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THE LIGHT THAT DOES NOT FAIL .

By

Erika Mann

ERIKA MANN:

THE LIGHT THAT DOES NOT FAIL .

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(The Army Of The Blind Can Take It!)

There are some 200 000 totally blind people in this country. Now, I wondered, can this sizable army be used within the war effort. Sure enough, they are neither ill, nor mentally unbalanced, those sightless men and women. They love their country with as much fervor as does any of their compatriots. They are organized. And their lack of sight, while excluding them of many spheres of activity, might on the other hand give them even certain advantages over those who do see. At this point of my contemplations the word BLACK-OUT crept into my mind. I ^{remembered} ~~remembered~~ leaving an illuminated place in blacked-out London and, stumbling over the threshold, finding myself entirely lost in the darkness of the streets. None but a blind person, accustomed to perpetual blackout, would have been able to guide me.

The New York Lighthouse for the Blind is located at 111 East 59th Street. I entered the place with that mixed feeling which takes possession of us when we do not quite know what we are going to experience and how we are going to take it.

Soft organ music received me. Of course, I thought, they can play the organ, they can feel where the keys are and many of them are musical, having developed their hearing powers, on which they depend so much, more than ordinary people.

The elevator door was open but there was no operator on hand. A lady followed me through the street entrance and walked with

a firm step into the elevator. There she waited for two seconds or so, then walked out again.

"I can't stand being alone in an elevator", she declared.

It was only now I noticed that she was blind. Obviously there was no floor tile anywhere in the Lighthouse she did not know by heart.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "Any war work?"

"Why, naturally, I am just going up for my first aid course. I've been knitting about eleven and a half sweaters for our pilots since the war started, and even hope to be of some assistance as a telephone operator at Red Cross Headquarters one of these days!" was her cheerful reply.

She had a deep and vigorous voice and a very determined bearing.

The operator arrived. The first aid course was on the third floor. We were received by Mrs. Septinelli, head of "Women's Recreation", a seeing lady whose husband, however, is blind. There is something greatly captivating about places where people work together under such extraordinary circumstances. No sooner have you spent a few minutes at the Lighthouse, than you feel blindness to be the normal condition. Moreover there seemed to be something odd about Mrs. Septinelli and myself.

I shook hands with Mr. Septinelli who, in his capacity of Placement Field Agent has been of great service to his sightless comrades. Now he told me that he had not seen a visitor for some time. It is a strangely moving habit of the blind to speak about the things they "see", landscapes, colors, forms; ~~in fact, they see quite a few~~ and all sorts of visual sensations rather more frequently than do the rest of us.

"Look", said Mrs. Septinelli to her blind husband and added something about the first aid course, but Mr. Septinelli could not look.

There were about twenty women in the class room, all of whom found their chairs with uncanny swiftness. They were to practice hand and head bandages on that particular day. If there was any time left, a lesson in making slings was also scheduled.

The nurse in charge of the course must have had previous experience with blind people. Not for one moment did she forget whom she was talking to. She actually seemed to put herself in the position of a person deprived of her eye sight.

"First find your patient!" she said. "Always work in front of him. Take your triangles and do your head-bandages. Remember that the knot must be placed in the center of the forehead. That's easy to follow isn't it? And then your bandages mustn't be too tight. This, too, you will sense easily."

The women worked. They must have tried this before, but even so the speed and efficiency with which they worked were astounding. ~~Many of them, it seemed to me, had remarkably beautiful hands.~~ ^{Many of them, it seemed to me,} I wondered whether this beauty was inborn or derived from the special sensibility gradually acquired by the hands of the blind.

"Now, your patient is bleeding very badly and you want to find out if he is suffering from a real hemorrhage. How do you find that out, Alice?"

Alice, knitting her brows over her sightless eyes, said: "My patient would be extremely pale." The nurse laughed. It was a gay little laughter without any trace of embarrassment. "He dear!" She exclaimed, "We are not at all interested in the extreme pallor of our patient. We can't see it. But there are plenty of other symptoms."

What are they?"

Alice, too, laughed. "Rapid and weak pulse," she giggled; "thirst cold perspiration, air-hunger!"

