

S. R. CROCKETT

By GEORGE BIZET

MEN of the South, Gentlemen of the North, People of the West, and Folk of Fife, is Sir Walter's classification of his "loving countrymen"; and it is the first of these that, so far, Mr. Crockett has mainly made his reputation by representing. Full-blooded and fond of the lasses are the men of the Crockett country. The novelist has the temperament, and the mental accent, of his native Galloway. What the Parliament House and upper-class Edinburgh were to Stevenson, Galloway and its legends are to Mr. Crockett. In colours rich and warm he pictures the place, the people and its personages. He "commenced author" with poems—"Dulce Cor"—and there is an abundance of the "sweet-heart" element in all his writings. At first, while continuing to be a clergyman, his productions were rather in the realistic vein, such as "The Stickit Minister"; but when he became a professional novelist he widened his area, joining in the renaissance of idealism and romance.

To soothe the tired brain and calm the over-strained nerves; to carry us into a world where they pass the time carelessly as they did in the golden age; to delight our eyes and senses with gallant and gorgeous pageants; to appeal to that healthy feeling for action and deeds of high prowess, for all that is heroic in man and lovely in woman—these are no mean achievements, and so long as human nature is what it is, the novel which does this will not wholly lose its dominion over men's minds. That is the opinion of the keenest literary critic of my acquaintance, and it appears to me very applicable to many of Mr. Crockett's best romances; to "The Grey Man," vital with tender passion and alive with action, and to "Little Anna Mark." Here I may observe that Mr. Crockett is not generally successful in the highest in depicting woman: her part is often only that of a chorus, and she is, occasionally, at least, a little out of tune. But Anna Mark lives and moves and has her being, doing her part admirably in that splendid story, the wild rapidity of the events in which raises one to a pitch of excitement and expectation sufficient to carry off even the rather De Rougemont devil-fish episode.

Exuberant in invention of incident, Mr. Crockett is sometimes too stirring for the

middle-aged reader; as in the almost unceasing "go" and gore of "The Red Axe," the weird Satan-worship adventures in the later portion of "The Black Douglas," and in his latest story, "Strong Mac," where in one serial instalment the hero is liberated from durance for suspected sheep-stealing, only to be imprisoned again on suspicion of murder. Accustomed to the strict legal accuracy of Scott and Stevenson, one is struck with the mis-description "the Crown Council" for Crown Counsel, in "Strong Mac," which, mayhap, will read better as a whole. Such fecundity is incompatible probably with perfection. The novelist must live: he is human, with a home to support, and to be too scrupulous might be selfish. Hence he cannot always be too particular, thus resembling the Borderer, of whom it is written—

"He sought the beeves that made his broth
In Scotland and in England both."

Mr. Crockett was wont to be classed by severely æsthetic and satirical reviewers as of the "Kailyard School." That phrase has disappeared. Such a school never existed. It was merely a nine-pin put up by jocose writers, whose criticism had a tendency towards beer and skittles, and whose maxim was the easy one—"Tis better to damn than to be dull." It is facile work to find fault. Ignorance is very apt in the language of contempt. One sneering individual I cornered recently on an admission that he had read nothing scarcely of Mr. Crockett's, which fact surely cut him off from criticising, although he was voluble enough, after the manner of men who "parrot" superfine criticism.

Time enough to dissect him when he's dead. Meantime, he is, happily, very much alive; and so are the creations of his pen. Warm, palpitating, hearty people compose the world of Mr. Crockett, whose atmosphere is one of general joyousness. No life at low ebb, no helpless, hopeless pessimism; no anæmic analysis, but muscular action: in this somewhat resembling the cheerful student who, asked if he was to do analytical work, replied, "No, but I'm learning a little lyric about 'Annie Laurie.'"

Elizabethan directness is an element in

OUR BIRTHDAY PORTRAITS.—XVII.

