

Upper stage

Exploring

The Miracle Worker

by William Gibson

Sep 20 - Oct 21, 2000

an IRT Study Guide

Helen Keller was a normal, healthy, bright two-year-old in 1882 when she was suddenly struck by illness which left her deaf and blind. Against overwhelming odds, she not only learned to communicate, she became one of the twentieth century's most prominent and inspiring figures, writing, lecturing, and working ceaselessly for the betterment of people's lives around the world.

Annie Sullivan was stricken with near-blindness at the age of five. Orphaned at eight, she suffered in a wretched state institution until she was able to convince authorities to send her to a school for the blind. Graduating at the head of her class, she went to work as a governess for seven-year-old, deaf, blind Helen Keller.

The Miracle Worker shows us the powerful battle of wills between the wild, uncontrollable young Helen, raging fiercely in her dark and silent world, and the inexperienced yet determined young teacher who would eventually break through the barriers of handicap and teach her how to communicate. The famous moment at the water pump, when Helen stands with one hand under the flowing water while Annie spells the word *water* into her other

hand, and Helen finally recognizes the connection between the word and the substance, has become not only a great moment in American history, but a great moment in American theatre.

Helen Keller herself later wrote of this moment: "There was a strange stir within me, a misty consciousness, a sense of something remembered. It was as if I had come back to life after being dead.... I understood it was possible for me to communicate with other people by these signs. Thoughts that ran forward and backward came to me quickly, thoughts that seemed to start in my brain and spread all over me. I think it was in the nature of a revelation.... I felt joyous, strong, equal to my limitations. Delicious sensations rippled through me, and sweet strange things that were locked in my heart began to sing."

Playwright William Gibson wrote three different versions of *The Miracle Worker*. The first, in 1957, was broadcast live on the CBS dramatic anthology "Playhouse 90," with Teresa Wright as Annie Sullivan, Patty McCormack as Helen, and Burl Ives as Captain Keller. (Four decades later, Patty McCormack appeared in the IRT's 1998 production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*.) The second version, written for the stage, opened at the Playhouse on Broadway in 1959 with Anne Bancroft as Annie, twelve-year-old Patty Duke as Helen, and Patricia Neal as Mrs. Keller. The play won Tony Awards for Best Play and Best Actress (Anne Bancroft). Gibson's third version was for the 1962 United Artists' film in which Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke reprised their Broadway roles and for which they both won Academy Awards.

Instantly recognized as a contemporary classic, the original Broadway production ran for two years and over seven hundred performances. One critic described it as "harrowing and explosive." Robert Coleman of the *Daily Mirror* wrote: "Gibson's words are terse and eloquent, highly dramatic, but it is the frightening, harrowing, physical conflicts of his drama that terrify and grip you." ★

The American deaf community primarily uses American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate. This is a language just like any other with its own grammar and its own symbolic representation of objects and ideas. In ASL, however, instead of the linguistic symbols being written or verbal words, they are visual images conveyed by hand and body motions.

The American Manual Alphabet is not a language of its own, but a literal translation of words—a letter-by-letter representation through finger spelling. It is used in concert with ASL when encountering unfamiliar words or names which have no "sign." Each letter of the alphabet is represented by a specific hand shape. This kind of finger spelling is how Annie Sullivan was able to communicate with Helen.

