

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH.

By ELEONORE D'ESTERRE-KEELING.

In the work of every musician something of his character is revealed. As we listen to the glorious symphonies or sonatas of Beethoven we feel the pulsings of that great heart which yearned for a sympathy it never gained.

As Mozart's graceful melodies strike our ears with infinite tenderness we seem conscious of the presence of the kindly, courteous Viennese.

Haydn says to us, and repeats it over and over again:—"How happy I am. How gay is the world. Let us be merry together."

Händel and Bach point to Heaven and cry, "God is good!" And yet how differently these two utter the cry.

To Händel, who travelled across foreign countries, and visited many courts, God was a King, and he praised Him with right royal magnificence. To Bach, in his obscure German town, far from pomp or worldliness, God was a Spirit, to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

If we look into the circumstances of Bach's childhood, and consider the nature of his surroundings, it will become clearer to us how this thing came to be.

The beautiful province of Thuringia is bordered on its northern side by the Hartz Mountains, the home of German fairy-tale and legend; its former capital is a small unimportant town, which is usually overlooked by the casual tourist. Shyly it hides itself among the hills and forests, but even the passing traveller, speeding towards Leipzig and Dresden is struck by the massive fortress which stands above it on the crest of a mountain peak, the steep ascent to which is almost hidden by a dense mass of foliage. This town is Eisenach, the birthplace of Sebastian Bach, and the fortress is the famous Wartburg. The Wartburg was built with incredible speed, between the years 1060-69, when a terrible famine had laid waste the land and the men of Eisenach were thankful to labour in return for bread for themselves and their starving families. Till 1440 the Landgraves of Thuringia resided there, and during the reign of Landgrave Hermann, about 1207, the Wartburg was the scene of the famous Sängerkrieg or Minstrel War, a contest of song between some of the most renowned of the Minnesänger, among them being Walther von der Vogelweide, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Heinrich von Ofterdingen. These Minnesänger laid the foundation of Germany's musical greatness. Not only did they write poems, but each man set his words to music, and sang his song to his own accompaniment, played on harp or violin. The theme of all these songs, as their name, Minne, implied, was love, but it was love in the purest and most

ideal sense. The Landgrave Hermann was succeeded by his son, Ludwig, husband of the holy Elisabeth, whose beautiful life has been extolled in history and legend. This gracious princess used to visit the poor and sick in the little town of Eisenach, and she founded there the St. Anna's Hospital, which afterwards sheltered her from her enemies when, her husband having died on his way to Otranto, whither he had gone to join the Crusaders, she was driven by his relations from her rightful home. It was during her lifetime, but after she

among these children were some who bore the name of Bach. There were many of them, and all, or nearly all, were musical. One who was born about 1550 at Wechmar, not far from Eisenach, was called Veit Bach. He became a miller and baker, and in the intervals between grinding his corn and baking his bread, good Veit used to play on a peculiar kind of instrument which somewhat resembled a guitar. Veit's son Hans turned his back on the mill and became a musician, travelling about the country and fiddling at

weddings, christenings, and the like festivities. He is known in the annals of the Bach family as "Hans der Spielmann" (Hans the player). He had three sons, the eldest of whom, Johann, became the first organist among them. The second son, Christoph, had a greater destiny; he was to be the grandfather of Sebastian.

By this time the whole province of Thuringia was becoming well peopled with Bachs, and by degrees they came to occupy all the principal positions in the various neighbouring towns. Erfurt, Eisenach, and Arnstadt were their chief centres, and all the branches of the family used to meet at one or other of these three places for certain festival occasions, such as Christmas, Easter or Whitsuntide. To all these Bachs music was a sacred possession, to be cherished and fostered for itself alone, regardless of any material benefit that might accrue from its practice. When a man who had filled the post of organist, choir-master, or town musician grew old, and died or retired, it was usual for his successor to marry his daughter. To this rule the Bachs strictly adhered, with the result that bride and bridegroom were frequently of the same family, though the cousinship was often distant. The father of Sebastian Bach, Johann Ambrosius, was an exception; he did not marry a cousin, but chose for his wife, Elisabeth Lämmerhirt, the daughter of a furrier at Erfurt. But though Elisabeth was not herself a Bach, her family had already been connected with the Bach family, for Johann, the great-uncle of her husband, who has been mentioned as the first organist among them, had married Hedwig Lämmerhirt, probably a great-aunt of Elisabeth's.

It seems strange that nothing but the name should be known of the mother of Sebastian Bach; his numerous biographers have taken infinite pains to trace out his family on the father's side through a bewildering number of generations, but even the best of them, Spitta, is content to mention merely the name of his mother, and tells us nothing about her character or tastes.

Johann Ambrosius and Elisabeth Bach had



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had retired to the convent in which she ended her days, that Martin Luther found a refuge from his pursuers in the friendly Wartburg. The tree is still shown about fourteen miles from Eisenach, beneath which, at midnight on May 4th, 1521, the reformer was seized by followers of the Elector of Saxony, who had directions to carry him off and hide him in the fortress where he spent ten months, disguised as "Yunker George." Here he wrote a great part of his translation of the Bible, and the room in which he sat is still pointed out to visitors, though the table at which he worked has had to be replaced by a new one, the original having been wholly whittled away by people anxious to obtain relics of his presence.

Years passed by. Life was uneventful in the little Thuringian town where children were born, grew up and died, without apparent influence on the history of the world. But