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THE TALKING HORSE

BY WALTER BROOKS

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WALTER BROOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY TONY SARG

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Introducing Ed. You'll like him!—A joyous tale of a worm that turned and a beast that wasn't so dumb.

Take this Wilbur Pope I think his name was. He was kind of a small quiet man in the advertising business. Not the kind of man as you know perfectly well to imagine things like this even if he did have a few extra highballs. He says it is all true and I would rather believe him than a lot of malicious gossip.

So this Mr. Pope lived in Mount Kisco and he had a wife that was part Spanish and part bad temper. Most of the neighbors were in love with her because she was beautiful all right and as seductive as all get-out. But when she was in high spirits she didn't pay any attention to her husband and when she was low and cranky she didn't pay attention to any one else.

But Mr. Pope was in love with his wife whose name was Carlotta because of that Spanish strain I suppose.

Well as an advertising account executive in charge of a couple of drug and cosmetic accounts Mr. Pope had done a lot of what advertising men call research in the course of which he had spent several months reading about old folk remedies and magical prescriptions in the hope of turning up some new product. Mr. Pope got interested particularly in the more miraculous herbs because being an advertising man he had immense powers of belief. And one thing that cropped up in so many old folk tales was the leaf of a certain tree which you ate and could then understand the speech of all animals. He liked this idea because when he was a boy he had had a dog named Horace who could almost talk. But Horace had died without saying a word.

Mrs. Pope wouldn't let Mr. Pope have a dog but she thought it would be nice if he had a horse so he bought a horse named Ed. It was just a horse. But Mr. Pope enjoyed jogging around on him Sunday mornings and talking to him and Ed seemed to understand. And after Mr. Pope read about the magic leaf he used to stop whenever he saw a tree he didn't know and eat a leaf or two hopefully.

Well one Sunday Mr. Pope got back from his ride to find a noisy crowd guzzling cocktails on the porch. There were the Lawtons and Annabelle Stanton and Fitch Parmenter and a tall stranger named Douglas Hendry. Hi Wilbur said Annabelle been for your morning gallop? Poor old Ed said Mr. Pope if he galloped a hundred yards he'd have to lie down. Do you hunt Mr. Pope? asked Mr. Hendry and before Mr. Pope could answer Mrs. Pope laughed merrily and said Can't you just see Wilb careering over the landscape in a pink coat? She called him Wilb because it was about the only thing that really irritated him. And everybody looked at Mr. Pope and laughed loud and heartily including Mr. Hendry. Only Ed didn't laugh.

Well then Mr. Hendry told about his own exploits in the hunting field and also his prowess in other athletic fields. But he was very kind to Mr. Pope and he said I really think you would have a quite passable seat if you'd shorten your stirrups a bit and keep your hands down and your elbows in and not slump so much in the saddle. Thank you said Mr. Pope but frankly my present seat is quite adequate and I am afraid it would only puzzle Ed if I had it altered. You see he said I only ride for amusement and a little exercise. And then he asked Mr. Hendry if he took regular exercise.

Well everybody looked shocked but Mr. Hendry took it very well. Exercise? he said. Ha ha do you think I need it? And he flexed a lot of muscles so that his coat stretched and looked too small on him and Mrs. Pope said Wilb! What a stupid question! But Mr. Pope just looked innocent and said he guessed he'd put his incorrect seat down on a chair and have a drink. There's no time now said Mrs. Pope we're all going to the Lawtons' to lunch. Come on everybody. And they all trooped out to the car.

So Mr. Pope got up and started to troop after them and then he stopped and said Sorry I'm afraid I can't join you for Ed and I have a date. But nobody listened and Mrs. Pope looked up at Mr. Hendry and said Ride with me Doug? and Mr. Hendry put his arm around her and said Betcha! And Mr. Pope finished up what was in the shaker and then he had two or three straight to counteract the cocktails and then he seated himself incorrectly on Ed and trotted off in the other direction.

Well by and by they came out on a hilltop and Mr. Pope started to sing. Ed looked around at him a couple times but Mr. Pope just smiled and patted his neck and said You're a good scout Ed and if you die I promise I'll have you stuffed and stuck up whole over the mantelpiece whatever Carlotta says. And he went on singing. And then Ed turned around again and said O for Pete's sake Wilb shut up!

Well Mr. Pope's seat almost failed him and he grabbed at Ed's mane and held on and said in a shaky voice Ed why I must have found that magic leaf and eaten it without knowing it! O can that magic stuff said Ed and don't be such a sap! Judas you'd believe anything! Ed said Look we might as well have this thing out but for gosh sakes get down and come around and sit on the grass where I can look at you without getting a crick in my neck.

So Mr. Pope got down and they had a long talk and the main thing Ed told him was that animals can talk only they almost never let humans know it because they'd just get a lot of extra work shoved on them. And anyway what does talk get you? said Ed. Just trouble that's all. Then I don't see why you spoke to me said Mr. Pope and Ed said Because I couldn't stand any more of that singing for one thing. And for another he said you're a nice guy and we get along fine but you make me sick the way you let your wife boot you around. O Carlotta's all right she don't mean anything said Mr. Pope. Believe me said Ed if she was my wife I'd beat her teeth in. And that Hendry guy—you ought to smacked him on the nose.

Well it's a cinch you learned your talk in a stable Ed said Mr. Pope and then he tried to explain that you had to be civilized with people and if they were rude it was no excuse for you doing the same thing but Ed said Nuts! You used to be a pretty good boxer he said and if I'm any judge that guy's muscles are only for show and you could gentle him easy with a couple good smacks in the puss. Mr. Pope grinned and said Yes it would be fun. Listen said Ed I'm going to fix you up. And then he and Mr. Pope had a long talk and then they went back down to the Lawtons'.

