J. M. Barrie

The Admirable Crichton

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ACT I. AT LOAM HOUSE, MAYFAIR

A moment before the curtain rises, the Hon. Ernest Woolley drives up to the door of Loam House in Mayfair. There is a happy smile on his pleasant, insignificant face, and this presumably means that he is thinking of himself. He is too busy over nothing, this man about town, to be always thinking of himself, but, on the other hand, he almost never thinks of any other person. Probably Ernest's great moment is when he wakes of a morning and realises that he really is Ernest, for we must all wish to be that which is our ideal. We can conceive him springing out of bed light-heartedly and waiting for his man to do the rest. He is dressed in excellent taste, with just the little bit more which shows that he is not without a sense of humour: the dandiacal are often saved by carrying a smile at the whole thing in their spats, let us say. Ernest left Cambridge the other day, a member of The Athenaeum (which he would be sorry to have you confound with a club in London of the same name). He is a bachelor, but not of arts, no mean epigrammatist (as you shall see), and a favourite of the ladies. He is almost a celebrity in restaurants, where he dines frequently, returning to sup; and during this last year he has probably paid as much in them for the privilege of handing his hat to an attendant as the rent of a working-man's flat. He complains brightly that he is hard up, and that if somebody or other at Westminster does not look out the country will go to the dogs. He is no fool. He has the shrewdness to float with the current because it is a labour-saving process, but he has sufficient pluck to fight, if fight he must (a brief contest, for he would soon be toppled over). He has a light nature, which would enable him to bob up cheerily in new conditions and return unaltered to the old ones. His selfishness is his most endearing quality. If he has his way he will spend his life like a cat in pushing his betters out of the soft places, and until he is old he will be fondled in the process.

He gives his hat to one footman and his cane to another, and mounts the great staircase unassisted and undirected. As a nephew of the house he need show no credentials even to Crichton, who is guarding a door above.

It would not be good taste to describe Crichton, who is only a servant; if to the scandal of all good houses he is to stand out as a figure in the play, he must do it on his own, as they say in the pantry and the boudoir.

We are not going to help him. We have had misgivings ever since we found his name in the title, and we shall keep him out of his rights as long as we can. Even though we softened to him he would not be a hero in these clothes of servitude; and he loves his clothes. How to get him out of them? It would require a cataclysm. To be an indoor servant at all is to Crichton a badge of honour; to be a butler at thirty is the realisation of his proudest ambitions. He is devotedly attached to his master, who, in his opinion, has but one fault, he is not sufficiently contemptuous of his inferiors. We are immediately to be introduced to this solitary failing of a great English peer.

This perfect butler, then, opens a door, and ushers Ernest into a certain room. At the same moment the curtain rises on this room, and the play begins.

It is one of several reception-rooms in Loam House, not the most magnificent but quite the softest; and of a warm afternoon all that those who are anybody crave for is the softest. The larger rooms are magnificent and bare, carpetless, so that it is an accomplishment to keep one's feet on them; they are sometimes lent for charitable purposes; they are also all in use on the night of a dinner-party, when you may find yourself alone in one, having taken a wrong turning; or alone, save for two others who are within hailing distance.

This room, however, is comparatively small and very soft. There are so many cushions in it that you wonder why, if you are an outsider and don't know that, it needs six cushions to make one fair head comfy. The couches themselves are cushions as large as beds, and there is an art of sinking into them and of waiting to be helped out of them. There are several famous paintings on the walls, of which you may say 'Jolly thing that,' without losing caste as knowing too much; and in cases there are glorious miniatures, but the daughters of the house cannot tell you of whom; 'there is a catalogue somewhere.' There are a thousand or so of roses in basins, several library novels, and a row of weekly illustrated newspapers lying against each other like fallen soldiers. If any one disturbs this row Crichton seems to know of it from afar and appears noiselessly and replaces the wanderer. One thing unexpected in such a room is a great array of tea things. Ernest spots them with a twinkle, and has his epigram at once unsheathed. He dallies, however, before delivering the thrust.

ERNEST. I perceive, from the tea cups, Crichton, that the great function is to take place here.

CRICHTON (with a respectful sigh). Yes, sir.

ERNEST (chuckling heartlessly). The servants' hall coming up to have tea in the drawing-room! (With terrible sarcasm.) No wonder you look happy, Crichton.

