CHAPTER II. PERSONALITY

Mark Twain has said that the two most interesting characters of the nineteenth century are Napoleon and Helen Keller. The admiration with which the world has regarded her is more than justified by what she has done. No one can tell any great truth about her which has not already been written, and all that I can do is to give a few more facts about Miss Keller's work and add a little to what is known of her personality.

Miss Keller is tall and strongly built, and has always had good health. She seems to be more nervous than she really is, because she expresses more with her hands than do most English-speaking people. One reason for this habit of gesture is that her hands have been so long her instruments of communication that they have taken to themselves the quick shiftings of the eye, and

express some of the things that we say in a glance. All deaf people naturally gesticulate. Indeed, at one time it was believed that the best way for them to communicate was through systematized gestures, the sign language invented by the Abbe de l'Epee.

When Miss Keller speaks, her face is animated and expresses all the modes of her thought—the expressions that make the features eloquent and give speech half its meaning. On the other hand she does not know another's expression. When she is talking with an intimate friend, however, her hand goes quickly to her friend's face to see, as she says, "the twist of the mouth." In this way she is able to get the meaning of those half sentences which we complete unconsciously from the tone of the voice or the twinkle of the eye.

Her memory of people is remarkable. She remembers the grasp of fingers she has held before, all the characteristic tightening of the muscles that makes one person's handshake different from that of another.

The trait most characteristic, perhaps, of Miss Keller (and also of Miss Sullivan) is humour. Skill in the use of words and her habit of playing with them make her ready with mots and epigrams.

Some one asked her if she liked to study.

"Yes," she replied, "but I like to play also, and I feel sometimes as if I were a music box with all the play shut up inside me."

When she met Dr. Furness, the Shakespearean scholar, he warned her not to let the college professors tell her too many assumed facts about the life of Shakespeare; all we know, he said, is that Shakespeare was baptized, married, and died.

"Well," she replied, "he seems to have done all the essential things."

Once a friend who was learning the manual alphabet kept making "g," which is like the hand of a sign-post, for "h," which is made with two fingers extended. Finally Miss Keller told him to "fire both barrels."

Mr. Joseph Jefferson was once explaining to Miss Keller what the bumps on her head meant.

"That," he said, "is your prize-fighting bump."

"I never fight," she replied, "except against difficulties."

Miss Keller's humour is that deeper kind of humour which is courage.

Thirteen years ago she made up her mind to learn to speak, and she gave her teacher no rest until she was allowed to take lessons, although wise people, even Miss Sullivan, the wisest of them all, regarded it as an experiment unlikely to succeed and almost sure to make her unhappy. It was this same perseverance that made her go to college. After she had passed her examinations and received her certificate of admission, she was advised by the Dean of Radcliffe and others not to go on. She accordingly delayed a year. But she was not satisfied until she had carried out her purpose and entered college.

Her life has been a series of attempts to do whatever other people do, and to do it as well. Her success has been complete, for in trying to be like other people she has come most fully to be herself. Her unwillingness to be beaten has developed her courage. Where another can go, she can go. Her respect for physical bravery is like Stevenson's—the boy's contempt for the fellow who cries, with a touch of young bravado in it. She takes tramps in the woods, plunging through the underbrush, where she is scratched and bruised; yet you could not get her to admit that she is hurt, and you certainly could not persuade her to stay at home next time.

So when people try experiments with her, she displays a sportsmanlike determination to win in any test, however unreasonable, that one may wish to put her to.

If she does not know the answer to a question, she guesses with mischievous assurance. Ask her

the colour of your coat (no blind person can tell colour), she will feel it and say "black." If it happens to be blue, and you tell her so triumphantly, she is likely to answer, "Thank you. I am glad you know. Why did you ask me?"

Her whimsical and adventuresome spirit puts her so much on her mettle that she makes rather a poor subject for the psychological experimenter. Moreover, Miss Sullivan does not see why Miss Keller should be subjected to the investigation of the scientist, and has not herself made many experiments. When a psychologist asked her if Miss Keller spelled on her fingers in her sleep, Miss Sullivan replied that she did not think it worth while to sit up and watch, such matters were of so little consequence.

