

Little Foxes!

The Little Sins That Mar the Christian Character

By John Colwel

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"Catch the foxes — the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes!"
Song of Songs 2:15

CHAPTER 3. GRUMBLING AND SCOLDING.

We link these two foxes together because they are as like each other as twin brothers, which, indeed, they are. They generally — though not invariably — hunt in company, and may be recognized by their scowling brows and savage demeanor. The grumbling fox is known by his constant growl, and the scolding fox by his snappish bark. They are an unlovely pair, and as they are so much alike, however, we need only deal with one. Which shall it be? Suppose we take the GRUMBLER.

After such an introduction, nobody will expect us to say one word in the grumbler's defense, and yet we intend to do so. For, despite his uncomfortable appearance and the undesirableness of his companionship, there is something to be said in his favor. If we question it, let us ask ourselves what would have been the present condition of the world — had there never been any grumblers in it — no people who were dissatisfied with things as they found them?

Had there been no grumblers among men, we should be still in the dark ages, without houses, roads, conveyances, comforts, or knowledge. "But the men who have given us these things, were not mere grumblers." Exactly so; we intended to make that very remark at the close of this chapter. But for the present let it suffice that grumbling has done good, and, under proper restrictions, may yet do good.

With Englishmen grumbling is often a safety-valve. We grumble and retain our loyalty, while our friends across the Channel are silent for a while, and then suddenly flame up into revolution. Our grumbling relieves us — while for the lack of it they rebel. Besides, the freedom which permits us to grumble at our abuses, lessens and eventually destroys them, and thus more serious consequences are averted.

On the whole, then, it is, we think, clear that this grumbling fox must not be turned out of the vineyard, but rather be well trained, securely tied up within proper bounds, and made our servant rather than our master. Let us suggest some DIRECTIONS.

1. Do not grumble too frequently or too loudly. "It is the worst wheel that creaks most." "To overdo, is to undo." And in nothing is this so true, as in grumbling.

A little while ago, the writer called upon a lady of his acquaintance, and found her much disturbed. It appeared she was tried by a careless and untidy servant, which, as she herself was a pattern of neatness and order, was a sore trial indeed. She immediately began to recite her sorrows — thus:

"Never was Job as tried as I am. Here have I been trying and trying to teach my servant some degree of order, and I cannot. If I am to judge her by her actions, she thinks the proper place for the saucepan is on the drawing-room rug, and that the best fireirons are first to be well cleaned and then carefully stowed away in the cellar. I have called her back fifty times this morning, if I have once."

To have made any remark calling the lady's wisdom in question, would have been rude — but we did mentally reflect that she must be a clever servant indeed, who could be called back fifty times in one morning, and yet do her work. Were not fifty times rather too many? But perhaps the lady was a little excited, and really meant to say fifteen or twenty-five times. However that might be, she had grumbled away her servant's possibility of improvement. For when we were afterwards thrown into the girl's way, we found her crying and exclaiming, "It's no use, I can't please her, and I won't try!"

In this age, perhaps, parents who are not sufficiently particular with their children, are more common than those who are too much so; but the grumbling spirit sometimes takes unhappy possession of a father's or mother's heart. Said a youth to me a little while ago: "I would be very glad to win the approval of my father, but I find it impossible. He is always down upon me. When I make my appearance in the morning, he grumbles at my dirty boots; or, if they are clean, at my untidy boot-laces; or, if there is nothing wrong with my feet, he grumbles at something that is wrong about my head. He is so particular that nothing escapes him, and he grumbles as loudly about a misplaced hair, as about the loss of a hundred dollars."

From what we know of the young man's father, we fear this is true. Yet, when out of his son's hearing, he speaks well of him, and knows full well that he is a worthy lad.

But we need not multiply illustrations; they will occur to every mind. What we would do is to suggest, to all whom it may concern, the old maxim — "fair and softly." Let us remember, even in our legitimate grumbings, the courtesies of life,

that true generosity which is a mark of noble-mindedness; and, above all, let us never carry our grumblings too far. Which leads us to say —

2. Do not form the habit of grumbling. Like other habits, it grows, and like other habits, it will hold us fast at last. The only way to avoid arriving at the terminus, is to abstain from taking a ticket and becoming a daily passenger.

The reader will, perhaps, remember, as we do, many otherwise estimable Christian men who are utterly spoiled — both for their own good and that of others — by the fact that this unpleasant little fox is always at their heels! As a blind beggar is always accompanied by his dog — so are they by this unsavory little fox! He is forever snapping at the clouds for keeping off the sun and making it so cold; or snarling at the sun for shining and making it so hot; or complaining at the parson for preaching so long; or railing at him for not finishing his sermon while he was at it. You cannot satisfy them any way. When you suggest a new scheme to them, you see the face elongating, and the sledge hammer of criticism being uplifted for a blow. Or, that like flies, they are looking for the sore place, and when they have found it — as they assuredly will — upon that place will they settle. And since with them it is, "Love me — love my dog," and since you cannot love his fox, you are compelled to shun the master, much as you may, in some respects, esteem him. As no man who renders himself distasteful can do very much good — the grumbler destroys his own usefulness.

In many instances this is mainly the result of habit; it does not spring from an unkindly heart. Perhaps, however, the grumbler does more harm to himself than to others. He embitters his own life, mars his happiness, and brings upon himself evils from which a more happy disposition would entirely save him.

May we suggest that not only that grumblers may bring evil upon themselves, but also that some of the persons and things at which they grumble, may be better than they take them to be, after all.

3. Do not be MERE grumblers. We intimated earlier, that we would make this remark, and here it is. That spirit which in small and ignoble minds evaporates in fault-finding, passes — in larger and nobler ones minds, translate into self-sacrificing labors and earnest activities, having for their object the removal of those evils at which mere grumblers only complain. It was so with Wilberforce, Clarkson, and others who attacked and destroyed the slave-trade. Many had grumbled at it; so, perhaps, did they; but they did more.

Grumbling may sometimes serve a good purpose — or it may become a pest; just as the steam may drive the train — or be allowed to escape, with continual hissing, through a puncture in the boiler. In the one case, it is a great power for good; while in the other, it is a useless annoyance. Just so, a reformer of abuses is a national blessing — while a mere grumbler is a paltry fellow.

An old countryman once gave me some good advice which I have never forgotten:

"There are two things," said he, "at which you should never grumble — first, at things which you can change; and, secondly, at things which you cannot change. If you can change them — then change them. And if you cannot change them — then leave them alone."

"Why, then, we shall never grumble at anything," I replied.

"Exactly so!" said he.

"Do not grumble against one another, brethren!" James 5:9

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