

Louis Braille

Opening the Doors of Knowledge

by James Rumford

1 **T**wo hundred years ago, if you were blind, you became a beggar. Or maybe, if you were lucky, a circus musician or a fortuneteller. Most seeing people pitied you because they thought you had only half their wits. Few understood that it was only your eyes that did not work. Your heart and your mind were like everyone else's.

2 So said a Frenchman named Haüy [ah-wee], who opened a school in Paris for blind children in 1784. He spent all his money to prove that the blind could learn. He even invented special books with huge, raised letters so that they could read with their fingertips.

3 News of Haüy's school spread across France, arriving one day in 1818 at the doorstep of a poor saddle maker named Simon Braille. Several years before, the saddle maker's three-year-old son Louis had punctured his eye with a sharp,

pointed awl while playing. Infection quickly sealed his eyes shut, and within days he was blind.

4 Everyone knew what was in store for the boy—a life of begging. But Louis's father and mother would have none of that. The village priest and the village schoolteacher agreed, and they taught Louis, even though there were no books for blind children to read or ways for them to write. But Louis was bright and in two years had learned all he could at the village school.

5 Then the village priest came knocking at the Brailles' door with an astounding proposal: send Louis to Paris, to Haüy's school. But how? There was no money. So the priest went to the most powerful man in the county, who wrote a letter to the school.

6 Within a few months, Louis had a scholarship and left his village of Coupvray [coo-vray] for a new life in Paris. He was only 10.

7 When Louis was 12, an extraordinary man named Captain Barbier [bar-bee-ay] came to the school. He wanted to show off his invention, called “night writing.” This was a code of 12 raised bumps that made it possible for soldiers to send and read messages in the dark.

8 The sighted teachers called Captain Barbier a clever man, but, when Louis slid his fingers over the bumps, he whispered, “No, he’s a genius!”

9 Louis realized that night writing was a way for blind people to write down the ideas that filled their heads. No longer would they have to ask seeing people for help. And night writing was a way for blind people to read, really read, instead of slowly tracing their fingers over giant, raised letters.

10 But night writing needed work. Its clumps of dots took too much time to write and were almost as hard as Haüy’s letters to read. For three years Louis punched out new combinations of dots, but nothing worked. Then one summer, when he was 15, he had a breakthrough. Instead of basing his letters on 12 dots, Louis based them on six. This made his letters easy to write—and easy to read, for each letter was small enough to fit under a fingertip.



11 Louis couldn’t wait to teach his friends back at school. Within days of his return, his friends were gliding their fingertips across words *they* had written. No longer did they need sighted people to write for them. Louis’s dots meant freedom!

12 The head of the school, Director Pignier [peen-yay], welcomed Louis’s dot system, but some of the teachers scoffed at the boy’s foolishness. How could the blind learn without the help of the seeing? How could the blind lead the blind? But Louis paid no attention. Before long, dot-filled books appeared in classrooms.

13 At age 17 Louis was made a teacher at the school; at 24, a full professor. Students filled his classes, and he in turn filled them with hope and the promise that they each had something valuable to contribute to the world.

14 Louis even used his dots to write down music. His students no longer had to memorize every piece. Now they could compose as well. More freedom. More promise.

15 In 1840, Director Pignier was dismissed and a teacher named Dufau [dew-foe] took his place. Dufau didn't like Louis's dots. They made the students too independent. One summer, when Louis was back in Coupvray, Dufau introduced a simplified form of Haüy's raised letters. Then, to make sure that everyone used the new system, he burned Haüy's books and Louis's as well. There was also a new rule: No more dot writing.

16 But no one gives up newly won freedom without a fight. Louis, even in his grief, knew that. The students defied the director. They wrote in secret. They passed notes at night.

17 When Dufau saw how the students supported Louis, he gave in. Dot books and dot writing were back. For the next eight years, Louis continued to teach, and his system of reading and writing flourished.

18 Then, in 1852, he became seriously ill and died. No newspaper mentioned his death. Only people at the school knew that a great man had passed away. They built a statue of their beloved teacher and wrote his life story.

19 Slowly, the world came to know of Louis Braille and adopted his system of dot writing. In 1952, 100 years after his death, his body was taken to Paris and buried alongside the heroes of France. That day, every newspaper in the world wrote about Louis, and thousands of blind people lined the streets to honor him. Louis Braille had given them the means to prove that their hearts and minds were like everyone else's.

