

Helen Keller

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1880-1968

When she was nineteen months old, Helen Keller became ill with what doctors called "brain fever." The illness left her blind and deaf — and therefore unable to speak. She was cut off from the world around her. But despite years of struggle and pain, she conquered her tremendous physical disabilities, becoming a shining example of courage to millions of people.

From the time of her illness until she was almost seven years old, Helen could communicate only through strange grunting sounds, laughter, and wild temper tantrums. Then a very special teacher, Anne Sullivan, came into her life. Miss Sullivan's combination of strict discipline and endless patience enabled her to reach young Helen's mind. The memoir *The Miracle Worker* tells the story of the remarkable relationship between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. Using a special sign language, Miss Sullivan taught Helen to connect words with objects. Then Helen understood this language, she wanted to learn everything. In three years she could read and write in Braille, she learned language for the blind. She had a special typewriter built for her in which she did most of her writing.

In 1909, Helen found out about a deaf and blind girl who had learned to speak. This gave Helen the determination to learn to talk as well. By age sixteen, Helen could speak well enough to attend college. She graduated with honors from Radcliffe in 1904. In the whole, she traveled extensively and worked on behalf of the blind. She wrote many books and received hundreds of awards for her work. Her autobiography became an inspiration to millions of people all over the world.



The story of Helen Keller is the story of a child who, at the age of 19 months, suddenly lost her hearing and vision, and who, against overwhelming odds and with a great deal of persistence, grew into a highly intelligent and sensitive woman who wrote, spoke, and labored incessantly for the betterment of others. So powerful a symbol of triumph over adversity did she become that she has a definite place in the history of our time and of times to come.

Helen Adams Keller was born a healthy child in Tuscumbia, Alabama, U.S. on June 27, 1880 in a white, frame cottage called "Ivy Green." On her father's side she was descended from Alexander Spottswood, a colonial governor of Virginia, who was connected with the Lees and other Southern families. On her mother's side, she was related to a number of prominent New England families, including the Hales, the Everetts, and the Adamses. Her father, Captain Arthur Keller, was the editor of a newspaper, the North Alabamian. Captain Keller also had a strong interest in public life and was an influential figure in his own community. In 1885, under the Cleveland administration, he was appointed Marshal of North Alabama.

The illness that struck the infant Helen Keller, and left her deaf and blind before she learned to speak, was diagnosed as brain fever at the time; perhaps it was scarlet fever. As Helen Keller grew from infancy into childhood she was wild and unruly, and had little real understanding of the world around her.

Helen Keller's new life began on a March day in 1887 when she was a few months short of seven years old. On that day, which Miss Keller was always to call "The most important day I can remember in my life," Anne Mansfield Sullivan came to Tuscumbia to be her teacher. Miss Sullivan, a 20-year-old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, who had regained useful sight through a series of operations, had come to the Kellers through the sympathetic interest of Alexander Graham Bell. From that fateful day, the two—teacher and pupil—were inseparable until the death of the former in 1936.

How Miss Sullivan turned the uncontrolled child into a responsible human being and succeeded in awakening and stimulating her marvellous mind is familiar to millions, most notably

through William Gibson's play and film, **The Miracle Worker**, Miss Keller's autobiography of her early years, **The Story of My Life**, and Joseph Lash's **Helen and Teacher**.

Miss Sullivan began her task with a doll that the children at Perkins had made for her to take to Helen. By spelling "d-o-l-l" into the child's hand, she hoped to teach her to connect objects with letters. Helen quickly learned to form the letters correctly and in the correct order, but did not know she was spelling a word, or even that words existed. In the days that followed she learned to spell a great many more words in this uncomprehending way.

One day she and "Teacher"—as Helen always called her—went to the outdoor pump. Miss Sullivan started to draw water and put Helen's hand under the spout. As the cool water gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other hand the word "w-a-t-e-r" first slowly, then rapidly. Suddenly, the signals had meaning in Helen's mind. She knew that "water" meant the wonderful cool substance flowing over her hand. Quickly, she stopped and touched the earth and demanded its letter name and by nightfall she had learned 30 words.

Thus began Helen Keller's education. She proceeded quickly to master the alphabet, both manual and in raised print for blind readers, and gained facility in reading and writing. In 1890, when she was just 10, she expressed a desire to learn to speak. Somehow she had found out that a little deaf-blind girl in Norway had acquired that ability. Miss Sarah Fuller of the Horace Mann School was her first speech teacher.

