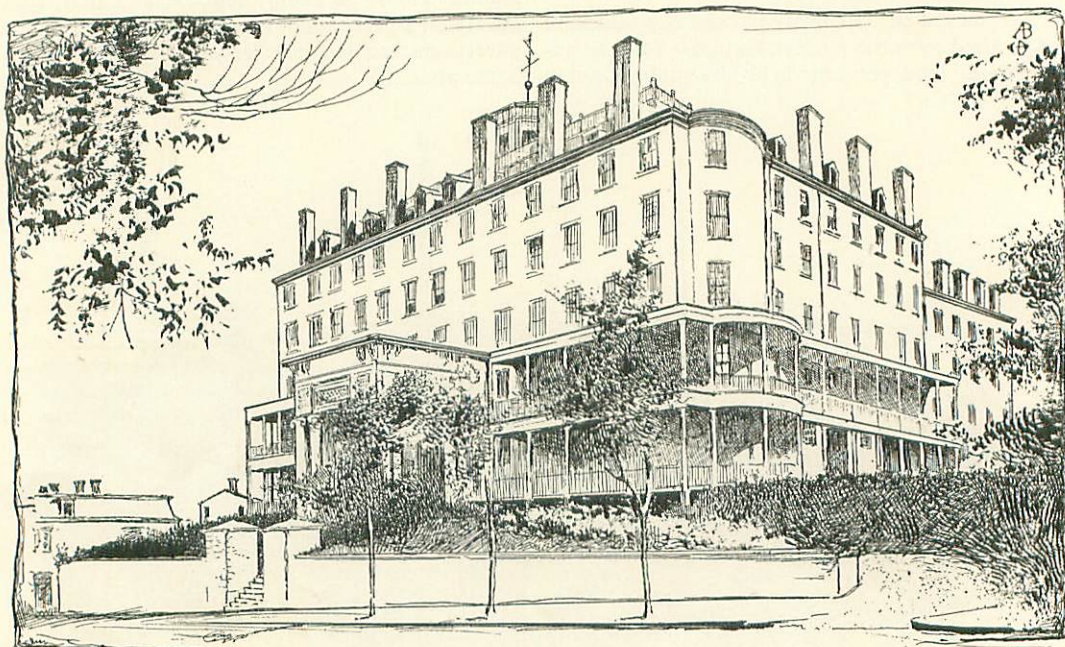


THE STORY OF LAURA BRIDGMAN.

BY JOSEPH JASTROW, PH. D.



THE PERKINS INSTITUTE FOR THE BLIND, SOUTH BOSTON.

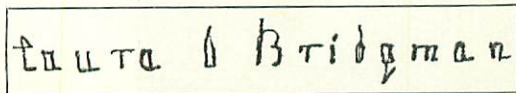
ONCE upon a time (so all strange stories begin) there was born a baby girl. The peculiar thing about this "once upon a time" is, that I can tell you just when it happened, while the fairy-tale writers never can. It was on December 21, 1829, she was born into this world; and no one dreamed of the wonderful life this child was destined to live. She was a pretty infant with bright blue eyes, but very delicate and small, and she was often severely ill. But when she came to be about eighteen months old, her health improved, and at two years of age, those who knew her describe her as a very active and intelligent child. She had already learned to speak a few words, and knew some of the letters of the alphabet.

But, when she was two years and one month old, came the sad event which was to make her life a strange one. The scarlet-fever entered the household. Her two elder sisters died of the disease, and she was stricken down by it. She was

dangerously ill for a long, long time. No one thought it possible that this delicate child could recover. For five months she was in bed, in a perfectly dark room. She could eat no solid food for seven weeks. It was a whole year before she could walk without support, and two years before she could sit up all day and dismiss the doctor. But she did not die, though for long her life hung by a slender thread. And, when she recovered, she was really born anew into a strange world—a world so strange that we of this world can hardly imagine what it is to live in it. The fever had destroyed her sight,—the poor little girl was forever blind. Nor was this all; her hearing, too, was totally gone. And, not being able to hear, she would never learn to talk as we do,—she was dumb. A pretty child of five years,—deaf, dumb, and blind! Even worse,—she had very little power to smell or taste. Touch was her only sense. Her fingers must take the place of eyes, ears, and mouth.

