

In a letter written when he was 22, Louis mocked his own handwriting as "scribbling." In fact, as is evident from this facsimile, Louis's writing was perfectly legible.

Coupray, 1 September 1831¹

Sir,

I have the honor of writing these lines to request the renewal of your promise to keep me informed of the date of our next concert.

If I receive no response by Monday, I would ask you kindly to agree to my returning to the Institution on Tuesday. Pardon, Sir, the pestering of your affectionate student.

Louis Braille

I am rather happy, dear Mr. Pignier, that you may have lost only a quarter of an hour in deciphering the first page of this scribble. Do not read the rest if you are in a hurry because, from now on, I write for my [own] pleasure and to answer the kind request you have been good enough to ask of me. I had left Coupray for a few days when two charming letters arrived. Otherwise my second draft would have crossed with your second letter. All is well here, but only the garden grapes have ripened. At least I have the satisfaction of enjoying beautiful walks. Give my kind regards to Mademoiselle your sister.

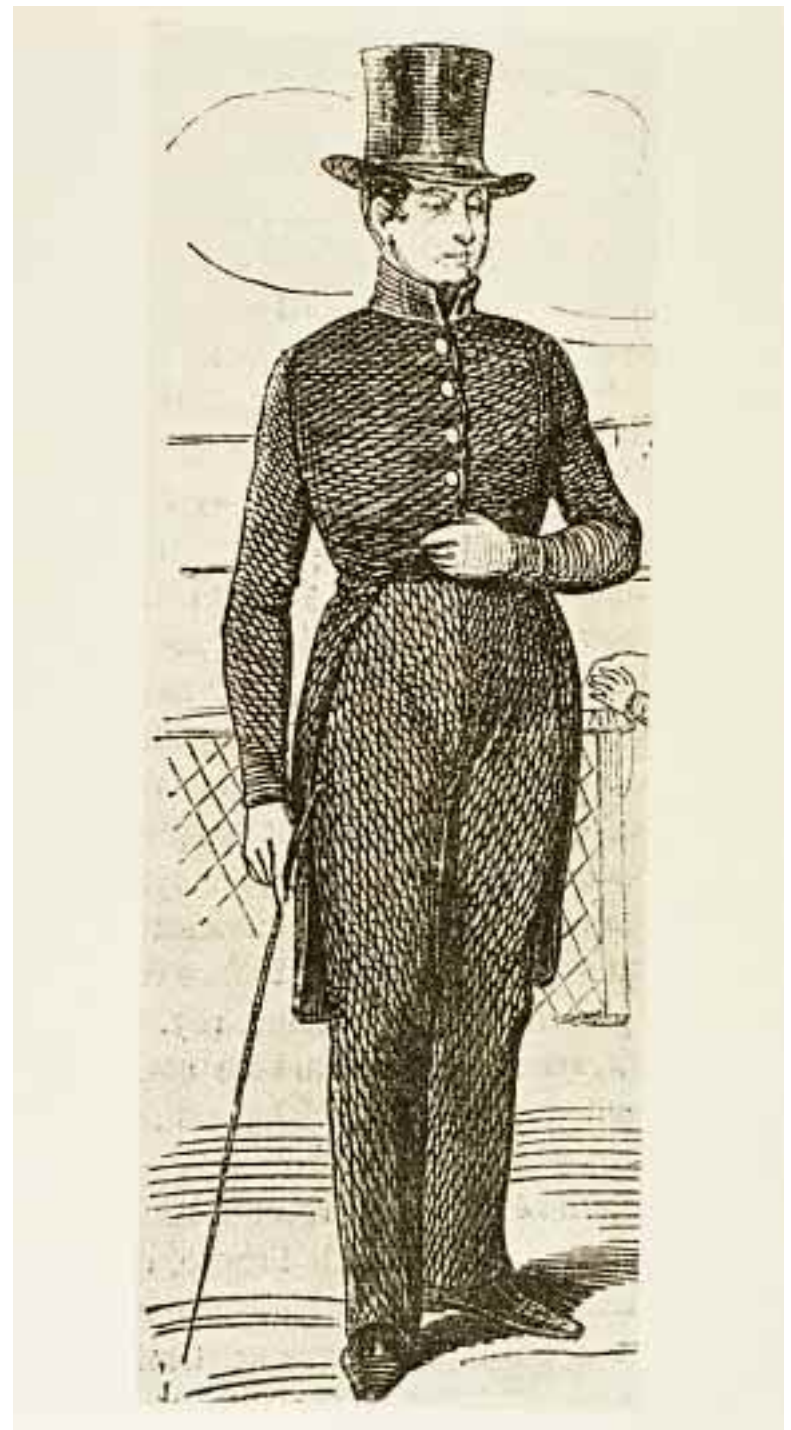
I am thinking of you and of... [ellipsis appears in the original]

