THE MAN BORN BLIND

by

C.S. Lewis

"Bless us!" said Mary. "There's eleven o'clock. And you're nearly asleep, Robin."

She rose with a bustle of familiar noises, bundling her spools and her little cardboard boxes into the work-basket. "Come on, lazy-bones!" she said. "You want to be nice and fresh for your first walk tomorrow."

"That reminds me," said Robin, and then stopped. His heart was beating so loudly that he was afraid it would make his voice sound odd. He had to wait before he went on. "I suppose," he said, "there... there'll be light out ther -- when I go for that walk?"

"What do you mean, dear?" said Mary. "You mean it will be lighter out of doors? Well, yes, I suppose it will. But I must say I always think this is a very light house. This room, now. We've had the sun on it all day."

"The sun makes it ... hot?" said Robin tentatively.

"What are you talking about?" said Mary, suddenly turning around. She spoke sharply, in what Robin called her 'governess' voice.

"I mean," said Robin, " ... well, look here, Mary. There's a thing I've been meaning to ask you ever since I cam back from the nursing home. I know it'll sound silly to you. But then it's different for me. As soon as I knew I had a chance of getting my sight, of course I looked forward. The last thing I thought before the operation was "light". Then all those days afterwards, waiting till they took the bandages off --"

"Of course, darling. That was only natural."

"Then, then, why don't I ... I mean, where is the light?"

She laid her hand on his arm. Three weeks of sight had not yet taught him to read the expression of a face, but he knew by her touch the great warm wave of stupid, frightened affection that had welled up in her.

"Why not come to bed, Robin dear?" she said. "If it's anything important, can't we talk about it in the morning? You know you're tired now."

"No. I've got to have this out. You've got to tell me about light. Great Scot -- don't you want me to know?"

She sat down suddenly with a formal calmness that alarmed him.

"Very well, Robin," she said. "Just ask me anything you like. There's nothing to be worried about -- is there?"

"Well then, first of all, there's light in this room at present?"

"Of course there is."

"Then where is it?"

"Why, all around us."

"Can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Then why can't I?"

"But Robin, you can. Dear, do be sensible. You can see me, can't you, and the mantelpiece, and the table and everything?"

"Are those light? Is that all it means? Are you light? Is the mantelpiece light? Is the table light?"

"Oh! I see. No. Of course not. That's the light," and she pointed to the bulb, roofed with its broad pink shade, that hung from the ceiling.

"If that's the light, why did you tell me the light was all round us?"

"I mean, that's what gives the light. The light comes from there."

"Then where is the light itself? You see, you won't say. Nobody will say. You tell me the light is here and the light is there, and this is in the light and that is in the light and yesterday you told me that I was in your light, and now you say that light is a bit of yellow wire in a glass bulb hanging from the ceiling. Call that light? Is that what Milton was talking about? What are you crying about? If you don't know what light is, why can't you say so? If the operation has been a failure and I can't see properly after all, tell me. If there's no such thing -- if it was all a fairy tale from the beginning -- tell me. But for God's sake --"

"Robin! Robin! Don't. Don't go on like that."

"Go on like what?" Then he gave it up and apologised and comforted her, and they went to bed.

A blind man has few friends; a blind man who has recently received his sight has, in a sense, none. He belongs neither to the world of the blind nor to that of the seeing, and no one can share his experience. After that night's conversations Robin never mentioned to anyone his problem about light. He knew that he would only be suspected of madness. When Mary took him out next day for his first walk he replied to everything she said. "It's lovely -- all lovely. Just let me drink it in," and she was satisfied. She interpreted his quick glances as glances of delight. In reality, of course, he was searching with a hunger that had already something of desperation in it. Even had he dared, he knew it would be useless to ask her of any of the objects he saw, "Is that light?" He could see for himself that she would only answer, "No. That's green" (or "blue", or "yellow", or "a field", or "a tree" or "a car"). Nothing could be done until he had learned to go for walks by himself.

