



Fanny Mendelssohn (1805–1847), by Wilhelm Hensel

Sister of the Artist

Still, happy and serene as his life certainly was, for he had everything a man of his talents could desire, there were bitter drops in it of which the world knew little, and need not know anything now. There are things we know, important things which the world would be glad to know. But we bury them; they are to be as if they had never been, like letters that are reduced to ashes and can never be produced again by friends or enemies.

– F. Max Müller on Felix Mendelssohn, *Aud Lang Syne* (1898)

Note: I once found myself editing a film on which a little of Fanny Mendelssohn's music was to be used. We asked the researcher to look out a portrait of her, and this was duly received from a commercial picture library. The caption on the back read: 'Fanny Mendelssohn – sister of the composer.'

IT RISES AS A LOW SUN rendered oval by the atmosphere.

Having deftly cracked the egg and decanted it back and forth over the shell with a rolling motion of his wrists, seductive to the eye, and having rolled the yolk out and passed it slipperily from palm to palm to dry it, he now holds the orange-yellow globe on the flat of one hand and, with the greatest care, so as not to split it, pinches the sac between thumb and forefinger and begins to lift it, its weight deforming its circularity. 'An oblation for our art,' he laughs. And as she watches it rise, the glistening chalaza still linking it with what is left of the albumen, she remembers the apricot sun poised mistily above the frozen lake where their governesses, skating with long, languid strides, sketching evanescent curlicues on the ice's powdery mirror, pushed them for an outing in their infant-sledges. She must have been four years old, or thereabouts – nearly too grown-up for it. She remembers those governesses as great big moths, their hair piled up into their fur hats, their straight cloaks ending in

sable trim but, at each propulsive stroke of the leg, opening slightly as will a moth's outer wings to reveal a glimpse of their stiff white uniforms. And she remembers how much she used to love her sledge, its worn wooden handle between swan's-neck mounts, its balding green upholstery and its flanks of filigree cast iron painted white. And she remembers the overhanging pines, snow-padded to windward, burdened with muffs of ermine, the bottle-green shadows and the swish of the blades like a glass-cutter's wheel passing close with a puff of icing sugar, and the crackle behind the runners as the ice re-froze instantly. And she remembers thinking, as her months-old brother glided close and away again in their intersecting orbits, 'He is my little Indian boy, and he will be mine for ever.'

He punctures the sac sharply from below, and the yolk drops into the ceremoniously proffered bowl.

They are in one of the older buildings: a gaunt space with bare stone walls and with slate shelves, a touch slimy, set into alcoves. It has obviously been some sort of a workshop – or perhaps, as they liked once to tell each other, an alchemist's den redolent of vitriol and toad offal. Now, however, the smells are of resin and fresh laths and of exotic earths and of seed oil cooling. Viktor, in the excitement of his enrolment at the Academy, has transformed it into a studio. In one corner a tin sheet tilts over a lamp to collect the soot. On a shelf to the side, an assortment of jars contains vine charcoal, knotted roots, organisms scraped from the bark of oak trees, clip-

pings of copper steeping in vinegar, the urine of an Asiatic cow . . . Viktor has said, 'When we began, you guided me in everything. Now I shall show you everything as quickly as I learn it. There must never be any secrets between us.'

Alert to every detail, Veronika watches as he pulls towards him the iron mortar already silver-shiny with his pounding of malachite and cinnabar and tips into it some granules of lapis lazuli.

'Butterfly blue for Titania's robe,' he says.

'And Veronese green for Oberon's,' she answers, 'to echo the pine needles with their sheen of metallic ice. And behind the trees, though it is already night, we should have a streak of peach light as a reminder of the day that has passed.' Then, as an afterthought, she adds, 'And Oberon's features should be the same as the Indian boy's.'

She whisks a paper from a loose-bound sheaf, examines the point of the quill, dips it into the ink and proceeds with the expertise of a snake writing on sand to delineate a youthful woman seated in a bower while behind, solemn as the upright boles through which he moves, the tall, shadowed figure of the faery King approaches her. Veronika is about to add the Indian boy cradled against her breast when Viktor playfully snatches the quill and sketches there the corpulent form of a man, curled up sleeping, his furry-eared soft brown head resting placidly in her lap.

