

# SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN

## *Personal Glimpses*

M. E. R.

SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN'S *The Imperialist* is known to Canadian readers, but only in recent years have biographers and critics made an effort to write about the successive phases of her career: as a journalist in Canada, a novelist in India and England, and latterly an aspiring playwright in London. A thesis by Miss Rae E. Goodwin, a postgraduate student working under Professor Gordon Roper at Trinity College, Toronto, has established the facts about S.J.D.'s early journalism; a thesis on the English-Canadian-American novels is being prepared by Mr. T. W. McGuffin; and the manuscripts of a dozen plays are under study in the Library of the University of Western Ontario, having recently been deposited there through the kindness of Mrs. P. V. Cotes of Oxshott, Surrey (the widow of Everard Cotes).

Sara Jeannette Duncan was the first wife of Everard Cotes, and sometimes signed her works as Mrs. Cotes. She died in 1922 and was buried beside the parish church in Ashstead, near Epsom, Surrey. No one now has intimate knowledge of the novelist's Indian and English periods to match that of Mrs. Sandford Ross ("M.E.R.") of Combe, in Oxfordshire, the author of this brief, but skillfully revealing, sketch. Mrs. Ross, a niece of S.J.D.'s husband, was a youthful guest in the Cote's home in India and was with her aunt when the latter died in Ashtead.

CARL F. KLINCK

**I**T WAS IN MY EARLY TEENS that I first came to know Sara Jeannette Duncan — Aunt Redney. Till then she had been merely the Canadian Aunt in India who wrote books — and especially a little blue covered book called *Sonny Sahib*. There were no pictures in this book as there were in

later editions, so that I was surprised to find anything to attract me in it in those youthful days. But I read it many times and always ended in tears for the motherless little boy who "did not tell", and old Tooni who had kept the Memsahib's Bible safely as proof of Sonny Sahib's parentage. I was told that the story was based on an incident of the Indian Mutiny, but I do not know if that was a fact. I do know that in later years the author told me of all her books that slim little early one had paid her royalties ever since it was first published.

I think that Aunt Redney was not often in England during the first ten or twelve years of her married life, for I do not remember seeing her much until I was about fourteen, though she told me that she had seen me as a baby in London. Later my family lived in the country and it was on a country walk in our village that I have a clear picture of her. There was a little shop that sold fish and on the marble slab was a heap of winkles. Aunt Redney asked me what they were and said she had never seen them before. I had to confess that I had never tasted one, but that our nursemaid said they were "lovely", and you got them out of their shells with a pin. My Aunt said at once that she must try one in spite of my saying they were horrid little sea snails. The shopman was very much amused at being asked for one winkle! However a pin was found and rather to my surprise the winkle did come out on the end of the pin and Aunt Redney popped it into her mouth. She chewed it and chewed it as we walked on, but at last she threw it out and said it was a tough proposition. At that moment a small dog came in sight, and seeing something being thrown out he thought it worth while investigating and he also started to chew; however he very soon gave up and spat it out, which tickled Aunt Redney who said — "There — you see he agrees with me, so I don't want any more winkles."

I suppose she returned then to India, possibly via Canada unless she had been there first, as she generally visited England and Canada when she came from India, sometimes with my Uncle and sometimes by herself.

In re-reading *The Imperialist* recently I was reminded that the authoress was staying with us in Hertfordshire just before a General Election and that she was extremely interested in the canvassing and posters, and asked many questions about it and may have been taken to some of the local meetings addressed by the candidates or their friends. I can remember being told that she was writing a book and wanted to see how such election preparations compared with those in Canada. *The Imperialist* was of course the book, though at the time I did not know that it was her only one apparently that had its stage and setting in Canada, her birthplace.

After this she must have been more in India than anywhere else for there is a fairly long gap when I do not remember her or my Uncle for more than passing glimpses until the Spring of 1912 when I went with her to India, and I remember how great an interest she took in choosing pretty frocks for me and making all the arrangements for the voyage out. In those days there was no such thing as air-conditioning in the cabins and fans were luxuries, so I was much impressed to see an electric fan in her cabin and to be told that it was a "compliment" from the shipping company or her publisher, I do not remember which.

We arrived in Bombay where my Uncle met us on my birthday and Aunt Redney got me a charming little necklace of Indian gold and turquoise which I still possess.

We went straight up to Simla, then the summer capital and seat of government for the hot season, and where Aunt Redney had for some years been very interested in converting poor bungalows into charming dwellings. We went to the one she had been working on the summer before and she had made it a very delightful home. It was called "Dormers", and we had brought out with us her new materials for the furnishings. Ivory-coloured linen with a design of moss-rosebuds and said to have been designed originally for Queen Victoria's yacht, and soft green velvet for long doors and French windows.

