

Reading 2

THE HAND OF MAN

Despite what she called her “infirmity,” in many ways Helen had an ideal childhood. She had parents who loved her deeply and were able to afford the finer things in life. She had many friends and traveled widely to interesting places. She loved reading and learning, and she looked forward to a career as a writer.

But when she graduated from Radcliffe, she said nothing learned in school had prepared her for life. In school she studied the philosophies and languages of a world long gone. In the real world of the early nineteenth century, conditions were dismal: widespread poverty and hunger, children put to work in factories, unequal access to medicine, unsanitary slums, the denial of voting rights for women, and the horrors of war.

Always optimistic, she decided to do something about it. “I do not like the world as it is,” she was to write later, “so I am trying to make it a little more as I want it.” She was a social activist, like Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg in today’s world or Eleanor Roosevelt 80 years ago, trying to make the world a better place.



In 1909, when she was 29, Helen joined the new Socialist Party of America because the socialists appeared to have a plan for righting the wrongs of the world. Helen was an international celebrity and quickly became a leader in the movement. In her writings and speeches, she called for the end of an economic order in which “the working class lives in want while the master class

lives in luxury.” She knew that reporters, like today’s paparazzi, were always interested in what she did, and if she showed up to support striking workers, the news would be on the front pages of the newspaper the next day.

The except below is from a longer work called "The Hand of Man" first published in American Magazine and later in a book of collected essays, titled Out of Darkness. It explains how her idealism turned to activism.

. . . Once I rejoiced when I heard of a new invention for the comfort of man. Taught by religion and a gentle home life, nourished with good books, I could not but believe that all men had access to the benefits of inventive genius. When I heard that locomotives had doubled in size and speed, I thought: "The food of the wheat-fields will come cheaper to the poor of the cities now/" and I was glad. But flour costs more to-day than when I read of those great new engines. Why do not improved methods of milling and transportation improve the dinner of the poor? I supposed that in our civilization all advances benefited every man. I imagined that every worthy endeavour brought a sure reward. I had felt in my life the touch only of hands that uphold the weak, hands that are all eye and ear, charged with helpful intelligence. I believed that people made their own conditions, and that, if the conditions were not always of the best, they were at least tolerable, just as my infirmity was tolerable.

As the years went by and I read more widely, I learned that the miseries and failures of the poor are not always due to their own faults, that multitudes of men, for some strange reason, fail to share in the much-talked-of progress of the world. I shall never forget the pain and amazement which I felt when I came to examine the statistics of blindness, its causes, and its connection with other calamities that befall thousands of my fellow-men. I learned how workmen are stricken by the machine hands that they are operating. It became clear to

me that the labour-saving machine does not save the labourer. . . .

Step by step my investigation of blindness led me into the industrial world. And what a world it is! How different from the world of my beliefs! I must face unflinchingly a world of facts – a world of misery and degradation, of blindness, crookedness, and sin, a world struggling against the elements, against the unknown, against itself. How reconcile this world of fact with the bright world of my imagining? My darkness had been filled with the light of intelligence, and, behold, the outer daylight world was stumbling and groping in social blindness!

At first I was most unhappy; but deeper study restored my confidence. By learning the sufferings and burdens of men, I became aware as never before of the life-power that has survived the forces of darkness, the power which, though never completely victorious, is continuously conquering. The very fact that we are still here carrying on the contest against the hosts of annihilation proves that on the whole the battle has gone for humanity. The world's great heart has proved equal to the prodigious undertaking which God set it. Rebuffed, but always persevering; self-reproached, but ever regaining faith; undaunted, tenacious, the heart of man labours toward immeasurably distant goals. Discouraged not by difficulties without, or the anguish of ages within, the heart listens to a secret voice that whispers: "Be not dismayed; in the future lies the Promised Land."

When I think of all the wonders that the hand of man has wrought, I rejoice, and am lifted up. It seems the image and agent of the Hand that upholds us all. We are its creatures, its triumphs, remade by it in the ages since the birth of the race. Nothing on

earth is so thrilling, so terrifying, as the power of our own hands to keep us or mar us. All that man does is the hand alive, the hand manifest, creating and destroying, itself the instrument of order and demolition. It moves a stone, and the universe undergoes a readjustment. It breaks a clod, and new beauty bursts forth in fruits and flowers, and the sea of fertility flows over the desert.

With our hands we raise each other to the heights of knowledge and achievement, and with the same hands we plunge each other into the pit. I have stood beside a gun which they told me could in a few minutes destroy a town and all the people in it. When I learned how much the gun cost, I thought: "Enough labour is wasted on that gun to build a town full of clean streets and wholesome dwellings!" Misguided hands that destroy their own handiwork and deface the image of God! Wonderful hands that wound and can bind up, that make sore and can heal, suffering all injuries, yet triumphant in measureless enterprise! What on earth is like unto the hands in their possibilities of good and evil? So much creative power has God deputed to us that we can fashion human beings round about with strong sinews and noble limbs, or we can shrivel them up, grind living hearts and living hands in the mills of penury. This power gives me confidence. But because it is often misdirected, my confidence is mingled with discontent. . . .

In our mills, factories, and mines, human hands are herded together to dig, to spin, and to feed the machines that they have made, and the product of the machine is not theirs. Day after day naked hands, without safeguard, without respite, must guide the machines under dangerous and unclean conditions. Day after day they must keep firm hold of the little that they grasp of life, until they are hardened,

brutalized. Still the portent of idle hands grows apace, and the hand-to-hand grapple waxes more fierce. O pitiful blindness! O folly that men should allow such contradictions – contradictions that violate not only the higher justice but the plainest common sense . . .

Excerpted from "The Hand of the World," from American Magazine, December 1912, reprinted in Out of the Darkness in 1913



About socialism

In its simplest form, socialism means that the workers should control the means of production, that is, what people produce. The money made by selling the products belongs to the people who made them. Socialists believe that everything in society is made by the cooperative efforts of the people.

When Helen Keller joined The Socialist Party in 1909, the party was less than ten years old. Its plans were to establish a society in which:

- The people owned and controlled the means of production.
- The wealth from production was used to the benefit of all humanity, not for the private profit of a few.
- All forms of racial segregation, prejudice, and inequality were gone..
- War did not exist.
- People had control over their own lives.
- Employment was available for everyone who wanted to work
- Women and men were completely equal.

Helen remained a socialist all her life, though her understanding of what that meant changed overtime.

You can read some of Helen's essays about socialism here.



THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE READ

1. After reading Helen's essay on "the Hands of Man," are you surprised she joined the Socialist party? Pick a few sentences from the essay to prove your point.
2. What does Helen mean by "social blindness"?
3. We use the word "social" all the time: social season, social activity, social media, social issue, social support. For some people in the United States today, however, "socialism" is a very negative word. See if you can find out why.