RED, THE HOMING PIGEON

By BEN BLOW

FAR out in the suburbs of San Francisco, perching on a hill that overlooks the Golden gate, there is a little cottage with vine covered porch. Back of the cottage is a stable and in the stable loft a family of homing pigeons lives. The loft is clean and white and sweet smelling and has a window where the first rays of the new born sun peep through. Around the walls, in little boxes filled with straw, the pigeons keep house comfortably and raise their babies with as much care as human mothers almost, both parents sharing in the work, for meal time comes with little interval for baby pigeons.

There, one bright February morning, when the sun shone as clear and warm as if the month were really May instead of being in the rainy season, a baby pigeon came out from his shiny egg. The rains upon the stable roof, pelting down between the kisses of the sun, ran in little rivulets that sang and whispered like mountain streams, creeping along beneath the shadows of the far distant northern woods. He was a funny baby, this little pigeon, nearly all head, with wings that were mere flippers and feathers that looked more like pins than real feathers, but he was very hungry and the first thing that he did was to tell his father and his mother that he was very much in need of food.

All about the loft were other pigeon families and other baby pigeons and all of them were very hungry, too, for they kept up a constant peeping of complaint. But among them all the baby pigeon that had seen the sunlight for the first time upon the bright and summer like February day seemed to be the hungriest, and no matter how often his father or his mother flew up on the edge of the nest with food they always found him with his mouth wide open and his funny wings beating the air, just as hungry as if he had not had a meal for hours and hours.

But as the days went by the little pigeon grew. The hunger that was ever present in his little stomach told a story of rapid growth and as the days went by his muscles grew strong and round and his body became covered with beautiful feathers terra cotta colored that shone as if some one had polished them.

One day when he was just beginning to wonder what wings were for a man came into the loft, the same man who had come there every morning since he could remember, and, as he did always, he sprinkled sweet, clean grain about the floor, put it in little boxes where the old pigeons perched and brought new water for the thirsty birds. Then, after he had looked into the nests where all the smaller baby birds were tucked away, he walked over to the nest where the hungry, terra cotta colored little youngster was and looked at him. The little pigeon's mother scolded and quarreled as the man pushed her aside, but his father flew up on the man's shoulder and perched there perfectly at home. They both knew that they were safe when the man picked them up, but the mother, tired out from fussing over her babies, couldn't help scolding a little, and as she buzzed away more like an angry bumblebee than a mother pigeon the man laughed and rubbed her shiny feathers. Then he picked the little bird up and slipped a little german silver bracelet on his leg, over his foot, which was as soft as a human baby's hand. The bracelet was light and loose and had a letter and a number on it, and when he had put the little bird down the man took a note book out of his pocket, put down the date when the baby bird had come out from his egg, the name of his father and his mother and then wrote B-565.

But as he put the baby bird down he glanced at him and laughed. "You're such a red feathered youngster," he said, "I think I'll have to call you 'Red.'"

The door that led into the loft from outside was a little arch that had a wire gate swinging down, and when one of the old pigeons came home from a flight he pushed the wire gate up and crept through into where the rest of the pigeons were waiting for news from the outside world. The gate before the door swung one way only, and when a pigeon came inside he had to stay until the man who fed them came and fixed the door so that the way was open. Before long the nest where the pigeon family lived had three bright, shiny, white eggs in it and the young bird's father and his mother were very busy indeed. Both of them took turns keeping the eggs warm, and sometimes when the mother bird would forget that it was her turn the father pigeon would climb down from the nest and scold her and flap his wings until she took his place, but she was very seldom lazy, and in a time that seemed very short there were three tiny little pigeons in the nest, crying and begging for food as hungrily as the baby who had grown big enough to take care of himself had done.

