Photograph by Falk, 1895

Helen Keller and Miss Sullivan

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Documents of an Education

James Berger

This hundredth-anniversary publication of a restored edition of Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* is an important event. Helen Keller is simultaneously one of the best known and least known figures in American cultural history, and the same can be said of *The Story of My Life*, the first and most famous of the fourteen books she authored. Everyone knows of Helen Keller the legend, the saint, the miracle; but the substance of Keller as thinker, writer, and social critic and activist—in fact, as an active socialist—has been long forgotten. Likewise, countless people have read some version of Keller's precocious and inspiring memoir of the first twenty years of her life, but few may be aware that this memoir constitutes only the first third of the book that Doubleday, Page & Company published in 1903 under the title *The Story of My Life, by Helen Keller, with Her Letters (1887–1901), and a Supplementary Account of Her Education, Including Passages from the Reports and Letters of Her Teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, by John Albert Macy*. There are today at least ten editions available of Helen Keller's memoir alone, but the complete book was last reprinted in 1954 and has long been out of print.

Why is it important that we are again able to read *The Story of My Life* in its original form? We all know, of course, that Helen Keller's life was a collaborative life. From the time when

Anne Sullivan arrived at Keller's home in Tuscumbia, Alabama, in 1887 (when Helen was seven and Anne was twenty-one), Helen's experience of the world was shared and mediated through the eyes, ears, and language of others. In a broad sense, all of our lives are collaborations, for we do not live alone and do not perceive our outer or our inner worlds without plentiful and continual contributions from those we know and from what we learn through print and other media. But in Keller's case, the collaborative nature of perception and consciousness is especially vivid; for seventy years, another person spelled the world into her hands.

The Story of My Life in its complete, collaborative form is not simply the memoir of a young deaf-blind woman, as extraordinary as that memoir is. This book is a story of an extraordinary education, a documentary of how a young woman—who because of her sensory deprivations was bereft of language and meaningful social contact—develops language, and through language enters into the worlds of personal identity, social interaction, ethical understanding, and the broadest ranges of human feeling.

In part I, her memoir—the section of the book still widely in print—Helen looks back at her life and tells us how she grew into the young woman she had become. Then, in part II, through a selection of Keller's letters from the age of eight, we see that growth year by year, and even week by week. In her astonishing linguistic development, we see the strengthening and deepening of all her cognitive, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic faculties. Helen the girl tells us, or shows us, many things that Helen the woman would become but could not recall. In part III, John Macy provides commentaries on Keller's personality, education, speech, and literary style.

The essay on Keller's education is of special value and

interest because it consists largely of letters written by Anne Sullivan from 1887 through 1894, giving accounts of her first seven years' work with Helen. Sullivan's letters will be, for most readers, a revelation. Everyone with even a casual interest in Helen Keller shares a general admiration for Anne Sullivan based largely on Anne Bancroft's portrayal of her in the film *The Miracle Worker* (1962). But to encounter her voice directly in this series of letters, to accompany her as she conceives and reconceives the process of Helen's education, to read of the setbacks and triumphs and of the emotional bond that grows between the teacher and student may comprise the most thrilling moments in this extraordinary book. Keller's accomplishments, of course, were incomparable, and she developed into a clear, humane thinker and a graceful writer. John Macy, who married Anne Sullivan shortly after the publication of this book, was a respected literary critic, a man of unquestionable intelligence and ability. But Sullivan's voice brings with it new levels of alertness, intelligence, and feeling. Sullivan was a fighter, with a bit of a chip on her shoulder. Not a saint or a miracle or a Harvard graduate, she had a fine, sarcastic sense of humor, and her writing is intellectually and emotionally alive at every moment. Indeed, Sullivan, who wrote no books of her own, may have been the best writer of the three collaborators. Samuel Clemens, one of many distinguished people who befriended Keller, wrote to her upon reading *The Story of My Life*, "How she [Sullivan] stands out in her letters! Her brilliancy, penetration, originality, wisdom, character, and the fine competencies of her pen—they are all there."[1] And Alexander Graham Bell wrote to Sullivan, "Why in the world did you not tell us about those letters to Mrs. Hopkins? … They are of the greatest value and importance.… These letters to Mrs. Hopkins will become a standard, the

principles that guided you in the early education of Helen are of the greatest importance to all teachers."[2]

SULLIVAN AND MACY

Anne Sullivan (1866–1936) was the daughter of impoverished Irish immigrants. Her mother died when she was eight. Her abusive, alcoholic father abandoned Anne and her two surviving siblings two years later. In 1876, Anne and her younger brother Jimmie were sent to the poorhouse at the State Infirmary in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. Jimmie was crippled by a tubercular hip; Anne's vision was severely impaired by trachoma. Within three months, Jimmie was dead. Anne, however, against all odds, managed to obtain a scholarship to attend the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston after four years at Tewksbury. Though she was an avid student, her enduring anger surrounding her sense of abandonment and the death of her brother helped shape an intransigent personality that antagonized many at the school. Moreover, Sullivan felt intensely, and often was made to feel, the difference in social class between herself and the other Perkins students. But with the help of teachers like Mary Moore and Fanny Marrett, the friendship of her housemother Sophia Hopkins, and the support of Perkins's director, Michael Anagnos, Sullivan excelled academically, especially in the study of literature, and graduated as valedictorian in 1886. During her years at Perkins, a series of eye operations partially restored her vision, though her eyes pained and troubled her throughout her life.

The summer after her graduation, Anagnos recommended her for the position of governess and tutor to Helen Keller, and the principal and consuming acts of her life began the

following year. Sullivan was quick to recognize the magnitude and the potential of the task she had taken on. In May 1887, she wrote to Sophia Hopkins, "I know that the education of this child will be the distinguishing event of my life, if I have the brains and perseverance to accomplish it" (this page). And a month later, "Something within me tells me that I shall succeed beyond my dreams.… I know that she has remarkable powers, and I believe that I shall be able to develop and mould them. I cannot tell how I know these things. I had no idea a short time ago how to go to work; I was feeling about in the dark; but somehow I know now, and I know that I know" (this page).

John Macy (1877–1932) was born in Detroit to middle-class parents, though descended from a somewhat poorer Nantucket whaling family. He attended Harvard on a scholarship and excelled there. He was class poet, editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Advocate*, and assistant editor of the *Lampoon*. Upon graduation in 1899, he began work as an instructor at Harvard. There he was introduced to Keller and Sullivan, and recommended to them as an editor who could help transform a series of autobiographical magazine articles Keller had written for *Ladies' Home Journal* into a book. Macy quickly learned the finger alphabet so he could communicate with Keller, and he and Sullivan began a romantic relationship. Sullivan was thirty-eight, while Macy was a rather dashing twenty-seven. Keller's biographers, Dorothy Herrmann especially, have trouble accounting for this romance and marriage, and Herrmann implies that the more natural relationship would have been between Macy and Helen.*

But Sullivan and Macy shared a terrific quickness of mind and verbal facility; and, of course, they shared Helen, and each could love Helen even more through the other and each other

more through Helen. The Sullivan-Macy marriage was short lived. They were married in 1905, and though they were never divorced, the marriage had effectively ended by 1914. After their separation, Macy entered a relationship with a deaf-blind sculptor named Myla, with whom he had a daughter. Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Myla, except that she died five years later.

After his extensive editorial work on *The Story of My Life*, Macy helped Keller, to a lesser degree, with her next four books, and served also as her agent in negotiations with publishers. In his own right, John Macy published a biography of Edgar Allan Poe (1907), *The Spirit of American Literature* (1913), and *Socialism in America* (1916). He was an associate editor of *Youth's Companion* and literary editor of *The Nation*. He served as secretary to the socialist mayor of Schenectady, George R. Lunn. And it was John Macy who introduced Helen Keller to socialism.

HELEN KELLER'S EDUCATION: A STORY OF LANGUAGE

In spite of the contributions and talents of Sullivan and Macy, our attention returns to Helen Keller. Helen Keller was internationally famous at the age of ten, remained a public figure her entire life, and even years after her death continues to be an object of fascinated admiration. From childhood on, she was regarded as an intellectual marvel and a moral saint. Her life became legend. Deaf and blind, she had learned language—so well in fact that she graduated *cum laude* with a B.A. in English from Radcliffe, and wrote fourteen books. Moreover, far from being bitter about her sensory limitations or excessively prideful about her accomplishments, she impressed almost all who knew or met her as extraordinarily

happy, kind, and generous, a being on the boundary of divinity. Samuel Clemens regarded her as the most remarkable woman he had ever met, and probably the most remarkable woman since Joan of Arc.[3]Alexander Graham Bell wrote that in Keller, "I have seen more of the divine than has been manifest in anyone I ever met before."[4] Later in Keller's life, Martha Graham, who used Keller in one of her dances, would remark, "she allows no ego block—lets nothing stand in the way; becomes a completely receptive instrument, a witness of God."[5] Another observer felt "as if looking into a perfectly clean, fresh soul … a creature who absolutely knew no guile or sorrow … a child of nature."[6] Responses like these were typical. Helen Keller became a living icon who revealed the highest possibilities of mental, moral, and spiritual development.

Certainly, this adulation is understandable, given the magnitude of Keller's accomplishments in the face of her disabilities. Yet it might seem also that the fervor of this veneration suggests deeper sources. Helen Keller's story is in large part the story of how she acquired language. She lost her sight and hearing just as she was beginning to speak, and for the next five years, though she developed some signs for objects and people around her, she had no words. She was a being without language living in, yet apart from, a social world that derived its structures, meanings, and personal relationships through language. And then, through seemingly miraculous means, she acquired language and entered this world. Keller's extraordinary status in passing from nonlinguistic to linguistic consciousness places her in a long history of human society's dialogue with the nonspeaking. From our earliest recorded myths to the most recent research in neurology and the evolution of the brain, we see an

enduring fascination with the boundary between those who use language and those who do not. In Genesis, just after creation, Adam names the animals, and Midrashic commentaries tell us that Adam performed this linguistic act after the angels could not. "His wisdom will exceed yours," God tells the angels.[7] In the epic of Gilgamesh, when Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu learns language, he is no longer able to run with the animals.

Terrence Deacon, evolutionary biologist and author of *The Symbolic Species*, argues that language is not simply a result of human evolution; rather, each small development in the ability to use symbols emphasizes and affects particular structures of the brain that then, proving advantageous, are retained through natural selection. A more sophisticated brain made possible more extensive language use, which then, again, led to the selection and genetic transmission of the brain structures best suited to language. In other words, language and the human brain coevolved. As Deacon points out, other animals use a variety of signs to communicate. The vervet monkey makes a certain cry to indicate that an eagle is approaching from the sky, and another cry to indicate that a jaguar is approaching on the ground. But these cries are not parts of a language. Each cry, Deacon argues, is an "index"; it points to a particular object at a particular moment, and is never used in the absence of that object. The index is a form of reference that is locked to its object. Many animals can employ it, and it is enormously useful. But the index is not a symbol, which is not fixed to only one object or meaning, which can make puns, abstractions, fictions, and lies; and the evolutionary work required to transform our hominid ancestors from indexical to symbolic beings took over a million years.[8]

Helen Keller's education also shows this transition from an indexical to a symbolic use of words. Anne Sullivan very

quickly was able to teach Keller the manual alphabet, and began spelling words into her hand and associating the words with objects. Yet, even as Helen learned more and more words, Sullivan commented in March 1887, she "has no idea how to use them" (this page). Keller in her memoir recalls her confusion between the words "mug" and "water." To her, there seemed to be no difference: the vessel and its contents were one object—something to drink—and she could not generalize that "water" existed independent of the mug she drank from. Her mind, in effect, was working indexically. There is the "mug-of-water." Water in some other context must require some other sign. At the famous episode at the well, however, on April 5, 1887, "the mystery of language was revealed to me" (this page) and she grasped, or began to grasp, both the particularity and generality of words. "Water" then was the word for the water in the mug and the water in the well and the water in the river and the ocean. A "mug" could contain water or milk or lemonade, and there were many mugs of different shapes and sizes; yet the name "mug" applied to all.

Thus Helen learned the crucial fact that words refer to things in ways that are both specific and general. But what about words that are wholly abstract? As Anne Sullivan wrote in a report to the Perkins Institution in October 1888, "I am constantly asked the question, 'How did you teach her the meaning of words expressive of intellectual and moral qualities?' " (this page) Sullivan responded that the meanings of words such as "love," "good," "bad," "happy," and "sorry" could be learned only by hearing them and using them in the course of conversation—"through association and repetition," as she put it. The meanings of these words become clear only in the overall context of using a language. Helen tried to associate the word "love" with an object—a bunch of flowers

and their smell, the sun and its warmth. A few days later, when she was having trouble with a lesson, Sullivan spelled "think" on her forehead, and Keller experienced for the first time "that the word was the name of a process that was going on in my head. This was my first conscious perception of an abstract idea" (this page). At this point, for Helen, the roles of feelings, ideas, and the words that represent them began to take shape. "The beautiful truth burst upon my mind—I felt that there were invisible lines stretched between my spirit and the spirits of others" (this page). These linguistic lines are real; they truly are a large—perhaps the largest—part of what connects us with others.

