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SKETCH BY L. ALMA-TADEMA.

R.A. Council meeting/  
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LAURENS ALMA-TADEMA.

THE peculiar charm of the reproductions of antique life painted by Mr. Alma-Tadema, and the tradition which has grown up of his supposed attempt to live that life himself in the midst of modern London, have rendered this artist the object of a curiosity unusual even in this curious age. Hence has followed an endless multiplication of "lives" and "studies" and "interviews," published for the delectation of the inquisitive, and mainly occupied with saying the same things in slightly different ways. But although much has been said and resaid about his person, as well as about his successive paintings and surroundings, very little has yet been told about his methods of work. Every artist has his own particular way of endeavoring to present in a concrete form the idea that he at

first sees with his mind's eye only; and this, if we reflect, is really the interesting thing about him. The manner in which each painter works out his subject varies very much, according to his temperament and his training. I purpose, in this article, to dwell somewhat on the processes through which Mr. Alma-Tadema's paintings pass, from the first rough sketch done in charcoal to the highly finished canvas.

Before, however, describing these methods in detail, it may be desirable to make a rapid survey of the principal events in Mr. Alma-Tadema's career, and to enumerate, also, some of his more notable paintings, endeavoring to arrange the latter into groups, according to the periods in which they were painted, since from time to time this artist has succumbed to

the fascination of the history and artistic bearing of different countries and times. At first it was German life in the early middle ages that attracted him; then the barbaric strength and beauty of the Merovingian age took his attention; while, later on, the more formal designs and the flat coloring of the Pompeian period roused his curiosity, to be followed by an enthusiastic devotion to the ancient days of Egypt, and to the early Greek, and later Roman, times.

## I.

LAURENS ALMA-TADEMA is a Friesian, and therefore a Dutchman. He was born January 8, 1836, the fifth son of Pieter Tadema, of Dronryp, near Leeu Warden, in the ancient province of Friesland. His father died when he was four years old, and he was left to the care of his mother, a woman of great refine-

ment, and was nurtured by those members of his family who were most interested in his education, and the boy could get time for his drawing only by rising early—a habit that has often stood him in good stead at those seasons of the year when he has been hard driven for want of time, or lack of London daylight, to finish his paintings for the exhibitions. On such occasions he thinks nothing of rising at four or five o'clock in the morning, in order to work out, or paint in, some elaborate detail of his pictures.

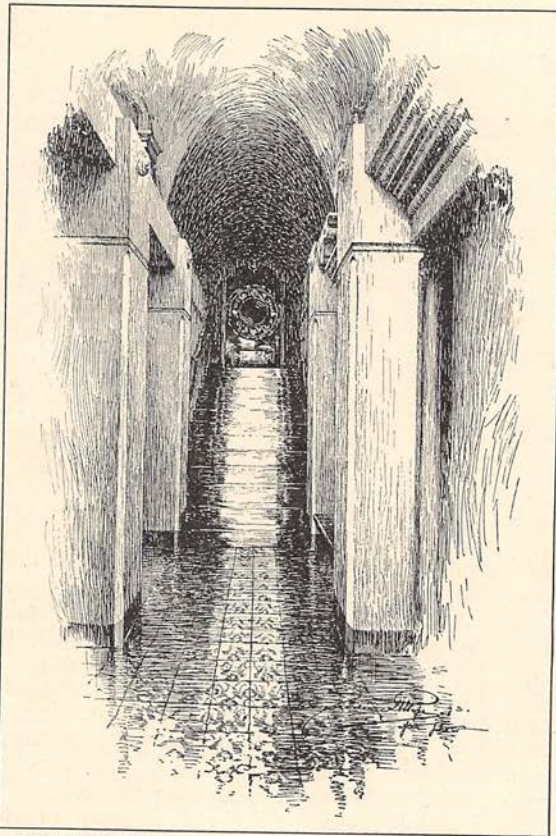
As the young Tadema grew up, his health showed signs of giving way, whether or not from the over-strain of long hours of uncongenial study, it is impossible to say. His guardians, convinced that he had not long to live, judged it useless to urge any more their determination that he should be trained for the law, and the lad entered upon his art stud-

ies, with so great success as to produce, at the age of fourteen, one finished portrait of his sister, and, at the age of sixteen, one of himself, which were good likenesses as well as of sound workmanship, and proved his vocation beyond further question. He entered the Royal Art school at Antwerp, then under the guidance of Baron Wappers. Afterward he profited much by the advice of another painter, Baron Leys. In Tadema's earlier paintings it is not difficult to trace the influence which that distinguished master exercised over the promising artist. The work done on Leys's pictures by Tadema has been of infinite use to him: he there acquired the knowledge of making pictures that has been of such great service to him throughout his career, together with a certain habit of seeing objects solidly, and seeing them as a whole.

In 1859 the young painter's mother and sister joined him in Antwerp, and it was during the four brief years spent there together that Mrs. Tadema saw her son's talent show itself unmistakably in the great success he obtained with one of his earliest pictures, "The Education of the Children of Clovis," which was painted in 1861.

In the year 1863 Mr. Alma-Tadema married a French lady, and visited Italy; in 1865 he settled in Brussels. Here were born to him two daughters, Laurence and Anna, the latter of whom has

