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part II: paris and after, 1900-1904

isadora reexamined:

lesser-known aspects of the great dancer's life

by nesta macdonald

Left: Isadora with her niece at Kopanos, Greece, 1904. (Photo: No credit, but probably Raymond Duncan) Opposite: Isadora in 1903, as she was when she first met Kathleen Bruce, who would become a close friend over the years. (Photo: Collection of Lord Kennet/Kathleen Bruce)

Paris, 1900!
When Isadora crossed the Channel in July 1900, she went from a world in which she spoke the language to a country of whose tongue she was totally ignorant. This was less important than the more nebulous matter of the difference of atmosphere. London, still dominated by its eighty-year-old Queen, seems incredibly staid in comparison with Paris at the turn of the century—the Paris of the Exposition Universelle.

In *My Life*, Isadora described the happy time she had when she and her mother joined Raymond there. Here again, Isadora may have amalgamated two visits, for she spoke of Paris in the spring. Possibly she and her mother had gone over for a few days after her first New Gallery recital—perhaps for Easter, which fell in mid-April. When, after her third New Gallery recital and another engagement, she finally left London behind in July, she found Raymond greatly changed. He had taken to the fashionable Left Bank style and attire—long hair, a turned-down collar and a flowing tie—and had acquired a midinette. With new sights, new friends, new patrons, and even the attempt to learn the new language, Isadora was cheerfully occupied.

The spirit of the age was not at all serious. Paris was considered the city for art, for frivolity, and for femininity. Isadora still wore clothes only a little removed from the fashionable, when "ladies looked like ladies," with small waists, leg-o'-mutton sleeves, and skirts which they maneuvered with great elegance. The impression is one of girls everywhere—"a seascape of girls," said Proust. Isadora never forgot a London purchase, her Liberty hat. Later on, as she consolidated her style as a performer, she carried it also into her clothes, and consolidated this style also, wearing vaguely "classical" robes at all times. And very beautiful did they look.

Charles Hallé, born in France and an inveterate traveler, needed no such excuse as the Exposition to follow Isadora when the London season ended. To Raymond's chagrin, he monopolized her, supplanting the free visits brother and sister had been making to museums with many expensive sorties to the vast Exposition.

The turn of centuries must always hold elements of mystery and high portent, but one cannot see at any other an air of change comparable to that when the nineteenth century's life ebbed away, and the first lusty cries of the twentieth were drowned in the roar of the new machines, especially the horseless carriages which were so soon to alter life forever. The huge Exhibitions in England and France since 1851 had all been successful and profitable. The Exposition Universelle had been in the making for eight years. The results were sensational.

The sites covered 1,500 acres in the center of the city. The main entrance, on the Place de la Concorde, was a fantastic porch designed by the architect Binet, surmounted by La Parisienne, a fifteen-foot-high figure of a woman dressed in Paquin clothes. On the Right Bank, two permanent buildings to house art exhibitions were erected—the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais. There was also a Pavilion devoted entirely to the works of Rodin, the sculptor, nearby. Along the Quais, from the Pont de l'Alma to the Pont des Invalides, over forty ephemeral Pavilions of the Nations were put up, housing displays of national art and products, and each with its own restaurant offering its national cuisine. (Greece was not represented, so there was no ready-made setting for Isadora's "interpretations" and her little Greek tunic.) On the Champs de Mars, between the Seine and the Eiffel Tower—itself the wonder of the 1889 Exhibition—were two impermanent structures, the Palais de l'Electricité and the Château d'Eau.

The nineteenth century had been lit first by oil and then by gas. The twentieth was to see life transformed by the development of electricity. That great Palais de l'Electricité was no mere exhibition hall dedicated to the history of this source of power. It was a powerhouse itself, on which the entire Exposition depended for current. Moreover, the year 1900 marked the coming-of-age of the incandescent bulb, as manufactured by Thomas Edison, and was the year when the performance of millions of these objects finally ousted gaslight and gave Paris its soubriquet—La Ville Lumière.

It may seem that all this had nothing to do with a young American dancer, arriving with ambition and little experience. There were forty million visitors between April and November. What room could there have been for a novice?

