

Honorable Mention, Fiction

Codename: Miracle Worker

by Errol Rivera

Copyright © 2012 Errol Rivera. All rights reserved.

Being the Secret Accounts of
Helen Adams Keller & Anne Mansfield Sullivan
Agent and Handler, Respectively

“I woke up on the floor of a strange bedroom, clutching a single bullet in my right hand. I couldn’t see any sign of a gun.”

– Spoken by Captain [Redacted], upon my arrival at The Gypsy Rose Hotel.

Thus begins this entry in the journal of Anne Sullivan,

Dispatcher of Specialized Forces to the Office of the President,

March the 14th, year of Our Lord 1896

I bade the good Captain [Redacted] to refrain from continuing his tale of the enigmatic munition. As he is a personal intelligencer to President Grover Cleveland, having been taken from his own home and set upon by an unsolvable mystery would surely be a black mark on the Captain’s career, to say nothing of his pride. Thus he found himself in the tea room of the Gypsy Rose, meeting with yours truly, serving in my role as one half of Specialized Force “Codename: Miracle Worker.” After all, for the Captain to engage his personal resources in this query would have necessitated the revelation of his own vulnerabilities – a seemingly impossible feat for soldiers, politicians, and above all, men. And poor Captain [Redacted]... he had the solemn misfortune of being all three. Though my pitiful heart moved me to spare him the embarrassment of telling his story, this was not the cause of my interrupting him. It was simply not my place to take his statement. I leave those duties to the extraordinary young woman in my charge.

“Captain, please rest assured that whatever machinations have been set against you, they will be dismantled. But for reasons of security, you must not reveal the details of your problem to me.” Throughout my explanations, I found myself pausing frequently for a sip of tea, and though I was happy to give the Captain a moment here and there to take in the details of my instructions, the truth is simply that the tea served at The Gypsy Rose was a rare pleasure and wickedly sensational.

“Miss Sullivan,” he snapped, “you will hear my plea. To speak of preserving my security is to mock me. My security has already been compromised, woman!”

When the frustrated souls who seek our help lash out at me, it is not only my duty, but my personal pleasure to respond with frustrating upright professionalism, “No, sir. Your security has not been compromised. It has been destroyed. Your adversaries, whoever they are, could have just as easily killed you. The fact that they did not means they wish to control you, to violate you. Like a woman. There is a leak in the dam of your life, sir. What you do with it is your affair. My duty and the duty of my agent is to find those who would exploit such a gross lapse in vigilance, brutally murder them, and bury them in the soil of this great nation. Bury them, sir, next to their friends, their dogs, and the whores they lie with. To accomplish this, I must ensure that my agent and I stay alive long enough to do so. Your security is of no concern to me, Captain. Mine, however, *is.*”

What followed was a brief but lively discourse between the Captain and myself including a display of my mastery in the darker arts of language, which I have elected to omit from this volume. Though I do look back at that exchange with some fondness, it occurs to me that this document must eventually be submitted for review to the Office of Records, and as long as my nation remains, so shall every cruel deed and low word I commit to the page. While I have no reservations about recording for posterity the acts of savagery required of me by my country and my countrymen, I must insist that my reputation as a teacher of the English language remain untarnished. If whosoever reads this volume should take issue with this omission, I invite you to find a comfort in the idea that some moments in history are better imagined than remembered.

As for matters of record, I can say that the final volley was mine, and I punctuated it with a gaze which was perfected by my mother and has proven very useful in the corralling of disagreeable men. When the good Captain understood that our success was dependant on his cooperation, I detailed to him the following instructions:

“I will take possession of the bullet found in your hand. After which, you will proceed outside to the rear entrance of The Gypsy Rose. My agent will be waiting across the street. She will be a girl in a green dress, no older than sixteen. You will not go to her. Wait for the rain, sir. When it falls steadily, you will remain where you stand, face my agent and begin recounting the details of your story, the room in which you awoke, and the bullet in question. You will need to speak clearly into the rain, but no louder than if you were talking to yourself. Do not be overly concerned with the oddities or effectiveness of our methods. The breath of your words will move through the rain like ripples across a pond. My agent can decipher these ripples as they ebb and flow across her flesh, and she will ‘hear’ you after a fashion. Be sure to include all pertinent details of your experience that you can remember. Smells are of particular importance. We will contact you when the task is complete. Go now, Captain. The weather is turning.”

After the Captain departed, I remained in the velvet lobby of The Gypsy Rose where I took my ease by an easterly window, watched the rain fall, and meditated on the

fearsome perils that awaited Helen and myself in this latest plot as I finished every last drop of a truly remarkable tea.

