

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 5. OVER-SENSITIVENESS.

By over-sensitiveness, we mean an abnormal, unhealthy, or over-active condition of either the physical, mental, or spiritual senses. This "little fox" is often seen, and destroys much good. He is wide awake, has the quickest eye, the keenest sense, the strongest scent, and the most finely-strung nervous organization. Unhappily, he always frequents the best vineyards. Vines of coarse growth, crude foliage, and average fruit are not often molested by him — but the most precious vines and the most luscious grapes, rarely escape his unwelcome attentions.

Very able men, especially those who have not largely mixed in the common activities of life, are often credited with irritability or ill-temper, though, in reality, they do but suffer from over-sensitiveness.

Some time ago, we wandered amid the beauties of Rydal Mount, and as we gazed upon the bright waters and the grand hilltops around us, and threaded the shady paths along which Wordsworth must often have passed while he meditated his poems — we thought of him with great delight. Meeting an old woman, we eagerly asked, "Did you know Wordsworth?" "Ay, I did, and a right crusty old fellow he was, too," was the reply. What a shock! Was Wordsworth bad-tempered, then? We do not think so. But, like some others with less genius than himself, he was too *sensitive*.

This "little fox" may be best described as *a good watch-dog unduly developed*, so that instead of the careful and useful animal that might guard your treasures — you have the quarrelsome brute that embroils you with itself and with your neighbors.

The sensitive man has two great defects: his senses — physical, mental, spiritual — are too keen. Secondly, they are almost always mistaken.

They are too keen. He sees what he should not see, and hears what he should not hear. The gates of his spirit are not shut day or night; the avenues of his soul are ever open. A friend of the writer's once called upon an optometrist for advice. After question and examination, the optometrist said, "Your sight is too keen, too circumscribed; we must disperse it, make it more general and less minute." In other words, his sight was too sensitive. The most trifling irregularity disturbed him, an insignificant disorder worried him, he was too particular. So is the too-sensitive soul.

Addison, in one of his charming essays, tells us of a man who spent his life in the regulation of his weight. He constructed a weighing-chair, in which he ate, drank, and slept, so that for years he lived in a pair of scales. After a feast he weighed two hundred and one pounds; after a fast only one hundred and ninety-nine pounds. The great business of his life was to "trim the balance between these two volatile pounds in his constitution." Then follows an amusing account of the way in which this "trimming" was accomplished. How is it possible to avoid *pitying* such an individual? The empire might collapse. That meant nothing to him. He was gaining the pound he had lost. His wife might die. But what of that? He was a quarter of a pound too heavy, and he must reduce himself!

We smile at this man. We should say that death would be preferable to such a life. But does not the over-sensitive man too often imitate him? If we never rest until there is no crumb on the carpet, no crease in the window-curtain, absolutely no dust on the furniture, and no "hitch" in the vast and complicated machinery of human life — we shall never rest until the grave encloses us! The forgetfulness or neglect of this, works much evil in every department of life.

As a result of excessive keenness of sight, comes *mistaken* sight. People who are too sensitive, not only see some things too keenly — but they often see the wrong things. Benjamin Franklin hit on a strange expedient for discovering the tendencies of his friends. He did not wish to keep company with people who were too sensitive, who were always looking out for defects and spots, which became sources of annoyance to them. He had the misfortune to have one deformed leg, while the other was normal. When any newcomer appeared, he so disposed himself as to exhibit his legs, and then judged the character of his visitors, by the leg upon which they first remarked. If they first remarked upon the deformed leg — he bade them goodbye; if upon the normal leg — he invited them to remain. Franklin closes his story by advising us to "*Stop looking at the ugly leg!*"

But how difficult it is for the man who is, by nature or habit, unduly sensitive, to act upon that advice. Such persons remember the *one wasp* — while they forget the *numberless butterflies*; and overlook the long summer beauties, in their moanings over the one thunderstorm. By a strange perversity, they are blind and deaf to beauties and blessings, both great and small. But they are painfully alive to all that is defective or disorderly. They see the shadows with intense distinctness, while the brightness plays around them in vain.

The painful nature of their disease — for so we must call it — reminds us of a lesson once read by a friend of ours to a sentimental youth. The youth was "far-sighted." He was disposed to think all evil, of the things which he knew; and all good, of those which he knew not. Other people's gardens were better than his father's, other countries better than England, other continents better than Europe. The farther a thing might be from his father's garden wall — the more he prized it.

One day our friend walked up to him with a beautiful flower. "See what a rare treasure I have found!" said he. "O, how delightful!" was the reply. "It is lovely. Where did it come from? From a long way off, I'm sure. How sweet, how rich!" "It is the flower of the *Solatium tuberosum*" replied our friend, "and is a native of South America." The youth went into still greater ecstasies. But when our friend had "fooled him to the top of his bent," he suddenly brought him down again by saying, "Yes, this beautiful flower grows upon a *potato-top*; I have just plucked it in your father's garden, where there are hundreds more!"

It was the Latin name and the pretended admiration of our friend, that threw the young gentleman into such raptures. The *moral* is obvious.

An acquaintance of ours unfortunately suffered from an injured arm. It was not painful, but inconvenient. Its possessor was, however, of an unhappy, morbid temperament, and very soon took especial pleasure in nursing and cherishing the afflicted member.

"Did you enjoy the service?"

"Yes, but for my arm."

"It is a fine morning!"

"O, yes, the morning's fine enough, if it was not for my arm."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, but I had to mind my arm."

That unhappy limb soon became the nuisance and by-word of the village!

Just so, some people take a *morbid delight in their sensitiveness*, and nurse and develop what they should ruthlessly destroy.

"I have just met Mr. Parson, and he never spoke to me," said Mrs. Leader to her husband. "Did you speak to him?" replied Mr. Leader. "Certainly not," was the response. "Then he is probably making the same remark about you."

For sensitive people, as a class, we feel great sympathy. We would encourage them to fight manfully against their evil genius. The best weapons with which to attack it, are strong common sense and true religion. Let them also bear in mind these simple directions.

Cultivate an accurate knowledge of the disease. If a lady is aware of her deafness, she takes it into account, and does not accuse the preacher of whispering his sermons. A knowledge of our physical and spiritual conditions, will save both ourselves and others a world of trouble. If sensitive people know and remember that they are sensitive, they will be able to discount the *slights* and *annoyances* they receive — or *imagine* they receive; a knowledge of the evil and its causes, may enable them largely to diminish it.

Cultivate *self-depreciation*. What is self? After all, who am I? Only a trifling part of the great universe — a little drop in a vast, unfathomed sea. Why should I be specially considered? Among the millions that toil around me, there are many better than I, many whose claims are stronger than mine; let them be first thought of. "In honor preferring one another" says the Apostle. My Master came to destroy self. "I live, yet not I" said Paul. Self was dead. *Sensitiveness is too often undue self-consciousness.*

Cultivate some *active work*. Let both body and mind be well employed. Work clears . . .

the *body* of evil distempers,

the *brain* of evil thoughts,

the *heart* of evil attitudes.

The worst curse may be turned to a blessing, by the worker. Work was the saving clause in Adam's doom. How could he and Eve have dwelt together in their altered state — had they been unemployed? Of the *general benefits of work*, however, we do not now speak; we simply point to it as a relief, if not a cure, for sensitiveness.

We have more sensitiveness in the community, than of yore; partly because our high state of civilization has increased the number of *refined idlers* in our midst. If such persons would return to moral and spiritual well-being, they must accept its first and last condition — WORK! "I must work" said the Great Exemplar. Trifles, irritations, small vexations, and annoying slights — disappear in the footsteps of the earnest worker.

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