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COLLEGE STUDENT

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Title: Ed Has His Mind Improved

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Walter Rollin Brooks (1886-1958)

Date first posted: Dec. 14, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 14, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211224

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Ed Has His Mind Improved

—and almost becomes a celebrity. Here's another
gay and chucklesome tale of Wilbur's talking horse

BY

WALTER BROOKS

First published *Liberty*, October 14, 1939.

WALTER BROOKS

has written advertising and publicity and has done editorial work on several magazines. He is the author of children's books, novels, and of several short stories. A native of Rome, New York, he now spends his winters in his house in New York City and his summers in Higganum, Connecticut.

I suppose it's kind of silly of me to keep on telling people about Wilbur Pope's talking horse. People are awful skeptical. Prove it they say. Prove it. Well I can't prove it. Neither can Mr. Pope prove it because the darn horse won't co-operate. He'll talk all right when he's alone with Mr. Pope, but get him out in company where you want him to show what he can do and he shuts up like a clam. I've told everybody you can talk Ed said Mr. Pope and I do think you might back me up. All our neighbors here around Mt. Kisco are beginning to whisper behind their hands when I come into a room and I've lost two of my best accounts because they say they can't leave their advertising in the hands of a man who chats with animals. I appeal to your better nature Ed he said. But Ed just laughed. Yeah? he said Who told you I had one? So Mr. Pope had to go around and tell everybody that he had just been kidding and that Ed couldn't talk at all. But they still act funny to him in Mt. Kisco.

Well I don't live in Mt. Kisco and I'm not an advertising man and so I don't see why I can't tell the truth about things. And particularly about what happened when Ed learned to read because there's a lesson in it for us.

Well Mr. Pope's house was always overrun on Saturdays and Sundays with a noisy crowd of Mrs. Pope's friends—at least I suppose you'd call them friends for most of them were young men who were trying to persuade Mrs. Pope to run away from Mr. Pope and marry them or something. It really wasn't any fun for Mr. Pope. It wasn't good for him either. He was getting a terrible inferiority complex for all of Mrs. Pope's suitors treated him as if he were a sort of oaf. So he bought this horse Ed and spent most of his week-ends riding.

Ed had things the other way round. To him Mrs. Pope was the oaf and Mr. Pope the jewel and he didn't hesitate to say so. He was pretty outspoken even for a horse. Mr. Pope said Tut tut! and Pshaw! and I can't have you saying things about Carlotta Ed. But he liked it. It built him up. He and Ed ambled over the countryside stopping at wayside taverns for beer and lolling and arguing about life under roadside trees.

Well one day they were sitting around like this and Mr. Pope was reading the Sunday paper and every now and then he would read out an item to Ed and they'd argue about it. But by and by Ed said I wish you'd lay off this political and business stuff. Haven't you got any good murders? Murders don't improve your mind Ed said Mr. Pope reprovingly. Neither do the columnists said Ed. I'd like to pick my own news for a change. Well said Mr. Pope suppose I teach you to read?

So after a while they rode home and Mr. Pope sneaked into the house the back way and got a bottle and an old primer from the attic and took them out to the barn. The first lesson wasn't very successful from a cultural point of view because the primer was one of those that starts with A stands for Aardvark. What the hell is an aardvark? said Ed. Why not teach me words I know? Like A stands for Ale? What's this next letter? Mr. Pope said it was B. That's an easy one said Ed B stands for Beer. And what's this? C said Mr. Pope. C stands for Scotch said Ed. No no Ed said Mr. Pope C stands for—let me see—Cognac.

Well this didn't make sense to Ed and Mr. Pope tried to explain and they got into an argument that lasted until it was so dark that they couldn't see the letters any more. The bottle was empty too.

Ed was persistent and he had Mr. Pope nail the primer up over the manger and in a week he could read The Cat Chases the Rat as well as you or I can. Then Mr. Pope brought out an old school reader and Ed went to work on that. But after he'd got through the third selection he struck. This stuff is too darn noble Wilbur he said. I can get all the edification I need out of

your conversation. Bring me something a little low. So Mr. Pope got copies of a few of the more ribald magazines. And as a slight corrective to these he brought out *The Three Musketeers*.

