

BITS OF VERSE ABOUT BUGS

At first thought bugs may seem an unlikely subject for verse and one may wonder that poets with all the miracles of air and earth and sky to write about should trouble themselves about anything so insignificant as a bug. Those, however, who have made excursions, even very brief ones, into the realm of entomology, remember what new and fascinating vistas opened before them. To realize the fascination of the subject one needs only to read Henri Fabre, the insect Homer, or Sir John Lubbock, or Maeterlinck's story of the bees, or, most interesting of all, the naive and delightful, "Insekten Belustigung" of Baron Rösler von Rosenhof. The latter, indeed, was so ardent an entomologist that his inspired biographer, in a three-page poem which he incorporates in the preface to the sixth volume, reassures the departed spirit thus:

"Scientists thy name shall cherish,
So that thy fame shall never perish,
And the creeping things of earth shall be
A lasting monument to thee."

The insect world is indeed a wide one, and even those men who have found within it inspiration and material for a whole lifetime of work have been able to study minutely only a few groups. A vast world it is, but even more ephemeral, even more fluctuating than the world of men.

"The sun comes forth and many reptiles spawn;
It sets, and each ephemeral insect then
Is gathered into death without a dawn,
And the immortal stars awake again."

Poets have sung freely, and more or less accurately, of birds

and flowers, but allusions to the insect life which forms so vital a part of our environment are comparatively rare. Many of these allusions are hackneyed and conventional, - "the busy bee", "the frivolous butterfly", "the industrious ant", "the idle grasshopper" - these add nothing to the sum of our knowledge. Perhaps the butterfly is the insect most celebrated in prose and poetry. Its gorgeous colors, graceful flight and curious and easily observed transformation have attracted general notice. The Greeks made it the symbol of the soul and pictured Psyche with the wings of a butterfly. Many writers have seen in the three stages of its development the three phases in the life of the human soul. Like the caterpillar, we grovel on the earth; like the chrysalis, seeming dead, we lie in the grave, and like the butterfly, leaving the empty shell of our bodies, we shall find a new and glorious life in a new form. Shelley alludes to this belief when he speaks of

"Many an antenatal tomb
Where butterflies dream of the life to come."

Bryant, who probably wrote more about nature than any other American poet, gives in "After a Tempest" these lines:

"And from beneath the leaves that kept them dry
Flew many a glittering insect here and there,
And darted up and down the butterfly,
That seemed a living blossom of the air".

This description is at once apt and poetical, for the butterflies, whether we contemplate the pale glory of the Luna moth or the iridescent sapphire of some tropical species, are most flower-like. So rare is their beauty that we feel that Titania chose well when she bids the elves who are to attend Bottom

"Pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes".

In "June" Bryant returns to the conventional idea when he says:

"The idle butterfly
Should rest him there, and there be heard
The housewife bee and humming bird."

The butterfly does not really deserve the reproach of idleness and is far from being the frivolous creature he has so often been considered. In all these seemingly purposeless flutterings from flower to flower he has motives the most important possible to any species - the twin motives of self preservation and reproduction. The nectar which he draws from the flowers with his long sucking tube represents to him bread, butter and beefsteak; and, in various situations according to species, the female deposits the eggs which insure the next generation. To this practically the entire adult life of the butterfly is devoted, and since lectures on birth control have formed no part of their curriculum, they go about the business with great thoroughness. The gardener who wages incessant battle with the cabbage worms contends that they are far too thorough, for these same hated cabbage worms are the larvae of Pieris, the dainty white and golden butterflies that dance like animated pearl and gold necklaces about one's garden all summer long.

Ruth McEnery Stuart shares the common opinion as to the indolence of the butterfly:

"Sis' Butterfly aimed to work all right,
But 'er wings des was heavy, an' 'er head too light,
So she riz in de air, case she see she was made
Jes' to fly in de sun in de beauty parade.
An' she ain't by 'erself in dat, in dat --
An' she ain't by 'erself in dat."