The answer is, *none*. That is not surprising. What is much more surprising is that the spirit of the whole Exposition was summed up by another American dancer, about ten years older than Isadora, and already, for seven years, an established feature of entertainment in Paris. In his fascinating book, *The Triumph of Art Nouveau—Paris Exhibition, 1900,* Philippe Jullian described her:

> An American dancer, Loie Fuller, who was neither pretty nor young, expressed the splendour of electric lighting so effectively that she came to be regarded as the embodiment of this new beauty. She had her own theater at the exhibition. Her statue, with its mass of floating draperies, stood above the low, cavern-like entrance. . . . The Loie Fuller Theater was designed by Henri Sauvage. It is typical of the vulgarities of the "Modern Style." The performance which she gave here enraptured the artistic public, who bought bronzes of the dancer, in the form of lamps or ashtrays, as they came out.

Isadora danced in the simplest of abbreviated attire. Loie Fuller moved, rather than danced, in a whirl of hundreds of yards of the thinnest of shimmering pure silk. Lit from below through frosted glass panels let into the floor, and by spotlights directed at her from all angles, she created effects of constantly changing beauty. These aroused extraordinary reactions in some of the audiences. A contemporary French reporter, Jean Lorrain, wrote of her in 1900:

> Modelled in glowing embers, Loie Fuller does not burn; she oozes brightness, she is flame itself. . . . I have talked elsewhere of the morbid voluptuousness of the *Dance of the Lily*—La Loie, wrapped in wreaths of frost and opal shimmerings, herself becoming a huge flower, a sort of giant calyx with her bust as the pistil. But what I have been unable to tell you and could never convey properly. . .is the sublimity, the deathly terror of La Fuller's entrance in the *Dance of the Lily*. . .how poignant, how superb, how overwhelming and frightening, like a nightmare induced by morphine or ether. . . .

It was to a world in which such subliminal thoughts could be publicly communicated that Isadora now applied herself. Can it be wondered that her naïve extrovert aspirations were hardly noticed? Until the Exposition was over, she was wiser to throw herself into enjoying it, and not bother about her own career. With such an escort as Charles Hallé, why not?

Isadora said that Hallé used to take her to dinner on the Tour Eiffel, and that when she was tired, he would put her into a "rolling :hair." "And," she said, "I was often tired, for the art of the Exposition did not seem to me at all equal to the art of the Louvre, ɔut I was very happy, for I adored Paris and I adored Charles Hallé." This must have been a delicious companionship, with Hallé, witty and traveled, guiding Isadora, observant and critical. [t must have been great fun for both of them. They used to go, of ɔourse, to the Loie Fuller Theater, where, in addition to her own roupe, La Loie was presenting a great novelty, which had especial ıppeal for Isadora, herself a born mime. Amidst all the vulgarities ɔf the Exposition, this was the spectacle most appreciated by the ıesthetes.

> The greatest triumph belonged to the Japanese actress Sada Yacco. . . .Her miming seemed quite extraordinary to Parisians, though the Japanese criticized her for confusing different traditions. . . .Sada Yacco was compared to Eleonora Duse because of her pathetic realism (it was even rumoured that the great Sarah Bernhardt, disguised by a thick veil, would go to study a certain death scene performed by her Japanese rival in order to bring something new to her own death in *L'Aiglon*. . . .

When Hallé simply had to return to London, he confided [sadora to the care of a nephew. He had introduced her to the world ɔf artists and their patrons. She might be a penniless young woman, ınd an amateur in a city of professionals, but her splendid ntroductions opened doors. As before, she obtained engagements to lance at private parties, where the audiences would have been the :quivalent of those assembled for her at the New Gallery. She had ıbviously been given her New Gallery costumes, and her 'Botticelli" and "Chopin" programs were the most admired.

Though the atmosphere in Paris was more vivid, Isadora's career till followed an intimate pattern. She was visited by the Princesse e Polignac, the millionairess Winnaretta Singer, who, herself an ccomplished musician and painter, was a generous patron of young ıusicians. She gave Isadora a substantial sum of money and still no ıeatrical manager would touch Isadora until, late in 1901, when ıe had already been in Paris for nearly a year and a half, Loie ıller offered her the chance to tour Berlin, Leipzig, Munich and ienna, giving her own numbers, as Sada Yacco had done. This led an engagement to give thirty performances at the Urania Theater Budapest in 1902, and, from that point, Isadora was "off."

It was, therefore, only from 1902 onwards, when she was, as we w know, as much as twenty-five years old, that her success ɔame considerable, and she herself a star. It was in Budapest that, the first time, Isadora was to experience the sensation of ımphing over a large audience. Moreover, this was when she rnt what it was to be treated as a star, a person not only able to n large sums for herself, but to spin them for managers and aters. The spoiling she had received in the past had been genuine. w some of it was to become synthetic.

