The Story of My Life

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HELEN KELLER

Helen Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama in 1880 to affluent parents who lived on a large estate. Her father was a newspaper editor and had fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. At the age of two, Helen was stricken by an acute illness, which many believe to have been scarlet fever. The young Helen survived, but was rendered deaf, dumb, and blind. After travelling to Washington to consult with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, Helen's parents secured a tutor for her: Anne Sullivan, an instructor from the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts. Sullivan came to Tuscumbia when Helen was six and began instructing her, helping her to acquire language, learn signs, read braille, and take pleasure in the world around her despite her limitations. Helen's education took her to Boston, New York, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she studied at Radcliffe College—the women's college at Harvard University. Helen wrote and published *The Story of My Life* while still a student at Radcliffe. After her graduation, she went on to become a writer, activist, and lecturer. Helen was an outspoken political radical who supported women's suffrage, pacifism, socialism, and birth control. She helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union, or the ACLU, and campaigned on behalf of the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World throughout the 1920s. An accomplished writer, Keller published many books and essays over the course of her life, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 for her tireless activism, especially in support of the American Foundation for the Blind. Keller died in her sleep in 1968, and her ashes were placed next to the grave of her constant and beloved teacher and companion, Anne Sullivan, at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Helen Keller's childhood in the late 1880s coincided with a period of American history known as the Gilded Age. The name for this period was coined by one of Keller's acquaintances, Mark Twain. By classifying the era as "gilded" he was referring to a time of serious social problems which were masked by a thin veneer of gold. The United States underwent rapid economic growth and industrialization, but the gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow and grow while political corruption reigned. By the late 1890s and well into the 1920s, the Progressive Era had taken over. *The Story of My Life*, published in 1903, was written in the early days of the Progressive Era, which focused on social activism and political reform. Helen Keller was on the front lines of the Progressive Era, working as a writer and activist, championing the issues facing the blind and the deaf, and throwing herself into politics and social work on behalf of laborers and women.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Story of My Life has gained renown as one of the most famous autobiographies of the twentieth century. Like Anne Frank's *The Diary of A Young Girl*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Story of My Life* reckons with hardship, pain, fear, and struggle, but ultimately acknowledges the enduring beauty of the world and the hope which friendship, solidarity, and goodwill have brought the protagonist. Helen Keller published numerous books throughout the course of her life, among them *The World I Live In*, which describes in great detail the ways in which Helen moves through the world, with a focus on her sensory experience of the world and her communication through sign language, lip reading, and writing, and also delves into her dream world and experiences with literature. Also of note among Keller's written works are "The Frost King," the accidentally-plagiarized short story which Helen describes writing in *The Story of My Life*, and a biography and ode to Anne Sullivan, entitled *Teacher: Anne Sullivan Macy*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Story of My Life*
- **When Written:** Early 1900s
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, MA
- **When Published:** 1903
- **Literary Period:** Gilded Age/Progressive Era
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Tuscumbia, Alabama; Boston, Cambridge, and Wrentham, Massachusetts; New York City and Niagara Falls, New York
- **Climax:** Helen, despite the doubts of her friends and family and in the face of institutional bureaucracy, passes her entrance exams and is admitted to Radcliffe College at Harvard University
- **Antagonist:** Self-doubt
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Highly Adaptable. The beautiful language, moving message, and intriguing characters which are all encompassed within *The Story of My Life* have made it one of Helen Keller's best-known works and rich fodder for adaptation and reinvention. William

Gibson adapted Helen and Anne's story into a teleplay, *The Miracle Worker*, in 1957, and later rewrote the script for Broadway. In 1962, Gibson's play was adapted into a feature film starting Anne Bancroft as Anne Sullivan and Patty Duke as Helen Keller. The film was an instant success and was nominated for five Academy Awards. Bancroft and Duke won the Oscars for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress, respectively.

PLOT SUMMARY

Helen Keller was born on June 27th, 1880 in Tuscumbia, a small town in Northern Alabama. Helen's paternal lineage can be traced back to Switzerland, where one of her ancestors, ironically, was the first teacher of deaf children in Zurich. The beginning of Helen's life was ordinary but joyful—she lived with her parents in a small house on a large familial estate, and was a happy and intrepid child. When she was nearly two years old, however, she was struck with a sickness which gave her a high fever and which her parents and her doctor all feared she would not survive. Helen's fever eventually broke, but the illness left her blind, dumb, and deaf.

In the months after Helen's illness, she clung tightly to her mother, and the two of them developed a few crude signs by which Helen could communicate her wants and needs. Despite Helen's impairment, she still understood a lot of what was happening around her, and could complete small tasks, play games with her dog and the daughter of the family cook, and even get into mischief and danger, once nearly knocking her baby sister Mildred from the crib where she slept.

As Helen grew, so did her desire to express herself. Without any language at all, Helen often succumbed to fits of frustration and rage, and Helen's parents—far from any school for the deaf or the blind and afraid that no tutors would come to their small Alabama town—feared that their daughter would never be educated. After a trip to an oculist in Baltimore, the Kellers were referred to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, famed inventor of the telephone and advocate for deaf and blind children. Dr. Bell told the Kellers to write to Mr. Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, and they did so. Within weeks, they received a letter back telling them that a teacher had been found, and the following March, Helen's teacher arrived.

Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan's arrival in Tuscumbia marked a new chapter in young Helen's life. Helen and Miss Sullivan had an instant connection, and with Miss Sullivan's constant, patient care, Helen began to understand and acquire language through finger-spelling the alphabet. Helen's world was changed, and she found herself excited for the future for the first time in her life. Miss Sullivan instilled a love of the natural world in Helen, and though Helen came to realize that **nature** is as dangerous as it is beautiful, her love of plants, trees, flowers, and animals was deep and abiding.

Soon after Helen acquired language and tools of communication, she learned how to read in braille. Helen's lessons in reading and in sign language were informal, and often conducted outdoors. Helen continued to learn in and through nature, and credits Miss Sullivan's "loving touch" with awakening her to the pleasures and comforts of learning, nature, self-expression, and kindness.

In May of 1888, Helen began her education in Boston at the Perkins Institution for the Blind. She delighted in being around other children and classmates who were so much like her. Helen took trips to the seaside during summer vacation, and discovered her love of the water. In the fall, Helen and Miss Sullivan returned to Alabama for a stay at the Keller's country home, Fern Quarry, where they shared exciting and perilous adventures in the mountainous countryside with Helen's little sister Mildred.

In the spring of 1890, Helen heard the story of a deaf and blind Norwegian girl who had been taught to speak out loud. Helen had been yearning for a more articulate way of expressing herself, and decided to undertake lessons to learn how to speak with Miss Sarah Fuller at the Horace Mann School in New York. As Helen progressed in her speech lessons, she felt her soul come awake in a new way, and was delighted to return home to Alabama and share her new gift with her adoring family.

In the winter of 1892, Helen experienced a major setback in her creative life. She composed a story called "The Frost King," inspired by Miss Sullivan's vivid descriptions of the changing fall foliage at Fern Quarry. Helen sent the story to Mr. Anagnos as a birthday gift, and Anagnos was so pleased and impressed that he published the story in a Perkins Institution newsletter. Soon after the story's publication, however, it was discovered that "The Frost King" bore striking similarities to a well-known children's story called "The Frost Fairies," published years before Helen was even born. Helen was ashamed, astonished, and embarrassed, though she realized that her plagiarism was inadvertent. She must have had the story read to her by Miss Sullivan at a young age, and had its details stamped upon the surface of her memory, as when she was still learning language she retained everything read to her in sharp detail. Mr. Anagnos, convinced that Helen had willfully plagiarized the story, forced her to appear before a "court" of teachers and administrators at the Perkins Institution. Although Helen was ultimately found innocent, the ordeal changed Helen's relationship to the written word and caused her to second-guess herself in all of her compositions for a long while. Ultimately, though, Helen concludes that the incident did serve to teach her to think deeply about the problems and methods of composition, and the ways in which young writers must wade through the temptations toward assimilation and reproduction of others' words and ideas in order to find their own true

voices.

In 1893, Helen attended the inauguration of President Cleveland, visited Niagara Falls, and accompanied Dr. Alexander Graham Bell to the World's Fair. The year was one of excitement and awakening for Helen, as she also began more regular lessons in the histories of Greece and Rome, French grammar, and Latin. In the summer of 1894, Helen began studies at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City, where she fell in love with German literature and enjoyed a happy two years in the city. At the end of her time in New York, however, Helen's father died, causing her, her mother, and her sister deep sorrow.

In October of 1896, Helen, determined to one day gain admission to Radcliffe (the women's college at Harvard University) enrolled as a student at the Cambridge School for Young Ladies. Helen knew that there would be challenges and obstacles, but wanted very badly to be admitted to Radcliffe alongside her seeing and hearing peers. Helen's teachers at this new school had no experience with teaching deaf or blind children, and Helen was almost entirely reliant on Miss Sullivan to interpret for her what her teachers in each class were saying. Helen's course load was heavy, though, and on top of her rigorous studies there was a lot of extra work for Helen to do, like copying her lessons into braille and ordering specially-embossed braille textbooks from London and Philadelphia. Despite these challenges, Helen progressed well in school, and enjoyed the friendships she made with her new classmates. After Christmas that year, Mildred also enrolled at the school, and so Helen enjoyed many happy months studying, working, and playing alongside her beloved sister. Helen completed her preliminary examinations and passed with flying colors, and as she headed into her second year of school, she was determined to continue her unflagging success. Helen's second year, however, featured a course load more heavily focused on mathematics—Helen's greatest weakness in school since she began lessons with Miss Sullivan long ago. Helen was determined to keep up, but the principal of the school believed that Helen was falling behind, and refused to let her take her final examinations with the rest of her class. Helen's mother withdrew both her and Mildred from the school, and Helen began studying with an independent tutor, splitting her time between Boston and Wrentham, Massachusetts. In June of 1899, it was time for Helen to take her final exams for entrance to Radcliffe. The college authorities barred Miss Sullivan from sitting during Helen with her exams and interpreting for her, but despite the unfamiliarity of her designated proctor and the difficulty of the mathematics exam, Helen passed her exams and gained admission to Radcliffe.

After one more year of preparation with a private tutor, Helen began school at Radcliffe, excited to finally fulfill her lifelong dream of attending college. Helen soon discovered, however, that college was not the "romantic lyceum" or utopia she'd dreamed it would be. It was difficult for Helen to keep up without careful attention to her "peculiar" needs. By her third year of college—the time in which Helen is composing this story of her life—Helen is taking classes which deeply interest her, and has come to learn that the way she was educated in the earlier part of her life—leisurely but hungrily, with an open mind and heart and a desire not just to memorize facts but to truly come to understand the history of the human race, the delicate nature of the natural world, and the integrity and beauty of the written world—was the best education for her all along.

Helen dedicates an entire chapter to expressing her love of books, and the indebtedness she feels to the stories which have brought her joy, comfort, and companionship throughout her life. Literature is her Utopia, she writes, and when she is reading, she does not feel disabled or barred from the human experience in any way—she has learned love and charity from books, and is grateful to writers like Shakespeare, Goethe, Moliére, Hawthorne, and Hugo for all they have taught her.

Helen doesn't want her readers to think, however, that books are her only amusement. She takes great pleasure in physical activity and the natural world, and enjoys sailing, rowing, and canoeing. As much as she has come to love college, she treasures her escapes to the countryside in Wrentham, where she can get away from the dirt, grime, and speed of the city and find peace in beloved nature. Helen also enjoys taking in art and museums, attending the theater, and seeing the world through the eyes of others.

Helen gives thanks to her many friends, who have enriched her life beyond measure. She is grateful for her friends both famous and obscure, as well as those friends whom she has never met but with whom she has corresponded. Other people have made her life what it is, and have "turned [her] limitations into beautiful privileges."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Helen Keller – Born in June of 1880 in the small town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, Helen Keller enjoyed a happy childhood until an illness—most likely scarlet fever—left her deaf, dumb, and blind at just nineteen months old. As Helen grew older, the crude signs she and her parents had developed to allow her to communicate with them became insufficient. She longed to express herself more fully. At the behest of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, Helen's parents wrote to Dr. Aragnos, the director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, and he suggested a teacher come to Tuscumbia to teach Helen. When Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan arrived several months later, Helen's parents feared that their unruly child couldn't be taught, but Miss Sullivan's patient disposition and steadfast

approach led to a major breakthrough in Helen's conception of language, and soon Helen was signing, communicating, and learning about the wide world around her. Helen's lessons were mostly conducted outside, as Miss Sullivan instilled in her a deep and abiding love of **nature**. She became a voracious reader, and her desire for self-expression grew; as Helen learned more and more about the world, signing was no longer sufficient, and Helen sought speech lessons which would enable her to use her voice at long last. Helen's insatiable appetite for learning took her to special schools in New York City and Boston, and eventually, to a mainstream girls' preparatory school in Cambridge, where she studied hard and took examinations to gain admission to the prestigious Radcliffe College, the women's college at Harvard University. Despite the many setbacks, roadblocks, tragedies, and hardships Helen faced, she never gave into fear or self-doubt and constantly remembered the value of education, self-expression, and communion with and goodwill towards others. Helen's arc ties in with all of the book's major themes: determination and perseverance; education; storytelling and communication; and friendship, community, and goodwill. *The Story of My Life* is Helen's first book. She composed it while she was in her third year at Radcliffe.

Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan – Helen Keller's teacher, Miss Anne Sullivan, was the most profound influence on Helen's life and her dearest companion. Miss Sullivan came to Tuscumbia, Alabama in the spring of Helen's sixth year, and Helen writes of her arrival in reverent terms and Biblical allegories. Miss Sullivan set about teaching Helen sign language and the manual alphabet right away, and after a short period of false starts and adjustments, Helen experienced a breakthrough when Miss Sullivan held Helen's hand beneath a water pump and signed the word "water" into her palm. From that moment on, Helen became a voracious learner, excited to acquire as many words and expressions as she could and impress both her parents and her beloved teacher. Miss Sullivan was Helen's constant companion throughout not just her childhood, but her college years and even beyond. When Helen, toward the end of the novel, concludes that the story of her life has been made as interesting and wonderful as it is solely by virtue of the friendships she has known, it is Miss Sullivan who tops the list of her most profound influences and most steadfast friends. Miss Sullivan is patient and kind, but also challenges Helen, and introduces her to the beauty, majesty, terror, and wonder of **nature**. Miss Sullivan is closely related to the memoir's major themes of determination and perseverance, storytelling and communication, education, and friendship, community and goodwill.

Dr. Alexander Graham Bell – The famed inventor of the telephone and a devoted advocate on behalf of blind and deaf children, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell became a friend and mentor to Helen when she was still a young girl. It is Dr. Bell who led the Kellers to Anne Sullivan by suggesting they write Mr. Anagnos at the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Dr. Bell and Helen maintain a friendship over the years, and he brings her to the World's Fair in 1893 and introduces her to many famous people and literary celebrities.

