CHAPTER IV. SPEECH

The two persons who have written authoritatively about Miss Keller's speech and the way she learned it are Miss Sarah Fuller, of the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston, Massachusetts, who gave her the first lessons, and Miss Sullivan, who, by her unremitting discipline, carried on the success of these first lessons.

Before I quote from Miss Sullivan's account, let me try to give some impression of what Miss

Keller's speech and voice qualities are at present.

Her voice is low and pleasant to listen to. Her speech lacks variety and modulation; it runs in a sing-song when she is reading aloud; and when she speaks with fair degree of loudness, it hovers about two or three middle tones. Her voice has an aspirate quality; there seems always to be too much breath for the amount of tone. Some of her notes are musical and charming. When she is telling a child's story, or one with pathos in it, her voice runs into pretty slurs from one tone to another. This is like the effect of the slow dwelling on long words, not quite well managed, that one notices in a child who is telling a solemn story.

The principal thing that is lacking is sentence accent and variety in the inflection of phrases. Miss Keller pronounces each word as a foreigner does when he is still labouring with the elements of a sentence, or as children sometimes read in school when they have to pick out each word.

She speaks French and German. Her friend, Mr. John Hitz, whose native tongue is German, says that her pronunciation is excellent. Another friend, who is as familiar with French as with English, finds her French much more intelligible than her English. When she speaks English she distributes her emphasis as in French and so does not put sufficient stress on accented syllables. She says for example, "pro-vo-ca-tion," "in-di-vi-du-al," with ever so little difference between the value of syllables, and a good deal of inconsistency in the pronunciation of the same word one day and the next. It would, I think, be hard to make her feel just how to pronounce DICTIONARY without her erring either toward DICTIONAYRY or DICTION'RY, and, of course the word is neither one nor the other. For no system of marks in a lexicon can tell one how to pronounce a word. The only way is to hear it, especially in a language like English which is so full of unspellable, suppressed vowels and quasi-vowels.

Miss Keller's vowels are not firm. Her AWFUL is nearly AWFIL. The wavering is caused by the absence of accent on FUL, for she pronounces FULL correctly.

She sometimes mispronounces as she reads aloud and comes on a word which she happens never to have uttered, though she may have written it many times. This difficulty and some others may be corrected when she and Miss Sullivan have more time. Since 1894, they have been so much in their books that they have neglected everything that was not necessary to the immediate task of passing the school years successfully. Miss Keller will never be able, I believe, to speak loud without destroying the pleasant quality and the distinctness of her words, but she can do much to make her speech clearer.

When she was at the Wright-Humason School in New York, Dr. Humason tried to improve her voice, not only her word pronunciation, but the voice itself, and gave her lessons in tone and vocal exercises.

It is hard to say whether or not Miss Keller's speech is easy to understand. Some understand her readily; others do not. Her friends grow accustomed to her speech and forget that it is different from that of any one else. Children seldom have any difficulty in understanding her; which suggests that her deliberate measured speech is like theirs, before they come to the adult trick of running all the words of a phrase into one movement of the breath. I am told that Miss Keller speaks better than most other deaf people.

Miss Keller has told how she learned to speak. Miss Sullivan's account in her address at Chautauqua, in July, 1894, at the meeting of The American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, is substantially like Miss Keller's in points of fact.

MISS SULLIVAN'S ACCOUNT OF MISS KELLER'S SPEECH

It was three years from the time when Helen began to communicate by means of the manual alphabet that she received her first lesson in the more natural and universal medium of human intercourse—oral language. She had become very proficient in the use of the manual alphabet, which

