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# The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn

WILLIAM SHARP



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FROM A PENCIL DRAWING BY SEYMOUR KIRKUP  
ROME 1822

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THE  
LIFE AND LETTERS  
OF  
JOSEPH SEVERN

BY  
WILLIAM SHARP



*Severn's recollection in old age of Keats*

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TO  
WALTER SEVERN AND ARTHUR SEVERN  
THE DISTINGUISHED SONS OF  
A DISTINGUISHED FATHER:  
INHERITORS OF A NAME IMMORTALLY ASSOCIATED WITH THAT OF  
ONE OF THE GREATEST OF ENGLISH POETS,  
THESE MEMOIRS ARE INSCRIBED.

## ERRATUM.



On page xiii., fourth line from bottom, *for* derogate from the facts,  
*read* deviate from the facts.

## P R E F A C E.

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SEVERAL years have elapsed since the Severn MSS. consisting of a great mass of letters, journals, reminiscences, and fragmentary records, were placed in the hands of the present writer to be edited at his discretion. One or two editorial considerations, as well as other equally potent causes beyond his control, necessitated delay after delay; but it will suffice to say now, that in the main the original procrastination was due to the constantly recurring discovery of much relative matter (chiefly correspondence) which could not be overlooked, and also to the need, on many points, of difficult inquiries and careful investigation. The book was practically finished, in Rome, by the winter of 1890–91, but since then it has been wholly re-written. The original project was that the Memoirs should be issued in two large volumes, the first of which would practically justify the title ‘Keats and his Circle,’ while the second would for the most part be occupied with Severn’s middle period in London (1840 to 1860), his consular life (1861 to 1870) in Rome, and his last years in that city (1871 to 1879). But ultimately it was decided that this biographical scheme should be abandoned in favour of a more concise record. Of course, there is loss of a kind. A mass of correspondence of considerable interest has had to be wholly disregarded, and records and diaries covering many years have had to be condensed into even fewer pages. On the other hand there is the gain involved in the exclusion of much that would, in all probability, interest only a few

specialists, and of a still larger quantity of what in a sense may be called historical matter—either irrelative to the story of Severn's life, or which is to be found elsewhere, set forth with wider knowledge and greater skill. There can be little question that the life of Joseph Severn is of interest to the present generation not so much by virtue of his achievements as a painter, his consular services at a vital period when the re-birth of Italy was yearly, daily, almost hourly in process before his eyes, or even by that winsome personality to which such generous testimony has been borne by Mr. Ruskin; but on account of his intimate connection with the great English poet who, howsoever we may differ as to the qualities and reach of his genius, is, of all his kindred, the singer who is nearest to our hearts. Severn himself, declares a friend in Rome who knew him intimately, remarked, not long before his death: "With a truth that was ever inapplicable to Keats, I may say that of all I have done with brush or pen, as artist or man, scarce anything will long outlast me, for writ in water indeed are my best deeds as well as my worst failures; yet through my beloved Keats I shall be remembered—in the hearts of all who revere my beloved Keats there will be a corner of loving memory for me." Truly, Joseph Severn is worthy of remembrance for much beside his perfect friendship for Keats; yet his own foreknowledge is not to be gainsaid in great degree, for, notable as he was, and noteworthy much in his accomplishment and artistic and literary experiences, he would, dissociated from Keats, be, at this late date and in the inevitable pressure of more immediate and more vital interests, only as it were a voice to charm those among whom the personal tradition of the man is still more or less potent.

