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SIR SIDNEY COLVIN IN *THE GOLDEN BOWL*:
MR. CRICHTON IDENTIFIED

By ADELINE R. TINTNER

Henry James disguised Edith Wharton as the scribbling Princess in "The Velvet Glove," as Leon Edel and I have recently independently shown.¹ However, this was not the first time that he had slyly but good-naturedly introduced one of his contemporaries into his work.

In *The Golden Bowl* Mr. Crichton, "the custodian of one of the richest departments of the great collection of precious things"² in the British Museum, who introduces Maggie to the documents relating to the Prince's family, is a portrait of James's old friend, Sir Sidney Colvin. He is discreetly but recognizably characterized in James's ornamental, bantering late style. Although in volume one Maggie has been once to the British Museum with Fanny Assingham to check on the historical glories of the Prince's family, there is no mention, according to the one reference to the visit Fanny makes to her husband, that Mr. Crichton had been their sponsor. "Go to the British Museum," she tells Bob, "I went one day with Maggie. We looked him up, so to say. They were most civil" (I, 80). However, in volume two James seems to have realized that it might be entertaining to transform the impersonal "they" in volume one to a specific character, Mr. Crichton, who would be a disguise for his friend, Sidney Colvin. So now James makes Mr. Crichton retroactively involved. "It was at his invitation, Fanny well recalled, that Maggie, one day, long before . . . paid a visit" to see the records of the Prince's family (II, 147). This personal invitation is news to the reader. Although unmentioned in volume one as Maggie's sponsor to the Museum, Mr. Crichton is now introduced to the story and given a role, since it is "some renewed conversation with Mr. Crichton" (II, 148) that gave Maggie "the idea, irresistible, intense, of going to pay at the Museum a visit to Mr.

1. Leon Edel, *The Master* (Philadelphia, 1972), 352-359, 574; Adeline R. Tintner, "James's Mock Epic: 'The Velvet Glove,' Edith Wharton, and Other Late Tales," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XVII (Winter, 1971-2), 483-499.
2. *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York, 1909), *The Golden Bowl*, II, 146. All references are to this edition and are indicated by volume and page number.

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Crichton" a second time, just when she is reaching a crisis in her awareness of her husband's adultery (II, 146).

What is the evidence that Mr. Crichton, (whose name, like Colvin's also begins with a C) is a portrait of Sir Sidney Colvin?³ First, he is described as "the most accomplished and obliging of public functionaries, whom everyone knew and who knew everyone," and as the "custodian of one of the richest departments of the great collection of precious things," at the Museum (II, 146). Colvin was Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum from 1884 to 1912 and the host of "a literary and artistic centre."⁴ It is true that Maggie is not going to the Department of Prints and Drawings, Colvin's territory, to look up Amerigo's family records but that discrepancy is easily overcome by James. Mr. Crichton is made to introduce Maggie to the authorities concerned with her project; "though not sworn of the province toward which his friend had found herself, according to her appeal to him, yearning again, nothing was easier for him than to put her in relation with the presiding urbanities" (II, 148). The following sentence clinches the resemblance between Mr. Crichton and Colvin. "He had desired, Mr. Crichton, with characteristic kindness, after the wonderful show, after offered luncheon at his contiguous lodge, a part of the place, to see her safely home; especially noting, in attending her to the great steps, that she had dismissed her carriage" (II, 154). We know that Colvin's Keepership "comes with a residence within the museum precincts" which, in Colvin's case "gradually became a literary and artistic centre,"⁵ and which corresponds to Mr. Crichton's "contiguous lodge, a part of the place." Robert Louis Stevenson, Colvin's very close friend, calls it, incorrectly, "the many-pillared and the well-beloved," for, as Colvin pointed out, Stevenson describes it "as though the keepers' houses stood within the great front colonnade of the museum, which they do not, but project in advance of it on either flank."⁶

³ James mentioned seeing Colvin and James Barrie together on December 21, 1895 (*The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen & Kenneth B. Murdock [New York, 1947], 234). *The Admirable Crichton* was one of Barrie's three hits that were running in 1903, and may have suggested the name to James.