Mr. Anagnos – The director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, Mr. Anagnos is a dear friend to Helen and an educator deeply invested in her growth and success. When Helen composes a short story called "The Frost King" and sends it to Mr. Anagnos for his birthday one year, he is proud and delighted, and publishes the story in one of the institution's newsletters. However, when it is discovered that the story was inadvertently plagiarized (Helen had heard the story several times in her childhood) Mr. Anagnos refuses to believe Helen's innocence and forces her to testify before a "court" composed of teachers and administrators at the school. Years later, after Helen's innocence was confirmed, Mr. Anagnos published an apology to Helen, but the friendship and mentorship was too broken to repair.

Arthur H. Keller – Helen's father, whose lineage traces back to Switzerland, where one of his ancestors was the first teacher of deaf children in Zurich. Arthur is a newspaper editor and an avid hunter. He supports Helen through all of her endeavors, and his passing in 1896 brings Helen, her mother, and her sister deep sorrow.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Sarah Fuller – Helen's speech teacher at the Horace Mann School in New York City.

Kate Adams Keller – Helen's mother, with whom Helen has a very close and special relationship.

Mildred Keller – Helen's younger sister. Mildred enrolls at the same preparatory school in Cambridge that Helen attends, and the two enjoy their time studying together until Helen is forced to leave the school to seek private tutoring.

Martha Washington – The daughter of the Keller family's cook and one of Helen's childhood playmates.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DETERMINATION AND PERSEVERANCE

Helen Keller's autobiography *The Story of My Life*, written during her time as a student at Radcliffe (the women's college at Harvard University)

reflects both the trials and joys of her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. After being struck deaf, dumb, and blind by a bout of scarlet fever when she was nineteen months old, young Helen's childhood was marked by frustration, isolation, and pain, but also by joy, grace, and love. As Helen pushed through the limitations of her disabilities, she discovered the bounty of the natural world, the beauty of the human spirit, and the comfort of the written word. In her memoir, Keller speaks adoringly of nature and literature and demurely but straightforwardly about her incredible accomplishments despite her physical disadvantages, suggesting that determination and perseverance were the qualities that helped her to achieve not just happiness but greatness despite doubt, fear, and others' low expectations.

After the illness which took her sight and hearing, Helen grew up knowing that she was different from those around her. Nonetheless, she was determined, even as a very young child, to partake in normal activities like exploring the land around her house, helping her mother prepare for Christmas holidays, and interacting with her parents' friends and visitors. Even though Helen could not see, hear, or effectively express herself, she pushed through her childhood as an active young girl, with a fierce drive toward understanding and participating in the world around her. As Helen grew, her inability to express herself began frustrating her, and she often threw fits and felt held back by "invisible hands." Her parents, "grieved and perplexed," feared that no teacher of blind or deaf children would come all the way out to their remote home in Tuscumbia, Alabama to teach Helen. Still, they knew that as long as Helen was trying, they had to try, too. After trips to Baltimore to see a renowned oculist and Washington, D.C to meet with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, Helen's parents wrote to Mr. Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. The following March, Anne Sullivan was sent to Tuscumbia, and Helen's education began. When Miss Sullivan arrived, Helen had fallen into a pit of "anger and bitterness" after weeks of feeling as if no one would ever come for her. Thus, upon Miss Sullivan's arrival, Helen needed to muster the strength to push onward.

Finding a teacher for Helen, it turned out, was only half the battle. As Helen began to study and learn with Miss Sullivan, she realized that her struggles to understand the world around her and assert her own feelings and emotions would be daily and without end. Still, Helen was bolstered by Miss Sullivan's attention, patience, and praise, and soon became an accomplished student of language and literature. As Helen's education advanced, so did her goals for herself—she wanted to study at Harvard University. Though this announcement "surprised" her family and friends, she was determined to fulfill her goal, and moved with Miss Sullivan to Cambridge in order to attend a preparatory school. Helen's instructors at the Cambridge School for Girls had no experience in teaching students with disabilities, and at first Helen struggled mightily to make sure that her special needs were taken care of. She needed Miss Sullivan to spell out all of her required reading books into her hands, translate for her during lectures (which made taking notes impossible), and she required special braille-embossed textbooks which had to be ordered from London and Philadelphia. Nevertheless, Helen persevered in the face of the "ordeal" of her preparatory-school lessons and final examinations, and was eventually admitted to Radcliffe College, "eager to overcome" the obstacles she knew would be waiting for her as she fulfilled her long-held dreams.

Over the years, Helen Keller has come to be known as a hero in the truest sense of the word. Through determination and perseverance, she pushed past the boundaries of her physical capabilities and committed herself daily to furthering her knowledge of the world, herself, and those around her. Her inquisitive nature and desire to achieve honors, distinctions, and milestones well beyond what anyone thought she could achieve led her to great renown not just in the blind or deaf communities, but in society at large and in the American imagination as well.

STORYTELLING AND COMMUNICATION

Stories formed the foundation of much of the young Helen Keller's life. Children's stories, classic plays, and the literature of Louisa May Alcott and Frances Hodgson Burnett greatly shaped Keller's imagination and her grasp of language alike. The stories Anne Sullivan told Helen were most often rooted in **nature** and the world around her. By telling Helen stories about the world she lived in, Miss Sullivan accomplished a task which seemed nearly impossible: she communicated to an individual without the powers of sight or hearing the beauty, wonder, and terror of the world around her. As Keller tells the story of her life—communicating her story to readers just as the story of the world was communicated to her—she displays a remarkable command of language, an intense communion with the natural world despite her inability to see or hear it, and a burning desire to find new ways of communicating with the world. Through her memoir, she shows how the drive toward self-expression and communication is not only one of the strongest forces in her own life, but in the human spirit more generally. Keller argues that for all of humanity, stories are both the most profound and the most effective method of communication we have.

Many of the stories Keller shares are about the joys of communication itself, and the ways in which Keller learned how to express herself to the world around her. The story of Miss Sullivan spelling "water" into Helen's hand while holding it beneath a water pump, which was made famous by William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker*, is barely more than a blip in Helen's narrative. She tells stories of exploring nature, her love of animals, and her frightful experience with thunderstorms

and rip tides, using these tales to create metaphors for the insufficiencies, difficulties, and fears inherent in human communication and connection. The story of Helen's young life is the story of her journey toward full and complete self-expression, and through the stories she shares throughout this memoir she establishes how important storytelling has been to her sense of being a complete person.

One of the many stories Keller shares is a story *about* a story. She reflects on a time when she composed a short story called "The Frost King" and sent it to Mr. Anagnos at the Perkins Institution for his birthday in order to show off her writing and communication skills, and to thank him for his part in helping them develop. The story was so good that Anne even asked Helen if she had read it in a book, but Helen insisted that the story was her own. Anagnos, impressed by the story, published it in one of the Perkins Institution newsletters, and this made Helen gleeful. However, Helen soon discovered that the story which she believed to be her own was an inadvertent plagiarism. When Helen came across a story called "The Frost Fairies" by another writer, she realized that the story had been told to her in childhood and she had internalized it very deeply. Helen was shattered by this discovery of her inadvertent theft and the resulting disciplinary measures the institution took against her, and for a long time thereafter questioned everything she wrote, wondering if she was accidentally stealing her words and sentences from someone else. This story, which is relayed at the midway point of the memoir, serves to both metaphorically and literally illustrate the risks of failure inherent in communication. It also demonstrates the seriousness with which Helen approached storytelling, and the reverence she had for other people's stories most of all.

Keller highlights the fact that *The Story of My Life* is a memoir largely about the role storytelling has played in her life when, at the start of the book, she informs her readers that "in order not to be tedious," she will present "in a series of sketches only the episodes that seem to me to be the most interesting and important." Thus, each chapter can be read as a story meant to communicate an idea, a lesson, or a value. Just as Keller's education was based largely in the use of stories to communicate lessons and ideals, she has constructed a narrative which is laid out in that same way, and which reinforces her argument that the drive to share stories is both a powerful instinct and a powerful social tool.

Keller's argument that stories are the most vital and meaningful means of communication, and that the drive to share stories is a force often stronger than nature itself, is reflected in the thoughtful, open, joyful pages of *The Story of My Life*. Keller understands that the chance to share her story is a gift—she has longed all her life simply to be in communication with the world around her and to add her story to the innumerable collection of stories that make up the human experience. By setting her own story down and inviting readers to engage with it, she both accomplishes her own goal and urges others to pursue it.

EDUCATION

Helen Keller wrote her memoir while enrolled at the prestigious Radcliffe College—an incredible achievement for anyone, let alone for a deaf and blind woman at that time. Nevertheless, the autobiography is largely critical of traditional education. Keller recounts the story of her very nontraditional education, which was presided over chiefly by Miss Anne Sullivan. Sullivan was a teacher of the deaf and blind who, upon arriving at the Keller household, gave Keller the tools to communicate through sign language, lip reading, and eventually regular speech, achieving this through great effort and sometimes unorthodox methodology. Miss Sullivan emphasized the importance of learning not for learning's sake, but as a tool for enriching the mind and the soul alike. As Keller speaks lovingly of Sullivan and her offbeat but empathetic and holistic teaching style, she suggests that rote learning, repetition, and book smarts should not be confused with intelligence. One can gain a deeper understanding of the world by studying **nature**, literature, science, mathematics, and art, if one approaches one's education with an open mind and heart. There is more to the world than can be taught in a book, Keller argues, and a person's intelligence cannot be measured by the sum of the facts they accrue in a classroom.

Before her education began, Keller writes, she was like a ship "at sea in a dense fog." With the arrival of Anne Sullivan, however, young Helen soon found herself a compass and a safe harbor. Miss Sullivan's arrival helped Helen to understand that "knowledge is love and light and vision." Helen also compares herself, when speaking of Miss Sullivan's arrival, to Moses standing at the foot of mount Sinai, waiting to receive the Commandments from the Lord. As Miss Sullivan began teaching Helen sign language, Helen experienced a major breakthrough: she finally understood that everything in the world had a name, including feelings and emotions. With the tools to finally express herself and begin to learn about the world around her, the young Helen became overjoyed. After her first day with Miss Sullivan, Helen found herself longing for "a new day to come" for the first time in her life. She was enlivened and excited by the possibilities of language and learning, and described a "sudden awakening" of her soul as a result of her education.

Helen describes the early days of her education as "more like play than work." Anne Sullivan taught Helen through stories, poems, and exercises in which Helen would pin notecards with words written on them in braille to household objects and members of her family. Most of Helen's lessons took place in the woods rather than inside, and Miss Sullivan used this unique "classroom" environment to teach Helen the names of as many different types of flowers, trees, and animals as she

could. Helen describes her first few years with Miss Sullivan as "beautiful," and credits Miss Sullivan as instilling in her a sense of "delight in all beautiful things." The early years of Helen's education were as much about learning as they were about coming to understand—and fall in love with—the world around her. It was only once Helen's education in words, feelings, and sensations was complete that she was taken to study at the Perkins Institution for the Blind for a summer, and then began lessons with a woman named Sarah Fuller who began teaching Helen to communicate by speaking.

Helen slowly began taking on more and more challenging material and adventures. She took lessons in Latin, German, and French, as well as classes at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York and the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in Massachusetts. Along the way, she found that while learning did not grow any more difficult, the obstacles and lack of accommodations she faced impeded her ability to learn with the same carefree, omnivorous attitude she had had in the past. She had difficulty acquiring books in braille, and found that in her algebra and geometry classes there was little her instructors could do for her to help her understand shapes and equations. Miss Sullivan was barred from sitting with Helen during her Harvard entrance exams; Helen was instead given the help of proctor with whom she was much less familiar, and who was of course unfamiliar with Helen's specific needs. Reflecting on the later years of her education, Keller writes that "every one who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone, and since there is no royal road to the summit, I must zigzag it in my own way. [...] Every struggle is a victory." Helen felt herself bogged down by the education in many ways, but still did not let the institutional struggles she faced diminish her love of learning. She threw herself into novels and plays in English, German, and Greek, attended plays and received private visitations with famous actors, and continued her exploration of the natural world through taking up rowing, canoeing, and sailing. Despite all her academic success, Keller always felt that human connection and communion with the natural world was the most important thing of all. In this way, the things she learned in her adolescence—about herself, about the history of the world, and about the possibilities for her own place in it—were far more valuable than the rote exercises and drudgery of her formal education.

Helen Keller benefited from a rigorous but unusual education. Because she had to learn about the world from the ground up, and did not have the benefit of sight or hearing to help her move smoothly through a traditional education system, she learned about history, literature, and language in a very different way than most people. Though Keller became an accomplished academic and an extremely well-read woman, she argues that the most valuable education originates in a "potent" desire to understand the world and a recognition that much of what is important in life cannot be learned in a book.

FRIENDSHIP, COMMUNITY, AND GOODWILL

In the last lines of her autobiography, Helen Keller reflects on how her friends "have made the story of [her] life." She knows that it is only through friendship and community that her achievements have been made possible, and she spends the last several pages of the text gratefully thanking her friends. Specifically, she is grateful to have been able to feel part of a community despite the often-isolating nature of her existence. In this way, Keller suggests that it is not one's achievements, nor intelligence, nor wealth which make the "story" of a life worthwhile—it is the relationships one forges, the love one shares, and the goodwill one shows to others which make a life whole.

Helen's first and best friend is her teacher, Anne Sullivan, who was sent to be her instructor and companion when she was just six years old. When speaking of Miss Sullivan, Helen writes: "My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her" and "there is not a talent, or an inspiration or a joy in me that has not awakened by her loving touch." At the time of the memoir's composition, Miss Sullivan was still Helen's companion, and had travelled with her to Cambridge to help her pursue her studies at the Cambridge School for Girls and Radcliffe College. As Helen, composing her memoir, considered the most profound influences on her existence and the anecdotes which would make up the "story of her life," it becomes clear that Anne Sullivan's patience, love, and grace form the cornerstones of Helen's achievements, and are the greatest source of inspiration and comfort to her throughout the years. Miss Sullivan is present on nearly every page of the book—she accompanies Helen everywhere, teaches her about **nature**, language, literature, feelings, communication, and companionship, and encourages her to persevere in the face of difficulty, doubt, and fear of failure. Miss Sullivan is the most important figure in Helen's life, and throughout the memoir the love between Miss Sullivan and Helen is portrayed as mutual and deep.

As Helen's story progresses, she finds herself in pursuit not just of knowledge or a means of self-expression but of community. This becomes available to her first at the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston and at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City. Helen and her classmates at both schools take excursions to Plymouth Rock and cities along the Hudson River, respectively, and Helen experiences many "bright days" in the company of her new friends and teachers as they explore the world together.

One of Helen's closest and most unlikely friends is the famous inventor, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. It is through Bell that the Keller family was able to find Anne Sullivan and bring her to

Alabama to instruct Helen. Helen describes Bell as a sensitive and magnanimous individual who delighted in the presence of children and who, throughout her life, supported and helped educate her, bringing her along to the World's Fair in 1893 and introducing her to "objects of great interest." Keller remarks on Bell's charitable nature and passion for helping children living with disabilities, and it is perhaps "his labours on behalf of the deaf" and "what he has evoked from others" which inspired Helen's early forays into charitable work.

