

Dr. Ida S. Scudder, (1870–1960),  
Excerpt #One from *A Thousand Years in Thy Sight*,  
*The Story of the Scudder Missionaries of India*<sup>1</sup>

By Dorothy Jealous Scudder  
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‘Illay,\* Amma,’ the brahmin replied proudly. ‘I would not think of having a man deliver my wife: I would rather that she should die than be seen by another man. If you cannot come, I must lose her.’ Ida had pled with the husband to let her father, Dr. John, deliver the baby, but to no avail. She had even offered to go with them and do what she could under her father’s direction, but the Brahmin was adamant. She had no medical training: she was forced to let this husband go without aid for his dying wife.

\* Illay means “no” in Tamil.

Ida sat down sadly at her desk and tried to fasten her attention on Tamil. Soon she heard the familiar cough, which serves as a doorbell in India. She looked up hopefully, thinking that perhaps the Brahmin had relented. Instead, she saw a Mohammedan with the same anxious look in his eyes that she had observed in those of the Brahmin, for his child-wife was also dying in childbirth. The midwives had said they could do nothing more. He had come for ‘Scudder Missey’s’ help. Again, she called her father and again they pled with this man to let the doctor go. But Mohammedans are even stricter in regard to their women than are high caste Hindus. They do not allow a man outside the family even so much as to look upon the faces of their women: they

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<sup>1</sup> “Dr. Ida (1890–1893), 1900–1955).” Chapter XXV, In Dorothy Jealous Scudder, *A Thousand Years in Thy Sight*, (New York: Vantage Press, 1984), 185–196. Dorothy is also known as “D. V.” Scudder.

<sup>2</sup> “Ida S. Scudder,” Scudder Association Foundation.

keep them shut up behind the curtain—in purdah. That a man should attend a Mohammedan woman in childbirth was to them pollution. So, he, too, left without help for his dying wife.

It seemed incredible that a third such request could come that same evening, but it did. Another cough, the same anxious eyes. Another caste Hindu, though not a Brahmin. All of them, Brahmin, Mohammedan, Hindu, were sharing the antipathy to any man, even a doctor, looking on their wives. If Missey could not help, no one else should. So each of the three left unaided and in despair.

All night long Ida lay thinking of those three child mothers dying because there was no trained woman to help them: thinking of the thousands, the millions even, of other mothers all over India likewise victims of convention and ignorance. Years ago, her grandfather—the first Dr. John—had seen a tremendous task which he knew that he must do and do alone. Now she faced the same challenge. Whatever was done to help these women, she must do herself. And she did not want to. She was so anxious for a conventional and happy life in America. If she thought about it at all, she must have appreciated then the struggle that her grandmother went through before she consented to go to India. But like her grandmother, she prayed for guidance. Her prayer was answered, for never before had she felt so conscious of the Divine Presence nor realized so clearly the path she was to follow.

Early in the morning she heard the tom-tom beating in the village. It struck terror to her heart. She sent a peon to each house where the child-mothers lived, but even before his return she knew that all three were dead.

She hesitated no longer. Going to her father and mother, she said, ‘God has taken very drastic means to show me what I must do. He has made it clear that I am to study medicine and come back to care for the women of India.’<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Scudder, Chapter XXV, Section 1, 185–187.

<sup>4</sup> Photo of Ida and her parents, Dr. John Scudder II and Sophia (Weld) Scudder, and her brother Henry in Scudder, page 148.

A natural shyness, heightened by the deprivations experienced by missionary's children, made Ida somewhat retiring, but she was not lacking in spirit, thanks to five older brothers. On December 9, 1870, when her mother had been told that her new-born child was a daughter, she had said, 'I can't believe it.' She had so longed for a little girl and had had so many sons that she could hardly realize that at last her wish was fulfilled. Little Ida grew up under the ruthless discipline of brothers. They teased her unmercifully, giving her plenty of opportunity to develop both spirit and temper. Just the same, they adored her and any one of them would walk to a cannon's mouth without the flicker of an eyelash if she had asked them to. Her winsome smile and blue eyes gave her the nickname of 'Bonney,' soon shortened to 'Bon.' She was a canny little thing: it did not take her long to learn that her smile could win her anything she wanted. Throughout their lives, her brothers responded to Bon's slightest wish or whim.