Even when she was a little girl, Helen Keller said, "Someday I shall go to college." And go to college she did. In 1898 she entered the Cambridge School for Young Ladies to prepare for Radcliffe College. She entered Radcliffe in the fall of 1900 and received her bachelor of arts degree cum laude in 1904. Throughout these years and until her own death in 1936, Anne Sullivan was always by Helen's side, laboriously spelling book after book and lecture after lecture, into her pupil's hand.

Helen Keller's formal schooling ended when she received her B.A. degree, but throughout her life she continued to study and stay informed on all matters of importance to modern people. In recognition of her wide knowledge and many

scholarly achievements, she received honorary doctoral degrees from Temple University and Harvard University and from the Universities of Glasgow, Scotland; Berlin, Germany; Delhi, India; and Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

She was also an Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. Anne Sullivan's marriage, in 1905, to John Macy, an eminent critic and prominent socialist, caused no change in the teacher-pupil relationship. Helen went to live with the Macys and both husband and wife unstintingly gave their time to help her with her studies and other activities.

While still a student at Radcliffe, Helen Keller began a writing career that was to continue on and off for 50 years. In 1903, **The Story of My Life**, which had first appeared in serial form in the Ladies Home Journal, appeared in book form. This was always to be the most popular of her works and today is available in more than 50 languages, including Marathi, Pushtu, Tagalog, and Vedu. It is also available in several paperback editions in the United States.

Miss Keller's other published works include

Optimism, an essay; **The World I Live In**; **The Song of the Stone Wall**; **Out of the Dark**; **My Religion**; **Midstream—My Later Life**; **Peace at Eventide**; **Helen Keller in Scotland**; **Helen Keller's Journal**; **Let Us Have Faith**; **Teacher**, **Anne Sullivan Macy**; and **The Open Door**.

In addition, she was a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers, writing most frequently on blindness, deafness, socialism, social issues, and women's rights. She used a braille typewriter to prepare her manuscripts and then copied them on a regular typewriter.

During her lifetime, Helen Keller received awards of great distinction too numerous to recount fully here. An entire room, called the Helen Keller Archives at the American Foundation for the Blind in New York City, is devoted to their preservation. These awards include Brazil's Order of the Southern Cross; Japan's Sacred Treasure; the Philippines' Golden Heart; Lebanon's Gold Medal of Merit; and her own country's highest honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Most of these awards were bestowed on her in recognition of the stimulation her example and presence gave to

work for the blind in those countries. In 1933 she was elected to membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters. During the Louis Braille Centennial Commemoration in 1952, Miss Keller was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor at a ceremony in the Sorbonne.

On the 50th anniversary of her graduation, Radcliffe College granted her its Alumnae Achievement Award. Her Alma Mater also showed its pride in her by dedicating the Helen Keller Garden in her honor and by naming a fountain in the garden for Anne Sullivan Macy.

Miss Keller also received the Americas Award for Inter-American Unity, the Gold Medal Award from the National Institute of Social Sciences, the National Humanitarian Award from Variety Clubs International, and many others. She held honorary memberships in scientific societies and philanthropic organizations throughout the world.

Yet another honor came to Helen Keller in 1954 when her birthplace, "Ivy Green," in Tuscumbia, was made a permanent shrine. It was dedicated on May 7, 1954 with officials of the American Foundation for the Blind and many other agencies and organizations present.

In conjunction with this event, the premiere of Miss Keller's film biography, "The Unconquered," produced by Nancy Hamilton and narrated by Katharine Cornell, was held in the nearby city of Birmingham. The film was later renamed "Helen Keller in Her Story" and in 1955 won an "Oscar"—the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences award as the best feature-length documentary film of the year.

Miss Keller was indirectly responsible for two other "Oscars" a few years later when Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke won them for their portrayals of Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller in the film version of "The Miracle Worker."

More rewarding to her than the many honors she received were the acquaintances and friendships Helen Keller made with most of the leading personalities of her time. She met many world figures, from Grover Cleveland to Charlie Chaplin, Nehru, and John F. Kennedy. Among those she met, she counted many personal friends including Katharine Cornell, Van Wyck Brooks, Alexander Graham Bell, and Jo Davidson. Two friends from her early youth, Mark Twain and William James, expressed beautifully what most of her friends felt about her.