Of course the fever had destroyed all recollection of her babyhood. Her life in this beautiful world that children love, and which she had hardly known, was over. She must live in a dark world without sunshine,—a silent world without a sound. She could not even smell the flowers whose beauties she could not see.

But lest you should think so strange and sad a story is not meant to be true, I will tell you her name. It was Laura Dewey Bridgman. Here it is in her own handwriting :



Her parents—Daniel and Harmony Bridgman—lived on a farm about seven miles from Hanover, New Hampshire, and there Laura was born.

Some time ago I went to a large, old-fashioned building in South Boston—the Perkins Institute for the Blind. At the door of a neat cottage near the main building I asked for Miss Bridgman. Soon a pleasant-looking woman, fifty-seven years old, though looking younger, came into the parlor with the matron.

Miss Bridgman was rather tall and thin and usually wore large blue spectacles. When told my name, she shook hands and was pleased to learn that I brought the greetings of a friend of hers. Her face brightened and she uttered a low sound which she could make when pleased. She was very lively, and one could almost read her feelings by her face.

But how could she talk and be understood? That is a long and a strange story. I must begin at the beginning.

She lived on the farm near Hanover until she was eight years old. Her parents were poor and they knew nothing of the ways of teaching the blind or the deaf and dumb. They treated her with great kindness and taught her to make herself useful about the house. It was difficult to make her understand what they desired, but they communicated by simple signs. Pushing meant "go," and pulling, "come." A pat on the head meant "That 's good, Laura"; a pat on the back, "Laura must n't do that." When Laura wanted bread and butter she stroked one hand with the other to imitate the buttering; when she wished to go to bed, she nodded her head, just as other children do when "the Sandman" comes. And when she did n't wish to go to bed, but her father thought she ought (perhaps you have heard of such cases), he stamped on the floor until she felt the shaking, and Laura knew what he meant.

* I am never sure of her punctuation.

Her mother taught her to knit, to sew, to set the table, and to do other such little things. When she set the table, she never forgot just where the little knife and fork belonged for her little brother. But I will not tell this part of the story, because Laura has told it herself. When she was twenty-five years old, she wrote an autobiography, telling all she remembered of her life at home. Here it lies on my table; sixty-five pages written in a queer, square handwriting. She had a peculiar way of saying things; but when you remember that she never heard a word spoken, nor spoke one herself, and how hard it must be to learn to write without seeing the letters, you will think it wonderful enough that she could write at all. Here is the first page of the autobiography:*

"THE HISTORY OF MY LIFE.

"I should like to write down the earliest life extremely. I recollect very distinctly how my life elapsed since I was an infant. But that I have had the vague recollection of my infancy. I was taken most perilously ill when I was two years and a half. I was attacked with the scarlet-fever for three long weeks. My dearest mother was so painfully apprehensive that there was a great danger of my dying, for my sickness was so excessive. The physician pronounced that I should not live much longer. My mother had a watch over me in my great agony many many nights. I was choked up for 7 weeks as I could not swallow a morsel of any sort of food, except I drank some crust coffee. I was not conveyed out of the house, for an instant for 4 months till in June or July."

Then she tells how delighted her mother was when she was getting well, how attentive people were to her, and how the light stung her eyelids "like a sharpest needle or a wasp." She liked to see her mother "make so numerous cheeses, apple, and egg, and mince-pies, and doughnuts, and all kinds of food which always gratified my appetite very much." She tells how her mother spun and carded wool, and washed, and cooked, and ironed, and made maple-molasses, and butter, and much else. It is really wonderful how well she knew what was going on. She used to follow her mother about the rooms, and touch the various objects, tables, chairs, books, etc., until she knew them all.

