

## A NOVELIST'S TRAINING.

A TALK WITH MR. S. R. CROCKETT AT PENICUIK.



MR. S. R. CROCKETT.

*(From a photograph by J. Moffat, Edinburgh.)*

**T**HE railway journey from Edinburgh to Penicuik is longer than the scheme of the universe seems to have designed. The line makes so unconscionable a sweep round as to cause the train to take fifty minutes to cover a distance which is little over nine miles by road. In amends, the traveller finds himself embarked upon a country which is always interesting, and which offers scenes of extreme beauty on a winter's day, like that on which I lately made the journey for the purpose of visiting Mr. Crockett. You circle widely round the broad base of Arthur's Seat, below the couchant lion that keeps eternal watch over the royal city. A glimpse of the sea is gained at Portobello, where the old sailor once built his lonely house, and named it after the most famous of his battles, and where now long rows of villas, plain and coloured, bear witness to the thriving condition of the Gravesend of Scotland. Then the snow-clad fields begin to open out white and bare on either side. On the one hand, the long and picturesque range of the Pentlands rears itself into the wintry sky; on the other, tall chimneys and pit-head buildings

testify to the mineral wealth of Lothian. Later, one comes to the region of the Esk, and the wayside stations boast names as familiar to the lettered traveller as Rosslyn Castle and "classic Hawthornden." None of Drummond's roses are blooming now, but the famous chapel where the St. Clairs rest is conspicuous on the hillside, until it is hidden by the slope of a cutting. Directly after, one is reminded of changed times by entering the long shed which has been erected over the line to safeguard the Rosslyn powder-works from inconvenient sparks; and in a very few minutes more the train comes to the end of its journey in the little terminal station of Penicuik.

It is not far to the house where Mr. Crockett has lived since he found the Free Church Manse too small to hold him. Bank House is little more than the length of its avenue from the station: a good substantial country house, pretentious to little more than comfort, but strong in that. A tiny brook gurgles and bickers beside you as you pick your way up the narrow path that is swept in the avenue, and in a moment more you renew your acquaintance with the warm,

nervous hand-shake which is characteristic of the eminently healthy temperament of the author of "The Raiders."

As it happens, I was the first journalist who had the pleasure—I use the word advisedly in this case—of interviewing Mr. Crockett, just after the remarkable success of his first volume had brought him into the public eye.

"That was little more than a year ago," I said to him, while we dallied with a grateful cup of tea. "You have had many interviewers since?"

"Indeed I have," was the cheery answer. "One day there were as many as five here at once. The fact is that I have always made a point of never refusing any request of this sort. You wonder why? Well, I have been a journalist myself, you know. One of my keenest recollections of that time is this: Many years ago a certain editor, for whom I had been doing some work, asked me to go and see a politician of the second rank and get his views on some matter of interest at the moment—a Queen's Speech, I think. I went off—this was in the days before interviewing was common. I found my gentleman just coming out of his big West End mansion, and made my request. 'No, I won't tell you anything: go away!' he said, just in those words.

I sneaked back to my editor, revolving thoughts of murder or suicide in my mind."

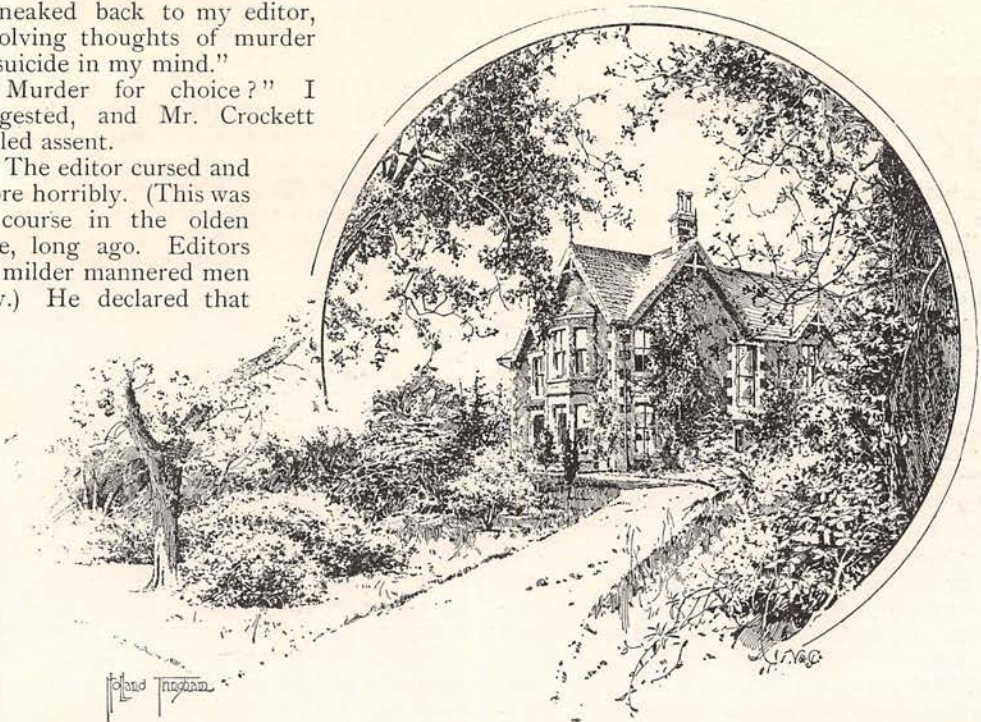
"Murder for choice?" I suggested, and Mr. Crockett smiled assent.

