

# THE READING FINGERS

Life of Louis Braille

1809-1852

JEAN ROBLIN



American Foundation for the Blind  
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JEAN ROBLIN

Translated from the French by  
RUTH G. MANDALIAN



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## PREFACE

This translation from the French of a biography of Louis Braille was first published in March 1952 in a slightly abbreviated form. Since that time there has been strong evidence of a constantly increasing interest in the life of the man who made the foremost contribution of all time to blind people by giving them a key to reading and writing and thus to the world of education and training and recreation. It therefore seems pertinent at this time to make available to all interested persons the complete text of what is at present the only authoritative biography of Louis Braille in the English language.

On June 22, 1952, after this book was first published, the French government paid homage to Louis Braille by placing his body in the Pantheon among the great and famous of France. This ceremony culminated a week-long celebration in the French capital in commemoration of the centenary of Louis Braille's death in 1852. The world had at last recognized his contribution to the intellectual advancement of the human race.

M. ROBERT BARNETT  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR





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## A WEDDING DURING THE REVOLUTION

THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER, 1792 toward eleven o'clock in the morning, Pierre Dezeaut, school-master and bell-ringer for the town of Coupvray, sent a lusty carillon echoing to the four corners of the sky.

That day, in the little parish church lighted by candles and decorated with autumn flowers, was being celebrated the wedding of Simon René Braille, harness-maker, and Monique Baron.

Relatives and friends filled the seats and the benches. There were Jean Baron, the wine-grower, a little stiff in his black suit; the mothers-in-law, Henriette Viret and Geneviève Auville, with beribboned hats; and the near relations, the Occidents, the Triolets, and the Lehogues of Coupvray, the Rigauts of Villeneuve-le-Comte. Old father Braille alone was missing, taken by a bad fever in 1782.

In the choir, Monique and Simon, kneeling, were answering the questions of the priest. When the solemn moment came for the newly-weds to pass the ring, the Abbé Acrint began the traditional little speech. He spoke of the two old families of Coupvray from whom the young people came and of the Christian virtues of its citizens. He passed over in silence the customary flattery about their "perfect republican citizenship," for everything leads us to believe that the Brailles were very devoted to the old régime. Then he blessed their union.

The wedding was merry. The revolution was still going on, but Coupvray, wrapped up in its rural life forty kilometers from Paris, knew nothing of the revolutionary fever in the capital. The stage-coach from Meaux passed through only once a week and news was rare.

In September, however, feeling in the countryside had been running high. A native of Coupvray, Pierre Cyprien Guédon, priest of the diocese of Meaux and master in theology, had been slain in

the prison of Carmes. The whole village had been indignant over this barbaric conduct unworthy of the young republic.

The 24th of the same month, sixty soldiers of the National Guard of Indre and Loire, commanded by a lieutenant-captain, drew up at the town hall and ordered the surrender of all weapons. The reluctant mayor insisted on being shown a written order. The officer replied haughtily that his only order was the law, and had a thorough search of the entire village begun immediately. This scarcely pleased the people of Coupvray and they protested vigorously. The report tells us six guns, twenty hunting-knives, six pistols, five swords and one musket were found.

On the 29th of September, more indignation on the part of the populace. Troops billeted at Montry pillaged vineyards on Coupvray land. All these vexations served only to increase distrust toward the Republic. Nostalgia for manorial power was still felt here, and memory of the nobles lived on in many hearts.

Then the business of everyday life had been resumed. Land and beast make imperious demands on country people. The victory of Valmy and the arrival of Austrian prisoners had played upon patriotic feelings. With the excitement over everyone had taken to laughing and singing again. So why, on this fifth day of November, should it have occurred to the smiling procession descending towards the valley, married couples in the lead, that the same day in Paris Danton was demanding executions, that the Girondins and the Montagnards were confronting each other in the Assembly and that preparations were underway to try the King?

From their doorsteps friends greeted the young couple affectionately. There were handclasps, and the traditional congratulations: "Much happiness! Many children!"

Many children? Simon René and Monique were to have four of them. On November 5, 1793, Monique Catherine Josephine was born; on March 9, 1795, a boy, Louis Simon; on January 15, 1797, Marie Céline; and January 4, 1809, Louis, honored today by all blind people.



## SIMON, THE HARNESS-MAKER

THE REGION of gentle hills where Coupvray lies, clinging to a slope, is a country typical of Ile de France. From the magnificent castle overlooking the valley a vast panorama unfolds; to the east, Meaux, kneeling at the foot of its tall cathedral; to the north, the flat lands of Dammartin-en-Goële; to the west, the Marne, stretching out capriciously between the wooded hills and flowing broadly toward Lagny.

Coupvray has kept the picturesqueness of a small village of olden times, and there is little difficulty in going back a century and a half to discover the places young Louis Braille knew. Here in the upper village above the farmhouse built on the grounds of the old abbey of the Trinitarians, is the little square and its old watering-trough, the church and its princely epitaphs; here along St. Denis, the main street, are ancestral homes with gray walls full of crevices and mossy roofs from which emerge rustic dormer windows; here is the Touarte, a steep, stony street descending toward lower Coupvray; here at the foot of the hill we find a tiny brook, the old wooden wash-house, some farmhouses and the other slope of the territory of Coupvray, well exposed to the south where grapevines once grew.

With its four annual fairs and weekly market-days the busy trade of Coupvray under the old régime attracted the inhabitants of numerous neighboring villages. At that time its population was six hundred and ten souls, living in one hundred and seventy homes. A magistrate dispensed justice and since 1628 a notary had kept official documents. Several doctors and a midwife practiced there and a school founded by the Trinitarians taught the children without charge.

In 1809 Coupvray had not yet lost its old traditions. If the magistrate and the Trinitarian school had disappeared along with royalty, if taxes were no longer paid to the Seigneur de Rohan but

to Monsieur Pierre Baudier, the tax-collector, the young people as before practiced every Sunday the "noble sport of archery." The town records reveal to us the numerous trades which prospered at that period. Boury was the tailor, Seguin the locksmith, Louis Bailly, the rope-maker. One of the weavers lived on Rue aux Chevaux and Simon René Braille, the harness-maker, on Chemin des Buttes in the lower village.

On this little street (named Braille Street in 1831 and today Louis Braille Street) the Braille family owned a house, a workshop and several farm buildings. The house is still standing. It is a decrepit dwelling with gray walls where in places the stones can be seen through the broken plaster. There is a courtyard and a small landing. A few steps lead us to a low oak door. Let us go in! We find ourselves in a large room with a recess for accommodating a bed. The daylight which makes its way in through a window near the door feebly lights an interior of long ago, where nothing in the construction has been changed in two centuries. One can still see the oven where the Braille family baked bread, the hearth surmounted by its long canopy where the heavy cast-iron pot hung from the chimney-hook, and the worn sink with its stone drainpipe running along the wall. The walls were white-washed at some long-forgotten period and the years have covered them with a reddish-brown patina. On the right, a door leads to the garret.

It was toward 1750 that Simon Braille, grandfather of Louis, came to settle in Coupvray to engage there in the trade of harness-making. When he died in 1782, his son, Simon René, succeeded him. The latter, a skillful workman, soon gained throughout the region a reputation as an honest craftsman, and became a master harness-maker before 1791. This was a much sought-after title in those times when small industries flourished and organized in guilds. They were the core of the French craft system. To obtain the distinction of this title, one had to execute a master-piece. Then, if successful, one could engage journeymen and have apprentices. It was a point of honor with the master to deliver only work well done, to strive for perfection in the whole and in detail.

Business went well and Simon René Braille was able to take care of his little family without too much difficulty. He had gradually increased his property. Besides his houses on the Chemin des



Buttes he owned seven and a half acres of land and vineyards in the town. He had a cow and poultry and he gathered in hay for the winter. His vineyards furnished enough wine for the year and the kitchen-garden provided the vegetables. It was the simple and healthy life of the country.

The meager description on a passport application found in the files of the town of Coupvray has left us a physical portrait, unfortunately quite incomplete, of the parents of Louis Braille. Monique measured only five feet; she had brown hair, a low forehead, a pointed chin and blue eyes. Simon René was five feet, six inches tall; his hair and eyebrows were brown, his nose was large, his mouth average, his chin round. He was forty-four in 1809 and had remained faithful to the old régime, loyal to its traditions. Pignier, director of the Institution for Blind Youth from 1821 to 1840, tells us, "His integrity and habits bring to mind the old days." We had hoped to see his personality in a new light by searching through the town records for traces of some real civic action on his part; but Simon René Braille undoubtedly did not enjoy mixing in public life, for his name is not to be found in any association. If, on February 8, 1804 he agreed to be tax assessor for 1804, if sometimes he was present at the annual discussion of the budget, it certainly was not because these roles appealed to him. Rather he did not know how to turn down his good friends, Simon Occident and René Coquelet, both of whom were very devoted to the interests of the town.

He must have been if not hostile to progress at least distrustful of the benefits of new inventions. In 1816, when an epidemic of smallpox began to wreak havoc in the town, he refused to allow either himself or his family to be vaccinated. It is true that a good many people in Coupvray had no wish to be acquainted with Doctor Jannin and his inoculations. In spite of everything the harness-maker's little family weathered the storm safely. But let's not get ahead of the story!

### III

## THE EARLY YEARS

THE FOURTH OF JANUARY, 1809 was a day of happiness for the Braille family. The parents, however, were no longer very young; but Simon René said proudly that the new baby to be born would be the companion of his old age.

It was winter. Suffering labor pains since evening Monique had been impatiently awaiting the birth. The local mid-wife, Marguerite Parivel, was attending her. The children had been sent to stay with the Simonnets, wine-growers and friends of the family who lived on Maupas Street above the village. In a corner of the room the anxious father waited.

At four o'clock in the morning a small, puny creature with flabby, wrinkled skin was born, and for some time it was thought he would not live. The next day, however, M. Molin, notary and deputy mayor of the town, wrote in the official register:

"In the year one thousand eight hundred and nine, on the fifth of January, at ten o'clock in the morning, before us, Deputy Mayor of the town of Coupvray, performing the functions of the civil authority of the state in the above-mentioned town, in the absence of the Mayor, appeared Simon René Braille, aged forty-four, harness-maker, living in Coupvray, who presented to us a child of the male sex, born yesterday at four o'clock in the morning, son of himself and his wife, Monique Baron, and to whom he said he wished to give the name of Louis. The above declarations and presentations having been made in the presence of René Coquelet, aged forty-five, grocer, and Mathieu Simonnet, aged forty-nine, wine-grower, both dwelling in the aforesaid Coupvray, the father and witnesses signed with us this certificate after it had been read to them."

Three days later the baby was baptized; such haste used to be customary in the villages where lack of care and hygiene favored infant mortality. The Braille family itself (according to town rec-



ords) had been marked by very early deaths, and this Christian household would not wish to delay.

Abbé Pillon baptized the new baby. We have few details on the ceremony. The baptismal certificate tells us that a farmer of the parish of Chalifert was godfather; his name was Louis François André Michel. The godmother was Geneviève Boulingre of Jablines. Another signature was that of M. Petit, the town schoolteacher who, in addition to his school duties had to assist in the work of the church, ring the Angelus, wind the clock and each Sunday carry holy water into the houses.

The days and months passed and the baby was growing and began to walk. Between his father and his mother in the one room where the acrid odor of leather lingered he unsteadily tried his first steps. When the weather was good he would play outdoors on the grass of the court-yard, and through the open window his father would keep an eye on him while working away. It is easy to imagine the babbling of the little boy. His mind, already wide-awake showed the mark of the intelligence which time was to demonstrate. This child, like all children, opened big astonished eyes on the world, eyes which were to close so quickly.

1811 was an extremely poor year, with light crops, and Coupvray along with the other country villages underwent a hard winter. The harness-maker is dependent upon the peasant. Ordering of new articles was infrequent. Simon René Braille had to be satisfied with making essential repairs; overhauling of harnesses, straps and bridles, all those leather jobs which bring in little. But reserves allowed the little family to wait for fine weather and the first crops.

