

CHAPTER XX

SOME POEMS ABOUT INSECTS

ONE of the great defects of English books printed in the last century is the want of an index. The importance of being able to refer at once to any subject treated of in a book was not recognized until the days when exact scholarship necessitated indexing of the most elaborate kind. But even now we constantly find good books severely criticized because of this deficiency. All that I have said tends to show that even to-day in Western countries the immense importance of systematic arrangement in literary collections is not sufficiently recognized. We have, of course, a great many English anthologies,—that is to say, collections of the best typical compositions of a certain epoch in poetry or in prose. But you must have observed that, in Western countries, nearly all such anthologies are compiled chronologically—not according to the subject of the poems. To this general rule there are indeed a few exceptions. There is a collection of love poetry by Watson, which is famous; a collection of child poetry by Patmore; a collection of “society verse” by Locker; and several things of that sort. But even here the arrangement is not of a special kind; nor is it ever divided according to the subject of each particular poem. I know that some books have been published of late years with such titles as “Poems of the Sea,” “Poems of Nature”—but these are of no literary importance at all, and they are not compiled by competent critics. Besides, the subject-heads are always of much too general a kind. The French are far in advance of the English in the art of making anthologies; but even in such splendid anthologies as those of Crépet and of Lemerre the arrangement is of the most

general kind,—chronological, and little more.

I was reminded to tell you this, because of several questions recently asked me, which I found it impossible to answer. Many a Japanese student might suppose that Western poetry has its classified arrangements corresponding in some sort to those of Japanese poetry. Perhaps the Germans have something of the kind, but the English and French have not. Any authority upon the subject of Japanese literature can, I have been told, inform himself almost immediately as to all that has been written in poetry upon a particular subject. Japanese poetry has been classified and sub-classified and double-indexed or even quadruple-indexed after a manner incomparably more exact than anything English anthologies can show. I am aware that this fact is chiefly owing to the ancient rules about subjects, seasons, contrasts, and harmonies, after which the old poets used to write. But whatever be said about such rules, there can be no doubt at all of the excellence of the arrangements which the rules produced. It is greatly to be regretted that we have not in English a system of arrangement enabling the student to discover quickly all that has been written upon a particular subject—such as roses, for example, or pine trees, or doves, or the beauties of the autumn season. There is nobody to tell you where to find such things; and as the whole range of English poetry is so great that it takes a great many years even to glance through it, a memorized knowledge of the subjects is impossible for the average man. I believe that Macaulay would have been able to remember almost any reference in the poetry then accessible to scholars,—just as the wonderful Greek scholar Porson could remember the exact place of any text in the whole of Greek literature, and even all the variations of that text. But such men are born only once in hundreds of years; the common memory cannot attempt to emulate their feats. And it is very difficult at the present time for the ordinary student of poetry to tell you just how much has been written upon any particular subject by the best English poets.

Now you will recognize some difficulties in the way of a lecturer in attempting to make classifications of English poetry after the same manner that Japanese classification can be made of Japanese poetry. One must read enormously merely to obtain one's materials, and even then the result is not to be thought of as exhaustive. I am going to try to give you a few lectures upon English poetry thus classified, but we must not expect that the lectures will be authoritatively complete. Indeed, we have no time for lectures of so thorough a sort. All that I can attempt will be to give you an idea of the best things that English poets have thought and expressed upon certain subjects.

You know that the old Greeks wrote a great deal of beautiful poetry about insects,—especially about musical insects, crickets, cicadæ, and other insects such as those the Japanese poets have been writing about for so many hundreds of years. But in modern Western poetry there is very little, comparatively speaking, about insects. The English poets have all written a great deal about birds, and especially about singing birds; but very little has been written upon the subject of insects—singing insects. One reason is probably that the number of musical insects in England is very small, perhaps owing to the climate. American poets have written more about insects than English poets have done, though their work is of a much less finished kind. But this is because musical insects in America are very numerous. On the whole, we may say that neither in English nor in French poetry will you find much about the voices of crickets, locusts, or cicadæ. I could not even give you a special lecture upon that subject. We must take the subject "insect" in a rather general signification; and if we do that we can edit together a nice little collection of poetical examples.

The butterfly was regarded by the Greeks especially as the emblem of the soul and therefore of immortality. We have several Greek remains, picturing the butterfly as perched upon a skull, thus symbolizing life beyond death. And

the metamorphosis of the insect is, you know, very often referred to in Greek philosophy. We might expect that English poets would have considered the butterfly especially from this point of view; and we do have a few examples. Perhaps the best known is that of Coleridge.

The Butterfly the ancient Grecians made
The soul's fair emblem, and its only name—
But of the soul, escaped the slavish trade
Of earthly life!—For in this mortal frame
Ours is the reptile's lot, much toil, much blame,
Manifold motions making little speed,
And to deform and kill the things whereon we feed.

The allusion to the "name" is of course to the Greek word, *Psyche*, which signifies both soul and butterfly. Psyche, as the soul, was pictured by the Greeks as a beautiful girl, with a somewhat sad face, and butterfly wings springing from her shoulders. Coleridge tells us here that although the Greeks likened the soul to the butterfly, we must remember what the butterfly really is,—the last and highest state of insect-being—"escaped the slavish trade of earthly life." What is this so-called slavish trade? It is the necessity of working and struggling in order to live—in order to obtain food. The butterfly is not much of an eater; some varieties, indeed, do not eat at all. All the necessity for eating ended with the life of the larva. In the same manner religion teaches that the soul represents the changed state of man. In this life a man is only like a caterpillar; death changes him into a chrysalis, and out of the chrysalis issues the winged soul which does not have to trouble itself about such matters as eating and drinking. By the word "reptile" in this verse, you must understand caterpillar. Therefore the poet speaks of all our human work as manifold motions making little speed; you have seen how many motions a caterpillar must make in order to go even a little distance, and you must have noticed the manner in which it spoils the appearance of the plant upon which it feeds.

