Helen Keller:

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When Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880, her parents were overjoyed. Helen was a healthy, rosy baby... just what her parents had been wishing for. Surely, no home was more joyful than their farm “Ivy Green” in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Even with two older half-brothers and a little sister and brother soon to come, both parents treasured their little daughter more than any money or riches in the world.

But little did they know of the amazing life that she would lead or the courage she would demonstrate. By overcoming disabilities and persevering to reach her goals, Helen Keller was “America’s First Lady of Courage” during her childhood and on into her adulthood.

When Helen was 19 months old, she developed a severe fever. “Acute congestion of the stomach and brain” (Keller 4) was what the doctor diagnosed. Everyone doubted Helen would live. Miraculously, one night the illness vanished, but it left Helen blind and deaf.

Up until she was six years old, Helen had terrible fits of anger and frustration. She felt “invisible hands” (Keller 11) holding onto her and preventing her from communicating to her parents. She couldn’t lead a normal life. Helen communicated with motions, pushing and tugging at her family to show what she wanted. Although she didn’t understand the concept of speaking, she was still determined to let her parents know what she needed in a clear manner. But otherwise, her world was shut up in darkness.

Helen was spoiled and had everything her way, since the Kellers didn’t know how to control their willful, quick-tempered daughter. But they had one hope for Helen. Kate Keller had been reading about an educated blind and deaf person in the U.S. Maybe, Helen could be taught, too?

When Helen was six years old, the Kellers wrote the Perkins Institute for the Blind for a teacher to instruct Helen. This was by suggestion of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. On March 3, 1887, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan, a star student at Perkins, arrived at the Kellers’ home. This day would be Helen’s “soul’s birthday,” she described later on. (Delano 21)

At first, Helen rebelled against this stranger. Soon, however, she learned that Miss Sullivan was a firm yet kind teacher to be trusted. Also, Annie was once blind herself and still struggled with sight issues, so she understood Helen’s barriers.

When the Kellers were alarmed at Annie’s strict ways with their spoiled daughter, it was agreed that Annie and Helen would move into a separate house for a little while. That way, Annie could teach Helen without the Kellers’ well-meaning interference. So, alone with Annie for two weeks, Helen learned the manual alphabet – a way of forming letters with her hands. Soon she could spell “doll,” “milk,” “mug” and more – but didn’t realize that they were names for objects. (Wilkie 70-71)

Two weeks later, Annie and Helen were at a well. Annie pumped water over Helen’s hands and slowly spelled the letters “w-a-t-e-r” into Helen’s hand. Suddenly, a light broke over Helen’s face as she slowly spelled the letters back. Water. “That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!” Helen described. (Keller 15)

After that, six-year-old Helen made shocking progress. Soon she was fluent in the manual alphabet and learning to read raised letters. Helen was eager to learn about the bright world of life around her and discard the empty, gray one she had endured for years. When she asked for Annie’s name, Annie spelled “t-e-a-c-h-e-r.” And that was what Helen called her from then on.

Helen and Teacher traveled to various places to receive special education for Helen. When Helen was eight, they went to Boston to the Perkins Institute for the Blind. There, she attended school for three years. In March 1890, Helen and Teacher visited the Horace Mann School for the Deaf to meet Miss Sarah Fuller. They were going to attempt a daring thing. Through eleven lessons, by putting her hand on Miss Fuller’s mouth and feeling its movements, Helen—blind, deaf, and dumb—actually learned how to speak. What joy they felt when Helen spoke her first sentence:
“It is warm.” (Keller 41) Helen’s favorite sentence that she repeated was: “I am not dumb now.” (St. George 38) At last, she could control her lips like her family, her teacher, and everyone else.

Surprise and pure joy filled Helen’s thoughts, and the bravery to try harder, aim higher. In 1892, she was accused of plagiarism and of not being the amazing blind/deaf girl who could speak. Some people thought that she was a perfectly healthy girl who was pretending to have overcome multiple disabilities. Still, Helen didn’t let anything dampen her enthusiastic and courageous spirit, and she continued to study and learn in spite of skeptical thoughts and doubts from many.

Later, Helen was taught under a tutor in Hulton, Pennsylvania for a number of years. Soon after, she declared what seemed like an impossible and certainly daring wish. Helen Keller wanted to go to Radcliffe College. To prepare for examinations, Helen attended the Wright-Humanson school and then the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in Boston. She later studied under tutor Merton S. Keith.

Radcliffe examinations loomed ahead. Helen had her doubts. This was her chance to fulfill her dream of being a normal girl. She summoned all her courage and put her whole heart into those examinations. So when she passed the Radcliffe examinations with honors after studying for years, Helen could see her dream coming true.

Helen entered Radcliffe College in 1900. There, Helen and Teacher faced difficulties because the professors didn’t use the manual alphabet or have many college books in Braille. Even though Helen was sometimes stressed, worried, or tempted to give up completely, she persevered to the end.

