Chapter VI

My lady's tongue is like the meadow blades, That cut you stroking them with idle hand. Nice cutting is her function: she divides With spiritual edge the millet-seed, And makes intangible savings.

As Mr Casaubon's carriage was passing out of the gateway, it arrested the entrance of a pony phaeton driven by a lady with a servant seated behind. It was doubtful whether the recognition had been mutual, for Mr Casaubon was looking absently before him; but the lady was quick-eyed, and threw a nod and a 'How do you do?' in the nick of time. In spite of her shabby bonnet and very old Indian shawl, it was plain that the lodge-keeper regarded her as an important personage, from the low curtsy which was dropped on the entrance of the small phaeton.

'Well, Mrs Fitchett, how are your fowls laying now?' said the high-colored, dark-eyed lady, with the clearest chiselled utterance.

'Pretty well for laying, madam, but they've ta'en to eating their eggs: I've no peace o' mind with 'em at all.'

'Oh, the cannibals! Better sell them cheap at once. What will you sell them a couple? One can't eat fowls of a bad character at a high price.'

'Well, madam, half-a-crown: I couldn't let 'em go, not under.'

'Half-a-crown, these times! Come now - for the Rector's chicken-broth on a Sunday. He has consumed all ours that I can spare. You are half paid with the sermon, Mrs Fitchett, remember that. Take a pair of tumbler-pigeons for them - little beauties. You must come and see them. You have no tumblers among your pigeons.'

'Well, madam, Master Fitchett shall go and see 'em after work. He's very hot on new sorts; to oblige you.'

'Oblige me! It will be the best bargain he ever made. A pair of church pigeons for a couple of wicked Spanish fowls that eat their own eggs! Don't you and Fitchett boast too much, that is all!'

The phaeton was driven onwards with the last words, leaving Mrs Fitchett laughing and shaking her head slowly, with an interjectional 'Sure*ly*, sure*ly*!' - from which it might be inferred that she would have found the country-side somewhat duller if the Rector's lady had been less free-spoken and less of a skinflint. Indeed, both the farmers and laborers in the parishes of Freshitt and Tipton would have felt a sad lack of conversation but for the stories about what Mrs Cadwallader said and did: a lady of immeasurably high birth, descended, as it

were, from unknown earls, dim as the crowd of heroic shades - who pleaded poverty, pared down prices, and cut jokes in the most companionable manner, though with a turn of tongue that let you know who she was. Such a lady gave a neighborliness to both rank and religion, and mitigated the bitterness of uncommuted tithe. A much more exemplary character with an infusion of sour dignity would not have furthered their comprehension of the Thirty-nine Articles, and would have been less socially uniting.

Mr Brooke, seeing Mrs Cadwallader's merits from a different point of view, winced a little when her name was announced in the library, where he was sitting alone.

'I see you have had our Lowick Cicero here,' she said, seating herself comfortably, throwing back her wraps, and showing a thin but well-built figure. 'I suspect you and he are brewing some bad polities, else you would not be seeing so much of the lively man. I shall inform against you: remember you are both suspicious characters since you took Peel's side about the Catholic Bill. I shall tell everybody that you are going to put up for Middlemarch on the Whig side when old Pinkerton resigns, and that Casaubon is going to help you in an underhand manner: going to bribe the voters with pamphlets, and throw open the public-houses to distribute them. Come, confess!'

'Nothing of the sort,' said Mr Brooke, smiling and rubbing his eye-glasses, but really blushing a little at the impeachment. 'Casaubon and I don't talk politics much. He doesn't care much about the philanthropic side of things; punishments, and that kind of thing. He only cares about Church questions. That is not my line of action, you know.'

'Ra-a-ther too much, my friend. I have heard of your doings. Who was it that sold his bit of land to the Papists at Middlemarch? I believe you bought it on purpose. You are a perfect Guy Faux. See if you are not burnt in effigy this 5th of November coming. Humphrey would not come to quarrel with you about it, so I am come.'

