

Latest particulars of the history of Laura Bridgman / compiled chiefly from the last report of the late S.G. Howe.

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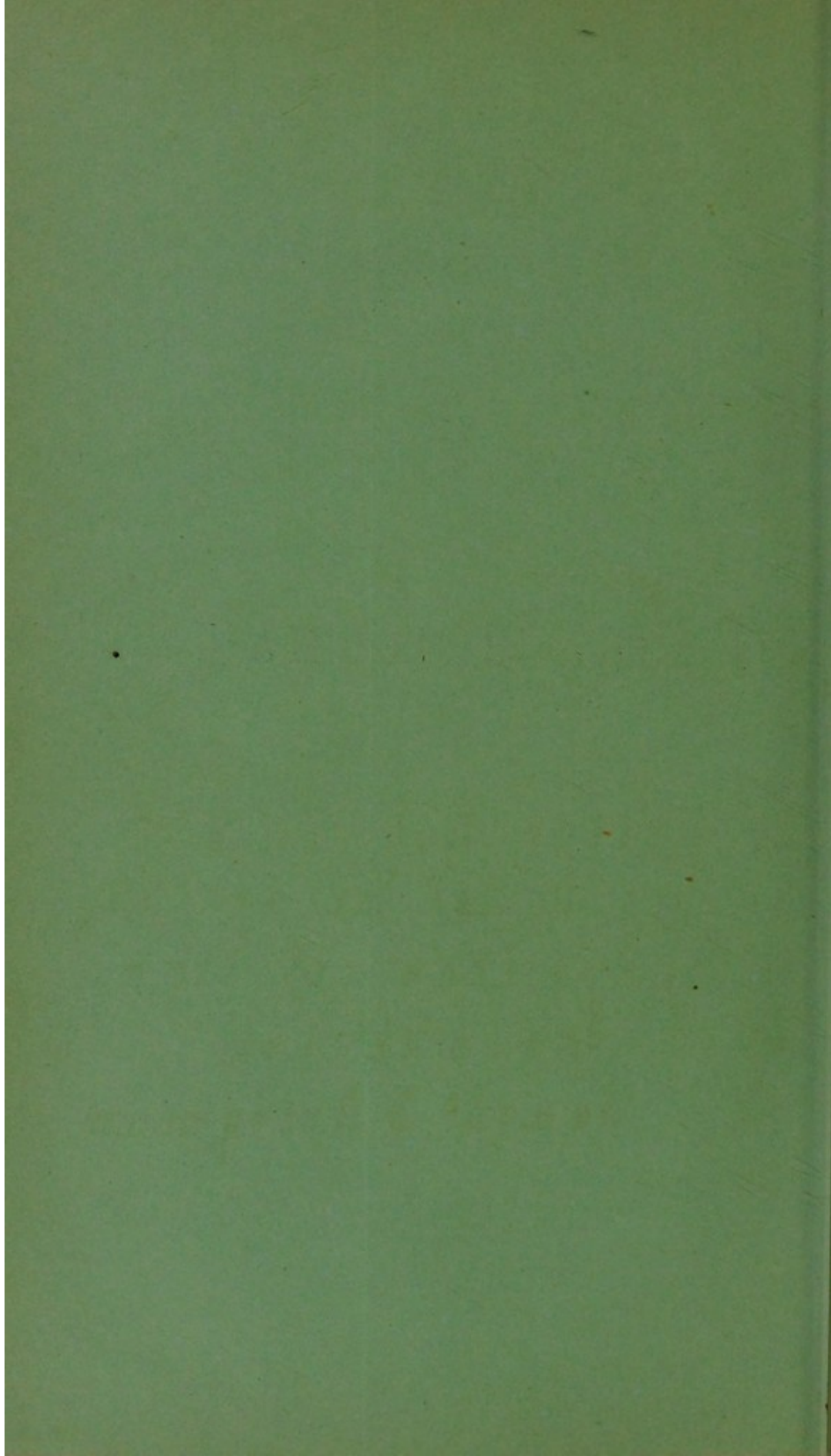
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LAURA BRIDGMAN.



LATEST PARTICULARS

OF THE

HISTORY OF LAURA BRIDGMAN.

