

Helen Keller

‘The Story of my Life’

LEVEL C1 / C2

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The Early Days

Preview Questions

1. Look at the title of the chapter. What do you think this chapter is going to be about?
2. Do you think the writer can actually remember when she was a baby? Why/Why not?
3. What is your earliest memory?

I was born in a little town called Tuscomb in northern Alabama on June 27th 1880. My father, Arthur, was a captain in the Confederate army and my mother, Kate, was his second wife and many years younger than him. In my earliest years we lived in a small house that was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and perfumed honeysuckle. The porch was completely hidden from view by these beautiful plants and they were a magnet for hummingbirds and bees. I will always remember the garden with great affection. What joy it was to lose myself in that garden of flowers, to wander happily from spot to spot, until I would suddenly come upon a beautiful vine that I recognized by its leaves and blossoms and which covered the tumbledown summerhouse at the farther end of the garden. Here, also, were trailing clematis, drooping jasmine, and some rare sweet flowers called butterfly lilies, because their fragile petals resemble butterflies' wings. But the roses - they were the loveliest of all.

The beginning of my life was simple and much like that of any other child. I came, I saw, I conquered, as the first baby in the family always does. There was the usual amount of discussion as to a name for me. The naming of the first baby in the family was not to be undertaken lightly; everyone was emphatic about that. My father suggested the name of Mildred Campbell, an ancestor whom he highly esteemed, and he declined to take any further part in the discussion. My mother solved the problem by saying that I should be called after her mother, whose maiden name was Helen Everett. But during the excitement of carrying me to church my father forgot the name. When the vicar asked him for it, he got confused and thought that it had been decided to call me after my grandmother, and he told him the name was Helen Adams.

I am told that while I was still just an infant I showed many signs of an eager, self-asserting disposition. Everything that I saw other people do I insisted upon imitating. At six months I could pipe out "How d'ye", and one day I attracted everyone's attention by saying "Tea, tea, tea" quite

plainly. Even after my illness I remembered one of the words I had learned in these early months. It was the word ‘water’, and I continued to make some sound for that word after all other speech was lost. I ceased making the sound ‘wah-wah’ only when I learned to spell the word. They tell me I walked the day I was a year old. My mother had just taken me out of the bathtub and was holding me in her lap, when I was suddenly attracted by the flickering shadows of leaves that danced in the sunlight on the smooth floor. I slipped from my mother’s lap and almost ran toward them. The impulse gone, I fell down and cried for her to take me up in her arms.

These happy days did not last long. One brief spring, musical with the song of robin and mockingbird, one summer rich in fruit and roses, one autumn of gold and crimson, sped by and left their gifts at the feet of an eager, delighted child. Then, in the dreary month of February, came the illness which closed my eyes and ears and plunged me into the unconsciousness of a newborn baby. They called it acute congestion of the stomach and brain. The doctor thought I would not live. Early one morning, however, the fever left me as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come. There was great rejoicing in the family that morning, but no one, not even the doctor, knew that I should never see or hear again.

I fancy I still have confused recollections of that illness. I especially remember the tenderness with which my mother tried to soothe me in my terrible hours of fret and pain, and the agony and bewilderment with which I awoke after a night of tossing and turning in my bed, and turned my eyes, so dry and hot, to the wall away from the once-loved light, which grew increasingly dimmer by the day. But, except for these fleeting memories, if, indeed, they be memories, it all seems very unreal, like a nightmare. Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came -my teacher- who was to set my spirit free. But during the first nineteen months of my life I had caught glimpses of broad, green fields, a luminous sky, trees and flowers which the darkness that followed could not wholly blot out.

Review Questions

1. Why do you think the writer describes the garden in so much detail?
2. How could the writer be described as an infant before her illness?
3. What does the writer remember about the illness?

CHAPTER 1

wander (<i>v</i>)	walk in no particular direction and with no real purpose
tumbledown (<i>adj</i>)	in very bad condition
resemble (<i>v</i>)	look like something else
conquer (<i>v</i>)	win, defeat, be able to achieve something that was difficult to do
lightly (<i>adv</i>)	without care and thought
emphatic (<i>adj</i>)	strong, powerful, definite
esteem (<i>v</i>)	regard with respect
disposition (<i>n</i>)	character, mood
imitate (<i>v</i>)	copy
flicker (<i>v</i>)	(of light or fire) to go on and off or move
impulse (<i>n</i>)	an action that is done without thought or planning
acute (<i>adj</i>)	(of illness) becoming serious very quickly
rejoicing (<i>n</i>)	celebration
bewilderment (<i>n</i>)	confusion
fleeting (<i>adj</i>)	only lasting for a short time, brief
blot out (<i>phr v</i>)	ignore, get rid of, not acknowledge

