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“AN EARTHLY PARADISE.”

“All the heaven of heavens in one little child.”

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[Sir L. Abme-Tudema, R.A.

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Illustrated Interviews.

LXVIII.—SIR LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA, R.A.

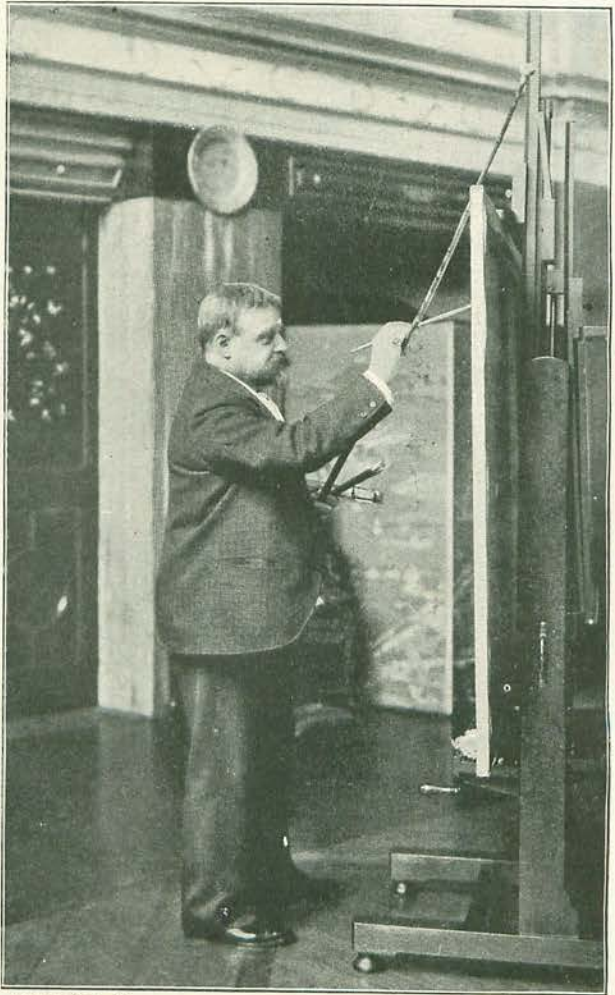
BY FREDERICK DOLMAN.



F "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome" there is no greater living exponent in pictorial art than Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Many a visitor to the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy, looking upon his vivid realization of daily life in the ancient classical period, with its graceful women and stately men, its brilliant sky, gleaming marbles, and gorgeous flowers, must have greatly wondered where and how in murky, commonplace London such pictures could be conceived and created, it being well known that the distinguished painter, a Dutchman by birth, has long been an Englishman by adoption, and a Londoner by choice. No. 17, Grove End Road, St. John's Wood, where Sir Lawrence has resided for many years, is not an address which in itself signifies much in answer to such a question, and you might pass along the thoroughfare a dozen times without having your attention attracted to the dwelling-place which bears that number, surrounded as it is by a high garden-wall in accordance with the general plan of the neighbourhood.

When you pull the old-fashioned iron bell-handle, however, and the garden-gate in response gently slips open, tacitly inviting you to walk along the tessellated pavement, protected by a glass awning, to the portal of the house, revelations are assuredly at hand full of enlightenment as to the value

which a great artist with enthusiasm for his work puts upon sympathetic environment. The door-knocker, a massive antique mask of brass, with the word *Salve*—the favourite greeting of the Romans—carved above in bold lettering, fitly heralds your entrance to



From a Photo. by] SIR LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA, R.A. [Geo. Newnes, Ltd.



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"SAPPHO."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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a home which more than any other in London illustrates the artistic beauty of domiciles such as Horace and Cicero knew, and such as are suggested to us to-day in the finest remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The atrium, triclinium, peristyle, impluvium, and other features which Lord Lytton describes with so much detail in "The Last Days of Pompeii" have been reproduced with as much fidelity as was consistent with present-day convenience and the English climate.

