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Helen Keller

A New Doorway for the Human Spirit
by Jennifer Elvgren

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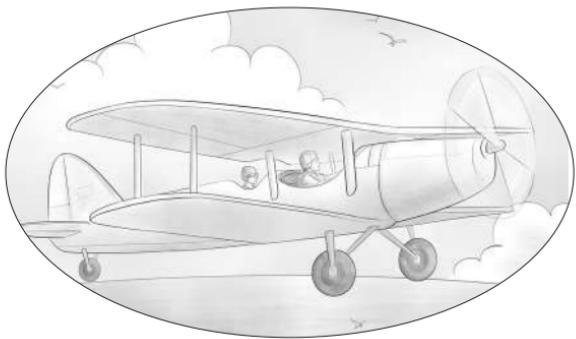
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A New Doorway for the Human Spirit

by

Jennifer Elvgren

VOICES IN HISTORY: BIOGRAPHY SERIESTM

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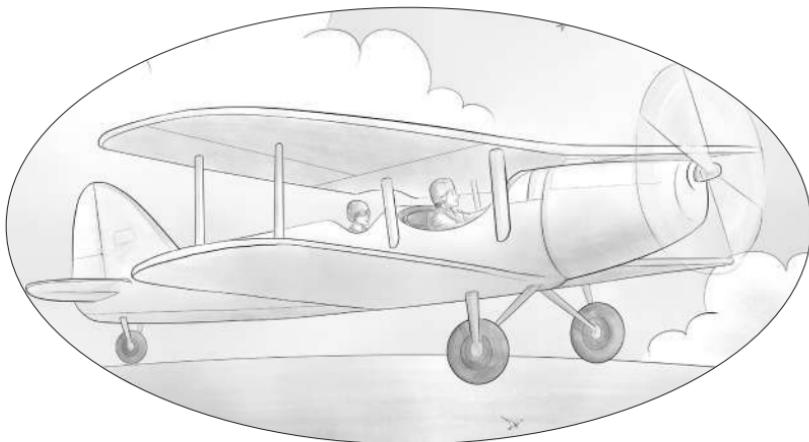
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1

Away from the Once-Loved Light

It was June 1946. The Douglas C-54 Skymaster sliced through a clear sky as it flew northwest from Rome toward Paris. As the plane crossed the sparkling Mediterranean Sea, the pilot turned the controls over to the copilot for twenty minutes.

There would be nothing unusual about this during most flights. However, this copilot was Helen Adams Keller, a woman in her mid-sixties who had been deaf-blind since she was nineteen months old.



While Helen couldn't see the sky or the sea or hear the pilot, she calmly took the plane's controls. The pilot communicated directions to Helen's companion, Polly Thomson. Polly finger-spelled each letter of each word the pilot said into Helen's hand. Then Helen followed the pilot's instructions.

The amazed crew praised Helen's steadiness at the controls. The plane didn't shake once.

Helen thought it "wonderful to feel the delicate movement of the aircraft through the controls."

The American Foundation for the Overseas Blind had sponsored Helen and Polly's trip to Europe. After Helen had given a speech about her life story, she had the opportunity to pilot the plane.

Flying, Helen said, made her feel free. The last time she felt such freedom was as a toddler in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

The first child of Arthur Henley Keller and Kate Adams Keller, Helen was born on June 27, 1880, at the family home, Ivy Green. The simple white clapboard house was covered in ivy. Vegetable gardens, flower gardens, and an orchard surrounded the house. While her father edited the local newspaper, Helen spent days with her devoted mother, rambling around the large grounds. A clever child, she had pale blue eyes and golden curls.

At six months, Helen could greet people with a “How d’ye” and once drew attention by saying, “Tea, tea, tea.” She could also say “wah-wah” to ask for a drink of water.

While drying off from a bath around the age of one, Helen wriggled out of Kate’s lap and took her first steps. She was drawn to the shadows of leaves waving on the bathroom floor. After that, nothing could keep Helen from moving, especially outside.

Helen called the garden the “paradise of [her] childhood,” and she found joy in losing herself in the flowers—the colors, the textures, the fragrances. Helen loved the honeysuckle, the trailing clematis, the drooping jessamine, and the butterfly lilies. But her favorite was the roses because of their scent and their softness.

Helen gently explored each delicate bloom and leaf with her fingers and delighted in each fragrance. Birdsong and bees collecting nectar also captured her attention. But these carefree days would soon be over.

In the “dreary” February of 1882, Helen spiked a fever. The doctors called it “acute congestion of the stomach and brain,” or “brain fever.” Some modern-day doctors think Helen caught scarlet fever, which is a bacterial illness that develops in some people with untreated strep throat. Other modern-day doctors think Helen caught

textures: the feel and structures of things

meningitis, a bacterial or viral infection of the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

Helen's fever persisted day after day. The family doctor wondered if she would survive. Helen later recalled, "I especially remember the tenderness with which my mother tried to soothe me in my wailing hours of fret and pain, and the agony and bewilderment with which I awoke after a tossing half sleep, and turned my eyes, so dry and hot, to the wall, away from the once-loved light, which came to me dim and yet more dim each day."

The fever broke as suddenly as it started. The Keller family and the doctor rejoiced, not yet realizing that the fever had taken Helen's sight and hearing.

Kate was the first to discover that her baby couldn't see or hear. She ran her hand in front of Helen's eyes, trying to make her blink. Helen's eyes remained wide open. Then Kate rang the dinner bell beside Helen's ear. Helen did not flinch. Kate also noticed that Helen no longer spoke.

Years later, Helen wrote of this time, "I was too young to realize what had happened. When I awoke and found that all was dark and still, I suppose I thought it was night, and I must have wondered why day was so long

fret: irritation

coming. Gradually, however, I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me, and forgot that it had ever been day."

Helen's condition was rare. After medical tests confirmed that she couldn't detect any light or sound, local doctors were unsure how to treat her. Her parents were unsure how to help her. It seemed that a quiet darkness had settled over not only Helen but the entire family.

2

Vexed

Helen sniffed the air. The wonderful smells of roasted meat and freshly baked bread floated down the hallway. It was time for dinner, so she felt her way to the dining room table. Helen refused to sit in her chair and eat from a plate using a fork or spoon. Instead, she circled the table, grabbing food from every other dinner plate.

Some family members and guests tolerated Helen's hands in their food. Others blocked her. Often this would result in a kicking and screaming tantrum.

