

## 5. The Man Who Empowered the Blind

*Have you ever been in a room when the lights suddenly go off and everything becomes dark? How lost you feel! But then the lights come back and all is well for you. Imagine someone for whom the lights never come back and his/her world is dark all the time. These are the sightless people whose eyes cannot see. Here is a story of one such person who empowered the blind to read and write.*

Louis Braille was born in a small village of Coupvray near Paris, France in 1809. Monsieur Braille, Louis' father, made harnesses and saddles with an awl.

One day little Louis picked up the awl and made a stab at the leather. As he bent down, the awl suddenly flipped up and injured his eyes, leaving him blinded. Now the three-year old Louis was in total darkness, never to see again.

Those days the blind in the backward parts of Europe and Asia were often trained to be beggars. Poor Monsieur Braille could never forgive himself for the accident to his son and everybody tried to make life easier for him. The boy had a cane and soon learned to tap his way around the village.

"There comes little Louis," the villagers said when they heard the tapping of his cane. They scratched out grooves on the road so that Louis would count out the exact number of cane taps it took him to reach the road. Tap, tap, tap so many taps to the big trees. So many more to the pond. Then many more to



Étienne Braille

the hills. This tapping stayed with him through his life and was to mean much to the world later on.

At home as he grew older, Louis tried to help his father in the harness shop, handling the tools and bits of leather. Louis' fingers grew nimble and strong, his hearing became very keen. At the village school his teacher was amazed at how well Louis learned by ear and memory.

Yet he was unhappy, for Louis wanted to learn to read and write like other children and he knew he could not. Then it so happened that the school master heard of a school in Paris called the Royal Institute for the Young Blind. He got Louis admitted into this Institute, where he learned to play the piano and the cello expertly. Louis graduated from the institute after eight years. Then the institute appointed him as a teacher of the blind children. For the rest of his life he devoted himself to teaching and helping the blind.

At about the time Louis Braille came to the institute, the institute's founder, Valentin Huay had developed a new way of reading for the blind. In this way the letters were "embossed" – that is, "raised" on the other side of the heavy paper so that the blind person could trace their shape with his fingers. Louis would trace each letter over and over again. "I will learn to read," he said determinedly. And he did. But for a quick mind like Louis Braille's this was much too slow a way to read, for the letters had to be very large – at least an inch high. So even a very short story would fill many heavy volumes and a blind child would have to spend a long time doing just a little reading.

Besides, it was hard and expensive to print books with embossed letters, so there was very little for the blind to read. For long or important books, a blind person had to depend on friends to read out to him.

"There must be an easier way for the blind to read and write," young Braille said over and over again. "Only books can free the blind. A person can never be truly educated unless he can read."

Louis was only seventeen years old when an idea struck him that there must be an easier, quicker way for the blind to read than by trying to feel all the way around each letter. He was looking for a code.

One evening he found the answer. He was sitting in a restaurant listening to a friend read aloud from a newspaper. Suddenly he heard something that made him jump up. In his excitement Louis pounded on the table, shouting, laughing and crying all at once.

The new article was about night writing, a new signal code in the French army. An artillery captain named Charles Barbier in the Napoleon Army had developed a technique of sending messages by means of dots and dashes “in relief,” that is, standing above the surface of the paper like embossed type. This code could be used in the dark because it could be felt with the finger tips. If a man could read and write a message in the dark without using his eyes, then a blind person could do it too!

Louis met Captain Barbier who explained his code to him. He punched some holes in a sheet of paper with a simple awl not so different from the one that had cost him his sight.