About five weeks later Mary had a headache and took breakfast in bed. As Robin came downstairs he was for a moment shocked to notice the sweet feeling of escape that came with her absence. Then, with a long shameless sigh of comfort, he deliberately closed his eyes and groped across the dining-room to his bookcase - for this one morning he would give up the tedious business of guiding himself by his eyes and judging distances and would enjoy the old, easy methods of the blind. Without effort his fingers rand down the row of faithful Braille books and picked out the worn volume he wanted. He slipped his hand between the leaves and shuffled across to the table, reading as he went. Still with his eyes shut, he cut up his food, laid down the knife, took the fork in his left hand and began reading with his right. He realized at once that this was the first meal he had really enjoyed since the recovery of his sight. It was also the first book he enjoyed. He had been very quick, everyone told him, in learning to read by sight, but it would never be the real thing. "W-A-T-E-R" could be spelled out; but never, never would those black marks be wedded to their meaning as in Braille, where the very shape of the characters communicated an instantaneous sense of liquidity through his fingertips. He took a long time over breakfast. Then he went out.

There was a mist that morning, but he had encountered mists before and this did not trouble him. He walked through it, out of the little town and up the steep hill and then along the field path that ran round the lip of the quarry. Mary had taken him there a few days ago to show him what she called the "view". And while they had sat looking at it she had said, "What a lovely light that is on the hills over there." It was a wretched clue, for he was now convinced that she knew no more about light than he did, that she used the word but meant nothing by it. He was even beginning to suspect that most of the un-blind were in the same position. What one heard among them was merely the parrot-like repetition of a rumor - the rumor of something which perhaps (it was his last hope) great poets and prophets of old had really known and seen. It was on their testimony alone that he still hoped. It was still just possible that somewhere in the world, not everywhere as fools had tried to make him believe, guarded in deep woods, or divided by distant seas, the thing Light might actually exist, sprining up like a fountain or growing like a flower.

The mist was thinning when he came to the lip of the quarry. To left and right more and more trees were visible and their colors grew brighter every moment. His own shadow lay before him; he noticed that it became blacker and firmer-edged while he looked at it. The birds were singing too and he was quite hot. "But still no Light," he muttered. The sun was visible behind him but the pit of the quarry was still full of mist - a shapeless whiteness, now almost blindingly white.

Suddenly he heard a man singing. Someone whom he had not noticed before was standing near the cliff edge with his legs wide apart dabbing at an object which Robin could not recognize. If he had been more experienced he would have recognized it as a canvas on an easel. As it was, his eyes met the eyes of this wild-looking stranger so unexpectedly that he had blurted out, "What are you doing?" before he realized it.

"Doing?" said the stranger with a certain savagery. "Doing? I'm trying to catch light, if you want to know, damn it."

A smile came over Robin's face. "So am I," he said and came a step nearer.

"Oh - you know too, do you?" said the other. Then, almost vindictively, "They're all fools. How many of them come out to pain on a day like this, eh? How many of them will recognize it if you show 'em? And yet if they could open their eyes, it's the only sort of day in the whole year when you can really see light, solid light, that you could drink in a cup or bathe in! Look at it!"

He caught Robin roughly by the arm and pointed into the depths at their feet. The fog was at death-grips with the sun, but not a stone on the quarry floor was yet visible. The bath of vapor shone like white metal and unfolded itself continually in ever-widening spirals towards them. "Do you see that?" shouted the violent stranger. "There's light for you if you like it!"

A second later the expression on the painter's face changed. "Here!" he cried. "Are you mad?" He made a grab at Robin. But he was too late. Already he was alone on the path. From beneath a new-made and rapidly vanishing rift in the fog there came up no cry but only a sound so sharp and definite that you would hardly expect it to have been made by the fall of anything so soft as a human body; that, and some rattling of loosened stones.