



MADAME ALBANI AND THE LUCKY BLACK CAT.

Illustrated Interviews.

No. III.—MADAME ALBANI.

IN one of the prettiest corners of Kensington is a quiet spot known as The Boltons. No happier or more suggestive name could have been found for it than that bestowed by the famous singer's little boy. He calls it "Our Village," and you have only to look out from the windows of any of the surrounding houses, and there, in the midst of a wealth of green and trees, is the church; whilst there is nothing to disturb the stillness save the singing of the birds, which are piping here, there, and everywhere. In a large corner house, with great balconies which seem to suggest a trysting-place for Romeo and Juliet, resides Mrs. Ernest Gye, familiarly known the wide world over as Madame Albani. It is an attractive spot to the passer-by, and a delighted open-air audience may often be found there in the morning, when the sounds of the artiste's voice are to be heard, practising the opera for the night, in the drawing-room.

I could not have called at a more opportune time. It was the afternoon following her last appearance at Covent Garden this season, and the place was a veritable garden of flowers—floral rewards bestowed upon the singer the previous night for her dramatic rendering of *Desdemona* in "Otello." Wherever the eye looked there were flowers—roses were springing out of every nook and corner, huge

posies and heavy baskets, whilst leaning negligently against the wall of the drawing-room was a great A composed of white sweet-peas, and the tiny vases scattered about were brimming over with the blossoms. They had to be conveyed home in a cab last night, for the carriage was already full of them.

Madame Albani's talents have won for her a precious collection of souvenirs, and the house is a store for them. After passing through the entrance hall, where a moment before her clever dog "Chat" has kindly obliged by sitting for his picture, we come, on the immediate right, to Mr. Gye's study. On his table are set out homely photos of himself, his wife, and their only child, Ernest; and over the fireplace is a magnificent stag's head, a reminiscence of Scotland. In a niche in the hall by the window is a life-size statue of their son, by Prince Victor of Hohenlohe. The little fellow is in sailor's costume, and playing

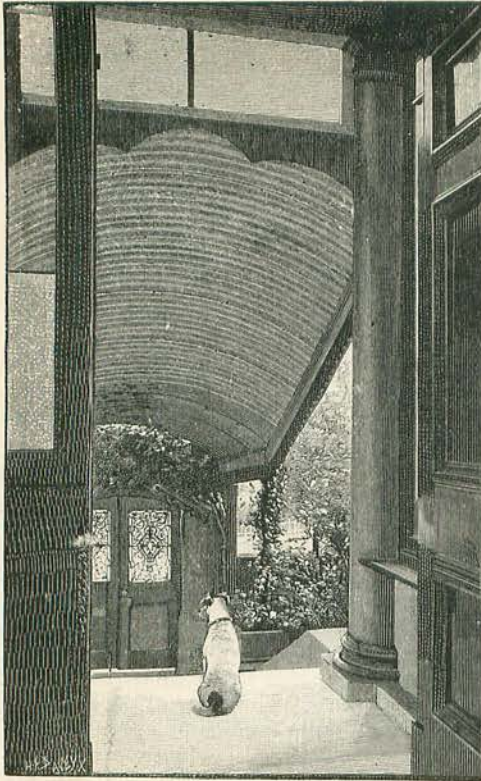
with a toy railway engine, his one great amusement when three or four years of age, when he could boast of a collection of engines and tenders which would make any child in the land pardonably envious. It is in the drawing-room where one realises to what extent Madame Albani's talents have been acknowledged, so far as the bestowal of kindly gifts conveys appreciation. The apartment is richly draped, and its walls are an agreeable



From a Photo. by]

MADAME ALBANI.

[Kameke.



