

The Makers of the Flag

This morning, as I passed into the Land Office, the Flag dropped me a most cordial salutation, and from its rippling folds I heard it say: "Good morning, Mr. Flag-maker."

"I beg your pardon, Old Glory," I said, "aren't you mistaken? I am not the President of the United States, nor a member of Congress, nor even a general in the army. I am only a government clerk."

"I greet you again, Mr. Flag-maker," replied the gay voice; "I know you well. You are the man who worked in the swelter of yesterday straightening out the tangle of that farmer's homestead in Idaho, or perhaps you found the mistake in that Indian contract in Oklahoma, or helped to clear that patent for the hopeful inventor in New York, or pushed the opening of that new ditch in Colorado, or made that mine in Illinois more safe, or brought relief to the old soldier in Wyoming. No matter; whichever one of these beneficent individuals you may happen to be, I give you greeting, Mr. Flag-maker."

I was about to pass on, when the Flag stopped me with these words:

"Yesterday the President spoke a word that made happier the future of ten million peons in Mexico; but that act looms no larger on the flag than the struggle which the boy in Georgia is making to win the Corn Club prize this summer.

"Yesterday the Congress spoke a word which will open the door of Alaska; but a mother in Michigan worked from sunrise until far into the night to give her boy an education. She, too, is making the Flag.

"Yesterday we made a new law to prevent financial panics, and yesterday, maybe, a school teacher in Ohio taught his first letters to a boy who will one day write a song that will give cheer to the millions of our race. We are all making the Flag."

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“But,” I said impatiently, “these people were only working!”

Then came a great shout from the Flag:

“The work that we do is the making of the Flag.

“I am not the Flag; not at all. I am but its shadow.

“I am whatever you make me; nothing more.

“I am your belief in yourself, your dream of what a people may become.

“I live a changing life, a life of moods and passions, of heartbreaks and tired muscles.

“Sometimes I am strong with pride, when men do an honest work, fitting the rails together truly.

“Sometimes I droop, for then purpose has gone from me, and cynically I play the coward.

“Sometimes I am loud, garish and full of that ego that blasts judgment.

“But always I am all that you hope to be and have the courage to try for.

“I am song and fear, struggle and panic, and ennobling hope.

“I am the day’s work of the weakest men and the largest dream of the most daring.

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“I am the Constitution and the courts, statutes and the statute-makers, soldier and dreadnought, drayman and street sweep, cook, counselor and clerk.

“I am the battle of yesterday and the mistake of tomorrow.

“I am the mystery of the men who do without knowing why.

“I am the clutch of an idea and the reasoned purpose of resolution.

“I am no more than what you believe me to be, and I am all that you believe I can be.

”I am what you make me; nothing more.

“I swing before your eyes as a bright gleam of color, a symbol of yourself, the pictured suggestion of that big thing which makes this nation. My stars and my stripes are your dream and your labors. They are bright with cheer, brilliant with courage, firm with faith, because you have made them so out of your hearts; for you are the makers of the Flag, and it is well that you glory in the making.”

Delivered by the late Franklin K. Lane (died 1921), when Secretary of the Interior, on Flag Day, 1914, before the employees of the Department of the interior, Washington, D.C.