Laura's great friend was a Mr. Tenny, a kind-hearted old man, who "loved me as much as if I was his own daughter," she writes. He used to take her out for a walk across the fields, or sit down by the brook and amuse her by throwing stones into the water and letting her feel the little waves, that the stones made, come back to the shore. She always knew Mr. Tenny and all her friends by simply feeling their hands. So you see that little Laura was quite happy. She never knew how

All the rest is just as she wrote it.

much more of the world other little girls could enjoy, and so she did not envy them. She says herself that "I was full of mischief and fun. I was in such high spirits, generally, I would cling to my mother, wildly and peevishly many times." She

my boot, nor any of my folks. I did not feel so solitary with a baby as I should have felt if I had not it." "I liked my living baby, the cat, much better than the boot."

In this way she spent three long years. Her few



LAURA DEWEY BRIDGMAN. (FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY CONLY, BOSTON.)

once seized Mr. Tenny's spectacles from his nose, and the old gentleman took it very good-naturedly. She innocently threw the cat into the fire, which neither her mother nor the cat considered good fun. She liked sweet things and nice dresses, and was not so very different from other girls, in any way. Of course she had a doll, but a queer one it was: "I had a man's large boot which I called my little baby. I enjoyed myself in playing with the artificial baby very much. I never knew how to kiss

signs were all that connected her with other human beings. She did not know the name of anything. She knew only the few things that she could touch. For all the rest she lived in that dark, silent, lonely world of her own. The green trees and gay flowers, the blue sky and floating clouds were unknown to her. Imagine, if you can, a world without color, without light! A perpetual night without moon or stars; would n't it be awful? No green fields and no sky; no blue eyes and golden hair; no pict-

ure-books nor bright dresses. And the sad stillness of that world, where nobody laughs and no birds sing and Mother's voice does n't call and comfort; where nobody can tell stories or play make-believe. Think of a child who could n't ask questions! Why, that's the principal thing that children have to do!

But Laura was not to stay much longer in her lonely world. One day a gentleman came to see her parents and offered to take Laura to Boston to teach her to read and write as other blind children do, and to talk with her fingers, as do the deaf and dumb. It was Dr. Samuel Howe, superintendent of the Perkins Institute for the Blind. He was one of those wise men who put heart and soul into whatever they decide to do. What Dr. Howe decided to do was to bring Laura Bridgman back into our world, just so far as that could be done. Of course her parents were sorry to have Laura go, but they knew it was for the best; and Laura felt just as homesick, when she came to the big institution in Boston, as any other girl of eight years would have felt. Of course she could n't know why she was taken away from home. She soon made friends with the matron, and with her teacher, Miss Drew. She spent much time, the first few days, in knitting, for she liked to have something to do, and took her work to the matron whenever she dropped a stitch.

One morning, after she was used to the Home, Dr. Howe and Miss Drew gave Laura her first lesson. They were to teach her the alphabet. But how? She could n't see the letters, but she could feel them if they were cut out of wood or raised on paper. But when she felt something like an A, she could not know what it was, and they could not tell her. It was just the same as feeling her mother's tea-pot:—it was a thing with a funny shape and did n't seem to be of any known use. As for three things, like C, A, T, spelling or meaning the puss, you might as well ask her to feel a table, a chair, and an inkstand, and give her to understand that *those* meant the cat. There did not seem to be any way of showing her what a word was for; *you* learned it just by hearing other people speak. But Laura had never heard nor read nor spoken a word since she could remember.

This is what Dr. Howe did. He took some things such as she knew at home,—a knife, fork, spoon, key, chair,—and then formed on labels in large raised letters the names of these things—KNIFE, FORK, etc. He made her feel the knife, and then passed her finger over the label; then he pasted the label, KNIFE, on the knife, to show that they belonged together, and made her feel them again. Laura submitted to it. But all she understood was that the labels were not all alike,

and people seemed to want to paste them on things. Her first lesson, lasting three-quarters of an hour, left her much puzzled. But at last, after many repetitions of this exercise, she seemed to get the idea that the raised labels *meant* the objects. She showed this by taking the label, CHAIR, and placing it on one chair and then on another. Now, Laura was interested; it was a splendid game. Dr. Howe gave her the things and she was to find the right labels; then he gave her the labels and she found the things. She had learned what a *word* is, and was delighted. Dr. Howe always patted her on the head when she was right, and tapped her lightly on the elbow when she was wrong. The lessons were long and tedious, but—she was acquiring a language!