'There!' he says. 'There is the creature whose bray is the laughter of all who do not understand us.'

She thinks this will perhaps serve as a version; and she nods thoughtfully. 'At the same time he is the ass of Apuleius; and he is the hobby-horse prancing between the thighs to the understandable consternation of the clergy . . .'

She has been summoned to their father's study, which is situated in a tower in the far reaches of the estate, this mud-dlement of buildings and service yards which thrusts out into the countryside as if dropped at the caprice of a retreating glacier, or as an outcrop of rocks will strike higgledy-piggledy into the sea. From an abandoned stable, draughty and web-swagged, a short spiral stone staircase, immaculately whited, leads up to the room where the frail patriarch sits with a bearskin over his knees beneath shelf upon shelf of disciplined, hide-bound volumes, and in a corner a grandfather clock imperturbably mummifies the hours. As he opens the book propped before him, it emits the creak of a door to passageways of old wisdom such as only the old trouble with. In fact he is comparing the month's accounts with those of the same month last century.

He turns as Veronika enters, and takes her hand gently in his as she halts before him.

'Are you well, my daughter?'

'Very well, Father.'

'Hmm. I had heard from others that you seemed a little restless of late.'

'As you may know, Father, I was bitterly upset at being

unable to join Viktor at the Academy. But Viktor has promised to pass on to me everything he learns. Both he and I are determined that such a setback shall not be allowed to impede my progress towards mastery in our art.'

The father puts his arm around his daughter's waist.

'My dear one, there is something you must try to understand. The way of art is a man's way. Do not misconstrue me. I am not casting doubt upon your talents; and your accomplishments in this field do you nothing but credit. But they cannot provide – and you must not look to them to provide – your centre and your fulfilment. If this distresses you, it should not: for it implies a higher calling. It will be your destiny as a woman not merely to reflect life but to embody life; not merely to record life but to give it.'

He speaks persuasively; but his face is that of Abraham bowing to the proposition that he must sacrifice Isaac on the propitiatory pyre.

In a low-roofed tavern in a side street off the square where the Academy stands Doric and resplendent, Viktor and Sergei replenish their stoneware tankards from the vat of punch.

'So tell me, Viktor, are you engaged upon any work at home, aside from what you do at the behest of our professors here?'

'Well, yes, since you ask. We're at work on a large canvas of Titania and Oberon. It's nearly finished.'

‘We?’

‘Veronika – my sister – and I. We are doing it together. At least . . .’ He hesitates, unsure how to represent the nature of their collaboration. He has never needed to speak of it before; and he feels a little uncomfortable, even a little treacherous, in speaking of it now. But Sergei is intrigued:

‘You’re actually painting it together? I mean, section by section, or she the foliage and you the figures, or – or how?’

‘Not quite that. She has little experience of painting – although she picks things up quickly, and has executed one or two colour sketches from nature. We took drawing instruction together for two or three years before I was accepted for the Academy. No; she has contributed to the composition to some extent; but it’s rather a question of . . . I cannot say exactly. It is a world we have always shared, a world into which you might say she introduced me with her stories when I was too young to understand, when we were together for long hours, hiding in a library she’d somehow found: stories of Titania and the Indian boy, and of the forest and of the lake, and . . .’

Sergei waits politely, then realises Viktor is not going to continue.

‘And what does it look like, your painting?’

Viktor rummages in his satchel and retrieves one of the more recent composition studies, which Sergei pores over with interest.

‘Is this one of yours or one of hers?’

Viktor frowns. ‘I’m honestly not sure.’

‘It has a distinctive atmosphere. There’s something haunted about it. I’d like to see it some time. Might I come back with you one weekend?’

Viktor feels suddenly that a situation has arisen which can be resolved only by Sergei’s seeing the painting. It has become imperative that he should do so.

‘Come with me now. It is only two hours’ ride. I can bribe the ostler here to lend us horses – though he’s a greedy fellow.’

‘Whose horses?’

‘Oh, those of travellers who are sleeping the sleep of the damned. It wouldn’t be the first time. We’ll be back long before daybreak, and no one will be any the wiser – except that tomorrow some fat merchant will find his nag more lethargic than usual.’

