

S. R. CROCKETT

THE DAY DREAMER OF GALLOWAY

THE Green Isle of Heston lies placid in the blue waters of the Solway, near the mouth of the Urr, basking in summer sunshine. Shoreward are the brown and purple Galloway hills, the cliffs, and the red sands. Something stirs within us as we look on them. Or we may be lucky enough to be drifting on "the still flow of a silver tide" running inwards on a calm moonlight night. There are deep black shadows contrasting with the white light. Romance is in the air. We listen for the ring of an iron horse-shoe on the granite. Surely we should be able to see faint shadowy figures of the wild lington men moving along the narrow "pad" on the cliff head. So felt the youthful Crockett when he came out on his first visit to Heston from the Scaur. The subtle magic of the setting took form and substance in his brain, and his genius gave them suitable utterance. "Moonlight and May Mischief!" The tomb of the MacLurgs. The baying of the loathly hounds coming down the wind.

It is something in these hurried, modern days to have written a book which people can read over and over again, always deriving pleasure from it. This can surely be said of Samuel Rutherford Crockett's most famous book, *The Raiders*. It was the second volume by the new author to catch the attention of a rapidly widening public. When within a little more than a year *The Grey Man* appeared there were many who saw in it a definite advance in the novelist's powers. Popularity, however, has gradually settled on *The Raiders*. *The Stickit Minister* (published in 1893) has still its admirers. It came at the time when there was a widespread appetite for the sort of short stories and sketches which make up the volume; and it owed also something to its title. A "stickit minister" was an expression more common in Scotland forty years ago than it is now. Few ministers nowadays need really be "stickit" unless from choice. To be a "stickit minister" a generation ago, however, was a calamity. The expression was one of contempt and opprobrium. It puzzled Southerners, who were intrigued to find out what it meant. There was sometimes confusion. Tales of well-meaning ladies asking at bookstalls or public libraries for *The Crookit Minister* by Stickit may be recalled!

Where the Whaups are Crying

Having passed the test of ability to read it again and again, *The Raiders* may be conceded to be a classic. Wherein lies this perennial power to interest, to absorb, inherent in the genius of Crockett as shown in this and some others of his works? There is a power to impregnate incidents or localities with his own rich imagination, to lift up ordinary people and scenes and episodes to a higher rate of vibration, as it were—to mirror things as we know them, and yet to display them in an entrancing light. There is also the interest of locality. Gallovidians who know the places are amongst the most enthusiastic admirers of Crockett. They will point out this or that hill, this lonely lochan, this fantasy of Nature, the place where stood the tower on Rathen Isle, the cliffhead on which Patrick Heron "first heard their bridle-reins jingling clear, and saw the harness glisten on their backs." From that little white-washed cottage, in the peacefulness and freshness of an early summer morning, Jang Sammie Tamson emerged to feed the peeping chicks. Jang Sammie, a kindly soul, unsentimental, an unsuspected humour within him, a philosopher carrying self-effacement almost to a fault—he is a creation fit to stand beside R. L. Stevenson's Will o' the Mill. It is a great satisfaction to Scotsmen who admire both of these great Scottish romancers that Stevenson and Crockett were able to hail one another across the seas. That dedication of *The Stickit Minister* to Stevenson, with its waft of the hills of the Home Country, could not fail to take Stevenson by the throat. "Did you see a man," he wrote to Sidney Colvin, "who wrote *The Stickit Minister* and dedicated it to me in words that brought the tears to my eyes every time I looked at them? 'Where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying—his heart remembers how.' Ah, by God it does." Elsewhere Stevenson records receiving this first Crockett volume, "with a dedication to myself which affected me strangely, so that I cannot read it without a gulp."

The Wild Riders

Crockett's works are marked by a profound and wide sympathy and imagination. They are charged with emotion and humour. His technique was a great faculty for expressive language, interest in and keen observation of life and people, and a special flair for conveying the impressions and effects of Nature. In his pages we seem to smell the scents of the seaside and the woods and the hills; the fresh airs of heaven blow upon us. We are aware of the magic of the moonlight and the heat and the glare of the sun at noon. We feel the sharp stinging cold of the early morning flow of the tide of the Solway; we know the black shadows under the cliffs, and the silver of the reflected moon on the calm surface of Balcarry Bay. But these things are all by way of setting, and in due proportion; not an end in themselves, but the rich and opulent stage for high, moving events. Crockett takes us with him on the quest of the true romance—not any effete and over-aesthetic goddess, but something vigorous, jolly, even noisy. He is beyond all others the exponent of such romance and adventure as can be conceived attaching to the gypsies, the smugglers, the outlaws of times freer and bolder and more adventurous than the present.

"Where'er we see a bonny lass, we'll caa' as we ga' by;
 Where'er we meet wi' liquor guid, we'll drink an
 we be dry.
 There's brandy at the Abbeyburn, there's rum
 at Heston Bay,
 And we will go a-smuggling afore the break o'
 day."

This love of Nature, this extension of himself, as it were, into the things around him, dates from the first stirring of self-consciousness. Almost his first conscious observance of this world is described by himself in *Raiderland*.

"The earliest scent I can remember is that of fresh pine chips, among which my mother laid me while she and her brothers gathered 'kindling' among the yet unfallen giants. 'Too young to walk, I had to be carried pick-a-back to the wood. But I can remember with a strange clearness the broad spread of the moor beneath, over which we had come, the warmth of the shawl in which I was wrapped, the dreary scent of the newly cut fir-chips in which they had left me nestled—above all, I recall a certain bit of blue sky that looked down at me with so friendly a wink, as a white racing cloud passed high overhead. Such is the first beginning that I remember of that outdoor life, to which ever since my eyes have kept themselves wide open."

This remarkable child had only one earlier impression. He describes it thus:—

"It was a warm harvest day—early September, most likely—all the family out at the oats, following the slow sweep of the scythe or the crisper crop of the reaping-hook. Silence in the little kitchen of the Duchrae! Only my grandmother, padding softly about in her list slippers (or hosiery), baking farles of cake on the 'girdle,' the round plate of iron described by Froissart. The door and windows were open, and without there spread that silence in comparison with which the hush of a kirkyard is almost company—the silence of a Scottish farmyard in the first burst of harvest. And I—what was I doing? I know not, but this I do know—that I came to myself lying under the hood of an old worm-eaten cradle of a worn plum colour, staring at my own bare toes, which I had set up on the bar at the cradle-foot! These two memories, outdoor and indoor, have stood out clear and distinct all my life, and do so now."

This was at the little Duchrae, near the village of Laurieston, where to-morrow the memorial to Crockett erected by his admirers in this country and abroad is to be inaugurated. It was here, and in his excursions further afield in Galloway as he grew up in boyhood, that he gathered those impressions which are made admirable use of in his novels. Genius, it has been said, is only the faculty of recollecting in maturity the emotions of one's childhood. One may well believe it as one reads the pages of these books, which enshrine something of the wonder, the vitality, the immense zest in life, which belong properly to the golden age of youth.

Style

Through all Crockett's books runs the unmistakable imprint of style, the expression of a strong personality. It is this factor which

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