Miss Keller likes to be part of the company. If any one whom she is touching laughs at a joke, she laughs, too, just as if she had heard it. If others are aglow with music, a responding glow, caught sympathetically, shines in her face. Indeed, she feels the movements of Miss Sullivan so minutely that she responds to her moods, and so she seems to know what is going on, even though the conversation has not been spelled to her for some time. In the same way her response to music is in part sympathetic, although she enjoys it for its own sake.

Music probably can mean little to her but beat and pulsation. She cannot sing and she cannot play the piano, although, as some early experiments show, she could learn mechanically to beat out a tune on the keys. Her enjoyment of music, however, is very genuine, for she has a tactile recognition of sound when the waves of air beat against her. Part of her experience of the rhythm of music comes, no doubt, from the vibration of solid objects which she is touching: the floor, or, what is more evident, the case of the piano, on which her hand rests. But she seems to feel the pulsation of the air itself. When the organ was played for her in St. Bartholomew's, the whole building shook with the great pedal notes, but that does not altogether account for what she felt and enjoyed. The vibration of the air as the organ notes swelled made her sway in answer. Sometimes she puts her hand on a singer's throat to feel the muscular thrill and contraction, and from this she gets genuine pleasure. No one knows, however, just what her sensations are. It is amusing to read in one of the magazines of 1895 that Miss Keller "has a just and intelligent appreciation of different composers from having literally felt their music, Schumann being her favourite." If she knows the difference between Schumann and Beethoven, it is because she has read it, and if she has read it, she remembers it and can tell any one who asks her.

Miss Keller's effort to reach out and meet other people on their own intellectual ground has kept her informed of daily affairs. When her education became more systematic and she was busy with books, it would have been very easy for Miss Sullivan to let her draw into herself, if she had been so inclined. But every one who has met her has given his best ideas to her and she has taken them. If, in the course of a conversation, the friend next to her has ceased for some moments to spell into her hand, the question comes inevitably, "What are you talking about?" Thus she picks up the fragments of the daily intercourse of normal people, so that her detailed information is singularly full and accurate. She is a good talker on the little occasional affairs of life.

Much of her knowledge comes to her directly. When she is out walking she often stops suddenly, attracted by the odour of a bit of shrubbery. She reaches out and touches the leaves, and the world of growing things is hers, as truly as it is ours, to enjoy while she holds the leaves in her fingers and smells the blossoms, and to remember when the walk is done.

When she is in a new place, especially an interesting place like Niagara, whoever accompanies her —usually, of course, Miss Sullivan—is kept busy giving her an idea of visible details. Miss Sullivan, who knows her pupil's mind, selects from the passing landscape essential elements, which give a certain clearness to Miss Keller's imagined view of an outer world that to our eyes is confused and overloaded with particulars. If her companion does not give her enough details, Miss Keller asks

questions until she has completed the view to her satisfaction.

She does not see with her eyes, but through the inner faculty to serve which eyes were given to us. When she returns from a walk and tells some one about it, her descriptions are accurate and vivid. A comparative experience drawn from written descriptions and from her teacher's words has kept her free from errors in her use of terms of sound and vision. True, her view of life is highly coloured and full of poetic exaggeration; the universe, as she sees it, is no doubt a little better than it really is. But her knowledge of it is not so incomplete as one might suppose. Occasionally she astonishes you by ignorance of some fact which no one happens to have told her; for instance, she did not know, until her first plunge into the sea, that it is salt. Many of the detached incidents and facts of our daily life pass around and over her unobserved; but she has enough detailed acquaintance with the world to keep her view of it from being essentially defective.

Most that she knows at first hand comes from her sense of touch. This sense is not, however, so finely developed as in some other blind people. Laura Bridgman could tell minute shades of difference in the size of thread, and made beautiful lace. Miss Keller used to knit and crochet, but she has had better things to do. With her varied powers and accomplishments, her sense of touch has not been used enough to develop it very far beyond normal acuteness. A friend tried Miss Keller one day with several coins. She was slower than he expected her to be in identifying them by their relative weight and size. But it should be said she almost never handles money—one of the many sordid and petty details of life, by the way, which she has been spared.

