

The Blind Who See

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Years ago while I was reading a charming story of the triumph of an artist over the singularly difficult handicap of sudden blindness, I first became interested in the sightless. Like most other people, I had considered the loss of our eyes a condition which removed us from ordinary life, and wondered how it was possible without sight to do almost any of the normal, everyday duties which are a part of living. After practising some of these activities blindfold, I learned that there are even more problems than I knew; I decided that to be blind was certainly a dreadful catastrophe.

In the years that have passed, possibly because of this early impression, and certainly because I associated with many disabled veterans, I have become more interested than ever in the study of people deprived of sight. I no longer call them blind, a word which sets them apart from normal people, because I feel that they often see more than we do and have clearer, more detailed pictures of many things. They have sharpened their remaining senses on the whetstone of bitter experience; where we are content to sniff, they smell and savor; where we touch or brush against, they feel texture, height, and depth; and where we half-listen or shut out every-day sounds, they detect, remember, and associate these sounds according to time, place, and people. On my way to work I carry as a passenger a sightless veteran who knows my car by the sound of its motor, the streets and crossings by their familiar bumps and conformations. He identifies stop streets by the sound of accelerating gears of crossing traffic; he "sees" the streets as wet, roads as muddy or dusty, the day as cloudy or sunny; he smells the seasons; and he can as quickly separate nickels, dimes, quarters, and pennies as you or I. An untold number of sounds and voices he catalogs in a mental file seldom used by those who depend upon sight. Even the opinions of this man often seem to stem from a broader perspective than ours, I think, because the obvious and the circumstantial have no way to invade his mind to distort his thoughts. You might say that because he cannot see, he has learned to see more.

The splendid dogs which so often mark the sightless have long been a legend. Not in disparagement of these talented "yes"—for what man would take their place in such end-

less self-denial — but to show further the courage, trust, and energy of the blind who use the animals, it should be pointed out that as human as the dogs appear to be sometimes, they are, after all, just dogs. For instance, it is commonly believed that seeing-eye dogs know green lights from red; actually dogs are indisputably color-blind. It is the keen ear of the master and a short command from him which send the pair unerringly across the street. Nor can the dogs miraculously respond to "Take me to the barber shop," or "over to Mabel's." It is true that dogs have an instinct for directions and learn to know those familiar paths about the home and neighborhood, but it is the finely drawn map in the mind of the sightless traveler which leads man and dog to their destination. Although obedient, cheerful, trustworthy, and companionable, the seeing-eye dog is still only a well-trained animal.

Of the three-hundred thousand blinded persons in America, six thousand are in Indiana; many are successful in businesses of many kinds, in selling, in handicrafts. Many have done well as lawyers, legislators, writers, and social workers. In their courage and efficiency they are the envy sometimes of sighted people who have not used their own opportunities so wisely.

It would not be fun to be blind; it is not even fun to play "blind-man's bluff" to imitate the blind. An insidious little whisper that you are tempting fate draws you into a near-panic, and you breathe freely again only after ripping away the dark barrier. You are glad to see the sun in the window, the flowers on the table. The many tints and shades of ordinary objects around you become cause for comment, as though you had discovered something new. The blind-fold experience teaches you many things: the resonance of walls, the difference in the tick-tock of the kitchen and living-room clocks, the number of steps off the front porch! I found it exciting and interesting, and still occasionally close my eyes to try little tricks, such as identifying a penny and a dime. More than anything else I have learned to respect the courage, energy, confidence, and faith of the people who have learned to see and do so well without eyes. If they are to be set apart, I believe it should be as an example of what we could do if we tried.