His father and his mother having forgot him as far as he could see, the little pigeon learned to fly down on the floor when the man came in to feed him and to wrestle with the grown up pigeons for the nicest grains of wheat, until before very long he was as big and strong as any of them, only he did not know how to use his wings as well because he had not had the chance to practice in the open air. But in the loft he flew about daily and learned some things that he could not have learned in the open air. He made the circle of the loft time after time and learned to thread his way among the perches, dodging this way and that by swift wing strokes that threw him to one side or the other. He learned to fly straight up in the air instead of rising in a long slant, and as he learned his wings grew broad and strong, the muscles in his breast became full and round and his feathers shone like polished copper, because he cleaned them every morning when the sun first peeped into the window.

Among the pigeons in the loft there were a lot of youngsters who were almost of the same age as the one who had been named Red by the man who fed them. Each one of them had a band about his leg and had a letter and a number also, but none of the younger pigeons were nearly so large or strong or pretty, and of them all he was the only one that had a real name. And none of them got quite so much attention from the man who kept the loft in order and fed the birds. Finding that all the food was brought into the loft by this one person, the little bird began to make friends with him and soon was perching on his head and begging for the sweet, clean grain that made such a satisfying meal. But after he had been fed he flew up on the window sill and looked out longingly into the world.

With him there was a boy, and all the pigeons flew about the loft, not knowing just what kind of a boy he was and being a little bit afraid because he was a stranger. But when he began to feed them, and because he did not try to catch them, they soon grew accustomed to him and flew down on the floor and each one tried to get just as much of the grain as he could. The boy watched them and kept throwing out handfuls of food for them to squabble over, and then, when his pan was empty, he looked up at the man who stood by watching him, and said:

"What pretty birds your pigeons are, Uncle Harry; I wish that I could have one of them for mine."

The man looked down at him and smiled. "Now which one would you take if I said you could have any one you wanted?" he asked.

The boy looked at them sitting around on their perches and watched those which still were hunting for stray grains of food upon the floor. Among them was the little pigeon that the man had called Red, and as the boy looked at them he seemed to see this one and single him out from among all the rest.

"I think that one that looks like polished copper is the prettiest of any of them," he said, "and if I could really have one of them I'd take him."

"You've chosen the best young pigeon in the loft," the man answered; "one that is going to be a fine, strong bird, and now that you have come to make your home with aunt and uncle, I'm going to give him to you and I'm going to teach you how to take care of pigeons so that you can help me."

"I'd just like to help you with the pigeons, better than anything else that I know," the boy answered. "I love birds and would be so careful to feed them and keep the loft clean, and I think it's just bully to have one of them for mine."

"I knew you'd like my pets," the man replied, smiling, "and really they are something more than pets. They are called homing pigeons, because they fly straight home from almost any distance, and by writing a message upon thin tissue paper and tying it about the pigeon's leg a man can send a little letter back home faster than any mail train would carry it and sometimes faster than the telegraph could reach a place that was not near an office. That red bird that you think is such a fine one is going to be a good bird, and he comes by it honestly, for his father and his mother are both prize winners. I got them from a man who lives in St. Louis, where they have races every year for pigeons, and both of them have taken prizes for getting home before the ones who flew the distance that they did. His name is really B565, but because he is such a red fellow I call him 'Red,' and now that he is yours I am going to show you how to take care of him and train him so that he will make you proud of him some day."

"But why is his real name B565?" the boy asked, somewhat puzzled at the queerness of the name.

"All over the United States there are men who raise homing pigeons," was the answer, "and they have formed a club that has charge of all the races that take place. Every pure blooded pigeon is kept track of, so that better birds can be raised, and when a man joins the club he keeps track of his birds and registers them when they are little fellows, so that every one can know just where the bird comes from, who raised him and who his parents were and what races they won, if they were racing pigeons like Red."

"But why do you put a band around his leg," the boy asked, very much interested in all he saw.

"That band is put there when the bird is nothing but a tiny little baby," was the answer. "His foot is small and soft and folds up so that the band can be slipped on without hurting him, but when he grows big the band fits tight and snug and can not possibly come off. When I have put a band on a pigeon's leg I write to the office of the pigeon racers' club and give the date of hatching and the name of the little pigeon's father and mother, and give them my name and address, so that if anything happens to the bird when he is out upon a race his owner can be found by asking and by telling the letter and the number on the pigeon's leg."

