

QUEENS OF SONG :

MADAME PATEY AND MADAME CHRISTINE NILSSON.

BY F. KLICKMANN.



THAT the reign of Queen Victoria has been a remarkable one, as far as Art is concerned, the merest board school boy is now aware. Jubilee literature has dealt with this sixty years so exhaustively that one is at first inclined to think that there is nothing concerning it that has not already been proclaimed from the housetops. Nevertheless, very little attention has, after all, been paid to the fact that for marvellous voices this reign stands almost unique in the history of the world's music.

The past is so easily lost sight of in the present. The casual concert-goer applauds indiscriminately at to-day's concert, and forgets all about it to-morrow. But to the musician there are names that stand out as landmarks in the realm of song—queens of song who, when they cease to sing, make a silence that no one else can fill.

And of these, surely the first name that comes to one is that of Madame Patey. Her death occurred such a very short while ago—February, 1894—that she must still be fresh in the memory of all.

"A singer whom we shall find it difficult to replace," was the general Press eulogy on her sudden decease. Time has proved that this is only too true; no one has been able to replace her. We have no contralto living who can even approach her in her particular field of musical art.

Oratorio was her *forte*, though she was a

woman who would have excelled in whatever branch of the art she had entered upon. But there is so little scope for a contralto in opera here in England that it is not surprising that, great as was Madame Patey's dramatic instinct, she preferred to devote her chief energy to oratorio. And what a revelation it was to hear her in those masterpieces that are so essentially a part of our national character!

In England oratorio music can be heard to perfection. We have attained this height at the expense of opera; but that matters little. As a nation there is a great deal of religious feeling at the bottom of us (though many would like to deny it), and this comes out in the music and the musicians we cultivate. Madame Patey was essentially British in this; and wherever the English language is spoken her name was known and honoured. How often has one heard the remark made that her majestic and devotional rendering of "O, Rest in the Lord," was in itself a sermon. And yet how the versatility of her genius was shown when she rendered, with all the dramatic



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THE LATE MADAME PATEY.

force of her nature, the music allotted to *Jezebel* in the same oratorio.

Janet Monach Whytock was born May 1, 1842. There seems to be an uncertainty as to whether London or Glasgow should be privileged to claim her as a native. She came of a Glasgow family, however. Her father, realising that she had musical ability beyond the average, had her voice



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THE LATE MADAME PATEY.

[Hemus, Auckland, N.Z.

(A portrait taken during her tour in New Zealand.)

trained and her musical gifts generally developed. For some time she sang in the once famous "Leslie Choir." She made her *début* in Birmingham. On this occasion her rendering of "Kathleen Mavourneen" won for her unqualified praise. In London she studied under the late Mrs. Sims Reeves and Pinsuti.

It was not until after her marriage with Mr. J. G. Patey in 1866, however, that the great contralto became recognised as one of the foremost singers of the day. On the retirement of Madame Sainton-Dolby, she stepped immediately into the position of the leading contralto soloist. Her husband was himself an eminent baritone singer at that time,

though in these later days his name is only associated by the younger generation with the well-known firm of music publishers which bear his name.

When once Madame Patey-Whytock's position was fairly established, there was no lack of engagements. In those days Exeter Hall and the "Sacred Harmonic" were features no self-respecting Britisher overlooked, did an opportunity of attending one or all of the concerts fall in his way. Here Madame Patey was sure of a welcome and an absolute appreciation. The Handel Festivals and the Royal Albert Hall concerts were for years habituated by people who eagerly looked forward to her appearance.

Nor was her popularity confined only to her own country. In Australia and also in America she had a wide reputation, and had even extended her tours to Japan, and penetrated into the land of John Chinaman. It is impossible to mention all the notable occasions on which Madame Patey achieved unusual success, but reference must be made to her appearance in Paris in 1875, when she sang at four performances (in French) of the "Messiah," given under the direction of M. Lamoureux. The great contralto made a marked impression in the gay capital, and after singing "O, Rest in the Lord," at one of the Conservatoire concerts, the directors presented her with a special medal bearing an inscription referring to the occasion.

If Madame Patey's career was a remarkable one, her death was in no degree less so. It was early in 1894 that she decided to retire from public work and settle down to enjoy a well-merited rest at Falmouth, a town for which she and her husband entertained a great affection. Her voice was still in excellent condition; but she wisely preferred to retire before it had become like some of the pathetic ghosts of departed greatness that still haunt the platforms of our concert rooms. And here one may remark, parenthetically, how unfortunate it is that so comparatively few of our fine vocalists realise the advisability of saying good-bye to the public *before* the public is yearningly anxious to say good-bye to them. If only they would remember that it is one thing to be welcomed and quite another to be merely tolerated on the platform. Of course, it occasionally happens that some step out of the ranks who can ill be spared. Miss Liza Lehmann was a genuine loss when, on her marriage, she decided to give up concert work. Later still, we have Miss Anna Williams, who last October

sang "Farewell" at Albert Hall to her thousands of friends and admirers, her magnificent voice on that occasion being at its prime.

