THE

LAND QUESTION:

A LECTURE

GIVEN AT THE OXFORD REFORM CLUB,

NOVEMBER 26, 1884,

BY

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THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE FOR THE CITY OF OXFORD.

"What may we expect with regard to the treatment of the land question in the next Parliament? On this subject I will commend to notice a pamphlet which has been written by Mr. Fyffe, who is Liberal candidate for the city of Oxford, and who I hope will represent the city of Oxford. Mr. Fyffe, in his pamphlet, has discussed in a thoroughly practical way the difficulties of the agricultural interest in this country at the present time, and has shown methods for their solution which are deserving of much attention.—*Sir Charles Dilke.*

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Lecture by MR. C. A. FYFFE, *Liberal Candidate for the representation of the City of Oxford, delivered at the Oxford Reform Club, on Wednesday, November* 26*th*, 1884.

MR. FYFFE, who was very heartily received, said:— The subject on which I am going to address you this evening is a somewhat technical one. It is necessary to go into details which may cause some strain on your attention; but if we are really to understand the land question, if we are to arrive at projects of reform which are practical and not speculative; above all, if we are to make out such a case that people who are not inclined to agree with us will confess that there is something in what we say,—then it is a matter of necessity to go into details, and to make ourselves see things, not as the politician or the man of letters sees them, but as the farmer, or the labourer, or the small tradesman sees them, or, I may add, as the emigrant sees them, when he leaves his native village, where, in all its solitude, he finds that there is no room and no career for himself.

I think that if an intelligent foreigner, accustomed to the system of general proprietorship in land which prevails in most European countries, were to go about the midlands and south-east of England, about our growing towns as well as our country districts, with the object of studying our

land-system and the results that flow from it, he might make some of the following remarks:—"I see a country on the whole fertile and well cultivated, but often very lonely. I see the houses of the country-gentlemen more handsome, more picturesque, more beautifully wooded than anywhere upon the continent of Europe. I see substantial farm-houses with good useful buildings, and often with immense corn-ricks about them: but I do not see the homes of an agricultural people; I do not see either the little houses scattered about that one might expect, or the frequent large villages that would be met with in any equally rich district on the mainland. And when I go into the labourer's cottage I am astonished to find that he has generally no further tie with his home than a weekly tenancy of its four walls; that he possesses no property whatever beyond a few articles of furniture; that he supports his family on from ten to fourteen shillings a week as long as he can earn wages; and that he looks forward to old age spent in the workhouse, or in receipt of public charity, as a matter of course. I further observe that the quantity of stock on your farms, though considerable, is extremely small in proportion to the population of the island, and that an insignificant amount of land is planted with orchards or fruit trees, or used in market-gardening. And when I go from your lonely country-districts into your towns, I observe enormous over-crowding and over-competition, with great misery and squalor in the poorer parts. I see everywhere that as towns extend the land is let on building-leases and not sold to the occupants; and finally, after being wearied out with the farmer's complaints of the cheapness of corn, and after being told that land within forty miles of London is going out of cultivation because farming cannot be made remunerative, I find that the consumption of milk in Liverpool is one pint per week per person; that meat is everywhere enormously dear; and that you pay to the French and other nations annually the following sums:— for butter, £12,000,000, for cheese, £5,000,000, for potatoes and vegetables, £4,000,000, for poultry and eggs, £3,000,000. And I am not surprised," the foreigner might say in conclusion, "that under such circumstances the English people, conservative as they are, are now asking themselves whether there is not something in their land-system which needs a good deal of amendment."

Into some of the above points I propose to enter in this lecture; and as it is constantly said that people with conviction about land-reform are all theorists, ignorant of the very elements of rural life, I ought perhaps to say in self-defence that my own ideas, such as they are, have been gathered in the course of some years' superintendence of Corporate Estates amounting to about seven thousand acres, and that I have the misfortune to be personally interested in a small landed property, of which I have at present a hundred and fifty acres on my hands so that I address you to-night in the character of a distressed agriculturist.

Primogeniture and Settlements.

Now for some time past nearly all reformers have agreed that there are certain legal institutions in connection with land which ought to be swept away, because they artificially tie land up, and prevent that sort of natural dispersion of it which would bring land into the hands of those who have money to spend upon it. These artifices are generally described as the Laws of Primogeniture and Entail. This is not quite an accurate expression, for there is no law of Primogeniture except where a man dies without a Will; and instead of speaking of Entail we ought to speak of Settlements, for Entails, except in the case of a few estates, can be extinguished by a simple deed. It is not a law of Entail, but the custom of making Family Settlements from generation to generation, that ties land up. What usually happens is this. When the eldest son comes of age or is about to marry, a Settlement is made by which he becomes entitled after his father's death only to a life-interest in the estate, and it is settled in remainder upon his unborn eldest son. A power is given to him to charge the estate with annuities or capital sums for his younger children, and for his widow, if he leaves one; and thus the usual condition of an estate is, that the person in possession is only a tenant for life; that there is some one, perhaps an unborn person, entitled to it after him, and that there are charges upon the estate which perhaps take off fifty percent, of the nominal rental, and leave its possessor only half the income which he ought to have in order to do justice to the land, One evil of Settlements is that the person in possession of the land is only its partial owner and cannot deal with it freely. Another is,

