

The Story of My Life

Helen Keller was born in America in 1880. When she was 19 months old, Helen contracted an illness which left her permanently blind and deaf. In this extract from her autobiography, Helen explains how she tried to communicate with the people around her when she was a young girl.

I cannot recall what happened during the first months after my illness. I only know that I sat in my mother's lap or clung to her dress as she went about her household duties. My hands felt every object and observed every motion, and in this way I learned to know many things. Soon I felt the need of some communication with others and began to make crude signs. A shake of the head meant "No" and a nod, "Yes," a pull meant "Come" and a push, "Go." Was it bread that I wanted? Then I would imitate the acts of cutting the slices and buttering them. If I wanted my mother to make ice-cream for dinner I made the sign for working the freezer and shivered, indicating cold. My mother, moreover, succeeded in making me understand a good deal. I always knew when she wished me to bring her something, and I would run upstairs or anywhere else she indicated. Indeed, I owe to her loving wisdom all that was bright and good in my long night.

I understood a good deal of what was going on about me. At five I learned to fold and put away the clean clothes when they were brought in from the laundry, and I distinguished* my own from the rest. I knew by the way my mother and aunt dressed when they were going out, and I invariably begged to go with them. I was always sent for when there was company, and when the guests took their leave, I waved my hand to them, I think with a vague remembrance of the meaning of the gesture. [...]

I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people; but I knew it before my teacher came to me. I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths. Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand, and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated* frantically without result. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted.

I think I knew when I was naughty, for I knew that it hurt Ella, my nurse, to kick her, and when my fit of temper was over I had a feeling akin to regret. But I cannot remember any instance in which this feeling prevented me from repeating the naughtiness when I failed to get what I wanted.

In those days a little girl, Martha Washington, the child of our cook, and Belle, an old setter, and a great hunter in her day, were my constant companions. Martha Washington understood my signs, and I seldom had any difficulty in making her do just as I wished. It pleased me to domineer over* her, and she generally submitted to my tyranny* rather than risk a hand-to-hand encounter. I was strong, active, indifferent* to consequences. I knew my own mind well enough and always had my own way, even if I had to fight tooth and nail for it.

An abridged extract from *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller.

Glossary

distinguished — recognised gesticulated — made gestures
domineer over — bully tyranny — cruelty indifferent — not caring

1 Identify two features of the text which show it is an autobiography.

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2 marks

2 What do you think the phrase "my long night" (lines 10-11) means?

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1 mark

3 How did Helen know that she should wave goodbye to guests?

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1 mark

4 Why do you think Helen kicked her nurse, even though she knew it was wrong?

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2 marks

5 How do you think Martha Washington felt towards Helen? Explain your answer.

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2 marks

6 How do you think your life would change if you were blind and deaf? Explain your answer.

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2 marks

Total
out of 10