ROALD DAHL

Matilda

Illustrated by Quentin Blake

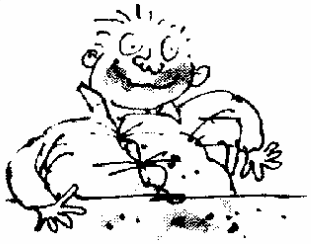
PUFFIN BOOKS

Matilda

Michael

Miss Honey

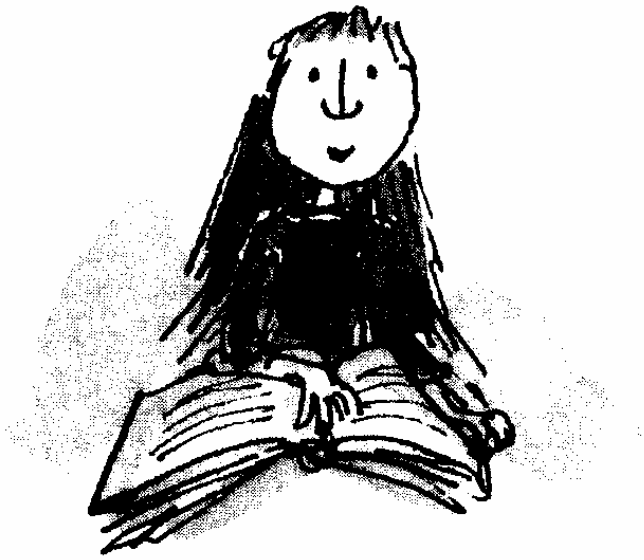
Mr & Mrs Wormwood



Bruce Bogtrotter

Amanda Thripp

Miss Trunchbull



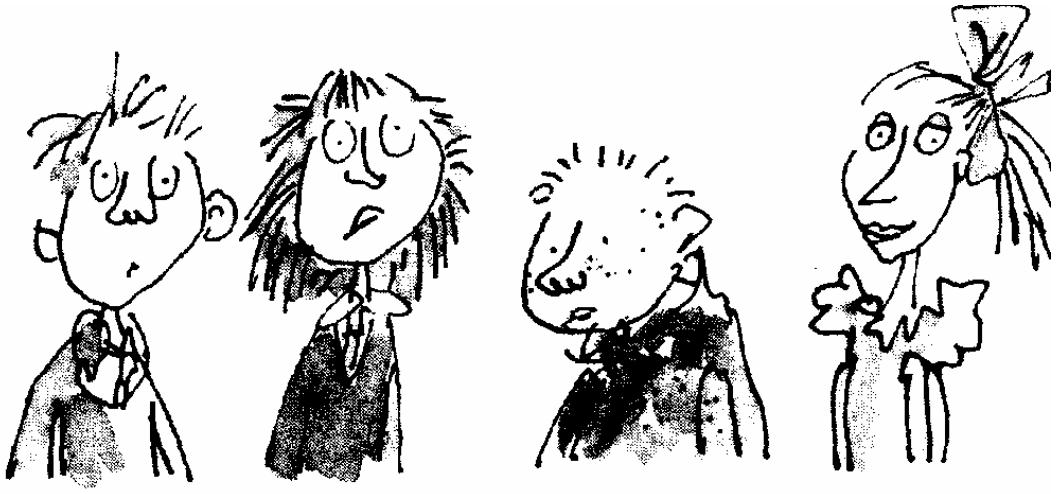
The Reader of Books

It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful.

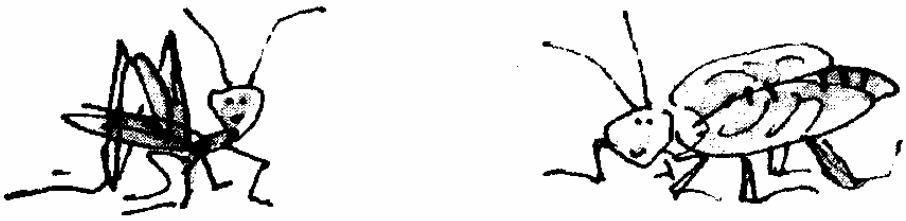
Some parents go further. They become so blinded by adoration they manage to convince themselves their child has qualities of genius.

Well, there is nothing very wrong with all this. It's the way of the world. It is only when the parents begin telling *us* about the brilliance of their own revolting offspring, that we start shouting, 'Bring us a basin! We're going to be sick!'