Wickedly sensational indeed.

Yours in service,

~Anne

Five days after receiving the case, Helen and Anne would board the 97 train, departing for Connecticut. The first objective in their case was to make contact with an informant, and in so doing, gain so ground from which to begin. Their contact was an elderly man of some remarkable experience, who stayed well apprised of the intelligence community and its movements, and whom Anne referred to as the “brilliant coot.”

Their meeting place was the same every time, a tavern that shall remain unnamed, in a small town undisclosed. The tavern was chosen both for its proximity to their contact and a quality unique to the area. It was one of few local taverns equipped with running water, which flowed through exposed pipes that lined the inner walls of the establishment. Using her well trained skills, Helen would use the pipes to conduct her business with the necessary discretion.

Anne dressed as a barmaid, her least favorite disguise, and so kept a clandestine watch over Helen and the other patrons. In her pocket were two sticks of incense, one of frankincense and the other of myrrh. When the interview was concluded, Anne would light the frankincense if it was safe for Helen to leave. The myrrh signaled danger. As usual, Helen took tea at alone in a corner table, discretely placed a hand on one of the pipes, and waited.

It wasn’t long before the contact arrived. He was a man in his early sixties, and though he walked with a cane, his stride carried the curiosity and enthusiasm of young boy. His hair was a snow white untamed briar patch, which was a stark contrast to his thick, well groomed mustache. The suit he wore was as white as his hair, yet it seemed to be far better at avoiding dirt and dust. He observed the room carefully as he entered it, and seemed to find some kind of humor in everything before him. Upon spotting Helen, the contact made his way to the far side of an adjacent wall and leaned on one of the exposed pipes across the room from the girl who awaited him.

As he spoke, the vibrations of his voice were carried through the plumbing all the way to Helen’s fingertips. With practice, she had learned to interpret the vibrations, making the words of her contact as clear as any bell.

“Hello, my dear,” said the old man.

Helen would respond to him by rapidly tapping on her tea cup in morse code, which the contact observed with a sharp eye.

“S.A.M. T.H.A.N.K Y.O.U. F.O.R. C.O.M.I.N.G.”

“How is the lovely Miss Sullivan?”

“S.H.E. S.E.N.D.S. H.E.R. L.O.V.E. F.R.O.M. T.H.E. B.A.R.”

“You’re here about the Captain’s debacle, hmm? Nasty business, that”

“Y.E.S. W.H.A.T. D.O. Y.O.U. K.N.O.W. O.F. H.I.S. E.N.E.M.I.E.S.”

“He has more than a few concurrently running games. Any number of souls could be threatened by them.”

Anne kept a close watch on her charge. She couldn’t help but marvel at the young girl, who’d taken to conducting these interviews herself since she was only fourteen. Her eyes often leapt back and forth between Helen and Sam. She was also well aware of the two men in the corner who seemed to be doing the same.

“G.A.M.E.S.”

“Yes. The good captain has been a busy man. Infiltrating labor unions in Pennsylvania. Interviewing retired spymasters in Chicago. Last I heard, he was investigating the Ku Klux Klan’s connection to the Kentucky 7. I heard you had a hand in that one, actually.”

“I.T. W.A.S.N.T. M.U.C.H.”

“Don’t be so modest, my dear. You’ve made quite an impact on the intelligence world. For a young lady whose skill is blending in, you certainly are getting noticed”

“I. H.A.V.E. O.T.H.E.R. S.K.I.L.L.S”

“I have no doubt,” Sam chuckled to himself. “Press the captain about his current projects and you may yet find an enemy who requires him alive. It’s the only reason these cut throats would put a bullet in his hand instead of in his head.”

“H.E.S. U.N.D.E.R.G.R.O.U.N.D.”

“What information did he provide you?”

“A. S.T.O.R.Y A.N.D. A. B.U.L.L.E.T.”

“Got to work with what you have, hmm?”

“E.X.A.C.T.L.Y.”

“Then you’ll want to speak to his right hand man, Clive Murdoch. A war veteran and fellow spymaster. A bit of an entitled ass if you ask me, but a good a good chap. Fiercely loyal to the captain, and works closely with him on his endeavors. He’ll have the information you seek.”

“T.H.A.N.K. Y.O.U. M.R. C.L.E.M.E.N.S.”

