

The Admirable Crichton

Performed at Duke of York's Theatre, London.
A comedy by J.M. Barrie.
Opened 4th November, 1902 - ran for 828 performances.
Starring: Irene Vanbrugh.

Editorial and Photos as published in 'The Play Pictorial' No. XI (1903).
Except as indicated

THE CAST

Dramatis Personae

Lady Mary - Irene Vanbrugh
Crichton - H.B. Irving
Lord Loam - Henry Kemble
Lady Catherine - Sybil Carlisle
Lady Agatha - Muriel Beaumont
Ernest Woolley - Gerald du Maurier
Tweeny - Pattie Brown

Scene - Shipwrecked on an uninhabited island.

REVIEW



THE form of a society is decided by the most natural of all processes, and though the conditions which prevail at one time or another may vary the positions of one class or another, one will always be dominant and another subservient to it. In some societies birth and riches, in others merit and intellect, will prevail. But whether it be in the drawing room or the kitchen, in the factory or the coal mine, on a densely populated continent or a sparsely populated island, aristocracy in some form will assert itself. This is Crichton's axiom, as he expresses it to Lady Mary Lasenby.

The Right Hon. the Earl of Loam thinks differently. Between himself and the humblest of his domestics there is--according to the laws of Nature--no social difference at all. True, they shall continue to dwell in the kitchen and scullery, but in proof of his principles they shall attend a drawing-room reception, be welcomed as equals, so far as a

cordial handshake can convey equality, and be treated to an oration in which all these matters are eloquently settled.

Such an upheaval of the natural relations between master and man can only appear shocking to Crichton, who finds his authority as butler threatened in the adoption by the lesser servants of these heretical views. "It pains me, your ladyship," he says. "It disturbs the etiquette of the servants' hall. After last month's meeting, my lady, the page boy, in a burst of equality, called me Crichton. He was dismissed."

But Crichton is not the only one to challenge his master's principles. It is related that when some of the slaves in the Southern States received their freedom, others who were still in bondage met those enjoying the sweets of liberty with the taunt, "Hi! you nigger, you got no massa!" and many returned voluntarily to slavery rather than endure the reproach. Lord Loam's servants are moved, if not by the same, by similar compunctions; for in his zeal for thoroughness, his lordship has determined that, on their yachting trip, his daughters shall have but one maid between them. The indignation of all three maids ends in prompt notice, and Lord Loam's valet gives notice at the same time. The first difficulty has to be overcome by an appeal to Crichton, the enemy of the new system. For it is impossible that Lady Mary and her three sisters should travel without a maid. It is equally impossible that his lordship should travel without a valet. It appears to Crichton just as impossible that he, the confidential butler, the son of a butler and a lady's maid, should descend to perform the functions of a mere valet. But Lady Mary carries the point, by warning Crichton of what might happen to his master if, holding views subversive of all civilized usage, he travel without the care and attention of so watchful a person as himself.

This argument carries weight, and Crichton, not without an inward struggle, offers himself as valet, thus relieving his noble employer from the embarrassment following too literal an interpretation of his views. Lady Mary and her sisters are induced--on the recommendation of Crichton--to engage the services of "Tweeny" (the between maid) in place of the revolted ladies' maids.

How this arrangement worked we are left to conjecture, for when next we meet those most concerned with it, they are castaways on an uninhabited island, helpless, but for Crichton's indefatigable efforts. While the girls loudly bemoan their position, and Ernest, Lord Loam's nephew, continues a career of epigram and general uselessness, Crichton turns every piece of the wreck to some advantage--building a hut with sticks hastily collected, and clearing the high grass and undergrowth.

Here, then, is a position in which the rival theories are to be tested. There is no likelihood of a passing ship approaching the island, for the yacht has drifted miles out of its course before running ashore. The whole party are thrown upon their joint resources. For the moment the old social relations are maintained. Lord Loam dictates, Ernest "thinks," and Crichton works. But some new influence is at work too--or the old influence differently distributed. It expresses itself for the first time in a chance word of Crichton's.

