

THE WORLD I LIVE IN

HELEN KELLER

Edited and with an introduction by

ROGER SHATTUCK

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

nyrb

New York

(Written wholly without help of any sort by a deaf blind girl,
twelve years old, and printed without change.)

Mind, mind alone

Is light and hope and life and power!

I WAS BORN twelve years ago, one bright June morning, in Tuscumbia, a pleasant little town in the northern part of Alabama. The beginning of my life was very simple, and very much like the beginning of every other little life; for I could see and hear when I first came to live in this beautiful world. But I did not notice anything in my new home for several days. Content in my mother's tender arms I lay, and smiled as if my little heart were filled with sweetest memories of the world I just had left.

I like to think I lived with God in the beautiful Somewhere before I came here, and that is why I always knew God loved me, even when I had forgotten His name.

But when I did begin to notice things, my blue eyes

were filled with wondering joy. I gazed long at the lovely, deep blue sky, and stretched out my tiny hands for the golden sunbeams that came to play hide-and-seek with me. So my happy baby hours went. I grew and cried and laughed, as all infants do.

In the meantime I had a name given to me; I was called Helen, because Helen means light, and my mother liked to think that my life would be full of the brightness of day.

Of course my recollections of my early childhood are very indistinct. I have confused memories of long summer days filled with light, and the voices of birds singing in the clear sunshine. I seem to remember, as if it were yesterday, being lost in a great green place, where there were beautiful flowers and fragrant trees. I stood under one tall plant, and let its blossoms rest upon my curly head. I saw little flakes of light flitting among the flowers; I suppose they were birds, or perhaps butterflies. I heard a well-known voice calling me, but feeling roguish, I did not answer. I was glad, however, when my mother found me, and carried me away in her arms.

I discovered the true way to walk the day I was a year old, and during the radiant summer days that followed I was never still a minute. My mother watched me coming, going, laughing, playing, prattling with proud, happy eyes. I was her only child, and she thought there never had been another baby quite so beautiful as her little Helen.

Then when my father came in the evening, I would run to the gate to meet him, and he would take me up in his strong arms, and put back the tangled curls from my face and kiss me many times, saying, "What has my Little Woman been doing to-day?"

But the brightest summer has winter behind it. In the cold, dreary month of February, when I was nineteen months old, I had a serious illness. I still have confused memories of that illness. My mother sat beside my little bed and tried to soothe my feverish moans, while in her troubled heart she prayed: "Father in Heaven, spare my baby's life." But the fever grew and flamed in my eyes, and for several days my kind physician thought I would die.

But early one morning the fever left and as mysteriously and unexpectedly as it had come, and I fell into a quiet sleep. Then my parents knew I would live, and they were very happy. They did not know for some time after my recovery that the cruel fever had taken my sight and hearing; taken all the light and music and gladness out of my little life.

By and by the sad truth dawned upon them, and the thought that their little daughter would never more see the beautiful light or hear the voices she loved filled their hearts with anguish.

But I was too young to realize what had happened. When I awoke and found that all was dark and still, I suppose I thought it was night, and I must have wondered

why day was so long coming. Gradually, however, I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me, and forgot that it had ever been day.

I forgot everything that had been, except my mother's tender love. Soon even my childish voice was stilled, because I had ceased to hear any sound.

But all was not lost! After all, sight and hearing are but two of the beautiful blessings which God had given me. The most precious, the most wonderful of His gifts was still mine. My mind remained clear and active, "though fled fore'er the light."

As soon as my strength returned, I began to take an interest in what the people around me were doing. I would cling to my mother's dress as she went about her household duties, and my little hands felt every object and observed every motion, and in this way I learned a great many things.

When I was a little older I felt the need of some means of communication with those around me, and I began to make shape signs which my parents and friends readily understood; but it often happened that I was unable to express my thoughts intelligibly, and at such times I would give way to my angry feelings utterly.

Of course my parents were very anxious about me when I behaved so ill, and they tried to think of some way of having me educated. Finally they decided that I must have a teacher. My father wrote to Mr. Anagnos, the director of the institution where Laura Bridgman had

been taught, and asked him if he could send his little daughter a kind of teacher. Dear Mr. Anagnos replied that he could. That was in the summer of 1886. I was then six years old.

My little sister Mildred came to us the following October. One day I discovered a beautiful doll (at least I thought it was a doll, but really it was a lovely little baby) in Nancy's cradle. Nancy was a big, much petted and sadly abused rag-doll. I was delighted with the baby at first, but after a while she seemed much in my way. I thought my mother's love and care all belonged to me, and I began to look upon my sweet sister as an intruder.

