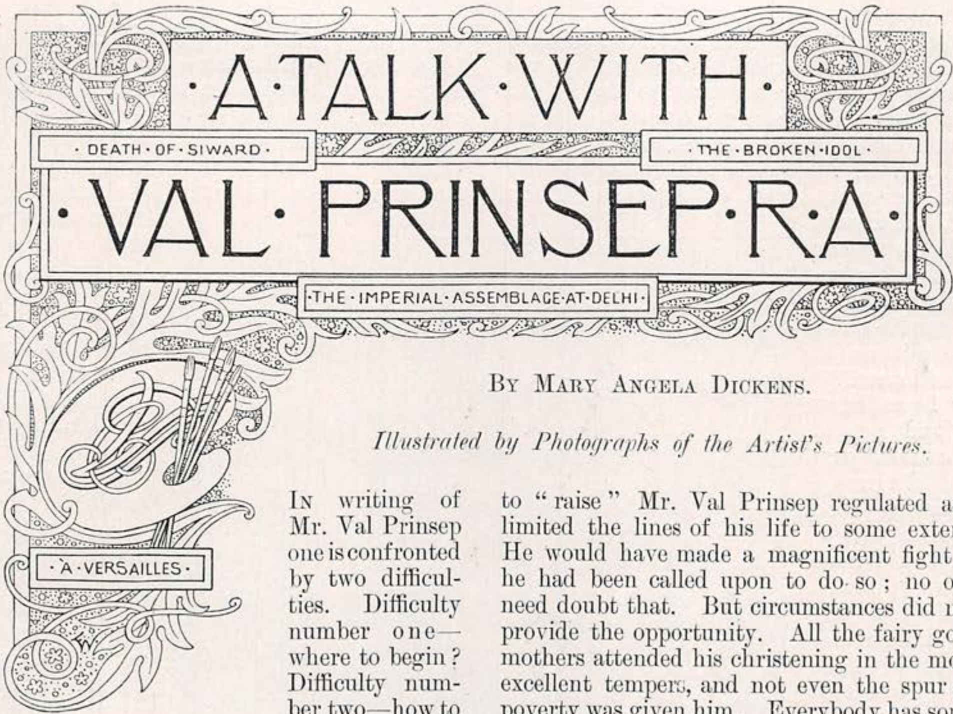


A Talk with Val Prinsep, R.A.

By Mary Angela Dickens.

Illustrated by Photographs of the Artist's Pictures.

In writing of Mr. Val Prinsep one is confronted by two difficulties. Difficulty number one—where to begin? Difficulty number two—how to leave off? The whole man is so many-sided and so full of life in every direction that one literally hardly knows "where to have him."

This is an age pre-eminently of "reserved force." Most people, being desperately anxious to make the most of their little modicum of gifts and graces, feel within them, consciously or unconsciously, an uneasy necessity to husband their resources. But this is emphatically not the case with Mr. Val Prinsep.

First, there is the actual personality of the man himself. The outward man is tall and powerful, and a good deal of Mr. Prinsep's superfluous energy has gone at one time or another to athletic pursuits. When he talks, his speech is rapid; he wastes no words, and there is even a touch of picturesque brusqueness about his terse phrases. Sometimes, however, his energetic mind moves too quickly. Words, apparently, become to him an ineffective triviality, and he takes refuge in a "splendid silence." But whether he speaks or whether he is silent, he conveys the same impression of vigorous life and of its enjoyment. There is an atmosphere of constant mental movement about him, and where he is stagnation emphatically is not.