"No work, no dinner will make a deal of difference in Mr. Ernest," says Crichton. Lady Mary, to whom he addresses this, is bewildered. "When did you invent that?" she asks. "You are not suggesting anything so unnatural as that if I and my sisters don't work there will no dinner for us?" The explanation is prompt enough. This startling paradox is as old as the world; it is written up, says Crichton, on all the trees, and will inevitably assert itself in all the relations of the new life, together with many other principles of the same tendency. As a beginning Ernest's epigrams receive sudden and swift retribution. They are out of place on an island, where all must work for the common good, and Crichton proceeds on the first offence to immerse the head of the inveterate epigrammatist in a bucket of cold water. Lady Mary sees in this action an attempt on the part of Crichton to usurp Lord Loam's position as natural head of the party, and demands from him a recognition of his master's superiority. But Crichton will not commit himself further than by an assurance that nature will settle the point.

With this equivocation neither Lady Mary nor Lord Loam is satisfied, and since on a desert island a month's notice to a recalcitrant servant does not appear to be very effective, the Earl, his daughters, Ernest, and young Treherne leave Crichton in the solitary enjoyment of the property he had collected, the fire which he had lighted, and the food, now nearly cooked, which he had obtained and dressed. But Crichton has a powerful ally. The whole party is hungry. There are onions in the

boiling pot, the wind carries their fragrance to his indignant but starving companions, and one by one they creep to the fire and to the food, and lingering behind all the others, but still approaching, comes Lady Mary Lasenby.

On an island, as elsewhere, much may happen in two years. The ominous warning of the first few days is not without justification. Crichton's superior capabilities had provided the party with the necessaries of life in the very earliest stages of their distress. By his superiority and forethought shelter is also hastily devised, and the obsequious servant is rapidly merged in the competent leader.

The circumstances of birth and position, which gave his former master authority over him, are now borne down by surroundings which base superiority on other and more fruitful qualities. The man who can hold the House of Lords with his eloquence, who can demand and obtain the obedience of political parties, is unable to contend with the problems that beset men thrown upon their own resources. He had very early betrayed his failure to grasp the necessities of the situation. "What use," he says, "of one hairpin among so many?" and throws the precious article away. But Crichton sees the importance of even so simple an implement on an island. With that hairpin they could have made a needle, and with that needle trousers, of which they all stand sadly in need, and in that first reproach from his servant the fate of Lord Loam is sealed.

Ernest's first ducking was an equally effective intimation as to the claim altered circumstance made upon his energies, and Treherne very sensibly recognizes Crichton's superior powers and submits to them. Thus, in two years, the master-mind had with little difficulty become dominant.

Crichton is a power in his little kingdom by virtue of his greater capabilities. He has organized the party into a self-supporting little colony. He has turned the natural resources of the island to the best account, and the human items with whom he has to deal, have each been allotted their several tasks, and work for the common weal. Lady Mary, now homely "Polly" has become an accomplished huntress, using bow and arrow devised by Crichton. Her sisters obtain fish from the rivers with rods and hooks made by Crichton; Lord Loam, now "Daddy," enlivens the community by his light spirits and cleans out the dam built by Crichton. Ernest has cheerfully dropped epigram for more menial occupations. Tweeny presides in the kitchen, and is much regarded by the men for her light pastry, and by the women as the happy possessor of the only skirt on the island. Treherne is useful in many ways, but there appears to be a possibility that his services as the only priest may also be claimed. For the Guv. is in love, and Polly has accepted his suit, to the great chagrin of all the other girls, who look with envy upon her approaching elevation.

But in the midst of it all, even as the betrothal is being celebrated with dance and music, a ship approaches the island. It is no sooner seen than it begins to recede, notwithstanding the frantic signals and shouts of the party on the shore. With Crichton the whole matter now rests. He has but to pull a lever and beacons on the heights, arranged by him for such a juncture, will blaze out their fiery message to the receding vessel. Realizing all that his action means to him, with "Polly" urging him to desist, he clutches the handle, and for a moment hesitates--but only for a moment. "Bill Crichton's got to play the game," he says, and pulls the lever. The boat, recalled by the signal, returns, and the little colony is rescued. Once more "Daddy" is Lord Loam, "Polly" is Lady Mary Lasenby, and the "Guv." Crichton, admirable if you will, but the earl's butler.