Keller came to believe that the meanings of abstract terms depended on their linguistic contexts. As she wrote in her third book, *The World I Live In* (1908), colors to her were as much abstractions as terms like "hope, idealism, monotheism, intellect." Yet, she could refer to "red" and "blue" as easily as she could refer to "God" or "justice" because she knew how all these words worked in the language. "The force of association drives me to say that white is exalted and pure, green is exuberant, red suggests love or shame or strength."[9] As a deaf-blind person, she used metaphors where other people would speak literally. "I know these are metaphors. Still, I must prove with them, since there is nothing in our language to replace them.… Because I can understand the word 'reflect,' a mirror has never perplexed me."[10]

Helen Keller's unique experience of coming into language from a place outside language seems to promise some revelations about ourselves as conscious, linguistic, social animals. Whether human consciousness and selfhood are primarily constructions of language remains a topic of research and debate among numerous branches of science and

philosophy.[11] But even neurologist Antonio Damasio, who describes a fundamental bodily, nonlinguistic basis of consciousness, makes language the crucial factor in what he calls "extended" consciousness—that fully human consciousness that places us in time and gives our lives a story. Most people undergo this transition into language moving from infancy to childhood and maturity. But it is the special cases—like that of Helen Keller—that seem most absorbing and illustrative. For the European Enlightenment, for example, the notion of feral or "wild" children was particularly evocative. These children seemed to represent the exact point of transition between nature and civilization, and so fueled an enormous range of speculation regarding which human qualities are innate and which are socialized, and whether socialization is an ennobling or corrupting process. Scholars, as Philippe Pinel wrote in 1800, "were delighted at the possibility of studying the rudimentary character of man and of finding out the nexus of ideas and moral sentiments which are independent of socialization."[12] The wild child provided an apparent test of human nature, though with ambiguous results. The affectionate and generous Kaspar Hauser seemed to confirm a Rousseauean view of natural goodness, "a living refutation of the doctrine of original sin," one witness described him;[13] while Victor of Aveyron inspired an observer to remark that "nature … is a state of nullity and barbarism," and "moral superiority said to be *natural* to man is only the result of civilization."[14]

Fascination with the meaning of the "wild child" continues to this day. The tragic story of "Genie," the girl forced by her family in Los Angeles to live in almost complete isolation—exposed to no language—until she was liberated by child-welfare officials in 1970 when she was thirteen, aroused

widespread outrage and horror. It also instigated competition among psychologists and linguists for access to Genie as evidence to support or disprove theories of language development; Genie became, as Noam Chomsky put it, "a natural experiment."[15] Fortunately, such experiments are rare. The reality—as opposed to the philosophical dream—of wild children, as Jeffrey Masson has observed, is one of abandonment and abuse. For the most part, children deprived of language during the crucial early years will later develop language skills only imperfectly, if at all.

And so we must imagine them—these messengers able to tell both sides of the linguistic and social boundary, and to judge the merits of both. Through our fantasies of the wild child, we hope to judge or test the values of our culture, for the wild child who comes into language, whose consciousness we see reshaped step-by-step into the molds and patterns that language provides, becomes a culture's purest product. Whatever they become is what we are. Shakespeare may have been the first to recognize how acquiring language is a test of culture, as illustrated by his characterization of Caliban: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse."[16] And Mary Shelley was first to imagine thoroughly the full moral consequences of an unformed creature entering a world through language. Frankenstein's monster is a culmination of Enlightenment thinking about nature, culture, and language. His education, which is literary and sentimental, permeated by noble ideals, stands in wretched contrast to the brutal treatment he receives from all who see him, and especially his creator. The deformed, abandoned creature is, for Mary Shelley, a perfect product of Enlightenment philosophy and romantic literature; as both a victim and perpetrator of violence, the monster demonstrates the ethical

and political failures of the culture that formed and deformed him.

Since Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the artificial creature—as monster, robot, artificial intelligence, or cyborg—has taken its place as cousin and philosophical companion of the wild child. It is the blankest of Lockean slates, possessing no history, experience, or knowledge except what its creator presents to it. As such, it is fully a reflection of its creator, and thereby a judgment on the creator and the creator's culture. Think, for instance, of HAL, the conscious computer of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Efficient, brilliant, dedicated, empathetic, paranoid, and murderous, HAL, for Kubrick, is the culmination and emblem of the entire epoch of human technology, and HAL's flaws are those of his creators.

But contemporary wild child fantasies are not just technological. François Truffaut directed a film version of Victor of Aveyron's story in 1969, and Werner Herzog filmed Kaspar Hauser's story in 1974. More recently, in American popular films, we have seen a procession of variously cognitively and linguistically impaired characters trying to enter, or resisting entering, the social world. Films like *Rain Man, Shine, Sling Blade, Nell, What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, and *The Other Sister* use the language impairments that keep their characters outside mainstream society as a means of questioning the conventions and assumptions—in effect, the language—of that society. Coming into language, and thus into society, for these characters entails (as it did for Enkidu, for Caliban, for Frankenstein's creature, for Kaspar Hauser) losses as well as gains.[17]

Helen Keller has become part of this tradition. We can regard Helen Keller as the most successful wild child in history, and this may be the deepest source of her appeal. Most of us

move gradually from the non-linguistic world of infancy into the linguistic world of childhood. But Helen Keller was framed in language more radically and completely than is the case for seeing and hearing people. Moreover, as we will see, Keller's identity was shaped not only by ordinary language but also by the language of literature.

In his commentary on Keller's personality, John Macy rejects the use of Helen Keller as evidence for any philosophical position:

> Miss Keller is distinctly not a singular proof of occult and mysterious theories.... She is no more mysterious and complex than any other person.... She does not, it would seem, prove the existence of spirit without matter, or of innate ideas, or of immortality, or anything else that any other human being does not prove. Philosophers have tried to find out what was her conception of abstract ideas before she learned language. If she had any conception, there is no way of discovering it now; for she cannot remember, and obviously there was no record at the time. She had no conception of God before she heard the word "God." (this page)

Macy's skepticism and caution are well justified, and they point to the impasses of theorizing that accompanied earlier attempts to teach language to the speechless. But his disbelief in a spiritual essence or pre-linguistic consciousness is, of course, itself a philosophical position: there is no God (or truth, love, etc.) until one can name it in a language. Language, in this view, is not primarily a way of describing or referring to the world. It is, rather, our means of creating, of shaping, of populating the world; it is what makes the world *our* world.

"Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am," Keller wrote in *The World I Live In*. "I lived in a world that was a no-world … [I] had neither will nor intellect … only a

certain blind natural impetus."[18]"My mind was in a state of anarchy in which meaningless sensations rioted."[19] Anne Sullivan's first impression of Helen in 1887, described in a letter to Sophia Hopkins, was that her face was "intelligent, but lacks mobility, or soul, or something" (this page). Nor did this girl without language possess an ethical sense. Anne Sullivan described her as a "tyrant" with a violent temper, impossible for her family to control, whose "untaught, unsatisfied hands destroy whatever they touch" (this page). The rapid changes that came with Helen's first acquisition of language, as both she and Anne Sullivan described it, were not only cognitive but also moral. Just after the famous linguistic revelation at the water pump, Helen returned home and found pieces of a doll she had broken earlier in the day. She tried and failed to put it back together, and then "my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow" (this page). The revelation of language led also to love, as Anne Sullivan related how "Helen got up this morning like a radiant fairy. She has flitted from object to object, asking the name of everything and kissing me for very gladness. Last night when I got in bed, she stole into my arms of her own accord and kissed me for the first time, and I thought my heart would burst, so full was it of joy" (this page).

Helen Keller, of course, possessed a wonderfully developed sense of touch. She cited Diderot in claiming touch to be "the most profound and philosophical" of the senses.[20] Yet language was Keller's principal mode of apprehending the world, and she maintained her faith in language all her life. We see it touchingly in this book in her letters referring to (and trying to raise money for the education of) Tommy Stringer, an impoverished deaf-blind boy whom she heard about in 1891. In a letter thanking one benefactor for a contribution, she

wrote, “He loves to climb much better than to spell, but that is because he does not know yet what a wonderful thing language is. He cannot imagine how very, very happy he will be when he can tell us his thoughts, and we can tell him how we have loved him so long” (this page). And to the poet Oliver Wendall Holmes, she wrote, “I am very sorry to say that Tommy has not learned any words yet. He is the same restless little creature he was when you saw him. But it is pleasant to think that he is happy and playful in his bright new home, and by and by that strange, wonderful thing teacher calls *mind*, will begin to spread its beautiful wings and fly away in search of knowledge-land. Words are the mind’s wings, are they not?” (pp. 151–52)

In order to understand how Helen Keller was able to articulate this insight at the age of eleven, how language became her mind’s wings, we must look at Anne Sullivan’s methods as a teacher, reminding ourselves that *The Story of My Life* is above all the story of a unique education. John Macy commented that Sullivan’s method was both a “natural method” and “a destruction of method.” By this he meant that Sullivan did not teach Keller language in a series of structured lessons, but rather she created for her—and immersed her in—a total environment of language. *“I shall talk into her hand as we talk into the baby’s ears”* (this page), Sullivan wrote in April 1887. And though she devoted a period of time each day specifically to teaching Helen new words, Sullivan insisted, “you *mustn’t think this is the only time I spell to Helen; for I spell in her hand everything we do all day long, although she has no idea as yet what the spelling means”* (this page). Moreover, this total, continuous environment of language was a grammatical environment. From the beginning of her education, Sullivan signed full sentences, never fragments or single words. “[T]he

whole sentence," Sullivan wrote, *"repeated many times during the day, must in time impress itself upon the brain, and by and by she will use it herself"* (this page). In her 1891 report to the Perkins Institution, Sullivan elaborated on this theme:

> I have always talked to Helen exactly as I would talk to a seeing and hearing child, and I have insisted that other people should do the same. Whenever any one asks me if she will understand this or that word I always reply: "Never mind whether she understands each separate word of a sentence or not. She will guess the meanings of the new words from their connection with others which are already intelligible to her." (this page)

Method or no method, the education was certainly successful. Looking back at her teaching in 1894, Sullivan concluded, "the fluency with which Helen uses language is due to the fact that nearly every impression which she receives comes through the medium of language" (this page).

"LITERATURE IS MY UTOPIA"

But Keller was immersed in not just any language context, but specifically in literature. Eight months after Helen's language training began, Sullivan wrote, "I am teaching her little rhymes and verses, too. They fix beautiful thoughts in her memory … [and] quicken all the child's faculties, because they stimulate the imagination" (this page). Three years later, in her report to the Perkins Institution, she concluded that "Helen's use of English is due largely to her familiarity with books" (this page), and in 1894, speaking to the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, Sullivan explained in more detail her ideas on the importance of

literature in Helen's education, and indeed for education in general. "[T]he language of educated people," she wrote, "is the memory of the language of books" (this page). And for Helen in particular, "the constant companionship of good books has been of supreme importance in her education" (this page). As with language in general, Sullivan held that it was "not necessary that a child should understand every word in a book before he can read with pleasure and profit.… Helen drank in language which she at first could not understand, and it remained in her mind until needed.… " "I have always observed," Sullivan wrote, "that children manifest the greatest delight in the lofty, poetic language which we are too ready to think beyond their comprehension" (this page).

Sullivan read to Helen constantly from the earliest moments of her education, and Helen read a wide variety of literature, both for children and adults. The sentimental and didactic children's novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy* made a great impression on her when she was eight, and when she was twelve she was reading *Paradise Lost.*[21] Keller's literary education, as she describes it in chapter XXI of her memoir, though wide-ranging, centered around a classical canon—the Bible, Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare —and branched out from there, primarily to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American fiction, poetry, and children's literature. At Radcliffe, she extended her reading to French and German literature. From the quotations she included in her memoir and letters, we know she was familiar with the popular American poets of her time: Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as well as with Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Goethe. And she was, of course, personally acquainted with many well-known writers, including Holmes, Whittier, Samuel Clemens, and William

Dean Howells. Keller refers to Hawthorne, but I find it noteworthy that she does not mention having read Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. Nor does she refer to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, or Charles Chesnutt. It seems Keller was not yet familiar with some of the powerful traditions of social criticism running through American literature. Of Mark Twain, she wrote: "I love Mark Twain—who does not? The gods, too, loved him and put into his heart all manner of wisdom; then, fearing lest he should become a pessimist, they spanned his mind with a rainbow of love and faith" (this page). It is difficult to justify this optimistic appraisal with, for instance, the holocaustal ending of *Connecticut Yankee*. But, as Keller continued, "literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book-friends" (this page). In this literary utopia, in Sullivan's words (again from her speech in 1894), "Helen has had the best and purest models in language constantly presented to her.... Her mind is so filled with the beautiful thoughts and ideas of the great poets that nothing seems commonplace to her; for her imagination colours all life with its own rich hues" (this page).

I have found no evidence that Anne Sullivan had read the work of the British poet and literary and social critic Matthew Arnold by the time *The Story of My Life* was first published, but Arnold's ideas had great influence in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution when Sullivan was a student there, was an admirer of Matthew Arnold, and Sullivan's ideas on education and literature show Arnold's influence.[22]

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold presented literary culture as a moral contrast and corrective to the commerce and industry that he saw beginning to dominate the modern world.

Defending elite literary culture against charges that it was trivial and useless, Arnold argued that culture had powerful social uses. Culture's aesthetic urge toward perfection, Arnold claimed, contained "moral and social passion."[23] Culture provided a means of criticizing and overcoming the two major social dangers he saw in his time: the unimpeded worship of wealth among the upper-class "barbarians," and the violent, or potentially violent, protests of working-class "anarchists." It would also, of course, transform the souls, and tastes, of the middle-class "philistines" who were its principal consumers. Indeed, for Arnold, culture's power to transform—or "perfect"—people's souls, regardless of their background, would ultimately eliminate social-class distinctions altogether. Only when "the best that has been thought and known in the world" had been made "current everywhere," and when "the whole of society [was] in the fullest measure permeated by thought, sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive"[24] could meaningful social reform be instituted. Thus, Arnold implied that cultural education—elite in its curriculum but available to everyone—was the necessary precondition for a harmonious society. But—and here Arnold reversed his democratic impulses—he also held that any political actions by the working class for greater economic and political power were misconceived and dangerous, and should be forcibly suppressed.[25]

Anne Sullivan, the impoverished and abused Irish orphan who was educated at Michael Anagnos's school and graduated at the top of her class, could be an advertisement for Arnold's educational ideals—both in their emphasis on literature's powers to transform the soul and in their ultimate rejection of overt political action by the lower classes. For Sullivan, unlike her husband or her student, never became a socialist, and

remained skeptical of all politics. But it was Sullivan's student, Helen Keller, who became the perfect Arnoldian creation, a direct product of Sullivan's selections of "the best that has been thought and known." Her views of the world and its values were shaped by her immersion in an elite, Arnoldian literary canon, and her moral outlook was formed by her experiences of literature. From an early age, Anne Sullivan reported that Keller used literature as a moral template: "She is at once transported into the midst of the events of a story. She rejoices when justice wins, she is sad when virtue lies low, and her face glows with admiration and reverence when heroic deeds are described. She even enters into the spirit of battle; she says, 'I think it is right for men to fight against wrongs and tyrants' " (this page). Literature leads to love, and then to a love of justice. Helen seemed to unite the aesthetic and moral components—the Hellenist and Hebraist, Arnold called them—of Arnold's theory of culture. As she wrote in her memoir, when reading literature, "my spirit reverently follows … into the regions where Beauty and Truth and Goodness are one" (this page).