that where you have Settlements you inevitably have charges and mortgages on the land made, to avoid the necessity of selling part of it to raise money for young children; and when once land is heavily mortgaged there is an end of all improvements on the part of the owner. The farmer's rents are screwed up in order to meet the mortgage-interest and at the same time to keep up appearances in the family mansion. Everything is taken out of the land, nothing is put into it. Wages are reduced; everybody feels pinched: and at last, when there come bad seasons, and the farmers can no longer pay their rents in full, the family-system fairly breaks down. The mansion is put into the hands of a letting agent, and the family go abroad to some French watering place to economise. There what remains of the rent is spent, instead of being spent, as it ought to be, among the tenants and upon the land.

Now as to the remedies proposed with regard to Primogeniture and Settlements, it seems reasonable that if a man dies without a will his landed property should be divided, just as his money would be divided, among his children equally. And although few landowners do as a matter of fact die without making their will, yet the alteration of the law would probably produce some effect through the alteration it would make in the ideas of the lawyers. At present, when a father goes to a lawyer to make a settlement or to make his will, the lawyer says to him, "Whatever land you leave your younger children you are taking away from what the law would give your eldest son." Instead of saying that, the lawyer would say, "You surely cannot intend to leave your whole estate, to your eldest son, for then you will be depriving your younger children of their natural and legal share." Something, I think, would be effected in that way; but it is unnecessary to speculate further on the greater or less result that would follow from this alteration of the law, for it is quite certain that when once land-reform is taken in hand seriously the law of Intestate Primogeniture will be the first thing to fall.

To pass on then to Settlements. There has been in this matter some attempt at law-reform. An Act was passed in 1882 making it easier for the tenant for life to deal with his property by sale or otherwise. But even now there are difficulties in the way. If there are trustees with power of sale, the purchase-money goes to the trustees, and if there are no such trustees then the tenant has to go to the Court of Chancery to get them appointed. The Act of 1882 was in fact a piece of tinkering, intended to bolster up the existing system by mitigating some of its worst effects instead of reforming it altogether. Of course the object of Settlements is to keep family estates unbroken. That is, the land is treated as an instrument for maintaining family dignity, instead of being treated as a source of national comfort and well-being. I trust that when we get a new Parliament and a government capable of dealing with these large questions in a large and courageous way, the simple course will be taken of abolishing Family Settlements altogether, and making the proprietorship of land (subject of course to leases granted for valuable consideration) everywhere ownership in fee-simple. There would be difficulties in the way of doing this; but these difficulties are not beyond the power of lawyers to overcome; and I venture to say that if the pension of the present Ex-Lord Chancellor were made dependent upon his producing some effectual scheme for this purpose, the scheme would not be long in forthcoming.

Mortgages and Charges on Land.

I now pass on to the question of mortgages and charges in general. It is an open question whether in the public interest all mortgages and charges whatsoever on land should not be made null and void; for the operation of the system is that a quantity of land is kept together in the hands of impoverished owners, so that a man who passes for the owner of an estate of say 2,000 acres, bringing in a rental of £3,000 a year, may really have to pay away £1,500 a year in interest or annuities, and so have only half the income necessary for the purpose of keeping up his estate. It would be much better that half the estate should from time to time have been sold in the natural way. The owner would then have the same or a better income, and instead of starving and pinching 2,000 acres he would be able to do justice to half that amount of land, while the rest of the estate would have passed into the hands of people possessed of more capital and capable of making a better use of the land. But

whether or not we go so far as to prohibit all mortgages and charges, it is certain that these operations, if permitted, ought to be made public, and to be registered in some Court open to public inspection. The tradesman who gives a bill of sale on his goods has to submit to its being registered in a public office, and the landlord who gives a bill of sale on his land (for it comes to exactly the same thing) ought to be treated in the same way. The result of the secrecy of mortgages and charges is that, when a piece of land is sold, the purchaser's lawyer has often to look through a document half-a-foot thick, called the Abstract of Title, to see what charges have been made upon the land for the last sixty years; for if these are not cleared off they will run with the land, and the purchaser will be liable, after he has got the land, for the payment of all of them. These mortgages and charges are the things that make the expenses attaching to the sale of land so heavy. Without them there would be but little law in the matter, and the expenses would be comparatively small. Now the effect of requiring all mortgages and charges to be made public would be as follows. Landowners would see that, as there was an end of the secrecy they value so much, and the encumbrances on their property were published to all the world, they might just as well abandon the fiction of territorial immutability, and condescend to part with enough of their estates to make them really masters of what they retained. Thus, instead of the squire raising a mortgage of £5,000 here and £5,000 there for setting up his younger sons, and charging his lands with say £300 per annum for his widow, and £150 for each of his unmarried daughters, he would put portions of the estate into the market as occasion or opportunity arose, with benefit to his neighbours who might want to buy, and without injuring anybody or anything except that social superstition that what a county-family once has had it is bound for ever to retain.