Ida was less enthusiastic over the Nebraska farm<sup>5</sup> than her brothers, Henry and Walter. Yet she managed to make life rewarding. In 1884 her mother returned to India without her. Little Ida was hurt and indignant. How could a mother who really loved her children leave them all in America and go back to those Indians? They couldn't love her mother as she did. For the moment she hated the Indians. They had taken away what belonged to her. She would *never* go to India.

Mrs. John left Ida in Chicago with Uncle Henry Martyn Scudder, who was pastor of the Plymouth Church. As all of her family was grown, it was difficult for Mrs. Henry to adapt herself to life with this young and rebellious niece. Apparently, she was much stricter than Ida's parents had been, and Ida did not like it. Once, when she had been sent supperless to her room for some harmless prank, a glass of milk and a plate of bread were finally taken to her. She threw them out of the window in a rage. Then she stood defiantly waiting for Uncle Henry's step on the stairs. When he came into the room and put his arms around her, her defiance melted and she wept on his shoulder. He could comfort her for he realized that her high spirit was so like his own at her age. He knew too that she was too much for Aunt Fanny to cope with. The way opened for a solution when Dwight Moody asked to have her at his Northfield Seminary; the Scudders gladly complied with the request, especially as Uncle Henry was considering Japan as a new field for his missionary labors.

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<sup>5</sup> Scudder, 139, Dr. John and Sophia (Weld) Scudder, took their family to America for five years during which time they established a farm in Nebraska, 1878–1883, before Dr. John returned to India alone until Sophia could make adequate living and educational arrangements for all of the children, including Ida.

At Northfield, Ida's high spirits had free rein. She was a leader in whatever took place, studies, athletics or pranks—especially pranks. These were never premeditated. It was usually thoughtlessness that led her into scrapes. When she thought of something that would be fun to do, she acted immediately: Once she and her roommate found the German teacher's horse and carriage tied to a hitching post in front of their dormitory. Ida had not spent four years on a farm without learning to drive. They unfastened the horse, climbed into the carriage and drove gaily out into the countryside and had a glorious time. Since Ida was always suspect in such matters, she was the first one summoned for questioning. She took her punishment in good part, for she knew she had been wrong. On another occasion, Thanksgiving Day, she and some friends got permission to go to Brattleboro for dinner. They ran into some Mt. Hermon boys who had a similar idea. What was more natural than for the boys and girls to have dinner together! But it was against the rules and, unfortunately, there was a Northfield teacher dining at the same hotel. Here Ida displayed her dominant characteristic—the ability to meet a situation full face and more than half way. When the teacher returned to her room she found a big box of flowers with a card from Ida and her friends thanking her for *allowing* them to have such a nice Thanksgiving Day! Fortunately for them, this teacher was exceedingly fond of flowers.



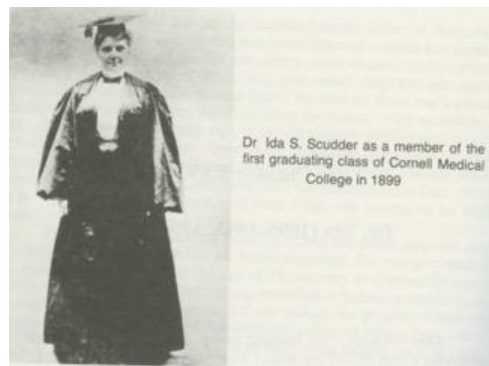
Soon, Ida began growing up. She was learning to control her temper, although it was manifest on occasions then and continued throughout her life. Those lovely blue eyes could snap when she heard of any injustice, whether to herself, to her loved ones, or to her Indian 'children.'

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<sup>6</sup> "Ida S. Scudder," Scudder Association Foundation, <https://scudder.org/about/history/india-medical-missions/ida-scudder-story/>.

