
Joseph P. Lash (1909–1987) was born in New York City and was educated at City College and Columbia University. He is best known as a biographer, particularly of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Lash was at work on one of the Roosevelt biographies when the president of Radcliffe College asked if he would write a biography of Radcliffe's famous graduate, the blind and deaf Helen Keller. Lash at first refused, but his wife pointed out to him that it was an unusual honor for a man to be asked by a women's college to write a book about a woman. He read and was enchanted by Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. He decided that "it would be good for me to get away for a time from those power-oriented men, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin."

Lash's research took him from Massachusetts to New York, Washington, Iowa, Illinois, California, and Tuscumbia, Alabama. He read newspapers and correspondence, studied journals, and interviewed friends and relatives of Helen Keller. He found that it was impossible to write a book about Helen Keller that was not also a book about her teacher, Annie Sullivan. Therefore, his book *Helen and Teacher* starts with Annie.

The Miracle Worker, on page 494 in the drama section of this book, is a dramatization of the relationship between the extraordinary pupil and her extraordinary tutor. The excerpt that follows forms most of the first chapter of *Helen and Teacher*. Read carefully the first two paragraphs: What would you say is Lash's feeling for Annie?

“ANNIE”

Joseph P. Lash

In 1880, when Annie Sullivan, aged fourteen, was permitted to enroll in the Perkins Institution for the Blind in South Boston and begin her schooling, she discovered that history for her schoolmates was the Civil War. For Annie there was only one event in history, the Great Famine in Ireland of 1847 that had subsequently driven her impoverished young parents, like thousands of others, to the United States. "I knew very little about my parents," she said later. "There was no Bible record of births and deaths in my family. A few facts have been dug out of church and municipal records. I know that Limerick, Ireland, was their birthplace. I presume, without knowing the facts, that they were victims of the 'hungry forties.' . . . They left all that was dear to them and came to a strange land, perhaps with Tom Hood's cry upon their lips,

'O God, that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap!'

Annie was born in April 1866 in Feeding Hills, a village outside of Springfield, Massachusetts, in circumstances of poverty that were not uncommon among Irish immigrants. But the destitution of the Sullivans was starker and more desolate than even that of their compatriots. Annie's father, red-haired Thomas Sullivan, was not only illiterate and unskilled but a drinker and a brawler, and shiftless. Her gentle mother, born Alice Cloesy (spelled Cloahassy on Annie's baptismal certificate), was tubercular, and after a fall when Annie was three or four, was unable to walk again except on crutches. She bore five children. Annie, christened Johanna, was the oldest. The fifth, John, died before he was three months old. A sister, Nellie, had died before that. Her little brother Jimmie was born with a tubercular hip. Only Mary, next to the youngest, did not ail. Annie, although physically robust, contracted trachoma when she was about five. Untreated, this was gradually destroying her vision. One of her

earliest memories was a neighbor saying, "She would be so pretty if it were not for her eyes." A woman urged her mother to wash them in geranium water, and Annie remembers thin hands dabbing her "bad" eyes.

Half-blind, hot-tempered like her father, Annie responded to the miseries within and about her by lashing out, childishly, throwing things, going into tantrums. "What a terrible child," the neighbors said. "You little devil," her father often shouted, and tried to control her by beatings so severe that, to save her, Annie's mother would try to hide her little daughter. Horror followed horror. Her mother, "gentle Alice Cloesy," as her neighbors from Limerick called her, died. This was Annie's memory of that dreadful event as she told it fifty years later to Nella Braddy, with a vividness of detail and dramatic sweep that testified to her narrative power:

I am being dragged out of bed. I had a feeling that something very unusual had happened, and I must let them do with me as they liked. I was taken into a room where people were moving about. Soon Jimmie and Mary were there too. They were crying, and other children came and looked at us. Then a blank space. The next thing I remember, I was back in my mother's room. The men were taking the slats out of the trundle-bed and putting them on carpenters' horses. I was intensely interested and watched them quietly. They put three or four slats together. When their work was finished, and they went away, two women laid on the slats the mattress that was on the trundle-bed, then they went over to my mother's bed. I wondered what they were going to do, and I was afraid. I must have made a noise, for I was jerked out of the room. When I went into it again, I saw my mother on the improvised bed. I was astonished to see her in a brown habit which the priests had brought. Her hair was very smooth, and she looked so still! Her hands were crossed. There were white bands around her neck and her sleeves, and there was something on her breast which I knew was a word in white. Many years afterward, when I read "Jesu" in print, I realized in a flash that was