Vow she had to stay in the best hotels, to eat in the best aurants. Make no mistake about it, Isadora loved luxury. The osite side of the coin was the constant traveling, the fevered lic receptions, and the loneliness of those hotel bedrooms once was alone. Isadora liked to have her family and friends eling with her. Money now flowed in, but it also flowed out, as ɔaid the expenses of all about her. Generosity was one of ora's most likeable characteristics, and she never tempered ; instincts with prudence. With so much traveling, Isadora also ɔd to an outlet common to many theatricals—she became npulsive letter-writer.

ıe chronology of the next few months is well known. Isadora

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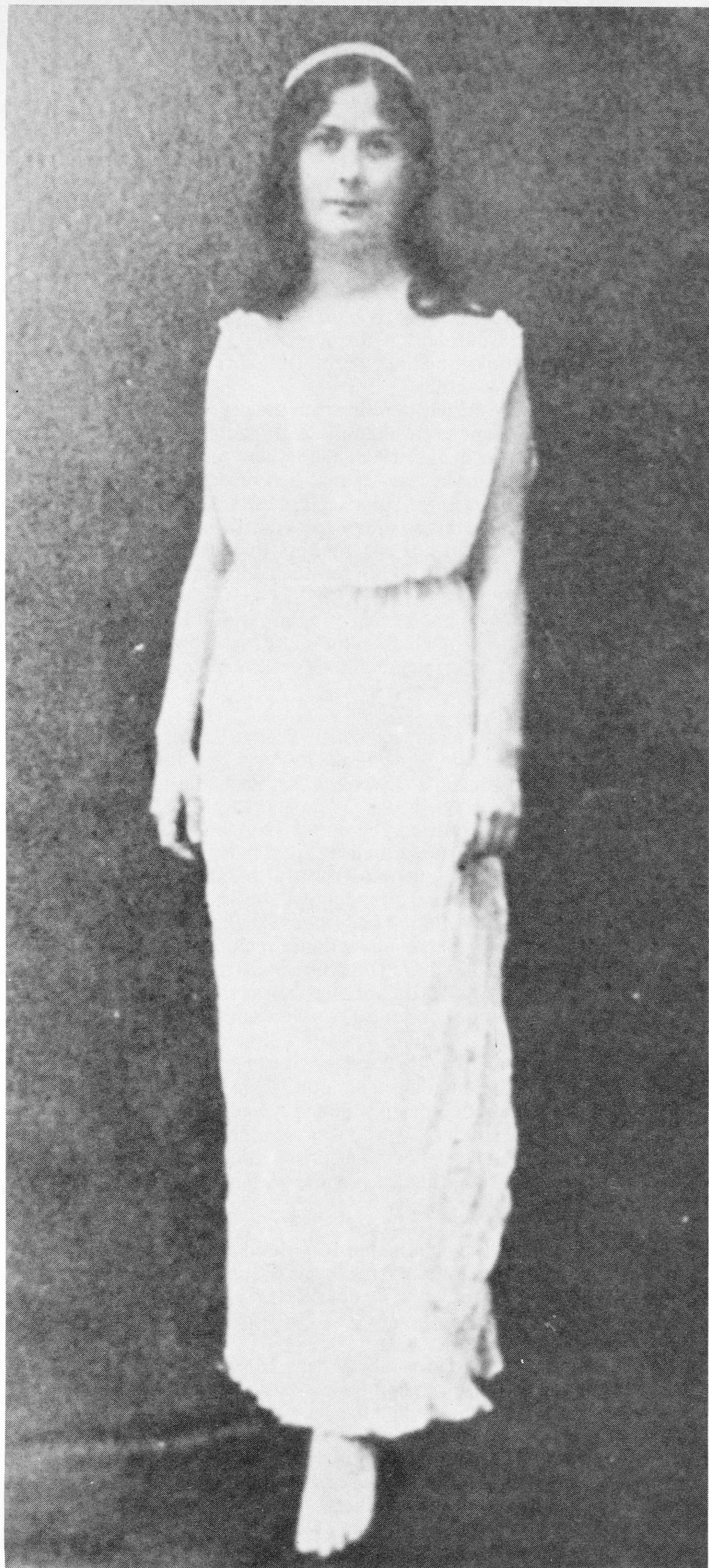

