



BLIND GIRLS KNITTING AND LISTENING TO A BLIND READER.

## THE EDUCATION OF THE BLIND.

BY PHILIP GIBBS.

*Illustrated from Photographs by J. A. Powell.*

**T**HERE are comparatively few people who have any definite knowledge of the condition and capabilities of the blind. The average person is apt to regard them simply as beings to be pitied, shut off from all the joys of life, utterly incapable of doing anything for themselves or anybody else. Even people with large hearts, always ready to sympathise with the sorrows of their fellow beings, are apt to think of the blind as only worthy objects of their charity, without realising that they may be educated to become useful members of

society. Fortunately, in spite of the general ignorance and indifference on this matter, there have been, and still are, a select few of ardent and unselfish spirits who have recognised that persons without sight, even from birth, may be given the privileges of higher education, and by careful training may be taught many professions and trades by which they can support themselves and be enrolled among the world's workers.

A visit to such an institution as the school at Swiss Cottage, maintained by the London Society for Teaching the Blind to Read, would do much to dispel the hazy ideas that are extant with



BLIND BOYS TAUGHT BY MEANS OF CLAY MODELS.



regard to the helplessness of the blind. The first thing which astonishes a visitor, who has come with a heart full of pity, is the general happiness and even joyous air which seems to pervade the place. On a Saturday afternoon, for instance, when the students have free time, the grounds are full of merry girls skipping or running about, so that it is almost impossible for a sighted stranger to realise that they are blind. On the afternoon when the writer visited this school the girls were sitting in the grounds in horse-shoe form,



ROPE-MAKING.

knitting, sewing, playing chess or draughts, while their mistress, Miss Hay, was diverting them with sprightly gossip. A general buzz of chatter was maintained, interrupted now and again by a merry peal of laughter from the girls. On no face was there a sign of unusual sadness.

In the boys' playground the same cheerful air prevailed. A game of cricket was in progress among three or four younger boys, and they seemed to enjoy it as heartily as any English schoolboy. Truly a strange sight! How did these sightless youngsters

know when and where to hit or throw the ball?

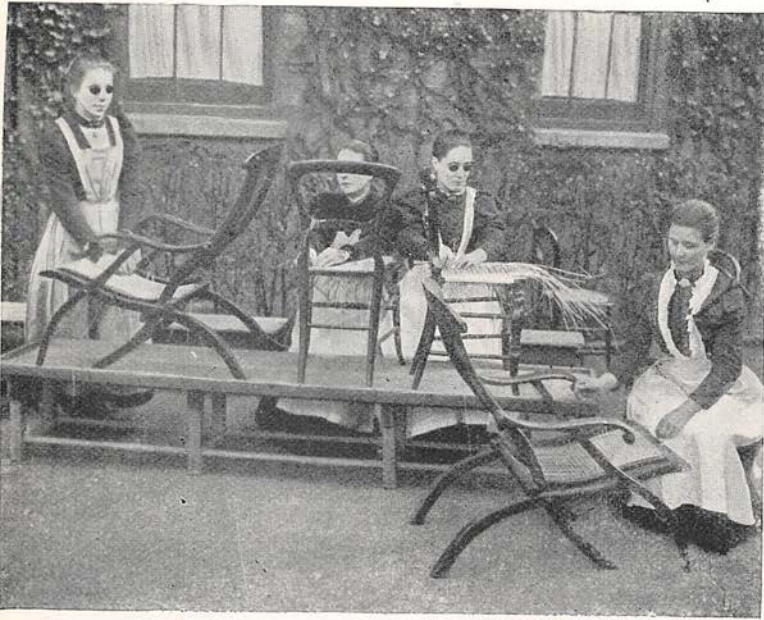
It is difficult for a sighted stranger to refrain from exclamations of astonishment at many of the things he sees done by the inmates of this institution, but there is a thoughtful notice in the hall and other places which requests visitors not to speak of the pupils' blindness in their hearing. Unfortunately people do not always observe this rule. Miss Hay, the head mistress of the school, tells the story of a lady who stood in front of one of the blind girls, and, after gazing at her for a moment with mingled compassion and disgust, turned away with a shudder, and said, in a loud voice, "Poor thing! what a horrible sight!"