Though Helen was still a young woman in college while writing *The Story of My Life*, she speaks of visiting with the poor and being "haunted" by the struggle of their existence. "Their life seems an immense disparity between effort and opportunity," she writes. In reflecting on her interactions with the poor, Helen recognizes her own good fortune and implies that this is the reason for her connection to the downtrodden: Helen, born as she was to well-off parents, was able to receive treatment for her illness, special education in the wake of her affliction, and opportunities to travel, learn, and grow all across the country. Her charitable instincts and desire to perform acts of goodwill even at a young age perhaps stem from this recognition of her own relative good fortune in matters of wealth. She developed a strong desire to pass along to others the goodwill and kindnesses which found their way to her through the love and support of people like Anne Sullivan and Dr. Bell.

As Helen Keller pushed through obstacle after obstacle toward her goals of attending Harvard, speaking aloud, and writing a book, she recognized each and every step of the way that her goals were only made possible through the support of her friends and the strength of her community. This, in turn, developed in her an awareness of the importance of performing acts of goodwill toward the less fortunate. Keller describes herself as "indebted" to the influence and goodwill of her friends toward the end of her memoir, and acknowledges that the depths of her friendships are so great that there are things "too sacred to set forth in cold print." Despite her considerable setbacks and disadvantages, there is so much she is grateful for. Above all, friendship is the thing that has made Helen's life whole and "enable[d her] to walk serene and happy in the shadow cast by [her] deprivation."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

NATURE

Helen Keller's memoir is suffused with loving descriptions and carefully-rendered imagery of the natural world. Helen appreciated nature and animals before her illness, and even in the months directly following it, but when her teacher, Anne Sullivan, came to Tuscumbia to help Helen learn how to speak and read, she instilled in Helen a deep and abiding love of the natural world. With Miss Sullivan at her side, Helen enjoys canoeing under the moon at night, recognizes the mimosa tree in her parents' yard by its familiar scent, delights in the quiet of the countryside, toboggans through fresh-fallen snow, and tends to all manner of animals, from dogs to canaries to insects she finds in the garden. Throughout her autobiography, Helen repeatedly points out the irony she believes her readers must sense in a blind and deaf woman taking such delight in things she cannot see or hear, but insists that her experience of nature is just as full, exciting, and nourishing as that of any hearing or seeing person. Throughout the text, nature serves as a symbol for Helen's determination and perseverance in the face of her disabilities, and also acts as a reminder of the ways in which society is all too quick to diminish the pleasure and happiness disabled people feel each day, instead dramatizing their struggles and making it more difficult for disabled communities to claim agency within and over their own narratives. Each time Helen finds herself in nature, it is a reminder of the fact that she does not have to be isolated by her disabilities. Her blindness and deafness are obstacles, to be sure, but they do not have to hold her back from the things she loves or the chance at a life full of the same pleasures any sighted or hearing person enjoys. Thus, throughout the memoir nature symbolizes Helen's deep sense of connection to the world despite the disabilities that once kept her so isolated.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Story of My Life* published in 1996.

Chapter 1 Quotes

It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life. I have, as it were, a superstitious hesitation in lifting the veil that clings about my childhood like a golden mist. The task of writing an autobiography is a difficult one. When I try to classify my earliest impressions, I find that fact and fancy look alike across the years that link the past with the present. The woman paints the child's experiences in her own fantasy. A few impressions stand out vividly from the first years of my life; but "the shadows of the prison-house are on the rest." Besides, many of the joys and sorrows of childhood have lost their poignancy; and many incidents of vital importance in my early education have been forgotten in the excitement of great discoveries. In order, therefore, not to be tedious I shall try to present in a series of sketches only the episodes that seem to me to be the most interesting and important.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen Keller begins writing her autobiography, she feels fear, trepidation, and uncertainty. Helen was still a young woman when she composed this memoir, and the anxiety she writes about in her book's opening lines reveals a hesitation to "lift the veil" which has shadowed her private life alongside a desire to surmount the "difficult" task of writing an autobiography. Keller addresses her readers directly in this passage, implicitly apologizing for the ways in which the years have shrouded, faded, and changed her memories, and vowing only to write about the "interesting" and important" bits of her life. As a determined perfectionist, Keller no doubt longed to write a text which would capture readers' imaginations and move them the way books moved her for so much of her life.

One of my Swiss ancestors was the first teacher of the deaf in Zurich and wrote a book on the subject of their education—rather a singular coincidence; though it is true that there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Arthur H. Keller

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Helen Keller acknowledges the irony—or the pure coincidence—of her being descended from a renowned teacher of the deaf in Zurich. Helen herself remains stunned by the "singular coincidence," but seems to imply that there is a larger order to the universe which ensures that such coincidences take place. Balance, justice, and irony itself are necessary and unavoidable forces which render the human experience one of endless repetition, and in acknowledging that human history is rooted in this never-ending back-and-forth, Helen seems to express a kind of admiration for the unseen mechanisms which mete out these kinds of coincidences and counterbalances.

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 waking hours of fret and pain, and the agony and bewilderment with which I awoke after a tossing half sleep, and turned my eyes, so dry and hot, to the wall, away from the once-loved light, which came to me dim and yet more dim each 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. If we have once seen, "the day is ours, and what the day has shown."

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan, Kate Adams Keller

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Helen's memories of the painful and debilitating illness which robbed her of her senses of sight and hearing are fuzzy in places and sharp in others, and yet Helen herself acknowledges that her half-remembered recollections might be dreams or inventions. Still, she recalls very clearly the matter-of-fact way in which she "got used to" her new way of moving through the world, without sight or hearing. She was not numb to or forgetful of the glimpses of the world she'd seen and heard in the months of her life before

her illness. Rather than lamenting the fact that she would never see trees, flowers, or the faces of her loved ones again, Helen is seemingly grateful for the fact that she got to see these things at all—and for the fact that, once seen, these things could not be forgotten. This passage establishes Helen as grateful even in the face of hardship and deprivation, illuminating her optimism, grace, and goodwill toward the world and her place in it.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line, and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was. "Light! Give me light!" was the wordless cry of my soul, and the light of love shone on me in that very hour.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen describes the day when her teacher and lifelong companion, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to stay, she enters the realm of metaphor in order to emphasize how profoundly Miss Sullivan changed Helen's life by shining "the light of love" upon her. Helen lived in a world of darkness and isolation—not unhappy, but walled-off in many ways from the people she loved and unable to engage with the world around her. In this passage, Helen delves into metaphorical speech in order to express just how lost and alone she felt, and how much of a bounty—and a saving grace—Miss Sullivan's benevolent presence was almost right away.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ We read and studied out of doors, preferring the sunlit woods to the house. All my early lessons have in them the breath of the woods—the fine, resinous odour of pine needles, blended with the perfume of wild grapes. Seated in the gracious shade of a wild tulip tree, I learned to think that everything has a lesson and a suggestion. "The loveliness of things taught me all their use." Indeed, everything that could hum, or buzz, or sing, or bloom, had a part in my education—noisy-throated frogs, katydids and crickets held in my hand until, forgetting their embarrassment, they trilled their reedy note, little downy chickens and wildflowers, the dogwood blossoms, meadow-violets and budding fruit trees.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

One of the major symbols throughout the text is nature and the natural world. Despite her inability to connect with it through seeing or hearing, Helen expresses time and time again her love of nature and the ways in which she rejoices in being in the natural world. In this passage, she demonstrates how Miss Sullivan instilled in her this love of nature, and gave Helen the life-changing knowledge that every little thing had something to teach her or something to give her. Helen will, later in the text, explain how deeply important nature is to her, and why, despite her inability to see or hear the plants, trees, and animals she loves so well, they move her and enrich her llife. This passage sets up the ineffable and almost innately positive effect the natural world had on young Helen.

❝ My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never tell. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her—there is not a talent, or an inspiration or a joy in me that has not awakened by her loving touch.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In these lines, which are a kind of ode to the love and influence of Miss Sullivan, Helen notes that because Miss Sullivan came to her at such a crucial time in her life and taught her so much, she sees their two beings as inseparable from one another. Miss Sullivan gave Helen the greatest gift of all—the gift of language and self-expression. Miss Sullivan painstakingly taught Helen the words for each and every thing in the world around her, and because of this deep and profound influence, Helen's conception of the world has always been and will always be filtered through the lens of Miss Sullivan's tutelage. This has created a deep and everlasting bond between the two women, and in this quotation Helen acknowledges that bond and gives thanks for the "inspiration" and "joy" which Miss Sullivan's presence in her life has awakened in her spirit.

Chapter 13 Quotes

I had known for a long time that the people about me used a method of communication different from mine; and even before I knew that a deaf child could be taught to speak, I was conscious of dissatisfaction with the means of communication I already possessed. One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness. This feeling began to agitate me with a vexing, forward-reaching sense of a lack that should be filled.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Helen explains her frustration with the only method of communication she had at her disposal in her earlier years—the manual alphabet and sign language. These tools gave Helen the initial ability to express herself and to learn about the world around her, but their slightly cumbersome nature soon became insufficient and dissatisfying. Helen, a deeply intelligent, thoughtful, and opinionated young woman, longed to be able to give voice to the thoughts and words which raced through her brain, and wanted to widen the array of tools at her disposal to engage in communication with the people she loved.

I would not rest satisfied until my teacher took me, for advice and assistance, to Miss Sarah Fuller, principal of the Horace Mann School. This lovely, sweet-natured lady offered to teach me herself, and we began the twenty-sixth of March, 1890. Miss Fuller's method was this: she passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. I was eager to imitate every motion and in an hour had learned six elements of speech. Miss Fuller gave me eleven lessons in all. I shall never forget the surprise and delight I felt when I uttered my first connected sentence, "It is warm." True, they were broken and stammering syllables, but they were human speech. My soul, conscious of new strength, came out of bondage, and was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and face. [...] As I talked, happy thoughts fluttered up out of my words that might perhaps have struggled in vain to escape my fingers.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Miss Sarah Fuller, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Helen takes her first steps toward verbal speech, she demonstrates how her desire and determination to learn how to speak pushed her onward and also allowed her to learn at an incredibly rapid rate. Helen knew that gaining the ability to speak would be the best thing for her, and despite the doubts and hesitations of her friends and family, she pursued her goal all the way to New York City. She soon found that her intuition had been right all along, and that speech had been the very thing she'd needed to release her soul from "bondage" and express herself even more deeply and concisely than she had been able previously.

My work was practice, practice, practice. Discouragement and weariness cast me down frequently; but the next moment the thought that I should soon be at home and show my loved ones what I had accomplished spurred me on, and I eagerly looked forward to their pleasure in my achievement.

"My little sister will understand me now," was a thought stronger than all obstacles. I used to repeat ecstatically, "I am not dumb now." I could not be despondent while I anticipated the delight of talking to my mother and reading her responses from her lips.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker), Mildred Keller,

Kate Adams Keller

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen, up in New York City, continued her studies in speech and verbal communication, she encountered many obstacles and discouraging moments. She describes the depths of these moments of pain and uncertainty with sorrow, but also recalls that the desire to finally find a way to communicate fully with her loved ones is what pulled her out of those horrible times. Just imagining the delight her little sister Mildred or her mother would take in Helen's new skill spurred her onward, and motivated her to continue relentlessly in the direction of her dreams and aspirations.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ The stories [from "Birdie and His Friends"] had little or no meaning for me then, but the mere spelling of the strange words was sufficient to amuse a little who could who could do almost nothing to amuse herself; and although I do not recall a single circumstance connected with the reading of the stories, yet I cannot help thinking that I made a great effort to remember the words.... One thing is certain, the language was ineffaceably stamped upon my brain, though for a long time no one knew it, least of all myself.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

One of the darkest periods of Helen's young life was not a moment of isolation or discouragement caused by one of her disabilities, but rather an instance in which her own ambition backfired. She composed a story for Mr. Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind, but it soon became apparent, after the story's publication, that Helen had lifted the idea for the piece—and indeed much of the language within it—from a story which had been read to her in her childhood. Helen had done so unwittingly, without realizing that she was plagiarizing, but the disgrace this discovery brought her was deep and intense. In this passage, Helen reflects on how this incident was in large part the product of her own particular way of learning. By memorizing words and details so clearly in an effort to retain them and widen her grasp of language, Helen unconsciously retained the story so well that she was able to reproduce it uncannily and without even noticing.

❝ Miss Canby [the author of "The Frost Fairies"] herself wrote kindly, "Some day you will write a great story out of your own head, that will be a comfort and help to many." But this kind prophecy has never been fulfilled. I have never played with words again for the mere pleasure of the game. Indeed, I have ever since been tortured by the fear that what I write is not my own. For a long time, when I wrote a letter, even to my mother, I was seized with a sudden feeling of terror, and I would spell the sentences over and over, to make sure that I had not read them in a book. Had it not been for the persistent encouragement of Miss Sullivan, I think I should have given up trying to write altogether.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of Helen's inadvertent plagiarism, most of those around her—and even the plagiarized story's author, Miss Canby—expressed their understanding of Helen's mistake and showed her great kindness. Despite the reassurances that Helen had done nothing intentionally wrong, and was morally blameless, Helen internalized this failure very deeply, and found that for years afterward she felt herself unable to express herself as freely or thoughtlessly as she had in the past. The sneaking suspicion that her words were not her own—again, a peculiar byproduct of her specific approach to language acquisition and learning—dogged Helen for a long time, and though she nearly gave up writing forever, she credits those nearest to her for encouraging her to press on and continue writing.

I was learning, as all young and inexperienced persons learn, by assimilation and imitation, to put ideas into words. Everything I found in books that pleased me I retained in my memory, consciously or unconsciously, and adapted it. The young writer, as Stevenson has said, instinctively tries to copy whatever seems most admirable, and he shifts his admiration with astonishing versatility. It is only after years of this sort of practice that even great men have learned to marshal the legion of words which come thronging through every byway of the mind. I am afraid I have not yet completed this process. It is certain that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind. [...] But we keep on trying because we know that others have succeeded, and we are not willing to acknowledge defeat.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of this chapter, Helen reflects on the ways in which she is still coming into her own as a writer and a thinker. She has, like many other young writers, attempted to learn and create by repetition. Although she knows that countless young artists and writers learn this way, Helen is particularly hard on herself, because she holds herself to such high standards and knows that she must work twice as hard as sighted and hearing people to achieve the goals which come more easily to them. In this passage, Helen demonstrates a keen understanding of the processes by which art and critical thought come to fruition, as well as an intense desire to succeed in her goals despite the setbacks she has suffered.

Chapter 15 Quotes

It seems strange to many people that I should be impressed by the wonders and beauties of Niagara. They are always asking: what does this beauty or that music mean to you? You cannot see the waves rolling up the beach or hear their roar. What do they mean to you?" In the most evident sense they mean everything. I cannot fathom or define their meaning any more than I can fathom or define love or religion or goodness.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Helen has had a lifelong love of nature, largely instilled in her by her teacher and companion, Miss Sullivan. This deep and abiding love has brought her much joy and peace throughout her life, and Helen is irked when people question that love. Despite her inability to see or hear, she insists that her experience of nature is just as profound and ineffable as anyone else's. She cannot describe why nature is important to her any better than she can describe why her deepest core values are so important to her. In this passage, she balks at those who would claim that she cannot have as deep an appreciation for the physical world as a sighted or hearing person, and insists that love of some things cannot be quantified or explained.

