

HOW TO NATIONALISE THE LAND.

A PLEA FOR THE FARMER.

PROF. ALFRED WALLACE writes in the *Arena* for March upon "The Social Quagmire and the Way Out," dealing in the first of his papers with the farmer. He holds that a system of land nationalisation will be the salvation of the farmer, but it must be confessed that to uninstructed men who know that the prairie value of the land often constitutes the very smallest part of its value, it is difficult to see how the millennium is to be introduced by transferring the rent of the prairie value to the State.

WHAT THE FARMER WOULD PAY.

He thus describes the position of the farmer if the land nationalisation scheme were adopted by the State:—

It will of course be understood that under such a system the farmers would be really as much the owners of their land as if they possessed the fee simple and were free of mortgage. So long as the very moderate differential rent or land tax was paid, the farmer would have perpetual, undisturbed possession, with the right to bequeath or sell, just as he has now. Rents would never be raised on the farmer's improvements, but only on any increase of value of the land itself, due to the action of the community, as when increase of population or new railroads so raised prices or cheapened production as to increase the inherent value of land in that locality in proportion to its value in other localities. But it should be always recognised that the creation of "happy homes," so far as material well-being affects them, is the first object of land legislation; and thus rents should in every case be assessed low enough to secure that end, always supposing reasonable care and industry in the farmer, which would be sufficiently indicated by the average result.

ALL LAND TO BE PERSONALLY OCCUPIED.

He then goes on to explain how this improved state of things might be brought into existence. He proposes two methods, the first of which is that he would have it declared contrary to public policy for anyone to hold land excepting for personal use and occupation:—

A date might then be fixed before which all land not personally occupied must be sold; and that it should be really sold might be insured by declaring that afterwards no rental or other charge on land to individuals or companies would be recoverable at law. All municipalities, townships, or other local authorities should, however, have a prior and also a continuous right to purchase all such land at a moderate but fair valuation, paying for it with bonds bearing a low interest and redeemable at fixed dates. In this way the public would be able to acquire most of the land for some miles around all towns and cities; and as this would certainly increase rapidly in value, through growth of population and municipal improvements, the bonds could in a few years be redeemed out of the increased rents.

NO RIGHT TO SUCCESSION IN LAND.

There is, however, another quite distinct method of reclaiming the land for the community which has many advantages. This may be effected by carrying into practice two great ethical principles. These are, first, that the unborn have no individual rights to succeed to property; and second, that there is no equitable principle involved in *collateral* succession to property, whatever there may be in *direct* succession. By the application of these two principles the people may, if they so will, in the course of some eighty years, gradually regain possession of the whole national domain without either confiscation or purchase. The law should declare that, after a certain date, land would cease to be transferable except to direct descendants—children or grandchildren—and that, when all the children of these direct descendants who were living at the time of passing the law had died out, the land should revert to the State. As people owning land, but having no children, are dying daily, while even whole families often die off in a few years, land would be continually falling

in, to be let out to applicants on a secure and permanent tenure, as already explained, so as best to subserve the wants of the community.

WHAT NATIONALISATION WOULD DO.

Here, then, are two very distinct methods of obtaining the land, both thoroughly justifiable when the welfare of a whole nation is at stake. The last named is that which seems best to the present writer, since it would at once abolish the greatest evils of the American social system—those founded on land speculation and land monopoly—while the land itself would be acquired by means involving the minimum of interference with the property or welfare of any living persons. But unless by these or some analogous measures farmers are relieved from the competition of great capitalists, while competition among themselves is rendered fair and equal by a differential rent or land tax, no other kind of legislation can possibly relieve the majority of them from the state of poverty and continuous labour in which they now exist. In an unfair and unequal competition the less favoured must always be beaten.