that ever strake with sword; and thou were the goodliest person that ever came among press of knights; and thou were the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in rest.”

**Tuesday, September 4, 1906**

**The supremacy of the house-fly.**

There is one thing which fills me with wonder and reverence every time I think of it—and that is the confident and splendid fight for supremacy which the house-fly makes against the human being. Man, by his inventive ingenuity, has in the course of the ages, by help of diligence and determination, found ways to acquire and establish his mastery over every living creature under the vault of heaven—except the house-fly. With the house-fly he has always failed. The house-fly is as independent of him to-day as he was when Adam made his first grab for one and didn’t get him. The house-fly defies all man’s inventions for his subjugation or destruction. No creature was ever yet devised that could meet man on his own level and laugh at him and defy him, except the house-fly. In ancient times man’s dominion over animated nature was not complete; but, detail by detail, as the ages have drifted by, his inventive genius has brought first one and then another of the unconquerables under his dominion: first the elephant and the tiger, and then the lion, the hippopotamus, the bear, the crocodile, the whale, and so on. One by one man’s superiors in fight have succumbed and hauled down the flag. Man is confessed master of them all, now. There isn’t one of them—there isn’t a single species—that can survive if man sets himself the task of exterminating it—the house-fly always excepted.

Nature cannot construct a monster on so colossal a scale that man can’t find a way to exterminate it as soon as he is tired of its society. Nature cannot contrive a creature of the microscopicallest infinitesimality and hide it where man cannot find it—find it and kill it. Nature has tried reducing microbes to the last expression of littleness, in the hope of protecting and preserving by this trick a hundred deadly diseases which she holds in warmer affection than she holds any benefit which she has ever conferred upon man, but man has circumvented her and made her waste her time and her effort. She has gone on pathetically and hopefully reducing her microbes until at last she has got them down so fine that she can conceal a hundred million of them in a single drop of a man’s blood—but it is all in vain. When man is tired of his microbes he knows how to find them and exterminate them. It is most strange, but there stands the simple truth: of all the myriad of creatures that inhabit the earth, including the Christian dissenter, not one is beyond the reach of the annihilatory ingenuity of scientific man—except the house-fly.

It is a most disastrous condition. If all the troublesome and noxious creatures in the earth could be multiplied a hundred-fold, and the house-fly exterminated as compensation, man should be glad and grateful to sign the contract. We should be infinitely better off than we are now. One house-fly, all by itself, can cause us more distress and misery
and exasperation than can any dozen of the other vexations which Nature has invented for the poisoning of our peace and the destruction of our comfort. All human ingenuities have been exhausted in the holy war against the fly, and yet the fly remains to-day just what he was in Adam’s time— independent, insolent, intrusive, and indestructible. Flypaper has accomplished nothing. The percentage of flies that get hitched to it is but one in the hundred, and the other ninety-nine assemble as at a circus and enjoy the performance. Slapping flies with a wet towel results in nothing valuable beyond the exercise. There are not two marksmen in fifty that can hit a fly with a wet towel at even a short range, and this method brings far more humiliation than satisfaction, because there is an expression about the missed fly which is so eloquent with derision that no operator with sensitive feelings can continue his labors after his self-respect is gone—a result which almost always follows his third or fourth miss. Anger and eagerness disorder his aim. Under these influences he delivers a slap which would get a dog every time, yet misses the fly mysteriously and unaccountably—does not land on the fly’s territory at all. Then the fly smiles that cold and offensive smile which is sacred to the fly, and the man is conquered, and gives up the contest. Poisonous powders have been invented for the destruction of noxious insects; they kill the others, but the fly prefers them to sugar. No method of actually exterminating the fly and getting your house thoroughly rid of him has ever been discovered. When our modern fashion of screening all the doors and windows was introduced, it was supposed that we were now done with the fly, and that we had defeated him at last, along with the mosquito. It was not so. Those other creatures have to stay outside nowadays, but the fly remains a member of the family just as before.

A week or two ago we hunted down every fly in my bedroom and took his life; then we closed the doors and kept them closed night and day. I believed I was now rid of the pest for good and all, and I was jubilant. It was premature. When I woke the next morning there was a congregation of flies all about me waiting for breakfast—flies that had been visiting the hog-pen, and the hospital, and all places where disease, decay, corruption and death are to be found, and had come with their beaks and their legs fuzzy with microbes gathered from wounds and running sores and ulcers, and were ready and eagerly waiting to wipe off these accumulations upon the butter, and thus accomplish the degraded duty wherewith Nature—man’s persistent and implacable enemy—had commissioned them.

It was matter for astonishment. The screens were perfect; the doors had been kept closed; how did the creatures get into the room? Upon consultation it was determined that they must have come down the chimney, since there was certainly no other entrance to the place available. I was jubilant once more, for now I believed that we could infallibly beat the fly. Militarily speaking, we had him in the last ditch. That was our thought. At once we had a fine wire screen constructed and fitted closely and exactly into the front of the fireplace, whereby that entrance was effectually closed. During the day we destroyed all the flies in the room. At night we laid the wood fire and placed the screen. Next morning I had no company for breakfast and was able to eat it in peace at last. The fire had been lighted and was flaming hospitably and companionably up. Then presently I saw that our guess as to how the flies got in had been correct, for they had now begun

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to come down the chimney, in spite of the fire and smoke, and assemble on the inside of the screen. It was almost unbelievable that they had ventured to descend through all that fire and smoke, but that is what they had done. I suppose there is nothing that a fly is afraid of. His daring makes all other courage seem cheap and poor. Now that I know that he will go through fire to attain his ends it is my conviction that there are no perils for him in this earth that he does not despise.

