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 William Sharp
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LIFE AND FRIENDSHIPS

OF

JOSEPH SEVERN.

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CHAPTER I.

Early training—Boyhood vicissitudes—Apprentice to an engraver—
 Beginnings in Art—Rivalries—Mrs. Siddons as Queen Katherine—
 First steps to success.

THE name Severn, writes Mr. Freeman in a private letter, “is a curious bit of philology. The Welsh is *Hafren*, or some such name, which is said to mean *divider* or frontier stream. The Lake *Sabrinus* is according to a very old analogy, by which the initial *h* in Welsh, as in Greek, answers to initial *s* in Latin. The puzzling thing is that a law of change of that sort should be applied at so late a stage of the language. It is possible that the modern Welsh form may be later than the Roman Conquest, as in old Greek we find $\sigma\upsilon\varsigma$ for $\upsilon\varsigma$. But, as I am not a Celtic scholar, I do not much like guessing at these things.”

The Severns were a family of good West-country stock, for several generations settled by the banks of the Severn in Gloucestershire. In the latter half of the eighteenth century trouble came to them and caused the wide scattering of what had been almost a clan. One member of the family settled in Bedfordshire, and his eldest son, James, was the father of Joseph Severn. Mr. James Severn married a Miss Littel, belonging to an old Huguenot

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family, and shortly before his marriage definitely adopted, owing to a collapse in the small remaining family fortunes, the profession of music. Mr. Severn was a man of an excitable and somewhat flighty temperament, with native, though untrained æsthetic tastes. He was fortunate in his wife, a woman whose comeliness was only less remarkable than her sweetness of nature and alert sympathy. Despite her husband's headstrong temper, their life seems to have been a happy one. The Severns are a long-living family, and Miss Littel brought to that strenuous stock her share of the proverbial hardihood of the Huguenots; for, through troublous times, she preserved her notable vigour and serenity, and survived to a great age. Her eldest son lived to his eighty-sixth year; one of her daughters died three or four years ago, well on in her eighth decade; her youngest son, Mr. Charles Severn, after a long and honourable career as a musician, is happily still living, and as active at the age of eighty-six as are most men younger than he by a score of years.

Early in 1793 Mr. and Mrs. Severn settled in Hoxton, then a somewhat remote village to the north of London, and there, on the 7th of December in the same year (not in 1796 as sometimes stated), the eldest of their six children was born, and duly christened Joseph. The boy was precocious, for while still a child of five he drew a portrait of his father. The drawing was in profile, and was sufficiently good to attract more general attention than infantile attempts generally do; indeed, an artist friend of Mr. Severn declared that it was, in everything except firmness, excellent. One of the hobbies of the lad's father was to collect old pictures at local and second-rate Metropolitan sales, and though in one of his MS. confessions his son irreverentially alludes to the "rubbishy old pictures which [his father] was always picking up when other people dropped 'em," he admits that this paternal fancy, and the tolerable and intolerable pictures themselves, helped to educate his own latent sense of line, mass, and colour. Father and son were companionable while Joseph was but a child; in great

part, as the latter admits, because he was never tired of staring up at the canvas treasures (which came and went with almost tidal regularity), and of listening to explanations of their subjects or expositions of their merits.

As soon as Mr. Severn became convinced that his first-born possessed an exceptional faculty, he lost no opportunity of assisting its development. He helped the boy with hints in the elements of drawing and composition, and sometimes took him for a walk into the country, where he would point out a cottage, or a hamlet clustered under tall elms, or a wayside inn nestling like a huge white-and-red-strawberry among a mass of foliage, and explain the value and methods of pictorial selection. Occasionally he would insist on the boy's attempting one of these familiar subjects; once, for instance, at Tottenham, he prevailed on him to sketch an ivy-mantled cottage, for which purpose he borrowed a stool from the old lady who occupied the cottage, who watched the child with an astonishment which culminated in profound admiration followed by profuse offers of cake.