It is in the essentially modern billiard-room, however, that Sir Lawrence receives me as the representative of THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

We seat ourselves in a little recess at the end of the room, just raised a little to afford a better view of the table when a game is in progress, and light cigars. The electric globe fills this recess with a soft glow, but there is only a dim light over the rest of the room, and the figure and features of the artist, as he reclines in his chair, are consequently placed in clear relief. Of about the middle height, Sir Lawrence looks lithe and strong, and although his rather shaggy hair is partially grey, and the *pince-nez* looks like a fixture, you would never take him to be a man who had seen sixty-three years and has painted more than three hundred important pictures. He is dressed in the *négligé* style of the studio, the brown hue of his clothes seeming to set off the slight colour on his frank, energetic face. Although

so pleasing, the face is not of an English type, and, if it were, it would be denied by the accent with which, in excellent literary form, and sometimes very quickly, Sir Lawrence speaks in the tongue of the country which he honours by making his own.

"Then it is your custom to work every day and all day?" I remark, resuming the talk when our cigars were well alight.

"Yes, but I cannot claim to work with the regularity of some artists. I never know how much or how little I am going to do. For days I make no progress with a picture—there is so much painting-out. Leighton, on the other hand, as you may know, was able to apportion every part of his day to its allotted task—two hours to a model, two hours to a sitter, so much more to a study, and so on."

"And yet your work, Sir Lawrence, is mostly of the same kind—the public won't let you paint much without blue sky and white marble in it."

"That is true, but it only increases, I think, the strain upon the artist. I have attained—at least, people think I have attained—to excellence in a certain groove of art. I must continue to work in that groove, but at the same time I must not merely repeat myself. In this groove I have to find fresh features of interest, new points of achievement. This makes the artistic effort, although, in a sense, I may be able to paint very blue skies and very light marbles better and more easily than anything else."

"Then you are not in the same position as the actor who is condemned by success to play the same part night after night?"

"Not quite. But actors are prone to tire of the sphere in which they have made their reputations. Many a comedian has longed to distinguish himself as a tragedian, when it is pretty certain that if he were to make the attempt, comedy would lose an excellent interpreter, and tragedy would gain little. In the same way painters are apt to despise success as soon as it seems to be too easily gained—they often strive ambitiously

work of his earlier years was of somewhat different character, and I am moved to inquire how he discovered his true *métier*.

"I was always very fond of Roman history, although at school, which I left rather early, I am afraid I never made very much headway with Latin and Greek. I was first attracted to the artistic possibilities of marble when visiting Ghent in 1858. A friend happened to take me into a certain clubhouse—I forget for the moment the name of the club—which had a marble smoking-room. I don't suppose the room was of any



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"THE PROPOSAL."

[Sir L. Alma Tadema, R.A.]

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in some new field for which they are less fitted, but then it is so difficult to know one's own powers."

It is in association with such pictures as "The Shrine of Venus," "A Reading from Homer," and "An Audience at Agrippa's" that the name of Alma-Tadema will long be memorable in the annals of art. But the

exceptional magnificence, but it was the finest marble room I had then seen, and its wonderful whiteness and atmosphere made an extraordinary impression upon me."

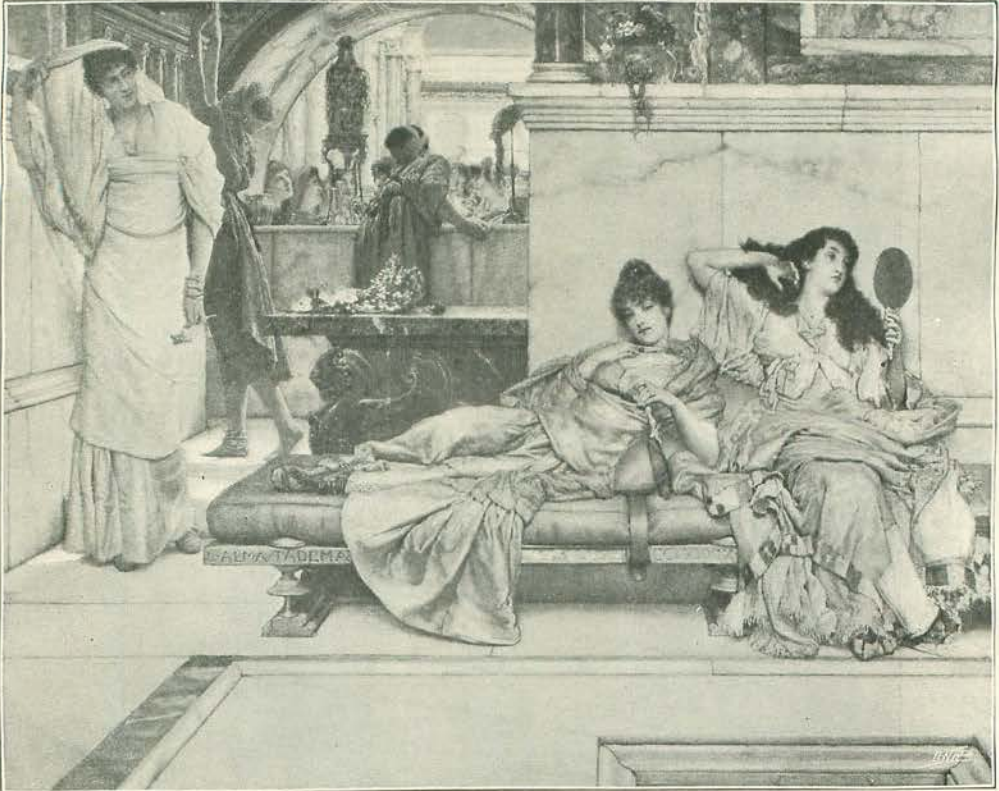
"And with this association of ideas—historical interest and the beauty of marble—you proceeded to Italy and Greece?"