Once back in England the old relations reassert themselves, but Crichton, restless under their restraint, leaves the service of his master, marries Tweeny, and settles in a crich-house.

NOTE.--We regret that the account since published by Mr. Woolley does not agree with the story told here, but we do not see our way to make any alteration.--ED., PLAY PICTORIAL.

NB: This last was by way of a joke, since the play ends with Ernest Woolley publishing a book

recounting the adventures on the island, but casting himself as the hero --ED., Stagebeauty.Net

ALTERNATE REVIEW

(from *DRAMA AND LIFE* by A. B. WALKLEY - METHUEN & CO., 36 ESSEX STREET W.C, LONDON, 1907)

J. M. BARRIE - THE ADMIRABLE CRICHTON (DUKE OF YORK'S, November 1902)

It has been whispered here and there that the root-idea of *The Admirable Crichton* is to be traced to a German play, *Robinsons Eiland*, by Ludwig Fulda. I mention the rumour, but feel quite indifferent as to its accuracy of fact. The root-idea of Mr. Barrie's "Fantasy in Four Acts" is really common property, an idea as old as the hills. But *difficile est proprie communia dicere* and the point is what exactly an author makes of a common idea whether he can appropriate it to himself by giving it an individual turn, the turn peculiar to his genius. Now on this point there cannot be the slightest doubt in the case of *The Admirable Crichton*. It is signed "Barrie" over and over again; hold it up to the light and you see "Barrie" in the watermark. And therefore it seems absurd to be reminded by it of some *Conte Philosophique* of Voltaire, because no one will accuse Mr. Barrie of being a Voltairean. But if we are to seek a literary analogy I would assuredly rather find it in eighteenth-century Gallic wit and philosophy than in the Teutonisms of Herr Fulda.

In form a brilliant extravaganza, in substance a piece of hard logic, of close-packed thought, this play of Mr. Barrie's is in reality something which Voltaire could never have succeeded in writing had he tried till he was black in the face. Let me take another glance at the eighteenth-century philosophers, and say the theme of this play comes straight from Rousseau. It deals with Rousseau's perpetual subject, "the return to nature." But it deals with that subject in a whimsical, pathetic, ironic, serious way which would have driven Rousseau crazy.

Perhaps it takes a little too long in the telling. Perhaps the actors are a little slow. But when all discount has been allowed, the play is to my thinking as delightful a play as the English stage has produced in our generation; always fresh and exhilarating, yet always giving *furieusement dispenser*.

The "return to nature." That is the theme, and in Act I. we find the Earl of Loam expounding it. His lordship believes in equality once a month and once a month invites his servants into the drawing-room, where, much to their discomfort, they are treated as honoured guests. In vain his lordship's daughters pout and protest; if any one of them is not properly polite, threatens the Earl, she shall be condemned to recite. Mr. Crichton, his lordship's butler, does not protest he is too perfect a butler for that but he does venture to hint that treating the servants as equals is not really a "return to nature." In London, he says, it is "natural" for earls to be earls and for servants to be servants. The butler alone, then, maintains the calm of philosophic resignation, while the domestics of the household strike attitudes of ludicrous discomposure.

This scene of the servants in the drawing-room is a little masterpiece in the presentation of *Low Life above Stairs*. Dominating the scene is the austere figure of the butler, knowing his place, remembering, not without pride, that he is the son of a butler and a lady's-maid, perhaps the happiest of all combinations."

