NATIONALISATION OF THE LAND.

Sir,—The interesting letters of Mr. A. H. Wallace upon "Nationalisation of the Land" have not been followed by such criticisms as might have been looked for. It is generally conceded that silence implies acceptance. I do not propose to waste the precious pages of the "Contemporary Review" on the scheme from a conservative standpoint, but to inquire whether the suggested changes would be followed by desirable consequences.

In passing, I may be allowed to take a general exception to Mr. Wallace's reasoning to the effect that the law of free tenure is a legal fiction. He advances the point that the fee-simple of the land, as in the case of freehold estate, equals the fee-simple of the land. The difference between the two—a sum of many millions, even if it were substantially representing the whole value of the property—would be sufficient compensation for the landowner. A is a wealthy manufacturer in a moderate country town. He employs a large proportion of the "social, religious, and educational advantages" which the liberal benefactor would receive with the acquisition of a large and valuable estate upon the outskirts of the town. Being a philanthropist as well as a fierce competitor of the artisan, he looks forward to his miraculous transformation into a "productive Harpagon" and the value of "the quality or productivity of the land itself," whatever that abstraction may be, and no more.

At the end of "ten years (more or less) after the passing of the Act the whole land of the country will become the property of the State." The hardships entailed upon its unfortunate possessors would be as inevitable as they would be insurable, for the compensation provided by compensation would be inadequate, with no margin of grace whatever were allowed. Not one acre of land would be sold during that time except at ruinous loss. The owners of great properties, who are advertised that they have only the "mercy" of their confiscators to trust to, would be induced to throw their land into a glutted market. The farmers would have been dealt with in so ungenerous a manner that the greater would be the prospect of their loss, as has been shown by the example already taken. At the end of the ten years would come the fresh evictions. "No doubt an extensive re-arrangement of holdings would then take place." The same "ten-year right" would attract an infinity of claimants, while some one would be willing to settle on hectares of land for the possibility of purchasing land through rise of price, and thereby gain a second or third or fourth claim to the landowner.

The continued struggle for the spoil would begot every sort of demoralisation, discontent, litigations and possibly violence, since every enactment would be justified in resisting extrusion from his "right." To this may be added the practical difficulties attending the "ideal genuine agriculturist." How is the needful capital to be gathered? With the farmer at sixpence an acre at any time, how can a single million or a "millions" claim his "birthright" out of part of the farmer's holdings? There is, indeed, one way in which existing landowners might act. It is possible on paper, but in practice it would involve civil war.

As land was approaching in value, the tenantry, tenant-right—and which to perpetuity it is to be attached—would rapidly rise in value; for unless the official valuations were to be followed by an army of secret police, it would be impossible to prevent competition for advantageous holdings. The official valuation would, in short, be to the real value of tenant-right as in the days of army-purchase the regulation price of commissions was too the price actually paid. But in order to secure this competition with its fruits it would be necessary for the landowner to have a complete command of the land and tenant-right at the end of the ten years, and this could only be produced by wholesale and unsparing evictions immediately before the close of the period. The occupiers would be, for possible, for a white drain from the soil.

Similar ill consequences would be begotten in towns. There, no doubt, evictions would be more easily and difficulty; but the uncertainty of the values and natural doubts of the "mercy" of the official valuator would preclude the expenditure of one penny during the ten years' interval upon the dwellings of the poor. The artisan looking forward to his miraculous transformation into the small farmer—a transformation, be it observed, which none of the statesmen have been able to create a peasant proprietor have yet ever attempted

...in the midst of sicken in his dilapidated tenement. In his paper in the Contemporary Review, Mr. Wallace was obliged to admit the possibility of a consistent working of his scheme in towns. He offered some reasons for the conclusion that it is no more consistent with the artisan's "ecstacy" during the ten years' interval, and his example have raised the value of the town and neighbourhood enjoy is due to him. His presence and his example have raised the value of the residential estate. The industry of the town is well employed, and there are no beggars; the country side has been washed from the alehouse, and there are no paupers.

But in Mr. Wallace's statement of his scheme these advantages, which everyone must admit are incapable of exact calculation, are to be bought at a sacrifice to the community at large. I have drawn no fancy picture, but one which I have myself seen. The author of these works of beneficence is not unknown to your columns. Similar instances might, no doubt, be cited from many large towns.

In the main object with land-reformers that the tenant should be protected against a rise upon his own improvements. The provisions which are intended to prevent this form a marked feature of the Farmers' Alliance Land Bill. Even so, however, the unhappy tenant is permitted to appropriate any difference there may be between his enhanced rent and the returns upon the outlay in reference to which that rent was raised. By Mr. Wallace's scheme the landlord takes the place of the tenant, and the messes margin is absolutely confiscated; for such improvements as have been described are beyond the capacity of any Government official to estimate. A value coming down from any central office would be compelled to take things as he found them, and in conformity with Mr. Wallace's inflexible schedules, the liberal benefactor would receive with the acquiescence of the Government the value of "the quality or productivity of the land itself," whatever that abstraction may be, and no more.

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