Contracts relating to Land.

And now I have done with the strictly legal part of our subject. There is a school of land-reformers who consider that when the old legal artifices put in the way of the sale of land are removed, and you have what I may call permissive free trade in land, everything that can be done has been done, and that it is a mistake to seek for more by legislation. I wish to speak with respect of this school of land-reformers, which numbers among it men like my friend Mr. Brodrick, men who took up the question while the public were still indifferent to it, and who did a great deal in clearing away popular prejudice by dint of honest argument. I wish to speak with respect of this school of political economists, but I cannot myself agree with them. Looking at the actual facts of life, and the conditions under which people live in a thickly populated country like our own, I cannot bring myself to believe that the soil of England is one of those purely commercial objects whose transfer ought to be wholly governed by individual agreement between the buyer and the seller, or between the hirer and the letter. Land has two characteristics which, taken together, distinguish it from any other commodity. The use of a portion of it is absolutely indispensable, and it is not capable of being increased. It is absolutely indispensable, because a man must live somewhere, and even if you live in a garret you cannot suspend your garret from the clouds. And although you may say that the world is a large place, and that a man need not live in England, yet I think we may assume that there is to be such a thing as an English people living in England, and that we are not to be turned out in a mass as the poor Jews were in B.C. 700, to please King Sennacherib, or as the poor Highlanders were in A.D. 1814, to please the Duchess of Sutherland. We may assume that there will be an English people, an English people constantly increasing in number; and while the number goes on increasing the area of the land remains fixed, and all the industry of the nation cannot add one acre to its surface. This consideration, to my mind, removes land from the domain in which the law of *laissez Faire*, or leaving things entirely to individual contract, is supreme. We know perfectly well that the accumulation of landed property in single hands might easily reach such a degree that the nation would not put up with it; and I therefore make no apology for assuming that the public interest ought even now to be the first principle in regulating our land laws, and that private property in land must be subject to such limitation as the public interest dictates.

Building Leases.

People have of late begun to understand that the land-question is a town-question as well as a country-question. It is so, in the first place, through the system of Building Leases, which prevents the inhabitants of towns from acquiring more than a temporary interest in their residences or places of business, and puts them at the mercy of the ground-landlords when these leases run out. And in the second place it is a town-question, because the action of our land-system has been to drive people unnecessarily out of the country, and so artificially to increase the over-crowding of our towns and the misery resulting from over-competition. Let me speak first of the system of Building Leases. The soil in or immediately around a growing town usually belongs to a comparatively small number of persons; perhaps, as in the case of some towns in our mining districts, to a single person. Anyone wanting a house must go either to one of these ground-landlords or to some builder to whom they have let the land. Whether you build your own house or buy one of the builder's houses, you get a lease of 20, 40, or perhaps even 90 years, on payment to the ground-landlord of an annual ground-rent, which is probably from ten to a hundred times as much as the agricultural rental of the site. The value of the land has increased through the industry of the people, not usually through the merit of the landlord; but not only does the landlord have the greatly increased ground-rent while the lease lasts, but when it ends your house becomes the landlord's property out and out, and the more you have done to raise its value through your own industry the more he will make you pay to renew the lease. Of course this is particularly hard on tradesmen and men of business, because their customers have come to know a particular spot, and when they have to turn out and go somewhere else they may lose a great part of their connection; or indeed the business may be a strictly local one, and they may lose it altogether. There are many other evils connected with the leasehold system, and one is the immense development it gives to the speculative builder and to the army of money-lenders and lawyers who are necessary to his existence. In the part of London where I live the ground-landlord gave building leases to a speculative builder, who, to raise capital for his operations, mortgaged each house before it was completed to a money-lending company, and subsequently gave second charges upon them to a Bank for further advances. The consequence was that when my neighbours and myself came to buy our houses, we found that all the following had to take part in the conveyance—the ground-landlord, the builder, the loan-company, the surviving partners of the bank, and the representatives of those who were dead; and, counting the purchaser's own lawyer, there were no less than five firms of solicitors making profits out of the sale of each house, to say nothing of the profits made by the bank and the loan-company. Of course somebody must pay for all this, and that somebody is the purchaser; that is, instead of simply buying a bit of land from its owner and building a house, or buying a house built by the ground-landlord, I am compelled to pay a price sufficiently high to remunerate, besides the builder and the vendor's solicitor, three extra solicitors, a bank, and a money-lending Company; and when all this is done I am unable to make any alteration in the house without begging leave, and every penny that I spend upon it in improvements will be taken away from my representatives at the end of the lease, and become the ground-landlord's property. This seems hard enough; but how much more hard and inequitable is the case of the manufacturer or the tradesman whose industry has really given value to the spot he occupies. He may have been working at a loss during all the earlier years of his lease, or at any rate giving up the best years of his life to the development of his business from small beginnings; and then, when it has begun to be remunerative and to recoup him for his efforts, in comes the landlord and appropriates all the increased value given to the premises. The remedy as between tenant and landlord seems simple enough, namely, that proposed by Mr. Broadhurst's Bill, empowering every tenant with more than 20 years' lease unexpired to acquire, on equitable terms, the fee simple of his holding. The landlord would get what his reversionary interest is fairly worth; and the tenant, if he made the place more valuable by his industry, would get the fruits of his labour. And if it be said that good neighbourhoods would be spoilt by people introducing unpleasant businesses when they got the property in their own hands, that objection could be easily remedied by making the ownership of each tenant subject to the same stipulations against nuisances or annoyances which existed in his lease, and giving to other occupants of the estate the same power of enforcing those provisions which originally belonged to the ground-landlord.