COMPILED CHIEFLY FROM THE LAST
REPORT OF THE LATE DR S. G. HOWE,
DIRECTOR OF THE BOSTON INSTITUTION FOR THE BLIND.

Y praise God for his
mercy to let me meet
a true friend of the
Lord Jesus Christ
Laura Bridgman

EDINBURGH:
PRINTED BY NEILL AND COMPANY

1877.

“IT IS A CURIOUS CASE, THIS OF LAURA’S—A poor blind and deaf girl, of humble history and humbler hopes,—unconscious of being the object of special regard, and yet every act and word carefully noted down, and more eagerly looked for by thousands in various parts of the world than those of purple-born princesses! and yet it may not be a solitary case. It may be that each one of us is watched over with tender interest by guardian spirits;—that ‘all our faults are observed, conned, and scanned by rote, and set in a book,’ not, perhaps, ‘to be cast in our teeth,’ but to serve the great purposes of truth and good.

“Could Laura be suddenly restored to her senses, and clothed with our faculties and intellect, which so far transcend hers, she would stand amazed to find herself the centre of so much observation; she would fearfully and anxiously look back to recall all her past thoughts and deeds, and, perhaps, painfully repent that some of them had not been better. So it may be with us when the clog of the flesh shall be removed from those faculties and powers that so far transcend those of the body. We may find that what we whispered in secret was heard through the universe,—what we did in the darkness was seen as at noonday. But it is better for her and for us that it should be as it is—that we should shun the wrong, not because others may punish us, and do the right, not because others may reward us, but because the one is good and the other is bad.”—Dr Howe’s remarks on the operation of a conscience in Laura.

PREFATORY NOTE.

THE object in presenting this short account of Laura Bridgman to friends on this side the Atlantic, is to give an opportunity of responding to the Appeal on her behalf, so gently put by her benefactor and best friend, Dr Howe, in his last report issued shortly before his death (see p. 8). This appeal has already secured some small contributions for Laura, and one kind friend who had received a little note of thanks from Laura's own hand, "invited all friends who feel interested in Laura's case to join with her in giving a shilling. She asks only that sum, and will be much gratified by being able to remit at least £1 to Laura." This good work it was felt would gladly be shared in by many others if the peculiar circumstances were more widely known. A request was forwarded to Boston for some copies of the plate which accompanied Dr Howe's report, with a statement of the object proposed, to which the following reply from M. Anagnos, son-in-law of Dr Howe, has just been received:—

PERKINS INSTITUTION AND
MASSACHUSETTS ASYLUM FOR THE BLIND,
BOSTON, *November 28th, 1876.*

MY DEAR SIR,—I do not know how to express to you my gratitude and pleasure at your goodness, and that of your friends, to Laura. It goes right to my heart I assure you; and, what is much more to the point, will be a great help to her.

I take the greatest pleasure in forwarding to you by mail a small package, containing 150 copies of the plate you desire, one of her recent photographs, one of her crotchetted mats, two lace-collars, and some extracts of Dr Howe's accounts of Laura. I am very sorry that we have no lithographed copies of her handwriting.

Laura's life will, I suppose, yet be written; but I regret to say that I cannot refer you, at present, to any other works than those which you yourself make mention of, viz., the Doctor's notices of her, and the sketch given by Dickens in his "American Notes." *

Her religious feelings are very strong, and she is a regular communicant at the Church of which she is a member; although, owing to her infirmity, she does not attend the services at other times.

Our friend, Dr Jarvis, is appointed Dr Howe's successor in the care of the School for Idiots; but as he is pretty infirm, his assistant, Dr Henry Tuck, is the acting Superintendent. I will tell the good Doctor that you ask for him.

I shall be much obliged if you will be so kind as to send me one or two copies of the little pamphlet you intend printing.

Please accept, dear Dr Brodie, my warmest thanks for all your goodness to Laura, and believe me ever yours, most sincerely,

M. ANAGNOS.

Dr DAVID BRODIE,

Private Institution for the Education of
Mentally Peculiar Children, Liberton, Edinburgh.

The photograph and specimens of Laura's work may be seen, and copies of this pamphlet obtained, at the Royal Blind Asylum, Nicolson Street, Edinburgh.