However, in June, there was so much misery in the town that the municipality decided to organize collections for the poor. The Marquis d'Orvilliers donated vegetables for several months, and at his own expense set up a woodburning oven where bread was baked daily for the needy. Alms were sought from the less unfortunate. Simon René Braille gave modest contributions in June, July and August. If life was not always easy, little Louis was there to brighten up the house, able through his awkward motions and faltering words to bring back the smiles to their faces.

The little boy was now three years old. He walked, ran, and played in the house. Gradually he was familiarizing himself with

everyday happenings, and his father's workshop soon became a fascinating world. So many things excited his curiosity, so many things neatly arranged, or lying about on the bench. There were the sharply pointed awls, the knives as keen as razors.

The little girl attentively watching her mother sew pretty dresses wants very much to use her scissors; young Braille wanted only one thing, to handle his father's mysterious tools. He had been forbidden to go near the workbench, but temptation is so strong!

Availing himself one day of his parents' absence he took hold of a knife. Through the window the sun shone on the blade, making it gleam. The child picked up a piece of leather and tried to cut it with hands still too chubby to be skillful. The leather resisted, then yielded and the blade slowly cut in and took out a piece. Suddenly it slipped and plunged violently in the child's eye. The pain was so sharp that Louis began to cry and blood gushed down his face. Hearing his cries his parents ran up, panic-stricken. Louis' tears redoubled. Mme. Boury and Mme. Hurault came out on their doorsteps, grew worried and hurried over. Simon René Braille took the boy on his knees, asked for white linen and fresh water and bandaged the injured eye while blood mingled with tears on the little face. An old woman of the vicinity who it was said possessed healing secrets, brought lily-water. A compress was prepared and applied. As if by a miracle the blood stopped running.

The little book of that time entitled *Popular Medicine*, by Dr. Leopold Turck, former member of the Constituent Assembly, informs us of the treatment given to eye injuries at this period.

"Light should be prevented from entering the room, and the eye should be covered with compresses soaked in cold water. Bleeding of the arm, applications of leeches around the injured eye, diet and a dose of calomel are the methods usually employed in this case and in all those in which the eye has received a rather serious injury."

And Dr. Turck closes by strongly advising consultation of a doctor. There is no doubt that the parents asked one of the Coupvray doctors to the injured child's bedside. But, inadequate in itself, the therapy ordered was powerless against a deep wound. Conjunctivitis broke out. The eye became red, and the inflamed eyelids grew discolored, as if from a blow. At this stage careful hygienic



precautions could have saved the child's sight. However, there was no positive medical aid to eliminate the center of infection. Soon it became purulent ophthalmia.

The climax approached. Through contact with the hands, the other eye became infected, and each day a blur spread, darker and dimmer. The child began stumbling, no longer able to make out anything but the location of the window. Then came the night which was to have no end.

From that time onward, he stared with an empty gaze. On his face was a pitiful expression with eyes striated with purple.

Louis Braille was blind.

His family tried everything. They went to the hospital in Meaux to consult an oculist. It was wasted effort for the generalized infection had destroyed the corneas. There was no hope.

The little boy did not understand. The world full of attractive things, the life around him, the birds whose songs he heard—who had robbed him of them? Who had shut him up in a dark closet? In his young mind this darkness was connected with his father's gleaming knife. As for the rest, he could not grasp it.

Who knows the thoughts of little Louis Braille? Hardly had he become acquainted with the beauty of visible things than he was condemned never again to see them. Certainly he was too young to understand that from then on many things would hold an impenetrable secret. He did not yet realize that when he heard running water in the country he would never know its clearness.

The town records reveal that on June 3, 1813, the following year, Louis Braille's older sister, Monique Catherine was married to Jean François Carron. The young couple went to live on Moulin Street and the little boy thus lost his big sister who every noontime used to lead him to the Fréminette to get water and tell him stories as they walked along.

At the beginning of January 1814 a piece of news which seemed incredible suddenly spread through Coupvray. Napoleon's Grand Army, the army of Austerlitz and Wagram, had retreated over the Rhine and was falling back in disorder to Paris.

Through the requisition orders and prefectorial decrees in the town archives we can follow this battle of France and the advance of the allied troops. Napoleon, who was trying to reorganize his

army, drew ruthlessly on the last national resources and ground down the country-side with imperious demands. On January 2, 1814 Coupvray furnished 275 bushels of oats to the troops; January 23rd, 132 bushels; January 28th, 1200 bundles of hay. An order came to take eight cows to Coulommiers. On one day Acat, the baker, prepared 706 loaves of bread for the Grand Army. Mares were requisitioned as a result of the orders of the Emperor.

During this time, renewing the exploits of his Italian campaign, Napoleon harried the enemy armies with a handful of men and beat them at Champaubert and Montmirail. Coupvray continued to make sacrifices for the troops. In one month a dozen cows were requisitioned. Each inhabitant paid his contribution. Thus the lists of assessments show that the campaign of France cost Simon René Braille sixteen Napoleons (320 francs).

On March 25 Marshalls Mortier and Marmont, beaten at Fère-Champenoise, opened to the enemy the route to Paris and the troops of Bülow swept over the plains of Brie toward the capital. They arrived there March 31.

For a month Coupvray was to be free of all servitude. The last French requisition is dated March 19, and it was not until April 14th, the date when the grenadiers of the Russian general Pernosky made their entrance into the town, that a new series of requisitions began. Hay, oats, cows, horses, everything disappeared to satisfy the growing appetite of the occupier. Simon René Braille was forced to surrender his cow and take it to Claye where many troops were passing through. He was compelled to quarter Prussian soldiers. Like everyone else he submitted stoically to his share of troubles.

After the Russians had left Bavarian infantry arrived in Coupvray, then Russian cuirassiers once again. The allied commanding officer of Lagny levied contributions once more on the town. Eight thousand Prussians were expected to pass through Claye. By order of General Bülow, Coupvray was to furnish six two-horse wagons.

Please excuse us for having neglected our subject for a few moments, but we believe it was necessary to place our little blind five-year-old in this warlike atmosphere which left a mark on part of his childhood. We can imagine him worried by the grave conversations of his elders, puzzled by the unknown voices haunting his house, undoubtedly frightened by hearing the pavements ring



every day for long hours to the passage of enemy regiments.

The Abbé Pillon, the old priest who had baptized the child, died at Coupvray on February 12, 1815. The diocese appointed a new curé, the Abbé Jacques Palluy. It was while visiting his parishioners that the latter several days later became acquainted with the Braille family and soon formed a friendship with them. Educated and intelligent, the Abbé Palluy understood the common people. He immediately appreciated the sound qualities of these hard workers and took an interest in the little blind boy. He learned about the accident, and in questioning the child became aware of his fine young intelligence awakening in the darkness.

Thanks to the Abbé Palluy Louis Braille came, little by little, to a knowledge of things. His curious, investigating nature continued to develop. He renewed his acquaintance with the world, became familiar again with what he had known.

In the office of the old presbytery near the church or seated in summer beneath the trees in the garden, the Abbé Palluy used to teach the child. Very early he gave him a Christian outlook which was never to leave him. Throughout his life we will find indications of his Christianity, of the most beautiful part of Christianity, that which expresses itself in these three words: love, kindness, humility.

The consequences of the enemy occupation were not long in making themselves felt in the town where Prussians and Russians had brought misery. Undernourishment soon bred illness, and at the beginning of 1816 smallpox made its appearance. Energetic measures were prescribed to check the epidemic, but the vaccinations ordered by the sous-préfet were not well received and the terrible scourge found numerous victims among those who remained adamant.

Those who had been plundered, all those who had suffered damages under the occupation claimed compensation. In the month of March Louis XVIII and the royal family offered eleven million francs to the invaded departments to satisfy the claims. On May 8, 1816 Simon René Braille received as compensation fifty-seven francs and fifty-seven centimes for having quartered Prussians. Rather a small compensation!

In the harness-maker's home life gradually resumed its normal routine. The children were growing; Louis Simon who, on Septem-

ber 25, 1815 had married Virginie Cotte, daughter of a wine-grower in Lesches, helped her father in the fields, plowing, hay-making and dressing vines.

In Coupvray grape-harvesting day took on the character of a solemn ceremony. The Town Council set the date, and public proclamation of grape-harvesting was made. "Considering that most of the grapes are ripe and that because of the advanced season there is the risk of frost, let us resolve unanimously . . ." Then, a month later, would come the gleanings, a charitable custom which allowed the poor to gather the grapes left behind.

With their two and a half acres of vines, the Braille family was not idle. Jean François Carron and Monique Catherine came to share in the work. What did our little blind boy do on this exciting day? Undoubtedly, he used to help as well as he could with the small easy tasks, for his parents, always anxious to occupy his mind, never left him idle.

Misery continued rife in the village; the elderly, the infirm, women and children were its innocent victims. The relief committee meeting on December 1, 1816 enumerated seventy-two persons requiring immediate aid; a list of the "persons able to work and who most needed employment" was drawn up that day. When he was solicited, M. d'Orvilliers agreed to provide work for fifty-one people on his vast estate. At the same time a fund drive was opened among the artisans and leading members of the community. Everyone's potentialities were evaluated. "Simon René Braille, harness-maker landowner, should give three francs," states the "list of inhabitants able to contribute for three months." But Simon was to give only one franc the first month, nothing the second, and four francs the last month. It is true that the committee had probably overestimated the abilities of the subscribers in order to arouse their charity.

In 1816 the Town Council of Coupvray proceeded by way of open competition to the replacing of the deceased school-teacher. The candidacy of Antoine Becheret was decided upon. In the words of the recorder: "After having examined three applicants for this position, the Town Council announced that M. Antoine Becheret, aged twenty-one and a half, seemed to it the most educated of the three. He gave evidence of upright living, good morals and Catho-



licity. He is to instruct the children in the Catholic religion, reading, writing and arithmetic, and give instruction to ten poor children of the parish."

As soon as Antoine Becheret was installed, the Abbé Palluy asked him to teach little Louis Braille. There followed for the boy two studious years in which he listened obediently to the teacher. A schoolboy in the neighborhood came to get him at home. Hand in hand they would ascend Touarte Street to the school above the village. There the blind child recited the lessons he had heard the previous day, amazing the teacher by his astonishing ability. Antoine Becheret was in an excellent position to observe his young pupil. He found him thoughtful and of superior intelligence. The child dumbfounded him with his responses by turns pertinent and amusing, for despite the darkness in which he lived Louis Braille was smiling and gay. It was a trait of his character about which we shall have occasion to speak again.

The Abbé Palluy pondered over the child's future. What was to become of him when he grew up? Would he remain in the village, incapable of creating a career for himself, taken care of by his old parents?

An event which we ought to point out and which assumed at Coupvray the nature of a revolt against the authorities probably hastened Louis Braille's departure. That year, by order of the Préfecture, a new system of teaching called "mutual instruction" was being tried out in several schools of the department. At the outset the formula seemed highly interesting, since the pupils themselves taught each other, thus creating in the school an excellent spirit of emulation and of research which stimulated study. This method, however, could not stand up under the test of a careful examination, and Antoine Becheret soon discovered its serious defects. The pedagogical role of the teacher was much lessened and the absence of the young monitors, occupied as they were in summer by work in the fields, made continuity in the teaching uncertain.

Consequently, Antoine Becheret refused to adopt this system and notified the Mayor of Coupvray accordingly. The latter wrote on March 12, 1817 to the Prefet, "I have forbidden Antoine Becheret to continue and have ordered him to proceed to the School of Mutual Instruction of Melun . . ." To these threats, the teacher had

to yield in order not to lose his position, and he went to Melun.

Upon his return in the month of February, 1818 he started mutual instruction at Coupvray and, if we believe the reports of it preserved in the "Public Instruction" file, the results gave promise of being satisfactory. But the population, influenced by the Abbé Palluy, showed no enthusiasm for the new method and as early as August 1818 several pupils left the Coupvray school for that of Lesches where they could learn under the former system.

It was undoubtedly to join with this movement that Louis Braille's parents asked Abbé Palluy to find a solution which would reconcile their anti-mutual feelings and their son's blindness. In November, 1818 the blind youngster was always at the head of the class. Nevertheless, the Abbé Palluy began searching, made investigations, questioned his connections. Charitable and persevering, he soon discovered a new path which was to open up Louis Braille's whole future.

