

HECTOR AND HELEN
STANLEY DAVID GEDZELMAN
20-21 January 1970

Hector could not remember ever having been with his parents. "It's a dog's lot", said he, for he had a subtle sense of humor. Hector's first memory in life was being rolled around and attacked by his three year old master, David. David took full advantage of his uncoordinated size and Hector remembered clearly how David's mother came in the room and scolded her son.

"What are you doing to Hector, David? He's just a tiny puppy and you might really hurt him. Remember, he's a Saint Bernard and they grow huge. Why, in half a year he'll be big and strong, and if you've been mean to him you better watch out. Now, if you want him to be nice to you and obey you, you be nice to him now. Do you understand, David?"

"Yes, Mommy," said David.

But, it's quite hard to tell which side understanding was on. David understood what Mommy said in the way all little children understand their parents' morality and logic. But mommy, it seems, hadn't understood the dog. For in Hector was the instinct that he would soon far overpower the little boy and he also had that dog's instinct which forgot today's pain rapidly so long as it wasn't caused by cruelty. And Hector just looked funny squirming around because secretly David felt powerful. Later, when the dog became strong, David in his imaginings would absorb the strength he saw in the admirable Hector.

And it was in the dog's nature to agree to these plans for this was the same deal he and his ancestors made with mankind. Human protection and love were given in return for borrowing the dog's strength and patience. There were breaks in the partnership to be sure, but they were generally on the part of the angry human who retracted his love quite easily. The prerogatives seemed to be all with the humans, but strangely enough the dogs generally don't seem to mind it.

Well, sure enough, within half a year Hector was a giant next to David and when winter came around, Hector was hitched up and pulled David around on a sled. Hector knew that his little master was clumsy so he never went too fast or jerked at the sled or turned too sharp a corner. Only once did David fall off, and then Hector stopped the sled immediately so that his master could get on again and lead him. The ever-ready sled and dog even succeeded in keeping the young master from crying.

Hector, for some reason, fell in love with his master and that love was returned in full measure. By the time David was six, such tricks as hitting the dog were a thing far in the past. Occasionally, he would tie Hector's ears together into a bow, but the dog would shake his head and the bow would quickly come undone. But these tricks and games were interspersed with hugs so that the dog tolerated it all in an amiable and even stately manner and came back for more whenever possible.

For David's sixth birthday his parents brought home a tiny kitten, a mere pebble of fluff next to Hector. David couldn't understand the purpose of the cat. Perhaps it was some form of sacrifice to be offered to Hector. However, the dog's interest seemed to extend only as far as his nose and it soon abated.

David's father said, "Son, I think we should name this cat Helen since it's a girl cat and anyway, you know how good friends dogs and cats usually are. But when a cat is young, if it is brought up with a dog they usually get along somehow, just like 3000 years ago a brave warrior named Hector got along with a beautiful lady named Helen. So, don't you think it will be a good name to give the cat?"

"OK," said David, really not much interested in the cat or for that matter in Troy, which he knew nothing about. David would have much preferred some other birthday present, one that the other boys had – but maybe that would come next birthday.

Nevertheless, David soon began to appreciate his birthday present, if only because of Hector. The playful kitten would rip and claw at Hector's legs when the dog was standing or bury itself in Hector's fur when the latter was lying down. As the months passed the cat became less playful and more deliberate. She sharpened her hunting instincts on Hector and the dog accepted her in a very friendly way. He even seemed to enjoy being hunted and at times would hide from Helen, although she never had any difficulty in rooting him out. There were times that she hurt him a little but he would never make the least aggressive looking move towards her. There was simply too great a disparity in their strengths. And David saw that Hector treated Helen like a lady and determined that he too would act like a gentleman. Besides, the cat demanded good treatment.

