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Joseph Fels

By Israel Zangwill.

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I

I HAD never heard of Joseph Fels until a shining-eyed little man walked into my office unannounced and unheralded, and offered me a hundred thousand dollars. It was in Essex Street, where Dr. Johnson had once presided over Sam's Club, that this miracle occurred. In this old-world by-way off the Thames, in an atmosphere of solicitors and sporting papers, the Jewish Territorial Organization (yclept for short, I.T.O.) had raised the standard of the Jewish State, and the visitor's offer was meant as a contribution to the sinews of war. Unfortunately, Joseph Fels it is not only the propositions of Satan that have strings to them. Even angels, whose visits are so few and far between, hedge their gifts with conditions, and what Mr. Fels wanted was that the State to be brought into being should be established on a single-tax basis.

Sympathetically disposed as I was towards land-nationalization, and still more towards I.T.O. capitalization, I was unable to pledge the organization to the Henry Georgian principle, because it was impossible to foresee the circumstances and conditions under which the desired tract of territory would become attainable—if, indeed, it would become attainable at all in a world ruled by unreason and the sword. In the motto of the old Flemish painter, "not as I would, but as I can." Our first business was to obtain a territory. For Fels the first business was to single-tax it. One could not know him for a day without discovering that to him Henry George was Moses, and "single-tax" all the law and the prophets. "A Calvinistic preacher," says Hazlitt, "would not relinquish a single point of faith to be the Pope of Rome." Fels would not sanction private property in land to be the President of the United States; taxation of land values was the medicine for all human ills, though when I once bantered him upon his persuasion that it was a panacea, he replied with a humor as characteristic as his fervor, "I don't say it will cure in-growing toe-nails." It was this humor that made him bearable even to the heathen who swore not by St. George, nor held the single-tax sacred. He spoke the American language with a fund of rich and racy locutions that recalled the pungent vitality of the early Mark Twain. They added—if anything could—to the radiation he gave of absolute sincerity, and were the joy of his audiences, public or private. "I love a fanatic," said Oscar Straus to me after an hour of Joseph Fels, with whom he disagreed profoundly. But Joseph Fels was loved in despite of his fanaticism as well as on account of it.

An Angel of Many Causes

NOR did his fanaticism prevent his co-operation in other causes, though it prevented his absorption in them. He was interested in the Woman Question, and played a useful part in bailing out suffragettes, male or female. He was of similar service in the Tchaikowsky and other troubles in Russia—indeed, in an age when money is so rarely forthcoming at the call of the spirit, though it can be had in sacksful for causes of recognized respectability, Fels filled a role in which it is not easy to replace him. He was the

universal provider, the financier of the unprofitable, the philanthropic publicist, the handy-man of the social revolution, the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Bohemia. He advertised his soap, FelsNaptha, in papers chosen not for their circulation but for their lack of it; sweet are the uses of advertisement. He commissioned a single-tax play; sculptures were dumped in his drawing-room.

I once calculated with him the annual income necessary for rescuing from the toils of poverty all the unrecognized geniuses of the day—the toll was not alarming. The people who count are easily counted. The prophets, poets, and painters, the thinkers and teachers of the world, could be supported by the State at the annual cost of one shell sent on its mission of destruction from a seventeen-inch gun. It is a splendid opening for a small capitalist. Fels actually did subsidize geniuses of various sorts, much as Wedgwood subsidized Coleridge: possibly also charlatans. I had the sense of his being surrounded by wild-cat schemes and schemers, as well as by men splendidly devoted to himself and the common cause. Less directly he subsidized scribes, especially of the single-tax species. A book on the creed, or in its spirit, he would buy up and circulate by the hundred. It is an example that as an author I warmly commend. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* he of course distributed by the bushel as a missionary distributes Bibles. In my own capacity as a heathen savage I received two copies inscribed, "It is to learn." I never got a letter from him but was surcharged with tracts, mottos, and verses. He was my bulkiest correspondent; no doubt others too received his tuition by correspondence. As he appraised men by their soundness on the single-tax and despised some of my most admired friends, his patience towards me must have been the missionary's hope of his prey. Unless it was that his interest in the Jewish question was far deeper than he admitted even to himself.

