The Story of My Life

Helen Keller
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Keller was born in Tuscombia, Alabama in June of 1880. At the age of nineteen months she lost her sight and hearing due to a tragic illness. When Helen was six years old her parents hired Miss Anne Sullivan (later Mrs. John Macy) to be her teacher. Miss Sullivan, partially blind herself, was a graduate of the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts.

After being with her teacher for just a month, Helen acquired the gift of language. Through the combined efforts of Miss Sullivan, the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston, and the Wright-Humason Oral School in New York, Miss Keller learned how to read, write, and talk. She was an excellent student all through her school years and graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College in 1904.

The life of Helen Keller is most extraordinary and shows how she prevailed against almost insuperable odds. In 1902, Miss Keller wrote The Story of My Life in which she describes the results of modern methods for educating handicapped people.
This is a true story of a blind and deaf girl who learned to speak her thoughts and became famous throughout the world. But first there was the long struggle to break through the darkness and silence that surrounded her.
I was born in 1890 in a little town in northern Alabama.

I was the first baby in the family and was made much of.

I think she looks like you. No, more like you!

When I was six months old, . . .

I learned other words, too, . . .

Baby! Daddy! Her first words . . .

Wah-wah! That's how she says water!

I walked the day I was a year old.

Then, in February, came a strange illness.

That summer and fall I was a happy child.

See the pretty roses, Helen!

I believe she has a fever of the stomach and brain.

I must tell you, . . . I do not think she can live.
Suddenly, one morning... Her fever is gone! Her temperature is back to normal!

No one knew yet that I would never see or hear again.

The worst is over! She'll be better in no time!

Thank God!

But that illness left me surrounded by darkness and silence.

Can't see... can't hear...
I began to make signs. A nod for "Yes"...

She's nodding... she wants the candy.

A shake of the head for "No"...

I guess she doesn't want her doll now.

I learned other signs, too... 

What does that mean? She's imitating cutting slices—she wants a piece of bread.

I understood many things. I knew from my mother's clothes when she was going out.

A pull meant "Come"...

Poor dear! You must be hungry!

A push meant "Go"...

Helen wants to go for a walk.

Then I noticed that other people did not make signs. They talked with their mouths. I touched their lips...

I wonder what she thinks when she touches our lips like that.

It's hard to say.
I moved my lips and wildly waved my arms— with no results. Angry, I kicked and screamed until I was so tired I couldn't move. A-a-a-ah!

What on earth is she trying to do?

As I grew older, I burst out more and more often.

Eeeeee!

Not that I was always angry, I spent many happy hours helping our cook in the kitchen.

Her daughter Martha was my friend. She understood my signs.

Helen wants to play outside, Mama.

We were full of trouble. Once we carried off a whole cake.... Mmmm....

Run along, then. Mind you two behave!

Afterwards... Another time, we were cutting paper dolls.

I...I don't feel so good. You don't look so good either.
OH! My hair!

Now it's my turn!

My mother saved my curls.
You bad child! What are you doing? Stop at once!

Well, she cut off my hair, first!

When my sister Mildred was born, I was no longer my mother's only darling. I was very unhappy!

One day I found Mildred in my doll's cradle.

Again my mother came to the rescue.

Oh!
Meanwhile, my temper tantrums continued....

They lasted longer, too.

Then I would cry and throw myself into my mother's arms.

Poor child!

We must do something to help her.

Yes—but what?

About this time I found out how to use a key.

Let me out, please!

No one else was about, and it was three hours before she was let out.

Who locked you in?

Knock knock

It was Helen!
That settles it. We must find some way of teaching Helen.

The big question is—how?

Didn't you read about someone who taught a deaf and blind English girl named Laura Bridgman?

Yes, but he's been dead many years.

There is one thing we can do—take her to Dr. Chisholm in Baltimore!

Who is he?

He's an occultist. They say he's been very successful with many cases of blindness.

If only he can help our Helen!

Well, Doctor?

I am sorry to say I can do nothing for Helen. She will be blind for life.

But I believe she can be taught many things.

We agree. But where can we find a teacher for her?

And so we took the train to Baltimore... where Dr. Chisholm examined me...
I suggest you see Dr. Alexander Graham Bell in Washington. He may be able to help you.