School teachers suffer a good deal from having to listen to this sort of twaddle from proud parents, but they usually get their own back when the time comes to write the end-of-term reports. If I were a teacher I would cook up some real scorchers for the children of doting parents. 'Your son Maximilian,' I would write, 'is a total wash-out. I hope you have a family business you can push him into when he leaves school because he sure as heck won't get a job anywhere else.' Or if I were feeling lyrical that day, I might write, 'It is a curious truth that grasshoppers have their hearing-organs in the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Vanessa, judging by what she's learnt this term, has no hearing-organs at all.'

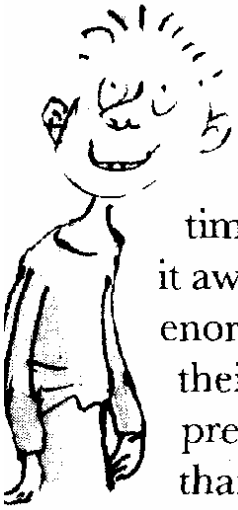


I might even delve deeper into natural history and say, 'The periodical cicada spends six years as a grub underground, and no more than six *days* as a free creature of sunlight and air. Your son Wilfred has spent six years as a grub in this school and we are still waiting for him to emerge from the chrysalis.' A particularly poisonous little girl might sting me into saying, 'Fiona has the same glacial beauty as an iceberg, but unlike the iceberg she has absolutely



nothing below the surface.' I think I might enjoy writing end-of-term reports for the stinkers in my class. But enough of that. We have to get on.

Occasionally one comes across parents who take the opposite line, who show no interest at all in their children, and these of course are far worse than the doting ones. Mr and Mrs Wormwood were two such parents. They had a son called Michael and a daughter called Matilda, and the parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away. Mr and Mrs Wormwood looked forward enormously to the time when they could pick their little daughter off and flick her away, preferably into the next county or even further than that.



It is bad enough when parents treat *ordinary* children as though they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is *extra*-ordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant. Matilda was both of these things, but above all she was brilliant. Her mind was so nimble and she was so quick to learn that her ability should have been obvious even to the most half-witted of parents. But Mr and Mrs Wormwood were both so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter. To tell the truth, I doubt they would have noticed had she crawled into the house with a broken leg.

Matilda's brother Michael was a perfectly normal boy, but the sister, as I said, was something to make your eyes pop. By the age of *one and a half* her speech was perfect and she knew as many words as most grown-ups. The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen and not heard.

By the time she was *three*, Matilda had taught herself to read by studying newspapers and magazines that lay around the house. At the age of *four*, she could read fast and well and she naturally began hankering after books. The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called *Easy Cooking* belonging to her mother, and when she had read this from cover to cover and had learnt all the recipes by heart, she decided she wanted something more interesting.

'Daddy,' she said, 'do you think you could buy me a book?'

'A *book*?' he said. 'What d'you want a flaming book for?'

'To read, Daddy.'

'What's wrong with the telly, for heaven's sake? We've got a lovely telly with a twelve-inch screen and now you come asking for a book! You're getting spoiled, my girl!'

Nearly every weekday afternoon Matilda was left alone in the house. Her brother (five years older than her) went to school. Her father went to work and her mother went out playing bingo in a town eight miles away. Mrs Wormwood was hooked on bingo and played it five afternoons a week. On the afternoon of the day when her father had refused to buy her a book, Matilda set out all by herself to walk to the public library in the village. When she arrived, she introduced herself to the librarian, Mrs Phelps. She asked if she might sit awhile and read a book. Mrs Phelps, slightly taken aback at the arrival of such a tiny girl

unaccompanied by a parent, nevertheless told her she was very welcome.

'Where are the children's books please?' Matilda asked.

'They're over there on those lower shelves,' Mrs Phelps told her. 'Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of pictures in it?'

'No, thank you,' Matilda said. 'I'm sure I can manage.'

From then on, every afternoon, as soon as her mother had left for bingo, Matilda would toddle down to the library. The walk took only ten minutes and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly by herself in a cosy corner devouring one book after another. When she had read every single children's book in the place, she started wandering round in search of something else.

Mrs Phelps, who had been watching her with fascination for the past few weeks, now got up from her desk and went over to her. 'Can I help you, Matilda?' she asked.