'Very good. I was prepared to be persecuted for not persecuting - not persecuting, you know.'

'There you go! That is a piece of clap-trap you have got ready for the hustings. Now, *do not* let them lure you to the hustings, my dear Mr Brooke. A man always makes a fool of himself, speechifying: there's no excuse but being on the right side, so that you can ask a blessing on your humming and hawing. You will lose yourself, I forewarn you. You will make a Saturday pie of all parties' opinions, and be pelted by everybody.'

'That is what I expect, you know,' said Mr Brooke, not wishing to betray how little he enjoyed this prophetic sketch - 'what I expect as an independent man. As to the Whigs, a man who goes with the thinkers is not likely to be hooked on by any party. He may go with them up to a certain point - up to a certain point, you know. But that is what you ladies never understand.'

'Where your certain point is? No. I should like to be told how a man can have any certain point when he belongs to no party - leading a roving life, and never letting his friends know his address. `Nobody knows where Brooke will be - there's no counting on Brooke' - that is what people say of you, to be quite frank. Now, do turn respectable. How will you like going to Sessions with everybody looking shy on you, and you with a bad conscience and an empty pocket?'

'I don't pretend to argue with a lady on politics,' said Mr Brooke, with an air of smiling indifference, but feeling rather unpleasantly conscious that this attack of Mrs Cadwallader's had opened the defensive campaign to which certain rash steps had exposed him. 'Your sex are not thinkers, you know - varium et mutabile semper - that kind of thing. You don't know Virgil. I knew' - Mr Brooke reflected in time that he had not had the personal acquaintance of the Augustan poet - 'I was going to say, poor Stoddart, you know. That was what *he* said. You ladies are always against an independent attitude - a man's caring for nothing but truth, and that sort of thing. And there is no part of the county where opinion is narrower than it is here - I don't mean to throw stones, you know, but somebody is wanted to take the independent line; and if I don't take it, who will?'

'Who? Why, any upstart who has got neither blood nor position. People of standing should consume their independent nonsense at home, not hawk it about. And you! who are going to marry your niece, as good as your daughter, to one of our best men. Sir James would be cruelly annoyed: it will be too hard on him if you turn round now and make yourself a Whig sign-board.'

Mr Brooke again winced inwardly, for Dorothea's engagement had no sooner been decided, than he had thought of Mrs Cadwallader's prospective taunts. It might have been easy for ignorant observers to say, 'Quarrel with Mrs Cadwallader;' but where is a country gentleman to go who quarrels with his oldest neighbors? Who could taste the fine flavor in the name of Brooke if it were delivered casually, like wine without a seal? Certainly a man can only be cosmopolitan up to a certain point.

'I hope Chettam and I shall always be good friends; but I am sorry to say there is no prospect of his marrying my niece,' said Mr Brooke, much relieved to see through the window that Celia was coming in.

‘Why not?’ said Mrs Cadwallader, with a sharp note of surprise. ‘It is hardly a fortnight since you and I were talking about it.’

‘My niece has chosen another suitor - has chosen him, you know. I have had nothing to do with it. I should have preferred Chettam; and I should have said Chettam was the man any girl would have chosen. But there is no accounting for these things. Your sex is capricious, you know.’

‘Why, whom do you mean to say that you are going to let her marry?’ Mrs Cadwallader's mind was rapidly surveying the possibilities of choice for Dorothea.

But here Celia entered, blooming from a walk in the garden, and the greeting with her delivered Mr Brooke from the necessity of answering immediately. He got up hastily, and saying, ‘By the way, I must speak to Wright about the horses,’ shuffled quickly out of the room.

‘My dear child, what is this? - this about your sister's engagement?’ said Mrs Cadwallader.

‘She is engaged to marry Mr Casaubon,’ said Celia, resorting, as usual, to the simplest statement of fact, and enjoying this opportunity of speaking to the Rector's wife alone.

‘This is frightful. How long has it been going on?’

‘I only knew of it yesterday. They are to be married in six weeks.’