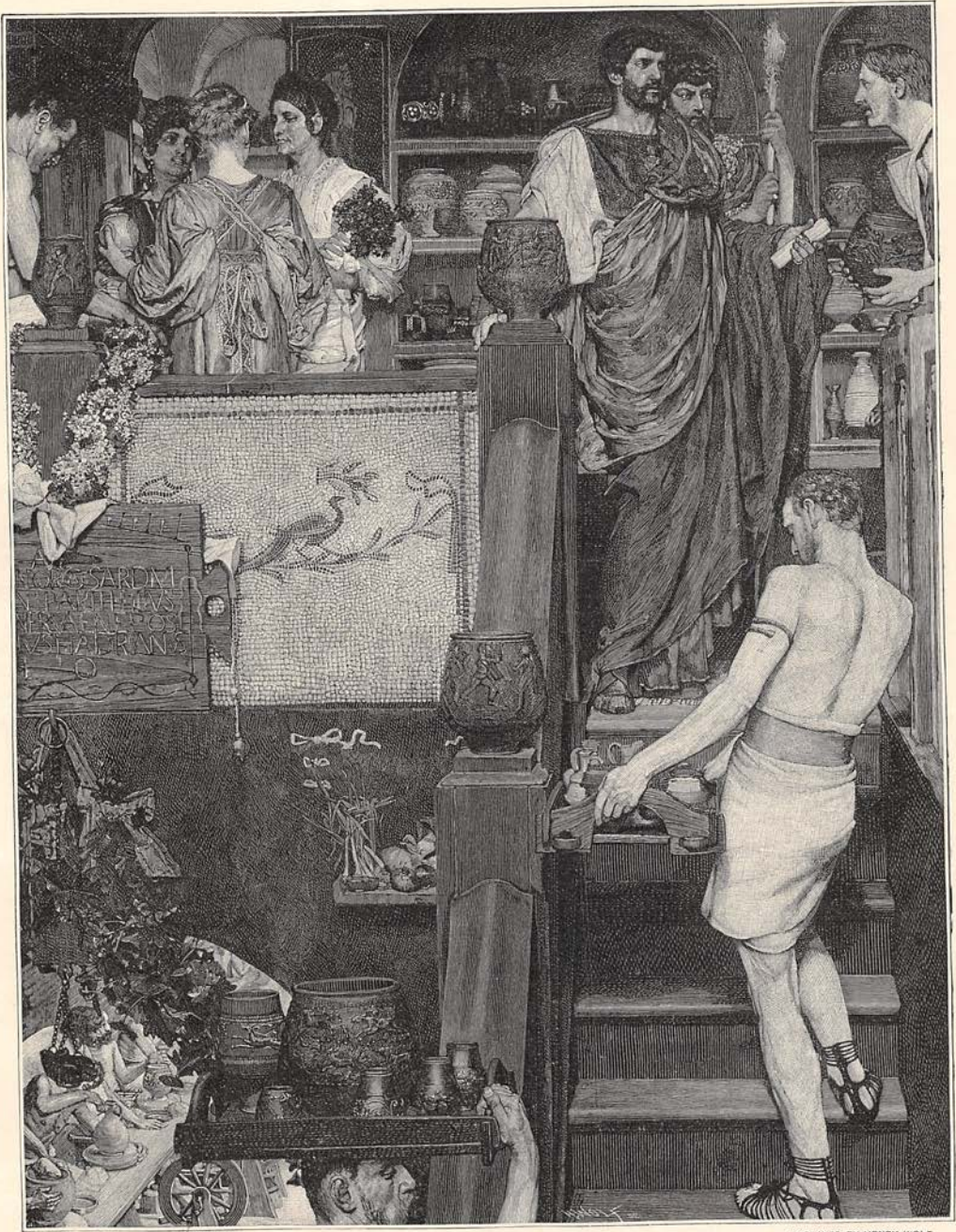
distinguished herself during the last few years by many highly finished water-color studies of buildings and house-interiors, and also by several delicately drawn portrait-heads, executed in pencil and chalk. During Mr.



DRAWN BY F. L. M. PAPE.

BRASS STAIRCASE LEADING FROM ALMA-TADEMA'S FRONT DOOR TO HIS STUDIO.

ment of taste and of decided artistic feeling. It was intended that the son should follow his father's profession, the law, but he himself showed very early in life a strong predilection for art. This bias, however, was not encou-



PAINTED BY L. ALMA-TADEMA.

ENGRAVED BY HENRY WOLF.

“HADRIAN IN ENGLAND.”

(THE EMPEROR INSPECTING ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERIES.)

Alma-Tadema's residence in Brussels he produced many striking pictures, among them the fine composition of "Tarquinius Superbus." In this painting is seen the regal governor of men receiving certain meek emissaries from the city of Gabia; in the foreground stands the mass of tall poppies, the tallest heads of which he is presently to mow off with his scepter.

Mr. Alma-Tadema soon lost his first wife, and in 1870, shortly after her death, he left Brussels, and proceeded to England. Here he presently settled, became a British subject, and made for himself a fascinating home on the northern side of Regent's Park.

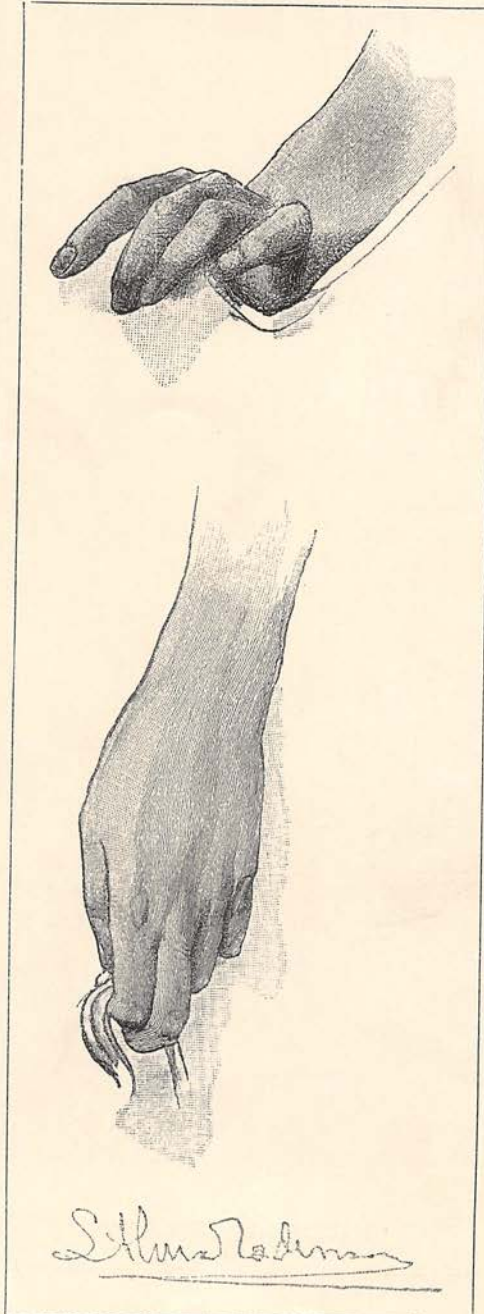
The fine "Pyrrhic Dance," painted in 1868, was his first picture exhibited at the Royal Academy, in the new building of Burlington House, in the year 1869. It marked a critical point in the painter's career. This extraordinary composition at once roused the attention of the British public to a knowledge of the great gifts of the young foreigner who had taken up his abode among them. "The Pyrrhic Dance" was followed the next year by "The Juggler," and by some of the earlier Roman interiors. In 1870 Mr. Alma-Tadema painted, in his London studio, "A Roman Emperor," this being his second version of that most tragic subject, the death of Caligula and the acclamation of the new emperor, Claudius. Mr. Alma-Tadema, in this version, ventured upon an entirely new scheme of coloring, to the de-

spair, it is said, of certain of his clients, who saw in this departure an alarming tendency toward Preraphaelitism. They felt that the public, which had lately learned to accept Mr. Alma-Tadema as the expounder of the beauty of cool white marbles and pale-tinted robes, was not being fairly treated; for here he was

boldly introducing a copper-headed girl into the crowd of his Roman rabble, and clothing the very bodies of the dead in gay-colored blues and vivid purples, while even the purity of the marble floor was not only stained with the redness of blood, but was everywhere cut up and intersected by distracting, many-colored mosaics. This was, indeed, to open out a revolutionary prospect into the future!