"The editor cursed and swore horribly. (This was of course in the olden time, long ago. Editors are milder mannered men now.) He declared that

a man that could not get such a simple thing as that was of no use to him, and sent me about my business. Since then, I have tried never to be unkind to an interviewer."

"I wish every public man had had the same experience," I said feelingly. "But one result of your good-nature is that all the facts of your life are pretty well known. You were born and brought up in Galloway, among the Cameronians, I know. Tell me the salient features of your early life, will you?"

"Why, the most important influences in it were these, so far as one can indicate the facts of a dozen years in a few sentences. First, I should count the extreme strictness of our education. The Cameronians were the theological aristocracy of the Galloway countryside, so to speak; and the two or three families of whom we consisted mixed little with the laxer brethren round about. Amusements were almost all tabooed: to this day I find it difficult not to look on cards, for instance, as sinful. Besides, I can't play. Even 'light literature' was not allowed, and I had to read Scott and Shakespeare on the sly. I told you once before how the late Professor Clerk Maxwell found me lying on the muir and reading Shakespeare, and gave me two half-crowns in reward of my good



MR. CROCKETT'S HOUSE.

(From a photograph by J. Moffat, Edinburgh.)

taste. Now I have noticed that the other boys of the village, who were allowed to read as many novels as they chose, preferred 'The Boys of England,' and I make little doubt that I owe my early taste for good literature to this fact that it was 'stolen waters.' In other essentials my training was ideal. I could talk to you for hours about my old Cameronian grandfather, with the overweening passion for justice that dominated his life.

money in the matter when I tell you that for the whole time I was there my living expenses averaged nine shillings a week—three for rooms and six for food, eked out by a cheese and a bag of meal from home. I can show you my account-books still to prove it."

"And then you went up to Oxford, didn't you?"

"Yes; but not to stay. I had an idea of



MR. CROCKETT'S LIBRARY.

(From a photograph by J. Moffat, Edinburgh.)

I hope to put that beautiful character in one of my books, if I can do it well enough."

"And then you went to school to Castle Douglas?"

"Yes; I owe a heavy debt to my master there, John Cowper. An Aberdeen and London graduate, and a sound scholar—a 'dominie' in all things of the true old type—he gave me a grounding in classics that has done me good service, besides teaching me the far more useful lessons that come from a noble life. I took a bursary at Edinburgh University straight from his teaching, and went up there when I was fifteen. It was a pretty hard life, but a healthy and enjoyable one. You may guess that there wasn't overmuch

keeping myself there as an unattached student; but by good fortune I had an introduction to the Head of one of the great colleges, who shall be nameless. He changed my mind for me."

"How did you find that gentleman? He could be disagreeable enough on occasion, I understand?"

"Oh, yes! but I think he was never anything but pleasant to the poor amongst us. He was very kind to me. 'We shall do you no good here,' he said to me plainly. 'What you want is a travelling tutorship.' And he got me one at once: first a young American, and then a Ward in Chancery. With them I went all over Europe. I have visited every

capital but Copenhagen. We always travelled *en prince*, and saw most of the people who were worth seeing, from Bismarck to Russell Lowell. On a similar trip I visited northern Africa, and I have been in Siberia. This, as you can imagine, was a very good training for a fellow who was to earn his bread by novel-writing in the future."

"I can hardly imagine a better one," I said. "I suppose you will tell us all about your travels one day?"

"I am going to use them as backgrounds to stories, if you mean that. For instance, in my book that is coming out shortly there is a tale—'St. Lucy of the Eyes'—in which I have worked in a curious couple of clergymen that we met in Italy. One was a Waldensian minister, the other the Catholic priest of the same village. The priest complained that his parishioners would only pay their dues when the fear of death was upon them in a sickly season; while the minister's flock only cashed up when Communion-time approached. So to keep things at a fair average, the two men—who were excellent friends in private, but bitter foes in the street—had hit on the device of pooling all their drawings and dividing the proceeds! Smart, eh? Now, there are hundreds of incidents like that that one can always work up into stories."

"Quite so," I said. "But was all your travelling done in this luxurious style? Did you never rough it sufficiently to get down to the bed-rock of life?"