His Service to the I.T.O.

TIE would have called the I.T.O. one of his side-shows, but he never wilfully missed a committee meeting or a public gathering, and his speeches upon our platform were not infrequent. But though he never neglected the opportunity to propagate the single-tax, he could not have entertained more than a shadowy prospect of propagating it practically through a Jewish State, and if his purse was the first to open to our necessities and the last to close, it could only have been because of his increasing perception of the Jewish tragedy. He contributed liberally to the expenses of our investigation of Cyrenaica under Professor Gregory, and in his eagerness to hear the results he accompanied me to Folkestone to meet the returning expedition, and keen was his disappointment to learn that that vaunted land was practically a dangerous desert (as the Italian Imperialists who burked our report have since found to their cost). And when it looked as if Portugal in her fear of German grabbing would concede Angola, or a stretch of it, for Jewish colonization, the new expedition would not have been able to set out at all had Fels not generously advanced half the initial outlay.

Nor was he by any means a passive committeeman. More than once he tried to hustle a world that is not to be hustled, to poke up Colonial statesmen, to interview business men. His greatest feat on our behalf was his journey to Mexico to obtain a concession of territory from President Diaz. That great if not good man was more than willing to facilitate a large immigration of Jewish industrial and commercial workers, but did not welcome the idea of a special territory upon an agricultural basis. It has just transpired that thirty years ago Diaz himself sought to attract a large Jewish colonization, and that he was even willing to pay the expenses of a scientific commission to investigate his offer. Our

Organization was not then in existence to educate the Jews on the necessity of a national home if they wished to survive, and this, like many another chance in Canada and Australasia, was let slip. History does not go back on itself, and the I.T.O., like Germany, began to feel it had come too late.

At one time Fels thought that a tract in Paraguay, which he had secured for the purpose of obtaining an ingredient of his Fels-Naptha soap, might afford the nucleus of the desired development while the extracting of this ingredient would afford employment to pioneer immigrants, and help the early stages of colonization. It was a scheme that would have made both of his ends meet. I remember a long councilmeeting at his house with his Paraguay agents, when we worked out the details, but Paraguay, already the scene of so many fantastic and socialistic experiments, has hitherto remained immune from ours. Latterly, Fels became enthusiastic for a Mesopotamian scheme, which I had publicly broached, but his zeal for which owed perhaps more to Zionism, and most to his wife's intuition in its favor, an intuition, he told me proudly, that had never been at fault.

Helping to Mend Human Misery

CO far, indeed, was he beguiled into side-excursions from the high road of the single-tax that he joined the department of the I.T.O. founded to regulate emigration in view of needs that could not await the foundation of a State. The gravitation of the Jewish masses to New York and the Eastern cities of America had produced an unhealthy congestion, and to avoid the slums and competition of these self-made Ghettos, our Emigration Regulation Department set about educating the Russian masses, in the words of Horace Greeley, to "go West." They were to enter by Galveston—a port utterly unknown in the Pale—and thence to be distributed over the immense region west of the Mississippi.