Chapter 19 Quotes

I do not blame any one. The administrative board of Radcliffe did not realize how difficult they were making my examinations, nor did they understand the peculiar difficulties I had to surmount. But if they unintentionally placed obstacles in my way, I have the consolation of knowing that I overcame them all.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen reflects on how difficult her Radcliffe entrance examinations were, it is not the rigor of the subject matter or an ineptitude on her own behalf which made the exams so strenuous. Rather, it is the fact that the Radcliffe admission board prevented Miss Sullivan from translating the exam for Helen, and instead assigned her a proctor who was no more than a stranger. Additionally, the braille translations used in Helen's mathematics exams were unfamiliar and not the kind she normally used, and this created confusion and the need for her to take extra time during the exam. In recounting all of this, Helen ultimately concludes—with a rather cheeky measure of pride—that despite the obstacles the committee knowingly or unknowingly threw into her path, she was able to gain admission to Radcliffe anyway.

Chapter 20 Quotes

I remember my first day at Radcliffe. It was a day full of interest for me. I had looked forward to it for years. A potent force within me, stronger than the persuasion of my friends, stronger even than the pleadings of my heart, had impelled me to try my strength by the standards of those who see and hear. I knew that there were many obstacles in the way; but I was eager to overcome them. I had taken to heart the words of the wise Roman who said, "To be banished from Rome is but to live outside of Rome." Debarred from the great highways of knowledge, I was compelled to make the journey across by unfrequented roads—that was all; and I knew that in college there were many bypaths where I could touch hands with girls who were thinking, loving and struggling like me.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen reflects on her first day at Radcliffe, she looks back on the motivating forces which led her there. Helen did not want to be "banished" from the upper echelons of the academic world just because of her disabilities, and so made a path for herself in the face of doubt, hesitation, and countless obstacles. Once at college, she knew that the tough road was not over—she would still have to use "unfrequented roads" to forge the path toward her deepest-held dreams and loftiest goals, but she had the knowledge that at Radcliffe she would be among a new community of young girls who, despite their differences, were "struggling" through life just as she was, longing for the same adventures, fulfillments, and comforts as Helen herself.

I need more time to prepare my lessons than other girls...I have perplexities which they have not. There are days when the close attention I must give to details chafes my spirit, and the thought that I must spend hours reading a few chapters, while in the world without other girls are laughing and singing and dancing, makes me rebellious; but soon I recover my buoyancy and laugh the discontent out of my heart. For, after all, every one who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone, and since there is no royal road to the summit, I must zigzag it in my own way. I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better. I trudge on, I gain a little, I feel encouraged, I get more eager and climb higher and begin to see the widening horizon. Every struggle is a victory.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen describes her experience at Radcliffe so far, she admits that it is full of difficulties, and that nearly every day is a struggle to climb a metaphorical hill. There is no straight shot to the top, Helen notes; instead, she must make her own path, learning and carving out space for herself as she goes. Though the path is difficult and she often "slips" and struggles, Helen writes that the hardships she faces each day at college make her victories that much sweeter and more meaningful. Each learning experience enriches her world and broadens her horizon, and though her education is different than what she thought it would be, she has made it work for her and has discovered herself and her potential along the way.

> While my days at Radcliffe were still in the future, they were encircled with a halo of romance, which they have lost; but in the transition from romantic to actual I have learned many things I should never have known had I not tried the experiment. One of them is the precious science of patience, which teaches us that we should take our education as we would take a walk in the country, leisurely, our minds hospitably open to impressions of every sort. Such knowledge floods the soul unseen with a soundless tidal wave of deepening thought. "Knowledge is power." Rather, knowledge is happiness, because to have knowledge—broad, deep knowledge—is to know true ends from false, and lofty things from low. To know the thoughts and deeds that have marked man's progress is to feel the great heart-throbs of humanity through the centuries; and if one does not feel in these pulsations a heavenward striving, one must indeed be deaf to the harmonies of life.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

As Helen has gone through the years at Radcliffe, she has come to realize that college is no Utopia, and is hardly even a romantic or ideal place to be—but Helen writes in this passage that she prefers what college actually is to what she dreamed it would be. At college, Helen has learned that institutional learning, rote memorization, and book-smarts are not the cornerstones of personal edification. Rather, her own early education with Miss Sullivan, which instilled in her a love of nature, literature, and language, has brought her happiness. Learning "true ends from false and lofty things from low" cannot necessarily be taught at a university. Helen yearns to pursue alternative types of education which seek to enrich the soul as well as the mind, for this is what allows one to feel the echoes of the "heart-throbs" of humanity.

Chapter 21 Quotes

> I read [books] in the intervals between study and play with an ever-deepening sense of pleasure. I did not study nor analyze them—I did not know whether they were well written or not; I never thought about style or authorship. They laid their treasures at my feet, and I accepted them as we accept the sunshine and the love of our friends. I loved *Little Women* because it gave me a sense of kinship with girls and boys who could see and hear. Circumscribed as my life was in so many ways, I had to look between the covers of books for news of the world that lay outside my own.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen first began reading, she did so with an open mind and heart and with no eye toward criticism or academic gain. She merely accepted the "treasures" which books brought into her life, and valued them for the ways in which they allowed her to peer into the lives of others and feel "kinship" with kinds of people she wouldn't otherwise ordinarily meet. Helen felt that her life was narrow and confining, at times, despite the many small pleasures it contained, and books allowed her to widen her horizon and experience other lives, other worlds, and other stories.

> In a word, literature is my Utopia. Here I am not disenfranchised. No barrier of the senses shuts me out from the sweet, gracious discourse of my book-friends. They talk to me without embarrassment or awkwardness. The things I have learned and the things I have been taught seem of ridiculously little importance compared with their "large loves and heavenly charities."

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Books have been some of Helen's most constant companions throughout her life, and in this chapter she has waxed poetic to her readers about the joys, lessons, and values that books have brought into her world over the years. In this passage, Helen again highlights her love of

books and the ways in which they deliver her to a kind of "Utopia" where, through the words and experiences of others, she is able to feel complete, happy, and loved. Books do not condescend to her or tiptoe around her—rather, they lift her up and enrich her life, enlivening her existence with all that is contained within them.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ Is it no true, then, that my life with all its limitations touches at many points the life of the World Beautiful? Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content. Sometimes, it is true, a sense of isolation enfolds me like a cold mist as I sit alone and wait at life's shut gate. Beyond there is light, and music, and sweet companionship; but I may not enter. Fate, silent, pitiless, bars the way. Fain would I question his imperious decree; for my heart is still undisciplined and passionate; but my tongue will not utter the bitter, futile words that rise to my lips, and they fall back into my heart like unshed tears. Silence sits immense upon my soul. Then comes hope with a smile and whispers, "There is joy in self-forgetfulness." So I try to make the light in others' eyes my sun, the music in others' ears my symphony, the smile on others' lips my happiness.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Helen considers the nature of her existence, and the unexpected ways in which she has found contentedness, community, happiness, and connection with the "outside" world. Helen admits in this quotation that her life has had many moments of darkness, silence, and isolation, and even implies that she has, at times, longed for death and the world beyond her mortal life. In the end, however, it is Fate which has instructed Helen to remain on Earth and live out her life, achieving and learning as much as she can. Even in bitter, heartbreaking moments, there is always hope to be found, and when Helen forgets the pains and burdens of her life, she is able to find joy, light, and happiness in the hearts, lives, and minds of those around her.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Thus it is that my friends have made the story of my life. In a thousand ways they have turned my limitations into beautiful privileges, and enabled me to walk serene and happy in the shadow cast by my deprivation.

Related Characters: Helen Keller (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In the last lines of her autobiography, Helen confirms the argument her book has been working toward all along: that it is love, friendship, and community which ultimately determine what one is capable of achieving and how fulfilling one's life will be. Through the friendships she has made and the good she has done, Helen has been able to navigate the world of her "deprivation" and has come out on the other side feeling serene, happy, fulfilled, and supported. It is not any one of Helen's many achievements in academia or social work that have made her life so noteworthy or fulfilling, but rather the good, kind, caring company she has kept and the lives she herself has influenced and enriched.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

"With a kind of fear," Helen Keller begins telling the story of her life. She has hesitated to "lift the veil" which has been lain over the story of her childhood, finding it difficult to communicate her earliest memories and impressions. As a grown woman, she finds herself rendering her childhood through the lens of her own present perceptions and ideas, and moreover finds that many of the emotions and memories from her younger years have lost their potency and poignancy. Having communicated all this to her readers, Helen vows to present only the "most interesting and important" episodes from her life over the span of her autobiography.

As Helen looks back on the story of her life thus far in preparation for writing an autobiography, she expresses fear and trepidation that she will not be able to do her own story justice, or that she will bore her readers with the small moments and intricacies of her life. Nevertheless, she sets out to put her story in writing, and to teach her readers about all the hardships she has faced and all of the memories—painful and happy alike—which have made her who she is today.

Helen writes that she was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, a small town in northern Alabama. On her father's side, she is descended from Swiss immigrants, and she notes that one of her Swiss ancestors was the very first teacher of the deaf in Zurich, Switzerland, and wrote a book on educating deaf children. Helen notes that though this seems like a coincidence, "there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his."

As Helen relays her family history, she notes an interesting coincidence which seems to speak to an unseen but strong sense of justice, irony, and balance in the universe.

Helen writes that she is distantly related to Robert E. Lee on her father's side, and that her father, Arthur H. Keller, was a captain in the Confederate Army. Her mother, Kate Adams, is her father's second wife, and is many years younger than him. Her mother's family hails from Massachusetts, but later moved to Arkansas, and her mother's family, too, fought for the Confederacy during the war.

Helen's parents are people of means and status, as is revealed in this passage, and this means that they are able to dote upon Helen and provide her with the special things she will need throughout her life. If Helen had been born to a family of lesser means, she likely would not have had the resources necessary to become the accomplished and well-known woman she is in history.

Up until the time of the illness which robbed Helen of her sight and her hearing, she lived in a "tiny house" on her father's family's homestead in Tuscumbia. The house was covered with vines, roses, and honeysuckle, and hummingbirds and bees buzzed around the façade all day long. The larger house on the property was called "Ivy Green," and as a very young child Helen used to visit its gardens to calm herself in moments of sadness or temper.

In this passage, reflecting on the home and gardens of her very early childhood, Helen expresses her love of nature, which has been with her from a very young age. The natural world, throughout the book, symbolizes Helen's deep sense of connectedness to the world despite the limitations that keep her from seeing and hearing it.

The beginning of her life, Helen writes, was "much like every other little life." She was an intrepid child and she had an "eager, self-asserting disposition." She spoke at a very early age, impressing her parents and their friends, but after her illness, she retained the memory of only one word: *water*.

Helen was just like any other child, and was possessed of a fiery, determined personality which would prove invaluable as she faced the difficult challenges that life would soon present.

The "happy days" of Helen's early childhood did not last long—they were dashed when one dreary February, Helen was struck by "acute congestion of the stomach and brain." The doctor attending to her told her parents she would not live, but one morning, Helen's fever broke. Her family rejoiced, unaware that their daughter would never see or hear again.

Helen's illness struck her down in the middle of her happy childhood. It was believed that Helen would die, but instead she survived—though it would come to light that the illness had robbed her of two major faculties and would change the course of her life forever.

Helen believes that she still has memories of her illness. She recalls her mother trying to soothe her tenderly; she remembers tossing and turning in agony, and a hot, dry, feeling behind her eyes. All of these memories, though, are fleeting, and she wonders often if they are unreal or constructed. After her illness, Helen grew used to the silence and darkness which enveloped her, and even forgot that things had ever been different—until her teacher came, and "set [her] spirit free." Despite the darkness in which Helen now found herself, she had caught glimpses of **nature** during her first nineteen months of life, and because she had seen fields, trees, and flowers even just briefly, she would not forget them.

As Helen wades through her hazy memories of her illness, she wonders whether they are instead merely dreams or invented images. Regardless of whether her memories are real, the pain and fear of the illness is sharp in her mind. Despite all it took from her, the illness could not erase Helen's earliest memories, which instilled in her an intrepid spirit, a love of nature, and a reverence for her beloved family.

CHAPTER 2

Helen does not remember much of the first few months after her illness, but she knows that she mostly sat on her mother's lap or clung to her dress as her mother went about her day. Helen felt every object in the house, and had some sense of what things were. She could also use "crude signs" to communicate her desires; she would shake her head for "no" and nod it for "yes," pull someone towards her for "come" and push them for "go." Helen's mother was very attentive toward her, and helped her to understand a good deal of things. Her mother was "all that was bright and good in [Helen's] long night."

As Helen reflects on the period following her illness, it does not seem to be a time marked by total sadness and isolation—instead, she was constantly surrounded by the company of her family, especially her mother, who worked with her tirelessly to try and help little Helen find a way to communicate. Helen's mother helped her through a difficult time by showing her love, patience, and compassion.

Though Helen was impaired, she still understood a lot of what was happening around her. She could fold and put away clean clothes, and knew by what her mother and aunt were wearing whether they were going out or staying in. She could hear vibrations in the floorboards and doorways, and would ready herself for guests by putting on her mother's powder and oils. She had an awareness that other people were different from her, and did not use signs to communicate but rather talked with their mouths. When Helen achieved no results in verbal communication, she often became very angry, and would throw fits and tantrums.

Helen participated more in her family and in day-to-day life than one might expect of a child who had been struck with such a devastating disability—Helen excitedly greeted her parents' visitors and expressed curiosity about communication and the way her family did things. Helen found herself deeply frustrated, though, because despite her attempts to connect with the world around her, she was still profoundly unable to express herself.

Helen's constant companions were her dog Belle and a girl named Martha Washington, the daughter of the Keller family's cook. Martha understood all of Helen's signs, and more than that often did whatever Helen told her to do. Helen enjoyed having dominion over another person, and loved getting her way. The two of them spent a lot of time in the kitchen, cooking and making ice-cream, and occasionally would hunt for bird's eggs in the grass or help milk the cows in the mornings and evenings.

Even in the face of sadness and frustration, Helen found ways to make friendships and explore the world. Her feisty attitude remained strong as ever as she embarked on an imbalanced but seemingly joyful friendship with one of her parents' servant's children, and with Martha she continued to explore the world around the house and the nature and animals there.

Helen found herself getting into mischief like any other child; she and Martha cut one another's hair, much to their parents' dismay, and once, trying to dry out one of her aprons by the hearth, Helen briefly caught fire and her nurse had to throw a blanket over her to put the fire out. Helen found out what keys were, and what they were for, and once locked her mother in the pantry for three hours. Later, when Helen's teacher Miss Sullivan came to stay, she would repeat this clever trick, forcing Miss Sullivan to be lowered out her bedroom window on a ladder.