Act II. shows us what the "return to nature" really is. The Earl and his family, yachting in the South Seas, have been wrecked on a desert island; and, as by a turn of the kaleidoscope, all the relative positions of the parties are changed. Crichton proves to be a born "handy man," full of invention, able to fashion needles out of hairpins, and to light fires by catching the sun's rays on a watch-glass. He also proves born to command. The rest of the party struggle feebly against his authority, but in

vain. They even give him "notice," and retire to another part of the island. But he presides over the cooking-pot, and he knows that hunger will bring them back.

The scene wherein they crawl humbly and silently back and gather in the darkness round the cooking-pot, over which Crichton is thoughtfully smoking his philosophic pipe, is the "return to nature" in dumb show. And the point is that Crichton has assumed his ascendancy not by willing it, not by domineering, but by sheer force of circumstance. He is the one strong man on the spot; the rest follows by a "natural" law. Nothing could be more droll and nothing more deeply suggestive than the impotence of the weaklings to assert themselves on the old social basis. "Nature" on an island establishes a different social hierarchy from that which is settled by "nature" in Mayfair. Crichton does nothing of set policy to further the change; he is indeed quite sorry for it; he simply cannot help it.

Two years have passed before the curtain rises on Act III., and in that interval an extraordinary transformation has been effected. Crichton, beginning as the pioneer and founder, has become the veritable king of the little community. The Earl has cheerfully descended to menial offices. His daughters wait humbly upon King Crichton (and find they have insensibly acquired the trick of "washing their hands with invisible soap" which he had when a butler). The Earl's nephew has been trained to useful work by getting a ducking in a bucket whenever he lapses into one of his old Mayfair epigrams. The greatest change is in the character of Crichton himself. He suffers from megalomania, he condescends to the Earl's daughter, as King Cophetua to the beggar maiden. Everyone trembles at his slightest word.

But hark! What was that? A gun! A ship has by accident touched at the island, and a British naval party lands to carry the little community back to civilisation. Farewell, a long farewell to all Crichton's greatness! He could, at one moment, have allowed the ship's boat to return from the island without the discovery that it was inhabited. But he is too much of a man to suffer that; he will "play the game." And, as the rescue party enters, and the menials are once more addressed as lords and ladies and the nephew begins to think once more of his Mayfair epigrams, Crichton once more falls into his old respectful butler attitude.

In the last act they are all at home again. The nephew has brought out a book about their adventure, in which he figures as the hero, though he pays Crichton "a kindly tribute in a footnote." All the efforts of the family are now directed to hushing up the truth about what happened on the island. An old busybody, Lady Brocklehurst, is within an ace of discovering the facts, but Crichton holds his tongue, and settles down with the serving-wench who has been faithful to him all along in a little public-house in the Harrow Road, "at the more fashionable end."

I have spoken of the play as a fantasia on the theme of the "return to nature." Sir Leslie Stephen once said that he never saw the word "nature" without instinctively putting himself on his guard against some bit of slipshod criticism or sham philosophy, and that he heartily wished the word could be turned out of the language. This is all very well; but what would become of drama? Ever since the days of Thespis and his cart the drama has busied itself with the question, What is nature? and that, of course, in no mere dispassionate spirit of inquiry, but with the practical object of exalting nature, when "located" in any given set of circumstances, as the true guide of conduct. The conflict of forces which is at the root of all drama has been, nearly always, a conflict of nature on the one side against the various restraints moral, social, political, religious, or merely formal which the human race has imposed upon nature. And just here, one may say parenthetically, is to be found the real explanation of the antagonism displayed through all the Christian ages by all the Churches, by the Puritan spirit, by the Nonconformist conscience, by all the ascetic sects, to the theatre; because it is the mission of the theatre, willy-nilly, to exalt and glorify nature, while for all these other institutions nature is something to be checked and chastened and trampled under foot.