That the life of such a man should be full of stir and movement goes without saying. The conditions amid which it pleased nature to "raise" Mr. Val Prinsep regulated and limited the lines of his life to some extent. He would have made a magnificent fight if he had been called upon to do so; no one need doubt that. But circumstances did not provide the opportunity. All the fairy godmothers attended his christening in the most excellent tempers, and not even the spur of poverty was given him. Everybody has some vague connection of ideas, at least, with the name of Little Holland House. Everybody knows that at Little Holland House all that was best in the London society of the day was wont to assemble itself, there to disport itself gravely or gaily, according to the temper of the moment. The mistress of Little Holland House was Mr. Val Prinsep's mother. There is a portrait of Mrs. Prinsep, painted by her son not long before she died, hanging now in Mr. Val Prinsep's dining-room—a portrait most graceful and dignified and altogether charming. The face framed by soft gray hair is very sweet and strong, and—before all things—intensely sympathetic. It is easy to understand, looking at this picture, wherein lay the charm of Little Holland House. There are two pictures of the place itself, also, in Mr. Prinsep's studio. They represent an ideal old country house, irregular, red-roofed, with a delicious garden. And they make one fiercely indignant with the recklessness which pulls down such places, sweeping away even the remembrance of them from men's minds.

Here, then, Mr. Prinsep grew up, coming into contact with all of that day that was best and wittiest. His father had connections with India; Mr. Val Prinsep was destined, like his brother, for the Indian Civil Service, and he accepted the career thus mapped out for him cheerily and as

a matter of course. But there was another influence at work upon his destiny. It was many years before he went to India, and then it was in a capacity unthought of in his boyish days. A close friend of his father's was Mr. G. F. Watts; Mr. Watts was, in fact, for many years an inmate of Little Holland House, and the picture of it before described shows the studio which he built on to it for himself.

"I was always in and out of his studio," says Mr. Prinsep, "drawing and painting and so on, and I liked it very much. And one day my father said to me: 'Look here, Watts tells me you have talent and that sort of thing, and if you like to study and go in for it, I'll give you so much a year for ten years.' Of course I jumped at it," adds Mr. Prinsep, "and that's how I became a painter."

With Watts and with Rossetti Mr. Prinsep studied until 1859. Rossetti in particular had an immense influence over his mind, and among his treasures in the book line is a little volume of Rossetti's poems interleaved by the poet with corrections. But Mr. Prinsep, even as a youth, had far too robust a personality to be dominated wholesale by any man. He put his finger on the weak place in Rossetti's art, and in 1859 he departed to Paris to study drawing under Gleyre. For the French school of painting he had, in those days, no admiration—a judgment which more mature experience has led him to correct. In 1860 he went to Rome, where he studied for some time. And in 1862 he exhibited in the Royal Academy for the first time. The subject of the picture was "Bianca Capello." "Since that time," says Mr. Prinsep cheerily, "I have exhibited every year."

From a photo by] [*F. Hollyer.*

"AN INDIAN GIRL."—BY VAL C. PRINSEP, R.A.

It was in 1877 that Mr. Prinsep went to India. The gorgeousness of tint characteristic of the East appealed strongly to all his instincts, and there is no doubt that his Indian experiences tended to develop and confirm that feeling for colour which has always been one of his most striking characteristics. Mr. Prinsep steeped himself in Eastern life. He came back with about forty "kitcats," beside other studies. But his amazing versatility and individuality saved him from the fate which would have overtaken almost any other man who had made so complete a study of so fascinating a subject. Most men, having thus primed themselves, would have gone no further; would have settled into painters of a single subject; would have reproduced India in various forms to the end of their days, to the total ignoring of any other country or form of

From a photo by] [*F. Hollyer.*

"THE RETURN FROM THE HONEYMOON."—BY VAL C. PRINSEP, R.A.

life whatsoever. But to Mr. Prinsep such a course would have been simply impossible. He painted his great Durbar picture when he came home. He has painted many Indian pictures since. But his interests are too wide, and too vigorous, to allow of any limitation in the choice of his subjects. English history, Roman history, French history; that wonderful treasure-house of Eastern fancies, the Arabian Nights' Entertainments; domesticity, English, French or Italian—all these have been requisitioned by him at one time or another. He is a portrait painter too, and a very excellent portrait painter, as everyone knows.