‘Well, my dear, I wish you joy of your brother-in-law.’

‘I am so sorry for Dorothea.’

‘Sorry! It is her doing, I suppose.’

‘Yes; she says Mr Casaubon has a great soul.’

‘With all my heart.’

‘Oh, Mrs Cadwallader, I don't think it can be nice to marry a man with a great soul.’

‘Well, my dear, take warning. You know the look of one now; when the next comes and wants to marry you, don't you accept him.’

‘I'm sure I never should.’

‘No; one such in a family is enough. So your sister never cared about Sir James Chettam? What would you have said to *him* for a brother-in-law?’

‘I should have liked that very much. I am sure he would have been a good husband. Only,’ Celia added, with a slight blush (she sometimes seemed to blush as she breathed), ‘I don't think he would have suited Dorothea.’

‘Not high-flown enough?’

‘Dodo is very strict. She thinks so much about everything, and is so particular about what one says. Sir James never seemed to please her.’

‘She must have encouraged him, I am sure. That is not very creditable.’

‘Please don't be angry with Dodo; she does not see things. She thought so much about the cottages, and she was rude to Sir James sometimes; but he is so kind, he never noticed it.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Cadwallader, putting on her shawl, and rising, as if in haste, ‘I must go straight to Sir James and break this to him. He will have brought his mother back by this time, and I must call. Your uncle will never tell him. We are all disappointed, my dear. Young people should think of their families in marrying. I set a bad example - married a poor clergyman, and made myself a pitiable object among the De Bracys - obliged to get my coals by stratagem, and pray to heaven for my salad oil. However, Casaubon has money enough; I must do him that justice. As to his blood, I suppose the family quarterings are three cuttle-fish sable, and a commentator rampant. By the bye, before I go, my dear, I must speak to your Mrs Carter about pastry. I want to send my young cook to learn of her. Poor people with four children, like us, you know, can't afford to keep a good cook. I have no doubt Mrs Carter will oblige me. Sir James's cook is a perfect dragon.’

In less than an hour, Mrs Cadwallader had circumvented Mrs Carter and driven to Freshitt Hall, which was not far from her own parsonage, her husband being resident in Freshitt and keeping a curate in Tipton.

Sir James Chettam had returned from the short journey which had kept him absent for a couple of days, and had changed his dress, intending to ride over to Tipton Grange. His horse was standing at the door when Mrs Cadwallader drove up, and he immediately appeared there himself, whip in hand. Lady Chettam had not yet returned, but

Mrs Cadwallader's errand could not be despatched in the presence of grooms, so she asked to be taken into the conservatory close by, to look at the new plants; and on coming to a contemplative stand, she said -

'I have a great shock for you; I hope you are not so far gone in love as you pretended to be.'

It was of no use protesting, against Mrs Cadwallader's way of putting things. But Sir James's countenance changed a little. He felt a vague alarm.

'I do believe Brooke is going to expose himself after all. I accused him of meaning to stand for Middlemarch on the Liberal side, and he looked silly and never denied it - talked about the independent line, and the usual nonsense.'

'Is that all?' said Sir James, much relieved.

'Why,' rejoined Mrs Cadwallader, with a sharper note, 'you don't mean to say that you would like him to turn public man in that way - making a sort of political Cheap Jack of himself?'

'He might be dissuaded, I should think. He would not like the expense.'

'That is what I told him. He is vulnerable to reason there - always a few grains of common-sense in an ounce of miserliness. Miserliness is a capital quality to run in families; it's the safe side for madness to dip on. And there must be a little crack in the Brooke family, else we should not see what we are to see.'

'What? Brooke standing for Middlemarch?'

'Worse than that. I really feel a little responsible. I always told you Miss Brooke would be such a fine match. I knew there was a great deal of nonsense in her - a flighty sort of Methodistical stuff. But these things wear out of girls. However, I am taken by surprise for once.'