The simple creed of Crichton in Mr. Barrie's play, "Whatever is natural is right," has always been the creed of the drama. Terence preached it as well as Moliere; it is the common ground of authors otherwise so dissimilar as Sheridan and Dumas *filis*, as (with a more searching analysis of "nature") Henrik Ibsen and Henri Becque. Indeed, it is the great element of continuity in dramatic literature, this thesis that nature will have her way, that though you expel her with a fork she will yet recur. Take this simple application of the thesis - that brides resist all schemes of education elaborated for them by elderly men and fly naturally into the arms of the first young gallant who comes in at the window. That is the story of *L'Ecole des Femmes*; it is also the story of Mrs. Ryley's *Mice and Men*. Nature will not be denied is the implied thesis of the *Adelphi*; it is also, however differently worked out, the implied thesis of Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Eleanor*. All Mr. Gilbert's work in its various forms may be said to be a plea for nature - with a homely, rather prosaic, view of nature. So also may the work of M. Alfred Capus - who takes nature more easily, with a Rabelaisian liberality. No modern dramatist has been more anxiously concerned with nature than Mr. Bernard Shaw; we may not agree with him as to what shall be called "natural" - indeed, it is his deliberate purpose to upset the current views about that - but when once he has settled upon the "natural" he bids us follow it. He, like all his predecessors, holds Crichton's creed, Whatever is natural is right.

Virtually all the dramatists, then, have treated this "nature" theme in their several ways - as Hotgospellers (Dumas *filis*), or as "the plain man" (Moliere), or satirically (Gilbert), or with irony (moral, Shaw; unmoral Becque; immoral, Capus). It has been reserved for Mr. Barrie to work out the theme in several moods at once; he is at once ironic, playfully satirical - as "detached" as you please - and yet very much in earnest, contemplating all forms of creed, and yet making it quite plain that he holds firmly to one.

The simplicity and straightforwardness of *The Admirable Crichton* as a play must not blind us to the subtlety and complexity of the ideas underlying it. And, first, there is the question, What is nature? Equality, answers Lord Loam; all men are by nature equal. To be sure, his lordship's notions of equality are a little odd. He confutes in the very act of explaining himself. "I'll soon show you if I am not your equal," he says testily to his butler Crichton; "hold your tongue." Also his equality is subject, like comets, to the law of periodicity; all men are equal - once a month, when the servants take tea in the drawing-room. Crichton, on the other hand, declares for inequality as the law of nature. There will always be a social hierarchy, always the regime of master and servant. And the system extends further than his lordship suspects. Even were equality established in the drawing-room, it would never obtain in the servants' hall.

"Little fleas have lesser fleas." A butler never "walks out" with a servant-girl, is never engaged; he may "cast a favourable eye." Between cook at one end of the kitchen table and John and Thomas at the other is the "tweeny" to pass the dishes. All are but parts of one stupendous whole, and the system is to Crichton not merely inevitable, but aesthetically gratifying and best for everyone. "To me," he cries, "the most beautiful thing in the world is a haughty aristocratic English house with everyone kept in his place. Though I were equal to you, what would be the pleasure to me? It would be counter-balanced by the pain of feeling that John and Thomas were equal to me."

At bottom Crichton's conception of nature is the evolutionist's: the perfect adaptation of organism to environment; and at once there arises the further question, What happens with a change of environment - say, from Mayfair to a South Sea Island? To answer that question in action is the main object of the play which, be it observed, would be a good play merely from the superficial drollery of its action, the humours of drawing-room and kitchen in Mayfair and the humours of castaways on a desert island, but which is a thousand times better play because underneath the drolleries at the surface is a logical nexus of ideas.

What happens with the changed environment is an inversion of the old hierarchy; servants (being

inured to practical work) become masters, and masters (being useless outside civilisation) become servants. And, mark, it is by no conscious volition that the change comes about, but by a natural law, "something not ourselves which makes for" the new inequality. Lord Loam sinks "naturally" to the bottom, just as Crichton rises "naturally" to the top. All the conscious effort there is is devoted by all concerned to the maintenance of the old order; but in vain. When Crichton lays down the rule "no work, no dinner," he did not invent it, he "seemed to see it growing on the island." And when the aristocrats, after giving Crichton "notice," humbly creep back to him, he has not summoned them; it is their hunger drawing them to the cooking-pot.