Antoine Becheret had in the course of his studies in Paris heard of an institution which admitted young blind people. Interested, the Abbé Palluy approached M. d'Orvilliers, the lord of the manor who had lived in the magnificent residence of the Rohans for many years. He was a man of sixty, very tall, with brown hair and eyebrows. His oval, round-chinned face was framed by a brown beard to conceal the scars which small-pox had left on his cheeks.

The good deeds of this generous man were countless. Often the Abbé brought to his attention cases of extreme poverty needing aid, and since M. d'Orvilliers was kind-hearted he never rejected these requests.

Besides, little Louis Braille was not unknown to him. He had noticed the little blind boy who came to Mass every Sunday, accompanied by his big sister. It was, therefore, with real attention that the Marquis listened to the Abbé.

M. d'Orvilliers recalled meeting around 1786 a certain Valentin Haüy at the court of Versailles. He even remembered clearly that one Christmas evening, before the King and Queen, this M. Haüy had astonished the noble audience by presenting blind children educated according to his principles. They had performed, done arithmetic, and above all read with an astonishing ease, thanks to his ingenious system. M. d'Orvilliers had encouraged Valentin Haüy



and helped to support the projects of this benefactor of the blind. Like the King, the Queen and other courtiers, he had given a sizeable sum of money to found an institution. At this point in the conversation, the Abbé Palluy suggested that perhaps the Marquis could write to the director of this institution, asking him to admit their young protégé. M. d'Orvilliers agreed.

The Abbé Palluy then went to find the parents. In a corner of the room young Louis was making multicolored fringes that his father would then fasten to the harnesses. The Abbé spoke:

“Would you like your son to be educated? To be taught a trade?”

Of course his parents were eager for that. But they had no idea how to carry out these wonderful plans. Then the Abbé explained.

Country folk seldom become enthusiastic. They reflect, ponder the matter and wish to know all about it before committing themselves. That is why one of Louis Braille's biographers tells us that his parents agreed “after being assured, more than once, that it would be advantageous for their son.” When they were sure, however, that Louis would be very happy in this institution, that he would make friends there, that the teachers would instruct him in literature, the sciences and the arts, that he would be taught some manual work, their joy knew no bounds. They made a thousand and one plans for the future of their son.

Several days later the parents received a letter from Dr. Guillié, director of the Royal Institution for Blind Youth. At its meeting on January 15th the school board had ruled favorably on the application of young Louis Braille for admission, had granted the child a scholarship and set the date for his entrance for February 15, 1819.

On the morning of February 15th the stage-coach from Meaux was carrying the little blind boy and his father toward Paris. The Ile de France went past, framed by the coach-door, the country was white under the frost. In Lagny a stop was made at the Hôtel de l'Ours, in Chelles at the Ecu de France. Several travelers got on. Then came Nogent. The child questioned his father. His intuitive intelligence recreated the landscapes which Simon faithfully described to him, lighting briefly the darkness of which he was a prisoner.

After four hours of travel the stage-coach stopped at the Gate

of the Trone. Simon René Braille and Louis got out. The Royal Institution for Blind Youth was then on Victor Street. They made their way on foot across the Paris of Louis XVIII, a Paris still full of memories of the Empire, a Paris where the people of the elegant world passed idle grumblers on the boulevards. It was a troubled time when the reviving royalty was trying to restore its power and prestige of yesteryear.



#### IV

### THE PUPIL

THE SOUNDS OF PARIS surprised the child. His village had never offered so much variety. Suddenly the city furnished his world with new noises. They came at last to Victor Street. A narrow building reared its sad, grey walls before them. They rapped the door-knocker and entered.

There is always something dramatic about children first entering a school. Temporarily ties between those dear to each other break. A new life begins. As he entered the child felt the colder air, the chillier darkness and the humidity, and the coldness of the walls which his hand brushed against made him shiver. He knew that today he was losing many things, and perhaps he did not yet understand the usefulness of this separation. The gentle, soothing atmosphere of the little house in Coupvray, the tenderness of his mother, all came back to him. He clasped his father's hand more tightly.

The concierge, Monsieur Demeziere, was expecting the new pupil. He immediately led father and child by worn stairways and through dark corridors to the office of Dr. Guillié, the director. The interview was friendly. We have reason, however, to believe that Dr. Guillié was not a fundamentally honest and good man. Several of his actions of which we shall have occasion to speak in the course of this chapter convince us that his conduct was not spotless, and that concern for the health of the blind lagged behind a good many other considerations. Despite that, he had a kindly manner, knew how to talk and make people feel at home. His greeting reassured the boy. Gently he described the life of the school and the everyday work. Simon René Braille must have felt that he could not have found a better place elsewhere for his son. He settled a few necessary arrangements, and giving Louis a long hug, set off again for Coupvray.

The director led the boy to the class of M. Dufau, the vice-principal and second teacher. The geography lesson was in progress.

Fifteen or so blind pupils were listening to the teacher. The opening of the door relaxed their attention, and faces turned toward the arrivals, but the director harshly ordered them to turn around again. M. Dufau spoke to the new boy, asked his name and helped him to an empty seat. Then he took up again the interrupted lesson.

The fear that had been gripping Louis all morning seemed to leave. He forgot that he was far from his parents and among strangers, so wonderful were the things the teacher was quietly telling them. Louis's remarkable memory registered what was said about the country of France, and when, before the end of the class, M. Dufau called on him, he answered clearly, without faltering. This immediately made a very favorable impression on the teacher.

The bell rang for recess; again Louis felt lonely. A supervisor introduced him to his comrades. They exchanged names, but close friendships are more difficult to form when sight cannot reinforce the harmony of two voices seeking friendship. That evening in the great silence of the dormitory, in a little iron bed in which his mother had not tucked him, he began to cry softly, thinking again about his parents, his parents with whom he used to exchange a few affectionate words before going to sleep. Perhaps it was that evening that Gauthier, a young pupil like himself, consoled him and there sprang up between them that great friendship which thirty-four years of companionship was not to change.

The weeks followed each other rapidly. In the enthusiasm of an active life Louis Braille now had no time to be bored. Besides, letters which a supervisor read to him arrived from Coupvray and reassured him about his family. He no longer felt lonesome and realized now how much benefit he could derive from the instruction at the Institution. Little by little Braille had become acquainted with the teachers, the supervisors and his blind comrades. He had learned to find his bearings, to count his steps from his bed to the door of the dormitory, from the door to the stairs, from the stairs to the dining-hall and from the dining-hall to the courtyard. He made his way about the great building as if he had always lived there.

He liked the courses. Coltat (a pupil under Braille and later his friend) tells us: "Being intelligent, Braille was soon well-informed on the elements of grammar, geography, history and arithmetic. These subjects were taught by having the pupils repeat what they



heard, supplemented sometimes by the reading of a few books written in Valentin Haüy's system. It was the official reading method for the blind, and if it rendered great service, no one was unaware of its imperfections. Many volumes were necessary to contain the text of a little school book. Moreover, the touch of some of the young blind students was not sensitive enough to permit them to make out rapidly the form of the letters. There resulted a loss of time for both pupils and teachers. But since there was no other method it was necessary to have recourse to it, as repeated hearing of the lessons was insufficient for a good instruction.

Recreation played an important part in the life of the school and Braille participated in it with his usual high spirits. Certainly the blind students were barred from many games. They could never play prisoner's base, knuckle-bones or marbles. Still they found means of amusing themselves, and of using up their energy in suitable physical exercises. Thus they often engaged in boisterous round dances guided by a supervisor, where laughter and cries rang out clearly and joyously.

From the first year of his stay at the Institution Louis Braille particularly liked the music class. Teachers from the Conservatory came to instruct gratuitously. The pupils learned by means of repeated hearing of the pieces; one would learn to play the piano on the stair-landing; another the flute in a window-recess; a third, against a doorway, would play the bassoon; while several old pianos were arranged in the big room. Conditions were not ideal for learning music, of course. Besides, repeated hearing did not give good results. Thus, the teacher sometimes had to guide the hands of his pupil on the instrument. As soon as a boy knew the theory sufficiently, he would be asked to teach a few comrades.

It was under these conditions that Louis Braille learned to play the piano. He found a beneficial and happy escape although he could not see. A note, a trill, a run, an improvisation conjured up in his mind long-ago pictures forever lost. He gave music everything he had, as he did to all the tasks he undertook with his characteristic conscientiousness and fervor. He felt music intuitively and that is why he excelled in it. Though he was still young, he had already a natural aptitude which foreshadowed the talented organist he would later be when he sat at the organ of Notre Dame des Champs.

Guillié had allowed Louis Braille's father to see only the good side of the school. What was behind the scenes nevertheless worried the director. The financial situation of the establishment was catastrophic, with no credit to be had. Some of the staff had been dismissed and the supervision proved inadequate. Thus, to maintain order in the Institution, Guillié had introduced a series of severe punishments. The pupils were not locked up in a dark closet, a punishment very frequent in the schools of that time (being shut up in darkness means nothing to the blind); rather they were put on dry bread and water, given physical punishment or restricted from going out. Braille undoubtedly had his share of punishment, for his gay and sometimes teasing temperament must not always have pleased the supervisors.

Every Thursday after the noon meal the pupils were led to the Botanical Garden. The supervisor walked at the head and the children followed, holding a long rope which kept them together—a touching procession which made the passers-by turn around. Each walk brought Louis unexpected sensations which enlarged his universe. He heard mysterious, unknown sounds and absorbed new fragrances.

The end of the school year approached. At the Institution a little celebration had brought together pupils and faculty for the formal prize distribution. In a moving ceremony Louis Braille received his first laurels, a certificate of merit in knitting and making slippers. Gauthier, who had been even longer in the school was much congratulated for his prize in piano, an award for a pupil especially gifted in music. The two friends were very proud of their awards. They often talked together of the coming vacations which were going to separate them. For two months Louis would become reacquainted with his native village and his family, so dear to his childish heart. Like schoolboys all over the world he planned projects and anticipated the joys which were soon to be his. He thought of long walks in the country, of his childhood friends whom he loved and it seemed to him that he already heard his father's hammer making dull thuds on the damp leather in the little workshop in Coupvray.

The joy of vacation! Reunited with his family Louis rediscovered the peaceful life of before. His parents brought him up to date



on the small happenings in the village; he talked of the Institution, his work, his friends. He soaked himself in the family atmosphere which he had missed so much at the beginning of his stay in Paris.

His sister, Marie Céline, no longer lived at home. In June, 1819 she had married François Isidore Marniesse. (From this union came the last of the descendants of the Braille family, the Meuniers, one of whom, born in 1877, still lives in Coupvray.) As for Louis Simon, he had settled down in Chessy, several miles from Coupvray. His father had wanted him to continue the tradition, and had taught him the trade of the harness-maker so that he could later succeed him. But Louis Simon certainly did not have much inclination for this work, which calls for patience and a real liking for it. He thought that in a few years he would give up the trade, buy some land and devote himself to the cultivation of vineyards. He got along well with Louis. Sundays when he came to see his parents, he would guide his brother to church. What a pleasure for the little blind boy to hear the Abbé Palluy chant the Mass, to rediscover Antoine Becheret, the teacher, and Monsieur d'Orvilliers, who, as he came out, shook his hand and asked him about his studies.

At the reopening of school in October, Louis took up his studious life once more. "He walked very fast along the path of progress; he soon went from elementary classes to those more advanced," says Coltat.

At the beginning of 1821 Guillié, the director, was dismissed by the Institution. A discreet inquiry by the responsible authorities disclosed "an intimate relationship with the schoolmistress," which was not in keeping with the very moral and strict ways of the school. We have already described the unsympathetic side of this proud man who in 1817 had recklessly had the great Valentin Haüy thrown out of the Institution when he returned from Russia, tired, discouraged and without resources. The blind know enough of the magnificent role of Valentin Haüy, so that the name of Guillié will forever be tarnished by his unpardonable, unjust act. The Institution did not regret his going and another director was chosen, who has left behind only good memories. All his life he shared in the creative work of Braille.

His name was Pignier. Rectifying the mistakes of his predecessor

he welcomed Valentin Haüy, assured him of the gratitude of the blind and asked him to come often to the Institution.

In great secrecy pupils and teachers were getting ready for the celebration of August 21, 1821, which was to crown grand old Valentin Haüy's entire life.