She liked Northfield, but graduating was less of a sorrow than it would have been had her mother not needed her. She had not seen her parents for six years. She realized that a year in India before going to college would be interesting and she would be with her mother. Afterwards, she would come back to America, go to Wellesley, marry and have a happy life.

But the tragic experience of three Indian women dying in childbirth changed all that. After three years at Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, Ida and her roommate, Ellen Bartholomew, bicycled from Philadelphia to New York to enter Cornell Medical College which was just opening its doors to women in 1898. Upon completion of this medical course, Ellen married Ida's brother, Walter. Ida, although in love with a young medical student and he with her, turned her eyes resolutely away from romance.



She knew that she had been called to different accomplishments, ones which would be difficult of fulfillment if one had a family. The man who loved her never married. He died a few years later still wearing the cross which she had given him at parting. Ida's love, instead of being channeled into family life, flowed out to embrace thousands of women and children of India.

Before Ida left America, she wanted to raise \$50,000 for a women's hospital where she might minister to Indian women. The first obstacle was the Home Board's refusal to allow her to appeal for funds specifically for her own work. They would allot her what they could out of their treasury. Nevertheless, the Mission cabled, asking for \$8,000 for a hospital, and the Board gave her permission to appeal for that amount. How paltry \$8,000 seemed compared to her vision of \$50,000!

Ida went to see Miss Taber, president of the Missionary Society at the Collegiate Church on Twenty Ninth Street. She asked her permission to make an appeal to that group. As she entered

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<sup>7</sup> Scudder, 186.

Miss Taber's home, she was conducted through the library where elderly Mr. Schell, Miss Taber's brother-in-law, was sitting by the fire. He exchanged a 'Good evening' with her and Ida passed into an adjoining room to present her case to Miss Taber.

The following morning, Ida received a note from Mr. Schell asking her to call on him, which she did at once. He had overheard her arguments the evening before and asked for more particulars about her proposed hospital. He had long been planning a memorial to his wife, Mary Taber Schell, and had decided there could be 'none more fitting' than a hospital for women in a land where women so needed help. He asked her how much she wanted, and when she said \$8,000 wrote her a check for \$10,000. To the end of her life, she regretted that she did not ask for the \$50,000 she wanted as she was sure he would have given it. In addition to the \$10,000, Mr. Schell bought her the instruments she would need and insisted on accompanying her while she picked them out. The two of them drove gaily down Fifth Avenue behind a pair of fine black horses and Ida let herself imagine for a moment that she was not a poor missionary, but a ravishing belle out for a drive behind her own thoroughbreds. Ida loved the luxuries that only money could buy. But she loved even more the services that are above price.<sup>8</sup>



SCUDDER MISSIONARY FAMILY

(Ida's parents John Scudder II and Sophia (Weld) Scudder on front row, Ida in center near back, l. of the child)

Dr. Ida landed in India on January 1, 1900, and was welcomed with the traditional garlands of flowers placed about her neck. She spent little time in festivities, but plunged directly into the work which was waiting for her. She began practicing medicine at once. In the early mornings before people left to toil in the fields, she visited patients in their homes. Her father,

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<sup>8</sup> Scudder, Section 2, 187–190.

<sup>9</sup> Scudder Family Photo, Scudder Association Foundation.

then stationed in Vellore, gave her a room in the bungalow for her dispensary. Yet the work spread so rapidly that soon she commandeered her mother's guest room as well, and then a small out-house which would accommodate six patients.



The Scudder mission "bungalow" in Vellore where Dr. Ida opened her first medical dispensary in 1900

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The Mary Taber Schell Hospital was ready for occupancy by 1909, not a day before it was needed, for the Scudder house and compound were crowded with patients morning, noon and night. Soon even the hospital wards were overflowing. When beds were all occupied, patients were put on mats on the floor. This was not hardship for the patients who were probably more comfortable there than were those on the beds.

In one instance at least the difference between an Indian and an American hospital made things easier: the shortage of nurses made it imperative to allow at least one and sometimes more relatives to stay with the patient, sleeping beside or under her bed. In fact, few patients then or now would stay in the hospital if they could not have a relative with them. The caste people will not eat the food in a Christian kitchen, so someone must cook the patient's food. Here, again, the relatives are useful. If they can afford it, they rent a caste kitchen, specially built on the grounds. If too poor for this, they set up some stones under a tree and cook there. All the 'care' not requiring special training is done by the relatives.