Still less considerate than this was the remark of another lady who evidently considered herself a philosopher of the Stoic school. She met the Sunday procession of blind boys on their way to church, and with considerable emotion exclaimed to her husband, "Good Heavens, my love! Better shoot them at once!" The boys heard this remark and, doubtless to the lady's surprise, burst into peals of laughter.

Not more sensible are some of the questions asked by charitable visitors. "How do the blind eat?" "Can they find their way to their mouths?" "Do the blind wash themselves?"—these are some of the queries which may be heard on visiting days.

Some questions certainly frame themselves in the mind of any intelligent visitor to this school when he finds that the students possess a good elementary education, and that many of them read and enjoy such difficult literature as that of Carlyle or Thackeray, and can write intelligently on any ordinary subject of composition. How is it, one may ask, that a child blind from birth or babyhood can obtain any truthful idea of the world around it, of complicated forms and things which it can never see, nor smell, nor even touch, as castles, bridges, hills, or trains? How is it that without ever having seen a house, a tree, a horse, or one of their fellow beings, they can yet realise and enjoy the humours of a novel by





GIRLS CANING CHAIRS.

Charles Dickens, or talk intelligently upon any ordinary subject?

Even teachers of the blind cannot answer these questions fully. They can only tell you that their pupils learn to build up ideas by a comparative system through the medium of touch. But they will tell you also that this does not account for all their ideas, and that they seem to possess a perception beyond that obtained through sensation.

Of course, a collection of models is one of the best means of giving the blind accurate ideas of the world around them. A lump of soft clay in the hands of a capable teacher can easily build up miniature hills and valleys, castles with battlements, and other objects of Nature or man's handicraft, and the

imagination of the pupils can magnify these to the required size.

At the Blind School at Swiss Cottage the boys themselves are taught clay-modelling under the able guidance of the head master, Mr. Corbett Dyer. It is really remarkable to see the ingenious and intricate models which the boys build up. One of their latest achievements is a model which they call Portsmouth Harbour. It is built in a large zinc tray half filled with water and is a

capital imitation of a harbour with ports and towers. One of the boys, whose father is a boat-builder, has constructed some excellent clay boats, which float about the "harbour" to the delight of the sightless modellers. It was unusually pretty and interesting to



BASKET-MAKING.



watch one of these boys modelling a hand from a plaster copy. He was stroking the cast with the tips of his fingers, lightly feeling the bumps and indentations, and the general contour, so that his mind should have an exact idea of the subject. Then he deftly reproduced his idea in clay, and in all respects it was an admirable and exact copy of the plaster hand.

Of course, one of the earliest steps in the education of the blind is to teach them to read. When once they can do this they possess the key to all the knowledge which the human mind can achieve without the aid of sight. Many ingenious systems have been invented to convey printed characters to the minds of sightless people. The most popular at the present day is the Braille system, which is the one in use at Swiss Cottage Blind School. Louis Braille, the inventor of the system, was born at Coupvray, near Paris, in 1809. He lost his sight at the age of three, and when he was nineteen he entered the Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles at Paris. Here he distinguished himself as a pupil and afterwards became a professor. He learnt to read every system of blind characters then invented, but he recognised that all of them were faulty. He laboured to invent a simpler system which the blind could not only read easily, but might also write in relief. This he at last accomplished by the beautiful and ingenious system which bears his name. By various combinations of



BASKETS MADE BY THE BLIND.

six dots raised upon a plain surface, all the letters of the alphabet and many combinations and contractions are represented, and an ordinarily intelligent pupil finds no difficulty in learning to read and write by this system.

At the Blind School at Swiss Cottage the boys learn to print their own books. It is exceedingly interesting to watch one of these blind printers. He has a thin sheet of brass, folded in two, which is fixed into a wooden frame. On this is placed a movable metal guide with oblong holes large enough to allow six dots or dents to be punched in the vacant spaces. On each of these spaces above the metal the printer punches, by means of a blunt awl and a hammer, the dots which correspond to the letter required. When the metal sheet is covered with these dots it is taken from the frame and placed in the printing press. A sheet of cartridge paper is placed over the embossed metal in the same way as it would



ARTICLES MADE BY BLIND GIRLS.