the word I had seen on the death robe. There was also a green ribbon round her neck with a little cross which I had never seen and which almost touched her hands. I saw Mary and Jimmie sobbing, and Mary was sitting at my father's knee. I didn't cry or move. Somehow they didn't seem to belong to me or I to them. They seemed more like other people who were sitting around—strangers. I don't remember anyone speaking to me or anything that happened afterward, until my father, Jimmie, Mary, and I were together in a big, black carriage. And I was furious with Jimmie because he wouldn't give me his place by the window so that I could watch the horses. He began to cry, saying I hurt him, and my father struck me sharply on the side of my head. A fire of hatred blazed up in me which burned for many years.

There was no money for the funeral, and the town helped to defray the expenses. She was buried in Potter's Field,¹ a kinswoman told Annie years later. She remembered her father saying after the funeral, "God put a curse on me for leaving Ireland and the old folks." Then he would rage wildly against "the landlords" and weep.

Although the other Sullivans had lost patience with Thomas, an uncle took in Mary and Jimmie, while eight-year-old Annie undertook to keep house for her father in a dilapidated little cabin on her uncle's farm. Her memories of this brief period were not punctuated with hostility and rage. She did not go to school, and no one ever read stories to her, but her imagination and mind were fired by the Irish folklore with which her father regaled her in his heavy brogue.

"My colleen bawn, you can't hear the little people in this new land," my father would say, "but in Ireland the brake² is full of voices, lowlike, and many are the times I heard them meself. When it's still-like, and night is coming on like a black rook spreading its wings—it's then you hear them talking of the sheep that

1. Potter's Field: public land set aside for burial of very poor or unknown persons.

2. brake (brāk): thicket.

went astray on the shepherd and how the wheezing soul of old Patrick Munn passed on the wind of last night and how Mrs. Shea's new baby had cut its teeth before ever it was born. As swately as mating doves they whisper. But if any man or woman meddles with them, they'll nurse a grudge till the end of time. There was Michael Doane who kicked a stone in a cairn. 'Let them move it as can,' he says, and turns his back. The next night the stone was moved to his doorstep! Mike never knew a peaceful night until they put him under six feet of Irish soil."

To her father, the River Shannon that flowed through Limerick was holy water. Once he took her to a Westfield oculist, and when that visit did nothing for her eyes, he sought to comfort her by saying that a drop from the River Shannon would cure them. How, she wanted to know. "I've told ye more times than ye's got fingers and toes that the Shannon begins in the eyes of the Lord hisself. He looking down from the high place and seeing the beautiful green land of Ireland He had created, not minding what He was doing, tears gushed out of His eyes, like the springs out of the hills, and there in the great plain afore Limerick, the Shannon began. Galway and Killslee have mountains, I hear say; but Limerick has the river Shannon for her glory."

He also filled his daughter with hate for landlords. In his father's house there had been four windows, he told her, but three of them were boarded up. Why? asked Annie. "Because openings are taxed in Ireland. You pay the landlord for air and light. Everything belongs to the landlord. He owns the farm you till. He grows fat on the harvest you reap. You handle the spade, follow the plough, plant, sow, and he is always before you or behind you like your own shadow. He orders you about, 'This must be done today, that must be begun tomorrow.' With difficulty you keep from splitting his head wide-open with the spade, but you only curse the devil under your breath." Irish hatred of landlords and the British, he told her, "smoulders on and on like turf-fire."

Even the run-down shack on her uncle's place was too much for her father to maintain. He gave

it up, and she too went to live in the house of her uncle and aunt who had taken in Jimmie and Mary. Her uncle was doing well as a tobacco farmer; but, unable to get any help from her father toward the children's support, he appealed to the town. Mary was taken in by another aunt. On February 22, 1876, Annie and Jimmie, who was on a crutch because of his diseased hip, were delivered in a *Black Maria*³ to the state poorhouse in Tewksbury. It was an isolated, forbidding huddle of grimy structures. The attendant who received them proposed to separate them, sending Annie to the women's ward and Jimmie to the men's; but Annie, whose whole childhood had been one abandonment after another, protested with such passionate sobs that the attendant relented and sent them both to a women's ward. No matter that it was unpainted, overcrowded, peopled with misshapen, diseased, often manic women; they were together.

