation*

IN THE WINTER OF 1905 the late General Booth, appalled by the degree of unemployment then existing, came to the conclusion that only in emigration was a remedy to be found. He proposed, therefore, to raise a fund by means of which five thousand families should be assisted to emigrate to Australia. He was convinced that it lay in his power to send out the type of settler of which he believed the colony to stand in need. Joseph emphatically disagreed with this proposal. He was not convinced, in the first place, that work was to be had in Australia. He doubted very seriously whether "assisted" emigration of the type suggested by General Booth would result in the choice of fit persons; and, above all, he felt certain that there was room and to spare in Great Britain for the proposed emigrants. With this thought in mind he made an offer through the Press to the British Government. It was in the following terms:

"I am informed that, probably encouraged by Mr. Rider Haggard's report to the Government on the

success of Salvation Army colonies in South America, General Booth has offered to settle some 1,500 families on land in the Colonies, if the Government will provide, say, £300,000 for that purpose.

"I believe England's own homeland will support her present population, and she should not allow some of her best blood to leave her shores by assisted emigration. There can be no objection to voluntary emigration.

"If General Booth's scheme is really to settle 1,500 families in the Colonies, and if he makes the proviso that the Government shall assist him in his undertaking to the extent of £300,000, I am quite sure that better results can be obtained with a like amount of money without so large a proportion of the money being unproductively paid over to transportation companies or in commission to land and other agents.

"Bearing these points in mind, I would gladly be one of twenty to guarantee the settling—right here in Great Britain—on home land, of the same number of families with the same assistance from Government. If nineteen others cannot be found to join me, I shall still be prepared to act alone to the extent of my proportion.

"Inasmuch as there is a hitch in connection with General Booth's scheme which will probably ultimately cause it to be entirely dropped, the present seems an opportune moment for carrying out home

colonisation. During the last fifty years the number of persons employed upon the land in this country has decreased by some one and a quarter millions, whilst there is no evidence to show that the quality of the land or the conditions of the climate are responsible for this great falling-off.

“Experiments made by private landowners and public authorities prove conclusively that, under a system of small holdings, with absolute security of tenure for the cultivator, farming is still a profitable occupation. The Vale of Evesham, Worcester, is somewhat of an object-lesson in this direction, there being thousands of acres in small holdings, though conditions are not nearly what they should be in respect of permanence of tenure or of occupation.

“The public does not know that there is about the same percentage of unemployed in most of the Colonies as in the Mother Country. It may also not be aware that the United States is not a Mecca for the unemployed and the moneyless.

“In addition to agriculture, which has been so much neglected of late years in Great Britain for reasons which must be obvious to most thinking people, there is the question of afforestation. A Royal Commission has shown that there are in Great Britain some twenty million acres of absolutely wasted land capable of being put under timber. Not less than one hundred thousand adults, representing a population

of (say) half a million people, would find profitable and healthy employment in this industry.

"The State forests of Germany bring in an average of about eighteen million pounds to the national exchequer; Great Britain imports timber to the value of over forty million pounds, a great proportion of which could and should be grown on home land."

It was but a nine days' wonder. General Booth's scheme was, as Joseph had foreshadowed, already doomed owing to the great divergence of Australian opinion as to its merits. The Press loudly acclaimed "Mr. Fels' generosity", articles were written about his "public spirit", the usual notices were contributed on the possibilities of afforestation; in prospect, indeed, the money was spent over and over again. One comment on the plan, that of the (London) Star, is worth preserving because it shows so real an appreciation of Joseph's object. Its editor commented on the plan as follows (issue of October 18, 1905):