It was March before my Teacher came to me. The earth was beginning to feel its great heart astir with new life. The fruit-trees were blooming, and in the garden the mocking-birds were building their nests anew. Oh, how well I remember the evening when she came! My mother had made me understand in a dim way that a lady was coming who would have something to do with me.

I was standing on the porch when Teacher arrived. I had been waiting there ever since my mother kissed me and went to the station to meet the strange lady. I can imagine it all now. There I stood, clinging to the lattice of the porch, wistfully waiting for I knew not what.

The last rays of the setting sun fell upon my hair and softly kissed my upturned face. Suddenly I felt approaching footsteps; they came nearer; I stretched out my little hand eagerly; some one took it, and in another

instant I was in my Teacher's arms. I felt her face and hands curiously, and let her kiss me, while feelings that I cannot describe entered my heart.

We could not speak to each other; I could not ask her why she had come. Yet I am sure I felt, in a vague, bewildered way that something beautiful was going to happen to me. I knew the strange lady loved me, and that her love would make my life sweet and good and happy.

The morning after Teacher came I went to her room, and found her very busy unpacking her trunk; but she did not send me away. She let me stay and help her. When everything was in its place, she kissed me kindly and gave me a beautiful doll. Oh, she was a lovely and delicate doll, with long curly hair and eyes that opened and shut and pouting lips. And exquisite as she was, my curiosity concerning her was soon satisfied, and she lay unnoticed in my lap.

Then Teacher took my hand and slowly made the letters d-o-l-l with her fingers, at the same time making me touch the doll.

Of course I did not know the motions meant letters. I did not know what letters were; but I was interested in the finger-play, and tried to initiate the motions, and I think I succeeded in spelling "doll" in a very little while. Then I ran down-stairs to show my new doll to my mother, and I am sure she was surprised and pleased when I held up my little hand and made the letters for doll.

That afternoon, besides "doll," I learned to spell "pin" and "hat;" but I did not understand that everything had a name. I had not the least idea that my finger-play was the magical key which was to unlock my mind's prison door and open wide the windows of my soul.

Teacher had been with me nearly two weeks, and I had learned eighteen or twenty words, before that thought flashed into my mind, as the sun breaks upon a sleeping world; and in that moment of illumination the secret of language was revealed to me, and I caught a glimpse of the beautiful country I was about to explore.

Teacher had been trying all the morning to make me understand that the mug and the milk in the mug had different names; but I was very dull, and kept spelling "milk" for mug, and "mug" for milk until teacher must have lost all hope of making me see my mistake. At last she got up, gave me the mug, and led me out of the door to the pump-house. Some one was pumping water, and as the cool, fresh stream burst forth, teacher made me put my mug under the spout and spelled w-a-t-e-r. Water!

That word startled my soul, and it awoke, full of the spirit of the morning, full of joyous, exultant song. Until that day my mind had been like a darkened chamber, waiting for words to enter and light the lamp, which is thought.

I left the pump-house eager to learn everything. We met the nurse carrying my little cousin, and teacher

spelled "baby." And for the first time I was impressed with the smallness and helplessness of a little baby, and mingled with that thought there was another one of myself, and I was glad I was myself, and not a baby.

I learned a great many words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that "mother," "father," "sister" and "teacher" were among them. It would have been difficult to find a happier little child than I was that night as I lay in my crib and thought over the joy the day had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.

The next morning I awoke with joy in my heart. Everything I touched seemed to quiver with life. It was because I saw everything with the new, strange, beautiful sight which had been given me. I was never angry after that because I understood what my friends said to me, and I was very busy learning many wonderful things. I was never still during the first glad days of my freedom. I was continually spelling, and acting out the words as I spelled them. I would run, skip, jump and swing, no matter where I happened to be. Everything was budding and blossoming. The honeysuckle hung in long garlands, deliciously fragrant, and the roses had never been so beautiful before. Teacher and I lived out-of-doors from morning until night, and I rejoiced greatly in the forgotten light and sunshine found again.

I did not have regular lessons then as I do now. I just learned about everything, about trees and flowers, how

they absorb the dew and sunshine; about animals, "their names and all their secrets;

How the beavers built their lodges,
Where the squirrels hid their acorns,
How the reindeer ran so swiftly,
Why the rabbit was so timid."

Once I went to a circus, and Teacher described to me the wild animals and the countries where they live. I fed the elephants and monkeys; I patted a sleeping lion and sat on a camel's back. I was very much interested in the wild animals, and I approached them without fear, for they seemed to me a part of the great, beautiful country I was exploring.