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Away from the Once-Loved Light

It was June 1946. The Douglas C-54 Skymaster sliced through a clear sky as it flew northwest from Rome toward Paris. As the plane crossed the sparkling Mediterranean Sea, the pilot turned the controls over to the copilot for twenty minutes.

There would be nothing unusual about this during most flights. However, this copilot was Helen Adams Keller, a woman in her mid-sixties who had been deaf-blind since she was nineteen months old.
While Helen couldn’t see the sky or the sea or hear the pilot, she calmly took the plane’s controls. The pilot communicated directions to Helen’s companion, Polly Thomson. Polly finger-spelled each letter of each word the pilot said into Helen’s hand. Then Helen followed the pilot’s instructions.

The amazed crew praised Helen’s steadiness at the controls. The plane didn’t shake once.

Helen thought it “wonderful to feel the delicate movement of the aircraft through the controls.”

The American Foundation for the Overseas Blind had sponsored Helen and Polly’s trip to Europe. After Helen had given a speech about her life story, she had the opportunity to pilot the plane.

Flying, Helen said, made her feel free. The last time she felt such freedom was as a toddler in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

The first child of Arthur Henley Keller and Kate Adams Keller, Helen was born on June 27, 1880, at the family home, Ivy Green. The simple white clapboard house was covered in ivy. Vegetable gardens, flower gardens, and an orchard surrounded the house. While her father edited the local newspaper, Helen spent days with her devoted mother, rambling around the large grounds. A clever child, she had pale blue eyes and golden curls.
At six months, Helen could greet people with a “How d’ye” and once drew attention by saying, “Tea, tea, tea.” She could also say “wah-wah” to ask for a drink of water.

While drying off from a bath around the age of one, Helen wriggled out of Kate’s lap and took her first steps. She was drawn to the shadows of leaves waving on the bathroom floor. After that, nothing could keep Helen from moving, especially outside.

Helen called the garden the “paradise of [her] childhood,” and she found joy in losing herself in the flowers—the colors, the textures, the fragrances. Helen loved the honeysuckle, the trailing clematis, the drooping jessamine, and the butterfly lilies. But her favorite was the roses because of their scent and their softness.

Helen gently explored each delicate bloom and leaf with her fingers and delighted in each fragrance. Birdsong and bees collecting nectar also captured her attention. But these carefree days would soon be over.

In the “dreary” February of 1882, Helen spiked a fever. The doctors called it “acute congestion of the stomach and brain,” or “brain fever.” Some modern-day doctors think Helen caught scarlet fever, which is a bacterial illness that develops in some people with untreated strep throat. Other modern-day doctors think Helen caught

**textures**: the feel and structures of things
Helen’s fever persisted day after day. The family doctor wondered if she would survive. Helen later recalled, “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.”

The fever broke as suddenly as it started. The Keller family and the doctor rejoiced, not yet realizing that the fever had taken Helen’s sight and hearing.

Kate was the first to discover that her baby couldn’t see or hear. She ran her hand in front of Helen’s eyes, trying to make her blink. Helen’s eyes remained wide open. Then Kate rang the dinner bell beside Helen’s ear. Helen did not flinch. Kate also noticed that Helen no longer spoke.

Years later, Helen wrote of this time, “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.

fret: irritation
coming. Gradually, however, I got used to the silence and
darkness that surrounded me, and forgot that it had ever
been day.”

Helen’s condition was rare. After medical tests confirmed that she couldn't detect any light or sound, local doctors were unsure how to treat her. Her parents were unsure how to help her. It seemed that a quiet darkness had settled over not only Helen but the entire family.