From a Photo. by] THE ENTRANCE HALL. [Elliott & Fry.

symphony of amber and cream. The elaborately-worked cushions and footstools, the chairs, almost in miniature, and exquisitely draped, the tables positively loaded with gifts, are innumerable. One table is set out with silver trinkets—silver ships, fishes, horses, scent bottles, and even snuff boxes. At the far end of the room is a cabinet filled with valuable pieces of china, and close by is a bust of Madame Albani by the same Royal sculptor who executed that of her son. Here, too, is a harp, for the singer is a brilliant harpist, and her fingers often run over the strings. The piano is a useful-looking one, and it need be, for its keys are severely and incessantly worked. An interesting photo stands here on a crimson plush easel. It is that of the Princess Frederica of Hanover, who, being desirous of being photographed as *Elsa* in "Lohengrin," borrowed the real costume in the shape of the identical cloak and veil worn by Madame Albani when singing in the character. An interesting gift, too, is that of a fine vase presented to her by the Empress Augusta of Germany. It shows the

palace and the window where the old Emperor was wont to stand and salute the guard. In a glass case, by the window, is a silver wreath—a reminiscence of the terrible inundations in Belgium, presented by the Mayor of Brussels when the artist sang in aid of a fund for the sufferers.

But what strikes one most of all are the almost countless photos of nearly every member of the Royal family. Madame Albani may justly claim to be the favourite singer of the Queen. When the vocalist visited Berlin a few years ago the Queen sent a telegram to the Crown Princess, speaking in the highest terms of the great singer; and this telegram is here preserved. Once every year Her Majesty visits her favourite at Old Mar Lodge, and takes tea there, and many are the "private appearances" at Balmoral, when the Queen often listens to the delightful voice in many an old song and ballad of which she is so fond. It was when Her Majesty was paying her customary visit to the old hunting lodge of the Duke of Fife that she brought with her the Jubilee portrait of herself which hangs near the drawing-room mantel-board, framed in gold and surmounted with a crown. Look along the mantel-board—every photo bears the autograph of the giver. The Prince and Princess of Wales are in ivory frames,



MASTER ERNEST GYE.



From a Photo, by]

THE DRAWING-ROOM.

[Elliott & Fry.

with the smoke of Old Mar rising. This is the resting-place of Madame Albani for two months every year. It is a quaint old Scotch house, possessing a grand garden, where the singer frankly admits she spends her time in gathering flowers and eating raspberries.

Here, too, her abilities as an amateur gardener and angler have full play. Every morning, after breakfast, the beds have her close attention for one allotted hour, and

and near to them are the Duke and Duchess of Fife and the Duke and Duchess of Westminster. Here, again, is the Queen with one of the Duke of Connaught's children, the old Emperor of Germany and Princess Beatrice.

The dining-room is an apartment remarkable for its fine oak furniture—a beautifully carved sideboard and quaint clerical-looking high-back chairs. The table—which for the moment is florally decorated with sweet-peas which have evidently strayed from the great A—is lighted by a trio of electric lights beneath an immense crimson shade. The room contains many fine oil paintings, and against a chair, presumably waiting to fill a place on the wall, is an engraving of the Jubilee picture of the scene in Westminster Abbey, showing Madame Albani standing next to Miss Ellen Terry. A fine water-colour shows a glen.

then, with rod and line, she will sit on the banks of the Dee, and many a good trout and weighty salmon have responded to her silent invitation to take "a bite."

A little conservatory, sweet with fuchsias and gay with ferns and palms, where Miss Lajeunesse—Madame Albani's sister—is just now engaged in watering them, leads



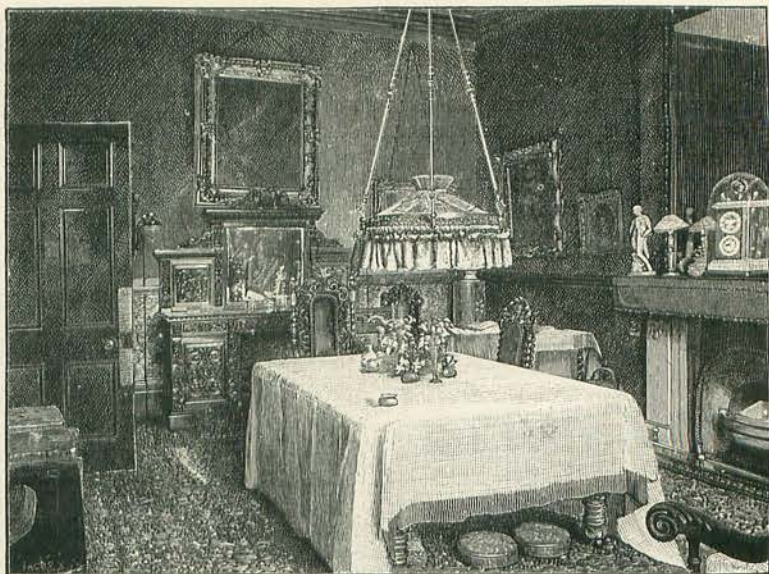
From a Photo, by]

THE DRAWING-ROOM.

