

## The Ghost

There was comparative calm in the Wormwood household for about a week after the Superglue episode. The experience had clearly chastened Mr Wormwood and he seemed temporarily to have lost his taste for boasting and bullying.

Then suddenly he struck again. Perhaps he had had a bad day at the garage and had not sold enough crummy second-hand cars. There are many things that make a man irritable when he arrives home from work in the evening and a sensible wife will usually notice the storm-signals and will leave him alone until he simmers down.

When Mr Wormwood arrived back from the garage that evening his face was as dark as a thundercloud and somebody was clearly for the high-jump pretty soon. His wife recognised the signs immediately and made herself scarce. He then strode into the living-room. Matilda happened to be curled up in an arm-chair in the corner, totally absorbed in a book. Mr Wormwood switched on the television. The screen lit up. The programme blared. Mr Wormwood glared at Matilda. She hadn't moved. She had somehow trained herself by now to block her ears to the ghastly sound of the dreaded box. She kept right on reading, and for some reason this infuriated the father. Perhaps his anger was



intensified because he saw her getting pleasure from something that was beyond his reach.

"Don't you ever stop reading?" he snapped at her.

"Oh, hello daddy," she said pleasantly. "Did you have a good day?"

"What is this trash?" he said, snatching the book from her hands.

"It isn't trash, daddy, it's lovely. It's called *The Red Pony*. It's by John Steinbeck, an American writer. Why don't you try it? You'll love it."

"Filth," Mr Wormwood said. "If it's by an American it's certain to be filth. That's all they write about."

"No daddy, it's beautiful, honestly it is. It's about . . ."

"I don't want to know what it's about," Mr Wormwood barked. "I'm fed up with your reading anyway. Go and find yourself something useful to



do." With frightening suddenness he now began ripping the pages out of the book in handfuls and throwing them in the waste-paper basket.

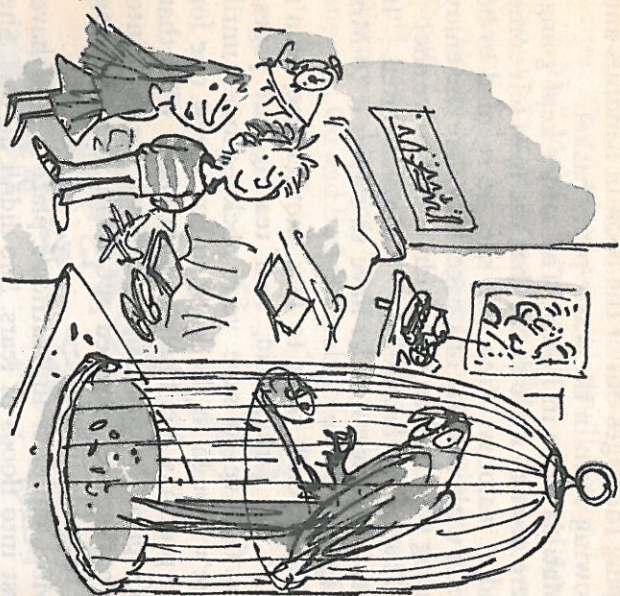
Matilda froze in horror. The father kept going. There seemed little doubt that the man felt some kind of jealousy. How dare she, he seemed to be saying with each rip of a page, how dare she enjoy reading books when he couldn't? How dare she?

"That's a *library* book!" Matilda cried. "It doesn't belong to me! I have to return it to Mrs Phelps!"

"Then you'll have to buy another one, won't you?" the father said, still tearing out pages.

"You'll have to save your pocket-money until there's enough in the kitty to buy a new one for your precious Mrs Phelps, won't you?" With that he dropped the now empty covers of the book into the basket and marched out of the room, leaving the telly blaring.

Most children in Matilda's place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn't do this. She sat there very still and white and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is, as Napoleon once said, to counter-attack. Matilda's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising yet another suitable punishment for the poisonous parent. The plan that was now beginning to hatch in her mind depended, however, upon whether or not Fred's parrot was really as good a talker as Fred made out.



Fred was a friend of Matilda's. He was a small boy of six who lived just around the corner from her, and for days he had been going on about this great talking parrot his father had given him.

So the following afternoon, as soon as Mrs Wormwood had departed in her car for another session of bingo, Matilda set out for Fred's house to investigate. She knocked on his door and asked if he would be kind enough to show her the famous

bird. Fred was delighted and led her up to his bedroom where a truly magnificent blue and yellow parrot sat in a tall cage.

"There it is," Fred said. "It's name is Chopper."

"Make it talk," Matilda said.