As Helen grew and this behavior continued, a sense of helplessness took root in Kate. At that time, deaf or blind people were not educated, given jobs, or accepted into society. What would happen to her deaf-blind daughter?

tantrum: angry outburst

Some days went well and gave Kate a little hope. Helen could nod her head for “yes” and shake her head for “no.” A pulling motion meant “come,” and a pushing motion meant “go.”

When Helen wanted Arthur, she pretended to put on glasses. When she wanted Kate, she placed her hand on her cheek. And when she wanted baby Mildred, she sucked her thumb. Helen often helped with easy kitchen chores and folding clean clothes.

Most days held serious challenges, though, making Kate worry about the future. Because she only saw her beautiful little girl, Kate couldn’t bear to punish Helen. Yet she knew she should. Kate also ignored some of Helen’s other naughty behaviors, including pinching her grandmother and purposefully breaking dishes and lamps.

Helen later wrote of this time, “I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths. Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand, and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated frantically without result.” At times, this made Helen so angry that she “kicked and screamed until [she] was exhausted.”

conversing: talking to each other

vexed: irritated

gesticulated: gestured



As Helen became more frustrated, her behavior became more dangerous. She threw things and tipped things over. Once, Helen locked Kate in the kitchen pantry for several hours. Another time, she cut off a playmate's hair. Even worse, when Helen became jealous of Mildred, she tipped her cradle. Luckily, Kate caught the baby before she hit the hard floor.

Helen later wrote, "For a long time I regarded my little sister as an intruder. I knew that I had ceased to be my mother's only darling, and the thought filled me with jealousy. She sat in my mother's lap constantly, where I used to sit, and seemed to take up all her care and time."

intruder: someone who enters without permission or welcome

ceased: came to an end

This incident, plus Helen throwing almost hourly tantrums, caused several relatives to suggest that Kate institutionalize Helen. As Helen grew bigger and stronger, Kate wondered how they would be able to keep Helen and others safe. But in Kate's mind, sending Helen away was not an option.

After a particularly bad day, Kate finally quieted Helen. While they rested, a memory arose. Kate's favorite author, Charles Dickens, had written about a deaf-blind child named Laura Bridgman who had learned to communicate. Kate had always assumed that the Kellers could provide for Helen's needs. Now that seemed unlikely. Perhaps they should look outside of Alabama and the neighboring state of Tennessee for help.

The Kellers headed north to Baltimore, Maryland, to visit an eye doctor who specialized in difficult cases. Kate worried about the long train ride. She thought Helen would get bored and become upset. But Helen enjoyed the train. She strung seashell necklaces, played with a rag doll, and helped the conductor, whose kindness she later remembered fondly. "Often when he went his rounds I clung to his coat tails while he collected and punched the tickets," Helen wrote. "His punch, with which he let me play, was a delightful toy. Curled up in a corner of the seat I amused myself for hours making funny little holes in bits of cardboard."

institutionalize: placed in a specialized facility

While the eye specialist in Baltimore agreed with Helen's previous doctors that she would never see again, he did believe she could be educated. And he knew just the person to help—Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, the first person to patent the telephone. Because both Dr. Bell's mother and his wife suffered hearing loss due to childhood illnesses, he became a teacher for the deaf.

Once more, the Kellers boarded the train. This time, they traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet Dr. Bell, who welcomed them with open arms. "He held me on his knee while I examined his watch, and he made it strike for me," Helen later recalled. "He understood my signs,



patent: obtain a legal right to make or sell something

and I knew it and loved him at once."

Dr. Bell advised the Kellers to contact the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts, which Laura Bridgman had attended, to request a teacher for Helen. He also became Helen's lifelong friend. It wasn't until much later that Helen realized that this was a life-changing meeting. At that time, she wrote, "I did not dream that that interview would be the door through which I should pass from darkness into light, from isolation to friendship, companionship, knowledge, love."

3

To Reveal All Things

Helen moved restlessly around the front porch at Ivy Green. Not even the warm sun on her face or the newly bloomed honeysuckle calmed her. Kate had been anxiously preparing the house. That made Helen nervous. Little did she know that the third day of March 1887 was the day she would meet the most important person in her life.

Kate had not fought with Helen about her appearance. She wore a dirty pinafore and strings in her shoes. Helen had also refused to have her wild hair combed. Finally tired, she settled down and waited by the door. For what? Helen didn't know. Before too long, she felt footsteps approaching. They were light, just like Kate's. Stretching out her hand to who she thought was her mother, Helen was surprised when a stranger took it.

"I was caught up and held close in the arms of her who had come to reveal all things to me, and, more than all things else, to love me," Helen later wrote.

The stranger was Anne Mansfield Sullivan, called Annie. True to Dr. Bell's word, the Perkins Institution

for the Blind had sent Annie from Massachusetts to Alabama to be Helen's teacher.

Because Annie understood hardship and illness, she felt drawn to work with Helen. Born in 1866 in Feeding Hills, Massachusetts, to poor Irish immigrants, Annie was the eldest of five children. One of her siblings died in infancy, and another died as a young child. At age five, Annie fell ill with a bacterial eye disease called trachoma. This disease caused her to have eye infection after eye infection, which left her partially blind. She was unable to see well enough to learn how to read or write, although she did have a sense of perspective and distance.

Annie's mother died three years later, when Annie was eight. Two years after that, her father abandoned his remaining three children. Annie and a younger brother, Jimmie, were sent to live in an overcrowded poorhouse, where Jimmie soon died.

A few people took an interest in Annie and gave her the opportunity for several eye surgeries, which only helped a little and only for a short time. She was left with bright colors swirling before her eyes. In 1880, the year Helen was born, Annie began attending the Perkins Institution for the Blind. While there, she learned to read braille and spell.

perspective: how objects look in relation to each other's position and distance
poorhouse: public-funded residence for people in need
braille: system of writing in which raised dots represent letters

Eventually, Annie was referred to the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary for two more eye surgeries. The last one worked well enough that she could read for short periods of time. Annie spent six years at Perkins and graduated first in her class in 1886. At age twenty, she remained unsure of her future and decided to spend the summer in Cape Cod with her house mother, Mrs. Hopkins, as she had in previous years. Everything changed on August 26, 1886, when Annie received a letter from Michael Anagnos, the director of Perkins:

My Dear Annie,

Please read the enclosed letters carefully, and let me know at your earliest convenience whether you would be disposed to consider favorably an offer of a position in the family of Mr. Keller as governess of his little deaf-mute and blind daughter.

I have no other information about the standing and responsibility of the man save that contained in his own letters: but, if you decide to be a candidate for the position, it is an easy matter to write and ask for further particulars.