The impulse of the moment serves him well, and the number of pictures which he produces every year under pressure of that restless energy of his would be outlet enough for most men's imaginative and creative faculties. But Mr. Prinsep is inexhaustible, and in his leisure moments he is both novelist and dramatist. He has written two one-act plays, produced some years since by Mr. John Hare, "Cousin Dick" and "Monsieur le Duc." Of these "Cousin Dick" is still played in the provinces, by no means seldom. His novel "Virginie" ran as a serial in *Longman's* some years ago, and is of course well known to all novel readers. His first

From a photo by] [*H. Dixon.*

"À VERSAILLES."—BY VAL C. PRINSEP, R.A.

book, however, treated of fact, not fiction. "Imperial India" tells of his travels in India, and it was "Imperial India" which first led him into the paths of literature.

"I paint what I like," he says, with a laugh. "It's a bad thing for popularity. People like to know what to expect of a man. When he has made a success with one subject, everybody wants a picture like it. That's how painters get driven into a groove."

Mr. Val Prinsep has done an immense amount of work in the thirty-two years which have passed since that first picture was exhibited in the Academy. He is a very rapid worker, but he works—nowadays at any rate—rather on impulse than on any hard and fast principles of industry.

"When I get a thing I like," he says, "I like to go at it and finish it."

"I used to spend my evenings reading and smoking," Mr. Prinsep tells you. "And when I got hold of the idea for 'Virginie,' it was in the evenings—two hours or so every evening—that I wrote it."

"Virginie" was not originally intended for a three-volume novel. Mr. Prinsep's idea was to write a series of short stories, each one of which was to be woven round an object in a lady's boudoir.

"You know the kind of thing," Mr.

Prinsep explains, "the little things a lady fills her room up with, each with its own little history."

A friend of Mr. Prinsep's had a bit of Sèvres china which caught his fancy; and reading up the annals of the French Revolution at about the same time, he discovered that the painter thereof had been guillotined. Here was the germ. The original short story burst its bounds in every direction, and "Virginie" was produced. Mr. Prinsep never went back to the lady's boudoir idea. He wrote another long story. "But," he tells you, with a regular burst of laughter, "I put the manuscript away somewhere, and I've never been able to find it again. I suppose it must be somewhere!" Let us hope it is "somewhere," and that it will some day turn up. It is a loss which few authors would take so hilariously.

Mr. Prinsep is not only a book-writer, he is moreover a book-lover and a book-collector—that is to say, he collects books principally of the period which has for him a pre-eminent fascination—the French Revolution. There is a little room opening out of the studio in which a student of French memoirs might make himself happy for many hours. There is a beautifully got up book, in particular, with coloured plates, from which one may reconstruct the whole period for oneself. There are fashion-plates at which one looks with awe and wonder as one asks whether it is possible that any human beings actually lived and moved and had their being in such garments. There are pictures of various vehicles of the day, including one of the famous berline in which Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette made that ill-conducted bid for freedom which ended so disastrously at Varennes. And there is another book, with large coloured illustrations of scenes during the Revolution, notably one representing the forcible entry of a body of soldiers into a convent school, of which Mr. Prinsep says as he shows it to you that "dear old Johnny Millais thought it was capital!" There are other books, too, of other times in this very choice and fascinating little library: a Caxton Froissart, a splendid specimen of printing; a "Morte d'Arthur," on which, Mr. Prinsep tells you, he was "brought up" by Rossetti. It is a reprint of the original edition, in a peculiar soft binding which Rossetti used to call "pussy-cat" binding.

