

DICKENS AND HIS FRIENDS

By Henry Litchfield West

A LABOR of love, extending over many years, has enabled Mr. Ley to collect, classify, and publish a wealth of information relating to the friends of Charles Dickens. His book is a monument to well directed and intelligent industry and enthusiasm. It presents a stage crowded with the notable people to whom Dickens wrote, with whom he talked, and among whom he lived; but so skilfully has Mr. Ley done his work that these people seem to be endowed, even in the printed pages, with flesh and blood and living souls. It is this fact which makes the volume more than a mere complement to Forster's "Life of Dickens". It is a distinctive contribution and is worthy of a niche in any library where Dickens holds a place of honor.

Inspired by a desire to show the magnetism of Dickens's personality, "which attracted to him so many of the brilliant men and women of the time, and won for him their whole-hearted friendship", Mr. Ley has gathered from every conceivable source an immense amount of personal material, nearly all of which has a decided literary value. Even the trivialities are interesting because they illustrate some characteristic of Dick-

ens or of his friends. The latter, by the way, were almost as innumerable as the stars in heaven. It is doubtful whether any man was ever surrounded by such a circle; certainly no one ever left behind him a record of friendship so voluminous and convincing as the one which Mr. Ley has compiled.

No one can read the volume without being impressed, first of all, with the wonderful personnel of the Victorian era in which Dickens lived. Thackeray, Browning, Tennyson, Carlyle, Macready, Leigh Hunt, Douglas Jerrold, Bulwer Lytton, John Leech, Landor, Tom Hood, Wilkie Collins, Edmund Yates—with all these, and with a multitude of other men and women of distinction, Dickens enjoyed a friendship which was mutual; and while there is more or less of a tendency to make Dickens the sun around which the others revolved as lesser luminaries, Mr. Ley does not lack discrimination. For instance, when comparing Browning and Dickens, he says that "one was a cultured man and the other had no learning at all". He has also been judicious in the treatment of the episode in which Edmund Yates was the chief figure, and which led to the long estrangement between Thackeray and Dickens. The latter had interfered without warrant in a club quarrel between Thackeray and Yates, and Mr. Ley does not attempt to justify the course which Dickens pursued. It is pleasant to note that there was a reconciliation a few days before Thackeray died, because Thackeray had been a staunch friend of Dickens, had been a welcome visitor at his house, and having in some way made Dickens happy "a long way from home", had been given an autograph copy of "A Christmas Carol". This book was later purchased by Queen Victoria.

Mr. Ley's work is not confined to those whose names are "household words". There are chapters devoted to Mr. and Mrs. Watson, to whom "David Copperfield" was dedicated; to Thomas Noon Talfourd, whose name appears on the dedication page of "Pickwick"; to Baroness Burdett-Coutts, to whom a like honor was paid in connection with "Martin Chuzzlewit"; and to Lady Blessington, Mary Boyle, Clarkson Stanfield, "the best-loved friend Dickens ever had", and many others. These chapters, dealing with comparatively unknown persons, are full of interest and demonstrate the catholicity of the book. It is noteworthy that the "Dickens circle" consisted mainly of authors, artists, actors, and lawyers. "There is one class", says Mr. Ley, "that scarcely ever found a place within his circle. I mean the politicians." Dickens, it seems, "had a contempt for Parliament and its heroes". As a matter of fact, a political atmosphere would be utterly foreign to the book and would destroy the literary quality which is its charm.

It is not easy to withstand the temptation to present many of the incidents which reveal Dickens's character, and especially to reprint the details of his friendship with Irving, Holmes, Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, and other American authors. His relations with these men were so cordial and their reception of him was so hearty and sincere, that it is difficult to understand why Dickens should have displayed so much spleen in his "American notes". There is reason to believe that he afterward felt that he had been unduly critical. Lord Macaulay, by the way, declined to review this book. "It seems to me to be on the whole a failure," he wrote, and he added that it was vulgar and

flippant, frivolous and dull. This is a case where Mr. Ley prints the fact as he finds it; another instance being the uncharitable criticisms uttered by the Reverend W. H. Brookfield, whose wife will always be remembered as the woman to whom Thackeray wrote some of the most delightful letters ever penned.

The book, as a whole, is worthy of all commendation. It appeals to every lover of Dickens; but its influence will not be confined to this narrow limit. The whole world will be richer and better for its splendid testimony to the existence of a circle of friendships more precious than gold could buy.

The Dickens Circle. By J. W. T. Ley.
E. P. Dutton and Co.