

MENDELSSOHN.



CHAPTER I.

THE FOUNDER OF THE FAMILY.

AMONG the once celebrated but now almost forgotten Art-centres of northern Europe, the nurseries of Song, the *foci* whence, from time to time, bright flashes of creative genius have radiated far and wide, few have laid the world under deeper obligations than sober, business-loving Hamburg. When German Opera was in its infancy, the inhabitants of the old Hanse town fostered its early efforts with a well-directed zeal which soon led to its acceptance as an independent manifestation of inventive power. The earliest Singspiel that was ever publicly performed in the German language—Johann Theile's *Adam und Eva*—was first produced at Hamburg, in 1678. Here, fourteen years later, the wealthy merchants of the north-east frontier built themselves a Theatre, in the busy Gänsemarkt, and flocked to it in crowds to hear

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the Operas of Strunck, and Franck, and Conradi, and valiant Reinhard Keiser. Here Handel produced *Almira*, and *Nero*, and *Daphne*, and *Clorindo*; and set to music the Passion-poem of Brockes, as Keiser and Telemann had done before him; and laid the first foundation of his world-wide fame. Here Mattheson invented the art of musical criticism; or, at least, invested it with so new and powerful an interest that he may fairly be said to have first breathed into it the breath of life. And here, on Friday, the 3rd of February, 1809, was born, at No. 14 in the Grosse Michælisstrasse, one of the brightest musical geniuses of the present century, Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, the subject of our present memoir.

The question of the hereditary transmission of genius is a vexed one; supported on the one side, and negatived on the other, by evidence of the most contradictory character. The history of the Bach family, for instance, would lead us to a conclusion very different to that suggested by general observation. But on one point there is no doubt. Whatever may be the case with regard to special manifestations of artistic power, it is quite certain that intellectual capacity, in its abstract form, is transmissible from father to son in unlimited measure, and, in certain cases, waits only to unite itself with some definite inspiration of imaginative talent, in order to produce an artist of the highest order. The special

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tendency may lie in the direction of Painting, of Sculpture, of Architecture, of Music, or of any other Art for the perfect expression of which imagination and science are needful in an equal degree. In either case, its power will be immeasurably augmented by combination with mental qualities of exceptional brilliancy. And therefore it is that we constantly find great artists springing from clever families not previously remarkable for the cultivation of the particular form of Art to which they have devoted themselves. There is nothing unnatural in this. The fire of heaven-born genius shines with tenfold brightness when united with hereditary clearness of intellect: that is all. Over and over again this fortunate concurrence of circumstances has led to the happiest results; but never to happier ones than in the case before us.

The Mendelssohn family was an exceptionally talented one. The branch of it with which we are now concerned, traces its origin from a Jewish schoolmaster of Dessau, named Mendel; a man of liberal education, though, as a descendant of Abraham, deprived, by the oppressive laws of the period at which he lived, of every opportunity of acquiring knowledge, except by stealth. On the 6th of September, 1729, the wife of this poor but faithful representative of the chosen people gave birth to a son, who was called Moses, and who in due time became known in Dessau as Moses, the son of

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Mendel—in German, Moses Mendels Sohn—whence the origin of the family name. The child displayed a remarkable aptitude for learning; and, by the time he was five years old, had advanced so far that his father decided upon placing him under the care of Rabbi Fränkel, to whom he soon became devotedly attached, and with whom he studied diligently. When Fränkel was summoned, some time afterwards, to occupy the post of chief Rabbi at Berlin, Moses followed him to the capital on foot; and, while supporting existence on a few pence gained by copying, still managed to continue his studies, in spite of poverty so grinding that his sole food consisted of a weekly loaf, on which he carefully marked out his daily allowance, in order that he might not be tempted by hunger to anticipate the morrow's meal. Under every disadvantage that an unjust and cruel legislature could throw in the way of a Jewish student, the frugal youth rose, from this miserable beginning, to a position in which he was universally recognised as the most accomplished scholar in Europe. In 1763, he married a maiden of his own Faith, named Fromet Gugenheim, the daughter of a Hamburg merchant. So rapacious were the laws under which his people groaned that, before he could obtain his marriage-licence, he was compelled to spend a certain amount of money at the royal Berlin china manufactory, without even being permitted to choose the pieces he would buy. The

manager, having on hand twenty huge china apes, supposed to be unsaleable, insisted upon his choosing these; and they are preserved in the family to this day as priceless heirlooms.

