

THE WOMAN WHO TOOK CARE OF A GENIUS

Walt Whitman's Neglected and Misunderstood Housekeeper, Mary Oakes Davis, Finds a Champion in Mrs. Elizabeth Leavitt Keller, Now Eighty-two Years Old, Who Nursed the Poet in His Last Days, and Who Writes a Book About Mickle Street

By ARTHUR CHAPMAN Portrait by ROY WILLIAMS

TWO women took care of Walt Whitman during his final illness at Camden in 1892. One of them was Mary Oakes Davis, who for seven years had been "housekeeper, nurse and friend" to the poet, as Whitman himself put it. The other woman was Elizabeth Leavitt Keller, one of the first of this country's graduate nurses, who had been summoned in her professional capacity to his care for the poet.

Mrs. Keller, who is now eighty-two years old, has made that meeting at Walt Whitman's bedside in Camden the basis of an absorbing book which is a fine and sisterly tribute to Mrs. Davis, whose patient self-sacrifice and motherly care undoubtedly did much toward making Whitman's last work possible, but who has hitherto been the victim of neglect or misunderstanding on the part of the poet's biographers. Mrs. Keller learned to love the quiet Mrs. Davis, who had sacrificed her health and personal property in caring for the poet, and who was ignored by some and cruelly misunderstood by others who visited the little house in Mickle Street when fame and prosperity finally came in full measure to Whitman.

Not a Flattering Biography, This

Mrs. Keller's book, "Walt Whitman in Mickle Street," is intended to set Mary Oakes Davis right with the world. Quite naturally, in the course of the work, new lights are cast on Walt Whitman. One sees the poet as Mrs. Davis saw him, and as he became known to Mrs. Keller through the housekeeper's intimate talks. One goes through the daily round of existence with him in the sordid surroundings of Mickle Street—not as visitors saw him, nor as he was seen by eager biographers who found him in his more inspired moments. It is not flattering, but it is intensely human.

Mrs. Keller is herself a remarkable woman. Her book, which is published by Mitchell Kennerly, of New York, was brought out on her eighty-second birthday. She had worked on the book for fifteen years, rewriting it and strengthening it here and there through correspondence and personal visits with those whom she had met during Whitman's last days. After she had completed her book it began to look as if her story of Mary Davis and Walt Whitman never would be published. "Nobody seemed to want it one way or another," was Mrs. Keller's way of putting it, in discussing the first journeys of the manuscript to and from publishing houses. But when it came to Mr. Kennerly's hands he recognized its uniqueness among the many publications bearing on Walt Whitman's life. He published it a few months ago, and none can read the work of this eighty-two-year-old author and not be struck by its clearness of thought and style and the vividness of the picture it draws of the seven years in Mickle Street which brought Whitman out of obscurity and poverty.

The character of Mary Davis seems to have made an impression upon Mrs. Keller which could not be shaken off. Every time the poet Whitman was spoken of, Mrs. Keller would think of that quiet, self-sacrificing woman who had found Whitman at her kitchen door—a poor, sick old man—and who had taken a motherly care of him which undoubtedly long sustained his ailing body and enabled him to accomplish work which was the culminating dream of his life. Rather than see Mrs. Davis pass into obscurity merely as "Walt Whitman's housekeeper," Mrs. Keller determined to set down what she knew of the woman and to find some way of preserving the record for posterity. For years she made notes, based on her own months of nursing in Whitman's home, and, in order that she might have leisure to carry out her design and complete her book, she entered an old ladies' home in her own city of Buffalo—truly a remarkable example of determination. With the savings of a lifetime she thus provided herself with a home, that she might write.

Put Up With Whitman's Whims, Which Were Many

Mrs. Keller has been visiting Mrs. Jessie L. Harkrader, of 703 Sterling Place, Brooklyn, and Mrs. Charles Gay, of 426 East Eighty-seventh Street, New York City, recently. She was interviewed at Mrs. Harkrader's home, and talked interestingly of the experiences which led her to write the book concerning Mrs. Davis and Walt Whitman. She expressed it as her firm belief that if it had

not been for Mrs. Davis, much of Whitman's best work would not have been written. Mrs. Davis gave the poet the unceasing care which the sick man demanded, and furthermore put up with all his whims and eccentricities which would have been too much for any but the most patient of souls to bear.