Somehow it all seemed "very homelike" to Annie. The children's cots were next to each other. They had the "dead house" where corpses were prepared for burial to play in, and old issues of the *Godey's Lady's Book* and the *Police Gazette* to cut up. It seemed homelike to Annie, too, because most of the women were Irish, the Catholic priest was always about—and she was no stranger to filth and disease.

In the years that Annie was at Tewksbury the poorhouse cared for an average of 940 men, women, and children. The mortality rate was very high, particularly among the children. In the summer there were no screens to keep out the mosquitos and flies, and in the winter the heating often broke down because of rusty pipes. The superintendent repeatedly begged the state for a separate building in which to house the dangerous inmates, especially those with delirium tremens and offensive diseases. Men and women were inadequately separated. . . . Every day at the blast of a whistle the women rushed to the narrow windows crying, "The Horribles! The Horribles!" to watch the procession of the men to the dining hall. Deformed, legless, some with

3. *Black Maria*: patrol wagon.

faces distorted by cancer or goiters, they pushed like animals to get to their food, often using canes and crutches as prods if someone slowed down or got in their way. For almost all of six years this constituted Annie's whole world.

Death was a common occurrence, and all her life Annie remembered the clatter of the cots being wheeled over the wooden floor in the dead house. Then the dead house claimed Jimmie. She awoke suddenly in the middle of the night and, sensing the empty space next to her, knew immediately what had happened. She began to tremble. She crept to the dead room and, feeling his cold body under the sheets, began to scream, wakening everyone. As the women dragged her away, she clung to the lifeless body and kicked and screamed. Only when it was light was she permitted to go into the dead room again and sit on a chair beside the bed. Then the sheet was lifted for her and again she flung herself on the little body "and kissed and kissed and kissed his face—the dearest thing in the world—the only thing I had ever loved." Later the matron allowed her to go outside to pick an armful of flowers. These she placed on the little body. She begged to be allowed to follow the coffin to the burial ground. No priest was there as it was lowered into the bare, sandy spot. "When I got back, I saw that they had put Jimmie's bed back in its place. I sat down between my bed and his empty bed, and I hoped desperately to die. I believe very few children have ever been so completely left alone as I was."

Although the Catholic Church was a constant and comforting presence in the almshouse, the priest because of illness had not come to Jimmie's funeral. Fifty years later, in 1927, after she revisited Tewksbury together with Nella, she tried to put Jimmie's death into unrhymed verse:

The women told each other how they liked
to look at him
Cutting out pictures.
"His hair was curly, you mind,
You'd think it was done on curl-papers,
And his eyes were like the sky at night
With stars shining in them.
They shouldn't bury the dead little boy Jim-
mie

Before the priest comes,
Heathens that they are!
If God heard the prayers of the poor,
He'd strike them dead for their hard hearts.
The sister will miss the dead little boy, I say,
It's crazed with grief she is—anyone can see
that.

She was never hard with him,
And her having a bad temper
The pair of them was like two turtle-doves
together.

That'll make her trouble, I'm telling you.
It's a time they had getting him out,
And her holding fast to the pine box!
Holy Mother! It would melt the hardest heart
to hear

How the girl is grieving,
But they have stones for hearts.
God's curse be on them that have stones for
hearts!

What's that you said, woman?"

I said, God pity the little dead boy's sister.
It's a fair prayer that—

And God be merciful to the poor wherever
they are,

And God rest the soul of the little dead boy
Jimmie.

Not long after Jimmie's death, an estrangement from the Church began. Someone gave her an *Agnus Dei*⁴ to wear around her neck. Curious to see whether it really held the body of the Lord as she had been told, she broke open the silken covers. When the priest learned what she had done, he scolded her. "You have wounded the body of the Lord." That outraged her, and she told him she was through with confession. He imposed penances—fasting and telling her beads—but that only made her more defiant. After a time he was transferred and another priest—Father Barbara, a Jesuit—replaced him, and her attitude toward the Church shifted again. Father Barbara, a big man, was warm and protective. He befriended the young girl, and she responded to his concern. One day he announced, "This is no place for you, little

4. *Agnus Dei*: a small cloth-covered disk of wax stamped with the figure of a lamb, blessed by the Pope. The lamb would stand for Christ. *Agnus dei* means "lamb of God" in Latin.

woman; I am going to take you away." So in February 1877, almost a year after she arrived, she went to the Hospital of Les Soeurs de la Charité in Lowell, Massachusetts. There she underwent another operation. Two had been performed at Tewksbury, but they had not helped her vision. This one, too, while providing some relief from pain and the shooting lights in her eyes, left her vision so blurred that she continued to be listed on the public records as blind.