Everybody was sitting around the swimming pool in bathing suits. Mr. Hendry had on a pair of trunks would about cover your hand to show off his muscles and he was sitting on the

edge of the pool with an arm around Mrs. Pope telling a long story about pigsticking in India. Mr. Pope rode up and dismounted behind them but nobody paid any attention. Go ahead tell the guy to take his arm away muttered Ed. O hell Ed, whispered Mr. Pope let's call it off. Boy you're going through with it now said Ed and then he let out a regular horse laugh. Pigsticking! he yelled Haw haw! back of your father's barn probably.

Mr. Hendry jumped up and stuck out his jaw and strutted up to Mr. Pope and said Hey what's the idea? Well Mr. Pope couldn't say that the horse had made the remark and it struck him funny anyway so he grinned and said Sorry old man it slipped out. Go on with your story. Mr. Hendry said Well don't let it happen again. And then he looked at Ed and laughed sort of nasty and turned to go back. But as soon as Mr. Hendry's back was to him Ed lifted his nose suddenly and it caught Mr. Hendry between the shoulder blades and shot him forward in a staggering run that ended with a splash in the pool.

Fitch Parmenter laughed right out but the rest looked horrified and Mrs. Pope said Willb have you gone crazy? Go home if you can't behave yourself. Then Mr. Hendry climbed out of the pool and rushed up to Ed and grabbed his bridle and started to slap him on the nose.

And then Mr. Pope got mad. He shoved Mr. Hendry away. That's enough of that he said. O is that so? said Mr. Hendry and Mr. Pope said Yes it is and for all your bragging I don't think you know much about horses or you wouldn't get mad at one just for nudging you. Yeah? said Mr. Hendry sneering. Why do you call that a horse? If he belonged to me I'd send him to the boneyard. I guess you would said Mr. Pope because I don't believe you can ride. I don't believe you even know how to steer. And he winked at Ed and Ed winked back because that was what they had been working up to.

Well Mr. Hendry gave a sort of growl and then he put a hand on Ed's neck and vaulted into the saddle. At least he started to but Ed sort of squinted down and Mr. Hendry flew right over him. He landed semirecumbent and Fitch Parmenter lay right down and rolled on the ground and all the others laughed a little too. But Mrs. Pope ran to Mr. Hendry and said O Doug did it hurt you? No no it was nothing said Mr. Hendry bravely and he got up and put an arm around her and said Now just let me get my breath and then you watch.

Mr. Pope was standing with his hand on Ed's bridle and Ed whispered to him. He said Are you going to stand for this? Because he said if you don't sock him I will. And he began to sidle around into position where he could smack a couple of iron horseshoe-prints on Mr. Hendry's stomach. But Mr. Pope slapped him on the neck and said Lay off Ed I'll handle this. We don't want to kill the guy. And he said quietly Hendry take your hands off my wife. And all at once everybody was very quiet and subdued and they all looked at Mr. Pope as if they had never seen him before. And Mr. Hendry's arm dropped away from Mrs. Pope and he said Well do you want me to ride your old hack or not? Sure said Mr. Pope go to it.

Well Ed stood still while Mr. Hendry got into the saddle and then he trotted in his usual slow weary trot around the pool and Mr. Hendry who really was a fair rider pretended to be terrified and then he laughed and laughed and blew a kiss to Mrs. Pope and as he passed Mr. Pope he said Is this enough? because I don't want him to drop dead under me. O K Ed said Mr. Pope. Let him have it.

So then Ed suddenly pranced and reared and bucked but not too hard. Mr. Hendry lost his stirrups and threw his arms around Ed's neck and finally Mr. Pope said I guess that's enough Ed. But Ed had his own ideas. He stopped long enough for Mr. Hendry to find his stirrups and then he threw up his head and I don't suppose you'll believe me but he gave a loud laugh. And then he bolted across the lawn jumped the hedge and with Mr. Hendry disappeared.

Well everybody looked aghast and they glanced respectfully at Mr. Pope who smiled and said Well they won't be back for a long time so let's sit down shall we? But Mrs. Pope came over to him and said Wilb this is outrageous! Go after him at once. Shut up Carlotta said Mr. Pope quietly and sit down. And after a minute she did.

Well they sat there talking until they heard a thump and Ed sailed over the hedge and came trotting toward them. He had Mr. Hendry's little swimming pants in his teeth and he laid them down beside Mr. Pope and then went off and nibbled at the Lawtons' perennials.

Mr. Pope picked up the pants and looked at the rips and tears in them. Mr. Hendry's seat will never be the same again I gather he said and then he looked at Mrs. Pope and said Well Carlotta I think you'd better drive home now. Mrs. Pope just sniffed and Mr. Pope shrugged and got up. Ed caught his eye. He dropped the larkspur he was chewing and formed the word Sap! with his lips. And Mr. Pope turned and grabbed Mrs. Pope by the hair and said Go get your car. And Mrs. Pope said Yes Wilbur and burst into tears and went.

On the way home every now and then Ed would have to stop because he got laughing so. And late that night Mrs. Pope said Wilbur! and Mr. Pope said What? and Mrs. Pope said I thought I heard some one laughing down in the stables and Mr. Pope said Well I bet it isn't the first time that that Hendry has made a horse laugh. And Mrs. Pope said O Wilbur I think you're wonderful! Yeah said Mr. Pope I am and don't you ever forget it again. And the funny part of it was that she didn't.

Next day Mr. Pope brought home a ten pound box of candy for Ed. But he didn't bring anything for Mrs. Pope.



Boy you're going through with it now said Ed and he let out a regular horse laugh
Haw haw!

THE END

[The end of *The Talking Horse* by Walter Rollin Brooks]