

The Boy who brightened Millions of Lives

It was the year 1809. A baby was born to Monique and Simon-Rene Braille, in a village of France. They named him Louis Braille. The couple had three older children, But, little Louis, who was quite weak, became their favourite. Louis was a happy baby, and as he grew older it was clear that he had an inquisitive and intelligent mind.

Simon-Rene had a small workshop where he made saddles and harnesses for the villagers' horses. Louis at three years old, used to go in there to play. But, one day, watching his father at work, he decided to copy him and do something exciting. So, he picked up a sharp tool and tried to cut leather with it. But what happened was that instead of cutting the leather, the sharp tool bounced back from his hand and wounded his right eye. Medical treatment, in a 19th century village, was neither the best, nor speedily available. The result was that an infection set in, in the child's eyes. Soon the infection reached the left eye as well. And, by the time he was five years old, Louis was blind in both eyes.

The parents did all they could to help him live a normal life, and sent him to school so that he would not remain blind as well as illiterate for the rest of his life.

At school, the teachers were impressed by their only blind student's intelligence, and his eagerness and ability to learn. Subsequently, at the age of ten he was able to gain admission to a boarding school in Paris, the

Royal Institute for Blind Youth, which was one of the first schools for the blind in the world.

The school also taught music, which Louis loved. But it had some strict rules as well. For example, students were not allowed to have more than one bath a month!

Blind students of those days learned to read from the Haüy system, in which every letter of each word was raised, and kept its original shape. Readers had to slide a finger all over each of the letters to read the word they spelt. This system taught the blind to read, but it was not an easy system, since it took a long time for the reader to figure out every letter and word. Also, the letters had copper wire underneath, to raise them, which made the books bulky and heavy. As a result, several students never learned to read. However, our hero was not one of them. His eagerness and hard work helped him learn to read even in difficult conditions. At the same time, he became a good student of music.

Then came Captain Barbier's invention. He had created a system for reading in the dark, which was suitable for blind readers. In Barbier's system, twelve embossed (raised) dots took the place of full, raised letters. When students tried this new means of reading, they found it easier than the Haüy system they had used so far.

Louis Braille was fascinated by the advancement from full letters to dots. But he wanted to make the system even easier. He worked hard at it, and by the time he was fifteen he had invented a much more refined system,

in which there were only six raised dots, in a cell. In addition to letters, his invention included punctuation marks, numbers, and even musical notes, which the older systems (Barbier's and Valentin Haüy's) did not have. Louis Braille's system was given the name 'Braille', by which it is still known.

After he had finished his education, Louis Braille worked as a professor in his Institute. A talented player of several musical instruments, he also played the organ at various churches. But his main interest remained the improvement and refinement of Braille.

Louis Braille died at the age of 43, but several years went by after his death before Braille was recognized as the best '*tactile code', (not just a single language), and was adapted for use by blind speakers of most languages in the world; and is still used today.

*tactile: felt by touch

*code: Set of instructions.

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