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# The Settler's Nightmare: A Tract for Farmers

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W. G.

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# THE SETTLER'S NIGHTMARE.

*A Tract for Farmers by "W. G." and Louis F. Post.*

## THE DREAM.

*To the Editor of the Standard:* Your paper is anything but soporific, yet I must confess I fell asleep while reading the last number. No doubt the hearty dinner I had just eaten had something to do with my mental condition, and it will be quite in order for you to say that the dream which I am about to relate, and which I beg you to interpret, is due to the same cause.

We do things in our dreams that we should never think of doing in our waking moments, and this will explain why, as the paper fluttered to the floor, I started west, bought a tract of Government land and went to farming. I built a cabin for my family, by hard work cleared up a part of my land, and, having sold my first crop, I was thinking about replacing my oxen with faster animals, when a horse dealer happened along and, after the customary bargaining on my part and much wrestling with the truth on his, I bought a good, strong animal.

Just when that horse had established his character and become the pet and pride of the family the horse dealer returned one night with a pale face and a frightened manner. Taking me out behind the barn, and speaking in a tremulous whisper, the man told me that he had stolen the horse he sold to me.

"It's a case of downright conscience with me," said the penitent horse thief, and as he said this he hitched his belt around, accidentally of course, but it brought the stock of a revolver under the moon's rays. "I want to do the square thing," he continued, "so I'll give you back your money and will take the horse and return him to his owner."

I soon saw that the horse thief's desire to lead a better and a nobler life was so strong that he would not hesitate to use his pistol

against any one who attempted to swerve him from the straight and narrow path of rectitude on which he had just entered; so I gave up the horse and got back the one hundred and twenty dollars I had paid for him. The next day I discovered that half the money was counterfeit; but, as it had been in the reformed thief's power to have paid me the whole in spurious paper, I reasoned that, for a man with such a past, he had made a very fair start in his new career.

The next day I had another visitor, a tall, ungainly man, with long leathery jaws, keen gray eyes, and a tuft of chin whiskers. He wore a high woolly hat, his trousers were alternate stripes of red and white, and they were kept from flying above his knees by strong straps. He had an old-fashioned blue coat with long spiked tails, and about the breast and collar there was a galaxy of thirty eight stars, half of them woollen and the rest cotton.

"Let me introduce myself as a kinsman of yours," said the stranger with an air of mingled kindness and authority. "I am your Uncle Sam."

I shook hands with the gentleman and was wondering if he had heard of the counterfeit money, which I had neglected to destroy, when he set my mind at rest as to the object of his visit by saying:

"You must give up your title to this farm, my son."

"Why so?" I asked, in surprise.

"Because it is no good," he growled.

"But, sir, I got it from you and paid for it."

"That's all very true, my son, but since that little deal I have discovered that I had not the power to parcel out to a few what

really belong to all the people; and then, between you and me, my original title was smirched." Then sinking his voice to a whisper and bringing his mouth close to my ear he added, "I stole the land in the first place from the Indians."

"Then let the 'Indians come and claim what is theirs," I said angrily. "The fact is, I am ready to be interviewed by Indians—a few at a time."

"Oh, the Indians have been killed off or cooped up; and then, you know, they've got no votes. I guess their title has lapsed; at any rate, they won't debate that point with me. But though it's a little late, I'm now going to do the fair thing. You must surrender your separate title to this farm, and pool it with the common domain."

"But," I asked, angrily, "when did you learn that the title you gave me was not good?"

"Since I have been studying Henry George's books on the land question. You read them carefully and prayerfully, my son, and you will become not only reconciled to the change, but glad of it."

"And my buildings, improvements, and crops?" I groaned.

"Oh!" said Uncle Sam quickly, "they are the fruits of your own labour and belong to you. And let me console you by saying that you can continue to reside on this land and to work it as you will, provided you pay the same rental as others may be willing to pay for the adjoining quarter sections."

"So," I said, "another man, without paying one cent to you, can take his money to improve the leased land, and he is taxed no more than I am?"

"Just so."

"Then the money I paid is a dead loss?"

"Oh, no," replied Uncle Sam, as he stroked his goatee and looked thoughtfully up at the sky. "Your few hundred dollars are enjoying the aristocratic company of a great many millions I have locked up in my vaults at Washington. But read Mr. George's books and you will see clearly that land-owners should not be compensated. The ablest men in the country are coming to this conclusion."

"But the honest men!" I shouted.

"Honest men! Come, my son, I have a world of patience, and my capacity for long suffering is oceanic in its immensity, but when you reflect against my honesty it stirs my dander like all creation gone mad! What I am after now is the common good, not the uncertain rights of the individual. There is my much beloved nephew, Dr. McGlynn.