Helen Keller's consciousness, then, was formed by language, by an elite, often didactic, literature, and by the values of nobility, sacrifice, beauty, and struggle that such literature so often conveys. This is, of course, a very one-sided literature and a very flattering view of humanity, and it may be that this is what we see when we regard Helen Keller: an embodiment of what we feel is best about ourselves. To use a term that Arnold applied to culture, she radiates "sweetness and light."[26] In her goodness, Helen showed that her culture was good, and that the society that created and valued that culture was good.

If Helen Keller can be considered a kind of test of the value, or values, of the elite literary cultures that formed her, then

these cultures would seem to have passed the test. But two problems complicate the question: the problem of plagiarism, or authentic consciousness; and the problem of the world, or of injustice.

Plagiarism And Originality

Along with the general adulation for her accomplishments and character, Keller encountered an undercurrent of criticism asserting that her sensitivity, soulfulness, and cultural fluency were fraudulent, that she was a plagiarist and merely a creature of others' words. The comments of some blind critics were especially harsh. The blind psychologist Thomas Cutsworth asserted that "with all her education in visual verbal concepts, there is far less experiential reality and situational weight in the adult Helen than there was in the untutored child.... Literary expression has been the goal of her formal education. Her own experience and her own world were neglected.... It is a birthright sold for a mass of verbiage."[27] Likewise, a blind literary critic, Pierre Villey-Desmeserets, wrote that Keller was the victim of "verbalism," "... constantly the dupe of words, or rather the dupe of her dreams. Wordiness, unreal emotion and, in the worst sense of the term, literature, occupy a disconcerting place in her writing."[28]

Keller could not fully defend herself against such criticisms. In fact, she agreed with their premise that she had been shaped by words, and by literary language in particular; though for her this didn't imply that she had been duped and miseducated. One of Keller's most painful, and most formative, experiences was an accusation against her of plagiarism of a story she wrote in 1892, when she was eleven. This was the

famous “Frost King” episode, which Keller discusses in chapter XIV of her memoir and John Macy returns to at length in his commentary. Keller wrote the story as a birthday present for Michael Anagnos, and Anagnos, charmed and impressed, had the story published in the annual report of the Perkins Institution. Soon after it was published, however, a reader informed Anagnos that Keller’s “The Frost King” was nearly identical in its plot and in much of its language to a story by a writer named Margaret T. Canby, entitled “The Frost Fairies.” The young Helen, horrified and humiliated, could not remember ever having read or heard Canby’s story, but could not deny the extensive and obvious similarities with her own. Anne Sullivan said she had no knowledge of “The Frost Fairies” and had never read it to Helen. Sophia Hopkins, Sullivan’s friend and former housemother at Perkins, owned a copy of Canby’s book at her summer house on Cape Cod, where Sullivan and Keller often visited. Hopkins read many stories to Helen, though she could not recall having read “The Frost Fairies.” It may be that Mrs. Hopkins read the story to Helen. It may also be that Anne Sullivan read it to her and then, embarrassed by the controversy and accusations, lied. Both of Keller’s recent biographers, Joseph Lash and Dorothy Herrmann, believe that Keller probably received Canby’s story from Sullivan’s hands.

Whatever the case, it was a painful episode, and helped lead to the break in relations between Sullivan (and Keller) and Anagnos. For Keller’s part, her close adaptation of Margaret Canby’s story seems to have been unconscious, but for some time after the “Frost King” incident, she was, as she wrote in her memoir, “tortured by the fear that what I write is not my own” (this page) and thought she would never write again. By the time she wrote *The Story of My Life*, however, she had

begun to question the possibility of singularly original, immaculate authorship. She recognized that she could not "always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read become the very substance and texture of my mind." Thus, both her consciousness and her compositions were a "crazy patchwork … all sorts of odds and ends … made up of crude notions of my own, inlaid with the brighter thoughts and riper opinions of the authors I have read" (this page). These conclusions she drew from her own experience and, most likely, from conversations with John Macy, who wrote in his commentary on Keller's literary style, "the style of every writer and indeed, of every human being, illiterate or cultivated, is a composite reminiscence of all that he has read and heard. Of the sources of his vocabulary he is, for the most part, as unaware as he is of the moment when he ate the food which makes a bit of his thumbnail. With most of us the contributions from different sources are blended, crossed, and confused" (this page). Three years later, in *The World I Live In*, Keller also made her personal observations more general. "The bulk of the world's knowledge," she wrote, "is an imaginary construction.… History is but a mode of imagining, of making us see civilizations that no longer appear upon the earth."[29] Even direct sensory experience is a complicated assembly of sensations and language. For instance, "our ideas of the sky are an accumulation of touch-glimpses, literary allusions, and the observations of others, with an emotional blending of all."[30]

Can a person who is so explicitly and avowedly a verbal construction, a "patchwork" of language and culture, still be revered as an emblem of what is best in that culture—especially when her culture holds originality as one of its primary values? The question forces all of us to reflect, as Helen Keller did, on how our minds are put together, and on

the limits and nature of our freedom of thought. The example of Helen Keller shows that a shared symbolic system is far more important than shared physical abilities for creating social bonds and values. Thus, Helen Keller, with her extreme physical disabilities, could serve as a unique instance who proved a general condition. We all are in large part constructed by the social and linguistic worlds in which we grow up. (But, fortunately, we grow up in many such worlds, and their inevitable and unpredictable combinations, I believe, make possible novelty and originality.) The clarity and obviousness of Keller's constructedness made her the ideal mirror of her culture. And so her powers of imitation; her status as doll, automaton with a beautiful soul; the fact that she could, in some sense, be only a plagiarist, and thus confirm the value of what she plagiarized—all this did not disqualify her, but rather reconfirmed her role as an object of adoration.

The World, Injustice, And Politics

The more serious problem came when Keller confronted social injustices. A few years after the publication of *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller became a socialist and an active spokesperson for labor unions. She rejected her education and its Arnoldian faith in the values of literature and elite culture. And, for this transgression, she lost much of the widespread adulation she had previously enjoyed.

Human suffering, whether through malice or accident, troubled Helen Keller from an early age. In a letter from 1889, at the age of nine, she wrote, "Sometimes very terrible accidents happen, and many people are burned and drowned and injured. The other day I broke my doll's head off; but that was not a dreadful accident, because dolls do not live and feel,

like people" (this page). A year later, she wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes concerning a story she had read, "I used to think—when I was small, and before I could read—that everybody was always happy, and at first it made me very sad to know about pain and great sorrow; but now I know that we could never learn to be brave and patient, if there were only joy in the world" (this page). To the Reverend Phillips Brooks, in the same year, Keller continued her thinking about suffering: "Why does the dear Father in heaven think it best for us to have very great sorrow sometimes? … When people do very wrong and hurt animals and treat children unkindly God is grieved, but what will he do to them to teach them to be pitiful and loving?" (this page). John Macy was right to remark that "[o]f all the subjects which perplex and trouble Helen, none distresses her so much as the knowledge of the existence of evil, and of the suffering which results from it" (this page).

In her memoir, now writing as a young woman, a student at Radcliffe, Keller continued to question the world's moral makeup, though now using characters from Euripides rather than Lord Fauntleroy as examples. Why, she wondered of Medea and Jason, did "the gods [permit] them to do wrong and then [punish] them for their wickedness"? And she asked, quoting Sidney Lanier, "how 'God can dumbness keep / While Sin creeps grinning through His house of Time' " (this page). Keller thought also about history and about contemporary social problems. She recalls her introduction as a child to American history, her visits to Plymouth Rock and Bunker Hill, and her sense of the heroism and nobility of the American past: "How my childish imagination glowed with the splendour of their enterprise! I idealized them as the bravest and most generous men that ever sought a home in a strange land." But then she recounts feeling "keenly surprised and disappointed

years later to learn of their acts of persecution that make us tingle with shame, even while we glory in the courage and energy that gave us our 'Country Beautiful' " (this page). In chapter XXII, she turns her attention briefly to current events: "We heard of the cruel, unnecessary fighting in the far-away Pacific, and learned of the struggles going on between capital and labour. We knew that beyond the border of our Eden men were making history by the sweat of their brows when they might better make a holiday" (this page). A paragraph later, she continues,

> I grow hot and indignant to think that good people should be content to live in fine houses and become strong and beautiful, while others are condemned to live in hideous, sunless tenements and grow ugly, withered and cringing.... I have felt their hard, rough hands and realized what an endless struggle their existence must be—no more than a series of scrimmages, thwarted attempts to do something. Their life seems an immense disparity between effort and opportunity. (this page–this page)

Keller's indignation, however, is soon put to rest, for this passage appears in the midst of a short essay extolling the virtues of a rural or pastoral life over the ills of urban living: "Oh, would that men would leave the city, its splendour and its tumult and its gold, and return to wood and field and simple, honest living! Then would their children grow stately as noble trees ..." (this page).

This overly easy resolution of moral problems, with its detour around political questions, is typical of Helen Keller's thinking at the time she wrote *The Story of My Life*. Evil, she always feels, will naturally and inevitably be converted into good. "[T]he Shylocks," she writes, "the Judases, and even the Devil are broken spokes in the great wheel of good which shall in due time be made whole" (this page). The writer Charles

Dudley Warner would seem to have been correct when he said of Keller that she lacked " 'righteous indignation' " (this page). But this lack would not persist much longer.

In 1908, Keller read H. G. Wells's case for socialism in *New Worlds for Old*, and her strong feelings about suffering and injustice began to achieve a clearer focus. She was already thinking more about current political and economic conditions, and had complained in her preface to *The World I Live In* that "apparently nobody cares what I think of the tariff, the conservation of our natural resources, or the conflicts which revolve about the name of Dreyfus," and that all anyone wants to know is "what idea you had of goodness and beauty when you were six years old."[31] From Wells, Keller moved on to Marx and Engels. In 1909, she joined the Socialist Party, then joined the more militant International Workers of the World in 1911. For the next fifteen years, the bulk of her public activities and writing were devoted to socialist and labor-union causes.

This perfect creation of a culture and society that wished to view her as its reflection was now criticizing its products and its premises. She berated her own literary education and culture for its blindness to the real "industrial world. And what a world it is!" she wrote in 1912:

> How different from the world of my beliefs! I must face unflinchingly a world of facts—a world of misery and degradation, of blindness, crookedness and sin.... How reconcile this world of fact with the bright world of my imagining? My darkness had been filled with the light of intelligence and, behold, the outer daylight world was stumbling and groping in social blindness![32]

In her essay "The Modern Woman,"[33] Keller dismissed

literary education as trivial. “When Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, or whether he wrote it or not, seems relatively unimportant compared with the question whether the working women in your town receive a living wage and bear their children amid proper surroundings.… The educated woman,” she insisted, “is she who knows the social basis of her life,” and education at present, including her own with Anne Sullivan and at Radcliffe, “ignores these fundamental propositions.”[34]

In her writings and public speeches, and in her active support for demonstrations, strikes, and civil disobedience, Keller transformed herself from a perfect Arnoldian creation of “the best that has been thought and known” into the “anarchist” that Matthew Arnold so greatly feared. Unjust laws should be disobeyed, she wrote, since “laws are for the most part made by and for the possessing classes, and in a contest with the workers the bosses do not respect the laws, but quite shamelessly break them.”[35]

With these new beliefs and affiliations, Keller could no longer be revered as a miraculous icon of intellectual achievement and moral purity who represented all that was best in American culture. While *The Story of My Life* was reprinted ten times in its first year of publication, her book of socialist writings, *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision* (1913), did not sell well and was never reprinted. Her move to socialism was generally attacked by journalists. Some claimed that she was exploited by Anne Sullivan and John Macy and was a dupe of “enthusiastic Marxist propagandists” (although Sullivan never shared Keller’s socialist views). Others, who previously had celebrated her accomplishments as a deaf-blind woman, now concluded that “her mistakes spring out of the manifest limitations of her development.”[36]The *New York Herald* condemned the use of

"the pathos of her personality to promote a propaganda of disloyalty and anarchy."[37] By the end of World War I, her invitations to lecture to general, nonsocialist audiences had nearly disappeared.[38]

By the mid-1920s, Keller had become less active in socialist and labor causes. The persecution of radicals in the "red scares" after the First World War, the need to make a living, and perhaps her wish to be liked all led Keller toward more widely acceptable social commitments, such as work for the blind. According to historian Philip Foner, Keller retained her socialist sympathies all her life,[39] but after she began work for the American Foundation for the Blind, she restricted her political expression to support in the 1930s for the New Deal and in the 1950s for world peace and disarmament. Keller thus resumed her status as miracle and saint, and her radical politics was forgotten.

But what finally was the relationship between Keller's politics and the literary canon that helped form her consciousness? Did she genuinely turn against the values that seemed to shape her, or was her radicalism itself a product of the ethical concerns projected through those values—an adaptation, another unconscious plagiarism?

It is difficult to conclude, for the story of Helen Keller is a story without an ending. It provokes our most strenuous, and most contradictory, thoughts and imaginings, and raises questions that will always remain open. How are consciousness and identity shaped by our immersion in language? How do our ethical and political commitments emerge from our educations? Can literature and art be forces for democracy, as Matthew Arnold once hoped, or do they merely substitute beauty for justice, as many critics now contend? Can any of us claim to have created ourselves through personal acts of will

and intellect, or are we all the products of some larger collaboration? If we are constructed beings, can we nonetheless rearrange and augment ourselves with feeling and brilliance, and produce something new—perhaps once in our lives; perhaps every moment? When we understand the story of Helen Keller, we will be closer to the answers to these questions, too.

Helen Keller And Disability

Helen Keller's legacy for current movements for the disabled is ambiguous. She devoted most of her adult life to work for the blind. At the same time, she tried her best to integrate herself into the seeing and hearing culture. One of her lifelong goals, only imperfectly realized, was to learn to speak intelligibly, and she preferred oral speech and alphabetical finger communication over all forms of sign language. In this preference, she was typical of her time. And while educators and advocates for the deaf still debate the value of speech versus signing, American Sign Language (ASL) is now recognized by linguists as a legitimate language, and a particular and unique deaf culture has emerged that Keller could not have imagined and probably would not have approved of.[40]

Especially in her years of socialist activism, Keller subordinated charitable interest in the disabled to broader social concerns. She disdained what she regarded as sentimental sympathy for "the unfortunate," and believed that "the way to help the blind or any other defective class is to understand, correct, remove the incapacities and inequalities of our entire civilization.… Technically we know how to prevent blindness … but socially we do not know how. Socially we are

still ignorant."[41]

It is not clear to what extent Helen Keller believed the disabled could lead independent lives. She well knew that she did not, and from her writings we can judge that she felt her own case was simply an intensified version of the norm—that all people are mutually dependent collaborators in one another's lives. At the same time, Keller assumed the role of paragon—beautiful, spiritual, intellectual, and pure—whose reassuring image could be opposed to other, more threatening embodiments of the disabled (or, as they were still called by Keller and others, the "defective"): the blind, deaf, crippled, deformed, insane, and retarded, especially those from the lower classes who could not receive adequate care. In her apparent perfection, Helen Keller buffered "able" society from contact with those hideous others.