It seemed to the present writer, therefore—as well as to those who are also immediately concerned—that, from every point of view, the wisest plan was to make the

---

*PREFACE.*

vii

Memoirs in great part a record, in the first place of Severn's youthful life, and his early intimacy with Keats; in the second, of the whole episode of Keats and Severn in Italy, with, to repeat a useful titular phrase, all interesting new correspondence and often matter concerning 'Keats and his Circle;' and, finally, of the last five-and-fifty years of his long life, a life coloured and even directed from the outset to the close by the abiding influence of the poet. Naturally, again, with this biographical scheme, it was thought best, at the expense of any arbitrary considerations of proportion, to educe from the available new material as much as possible relative to Severn's early years, friendship with, and subsequent correspondence concerning Keats; to deal much more succinctly with the doings, experiences, and correspondence of Severn and his wide circle of distinguished friends, during the middle period of his life (1830 till 1860); and to concentrate, within the extreme practical limits, the record of what he justly viewed as the eventful and interesting period of close upon twenty years posterior to his return to Rome in 1861. Indeed, necessity as well as judgment demanded the condensation of the correspondence, and above all the minutely detailed and uninterrupted diaries from 1860 onward; for the alternative was a record so ample that the fundamental scheme of the *Memoirs* would be destroyed.

The only rival of Severn, in the minds of those who revere the genius of Keats, is Charles Armitage Brown. As many letters and part-letters by him have been quoted as was found practicable; a volume might easily be written from the Brown-material alone. But, at any rate, even the Keats-student will, in the following pages, gain a fuller knowledge of Charles Armitage Brown's life and personality than hitherto has been possible. The prevalent impression seems to be that Brown was merely a man of independent means and literary tastes; but he was, in truth, and of

necessity, much more a professional man of letters than were most of the minor members of the Keats-circle, certainly not less, for instance, than was John Hamilton Reynolds, though Reynolds had a finer native talent and a more distinctive expression. Brown's letters extend from the days of his trip to Scotland with Keats to the year of his death in New Zealand. They contain ample evidence that he was at once a shrewd man of the world and an impulsive enthusiast, loyal and unselfish in his affections, bitter and often unreasonable in his dislikes, at all times ready to resent an affront, real or imaginary, or to smoke the pipe of peace whether as forgiver or as the forgiven. But with all his hot head and warm heart he was an excellent counsellor for others, and no one of his friends benefited more by his good sense, discretion, and intelligent sympathy, than did Joseph Severn. Of his writings nothing has survived, save his share in the tragedy of *Otho*, his ingenious and painstaking volume on Shakespeare's life and genius, and, in another sense, that MS. Memoir of Keats which is re-embodied in Lord Houghton's 'Life' of the poet. His early productions are valueless, and even the humour of his comic opera *Narensky*, is of that broad farcical kind which sounds so flat to our ears. Some of his tales, and more particularly his miscellaneous descriptive and critical papers, are creditable performances, and as a translator he is at once sympathetic and able. It was a strong wish of his at one time to render the whole of Goldoni's comedies into English, and among his posthumous papers were many translations, and a long and exhaustive critical study of the Venetian dramatist. In his latter days in New Zealand he often talked of writing his reminiscences, not only a more detailed record of Keats, but of all the men of letters, artists, and other interesting people whom he had known. As he was a good *raconteur*, and a shepherd of all the

---

PREFACE.

ix

vagrant amusing stories of his day, it is a pity that he postponed his work till too late. Every one who knew him delighted in his company. Keats, as we know, rejoiced at a letter from the friend whom, in well-known lines, he once parodied as “a melancholy carle.” Bailey, Reynolds, Haslam, had a high opinion of him, and he was esteemed by Byron and Leigh Hunt and Samuel Rogers. There is much in his letters that would no longer be of interest, somewhat that is of too personal or private a nature to be disengaged from the gossip of a bygone day, and occasionally passages in that broader humour which has ceased to please; but in the main they are the letters of a gentleman and a good fellow, of a scholar and of a man of quick sympathies and native insight. His indomitable energy of mind and body (though not as a ‘Russia merchant,’ retired or otherwise—for Brown’s youthful experiences in commerce were of the briefest, and consisted chiefly in winding up the business which his father and elder brother had suffered to decay)—this indomitable energy was, no doubt, part secret of his power to refresh and stimulate those whom he encountered as friends; a faculty he had in no common degree, as Severn, who himself possessed this happy gift, has emphatically and again and again testified.

