



MISS ANNA WILLIAMS AND MISS HILDA WILSON.

BY F. KLICKMANN.



IN the extreme north-west of suburban London numbers of pretty red brick houses are continually springing up among the green fields and fine old trees, and are eagerly seized upon by those who love seclusion and quiet and yet desire to be within easy reach of the huge vortex of life, the metropolis. The district fairly bristles with well-known names, for the great ones of the earth are rapidly finding out that the bracing air of the heights is infinitely preferable to the stifling atmosphere of the West-End terraces and squares.

One of the prettiest of these pretty houses is the home of Miss Anna Williams, a singer who requires no introduction. To have been before the public since 1874, in the very front rank of the profession too, and yet retain the freshness and brilliancy of twenty years ago, is an enviable reputation.

In speaking of her childhood, Miss Williams said that everyone was most astonished when she stated her determination to enter the musical profession. Her father, Mr. Smith Williams, was a man of an extremely romantic and artistic temperament. In the evening the small petted Anna would sit on a stool at his knee while he said to the older ones—

“Now, girls, shall we have some Mozart?”

“I don't like Mozart!” the little maiden would say. “Can't we have some operatic music instead?” But Mozart invariably carried the day.

Mr. Smith Williams was connected with the well-known publishing house of Smith, Elder & Co., and though he was intensely musical, it was literature that was his life-

work. An opportunity came to him that does not come to every man, and he did not fail to make the best of it. One day a MS. by a new and unknown writer was submitted to the publishers for their consideration. Mr. Williams read it and urged its purchase; but the firm eyed it askance. It was entitled “Jane Eyre,” and was rather more sensational than the books usually issued by the house. They thought it a risky and questionable policy to take it, but Mr. Williams eventually had his way; and in due course other MSS. by the same author found their way to London and aroused the interest of the reading world.

One day Mr. Williams told his wife that he had distant country cousins coming to visit him, and he brought them to the house and introduced them under an assumed name. Mrs. Smith Williams was as shrewdly practical as her husband was visionary and romantic; and, being a woman, was not so easily deceived. When those quiet, unassuming north country women were gone, she said to her husband, “Unless I am much mistaken those are the Miss Brontës; in that case they must indeed be very distant cousins!” And her husband only laughed. At the house of Mr. Smith Williams the Brontës were introduced to Thackeray and the other leading literary lights of the day.

“When my father was living we saw such a number of interesting people,” Miss Williams said—“Ruskin, Carlyle, Thackeray, Leigh Hunt, and so many others.” But she deplors the fact that she can remember but little of this; she was quite young when her father died. It is the older brothers and sisters who have vivid personal recollections of these brilliant gatherings. There is a

large crayon sketch of Leigh Hunt hanging on the dining-room wall, the work of one brother, who would have been an exceptionally clever artist had he lived (he was only a lad at the time he sketched this); while in the drawing-room is an exquisite portrait of a great granddaughter of the poet.

But literature must give place to music, though it is impossible to get Miss Anna Williams to do herself justice, from an interviewesque point of view. If one asks "What was your first big success?" she looks up in a surprised manner, and says, "I wasn't aware I had ever had any!" She is absolutely devoid of any trace of egoism.

"You see my career has been merely a process of degrees," she explained. "I was not like some people who have gone to bed a nonentity, and got up next morning to find themselves famous. It has been simply a question of steadily moving along; trying to be ready for everything that came in my way; never feeling that I had done anything, but always hoping to do it in the future. I was fortunate in being able to step into a gap, now and again, at a moment's notice; and so one thing led on to more.