One day when David took the dog and cat for a walk the collie down the block launched a sneak attack on Helen. This dog had always given Hector a rough time but Hector had never been aggressive. Only once did he ever face the collie and several times he ran away. But this time with Helen in danger, Hector became vicious. It was the first time he attacked anything, but instinct served him well and surprise was on his side. In an instant the collie was on its back and Hector was at its throat. Normally, a victorious dog will cease its attack once its victim is on its back, but this time Hector went berserk. By the time David could pull Hector off the collie was a bloody mess. Never again would it be the nuisance it had been to all the neighborhood dogs.

David's father was angry when the collie's owner complained to him, but when David explained that the collie had gone after Helen and besides was mean and sneaky, always attacking Hector and other dogs, David's father relented and said that Hector didn't even deserve a punishment. "Ah, I see that Hector is once again a reluctant warrior and defending Helen too! I should write to Reader's Digest. I might get something for it. David, this is just like the story of Troy." And he proceeded to tell David the entire story.

Well, David didn't like that story very much, especially since Hector and just about every Trojan man got killed, and all for Helen. David didn't like girls too much so he certainly couldn't see why all these men were fighting over one woman. But his father told him that some day he'd understand because when he grew up he'd fall in love with the ladies. David said yes, but really didn't much believe that even though there were one or two girls in the class that he really liked, but only because they were pretty. Otherwise, they were just annoying, prissy, and bossy.

Helen thanked Hector for his heroism. "I never thought you had a backbone. You really surprised me, you know. You always run away and if you are punished you repent and lick up to the master to get in his good graces again. But this time you were different and I've got to thank you even though

the only reason I was in trouble was because my guard was down since I was with you. For a moment I almost started to trust dogs.”

“Well,” replied Hector, “the collie is a real bad dog. Most dogs are nice. You just don’t trust anyone. That’s the trouble with you. I wish you’d be more trusting. Do you know that this is the first time you’ve ever spoken to me?”

“We cats don’t usually talk to dogs except to deceive you. So, don’t expect too much from me. It usually doesn’t pay to talk to you dogs, you’re all so stupid. You take anything that comes your way, good and bad and only fight back when it is too late, except, of course when you fight against us cats. You’re just lucky I tolerate you.”

Helen continued, “Listen to me! These people have made slaves of us. And you seem to appreciate them for it. You act towards them the way they act towards the police or the priests. And the more they put you down the nicer you act towards them. When they treat me bad I snub them – in fact, except when I feel like purring I stay away from them and ignore them. They like to be snubbed. You just don’t handle them right.”

“You have it all wrong, Helen. They really love us. They may punish me occasionally but it never really hurts and they wouldn’t do us bad. Why, they’re our protectors. They feed us every day. They even let us run around free sometimes and you can’t think it’s too bad or you wouldn’t come back. And besides, if you’re always angry you’ll never really enjoy life. You’re always angry and suspicious. I can’t understand you.”

“Listen, just because I come back doesn’t mean anything. These humans have all the good food, that’s why I come back. And if I were your size I’d let them have it. Let me tell you that if I ever get my chance I am going to hurt them for what they’ve done to me. I hate the way they push me around. I’m just an extension of their wills as far as they’re concerned and you are too. But you really are. Just remember – I’ll find my way.”

That ended the conversation because Helen walked away. Hector was depressed and worried but when he sat and thought for a while he regained some part of his usual calm because he couldn’t see any way that Helen could live up to her threats. And the cat, whom he liked and protected couldn’t have cared less about him. Why, he hadn’t even known she could talk. Hector’s instincts didn’t extend to understanding cats for historically, dogs and cats have not been associates for very long. So naturally, the shrewd cat was able to upset the trusting St. Bernard.

Cats, you see, made their deal with humans in a quite different manner from the way dogs did. Long after the dogs had been domesticated and the cats caught on to the fact that the dogs weren’t being killed, the cats began to frequent men’s camps. They had a hard time with all the dogs but for the cats this was a deal not to be missed. Dogs could offer men various services but cats knew they were almost useless. They offered themselves to man because they were too small to catch anything but rodents, and the cats saw how well the dogs were fed. So they plagued mankind until they were taken in, whereupon they occasionally performed the service of keeping down the population of mice and smaller rats, but otherwise remained useless, elusive, and suspicious. And mankind took to this generally frigid but sometimes purring animal.