was her only means of communication with the outside world; through it she had acquired a vocabulary which enabled her to converse freely, read intelligently, and write with comparative ease and correctness. Nevertheless, the impulse to utter audible sounds was strong within her, and the constant efforts which I made to repress this instinctive tendency, which I feared in time would become unpleasant, were of no avail. I made no effort to teach her to speak, because I regarded her inability to watch the lips of others as an insurmountable obstacle. But she gradually became conscious that her way of communicating was different from that used by those around her, and one day her thoughts found expression. "How do the blind girls know what to say with their mouths? Why do you not teach me to talk like them? Do deaf children ever learn to speak?" I explained to her that some deaf children were taught to speak, but that they could see their teachers' mouths, and that that was a very great assistance to them. But she interrupted me to say she was very sure she could feel my mouth very well. Soon after this conversation, a lady came to see her and told her about the deaf and blind Norwegian child, Ragnhild Kaata, who had been taught to speak and understand what her teacher said to her by touching his lips with her fingers. She at once resolved to learn to speak, and from that day to this she has never wavered in that resolution. She began immediately to make sounds which she called speaking, and I saw the necessity of correct instruction, since her heart was set upon learning to talk; and, feeling my own incompetence to teach her, never having given the subject of articulation serious study, I went with my pupil for advice and assistance, to Miss Sarah Fuller. Miss Fuller was delighted with Helen's earnestness and enthusiasm, and at once began to teach her. In a few lessons she learned nearly all of the English sounds, and in less than a month she was able to articulate a great many words distinctly. From the first she was not content to be drilled in single sounds, but was impatient to pronounce words and sentences. The length of the word or the difficulty of the arrangement of the elements never seemed to discourage her. But, with all her eagerness and intelligence, learning to speak taxed her powers to the utmost. But there was satisfaction in seeing from day to day the evidence of growing mastery and the possibility of final success. And Helen's success has been more complete and inspiring than any of her friends expected, and the child's delight in being able to utter her thoughts in living and distinct speech is shared by all who witness her pleasure when strangers tell her that they understand her.

I have been asked a great many times whether I think Helen will ever speak naturally; that is, as other people speak. I am hardly prepared to decide that question, or even give an opinion regarding it. I believe that I have hardly begun yet to know what is possible. Teachers of the deaf often express surprise that Helen's speech is so good when she has not received any regular instruction in speech since the first few lessons given her by Miss Fuller. I can only say in reply, "This is due to habitual imitation and practice! practice! practice!" Nature has determined how the child shall learn to speak, and all we can do is to aid him in the simplest, easiest way possible, by encouraging him to observe and imitate the vibrations in the voice.

Some further details appear in an earlier, more detailed account, which Miss Sullivan wrote for the Perkins Institution Report of 1891.

I knew that Laura Bridgman had shown the same intuitive desire to produce sounds, and had even learned to pronounce a few simple words, which she took great delight in using, and I did not doubt that Helen could accomplish as much as this. I thought, however, that the advantage she would derive would not repay her for the time and labour that such an experiment would cost.

Moreover, the absence of hearing renders the voice monotonous and often very disagreeable; and such speech is generally unintelligible except to those familiar with the speaker.

The acquiring of speech by untaught deaf children is always slow and often painful. Too much stress, it seems to me, is often laid upon the importance of teaching a deaf child to articulate—a process which may be detrimental to the pupil's intellectual development. In the very nature of things, articulation is an unsatisfactory means of education; while the use of the manual alphabet quickens

and invigorates mental activity, since through it the deaf child is brought into close contact with the English language, and the highest and most abstract ideas may be conveyed to the mind readily and accurately. Helen's case proved it to be also an invaluable aid in acquiring articulation. She was already perfectly familiar with words and the construction of sentences, and had only mechanical difficulties to overcome. Moreover, she knew what a pleasure speech would be to her, and this definite knowledge of what she was striving for gave her the delight of anticipation which made drudgery easy. The untaught deaf child who is made to articulate does not know what the goal is, and his lessons in speech are for a long time tedious and meaningless.

