LITTLE FOXES.

BY

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FAULT-FINDING.

"PAPA, what are you going to give us this winter for our evening readings?" said Jennie.

"I am thinking, for one thing," I replied, "of preaching a course of household sermons from a very odd text prefixed to a discourse which I found at the bottom of the pamphlet-barrel in the garret."

"Don't say sermon, Papa,—it has such a dreadful sound; and on winter evenings one wants something entertaining."

"Well, treatise, then," said I, "or discourse, or essay, or prelection; I'm not particular as to words."

"But what is the queer text that you found at the bottom of the pamphlet-barrel?"

"It was one preached upon by your mother's great-great-grandfather, the very savory and much-respected Simeon Shuttleworth, 'on the occasion of the melancholy defections and divisions among the godly in the town of West Dofield'; and it runs thus,—'*Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes.*'"

"It's a curious text enough; but I can't imagine what you are going to make of it."

"Simply an essay on Little Foxes," said I, "by which I mean those unsuspected, unwatched, insignificant *little* causes, that

nibble away domestic happiness, and make home less than so noble an institution should be.

"You may build beautiful, convenient, attractive houses,—you may hang the walls with lovely pictures and stud them with gems of Art; and there may be living there together persons bound by blood and affection in one common interest, leading a life common to themselves and apart from others; and these persons may each one of them be possessed of good and noble traits; there may be a common basis of affection, of generosity, of good principle, of religion; and yet, through the influence of some of these perverse, nibbling, insignificant little foxes, half the clusters of happiness on these so promising vines may fail to come to maturity. A little community of people, all of whom would be willing to die for each other, may not be able to live happily together; that is, they may have far less happiness than their circumstances, their fine and excellent traits, entitle them to expect.

"The reason for this in general is that home is a place not only of strong affections, but of entire unreserves; it is life's undress rehearsal, its back-room, its dressing-room, from which we go forth to more careful and guarded intercourse, leaving behind us much *débris* of cast-off and every-day clothing. Hence has arisen the common proverb, 'No man is a hero to his *valet-de-chambre*'; and the common warning, 'If you wish to keep your friend, don't go and live with him.'"

"Which is only another way of saying," said my wife, "that we are all human and imperfect; and the nearer you get to any human being, the more defects you see. The characters that can stand the test of daily intimacy are about as numerous as four-leaved clovers in a meadow; in general, those who do not annoy you with positive

faults bore you with their insipidity. The evenness and beauty of a strong, well-defined nature, perfectly governed and balanced, is about the last thing one is likely to meet with in one's researches into life."

"But what I have to say," replied I, "is this,—that, family-life being a state of unreserve, a state in which there are few of those barriers and veils that keep people in the world from seeing each other's defects and mutually jarring and grating upon each other, it is remarkable that it is entered upon and maintained generally with less reflection, less care and forethought, than pertain to most kinds of business which men and women set their hands to. A man does not undertake to run an engine or manage a piece of machinery without some careful examination of its parts and capabilities, and some inquiry whether he have the necessary knowledge, skill, and strength to make it do itself and him justice. A man does not try to play on the violin without seeing if his fingers are long and flexible enough to bring out the harmonies and raise his performance above the grade of dismal scraping to that of divine music. What should we think of a man who should set a whole orchestra of instruments upon playing together without the least provision or forethought as to their chord, and then howl and tear his hair at the result? It is not the fault of the instruments that they grate harsh thunders together; they may each be noble and of celestial temper; but united without regard to their nature, dire confusion is the result. Still worse were it, if a man were supposed so stupid as to expect of each instrument a *rôle* opposed to its nature,—if he asked of the octave-flute a bass solo, and condemned the trombone because it could not do the work of the many-voiced violin.

"Yet just so carelessly is the work of forming a family often performed. A man and woman come together from some affinity,

some partial accord of their nature which has inspired mutual affection. There is generally very little careful consideration of who and what they are,—no thought of the reciprocal influence of mutual traits,—no previous chording and testing of the instruments which are to make lifelong harmony or discord,—and after a short period of engagement, in which all their mutual relations are made as opposite as possible to those which must follow marriage, these two furnish their house and begin life together.

"Then in many cases the domestic roof is supposed at once to be the proper refuge for relations and friends on both sides, who also are introduced into the interior concert without any special consideration of what is likely to be the operation of character on character, the play of instrument with instrument;—then follow children, each of whom is a separate entity, a separate will, a separate force in the circle; and thus, with the lesser powers of servants and dependants, a family is made up. And there is no wonder if all these chance-assorted instruments, playing together, sometimes make quite as much discord as harmony. For if the husband and wife chord, the wife's sister or husband's mother may introduce a discord; and then again, each child of marked character introduces another possibility of confusion.

