MORE THACKERAY LETTERS

By H. L. Pangborn

ALTHOUGH the many Thackeray letters, now printed for the first time in this volume, together with much material from Lady Ritchie's journals and correspondence, can hardly be said to throw any new light upon him or to add any facts of importance to the record of his life, the book is of the first rank in value to all Thackeray lovers. It serves to accentuate, to bring out more completely, the lines and detail of an already familiar and beloved portrait — of the valiant, warm hearted, loving and profoundly understanding man, unbroken, with head and soul erect under the weight of appalling domestic tragedy. Indeed, the dominant note in these letters, not only those to his infant daughters but to his mother, is one of cheerfulness and courage; not a forced, artificial cheerfulness, but rather the refusal of a great spirit to be overcome by calamity. Of all perverted, absurd literary misjudgments there is nothing to compare in ineptitude with the label of "cynic" applied to Thackeray. Satirist, hater of shams, he was, but there is not a trace of cynicism in anything he wrote.

It will be remembered that Thackeray himself forbade any official biography. His daughter's journal records that shortly before his death he said to her: "When I drop there is to be no life written of me; *mind this* and consider it my last testament and desire." But, of course, absolute compliance with that wish became impossible and the publication of a large body of his correspondence was legitimate. Now, with this volume added to the Baxter letters and the Brookfield correspondence, and taken with the important introductions by Lady Ritchie to the "biographical edition" of his works, in 1898, we have a sufficient fund of first hand information concerning Thackeray, the man. Moreover, to the understanding reader, no novelist ever put more of his essential self into his books than he did — especially in "Pendennis" — not as an intrusion, but rather as a pervading sense of the author's great personality behind the writing.

Anne Isabella, Thackeray's eldest daughter, was born in 1837 and was but three years old when her mother became insane. It had been a notably auspicious marriage. "It would do your heart good", Thackeray wrote to Fitzgerald, "to see how happy I am." Then the wreck; leaving the young man of twenty nine, still struggling for a foothold, poor and burdened with heavy expense, to go on alone. The children were, at first, sent to their grandmother. "God grant", he wrote in 1846, when the family was reunited, "I may be a father to my children."

Very many of the letters included in this volume demonstrate that he was. It is not an easy thing to write a real letter to a child, without "writing down" or posing; it demands, first of all, an absolute sincerity and a perfection of sympathy. Most of the other letters are addressed to his mother. They are frequently enlivened by characteristic sketches. There is comparatively little reference to his books, except in passing, in this correspondence. The letters are of value chiefly as additional illumination upon the man.

The latter half of the book covers, sketchily, Lady Ritchie's long and very full life, displayed in a series of letters to many people. She was, herself, a voluminous writer of no small ability, though of course overshadowed by her father's greatness. The section dealing with her, however, does not lack interest. She came in contact with most of the notable figures of more than half a century and we get glimpses of many of them — Tennyson, Darwin, Jowett, the Brownings, and even the aged Carlyle. The volume is an indispensable addition to nineteenth century literary history.

Thackeray and His Daughter. Edited by Hester Thackeray Ritchie. With drawings by Thackeray and Lady Ritchie. Harper and Bros.