American Manual Alphabet



A



B



C



D

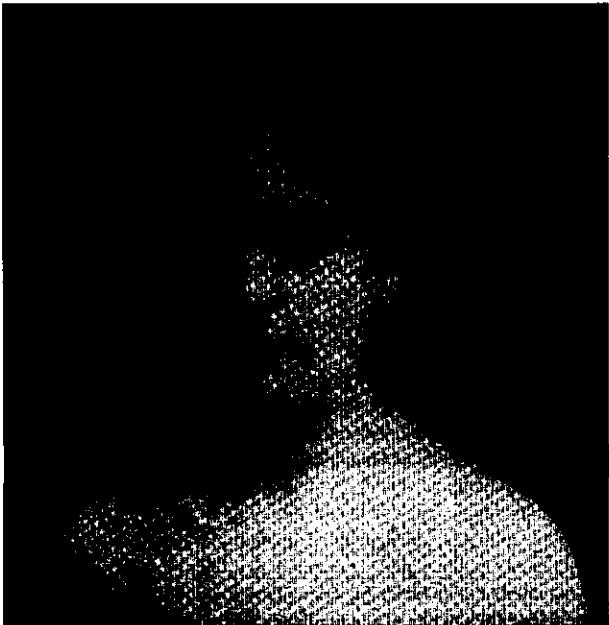


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The story of Helen Keller's teacher, Annie Sullivan, is itself a story of triumph over almost insurmountable difficulties. Born into poverty and stricken with adversity from her earliest years, she went on to become a fine writer, a discerning reader, and above all, a brilliantly intuitive teacher. Though she struggled all her life with failing eyesight and extremely poor health, she nevertheless gave herself so completely to Helen's education that even today it is hard to separate the accomplishments of her remarkable pupil from her own. She was, in fact, widely regarded by the public as a "miracle worker."

Helen Keller wrote that meeting Annie Sullivan was the beginning of her "soul's dawn." The devoted Helen always referred to Sullivan as "Teacher."

Anne Mansfield Sullivan was born on April 14, 1886, in Feeding Hills, Massachusetts. Her parents, who had migrated from Ireland during the years after the great famine of 1847, were virtually destitute, and their fortunes changed little after their arrival in the United States. While her father scratched out a meager existence as a farm laborer, her mother, suffering terribly from the ravages of tuberculosis, found bearing and raising children beyond her capacity to cope. Of Annie's four siblings, two died very young, and a third—her younger brother Jimmie—was born with a tubercular hip.



Annie Sullivan, 1887.

When she was five years old, Annie Sullivan was stricken with trachoma, a disease that caused the corneas of her eyes to cloud over, thus leaving her virtually blind.

"The highest result of education is tolerance."
-Helen Keller

Three years later, the fabric of her family was torn beyond repair. Her mother died and was buried in a pauper's grave. Her father abandoned the family and disappeared from their lives forever. Annie and her younger brother were sent to the state infirmary in Tewksbury, Massachusetts, where conditions were so unspeakably bad that few children survived. Annie would later tell how their first night at Tewksbury was spent in the "dead house," a small enclosure where corpses were held before burial, a foul-smelling place crawling with vermin. In this

Teacher

the life of Annie Sullivan

hellish environment, her brother Jimmie only lasted a few weeks. Annie was now alone, almost blind, amongst beggars, thieves, molesters, and prostitutes.

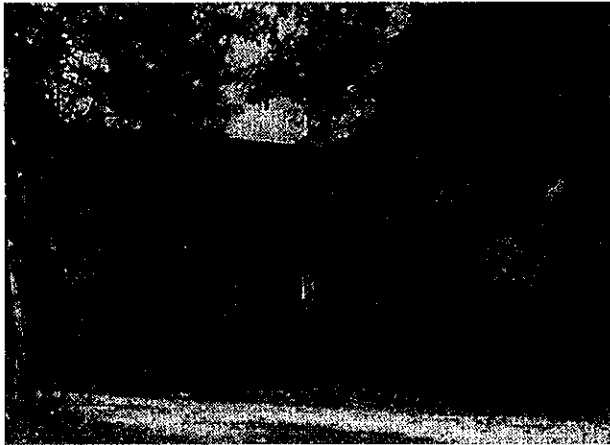
Amazingly, she survived. After hearing about the existence of special schools for the blind, she made up her mind to get herself admitted to one. She tells how one day, when a state official came to inspect the infirmary, she flung herself onto the floor in front of the visiting party and cried out "Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school!"

Her plucky spirit was rewarded. In 1880, she was transferred to the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind in Boston. She proved to be a demanding and difficult student but also an apt one, quickly learning to spell and to use braille. With the help of a wealthy benefactor, she was able to receive restorative surgery to her eyes, and after two operations, was able to see well enough to read. The school's director, Michael Anagnos, took a special liking to her and guided her through her studies. In 1886, six years after being admitted to Perkins, she graduated as valedictorian of her class.

Not long after graduation, she received a letter from Dr. Anagnos informing her of an opportunity for employment—"a position in the family of Mr. Keller as governess of his little deaf mute and blind daughter." In early March 1887 Annie Sullivan set off on a thousand-mile journey to a house known as Ivy Green at the end of a shady lane in Tuscumbia, Alabama, where Helen and her family were waiting for her. She was just twenty-one. Her salary was \$25 a month.