But books are by no means Mr. Prinsep's only treasures. He has pictures also. He tells you emphatically that he has the best picture Millais ever painted, and he is very proud of the possession. The picture in question is "The Eve of Saint Agnes," and Mr. Prinsep likes to remember that it was a favourite with its painter himself, and that Millais was pleased when he—Mr. Prinsep—bought it. Nor is Millais by any means the only one of his great contemporaries represented on the walls of Mr. Prinsep's house. There is a Burne-Jones in the drawing-room. It is a design for a tomb, a marvellous "arrangement" in blues and gold. And about this picture there is a double interest, for it was given by Burne-Jones originally to Sir Frederick Leighton. There is a portrait of Mr. Val Prinsep by Watts in the dining-room, painted some sixteen years ago. Of Mr. Prinsep's own work there are several capital specimens here and there about the house. Mr. Prinsep has no favourites among the children of his brush; he would have you believe so at any rate.

"Isn't the last always the best?" he asks with a laugh. But perhaps he has a peculiar kindliness for two which hang now in his drawing-room. One of these is the "Black Pearl," an Indian picture exhibited in the Royal Academy. The other is a picture of "Jane Shore," and for this Mr. Prinsep entertains a parent's affection for a child who has been ill-treated. The picture was sold originally to Mr. Hill, of Brighton, who hung it over the grating of the heating apparatus. Direful results in the way of cracking ensued, and when Mr. Prinsep met his picture again at a sale it was in a parlous state. He bought it for next to nothing, put it to rights, and nobody now would guess its sad story from its appearance. In the dining-room hangs the portrait of his mother, already described, and the portrait of his wife and two elder boys; in the studio "Theodora, Empress and Comedian," confronts you. After the pictures come all sorts of interesting odds and ends. A silver box, a wedding present from the Prince of Wales, is a very beautiful thing. And Mr. Prinsep has also a great affection for a more unique and old-time object, which stands on a pedestal in the music-room—the prow of a Venetian gondola of state. To possess something of which there is no duplicate is the true joy of every man!

Of the pretty house itself which contains all these things, it is difficult to give any adequate idea in words. One could describe the shape of the rooms and the arrangement of the furniture, but one can convey little of the colouring, and to the colouring a large

From a photo by] [*H. Dixon.*

PORTRAIT OF MRS. VAL PRINSEP AND CHILDREN.—BY VAL C. PRINSEP, R.A.

part of the effect is due. There is a variety about the house, also, which is striking. The dining-room, for instance, is a long narrow room, very simple in furniture and decoration, as a dining-room should be. It has panelled walls, a delicate green in tone, and against this comes a general impression of various browns—most noticeably a curious and very effective sideboard, an early piece of Morris furniture. The drawing-room, on the other hand, is a room of irregular and nondescript shape, and the first thing that strikes you about it is its remarkable richness of colour. Then you get a vague idea that there is an Italian tone about the whole thing, but this idea is mainly created, I believe, by one beautiful Italian cabinet. The music-room, again, is a fine square room, with long windows looking out into the garden.

A man's work-room is of course always the most characteristic and attractive room in his house—the heart of the house, as it were. Mr. Prinsep's studio is a magnificent room of regular proportions, rather long than square; and perhaps the most interesting feature here—apart from Mr. Prinsep's own work and the unconscious revelations of the owner's personality which necessarily abound—is a collection of sketches which stand by themselves on a little shelf running along the wall. All these sketches are Sir Frederick Leighton's, and several of them were done when he and Mr. Prinsep were travelling together in Ireland. These sketches were purchased at the late sale of Lord Leighton's works at Christie's.

Sir Frederick Leighton was a man of few friends, and of these few Mr. Val Prinsep was the most intimate.

"I am the only man who ever dined with him at the club," Mr. Prinsep observes, "and the only man who ever travelled with him."

For many years Mr. Prinsep and Sir Frederick Leighton lived next door to one another, but the friendship between them was of older date even than this. It was when Mr. Prinsep was quite a young man, just embarking on his career as a painter, that Leighton came over from Italy with two pictures and an introduction to Watts. An introduction to Watts meant an introduction to the Prinsep family, and Leighton was constantly at Little Holland House. He was eight years older than Mr. Val Prinsep, and eight years in advance of him, therefore, on the artistic road they were to travel together. He took a great interest in the younger man's work and gave him all the advice and assistance in his power. And in this natural and simple fashion the friendship was begun which was to prove life-long.