Isadora Duncan (Cont'd)

claims to have lost her virginity in Budapest, the lucky man being Hungary's foremost young actor, Oskar Beregi. The illness which followed may be taken to have been a miscarriage, and her manager and his wife cared for her. She toured again, had a holiday on the Adriatic, and toured still more. By March 1903, she had returned to Paris, and, once again, to a lack of interest, despite her considerable reputation in Germany. She had become the darling of the artists there, and, amongst other things, had been the subject of a series of terra-cotta statuettes in which Professor Schott presented her in different poses of joyous motion, a dancing Tanagra figure. Back in Paris, it was, once again, the artists who most appreciated her. She became their darling, but theatrical managers held off.

Parisian theaters were frequently booked for odd dates, and Isadora did just this. Confident in her new-found ability to hold a large audience, she took the Sarah Bernhardt, with seating capacity of 1,200.

Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the need to examine varied reports of the same event than these of Isadora's three programs at this theater in July 1903. Were these performances to be considered a complete success—a qualified success, an artistic success, a success with one particular section of the audience, a box-office success? It would demand many press cuttings and a look at the balance sheet to be sure of the answers to all these questions. There are two accounts which do not so much conflict as complement each other.

Mabel Dolmetsch, who had been a pupil of Arnold Dolmetsch when Isadora danced at the New Gallery and was now her *maître's* third wife, was able to describe much that went on behind the scenes:

> In the summer of 1903 a reduced consort consisting of Arnold, Beatrice and myself spent some weeks in Paris, providing. . .the music for Isadora Duncan's *Dance Idylls*, then being staged at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt. . . . [We] called at the well-appointed flat which housed the entire Duncan family, namely: Mama, a brave and rather touching figure; Raymond, the resourceful; Isabella (Augustin's youthful wife), the brains of the family; Gussie, all-round good fellow; and Isadora, the presiding genius. In addition to her *Dance Idylls*, towards which we were to contribute ancient dance melodies. . .Isadora had devised a little ballet, based on a Greek mythological subject, for which a small string orchestra was to provide the music. At the moment of our entry, we were surprised to see members of the orchestra filing out with tightened lips and lowered eyelids, headed by their leader. We learned subsequently that there had been an altercation between Raymond and the conductor, in which they had come to blows. Unfortunately, the conductor, who was also the composer of the music, had taken away his manuscript with him, to Isadora's consternation, thus leaving her with her ballet and no music!

Perhaps this shows that my guess that Raymond had taken himself off in dudgeon from London after Isadora's first recital at the New Gallery, in March 1900, is probably near the mark. Mabel Dolmetsch continued:

> Arnold, rising to the occasion, asked her to dance it for him, and thereupon set himself to compose suitable music, working far into the night. The ballet had been entitled *Pan and Echo*, and was intended to portray the flight of the timid nymph, eluding the pursuit of the woodland god. The music. . .seemed to me both apt and pleasing. Especially striking was Pan's bounding entry to a descending whole-tone scale, played on the bassoon (in those days something of a novelty!). Several rehearsals were held, and Isadora appeared satisfied.
>
> On the day of the performance, however, she became nervous and said that, having originally conceived it to other music, she feared that Arnold's setting might put her out. She therefore decided to perform it wholly unaccompanied. This was unfortunate since, with herself assuming alternately the roles of both Echo and Pan, the lack of any musical intimation of the change of personalities caused confusion. The airy flights of the nymph in her diaphanous draperies and floral garlands were effective and charming, despite the absence of music. But when (still thus attired) she suddenly assumed a sinister frown, and twiddling her fingers to suggest the manipulation of a wind instrument, broke into uncouth gambols, a ripple of incredulous laughter ran through the audience. . . .
>
> The re-appearance of the nymph sobered them for a time, though the interest began to flag for want of the music. When, however, with the former facial contortion, she resumed her grotesque antics, the audience became convulsed! It said something for Isadora's courage that she carried her ballet through to the end. Thereafter, however, it was tactfully buried.

In this last observation, Mabel Dolmetsch was mistaken. Isadora kept *Pan and Echo* in her repertoire. Perhaps this anecdote may serve to show that Isadora's inspirations were sometimes all the better for the judgement of friends before she performed them in public.

"Unfortunately," continued Mrs. Dolmetsch, "business relations became unsatisfactory owing to the flighty behavior of Isadora's financial collaborators; and so we parted on strained terms. It is perhaps on this account that she omits all mention of this, her first Paris season, in her memoirs, and ascribes the said Italian dance melodies to some other Italian dance musician of later date."

