



Life, Literature and Education.



William Makepeace Thackeray.

It is rather strange that so little is known of the life of Thackeray. In these days of publicity, when the most private affairs of every illustrious man are pried out, and in cold blood set up in type, this might seem a thing to be regretted. Why not, for instance, have a series of "Love Letters from Thackeray," with all sorts of interesting allusions to domestic affairs which are not nor ever were anybody's business but his own? Such a series from such a man might prove a rather interesting condiment. Rather obviously, however, it reflects rather favorably upon the character of Thackeray himself that he has chosen the other part. That such a man as he should deliberately give orders that no anecdote concerning himself, no great harangue over his character, his likes, his dislikes, his foibles, should be recorded by his family, those best situated to know, is surely a strong testimony to us who would still dare to ask, "What manner of man was this Thackeray?" to a modesty which must, in these days of advertising, prove as interesting as novel. Perhaps Thackeray lived somewhat before the days of advertising—and yet, even the love-letters, and the reverse kind, of Dickens have been published; and Dickens was his contemporary.

As a matter of fact, although Thackeray positively forbade that any "life" of him should be written during his lifetime, or published after his death, from what has been handed down of him from the broad range of society in which he was so well known, we know him to have been a man of singularly admirable character, gifted, in spite of his apparent cynicism, with the gentlest heart in the world, charitable to a fault, witty, bright in conversation, level-headed above all things, severe only upon insincerity, affectation and cant—three similar things, perhaps, with a difference. "His face and figure," said one who knew him at the height of his power, "his 6 feet 4 inches in height,

with his flowing hair, already nearly gray, and his broken nose, his broad forehead and ample chest, encountered everywhere either love or respect, and his daughters to him were all the world." If he had a weakness, perhaps, it was that he was possessed of a settled melancholy. This, however, he fought off persistently for the sake of those about him, covering it up with a playfulness which sometimes became almost buffoonery, and laughing, where a weaker man might have given way to irritability and gloom. For this melancholy, perhaps the greatest reason was that it was constitutional. True, his married life was very unhappy. Very early his wife lost her reason, and from that time until his daughters grew up he had no home life, but lived continually at the clubs. Nevertheless, brilliant success came ultimately to him in his work, and his daughters came to be all that he could have wished of them.

Briefly, the story of his life was this: He was born in Calcutta, India, in July, 1811, and was the only child of Richmond Thackeray, who held the position of Secretary to the Board of Revenue there. When the child was only five, however, the father died. His widow married again, and sent the boy to an aunt in England. Here he went to several private schools, entering the Charter House (which he usually referred to afterwards as the Slaughter House) in 1822. In "Pendennis" we find an account of his school-days there. Thackeray was not brilliant at school, nor ever a great favorite with his masters, although he showed some ability in writing verses and in drawing pictures. In 1829 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he remained for scarcely a year. During this time, however, he found the first outlet for his talent in writing for a small University paper called "The Snob," of which he was assistant editor. At Cambridge, too, he entered a poem, "Timbuctoo," in competition for the Chancellor's prize, which was, however, won by Tennyson.

On leaving Cambridge, Thackeray, who was at this time in no way hampered for money, went to the Continent, and, apparently, with the object of becoming an artist, spent some time in study in Paris and Weimar. But he never really learned to draw, and, presumably, since he presently gave up the study, became aware of the fact that he never should learn. Subsequently he illustrated his own books, but his drawings are merely burlesques, as, perhaps, he intends them to be. At all events, they usually bring out his ideas fairly well, with that emphasis on the side of ridicule which no one else, perhaps, would have accomplished so successfully.

In 1832, when he became of age, he became the proprietor of a paper, but lost heavily in the speculation. At this time, too, he fell, it is said, into the habit of gambling, and lost there again. At all events, he got away with his fortune in short order, and presently found himself under the necessity of working for bread—possibly the best thing that could have happened him,

as he was beset with an unfortunate faculty of leaving things off until it was impossible to do so any longer. He now contributed to several magazines, chiefly to Fraser's and Punch, writing first under the name of Michael Angelo Titmarsh. These first letters, which were extremely clever satires on current subjects, attracted some attention, but, strangely enough, while Dickens, a year younger than Thackeray, had burst forth into a blaze of popularity, Thackeray was still only "Titmarsh," comparatively unnoticed, nay, comparatively unknown. Today, popular though Dickens still is, no critic of authority hesitates an instant about which of these writers to place first as an artist in literature. Thackeray's first essays, too, were as powerful, in many respects, as his later works; but at the time, somehow, they did not catch the popular fancy. Perhaps, when the new writer struck, he struck too severely, straight out from the shoulder, and to pay too much attention, or to retaliate, would have been to acknowledge too well that a mark had been found. At all events, this inappreciation worried Thackeray. He must have been conscious of his own power, but few others seemed to recognize it, and he was continually harassed as to whether his work would meet with the success which meant not only the bread, but the butter, too, of himself and his family.