She recognizes the subject and general intention of a statuette six inches high. Anything shallower than a half-inch bas-relief is a blank to her, so far as it expresses an idea of beauty. Large statues, of which she can feel the sweep of line with her whole hand, she knows in their higher esthetic value. She suggests herself that she can know them better than we do, because she can get the true dimensions and appreciate more immediately the solid nature of a sculptured figure. When she was at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston she stood on a step-ladder and let both hands play over the statues. When she felt a bas-relief of dancing girls she asked, "Where are the singers?" When she found them she said, "One is silent." The lips of the singer were closed.

It is, however, in her daily life that one can best measure the delicacy of her senses and her manual skill. She seems to have very little sense of direction. She gropes her way without much certainty in rooms where she is quite familiar. Most blind people are aided by the sense of sound, so that a fair comparison is hard to make, except with other deaf-blind persons. Her dexterity is not notable either in comparison with the normal person, whose movements are guided by the eye, or, I am told, with other blind people. She has practised no single constructive craft which would call for the use of her hands. When she was twelve, her friend Mr. Albert H. Munsell, the artist, let her experiment with a wax tablet and a stylus. He says that she did pretty well and managed to make, after models, some conventional designs of the outlines of leaves and rosettes. The only thing she does which requires skill with the hands is her work on the typewriter. Although she has used the typewriter since she was eleven years old, she is rather careful than rapid. She writes with fair speed and absolute sureness. Her manuscripts seldom contain typographical errors when she hands them to Miss Sullivan to read. Her typewriter has no special attachments. She keeps the relative position of the keys by an occasional touch of the little finger on the outer edge of the board.

Miss Keller's reading of the manual alphabet by her sense of touch seems to cause some perplexity. Even people who know her fairly well have written in the magazines about Miss Sullivan's "mysterious telegraphic communications" with her pupil. The manual alphabet is that in use among all educated deaf people. Most dictionaries contain an engraving of the manual letters. The deaf person with sight looks at the fingers of his companion, but it is also possible to feel them. Miss Keller puts her fingers lightly over the hand of one who is talking to her and gets the words as rapidly as they can be spelled. As she explains, she is not conscious of the single letters or of separate words. Miss

Sullivan and others who live constantly with the deaf can spell very rapidly—fast enough to get a slow lecture, not fast enough to get every word of a rapid speaker.

Anybody can learn the manual letters in a few minutes, use them slowly in a day, and in thirty days of constant use talk to Miss Keller or any other deaf person without realizing what his fingers are doing. If more people knew this, and the friends and relatives of deaf children learned the manual alphabet at once the deaf all over the world would be happier and better educated.

Miss Keller reads by means of embossed print or the various kinds of braille. The ordinary embossed book is made with roman letters, both small letters and capitals. These letters are of simple, square, angular design. The small letters are about three-sixteenths of an inch high, and are raised from the page the thickness of the thumbnail. The books are large, about the size of a volume of an encyclopedia. Green's "Short History of the English People" is in six large volumes. The books are not heavy, because the leaves with the raised type do not lie close. The time that one of Miss Keller's friends realizes most strongly that she is blind is when he comes on her suddenly in the dark and hears the rustle of her fingers across the page.

The most convenient print for the blind is braille, which has several variations, too many, indeed—English, American, New York Point. Miss Keller reads them all. Most educated blind people know several, but it would save trouble if, as Miss Keller suggests, English braille were universally adopted. The facsimile on page xv [omitted from etext] gives an idea of how the raised dots look. Each character (either a letter or a special braille contraction) is a combination made by varying in place and number points in six possible positions. Miss Keller has a braille writer on which she keeps notes and writes letters to her blind friends. There are six keys, and by pressing different combinations at a stroke (as one plays a chord on the piano) the operator makes a character at a time in a sheet of thick paper, and can write about half as rapidly as on a typewriter. Braille is especially useful in making single manuscript copies of books.