There is here an allusion to the strange and terrible fact that all life—and particularly the life of man—is maintained only by the destruction of other life. In order to live we must kill—perhaps only plants, but in any case we must kill.

Wordsworth has several poems on butterflies, but only one of them is really fine. It is fine, not because it suggests any deep problem, but because with absolute simplicity it pictures the charming difference of character in a little boy and a little girl playing together in the fields. The poem is addressed to the butterfly.

Stay near me—do not take thy flight!
 A little longer stay in sight!
 Much converse do I find in thee,
 Historian of my infancy!
 Float near me; do not yet depart!
 Dead times revive in thee:
 Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art!
 A solemn image to my heart,
 My father's family.

Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,
 The time, when, in our childish plays,
 My sister Emmeline and I
 Together chased the butterfly!
 A very hunter did I rush
 Upon the prey:—with leaps and springs
 I followed on from brake to bush;
 But she, God love her! feared to brush
 The dust from off its wings.

What we call and what looks like dust on the wings of a butterfly, English children are now taught to know as really beautiful scales or featherlets, but in Wordsworth's time the real structure of the insect was not so well known as now to little people. Therefore to the boy the coloured matter brushed from the wings would only have seemed so much dust. But the little girl, with the instinctive tenderness of the future mother-soul in her, dreads to touch those

strangely delicate wings; she fears, not only to spoil, but also to hurt.

Deeper thoughts than memory may still be suggested to English poets by the sight of a butterfly, and probably will be for hundreds of years to come. Perhaps the best poem of a half-metaphorical, half-philosophical thought about butterflies is the beautiful prologue to Browning's "Fifine at the Fair," which prologue is curiously entitled "Amphibian"—implying that we are about to have a reference to creatures capable of living in two distinctive elements, yet absolutely belonging neither to the one nor to the other. The poet swims out far into the sea on a beautiful day; and suddenly, looking up, perceives a beautiful butterfly flying over his head, as if watching him. The sight of the insect at once suggests to him its relation to Greek fancy as a name for the soul; then he begins to wonder whether it might not really be the soul, or be the symbol of the soul, of a dead woman who loved him. From that point of the poem begins a little metaphysical fantasy about the possible condition of souls.

The fancy I had to-day,
 Fancy which turned a fear!
 I swam far out in the bay,
 Since waves laughed warm and clear.

I lay and looked at the sun,
 The noon-sun looked at me:
 Between us two, no one
 Live creature, that I could see.

Yes! There came floating by
 Me, who lay floating too,
 Such a strange butterfly!
 Creature as dear as new:

Because the membraned wings
 So wonderful, so wide,
 So sun-suffused, were things
 Like soul and nought beside.

So much for the conditions of the poet's reverie. He is swimming in the sea; above his face, only a few inches away, the beautiful butterfly is hovering. Its apparition makes him think of many things—perhaps first about the dangerous position of the butterfly, for if it should only touch the water, it is certain to be drowned. But it does not touch the water; and he begins to think how clumsy is the man who moves in water compared with the insect that moves in air, and how ugly a man is by comparison with the exquisite creature which the Greeks likened to the soul or ghost of the man. Thinking about ghosts leads him at once to the memory of a certain very dear ghost about which he forthwith begins to dream.

What if a certain soul
Which early slipped its sheath,
And has for its home the whole
Of heaven, thus look beneath,

Thus watch one who, in the world,
Both lives and likes life's way,
Nor wishes the wings unfurled
That sleep in the worm, they say?

But sometimes when the weather
Is blue, and warm waves tempt
To free oneself of tether,
And try a life exempt

From worldly noise and dust,
In the sphere which overbrims
With passion and thought,—why, just
Unable to fly, one swims!

This is better understood by paraphrase: "I wonder if the soul of a certain person, who lately died, slipped so gently out of the hard sheath of the perishable body—I wonder if she does not look down from her home in the sky upon me, just as that little butterfly is doing at this moment. And I wonder if she laughs at the clumsiness of this poor

swimmer, who finds it so much labour even to move through the water, while she can move through whatever she pleases by the simple act of wishing. And this man, strangely enough, does not want to die, and to become a ghost. He likes to live very much; he does not yet desire those soul-wings which are supposed to be growing within the shell of his body, just as the wings of the butterfly begin to grow in the chrysalis. He does not want to die at all. But sometimes he wants to get away from the struggle and the dust of the city, and to be alone with nature; and then, in order to be perfectly alone, he swims. He would like to fly much better; but he can not. However, swimming is very much like flying; only the element of water is thicker than air."

However, more than the poet's words is suggested here. We are really told that what a fine mind desires is spiritual life, pure intellectual life—free from all the trammels of bodily necessity. Is not the swimmer really a symbol of the superior mind in its present condition? Your best swimmer cannot live under the water, neither can he rise into the beautiful blue air. He can only keep his head in the air; his body must remain in the grosser element. Well, a great thinker and poet is ever thus—floating between the universe of spirit and the universe of matter. By his mind he belongs to the region of pure mind,—the ethereal state; but the hard necessity of living keeps him down in the world of sense and grossness and struggle. On the other hand the butterfly, freely moving in a finer element, better represents the state of spirit or soul.

What is the use of being dissatisfied with nature? The best we can do is to enjoy in the imagination those things which it is not possible for us to enjoy in fact.

Emancipate through passion
And thought, with sea for sky,
We substitute, in a fashion,
For heaven—poetry;

Which sea, to all intent,
 Gives flesh such noon-disport,
 As a finer element
 Affords the spirit-sort.