"No, I did not visit Rome for some years

later, and Greece I have never seen. A friend of my mother's did, indeed, offer me a sum of money quite early in my career to enable me to have a long course of travel. But, after due consideration, I declined the kind offer. It seemed to me—and my opinion remains the same to-day—that a young artist whose style and individuality had yet to be formed was more likely to be harmed than

'I am Alma-Tadema'—and could enjoy and profit by all that I saw without danger of mere imitation. You remember the story of Correggio, the desire of whose heart was to see the Raphaels in the Vatican. When it was realized, and he stood before the famous works, he exclaimed, 'And I too am a painter!'

"But how, then, did you obtain the know-



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"AT THE SHRINE OF VENUS."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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benefited by going to Venice, say, and studying Titian, to Rome and studying Michael Angelo, to Spain and immersing himself in Velasquez."

"Yet the Royal Academy maintains several travelling studentships?"

"Yes, I know, but the policy, in my opinion, is a mistaken one. Scarcely any of the greatest painters travelled in their youth."

And Sir Lawrence promptly ran through many names of the Masters, both old and modern, in verification of his statement.

"When I first visited Italy in 1863 I had developed as an artist into what I am now—I could say to myself without egotism,

ledge of every detail of old Greek and Roman life shown in your pictures?"

"As to the costume, mainly from sculpture and antique paintings; as to general details of architecture, furnishing, etc., mainly from museums and collections. Baring Gould's 'Tragedy of the Cæsars,' for instance, is an excellent work, inspired by the portraits of the time. Of course, I know Pompeii by heart—I spent a long time in exploring it, especially in 1884 and in 1863, when the pavements were uncovered, and not as now covered up with mud, owing to the misguided methods of preservation adopted by the Italian officials. I have never visited Greece and the Orient,



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"UNCONSCIOUS RIVALS."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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from the fear that I should not be able to see the ancient life there for the crowds of living people and things of to-day. Even Rome is becoming hopelessly modern in that sense—on my last visit in 1886 I was much less able to discover for myself the life of the ancient city."

"And you do not have to go abroad in search of models?"

"No, in London a painter can obtain everything he wants in that way. As to Italians, for instance, there are available models of as many types as in Rome itself. It has been said, I know, that some of my Greeks and Romans are too English in their appearance. But, after all, there is not such a great difference between the ancients and the moderns as we are apt to suppose. This is the truth that I have always endeavoured to express in my pictures, that the old Romans were human flesh and blood, like ourselves, moved by much the same passions and emotions."

"Your knowledge of Greek and Roman life has been more than once enlisted in the service of the stage, Sir Lawrence?"

"Yes, I was first asked by Irving to assist him with 'Coriolanus.' But as you know, 'Coriolanus' was never produced, and my

work did not get beyond careful sketches for the scenery. Then I was consulted by Mr. Beerbohm Tree about the mounting of 'Hypatia,' for which I made myself responsible. In 1897 I assisted Sir Henry in the production of 'Cymbeline,' and last year I had a good deal to do with Tree's production of 'Julius Cæsar.'"

"You have found in these matters, I suppose, pleasant relaxation after the work of the studio?"