I remain, dear Annie, with kind remembrances to Mrs. Hopkins,

Sincerely your friend,

M. Anagnos.

disposed: inclined

Because Annie felt unqualified to teach a deaf-blind child, she headed back to Perkins in the fall. While there, she reviewed the notes that Laura Bridgman's teachers had kept while working with her. So when Annie stepped out of the carriage at Ivy Green the following spring and saw Helen on the front porch, she knew she was ready.

Helen appeared to be a healthy, strong child. The only hint of blindness was her eyes. Helen's left eye slightly bulged and was larger than her right eye. Annie bent over and scooped Helen up in her arms.

Helen wanted nothing to do with the hug. She squirmed out of Annie's arms. But curiosity got the better of her. Helen's fingers flew over Annie's face, dress, and bag. When she tried to open Annie's bag, Kate shook her head no. Helen tried to open the bag again, and Kate took Annie's bag away.

"Helen's face grew red to the roots of her hair, and she began to clutch at her mother's dress and kick violently," Annie later wrote.

Quickly, Annie offered her watch to Helen to play with and showed her how to press a spring to open it. After that, Helen followed Annie to her room to help her unpack.

Annie looked forward to the next morning, when lessons would begin. The children and staff at Perkins had sent a new doll for Helen. Laura Bridgman, who still lived at Perkins, had made its clothes. Annie planned to use the doll as a gentle introduction to the manual alphabet, also called finger-spelling. In finger-spelling, each letter is formed with a different hand signal, and those letters together form words.

As Helen tried on Annie's traveling hat, Annie watched her. She vowed that she would not "conquer [Helen] by force alone." But that promise would not be fully kept.

4

The Wonderful Cool Something

Annie began Helen's lessons with finger-spelling. Helen was not in the mood to learn. When Annie disciplined her, Helen threw a tantrum and knocked out one of Annie's front teeth.

That might have been enough to send another teacher back to Massachusetts, but Helen had met her match in Annie. Annie was tough and persistent. She realized that there would be no place in the world for Helen if she didn't learn to communicate.

A few days later, Annie gave Helen the gift from the students at Perkins. As Helen cuddled her new doll, Annie gently took one of Helen's hands and finger-spelled D-O-L-L into her palm.

The doll seemed at first to do the trick. "I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it," Helen later recalled. "When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly I was flushed with childish

persistent: strongly determined

imitate: mimic

HELEN KELLER



pleasure and pride." But when Annie took the doll out of Helen's arms and encouraged her to finger-spell *doll*, Helen assumed that Annie had taken the doll away for good. Helen lashed out.

A few days after the doll skirmish, Helen made her way around the breakfast table, eating from her family members' plates as usual. When she got to Annie's plate, Annie pushed her hand away. An enraged Helen screamed and rolled around on the floor. Annie sent the Keller family out of the room and locked the door behind them. Annie calmly continued eating. Helen tried to tip over Annie's chair. It didn't work. Little by little, Helen calmed down and tried to figure out what Annie was doing.

"I let her see that I was eating, but did not let her put her hand in the plate," Annie wrote in a letter to Mrs. Hopkins. "She pinched me, and I slapped her every time she did it. Then she went all round the table to see who was there, and finding no one but me, she seemed bewildered. After a few minutes she came back to her place and began to eat her breakfast with her fingers. I gave her a spoon, which she threw on the floor. I forced her out of the chair and made her pick it up. Finally I succeeded in getting her back in her chair again, and held the spoon in her hand, compelling her to take up the food with it and put it in her mouth. In a few minutes she yielded and finished her breakfast peaceably."

compelling: urging strongly

Annie believed that if she was going to bond with Helen, the two of them would have to live alone. Kate and the rest of the family gave in to Helen to avoid tantrums. That made matters worse.

Annie thought the two-bedroom cottage beside the main house would be perfect. Much to Annie's surprise, Arthur and Kate agreed. Because Helen had been born in the rose-covered cottage and knew it well, Annie devised a plan to disguise it. She took Helen on a long carriage ride. While they were gone, the furniture in the cottage was rearranged. Helen did not recognize the cottage upon their return.

The first days at the cottage were difficult. Screaming. Kicking. Biting. Tantrums. In the calmer moments, Helen went to the door and rubbed her cheek, asking for Kate. At times, Arthur peered through the window, watching Helen. He came very close to sending Annie back to Massachusetts. But family members convinced him to wait a little longer.

The methods Annie used to win Helen over would not be popular today. Yet by the end of two weeks, Helen was allowing Annie to show her affection. Helen sat in Annie's lap and received a hug or a kiss. Using a fork or spoon and dressing herself became easier.

bond: develop a close relationship

Although she didn't yet understand, Helen learned to finger-spell more words. *Pin. Hat. Cup. Sit. Stand. Walk.* She often touched the object, then patted Annie's hand.

Helen had difficulty understanding that *milk* was a drink and a *mug* was what held it. She kept mixing up the words. Annie puzzled over how to help her understand. One morning while washing, Helen asked about the word for *water*. That gave Annie an idea. After breakfast, she took Helen out to the well-house pump.

Helen held a mug as Annie pumped cool water over Helen's hand and into the mug. As the water flowed over Helen's hand, Annie finger-spelled W-A-T-E-R into her other hand. Startled, Helen dropped the mug and froze. Suddenly she understood.

"I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand," Helen later wrote. "That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"

Helen ran from the well house and touched every object she could, asking Annie to finger-spell the name. *Mother. Father. Baby. Door. Open. Shut.* She learned thirty new words in two hours.

Finally, Helen turned and patted Annie. Annie finger-spelled T-E-A-C-H-E-R into her hand.



5

Love Is Something like the Clouds

After the day at the well-house pump, Helen continued to ask Annie to finger-spell the name of everything she touched. Annie answered until her fingers became exhausted. It seemed that Helen was making progress, but a couple of things bothered Annie. How could she make Helen understand feelings like *love* or non-action words like *think*? How could she help Helen understand that words made up sentences, which made up thoughts?

Annie decided to start over. She wrote to Mr. Anagnos that she would “talk into [Helen’s] hand as we talk into the baby’s ears.”

Helen responded well to games, so Annie tried to make the next step in learning fun. First, Annie gave Helen cardboard cards with raised letters on them that spelled out words like *doll*. She would then place each card on the thing it spelled.

Helen quickly understood that, for example, the raised letters D-O-L-L were the word for *doll*. Then she began to tell the difference between words for objects and words for actions. Finally, Helen constructed short sentences. She placed her doll on the bed with the doll card on top of it and cards reading *is*, *on*, and *bed* beside it, forming the sentence *Doll is on bed*. Annie and Helen played this game for hours.