Now you see where the poet's vision of a beautiful butterfly has been leading his imagination. The nearest approach which we can make to the act of flying, in the body, is the act of swimming. The nearest approach that we can make to the heavenly condition, mentally, is in poetry. Poetry, imagination, the pleasure of emotional expression—these represent our nearest approach to paradise. Poetry is the sea in which the soul of man can swim even as butterflies can swim in the air, or happy ghosts swim in the finer element of the infinite ether. The last three stanzas of the poem are very suggestive :

And meantime, yonder streak
 Meets the horizon's verge;
 That is the land, to seek
 If we tire or dread the surge:

Land the solid and safe —
 To welcome again (confess!)
 When, high and dry, we chafe
 The body, and don the dress.

Does she look, pity, wonder
 At one who mimics flight,
 Swims—heaven above, sea under,
 Yet always earth in sight?

“Streak,” meaning an indistinct line, here refers to the coast far away, as it appears to the swimmer. It is just such a word as a good Japanese painter ought to appreciate in such a relation. In suggesting that the swimmer is glad to return to shore again and get warm, the poet is telling us that however much we may talk about the happiness of spirits in heaven—however much we may praise heaven in poetry—the truth is that we are very fond of this world,

we like comfort, we like company, we like human love and human pleasures. There is a good deal of nonsense in pretending that we think heaven is a better place than the world to which we belong. Perhaps it is a better place, but, as a matter of fact, we do not know anything about it; and we should be frightened if we could go beyond a certain distance from the real world which we do know. As he tells us this, the poet begins again to think about the spirit of the dead woman. Is she happy? Is she looking at him—and pitying him as he swims, taking good care not to go too far away from the land? Or is she laughing at him, because in his secret thoughts he confesses that he likes to live—that he does not want to become a pure ghost at the present time?

Evidently a butterfly was quite enough, not only to make Browning's mind think very seriously, but to make that mind teach us the truth and seriousness which may attach to very small things—incidents, happenings of daily life, in any hour and place. I believe that is the greatest English poem we have on the subject of the butterfly.

The idea that a butterfly might be, not merely the symbol of the soul, but in very fact the spirit of a dead person, is somewhat foreign to English thought; and whatever exists in poetry on the subject must necessarily be quite new. The idea of a relation between insects, birds, or other living creatures, and the spirits of the dead, is enormously old in Oriental literature;—we find it in Sanskrit texts thousands of years ago. But the Western mind has not been accustomed to think of spiritual life as outside of man; and much of natural poetry has consequently remained undeveloped in Western countries. A strange little poem, "The White Moth," is an exception to the general rule that I have indicated; but I am almost certain that its author, A. T. Quiller-Couch, must have read Oriental books, or obtained his fancy from some Eastern source. As the knowledge of Indian literature becomes more general in England, we may expect to find poetry much influenced by Oriental ideas. At

the present time, such a composition as this is quite a strange anomaly.

*If a leaf rustled, she would start:
And yet she died, a year ago.
How had so frail a thing the heart
To journey where she trembled so?
And do they turn and turn in fright,
Those little feet, in so much night?*

The light above the poet's head
Streamed on the page and on the cloth,
And twice and thrice there buffeted
On the black pane a white-winged moth:
'T was Annie's soul that beat outside,
And "Open, open, open!" cried:

"I could not find the way to God;
There were too many flaming suns
For signposts, and the fearful road
Led over wastes where millions
Of tangled comets hissed and burned—
I was bewildered and I turned.

"O, it was easy then! I knew
Your window and no star beside.
Look up, and take me back to you!"
—He rose and thrust the window wide.
'T was but because his brain was hot
With rhyming; for he heard her not.

But poets polishing a phrase
Show anger over trivial things;
And as she blundered in the blaze
Towards him, on ecstatic wings,
He raised a hand and smote her dead;
Then wrote "*That I had died instead!*"

The lover, or bereaved husband, is writing a poem of which a part is given in the first stanza—which is therefore put in italics. The action proper begins with the second stanza. The soul of the dead woman taps at the window

in the shape of a night-butterfly or moth—imagining, perhaps, that she has still a voice and can make herself heard by the man that she loves. She tells the story of her wandering in space—privileged to pass to heaven, yet afraid of the journey. Now the subject of the poem which the lover happens to be writing inside the room is a memory of the dead woman—mourning for her, describing her in exquisite ways. He cannot hear her at all; he does not hear even the beating of the little wings at the window, but he stands up and opens the window—because he happens to feel hot and tired. The moth thinks that he has heard her, that he knows; and she flies toward him in great delight. But he, thinking that it is only a troublesome insect, kills her with a blow of his hand; and then sits down to continue his poem with the words, “Oh, how I wish I could have died instead of that dear woman!” Altogether this is a queer poem in English literature, and I believe almost alone of its kind. But it is queer only because of its rarity of subject. As for construction, it is very good indeed.

I do not know that it is necessary to quote any more poems upon butterflies or moths. There are several others; but the workmanship and the thought are not good enough or original enough to justify their use here as class texts. So I shall now turn to the subject of dragon-flies. Here we must again be very brief. References to dragon-flies are common throughout English poetry, but the references signify little more than a mere colourless mention of the passing of the insect. However, it so happens that the finest modern lines of pure description written about any insect, are about dragon-flies. And they also happen to be by Tennyson. Naturalists and men of science have greatly praised these lines, because of their truth to nature and the accuracy of observation which they show. You will find them in the poem entitled “The Two Voices.”

To-day I saw the dragon-fly
Come from the wells where he did lie.

An inner impulse rent the veil
 Of his old husk: from head to tail
 Came out clear plates of sapphire mail.

He dried his wings: like gauze they grew;
 Thro' crofts and pastures wet with dew
 A living flash of light he flew.

There are very few real poems, however, upon the dragon-fly in English, and considering the extraordinary beauty and grace of the insect, this may appear strange to you. But I think that you can explain the strangeness at a later time. The silence of English poets on the subject of insects as compared with Japanese poets is due to general causes that we shall consider at the close of the lecture.

