The New York World
February 17, 1889

Deaf, Dumb and Blind

And Yet Laura Bridgman Has Accomplished Almost Miracles

Nellie Bly Visits the Most Remarkable Woman In The World

How Her Mind, Although Hidden as in a Sealed Tomb, Was Finally Reached – Every Sense but Touch Destroyed When She was Two Years Old – She Now Reads, Writes and Converses with Her Fingers – The Strange Story of Her Childhood – Dickens Marveled at Her Accomplishments – A Glance at the Institution for the Blind.

Boston, Mass., Feb. 13 – I came to Boston to see *bete noire* of my childhood days. I have seen her and she has made me feel tenfold the force of that early lesson. "If she can accomplish so much," I thought, while gazing on her, the most afflicted of all creatures, "What can I not do?" and I came away from her filled with new strength, new resolution.

Almost my first recollection of disagreeable things was the necessity of learning the alphabet and of conquering words of two syllables. I am positive I said "I can't" oftener than I repeated my letters. Every time I said "I can't" I was told this little story:

"There was a little girl who could not see nor hear nor speak. Several years she lived in great unhappiness, and then a wise man found her and was anxious to teach her some way to understand, that she might know all about the world and books and people. She was very good and never said 'I can't' but had great patience and perseverance, and not only learned to read and to speak with her fingers but to sew and knit and do many useful things. That little girl could not see her letters, could not hear them spoken, could not speak them, but she never said 'I can't.' "

I do not think the story had the desired effect, for it always made me think it all the more reason why I should enjoy to the utmost those privileges of sight and speech and hearing of which she was deprived, and leave to her the study and work which alone she could enjoy.

After a while I heard no more discourses on my *bete noire*, but I remembered her as I remembered the old woman who lived in a shoe and the bears who ate the children up for calling an old man "bald head." I shall never forget my astonishment when first I glanced through a volume of Dickens to find that my *bete noire* was not a freak of the superlatively good imagination conjured to shame little girls into doing that for which they had no inclination. From him I learned that she was a living, breathing creature, and had accomplished all the wonderful things credited to her. My dislike for the deaf and dumb blind girl who did so much changed to admiration, and I was filled with wonder. Her history had more charms for me than the story of the "Arabian Nights." From that day to this I have eagerly read every word which has been written about her, and now I have seen her.

I suppose Charles Dickens aided in telling the world the wonders of this afflicted being by his lengthy description of her and her accomplishments in his very true but most abused "American Notes." They say that forty years ago her name was a household word, and that her education was followed by the most eager and general interest. The story of her life is never tiresome, and will always bear repetition.

Laura Bridgman's History.

Daniel Bridgman and his wife, Harmony, owned a farm in Hanover. N.H. There they lived the usual life of farmers – quiet, unpretentious and God-fearing. On Dec. 21, 1829, there was born to them a little delicate daughter, subject to severe convulsions, who was destined to make their name live forever. She was christened Laura Dewey Bridgman. When eighteen months old her health improved, and, by the time she had completed two years—as if to make up for what she had suffered—she was more intelligent and active than children of that age ordinarily are. She had learned to lisp a few words and knew some of the letters of the alphabet. A month after she had passed her two-year mile-post, when she had known about six months of health, scarlet fever entered the family and all the children—two older sisters and Laura—were afflicted.

The two sisters died, but Laura, as if strengthened to endurance by her eighteen months suffering, clung to life when everyone thought it impossible for her to live. For seven weeks she was unable to swallow any solid food; yet she lived. Then both her eyes and ears suppurated and discharged their contents, but deaf and blind, she still lived. The sense of taste and smell also died, but living brain, although almost enclosed in a dead casket, refused to die. For five months she was kept in a darkened room. A year passed before she could walk unsupported. Two years elapsed before she was strong enough to sit up all day.

Only One Sense Remained

At five years of age she was virtually born again. Her four and a half years of untold suffering totally effaced the recollection of her six months' health, and all she had learned in that short time was forgotten. Her mind remained unimpaired, but there was no way to communicate with her. She was blind; she could not hear a cannon fired by her side, and because of her deafness she was dumb. One sense alone remained – she could feel. By the sense of touch she followed every motion made by her mother. So she learned to sew, to knit and to braid.

Certain signs she learned to understand. Pushing meant go; pulling, come; a pat on the head, approval; on the back, disapproval. She cannot be better described than was done by Charles Dickens in his "American Notes:"

"There she was, before me, built up, as it were, in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light or particle of sound; with her poor white hands peeping through a chink in the wall, beckoning to some good man for help that an immortal soul might be awakened."