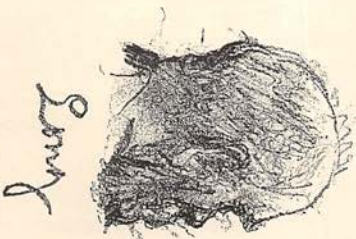
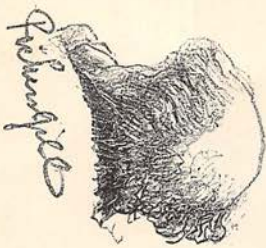
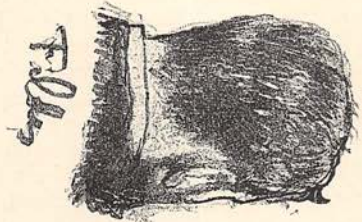
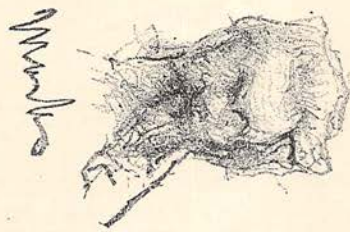
But this departure was one which led ultimately to many beautiful pictures, dealing often with joyous subjects, in which the artist has painted dancing-girls and youths, either in solemn procession, or in a frenzy of religious fervor, or else simply gay with the rapid throbbing of the blood in their young veins. From this period, and onward to the present year, belong many charming panels of blossom-crowned orchards and anemone-strewn fields. The lily-covered tanks, on the other hand, and the innumerable and wonderful garlands, belong to the architectural section of Mr. Alma-Tadema's work, rather than to the series of open-air subjects.

In the year 1871 the artist married an English lady, who has



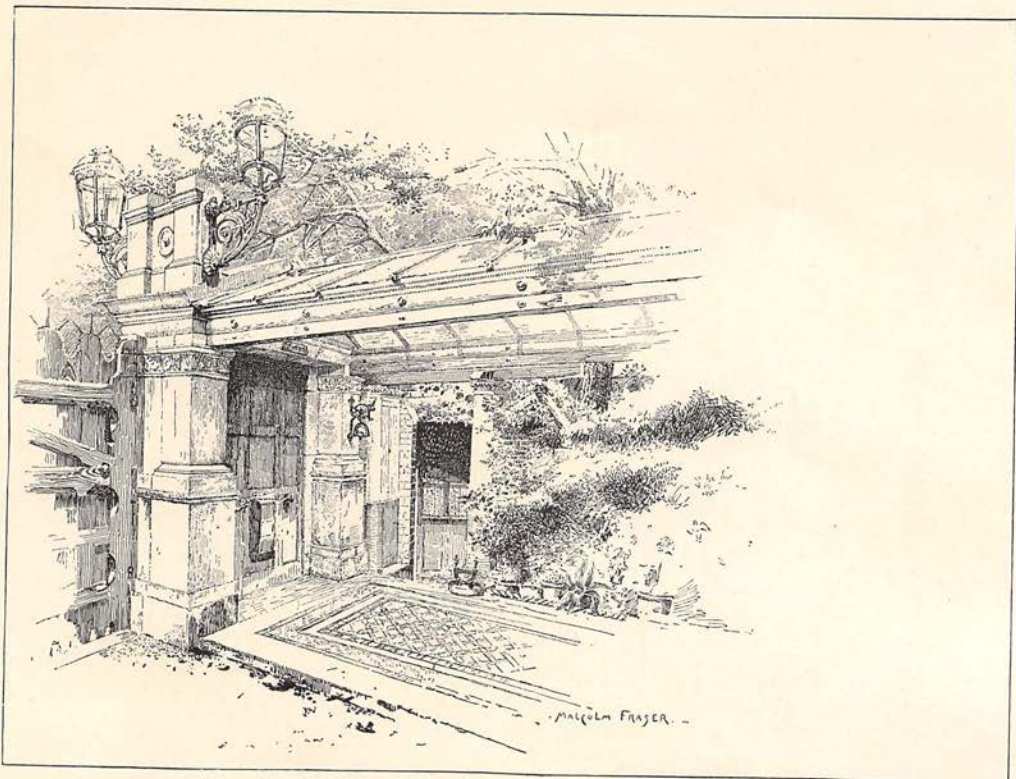
ENGRAVED BY O. NAYLOR.

STUDIES OF HANDS, FROM ALMA-TADEMA'S NOTE-BOOK.



SKETCHES OF NOTED ARTISTS BY L. ALMA-TADEMA, AT A COUNCIL MEETING OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY.

ENGRAVED BY A. WALDBERG.



FRONT ENTRANCE TO VESTIBULE.

since distinguished herself by her pictures of charming children, quaintly clad, and busy in their old-fashioned tiled, or paneled, surroundings.

By the year 1874 the decorations of Mr. Alma-Tadema's house, at the North Gate, Regent's Park, were completed, and the whole effect was of a palace of exotic beauty. In a moment all this beauty was well nigh destroyed by the explosion of a barge laden with gunpowder and benzolin, which was passing along the canal in front of his house. The walls were cracked, the windows broken, the front door, even, was torn off its hinges, so that the open portal showed on its threshold the almost too hospitable greeting of "Salve" to the outside world. M. Tissot, the French artist, who was at that time living in London, said that the terrace of houses nearest to the scene of the accident had all the appearance of the streets of Paris after the bombardment during the Commune. There is a pretty story of the behavior on this occasion of the two young daughters of the house. They had always been told that if they felt frightened at night they were to ring their bedroom bell; so, when they awoke suddenly, in the utter darkness, to find the window-frame lying on their bed, the ceiling falling in fragments, and hun-

dreds of hazelnuts — part of the boat's cargo — showering down upon them, the elder child remarked to her sister, in the high calm voice of authority, "Anna, ring the bell!"

The news of the explosion was a terrible blow to Mr. and Mrs. Alma-Tadema, who were traveling in Scotland at the time. But Mr. Alma-Tadema's splendid energy was equal to the occasion, and he at once saw means for improving his house. The outer walls were, first of all, firmly clamped together with huge iron girders; next, the inner house was considered. New doorways were cut through the side-walls, arches were constructed, and here and there a slim, supporting column was added. The whole aspect of the place became, if possible, more charming and fairy-like than before. The artist decorated the ceiling of his studio in the Pompeian style, with figures of his own hand in a design of light floral festoons, dividing the space into panels of different sizes and shapes. For these Mr. Alma-Tadema made some charming sketches of dancing nymphs and tootling satyrs.

