

THE LAND QUESTION*

BY ETHEL WEDGWOOD

During the past two years thousands of women of every age have tasted what they have been wanting, perhaps without hope, all their life—Economic Independence. It is certain that they will never go back to their old state of semi-servitude.

Many of them have been engaged in open-air work on the land—a novelty in England, though not on the Continent. These have found how much they enjoy the healthy out-door life; and they have found, too, that they are quite able to do even farm work, although their muscles were not previously trained to it. They have proved also that physical work does not dull their minds, but invigorates them all round, in brain and body. They will not be contented to return again for ever to stuffy offices and shops, and to cut themselves quite off from "Nature," now they have grown to love her.

Such outdoor work has been of great use to the whole nation, even though, from the prejudice of farmers and others, only a small number of the women who volunteered for it may have actually been employed. Even what has been done by this comparatively small number has helped to keep up the supplies of fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, &c., without which food prices would have been still higher than they are; it has safeguarded next year's crops, kept farm stock alive, and saved good soil from deteriorating.

It has saved other things too—perhaps the nerves and health of many of the workers themselves. How foolish to have huge sanatoria for consumptive town dwellers and costly "rest cures" for over-driven nerves, when the cure lies just outside the door in pleasant and useful occupation!

There is no reason in the nature of things why every woman, or man, who desires to do so, should not be able to work regularly or occasionally on the land, and for much better wages than the country labourer receives now; nor, if they can get good wages, why they should not make a home in the country, surrounded by neighbours like themselves, founding a family, too, if they like, and rearing vigorous, merry children among the green trees and fields. There is plenty of land in the country, besides what is already being used, and good soil, too—acres upon acres that have been let go to grass or otherwise impoverished by lack of cultivation.

Just because the land is not obliged to be turned to profitable account rural wages are so low. Landowners will frequently allow their land to remain idle rather than let it out to working tenants, or pay steady labourers such wages as they would give as a matter of course to a domestic servant or to an artisan in a town; while farmers who are really supporting themselves on their farms cannot afford to give good wages because of high rents and high rates and because they lease their land on inconvenient terms. Thus there is scarcity of agricultural labour, not because there are no manual workers out of employment (if this were the cause farm hands would be highly paid, as in Australia), but just because rural conditions are intolerable owing to the arbitrary use or abuse of landed property.

What is needed is to get the land out of the hands of those who merely play with it, or who, for some reason or another, cannot turn it to account, and to get it into the hands of those who want to use it, and who can do so with good results. There are three possible ways of effecting this.

First, you may ask a landowner to give you some. Unless he is a philanthropist, this is not usually a successful way for ordinary people, for he will probably ask you a price much higher than you can pay out of what you will

make by your gardening or farming; or else he will rent it to you on harassing terms; or else he will refuse altogether either to sell or to let. People who have tried to get small holdings know the truth of this.

Or you can petition "Government" to buy up land, and to lease it to you (among other people) on "reasonable" terms. This would involve everybody (including yourself) being taxed to pay for the Government grant for purchase, and, incidentally, it would make the land you wished to obtain dearer than at present. In many places where municipalities systematically tried to buy land for small holders the price of land near the town rose 15 to 20 per cent. You would also, under such a scheme, be continually worried by official red-tape and interference.

The third, and the best, way of obtaining land to work is to make it very expensive and unpleasant for owners of land to keep it idle or badly used; in short, to make them pay rent to the whole nation for the value of the land they own—that is, a tax in proportion to what their estates are worth to the workers who want to use them—not, of course, taxing them for any money or labour that they themselves have expended on improving their land. If this were done, owners would be obliged to treat their land seriously and to see that it were properly worked, so as to yield a return which should pay the tax on it. Otherwise they would find it necessary to let or sell it to those who could work it. Such a tax would be quite fair, because the value of an owner's land is not now in any way proportioned to what he himself has done to make it valuable, but just depends on how badly other people need it. In districts near railways or towns, especially where landowners refuse to let or sell land, such land as can be obtained is extremely costly, although the soil itself may be covered with thistles.

Such a tax on "site-value" would bring the hundreds of thousands of acres now lying idle into speedy use, and enable a still larger number of women and men to settle and work in the country, and to either earn good money wages or to live on their own holdings. This would be a great social reform, for many of those good things would naturally follow concerning which so many schemes are planned—good cottages properly built and fitted, agricultural co-operation, and a sociable, intelligent village life. Incidentally, too, wholesome food would be more plentiful and easily obtained because of the increased production from the soil.

At the same time that this tax on bare "site-value" is imposed, owners and tenants who cultivate their land must have their rates reduced by taking off all the rates that they now have to pay for the improvements they make. They must be able to put up a forcing-house, or a cowshed, or to turn a grass field into a market garden, without being punished—as they now are—by having all such improvements added on to their "assessment."

In a little while, inevitably, no matter what political party is in power, women will have the Parliamentary vote. It will be one of your chief responsibilities to see that the Land Question is not ignored, and that Parliament puts a tax on site-values sufficient to bring idle land into use, and takes all rates off improvements.

How many social evils, and how much industrial strife and bitterness between men and women workers (now jealously elbowing each other for "jobs"), would cease, if those competing so anxiously for employment could find a livelihood and a decent home life for their families on what are now waste stretches of beautiful, but unprofitable, country-side!

Those who desire further information on this subject should apply to the Secretary of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, 11, Tothill Street, Westminster, who can supply pamphlets and recommend competent lecturers.

* The above article has been reproduced in pamphlet form, and may be obtained from The United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, 11, Tothill Street, Westminster, S.W. (1s. per 100, post free.)