

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### METEMPSYCHOSIS IN MODERN VERSE

AS we have a few more hours for this class of lectures, I shall devote that time to slight studies upon some unfamiliar but interesting phases of poetical literature. To-day I want to call your attention to the subject of metempsychosis in modern verse. There is very little nineteenth century poetry on this subject, and still less of poetry of a high order. Of course there are a number of very fine poems dealing with superindividual memory—organic memory of former lives;—and you have noticed poetry of this kind in Rossetti, in Swinburne, and in others: also you may remember a beautiful little poem by Alice Meynell which I dictated to you the year before last, entitled “The Modern Poet.” But the true idea of metempsychosis,—the idea that a soul may pass, not merely from one human body to another, but from a human body into other shapes of being, animal or vegetable,—that is very rare in good English poetry. We have, however, some examples; and I want to call your attention to one of them which is by an Englishman of considerable reputation in the world of letters. It is entitled “The White Moth;” and I think it should be interesting to you because of some analogy which it offers with a few Japanese poems on the same subject. Of course the treatment is altogether different; we have here almost the light tone of society verse. But the fundamental notion is very seldom utilized by our poets—although it is as old as Plato.

*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 reason why the first verse is put in italics is that it represents a manuscript form on which the hero of the story is engaged. He has just been writing a poem about his dead wife, and has just finished this verse of it when his dead wife returns to him in the form of a night butterfly, as we shall see in the next verse.

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!*"

This little thing is pretty and light in itself almost as a

butterfly: and although the pathos is only half serious, it stays in the mind and thrills there long after the poem has been read—which is a sign of power. The author's name is Quiller-Couch.