## II.

HIS picture of "The Education of the Children of Clovis" was the first subject of this period treated by Mr. Alma-Tadema, and the

first he painted under Leys's corrections. It was followed by a whole series of paintings illustrating the thrilling and tragic story of Fredegonda and Galswinde. In these productions the determined character of the painter is seen; he is unflinching in the way in which he wrestles with his subject until he has con-

Egyptians Amused themselves Three Thousand Years ago." Another Egyptian painting of his shows two very lean men seated on their heels, and playing a game of chess at a low table. I have heard Mr. Alma-Tadema say that very few European persons are able to sit with ease, and for any length of time, in this position. This



PORTICO AT ENTRANCE TO THE DINING-ROOM.

quered the difficulties of it. Also there is apparent in these works the ceaseless trouble that he always takes to inform himself accurately and thoroughly in matters of detail; these details once grasped, whether they be pleasing to the eye or not, are firmly written down by that truthful pencil of his.

Mr. Alma-Tadema always acknowledges the great debt that he owes to his early acquaintance with Leonardo da Vinci's book, "How to Become a Painter." Such a book would naturally be of immense service to a worker of his temperament, for whom half-measures and half-knowledge do not exist; for he is a man who must fully realize for himself exactly how any given subject, with all its accessories, actually looks before he will attempt to represent it in a concrete form.

In 1863 Mr. Alma-Tadema painted his first Egyptian picture, which he called "How the

picture of the chess-players was sold in Berlin in 1865 to a banker of Moscow, and was the means of Mr. Alma-Tadema's acquaintance with M. Gambert, the picture-dealer, who, recognizing at once the unusual gifts of the young painter, at the advice of Baron Leys and Rosa Bonheur, gave him an order for twenty-four pictures.

In 1865 began the series of Greek and Roman subjects by which Mr. Alma-Tadema is perhaps most widely known. The earlier examples of these are, however, very different from the paintings that Mr. Alma-Tadema produces to-day: they are darker in tone, deeper in color, and more crowded with detail. But now and again this painter still returns to his earlier love, and gives us one of his powerful Egyptian subjects.

If the titles of all Mr. Alma-Tadema's pictures were enumerated here, they would fill



DRAWN BY MALCOLM FRASER.

THE RECEPTION-ROOM.

several columns of this magazine. "The Pyrrhic Dance" was the first of a long series of representations of ancient dances, whether of the solemn and religious sort, or of the more homely kinds, of the Roman people. In 1870 the large composition of "The Vintage Festival" was painted, and was exhibited by itself in one of the London galleries. This picture impressed the British public greatly with its serious and novel kind of beauty, as well as by its vivid presentment of ancient times. To the year 1874 belongs perhaps the grandest and most solemn of all Mr. Alma-Tadema's conceptions, "The Death of the First-Born" (The Last Plague). In 1875 the painter returned to a Merovingian subject, and produced a new version of the story of Fredegonda in "The Tragedy of an Honest Wife." To the years 1873 and 1874 belong the large canvases of "The Sculpture Gal-

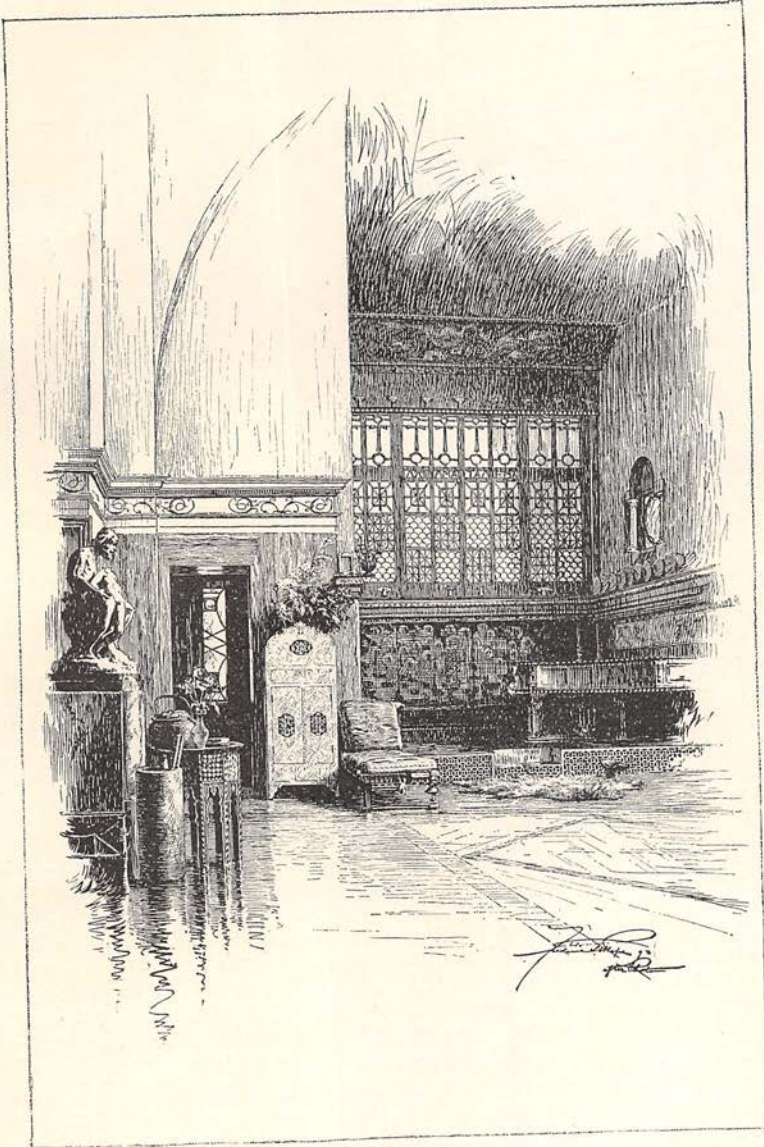
lery" and "The Picture Gallery," as well as numerous smaller panel-pieces of gardens, courtyards, flowers, and young girls. In 1884 came "Hadrian in England," showing that emperor inspecting a factory of Romano-British potteries. In 1888 was painted that most strange and gorgeously colored picture of a practical joke on a large scale, called "The Roses of Heliogabalus," wherein were seen perfect clouds of roses and rose petals let loose through the unfastening of the cords of the velarium, and showering down upon the lounging and unsuspecting guests, half-smothering them.