"Relaxation!" and the artist gave a sardonic little laugh. "It was confoundedly harder work than painting. When I was not attending rehearsals I had members of the company here on all sorts of questions, and I had no end of difficulty in persuading them to be truly Roman in appearance. Portia would wear jewels, and so on. Then, the long interviews with scene-painters, and the rehearsals! I remember on one occasion I was at Her Majesty's—it was the dress-rehearsal of 'Julius Cæsar'—from seven in the evening till three the next morning. I suppose it was my own fault—I couldn't help entering fully into the interest and excitement of the thing. But that is always my way—I concentrate all my energy and attention on whatever I take in hand. For the time being



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“LOVE'S VOTARIES.”

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[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

I found it practically impossible to do any other work, and I think I shall have to refuse anything of the kind again. At the same time I got a considerable amount of enjoyment out of the experience, as our actors and artists are such nice people to deal with."

With all the enthusiasm for art which this conversation has revealed, it was only by an interposition of Providence—as some people would call it—that Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema became an artist. The son of a notary in the village of Dronryp, near Leeuwarden, he lost his father when only four years old. His mother, of whom he always speaks with affection as a woman of rare strength of purpose and character, had a large family to bring up on comparatively small means. Although even in childhood Laurens showed cleverness with the pencil, she not unnaturally distrusted art as too precarious a profession for her boy. It was decided that he should be a lawyer, like his father, and to that end was sent to the public school at Leeuwarden.

But the passion for art was not to be stifled. He would get up at daybreak and work for hours with pencil and brush before the irksome school routine began. His first distinct success in art was a portrait of his sister, painted at the age of thirteen, and exhibited in a Leeuwarden gallery.

All this undermined his health, and the doctors doubted whether his vitality would last him many months, so he was allowed to go in for art as a profession. Then a seeming miracle happened. Instead of sinking into the grave, the lad henceforth grew in strength and vigour. Emancipation for his art in which he rejoiced had saved his life. In 1852 Alma-Tadema was entered as a student at the Academy of Art in Antwerp, and for several years worked there under Wappers and de Keyzer. According to the testimony of contemporaries his industry was prodigious, and he produced in the school a number of pictures having semi-mystical, semi-historical subjects, but all of these were destroyed by the hands of their extremely self-critical creator.

Alma-Tadema left the Antwerp Academy in 1858 to become the pupil of Hendrik Leys, the distinguished Belgian historical painter, whom he often assisted in the execution of his pictures, the principal subjects relating to the sixteenth century. Under the inspiration of Leys he produced a picture, "The Education of the Children of Clovis" (1861), which first laid the foundations of his fame. This picture, originally sold for about £65, which

is now in the possession of the King of the Belgians, was one of several painted between 1860-63 that were suggested by that strange old work, Gregory of Tours's "History of the Franks." Settling in Antwerp, the young artist had been joined there by his mother and sister in 1859. The beloved mother, however, did not live to see the name of Alma-Tadema obtain more than a local reputation. She died in 1863, and a few months later the artist sought consolation for his bereavement in marriage. He lost his first wife, a French lady, in 1869, and in the same year came to London, which has ever since been his home.