Of course, Isadora was not the only young lady of talent living in Paris early in this century. About the same age, there was an English girl of good family but no fortune, a lovely creature, a gifted sculptress with a sensitive inner intelligence that charmed great men, and a gaiety which made her very popular. Kathleen Bruce was the youngest in a family of eleven, children of a Canon of York. After an education in an Anglican convent, she enrolled at the Slade, and, in 1901, at Colarossi's studio in Paris. During the first years she spent there, she made friends, shyly, with a young man who ate in the same student bistro, and who turned into Edward Steichen, one of the world's great photographers.

Not until 1910 did Kathleen Bruce keep a regular diary, though she often filled an odd notebook about some special event. When she started on her autobiography in 1932 she had to draw on memory for the early years. As she was a born gypsy, always traveling, she occasionally mixed up dates. The emotions she expressed, however, are very simple to follow. As she was to become one of Isadora's greatest friends, and more or less idolized the dancer, it is fitting to say something about Kathleen's own view of herself first.

Kathleen Bruce was convinced that she had been created for one purpose—to bear a son. Nothing else mattered at all. She had a kind and practical streak, and was accustomed to deal efficiently with the crises of her friends. She adored social dancing. The men who flocked round her could be delightful and amusing, but it was a long time before any one of them matched up to the standards she required in the father of her son.

Kathleen described the day she first met Isadora. It was in July 1903, the Sunday after Isadora's Sarah Bernhardt performance:

> One day there was a picnic to celebrate Rodin's birthday, and a large company of people went down by special train from Paris. . . . I knew no one, but became aware that there seemed to be some rather dominant figure round whom the conversation surged. . .it apparently was a girl, talking bad and ugly French. . . . Why yes, it was Isadora Duncan, the great dancer of the day. I had seen her dance a day or two before at the Châtelet with the Colonne orchestra of a hundred players. I had been with my painter and we had both wept unashamedly in our delight. The dancer had seemed the most remote, the most intangible expression of ultimate beauty. Here she was, sitting in a crowded railway carriage, and talking barbaric French. . . . After lunch at the picnic a fine old Norwegian painter, Fritz Thalon, tuned up his fiddle, and somebody said the lovely dancer must dance. Isadora had a long, white, high-waisted Liberty frock on, and shoes. She said she could not dance because her frock was too long. Somebody said, "Take it off," and the cry rose, "Take it off." So she did, and her shoes too, and as the fiddler began to play, Isadora, in a little white petticoat and bare feet, began to move, to sway, to rush, to be as a falling leaf in a high gale, and finally to drop at Rodin's feet in an unforgettable pose of childish abandonment. I was blinded with joy. Rodin was enchanted. Everyone was enchanted, save the few inevitable detrimentalists who seem to creep in almost everywhere to prevent artists from having their full joy of one another.

A few points in this souvenir have to be corrected. It was not Rodin's birthday (he was born on November 12, 1840). It was

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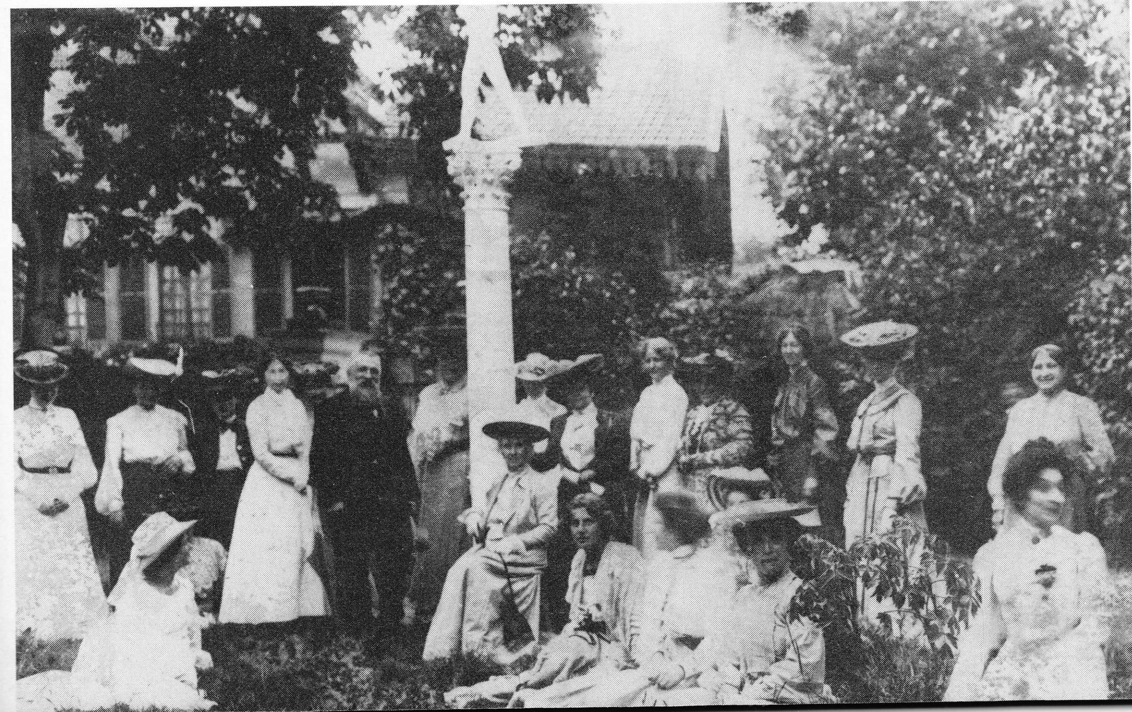

