

Little Foxes!

The Little Sins That Mar the Christian Character

By [John Colwell](#)

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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 4. TRIFLING.

This fox might be well described as silly, rather than wicked — were it not that his silliness sometimes covers the most wicked propensities, and, not seldom, brings about a long train of evil consequences!

When the fretter whines you can retire;

when the grumbler snarls you can run away;

when the scolder snaps you can remonstrate with him;

but when the trifler meets you with his easy smile or his mirthful laugh — you are in danger of catching his attractive but dangerous distemper, for trifling is a spreading malady!

It is, likewise, an unmitigated disease; it is only evil — and evil continually.

Fretting is, often, the little fox which mars an over-conscientious nature .

Grumbling is, often, the little fox that mars a nature over-earnest and anxious for good. Moreover, grumbling may sometimes lead to the destruction of that which is evil and the improvement of that which is good. But trifling is the deadly fox that utterly spoils the vineyard he frequents, tearing the tender vines and crushing the choice grapes beyond all redemption. Innumerable and unutterable evils have come of trifling; and, so far as we know, they have not been attended by one solitary good.

Let us not, however, be misunderstood. By trifling we do not mean innocent mirth, hearty laughter, pungent wit, or stirring humor. We have not a word to say against these things. The same good Book that tells us there is "a time to weep," also tells us there is "a time to laugh." But these good things may be used in a

trifling spirit and for trifling purposes — rather than for high and worthy ends. In order to avoid this, we must bear in mind some such RULES as the following:

1. That laughter and fun must never be used without a lawful object. We do not object to hear a witty preacher — not even when he makes his people smile — provided only that his quiet humor is full of earnestness, and has a definite and worthy object before it. But when he forgets himself — as he sometimes does — and says a funny thing because it is funny and makes people laugh — we think we see the trifling fox coming into the pulpit, and doing his best to spoil the good man's sermon!

A friend of ours informs us that it was his misfortune, he says, to hear that wonderful man, Mr. Comic Merryman, deliver his popular sermon on "Windbags," to a very large audience, a little while ago. The merriment, laughter, and applause were overwhelming. As the people retired, they made a great variety of comments.

"A startling genius!" said one.

"One of the wonders of the age!" said another.

"A base comedian, who mistook a chapel for a theater!" said Mr. Crusty.

"None of them stated my opinion," said our friend, "which was this: that three-fourths of the humor was given because it was funny; it had no connection with the subject, and no worthy object. It was given in order to amuse the people. And," he added, "I think all such action is sinful trifling, a waste of the people's time, and sacrilegious. Such a thing may not be out of place in a country fair or theater — but it certainly is in God's house, and when done by religious men." We are bound to confess to some sympathy with our friend. If laughter, or wit, is without an object of some worthy kind — then it becomes trifling.

2. Our merriment and fun should be kept within due bounds. Is not change, recreation, play, becoming with many people rather the rule, than the exception? Within due bounds, recreation is most beneficial — but when carried to an extreme it seems to rob life of nobility of purpose, and power to accomplish anything that is worth accomplishing. This reduces life to a kind of butterfly existence, and degrades it to a solemn trifle.

If the miller's horse is made to work seven days a week he becomes a poor, dejected hack; but if he is allowed to roam the fields six days out of seven, he will be so frolicsome on the seventh day as to be unmanageable, not to speak of the fact, that a horse who would only work one day out of seven would ruin any miller in the kingdom!

"Salt is good," but you may have too much of it. If little Johnny's father insists on putting a cupful of salt on Johnny's potato — alas for little Johnny! Just so, laughter, fun, and recreation may be the relish of our lives, and thus help us to do better and more effective service; while, if they are taken in too large doses, they may waste our powers, and make our lives unlovely and unfruitful.

Trifling may be described either as the absence of a sober and earnest spirit — or as the presence of a light and thoughtless one. The effect of it, is to make men incapable of careful and patient toil, and restless under the needful restraints of life.