With that, their interview was over. Clemens left the tavern through the back door which lead to an alley. He came to a stop at the alley’s end, peered out in search of possible onlookers, and once he was satisfied, subtly retracted again. Feeling safe for a moment, he reached into the jacket pocket of his pearl white suit and retrieved a steel flask. With an old man’s hands he fumbled with the flask’s stubborn twist top. Suddenly, every muscle in his withering body seized all at once. It wasn’t a spell or a stroke. Though he was prepared for one. His father was far younger than him when he suffered his first. No, this was survival instinct. It was an animal reaction to the short but fine blade, which only half a moment ago was pressed

tight against the once loose skin of his neck. Clemens was a strange man, however, and rather than being overwhelmed by fear, he took a moment to feel proud of his own reflexes, the speed of which he considered almost youthful.

Slowly, possessed more by curiosity than fear, he raised his flask using its flat side to catch the reflection of his attacker. On the surface of it he found the face of Anne Sullivan, and in the moment he studied her. He marvelled at her transformation. Her porcelain face, which to his mind represented all the softness of an Irish girl's grace, was then as angular as the blade she held. Her eyes which he knew to bare the steady flame of a curiosity and enthusiasm so similar to his own, were as cold as the steel which reflected them.

The old writer, now hostage, carefully placed the flask back in his pocket. Anne, uncertain of his motives, pressed the knife's edge.

"Steady on, girl." he said with an almost playful cheer.

To Anne's relief, it would seem that Clemens had reached not for a weapon but for a cigar and match. Clemens could feel no such relief against his neck, but that wouldn't dissuade him from striking a match to light that cigar. Little could.

"I take it you saw the thugs eyeing Helen in the tavern. I'd have thought they'd be more discreet."

Anne had no patience for Clemens' brand of humor which was often inappropriate and simultaneously undeniable. "We are friends, Mr. Clemens, and you have aided my Helen on more than one occasion, but betray or endanger her in anyway, and I swear by this knife in my hands you will be famous for a red suit instead of a white one." Few else but Samuel Clemens would have noticed the slight crack in an otherwise frozen tone. It was enough for him to know that when she said they were friends, she meant it.

"It's almost comical isn't it? The turn of the world." He chortled a bit. Speaking the thought as he thought it. "The Anne I knew would advise I pray to a god before swearing by a blade."

Anne reaffirmed her grip on the knife as if it were the situation. "Pray to me, sir, for we are alone in this alley, and I see no god here to stay my hand. You know more than you say, and for a writer that is highly unusual."

"Quite right. Quite right." Chortling still.

"Then do what you do best, Samuel, and talk." Anne released him as quickly as he was ambushed, taking two steps back, her knife at the ready. A clever man would have noticed that the knifepoint was constantly directed towards the old man's heart, and Clemens was as clever as any.

With cigar still in hand and chuckling to himself, the old man dusted off his suit which, as always, had remained unscathed. "I can't say I've ever been attacked in such a way. Very firm. Very intimate. While still letting me know exactly what I had done to wrong you. Tell me, Miss Sullivan, have you given any thought to motherhood?"

“Did you lie to Helen?”

Clemens turned slowly with his hands in the air. His eyes softened, his jocularity faded, and his smile receded beneath his mustache. “Not once.”

“But you did tell those men we’d be here?”

He sighed, nodding slowly with regret.

“Then they have leverage over you, Samuel?”

“My daughters. In exchange for their lives, I had only to lead those thugs to Helen.”

“Are they safe? Your girls?”

“Returned to me the moment I sold you.”

Anne relaxed her knife-hand. She stumbled back, taking seat on an old crate. Her head fell. She took a deep breath as if she had not inhaled for several minutes. She felt relieved and disappointed, exhilarated and exhausted all at once.

Clemens broke the silence as always, “To tell you the truth, it was the easiest bargain I ever made.”

“Betraying your friends?” she said with a glower.

“Well, that’s a rather narrow view of the landscape, hmm? I prefer to think of it as ensuring my daughter’s safety. And to that end, all that was required of me was to put men who would threaten my family in a room with America’s most dangerous woman. My, God, it took everything I had not to laugh!” He tilted his head slightly, checking to see if he had coaxed a smile out of Anne. He found no sign of one. Sam closed the distance between them, and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Johanna, I have no doubt that you would have found these men, but time is not your ally, and the quickest way to find a clue...”

“...is for the clues to find us.” Anne answered, with her head still low. “Very clever, old man. But no one wriggles off my hook that easily. So answer me true. These men, whoever they are, what do they know of Helen?”

Clemens flicked the ash from his cigar, peeking at Anne through the corner of his eye while trying to suppress a smile. “They believe she’s merely a tool of espionage and that she plays at being blind and deaf to steal secrets. They also believe that the Captain needs her because she...hmm... knows something.”

