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"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

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Religious.

The Unfriendly Letter.

"Spread it before the Lord, Leonard," said Lucy Grey. "Do not say any more about it, nor answer it, nor take any steps about it, till you have spread it before the Lord."

Leonard Grey made no reply to his sister, but continued to pace the room with unequal steps. His countenance betokened anger, and he thought he did well to be angry. It was natural anger, and just anger, and righteous anger, and generous anger: so he would have said. An open letter was in his hand. His first impulse on reading it had been to tear it up and trample it under his feet in token of angry contempt of the writer: so far he had restrained himself; but whether the offending sheet would be thrust between the fire bars or thrown into his desk was yet an open question, when his sister interposed again.

"Be angry, but sin not, dear Leonard. Follow Hezekiah's example."

"Hezekiah! Hezekiah! what are you talking about Lucy?" said Leonard, turning round upon his sister sharply perhaps; at least he thought so himself afterwards, when he became cooler. It is to be noted that, though Leonard Grey was a Bible student, he was just then so carried away with his angry feelings, that for the moment he did not catch his sister's meaning. He heard her words indeed, but they conveyed little sense to his mind.

It is a great blessing and a great mercy too when an impetuous, hot-headed, generous-hearted man has a better angel by his side, in the shape of a wife or a sister, for instance, who is not afraid, on any needful occasion, to tell an unwelcome truth in a gentle way, or to pour the oil of mild persuasion and judicious counsel on the turbulent waves of passion. Such an one was Lucy Grey to her brother, who at this time, however, felt far too provoked and excited to listen at first to his sister's mild remonstrances.

"Is it not an abominable letter, Lucy? tell me that," said he, striking off from Hezekiah at a tangent.

"If I were to say yes, would that do any good?" asked Lucy, with a half smile on her countenance, though in truth she sympathized deeply with the insult and injury her brother had received.

"Good! why, you know it would do good, Lucy. I should feel doubly sure then that the man who wrote this"—Leonard crushed up the poor letter in his hand as he spoke—"that the man who wrote this is a detestable, sneaking, undermining—"

"Leonard, Leonard, dear brother; 'In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin,'" interposed Lucy.

"Sin, Lucy! It is no sin to call things by their right names."

"But there may be sin, brother, in the temper of mind which induces us to call things by even their right names. Besides, we may be mistaken; and though this letter seems very unkind, illiberal, and unchristian—"

"Seems, Lucy! It is all that, and more. I am sure you cannot deny it, gloss it over as you may," said Leonard, breaking in upon his sister's apology for the writer.

"Well, dear Leonard, say then that it is all that and more; what a fine opportunity here is for showing a better spirit. Do not forget, my dear brother, that you are a Christian; a follower of the blessed One who, when he was reviled, reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously."

"I am to submit, then, to these imputations, Lucy; and the fellow who wrote this letter"—once more the poor sheet of paper was crushed up in Leonard Grey's hand—"is to go over half the world blasting my character? Do you mean that?"

"Half the world is a long journey, Leonard. But better even that he should do this than that you should do wrong. Two wrongs can never make one right, you know. They never have yet; and never will."

"A word spoken in season, how good it is!" Leonard paused in his erratic course across the carpet of his drawing room, laid the offending epistle on the table, and sat down in silence by his sister's side.

Now, what was in that letter need never be known: our readers may supply this want of information for themselves. Perhaps it contained false accusations affecting the personal character of the receiver. It might have been a retaliatory letter, threatening injury for some imagined wrong. Or it was possibly a legal demand for a large sum of money not really due to the writer except by some flaw in an agreement or in consequence of some pettifoggish quibble. Or it was, perhaps, a mean and spiteful letter, intended to give offence to Leonard Grey by some rival in business. On the other hand, it was probably an honest though mistaken outpouring of wrath stirred up by a tale-bearer and backbiter, or by some mutual misunderstanding. All these things have happened since the world began, and will happen again and again before it comes to an end; at any rate until the happy time comes, prophetically prefigured by the dwelling together of the wolf and the lamb, the lying down of the leopard with the kid, and the cow and the bear feeding together. Until then it must needs be that offences come; and brother will sometimes sin against brother.