Louis Braille

TEACHIER

After completing his own studies, Louis was named a *répétiteur* (a kind of apprentice teacher) on August 8, 1828.² Where previously he slept in a dormitory with all the other students, now Louis was entitled to a room of his own. "If he regretted no longer being able to chat with his friend Gauthier in the evening, he had the peace and quiet necessary for devoting himself to this numerous projects."³ Louis taught grammar and geography to both blind and sighted students until 1835, after which he taught only blind children in grammar, spelling, geography, history, reading, arithmetic, and algebra.

This formal attire, worn by residents of the Quinze-Vingts, is similar to that worn by Louis Braille and his fellow students at the Institute. The lapels on Louis's uniform sported palm leaves—symbols of learning—to show his status as a teacher.



THE 'DEAN'

Braille's standing improved considerably in 1833, when Pignier successfully lobbied Interior Minister Louis Adolphe Thiers⁴ to elevate three blind *répétiteurs* to the status of teacher: Louis Braille and his two friends, Gabriel Gauthier and Hippolyte Coltat. The promotion came with a salary of 300 francs a year and the privilege of wearing a uniform that sported silk or gilt palm leaves on both lapels of the jacket.⁵ Braille proudly wore his uniform when going to church to play the organ, or whenever he was about town.⁶

Louis was a skillful and popular teacher.⁷ According to his friend, Hippolyte Coltat, "He functioned as a teacher with such charm and wisdom that, for his students, the requirement to attend class was transformed into a real pleasure. They competed among themselves, not only to be equal to or better than each other, but to make a sincere and continuous effort to please their teacher, whom they loved as a respected superior and a wise and enlightened friend overflowing with good advice."⁸

Though he could be polite and charming, Braille was no pantywaist. He earned the nickname "dean" (*censeur*) for his willingness to reprimand students who engaged in unbecoming behavior. Where others hesitated to intervene, Braille would smile and boldly say,

"Let's go! I will sacrifice myself."⁹ His aim, Coltat informs us, was to make sure that his friends benefited from his "firm and luminous" advice. Coltat further elaborated on Louis Braille's nature:

"His observant mind was at work with such discretion during a conversation, that he wouldn't let anything disagreeable slip out and disturb anyone. He knew how to keep [the conversation] going in an interesting and varied manner. It is said that Labruyère cast off the yoke of one of the greatest difficulties of style—transitions. L. Braille had a natural talent [for them] and made them a permanent study. These chats imperceptibly went from being jocular to earnest and from gracious to harsh in tone. While this was done in a positive manner, he never let it become a society joke [meaning he never let himself become a clown]. He would from time to time show the bright side of his humor and even allowed himself to utter a witty phrase. Some of his expressions became his friends' favorites that soon traveled by word of mouth with the authority and weight of a proverb.

"His words and the tone of his voice were marked by a subtlety that was mirrored on his face, making it difficult to untangle his thoughts from his opinions, as he knew so well how to keep them to himself, thanks to the strength of his character and his willpower. Once he had made up his mind, he conscientiously did what he

had to do, no matter how pleasant or unpleasant; it was enough for him that they were useful. His deportment was controlled by the strictest rules of propriety. He was careful not to let anything slip out that might draw attention to himself. He despised both eccentric and pretentious personalities. His own eccentricity was not to appear eccentric."¹⁰

LOUIS IS DRAFTED

Louis was conscripted in 1829, and his father accompanied him to the draft board to explain why his son could not serve.