He gives up a steady job and makes Rome howl on the land question, for which he receives nothing. Another nephew, not so well known, is Dr. Pentecost, and he is fast getting the people of New Jersey to believe that it would be better if they owned the state themselves than permit the railroads to buy and sell it as they please."

At this juncture I recalled the substance of a motto I had seen on a banner in a labor procession, and I interrupted by shouting out:—"An injury to the least is the concern of all! Take my land, for, like the horse thief, you have the power, but imitate the thief by returning me a part at least of the hard earned money I paid you in such good faith."

"Ha! methinks I sniff an incipient rebellion! I am accustomed to stamping out such things."

Uncle Sam raised his foot and he must have kicked me, for the next instant I awoke on the floor.

Now, that dream still perplexes me, for I recall that tens of thousands of honest hard-working men have invested their savings in a part of the public domain, believing that the authority that gave them their deeds would protect them in their rights. Should the money they paid for their land be refunded to those poor people—it is the fruit of their labour—or do the land reformers hold that ignorance of a fundamental law is no excuse for its violation, and so these people must pay the penalty, just as if they violated any other natural law.

Here to me is the heart of the land question. If the individual can have no vested rights in realty, then in common honesty the government should return every dollar it has received as purchase money from the settler. What do you say?

W.G.

## THE INTERPRETATION.

You do not tell your dream as it occurred, nor all of it. It was not a penitent horse thief who came to you; it was the lawful owner of the horse, and he did not show you the stock of the revolver, but a writ of replevin. Nor did he return the purchase price half in counterfeit money, he gave you nothing. You had bought something to which the seller had no title, and when the real owner came you were compelled to yield up the property to him. Thus far there was nothing remarkable in your dream. The

One thing happens every day, as many a careless buyer of stolen goods can tell you. Actual experience instances far more unfortunate may be cited. For example, if you dreamed you bought a farm, and that in consequence of some fundamental flaw which you had overlooked the title proved defective, and that the farm with all your improvements was taken from you without compensation, and that you were forced to pay over all the profits you had made during your occupancy, the dream would not have been in the slightest degree fanciful.

Your report of your interview with your Uncle Sam is singularly defective. He did not say you must give up your title to the land; he told you he was going to take all the crops off your improvements and crops and put them on the value of land in its natural condition. And it was in that connection that he told you the improvements were the fruits of your own labour.

It is true that you, in the mental confusion which men are subject in dreams, exclaimed: "Then the money I paid for this land is a dead loss?"

But your Uncle Sam did not reply as you report him. He asked you how much your farm, buildings, fences, stock, and crops were worth, and you replied a thousand dollars. He then asked how much your land was worth, and you told him five hundred dollars.

"Well, my dear nephew," said he, "couldn't you rather pay taxes on five hundred dollars, the value of your land, than one thousand five hundred dollars, the value of all you own?"

This almost woke you up, but your Uncle Sam went on: "Now, for nearly everything you buy at the store you must pay a protective tariff price. I intend to abolish the tariff, so you will be freed from that tax too. Have you any objection to that, my boy?"

It was at this point that you mumbled something about other people who get land without having the same advantages. He who were out of pocket what you paid for your land. To use your own expression, which is as nearly correct as could be expected under the circumstances, you said: "Another man, without paying one cent for you, can take his money to improve the land and he is taxed no more than I

but you blushed, in your dream, when Uncle Sam told you that this other man might be your own son, who without this change of policy, would, when he came of

age, have to pay a great deal more than you did for a piece of land, or else move a long distance away, or be somebody else's hired man.

The dream might have ended here, had you not tried the old man's patience by shouting something to the effect that honest men were opposed to the plan.

"Honest men!" your Uncle Sam cried. "I have a world of patience, and my capacity for long suffering is oceanic in its immensity; but when you talk about the opposition of honest men you make me mad. Honest men who own millions of acres which they are holding until the necessities of the people enable them, by selling or renting it, to live on the labour of others! Honest men, who fence in thousands of building lots in cities and crowd the poor into squalid tenements, neither building nor letting others build, merely for their own enrichment at the expense of the thrifty and industrious! Honest men, who encourage the withdrawal from use of the greater part of the surface of the country, so as to increase the number of the unemployed, and, by making a competition among working men, press wages down to the lowest point! Honest men, who put a private tariff on coal mines, ore mines, gold and silver deposits and oil wells, and when they want to raise the tariff look them up! Honest men, who to perpetuate their own plundering, appeal to the avarice of fools like you! Honest men, indeed!"

