8th November 2025

Wit

"For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth
Action, utterance, nor power of speech,
To stir men's blood."

William Shakespeare, *Julius Ceasar*

A Maths teacher arrives at his class, and there's a chair suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room. "Right, class," he begins. "Here is your assignment for today. First … without recourse to instruments, with no discussion or moving from your desks, estimate the distance between the lowest point of that chair and the floor – to the nearest centimetre. 6 marks." He pauses for effect. "Second … given that the chair is hanging at an angle, and again without using instruments and with no discussion, estimate the angle of the chair from the vertical. 10 marks." He waits for a moment before continuing. "And third … and most importantly, ladies and gentlemen, write at the bottom of your worksheets the person, or persons, who had the audacity to hang that chair from the ceiling … and why. 86 marks. You have fifteen minutes for your assignment. Please begin."

I've not been informed how successful that teacher was in sussing out who was responsible for the devious ploy, if any of the class actually grassed on their mates, or whether anyone confessed to their own misbehaviour. But I have to say, I liked his style …

For me, in the other hand, it's usually a case of thinking of a clever thing to say *after* it's all over. I'm a master of the zippy response, clever one-liner, sharpness of wit *after* I'm sitting in my car, or going home, or at my desk. Oh to think quickly and be as sharp as a tack when it's needed …

But there's a counter argument. There's an old proverb which runs, "Hasty climbers have sudden falls." I would put it this way: "Hasty words can cause sudden – and lasting – hurt." The slick repartee can easily become a nasty judgement. The quick-witted comment can come over as a cruel dismissal. The clever one-liner can sound harsh and snide. And, far from your speed of thought and clever use of language being admired and remembered, you might be labelled as downright horrible.

While the right word spoken at the right time can be recalled with delight, the wrong word spoken at the wrong time can cause untold damage, maybe even a nasty fall – just like a hasty climber.

A prayer for today

The right word offered at the right time? Please, keep me on the right track!

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