Her Salvation

So she lived until eight years of age, when Dr. S. G. Howe, Director of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, in South Boston, heard of her. In company with Mr. Longfellow and several other gentlemen he took a trip to the White Mountains. His

main object was to visit Laura Bridgman's parents in New Hampshire to persuade them to entrust the child to his care. He succeeded in his purpose and she was taken to the institution Oct. 12, 1837.

The first lessons this child received were very interesting. Dr. Howe had the names of common household objects, such as knife, spoon, fork, chair, table, etc., printed in raised letters, such as are used for the blind. Then he had the objects also labeled with the same names. First he gave her the word "knife," and made her feel it as the blind feel letters in reading. Then he gave her a knife and let her feel the word labeled upon it. This he did with all the other articles, until he thought she knew the difference. Then taking the labels from off all the other articles, he would give her a label and get her to put it on the article it designated, or, giving her the article, would get her to put it on the table. Then he would give her the word "table." He would let her work around until she would understand to put it on the table. In this way he taught her that objects had names and how to apply them.

When proficient in this practice he had type made and taught her to spell and form the words she had learned with them. She learned it readily and eagerly, and it was a great step in advancement. Yet Dr. Howe said that all this Laura learned as a dog learns tricks from his master. It was limitation without understanding. They undertook then to teach her the manual alphabet—commonly called the deaf-and-dumb alphabet. The teacher formed each letter, which Laura now knew from her type, with the fingers, but of one hand only. By resting her hand easily on the teacher's Laura caught the movements and so learned to use them herself. When she did right they patted her head, when she did wrong they knocked her elbow.

Dr. Howe said he knew the very moment that Laura first understood—when being taught the manual alphabet—that by this means she could communicate with the world. He said the knowledge of understanding came in an instant, and her face filled with an unspeakable radiance that he could never forget. I think that look of—yes, heavenly happiness, repaid him for all his tender patience with his protégée. Can one imagine the delight Laura Bridgman must have felt when in her sealed casket she found by the movements of her fingers she could communicate with the world; that she could express the thoughts and ask the questions which had gathered there unanswered since her birth? Is it surprising that her hungry soul would eagerly grasp every new word and never forget it; and that she never tired of conversation? Her progress was marvelous, and she was soon able to read books for the blind and to write letters to her parents, whom she could not see or hear. Think what a pleasure it is to us to communicate with our friends who are very far away. Think, then, if we were among them and unable to see or hear or speak, what would be our rapture when we could communicate with them from a distance more terrible than all the miles we could count.

The Blind Woman of Today

And this is the wonderful creature I came to Boston to see.

Mr. Anognos, the director of the Perkins Institute, was very kind, and assured me that he would take pleasure in introducing me to Laura Bridgman. I followed him out through the long halls of the building, passing blind pupils, who avoided us as deftly as though their sight were perfect; through a beautiful gymnasium to a street, on which faced from the grounds of the institution four cottages.

"These cottages," explained Mr. Anognos, "bear the names of four men who did much work for the blind—Fisher, Brooks, May and Oliver. Dr. Fisher was the first man in America to

establish a school for the blind. In 1827 he began this great benevolent work, and 1829 this institution was incorporated. In these cottages the matron, teachers and girls live. The boys are kept in the main building.

The matron, Miss Moulton, answered the director's ring and the object of my visit was explained to her. We sat down in a very pleasant room, where everything was the model of cleanliness and comfort. The matron left us and soon returned with Laura Bridgman on her arm. Mrs. Moulton told Laura who was present and she cordially shook hands with us both. As Laura sat down beside Miss Moulton on the sofa she gave a little gasping sound like a choked laugh and then spelled something on her fingers.

"Laura says she wants you for her banker," Miss Moulton translated to Mr. Anognos. "She has got so much money."

"Very well," replied Mr. Anognos, and then he left us alone together.

Laura Bridgman is almost sixty years old. She looked very fragile as she sat before me on the sofa. Miss Moulton says that although Laura's appearance would indicate that she is delicate, she always enjoys the best of health and is never ill. There is nothing extraordinary-looking about Laura one way or the other. Her head is finely developed, over which her light brown hair, now mingled with a few white threads, is parted in the middle and combed very smoothly back. The ends are braided in fine plaits and twisted around the back of her head. Her face is small and somewhat wrinkled, her mouth very small, her lips thin and colorless and her nose slender and straight. She wears blue glasses, which effectually hide what unpleasant things there might be about her ever-sleeping eyes. She has the primness of a dear little old maid and many of the same movements.

