

[Mrs. Elizabeth Dismukes]

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Mrs. Elizabeth Dismukes

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Rose Shepherd, writer.

MRS.ELIZABETH DISMUKES

Mrs. Dismukes, an erect, slender woman, was interviewed in her lovely home overlooking Matanzas Bay. She moves quickly and speaks with animation, but failing eyesight has compelled her to give up her beloved pastime of reading. "But I have a reader come in every evening for an hour or so, and she reads the newspapers and excerpts from the leading magazines, and thus I keep fairly abreast of the times, and know in a general way what is going on in the world."

With reference to a copy of James McNeill Whistler's famous painting of his mother hanging on the wall in the living room, Mrs. Dismukes said:

"She married my father's cousin, becoming Anna McNeill, and we always called her 'Aunt Anna.' As she was old when we first knew her. She had tuberculosis, or 'consumption' as they called it in the early days, and always wore the little white shawl around her

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shoulders. She looked just like the picture. There were five sons and one daughter in Aunt Anna's family. I never saw James McNeill Whistler, as he was sent abroad early in life to study art and did not live in St. Augustine, but I knew his younger brother, Willie, very well. He married his cousin, Florida King, who was my cousin also. That is her portrait just below that of Mrs. Whistler. My father, Ebeneser Kingsley's sister Isabel married Ralph King, 2 and that is how the relationship came in. She lived in Brooklyn.

"Willie Whistler studied medicine and during the war between the States was a surgeon in the Confederate Army.

"In Europe, James McNeill Whistler developed a devoted and lasting friendship with Oscar Wilde, which has become the subject of considerable comment in his autobiography and historical sketches of his life.

"Anna McNeill Whistler was my father's first cousin, and she as a young woman when she married John Whistler. She used to come over to our home every day. I am the only person living today who know her personally. This picture of her is nearly one hundred years old. I do not know if Anna and John Whistler were married in the old home on the St. Johns River.

"This portrait of my mother, who was Bettie Elkin, is painted on wood, and while the colors are very bright still, it is quote old also. I never knew my mother, as she died when I was born.

"Father's widowed sister, Aunt Sophia Couper, married General Duncan Lamont Clinch, and as his fame increased she became very 'high-hat.' She had married a widower with a bushel of children, though," laughed Mrs. Dismukes.

"One of his daughters - Elizabeth - married Anderson Hayward, of Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and her son, D. Clinch Hayward, is a former governor of that State. His home is at Columbia, South Carolina.

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“Clinch Hayward's grandfather was known as the wealthiest 3 man in the state of South Carolina. He had three plantations, one in Georgia and two in South Carolina, and had 2,500 slaves. He had a book in which he kept a record of every negro he owned - when they were born, married and died, or if they were purchased from some other planter, the date and as much information as he could secure regarding their previous life.

“When Clinch Hayward was governor, one day a splendid-looking negro was ushered into his office, and said: 'marse Clinch, I would like to see The Book,' (That was its title, and everyone knew it by that name, and also what it was). Clinch reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and brought out the record. The man had been a pickaninny on one of the plantations, and wished to establish his identity. The Book gave a complete record of his genealogy, - who his father and mother were, and also his grandfather and grandmother. Clinch has the record book yet, it is one of his prized possessions.

“Aunt Sophia Clinch was a homely little old lady. Here is a picture of her,” she said, selecting from a folder an old photograph of a middle-aged woman in the tight-waist buttoned-down the front - voluminous hoopskirt before-the-war period.

“Clinch sent me this, and if you will write him, he will no doubt be able to furnish you a copy also. I never cared so much for her, especially after she adopted her haughty attitude towards her many relatives, but Clinch always said she was just the ‘grandest grandmother in the world.’

4

“There were four forts in various sections named after General Clinch.

“And by the way, the town of Bayard, Florida, on the Florida East Coast Railway, was named for one of his sons, Bayard Clinch, and not for the statesman and cabinet officer, as is so often claimed.

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“Aunt Sophia was a good deal like cousin Minnie Smithers, she was tall and very dignified. When I was a little girl, I was rather scared of Aunt Sophia, and stood in great awe on the occasions of her infrequent visits at our home with her daughters, Miss Mary and Miss Pattie, who were very much like her. They were dignified and austere, too.

“Here is a picture of our early home in St. Augustine, painted vary accurately by Mrs. Reed. You see it was a Spanish type house, very much like the Burt house, built of coquina. I have been married sixty-five years, and I never saw that house after I was married. It was on Bay Street, and was burned twice, the second time never rebuilt.

“I was named for Elizabeth Bolling Gibbs, who lived in St. Augustine when I was born.

“I do not remember anything about the early history of Jacksonville, although I do remember grandmother Doggett, who was married at the age of 15 during the Seminole War, she was a Miss Cleland. A sister, Selina, married a Buckman. When I was a little girl six years old, I remember meeting Colonel Buckman, and also Mr. Garner, of Jacksonville.