This strange zone of cultural contact between able society and its disabled others has been a topic of much thinking among scholars of disability. One general conclusion these scholars have reached is that "normal" society tends to project onto the disabled those physical and moral qualities that they find unacceptable in themselves: ugliness, unintelligence, helplessness, and feelings of abandonment and worthlessness. Thus, the disabled must confront not only their genuine physical and psychological limitations, and the institutional barriers that often exacerbate them, but also the revulsion of "normal" people who are unable to tolerate any hint of "disability" in themselves. The existence of the disabled, in effect, is necessary for the normal to see themselves as normal. In this way, Lennard Davis argues, the hideousness of Medusa is necessary to confirm the beauty of Venus. Similarly, psychotherapist Jeanne Safer describes a "Caliban Syndrome" in which a normal sibling, the family's "Miranda," preserves

her sense of normality and favor by ladening a damaged (whether disabled or merely "difficult") sister or brother with all the negative traits she does not want to recognize in herself.[42]

Helen Keller has proven to be an enormously sturdy and effective cultural indicator, for she unites both sides of the metaphorical balance. She is both Venus and Medusa, Miranda and Caliban. Her sightless, silent world is what we most dread, while her beauty, goodness, and wisdom are what we most desire. And, except during her years of militant socialism, she approaches the seeing and hearing world without recrimination, but with love, and in perfect imitation of what we wish we could be.

A Note On Economics

The documents that comprise *The Story of My Life* tell us a great deal about the lives and minds of its protagonists, but they certainly do not tell us everything. We learn nothing, for instance, about Helen's sexual feelings as she grows from childhood to adolescence to adulthood—except through Anne Sullivan's humorous comment in 1887 that "I do wish things would stop being born!" (this page). The sexual mores of the time, particularly with regard to the disabled, probably explain this reticence.[43]A more striking omission, however, involves the question of money.

John Macy remarks that "it should be said she almost never handles money—one of the many sordid and petty details of life … which she has been spared" (this page). Macy's remark is highly misleading for, in fact, the need for money was a continuing worry in Keller's life and a frequent subtext in *The*

Story of My Life. Her father, Arthur Keller, a former captain in the Confederate army, was never free of financial problems. His farm was not a reliable source of income, and when he lost his job as federal marshal of northern Alabama in 1889 (when Republican Benjamin Harrison became president), he was forced into debt to pay for Helen's education and traveling expenses. Helen's growing fame, however, attracted the attention of wealthy people who became her friends and benefactors. Many of the letters in part II of this book were written to these benefactors: Mr. and Mrs. Laurence Hutton, William Wade, John Spaulding, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mrs. William Thaw, Charles Dudley Warner. Indeed, much of Helen Keller's correspondence can be read as a sequence of elaborate thank-you notes to those whose financial support was essential to her and Anne Sullivan's livelihood.

With Keller's conversion to socialism, some of these relationships became strained. In 1909, Keller turned down a pension offered to her by Andrew Carnegie, though a few years later she decided to accept it after all. During her most active socialist years, she relied mainly on the Carnegie pension, donations from Henry Rogers and Mrs. William Thaw, and income from lectures. In order to become more financially independent, from 1919 through 1923, Helen and Anne performed on programs in vaudeville theaters, an occupation that Helen highly enjoyed and Anne did not.

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"Helen Keller has been so long before the public, first as an afflicted child and then as a gifted young woman, that one's first thought in taking up her book of more than four hundred pages is: How can there be anything more of interest to tell?" So opens the May 1903 review in *Literary World* of *The Story of*

My Life,[44] and these sentiments of a century ago may be even more true today. Like the reviewer, we think we already know this woman who indeed lived her whole life in the public eye; but, in addition, we think we already know this book. Reading the restored edition—with Keller's memoir, her letters, Sullivan's letters, and Macy's commentaries—forces us to reconsider both these assumptions. This documentary of an education, this many-voiced chronicle of the shaping of an extraordinary, collaborative consciousness, continues to reveal new understandings and new questions about our physical, intellectual, and moral lives. As the *Literary World*'s reviewer saw in 1903, *The Story of My Life* is "unique, in all which that word implies."

NOTES

1. Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (New York: Delacorte Press; Seymour Lawrence, 1980), 290.
2. Ibid., 291.
3. Dorothy Herrmann, *Helen Keller: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 102, 107.
4. Lash, 172.
5. Herrmann, 304.
6. Ibid., 101.
7. *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London and New York: Soncino Press, 1939), 135.
8. Deacon adapted his terminology of index and symbol from the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who proposed also a third type of sign, the icon. More elementary than either the index or

symbol, the icon is, in effect, a sign that stands for exactly what it is—as, for instance, a religious icon can be seen as an actual incarnation of the deity it represents. Deacon argues that the most primitive animals perceive the world iconically: each thing is what it is, and thus is distinct from everything else, and thus cannot stand for or point toward some other thing (as an index would do). For other biological perspectives on the evolution of language, see Steven Pinker, Antonio Damasio, and Gerald Edelman.

9. Helen Keller, *The World I Live In* (New York: Century Co., 1908), 108.

10. Keller, *World*, 126. Sullivan's and Keller's conviction that the meanings of individual words derive from their places in a broader landscape of language resembles in part the thinking of some of their distinguished contemporaries—the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American scientist, mathematician, and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Peirce reasoned that no act of interpretation was "immediate," that is, without context. Nor was interpretation merely the linking of an object or idea with an appropriate sign. Rather, there is always an outside, or "third," element in every act of interpretation, and "meaning" is a process of triangulation, a setting of one term against at least two others. Similarly, de Saussure wrote, "language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" *(Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin [1915; reprint, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959], 114).

11. See work by philosophers Donald Davidson and Daniel Dennett; neurologists Gerald Edelman and Antonio Damasio; zoologists Donald Griffin and Richard Byrne; and collections of work by cognitive psychologists, edited by L. Weiskrantz, and by Peter Carruthers and Jill Boucher.

12. Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 58.

13. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *Lost Prince: The Unsolved Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 44.

14. Lane, *Wild Boy*, 129.

15. Russ Rymer, *Genie: An Abused Child's Flight from Silence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 38.

16. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii.363–64, *The Complete Works*. General ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).

17. There is an extensive tradition of modern literature that features characters with a variety of language and cognitive impairments, from the stuttering of Melville's Billy Budd through the mental retardation of characters such as Faulkner's Benjy (The *Sound and the Fury)*, Conrad's Stevie (The *Secret Agent)*, and Steinbeck's Lenny *(Of Mice and Men)*. More recently, we see the deaf-mute John Singer in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the mute Indian in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the silent Chinese girl in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the ambiguously impaired Wilder in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, other postmodern "wild children" in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* and Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, the stutterer Hex Raitcliffe in Rick Moody's *Purple America*, and Jonathan Lethem's detective with Tourette's syndrome in *Motherless Brooklyn*. See also Richard Powers's extraordinary novel of the education of an artificial intelligence, *Galatea 2.2*, which, I believe, is modeled on the education of Helen Keller. (See my essay "Testing Literature: Helen Keller and Richard Powers' Implementation [H]elen" *[Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2002].) In addition, speechlessness and language impairment is a powerful motif in postcolonial literature, particularly in the novels of the South African J. M. Coetzee, and in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. This astonishingly broad range of imaginings of characters on or just outside the borders of language indicates a profound cultural need both to communicate in a deeper way than what language provides and also to come to terms with ourselves as linguistic (and thus social and political) beings.

18. Keller, *World*, 113.

19. Ibid., 160.

20. Ibid., 80.

21. In her very fine book, Mary Klages describes how Helen Keller's moral development and the widespread perceptions of her as a moral paragon owed much to the sentimental children's literature of the time, which was widely read and formed a major part of Keller's early reading. Keller, Klages argues, became through her reading the "good girl" so often portrayed in that sentimental fiction.

22. See John Henry Raleigh and Lawrence Levine for accounts of Matthew Arnold's place in American culture. See also Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton for discussions of the broader implications of the term "culture" and how it has been used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

23. Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy, with Friendship's Garland and Some Literary Essays*, R. H. Super, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 90.

24. Ibid., 113, 112.

25. Ibid., 223.

26. In Arnold's view, the transformation of the soul by means of literature will create new conceptions of self-interest. But in the interim, before this transformation is achieved, the state must function as the "best self" for the entire society—and must, therefore, transcend the interests of any particular class. Here lies the problem in any debate concerning the social-political function of literature. Most of what we have been used to thinking of as "classic" literature has been produced by and for members of a privileged class and is open to the criticism that inevitably, on some level, it serves the interests of the dominant class. Whatever social criticisms it contains will not truly challenge the status quo, and its very emotional force and even its beauty ultimately serve to tranquilize its readers into a state of acquiescence. Walter Benjamin expressed this line of criticism most succinctly when he wrote, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" *(Illuminations*, ed. Hannah

Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1969], 256). Benjamin's is not the last word, however. I would direct readers to Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Sacvan Bercovitch, Robert Scholes, and Fredric Jameson (and this is a very partial list) for intelligent, nuanced criticisms and defenses of the social value of literature.

27. Thomas Cutsworth, *The Blind in School and Society* (1933; reprint, New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1951), 52.

28. Pierre Villey-Desmeserets, *The World of the Blind* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 313.

29. Keller, *World*, 89.

30. Ibid., 100.

31. Ibid., xi–xii.

32. Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Helen Keller: Her Socialist Years* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 42.

33. Helen Keller, *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, P. & Co., 1913), "The Modern Woman," 36–82.

34. Ibid., 40–41.

35. Foner, 60.

36. From *Brooklyn Eagle*, cited by Keller in "How I Became a Socialist," in Foner, 25.

37. Lash, 424. See also Foner, 23–25; and Herrmann, 172–76.

38. Lash, 469.

39. Foner, 16.

40. Over a hundred American colleges and universities now offer ASL courses in fulfillment of their foreign language requirements. For an excellent study of attitudes regarding speech and signing in the early twentieth century, see Douglas Baynton's *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign*

Against Sign Language. For other more general studies of this issue, see Harlan Lane's *When the Mind Hears* and John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry Crouch's *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*.

41. Keller, *Out of the Dark*, 40.

42. For an excellent discussion of the representation of disability in philosophy, literature, and film, see David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Mitchell and Snyder argue that the difference, the threat, posed by the disabled body is of central importance in many defining texts of western culture. The portrayal of disability is an "artistic prosthesis … on which cultural and literary narratives rely" and which "provides an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed on the body" ([Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 51).

43. Dorothy Herrmann's biography *Helen Keller: A Life* provides an excellent discussion of the restrictions placed on Keller's sexual desires and romantic aspirations.

44. Review, *Literary World* 34, no. 5 (1903): 118.

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* Specific titles of the writers and researchers referred to in the Editor's Preface can be found in the bibliography.

Acknowledgments

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Thanks to Chris Krentz at the University of Virginia for his very helpful comments regarding the speech versus signing controversy in the education of the deaf.

Thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities for providing funding during part of the time I was preparing this edition, and to Hofstra University for their support of my research.

A Note on the Text

In this restored edition of *The Story of My Life*, I have made a few cuts but have maintained the form and integrity of the book that was published in 1903. Helen Keller's memoir (part I) is completely unabridged. In part II, I have removed fifteen letters that seemed to me redundant. The reader, I am certain, will get a clear idea of the development of Helen Keller's linguistic and social abilities, and of her literary and ethical interests, from the remaining one hundred and eight. Also published here are John Macy's introduction to part II and his short comments between some of the letters.

In part III, I have cut Macy's brief biography of Anne Sullivan, since I discuss her life in my preface, and some of Macy's summaries of Sullivan's educational methods, since I believe that Sullivan's explanations stand sufficiently on their own. I have also cut some of Macy's comments on the subject of Helen's efforts to learn to speak that largely repeat material covered in Keller's memoir and letters. Finally, I have selected passages from Margaret Canby's "The Frost Fairies" and Keller's "The Frost King" and juxtaposed them in an endnote so that readers can get a sense of how Keller adapted the language of the earlier story, but I have not reprinted the two stories in their entirety as Macy did in the original edition. I believe that my excerpting passages will make comparison easier for the reader. In each place where I cut or abridged in part III, I have provided a transitional note describing what is missing.

Other than these small changes, the text of this edition is

identical to the text published by Doubleday, Page and Company in 1903.

In addition, as appendices to this edition, excerpts from two other works by Helen Keller have been attached. The first appendix is a chapter from *The World I Live In*, which is thought by many to be Keller's best-written book. In this book, Keller responds to numerous requests she had received to describe in more detail what it felt like to live without sight and hearing. In the excerpted chapter, "Before the Soul Dawn," she provides a fascinating and eloquent account of her efforts to remember what her consciousness was before she acquired language. The second appendix is part of Keller's essay "The Modern Woman," which is a chapter in her book of socialist writings, *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision*.

To

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL[1]

Who has taught the deaf to speak

and enabled the listening ear to hear

speech from the Atlantic to the Rockies,

I DEDICATE

this Story of My Life.

Original Preface

This book is in three parts. The first two, Miss Keller's story and the extracts from her letters, form a complete account of her life as far as she can give it. Much of her education she cannot explain herself, and since a knowledge of that is necessary to an understanding of what she has written, it was thought best to supplement her autobiography with the reports and letters of her teacher, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan. The addition of a further account of Miss Keller's personality and achievements may be unnecessary; yet it will help to make clear some of the traits of her character and the nature of the work which she and her teacher have done.

For the third part of the book the Editor is responsible, though all that is valid in it he owes to authentic records and to the advice of Miss Sullivan.

