

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a woman in a purple dress kneeling on a rocky shore, holding the hand of a young girl in a brown dress. They are surrounded by vibrant yellow and red flowers. In the background, there is a large, leafy tree on the right and a calm body of water under a bright sky. The entire scene is framed by a teal border with decorative scrollwork in the corners.

*The Touch of Magic*

*By Lorena A. Hickok*

*The Story of My Life*

*By Helen Keller*



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

# The Touch of Magic & The Story of My Life

Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, is not only fascinating and inspiring, but it also includes wonderful description, an elevated vocabulary, and deep insights into life. Accompanying this autobiography is a beautifully written biography, *The Touch of Magic*, about Helen Keller's teacher, Annie Sullivan. As a destitute, misbehaving orphan who is going blind, Annie experiences and overcomes the extreme trials in her life, which prepare her for the great work she does with Helen Keller.

*"After reading these two books, I knew they needed to be put together, to be read one right after another. First, you read about the absolutely fascinating life of Annie Sullivan, and see how her unique experiences prepare her for her life's work with Helen Keller. Then, you read the story of Helen Keller and her perspective of how Annie Sullivan completely changed her life. These two noble lives were beautifully entwined, just as these two books intertwine to show a full and beautiful picture of the incredible Helen Keller story."*

—Jenny Phillips

  
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*The Touch of Magic*

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*The Story of My Life*

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*The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller First published in 1903

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This unabridged version has updated grammar and spelling.

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# CHAPTER 1

## *The Unwanted*

The day was Washington's Birthday. The year, 1876.

Through the cold February twilight, an ugly black conveyance jolted and rattled on high iron-rimmed wheels over a frozen dirt road through the outskirts of Tewksbury, Massachusetts.

It had only one small window, covered with iron bars, in the padlocked rear door. Along the sides, up near the top, were narrow slits, presumably to let in a little light and air. It was drawn by two dejected-looking horses.

Housewives, cleaning up after their children's Washington's Birthday parties, frowned as they glanced out their windows and saw it go by. For it was called "The Black Maria," and it was used to haul criminals off to jail.

The passengers on this trip, however, were not under arrest. There were two of them, a small boy and girl huddled together on one of the long wooden benches that ran along the sides. The Black Maria was borrowed to take people to the place where they were going. It belonged to the town, and it was the only conveyance available.

The bench was worn and slippery, and the children clung desperately to each other to keep from falling off. The boy had a crutch, and he whimpered and sometimes cried out in pain as the cumbersome vehicle swayed and lurched in the frozen ruts.

Outside the town, the Black Maria turned into a driveway, passed through a big gate and stopped in front of a large building



that looked run-down and rickety even in the dim wintry dusk. A man who had brought them out from Boston on a train climbed down from the front seat, where he had ridden with the driver, and led the tired, half-frozen passengers up some creaking steps, across a sagging porch and into a big hall dimly lighted with kerosene lamps. Nine-year-old Annie Sullivan and her little brother Jimmie had arrived at their new home.

It was called the Massachusetts State Infirmiry. But there were no nurses about, in starched white uniforms. When doctors came there—and they seldom came unless called in an emergency—they received no pay. Although its name implied that it was a hospital, this was actually the state almshouse, grudgingly supported by the legislature at a cost of \$1.88 per week for each patient.

The patients were people whom nobody wanted around. Some were insane; some were alcoholics. Some were foundlings, born out of wedlock. Most of the babies did not live long, for there was not enough money to give them proper food and care. Many of the inmates were old people, no longer able to work, without money and with nobody to support them. Here they were sent to die, out of sight and forgotten. In their misery, some of them welcomed death as a release.

Annie and Jimmie were sent there because they had no other place to go. Their mother was dead, and their father had deserted them. Annie's eyes were bad, and Jimmie had a lump on his hip which the doctor said was tuberculous. He was unable to walk without a crutch. Nobody wanted a nine-year-old girl who was going blind or a little boy who was a cripple.

The trouble with Annie's eyes had started before she was three years old. They became badly inflamed as little lumps began to form on the insides of her eyelids. The disease was trachoma, which is most apt to occur where sanitary conditions are bad. It is a virus that can be carried by flies, and window screens were a luxury beyond the means of families situated as the Sullivans were. When a person has trachoma, the lumps inside the eyelids, soft and fuzzy at first, eventually become hard, like

calluses. These keep scratching the eyeballs, causing ulcers and scar tissue. Gradually the scar tissue covers the eyes, and blindness results.

With proper care and treatment in the beginning, Annie's sight might have been saved. But her father, working as a day laborer on farms around Feeding Hills, Massachusetts, where Annie was born, spent most of his meager pay on cheap whisky. There was little enough left to buy food, let alone to pay doctor bills. Her mother, crippled and ill herself, did not know what was wrong with Annie's eyes. A neighbor woman told her to wash them with "geranium water." So she would pluck leaves off a scrawny plant that somehow managed to survive in a tin can on her kitchen window. These she cooked up into a brew that smarted and made Annie howl with pain when it was applied to her sore, inflamed eyes. It did no good. Annie's father, who would sometimes be in an amiable mood when he came home drunk on pay day, said her eyes could be cured with drops of water from the River Shannon. But Feeding Hills was a long, long way from Ireland and the River Shannon.

