

Horace Horrise's Grandad gets a Haircut

“Horace, we do need to get you invested into 3rd Chislehurst fairly soon; things are starting to drag. Have you learnt your Scout Promise yet?”

“Err...errr...”

Horace was standing in Ravens patrol, at ease with his legs apart and his hands behind his back. He was “at easing” next to Melanie and so he was trying not to fidget. No one fidgeted when standing next to Melanie. Horace *had* learnt his Promise, several in fact, but was not going to say so. Just because he *had* learnt them didn't mean that he actually *knew* them. It was perfectly possible to have learnt them yet not be able to recall them, especially on demand and with your scout leader looking at you and waiting for a word-perfect recitation. Horace thought that if he said that he had learnt them then John would ask him to practice them - something that Horace was not prepared to do, so he merely replied, “Err...errr...”

This was the signal, although Horace didn't realise it, for Melanie to speak. “Horace *has* learnt them, Skip, 'cos I heard him say them the other day, but you can't expect him to remember them forever. Actors have to learn loads of words 'cos it's their job but once they've done the play or whatever then they forget them. They can't be expected to remember them forever so if you don't invest Horace soon so that he can still remember them then he's going to forget, isn't he?”

“Well, thank you Melanie, but *I* haven’t forgotten it,” said John, trying hard not to sound too confrontational. But Melanie was warming to her theme.

“Yeah, but you say it and hear it loads of times, Skip, like when everyone’s invested and stuff like that. And you have to remember it in case someone forgets it. And you’re grown-up so you have a bigger memory. And anyway, you don’t have to remember so much when you’re older but us young people have to remember so much what with school and sums and geography and stuff so the Scout Promise is yet another thing. Then we only get to say it once and then we forget it. I know we say it at St George’s Day and times like that but we don’t have to remember it for that ’cos we can just pretend ’cos there’s someone at the front saying it with a microphone so they don’t know if we’re saying it or not. In any case...”

“Melanie. Melanie. Thank you, but I’m sure Horace is able to speak for himself. He’s never had any problem remembering anything before so a few lines shouldn’t be much of an issue. If he’s learnt it then I would have hoped that he, and you for that matter, wouldn’t ever forget it. It’s a template for life: doing your best, helping others, keeping the Scout Law. There’s loads in the Scout Law. Maybe you should learn that as well.”

“Please Skip, I will re-remember them,” said Horace who thought that it was time to take command of a situation where he was the subject-matter but not a participant.

“The problem is that there are so many versions of it to learn. There’s the normal one, then there’s one for every religion. Then there’s one for no religion. It’s all so much.”

John looked at Horace, normally so upbeat but his face had fallen and John thought that he appeared quite sad. Maybe he had overdone it after all. It was time for a spot of empathy as well as a small correction.

“Now then Horace, I think you may be under a slight misapprehension. You only have to learn one Promise, not all of them. And what’s more, you decide which one.” Horace’s eyes sparkled again. His countenance had suddenly changed and he now looked like someone from whom a great burden had been lifted. But his response was far from being one of gratitude.

“Well I wish someone had told me,” he said, sounding more than a little annoyed. “I thought I had to learn all of them and then you decided which ones I should do. You told me that I had to learn the Scout Promise, not a Scout Promise.”

“No Horace,” said John smiling. He was not going to argue. The way to stop an argument was not to continue to disagree. He did not want Horace to descend back into despair. A sad scout was not a happy scout. “You decide, Horace. You decide.” Horace’s response was not what John was expecting. The standard one was the one that John thought that Horace would opt for.

“In that case I’ll do the Arabic one,” said Horace brightly. John looked perplexed.

“‘Arabic’, Horace?”

“Yes Skip. I presume you know it. ’Cos how are you going to prompt me if you don’t?” John thought for a moment. It was time to come clean.

“I don’t but I will make every effort to learn it. But why Arabic?”

“Cos I can. I mean I am allowed to as well as I am able to, so why not? And I will be invested whenever you want,” said Horace. “I love scouts and I will always do my best. And I have been doing my best even though I haven’t promised to yet and I will do my best even when I have been invested. Unlike some of the others,” Horace added darkly.

“Yes, Horace, I realise that. We’ll get a date sorted out. And do keep on doing and helping even though you’re not yet invested.” John turned to address the whole section. “Now then scouts, don’t forget it’s our annual barbeque here tomorrow afternoon. At the same time we’ve also offered to cut the grass in the stable’s small field next door as well - for which we will be paid a not insignificant amount - as part of Community Week. I hope you can all make it. Don’t be late. Troop, troop alert...”

“It’s not at all fair, Melanie,” Horace moaned after the meeting had ended and the scouts were starting to drift homewards. “I have learnt some Promises but still Skip won’t invest me. What am I doing wrong?”