[Elliott & Fry

from the dining-room to the garden, with its beds and banks of ferns, marguerites, bluebells, and scarlet geraniums. Beneath a leafy arch the singer, in our illustration, is seen standing.

Just then the clock in the dining-room chimes five—a suggestive warning that in the prettiest corner of the drawing-room a little table is laid out for tea; for it was during such an essentially Kensingtonian ceremony as “five o'clock tea” that I learnt from Madame Albani's lips the story of her life. It is no easy matter to describe the famous singer.



From a Photo. by]

THE DINING-ROOM.

[Elliott & Fry.

She is a handsome woman, of unbounded vivacity, and speaks with a charming French accent. She accompanies her story with constant gesture, and is always smiling. She will look at you and speak most seriously, but her eyes are ever twinkling with merriment. She is a delightful woman, who has won her present position to-day by sheer hard work.

“What *am* I to tell you? What *am* I to tell you?” she exclaims, pouring out a cup of tea. “Shall I go back to many, many years ago, when as a tiny mite of two and a half I used to watch my father's fingers on the violin, as I stood by his side and tried to sing each note? Well, I will. That was at Chambly, near Montreal, where I was born on November 1, 1851, in a little house that was so small, that when they wanted to make some alterations in the neighbourhood, they lifted it up and moved it away bodily. But it is not destroyed. Another spot was found for it. My father was a professor of music and organist, and at that early age I commenced to study. I have heard him say that I sang before I talked. When I was four my mother also looked after my musical training, and a year later I was practising five and six hours every day. I often used to practise then two hours every morning before



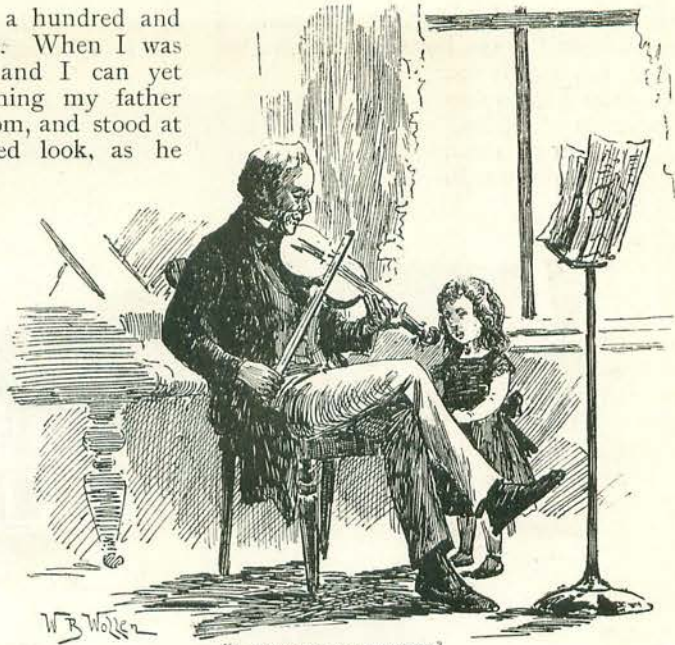
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THE CONSERVATORY STEPS.

[Elliott & Fry.

breakfast, and get through a hundred and fifty pages of music a day. When I was seven my mother died, and I can yet remember how one morning my father suddenly came into the room, and stood at the door with a surprised look, as he listened to me singing my favourite little bits out of such operas as "Lucrezia Borgia," "Martha," and "Norma."

"One day my father and I were at a large store where I used to practise on the piano, and a Scotchman, who was giving concerts in Montreal, came in. I was eight years old at the time, and he persuaded my father to let me sing at a concert. I did, and I had to give three concerts, and every night the stage used to be strewn with flowers. Flowers! Why, do you know I once had a great floral trophy given to me that took three men to bring on to the stage? It was



"I WATCHED HIS FINGERS."