In "The Butterfly that Stamped" Kipling has written a de-

lightful fable with a moral for all discontented wives. Rossetti sums up the life history of the butterfly in one of his quaint experiments in rhyme:

"Brown shell first for the butterfly,
And a bright wing by and by.
Butterfly, goodbye to your shell
And bright wings, speed you well.
Bright lamplight for the butterfly,
And a burnt wing by and by.
Butterfly, alas for your shell,
And bright wings, fare you well."

When we are feeling peculiarly humble we call ourselves "worms of the dust", and worms have long been one of the gruesome accompaniments of our images of death and the grave. These so-called worms are mostly insect larvae, and a large proportion of them have been maligned as to their habits, since in general they are vegetarian to a degree. True, certain beetles and certain flies lay their eggs in decaying flesh and the developing larvae feed upon it, but this should not give a bad character to all worms, particularly when the common interpretation includes under that name such diverse creatures as angle worms, myriapods and the larvae of several different orders of insects. Virgil, in the last book of the Georgics, has an elaborate formula for engendering bees in the decaying flesh of kine, which bit of misinformation undoubtedly had its origin in the hatching of flies in such situations.

Flies, indeed, have suffered much and deservedly at the hands of literary man and layman. There is a wide gap between Uncle Toby's benevolent "This world is surely wide enough to hold both thee and me", and the modern version of our childhood rhyme which reads, "Baby bye, there's a fly! Let us swat it,

you and I". When we consider the menace to life and health represented by the fly, it seems indeed poetic justice that it should be fly larvae which most frequently play the leading role of the piece of which Poe wrote:

"The play is the tragedy, Man,
The hero the Conqueror Worm."

In harmony with the gloomy and mysterious character of Poe's poetry we find this theme a favorite with him. In "The Sleeper" we read:

"My love, she sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,
As it is lasting, so be deep!
Soft may the worms about her creep!"

The Bible, that storehouse of forceful imagery, abounds in such descriptions. The prophet Isaiah, in his song of triumph over the King of Babylon, chants:

"The worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!"

And in the gloomiest of Shakespeare's sonnets, the seventy-first:

"No longer mourn for me when I am dead,
Than you shall hear the surly, sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell."

Not solely as the emblems of death and corruption does he mention worms. In "Twelfth Night" Viola speaks of her sister:

" who never told her love,
But let Concealment, like the worm i' the bud,
Gnaw at her damask cheek."

This "worm i' the bud" was probably the larva of one of the numerous species of flower beetles. Beetles, however, have received scant courtesy at the hands of our poets, - a neglect the more remarkable when we consider that this is one of the largest

Altho' Titania is somewhat more poetical, her entomology is less accurate than that of a later poet who chants eloquently:

"The lightning bug is brilliant,
But he hasn't any mind,
He blunders through creation
With his headlight on behind."

In "Locksley Hall" Tennyson uses the firefly in a rather inadequate simile, when he speaks of the Pleiads as "A swarm of fireflies, tangled in a golden braid."

There is an old song by an unknown writer, "The Great Adventurer", which records that,

"Where there is no place
For the glow worm to lie,
Where there is no space
For receipt of a fly;
Where the midge dares not venture,
Lest herself fast she lay;
If love come he will enter
And soon find out his way."

Lowell's patriotic outburst, "The Washers of the Shroud", has its atmosphere of mystery and the supernatural enhanced by the lines:

"Pale fireflies pulsed within the meadow mist,
Their halos wavering thistledowns of light."

Whittier has a most appropriate reference to the firefly in "The Barefoot Boy":

"While for music came the play
Of the pied frogs' orchestra,
And to light the noisy choir
Lit the firefly his lamp of fire."

This poem abounds in nature lore:

"Knowledge never learned of schools,
Of the wild bee's morning chase,
Of the wild flower's time and place,
Of the black wasp's cunning way,
Mason of his walls of clay,
And the architectural plans
Of grey hornet artisans."