"Splendid!" The nurse was very pleased. "And what are you going to do about your case?"

"After having bandaged his wound I call a doctor, make my patient good and warm, tell him he's fine, place his head lower than his feet and give him nothing to drink."

I felt that I wouldn't really mind having some slight hemorrhage if Alice ^{was} ~~was~~ going to take care of me.

"Let's do our hand-bandages" the nurse continued. "Now, look! Quickness counts! Your patient has burnt his hand and there is nobody around to help him - only you."

"Shouldn't we put some dressing on the wound first?" someone asked. "You certainly shouldn't!" was the answer. "Always remember we are just first aid people, not nurses or doctors or anything of the kind. Besides, we might mix up the boxes and bottles since we cannot see~~x~~ them."

"That's just it", the blind insisted. "We ought to have Braille labels on those boxes and bottles. Then we would do exactly as well as any seeing person."

This was not a bad idea and all those present decided to follow it up.

"Aren't their bandages lovely?" the nurse addressed me and "surely they are!" She answered herself. "Those are lovely hand-bandages, girls, I congratulate you!"

They did their slings - and they even did their foot-bandages. They discussed all sorts of respiratory problems and I learned

that things must be "radically wrong" with a person whose respiratory count was 40 every minute, 16- 20 being normal. And again I noticed the eagerness with which my friends talked about all the things they are not able to see. The nurse had to describe to them in detail the uniforms worn by the various types of nurses - their color, and the way they were cut, and if they were goodlooking.

When the class was over I was introduced to some of the students, one of whom had just received a letter from the White House. She had brought it along in order to take it to the framer from here. It was destined to hang close to a letter from Mr. Churchill over her bed. Both the President and the Prime Minister had thanked her for some patriotic verses she had composed and sent to Washington and London.

"I doubt", she said, "whether I would have received such lovely replies so promptly if I were not blind. People are very kind to us, I feel. And I only wish we could fully repay our country in this emergency for what it has done for us in times of peace!"

I wondered whether the blind depended entirely on private charity and initiative. I ought to have known better. Only some time ago - the poetess reminded me - my father's novel "The Buddenbrooks" was transcribed into a "Talking Book", a thing made possible by an act Congress had passed in 1931, known as the "Pratt-Smoot Law". This law authorized an appropriation of \$ 100 000 annually to the Library of Congress for books for the adult blind. Subsequently the appropriation increased, until, in 1942 the annual amount had reached \$ 350 000. Of this sum \$ 100 000 was allotted for books in raised characters and \$ 250 000 to the publication of books on sound reproduction records. It takes from fifteen to eighteen twelve-inch disks to record an average-size book. But "Gone with the Wind", for instance, covers no less than eighty records! The "books"

are deposited in libraries serving large regions and often including several states. They are being "read" by all those who are unable to read Braille. I understand that it is not much more than 20 % of the blind from coast to coast who read Braille with any degree of proficiency or pleasure. Both, the talking books, and the Braille publications are of course of great importance at times when the blind are particularly eager for any information and stimulus the radio will not provide.

They showed me their Braille calendar for the year 1942 and read me some of the beautiful Lincoln quotations and old American war songs as printed by means of those six mysterious elevated points whose position to one another determines their meaning in the alphabet of the blind.

They also showed me their type writing class and their workshop.

There were 4203 blind persons registered at the Lighthouse in 1941. Among those whom I saw at work I noticed quite a few negroes. Miss Kentner who takes care of public relations was showing me around. She assured me that it is one of the guiding principles of the institution to serve all blind people regardless of race, color, or creed. "We are also taking care of people who are not only blind but besides deaf or mute or both. And many of our blind have learned to communicate with our deaf-mutes by studying their silent language. Would you like to see the room where we are doing our bit to 'keep 'em flying'?"

A new type of war work has been developed by the blind of the Lighthouse. They began sorting rivets for an airplane factory. The rivets, made of aluminum, are salvaged from the floor of the factory and delivered to the Lighthouse for sorting into fifty different sizes

and shapes. This would be an extremely strenuous job for any seeing person since the rivets differ very little from one another. The blind, however, feel even the slightest variance and are easily able to place each rivet where it belongs, much like Cinderella could readily assort her peas. They are aided in this work by a very ingenious arrangement.