"I started as a girl with the desire to become a singer; I knew I should have to work hard, but that was an inducement rather than otherwise. My brothers and sisters were all musical, consequently my voice, which was the smallest of all, was considered unworthy of a second thought. But when I began to show signs of improvement a friend offered me a hundred pounds if I would go to Italy to study, and I calmly announced at home that I was going. 'What!' they all said, 'Anna! Going abroad! Why, she is so nervous that she is afraid to sleep in a room without a nightlight burning, and she is frightened of her own shadow. She will never have the courage to go, and if she does she'll soon come back again!' But my own mind was quite made up, and to Naples I went. I feel I owe so much to that year in Italy. In the first place I found my own level. It is such a good thing for a student

to be removed clean out of her circle of admiring relatives, who as a rule praise so indiscriminately! Then I could work without the interruptions that inevitably occur when one is at home. But above all, the Italian method of voice production is so splendid; so utterly unlike anything one is taught elsewhere. The Italians seem to me to be so far in advance of any other nation in this respect. Although Germany is the land of music that it is, they force their voices too much, and produce a harsh tone, while in France very few singers understand how to manage their breath correctly, and the result is a dreadful *vibrato*."

"Did you continue your studies when you returned to England?"

"Why, yes, of course!

I have never discontinued them. I am always studying and re-studying a work. I often smile when people say to me, 'Ah, how delightful it must be when one has really got there, as you have. How pleasant it must be to feel that you have nothing left to do.' But wherever that ambiguous 'there' may be that they suppose I have reached, I am sure I do not know. All I can say is that I work every day as hard and as conscientiously as in my earliest student days. An accompanist comes to me frequently, and I not only study minutely every new work in which I have to

sing, but I keep going over again and again such old friends as 'Samson,' 'St. Paul,' 'The Last Judgment,' and the like. In this way one's rendering should benefit, as time goes on, by the experience one has gained."

Here it might be mentioned as an indication of the thoroughness with which this celebrated soprano prepares for a concert, that in a large work she not only studies her own part, but she makes herself thoroughly acquainted with the entire work, solos and all, maintaining that it is only in this way that one can properly grasp the whole of the composer's meaning.

One always thinks of Miss Anna Williams as essentially an oratorical singer. I asked if she had ever sung in opera.



From a photo by]

[Hadley, Lincoln.

MISS ANNA WILLIAMS.

"Yes, in my early days I did; and, oh! I should have liked above all things to have been allowed to continue. But I am too tall for the ordinary heroine; and more than that it was oratorio music I was always being called to sing. It is strange, but one doesn't find one's own *métier*; the public find it for you; and in my case they have kindly decided that they prefer me in sacred music."

And the public are right. Miss Anna Williams has sung in every one of the Three Choir Festivals since 1876, she has also sung at the Birmingham and other provincial festivals, in addition to the Handel Festivals and Royal Choral Society's concerts. This may be said to cover the whole of the ground devoted to sacred music, and is in itself a wonderful tribute to her prestige as a singer and her ability as a musician.

As our "Moments" are unconventional, a word or two may be said about Miss Williams "at home." Perhaps the first thing that strikes one on looking round the rooms, is the utter absence of indication that it is the home of a musician. True there are pianos, and a little music here and there, but that is no distinctive feature in the modern dwelling. One looks about for the hundred-and-one signed portraits that invariably be-litter the home of a *prima donna*. But there are only two or three at the most, and they hardly catch one's eye, the walls being hung with a legion of beautiful paintings, by various well-known artists, including several by Mr. Lowes Dickinson, who is a brother-in-law of Miss Williams.

But by an inverse ratio the portraits that are in evidence gain in distinction what they lack in numbers.

"Whom do I consider the greatest living conductor?" said Miss Williams, echoing my words. "Here he is." And from the mantelpiece she took a portrait of Dr. Richter, on the back of which was written in the doctor's graceful handwriting: "To Miss Williams. In remembrance of her excellent singing of the great aria from 'Fidelio,' Birmingham, '88," and a few bars of the solo are added. On one occasion, in speaking of Miss Williams, the Hungarian conductor described her as a "hero." Close beside the great conductor stands a panel portrait of Dr. Hubert Parry, upon which the composer has written a few bars from "Judith," in the rendering of the soprano solos of which Miss Anna Williams has no equal. She is a great admirer of Dr. Parry's works; and she is well calculated to judge,

having created the soprano parts of "Prometheus Unbound," and "Judith."