Certain words of the latter may fitly be quoted here, applicable as they are to the person who uttered them as well as to Charles Brown:—“One of the best fellows who ever lived; a creditable writer [painter]; a natural wit; a man of the world in the best sense; and possessed with a happy genius for friendship.”

It has been no easy task to select from the vast mass of Severn’s correspondence (and from his earliest days in Rome he was a great letter-writer, though ever an irregular correspondent) those letters and part-letters which seemed to bear most directly on the matter in hand. No doubt much has

been omitted which, were it included, would interest many readers ; on the other hand, it was obviously impossible to satisfy all in this respect, and the MS. material was sifted over and over to the end that no useful sidelights should be lost, no really valuable matter be overlooked. Severn kept most of the letters which were addressed to him, even when these were mere notes of no other interest than that of the moment ; and frequently he preserved the first drafts or later copies of the epistles which he himself sent.

His biographer has, of course, primarily been indebted to the great quantity of MSS.—letters to and from Severn during a period of nearly sixty years ; reminiscences, fragmentary, and more complete, written at different times in his life ; and many volumes of scrupulously explicit journals—placed in his hands by Mr. Walter Severn. Thereafter he has to express his obligations to Mr. Charles Severn, Joseph's younger brother, for much interesting information of a personal nature, and again to him and to Mr. Rayner Storr for their joint courtesy and assistance in entrusting him with a large quantity of Severn's home-letters for examination, excerption, or quotation. There are so many persons to thank for all manner of aid that it is best to make no attempt to specify each generous collaborator ; but sincere acknowledgments are in particular due to the friends and strangers, not only in this country but also in America, and Italy—and above all to those in Rome—who by loan of letters, communication of interesting facts and anecdotes, and records and memoranda of various kinds, have helped to animate what is even now a less comprehensive and living portrait than the limner would fain have wrought.

To already published writings he is also, of course, indebted. The most important single book or article is Severn's own paper in the *Atlantic Monthly* for 1863 on the 'Vicissitudes of Keats's Fame.' Thereafter should be



## PREFACE.

xi

mentioned Mr. H. Buxton Forman's monumental edition of 'Keats' (to which, in particular, acknowledgments are due in the instance of a few of Severn's letters or part-letters, copied therefrom instead of from the originals); Mr. Sidney Colvin's admirable monograph on Keats in the *English Men of Letters* series, and to his delightful edition of the poet's letters, a compilation edited with so much patience and care, and distinguished by such discreet sympathy and judgment, that it must be accepted as the standard 'Letters of Keats;' and, almost needless to say, to Lord Houghton's original and revised "Memoirs." Naturally all noteworthy writings bearing upon the personality, circle, or period of Keats have been consulted; but further specification would be as undesirable as it is unnecessary. Finally, thanks are due to one or two literary friends for advice on matters of detail, and for assistance in research where a more or less arduous quest proved necessary—and notably to Mr. Richard Garnett, LL.D., and to Mr. G. K. Fortescue.

A word upon the portrait-illustrations in this volume. The interesting silhouette of Keats is reproduced for the first time. The original, in the possession of Mr. Walter Severn, was discovered only within the last few years, having been accounted lost or destroyed at a period long anterior. To all Keats-students it will have a particular value; and specialists will note those indications of strength which are inconspicuous in certain familiar likenesses of the poet. The vignette-head of Keats, on the title-page, is not after the early miniature, but a reproduction of a late drawing; the latest portrait, indeed, which in his old age Severn made. Rightly or wrongly, he was wont to declare that it represented the poet as he commonly was; it is certainly different in several respects from the well-known engraving after the earlier miniature, which stands as a frontispiece to Lord Houghton's 'Life' of Keats. The