Fromet bore Moses Mendelssohn three sons, named Joseph, Abraham, and Nathan; and three daughters, Dorothea, Henrietta, and Recha; besides two other children, one of whom died in infancy, and the other in early boyhood. For the support of this large family the now famous philosopher laboured incessantly, but always with true scholarly reverence for a scholar's work; dying on the 4th of January, 1786, and leaving behind him a deathless fame, and three good sons, well able to provide for the future needs of the family. Of these, the eldest, Joseph, settled with his mother in Hamburg; where he succeeded in establishing a flourishing banking-business. Abraham, born the 11th of December, 1776, and therefore ten years old at the time of his father's death, was sent to Paris, whither his sisters Dorothea and Henrietta soon afterwards followed him. Dorothea was married, first, during her father's lifetime, to a Jewish merchant, named Simon Veit, from whom she was judicially separated in 1798; and afterwards, to the well-known writer, Friedrich von Schlegel. Henrietta—the "Tante Jette" of the family correspondence—remained unmarried, and was, for many years, governess to the daughter of General Sebastiani, so

fatally celebrated, at a later period, as the Duchesse de Praslin. Recha married a Mecklenburger, named Meyer, from whom, after a few years of domestic misery, she obtained a divorce. Dorothea and Henrietta became Roman Catholics in after-life, and derived lasting comfort from a change which they adopted from sincere conviction. Joseph and Nathan died, as they had lived, in the Jewish community; the one at the head of the family banking-establishment, the other in the enjoyment of a government appointment in Berlin. It is necessary that the reader should bear these details carefully in mind, for the descendants of Moses Mendelssohn were bound together by so devoted an *esprit de famille*, that it is impossible to separate the history of any one of them from that of the beloved relatives whose interests were too closely interwoven together to admit of even temporary isolation. For the present, it is true, we are chiefly concerned with the fortunes of the philosopher's second son; but it is none the less necessary that we should give a fair amount of attention to those of the collateral branches of the family.

CHAPTER II.

THE REMOVAL TO BERLIN.

OF Abraham Mendelssohn's career in Paris very little is known, except that, after working his way steadily upwards, he was fortunate enough, in 1803, to obtain the appointment of cashier in Messrs. Fould's banking-house. Resigning this post in 1804, he entered into partnership with his brother Joseph, in Hamburg; and, on the 26th of December in the same year, married Fräulein Leah Salomon, a Jewish lady, of considerable property, and quite exceptional accomplishments, residing at Berlin. The first fruit of this marriage was a daughter, named Fanny Cäcilie, born the 14th of November, 1805. The second was a son, Jakob Ludwig Felix, born, as we have already said, on the 3rd of February, 1809. Another daughter, Rebecka, followed on the 11th of April, 1811. Soon after the birth of this third child, Hamburg fell into the hands of the French, and the family, having incurred the displeasure of the invaders, were compelled to make their escape from the captured city by night, and take refuge in

Berlin, where the banking-business was carried on without interruption, though, after a time, Abraham withdrew from it, and opened another establishment on his own account. For some considerable time, the whole family lived together in a large house on the Neue Promenade, a retired street, with buildings on one side, and a canal bordered with trees on the other. Here, on the 30th of October, 1813, Abraham's youngest child, Paul, was born, ten days after the battle of Leipzig. And here the education of the children was continued, until Felix was sixteen years old, and Paul twelve.

And now it was Abraham's turn to take the step which his two elder sisters had already taken, with such comfort to themselves, and—so true, so loyal, was the bond of affection which cemented the whole family together—with the tacit consent, if not the inward approbation, of those of its members who still maintained the tenets of Judaism. Leah Salomon's elder brother had long been a Christian; and, in accordance with prevalent German custom, had, on his admission into the Lutheran community, assumed the surname of Bartholdy, in addition to his own. By his advice, Abraham decided to have his children baptized in accordance with the Lutheran formula, and educated as Protestant Christians. He seems to have adopted this course in the full conviction that he was doing the right thing for his children, though he had not, at first, the courage to take the same

step himself. But this period of irresolution soon passed away, and no long time elapsed before he presented himself for baptism, at Frankfort, together with his faithful Leah, who took the two new Christian-names of Felicia and Paulina, in allusion to those of her two sons, while the whole family assumed the double surname by which its members have ever since been distinguished—that of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

The only relative from whom any opposition to this proceeding was apprehended was Leah's mother, Madame Salomon, who, in accordance with Israelitish custom, had solemnly cursed her son after his conversion to Christianity; but even she was eventually reconciled to the inevitable change, and, at the intercession of her granddaughter, Fanny, wrote to Salomon Bartholdy, to assure him of her forgiveness, "for Fanny's sake." The separation from the Jewish community was thenceforth complete; and, though the affection of the three brothers remained undiminished, the Mendelssohn-Bartholdys were everywhere recognised as a Christian family.

CHAPTER III.

FELIX'S CHILDHOOD.

ABRAHAM MENDELSSOHN was a man of firm character, and great general ability; and, though not himself an artist, was gifted with a far keener insight than most *dilettanti* into the higher qualities of art. With sufficient discernment to detect in his children the signs, not only of talent, but of innate genius, he was himself entirely destitute of imaginative power; and, in later life, he frankly confessed his inferior position between the more famous members of his house, in the well-known *bon-mot*, "Formerly I was the son of my father: I am now the father of my son."¹ But, if wanting in the qualities which made Moses Mendelssohn a philosopher, and Felix a musician, he was wise enough to exercise upon the education of the latter an influence which proved of infinite value to him in after-life. And in this he was nobly seconded by his wife, a woman of highly-cultured intellect, who devoted herself without reserve

¹ "*Früher war ich der Sohn meines Vaters: jetzt bin ich der Vater meines Sohnes.*"