Mark Twain said, "The two most interesting characters of the 19th century are Napoleon and Helen Keller." William James wrote, "But whatever you were or are, you're a blessing!"

As broad and wide ranging as her interests were, Helen Keller never lost sight of the needs of other blind and deaf-blind individuals. From her youth, she was always willing to help them by appearing before legislatures, giving lectures, writing articles, and above all, by her own example of what a severely disabled person could accomplish. When the American Foundation for the Blind, the national clearing-house for information on blindness, was established in 1921, she at last had an effective national outlet for her efforts. From 1924 until her death she was a member of the Foundation staff, serving as counselor on national and international relations. It was also in 1924 that Miss Keller began her campaign to raise the "Helen Keller Endowment Fund" for the Foundation. Until her retirement from public life, she was tireless in her efforts to make the Fund adequate for the Foundation's needs.

Of all her contributions to the Foundation, Miss

Keller was perhaps most proud of her assistance in the formation in 1946 of its special service for deaf-blind persons. She was, of course, deeply concerned for this group of people and was always searching for ways to help those "less fortunate than myself."

Helen Keller was as interested in the welfare of blind persons in other countries as she was for those in her own country; conditions in the underdeveloped and war-ravaged nations were of particular concern. Her active participation in this area of work for the blind began as early as 1915 when the Permanent Blind War Relief Fund, later called the American Braille Press, was founded. She was a member of its first board of directors.

When the American Braille Press became the American Foundation for Overseas Blind (now Helen Keller International) in 1946, Miss Keller was appointed counselor on international relations. It was then that she began the globe-circling tours on behalf of the blind for which she was so well known during her later years. During seven trips between 1946 and 1957 she visited 35 countries on five continents. In 1955, when she was 75 years old, she embarked on

one of her longest and most grueling journeys, a 40,000-mile, five-month-long tour through Asia. Wherever she traveled, she brought encouragement to millions of blind people, and many of the efforts to improve conditions among blind people outside the U.S. can be traced directly to her visits.

During her lifetime, Helen Keller lived in many different places—Tuscumbia, Alabama; Cambridge and Wrentham, Massachusetts; Forest Hills, New York, but perhaps her favorite residence was her last, the house in Westport, Connecticut she called "Arcan Ridge." She moved to this white, frame house surrounded by mementos of her rich and busy life after her beloved "Teacher's" death in 1936. And it was Arcan Ridge she called home for the rest of her life. "Teacher's" death, although it left her with a heavy heart, did not leave Helen alone. Polly Thomson, a Scotswoman who joined the Keller household in 1914, assumed the task of assisting Helen with her work. After Miss Thomson's death in 1960, a devoted nurse-companion, Mrs. Winifred Corbally, assisted her until her last day.

Helen Keller made her last major public

appearance in 1961 at a Washington, DC, Lions Clubs Meeting. At that meeting she received the Lions Humanitarian Award for her lifetime of service to humanity and for providing the inspiration for the adoption by Lions International of their sight conservation and aid to blind programs. During that visit to Washington, she also called on President Kennedy at the White House. After that White House visit, a reporter asked her how many of our presidents she had met. She replied that she did not know how many, but that she had met all of them since Grover Cleveland!

After 1961, Helen Keller lived quietly at Arcan Ridge. She saw her family, close friends, and associates from the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Foundation for Overseas Blind, and spent much time reading. Her favorite books were the Bible and volumes of poetry and philosophy.

Despite her retirement from public life, Helen Keller was not forgotten. In 1964 she received the previously mentioned Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1965, she was one of 20 elected to the Women's Hall of Fame at the New York World's Fair. Miss Keller and Eleanor Roosevelt

received the most votes among the 100 nominees. Helen Keller is now honored in **The Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field.**

Helen Keller died on June 1, 1968, at Arcan Ridge, a few weeks short of her 88th birthday. Her ashes were placed next to her beloved companions, Anne Sullivan Macy and Polly Thomson, in the St. Joseph's Chapel of Washington Cathedral. On that occasion a public memorial service was held in the Cathedral. It was attended by her family and friends, government officials, prominent persons from all walks of life, and delegations from most of the organizations for the blind and deaf.

In his eulogy, Senator Lister Hill of Alabama expressed the feelings of the whole world when he said of Helen Keller, "She will live on, one of the few, the immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world there are no boundaries to courage and faith."



Helen Keller in
1905



Helen Keller
Age 66

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