"Why, you eternal idiot, if these beggars were bribed to stop their piracy, who would have to pay the bribe? You and the rest of the donkeys, wouldn't you? And if you got back what you paid me for this pesky little farm of yours, how much of it would you have left after paying the fellows that are trying to tomfool you?"

"Here you've got 100 acres of ground. There ain't a neighbour within two miles of you. When you want to go to the store or the blacksmith shop you must travel twenty miles. What you buy you have to pay two prices for on account of the tariff tax. Once a year the assessor comes around and taxes you on everything you've got, and the harder you work, the more you produce, the higher he taxes you. And all around you is just as good land as yours, which nobody uses because some dog-in-the-manger owns it and wants a big price for it. Now I come around and propose to tax land values instead of other things, so as to bring all this land into use and give you plenty of neighbours, and bring your store and blacksmith shop twenty miles nearer, and give you goods for one

price, and make the assessor confine his taxes to the value of the land you use, regardless of whether you work hard or not or produce little or much, and open up land free for your son when he comes of age and wants a farm, instead of forcing him to work for some one else for a mere living—and you haven't any more gratitude than to whine about that \$200 you paid me, and talk about honesty. Was there ever such a fool?

“Why, you talk about taxing the value of your land; what do you suppose your land is worth, anyhow? Not a single red? You say it's worth \$500. So it is now, because all this other land is taken up and kept out of use, and people would rather pay \$500 for a piece of land like this than not have any land. But when I take taxes off other things and put them on land values the speculators who hold this vacant land will drop it like a hot potato, and a man can get all the land he wants to use, just as good as yours, for nothing. What will your land be worth then? It won't be worth anything, for there ain't any fools to buy land when they can get just as good for nothing. And if your land ain't worth anything you won't pay any taxes at all when all taxes are put on land values, will you?

Now, my dear boy, for I think a good deal of you in spite of your stupid greed, just charge that 200dols. to profit and loss, and with your wages and capital freed from all taxes, and your land free, too, until population grows so thick around you that it acquires a real value, go to work and make up the loss, which you will do on the first crop; and don't cry if your son does get the same advantages that you have under a good system without losing 200dols. as you did under a bad system.”

At this your eyes twinkled in your dream, for you thought you had your benevolent uncle in a corner when you said:

“Uncle Sam, I'll pardon these complimentary remarks of yours if you will tell me how you expect to raise any taxes if all taxes are to be put on land values and land is to have no value.”

“Well I never!” said Uncle Sam. “Had ever a man such a jackass for a nephew? I didn't say land was to have no value. I said your land away out on the prairie, twenty miles from anywhere, and nothing much but vacant land between, wouldn't have any value. How would I expect to raise taxes? Why, out of the bloodsuckers who own land in New York worth from a million dollars an acre down; out of the saviors of society

who own twenty or thirty thousand acres of valuable land in the immediate neighborhood of New York; out of the men that own coal mines in Pennsylvania, iron mines in New Jersey, and city lots and fancy farms in all the States. Wouldn't that be enough? I guess so. I wouldn't have any custom houses to keep up or customs officers to pay; a great part of the taxing machinery in all the States would be abolished; registers for recording titles would go out of business pretty near; almshouses wouldn't have any tenants; police forces could be reduced; and in a great many other ways my expenses would be cut down. Enough! Why I would have enough left over running expenses to keep up good schools everywhere, maintain resorts for widows and orphans, hospitals for the sick, public halls, libraries, parks, and art galleries; and what's more, I wouldn't have a million nephews hunting around for a job to keep the wolf from the door. No one who wanted to work would have to beg for a chance.

Your Uncle Sam raised his foot to go, and, as you awoke on the floor the next instant, you thought he had kicked you, but you were mistaken. It was simply the weight of Uncle Sam's plain-spoken arguments that crushed the foolishness out of you, and made you try to kick yourself.

Munger in his “Freedom of Faith” in a sermon on “Land Tenure” (Lev. xxv-10 to 13) says—“There is hardly a heavy capitalist in the country who is not a large landowner at the west; and these lands lying unused in the track of advancing population become the cause of the high cost of farms bought by the poor. A Boston or New York capitalist early secures some thousands of acres; the poor emigrants push beyond, settle the country, and thereby advance the value of the tract many fold, a shrewd and technically just operation, but essentially mean and eternally unjust.—Back of all claims of inheritance, above all laws, and deeper down than technical justice is the ineradicable conviction that the soil is for the people simply because they live out of the soil.—When wealth oppresses the poor, or keeps them at the mere living point, when monopolies tax the people, whenever a few own the soil, however legal the form of possession, when there is any process going on by which the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer, there is a divine justice above all formal justice that steps in and declares that such processes must stop.”