Anne’s head remained low, but after a quiet moment it began to bob, then bounced fervently with a chuckle, until it finally arose into an explosion of laughter. Anne wrapped her arms around herself, physically trying to hold the laughter in, forgetting her manners, unable to even cover her mouth. Clemens looked upon her with a strangeness, until his mustache began to dance, his own soft swallowed chuckles erupted, and his usual playful composure was replaced with a cackling, hysterical old man who could hardly stand up straight, laughing and slapping his knee.

This went on for several minutes. It was all the passersby could do to ignore what must have been a pair of giddy drunks in the alley behind the tavern.

A gunshot rang through the town.

Minutes before...

When the interview concluded, Helen took her leave of Clemens, effortlessly navigating around tables and weaving between the swarming patrons as she made her way to the tavern's front door. She was only a few steps from exiting safely, when Anne noticed that the two men in the corner, whom she had spied earlier, were suddenly gone.

A scent, the roaring tide of myrrh, flashed across Helen's nose like a sudden sunrise. Anne had lit the danger signal, but rather than follow her, the scent seemed to grow further away. Helen concluded that Anne must have left through the back door, but could not figure as to why. Helen paused, imperceptibly, and continued toward her exit until she felt the daylight on her face. She turned and walked down the sidewalk, and with every step she took, she searched the wooden planks beneath her feet for a certain resonance – the synchronizing percussion of matching footsteps, a sign that she was being followed.

With her well honed senses, she felt the footsteps of two men, whom she identified by their individual overpowering smells, Tobacco and Whiskey. Tobacco was a tall man, by the length of his stride. He was a thin man, with little grace in his step, so likely not a fighter. His usefulness came from that smell of gunpowder and oil, resting in a freshly polished leather holster which hissed as it rubbed against the inside of his vest. He had to have been an excellent shot to earn such fine tools.

Whiskey was another story. A shorter, stockier man, with a surprisingly nimble step. He had small cuts on his lips and eyebrows that were early in their healing, and the smell of soap over blood from a raw steak. He was an experienced boxer, and likely the first to attack. A nearby man dropped a coin into a beggar's tin can, and with the fine vibrations that resounded throughout her environment, Helen sensed a narrow alley nearby, and turned into it. Tobacco and Whiskey followed behind.

Whiskey reached for the girl. She let him grab her shoulder. It was a quicker, easier way to know where he was, and it was as far as he got. Her fists were small but accurate, and though their impacts weren't especially painful, where they landed sent storms of electricity and numbness through Whiskey's body. Tobacco would have come to his aid, but the alley was narrow, and he was forced to draw his gun and wait for a shot. She kept Whiskey between them, obscuring Tobacco's aim. Helen stamped onto the behemoth's boot and left her foot there with every step he took. She could feel the movement of his entire body through that contact, allowing her to dodge every one of his lumbering blows which were slowed by the pain she had planted in him.

With every fruitless swing of Whiskey's bulky fists, a small gust of air beat against her face, giving Helen's nose a better lay of the land. It's how she could tell that the gunpowder stench had gotten stronger, and that it was directly funneled at her through the oily barrel of a

gun that pointed directly at her head. Helen knew it was time to stop playing. The pistol's hammer drew back, Helen spun Whiskey around on his heel, turning his arm up behind his back, and putting his thick stocky body between her and the gun. She couldn't hear the shot, but she could feel the jolt of Whiskey's body, and felt her human shield go limp in her arms. It wouldn't have time to fall to the ground, and Tobacco wouldn't have time to get another shot off. With a forceful kick, Helen struck the still standing corpse in the dead center of his mass, sending him flying into Tobacco and rendering the shooter unconscious.

Helen felt the stampede of the townspeople running toward the sound of gunfire. She scrambled through the pockets of her attackers, finding only money, cigarettes, and a single card, which she pocketed. The first people to arrive on the scene found two men on the ground, one laying dead on top of the other, and a helpless young blind girl balled up in the corner, crying for her mother.

It took Helen only minutes to slip away from the townswoman that attempted to care for her. She walked along the dirt road that ran through town. Soil and clay caked on the soles of her feet after having left her shoes behind her. She found that without the rain or planks of dead wood to walk upon, being barefoot allowed her to better image her surroundings on open earth. It made walking easier. She could walk without hesitation, causing her to appear sighted to casual onlookers. As Helen strolled away from the town, she held her face up to the sun while she fingered the confiscated card in her hands. She smelled the card, and then licked it, concluding that it had been printed as opposed to written on, and in a pocket for some time. She previously had luck with reading by finger beyond simple braille. Her best results were with raised print, or anything written by hand in broad strokes. She could even read a traditional book if the print was large enough. The design on this card, however, was too fine and too intricate for her to discern.