From time to time has appeared an Egyptian piece in which the heads of the chief figures have had all the *vraisemblance* of portraits painted from the life: of these are "The Grand Chamberlain of Sesostris" (1869); "The



Egyptian at his House Door" (1864); and Joseph as "Pharaoh's Overseer," in which last picture Joseph is seen examining specimens of the cereals brought by his fellow-Israelites to the king. In all of these paintings of Eastern life the spectator is strongly impressed by the minutely realistic aspect of the people and their surroundings.

encouragements, I have many times heard him urge on faint-hearted followers. He will never allow himself to be beaten by the difficulties of any subject. No shirking of intricate detail, no vagueness of line, will this advocate of thoroughness allow to any timid or indolent pupil. He never evades a tedious accessory, nor does he spare his brain more than his hand when,



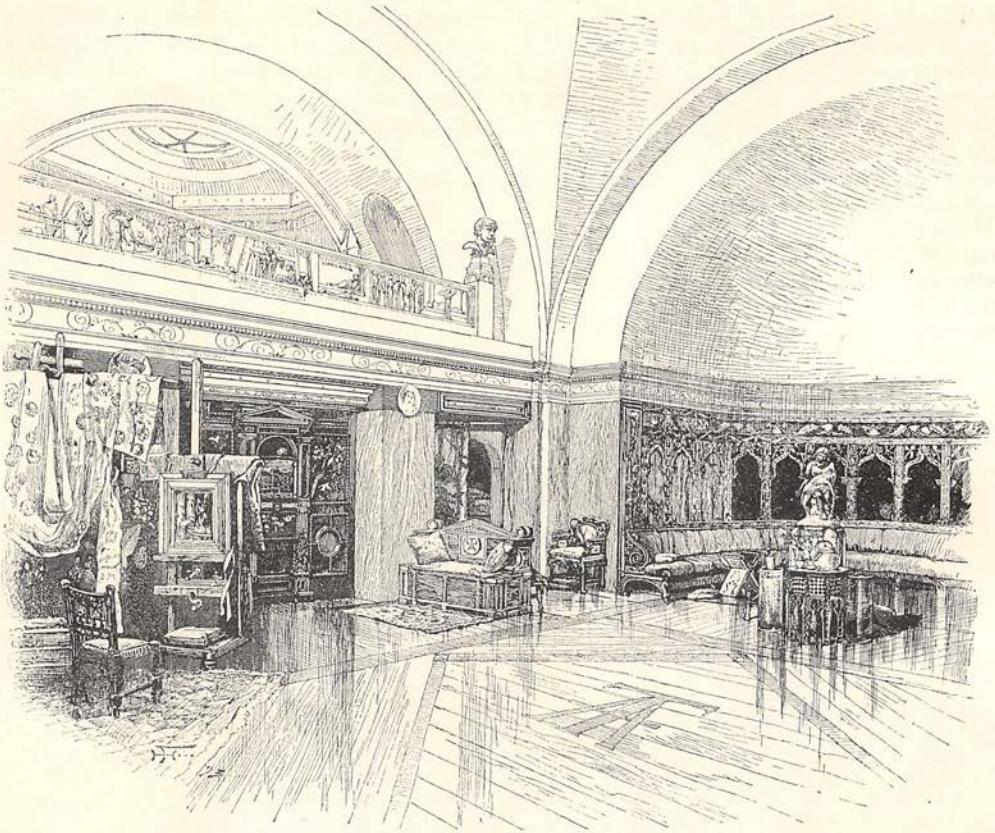
DRAWN BY F. L. M. PAPE.

INTERIOR OF STUDIO—WEST VIEW.

## III.

MR. ALMA-TADEMA is a great advocate of work. "Nothing can be done well without taking trouble," he says; "you must work hard if you mean to succeed." By these and similar

by the making of endless studies, he can gain exacter knowledge, or add to the accuracy of the spirit and detail in his designs. But this diligence is not allied to any love of his own handiwork. Mr. Alma-Tadema is ruthless in destroying results that do not seem to him to be



DRAWN BY HARRY FENN.

INTERIOR OF STUDIO—EAST VIEW.

satisfactory; I have often seen him wipe from his canvas a beautiful figure or a lovely object, when he thought that by doing so the line of his composition would be improved, or that greater simplicity would be gained by the sacrifice. I have heard Mr. Alma-Tadema tell a story of the fate of two unsuccessful pictures of his student days. One of them was returned unsold by the committee of the Brussels exhibition in 1859—the subject, I believe, was of a house on fire, with people rescuing the victims. His fellow-students were asked into the studio of the rejected painter, and were invited to jump through the canvas, the owner of it leading the way by leaping, head first, through the oily flames. The other story was of a large-sized, square picture which came back hopelessly, again and again, to the easel of its creator, until at last it was cut out of its frame, and was given to an old woman to use as a table-cover, and who remarked that it “was much better than those common oil-cloth things that always let the water through, for this one of Mr. Tadema’s making was a good thick one, with plenty of paint on it.”

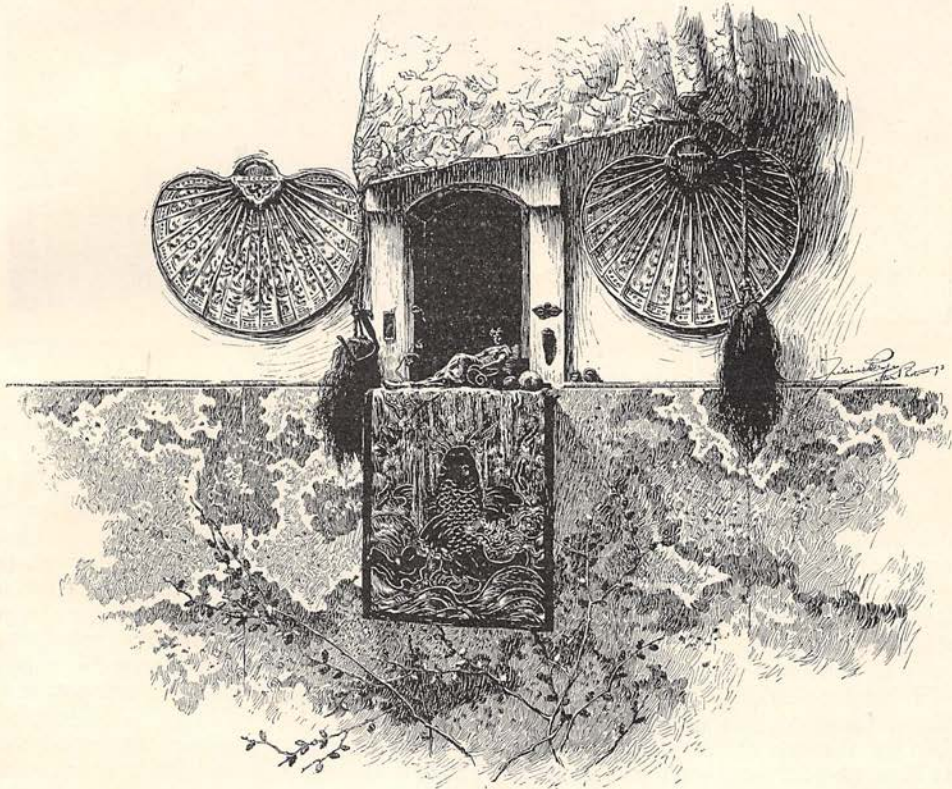
Mr. Alma-Tadema has no patience with

would-be dilettanti, who, I fear, pester all busy professional people with fatuous inquiries about their ways of work, such as, “Now, what color would you use if you were going to paint a bluebell?” or, “How many hairs should an outline paint-brush have?” He thinks they should be answered as by the sculptor, who, on being asked by an ardent young admirer to show him the tool with which he had modeled his beautiful Venus, showed the muscle of his own broad thumb. Mr. Alma-Tadema uses very few paints, and those are of the simpler and more old-fashioned kinds, such as siennas and ochers. He is firm in his conviction that the colors on a palette should be composed either entirely of mineral, or entirely of vegetable substances; he considers that to mix the two kinds is highly perilous to the future safety of the painting.