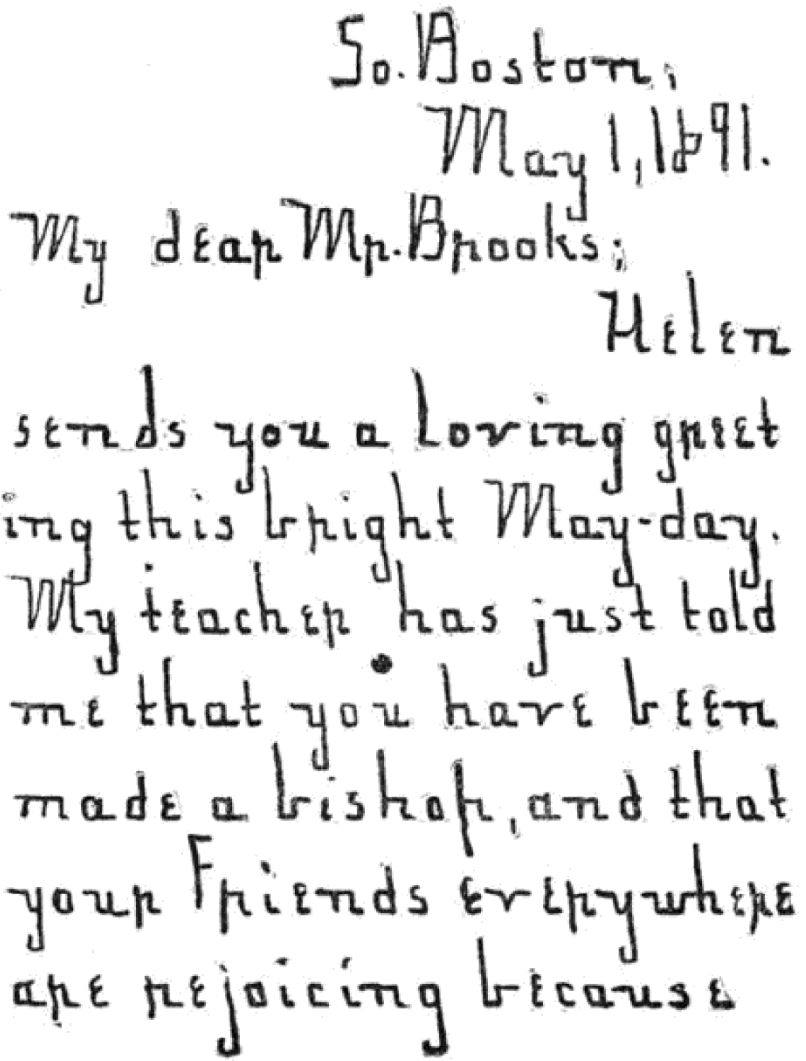
The Editor desires to express his gratitude and the gratitude of Miss Keller and Miss Sullivan to *The Ladies' Home Journal* and to its editors, Mr. Edward Bok and Mr. William V. Alexander, who have been unfailingly kind and have given for use in this book all the photographs which were taken expressly for the *Journal;* and the Editor thanks Miss Keller's many friends who have lent him her letters to them and given him valuable information; especially Mrs. Laurence Hutton, who supplied him with her large collection of notes and anecdotes; Mr. John Hitz, Superintendent of the Volta Bureau for the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge relating to the Deaf; and Mrs. Sophia C. Hopkins, to whom Miss Sullivan

wrote those illuminating letters, the extracts from which give a better idea of her methods with her pupil than anything heretofore published.

Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin and Company have courteously permitted the reprinting of Miss Keller's letter to Dr. Holmes, which appeared in "Over the Teacups," and one of Whittier's letters to Miss Keller. Mr. S. T. Pickard, Whittier's literary executor, kindly sent the original of another letter from Miss Keller to Whittier.

JOHN ALBERT MACY

Cambridge, Massachusetts, February 1, 1903


So. Boston,
May 1, 1891.

My dear Mr. Brooks;

Helen sends you a loving greeting this bright May-day. My teacher has just told me that you have been made a bishop, and that your Friends everywhere are rejoicing because

Facsimile of Part of Letter to Phillips Brooks

one whom they love
has been greatly honor-
ed. I do not understand
very well what a
bishop's work is, but
I am sure it must be
good and helpful, and
I am glad that my
dear friend is brave,
and wise, and loving
enough to do it. It is
very beautiful to think
that you can tell so

PART I

THE STORY OF MY LIFE

CHAPTER I

It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life. I have, as it were, a superstitious hesitation in lifting the veil that clings about my childhood like a golden mist. The task of writing an autobiography is a difficult one. When I try to classify my earliest impressions, I find that fact and fancy look alike across the years that link the past with the present. The woman paints the child's experiences in her own fantasy. A few impressions stand out vividly from the first years of my life; but "the shadows of the prison-house are on the rest." Besides, many of the joys and sorrows of childhood have lost their poignancy; and many incidents of vital importance in my early education have been forgotten in the excitement of great discoveries. In order, therefore, not to be tedious I shall try to present in a series of sketches only the episodes that seem to me to be the most interesting and important.

I was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, a little town of northern Alabama.

The family on my father's side is descended from Caspar Keller, a native of Switzerland, who settled in Maryland. One of my Swiss ancestors was the first teacher of the deaf in Zurich and wrote a book on the subject of their education—rather a singular coincidence; though it is true that there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his.

My grandfather, Caspar Keller's son, "entered" large tracts of land in Alabama and finally settled there. I have been told that once a year he went from Tuscumbia to Philadelphia on

horseback to purchase supplies for the plantation, and my aunt has in her possession many of the letters to his family, which give charming and vivid accounts of these trips.

My Grandmother Keller was a daughter of one of Lafayette's aides, Alexander Moore, and granddaughter of Alexander Spotswood, an early Colonial Governor of Virginia. She was also second cousin to Robert E. Lee.

My father, Arthur H. Keller, was a captain in the Confederate Army, and my mother, Kate Adams, was his second wife and many years younger. Her grandfather, Benjamin Adams, married Susanna E. Goodhue, and lived in Newbury, Massachusetts, for many years. Their son, Charles Adams, was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and moved to Helena, Arkansas. When the Civil War broke out, he fought on the side of the South and became a brigadier-general. He married Lucy Helen Everett, who belonged to the same family of Everetts as Edward Everett and Dr. Edward Everett Hale. After the war was over the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee.

I lived, up to the time of the illness that deprived me of my sight and hearing, in a tiny house consisting of a large square room and a small one, in which the servant slept. It is a custom in the South to build a small house near the homestead as an annex to be used on occasion. Such a house my father built after the Civil War, and when he married my mother they went to live in it. It was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and honeysuckles. From the garden it looked like an arbour. The little porch was hidden from view by a screen of yellow roses and Southern smilax. It was the favourite haunt of humming-birds and bees.

The Keller homestead, where the family lived, was a few steps from our little rose-bower. It was called "Ivy Green" because the house and the surrounding trees and fences were

covered with beautiful English ivy. Its old-fashioned garden was the paradise of my childhood.

Even in the days before my teacher came, I used to feel along the square stiff boxwood hedges, and, guided by the sense of smell, would find the first violets and lilies. There, too, after a fit of temper, I went to find comfort and to hide my hot face in the cool leaves and grass. What joy it was to lose myself in that garden of flowers, to wander happily from spot to spot, until, coming suddenly upon a beautiful vine, I recognized it by its leaves and blossoms, and knew it was the vine which covered the tumble-down summer-house at the farther end of the garden! Here, also, were trailing clematis, drooping jessamine, and some rare sweet flowers called butterfly lilies, because their fragile petals resemble butterflies' wings. But the roses—they were loveliest of all. Never have I found in the greenhouses of the North such heart-satisfying roses as the climbing roses of my southern home. They used to hang in long festoons from our porch, filling the whole air with their fragrance, untainted by any earthy smell; and in the early morning, washed in the dew, they felt so soft, so pure, I could not help wondering if they did not resemble the asphodels of God's garden.

Photograph by Collins

Ivy Green, the Keller Homestead
(The small house on the right is where Helen Keller was born.)

The beginning of my life was simple and much like every other little life. I came, I saw, I conquered, as the first baby in the family always does. There was the usual amount of discussion as to a name for me. The first baby in the family was not to be lightly named, every one was emphatic about that. My father suggested the name of Mildred Campbell, an ancestor whom he highly esteemed, and he declined to take any further part in the discussion. My mother solved the problem by giving it as her wish that I should be called after her mother, whose maiden name was Helen Everett. But in the excitement of carrying me to church my father lost the name on the way, very naturally, since it was one in which he had declined to have a part. When the minister asked him for it, he

just remembered that it had been decided to call me after my grandmother, and he gave her name as Helen Adams.

I am told that while I was still in long dresses I showed many signs of an eager, self-asserting disposition. Everything that I saw other people do I insisted upon imitating. At six months I could pipe out "How d'ye," and one day I attracted every one's attention by saying "Tea, tea, tea" quite plainly. Even after my illness I remembered one of the words I had learned in these early months. It was the word "water," and I continued to make some sound for that word after all other speech was lost. I ceased making the sound "wah-wah" only when I learned to spell the word.

They tell me I walked the day I was a year old. My mother had just taken me out of the bath-tub and was holding me in her lap, when I was suddenly attracted by the flickering shadows of leaves that danced in the sunlight on the smooth floor. I slipped from my mother's lap and almost ran toward them. The impulse gone, I fell down and cried for her to take me up in her arms.

These happy days did not last long. One brief spring, musical with the song of robin and mockingbird, one summer rich in fruit and roses, one autumn of gold and crimson sped by and left their gifts at the feet of an eager, delighted child. Then, in the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a new-born baby. They called it acute congestion of the stomach and brain.[1] The doctor thought I could not live. Early one morning, however, the fever left me as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come. There was great rejoicing in the family that morning, but no one, not even the doctor, knew that I should never see or hear again.

I fancy I still have confused recollections of that illness. I

especially remember the tenderness with which my mother tried to soothe me in my waking 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. But, except for these fleeting memories, if, indeed, they be memories, it all seems very unreal, like a nightmare. Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came—my teacher—who was to set my spirit free. But during the first nineteen months of my life I had caught glimpses of broad, green fields, a luminous sky, trees and flowers which the darkness that followed could not wholly blot out. If we have once seen, "the day is ours, and what the day has shown."

CHAPTER II

I cannot recall what happened during the first months after my illness. I only know that I sat in my mother's lap or clung to her dress as she went about her household duties. My hands felt every object and observed every motion, and in this way I learned to know many things. Soon I felt the need of some communication with others and began to make crude signs. A shake of the head meant "No" and a nod, "Yes," a pull meant "Come" and a push, "Go." Was it bread that I wanted? Then I would imitate the acts of cutting the slices and buttering them. If I wanted my mother to make ice-cream for dinner I made the sign for working the freezer and shivered, indicating cold. My mother, moreover, succeeded in making me understand a good deal. I always knew when she wished me to bring her something, and I would run upstairs or anywhere else she indicated. Indeed, I owe to her loving wisdom all that was bright and good in my long night.

I understood a good deal of what was going on about me. At five I learned to fold and put away the clean clothes when they were brought in from the laundry, and I distinguished my own from the rest. I knew by the way my mother and aunt dressed when they were going out, and I invariably begged to go with them. I was always sent for when there was company, and when the guests took their leave, I waved my hand to them, I think with a vague remembrance of the meaning of the gesture. One day some gentlemen called on my mother, and I felt the shutting of the front door and other sounds that indicated their arrival. On a sudden thought I ran upstairs

before any one could stop me, to put on my idea of a company dress. Standing before the mirror, as I had seen others do, I anointed mine head with oil and covered my face thickly with powder. Then I pinned a veil over my head so that it covered my face and fell in folds down to my shoulders, and tied an enormous bustle round my small waist, so that it dangled behind, almost meeting the hem of my skirt. Thus attired I went down to help entertain the company.

I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people; but I knew it before my teacher came to me. 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. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted.

I think I knew when I was naughty, for I knew that it hurt Ella, my nurse, to kick her, and when my fit of temper was over I had a feeling akin to regret. But I cannot remember any instance in which this feeling prevented me from repeating the naughtiness when I failed to get what I wanted.

In those days a little coloured girl, Martha Washington, the child of our cook, and Belle, an old setter and a great hunter in her day, were my constant companions. Martha Washington understood my signs, and I seldom had any difficulty in making her do just as I wished. It pleased me to domineer over her, and she generally submitted to my tyranny rather than risk a hand-to-hand encounter. I was strong, active, indifferent to consequences. I knew my own mind well enough and always had my own way, even if I had to fight tooth and nail for it. We spent a great deal of time in the kitchen, kneading dough

balls, helping make ice-cream, grinding coffee, quarreling over the cake-bowl, and feeding the hens and turkeys that swarmed about the kitchen steps. Many of them were so tame that they would eat from my hand and let me feel them. One big gobbler snatched a tomato from me one day and ran away with it. Inspired, perhaps, by Master Gobbler's success, we carried off to the woodpile a cake which the cook had just frosted, and ate every bit of it. I was quite ill afterward, and I wonder if retribution also overtook the turkey.

The guinea-fowl likes to hide her nest in out-of-the-way places, and it was one of my greatest delights to hunt for the eggs in the long grass. I could not tell Martha Washington when I wanted to go egg-hunting, but I would double my hands and put them on the ground, which meant something round in the grass, and Martha always understood. When we were fortunate enough to find a nest I never allowed her to carry the eggs home, making her understand by emphatic signs that she might fall and break them.

The sheds where the corn was stored, the stable where the horses were kept, and the yard where the cows were milked morning and evening were unfailing sources of interest to Martha and me. The milkers would let me keep my hands on the cows while they milked, and I often got well switched by the cow for my curiosity.

The making ready for Christmas was always a delight to me. Of course I did not know what it was all about, but I enjoyed the pleasant odours that filled the house and the tidbits that were given to Martha Washington and me to keep us quiet. We were sadly in the way, but that did not interfere with our pleasure in the least. They allowed us to grind the spices, pick over the raisins and lick the stirring spoons. I hung my stocking because the others did; I cannot remember, however,

that the ceremony interested me especially, nor did my curiosity cause me to wake before daylight to look for my gifts.

Martha Washington had as great a love of mischief as I. Two little children were seated on the veranda steps one hot July afternoon. One was black as ebony, with little bunches of fuzzy hair tied with shoestrings sticking out all over her head like corkscrews. The other was white, with long golden curls. One child was six years old, the other two or three years older. The younger child was blind—that was I—and the other was Martha Washington. We were busy cutting out paper dolls; but we soon wearied of this amusement, and after cutting up our shoestrings and clipping all the leaves off the honeysuckle that were within reach, I turned my attention to Martha's corkscrews. She objected at first, but finally submitted. Thinking that turn and turn about is fair play, she seized the scissors and cut off one of my curls, and would have cut them all off but for my mother's timely interference.