It is confidently hoped that not a few will follow in the wake of the kind friend who has originated this effort, and that a substantial contribution to Laura's comfort may soon be forwarded to her.

DAVID BRODIE.

LIBERTON, *January 15, 1877.*

* In a former note M. Anagnos says, "I am sorry to say that Dr Howe's last illness prevented him from putting into shape for publication his promised work on the education of Laura, and that his notes and memoranda on the subject are so incomplete and in such a crude state that no one else can finish it."

An interesting notice of Laura appears in "The Early Choice; a Book for Daughters," by the late Rev. W. K. Tweedie, D.D. T. Nelson & Sons, London, Edinburgh, and New York; and a volume, entitled "An Account of Laura Bridgman," pp. 192, was published by Houlston and Stoneman, London, 1852; an article also appears in the "Revue Philosophique," *L'education de Laura Bridgman*, 4ieme livraison, Paris, 1876.

LAURA BRIDGMAN.

DR HOWE first heard of Laura in 1837 through an account in a country newspaper, of a girl devoid of sight, hearing, and smell. His interest was aroused, and he set off at once to ascertain the facts of the case. He found in a village in the mountains of New Hampshire a pretty and lively girl about six years old, who was TOTALLY BLIND AND DEAF, and who had only a very indistinct sense of smell, so indistinct that, unlike other young deaf mutes who are continually smelling at things, she did not smell even at her food. Her senses had been lost through scarlet fever, at so very early an age that Laura had no recollection of any exercise of them. Dr Howe's proposal to give her regular instruction seemed to be a very wild one; but her mother, a woman of great natural ability, animated by warm love for her daughter, eagerly assented to the proposal, and in a few days Laura was brought to his house in Boston, and placed under regular instruction. At first several hours a day were devoted to physical training. She learned to use her hands, and to control her muscles and limbs. But Dr Howe's chief aim was to get her to learn the 26 letters of the alphabet, and Laura submitted patiently to the tedious process without at all understanding its purpose. The whole course by which Dr Howe attained his object is so interesting that we must give it somewhat in detail. He selected two articles, a *pin* and a *pen*, so that the signs for their names might be as simple as possible. He familiarised her with the objects themselves, and then proceeded to form the three letters—*pen*—with his hand, making Laura feel carefully the position of his fingers. He did the same with *pin*, and repeated each lesson many scores of times. She at last perceived that the signs were complex, and that the middle sign of the one differed from the middle sign of the other, that is the *i* from the *e*. This was the first step gained. This process was repeated over and over hundreds of times, until finally the association was established in her mind between the three signs expressed by the three positions of the fingers and the article itself, so that when the pen was given to her she would make the sign, and when the sign was made by her teacher she would smile as in triumph and hold up the pen, as much as to say—"This is what you want."

Dr Howe rejoiced as well, for he felt that the first and only really difficult step was surmounted, and that by continuing the same process she could now go on and learn the forty and odd thousand signs or words in the English language. By degrees Laura learned all the 26 letters of the alphabet, and how to arrange them to express various objects; then she learned the 10 numerals, and then the punctuation and exclamation and interrogation points, some 46 signs in all. She had thus got the *key* to the whole treasury of the English language. She seemed fully alive to the importance of these acquisitions, and at times was too radiant with delight to be able to conceal her emotions. Dr Howe says, "It sometimes occurred to me that she was like a person alone and helpless in a deep, dark, still pit, and that I was letting down a cord and dangling it about, in hope that she might find it; and that, finally, she would seize it, and clinging to it be drawn up into the light of day and into human society." And so it did happen, and she herself instinctively and unconsciously aided in her happy deliverance.

Laura afterwards learned the same signs in types, which she could press on stiff paper, and so read. She was also provided with types having projecting pin-points, which, when pressed upon paper, left a dotted outline on the reverse side. She was also taught to write letters and words with a lead pencil, by the aid of the French Writing Board for the Blind, the most effective and cheapest method ever yet invented for regulating the size of the letters, and securing straight lines.

But Laura had yet to learn the words expressive of the material, or moral qualities of the things, with the names of which she was now familiar. The process was slow and difficult, but her native shrewdness and love for learning new things was so great that success followed; for instance, she knew that some of her companions were rough and impatient with her, while others were gentle and kind. By a little skill she was made to associate the one class with a sour apple, and the other with a sweet one, and thus she was supplied with a sign for a moral quality. This is but a rough illustration of a process which it is difficult to explain even in the experience of ordinary children.