The Draft Board's records show, "Exempt, being blind at the Hospital of the Quinze-Vingt [sic]." [Braille never lived at the Quinze-Vingts.] The Education column, marked with an O, meant, "cannot read and write." "What a cruel mockery of the man who... endowed blind people with an alphabet!"¹¹

A FLAIR FOR DIPLOMACY

Several of Braille's letters demonstrated a flair for diplomacy and a head for business. The one below also suggests that, at times, Braille could be garrulous. Here, Louis speaks on behalf of someone who evidently did not have direct access to Pignier. The gentleman he refers to, Emile Pierre Trencheri, was hired a few months later by Samuel Gridley Howe to teach at the New-England Institution for the Education of the Blind (now Perkins School) in Boston, Massachusetts. Trencheri did very well in the United States, and associated with such luminaries as Longfellow, Emerson, and Prescott, the renowned blind historian. In 1836, Trencheri established the first music store in the Midwest and sold the first piano to be shipped west of the Mississippi. He played the organ in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Alton, Illinois, and continued to tune pianos up to the age of 90.¹²

Coupray, 20 September 1831

Sir, I shall not have the honor of speaking to you in this letter about Mr. Déchasait to whom I have a thousand obligations. I am writing today for somebody who is unaware of the step I am taking, and to whose interests I cannot be indifferent. The person from whom we were supposed to collect 30 francs for singing has been in Dijon for a few months.

This person must have met with Trencheri either to give him the amount to reimburse him, or to advise him that the money had not been requested. But my friend's silence leads me to believe that Mr. De Ruba has received the requested sum. He never mentioned it, not even in his last letter. That is why I intended to ask Trencheri for a receipt signed by him or by that person. I would have delivered it to you, asking you to append it to the bill that Mr. De Ruba owes to the students. But I have changed my mind: I shall do nothing of the sort. It is more reasonable to entrust you with this matter. Forgive me, Sir, the liberty I took in speaking of something that concerns me only indirectly. However, allow me to tell you with confidence that I would deem myself happy if, having had the honor to communicate my brief to you, I may have the sweet satisfaction that you may come to the same conclusion. Before my departure, I forgot to mention to you Roustant, who could be accepted in a higher grade if you deem it suitable.

Do not tell me: damned talk [maudit parler], be quiet! One more word and I shall end by asking you to admit the new students to the history class.

Please, Sir, accept my mother's, brother's, and my respects. We also beg you to kindly convey our regards to Mademoiselle your sister.

It is my honor to be your very respectful student.

L. Braille

Dr. Pignier must have responded promptly, since Braille mailed another letter only a few days later. It is a pity that none of Pignier's letters have been found. Braille took pains not to abuse his favored position with Pignier when he solicited his counsel on behalf of others. Coltat said of Louis, "When he did [a good deed], he acted with such simplicity and delicacy that he hid, so to speak, the hand of the benefactor from the recipient of his kindness."¹³ In the following letter, Braille asks Pignier how a blind friend of his could get the most money possible from his Quinze-Vingts pension when he cashes it in. Beyond Louis's obvious attention to detail, his letters express a penchant for orderliness. This letter is in Louis-Simon's handwriting.

From Coupray, 2 October 1833

Sir, the kindness you have shown me would have been enough to induce me to return to Paris during my vacation, but I had already decided to come back the day after I wrote to you. I expect to arrive at the Institution on the 9th of this month between nine and ten in the evening. I have a letter from Chauvin in which he asks me to thank you for the box you sent him. It seems that he already received the first three months of the half-pension at the Quinze Vingt[s]. Perhaps this business was not quite clear to you. He told me he had sent me two letters at the Institution but I never received them.

A more embarrassing thing is that the postmaster from his province gave him twenty-eight francs and fourteen sous for the pension, covering the three months to July, when he should have received thirty-seven francs and ten sous. He is asking me what would be the best way for him to get his money. I believe that he should send a certificate of residence four times a year to a Parisian so that the person could cash [his money order] and mail the proceeds to him. I believe that he would then lose only four francs each time, including the postage.

I beg you, Sir, to tell me what your thoughts are on this subject. I hesitate to bother you for a stranger when I know how your children at the lycée¹⁴ take up all your time. However, he was once among your students and is recommended by a person who loves you and dares to hope for the same in return. Please tell my friends about my arrival so that I can find everything in order. I also ask you to share the good news about Chauvin. I dearly hope that Mademoiselle your sister's health will improve.

My mother, myself, and my brother send you and your sister our regards. Sir I have the honor to be your respectful and affectionate student,

Braille Louis



"Pay attention child, you haven't kept me from wandering into a pile of trash." Guided by sighted children, three blind gentlemen, in their distinctive Quinze-Vingts attire, leave the gates of the precinct. Distracted by a friendly dog, one guide allows a blind man to wander into a drunk passed out on the street.