"But I think we older singers should know when to leave off and make room for the younger ones," Miss Williams once remarked to me. And, after all, it is more artistic to depart too soon rather than to outstay one's welcome.

Madame Patey thought so too, and, in consequence, a series of farewell concerts were organised all over the kingdom, which were to terminate with a brilliant gathering at the Royal Albert Hall. This last performance, however, was never destined to take place.

It was at Sheffield that the great artiste was called upon to say her last farewell. The concert had been a marked success, the audience being most appreciative and enthusiastic. After a repeated demand for an encore, Madame Patey returned to the platform and sang "The Banks of Allan Water," which had always been a most popular item in her enormous repertoire. On leaving the platform she was suddenly taken ill, losing all consciousness, and never again rallying. She remained in this condition for a few hours, and then came the end. The last words she ever sang were, strangely enough, "There a corse lay she!"

The medical verdict was that her death was due to paralysis of the brain, caused by the excessive mental and nervous strain brought on by the excitement.

Like all great musicians, Madame Patey was of a most highly-strung temperament, though it may not have been evident to her audiences. After her first public appearance, to which I have already alluded, she was so overcome with nervous prostration that she lost her voice for about six months. But true artists have always to pay a high price for the gifts entrusted to their keeping. And we, the ordinary ones of the earth, who merely sit and listen, seldom realise how immense the cost may be, though, happily, it is not often that life itself is the forfeit.

The gap left by Madame Patey's death has never yet been filled. So far we have not one contralto who is her legitimate successor. Our young vocalists seem perfectly content to win the applause of indiscriminate audiences by the careless rendering of often worthless ballads, while they neglect the splendid classic music which would in time be as highly appreciated. Two or three honourable exceptions will occur to one's mind, but the fact remains that we have to-day no contralto as great as Madame Patey.

MADAME CHRISTINE NILSSON.

Of Madame Patey's contemporaries, mention must first be made of Christine Nilsson, who was born in 1843, and is, therefore, a year younger than the famous contralto and six months younger than Madame Patti. Her life is an excellent example of those strange turns the wheel of fortune sometimes takes on behalf of those who come into this world destitute of most things, but possessing genius. Christine Nilsson was born in Wexiö, Sweden, the native land, by the way, of another vocal wonder, Jenny Lind. Christine's father rented a humble little farm, called Sjöabol; and, as is sometimes the case with modest farmers even in our own enlightened land, his children were not over-burdened with pocket-money. The story goes that the small girl and her brother secretly determined to add to their personal exchequer by a public appearance at a fair in a neighbouring town. They stole off, taking with them a small violin, which both of the children could play, and, on arriving at the fair, gave various impromptu performances, both vocal and instrumental, netting, as the result of these labours, somewhere about a total of three-pence three-fathings, if I remember rightly. It is obvious that this sum would not have paid for the united shoe leather expended in the arduous undertaking. But, fortunately, fate was kinder to them in that respect than she is to some of us in this benighted London. She permitted them to go bare-footed, or at least it is thus the legend runs. But we know that even tradition is but human, and it sometimes errs; therefore I will not guarantee the exactness of these details. Suffice it, however, that at the age of sixteen Christine's voice was brought to the notice of the Baroness Leuhausen, who had herself been a singer of some fame as Miss Valerius. She gave Mdle. Nilsson lessons, and then had her trained both in Stockholm and in Paris. She made her *début* as *Violetta*, in "La Traviata," at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1864, making her first appearance in England in 1867 in the same part. The late Mr. Henry Jarrett was at that time her agent. She was also engaged for the Birmingham Festival in 1867.

From this time forward her success was assured. Whether in oratorio or opera, she was equally brilliant. Her voice had the extraordinary compass of nearly three octaves; but, at Rossini's suggestion, she abstained from putting the highest notes to

much use, on account of the abnormal strain it necessitated.

Christine Nilsson was the original *Ophelia*, *Margaret*, and *Helen of Troy* (in Boito's "Mefistofele"). Anyone who saw her *Marguerite*, her *Elvira*, her *Cherubino*, her *Elsa*, her *Violetta*, or her *Lucia*, will never forget the remarkable charm with which she invested these rôles.

In 1872 Miss Nilsson was married in Westminster Abbey to M. Auguste Rouzaud, whom she first met while studying in Paris. The wedding was a brilliant function, the "Bridal March" from "Lohengrin" being among the music selected for the occasion. This "March" has done excellent service at many musical weddings, notably those of Madame Albani and Mrs. Mary Davies. M. Rouzaud died in 1882.

The widow of Michael Balfe, the composer, resided with Madame Nilsson for some years, and it may be remembered that the singer gave another proof of the esteem in which she held Balfe by introducing at her farewell concert an hitherto unpublished song of his.