I have already described this scene of the return of the party to the cooking-pot as giving the gist of the play in dumb show. It is precisely this faculty of inventing such silent yet all-expressive actions which is the test faculty of the dramatist. After the "curtain" of *The Admirable Crichton* Act II., no one can again question Mr. Barrie's instinct for drama. But Act III. is *the* act. It is not too much to say that it has a real philosophical significance. For it shows not only how well a new environment, a new hierarchy, gets established, but how the features common to all hierarchies come "naturally" into being a sort of kinship, the discipline of fear, a servile class, the curious effects of what we call "prestige." Power becomes so "natural" to Crichton that we even see the first germ of a "divine right" theory working in him. And not only have the others abandoned all idea of resistance; they are *battus et contents*, like George Dandin in very different circumstances. Lord Loam is content to pluck Crichton's poultry. Lady Mary is content to be Crichton's parlourmaid. And, more, we are shown how the dyer's hand is subdued to what it works in; how the new servants not only perform the duties, but acquire the very tricks of the old. The Earl finds himself repeating Crichton's old catchword, "Thank you, Sir," and Lady Mary, when waiting at table, mechanically rubs her hands as Crichton used to do. Thus we see that not only will there always, as Crichton declared in Act I., be masters and servants, but the two classes will always "naturally" behave "as such," and in each will come out the "natural" stigmata of their employment.

Further, it is in this remarkable third act - almost disquieting by the reach of its intellectual suggestion - that Mr. Barrie, hitherto so detached, so playfully ironic, lets his own sincere conviction peep out. His conviction is that though all lives are "natural," when appropriate to their circumstances, the best "nature" is that of the wild island life. Under the influence of open air, hard exercise, and strict discipline "no work, no dinner" all the castaways are for the first time in their lives thoroughly happy.

You are reminded of Thoreau at Walden Pond or of Tusiata in Samoa. It is the old Abernethian recipe for happiness: live on sixpence a day and earn it. And the lesson is pointed by the obvious falling-off in happiness when they all return in the last act to Mayfair, where the Earl is worried by his collars and Lady Mary has painfully to check herself from running up three stairs at a time. What a dismal contrast to their enjoyment when they were "barbarians all at play"!

Indeed, the conclusion of the piece is the only portion of it which leaves a somewhat bitter flavour in the mouth. The aristocrats, who began by being merely fools, are driven in the end into being consummate liars. And they lie not only for self-preservation, but wantonly publishing a book ascribing all Crichton's heroic acts to themselves, and barely mentioning "the servants" in a footnote. The most cruel thing is the dwindling of Crichton to his original proportions; and, what is more serious, it is an incredible thing. Dramatically, I admit, it must so befall; Mr. Barrie's scheme involves symmetry and contrast, the return of all concerned to their precise starting-point after the fashion of those "biographs" at the music-halls which show the successive stages of a pillow-fight and then show those stages reversed. But while it was "natural" for Crichton to develop into the hero, or "overman" of Acts II. and III., it was not "natural" for him to shrink back into his old self.

For "nature" - if I may hazard something about her on my own account - never forgets. As the island

life turned a butler into a ruler, says Mr. Barrie, so civilisation turned the ruler back into a butler. That is rather too savage an indictment of civilisation. However, there is the play, brimful of ideas, and, quite apart from your delight in the sheer amusement of the thing, you welcome it with gratitude for its ideas. For what the English stage most sorely needs at this time of the day is ideas; and the advent of a dramatist who like Mr. Barrie can play with ideas, can (as Dr. Johnson said, "the dogs," his opponents, could not) "write trifles with dignity," is a rare piece of luck.