The bee, indeed, is so much one of our domestic creatures that

it is commonly alluded to as the household cat or dog. Whittier has a poem based on the old English tradition that bees will leave their hives if they are not duly informed of a death in the family:

"Stay at home, pretty bees, fly not hence,
Mistress Mary is dead and gone."

It is said that the bee was the harbinger of the pioneer and penetrated into the prairies only some few miles farther than the settlements. Bryant conveys this idea in the poem, "The Prairies":

"The bee,
A more adventurous colonist than man,
With whom he came across the eastern deep,
Fills the savannahs with his murmurings,
And hides his sweets, as in the golden age,
Within the hollow oak."

In "Summer Wind" he speaks of a noontide when

"All is silent, save the faint
And interrupted murmur of the bee,
Settling on sick flowers and then again,
Instantly on the wing."

Indeed, one may find in Bryant's poems a score of places where he introduces this note of the "murmuring bee", or the "hum of the laden bee" into his poetic symphony, but these allusions are too similar to repay quotation.

Lowell quaintly characterizes "the drowsy bee" who "stumbles among the clover tops", while Rossetti, in whose mystical stanzas trite allusions have no place, rings the changes on the honey bee thus:

"Honey flowers to the honey comb,
And the honey-bee's from home.
A honey comb and a honey flower
And the bee shall have his hour.
A honeyed heart for the honey comb,
And the humming bee flies home.
A heavy heart in the honey flower
And the bee has had his hour."

It is in Shakespeare's "Henry the Fifth", however, that we find the most complete and accurate description of the social habits which make the bees so interesting:

"For so work the honey bees,
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
They have a king and officers of sorts,
Where some, like magistrates, correct at home.
Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad;
Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,
Which pillage they with merry march bring home
To the tent royal of their emperor,
Who, busied in his majesty, surveys
The singing masons building roofs of gold,
The civil citizens kneading up the honey,
The poor mechanic porters crowding in
Their heavy burdens at his narrow gate;
The sad-eyed justice, with his surly hum,
Delivering o'er to executors pale,
The lazy, yawning drone."

The mosquito seems an unlikely subject for verse, yet to him Bryant dedicates an entire poem, beginning with the well known lines:

"Fair insect! that, with thread-like legs spread out,
And blood extracting bill and filmy wing,
Dost murmur, as thou slowly sails't about,
In pitiless ears full many a plaintive thing,
And tell how little our large veins would bleed,
Would we but yield them to thy bitter need.
Beneath the rushes was thy cradle swung,
And when at length thy gauzy wings grew strong,
Abroad to gentle airs their folds were flung."

He condoles with the mosquito over the nauseating flavor of rouse on the fair cheeks he seeks to bite, and after begging him not to bleed "a brother poet gaunt like thee", advises him to

"Try some plump alderman and suck the blood
Enriched by generous wine and costly meat;
On well filled skins, sleek as thy native mud,
Fix thy light pump and press thy freckled feet."

Even more unlikely than the mosquito as a subject for verse is that disagreeable parasite, the louse.

him the gift of immortal life, but she forgot to ask the ruler of Olympus for immortal youth, so she had the grief of beholding how her radiant lover grew ever older and more old, while she herself was with each dawning day as immortally fresh and fair as ever. With each year he withered more and more until he became but a cracked, complaining voice. Then Aurora, in pity for the once adored being, changed him into a grasshopper, and always in the late summer one may hear his voice incessantly lamenting his cruel fate. Thus in Drake's "Culprit Fay":

"The winds are whist and the owl is still,
And naught is heard on the lonely hill
But the cricket's chirp and the answer shrill
Of the gauze-winged katy-did."

For some reason, perhaps because of the aimless way in which he jumps from under your feet as you walk through the grass on a summer afternoon, the grasshopper, like the butterfly, has acquired a reputation for idleness and frivolity. Our fabulists delight to represent him as singing and dancing through the summer and the pleasant days of early autumn, and when winter finally comes, foodless and homeless, begging for aid from the thrifty ant, who does not, however, in the fable at least, add to her other virtues that of charity.

