

Letter from John Hitz to Alexander Graham Bell and Mabel Hubbard Bell, December 27, 1897

REPORT. December 27th. 1897. To Dr. and Mrs. A. G. Bell, 1331 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington City, U. S. A.

The deep and paternal interest you have jointly taken for years in Helen A. Keller, and your consistent recognition of the all important personal relations existing between her and her faithful teacher and friend, Miss A. M. Sullivan, together with your sincere appreciation of Miss Sullivan's earnest efforts to secure the best possible education for Helen, prompts me to place before you, briefly, as clear a statement of the recent occurrences at the Cambridge School, as an impartial, personal inquiry into the matter, enables me to give. I do so the more readily, owing to the prompt and effective action you took in setting matters aright before an intelligent public, when on a somewhat similar occasion, the character of both Helen, and her teacher, were mistakenly assailed by the Director of the institution of which they were then inmates.

Upon my arrival in Boston, I called at the residence of the late Dr. Pratt, where I obtained of Mrs. A. C. Pratt, a frank statement of occurrences relating to the matter, of which she was more or less personally cognizant. This was followed at Wrentham, by verbal statements separately made to me individually by Helen, Miss Sullivan, and Mrs. Keller, together with conferences had with Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Chamberlin, whose guests the afore named were, supplemented by the perusal of either the originals or copies of letters written by Mrs. S. E. Hopkins, Mr. W. Wade, and certain correspondence which passed between Direc- 4 increased the number of points (from 21 to 22), and substituted largely literary studies for those better calculated to promote mental disciplin. Miss. Sullivan, thereupon, returned to Cambridge, and stated to Mr. Gilman, that upon the advice of her , and Helens' friends, she now declared herself ready to accept his program, and assist

Library of Congress

as heretofore. Mr. Gilman, however, now peremptorily refused to grant Miss Sullivan admission to Helen, or to allow Helen to meet her teacher for whom she had been asking in vain for hours, during the latter's absence. Finally, Miss Sullivan declared she would not leave the premises except by force, until she had seen, and spoken to Helen. And Helen, on her part, had firmly declared she would neither recite or eat until her teacher had been restored to her. Under these circumstances, after several hours delay, Mr. Gilman at last yielded, and permitted Miss Sullivan, and Helen to meet, greatly to the joy of the latter.

Subsequently, Mr. Chamberlin, arrived on the scene, and with Mr. Gilman's consent, took Helen, her sister Mildred, and Miss Sullivan, to his residence at Wrentham, for a time. They are there now indefinitely, Miss Sullivan having returned with me to Cambridge on the 16th. inst., where with Mr. Gilman's assent, she packed Helen's, Mildred's, and her own trunks, with a view of permanently leaving the Cambridge School.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Keller had arrived in Boston, on Sunday, the 12th. inst., calling first upon Mrs. S. C. Hopkins, and the day following, on Mr. Gilman, who after stating his version of the affair, informed her that her children, and Miss Sullivan had gone with Mr. Chamberlin, to Wrentham, whither, Mrs. Keller hastened the same day. Not until her arrival at Wrentham, and conferring with Helen, Mildred, and Miss Sullivan, did Mrs. Keller realize how erroneously she had been informed of the real state of affairs, alike by Mr. Gilman, and her trusted friends, Mrs. Hopkins, and Mr. Wade, the latter of whom, not even having seen Helen, to have judged of her condition for himself. Mrs. Keller found both Helen and Miss Sullivan greatly agitated by the treatment they had been subjected to at the Cambridge School, during the previous few days. Helen, whom according to reports sent her, she expected to find in a state of collapse, proved to be enjoying unimpaired health, and indignantly resenting the idea of having been treated cruelly by her teacher. Mrs. Keller upon learning from her two children, and Miss Sullivan, the truth in regard to all that had taken place, in turn, showed herself highly incensed at the manner in which she had been written to by Mrs. Hopkins, Mr. Wade, and Mr. Gilman. She expressed her appreciation of all Mr. Gilman had done for her children during the previous school term,