Some of the photographs on this page were found in Kathleen Bruce's private collection, but they might all have been there, for they show Isadora as she was during the first years of their friendship. Two show Isadora dancing in the Ampitheater of Dionysus. (Photos: Irma Duncan Collection, probably by Raymond Duncan , Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts) The sculptor Auguste Rodin is surrounded (below) by the young ladies of the group who gave him a luncheon party in July 1903. Isadora, wearing a large hat, sits on the grass at left; Kathleen is center, third woman back on the grass, looking at the camera. Kathleen Bruce is seen directly above, circa 1902-3, as she was when she and Isadora were introduced in Paris by Rodin. (Photo: Collection of Lord Kennet/Kathleen Bruce) Top right: Isadora reads Ernst Haeckel's Anthropologie *in her garden at Bayreuth in 1904. (Photo: Dance Collection, Library and Museum of Performing Arts)*

Isadora Duncan (Cont'd)

simply a luncheon champêtre organized by a number of the young artists in the garden of an inn at Vélizy, near his home at Meudon. "All Rodin's assistants were there—Maillol, Schnegg, Dejean, Arnold, Pompon... Rodin and Bourdelle, both of whom regarded Isadora as the very embodiment of the dance, immortalized her in a series of remarkable sketches." The theater was not the Châtelet but, as has been said, the Sarah Bernhardt, on the opposite side of the square. This was an easy slip to make, because Kathleen must have seen the Diaghilev Ballet at the Châtelet from time to time from 1909 on. (She was a cousin of H.J. Bruce—Benjie—who married Karsavina years later.) And both the Dolmetsch Consort and the Colonne Orchestra played for Isadora. Each woman, setting down memories so long after, remembered some things and forgot others.

The most important thing that happened that afternoon, however, was described by Kathleen when she set it all down.

> Rodin took Isadora's and my hands in one of his and said, "My children, you two artists should understand each other."

And Kathleen added:

> So began a long-lasting relationship of the most unusual order.

Kathleen painted a pen-portrait of Isadora as she was in 1903:

> As an artist I thought of the dancer as a resplendent deity; as a human being I thought of her as a disgracefully naughty child. As an artist I exulted in her; as a tiresome child I could not abandon her. "Come with me to Brussels," said she, and I went. "Come with me to Berlin," and I went. "Come with me to The Hague." At each place and many more she gave her grand performance. The greatest conductors led the finest orchestras for her; the houses were crowded out. At Liège one night the audience stood up in their seats and waved their hats and roared. I sat quietly in my seat, disposing of my preposterous tears before going round to see that my dancer had her fruit and milk and a shawl over her whilst she cooled off, before facing the wild enthusiasts who surged round the stage door and yelled their delight.

