

Helen Keller

1880 - 1968

Disabled rights activist

Helen Adams Keller was the internationally celebrated disabled rights activist and feminist who conquered crippling physical handicaps with indomitable willpower. Acclaimed as one of America's most noteworthy women leaders, she burrowed her way out of darkness through pluck and a never-say-die attitude. Where ordinary ill-fated mortals would have resigned themselves to a listless existence on the margins of society, she waged a hard-won battle for a significant life. Mental toughness was her greatest bequest.

Keller was born a normal healthy child in Alabama, southern U.S.A., to a wealthy civil war veteran who edited a weekly and was a prominent landowner in the local community. She was a bright and pretty infant until calamity visited in the form of brain fever in 1882. The nineteen-month-old baby survived fortunately but was rendered blind, deaf and mute, a multiple curse that she transfigured into opportunity through iron determination.

In the initial years of disability, Keller struggled to express herself, 'giggling, chuckling, kicking and scratching' in unruly fashion. She formulated about sixty symbolic hand gestures to indicate what she wanted to her family. Refusing to admit her into a mental institution, her parents took her to meet Alexander Graham Bell who was devising hearing aids for the deaf. Her liveliness impressed Bell, who became a lifelong friend and benefactor. His conviction that she could learn social skills from a devoted private tutor led to the appointment of a young woman with limited eyesight, Anne Sullivan, as her home educator. Keller and Sullivan embarked on a monumental journey that had no precedent. The teacher treated Keller

as a normal girl without any trace of pity. The pupil showed an insatiable desire to learn words by spelling words on her palms, quickly mastering Braille script and square-hand writing. Her precocity for absorbing knowledge brought phenomenal results in just three years of training. By the end of 1887, the Perkins Institute for the Blind publicised her as 'One of the most remarkable children in existence.' Generous to the core, she capitalised on her fame to raise funds for rehabilitating a four-year-old handicapped boy.

In 1894, Keller moved to New York to acquire speech and hit it off with Mark Twain, the great novelist who pronounced her a 'Miracle girl'. Pursuing a college degree when most normal girls did not secure higher education, she enrolled at a preparatory school in Cambridge. Her fingertips bled from studying, but she gallantly cleared the tough admission tests for Radcliffe College in open competition with regular applicants. While acquiring a BA in language and philosophy, she wrote her awe-inspiring autobiography, *The 'Story of My Life'*, which was translated into more than fifty languages. On graduating in 1904, her classmates eulogised, 'Beside her task, our efforts pale.'

In 1908, Keller's book, *'The World I Live In'*, described her techniques of perceiving the physical surroundings. Appointed to the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, she highlighted the taboo subject of venereal diseases among prostitutes that caused blindness among their newborns. In 1909, she joined the Socialist Party and wrote a series of leftist essays, *'Out of the Dark'* (1913). She pointed out the high incidence of blindness in the working class owing to industrial accidents and inade-

quate medical care. She supported women's suffrage and abortion, and favoured abolition of war, child labour, capital punishment etc. Keller's radical praise for the Russian revolution and black American organisations met heavy criticism, but her rebellious spirit went on. From 1914 onward, her diary was filled with public speaking invitations across the country and around the globe. Her world tours touched Japan, Egypt, Israel, South Africa, Australia and India, besides Europe and Latin America. Visiting schools and hospitals for blind children and soldiers, she brought cheer and compassion to those wallowing in despair. The massive amount of money raised from her lectures was donated to the American Foundation for the Blind. She also lobbied for legislation in the U.S. for uplifting the handicapped.

Keller's superstar image and intellectual reputation drew her into endorsements of particular American presidential candidates from 1924. She lent her name to letterheads of liberal organisations and her opinions attracted extensive press coverage. In 1927, she published 'My Religion', affirming a late religiosity that compensated her essentially isolated personal life. In her view, 'A spiritual world offers no difficulty to one who is deaf and blind.' She accorded music a special place in life, listening through vibrations that penetrated the floor and furniture. Her sense of smell was so well developed that friends teased her as an aromatic specialist.

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In 1940, Keller's new book, 'Let Us Have Faith', iterated the mantra of overcoming debilitating barriers. Her optimism and idealistic outlook were best encapsulated in the statement: 'I seldom think about my limitations, and they never make me sad.' Her sang-froid, cheer and humour rubbed off on others and won her admirers among people everywhere. Keller's sheer charisma prompted several famous figures to leave written remembrances of her. On one visit to nuclear-devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, she stole many hearts by expressing the imperative to 'fight against the horrors of atomic warfare and for the constructive uses of atomic energy.'

Keller had reserves of superhuman gusto. Her last book, 'Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy', hit the stands when she was 75. Old age compounded her discomfort in reviewing compositions, as assistants had to spell the words back into her hands. On her eightieth birthday, she told interviewers via interpreters, 'I will always, as long as I have breath, work for the handicapped.' She retained a child-like curiosity for happenings around her until the very end, even after retiring from public life in 1961 due to heart ailments.

In 1964, Keller was awarded the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, crowning a most distinguished career in social service. In opinion polls at home and abroad, she swept the 'Greatest Woman' contest hands down. She shamed self-pitying defeatism and exhorted all human beings to determine their own fates. Helen Keller embodied character building that was easy to aspire to but Herculean to attain.