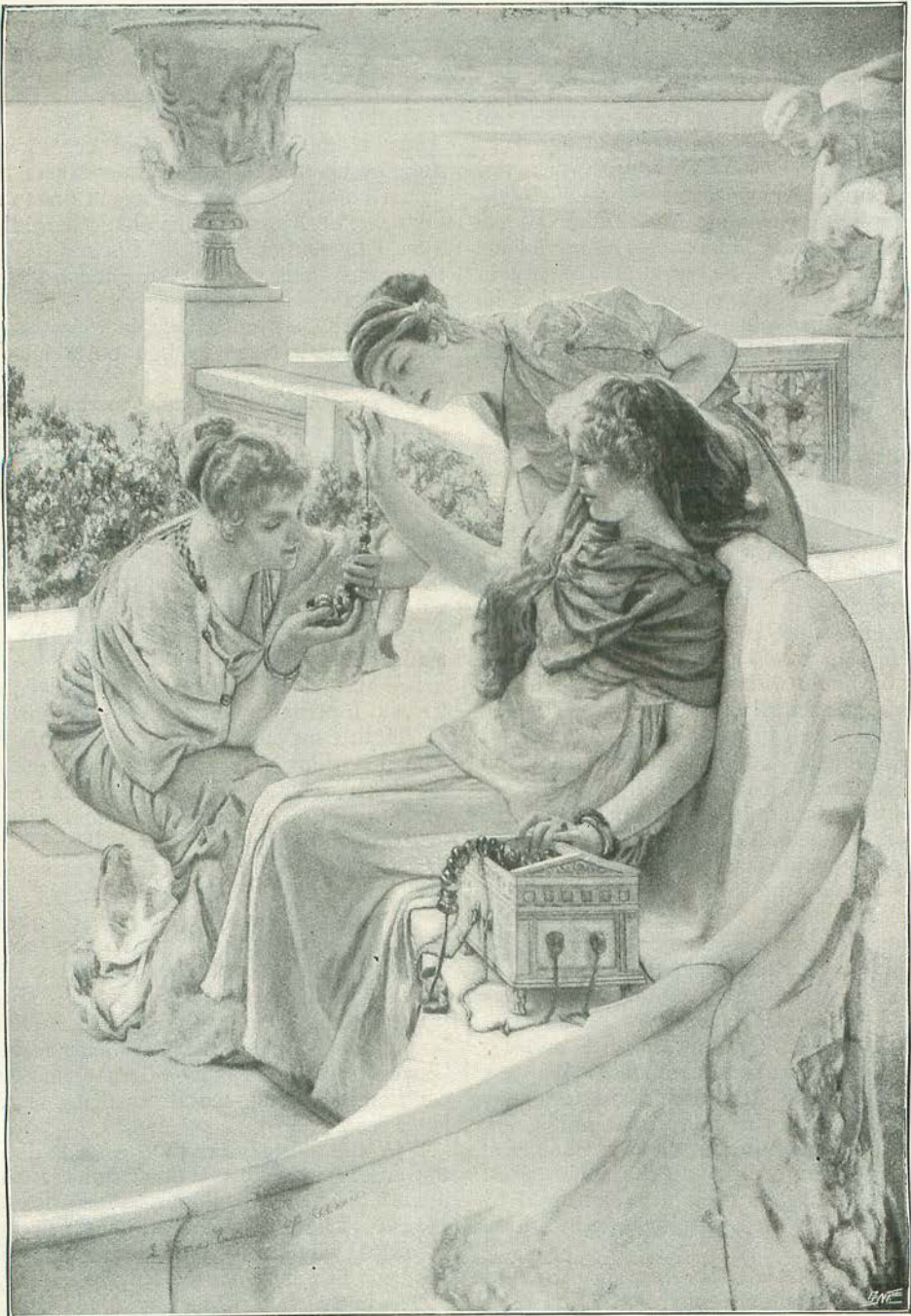
Before Alma-Tadema came to England his name had been noised abroad in the art circles of France and Germany by a number of pictures having ancient Egyptian and Roman life for their theme. The first of these, painted in 1863, was entitled "Egyptians Three Thousand Years Ago." An old friend, Dr. George Ebers, the great Egyptian scholar, once asked the painter why, in depicting ancient life, he should have begun with the land of Isis.

"Where else," replied Alma-Tadema, "when I made myself acquainted with the life of the ancients, should I have begun? The first thing the child learns of ancient times is about the Court of Pharaoh, and if we go back to the source of art and science, how often do we not go back to Egypt?"

"Egyptians Three Thousand Years Ago," "The Mummy," "The Chess-Players," etc., were followed by "A Roman Family," "Tarquinius Superbus," "Entrance to a Roman Theatre," and other pictures of the great city of the Cæsars. One of the pictures, "The Pyrrhic Dance," brought to England from Brussels, where Alma-Tadema resided between 1865 and 1869, became his first contribution to the Royal Academy of the latter year.

"In the thirty years that passed since," the artist remarked, "I don't think I have missed a single exhibition at Burlington House. I have exhibited at other galleries, of course, but all my most important work has been first shown at the Royal Academy."

The first picture painted by Alma-Tadema in England was "A Roman Emperor," and in the succeeding years this was followed by "The Death of the First-Born"—which the artist himself considers one of his best works—"The Picture Gallery," "The Sculpture Gallery," "An Audience at Agrippa's," and other canvases that quickly placed him in the front rank of our London exhibitors. At



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"FORTUNE'S FAVOURITE."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.]

"Gems and gemlike eyes and gold and golden heads."—Tennyson ("The Princess").
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the same time he was forming the ties which now bind him to England and English life. In 1871 he married Laura Theresa Epps, then a London art student, giving promise of the

talent she has since shown. In 1873 he took the earliest opportunity of becoming a British citizen, and three years later he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy.