'I'm wondering what to read next,' Matilda said. 'I've finished all the children's books.'

'You mean you've looked at the pictures?'

'Yes, but I've read the books as well.'

Mrs Phelps looked down at Matilda from her great height and Matilda looked right back up at her.

'I thought some were very poor,' Matilda said, 'but others were lovely. I liked *The Secret Garden* best of all. It was full of mystery. The mystery of the room behind

the closed door and the mystery of the garden behind the big wall.'

Mrs Phelps was stunned. 'Exactly how old are you, Matilda?' she asked.

'Four years and three months,' Matilda said.

Mrs Phelps was more stunned than ever, but she had the sense not to show it. 'What sort of a book would you like to read next?' she asked.

Matilda said, 'I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names.'

Mrs Phelps looked along the shelves, taking her time. She didn't quite know what to bring out. How, she asked herself, does one choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old school-girls, but for some reason she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.

'Try this,' she said at last. 'It's very famous and very good. If it's too long for you, just let me know and I'll find something shorter and a bit easier.'

'*Great Expectations*,' Matilda read, 'by Charles Dickens. I'd love to try it.'

I must be mad, Mrs Phelps told herself, but to Matilda she said, 'Of course you may try it.'

Over the next few afternoons Mrs Phelps could hardly take her eyes from the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with the book on her lap. It was necessary to rest

it on the lap because it was too heavy for her to hold up, which meant she had to sit leaning forward in order to read. And a strange sight it was, this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor, totally absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham and her cobwebbed house and by the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words. The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand every now and then to turn over a page, and Mrs Phelps always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say, 'It's ten to five, Matilda.'

During the first week of Matilda's visits Mrs Phelps had said to her, 'Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?'

'My mother goes to Aylesbury every afternoon to play bingo,' Matilda had said. 'She doesn't know I come here.'

'But that's surely not right,' Mrs Phelps said. 'I think you'd better ask her.'

'I'd rather not,' Matilda said. 'She doesn't encourage reading books. Nor does my father.'

'But what do they expect you to do every afternoon in an empty house?'

'Just mooch around and watch the telly.'

'I see.'

'She doesn't really care what I do,' Matilda said a little sadly.

Mrs Phelps was concerned about the child's safety

on the walk through the fairly busy village High Street and the crossing of the road, but she decided not to interfere.

Within a week, Matilda had finished *Great Expectations* which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. 'I loved it,' she said to Mrs Phelps. 'Has Mr Dickens written any others?'

'A great number,' said the astounded Mrs Phelps. 'Shall I choose you another?'

Over the next six months, under Mrs Phelps's watchful and compassionate eye, Matilda read the following books:

Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
Gone to Earth by Mary Webb
Kim by Rudyard Kipling
The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
The Good Companions by J. B. Priestley
Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
Animal Farm by George Orwell

It was a formidable list and by now Mrs Phelps was filled with wonder and excitement, but it was probably a good thing that she did not allow herself to be completely carried away by it all. Almost anyone else witnessing the achievements of this small child would have been tempted to make a great fuss and shout the news all over the village and beyond, but not so Mrs Phelps. She was someone who minded her own business and had long since discovered it was seldom worth while to interfere with other people's children.

'Mr Hemingway says a lot of things I don't under-

stand,' Matilda said to her. 'Especially about men and women. But I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I feel I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.'

'A fine writer will always make you feel that,' Mrs Phelps said. 'And don't worry about the bits you can't understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music.'

'I will, I will.'

'Did you know,' Mrs Phelps said, 'that public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?'

'I didn't know that,' Matilda said. 'Could *I* do it?'

'Of course,' Mrs Phelps said. 'When you have chosen the book you want, bring it to me so I can make a note of it and it's yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.'

From then on, Matilda would visit the library only once a week in order to take out new books and return the old ones. Her own small bedroom now became her reading-room and there she would sit and read most afternoons, often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not quite tall enough to reach things around the kitchen, but she kept a small box in the outhouse which she brought in and stood on in order to get whatever she wanted. Mostly it was hot chocolate she made, warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons. The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.

Mr Wormwood, the Great Car Dealer

Matilda's parents owned quite a nice house with three bedrooms upstairs, while on the ground floor there was a dining-room and a living-room and a kitchen. Her father was a dealer in second-hand cars and it seemed he did pretty well at it.

