

from *The Miracle Worker*
William Gibson
(permissions: Samuel French Agency, NYC)

For the first seven years of her life, Helen Keller—deaf and blind since age two—“communicated” with those around her by means of temper tantrums. Her parents had decided that she was beyond help and hope. They sat by patiently tolerating Helen’s angry outbursts.

Then Annie Sullivan came along. Annie was a teacher at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. Miraculously, Annie was able to penetrate through Helen’s rage and teach her a remarkable skill—the ability to communicate through words.

The following reading passage is an excerpt from a play about Annie and Helen. Its title, fittingly, is *The Miracle Worker*. In this passage, Helen has just deliberately knocked over a pitcher of water at the family dinner table. Annie, to the dismay of Helen’s parents, has dragged Helen out to the water pump to refill the pitcher.

Annie: All, right. Pump.

[Helen touches her cheek (a sign that she wants her mother), waits uncertainly.]

Annie: No, she’s not here. Pump!

[She forces Helen’s hand to work the handle, and then she lets go. And Helen obeys. She pumps till the water comes, then Annie puts the pitcher in her other hand and guides it under the spout, and the water tumbling half into and half around the pitcher douses Helen’s hand. Annie takes over the handle to keep water coming. And does automatically what she had done so many times before, spells into Helen’s free palm (by tapping her fingers, almost in a kind of Morse Code):]

Annie: Water. W, A, T, E, R. Water. It has a name—

[And now the miracle happens. Helen drops the pitcher on the slab under the spout, and it shatters. She stands transfixed (motionless). Annie freezes on the pump handle: There is a change in the sundown light, and with it a change in Helen’s face, some light coming into it that we have never seen there, some struggle in the depths behind it; and her lips tremble, trying to remember something the muscles around them once knew, till at last it finds its way out, painfully, a baby sound buried under the (emotional) debris of years . . .]

Helen: Wah. Wah. [And again, with great effort.] Wath. Wah.

[Helen plunges her hand into the dwindling water, spells it into her own palm. Then she gropes frantically. Annie reaches for her hand, and Helen spells into Annie’s hand.]

Annie: [Whispering.] Yes.

[Helen spells into it again.]

Annie: Yes!

[Helen grabs at the handle, pumps for more water, plunges her hand into its spurt and grabs Annie's hand to spell it again.]

Annie: Yes! Oh, my dear—

[She falls to her knees to clasp Helen's hand, but Helen pulls it free, stands almost bewildered, then drops to the ground, pats it softly, holds up her palm. Annie spells into it:]

Annie: Ground.

[Helen spells it back.]

Annie: Yes!

[Helen whirls to the pump, pats it, holds up her palm, and Annie spells into it.]

Annie: Pump.

[Helen spells it back.]

Annie: Yes! Yes!