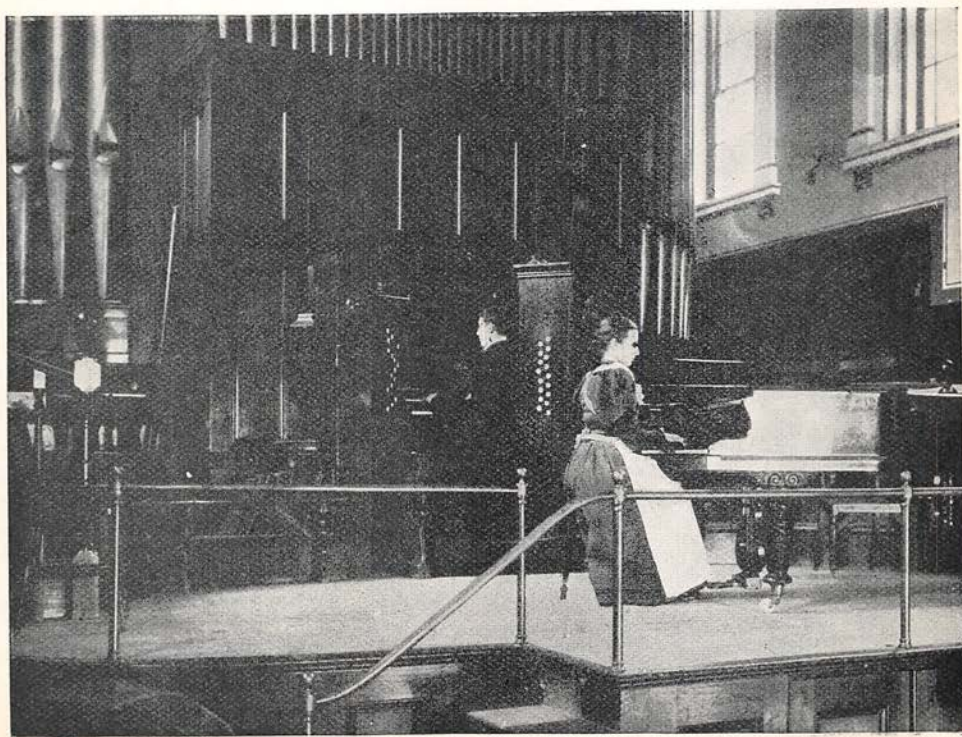
cover a stereo-plate on an ordinary printing machine. The pressure of the paper against the embossed metal causes it to be covered with a corresponding impression of dots. By means of these dots or "bumps" the blind student is provided with a perfect substitute for the letters of the ordinary sighted reader. The writing is done in the same way, except that the holes are punched in the paper without the backing of metal, and of course no printing press is required. Among



TUNING A PIANO.

the books printed by the blind scholars at this particular school

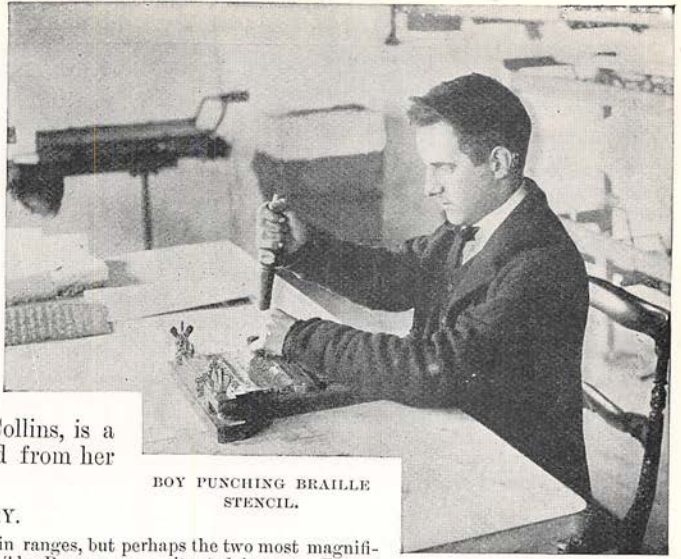
are the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, and a History of England.



