

# THE AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN SHANNON":

A TALK WITH MR. COULSON KERNAHAN.

BY ARCHIBALD CROMWELL.



ANTICIPATING the natural interest of those who have read Mr. Coulson Kernahan's previous works in his new story, "Captain Shannon," commencing in this issue of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE, I had a chat with the author the other day on the subject.

By way of preface, let me say that Mr. Kernahan is the son of Dr. James Kernahan, M.A., F.G.S., a commentator of remarkable insight, and a scientist of distinction, from whom, doubtless, he has derived much of his interest in the trend of modern thought. He is, as his name suggests, an Irishman, and it is in Ireland that most of his relatives live—his uncle, the Rev. R. A. Kernahan, B.D., being Rector of Hillsborough. He was born at Ilfracombe, and came to London about fifteen years ago to commence the career which has since won him

fame and friends among those who are best qualified to appreciate. The little circle of intimates of Philip Bourke Marston received him gladly into their midst. Mr. F. W.

Robinson—that kindly encourager of young authors—enlisted him in the band of new writers, among whom were reckoned J. M. Barrie, Jerome K. Jerome, and others, who have since "come to their own," and Dr. Robertson Nicoll and Mr. Theodore Watts gave him in his struggling days such generous help and kindness as he will, he says, never forget.

Mr. Kernahan's earliest striking success was that weird story, "A Dead Man's Diary," which appeared without a signature in *Lippincott's Magazine*. It made a decided sensation, and when published in volume form the entire edition was sold out in a few days, and since then four other large editions have been called for. It was avowedly eerie, but in the book there were lofty strains of imagination like veins of gold. An unscrupulous author in England, thinking the writer was an American, calmly annexed his reputation

by announcing his own book as "By the author of 'A Dead Man's Diary.'" Mr. Kernahan's publishers obtained an injunction, and the entire edition was destroyed. The Diary was followed by "A Book of Strange



From a photo by

MR. COULSON KERNAHAN.

[Russell.]



Sins," which achieved also a rapid popularity, every copy of the first edition being taken up on day of publication. As a contrast to this volume and an example of Mr. Kernahan's varied style may be cited "Sorrow and Song," a volume of critical essays collected from the *Fortnightly* and other leading reviews, which was issued in 1893. This exhibited a critical faculty which was speedily recognised by leading *littérateurs*.

He glories in being an optimist, believing in the existence of much good. I think he would agree with what Dr. Jeddler says in "The Battle of Life," that "it's a world full of hearts, a world we need to be careful how we libel—heaven forgive us! for it is a world of sacred mysteries, and its Creator only knows what lies beneath the surface of His lightest image." And he has that rare possession, enthusiasm, and cherishes it for his friends as well as for his ideals. Politics concern him little, but a fine seascape by his neighbour, Mr. Harvey Moore, or a poem uttered by some new voice in "the nest of singing birds," will extort his most fervent praise. To see Mr. Kernahan in his pretty home by the sea, revelling in long walks or playing with little Beryl—who makes her *début* in these pages—one would never suspect him

of having written "Captain Shannon." Tall and broad-shouldered, he suggests a military man rather than an author, and to this day he retains a boyish impulsiveness which is refreshing, while his merry laugh is absolutely infectious. His sympathy with the poor and unfortunate is only restricted when organ-grinders are concerned. He walks

fast, talks fast, and writes fast, but lives slowly, preferring the serenity of home to "the hurrying delight" of publicity.

This brings me naturally to "Thruns," the charming residence where, in sight of the sea, Mr. Kernahan does much of his literary work. In his green-studio at the end of the garden, "Captain Shannon" was written, and some of the local colour in the story can easily be recognised when you have visited Westcliff. A mile or so away from "Thruns"

you will see the long pier of Southend stretching like a centipede—I borrow the phrase from "Captain Shannon"—into the distance; or, looking in another direction, your eye can rest on Canvey Island, visible through the barrier of fishing smacks which stand like a line of sentinels along the shore; and Sheerness and Shoeburyness are other features in the wide panorama which unfolds itself when the sea



From a photo by]

[Shepherd, Southend.

MR. KERNAHAN AND HIS DAUGHTER BERYL.



mists have been dispelled by the sunshine so continual in this neighbourhood.

Going indoors you see the literary and artistic tastes of the inhabitants of "Thrums" visible everywhere you turn. On the crowded bookshelves there are countless volumes, made doubly valuable by their authors' autograph inscriptions therein, for Mr. Kernahan is fortunate in possessing as literary friends most of those who are of account in the world of letters. A signed portrait of Mr. Frederick Locker is flanked by one of Mr. William Watson, inscribed "To Coulson Kernahan from his pal, William Watson," while Jerome K. Jerome, Mrs. Louise Chandler Moulton, Max Pemberton, Lady Henry Somerset, S. J. Stone (the composer of that world-famous hymn "The Church's One Foundation"), are but representatives of many who have bestowed their photographs to adorn "Thrums."

I must allow myself the pleasure of alluding also to Mrs. Kernahan, who has a separate claim to notice as a story writer of undoubted ability. Her novel, "The House of Rimmon," published not very long ago, showed unusual power in delineating character. The sympathetic and acute observation of human nature which was evidenced in this interesting story impressed me so much that I was not surprised to learn that Mrs. Kernahan had had for some years a thorough acquaintance with medicine; she is also a clever musician, delighting especially in classical music. Her daughters (by her first marriage with the late brilliant and talented Professor G. T. Bettany, of Caius College, Cambridge, a contributor to the *Times*, the *Contemporary Review*, and the "Dictionary of National Biography") have had the advantage of musical training from their mother, and have fortunately inherited the same enthusiasm. Mrs. Kernahan's interest in literature matches that of her husband. Indeed in this, as in many other ways, they realise

The thousand sweet still joys of such  
As, hand in hand, face human life.