pathetic sketch of Keats in the extremity of his last illness is already known to every lover of the poet's work. The original is one of the finest things Severn ever did, and though it has necessarily lost much in process of reproduction, it will still, to those who look upon it—with the eyelids closed as they are in mortal weakness, and the hair matted with the dews of coming death—give that touching sense of nearness to the dying poet which so many have felt. Another instance of loss in reproduction is the engraving after the autograph portrait of Severn. Here certain features are too pronounced, and the more youthful look of the original drawing has evaded the translator. Fortunately, Seymour Kirkup's beautiful drawing of Severn, made early in 1822, and depicting him as Keats must have known him, has been admirably reproduced. It is further interesting as the handiwork of an eminent man and an artist who has scarcely had his meed of recognition. When one looks at this portrait of Severn in the prime of his early manhood, it is easy to understand how readily he fascinated men as well as women by his good looks and grace of manner, and how it was that in his early days in Rome his 'head' was so often 'taken' by his fellow-artists. It is quite likely that, in common with all Seymour Kirkup's portrait-work, this likeness is somewhat idealised; the artist himself, however, thought it a vivid portrayal of his friend as he was in the early Twenties. At a first glance, there is not much in common between this portrait by Kirkup and Severn's autograph likeness, though they belong to the same period of his life—even when allowance is made for the different way in which the long hair is brushed; but even here a similarity may be traced in the eyes and still more obviously in the mouth. In the originals the likeness is more readily recognisable.

It may be added that the illustration in the last chapter, that depicting the graves of Keats and Severn, is from a

---

*PREFACE.*

xiii

recent photograph, taken at a time when the interwoven clusters of violets grew as thickly as tangled grasses.

On one point, it seems necessary to add a few words. Severn had a capricious memory, and was at no time heedful of the exact verity of his statements. Thus it is that one set of reminiscences will sometimes contradict the other, and that even letters written in the same month (occasionally, on or about the same day), will be at variance in matters of more or less importance. The same picture will be variously sold at £70, or £100, or £150; the same event will occur "this year," or "last autumn," or "a few years ago;" this friendship or that acquaintanceship will date confusedly now from a period anterior to the writer's first encounter with the person concerned; now from a year or month when intimacy had long been established. In advanced age the old painter's memory often played him strange tricks, though in the very last years of his life his remembrance of the days of his youth grew clearer and more intensified, and much, it seemed, that he had forgotten in early manhood or middle-age, came back to him. It was this that underlay his exclamation in his eighty-fifth year, that he was fortunate among men in literally recovering in his old age his lost youth. A good reason, accordingly, is afforded for a certain suspicion of any positive affirmation in Severn's letters, reminiscences, or conversations; without verification, or, at least, consideration, one might easily be led to false conclusions. Possibly some of the Keats-anecdotes he used to narrate in his latter years were either coloured, or actually created, by retrospective imagination; on the other hand, he was so reverent of the genius and dear fame of his beloved friend that, in narration, he would not consciously derogate from the facts. A friend informed the present writer that the first time he heard Severn tell a new story about Keats he would doubt its all-round veracity; that on the second telling he would

think it was probably true in all essentials; and that if the story ever reached a third presentment, "it was certain to be an absolutely trustworthy record." So far, the present biographer has, in many like instances, followed this rough-and-ready means of judgment; that is, he has utilised no anecdote or reminiscence which did not seem to bear upon it the impress of actuality, or could in some degree be borne out.

In the same way that he has purposely refrained from dwelling on much of Severn's private life during the fifty years that followed his marriage—convinced that with the sayings and doings of Joseph Severn as a private individual, the public had no concern—he has also neglected many opportunities to diverge into mere gossip, and omitted much of personal family interest, which he need not have done were he a relative of Severn and engaged on a memoir practically intended for private circulation. Yet there is one point of general interest which should not be disregarded: the strong hereditary æsthetic strain in the Severn family—an inheritance exemplified in divers ways, but always notably: As stated in the early pages of the following Memoir, the father of Joseph Severn had a native love of pictorial art, and was, for a prolonged period, a teacher of music, a science which he almost passionately admired. His wife, too, loved it as one of the best things in life; and in her judgment, both of music and painting, showed an exacting refinement which, no doubt, was in some degree due to the French strain which she inherited from her Huguenot grandparents. Of the sons of their marriage, as noted at page 5 hereafter, Joseph became eminent as a painter, and might have won repute as a musician; Thomas was a popular composer; and Mr. Charles Severn was, for more than fifty years, a musician of high standing, the associate of the most eminent composers, singers, and executants of his time, and in his old age still