Ed simply ate them up. In the manger Mr. Pope had rigged up a reading light which was small enough so that Mrs. Pope couldn't see it from the house and the horse read far into the night. He got very clever at turning the pages with his nose and for the first few months he would hardly stop reading long enough to speak to Mr. Pope except to demand more books. But before long he had read all the adventure stories and even some of the more serious novels in the house. Mr. Pope wouldn't get him any more magazines with jokes or risqué stories in them because twice Ed had got to roaring with laughter in the middle of the night and Mrs. Pope had sent Mr. Pope out to the barn to see if it was tramps. So then Mr. Pope got Ed a card at the public library.

So two or three nights a week they would ride over to the library and get a couple of books. Of course Mr. Pope had to go in and pick them out and Ed didn't always like his selections. That's all right Ed said Mr. Pope but you can't read detective and adventure stories all the time. Some of your reading ought to be to improve your mind. Listen Wilbur said Ed I'm a horse. What good is an improved mind in a stable? Get me a good Western to read tonight will you?

Well along in the early fall Mr. Pope had to go to Detroit to present a new radio plan to one of his accounts. He got some library books and some detective story magazines for Ed and he hired Joe the handy man to take care of the horse while he was away. And the first thing Joe did was to find Ed's library and tell Mrs. Pope about it. Books in the barn? said Mrs. Pope and she went out to look them over. Good heavens what trash! she said. Throw these magazines out at once Joe. And these books seem to be some Mr. Pope got from the library. You'd better take them back. So Joe took them back.

Well Ed stuck it out without literature two days. On the third evening as soon as it got dark he slipped his halter and by cutting across lots and down back roads reached the library unobserved just before closing time. He peeked in a window. Nobody was there but Miss Sigsbee the librarian. Ed pushed the front door open with his nose and clumped up to the desk. Excuse me ma'am he said have you got anything by Edgar Wallace?

Miss Sigsbee gave a kind of faded squeal and went right over backwards chair and all. Sorry I startled you ma'am said Ed. If you got a slug of whisky handy it would make you feel better. I just wanted a book.

Well Miss Sigsbee was an old fashioned blue ribbon teetotaler and Ed's suggestion brought her round quicker than a drink would have. She was up and back in her chair before you could say John Galsworthy. How dare you! she said How dare you! Leave this library at once. I don't get it ma'am said Ed backing away from her. I just wanted a book. A horse! she said staring at him and she shuddered. Then she stiffened again. Horse or no horse she said you dare to come in here and offer me a drink of liquor! O that! said Ed. I didn't offer you a drink. I don't use the stuff myself. But skip it. Can I get a book out on Wilbur Pope's card?

Mr. Pope! said Miss Sigsbee. You're Mr. Pope's horse. I remember. There was some gossip about his pretending he had a talking horse. People thought he was joking. But then it wasn't a joke! No ma'am said Ed. Now about that book—

Of course we can let you have a book said Miss Sigsbee. But the books Mr. Pope has been selecting for you—Dear me! You won't mind if I select something suitable for you? Well

ma'am said Ed if you got any Edgar Wallace—Let me see said Miss Sigsbee How old are you? Ed said he was rising nine. Nine said Miss Sigsbee going over to a shelf. Now here is just the thing for you. Exciting and at the same time a high moral tone. Have you read any of the Rollo books? Naw! said Ed disgustedly.

See here young man! said Miss Sigsbee sternly. Then she stopped and said Gracious! I can't call you young man can I? What should it be—young colt? But at nine you're hardly a colt are you? No ma'am said Ed firmly I'm a grown horse and I don't want my mind or my morals improved. Now can I have an Edgar Wallace? Why of course said Miss Sigsbee we can't force you to improve yourself. And she got an Edgar Wallace and Ed thanked her and trotted off with it in his mouth.

Well Mr. Pope was in Detroit ten days and Ed went over to the library every night and he and Miss Sigsbee got quite friendly.

The library was badly in need of funds and so far all money-raising schemes had failed. Miss Sigsbee didn't have much sense about such things but she did know that a horse that could read would draw a crowd. So she put it up to Ed. Would he give a public reading? Well it was against Ed's principles to do such a thing but he couldn't help being flattered. Gosh ma'am he said it's nice of you to ask me. But I really couldn't. Nonsense said Miss Sigsbee Of course you could. The library has done a good deal for you and isn't it rather selfish of you to refuse to do so small a thing for the library? Well said Ed slowly now you put it that way I suppose it is. Well he said I'll do it.

