

# THE POET OF THE ISTHMUS.

"Panama Patchwork," by James Stanley Gilbert, Made More Interesting by the Poet's Recent Death.\*

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES SATURDAY REVIEW OF BOOKS by  
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IT is only a month or so ago that our highest critical authority in these matters (I hope Mr. Stedman will excuse my mentioning his name) brought to my attention a curious and questionable volume of verse entitled "Panama Patchwork." Before I had had leisure really to estimate the contents of a volume which came with such high credentials, word came that the author, James Stanley Gilbert, had died upon the Isthmus of which he had made himself the sole "vates." Just when he was beginning to make himself known to the persons by whom he desired to be known it ceased to be of interest to him whether or not he was known to anybody.

"Panama's poet is dead," said The Colon Independent, announcing the decease. And from the remarks made at the grave by Mr. Tracy Robinson, the faithful literary Achatas of the departed poet, one gathers, what indeed he might gather from the verses themselves, that Mr. Gilbert had a genius for friendship and attached to him with hooks of steel those of his fellow-exiles whom he cared to attach. From Mr. Robinson's remarks one gathers also that poetry was an unconsidered avocation with Mr. Gilbert. He had gone to the Isthmus twenty years ago to earn his living, which he earned first and for many years as Commissary of the Panama Railroad, and then as a member of a commercial house. There was, ten years ago, an amusing man who wrote in what was then the most modern language some sketches which were perverted to the advertisement of an aperient. Of him, dying while his things were at the height of their vogue, his brother, dropping the tributary tear, remarked: "He was a business man and carried literature only as a side line."

Fate has its revenges on the amateur. Not but that some of the things in literature which we would least willingly let die have not been done by persons who were doing something else for their livings. Only that one must hold his standard all the more firmly if he is doing "something else." Mr. Gilbert did not do this, any more than "John Phoenix" did it, or "Billy Baxter," just referred to, or the late Commissioner of Pensions, so much better and more widely known as "Ironquill." A "business man" in a literary environment, say Samuel Rogers, may take his literature seriously enough, not to mention the more modern instance to which I have already referred. But the business man with literary gifts in an unliterary environment is apt to display to the full the weaknesses of the amateur.

To this besetting snare of the amateur, at least of the amateur "in partibus," our present friend and subject has fallen an easy victim. There was nobody to criticize him on the Isthmus, nobody of whom he went in fear. Negligence consequently mars lines and poems which diligence would have made artistic. Negligence, even in the commonest matters of prosody, in the things which among cultivated versifiers "go without saying," though they do not go unless a great deal of trouble is taken about the saying. So that the most and best one can say about this halting and stammering verse is that it

may not be artistic, but it is "genius-sy." There is not a poem in the volume which the author could not obviously have made better. True, there are not many which do not show a real poetical endowment. One falls back on the impeccable criticism of the Vicar of Wakefield: "The picture would have been better if the painter had taken more pains."

Hence it follows that the reader betakes himself to this volume not so much as a piece of English verse as a "document" of life on the Isthmus of Panama. Truly, as the author modestly puts it, it is "Panama Patchwork." But a very vivid and illuminating document it nevertheless is. "The best book of poems produced in this country," The Colon Independent very safely says. The impression one gets from it is that nobody would reside in Panama who could possibly help it; that whoso does live there carries his life in his hand, at the daily and hourly risk of sudden death. The chorus of that old Anglo-Indian song

Hurrah for the dead already,  
Three cheers for the next that dies,  
might almost be the motto of the volume. Horrible, pestilential, miasmatic airs, relieved only when blown out by the trade wind. Here is the poet's picture of the normal and chronic condition of the Isthmus, under the title of "No Ice: A Litany of Thirst":

From a lowly latitude,  
Seeking Thy beatitude;  
From a long-forgotten spot,  
From creation's darkest blot,  
Comes a sound of rushing tears,  
Doth no other reach Thine ears?  
Listen, Lord!

Turn Thy head! Look West—look South!  
Canst Thou see the Chagres' mouth?  
Yes! Look there—below it—there!  
Thro' the mist that fouls the air,  
Thro' malaria's noisome veil,  
Hear'st Thou not the frenzied wail?  
Listen, Lord!

Cringing, shrinking, kneeling there,  
Thro' scorching night and midday glare;  
Craving only that Thy grace  
May assign their plea a place;  
Of Thy largess asking naught  
Save the boon that Dives sought:  
Listen, Lord!