“From the printed slip it was but a step to the printed book,” Helen wrote. “I took my ‘Reader for Beginners’ and hunted for the words I knew; when I found them my joy was like that of a game of hide-and-seek. Thus I began to read.”

The majority of Helen’s lessons were outdoors. There was plenty of room to roam and explore at Ivy Green. Biology was at her fingertips.

“The loveliness of things taught me all their use,” Helen recalled later. “Indeed, everything that could hum, or buzz, or sing, or bloom, had a part in my education—noisy-throated frogs, katydids and crickets held in my hand . . . little downy chickens and wildflowers, the dogwood blossoms, meadow-violets and budding fruit trees. I felt the bursting cotton-bolls and fingered their soft fiber and fuzzy seeds; I felt . . . the wind through the cornstalks, the silky rustling of the long leaves.”

cotton-bolls: seed pods of the cotton plant

Annie took Helen down to Keller's Landing, an old dock on the Tennessee River, to learn geography. After digging out a small pit in the bank, they used water, pebbles, and mud to make dams, rivers, islands, mountains, and lowlands.

Helen learned zoology and botany in the same hands-on manner. Annie took every opportunity to introduce Helen to new animals, including lion cubs, giraffes, and elephants when the circus came to town. During long walks through the woods, Annie pointed out new plants and blooms.

Helen excelled at her lessons and enjoyed all of them except for math. She did not like communicating with numbers. Annie taught Helen how to count by stringing beads. Using a series of short straws, Helen learned to add and subtract. She couldn't wait for her math lessons to be over and darted outside right afterward.

Despite math not being one of Helen's favorite subjects, it did help her learn the non-action words that Annie was so worried about. One day, when Helen was stringing beads of different sizes into like groups, she made quite a few mistakes.

zoology: area of biology that involves the study of animals

botany: area of biology that involves the study of plants

“Miss Sullivan had pointed them out again and again with gentle patience,” Helen wrote. “Finally I noticed a very obvious error . . . and tried to think how I should have arranged the beads. Miss Sullivan touched my forehead and spelled . . . ‘Think.’”

It was as if a bright light had turned on in Helen’s head. In an instant, she realized that *think* was the word for what was happening inside her mind. It was the first non-action word that she understood.

But Helen was still struggling with the word *love*. She knew that she loved the sweet smell of violets. She also knew that she loved the warm sun on her face. But each time she asked, Annie told her that those ideas were not quite right. Helen kept trying to grasp something that was just beyond her reach. She asked Annie again and again for the definition. One day, Annie finally explained love in a way that Helen understood.

“Love is something like the clouds that were in the sky before the sun came out,” Annie said, according to Helen’s recollection. “You cannot touch the clouds, you know; but you feel the rain and know how glad the flowers and the thirsty earth are to have it after a hot day.

definition: explanation of the meaning of a word

LOVE IS SOMETHING LIKE THE CLOUDS

You cannot touch love either; but you feel the sweetness that it pours into everything. Without love you would not be happy or want to play."

Once again, a bright light turned on in Helen's head. She imagined "invisible lines stretched between [her] spirit and the spirits of others." Helen now felt connected to others in a way she never had before. This new connection made Helen restless to find more ways to communicate with the people she loved.

6

Birds Against the Wind

Helen was in constant motion, learning by leaps and bounds—so much so that Annie decided she needed to expand Helen's experiences plus introduce her to more children her own age. In 1888, Annie and Helen, along with Kate, headed north to visit the Perkins Institution.

By that time, Mr. Anagnos and Dr. Bell had written and lectured so widely about Annie's teaching and Helen's progress that Helen had become world famous. People around the world admired Helen. She even inspired Queen Victoria.

Helen, though, was unaware of her fame, and Annie wanted to keep it that way. She believed it was her job to make sure that Helen could earn a living and that society would accept her. Education, Annie felt, was key.

But first, Helen, Annie, and Kate stopped in Washington, D.C., to visit Dr. Bell—and to meet President Grover Cleveland at the White House.

lectured: delivered speeches

“We went to see Mr. Cleveland,” wrote a young Helen. “He lives in a very large and beautiful white house, and there are lovely flowers and many trees and much fresh and green grass, and he was very glad to see me.”

Upon arriving in Boston, Helen delighted in meeting students at Perkins who were also blind and knew how to finger-spell. She felt less isolated.

That summer, Helen had her first history lessons. She and Annie traveled to Bunker Hill in Boston and learned about the early years of the American Revolution. Then they visited Plymouth Rock in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and learned about the Pilgrims’ voyage to America.

And Annie introduced Helen to the ocean at Cape Cod. Helen loved the salt air and the smooth sand under her feet, and she enjoyed searching for shells in all different shapes and sizes. She felt awed by the ocean—its bigness, her smallness.

“I thought it great fun to sit on a big rock in my bathing-suit and feel wave after wave dash against the rock, sending up a shower of spray which quite covered me,” Helen recalled. After each wave, she continued, “the breakers would swoop back to gather themselves for a mightier leap, and I clung to the rock, tense, fascinated, as I felt the dash and roar of the rushing sea!”

isolated: apart from others



After that summer, Helen and Annie divided their time between Massachusetts and Alabama. They spent most of their winters in Boston as guests of the Perkins Institution. Annie continued to be Helen's main teacher, but now Helen had other teachers—and Perkins's impressive library—to learn from as well.

One such winter brought a glorious encounter with snow and tobogganing. "We would get on our toboggan, a boy would give us a shove, and off we went! Plunging through drifts, leaping hollows, swooping down upon the lake, we would shoot across its gleaming surface to the opposite bank. What joy!" Helen later wrote.

The more Helen paid attention to the world around her, the more she noticed that people mostly communicated by speaking. Once again, she seemed on the outside of everything, and she begged Annie for speech lessons. Helen felt that finger-spelling limited what she was able to say. Sometimes, her mind moved faster than her fingers. As Helen later described it, her “thoughts would often rise and beat up like birds against the wind.”

Annie and Kate both thought that deaf children’s speech was hard to understand and difficult to listen to. Annie continued to worry that Helen’s speech might further separate her from the society that would be so important to her future. But in March 1890, Annie finally gave in and took Helen to the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston. The principal, Sarah Fuller, began to work with Helen.

Miss Fuller began their lessons by having Helen lightly place a hand on her face, which let Helen feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made vowel and consonant sounds. Within the first hour, Helen learned the letters *M*, *P*, *A*, *S*, *T*, and *I*. The first sentence she spoke aloud was “It is warm.”

