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Housekeepers' Chat

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Outwitting the Clothes Moth". Information from the Bureau of Entomology, U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Clothes Moths and Their Control".

The little bride across the street was singing as I came up the winding path to her doorway. The words of her song came floating out the open window.

"In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to--"

At this point the singing stopped. She had heard my step on the porch and had come out to greet me.

"I didn't mean to break into your song," I said. "Everybody ought to be singing on a morning like this and if the song is about springtime and young men's thoughts, so much the better."

"There are times when I think you are a bit sentimental, Aunt Sammy. I daresay Tennyson was right. Young men are frivolous beings in spring and I daresay their fancy does turn lightly to thoughts of love."

"What about young wives and their thoughts?"

"Young wives, Aunt Sammy, seriously turn their thoughts to clothes moths at this season. Yesterday I made a horrible discovery. I found two little light yellowish millers flying around in the dark corner of my hall closet, right where I keep all my best blankets. Then I knew it was high time to be up and at this business of protecting my possessions from moths. No ugly little white worms are going to lunch on my lovely new blankets, if I know it. Those blankets were all wedding presents and it would be like spoiling romance to have a hole eaten in them. As for my winter woolen clothes, they are going to be put away so carefully that not even the most persistent miller can get in and lay eggs. Now, Aunt Sammy, here's where you come in the picture. I'm going to take you into the front room and seat you in my most comfortable chair, and then you are going to tell me all you know about moths---where they come from, what they like to eat, what preventives and remedies can be used for them. Scientific information is what I'm after."

For information on moths and other household insect pests, the people to go to are the scientists in the Bureau of Entomology. In recent years they have been making investigations of these destructive insects and, if you are interested in the family life of the clothes moth, his habits, his history, what he likes to eat and how he lives, as well as the successful ways of ousting him from your home, you can read all about it in the booklet published on the subject. After reading that bulletin, you will never need to complain about moth destruction, unless you have been careless.

One thing I've learned from those scientists is that a lot of things recommended for clothes moth control do no good at all. I used to believe that tobacco sprinkled among the winter woollens would keep out moths. I was wrong. Other housekeepers I know have recommended dried lavender flowers and allspice. Just why anyone should suppose that moths would be disturbed by such pleasant odors as these, I'm sure I don't know. As a matter of fact they pay no attention to any such remedies. Neither are they bothered by cayenne pepper, powdered sulphur, salt, borax, or eucalyptus or red cedar leaves. Any housekeeper who uses such weapons to fight these pests is depending on superstitions, not science. Mild remedies like these don't work. Extreme remedies like fumigating the whole house aren't necessary either. But there are effective and inexpensive remedies.

Careful attention to cleaning, brushing and, if possible, sunning woollens before storing them away, then packing them with naphthalene or paradichlorobenzene crystals and packing them tightly in paper so that not a crack is open will keep the clothes safe. That long word was paradichlorobenzene, seven syllables long. You can buy it in crystal form at any drug store.

Constant watchfulness is necessary in keeping wool safely away from these enemies. No treatment known to kill moths already in fabrics will have any lasting effect in keeping other clothes moths from infesting fabrics later, if they are left exposed about the house. So clean your woollens before you put them away and brush and beat and sun them to do away with any eggs that may have been hidden under seams and hems. Then wrap up the garments with several thicknesses of unbroken paper putting some protecting material inside. Newspaper is all right for wrapping if you are sure it is whole, and that every edge is carefully folded over so that nothing can crawl in. Or pack the garments in tight closets, trunks or chests.

Naphthalene in the form of flakes or moth balls is a good remedy to use inside these tight containers. Then there is that paradichlorobenzene I mentioned a minute ago, equal in effectiveness to naphthalene and used in the same way.

Well, there are thirteen or fourteen other remedies recommended---cold storage---a certain but rather expensive protection and various gases for fumigating that have both faults and virtues and so forth.

But I am ahead of my story. I really meant to start out by telling you about how the moth and his cousins, aunts and uncles live. I thought you would be interested in a little family history before we went on to battle and talked about death-blows for young moths and so forth.

But never mind. We can go back to the beginning now. Shakespeare once described the seven ages of man. Moths go man one better. They take on not only different ages but different forms for each age.

The baby, of course, is the egg, laid by the little miller who flies about. She tries to lay her eggs in some dark, warm, protected spot where there will be plenty of food for the young larvae or worm when it hatches. The miller itself never does any damage. Its mouth parts are too imperfectly developed to feed at all, and the end aim of its life is simply to lay eggs. But when those eggs hatch, they mean destruction. So kill the millers whenever you can.

The eggs hatch out into little worms which, when they are fully grown, are whitish in color and about half an inch long. After these worms have fed over a period of time they spin cocoons in which they transform into the pupa stage. From this stage they change into the adult moth or miller. Four stages, but only during the worm stage is the insect capable of destroying fabrics.

Moths have excellent appetites when the proper diet is provided for them. In the best moth families, no one waits for a dinner bell to ring and eating between meals is allowed even the youngest in the family. In fact, if food is available the larva can eat almost constantly without being worried about bad manners or indigestion.

They feed upon wool, fur, bristles, hair, feathers and all fabrics manufactured from them. They also relish dried animal matter like untreated skins, or beef meal as well as dead insects including the dead of their own species. They like raw wool and soiled fabrics. A grease spot on a woolen dress is a joyful treat. When a campaign is waged on clothes moths in the home, it must be remembered that they may be found in many unexpected places. There are the carpets and rugs, the stuffing and covering of upholstered furniture, dust brushes, shaving brushes, the felts in pianos and a long array of articles which one might never suspect to be the camping ground of clothes moths. A single piece of hair-stuffed or feather-stuffed furniture may keep the whole house well stocked with moths for years.

There is one consolation, however. Household fabrics or wearing apparel in daily or weekly use, or articles that are brushed, cleaned or beaten once or twice a month are almost never injured. Moths like their comfort, you see. And they are not happy if they are disturbed at meals.

Frequent use of the vacuum cleaner helps to save the rugs. Plenty of sunshine and fresh air, especially in clothes closets, helps to save clothes. Careful storing and cleaning does the rest.

Tomorrow we'll have a whole family vegetable plate dinner. And, since Wednesday is the day we think of the children in the family, I have some tips to offer fathers. Tips for fathers, but of interest to mothers also, I hope.