It will be agreed that this is a vigorous statement of the normal condition of life on the Isthmus. And it will be agreed also that the following is a vigorous statement of the occasional relief:

## THE TRADE-WIND.

Blow, thou brave old trade-wind, blow!  
Send the mighty billows flashing  
In the radiant sunlight dashing,  
O'er the reef like thunder crashing!  
Blow, thou brave old trade-wind, blow!

Blow, thou grand old trade-wind, blow!  
Oh, for caves in which to store thee!  
See the palm-trees bow before thee—  
Yea, like them, we do adore thee.  
Blow, thou grand old trade-wind, blow!

Blow, thou kind old trade-wind, blow!  
Blow, oh, blow with fierce endeavor!  
Blow the fever far, forever!  
Let the mists return, oh, never!  
Blow, thou kind old trade-wind, blow!

Blow, thou good old trade-wind, blow!  
Blow away our tropic madness!  
Blow away our untold sadness!  
Blow us lasting peace and gladness!  
Blow, thou good old trade-wind, blow!

## "Rhetoric and Composition."

The Holts will shortly publish another textbook of rhetoric, entitled "Rhetoric and Composition," by Edward Fulton, who outlines work done in rhetoric in the freshman year at a large Western university.

## The United States Navy.

Houghton, Mifflin & Co. are finally bringing out "A Bibliography of the History of the United States Navy," compiled by C. T. Harbeck and revised

and edited by Agnes C. Boyle. This is the first book of its kind, and its preparation has covered several years. The books included have been carefully classified in alphabetical order and such descriptive matter is given as paging, illustration, plates, size, &c.

## ON A RUDE HILLTOP.

A STORY of a somewhat singular quality of humanness is "Power Lot," by Sarah P. McLean Greene, published by the Baker & Taylor Company. The author has written stories before in which the same quality appeared dimly, but in them it was fatally obscured by grotesque bucolic comedy of the Way Down East stripe. There is a good deal of bucolic comedy in the present volume, for that matter, and whole chapters might be omitted with advantage, but the story itself is a real story, full of quaint turns of humor and sentiment, and told with a peculiar eloquence and a strong feeling for dramatic effect.

The supposed narrator is one Capt. Jim Turbine, a sailor upon the Bay of Fundy, and this Capt. Jim's theme is the place he was born in, (Power Lot God Help Us is the full name of it,) and the woman he loves and may not win. Power Lot God Help Us is a wretched hamlet perched upon rocky hills above the sea, and the woman is named Mary—Mary Stingaree, Capt. Jim tells of her as a little girl; how she went to school; how she learned things beyond the rest; how she went away and learned yet more things and grew tall and noble to look at, with wonderful eyes. He tells how she was launched upon one knows not what high career as teacher in a far-off woman's college, and how, upon the death of her father, she gave up all her ambitions and came back to the desolation to devote her life to the task of keeping a poor house and caring for a bed-ridden mother and a drunken brother. That sounds quite like the common or garden Sunday school plot. So it is, as to material, but the treatment is somewhat different.

Presently a young man who is fuddling away his brains and wasting his wealth in the city is marooned at Power Lot God Help Us by a good physician. He comes gorgeously arrayed and most amiably drunk. Capt. Jim fetches him across the bay in his boat; he is borne up the steeps in an oxcart, and left in Mary Stingaree's charge. What follows tells of the regeneration of that youngman, partly by hard work, but chiefly by pulling upon the life line he made for himself out of his adoration for the young woman. The follies he committed, the things good and bad he suffered, furnish a thread upon which is strung much that will not bear transplanting from the soil of Power Lot—a deal that is, as we have said, superfluous. But there are homely scenes that etch themselves into the mind; there are passages that stir the blood; there are even some that may dim the eye if you have any weakness that way. For this Jim's idea of the Mary that he may not win is a noble and appealing figure of a woman, this blonde derelict of a boy from the city is somehow an appealing figure of a man. For relief there's a country coquette really charming in her inconsequence and fearless spontaneity. The other characters, to be sure, all belong utterly to the sphere of sentimental rural burlesque. They may or may not weary you, according to your taste. Probably they

will. Even if such things are your pet aversion (as is the case with the present reviewer) you will find that the rest of it holds. For the story has atmosphere, the people are human, and the talk they talk is often very good talk indeed.

\*PANAMA PATCHWORK. Poems by James Stanley Gilbert. New York: Robert Grier Cooke, Incorporated.