The grasshopper and his kindred among the Orthoptera, the locust and the cricket, were not popular in Bible times, in spite of John the Baptist's menu of locusts and wild honey. They appear usually in the role of a plague, as in the hundred and fifth Psalm:

"He spake and there came swarms of flies,
And lice in all their borders;
He spake and the locust came,
And the grasshopper, and that without number,

And did eat up every herb in their land,
And did eat up the fruit of their ground."

In proverbs we read:

"There are four things which are little upon the earth,
But they are exceeding wise.
The ants are people not strong,
Yet they provide their food in the summer;
The locusts have no king,
Yet they go forth all of them by bands."

Joel, who might be classed as a minor prophet because of the minor strain in his writings, if for no better reason, complains that "That which the palmer worm hath left the locust hath eaten, and that which the locust hath left the cankerworm hath eaten, and that which the cankerworm hath left the caterpillar hath eaten."

And finally, the wailing music of Ecclesiastes: "and the almond tree shall blossom, and the grasshopper shall be a burden and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets."

You may have noticed in the late summer an insect like a ridiculously magnified mosquito fluttering uncertainly against the screen; perhaps you called it a gallinipper and killed it, thinking that you had disposed of an unusually large and unusually venomous mosquito, - another case of the innocent bystander. The adult crane-fly is entirely harmless, tho' some species in the larval stage do injure grass and grain crops. He is not only harmless, but rather helpless, and the following verse is singularly expressive of his probable mental perturbation:

"My six long legs, all here and there,
Oppress my bosom with despair."

Speaking of legs, I cannot resist the temptation to intro-

duce another verse, tho' the centipede naturally cannot be classed among the Hexapoda, having a hundred legs instead of six; however, I am sure that your sympathy will be aroused:

"The centipede was happy quite,
Until the frog in fun
Said 'Pray which leg comes after which?'
That raised her mind to such a pitch
She lay distracted in a ditch,
Considering how to run."

Another insect as unknown to most people as is the crane-fly, and fully as deserving of notice, is the caddis worm. The adult is a dainty little insect with gauzy wings, pretty but inconspicuous, but it is the larvae form which is the more interesting. It lives only in clear, well aerated water, having a strong preference for rapid streams with stony or sandy bottoms, and it constructs for itself a most delightful little house of bits of bark, tiny stones or shells glued together into an ingenious mosaic. This covers the caddis worm up to the mailed head and fore segments, which protrude, to the dismay and destruction of other tiny water folk. This form is well known to anglers, who extract the caddis worm from his protecting case and impale him, naked and protesting, upon the hook. They do not talk of caddis worms, but can tell you well enough what a hellgramite is - a name which they apply impartially to the larvae of the caddis fly and to the larvae of *Corydalis*.

There is one species of caddis fly which bears the most poetic appellation of *Hydropsyche*, or water sprite, the larvae of which do not construct houses, but instead weave tiny nets between stones in the swiftly rushing water. So far as I have been able to discover this is the only caddis worm which has ever appeared in verse.

"Fairy nets in the stream build I,
Where the green-white water ripples by;
Artfully woven of finest silk,
In water foaming like new drawn milk.
Gloating beside my net sit I,
While the tiny stream-born creatures die."

The ant, like the bee, because of its social habits, in which man finds the analogues of his own customs, has received repeated mention in poetry and prose. No one perhaps has ever done for the ant what Maeterlinck has done for the bee, tho' Sir John Lubbock has written much which is both rhetorically charming and entomologically correct. That wonderful observer of men and things, Solomon, son of David, King of Israel, has a word of commendation for the ant:

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard,
Consider her ways and be wise,
Which, having no chief, overseer, or ruler,
Provideth her bread in the summer
And gathereth her food in the harvest."

While Ruth McEnery Stuart gives more qualified approval:

"Dem ants is sho got savin' ways,
An' even de scripture 'lows 'em praise;
But dey hoa'ds for deyselves f'om day to day,
An' dey stings any man wha' gits in de way,
An' dey ain't no new co'poration in dat --
No, dey ain't by deyselves in dat."

