

Based on the real-life story of  
Helen Keller and Martha Washington

Hand  
in  
Hand

Jean Little

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## Teacher

At long last, they got word that the teacher was on her way.

The night before she was to arrive, Martha lay awake, trying to imagine how life would be once Miss Annie Sullivan walked in the door.

Please, she prayed, let Helen behave. Let her not be too much for this Miss Sullivan to handle. Please.

The next morning, Helen seemed to pick up on the others' excitement. She ran upstairs and down, outside and in, never settling for longer than a minute. She kept going to the door, swinging it wide open, sweeping her hands through the empty space and then slamming the door shut, clearly disappointed to find only air. Martha longed to be able to tell Helen that she was right to expect someone, and who the newcomer would be.

"This whole household's on tenterhooks," Sadie

Washington whispered to Martha. The hours seemed twice as long as usual.

“You’re right, Mama,” Martha said. She’d seen Belle give a great sigh and meander out into the front hall, where she could lie down and still keep the door in sight. “Even Belle is jumpy.”

When the carriage finally arrived, bringing Captain Keller and Miss Sullivan from the station, the Kellers and their servants were all taken aback. The teacher was so *small*, shorter than any grown woman they knew. She was also much younger than they had expected her to be, and her eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

She explained right away that she needed to wear them because her eyes were sensitive to light, but Martha noticed the doubt, clear as day, on every face. Would such a tiny person be able to deal with Helen’s frequent tantrums, her sudden shifts of moods, her fits of violence?

Helen’s father was talking in an extra-loud voice, almost as though he thought the teacher didn’t understand English. Martha wondered if it was because he didn’t trust Yankees. Or because he was not partial to the Irish.

But Mrs. Keller took a deep breath and stepped

forward to welcome Annie Sullivan to their home. Martha figured she had waited far too long to give up without allowing Miss Annie a fair trial. If Dr. Bell had faith in her ability, surely she would prove to be the wonder worker they so desperately needed.

Martha, watching from the shadows, liked her at once. She was not nearly as tall as the mistress, for one thing. And she had a laugh that was as catching as a yawn.

When Miss Sullivan dropped her carpet bag to hug Helen, who was bouncing up and down with excitement, Martha slipped away to report to her mother how the first meeting had gone. "I like her laugh," she said. "I think she's going to be dandy."

"Praise the Lord," Sadie Washington replied.

Martha shot back to the Big House, just in time to see Helen diving into the teacher's valise and feeling around until she discovered a doll Miss Annie had brought her. Miss Annie explained to the Kellers that the doll had been dressed in clothing made especially for her by the children at the Perkins School for the Blind.

As Helen explored the lovely china doll's face and then felt its fancy dress, Martha's fingers itched to hold that doll herself. She had had a rag doll her mother

had made for her when she was small, but she had never even seen such a doll as this. It even had lace-edged underclothes!

Helen's hands explored the doll from top to bottom, then she cradled it in her arms. Often enough, Martha had seen Helen break things she took a dislike to, but she was obviously delighted with this beautiful doll.

The teacher reached out and pressed her fingers into Helen's palm.

"D-O-L-L," she said. "Doll."

Martha stared. Surely the woman knew Helen could not hear her.

Helen pushed the teacher's fingers away impatiently, needing both hands free for holding her new doll.

"She loves it," Mrs. Keller told the teacher. "It is beautiful, Miss Annie."

Miss Annie was smiling at the picture the little girl made.

Martha wrapped her arms tightly around herself, holding in all her mixed-up feelings, and left the room quietly. She knew the family would not miss her. And they would not guess how badly she wanted to snatch that doll away from Helen, who'd begun stroking its hair and re-examining its frilly clothes with eager fingers.



As Martha reached the door, Helen's mother let out a big breath. Martha knew just how she felt. She must be hoping Helen might soon stop bursting into wild fits of temper. Could this doll be the first step?

Martha got halfway to the cookhouse before she stopped cold. The *doll* was not what mattered. Helen would soon put it aside — or break it, as she did so many things. Right now Miss Annie was seeing Helen being good, but dinnertime was coming. What would the teacher think when she saw how the family ate?

It was not going to be simple. Miss Annie would surely be shocked at the way Helen left her own dinner to snatch whatever she wanted from the others' plates.

"It's shameful," Sadie Washington had often said, shaking her head. "They let her act as though she's a wild animal."

Martha could only nod.

Now Mrs. Keller had taken Miss Annie and Helen out into the garden, probably to keep Helen calmed down until it was time to eat.

Martha slipped back into the empty room. She longed to touch Helen's doll when nobody was watching. Sure enough, the doll was lying face down in the big easy chair. Careful not to make a sound, Martha took her up and straightened out her tumbled



skirts. She found the bonnet that had been tossed aside and, quick as a flash, put it back on the doll's head, carefully tying the ribbons under her chin. The baby doll smiled ever so sweetly up at her.

Then, footsteps. Someone was coming. In an instant, Helen's doll was back in the chair and Martha was out the door. She moved too fast to be caught, and she was smiling as sweetly as the doll.