In her book Mrs. Keller says of the woman to whom Whitman was indebted for so much of motherly care:

"Mrs. Davis's life from the cradle to the grave was one of self-sacrifice and devotion to others. Her first clear recollection was of a blind old woman to whom her parents had given a home. In speaking of this, she said: 'I never had a childhood, nor did I realize that I had a right to play like other children, for at six years of age "Blind Auntie" was my especial charge. On waking in the morning my first thought was of her, and then I felt I must not lie in bed another minute. I arose quickly, made my own toilet, and hastened to

the promise that he would not tell the Fritzingers until his return from the trip he was on the eve of taking. In a few days he left Camden. His vessel was wrecked off the coast of Maine and he was buried where he was washed ashore. His hasty marriage and unlooked-for death prevented him from making the intended provision for his wife, and, as she shrank from any contest with his family, all that was left to her were his name and the cherished memory of her one brief love."



Mrs. Elizabeth Leavitt Keller, whose book, "Walt Whitman in Mickle Street," sheds new light on the poet's life

her.' She continued with a detailed account of the attention daily given to "Blind Auntie," how she put on her stockings and shoes and handed her each article of clothing as it was needed; how she brought fresh water for her ablutions, combed her hair and made her presentable for the table; how at all meals she sat by her side to wait upon her, and how, after helping her mother with the dishes, she walked up and down the sidewalk until school-time to give "Auntie" her exercise, the walks being repeated when school was over.

"When Mary was twelve years of age 'Blind Auntie' died. Then came two more years of schooling, after which the girl voluntarily assumed another burden—the care of a melancholy, selfish invalid, a distant relative living in the country. With her she stayed for six years, being in turn nurse, companion, housekeeper or general servant, as need required."

Lifework of Mrs. Davis Was "Mothering"

At the age of twenty, disheartened after a long period of unremitting care and self-abnegation, she summoned up resolution to leave. She paid a visit to a dear friend, Mrs. Fritzing, wife of a sea captain in Camden, N. J. She found her friend ill and remained to nurse her. The protracted illness ended fatally, and on her deathbed Mrs. Fritzing gave her two young sons to Mary's care, and from that time on they called her mother. Captain Fritzing soon became blind and had to give up the sea. Then came a long illness, which resulted fatally. The captain appointed Mary co-guardian of his sons and divided his property equally among the three.

Captain Davis, a friend of the Fritzingers, proposed marriage to Mary. He was accepted on condition that the wedding should not take place until her friends had no further need of her. Says Mrs. Keller:

"But time slipped by; it may be Captain Davis thought their need of her would never end; so, meeting her in Philadelphia one morning, he insisted upon their going to a minister's and becoming man and wife. Mary, thus forcefully pressed, consented, but exacted

Captain Fritzing was blind nine years, and during that time Mary took unremitting care of him. The boys, on becoming fourteen and sixteen, respectively, went to sea, and on their return found their father dead. They remembered for longer voyages. Meantime Mary cared for another ex-sea captain, an old shipmate and friend of Captain Fritzing, who was in poor health and extremely crochety and who had been invited to the house to board and for companionship to the old sailor.

"Then ensued for Mrs. Davis two more years of fidelity and constant care," says Mrs. Keller, "until the one old shipmate went the way of the other. But even now the long-tried woman was not left without some one to minister to, for shortly before a young orphan girl had been entrusted to her. It was certainly her destiny to find full scope for the spirit of self-sacrifice so early implanted and so persistently called upon."

"Such was the woman who entered so closely into Walt Whitman's life during the seven years spent in Mickle Street. She meant more to him than he was perhaps aware of; more, certainly, than he ever cared to admit. If she was incapable of measuring the fullness of his genius, he seemed unable to measure the fullness of hers. But he was glad to profit by it."