Common flies could scarcely seem to be a subject for poetry—disgusting and annoying creatures as they are. But there are more poems about the house-fly than about the dragon-fly. Last year I quoted for you a remarkable and rather mystical composition by the poet Blake about accidentally killing a fly.* Blake represents his own thoughts about the brevity of human life which had been aroused by the incident. It is a charming little poem; but it does not describe the fly at all. I shall not quote it here again, because we shall have many other things to talk about; but I shall give you the text of a famous little composition by Oldys on the same topic. It has almost the simplicity of Blake,—and certainly something of the same kind of philosophy.

Busy, curious, thirsty fly!
 Drink with me, and drink as I.
 Freely welcome to my cup,
 Couldst thou sip and sip it up:
 Make the most of life you may;
 Life is short and wears away.

Both alike are mine and thine,
 Hastening quick to their decline.
 Thine's a summer, mine's no more,

* See *On Poets*, p. 475

Though repeated to threescore.
Threescore summers, when they're gone,
Will appear as short as one!

The suggestion is that, after all, time is only a very relative affair in the cosmic order of things. The life of the man of sixty years is not much longer than the life of the insect which lives but a few hours, days, or months. Had Oldys, who belongs to the eighteenth century, lived in our own time, he might have been able to write something very much more curious on this subject. It is now known that time, to the mind of an insect, must appear immensely longer than it appears to the mind of a man. It has been calculated that a mosquito or a gnat moves its wings between four and five hundred times a second. Now the scientific dissection of such an insect, under the microscope, justifies the opinion that the insect must be conscious of each beat of the wings—just as a man feels that he lifts his arm or bends his head every time that the action is performed. A man cannot even imagine the consciousness of so short an interval of time as the five-hundredth part of one second. But insect consciousness can be aware of such intervals; and a single day of life might well appear to the gnat as long as the period of a month to a man. Indeed, we have reason to suppose that to even the shortest lived insect life does not appear short at all; and that the ephemera may actually, so far as feeling is concerned, live as long as a man—although its birth and death does occur between the rising and the setting of the sun.

We might suppose that bees would form a favourite subject of poetry, especially in countries where apiculture is practised upon such a scale as in England. But such is not really the case. Nearly every English poet makes some reference to bees, as Tennyson does in the famous couplet—

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.*

* *The Princess* vii 221-2

But the only really remarkable poem addressed to a bee is by the American philosopher Emerson. The poem in question cannot be compared as to mere workmanship with some others which I have cited; but as to thinking, it is very interesting, and you must remember that the philosopher who writes poetry should be judged for his thought rather than for the measure of his verse. The whole is not equally good, nor is it short enough to quote entire; I shall only give the best parts.

Burly, dozing humble-bee,
Where thou art is clime for me.

Zigzag steerer, desert cheerer,
Let me chase thy waving lines;
Keep me nearer, me thy hearer,
Singing over shrubs and vines.

Insect lover of the sun,
Joy of thy dominion!
Sailor of the atmosphere;
Swimmer through the waves of air;
Voyager of light and noon;
Epicurean of June;
Wait, I prithee, till I come
Within earshot of thy hum,—
All without is martyrdom.

Thou, in sunny solitudes,
Rover of the underwoods,
The green silence dost displace
With thy mellow, breezy bass.

Aught unsavory or unclean
Hath my insect never seen.

Wiser far than human seer,
Yellow-breeched philosopher!
Seeing only what is fair,
Sipping only what is sweet,
Thou dost mock at fate and care,
Leave the chaff, and take the wheat.

This is really the poetry of the bee—visiting only beautiful flowers, and sucking from them their perfumed juices—always healthy, happy, and surrounded by beautiful things. A great rover, a constant wanderer is the bee—visiting many different places, seeing many different things, but stopping only to enjoy what is beautiful to the sight and sweet to the taste. Now Emerson tells us that a wise man should act like the bee—never stopping to look at what is bad, or what is morally ugly, but seeking only what is beautiful and nourishing for the mind. It is a very fine thought; and the manner of expressing it is greatly helped by Emerson's use of curious and forcible words—such as “burly,” “zigzag,” and the famous expression “yellow-breeched philosopher”—which has passed almost into an American household phrase. The allusion of course is to the thighs of the bee, covered with the yellow pollen of flowers so as to make them seem covered with yellow breeches, or trousers reaching only to the knees.

I do not of course include in the lecture such child songs about insects as that famous one beginning with the words, “How does the little busy bee improve each shining hour.” This is no doubt didactically very good; but I wish to offer you only examples of really fine poetry on the topic. Therefore leaving the subject of bees for the time, let us turn to the subject of musical insects—the singers of the fields and woods—grasshoppers and crickets.

In Japanese poetry there are thousands of verses upon such insects. Therefore it seems very strange that we have scarcely anything on the subject in English. And the little that we do have is best represented by the poem of Keats on the night cricket. The reference is probably to what we call in England the hearth cricket, an insect which hides in houses, making itself at home in some chink of the brick work or stone work about a fireplace, for it loves the warmth. I suppose that the small number of poems in English about crickets can be partly explained by the scarcity of night singers. Only the house cricket seems to be very well known.

But on the other hand, we cannot so well explain the rarity of composition in regard to the day-singers—the grasshoppers and locusts which can be heard, though somewhat faintly, in any English country place after sunset during the warm season. Another queer thing is that the example set by Keats has not been imitated or at least followed even up to the present time.

The poetry of earth is never dead:
 When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
 And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
 From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;
 That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
 In summer luxury,—he has never done
 With his delights, for when tired out with fun,
 He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
 The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
 On a lone winter evening, when the frost
 Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
 The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
 And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
 The Grasshopper's among some grassing hills.

