LIBERIA HERALD

DOWANTE;

Or Jack's History and Thirteen Minor Poems, by Robert H. Gibson.

Mr Editor:—

When I saw it announced in your last number that a volume of poetry, written by a Liberian would "be out in a few days," I was almost transported with joy—hoping—though I did not expect anything extraordinary—that the book would be of such a character as at least, to afford some slight remuneration to those who would spend their money in its purchase, and their time in its perusal; I hoped that, there would be here and there throughout the book, some scintillations of genius that might serve to illumine somewhat the pathway, and cheer the hearts of those in Liberia who are endeavoring to find their way up the difficult height of science. The book has appeared with the above title. "I have purchased and looked over a copy. To say that I have been disappointed and mortified would be to express, in the mildest terms possible, the character of my feelings.

"In every effusion claiming the high character of poetry, two attributes, at least, have usually been looked for. The one, thought, or common sense; the other rhythm or measure; and when rhyme has been effected, a third quality has usually been demanded—a concord in sound at measured and regular intervals." This species of writing therefore requires not only a faculty of making verses—or causing words to conform in sound at the end of lines—an attainment which seems to have been studiously sought after by the author of "Dowante"—but it needs talents of an extraordinary order Poetry has been called the "language of the passions, the echo of the imaginations," the thoughts of the poet must glow with feeling, sympathy and interest; his words winged with flame like the kindled arrow, "must gather new fires as they are sped to their goal; "he must possess that power called genius by which grace, novelty and attractions are imparted to the most common place subject. It is the prerogative of genius to produce novel impressions from familar objects." Unless this power is possessed, all attempts at poetic writing, will only be the means of bringing into existence matter to excite the humor of the intelligent, and of subjecting the writer to ridicule and contempt.

When a lively, graceful, and charming style has been attained, the sentiments are to considered. "No common place sentiment must be elevated to the throne of egasus; no low born thought must be introduced into the temples of the muses"

The ideas must be of such a character as to enlist the feelings, draw forth the sympathy—evoke and nourish the interest of the reader; for generally, "where excitement ends, disgust begins," Hence the advice of the ancient poet;

"'Tis not enough, ye writers, that ye charm
With ease and elegance; poems should warm
With soft affection; should possess the soul
And, as they will, the listening crowd control.'

I do not, Mr. Editor, assume to possess the intelligence, good sense, learning and sagacity of the critic; nor do I pretend that I could have produced a poem of any more merit than "*Dowante*;" but I beg that you will indulge me with space in your columns merely to call the attention of your readers to certain passages in this book which I marked while perusing it. The volume opens with a poem, in three books, purporting to be a history of a native African whom the author calls "Jack." He was, at the age of seven years, taken from his native land to America, where he was sold as a slave; having passed several years in servitude, he was emancipated and sent back to Africa. &c In perusing the three books, "the most remarkable circumstance that attracts the attention of the reader is the abrupt and random manner in which the hero is frequently brought in and made to relate the story himself, at the option and convenience of the poet.

The first book begins with an invocation of the Muses.—Descend O Muse!"—doubtless in imitation of Milton and other poets upon whom the Muses daltrually alight; and whose writings, unlike the production now before us, are in interesting accordance with the character and dignity of the inhabitants of Parnassus.

The poet introduces his hero thus;

"Young Jack, poor soul! just seven years of age," and gives a description of his father as follows:

"His father (tho' a heathen) was a sage,
Fill'd with a wisdom heathens seldom have.
And was resorted to by men, to lave
Their genius in his;—to catch the flame,
That flowed from him."

Jack's father was certainly a wonderful man We are informed first that he was resorted to by men, who went to "lave" that is, to "wash or bathe their genius in his," which evidently conveys the idea of the existence of water, or some liquid matter in which to lave; then in the next line, we are told they resorted to him to "catch the flame that flow'd from him." *Query* Did the water of genius, and the fire of genius exist in him at the same time? or did they fill his soul by turns?

