

32. Helen Keller



This is the story of a child who became completely deaf and blind before she had learnt to talk. Because of her own courage and also that of her wonderful teacher she learned to talk and write. She was able to go to school and to college and to live a full and happy life.



Helen was born in 1880 in a small town in the southern U.S.A. At 18 months, when she was beginning to talk, she suddenly became terribly ill and very nearly died. When she recovered she was completely deaf and blind.

It is very difficult for a deaf child to learn to talk. Most babies learn by hearing other people talking. But the deaf child cannot hear anyone so how can she know what talking sounds like? Many deaf people learn to lip-read, and they become very clever at understanding what other people are saying by watching them. But Helen could not see what other people were doing. She remembered a few words she had known before she was ill, for instance, she went on calling water 'waa-waa'. But she had to make signs for most things. She would shake her head for 'No', and nod for 'Yes'. A

pull meant 'Come', and a push, 'Go'. But of course she could say very little like this, and she depended entirely on other people. Yet Helen had an active mind and a clever brain, and wanted to do and say everything any other child would. She used to get into terrible tempers when she could not explain what she meant, or understand what others wanted.

Then when Helen was nearly seven, Anne Sullivan came to teach her and look after her. This clever and devoted teacher changed Helen's life.

Anne Sullivan herself had been nearly blind and had been at a school for blind people. There, Anne Sullivan had learnt the fingerspelling method. She felt sure that this was the only way to talk to Helen and teach her to say what she wanted. Because Helen could not see her making the signs, she would spell the words onto her pupil's hand. Helen had become very sensitive to the feel of things, much more sensitive than most people are. She could soon tell the difference between the feel of one letter and another.

Miss Sullivan gave Helen a doll, and when she gave it she spelled the letters D-O-L-L onto Helen's hand. She did this with the names of other things, such as C-A-K-E, and M-U-G. Helen obediently spelled them back; but she did not understand what it all meant, and she soon grew bored and unhappy. She would not try any more, and poor Anne Sullivan did not know what to do next.

Then one day Miss Sullivan took Helen outside to the water pump. As the water spilled into Helen's mug and overflowed on her hand, Miss Sullivan spelled W-A-T-E-R on her other hand. Suddenly Helen's face lit up. She understood that W-A-T-E-R was the name of this cold wet stuff, and it came to her in a flash that everything has a name.



Touching her little sister, she spelled B-A-B-Y, which was one of the words Miss Sullivan had shown her. All that day and for days after, Helen darted from one thing to the next demanding that Miss Sullivan should spell their names for her. She became so excited she could hardly

control herself. At last words began to have a meaning for her. She then learned the names of actions as well as things; SIT, STAND, RUN, WALK; and then descriptions of things and actions HARD, SOFT, QUICKLY, SLOWLY. From then on she was able to learn as any child does. Only, Helen spelled words with her fingers instead of saying them aloud. Although she made noises, she still could not talk.

Now that she had started to learn, Helen, with her quick brain and good memory, learned very fast indeed. She learned to spell words incredibly fast, and soon she and her beloved teacher could have long conversations. Wherever they went, Miss Sullivan described things to her and told her what people were saying. Helen soon learned to write on a special frame with ridges to keep the lines straight, and, later she learned to type. She began to read Braille books.

The next thing was to learn to talk aloud. For this she had a special teacher who taught her how to move her lips and tongue. Helen quickly learned to talk also and to 'listen' to people speaking by putting her sensitive fingers on their lips and throats. This meant that she could talk with people who did not know the fingerspelling method, so long as they spoke distinctly. All this was hard work, needing endless patience by both pupil and teacher, and long practice.

In time she could talk, read and write, and even learnt to speak

French and German. Now Helen was determined to go to university and take a degree. When she was twenty, she sat for the entrance examination of Radcliffe College, one of the best colleges in America. The papers were set in Braille, and she typed her answers. Of course, she could not read what she had written. She had to take a chance that she had made no mistakes. She had no difficulty in passing the examination and entering Radcliffe.

Miss Sullivan was with Helen all through her time at the university. In the end, this girl, who at seven had lived in a dark world, unable to hear, or speak, won high university honours.

Throughout her life, she helped other blind people to find courage. She travelled all over the world inspiring everyone by her example.

Helen Keller lived to a ripe old age of eighty-eight. She passed away in 1968.



Things to do :

1. Answer the following questions.

- (1) How did Helen overcome her handicaps ?
- (2) What part did Anne Sullivan play in Helen's life ?
- (3) How did Helen Keller help other blind people ?
- (4) Helen Keller's life is the story of.....
 - (a) a blind woman.
 - (b) courage, patience and struggle.
 - (c) a helpless, unfortunate girl.

2. Activity

- (1) What is meant by 'Honour the white cane'?
- (2) Find out what 'Braille' is.
- (3) Find out the difference between fingerspelling method, sign language and Braille.

3. Complete the following. Example : patient – patience.

* attend – * enter – * differ –

* * *