In this charming composition you will have noticed the word “stove”; but you must remember that this is not a stove as we understand the term now, and signifies only an old fashioned fireplace of brick or tile. In Keats's day there were no iron stoves. Another word which I want to notice is the word “poetry” in the first line. By the poetry of nature the poet means the voices of nature—the musical sounds made by its idle life in woods and fields. So the word “poetry” here has especially the meaning of song, and corresponds very closely to the Japanese word which signifies either poem or song, but perhaps more especially the latter. The general meaning of the sonnet is that at no time, either in winter or in summer, is nature silent. When the birds do not sing, the grasshoppers make music for us; and when the cold has killed or banished all other life, then the house cricket begins with its thin sweet song to make us

think of the dead voices of the summer.

There is not much else of note about the grasshopper and the cricket in the works of the great English poets. But perhaps you do not know that Tennyson in his youth took up the subject and made a long poem upon the grasshopper, but suppressed it after the edition of 1842. He did not think it good enough to rank with his other work. But a few months ago the poems which Tennyson suppressed in the final edition of his works have been published and carefully edited by an eminent scholar,* and among these poems we find "The Grasshopper." I will quote some of this poem, because it is beautiful, and because the fact of its suppression will serve to show you how very exact and careful Tennyson was to preserve only the very best things that he wrote.

Voice of the summer wind,
 Joy of the summerplain,
 Life of the summerhours,
 Carol clearly, bound along,
 No Tithon thou as poets feign
 (Shame fall 'em they are deaf and blind)
 But an insect lithe and strong,
 Bowing the seeded summerflowers.
 Prove their falsehood and thy quarrel,
 Vaulting on thine airy feet.
 Clap thy shielded sides and carol,
 Carol clearly, chirrup sweet.
 Thou art a mailéd warrior in youth and strength complete;
 Armed cap-a-pie,
 Full fair to see;
 Unknowing fear,
 Undreading loss,
 A gallant cavalier,
Sans peur et sans reproche,
 In sunlight and in shadow,
 The Bayard of the meadow.

* The reference is to *The Early Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson. Edited by J. C. Collins. 1900*

The reference to Tithonus is a reference of course to a subject afterwards beautifully elaborated in another poem by Tennyson, the great poem of "Tithonus." The Bayard here referred to was the great French model of perfect chivalry, and is sometimes called the last of the feudal knights. He was said to be without fear and without blame. You may remember that he was killed by a ball from a gun—it was soon after the use of artillery in war had been introduced; and his dying words were to the effect that he feared there was now an end of great deeds, because men had begun to fight from a distance with machines instead of fighting in the old knightly and noble way with sword and spear. The grasshopper, covered with green plates and bearing so many little sharp spines upon its long limbs, seems to have suggested to Tennyson the idea of a fairy knight in green armour.

As I said before, England is poor in singing insects, while America is rich in them—almost, perhaps, as rich as Japan, although you will not find as many different kinds of singing insects in any one state or district. The singing insects of America are peculiar to particular localities. But the Eastern States have perhaps the most curious insect of this kind. It is called the Katydid. This name is spelt either Katydid, or Catydid—though the former spelling is preferable. Katy, or Katie, is the abbreviation of the name Catherine; very few girls are called by the full name Catherine (also spelt Katherine); because the name is long and unmusical, their friends address them usually as Katy, and their acquaintances, as Kate. Well, the insect of which I am speaking, a kind of *semi*, makes a sound resembling the sound of the words "Katie did!" Hence the name—one of the few corresponding to the names given to the Japanese *semi*, such as *tsuku-tsuku-bôshi*, or *minmin-semi*. The most interesting composition upon this cicada is by Oliver Wendell Holmes, but it is of the lighter sort of verse, with a touch of humour in it. I shall quote a few verses only, as the piece contains some allusions that would require ex-

planation at considerable length.

I love to hear thine earnest voice,
 Wherever thou art hid,
 Thou testy little dogmatist,
 Thou pretty Katydid!
 Thou mindest me of gentlefolks,—
 Old gentlefolks are they,—
 Thou say'st an undisputed thing
 In such a solemn way.

. . . .

Oh tell me where did Katy live,
 And what did Katy do?
 And was she very fair and young,
 And yet so wicked too?
 Did Katy love a naughty man,
 Or kiss more cheeks than one?
 I warrant Katy did no more
 Than many a Kate has done.

. . . .

Ah, no! the living oak shall crash,
 That stood for ages still,
 The rock shall rend its mossy base
 And thunder down the hill,
 Before the little Katydid
 Shall add one word, to tell
 The mystic story of the maid
 Whose name she knows so well.

The word “testy” may be a little unfamiliar to some of you; it is a good old-fashioned English term for “cross,” “irritable.” The reference to the “old gentlefolks” implies the well-known fact that in argument old persons are inclined to be much more obstinate than young people. And there is also a hint in the poem of the tendency among old ladies to blame the conduct of young girls even more severely than may be necessary. There is nothing else to recommend the poem except its wit and the curiousness of the subject. There are several other verses about the same

creature, by different American poets; but none of them is quite so good as the composition of Holmes. However, I may cite a few verses from one of the earlier American poets, Philip Freneau, who flourished in the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth. He long anticipated the fancy of Holmes; but he spells the word *Caty-did*.

In a branch of willow hid,
Sings the evening *Caty-did*:
From the lofty locust bough
Feeding on a drop of dew,
In her suit of green arrayed
Hear her singing in the shade—
Caty-did, Caty-did, Caty-did!

.

While upon a leaf you tread,
Or repose your little head
On your sheet of shadows laid,
All the day you nothing said;
Half the night your cheery tongue
Revelled out its little song,—
Nothing else but *Caty-did*.

.

Tell me, what did *Caty* do?
Did she mean to trouble you?
Why was *Caty* not forbid
To trouble little *Caty-did*?
Wrong, indeed, at you to fling,
Hurting no one while you sing,—
Caty-did! Caty-did! Caty-did!