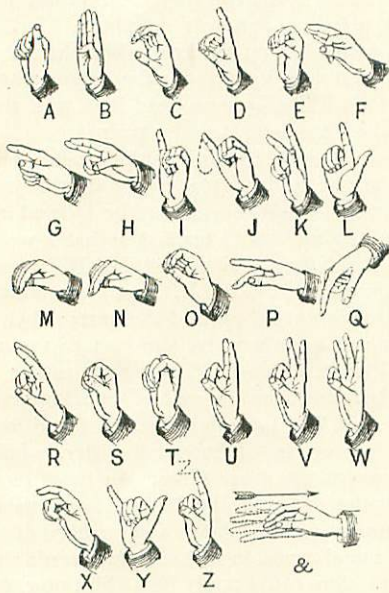
Of course one can not do much talking with a lot of labels; and a great many things that one wishes to talk about can not be labeled at all. The next thing was to teach her that a word was made up of letters. The label, BOOK, was cut up into four parts: B, O, O, K. Laura was then made to feel the label and each of the parts; then these were mixed together and she was to set up the word like the label. That was rather easy. Then Dr. Howe had a case of metal types made for her. It had four alphabets in it and one was always set up in alphabetical order, while she moved about the other three. In three days she learned the order of the letters, and could find any letter at once. She was never tired of setting up the metal types, to make the few words she had learned. She could really be a child now, for she could ask questions. She indicated the butter to ask what the name of it was, and her teacher set up B-U-T-T-E-R on the type-case. Laura felt it, took it apart and set it up again, and knew it ever after. Those were bright and busy days for her. She was making up for her long years of loneliness, and entering a real world at last.

But even this was a clumsy way of talking. There was a much quicker way for her: the finger alphabet; and that was learned next. Most deaf-mutes can *see* the signs, but Laura had to learn them by feeling. They gave her the type A to feel with one hand, while she felt the position of the teacher's hand with the other. Then she herself made the sign for A, and was patted on the head for getting it right. She was overjoyed with this easy way of talking. This is what her teacher said of it: "I shall never forget the first meal taken after she appreciated the use of the finger alphabet. Every article that she touched must have a name, and I was obliged to call some one to help me wait upon the other children, while she kept me busy in spelling the new words."

In that way she talked with me when I saw her

in Boston. The matron put her own hand in Miss Bridgman's and spelled out the words so fast that you could hardly follow the motions. But she was understood still faster and, with her other hand, Miss Bridgman was ready to spell out the answers. At one time, she went to lectures with her teacher, and if the lecturers spoke slowly her teacher could make the signs, and she could understand them as fast as the words were spoken.

So far, she knew only the names of things. When



THE FINGER ALPHABET.

she had learned about one hundred of these common nouns, Miss Drew began to teach her a few verbs. She let Laura feel the motion of the door as it was being closed, and then spelled out "Shut door" on her fingers. Then the door was opened and her teacher spelled out "Open door." Laura knew what "door" was, and so easily learned the meaning of "shut" and "open." Then adjectives were learned, beginning with such as could be easily understood, for example: heavy, light, rough, smooth, thick, thin, wet, dry. Next she learned proper names, and very soon she knew the names of all the many persons in that large institution. But just think! she never knew her own name nor even that she had one, until then—when she was nine years old. A year later, she began to learn to write. A pasteboard, with grooves in it, just the size of the small letters, was put under the paper. A letter was pricked in stiff paper so that she could feel its shape; then, holding the pencil in her right hand, she placed the forefinger of her right hand close up against the lead, so as to feel how the pencil was moving. It was rather

slow writing, but all the trouble it cost her to learn it was forgotten when she sent her first letter to her mother. You may be sure that all the village saw that wonderful letter, and not a few of the wise heads were rather doubtful whether Laura really had written the letter, after all.