“True, they were broken and stammering syllables,” Helen wrote later, “but they were human speech. My soul . . . was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and all faith.”

At first, Annie and Miss Fuller were the only ones who could understand Helen. Some described Helen’s voice as flat or lonely sounding. With Annie’s help, Helen would try to improve her speech throughout her life with more voice lessons. She also learned to “read” others’ speech by resting her middle finger on their nose, her forefinger on their lips, and her thumb on their voice box.

As Helen headed home to Tuscumbia after her first eleven speech lessons, she practiced and practiced. Helen was eager to speak to her family, especially Mildred. She wanted her speech to be the best it could be. Arthur, Kate, and Mildred waited on the platform as the train arrived. When they heard her voice, Helen’s family wept and hugged her. Then Mildred kissed Helen’s hand and danced for joy.

“At last,” Helen later wrote, “the happiest of happy moments arrived.”

7

Darkened by the One Cloud

The fall after Helen first learned to speak, she and Annie stayed later than usual in Alabama at Fern Quarry, the Kellers' mountain cottage near Tuscumbia.

Helen had spent many happy summers there. She rode her pony named Black Beauty, explored the forests and the streams, and enjoyed story time around family campfires.

That fall, as the leaves began to change, Annie described their beauty to Helen. Helen felt a story growing in her heart. Mr. Anagnos's birthday was coming up, and Helen thought the story would make a good birthday gift for him. She began writing.

"My thoughts flowed easily; I felt a sense of joy in the composition," Helen wrote later. "Words and images came tripping to my finger ends, and as I thought out sentence after sentence, I wrote them on my braille slate."



Helen called the story "Autumn Leaves." She read it to Annie and her family. They enjoyed the story—but thought it was perhaps too good. Maybe Helen had heard or read the story before. She dismissed their concerns. Helen changed the name to "The Frost King" and mailed the story to Mr. Anagnos. Impressed, he promptly published it in the Perkins alumni magazine, which was sent out to supporters and donors of the school.

alumni: people who have attended a school

After Helen and Annie returned to Perkins that winter, one of the story's readers recognized that "The Frost King" was similar in plot and tone to a story called "The Frost Fairies," written by Margaret T. Canby. "The Frost Fairies" had been published before Helen was born.

Helen couldn't remember ever reading Margaret Canby's story or having it read to her. Annie and Helen searched Perkins's library and Helen's personal books. No copy was found. Annie thought about all of the places they had traveled and discovered that Mrs. Hopkins, in Cape Cod, owned a copy. Could she have read it to Helen when they went to the ocean?

Some board members believed that Helen had deliberately copied the story. They pressured Mr. Anagnos to hold her accountable. At the age of twelve, she was subjected to a "court of investigation" at Perkins. Helen was accused of plagiarism, which is copying someone else's writing.

Helen appeared alone before the court, which consisted of Mr. Anagnos and eight school officers. Helen didn't know who was in the room, but the questions seemed designed to make her confess that she had remembered the book and purposefully copied it. Later, Helen recalled, "The blood pressed about my thumping heart, and I could scarcely speak."

After the questioning, four officers thought Helen was guilty. They believed that Annie and Helen both knew that Helen had read “The Frost Fairies” and had copied it. The other four officers thought Helen was innocent, accepting that she had believed “The Frost King” was her own original work. Mr. Anagnos broke the tie and voted in favor of Helen. All charges against Helen were dropped. Despite his vote, their relationship would never be close again.

“As I lay in bed that night, I wept as I hope few children have wept,” Helen wrote later. “I felt so cold, I imagined I should die before morning, and the thought comforted me. I think if this sorrow had come to me when I was older, it would have broken my spirit beyond repairing.”

This experience troubled Helen her entire life. She questioned everything she wrote from that point on—was it an original thought? Or did she read it somewhere else?

“The winter of 1892 was darkened by the one cloud in my childhood’s bright sky,” Helen wrote. “Joy deserted my heart, and for a long, long time I lived in doubt, anxiety and fear. Books lost their charm for me, and even now the thought of those dreadful days chills my heart.”

Although Helen remained cautious, she did gather the courage to write again. She considered herself an

cautious: careful

author, which was listed as her profession on her U.S. passport. In all, she wrote fourteen books and more than 475 speeches and essays on a variety of topics, including Annie, her religion, optimism, nature poetry, and what she would do if she had only three days to see. Helen's most popular book, her autobiography *The Complete Story of my Life*, remains in print.

Helen's joy for reading also returned. She devoured books on philosophy, economics, poetry, history, politics, and world events. She also read books in foreign languages, including French, Latin, and German.

“More than at any other time, when I hold a beloved book in my hand my limitations fall from me, my spirit is free,” Helen later wrote.

Annie was glad to see Helen back on track with reading and writing. Both of those skills would be necessary to complete her education and apply to college. Annie continued to feel that education would cement Helen's place in productive society as a deaf-blind person. Helen would once again have to dig down deep. She would have to prove to those around her that her tests and papers were her own work and that she deserved to be enrolled in college.

optimism: attitude that the best possible outcome will occur

economics: science of how goods and services are made, distributed, sold, and used

productive: characterized by producing something

8

The Spirit of the Great and Wise

Helen charmed almost everyone she met. Although she could not see them or hear them, Helen remembered people by smell. Did they wear perfume? Did they smoke a pipe? Did they farm the earth? Just like Kate at Ivy Green, Helen could also identify others by the heaviness or lightness of their step. Sometimes a limp or other telltale sign of movement gave a clue. Her memory for detail was also extraordinary.

At a party given in Helen's honor in Princeton, New Jersey, she was introduced to Samuel Clemens. Helen immediately asked Clemens why he had chosen the "nom de plume" Mark Twain.

Clemens was impressed that Helen knew about his work, his pen name, and a French phrase. When Clemens read one of his new stories to Helen, she laughed in all the right places. Annie asked Helen what the heart of Clemens's work was; Helen replied that it was humor and wisdom.

At the end of the evening, Helen bade Clemens goodbye. She felt his face, memorizing all the details, and stuck some violets in the buttonhole of his jacket. That evening, Helen had made another lifelong friend—one who would help her achieve her college dream.

Helen decided that the only school for her was Radcliffe College, a women's liberal arts school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Radcliffe was the sister college of the then all-male Harvard College. No deaf-blind student had ever attended. Annie knew they had their work cut out for them, not only academically but financially.