Library of Congress

but in a very emphatic manner, let it be understood, that she had been cruelly misled, and that any attempt made to separate Helen from her teacher Miss Sullivan, met with her unqualified condemnation. In this, she expressed herself as fully coinciding with the view taken by Mr. and Mrs. Fuller, Mr. and Mrs. Chamberlin, Mrs. Pratt, and others in Boston, Mr and Mrs. Hutton, and others in New York, and Washington, who had become familiar with the real circumstances in the case. In support of the positioo against retaining Miss Sullivan, Mr. Gilman asserted to Mrs. Keller, he had concluded from her letters, that it was Major Keller's expressed wish, previous to his death, that her separation from Helen, should be effected, and this Mr. Gilman even stated to Helens' little sister, Mildred, to have really been the case. This assumption on the part of Mr. Gilman, Mrs. Keller declares utterly at fault; that she had written nothing that could reasonably have given that impression. And, furthermore, Mrs. Keller declares in regard to the charge that she had allowed her authority as a natural guardian of Helen to lapse, to be contrary to fact or intention on her part, and that she had so informed Mr. Gilman.

To elucidate somewhat more clearly, Mr. Gilman's questionable action in the premises, it is proper to 6 in the premises, it is proper to state that whilst he declares to have been unwilling to assume the guardianship, and consequent control of Helen, he nevertheless had written himself to Mrs. Keller, and either had Mr. Wade, and Mrs. Hopkins to do so, or assented to their doing so, in a manner so fallacious, and antagonistic to Miss Sullivan, as to have elicited, telegraphically from Mrs. Keller the very authority he apparently disclaimed, and which Mrs Keller gave as she asserts, in total ignorance of the real facts in the case. In writing as he did, Mr. Gilman avers that he did so upon the information given by his teachers, which they were ready to testify to, and upon the opinion of his medical adviser, which latter, Helen declares never to her knowledge examined her. The further fact, however, presents itself, that during the first term, and up to the time when Mr. Gilman himself, and some of his teachers had acquired the requisite facility to converse with Helen, Miss Sullivan's services, and personal relations to Helen, were not only appreciated, but duly acknowledged. That, however, when it was thought her services

Library of Congress

were no longer essential in the education of Helen, in utter disregard of their personal relations, Mr Gilman, in what might be termed an underhanded manner, by letter, and otherwise, not only sought to undermine the good opinion which Miss Sullivan enjoyed among her friends, but actually proceeded to enforce a separation of Helen, from her friend, and faithful teacher, totally regardless of Helens' feelings in the matter. This view of Mr. Gilman's ultimate aim is further supported by the fact of which assurance was given me, that when Helen entered the Cambridge School, he personally approached a reporter of the Boston Transcript, (Smith) with an offer to pay for reportorial notices of Helens' attendance.

It may be well to note in conclusion, that during the first term, Helen and Miss Sullivan, were lodged in the Howell House Annex, with other girls, thus affording that social intercourse, and companionship to Helen, which Miss Sullivan specially desired, she should have; whereas, during the entire fall term, no lodgers other than Helen, her sister Mildred, and Miss Sullivan were located in the Howell House, whilst the Main Building was well nigh full, and suitable companions of her age, could very well have been lodged in the Howell House Annex, which isolation, Miss Sullivan in vain constantly remonstrated against.

To my mind, it would seem in summing up this whole matter, that Mr. Gilman, has either unwittingly been led to commit a most serious blunder, as to the personal relations which actually exist between Helen and Miss Sullivan, and likewise, as to the estimation in which Miss Sullivan is held by Helen's more intelligent friends, and especially so by the Trustees of the Helen Keller Fund,* or in allowing of late his ambition to get the better of his judgement, he sought by disreputable means to displace Miss Sullivan from her well earned and legitimate place as dearest friend and teacher of Helen, in order that (as has been alleged), the Cambridge School might claim the exclusive credit of her higher education.

* See letters of Mrs. Hutton.

Library of Congress

At the last interview I had with Mrs. Keller, she expressed herself as desiring, were it feasible, to leave Tuscumbia, and locate near Boston, where she could give Miss Sullivan, and Helen, a home, whilst the latter completed her Collegiate training, and at the same time, she would be enabled to have her children, Mildred, and Phillip Brooks, properly educated.

Sincerely yours, John Superintendent.