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<sup>10</sup> Scudder, 186.



Ida S at back of Judka on the way to the dispensary at Gudiyatham August 1909  
Dr. Ida Sophie Scudder (1870-1960)

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#### IDA'S DONKEY CART" DISPENSARY

One of Dr. Ida's first undertakings was to train Indian women as assistants. A half century earlier, Florence Nightingale had found that nursing was considered a degrading profession in the western world. It was considered even more so in the East. Ida had to use all her charm and all her tact to persuade parents to allow a few intelligent girls to come to her for training. Yet in a short time, she had a staff fairly well trained, although not so large as she needed. She had the assistance of two Canadians to help her in this early work: Miss Lillian Hart was the nursing superintendent. Her sister, Dr. Louisa Hart, was taken away from Ranipet where she had been Dr. Lew's assistant, because Dr. Ida's needs seemed to be the greater.

Ida depended on her father's advice, experience and wisdom to tide her over the early difficulties and show her the best road to follow. Unfortunately, she was not to have this help for long. His operations and death ensued only five months after Ida arrived in India.

Nevertheless, Ida continued her work, aided now by her mother whose practical experience was not the least of her many assets. Of the five thousand patients whom Ida treated at the bungalow during her second year, many preferred to have the 'peria doraiani\*' prescribe for them. They had more faith in Ida's mother than in 'that young thing.' Mrs. John would lift her hands in a characteristic gesture and say, 'Oh Ida, what shall I do?' But Ida paid no attention. She knew very well what her mother would do. She would confer with the butler and perhaps unlock the storeroom, giving out a few more supplies, and by the time the guests arrived be the most gracious hostess imaginable. Moreover, the luncheon would be perfect.

\*Literally, it means 'big madame.' Actually, 'older madame.'

<sup>11</sup> "Ida S. Scudder," <https://scudder.org/about/history/india-medical-missions/ida-scudder-story/>.





IDA'S MOTHER, SOPHIA (WELD) SCUDDER, also known as Mrs. John

So Mrs. John (Aunt Fida to the younger generation) very often treated the patients under her daughter's direction and they went away perfectly happy. She followed up all of Ida's cases intelligently; she performed a thousand services which only a mother's love and pioneer missionary's knowledge could supply.

She lifted from Ida's shoulders every domestic burden, taking complete charge of the household, sending trays from her kitchen to the European patients; she entertained visitors who came to see the hospital in increasing numbers. Sometimes Ida would come in at noon saying there would be four guests for lunch and they would arrive in fifteen minutes.

The Indian servant must be given his due as the never failing standby in such emergencies. No matter what time before a meal his mistress tells him there will be company, he always provides enough food and serves it punctiliously. No matter how close to the dinner hour it may be when he is told that the doctor will be one or two hours late and that he is to hold dinner, that meal will be quite as delicious as if it had been served on time.

Neither the heavy routine of hospital and dispensary, nor the unexpected interludes seemed to bother Dr. Ida. She was always fresh and ready to take on something more. In 1903 Vellore underwent another epidemic of plague. With the assistance of Rev. William I. Chamberlain, and a member of the Mission and Chairman of the Vellore Municipal Council, she was able to force prophylactic measures on many of the townspeople. On their rounds of inspection, they found many homes deserted; either the inmates did not want to be inoculated, or, worse, still, some member of the family had contracted the disease and in order to hide the fact, had been bundled up and taken to another village. There were about four hundred deaths in Vellore. Yet without preventive measures, the death toll might have been much greater.

