Hellen Keller Does Vaudeville, 1920

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Anne Sullivan did the talking, her finger
tapping Helen’s palm with a kind of Morse code.
Full grown, she could have been a stranger
With a headset on the other side
Of the world. But Anne stood by her, the crowd
That had come to jeer if unconvinced,
Well in hand. Their dim faces demanded
Spectacle a little less, impressed
Upon her only later when Anne could spell
It out: the curtain’s rise as in surrender
To astonished hush, then an earful
Of laughter with each dumb one liner
Helen mouthed and Anne translated. A thousand
People caught on as when Anne gave her water
As a word and let her mind drink. Reprised
The scene quenched a need: corny theater
Perhaps, but it still healed blind ignorance
By suggestion, like a hypnotist’s shibboleth.
To take action was the act, the humbling chance.
Psychic hermaphrodites, fire eating midgets—
The audience had seen all, and not enough,
Mesmerized with what Anne drummed into her, this
Like every day the performance of
Her life, touch as common sense and witness.