An account is then given of a "horrible war" that "broke out and rag'd," in which Jack who in youthful inadvertence, "went to spy the scene' was taken prisoner.

At the 30th line the poet introduces his hero and makes him relate himself the circumstances attending his capture and embarkation on board the slave ship which took him to America. At the 61st line Jack ceases to speak; from the 62nd to the 76th the poet tells of Jack's first impressions of the American shore as he viewed it from the deck of the slave ship—upon which having been lifted up—he stood, looking, "as slim, as if he could eat a peck." On his landing in America an auction was held at which Jack was sold to a "Carolina man."

At the 77th line Jack again speaks, tells his feeling after being sold, as he trod the American soil

"A" poor lonesome boy, but seven years of age."

At the 89th line the poet speaks for Jack; but 34 years of his life have passed and he is now forty one. He hears of the Colonization Society, and wishes to place himself under its patronage that he might be aided in returning to his native land, and "end the balance of his earthly race." In the 95th line he is represented as soliloquizing upon his troubles and the difficulties that stand in the way of his return to Africa At the 111th line he addresses a petition to Heaven—that he might be prepared to die and fitted for "sweet Canaan's blessed rest." These ejaculations close the first book.

The second book which gives an account of of Jack's emancipation, and preparation to return to Africa.—opens with a continuation of the prayer, that ends the first book, thus;—

"O thou Almighty, who dost interpose
Who diedst for even I, and then arose:

Here the poet manifests his need of a little more acquaintance with his grammar. *I* am aware that poets are allowed great license with language, on account of the limits to which, in versification, they are obliged to confine themselves: but I can see no possible excuse for the inaccuracy in this instance; as to have said. "Who diedst for even me"—which would have been correct—would not have altered in the least the number of feet in the line But this may have been an oversight in the author.

I cannot Mr Editor notice this book in detail, as it would be trespassing too much on your kindness, and would weary the patience of your readers; I will call attention only to that portion of it contained from the 88th to the 92nd line which describes the effect, which the announcement, made by his master, of his manumission, had upon Jack. The poet says—

"He leaps up from his knees and then bows
[to earth;]
Jumps in the kitchen, lies upon hearth;
Calls Sue dear love, sugar ter, honey, wife
Gives her a kiss, the first time in his life."

"What monkey tricks "for a man of Jacks intelligence; but it is very singular that he should never have kissed his wife before. At the age of forty one, he must, have been married at least ten years, and if during so long a residence together he never kissed her or called her "dear," he must have been remarkably frigid in his affections and utterly insensible to all those charms and delights—those fascinations and enchantments, which in my imagination hover around the domestic hearth.

The third book—for we must leave the second—gives an account of the sailing of Jack for and arrival at the coast of Africa—his first impressions of the country &c &c. This like the first book, begins with a prayer to the Muses We now find Jack with his wife Sue—"launched on the deep—

To scan the seas, and take a lasting peep."

But it seems he had not proceeded far on the voyage, before

"A squall struck in the ship a mighty swell
When all was sleep but one, and he as well;
The waters bursted in the cabin door."

"All was sleep but one, and he as well "Did you ever Mr Editor, in all your life hear of a ship at sea, having all the crew and passengers asleep" but one? In all the tales of the sea I have heard in all the stories of marine adventures and calamities I have read, this is the first instance I have met of "all on board asleep but one, and he as well. But we should like to know about this one who is made an exception—as well as what was he all were sleep, and he as well. What condition was he in? Of course the idea conveyed is, that he was as well as asleep—and therefore to all intents and purposes, he was asleep—Then *all* were asleep—The ship was certainly in a perilous condition—on the wide ocean—having passengers on board—and every solitary individual asleep. Strange, strange occurrence indeed! But perhaps this narration is not to be taken literally, but to be regarded as the result of the author's poetic imagination—the product of his creative genius. Well, we must award him the palm for orginality—This is certainly *rish* and perfectly original.

