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The

Diamond Jubilee

of

MARY ELLEN CHASE

Born in Blue Hill, Maine

February 24, 1887



Mary Ellen Chase

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No. 1

A PORTRAIT: 1962

By ELEANOR SHIPLEY DUCKETT

FOR more than thirty years Mary Ellen Chase and I have shared a home on the campus of Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Together we have crossed the Atlantic more often than we can recall. Year by year we have walked the Meadows from Cambridge to Grantchester; year by year we have climbed the Mendip hills in Somerset. We have found our way to East Anglian villages, to eighteenth century Bath; we have held our breath in wonder within York Minster and we have wandered over the moors which the Brontë children knew. We have looked together upon the windows of Chartres, and the bookstands along the Seine; we have thought of the Three Kings in Cologne and have floated along the Rhine; we have cast a dollar at Monte Carlo and have known the peace of an afternoon at Fiesole.

And then we have come home again, I and my friend Mary, to teach in Smith, to plan for our students, to write our books, to watch the fortunes of war and peace in our world.

How am I to picture her? Perhaps to those who talk with her their first experience comes through her amazing vitality. From the days when as a child she stood swaying upon the white gate before the house in Blue Hill, Maine, looking for whatsoever excitement might chance to come or go along the road outside, "between the sky and the sea," she has seized every moment that called to her for action or decision or debate. It is Mary who may be counted on to keep a dinner party alive with laughter; to speak out with courage at a time of horrid crisis; to rise from a sick-bed to write another chapter of her book in a hospital chair; to argue vehemently and in all pleasantness questions of world politics. To her home on Paradise Pond come friends of every kind and calling: the men and wom-

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en of various College departments or offices to discuss problems and possibilities; the students to pour out tales of success or failure, to drink coffee and play anagrams; the staff who work for our house and garden and are offered a beer or a coke; the girls and boys who want to talk of their ideas and ambitions. Churches and colleges, clubs and conventions, invite addresses; writers ask for criticism and suggestion; readers send fan mail; and all get an answer. American to the core, my colleague is received as cordially in Britain as I who carry a passport of British birth. Ship's authorities grasp her hand on board; Customs inspectors melt into a welcome, in Southampton or New York. Courtesy and hospitality to all, high and low, learned and simple—and Mary finds delight in the simple rather than the scholar—was the creed of her pioneer forefathers in New England; she would cheerfully die rather than betray it.

From this multitude of activities she turns to her beloved solitude. Every morning when shortly after eight I leave for the College Library I hear behind me a sigh of joy. The house is now hers alone, for various chores, for a quiet second cup of coffee, for work upon her novel, or that book which will light up for many people the Psalms, *not* of David, for finishing an essay or review, for sending off those many letters. She writes in our dining room, because it overlooks the wooded land around Paradise. Now and again she pauses to watch a squirrel leaping from branch to branch, to listen to a cardinal's call, or to rejoice in the trees rising dark and bare from the pure untrodden snow. Every afternoon, for a brief while, and every night before she sleeps, she reads alone, with now and then a word to me across the passage: "Are you all right? Isn't this wonderful?"

It was her childhood in Maine that bred in her the utter necessity of books, read and pondered in silence. Maine made and shaped her. "Here," said Philip Marston of *Windswept*, "away from the roar of the world and the confusion of themselves men might grow into heroic mould as in those early ages of the world, their spirits chastened and cured, seeing in these bare and rugged outlines the sure and simple design made for them in the beginning of things. For this was an old and a wise land, a long uninhabited and forgotten spur of a new world

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which elsewhere seemed to grow newer instead of older. Here one could, if he wanted, catch something of that wisdom which life in most places and under most circumstances leaves unfinished, even undiscovered."

In Maine Mary read the Bible until she knew much of it by heart; here "the classics struck wells of water in a Puritan Valley of Baca"; here she and her schoolmates sent the sun down as they lingered over their Greek; here she sat on winter mornings of holiday, absorbed in *Robinson Crusoe*, in Shakespeare, in *Oliver Twist*; here she first was led by her mother, whom she markedly resembles, into the mysteries of *The Gallic Wars*. Often I think of these things when, held in eye and ear with many other folk, I watch and listen to Mary bringing into vivid reality Prophets and Patriarchs, heroes and villains; when I delight in her scathing remarks concerning certain kings of old whom I was bidden by my elders and betters so reverently to admire! My friend does not collect knowledge, as many of us do, grain by grain, line upon line, precept upon precept. She absorbs it, almost unconsciously, and it is all there, ready for its own day and hour.

From her mother, too, she inherited that passion for order, in herself, in her house, and, alas! in the dwellers under her roof, which still thrives in Maine. All for her must be clean, pure, in correct standing, day by day, night by night. " 'Twould be a rugged moth that would venture into Mary Ellen's closet," observed a carpenter in our house one day. The pictures must be straight, the shades drawn to precisely the same line, the curtains hung correctly on their rods, the pots and pans on their familiar hooks. Happy is the day when Mrs. L. arrives—weekly—to waft me to the Library in her car and to work through the morning hours with Mary, on the silver, on the rugs, on the pantry shelves, all of which I duly and wonderfully admire when the clock commands my return. Happy are those whom she regales with Sunday suppers, cooked by her own hand; or those to whom she sends her gifts of nut bread and ginger cookies; and happy am I, hailed at noon with, "There's something special in the oven for your lunch!"

The coast of Maine surely prepared her for meeting and understanding crises, great and small. Well do I remember that Sunday afternoon when I returned from the Library and

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she met me quietly on my way: "We, too, are with you in this war!" And the day when she telephoned me from Maine that her brother Edward had been killed in a plane accident: "The family would like you to come to the funeral, but for mercy's sake don't go and buy a black suit." Or the time when the cellar was flooded, when the lights went out, and no workmen were at hand; or that week when she was stranded in England by a combined strike of ship and railroad. She was unknown in Southampton then; like hundreds of others, she lacked money. She walked straight to the American Consul, and on his table was lying her latest book. All henceforth was well!

We walk a great deal, and her eye is far quicker than mine to catch a bird or a flower. She knew by name my British plants along the hedge-rows when first she stayed in my father's house in the West Country of England. It was she who turned his gratitude for America's kindness to me into a deep personal liking of its people. He was a Tory and a Churchman of the strictest sect of Establishment, and he had heard somewhere rumors of "strange doings and doctrines" across the sea. Patiently she reassured him, and he saw us embark once more without dismay. She, also, was an Episcopalian, a lover of decorum, a soul after his own heart!

We kneel Sunday after Sunday in Saint John's Church, Northampton, I in the pew in front of her, she in the one directly behind. We like to be a little alone; but at the altar she sometimes tucks her hand in mine. The faith we share is well told in the words of young Silas Crockett to the girl he loved: "Believing in a thing doesn't mean that you've got to understand all about it first. That's where our generation makes its mistake, it seems to me. I think believing in a thing means hanging on to it because you know it's good and, even when you lose faith in it for a time, still hanging on to what it did for you when you had it. Do you know, Ann, I believe that truth is a much bigger thing than just what you can prove in your mind about it?"

