

STORIES of New Jersey

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THE SEEING EYE

In the village of Whippany, near Morristown, N.J. is an institution unique in this country and perhaps in the world. It is The Seeing Eye, a college for men and dogs.

The Seeing Eye trains dogs to guide blind men and women and supply the sharp eyes that the blind person lacks. Here dogs especially adapted to the purpose are painstakingly trained to lead the blind, to see for them, to be ever conscious of their welfare. German shepherd dogs are selected for this unusual duty. Females are preferred as being more docile than the male, more tractable, and infinitely better adapted to the work.

The dogs are not merely trained, they are actually educated. They learn to obey the commands, "forward, left, right," only as long as it is safe for the blind person. When told to do something that might mean disaster for the blind whom they are leading, they are taught to ignore the command. For instance, the man may order the dog to cross a street. But she sees a car speeding toward her. Regardless of the order, she stands still. When the car has passed, she looks in both directions, and when sure that the way is clear at last ventures across.

The dog wears a harness with a rigid U-shaped rubber handle placed conveniently for the blind man. Through this intimate touch both man and dog soon come to feel an instinctive relationship.

Three months is required for the training of an intelligent animal. The chief point is to train the dog to think of her master. She is taught to avoid impediments such as awnings that may be too low. To do this a bit of string is stretched before her, too low for her to pass under. She invariably walks round it. Bit by bit the string barrier is raised until she can pass under it, although her master is stopped. At this stage the dog passes under the string and then turns to see how her master is faring. Again and again she has to do this until she learns to circle the obstacle, even though she herself can pass under it. In the end she is able to judge whether an awning or other impediment is high enough for her master to pass under safely.

The blind person must also be educated, on lines different but just as important. Before coming to The Seeing Eye he may have been fearful of making any movement whatever. After many bumps and falls he may have formed the habit of shuffling and stretching out his arms. A possible obstruction, a dip in the path, any one of a thousand foes to a person whose eyes have been completely closed may have taught unusual timidity or caution. It is necessary