Of Sir Frederick Leighton's capacity for work and of his unceasing industry Mr. Prinsep probably knows more than any man alive. Comparing him with Millais, Mr. Prinsep unhesitatingly decides that Leighton was far the more untiring worker of the two. There was that fundamental difference between them of the man who could abstain from work, who could take and could enjoy a holiday, and the man to whom no such abstinence was possible. It was Millais' habit, at least during the latter years of his life, to give up work altogether for three months of the year; to turn his back on London, and, doing so, to turn his back also upon palette and brushes. But with Leighton it was different. He travelled a great deal, but wherever he travelled he sketched; he sketched anything and everything—places, people, details of all sorts—but he was never idle. With him "to do" a place meant hard and methodical work. He went into its every aspect, making notes of all he saw. In London his working day seldom or never ended with the daylight hours. In the late afternoons or early evenings, when a painter's day's work is usually over, Sir Frederick Leighton—to quote Mr. Prinsep—was "all over the place, at meetings or something of that sort." And of late years, moreover, he spent an immense amount of time and pains over the preparation of the bi-annual address given by the President to the students of the Academy. For these he prepared elaborate essays, taxing his reading, knowledge, and powers of research to the utmost.

The last journey taken by Mr. Prinsep with Sir Frederick Leighton was the journey to Ireland, already mentioned. And Mr. Prinsep's remembrances of this time are of the cheeriest nature, and full of fun. One of Leighton's objections to travelling companions arose from the fact that it made him very ill to sit in a carriage or a train with his back to the engine or the horses. And Mr. Prinsep's first reminiscence in connection with a journey with him is of his arrival at the railway station, and of his dashing off, bag in hand—"very often with my bag too," adds Mr. Prinsep—down the train to secure for himself the seat he wanted. In Ireland they lived at a farmhouse in Donegal, entering into a compact that each should go his own way quite independent of the other. They met, of course, for meals, and it was at these

times that their handmaiden Biddy appeared upon the scene.

Biddy was a typical Irish servant girl, worthy of a place in a farce! She had a shock head of hair, a mouth from ear to ear, and a readiness of mother wit which served her on all occasions. She was a source of immense entertainment to Leighton, and he was always drawing her out. The sitting-room shared by the two painters was of the ordinary farmhouse type, and there was—inevitably—a looking-glass over the mantelpiece. This looking-glass was a great snare to Biddy, and whenever she came into the room she found it necessary to take a look at her charms as therein reflected. This highly amused Leighton, and he was constantly "chaffing" her about it. But she was always ready with an excuse, and on one occasion she was distinctly too many for him. It so happened that Leighton always sat at the table with his back to the glass, and one day when Biddy was putting down a dish ana studying herself attentively meanwhile, he exclaimed as usual—

"Now then, Biddy, you're looking at yourself in the glass again!"

Biddy's answer came on the instant.

From a photo by] [*F. Hollyer.*

"CARMEN."—BY VAL C. PRINSEP, R.A.

"Faith, then, and it's no such thing I'm doin' at all. It was just your own beautiful curl I was admirin'."

There is another story of Biddy which Mr. Prinsep tells with immense appreciation. Biddy, it appears, was engaged to be married, and her "boy" was a somewhat weakly and undersized specimen of humanity. Leighton was much given to teasing her on the subject, and on one occasion in particular he was arguing the point with her.

"Why didn't you choose a fine strong fellow, Biddy?" he asked—"like Mr. Prinsep there, for instance."

"Biddy gave me a look," says Mr. Prinsep, "and then her feelings were too much for her. 'Heaven forbid us, what a loomp!' she exclaimed. Of course we both burst out laughing, whereupon she clapped her hands over her mouth and bolted. But a moment or two later she put her head round the door again. 'Sure, it's meself I meant as would be such a loomp in his arms!' she said." Biddy was not to be routed.