## PREFACE.

xv

delights in his nominal vocation as organist. The lady whom Joseph Severn married, though not an artist, had a keen sense of colour and form, and was, moreover, a woman of culture and refinement, native and inherited. Of their six children, three were girls: Claudia, Mary, and Eleanor. Of these only the third (Mrs. Furneaux) survives, and shares in no slight degree, not only the family love of Art, but, in particular, that of her twin-brother, Mr. Arthur Severn, whose name is so familiar as that of a painter of much originality, power, and poetic insight. Claudia Fitzroy Severn married Mr. Frederick Gale, so well known to cricket enthusiasts, and died in 1874; in her, the æsthetic strain betrayed itself in a delicate love and understanding of music. The second daughter, Mary, showed exceptional promise as an artist; some of her drawings had a refinement and grace which proved her possession of a strong and original talent; but, subsequent to her marriage with Mr., now Sir Charles, Newton, she died untimely in 1866. Of the three sons of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Severn, Mr. Walter Severn, the eldest, has already had a long and distinguished career as an artist; and in the craft of letters, also, has proved that he has inherited something of that literary faculty which his father had in a secondary degree. It would be altogether inappropriate for the present writer to dwell upon the life and achievement of Mr. Walter Severn; while, as an artist, what better word could be said of him than has already generously been uttered by Mr. Ruskin?\*

The same reasons obviously apply in the instance of Joseph Severn's youngest son, Arthur, to whom allusion has already been made. Born in London in 1841, Mr. Arthur Severn is now in the prime of life, and is fortunate in having sustained and enhanced the high repute which he won at an early age. This is neither the time nor the place to dwell upon his devotion to the illustrious friend of whom he

\* *Vide* Letter of March 26th, 1875, quoted at p. 219, *post*.

has been the intimate companion for many years, but it is significant that, with much else, he has inherited that genius for devoted friendship which was the good fortune of his father's life.\*

The late Henry Augustus Severn was a man of exceptional intellectual energy. Ill health interfered to some extent with what promised to be a brilliant scientific career, and in 1884 his constitution yielded to a prolonged strain. The eldest of Mr. Walter Severn's six children has also shown a marked scientific bias, and is now a member of the Royal College of Science. Two other sons perpetuate the family tradition; Mr. Nigel and Mr. Cecil Severn—the latter at present a midshipman on board the *Immortalité*, whence he has sent to the 'Daily Graphic' and elsewhere, clever sketches of naval life and marine experiences. It is not often that an artistic strain is at once so dispersed and so strenuous throughout three generations.

In a sense the writer of this 'Life of Severn' may repeat what Lord Houghton wrote of his Memoir of Keats: "I came to the conclusion that it was best to act simply as Editor of the Life which was, as it were, already written." He hopes that, at any rate, he has educed from the mass of material at his disposal enough to give an adequate idea of the life and achievement of his subject, and to make the personality of Joseph Severn live again. The story, at least, of an immortal friendship has for the first time been set forth in full detail. That friendship, as Severn was ever the first to recognise, was the golden gate whence issued the success and happiness of his life; and in the shadow of death, as in life, he turned his eyes longingly towards it. *Sic itur ad astra.*

WILLIAM SHARP.

\* Mr. Arthur Severn married a lady who is a cousin of Mr. Ruskin, and for many years the three have been one family, residing together at Brantwood, Coniston.