⁴ E.V. Lucas, *The Colvins and Their Friends* (New York, 1928), 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places* (New York, 1921), 143.

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James's description of the lodge as "contiguous" is correct.

Mr. Crichton is characterized by James as a "custodian" who "could feel for the sincere private collector and urge him on his way even when condemned to be present at his capture of trophies sacrificed by the country to parliamentary thrift" (II, 147). According to E.V. Lucas, Colvin managed to keep the Malcolm collection for the Museum ("the most notable achievement of Colvin's Keepership") for "it was due to his personal enterprise and exertions that the Government was persuaded to give a special grant and thus secure the collection for the nation."⁷ Apparently "he never spared efforts to persuade possible givers to enrich the nation in this way, often with success."⁸ Colvin as a museum official considered it "a chief part of his duty to win the regard and confidence of private collectors, to help and stimulate them in their pursuits."⁹ Like him Mr. Crichton "carried his amiability to the point of saying that since London, under pettifogging views, *had* to miss from time to time its rarest opportunities, he was almost consoled to see such lost causes invariably wander . . . into . . . the famous fold . . . beyond the Mississippi. There was a charm in his 'almosts' that was not to be resisted, especially after Mr. Verver and Maggie had grown sure — or almost again — of enjoying the monopoly of them; and on this basis of envy changed to sympathy by the more familiar view of the father and the daughter, Mr. Crichton had at both houses, though especially in Eaton Square, learned to fill out the responsive and suggestive character" (II, 147). James also seems to be suggesting with tongue in cheek that in preferring Eaton Square (Maggie's home), to Portland Place (Mr. Verver's home), Mr. Crichton prefers the company of the ladies to the gentlemen collectors. This is continued a few lines further on: "Visits of gracious ladies, under his protection, lighted up rosily, for this perhaps most flower-loving and honey-sipping member of the great Bloomsbury hive, its packed passages and cells" (II, 148). What could be a more poetic, almost Keatsian tribute, to his good friend and biographer of Keats, Colvin, the social, courtly, most "obliging of public functionaries" than this figure

⁷ Lucas, 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁹ Colvin, 205.

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of a bee extracting honey for the Museum from rich flowers?

The character of Mr. Crichton may affect the reader as being a gratuitous intrusion into the plot which at this point after five hundred and forty-eight pages is about to reach its first climax in the confirmation of Maggie's suspicions of the Prince's and Charlotte's adulterous relationship. It is as if James could not resist writing in a part for his friend and to justify the intrusion has given the character a double function. One is to usher Maggie into the repository of the history of her husband's family and the other is to release her into the Bloomsbury quarter where she will come upon the bowl, the proof of the flaw in her marriage.

Sidney Colvin probably never recognized his portrait, for he wrote in his *Memories and Notes*: "In creative literature, I do not remember any special instance of a character in whom the collecting passion is incarnate except that famous one of Cousin Pons in Balzac's *Les Parents Pauvres*."¹⁰ This suggests that he never made the acquaintance of Adam Verver, nor, probably, of Mr. Crichton. It is equally sad that Fanny Sitwell who became Mrs. Colvin probably missed a naughty but recognizable version of her name in Fanny Assingham, who also seems to resemble her in character and personality. Hugh Walpole's tribute to Lady Colvin describes a woman very much like Mrs. Assingham. She "joined so eagerly in the experiences of other people that you were amazed that she had time or energy left for her own. . . . Her curiosity was never greedy; she loved to hear all the details but passed on from them always to give fully her pity, her admiration, her praise and her irony."¹¹ In addition to the silver salver Henry James gave the Colvins when they married in July 1903, he may have also thought of *The Golden Bowl* as a wedding present.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

¹¹ Lucas, 351.