Helen wasn't worried about reading the card. Not with the feeling that pulsed through her feet. The galloping of horse hooves resounded through the earth like a well timed chorus of beating hammers. She could tell the the horse was heading straight for her, running nearly at top speed with no signs of slowing. The rider was light, very light. Most likely a woman, and being downwind from it, Helen smelled the unmistakable musk of frankincense and knew she was safe. She held her hand out, just soon enough for Anne to grab the girl by her wrist, yanking her up onto the full gallop horse that never lost a step.

Helen was uncomfortable with horse riding, especially at such a speed. She wrapped her arms around Anne, and pressed the side of her face against Anne's back.

"What's this?" Anne shouted, referring to the card in Helen's hand.

After feeling the words of Anne question reverberate down her back, Helen lifted her head and placed it on Anne's shoulder.

"I took it off one of my attackers." Helen said with finely honed elocution. "What is it?"

Anne examined it closely and Helen once again placed her ear against Anne's back, preparing for an answer. "It's an eye," Anne said. "Not the letter. An ornate drawing of human eye."

"Does that mean anything to you?" This was a powerful question that Helen never asked lightly. She lived in an unending awe of symbols and their meanings. They were Anne's gift to Helen. To her, life itself was a mystery filled with clues and begging to be solved. It made her perfect for the job.

Anne pondered for a moment, "There are a group of investigators known as Pinkertons. They use an eye as their signature image."

"Who do they work for?"

Anne did her best to review the rather large sum of knowledge she possessed while still focusing on riding, preferring the former to the latter almost infinitely. "Anyone," she answered. "They're a private company. They render their investigative prowess as a service to those who can pay. They work all over the country, even for the government, occasionally. However their home office is in Chicago."

This caught Helen's attention. "Sam mentioned that the captain was in Chicago recently. Interviewing a retired spy. Seems like a fair place to start."

"It's not much," Anne shouted.

Helen fell silent for a moment. Her demeanor grew heavy, as if tired from a task yet completed. As the two women sped off on their horse bound for the rail station, Helen felt the wind whipping across her skin, and from its cooling she knew that the sun would soon set. All expression died from her face as she pushed away the fatigue, and in her mind she concentrated on drinking from that inexhaustible font of willpower that resided within her. This was her truest gift. "No, it's not much," she said, "but it's enough."

*This story is lovingly dedicated to Helen Adams Keller,
A woman whose value, spirit, and shining mind surpass the written record and the imagination.
~*

To the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities – Thank you for all of your endeavors, and thank you for this opportunity. I have submitted to you, “Codename: Miracle Worker” an adventure/mystery historical short fiction about famous American Helen Keller, and Anne Sullivan, her friend, teacher, and faithful companion.

I had originally conceived of an idea for this story shortly before I knew of your competition, and its potential to offend was not lost on me. However, rather than idly push forward, or abandon it altogether, I resolved to do my homework. I knew a bit about Helen’s life and about her contributions to our world which stretched even beyond her great strides for the disabled, but I dove deeper into her history and what I found surpassed my imagination. I discovered a powerful woman, with a loving heart, firm opinions, and a mind that could not be caged. Her life was an adventure. She was dear friends with Alexander Graham Bell. She met the president twice before she was 20. She was one of the only human beings to touch the Santa Marina, save for its caretakers and its original crew.

It was this research that actually helped me to understand the true purpose of historical fiction. Its purpose is not to play with history, or to disrespect those who lived it, but to show us that in any world possessed of any rules, humanity remains. I wrote this story because I believe that in any endeavor, be it the learning of speech or the unraveling of an assassin’s plot, Helen Adams Keller would approach the situation with class, indomitable will, and an unceasing awe of all that a human being is capable.

I fear that I have little of value to say on the subject of disability. Maybe it is because I consider the word "disability" to be, in many ways, a relative term. No one is capable of everything, and thus everyone must be incapable of something. After all, when examining the life of Helen Keller and all that she achieved, who among us could come away certain that we could do the same? I think it's important to remember that imperfection defines humanity, but it does not define the human. Unfortunately, there are still many people and even institutions who are slow to accept this equality of inequality, and continue to marginalize those who are considered disabled. Disability may or may not be a relative term, but thanks to people like those at the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities, and the ever expanding landscape of human accomplishment, it becomes a little more relative every day.