Pignier and Dufau, the assistant-director, spared no effort to make the celebration a success. Everyone in the Institution helped. They decorated the classrooms and the dining-room, set up a platform in the court and carefully planned a musical party which would close the day. Like his comrades, Braille entered into the preparation of this program with his customary good-will. His father and his brother were to come from Coupvray to take part in the festivity, and the boy was delighted.

The great day arrived at last. It was a memorable occasion. When he saw the crowd of blind children gathered together cheering him, Valentin Haüy's joy knew no bounds. He spent the day in their midst, sharing their meals, talking with them about their work and their families and chatting with each one in a friendly way. When Braille felt the bony hands of the Master clasp his own, he was overcome by emotion and could not speak. He remained silent, listening as the great man gently spoke to him. It was a commonplace gesture (but for us a stirring symbol) which Braille remembered, drawing from it later the strength necessary to keep from capitulating before adversity. A simple gesture in which, without knowing it, the older man passed along the torch and inspired the excited child by his life of struggle.

The orchestra of the Institution poured forth waves of music toward the platform where the director and the teachers surrounded Valentin Haüy. A bit of cloudless August sky showed above the top of the buildings. It was hot. The pupils recited poetry. The choir sang a cantata dedicated to the founder of the school. It was wonderful. After years of lack of understanding, after years of failure and of hope, Valentin Haüy tasted the joy of recognition in his beloved school. When the music was over the old man, too moved to be grandiloquent, could only gather the children in his arms and repeat with tears in his eyes, "It is God who has done everything!"



A second St. Vincent de Paul, he finished his days unsatisfied, thinking perhaps that he had not yet done enough.

In the stage-coach taking him that same evening towards Coupvray, where he was to finish his vacation, Louis, seated between his father and his brother, thought over the details of the day. It seemed to him that it marked a decisive stage in his boyhood. He had understood that day all the greatness of the man who was being honored and full of enthusiasm he promised himself to become, like him, the servant of his companions in misfortune.

It was that year in his father's little workshop that he began to cut circles, triangles and squares out of leather, searching, groping, starting over and over again, giving himself to the enormous problem of an alphabet for the blind. (According to a family tradition told us by Monsieur L. Charpentier, harness-maker in Chessy and successor to Louis Simon Braille, the blind child might have used upholstery-nails with rounded heads to emboss his first alphabet.)

In the month of March, 1822, the Institution was plunged into mourning by sad news. Valentin Haüy had just died at the age of seventy-seven.

Ignored by officials and academies, he went to his last resting-place surrounded only by a few relatives, and blind pupils from his school. With his comrades, Braille wept as if Haüy had been a close friend.

## EARLY RESEARCH

NOW WE MUST GO BACK several years in order to present chronologically the succession of circumstances which enabled Louis Braille to invent his alphabet.

During the weekly meeting of the Academy of Sciences on June 28, 1819, the Secretary read to his assembled colleagues a letter from Charles Barbier de la Serre, who announced with many details the "invention of a new machine which engraves a writing of secret combinations without its being necessary to see the equipment." The placid academicians, accustomed to strange communications, were not unduly impressed, and without attaching too much importance to the new machine, chose two men to investigate, Messrs. Prony and Lacepede. In May of the following year (some time had been required to study the apparatus) the academicians at last presented their report. We shall spare the reader the entirety of the boring document, but will, however, quote the most important sentence: "This process makes communication between the deaf and the blind possible."

Charles Barbier, an artillery captain in Louis XVIII's army, had noticed the difficulties in transmitting orders during night maneuvers. With his inventive mind he solved the difficulty by combining on this cardboard dots and dashes in relief, which in combination gave orders to be carried out: "Advance!" "General withdrawal," etc. Thus, no matter how dark, the order could be rapidly deciphered merely by touch. This system was called "night writing." Charles Barbier, prompted by a zeal as sincere as it was disinterested, immediately gave thought to possible applications of his invention, and soon transformed it into writing for use by the blind, naming it Sonography.

Already Sonography showed real improvement and progress over nightwriting. Any sentence could be written, but the words were not spelled out; they were written phonetically. A great many

dots for a single word, however, made deciphering long and difficult. It was at this stage of his invention, however, that Charles Barbier, toward the end of 1820, turned up on St. Victor Street and asked to see Dr. Guillié.

In his inventive enthusiasm Barbier thought perhaps that the director was going to bless his invention immediately, adopt it on the spot, and have the blind profit from it right away. The road to success, alas, is difficult and unless people have been prepared in advance for a new idea, they are not always receptive. The captain was soon to realize this.

A persuasive and stubborn advocate of his system, Barbier knew how to present clearly the advantages of his writing. The two men discussed it at length. Guillié seemed particularly worried by the complexity of the invention. "Before we do anything else," said the director, "we must experiment with it on the blind, and only daily use can determine its real value." Barbier was sure of himself. He believed that his experiments were conclusive and that liberation of the blind need no longer be delayed. He would have liked to carry away with him an official acceptance.

We know Guillié. His decisions were irrevocable. He did not deliberately wish to discourage the captain and give him a definite refusal, but his experience as director told him he should not accept a new system however attractive at first glance. Often in the course of his career he had been visited by inspired inventors whose innovations, once in the hands of the blind, proved inadequate or unusable.

On that day Charles Barbier left the Institution a little disappointed. But then, he was stubborn. His dealings with the Academy of Sciences had taught him patience. He promised himself to return.

Dr. Guillié was unable himself to try out the system. Eight days later the scandal with the schoolmistress caused him to be dismissed from the school. It was Dr. Pignier who received a Charles Barbier not at all discouraged by his first set-back. Like his predecessor Pignier stated the blind would be informed of the new system of writing. Barbier, disgusted by the continual delay and unpardonable slowness, left that day again without a favorable response.

Perhaps the reader will think it astonishing that in a biography of Louis Braille we devote so much space to Charles Barbier. Let us explain. For reasons unknown to us prejudiced writers have tried



through a conspiracy of silence to eliminate this man from the invention of the system of writing in raised dots. We wish not to lessen the great value of Louis Braille's work but to render homage to the captain whose invention, imperfect though it undoubtedly was, necessarily served as a foundation for the alphabet of the blind. We frankly did not want to pass over Barbier's hard work in silence. Besides, Louis Braille himself later paid admiring tribute to this intelligent captain.

Several days after Barbier's second visit Dr. Pignier called together pupils, supervisors and teachers for a very important communication. It is hard to describe at length the curiosity which this mysterious meeting aroused in the blind. In one of the large rooms of the Institution sixty children waited, puzzled and anxious. Finally Pignier came in. He explained at length the history of the invention, described the principles of Sonography in detail, and since Barbier had left with him a few embossed pages he had them passed around among the children.

When Louis Braille felt beneath his fingers the little humps formed by the dots, his face lighted up with joy. This was what he had been looking for so many months! A writing different from that of those who could see! A writing responsive to the touch of the blind! Dots! At last something revolutionary had been created.

Supervisors, teachers and pupils were greatly interested and discussed it in small groups. They questioned Pignier. They tried to read the words. They exclaimed over it and gave their opinions. Some thought that it was rather complicated, but everyone agreed that the system must be adopted.

Thus it was that the following week Barbier learned in a letter from the director that his Sonography would be used at the Institution as an "auxiliary method of teaching."

Sonography soon held no secrets for Braille. When the busy life at the Institution left them some leisure, he and his friend Gauthier practiced writing sentences and gave them to each other to read. (Embossed writing was made possible by an ingenious device consisting of a sliding rule guided by the two edges of a board. The rule, pierced by little windows, permitted a blind person to trace the dots with precision by the aid of a stylus which embossed a heavy paper placed between the ruler and the board.)

But as Louis's ability became progressively greater, he discovered serious flaws in the system. Basically it was only an ingenious shorthand. No attention was paid to conventional spelling since the dots represented sounds only. There was no provision for punctuation, accents, numbers, mathematical symbols or music notation. And finally, the chief argument; the complexity of the combinations made reading very difficult. In spite of that Louis made improvements in the system. Very interesting changes for the better, moreover, which were conveyed by Pignier to the inventor. As soon as Barbier learned that a pupil of the Institution had solved problems for whose answer he had long been searching, he hastened to the school to meet this ingenious boy.

It is easy to understand the astonishment of the old captain (Barbier was then fifty-five), when he was introduced to a thin, pale youngster with blond hair. His surprise grew greater still when Louis began to speak very politely in carefully chosen language. He spoke of the drawbacks of Sonography for the blind and the improvements he was planning to introduce. Before the precociousness of the boy the captain felt a little ill at ease. This little boy in knickers was going to dare to change his system! That would be amusing, indeed! And Charles Barbier, while acknowledging the value of the improvements suggested by Louis Braille, defended the main principles of his invention so vigorously that Louis became intimidated and did not know what to say and gave up.

Then began the truly creative work of Louis Braille. Henceforth he was going to concentrate completely on a new method, of whose general outline he could as yet have only an inkling, but which was to solve all the problems raised by the Barbier writing system.

It was at night, especially, that the boy worked. When the breathing of his comrades had grown regular in the great dormitory of the Institution, he would take out his board and stylus and devote himself eagerly to calculations and experiments. Nights of work made up of perseverance and will-power. The boy knew that some day from all this would come light. Sometimes Louis Braille would doze off from exhaustion, his nose on his board, the stylus in his hand, as though he wanted to keep on working in his sleep. At other times, stimulated by the desire to hit upon a solution



and working feverishly with no idea of time, he would suddenly grow conscious of daybreak from the jolting of the first wagons on the street pavement. Vacation time came. Nights without sleep at the Institution had weakened Louis. The peacefulness of the country gave him new strength. He would sit on the edge of a slope and spend whole hours experimenting and patiently constructing his alphabet. Passers-by would draw near, curious. What a strange pastime for a child to make holes in paper with a stylus. The villagers used to say, "There is Louis making his pin-pricks!"

At last, with the reopening of school in October his invention was ready. By means of two rows of three dots arranged vertically, combined sometimes with small horizontal dashes, and by varying the number and the position of these dots and dashes, Louis had succeeded in obtaining sixty-three combinations representing all the letters in the alphabet, the accents, punctuation marks and mathematical signs.

The child prodigy was fifteen years old!

Soon the entire Institution knew all about the new method. Gauthier, who had shared in the first experiments, eagerly announced the creation of the alphabet to his comrades in a burst of admiration and friendship for Louis. Pignier, who had heard of it, summoned the boy. Seated in a large arm-chair opposite the director's desk, Louis repeated the astonishing demonstration once again on his board. Pignier could not believe his eyes. The simplicity and rapidity of execution were truly admirable. He embraced the boy with suppressed emotion and deep inner joy. Louis thought his work was not yet finished, that several problems of detail remained to be solved; but the fatherly encouragement of the director strengthened his resolve and gave him new courage. He left happy and determined to devote himself still further to his creative task.

The pupils quickly adopted the system, and Pignier responded to their enthusiastic wishes by having Barbier's sliding rulers converted. Thus new possibilities opened up to the blind children. Henceforth they were able to take notes in their classes, do their spelling and literary composition lessons and copy useful books and passages dictated to them; they could correspond either among themselves or with the seeing (provided that the latter had previously been initiated into their methods); they were able to gather



together their feelings, thoughts and impressions, and made paper the repository of the secrets of their souls.

The boy did not neglect his studies in favor of research. Manual and intellectual work filled his days. "Each year," Coltat tells us, "the name of Louis Braille rang out among the winners of the various prizes." History, rhetoric, philosophy, algebra—he assimilated everything with astonishing ability. We do not claim he was a genius, but his remarkable qualities and his exceptional intelligence must be acknowledged. In 1823, at fourteen, he was foreman of the workshop which made slippers. In 1826, when he was still a student, he began to teach algebra, grammar and geography. Between classes he continued to acquire knowledge. He attended courses at the Collège de France, studied the organ, and gave piano lessons to the young pupils at the Institution. In 1827 his alphabet made possible the transcription of parts of the *Grammar of Grammars*. In 1828, continuing his research, he applied his system to musical notation. He succeeded in writing notes in seven different octaves "simply by having the notes preceded by a symbol assigned to each octave." The same year he envisaged doing away with the dashes in his alphabet. (The dash is easily identifiable to the touch, but very difficult to engrave with the stylus.)