"But," she added, "I have had one immense disappointment in life. I had a dog that I thought was going to develop into a most beautiful specimen of a Dachshund, so I named him after our finest English composer. But, to my sorrow, he has turned out a terrible mongrel!"

A whistle quickly brought "Parry" to his mistress's feet, accompanied by his father "Nap," and then began an amusing performance. At a word they became "dead dogs" in a most exemplary manner. A biscuit was placed beside them, while they were told that it was "not for Sullivan"; I should have quickly settled that point beyond all further controversy, had I been the dogs, but they remained "dead," and were further informed that it was "not for Cowen," and not for various other musical celebrities; but on hearing the name "Parry," the biscuit instantly became a thing of nought. Then the two dogs stood on their hind-legs, side by side, and went through a rehearsal. Miss Williams conducted, and at the word "forte!" they barked simultaneously a loud, sharp bark; if "piano" was the order, or "mezza-voce," they promptly responded accordingly. If, however, they were told they were to sneeze and not to sing, they instantly obeyed.

"I call these my family," Miss Williams said laughingly. "And, by the way, it is strange how many people think I am married, whereas I am not, and I never have been. Yet continually such remarks get made to me as, 'I am so glad to meet you; I know your husband so well'; or, 'Is your husband with you to-night? My husband wants to see him so much; they were old college chums, you know.' I suppose it is that my name being an ordinary one, I get mistaken for someone else."

In addition to the recreation afforded by the training of her dogs, Miss Anna Williams is an enthusiast on the subject of gymnastics. For many years she regularly attended a gymnasium, and is a great authority on the question of ordinary drill. Fencing is another art to which she has devoted much of her spare time. She is a great advocate of all such exercise for vocalists, as everything that tends to strengthen and develop the lungs and chest is a gain to them. So far however she has escaped that deadly latter-day disease, pneumatics, and has no intention of taking to the wheel, I believe. She finds that fencing and gymnastics afford all the

exercise she requires, and her one regret is that she has now so little time to devote to these favourite pursuits.

Since last January she has been a professor of singing at the Royal College of Music, and finds the work most engrossing.

"I can't tell you how delightful it is to feel that one has some of the coming generation of singers in one's hand," she explained to me. "The lessons are only short ones—twenty minutes each; but every girl stays in the room during several lessons, and all in the class seem to take such an interest in their work. They are so pleased when at last they find that they are taking their breath correctly; and, oh, what a stumbling-block the breath is to some! It is only during the last few years that I have given any lessons at all; but I am very glad now that I decided to do so. Teaching is an immense pleasure to me, and what is more, it will be such an outlet for my energies when I retire from concert work. Just imagine how fearfully lost I should be then, if I had nothing to keep me busy and occupied."

Miss Williams has a tremendous capacity for work, and one can well understand her inability to ever settle down into a "do-nothing" existence. Sometimes she almost

wears herself out with work, she throws so much of herself into whatever she does, and, as a natural consequence, suffers for it afterwards. For she is still the same highly-strung nervous being that she was in the days when she was the wilful little "Nanny," the spoilt small sister of the family. Yet when occasion demands it she can brace herself up and go through anything.

A curious instance of this recurs to my mind. One day a friend sent an urgent message that he wanted to see her. He had been ill for some time, and she went to him immediately. When she entered the room where he was sitting she was alarmed to see how wild and strange he looked.

"I am glad you have come," he said in an

agitated whisper. "I have something I must tell you; but I am afraid lest anyone should hear me." And he thereupon locked the door. In an instant the truth flashed upon the girl. He was out of his mind, and she was locked in a room alone with a madman. She put a firm control on herself, and asked him soothingly and quietly to tell her now what it was he wanted her to know.