He was, moreover, a good story-teller, and held his children entranced with historical tales: sometimes he would simulate the personages of whom he spoke, as when he so impressed the imagination of his firstborn by his representation of the 'Ghost' in *Hamlet* that Joseph made, though in fear and trembling, a drawing of the gruesome apparition. Occasionally these peaceful interludes were momentarily broken by swift wrath at some misdeed of the precocious Joseph, when Mr. Severn would inflict unexpected chastisement with bewildering suddenness. Nevertheless, these summary punishments caused no feud between father and son, and in the main the boy seems to have been brought up wisely enough. The long walks in the country were good for body as well as for artistic training, and as the lad grew older his father was wont to take him with him to the various country-houses where he taught music, and show him the pictures and tell him particulars of the painters. Sometimes Joseph showed originality in his drawings, as

when he painted "a bright gamboge glory all round the coffin" in his drawing of the Nelson Car. This, however, must have been when he was no longer a child: and it was before he passed into his teens that some of his father's patrons noticed the drawings which Mr. Severn often took an opportunity of displaying, and encouraged the boy to persevere. In later life Severn was wont to attribute to his mother all his heritage of good qualities, and to her, certainly, he owed his joyous serenity of temperament: yet to his father, except in the matter of temper, he bore distinct resemblance. From him he inherited his most characteristic traits—sudden enthusiasms, swift emotions, personal vanity, with extremes of self-depreciation.

Mr. Severn deserves credit for having discerned his son's artistic tendencies, and for having done his best to cultivate them. Even when a mere child, the boy's education in this respect was not neglected, for drawings, engravings, and picture-books were frequently lent to him: and so keen was the lad's pleasure in these that, when given him at night, he used to go to bed early so as to "get up at dawn to devour them." Some of Severn's kindly-worded complaints against his father, therefore, must not be taken too literally; the "hardness" to which he more than once alludes was no very severe infliction after all—even the casual chastisements already alluded to, seem to have had no ill-results, and, as Mr. Whistler says of an apologetic critic's remarks, were "meant friendly." Moreover, as he fully admits, his father had several excellent qualities. He was thoughtful for his family despite his extravagances; he was generous, in the fullest sense of the word; and he invariably set an example of scrupulous honesty. His inability to bear contradiction was a cause of frequent disturbance, particularly as his children grew older; and no doubt here he had only himself to blame. Devoted to his wife, and not averse from domestic existence, he was something of the household-tyrant, for he would allow no domestic work to be done in his presence, and kept no restraint upon his anger if one of his children made any noise. Withal, he had the virtue

of industry, and displayed rare ingenuity in everything concerning the science of music and musical instruments.* It was well for Joseph Severn that he had so good a mother to counteract the somewhat too eccentric influences of his father, particularly as he seems to have been anything but a tractable youngster. Again and again in his "reminiscences," journals, and letters, he refers to his mother as his guardian-angel, as a woman of incomparable tact and rare sweetness of nature. From various accounts, it is clear that her charm of manner was peculiarly winsome. To her son she was something holy almost, and often in after years he wrought into the faces of the Madonnas whom he painted the expression of the mother whom he loved so well and revered so deeply. Among those who were almost equally impressed by the beauty of Mrs. Severn's character was Keats, who loved his own mother with passionate affection, and mourned her death, when he was in his fifteenth year, with poignant grief.†

Young Severn went through the usual vicissitudes of boyhood. It is needless to follow him in detail through his diffuse and discursive early reminiscences: it will suffice to refer to one or two incidents. During the celebration of the Victory of Trafalgar, the lad, enthusiastic for Nelson and the glory of a naval career, ran away from home; an act which had an untimely, not to say an ignominious ending, for, overcome with fatigue when but a short distance from home, he sank by the wayside and fell asleep by a post. There his alarmed parents found him, and so practical

* Unquestionably his three sons derived their musical faculties from him. Joseph, as he was assured again and again, might have been as successful as a composer as a painter; Mr. Charles Severn has won deserved repute; and their brother, Thomas, was a popular composer as well as a good executant.