But success came of faith and patience. It was Dr Howe's conviction that Laura possessed that grand universal characteristic of humanity, the innate disposition and capacity and desire to acquire and use a complete language, and she only required the discovery and application of such devices as would reach the dark and still abode in which her spirit was enshrouded. In this faith he acted; and holding to it firmly, succeeded in bringing her out of her mental darkness into light. Dr Howe generously confesses that he was much aided in the training of Laura by young lady teachers, who became in love with the work, and devoted themselves to it with saintly patience and perseverance. Great assistance also was given to Laura by the blind pupils of the Institution.

At an early stage of her training Dr Howe says, "She is now very expert with her needle ; she knits very easily, and can make twine bags and various fancy articles very prettily. She is very docile, has a quick sense of propriety, dresses herself with great neatness, and is always correct in her deportment. In short, it would be difficult to find a child in the possession of all her senses, and the enjoyment of the advantages that wealth and parental love can bestow, who is more contented and cheerful, or to whom existence seems a greater blessing than it does to this bereaved creature, for whom the sun has no light, the air no sound, and the flowers no colour or smell."

The innate desire for knowledge, and the instinctive efforts which the human faculties make to exercise their functions, is shown most remarkably in Laura. Her tiny fingers are to her as eyes, and ears, and nose, and most deftly and unceasingly does she keep them in motion ; like the feelers of some insects which are continually agitated, and which touch every grain of sand in their path, so Laura's arms and hands are continually in play ; and when she is walking with a person, she not only recognises everything she passes within touching distance, but by continually touching her companion's hands she ascertains what he is doing. A person walking across a room while she had hold on his left arm, would find it hard to take a pencil out of his waistcoat pocket with his right hand without her perceiving it.

Thus doth her now active mind, though all silent and dark within, commune by means of her one sense with things external, and gratify its innate craving for knowledge by close and ceaseless attention. Her curiosity is insatiable, and by the cheerful toil and patient labour with which she gleans her scanty harvest of knowledge, she reproves those who having eyes see not, and having ears hear not.

So she went on, diligently and happily, for a score or more of years until at last she acquired a large vocabulary of words, and could converse readily and rapidly with all deaf mutes and all persons who could use these signs. She could read printed books readily and easily, finding out for herself, for instance, any chapter or verse of Scripture. She could also write down her own thoughts and experience in a diary, and she could read letters from her friends in pricked type, or by the Braille system of points. Thus was she brought at last into easy and free relations with her fellow creatures, and made one of the human family.

During many years Laura passed most of her time in exercises such as those above described, new ones being devised as she proceeded. She spent as many hours daily in her studies and mental work as was consistent with her health, but all the rest of the time was given to gymnastics or learning to handle domestic implements, as the broom, the dishcloth, and the needle ; to sew, to knit, to braid, to occupy herself in simple

house-work, sweeping floors, dusting furniture, making beds ; finally, to more difficult kinds of work, as crotchet-work and the like.

In all these things she succeeded so well, that she is now capable of earning a livelihood as assistant to any kind and intelligent housekeeper who would accommodate her work to Laura's ways.

To make the whole method and process of instruction, long and tedious as it was, fully understood, will require a good sized volume ; but I must limit myself here to an expression of the thought and principle which gave me courage to begin and perseverance to finish the work. I propose to give later a minute account of the instruction of this dear child, and the condition into which it has brought her.

Dr Howe further says—I take this opportunity to say that Laura is now about 44 years old. Her father has recently died, and the little property which he thoughtfully left for his widow, and this, the most dearly beloved of his children, has been very selfishly, ungenerously, and, as I think, unlawfully, misappropriated by some relatives, so that Laura and her aged mother must bear such unkind treatment in the old homestead, that they continue to live in it only through the lack of means to live elsewhere.

Laura has for many years continued to earn a little money by making small articles in bead and crotchet work, and she has the interest of \$2000 bequeathed to her by two kind lady friends, Mrs and Miss Loring. She has also a home during the cold season at the Institution, but still she barely receives enough for necessary articles of dress, whereas she has a feminine love for personal ornamentation, and delights in fashionable dresses, bonnets, and the like, and trinkets for her dressing table, and it would give me, adds Dr Howe, great pleasure to gratify her innocent taste to a reasonable, and even to a little unreasonable degree.