Annie was not quite nine and Jimmie three when their mother died of tuberculosis. Of the three little Sullivans left motherless, only one was healthy and attractive. Mary, less than a year old, was a sweet, cuddly baby, and she was promptly adopted by relatives. They took Jimmie, too, but on a temporary basis.

For several months, Annie lived on with her father in a wretched, tumble-down cabin. While the memory of her mother's death was still fresh, the neighbors frequently sent in left-over dishes, and now and then one of the women would come in and help Annie clean house. But the neighbors had many mouths to feed, money was scarce and the women were busy looking after their own families. A child, nearly blind, trying to keep house for a father who came home on pay day drunk and with empty pockets, was in a hopeless situation. Finally her father did not come home at all, and the Sullivan relatives had to get together and decide what to do about Annie.

Annie, just turning nine, was strong, well developed and healthy, except for her eyes. She had thick, soft brown hair, a lovely Irish

complexion and beautifully curved lips that gave her face, in repose, a wistful expression. But her blue eyes were scarred and cloudy, the lids red and inflamed. All through her girlhood, people would say of her, “She’d be pretty if it weren’t for her eyes.”

Finding a home for Annie would have been difficult enough because she was going blind. She also had a very bad disposition, was subject to violent outbursts of temper and had never in her short life shown the slightest trace of love or affection for anyone. A child psychologist would have understood that a child in her predicament would be apt to develop into a little lone wolf fighting the world. But her Sullivan relatives knew nothing of child psychology. She was simply not a nice little girl, and nobody wanted her.

She was finally taken into the home of her father’s cousin John, the most prosperous of the Sullivans. John and his wife, Anastasia, whom the relatives called “Statia,” did not want her, but since they were better off than the others, they could not very well get out of it. John was a tobacco farmer, and he and Statia lived in a big white house, the cleanest, most comfortable house Annie had ever seen. They had several children, and Statia may have consoled herself with the thought that at least Annie could earn her keep by helping with the housework. If she had any such hope, however, she was soon disillusioned. Annie could not see well enough to do much, and she was so rude and at times so violent that Statia was a little afraid of her. Before long, Annie was left pretty much to her own devices, so long as she did not break anything in one of her tantrums. When autumn came, the other children went to school. Annie wanted to go, too, but when she asked Statia about it she was told harshly, “Don’t be a fool. With your eyes, you could never learn to read or write.” So Annie wandered out to the big red tobacco sheds to play by herself.

“She’s a queer one,” John remarked. “She can’t get along with people, but with animals and birds she gets along fine. This afternoon she was lying out there on the ground, so quiet that sparrows were hopping all around her, even lighting on her hands. They weren’t the least bit afraid



**THE STORY OF MY LIFE**

*by Helen Keller*

# THE STORY OF MY LIFE

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## CHAPTER 1

It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life. I have, as it were, a superstitious hesitation in lifting the veil that clings about my childhood like a golden mist. The task of writing an autobiography is a difficult one. When I try to classify my earliest impressions, I find that fact and fancy look alike across the years that link the past with the present. The woman paints the child's experiences in her own fantasy. A few impressions stand out vividly from the first years of my life; but "the shadows of the prison-house are on the rest." Besides, many of the joys and sorrows of childhood have lost their poignancy; and many incidents of vital importance in my early education have been forgotten in the excitement of great discoveries. In order, therefore, not to be tedious I shall try to present in a series of sketches only the episodes that seem to me to be the most interesting and important.

I was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, a little town of northern Alabama.

The family on my father's side is descended from Caspar Keller, a native of Switzerland, who settled in Maryland. One of my Swiss ancestors was the first teacher of the deaf in Zurich and wrote a book on the subject of their education—rather a singular coincidence; though it is true that there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his.

My grandfather, Caspar Keller's son, "entered" large tracts of land in Alabama and finally settled there. I have been told that once a year he went from Tuscumbia to Philadelphia on horseback to purchase supplies

for the plantation, and my aunt has in her possession many of the letters to his family, which give charming and vivid accounts of these trips.

My Grandmother Keller was a daughter of one of Lafayette's aides, Alexander Moore, and granddaughter of Alexander Spotswood, an early Colonial Governor of Virginia. She was also second cousin to Robert E. Lee.

My father, Arthur H. Keller, was a captain in the Confederate Army, and my mother, Kate Adams, was his second wife and many years younger. Her grandfather, Benjamin Adams, married Susanna E. Goodhue, and lived in Newbury, Massachusetts, for many years. Their son, Charles Adams, was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and moved to Helena, Arkansas. When the Civil War broke out, he fought on the side of the South and became a brigadier-general. He married Lucy Helen Everett, who belonged to the same family of Everetts as Edward Everett and Dr. Edward Everett Hale. After the war was over the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee.