The methodical ways of this painter are apparent in the arrangements of his house, and especially in those of his studio. He is eminently Dutch, even when he tries to be most classical. From a voluminous drapery down to a small pocket pen-knife, each has its appointed place in his studio: a glance at the

work-table, or along the lines of folios of studies on the many-divisioned shelves, will show this; each folio is numbered, and beneath it is written, in the painter's neat hand-writing, the subject matter of the drawings within, under such sectional headings as "Greek Head-dresses," "Bronzes," "Armor," "Furniture," "Wigs," "Ears and Hands," "Ornaments," etc. This extreme neatness, however, leads sometimes to painful anxiety; as, for instance, when some careless visitor leans against and disturbs the folds of a curtain, or crushes the surface of an embroidery; the very displacement of a

ranged and rearranged until the artist's eye is satisfied that the whole composition hangs well together, and that the attention of the spectator is carried naturally along to the chief incident of the scene. All the sketching in of the figures is done with the help of nature. A thin oil-color outline of some neutral color is used for this; sometimes the figures are painted at once. The whole canvas is now filled in, rather as a piece of cloisonné might be with color, so that the disturbing whiteness of the material is hidden. From this time forth, hard work follows. If the picture contained elaborate archi-



DRAWN BY F. L. M. PAPE.

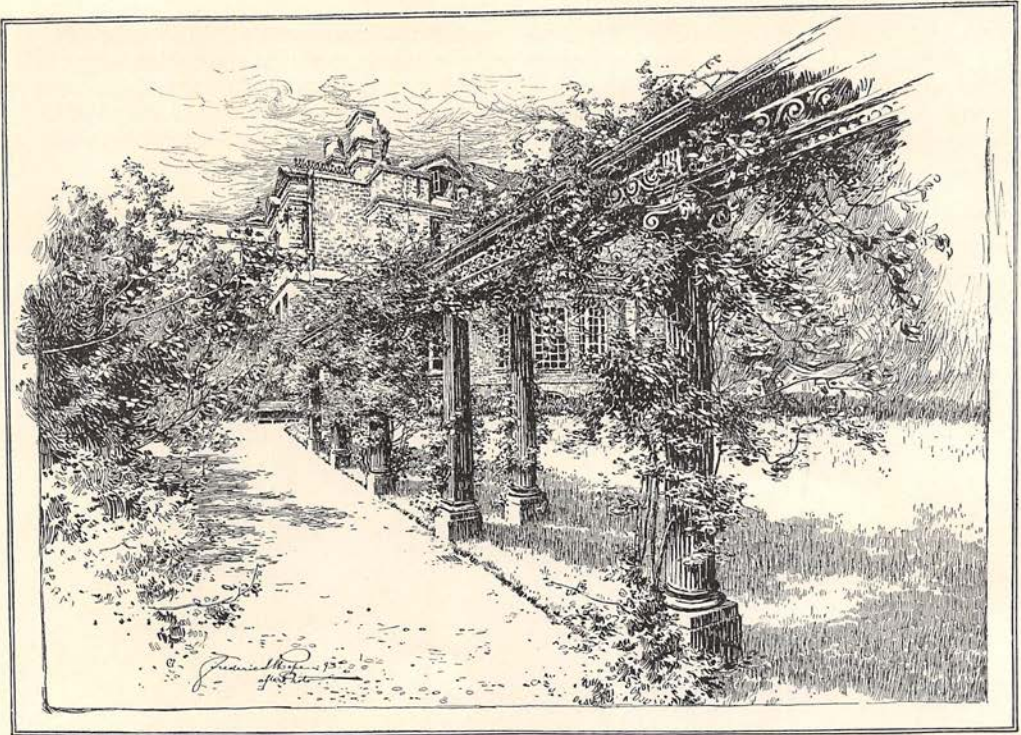
ALTAR IN ATRIUM, IN COLORED MARBLES.

chair may cause agony to the highly strung nerves, and be held to give an air of untidiness to the apartment. But with all this elaboration of the house surroundings, the every-day home-life of this painter is one of extreme simplicity and independence.

## IV.

MUCH has been written about Mr. Alma-Tadema's work, but I am not aware that any one has described the exact manner in which he proceeds. His first sketch for a picture is usually done slightly, and directly on the canvas or panel. The groups of figures are ar-

recture, he sometimes had a paper of the same size as the canvas stretched across a board, and the whole building—parts of which were to appear in the picture—drawn out carefully to scale by an assistant, with roof, sculptured columns, and elaborate tessellated pavement complete, untiring attention being paid to the perspective of the different parts. Unfortunately, he had always to do it afresh, as it was never good enough, and therefore he has abandoned this plan, and tries now himself to work out his backgrounds on the picture itself so completely and so thoroughly that an actual building could be constructed by following the



DRAWN BY F. L. M. PAPE.

COLONNADE IN THE FRONT GARDEN.

plans for it. I recollect once remarking to Mr. Alma-Tadema that I thought a pillar in the foreground of one of his pictures was rather too conspicuous: whereupon he at once showed me that it was obliged to be so, as it was the continuation of the line of architecture carried forward from the rear of the building, and he went on to point out how this façade fitted on to that hall, and that flight of steps made some other wall finish at a given angle, and so on, until I found myself quite convinced of the actuality of the whole thing, and believed, as he did, in the absolute necessity of that column remaining where it was, even if it did still seem unduly prominent.