But I think that the Leasehold Enfranchisement Bill does not go far enough. It would only secure existing leaseholders from confiscation or extortion when their leases are up; it would not touch the case of an expanding town where new leases have to be made, and where the landowner has it in his power to demand what price he chooses for the land, or even to prohibit the growth of the town altogether, because he prefers a country solitude. Districts outside London and other growing places thirty years ago produced the landlord a rental of two or three pounds per acre as market-garden; the industry of the community, and not the action of the landlord, has made the land worth perhaps a hundred times as much; and in my humble opinion the community, say the municipality, of a growing town ought to have the power to take up the land around it, just as a Railway Company might, at an equitable value to be fixed by some public authority. I say an equitable value, and by that I do not mean either an agricultural value on the one side, or a fancy value on the other; but such a price as an owner desiring to sell would accept from an ordinary purchaser. The community, as it expanded, would then be its own landlord; and the increased value in the land would fall to the benefit of those whose activity had produced it, and not to the landlord, who has sat still. I would say that as soon as a town has gained a population of say five thousand, it should be entitled to take possession of a belt or area of land immediately around it at a fair price; and that as the population increased the area should proportionately expand. The land might then either be built upon by the municipality and let to tenants, or be sold in plots for the citizens to make their own buildings. There would be this further advantage, that the suburbs of growing towns would then be planned and laid out by some responsible authority, instead of being left to the speculative builder as tempered by the uncertain and fluctuating action of local and sanitary boards.

Farmers, Landlords, and Labourers.

And now let us leave the towns and go into the country. The agricultural system of England rests, as you know, on a triple division of classes. The landlord owns the ground, and puts a considerable amount of capital into it, as a rule erecting the buildings and paying for the material in all improvements; the farmer also puts a large quantity of capital into the land and superintends its cultivation; the labourer does the actual bodily work. Now in considering what would be an equitable division of the profits of agriculture, I think we ought to proceed in this way: first, the labourer should be kept, I do not say in as good condition as the horses who are his fellow-labourers—that would be too revolutionary—but at any rate in decent comfort; then the landlord should have a trifling payment for as it were putting the tenant in a position to use his capital, say, the value of what the land would grow uncultivated; then the landlord and the farmer should have a reasonable percentage on the actual capital they have put on to the land, and the farmer should have a fair return for his work and superintendence; and if there is something over afterwards, then the landlord might have part of it as purely unearned income over and above what he may fairly claim in respect of his capital invested in buildings, roads, and other improvements. I do not of course mean that this series of calculations is to be worked out year by year; but it does afford us some guidance both in arriving at what is a fair average or annual amount of rent, and also as to the degree in which circumstances modify the equity of a claim to rent. But what actually happens in practice? Until very recently a fixed rent, representing very much more than a return on the landlord's capital so expended, was the first thing to be secured out of the farm profits. Then, after this had been as it were written off, the farmer calculated what remained, and in bad times paid the labourers just enough to keep them alive, and in good times rather more; and the balance, if any, represented the farmer's profit. What ought to have come last came first, and instead of the rent being the surplus that was over after the workers had been paid, the wages of the workers, when they rose above starvation-point, were made dependent upon what the farmer could afford after the fixed and, so to speak, arbitrary amount of rent had been paid. In other words, owing to the great legal powers and the great social ascendency of the landlord, there was a sort of natural combination between the landlord and the farmer against the labourer; and instead of the farmer saying "What rent can I afford to give to the landlord after paying the labourer?" he said "What wages can I afford to give the labourer after paying the landlord's rent?" As you are aware, the landlord had until recent times almost unlimited power of