Of the London Committee constituted to supervise this deflection of the human current, Joseph Fels was an original member. The Committee sat in the historic building of the Rothschilds in St. Swithin's Lane, and Mr. Leopold de Rothschild acted as Honorary Treasurer. To Fels this alliance with the high priesthood of capitalism was something like a pill, but he swallowed it bravely in view of the importance of the work. When by an unconstitutional caprice of the immigration authorities at Washington, a large batch of brawny immigrants was rejected at Galveston on the plea of "poor physique," and I travelled across the North Sea to meet the unhappy victims deported from Ellis Island, men who had sold off their homes in Russia and were now thrown back upon Europe, penniless, Fels accompanied me to Bremen and worked many hours with me at the task of mending all this superfluous man-made misery. He also hunted up a photographer to prove how many muscular giants the party contained, and as the emigration building—Stadt Warsaw—held likewise numerous other Jewish transmigrants, including half a hundred children, Fels had all the little ones photographed in a group—splendid populationstuff for the States they looked—and he bought up all the sweets in the establishment for them. But then children were always a weakness of his. "If I had a boy like yours," he said, rebuking my paternal stoicism, "I should want to have him by me all the time."

Bearding Lord Rothschild

'C'ELS would not have been Fels if he had not taken advantage of the contiguity with the late Lord Rothschild to seek an interview with the uncrowned King of Jewry; not, needless to say, in any courtier

spirit, but in the spirit of Catherine of Siena bearding the Pope at Avignon, or an early Quaker lady setting out to convert the Grand Turk. ' Whether the vices of capitalism or the virtues of the single-tax formed the main object of this mission I never quite understood. But, knowing both my men, I had no felicitous augury of the result. For Lord Rothschild was brusque, deaf, and despotic, and Fels cheery and irrepressible. The meeting was, I gathered, brief. Lord Rothschild generally secured the last word by leaving the room abruptly, and it is unlikely that he failed to . apply this skilful dialectical method on this occasion. What is certain is that Fels's opinion of peers, never very tropical, fell below freezing point. There was hardly anybody he could not call comrade or brother, but I suspect that his sense of camaraderie stopped thenceforward at Lord Rothschild.

His notion of true manhood had been formed at the feet of his Philadelphia neighbor, Walt Whitman, and it was probably "the good gray poet" that inspired the general enthusiasm for humanity, for which Henry George provided the special conduit. The reading of *Progress and Poverty* was the turning-point in his life. It was a conversion, a finding of salvation, in the fullest meaning of these terms. Thenceforth he had a creed by which to live and die. For, of course, he did not see the singletax like a Chancellor of the Exchequer hailing a fruitful fiscal expedient, but like Abou ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!), who loved his fellowmen, and like Don Quixote, out to charge against a monstrous wrong. Henry George had in fact more to give than a dry, economic device; he was a dynamic emotional impulse against evil, a prophet even in the minor sense of predicting. Nor was his intellectual contribution to political economy at all negligible. It was concrete and business-like, or it would not have carried away a keen business man like Fels, who had his Sancho Panza side and when another business man tried to best him felt the original sin in him leap like a tiger to the fray, much as the hero of *Les Affaires Sont Les Affaires* bristled for business-combat even over the body of his only son. The creator of Fels-Naptha was the last man in the world to be carried away by soft soap.

Land really is—how can one deny it ?—man's indispensable standing-ground; no nebulous but a very solid basis for an economic philosophy. That this national necessity should be in private hands is clearly discordant with our communal thinking. (Even Stonehenge has been sold, as if so historic a stone mystery could be subject to the whim of a proprietor—in Italy or any civilized country it would be a "national monument.") That land should be taxed peculiarly—or even taxed away without compensation—is a proposition not altogether indefensible. But Fels went much further. He had so convinced himself that private land-ownership was the sin against the Holy Ghost, and the taxation of land and all the values inherent and involved in it took on so many aspects to his imagination, that he beheld all life enriched and ameliorated by the unflinching application of his golden rule. Avenues and perspectives innumerable opened up to his vision, and with almost perverted ingenuity he would trace every social evil to its root in the monopolization of land values. Possibly that impassioned passage misled him in which the Master cries out: "It is this that turns the blessings of material progress into a curse. It is this that crowds human beings into noisome cellars and squalid tenement houses; that fills prisons and brothels; that goads men with want and consumes them with greed; that robs women of grace and beauty of perfect womanhood; that takes from little children the joy and innocence of life's morning."

