

RED, THE MORNING PIGEON

By BEN BLOW

THE trip from Santa Barbara was a try out, proving that Red not only could fly, but would do so, and for more than a week he rested on his laurels, keeping house and sharing in the troubles of his family, which was a very hungry one and demanded lots of food. Each night and morning, though, he was taken out from the loft and fed with cleanest grain, and while he ate there was no family present to disturb him with little cries of hunger. The calling of the little pigeons in the nest went on all day and faithfully the young red pigeon carried food to them, making trips out into the open, flying to far fields and racing back again to where his babies were.

His wings, grown strong from flying far, carried him along faster than any of the other pigeons; even his own father, who was a famous flyer, could not keep up with him when they chanced to meet away from the loft. The pigeon families in the loft were growing up; young birds learning to fly like Red had learned, were making journeys from one perch to the other, but the baby pigeons in his nest were yet too small to use their wings, and still required much feeding. Sometimes when the boy who fed the pigeons came into the loft he talked to Red and stroked his feathers and all his talk was about a place below Los Angeles, 500 miles away, where the races that ended the season started from. One day, when he had come into the loft with his uncle, he pointed at the young red pigeon: "Just look at him," he said; "his feathers shine as if some one had polished him, and he seems so very smart that sometimes I almost think that he can understand us when we talk."

"He's hardly that smart," was the answer, "but he shows that he is strong and healthy and in good condition for his race. We know that he can fly and that he will fly when he's by himself, but he never has made a trip when there were lots of other pigeons set free at the same time, and that's the only thing that I'm afraid of. He may loaf along with them instead of setting off for home."

"I'll bet he doesn't loaf a bit," the boy said; "he'll think about the baby pigeons and come back just as quick as ever he can."

"You are right about the baby pigeons," his uncle answered; "the bird that has a family always flies the best, and I'm glad that Red will have the little pigeons to think about; they'll make him come back home, no doubt of that."

"Will there be many pigeons in the race?" the boy asked next. "I'd like to see them started, a whole lot of them together; it must be quite a sight."

"Indeed it is," was the reply; "it's wonderful how quick they start their homeward trip."

"How do they know the way back home? Can Red fly up so high that he can see any place he knows? He flew back from Santa Barbara and he ought to know it when he sees it, but I really don't believe that he can see 100 miles."

"Nobody knows just how far a pigeon can see," said his uncle, "and no one knows just what it is that tells a pigeon which way leads him home, but every homing pigeon has a sense or instinct that tells him the way to go, and when Red starts off, no matter what he sees or what he doesn't see, he keeps on flying as long as daylight lasts. But when the night comes on or a fog keeps him from seeing the earth, he finds some place to rest and waits until it's clear before he starts again. The longest trip that any pigeon has ever made is from New Orleans to Boston, nearly 1,500 miles, and there is no way of telling how many miles the pigeon really flew, for it took him a week to make the trip."

"That is a long trip," said the boy. "I'm glad that Red will not have to fly so far. But, anyway, I'll be glad when the race is over, even if he shouldn't win, because I know he'll do his best."

For several days there was peace and quiet in the pigeon loft, but one afternoon five of the pigeons, four old birds and one young one, were placed in baskets ready for a journey, the old ones birds that had been in races, one of them Red's father, and the young bird was Red. All night they traveled on the train, then



CLOSER AND CLOSER HE CAME AND STRETCHED HIS TALONS FORWARD FOR KILL.

changed cars at Los Angeles and traveled several hours more. The rattling of the train was tiresome and when Red felt his basket lifted and taken out into the open air he tried his wings and found that they were still strong and ready for a trip. A little grain was given him, not half enough to satisfy his hunger, but enough to make him comfortable, and when he had eaten he went to sleep, knowing that in the morning he would have to fly a long, long way. The night seemed hardly started when he felt his basket lifted and, peeping out he could see that it was nearly daylight. He wondered if his breakfast was ready, but no breakfast came, and

then all of a sudden the cover of the basket lifted and set him free.

