

# A Day With Helen Keller

By JOSEPH EDGAR CHAMBERLIN

SOMETIMES we dream, or like to imagine, that we are something different from what we are. By a dismal freak of fancy we conceive ourselves, in such a dream, to be black instead of white; or we may see ourselves as a Syrian or Greek or Armenian immigrant just landed at New York, without a word of English, and strange to every thought and impulse of American life. In every such fancied situation we can at least think what we might think or do.

But no one of us can imagine what he would do, or think, or even feel, if he was a being without sight, or hearing, or speech. Our thoughts translate themselves into terms of seeing and hearing. What we have seen or heard, these things we pile up in our minds until we have what we call a life to look back upon, and out of which to body pictured things of the future for ourselves and others.

Conceive yourself, if you can, getting up some morning in a world which is totally dark, totally silent. You sit on the edge of a bed. You feel it. Something is under your feet that is hard. But what is beyond, what is above, what is about you? You cannot say which way you will go—there is no way.

This is the situation of one of the most habitually cheerful, and one of the cleverest and brightest of human beings: Helen Keller. Day after day I have seen this girl start out on her daily life, and have tried to put myself in her place as she stood before me with her habitual sweet smile on her face—and have never been able to do so. I only know that she images such a world as I image; but she does it through others' eyes, through others' ears; and just how she does it no one can tell.

Helen's inward mental world is one in which others' eyes and ears have served her; but when she confronts the physical outside world only her feet and her fingers can be of use to her. So she begins with the spot where she is, and feels her way to the place where she wants to go. This involves, as a general thing, following around the outside of the room.

She is not good at short cuts, though that other deaf-blind person, Tommy Stringer, apparently possesses an absolute sense of direction that enables him to run like a shot across a room, a dooryard, or the open space of a barn. Helen seems to arrive at a sense of direction only by reasoning out the relation in space of one known object to another. She follows around the side of the room she knows best of all, locating herself by well-remembered objects on the walls and shelves.

No one comes in blither mood to the table than Helen Keller. Her little helplessnesses there may trouble her inwardly; but she good-naturedly puts them aside as things not worthy of any show of attention from herself or others, thereby unconsciously rebuking the form of egotism by which we constantly ask the pardon of others for our little awkwardnesses and blunders.

## At the Table

SHE thinks of the table as a place where everybody is having a good time, and seeks to join in this good time at once. Of course the person next her, who is presumably her teacher (once Annie M. Sullivan, now Mrs. John Albert Macy), or some other friend who communicates with her in the sign-language for the deaf made upon her hand, where she feels the positions of the fingers, must act as her ears for what is said; and her own words are in her half-chanted, peculiarly uttered speech. Of course, she does not know when others are speaking, and depends on the fact being signified to her by her neighbor. She waits with a smile of sweet patience until others are silent. Sometimes, in merry companies, it is a long time before Helen gets the right of way; and when she speaks, what she says is always well worth listening to, and generally starts the table off on another tack with its suggestion.

Yet it is an odd thing that no one's talk is less introspective, less egotistic, less of the talker, than Helen Keller's. She is plainly thinking herself into the people around her. What they have been saying and doing, what they are going to do, what their ideas are about this, that or the other thing—this is her ordinary theme.

She is fond of relating a story, or repeating a witticism or clever thought that she has read. I have never seen a person who is so invariably pleased by other people's jokes as Helen Keller.

Helen has lived more in the world of intellect, or of communicated mental impressions, than in the world of sense. She has been a scholar most of her life so far, and even more than other attentive and diligent students, has spent much time in the reflected inner world of ideas. But she is no sooner up in the morning than her fingers, her nostrils, and her perception of vibrations begin to open to the world of sense.

She seeks the veranda, her every-day place of promenade, or if some one will

conduct her (she never ventures off the veranda alone), the lawn or the field. She touches things, inhales, tosses her head to feel the wind the better in her hair or upon her face, all with as keen a sense of enjoyment as that of any seeing person who revels in a beloved landscape.

She handles the branches of trees and shrubs, and particularly flowers, if she can get at them. Within the range of a somewhat limited botanical acquaintance, she distinguishes the species one from another. She delights in getting hold of living things in this little morning excursion, laughing at the discovery of an insect on a flower.

She has a way of feeling for sounds. She spoke once of "feeling the faint noise of a fly's wings." She said at another time: "I felt a soft sound approaching (on the veranda), and I knew the baby was coming." On the porch one morning—the house was a mile from the railroad, a lake lying between—she said to me: "The eight-o'clock train is going through."—"How do you know?"—"I smell the smoke." I smelled it then myself; but had not noticed it before. It is not that the senses which Helen possesses are keener than ours—it is simply that, having no others, she gives these closer heed.

