

# S. R. CROCKETT AND HIS STORIES.

BY ARCHIBALD CROMWELL.



It would be possible, as well as interesting, to publish a literary map of the United Kingdom, or even of the World, marking the districts chosen by past and present authors for the groundwork of their stories. Such a map—to write at random—might

allot Wessex to Thomas Hardy; parts of the metropolis to Charles Dickens and Walter Besant; "Thrums," inevitably, to J. M. Barrie; Cornwall to A. T. Quiller-Couch; Somersetshire to Walter Raymond; Devonshire to R. D. Blackmore; and Galloway to S. R. Crockett. It would be easy to allot almost every county in this way, and the map would have the double advantage of exhibiting the claims which, in colonial language, have been "pegged out," and the districts still "to be let" as backgrounds. To continue the idea, a literary Stanford might mark certain spots with crossed swords as the sites of fictitious battles, and the scenes of the deaths of celebrated characters could be printed in purple, and the names of the towns where marriages were celebrated might be encircled with a wedding ring. The possibilities of such a map are

endless, and the writer presents the suggestion gratis to any enterprising publisher.

In the Scottish school of story-writers which has arisen during the last dozen years, three names stand conspicuously before the public. J. M. Barrie may be awarded the position of head of the school by right of the fact that his "Auld Licht Idylls" (pub-

lished in 1888) was the first volume of the class in recent literature to attain pre-eminent success. In the following year his "Window in Thrums" was opened to the world, which has since then grown well acquainted with the joys, humours and sorrows of Kirriemuir, the humble village thus immortalised.

Samuel Rutherford Crockett, who is a year older than Mr. Barrie, next graduated in this famous school. The son of a Galloway farmer, he was born at Duchrae, and educated at the Free Church Institution, Castle Douglas. After being a pupil-teacher, young Crockett went with a bursary to Edinburgh University in 1876. Having finished his collegiate course he was a tutor, travelling over much of the



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[Russell.

*James*  
*S. R. Crockett*



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MISS CROCKETT.

old world during various engagements, during which period he began to feel his way in literature. Some of his poems were published under the title of "Dulce Cor" in 1886. It is interesting to remark that the same words anglicised form part of the title of his later book, "Sweetheart Travelers." Mr. Crockett entered the Free Church ministry in 1886, commencing his pastoral work at Penicuik, where he still resides. He resigned his ministerial charge a year and a half ago. It was in 1893 that "The Stickit Minister" was published, and immediately called attention to the new pen at work in the Midlothian manse. Edition after edition has been required to satisfy the constant demand for this entertaining volume of sketches of Scottish life. Its very name, puzzling to Southrons, aided its success. A story was circulated to the effect that a well-known lady said,

"I never can remember whether that book's called 'The Crockett Minister,' by Stickit, or 'The Stickit Minister,' by Crockett! And, in either case, can anyone inform me what is a 'stickit'?" While mentioning the title, one may refer to an amusing blunder committed not long ago by a *Daily News* leader-writer who wrote of "Mr. Crockett's latest book, 'Ian Maclaren'!" Each of the three Scottish writers has selected striking, if somewhat difficult, titles for his works. Mr. Barrie's "Auld Licht Idylls" has been a stumbling-block to many an English reader, and Ian Maclaren's "Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush" came to be called at Mudie's Library by the shortened form of "B.B.B.B."

It is unnecessary to expatiate on the charm of the sketches in "The Stickit Minister." The pertinacity of the young preacher, the laughable exploits of Cleg Kelly, and the chapter on sermon preparation are too well known to need more than passing mention. Cleg Kelly so delighted R. L. Stevenson that he urged Mr. Crockett to devote an entire book to the gamin, and this he has just finished. Yet, of course, the book has had its scoffers. An eminent critic threw the volume across the room in disgust at what he termed its "maudlin sentiment." And he was a brother Scot, and should have appreciated the 'fidelity of Mr. Crockett's word-painting. Sentiment is, after all, saying fearlessly what is in one's own heart without thought of critics. That which is



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[J. Moffat, Edinburgh.

BANK HOUSE, PENICUIK.  
(Mr. S. R. Crockett's home.)

so written will touch the heart of others, making it beat as strongly in sympathy. But curiously enough all three of these Scottish story-tellers have their largest circle of readers out of the land of their birth.

Robert Louis Stevenson's admiration of "The Stickit Minister," to whom the book was dedicated, has been equalled by that of Andrew Lang and John Ruskin, two very dissimilar critics. The latter invited Mr. Crockett to visit him at Brantwood, and expressed his warm interest in his work. "The Raiders," published in 1894, was

jingling clear"—sets a note of interest which is sustained to the last. The characters of Patrick Heron and May Maxwell are well contrasted, and the latter especially gains the sympathy of most readers.