"Mr. Joseph Fels comes forward with a practical proposal for the restoration of the manless land to the landless man. If the Government will grant a sum of £300,000, he will make one of twenty to guarantee the settling of fifteen hundred families in this country. If nineteen others cannot be found to join him, he is prepared to act alone to the extent of his proportion. We need not say that we heartily welcome Mr. Fels' patriotic offer. We hope he will get his nine-

teen partners in double quick time. Surely there are nineteen men who are willing to save England from the fate of Ireland, to stop the torrent of emigration which is draining her life blood. We have often been called 'Little Englanders' because we refuse to treat these islands as a mere parish and because we hold that the health of the outer empire depends upon our heart beats. That is why we supported Mr. Jesse Collings in his opposition to General Booth's scheme for deporting five thousand stalwart Englishmen to Australia. We are convinced that there is plenty of land at home for the strong man, if only the barriers between him and the land are levelled. During the last fifty years, as Mr. Fels points out, the number of persons employed upon the land has decreased by a million and a quarter. . . . There is no doubt that the scientific farmer, employing modern methods, can hold his own against the world. But he must be delivered from the fetters which our obsolete land laws have riveted upon his enterprise. It is time to call our great landlords to give an account of their stewardship. There can be no radical reform without compulsion. The State must recover the land for the people.

"It is, of course, more picturesque to ship our bone and sinew off to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. But it is a fact not generally known that the percentage of unemployed in most of the Colonies is as

high as it is here. The state of South Africa at this moment is deplorable. Thousands of white men are walking in gloomy despair about the streets of Cape Town and Johannesburg. We hear a great deal about the successful emigrants, but of the dismal failures we hear less. There are plenty of young men who curse the day when they left England. Yet, take it all in all, we do not believe there is a finer country in the world for the honest, steady, and strenuous man than this England of ours. We ought to rediscover its unknown rural charms, and to repopulate its desolate acres. The cult of the country, which the bicycle and the motor have revived, ought to make the task of manning the land an easy one. . . . If some part of the millions which our imperialists waste on barren war were spent on afforestation and land nationalisation, England would be happier and stronger. What did we get for the two hundred and fifty million pounds squandered in the South African War? We provided work under degrading conditions for forty-five thousand Chinamen. We established an oligarchy of landlords. Why not, in future, spend our millions at home for the benefit of our own people?"

Joseph heartily welcomed so spirited an appeal. He urged everywhere the justification of an immediate experiment. No country, he wrote, could be truly prosperous where the "submerged" population formed a large percentage of the people. The endurance and

the vitality of England must, sooner or later, be seriously threatened if there were allowed to grow up a permanently unemployed class. If competition were allowed so to operate that the worker thrown out of employment found it impossible to recover the means of livelihood, any real sentiment of patriotism became impossible.

Such was his plea. But beyond the demands of the Press that attention be devoted to his plan, nothing was done. So far as can be discovered, no seconder of his offer appeared. The rich classes were clearly apathetic. Of Government action of any kind we are ignorant. It is possible that the plan, like that of General Booth, was referred to the ministerial committee on agricultural settlements in the Colonies; perhaps in the last months of Mr. Balfour's Administration no time could be spared from the all-important task of saving his Ministry from the destruction to which it appeared doomed. Certainly Mr. Walter Long failed to give this experiment the thoughtful consideration he had devoted to the farm labour colonies. Joseph, not unnaturally, was keenly disappointed. The need was clear, conditions were urgent. Continental experiment and analogy justified high hopes for the success of a well executed plan of home colonisation. The existence of a real land hunger had been many times demonstrated; that industrial workers could be made into useful agriculturists Joseph him-

self had shown. If landlords cared nothing for his plan, something was seriously wrong with the landlords. Here, as in all other endeavours, he came face to face with the same intolerable barrier to progress.

Mention has already been made of Joseph's work in connection with the cultivation of vacant lots in Philadelphia. In 1904 he conceived the idea of starting a society in London with the same object. He went about seeking the co-operation of men and women whose help seemed likely to be of service, and by the end of the year an association, with a committee to which such men as Mr. Percy Alden, Professor Patrick Geddes, Mr. George Lansbury and Mr. Israel Zangwill gave their assistance, was formed. Mr. Fels himself acted as secretary of the enterprise. The society had objects more or less similar to those of its American parent. The temporary loan of unused land was to be obtained from every possible source. This land was to be prepared during the winter for cultivation, thus providing, in some degree at any rate, a source of constructive work for the unemployed. The land so prepared was to be let either free, or at a nominal rent to approved applicants, the preference being given to those with families. Tools and seeds were to be provided either free or at cost price, and practical instruction was to be given wherever necessary.

