

The Philosopher and the Butterflies

By Richard Garnett

The scene was in a garden on a fine summer morning, brilliant with slants of sunshine, yet chequered with clouds significant of more than a remote possibility of rain. All the animal world was astir. Birds flitted or hopped from spray to spray; butterflies eddied around flowers within or upon which bees were bustling; ants and earwigs ran nimbly about on the mould; a member of the Universal Knowledge Society perambulated the gravel path.

The Universal Knowledge Society, be it understood, exists for the dissemination and not for the acquisition of knowledge. Our philosopher, therefore, did not occupy himself with considering whether in that miniature world, with its countless varieties of animal and vegetable being, something might not be found with which he was himself unacquainted; but, like the honey-freighted bee, rather sought an opportunity of disburdening himself of his stores of information than of adding to them. But who was to profit by his communicativeness? The noisy birds could not hear themselves speak, much less him; he shrewdly distrusted his ability to command the attention of the busy bees; and even a member of the Universal Knowledge Society may well be at a loss for a suitable address to an earwig. At length he determined to accost a Butterfly, who, after sipping the juice of a flower remained perched indolently upon it, apparently undecided whither to direct his flight.

“It seems likely to rain,” he said; “have you an umbrella?”

The Butterfly looked curiously at him, but returned no answer.

“I do not ask,” resumed the Philosopher, “as one who should imply that the probability of even a complete saturation ought to appal a ratiocinative being, endowed with wisdom and virtue. I rather designed to direct your attention to the inquiry whether these attributes are, in fact, rightly predicable of Butterflies.”

Still no answer.

“An impression obtains among our own species,” continued the Philosopher, “that you Butterflies are deficient in foresight and providence to a remarkable, I might almost say a culpable degree. Pardon me if I add that this suspicion is to some extent confirmed by my finding you destitute of protection against imbriferous inclemency under atmospheric conditions whose contingent humidity should be obvious to a being endowed with the most ordinary allotment of meteorological prevision.”

The Butterfly still left all the talk to the Philosopher. This was just what the latter desired.

“I greatly fear,” he continued, “that the omission to which I have reluctantly adverted is to a certain extent typically characteristic of the entire political and social economy of the lepidopterous order. It has even been stated, though the circumstance appears scarcely credible, that your system of life does not include the accumulation of adequate resources against the inevitable exigencies of winter.”

“What is winter?” asked the Butterfly, and flew off without awaiting an answer.

The Philosopher remained for a moment speechless, whether from amazement at the Butterfly’s nescience or disgust at his ill-breeding. Recovering himself immediately, he shouted after the fugitive:

“Frivolous animal!” “It is this levity,” continued he, addressing a group of butterflies who had gradually assembled in the air, attracted by the conversation, “it is this fatal levity that constrains

me to despair wholly of the future of you insects. That you should persistently remain at your present depressed level! That you should not immediately enter upon a process of self-development! Look at the Bee! How did she acquire her sting, think you? Why cannot you store up honey, as she does?"

"We cannot build cells," suggested a Butterfly.

"And how did the Bee learn, do you suppose, unless by imbuing her mind with the elementary principles of mathematics? Know that time has been when the Bee was as incapable of architectural construction as yourselves, when you and she alike were indiscriminable particles of primary protoplasm. (I suppose you know what that is.) One has in process of time exalted itself to the cognition of mathematical truth, while the other—Pshaw! Now, really, my friends, I must beg you to take my observations in good part. I do not imply, of course, that any endeavours of yours in the direction I have indicated could benefit any of you personally, or any of your posterity for numberless generations. But I really do consider that after a while its effects would be very observable—that in twenty millions of years or so, provided no geological cataclysm supervened, you Butterflies, with your innate genius for mimicry, might be conformed in all respects to the hymenopterous model, or perhaps carry out the principle of development into novel and unheard-of directions. You should derive much encouragement from the beginning you have made already."

