

## Little Foxes!

### The Little Sins That Mar the Christian Character

By John Colwell

1882

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

#### CHAPTER 2. FRETTING.

We begin with this fox because, though he is one of the smallest, he is, nevertheless, one of the ugliest and most destructive. He looks very much as though he had walked backwards through a hedge, for his hair is always brushed the wrong way. His eyes are suffused with a watery substance which takes away all their brightness, and he manifests his presence by a continual whine.

Woe be to the vineyard disturbed by his daily or nightly visits! That which he eats or destroys, is as nothing compared to that which he sours and soils! His presence would spoil the glories of Heaven, and make the angels themselves weary of their blessed estate. Of all the unhappy ills with which man plagues himself — or allows the devil to plague him — fretfulness is one of the very worst. For although there are doubtless many evils that are more deadly in their influences, there are few that bring such an aggregate of evil to mankind. Let us then, by all means, keep this fox out of the vineyard. In order that we may do so, however, we must inquire for those gaps in the fence by which he enters.

The CAUSES of fretfulness are manifold, a few only of which we have space to name.

Sometimes fretfulness arises from constitutional tendency or disposition. It is as natural for some people to fret, as it is for some people to have dark hair; whining is as much a part of some constitutions, as tallness is of others. When that is the case, we must not be too hard upon the offender; nor must he be too hard upon himself. But, on the other hand, just as no man would continue to bear any mark of physical deformity which was possible to remove — neither ought he tamely to submit to a mental or moral defect because it — or the tendency to it — is natural. Rather let him show that true nobility of soul which will make all about him subservient to him, and that Christian grace which makes loveliness and

beauty grow even in an uncongenial soil. No man should willingly submit to the control of fretfulness.

Sometimes fretfulness arises from physical indisposition, or ill-health. Perhaps nothing produces so much fretfulness as this. Violent headaches, lack of sleep, shattered nerves, overwrought brains — sadly interfere with serenity of disposition and sweetness of temper.

Such people merit our pity, much more than they deserve our blame. And in such cases it is not always possible for religion alone to work a perfect or lasting remedy. If the cause is physical, so must be the cure. Fresh air, cold water, rest or change — with freedom from care — are the medicines most likely to give relief.

Sometimes fretfulness is produced by unfortunate surroundings. How the poor of our large cities can avoid fretful uneasiness and querulousness of temper, it is not easy to see. Crowded together as they are, surrounded by unhealthy sanitary conditions, breathing a vitiated atmosphere, worried by sickly children, ground down by hard poverty, and, above all, given up to the tender mercies of the tavern and the gin-seller — is it to be wondered at that they sometimes turn away with fretful, even savage, impatience from those who would gladly lead them to a sweeter and purer life? Human beings cannot live like animals — and act like gentlemen. But the cause and cure of such things would open up questions too large to be discussed here.

Fretfulness is often induced by an overheated, or too powerful, imagination. Our readers may question this at first sight, but a little consideration will suffice to convince them that we state no more than the sober truth. Fretting is more frequently produced by what is feared — than by what is suffered; by what the imagination borrows from the future — rather than by what the mind or body endures in the present. And who has a pen sufficiently graphic to paint the horrors that may be produced by a powerful imagination, when it is of a gloomy or foreboding nature?

A friend of the writer's tells him that his imagination is his greatest foe. Many times has he sat in his study and buried his wife and every one of his seven children. He has seen them suffer and die, and has wept real tears over it all. Suddenly awaking, he has discovered it to be a trick of his old enemy, and has had to pinch himself or stamp the floor in order to assure himself of the blessed fact that it was only a dream. How many times he has seen his boys do wrong and get committed to prison, he does not remember; yet better boys never lived.

A recent writer gives the following amusing instance of the power of the imagination in making people fretful. Two maiden ladies sat at an open window, looking out upon a beautiful landscape, but weeping most bitterly.

"Whatever is the matter?" said a friend on entering the room.

"O! it is too dreadful," replied the ladies in chorus.

"What is?"

"Positively awful," was the rejoinder. "We were thinking. And we supposed we had been married, and one of us had been sitting by this open window with her little baby, and the baby had been reaching out of the window after the flowers, and had fallen into the water below and been drowned."

And then the salt sea of their sorrows flowed again like a rising tide. It was only by the aid of pocket-handkerchiefs, smelling-salts, and much persuasion, that the visitor quieted the good ladies at all.

Though this may be putting the thing in a ridiculous light, it will perhaps help us to laugh off our foolish fears, and thus serve a good purpose. Many people fret because their imaginations make airy nothings appear to be sad realities; let us not be among the number.

We have enumerated the causes of fretfulness at some length, in the hope that to know the disease will help the cure; and fretfulness must be cured, before our characters can be either attractive or complete.

In closing this chapter, let us suggest some REMEDIES:

1. Think what it would be to have REAL sorrow. Remember the sorrows of the past; look at the sorrows of other people. Then it will be found that our own little trials, or dreaded woes — will grow smaller by degrees, until they disappear. The mill-dam looks large until we behold the river, which in its turn appears small when we gaze upon the sea. In like manner, a mole-hill trouble assumes its proper dimensions when contrasted with a mountain sorrow.

2. Avoid worry. For worry is, after all, the cause of very much of our fretfulness. And worry is almost inseparable from a highly-civilized — or artificial — way of living. One suggests that it would be well if some clever man would write an essay on the art of taking things coolly. That art may be learned in the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles.

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

"I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content," says Paul when speaking of himself, and when advising others, "We beseech you, brethren, that you study to be quiet." If our Lord taught the blessedness of a calm and quiet spirit in the far-off days in which He lived, and great men recognize the special force and application of such teaching to the present state of society — surely it will be our wisdom to put it into daily practice without more ado. He who can go through the tumults of life without tumultuousness — or being worried by them — will not have great difficulty in avoiding a fretful spirit. "Come unto Me," said Jesus, "and I will give you rest."

3. Cultivate contentment and cheerfulness. They are not plants natural to the soil of humanity, and that is why we call attention to the fact that they must be cultivated. And they may be. In uncongenial climates, unproductive soils, under forbidding skies, in a word, in soul-gardens that seem most uncongenial to their growth, they are often brought to the most beautiful perfection. Their cultivation will well repay us. They will help us to live, to live well, to live long. They will beautify life, sweeten goodness, add grace to nobility, glorify love, brighten home, and rob even sorrow of half its terror. If we are Christians, we must cultivate them. To be cheerful and contented is a moral virtue, a Christian grace, a religious duty.

4. Seek a deep trust in God. "I cannot choose my way — and I would not if I could." Just so. But if we do leave God to undertake for us, to guide us, to save us — then surely we can trust Him to do it fully — all in all. Bringing us to the end, involves taking care of us by the way; the fact that God is conducting us to an eternal home, surely carries with it the assurance that He will be mindful of us while we are exposed to the dangers of our pilgrimage there. Then why fret over the present? It is God's ordering. And why fret in reference to the future? God will be with us then, as He is with us now. "When I am afraid, I will trust in You!"

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).