confiscating the tenant's improvements. Everything that was put on the land became the landlord's property, except in so far as checked by local custom. As the landlord could turn out the tenant and take his property, of course he was master of the situation. Protective duties made things worse, and the high but fluctuating prices of corn turned the farmer into a gambler, and made him offer enormous rents. The history of this country from 1760 to 1830—the period during which rents advanced by leaps and bounds, and the country squire changed from the homely bumpkin into the fine gentleman—is a melancholy period in the history of the labourer. The money-profits of agriculture were very great; there was enough to have given prosperity alike to the landlord, the farmer, and the labourer; but because the labourer was weak and the landlord powerful, the whole of the increase in income went to the landlord, and the labourer became even poorer than he was before; wages, at the end of the French war, being actually below starvation-point, so that they had to be supplemented in bread out of the rates. When therefore landlords complain of the present bad times, I ask myself whether the good times, which they unconsciously make their standard of Comparison, were not the result of injustice, and whether the rents they then received would not have been impossible if there had been anything like a fair distribution of the profits of agriculture. Therefore, in so far as the land difficulty merely means the unpleasantness of landlords not getting so large a rent as formerly—which is what it means to a good many representatives of the landed interest in the House of Commons—I put it by, as a matter which may indeed excite individual commiseration, but does not call for public attention.

The Existing Agricultural Depression.

But the existing agricultural depression means a great deal more than this. We sometimes hear it said, when the way is dark before us, that before things get better they must get worse; and probably something like the utter collapse of our present farming system was necessary before we could hope for a thorough-going land-reform. Now, however, things have really come to such a pass that people are beginning to open their minds, and to contemplate the possibility of changes which ten years ago would have been thought revolutionary. Owing to the succession of wet summers from 1875 to 1883 the farmers of this country have sustained losses with regard to which it is hardly possible to use the language of exaggeration. The amount of tenants' capital lost in these years is reckoned by Sir James Caird at about £150,000,000. This loss has been partly in the actual death of sheep and cattle, partly in the money thrown away in agricultural operations which year after year have produced next to nothing. And now, when we have at last had a good harvest, the price of wheat has fallen so low that there is no profit to be made out of it. Of course there are some foolish people who tell the farmer that he ought to get a duty put upon foreign wheat to keep up prices. These are the worst enemies the farmer has; and the first thing that the agriculturist or the land-reformer ought to get into his head is that wheat will very possibly never again be grown in this country at a profit. A certain quantity of it must of course be grown for straw, and for supplying flour to the farm, but the money which the farmer is to make must be made out of something else. What then ought to be produced? The answer is, what does the consumer want? And what, that can be as cheaply produced at home, does he pay £30,000,000 a year to obtain from abroad? First, and on the largest scale, meat, butter, cheese, and milk; then, in the second rank, and on a smaller scale, eggs, fruit, poultry, vegetables. To produce enough meat for consumption, a great quantity of land that is now arable will have to be laid down in pasture; and this process is in fact extensively going on. During the last few years statistics show that nearly a million acres have been transferred from the plough to grass. But now comes a very striking fact, and one on which a great deal hinges. Though a million acres have been turned into grass, there is no increase in the number of cattle. The meaning of this is, that the farmer's capital is gone, and that he has not the means of getting a sufficiency of stock even when the land is laid down in grass. This is only one of a multitude of facts all pointing in the same direction, facts familiar to everyone who goes about among farmers, and who sees how much their way of life has changed during the last few years. The money is not there to conduct the business as it ought to be conducted; and until money comes in, it is hopeless to expect English farming to fulfil its proper function, and to supply to the towns of England the food which the soil of

England might and ought to produce. Probably £100,000,000 at least is required to set pastoral farming on a satisfactory footing, and make the most out of the land. Where is this money to come from? It cannot come from the State; it must come from private sources; and the only way to get a vast sum like this invested in a business is to induce people to enter that business by removing all unnecessary obstacles in the way of success, and giving them every possible chance of working at a profit. Is this the case with the farmer at present? I think not. It is true that the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1883 has made it impossible for the landlord to confiscate the tenant's improvements as he formerly could, because if he turns a tenant out he has now to pay him compensation for improvements. But there is nothing to prevent a landlord who is able to pay his compensation from either turning a tenant out at the expiry of his holding, or demanding an exorbitant rent for letting him stay on. To place agriculture on a fair footing it appears to me that the landlord must be treated as a sort of sleeping-partner, who has supplied part of the capital of the concern, and has, in addition, by putting the tenant in possession of the land, contributed something analogous to the goodwill of a business, or saved the tenant the trouble of emigrating. More than this the landlord is not; and the contract between landlord and tenant must moreover be subordinate to rules made in the public interest, which requires first of all that the utmost possible security should be given to the tenant, and that he should be encouraged to do his utmost both in labour and expenditure, under the certainty that he will not, without some good and sufficient cause, be turned out of his home.