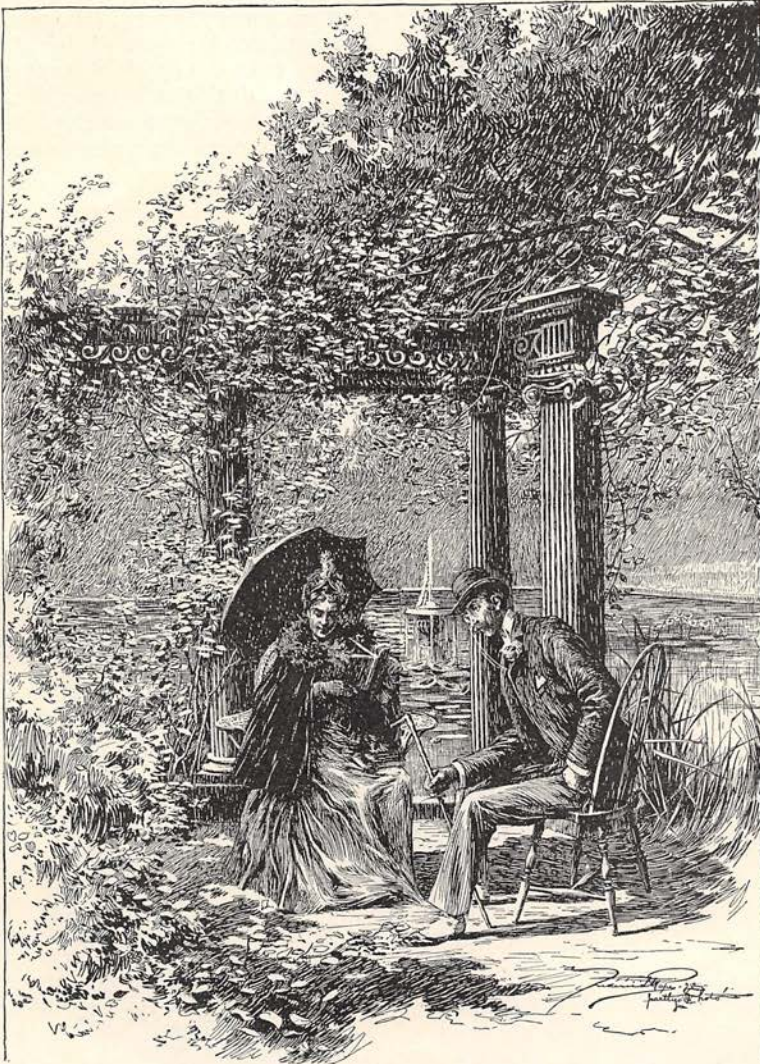
Mr. Alma-Tadema paints his figures direct from life in every instance, elaborately draped and coiffured as they appear in his completed pictures: but he will often pause in painting to make a delicate pencil-drawing of the details of a garment, as it appears and then loses itself among the close folds of the drapery, or to note the turn of a wrist or the curve of a neck.

The flowers that illuminate so many of Mr. Alma-Tadema's more recent pictures are also invariably painted from life; his house often presenting a most festive appearance, great bowls of roses, or vases of jonquils and acacia, standing in the atrium, waiting their turn to be carried into the great studio to be painted.

These flowers come from many foreign shores, some of them from Italy, some even from Algiers, others from English country gardens, while many of them are procured in Covent Garden market, that London pleasance where flowers are found blooming all through the year. In spite of the severeness of his mental eye, and his extraordinary knowledge of form, Mr. Alma-Tadema will never trust to his memory. If this is, as indeed it must be, a great merit, it may also be a slight limitation in his art.

When an important picture approaches completion, the whole household is aware of the painter's excitement, and eagerly shares it. Professional models are insufficient to supply the demand, and a friend is called upon at night, or some member of the family in the very early morning, to dedicate a face or a hand to the great sacrifice. During these critical times Mr. Alma-Tadema's intensity is something formidable, and he is in the mood, like Benvenuto Cellini, to pour all his most precious things into the fire of his devouring art. It is very exciting to share these periods of storm and stress. They do not last very long, or who could survive to tell the tale?

When his present home was under construction, he was continually drawing designs in delicate outline for such details as the turning



DRAWN BY F. L. M. PAPE.

UNDER THE COLONNADE IN THE FRONT GARDEN.

of an ivory handle, or the decoration of some inlaid panel; or, again, plans were made for couches with strange and elaborate legs, or for other articles of furniture, which his workmen would carry out from his designs. Mr. Alma-Tadema never seemed to get at the end of his ideas for his house. The very windows open strangely, and the doors, apparently, have no fastenings at all, and, to the uninitiated, are not a little puzzling to open and shut.

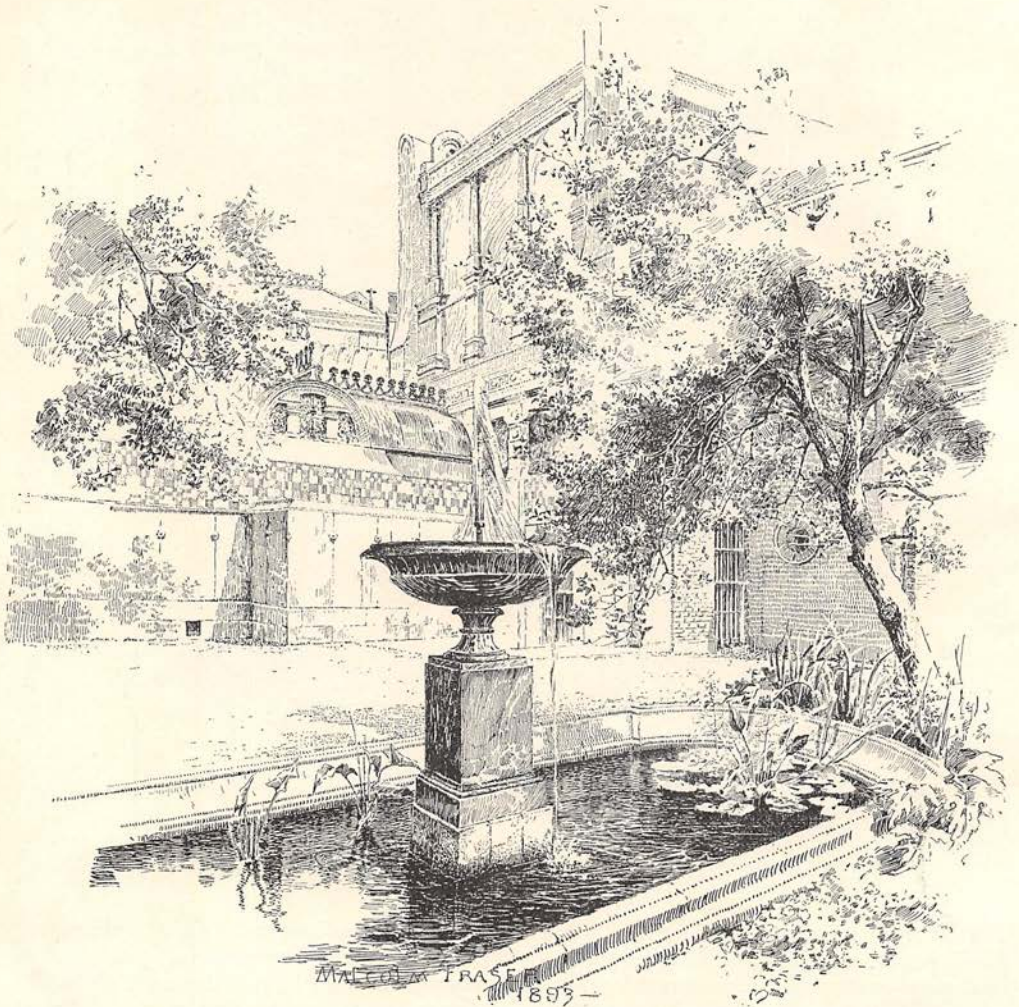
When the picture called "The Improvisatore" was being painted, much excitement prevailed. This painting shows a youth singing to some persons who are seated on the green sward, and accompanying his song on the lyre. The whole scene is bathed in moonlight, and the question which interested Mr. Alma-Ta-

dema's household was as to the actual amount of color that could be positively perceived in objects seen by the light of the moon alone. In order to test this point, draperies of different colors were placed in the garden, and evening visitors were asked candidly to say what colors they thought them to be. No two persons could agree as to the positive color of any given object in the moonlight. The painter, therefore, was obliged, on this occasion, to follow the instinct of his own eyesight.

