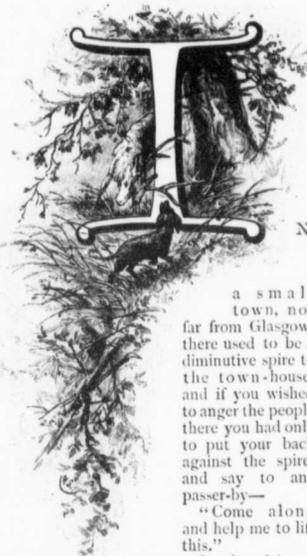


LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE.

BY JAMES AND NANETTE MASON.



A small town, not far from Glasgow, there used to be a diminutive spire to the town-house, and if you wished to anger the people there you had only to put your back against the spire, and say to any passer-by—

“Come along and help me to lift this.”

Its dwarfishness was a sore subject with the inhabitants. Let the spire alone, and you passed through the place as pleasantly as possible, received with courtesy by everybody, from the provost to the bellman. But, if you only hinted at its insignificance, nothing could save you from being stoned in the main street.

It was a good public illustration of the trouble that comes from rousing sleeping dogs, and of the great advantages that follow from allowing them to lie in peace.

No wonder that our ancestors in their wisdom coined a proverb advising us to leave them alone. They saw clearly enough that the world would be a great deal happier, and that people would get along together a great deal more harmoniously if some subjects were studiously avoided, and if a resolution were made by everybody, never if possible to touch upon the unwelcome, the disagreeable, the painful, or the irritating.

To some girls that would be a hard task—girls who have a mania for wrangling, discord, and disturbance, who would fight with the wind, and to whom a sleeping dog only suggests that they should tread on its tail or give it a poke with an umbrella. Such girls live in a perpetual atmosphere of growls and snarls, and not satisfied with that, they sometimes assist other people to do the same, like a promising maiden in a village in which we once lived, who made use of the education she had received at the Board School to write abusive letters, stirring up strife, for those who had a spite against their neighbours, but who were no scholars.

No disposition can be worse if one wants to get on in the world. Whoever would succeed must conciliate the minds of others, humouring them when that is necessary, and shutting her eyes often to what, if unfavourably commented on, would only make mischief.

It is by no means a good excuse that we say right out just what we think. To take a pride in doing that is a mistake, a sign not only of ill-breeding but of stupidity. “Nothing,” says an old writer, “is more silly than the

pleasure some people take in speaking their minds. A girl of this make will say a rude thing for the mere pleasure of saying it, when an opposite behaviour, full as innocent, might have preserved her friend and made her fortune.”

To rouse sleeping dogs is one of the easiest things in the world. A word will do it, a bare insinuation, a look even, and away they go barking to the discomfort of those who roused them, and to the sorrow and annoyance of everybody else.

There were once two young people who had sworn an eternal attachment, and it might have endured had it not been for the following incident.

“My dear,” said one, “I do not think your figure well suited for dancing, and as a sincere friend, I advise you to abstain from it in future.”

The other, naturally affected by such a mark of sincerity, replied—

“I feel very much obliged to you, my dear, for your advice. This proof of your goodwill demands some return, so I would recommend you to give up singing, as some of your high notes are more like the ill-regulated squalling of a wild cat than anything else.”

Truths which might have been allowed to slumber were now out, and the two never afterwards met except as enemies.

Much the same thing happened the other day to Eliza and Jane, when Eliza cast up to her friend that she dropped her h’s “all over the place,” and that you could pick up a bushel-basketful of them before she had been talking for half an hour. Jane retaliated with a home-thrust at Eliza’s freckled face and sandy hair, which was succeeded by an icy coldness between the two, and the wintry temperature is likely to last.

Yes, it is easy enough to make a disturbance. Arriving at a condition of quiet and repose afterwards is another matter.