CHAPTER 2

crude (<i>adj</i>)	basic, simple
distinguish (<i>v</i>)	tell the difference between two or more things
invariably (<i>adv</i>)	usually
vague (<i>adj</i>)	not clear or obvious
vexed (<i>adj</i>)	angry and frustrated
gesticulate (<i>v</i>)	make movements and signs with the hands
frantically (<i>adv</i>)	in a crazy, desperate way
domineer (<i>v</i>)	control, have power over
romp (<i>v</i>)	run around in a carefree, playful way
quiver (<i>v</i>)	shake with fear or excitement
contemptuous (<i>adj</i>)	showing strong dislike or disapproval of someone or something
hearth (<i>n</i>)	the area around a fireplace

suffocate (<i>v</i>)	cover someone's face so that they can't breathe
pounding (<i>n</i>)	repeated, and forceful hitting of someone
anecdote (<i>n</i>)	a short story about something
opportune (<i>adj</i>)	suitable, correct, lucky
prattle (<i>n</i>)	silly, pointless talking

CHAPTER 3

outburst (<i>n</i>)	sudden expression of emotion or speech
tempest (<i>n</i>)	temper, moment of anger
perplexed (<i>adj</i>)	confused
oculist (<i>n</i>)	an old-fashioned name for an eye doctor
misgivings (<i>n pl</i>)	doubts
anguish (<i>n</i>)	great worry

CHAPTER 4

penetrate (<i>v</i>)	break through or into, enter
linger (<i>v</i>)	stay for a while before leaving
marvellous (<i>adj</i>)	wonderful
tangible (<i>adj</i>)	real, that one can see or touch
grope (<i>v</i>)	feel with your hands when you can't see
spout (<i>n</i>)	something that water or other liquids come out of
gush (<i>v</i>)	of liquids to come out quickly and in large amounts
blossom (<i>v</i>)	develop, grow, do well

Exercise 1

Choose a suitable word from the glossary to complete the sentences. Remember to use the correct form of the words.

1. The flame from the candle in the breeze.
2. The identical twins are impossible to from one another.
3. We have a roast dinner on a Sunday as it's a family tradition.
4. My Granddad visited an, who prescribed a pair of reading glasses.
5. I must admit that this project has left me completely as I have no idea how to do it.
6. I've got a idea of what Andy does, but I don't know any real details about his job.
7. I'm determined to my fear of flying this year so that I can go abroad.
8. George is always telling amusing about things he has done in his life.
9. How does he live in such a old house?
10. This is not a decision to be taken, as it is extremely important.

Exercise 2

Choose the best answer A, B or C to complete the sentences.

1. We couldn't stop the flood water from into the house.
 A. groping B. gushing C. quivering
2. She acted on without thinking about the consequences.
 A. impulse B. disposition C. outburst
3. He does his father as they are both very tall and have dark hair.
 A. imitate B. resemble C. gesticulate
4. Stop the conversation and let someone else speak!
 A. domineering B. romping C. blotting out
5. She was in pain after breaking her leg.
 A. crude B. vexed C. acute
6. Jenny has in her new job and has already had a promotion.
 A. blossomed B. penetrated C. wandered
7. He felt complete when his wife left him because he had no idea why she had gone.
 A. misgivings B. bewilderment C. rejoicing
8. Don't after school because I want you to come straight home.
 A. esteem B. suffocate C. linger

Exercise 1 (Chapters 1 and 2)

Choose the best answer A, B, C or D to answer the questions.

1. What do we learn about the writer when she was a baby?
 - A. She was quite a nervous baby.
 - B. She could say complete sentences.
 - C. She was very aware of her surroundings.
 - D. She liked to drink tea.

2. What happened while the writer was ill?
 - A. The doctor thought she had died.
 - B. She temporarily lost her sight and hearing.
 - C. It was immediately clear that she would never hear or see again.
 - D. Her family was at first unaware of the lasting effects of the illness.

3. How did the writer communicate when she was very young?
 - A. By speaking very simple sentences.
 - B. By signs and gestures.
 - C. By pointing to everything that she wanted.
 - D. By writing things down.

4. What was the early relationship between the writer and Martha?
 - A. The writer was shy in her presence.
 - B. They used to argue constantly.
 - C. They encouraged each other to misbehave.
 - D. They were completely equal in status.

5. What does the story of the key tell us about the writer?
 - A. She was out of control.
 - B. She didn't love her mother.
 - C. She had no idea what she was doing.
 - D. She was unhappy living at home.

6. What do we learn about the writer's father?
 - A. He loved to cook.
 - B. He was a keen gardener.
 - C. He wrote short stories.
 - D. He wasn't sure how to relate to his daughter.

Exercise 2 (Chapters 3 and 4)

Say if the statements are True or False.

1. The writer and her family lived in a remote area.
2. Dickens had invented ways to communicate with deaf and blind people.
3. As a child, the writer often got angry and frustrated.
4. Luckily the conductor on the train to Baltimore was a family friend.
5. Initially the writer didn't trust Alexander Graham Bell.
6. Before her teacher arrived the writer felt unfulfilled and lost.
7. 'Water' was the first word that the writer learned to spell.
8. Understanding that everything has a name filled the writer with hope.



Helen Keller in 1899 with lifelong companion and teacher Anne Sullivan. Photo taken by Alexander Graham Bell at his School of Vocal Physiology and Mechanics of Speech