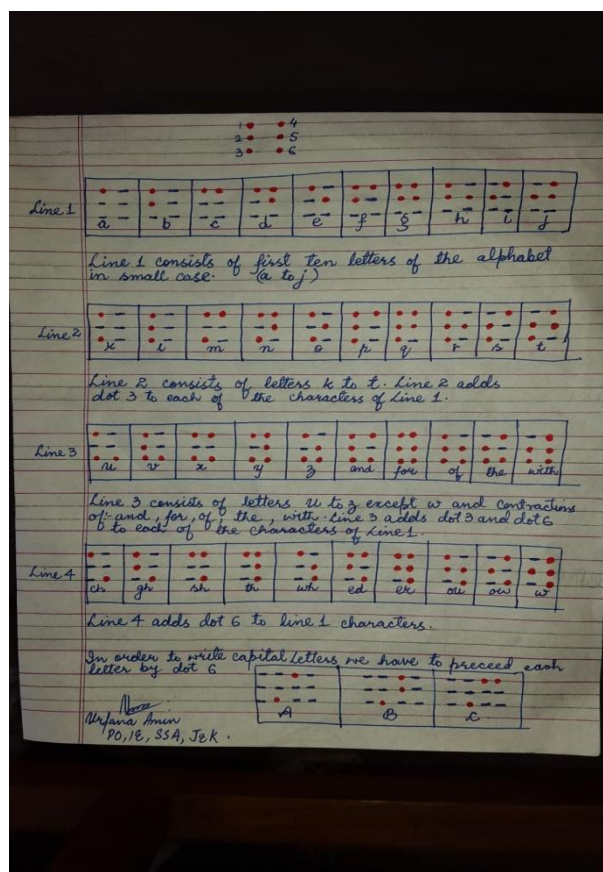
The Captain made Louis feel the bumps or dots that he had made on the other side of the paper. A certain combination of dots meant a certain army command like, “Retreat to the main line,” or “Cease fire,” and so on.

Louis Braille was overjoyed. Punching dots on paper was easy, fast and inexpensive. Now he could figure out a way by which the blind might punch out all words in a code made of dots.

After many months of hard work when Louis was twenty, in 1829, he had worked out his system. He designed a little hand punch that could be used with an oblong “cell” containing six holes. There was a special combination of dots for every letter of the alphabet, for every number and for every punctuation mark. Another blind person who knew the code could now feel the dots made by the punch and read what Braille had written.

After a while Louis learned to punch-write almost as fast as a person could talk and he could identify dot-writing with his fingers almost as quickly as sighted people could read printed type.

Louis punched out a number of stories as they were read to him from books. He knew the method. But now the authorities of the institute would not accept Braille’s idea. People who could



see were satisfied with the old methods and felt there was no reason to change to something new. Printers of the old-style embossed books were afraid they would lose business if Braille's system were adopted.

But Braille went on with his work. He taught his blind pupils in private after school hours. They soon realised how much better his method was and they told other blind people about it. Braille began to get letters from the blind in every country in the world begging for instruction.

For the next few years Braille worked to improve his system. He worked at his teaching and his music too. He designed a special code for musical notes so that a blind musician like himself could learn to play a score by reading the music with his fingertips.

Little by little, Braille and his friends punched out textbooks, storybooks and songbooks. Then some printers invented machinery for making copies of these books. But still his system was hardly known to the public. To Braille's great disappointment it had not caught on.

Loui's health began to fail and it seemed to him that the work of his lifetime might die with him. But he was still to have his moment of triumph. Among his music pupils was a blind young girl who was a very fine pianist. Braille had taught her his dot method of reading and writing music.

One evening she gave a concert which was highly applauded. The young girl held up her hand for silence. Then she made a speech about Braille and what his method had meant to her. "I beg you to applaud him, not me," she said, "I play through his eyes."

The next day the Paris newspapers were filled with stories about Braille and his work for his blind pupils. So much interest was aroused that many schools finally agreed to use his system.

When Braille heard about this, he wept out of joy because, he said that his life had not been a failure after all. This was in 1852 when Braille was forty-three years old. Two years later the Institute for the Young Blind officially adopted Louis' system and named it after him. Books were translated into "Braille" and through books, the blind found empowerment they had never dreamt of.