I lived, up to the time of the illness that deprived me of my sight and hearing, in a tiny house consisting of a large square room and a small one, in which the servant slept. It is a custom in the South to build a small house near the homestead as an annex to be used on occasion. Such a house my father built after the Civil War, and when he married my mother they went to live in it. It was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and honeysuckles. From the garden it looked like an arbor. The little porch was hidden from view by a screen of yellow roses and Southern smilax. It was the favorite haunt of humming-birds and bees.

The Keller homestead, where the family lived, was a few steps from our little rose-bower. It was called "Ivy Green" because the house and the surrounding trees and fences were covered with beautiful English ivy. Its old-fashioned garden was the paradise of my childhood.

Even in the days before my teacher came, I used to feel along the

square stiff boxwood hedges, and, guided by the sense of smell, would find the first violets and lilies. There, too, after a fit of temper, I went to find comfort and to hide my hot face in the cool leaves and grass. What joy it was to lose myself in that garden of flowers, to wander happily from spot to spot, until, coming suddenly upon a beautiful vine, I recognized it by its leaves and blossoms, and knew it was the vine which covered the tumble-down summer-house at the farther end of the garden! Here, also, were trailing clematis, drooping jessamine, and some rare sweet flowers called butterfly lilies, because their fragile petals resemble butterflies' wings. But the roses—they were loveliest of all. Never have I found in the greenhouses of the North such heart-satisfying roses as the climbing roses of my southern home. They used to hang in long festoons from our porch, filling the whole air with their fragrance, untainted by any earthy smell; and in the early morning, washed in the dew, they felt so soft, so pure, I could not help wondering if they did not resemble the asphodels of God's garden.

The beginning of my life was simple and much like every other little life. I came, I saw, I conquered, as the first baby in the family always does. There was the usual amount of discussion as to a name for me. The first baby in the family was not to be lightly named, everyone was emphatic about that. My father suggested the name of Mildred Campbell, an ancestor whom he highly esteemed, and he declined to take any further part in the discussion. My mother solved the problem by giving it as her wish that I should be called after her mother, whose maiden name was Helen Everett. But in the excitement of carrying me to church my father lost the name on the way, very naturally, since it was one in which he had declined to have a part. When the minister asked him for it, he just remembered that it had been decided to call me after my grandmother, and he gave her name as Helen Adams.

I am told that while I was still in long dresses I showed many signs of an eager, self-asserting disposition. Everything that I saw other people do I insisted upon imitating. At six months I could pipe out "How d'ye," and one day I attracted everyone's attention by saying "Tea, tea, tea" quite plainly. Even after my illness I remembered one of the words I had

learned in these early months. It was the word “water,” and I continued to make some sound for that word after all other speech was lost. I ceased making the sound “wah-wah” only when I learned to spell the word.

They tell me I walked the day I was a year old. My mother had just taken me out of the bath-tub and was holding me in her lap, when I was suddenly attracted by the flickering shadows of leaves that danced in the sunlight on the smooth floor. I slipped from my mother’s lap and almost ran toward them. The impulse gone, I fell down and cried for her to take me up in her arms.

These happy days did not last long. One brief spring, musical with the song of robin and mocking-bird, one summer rich in fruit and roses, one autumn of gold and crimson sped by and left their gifts at the feet of an eager, delighted child. Then, in the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a new-born baby. They called it acute congestion of the stomach and brain. The doctor thought I could not live. Early one morning, however, the fever left me as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come. There was great rejoicing in the family that morning, but no one, not even the doctor, knew that I should never see or hear again.

I fancy I still have confused recollections of that illness. I especially remember the tenderness with which my mother tried to soothe me in my wailing hours of fret and pain, and the agony and bewilderment with which I awoke after a tossing half sleep, and turned my eyes, so dry and hot, to the wall away from the once-loved light, which came to me dim and yet more dim each day. But, except for these fleeting memories, if, indeed, they be memories, it all seems very unreal, like a nightmare. Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came—my teacher—who was to set my spirit free. But during the first nineteen months of my life I had caught glimpses of broad, green fields, a luminous sky, trees and flowers which the darkness that followed could not wholly blot out. If we have once seen, “the day is ours, and what the day has shown.”



My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never tell. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her—there is not a talent, or an aspiration or a joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch.



Helen Keller with Anne Sullivan in July 1888

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leaping hollows, swooping down upon the lake, we would shoot across its gleaming surface to the opposite bank. What joy! What exhilarating madness! For one wild, glad moment we snapped the chain that binds us to earth, and joining hands with the winds we felt ourselves divine!



knew and loved him best can understand what his friendship meant to me. He, who made everyone happy in a beautiful, unobtrusive way, was most kind and tender to Miss Sullivan and me. So long as we felt his loving presence and knew that he took a watchful interest in our work, fraught with so many difficulties, we could not be discouraged. His going away left a vacancy in our lives that has never been filled.