As Helen grew older, she remained as intrepid and mischief-loving as ever. Her disability threatened to put her in danger once or twice, but despite this, Helen was able to get up to tricks and hijinks, mystifying and even frustrating those around her.

When Helen was about five, their family moved from the little vine-covered house to a new, larger home, and Helen's father would often sit reading newspapers. Helen was always very curious to understand what her father was doing, but it wasn't until years later that she would discover that he was a newspaper editor. Her father was "loving and indulgent," and deeply devoted to his family. He loved hunting, gardening, and storytelling, and after Helen acquired language her father would tell her wonderful, fanciful stories. Helen wishes to speak of her mother, but finds that her mother is so dear to her that it "seems indelicate to speak of her."

Helen's relationship with her parents remained as tender and loving as ever, and though she could not communicate with them very well, she delighted in their presence and has deeply fond memories of her childhood with them. Once Miss Sullivan arrived, her relationship to her parents would blossom even more. This shows how Miss Sullivan's love and support made it possible for Helen to forge new connections and strengthen existing ones.

As for Helen's little sister, Mildred, who came into the world when Helen was a few years old, Helen regarded her sister at first as an "intruder." She was jealous of her sister, and of how often the baby got to sit in her mother's lap. At the time of Mildred's birth, Helen had a "much-abused" doll named Nancy, whom Helen liked to place in a little cradle. One afternoon, Helen found Mildred sleeping in the cradle, and attempted to overturn it; her mother caught her just in time, and Mildred was unharmed. After Helen was "restored to [her] human heritage" through the acquisition of language, she and Mildred grew close, though often the two of them had trouble communicating with one another.

Helen's feistiness and combativeness extended to her defenseless infant sister, whom Helen did not fully understand and saw largely as a nuisance. Helen had her own way of doing things in spite of her disabilities, and Helen did not care for anyone who threatened her routine or sense of stability. She feels it important to note that later on, after Miss Sullivan made it possible for her to communicate with the outside world, she would come to regard her sister very dearly.

CHAPTER 3

As Helen grew older, her desire to express herself grew as well. The few signs she could make became inadequate, and as her despair grew, she became prone to more and more intense fits and tantrums. Her parents were "grieved and perplexed," as they lived very far from any school for the blind or deaf, and did not think they'd be able to get a special tutor for Helen to come all the way out to their little town of Tuscumbia. Moreover, Helen's parents wondered, as bad as her behavior often was, whether she could even be taught.

Helen soon outgrew the crude signs that she and her parents used to communicate with one another, and her frustrations became too much for her poor parents to manage. They didn't know what to do, as their home was so remote, and weren't even sure that if they were able to secure a tutor for their mercurial daughter, she'd be able to have a normal education or ever learn to communicate properly.

When Helen was about six, her father arranged to take her to a renowned oculist in Baltimore in hopes that something could be done to help her eyesight. Helen went with her parents and her aunt by train up to Baltimore, and she remembers how everyone on the train—her own family, other passengers, and even the conductor—helped play with her and keep her busy throughout the journey. Helen did not have one tantrum the entire way to Maryland.

Helen's parents, desperate to make things better for their beloved daughter, took her on a journey to pursue a way to open up Helen's dark, quiet world. Helen found joy in the community of friends, strangers, and family alike on the train, and this connection lessened her feelings of isolation and incommunicativeness.

In Baltimore, the oculist received the Kellers kindly, but could not do anything for Helen's eyes. Nevertheless, he advised them to get in touch with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, who would be able to give the Kellers information about schools and teachers for deaf and blind children. The Kellers then went immediately to Washington to visit Dr. Bell, who was kind and loving toward Helen. She did not know then that their meeting with the famous inventor "would be the door thorough which [she would] pass from darkness into light."

Though the oculist could not help the Kellers, they were determined to pursue any lead which might give Helen some hope for a brighter future. Dr. Bell, the famed inventor, was renowned for his philanthropy and love of children, and Helen to this day credits him with changing her life and allowing "light" into her world.

Dr. Bell told the Kellers to write to the director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, Mr. Anagnos, and ask if a teacher would come to Alabama to begin Helen's education. Helen's father did so at once, and within weeks a letter from Mr. Anagnos came back—a teacher had been found. The following March, Miss Sullivan arrived in Tuscumbia. Helen writes that she herself "came up out of Egypt and stood before Sinai, and a power divine touched [her] spirit and gave it sight, so that [she] beheld many wonders."

Though Helen, at the time, did not know that Miss Sullivan was on her way to her, looking back at this time in her life Helen is able to understand and appreciate how desperately she needed Miss Sullivan, and how radically Miss Sullivan would come to change her life and open her up to the world around her. The reference to Sinai in this passage is an allusion to the biblical story of Moses receiving the ten commandments from God. It suggests that Sullivan's intervention into Helen's life was divine.

CHAPTER 4

Helen remembers the day on which her teacher, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to Tuscumbia as the most important one of her life. Years and years later, she is still "filled with wonder" when she considers how that day fused her life with Miss Sullivan's. On the afternoon of Miss Sullivan's arrival, Helen sat on the porch, vaguely aware from the hustle and bustle throughout the house that something unusual was taking place that day. As Miss Sullivan walked up the porch steps, Helen stretched out her hand and felt someone take it. She describes herself as having been like a ship at sea in a dense fog, with no compass or hope of safe harbor, in the years before Miss Sullivan's arrival, but now her teacher had come to reveal "all things" to her, and more than that, to love her.

Miss Sullivan's arrival marked a turning point in Helen's life, and as Helen recalls the fateful day when Miss Sullivan came to stay, she finds herself dipping into metaphor in order to express the profundity of the way in which Miss Sullivan saved her from darkness, isolation, obscurity, and fear. Helen didn't know it at the time, but Miss Sullivan would soon transform her entire world, and more than just educating and enlightening her, would love, support, and cherish her for all her days.

On Miss Sullivan's first morning in Tuscumbia, she gave Helen a porcelain doll—a gift from the children at the Perkins Institution, though Helen did not know this at the time. After Helen had played with the doll for a while, Miss Sullivan spelled out the letters "d-o-l-l" into Helen's palm in sign language. Helen, believing this to be a new sort of game, imitated the letters back, and soon was spelling many more words. Despite her quick learning, Helen didn't understand that she was spelling a word, "or even that words existed."

When she arrived in Tuscumbia, Miss Sullivan found a little girl completely unaware of the existence of language. The task before her was enormous, but Miss Sullivan set right to it, and though Helen could not really comprehend the earliest words she was being taught, her desire to impress her teacher enabled her to pick up on the manual alphabet skills which would soon become her lifeline to the outside world.

One afternoon some time later, Miss Sullivan, frustrated by Helen's inability to grasp language, attempted to present Helen with two different types of dolls and explain that the word applied to both playthings. When Helen grew impatient, she dashed her porcelain doll on the floor and shattered it. Miss Sullivan put Helen's sun hat on her head and pulled her out to the well-house. She placed Helen's hands beneath the spout and spelled the word "water" into her hand, and suddenly, Helen understood; "the mystery of language was revealed."

Helen took her mischievous, feisty, and sometimes even cruel attitude out on Miss Sullivan, and the moment of anger and passion led to one of the most famous moments of Helen Keller's life and a tremendous breakthrough for the young girl. This pattern of frustration, breakdown, and breakthrough will repeat frequently throughout the story of Helen's life as she conquers the many obstacles she encounters again and again.

Helen left the well-house, eager to learn the names of everything around her. She was delighted by her new knowledge, and felt that as if every object around her suddenly seemed to "quiver with life." When Helen returned to her room and found the doll dashed on the floor, she began to cry, full of sorrow. Throughout the rest of the day, Helen learned the words for mother, father, sister, and teacher, and when she went to bed that night, she longed for the first time "for a new day to come."

For the first time in Helen's life, she realized that she had the ability to communicate with others, to influence them, and to express herself. She found herself in touch with new emotions and new expressions, and became determined and even excited to persevere through the days ahead for the first time in her young life.

CHAPTER 5

The summer of 1887 was the summer of the "awakening" of Helen's soul. She explored with her hands and learned the name of everything she touched, and as she learned more about the world around her, she began to feel a "kinship" with it. Miss Sullivan often took Helen for walks through the fields, and Helen had her first lessons in the "beneficence of **nature**." She began to delight in the world more and more as she learned about it, and Helen credits Miss Sullivan with instilling a love of the natural world within her.

As Helen explored the world around her and began to understand the names, roles, and interconnectedness of the things which made it up, she delighted in Miss Sullivan's company and felt grateful to have Miss Sullivan guiding her through the world and describing with reverence, love, and wonder all the marvels of the natural world.

Helen did have an experience, however, which taught her that **nature** is not always kind. One day Helen and Miss Sullivan stopped to rest in the shade of a large tree, and Miss Sullivan helped Helen to climb up into its branches. Miss Sullivan suggested the two of them eat lunch in the branches, but when she went to fetch their food, a "change" passed over the sky. Helen could feel the sun grow covered by clouds, and smelled the odor of oncoming rain. Helen longed to get down from the tree, but she was stuck. A great wind nearly blew her from the branches, and she crouched in the fork of the tree as twigs snapped all around her. At last, Miss Sullivan returned for her, and helped her down, and Helen realized that even "under softest touch [nature] hides treacherous claws."

Helen had been so excited and happy to learn about nature and begin to develop a deeper relationship with it that it did not occur to her that there was a darker side to its beauty. The experience up in the tree taught her that there was a duality to everything in the world, and that even in places of immense beauty and comfort, danger could swoop in at any moment. Helen's education at this point in her life was more than studying and learning abstractly—it was based in learning about the world from the world itself. This is a distinction that she will continue to make throughout the book.

Helen did not climb another tree for a long time after this incident, but one morning, she smelled the "sweet allurement" of a mimosa tree in full bloom, and followed the scent to the foot of the tree. She made her way to the trunk, lifted her foot into a space between the branches, and hoisted herself up. After surmounting her fear, Helen spent many a happy hour daydreaming in her "tree of paradise."

In the first instance of a pattern which will repeat throughout her life, Helen experiences a setback, learns from it, and redoubles her commitment to facing her fears and conquering them.

CHAPTER 6

Helen now had the key to language, and was eager to learn how to use it. She had had to trap each word "by a slow and often painful process" as opposed to children who can hear and acquire language without any tremendous effort, but she writes that no matter how one must struggle to acquire language, the result is always "wonderful."

Helen found acquiring language a slow process at times, but nonetheless delighted in finding more and more ways to express herself and engage with the world around her after so long spent in the dark.

As Helen learned more and more about language, she began to ask Miss Sullivan more and more questions about the world. One morning, before Helen knew many words, she asked her teacher what "love" meant. Miss Sullivan tried to explain, signing "I love Helen" into Helen's palm and attempting to kiss her on the head. Helen still could not understand, and asked if "love" was the sweetness of flowers or the heat of the sun.

As Helen's horizons expanded, she found herself thinking hard about abstract concepts and struggling to understand the more ineffable aspects of the human experience. It makes sense that Helen would struggle assigning words to her feelings after so long without any way of expressing herself. The desire to pin down these words pushed Helen forward.

A few days later, when Helen made a mistake while stringing beads of different sizes into groups, she found herself struggling to concentrate and figure out what she had done wrong. Miss Sullivan pointed to Helen's forehead and signed the word "think" into her palm, and suddenly Helen had a name for the process which was going on in her head. Excited by the new connection, Helen asked if this feeling was love—again, Annie tried to explain the ineffable nature of love, and suddenly Helen understood "the invisible lines stretched between [her own] spirit and the spirits of others."

As Helen acquired a deeper understanding of abstract concepts and began to learn words to describe how she was feeling inside, and what was happening within herself, she made more and deeper connections and began to understand the nature of community, humanity, and communion between friends and strangers alike.

Helen explains that Miss Sullivan always spoke to Helen with the eloquence she would use to speak to any speaking child, only she signed everything into Helen's hands. In this way, Helen slowly, over the course of a process which took several years, picked up the countless idioms and expressions used in daily conversation. Miss Sullivan repeated conversations to Helen verbatim in an attempt to give her the tools to engage in the art of conversation, but Helen writes that it took her many years to work up the confidence to take initiative in this way, barred as she was from distinguishing tone of voice and facial expressions, the things which make up the "very soul" of what one is saying at any given time.

Miss Sullivan never treated Helen condescendingly or spoke down to her, and it is because of this that Helen was able to acquire language and a sense of what words expressed so skillfully. Though the process took many years, Helen delighted in the work of piecing together the different parts of the world, and soon gathered up the self-confidence to express herself to those around her.

CHAPTER 7

The next major step in Helen's education was learning how to read. After Helen could spell a few words in sign language, Miss Sullivan began giving her pieces of cardboard upon which words were printed in raised letters. As Helen began to understand that each word stood for an object, act, feeling, or quality, she practiced arranging the words in sentences. One day, she pinned the word *girl* on her dress and stood in the wardrobe, arranging the words *is*, *in*, and *wardrobe* on the shelf. She delighted in this game, and played at it with Miss Sullivan for hours at a time each day. Soon, Helen was reading printed books in braille.

From the start, Helen took great delight and pride in her education, and longed to learn just as she longed to impress her beloved teacher with her cleverness, inventiveness, and intrepid nature. As Helen's conception of language expanded, she hungered for more and more knowledge and ways of expressing herself, and became an avid reader in no time at all.

Helen had no "regular" lessons for a long time—in the early days of her education, everything felt more like play than work, and Miss Sullivan used stories and poems to illustrate many concepts for Helen. Miss Sullivan had a "peculiar sympathy" with all of Helen's needs, as well as a "wonderful faculty for description." She taught Helen little by little, and never forced her pupil to focus on uninteresting things or nagged her with repetitive questions. Most of Helen's lessons took place outside, as both she and Miss Sullivan preferred to be in **nature**, among the lovely trees, frogs, flowers, and insects.

Helen attributes the joy she took in her education and the miraculous speed with which she learned and retained things about herself and the world around her to Miss Sullivan's sympathy, grace, patience, and expressiveness. Helen's love of language and nature grew out of Miss Sullivan's love of those things, and Helen became more and more fond of the same things her teacher liked as the weeks and months went by.

Helen often rose at dawn to steal into her father's garden and feel the flowers beneath her hands, occasionally catching insects as well. Miss Sullivan would often take Helen down to a lumber wharf on the Tennessee River, and there they would have geography lessons. Helen would play with pebbles and make islands and lakes in the muddy banks, mirroring the descriptions of geography, history, and cartography Miss Sullivan was imparting to her. Helen hardly ever realized she was being instructed in anything—she was having so much fun. The only subject she did not take to was arithmetic, and did not have the patience to go very far with numbers.

Helen's love of nature expanded and grew as she explored more and more not just of her own backyard but of the geography of the town around her. Helen delighted in taking in all this new information, and hardly realized that she was being "educated"—she was simply learning, and found great joy in acquiring more and more language and knowledge.

