

History is His Story

Little Anne was 5 when she contacted Trachoma, a bacterial disease that leads to rough scars inside the eyelids, erosion of the cornea and eventual blindness. At 8 her mother died of tuberculosis and the children were orphaned. Half-blind, **Anne Sullivan** was sent to an asylum at Tewksbury, Massachusetts. The nuns there mismanaged the orphanage, but loved the children and taught Anne to be generous. They taught her to finger-spell, a method of touching fingers to a palm to spell a word. Perhaps she could help another blind person in some way. Anne was transferred to Perkins School for the Blind soon thereafter. **Helen Keller** was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama and at age 19 months contracted something, perhaps Scarlet Fever, which left her deaf and blind. She lived, as she described it, "at sea in a dense fog." But she was not dumb, having devised over 60 signs with which she communicated to Martha Washington, daughter of the black cook of Helen's wealthy parents. The Perkins school was eventually contacted and they sent Anne to help the Helen. It was an enormous struggle at first. Anne was relentless in finger spelling but 7 year old Helen didn't even know what a word was. Then one day, Anne ran cool water over Helen's hand, and finger-spelled W-A-T-E-R. Helen remembered, "I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten —A thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!" That phraseology isn't accidental. Anne had shared her faith with Helen too.

The brilliant student progressed rapidly, Anne devised ways to teach vocabulary, not just names for everything. The two were sent back to Perkins and then to 2 deaf schools in New York City. At age 14, 1894, Helen met Samuel Clemens, **Mark Twain**, and they became best friends. "To me, he symbolizes the pioneer qualities—the large, free, unconventional, humorous point of view of men who sail new seas and blaze new trails through the wilderness." The famed author helped arrange for her to attend a secondary school and then Radcliffe College where she graduated in 1904, the first blind-deaf person to ever get a Bachelor of Arts degree. She learned Braille and found she could "hear" music through vibrations, and identify people by their walk. Determined to communicate with others as conventionally as possible, Keller learned to speak and spent much of her life giving speeches and lectures on aspects of her life. She learned to "hear" people's speech using the Tadoma method, which means using her fingers to feel the lips and throat of the speaker. She would travel to Clemens' Connecticut home and practice on him. One evening he offered to read to her from his short story, "Eve's Diary." But how would they arrange it? She said, "Oh, you will read aloud and my teacher will spell your words into my hand." "Well, I would have thought you could read my lips," he teased. But she did. She rested her fingers lightly upon his lips, felt his vibrating voice which she instantly identified as his southern drawl, and tried to not be mixed up by his gesticulations as he read. "To one hampered and circumscribed as I am it was a wonderful experience to have a friend like Mr. Clemens. He never made me feel that my opinions were worthless...He knew that we do not think with eyes and ears, and that our capacity for thought is not measured by 5 senses. He kept me always in mind while he talked, and treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him. Whenever I touched his face, his expression was sad, even when he was telling a funny story. He smiled, not with the mouth but with his mind—a gesture of the soul rather than the face. Ah, how sweet and poignant the memory of his soft slow speech playing over my listening fingers...It has been said that life has treated me harshly; and sometimes I have complained in my heart because many pleasures of human experience have been withheld from me, but when I recollect the treasure of friendship that has been bestowed upon me I withdraw all charges against life. If much has been denied me, much, very much has been given me."

Keller went on to learn English, French, German, and Latin in braille, to write like Twain and to become world famous. Clemens died 1910, the year after he had read "Eve's Diary" to her. Anne Sullivan died in 1936 holding Keller's hand, herself totally blind by then. Helen Keller lived and lectured for years until she died in 1968. Her life was portrayed by Patty Duke in both play and film. The interaction between Samuel Clemens and Helen Keller reminds us of ourselves and our best friend, Jesus Christ. We are hampered with sin, but He found us not worthless. We revere his Word, yet know that His Truth transcends the mere human words on a page--we see with eyes of faith. And though we are handicapped, He has given us New Life, so much that we cannot complain. And we owe much to our generous human friends. We "see" Jesus in them. Very much has been given us.