“Nothing, I don’t think,” replied Melanie sympathetically, casting her mind back to her own investiture that was hardly a masterclass in recalling a few lines.

“When I was invested I hadn’t learnt any Promise and so I had to repeat the normal one line by line after Skip. It was so funny. When he said, ‘Say after me, ‘On my honour’,’ I

said, 'Say after me, On my honour.' Then he said, 'No, not 'say after me', miss that bit off, just 'on my honour', so I said, 'No, not say after me, miss that bit off, just 'on my honour'.' Then he said, 'Melanie, listen to me. When I say 'say after me', you don't repeat that - you just repeat what comes after that. Let's try again, 'On my honour'.' So then I said, 'Melanie, listen to me. When I say 'say after me', you don't repeat that - you just repeat what comes after that. Let's try again, 'On my honour'.' Then he said, 'Right, I'm just going to take the last three words. Now, 'I promise that I will do my best'.' So I said, 'Right, I'm just going to take the last three words. Now, 'I promise that I will do my best'.' Anyway, we went through the whole investing thing like that. Everyone was laughing. It was such fun. The scouts were laughing although they are supposed to be silent; the mums and dads were laughing even though they were supposed to be silent also; the only person who wasn't laughing was Skip - he looked so very cross. When we finished he said that it had been the longest investiture ever and he would make sure in the future that each scout had learnt their Promise properly so that's what he's doing I guess, just making sure. He's giving you time to make sure."

"Well, he's giving me so much time thanks to you that I'm going to forget it and now that you've stuck your nose and your mouth in I've been forced to tell Skip that I want the Arabic one and how am I going to learn that? Arabic's all curly lines with a few stick people on top and I've no idea how it sounds. How do you pronounce a long line with a bump on the end? It looks like a sausage dog."

"How about, 'woof, woof?'" was Melanie's not very useful response.

"Even if I can't be invested yet I can at least continue to do my best and help other people like I told Skip and I'm going to try even harder than before," said Horace ignoring Melanie's unhelpful suggestion.

"Are you sure that's wise?" asked Archie suddenly. The other Ravens had all been listening in to Horace and Melanie's conversation and were perturbed by the thought of Horace trying even harder than the minimum required.

"No it probably isn't," said Horace and they all laughed heartily - out of relief as much as anything. Archie was acutely aware that his patrol leader status was not for ever and a day and if Horace continued to shine whilst Archie merely coasted along that day might come sooner than Archie's move up to explorers. It was perfectly possible that Skip could suddenly announce a reshuffle and there were opposite ways that Archie and Horace would travel, one down and one up.

Horace announced his arrival home with a crash of the front door. He was greeted by his mother in the hallway who had a finger to her lips. "We have a visitor Horace," she informed her son in a low voice without even asking after his meeting. Horace's heart immediately missed a beat. Was it Bear Grylls, or James Ketchell or Steve Backshall? He had written to all three recently asking if they could get him invested any quicker but had yet to receive any replies. Horace had had a dream during the week that his three favourite adventurers had paid him an unannounced visit; he had taken them out into the garden and spent a very constructive evening building survival shelters with them. No such luck in the real world. "It's grandad. He's come to

stay for the weekend. Won't that be fun for you, such a nice surprise?" she added, almost threateningly.

Horace loved his grandad and despite the fact that he wasn't actually a real adventurer he always spoke as if he had been. Grandad had been living in a care home since grandma had died the previous year. However, although he was very entertaining with his stories (that often started, "When I was a boy..."), he was now somewhat infirm and recently had begun to be wheelchair everywhere. This aspect of grandad's care, Horace thought, was the responsibility of his parents when he was visiting them but it seemed that this weekend they had other ideas. As Horace hadn't responded his mother decided that now was the time to push it a little further.

"Now then, tomorrow your father and I have to pop out for the day," she said in a low voice, keeping Horace in the hallway, "so we have another surprise for you, but it's a very pleasant one I'm sure you'll agree. You can look after grandad," his mother announced, not sounding as if there was any possibility of turning the invitation down.

"But..." said Horace, caught completely unawares. Just a few minutes ago Horace was up at the scout hut light-heartedly discussing Promises yet now he was being marched into keeping company with an onerous octogenarian and his accompanying caducity. Horace realised that this was a situation that called for the playing of some time. How could his parents "pop out" for a whole day? That wasn't a "pop", that was a full-on explosion.

“Sssh,” said his mother, putting a stop to Horace’s little game. She put a finger to his lips now. She knew what was probably coming otherwise.

“But...” said Horace again, who instead decided to launch into a tirade of complaint about how unjust it was that he was being prevented from speaking, even though he still wasn’t sure what it was that he was going to be saying when he was first interrupted.

From “Horace Horrise’s Grandad gets a Haircut.”