"Oh, dear, yes! For example, one of my ventures, when I had some spare cash in hand, was to hire three Orkney fishermen to take me across to Norway, with them in their open boat in the depth of winter. That was rough enough, I think. Then I went up farther north, on my own account. The things I saw then I have it in mind to use, as thus: I am going to write a novel about a young Scots adventurer who leaves his home and goes up with one of the early Arctic explorers—like Hendrik Hudson, you know, two or three centuries ago. It is much easier to throw one's self into the past in the far north, I find, or in Morocco, for instance, than here—there is practically no change with the centuries such as occurs in civilisation."

"But how did you come to go into the Church? This does not sound like the training of a minister, if one may say so. And you are a layman again now, aren't you?"

"My going into the Church," said Mr. Crockett, as he sought for pictures in the fire, "was the result of a sudden impulse working on such an early training as I have described. I was consumed at the time with

a sudden desire to do all I could to help the people—especially those of them who are down in this world. And I could not see that it was possible for a man standing alone to do anything of much importance; whereas in a great organisation like the Church he acts with the weight of all the centuries and all the brethren at his back. That was my determining motive. Now I have become a layman again, because I feel that I am able to do a different work, and can do more good as a free lance once more. But, as you know, I am just where I was, so far as unity with the Church in honest belief is concerned. I have just gone down into the ranks again—that is all. I shall always be the most loyal helper and hearer of the man who is chosen to fill the place that I have had to resign. But I shall preach no more, except in my books; and not obviously in them, I hope, for you know I don't approve of that kind of thing. The novel with a purpose is an artistic crime."

"And how did you become a novelist? Was that a sudden impulse too?"

"Something very like it," said Mr. Crockett, smiling, "only this time the impulse came from outside. I used to write articles regularly for a paper called the *Christian Leader*, of Glasgow. One day—I'm bad at dates, but it was in 1891, I think—I got a telegram asking me to supply a leading article in a great hurry on the duties of a minister. Oh, I make no doubt it would have been a most moral and improving article! But I had not time to write it. In my despair the thought occurred to me of throwing my ideas into the shape of a story, and I wrote what purported to be the account of a typical minister's day's work. It caught on, and the owner of the *Leader* asked me to write a story every week, whence arose 'The Stickit Minister,' or 'The Crockett Minister,' by Stickit, under which name I am told worthy people ask for it. The success of these stories opened up a new line of work to me, and you know what I have done since."

"You have never had any trouble since then about finding a market for your work, I believe?"

"No; not since the success of my first volume. I had one curious experience, though, with it. Before I offered it to my publisher I tried it on a Scottish firm. I had better not tell you their name. They returned it with a note politely assuring me that there was no market at all for this sort of thing. Well, not very long ago I received a letter from the same firm, saying that it was a great pity that Scottish work should go to England to be published, and adding that it would

gratify them very much to have a book from the author of 'The Raiders.' Thereupon the devil tempted me, and I fell. I looked up their earlier letter, which happened to be endorsed 'In replying, please refer to No. 396B.' So I wrote back, politely requesting Messrs. — to refer to No. 396B, and they would see their former opinion of the work of the author of 'The Raiders.' I had no reply to that!" And we both chuckled over the case.

"Now," I said, "I think it only remains for me to ask you how you write your books. Is that too large an order?"

"Well, it is rather a large one, isn't it?"

on the stage thus prepared, are they equally real to you?"

"Even more so. It is a real heartbreak to me to end a book and part from them. Indeed, I have never had the heart to close the door upon them entirely, and I hope to renew my acquaintance with some of them—notably with Patrick Heron and his friends. But I think you had better leave these questions for another occasion, and come and look at my latest books."

"They are still coming in, then?"

"Oh, by the way, you may say that that is one of the pleasures of being a scribbler."



THE MURDER HOLE AND THE MERRICK.—*VIDE* "THE RAIDERS."

What do you expect me to say? Of course, I try to get as good a plot as I can to begin with; then I seek for a period in which to embody it. I get up all the facts of the time and the local colour as well as I can. For instance, in writing the story of the Covenanters I have kept an assistant at work in the big Edinburgh libraries, extracting from the memoirs and MSS. of the period all that was likely to help me, as well as another in Galloway. I had the good luck to light upon the Earlston correspondence, previously unpublished, from which I have drawn a host of the details which are not in the histories, but add verisimilitude to a presentment of the times.

"And the imaginary figures that you bring

I have an American friend—I never saw him—who sends me regularly all the best books that come out in his country in return for the pleasure that he is good enough to say my books have given him. And only the other day a south-country tweed manufacturer sent me the stuff for a new suit. More practical than admiring letters, isn't it?"

So I went off to break the tenth commandment, as visitors to Mr. Crockett's charming library of over ten thousand volumes usually do.

Indeed, it is enough to persuade anyone to turn author, to see the happy and healthy life and the abundance of pretty and attractive surroundings that go with that once despised profession in this case.

W. E. G. F.