Whatever the subject of the letter, or the manner of the letter, or whoever the writer of the letter might be, it was an ugly, disagreeable epistle, or it would not have touched Leonard Grey to the quick as it did. And if you, reader, have ever had your choler stirred by an unkind and unjust, a hasty and ungenerous letter from either friend or foe, as very likely you have, you will know how to sympathize with him.

"Well, Lucy, what am I to do?" said Leonard, presently, when the first outbreak of his wrath was over.

"Spread it before the Lord," said Lucy, again. "Remember David's counsel, 'Cease from anger, and forsake wrath. Pre: not thyself in anywise to do evil.' Spread the letter before the Lord, as Hezekiah spread the threatening letter of Sennacherib the Assyrian."

Leonard understood his sister now; but his mind was still in a ferment. He was writhing under the insult received. He answered more mildly, however.

"I dare say you are right Lucy; that is to say, looking at it only from one point of view. But the fact is, the letter must be answered; and it resolves itself, after all, into a matter of business—disagreeable enough; but it is business, and it must be answered in a business way."

"And you think that God does not understand business, Leonard: is that what you are thinking?" asked Lucy, quietly.

"Lucy! what a strange question to ask!" exclaimed Leonard, turning quickly round upon his sister.

"Is the question stranger than the thought, Leonard?"

"I do not say that it is, Lucy; but—"

Leonard Grey did not get any further, for he knew that his sister was right. Yet, like some other professing Christians, he had never sufficiently recognised the fact that his heavenly Father really concerned himself about his "mean affairs." He, as we know very well where it is written, "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths;" and again, "Casting all you care upon him; for he careth for you." But it is likely he had not realized the full meaning of these encouragements. At any rate, his practice was defective if his faith was sound: no wonder, then, that in time of petty trials his patience failed him.

So Leonard passed that day with his mind unbinged, and his temper soured. He could not help thinking a good deal of the insult and injury conveyed in that unhappy letter; and the more he thought of them the deeper they seemed, as was but natural.

He answered the letter too—and he thought he had answered it well—with angry dignity, but in a tone of defiance which clearly proved, or was intended to prove, that he did not fear his adversary.

Nevertheless, he was satisfied. His sister's words rang in his ears, or at any rate, fastened themselves on his memory. "Spread it before the Lord." So pertinaciously did they adhere there that he could not shake them off; and the more he thought of them, the more wise and reasonable did the advice seem. "Am I a Christian?"—so he argued,

later in the day; "and shall I neglect what is obviously a Christian's privilege? Not that it will make any difference—how can it?—no difference, that is, to the steps I shall have to take about this letter, or to reply to it. But it may calm my mind, and—yes, Lucy is right; and I will 'spread it before the Lord.'"

So Leonard Grey went into his "closet," and shut the door, and prayed to his Father, who seeth in secret. How long he prayed, or what words he used is not of so much consequence as that he prayed "with the spirit and with understanding."

Leonard Grey looked at the unfriendly letter again. His opinion of it was not altered: if possible, it seemed blacker and more malignant than ever. "I would not have written such a letter," he thought, "for any amount of advantage I could gain by it; and I pity the man who wrote it. Then he glanced at his reply; and a blush mounted to his cheeks. "This will never do," he said within himself; and he tore it into fragments.

It was almost post-time, and there was not time to compose another reply. "I must write something, however," thought Leonard; and he sat down and wrote,

"Sir"—(he could not write "dear sir.")—"Sir, I received your letter to-day; and I have 'spread it before the Lord.'"

"I am, sir, yours respectfully,
LEONARD GREY."

We may follow this short note to the writer of the unfriendly letter.

"Spread it before the Lord!" What does Grey mean by sending such an answer as this? he said as he turned it over and over to make sure that nothing else was written. "He has spread it before the Lord, has he?" he continued, when he could find nothing else. "A pretty sort of an answer to give to my letter. Is the man making a fool of me? I'll let him know that I am not to be treated in this way."

To all appearance, certainly, Leonard Grey had not improved his position with his unfriendly correspondent by his reply.

Nevertheless, when this correspondent sat down to pen a rejoinder, he could not get on. He wrote about half a page, and then he paused.