Necessary Changes in the Law between Landlord and Tenant.

The changes necessary in the law appear to me to be the following:—

1. No tenant to be removed from his holding without the permission of a District Land Court, such permission to be given on reasonable ground, such as the bad farming of the tenant, or the *bonâ-fide* intention of the landlord to occupy the ground himself, or to turn it to some use more beneficial to the public than agriculture.

You will see that this does not go so far as giving absolute fixity of tenure. The Irish farmer gets his farm by inheritance; he builds his own buildings; and he has now very properly been recognised as a sort of copyholder. The English farmer takes his farm by contract; the buildings are erected by the landlord; and the farmer, after his contract of tenancy has expired, can hardly demand to be kept in permanent possession if real reason for change has occurred. The reason, however, should be such as would satisfy a public authority.

2. The Land Court must have the power of fixing rents in cases of dispute, and of reducing them even in the case of existing leases.

I rest this interference with contract-engagements on grounds of public utility, namely, the necessity of keeping the soil of England productive, which is impossible if farmers are to pay away their capital in rent; and I justify it by two well-known acts of the English Court of Chancery, in interfering with and setting aside certain forfeiture-clauses in leases, and those clauses in mortgages which gave the mortgagee absolute rights over the mortgaged estate in case of default of payment. It is not the case that voluntary concession has made the interference of a public authority unnecessary. The remissions of rents made by landlords during the last six years, large as they seem, are trifling in comparison with the losses sustained by farmers. In the parts of England that have suffered most, ten, twenty, or thirty per cent, in single years is nothing; a total remission of rent for three years together would probably not have covered the farmers' losses.

3. The farmer should have the right of selling his tenancy to anyone whom he chooses, subject to the landlord's right to urge any objection to the new tenant before the District Land Court. The new tenant to hold on the same terms as the old, that is, not to be ejected or to have his rent raised without the sanction of the Court.

Of course if the tenant is to be regarded as a sort of feudal retainer of the landlord, it sounds shocking that he should have the right of nominating a successor. But if the true object of our land-

system is to make the most out of the soil, then the farmer must be encouraged to do his very best by having the right to sell his tenancy at the best price he can get for it. At the same time we should protect the landlord from having an unsuitable tenant thrust upon him, by giving him the right of appealing to the Land Court, where the proposed incoming tenant could be put upon his oath as to his means, his character, and his qualifications.

With these three alterations in the law I think we may fairly say that farming business would have justice done to it, and that every reasonable inducement would be offered to people with some capital to put it into agriculture. One of the best managed farms I know is conducted by two partners, one of whom had always been a local farmer, while the other had been in business in London, and after leaving London took with him, I believe, a considerable capital into the country. There, instead of setting up the farming business entirely on his own account, he entered into partnership with the local man, and so combined his own capital with the skill and experience of a professional farmer. Their holding was a sort of oasis in the midst of an impoverished neighbourhood. Unfortunately, however, they were so imprudent as to be content with an annual tenancy under a Peer, thinking that his lordship would never disturb them. My lord, however, found it desirable the other day to sell his land, and the result is that the partners find themselves under a new landlord whom they cannot get on with, and they have in consequence to leave the place. In this case the inducement to the capitalist to put his money into the concern was the supposed security of tenure under a Peer. This proved imaginary; and I contend that it is necessary to make such security not imaginary but real, and that this can most effectually be done by such changes in the law as those which I have sketched.

Labourers and Small Holders.