### **New Words**

harness, saddle, awl, flip up, cane, tap, cello, afflict, emboss, code, pound, tremendous, score

**Glossary**

harness:	an arrangement of leather straps and metal pieces by which a horse, mule, etc., is fastened to a vehicle, etc.
saddle:	a seat for a rider, on a horse
awl:	a small pointed hand tool for making holes in wood, leather, etc.
flip up:	toss or turn over in the air
cane:	walking stick
tap (V):	a gentle sound or stroke made by hand or some object
tap (N):	hit something gently, and often repeatedly, especially making short sharp noises
cello:	a musical instrument
afflict:	cause suffering or unhappiness
emboss:	raise or print (a design, etc.)
code:	a system of letters or symbols which represent something in a secret or short form
pound:	strike heavily
tremendous:	vast; huge
score:	written version of the music for a film/play

**Thinking about the Text**

1. How did little Louis lose his eyesight?

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2. How did the young blind Louis find his way to different places?

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3. What helped him to excel in playing musical instruments?

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4. How were the blind taught reading when Louis Braille started studying at the Institute for the Young Blind?

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5. What was Captain Barbier's invention? How did it help Braille?

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6. Why were the authorities of the Institute for the Young Blind unwilling to accept Braille's method?

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7. How did the concert prove to be a great event in Louis' life?

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8. Give the following biographical details about Louis Braille:

**Louis Braille**

1. Year of birth:

2. Father's name:

3. Father's occupation:
4. The year in which he joined the Institute for the Young Blind:
5. The year of graduation:
6. The year in which he made the system for the blind:
7. The year his system was introduced in the Institute:

### Language Work

#### A. Complete the following statements:

1. Blind people before and during the days of Louis Braille earned their bread by \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The people of Coupvray were \_\_\_\_\_ to Louis Braille when he became blind.
3. The reading method used by Louis Braille had limitations such as \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Louis Braille was \_\_\_\_\_ when Captain Barbier explained his new invention to him.
5. Louis Braille evolved a system in which one letter was distinguished from another by \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Even when so many punched books were available for the blind, Louis Braille looked unhappy because \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Louis Braille's method of teaching the blind was called \_\_\_\_\_.

#### B. Read these sentences:

1. The head of the school soon found that Louis **quickly** learned whatever was taught to him.
2. A person can never be **truly** educated unless he can read.

In the above sentences, **quickly** and **truly** are adverbs. Now pick out at least five adverbs from the lesson and write them in the spaces below:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

#### C. Give one word for the following:

1. A keyboard instrument \_\_\_\_\_
2. To move back \_\_\_\_\_
3. To clap your hands to show appreciation \_\_\_\_\_
4. A person who plays the piano \_\_\_\_\_

**D. Match the words with their opposites.****Words**

1. tough
2. forgive
3. weary
4. nimble
5. tremendous
6. triumph
7. excitement
8. straight

**Opposites**

- a. clumsy
- b. fresh
- c. failure
- d. calmness
- e. crooked
- f. tender
- g. ordinary
- h. punish

**Grammar Work****Use of would and used to.**

1. Louis would trace each letter over and over again.
2. So even a very short story would fill many heavy volumes.

In each of these sentences would is used to talk about repeated actions in the past. These repeated actions in the past could also be expressed by used to. For instance, one would say,

Louis used to trace each letter over and over again.

Used to is also employed while talking about past situations as in the following sentences:

1. She used to travel a lot when she was young.
2. There used to be a lot of trees on this road.

**A. Rewrite the following sentences using used to and would. If both can be used in some cases, indicate the second alternative in the bracket.**

1. This huge building was a coffee house.
2. She helped the poor when she was at school.
3. I played football everyday last year after office hours.
4. When my sister was seven years old she ate ice cream regularly, but now she does not like it at all.
5. Her parents celebrated her birthday every year till she was five.
6. Tinku never sang earlier but now he sings in almost every school function.