"My brother is coming," he said hoarsely. "He is coming to murder me! I know it—I feel it! But when he comes I shall murder him. I know that it is God's will that I should kill him when he tries to murder me."

"Are you quite certain of this?" she asked him calmly. Yes, he was quite certain.

"Then I am sure I ought to go at once and prevent his coming to you," she said. "I will go and stand at the bottom of the steps and wait till he appears, then I will stop him coming any further. It would be so awful if you murdered him!"

The unsuspecting man agreed to this, and unlocked the door; and she went quietly out—to call the help that was really needed.

And this was the timid Anna!

"But though one can put an iron control on oneself at the time, one suffers for it afterwards," she said. "I get terribly

worked up over a festival, for instance, especially if I am singing in a new work. I remember when I sang Parry's 'Prometheus Unbound' at Gloucester, they told me I was singing away in my dreams the night before, and woke them up in the hotel. But when it was over my one desire was to have my head unscrewed and put away to rest, and my whole self gently taken to pieces and allowed to go to sleep till it all recovered its equilibrium again."

Fortunately, Miss Williams's recuperative powers are great, or a few such collapses from exhaustion would soon shatter her nervous constitution. As it is she is tall, vivacious, a brilliant talker, with a most animated expression of countenance, and a



From a photo by]

MISS HILDA WILSON.

[Russell.

particularly graceful carriage—at home. On the platform she is still tall and graceful, but her face loses most of its wonderful charm of expression; instead, she is calm, grave, even anxious-looking, all of which is due to the great repression she then places upon herself.

But when she sings, one forgets all else, and realises that the pretty little affectations of an operatic singer would be out of place in conjunction with such a majestic and, one might almost say, devotional voice.

#### MISS HILDA WILSON.

And now we turn to one of the most popular and one of the most gifted of our contralto vocalists, Miss Hilda Wilson, whose name is so often associated with that of Miss Anna Williams at our great festivals. On one occasion, at Worcester, both the ladies were singing in Gade's "Psyche," a week or two after its production at the Birmingham Festival. At the rehearsal the baritone did not turn up, and as he did not appear at the concert either, Miss Hilda Wilson had the unique honour of singing a long love duet (an octave lower) with Miss Williams, besides singing the baritone solo.

It is somewhat curious to notice that the songs that have taken the firmest hold on the public in modern times are principally contralto solos, as for example "The Lost Chord," "Oh, Rest in the Lord," "Kathleen Mavourneen," "Love's Old Sweet Song," and others, which involuntarily recall the grandeur of Madame Patey's artistic singing or the homely pathos of Madame Antoinette Sterling.

It may be that while the florid, operatic style of singing, in which so many sopranos delight, arouses the audience to a pitch of enthusiastic amazement at the marvellous power of execution, the more calm, dignified tones of the contralto, so full and rich in depth, appeal more directly to the heart of the listener. Simplicity of style is most deceptive, the uninitiated seldom recognise that therein lies the art that conceals art.

Miss Hilda Wilson's career is interesting as showing the hardworking side of the singer's life. We hear much of the glamour, and it is as well that our famous singers are conscientious enough sometimes to admit that the mount up the ladder of the Muses is often very stiff climbing.

"People have very little idea what hard work the life of a professional vocalist entails," Miss Wilson said to me. "They seem to think that all one has to do is to come smiling forward on to the platform

and sing, and that if one has properly studied the music beforehand there is nothing to fear. Few realise how terribly wrought up the over-strung nerves of a musician can become, and fewer still ever take into consideration the fact that when a singer unexpectedly fails to come up to his or her usual standard, it may be due to something that would greatly astonish the audience did they but know it.

"At the same time, so far as obtaining a hearing in the first place is concerned, I must admit that I found it all extremely smooth sailing. I cannot claim to have had any hard fight in that respect, for it is a fact that I never sang to concert givers, or wrote to obtain an engagement in my life.