'Sawdust,' he would say proudly, 'is one of the great secrets of my success. And it costs me nothing. I get it free from the sawmill.'

'What do you use it for?' Matilda asked him.

'Ha!' the father said. 'Wouldn't you like to know.'

'I don't see how sawdust can help you to sell second-hand cars, Daddy.'

'That's because you're an ignorant little twit,' the father said. His speech was never very delicate but Matilda was used to it. She also knew that he liked to boast and she would egg him on shamelessly.

'You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing,' she said. 'I wish I could do it.'

'You couldn't,' the father said. 'You're too stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day.' Ignoring Matilda, he turned to his son and said, 'I'm always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gears so badly they're all worn out and rattle like mad. I get it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot

of sawdust with the oil in the gear-box and it runs as sweet as a nut.'

'How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?' Matilda asked him.

'Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away,' the father said, grinning. 'About a hundred miles.'

'But that's dishonest, Daddy,' Matilda said. 'It's cheating.'

'No one ever got rich being honest,' the father said. 'Customers are there to be diddled.'

Mr Wormwood was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache. He liked to wear jackets with large brightly coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. 'Now take mileage for instance,' he went on. 'Anyone who's buying a second-hand car, the first thing he wants to know is how many miles it's done. Right?'

'Right,' the son said.

'So I buy an old dump that's got about a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock. I get it cheap. But no one's going to buy it with a mileage like that, are they? And these days you can't just take the speedometer out and fiddle the numbers back like you used to ten years ago. They've fixed it so it's impossible to tamper with it unless you're a ruddy watchmaker or something. So what do I do? I use my brains, laddie, that's what I do.'

'How?' young Michael asked, fascinated. He seemed

to have inherited his father's love of crookery.

'I sit down and say to myself, how can I convert a mileage reading of one hundred and fifty thousand into only ten thousand without taking the speedometer to pieces? Well, if I were to run the car backwards for long enough then obviously that would do it. The numbers would click backwards, wouldn't they? But who's going to drive a flaming car in reverse for thousands and thousands of miles? You couldn't do it!'

'Of course you couldn't,' young Michael said.

'So I scratch my head,' the father said. 'I use my brains. When you've been given a fine brain like I have, you've got to use it. And all of a sudden, the answer hits me. I tell you, I felt exactly like that other brilliant fellow must have felt when he discovered penicillin. "Eureka!" I cried. "I've got it!" '

'What did you do, Dad?' the son asked him.

'The speedometer,' Mr Wormwood said, 'is run off a cable that is coupled up to one of the front wheels. So first I disconnect the cable where it joins the front wheel. Next, I get one of those high-speed electric drills and I couple that up to the end of the cable in such a way that when the drill turns, it turns the cable *backwards*. You got me so far? You following me?'

'Yes, Daddy,' young Michael said.

'These drills run at a tremendous speed,' the father said, 'so when I switch on the drill the mileage numbers on the speedo spin backwards at a fantastic rate. I can knock fifty thousand miles off the clock in a

few minutes with my high-speed electric drill. And by the time I've finished, the car's only done ten thousand and it's ready for sale. "She's almost new," I say to the customer. "She's hardly done ten thou. Belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping."'

'Can you really turn the mileage back with an electric drill?' young Michael asked.

'I'm telling you trade secrets,' the father said. 'So don't you go talking about this to anyone else. You don't want me put in jug, do you?'

'I won't tell a soul,' the boy said. 'Do you do this to many cars, Dad?'

'Every single car that comes through my hands gets the treatment,' the father said. 'They all have their mileage cut to under ten thou before they're offered for sale. And to think I invented that all by myself,' he added proudly. 'It's made me a mint.'

Matilda, who had been listening closely, said, 'But Daddy, that's even more dishonest than the sawdust. It's disgusting. You're cheating people who trust you.'

'If you don't like it then don't eat the food in this house,' the father said. 'It's bought with the profits.'

'It's dirty money,' Matilda said. 'I hate it.'