Helen would need years of tutoring and a preparatory school—things that Perkins could not provide. And after the falling out with Mr. Anagnos, a change might be welcome. Around this time, Arthur had died in debt, leaving Kate to raise Mildred and Helen's younger brother, Phillips Brooks. By then, the care of and decision-making for Helen had largely been left to Annie.

Initially friends of Dr. Bell and later friends of Samuel Clemmens financed Helen's education from tutors to prep schools to finally college.

Helen's first tutor, Mr. Irons, taught her Latin grammar and continued her arithmetic lessons. He also helped her learn how to analyze fiction and poetry.

“I had read many books before, but never from a critical point of view,” Helen later wrote. “I learned for the first time to know an author, to recognize his style as I recognize the clasp of a friend’s hand.”

Next came the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City. There, Helen continued her lessons in speech, lip reading, arithmetic, and geography. She learned to read literature in German and French.

Helen and Annie took full advantage of Central Park, where they rode horses most mornings on the bridle path. Annie held the tether to Helen’s horse and made sure that the horses trotted or galloped together at the same speed.

The last stop before Helen would sit for entrance exams to Radcliffe was the Cambridge School for Young Ladies.

At Cambridge, Helen took classes in English history, English literature, German, Latin, arithmetic, and Latin composition. Annie sat with her through every class and finger-spelled all the instruction into her hand. Although Helen had a good start in some subjects, the workload was heavy and sometimes tedious.

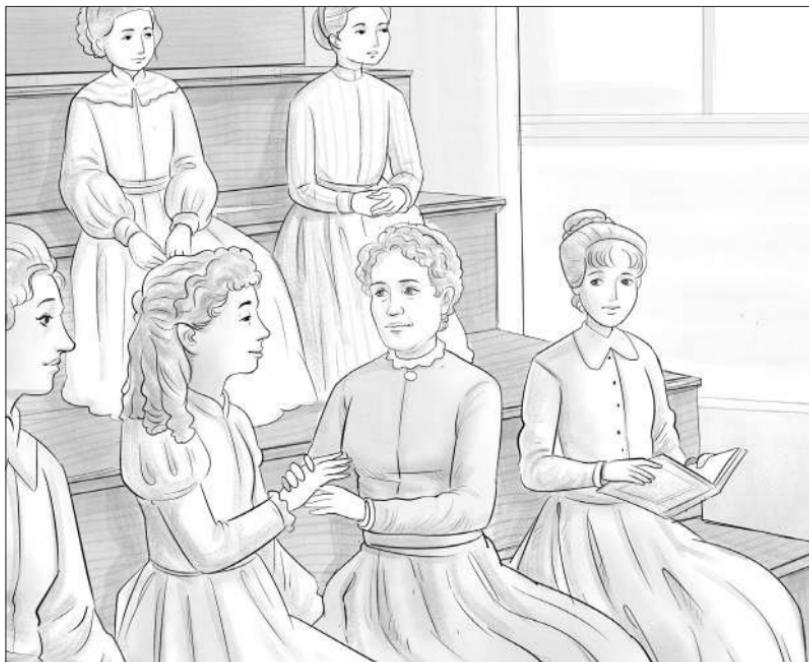
“Miss Sullivan could not spell out in my hand all that the

bridle path: trail used to ride horses

tether: line that fastens someone or something to keep it under control

tedious: boring

books required," Helen later recalled, "and it was very difficult to have text-books embossed in time to be of use to me."



The one thing Helen enjoyed the most about Cambridge was the friendships she formed with girls her own age who could see and hear. That made the hard work worthwhile.

In 1897, Helen sat for the preliminary exams for Radcliffe. Annie was not permitted in the testing room. The school's principal finger-spelled the questions into Helen's hand, and Helen typed the answers on a

preliminary: coming before something else

typewriter. In this way, she passed the exams for German, French, Latin, English, and Greek and Roman history, receiving honors in German and English. The testing took a total of nine hours.

Helen's second year at the Cambridge School did not go as well as her first. She focused on math and physics that year, subjects she had never enjoyed. And many of the textbooks she needed were not available in braille. Ultimately, Helen withdrew from the school, and a private tutor, Merton Keith, was hired to prepare her for her final Radcliffe entrance examinations.

Over the next two years, Helen studied with Mr. Keith, working harder than ever. She was often exhausted over algebra and geometry—subjects that she had always found difficult. “But even mathematics Mr. Keith made interesting; he succeeded in whittling problems small enough to get through my brain,” Helen later wrote. “He kept my mind alert and eager, and trained it to reason clearly, and to seek conclusions calmly and logically, instead of jumping wildly into space and arriving nowhere.”

algebra: area of mathematics that studies number operations, where numbers are represented by letters

geometry: area of mathematics that includes the study of lines, angles, and surfaces

whittling: reducing gradually

Helen persevered and passed her final examinations in elementary and advanced Greek, advanced Latin, geometry, and algebra. Finally, in the fall of 1900, Helen realized her dream of attending Radcliffe College. She was the first deaf-blind student to enter an institute of higher learning.

“The lecture-halls seemed filled with the spirit of the great and the wise,” Helen recalled, “and I thought the professors were the embodiment of wisdom.”

Helen graduated from Radcliffe College with honors in 1904. Her question then changed from where she fit into the world to how she could help people in the world.

And Annie remained right beside her.

9

I Have Found Myself

Helen waited in the wings of the stage until the orchestra played Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." That was her cue to walk onto the vaudeville set, designed like a living room with a fire in the hearth, a grand piano, fresh flowers, and long velvet curtains.

Vaudeville, popular from the mid-1890s until the 1930s, was made up of acts like jugglers, singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, and trained animals.

Annie had already introduced Helen and explained how she had learned to read, write, and speak. Now, Helen stood center stage, ready to answer questions from the audience. "Can you tell the time of day without a watch?" "Do you dream?" "What did you think about before you were taught?" "Do you like mathematics?"

From 1920 to 1924, Helen and Annie traveled all

vaudeville: stage show made up of several acts

around the United States with their vaudeville act. But one performance in Los Angeles, California, in 1921 would remain with Helen forever. Right before she went onstage, Helen received word that Kate had died.

“Every fiber of my being cried out at the thought of facing the audience, but it had to be done,” Helen later wrote.

Kate had been suffering from a secret illness when she had visited Helen the previous summer. When they parted at the train station, Kate said, “Helen, you will not see me again, but whatever happens, I shall wait for you.” Later, Kate wrote to Helen, “Do not let your feelings spoil your work, always do the best you can, and think of mother watching until you come.”