A talented and emotionally complex young woman, Annie Sullivan devoted her life to the education and companionship of Helen Keller. She calmed Helen's restless spirit and introduced her to the gift of language. She encouraged Helen to read the classics and taught her to

Ivy Green, the house where Helen Keller grew up in Tuscumbia, Alabama, is today a national shrine.



"I believe that the welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all."
-Helen Keller

write. She took Helen outdoors where the natural world became her classroom. "She made every word vibrant to my mind," wrote Helen. "She would not let the silence around me be silent.... She brought me into sensory contact with everything we could reach or feel—sunlit summer calm, the quivering of soap bubbles in the light, ... the rustling of silk, the creaking of a door, and the blood pulsing in my veins."

The rest of Annie's story is closely bound to Helen's. In 1899, she accompanied her to Radcliffe College, where she assisted her through 17 courses of study, including Shakespearean drama, economics, and philosophy.

In 1905, Annie married John Macy, a writer

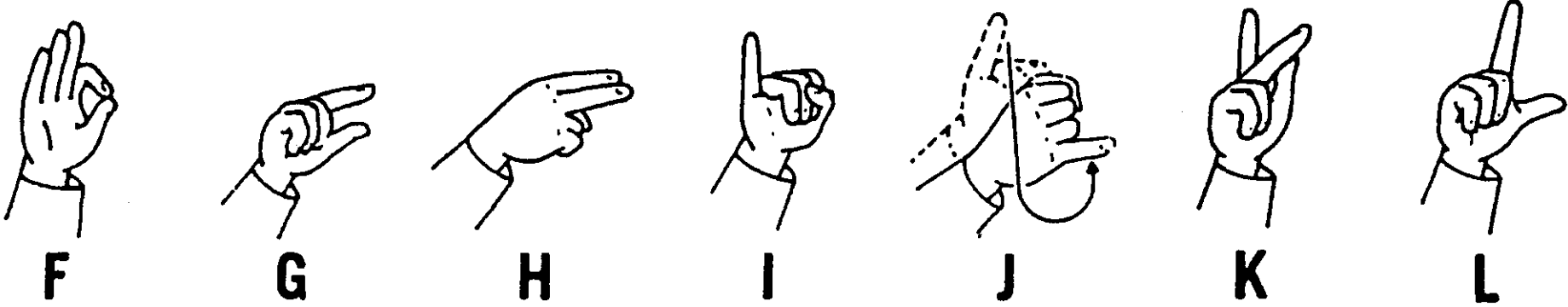


"It is not for us to pray for tasks equal to our powers but for powers equal to our tasks."
-Helen Keller

and teacher from Harvard who had assisted with the publication of Helen's first book. For a variety of reasons, including Annie's failing health, the marriage lasted only nine years, ending in 1914.

For the next two decades, Annie accompanied Helen on her travels around the world, until in 1933 she was forced to stay home because of her rapidly failing eyesight. Two operations on her eyes proved unsuccessful, and in 1936, partly as a result of complications from her second surgery, she died. At her funeral in Washington's National Cathedral, the presiding bishop called her one of the great teachers of all time, and her world-famous pupil blessed the memory of her "heaven-sent Teacher who wrought her miracle of liberation through Him who is the Lord of Life and Love." ★

"The grand of this is to do the best in whatever and however has capacity



The story told in *The Miracle Worker* represents only the beginning of a remarkable life. The celebrated moment at the water pump, when the seven-year-old Helen Keller connected the feeling of water itself with the feeling of the word *water* spelled in her hand, was also the birth moment of a conscious human being. In that miraculous instant, the deaf-blind child found her connection with the world, discovered the source of her freedom, and began to unlock her considerable creative powers.

In later years, Helen Keller accomplished many things: she wrote 14 books, became the much-admired friend of presidents and kings, and inspired audiences around the world.

Helen Keller

a chronology

"I will not just live my life.
I will not just spend my life.
I will invest my life."
-Helen Keller



Sullivan, 1887.

1880 Helen Keller is born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, to Captain Arthur Keller and Kate Adams Keller.