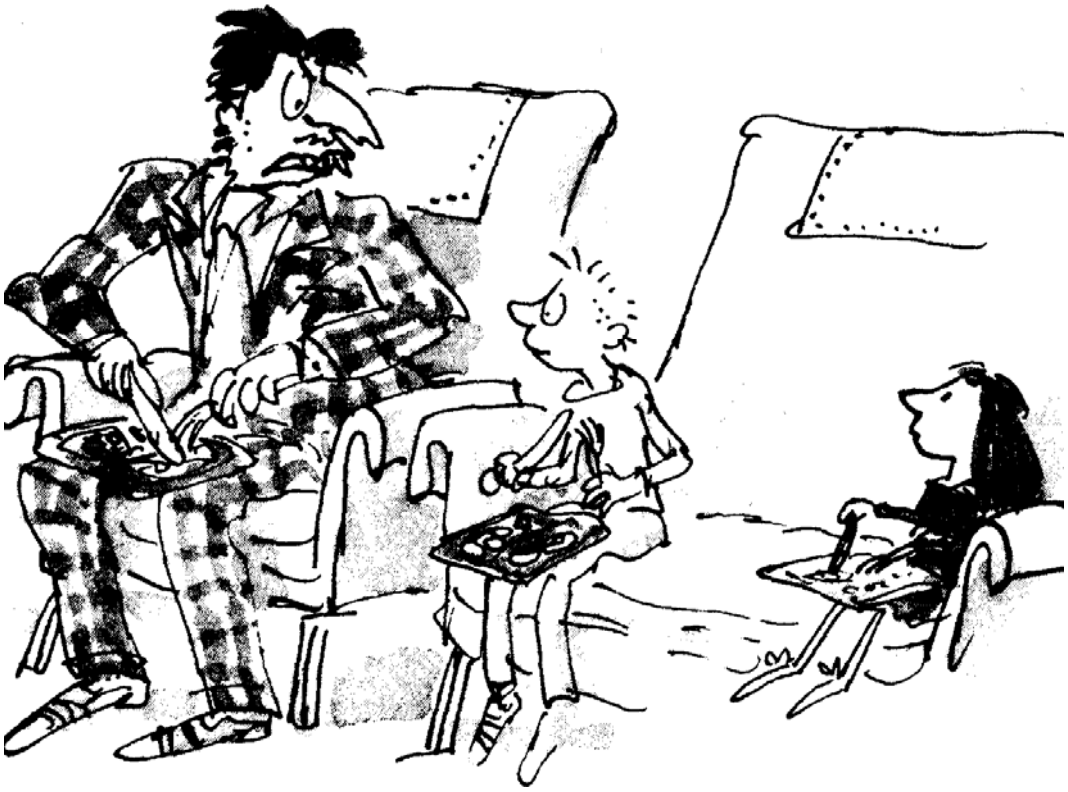
Two red spots appear on the father's cheeks. 'Who the heck do you think you are,' he shouted, 'the Archbishop of Canterbury or something, preaching to me about honesty? You're just an ignorant little squirt who hasn't the foggiest idea what you're talking about!'

'Quite right, Harry,' the mother said. And to

Matilda she said, 'You've got a nerve talking to your father like that. Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this programme in peace.'

They were in the living-room eating their suppers on their knees in front of the telly. The suppers were TV dinners in floppy aluminium containers with separate compartments for the stewed meat, the boiled potatoes and the peas. Mrs Wormwood sat munching her meal

with her eyes glued to the American soap-opera on the screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out.



'Mummy,' Matilda said, 'would you mind if I ate my supper in the dining-room so I could read my book?'

The father glanced up sharply. '*I* would mind!' he snapped. 'Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it's over!'

'But we're not at the table,' Matilda said. 'We never are. We're always eating off our knees and watching the telly.'

'What's wrong with watching the telly, may I ask?' the father said. His voice had suddenly become soft and dangerous.

Matilda didn't trust herself to answer him, so she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her. She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so. All

the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't. The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling, and as she lay in bed that night she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so, she was determined to have a go. Her father, after what had happened in front of the telly that evening, was first on her list.

The Hat and the Superglue

The following morning, just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage, Matilda slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick in order to hook the hat off the peg, and even then she only just made it. The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a jay's feather stuck in the hat-band and Mr Wormwood was very proud of it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look, especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Matilda, holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other, proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all round the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back on to the peg with the walking-stick. She timed this operation very carefully, applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr Wormwood didn't notice anything when he put the hat on, but when he arrived at the garage he couldn't get it off. Superglue is very powerful stuff, so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr Wormwood didn't want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the whole day long, even when putting sawdust in gear-boxes and fiddling the

mileages of cars with his electric drill. In an effort to save face, he adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he actually *meant* to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it, like gangsters do in the films.

