

FATHOMLESS OCEAN

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THE CONQUEST OF THE DUO – HELEN KELLER AND HER ALMA MATER

A. JASEEMA BANU

*"Faith is the strength by which a shattered world
shall emerge into the light."*

- Helen Keller

People with disabilities in this world have hope, courage and dreams like everyone else. The musician 'Beethoven' who was deaf became a great composer and pianist. 'Marlee Beth Matlin' lost her hearing capacity, but became a film and television actress. 'Frida Kahlo' contracted by polio was Mexico's most famous artist. All these gifted people were not indeed disabled but guided by their determined spirit. Helen Keller who was deaf and blind believed, *Faith is the strength which generates energy, perseverance, patience and love*. She was a woman of luminous intelligence, high ambition and great accomplishments who dedicated and devoted her life to help others. She was a world famous speaker and many of her speeches are preserved in the Helen Keller Archives owned by the AFB.

Helen Keller wrote twelve books which were published during her writing career. Her famous autobiography *The Story Of My Life* explores her challenges and struggles she faced as a deaf and dumb child. She also wrote a number of articles and was a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers. Helen Keller traveled across the world and gave several motivational speeches. She made seven trips across the world and met the world leaders including *Winston Churchill, Jawaharlal Nehru and Golda Meir*.

While at college she developed a strong interest in women's right. In 1909, she became a socialist and was active in various campaigns including those in favour of birth control, trade unionism and against child labour and capital punishment. In an article published in 'The Liberator' Helen Keller bravely expressed her view against the injuries caused to the people. In 1912, she was interviewed by Ernest Gruening, a young

journalist working for the Boston American. She spoke with interest of her desire to help others who were deaf and blind, and revealed that she was a socialist, repeatedly referring to socialism as the cure for the nation's ills. She donated money to *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*, one of the most prominent African-American civil rights organization.

Let us see, how the darkness of her world was transformed into radiant light and how her monotonous life became magnificent. She was born healthy on 27 June, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, to Arthur H. Keller and Kate Adams. Helen Keller's house was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and honeysuckles. She used to spend her time in her garden which she considered the paradise of her childhood. When she was one year old, there came the illness which shut her sight and hearing which brought her into the state of unconsciousness. The doctor thought that she could not live as she got acute congestion of the stomach and brain. One early morning, the fever left her mysteriously as it had come. There was a great joy in the family but no one, even the doctor knew that she could never see or hear again.

Gradually she got used to the silence and darkness until the great teacher relieved her from the world of prison. She realized that she was different from other people before she met her teacher. When she was about six years old, her father heard of an eminent oculist Dr. Chisholm in Baltimore. He took her to him, but the doctor couldn't do anything and advised to consult Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, of Washington, who could give him information about schools and teachers for deaf or blind children. Dr. Bell advised her father to write to Mr. Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution in Boston. At last they received a letter from Mr. Anagnos, who informed that a teacher had been found.

She was none other than her lovable teacher Johanna Mansfield Sullivan Macy, better known as Anne Sullivan. She was an American teacher, who taught Helen Keller, a blind and deaf child, how to communicate and read Braille. Anne Sullivan was a lifelong companion of Helen Keller. Sullivan had studied the instruction methods used with Laura Bridgman, a deaf and blind student she had known at Perkins.

before going to Alabama. After isolating Keller from her family in order to educate better, Sullivan began working to teach Keller how to communicate with the outside world. As Miss Sullivan began to teach her, she was beset by many difficulties. Helen wouldn't yield a point without contesting it to the bitter end. She couldn't coax her or compromise with her. To get her to do the simplest thing, such as combing her hair or washing her hands or buttoning her boots, it was necessary to use force, and, of course, a distressing scene followed. Miss Sullivan saw clearly that it was useless to try to teach her language or anything else until she learned to obey.

I have thought about it a great deal, and the more I think, the more certain I am that obedience is the gateway through which knowledge, yes, and love, too, enter the mind of the child.

- Miss Sullivan

The most important day in Helen's life was when she met her teacher the very first time, at the age of six. Her teacher led her into a room and gave a doll. When she started playing with it, Miss Sullivan slowly spelled into her hand the word "doll". She was at once interested in this finger play and tried to imitate it. When they walked down the path to the well-house, someone was drawing water and her teacher placed Helen's hand under the spout to feel the cool stream and she spelled the word "water" slowly, then rapidly. She felt the thrill of joy in her soul. Slowly she started learning the words. Once Helen found a few early violets in the garden and brought to her teacher. Miss Sullivan tried to kiss her, but at that time she did not like to have any one kiss her except her mother, so she refused. Miss Sullivan put her arm gently round Helen and spelled into her hand, "I love Helen". She asked what love is. The teacher pointed to Helen's heart and said it is here. Without touching, she couldn't understand anything. So, she was going on asking whether it was the violets, the flowers or the warm sun. Later, the teacher was able to make her understand by saying *you cannot touch the clouds but you feel the rain likewise you cannot touch love but you can feel the sweetness that it pours into everything.*

When Helen began her learning, Miss Sullivan was very patient with her. She made raised letters for Helen to learn the alphabet. She also used real objects, such as fossils to teach about dinosaurs, so that Helen would have something to touch, allowing her to make connections with time and concepts. The appreciative Helen once said, *All the best of me belongs to her*. Through Miss Sullivan, Helen formed friendship with other people. Helen further described her close relationship with Miss Sullivan in these words: *Her being is inseparable from my own, and the footsteps of my life are in hers*.

From the beginning of Helen's education Miss Sullivan made it a practice to write the sentences into her hand. The next important step in Helen's education was learning to read.