By this time, Polly Thomson had joined Helen and Annie’s household—first in Wrentham, Massachusetts, where they had lived since Helen had graduated from Radcliffe, and then in Forest Hills, New York, where they had moved in 1917. Polly helped with correspondence and other tasks to make their lives run smoothly. This freed Helen to raise awareness of and money for deaf and blind people around the country, not only through vaudeville but also through speaking engagements with the American Foundation for the Blind.

By the time they left Wrentham and moved to Forest Hills, New York, all of the travelling and bright lights were taking a toll on Annie's weak eyes. Annie had spent so many years worrying about Helen's eyes that she often neglected her own. For instance, Annie insisted that Helen only be photographed in right profile to hide her bulging left eye. She didn't want people to look down on Helen's physical disabilities. And as Helen's personal appearances increased, people began to notice. Annie didn't want to give anyone a reason not to listen to or come see Helen.

The decision was made to surgically remove both of Helen's eyes and replace them with bright blue prosthetic ones. This surgery also prevented any pain that Helen would eventually experience. The prosthetics were so lifelike, they fooled everyone.

While Helen was pain-free, Annie was not. Flickering candles, unshaded lamps, and even a white tablecloth caused Annie unbearable eye pain. She could barely read wearing heavy, double-lensed telescopic glasses. Eventually, Annie, too, lost her right eye. Polly's workload increased as she became Annie's eyes just as Annie had become Helen's eyes and ears.

prosthetic: artificial replacement for a body part

telescopic: magnifying

More often than not, Polly accompanied Helen to engagements rather than Annie as Helen's work was increasing with the American Foundation for the Blind.

Ultimately, Helen's favorite job through the organization became outreach and fundraising on behalf of blinded World War II veterans.

Helen and Polly spent countless hours visiting wounded veterans, bed by bed, in numerous hospital wards. They spoke words of encouragement and hope. Helen also supported New York senator Robert Wagner's legislation to fund "rehabilitation, special vocational training, placement, and supervision of blind persons, including those blinded in World War II."

In 1945, on behalf of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen wrote a personal letter to be sent to the families of blinded soldiers. "I can assure you out of the fullness of my own experience that your son has a splendid fighting chance. I too have been in the dark, yet I have found myself, found happiness and God. A wise teacher who treated me like any healthy seeing child created that life, and you also can help your son by cooperating with his natural desire to do a man's part in the world."

legislation: laws passed by lawmakers

rehabilitation: actions taken to improve or restore a health condition

vocational: relating to a skill or trade used for a career



Helen eventually became a member of the board of trustees for the American Foundation for the Blind. Her forty years of service to that organization led to the creation of rehabilitation centers and state commissions for the blind and changes in education so that blind people could learn.

As Helen gained more fame as a speaker in the United States, invitations began to pour in from around the world. Helen packed her suitcase. She was eager to go.

commissions: groups of people with a specific job to carry out

10

A Kingdom of Accomplishment

Helen stood under the pink canopy of blooming cherry blossoms at Tokyo's 1937 cherry blossom festival. She breathed in the fruity floral fragrance and was grateful to be in Japan. Helen was ready to meet the emperor.

Since the early 1930s, Helen had been increasingly asked to bring her message of hope and light to deaf and blind people around the world. Soon, she would have to do it without Annie's support and encouragement. Besides being nearly completely blind and increasingly frail, Annie had been diagnosed with heart disease. Year by year, Annie's health grew worse until she sadly passed away in 1936 as Helen held her hand.

“When she breathed no more,” Helen later wrote, “somehow the faith she had wished she could hold with me rose up stronger than ever and, leaning over, I said, ‘You know, dearest, don’t you, that life is beginning over again, glorious with light and peace.’”

After Annie died, Helen and Polly moved one final time, to a house called Arcan Ridge in Easton, Connecticut. For those who thought that Helen could not function without Annie, she proved them wrong. Helen was about to change the world's attitude toward disabled people through the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind, which would later be renamed Helen Keller International.

Deeply moved by the cherry blossom festival, Helen introduced herself to Emperor Hirohito, who gently shook her hand. She later said, "In his hands I felt grace."

Helen's tour then focused on the underrepresented disabled community, especially the seven hundred thousand blind people living in Japan at the time. She visited thirty-three cities throughout Japan, giving speeches to raise awareness. At one stop on her tour, she brought more than three thousand people to tears when she said aloud, "Love is power. Power is love. Let power and love build an independent and happy life for the physically handicapped. Let the light of sympathy brighten up the darkness of their lives." Helen's outreach directly inspired the creation of new facilities and support services for blind people in Japan.

Helen was given just as enthusiastic of a welcome over a decade later, when she visited New Zealand in 1948. At an official welcome at Parliament House, Helen met New Zealand's prime minister and other government officials. During her stay, she lectured at universities as well as schools and facilities for disabled children and adults.

"You have risen above misfortunes greater than any I have known, and I am sure you will carry on the struggle triumphantly," Helen said in a speech at the Disabled Servicemen's Re-establishment League in New Zealand. "We must take limitation by the horns and turn it into a kingdom of accomplishment."

She also spoke with Maori communities. The Maori are the Indigenous people of New Zealand. At the time, it was common for Maori people to ignore deaf and blind children because it was thought they could not be educated or lead normal, fulfilling lives. Helen served as proof that this was not the case.

To show their deep appreciation, the Maori gifted Helen with a carved ceremonial gate. The gate now stands in the garden at Ivy Green, surrounded by limelight hydrangeas, gardenias, ginger lilies, and yellow flag iris. This honor had only previously been bestowed upon one other person—the queen of England.

But perhaps the most moving international experience for Helen came from a child in South Africa in 1951. At Durban City Hall, she spoke before two thousand people, telling the crowd her story.

After the speech, instead of waiting to shake Helen's hand, fourteen-year-old Dawn Mansell asked her mother to take her home. Dawn retrieved her "expensive 'walkie-talkie' doll" and brought it back to the city hall. She presented the doll to Helen, suggesting that it be sold to raise money for the blind and deaf. "It is the most touching gift I've ever had," Helen said. "The doll came right from the little girl's heart."

Many more honors were given to Helen for her work with deaf and blind people, including the Lions Humanitarian Award, a medal of the French Legion of Honor, election to the Women's Hall of Fame, and an honorary degree from Harvard University. In addition to Grover Cleveland, she met every president of the United States from Calvin Coolidge to John F. Kennedy. A documentary of Helen's life, *The Unconquered*, won the 1955 Academy Award for best feature-length documentary. And William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker*, based on Helen's early life with Annie, debuted on Broadway in 1959.



In 1964, just four years before Helen's death, President Lyndon Johnson awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. By then, Helen had suffered her first stroke and had retired from public life. She was unable to attend the ceremony.