Full membership followed in 1879, and by the conferment of knighthood the Queen has now given a fitting recognition to a career which will adorn the annals of British art.

I do not pretend that Sir Lawrence gave me his autobiography thus as we sat smoking

soft glow of a window of Mexican onyx. The beauty of onyx windows in domestic architecture Alma-Tadema was the first to realize in this house, Lord Bute next introducing them into one of his residences, and Mr. Waterhouse, R.A., in designing the National



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"THE FRIGIDARIUM."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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after dinner in his billiard-room. Wild horses would not drag it from him, I think, in this way. But such is his life-story, as some of his friends have heard it from his lips in bits and fragments on various occasions.

Having finished our cigars, we rise from our easy chairs to visit the studio. Passing out of the billiard-room, I have a glance at Sir Lawrence's library, containing a choice collection of books on art, archæology, Greek and Roman life, etc. The library itself is unlike any other apartment so designated that I have yet seen. This room, which Sir Lawrence calls his atrium, is upstairs, adjoining the studio. The staircase to the gallery is in this room. In one corner is a small fountain, the water falling gently into a marble basin below, and a business-like escritoire, at which the artist writes whilst standing, is partially lit by the

Liberal Club, placing two at the top of its celebrated marble staircase. A quantity of withered rose-leaves are strewn about by the side of the marble basin.

"It was here that I painted the flowers," Sir Lawrence explains, "in my 'Roses of Heliogabalus,' and although it was—how many years ago?—these leaves have been kept ever since. In painting this picture I had to have roses sent from the Riviera, three boxes full a week during four winter months."

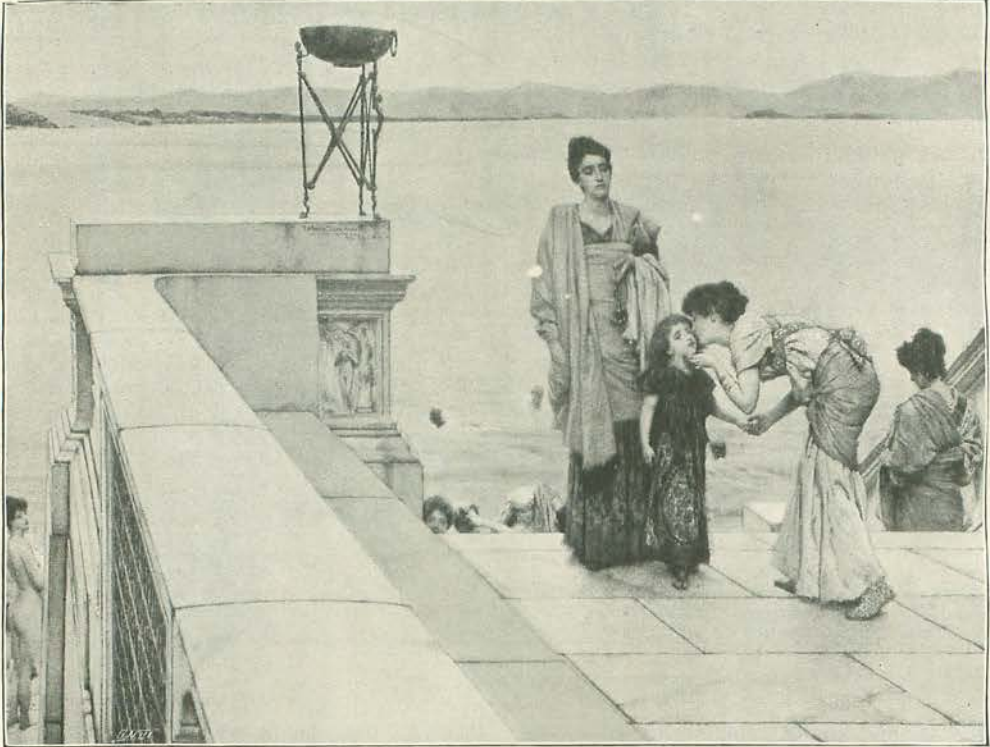
We approach the studio by a staircase of burnished brass. "This staircase was said to be of gold," remarks Sir Lawrence, "by an imaginative writer some time ago in one of the German papers, and the result was that for weeks almost every post brought me begging letters from Germany, where I was evidently regarded as a veritable Croesus."

