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opening extract from

Horrid Henry's Christmas Cracker

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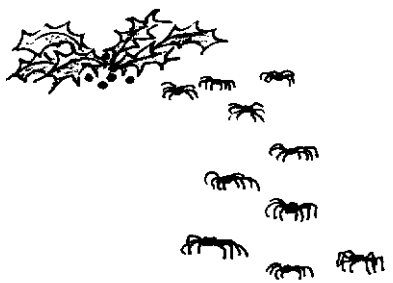
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1

HORRID HENRY'S CHRISTMAS PLAY



A cold dark day in November (37 days till Christmas)

Horrid Henry slumped on the carpet and willed the clock to go faster. Only five more minutes to hometime! Already Henry could taste those crisps he'd be sneaking from the cupboard.

Miss Battle-Axe droned on about school dinners (yuck), the new drinking fountain blah blah blah, maths homework blah blah blah, the school Christmas play blah blah . . . what? Did Miss Battle-Axe

say . . . Christmas play? Horrid Henry sat up.

'This is a brand-new play with singing and dancing,' continued Miss Battle-Axe. 'And both the older and the younger children are taking part this year.'

Singing! Dancing! Showing off in front of the whole school! Years ago, when Henry was in the infants' class, he'd played eighth sheep in the nativity play and had snatched the baby from the manger and refused to hand him back. Henry hoped Miss Battle-Axe wouldn't remember.

Because Henry had to play the lead. He had to. Who else but Henry could be an all-singing, all-dancing Joseph?

'I want to be Mary,' shouted every girl in the class.

'I want to be a wise man!' shouted Rude Ralph.

'I want to be a sheep!' shouted Anxious Andrew.

'I want to be Joseph!' shouted Horrid Henry.

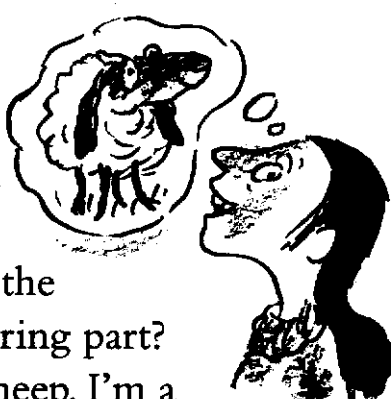
'No, me!' shouted Jazzy Jim.

'Me!' shouted Brainy Brian.

'Quiet!' shrieked Miss Battle-Axe. 'I'm the director, and my decision about who will act which part is final. I've cast the play as follows: Margaret. You will be Mary.' She handed her a thick script.

Moody Margaret whooped with joy. All the other girls glared at her.

'Susan, front legs of the donkey; Linda, hind legs; cows, Fiona and Clare. Blades of grass—' Miss Battle-Axe continued assigning parts.



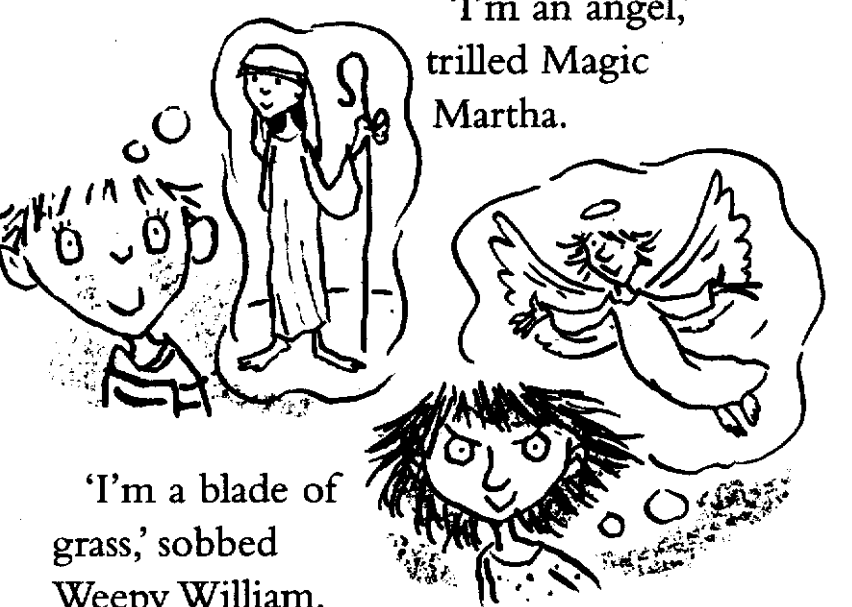
Pick me for Joseph, pick me for Joseph, Horrid Henry begged silently. Who better than the best actor in the school to play the starring part?