In 1829, after the transcription of the grammar there appeared the first edition of the *Method of Writing Words, Music and Plain Songs by Means of Dots, for Use by the Blind and Arranged for Them*.

It is in the preface of this book that Braille says in speaking of Barbier, "If we have pointed out the advantages of our method over his, we must say in his honor that his method gave us the first idea of our own."

This tribute paid to Barbier is touching proof of Louis Braille's modesty. Stupid vanity was foreign to him. He had no desire to reap glory from his alphabet. He was happy simply to improve the lot of his comrades. Furthermore, he did not care to be the center of attention. He preferred to live unobtrusively. As the child had been obliging and good, so the young man revealed himself pure in heart and in life. He wanted only to be the humble servant of his brothers. The spirit of this blind man teaches us many lessons in humbleness.

## THE TEACHER

ON AUGUST 8, 1828, through Pignier's decision, Braille was officially appointed apprentice teacher with a salary of not more than fifteen francs a month. He was unquestionably gifted with pedagogical qualifications; his conscientiousness, scholarship and patience marked him out for teaching.

At the reopening of school in October the director entrusted him with the grammar, geography and arithmetic classes. One of his young pupils, Coltat, recalls in his *Historical Note on Louis Braille* how his well-prepared courses captured everyone's attention. "He carried out his duties with so much charm and wisdom that the obligation of attending class was transformed into a real pleasure for his pupils. They competed not only to equal and surpass each other, but also in a touching and constant effort to please a teacher whom they admired as a superior and liked as a wise and well-informed friend, ready with sound advice."

His adaptable and versatile mind was as much at home with the dryness of mathematics as with the colorfulness of geography. He knew how, by turns amusing and entertaining, to interest the most rebellious pupils. He would find the sentence which awakened curiosity, and he would use the most expressive word. He knew all his pupils, watched over their health and comforted them when sorrows troubled their childish calm. He almost never punished a child. In the words of Coltat, "a kind firmness" kept his pupils obedient and respectful.

Louis Braille had just turned twenty. He had remained medium in height, thin, rather graceful and muscular. His head bent forward slightly, his blond hair curled naturally, he had free and easy manners, his features were regular but his pale complexion indicated frail health. His gestures were vivacious and his step was firm and nimble. He wore the uniform of the Institution, a jacket and trousers



of black cloth, differentiated from the uniform of the pupils only by trimmings in silk and gold.

He had been called up with the class of 1829 and was represented before the recruiting board by his father. "Exempt, being blind at the Hospital of the Quinze-Vingt," states the Census List. The column "Education" is marked with "O" which means, "Cannot read or write." Cruel irony for the one who was to endow the blind with an alphabet!

His appointment to the position of apprentice teacher changed his life very little. By tradition the young teachers were thought of merely as big pupils. They were still subject to discipline. Louis could not leave the school without permission; before each visit he had to obtain the consent of the director. When a letter came from Coupvray, the director would tell him of its contents before giving it to him. One wonders at the reasons for such proceedings.

Nevertheless, Braille had a room separate from the pupils' dormitory. If he regretted no longer being able to chat with his friend Gauthier in the evening, he had the quiet necessary for devoting himself to his numerous projects. By means of his alphabet he prepared his courses and began an edition of a treatise on arithmetic. His research on musical notation continued. Let Coltat speak on this subject: "He was gifted with great patience in his endeavors, and with an essentially methodical mind. With the aid of the double light provided by analysis and synthesis and relying on previous efforts at the Institution, Louis took advantage of a particular bent of his mind, that of pursuing the least to arrive at the most by imperceptible but real degrees. His first aim was the notation of the plain song, then that of very simple little tunes. Gradually he came to writing piano music and very complicated scores. Six dots variously combined brought about these wonders."

Pignier, very generously, was particularly concerned about improving the life of the young teachers. He advised them, directed them in their work, invited them to his parties and took them out into society.

In this way Braille first became acquainted with the polite hubbub of a fashionable evening with distinguished people, the innocent chatter, the clinking of glasses at the refreshment table, and the trivial little conversations of dancing parties. He was always



asked to play the piano. Complete silence would suddenly come over the audience while the blind young man sat down, searching with tense hands for the keyboard. When his fingers contacted the keys they ran so fast and so nimbly that the astonished audience could not contain its emotion. Braille played Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven equally well. His performance was exact, brilliant, easy, reflecting his personality. Admiring applause would greet his youthful talent. He would return to the Institution late in the evening, escorted by Mademoiselle Pignier, sister of the director, who aided the assistant teachers in the teaching of trades. The crowd intoxicated him, but tired him, too. He was not interested in being the object of an admiration mixed with a little pity. He gladly returned to the solitude of his own room.

On May 31, 1831 his brother arrived at the Institution with sorrowful news. Their father had just died. Until the last Simon René Braille had spoken of his blind son and worried about his future. He had even wished to write Dr. Pignier. It was this letter, dictated by a dying man that Louis's brother brought with him. It was a moving letter, in which the old father commended his young son to the director and asked him never to forsake him. It is Pignier himself, who tells this detail in his *Historical Note on Three Blind Teachers in the Institution*. He adds, "It was a sacred bequest made to the Director of the Institution which the latter accepted in advance."

The two brothers left for Coupvray in the afternoon. There was a stage-coach leaving the Gate of the Trone at six o'clock. It was not a gay trip like those Louis had taken each year in the glow of a new vacation. He let himself drift toward sad thoughts while the memory of their father filled the silence. Sometimes Louis asked questions. Had he suffered? Had he mentioned him? Night was falling when the first houses of Coupvray appeared. The countryside had the mildness of spring. They had arrived.

In his mother's arms Louis let the tears come at last. On the bed in the alcove Simon René Braille was sleeping his last sleep. The smell of wax filled the little room. Marie Céline and Monique Catherine were there, and Louis heard their sobs. He went to kneel near his father. A witness of his first youth had just gone away, and the young man tried to remember his face.

The family spent the night in prayer, and the next morning the harness-maker of Coupvray was carried to the church. Almost all the village had come to show its respect to the relatives of the old craftsman. Louis, who was very proud of his father, knew how much he was beloved in Coupvray. It was a consolation to think that he had left only good memories and saddened friends behind him. The Abbé Gallet chanted the absolution. Louis added his fervent prayers. For the first time he realized how terrible it is never to see again those whom you love. After the sad procession to the cemetery the grave was blessed; the family received their friends' condolences and returned in a silence heavy with grief to the little house where a good honest man had lived for more than sixty years.

Ten months after Simon René Braille's death an epidemic of cholera which had just ravaged America, London and Calais broke out ferociously in Paris, and soon spread to twenty-seven departments. A great panic seized the population. Rumors went about of organized poisoning, the work of mysterious criminals and the authorities had a great deal of trouble in taking the urgent measures necessitated by the circumstances.

In Coupvray two hundred people needed aid, and at the beginning of April 1832 a letter notified Louis Braille that his sister, Monique Catherine, the wife of Jean François Carron, was feeling the first symptoms of the terrible disease. Monsieur and Madame d'Orvilliers hurriedly organized aid for the unfortunate. They stored medicine and clothing with the Abbé Hussey who from the beginning of the epidemic had given of himself unstintingly, cared for the sick at home, helped the doctors, and brought the comfort of his presence and his valuable advice. Monsieur d'Orvilliers may well have been a victim of his devotion. On April 30, 1832 he died at his residence in Paris, 12 Rue Basse du Rempart. A few days earlier he had been in Coupvray joining with the others in the fight to aid the sick and check the scourge. Undoubtedly cholera had savagely overwhelmed the former aristocrat. He was a great man who had never scorned the humble despite the nobility and prestige of his name.

The epidemic, which claimed thirty-two victims in Coupvray, spared the Braille family, for beginning with September 1832 the name of Monique Catherine Carron is found on the list of convales-



cents. It seems likely that Louis Braille did not come that year to his native village to spend his vacation, since traveling increased the risk of contagion. He probably kept busy with his research in Paris and postponed until later the joy of seeing his family and friends in Coupvray. At this time there were two other blind persons in Coupvray. We think that Louis Braille knew about them and went to visit them during his vacations, perhaps trying to teach them his system of writing in raised dots.

Pignier had had the idea of introducing sighted students into the school. He thought he could make able and loyal supervisors of them later. This sometimes happened. Every Sunday morning one of the young sighted students at the Institution would accompany Braille to the church. At first he had regretted being present at the Mass less as a believer than as an organist. He had no desire to be part of the scenery, and to represent only the technical side of the ceremony. Braille wanted to share in and live the Mass. Gradually he became experienced enough to be less absorbed by his playing. With a freer mind and in constant communion with the voice of the priest, Braille made his playing more moving still.

Here, in speaking of his faith, we come across one of the most outstanding sides of his personality. His blindness had not made him rebellious. He did not curse God. He accepted his fate with tranquil resignation. He realized that it was only the first act in a destiny whose ending is not acted upon earth. Deprived of the light of the world, he trustfully took refuge in the light of his faith. Toward the end, his life bordered on saintliness.

In 1833 Pignier took advantage of a visit by Thiers to the Institution and requested that some of his students be raised to the rank of the regular teacher. Braille, Gauthier and Coltat received this promotion. From then on their annual salary was 300 francs.

The years passed, and Louis enjoyed life more and more. He saw in his task of teaching and in his unceasing efforts to improve his invention justification for his life. Thanks to Pignier he had been able to demonstrate his system at the Exposition of Industry of 1834. Opened on May 1 in a building constructed on the Place de la Concorde, it was inaugurated by Louis-Philippe, who visited at length and in detail the galleries of the exposition, finding a flattering word for everyone.



In a melancholy period when Vigny wept for his Eva, Lamartine for his Elvire, and when Hugo mingled his cries with those of Olympio, in a world where the intellectual elite delighted in the dissection of its woes, Braille, though he had sufficient reason, did not linger over his sufferings. On the contrary, his methodical and constructive mind pushed him to escape from physical limitations. He was a stranger to idleness; his life flowed on full and varied. His courses and his research hardly left him time for introspection. His frail health grew no better, but he disliked losing precious moments in thinking about himself.

For months he had felt great fatigue. Sometimes the stairway of the Institution seemed interminable: he would have to stop, short of breath. On some days he had dizzy spells. Then his head felt heavy and feverish. He would try to pull himself together and think no more about it, but illness persistently and stubbornly crept over him. An observant friend noticed the pallor of his face and his prominent red cheek-bones. Fever was secretly undermining him. He woke up in the morning as tired as when he had gone to bed, and his restless sleep kept him from recovering his expended strength. Often during his classes he had to stop talking; he would be exhausted and his chest would feel tight.

Louis Braille who was then only twenty-six (it was 1835), did not like to think that illness was imminent. He thought his pains were fleeting and would soon disappear. He stubbornly forced himself to continue his usual full teaching program.

However, one night as fever kept him awake he suddenly felt his mouth fill with a liquid which left him no illusions. It was blood! Then he realized the seriousness of his condition and called out. The night supervisor came and left again in a panic to look for the director.

Dr. Pignier quickly understood the catastrophe. Diagnosis was simple. Louis had been the victim of a hemorrhage due to a lung lesion. It was tuberculosis in its first stage.

What could Dr. Pignier do to combat this encroaching disease? In 1835 medical research left the patients with no hope for a cure. One had to be content with prolonging their lives by ineffectual measures against this terrible bacillus. Moreover, it was not known then that tuberculosis was of bacillary origin. Pignier ordered rest

and plenty of food. Braille should have had the fresh air of the mountains. The Institution itself, damp and unhealthy, was far from being an ideal place for a cure. Louis had to live there nine months out of the year, during the school session. The fatherly Pignier, however, asked him to spare himself. Aware of the danger that a too great expenditure of energy meant for Louis, he reduced his work by giving him small classes which required few words and no preparation.

Louis Braille accepted. Nevertheless, he was not afraid of death. His strong piety kept him safe from that great weakness. But he did not want unconcern for his health to turn into a kind of suicide. From then on he took precautions and resolved upon a strictly ordered life. He thought that with time everything would turn out all right. He hoped especially that the open air of Coupvray would restore his health during the next vacation.