"Land and Liberty!"

THE single-tax is after all only a fiscal expedient which would lessen the financial burdens of the poor, and even if it increased production and thus diminished poverty, positively as well as negatively, poverty is, alas! only one of the many roots of human misery, and were all the prisons, brothels, ugly women and blighted children due to it eliminated, I can imagine them all co-existing—if in smaller numbers—with comparative comfort. It was not poverty that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered from. Still Poverty is such a Giant Despair that to despatch him at a stroke would be an achievement so massive that the single-taxers need hardly put their claim higher.

But their cause suffers from under-statement as well as over-statement, for "land-values" is an unfortunate term which to the vulgar connotes mostly rent or price per acre, whereas to the true single-taxer it means likewise rent or price for tramway, railway, lighting, cable, or other concessions, and the automatic tapping by the community of these and whatsoever other potentialities of profit are created less by the initiative of the individual than by the accretion of the population, no unit of which has earned the increment arising from the aggregation. It is a concept not easily distinguishable—in this enlarged form—from Socialism proper. But Fels drew the line at Socialism, though he shared its spirit. In view of the redemptive efficiency of the single-tax, he thought it superfluous. In the words of the Master: "All that is necessary to social regeneration is included in the motto of those Russian patriots, sometimes called Nihilists—'Land and Liberty!'"

If I occasionally rallied him on his formula-of-all-work, I was none the less aware that it is only the one-eyed who accomplish anything in the world of action, and that Argus with his hundred eyes proved hopelessly inefficient at his one job of watching. If the epithet "one-eyed" displeases, let it be replaced by "single-eyed," which carries the meaning with more dignity. Fels had no eye, for example, for the sentimental side of land, the emotional value of a meadow or an orchard to a family; to such artistic beauties as inhere in the feudal system of great estates he was blind. Burke, according to Hazlitt, thought it as absurd to reduce all mankind to the same insipid level as to destroy the inequalities of surface in a country for the benefit of agriculture and commerce. Fels thought inequalities that diminished agriculture and commerce, not picturesque, but criminal. The great landed aristocracy of England was anathema. The English ideal of isolation was antipathetic to his American passion for foregathering. The more people enjoying and subdividing a piece of land, the merrier. What right had you to cling to an old family garden, if laborers lacked land for their cottages or the villagers plots for their potatoes? That there were imponderable land-values, by which society benefited, even though immaterially and indirectly—as through the poems and pictures and thoughts they inspired—he would not admit. There was something of an inverted Gradgrind in this remorseless pursuit of happiness for the million.

Experiment and Achievement

NOR did he allow sufficiently for the fact that the gospel of Henry George arose in a late and sophisticated period of civilization, when the first efforts to break in an intractable earth had already been made, and land had ceased to have its original relation with pioneer labor. It so happened that the Jewish Territorial Organization brought him into contact with the phase of the problem that Henry George had overlooked. But even the fact that the I.T.O. did not consider Cyrenaica worth the cost of cultivation or irrigation did not alter his sense that its land-values should be taxed. In the pioneering

stage of land-development the increment is by no means unearned; it is hard-earned by danger, initiative, and capital. That at a later stage the landlord, especially in growing cities, receives a fat and disproportionate increment is a separate question, but once land has been treated as private property, transferable like any other form, society can only gradually undo what it has done.

Fels learnt no lesson either from the failure of his Essex experiment, "Maylands," which struck me, when I visited it, as a melancholy and expensive refutation of his theories of the small cultivator and the converted townsman. Farming is, in fact, an expert occupation, and the value of land qua land is absolutely nil. In Canada you may still have 160 acres for nothing or, rather, in exchange for your pioneer labor.

On the other hand, Fels did splendidly practical and successful work by his Society for the Cultivation of Waste Spaces—of which I was an otiose and absent-bodied member. That is an enterprise which, started long before the war, found imitation in more than one of the belligerent countries, anxious about the food-supply. And, of course, in estimating his practical achievements one must not forget that Fels-Naptha has lightened washing-day in a million homes.