1882 Helen suffers a severe congestion of stomach and brain—possibly scarlet fever or meningitis—leaving her deaf, blind, and mute.

1885 Helen communicates by means of simple gestures but also is subject to episodes of intense emotion and destructive behavior.

1887 Annie Sullivan (age 20) is hired as Helen's governess. Miss Sullivan succeeds in calming her behavior and teaching her to "speak" by means of touch. Helen later describes March 3, 1887—the day her teacher arrived—as her "soul's birthday."

1888 Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institute in Boston, publishes an article referring to Helen as a "phenomenon" and brings her story to world-wide attention.

and the simplest law
Oracle within us
of which we are capable,
situation we are placed;
very human being,
disabled he may be,
enough to obey it."
-Helen Keller

1895 Helen meets wealthy socialites Laurence and Eleanor Hutton who establish a fund for Helen's continuing education. Through the Huttons, she meets Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), who becomes a life-long admirer and friend.

1899 Helen enters Radcliffe College, the first person with her handicaps to be enrolled in an American institution of higher learning.

1903 Publishes *The Story of My Life*, an autobiography of her earlier years. (In 1996, the New York Public Library will list it as one of the 100 most important books of the twentieth century.)

1904 Helen graduates *cum laude* with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Radcliffe.

1905 Annie Sullivan marries John Macy, a Harvard-educated literary critic, poet, and socialist.



The water pump at Ivy Green is still preserved today.

1908 Helen's book *The World I Live In*, which describes in detail her contact with the outside world through the senses of touch, taste, and smell, is published.

1909 Helen becomes a member of the Socialist Party of Massachusetts, thus beginning her life-long interest in, and support for, socialist causes around the world.

1910 Helen begins to take voice lessons so she can lecture on the Chautauqua circuit.

1914 While staying with her sister Mildred in Montgomery, Helen meets and falls in love with Peter Fagan. Their plans to be secretly married are spoiled by the intervention of her mother.

Helen Keller approaches her 80th birthday, 1960.

1920 In desperate need of money, Helen and Annie join the vaudeville circuit, travelling across the country, telling their story and demonstrating Helen's accomplishments.

1921 Kate Keller, Helen's mother, dies.

1922 A widower from Kansas City with five children proposes marriage to Helen by letter. Helen declines.

1927 *My Religion*, an account of Helen's acceptance of the ideas of religious philosopher, Emanuel Swedenborg, is published.

1934 Ann Sullivan Macy (now 68) becomes virtually blind, and Helen's care falls increasingly into the hands of another companion, Polly Thompson.

1936 Annie Sullivan dies.

1937 As a result of Helen's efforts on behalf of the blind, 30 states establish commissions for blind citizens. In Japan, she raises 35 million yen for the welfare of the blind and deaf.

1939 Helen moves to a new home, Arcan Ridge, in Connecticut.

1943 Helen visits men and women wounded in the Second World War

1946 Helen takes a world tour on behalf of the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind.

1948 Helen visits Hiroshima and Nagasaki to witness the damage caused by the atomic bombs.

1950 Helen visits South Africa

1953 Helen tours Latin America

1955 *Teacher*, Helen's own account of the life of Annie Sullivan, is published.

1959 William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* opens on Broadway.

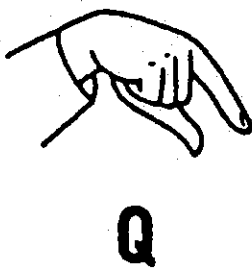
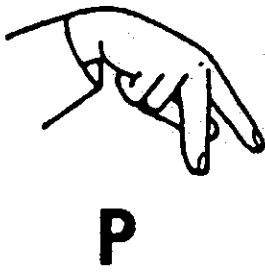
1961 Helen retires from public life.

1964 Helen is awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon Johnson.

1968 Helen dies at age 88 and is buried in Washington's National Cathedral. ★

1893 Helen and Annie visit the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago with Alexander Graham Bell as their guide. Bell introduces them to some of the miracles of science and technology.