As we enter the studio it is in darkness,

and Sir Lawrence goes round switching on the electric lights. There is thus gradually revealed to me a large and lofty chamber, with a gallery at one end and an apse at the side, marble panellings and cedar doors, and an antique marble fireplace. The ceiling is vaulted, that of the apse being in the shape of half-dome. The studio, like the rest of the house, was designed by Sir Lawrence, when in 1885-86 No. 17, Grove End Road, which

plasion—I tried the effect of a white studio. Now, as you see, the prevailing hue is a silvery white, and that, I think, best agrees with my present temperament, artistically speaking.”

On a *daïs* at one side of the studio is a wonderful piano, the winner of the gold medal at the London Musical Exhibition a few years ago. It is inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl; whilst, inside the lid, on



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“A KISS.”

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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had been in the occupation of M. Tissot, the French artist, was practically re-built from its foundations.

The walls are of marble, but the beautiful ceiling has the soft, silvery tint of aluminium.

“I have always found that the light and colour in a studio had a great influence upon me in my work. I first painted in a studio with panels of black decoration. Then in my studio in Brussels I was surrounded by bright red, and in London—at Townshend House, Regent’s Park—I worked under the influence of a light green tint. During the winter I spent in Rome in 1875-76—when I was obliged to leave my London house by the destructive effect of the Regent’s Canal ex-

a vellum lining, are to be found the autographs of the famous musicians, Paderewski among the number, who have played upon the instrument as the artist’s guests. In the apse may be read the inscription, *Ars longa vita brevis*, whilst over the door Alma-Tadema’s favourite motto has been carved in letters of gold: “As the sun colours flowers, so art colours life.”

Three or four easels stand about on the parquet floor, each bearing an unfinished picture.

“I always have two or three pictures in hand at the same time,” Sir Lawrence explained. “I am obliged to—otherwise I should become too much absorbed in one subject.

I must turn from one picture to another for quickness and freshness of interest. You see this picture upside down on the easel? That is as I left it this afternoon after a hard day's work upon it, and if you don't mind I would rather not look at the canvas again to-day.

"I have had this picture in hand," and the artist pointed to a rather small canvas, only half painted, "for nearly two years, and I am afraid I have now for-

gotten what I had originally intended to put in the upper part. The paint and pencilled lines show it to be a bathing scene—but I can tell you nothing as to the details."

This was an exceptional case, but despite the amount of his work, Alma-Tadema has spent a fairly long time—one, two, or even three years—on all his more important pictures, such as "At the Shrine of Venus," "The Vintage Festival," "A Dedication to Bacchus," and "The Coliseum." There is so much "painting-out," he confesses. He has the Dutch care for detail, and some detail in a picture may be painted and re-painted before it satisfies him. A pile of large photographs and original drawings of Rome which I discovered on a seat in the studio had been thus accumulated, it seems, during the painting of "The Baths of Caracalla," Sir Lawrence's principal contribution to this year's Academy. "Photography," he remarked, "is a great boon undoubtedly to the artist of to-day who has any concern for accuracy in details."

A large canvas filled with pencilled outlines attracts my attention. But looking at it with a curious eye, my lips are sealed by Sir Lawrence's warning words: "Yes, I hope to make a picture of it for next year's Academy, but beyond that I can say nothing. The idea may come to nothing."

A narrow staircase takes us to the gallery,



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PORTRAIT OF M. PADEREWSKI.

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.]