One important event in Helen’s college years was her autobiography. Encouraged by Teacher to reveal the true story about the past twenty-two years of her life, Helen wrote “The Story of My Life.” A man named John Macy acted as secretary, agent and editor to Helen. Dedicated to Dr. Bell, the blind and deaf girl’s book received excellent reviews. (Wilkie 178)

Helen graduated from Radcliffe with honors. And her joy was even greater when Teacher and John Macy were married. She then moved to Wrentham, Massachusetts with the newlyweds and lived there for eight years. This was a time of joy and peace for Helen.

But this was hardly the end of the adventurous part of Helen’s amazing life. Helen and Teacher kept a close relationship, and they went on a lecture tour in 1913. Even when Teacher’s marriage failed and her health grew poor, they still didn’t give up. Soon they met Polly Thompson. The twosome became a threesome as they continued to give talks. They were even invited to make a movie about Helen’s life: Deliverance. Unfortunately, it made little money to support them. So, with spirits of adventure, they started a traveling entertainment show during 1919-1922. (Delano 52)

Through all this, Helen continued to write, read, and fight for women’s rights.

In 1936, Teacher died. This was the most heartbreaking event that Helen had ever encountered. Teacher had been by her side since she was six, and Helen was miserable. Still, she recovered and continued to persevere. Her resolve proved to America that Helen Keller could truly live a normal life even without her teacher constantly by her side.

“America’s First Lady of Courage.” (Wilkie 192) Helen Keller was known as this even beyond her death on June 1, 1968. This blind, deaf and once dumb girl had met Grover Cleveland, Woodrow Wilson, John D. Rockefeller, Mark Twain and more famous people. Today, there is a movie about Helen’s and Annie’s amazing story, titled “The Miracle Worker.” There are U.S. stamps and coins with Helen’s picture, and she is also in the National Women’s Hall of Fame. Around the world, people hear “Helen Keller” and think of the courageous beam of light she displayed, even though she was in the dark the entire time.
Dialogue at the Circus

Helen is riding on an elephant with a performer. Annie is watching on the side. A boy bumps into Annie.

Boy: Sorry, ma’am. (Notices Helen) Whoa, who is that? I didn’t know you could ride on the elephant. Where’s the line?

Annie: That’s alright. And, oh, that’s Helen. Not just anyone can ride on the elephant – the keepers are letting her ride because she’s, well, handicapped.

Boy: (frowns) Handicapped? What do you mean?

Annie: You see, Helen is blind and deaf. She can’t see or hear, so we asked if she could touch the animals. She’s seeing the elephants now, but she’s already played with the monkeys and visited the giraffe and the bears! She is enjoying her first visit to the circus thoroughly. I’m her teacher, Miss Sullivan.

Boy: Oh. (Pauses) Look, Helen’s coming down from the elephant now… listen how the audience cheers! And now she’s feeding the elephant peanuts! What’s she doing now? She’s sniffing the air – (laughs) almost like a dog!

Annie: Helen is probably getting hungry, and can smell the popcorn and hot dogs.

Boy: I can, too!

Annie: Here’s Helen now. Would you like to meet her? Tell me what you want to tell her, and I’ll translate it into the manual alphabet. That’s when I use my hands to make letters that she can feel.

Boy: Okay. Um… Please tell her, Hi! I’m Billy. You rode the elephant well.

(Helen smiles.)

Annie: She signed, Thanks. It was fun. Do you like the circus?

Boy: Tell her I say, Yes, I do. My favorite part was probably the monkeys. They’re the funniest things ever, and so curious and mischievous! Miss Sullivan says that you played with them. What was it like? Was it fun? Were you scared?

Annie: I’ve never known Helen to be scared of anything! But let’s see… she is signing, They were adorable. One sat on my shoulder and tugged my hair. It had a long, long tail. I wasn’t scared, only excited. I wish I could do it again! But I think I’d rather ride the elephant. I think I could talk about the circus forever!

Boy: Me too! But I’m getting hungry.

Annie: (laughs) Helen says, I am, too! Billy, would you like to eat lunch with Helen and me?

Boy: I wish I could, but I told my parents I would meet them for lunch. They’ll be looking for me by now. Bye, Miss Sullivan, and thanks for letting me meet Helen! Bye, Helen! Nice meeting you.
Boston

Letter to Mother from Helen

Dear Mother,

Teacher and I are at Perkins School. Teacher says I’m a good pupil for eight years old. But it isn’t just schooling... we have had so much fun visiting friends and getting ready for Christmas! I was very happy to get Christmas money from Father and the box of presents from you. That’s why I got out a typewriter right away to write a letter to you.

I bought a special present for Teacher with the money Father sent – lilac perfume. It will be a surprise. I have also bought presents for all my friends and we have decorated the school Christmas tree.