1894 Helen attends the Wright Humason School for the Deaf in New York City.



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Questions or comments?
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WEBSITE SPONSOR



On the World Wide Web there is a home page created by a young man in England named James Gallagher. His hobbies include working on his computers and keeping up with the changes in computer technology through newspapers, newsletters, and PC magazines. What makes him different from other young computer whizzes, however, is that James—like Helen Keller—is both deaf and blind. He created his home page, which he calls "A-Z to Deaf-Blindness," to communicate with other deaf-blind people around the world and to increase public awareness about how the deaf-blind use modern technology to communicate with each other. With James's permission we are sharing a few paragraphs from the beginning of his web page.

For those interested in more information,

James's Web Page address is:

www.s55wilma.demon.co.uk/info-db.html.

Hello There!

It's James here. I would like to welcome you to this page of Deaf-Blind Link, and thank you for being interested in finding out more about us. A special welcome to fellow Deaf Blind people, Blind, and of course our Deaf friends as well....

By coming to this particular page you must be interested in learning how we the deaf blind communicate with each other, our family and friends, and the hearing world which we all live in. I sincerely hope that with the information below ... you may become more aware about deaf blindness and ... how to communicate with a deaf blind person, or a deaf person, when you meet them.

A little information about me. My name is James Gallagher, and I live in the United Kingdom.

I am totally blind and almost profoundly deaf. I have to wear two powerful hearing aids which are linked to a piece of equipment called a "hearit." This equipment, which is worn around my neck and is placed on my chest, amplifies the hearing aids.... If someone wishes to speak to me, they have to speak directly into the "hearit." This method is cumbersome for them and for me but not everyone knows the deaf-blind manual [alphabet]. Without my hearing aids, I am totally deaf.

The "hearit" is just for indoor use. When I am outdoors, I need a Guide/Communicator with me. When I have to go somewhere immediately I can leave home with my Guide Dog. Her name is Wilma. The British Blind Dog Association will train a deaf-blind person with a Guide Dog. Even though Wilma is my eyes on the road, she can't be my ears as well. So when I am out with her, I also wear a device called TAM.

TAM is a lightweight sound monitor for profoundly deaf people. You wear the TAM like a watch on your left

Deaf & Blind on the Web



James's guide dog, Wilma.

wrist. It has a very thin wire which is attached to the watch like a band. The other end of the wire is connected to a small control box which you have clipped onto your jumper or your inside pocket. What does TAM do for me? Well, the watch band on my wrist is a Vibrator

which gives me a clear firm vibration when a sound is quite near me, useful for trying to cross a busy road. But if the road is a particularly busy one, there of course will be quite a lot of noise around. Then it's a waiting game for someone to escort me across the road.

TAM is also very useful indoors as well. It alerts you when someone enters the room, or when they are trying to communicate to you. A very useful bit of equipment and one which I constantly use. But I wonder what people think when they first meet me and see wires coming out everywhere.

As I said above, I also have a Guide Dog. Because she is guiding a deaf-blind person, she has a different color of harness. It's a red and white harness. In the British highway code, it specifies that red and white are the colors which should inform drivers that the pedestrian standing at the curb is a deaf blind person. But this fact is not readily known. But you know now, don't you? Other countries use different methods to distinguish the difference between blind and deaf-blind people.

My hobby is working with my computers and learning about the new technology advances that are happening almost every day. After all, if it wasn't for the advancement of technology then I wouldn't have been able to create a deaf-blind link on the net.

For you, the equipment sitting on the desk in front of you is just a metal frame with some plastic around it and some boards that are within the unit.

But for me computers are my gateway to the outside world. Like many other deaf-blind and blind people on the net, I can access information, such as the newspapers, magazines, especially PC magazines.... There are also many archives of the great classic books on the net. You may be saying to yourself, so what? But to people like myself who cannot have access to such material, it's great. The net is like our public library, and it is our corner shop to get our newspapers as well.

I have been on the net for almost two years now. I have taught myself all about computers but I'm still learning more and more every day. Some people find it hard to believe that people like myself are capable of creating and maintaining a web site. I made "A-Z to Deaf-Blindness" on my own without the help of anyone.

Sometimes people can only see a person's disability. They are blinding themselves with their own prejudices. A person's true strength is within them....

Once again, thank you for visiting "A-Z to Deaf-Blindness." I hope you have found some of the information useful and interesting.

All the very best to you,

James



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V



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X



Y



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