

# Helen Keller

Brief life of a woman who found her own way: 1880-1968

by ROGER SHATTUCK

TOTALLY DEAF AND BLIND from the age of 19 months, world famous at seven for having learned to read, write, and communicate through the finger alphabet, Helen Keller took it into her head, as a teenager addicted to books, to apply for admission to Radcliffe College. She really wanted to go to Harvard, which would not consider her. For four years she prepped and was tutored for examinations in English literature, French, German, Latin, Greek, history, and mathematics. Working on a typewriter, she earned satisfactory grades in all subjects; for the bugaboo of geometry, she relied on tactile diagrams made of raised letters and lines. Radcliffe admitted her.

Keller and Anne Sullivan, her resourceful, demanding teacher and companion from the age of six, struggled together through four years of college like a pair of Siamese twins, joined by their flying fingers. Described as excellent in English letters, Keller graduated cum laude in 1904 into a world unprepared for an educated freak, even a talented and good-natured one. What could these two beautiful, celebrated, mutually dependent women, without family resources, do in life?

A few years earlier, Keller had discovered that she could write effectively and she pursued that calling, undaunted by an early incident in which her powerful memory entangled her in involuntary plagiarism. While at Radcliffe, she composed a vivid personal account of her own miraculous coming of age through language after five and a half years of blank solitude. A discerning editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* commissioned her to produce a series of six personal narratives under the title *The Story of My Life*. Even though she was still struggling with college courses, Keller completed the series in 1902 and brought out a full-length book with the same title in 1903. *The Story of My Life* has become a major classic of American literature and autobiography. Keller was 23.

Five years later, she wrote *The World I Live In*, a book of personal essays, originally published in *Century Magazine*, to answer skeptics and critics of her first book and to refute the claim that she and Sullivan were impostors. Literary critics such as Van Wyck Brooks, Walter Percy, and Cynthia Ozick, and cognitive scientists such as William James, Oliver Sacks, and Gerald Edelman have found in *The Story of My Life* and *The World I Live In* two of the most revealing inside narratives of the formation of what we call human consciousness. The books also offer an exciting case history of an unprecedented feat of individual education against crippling odds and make clear why Alexander Graham Bell, Mark Twain, and Andrew Carnegie regarded Keller and Sullivan as two of the most remarkable women of their time.

Keller embraced life enthusiastically—whether horseback rid-

ing, swimming, visiting Niagara Falls, or giving lectures with Sullivan. The two women also performed as themselves on the vaudeville circuit. But they could not support themselves that way and soon had to rely on a trust fund set up for them by wealthy friends in Boston and New York. After Keller became a convinced socialist, joining labor parades and feminist demonstrations, she found a certain awkwardness in living off the fruits of capitalism. In 1910 she felt compelled to decline Andrew Carnegie's offer of a generous pension, explaining, "I hope to enlarge my life and work by my own efforts, and you, sir, who have won prosperity from small beginnings, will uphold me in my decision to fight my battles without further help than I am now receiving from loyal friends and a generous world." She and Carnegie nevertheless became good friends, and later she was obliged to accept his offer.

Increasingly, Keller's time and energy were devoted to philanthropy, and she traveled all over the world for the American Foundation for the Blind to raise money and support for the deaf, the blind, and the needy. In 1955, when she was 75, Harvard acknowledged her with its first honorary degree ever granted to a woman. The citation for the new doctor of laws stated, "From a still, dark world she has brought us light and sound; our lives are richer for her faith and her example."

It is fully appropriate that for the centennials of her first book and of her graduation from Radcliffe, Keller's two greatest books have reappeared in restored, unabridged editions (see below). The exciting play and film versions of her story in William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* have moved many viewers, but they cannot match the compelling accounts she wrote herself. Beyond her iconic status as a handicapped person, Helen Keller lives on through her own words as a woman who could look at her afflictions "in such a way that they become privileges" (as she put it in the epigraph to the magazine version of *The Story of My Life*). She remains an eloquent witness of the deepest meaning of being alive as a human being. ♡

Now University Professor emeritus at Boston University, Roger Shattuck, a Junior Fellow at Harvard from 1950 to 1953 and scholar of comparative literature, is the author of *The Banquet Years*, *Proust's Way*, and *Forbidden Knowledge*. Most recently, he is coeditor, with Keller biographer Dorothy Herrmann, of an unabridged edition of Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (Norton, 2003) and editor of an unabridged edition of Keller's *The World I Live In* (New York Review Books, 2004).

Opposite: This 1898 photograph from a souvenir publication shows how Anne Sullivan (at right) "read-spelled" to Helen Keller and how they conversed.