Well, soon enough an opportunity was presented to Helen. For, shortly before David's eighth birthday his mother, whose stomach had been quite puffed up came back from the hospital with a flattened belly and Stuart, a little baby boy.

It was a lucky thing that David had Hector that winter. The dog served to reduce David's jealousy. For David was the most popular kid on the block once Hector was hitched up to the sled. David gave out rides and the dog, knowing that his master and the other kids could take it, really raced around. And they praised Hector all the more for upsetting any kid.

Towards the end of winter a blizzard buried the town and Hector was the hero of the day because he dragged the sled all the way to the grocery store. David's father and David and Helen sat on it as broad-pawed Hector moved the world past them. On the way back Helen upset the festive mood by announcing to Hector that she had discovered how to carry out her plan. That was only the second time she had spoken to Hector.

When they got back into the house and while David and his father were praising the dog, Helen spit at him. "You know how I'll get at them – through the baby! I'll get that baby and scratch its eyes out. You fool, you crave praise even when you know it's only because you've made a slave out of yourself to them."

And the cat was making such a racket that David's mother picked it up and hugged it, an act for which her sweater was clawed. But she excused the cat. "Oh, poor Helen is jealous of all the attention you're giving Hector. If Helen were big she'd help too, wouldn't you, Helen?" To which the cat responded not a whit but squirmed around demanding to be put down. And David's mother went right off to get Helen a dish of milk – to which Helen did respond.

When the festivities had ended, Hector sought out Helen and said, "Helen, you're not going to hurt that little baby. I won't let you. And you're not right. I'm no slave. I pull them and you around because I like you all and I like to pull things. I love pulling the sled in the snow. You were just jealous like the mistress said that I was getting the attention."

"Stupid," spit the cat at Hector. "That's why cats don't waste their time with dogs. Why couldn't they have given me a cat for a playmate instead of a dull thing like you? Don't forget my promise! Just you wait."

Hector was getting angry. "I don't think I like you anymore. You're really hateful." Then Helen attacked Hector and he was hard put to get her off him and get her settled down. Now Hector understood why ages of dogs had chased cats. The cats asked for it – they teased and were mean. Why he recalled having fun chasing them when he was just a year old. But he had stopped when Helen was brought to him. Now he wished he never knew Helen.

Over the next few months David's father noticed a change in Hector. "David do you know what's eating that dog. He used to be so calm and now he looks so jittery it's pathetic. He worries me." David said, "I don't know, Dad. But he used to play with Helen and now he just stares at her."

A few months passed. Just when the baby began to crawl Helen hissed at Hector, "I'm going to get him now."

“I just won’t let you, Helen.”

The infuriated cat sprang on the baby and began scratching for his eyes. Hector charged, accidentally knocking over the scratched baby, who was screaming at the top of his lungs. In one huge leap Hector caught the cat’s neck in his mouth and clamped down on it. He felt Helen’s neck crunch in his jaws and then he felt the quivering, and dropped the bloody cat. It had almost instantly died.

Stuart’s mother ran into the room and started screaming. Her husband wasn’t far behind. When he saw the carnage he ran out and came back with the carving knife. He attacked Hector who in desperation bit deep into his wrist. The tremendous pressure made his arm go limp and the knife dropped to the floor.

The next day David’s father, with bandaged wrist, ordered Hector to follow him. “Get in the car you swine!” With tail down the dog obeyed and was driven off.

That night David was told that Hector had been put to sleep. “Son,” said his father, “that dog didn’t know his own strength. He almost killed Stuart trying to get the cat. We couldn’t let anything like that happen again. You saw that he had become a nervous, unpredictable menace. And he almost bit clear through my arm. We had to put him to sleep.”

“It was all because of Helen. She clawed Stuart, look at the scratch marks. It was Helen’s fault and I’m glad she’s dead.” Then he ran upstairs crying.

“My God”, said his father to himself. “The kid’s right.”