"You can't *make* it talk," Fred said. "You have to be patient. It'll talk when it feels like it."

They hung around, waiting. Suddenly the parrot said, "Hullo, hullo, hullo." It was exactly like a human voice. Matilda said, "That's amazing! What else can it say?"

"Rattle my bones!" the parrot said, giving a wonderful imitation of a spooky voice. "Rattle my bones!"

"He's always saying that," Fred told her

"What else can he say?" Matilda asked.

"That's about it," Fred said. "But it is pretty marvellous don't you think?"

"It's fabulous," Matilda said. "Will you lend him to me just for one night?"

"No," Fred said. "Certainly not."

"I'll give you all my next week's pocket-money," Matilda said.

That was different. Fred thought about it for a few seconds. "All right, then," he said, "If you promise to return him tomorrow."

Matilda staggered back to her own empty house carrying the tall cage in both hands. There was a large fireplace in the dining-room and she now set about wedging the cage up the chimney and out of sight. This wasn't so easy, but she managed it in the end.



"Hullo, hullo, hullo!" the bird called down to her. "Hullo, hullo!"

"Shut up, you nut!" Matilda said, and she went out to wash the soot off her hands.

That evening while the mother, the father, the brother and Matilda were having supper as usual in the living-room in front of the television, a voice came loud and clear from the dining-room across the hall. "Hullo, hullo, hullo," it said.

"Harry!" cried the mother, turning white.

"There's someone in the house! I heard a voice!"

"So did I!" the brother said. Matilda jumped up and switched off the telly. "Sssh!" she said. "Listen!"

They all stopped eating and sat there very tense, listening.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo!" came the voice again.

"There it is!" cried the brother.

"It's burglars!" hissed the mother. "They're in the dining-room!"

"I think they are," the father said, sitting tight.

"Then go and catch them, Harry!" hissed the mother. "Go out and collar them red-handed!"

The father didn't move. He seemed in no hurry to dash off and be a hero. His face had turned grey.

"Get on with it!" hissed the mother. "They're probably after the silver!"

The husband wiped his lips nervously with his napkin. "Why don't we all go and look together?" he said.

"Come on, then," the brother said. "Come on, mum."

"They're definitely in the dining-room," Matilda whispered. "I'm sure they are."

The mother grabbed a poker from the fireplace. The father took a golf-club that was standing in the corner. The brother seized a table-lamp, ripping the plug out of its socket. Matilda took the knife she had been eating with, and all four of them crept towards the dining-room door, the father keeping well behind the others.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo," came the voice again.

"Come on!" Matilda cried and she burst into the room, brandishing her knife. "Stick 'em up!" she yelled. "We've caught you!" The others followed



her, waving their weapons. Then they stopped. They stared around the room. There was no one there.

"There's no one here," the father said, greatly relieved.

"I heard him, Harry!" the mother shrieked, still quaking. "I distinctly heard his voice! So did you!"

"I'm certain I heard him!" Matilda cried. "He's in here somewhere!" She began searching behind the sofa and behind the curtains.

Then came the voice once again, soft and spooky this time, "Rattle my bones," it said. "Rattle my bones."



They all jumped, including Matilda who was a pretty good actress. They stared round the room. There was still no one there.

"It's a ghost," Matilda said.

"Heaven help us!" cried the mother, clutching her husband round the neck.

"I know it's a ghost!" Matilda said. "I've heard it here before! This room is haunted! I thought you knew that."

"Save us!" the mother screamed, almost throttling her husband.

"I'm getting out of here," the father said, greyer than ever now. They all fled, slamming the door behind them.

The next afternoon, Matilda managed to get a rather sooty and grumpy parrot down from the chimney and out of the house without being seen. She carried it through the back-door and ran with it all the way to Fred's house.

"Did it behave itself?" Fred asked her.

"We had a lovely time with it," Matilda said.

"My parents adored it."

## Arithmetic

Matilda longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honourable and intelligent. The fact that they were none of these things was something she had to put up with. It was not easy to do so. But the new game she had invented of punishing one or both of them each time they were beastly to her made her life more or less bearable.

Being very small and very young, the only power Matilda had over anyone in her family was brain-power. For sheer cleverness she could run rings around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told, however asinine the orders might be. Thus she was always forced to eat her evening meals out of TV-dinner-trays in front of the dreaded box. She always had to stay alone on weekday afternoons, and whenever she was told to shut up, she had to shut up.

Her safety-valve, the thing that prevented her from going round the bend, was the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments, and the lovely thing was that they seemed to work, at any rate for short periods. The father in particular became less cocky and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Matilda's magic medicine. The parrot-in-the-chimney affair quite definitely