The new rhythm of his life left him more leisure and he spent much time with his friends, Gauthier and Coltat. A young sighted student read them the *Moniteur*. They talked about events and discussed the news. They had friendly conversations in which Braille sometimes demonstrated his talent as a story-teller. He could animate his stories and go imperceptibly from the gay to the serious with that sense of transition so dear to La Bruyère. Sometimes he would joke, flinging out witty remarks and even resort to pointed epigrams. Some of his expressions were famous among his friends and soon became proverbial.

Coltat says that "with him friendship was a conscientious duty as well as a tender sentiment. He would have sacrificed everything to it—his time, his health and his possessions." He cultivated it as a careful horticulturist would a rare orchid. And it is surely to his credit that he attached so much importance to a sentiment which some rank above love.

Coltat continues, "He wanted the objects of his friendship to profit from it. Thus, he was watchful of their conduct, and often inspired them with firm and brilliant counsels. If the others showed understandable hesitation or reluctance to give what he considered important though painful advice to a mutual friend, he would laugh and say, 'Come, I'll sacrifice myself.' Once he had resolved to do something he would carry it through conscientiously. It did not



matter whether the task was pleasant or unpleasant, but only whether it was useful. He handled such delicate matters so often that the expression 'Come, I'll sacrifice myself' became known as his, and his friends had fun in nicknaming him 'the Censor.'

"The remarkable soundness of his mind, the correctness of his judgment and the acuteness of his intelligence enabled him to foresee the train and consequences of events; as a result, there were few among those who knew him well who did not follow his advice and consider it excellent.

"But Louis Braille did not confine himself to the happy influence of his words. He followed them up with action and devotion. He liked to do a good turn and help the unfortunate. When he did so, he acted with such simplicity and delicacy that he hid, so to speak, the hand of the benefactor from the recipient of his kindness. He knew that it is not enough to give, but that it must be done with that spirit of Christian charity which respects the dignity of the human soul in the person of the poor."

Louis Braille was inventive and stubborn and even on medical advice would not give up his fascinating research. He was made for work, and nothing could stop his creative vigor. In 1836, at the request of Hayter, an Englishman, he added the letter "W" to his alphabet. In 1837 he published a new edition of his *Method of Writing Words, Music and Plain Songs by Means of Dots, for Use by the Blind*. About this time he became interested in a new problem, that of written communication between the blind and the seeing. His system of embossed dots was of no use in such a situation, for it required an apprenticeship on the part of the seeing. What was needed was a method which permitted the blind to write by means of the normal system of the seeing. Several solutions had already occurred to him, but he eliminated some as being unsatisfactory. He relied in his research on the following fundamental principle, the blind in writing need a regulator with which they can ascertain perfectly dimensions and distances without any discontinuity.



## VII

# CONFLICTS

THE WORLD OF THE BLIND is not free from imperfections, and jealousy sometimes rears its ugly head. As in all society, men confront each other, fight and suffer attacks from the malicious, the wicked, and impostors. Since 1836 Dufau, the assistant-director, had been scheming outside the Institution to have Pignier dismissed. Together with Madame Landresse, a teacher, and the accountant, he drew up a report which he sent to the Ministry. What was the charge against Pignier? Their accusation was strange, to say the least: "Pignier corrupts minds by his history teaching." The real reason for this move against the director was that his authority, his firmness in the conduct of the establishment and his sense of values were obstacles to Dufau's dreams for the Institution.

Braille knew about this scheming but he remained outside the conflict. He had too much admiration, respect and gratitude for Pignier. It was he who had encouraged him in his work, cared for him at the time of his hemorrhage and advised him after the death of his father. Furthermore, it was to Pignier that the pupils and the teachers owed the authorization to use the alphabet in raised dots in their courses, for the official method was still the old method of Valentin Haüy. In ministerial circles only the latter was known and there was no desire for anything different.

The invention of Louis Braille, however, brought the blind possibilities unknown up to that time. One might think that it would be greeted immediately by a chorus of praise, that the academies would undertake to reward this unpretentious, modest young man, that the press, seizing upon the invention, would describe its amazing merits in lengthy columns, that the Government would bestow upon its inventor the Legion of Honor as a mark of admiration, as was requested in 1839 by his pupils. Quite the contrary! Since 1829 Pignier's repeated requests for its recognition had come up against a routine administration. The French do not like to overthrow

established customs, and Braille suffered from lack of action on the part of the public authorities. His youthful enthusiasm was unsuccessful in combating the disconcerting inertia of the government bureaus. He could not understand why the Institution was still required to teach its young pupils to read with letters in relief, a loss of time for everyone. Braille himself wrote to the Ministry of the Interior. No answer! He had to wait several years until 1840, when, in following up a new request by Pignier, the Ministry finally replied in a few words which still did not make the method official, "This work strikes me as remarkable, and I think that M. Braille ought to be encouraged."

Certainly he deserved to be encouraged. Pignier and his friends were always ready to give him proof of their affection. Louis's work did not slow down. In 1838 he published his *Little Synopsis of Arithmetic for Beginners*. It is in this book that he set down his ideas on the arrangement of textbooks for use by the blind: "Our methods of printing require a great deal of space on the paper. It is necessary, therefore, to compress thought into the fewest possible words." Coltat says, "This characteristic had become a habit with him and even gave a little dryness to his style when he dealt with matters other than science; it is said that Braille liked his writing 'to contain fewer words than meaning,' in imitation of Latin satire. The same conciseness is found in the history summary he made for his pupils." This conciseness that one found even in his conversation became necessary for him later, moreover, as a result of his weak chest.

In 1839 he succeeded in solving completely the problem of written communication between the blind and the seeing. He published the explanation of his system: *New Method for Representing by Dots the Form of the Letters Themselves, Maps, Geometric Figures, Musical Symbols, etc. . . . for Use by the Blind*. This method consisted in drawing the letters of the alphabet with a stylus and a series of little dots. To standardize the dimensions of the signs he devised a table giving the number of dots required by the form of a letter. As the stylus embosses the paper and gives a relief, the blind as well as the seeing can easily read the text. This new invention which Braille called Raphigraphy was, like its predecessor, enthusiastically adopted by the pupils. Guadet in his report on the system of writing in raised dots which appeared in 1844 writes: "For this purpose he



also made a device analogous to that by means of which he wrote his conventional characters. Later another blind person, M. Foucault, an inmate in the Royal Hospital des Quinze-Vingts, invented an apparatus far preferable to the first." It was a clever device which won its inventor a platinum medal offered by the Society for the Promotion of National Industry. Braille used this apparatus for his Raphigraphy.

In 1840, however, Dufau's intrigues bore fruit. The Cabinet lent a sympathetic ear to the report of the assistant director, and Pignier was dismissed from the Institution.

When he left, Louis Braille lost his staunchest defender. From then on he would have to fight alone for the adoption of his ideas.

The inventive captain, Charles Barbier, still obstinately wanted his night writing to become the fundamental basis of instruction for the blind. Since he was positive his method was perfect, he harassed Pignier by incessant visits. Already in 1827 at the time Louis Braille transcribed the *Grammar of Grammars* he had been, Guilbeau tells us, "very chagrined at the deformation of his method." In 1833 he seems, however, to have recognized the superiority of the Braille alphabet, for on March 31 he wrote to the young man, "I cannot praise too highly the kind feelings which prompt you to be useful to those who share your misfortune. . . . It is fine at your age to set out as you have, and much can be expected of the enlightened sentiments which guide you." Later, in a preface for a new edition of his method, Barbier says, "It is M. Louis Braille, a young student at the Royal Institution of Paris, who first had the happy idea of using for the writing of raised dots a ruler with three lines on it. The characters take up less space, and are easier to read. For these two reasons he rendered a great service for which we are indebted to him."

Nevertheless, Barbier continued to place his faith in night writing. He never obtained sanction for it, however. That implacable judge, time, consigned his inventions to oblivion. Braille's work, on the other hand, has steadily gained prestige. But in justice these two names must be associated.

Charles Barbier died on April 29, 1841 at the age of seventy-four. In 1837 Braille had paid him a solemn tribute when he wrote, "And if we are rather happy to have done something which may be



useful to our companions in misfortune, we would like always to reiterate that we are grateful to M. Barbier who first invented a method of writing by means of dots for use by the blind."

On June 9, 1841, one month after the death of Barbier, Marie Céline Marniesse, Louis's second sister, died in Coupvray. She was only forty-three and left two young children, Marie-Thérèse, thirteen, and Céline Louise, six. Louis was struck with dismay by this news, still another of the misfortunes and sufferings which the years 1840 and 1841 seemed to have in store for him.

He had been asked to go to Austria to teach a blind prince of the royal family, but the poor state of his health made such a long trip out of the question. He wrote, however, the following letter to Johann Wilhelm Klein, the founder of the first school for the blind in Vienna:

Paris, July 11, 1840

Dear Mr. Klein,

Knowing the keen interest you take in the education of the blind, I have the honor of offering you an explanation of a new way of writing for use by the blind, and I beg you to consider these lines a sincere tribute to your devotion to the unfortunate ones whose fate I share.

I would be happy if my little method could be useful to your pupils, and if this specimen were to be proof for you of the high consideration with which I have the honor of being, Sir, your respectful and very humble servant.

Braille

Royal Institution for Blind Youth

Unfortunately, J. W. Klein, who had made inquiries among the institutions of the blind all over the world concerning an effective system, did not accept the "little method" of Louis Braille. This writing upset too much the established principles of the day. Braille bore this disillusionment stoically. But other more difficult trials awaited him. The directorship of Dufau was to be a school of hard knocks although it would strengthen even more his courage, his will and his faith.

People were not drawn to Dufau. The students found his solemn manner disagreeable. To justify Pignier's dismissal he began to revolutionize everything in the school. His innovations were uneven,

with good and bad reforms side by side. He had imagination, and his new ideas were put into practice immediately, regardless of whether they were of use to the blind. For Dufau was one of those seeing teachers who, by virtue of their visual superiority considered themselves indispensable.

Long hostile to the Braille alphabet, Dufau believed like many of his colleagues that this writing would make the world of the blind close in on itself. A peculiar argument! Above all, the seeing teachers were afraid of losing their superior position in the school, since instruction by the method of raised dots could be entirely done by blind teachers.

At the beginning of his directorship, Dufau was not in direct conflict with Braille. His tactics were more subtle. He was satisfied to ignore the new system. In one of his works, in which he examined the numerous methods at the disposal of the blind, he does not even mention Braille's method. This is an unpardonable omission which nothing seems to justify except his desire to eliminate Louis Braille as a dangerous rival. He had, Pignier tells us, invented a hand-guide which was supposed to facilitate the work of the blind. The use of this device depended on utilizing the Valentin Haüy system, ignoring, naturally, the Braille system! Ambition alone seemed to guide this man. At the same time he was very intelligent, which explains still less the fraudulent attitude which was to delay by several years the official triumph of the method.

The hostility of the director, however, could not prevent this system from gaining each day more importance with the blind. Its success was established, and the pupils recognized its incontestable advantages. If Dufau was the great adversary of this writing, the young blind students were its advocates. "There was quite a fight," says Pignier, "for the pages of the first *Précis of History* by Louis Braille. During the courses they took notes and made up little notebooks." Thus, gradually there took place at the lower levels the necessary evolution which was to lead the authorities several years later to accept the *fait accompli*.

The continual struggles and uncertainties, however, unsettled Louis's frail health again. In 1843 several hemorrhages forced him to take to his bed. Dr. Allibert who had been following the progress of his illness since 1837, soon noticed the warning signs of a turn



for the worse. He advised him to give up his courses, and Dufau accordingly relieved him of the small classes in his charge.

Braille kept to his room for several weeks, cared for by the nursing sisters of the Institution. His friends came to see him and inquire after his health. For each he had a word of gratitude and deep thanks. Gauthier kept him up-to-date on even the most minor activities of the school. Thus Braille was less alone in his illness.

A great gentleness and an affectionate serenity which made him loved by all who came near him emanated from his conversation. He never complained, hardly spoke of his sufferings but was, on the contrary, interested in the troubles of others and always ready to comfort and help them.

