

# The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot

A Mexican pedlar, a French art thief, an English puzzle-maker – there's a whiff of international intrigue in the second T3I mystery. It begins innocuously enough; the T3I take on the case of a lost yellow-headed parrot, that of Malcolm Fentris, a friend of Alfred Hitchcock.

One bird leads to six. The seven lead to a little lamb – and a scuffle in a graveyard.

**The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot** (1964) has that classic plotline which sends most hearts aflutter – a treasure hunt. Where there's a treasure, there's a treasure-map hopping, not far behind. Most treasure-maps toe the same line: daub an **X** here, dab a squiggle there, splash tea-brown everywhere.

Well, the map here is a flapping mass of dark and yellow; the feathered mimics – six parrots, to say nothing of a mynah – are squawking signposts. Robert Arthur seemed to have birds on the brain – recall the bird whisperer in *The Secret of Terror Castle* (1964).

This fun use of a *being* as a barrel of clues is also present in the Hitchcock movies *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) in the form of *Mr. Memory* (one of Hitchcock's favorite characters [\[1\]](#)) and *Miss Froy* respectively.

The Stuttering Parrot begins with a chilling cry of help (a technique favored by Hitchcock in several movies including *The Lodger* (1927)). Things move quickly in the beginning – we are introduced to the antagonists by chapter two. Then the story ambles in the search for the elusive birds.

Along the way, we learn of the private feud between Mr. Claudius, an art dealer, and John Silver, an eccentric Englishman with an apt pseudonym. It is he, John Silver, who hatches the elaborate ploy of training the birds to memorize a whimsical riddle each. These riddles are the breadcrumbs that lead to a prized painting of a shepherdess. Haganay, a French art thief, is also in close pursuit.

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Two of the many enjoyable paths of the ramble are witnessing the birth of the Ghost-to-Ghost-Hookup, and the introduction of an endearing character – Carlos.

The Ghost-to-Ghost-Hookup is built on the exponential power of friendship; an underground network built on kids and telephone-cord tendrils. Information is sought by the T3I through their friends and their friends' friends. A ride in the golden Rolls Royce is offered as a reward. Though the cracking idea is credited to Jupe, it's really Bob who bakes the cake. Jupe but pours chocolate sauce on top.

It's admirable to see Robert Arthur concede in the book itself that the Ghost-to-Ghost-Hookup has a drawback: "It lets a lot of people know what you are up to". Similarly, in a letter to his editor Walter Retan, he hints at adding a plot element in book two wherein the boys get into trouble because of their instantly recognizable gleaming car [2]. Thus both snags are used to land the T3I into a spot of bother. The proverb involving lemons and lemonade leaps to mind.

The segment featuring the plucky Mexican boy, Carlos, his ill uncle Ramos, and his pet donkey, "little grey Pablo", is surprisingly tender without slush. Their plight – living in a tumbledown house and eking out an existence by selling a patchful of flowers – touched this gruff heart (*Puzzle for the Secret Seven* (1958) where the Secret Seven pitch in for Benjy and his family is another such heartwarming story I can recall). A thousand pities Carlos never appeared again.

We also get to see here glimpses of Robert Arthur the poet. The painting is described as "a piece off the end of a rainbow". Or consider the sentence: "... car and men were gone". Even the painting's hiding place is given a poetic flourish – "a box without locks" (Robert Arthur had poked gentle fun at greeting card poetry in the short story *Mr. Milton's Gift* earlier).

The Stuttering Parrot is filled with some nice character moments. I had always pegged Jupe (Baby Fatso), and Fatty, from the *Five-Find Outers*, to be similar: natural leaders, similar nicknames, apt to be taken down a peg or two by the others. But when I re-read *Terror Castle* last year, I realized they differ in one aspect: a sense of humor. Fatty loves to act the clown; Jupe is rather grave. So it was surprising and fun to see Jupe pull Pete's leg here. Naturally, Jupe's mode of humor is deadpan.