## CONTENTS.

### CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
Early training—Boyhood vicissitudes—Apprentice to an engraver— Beginnings in Art—Rivalries—Mrs. Siddons as Queen Katherine —First steps to success .. .. .	1

### CHAPTER II.

First meeting with Keats—Letter from Geo. Keats—Keats's appearance—Country walks with Keats—His first picture—Arduous studies—'The Cave of Despair'—Letters from Keats—Severn gains the Gold Medal—Keats-reminiscences—Haydon's famous dinner-party—Severn and <i>Hyperion</i> and <i>Lamia</i> —Earliest version of Keats's 'Fingal's Cave'—Death of Tom Keats—Miss Fanny Brawne—The Ode to a Nightingale—Keats and the Elgin Marbles—Keats's first collapse—Keats's decision to go to Italy	16
---	----

### CHAPTER III.

Severn's Art prospects—Haslam asks Severn to go with Keats—Severn decides to go with Keats—A gloomy departure—Sailing of the <i>Maria Crowther</i> —Keats's last poem—Incidents of the voyage—In quarantine in the Bay of Naples—Keats and Severn in Naples—Keats's indignation in Naples—Keats and Severn in Rome—Their early life in Rome—Keats's relapse .. .. .	45
---	----

### CHAPTER IV.

Letter from Haslam about Keats—Letters from Haslam and Chas. Armitage Brown—Miss Brawne and Keats—Letter to Mrs. Brawne—Keats's mortal illness—A brief rally—Severn's death-bed portrait of Keats—"He for his death: and I for his life"—Leigh Hunt's letter about Keats—Long letter to Mrs. Brawne—Keats's last days—Letter to Haslam—Death of Keats—His burial—Severn's many troubles—Miss Brawne and Keats's death—Notable letters from Brown and Mr. Taylor—Preparations for a biography—Keats's will—Severn after Keats's death .. .. .	71
--	----

b

	PAGE
CHAPTER V.	
Keats-remiscences—'The Death of Alcibiades' and other Art-work—Wm. Ewing—Seymour Kirkup and Sir Geo. Beaumont—Chas. Eastlake— <i>Keatsiana</i> —Letters from Severn and Taylor—Letter from Charles Brown—Brown's reasons for opposing Taylor—Severn gains the travelling-pension—Severn and Samuel Rogers—Remiscences of Shelley—Shelley's influence on Keats—Shelley, Keats, and Severn—The 'Adonais' Preface—Edward Trelawny—Burial of Shelley's ashes .. .. .	102
CHAPTER VI.	
A vision of 'Endymion'—Letter from Edward Holmes—Charles Brown comes to Italy—Correspondence—Leigh Hunt: Byron: Keats—Letter from Sir Thomas Lawrence, P.R.A.—The 'Greek Shepherds' and other Art-work—The Keats-monument project—First impressions of Trelawny—Letter from Leigh Hunt—Severn goes to Venice—His growing repute as an artist—Severn as a musician .. .. .	125
CHAPTER VII.	
Letter from Richard Westmacott—Brown's new home—Severn goes to the Alban hills—Massimo d'Azeglio—Severn's friendships through Keats—Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Gladstone, &c.—Letter from Charles Brown about Geo. Keats—Goes with Lady Westmorland to Naples—Miss Cotterell again—His life in Rome—Gibson: Westmacott: Seymour Kirkup: Hazlitt, &c.—Severn meets his future wife—A strange story of Papal Rome—A terrible tragedy—Severn's marriage—Letter from Trelawny—The projected Keats-memorial—Letters from Severn about Keats—Severn's wish to see 'Otho' acted—Eager for a monument to Keats—Prolific in Art-work—Birth of Walter Severn—Severn's famous cathedral-picture—His prosperity—Letters from Brown and R. Westmacott—Severn and Sir Walter Scott—Brown meets Monckton Milnes—Letter from Leigh Hunt .. .. .	141
CHAPTER VIII.	
The Keats-memorial—Brown's memoir of Keats—The "Great Plague" in Rome—Severn-correspondence—Tragic death of Severn's child—Charles Dilke and Charles Lamb—Letter from Sir Charles Eastlake—Letter from George Richmond, R.A.—Letter from Charles Brown—Keats's possible biographers—Last news of Charles Brown—His death in New Zealand—Letter from Mr. Dilke—Keats and "fame" .. .. .	177