There is a rail in front of the various compartments ^{provided} ~~provided~~ for ^{various} ~~various~~ the rivets. Consequently the blind need not count the compartments in order to determine where, for example, rivet number 5 should be placed, but simply have to adjust the rivet on the rail, knowing exactly that the compartment for rivet number five would be, let's say, 7 inches from the starting point. It is easy for an experienced blind to gauge a distance of 7 inches. ~~SEVEN INCHES~~

They were gay and animated at work, those 20 men in their rivets shop. They chatted and some of them had bet on who could surpass the other in speed. The blind foreman of the occupational department was not on the job ^{right} ~~right~~ now but conversed with a deaf-mute, explaining to him what he should do. It looked as if he were playing the piano on the arms and shoulders of his listener, while on his part receiving the signs and pats of the mute man, a queer and touching picture.. To think that this phantastic conversation ~~as well as~~ as well as the innumerable delicate manipulations of the blind might ultimately result in an airplane carrying American soldiers to victory - to think that these people in the helplessness of their eternal black-out were not only eager but actually able directly to assist in the war effort of their country, produced a disturbing little lump in my throat.

"Do most of your patients like music?" I asked Miss Kentner, just in order to say something and to overcome my sentimentality.

"Never call them patients, if you please!" Said Miss Bentner. "They are not ill and resent being treated like invalids. Besides, it is an old mistake made by outsiders to conceive the blind as a compact group or class with definite characteristics of their own. They are individuals just as we are and to assert that most of them are musical would of course be exaggerated. You may say, though, that most of them are trying hard to develop all senses at their command to make up for the one they lack. They are quite ambitious, you know, and this whole rivets experiment pleases them particularly because it more than any of their other activities gives them a feeling of doing their share for victory."

The "rivets experiment" seems to work out very well indeed, but at this moment is still peculiar to the New York Lighthouse which by the way happens to be the first adult organization for the blind in the United States. However, there is hardly any doubt that among the 54 sheltered workshops for the blind distributed throughout 26 states, which are at present filling war orders for the Government in this country, many will add this important work to their other activities.

The orders placed by the United States Government with the workshops for the blind have assumed huge proportions. During 1941 the National Industries for the Blind, organized by and affiliated with the American Foundation for the Blind, allocated among other articles from those workshops more than:

	5 Million pillow cases,
over	2 Million lbs. mops
and	1 1/2 Million brooms.

Mailing bags, mop handles, whisk brooms and cocoa-mats are also being produced in enormous numbers.

Wages earned by the blind engaged on Government orders aggregate at present \$ 465 000. But more and more sightless people are writing to the American Foundation for the Blind, seeking guidance as to the best way in which they may - each of them as an individual - aid Democracy at war. And as an increasing number of sighted workers are drawn into the Army or are taken from private enterprises for specialized war industries, their places will have to be filled in many instances by the blind. Workers without sight have already demonstrated their value as sorters, packers and assemblers particularly in processes where sensitive fingers are essential. And, from California, where the war somehow seems to be closer to the population than in other parts of the country, the first reports come in testifying to the ability and morale of blind workers under war-time conditions.

During the frequent air-raid and black-out trials at the Industrial Home for the Adult Blind in Oakland, the most encouraging results have been observed. In fact, even in total darkness the sightless men and women continued with their work as though nothing had happened. It was the seeing matrons and janitors of the Home who seemed to be the blind in the blackout, ~~WHEN~~ changing parts with their "patients", whose ^{"normal"} world is ~~usually~~ so full of dangers, difficulties and traps, that they face the additional threats of the war with great equanimity.

It is meaningful that the American Foundation for the Blind, nerve center of the extraordinary working unit, has as its honorary President, Mr. Franklin Delano Roosevelt; for he, too, has passed through the darkness of a great illness from which he emerged even stronger, and more spirited than he had been before. And he, the Supreme Commander of all American forces, is also in command of that Army of

the blind, of those 200 000 men and women, who march side by side
with all those who fight for the survival and ultimate victory
of democracy.

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