

**WALT WHITMAN  
IN MICKLE STREET**

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Walt Whitman in Mickle street by Elizabeth Keller

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**ELIZABETH KELLER**

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328 MICKLE STREET

FROM A PAINTING [1908] BY MARSDEN HARTLEY

UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

# WALT WHITMAN IN MICKLE STREET

ELIZABETH LEAVITT KELLER



NEW YORK  
MITCHELL KENNERLEY  
MCMXXI

## EDITOR'S NOTE

**E**LIZABETH LEAVITT KELLER was born at Buffalo, N. Y., on November 3, 1839. Both her parents were descended from the first settlers of this country, and each in turn came to Buffalo in its early days, her mother, Sarah Ellis, by private conveyance in 1825, and her father, James S. Leavitt, by way of the newly opened Erie Canal in 1834.

Elizabeth was the second daughter. In the spring of 1841 she was taken to Niagara Falls, and all her childhood recollections are clustered around that place. Returning to Buffalo in 1846, her father opened a bookbindery, and later added a printing office and stationery store.

At nineteen years of age Elizabeth Leavitt was married to William Wallace Keller, of Little Falls, N. Y. Seven years later she became a widow.

Her natural instinct for nursing was developed during the Civil War and the years that followed, but the time and opportunity

for professional training did not come until 1876, when, her two children being provided for, she was free to apply for admission to the school for nurses connected with the Women's Hospital in Philadelphia — one of the three small training schools then existing in the United States.

Before her course was finished her younger sister died. Mrs. Keller left the hospital to take care of the five motherless children, and it was not until ten years later that she was free to resume her training. When she graduated she was a grandmother — the only one, it need scarcely be said, in the class.

While nursing her patient, Walt Whitman, during his last illness, she learnt much about his personality and home life, and much also about his unselfish friend and house-keeper, Mrs. Davis. The desire to tell the truth about the whole case — so often misunderstood or distorted — grew stronger with the passing years, and finally Mrs. Keller entered an old ladies' home in her own city, where she would have leisure to carry out her design. Here the book was commenced and completed. "After numerous struggles and disappointments," she writes, "my second great desire — to set Mrs.



Davis in her true light — has been fulfilled — this time by a great-grandmother!"

It is not often that a great-grandmother, after a long life of service to others, sees her first book published on her eighty-second birthday.

Mrs. Keller uses her pen as if she were twenty or thirty years younger. Her letters are simple but cheery, her outlook on life contented but in no way obscured. Not deliberately, but through a natural gift, she conveys vivid impressions of the world as it now appears to her, just as she conveys so unpretentiously but unforgettably in her book the whole atmosphere of Walt Whitman's world, when it had been narrowed to the little frame house in Mickle Street, and finally to a bed of suffering in one room of that little house.

Whatever else her book may be, it is an extraordinary instance of revelation through simplicity; the picture stands out with all its details, not as a work of conscious art, but assuredly as a work that the artist, the student of life and of human nature, will be glad to have.

CHARLES VALE



## PREFACE

**H**AD it ever occurred to me that the time might come when I should feel impelled to write something in regard to my late patient, Walt Whitman, I should have taken care to be better prepared in anticipation; would have kept a personal account, jotted down notes for my own use, observed his visitors more closely, preserved all my correspondence with Dr. Bucke, and recorded items of more or less interest that fade from memory as the years go by. Still, I have my diary, fortunately, and can be true to dates.

After I had been interviewed a number of times, and had answered various questions to the best of my knowledge and belief, I was surprised to see several high-flown articles published, all based on the meagre information I had furnished, and all imperfect and unsatisfactory.

Interviewers seemed to look for something beyond me; to wait expectantly in the hope that I could recall some unusual thing