

The Lion and the Gnat

by Jean de La Fontaine

"Go, paltry insect, nature's meanest brat!"

Thus said the royal lion to the gnat.
The gnat declared immediate war.

"Think you," said he, "your royal name
To me worth caring for?"

Think you I tremble at your power or fame?

The ox is bigger far than you;
Yet him I drive, and all his crew."

This said, as one that did no fear owe,
Himself he blew the battle charge,
Himself both trumpeter and hero.

At first he play'd about at large,
Then on the lion's neck, at leisure, settled,
And there the royal beast full sorely nettled.

With foaming mouth, and flashing eye,
He roars. All creatures hide or fly,--
Such mortal terror at

The work of one poor gnat!
With constant change of his attack,
The snout now stinging, now the back,
And now the chambers of the nose;
The pigmy fly no mercy shows.

The lion's rage was at its height;
His viewless foe now laugh'd outright,
When on his battle-ground he saw,
That every savage tooth and claw

Had got its proper beauty
By doing bloody duty;
Himself, the hapless lion, tore his hide,
And lash'd with sounding tail from side to side.

Ah! bootless blow, and bite, and curse!
He beat the harmless air, and worse;
For, though so fierce and stout,
By effort wearied out,

He fainted, fell, gave up the quarrel;
The gnat retires with verdant laurel.

*We often have the most to fear
From those we most despise;
Again, great risks a man may clear,
Who by the smallest dies.*