To Dr. Holmes the voice of the cicada seemed like the voice of an old obstinate woman, an old prude, accusing a young girl of some fault,—but to Freneau the cry of the little creature seemed rather to be like the cry of a little child complaining—a little girl, perhaps, complaining that somebody had been throwing stones at her, or had hurt her in some way. And, of course, the unfinished character of the phrase allows equally well either supposition.

Before going back to more serious poetry, I want—while we are speaking of American poets—to make one reference to the ironical or satirical poetry which insects have inspired in some minds, taking for example the poem by Charlotte Pekins Stetson about a butterfly. This author is rather a person of note, being a prominent figure in educational reforms and the author of a volume of poems of a remarkably strong kind in the didactic sense. In other words, she is especially a moral poet; and unless moral poetry be really very well executed, it is scarcely worth while classing it as literature. I think, however, that the symbolism in the following verses will interest you—especially when we comment upon them. The composition from which they are taken is entitled “A Conservative.”

The poet, walking in the garden one morning, sees a butterfly, very unhappy, and gifted with power to express the reason of its unhappiness. The butterfly says, complaining of its wings,

“My legs are thin and few
 Where once I had a swarm!
 Soft fuzzy fur—a joy to view—
 Once kept my body warm,
 Before these flapping wing-things grew,
 To hamper and deform!”

At that outrageous bug I shot
 The fury of mine eye;
 Said I, in scorn all burning hot,
 In rage and anger high,
 “You ignominious idiot,
 Those wings were made to fly!”

“I do not want to fly,” said he,
 “I only want to squirm!”
 He drooped his wings dejectedly,
 But still his voice was firm:
 “I do not want to be a fly!
 I want to be a worm!”

O yesterday of unknown lack!
To-day of unknown bliss!
I left my fool in red and black;
The last I saw was this,—
The creature madly climbing back
Into his chrysalis.

Of course the wings here represent the powers of the mind—knowledge, reason, will. Men ought to use these in order to reach still nobler and higher states of life. But there are men who refuse to use their best faculties for this end. Such men are like butterflies who do not want to take the trouble to fly, but prefer the former condition of the caterpillar which does nothing but eat and sleep. As applied to certain forms of conservatism the satire is strong.

Something may now be said as to poems about spiders. But let me remind you that a spider is not an insect. Scientifically it has no relation to the great family of true insects; it belongs to the very distinct family of the arthropoda or “joint-footed” animals. But as it is still popularly called an insect in most European countries, we may be excused for including it in the subject of the present lecture. I suppose you know that one of the scientific names for this whole class of creatures is Arachnida,—a name derived from the Greek name Arachne. The story of Arachne is interesting, and everybody studying natural history ought to know it. Arachne was a young girl, according to the Greek story, who was very skilful at weaving. She wove cloths of many different colours and beautiful patterns, and everybody admired her work. This made her vain—so vain that at last she said that even the goddess of weaving could not weave better than she. Immediately after she had said that, the terrible goddess herself—Pallas Athena—entered the room. Pallas Athena was not only the goddess of wisdom, you know, but especially the goddess of young girls, presiding over the chastity, the filial piety, and the domestic occupations of virgins; and she was very angry at the conceit of this girl. So she said to her, “You have boasted that you

can weave as well as I can; now let me see you weave!" So Arachne was obliged to sit down at her loom and weave in the presence of the goddess; and the goddess also wove, far surpassing the weaving of Arachne. When the weaving was done, the goddess asked the girl, "Now see! which is the better, my work or yours?" And Arachne was obliged to confess that she had been defeated and put to shame. But the goddess was not thoroughly satisfied; to punish Arachne, she touched her lightly with the distaff, saying, "Spin for ever!" and thereupon Arachne was changed into a spider, which for ever spins and weaves perishable films of perishable shiny thread. Poetically we still may call a spider Arachne.

I have here a little poem of a touching character entitled "Arachne," by Rose Terry Cooke,—one of the symbolic poems which are becoming so numerous in these days of newer and deeper philosophy. I think that you will like it: a spinster, that is, a maiden past the age of girlhood, is the speaker.

I watch her in the corner there,
As, restless, bold, and unafraid,
She slips and floats along the air
Till all her subtile house is made.

Her home, her bed, her daily food,
All from that hidden store she draws;
She fashions it and knows it good,
By instinct's strong and sacred laws.

No tenuous threads to weave her nest,
She seeks and gathers there or here;
But spins it from her faithful breast,
Renewing still, till leaves are sere.

Then, worn with toil, and tired of life,
In vain her shining traps are set.
The frost hath hushed the insect strife
And gilded flies her charm forget.

But swinging in the snares she spun,
She sways to every wintry wind:
Her joy, her toil, her errand done,
Her corse the sport of storms unkind.

The symbolism of these verses will appear to you more significant when I tell you that it refers especially to conditions in New England in the present period. The finest American population—perhaps the finest Anglo-Saxons ever produced—were the New Englanders of the early part of the century. But with the growth of the new century, the men found themselves attracted elsewhere, especially westward; their shrewdness, their energies, their inventiveness, were needed in newer regions. And they wandered away by thousands and thousands, never to come back again, and leaving the women behind them. Gradually the place of these men was taken by immigrants of inferior development—but the New England women had nothing to hope for from these strangers. The bravest of them also went away to other states; but myriads who could not go were condemned by circumstances to stay and earn their living by hard work without any prospect of happy marriage. The difficulty which a girl of culture may experience in trying to live by the work of her hands in New England is something not easily imagined. But it is getting to be the same in most Western countries. Such a girl is watching a spider weaving in the corner of the same room where she herself is weaving; and she thinks, “Am I not like that spider, obliged to supply my every need by the work of my own hands, without sympathy, without friends? The spider will spin and catch flies until the autumn comes; then she will die. Perhaps I too must continue to spin until the autumn of my own life—until I become too old to work hard, and die of cold and of exhaustion.”

