

Mrs. Nansen.

BY J. ARTHUR BAIN.



EVA SARS NANSEN.

From a Photo. by Scacinski, Christiania.

IT was his life-work, and without an attempt at it he could never have been happy. Indeed, so far from using any influence to dissuade my husband from his bold plans, I have always urged and encouraged him to the task."

In these words, there was a touch of heroism. They were spoken many years ago, when Nansen was making preparations for his maiden trip to the North-seas, and in them lay one of the secrets of the great explorer's success. Since that time the world has praised him for his indomitable courage, and the discoveries that he has made; but through it all, I have remembered the figure in the background—the helpful wife, who understood her husband's life-work and spurred him on to success.

Some time after Dr. Nansen started, I first met Mrs. Nansen. In response to an invitation I had set off for Norway, and at Christiania soon received a characteristic

note, written upon news of my arrival. "I shall be very glad to see you at Lysaker," the note ran. "I regret very much that I speak so horribly bad English, but shall do all that I can so that you can understand me."

Lysaker is the fourth station from Christiania, and our way to the Nansen home lay through beautiful meadows and odorous pine-woods. The day was perfect, and the temptation to wander from the path was great. The beauty and grandeur of the scenery stopped us at every step, and as we neared the "Godthaab Villa," at the foot of a wooded hill, and loitered to listen to the ripple of the fjord, we heard a woman's voice in song.

There was no need to ask the singer's name, for Fru Nansen, as she is called in her own language, is the finest romance singer of Norway. The music, sweet and echoing, suddenly ceased, and in a moment the door of the log-house was pushed open, and a trim, *petite* figure stood in front of us with welcoming hand and a smiling face.

That smile dispelled all awkwardness, and made us at home at once. Mrs. Nansen is a dark woman, with all the merriment and warm colouring of a more southern people, although, like her husband, she is thoroughly Norwegian. She wore a dark serge skirt, a cross-over blouse with full sleeves, in the English style of that moment. Again apologizing for her bad English, which, as we soon discovered, was unusually good, she led us to the drawing-room, and with a delightful movement of her pretty hand, said, "This is our little home."

The house is filled with the most exquisite art-beauties and curiosities from all parts of the globe, including trophies and relics from Nansen's Greenland and other expeditions. From the window of the drawing-room we had a magnificent view down the fjord stretching to the sea, and of the fir trees and mountains above. As we stood by the window, looking at the distant scenery, Mrs. Nansen remarked: "I have seldom seen the view to better advantage. He selected the site, and named the old log-house 'Godthaab Villa.'"

"Why?" we ventured to ask.

"To express his gratitude at finding a haven of rest on the west coast after his journey across Greenland."

At this moment a little child ran into the room, and quickly nestled in her mother's arms. A little round face, with beautiful eyes and a head of silky hair—this was Liv, or Life, who was a mere baby when her father went away. She soon sprang from her mother's arms, and her plump little body lost itself in one of the big carved wooden chairs that lined the room.

The Norseness—if I may so call it—is the most striking feature of the Nansen home. In the old Norwegian style, it is constructed of brown pine-wood trunks, and both house and furniture are carved in characteristic old dragons' and serpents' heads. In Dr. Nansen's room, to which our hostess

led us through a charmingly fitted alcove, everything is Norwegian, down to the very carpet and hangings. The arms of the carved wooden chairs are formed by the old Norse serpent twist. The quaint wooden walls, consisting of trees, not planks, give the interior quite a backwoods appearance. The study is a delightful spot, and at once affords an index to the tastes of the explorer and the domesticity of his wife. The books on the shelves contrasted strangely with the relics from barbarous and semi-barbarous countries on walls and floors.

"My husband is fond of music," said Mrs. Nansen, "and in his spare moments, I play and sing to him. But he usually has very little time."

A grand piano stood in the centre of the apartment, and we begged Mrs. Nansen

to play for us. She did it without hesitation, for music is the ruling power in her life, if we except the love for her husband.

Mrs. Nansen's sister, who, like herself, is endowed with great musical taste, is the wife of the well-known singer and teacher, Herr Lammers. The musical training of Mrs. Nansen was the



GODTHAAB VILLA—THE HOME OF THE NANSENS.
From a Photograph.

work of Herr Lammers and his wife. For five years she was an apt pupil, and when she went to Berlin to continue her studies her artistic education was already far advanced. For a whole winter she studied in the German capital with Madame Artot, and gave special attention to the title parts in the operas of "Mignon" and "Carmen." Yet she never became an operatic singer, as she was shy of making an appearance on the stage in that capacity. On her return to Christiania she commenced to teach singing, and this useful employment still occupies part of her time. She frequently appears at concerts; and the music-lovers of Christiania, Bergen, Trondhjem, and other Norwegian towns hail her appearance on the platform with lively satisfaction. The tours which

she has from time to time taken through Sweden and Denmark were attended by conspicuous success. Her assistance, highly appreciated and frequently solicited as it is, is given readily, and with a winning grace that enhances the charm of the favour.

