

The Miracle Worker

Could a child of 7, deaf and blind from the age of 19 months, really be taught to communicate with the outside world? This was the central question in the film *The Miracle Worker*, a story about Helen Keller. It focused on the first month of Helen adjusting to her teacher, Annie Sullivan, and Annie's methods of teaching. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* stated that the movie emphasized the physical and emotional struggles between Annie and Helen. Though there were minor differences between the movie and actual events, three scenes contained major inaccuracies. Three main differences between *The Miracle Worker* and real life were the scenes when the aunt informed Captain Keller about Perkins school, when it was said that Annie Sullivan had nine eye operations, and when Helen threw a pitcher of water in Annie's face during the dinner scene before the famous water pump event.

The first difference between the film and real life was a scene in the film where the aunt informed Helen's father, Captain Arthur Keller, about the Perkins School for the blind. The scene started when Helen (about 7 years old) was brought into the parlor after a struggle with another girl. Helen's aunt told Helen's father that something needed to be done with Helen. He asked what she had in mind, and she responded, "Why this very famous Perkins School in Boston. They're just supposed to do wonders." Captain Keller remarked that he had already consulted someone in Baltimore and Washington and gave the impression that he did all he could do. However, he was pressured by his wife and aunt to contact the Perkins School, which he finally did. The scene acknowledged the difficulties the family went through and what options they had, if any, to help Helen.

In real life, Helen's parents never gave up hope in finding help for their daughter. In *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller wrote that her mother, Kate, received hope when she read Charles Dickens's *American Notes*. In that work was an article on Laura Bridgman. Dickens reported that Laura Bridgman was deaf and blind at a young age and was educated by Dr. Howe. However, by the time Kate read the article, Dr. Howe had passed away. Keller continued to write, however, that her father took her to Baltimore to see "an eminent oculist," Dr. Chisholm (11-12). It was in Baltimore that a chain of events occurred, which gave the parents strong hope. Keller continued to state that she was about six years old at the time when they saw Dr. Chisholm; he said that she "could be educated" (12). Dr. Chisholm recommended they consult with Alexander Graham Bell, who was in Washington, D.C. Dr. Bell would have information on schools that teach deaf and blind students (Keller 12). In regards to Alexander Graham Bell, Nancy Hunt and Kathleen Marshall of *Exceptional Children and Youth* stated, "Alexander Graham Bell did not think of himself as the inventor of the telephone but as a teacher of children who were deaf. Bell came from a family of speech teachers, and his mother was deaf, so it was natural for him to use his skills to teach deaf children to speak." According to *American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)*, in the summer of 1886, the Kellers met Dr. Bell, who recommended they contact Director Michael Anagnos of Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. That summer, Captain Keller wrote to Director Anagnos, who then contacted "his star pupil and valedictorian, Anne Mansfield Sullivan" (AFB, "Helen").

Helen's parents took the initiative to read *American Notes*, made the appointments with Dr. Chisholm and Dr. Bell, and wrote the letter to Perkins, which showed that the parents were very proactive in trying to find help for Helen. It seemed that the filmmakers wanted to tone down the efforts that the parents made and just emphasize here the frustration of the family and a need of someone to help them. That someone was Annie Sullivan, who arrived at the Kellers' home on March 3, 1887 (AFB, "Helen").

The second difference between the film and real life was Annie Sullivan's eye operations. The scene was when Annie first entered the Kellers' home. Captain Keller asked his wife why Annie was wearing those glasses. In answer, Kate told him that it was because of the sun and further explained that she was blind and had nine eye operations. The father was just astounded that he now had two blind people in his home.

It was true that Annie was blind, but she had not endured the number of operations that was mentioned in the film. According to the *Perkins School for the Blind History Museum*, Annie came down with trachoma, "an eye disease caused by bacteria," when she was about five years old. By the age of seven, Annie was nearly blind from being untreated (AFB, "Anne"). Annie received two eye surgeries, which were unsuccessful, while she was lived in Tewsbury, a state almshouse in Massachusetts (AFB, "Anne"). She came to Perkins Institute when she was about 14 years old. There at the ages of 15 and 16 years, she had two eye operations, which were successful (AFB, "Anne"). Jean Welt Taylor of *Gentle Hand to Victory* wrote that while Annie was in Perkins, Annie met and befriended Laura Bridgman. Annie learned the manual alphabet to communicate with Laura (136). After the surgeries, Annie could see but was "visually impaired for the rest of her life" (AFB, "Anne"). When Annie was 61 years old in 1927, her vision grew worse, and in 1929 her right eye was removed (AFB, "Anne"). About five years later, Annie was to the point of total blindness. Taylor wrote, "When Helen tried to teach Annie Braille, the child's teacher now became frustrated and rebellious because it was so slow" (Taylor 174). From the age of five, Annie had endured many treatments and hardships with her eyes.

In total, Annie had four major eye operations before she met Helen. The movie stated nine eye operations and one just before arriving to the Kellers' home. The filmmakers apparently wanted to emphasize Annie's eye conditions without going into a lot of details. Regardless of the number of operations Annie had, with her experience with blindness and her friendship with Laura, she was a teacher that understood Helen's darkness and silence. Despite her struggles with her vision, Annie had her shares of struggles in teaching Helen, which lead to the third difference in the film.

The third difference between the film and real life was the scene in the film at dinner where Helen threw a pitcher of water into Annie's face. It took place just before going to the famous water pump, where Helen learned the word "water" had a meaning. At dinner, Helen went against what Annie had taught her about table manners. There was a struggle between the two, and it climaxed when Helen threw a pitcher of water into Annie's face. Annie then grabbed Helen and the empty pitcher and went to the water pump. As the water poured onto Helen's hand, Annie spelled W-A-T-E-R into her other hand. There, Helen made the connection that the letters meant the word "water".

In real life, the dinner scene did not take place. Instead, it was a normal day of learning. Keller stated that Annie was trying to impress upon her the difference between mug and water. Helen was confused and in frustration, grabbed a new doll and smashed it to the floor. Annie took her outside to take a break from learning. It was a warm day, and they went to refresh themselves at the water pump. As the water was being pumped onto Helen's hand; Annie spelled "water" into Helen's other hand. It was on April 5, 1887, that Helen learned the meaning of water (Keller 15; AFB, "Helen"). To express her feelings of that memorable moment, Keller wrote, "Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!" (15).

Perhaps the normal day of learning was not dramatic enough for the filmmakers because of the preceding scenes of struggles and frustrations. The movie's depiction of a defiant Helen throwing the water to Annie's face had a more dramatic effect and prepared the audience for the climatic scene at the water pump. It kept the audience emotionally involved; it did not take away from the elation of Helen's day of awakening.

Despite the three differences in the movie where the aunt informed Captain Keller about the Perkins School for the Blind, Annie had nine eye operations, and Helen threw a pitcher of water in Annie's face at dinner, it did not change the fact that it was a momentous moment for Helen when she was at the water pump and learned that "w-a-t-e-r" meant water. The movie suggested that a short period of time passed between Annie's arrival to Helen's awakening at the water pump, and this was true. Annie arrived at the Kellers' home on March 3, 1887 and it was a month later that "Annie [made] the 'miracle' breakthrough, teaching Helen that 'everything had a name'" (AFB, "Helen"). Mark Twain called Annie Sullivan a "miracle worker" (AFB, "Anne"). One could not ask for a more appropriate title for the film than *The Miracle Worker*.

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