

Joseph Fels, Reformer

By "J. O." in Land Values

Where did the budget come from? This question has been asked and will be asked again. The budget is the result of men's faith in, and work for, a great and simple idea, just like the fruit of gardens and fields. No one interested in such matters is surprised if a lily, whose roots are loosened and torn from the soil, withers or grows weak and distorted. No such person has any doubt as to how this weakness may be prevented or repaired. There are people who hold exactly similar views with regard to the condition of human beings to the soil. They see no matter for amazement in the imperfections which mark the bodies, minds and characters of men and women, whose connection with land is not according to their needs. They see no way of removing the imperfections except by allowing these men and women to strike their roots again into the element from which their life is drawn. Given this freedom they see nothing to prevent them from becoming strong and beautiful in every part of their nature.

Joseph Fels is one of the people who hold this faith. Nations of men have been wrenched from their hold on land by national systems of land tenure—if systems, which daily become more perfect instruments for separating men from land, can be called systems of "tenure." Whole nations decay and die under these systems, and as a great and universal alternative to all these, the taxation of land values, has been advanced. To the promotion of this alternative Joseph Fels has set himself with remarkable devotion and energy. "The taxation of land values," he said a few weeks ago at a meeting held in one of the committee rooms of the British House of Commons, "the taxation of land values in this world is the way to heaven in the next." These are the words of an enthusiast who sees in this reform the means of regenerating men in the highest moral and spiritual sense.

Joseph Fels was born in a country village called Halifax Court House, Virginia, on December 16th, 1834. When very young his father moved to Yanceyville in North Carolina, and from there he was sent to school in Richmond, Virginia, an old town, as American towns go. In 1867 the family removed to Baltimore, but here business reverses overtook the father and Joseph was obliged to leave school in 1870, and in the next year, at the age of seventeen, started as traveller for a firm of toilet soap manufacturers in Baltimore. In 1872 he changed his position, and, along with his father, represented and travelled for a Philadelphia firm in Baltimore. In a year or two they both became partners, their services and connection being their capital. A little later, after paying off obligations incurred by the business, they purchased it and removed to Philadelphia. The firm became Fels & Co. with father and son as partners. In 1894 a special process of soap-making was invented, and from that time the firm devoted itself solely to the manufacture of the well-known soap—Fels-Naptha, a business which has had a great success.

Having visited England for almost twenty years on business, Mr. Fels decided to open a selling branch in this country in 1901. Since that time Mrs. Fels and he have lived part of every year in England. Shortly after this he began to take an interest in social questions, and particularly in the land question. Fairhope Single Tax Colony which had been founded on Mobile Bay, Ala., appealed to him. The land was held on Single Tax principles, and as far as it was possible for a small community embraced in a larger community, not governed by these principles, it was hoped that it might furnish an object lesson. Mr. Fels has generously supported the experiment. In 1903 he purchased some 1300 acres at Hollesley Bay, England, to form a labor colony for the unemployed. This experiment has since been taken over by the government. He also purchased 600 acres at Maylands, Essex, a large part of which is under French gardening and intensive cultivation by small holders.

While these schemes were undertaken from a desire to see men, who had been broken in the pitiless industrial struggle, immediately restored to a natural in-

dependence, his mind is too active, and his vision and sympathies too wide to be confined in them. He is statesman and philosopher enough to see that national, and even world-wide institutions must be swept away before any class of people can avail themselves of the natural and indispensable opportunities of living.

In 1907 he became interested in the British movement for the taxation of land values. The work being done by the United Committee and by the different Leagues gained his approval, and from that time he has given his money liberally to enable them to extend their activities through the press, by meetings and demonstrations, by the publication of literature and by any other means which the political situation should demand. It is owing to this magnificent and generous support, more perhaps than to anything else, that the movement has made such great progress in Great Britain and in the world during the past year. The budget was brought in on the wave of opinion made in its favor throughout the country; it was carried to the lords on opinion made by such demonstrations as that in Hyde Park and it will be carried in spite of the lords by opinions made in similar ways.

By much the greater part of the means for carrying on this work was furnished by Mr. Fels. To the United Committee he has offered £10,000 a year, provided an equal amount is subscribed by others. At present he is spending about £20,000 in the movement throughout the world.

In whatever country Mr. Fels finds a movement for this reform he supports it; in America, in Australia, in New Zealand and on the continent. He has wealth and his wealth gives him power in these days when a man, with well-directed effort, may overthrow not merely a dynasty, but a system on which twenty tyrannies rest. While these are not yet the days of democracy, they are the days when democracy is strenuously and successfully struggling to be born. Behind all the political movement and crises there has been the agitation for the clear and definite principle of justice in industrial relations; behind the politicians there has been a body of men who refer every question to justice, not to political or legal precedents and customs which are one thing today and another tomorrow. Joseph Fels is in this class. He is singular among wealthy men. It is common now for beneficiaries of privilege to endow universities, to pay privileged teachers to teach privileged students, who are then given a motive to maintain privilege. With his wealth, he gives truth feet to run through the open streets, into the markets and workshops, to escape from the schools and churches, where its feet are tied. He has no fear of justice; he does not believe that its universal and speedy establishment would injure a single interest that is worthy of protection, or hurt a single human feeling that deserved consideration or tender treatment. He knows that beautiful traits of human character are now repressed by social injustice, and that ugly and repulsive traits are developed. He strikes hard and fearlessly at this injustice.

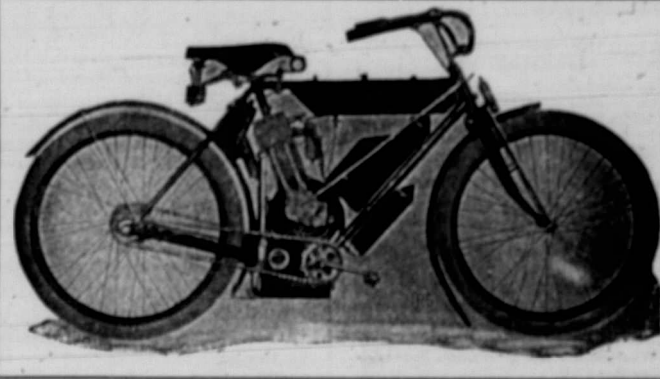
Mr. Fels owes much of his success as a business man, and his more singular success as a reformer, to certain simple qualities of mind and character. He keeps himself peculiarly open and receptive to suggestions and schemes for the advancement of any cause in which he is interested. He listens to all who approach him. He makes a wide search for movements which are seriously calculated to alter social conditions, and when he finds them, he supports them with intense energy and devotion. Inviting frank communications and suggestions he is himself exceedingly frank and straightforward. Besides being an American, he is a Jew, and the combination in his case has produced a man in whose being there are no exclusive barriers, and no mysterious recesses. His love of mankind, his wide, practical sympathy, his utter disregard for nationalities and other divisive marks, his perfect frankness, sometimes embarrass-

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