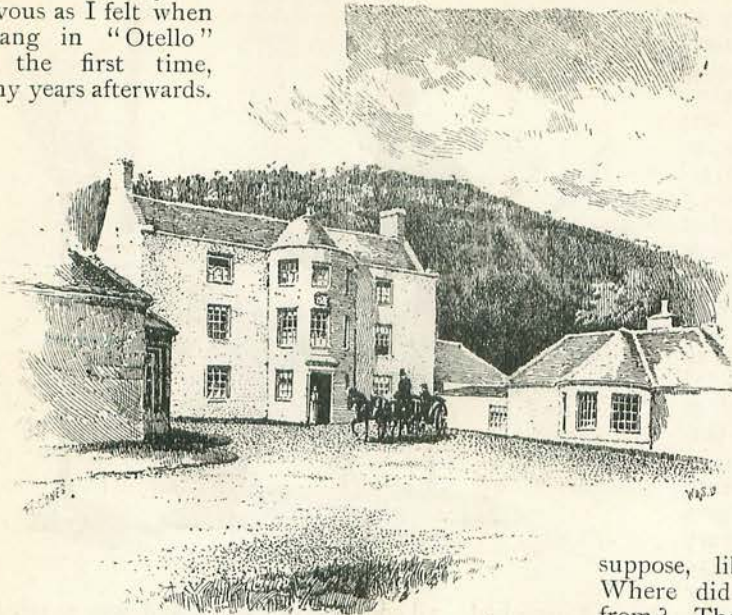
all composed of roses, and was a gift from the ladies of Philadelphia.

"When I was nine, I entered the convent of The Sacred Heart, at Sault-au-Recollet. I was organist there, and remained there several years, and after leaving we went to live at Albany. Ah! does that name strike you? Yes, you are quite correct. After studying in Paris under Duprez, and afterwards with Lamperti, at Milan, I made my *début* there in 1870 as *Amina* in "Sonnambula," under the name of Albani, out of remembrance of the city, the people of which helped me so much, and where I think my future career was decided upon. You see, I just changed the last letter to i, and that gave me my operatic name. I



THE MADMAN'S GIFT.

well remember that first appearance. I had no friends in the house that night, but I was not nearly so nervous as I felt when I sang in "Otello" for the first time, many years afterwards.

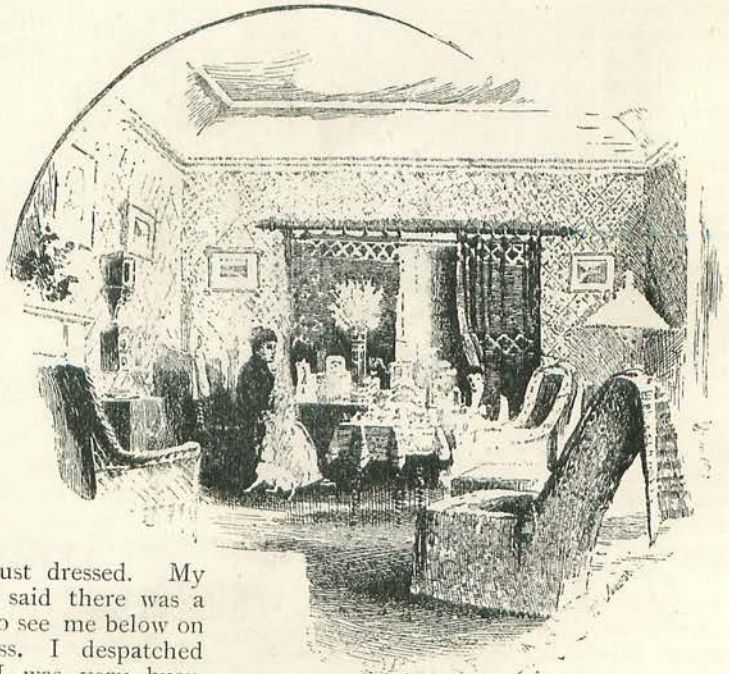


OLD MAR LODGE.

When one is eighteen one has no fear. At the first rehearsal I trembled a little bit for, you see, I was French-Canadian, and not Italian, but at the finish of my first song my brother and sister artistes took me up and almost carried me to my room.