Thus they clatter out of the city, their shadows thrown by the night watchman’s brazier leaping ghoulishly behind, great bats, as if to pounce on them, and away across the grasslands and up the forest path to the settlement, where Viktor softly opens the door of the studio and lights the lamp.

The thing looks more haunted than ever as Viktor holds the stuttering flame up for Sergei to see: haunted yet strangely consolatory: the cowed and antlered figure of Oberon, in his straight cloak of frosty green, rising behind his queen

who has deep alert black eyes and surprisingly heavy eyebrows. Sergei regards it for a long time, then delivers his judgment:

‘It is a wonderful piece. I congratulate you – both of you. But is it completed? I mean, is it not somewhat bare? Should it not have elves, tree spirits, goblins cavorting – something to set off the regal posture of the king and the serenity of the queen, and to lend them greater authority by the contrast? At least, that would be the way . . .’

‘You are right. You are right!’ Viktor is looking afresh at the composition, imagining the foreground meshed with arabesques of bramble in which Peaseblossom and Mustardseed will scurry about their errands and moths flutter with their snuffy wings. ‘Sergei, do this for me: take both horses back with you – you can’t go astray, there is only one path – and tell them at the Academy that I was called away on urgent family business, and will be there again next week. Would you?’

He does not so much as glance at Sergei, who, sensing the demented nature of his friend’s preoccupations, backs respectfully out of the door. With demonic resolve, Viktor sets to work. Some of the pigments are ready. Others he must grind and prepare. Resorting to the sketch-pad only for the occasional detail, he works directly onto the canvas. For a night and a day and a night he works without respite, without sleep, without eating. Early the following morning he steps back to survey what he believes to be the finished

picture. And, hearing the door open behind him, he turns and sees Veronika silhouetted against the dawn.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, now crestfallen, the fatigue rising in him to suffocate any sense of triumph. ‘I ought to have asked you first. Veronika, I’m sorry . . .’

She comes forward to stand beside him, her eyes needing time to adjust to the relative gloom. He tells her, in limping sentences, all that happened. He sways, but will not allow himself to fall.

After what seems to him less a hiatus than a gap in the very fabric of time, she moves towards the painting, picks up a small brush, dips it in white lead and adds two tiny highlights to Mustardseed’s eyes, so that the elf seems almost capable of hopping out onto the floor. She returns to Viktor’s side and gazes for a while longer. Then she says: ‘It has its own truth. Perhaps I preferred it as it was – perhaps not.’ His hand still holds a paintbrush as she lifts it to her lips and kisses it. Then she adds, violently, ‘But don’t you ever bring that Sergei fellow here again.’

Veronika leaves. Viktor curls up under the bench and passes out.

For many years after they had discovered it, the two made visits to the hidden library. It is only they who call it that, since, so far as they are aware, no one else is aware of its existence. It occupies a length of neglected corridor between two unoccupied rooms at the northernmost extremity of the

rambling manor. To have called it a library at all was something of a child's fancy, for it consists of a space a mere fifteen feet long and four feet wide with shelving set into one wall and two dusty window recesses in the other from which only the immensity of the forest and the immensity of the sky are visible – or were visible on good days. But the shelves are stuffed with books, many with extravagant and memorable bindings.

A book bound in what looks like fishskin. The scales are grey-blue, dull as corpse eyes, except that in certain lights they seem to glimmer with forgotten rainbow hues – or, perhaps more accurately, with that spectral spectrum which haloes the moon in winter. Opening it, one reads the following.

LONG AGO, when the world was ruled by demiurges – no, no, before that even, when the world was cradled only by premonitory rumourings of the yet to be, by anticipatory ghosts of Newcomen engines and sidereal navigation and horseborne plagues – a sister and a brother were born at the moon's pleasure and, since there was no one to make a crib for them, bedded themselves where quantities of mould and feathers had gathered by peradventure; and they fed on berries which ravens dropped and on nuts the squirrels had hoarded and, later, on baby mice whose frail bones were sharp as needles and from which their young teeth drew the flesh with aristocratic delicacy.

Because they had no parents to speak to them, they had