Poor sister of the spinster clan!
I too from out my store within
My daily life and living plan,
My home, my rest, my pleasure spin.

I know thy heart when heartless hands
Sweep all that hard-earned web away:
Destroy its pearled and glittering bands
And leave thee homeless by the way.

I know thy peace when all is done,
Each anchored thread, each tiny knot,
Soft shining in the autumn sun;
A sheltered, silent, tranquil lot.

I know what thou hast never known,—
Sad presage to a soul allowed—
That not for life I spin, alone,
But day by day I spin my shroud.

The reference to the sweeping away of the spider's web, of course, implies the pain often caused to such hard-working girls by the meanness of men who employ them only to cheat them—shopkeepers or manufacturers who take their work without justly paying for it, and who criticize it as bad in order to force the owner to accept less money than it is worth. Again a reference may be intended to the destruction of the home by some legal trick—some unscrupulous method of cheating the daughter out of the property bequeathed to her by her parents.

Notice a few pretty words here. The "pearled" as applied to the spider's thread gives an intimation of the effect produced by dew on the thread, but there is also the suggestion of tears upon the thread work woven by the hands of the girl. The participle "anchored" is very pretty in its use here as an adjective, because this word is now especially used for rope-fastening, whether the rope be steel or hemp; and particularly for the fastening of the cables of a bridge. The last stanza might be paraphrased thus: "Sister Spider, I know more than you—and that knowledge makes me unhappy. You do not know, when you are spinning your little web, that you are really weaving your own shroud. But I know this, my work is slowly but surely killing me. And I know it because I have a soul—at least a mind made otherwise than yours."

The use of the word "soul" in the last stanza of this poem, brings me back to the question put forth in an earlier part of the lecture,—why European poets, during the last two thousand years, have written so little upon the subject of insects? Three thousand, four thousand years ago, the most beautiful Greek poetry—poetry more perfect than anything of English poetry—was written upon insects. In old Japanese literature poems upon insects are to be found by thousands. What is the signification of the great modern silence in Western countries upon this delightful topic? I believe that Christianity, as dogma, accounts for the long silence. The opinions of the early Church refused soul, ghost, intelligence of any sort, to other creatures than man. All animals were considered as automata—that is, as self-acting machines, moved by a something called instinct, for want of a better name. To talk about the souls of animals or the spirits of animals would have been very dangerous in the Middle Ages, when the Church had supreme power; it would indeed have been to risk or to invite an accusation of witchcraft, for demons were then thought to take the shape of animals at certain times. To discuss the *mind* of an animal would have been for the Christian faith to throw doubt upon the existence of human souls as taught by the Church; for if you grant that animals are able to think, then you must acknowledge that man is able to think without a soul, or you must acknowledge that the soul is not the essential principle of thought and action. Until after the time of Descartes, who later argued philosophically that animals were only machines, it was scarcely possible to argue rationally about the matter in Europe.

Nevertheless, we shall soon perceive that this explanation will not cover all the facts. You will naturally ask how it happens that, if the question be a question of animal souls, birds, horses, dogs, cats, and many other animals have been made the subject of Western poems from ancient times. The silence is only upon the subject of insects. And, again, Christianity has one saint—the most beautiful character in

all Christian hagiography—who thought of all nature in a manner that, at first sight, strangely resembles Buddhism. This saint was Francis of Assisi, born in the latter part of the twelfth century, so that he may be said to belong to the very heart of the Middle Ages,—the most superstitious epoch of Christianity. Now this saint used to talk to trees and stones as if they were animated beings. He addressed the sun as “my brother sun;” and he spoke of the moon as his sister. He preached not only to human beings, but also to the birds and the fishes; and he made a great many poems on these subjects, full of a strange and childish beauty. For example, his sermon to the doves, beginning, “My little sisters, the doves,” in which he reminds them that their form is the emblem or symbol of the Holy Ghost, is a beautiful poem; and has been, with many others translated into nearly all modern languages. But observe that neither St. Francis nor any other saint has anything to say on the subject of insects.

Perhaps we must go back further than Christianity to guess the meaning of these distinctions. Among the ancient races of Asia, where the Jewish faith arose, there were strange and sinister beliefs about insects—old Assyrian superstitions, old Babylonian beliefs. Insects seemed to those early peoples very mysterious creatures (which they really are); and it appears to have been thought that they had a close relation to the world of demons and evil spirits. I suppose you know that the name of one of their gods, Beelzebub, signified the Lord of Flies. The Jews, as is shown by their Talmudic literature, inherited some of these ideas; and it is quite probable that they were passed on to the days of Christianity. Again, in the early times of Christianity in northern Africa the Church had to fight against superstitions of an equally strange sort derived from old Egyptian beliefs. Among the Egyptians, certain insects were sacred and became symbols of divinity,—such as the beetle. Now I imagine that for these reasons the subject of insects became at an early time a subject which Christianity thought dangerous, and that thereafter a kind of hostile opinion pre-

vailed regarding any literature upon this topic.

However, to-day things are very different. With the development of scientific studies—especially of microscopic study—it has been found that insects, far from being the lowliest of creatures, are the most highly organized of all beings; that their special senses are incomparably superior to our own; and that in natural history, from the evolutional standpoint, they have to be given first place. This of course renders it impossible any longer to consider the insect as a trifling subject. Moreover, the new philosophy is teaching the thinking classes in all Western countries the great truth of the unity of life. With the recognition of such unity, an insect must interest the philosophers—even the man of ordinary culture—quite as much as the bird or any other animal.

Nearly all the poems which I have quoted to you have been poems of very modern date—from which we may infer that interest in the subject of insects has been developing of late years only. In this connection it is interesting to note that a very religious poet, Whittier, gave us in the last days of his life a poem upon ants. This would have seemed strange enough in a former age; it does not seem strange to-day, and it is beautiful. The subject is taken from old Jewish literature.