"It was there—at Messina—that I very nearly made the acquaintance of a madman; at any rate, I am sorry to say that I was the means of sending him back to the lunatic asylum again. In Italy presents to artistes are very numerous, and people pay one all sorts of attentions. It was the morning after the opera, and I was just dressed. My maid came to me and said there was a gentleman who wanted to see me below on most important business. I despatched my maid to say that I was very busy, when, a few minutes afterwards, she

suppose, liked my singing. Where did the jewels come from? They belonged to his wife. He had stripped her jewel cases of everything. Poor fellow! he was sent back to Naples again.



DRAWING-ROOM, OLD MAR LODGE.

"It was in Italy, too, that the opera house came very near to being burnt down, and this little incident will just show you how calm the generally considered impetuous Italian can be in case of emergency. It was towards the end of the second act, when suddenly I saw one of the ballet dancers rush out of her room with her thin dress ablaze. The room where the dancers dressed was on fire. We had to pass it to get out into the street near the stage door. They covered me up in great shawls and carried me out to a café opposite. The fire was put out in twenty minutes. I returned to the theatre, we finished the opera, and everybody enjoyed it just as though nothing had happened.

"I made my *début* in London at Covent Garden on April 2, 1872, in my favourite *Amina*, and I don't mind confessing that I attributed a great deal of my success that night to the sudden appearance of a big black cat. I am very superstitious. I always occupy the same room at the theatre—it is one of the largest in the house. Just as I was all ready, and preparing to go on to the stage, the door was slowly and silently pushed open, and one of the biggest black cats imaginable peeped in and looked up at me. Oh! how delighted I was! Yes, I don't wonder at your smiling, but a black cat has always been a lucky thing for me, and I would welcome one at any time;" and the gifted artiste laughs heartily as she tells

me that she does not keep one specially in the house to ensure good fortune entering at the front door. But, she has "Chat," her pet terrier—a fine young fellow, who lies on the rug at the foot of the piano, and listens to every note whilst his mistress

is practising. "Chat" is clever, too, and would be a distinct acquisition to any performing troupe.

For a moment Madame Albani rearranges some of the flowers in the room, and, as she handles a particularly fine bouquet of crimson roses, a smile comes over her face.

"It was just like that," she quietly remarks, with the smile still there, and weighing the bunch of flowers somewhat mischievously and meditatively in her hands. And then the recollection which had made her smile leaked out. The stage of Covent Garden Theatre was the scene. Amid intense excitement, amongst the flowers thrown



MADAME ALBANI AS "MARGHERITA" (*Faust*).
From a Photograph by Heath & Bullingham, Plymouth.

over the footlights was a bouquet containing a bracelet. But, unfortunately for poor Madame Albani, the aim was not straight, the roses were not as soft as they are generally supposed to be, and the floral missile, instead of landing gracefully before her feet, struck her on the head. The artiste laughed most heartily as she remembered this little incident.

"Since I commenced my career I have sung in some strange places. One of my most remarkable experiences was in Russia, at the Royal marriage. In Russia the

singers are all considered as servants. Well, it was most strange. We were all put in a sort of balcony which looked down upon the banqueting scene below, and as each of our turns came to sing, we went to a little opening and sang through it. What amused me was this, that all the time we were trying to sing our best, and produce our notes most effectively, the clatter of knives and forks still went on, and to make all complete, the singer might be in a most impressive passage and right in the midst of it, when, quite regardless of the uncomplaining singers, there would be a flourish of trumpets and somebody would get up and propose a toast. I was more fortunate than Madame Patti, for she was interrupted in the middle of her solo.

"Yes, I have often had requests to sing beside a deathbed or a person very ill. I sang to the old Bishop of Albany when he was suffering. The first festival I ever sang in was at Norwich, and when I returned to that place after six years, I had a letter from an old gentleman who heard me there, and who was now bedridden. He wanted to hear 'The Last Rose of Summer,' and I shall never forget standing there by his side and singing that beautiful song. And many a time have I had to convert the balcony of the hotel where I was staying into a temporary platform, and appear at midnight, long after the opera was over, and sing 'Home, sweet Home,' or some such popular ballad to the people waiting outside. That was the case at Dublin some few years ago, when the students there took the horses out of my carriage, and I was told that if I did not sing they would break the windows of the hotel. I stood on the balcony, wrapped up in great shawls, for it was a bitterly cold night, and it was no easy matter to sing 'The Last Rose of Summer' under those circumstances.