BLIND ORGANIST AND BLIND PIANIST.



At this institution is produced one of the most extraordinary magazines in the world. It is edited, written, and printed by blind boys and girls. Some of the contributions are not only remarkable, considering the difficulties under which their authors labour, but are excellent in themselves. We do not think the readers of the WINDSOR will begrudge the space occupied by the following extract from this school magazine when they reflect that the author, Miss Jessie Collins, is a young girl who has been blind from her early childhood—



BOY PUNCHING BRAILLE STENCIL.

#### MOUNTAIN SCENERY.

Europe has many beautiful mountain ranges, but perhaps the two most magnificent are the Pyrenees and the Alps. The Pyrenees are situated between France and Spain and have very picturesque scenery. Their lofty peaks are covered with a cold mantle of snow, while in green contrast their sides are clothed with large forests of pine, oak, chestnut and beech. But, beautiful as these mountains are, they seem a mere nothing beside the solemn grandeur of the Alps. Great travellers have, by art and poetical language, tried to awaken in us the feelings of ecstasy and awe which they themselves experienced whilst gazing on their majestic heights.

Seen by daylight the aspect of the Alps is stern and cold, with nothing to break the dreary monotony of broad sheets of ice and snow. Far up the mountains the little Alpine primrose lives its solitary life, with no one to behold its simple beauty but its Creator.

Let us turn from this picture of solitude and view the Alps in the early morning. It is a glorious sight to see peak after peak light up with the soft colours of the rising sun, while the valleys below are wrapped in shadows. Gradually the splendour brightens, turning the glaciers into crowns of sparkling diamonds worthy to adorn the hoary heads of these mighty kings of solitude.

We cannot wonder that Europe rejoices in the pride and magnificence of the Alps, and that the great Aurora should enthrone herself on their mighty summits and clothe them in her brightest glory.



TAKING IMPRESSIONS FROM BRAILLE STENCIL.

Can anyone read this pretty piece of imaginative writing without marvelling that a sightless person can gain such vivid ideas of the beauties of Nature, never having seen them except by the eyes of fancy?

Many of the pupils at this school are taught music, and they have achieved an excellent standard of proficiency. When the writer of this article visited the school, two young musicians were performing in the large concert-room, which is provided with a magnificent organ and a "Broadwood" which cost three hundred guineas. A boy was seated at the organ, making the noble instrument throb with a flood of solemn and glorious music. Then a young girl filled the room with a thousand sweet harmonies from the piano. As her fingers swept lightly over the keys a bright beam of sunshine fell upon her uplifted face and fair hair, and without sentiment it may be said that a hush of awe came upon the hearers, as they watched the look of joy upon the



delicate features of the blind girl and listened to the cascade of silvery notes struck by her fingers.

Many of the students are taught piano-tuning, and this knowledge enables them to earn their living in after-life when they have to leave the friendly shelter of this benevolent institution.

This particular school at Swiss Cottage is more a general educational institution than one for teaching definite trades to the blind. In spite of this, however, the girls are taught sewing, knitting and crochet-work, rope-making and chair-caning. Some of their specimens of needlework are almost miracles of workmanship, considering their authors. The most intricate and beautiful patterns are produced by these afflicted girls with as much perfection as by the most competent of sighted needlewomen.

The trade specially taken up by the men is basket-making, and some of them are employed as paid craftsmen in this capacity when they are too old to remain in the school as pupils. From the accompanying photographs it will be seen that want of sight does not prevent them from making the most elaborate and complicated articles of basketwork.

Many other things are to be seen at this admirable institution, all of which go to prove that the blind may be trained to become most useful members of society, and that they can appreciate the privileges of higher education, and can learn trades and professions by which they may earn their livings creditably and happily. All honour to the men and women who have founded and who maintain such noble institutions as the Blind School at Swiss Cottage.



“WHEN THE FLOWING TIDE COMES IN.”

*From a photograph by the Woodbury Permanent Photographic Co.*