Helen studied zoology and botany practically, by examining fossils and shells, by growing plants on her windowsill, and by raising tadpoles in a glass globe. She learned about life from life itself, and credits Miss Sullivan, again with, pointing out "the beauty that is in everything." Miss Sullivan made the first years of Helen's education "beautiful" by feeding it with beautiful things, and encouraging Helen to approach her studies both practically and joyfully.

Helen credits Miss Sullivan with instilling a love of learning, language, and nature in her, and with making everything seem so beautiful, exciting, and enticing. Helen learned by doing, and expanded her knowledge and skills rapidly without even realizing that an "education" was taking place.

To this day, Helen writes, she cannot tell how much of her delight in beautiful things and in the **natural world** is innate, and how much is due to Miss Sullivan's influence. Helen also feels that Miss Sullivan's being is "inseparable" from her own being, and that all the best of Helen belongs to Miss Sullivan, and was first "awakened by her loving touch."

Helen expresses her gratitude and love for Miss Sullivan, and tries to put into words the depth of the bond that exists between them. Miss Sullivan "awakened" a love of the world in Helen and reignited her sense of what was possible each and every day.

CHAPTER 8

Helen writes that the first Christmas after Miss Sullivan came to Tuscumbia was "a great event." Together, Miss Sullivan and Helen prepared surprises for everyone in the family, and for Helen's friends as well. Helen's friends teased her with surprises, too, half-spelling the words for the gifts she'd be receiving into her palm before quickly drawing their hands away. As Christmas drew closer, Helen grew more and more excited for the holiday.

Helen had always loved Christmastime, but had never fully understood what was going on in the days leading up to the festivities. Now, with Miss Sullivan at her side, Helen could fully anticipate and appreciate the excitement, glee, and warm feelings of the holiday.

On Christmas Eve, Helen joined the Tuscumbia schoolchildren at their celebration, and she marveled at the beautiful and tall Christmas tree in the center of the room. She "capered" around the tree in delight, and that evening, she lay awake in bed a long time, waiting excitedly for Santa Claus to come. In the morning, Helen found surprises for her scattered all through the house, but the best present of all was Miss Sullivan's gift—a canary, which Helen named Little Tim.

Helen describes experiencing Christmastime through fresh eyes, truly delighted by the tidings and trimmings of the season for the first time in her life. Miss Sullivan's presence has made everything wonderful, and the gift she gives Helen—a small piece of nature for Helen to have to herself—is the greatest part of the holiday.

Helen cared dutifully for Little Tim—she cleaned his cage and fed and watered him each day. One morning, however, Helen left the canary's cage open on the window-seat while preparing water for his bath, and when she returned she felt a cat brush past her. She reached into Tim's cage, but he was gone, and Helen knew sadly that she would never see her little bird again.

Unfortunately, Helen's gift from Miss Sullivan is short-lived. Just as Helen learned earlier from the storm that nature has its dark side, she again must confront the sad realities of the natural world.

CHAPTER 9

In May of 1888, Helen, her mother, and Miss Sullivan took a journey by train to Boston to the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Helen was no longer restless and excitable, and did not require the attention of everyone on the train to keep her amused. Instead, Helen sat quietly beside Miss Sullivan, who spelled into Helen's hands descriptions of the countryside as it flew by. At the school, Helen was thrilled to meet friends and classmates who were just like her. Helen was thrilled to be in Boston, and delighted in taking in the history of the city as well as her new friends. She visited Bunker Hill and Plymouth Rock, and learned the wonderful stories behind the histories of both places. Helen, having made so many wonderful new friends in Boston, forevermore referred to the place as "the City of Kind Hearts."

Helen's journey to Boston illuminated for her the delights and comforts of finding a true community. As Helen's education continued, she delighted in learning new things about a new place, and experiencing a big city for the first time. Her impressions of Boston left her with lasting memories of friendship and goodwill, and served as a touchstone and a reminder of all the joys that education could bring into her life.

CHAPTER 10

Just before the Perkins Institution closed for the summer, Miss Sullivan and Helen decided to spend their vacation in Cape Cod. As soon as Helen and Miss Sullivan arrived at the seaside, Helen put on her bathing suit and sprang out into the water, never having been to the shore before. She was joyful to at last be in the water, but soon found herself caught in a riptide, and tumbled to and fro in the surf. Finally, the ocean tossed her back to shore, and Miss Sullivan drew the confused and frightened Helen into her arms. After that, Helen preferred to sit on a rock near the waves and instead feel the surf spray upon her. She loved the shore, though, and felt she could never stay at the beach long enough—she loved the "free sea air" and all the creatures of the shoreline.

There was more to Helen's education than just learning lessons and attending new institutions; she also had to learn about the world around her, and the beauty and danger combined within it. On this trip to the seaside, Helen flung herself into the ocean without any idea of the perils lurking under the surface, and though she emerged unharmed, she learned an important lesson about the power of nature. For Helen, life is a series of experiences of learning through trial and error.

CHAPTER 11

In the fall, Helen and Miss Sullivan returned to Alabama with full hearts and happy memories. Helen spent the autumn with her family at their summer cottage, Fern Quarry, about fourteen miles from Tuscumbia. The estate was on a mountain covered in thick woods, and Helen delighted in losing herself in the woods each day. Helen's parents entertained many visitors, especially her father, whose friends came in droves to hunt deer.

Helen went from one beautiful natural environment to another, and delighted in the hustle and bustle of her parents' lives as they entertained friends and fostered a sense of warmth and community at their summer homestead.

At the foot of the mountain there was a railroad, and often Helen and Mildred and their friends would watch the train go by. The tracks ran over a deep gorge, and were supported by a large trestle. One day, Mildred, Miss Sullivan, and Helen became lost in the woods, but at last spotted the trestle. They walked along the tracks, trying to find their way home, but soon heard a train approaching. They climbed down onto the trestle and waited for the train to pass overhead. After the fearsome incident they made their way home to find Fern Quarry empty; everyone was out searching for them.

Again, Helen—and this time, her younger sister Mildred, too—learn about the perils of becoming lost in nature, this time being forced to reckon with how the "real" world can intrude rather dangerously upon the realm of the natural one.

CHAPTER 12

After her first visit to Boston, Helen spent nearly every winter up North. Once she visited a small New England village, and was able to play in the snow for the first time. She was mystified by the contrasting beauty and bleakness of winter. During a snowstorm one afternoon, Helen and Miss Sullivan rushed outside to feel the flakes falling, but as the storm worsened, they retreated inside and sat cozily around the fire while the snow blew through the air outside. The morning after the storm broke, Helen went out to play in the snow. "So dazzling was the light," she writes, that "it penetrated even the darkness that veils my eyes." As the days passed, the snowdrifts melted and shrunk, but another storm came before they were gone and replenished them. On pleasant days, Helen and Miss Sullivan enjoyed tobogganing, and Helen experienced incredible joy and "felt [herself] divine" as she flew down the steep slopes.

Helen's sense of wonder in the natural world continues to expand as she experiences different regions and different climates with her friend, guide, and companion Miss Sullivan by her side. Helen is "dazzled" by nature time and time again, and delights in these new experiences as they enrich her conception of the world around her and allow her to feel a little bit more at home in it despite the disabilities which held her back in her youth.

CHAPTER 13

In the spring of 1890, Helen learned to speak. For years, she'd wanted to utter sounds in order to express herself. She had laughed and cried and exercised her vocal chords through wordless utterances, but could not remember how to speak as she had just been learning to do when her illness struck. She was dissatisfied with her means of communication—the manual alphabet—and as she grew older this dissatisfaction only grew. One day, Helen heard the story of a deaf and blind Norwegian girl who had been taught to speak, and soon was "on fire with eagerness" to learn herself. Miss Sullivan took Helen to study with Miss Sarah Fuller, the principal of the Horace Mann School, and soon her speech lessons began.

In this chapter, Helen demonstrates her desire to continually broaden her horizons and challenge other people's expectations of what she could do. Helen, bursting with love for the natural world and desire for more and more experiences, longed to be able to communicate more intuitively with her loved ones, and fought intrepidly to pursue her goals. Speaking out loud, for Helen, represents one step closer to being able to communicate with others around her without so much mediation or as many obstacles.

Miss Fuller would pass Helen's hand over her face and allow Helen to feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. In just an hour, Helen learned the major elements of speech, and after eleven lessons she was able to utter her first connected sentence: "It is warm." With the ability to speak out loud, Helen felt her soul come "out of bondage" and reach for new heights.

Just as Miss Sullivan lifted the veil of darkness which had fallen over Helen's childhood, Miss Fuller now helps Helen to break out of the cage of her dark, quiet world even more by helping her to quite literally find her voice.

Helen spoke to everyone and everything—her toys, stones, trees, and animals. It was a thrill to speak in words that did not need to be interpreted by another, and Helen found herself expressing thoughts through words that "might perhaps have struggled in vain to escape [her] fingers."

Helen was so excited to share her new skill, and delighted in expressing herself even to inanimate objects. As she did so, she found her thoughts soaring to new heights, and realized that her goal of communicating more deftly was on its way to being achieved.

Helen admits that she could not "really" talk at this time—she had only learned the elements of speech. Her teachers could understand her, but most others could not. Miss Sullivan helped Helen daily to practice her speech, and though even now Miss Sullivan still corrects Helen's mispronounced words here and there, their shared labors have paid off. The work of learning to speak was fraught with "discouragement and weariness," but the desire to show her loved ones all that she could accomplish spurred Helen on, and any time she thought of talking with her sister and her mother she was able to pull herself up out of her frustration.

Helen struggled mightily in pursuit of her goal, but undertook her journey towards speech knowing that it would be a lifelong endeavor which would challenge her repeatedly as the years passed by. Helen was spirited in this pursuit by the thought of communicating more effortlessly with her family, and being able to engage with them in a new way.

At last, it was time for Helen to return home to Tuscumbia and show her family what she had learned. At the Tuscumbia train station, Helen met her entire family on the platform, and as Helen spoke out loud to them for the first time, her mother hugged Helen and "tremble[d] with delight," her sister Mildred kissed her hands, and her father was so stunned and proud that he could only manage silence.

Helen's family was proud and delighted as she shared her new skill with them, and from Helen's description of their happy trembling and outward displays of affection, it is clear that they were deeply moved by how hard she had worked and how far she had come.

CHAPTER 14

In the winter of 1892, the "bright sky" of Helen's childhood was darkened by a single cloud. Helen found herself living in doubt, anxiety, and fear, no longer able to enjoy one of her favorite things in the world—books. Even now, she writes, the thought of the "dreadful days" of that winter chills her heart. Helen had written a story called "The Frost King," and sent it to Mr. Anagnos at the Perkins Institution, and this little story was the root of all her troubles. In this chapter Helen endeavors to "set forth the facts" about what happened.

Helen had been having a delightful time learning all about the world, herself, and new avenues of communication and language. As Helen embarked on yet another endeavor to attempt to connect and communicate, she found herself, at last, coming up against a wall, and experiencing a dark and painful moment in her growth and education.

Helen wrote "The Frost King" at Fern Quarry, the autumn after she had learned how to speak. While up at the country house, Miss Sullivan had described to Helen the beauty of the autumn foliage, and Helen, reflecting upon this time, notes that Miss Sullivan's descriptions must have stirred up subconscious memories of a story which had been read to Helen in her youth. As Helen, inspired by the descriptions of the foliage, sat down to write, she thought that she was making up a story. The writing came flowing out of her, and though Helen now knows that if words and images come to her too easily it probably means that they are not "the offspring of [her] own mind," at the time she thought that the story was entirely of her own invention.

Helen reflects on how, moved as she was by Miss Sullivan's characteristically gorgeous and graceful descriptions of nature, she sat down to write, but unintentionally began reproducing a story which had been told to her in her youth. Though Helen did not know it at the time, her unique sense of language and how it relates to memory was creating a disconnect and impacting her communication.

When the story was finished, Helen read it aloud to Miss Sullivan, who corrected her pronunciation and praised her for her hard work. That night at dinner, Helen read the story aloud to her family, and they were so impressed that someone even asked her if she had read the story in a book. Helen, however, insisted that it was her own idea, and that she had composed it for Mr. Anagnos. Helen then copied the story and sent it to Mr. Anagnos, feeling as if she was "walking on air" as she took it to the post office. Mr. Anagnos received the story and was delighted by it, and even published it in one of the Perkins Institution reports. Helen felt that she was at the "pinnacle" of happiness, and did not know that she would soon be dashed back to earth.

Helen was so pleased with and proud of herself for having finally written a short story that she shared it with everyone she could. Her parents found the story remarkable, but didn't really doubt that it was Helen's own invention once she assured them that it had come from her own head. Their initial disbelief actually increased Helen's sense of pride, and she was overjoyed, given her love of books and literature, to finally have contributed something impressive of her own to the world of stories and books.

Once Helen was back in Boston for school, it came to light that a story very similar to Helen's, called "The Frost Fairies," had been published in a book before Helen was born. Helen realized that the story must have been read to her at some point in her childhood—meaning her own story was plagiarism. Helen was ashamed and embarrassed, but luckily Mr. Anagnos believed Helen's innocence in the matter, and showed her tenderness and kindness. The night before a school celebration, however, one of Helen's teachers asked her about the story, and when Helen answered that Miss Sullivan had told her about Jack Frost and the turning of the autumn leaves up at Fern Quarry, the teacher believed that Helen had willfully copied the story. She told this to Mr. Anagnos, who also began to believe that Helen had lied.

Helen's grief at realizing that she had unwittingly plagiarized a childhood story was immense. For a while she was bolstered by the support, goodwill, and good faith of her teachers and her beloved Mr. Anagnos, but eventually a series of miscommunications and sneaking suspicions led to Helen being placed on trial as though she were a criminal. Though Mr. Anagnos had initially believed Helen, misinformation from one of Helen's teachers turned him against his young pupil, and he believed that she had deceived him and all her teachers purposefully.

Helen was brought before a "court" composed of teachers and officers of the Perkins Institution, and forced to answer their questions without Miss Sullivan present. Helen was so upset and so nervous that she could hardly speak, but tried her best to communicate that she had not intentionally copied "The Frost Fairies."

The Perkins Institution took Helen's "plagiarism" very seriously, and spooked her gravely by forcing her to appear on her own in an unfamiliar setting to prove her own innocence in the matter despite the director's belief that she was lying.

Miss Sullivan tracked a copy of the original "Frost Fairies" stories to the summer home of a friend the two of them had stayed with many years ago, and their hostess did recall Miss Sullivan having read Helen many books aloud that summer. Helen posits that because she was so young that summer, and so new to language, she must have put in a great effort to understand and remember the words being spelled out to her—she believes that the language of the story became "stamped" on her brain, though she did not realize it or remember from whence it came.

As more and more of the truth of the matter came to light, Helen realized that the peculiar way in which she learned and retained information had contributed to her detailed but unconscious memory of the story and the ease with which she recalled it, causing her to believe that it had sprung from her own mind.

During the ordeal, Helen received many messages of support and sympathy, and even got a letter from the author of "The Frost Fairies" herself. The letter assured Helen that someday she would write a wonderful story of her very own, but Helen writes now that this is not true—she has rarely played with words for pleasure since the incident, and even now when she writes simple letters to friends and family she is seized by the fear that the words she is writing are not her own.