In 1887 Madame Nilsson was married to a Spanish nobleman, the Count Casa di Miranda, upon which she announced her intention of retiring from professional life, and the following year took her official farewell of the public.

"How well I remember the farewell concert of Madame Christine Nilsson," writes a friend, "for I nearly lost my life in the terrible crush at the entrance. Still, it was worth a good deal of inconvenience to be present on so notable an occasion. I sat just above the platform, so that I had a specially pleasant view of Madame Nilsson's strikingly beautiful face as she left the platform after each recall. She sang splendidly through the long programme, and responded readily and graciously to the enthusiastic demands for encores. The Albert Hall was thronged with a brilliant audience, including members of the royal family and representatives of all the brilliant sides of London society. During the singing of Madame Nilsson her colleagues in art pressed eagerly on to the platform, in order to catch every note of her glorious voice. One of the greatest successes of a wonderful evening was achieved when Madame Nilsson sang, as she alone could sing, 'Angels, ever bright and fair.' A great hush fell upon the vast audience as the lovely notes, now pathetically persuasive, now thrilling in their intensity of emotion, rang out in a perfection which made one wonder if it would ever be equalled

or excelled. After this triumph there were many recalls, and a lovely array of floral tributes were handed up to the singer. As the programme proceeded, the enthusiasm grew in fervour, reaching its climax at the conclusion of the last solo allotted to Madame Nilsson. She had sung nine times, but the audience was still impatient for more. When the great singer had responded to many calls, each outvying the other in excited and affectionate insistence, she came back to the platform and seated herself at the piano. To her own accompaniment she sang, with a pathos which brought tears to many eyes, a song of her native land. After this supreme effort, thousands of handkerchiefs waved a farewell to their favourite, who, with tears in her blue eyes, smiled and kissed her hand to the great multitude which seemed so reluctant to part with her."

That was in June, 1888, and a London audience was destined to renew acquaintance with Madame Nilsson in 1891, when the famous cantatrice was persuaded to come from Madrid on purpose to sing at the farewell concert given by Mr. Sims Reeves in the Albert Hall, the scene of her own last appearance. Once again there was the same enthusiasm when Madame Nilsson was seen being escorted to the platform by the *bénéficiaire*, Mr. Sims Reeves. One was a little anxious as to whether time had tarnished the superb voice, but the anxiety disappeared at the first sound of that clarion. Madame Nilsson sang four or five times, and her reception

almost eclipsed that accorded to Mr. Reeves, who was, of course, the star of the evening. She joined the famous tenor in a duet, which brought memories to all opera frequenters of past triumphs. The audience, as I have



MADAME CHRISTINE NILSSON.
(From a photo by Bassano.)

said, almost forgot the hero of the concert in their pleasure at welcoming Madame Nilsson back to England. The Prince of Wales, who, despite a severe cold, had made an effort to be present, paid a visit to the

artistes' room and congratulated Madame Nilsson on her return to the land of her many successes. Since that date only occa-



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[London Stereoscopic Co.

MADAME CHRISTINE NILSSON.

sional visits have been paid by the popular singer to this country. She has been noticed at one or two concerts, listening with particular interest to new singers, and one day I think I saw her at a Patti concert. The usual rumours of her possible return to the operatic stage have been circulated from time to time, but there is no reason to believe that we shall see Madame Nilsson any more in those rôles which she once assumed with such striking effect.

This singer has always had the power of attracting crowds from her earliest appearances. Once this magnetism had a sad sequel. Madame Nilsson was staying at the Grand Hotel, Stockholm, and an enormous gathering of her fellow-countrymen had collected in front of the building in the expectation that the prima donna would appear on the balcony and sing. When at last their pertinacity was rewarded, the surging crowd was so excited that all order was at an end, and several persons were pushed in the water, and some were drowned.

Prima donnas are always allowed a certain amount of vagaries; indeed, it sometimes adds an additional value to their professional reputation. Thus we hear of one famous

lady who affects a pet tiger, which is the terror of hotel proprietors. Another equally illustrious dame elects, so it is said, to sleep in her coffin. A third collects eye-glasses; and one might prolong the list *ad infinitum*. The ways of women are curious, and full of constant surprises. Thus it transpires that the Countess Casa di Miranda departed somewhat from the art canons of the orthodox when she had one of her rooms in her home in Madrid papered throughout with the whole of her professional tours, while another room was similarly honoured with her concert programmes. Her collection of fans is particularly fine, including as it does several beautiful gifts from monarchs before whom Madame Nilsson has sung. By far the most interesting thing in the house, however, is the small violin (now kept under a glass case) upon which the prima donna first performed in public at that long ago fair. Madame Nilsson is, like most of the sons and daughters of those northern lands, patriotic to the core, and one of the earliest acts of her professional life was to purchase, with her first earnings, the little farm, Sjöabol, on which her father and mother had laboured for so long.



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MADAME CHRISTINE NILSSON.