The unflappable Worthington also gets a chance to shine. He stands up for himself and the T3I when confronted with a bully. Aunt Mathilda is shown to have "a big heart" when she chips in to help Carlos. Uncle Titus cracks a terrible and endearing pun on deer.

I was deeply struck by just how much of an obstacle, the lack of money is for the T3I here. The concept of pocket money didn't exist at my home. So it was novel and amusing when Fatty would toss about the pots of loose cash gifted by his relatives. The T3I, though, have to put in the hard yards in the Yard to raise dough for the parrots. They themselves are struck by Carlos's situation ("It was hard to realize that some people didn't have any money – not any at all"). When Carlos gets to choose an item from the Salvage Yard as a reward for information, the Mexican selects material to repair the wall of his uncle's ramshackle cottage.

Surprisingly, clue-cracking begins only after about two-thirds of the book. So the ending feels rather rushed. The clues themselves are a ragbag: some cryptic, some hidden in plain sight, some coded and some straightforward directions. The stuttering clue is intriguing and obvious in hindsight – the sign of an ingenious clue. Clue 6 is simple and elegant and works beautifully in tandem with the audacious seventh clue. I also enjoyed Jupe's meticulous checking up of clue 4 in which a fair amount of maths is involved. I had paid scant attention to the math when a kid.

There's also the classic list of red herrings among whom lies the goldfish – the painting's hidey-hole. Robert Arthur even wheels out the goldfish into the spotlight repeatedly – a daring move. Somewhere, he even drops that Blackbeard, the mynah, is a Jack-of-all-Trades, a most satisfying hint on a re-read.

The T3I do catch a number of lucky breaks. The Ghost-to-Ghost-Hookup leads them straight to Carlos and thus to the heart of the mystery. Bob's dad sets them on the path of untangling the clues (this ploy of adults unwittingly providing solutions is used quite frequently throughout T3I). Why, even Haganay has to point the T3I towards the treasure staring them in the face.

At times the T3I are quite lax too. It takes them forever to twig that the parrots are clues to the painting. Pete drives Blackbeard away. Jupe solves clue 3 through a brute force method while Huaganay arrives at the same conclusion by an elegant way. The T3I lose all the parrots to Huaganay before Jupe is utterly stumped - very unlike him.

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The parrots of the T3I mystery seem closely related to the yellow-headed Amazon (native to Mexico and North America). The Amazona oratrix – to give its scientific name – dwindled in large numbers due to habitat loss and rampant pet trade and currently lies in danger of being found only within a book [3].

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The tussle for the birds reminded me of another avian adventure, and another young investigator, **Tintin**. In *The Broken Ear* (1935-37), there's a mad dash for a parrot – an eyewitness. Tintin too lets the parrot slip from his fingers.

Herge really seemed keen on the birds. Bianca Castafiore, the formidable opera singer, gifts Captain Haddock a parrot in *The Castafiore Emerald* (1961-62). There's another Castafiore connection; Irma Waggoner, another parrot patron in *Stuttering Parrot*, is phonetically sort of a hybrid of two Tintin characters to wit Irma and Igor Wagner, dresser and pianist respectively to Castafiore. And then there are the parrots, colorful of language and feather, found on the treasure island in *Red Rackham's Treasure* (1943). Clearly parrots and treasure flock together as Robert Louis Stevenson first showed.

Robert Arthur pulls off the tough act of following Terror Castle. The Stuttering Parrot is flawed and it is enjoyable, much like a smudged rainbow.

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## References:

[1] *Mr. Memory*. [https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Mr.\\_Memory](https://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Mr._Memory).

[2] Smolinske, Seth T. *Vintage Letters from the Random House T3I Files*. <https://www.threeinvestigatorsbooks.com/Robert-Arthur-Random-House-Letters.html>.

[3] *Yellow-headed Amazon Amazona oratrix*. <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/yellow-headed-amazon-amazona-oratrix/text>.