Before describing the process of teaching Helen to speak, it may be well to state briefly to what extent she had used the vocal organs before she began to receive regular instruction in articulation. When she was stricken down with the illness which resulted in her loss of sight and hearing, at the age of nineteen months, she was learning to talk. The unmeaning babblings of the infant were becoming day by day conscious and voluntary signs of what she felt and thought. But the disease checked her progress in the acquisition of oral language, and, when her physical strength returned, it was found that she had ceased to speak intelligibly because she could no longer hear a sound. She continued to exercise her vocal organs mechanically, as ordinary children do. Her cries and laughter and the tones of her voice as she pronounced many word elements were perfectly natural, but the child evidently attached no significance to them, and with one exception they were produced not with any intention of communicating with those around her, but from the sheer necessity of exercising her innate, organic, and hereditary faculty of expression. She always attached a meaning to the word water, which was one of the first sounds her baby lips learned to form, and it was the only word which she continued to articulate after she lost her hearing. Her pronunciation of this gradually became indistinct, and when I first knew her it was nothing more than a peculiar noise. Nevertheless, it was the only sign she ever made for water, and not until she had learned to spell the word with her fingers did she forget the spoken symbol. The word water, and the gesture which corresponds to the word good-by,seem to have been all that the child remembered of the natural and acquired signs with which she had been familiar before her illness.

As she became acquainted with her surroundings through the sense of feeling (I use the word in the broadest sense, as including all tactile impressions), she felt more and more the pressing necessity of communicating with those around her. Her little hands felt every object and observed every movement of the persons about her, and she was quick to imitate these movements. She was thus able to express her more imperative needs and many of her thoughts.

At the time when I became her teacher, she had made for herself upward of sixty signs, all of which were imitative and were readily understood by those who knew her. The only signs which I think she may have invented were her signs for SMALL and LARGE. Whenever she wished for anything very much she would gesticulate in a very expressive manner. Failing to make herself understood, she would become violent. In the years of her mental imprisonment she depended entirely upon signs, and she did not work out for herself any sort of articulate language capable of expressing ideas. It seems, however, that, while she was still suffering from severe pain, she noticed the movements of her mother's lips.

When she was not occupied, she wandered restlessly about the house, making strange though rarely unpleasant sounds. I have seen her rock her doll, making a continuous, monotonous sound, keeping one hand on her throat, while the fingers of the other hand noted the movements of her lips. This was in imitation of her mother's crooning to the baby. Occasionally she broke out into a merry laugh, and then she would reach out and touch the mouth of any one who happened to be near her, to see if he were laughing also. If she detected no smile, she gesticulated excitedly, trying to convey her thought; but if she failed to make her companion laugh, she sat still for a few moments, with a troubled and disappointed expression. She was pleased with anything which made a noise. She liked

to feel the cat purr; and if by chance she felt a dog in the act of barking, she showed great pleasure. She always liked to stand by the piano when some one was playing and singing. She kept one hand on the singer's mouth, while the other rested on the piano, and she stood in this position as long as any one would sing to her, and afterward she would make a continuous sound which she called singing. The only words she had learned to pronounce with any degree of distinctness previous to March, 1890, were PAPA, MAMMA, BABY, SISTER. These words she had caught without instruction from the lips of friends. It will be seen that they contain three vowel and six consonant elements, and these formed the foundation for her first real lesson in speaking.

At the end of the first lesson she was able to pronounce distinctly the following sounds: a, a", a^, e, i, o, c soft like s and hard like k, g hard, b, l, n, m, t, p, s, u, k, f and d. Hard consonants were, and indeed still are, very difficult for her to pronounce in connection with one another in the same word; she often suppresses the one and changes the other, and sometimes she replaces both by an analogous sound with soft aspiration. The confusion between l and r was very noticeable in her speech at first. She would repeatedly use one for the other. The great difficulty in the pronunciation of the r made it one of the last elements which she mastered. The ch, sh and soft g also gave her much trouble, and she does not yet enunciate them clearly. [The difficulties which Miss Sullivan found in 1891 are, in a measure, the difficulties which show in Miss Keller's speech today.]

When she had been talking for less than a week, she met her friend, Mr. Rodocanachi, and immediately began to struggle with the pronunciation of his name; nor would she give it up until she was able to articulate the word distinctly. Her interest never diminished for a moment; and, in her eagerness to overcome the difficulties which beset her on all sides, she taxed her powers to the utmost, and learned in eleven lessons all of the separate elements of speech.

