

The Strange Man

Kendall held the door open for Mrs. Barnett as her aunt hooked the leash to Bo's collar and led the black Labrador retriever out of the car. Before he could take off running through the tall pine trees at the edge of the picnic area, the young girl grabbed hold of his leash. Bo quickly dashed ahead of her. Mrs. Barnett attempted to follow but soon gave up.

The dog pulled and tugged at the leash, straining to stay ahead. "Bo, stop!" Kendall yelled.

"Hold on to the leash!" shouted Mrs. Barnett, watching as Bo gradually slowed down to sniff the ground anxiously, catching whiffs of new, strange scents.

"I have a good grip on him now," shouted Kendall.

The pretty thirteen-year-old girl with long, blond

hair was Mrs. Barnett's niece visiting her from Henderson, Nevada. The three of them had stopped at a picnic area beyond Newton, Texas, to have lunch before continuing to the farm a few miles outside of town. The east Texas town was the county seat of Newton County, with its eastern boundary, the Sabine River, separating Texas from the state of Louisiana. They were going to stay at the old Simmons farm while the Harrisons, who now lived on the farm, were on their summer vacation. Mrs. Barnett and the Harrisons were close friends, and they had asked her to housesit while they were away. Kendall's parents agreed to let her lengthen her summer visit with her aunt until after school started so that she could take this opportunity to learn about east Texas and some of its history.

After scheduling the dates she and her niece would stay at the turn-of-the-century farmhouse, Mrs. Barnett contacted another friend, Dr. Larry Simmons, the great-grandson of the farm's original owner. She asked him if his granddaughters would be in the area while she and Kendall were there. In talking to him she learned that his granddaughters Claire and Ruth were visiting close by and would still be there when Mrs. Barnett

arrived. The girls had lived in Argyle, Texas, before moving to Virginia, and Claire, the older of the two, helped to crack the case of the missing dog mystery that Bo, the famous retriever, was instrumental in solving. The Simmons sisters were close to Kendall's age, and their grandfather said he would tell them to stop by the farm before they left to go back home.

This was Bo's first trip away from Argyle, the small north Texas town where Bo and Mrs. Barnett lived. He became known as "the Famous Retriever" after helping the police solve his first big case. Bo's uncanny nose, along with his superb retrieving abilities, guided him in sniffing out burglars, catching dog snatchers, and breaking up a crime ring. A lot had happened since Mrs. Barnett's son had left his six-month-old black Labrador retriever with her when he took a government job in Alaska.

Although Bo had been helpful in solving crimes around town, he was still a handful and could be difficult to manage. At different times her teenage neighbor, P.J. Brown, taught Bo how to sit and stay. He also taught him to come when he was called, but the dog was still untrained. He didn't

walk on the leash as he should, and he didn't mind very well either.

"I wonder how he'll get along without bringing home the neighbors' newspapers," pondered Mrs. Barnett as she took the picnic basket out of the car. Every afternoon, Bo ran out the door—or nearly tore up the house if he couldn't—snatching up each neighbor's newspaper and taking it home. When he finished delivering the eleven newspapers to Mrs. Barnett's front porch, she had to redeliver them to where they belonged. It was a constant problem. Neither she nor anyone else could stop him.

Taking the basket with her, Mrs. Barnett looked around and found the perfect spot for a picnic under the shade of a large pecan tree. As she covered the concrete table with a red and white checked cloth, she then wondered how Bo would behave while they ate their lunch.

She was facing the table, putting out silverware, when suddenly something hit her between the shoulder blades, shoving her across the stone bench and against the table. She heard footsteps run past her and smelled a strong, sweet scent, but the jab to her back was so unexpected she didn't have time to turn around to see who it was. Placing



her hands on the table, she pushed herself back and turned her head in time to catch a glimpse of a person running across the parking area.

Bo led the way as Kendall raced to her. “Are you hurt?” she asked, extending her hand to grab Mrs. Barnett’s arm.

“I don’t know. It was such a surprise.”

“I saw him run out of the pine forest and zigzag down the sidewalk.”

Mrs. Barnett looked puzzled. “He zigzagged?”

“Yes, like this,” she said, demonstrating how the man hopped as he ran from one side of the sidewalk to the other.

“That’s more like a limp,” Mrs. Barnett observed. “All I saw was a large person waving his hands as he ran to a truck in the parking area.”

“It was a man, and he drove off in an old brownish-colored truck.”

Bewildered, Mrs. Barnett listened.

“He had on a dark blue baseball cap,” Kendall continued, “and sort of waved his arms around his head like this.” With Bo’s leash still wrapped around her hand, she made an awkward attempt to show her.

“Well, I’m all right, and let’s don’t let that

strange man with his bizarre behavior spoil our picnic,” Mrs. Barnett suggested, wanting to change the subject and focus their attention on the food. “So that we can eat without Bo bothering us, see if you can tie his leash around this table leg.”

Bo didn’t like having his leash shortened. He pulled at it, acting as if he wanted to take off again, but the strong strap held him in place. He sat down and immediately lifted his nose up to the edge of the table, sniffing the air. Right away his eyes focused on the baked chicken, and Mrs. Barnett said, “He’s settled down now, and I think the leash is secure enough to keep him here.”

Watching Bo stretch his head up to the table and make loud sniffing sounds as he smelled the aroma of the food, Kendall laughed, “I think getting a whiff of that chicken changed his mind about leaving.”