Less familiarly known than the butterfly, and for some unknown reason frequently endowed with many evil and malignant traits, the dragonfly is scarcely less beautiful and interesting. "Devil's darning needle" and "snake feeder" are appellations expressive of popular dis-esteem, as are the common school boy belief that "he'll sew your ears shut", and the more widely distributed but equally mistaken belief that this graceful, sure-winged inhabitant of the summer air has a sting or other weapon of offense. The life history is peculiarly fascinating. The

eggs are laid in water and the larval stage is passed there, the larvae being grotesque creatures, as different as possible in appearance from the gauzy-winged imago, but with a most interesting mode of life. Comparatively little is known as to the duration of this larval existence, but after a long period comes the day when the dragonfly larva crawls up onto a reed or strong grass stem and prepares for the transformation of which Tennyson has given so accurate a picture in "The Two Voices":

"Today 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."

Lowell has well portrayed the flight of the small blue and green dragonflies, more correctly called Zygoptera - the damselflies. These are the daintiest of dragonflies, and their fluttering, hesitant flight is a contrast to the superb sweeping flights of the larger species.

"In summer noon flushes, when all the world hushes,
Blue dragonflies knitting, to and fro in the sun,
With sidelong jerk flitting, sink down on the rushes,
And motionless sitting, hear it bubble and run;
Hear its low inward singing, with level wings swinging
On green tasseled rushes, to dream in the sun."

While in another stanza he pays tribute to their restlessness in these words:

"Tho' Love's Maytime be as brief
As a dragonfly's repose."

Their flight caught Riley's attention also:

"And the dragonfly in light
Burnished armor, shining bright,
Came tilting down the river
In a wild bewildered flight."

Others have noted the connection between the dragonfly and the fluer de lis - a connection which is purely a matter of similarity in environment, since the dragonfly lives almost exclusively on small insects and has no use for the nectar of flowers. Longfellow was impressed with his likeness to an armored knight:

"The burnished dragonfly is thine attendant,
And tilts against the field,
And down the listed sunbeam rides resplendent,
In sky-blue mail and shield."

In a hymn to the Skokie Marsh modeled on Lanier's "Marshes of Glynn" we read:

"Iris, in samite of purple befitting a queen,
Summon the aid of your guardian lancers in green,
Fend off that opal winged dragonfly, sapphire of sheen,
Assailing with blue mailed metals
The veiling soft sheaves of your petals."

Rossetti, with unfailing beauty of touch, records that:

"Deep in the sun-searched depths the dragonfly
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky."

And we have also this charming couplet by Paul Heyse:

"Ich sitz am Bach und siehe die Libellen,
Sich fliehen und jagen in der Sommer Luft."

while Lafcadio Hearn has rendered for us in English the pathetic plaint of the Japanese lover:

"I have become thinner than the shadow of a dragonfly,
By reason of the slightness of thy love."

This subject is one whose fascinations increase upon closer study, and tho' in comparison with birds and flowers, insects have been very little noted by poets, still one finds many allusions to:

"The plumed insects, swift and free --
Like golden boats on a sunny sea,
Laden with light and odor - which pass
Over the gleam of the living grass."

The insects I have mentioned and many, many others which

could not be included within the scope of this paper, have life histories and habits of the profoundest interest to the most unscientific reader. It is unfortunately true that much which has been written about insects is so technical, so bristling with entomological terms, as to completely baffle the casual reader. Whoever does study this subject, however, will find that it opens for one an entirely new field, and a field full of fresh and unexpected interest. Lubbock, Maeterlinck, and most of all, Fabre, have written in a manner to please the layman.

"Over their tiny hills and cities bending,
An old man's face, kindly and comprehending,
Scans all the story of their little lives;
And then with Virgil's art and Darwin's zeal,
He gives our alien, Titan race to feel
And know the epic of the webs and hives."