CRICHTON (under the knife). No, sir.

ERNEST. Do you know, Crichton, I think that with an effort you might look even happier. (CRICHTON smiles wanly.) You don't approve of his lordship's compelling his servants to be his equals—once a month?

CRICHTON. It is not for me, sir, to disapprove of his lordship's radical views.

ERNEST. Certainly not. And, after all, it is only once a month that he is affable to you.

CRICHTON. On all other days of the month, sir, his lordship's treatment of us is everything that could be desired.

ERNEST. (This is the epigram.) Tea cups! Life, Crichton, is like a cup of tea; the more heartily we drink, the sooner we reach the dregs.

CRICHTON (obediently). Thank you, sir.

ERNEST (becoming confidential, as we do when we have need of an ally). Crichton, in case I should be asked to say a few words to the servants, I have strung together a little speech. (His hand strays to his pocket.) I was wondering where I should stand.

(He tries various places and postures, and comes to rest leaning over a high chair, whence, in dumb show, he addresses a gathering. CRICHTON, with the best intentions, gives him a footstool to stand on, and departs, happily unconscious that ERNEST in some dudgeon has kicked the footstool across the room.)

ERNEST (addressing an imaginary audience, and desirous of startling them at once). Suppose you were all little fishes at the bottom of the sea—

(He is not quite satisfied with his position, though sure that the fault must lie with the chair for being too high, not with him for being too short. CRICHTON'S suggestion was not perhaps a bad one after all. He lifts the stool, but hastily conceals it behind him on the entrance of the LADIES CATHERINE and AGATHA, two daughters of the house. CATHERINE is twenty, and AGATHA two years younger. They are very fashionable young women indeed, who might wake up for a dance, but they are very lazy, CATHERINE being two years lazier than AGATHA.)

ERNEST (uneasily jocular, because he is concealing the footstool). And how are my little friends to-day?

AGATHA (contriving to reach a settee). Don't be silly, Ernest. If you want to know how we are, we are dead. Even to think of entertaining the servants is so exhausting.

CATHERINE (subsiding nearer the door). Besides which, we have had to decide what frocks to take with us on the yacht, and that is such a mental strain.

ERNEST. You poor over-worked things. (Evidently AGATHA is his favourite, for he helps her to put her feet on the settee, while CATHERINE has to dispose of her own feet.) Rest your weary limbs.

CATHERINE (perhaps in revenge). But why have you a footstool in your hand?

AGATHA. Yes?

ERNEST. Why? (Brilliantly; but to be sure he has had time to think it out.) You see, as the servants are to be the guests I must be butler. I was practising. This is a tray, observe.

(Holding the footstool as a tray, he minces across the room like an accomplished footman. The gods favour him, for just here LADY MARY enters, and he holds out the footstool to her.)

Tea, my lady?

(LADY MARY is a beautiful creature of twenty-two, and is of a natural hauteur which is at once the fury and the envy of her sisters. If she chooses she can make you seem so insignificant that you feel you might be swept away with the crumb-brush. She seldom chooses, because of the trouble of preening herself as she does it; she is usually content to show that you merely tire her eyes. She often seems to be about to go to sleep in the middle of a remark: there is quite a long and anxious pause, and then she continues, like a clock that hesitates, bored in the middle of its strike.)

LADY MARY (arching her brows). It is only you, Ernest; I thought there was some one here (and she also bestows herself on cushions).

ERNEST (a little piqued, and deserting the footstool). Had a very tiring day also, Mary?

LADY MARY (yawning). Dreadfully. Been trying on engagement-rings all the morning.

ERNEST (who is as fond of gossip as the oldest club member). What's that? (To AGATHA.) Is it Brocklehurst?

(The energetic AGATHA nods.)

You have given your warm young heart to Brocky?

(LADY MARY is impervious to his humour, but he continues bravely.)

I don't wish to fatigue you, Mary, by insisting on a verbal answer, but if, without straining yourself, you can signify Yes or No, won't you make the effort?

(She indolently flashes a ring on her most important finger, and he starts back melodramatically.)