Enough appears in the accounts by Miss Keller's teacher to show the process by which she reads the lips with her fingers, the process by which she was taught to speak, and by which, of course, she can listen to conversation now. In reading the lips she is not so quick or so accurate as some reports declare. It is a clumsy and unsatisfactory way of receiving communication, useless when Miss Sullivan or some one else who knows the manual alphabet is present to give Miss Keller the spoken words of others. Indeed, when some friend is trying to speak to Miss Keller, and the attempt is not proving successful, Miss Sullivan usually helps by spelling the lost words into Miss Keller's hand.

President Roosevelt had little difficulty last spring in making Miss Keller understand him, and especially requested Miss Sullivan not to spell into her hand. She got every word, for the President's speech is notably distinct. Other people say they have no success in making Miss Keller "hear" them.

A few friends to whom she is accustomed, like Mrs. A. C. Pratt, and Mr. J. E. Chamberlin, can pass a whole day with her and tell her everything without the manual alphabet. The ability to read the lips helps Miss Keller in getting corrections of her pronunciation from Miss Sullivan and others, just as it was the means of her learning to speak at all, but it is rather an accomplishment than a necessity.

It must be remembered that speech contributed in no way to her fundamental education, though without the ability to speak she could hardly have gone to higher schools and to college. But she knows better than any one else what value speech has had for her. The following is her address at the fifth meeting of the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, at Mt. Airy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 8, 1896:

ADDRESS OF HELEN KELLER AT MT. AIRY

If you knew all the joy I feel in being able to speak to you to-day, I think you would have some idea of the value of speech to the deaf, and you would understand why I want every little deaf child in all this great world to have an opportunity to learn to speak. I know that much has been said and written on this subject, and that there is a wide difference of opinion among teachers of the deaf in regard to oral instruction. It seems very strange to me that there should be this difference of opinion;

I cannot understand how any one interested in our education can fail to appreciate the satisfaction we feel in being able to express our thoughts in living words. Why, I use speech constantly, and I cannot begin to tell you how much pleasure it gives me to do so. Of course I know that it is not always easy for strangers to understand me, but it will be by and by; and in the meantime I have the unspeakable happiness of knowing that my family and friends rejoice in my ability to speak. My little sister and baby brother love to have me tell them stories in the long summer evenings when I am at home; and my mother and teacher often ask me to read to them from my favourite books. I also discuss the political situation with my dear father, and we decide the most perplexing questions quite as satisfactorily to ourselves as if I could see and hear. So you see what a blessing speech is to me. It brings me into closer and tenderer relationship with those I love, and makes it possible for me to enjoy the sweet companionship of a great many persons from whom I should be entirely cut off if I could not talk.

I can remember the time before I learned to speak, and how I used to struggle to express my thoughts by means of the manual alphabet—how my thoughts used to beat against my finger tips like little birds striving to gain their freedom, until one day Miss Fuller opened wide the prison-door and let them escape. I wonder if she remembers how eagerly and gladly they spread their wings and flew away. Of course, it was not easy at first to fly. The speech-wings were weak and broken, and had lost all the grace and beauty that had once been theirs; indeed, nothing was left save the impulse to fly, but that was something. One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar. But, nevertheless, it seemed to me sometimes that I could never use my speech-wings as God intended I should use them; there were so many difficulties in the way, so many discouragements; but I kept on trying, knowing that patience and perseverance would win in the end. And while I worked, I built the most beautiful air-castles, and dreamed dreams, the pleasantest of which was of the time when I should talk like other people, and the thought of the pleasure it would give my mother to hear my voice once more, sweetened every effort and made every failure an incentive to try harder next time. So I want to say to those who are trying to learn to speak and those who are teaching them: Be of good cheer. Do not think of to-days failures, but of the success that may come to-morrow. You have set yourselves a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere, and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles—a delight in climbing rugged paths, which you would perhaps never know if you did not sometime slip backward—if the road was always smooth and pleasant. Remember, no effort that we make to attain something beautiful is ever lost. Sometime, somewhere, somehow we shall find that which we seek. We shall speak, yes, and sing, too, as God intended we should speak and sing.