Sometimes a longing comes over us for a little repose from all this crowded perfection of detail; a wish creeps into the mind for a little dimness, a slight mist over it all, or for at least a little uncertainty in some of the details. But Mr. Alma-Tadema's character comes out in his

refusal of this indulgence, and in his conviction that there is only one right way; "no half measures," and "no hesitation or uncertainty." He draws everything to measure; every inch, or fraction of an inch, is proved; "It must, it shall, be right and exact; if you are sure of

advances, luckily to reappear again at the end. Also, with this great knowledge of detail, he is inclined to be too lavish of decoration. As an instance of this, attention may be called to the fact that his elaborately veined and finished marbles are often the plainest parts of his pic-



BACK GARDEN, SHOWING THE STUDIO AND COVERED APPROACH TO THE HOUSE.

your facts, why hesitate to state them definitely?" is what this severe master of detail may say to any one who recommends a concession to what is graceful or apparent.

There can be no doubt that Mr. Alma-Tadema is so fascinated by the beauty of detail and of surface-painting, and so accomplished in rendering it, that he sometimes loses sight of the original intention of his picture — the motive of his composition. The light in his unfinished paintings is apt to die down as the picture

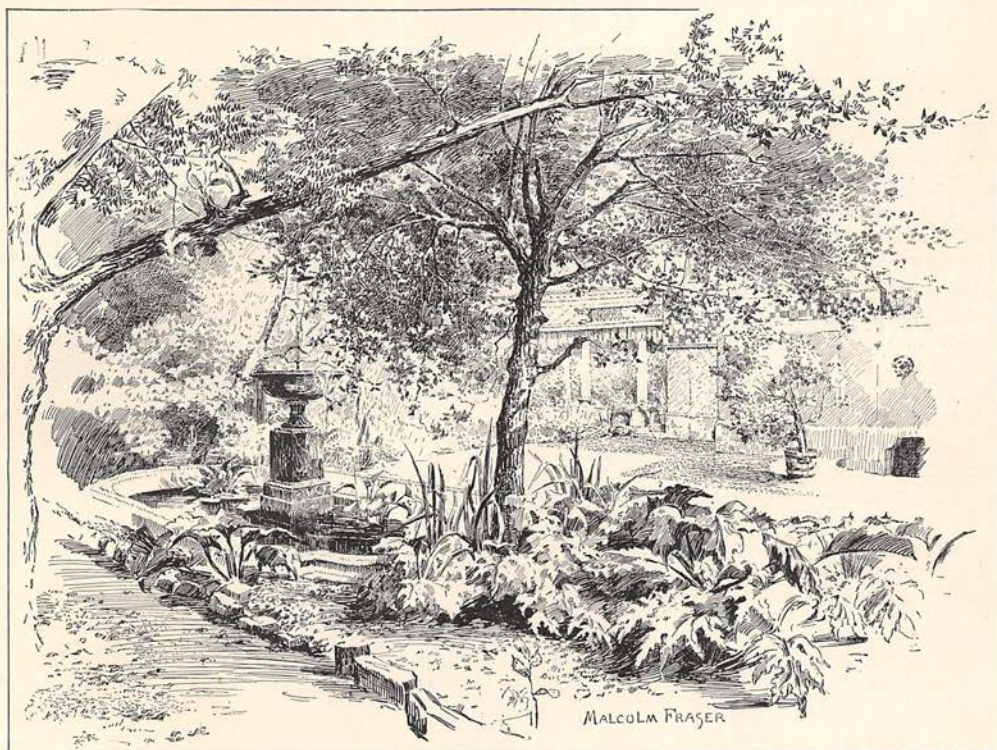
tures — wherein perhaps lies in some measure the secret of his great charm.

v.

NOTHING is commoner than to see Mr. Alma-Tadema, in the circle of his intimate friends, pull out his sketch-book and enter a hurried note of the graceful pose of some figure among the guests, or of the combined lines of a group; or he will make a sketch of the

outline of a child's cheek, with the tip of its little nose showing beyond, all else of its face being hidden by its frilled hood or its falling curls. At such a party Mr. Alma-Tadema keeps the whole company laughing merrily over his clever little drawings, made with a few strokes of the pencil, but yet portraying to the life the aspect of the "sad or gay pig," or of the "portly bishop and his lady, seen from a

which, when he is in a gay mood, beams with kindly expression, his eyes twinkling, and his whole face becoming suffused with smiles. His manner is very genial, but on formal occasions, or at public ceremonies, he has a courtly and rather foreign carriage. When roused, and in argument about politics or art, his voice becomes raised, and his eyes kindle with fire; at these times the spectator is struck



DRAWN BY MALCOLM FRASER.

GARDEN VIEW AT THE SIDE OF THE STUDIO.

third-floor window," or else of that ingenious face whose features, looked at without prejudice, are simply the figures  $15\frac{2}{3}$ ; but regarded non-critically, and with a little imagination, represent the portrait of a rather prim and elderly woman in a spoonbill bonnet, or her lover.

Mr. Alma-Tadema's sense of humor is very broad and genial; he is a perfect fund of amusing anecdotes and conundrums, and it is often a question among his friends where he can possibly find the great number of stories and bon-mots that he tells on all occasions. As a host his manner is very hearty and hospitable, and he takes untiring pleasure in showing the beauty and surprises of his house to the numerous visitors who gather weekly at his studio.

In appearance he is fair, and is of a strong, broad build; he has almost a chubby face,

with the great decision of character which is accentuated by the lines of the square forehead and the firmly drawn jaw, the fullness of the lips, and the set of the head.

A few words must be said about Mr. Alma-Tadema's great love of music. To see him playing over in duet form, with a member of his family, the score of some favorite opera, the volume of sound increasing as his excitement rises, and the whole being capped by his shouting aloud the arias of the hero, is a scene that it is delightful to witness. Many of the first musicians of the day may be counted among Mr. Alma-Tadema's friends; and those gatherings at his house, when music is poured forth under the silver dome of the mysteriously lighted studio, are among the most striking and beautiful scenes to be met with in London.

*Ellen Gosse.*



ENGRAVED BY R. G. TIETZE.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY WALERY.

L. ALMA-TADEMA.