But for my deep prejudices, I should have admired those daring creatures. I should have felt obliged to admire them. And indeed I would have admired them anyway if they could have departed a little from the inborn insolence and immodesty of their nature and behaved themselves in a humble and winning Christian way for once. But they were flies, and they couldn’t do that. Their backs were scorching with the heat—I knew it, I could see it—yet with an ill-timed and offensive ostentation they pretended to like it. It is a vain, mean-spirited and unpleasant creature. You cannot situate a fly in any circumstances howsoever shameful and grotesque that he will not try to show off.

We assailed the screen with brooms and wet towels and things and tried to dislodge those flies and drive them into the fire, but it only amused them. A fly can get amusement out of anything you can start. They took it for a game, and they played it with untiring assiduity and enjoyment. As always, they came out ahead. As always, man gave it up and the fly prevailed. It was cold, and by and by we were obliged to take away the screen so that we could mend the fire. Then they all plunged into the room with a hurrah and said they were glad to see us, and explained that they would have come earlier but that they had been delayed by unforeseen circumstances.

However, we have hopes. By noon the fire had been out a couple of hours, the screen had been replaced, and there were no flies on the inside of it. This meant a good deal—it seemed to mean a good deal, at any rate—and so we have a new scheme now. When we start a fire mornings, hereafter, we shan’t mend it again that day. I will freeze, rather. As many flies may come down and gather on the screen and show off as may desire to do it, but there they will remain. We shan’t admit them to the room again, and when the fire goes down they will retire up the chimney and distribute elsewhere the wanton and malicious persecutions for which they were created.

The flea never associates with me—has never shown even a passing desire for my company, and so I have none but the friendliest feeling toward him. The mosquito troubles me but little, and I feel nothing but a mild dislike for him. Of all the animals that inhabit the earth, the air, and the waters, I hate only one—and that is the house-fly. But I do hate him. I hate him with a hatred that is not measurable with words. I always spare the snake and the spider, and the others, and would not intentionally give them pain, but I would go out of my way, and put aside my dearest occupation, to kill a fly, even if I knew it was the very last one. I can even bear to see a fly suffer, for an entire minute—even two minutes, if it is one that I have spent an hour hunting around the place with a wet towel—but that is the limit. I would like to see him suffer a year, and would do it, and gladly, if I could restrict the suffering to himself; but after it reaches a certain point, and the bulk of it begins to fall to my share, I have to call a halt and put
him out of his misery, for I am like the rest of my race— I am merciful to a fellow-creature upon one condition only: that its pain shall not confer pain upon me.

I have watched the human race with close attention for five and twenty years now, and I know beyond shadow of doubt that we can stand the pain of another creature straight along, without discomfort, until its pain gives us pain. Then we become immediately and creditably merciful. I suppose it is a pity that we have no higher motive for sparing pain to a fellow creature, still it is the cold truth—we have no higher one. We have no vestige of pity, not a single shred of it, for any creature’s misery until it reaches the point where the contemplation of it inflicts misery upon ourselves. This remark describes every human being that has ever lived.

After improving my marksmanship with considerable practice with a towel, this morning, I slapped a couple of flies into the wash-bowl. With deep satisfaction I watched them spin around and around in the water. Twice they made land and started to climb up the bowl, but I shoved them back with fresh satisfaction and plunged them under with my finger, with more satisfaction. I went on gloating over their efforts to get out of their trouble. Twice more they made land, and in both instances I restored them to their activities in the water. But at last their struggles relaxed and the forlorn things began to exhibit pitiful signs of exhaustion and despair. This pathetic spectacle gave me pain, and I recognized that I had reached my limit. I cared not a rap for their sufferings so long as they furnished enjoyment for me, but when they began to inflict pain upon me, that was another matter. The conditions had become personal. I was human, and by the law of my make it was not possible for me to allow myself to suffer when I could prevent it. I had to put the flies out of their troubles, I couldn’t help it. I turned a soap-dish over them, and when I looked under it half an hour later I perceived that the spiritual part of them had ascended to the happy hunting grounds of their fathers.

Wednesday, September 5, 1906

Items from the Children’s Record, showing their different characteristics.

It is years since I have examined the Children’s Record. I have turned over a few of its pages this morning. This book is a record in which Mrs. Clemens and I registered some of the sayings and doings of the children, in the long ago, when they were little chaps. Of course we wrote these things down at the time because they were of momentary interest—things of the passing hour, and of no permanent value—but at this distant day I find that they still possess an interest for me and also a value, because it turns out that they were registrations of character. The qualities then revealed by fitful glimpses, in childish acts and speeches, remained as a permanency in the children’s characters in the drift of the years, and were always afterward clearly and definitely recognizable.

There is a masterful streak in Jean that now and then moves her to set my authority