Before going on with the story let me tell you of her mother's first visit to the institution. Laura had been away from home for six months, and doubtless had been wondering in her own mute way whether she should ever go home again. She did not know enough language to ask about it. Dr. Howe tells how the mother stood gazing, with tears in her eyes, at the unfortunate child, who was playing about the room and knew nothing of her presence. Presently Laura ran against her and began feeling her hands and dress to find out who she was; but soon turned away from her poor mother as from a stranger. Her mother then gave Laura a string of beads which Laura had worn at home. She recognized the beads and joyfully put them around her neck. Her mother now tried to caress her, but Laura preferred to play. Another article from home was given her and she was much interested. She examined the stranger more closely; she became very much excited and quite pale; suddenly it seemed to flash upon her that this was her mother. She cared nothing for beads or playmates, now! Nothing could tear her away from her mother's side.

But, when the time for parting came, Laura bore it like a little heroine. She went with her mother to the door and, after embracing her fervently, took her mother's hand in one of her own and grasped the hand of the matron with the other. Then she sadly dropped her mother's hand and, weeping, walked back into the house.

The language Laura used at first, and, indeed, what she always used, was somewhat different from that you and I talk, as is only natural in one whose language has not been learned by talking. Her language is more like written or "book" language. Here are a few of her early sayings and doings. When she wanted bread she said, "Bread give Laura." She once asked why t-a-c would not spell "cat" as well as c-a-t. That may seem silly to you, because you have heard it pronounced; but for her the letters were but three signs, and she could not see why one way of making them should not be as good as another. When she was taught what "right" and "left" meant, she correctly described her hands, ears, and eyes, as being right or left, but stopped in surprise when she came to her nose and did not know which to call it. When her lessons were rather long she said, "My think is tired." She soon began to make words as children do. She knew what "alone" meant and wished to say that she desired company, so she said, "Laura

go *al-tuo*." After giving her the word "bachelor," her teacher asked her to tell what it meant; she remembered old Mr. Tenny and spelled: "Tenny bachelor — man have no wife and smoke pipe."

She had a funny way of playing a game with herself. She would spell a word wrong with one hand, slap that hand with the other, then spell it right and laugh at the fun. And once, going over a box of ribbons that belonged to her teacher, she was tempted to take some, but she gravely knocked herself on the elbow, which was her own way of saying "wrong," and put them away. When she was quite alone, she sometimes talked to herself, and the little fingers spelled out the words as though they were proud of what they could do. Even in her sleep she has been seen to make the signs indistinctly with one hand and feel them with the other, as though mumbling something in her dreams.

At one time it was noticed that she was already up and dressing when they came to call her in the morning. When asked how she knew when to get up (for she had no means of knowing the time), she said she put her finger in the key-hole and, if she felt the shaking, then she knew the girls were moving about and it was time to rise. That was certainly very bright. She once brought her doll to school, and moved its fingers to spell out words and said, with delight, "Doll can talk with fingers; I taught doll to talk with fingers."

When Charles Dickens visited her, in 1842, he wrote some pages about her in his "American Notes," in which he mentions that Laura wore a green silk band over her eyes and, on picking up her doll, he noticed that a tiny band was tied across the doll's eyes too. The little girl wished the doll to live in her small world, where people could not see their eyes and had to talk with their fingers.

But it would be impossible to tell all there is to tell: how she learned arithmetic, and geography, and history, and much else; in short how a silent, sightless child, with power to make only a few signs, grew up into a well-educated, bright, pleasant, happy woman. You will find much of the story in a book about Laura Bridgman, written by one of her teachers, Mrs. Lamson.

I can only tell you in a few words how her life has been passed. Through the kindness of Mr. George Combe, of Scotland, and others, it was made possible to give her a teacher all to herself. Without one, she could not have been cared for as she deserved. Her teachers kept a journal in which they put down the story of Laura's progress, and you can read it in Mrs. Lamson's book.

She received all her education at the Perkins Institute for the Blind, and has always been there except when spending the vacations at home. She had many friends, and, through the reports that

Dr. Howe wrote for many years of her progress, had become known to people all over the world. Many ladies learned the finger alphabet simply to be able to talk with her, and she wrote and received many letters. Her room had a window facing south, and she often headed her letters "Sunny Home." She took pleasure in arranging her room and read a great deal. You know that quite a number of books have been printed in raised letters for the blind. The letters must be large and are printed on one side of the page only. It takes sixteen large volumes to print the Bible in this way. Most blind persons cultivate one finger for reading until it is very sensitive and can feel the letters very rapidly, but, of course, not so rapidly as we can read with our eyes.