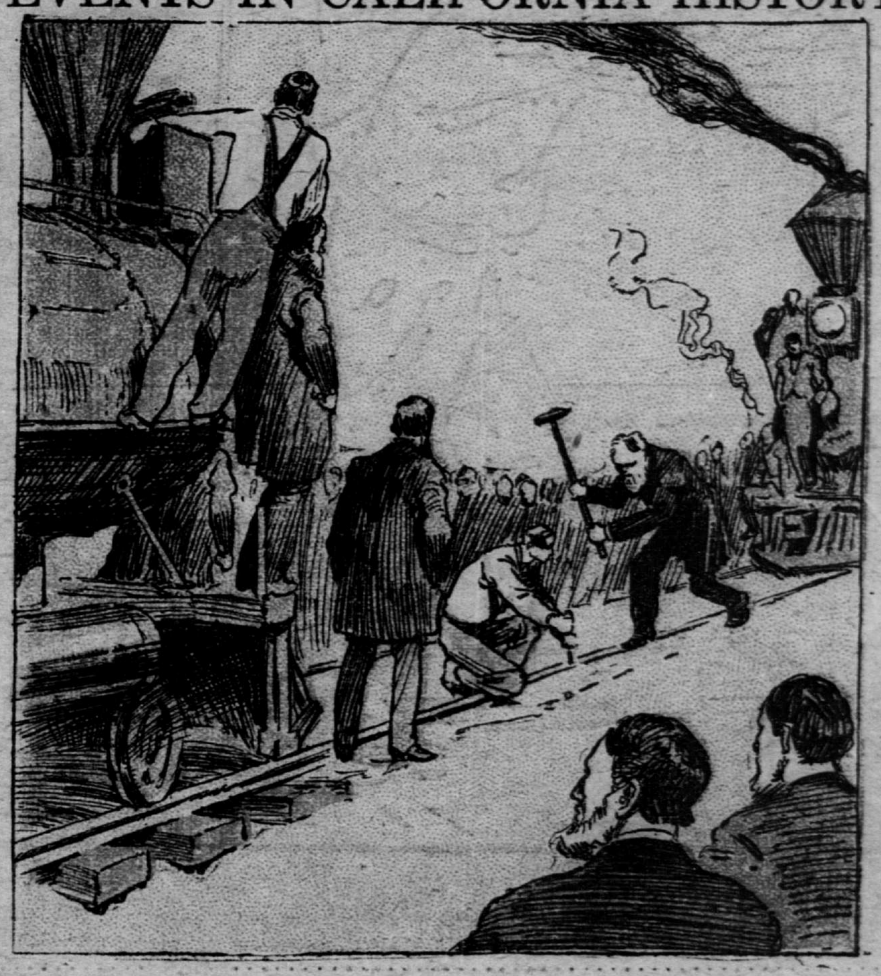
"Just think of it," the boy said; "just think of keeping track of all the pigeons like that and being able to know just when they were baby birds and who owns them and who their father and mother were! It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it really is wonderful," the man answered, "but there's a lot about homing pigeons that it more wonderful, how they fly home across miles and miles of country that they have never seen, how they know just the direction to take, how they keep on hour after hour without getting tired, and how they have carried messages in from ships that were wrecked 200 miles out at sea. But at first I am going to show you how to take care of them, and then you must make friends with all the birds and learn how to handle them, and then we will train your pigeon and practice with him and find out if he is as good as he looks. I think he will be a fine, strong bird because his father and his mother are fine birds and because he is bigger and stronger than any of the other birds of his age. But while we are doing that you must remember that it takes care and patience and you must be very gentle with him, for he is a little bit afraid of strangers and you are really a stranger to him yet."

"Jiminy, I'll be just as careful as I can," was the answer, "and some day we'll have Red win a big long race, and then maybe we will not be proud of him! I just know he is going to be a winner, I can see it by the way he looks."

(Continued Next Saturday.)

EVENTS IN CALIFORNIA HISTORY



Driving the Last Spike, May 10, 1869