



THE WORLD
I LIVE IN

HELEN KELLER

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The World I Live In

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"The autobiography of Helen Keller is unquestionably one of the most remarkable records ever published."—*British Weekly*.

"This book is a human document of intense interest, and without a parallel, we suppose, in the history of literature."—*Yorkshire Post*.

"Miss Keller's autobiography, well written and full of practical interest in all sides of life, literary, artistic and social, records an extraordinary victory over physical disabilities."—*Times*.

"This book is a record of the miraculous. No one can read it without being profoundly touched by the patience and devotion which brought the blind, deaf-mute child into touch with human life, without being filled with wonder at the quick intelligence which made such communication with the outside world possible."—*Queen*.

To

HENRY H. ROGERS

MY DEAR FRIEND OF

MANY YEARS

Preface

*

The essays and the poem in this book appeared originally in the "Century Magazine," the essays under the titles "A Chat About the Hand," "Sense and Sensibility," and "My Dreams." Mr. Gilder suggested the articles, and I thank him for his kind interest and encouragement. But he must also accept the responsibility which goes with my gratitude. For it is owing to his wish and that of other editors that I talk so much about myself.

Every book is in a sense autobiographical. But while other self-recording creatures are permitted at least to seem to change the subject, 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. If I offer to reform the education system of the world, my editorial friends say, "That is interesting. But will you please tell us what idea you had of goodness and beauty when you were six years old?" First they ask me to tell the life of the child who is mother to the woman. Then they make me my own daughter and ask for an account of grown-up sensations. Finally I am requested to write about my dreams, and thus I become an anachronical grandmother; for it is the special privilege of old age to relate dreams. The editors are so kind that they are no doubt right in thinking that nothing I have to say about the affairs of the universe would be interesting. But until they give me opportunity to write about matters that are not-me, the world must go on uninstructed and unreformed, and I can only do my best with the one small subject upon which I am allowed to discourse.

In "The Chant of Darkness" I did not intend to set up as a poet. I thought I was writing prose, except for the magnificent passage from Job which I was paraphrasing. But this part seemed to my friends to separate itself from the exposition, and I made it into a kind of poem.

H. K.

I - The Seeing Hand

*

I HAVE just touched my dog. He was rolling on the grass, with pleasure in every muscle and limb. I wanted to catch a picture of him in my fingers, and I touched him as lightly as I would cobwebs; but lo, his fat body revolved, stiffened and solidified into an upright position, and his tongue gave my hand a lick! He pressed close to me, as if he were fain to crowd himself into my hand. He loved it with his tail, with his paw, with his tongue. If he could speak, I believe he would say with me that paradise is attained by touch; for in touch is all love and intelligence.

This small incident started me on a chat about hands, and if my chat is fortunate I have to thank my dog-star. In any case, it is pleasant to have something to talk about that no one else has monopolized; it is like making a new path in the trackless woods, blazing the trail where no foot has pressed before. I am glad to take you by the hand and lead you along an untrodden way into a world where the hand is supreme. But at the very outset we encounter a difficulty. You are so accustomed to light, I fear you will stumble when I try to guide you through the land of darkness and silence. The blind are not supposed to be the best of guides. Still, though I cannot warrant not to lose you, I promise that you shall not be led into fire or water, or fall into a deep pit. If you will follow me patiently, you will find that "there's a sound so fine, nothing lives 'twixt it and silence," and that there is more meant in things than meets the eye.

My hand is to me what your hearing and sight together are to you. In large measure we travel the same highways, read the same books, speak the same language, yet our experiences are different. All my comings and goings turn on the hand as on a pivot. It is the hand that binds me to the world of men and women. The hand is my feeler with which I reach through isolation and darkness and seize every pleasure, every activity that my fingers encounter. With the dropping of a little word from another's hand into mine, a slight flutter of the fingers, began the intelligence, the joy, the fullness of my life. Like Job, I feel as if a hand had made me, fashioned me together round about and moulded my very soul.

In all my experiences and thoughts I am conscious of a hand. Whatever moves me, whatever thrills me, is as a hand that touches me in the dark, and that touch is my reality. You might as well say that a sight which makes you glad, or a blow which brings the stinging tears to your eyes, is unreal as to say that those impressions are unreal which I have accumulated by means of touch. The delicate tremble of a butterfly's wings in my hand, the soft petals of violets curling in the cool folds of their leaves or lifting sweetly out of the meadow-grass, the clear, firm outline of face and limb, the smooth arch of a horse's neck and the velvety touch of his nose—all these, and a thousand resultant combinations, which take shape in my mind, constitute my world.