The house dress she wore was made of a soft brown woolen material, with velvet collar and cuffs and pockets. White ruching edged the sleeves and collar, the latter being fastened with a little gold breast-pin. Altogether she looked as exact as if she had dressed to sit for a photograph, yet that is her ordinary or working apparel. She always dresses herself and keeps her wardrobe in order, so her neatness is of her own doing.

A Strange Interview

My little conversation with her was carried on with the aid of the matron. Laura lightly rested her hand on the matron's while the latter spelled to her with the finger language what I said. Then when she spelled with her fingers, the matron lightly tapped Laura's wrist to show her that she was attentive. After receiving the answer in this way the matron translated it to me. Laura made many little sounds when she wished to attract the matron's attention so she could talk.

First Laura asked if I could make the manual alphabet with my hands.

I replied, "No."

Then she asked if I would like to see some lace she was making. I replied that I would, and she got up and went swiftly from the room with a pretty, noiseless, gliding motion. Her hands were held out a little in advance of her, but had one not known of the afflictions they would never have learned of them from her movements. She returned with a small black box and resumed her place on the sofa. She made a slight noise by catching her breath, and Miss Moulton tapped her wrist as a signal that she was all attention. Laura said with her fingers: "This lace is for a lady in California. She sent money for me to make it."

I took the lace from her outstretched hand and examined it curiously. It was probably four inches deep and made of No. 80 white cotton. The pattern was very difficult and pretty and was done—as is all Laura's work—perfectly. It would require a very skillful woman even with perfect sight to make such lace.

If she drops a stitch and the matron puts it on, Laura can tell instantly if the thread is on right or wrong. What is hardly perceptible to the sight is very plain to her dainty touch.

I expressed a desire to obtain a sample of her work, which was told her. She caught her breath with a little happy sound—it pleases her to have her work appreciated—and told the matron that she had none now, all having been sold, even this she was making. She makes samples of lace which visitors are eager to buy as mementos of her skill. She has a great desire to be useful and delights in the idea of earning money and accumulating it. She always gives her autograph with every mat she sells, with the price marked on it. To feel that, with her indescribable afflictions, she is useful and capable is bliss to her.

She is very anxious to entertain visitors, and so she asked if I wished to see her clock and have her tell the time. Again she glided away, with that soft, swift movement, movement, to return with a small box containing a clock little larger than a watch. She took it out of the box and placed it in my hand, then, making a slight sound, she drew the matron's attention, and asked her what I thought of it. After I had expressed my opinion as to its beauty, she said:

"I have a watch. It is being repaired. This was given me in place of it. Notice—it has no crystal, that I may feel the hands and tell the time. Would she want me to tell the time?"

I answered "Yes," and she gently felt both hands and quickly told the exact time—10:30.

I gave her a dollar bill, and she clapped her hands softly in pleasure when I told her I wanted her to make me a sample of lace. She was much concerned, however, and hastened to assure me that she had sold what she was now making, and, as her promise was given, she must do it first. Then she would be pleased to make some for me; nor did she forget to ask that I write my name and address on a card for her, so she would be sure to send the lace to the right place.

She sells her photographs to visitors who want them, and she asked if I cared to have one. I had hardly said "yes," when she went to get them and trustfully handed me a package to select from. Thirty cents, she said, was the price. I gave her thirty-five cents. She felt the money, then with a little hurried noise informed the matron that I had given her five cents too much. She can tell money from the touch as quickly as I can by sight.

Another rush from the room and upstairs. This time she had gone to her purse and returned with the right change. She now offered to write her autograph for me, and for the purpose she brought from the next room a sheet of note paper and a covered pad. The pad she placed on her knee, and with a lead pencil wrote her name and "a motto," as she said. This pad has slight grooves in it which keep her lines straight. She places two fingers on the groove and quickly makes the letters, pushing her fingers close to the pencil, so that she will not run one letter on to another. It did not require any more time for her to write her autograph than it does for anyone else. After it was written she tore the paper across and gave me the part written on, which is here exactly reproduced.

Suddenly a thought came to her and she asked what she was "doing in her photograph." The matron told her and she seemed much pleased.