The next day Mr. Pope got home and he was pretty sore when Ed told him. I suppose you know what it means—thousands of curiosity seekers tramping over the lawn and eating peanuts and staring at you and news photographers hiding in the oatbin. Never a moment to yourself any more. No cross no crown Wilbur said Ed. I expect it's the penalty of fame. And don't forget there'll be Hollywood scouts too. I'm not forgetting it said Mr. Pope. But what good would it be if I signed up a Hollywood contract for you? You wouldn't go through with it and let me make some money. You'd just refuse to talk again. Probably I would said Ed. But I don't see why I can't have a little fun when it comes my way. And anyway he said I promised Miss Sigsbee.

Mr. Pope was pretty upset. The good times he and Ed had had together would come to an end once the horse was a celebrity. And Carlotta would be furious at the notoriety. He walked down to the library that night to plead with Miss Sigsbee. But it wasn't any good. Anyway I couldn't stop it now if I wanted to she said. I've taken the matter up with the trustees. I hadn't anticipated that they would be so skeptical. Frankly Mr. Pope my position and even my reputation are at stake. Mrs. Dillway and Dr. Polder are the only trustees in town. Mrs. Dillway has agreed always to double any amount we take in through our little entertainments. Of course as there is usually a deficit—But as I was saying I have always considered her and Dr. Polder very good friends of mine but when I told them—Dear me it was a very stormy session. I insisted however and finally they did agree to give me a chance to prove my assertion. We have arranged to meet quite informally tomorrow evening in my garden. Now that you are back Mr. Pope you will of course come over with Ed. You see my position I am sure. If he doesn't read for them at this little dress rehearsal—Mr. Pope saw all right.

So the next evening he rode Ed over. Mrs. Dillway was a large imposing presence. She did not believe that horses could talk as was manifest in the indignant heave of her massive bosom

as she gazed on Ed. The Rev. Dr. Polder didn't believe it either. You see how people really feel toward a talking horse Ed said Mr. Pope as they paused before crossing the lawn toward the three. And here's another thing he said. When the Hollywood producers begin to bid for you I'm going to sign up with the highest bidder. I'm going to sign a bill of sale. Think that over.

What? said Ed. Hey Wilbur you can't do that. You've made your bed Ed said Mr. Pope. Come on. No but have a heart Wilb Ed protested. I'm in a spot. If I let Miss Sigsbee down now she'll lose her job. You should have thought of that before said Mr. Pope pulling him forward. Good evening Miss Sigsbee.

Miss Sigsbee got up and presented Ed and Mr. Pope to the trustees. They bowed coldly to Mr. Pope and Dr. Polder gave Ed a timid nod but Mrs. Dillway flipped open a lorgnette and gave the horse her celebrated basilisk once-over. Ed fidgeted for a second and then he threw up his head. You don't need that thing lady he said. I'll tell you what I am. I'm a horse.

Mrs. Dillway gave a strong shudder. Don't be impudent! she said. Then she turned and caught Dr. Polder by the wrist. He had been saying O dear me! O dear me! and wringing his hands. Be quiet Dr. Polder she said. No! said Dr. Polder trying to jerk away. This is witchcraft—sorcery. I cannot countenance such an exhibition. My bishop—Nonsense! said Mrs. Dillway. It's merely ventriloquism. We shall expose it.

So after a minute Dr. Polder calmed down though he continued to tremble and Miss Sigsbee took a magazine and had Mrs. Dillway open it at random and then held it up for Ed to read while Mr. Pope sat down next to Mrs. Dillway. Ed glanced at the page and shook his head. No he said I can't do it. Why Ed! said Miss Sigsbee. It's hard on you ma'am said Ed but I got to consider my own future. Come on Wilbur let's get out of here.

Mrs. Dillway's lorgnette came up again and she gave a satisfied smile. You see Doctor? she said. Simply ventriloquism. Naturally if this Mr. Pope can't see the page the horse can't read it.