The ring! Then I am too late, too late! (Fixing LADY MARY sternly, like a prosecuting counsel.) May I ask, Mary, does Brocky know? Of course, it was that terrible mother of his who pulled this through. Mother does everything for Brocky. Still, in the eyes of the law you will be, not her wife, but his, and, therefore, I hold that Brocky ought to be informed. Now—

(He discovers that their languorous eyes have closed.)

If you girls are shamming sleep in the expectation that I shall awaken you in the manner beloved of ladies, abandon all such hopes.

(CATHERINE and AGATHA look up without speaking.)

LADY MARY (speaking without looking up). You impertinent boy.

ERNEST (eagerly plucking another epigram from his quiver). I knew that was it, though I don't know everything. Agatha, I'm not young enough to know everything.

(He looks hopefully from one to another, but though they try to grasp this, his brilliance baffles them.)

AGATHA (his secret admirer). Young enough?

ERNEST (encouragingly). Don't you see? I'm not young enough to know everything.

AGATHA. I'm sure it's awfully clever, but it's so puzzling.

(Here CRICHTON ushers in an athletic, pleasant-faced young clergyman, MR. TREHERNE, who greets the company.)

CATHERINE. Ernest, say it to Mr. Treherne.

ERNEST. Look here, Treherne, I'm not young enough to know everything.

TREHERNE. How do you mean, Ernest?

ERNEST. (a little nettled). I mean what I say.

LADY MARY. Say it again; say it more slowly.

ERNEST. I'm—not—young—enough—to—know—everything.

TREHERNE. I see. What you really mean, my boy, is that you are not old enough to know everything.

ERNEST. No, I don't.

TREHERNE. I assure you that's it.

LADY MARY. Of course it is.

CATHERINE. Yes, Ernest, that's it.

(ERNEST, in desperation, appeals to CRICHTON.)

ERNEST. I am not young enough, Crichton, to know everything.

(It is an anxious moment, but a smile is at length extorted from CRICHTON as with a corkscrew.)

CRICHTON. Thank you, sir. (He goes.)

ERNEST (relieved). Ah, if you had that fellow's head, Treherne, you would find something better to do with it than play cricket. I hear you bowl with your head.

TREHERNE (with proper humility). I'm afraid cricket is all I'm good for, Ernest.

CATHERINE (who thinks he has a heavenly nose). Indeed, it isn't. You are sure to get on, Mr. Treherne.

TREHERNE. Thank you, Lady Catherine.

CATHERINE. But it was the bishop who told me so. He said a clergyman who breaks both ways is sure to get on in England.

TREHERNE. I'm jolly glad.

(The master of the house comes in, accompanied by LORD BROCKLEHURST. The EARL OF LOAM is a widower, a philanthropist, and a peer of advanced ideas. As a widower he is at least able to interfere in the domestic concerns of his house—to rummage in the drawers, so to speak, for which he has felt an itching all his blameless life; his philanthropy has opened quite a number of other drawers to him; and his advanced ideas have blown out his figure. He takes in all the weightiest monthly reviews, and prefers those that are uncut, because he perhaps never looks better than when cutting them; but he does not read them, and save for the cutting it would suit him as well merely to take in the covers. He writes letters to the papers, which are printed in a type to scale with himself, and he is very jealous of those other correspondents who get his type. Let laws and learning, art and commerce die, but leave the big type to an intellectual aristocracy. He is really the reformed House of Lords which will come some day.

Young LORD BROCKLEHURST is nothing save for his rank. You could pick him up by the handful any day in Piccadilly or Holborn, buying socks—or selling them.)

LORD LOAM (expansively). You are here, Ernest. Feeling fit for the voyage, Treherne?

TREHERNE. Looking forward to it enormously.

LORD LOAM. That's right. (He chases his children about as if they were chickens.) Now then, Mary, up and doing, up and doing. Time we had the servants in. They enjoy it so much.

LADY MARY. They hate it.

LORD LOAM. Mary, to your duties. (And he points severely to the tea-table.)

ERNEST (twinkling). Congratulations, Brocky.

LORD BROCKLEHURST (who detests humour). Thanks.

ERNEST. Mother pleased?

LORD BROCKLEHURST (with dignity). Mother is very pleased.

ERNEST. That's good. Do you go on the yacht with us?

LORD BROCKLEHURST. Sorry I can't. And look here, Ernest, I will not be called Brocky.

ERNEST. Mother don't like it?