'I'm a sheep, I'm a sheep, I'm a

beautiful sheep!' warbled Singing Soraya.

'I'm a shepherd!' beamed Jolly Josh.

'I'm an angel,' trilled Magic Martha.



'I'm a blade of grass,' sobbed Weepy William.

'Joseph will be played by—'

'ME!' screamed Henry.

'Me!' screamed New Nick, Greedy Graham, Dizzy Dave and Aerobic Al.

'—Peter,' said Miss Battle-Axe. 'From Miss Lovely's class.'

Horrid Henry felt as if he'd been slugged in the stomach. Perfect Peter?

His *younger* brother? Perfect Peter get the starring part?

'It's not fair!' howled Horrid Henry.

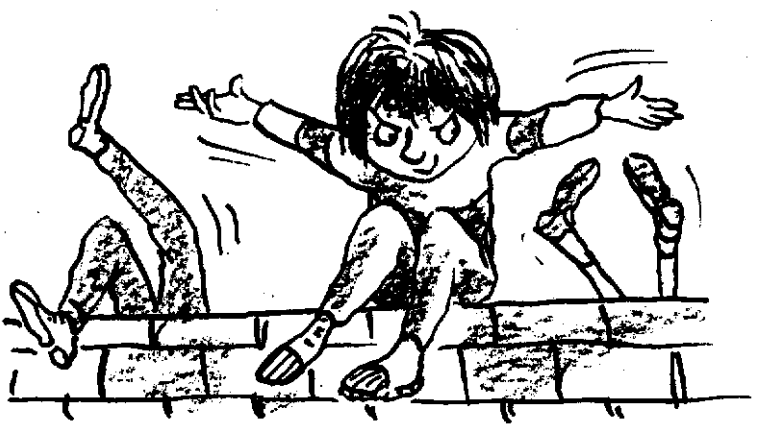
Miss Battle-Axe glared at him.

'Henry, you're—' Miss Battle-Axe consulted her list. Please not a blade of grass, please not a blade of grass, prayed Horrid Henry, shrinking. That would be just like Miss Battle-Axe, to humiliate him. Anything but that—

'—the innkeeper.'

The innkeeper! Horrid Henry sat up, beaming. How stupid he'd been: the *innkeeper* must be the starring part. Henry could see himself now, polishing glasses, throwing darts, pouring out big foaming Fizzywizz drinks to all his happy customers while singing a song about the joys of innkeeping. Then he'd get into a nice long argument about why there was no room at the inn, and finally, the chance to slam the door in Moody

Margaret's face after he'd pushed her away. Wow. Maybe he'd even get a second song. 'Ten Green Bottles' would fit right into the story: he'd sing and dance while knocking his less talented classmates off a wall. Wouldn't that be fun!



Miss Battle-Axe handed a page to Henry. 'Your script,' she said.

Henry was puzzled. Surely there were some pages missing?

He read:

(Joseph knocks. The innkeeper opens the door.)

JOSEPH: Is there any room at the inn?
INNKEEPER: No.

(The innkeeper shuts the door.)

Horrid Henry turned over the page.

It was blank. He held it up to the light.

There was no secret writing. That was it.

His entire part was one line. One stupid puny line. Not even a line, a word. 'No.'

Where was his song? Where was his dance with the bottles and the guests at the inn? How could he, Horrid Henry, the best actor in the class (and indeed, the world) be given just one word in the school play? Even the donkeys got a song.

Worse, after he said his *one* word, Perfect Peter and Moody Margaret got to yack for hours about mangers and wise men and shepherds and sheep, and then

sing a duet, while he, Henry, hung about behind the hay with the blades of grass.

It was so unfair!

He should be the star of the show, not his stupid worm of a brother. Why on earth was Peter cast as Joseph anyway? He was a terrible actor. He couldn't sing, he just squeaked like a squished toad. And why was Margaret playing Mary? Now she'd never stop bragging and swaggering.

AAARRRRGGGGHHHH!

'Isn't it exciting!' said Mum.