"Restoring His Profits to the World's Service"

TF Fels owed much to Walt Whitman, and more to Henry George, he had his own spiritual power welling up from his own racial founts. For was he not of the race whose prophet taught land-nationalization three thousand years before Henry George, and whose teachers had risen—even before Jesus—from the brotherhood of Israel to the thought of the brotherhood of the nations? It is not without significance that Christians pronounced him the best Christian they had ever known. He and I had a good chuckle together over the correspondent who wrote to the papers to ask what was the good of Mr. Joseph Fels trying to bring the land to the people, when alien Jews were battenning upon Britain? He himself knew no blank page between the Old and New Testaments, regarding the spiritual tradition as continuous, and doubtless at the bottom of his soul he believed it was a single-taxer that drove the money changers out of the Temple. And, in truth, did not Jesus say he was come to fulfil the law of Moses, not to destroy it? We know as a fact that the jubilee provision of the Mosaic land-laws had always been evaded.

But Fels had none of the other-worldliness which often adulterates earthly goodness. He had no wish to "lay up treasure in heaven." He had no conception of future reward—even future life had been left by Henry George as a mere hope—but he wanted to see heaven here below. He wanted to see with his own eyes the Kingdom coming nearer. Postmortem philanthropy was his abhorrence. His money must be spent here and now; indeed, it was only his in the sense that he had the responsibility of its spending. To denounce himself as a capitalist, fattening on the labors of his fellow-men, was no rhetorical figure or sensational trick. While not unconscious of the humor of his situation and even with a certain whimsical enjoyment of the disconcertment of other members of his firm, he had a genuine conviction of sin, which could be cancelled only by restoring his business profits to the world's service. He was stained with the crime of capitalism—he was grubby with earth privately owned—why should he not use his soap to wash himself clean? Hence it was that he reduced his personal expenditure to a minimum, eschewing, for example, Pullman carriages and motor-cars, and riding third class or in omnibuses. True,

he was far less rich than the rumor of him, but then his donations were so large, his feat in financing the single-tax movement in so many countries so unique, that people, never guessing he was giving to his utmost, thought his gifts were mere crumbs from the millionaire's table. They more nearly represented the millionaire's meal. The millionaire, in fact, was a myth, and even a bit of a fraud. "The more I give, the more they think I've got," he said to me once with a droll twinkle. The more he gave the less he had, and he would quite cheerfully have gone to the workhouse to ensure that the land it stood on should revert to the people.

But if his was not the charity that gives away what it does not want, neither was it the charity of checks. "You cannot give money and not yourself," he said. What he gave in time and work, in self-consuming zeal, was even more than he gave in money. No journey was too great to make for his ideal. He would have travelled to Tibet to educate the Grand Lama, or unflinchingly addressed Icelandic audiences in Americanese. Nor was his the charity that breeds charity. He hated subscriptions to perpetual palliatives, donations that pauperized and not redeemed. Even the propping up of art and artists began to appeal less to him when he realized that his money scarcely sufficed for his central mission. The Apostle became jealous of the Maecenas, and the only time I ever saw him fly into a passion was against himself. The thought that he was letting his pockets be plucked at from every side threw him into a sudden rage. One had to support ideas, not individuals. The ideas would ultimately support the individuals. A distich conveying this moral was one of his favorite enclosures.