"I have sung, too, in the quiet little church at Braemar in the choir, and it was there that I received what I have always considered one of my greatest compliments. The speaker was one of the mountain folk, and had never even been to Edinburgh. When the service was over a friend of mine heard

him say, "I never thought anybody could have such control over one's voice." That was all, but that is the whole secret of a singer's success—perfect control."

Then it was that I learned something about Madame Albani's method of studying. Like all great singers, she has one hard and fast rule which binds her household. When rehearsing nobody is ever allowed to disturb her. Her soul is in her work just as earnestly in the drawing-room as on the stage. She is a remarkably quick study, a thing she attributes to her arduous

though enjoyable training in her early childhood. Madame Albani studied and sang "Lohengrin" in a fortnight, and she has been equally rapid in gaining her knowledge of such lengthy studies as *Margherita*, *Ophelia*, *Mignon*, *Elisabetta*, *Lucia*, and other operatic characters which will always be associated with her name. When she is about to take up a new character, she will first of all sit down quietly in the wicker chair in the conservatory, or in some quiet

and undisturbable corner about the house, and taking the score in her lap, run through the music. Then she devotes herself to the words. Having learnt these, she now sits down to the piano, and commences work in real earnest. Having learnt both words and music, the services of an accompanist are called in, and, as she plays, Madame Albani will take up her position in the room, and, imagining the other characters about her, rehearse piece by piece. The morning preceding the opera she will go through every note to be sung in the evening. After all this individual work it is possible that she may get three piano rehearsals at the theatre, two fully orchestral, and one for action and situations.

She likes "Otello" best of any opera. She learnt the music of it in a fortnight.

"But," once more resumes the artiste, "there is much more to think about besides words and music. I read my Shakespeare well, and the operatic singer must realise the character to be 'sung,' just as much as the actor must realise the part he is to play. I design all my own dresses,



From a]

"CHAT."

[Photograph.

and get most of my ideas from South Kensington Museum. Sometimes I see a figure in a picture that strikes me, and I may borrow a sleeve from that, and a design for a bodice from another. These costumes when made up cost from 70 to 80 guineas, and some much more. I have dresses for twenty operas, and many operas require three or four distinct changes of costume. The expense of these does not include jewels? Oh! dear, no; the jewellery I wear on them would make them worth many, many hundreds of pounds. Will I show you my jewels? Just wait a moment."

She leaves the room for a moment, and then returns with a big bundle of letters and a great bag.

"These letters are all applications for my autograph. I get them from all parts of the world—India, Australia, New Zealand. When I have collected a couple of hundred of them, I just clear them all over at once, devoting a morning to the task." Then opening the bag, a score of cases are brought out, the lids of which when raised present to the view gifts from every Royal personage in Europe. One by one Madame Albani takes them out. Here is a cross of sparkling gems presented to her by the late Emperor of Russia, and a diamond star and a butterfly of jewels given by the subscribers to the opera at St. Petersburg and Moscow. In Russia, on the benefit night of a

favourite artiste, the subscribers collect as much money as they possibly can, and spend it in providing presents. The body of the butterfly—which I have in my hand—is one great emerald, and the wings are of rubies and diamonds. This is a gold medal from the old German Emperor, who appointed Madame Albani Court singer the last year he was alive. It was struck to commemorate his 80th year in the army, and the 90th year of his age, and was a reward to the artiste for having specially studied German in order to sing 'Lohengrin' in the language of the Fatherland.

Many are the presents from the Queen—a gold cross set with emeralds and diamonds, and a glance at Madame Albani's wrist shows two magnificent bracelets which she always wears. They are both of gold; one is set with emeralds and diamonds, a gift from Her Majesty, and the other is of rubies and diamonds, from the Princess of Wales.

Again the clock is heard chiming, and the watchful "Chat" follows me to the top of the steps which lead into "Our Village." Again the sounds of the piano are heard; a voice—which has reached many a heart—is singing. As I hurry away I am inclined to envy those who often have to pass by the house I have just left.



From Photo. by MADAME ALBANI AS "ELSA" (*Lohengrin*). [Savony, New York.

HARRY HOW.