The song that Mrs. Nansen sang for us expressed the character of the woman. It was natural, true, strong in its depths and earnestness of feeling, and destitute of any trace of false sentimentality. "It is one of Grieg's," she said. "I am passionately fond of Grieg and Jansen, and they are among my best friends."

Mrs. Nansen comes from one of the best families of Norway. She is the youngest daughter of the late Professor M. Sars, a Norwegian naturalist of great eminence; was born in Christiania in 1858, and was married in September, 1889. Her father was the talented author of "Fauna Litteralis Norwegiæ."

Her mother is a sister of the Norwegian poet Welhaven, a contemporary of Vergeland. The Sars salon is a centre of the intellectual world of the Norwegian capital, both artistic, scientific, and political, reminding one of those Parisian centres of talent and wit of the days of Louis Quatorze. The family consists of four — two brothers and two sisters. Ernest, the eldest, has won distinction in literature. He is classed among Norway's most celebrated historians; and he and the famous Bjornstjerne Bjornson are the chief Radical leaders in Norway. Ossian, the younger son, has trodden his father's footsteps, is looked upon as an undoubted authority in matters relating to natural history, and is the present Professor of Zoology at the University of Christiania.

A few of these facts were modestly given by Mrs. Nansen as we looked at the family photographs. There were several oil-paintings from the brushes of Dr. and Mrs. Nansen on the walls. But among the pictures which were treasured most were two instantaneous photographs, taken at the time of his departure on the now celebrated trip, the first depicting Dr. Nansen gazing through

a pair of glasses at his wife from the bridge of the *Fram*, as the vessel steamed slowly down the fjord on its way to the sea; the second showing him in the act of waving his hat to her in a last farewell.

We then showed our hostess a photograph of her husband which had been purchased in Christiania, but when she saw it she shook her head.

"It is very poor. This is the only real portrait of the doctor." And she handed a cabinet to me, adding, "I will give it to you." The photograph is here reproduced.

It was evident that it did not disturb Mrs. Nansen in the least to talk of her absent husband. At the present moment, when the wanderer has returned and the happy reunion has come, the long moments of waiting have been forgotten. But at the time of our visit, the strain must have been particularly hard, yet in her words there was a trustfulness and sweet content. They were prophetic, too.

"Not for a moment," said Mrs. Nansen, "do I doubt his return. Why, if I had not indeed the greatest confidence in his success, I should never have been foolish enough to let him go. The *Fram* may be crushed, but they have special boats in case of that disaster. If they, too, are lost, then they have their lighter boats and strong portable silk tents and sleeping-bags to place

on the ice, in which to live, as they drift on or travel over the ice on their ski, for, as in the crossing of Greenland, these will form a special feature of locomotion should the ship be deserted.

"When he comes back," she continued, "he will be quite exhausted. He was tired out after his trip to Greenland and his lecture tour in England. I shall take him away to our mountains, and, perhaps, we may go to England." Then, after a pause, "I love your England. I was there for a few weeks on my wedding tour, and I should like to go again to learn the language perfectly."

For a few seconds we chatted about languages. "I find German the easiest to



DR. NANSEN.
From a Photo. by Szacinski, Christiania.

learn, and English next. But, French—oh! it is so difficult to me.”

We were now seated in the drawing-room, and looking through the open window on the spreading waters of the fjord. The little bright-eyed child was playing in a far-off corner, and did not hear the mother's soft remark:—

“Liv was only a baby when her father went away. Won't he be surprised when he gets back to see how big she has grown!”

We then asked Mrs. Nansen if it was true that she had been on the very point of accompanying her husband to the Pole.

“Yes, quite true. It was his intention to let me go, but at the last moment Captain Sverdrup asked him to leave me at home, and the crew, although they really thought I could stand the voyage, joined the captain in his request. So I stayed at home, and since then have spent my time singing and teaching. But I often think that I might have stood the trip.”

There was a good reason for this remark, for Mrs. Nansen, despite her small frame, is one of the most athletic women of the North. Her skill as a skilober is recognised throughout Scandinavia, and she has accompanied her husband in many of his winter ski runs in the mountains and valleys of their beloved Norway. “He candidly confesses,” she laughed, “that he never saw me ‘done up’ but once, and that was after twenty-four hours' severe hill-climbing on ski.”

Before their marriage, Dr. Nansen and his *fiancée* agreed that the modes of life of neither should be materially changed; that he should not abandon his scheme of exploration, and that she should continue her teaching. And once, when she was asked if she had no desire to accompany her husband, she answered, “No, indeed, that would be

outside the sphere of woman.” The desire grew strong, however, and it was but natural that she should want to accompany the explorer into danger. For of such material are wifely women made.



MRS. NANSEN AND HER DAUGHTER LIV.
From a Photo. by Gibbsson, Christiania.