† In the MS. of "Early Remembrances," Severn records a statement of Keats, "that his great misfortune had been that from his infancy he had no mother." There is palpable forgetfulness, or confusion of some kind, here. Probably Severn, who did not become acquainted with Keats till after his mother's death, believed that Mrs. Rawlings (for she had married again) had died during his friend's infancy, or perhaps that she was but Keats's step-mother, and remembered or misapprehended some casual remark by the poet.

was his father's argument that he did not again attempt surreptitious flight. Of an emotional and imaginative temperament, he seems to have been permanently impressed by a tragic incident which occurred in his eighth year. He had gone with a schoolmate named Cole to bathe in some water-filled gravel-pits, and in one of them his companion ventured beyond his depth and was drowned. There was no one near at the time, so the child had to watch his comrade perish, and then to make his way home, carrying the drowned boy's clothes, and break the news to Mrs. Cole. No doubt his extreme horror of sudden death was in great part due to this experience.

When Joseph was in his fifteenth year his father began to look about for some suitable vocation for him. If he had been able he would have himself instructed Joseph in the technique of Art, but notwithstanding his mania for collecting and dispersing old pictures, he had little trained taste or knowledge, and could not draw in the least. An artistic education for his son was altogether beyond his means. Entering his house one day, and seeing Joseph engaged in copying with great accuracy some old plate, it occurred to him that he could not do better than apprentice the boy to an engraver. Here again the question of means nearly brought about the abandonment of the project, for in almost every instance a premium was asked, varying from £100 to £300. At last Mr. Severn saw an advertisement which promised more satisfactorily, for no premium was demanded, but only an undertaking as to board and partial lodging. The advertiser was Mr. William Bond, whom Severn describes as "an engraver in the chalk manner," and who was then engaged in reproducing some paintings by Singleton. Young Severn had never drawn from oil pictures, and was delighted; moreover, in comparison with the canvases he was accustomed to see in his father's house those at Mr. Bond's seemed to him works of high art. In a word, he was fascinated by the novel artistic atmosphere, and, inexperienced as he was, imagined that with Mr. William Bond as guide he would soon become an artist.

Mr. Bond, on his part, was satisfied with the drawings which Mr. Severn showed him, particularly with one of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and agreed to take Joseph as an apprentice for seven years on his father's guarantee as to the fulfilment of the stipulations concerning partial board and accommodation.

It was an important change for the young would-be artist, no doubt, and perhaps may have been more influential for good than he was ever willing to allow. Yet it was the beginning of a long period of fret and unhappiness. In his own words, he "was popped unwittingly into slavery, and doomed to stab copper for seven long years." In the first few months he was well content, for though he had some qualms at being so rigidly bound by the indenture, after he had made such rapid progress that Mr. Bond became anxious lest so promising a pupil should leave his service, he rejoiced in his new surroundings and comparatively congenial work. After some months of exercises in drawing, chiefly in copying in Indian ink prints by Bartolozzi, he was set "to stab the copper." At first this interested him greatly, and he was an apt pupil; but when he wished to devote himself more exclusively to drawing, Mr. Bond held him to the terms of the agreement, and in every way discouraged all original effort. A feeling of resentment towards the engraver grew in young Severn's mind, unjustifiably in some respects, for Mr. Bond had bargained for an assistant in his trade and not for the superintendence of an ambitious and restless young artist; though, on the other hand, neither he nor Mr. Severn seems to have made the youth clearly understand the nature of the indenture.

It was about this time, however, that he began to find some solace in the study of literature. The "epics and histories" which he read eagerly in his few periods of leisure when he could not be working at his drawings further stimulated his inventive faculty. The desire to create became almost a passion, and slowly he began to feel his way towards independent accomplishment, though as

he had never been able to work in colour save with Indian ink or at best with indifferent water colours, he was conscious of his painful limitations. Occasionally he rebelled against his circumstances, and it was all his parents could do to persuade him that he would be foolish as well as wrong to desert the honourable trade to which he had been apprenticed. Ultimately Mr. Bond consented to his pupil's having some more time to himself for purposes of recreation as well as of study, for the boy's health was delicate.