The word "bursted" in the second line is in bad taste, as well as a violation of the rules of grammar; "burst" being an irregular verb does not take *ed* to form the preterit tenses. But it is likely that the poet was here at a loss for a foot and was obliged to commit this grammatical peccance to complete the measure. Though he might have saved himself this trouble, by writing the preposition which follows bursted *in* *to* instead of "in" which would have been more according to rule after such a verb, then without the addition of *ed*, to "burst" he would have secured the desired number of feet.

But to the story;—The storm passes and the ship progresses on its course; at length Africa is in view. The captain is represented as "boasting to his mates and sailors" The "passengers rejoice to see the sight."

"But Jack," says the poet sings out aloud
And suddenly astonishes the crowd" by delivering a lengthy speech of his impressions of the country; expressing his regret of his waste of time in America when he ought to have been enjoying freedom in Africa, Turning to his wife Sue, he thus addresses her;—

Now Sue, we see a land of earthly rest,
Whose fields look fair and seem by Heaven
[blest]
Awake shake off thy slavish fears and sing,
Sweet freedom's voice, and make it loudly
[ring]

He then expatiates on the character and capabilities of the country—which are to be developed by the rising generation, expresses an earnest desire for progress in literature; and promises to do wonderful things if he

"Could see his country-men adore,
Sweet literature's *sound*, if nothing more!"

Listen to all that Jack would do:—

My soul would fill and burst into the skies
A loud rejoicing with a great surprise.
I'd scan the skies by meditations sweep,
Then by my fleeting thoughts, sink in the
[deep.]
I'd stop not here, but sink down to the sand
And scratch the bottom with my feeble
[hand:—]
Write in the mud, that literature's art,
Begins to take among my race a start

Notice; first his "soul would fill and burst into the skies;" after bursting it would scan the skies by meditation; then, from such a lofty height, his fleeting thoughts" would sink into the deep. But he would not stop on the surface of the water, he would go down to the sand, and "scratch the bottom—"and" write in the mud, Sue! The poet's transition from the sublime to the ridiculous is most remarkable; first his heroe would be up to the skies, then darting downwards would plunge into the deep—and going to the bottom of the sea would there write in mud—the interesting fact that literature had taken a start among his race A very ineligible place we should think to make so important a record, "in mud, at the bottom of the sea" None would be able to discover it, but those who like Jack, should take such wonderful flights; and even could the inscription be seen by all, we think that none would like to endure the inconvenience and unpleasantness of stooping to read it in such a situation but those possessed of *boarish* propensities.

Having reached the conclusion of Jacks eloquent address to the "astonished" crew of the ship, we expected to find some account of his disembarkation; his impressions of his new home &c—but all is passed over in silence, and the poet informs us very coolly and abruptly at the conclusion of the third book:—

Jack's history here ends:—he dies in
[peace,]
And leaves his country, after great increase,
He dies rejoicing o'er the glorious hope,
Of having earth, *free* as a Romish Pope."

After informing us of the demise of Jack the author gives us, in a succeeding poem, "Jack's soliloquy. Is the same Jack here alluded to? If so where was he, when he so pathetically soliloquized? Was he in America? Was he on the briny deep? Was he in Africa? Or was it the soliloquy of his *manes* after he had left the earth, "*free* as a Romish Pope?"

After Jack's soliloquy—follows "An epistle to Hon: Joseph T. Gibson—a brother of the author—expressing gratitude for his fraternal care bestowed upon him in childhood, He alludes to his dullness when a schoolboy and congratulates himself on the progress he has since made, in the following strains:—

I could not Brother think ten years ago,
That I, who laid and slept, just like a Bear
Should wake from lethargy, and dart along,
Through region far with poetic song.

The verb "laid" in the second line here should be *lay*—another error, overlooked by the poet. Is the comparison here instituted between him self and a "boar" used to express the squalidity of the position in which the writer lay; or is it to denote the despicable slothfulness in which he was accustomed to indulge?—a boar is extremely filthy and indolent in his habits, these are the only remarkable traits in his character; to which of these does the poet allude in the comparison?