Belle, our dog, my other companion, was old and lazy and liked to sleep by the open fire rather than to romp with me. I tried hard to teach her my sign language, but she was dull and inattentive. She sometimes started and quivered with excitement, then she became perfectly rigid, as dogs do when they point a bird. I did not then know why Belle acted in this way; but I knew she was not doing as I wished. This vexed me and the lesson always ended in a one-sided boxing match. Belle would get up, stretch herself lazily, give one or two contemptuous sniffs, go to the opposite side of the hearth and lie down again, and I, wearied and disappointed, went off in search of Martha.

Many incidents of those early years are fixed in my memory, isolated, but clear and distinct, making the sense of that silent, aimless, dayless life all the more intense.

One day I happened to spill water on my apron, and I spread it out to dry before the fire which was flickering on the sitting-room hearth. The apron did not dry quickly enough to suit me, so I drew nearer and threw it right over the hot ashes. The fire leaped into life; the flames encircled me so that in a moment my clothes were blazing. I made a terrified noise that brought Viney, my old nurse, to the rescue. Throwing a blanket over me, she almost suffocated me, but she put out the fire. Except for my hands and hair I was not badly burned.

About this time I found out the use of a key. One morning I locked my mother up in the pantry, where she was obliged to remain three hours, as the servants were in a detached part of the house. She kept pounding on the door, while I sat outside on the porch steps and laughed with glee as I felt the jar of the pounding. This most naughty prank of mine convinced my parents that I must be taught as soon as possible. After my teacher, Miss Sullivan, came to me, I sought an early opportunity to lock her in her room. I went upstairs with something which my mother made me understand I was to give to Miss Sullivan; but no sooner had I given it to her than I slammed the door to, locked it, and hid the key under the wardrobe in the hall. I could not be induced to tell where the key was. My father was obliged to get a ladder and take Miss Sullivan out through the window—much to my delight. Months after I produced the key.

When I was about five years old we moved from the little vine-covered house to a large new one. The family consisted of my father and mother, two older half-brothers, and, afterward, a little sister, Mildred. My earliest distinct recollection of my father is making my way through great drifts of newspapers to his side and finding him alone, holding a sheet of paper before his face. I was greatly puzzled to know what he was doing. I

imitated this action, even wearing his spectacles, thinking they might help solve the mystery. But I did not find out the secret for several years. Then I learned what those papers were, and that my father edited one of them.

My father was most loving and indulgent, devoted to his home, seldom leaving us, except in the hunting season. He was a great hunter, I have been told, and a celebrated shot. Next to his family he loved his dogs and gun. His hospitality was great, almost to a fault, and he seldom came home without bringing a guest. His special pride was the big garden where, it was said, he raised the finest watermelons and strawberries in the county; and to me he brought the first ripe grapes and the choicest berries. I remember his caressing touch as he led me from tree to tree, from vine to vine, and his eager delight in whatever pleased me.

He was a famous story-teller; after I had acquired language he used to spell clumsily into my hand his cleverest anecdotes, and nothing pleased him more than to have me repeat them at an opportune moment.

I was in the North, enjoying the last beautiful days of the summer of 1896, when I heard the news of my father's death. He had had a short illness, there had been a brief time of acute suffering, then all was over. This was my first great sorrow—my first personal experience with death.

How shall I write of my mother? She is so near to me that it almost seems indelicate to speak of her.

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. One day something happened which seemed to me to be adding insult to injury.

At that time I had a much-petted, much-abused doll, which I afterward named Nancy. She was, alas, the helpless victim of my outbursts of temper and of affection, so that she became much the worse for wear. I had dolls which talked, and cried, and opened and shut their eyes; yet I never loved one of them as I loved poor Nancy. She had a cradle, and I often spent an hour or more rocking her. I guarded both doll and cradle with the most jealous care; but once I discovered my little sister sleeping peacefully in the cradle. At this presumption on the part of one to whom as yet no tie of love bound me I grew angry. I rushed upon the cradle and overturned it, and the baby might have been killed had my mother not caught her as she fell. Thus it is that when we walk in the valley of twofold solitude we know little of the tender affections that grow out of endearing words and actions and companionship. But afterward, when I was restored to my human heritage, Mildred and I grew into each other's hearts, so that we were content to go hand-in-hand wherever caprice led us, although she could not understand my finger language, nor I her childish prattle.

CHAPTER III

Meanwhile the desire to express myself grew. The few signs I used became less and less adequate, and my failures to make myself understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion. I felt as if invisible hands were holding me, and I made frantic efforts to free myself. I struggled—not that struggling helped matters, but the spirit of resistance was strong within me; I generally broke down in tears and physical exhaustion. If my mother happened to be near I crept into her arms, too miserable even to remember the cause of the tempest. After awhile the need of some means of communication became so urgent that these outbursts occurred daily, sometimes hourly.

My parents were deeply grieved and perplexed. We lived a long way from any school for the blind or the deaf, and it seemed unlikely that any one would come to such an out-of-the-way place as Tuscumbia to teach a child who was both deaf and blind. Indeed, my friends and relatives sometimes doubted whether I could be taught. My mother's only ray of hope came from Dickens's "American Notes." She had read his account of Laura Bridgman,[2] and remembered vaguely that she was deaf and blind, yet had been educated. But she also remembered with a hopeless pang that Dr. Howe,[3] who had discovered the way to teach the deaf and blind, had been dead many years. His methods had probably died with him; and if they had not, how was a little girl in a far-off town in Alabama to receive the benefit of them?

When I was about six years old, my father heard of an

eminent oculist in Baltimore, who had been successful in many cases that had seemed hopeless. My parents at once determined to take me to Baltimore to see if anything could be done for my eyes.

The journey, which I remember well, was very pleasant. I made friends with many people on the train. One lady gave me a box of shells. My father made holes in these so that I could string them, and for a long time they kept me happy and contented. The conductor, too, was kind. Often when he went his rounds I clung to his coat tails while he collected and punched the tickets. 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.

My aunt made me a big doll out of towels. It was the most comical, shapeless thing, this improvised doll, with no nose, mouth, ears or eyes—nothing that even the imagination of a child could convert into a face. Curiously enough, the absence of eyes struck me more than all the other defects put together. I pointed this out to everybody with provoking persistency, but no one seemed equal to the task of providing the doll with eyes. A bright idea, however, shot into my mind, and the problem was solved. I tumbled off the seat and searched under it until I found my aunt's cape, which was trimmed with large beads. I pulled two beads off and indicated to her that I wanted her to sew them on my doll. She raised my hand to her eyes in a questioning way, and I nodded energetically. The beads were sewed in the right place and I could not contain myself for joy; but immediately I lost all interest in the doll. During the whole trip I did not have one fit of temper, there were so many things to keep my mind and fingers busy.

When we arrived in Baltimore, Dr. Chisholm received us kindly: but he could do nothing. He said, however, that I could

be educated, and advised my father to consult Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, of Washington, who would be able to give him information about schools and teachers of deaf or blind children. Acting on the doctor's advice, we went immediately to Washington to see Dr. Bell, my father with a sad heart and many misgivings, I wholly unconscious of his anguish, finding pleasure in the excitement of moving from place to place. Child as I was, I at once felt the tenderness and sympathy which endeared Dr. Bell to so many hearts, as his wonderful achievements enlist their admiration. He held me on his knee while I examined his watch, and he made it strike for me. He understood my signs, and I knew it and loved him at once. But 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.

Dr. Bell advised my father to write to Mr. Anagnos,[4] director of the Perkins Institution in Boston, the scene of Dr. Howe's great labours for the blind, and ask him if he had a teacher competent to begin my education. This my father did at once, and in a few weeks there came a kind letter from Mr. Anagnos with the comforting assurance that a teacher had been found. This was in the summer of 1886. But Miss Sullivan did not arrive until the following March.

Thus I came up out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched my spirit and gave it sight, so that I beheld many wonders. And from the sacred mountain I heard a voice which said, "Knowledge is love and light and vision."

CHAPTER IV

The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrast between the two lives which it connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old.

On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother's signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps. The afternoon sun penetrated the mass of honeysuckle that covered the porch, and fell on my upturned face. My fingers lingered almost unconsciously on the familiar leaves and blossoms which had just come forth to greet the sweet southern spring. I did not know what the future held of marvel or surprise for me. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks and a deep languor had succeeded this passionate struggle.

Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbour was. "Light! give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

I felt approaching footsteps. I stretched out my hand as I

supposed to my mother. Some one took it, and 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.

The morning after my teacher came she led me into her room and gave me a doll. The little blind children at the Perkins Institution had sent it and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I had played with it a little while, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into my hand the word "d-o-l-l." I was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When I finally succeeded in making the letters correctly I was flushed with childish pleasure and pride. Running downstairs to my mother I held up my hand and made the letters for doll. I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation. In the days that followed I learned to spell in this uncomprehending way a great many words, among them *pin, hat, cup* and a few verbs like *sit, stand* and *walk*. But my teacher had been with me several weeks before I understood that everything has a name.

One day, while I was playing with my new doll, Miss Sullivan put my big rag doll into my lap also, spelled "d-o-l-l" and tried to make me understand that "d-o-l-l" applied to both. Earlier in the day we had had a tussle over the words "m-u-g" and "w-a-t-e-r." Miss Sullivan had tried to impress it upon me that "m-u-g" is *mug* and that "w-a-t-e-r" is *water*, but I persisted in confounding the two. In despair she had dropped the subject for the time, only to renew it at the first opportunity. I became impatient at her repeated attempts and, seizing the new doll, I dashed it upon the floor. I was keenly delighted when I felt the fragments of the broken doll at my feet. Neither sorrow nor regret followed my passionate outburst. I had not loved the doll. In the still, dark world in which I lived there was no

strong sentiment or tenderness. I felt my teacher sweep the fragments to one side of the hearth, and I had a sense of satisfaction that the cause of my discomfort was removed. She brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten —a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.*

Photograph by Deane, 1887

Helen Keller at the Age of Seven

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my

eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that *mother, father, sister, teacher* were among them—words that were to make the world blossom for me, "like Aaron's rod, with flowers." It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.

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* See Miss Sullivan's letter, page 230.

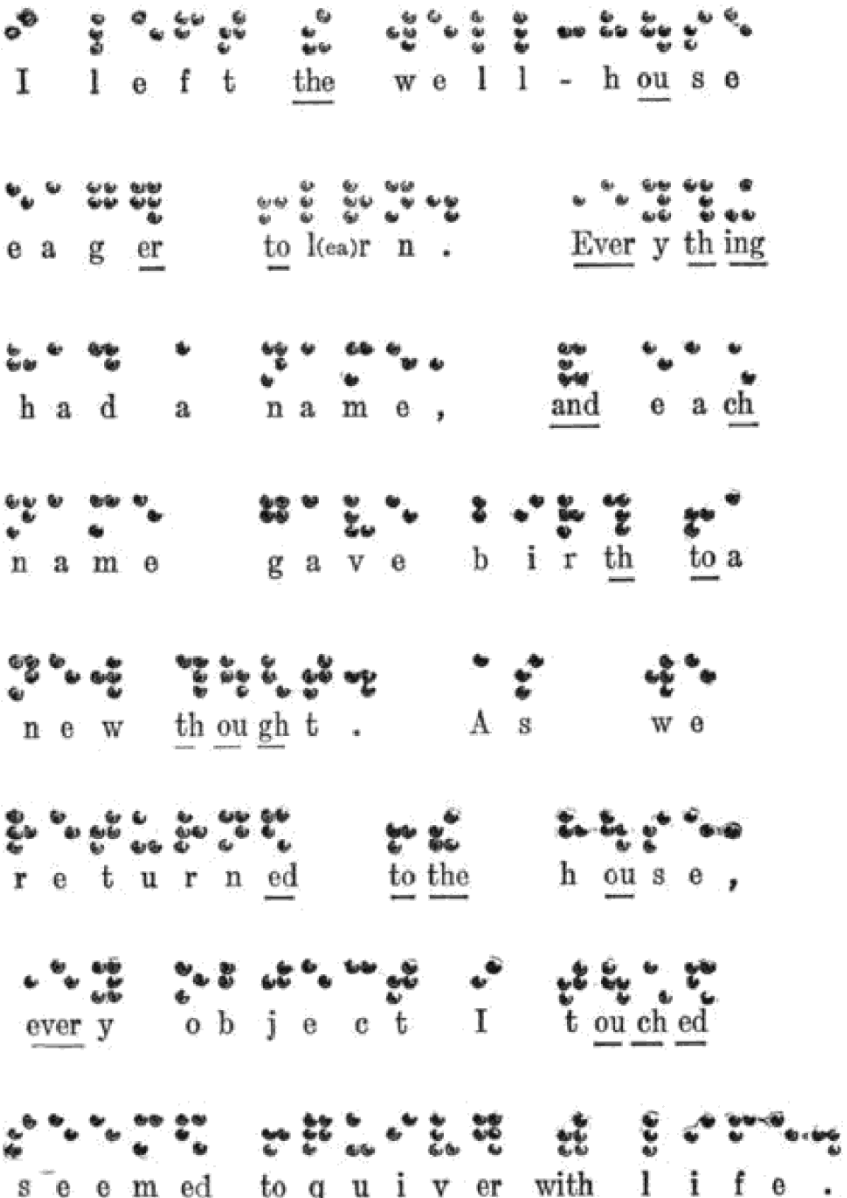
CHAPTER V

I recall many incidents of the summer of 1887 that followed my soul's sudden awakening. I did nothing but explore with my hands and learn the name of every object that I touched; and the more I handled things and learned their names and uses, the more joyous and confident grew my sense of kinship with the rest of the world.

When the time of daisies and buttercups came Miss Sullivan took me by the hand across the fields, where men were preparing the earth for the seed, to the banks of the Tennessee River, and there, sitting on the warm grass, I had my first lessons in the beneficence of nature. I learned how the sun and the rain make to grow out of the ground every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, how birds build their nests and live and thrive from land to land, how the squirrel, the deer, the lion and every other creature finds food and shelter. As my knowledge of things grew I felt more and more the delight of the world I was in. Long before I learned to do a sum in arithmetic or describe the shape of the earth, Miss Sullivan had taught me to find beauty in the fragrant woods, in every blade of grass, and in the curves and dimples of my baby sister's hand. She linked my earliest thoughts with nature, and made me feel that "birds and flowers and I were happy peers."