Mr. Crockett, on a visit to London about a year ago, was the guest of the New Vagabonds Club, and no one who was present will forget the unaffectedly modest speech in which he expressed his gratitude for the welcome accorded by the army of literature to its latest recruit. "I determined not to spoil a good dinner by the



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MR. S. R. CROCKETT'S WRITING-ROOM.

[J. Moffat, Edinburgh.

rather a surprise to that section of the public which was only acquainted with "The Stickit Minister." Its plot reminds one slightly of R. D. Blackmore's "Lorna Doone" and R. L. Stevenson's "Treasure Island." As in the latter volume, there is a "Silver" in "The Raiders"—Silver Sand. Throughout the long story—a trifle long drawn-out, perhaps—Mr. Crockett has given many fine descriptive passages, and in nearly every landscape, depicted in glowing colours, there are human figures in the foreground. The opening sentence—"It was upon Rathan Head that I first heard their bridle-reins

thought of making a bad speech," was Mr. Crockett's apology for not delivering a finished oration. But there was no doubt that his sincere and cordial little speech was quite to the liking of the Vagabonds. Many of them were surprised to find the Scottish novelist was so youthful and had "a ruddy countenance," for portraits had hardly given that impression. Mr. Crockett is tall and broad—a figure which would not pass unobserved in any company. He was a guest during this visit in several homes of literary men, and not a few of them, including Mr. Andrew Lang, have enjoyed Mr. Crockett's

hospitality at Penicuik. Since he resigned the charge of the Free Church he has resided at Bank House, a view of which is given herewith. The house stands on high ground, and the breezy air and beautiful outlook make it a delightful place. In the summer time the garden is the favourite resort of Mr. Crockett, although he is much attached to his study, where thousands of volumes, chiefly historical and adventurous, line the walls. Into this room the sunshine pleasantly pours during the early morning—the time when the novelist is busiest with his pen. Then after luncheon he walks or cycles, sometimes with his little girl, who has become endeared to thousands who have enjoyed the book, "Sweetheart Travelers."

"The Lilac Sun-bonnet," which was published in 1894, had a curiously diverse reception from the reviewers. The author says of it:

"It was my first book in point of time, written before 'The Stickit Minister,' and it has been the most popular in point of sale." It was an unambitious piece of work—one of Mr. Crockett's "recreations," so it seemed to me—and "The Play Actress" was somewhat similar in style. One could easily believe that the latter little story was founded on fact, for it had a pathos which

had the note of an echo from real life. Undoubtedly, in stories of a simple domestic nature, Mr. Crockett shines to advantage. When he wades into history there is a danger of the general reader getting out of his depth and wearying for the solid ground more familiar to him. With all his fine imagination Mr. Crockett resists the tempta-

tion of florid word-painting, but nevertheless he gets his effects with singular certainty. Two recent works are "The Men of the Moss Hags," which is truer than any novel, for the letters and sermons therein are genuine, and most of the conversations in the book are echoes from life; and "The Grey Man of Auchendrayne." The scene of the latter story is Ayrshire. Another volume by Mr. Crockett is "Bog-Myrtle and Peat."

In the story which precedes this article—"The Count and Little Gertrud"—Mr. Crockett ventures out of his beloved Galloway and tells a tale of quiet heroism with a straightforward force which is certain to appeal to all who read it. He heard the incidents related by the Count himself, in broken English, last year, and the happy sequel is, like the rest of the story, true. It may be interesting to state that considerable alterations were made in the



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[J. Moffat, Edinburgh.

"SWEETHEART" AND HER DOLLS.  
(The most characteristic portrait of Miss Crockett.)

narrative after it had been set in type, and the title was changed from "A Mere School Girl" to "The Count and Little Gertrud." Mr. Crockett's MSS. are type-written, in very neat fashion, on thin white paper, and during the last three years the number of pages which have passed into various printing offices must exceed several thousands. He is very punctual in fulfilling his literary engagements, and though his pen has commissions which will last at least the next seven years, there is little fear of its running dry. In three years the aggregate sale of Mr. Crockett's books has reached a quarter of a million copies. Just lately he has been taking a well-earned holiday in the Netherlands. Mr. Crockett has developed a taste for golf, achieving quite an admirable record for a beginner on certain links where many famous literary men are wont to disport themselves.

In America his books have had a very large sale, not always to the monetary advantage of their author, owing to the pirated editions which have been published. The Tauchnitz Library, too, has paid him the compliment of including one or two stories in their list. Mr. Crockett has received the most generous appreciation from other novelists, who recognise in his work the true marks of literary workmanship—knowledge and sincerity. He has also had the satisfaction of recalling to many Scots who have gone from their home to seek fortune in different parts of the globe, the characteristics of their native land. And some of his most treasured possessions are letters from readers in all parts of the world who have thanked him for the wholesome breath of health which pervades all his stories—all the more welcome in a period when jaundice has affected fiction.



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THE DRAWING-ROOM AT BANK HOUSE.

[J. Moffat, Edinburg].