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Profile of the Month: Enrique Gil Gilbert.

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Profile of the Month

Enrique Gil Gilbert

It is our pleasure to present Enrique Gil Gilbert of Guayaquil, Ecuador, because we believe in the good neighbour-policy, and he looks to us like a good neighbour, and a good ~~writer~~ ^{American}, and a good ~~man~~ ^{fellow}. He is twenty-eight years old and definitely handsome, with his dark hair and expressive eyes, his olive-green complexion and thick, smiling lips. He is a Spaniard from his father's side (great-grandfather Gilbert came from the city of Murcia), and has a bit of English blood from his mother. ~~He is fair and tall, according to his report.~~ "Much mixed blood," he states proudly, in his broken but colourful English. "Indian blood, too, ^{and} ~~perhaps some blood~~ ^{a few drops} from the Negroes. The whole League of Nations is in my veins," he concludes with an eloquent gesture of comprehensive friendliness, and then adds, with a gay and self-sure little laugh, "Herr Hitler, I suppose, wouldn't like it."

We almost forgot to mention that he is a novelist - in fact, one of the young writers who won awards in the Latin American Prize Novel Contest, sponsored jointly by the publishing house of Farrar and Rinehart and Redbook Magazine. The contest was organized in all the Latin-American countries and in Puerto Rico with the assistance of the Division of Intellectual Cooperation of the Pan American Union. National Committees were formed in each country to choose the best from among the manuscripts submitted to them. The winning novels were then sent to New York to be submitted to an International jury consisting of Blair Niles, John Dos Passos and the Chilean critic Ernesto Montenegro. Winner of the First Prize is Ciro Alegria, who was, in 1935, awarded first prize for his novel La Serpiente de Oro. His present prize-winning novel is called El Mundo es Ancho y Ajeno ("Broad and Alien is the World,")

On April Fourteenth, a "Latin American Prize Novel Dinner" took place at the Waldorf-Astoria, in honor of ^fCiro Alegria of Peru, Cecilio J. Carneiro of Brazil, Miguel Angel Menéndez of Mexico, and our friend Enrique Gil Gilbert, who told us that he was having a grand time. Archibald MacLeish acted as Chairman, Nelson Rockefeller broadcast ~~ed~~ from Washington, and several distinguished representatives of the North-American literature hailed the Latin guests. ~~During the dinner a group of dancers with grandiose and melodious names entertained the audience. Parts of the program were broadcast over the Blue Network of the National Broadcasting Company and by short wave to South America.~~ It was all very solemn.

"But now I would like to see some plain people," Enrique Gil Gilbert declares. He is interested in labor problems and in the problems of popular education. ~~How could~~ In fact, he is a teacher himself. How could he tell us if he likes New York, as he had no opportunity as yet to make friends with the average folks, the young and the workingmen? Neither the architecture nor the museums or the night life of the metropolis seem to excite him considerably: Everything turned out to be almost exactly as he had imagined. The young man from Ecuador was far from being surprised by the Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Center, Wall Street or Washington Bridge. The movies have familiarized the whole word ^lwith these much-vaunted sights.

"And then, the American novelists!" he observes, ~~in a voice lowered with awe but~~ his face beaming with gratitude. "Their descriptions are so lively, so precise... I feel at home in the United States because I've read Dreiser and ~~Sinclair~~ Upton Sinclair and John Dos Passos."

He considers "An American Tragedy" the greatest novel written in this country. Among the younger writers he admires Steinbeck and Hemingway (particularly "For Whom the Bell Tolls") and Dos Passos,

whom he has met, down there in Ecuador, and calls proudly "my friend."
He mentions also Waldo Frank, Richard Wright, Clifford Odette and, several times, Upton Sinclair.

Obviously, what he seeks in literature is, primarily, the social program - the political message. But his opinions are not standardized or distorted by party slogans. Both his criticism and enthusiasm have the validity and the charm characteristic of any ^{truly} ~~real~~ spontaneous reaction.

He has read a great deal, with a keen, ~~in~~ somewhat indiscriminative curiosity - not only the Latin American classics and contemporaries but also quite a few of the modern Europeans and even some of the ~~great~~ Nineteenth Century masters. Who are his favourites? Dostojewsky, of course, and Zola. ~~In the realm of Russian novel he seems more intimately at home than in the French or German literatures.~~ Gorki has influenced his own writing. He speaks also of Gladkov and some other Soviet celebrities. But the two greatest living novelists, he insists, are Romain Rolland and Thomas Mann.

Ortega Y Gasset? - Interesting, stimulating; but, after all, "the philosopher of a decadent society."

The Surrealists? - He becomes a little evasive: "Yes, of course... I know... André Gide, Cocteau..."

(Poor André Breton! Pauvre Cocteau! This is fame...)

"Do you like Gide?"

Enrique Gil Gilbert, with one of those radiant, irresistible smiles: "A little..."