When fine weather came, a noticeable improvement took place in his health and Dr. Allibert permitted him several walks in the open air, away from the corridors and drafts of the Institution. It was at this period that he often went with Gauthier and Coltat to visit Pignier, the former director, who was always very happy to see his grown-up pupils. They talked together about their beloved school and their work. At the close of the afternoon the three friends would return quietly through the broad avenues lined with trees subtly smelling of the first leaves of spring.

Upon his return from one of these strolls, when he was undoubtedly fatigued by too long a walk, he was seized with another hemorrhage. Dr. Allibert could see only one remedy to avoid a fatal ending, the country. Braille left accordingly at the beginning of April 1843 for Coupvray. He was not to return to the Institution until six months later.



## VIII

### FINAL LABORS

THE BRACING, FRESH COUNTRY AIR, the absence of worry, and the nearness of his family soon gave Louis Braille new strength and the illusion of recovered health. Far from the feverish activity of Paris, far from jealousies, intrigues and underhanded fights, he felt like himself again; his whole being benefitted from restored calm and serenity.

His family took advantage of his long stay in Coupvray to settle the harness-maker's estate. It may appear strange that they had waited so long (Simon René Braille died in 1831) to apportion the property among the children. However, the Record of the Town Plots is positive on this point. In 1843 the distribution of the different properties was officially carried out. We can estimate the value of Louis Braille's little inheritance by going through the large volume, where on page 702 we find the imposing list of his property, in all, two and a half acres of land, 1700 square meters of vineyards, the revenue from which was evaluated at forty-six francs and thirty-nine centimes.

The allotting of the buildings seems to have been carried out fairly, in accordance with the wishes and needs of everyone. Louis Simon Braille, who lived in Chessy, asked only for a farm building and the workshop to store the crops from his numerous fields located in Coupvray. The Marniesses, already the owners of a large house and a workshop in Coupvray, also received two farm buildings. Louis Braille, who probably wished to have a home to which to come each year for his vacations, obtained the old family house where he was born. As for the Carrons, if their share seemed unimportant (one building shared with Louis Simon, and a few plots of land and vineyards), it is very possible that they received as compensation some of the tools from the harness-maker's shop; for Louis Braille's two nephews had learned the trade of their grandfather.

In 1843 Antoine Becheret, the teacher who had once inspired

the blind boy with a desire for an education died in Coupvray. First the Abbé Palluy and the Marquis d'Orvilliers had gone, and now the last of his benefactors, the one to whom he felt most deeply indebted. A very understandable grief seized him when he thought of his friends and his relatives disappearing one by one, without his ever once being able to see their faces. He braced himself, however, and chased away such depressing thoughts. It was not his habit to dwell on his own life. There was his mother, always gentle and good, and his brother Louis Simon and his sister Monique Catherine, who did everything to make him happy. In Paris he could count on Gauthier, Coltat, and Pignier, all so understanding and affectionate. Why despair of life then? Besides there was his work, his research, and his invention, to which he devoted most of his time and thoughts, and which kept him from falling into a morbid and unproductive depression.

Louis Braille returned to Paris at the beginning of October. New setbacks awaited him. In his absence Dufau, stiffening his unfriendly attitude and continuing the changes undertaken at the start of his directorship, had widened the gulf which separated the defenders of the old system and the partisans of the alphabet in raised dots. Imitating Scotland and the United States, he had changed the dimensions of the Valentin Haüy letters, and burned all the Institution's old books.

Thus, the pupils were forced to start over again on new methods, and the unexpected result was that by this inopportune innovation Dufau considerably helped the braille system to make headway. "The students taught it to each other in outside 'classes'," Guilbeau tells us. It was the stubbornness of the blind children which was to make the alphabet triumph.

We have previously explained Dufau's tactics. He wilfully ignored the system, or sometimes, if he were forced to reckon with it, minimized its results. But soon, confronted by its growing success, he began to fight it directly and, finally, backed by an incapable and bureaucratic administration, he forbade it. The seeing thus won the first round of a match where the fate of the blind was at stake. One student was to say later in speaking of this troubled period, "We had to learn the alphabet in secret, and when we were caught using it, we were punished."



Louis recalled the struggles of Valentin Haüy whose many disappointments had shaken neither his perseverance, his courage, nor his faith in the final triumph of his work. His life was an example to Louis. He remembered, not without emotion, the great joy of the Master when, on his return to his beloved Institution, he was able to measure before his death the extent of his work. Maurice de la Sizeranne rightly says, "It requires a will of a particular stamp to succeed in putting over an idea. Men in general rarely adopt a new idea, it must be imposed upon them!" Impose it? Could Braille do more than disclose to those around him the incontestable merits of his system? He was not one of those mighty fighters who move heaven and earth to achieve their goal. But he believed sincerely that one day the administration would be forced to recognize his system when experience had proved its superiority. Moreover, the year 1844 was to bring him his first official success.

In 1840 Dufau, now director, had sent for one of his friends to assist him. Joseph Guadet, was a nephew of the famous Girondin. He was a man of letters, completely ignorant of the teaching methods used with the blind; but he immediately set to work, and if for a time he took Dufau's side against Pignier, he soon grew enthusiastic about the alphabet, and resolved to bring the director gradually to a more reasonable appreciation of Louis Braille's work.

Before going into his positive assistance we must narrate briefly the events which marked the life of the Institution at the end of the year 1843, events which, aided probably by the influence of the assistant director, paved the way for Dufau's change of mind.

For many years, the buildings on St. Victor Street had been inconvenient and unhealthy; and like others of his comrades, Louis Braille had suffered the evil consequences. The dampness and crowded quarters became a real danger to everyone, but in spite of the medical reports drawing attention to pupils of a "sickly appearance" no one seemed in a hurry to construct a new building. Lamartine, however, took up the defense of the Institution in 1838 and by a noble and eloquent speech in the Chamber of Deputies obtained the consent of the Government. A sum of money was voted, and work was begun immediately. On November 11, 1843 the school was finished and classes opened at 56 Boulevard des Invalides. The Institution for Blind Youth still occupies these premises.



We can understand the sadness of the blind when they had to leave their old home on St. Victor Street. Certainly they were going to new premises, spacious and well-ventilated, but their hearts sank at abandoning the old school, full of childhood memories. Braille remembered a morning in February 1819, when he had had to say good-bye to his father and remain, far away from his family among strangers in this house, once so unfriendly. Now that it had sheltered him for twenty-five years, he was fond of it. "Like the exile who goes away from his country and feels the more regret the more unfortunate and poor it is, several of the teachers and pupils wept, and sadly traveled the distance which was to separate them from their old home," wrote Guadet, who was present at this exodus. Such understandable regret, however, did not last long. The blind soon became accustomed to their new home. On December 28, 1843 Monseigneur Dupanloup consecrated the chapel, and on February 22, 1844, in the presence of a large public, the new buildings of the Royal Institution for Blind Youth were inaugurated.

We have before us a little booklet published that year and entitled: *Account of the System of Writing in Raised Dots for Use by the Blind*, read at the inauguration of the new buildings of the Institution, February 22, 1844 by J. Guadet. In some fifteen pages the author first sets down the defects of the Barbier system, gradually arrives at the Braille conception of writing in raised dots, and pays tribute to the talent of its young inventor.

Thus, before all the teachers and pupils of the school and the assembled friends and relatives, Dufau, through the voice of his assistant director, made the alphabet of Louis Braille official. That day the fruitless struggle which had delayed acceptance for several years ended in the very heart of the Institution. Acceptance was undoubtedly still incomplete (the Ministry concerned had not yet given its approval), but it marked the beginning of the general spread of the system throughout the world.

When Guadet had finished reading his account, actual experiments were performed. Let us transcribe faithfully the final little note in the pamphlet. Its dry style has for us the importance of an epic, since the facts related determine the fate of an invention and the future glory of Louis Braille. Mademoiselle Cailhe, a teacher, had a little girl write down poetry dictated by one of the spectators.

The lines were read by another little girl who had been made to go out of the room. Then the schoolmaster, Guadet, had one of the teachers write a musical phrase under the dictation of one of those present. It, too, was read with the greatest of ease by a young blind pupil who was absent when it was written.

Enthusiastic applause greeted these conclusive results and moved Louis Braille deeply. After years of failure success now appeared absolute and final. Let us pay tribute to the intelligence of Guadet, who recognized the propitious moment for bringing the work of our extraordinary inventor to public attention. Moreover, he himself has judged his role in lines that poorly conceal his pride in having greatly contributed to the launching of a system which was to revolutionize the world of the blind. "Braille was modest, too modest. . . . Those around him did not appreciate him, or at least were wrong to leave him in the shade. We were perhaps the first to give him his proper place in the eyes of the public, either in spreading his system more widely in our musical instruction or in making known the full significance of his invention," he wrote.

Braille, however, could no longer stand the hectic life of Paris. The improvement in his health due to his stay in the country was soon endangered. The moving of the school, the courageous resumption of his classes and the preparation for the celebration of February 22, brought back the fatigue and the other symptoms of the terrible illness which was undermining him. In the first months of 1844 the director of the Institution declared him unfit to continue the class in his charge and asked the Ministry for authorization to keep him at the Institution during his illness to give him the care he needed.

With wonderful clarity and Christian serenity, Louis Braille more and more realized the seriousness of his condition; but the religion he had always embraced with as much assiduity as conviction let him look upon approaching death, if not without emotion, at least without fear. His piety was sincere, without ostentation and display, like the rest of his conduct. His love of God revealed itself in his life not only by strict faithfulness to religious ritual, but, more than that, by an ever-active charity. Pignier tells us, "he never spoke of the good that he could do, except when necessary, and then always with great discretion; those who did not know him could



easily have assumed he was little interested in good works." In truth, it was a great joy to him to be able to ease his worried friends, and to bring material and moral comfort to his immediate circle with the eagerness of an apostle and the quiet zeal of a saint.

Of course, many of the deeds which should be attributed to him will always remain unknown, but thanks to the very commendable indiscreetness of some of his friends, we can measure the extent of his kindness.

He lived temperately, without any wastefulness, and bought only what he needed; this frugal existence enabled him each year to save from his salary small sums which, added to the modest income from his land, went very quickly to his close friends and to the poor.

His smiling, sensitive and kindly face radiated about him the joy of a happy man. He wished that no one knew the trials of his daily life, and so he tried to soften the effects of misfortune. He corresponded with his former pupils, kept his friendship for them intact, and obtained books or writing instruments for them. He had them copy books, paid them, and then distributed the copies to others, thus performing two acts of charity at the same time. Pignier tells us that during a trip (he was probably returning to Coupvray), he became acquainted with a blind person with whom he grew so friendly that, after he had taught her his system of writing and corresponded with her, he asked her to become "the dispenser of his charity." A friend, touched by his generosity, was to say later, "He never wanted to be thanked!"

Some cynic might say perhaps that his great kindness cost him nothing, that his property and his salary as teacher allowed him to live without worry and that, therefore, his charity had no spiritual value. But Braille deprived himself, even if he had to suffer for it. When one of his comrades was without work, he gave him his position as organist in an important Parisian parish. He left without regret a post from which he had derived great pleasure every Sunday, just because someone more unfortunate needed help.

That is the best proof of his great charity.

With his unshakeable will, Louis Braille was able once again to master the violent attack of tuberculosis which he suffered in 1844. Thanks to a prolonged rest imposed by Dufau, thanks also to extreme moderation, his body seemed in the months which followed



to grow stronger and more successful in its fight against illness. The reader will notice this alternating of periods of apparent health with near-fatal hemorrhages, which had marked his life since 1835 and which had sometimes given him hope of returning to a normal existence. In 1847 Dufau, noticing an improvement and believing perhaps in a miracle of will or of medicine, allowed him, on the advice of Dr. Allibert, to resume teaching.

For three years Louis Braille knew once again the joys of teaching. He rejoined his pupils at last. If he no longer had his former strength, if he talked in a low voice so as not to tire his delicate chest, he still showed in class the same qualities of synthesis which had earned him the admiration of everyone.

He returned to Coupvray from time to time; he took an interest in the life and work of his family, visited his fields and vineyards with Louis Simon, and managed his small income. In 1846 by decree of the Sous-Préfet, he had to give up several parcels of land to permit right of way for the Paris-Strasbourg railroad, already under construction. Two years later, in order to make use of the compensation he had received, and to keep from eating into his small possessions, he bought 3012 feet of land on the road to Lesches which his brother cultivated for him.