A beginning had already been made when the so-



ciety was organised with land lent by the Bromley Gas Light and Coke Company in West Ham. This was a dreary-looking tract situated in the most desolate region of East London. It had once been a fertile market garden, famous for the production of celery. It was now covered with twitch which flourished and killed every other plant. In a few months twenty-five acres of this desert were transformed into flourishing vegetable gardens. The heavy labour of preparing their allotments fell mostly upon the applicants themselves and provided a serious test of their interest and perseverance. The result of the first season's working was a financial return of about forty pounds per acre, which meant that the holders of even a few rods had gone far toward the maintenance of themselves and families. The success of this first effort strengthened the Society in approaching public authorities and private owners. The London County Council placed at its disposal several pieces of unused land and the work was extended to many districts.

Within six months after the formation of the London Vacant Land Cultivation Society, it had given birth to similar societies in Edinburgh, Belfast, Middlesbrough and Dublin. Wherever an invitation to explain the scheme was forthcoming, Joseph threw other work aside to go. By the end of the first year the London Society had two hundred and fifty men at work on its plots, and had many more applications

for land. Ninety per cent. of the men were successful in their experiment, and the average yield per acre exceeded forty pounds sterling. Nothing handicapped the Society except the lack of land.

During the eight years which followed the formation of the London Vacant Land Cultivation Society every effort was made on the lines laid down by Joseph. On the surface there did not appear to have been the success he had hoped for, since the highest number of allotments secured by the Society only represented 400, occupying about 40 acres of land, in various parts of the Metropolis.

Then came the war, and as a result food shortage. This brought home in a very effective way the object-lesson which Joseph had, in this bit of social service, constantly sought to inculcate—i.e., the crime of permitting land to remain idle. The nation's needs awakened the Government to the necessity for action, and drastic measures were taken to increase the supply of homegrown foodstuffs. The Council of the Vacant Land Cultivation Society seized the opportunity and joyously placed its organisation at the disposal of the authorities. The Government, through the machinery provided by the Defence of the Realm Act, gave powers to the Board of Agriculture enabling that department to compulsorily take over all unused land, and through the various local authorities to arrange for its cultivation.

Within six months the Vacant Land Cultivation Society had organised and manned no fewer than 5,500 allotments in the London area alone. As this work and the needs of the allotment holders increased, it was felt that an organisation on a wider and more democratic basis than the Vacant Land Cultivation Society was required, and as a result a conference of allotment holders was held in London, and an organisation, which eventually adopted the title of the National Union of Allotment Holders, was brought into being. Within a few months, in this great national emergency, no fewer than 1,500,000 allotments were organised. Even after the war this valuable contribution to the national welfare continued to flourish. The National Union has amalgamated with another organisation. This united body has now, after the initial effort of Joseph, 27 years ago, a membership of nearly 150,000.

One feature of this movement, which is a matter of gratification to me, and one which would have given Joseph the greatest pleasure, is that it has not only demonstrated the great benefits which the cultivation of land held out of use would bring at a time of national crisis, but it has created a new and keen interest in the solving of the land question. It has shown the evils of private monopoly in the national resources of the country, among town dwellers in general, and the working classes in particular, a fact

which must in the future bring a strong volume of public opinion to bear upon the land question with the most satisfactory results. When the average British elector understands this problem and goes to the ballot-box determined to solve it, a great step will have been taken towards realising the ideal conditions of life for which Joseph laboured so devoutly.

When it is remembered that the annual income of the V.L.C. Society did not average more than three hundred and fifty pounds, the measure of its success will be in some degree realised. The Society remained in existence until 1928. Then I withdrew my support. England was hindering rather than helping. As no one came forward to take my place the work could not continue.