

The Story of My Life

by Helen Keller

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 that it connects. It was in 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.

I felt approaching footsteps. I stretched out my hand, as I supposed, to 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.

The morning after my teacher came she led me into her room and gave me a doll. 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.

Later 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 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.

I had now the key to all language, and I was eager to learn to use it. Children who hear ac-

quire 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.

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. 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.

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 splendor.

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.

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 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 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.

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 March 26, 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.

When I had made speech my own, I could not wait to go home. At last the happiest of happy moments arrived. I had made my homeward journey, talking constantly to Miss Sullivan, not for the sake of talking, but determined to improve to the last minute. Almost before I knew it, the train stopped at the Tuscumbia station, and there on the platform stood the whole family. My eyes fill with tears now as I think how my mother pressed me close to her, speechless and trembling with delight, taking in every syllable that I spoke, while little Mildred seized my free hand and kissed it and danced, and my father expressed his pride and affection in a big silence. It was as if Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled in me: "The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands!"



After Helen played with the doll, her teacher slowly spelled into her hand the word *d-o-l-l*. The girl imitated this finger game.

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How well do you understand what you have read? Read each item below and find the best answer. Write your answers on page 7 of the Progress Folder.

1 When Helen Keller, the author, first met Miss Sullivan, her teacher, Helen was nearly

- a thirteen years old
- b nine years old
- c eleven years old
- d seven years old
- e fifteen years old

2 On the day the teacher arrived, Helen knew vaguely that something unusual was about to happen because her mother

- a put on her best dress
- b went to the door and waited on the steps
- c told her a teacher was coming
- d hurried around the house
- e would not let her go out to play

3 The only way that Miss Sullivan was able to teach Helen words and their meanings was through the girl's sense of

- a hearing
- b sight
- c touch
- d smell
- e taste

4 The most important discovery that Helen made during the first day with her teacher was this key to language:

- a Everything has a special feeling.
- b Everything has a name.
- c Everything is different.
- d Everything is alive.
- e Everything can be spelled out.

5 When Miss Sullivan received a bunch of violets from Helen, she tried unsuccessfully to help the girl understand the meaning of the word *love* by spelling out the sentence "I love Helen," and by

- a putting her arm gently round the girl
- b placing the girl's hand near the teacher's heart
- c kissing the girl gently on the cheek
- d holding the girl's hand tightly with affection
- e pressing the flowers gently against the girl's lips

6 Helen found it especially difficult to understand the word *love*, chiefly because she could not

- a tell the difference between love and warmth from the sun
- b figure out exactly how the word was spelled
- c touch the thing the word stood for
- d feel love in a world where she was so handicapped
- e learn to say the word aloud to her teacher

7 In the lesson on stringing beads, Helen was learning mainly to

- a select beads of different shapes and sizes
- b prepare for a job where she could earn a living
- c organize things according to a given pattern
- d put the string through the holes in the beads
- e do something that pleased her teacher

8 From her bead stringing, Helen first learned that certain words stood for

- a concrete things
- b abstract ideas
- c definite shapes and sizes
- d natural objects
- e personal relationships

9 Helen became dissatisfied with her touch system of talking because she found that this system

- a hampered her in expressing her ideas to other people
- b was no better than that used by other people in communicating
- c could be replaced by speech even by persons who were deaf
- d was inferior to the method she used before her illness
- e restrained her in listening to other people's ideas

10 When Helen returned from the Horace Mann School, she was met by her family at the railroad station platform. There each of these things except one occurred. Which one did not occur?

- a Helen's father was silent but proud of his daughter.
- b Helen spoke to her family.
- c Miss Sullivan helped Helen to improve her pronunciation.
- d Mildred kissed Helen's hand and did a little dance.
- e Holding Helen close to her, her mother trembled with delight.