In 1848 the revolution broke out in Paris. The workers were fighting passionately on the barricades. Gauthier, a fervent republican, composed a triumphal march to the words of Beranger, and all France planted trees of liberty singing, "Queen of the world, O France, O my country." The two friends followed the events enthusiastically. Louis freed himself from the traditional spirit which his father had instilled in him and adopted the new doctrines. He joined in with the demands of the workers, but he detested the riots, the pillaging, the hatreds, and the sometimes unjustified anger of a people in a frenzy—the whole violent aspect of revolutions. He was an idealist and greeted the Republic as the form of government under which liberty and fraternity could best develop.

Renouncing his past errors, Dufau now did everything he could to facilitate research. At this period different printing methods adapted to braille were being tried out, and already positive results crowned these new enterprises. One of the first methods, which consisted of assembling type molds of six dots, from which one,

two, three, four or five units would be subtracted to make the symbol needed was tried in 1847. This method, however, was inconvenient in that it required an operation for each symbol. Nevertheless, the Book of Psalms was printed in this way.

The braille system triumphed in every activity of the blind. Fournier used it for his solfeggio class from 1846 on. Roussel introduced it in chapel service. In 1849 Leas d'Aguen, who had invented stereotype, stereotyped perfectly a fragment of the *Imitation of Jesus Christ* and several other books. Guadet revealed the advantages of braille in the *Annals of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind*. The system began to spread in Europe. Belgium adopted it. The wonderful invention of a fifteen-year-old began to conquer the world.

The combined efforts of everyone to exploit his work gave Louis Braille the proof at last that his years of hard work had not been in vain. But for him, the alphabet in raised dots already belonged to the past. It was a completely worked-out invention, which needed only to become known. To be satisfied, Louis Braille's creative mind had to father new projects and resolve new problems. Music remained his principal preoccupation, for no one had yet dared to ask a blind person to trace the signs of this complex art on paper. He tried it, and by using Foucault's machine adapted for this purpose, he obtained satisfactory results which he undoubtedly would have further perfected if the terrible illness which was to carry him off had not come once more to interfere with his research.

In 1850, feeling his strength leave him, he asked Dufau to be so kind as to let him retire. But since the meagerness of a pension would not have permitted him to live decently the director agreed to keep him on at the Institution and to employ him only within his means for a few infrequent piano lessons.



## TOWARD THE LIGHT

No ONE could ever give a better and more detailed account than Coltat of the weeks preceding the death of Louis Braille. He was a loyal friend, bound closely to the older man by ties of the same misfortune and an affectionate admiration, and it was his privilege to be present until his last breath. We will withdraw, therefore, before his testimony, and in order not to misinterpret him, we put down his own words, simple but moving, with glimpses of grandeur.

“On the night of December 4, 1851, after a cold he had perhaps neglected a little, he suffered a violent hemorrhage; it was the final blow which was to keep him from ever leaving his bed again.

“The same thing recurred again and again during the following days with an intensity appalling to those surrounding the sick man. L. Braille remained very calm; nevertheless, he himself felt that his life was in danger. As a precaution, he asked for spiritual aid, and then received the sacraments with a devotion as respectful as it was edifying. The day after this moving and solemn ceremony he addressed the following words to the friend who visited him most often, and who kept them in his heart like a precious treasure, ‘Yesterday was one of the greatest and most beautiful of my life. When you have experienced that, you understand all the power and majesty of religion. But, oh, unfathomable mystery of the human heart, I am convinced that my mission on earth is finished; yesterday I tasted the greatest joys. God was pleased to hold before my eyes the dazzling splendors of eternal hope. After that, doesn’t it seem that nothing more could keep me bound to the earth? Well, I asked God to take me from the world, it is true. . . . But I felt that I wasn’t asking very hard.’

“Ten days later Christmas came; the pious patient wanted to celebrate it on his bed of pain, and received again the God who brings patience and resignation. To keep his soul pleasantly occupied, he begged his friend to suggest some good thoughts, drawn

especially from the circumstances of the time and condition of illness in which he found himself. They had to be short and meaningful; for he liked wordiness in the language of devotion no better than in ordinary language."

Constant concern, however, for his spiritual interests did not make him neglect his temporal affairs. Before leaving on the final journey, he wanted to honor his friends with one last gesture of gratitude.

On December 26 he had a notary, M. Thiac, summoned, and in the presence of Joseph Guadet, Edouard Pelicier, accountant of the Institution, and Hector Chevalier and Louis Laas d'Aguens, supervisors, he dictated his will. His mother received a life annuity; he divided his other securities between his niece and god-daughter, Louise Céline Marniesse, and his nephew, Louis Théodore Carron. He left a piece of land to Louis Simon, and to Coltat, "My friend and colleague at the Institution where he lives, my savings-bank book, my piano, movable furniture, books, linen, scientific instruments, and in general, all I own at the Institution." Through this will we see more clearly still the true character of Louis Braille, who was the soul of kindness. Gratitude was not just a word with him; his little guide, the infirmary boy, the nightwatchman, and the servant who took care of his room, to whom he left part of his estate, were all witnesses of his generosity and greatness of soul. He gave sixty francs to the Curé of Coupvray for Masses, and, in his own words, for "a remembrance to the church of my village." He likewise did not forget the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of St. Nicholas des Chardonnerets, the parish where he had made his first communion and been confirmed. In accordance with his instructions, Coltat distributed his clothes, and his small personal belongings as mementos to his pupils. He earnestly requested that the money he had loaned not be returned.

Yvonne Pitrois tells in *Three Lights in the Darkness* that after his death a small box was found on which was written: "To be burned without opening." Out of curiosity the box was opened; it contained many acknowledgments of debt. Despite this first indiscretion, his wish was respected and all the papers were burned.

All his friends came to see him. They could not believe that he was going to leave them forever. The Lazarists, for whom he had



played the organ for many years, remained close to his bedside, helping him prepare himself to meet death. His brother came alone from Coupvray, since their aged mother could not undertake the journey. He brought messages of affection and loving solicitude from the family. They all felt the moment of the last good-by drawing nearer each day, yet they tried to make him forget it by talking hopefully of a cure. But he answered, "You know that I don't deal in that coin, there's no need to hide the truth." Little by little life was withdrawing from his body racked by tuberculosis. Dr. Allibert, as well as the Abbé Durand, the chaplain of the Institution, knew that now nothing could save him.

We again quote Coltat, "Meanwhile, through an illusion fairly common in his type of illness, he appeared a few days before his death to have recovered confidence in his return to health. It is as though Providence, taking pity on our human frailty, wished in these crucial periods to veil the face of death in order to make it seem less dreadful.

"January 6, 1852 was to be his last day. In the morning he asked to have repeated to him the symbolic meanings of gold, incense and myrrh, for it was Epiphany. . . . Toward the middle of the day, feeling the end near, he wished to fortify himself for the dread journey, and once more received communion with loving devotion. Before and after the ceremony his friends and his brother gathered around him and embraced him for the last time. To each he gave most touching tokens of his affection, and when he could no longer talk, he moved his lips, a gesture which spoke more directly to the heart than any word. All those present were moved to tears. The final agony began about four o'clock in the afternoon, and at seven-thirty Louis Braille delivered up his pure soul to the hands of God."

On the very same evening, Louis Simon returned to Coupvray to announce the sad outcome to his family. We can understand the sorrow of Monique Braille when she learned the news, so painful to the heart of a mother already broken by the loss of a husband and a daughter, and now separated from a son whom she loved tenderly. Perhaps it was to see him once again that she asked Louis Simon to bring him back to Coupvray. Perhaps it was also to reunite Simon, Marie and Louis in the same plot of earth and the same affection.

On January 7th Louis Simon went to the Mayor's office and obtained from Monsieur Lahogue, the first assistant, authorization to have Louis Braille buried in his native village. He returned to Paris immediately, found a conveyor, M. Bulton, took the necessary steps at Police Headquarters, and fixed the transfer for Friday, January 9.

On the 8th funeral services were held at the Institution. Pupils and teachers, and all the others who had known and loved Louis Braille were present. His friends had had his portrait done and a plaster cast of his face made, which was used by the sculptor, Jouffroy, to cut a marble bust of him. The latter was unveiled at the Institution on May 25, 1853.

Then on the 9th M. Bulton and Louis Simon started for Coupvray. The route which the blind boy had formerly taken to the Institution he now took for the last time thirty-two years later, in a black van behind a gently trotting horse which was carrying him toward the place of his childhood. Neuilly, Nogent, Chelles, Lagny. After four hours of traveling, the imposing mass of the farm-house belonging to the chateau stood out against the hillside with bare trees sharply outlined against the wintry sky beyond. The van turned to the left, and descended rapidly toward the lower village where, in the old family house, Louis Braille was to rest a few hours longer.

M. Lahogue, who drew up the report of the transfer for Police Headquarters, wrote the next day, "Yesterday, the 9th of the present month, the body of Louis Braille arrived in Coupvray. I went to the place where he had been taken, and in the presence of his entire family I had the coffin opened to verify the identity of the body. The deceased was recognized to be really the aforesaid Louis Braille. Today, January 10th, at noon, the burial took place."

In the crowded little parish church there re-echoed the plaintive notes of prayers for the dead. Then four men carried the coffin to the cemetery. When the Abbé Baudin had said the final prayer, the body of Louis Braille was lowered into the earth.



1852 - 1952

THE MAN who, during thirty years of patient research, had done more for the blind than eight centuries of charity and alms, died ignored by his contemporaries, without ostentation or glory, but simply, as he had lived. No one had had a presentiment of the world-wide significance of his work; no one, apart from his very restricted circle of friends, had noticed that at forty-three had died the deliverer of millions of beings formerly doomed to ignorance who today, because of him, are able to attain the highest pinnacles of culture.

We have looked in vain in the newspapers of the time for some article announcing his death. That day there was mention of the banquet at the Hôtel-de-Ville which the Prince-President, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, was to attend. Lamartine announced that his paper, *Le Conseiller du Peuple*, would cease publication, to be replaced by a literary paper, *L'Humanité*. The candidature of Monsieur Alfred de Musset to the French Academy was being criticized, but no one spoke of Braille, not even in the obituary columns.

A hundred years later, however, overflowing the too narrow confines of our country, the fame of the boy of fifteen who had bestowed upon his blind brothers the wonderful six-dot system has spread over the entire world. As long ago as 1878, a congress met at Paris and decided to adopt braille as an international system of writing for the blind. In 1917 America, which had for many years used derivative alphabets, brought about unity by compelling recognition of Braille's original alphabet. In 1950 on the initiative of UNESCO, the braille system was extended to a substantial number of African dialects. This great organization is now working for the application of the alphabet to oriental languages.

It is, therefore, on an international scale that men ought to

honor Louis Braille, for he is one of the great benefactors of the world, and his name, unknown in 1852, will join those of Pasteur, Reed and Fleming, united by the same universal gratitude.

We lived several months in Coupvray close to the house where Louis Braille was born, soaking up the peaceful life of this little town, unearthing pages yellowed with age from dusty archives in the town garret, and bringing back to life people of days gone by whom the blind child had known. Very often our steps turned toward his house, so simple, so full of memories still. Often, too, climbing the Touarte we found ourselves in the cemetery before his grave, a poor grave and plain, where the blind of the whole world come to meditate and give thanks to their deliverer. It occurred to us that between the beginning and end, between the house where he was born and this final resting place of his, there was a tragedy and a deliverance, a life of courage and of struggle against darkness, the amazing disproportion between his humble origins and the magnitude of his achievement.

Louis Braille was the apostle of light. If it is true that above all posterity remembers the work of a man extraordinarily persevering and methodical, with a prodigious power of concentration, we must yet recognize that not only did he have the mind of an inventor but also the soul of a saint; and to our eyes this latter is the most significant aspect of his life. In spite of the accident which blinded him at the age of four, in spite of the long battle to obtain acceptance of his system, in spite of the malady which sapped his strength from within, he never grew bitter, he never despaired. He remained good, charitable, loving, faithful to his friends as to his ideals. Thus live the virtuous and pure in heart. Thus do we see, undimmed by a century since his death, the true Louis Braille.