'What do you mean, Mrs Cadwallader?' said Sir James. His fear lest Miss Brooke should have run away to join the Moravian Brethren, or some preposterous sect unknown to good society, was a little allayed by the knowledge that Mrs Cadwallader always made the worst of things. 'What has happened to Miss Brooke? Pray speak out.'

'Very well. She is engaged to be married.' Mrs Cadwallader paused a few moments, observing the deeply hurt expression in her friend's

face, which he was trying to conceal by a nervous smile, while he whipped his boot; but she soon added, 'Engaged to Casaubon.'

Sir James let his whip fall and stooped to pick it up. Perhaps his face had never before gathered so much concentrated disgust as when he turned to Mrs Cadwallader and repeated, 'Casaubon?'

'Even so. You know my errand now.'

'Good God! It is horrible! He is no better than a mummy!' (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)

'She says, he is a great soul. - A great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!' said Mrs Cadwallader.

'What business has an old bachelor like that to marry?' said Sir James. 'He has one foot in the grave.'

'He means to draw it out again, I suppose.'

'Brooke ought not to allow it: he should insist on its being put off till she is of age. She would think better of it then. What is a guardian for?'

'As if you could ever squeeze a resolution out of Brooke!'

'Cadwallader might talk to him.'

'Not he! Humphrey finds everybody charming. I never can get him to abuse Casaubon. He will even speak well of the bishop, though I tell him it is unnatural in a beneficed clergyman; what can one do with a husband who attends so little to the decencies? I hide it as well as I can by abusing everybody myself. Come, come, cheer up! you are well rid of Miss Brooke, a girl who would have been requiring you to see the stars by daylight. Between ourselves, little Celia is worth two of her, and likely after all to be the better match. For this marriage to Casaubon is as good as going to a nunnery.'

'Oh, on my own account - it is for Miss Brooke's sake I think her friends should try to use their influence.'

'Well, Humphrey doesn't know yet. But when I tell him, you may depend on it he will say, `Why not? Casaubon is a good fellow - and young - young enough.' These charitable people never know vinegar from wine till they have swallowed it and got the colic. However, if I were a man I should prefer Celia, especially when Dorothea was gone. The truth is, you have been courting one and have won the other. I

can see that she admires you almost as much as a man expects to be admired. If it were any one but me who said so, you might think it exaggeration. Good-by!'

Sir James handed Mrs Cadwallader to the phaeton, and then jumped on his horse. He was not going to renounce his ride because of his friend's unpleasant news - only to ride the faster in some other direction than that of Tipton Grange.

Now, why on earth should Mrs Cadwallader have been at all busy about Miss Brooke's marriage; and why, when one match that she liked to think she had a hand in was frustrated, should she have straightway contrived the preliminaries of another? Was there any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch? Not at all: a telescope might have swept the parishes of Tipton and Freshitt, the whole area visited by Mrs Cadwallader in her phaeton, without witnessing any interview that could excite suspicion, or any scene from which she did not return with the same unperturbed keenness of eye and the same high natural color. In fact, if that convenient vehicle had existed in the days of the Seven Sages, one of them would doubtless have remarked, that you can know little of women by following them about in their pony-phaetons. Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. Her life was rurally simple, quite free from secrets either foul, dangerous, or otherwise important, and not consciously affected by the great affairs of the world. All the more did the affairs of the great world interest her, when communicated in the letters of high-born relations: the way in which fascinating younger sons had gone to the dogs by marrying their mistresses; the fine old-blooded idiocy of young Lord Tapir, and the furious gouty humors of old Lord Megatherium; the exact crossing of genealogies which had brought a coronet into a new branch and widened the relations of scandal, - these were topics of which she retained details with the utmost accuracy, and reproduced them in an excellent pickle of epigrams, which she herself enjoyed the more because she believed as unquestionably in birth and no-birth as she did in game and vermin. She would never have disowned any one on the ground of poverty: a De Bracy reduced to take his dinner in a basin would have seemed to her an example of pathos worth exaggerating, and I fear his

aristocratic vices would not have horrified her. But her feeling towards the vulgar rich was a sort of religious hatred: they had probably made all their money out of high retail prices, and Mrs Cadwallader detested high prices for everything that was not paid in kind at the Rectory: such people were no part of God's design in making the world; and their accent was an affliction to the ears. A town where such monsters abounded was hardly more than a sort of low comedy, which could not be taken account of in a well-bred scheme of the universe. Let any lady who is inclined to be hard on Mrs Cadwallader inquire into the comprehensiveness of her own beautiful views, and be quite sure that they afford accommodation for all the lives which have the honor to coexist with hers.