Oh; I hope so, I hope so!

But when we talked with Dr. Bell...

She is a very bright child, and I'm sure she can be taught. I want you to write to Mr. Anagnos of the Perkins Institution in Boston.

So off we went to Washington.

You seem so worried, Why?

I am afraid, my dear, we will be disappointed again.

He should be able to find a teacher for Helen.

Thank you, Dr. Bell! I'll write him at once!

We returned home, and in a few weeks...

Letter from Mr. Anagnos! He's found a teacher for Helen!

How wonderful!

Her name is Anne Mansfield Sullivan. She'll be here in March.

At last our Helen can begin to learn!

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher came to me. I guessed from the excitement in the house that something important was about to happen.

It's time you went to the station to meet Miss Sullivan!

I'm going!
I went outside and waited.... I felt footsteps coming towards me. Thinking it was my mother, I held out my hand.

Someone took it.... Next morning, my teacher led me into her room.... And she gave me a new doll.

I was caught up and held close in the arms of the person who had come to show all things to me.

I played with it for a while.

Then she spelled into my hand the word "doll."
This is the alphabet of finger signs with which Miss Sullivan taught me words. It is the finger alphabet used by deaf mutes.

But, instead of seeing the signs with my eyes, I had to learn them by touch.
I tried to do the same thing she did.

I finally was able to do it.

I ran downstairs to my mother and showed her the letters for "doll."

So began my education, which helped me to break through the darkness and silence.

PART II—AS WRITTEN BY ANNE SULLIVAN

To the Reader:
Up to now, you have been reading the story of Helen Keller's life, as she herself wrote it. To show how she was taught, Part II is taken from letters and reports of her great teacher, Anne Sullivan.

Shortly after I came to the Kellers, at breakfast...
As usual, Helen grabbed whatever she wanted. But I would not let her put her hand in my plate.

I had to fight with her.

Agh! Agh!

I sat down and went on eating.

Helen threw herself on the floor.

A-aaaaa-agh!

I can't stand any more of this!

Neither can I!

After her parents left, I locked the door.

This went on for a half hour, until...
She began pinching me, and... I slapped her every time she did. Then I forced her to use the spoon.

At last she began to eat, but with her hands. So I gave her a spoon, but she threw it on the floor. We had many more battles. Over combing her hair.

After a while, she finished her breakfast peacefully. That's better! She needs discipline. Over washing her hands...
Miss Sullivan, may I speak with you, please?

In a moment, Mrs. Keller.

Must we have these terrible fights every day?

Let me tell you the truth, Mrs. Keller. For years you have let Helen have her own way in all things.

It's understandable, of course. But now she must learn to obey me, or I cannot teach her.

I suppose you're right.

And there must be no butting in from you or Mr. Keller. Otherwise I will never get anywhere with Helen.

In fact, it would be best if she were separated from the family, at least for a few weeks.

I'll talk it over with Mr. Keller, and let you know.

Later...

We agree it would be a good thing for you to go away with Helen for a while. We have a little garden house on the grounds that would be just right.

Good! You can look in on us every day, but don't let Helen know you're there.

And so Helen and I moved into the little house.

That night we had a terrific tussle. It took two hours to get Helen to bed.
But after two weeks had passed. . .

A miracle, Mr. Keller! My experiment has worked! The wild little girl has become gentle!

I've brought Belle, my setter, with me. Helen is very fond of her. I wonder if she'll know her old playmate.

We'll soon find out.

How quiet she is! I've taught her to crochet, as you see. And she's learned several new words.

What on earth is she doing?

Helen quickly felt there was something new in the room. She felt about until . . .

I believe I have Helen well started on her education. But you must promise not to interfere, even when I punish her.

We promise we can see how much improved she is.

And so I went on teaching Helen, and by the end of the month she had learned to knit and knew twenty-one words.

A few days later, Helen and I returned to the Keller home.
To the Reader:
In Part III we return to the words of Helen Keller, telling the story of her own life.

I now knew a number of words, but I kept mixing up the words for "mug" and "water."

So far, the spelling Miss Sullivan had taught me was just another game. I did not know that a word was a name for something, that it had a meaning.