Ultimately, Helen was exonerated and even received an outpouring of support from her friends, but the blow to her ego—and the fear it caused that she would embarrass herself or appear dishonest ever again—held her back from making new strides in her own written communication.

Helen notes that she had, in much of her early writing, a habit of assimilating things that struck or pleased her and reprinting them as her own unknowingly. She was learning, she says—as all young people learn—through imitation. She fears she still has not completed the process of coming into her own as a writer and a thinker, as she still cannot always distinguish her own thoughts from concepts she has read about. Though she still struggles to write thoughtfully and originally, she keeps on trying because she is "not willing to acknowledge defeat." She hopes that one day she will yet find her true, original voice.

Helen notes that many young writers learn to express themselves just the way that she did; she did nothing wrong, but fell prey to the process by which young minds develop their own senses of the world and their own ways of describing it, expressing themselves, and communicating with others. Helen's renewed determination came, perhaps, from realizing that she made a mistake that anyone could have made, and knowing that the only way to avoid repeating it was to soldier on and strengthen her skills.

Helen writes that this "sad experience" has actually done more good than harm in the long run—it has caused her to think deeply about the problems of composition. She regrets that she lost a friend in Mr. Anagnos, but ends the chapter by stating that since portions of her memoir have been published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Mr. Anagnos has made a public statement announcing that he always believed Helen was innocent. Despite this, however, Helen cannot shake the memory of walking into the "courtroom" and feeling only hostility, suspicion, and menace in the air. Helen writes that she has given this account in her memoir because the incident was important to her life and to her education, and she does not want for there to be any misunderstandings about the hard facts.

In a pattern which will become repetitious throughout the text, a painful lesson or an unhappy realization actually leads to a breakthrough, or a change, or a new way of looking at things for Helen. Though this incident seriously impacted her life and transformed a very important friendship, Helen emerged from it stronger, and with a renewed desire to dedicate herself to the written word.

CHAPTER 15

Helen spent the summer and winter after the "Frost King" incident with her family in Alabama. There, she began writing down the story of her life. She was still nervous and "excessively scrupulous" about everything she wrote, and she often confessed to Miss Sullivan that she was second-guessing herself and worried that the things she was writing were not her own ideas. Miss Sullivan consoled her, and the twelve-year-old Helen "timidly, fearfully, but resolutely" persevered in writing a brief account of her life for the *Youth's Companion*. Helen was no longer living the "unconscious life of a little child;" she was now self-aware, cautious, and clear-minded.

Though the incident surrounding her accidentally plagiarized story was still fresh in Helen's mind, she also, surrounded by her loving family, experienced a renewed determination to return to the pleasures of the written word. Though she was still overly cautious and afraid of repeating her past mistakes, Helen pushed forward with the encouragement of her family and her teacher and accomplished a tremendous feat—publishing an article in a magazine. Helen, a lover of books and the world of writing, saw this achievement as the dividing line between her childhood and her adolescence.

In 1893 Helen attended the inauguration of President Cleveland, and also visited Niagara Falls and the World's Fair. Helen was deeply emotional at the falls, and notes that many people have asked her how she could have had such a strong emotional reaction to the wonder and **natural beauty** of Niagara when she cannot see or hear the falls or the waves. Helen, however, cannot define what the Falls meant to her any more than she can "love or religion or goodness."

Helen insists that the joy and comfort she derives not just from the falls but from all nature, despite her inability to see or hear it, is as true and as difficult to parse as love or religion. With this assertion, she pushes back against those who would assume her experience of the world was somehow diminished or not whole.

In the summer of 1893 Helen and Miss Sullivan attended the World's Fair with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. Helen's imagination was enlivened by all she experienced there, and delighted as "marvels of invention [and] treasures of industry" passed beneath her hands. Helen took in all the glory of the fair with her fingertips as she touched and learned about French bronzes, diamond mining, electrical inventions, Egyptian mummies, ancient South American relics. Helen credits this trip to the fair with allowing her to make a leap from childish interests in fairy tales and toys to "the appreciation of the real."

Helen, already feeling propelled toward adulthood by her literary accomplishments, saw her visit to the World's Fair as yet another step away from childhood. She engaged with the world and learned much about it from the curious and wonderful exhibits which Dr. Bell showed her, and this allowed her to feel a part of a vast, varied, and endlessly wonderful community.

CHAPTER 16

Before October of 1893, Helen had studied in a loose and relaxed way. She read histories of Greece, Rome, and the United States, and studied French grammar and pronunciation. After returning from the World's Fair, however, Helen's lessons became fixed, and she studied certain subjects and certain hours. Helen was at first unwilling to conform to a formal lesson plan, particularly where Latin was concerned, but as she got deeper into the subject, she found beauty in the language, and to this day still enjoys reading Latin passages. Helen believes that there is "nothing more beautiful" than the feeling of studying a new language.

Continuing her journey into adulthood, Helen began taking lessons at fixed times and in fixed subjects, furthering her education in language, literature, and the arts. Helen's love of language, and the inexpressible feelings associated with learning a new one, demonstrate her desire for seemingly endless ways to communicate and be present in the world.

CHAPTER 17

In the summer of 1894, Helen attended a meeting of the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, and there it was arranged that Helen would go to study at the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City. In October of that year, Helen went to New York, accompanied, of course, by Miss Sullivan. There, Helen trained in vocal culture and lip reading, but also studied arithmetic, geography, French, and German.

Helen expanded the horizons of her education by taking classes at yet another renowned specialized school for children with disabilities like her own. Helen's commitment—and her family's—to furthering both her own personal edification and her sense of community is evident in her stellar education.

Helen liked German best of all but found French very difficult. Her progress in speech, similarly, was not what her teachers hoped it would be—Helen wanted to speak like other people, but could not quite reach her goal. She struggled in arithmetic, and often found herself jumping to conclusions and aggravating her difficulties. Despite all these setbacks, Helen excelled in geography and loved learning all the secrets of **nature**. She took walks each day in Central Park with her teachers and fellow students, and in the springtime took excursions to small towns along the Hudson River. Helen reflects on her two years in New York as extremely happy ones, largely due to the dedication and care of her teachers.

As Helen branched out in her interests and school subjects, she found herself on a learning curve—things which once came easily to her demanded more of her, suddenly, and she struggled to keep up with the new, broadening horizons in her education. Helen's love of nature continued to bring her comfort and joy, and her years in New York were made happier by her excursions into nature with her new community of teachers and friends.

Before she left New York, however, Helen's "bright days" were darkened by a deep sorrow—her father died in February of 1896. Despite her father's passing, Helen could still feel his loving presence and "watchful interest" in her hard work, and has refused to be discouraged from her studies and progress despite the deep void her father's loss left in her life.

Helen's setbacks up to this point have been largely practical or intellectual; this emotional setback was new to her, and though her father's death brought her great sorrow, she continued in pursuit of her goals, knowing that doing so is what he would have wanted for her.

CHAPTER 18

In October of 1896, Helen entered the Cambridge School for Young Ladies to prepare for admission to Radcliffe. As a young girl, Helen had visited Wellesley—an all-women's college—and declared that she wanted to attend Harvard, not Wellesley, one day in the future. Helen left New York for Cambridge with the resolve to enter into the competition for admission to Harvard alongside hearing and seeing girls despite the challenges she would face along the way.

Helen has long wanted to achieve a tremendous goal in service of her own education: gaining admission to the most prestigious college in the country. Helen's desire to prove that she was just as capable as any hearing or sighted person was just as strong as her desire to achieve new heights in her own lifelong pursuit of knowledge and education.

Once at the Cambridge School, Helen had Miss Sullivan attend classes with her and interpret what her instructors were saying. Her teachers at the new school had no experience teaching deaf or blind children, and Helen's only means of conversing with them was through lip-reading. Helen's first-year classes consisted of English history, English literature, German, Latin, arithmetic, and Latin composition. Helen had a good start in all of these subjects, and despite her heavy course load, it seemed she would have many advantages.

Helen's education seemed to be off to a very good start as she navigated the environments of her new classes with the help of her beloved teacher and companion at her side. The education Helen had received from Miss Sullivan, and from her instructors at Perkins and the Wright-Humason school, had laid a strong foundation which allowed Helen to hit the ground running despite it being her first time in a school that didn't tailor its program to her special needs.

Helen, however, encountered some setbacks to her education early on. Miss Sullivan could not spell out all of Helen's required reading into her hands, and Helen had to get her textbooks custom-embossed in London and Philadelphia. She had to copy out her own lessons into braille so that she could keep up with the other girls, and though she attempted to use her fairly new speaking skills, her instructors took a while to become familiar with Helen's imperfect speech. Helen could not take notes in class, as she had to have Miss Sullivan spell everything out to her in real-time. Despite these disadvantages, Helen encountered a lot of kindness, and her German teacher and the school principal learned the finger alphabet in order to better instruct Helen.

Though it seemed that Helen would skate by at the Cambridge School, soon it became evident that a mainstream institution would present new and strange challenges which neither Helen nor Miss Sullivan were entirely prepared to face. Nevertheless, Helen found strength, like always, in her community, and began pushing through institutional barriers with the help and kindness of her teachers.

Helen progressed well in school, and enjoyed her reading in Latin, German, and English literature. Helen delighted in the writers whose work she was reading, and found herself deeply invested in many of the new stories she encountered. Helen also enjoyed, for the first time in her life, the company of seeing and hearing girls her own age. She played, took walks, and had conversations with her new school friends, and many of them even learned sign language so that they could communicate with Helen without Miss Sullivan needing to translate.

Though there were many setbacks Helen had to overcome at her new school, there were also many new joys awaiting her, one of which was finding herself ensconced in a new kind of community and nurturing new kinds of friendship for the first time in her life. Again, Helen found that her peers were willing to go above and beyond to ensure that they could communicate with her and build friendships with her.

At Christmastime, Helen's mother and her sister Mildred came up to Cambridge, and after the holidays Mildred was permitted to stay on at the school and study with Helen for the rest of the year. Helen loved having her sister at school with her, and they spent many happy months together studying and playing.

An even greater joy came in the form of Mildred's decision to attend the Cambridge School, as well, which bolstered even further Helen's sense of love and community there.

Helen took her preliminary examinations for Radcliffe in June and July of 1897. She took exams in German, French, Latin, English, and Greek and Roman history. Helen passed everything and even received honors in German and English. Helen took her examinations in a room by herself, as she needed to use a typewriter, and the proctors did not want her to disturb the other students with the noise. The school principal read all the prompts to Helen by means of the manual alphabet, sentence by sentence. Helen's exams were difficult, but after the success of her German test, she was encouraged to complete the rest "with a light heart and a steady hand."

As Helen's first year came to a close, her examinations themselves reflected the challenges and triumphs of her time so far at Cambridge: she struggled in some arenas, but used the strength and joy she got from defying the expectations of others in order to push forward and not just succeed, but excel.

CHAPTER 19

As she began her second year at the Cambridge school, Helen was determined to succeed—but during the first few weeks of school, as Helen's course load tilted toward mathematics principally, Helen found herself struggling. Her math classes were very large, and she did not receive any special instruction from her teachers. Miss Sullivan was tasked with translating and interpreting for Helen, and for the first time in their entire relationship it seemed as if neither of them was up to the task.

Helen encountered, for the first time, real and serious obstacles to her education. Math had always been a nuisance, but now Helen was forced to study it not at her own pace but amongst others her age—and to keep up with her fellow classmates despite her dislike of the subject and the unique challenges she faced in bettering her math skills.

Helen eventually acquired a braille writer, which allowed her to keep track of the steps in her work, but as she still could not see the figures being drawn on the blackboard, she needed to have Miss Sullivan make shapes for her on a cushion with straight and curved wires. This process was difficult, and Helen often lost her courage. Little by little, however, as the year went on, Helen's struggles began to disappear. Her specially-embossed books arrived at last, and she threw herself into the work despite her insecurities in algebra and geometry.

As Helen slowly but surely maneuvered the obstacles in her path, she often found herself getting discouraged or doubting herself. As Helen slowly acquired the tools she needed, though, and settled into the routine and rhythm of her studies alongside Miss Sullivan, she found a renewed sense of determination and resolved to persevere in the face of difficulty.

The principal of the school believed that Helen was working too hard, and so reduced the number of her lessons despite her protests. Helen, realizing that this meant that she would need extra time to finish school and would not enter college with her class, was vexed and upset. One day, when Helen was feeling ill and did not attend classes, the principal came to believe that Helen was overworked, and refused to let her take her final examinations with her class. Helen's mother withdrew both Helen and Mildred from the school.

Despite Helen's resolve to work hard and keep up despite obstacles, many of those around her still doubted her and attempted to discourage her from working as hard as she needed to work in order to succeed. Helen's mother, in protest, removed both Helen and Mildred from the school environment, not wanting her children to be underestimated or mollycoddled.

Helen continued her studies with an independent tutor, and took many of her lessons in Wrentham, Massachusetts, at a family friend's country home, from February to July. In October of 1898, Helen and Miss Sullivan returned to Boston and continued lessons with the private tutor, and Helen's college preparation went on without any interruption. She enjoyed private lessons much more than she had enjoyed class time—there was no hurry or confusion, and Helen was able to go at her own pace. She finally began to enjoy mathematics with the help of her tutor.

Helen found herself relieved to be away from the intellectual and emotional confines of a traditional education, but remained determined to continue her education by working with her tutor to prepare for her final Radcliffe entrance exams.

In June of 1899, Helen sat her final exams for entrance to Radcliffe over the course of two days. The college authorities barred Miss Sullivan from sitting with Helen during her exams and reading the papers to her, so one of the instructors from the Perkins Institution for the Blind copied all of Helen's papers into braille. This worked for the languages, but was complicated in the geometry and algebra exams, and Helen felt discouraged. Helen's work on the exams was "painfully slow," but she does not blame the Radcliffe administrative board—they did not realize Helen's particular needs, and despite the unintentional obstacles they placed in her way, she is to this day satisfied in the knowledge that she overcame them all.

In this rather cheeky passage, Helen sets up all the obstacles which she found herself facing as she took her final exams, and then recounts how she toppled each one of them and ultimately accomplished one of her most important goals. This passage demonstrates Helen's extreme perseverance, and highlights how her nontraditional education, despite her desire to get away from it, ultimately aided her in achieving her dreams.

CHAPTER 20

Having finally gained admission to Radcliffe, Helen could enroll whenever she pleased. However, despite her earlier desire to enroll as soon as possible, Helen decided to take another year to study with her private tutor, and did not begin her studies at Radcliffe until the fall of 1900.

As Helen has grown older, her needs and desires have shifted. Where it was once of paramount importance to keep up with her classmates, she now realizes that it is more beneficial to go at her own pace and attend to her own needs rather than a false idea of success or progress.

Helen remembers her first day of Radcliffe—it was a day she had awaited for many years. She had been compelled by a "potent force" inside of herself to test her strength and skills alongside seeing and hearing people, and was determined to overcome whatever obstacles would stand in her way. She did not want to be "debarred from the great highways of knowledge," and delighted in the idea that at college she could be in the presence of "girls who were thinking, loving, and struggling" in the same ways that she herself was.