Sara Jeannette Duncan did much writing in Simla and her normal hours for it were from 10 a.m. to 2 or 3 p.m. Before 10 a.m. she had sometimes been riding with my Uncle before breakfast, and after the meal she did her interviewing with the *khansamah* (cook) and the *khitmagar* (head house servant) and then often she strolled round the garden with me and talked to the *mali* about the flowers and what he was to provide for the table if there was a dinner party on. I well remember that early Spring in her garden, a narrow ledge cut out of the hillside and facing the gorgeous range of snow-capped Himalayas, and at our feet a bed of lilies-of-the-valley which the *mali* called "Lili-he-lili", which greatly charmed her.

Sometimes on a Sunday morning there would be a "breakfast" party at 10 a.m. I was aware of the great interest my Aunt took in the political situation then in India, with all the talk of removing the capital from Calcutta and making a New Delhi, and I do not think it would be going too far to say that she had a good deal to do with the outcome, especially as to the positioning of the main buildings. Certainly there was much talk in high places as well as at the Sunday breakfasts. Later in Delhi the original foundation stones familiarly and affectionately known as George and Mary for obvious reasons, were found to have

flitted in the night to where I presume they may still stand. It was all very interesting and exciting to me who saw how much my Aunt's influence and advice was sought.

Normally the writing hours were spent in her bedroom, where propped among pillows she would work with pencil and paper, and one just did not venture to disturb her during that time. She did not have a mid-day meal, nor did my Uncle, so I lunched in solemn state alone!

During the rainy month, August I think it was, there was a weekly "At Home", when many people came to tea and talk and I used to think what a charming and wonderful hostess she was.

At the end of the Simla season that year the government and everyone else went down for its cold weather in Delhi, and the inauguration of it. The opening ceremony made history in more ways than was intended, by the bomb throwing at the Viceroy, and the marvellous behaviour of the processional elephants. My Aunt was among those who wondered if this incident would spark off more trouble, and the air was tense and electric. We were so near it all there, and the day before I had ridden the processional route all through old Delhi upon the Commander-in-Chief's elephant in the rehearsal for the next day's pageant. This elephant was directly behind the one carrying the Viceroy when the bomb fell into the back compartment of the Howdah killing one of the jamadars and slightly wounding the Viceroy. The inauguration ceremony was cancelled naturally, and a uniformed rider came galloping to the place where everyone was waiting for the procession to arrive to announce the cancellation and give the news.

Aunt Redney had a busy time that first season in Delhi, and she met many people and was consulted on many important matters, but I rather lost touch then as I was summoned home suddenly owing to my Father's death, and I did not see my Aunt again till she came to England later in 1913. It may have been that year that she had for a time a charming little house in the Chelsea area, and I was often there with her, but I remember her more after the start of the 1914 war when she returned from Canada via the U.S.A. and gave us all a graphic description of her voyage when the Captain prevented the ship from being torpedoed by flying the Stars and Stripes. He had very many Americans aboard and so saved the ship, though I believe she was sunk on her next trip.

In March 1915 I returned to India with Aunt Redney; the War was in its early stages and a British ship that passed through the Suez Canal a few days before us had seen the bodies of Turks floating in the Canal as the result of an engagement with our troops. We reached Bombay without incident and went on to

Simla to the pretty house — Dormers. I chiefly remember that my Aunt was much occupied with a play she wrote then to raise funds for War Charities. It was called "Brown with an E" and was put on the stage by the Amateur Dramatic Society of Simla, in which there were some very good performers. I think the name was changed later when it was put on in London also for War Charities. I know that still later when it reached the provinces it had been so vulgarized that my Aunt had her name taken off the boards. I do not know how much money the charities got from it, as I did not go with her to England then. Needless to say there was a Brown without an "E"; both were young soldiers enlisted for the War and came from very different ways of life. The mix-up lent itself to comical and ridiculous positions made much of by the Author.

Aunt Redney did not return to India nor could I get to England, as by then women and children were not allowed to travel.

At the end of the War my Uncle retired and I went Home to England with him and joined my Aunt in her Chelsea house. Then she and my Uncle started to look for a home near London, but in the country. In the early Spring they found one at Ashtead in Surrey, and I was busy helping with all the business of alterations and moving and furnishing, so it was not till May that we moved in to a very unfinished interior. My Aunt was also busy with her writing, so I had my hands full indeed.

Alas — she was never to see her plans all finished and the new carpets laid. My Uncle was going daily to London as he took on some work for an American newspaper. Just after breakfast one morning in June I went in to the garden at a call from Aunt Redney — she was standing on a flower-bed with a fork in her hands, and said "I feel awfully queer." I got her to bed with hot bottles, and then ran across to some kindly neighbours to ask who and where was a doctor; then I 'phoned my Uncle. I don't know now how long she was ill — perhaps ten days — but I was with her at the end and she turned her head towards me and opened her wonderful blue eyes, so live and clear, as if she would impress something on my mind, and then closed them for ever.