"The conservative forces of human nature are so strong and so various, that with all these drawbacks the family state is after all the best and purest happiness that earth affords. But then, with cultivation and care, it might be a great deal happier. Very fair pears have been raised by dropping a seed into a good soil and letting it alone for years; but finer and choicer are raised by the watchings, tendings, prunings of the gardener. Wild grape-vines bore very fine grapes, and an abundance of them, before our friend Dr. Grant took up his abode at Iona, and, studying the laws of

Nature, conjured up new species of rarer fruit and flavor out of the old. And so, if all the little foxes that infest our domestic vine and fig-tree were once hunted out and killed, we might have fairer clusters and fruit all winter."

"But, Papa," said Jennie, "to come to the foxes; let's know what they are."

"Well, as the text says, *little* foxes, the pet foxes of good people, unsuspected little animals,—on the whole, often thought to be really creditable little beasts, that may do good, and at all events cannot do much harm. And as I have taken to the Puritanic order in my discourse, I shall set them in sevens, as Noah did his clean beasts in the ark. Now my seven little foxes are these:—Fault-Finding, Intolerance, Reticence, Irritability, Exactingness, Discourtesy, Self-Will. And here," turning to my sermon, "is what I have to say about the first of them."

FAULT-FINDING,—

A most respectable little animal, that many people let run freely among their domestic vines, under the notion that he helps the growth of the grapes, and is the principal means of keeping them in order.

Now it may safely be set down as a maxim, that nobody likes to be found fault with, but everybody likes to find fault when things do not suit him.

Let my courteous reader ask him or herself if he or she does not experience a relief and pleasure in finding fault with or about whatever troubles them.

This appears at first sight an anomaly in the provisions of Nature. Generally we are so constituted that what it is a pleasure to us to do it is a pleasure to our neighbor to have us do. It is a pleasure to give, and a pleasure to receive. It is a pleasure to love, and a pleasure to be loved; a pleasure to admire, a pleasure to be admired. It is a pleasure also to find fault, but *not* a pleasure to be found fault with. Furthermore, those people whose sensitiveness of temperament leads them to find the most fault are precisely those who can least bear to be found fault with; they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on other men's shoulders, but they themselves cannot bear the weight of a finger.

Now the difficulty in the case is this: There are things in life that need to be altered; and that things may be altered, they must be spoken of to the people whose business it is to make the change. This opens wide the door of fault-finding to well-disposed people, and gives them latitude of conscience to impose on their fellows all the annoyances which they themselves feel. The father and mother of a family are fault-finders, *ex officio*; and to them flows back the tide of every separate individual's complaints in the domestic circle, till often the whole air of the house is chilled and darkened by a drizzling Scotch mist of querulousness. Very bad are these mists for grape-vines, and produce mildew in many a fair cluster.

Enthusius falls in love with Hermione, because she looks like a moonbeam,—because she is ethereal as a summer cloud, *spirituelle*. He commences forthwith the perpetual adoration system that precedes marriage. He assures her that she is too good for this world, too delicate and fair for any of the uses of poor mortality,—that she ought to tread on roses, sleep on the clouds,—that she ought never to shed a tear, know a fatigue, or make an exertion, but live apart in some bright, ethereal sphere worthy of

her charms. All which is duly chanted in her ear in moonlight walks or sails, and so often repeated that a sensible girl may be excused for believing that a little of it may be true.

Now comes marriage,—and it turns out that Enthusius is very particular as to his coffee, that he is excessively disturbed if his meals are at all irregular, and that he cannot be comfortable with any table arrangements which do not resemble those of his notable mother, lately deceased in the odor of sanctity; he also wants his house in perfect order at all hours. Still he does not propose to provide a trained housekeeper; it is all to be effected by means of certain raw Irish girls, under the superintendence of this angel who was to tread on roses, sleep on clouds, and never know an earthly care. Neither has Enthusius ever considered it a part of a husband's duty to bear personal inconveniences in silence. He would freely shed his blood for Hermione,—nay, has often frantically proposed the same in the hours of courtship, when of course nobody wanted it done, and it could answer no manner of use; but now to the idyllic dialogues of that period succeed such as these:—

"My dear, this tea is smoked: can't you get Jane into the way of making it better?"

"My dear, I have tried; but she will not do as I tell her."

"Well, all I know is, *other* people can have good tea, and I should think we might."

And again at dinner:—

"My dear, this mutton is overdone again; it is *always* overdone."

“Not always, dear, because you recollect on Monday you said it was just right.”

“Well, *almost* always.”

“Well, my dear, the reason to-day was, I had company in the parlor, and could not go out to caution Bridget, as I generally do. It’s very difficult to get things done with such a girl.”

“My mother’s things were always well done, no matter what her girl was.”

