

# Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan



*"Knowledge is love and light and vision."*

*by Helen Keller*

*[Editors' Note: Helen Keller became ill at age two and was left blind and deaf. For the next five years she grew up in a world of darkness and emptiness. She was afraid, alone and without any anchor. This is the story of her meeting the teacher who would change her life.]*

- 1 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 contrasts between the two lives which it connects. It was the third of March, 1887, three months before I was seven years old.
- 2 On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb and 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.
- 3 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 harbor was. "Light! Give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.
- 4 I felt approaching footsteps. I stretched out my hand as I supposed it was my mother. Someone 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.
- 5 The morning after my teacher came she led me into her room and gave me a doll. The little blind children at Perkins Institution had sent it and Laura Bridgman had dressed it; but I did not know this until afterward. When I 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.

6 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.

7 We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone 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.

8 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 that 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.

9 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.

*[Editors' Note: Helen went on to graduate cum laude from Radcliffe. She then devoted the rest of her life to teaching and giving hope to the blind and deaf, as her teacher had done. She and Anne remained friends until Anne's death.]*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## QUIZ

### *Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan*

*Directions: Circle the best answer.*

1. A theme of this memoir is that
  - a. it's important to have a teacher.
  - b. illness can change your life.
  - c. having a disability doesn't prevent one from living a full life.
  - d. childhood memories are important.
2. Anne Sullivan can best be described as
  - a. persistent and compassionate.
  - b. determined and angry.
  - c. wise and impulsive.
  - d. caring and courteous.
3. The word confounding in paragraph 6 means
  - a. understanding.
  - b. confusing.
  - c. thinking about.
  - d. doing.
4. Learning the word *water* was transformational because
  - a. it reminded Helen of how she was before her illness.
  - b. it triggered her understanding that words represented objects and ideas.
  - c. Helen could now ask for water when she was thirsty.
  - d. it made Helen happy for the first time she could remember.
5. Why does Helen compare herself to a ship in paragraph 3?
  - a. to argue that everyone deserves an education
  - b. to explain how she finally understood that words represent objects
  - c. to show that she wanted to travel the world and share her story
  - d. to describe how she felt adrift before she had language