I will now leave the farmers and go on to the labourers and small holders. There was a speech made by Lord Rosebery some little time ago in which he was reported to have spoken of the prospect of our entire population flocking into the towns, leaving in the country none but the mere handful of people who, with all the latest improvements to machinery, would suffice to cultivate the estates of their betters. I trust that this was not Lord Rosebery's own ideal, for it is difficult to say whether it is worst politically, socially, or agriculturally. It appears to me to concentrate in it nearly everything that is most in conflict with what we ought to desire; and if this is to be the creed of official Liberalism on the land-question, I for one would rather join hands with Mr. George and sweep all landlords into the workhouse, than act with men who would reduce rural England to an appanage of the Rothschilds. The migration of the agricultural labourer into the towns has gone too far already. The reason of it has been the miserable life which the labourer has led, and the absence of any means of bettering his position in the country. The farmer, paying the landlord the rent he has been compelled to pay, could not give the labourer more than the scantiest wages; and when, owing to the increasing scarcity of labourers through migration into towns, the rates of wages rose, then the farmer, not having the means of meeting this expense, began to employ a smaller number and to turn off hands, keeping perhaps two men on the farm where before he had kept three. The agricultural collapse of the last ten years has certainly been increased by the insufficient employment of labour. Every one who knows farms intimately is aware that this is the case. Hay crops have been lost and corn crops have been lost because, when there was an interval of fine weather, there were not hands enough to get the harvest in. Sowing has been interrupted by winter, and fields have got into the most dreadful condition, or gone out of cultivation altogether, because the work was more than the hands could do; and as for making up for bad harvests by any of the minute and more lucrative forms of husbandry, that of course was out of the question, when the roughest work could not be adequately performed. Then another result of immigration from the country to the town has been to lower the average type and character of the labourer himself. The best men, especially in the south of England, have gone away. Those who have remained have been been in too many cases the weak, the apathetic, and the hopeless. In many villages the labourers are all old men; and the complaint so often made has probably a great deal of truth in it, that you cannot get the work out of the labourer that you could

twenty years ago. Well, whose fault is this? The fault of those who have made the labourer's life one of such unredeemed and hopeless drudgery that young men will go into anything in the world rather than put up with it. And if, in the interest of the farmer himself, steady and vigorous men are to be kept in the villages, the labourer's existence must be made a better one than it is, and he must have a possibility opened to him of rising to something better in the world. Two things seem obviously necessary; first, every land- owner or group of landowners should be bound to provide cottage-accommodation for the number of people who would reasonably be employed on their land; and secondly, every parish should have compulsory power of taking land to let to labourers in small lots. One difficulty at present is that you cannot get labourers to take lots. I am speaking of counties like Northamptonshire, where the labourer is at his worst. "How can a man cultivate a bit of land for himself," a Northamptonshire labourer said to me, in reply to an offer of some land, "when he has to be at his work at six in the morning and to stay till six at night?" The answer to this is, that in Yorkshire labourers do have land of their own, and do somehow manage to get it cultivated, whatever may be their hours of work with the farmers. But there is another answer; and that is, Why must the agricultural labourer always have twelve hours' work a day when other working people have eight or ten? It is said, because the farmer cannot afford to pay him his wages for less than twelve hours' work. Why? We come back to the real mainspring of the whole concern: because the farmer has agreed to pay too much in rent. The reason why the labourer has to work twelve hours a day is because the farmer undertakes that the landlord shall have, say, thirty shillings an acre. If the landlord had twenty shillings or twenty-five shillings, it would mean that the labourer's day could be reduced from twelve to ten or even nine hours, and he would then have no difficulty in managing a bit of land of his own. The reduction of the hours of labour, I suppose, can only be accomplished by an agricultural labourers' trades-union; but the object is a right one and a possible one. It is a right one because the social improvement of the labourer is all but hopeless if he has to work twelve hours a day; and it is a possible one, because there is a margin of unearned profit in the shape of landlord's rent which may perfectly well be diminished without inflicting a wrong on anybody.

We shall have got some way towards putting things right when we have secured a sufficiency of cottage accommodation for the labourer, when we have diminished his hours of work, and given the parish power to take up land for labourers' holdings. The labourer would then have before him the prospect of rising by thrift and industry; for, without losing the security of weekly wages, he might gradually enlarge his holding, and so at last become an independent person. But there is one enormous difficulty in the way. Where is the labourer to get the capital to stock his holding at the commencement 1 If there is pasture available, probably the best thing he can do is to keep a cow; if not, he ought to grow fruit or vegetables. In any case, if he has anything more than a mere garden, he will want at least from £20 to £50 to make a fair start, and where is this to come from? In individual cases landlords might be willing to advance the money, or companies might be formed on a commercial basis; but it would not do to count on this. I see nothing for it but to empower local authorities to advance the money on loan out of local funds, and to authorise the Charity Commissioners, and other authorities in control of semi-public moneys, to include such loans among their recognised objects. After all, we are great communists in this country with regard to our workhouses and poor-rates. Every Englishman is entitled in the last resort to have food, fire, and lodging provided for him in the workhouse out of the ratepayers' pockets, without the least chance of their getting anything back; and I do not see that it is by any means so bad an application of public funds if, instead of waiting till people are paupers, we lend, with due precautions for repayment, in order to give a start to those who, in the absence of such assistance, will certainly live upon the public rates as paupers in their old age.

Village Industries.