Again: “My dear, you must speak to the servants about wasting the coal. I never saw such a consumption of fuel in a family of our size”; or, “My dear, how can you let Maggie tear the morning paper?” or, “My dear, I shall actually have to give up coming to dinner, if my dinners cannot be regular”; or, “My dear, I wish you would look at the way my shirts are ironed,—it is perfectly scandalous”; or, “My dear, you must not let Johnnie finger the mirror in the parlor”; or, “My dear, you must stop the children from playing in the garret”, or, “My dear, you must see that Maggie doesn’t leave the mat out on the railing when she sweeps the front hall”; and so on, up stairs and down stairs, in the lady’s chamber, in attic, garret, and cellar, “my dear” is to see that nothing goes wrong, and she is found fault with when anything does.

Yet Enthusius, when occasionally he finds his sometime angel in tears, and she tells him he does not love her as he once did, repudiates the charge with all his heart, and declares he loves her more than ever,—and perhaps he does. The only difficulty is that she has passed out of the plane of moonshine and poetry into that of actualities. While she was considered an angel, a star, a bird, an

evening cloud, of course there was nothing to be found fault with in her; but now that the angel has become chief business-partner in an earthly working firm, relations are different. Enthusius could say the same things over again under the same circumstances, but unfortunately now they never are in the same circumstances. Enthusius is simply a man who is in the habit of speaking from impulse, and saying a thing merely and only because he feels it at the moment. Before marriage he worshipped and adored his wife as an ideal being dwelling in the land of dreams and poetries, and did his very best to make her unpractical and unfitted to enjoy the life to which he was to introduce her after marriage. After marriage he still yields unreflectingly to present impulses, which are no longer to praise, but to criticise and condemn. The very sensibility to beauty and love of elegance, which made him admire her before marriage, now transferred to the arrangement of the domestic *ménage*, lead him daily to perceive a hundred defects and find a hundred annoyances.

Thus far we suppose an amiable, submissive wife, who is only grieved, not provoked,—who has no sense of injustice, and meekly strives to make good the hard conditions of her lot. Such poor, little, faded women have we seen, looking for all the world like plants that have been nursed and forced into bloom in the steam-heat of the conservatory, and are now sickly and yellow, dropping leaf by leaf, in the dry, dusty parlor.

But there is another side of the picture,—where the wife, provoked and indignant, takes up the fault-finding trade in return, and with the keen arrows of her woman's wit searches and penetrates every joint of the husband's armor, showing herself full as unjust and far more capable in this sort of conflict.

Saddest of all sad things is it to see two once very dear friends employing all that peculiar knowledge of each other which love had given them only to harass and provoke,—thrusting and piercing with a certainty of aim that only past habits of confidence and affection could have put in their power, wounding their own hearts with every deadly thrust they make at one another, and all for such inexpressibly miserable trifles as usually form the openings of fault-finding dramas.

For the contentions that loosen the very foundations of love, that crumble away all its fine traceries and carved work, about what miserable, worthless things do they commonly begin!—a dinner underdone, too much oil consumed, a newspaper torn, a waste of coal or soap, a dish broken!—and for this miserable sort of trash, very good, very generous, very religious people will sometimes waste and throw away by double-handfuls the very thing for which houses are built and coal burned, and all the paraphernalia of a home established,—*their happiness*. Better cold coffee, smoky tea, burnt meat, better any inconvenience, any loss, than a loss of *love*; and nothing so surely burns away love as constant fault-finding.

For fault-finding once allowed as a habit between two near and dear friends comes in time to establish a chronic soreness, so that the mildest, the most reasonable suggestion, the gentlest implied reproof, occasions burning irritation; and when this morbid stage has once set in, the restoration of love seems wellnigh impossible.

For example: Enthusius, having risen this morning in the best of humors, in the most playful tones begs Hermione not to make the tails of her g’s quite so long; and Hermione fires up with with—

“And, pray, what else wouldn’t you wish me to do? Perhaps you would be so good, when you have leisure, as to make out an alphabetical list of the things in me that need correcting.”

“My dear, you are unreasonable.”

“I don’t think so. I should like to get to the end of the requirements of my lord and master sometimes.”

“Now, my dear, you really are very silly.”

“Please say something original, my dear. I have heard that till it has lost the charm of novelty.”

“Come now, Hermione, don’t let’s quarrel.”

“My dear sir, who thinks of quarrelling? Not I; I’m sure I was only asking to be directed. I trust some time, if I live to be ninety, to suit your fastidious taste. I trust the coffee is right this morning, *and* the tea, *and* the toast, *and* the steak, *and* the servants, *and* the front-hall mat, *and* the upper-story hall-door, *and* the basement premises; and now I suppose I am to be trained in respect to my general education. I shall set about the tails of my g’s at once, but trust you will prepare a list of any other little things that need emendation.”