An Honored Prophet at Home and Abroad

NEVERTHELESS, Joe Fels was no lover of abstractions. He was always surrounded by individuals, not all of whom clung to him for support, though he rendered friendly services to them all, from prime donnes to professors, from musicians to Labor Members or masseurs. Guests of every nationality, especially the Bohemian, and embracing equally poets and lady laundresses, millenarian meat-packers, and vegetarians, you would always find at his house in Regent's Park—indeed, he never seemed to "live unto himself alone." And with his erratic habit of dragging one home to eat and sleep, he must have had in Mrs. Fels a housekeeper, as well as a hostess, of genius. But all his motley guests were made into one happy family, and there was always more than enough to

eat, if not always enough to sleep on. All the men were his brothers and all the women his sisters, and the atmosphere of an early Christian agapemone pervaded these meals, eaten as if in communion.

These guests of his included some of the most distinguished persons of our time, and it is no small tribute to his fascination that with only a moderate equipment of education, with no graces of breeding, and the handicap of a soap-business, he was able to attract so many diverse personalities. It was the moral core of the man, the passion of faith, which raised him to equality with them, nay, that made them his inferiors, and sometimes his conscious inferiors. Members of Parliament acknowledged his force and leadership. He had confabulations with Cabinet Ministers. He inspired a band of workers in a dozen countries. He was received in Spain with the honors of a prophet, nor was he without honor even in his native America. Persons who spend huge sums to uplift themselves socially may note with envy at how small a money-price it is possible to become a world-figure, if advertisement is the last thing you are thinking of. "To how few of those who sow the seed," writes Henry George wistfully, "is it given to

see it grow, or even with certainty know that it will grow." Joseph Fels was one of the fortunate few. His death was sadly premature, but in his comparatively brief span he set in motion historic influences, and he saw them begin to modify history. And he enjoyed his success. "I am having the time of my life," he told me, when the movement began to hum and his business partners to be wroth. Wherein the devotees of enjoyment may read another lesson. But Mill has already pointed out the paradox that happiness comes not to the wilful hunter, if, indeed, it had not been pointed out long before in Galilee.

"Brave Faith Has Not Lived in Vain"

IF his domestic happiness it is not for an outsider to speak. But it may be recorded without indiscretion that he once said to me: "I saw my wife first when she was a very young girl, and I made up my mind there and then that I would marry nobody else." The two were cousins, but it is curious that they should have found each other so unerringly, for, though equally rare souls, they were supplementary rather than similar. I remember a period at which Mrs. Fels was not unreservedly a devotee of the single-tax—Female Suffrage, I imagine, ranked higher. But I remember no time at which Mr. Fels was not unreservedly a devotee of Mrs. Fels. When he parted with her in Piccadilly—to meet two hours later in Regent's Park—he took farewell as if her omnibus were a liner bearing her across the seas. It was an inspiring instance of his delicate instinct, to make her the sole and unconditioned beneficiary of his estate. All-absorbing as his passion for land-nationalization was otherwise, he did not feel it had the right to absorb her. But here as often love and wisdom were one, and the abnegation of his cause proved the road to its continuance.

That he died when he did, in the flush of his hope and his happiness, and did not live to see all the dreams of the ages mocked by a senseless and ineffably ghastly war, is no tragedy, so far as he was concerned. We may even rejoice that he was spared to see the sinister fulfilment of the prophecy of the Master: "The civilized world is trembling on the verge of a great movement. Either it must be a leap upwards, which will open the way to advances yet undreamed of, or it must be a plunge downward, which will carry us back toward barbarism." To live to see the grimmer alternative would have been agony to this man of fellow-feeling. But for the world it is tragic to be bereft of him at a moment when it needs every glimmer of optimism and aspiration. And for his friends life would have been a little less dark, had we still the sustainment of his sunny camaraderie, his indomitable idealism, his breezy pugnacity, his lovable laughter. By what strange prescience was it that Henry George prefixed to the concluding chapter of his Gospel a stanza that might have been written for the passing of his chief disciple?

"The days of the nations bear no trace
Of all the sunshine so far foretold;
The cannon speaks in the teacher's place—
The age is weary with work and gold
And high hopes wither, and memories wane;
On hearths and altars the fires are dead;
But that brave faith has not lived in vain—
And this is all that our watcher said."