

Hedgehog Experience

Henri lived with his father and grandmother in a small house in a tiny village in the country of Senegal, West Africa. His grandmother had an uncanny sense of weather and time and had been able to predict every major storm for the past thirty years and could, without a glance at a calendar, tell how many days remained until the next full moon.

Henri was fascinated by hedgehogs, little animals that thrived in his native country. If you have never seen a hedgehog, you will have to imagine it. Picture in your mind a small football shaped body of spikes, with a long, soft nose poking out. Then picture those spikes moving in tiny waves as the hedgehog moves, and when it is defending itself, curling up tighter and tighter to form a compressed impenetrable ball of spikes. The spikes are so numerous and fine that you're almost fooled into thinking that you're looking at a fine coat of soft fur. But beware and approach it with extreme caution because it is actually covered with stone-stiff blades sticking out evenly in every direction. This is a hedgehog, and the spikes are why few animals try to eat it.

Henri loved to watch hedgehogs move at their careful deliberate pace. They had no need to hide or run away, and Henri found them to be rather pleasant and soothing animals to observe. Henri had a fascination with just about everything to do with hedgehogs. Henri's father, however, would have nothing to do with them and was always irritated when Henri brought home his new hedgy friends.

"Henri," shrieked his father, "you've brought home another one of those spiked rats! You know I can't stand them! Those thorny things belong OUTside, not inside! Take it outside immediately!"

"But father," pleaded Henri, "I'll keep it far away from you. I'll keep it just for tonight, and then release it first thing in the morning." It was not that Henri actually lost these arguments with his father; they usually just reached a stalemate and stopped talking about it, whether Henri released the new friend or hid it away from his father's view.

"A plague is coming," his Grandmother said one morning as she stood over the fireplace making porridge for breakfast. "It's going to be a big one. Ants, probably."

Despite the overwhelming history of accuracy of Grandmother's predictions, Henri's father rarely gave her any credit until the foretold events came to pass, and then he would reason that she couldn't possibly have known anything of such great importance. "How can there be a plague in this day and age?" Henri's father said, waving his hands in the air at her. "The government takes care of those things with modern technology. That

kind of thing doesn't happen anymore."

Grandmother was unperturbed by her son's disbelief saying, "No, a plague is coming, and it will be a swarm of ants thicker than this porridge, and hungrier than a nation of giants. If something doesn't stop them, then they'll eat every edible crop for miles around."

As he always did, Henri listened intently to his grandmother. A plague of ants certainly sounded frightening. But, then again, perhaps this time his father was right to take the opposite viewpoint. Henri had never seen such a thing in his own lifetime.

Henri's thoughts quickly turned back to the school day ahead. After school he would play soccer with his friends until sunset, and then he would go hunting for hedgehogs to watch them emerge and start their evening's activities.

Finding hedgehogs was usually easy for Henri because countless numbers of them lived near Henri's village. Henri tried to be content just to follow or watch them, but often he couldn't resist the temptation to take one home. Scooping the spiky ball up with a flat board, he would spill it into a shoebox and then try to sneak it into the house without his father noticing. If his father found out about the hedgehog, the time-worn debate would be on again.

As time passed, Henri started to have a surprisingly difficult time finding hedgehogs nearby. Each day he began to notice fewer and fewer hedgehogs. In the following days, he ventured farther and farther away from the village to seek out his favorite friends, eventually finding none at all, no matter how far he went.

Henri spent most of each day the next week in his old routine, but he felt an absence in his life. At first he felt anxious, then increasingly depressed. His life didn't seem to go very smoothly without the ability to pursue his favorite distraction. Finally, Henri had had enough, and he needed to do something about his predicament. So, one day after school, Henri set out walking away from the village, leaving his friends behind on the soccer field. He set out traveling away from the sunset, beyond the village limits, amidst the surrounding small farms in the dry countryside.

Henri walked so long he lost all track of where he was. All he knew was that he was heading east, away from the sun. He became thirsty beyond belief, and was beginning to wonder if he had been gone too long. He watched the hot sun make mirages that looked like silvery pools over the grasslands and decided that he should start to walk back.

Just as he turned around to leave, Henri noticed a movement on the plains unlike the typical, magical waviness of a mirage. At a distance, it looked like the ground was moving and seething with hills of moving bushes. He knew right away that this was not something he had ever seen in all of his years in the village.

As he peered more intently, attempting to discern exactly what was happening, he began to make out familiar shapes. He saw an undulating line of round spiky balls moving at their characteristically slow speed of confidence and safety. There were hundreds of long noses poking out from those spiky balls, dipping down to the ground, up and down, up and down.

Just beyond the long row of hundreds of hedgehogs was an enormous, moving mass of black life - as though the inky night sky had fallen to earth and was now crawling across the grasslands. Grandmother had been right!

The black vastness looked unstoppable! Then Henri remembered Grandmother's one condition on the wide destruction she had predicted: "If something doesn't stop them." Henri thought about what his grandmother had said as he watched the thick wall of hedgehogs aggressively and systematically gobbling up whole piles of tiny ants at a time.

Watching hedgehogs eat the occasional beetle, holding them in a shoe box, or keeping them at home wasn't the same as watching them here. Henri never knew the true power, the potential, the amazing appetite, or the critical importance that his cute companions held in the wide world of nature. With awe, he witnessed the hedgehogs work. For the first time, he truly saw why they belonged where they belong and why his father was right about them.

Henri raced home, following the sun to his village and family. He burst inside the house, thrilled to share the awesome spectacle he had just witnessed, but he couldn't speak and just stammered, gasping and panting. He finally shouted, "Father! Grandmother! Hedgehogs! Out there! Hundreds! Hedgehogs! Plague!"