She Admires The English

Laura Bridgman is to some extent an Anglo-maniac. She is very fond of English people and never tires talking to them about England. She receives many visitors with whom she converses on the topics of the day or anything of general interest or follows any of the subjects suggested by them. I don't think there is any one in America who can claim to have received as many calls from distinguished people. Everybody of note who has lived these last fifty years in America, or visited here, has been pleased to call upon Laura Bridgman. She understands it, too.

Mr. Anognos tells me that once the secretary of some state, I have forgotten who and what, called upon Laura. He was a distinguished man and so Mr. Anognos introduced him as the Hon. Mr. Etc., Laura lifted her head slightly and answered with pride:

"Very many distinguished persons call upon me."

Her duties at the institution are not few, because she is desirous to be useful. She is never idle, though lacking little of sixty years. She rises early when the others do. She does all the dusting in the Fisher cottage, where she is living this year. Every year she is changed from one cottage to another, so that the responsibility of those in charge—who must be her tongue—is equal. The matron says no one could dust better and that Laura never knocks down any little bits of china which decorate the room, or photographs. She attends to her wardrobe, knits lace, crochets mats and all sorts of such work. It is also her duty to assist in the workroom where the blind pupils are taught to sew. Her duty is to thread all the needles and to examine the work, which she does very carefully with her all-seeing fingers, and what one with sight would probably pass as 'pretty good" she carefully undoes and makes the worker do it over until perfect. She threads the needles by placing the eye on her tongue and deftly rolling the thread into it.

She has a great deal or correspondence but no longer keeps a diary. When President Garfield died she wrote a long letter of condolence to Mrs. Garfield without any one prompting or suggesting the idea to her. She also wrote Mrs. Beecher a letter of condolence.

Her Enjoyments

I endeavored to learn her greatest pleasure in life. I can safely say her highest pleasure is conversation. Probably the next highest is the attention of people. She enjoys so much to go out to tea and to receive invitations to visit people's homes. She is always pleased to assist the teachers in the institution. She also enjoys music, which she says she hears through her feet. It is the vibration she detects.

She is well educated and is constantly thirsty for a knowledge of the doings of the world which she is in and yet so far removed from. She spends much of her time in reading the Bible and a dictionary, and likes to have books and magazines and newspapers read to her. Any subject that it is thought might bring her sadness by realizing her isolation is carefully avoided. They all say that Laura does not realize what she has missed in life. She is always cheerful, happy and affectionate to her nearest friends.

At her meals she sits on the matron's right and eats after the manner of any cultured person, but is rather inclined to favor the spoon as a conveyance of food. She never recovered her sense of smell and has very little of taste. She is fond of chicken broth and liquid foods. Vinegar, salt, or anything sour or bitter she will not taste.

No woman in society is more fond of dressing, and none can be more particular about her apparel than Laura. For her own gowns she is inclined to silks and soft materials. Sealskin or any kind of fur, or textures of the broadcloth quality, almost give her a chill, they are so unspeakably

horrible to her. She has never conquered her childish fear of dogs and cats, and the touch of them fills her with horror.

Laura Bridgman's diary and all her writings, which are considered very valuable from a scientific point of view, are kept in the archives of the institution. Those who are interested in such studies as the human mind may be pleased to know that it is proven by Laura Bridgman's case—her now-told recollections of her early childhood—that she thought before conversation was possible. Another interesting fact was proven—that she had no innate idea of God or a Supreme Being. She has dreams the same as anyone else, but she never dreams that she can see or hear or speak. If restless at night she will talk in her sleep with her fingers.

Laura became converted to religion, and after a while, through talks with a companion, changed her religion and was baptized in the faith of her parents, that of the Baptist Church. In December, 1887, Laura Bridgman's semi-centennial was celebrated at the institution. She had passed fifty years there, and, as she expressed it when once she spoke of death, she "hoped to die there and be buried in a white casket." Many prominent people were there, among others Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, the widow of Dr. Howe, who gave Laura a language and raised her from a state little better that a brute's. Laura received many presents on the occasion. A very pleasant address written by her was read to those assembled by Mrs. Howe. Part of every summer and fall Laura spends with her mother at Hanover, N.H.

Laura is an ardent politician. She is a Republican, and enjoys very much conversing with gentlemen on the subject. She told me that Mr. Will Carleton called on her the other day, and told her that he would send her a poem for a valentine. She was very much delighted with his promise.