When he got home that evening he still couldn't get the hat off. 'Don't be silly,' his wife said. 'Come here. I'll take it off for you.'

She gave the hat a sharp yank. Mr Wormwood let out a yell that rattled the window-panes. 'Ow-w-w!' he screamed. 'Don't do that! Let go! You'll take half the skin off my forehead!'

Matilda, nestling in her usual chair, was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

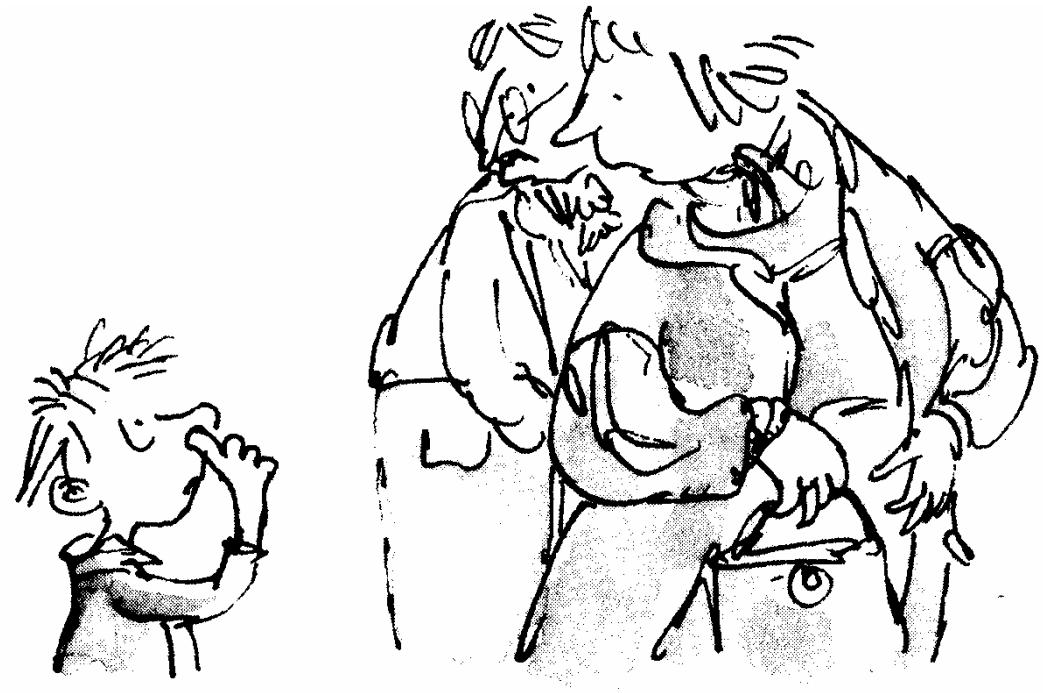
'What's the matter, Daddy?' she said. 'Has your head suddenly swollen or something?'

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion, but said nothing. How could he? Mrs Wormwood said to him, 'It *must* be Superglue. It couldn't be anything else. That'll teach you to go playing round with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.'

'I haven't touched the flaming stuff!' Mr Wormwood shouted. He turned and looked again at Matilda, who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Mrs Wormwood said to him, 'You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products. Always follow the instructions on the label.'

'What in heaven's name are you talking about, you stupid witch?' Mr Wormwood shouted, clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. 'D'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?'



Matilda said, 'There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.'

Mr Wormwood jumped. 'What happened to him?' he spluttered.

'The finger got stuck inside his nose,' Matilda said, 'and he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him, "Stop picking your nose," and he couldn't do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.'

'Serve him right,' Mrs Wormwood said. 'He shouldn't have put his finger up there in the first place. It's a nasty habit. If all children had Superglue put on their fingers they'd soon stop doing it.'

Matilda said, 'Grown-ups do it too, Mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.'

'That's quite enough from you,' Mrs Wormwood said, turning pink.

Mr Wormwood had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he went up to bed he tried again to get the thing off, and so did his wife, but it wouldn't budge. 'How am I going to have my shower?' he demanded.

'You'll just have to do without it, won't you,' his wife told him. And later on, as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pyjamas with a pork-pie hat on his head, she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about, she told herself.

Mr Wormwood discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it. It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. 'Now do stop fussing around,' his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. 'I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.'

