

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1897.

TEACHING THE BLIND.

HOW INSTRUCTION IS IMPARTED TO THE SIGHTLESS.

The Ecole Braille in Paris and Its Unfortunate Pupils—How Geography and Natural History Are Learned—The Blind in the States.

Most visitors to Paris and other large French towns have been in turn moved and disgusted by the unsightly mass of beggars who crowd around the porch of each French church and public building. More particularly is the French love of children exploited, and the birth of a blind child into a poverty stricken family is often hailed with rejoicing, for the unfortunate will very soon become a very profitable source of income to all those connected with him.

A well-known philanthropist, M. Pephau, made up his mind to provide a remedy for this deplorable state of things. After many fruitless efforts, he interested the government in his scheme, and on Jan. 1, 1883, was formally opened the Ecole (school) Braille, which, though originally founded in Paris, has now been transferred to the pretty country town of Saint Mande. Once however, that a blind child has the good fortune to find himself an inmate of the Ecole Braille, his lot may be envied by his more fortunate brother or sister, for each blind scholar is not only carefully taught all that the ordinary French child learns in the primary government schools, but also shares in the advantages of a splendid and delightful playground.

Most people have heard of the Braille system of teaching the blind, but probably few realize exactly in what it consists. The sense of touch or feeling is very highly developed among those who are without sight and it is extraordinary to what an extent this sense can be cultivated and increased. The Braille system simply consists of developing and applying the sense of touch till through it the pupil can be taught everything, from the alphabet to basket-making. In other words, although it may seem paradoxical to say so, everything is done to develop among the blind the sense of observation. Indeed, in some ways the inmates of the institution would seem to be even more intelligent and quick than are ordinary children, and, as a rule, they reply to the questions put to them, by their masters and mistresses quickly and accurately.

In the Ecole Braille the blind are afforded opportunities not only to acquire an education but also a trade or occupation, and attention is devoted to their physical culture and training in athletics. In short so far as their condition permits, all the advantages granted to those in full possession of their faculties are accorded also to the blind.

The school is named in honor of the famous teacher who invented what many regard as being the most practical alphabet for the blind. Besides his invention of the alphabet Braille was a practical writer on subjects of interest to the blind and their teachers, and many of his suggestions were so full of common sense that they have been since adopted in most of the institutions for these unfortunates.

Teaching a blind child to read with its fingers is one of the most interesting performances to be witnessed in the institution. The little one's fingers are taken in hand by the teacher, the points and their position are explained, and one letter after another is taught, solely through the sense of touch.

To teach a blind child geography would seem a hopeless task, for never having seen the hills, the rivers, the plains, it would appear difficult, if not impossible, to communicate to such a mind the idea of these objects. In reality the process is easy. The play-ground is perfectly level and contains no posts or other objects, against which the children might run, and in their haste hurt themselves. A plain is, therefore, but an extension of the play-ground for hundreds of kilometers, and the idea is perfectly understood. In their walks the children are taken to a brook, made to climb down its banks to the water and to ascertain for themselves its dimensions. A river is only a brook one or two kilometers in breadth; the children are conducted to the steepest hill to be found in the vicinity, made to climb it, and then given to understand that mountains are many times higher and steeper than this hill and that other countries of the earth are far larger than that in which they live. When these facts have been gained the

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children are taken to a large globe on which the continents, the mountains, the plains are in relief. A line of prominence represents a range of mountains, the courses of the rivers are indicated by depressed lines cities, by round headed tacks, the boundaries of countries by slips of sheet iron, set edgewise in the plaster of which the globe is made. The shape of the earth is first explained, then the continents are named, and the pupils trace each with their fingers until perfectly familiar outline. Then the different countries are named, their boundaries are given, and, as each is explained, the pupil traces its limits with his fingers. Thus little by little, a knowledge of the whole earth is acquired, and afterward this general information is supplemented by flat maps, also in relief, and on a larger scale of the different countries.

Natural history is taught by the use of stuffed animals, the institution Braille having a large museum of stuffed animals and birds. With the domestic animals such as

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the cat, dog, horse and cow, the children are already, in most cases, familiar; then the points of similarity between these and the other animals are explained, and the children soon learn that a fox is like a dog and that among birds there are general resemblances which constitute them a class by themselves. The specimens of the Ecole Braille are selected with a view to illustrating the peculiarities of the animal creation, and it is said to be in the highest degree entertaining to see the amusement with which the children discover that a pelican has an enormous pouch under his bill; that the mountain sheep has horns so disproportioned to his size.

Music is taught the blind by means of the Braille system of letters. The blind have not, as is commonly supposed, better musical gifts than other people, and far more labor is required for them to become expert musicians than is necessary for one in the possession of his sight. Those who can see, read at a glance a double line of music; the blind must read with their fingers, one note at a time, then commit a passage to memory ere they can retain it. With practice, however, they often become wonderfully expert at both reading and playing, the adaptation of the Braille sys-

tem to musical notation materially lessening their labor.

Trades for the blind are far more numerous now than they were ere systematic instruction began. The blind make baskets and brushes and bedding, ropes, sacks, matting and chairs while the girls learn knitting, sewing, crocheting, and embroidery, and both sexes frequently attain in these trades a cleverness which makes their work equal to that of men and women who can see. Piano tuning is a favorite trade, and perhaps the best as regards its remuneration, and blind tuners are usually thorough and effective in their work. All trades which the blind can practice are now taught in the institutions for their special instruction, and it is gratifying to know that the list of occupations is increasing.

The number of these unhappy people is much larger than is commonly supposed. In the United States in 1890 there were 50,411 blind persons, an increase of nearly 2,000 over the preceding census. In England and Wales the number is 23,487; in the German Empire there are 37,672; in France there were at the latest returns 32,060.

The instruction of the blind is of comparatively recent date. Formerly they were taken care of simply as unfortunates, no attempt being made to give them instruction. Saint Louis, in 1260, founded a hospital for soldiers, crusaders who, on the burning sands of Syria, lost their eye-

sight. Other hospitals were founded from time to time, but the first effort at education was by Bernoulli, in 1857, who tried to teach a blind girl to read. Valentine Haug, in 1784, made the first successful attempt, in a practical way, toward systematic instruction of the blind, and he has been followed by a host of devoted men and women, many of them themselves unfortunates in this respect, who have brought the training of this class up to the highest point.

There are in Great Britain and Ireland sixty-one institutions and asylums, where the blind are either cared for or receive a measure of instruction. Germany has thirty-five institutions. France twenty-three and Italy twenty-two. The United States has thirty-six schools for the education of the blind which contain about 2,500 pupils. On the whole, the condition of these people is, in this country, far in advance of what it is in any other. Every blind child in the United States has the right to be educated at public expense, and in our institutions the instruction given is not surpassed in scope or method by that of any foreign country.

Plenty of Exercise.

High Priced Doctor—You are now convalescent, and all you need is exercise. You should walk ten, twenty, thirty miles a day, sir but your walking should have an object. Patient—All right, doctor. I'll travel around trying to borrow enough money to pay your bill.