"Grey will be spreading this before the Lord, I suppose," said he; and he took another sheet. He tried to write again, but with no better success. Then he took another sheet, and another; but frame his words as he might, he could not please himself. The truth is, his conscience began to be touched; and this appeal to the highest court of all gave him more uneasiness than he liked to acknowledge even to himself. If the dispute between himself and Leonard Grey had to be referred to a court of honour, or a court of common pleas, or a court of queen's bench, or a court of chancery, he would have fought out the battle inch by inch, and his natural obstinacy and self-importance would have carried him through the controversy, whether he were in the right or in the wrong. But to have it taken into the high court of heaven, and before the Judge of all—so unceremoniously too, and without any preliminary notice! He was not prepared for this. He threw his pen aside, and tore up his unfinished sheet. He would have nothing more to do with a man who could spread his letter before the Lord, like that. He began to be half afraid of him.

A good many weeks passed away, and Leonard Grey began to wonder.

"I have not heard a word from Mr. E—," said he, one day, to his sister.

"Nor written to him about that business?"

"No; for when I came to look at it again there was nothing for me to write about. It was for him to follow up his letter, and nothing I could have written would have made any difference; so I thought the wisest plan was for me to be silent."

"You did not think so at first," said Lucy.

"Well, no, I was too angry; but after I followed your advice and spread his letter before the Lord, it came to me that there was nothing else for me to do. Was I right?"

"I suppose so, Leonard; I believe so. But are you quite sure that Mr. E— is not following up his letter, as you say?"

"Not quite sure; but yet if he had been I should have heard of it. As I have not, I am very well content to wait."

Leonard Grey had not long to wait. That same evening there was a knock at his door, and Mr. E. was admitted.

"I wrote an ugly letter to you some time ago, Mr. Grey," he said.

Leonard could not deny this, so he said nothing.

"And you sent me a very proper answer. I am come to thank you for it."

"I am glad you think it so," said Leonard.

"I did not think so at first: it put me out more than I care to acknowledge now," continued Mr. E—; "but it was a right and proper answer. And I am come to tell you now that I was in the wrong altogether. Will you shake hands with me over it?" He held out his hand as he spoke, and Leonard took it.

"I have something else to say to you," Mr. E— went on; and his voice trembled a little.—"I have been ill since I wrote to you,"—Leonard Grey noticed now that his visitor looked weak and pallid—"and when, I was at the worst, your letter kept haunting me. You wrote that you had 'spread' my letter 'before the Lord'; and I thought how all my thoughts, and words, and deeds had been spread before him all my life long. I thought of this, Mr. Grey, till I could bear the thought no longer."

"And then—"

"And then I spread my own unhappy case before the Lord. I said 'Enter not into judgment with me, O Lord; for I have sinned; I have sinned?'"

"And then, Mr. E—?" said Leonard, with a beaming, eager, anxious smile.

"And then, sir, the blessed truth was brought home to my soul, as I hope and believe,—'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' And now, Mr. Grey, I ask you once more to forgive me for writing that unfriendly and unjust letter."

We need not write down Leonard Grey's reply.

"This do in remembrance of me."

"Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."—Romans 12: 2.

The Christian is Christ's loving epistle to a fallen world. He is to tell of a Saviour's love, breathe the Saviour's spirit, testify of the Saviour's merit, and deliver the Saviour's invitation. He is not to conform himself to the world but endeavor to conform to the will of his Lord. How very inconsistent to be one day at the Lord's table, showing forth the Lord's death; and another standing up in the giddy dance, to the sound of jivial music. How incongruous, to be spending the morning in reading God's blessed book, and bowing the knee at his throne, and in the evening sitting down to cards, or some trifling amusement. How improper when required to visit the sick, and fatherless, and widows in their affliction, to spend our time in worldly parties, and our money in adorning the person. Oh how much conformity to the world there is among many professors of that religion which requires us to mortify the flesh, and its passions and lusts! How many are overcome by the fashions, pleasures, and gay amusements of the world, who ought to have the world under their feet, and eternal glory in their eye. "Marvel not," said Jesus, "if the world hate you, for ye know that it hated me before it hated you." But how can it hate those who conform to it, and so much resemble it? It cannot. It does not. There is not that distinction between professors and the world which there ought to be. If we were the temples of the Holy Ghost—if Christ dwelt in us—if we lived in close fellowship with God—could we be so conformed to the world as many of us are?

"Pure religion, and undefiled, before God and the Father, is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."—James 1: 27.

God ordained prayer, and so proclaimed his paternity to man.