5

“Julia /Livinston Burroughs was adopted into our family when she was three years old and we were reared together. We had come to Jacksonville, or rather had been brought there on a visit for a few days, and staid at the Judson house. Julia was very attractive and was always the object of much attention, while I was never good looking, but I remember we were beautifully dressed in the low-necked beruffled costumes of the time, and a gentleman at the hotel looking at me said: ‘What a beautiful high chest that little girl has.’ I was mortified at the remark which I had overheard, and ran to our room, crawled under the bed and cried and cried, I was so sensitive. I cannot imagine the bold little youngsters of the present day being embarrassed by such a remark.

“Miss Lydia Pearson was a member of our party, and one of two gentlemen who had called to see her made the ‘high chest’ comment.

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"I remember another time Julia and I were on a river trip up the St. Johns to visit King Gibbs who had a plantation at Newcastle, where two servants were to meet us. But night overtook us and through some error we left the boat at Baxter's Landing, the station immediately above Newcastle. We were compelled to spend the night with the Zephaniah Kingsleys at Fort George.

"The old woman was there, (Zephaniah Kingsley's wife, the African Princess Ma'am Anna). I remember her very distinctly. She was not black, and had the most beautiful features you ever saw. She was a most imposing and very handsome woman. Her smooth, light brown skin, her dark-eyes and wavy made her outstanding, and I would not keep my eyes away for admiration. She was quiet and moved with regal dignity - I have never seen anything like her, before or since. Her daughter was there also, and she was very light in color, but not as good looking as her mother. I was six or seven years old at the time. I was Kingsley's niece. The next morning my aunt, Mrs. Gibbs, sent two servants for us with a horse and buggy and we were carried over to Newcastle. My mother was furious that we had spent the night at Ma'am Anna's, but it could not be helped.

"I do not remember the negroes singing en route, they were well behaved and very quiet. Nor do I recall any river songs or boat songs sung by the slaves of that day.

"I have had such a varied life. I must have been a very bad child, because I spent so much of my girlhood away from St. Augustine. From the time I was five until I was twelve years of age I lived most of the time in Brooklyn with the Kings.

"We lived in St. Augustine when the war came on. My father took command of the fort here, and the Confederate flag which flew over it was made by the people of this city on the floor of our house. Then father went to Virginia to join General Robert E. Lee's Army of Virginia. He later became a Confederate Colonel. My mother followed to be as near to him as possible in Virginia, and Julia and I were placed in school - a girls' seminary conducted by a Reverend Mr. Howard and his three daughters near Rome, Georgia.

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There we spent the whole period of the war, without molestation, and far from the region of Sherman's famous march through Georgia to the sea. I was sixteen when that happened. I remember, though, father became alarmed, and sent word to have us placed in a troop train leaving Rome, so Julia and I rode to Quincy, Florida, with a regiment of young Confederates, just us two young girls with a carload of boys, and we had a perfectly grand time!

"We went to Quincy with a trunkful of Confederate money. We staid there during the Reconstruction period. Father and mother joined us there, and we journeyed to St. Augustine. Our house was standing, but was entirely empty. It had been occupied by Federal officers during the occupation of the city, and had been looted of everything, furniture, clothing, all our keepsakes and heirlooms.

"I wonder to this day how father and mother managed to secure furniture to equip the house, beds for us to sleep on, and food to eat. The slaves were all gone. We must have fared terribly hard.

"I was married in Rochester, New York. We lived in Arkansas for several years, then came to Quincy, and finally located back here in St. Augustine, building this house where I have made my home for fifty years.

"Everything I had in trunks stored in the old house was burned, letters of my father and mother, pictures, etc. I do not believe there is a picture of Zephaniah Kingsley extant.

8

"I have written my 'memoirs' which I will let you read some time. Since I can't read, I spend most of my time talking. I tell my daughter, Robbie, now that the Lord has taken my eyes, I have to look inward for consolation. Most things in my life do not seem of much importance, now that I look back in retrospection, but I do remember the old city, its early life, and especially what happened in the last fifty years.

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“St. Augustine used to be a gay place when the Ponce de Leon and the Alcazar were open during the winter season. [?] wealthy people, interesting, educated and traveled used to spend the winter here, but of course, now they go to West Palm Beach and Miami, and it seems dead.

“Mme. Louise Homer and her husband, Sidney Homer, have been such a welcome addition to our life here. She is so charming and unpretentious, like all great people, and they both tell of the hardships they have endured in their long careers striving for recognition, she as a singer, and he as a composer - how at one time they were so poor they had to do without butter for their frugal meals. She gives teas in her studio-apartment and everybody in town has called upon her, although she never returns formal calls. They are doing a wonderful work in giving of their time and talents to develop qualified and talented young singers. But hard times come in everybody's life. I remember once before I was married and another time four years ago when a local bank failed, I did not have fifty cents to my name.

“I shall be glad to have Susan L'Engles Diary. I am certain it will be interesting in its references to the old families and early days of Jacksonville and this section of Florida.