Ideas make the world we live in, and impressions furnish ideas. My world is built of touch-sensations, devoid of physical colour and sound; but without colour and sound it breathes and throbs with life. Every object is associated in my mind with tactual qualities which, combined in countless ways, give me a sense of power, of beauty, or of incongruity: for with my hands I can feel the comic as well as the beautiful in the outward appearance of things. Remember that you, dependent on your sight, do not realize how many things are tangible. All palpable things are mobile or rigid,

solid or liquid, big or small, warm or cold, and these qualities are variously modified. The coolness of a water-lily rounding into bloom is different from the coolness of an evening wind in summer, and different again from the coolness of the rain that soaks into the hearts of growing things and gives them life and body. The velvet of the rose is not that of a ripe peach or of a baby's dimpled cheek. The hardness of the rock is to the hardness of wood what a man's deep bass is to a woman's voice when it is low. What I call beauty I find in certain combinations of all these qualities, and is largely derived from the flow of curved and straight lines which is over all things.

"What does the straight line mean to you?" I think you will ask.

It *means* several things. It symbolizes duty. It seems to have the quality of inexorableness that duty has. When I have something to do that must not be set aside, I feel as if I were going forward in a straight line, bound to arrive somewhere, or go on forever without swerving to the right or to the left.

That is what it means. To escape this moralizing you should ask, "How does the straight line feel?" It feels, as I suppose it looks, straight—a dull thought drawn out endlessly. Eloquence to the touch resides not in straight lines, but in unstraight lines, or in many curved and straight lines together. They appear and disappear, are now deep, now shallow, now broken off or lengthened or swelling. They rise and sink beneath my fingers, they are full of sudden starts and pauses, and their variety is inexhaustible and wonderful. So you see I am not shut out from the region of the beautiful, though my hand cannot perceive the brilliant colours in the sunset or on the mountain, or reach into the blue depths of the sky.

Physics tells me that I am well off in a world which, I am told, knows neither cold nor sound, but is made in terms of size, shape, and inherent qualities; for at least every object appears to my fingers standing solidly right side up, and is not an inverted image on the retina which, I understand, your brain is at infinite though unconscious labour to set back on its feet. A tangible object passes complete into my brain with the warmth of life upon it, and occupies the same place that it does in space; for, without egotism, the mind is as large as the universe. When I think of hills, I think of the upward strength I tread upon. When water is the object of my thought, I feel the cool shock of the plunge and the quick yielding of the waves that crisp and curl and ripple about my body. The pleasing changes of rough and smooth, pliant and rigid, curved and straight in the bark and branches of a tree give the truth to my hand. The immovable rock, with its juts and warped surface, bends beneath my fingers into all manner of grooves and hollows. The bulge of a watermelon and the puffed-up rotundities of squashes that sprout, bud, and ripen in that strange garden planted somewhere behind my finger-tips are the ludicrous in my tactual memory and imagination. My fingers are tickled to delight by the soft ripple of a baby's laugh, and find amusement in the lusty crow of the barnyard autocrat. Once I had a pet rooster that used to perch on my knee and stretch his neck and crow. A bird in my hand was then worth two in the—barnyard.

My fingers cannot, of course, get the impression of a large whole at a glance; but I feel the parts, and my mind puts them together. I move around my house, touching object after object in order, before I can form an idea of the entire house. In other people's houses I can touch only what is shown to me—the chief objects of interest, carvings on the wall, or a curious architectural feature, exhibited like the family album. Therefore a house with which I am not familiar has for me, at first, no general effect or harmony of detail. It is not a complete conception, but a collection of object-

impressions which, as they come to me, are disconnected and isolated. But my mind is full of associations, sensations, theories, and with them it constructs the house. The process reminds me of the building of Solomon's temple, where was neither saw, nor hammer, nor any tool heard while the stones were being laid one upon another. The silent worker is imagination which decrees reality out of chaos.

Without imagination what a poor thing my world would be! My garden would be a silent patch of earth strewn with sticks of a variety of shapes and smells. But when the eye of my mind is opened to its beauty, the bare ground brightens beneath my feet, and the hedge-row bursts into leaf, and the rose-tree shakes its fragrance everywhere. I know how budding trees look, and I enter into the amorous joy of the mating birds, and this is the miracle of imagination.

Twofold is the miracle when, through my fingers, my imagination reaches forth and meets the imagination of an artist which he has embodied in a sculptured form. Although, compared with the life-warm, mobile face of a friend, the marble is cold and pulseless and unresponsive, yet it is beautiful to my hand. Its flowing curves and bendings are a real pleasure; only breath is wanting; but under the spell of the imagination the marble thrills and becomes the divine reality of the ideal. Imagination puts a sentiment into every line and curve, and the statue in my touch is indeed the goddess herself who breathes and moves and enchants.