Any persons disposed to make addition to the Loring Fund can do so by remitting to me, or to the Treasurer of the Institution, with explanations of their wishes.

In response to this invitation, some friends have felt it a privilege to send to Boston some small expressions of sympathy with Laura and her mother in their trying circumstances, and these notes of the simple facts of the case are sent forth in the assurance that others will gladly join in doing a kindness to one so singularly dependent on the sympathy and aid of her fellows. One incident in Laura's history is of such special interest as to deserve to be here put on record

Many years did not elapse till Dr Howe heard of another case in the same sad condition as Laura—Oliver Caswell, a comely boy of 12 years and in good health, but totally blind and deaf from early infancy. He was brought to the Institution, and the same zealous and intelligent young ladies who had been engaged in training Laura employed the same methods and contrivances in his instruction. After long, oft-repeated, and patient efforts,

he got hold of the thread by which he was led out of his dark and isolated labyrinth into light. Laura took great interest and pleasure in assisting those who undertook the tedious task of instructing him. She loved to take his brawny hand with her slender fingers, and show him how to shape the mysterious signs which were to become to him keys of knowledge and methods of expressing his wants, his feelings, and his thoughts; so that he might have free and full communion with father, mother, brother, sister, and friends of all degrees. No scene in a long life, says Dr Howe, has left more vivid and pleasant impression upon my mind than did that of these two young children of nature, helping each other to work their way through the thick wall which cut them off from intelligible and sympathetic relations with all their fellow-creatures. They must have felt as if immured in a dark and silent cell, through chinks in the wall of which they got a few vague and incomprehensible signs of the existence of persons like themselves in form and nature, — would that the picture could be drawn vividly enough to impress the minds of others as strongly and pleasantly as it did to my own. I see Laura grasping one of Oliver's stout hands with her long, graceful fingers, and guiding his forefinger along the embossed paste-board before them, while with her other hand she feels the changes in the features of his face to find whether, by any motion of the lips or expanding smile he shows any sign of understanding the lesson; while her own handsome and expressive face is turned eagerly toward his, every feature of her countenance absolutely radiant with intense emotions, among which curiosity and hope shine most brightly, Oliver with his head thrown a little back shews curiosity amounting to wonder, and his parted lips and relaxing facial muscles express keen pleasure until they beam with that fun and drollery which always characterize him. * * *

Three years wrought a strange change and wonderful improvement. They would stand face to face as if expecting some burst of light to dispel the utter darkness, and enable them to see each other's countenance. They seemed listening attentively for some strange sound to break and dispel the perpetual and death-like silence in which they had ever lived, and permit them to hear each other's voice. * * *

How changed again the scene of their intercourse after four years use of tangible speech had given them a great range of language and enabled them to interchange thoughts and emotions easily and rapidly! Laura, quick as lightning in her perceptions of meaning and in her apt replies, would still almost quiver in her eagerness for greater speed in the flow of her companion's signs. Oliver, patient, passive, reflective, and even smiling, was closely attentive. As the interest increased, Laura would gesticulate with arms and hands as well as fingers, and dance up and down upon the floor excitedly; while Oliver's face, as he grew a little moved, would become flushed, and the perpetual smile on his lips would spread into a broad

laugh, which made his pallid face the very image of fun and frolic. No scene on the boards of a pantomimic theatre could exceed this real, living, but silent, intercourse between two sorely bereaved but happy youths, who never thought of the impression which they made upon beholders.

Oliver's case was in some respects even more interesting than Laura's, because although far inferior in mental capacity, and slower in perceptions, he had an uncommonly sweet temper, an affectionate disposition, and a love of sympathy and of fun, the gratification of which made him happy at heart, and clad his handsome honest face in perpetual smiles. But Laura, although comely and refined in form and attitude, graceful in motion, and positively handsome in features, and although eager for social intercourse and communion of thought and sentiment with her fellows, had not that truly sympathetic nature which distinguished Oliver.