Mrs. Davis's home was in Stevens Street, in which street Walt Whitman had lived with his brother George, who says, "Walt was always a trying person to live with." But when George Whitman and his wife, for whom Walt Whit-



"The Good Gray Poet"



The little house in Mickle Street, Camden, where Walt Whitman died

man always had the highest regard, moved to Burlington, N. J., they urged the poet to accompany them. Walt Whitman decided to stay in Camden, first renting a room and taking his meals at odd times and in odd places—a miserable existence which could not have been maintained long in his state of health. He was trying vainly to sell the very limited editions of his works, which, according to Thomas Donaldson, "he himself usually paid for." Says Mrs. Keller:

"The old man, with his basket of literature on his arm, plodding his way through the streets of Camden and Philadelphia, had long been a familiar sight, and now, with slow sales and lack of comforts, it was doubly hard on him. But at this time his life had settled down to one great desire—that of rewriting his book, 'Leaves of Grass,' and living to see it put be-

fore the world in a full, improved and complete form."

"Whitman was extremely poor in Camden after his brother moved away and up to about 1884," says Thomas Donaldson. "His change of luck began about then. He had previously, to use a sailor's phrase, been 'scudding under bare poles.' He had several runs of luck after 1884."

In His Neighbor's Judgment, Whitman Was "a Bit Off"

Whitman's chief "run of luck" about this time seems to have been his acquaintance with the motherly Mary Davis. Mrs. Keller writes: "Walt Whitman and Mrs. Davis were not personally acquainted. To be sure, he had seen her innumerable times leading Captain Fritzing past his brother's house, but he had never spoken to her. As for her, the poor old man had long been a secret pensioner upon her tender heart, drawing a full bounty of pity therefrom.

"Their first interview took place on one cold, frosty morning, when, in deepest dejection, he came a suppliant to her door. Surprised as she was to find him there, she invited him in, and a good breakfast soon followed the kind reception.

"With his writings she was totally unacquainted, and she naturally shared the universal opinion of her neighbors that he was 'a little off.' Nevertheless, when from the grateful warmth and good cheer he grew loquacious and dilated upon his work and aired his lofty hopes, she listened attentively, that he might not suspect that to her all this seemed but an empty dream and delusion.

"She talked encouragingly, and on his rising to go cordially invited him to repeat his visit. He did so, and thenceforth this compassionate woman's homely kitchen became his one haven of rest. He knew that a hot meal and many thoughtful attentions always awaited him there; attentions such as lacing his shoes, washing and mending his clothing and not infrequently superintending a refreshing foot bath. . . . As the fall advanced and the weather became more severe, his bachelor quarters became more and more unsuitable and he was indeed fortunate in the companionship he had so auspiciously formed. He developed into a daily visitor, and each morning might have been seen scuffling along in his unclashed arctics, cane in hand, and his long white hair and beard blowing in the wind. Mrs. Davis said that the very sight of those ungainly old arctics always brought tears to her eyes."

Mrs. Keller tells how Whitman, in the winter of 1884-'85, through the generosity of George W. Childs and the sale of his book, was able to arrange for a payment upon a small house. He secured the property at 328 Mickle Street, "a coop at best," as Donaldson called it, his arrangement being to board with the tenants. But they left and Whitman was solitary, his household goods consisting of "a

scantily furnished bedstead, a home-made table, a rickety chair and a large packing box. The table served as a writing desk and the packing box as kitchen and dining table. Upon it was a small oil stove, where he would cook a bite at the risk of his life," says Donaldson. Mrs. Keller says his daily visits to Mrs. Davis were resumed. "Her back door would slowly open, and he would appear, saying in a pathetic voice: 'Pity the sorrows of a poor old man, whose trembling limbs have brought him to your door.'"