Miss Bridgman became quite an author, too. Almost from the time she learned to write, she began to keep daily journals. Those she wrote during her first five years in Boston form quite a large pack, and are full of many interesting things. She recorded all her little daily doings, and in going through them from the earliest to the latest entries, you can see how she gradually used more and more words, and began to use capitals, and wrote more clearly. She had also written a few poems. These have no rhyme, of course, because that depends on the sound. What she says in her poems is in great part taken or imitated from the Bible.

Her spare time was devoted to knitting, sewing, crocheting lace and mats, and talking. I have a very pretty crocheted mat which she made in one evening. Though her life was a peaceful and happy one, it had also its severe trials. Several of her teachers, to whom she was much attached, died; her closest tie with the world was always her constant teacher and companion, who was eyes, ears, and tongue for her. Her teachers naturally learned to sympathize with her condition more than others could, and the loss of one of these dear friends was a great affliction. She even had to endure the loss of her benefactor, Dr. Howe. He had lived to see her grow up into what he had hoped she might become when he took her from her home in Hanover. His death occurred in 1876, and affected Miss Bridgman so seriously that she was very ill and weak for a long time afterward.

So she lived her quiet life, so the days grew into months, and the months into years — and so, also, quietly and peacefully she passed away, on the 24th of May, 1889.

Laura Bridgman's days of darkness are over. Many persons will, for a long time to come, think of her, and will often speak of the patience she showed in her affliction and the earnestness with which she labored to make the most of her life.

She was cared for to the last by the loving friends

who had made a happy existence possible to one so grievously helpless. Into her dark and silent world the wisdom of man found a way ; it brought to her the sense of human love and sympathy, and even made her a sharer in the world's treasure of learning and imagination.

THE STORY OF THE FLOWER.

BY HARRIET PRESCOTT SPOFFORD.

<p>A SPOTLESS thing enough, they said, The drift, perchance, from foreign lands, Washed in atop of mighty tides And lightly left along the sands.</p> <p>Was it the treasure of some shell? Some islander's forgotten bead? A wave-worn polyp from the reef? The gardener said, "It is a seed."</p> <p>"Bury it," said he, "in the soil. The earth will quicken here, as there, With vital force ; — so fair the seed, The blossom must be wondrous fair !"</p> <p>Ah, woe, to lose the ample breath Of the salt wastes ! To see no more The sacrifice of morning burn And blot the stars from shore to shore.</p> <p>Ah, woe, to go into the dark ! Was it for this, the buoyant slide Up the steep surge, the flight of foam, The great propulsion of the tide ?</p> <p>To lose the half-developed dream Of unknown powers, the bursting throe Of destinies to be fulfilled, And go into the dark—ah, woe !</p> <p>But the mold closed above the seed Relentlessly ; and still as well All life went on ; the warm winds blew ; The strong suns shone ; the soft rains fell.</p>	<p>Whether he slept, or waited there Unconscious, after that wild pang,— Who knows? There came to him at last A sense as if some sweet voice sang ;</p> <p>As if, throughout the universe, Each atom were obeying law In rhythmic order. In his heart He felt the same deep music draw.</p> <p>And one sharp thrill of tingling warmth Divided him ; as if the earth Throbbled through him all her stellar might With the swift pulse of some new birth.</p> <p>Up the long spirals of his stems What currents coming from afar, What blessedness of being glows,— Was he a blossom or a star ?</p> <p>Wings like their own the great moths thought His pinions rippling on the breeze,— Did ever a king's banner stream With such resplendent stains as these ?</p> <p>Over what honey and what dew His fragrant gossamers uncurled ! Forgotten be that seed's poor day, Free, and a part of this high world !</p> <p>A world of winds, and showers aslant, With gauzy rainbows everywhere, Cradled in silken sunshine, rocked In skies full of delicious air !</p>
<p>Ah, happy world, where all things live Creatures of one great law, indeed ; Bound by strong roots, the splendid flower,— Swept by great seas, the drifting seed !</p>	