The most likely time for discovering whether there are any sleeping dogs about is when people begin arguing about anything. Of all dispositions calculated to promote ill-feeling nothing beats the argumentative. It is the bane of all social happiness, and of all rational intercourse, and we have known it do more mischief in ten minutes than could be undone in a lifetime.

We do not say never argue, because if conducted temperately, with the sole object of arriving at truth, and with tolerance and kindly feeling on both sides, argument is useful. But without these conditions—difficult, we all know, to arrive at—argument is only a waste of words, and we are better to spend our breath another way.

In a heat we often say things that would be much better left unsaid. Our temper gets roused and out comes a word, a phrase, a statement, that does all the harm. It is, perhaps, not directly intended, and is only due to the excitement of the moment. But the thing is done. The main subject is forgotten. Bow-wow-wow go all the roused animals!

If this sort of thing is lamentable outside our homes, how much more so is it in our own parlours and drawing-rooms. In families, a wise observer remarks, it is a very common thing to have stock subjects of dispute. When people live much together they come to have certain set topics around which from frequent discussion there is such a growth of angry words, mortified vanity, and the like, that the original subject of difference becomes a standing subject of quarrel, and there is a tendency in all minor disputes to drift down to it. It is

a sleeping dog, always in waiting for its tail to be trod on.

The remedy for this is resolutely to avoid all reference to such topics on your own part, and to take not the slightest notice of them should they be introduced by others. “I think,” says one of the philosophers of antiquity, “the first virtue is to restrain the tongue. She approaches nearest to the gods who knows how to be silent even though she is in the right.”

Judicious silence is a wonder-working oil for making the wheels of home-life run smoothly. And that they should run smoothly is the interest of all sons and daughters who toast their toes on the same hearthrug. We can keep out of the way of irritated and irritable strangers, but we can’t very well do that with those who every day sit at the same table and are warmed by the same fire.

Sleeping dogs roused by brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins, are bad enough. What shall we say then, of those waked out of their slumbers by husbands and wives? One of the saddest objects in creation is that of a man tied to a nagging wife, who spends her time in gnawing the bones of old grievances, and whose tongue is an alarm-bell, waking up all the canine life in the neighbourhood.

Let girls who are going to be wives one of these days take note of it. She is terrible even to think about, her domestic barometer always standing at stormy, and her poor husband weary, dazed, and ill at ease. Mrs. Caudle of the *Curtain Lectures* is a type of this class little exaggerated, and those who notice in themselves early symptoms of a nagging disposition, a tendency to harp on grievances real or imaginary, and a conviction that weak woman has by man been “put upon from the beginning” (which she is not going to stand any longer), might spend their first hours of leisure very profitably in reading that book.

True, Mary, there are nagging men, if that is what you said just now. But they are more rare, and then we are only writing at present for such as your ladyship.

It is much oftener in conversation that sleeping dogs are roused than in writing. About writing there is a great deal more of deliberation, and common sense has a chance to put in a word of advice. Before the dangerous matter gets all down on paper it whispers, Draw your pen through that and leave the rest in the ink-bottle.

Besides, there follows the delay of getting the letter to the post, and that gives more or less time for reflection, during which we often discover how second thoughts are best, and how peace and safety are secured by the golden pen of discretion and compliments. We have nothing but praise for our friend Isabel, who wrote a letter last week, and in it in a bit of a temper, raked up an old subject which was sure to act on her correspondent like a spark to gunpowder. But she repented before the letter went off, and re-wrote it all in a different strain, even though it prevented her finishing that evening one of the stories of our MONTHLY SUPPLEMENT, the end of which she eagerly wished to see.

When irritating topics, however, do get into letters, they are far worse than in conversation. The exact terms of a conversation are soon forgotten, and time happily takes the sharp edge off remarks that have been unpalatable. But the letter is shut up in a desk or laid away in a drawer, and every time the desk or drawer is opened, the memory of what it contains is brought back in all its freshness, and the roused dogs bark perhaps for days afterwards.

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