Oliver's progress in learning language and acquiring intellectual knowledge is comparatively slow, his memory is not tenacious, a great part of what has been taught him he forgets in a month afterwards. This is true of all the intellectual branches, especially of those in which objects are not used as illustrations; but it is not true of the mechanic arts, of the knowledge of persons and things with which he comes in contact. He is a very apt learner at any handiwork; he delights in the use of tools, and excels most of his companions in the workshop. He never forgets a lesson which has been taught him there.

Oliver Caswell, too, will have full mention in another place; he points my moral and adorns my tale here by giving living proof that a blind and deaf mute man may pass his life usefully and happily; and may make himself independent by the trained work of his own hands, and lay up a surplus in the bank for his old age. His right to be recognised as an intelligent and morally responsible person has been fully established.

Henceforward there can be no excuse for leaving any deaf and blind mute, who has ordinary capacity, in the state of irresponsible idiocy to which persons in this situation have heretofore been condemned by high legal authorities,* as well as by public opinion.

* "A man is not an idiot if he hath any glimmering of reason, so that he can tell his parents, his age, or the like matters. But a man who is born deaf, dumb, and blind is looked upon by the law as in the same state with an idiot; he being supposed incapable of any understanding, as wanting all those senses which furnish the human mind with ideas."—*Blackstone's Commentaries*, vol. i. p. 304.

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."—
Gal. vi. 3

LAURA BRIDGMAN.

A friend has kindly supplied what was looked for in vain before the publication of our notice of Laura, a record, viz., of her contribution to the famine-stricken Irish, in 1846, which we beg now to present as a most appropriate supplement to our appeal on her behalf, is it not our turn now to "give into her bosom, good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over."—Luke vi. 38.

. "Her finger ends became endowed with faculties almost miraculous. . . . Her little white whispering, loving, listening fingers. . . How she plied at morning, noon, and night, these fingers! Wonderful fingers! It seemed that the very finger of God had touched them with miraculous susceptibilities of fellowship with the spirit world and that around her; she put them upon the face of His written word, and felt them thrilled to her heart with the pulsations of His great thoughts of love to man, and then she felt for others' woe. Poor child! God bless her richly! She reached out her arms to feel after some more unhappy than she in the condition of this life; some whose fingers' ends had not read such sweet paragraphs of heaven's mercy as hers had done; some who had not seen, heard, and felt, what her dumb, silent, deaf fingers had brought into her heart of joy, hope, and love. Think of that, ye young eyes and ears, that daily feast upon the beauty and melody of this outer world.

"Within the atmosphere of her quick sensibilities, she felt the presence of those whose cup was full of affliction. She put her fingers, with their throbbing sympathies, upon the lean, bloodless faces of the famishing children in Ireland, and her sightless eyes filled with the tears that the blind may shed for griefs they cannot see. And then she plied the needle with those fingers, and quickened their industry by placing them anon upon the slow, sickly, pulse of want, that wasted her kind at noon-day across the ocean. Days and nights too—for day and night were alike to her wakeful sympathies—and weeks she wrought on with her needle. And then the embroidery of those fingers was sold to the merchants—would it had been sold to England's Queen, to be worn by the young princesses on days of state; it was sold, and its purchase price was a *barrel of flour*, instead of a country's harvest, which it was well worth. And that barrel of flour was stowed away, without other private mark than that the recording angel put upon it, among the thousands that freighted the *Jamestown* on her recent mission of brotherly love to Ireland. That barrel of flour! would that it might be to all the children of want in Ireland what the barrel of meal was to the household of her who entertained the prophet of old. That barrel of flour! would at least that those whom it supplies with bread, might know what fingers wrought for their sustenance. LAURA BRIDGMAN AND HER BARREL OF FLOUR should teach the world a lesson worth the woes of one year's famine. Let all the children of England and America learn that lesson by heart, and Ireland and the whole family of mankind will be the better for this grievous visitation of want."—"Sparks from the Anvil," by Elisha Burritt. London, C. Gilpin. 1847.

"How beautiful and affecting is the idea of this angelic girl spending days and days in toil, to obtain a little fund, so that she herself might administer to the wants of those who were more miserable even than herself."—From an interesting account of Laura in *Howitt's Journal*, Oct. 9, 1874.

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LETTER BOOK