Books for the blind are very limited in number. They cost a great deal to publish and they have not a large enough sale to make them profitable to the publisher; but there are several institutions with special funds to pay for embossed books. Miss Keller is more fortunate than most blind people in the kindness of her friends who have books made especially for her, and in the willingness of gentlemen, like Mr. E. E. Allen of the Pennsylvania Institute for the Instruction of the Blind, to print, as he has on several occasions, editions of books that she has needed.

Miss Keller does not as a rule read very fast, but she reads deliberately, not so much because she feels the words less quickly than we see then, as because it is one of her habits of mind to do things thoroughly and well. When a passage interests her, or she needs to remember it for some future use, she flutters it off swiftly on the fingers of her right hand. Sometimes this finger-play is unconscious. Miss Keller talks to herself absent-mindedly in the manual alphabet. When she is walking up or down the hall or along the veranda, her hands go flying along beside her like a confusion of birds' wings.

There is, I am told, tactile memory as well as visual and aural memory. Miss Sullivan says that both she and Miss Keller remember "in their fingers" what they have said. For Miss Keller to spell a sentence in the manual alphabet impresses it on her mind just as we learn a thing from having heard it many times and can call back the memory of its sound.

Like every deaf or blind person, Miss Keller depends on her sense of smell to an unusual degree. When she was a little girl she smelled everything and knew where she was, what neighbour's house she was passing, by the distinctive odours. As her intellect grew she became less dependent on this sense. To what extent she now identifies objects by their odour is hard to determine. The sense of smell has fallen into disrepute, and a deaf person is reluctant to speak of it. Miss Keller's acute sense of smell may account, however, in some part for that recognition of persons and things which it has

been customary to attribute to a special sense, or to an unusual development of the power that we all seem to have of telling when some one is near.

The question of a special "sixth sense," such as people have ascribed. to Miss Keller, is a delicate one. This much is certain, she cannot have any sense that other people may not have, and the existence of a special sense is not evident to her or to any one who knows her. Miss Keller is distinctly not a singular proof of occult and mysterious theories, and any attempt to explain her in that way fails to reckon with her normality. She is no more mysterious and complex than any other person. All that she is, all that she has done, can be explained directly, except such things in every human being as never can be explained. She does not, it would seem, prove the existence of spirit without matter, or of innate ideas, or of immortality, or anything else that any other human being does not prove. Philosophers have tried to find out what was her conception of abstract ideas before she learned language. If she had any conception, there is no way of discovering it now; for she cannot remember, and obviously there was no record at the time. She had no conception of God before she heard the word "God," as her comments very clearly show.

Her sense of time is excellent, but whether it would have developed as a special faculty cannot be known, for she has had a watch since she was seven years old.

Miss Keller has two watches, which have been given her. They are, I think, the only ones of their kind in America. The watch has on the back cover a flat gold indicator which can be pushed freely around from left to right until, by means of a pin inside the case, it locks with the hour hand and takes a corresponding position. The point of this gold indicator bends over the edge of the case, round which are set eleven raised points—the stem forms the twelfth. Thus the watch, an ordinary watch with a white dial for the person who sees, becomes for a blind person by this special attachment in effect one with a single raised hour hand and raised figures. Though there is less than half an inch between the points—a space which represents sixty minutes—Miss Keller tells the time almost exactly. It should be said that any double-case watch with the crystal removed serves well enough for a blind person whose touch is sufficiently delicate to feel the position of the hands and not disturb or injure them.

The finer traits of Miss Keller's character are so well known that one needs not say much about them. Good sense, good humour, and imagination keep her scheme of things sane and beautiful. No attempt is made by those around her either to preserve or to break her illusions. When she was a little girl, a good many unwise and tactless things that were said for her benefit were not repeated to her, thanks to the wise watchfulness of Miss Sullivan. Now that she has grown up, nobody thinks of being less frank with her than with any other intelligent young woman. What her good friend, Charles Dudley Warner, wrote about her in Harper's Magazine in 1896 was true then, and it remains true now:

"I believe she is the purest-minded human ever in existence.... The world to her is what her own mind is. She has not even learned that exhibition on which so many pride themselves, of 'righteous indignation.'