It evidences its presence in the Church and the world, in rich and poor, in old and young. To discuss it exhaustively in one brief chapter is, of course, out of the question, but we may suggest some of the more prominent ways in which it is, just now, manifesting itself.

We see it in the READING of the day. Some authors write trifling books. Books in which they trifle with the understandings of their readers, with the most important elements of human nature, and with the most solemn questions that affect human destiny. Great controversies that have agitated the greatest minds for centuries, are sought to be settled by an offhand stroke of some flippant pen. Great questions affecting human happiness and well-being, are discussed in a spirit scarcely more serious than that which animates Gulliver's Travels.

And, worse still, in much of our cheap literature, no great questions at all are discussed, but uninterrupted and unmitigated froth and foolishness hold undisputed sway. If anyone will be at the pains to examine the majority of the books heaped upon the respectable bookstalls — not to speak of the "catch-pennies" so freely sold in the poorer parts of our large cities — we do not think they will condemn us for speaking strongly of much of our current literature, that it is mere trash.

"But the authors produce what the public desires; to a great extent the demand creates the supply." Too true. We admit that the public is the greater sinner. How many trifling readers there are! Observe the character of the books read by Miss Blushrose on her railway journey, "my lady" in her boudoir, and Polly Longstitch the dressmaker. They differ, certainly — in the binding. Otherwise they are "too near akin." They consist of the same plot — or no plot — and are filled with the same "lingering nonsense long drawn out."

Our libraries lend out more fiction than anything else, and more of the insipid and of the morally questionable books, than of any other kind. Young men, who have never read for an hour those immortal poets who have made our mother English an imperishable tongue, who have never delved in the golden mines of Butler or Paley, nor ever gathered the pearls that glitter on the pages of Macaulay like sparkling dew, and to whom the stores of "honeyed wisdom" which lie around us

are all unknown — do, nevertheless, eagerly follow the sorrows, joys and adventures of the most insipid people that were ever conceived in the weak brain of a fashionable novelist!

Those who read trifling books, must run a very serious risk of becoming trifling people!

We see it in the CONVERSATION of the day. Conversation should, no doubt, be a pleasant relaxation from graver cares. But that is no reason why it should be trifling. It is impossible to give a better definition of what it should be, than in the oft-quoted words of Lord Bacon: "It is good in conversation to vary and intermingle: speech of the present occasion — with arguments; tales — with reason; asking of questions — with telling of opinions, and jest — with earnest." And is it possible to give a description more unlike what it often is? How frequently do the jests and funny stories jostle the reason and arguments out of the room!

The power to converse profitably and pleasantly, is a great gift which few possess, but the avoidance of trifling is within the reach of all.

Other instances of trifling are not lacking. Some people's DRESS seems to be made up of trifles, rather than of substantial articles of apparel. If you should take the trifles off some young ladies and gentlemen of our acquaintance, they would hardly seem to be dressed at all; certainly they would not be "presentable."

"O dear, how shall I get warm?" said a lady of this sort, as she shivered in the winter wind. "I cannot tell you, unless you should put on one more piece of jewelry," replied the Quaker.

How much time is trifled away in preparing these trifles, we dare hardly contemplate.

How many of the youth of both sexes trifle with their AFFECTIONS. "Engagements" are triflingly formed, and as triflingly broken. To have somebody to date is a matter of course; whether the heart is concerned in it or not, is hardly thought of. And yet such things are of grave importance."

Trifling, anywhere and everywhere, is both unworthy and injurious, and those who would aspire to true nobility of life must guard their vineyards securely against this little fox.

The late Charles Simeon, of Cambridge, kept a painting of Henry Martyn — who had once been his pupil — hung up in his study. "Whenever I look at it," he said, it seems to preach a sermon to me. The patient eyes beam tenderly upon me, and the silent lips seem to say, 'Don't trifle!' And I give the promise while I gaze upon his face and think of his life."

Reader, "Don't trifle!" So say all the noble dead whose faces look down upon us from the galleries of the past!

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