With wings that fairly roared he rose up in the air. All around him were other pigeons, flying this way and that, some climbing up, some flying around in circles and one or two making toward a nearby barn. Looking up in the air he saw his father, climbing higher every minute, and he beat his wings still faster until he reached him and then, knowing that he could see better when he was far up in the air, he put forth all his strength and passed the other birds. Far to the north he saw a bay and city and beyond, the mountains lifting far away. Below he saw pigeons flying around

in circles, some climbing up after him, some flying toward the mountains to the north, and as he climbed he looked around for something that would tell him where home was. He saw his father poise himself a minute, and then start off, he saw a lot of other pigeons start, all going in the same direction, and then he felt a little quiver, a little voice that called to him, and pointing straight for home he started off.

Far off he saw the other pigeons, and he tried to overtake them, but they flew so fast that he seemed hardly holding his place. Mile after mile, he went and then, looking ahead, he saw some mountains that nearly reached the sky. Below and far ahead the others were huddled in a flock, while up above them swung a hawk. Then he climbed up in the air, hoping to pass above the bird of prey, but as he rose the hawk rose also and poised above him to make the deadly swoop. With wings that bore him forward faster than a train Red swept along, and as he passed beneath the hawk he saw the cruel beak and deadly talons that were waiting for him, and then he saw the broad wings fold, and as a rock drops from a mountain precipice the hawk descended on his prey. Closer and closer he came and stretched his talons forward for the kill, but as he struck Red dodged, and with a quick, strong wing-beat swept to safety, while the hawk beat the air fiercely to check his unsuccessful dive, screamed once with wild, shrill note, and then sought other and easier victims for his kill.

With rapidly beating wings and heart that knew the feel of triumph Red swept along at higher speed. Back of him, as he flew, he saw another pigeon, and looking he could see that it was his father driving along with easy wing strokes that pushed him forward with little effort. Far back of him was Santa Barbara and ahead were hills that lifted up like barriers before him, and as he looked far off ahead he saw a place that seemed familiar and knew that he had been over the ground before. This gave him courage and new heart, and putting yet more strength into his wings he drew ahead of the other pigeon and set out for home faster than he had ever flown before. Far down below him the hills slid back in swift succession and little rivers shining underneath the sun seemed mere threads. His wings did not falter, even though weariness was on him, and he flew on just as fast as if he was fresh started on his trip, and when the sun began to drop toward the ocean he saw, far off ahead, the gleam that shone upon the church steeple, and then, beyond it, the cottage and the loft that held his nest and babies. With swift, long swoop he dropped toward it and settled on the little platform just before the entrance to the loft, then pushed his way into the loft, swinging the little gate that barred the way and forming a connection that rang a bell inside the house. With tired wings he flew over to his nest, and scarcely had he settled there when the man came in the loft, looked at him and called out to the boy who was downstairs, "Come up here quick, Arthur. Red just got in and you must take his racing number down to the club at once."

With flying feet the boy set off, hoping that his pigeon had won the race, and as the secretary of the club looked up at him he held the little aluminum tag that racing pigeons wear when flying for a prize. "My pigeon came back home at half past 4," he said, "at just exactly half past 4, and gee! I hope he won."

"He must have won," the secretary said, "for no other bird has come in yet, and unless some one from farther out has had a bird come home your pigeon is the winner of the race."

"I'm going to wait right here until I know for certain," the boy said, and as he spoke another man came.

"My pigeon just got in," he said, "he came into the loft at 20 minutes of 5."

"Too late," the secretary answered; "here's a boy whose bird got home at half past 4."

The streetcars seemed too slow for Red's owner when he started home, and when he burst into the house he raised a cheer for Red that made the neighbors want to know just what was happening. "My pigeon won the race," he cried; "he flew 500 miles, just think of it, just think that Red beat all the other birds."

With all the enthusiasm that he displayed he did not by any means forget his pet, and clean sweet grain and fresh cool water were taken to him, which made him forget the weary miles, and then, in less than two weeks from the day that Red had raced, there was a silver cup upon the mantel of the house before the loft, and on the cup these words were neatly engraved, "B 565. Winner of the 500 mile race, and breaker of all records for speed; average miles flown per hour 52½." And in the pigeon loft behind the little cottage with the vines upon the porch Red lives and races now and then, but never will he win another race that meant as much to him as the long race that made him winner of the silver cup.

(The End)

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