"Some time ago, when a policeman shot dead her dog, a dearly loved daily companion, she found in her forgiving heart no condemnation for the man; she only said, 'If he had only known what a good dog she was, he wouldn't have shot her.' It was said of old time, 'Lord forgive them, they know not what they do!'

"Of course the question will arise whether, if Helen Keller had not been guarded from the knowledge of evil, she would have been what she is to-day.... Her mind has neither been made effeminate by the weak and silly literature, nor has it been vitiated by that which is suggestive of baseness. In consequence her mind is not only vigorous, but it is pure. She is in love with noble things, with noble thoughts, and with the characters of noble men and women."

She still has a childlike aversion to tragedies. Her imagination is so vital that she falls completely under the illusion of a story, and lives in its world. Miss Sullivan writes in a letter of 1891:

"Yesterday I read to her the story of 'Macbeth,' as told by Charles and Mary Lamb. She was very greatly excited by it, and said: 'It is terrible! It makes me tremble!' After thinking a little while, she added, 'I think Shakespeare made it very terrible so that people would see how fearful it is to do wrong.'"

Of the real world she knows more of the good and less of the evil than most people seem to know. Her teacher does not harass her with the little unhappy things; but of the important difficulties they have been through, Miss Keller was fully informed, took her share of the suffering, and put her mind to the problems. She is logical and tolerant, most trustful of a world that has treated her kindly.

Once when some one asked her to define "love," she replied, "Why, bless you, that is easy; it is what everybody feels for everybody else."

"Toleration," she said once, when she was visiting her friend Mrs. Laurence Hutton, "is the greatest gift of the mind; it requires the same effort of the brain that it takes to balance oneself on a bicycle."

She has a large, generous sympathy and absolute fairness of temper. So far as she is noticeably different from other people she is less bound by convention. She has the courage of her metaphors and lets them take her skyward when we poor self-conscious folk would think them rather too bookish for ordinary conversation. She always says exactly what she thinks, without fear of the plain truth; yet no one is more tactful and adroit than she in turning an unpleasant truth so that it will do the least possible hurt to the feelings of others. Not all the attention that has been paid her since she was a child has made her take herself too seriously. Sometimes she gets started on a very solemn preachment. Then her teacher calls her an incorrigible little sermonizer, and she laughs at herself. Often, however, her sober ideas are not to be laughed at, for her earnestness carries her listeners with her. There is never the least false sententiousness in what she says. She means everything so thoroughly that her very quotations, her echoes from what she has read, are in truth original.

Her logic and her sympathy are in excellent balance. Her sympathy is of the swift and ministering sort which, fortunately, she has found so often in other people. And her sympathies go further and shape her opinions on political and national movements. She was intensely pro-Boer and wrote a strong argument in favour of Boer independence. When she was told of the surrender of the brave little people, her face clouded and she was silent a few minutes. Then she asked clear, penetrating questions about the terms of the surrender, and began to discuss them.

Both Mr. Gilman and Mr. Keith, the teachers who prepared her for college, were struck by her power of constructive reasoning; and she was excellent in pure mathematics, though she seems never to have enjoyed it much. Some of the best of her writing, apart from her fanciful and imaginative work, is her exposition in examinations and technical themes, and in some letters which she found it necessary to write to clear up misunderstandings, and which are models of close thinking enforced with sweet vehemence.

She is an optimist and an idealist.

"I hope," she writes in a letter, "that L—— isn't too practical, for if she is, I'm afraid she'll miss a great deal of pleasure."

In the diary that she kept at the Wright-Humason School in New York she wrote on October 18, 1894, "I find that I have four things to learn in my school life here, and indeed, in life—to think clearly without hurry or confusion, to love everybody sincerely, to act in everything with the highest motives, and to trust in dear God unhesitatingly."