Father Barbara now was a frequent companion, in the church next door where he took her around the Stations of the Cross, along the banks of the Merrimac where they strolled hand in hand, and in the hospital ward in the evening when he read her the lives of the saints and told her how Protestants had persecuted the Catholics. He was kind and fatherly. . . . But this idyll came to an end. Father Barbara took her to Boston to some friends for whom she was to do light kitchenwork. But her eyes troubled her, and she was sent to the city infirmary for two more operations. She came out of the hospital to discover that the Boston family did not want her back and that Father Barbara had been sent to another part of the country. So it was back to Tewksbury despite her screams of rage and protest. This time she was placed in a ward of younger women, many of them unwed and pregnant. Although some in the ward were diseased and crippled . . . , it was a relief to her to be with younger women.

"Very much of what I remember about Tewksbury is indecent, cruel, melancholy," she told Nella Braddy fifty years later, "gruesome in the light of grown-up experience; but nothing corresponding with my present understanding of these ideas entered my child mind. Everything interested me. I was not shocked, pained, grieved, or troubled by what happened. Such things happened. People behaved like that—that was all that there was to it. It was all the life I knew. Things impressed themselves upon me because I had a receptive mind. Curiosity kept me alert and keen to know everything." . . .

Maggie Hogan, the quiet little woman in charge of her ward, took a special interest in her. She introduced Annie to Tewksbury's small library and persuaded a mildly deranged girl, Tilly, to read

to Annie books that she selected, mostly by Irish authors. Later Annie selected the books herself. Those that she remembered and listed for her biographer were: *Caste*, *The Octoroon*, *The Lamplighter*, *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, *The Breadwinner*, *Cast up by the Sea*, *Winiford*, *Stepping Heavenward*, *Darkness and Daylight*, *Tempest and Sunshine*, a life of St. Theresa, and "the story of some saint who gave Jesus her rosary and He turned it into jewels."

Annie's overriding ambition was to get out of the almshouse and to go to school. The women in the ward accused her of putting on airs when she spoke of it, which was often. "She'll be walking out of here some day on the arm of the Emperor of Penzance," they scoffed. A sense that she was different, that she wanted something more from life than these women did, was always with her. Even in the first months at Tewksbury she had talked of wanting to go to school when she heard from a blind inmate that there were schools for the blind. One of the women had made light of her ambition, saying that "education doesn't make any difference, if the Lord wills otherwise; Our life is the Lord's and death's." She had retorted hotly, "I don't see what the Lord has to do with it. And all the same, I'm going to school when I grow up."

Her chance to escape from Tewksbury came when she heard that an investigating commission headed by Frank B. Sanborn, chairman of the State Board of Charities, had arrived to inspect the institution. Gruesome stories about Tewksbury were rife in the state, even rumors of skins being sold from dead bodies to make shoes. She followed the group from ward to ward, trying to screw up her courage to approach it directly. Finally, as the men stood at the gate, she acted. Without knowing which figure was the exalted Mr. Sanborn, she flung herself into the group, crying, "Mr. Sanborn, Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school!" "What's the matter with you?" a voice asked. "I can't see very well." "How long have you been here?" She was unable to tell him. The men left, but soon afterward a woman came and told her she was to leave Tewksbury and go to school.

Two calico dresses were found for her. The red

one she wore; the blue one, along with a coarse-grained chemise and two pairs of black cotton stockings, was tied up in a newspaper bundle. The women in the ward crowded around her shouting advice as she walked to the Black Maria. "Don't tell anyone you came from the poorhouse." "Keep your head up, you're as good as any of them." "Be a good girl and mind your teachers." When Tim, the driver, handed her over to a state charity official, he added his own bit of advice: "Don't ever come back to this place. Do you hear? Forget this and you will be all right."

In Boston, the charity worker handed her over

to another official. When he told her Annie came from Tewksbury, she patted the girl on the head. "Poor child," she said pityingly. Annie's face burned. She had thought the calico dress pretty, but the woman's pity suddenly aroused in her a sense of how poorly dressed she must be. "The essence of poverty," she told Nella Braddy, "is shame. Shame to have been overwhelmed by ugliness, shame to be a hole in the perfect pattern of the universe."

That day—October 7, 1880—she entered the Perkins Institution for the Blind.