Enthusius pushes away his coffee, and drums on the table.

“If I might be allowed one small criticism, my dear, I should observe that it is not good manners to drum on the table,” says his fair opposite.

“Hermione, you are enough to drive a man frantic!” exclaims Enthusius, rushing out with bitterness in his soul, and a determination to take his dinner at Delmonico’s.

Enthusius feels himself an abused man, and thinks there never was such a sprite of a woman,—the most utterly unreasonable, provoking human being he ever met with. What he does not think of is, that it is his own inconsiderate, constant fault-finding that has made every nerve so sensitive and sore, that the mildest suggestion of advice or reproof on the most indifferent subject is impossible. He has not, to be sure, been the guilty partner in this morning's encounter; he has said only what is fair and proper, and she has been unreasonable and cross; but, after all, the fault is remotely his.

When Enthusius awoke, after marriage, to find in his Hermione in very deed only a bird, a star, a flower, but no housekeeper, why did he not face the matter like an honest man? Why did he not remember all the fine things about dependence and uselessness with which he had been filling her head for a year or two, and in common honesty exact no more from her than he had bargained for? Can a bird make a good business-manager? Can a flower oversee Biddy and Mike, and impart to their uncircumcised ears the high crafts and mysteries of elegant housekeeping?

If his little wife has to learn her domestic *rôle* of household duty, as most girls do, by a thousand mortifications, a thousand perplexities, a thousand failures, let him, in ordinary fairness, make it as easy to her as possible. Let him remember with what admiring smiles, before marriage, he received her pretty professions of utter helplessness and incapacity in domestic matters, finding only poetry and grace in what, after marriage, proved an annoyance.

And if a man finds that he has a wife ill-adapted to wifely duties, does it follow that the best thing he can do is to blurt out, without form or ceremony, all the criticisms and corrections which may occur to him in the many details of household life? He would

not dare to speak with as little preface, apology, or circumlocution to his business manager, to his butcher, or his baker. When Enthusius was a bachelor, he never criticised the table at his boarding-house without some reflection, and studying to take unto himself acceptable words whereby to soften the asperity of the criticism. The laws of society require that a man should qualify, soften, and wisely time his admonitions to those he meets in the outer world, or they will turn again and rend him. But to his own wife, in his own house and home, he can find fault without ceremony or softening. So he can; and he can awake, in the course of a year or two, to find his wife a changed woman, and his home unendurable. He may find, too, that unceremonious fault-finding is a game that two can play at, and that a woman can shoot her arrows with far more precision and skill than a man.

But the fault lies not always on the side of the husband. Quite as often is a devoted, patient, good-tempered man harassed and hunted and baited by the inconsiderate fault-finding of a wife whose principal talent seems to lie in the ability at first glance to discover and make manifest the weak point in everything.

We have seen the most generous, the most warm-hearted and obliging of mortals, under this sort of training, made the most morose and disobliging of husbands. Sure to be found fault with, whatever they do, they have at last ceased doing. The disappointment of not pleasing they have abated by not trying to please.

We once knew a man who married a spoiled beauty, whose murmurs, exactions, and caprices were infinite. He had at last, as a refuge to his wearied nerves, settled down into a habit of utter disregard and neglect; he treated her wishes and her complaints

with equal indifference, and went on with his life as nearly as possible as if she did not exist. He silently provided for her what he thought proper, without troubling himself to notice her requests or listen to her grievances. Sickness came, but the heart of her husband was cold and gone; there was no sympathy left to warm her. Death came, and he breathed freely as a man released. He married again,—a woman with no beauty, but much love and goodness,—a woman who asked little, blamed seldom, and then with all the tact and address which the utmost thoughtfulness could devise; and the passive, negligent husband became the attentive, devoted slave of her will. He was in her hands as clay in the hands of the potter; the least breath or suggestion of criticism from her lips, who criticised so little and so thoughtfully, weighed more with him than many out-spoken words. So different is the same human being, according to the touch of the hand which plays upon him!

I have spoken hitherto of fault-finding as between husband and wife: its consequences are even worse as respects children. The habit once suffered to grow up between the two that constitute the head of the family descends and runs through all the branches. Children are more hurt by indiscriminate, thoughtless fault-finding than by any other one thing. Often a child has all the sensitiveness and all the susceptibility of a grown person, added to the faults of childhood. Nothing about him is right as yet; he is immature and faulty at all points, and everybody feels at perfect liberty to criticise him to right and left, above, below, and around, till he takes refuge either in callous hardness or irritable moroseness.

A bright, noisy boy rushes in from school, eager to tell his mother something he has on his heart, and Number One cries out,—“O, you’ve left the door open! I do wish you wouldn’t