"Hedgehogs, hedgehogs, hedgehogs!" his father spoke sharply as he cooked dinner. He immediately became upset. "I don't want to hear another word, Henri! Besides, you're late for supper." He pointed his knife at Henri and said, "All week you've been depressed, and now you're panicked, and the only words you can get out are 'hedgehog' and 'plague'? Perhaps it's a plague of hedgehogs, right? Just one of them is plague enough for me! I'd rather never see, nor hear about hedgehogs ever again. Enough already! Now, go wash up for dinner!"

"Ah... but... you don't understand..." tried Henri, still panting. He looked at Grandmother for understanding, and she quenched Henri's thirst for recognition with a knowing smile. Grandmother had heard all she needed to hear, and understood exactly what Henri had seen and knew just how amazing it was.

Grandmother thought it advisable to explain the situation to Henri's father at a better time. She brought Henri a glass of water to drink and led him out to wash up, saying, "We'll tell your father all about this over dinner." As he left with his grandmother,

Henri looked back at his father and said, "Okay, Father, no more hedgehogs around here anymore. They'll stay right where they belong: outside, not in."

- 1. In what part of Africa did this story take place?**
 - A. South Africa.
 - B. West Africa.
 - C. North Africa.

- 2. What prediction was Henri's grandmother able to make for many years?**
 - A. Predict when the moon would rise and set.
 - B. Predict when the seasons were going to change.
 - C. Predict when there would be a major storm.

- 3. Why did hedgehogs have no need to hide or run away from people?**
 - A. They moved in a way that made them uninteresting.
 - B. They had a way to protect themselves so they were safe.
 - C. They could look dangerous when they wanted to.

- 4. How did arguments between Henri and his dad about the hedgehogs that Henri brought home usually end?**
 - A. Henri's father made Henri put them outside.
 - B. No decision or conclusion was reached.
 - C. Henri agreed to keep the hedgehogs hidden.

- 5. How did Henri's father feel about Hedgehogs?**
 - A. He strongly disliked them and thought they belonged outside.
 - B. He thought they were interesting but didn't make good pets.
 - C. He thought they were okay as long as they stayed outside.

6. When did Henri first realize that his grandmother was right about the plague of ants?

- A. When he saw the noses of the hedgehogs moving up and down far away.
- B. When he realized what looked like hills of bushes were really hedgehogs.
- C. When he realized what the mass of black crawling across the grassland was.

7. What was Henri's father like?

- A. He thought that he knew more than other people.
- B. He had strong opinions about things and stuck to them.
- C. He was interested in learning new and unusual things.

8. How did the disappearance of hedgehogs affect Henry?

- A. He felt an absence in his life and was depressed.
- B. He felt it wasn't fair that he lost his animal friends.
- C. He felt there were more important things than hedgehogs.

9. After seeing the ant plague, what was Henri's biggest problem?

- A. Deciding how to deal with hedgehogs now that he knew their power.
- B. Getting help from his grandmother to tell his father about the plague.
- C. Communicating with his father about what he had seen on his walk.

10. What best describes the way Henri viewed hedgehogs after he saw them eating the ants?

- A. They were no longer just a curiosity but were a powerful force of nature.
- B. They were something to be feared, not something to be played with.
- C. They were still interesting, but now he would have to play with them outside.

11. What did Henri do when he could find no hedgehogs around his village?

- A. He went on a long walk to search for them elsewhere.
- B. He decided to play ball with his friends after school.
- C. He kept searching for them all around his village.

- 12. What probably kept Grandmother from becoming upset with her son when he didn't believe her?**
- A. She knew when the plague came her son would recognize that she was right.
 - B. She was sure it would happen, and there was nothing she could do about it.
 - C. She knew she was correct, and she expected her son to react negatively.
- 13. How will Henri's father probably react when he finds out that there was an ant plague?**
- A. He will realize Grandmother was right about all of her predictions and will apologize.
 - B. He will agree that Grandmother was right but will say that it was just a lucky guess.
 - C. He will be angry Grandmother's prediction came true and not want to talk about it.
- 14. What important thing did Henri remember his grandmother saying about the destruction she had predicted?**
- A. The ants were sure to cause destruction unless something stopped them.
 - B. The ants would be like hungry giants and destroy everything in their path.
 - C. There would be nothing that would stop the ants once they started to move.
- 15. After Henri learned that the plague would be ants, why did he consider that perhaps this time his father's viewpoint might be right?**
- A. He knew there couldn't be that many ants in one place.
 - B. He was afraid of what a real plague would be like.
 - C. He had never experienced anything like an ant plague.
- 16. How did Grandmother feel about her ability to make predictions?**
- A. She thought it was a special gift, and she should be given recognition for it.
 - B. She thought it was normal and not something she should get praised for.
 - C. She knew she was always right and was bothered others didn't listen to her.

17. What made Henri think about returning home when he was far from his village looking for hedgehogs?
- A. He couldn't find any hedgehogs, and he was getting tired.
 - B. He was heading away from the sun, and he was getting thirsty.
 - C. The sun was getting too hot for him, and it was a long way back.
18. What was this story mostly about?
- A. Why children should listen to their parents.
 - B. Special abilities that certain people have.
 - C. The relationship between man and nature.
19. What was the main argument Henri's father used for why there couldn't be a plague?
- A. The government wouldn't let such things happen.
 - B. Grandmother couldn't predict important things.
 - C. Plagues like that don't happen in modern times.
20. What best describes the way Henri's family functioned?
- A. Grandmother was the real head of the family, Henri thought his father was head, and Henri's father didn't care what Grandmother thought.
 - B. Henri didn't follow family rules because his father didn't care, and his grandmother wasn't strong enough to keep things balanced.
 - C. His father was a strong family head, Henri was an obedient son, and Grandmother kept the family balanced.