There is in everything which proceeds from the pen of Mr. Kernahan an evident feeling after the right word and phrase to express his ideas, and more often than most writers he attains success in his search. If you wish to grieve his genial spirit speak of a thing as "nice." A word like that is as objectionable to him as "bijou" was to Lady Camper in George Meredith's entertaining story. And here I may remark that one of his best essays was that written in

the *Nineteenth Century* on the late Frederick Locker-Lampson, with whom he collaborated in a new edition of "Lyra Elegantiarum," now being revised by Mr. Kernahan afresh. This "appreciation" of his friend was conceived in just that delicate sense of the appropriate which would have best pleased him who will be more familiar to the readers of the *WINDSOR MAGAZINE* as Frederick Locker, the author of "London Lyrics." He added the name of Lampson to his own after his marriage to the daughter of Sir Curtis Lampson, Bart. His first wife, Lady Charlotte Locker, the daughter of the Earl of Elgin, was sister-in-law to Dean Stanley. Mr. Locker was connected with Lord Tennyson by marriage, as his daughter was the wife of the Hon. Lionel Tennyson.

After Mr. Tennyson's death she married Mr. Augustine Birrell, Q.C., M.P., who is one of the sanest critics of the day, and certainly one of our most charming essayists. To hasten on, one can briefly mention "God and the Ant," which has circulated already



(From a photo by Willis, Southend.)  
MRS. KERNAHAN.

to the extent of thirty thousand copies, and has furnished the text of many sermons all over the world. It has also added considerably to Mr. Kernahan's letter-bag—not always to the joy of so busy a man.

Having summarised—I know inadequately—the literary achievements of Mr. Kernahan, I will give the result of our interview as to his story "Captain Shannon." The conversation appropriately occurred in the heart of London, where much of the plot is laid.

"Why did you strike out in such a new line?" was my first inevitable query. "Will the public recognise in this thrilling story the calm critic or the author of 'God and the Ant'?"

"I will answer the last question first. I



hope my literary ideals have not been entirely submerged in the interest of 'Captain Shannon.' I have tried to portray truthfully the mighty underground movements which exist in our great cities. The story is not merely an effort at exciting fiction. It is a story without a woman, but not, I hope, without a moral; and it is based on my personal investigation of the Socialist life in centres like Paris, Geneva, Brussels, and the East-End of London. Any worker in political or social schemes will recognise the plausibility of the plot. Ever since I wrote a story—no, you won't recollect it—called 'Number One,' I have wanted to

without ignition. My story is intended to awaken attention to a state of affairs of which few people have any conception. There have been in the last ten years plenty of facts brought to public knowledge substantiating incidents in the career of Captain Shannon."

"One more question, Mr. Kernahan. How did you write it?"

"It was commenced on December 5, 1894. I wrote occasionally till March, 1895; then it was put on one side till the autumn. In that season ideas seem to come to my mind more readily. Down at Westcliff the story grew gradually till, by the end of this March,

"The Murder was now put clean away & these and other rumours were passed from ~~mouth to mouth~~ <sup>mouth to mouth</sup> and were repeated into ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~of the~~ <sup>of the</sup> ~~doctor who was,~~ <sup>doctor who was,</sup> ~~by various persons promptly~~ <sup>well informed</sup> recognized as a ~~authoritative pronouncement~~ <sup>authoritative pronouncement</sup> by the ~~Chief Magistrate~~ <sup>Chief Magistrate</sup> Captain Shaw, the ~~Chief Commissioner of Police~~ <sup>Chief Commissioner of Police</sup> the Lord Mayor the Edward Lawson. ~~Every door became an object of~~ <sup>Every door became an object of</sup> ~~fearsome curiosity~~ <sup>fearsome curiosity</sup> People ~~were~~ <sup>were</sup> half inclined to wonder how they ~~could~~ <sup>could</sup> ever have passed the ~~secret~~ <sup>secret</sup> or many times ~~have passed the secret~~ <sup>have passed the secret</sup> ~~Mr. Kernahan~~ <sup>Mr. Kernahan</sup> ~~without recognizing~~ <sup>without recognizing</sup> that was something ~~in the~~ <sup>in the</sup> ~~shape of~~ <sup>shape of</sup> the

SOME LINES FROM THE ORIGINAL MS. OF "CAPTAIN SHANNON."

expand the idea of a mysterious individual holding in his secret hiding-place the threads of a gigantic upheaval. What I claim for Captain Shannon is the possibility of such a villain's clever evasion of the law. Why, just remember how 'Number One' managed to escape, despite the fact that every port and loophole was being guarded. Depend upon it there is beneath our feet and before our eyes a serious movement towards Socialism. Sir William Harcourt has indeed said, 'We are all Socialists now.' And sooner or later, unless in the meantime the heart of the community beats more in sympathy with the needs of the poor and oppressed, there will come the Social Revolution. Matches cannot be left very long

it was finished. Much of the original tale has been altered and compressed, and I hope it is now more closely knit together and improved by condensation. Just as in the theatrical world plays are said to be "tried on the dog," so my story has been read aloud to one or two critical friends, not omitting my lively dog, who ought by this time to be a judge of literature."

I may add, from my personal knowledge, that Mr. Kernahan's story made quite an impression on the young ladies who type-wrote it. Their eagerness to get the next sections will, I trust, only be equalled by that of the readers of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE in following the thrilling narrative of mysterious Captain Shannon.