What makes his attitude toward foreign cultures so touching is the combination of an eager desire of learning and a resolute opposition. For, while he cannot help being deeply attracted by the mellow accomplishments of those older, more established civilizations, he

liberate itself

wants his own country to ~~become more and more independent~~ from European influences. "The South-American writers," he declares, "used to be home-sick for Europe, even if they had never been over there. But matters have changed, during the last fifteen years or so. Now, we recognize our task: to build and to improve our own independent culture."

He hardly knew European writers when he published his first book, a collection of short stories. He was only eighteen years old, ^{his book} and ^{le us} was "greeted with indignation and applause," - as he reports himself, with a sort of pugnacious satisfaction. The spiritual leader to whom he owes most, is José Carlos Mariategui, the Peruvian revolutionary. There is a very strong and moving light in Gilbert's eyes as ^{he} ^{us} tells the story of Mariategui who went to Europe after the first World War, and didn't find things so good ^{over there} and described what he had seen in an exciting book, Escena Contemporánea. And then, he founded a magazine, Amauta, that became very famous and fascinated Enrique when he was a high school boy and wrote his first stories. "Mariategui was a great revolutionary," declares the young novelist from Ecuador, "and a very great man."

They are revolutionaries as well - Enrique Gil Gilbert and the literary group in his hometown, "El Grupo de Guayaquil", of which he is an active and faithful member. It's not folklore what they want to produce. Of course, they are interested in the age-old cultural treasures of their continent. Yet, "An Indian is, above all, a human being - an exploited, suffering man."

Gilbert's first novel, Our Daily Bread (for which he was given the prize) deals with the conditions on an Ecuadorian rice-plantation. It is, according to the critics, a story full of "a deeply native feeling." But the young novelist ^{observes} ~~declares~~: "The drama of the poor is the same - everywhere. Only the scenery changes."

Is he a "Marxist"? The term sounds strangely meaningless when applied to this emotional ~~and pleasant~~ youth. The revolutionary tradition of his country and his own social pathos - flamboyant, naive, slightly muddled - must by no means be confounded with the orthodoxy of any "party line." ~~He is against the nasty exploiters~~
~~and the oppressed ones, the slaves.~~ He believes that a man is fundamentally good, and that power is apt to corrupt his original goodness, and that a change of social conditions is desirable ~~not just in Germany but~~
~~everywhere, and in the United States, and everywhere.~~

Is he against the Nazis? Of course: definitely so. Nobody, he says, is for them in the Latin American countries, except the very rich ^{agents} and very nasty people, who ~~are his agents~~ act as Hitler's ^{agents}
as they do everywhere.

But, on the other hand, is Britain so very good? He disapproves of the Empire. Yet, he wants England to win and says that most of his friends feel the same way. Or rather, he wants both sides to lose, imperialist Britain as well as Nazi Germany. Or, both Germany and Britain should improve while they are fighting, and should find each other in a revolutionary embrace,

The same hopes, the same contradictions, the same apprehension everywhere. - Do you think, we ask him, that Hitler's victory would disturb the peaceful developments of your Latin-American republics? - Undoubtedly so, he confirms. "If Hitler rules over Europe, he conquers the Americas as well."

So this war, then, is ^{your} war as well?

He neither denies nor admits it. He knows the universal character of all problems, dangers and struggles, and that what happens today

in London or Saloniki may have consequences tomorrow in Guayaquid. Yet it cannot but make a difference whether one watches the European tragedy from New York or from Ecuador. A fellow like Enrique Gil Gilbert is, not aloof from anything that happens anywhere, but primarily concerned with the joys and sorrows and duties which are the substance, the pride and the crux of his own daily life. He grows ~~hardly~~ animated as he tells us about the school where he teaches (for it is hardly possible to earn one's life as a writer, in Ecuador); and about his wife who is a painter, ("and a pretty good one, too!"), and the house where he lives with his family - an old Spanish mansion with thick stone walls, nicely cool, even in the hottest time of the year...

And he adds, somewhat abruptly but with a convincing warmth: "Besides, Hitler can't win, in the long run: simply because all of us are against him - you, and myself, and my pals in Guayaquid, and your friends in Paris and Berlin and Barcelona, and the people here in the street. All decent folks are against him. So how could he win?"

May you be right, Enrique Gil Gilbert of Ecuador! May you be never be forced to reconsider your glowing faith in the human race, the cultural mission of Ecuador, the doctrines of Karl Marx, the persuasive power of left-wing literature and the ultimate triumph of justice! May you be allowed to continue your life and work, according to the ideals you ~~cherish~~ ^{cherish} - not disturbed by those sinister forces whom you confound - a little naively! - with "decadent capitalism." We are sure that you know how to treat the restive youngsters of Guayaquid, because you are young yourself. We don't doubt that your first novel is fine, and that your ~~many~~ ^{many} novels to come may be even

better; for you possess what makes a good story-teller and what also makes a good man: the knowledge of life as it is - rough, corrupt and full of bitterness; and the vision of life as it should be - rich and colourful and reasonably planned, from New York to Rio, from Berlin to Guayaquid.