With such a mind, active as phosphorus, biting everything that came near into the form that suited it, how could Mrs Cadwallader feel that the Miss Brookes and their matrimonial prospects were alien to her? especially as it had been the habit of years for her to scold Mr Brooke with the friendliest frankness, and let him know in confidence that she thought him a poor creature. From the first arrival of the young ladies in Tipton she had prearranged Dorothea's marriage with Sir James, and if it had taken place would have been quite sure that it was her doing: that it should not take place after she had preconceived it, caused her an irritation which every thinker will sympathize with. She was the diplomatist of Tipton and Freshitt, and for anything to happen in spite of her was an offensive irregularity. As to freaks like this of Miss Brooke's, Mrs Cadwallader had no patience with them, and now saw that her opinion of this girl had been infected with some of her husband's weak charitableness: those Methodistical whims, that air of being more religious than the rector and curate together, came from a deeper and more constitutional disease than she had been willing to believe.

'However,' said Mrs Cadwallader, first to herself and afterwards to her husband, 'I throw her over: there was a chance, if she had married Sir James, of her becoming a sane, sensible woman. He would never have contradicted her, and when a woman is not contradicted, she has no motive for obstinacy in her absurdities. But now I wish her joy of her hair shirt.'

It followed that Mrs Cadwallader must decide on another match for Sir James, and having made up her mind that it was to be the younger Miss Brooke, there could not have been a more skilful move towards the success of her plan than her hint to the baronet that he had made an impression on Celia's heart. For he was not one of those gentlemen who languish after the unattainable Sappho's apple that laughs from the topmost bough - the charms which

‘Smile like the knot of cowslips on the cliff, Not to be come at by the willing hand.’

He had no sonnets to write, and it could not strike him agreeably that he was not an object of preference to the woman whom he had preferred. Already the knowledge that Dorothea had chosen Mr Casaubon had bruised his attachment and relaxed its hold. Although Sir James was a sportsman, he had some other feelings towards women than towards grouse and foxes, and did not regard his future wife in the light of prey, valuable chiefly for the excitements of the chase. Neither was he so well acquainted with the habits of primitive races as to feel that an ideal combat for her, tomahawk in hand, so to speak, was necessary to the historical continuity of the marriage-tie. On the contrary, having the amiable vanity which knits us to those who are fond of us, and disinclines us to those who are indifferent, and also a good grateful nature, the mere idea that a woman had a kindness towards him spun little threads of tenderness from out his heart towards hers.

Thus it happened, that after Sir James had ridden rather fast for half an hour in a direction away from Tipton Grange, he slackened his pace, and at last turned into a road which would lead him back by a shorter cut. Various feelings wrought in him the determination after all to go to the Grange to-day as if nothing new had happened. He could not help rejoicing that he had never made the offer and been rejected; mere friendly politeness required that he should call to see Dorothea about the cottages, and now happily Mrs Cadwallader had prepared him to offer his congratulations, if necessary, without showing too much awkwardness. He really did not like it: giving up Dorothea was very painful to him; but there was something in the resolve to make this visit forthwith and conquer all show of feeling, which was a sort of file-biting and counter-irritant. And without his distinctly recognizing the impulse, there certainly was present in him the sense that Celia would be there, and that he should pay her more attention than he had done before.

We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner-time; keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries say, ‘Oh, nothing!’ Pride helps us; and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts - not to hurt others.