But it wasn't loose by the morning and it wouldn't slip off. So Mrs Wormwood took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head, bit by bit, first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back, she had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished up with a bald white ring round his head, like some sort of a monk. And in the front, where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin, there remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

At breakfast Matilda said to him, 'You *must* try to get those bits off your forehead, Daddy. It looks as though you've got little brown insects crawling about all over you. People will think you've got lice.'

'Be quiet!' the father snapped. 'Just keep your nasty mouth shut, will you!'

All in all it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

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 thunder-cloud and somebody was clearly for the high-jump pretty soon. His wife recognized the signs immediately and made herself scarce. He then strode into the living-room. Matilda happened to be curled up in an armchair 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, 'Hello, hello, hello.' 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.

'Hello, hello, hello!' the bird called down to her. 'Hello, hello!'

'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. 'Hello, hello, hello,' 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. 'Ssshh!' she said. 'Listen!'

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

'Hello, hello, hello!' 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!'

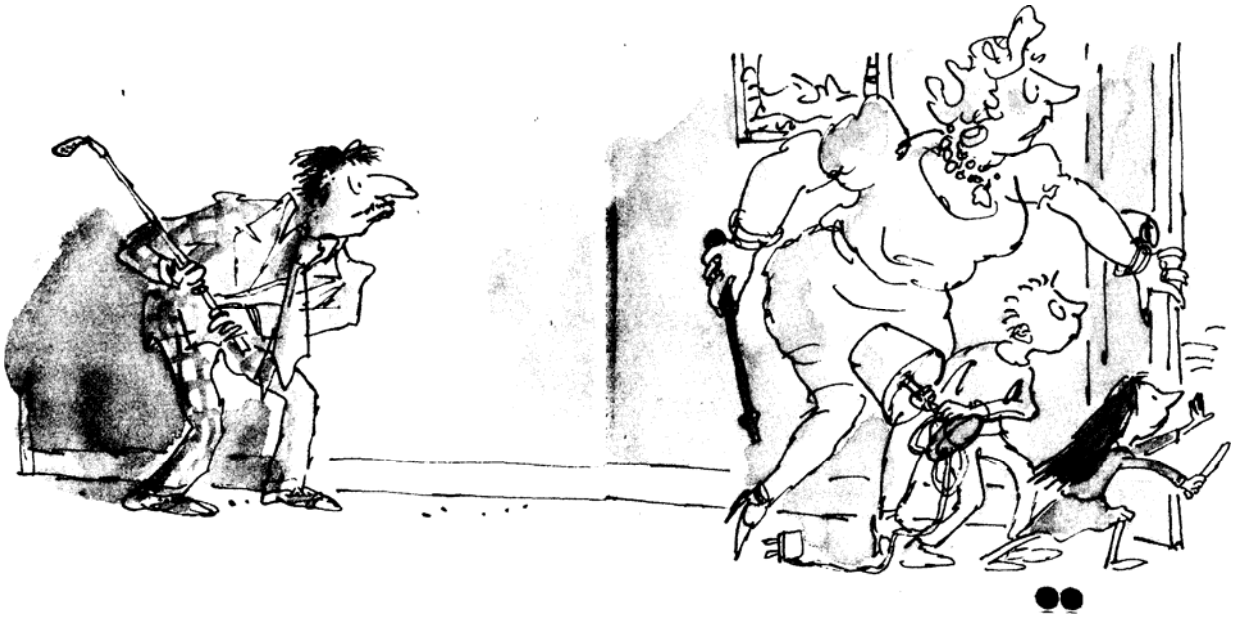
The husband wiped his lips nervously with his napkin. 'Why don't we all go and look together?' he said.

'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.

'Hello, hello, hello,' 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 cooled both parents down a lot and for over a week

they were comparatively civil to their small daughter. But alas, this couldn't last. The next flare-up came one evening in the sitting-room. Mr Wormwood had just returned from work. Matilda and her brother were sitting quietly on the sofa waiting for their mother to bring in the TV dinners on a tray. The television had not yet been switched on.