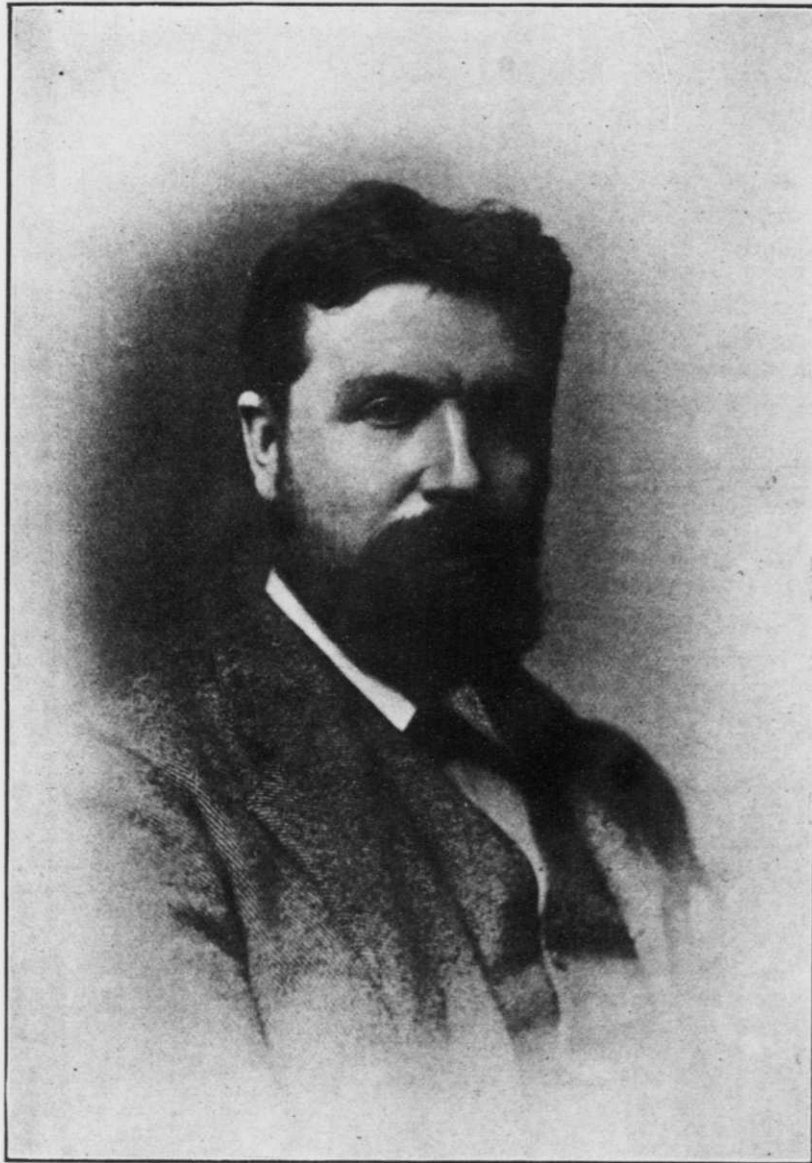


Photo by Elliott & Fry

S. R. CROCKETT.

Born September 24th, 1860.

his delineation of the dynamics of the tender passion, sung in "Bonnie Annie Laurie." Its energy rather than its enervation, its tension and its transports, are the main theme of much of his work, from "The Raiders" to "The Banner of Blue." That last is a powerful book. Its scene is laid in Midlothian, in the year '43. Mr. Crockett was Free Church minister at Penicuik in that county, and knows well the men, the place and the spirit of the time. From his familiarity with the Bible, there is a fine old English flavour about much of his phrasing. The tone of his mind is also elemental, that is, the great main facts of life are foremost—love, birth, and death.

His humour is strong, here and there a trifle heavy; but as Malise observes in "The Black Douglas," that highly-coloured searchlight on Scottish history: "Ah, well, 'tis not his fault. No man hath a sense of humour before he is forty years of his age, and for that matter 'tis all the riper at fifty."

Like the German Emperor, Mr. Crockett is still young, ardent, ambitious. High are the aspirations shadowed forth in the foreword to "Bog-Myrtle and Peat." The dreamed-of tales are to form the Book of his Youth, his Love and his Heart.

As the rosy fingers of the morn melt and the broad day flares forth, the visions of the night must fade. But aspiration and higher (if not highest) achievement may yet go hand in hand. For there is a brave and manly note in the conclusion—"Ever, with the eternal human expectation, I rise and wait the morning and the final opening of the 'Book Sealed.'"

Thackeray is a novelist of manners, George Eliot of character, and Mr. Crockett may be called a novelist of incident. But the time is not ripe for a more elaborate estimate; although there are those among us who rashly and roughly show a fine contempt and paltry pigeon-hole for most writers who have the misfortune to be not yet dead.

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