But about this time I had an experience which taught me that nature is not always kind. One day my teacher and I were returning from a long ramble. The morning had been fine, but it was growing warm and sultry when at last we turned our faces homeward. Two or three times we stopped to rest under

a tree by the wayside. Our last halt was under a wild cherry tree a short distance from the house. The shade was grateful, and the tree was so easy to climb that with my teacher's assistance I was able to scramble to a seat in the branches. It was so cool up in the tree that Miss Sullivan proposed that we have our luncheon there. I promised to keep still while she went to the house to fetch it.



Facsimile of the braille manuscript of the passage on this page, with equivalents slightly reduced. (Underlined combinations of letters have one sign in braille. Note the omission of the vowels before *r* in *learn*, and the joining of the sign for *to* with the word that follows it.)

Suddenly a change passed over the tree. All the sun's warmth left the air. I knew the sky was black, because all the heat, which meant light to me, had died out of the atmosphere. A strange odour came up from the earth. I knew it, it was the odour that always precedes a thunderstorm, and a nameless fear clutched at my heart. I felt absolutely alone, cut off from my friends and the firm earth. The immense, the unknown, enfolded me. I remained still and expectant; a chilling terror crept over me. I longed for my teacher's return; but above all things I wanted to get down from that tree.

There was a moment of sinister silence, then a multitudinous stirring of the leaves. A shiver ran through the tree, and the wind sent forth a blast that would have knocked me off had I not clung to the branch with might and main. The tree swayed and strained. The small twigs snapped and fell about me in showers. A wild impulse to jump seized me, but terror held me fast. I crouched down in the fork of the tree. The branches lashed about me. I felt the intermittent jarring that came now and then, as if something heavy had fallen and the shock had traveled up till it reached the limb I sat on. It worked my suspense up to the highest point, and just as I was thinking the tree and I should fall together, my teacher seized my hand and helped me down. I clung to her, trembling with joy to feel the earth under my feet once more. I had learned a new lesson—that nature "wages open war against her children, and under softest touch hides treacherous claws."

After this experience it was a long time before I climbed

another tree. The mere thought filled me with terror. It was the sweet allurement of the mimosa tree in full bloom that finally overcame my fears. One beautiful spring morning when I was alone in the summer-house, reading, I became aware of a wonderful subtle fragrance in the air. I started up and instinctively stretched out my hands. It seemed as if the spirit of spring had passed through the summer-house. “What is it?” I asked, and the next minute I recognized the odour of the mimosa blossoms. I felt my way to the end of the garden, knowing that the mimosa tree was near the fence, at the turn of the path. Yes, there it was, all quivering in the warm sunshine, its blossom-laden branches almost touching the long grass. Was there ever anything so exquisitely beautiful in the world before! Its delicate blossoms shrank from the slightest earthly touch; it seemed as if a tree of paradise had been transplanted to earth. I made my way through a shower of petals to the great trunk and for one minute stood irresolute; then, putting my foot in the broad space between the forked branches, I pulled myself up into the tree. I had some difficulty in holding on, for the branches were very large and the bark hurt my hands. But I had a delicious sense that I was doing something unusual and wonderful, so I kept on climbing higher and higher, until I reached a little seat which somebody had built there so long ago that it had grown part of the tree itself. I sat there for a long, long time, feeling like a fairy on a rosy cloud. After that I spent many happy hours in my tree of paradise, thinking fair thoughts and dreaming bright dreams.

CHAPTER VI

I had now the key to all language, and I was eager to learn to use it. Children who hear acquire language without any particular effort; the words that fall from others' lips they catch on the wing, as it were, delightedly, while the little deaf child must trap them by a slow and often painful process. But whatever the process, the result is wonderful. Gradually from naming an object we advance step by step until we have traversed the vast distance between our first stammered syllable and the sweep of thought in a line of Shakespeare.

At first, when my teacher told me about a new thing I asked very few questions. My ideas were vague, and my vocabulary was inadequate; but as my knowledge of things grew, and I learned more and more words, my field of inquiry broadened, and I would return again and again to the same subject, eager for further information. Sometimes a new word revived an image that some earlier experience had engraved on my brain.

I remember the morning that I first asked the meaning of the word, "love." This was before I knew many words. I had found a few early violets in the garden and brought them to my teacher. She tried to kiss me; but at that time I did not like to have any one kiss me except my mother. Miss Sullivan put her arm gently round me and spelled into my hand, "I love Helen."

"What is love?" I asked.

She drew me closer to her and said, "It is here," pointing to my heart, whose beats I was conscious of for the first time. Her words puzzled me very much because I did not then understand anything unless I touched it.

I smelt the violets in her hand and asked, half in words, half in signs, a question which meant, “Is love the sweetness of flowers?”

“No,” said my teacher.

Again I thought. The warm sun was shining on us.

“Is this not love?” I asked, pointing in the direction from which the heat came, “Is this not love?”

It seemed to me that there could be nothing more beautiful than the sun, whose warmth makes all things grow. But Miss Sullivan shook her head, and I was greatly puzzled and disappointed. I thought it strange that my teacher could not show me love.

A day or two afterward I was stringing beads of different sizes in symmetrical groups—two large beads, three small ones, and so on. I had made many mistakes, and Miss Sullivan had pointed them out again and again with gentle patience. Finally I noticed a very obvious error in the sequence and for an instant I concentrated my attention on the lesson and tried to think how I should have arranged the beads. Miss Sullivan touched my forehead and spelled with decided emphasis, “Think.”

In a flash I knew that the word was the name of the process that was going on in my head. This was my first conscious perception of an abstract idea.

For a long time I was still—I was not thinking of the beads in my lap, but trying to find a meaning for “love” in the light of this new idea. The sun had been under a cloud all day, and there had been brief showers; but suddenly the sun broke forth in all its southern splendour.

Again I asked my teacher, “Is this not love?”

“Love is something like the clouds that were in the sky before the sun came out,” she replied. Then in simpler words

than these, which at that time I could not have understood, she explained: “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. 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.”

The beautiful truth burst upon my mind—I felt that there were invisible lines stretched between my spirit and the spirits of others.

From the beginning of my education Miss Sullivan made it a practice to speak to me as she would speak to any hearing child; the only difference was that she spelled the sentences into my hand instead of speaking them. If I did not know the words and idioms necessary to express my thoughts she supplied them, even suggesting conversation when I was unable to keep up my end of the dialogue.

Photograph by Deane, 1887

Helen Keller and Jumbo

talked it over with me just as if she were a little girl herself. What many children think of with dread, as a painful plodding through grammar, hard sums and harder definitions, is to-day one of my most precious memories.

I cannot explain the peculiar sympathy Miss Sullivan had with my pleasures and desires. Perhaps it was the result of long association with the blind. Added to this she had a wonderful faculty for description. She went quickly over uninteresting details, and never nagged me with questions to see if I remembered the day-before-yesterday's lesson. She introduced dry technicalities of science little by little, making every subject so real that I could not help remembering what she taught.

We read and studied out of doors, preferring the sunlit woods to the house. All my early lessons have in them the breath of the woods—the fine, resinous odour of pine needles, blended with the perfume of wild grapes. Seated in the gracious shade of a wild tulip tree, I learned to think that everything has a lesson and a suggestion. "The loveliness of things taught me all their use." 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 until, forgetting their embarrassment, they trilled their reedy note, 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 low soughing of the wind through the cornstalks, the silky rustling of the long leaves, and the indignant snort of my pony, as we caught him in the pasture and put the bit in his mouth—ah me! how well I remember the spicy, clovery smell of his breath!

Sometimes I rose at dawn and stole into the garden while the

heavy dew lay on the grass and flowers. Few know what joy it is to feel the roses pressing softly into the hand, or the beautiful motion of the lilies as they sway in the morning breeze. Sometimes I caught an insect in the flower I was plucking, and I felt the faint noise of a pair of wings rubbed together in a sudden terror, as the little creature became aware of a pressure from without.

Another favourite haunt of mine was the orchard, where the fruit ripened early in July. The large, downy peaches would reach themselves into my hand, and as the joyous breezes flew about the trees the apples tumbled at my feet. Oh, the delight with which I gathered up the fruit in my pinafore, pressed my face against the smooth cheeks of the apples, still warm from the sun, and skipped back to the house!

Our favourite walk was to Keller's Landing, an old tumble-down lumber-wharf on the Tennessee River, used during the Civil War to land soldiers. There we spent many happy hours and played at learning geography. I built dams of pebbles, made islands and lakes, and dug riverbeds, all for fun, and never dreamed that I was learning a lesson. I listened with increasing wonder to Miss Sullivan's descriptions of the great round world with its burning mountains, buried cities, moving rivers of ice, and many other things as strange. She made raised maps in clay, so that I could feel the mountain ridges and valleys, and follow with my fingers the devious course of rivers. I liked this, too; but the division of the earth into zones and poles confused and teased my mind. The illustrative strings and the orange stick representing the poles seemed so real that even to this day the mere mention of temperate zone suggests a series of twine circles; and I believe that if any one should set about it he could convince me that white bears actually climb the North Pole.

Arithmetic seems to have been the only study I did not like. From the first I was not interested in the science of numbers. Miss Sullivan tried to teach me to count by stringing beads in groups, and by arranging kindergarten straws I learned to add and subtract. I never had patience to arrange more than five or six groups at a time. When I had accomplished this my conscience was at rest for the day, and I went out quickly to find my playmates.

In this same leisurely manner I studied zoology and botany.

Once a gentleman, whose name I have forgotten, sent me a collection of fossils—tiny mollusk shells beautifully marked, and bits of sandstone with the print of birds' claws, and a lovely fern in bas-relief. These were the keys which unlocked the treasures of the antediluvian world for me. With trembling fingers I listened to Miss Sullivan's descriptions of the terrible beasts, with uncouth, unpronounceable names, which once went tramping through the primeval forests, tearing down the branches of gigantic trees for food, and died in the dismal swamps of an unknown age. For a long time these strange creatures haunted my dreams, and this gloomy period formed a somber background to the joyous Now, filled with sunshine and roses and echoing with the gentle beat of my pony's hoof.

Another time a beautiful shell was given me, and with a child's surprise and delight I learned how a tiny mollusk had built the lustrous coil for his dwelling place, and how on still nights, when there is no breeze stirring the waves, the Nautilus sails on the blue waters of the Indian Ocean in his "ship of pearl." After I had learned a great many interesting things about the life and habits of the children of the sea—how in the midst of dashing waves the little polyps build the beautiful coral isles of the Pacific, and the foraminifera have made the chalk-hills of many a land—my teacher read me "The

Chambered Nautilus," and showed me that the shellbuilding process of the mollusks is symbolical of the development of the mind. Just as the wonder-working mantle of the Nautilus changes the material it absorbs from the water and makes it a part of itself, so the bits of knowledge one gathers undergo a similar change and become pearls of thought.

Again, it was the growth of a plant that furnished the text for a lesson. We bought a lily and set it in a sunny window. Very soon the green, pointed buds showed signs of opening. The slender, fingerlike leaves on the outside opened slowly, reluctant, I thought, to reveal the loveliness they hid; once having made a start, however, the opening process went on rapidly, but in order and systematically. There was always one bud larger and more beautiful than the rest, which pushed her outer covering back with more pomp, as if the beauty in soft, silky robes knew that she was the lily-queen by right divine, while her more timid sisters doffed their green hoods shyly, until the whole plant was one nodding bough of loveliness and fragrance.

Once there were eleven tadpoles in a glass globe set in a window full of plants. I remember the eagerness with which I made discoveries about them. It was great fun to plunge my hand into the bowl and feel the tadpoles frisk about, and to let them slip and slide between my fingers. One day a more ambitious fellow leaped beyond the edge of the bowl and fell on the floor, where I found him to all appearance more dead than alive. The only sign of life was a slight wriggling of his tail. But no sooner had he returned to his element than he darted to the bottom, swimming round and round in joyous activity. He had made his leap, he had seen the great world, and was content to stay in his pretty glass house under the big fuchsia tree until he attained the dignity of froghood. Then he

went to live in the leafy pool at the end of the garden, where he made the summer nights musical with his quaint love-song.

Thus I learned from life itself. At the beginning I was only a little mass of possibilities. It was my teacher who unfolded and developed them. When she came, everything about me breathed of love and joy and was full of meaning. She has never since let pass an opportunity to point out the beauty that is in everything, nor has she ceased trying in thought and action and example to make my life sweet and useful.

It was my teacher's genius, her quick sympathy, her loving tact which made the first years of my education so beautiful. It was because she seized the right moment to impart knowledge that made it so pleasant and acceptable to me. She realized that a child's mind is like a shallow brook which ripples and dances merrily over the stony course of its education and reflects here a flower, there a bush, yonder a fleecy cloud; and she attempted to guide my mind on its way, knowing that like a brook it should be fed by mountain streams and hidden springs, until it broadened out into a deep river, capable of reflecting in its placid surface, billowy hills, the luminous shadows of trees and the blue heavens, as well as the sweet face of a little flower.

Any teacher can take a child to the classroom, but not every teacher can make him learn. He will not work joyously unless he feels that liberty is his, whether he is busy or at rest; he must feel the flush of victory and the heart-sinking of disappointment before he takes with a will the tasks distasteful to him and resolves to dance his way bravely through a dull routine of textbooks.

My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never

leave the others until morning.

That night, after I had hung my stocking, I lay awake a long time, pretending to be asleep and keeping alert to see what Santa Claus would do when he came. At last I fell asleep with a new doll and a white bear in my arms. Next morning it was I who waked the whole family with my first "Merry Christmas!" I found surprises, not in the stocking only, but on the table, on all the chairs, at the door, on the very window-sill; indeed, I could hardly walk without stumbling on a bit of Christmas wrapped up in tissue paper. But when my teacher presented me with a canary, my cup of happiness overflowed.

Little Tim was so tame that he would hop on my finger and eat candied cherries out of my hand. Miss Sullivan taught me to take all the care of my new pet. Every morning after breakfast I prepared his bath, made his cage clean and sweet, filled his cups with fresh seed and water from the well-house, and hung a spray of chickweed in his swing.

One morning I left the cage on the window-seat while I went to fetch water for his bath. When I returned I felt a big cat brush past me as I opened the door. At first I did not realize what had happened; but when I put my hand in the cage and Tim's pretty wings did not meet my touch or his small pointed claws take hold of my finger, I knew that I should never see my sweet little singer again.