At times, it seems, this worry even drove him to think of giving up literature as a profession. More than once he tried to get a place on the Civil Service, and once, he essayed to become a Member of Parliament. In each case defeat met him (although in the latter case by a very small margin), and thus, probably, the country was saved a first-class novelist, at the expense of a very poor civil servant. In 1843 his "Irish Sketch Book" was published, and was met in Ireland with such a howl of resentment that, it is said, an Irish Colonel came over with the intention of fighting a duel with the author. As the Colonel left, however, on the best of terms with the offender, it is to be judged that the meeting was not exactly sanguinary.

In 1846 appeared the "Snob Papers," in which every conceivable type of snob was sketched, dissected or tomahawked, in a brilliant series of satirical portraits. Thackeray was, in fact, in his element when on the subject of the snob—not, perhaps, that it was so much his pleasure to lance, to probe, to cauterize, as he needs must in such a theme, but because so great was his horror of insincerity, sham, humbug, in any capacity whatever, that he must perforce seethe it down, laugh it down, burlesque it down. "I have," he says, "and for this gift I congratulate myself with a deep and abiding thankfulness, an eye for a snob. If the truthful is the beautiful, it is beautiful to study even the snobbish: to track snobs through history, as certain little dogs in Hampshire hunt out truffles; to sink shafts into society, and come upon rich veins of snob-ore." And so, from the beginning to the end,

Thackeray hunted snobs. In his younger days he perhaps overdid the matter; as he grew older he mellowed his assertions, as most people do with added age and experience, and became delightful.

In 1846, also, he started *Vanity Fair*, the work which really laid the foundation of his greatness, or, rather, of the appreciation of it. In writing *Vanity Fair*—the very name of which was a stroke of genius—he departed completely from the prescribed method of novel-writing. Previously it had been the fashion in novels to represent people as either all good or all bad. This seemed to Thackeray as nonsense, and he set out to picture actual life. As a consequence, publishers at first fought shy of the book. His good people, the critics said, were all fools, and the clever ones all knaves. They also said that Thackeray had taken upon himself to pronounce upon all the vices of the world, and that he had made the vicious of more importance than the noble. Thackeray, however, took the stand that no one is either all good or all bad. Rawdon Crawley, for instance, is a very human knave, who shows a bit of the better man throughout; Amelia is a thoroughly good, constant woman, with little weaknesses and oddities common to such a type. Becky Sharp is, perhaps, the strongest personification of selfishness ever portrayed in literature, and has, perhaps, as slight a mixture of the good with the evil as any of Thackeray's characters. She is, however, in her way, a masterpiece.

After "Vanity Fair," Thackeray wrote many novels of wonderful power: "Pendennis," "Esmond" (accorded by critics the honor of being the very type of the highest literature), "The Newcomes," "The Virginians." He died on the 20th of December, 1863, with yet another novel in hand, "Denis Duval."

Upon none of these can we touch in the space of a limited article. We can, however, and do recommend Thackeray to all lovers of high-class fiction. As you begin to read him, you may possibly feel almost pugnacious at him for his apparent cynicism. As you read on, keeping in mind the character of the man, you realize that, although he is a satirist, he is no cynic, and that he has simply asserted in cold blood things that people, as a rule, try to force themselves not to believe. His humor, too, is delightful, and scarcely a chapter in his work fails to contain more than one masterstroke of it. One is tempted to quote examples, but space forbids.

Thackeray's novels are nearly all long, two volume novels. They cannot be skimmed over in a hurry; but they will amply repay the trouble of reading. The other day the Governor-General of Canada visited this city. In our public library he enquired what had been, this year, the most popular book. He was unhesitatingly told "The House of Mirth." It may be very well to keep up with recent fiction, but we trust the readers of "The Farmer's Advocate" will not wholly set aside the old writers for the new. Thackeray, we venture to say, will compare favorably, even with Mrs. Wharton.