Helen's years of determination paid off, and as she began her studies at Radcliffe, she congratulated herself for having stopped at nothing to ensure that the same privileges afforded to other girls her age were eventually bestowed upon her. One of the major statements Helen is trying to make with this book is that she is not so different from other girls her age, and as she began classes at Radcliffe, she was able to show the world that that was true.

Helen began her studies with eagerness, knowing that in the land of the mind she was as free as any of her classmates. However, Helen soon discovered that college "was not quite the romantic lyceum" she'd always imagined, and that there were in fact many disadvantages in going to college. The one she still feels the most to this day is lack of time. Helen used to have endless time to sit and reflect alone with her thoughts, but in college there is no time for that—solitude, books, and imagination are left behind for fast-paced learning and regurgitation of information.

Helen was so focused on gaining admission to Radcliffe, and romanticizing what it would be like to study there, that she did not account for the ways in which her education there would be different from her expectations. Helen is surprised by the focus on speed and filling one's time rather than luxuriating in education and truly coming to know things in one's own time.

Helen writes that she is frequently asked about how she overcame—and continues to overcome—the "peculiar conditions" necessary for her to work, and endeavors to explain just how to her readers. In the classroom the words are spelled rapidly into her hands as the professor speaks, and though there is no time to take notes, she is able to keep up and retain information with little trouble. She uses a typewriter to complete her written work.

As Helen gives her readers a peek into what daily academic life is like for her, she acknowledges the ways in which she is in fact very different from her classmates, and highlights the strenuous extra pressure put on her by institutional insensitivity to her needs and the desire to keep up with her friends and classmates.

Very few of Helen's course books are printed for the blind, and so Miss Sullivan spells many of them directly into Helen's hands. Because of this, Helen needs more time than most girls to prepare for her lessons, and there are many days, she admits, when the extra time and attention she must spend on preparation for lectures frustrates her and leaves her feeling dejected. She always pulls herself out of these sad spells, however, by reminding herself that "every one who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone." Helen knows that she must "zigzag" up to the summit in her own way, and that even if she slips and falls in her pursuits, she must trudge on and gain a little ground at a time—"every struggle," she says, "is a victory."

Helen is having a difficult time, but instead of getting bogged down in how overwhelming her education is, along with all that is required to pursue it, she resolves to focus on how each struggle broadens her horizons, teaches her more about herself, and prepares her to continue to struggle upwards as she pursues knowledge and a sense of community.

This year, her third at Radcliffe, Helen is studying subjects that intrigue her—Elizabethan literature, Shakespeare, and the History of Philosophy. College is not the "universal Athens" she thought it would be, and Helen laments that she does not meet the great and the wise face to face. She has found that engaging with literature requires great sympathy rather than just understanding, and that it is important not to get caught up in criticism and opinion, but rather to simply focus on the poetry and true meaning of the great works.

Now in her third year of studies, Helen has come to terms with how different Radcliffe is from what she thought it would be, and now delights in her courses and the challenges they present. She is trying to find a way to meld her own priorities when it comes to education with the university's priorities, and keep in mind that there is a deeper meaning to the things she's studying.

Helen, at times, wishes she could "sweep away" much of what she is expected to learn—she feels that it is easy to lose sight of the reasons why she is reading when she has to keep up with so much schoolwork for the sake of "understanding" the things she is reading rather than simply communing with them, appreciating them, and enjoying the "treasure" she finds in the written word. She regrets having to read "hurriedly and nervously," and fears "smash[ing[the idols she came [to college] to worship." Exams are a nuisance and an ordeal, and she hates having to search her brain and regurgitate what she has learned for a grade.

The earlier days of Helen's education, which were focused on communing with nature, nourishing her soul alongside her mind, and exploring the possibilities and constrictions of language and communication, are long gone. Helen is afraid, on some level, to undo all the learning of her youth, and constantly reminds herself that true education is knowledge of the spirit and the self, of art and beauty, and not just what one can regurgitate on paper.

Helen writes that when her days at Radcliffe were still in her future, "they were encircled with a halo of romance." Though they have since lost that rosy glow, she has actually learned many important things. She has learned the science and the importance of patience, and now knows that it is important to treat one's education leisurely and openly, as one might treat a walk in the country. She feels it is important to let knowledge flood one's soul rather than just cram into one's mind. Knowledge is not just power, she says, but happiness, and acquiring knowledge of the past allows one to "feel the great heart-throbs of humanity through the centuries."

Just as Helen came to learn that struggling teaches her more and expands her worldview, she has come to realize that being somewhat disappointed in Radcliffe has actually allowed her to enjoy it more. She is learning what she can while she is here, while always keeping in the back of her mind an awareness that knowledge is a means not just to power or superiority but to true inner happiness. It gives her a sense of communion with the entire history of the world and the human experience.

CHAPTER 21

Helen writes that though she has sketched out the events of her life, she has not yet shown how greatly she has depended upon books for pleasure, knowledge of the world, and empathy. Helen writes that she first began to read connected stories in May of 1887, when she was seven years old, and since then has "devoured" everything that has come "within reach of [her] hungry finger tips."

Helen has learned a lot about the world from books, and in this chapter she wants to pay tribute to the influence the written word has had on the "story of her life." This is one of the memoir's main themes: the power of language, stories, and the written word.

Helen began to read seriously during her first trip to Boston, when she was permitted to spend parts of her days in the Perkins Institution library and take in whatever she pleased. She read voraciously, jumping form book to book, retaining much of what she read but understanding the true meaning of very little of it. Among her favorite books were *The Scarlet Letter* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and the latter especially fascinated and absorbed Helen. As Helen read the classics over the course of the next two years, delighting in stories like *The Arabian Nights*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Women*, *and Heidi*, she gave little thought to criticism or language and instead became lost in the stories the books told.

As Helen developed her palate as a young reader, she read voraciously, but gravitated to titles which told fantastic tales of faraway worlds, or otherwise focused on domestic drama and family life. It is no wonder Helen was drawn to these types of stories, as the former allowed her imagination to soar while the latter allowed her to explore a familiar but slightly different milieu.

Over the years, Helen has become obsessed with stories about antiquity, especially ancient Greece. She has also discovered the glories of reading the Bible, and reads it again and again throughout the years "with an ever-broadening sense of joy and inspiration." She loves Shakespeare dearly, and has found herself most deeply impressed by his darker plays, especially *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Helen also loves reading history, as well as French and German literature, and feels that the "eternal things" contained in the works of great writers such as Hugo, Goethe, and Moliére have allowed her spirit to access "regions where Beauty and Truth and Goodness are one."

Helen, now a young woman, is a versatile reader with a wide variety of tastes and interests. She is intrigued by religions of the world, and finds herself now drawn to but also slightly repelled by darker, more grotesque narratives. Helen enjoys that books give her the chance to access beauty and truth, but also enjoys the view of the world they allow her to have as she communes with all these different accounts of the human experience.

Helen states simply that literature is her Utopia. In the worlds of her best-loved books, Helen is not disenfranchised, and her blindness and deafness are not barriers—her "book-friends" talk to her, unlike so many real people, without any embarrassment or awkwardness, and in this way they have taught her love and charity.

Books have been Helen's unfailing friends, and have allowed her to experience a sense of communion with the world even when she is alone. Books allow her to be her truest self, and also expose her to versions of who she could be, and what she should strive towards as she grows.

CHAPTER 22

Helen writes that she hopes her readers don't think that reading is the only pleasure she has in life, and insists that the amusements she enjoys are "many and varied." She refers to her love of **nature**, the country, and outdoor sports; as a girl, she loved swimming, and now when she is in Wrentham, Massachusetts, she "almost live[s]" in her boat. She takes great pleasure in taking her friends out rowing, though she must rely on others to steer the rudder while she rows with the oars. She feels exhilarated when rowing, enjoying the "imperious surge of the water" and the way the boat becomes "obedient to [her] will and muscle."

Helen wants for her readers to know that while she is perhaps not exactly like them, neither is she barred from conventional enjoyments and physical pursuits. Her love of nature has spurred her to pursue many hobbies and activities which have enriched her life, and despite the fact that she does not enjoy them in exactly the same way as hearing or sighted people, they are no less thrilling or exhilarating to her.

Helen also enjoys canoeing on moonlit nights. She explains that even though she can't see the moon, she loves knowing that she is beneath its glow, and feels "a luminous warmth" during these nighttime trips out on the water.

Helen demonstrates her abiding love of being in nature, which is so great that the simple presence of the moon and the lake bring her warmth, comfort, and joy.

Last year, as soon as her exams were over, Helen and Miss Sullivan traveled to Wrentham, where they have a little cottage on a lake. The thoughts of "work and college and the noisy city" faded from Helen's mind as she took in the sensations of the **nature** of the countryside, and though the two of them occasionally caught "echoes" of fighting in the Pacific and the struggles between capital and labor in society, they were ensconced in their own Eden. Helen writes that readers and friends have expressed surprise that Helen, robbed of sight and hearing, is attuned to the differences between the city and the country, but Helen says that these people forget that her "whole body is alive" to the conditions in which she finds herself.

Helen has had to assert many times throughout the book that her experience of the world is not so different from that of hearing or sighted persons. In this passage, she asserts that even though she cannot see the sights or hear the sounds of a big, bustling city, her other senses allow her to perceive the world in other ways. The gentle comforts of the countryside are more calming to her than the noise, grime, and heat of the city.

Helen reflects on the visits she has made to see the poor and downtrodden, and she reveals her distress at the fact that wealthy people live comfortable lives of peace and luxury while the poor must live in "hideous" tenements and grow "ugly, withered, and cringing" over the years. Memories of the urchins in the alleys of her city "haunt" Helen, and she believes that if the world was not so focused on city living and people returned to nature, these children would grow up "stately" and nourished by the natural world.

Helen knows that there are many people whose journeys are much harder than hers, and who have not been afforded the opportunities and luxuries which she has been afforded. Helen's outgoing personality and deep interest in helping others—which she would come to be known for throughout her life—are shown to be taking root in this passage as she considers the plight of the poor and wonders what solutions might help restore peace and balance to society.

In the countryside, Helen takes leisurely walks and rides on her and Miss Sullivan's tandem bicycle. Her dog often accompanies her on these outings—she has had many pets over the years, and is always heartened by their sensitivity her limitations, as well as their affectionate demeanors. When Helen cannot go outside due to weather, she enjoys knitting and crocheting, checkers and chess, and playing games of solitaire with special cards embossed in braille.

As Helen describes the activities which bring her joy, she reveals her profound appreciation for the natural world, the comforts of home, and the loving company of friends, family, and animals. She graciously attributes her exceptional success in life to these things, as well as to her own perseverance.

Helen also enjoys taking in art and museums; though she cannot see the paintings or sculptures, she loves touching great works of art, and finds that her fingers can "discover the thought and emotion which the artist has portrayed." She keeps a medallion of Homer hung low on the wall of her study so that she can reach out and touch it, and remind herself of Homer's triumphs in spite of his struggles.

Helen again reminds her readers in this passage—and the passages following it—that she can appreciate and even delight in the same physical pleasures and activities that they do. Art and poetry are great inspirations to her, and enrich her life each time she is able to be around them.

Another of Helen's great pleasures, though it is a rarer one, is attending the theatre. She likes having plays described to her while they are being acted in front of her, because she enjoys feeling as if she is "living in the midst of stirring events." She has met many accomplished actors and actresses, and often even gets to have private audiences or behind the scenes visits with them in which they perform for her while she touches their wigs, costumes, and bodies so as to better get a sense of the action.

Just as Helen described being heartened and warmed by the presence of the full moon, she describes an ineffable but electric joy at sitting in a theatre while a play is taking place in front of her. She loves the chance to interact one on one with performers, and to feel their movements as they bring the stories she has loved for years to life right in front of her.

In reflecting on all her pleasures and passions, Helen writes that her life, even with all its limitations, "touches at many points the life of the World Beautiful." Though sometimes, in her dark and silent world, Helen finds herself enveloped in isolation and sorrow, she remembers that "there is joy in self-forgetfulness," and in these moments dedicates herself to making the light in the eyes of others her sun, the music in the ears of others her symphony, and the smile on the lips of others her happiness.

Helen attempts to show her readers in this passage that even though she has known many dark times, doubts, and fears, the whole of her life is one which is in deep communion with beauty, education, nature, and art. Experiencing all these things through others' eyes is one of her greatest joys in life.

CHAPTER 23

Helen writes that she wishes she could list the names of all of those who have "ministered to [her] happiness" over the years. Some are famous and some are obscure, but the influence of all her friends and kindred spirits lives "immortal" in her heart and her mind. Her friends have erased the "perplexities, irritations, and worries" of her life and instead filled her world with brightness, beauty, and harmony.

In her autobiography's final pages, Helen has paid tribute to her great loves in life: books, nature, and community. Now, she spends some time giving thanks to her friends, and the ways in which they have enriched her life and strengthened her sense of self.

Over the years, Helen has often been asked if other people bore her. She does not quite understand the question, but admits that "stupid and curious questions" about her disabilities and those who condescend to her are hypocritical and exasperating.

Helen shuts down those who would try to imply that because she is so different from other people, she must be unable to connect with them or "bored" by them—she is only bored by people who talk down to her by asking these kinds of questions.

Helen gives thanks for the friends she has never seen or met—those around the world who have written her letters and reached out to communicate with her—just as deeply as she gives thanks for the friendships she has known throughout her life "with many men of genius." She has known bishops, teachers, and doctors who have imbued her life with knowledge, grace, and important lessons about love, equality, and friendship.

Helen, in this passage, notes and gives thanks for how many different kinds of people have come into her life over the years and helped to make her life richer. Even the friends she has never met—those who have written to her to express their admiration and solidarity—have changed her for the better.

One of the most important friendships in Helen's life has been that which she has shared with Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, the man who led her to Miss Sullivan and whose love for children and labors on their behalf—especially the deaf and the blind—have made him a revered figure not just to Helen but to many children all over.

Helen is grateful to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell for taking such an interest in her and helping to amplify her voice, attend to her needs, and share the world with her in whatever way he can. He is a truly benevolent individual, and Helen knows that he has helped many other just like her, too.

Helen has enjoyed the company of many literary-minded people and famous writers, including Mark Twain. Though Helen writes that there is not space to mention all of her brilliant literary friends, even if there were, there are secret and sacred aspects of friendship which are better off not being "set forth in cold print."

Helen's deep love of books makes her literary friendships all the more special, and though she is reticent about some of them, it's clear that they hold a very deep meaning to her and are even too sacred to talk about on the page.

Helen concludes that it is her many friends who have "made the story of [her] life." The kind, generous, intelligent acquaintances and friendships she has made over the years have "turned [her] limitations into beautiful privileges," and have let her walk "serene and happy" through the world around her, even in spite of the "shadow" which was cast upon her in her youth as the result of her disabilities.

Helen's life has been made exemplary by virtue of her friendships above all else. Through the love of her friends, her disabilities and deprivations have been diminished, and she has been able to move happily through life with support and love on all sides.


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