*Any teacher can take a child to the classroom,
but not every teacher can make him learn*

-Helen Keller

Once Helen was furious but became fabulous, once she was adamant but became affectionate, once she was confused but became curious, once she was troublesome but became toilsome. It was only her teacher's genius, quick sympathy, loving tact which made the first years of Helen's education so beautiful. She captured the right moment to impart knowledge that made it so pleasant. It was in 1890, she learned to speak. Helen wrote a little story called *The Frost King* after she had learnt to speak and sent it to Mr. Anagnos, who was delighted and published it in one of the Perkins Institution reports.

In 1893, she studied the histories of Greece, Rome and the United States. She learnt Latin grammar from Mr. Irons, who also read Tennyson's "In Memoriam" with her. In 1894, she learnt arithmetic, physical geography, French and German. She made more progress in German from Miss. Reamy, German teacher. She was well developed in English by Miss Sullivan so, it was easy for her to learn English history, English literature. She could not take any notes in class but she did everything at home on her typewriter. She took her preliminary examinations in Radcliffe from the 29th of June to the 3rd of July in 1897.

She passed in all subjects like Elementary, Advanced German, French, Latin, English, and Greek and Roman history and received "honours" in German and English. In her second year at the Gilman school, she was taught physics, algebra, geometry, astronomy, Greek and Latin. Miss Sullivan read all the books for Helen and for the first time in eleven years Helen felt that her dear teacher's hand would not be equal to anything else.

Helen Keller's *Light in My Darkness* is originally published in 1927 to Emanuel Swedenborg whom Helen regarded as one of the noblest champions true Christianity has ever known. She dedicated the poem, *The Song of the Stone Wall* to Dr. Everett Hale who was a great Puritan. *The World I Live In* is a collection of essays that poignantly tells of her sense of touch, smell, her imagination and dreams. Her works are used for perseverance, thirst for learning, compassion and appreciation for the physically challenged. Mark Twain compared *Helen Keller to Caesar, Alexander, Napoleon, Homer, Shakespeare and the rest of the immortals. Her renown would endure a thousand years.*

It is incredible to believe that she read *As You Like It*, Burke's "Speech on Conciliation with America, and Macaulay's *Life of Samuel Johnson. Greek Heroes, La Fontaine's Fables, Hawthorne's Wonder Book, Bible Stories, Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, A Child's History of English* by Dickens, *The Arabian Nights, The Swiss Family Robinson, The Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Little Women and Heidi* in German. It was the *Iliad* that made Greece her paradise. *In a word, literature is her Utopia*, she quoted. She learnt a fact that there is only one universal religion - the religion of love from Bishop Brooks. Mark Twain said that the two most interesting characters of the nineteenth century are *Napoleon and Helen Keller.*

Helen Keller smelled and identified everything wherever she moved. Once when a policeman shot her dog, she did not reprimand she only said, *If he had only known what a good dog she was, he wouldn't have shot her.* She looked at everything in a positive way. The story of Helen Keller from being a deaf blind girl to graduating from Radcliffe and becoming a prominent writer and political activist provided inspiration to

all the people with disabilities. Her life story, achievements and speeches continue to be a source of inspiration to millions of people across the globe.

In 1948, Helen Keller was sent to Japan by General Douglas MacArthur as America's first Goodwill Ambassador. In 1952, she was awarded with The National Order of the Southern Cross by Brazil; and the Legion of Honour, the highest French order for military and civil merits. In 1955, she became the first recipient of the Order of the Golden Heart of Philippines. On September 14, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson conferred Helen Keller with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award of the United States. Winston Churchill quoted her as *The Greatest Woman of Our Age*. In 1965, she was one of the 20 women who were elected to the National Women's Hall of Fame at the New York World's Fair. Other awards received by Helen Keller include Japan's Sacred Treasure and Lebanon's Gold Medal of Merit.

In 1980, to mark the hundredth anniversary of Helen Keller's birth, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp featuring Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan. In 1999, the *TIME* magazine included Helen Keller in its list of the *100 most influential people of the 20th century*. On October 7, 2009, a bronze statue of Helen Keller was erected to replace the State of Alabama's former 1908 statue of the education reformer, Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry and added to the National Statuary Hall Collection. On show in the United States Capitol Visitor Center, it depicts Keller as a seven-year-old child standing at a water pump. The statue represents the seminal moment in Keller's life when she understood her first word: W-A-T-E-R, as signed into her hand by teacher Anne Sullivan. The pedestal base bears a quotation in raised Latin and Braille letters: *The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.* This statue is the first one of a person with a disability and of a child to be permanently displayed at the United States Capitol.

Miss Sullivan and Helen Keller are the two most admirable women of the nineteenth century. They are the two Angels of the globe. Though these two women had undergone trials and tribulations in their

life, they exposed or exhibited themselves as brave, blessed and enthusiastic spirits. They guided us as blazing torches. They are the beacon light to everyone especially those who think that they have lost their sense physically. Though Helen is physically weak, she is mentally double strong than others. She wouldn't have flourished or climbed the mountain without the faith and vigour of Miss Sullivan. Helen doesn't lose anything because her teacher has become her eyes, ears and heart.

The conquest of these two great women as Napoleon Hill says, *Patience, persistence and perspiration make an unbeatable combination for success.* We need water to quench our thirst, we need food to live in the world, we need education to cultivate our behaviours, we need parents to take care of us similarly we need these two powerful, hopeful and faithful women to create fire within us, to mould people into marvelous, to engrave everyone into excellent souls.

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*They were in their own sunshine,
basking in the golden glow of the Ocean*



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