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<sup>12</sup> From a group photo, "Scudders in India, 1000 Years of Service," *Scudder Association Foundation*, <https://scudder.org/about/history/india-medical-missions/scudders-in-india/>

Whether treating plague or in braving a riot, Ida pursued a fearless course. Some years later, during the Moplah rebellion, Vellore was placed under martial law. Only well-guarded streets could be used. Ida had a call from a Mohammedan patient who was seriously ill and who lived in the forbidden, dangerous part of town. She had school herself in obedience to law and she also felt that a higher law demanded that she see this woman. So, covering herself with a bourka,\* she set forth in a country cart, driving through the streets completely enveloped like any dutiful Mohammedan woman. She could feel the tenseness in the atmosphere. Rioting might have broken out if a white woman had been discovered in the area, but it is doubtful if anyone—Hindu or Mohammedan—would have let ill befall their ‘doctor amma.’

\*Bourka: the all-enveloping covering which Mohammedan women wore and which many still wear.

Ida’s first operation was a hysterectomy. She had come directly from medical school with no internship as is given nowadays. Her surgery had been theoretical or by observation. Her assistant did not know one instrument from another, much less the parts of the anatomy. The anaesthetist had given chloroform only twice before. The success of a surgeon’s first operation may determine the success or failure of his or her work for years to come on the frontiers of medicine as in India. Ida gave no thought to all there was against her. The woman was hemorrhaging badly and the only chance of saving her life was an immediate operation. She took the chance. She was successful. It gave her courage to go on to yet more difficult cases.

One woman came in with an ovarian cyst which, after removal, weighed more than the woman herself. Although she was a ward patient, Ida gave her a private room to keep her quiet. As washer habit, after dinner Ida returned to make evening rounds and be sure that all was well. She asked the nurse how that special patient was doing. ‘Oh, nicely, Doctor Amma,’ the nurse replied, ‘but she has many visitors.’ This was just what Dr. Scudder wanted to avoid. As she neared the room, she recognized the high pitched voice of her patient saying: And she took out my lungs and scrubbed them with a scrubbing brush and soap and water and then replaced them. Now I can breathe so easily.’

Ida found her patient of the morning, out of bed, sitting cross-legged on the floor and surrounded by an admiring coterie. She lost no time in disbanding the admirers and getting her patient back to bed. The woman recovered uneventfully and presented her doctor amma with a goat as a thank offering.

Not everyone wants to be relieved of such excrescences. One woman with a tumor half the size of her head at the back of her neck refused to have it removed because it served as her pillow.

Superstition and custom had constantly to be combatted. One patient having a wound which it was most important to keep aseptic, covered it with holy ashes made from cow dung the minute the doctor's head was turned. Septic fever ensued and the patient nearly lost her life. As the cow is sacred to Hindus, any of her properties are considered efficacious and the application of cow dung is a favorite remedy. On certain fast days, not a drop of medicine will be taken, no matter how serious the case nor how important the treatment. Sometimes a person, desperately ill, will be dragged from one house to another to escape the evil spirit which is keeping her from getting well.

Probably one of Vellore's saddest cases was that of a thirteen year old *temple girl* who was riddled with infection, covered with sores from head to foot, and about as repulsive as one could imagine. Ida labored over her for months and as the girl grew better, she grew more and more beautiful both in face and in spirit. She seemed to radiate happiness and was a joy to the nurses, other patients and even to visitors. One day, when she was well, she and Dr. Ida were laughing about some incident when suddenly the light went out of her face and she cringed. Ida glanced in the direction which the girl's eyes followed and saw a sinister looking woman approaching. It was the head-woman of the temple, come to claim her slave now that she was beautiful again. Ida offered to buy the girl. She went to Madras to consult lawyers who said they could do nothing if the girl was not of age. So this beautiful creature was dragged back to the temple. A few months later, Ida heard from one of her patients who had been there at the same time, that the girl had been found at the bottom of the temple well.

Many of Dr. Ida's cures were due to her scrupulous attention to detail and her personal devotion to every serious individual case. She was a tireless worker and would appear in the hospital at any hour of the night to see how this or that patient was doing. She showed initiative and courage in trying new treatments and new operations as they were written up in medical literature, and she developed one of her own which made her famous amongst gynaecologists and is often referred to as the Ida Scudder operation.\* She possessed the personality to create confidence, a smile that cheered, and a gentle touch that everyone in the hospital pronounced 'a good hand.' She showed optimism under the most difficult circumstances and had supreme faith in the power of prayer.