O is that so! Ed burst out and Miss Sigsbee said But Mrs. Dillway the horse really can read. I've heard him. I am sorry to see you persist in this attempt to hoax us Miss Sigsbee said Mrs. Dillway. The outcome can only be unfortunate for you. As for you Mr. Pope it seems to me that you are carrying a silly joke dangerously far.

Well Ed said Mr. Pope resignedly I take back what I said about selling you. You better do your stuff. We're going to get a lot of unpleasant publicity out of this any way of the goods. Leave it to me boss said Ed under his breath. There won't be any public reading and these goofs won't talk either. Then he said to Miss Sigsbee What you want me to read?

So Miss Sigsbee held the page up and Ed began. *The waters of the lake* he read *had changed from lead to silver and from silver to rose*. Good gracious! said Mrs. Dillway he really is reading! Why this—this—Miss Sigsbee I am afraid we owe you an apology. Go on—er—Ed.

So Ed went on. *The first flush of surprise reddened the naked limbs of the slender*— Ed! Ed! interrupted Miss Sigsbee blushing. It's *sunrise*—not *surprise*. Sorry said Ed. This is kind of fine print for a horse. He winked at Mr. Pope and continued.

Well he read a paragraph or two more and gradually the outraged expression faded from Mrs. Dillway's face. Then Ed read *As Gregory stepped out of the canoe the girl ran to him. He seized her and kicked her passionately on the mouth then drew back and booted her in the eyes. Kissed* Ed said Miss Sigsbee. And *looked*. O said Ed and continued. *'Darling' she cried 'if father finds you here—' 'I have my own ways of knowing about your father' he said. 'He*

will not find me here for he has found a better thing elsewhere today.' The words were obscene and as she nestled in his embrace—

Really Ed! said Mr. Pope and Miss Sigsbee said crossly. The word is *obscure*—not *obscene*. I'm sorry said Ed. I guess it's the company. I mean naturally I'm a little nervous. Let's see—'Gregory' she said 'Now damn you'—Hey wait a minute said Ed interrupting himself. I guess it's *How can you?*

Mrs. Dillway had got to her feet. Come Dr. Polder. We have had quite enough of this obscene exhibition. Please understand Miss Sigsbee that from today I withdraw all support from the library. Hey just a minute said Ed. He trotted around in front of the departing pair. There's something you ought to know ma'am he said before you pull anything like that. I'm giving a reading tonight down to the Elks' Hall. It'll be announced that it's for the benefit of the library and of course you'll have to stick to your agreement and match what we take in. You're giving no such disgraceful performance for any library I am connected with said Mrs. Dillway angrily. How you going to stop it? asked Ed and as Mrs. Dillway glared he said Now ma'am I don't want to be mean but we got to raise money. If you want to hand Miss Sigsbee a check for double what me and Wilbur estimate tonight's gate at—well we'll call the reading off.

Well Mrs. Dillway was practically speechless. This—this is extortion! she said. Yes ma'am said Ed Shall we say fifteen hundred? No! shouted Mrs. Dillway but Dr. Polder drew her aside and after a few minutes came back to say that she agreed.

O dear said Miss Sigsbee when they had gone it is wonderful about the money of course but I am afraid my position is gone. Pooh! said Ed They won't either of them dare say a word about this. No said Mr. Pope they can hardly go around complaining that they were insulted by a horse. Vulgar but effective—that's Ed. Yeah said Ed and the same thing could be said of Shakespeare. Dear me said Miss Sigsbee I never thought of it that way. But it's true. Just the same said Ed that fifteen hundred smackers will buy a lot of Edgar Wallace. O wait a minute lady he said I know I know. But part of it you're going to get Edgar Wallace with aren't you? If you want to make the world better you got to stop trying to improve people's minds and start improving their dispositions. Speaking of which Wilbur how about a can of beer? O excuse me ma'am for mentioning it. Not at all said Miss Sigsbee archly. After all Shakespeare also drank beer. I wonder—

She hesitated and Ed winked slowly at Mr. Pope. After all he said there can't any of us ever say anything about this evening in public can we? So it might as well be a good one. Wilbur let's creep over to Horley's and bring back half a case.

THE END

[The end of *Ed Has His Mind Improved* by Walter Rollin Brooks]