"One of my pleasantest recollections is in connection with my first appearance at the Albert Hall. At twelve o'clock one Saturday I received a telegram from an agent requesting me to come and see him immediately. When I arrived I found Miss Agnes Larkcom and others there, and the agent asked me if I would undertake the contralto part of Dvorák's 'Stabat Mater,' which was to be performed at the Royal Academy of Music the following Tuesday under Sir Joseph (then Mr.) Barnby. I consented, and we at once commenced to rehearse it. On the Monday I gave twenty-one lessons at Surbiton, so I only had Sunday and part of Tuesday to study the work. I got through successfully however, and on going to the Academy for my lesson two days later I found a letter from Barnby engaging me as principal contralto for 'Elijah,' the 'Redemption' and the 'Messiah' for the following season.

"How I got home I don't know! I felt as though I must tell my fellow-passengers in the omnibus of my great good luck, and generally proclaim it from the housetops! I know I could not wait to have my lesson, I was so anxious to tell my people the glorious news. So you see that I really have nothing whatever to grumble at in the way the Fates have dealt with me."

"Are your days usually filled with work, as well as your evenings?" I asked, reflecting on the twenty-one lessons given at Surbiton.

"Yes, I have always led a very busy life. I teach a great deal, and then you see I have the misfortune to belong to a musical family," she said with a smile and a little shrug of the shoulders. "My younger brothers and sister decided to go in for the same profession as myself, and that is a responsibility for the eldest sister!"

As Miss Hilda Wilson remarked, she comes

of a musical family. Her father was a professor of music in Gloucester, and his ability well-known in all the district for miles around. Consequently his daughter had the advantage of being brought up in a musical atmosphere from her earliest days. The spirit of the large provincial festivals must have taken hold of her from the very first, she seems so pre-eminently a part of them now.

In 1879 she entered the Royal Academy, and became a pupil of Mr. William Shakespeare. The following year she was engaged to sing at the Gloucester Festival, and in 1881 she appeared at the Worcester Festival. She remained at the Academy till 1882, being fortunate enough to win the Westmoreland Scholarship twice over, and also to have the Parepa-Rosa gold medal awarded to her. Her first big success in London was in the "Rose of Sharon," at St. James's Hall in 1883. Other engagements followed immediately, and from that day Miss Wilson's success was assured. Whereupon she immediately turned her attention to the other members of her family; and they are a remarkable family when all is told, despite the "misfortune" of all following in the same profession.

Miss Agnes Wilson is a contralto of great ability. She has sung at the Hereford, Lincoln, and other festivals.

Mr. W. Stroud Wilson is a violinist, and a member of the Italian Opera, Queen's Hall,

and Festival orchestras. He is also the principal baritone at Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Square.

Another brother, Mr. H. Lane Wilson, is a composer. Some of his songs have been exceptionally successful, notably, "Voices of the Angels," "Carmena," and "A Mother's Vigil." Mr. Santley recently discovered that he too had an unusually fine voice, and undertook to train it. Mr. Lane Wilson will therefore shortly make his *début* as a vocalist.

The West London Conservatoire of Music is entirely due to the enterprise of this gifted family, who, with some of the best musicians London can produce as professors, have succeeded in organising an excellent school of music where some of the best teaching can be had for very moderate terms. Miss Hilda Wilson is the president, and although she does not actually teach there, she watches the working of the institution, and gives advice whenever needed.

During the last ten years she has created the contralto parts of the majority of new works of any importance; among others, Cowen's "St. John's Eve," and "Transfiguration"; Dvorák's "Requiem"; Parry's "King Saul"; Dr. Bridge's "Nineveh," and many others.

Personally Miss Hilda Wilson is the very embodiment of kind-heartedness and good-nature, and her bright happy smile is quite refreshing to see.