It is true, however, that some sculptures, even recognized masterpieces, do not please my hand. When I touch what there is of the Winged Victory, it reminds me at first of a headless, limbless dream that flies towards me in an unrestful sleep. The garments of the Victory thrust stiffly out behind, and do not resemble garments that I have felt flying, fluttering, folding, spreading in the wind.

But imagination fulfils these imperfections, and straightway the Victory becomes a powerful and spirited figure with the sweep of sea-winds in her robes and the splendour of conquest in her wings.

I find in a beautiful statue perfection of bodily form, the qualities of balance and completeness. The Minerva, hung with a web of poetical allusion, gives me a sense of exhilaration that is almost physical; and I like the luxuriant, wavy hair of Bacchus and Apollo, and the wreath of ivy, so suggestive of pagan holidays.

So imagination crowns the experience of my hands. And they learned their cunning from the wise hand of another, which, itself guided by imagination, led me safely in paths that I knew not, made darkness light before me, and made crooked ways straight.

II - The Hands of Others

*

THE warmth and protectiveness of the hand are most homefelt to me who have always looked to it for aid and joy. I understand perfectly how the Psalmist can lift up his voice with strength and gladness, singing, "I put my trust in the Lord at all times, and his hand shall uphold me, and I shall dwell in safety." In the strength of the human hand, too, there is something divine. I am told that the glance of a beloved eye thrills one from a distance; but there is no distance in the touch of a beloved hand. Even the letters I receive are—

Kind letters that betray the heart's deep history,
In which we feel the presence of a hand.

It is interesting to observe the differences in the hands of people. They show all kinds of vitality, energy, stillness, and cordiality. I never realized how living the hand is until I saw those chill plaster images in Mr. Hutton's collection of casts. The hand I know in life has the fullness of blood in its veins, and is elastic with spirit. How different dear Mr. Hutton's hand was from its dull, insensate image! To me the cast lacks the very form of the hand. Of the many casts in Mr. Hutton's collection I did not recognize any, not even my own. But a loving hand I never forget. I remember in my fingers the large hands of Bishop Brooks, brimful of tenderness and a strong man's joy. If you were deaf and blind, and could have held Mr. Jefferson's hand, you would have seen in it a face and heard a kind voice unlike any other you have known. Mark Twain's

hand is full of whimsies and the drollest humours, and while you hold it the drollery changes to sympathy and championship.

I am told that the words I have just written do not "describe" the hands of my friends, but merely endow them with the kindly human qualities which I know they possess, and which language conveys in abstract words. The criticism implies that I am not giving the primary truth of what I feel; but how otherwise do descriptions in books I read, written by men who can see, render the visible look of a face? I read that a face is strong, gentle; that it is full of patience, of intellect; that it is fine, sweet, noble, beautiful. Have I not the same right to use these words in describing what I feel as you have in describing what you see? They express truly what I feel in the hand. I am seldom conscious of physical qualities, and I do not remember whether the fingers of a hand are short or long, or the skin is moist or dry. No more can you, without conscious effort, recall the details of a face, even when you have seen it many times. If you do recall the features, and say that an eye is blue, a chin sharp, a nose short, or a cheek sunken, I fancy that you do not succeed well in giving the impression of the person,—not so well as when you interpret at once to the heart the essential moral qualities of the face—its humour, gravity, sadness, spirituality. If I should tell you in physical terms how a hand feels, you would be no wiser for my account than a blind man to whom you describe a face in detail. Remember that when a blind man recovers his sight, he does not recognize the commonest thing that has been familiar to his touch, the dearest face intimate to his fingers, and it does not help him at all that things and people have been described to him again and again. So you, who are untrained of touch, do not recognize a hand by the grasp; and so, too, any description I might give would fail to make you acquainted with a friendly hand which my fingers have often folded about, and which my affection translates to my memory.

I cannot describe hands under any class or type; there is no democracy of hands. Some hands tell me that they do everything with the maximum of bustle and noise. Other hands are fidgety and unadvised, with nervous, fussy fingers which indicate a nature sensitive to the little pricks of daily life. Sometimes I recognize with foreboding the kindly but stupid hand of one who tells with many words news that is no news. I have met a bishop with a jocose hand, a humourist with a hand of leaden gravity, a man of pretentious valour with a timorous hand, and a quiet, apologetic man with a fist of iron. When I was a little girl I was taken to see [1] a woman who was blind and paralysed. I shall never forget how she held out her small, trembling hand and pressed sympathy into mine. My eyes fill with tears as I think of her. The weariness, pain, darkness, and sweet patience were all to be felt in her thin, wasted, groping, loving hand.