The Three Daughters of Lord Loam



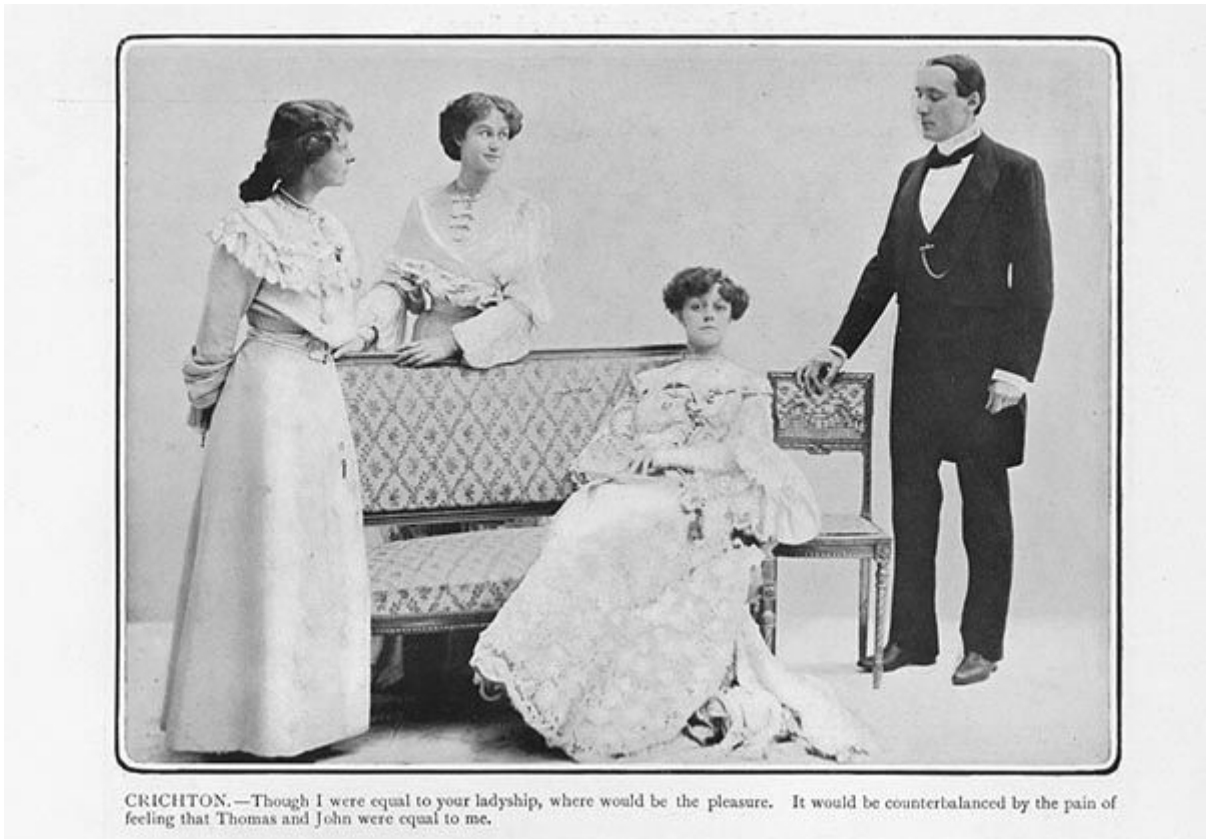
Crichton Addresses Lady Mary

Lord Loam's unfinished Speech.



PHOTO. COPYRIGHT. THE EARL OF LOAM.—MR. HENRY KEMBLE PLAY-PICTORIAL.
LORD LOAM.—The proverb to which I refer—a proverb I have never forgotten—a proverb I distinctly remember.

Loam's Unfinished Speech



CRICHTON.—Though I were equal to your ladyship, where would be the pleasure. It would be counterbalanced by the pain of feeling that Thomas and John were equal to me.

Crichton Attends the Ladies



FISHER (Miss Margaret Fraser).—I could not undertake, my lady, to wait upon three. *We* don't do it.



CRICHTON.—This, my lady, is the young person.

Fisher, Crichton and Tweeny



Lady Mary is not Easily Disturbed



LADY MARY.—Have you said that vampire bats suck the blood from our toes as we sleep?

