



*Times Wide World Photo*

*Helen Keller and Her Secretary in the Empire State Observation Tower.*

THE  
NEW YORK  
THAT  
HELEN KELLER  
“SEES”

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

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I DO not know when I have read any description of the Empire State and the City of New York that has so impressed me as has the letter written to Dr. John Finley by Miss Helen Keller.

There is no necessity for me to add another tribute to the many she has received for the stupendous task which she has accomplished in surmounting the obstacles nature placed in the path of her mental development. Without sight or hearing and with only her finger tips between herself and the world about her, Miss Keller has become a cultured, intelligent woman.

My hope is that her story in this booklet will be an inspiration to others as it has been to me.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alfred E. Smith". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper background.

[Signature: Alfred E.  
Smith]

SEEING in *The New York Times* the photograph of Helen Keller in the Observation Tower of the Empire State Building, I wrote her asking her what she really “saw” from that height. This remarkable letter written by her came in answer and was published in *The New York Times Magazine*. It will be agreed by all who read it that, as she said, she “beheld a brighter prospect than my friends with two good eyes.” In making the inquiry I quoted this passage from Cicero’s “Tusculan Disputations”:

*When Democritus lost his sight he could not, to be sure, distinguish black from white; but all the same he could distinguish good from bad, just from unjust, honorable from disgraceful, expedient from inexpedient, great from small, and it was permitted him to live happily without seeing changes of color; it was not permissible to do so without true ideas.*

Cicero might have written this as truly of Helen Keller who lives happily without seeing or hearing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Finley", with a horizontal line underneath.

[Signature: John Finley]

January 13, 1932.

Dear Dr. Finley:

**A**FTER many days and many tribulations which are inseparable from existence here below, I sit down to the pleasure of writing to you and answering your delightful question, “What Did You Think ‘of the Sight’ When You Were on the Top of the Empire Building?”

Frankly, I was so entranced “seeing” that I did not think about the sight. If there was a subconscious thought of it, it was in the nature of gratitude to God for having given the blind seeing minds. As I now recall the view I had from the Empire Tower, I am convinced that, until we have looked into darkness, we cannot know what a divine thing vision is.



*Times Wide World Photo*

*“Beneath the Surface Are Poetry, Mysticism and Inspiration”—A View  
From the Top of the Empire State Building.*

Perhaps I beheld a brighter prospect than my companions with two good eyes. Anyway, a blind friend gave me the best description I had of the Empire Building until I saw it myself.

Do I hear you reply, “I suppose to you it is a reasonable thesis that the universe is all a dream, and that the blind only are awake?” Y—es—no doubt I shall be left at the Last Day on the other bank defending the incredible prodigies of the unseen world, and, more incredible still, the strange grass and skies the blind behold are greener grass and bluer skies than ordinary eyes see. I will concede that my guides saw a thousand things that escaped

me from the top of the Empire Building, but I am not envious. For imagination creates distances and horizons that reach to the end of the world. It is as easy for the mind to think in stars as in cobble-stones. Sightless Milton dreamed visions no one else could see. Radiant with an inward light, he sent forth rays by which mankind beholds the realms of Paradise.

But what of the Empire Building? It was a thrilling experience to be whizzed in a “lift” a quarter of a mile heavenward, and to see New York spread out like a marvellous tapestry beneath us.

There was the Hudson—more like the flash of a sword-blade than a noble river. The little island of Manhattan, set like a jewel in its nest of rainbow waters, stared up into my face, and the solar system circled about my head! Why, I thought, the sun and the stars are suburbs of New York, and I never knew it! I had a sort of wild desire to invest in a bit of real estate on one of the planets. All sense of depression and hard times vanished, I felt like being frivolous with the stars. But that was only for a moment. I am too static to feel quite natural in a Star View cottage on the Milky Way, which must be something of a merry-go-round even on quiet days.

I was pleasantly surprised to find the Empire Building so poetical. From every one except my blind friend I had received an impression of sordid materialism—the piling up of one steel honeycomb upon another with no real purpose but to satisfy the American craving for the superlative in everything. A Frenchman has said, in his exalted moments the American fancies himself a demigod, nay, a god; for only gods never tire of the prodigious. The highest, the largest, the most costly is the breath of his vanity.

Well, I see in the Empire Building something else—passionate skill, arduous and fearless idealism. The tallest building is a victory of imagination. Instead of crouching close to earth like a beast, the spirit of man soars to higher regions, and from this new point of vantage he looks upon the impossible with fortified courage and dreams yet more magnificent enterprises.

What did I “see and hear” from the Empire Tower? As I stood there ’twixt earth and sky, I saw a romantic structure wrought by human brains and hands that is to the burning eye of the sun a rival luminary. I saw it stand erect and serene in the midst of storm and the tumult of elemental commotion. I heard the hammer of Thor ring when the shaft began to rise upward. I saw the unconquerable steel, the flash of testing flames, the sword-like rivets. I heard the steam drills in pandemonium. I saw countless skilled workers welding together that mighty symmetry. I looked upon the marvel of frail, yet indomitable hands that lifted the tower to its dominating height.

Let cynics and supersensitive souls say what they will about American materialism and machine civilization. Beneath the surface are poetry, mysticism and inspiration that the Empire Building somehow symbolizes. In that giant shaft I see a groping toward beauty and spiritual vision. I am one of those who see and yet believe.

I hope I have not wearied you with my “screed” about sight and seeing. The length of this letter is a sign of long, long thoughts that bring me happiness. I am, with every good wish for the New Year,

Sincerely yours,

HELEN KELLER

[Signature: Helen Keller]



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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The New York that Helen Keller "Sees"* by Helen Keller]