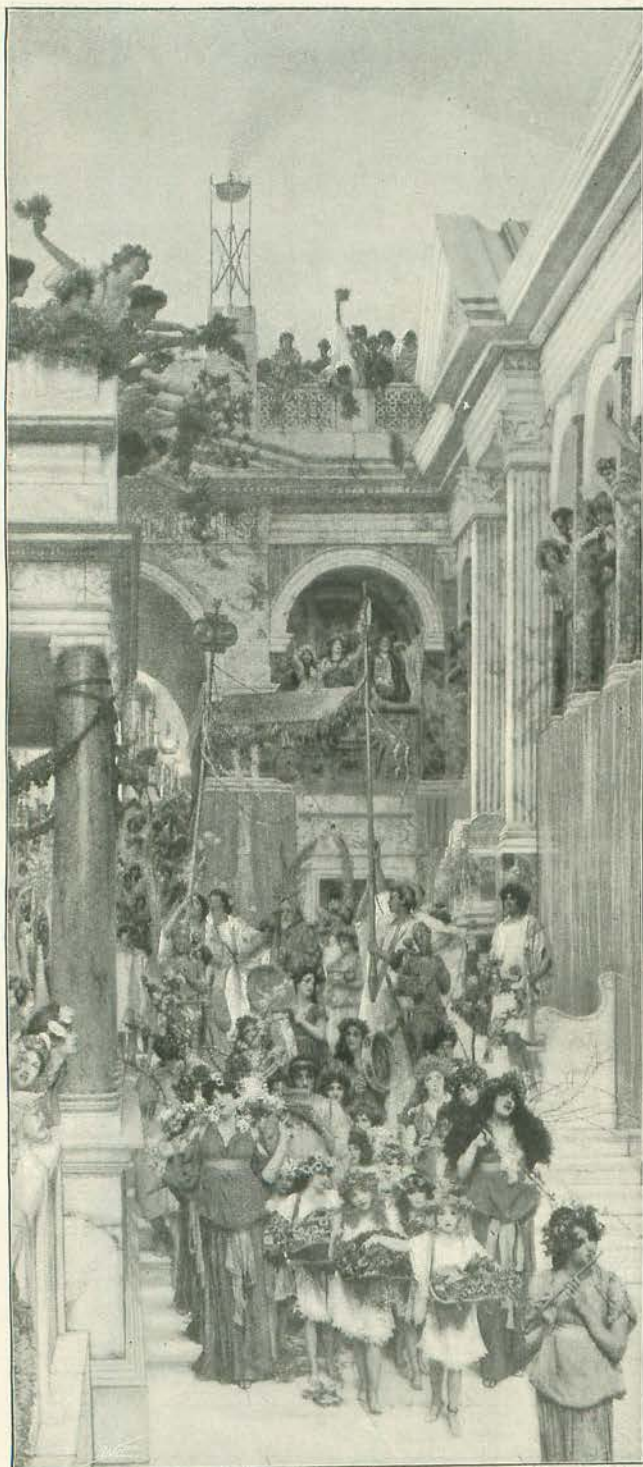
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looking down from which the full beauty of the studio, with its harmonies of light and colour, is impressed upon one. On the other side of this gallery is a conservatory, full of exotics, such as the artist has often introduced into his pictures. The gallery leads to a corridor, where I notice a fine portrait of Lady Alma-Tadema, painted by her husband, to whom she has sat for more than one of his subject pictures, notably in "The Departure," some years ago. He has exhibited portraits, it may be added, of his daughter, the artist, as well as of Miss Onslow Ford and Miss MacWhirter. But more characteristic examples, perhaps, of Alma-Tadema's style as a portrait-painter are his Paderewski at the piano and his Dr. Epps, the brother of Lady Alma-Tadema, at the bedside of a patient.

"People generally," Sir Lawrence plaintively remarks, "always seem to forget that I paint portraits."

"Portraits always appear to be considered the least interesting part of an exhibition," I remark.

"I hardly believe so; and painted in the old style portraits always please. As a rule, a portrait consists of a head and some clothes, perhaps one or two hands, and the rest of black or brown background, representing a person as he is never seen in real life. When you or I meet a friend, we see not only him but his surroundings, whether it is



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"SPRING."

[Sir L. Alma-Tadema, R.A.

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in a room, a garden, or the street. I consider, therefore, that you should paint not only men and women, but some part also of their accessories or environments, and it is upon this principle that most of my portraits have been executed. But people are very conservative in such matters, and a good many, I am afraid, when they engage to pay a certain price for a portrait, want the painter to devote the whole of his attention to their head only."

"Who have been the principal purchasers of your pictures, Sir Lawrence?"

"The greater portion have gone to America, I believe, although many remain in England, of course. Germany has bought a number, and the rest are scattered about the world. That picture of which I was showing you just now the engraving, 'Roses, Love's Delight,' was purchased by the Czar of Russia.

"Art has long since ceased to be dependent on the old aristocracy. It no longer lays up art treasures, and the best picture-buyers of to-day are the *nouveaux riches*. Then, with cheaper and improved methods of reproduction, the taste of the people generally is coming into account. With one or two exceptions all my pictures have been published, 'The Vintage Festival' leading the way."

In Sir Lawrence's genial company the night quickly grows late. I pass out through the dimly-lighted corridors and halls that seem so many backgrounds to the R.A.'s pictures, and at the big outer door experience a farewell handshake which is the speeding counterpart to its welcoming *Salve*.