But Leighton's intercourse with Biddy was not confined to teasing her and enjoying her retorts. Something went wrong with one of Biddy's hands, a "loomp" appearing in the wrong place, and Leighton sent her to a

doctor—not so simple and inexpensive a business in the wilds of Ireland as it is in London.

"Just like Leighton," says Mr. Prinsep; "he was always doing things of that kind."

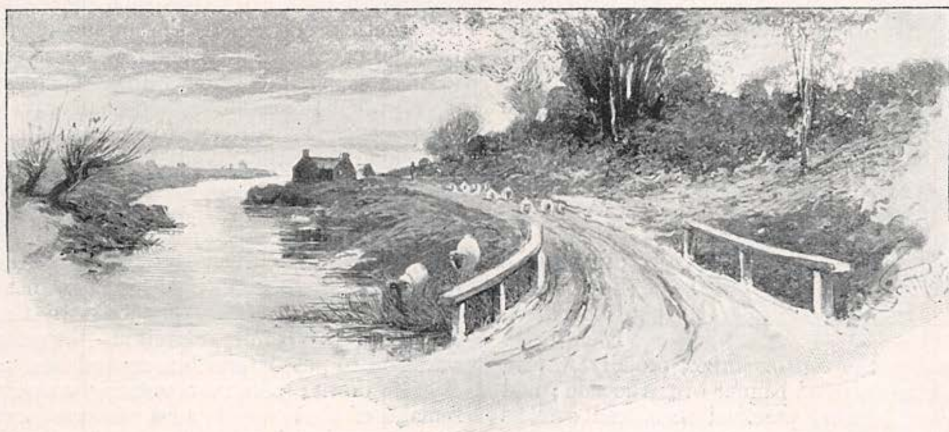
The "loomp" turned out to be a serious affair, demanding prompt surgical treatment, and Biddy probably owes her present possession of her hand to Leighton's ready generosity.