Very often we visit the Chamberlins, our friends close to school. We have had many peaceful nights in front of a fire with the wind and snow banging against the windows. But the wind and snow can’t get in and ruin our cozy evenings.

That doesn’t mean I don’t like the snow. One of my favorite things is to go tobogganing. We sit on a sled at the top of a hill (Teacher says the sled is dark green). Then someone pushes us and we go flying down the hill. I have never done anything so exciting. Wind whips my hair and I feel like a bird. I want to go again and again.

I will miss you during Christmas. Did you know this is the first Christmas I have spent away from you and Father? But I won’t forget you. Teacher sends her love. Tell Father and little sister Mildred Merry Christmas for me.

Your daughter,
Helen Keller
You’ve heard about Helen Keller.

You’ve heard about the illness that made her blind and deaf. You know about her teacher, Miss Annie Sullivan. You realize that she’s enrolled in Radcliffe College.

But did you ever want to hear ALL of her amazing story?

Now you can hear from Miss Keller’s own perspective. The Story of My Life, published March 21, 1903, expounds on Miss Keller’s life... You’ll experience the feeling of being trapped in darkness, the joy when she learns her first word, the apprehension of attending college, and you’ll get to read a collection of letters she has written to family and friends. This world-famous book has been translated into 50 languages. A must-read, for sure!

Even the renowned novelist, Mark Twain, has written to Miss Keller:

“I am charmed and enchanted with your book. You are a wonderful creature, the most wonderful in the world...”

Get it now for a special discount. Please write John Macy for more information.
How-to Directions
(To be used with the Overcome Blindness and Deafness Kit)

Included in the Kit:
- One firm yet kind teacher
- One garden house
- A home in Tuscumbia, Alabama
- One outdoor pump (that pumps cold water)

You provide:
- One spoiled, deaf and blind Helen Keller

WARNING: Only resort to these directions if your Helen has been let alone for 6 years. See if she will be able to make her way around and learn without special schooling. If not, it is time to take extreme measures and follow the instructions below.

Directions:
1. Introduce the firm yet kind teacher. If your Helen Keller rebels, have the teacher be strict.
2. Move your teacher and Helen Keller away from the parents into a garden house for two weeks.
3. Place the pump near the garden house.
4. Have the teacher do the manual alphabet for “w-a-t-e-r” while running water over Helen’s hands. Do this until Helen understands.
5. Continue teaching Helen basics – such as Braille, lip reading, typing, etc. and consider the tips below.

After this, your Helen should make surprising progress. Don’t let her Teacher leave her during her whole lifetime, except for short periods of time – once overnight when Helen is sixteen, and once for five months if her teacher’s health breaks down. Consider sending your Helen Keller (and Teacher, of course) to Perkins school. Don’t forget about college. You will be surprised at the amazing results of your Helen Keller!
Snapshots of Her Life

Helen and Annie

A portrait of Helen as a girl

A portrait of Annie Sullivan

Helen, graduating from Radcliffe College

Helen reading President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s lips

The cover of The Story of My Life
The Hammond typewriter – Helen’s favorite typewriter to use

A picture of an Alabama quarter, which has Helen’s picture on it

The Perkins School for the Blind as it would have looked when Helen attended

Radcliffe College, the college Helen attended, but as it looks today
Explanation of Genres

Dialogue at the Circus:
Annie really did take Helen to the circus, and the workers there really did let Helen play with the circus animals. The boy is a fictional character, however, but it is likely that some bystanders would’ve asked Annie about the blind and deaf girl riding on the elephant.

Letter to Mother:
Helen wrote many letters by hand, with a typewriter, or with the help of a friend during her lifetime. Although this letter is fictional, it is modeled after real letters that Helen wrote to her mother. It is true that Helen celebrated Christmas at the Perkins Institute for the Blind that year, and that she enjoyed buying presents for family and friends. The Chamberlins are real people, too, who introduced Helen to what was to be one of her favorite sports – tobogganing (sledding).

Advertisement for The Story of My Life
Although this is a made-up ad, there actually were multiple ads for Helen’s popular book. Helen’s book truly was translated into fifty different languages, included all aspects of her life listed, and received an excellent review from Mark Twain.

How-To Directions
If there were to be How-To Directions for Helen’s life, they would probably look like these. It is true that Teacher and Helen were separated only twice – from the time they met until Teacher’s death.

Snapshots of her Life:
All the pictures and captions are real-life with true information. The new information is that Helen’s favorite typewriter to use was the Hammond typewriter. She even once stated that she thought it was the easiest and most suited for a person like her to use.
Works Cited


*Works Cited for Additional Genres:*

Dialogue – Wilkie, pages 82-86

Letter – Wilkie, pages 105-110

Advertisement – Wilkie, pages 178-179

How-To Directions – Delano, pages 40 and 49

Pictures – Keller, page 70