Few people who do not know me will understand, I think, how much I get of the mood of a friend who is engaged in oral conversation with somebody else. My hand follows his motions; I touch his hand, his arm, his face. I can tell when he is full of glee over a good joke which has not been repeated to me, or when he is telling a lively story. One of my friends is rather aggressive, and his hand always announces the coming of a dispute. By his impatient jerk I know he has argument ready for some one. I have felt him start as a sudden recollection or a new idea shot through his mind. I have felt grief in his hand. I have felt his soul wrap itself in darkness majestically as in a garment. Another friend has positive, emphatic hands which show great pertinacity of opinion. She is the only person I know who emphasizes her spelled words and accents them as she emphasizes and accents her spoken words when I read her lips. I like this varied emphasis better than the monotonous pound of unmodulated people who hammer their meaning into my palm.

Some hands, when they clasp yours, beam and bubble over with gladness. They throb and expand with life. Strangers have clasped my hand like that of a long-lost sister. Other people shake hands with me as if with the fear that I may do them mischief. Such persons hold out civil finger-tips which they permit you to touch, and in the moment of contract they retreat, and inwardly you hope that you will not be called upon again to take that hand of "dormouse valour." It betokens a prudish mind, ungracious pride, and not seldom mistrust. It is the antipode to the hand of those who have large, lovable natures.

The handshake of some people makes you think of accident and sudden death. Contrast this ill-boding hand with the quick, skilful, quiet hand of a nurse whom I remember with affection because she took the best care of my teacher. I have clasped the hands of some rich people that spin not and toil not, and yet are not beautiful. Beneath their soft, smooth roundness what a chaos of undeveloped character!

I am sure there is no hand comparable to the physician's in patient skill, merciful gentleness and splendid certainty. No wonder that Ruskin finds in the sure strokes of the surgeon the perfection of control and delicate precision for the artist to emulate. If the physician is a man of great nature, there will be healing for the spirit in his touch. This magic touch of well-being was in the hand of a dear friend of mine who was our doctor in sickness and health. His happy cordial spirit did his patients good whether they needed medicine or not.

As there are many beauties of the face, so the beauties of the hand are many. Touch has its ecstasies. The hands of people of strong individuality and sensitiveness are wonderfully mobile. In a glance of their finger-tips they express many shades of thought. Now and again I touch a fine, graceful, supple-wristed hand which

spells with the same beauty and distinction that you must see in the handwriting of some highly cultivated people. I wish you could see how prettily little children spell in my hand. They are wild flowers of humanity, and their finger motions wild flowers of speech.

All this is my private science of palmistry, and when I tell your fortune it is by no mysterious intuition or gipsy witchcraft, but by natural, explicable recognition of the embossed character in your hand. Not only is the hand as easy to recognize as the face, but it reveals its secrets more openly and unconsciously. People control their countenances, but the hand is under no such restraint. It relaxes and becomes listless when the spirit is low and dejected; the muscles tighten when the mind is excited or the heart glad; and permanent qualities stand written on it all the time.

and, not content with endowing me with natural *first-hand* knowledge which is rightfully mine, ascribe to me a preternatural sixth sense and credit to miracles and heaven-sent compensations all that I have won and discovered with my good right hand. And with my left hand too; for with that I read, and it is as true and honourable as the other. By what half-development of human power has the left hand been neglected? When we arrive at the acme of civilization shall we not all be ambidextrous, and in our *hand-to-hand* contests against difficulties shall we not be doubly triumphant? It occurs to me, by the way, that when my teacher was training my unreclaimed spirit, her struggle against the powers of darkness, with the stout arm of discipline and the light of the manual alphabet, was in two senses a hand-to-hand conflict.

No essay would be complete without quotations from Shakspeare. In the field which, in the presumption of my youth, I thought was my own he has reaped before me. In almost every play there are passages where the hand plays a part. Lady Macbeth's heart-broken soliloquy over her little hand, from which all the perfumes of Arabia will not wash the stain, is the most pitiful moment in the tragedy. Mark Antony rewards Scarus, the bravest of his soldiers, by asking Cleopatra to give him her hand: "Commend unto his lips thy favouring hand." In a different mood he is enraged because Thyreus, whom he despises, has presumed to kiss the hand of the queen, "my playfellow, the kingly seal of high hearts." When Cleopatra is threatened with the humiliation of gracing Cæsar's triumph, she snatches a dagger, exclaiming, "I will trust my resolution and my good hands." With the same swift instinct, Cassius trusts to his hands when he stabs Cæsar: "Speak, hands, for me!" "Let me kiss your hand," says the blind Gloucester to Lear. "Let me wipe it first," replies the broken old king; "it smells of mortality." How charged is this single touch with sad meaning! How it opens our eyes to the fearful purging Lear has undergone, to learn that royalty is no defence against ingratitude and cruelty!