In came Mr Wormwood in a loud check suit and a yellow tie. The appalling broad orange-and-green check of the jacket and trousers almost blinded the onlooker. He looked like a low-grade bookmaker dressed up for his daughter's wedding, and he was clearly very pleased with himself this evening. He sat down in an armchair and rubbed his hands together and addressed his son in a loud voice. 'Well, my boy,' he said, 'your father's had a most successful day. He is a lot richer tonight than he was this morning. He has sold no less than five cars, each one at a tidy profit. Sawdust in the gear-boxes, the electric drill on the speedometer cables, a splash of paint here and there and a few other clever little tricks and the idiots were all falling over themselves to buy.'

He fished a bit of paper from his pocket and studied it. 'Listen boy,' he said, addressing the son and ignoring Matilda, 'seeing as you'll be going into this business with me one day, you've got to know how to add up the profits you make at the end of each day. Go and get yourself a pad and a pencil and let's see how clever you are.'

The son obediently left the room and returned with the writing materials.

'Write down these figures,' the father said, reading from his bit of paper. 'Car number one was bought by me for two hundred and seventy-eight pounds and sold for one thousand four hundred and twenty-five. Got that?'

The ten-year-old boy wrote the two separate amounts down slowly and carefully.

'Car number two,' the father went on, 'cost me one hundred and eighteen pounds and sold for seven hundred and sixty. Got it?'

'Yes, Dad,' the son said. 'I've got that.'

'Car number three cost one hundred and eleven pounds and sold for nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.'

'Say that again,' the son said. 'How much did it sell for?'

'Nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence,' the father said. 'And that, by the way, is another of my nifty little tricks to diddle the customer. Never ask for a big round figure. Always go just below it. Never say one thousand pounds. Always say nine hundred and ninety-nine fifty. It sounds much less but it isn't. Clever, isn't it?'

'Very,' the son said. 'You're brilliant, Dad.'

'Car number four cost eighty-six pounds – a real wreck that was – and sold for six hundred and ninety-nine pounds fifty.'

'Not too fast,' the son said, writing the numbers down. 'Right. I've got it.'

'Car number five cost six hundred and thirty-seven pounds and sold for sixteen hundred and forty-nine fifty. You got all those figures written down, son?'

'Yes, Daddy,' the boy said, crouching over his pad and carefully writing.

'Very well,' the father said. 'Now work out the profit I made on each of the five cars and add up the total. Then you'll be able to tell me how much money your rather brilliant father made altogether today.'

'That's a lot of sums,' the boy said.

'Of course it's a lot of sums,' the father answered. 'But when you're in big business like I am, you've got to be hot stuff at arithmetic. I've practically got a computer inside my head. It took me less than ten minutes to work the whole thing out.'

'You mean you did it in your head, Dad?' the son asked, goggling.

'Well, not exactly,' the father said. 'Nobody could do that. But it didn't take me long. When you're finished, tell me what you think my profit was for the day. I've got the final total written down here and I'll tell you if you're right.'

Matilda said quietly, 'Dad, you made exactly four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence altogether.'

'Don't butt in,' the father said. 'Your brother and I are busy with high finance.'

'But Dad . . .'

'Shut up,' the father said. 'Stop guessing and trying to be clever.'

'Look at your answer, Dad,' Matilda said gently. 'If you've done it right it ought to be four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence. Is that what you've got, Dad?'

The father glanced down at the paper in his hand. He seemed to stiffen. He became very quiet. There was a silence. Then he said, 'Say that again.'

'Four thousand three hundred and three pounds fifty,' Matilda said.

There was another silence. The father's face was beginning to go dark red.

'I'm sure it's right,' Matilda said.

'You . . . you little cheat!' the father suddenly shouted, pointing at her with his finger. 'You looked at my bit of paper! You read it off from what I've got written here!'

'Daddy, I'm the other side of the room,' Matilda said. 'How could I possibly see it?'

'Don't give me that rubbish!' the father shouted. 'Of course you looked! You must have looked! No one in the world could give the right answer just like that, especially a girl! You're a little cheat, madam, that's what you are! A cheat and a liar!'

At that point, the mother came in carrying a large tray on which were the four suppers. This time it was fish and chips which Mrs Wormwood had picked up in the fish and chip shop on her way home from bingo. It seemed that bingo afternoons left her so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal. So if it wasn't TV dinners it had to be fish and chips. 'What are you looking so red in the face about, Harry?' she said as she put the tray down on the coffee-table.

'Your daughter's a cheat and a liar,' the father said, taking his plate of fish and placing it on his knees. 'Turn the telly on and let's not have any more talk.'