## Recognition by Touch

THIS reminds me that, although she recognizes a friend instantly by the shaking of hands, even in the midst of a large crowd, she can easily be deceived by a false and unwonted manner on the part of the person she knows. Since she does not see nor hear, she depends on the personal characteristics, in movement, in the way of presenting or withdrawing a hand, in its special quality of steadiness or tremor, of slowness and lethargy, or quickness and nervousness, all of which we totally overlook unless they are of a marked character. There is no miracle of subtle skill about her perception—it is simply the exercise of the faculties she possesses.

When Helen goes to work, she works. As her face has nothing to do but express her feelings, it continually wears, as she studies, a look of patient and well-contented concentration. When she writes on the type-writer, or on the "Braille" machine—the little apparatus which pricks the points used in the point-writing of the blind—the expression on her face continually changes, reflecting the thoughts that are passing through her mind.

She has the fault of tense concentration—the liability to stick obstinately to an error that she has committed. A blunder, made in the course of close study, has to be educated out of her head by as careful a process as the correct thing is educated in.

Ever since her case became well-known to the

public, Helen has been visited by a great many more people than have really had a right to see her. To some of these people it has been necessary to refuse her. Nothing else would have been possible. But her natural tendency is to welcome all, from pure friendliness and innate courtesy.

Her happiest moments all day are spent in human intercourse. As she places her fingers to the lips of a visitor, to feel the positions into which the vocal organs are put, and thus to "hear" the words, it is plain that her expectation is fixed, not upon this process, but upon the thoughts that she has reason to anticipate. And as the sentences shape themselves she has a little trick of making quick starts of pleased surprise.

It is exactly the same when the words are read into her hands by those who employ with her the finger language of the deaf. Several people have learned to use this language with her with great rapidity. But she never uses it herself, except when she is alone and meditating, and is formulating ideas by the aid of words. Her answers to the shorthand of the fingers, as well as to the spoken words that she follows with her fingers upon the lips, are always vocal—in her half-singing, somewhat hollow, crooning voice which she herself has never heard.

Her greatest, wildest pleasure is swimming. Is it because the water, coming so close to her, unfolding her all about, shutting out the things that other people see, dulling the things they hear, pressing upon her sense of touch just as it does upon the senses of all other people, gives her a feeling of possession of the material world from which she is debarred in the open air, and in the hollow houses that are strange and only half known to her? I do not know that this has ever been her conscious thought; but perhaps she feels it, nevertheless. She has never been inclined to discuss her own psychology.

I shall not forget the day when a woman who believes in telepathy, and the Inward Eye, and all such occult notions, came to see Helen. This woman had long been seeking the opportunity, and at last fate placed it in her hands. She had a theory to prove. She asked Helen a thousand questions; she tried all kinds of telepathic experiments; she had the people who were present concentrate their thought and will-power on influencing Helen to do things—and absolutely nothing happened. Helen's courteous, puzzled desire to do what the woman wanted of her, and her innocent attempts to comprehend what it was all about, were deliciously, pathetically absurd.

There is not the first beginning of anything occult in the operations of her mind, though not all of its operations are as yet scientifically explained. All the "second sight" she has is the direct and natural product of a great deal of careful, well-organized, concentration of mind.

## Delight in Reading

HELEN'S most beautiful moments, both as they seem to affect her own state and as they impress her friends, are the half-hours—hours sometimes—at the end of the day, that she passes reading her books, not for the purpose of study, but of inward delight.

A considerable library of books has been put into the raised letters, just for her. That is to say, the interest of certain men of wealth and generosity in her case has led them to appropriate the large sum of money which it takes to put a considerable number of books into the raised letter; but all blind people get the benefit of these publications. When, upon completion just for her, the books take their way to her happy hands, they also go to the libraries of the blind institutions. Thus the fame of her case has resulted in a vast addition to the pleasures and the knowledge of the blind.

As the raised letters intended to be read by the blind are large and embossed, and imprinted upon one side of the paper only, a small book in ordinary print makes a large book in raised letters. Helen's library looks like a collection of big scrap-books. It takes two or three of these to hold "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table." Of this book Helen is especially and unwearingly fond. When she reads it her face wears an expression that it never wears at any other time. She is always expecting something funny, and when the funny thing comes her half-suppressed laugh always comes too. She has read the book so many times that she knows it almost by heart, and one who watches her can see the Autocrat's witty sayings dawning on her face sometime before she gets to them, as her fingers move with startling rapidity along the lines.

In the summer evening she sits on the veranda, with her big book spread in her lap, reading as the shadows gather, reading on after darkness has fallen—it is all one to her—and smiling, or knitting her brows, or gravely shaking her head, as the images that enter her mind through the tips of her



When She Confronts the Physical, Only Her Fingers Can be of Use to Her.