One day we had a tussle over those two words.

Miss Sullivan gave me my new doll to change the subject.

For a while, she let me play.

Then she again tried to show me the difference between the two words.

I became so angry.

I picked up the doll, and...
Quietly she swept up the pieces. She put on my hat, and I knew we were going out.

Outside, we walked down the path to the well-house. She put my hand under the spout.

She spelled the word "water" into my other hand, and... suddenly I knew what "water" meant.

W-A-T-E-R

It was as if I had seen a great light.

At last I understood the mystery of language! Everything had a name!
I wanted to know the name of everything about me.

For the first time, I felt sorry for something I had done.

Returning to the house, I remembered the doll I had broken.

But I soon forgot my sorrow in the joy of learning new words.

I tried to put the pieces together.

Helen has learned thirty new words today and understands their meanings.

As I went to bed that night, I knew this had been one of the happiest days in my life.
That summer I learned the name of everything I touched, and Miss Sullivan taught me the beauty of nature.

I explored everything.

One hot day I climbed a tree.

It was cool and pleasant there.

Miss Sullivan told me to stay there while she went to the house and got lunch.

After she had gone, a strong wind came up.

The tree swayed.
I was very frightened.

How glad I was when Miss Sullivan returned!

The next step in my education was learning to read. My teacher gave me cards with raised letters.

I "read" by touching the letters with my finger.

I had learned that nature wasn’t always gentle.

I learned that each word stood for something.

I played games....
...with both objects and words...

Then, with a writing board used by the blind, I learned to write.

Miss Sullivan taught me to make square letters.

Soon...

...I was reading books with raised letters.

When I had written my first sentence...

Helen wants to show you something she wrote.

Cat does drink milk.
Oh, Miss Sullivan, you've done wonders with Helen!

Thank you, Mrs. Keller—but it's Helen who has done wonders!

I also learned geography, from clay maps Miss Sullivan made.

I learned about plant life.

...from building dams and lakes.

...and from what she told me.

...and what Miss Sullivan told me of the past.

...and animal life.
I learned history from trips to places like Plymouth Rock... 

The only study I did not like was arithmetic.

I would run off to play as soon as I could.

On a trip to Cape Cod, I learned to know the ocean.

I asked, "Who put salt in the water?"

and Bunker Hill...
On other trips to New England, I learned to know the snow and the cold... and the joy of tobogganing.

I liked to keep my hand on a piano when it was being played... or on a singer's throat.

But all the while, I wanted to speak. I could make sounds... I liked to feel the cat purr...

I was determined to learn to speak. At last Miss Sullivan went to see Miss Fuller of the Horace Mann School.

What you've heard is true—a deaf and blind girl in Norway has been taught to speak. Then where do you think I should take Helen? Who can teach her?
Bring her to me, Miss Sullivan—I will teach her myself.

And so began my lessons with Miss Fuller.

How proud I was when I spoke my first sentence!

Not that I could be easily understood. It took much practice with Miss Sullivan.

I copied the motion of her lips and tongue.

At the end of an hour, I had learned the sounds of six letters.

...weeks and months of practice...

...until I could really speak.

Dictionary.

Do...you...have...your...dictionary?
In 1893, I visited the World's Fair with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. I was given permission to touch the exhibit.

Dr. Bell explained the telephone and other exhibits.

You speak into the mouthpiece, and your voice goes over the wire as an electrical current.

The next summer, I went to a school for the deaf in New York City.

In class, Miss Sullivan spelled out to me what the teacher said.

The next king of England was Henry the Eighth.
I learned to use a typewriter.

For the first time, I enjoyed the friendship of girls my own age.

In 1900, after some private study and many entrance examinations, I was admitted to Radcliffe College.

It has been a busy time for me. . .

Caption to the Reader:
Helen Keller wrote this story of her life while she was still in college. With the aid of Anne Sullivan, she went on to graduate and became world-famous. She was so famous that Presidents of the United States, from Grover Cleveland to John F. Kennedy, wanted to meet her. This remarkable woman, and her equally remarkable teacher, will always be remembered as an example of how human beings can overcome the greatest of handicaps.

The End