Mrs. Davis did her best to make Whitman's house habitable. At that time, according to Donaldson, she was "a strong, rosy-cheeked Jersey woman." She found the back door held open by ice, resulting from a broken water pipe. This ice she chopped away. She carpeted his sleeping room, gave him a mattress and bedding and in many other ways sought to make his "coop" comfortable. Mrs. Keller says:

"In speaking of this time she said: 'When the poor old man was not in sight, he was so much upon my mind I could not pass one peaceful hour.'

Poet Had a Canny Eye For His Own Comfort

"Some have considered him a cunning man; all agree that he was a remarkable judge of character. Understanding this woman as he did—as he must have done—had he resolved to have her devote herself to him? The question can never be truthfully answered, but whether with premeditation or not, he certainly gained a great influence over her."

Whitman proposed finally that Mrs. Davis be his housekeeper. He said: "I have a house, while you pay rent; you have furniture, while my rooms are bare; I propose that you come and live with me, bringing your furniture for the use of both." He persisted in this offer until finally Mrs. Davis agreed, reluctantly.

"The advantage was all on the poet's side," says Mrs. Keller, "as he must have seen, but recent events had raised his hopes and he made promises of adequate and more than adequate returns for all that had been done or might be done for him.

"As his money was 'only in sight,' to use his own words, all the expenses of moving were paid by Mrs. Davis; as he was disabled, the work and worry were hers as well; but finally all was accomplished, her goods were transferred to his house and put in their new places, and the seven years of their domestic life together commenced. In this way did the 'good gray poet' retire with his 'single attendant' to the little frame cottage, 328 Mickle Street."

There were biographers and commentators in plenty coming to the little house in Mickle Street in later years, when Whitman's fame began to spread and when monetary rewards began to come to the poet. But these were men, and they had the man's viewpoint of things. Man like, they did not understand the tremendous burden of work and worry that had been assumed by Whitman's "single attendant." Nor did they know of many other things concerning the poet which were brought out later in talks which Mrs. Davis held with Mrs. Keller, and which in all probability, Whitman's motherly guardian never would have told to anybody but a woman, because only a woman could have understood.

Mrs. Davis even accompanied Whitman on the walks he loved to take, particularly to the ferry. He was a heavy man, and, owing to his crippled condition, he "clung to her arm with a grip of iron." On her suggestion sufficient funds were secured by subscription from Whitman's friends to buy a pony and carriage. The poet was delighted, and drove the pony so much and so fast that its knees were soon sprung, and he sold it and bought a fast horse. He used to invite youths in the neighborhood to drive him, but, according to Mrs. Keller, "although Mrs. Davis was the usual messenger to and from the stable, although she got her charge ready for his drives, assisted him to the carriage and almost lifted him in and out of it, neither he nor any one else ever proposed that she should have the pleasure of a drive."

As Whitman's fame increased, visitors became more frequent. This meant much additional work for Mrs. Davis. Whitman invited friends to a meal at any time. His own meals were very irregular. He rapped on the floor when he wanted to get up, his breakfast hour being at any time in the forenoon. Whitman, suffering from the effect of his first paralytic stroke, required much assistance in dressing. All the water for his baths had to be carried upstairs until later a bathtub was put in—at Mrs. Davis's expense. Says Mrs. Keller:

Consideration for Housekeeper Not "a Good Gray" Specialty

"Occasionally, to suit her own convenience, she would have his breakfast prepared; but if she mentioned this fact while helping him to dress, he would invariably say, 'Ah, I will not eat anything for a while.' When the dishes had been set aside to be kept warm and Mary was again busily engaged—the wash perhaps partly hung on the line or her left hands in the dough—the preemptory signal would come, and on being helped down and seated at the table he would coolly demand something entirely different from what she had provided."

He would keep company at the table for hours; he refused to let his room be swept, as he "detested a broom"; and the litter of papers, twine and printers' proofs in his room and the front room threatened to spread to the rest of the house. Mrs. Davis, so Mrs. Keller points out, was often blamed for the bad condition of Whitman's home, whereas the fault was not hers.

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