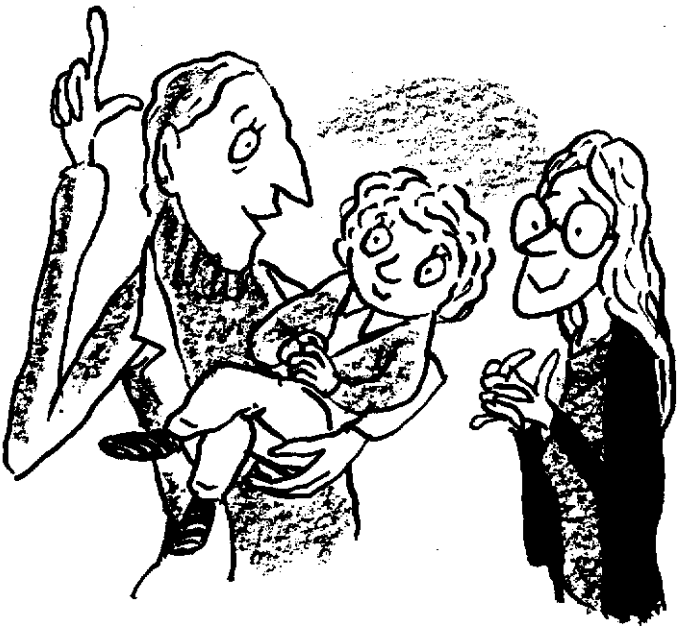
'Isn't it thrilling!' said Dad. 'Our little boy, the star of the show.'

'Well done, Peter,' said Mum.

'We're so proud of you,' said Dad.

Perfect Peter smiled modestly.

'Of course I'm not *really* the star,' he said, 'Everyone's important, even little parts like the blades of grass and the



innkeeper.'

Horrid Henry pounced. He was a Great White shark lunging for the kill.

'AAAARRRRGGGHH!' squealed Peter. 'Henry bit me!'

'Henry! Don't be horrid!' snapped Mum.

'Henry! Go to your room!' snapped Dad.

Horrid Henry stomped upstairs and

slammed the door. How could he bear the humiliation of playing the innkeeper when Peter was the star? He'd just have to force Peter to switch roles with him. Henry was sure he could find a way to persuade Peter, but persuading Miss Battle-Axe was a different matter. Miss Battle-Axe had a mean, horrible way of never doing what Henry wanted.

Maybe he could trick Peter into leaving the show. Yes! And then nobly offer to replace him.

But unfortunately, there was no guarantee Miss Battle-Axe would give Henry Peter's role. She'd probably just replace Peter with Goody-Goody Gordon. He was stuck.

And then Horrid Henry had a brilliant, spectacular idea. Why hadn't he thought of this before? If he couldn't play a bigger part, he'd just have to make his part bigger. For instance, he could *scream* 'No.' *That*

would get a reaction. Or he could bellow 'No,' and then hit Joseph. I'm an angry innkeeper, thought Horrid Henry, and I hate guests coming to my inn. Certainly smelly ones like Joseph. Or he could shout 'No!', hit Joseph, then rob him. I'm a robber innkeeper, thought Henry. Or, I'm a robber *pretending* to be an innkeeper. That would liven up the play a bit. Maybe he could be a French robber innkeeper, shout '*Non*', and rob Mary and Joseph. Or he was a French robber *pirate* innkeeper, so he could shout '*Non*,' tie Mary and Joseph up and make them walk the plank. Hmmm, thought Horrid Henry. Maybe my



part won't be so small. After all, the innkeeper *was* the most important character.

12 December
(only 13 more days till Christmas)

Rehearsals had been going on forever. Horrid Henry spent most of his time slumping in a chair. He'd never seen such a boring play. Naturally he'd done everything he could to improve it.

'Can't I add a dance?' asked Henry.

'No,' snapped Miss Battle-Axe.

'Can't I add a teeny-weeny-little song?' Henry pleaded.

'No!' said Miss Battle-Axe.

'But how does the



innkeeper *know* there's no room?' said Henry. 'I think I should—'

Miss Battle-Axe glared at him with her red eyes.

'One more word from you, Henry, and you'll change places with Linda,' snapped Miss Battle-Axe. 'Blades of grass, let's try again . . .'

Eeek! An innkeeper with one word was infinitely better than being invisible as the hind legs of a donkey. Still—it was so unfair. He was only trying to help.

22 December (only 3 more days till Christmas!)

Showtime! Not a teatowel was to be found in any local shop. Mums and dads had been up all night frantically sewing costumes. Now the waiting and the rehearsing were over.

Everyone lined up on stage behind the

curtain. Peter and Margaret waited on the side to make their big entrance as Mary and Joseph.

'Isn't it exciting, Henry, being in a real play?' whispered Peter.

'NO,' snarled Henry.

'Places, everyone, for the opening song,' hissed Miss Battle-Axe. 'Now remember, don't worry if you make a little mistake: just carry on and no one will notice.'