After the epistle—follows a poem under the caption "Thougats on Liberian Poets." On the 33rd page I find a poem under the very singular heading—"An address to a Guana," then follows another equally curious in its caption—"An address to a Baboon" Is it possible that in the whole animal kingdom, composed of such a variety of species no others could attract the attention of Mr G—but the Guana and Baboon? could no others call forth his poetic fire? Singular taste indeed for a poet! But this is not all, at the conclusion of his address to the Baboon, he thus, though a married man, makes love to that unsightly and repulsive creature;

Yet none shall touch thee, while I hold thee
[mine,
And thou by gentleness, dost own me thine"

We now come to the closing poem of the book, an "Epic sketch of the author" in which he reviews his life from eighteen and forty four; and is in some cases wonderfully minute in his narration; as, for instance in the 19th line, where he breaks forth thus:

"In forty-six, an *ulcer seized* my toe,
And fill'd my soul with earthly grief and
[woe;
For thirteen months I laid upon my back,
And often did I think the pains would rack
My feeble frame * * * *
My pains by day did often make me weep,
At night I could not lay in bed to sleep;—
But sat up in *the* chair, and pass'd the night,
In sighs and groans, caused by the wretch's
[fight"

Here again in the third line the word "laid" improperly occurs; in the seventh line the word "lay" should be *lie*. It is difficult, from what the writer says here, to ascertain the precise time during which he "laid upon his back;" for he first tells us that the time was thirteen months; then he informs us that at night he could not lay in bed, but "sat up in the chair;" I suppose in order to get the exact time during which he lay upon his back, we must find the number of *days* contained in thirteen months, and the number of *nights*; subtracting the nights, when he sat in the chair, from the days when he *laid* upon his back", we shall have a remainder equalling the length of time he "lay upon his back" But this is immaterial.

With reference to his literary acquirements, the author with affected modesty, yet evident egotism makes the admission—

"I am no scholar" yet, says he, "the scholar's
[part"
"I'll try to get by seeking wisdom's art;
My college was my study thro the night,
And with the dawn of day it took its flight
For oft times have I sat and scratch'd my
[head
Until the clock struck two"—

It is well that the last two lines here cited occur near the end of the volume, otherwise we had been at a loss to account for the cause of the author "scratching his head" until so late an hour; but having perused the book we are satisfied judging from its character, that the scratching of the head was occasioned more by outward and superficial causes, than by any internal perplexity arising from the conflicting of profound thoughts or lofty and inspiring ideas.

We have now reached the end of the book; I cannot leave "*Dowante*" however without expressing my admiration of the enterprising spirit of the writer in making so bold an attempt to advance the literature of Liberia. It is human to err; and if he has failed it is no proof that he did not aim high, it is no evidence that he does not sincerely desire the advancement of his race. Indeed, judgeing from several sentiments advanced in the book we should consider Mr Gibson enthusiastically devoted to the interests of his race and country and if his talents were only commensurate with his ambition, he would be a star in Liberia's literary firmament of no mean magnitude. But let him not despair; perseverance will overcome all obstacles. By perseverance several men who would otherwise have lived and died in obscurity have become eminent, and highly useful—Demosthenes—against whose progress, nature seemed to have opposed impassable barriers, became, by perseverance, the "prince of orators;" and why may not friend G. should he persevere make advancements beyond his most sanguine expectations? I hope he will not be dissuaded from further effort by my remarks. They have been made with the most friendly feelings, and with the best wishes for his literary welfare Hoping he will yet hit the mark, at which he aims.

I remain Your most Obedient &c
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Maryland Historical Society

The Maryland State Colonization Society Papers

XII. Newspapers
B. Liberia Herald

February 1842(XI,4)--February 18,1857(n.s. VII,4)

1855

NEW SERIES NO 2