Severn's arduous, if intermittent, studies enabled him to learn one invaluable lesson for a young artist, namely that his ignorance was out of all proportion to his aspirations, and more than this, that he had much to unlearn as well as to acquire. Sometimes there were pictures to be engraved which were really works of art, and from these, and his effort to reproduce them in monochrome or water-colours, he perceived wherein he fell short, as well as obtained glimpses of the goal towards which he was fain to strive. Among these pictures he particularly mentions a 'Laughing Girl,' by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and a Portrait of himself by the great artist. He also refers to a fine painting of Lord Stafford by Vandyke, which, he says, was offered to Mr. Severn for 2*l.*, an offer declined by his father, who "cared for nothing in Art except landscape." Untrained as he was, Joseph Severn at once recognised the beauty of the old picture, and for half-a-crown persuaded the dealer to let him take it home to copy. The copy was duly valued at Hoxton, not so much for its artistic merits as because it bore a striking resemblance to the head of the household. Twenty years later, when Severn returned from Rome on a visit to London, he saw at the British Institution this identical picture—"one of the finest specimens of the master, which had been foolishly lost owing to my father's ignorance of Art."

As his small circle of acquaintances extended, and with the renewed hope and artistic energy which were the result of his occasional holidays, Severn's health began to improve. The long walk to and fro between Hoxton and Newman Street, in all weathers; insufficient and monotonous diet;

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and the deep discontent which possessed him—one and all had wrought upon him to such an extent that he feared he could not endure the strain for long. But when he found himself free every now and again to do as he willed, his spirits rose, and all threatenings of a decline passed away. On these holidays (granted at first on condition that he would be more assiduous in his apprentice-work at other times), he frequently painted small portraits in water-colours, at the rate of half-a-guinea apiece, and the money thus obtained was spent on the materials of his craft and on books. He became, indeed, an eager student: for, more and more conscious of his ignorance, he set himself to self-instruction, not only in *belles-lettres* and history, but in mathematics, with rare and uncertain wanderings into the unknown ways of other sciences. But as time went on, and he found that he was no longer really gaining ground, and as, moreover, he realised keenly how fatal for him was his lack of training in anatomical study and drawing, he determined at all hazards to become a member of the Royal Academy student classes. A long time elapsed, however, before he gained his point. A drawing that he made, of ‘Joseph interpreting the Butler’s and the Baker’s dreams,’ seems to have been instrumental in convincing Mr. Bond that it would be best to let the youth find his level, whatever that was to be.

From this time forward Severn made rapid progress in the preliminaries of his art. When at home he lost no opportunity of useful experience, and he makes particular mention of one undertaking which helped him in no slight measure. For a long period, he says, “I was engaged at home making a little theatre. All the scenes were carefully drawn and painted, both in architecture and landscape; then the figures were equally well studied in cardboard, and in this way my ingenuity was called forth and many good opportunities afforded of learning not exactly to draw, but of knowing how much I wanted to learn, how much I needed to acquire.” But all this enthusiasm and determination was looked at askance by Mr. Severn, who could not believe

that his son had sufficient talent to enable him to overcome the apparently insuperable obstacles to success, and thought his indifference to the engraver's trade as foolish as it was reprehensible. In vain he pointed out that a master-engraver was an artist, and that there was artistic scope for the ablest draughtsman in so worthy a profession. His son replied that it might be the finest calling on earth, but was not to his liking, as even the finest engravings the world had seen were interpretative and not creative, and that he wanted to create, and to have free scope for his development to that end. The seven, or rather eight, years that were passed in more or less close apprenticeship to the art of "stabbing copper," were undoubtedly hurtful to Severn in other respects than by occupying the best years of his youth with labour at once enforced and alien to his tastes, and by circumscribing his opportunities for drawing and anatomical study. For the long apprenticeship meant all manner of adverse influences upon both his mental and physical development. He had no time for healthy exercise, little leisure for reading, and that at the expense of his already tired eyesight, and of his almost exhausted stock of energy; and, moreover, such reading as he could manage was haphazard, and so sometimes calculated to cause mental confusion rather than aid his intellectual growth. "The years of youth are as a mirror, foreshadowing the years to come," says an Oriental proverb; and with some such sentiment Severn closes the first section of his earliest reminiscences. No after-care, he says in effect, can absolutely readjust the balance lost through the expenditure in a wrong direction of those years of youth which should be bartered to a particular end with a heed at once scrupulous and far-seeing. "Owing to those limited beginnings," he admits, "I may perhaps have been induced since to undertake works that were rather the effect of love than skill, of enthusiasm than judgment. This may have been always an evil for me." It undoubtedly was, and credit is due to him for the self-criticism. Indeed, throughout life Severn was a strange mixture of childlike vanity, genuine