On June 1, 1968, Helen Adams Keller passed away in her sleep at the age of eighty-seven. More than 1,200 mourners attended her funeral at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., where her ashes are interred with Annie's and Polly's.

President Johnson described Helen as "an example of courage to all mankind" who "devoted her life to illuminating the dark world of the blind and the handicapped."

civilian honor: award given to someone not in the armed forces

Samuel Clemens thought Helen was “the eighth wonder of the world” and “fellow to Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Homer, Shakespeare, and the rest of the immortals.”

Helen spent her life in service to others, hoping to improve conditions for many disenfranchised people, especially the deaf and blind. Her idea of a legacy was mastering hardship, sincerely loving people, and forming partnerships. These things were made possible by her constant ability to remain positive.

Helen once wrote, “Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope.”

disenfranchised: kept from their rights

legacy: understanding of someone or something by future generations

Helen Keller Amazing Facts

A Dog Has Never Failed Me

In January 1933, the *Atlantic Monthly* published one of Helen's essays, called "Three Days to See." In this piece, Helen imagines being given the gift of sight for three days. She plans out how she would spend each day.

On the first day, Helen would memorize faces—those of Annie, her dearest friends, a baby, and all the dogs she had loved.

"I should like to look into the loyal, trusting eyes of my dogs—the grave, canny little Scottie, Darkie, and the stalwart, understanding Great Dane, Helga, whose warm, tender, and playful friendships are so comforting to me," Helen wrote.

From childhood through her entire life, Helen had a dog by her side. She depended on her dogs for companionship. They lifted her spirits with their thumping tails, snuggles, and wet noses.

Some of Helen's dogs were more famous than others. She spent hours finger-spelling words into the paw of her childhood dog, Belle. Helen's Radcliffe College classmates gifted her a Boston bull terrier named Phiz, who attended classes with her. An Akita named Kamikaze was a gift from the Japanese government in 1937. Kamikaze helped introduce the Akita breed to the United States.

stalwart: forceful in body, mind, or attitude

In an interview given toward the end of her life, Helen said, "Nobody who is not blind, as much as they may love their pet, can know what a dog's love really means. Dogs have traveled all over the world with me. They have always been my companions. A dog has never failed me."

I Do Not Like the World as It Is

Annie almost refused the job of being Helen's teacher. She assumed—correctly, as it turned out—that before the Civil War, the Keller family had owned slaves. Plus, Helen's father had served as a Confederate officer during the war. Annie found neither acceptable.

Despite her reservations, Annie moved from Massachusetts to Alabama to help Helen learn to navigate her dark world. Annie taught Helen not only words and ideas but how they fit into language. This also included how society failed people who were not treated equally.

Even as a young child, Helen had already sensed the differences. She recalled young Black children having less food and clothing than she did. This uncomfortable realization helped plant the seeds of her future humanitarian work.

Helen's support for the Black community never wavered throughout her lifetime. In 1916, she brought recognition to the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored

humanitarian: someone who works to improve the health and happiness of others

wavered: faltered

People (NAACP). Helen donated \$100 to the organization and allowed her essays to be published in its newspaper, *The Crisis*.

Also concerned about protecting individual rights and freedoms, Helen became a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920.

"I do not like the world as it is," Helen said in 1912, in a speech that used blindness as a metaphor for ignoring society's problems. "So I am trying to make it a little more as I want it."

We Demand the Vote

When Helen was born in the summer of 1880, only men were able to vote in the United States.

As students at Radcliffe College, she and her classmates spent long winter evenings gathered around a fire, drinking cider and eating popcorn. They talked about what worked in the world and what needed to be changed. It was during this time that Helen began forming her political views.

She felt strongly that every woman should have the right to vote. In 1909, Helen officially joined the suffragist movement, which fought to win the right for every American woman to vote. Helen read newspaper articles about suffragists and corresponded with the movement's leaders. In 1913, she was among the thousands of women marching in the Woman Suffrage Procession, the first suffragist parade in Washington, D.C.

In a 1920 speech, Helen said, "We demand the vote for women because it is in accordance with the principles of a true democracy."

That same year, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution legally guaranteed American women the right to vote.

Discussion Questions

1. What would you miss the most if you couldn't see? If you couldn't hear?
2. When Helen became deaf-blind, how did she use her other senses to explore the world?
3. Why did Helen throw tantrums? How did the well-house pump change her life?
4. How was Helen's experience of learning to read and write similar to or different from your experience?
5. What made Annie a good teacher?
6. What was your favorite thing that Annie helped Helen discover? What did your favorite teacher help you discover?
7. Was Helen treated fairly when she was accused of plagiarism? Why or why not?
8. What did perseverance look like to Annie and Helen? What does perseverance look like to you?
9. Which of Helen's accomplishments surprised you the most? Why?
10. Are people with disabilities more accepted in the world today? Did Helen's work help with this? How?

11. How has the world improved for people with disabilities? In communication? In education? In employment? Did Helen's work also help with this?
12. Do you know someone with a disability? What do they struggle with?
13. How should you treat people with disabilities?
14. What new technology for people with disabilities would surprise Helen?
15. How can you build on Helen's legacy and further improve the lives of people with disabilities?

Meet the Author



When Jennifer Elvgren was in second grade, her grandmother bought her a book about Helen Keller. She read it from cover to cover, over and over again. Then Jennifer took out and read every library book about Helen that she could find. Over the years, Jennifer pondered the strength and courage it took for Helen to learn to read, write, and speak while facing extraordinary challenges at every turn. Her love and admiration for Helen have only grown stronger.

When Jennifer was asked to write a children's biography about Helen, she accepted with a happy heart. She tried to tell Helen's story beyond the well-house pump, highlighting her support of suffragists and the Black community and her worldwide work for people with disabilities.

A former print journalist, Jennifer has received multiple awards for her children's books, including the Andersen Prize, the Américas Award, the Prairie Pasque Award, the Sydney Taylor Book Award, and a Jane Addams Children's Book Award. Her work has also appeared on the American Library Association's Notable Children's Books and Bank Street College's Best Children's Books of the Year lists.

Jennifer lives in Albemarle County, Virginia, with her family, Brontë the rescue foxhound, Chance the rescue tabby cat, Winslow the rescue donkey, and Gatsby the American paint horse. She likes to read to Winslow and Gatsby. Their favorite book is *The Wonky Donkey*, by Craig Smith.

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school, and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in Arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his and professional years in educational publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors, and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at digital and traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

Credits

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Title Page Illustration by

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