What ever was Isadora really like? How hard it is to sum up a creature who could so readily assume different personalities. How very different is Kathleen Bruce's view of her from that of John Young-Hunter! It is most unlikely that Kathleen ever came to hear of that episode in the life of Clan Duncan; when she tried to set her thoughts in order about Isadora, she could not deny the knowledge of hindsight, but this is what she said:

> No friends had we at all in these foreign towns. If pressmen came the dancer was self-conscious and austere, and since she talked nothing but American the interviews were brief. We got up early, ran in any park that was near, and did a few gymnastics. Whatever happened later, and terrible things did happen, at that time the dancer was a healthy, simple-living hard-working artist, neither beautiful nor intelligent apart from her one great gift for expression. Moreover, she was not musical in the usual sense of the word, though her rhythm could arouse the greatest and least to delirious rapture. She was open-handed, sweet-tempered, pliable and easy-going. "Oh, what's the difference?" she would say, if I, who hated to see her put upon, wanted to stand out against overcharges. "What's the difference?" But she ate carefully, and drank nothing ever at this time but water or milk. She was making enormous sums of money. Whatever she may have thought of herself afterwards, at that time she was nothing but a frightened girl.

These comments are extremely important in view of the changes in Isadora's entire behavior and habits which seem to have come upon her from the following year, with greater success and prosperity.

And so Rodin turned Kathleen into a willing slave; her slavery was to give her pleasure for many years; in the end, her loyalty was to be tested too hard.

Not long after that picnic and that tour, Clan Duncan set forth on its most adventurous journey. Isadora's huge earnings gave them the chance of a "sabbatical." And where would Clan Duncan naturally wish to spend it but in Greece? What is not generally realized is that Kathleen went with them. Writing later, she muddled journeys and dates. However, having a Greek grandmother and wanderlust, off she went.

"I knew some folks who were going, dancing vagabonds like myself, and I joined them.... For a month or two we camped on the thyme-covered slopes of Mount Hymettus, just outside Athens, and I made pilgrimage almost daily to the Acropolis.."

In 1938, Kathleen again visited Greece (not her first return journey; she had been there in 1906). This time she made an entry in a diary.

> MARCH 25th. My cousin..took me to find Kopanos, where...Isadora and the Duncans and I built a wonderful house. Everyone said it was no longer there. It had been demolished to build houses for the refugees. But I thought that I would make sure, and there it was, quite untouched, and half-roofed only. The big wooden doors were locked but I hammered and peeped, and at last two tidy young Greeks with a goat let me in.... There were the actual stones that I had put in their places. There was the water coming from the artesian well which we had dug. Every few days then the men used to say that they had reached water, and everyone stopped work and had drinks, and then we went back and found there was no water. Now it supplies the houses of the refugees, which are creeping up very near to our lovely house....

Just over thirty years later still, John Gregory and his wife Barbara Vernon, exponents of the Russian school of classical ballet, were in Athens. They were determined to find the house, if it still existed, but no one could direct them. A chance encounter with an English lady who worked in the Library in Athens made it all seem simple. "It is at the end of the 36 bus route. It's a Taverna now...."

John Gregory continued:

> That afternoon I found the 36 bus and set out. It took less than fifteen minutes. The place is a small foothill of Hymettus, now overgrown with an untidy sprawling mass of concrete and half houses; beyond were great stone quarries and more suburbs. I left the bus and walked a winding road for a few hundred yards until, rounding a bend, I came in sight of the Taverna. It was called "Arvo." Most of the house still stood. It was something of a ruin, but retained a certain charm and character. The court-yard to the terrace was intact and the view from the terrace was unsurpassable. Only the most sublime, the most exquisite, was good enough for Isadora!

How idyllic it must have been in 1903, when Isadora found the site, and never thought to ask about water. But there was no No. 36 bus then to bring explorers like John Gregory; no crude Taverna to disappoint him when he returned in the evening, as only then did the restaurant open—to find tough meat and mists shrouding the view.

What bliss they must all have had until Isadora started to recruit a team of boys whom she took back to Germany to perform....

In 1903, the lovely dream could not last. The cost of the search for water emptied Isadora's bank account once more. She returned to earn again, dancing for her most enthusiastic audiences, in Germany. In May, 1904, she went to Bayreuth to take part in the Festival. This had been the idea of Siegfried Wagner, son of the composer, and Isadora took part in a ballet of someone else's devising for the last time. She attracted devoted admirers, including a man whose wife was the daughter of Cosima Wagner. Here, she became notorious as well as famous. And in Berlin, to which she returned after the Festival, Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig met on December 14th, 1904. □

Next month Nesta Macdonald writes about Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig, taking the story through the year 1907. Nesta Macdonald is the author of Diaghilev, Observed *and* The Pheasantry, *as well as contributor to several dance publications.*