Anecdotes of Early Life

Some of the questions she asked when she was being educated were very amusing. One day when she was visiting a minister called and her hostess explained that the minister had "come to Boston to marry a couple." Her face expressed great disgust, and she quickly spelled on her fingers, "fool." She thought he had come to be married to a couple of wives! A scholar had the mumps. Laura learned the name of the disease. She caught it, but on one side only, so when someone said to her, "You have the mumps," she replied, "No, I have the mum." When she wanted lean pork at dinner she asked for "poor pork." The figure of a little dog and monk which belonged to her in the parlor she always placed facing the wall. When asked why she said: "To have them see the pictures on the wall."

One time she was told by her teacher to go to the school-room and "get my pencil. I don't know which desk it is on." She returned with the pencil and told the teacher that she could not find the which. When told that spiders ate flies she asked, "What for; to keep them out of the molasses?" When learning geography she bounded Chelsea, and found it was north by Reading. "Who lives in Reading?" she said, making a sign of reading in a book and laughing. "Tomorrow will be March," she said one day. "Will it be the once day of March?" When told the name of Cape Cod she asked, "To eat?" Read a question to her once, "If you can buy a barrel of cider for $4, how much can you buy for $1?" "How did the man who wrote the book know I was here?" She thought the "you" referred to her personally. When urged to do the question she replied, "I cannot give much for cider because it is very sour." She had a sum about a pole which was partly under water. "Did the man see the pole?" she asked. Still she doubted, and she asked "Is this a story?" meaning an untruth. When forgetful she said, "My thoughts waste." One day, when

moving her hands through the air, she wanted to know if by doing so she "cut the air." When asked what direction a river run she said, "Why do you say run? The river has no feet." She was very anxious to know if "brains and thoughts were the same, and how people know about brains?" When told that her feet were her horses and asked what was the driver she said, "My soul drives," and then changed it to "Think drives." When told about God she asked how they were sure that He lives in heaven. She told her teacher once that she would not talk to her in heaven because she would "be so busy seeing strangers." When told about the manner of Christ's death she asked "Why did not Christ escape?"

At Laura's anniversary Capt. R. Bennett Forbes, of Milton, a representative of the Perkins family, contributed a very interesting reminiscence connected with Laura's history:

"A friend reminds me that Thomas Carlyle impudently said, 'What great or noble thing has America ever done?' It was replied: 'She has produced a girl born deaf, dumb and blind, who, from her own earning, has sent a barrel of flour to the starving subjects of Great Britain in Ireland.' I had the pleasure of carrying the flour to Ireland in the Jamestown in 1747."

A Glance At The Blind School

After leaving Laura Bridgman I spent some time with Mr. Anognos in inspecting the school where the blind are taught to be useful. He made a remark that made me view the school in a different way than I ever had before.

"It is not an asylum," he said, "but a school to teach the blind to be useful and self-supporting."

As this article is not about the school but concerns one particular pupil, I will not attempt to describe what I saw, which to do justice would require columns. We visited the reading-room where little girls were running their sensitive fingers over raised letters and reading as fast as anyone with sight. There was the appearance of boarding-school about the children, but there was no offensive badge of charity. Every child looked hearty and happy and no two wore the same garb. The class in geometry had the blind teacher.

The slates and types used by the blind children to work their arithmetic questions on are very interesting. They are boards full of little square cavities. One end of the type stick set in different positions in the square cavity signifies two and four and six and eight, and the other end of the type means the odd numbers. That's as much as I could understand. How those sightless children can learn to do sums with those "fifteen puzzles" is more than I can understand.

At the end of every hour's study the pupils have recess, which they are compelled to spend out in the open air. It is very funny to watch the boys run for their sleds and coast down the sloping grounds. They just yelled as loud as all boys do and were just as happy. The girls were very happy in skating on a slippery place and falling down and getting up to try it over. By looking at them one could see little difference between their actions and those of children who see.

The institution, if I remember rightly, has forty-eight pianofortes and several organs, and the children are taught vocal and instrumental music as freely as their letters. Mr. Anognos opened several doors for me to see the little girls whose exercises we could hear outside. One place we heard a very pretty, promising voice, and when I looked in and saw the sightless eyes uplifted and heard the musical notes swell from the white throat a great pity flooded my heart as it did the first time I heard the sweet lay of a little bird that had been made blind to make it sing.

We visited the printing office where all the music and books are published. It is in the charge of a blind man. The workshops for the boys are very interesting, especially the tuning department. They say that no one can equal a blind man in tuning a musical instrument. No one else has the same fineness of touch and discernment of hearing. This department does a great deal of piano tuning for the citizens of Boston.