7. My father smoked twenty cigarettes a day until two years ago but now he does not even touch them.
8. Whenever our English teacher was angry with us he gave us a lot of homework.
9. The main road facing my house was always empty a few years ago, but today it is awfully crowded.
10. I drove very fast when I began to learn driving.

**Let's Talk**

Discuss with your classmates the contribution of Louis Braille.

**Let's Write**

As the head boy/ girl of the Roshni School for the Blind, J&K, you have been asked by the editor of the school magazine to contribute a brief biographical sketch of Louis Braille for the first issue of the magazine. Using the information collected in question 8 of **Thinking about the Text**, write a biographical sketch of Louis Braille in a brief paragraph.

## **Teacher's Page (The Man Who Empowered the Blind)**

1. Ask the students how they feel when they come across a blind person?
2. Ask the students to make a group and play the role of a blind man and express the difficulties they face.
3. Ask them to make a comparison between the blind and the sighted. Tell them how reading and writing came into existence and continue by telling them how important reading and writing for the blind for making their life better.
4. Arrange a trip to the local blind school. Let the children interact with the people in the school, especially the learners there.
5. Ask the children to write a short profile of any one of the learners in the blind school after interacting with them.
6. Recite the poem on the blind boy in the class that you have read in Class IV.

**The following points shall be helpful for the teacher in teaching the differently-abled children:**

1. Just like a normal child learns reading first, a visually impaired child also needs to learn to read braille first.
2. Make sure that the child is sitting straight.
3. The braille reading material should be at a comfortable height.
4. Check the finger and hand position of the child. Braille should be read with the tips of the fingers. The fingers should be slightly bent and the wrist slightly elevated.
5. Ensure that the child is using both the hands while reading.
6. Let the child touch the dots softly.

## THE EAGLE

He clasps the crag with crooked hands,  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls.

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Alfred Tennyson



**Aguila Calva**

### New Words

clasp, crag, crooked, azure, wrinkled, crawl, thunderbolt

### Glossary

clasp:	hold tightly
crag:	a steep rough rock forming part of a cliff, peak
crooked:	not straight
azure:	deep blue like the colour of the clear sky or sea
wrinkled:	having folds
crawl:	move along the ground on hands and knees; move helplessly or powerlessly
thunderbolt:	a flash of lightning accompanying thunder.

### Reading is Fun

1. How does the eagle stand on the mountains?

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2. What does the eagle do on the mountains?

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3. What is the eagle compared to in the end? Why?

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4. Pick out the rhyming words from the poem.

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### Language Work

- A. Complete the summary of the poem by filling in the words from the box:

The eagle uses it ..... to hold on to the steep ....., high up in the sky. It is free to fly anywhere in the blue sky. The world beneath appears very small from the height. Above the mountains, the eagle looks upon the ..... which seems like a ..... baby. When the sharp vision of the eagle spots its prey, it ..... towards the earth quick as a thunderbolt.

crawling	ocean	rocks	descends	claws
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- B. Write down the names of the objects of nature that appear in the poem.

### Let's Talk

Which is your favourite bird? Tell your class about it?

### Let's Write

Write down the names of birds found in your area/region. Write a short description of any two of them. Learn the vernacular names of these birds.

### **Teacher's Page (The Eagle)**

1. Ask the students about birds. Ask them about wild, domestic and migratory birds. Then ask them about their favourite bird. Make them come one by one and write a few lines on the board about their favourite bird.
2. Ask them if they have ever watched an eagle. Then discuss the character of the eagle from the poem. To make the lesson more interesting, compare the qualities of the favourite birds of the students with the eagle.
3. Ask the children to draw their favourite bird and an eagle.
4. Ask them how their favourite bird is different from an eagle.
5. Ask the students if they have a pet. If yes, ask them to describe it in a few lines.
6. Ask the children to learn the names of ten birds in their mother tongue.