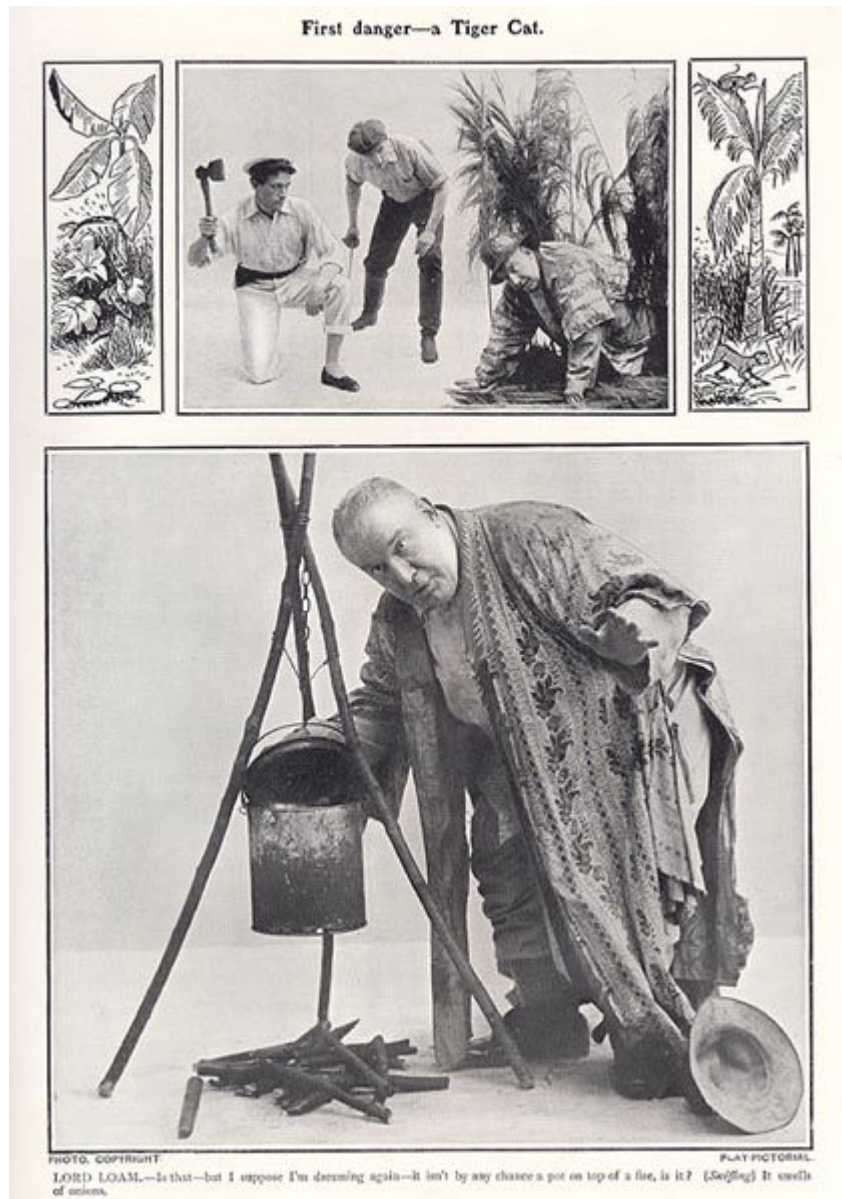


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LORD LOAM.—I always understood that if you flung stones at them they would retaliate by flinging coconuts at you. I flung a hundred stones, and not one monkey had sufficient intelligence to grasp my meaning.

Shipwrecked



First Danger / Cooking Dinner

"One to command and others to obey."



LORD LOAM.—Crichton, I don't like this.

One to Command, Others to Obey



The Triumph of Nature



Reminiscences



Ernest Proposes to Tweeny



A Hunting Story



The Gov's Dinner



Crichton and Lady Mary



A New Master Commands



A Ship in Sight



The interrupted Dance.



The Interrupted Dance



A Rescuer Arrives



Force of habit.



George, is Mary all we think her?

Mr. Ernest Woolley's New Book.



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"It was a 1'30-sec. of the target size, and, rushing forward with drawn knife, I stabbed the monster to the heart."

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