

Our Canal

Monroe, Harriet, 1860-1936

To Colonel Goethals and the Other Laborers in the Canal Zone

*In lazy laughing Panama—
O flutter of ribbon 'twixt the seas!
The low-roofed houses lie afloat,
White foam-drift of the Caribbees.
Under lithe palms that fan the sky
Down in each drowsy plaza there,
Brown-footed girls go glancing by
With red hibiscus in their hair.
Low mountains, trailing veils of cloud,
In the two oceans dip their feet,
And hear the proud tides roaring loud
Where Andes with Sierras meet.
O Panama! O ribbon-twist
That ties the continents together,
Now East and West shall slip your tether
And keep their ancient tryst.*

What are you doing here,
Young men, with your engines vast?
Sons of the pioneer
Who conquered wastes austere
And from ocean to ocean passed;
Sons of the men who made
Reaper and telegraph,
Steamer and aeroplane—
All the iron-handed things,
Swift feet and tongues and wings,
That would make the old gods laugh
For the bitter games they played
With the secrets they kept in vain:
What are you doing here,
Young men, with your dredges and drills
That level the ancient hills
Into a path for ships?
Open your eyes and lips—
What do you see and hear?

“Oh, we build you the world's last wonder,
The thing not made with hands.

Our steel beasts gnaw asunder
The locked and laboring lands.
We choke the torrent's rage,
And bid him his wrath assuage
By drowning the jungle deep.
In steel-locked chambers gray
We hold his floods at bay,
On wide blue lakes asleep.
Now shall the brave ships ride
Over the crouching hill
From eager tide to tide,
That so we may fulfil
The iron century's will;
That so our country, maker of tools sublime,
The nations may surprise
With this last gift of the grand old workman,
Time;
His prodigy powerful, delicate, sentient, wise,
Perfect in strange completeness, strong to obey,
Strong to compel the world along its way
And praise man's triumph in its mighty rhyme.”

But what are you doing here,
Young men, with your flags?—
With your glamour of joy severe
With your villages up the hill,
The screened little houses gay,
Where the good of all is the will
Of each in a grand new way?
Sons of the men who founded
New states in the wilds, to be
Garden and range unbounded
For young Democracy;
Sons of the heroes dear
Who fought for liberty,
What are you doing here?

“Look, it's the same old fight
Out of the dark to the light;
Never the end shall be
Till the last slave is free!
Here while we dig the Ditch
We would build you a perfect state,
Where service makes men great
And the great scorn to be rich;
Where each man has his place

And a measure more than his meed—
A banner of joy to grace
The strength of the daily deed;
Where Disease, trapped in his lair
With Squalor and Want and Care,
Is slain with the poison fume
He loosed for the proud world's doom;
Where the Work is a marching song
Sung by us all together,
Bearing the race along
Through good and evil weather.
Oh tell them, shout it through the halls of time !—
When the Big Chief unrolls his glorious plan,
Draws hearts and hands together in perfect rhyme,
Nothing shall be impossible to Man!”

But what are you doing here,
Young men, with your gates?
With your bells and beacons clear
Where the hope of the whole world waits?
With your call across the seas
To the ships that circle afar,
To the nations that burn and freeze
Each under her separate star?
Who followed the Truth austere,
Of poets and prophets grave—
What are you doing here?

“Hush! we wait at the gate
Till the dream shall be the law.
He gave us our beacons and bells
Who first the vision saw,
And the fleets of the world in state
Shall follow his caravels.
Ghost-led, our ships shall sail
West to the ancient East.
Once more the quest of the Grail,
And the greatest shall be the least.
We shall circle the earth around
With peace like a garland fine;
The warring world shall be bound
With a girdle of love divine.
What build we from coast to coast?
It's a path for the Holy Ghost.
Oh Tomorrow and Yesterday
At its gate clasp hands, touch lips;

They shall send men forth in ships
To find the perfect way.

“All that was writ shall be fulfilled at last.
Come—till we round the circle, end the story.
The west-bound sun leads forward to the past
The thundering cruisers and the caravels.
Tomorrow you shall hear our song of glory
Rung in the chime of India's temple bells.”

*O lazy laughing Panama!
O flutter of ribbon 'twixt the seas!
Pirate and king your colors wore
And stained with blood your golden keys.
Now what strange guest, on what mad quest,
Lifts up your trophy to the breeze!
O Panama, O ribbon-twist
That ties the continents together,
Now East and West shall slip your tether
And keep their ancient tryst.*