And here I leave the labourer, assuming that when he has got his holding he is not to be turned out without due reason. But the labourer is by no means the only person whom we have to do with in the village. On the contrary, those who have actually worked at the business of giving people land know

that it is just the labourer who is the slowest to take it, and that almost every kind of small tradesman or craftsman in the village is more ready to take land and more apt to turn it to good account than the labourer. Let me briefly enumerate the occupations of some of the small holders in the Yorkshire village of Linton, with which I have had a good deal to do myself. They are as follows: an innkeeper, a carrier, a grocer, a lock-keeper, a carpenter and blacksmith, a fisherman, a pig-dealer, a shoemaker, and a small miscellaneous dealer. Again, in the Worcestershire village of Astwood Bank, where nail-making is carried on, about sixty acres just outside the village are held almost entirely by people who are not agricultural labourers. It is indeed this class of people whom the land-reformer must desire above all others to encourage; for they bring to the land the intelligence that comes from business-pursuits and they make an enormous deal more out of the same acreage than any farmer will make. The right of the village to take up land for small holdings should therefore not be confined to the benefit of the labourer, but should be used for people of every occupation; and the more of them that will take land, and the larger the area of land that they will take, the better. The rent, owing to expenses of collection and also to preliminary expenses of fencing and other matters, must necessarily be somewhat higher per acre than the farmer's rent; but there is no excuse for the gross overcharging that is often practised by people who do let out such pieces of ground. The result of a good many experiments with which I have been connected is that land which is let at twenty-seven shillings per acre in large quantities to the farmer can without loss be let at forty or forty-two shillings in small lots; and I believe that after the system gets well to work this rate may be somewhat lowered.

It is indeed time that the English people awoke to the importance of developing the village and the industries of the village. Instead of forcing everybody into the great towns, we ought to endeavour to carry out industries and plant them in the country. It would make a great difference in the happiness of England if there were more distribution and less congestion of our industrial life. Trades will of course gather together; but perhaps one cause of the huge contrast between town and country is that for a long time promoters of industry had a rooted and well-grounded idea that on the estates of ordinary large proprietors it would have been perfectly useless for them to try to gain a footing. At the present moment there is no doubt a large quantity of land in the market and sites can be bought cheap; but it is difficult to draw employers of labour away from the large towns, and to induce them to start their works in new places. And when land has recovered its value the difficulty and the delay notoriously attaching to landed purchases will probably always make removal into less crowded neighbourhoods an exceptional thing, unless something is done to facilitate the acquisition of sites. I would therefore suggest in conclusion that when England is provided with the system of rural self-government which so many successive Ministries have promised to create, the local authority shall have that power of sanctioning compulsory tranfers of land which at present is exercised by Parliamentary Committees, and that an individual or a company requiring land for any useful purpose, and not necessarily one affecting the public at large, shall have the right of going before the local Land Court and obtaining an order for the compulsory sale of the land, if the object is one beneficial to the neighbourhood and no substantial objection can be adduced by the landed proprietor. He who needs ground for his own occupation seems *primâ facie* to be a more suitable owner of it than one who lets it to another. It is not, however, necessary to dwell upon the grounds which would naturally influence the Land Courts in the exercise of their discretion. I would not affront the gaze of the noble owner of Blenheim by erecting a row of factory-chimneys before his palace windows; I would not deliver the beautiful woods of Nuneham to the tender mercies of the speculative builder; but neither would I permit the caprice, or the inertia, or the exorbitance of individuals to close whole tracts of country to the reasonable requirements of an expanding people, and to deprive the rural population of the stimulus and the advantage resulting from the circulation of new life, new wealth, and new industries among them.

Recapitulation.

And now I have finished my discourse and will briefly recapituate the changes in the law which I have proposed. These are:—the alteration of the law of intestate primogeniture and the abolition of family settlements; the making public all mortgages and charges on land; the enfranchisement of leaseholds of houses with more than twenty years unexpired; the bestowal of the right on municipal or town authorities to take up the land around the town for building purposes; the prevention of the removal of agricultural tenants without sanction of some public authority; the creation of local Land Courts with power to fix rents in case of dispute and to order reductions under existing leases; the granting the farmer a right to sell his tenancy, subject to the landlord's right to object to the new tenant in the Land Court; the enforcement upon landlords of an obligation to provide reasonable cottage-accommodation on their estates; the empowering the parish to take up land for labourers' and other small holdings; the authorising of local authorities and those in control of charitable funds to advance money on loan to stock labourers' holdings; and finally the investiture of local Land Courts with the powers now exercised by the Legislature, to grant, whether to individuals or associations, for sufficient reason and on equitable terms, compulsory powers of purchasing land.

These changes, if carried out, would, I believe, make England, in a way that it has not been for the last hundred years, the home of the English people; and these changes will, I hope, be urged in a reformed Parliament by the representatives of your famous city.