## CONTENTS.

xix

## CHAPTER IX.

PAGE

Severn's life in London—Keats's dying bequest to Severn—The Westminster Cartoons—Letters from Mr. Gladstone and Mary Shelley—Portraits of Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Monckton Milnes—Death of Haslam—Letter from Venice from Mr. Ruskin—Letter from "Geo. Gordon Byron"—Severn's frescoes and other Art-work—Letter from Mr. Ruskin about Christian Art—Severn's 'Folio-Adonais'—The vacant Consulship at Rome—Correspondence—Severn appointed Consul—Letters from Mr. Ruskin ..	201
---	-----

## CHAPTER X.

## JOSEPH SEVERN'S MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS.

Mr. Ruskin on the East wind—'Imaginary Letters'—'Michel Angelo to Vittoria Colonna'—'Fra Savonarola to Fra Bartolomeo'—'Galileo to Milton'—'Light and Sound: A New Theory'—'Divine origin of the octave'—Severn's story: 'The Pale Bride'—Severn's novel: 'The Dead Hand'—Projected novel: 'The Lost Throne' .. .. .	221
--	-----

## CHAPTER XI.

Return to Rome—Severn and Keats—Meeting with and Letters from Keats's sister, Mme. de Llanos—Letters from Geo. Keats's Grandson—Letters from Chas. Cowden Clarke—Variants of the Keats-miniature—Letter from Alfred Domett—A strange Trelawny Letter—Letters from S. Kirkup—Strange conduct at St. Peter's—An amusing letter—Keats's Letters to Miss Brawne—Letters from J. T. Fields—Severn and the "Letters" .. .. .	248
--	-----

## CHAPTER XII.

Severn's Consular years—Severn's latter days—Mr. Ruskin's encomia—Death of Joseph Severn—Suggestions for Severn's grave-stone—Severn and his contemporaries—The 'Endymion' picture—Keats and Severn buried side by side .. .. .	275
---	-----

APPENDICES TO CHAPTER VII. (I. and II.) .. .. .	289
---	-----

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER XII.—"A Reminiscence of Severn" ..	301
--	-----

INDEX .. .. .	304
---------------	-----

## ILLUSTRATIONS.

I. <i>Frontispiece</i> . PORTRAIT OF SEVERN [1822]. By Seymour Kirkup.	
II. PORTRAIT OF KEATS FROM AN UNPUBLISHED PICTURE BY SEVERN . . . . .	<i>Title-page.</i>
III. SILHOUETTE OF KEATS . . . . .	<i>To face page</i> 34
IV. FACSIMILE OF PAGE OF SEVERN'S JOURNAL ON BOARD THE <i>Maria Crowther</i> . . . . .	" " 55
V. FACSIMILE OF UNFINISHED LETTER (24th Dec. 1820) . . . . .	" " 80
VI. DRAWING OF KEATS IN HIS LAST ILLNESS . . . . .	" " 84
VII. FACSIMILE OF LETTER FROM LEIGH HUNT . . . . .	" " 87
VIII. MOURNING FIGURE (in an unfinished Letter by Severn). . . . .	" " 94
IX. DRAWING OF A LADY OF GENZANO . . . . .	" " 144
X. GROUP FROM THE 'ITALIAN FOUNTAIN' . . . . .	" " 151
XI. GROUP FOR 'A PASTORAL' . . . . .	" " 153
XII. STUDY OF CENTRAL FIGURE IN 'SICILIAN MARINER'S HYMN' . . . . .	" " 167
XIII. MOTHER AND CHILD, FROM THE 'ROMAN <i>Ave Maria</i> ' . . . . .	" " 179
XIV. EARLIEST STUDY OF 'ARIEL AFLIGHT' . . . . .	" " 210
XV. AUTOGRAPH PORTRAIT OF SEVERN . . . . .	" " 248
XVI. THE GRAVES OF SEVERN AND KEATS . . . . .	" " 252
XVII. STUDY FOR THE PICTURE OF 'ARIEL AFLIGHT' . . . . .	" " 272