"How a beginning?" inquired a Butterfly.

"I am alluding to your larval constitution as Caterpillars," returned the Philosopher. "Your advance upon that humiliating condition is, I admit, remarkable. I only wonder that it should not have proceeded much further. With such capacity for development, it is incomprehensible that you should so long have remained stationary. You ought to be all toads by this time, at the very least."

"I beg your pardon," civilly interposed the Butterfly. "To what condition were you pleased to allude?"

"To that of a Caterpillar," rejoined the Philosopher.

"Caterpillar!" echoed the Butterfly, and "Caterpillar!" tittered all his volatile companions, till the air seemed broken into little silvery waves of fairy laughter.

"Caterpillar! he positively thinks we were once Caterpillars! He! he! he!"

"Do you actually mean to say you don't know that?" responded the Philosopher, scandalised at the irreverence of the insects, but inwardly rejoicing at the prospect of a controversy in which he could not be worsted.

"We know nothing of the sort," rejoined a Butterfly.

"Can you possibly be plunged into such utter oblivion of your embryonic antecedents?"

"We do not understand you. All we know is that we have always been butterflies."

"Sir," said a large, dull-looking Butterfly with one wing in tatters, crawling from under a cabbage, and limping by reason of the deficiency of several legs, "let me entreat you not to deduce our scientific status from the inconsiderate assertions of the unthinking vulgar. I am proud to assure you that our race comprises many philosophical reasoners—mostly indeed such as have been disabled by accidental injuries from joining in the amusements of the rest. The Origin of our Species has always occupied a distinguished place in their investigations. It has on several occasions engaged the attention of our profoundest thinkers for not less than two consecutive minutes. There is hardly a quadruped on the land, a bird in the air, or a fish in the water to which it has not been ascribed by some one at some time; but never, I am rejoiced to

say, has any Butterfly ever dreamed of attributing it to the obnoxious thing to which you have unaccountably made reference.”

“We should rather think not,” chorused all the Butterflies.

“Look here,” said the Philosopher, picking up and exhibiting a large hairy Caterpillar of very unprepossessing appearance. “Look here, what do you call this?”

“An abnormal organisation,” said the scientific Butterfly.

“A nasty beast,” said the others.

“Heavens,” exclaimed the Philosopher, “the obtuseness and arrogance of these creatures! No, my poor friend,” continued he, addressing the Caterpillar, “disdain you as they may, and unpromising as your aspect certainly is at present, the time is at hand when you will prank it with the gayest of them all.”

“I cry your mercy,” rejoined the Caterpillar somewhat crossly, “but I was digesting a gooseberry leaf when you lifted me in that abrupt manner, and I did not quite follow your remarks. Did I understand you to mention my name in connection with those flutterers?”

“I said the time would arrive when you would be even as they.”

“I,” exclaimed the Caterpillar, “I retrograde to the level of a Butterfly! Is not the ideal of creation impersonated in me already?”

“I was not aware of that,” replied the Philosopher, “although,” he added in a conciliatory tone, “far be it from me to deny you the possession of many interesting qualities.”

“You probably refer to my agility,” suggested the Caterpillar; “or perhaps to my abstemiousness?”

“I was not referring to either,” returned the Philosopher.

“To my utility to mankind?”

“Not by any manner of means.”

“To what then?”

“Well, if you must know, the best thing about you appears to me to be the prospect you enjoy of ultimately becoming a Butterfly.”

The Caterpillar erected himself upon his tail, and looked sternly at the Philosopher. The Philosopher’s countenance fell. A thrush, darting from an adjacent tree, seized the opportunity and the insect, and bore the latter away in his bill. At the same moment the shower prognosticated by the Sage burst forth, scattering the Butterflies in all directions, drenching the Philosopher, whose foresight had not assumed the shape of an umbrella, and spoiling his new hat. But he had ample consolation in the superiority of his head. And the Caterpillar was right too, for after all he never did become a Butterfly.