KING SOLOMON AND THE ANTS

Out from Jerusalem
 The King rode with his great
 War chiefs and lords of state,
 And Sheba's queen with them,
 Comely, but black withal,
 To whom, perchance, belongs
 That wondrous Song of songs
 Sensuous and mystical,
 Whereto devout souls turn
 In fond, ecstatic dream,
 And through its earth born theme
 The Love of loves discern.

Proud in the Syrian sun,
 In gold and purple sheen,
 The dusky Ethiop queen
 Smiled on King Solomon.

Wisest of men, he knew
 The languages of all
 The creatures great or small
 That trod the earth or flew.

Across an ant-hill led
 The king's path, and he heard
 Its small folk, and their word
 He thus interpreted:

"Here comes the king men greet
 As wise and good and just,
 To crush us in the dust
 Under his heedless feet."

The king, understanding the language of insects, turns to the queen and explains to her what the ants have just said. She advises him to pay no attention to the sarcasm of the ants—how dare such vile creatures speak thus about a king! But Solomon thinks otherwise:

"Nay," Solomon replied,
 "The wise and strong should seek
 The welfare of the weak,"
 And turned his horse aside.

His train, with quick alarm,
 Curved with their leader round
 The ant-hill's peopled mound,
 And left it free from harm.

The jewelled head bent low;
 "O king!" she said, "henceforth
 The secret of thy worth
 And wisdom well I know.

"Happy must be the State
 Whose ruler heedeth more
 The murmurs of the poor
 Than flatteries of the great."

The reference to "The Song of Songs"—also "The Song of Solomon" and "The Canticle of Canticles"—may require a little explanation. The line "Comely, but black withal," is borrowed from a verse of this song—"I am black but beautiful, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon." In another part of the "Song" the reason of this blackness is given: "I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me." From which we can see that the word "black" only means dark, brown, tanned by the sun. Perhaps you do not know that as late as the middle of the eighteenth century it was still the custom in England to speak of a person with black hair and eyes as "a black man"—a custom which Charles Lamb had reason to complain of even at a later day. The tents referred to in the text were probably tents made of camel-skin, such as the Arabs still make, and the colour of these is not black but brown. Whether Solomon wrote the so-called "Song" or not we do not know; but the poet refers to a legend that it was written in praise of the beauty of the dark queen who came from Sheba to visit the wisest man of the world. Such is not, however, the opinion of modern scholars. The composition is really dramatic, although thrown into lyrical form, and as arranged by Renan and others it becomes a beautiful little play, of which each act is a monologue. "Sensuous" the poet correctly calls it; for it is a form of praise of woman's beauty in all its details, as appears in such famous verses as these: "How beautiful are thy feet in shoes, O prince's daughter; the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins which feed among the lilies." But Christianity, instead of dismissing this part of the Bible, interpreted the song mystically—insisting that the woman described meant the church, and the lover, Christ. Of course only very pious people continue to believe this; even the good Whittier preferred the legend that it was written about the Queen of Sheba.

I suppose that I ought to end this lecture upon insect

poetry by some quotation to which a moral or philosophical meaning can be attached. I shall end it therefore with a quotation from the poet Gray. The poetry of insects may be said to have first appeared in English literature during the second half of the eighteenth century, so that it is only, at the most, one hundred and fifty years old. But the first really fine poem of the eighteenth century relating to the subject is quite as good as anything since composed by Englishmen upon insect-life in general. Perhaps Gray referred especially to what we call May-flies—those delicate ghostly insects which hover above water surfaces in fine weather, but which die on the same day that they are born. He does not specify May-flies, however, and we may consider the moral of the poem quite apart from any particular kind of insects. You will find this reference in the piece entitled “Ode on the Spring,” in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas.

Still is the toiling hand of Care:
 The panting herds repose;
 Yet hark, how thro' the peopled air
 The busy murmur glows!
 The insect youth are on the wing,
 Eager to taste the honied spring,
 And float amid the liquid noon:
 Some lightly o'er the current skim,
 Some shew their gaily-gilded trim
 Quick-glancing to the sun.

To Contemplation's sober eye
 Such is the race of Man:
 And they that creep, and they that fly,
 Shall end where they began.
 Alike the Busy and the Gay
 But flutter thro' life's little day,
 In fortune's varying colours drest:
 Brush'd by the hand of rough Mischance,
 Or chill'd by age, their airy dance
 They leave, in dust to rest.

Methinks I hear in accents low
The sportive kind reply:
Poor moralist! and what art thou?
A solitary fly!
Thy Joys no glittering female meets,
No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
No painted plumage to display:
On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
Thy sun is set; thy spring is gone—
We frolick, while 'tis May.

The poet Gray was never married, and the last stanza which I have quoted refers jocosely to himself. It is an artistic device to set off the moral by a little mockery, so that it may not appear too melancholy. Seeing the insects sporting in the bright weather, but all doomed so soon to die, the poet first thinks:

“Well, men are just like insects after all, in the eternal order of things. Some insects can only creep, while others can fly; some insects can store up honey or grain; some live only a few hours; some live for a season. In like manner, some men are stupid and are unable to succeed in the world; whereas others rise to honour, accumulate wealth, reach honoured old age and see their children prosper. But the end is the same for all men, as it is for the insect,—dust.” But then the poet fancies that he hears the voice of the insects reproaching him, and asking him: “What are you yourself, compared with an insect? You are not, perhaps, quite so good as an insect. For the insect at least fulfils its life upon earth; the male finds its female; the honey or the grain is stored up; and the joy of life is found by us. But you—what have you done in this world? You have no wife; you have no treasures; you have had no real part in the enjoyment of this world. And, therefore, however you may moralize, perhaps you are not worthy to compare yourself even with the bee or the ant or the dragon-fly that does its little duty in this impermanent state of existence.”