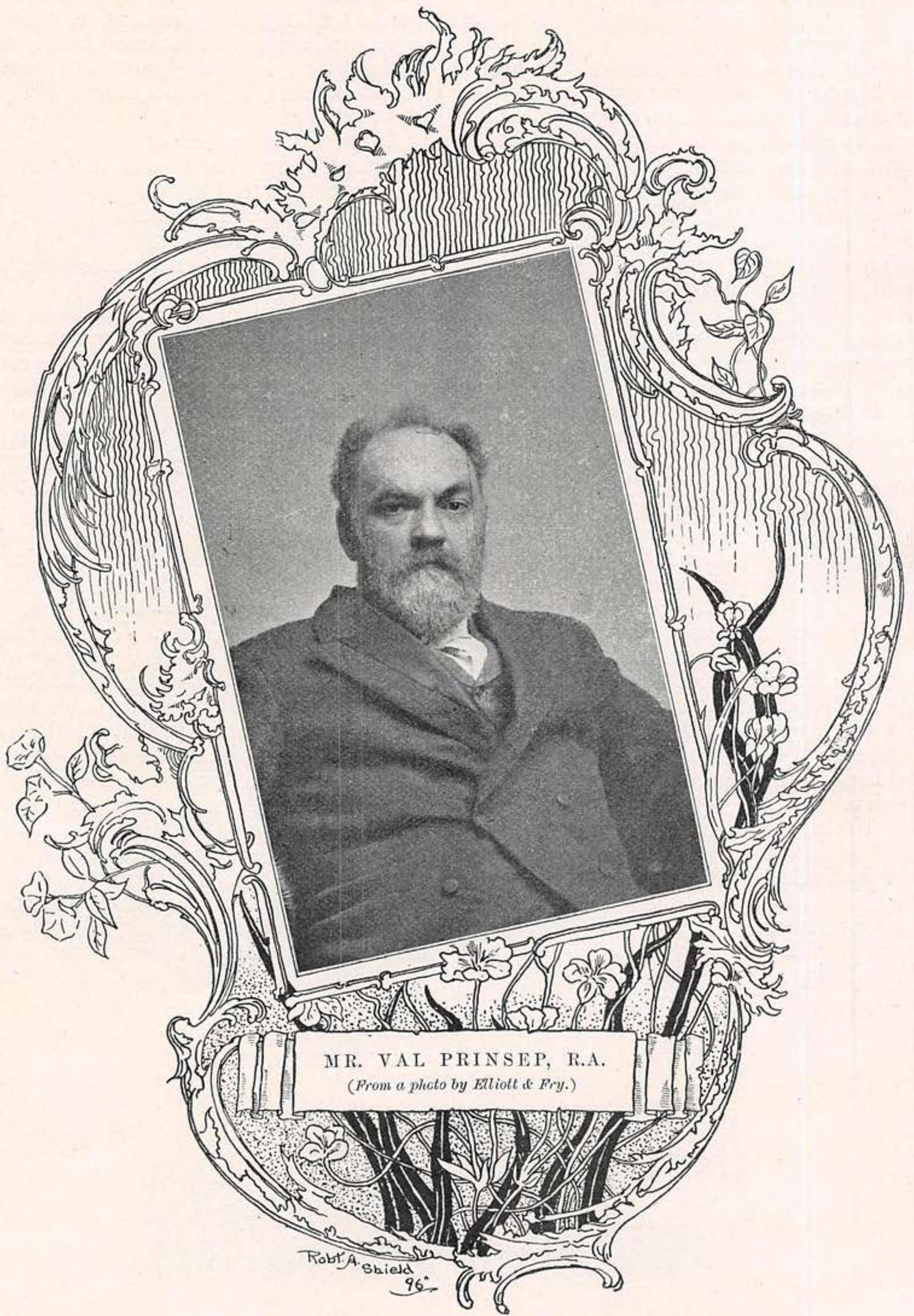
Mr. Prinsep is a most excellent story-teller—as how should he not be, since he is full of fun and full also of dramatic instinct. One of his aunts, Mrs. Cameron, was a woman very well known in her day. She was not only a wit and a very clever woman "all round," but she was a most admirable amateur photographer, at a time when artistic photography was hardly thought possible by anyone else. Mr. Prinsep tells two capital stories of her—good enough to be repeated, even if they have been told before. Mrs. Cameron knew—and photographed—all the great men of her day. Tennyson in particular was an intimate friend of hers, and another great friend was Sir Henry Taylor. She photographed them both. Tennyson had his little weaknesses, as everyone knows, and one of these was an inclination to depreciate Henry Taylor.

"He was looking at the two photographs one day," says Mr. Prinsep, "and he said to my aunt, 'I always think, do you know, that Henry Taylor has a mouth exactly like a fish.' 'If so, Alfred,' retorted my aunt, 'it's the mouth of a fish when the spirit of God moved upon the face of the water!'"

Mrs. Cameron was evidently not in the habit of sparing her poet friend, for the other story recounts another good-natured and witty snub for Tennyson. Tennyson, as we all know, was consumed with a desire for inviolate privacy of life; he was under the impression that the public was consumed with a desire to invade that privacy, and in his country home trespassers were warned off with persistent severity. A friend of Mrs. Cameron's, going into his neighbourhood, unwittingly betook herself into his grounds and there proceeded to make a sketch. She was immediately detected from the house, and emissaries were sent to tell her of the crime she was committing. She expressed her regret and withdrew at once. But she told the affair to Mrs. Cameron, and Mrs. Cameron descended upon the poet and spoke her mind, until Tennyson expressed a certain amount of penitence, and pleaded that he had not known the lady to be a friend of hers. Whereupon Mrs. Cameron delivered herself as follows:—

"I tell you what it is, Alfred, she came down here to look for a lion and she found a bear!"





MR. VAL PRINSEP, R.A.
(From a photo by Elliott & Fry.)