\*Her V. V. F. operation for the repair of vesico-vaginal fistula.

In 1907, with Dr. Hart at the helm, Ida and her mother were able to go home on leave. In America she raised another \$5,000 toward an endowment.<sup>13</sup>

Patients were flocking to the hospital but still there were hundreds who had no means of getting there. Evangelists came back from their village trips telling of the dire need for medical care.

When the “doctor Missey” returned to India a year later with a Peugeot car—the first motor car in the district she undertook trips to the villages.



PEUGEOT LION PHAETON 1907

At first, the one cylinder, wheezing vehicle caused such consternation that patients fled from it. However, once the novelty had worn off, the car enabled Ida to open her first outlying dispensary at Gudiyattam, twenty-five miles from Vellore, in 1909. Once a week, with a nurse and medicines, she started out in the direction of this town. Her appearance was the signal for the lame, the halt and the blind to flock across the fields from their villages to the road along which they knew she must pass. Every few miles she drew up under the shadow of a big tree to administer to those needing help. Children with sore eyes were brought in droves to have the healing drops. There were many lepers who came regularly for their injections of chaulmoogra oil.

Minor operations, such as extracting a tooth or cutting off a leper’s dangling finger, were performed there by the roadside with the motor of the car still running ‘because if we turned it off we might not get it running again’ Dr. Ida explained. Other patients needing greater help were urged to go to the hospital: if that was impossible, they were taken to the dispensary in the Peugeot.

<sup>13</sup> Scudder, Section 3, 190–194.

<sup>14</sup> “Peugeot Lion Phaéton 1907,” Wikimedia Commons, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peugeot\\_Lion\\_Pha%C3%A9ton\\_1907\\_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peugeot_Lion_Pha%C3%A9ton_1907_1.jpg).

This dispensary at Gudiyattam started with small beginnings: first a nurse's cottage was built next to the church and the church was used as a hospital during the week. Then the foundations were dug and as money came in, a room at a time was built over these foundations.

A full day's work at Gudiyattam consisted in examining patients—sometimes as many as three hundred—prescribing medicines, and operating on those who would not need much aftercare.

It was a relief, at the end of a long hot day, for Ida to sit back in the car and feel a breeze on her moist skin and clothes; to relax. This was never for long. A patient was sure to appear in the offing. For instance, there was a man hurrying across the fields to catch the attention of the 'Doctor Missey.' He had a fearfully infected hand, his arm was swollen to the shoulder, and a high fever. There was but one thing to do, and choosing a shady spot by the roadside, Ida set up her portable operating table, sterilized her instruments, and set to work on the worst hand she had ever examined. When all was over, she started off with little expectation of ever seeing the man again. But, on her next visit, there he was by the roadside holding up his formerly poisoned hand and arm. He was completely healed.

Once, when the Peugeot was out of commission for a few weeks, Ida had to stop her roadside work and go to Gudiyattam by train. Often, when the train was waiting at intermediate stations, faces would appear at the window and the chorus would begin: 'Have you forgotten us? Are you never coming again? Many have died since you stopped coming, for we have no medicine now. Will you not come again soon?' One day a man brought four annas for medicine for chills and fever. Ida did not have it with her, but promised to bring some back from Gudiyattam, the only trouble being that the return train did not stop at that station. 'I will wait for it if you will throw it to me,' the man said. That night, as the train dashed past the station, she hurled out a package of quinine powders to a solitary waiting figure.

Whenever the Peugeot was able to travel, it was taken out, rain or shine, for the monsoon never stopped Dr. Ida. Late one night, after heavy showers, she was coming back from Gudiyattam along a piece of road which crossed the bed of a stream. Usually, during the monsoon, the water was only six or eight inches deep. Now it measured a foot and a half and was flowing swiftly. The car could not cross it. But a group of former patients were still waiting for the 'Doctor Missey.' They knew she could not get across without her help. When they appeared out of the darkness, they got behind the car and beside it and pushed it over the stream.

Ida long ago discovered that medicine paid—if not in rupees, certainly in gratitude.<sup>15</sup>

To be continued

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<sup>15</sup> Scudder, 194