

OF CLEVERNESS

À PROPOS OF ONE CRICHTON

Crichton is an extremely clever person--abnormally, indeed almost unnaturally, so. He is not merely clever at this or that, but clever all round; he gives you no consolations. He goes about being needlessly brilliant. He caps your jests and corrects your mistakes, and does your special things over again in newer and smarter ways. Any really well-bred man who presumed so far would at least be plain or physically feeble, or unhappily married by way of apology, but the idea of so much civility seems never to have entered Crichton's head. He will come into a room where we are jesting perhaps, and immediately begin to flourish about less funny perhaps but decidedly more brilliant jests, until at last we retire one by one from the conversation and watch him with savage, weary eyes over our pipes. He invariably beats me at chess, invariably. People talk about him and ask my opinion of him, and if I venture to criticise him they begin to look as though they thought I was jealous. Grossly favourable notices of his books and his pictures crop up in the most unlikely places; indeed I have almost given up newspapers on account of him. Yet, after all----

This cleverness is not everything. It never pleases me, and I doubt sometimes if it pleases anyone. Suppose you let off some clever little thing, a subtlety of expression, a paradox, an allusive suggestive

picture; how does it affect ordinary people? Those who are less clever than yourself, the unspecialised, unsophisticated average people, are simply annoyed by the puzzle you set them; those who are cleverer find your cleverness mere obvious stupidity; and your equals, your competitors in cleverness, are naturally your deadly rivals. The fact is this cleverness, after all, is merely egotism in its worst and unwise phase. It is an incontinence of brilliance, graceless and aggressive, a glaring swagger. The drunken helot of cleverness is the creature who goes about making puns. A mere step above comes the epigram, the isolated epigram framed and glazed. Then such impressionist art as Crichton's pictures, mere puns in paint. What they mean is nothing, they arrest a quiet decent-minded man like myself with the same spasmodic disgust as a pun in literature--the subject is a transparent excuse; they are mere indecent and unedifying exhibitions of himself. He thinks it is something superlative to do everything in a startling way. He cannot even sign his name without being offensive. He lacks altogether the fundamental quality of a gentleman, the magnanimity to be commonplace. I----

On the score of personal dignity, why should a young man of respectable antecedents and some natural capacity stoop to this kind of thing? To be clever is the last desperate resort of the feeble, it is the merit of the ambitious slave. You cannot conquer vi et armis, you cannot stomach a decent inferiority, so you resort to lively, eccentric, and brain-wearying brilliance to ingratiate yourself. The cleverest animal by far is the monkey, and compare that creature's undignified activity

with the mountainous majesty of the elephant!

And I cannot help thinking, too, that cleverness must be the greatest obstacle a man can possibly have in his way upward in the world. One never sees really clever people in positions of trust, never widely influential or deeply rooted. Look, for instance, at the Royal Academy, at the Judges, at---But there! The very idea of cleverness is an all-round readiness and looseness that is the very negation of stability.

Whenever Crichton has been particularly exasperating, getting himself appreciated in a new quarter, or rising above his former successes, I find some consolation in thinking of my Uncle Augustus. He was the glory of our family. Even Aunt Charlotte's voice drooped a little in the mention of his name. He was conspicuous for an imposing and even colossal stupidity: he rose to eminence through it, and, what is more, to wealth and influence. He was as reliable, as unlikely to alter his precise position, or do anything unexpected, as the Pyramids of Egypt. I do not know any topic upon which he was not absolutely uninformed, and his contributions to conversation, delivered in that ringing baritone of his, were appallingly dull. Often I have seen him utterly flatten some cheerful clever person of the Crichton type with one of his simple garden-roller remarks--plain, solid, and heavy, which there was no possibility either of meeting or avoiding. He was very successful in argument, and yet he never fenced. He simply came down. It was, so to speak, a case of small sword versus the avalanche. His moral inertia

was tremendous. He was never excited, never anxious, never jaded; he was simply massive. Cleverness broke upon him like shipping on an ironbound coast. His monument is like him--a plain large obelisk of coarse granite, unpretending in its simple ugliness and prominent a mile off. Among the innumerable little white sorrows of the cemetery it looks exactly as he used to look among clever people.

Depend upon it cleverness is the antithesis of greatness. The British Empire, like the Roman, was built up by dull men. It may be we shall be ruined by clever ones. Imagine a regiment of lively and eccentric privates! There never was a statesman yet who had not some ballast of stupidity, and it seems to me that part at least of the essentials of a genius is a certain divine dulness. The people we used to call the masters--Shakespeare, Raphael, Milton, and so forth--had a certain simplicity Crichton lacks. They do not scintillate nearly so much as he does, and they do not give that same uncomfortable feeling of internal strain. Even Homer nods. There are restful places in their work, broad meadows of breezy flatness, calms. But Crichton has no Pacific Ocean to mitigate his everlasting weary passage of Cape Horn: it is all point and prominence, point and prominence.

No doubt this Crichton is having a certain vogue now, but it cannot last. I wish him no evil, of course, but I cannot help thinking he will presently have had his day. This epoch of cleverness must be very near its last flare. The last and the abiding thought of humanity is peace. A dull man will presently be sought like the shadow of a great rock in a

thirsty land. Dulness will be the New Genius. "Give us dull books," people will cry, "great dull restful pictures. We are weary, very weary." This hectic, restless, incessant phase in which we travail--fin-de-siècle, "decadent," and all the rest of it--will pass away. A chubby, sleepy literature, large in aim, colossal in execution, rotund and tranquil will lift its head. And this Crichton will become a classic, Messrs. Mudie will sell surplus copies of his works at a reduction, and I shall cease to be worried by his disgusting success.