CHAPTER IX

The next important event in my life was my visit to Boston, in May, 1888. As if it were yesterday I remember the preparations, the departure with my teacher and my mother, the journey, and finally the arrival in Boston. How different this journey was from the one I had made to Baltimore two years before! I was no longer a restless, excitable little creature, requiring the attention of everybody on the train to keep me amused. I sat quietly beside Miss Sullivan, taking in with eager interest all that she told me about what she saw out of the car window: the beautiful Tennessee River, the great cotton-fields, the hills and woods, and the crowds of laughing negroes at the stations, who waved to the people on the train and brought delicious candy and popcorn balls through the car. On the seat opposite me sat my big rag doll, Nancy, in a new gingham dress and a beruffled sunbonnet, looking at me out of two bead eyes. Sometimes, when I was not absorbed in Miss Sullivan's descriptions, I remembered Nancy's existence and took her up in my arms, but I generally calmed my conscience by making myself believe that she was asleep.

As I shall not have occasion to refer to Nancy again, I wish to tell here a sad experience she had soon after our arrival in Boston. She was covered with dirt—the remains of mud pies I had compelled her to eat, although she had never shown any special liking for them. The laundress at the Perkins Institution secretly carried her off to give her a bath. This was too much for poor Nancy. When I next saw her she was a formless heap of cotton, which I should not have recognized at all except for

the two bead eyes which looked out at me reproachfully.

When the train at last pulled into the station at Boston it was as if a beautiful fairy tale had come true. The "once upon a time" was now; the "far-away country" was here.

We had scarcely arrived at the Perkins Institution for the Blind when I began to make friends with the little blind children. It delighted me inexpressibly to find that they knew the manual alphabet. What joy to talk with other children in my own language! Until then I had been like a foreigner speaking through an interpreter. In the school where Laura Bridgman was taught I was in my own country. It took me some time to appreciate the fact that my new friends were blind. I knew I could not see; but it did not seem possible that all the eager, loving children who gathered round me and joined heartily in my frolics were also blind. I remember the surprise and the pain I felt as I noticed that they placed their hands over mine when I talked to them and that they read books with their fingers. Although I had been told this before, and although I understood my own deprivations, yet I had thought vaguely that since they could hear, they must have a sort of "second sight," and I was not prepared to find one child and another and yet another deprived of the same precious gift. But they were so happy and contented that I lost all sense of pain in the pleasure of their companionship.

One day spent with the blind children made me feel thoroughly at home in my new environment, and I looked eagerly from one pleasant experience to another as the days flew swiftly by. I could not quite convince myself that there was much world left, for I regarded Boston as the beginning and the end of creation.

While we were in Boston we visited Bunker Hill, and there I had my first lesson in history. The story of the brave men who

had fought on the spot where we stood excited me greatly. I climbed the monument, counting the steps, and wondering as I went higher and yet higher if the soldiers had climbed this great stairway and shot at the enemy on the ground below.

The next day we went to Plymouth by water. This was my first trip on the ocean and my first voyage in a steamboat. How full of life and motion it was! But the rumble of the machinery made me think it was thundering, and I began to cry, because I feared if it rained we should not be able to have our picnic out of doors. I was more interested, I think, in the great rock on which the Pilgrims landed than in anything else in Plymouth. I could touch it, and perhaps that made the coming of the Pilgrims and their toils and great deeds seem more real to me. I have often held in my hand a little model of the Plymouth Rock which a kind gentleman gave me at Pilgrim Hall, and I have fingered its curves, the split in the centre and the embossed figures "1620," and turned over in my mind all that I knew about the wonderful story of the Pilgrims.

How my childish imagination glowed with the splendour of their enterprise! I idealized them as the bravest and most generous men that ever sought a home in a strange land. I thought they desired the freedom of their fellow men as well as their own. I was keenly surprised and disappointed years later to learn of their acts of persecution that make us tingle with shame, even while we glory in the courage and energy that gave us our "Country Beautiful."

Among the many friends I made in Boston were Mr. William Endicott[5]and his daughter. Their kindness to me was the seed from which many pleasant memories have since grown. One day we visited their beautiful home at Beverly Farms. I remember with delight how I went through their rose-garden, how their dogs, big Leo and little curly-haired Fritz with long

ears, came to meet me, and how Nimrod, the swiftest of the horses, poked his nose into my hands for a pat and a lump of sugar. I also remember the beach, where for the first time I played in the sand. It was hard, smooth sand, very different from the loose, sharp sand, mingled with kelp and shells, at Brewster. Mr. Endicott told me about the great ships that came sailing by from Boston, bound for Europe. I saw him many times after that, and he was always a good friend to me; indeed, I was thinking of him when I called Boston "the City of Kind Hearts."

was not kind or wise to force this poor dumb creature out of his element, and after awhile I felt happy in the thought that perhaps he had returned to the sea.

CHAPTER XI

In the autumn I returned to my southern home with a heart full of joyous memories. As I recall that visit North I am filled with wonder at the richness and variety of the experiences that cluster about it. It seems to have been the beginning of everything. The treasures of a new, beautiful world were laid at my feet, and I took in pleasure and information at every turn. I lived myself into all things. I was never still a moment; my life was as full of motion as those little insects that crowd a whole existence into one brief day. I met many people who talked with me by spelling into my hand, and thought in joyous sympathy leaped up to meet thought, and behold, a miracle had been wrought! The barren places between my mind and the minds of others blossomed like the rose.

I spent the autumn months with my family at our summer cottage, on a mountain about fourteen miles from Tuscumbia. It was called Fern Quarry, because near it there was a limestone quarry, long since abandoned. Three frolicsome little streams ran through it from springs in the rocks above, leaping here and tumbling there in laughing cascades wherever the rocks tried to bar their way. The opening was filled with ferns which completely covered the beds of limestone and in places hid the streams. The rest of the mountain was thickly wooded. Here were great oaks and splendid evergreens with trunks like mossy pillars, from the branches of which hung garlands of ivy and mistletoe, and persimmon trees, the odour of which pervaded every nook and corner of the wood—an illusive, fragrant something that made the heart glad. In places the wild

muscadine and scuppernong vines stretched from tree to tree, making arbours which were always full of butterflies and buzzing insects. It was delightful to lose ourselves in the green hollows of that tangled wood in the late afternoon, and to smell the cool, delicious odours that came up from the earth at the close of day.

Our cottage was a sort of rough camp, beautifully situated on the top of the mountain among oaks and pines. The small rooms were arranged on each side of a long open hall. Round the house was a wide piazza, where the mountain winds blew, sweet with all wood-scents. We lived on the piazza most of the time—there we worked, ate and played. At the back door there was a great butternut tree, round which the steps had been built, and in front the trees stood so close that I could touch them and feel the wind shake their branches, or the leaves twirl downward in the autumn blast.

Many visitors came to Fern Quarry. In the evening, by the campfire, the men played cards and whiled away the hours in talk and sport. They told stories of their wonderful feats with fowl, fish and quadruped—how many wild ducks and turkeys they had shot, what "savage trout" they had caught, and how they had bagged the craftiest foxes, outwitted the most clever 'possums and overtaken the fleetest deer, until I thought that surely the lion, the tiger, the bear and the rest of the wild tribe would not be able to stand before these wily hunters. "To-morrow to the chase!" was their good-night shout as the circle of merry friends broke up for the night. The men slept in the hall outside our door, and I could feel the deep breathing of the dogs and the hunters as they lay on their improvised beds.

At dawn I was awakened by the smell of coffee, the rattling of guns, and the heavy footsteps of the men as they strode about, promising themselves the greatest luck of the season. I

could also feel the stamping of the horses, which they had ridden out from town and hitched under the trees, where they stood all night, neighing loudly, impatient to be off. At last the men mounted, and, as they say in the old songs, away went the steeds with bridles ringing and whips cracking and hounds racing ahead, and away went the champion hunters "with hark and whoop and wild halloo!"

Later in the morning we made preparations for a barbecue. A fire was kindled at the bottom of a deep hole in the ground, big sticks were laid crosswise at the top, and meat was hung from them and turned on spits. Around the fire squatted negroes, driving away the flies with long branches. The savoury odour of the meat made me hungry long before the tables were set.

When the bustle and excitement of preparation was at its height, the hunting party made its appearance, struggling in by twos and threes, the men hot and weary, the horses covered with foam, and the jaded hounds panting and dejected—and not a single kill! Every man declared that he had seen at least one deer, and that the animal had come very close; but however hotly the dogs might pursue the game, however well the guns might be aimed, at the snap of the trigger there was not a deer in sight. They had been as fortunate as the little boy who said he came very near seeing a rabbit—he saw his tracks. The party soon forgot its disappointment, however, and we sat down, not to venison, but to a tamer feast of veal and roast pig.

One summer I had my pony at Fern Quarry. I called him Black Beauty, as I had just read the book, and he resembled his namesake in every way, from his glossy black coat to the white star on his forehead. I spent many of my happiest hours on his back. Occasionally, when it was quite safe, my teacher would

let go the leading-rein, and the pony sauntered on or stopped at his sweet will to eat grass or nibble the leaves of the trees that grew beside the narrow trail.

On mornings when I did not care for the ride, my teacher and I would start after breakfast for a ramble in the woods, and allow ourselves to get lost amid the trees and vines, with no road to follow except the paths made by cows and horses. Frequently we came upon impassable thickets which forced us to take a roundabout way. We always returned to the cottage with armfuls of laurel, goldenrod, ferns and gorgeous swamp-flowers such as grow only in the South.

Sometimes I would go with Mildred and my little cousins to gather persimmons. I did not eat them; but I loved their fragrance and enjoyed hunting for them in the leaves and grass. We also went nutting, and I helped them open the chestnut burrs and break the shells of hickory-nuts and walnuts —the big, sweet walnuts!

At the foot of the mountain there was a railroad, and the children watched the trains whiz by. Sometimes a terrific whistle brought us to the steps, and Mildred told me in great excitement that a cow or a horse had strayed on the track. About a mile distant there was a trestle spanning a deep gorge. It was very difficult to walk over, the ties were wide apart and so narrow that one felt as if one were walking on knives. I had never crossed it until one day Mildred, Miss Sullivan and I were lost in the woods, and wandered for hours without finding a path.

Suddenly Mildred pointed with her little hand and exclaimed, “There’s the trestle!” We would have taken any way rather than this; but it was late and growing dark, and the trestle was a short cut home. I had to feel for the rails with my toe; but I was not afraid, and got on very well, until all at once


image
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landmark was visible, only a waste of snow with trees rising out of it.

In the evening a wind from the northeast sprang up, and the flakes rushed hither and thither in furious mêlée. Around the great fire we sat and told merry tales, and frolicked, and quite forgot that we were in the midst of a desolate solitude, shut in from all communication with the outside world. But during the night the fury of the wind increased to such a degree that it thrilled us with a vague terror. The rafters creaked and strained, and the branches of the trees surrounding the house rattled and beat against the windows, as the winds rioted up and down the country.

On the third day after the beginning of the storm the snow ceased. The sun broke through the clouds and shone upon a vast, undulating white plain. High mounds, pyramids heaped in fantastic shapes, and impenetrable drifts lay scattered in every direction.

Narrow paths were shoveled through the drifts. I put on my cloak and hood and went out. The air stung my cheeks like fire. Half walking in the paths, half working our way through the lesser drifts, we succeeded in reaching a pine grove just outside a broad pasture. The trees stood motionless and white like figures in a marble frieze. There was no odour of pine-needles. The rays of the sun fell upon the trees, so that the twigs sparkled like diamonds and dropped in showers when we touched them. So dazzling was the light, it penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes.

As the days wore on, the drifts gradually shrunk, but before they were wholly gone another storm came, so that I scarcely felt the earth under my feet once all winter. At intervals the trees lost their icy covering, and the bulrushes and underbrush were bare; but the lake lay frozen and hard beneath the sun.

Our favourite amusement during that winter was tobogganing. In places the shore of the lake rises abruptly from the water's edge. Down these steep slopes we used to coast. 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! What exhilarating madness! For one wild, glad moment we snapped the chain that binds us to earth, and joining hands with the winds we felt ourselves divine!

CHAPTER XIII

It was in the spring of 1890 that I learned to speak. The impulse to utter audible sounds had always been strong within me. I used to make noises, keeping one hand on my throat while the other hand felt the movements of my lips. I was pleased with anything that made a noise and liked to feel the cat purr and the dog bark. I also liked to keep my hand on a singer's throat, or on a piano when it was being played. Before I lost my sight and hearing, I was fast learning to talk, but after my illness it was found that I had ceased to speak because I could not hear. I used to sit in my mother's lap all day long and keep my hands on her face because it amused me to feel the motions of her lips; and I moved my lips, too, although I had forgotten what talking was. My friends say that I laughed and cried naturally, and for awhile I made many sounds and word-elements, not because they were a means of communication, but because the need of exercising my vocal organs was imperative. There was, however, one word the meaning of which I still remembered, *"water."* I pronounced it "wa-wa." Even this became less and less intelligible until the time when Miss Sullivan began to teach me. I stopped using it only after I had learned to spell the word on my fingers.

I had known for a long time that the people about me used a method of communication different from mine; and even before I knew that a deaf child could be taught to speak, I was conscious of dissatisfaction with the means of communication I already possessed. One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness.

This feeling began to agitate me with a vexing, forward-reaching sense of a lack that should be filled. My thoughts would often rise and beat up like birds against the wind; and I persisted in using my lips and voice. Friends tried to discourage this tendency, fearing lest it would lead to disappointment. But I persisted, and an accident soon occurred which resulted in the breaking down of this great barrier—I heard the story of Ragnhild Kaata.

In 1890 Mrs. Lamson, who had been one of Laura Bridgman's teachers, and who had just returned from a visit to Norway and Sweden, came to see me, and told me of Ragnhild Kaata, a deaf and blind girl in Norway who had actually been taught to speak. Mrs. Lamson had scarcely finished telling me about this girl's success before I was on fire with eagerness. I resolved that I, too, would learn to speak. I would not rest satisfied until my teacher took me, for advice and assistance, to Miss Sarah Fuller, principal of the Horace Mann School. This lovely, sweet-natured lady offered to teach me herself, and we began the twenty-sixth of March, 1890.

Miss Fuller's method was this: she passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. I was eager to imitate every motion and in an hour had learned six elements of speech: M, P, A, S, T, I. Miss Fuller gave me eleven lessons in all. I shall never forget the surprise and delight I felt when I uttered my first connected sentence, "It is warm." True, they were broken and stammering syllables; but they were human speech. My soul, conscious of new strength, came out of bondage, and was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and all faith.

No deaf child who has earnestly tried to speak the words which he has never heard—to come out of the prison of