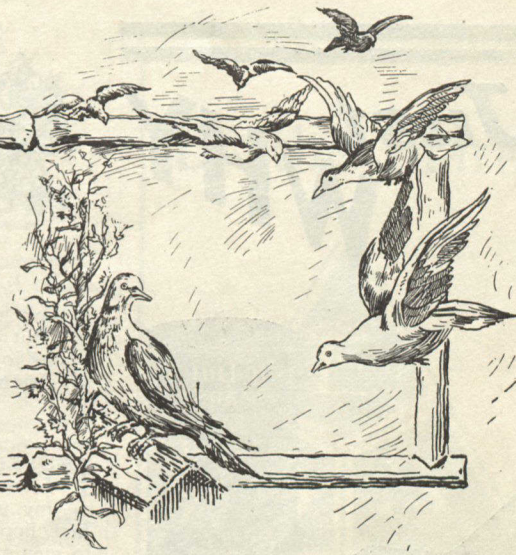


# The Flight of Philip's Pigeons

The Story of Some Wayward Pets

By NELLIE E. McCLUNG



PHILIP was a boy of ten years, with a generous growth of freckles and a loving heart. Most people saw the freckles, but it was only his mother who never lost sight of his affectionate nature. So, when one warm spring day, Philip sat moodily around the house, she was ready to listen to his grievance, for an air of gloom shadowed the cheerfulness of the spring freckles.

"I want something for a pet," said Philip. "I have no dog, or cat, or anything!"

"What would you like the best of all?" his mother asked, with the air of a fairy godmother.

"I want pigeons," said Philip. "They're so soft and white and pretty, and they lay eggs, and hatch young ones."

All his gloom had vanished. "What will a pair cost?" said his mother, who was a business woman.

"Twenty-five cents. Out at Crane's they have millions of them. I can walk out for them. It's only five miles."

His mother produced the money and Philip was ready to start on the instant.

"Where shall we put them when you bring them home?" she asked.

Philip's suggestion that they could share his room until he got their house built was promptly rejected; but Philip's father, interviewed in private by Philip's mother, agreed to nail a box on the end of the stable.

It was Saturday morning, and a beautiful day of glittering April sunshine. Philip was back at tea time with the pigeons, tired but happy. It seemed there had been some trouble about catching them. The price of twenty-five cents was for raw, uncaught pigeons, but Philip had succeeded, and brought back two beauties, one with blue markings, the other almost pure white.

The path of true love never ran smooth: difficulties were encountered at once. Philip put a generous supply of straw in one end of the box for a temporary resting place for the pigeons, but when he put them in they kept turning round and round as if they were not quite satisfied, and Philip was afraid they were not pleased with their new lodging. Then Philip had one of those dazzling ideas, which so often led to unpleasantness with the other members of the family.

He made a hurried visit to his sister Rose's room. Rose was a grown-up young lady of twelve.

When he came back he brought with him a dove-grey chiffon auto veil, which was much favored that spring by the young ladies in Rose's set for a head protection instead of a hat. Rose's intimate friend, Hattie Matthews, had tied a knot in each side, which caused it to fit very artistically on Rose's head. Philip took out the knots and draped it over the straw and was speechless with admiration over the effect. They looked so "woozy," he said.

In the innocence of his heart, he rushed in to get his sister Rose to rejoice with him.

Rose's language was dignified but plain, and the pretty sight was ruthlessly broken up. Philip's mother, however, found an old pale blue veil of her own, which was equally becoming to the pigeons, and all was well, for the time. It was Philip's mother who proposed a Pigeon Book, and a very pleasant time was spent making it. Not a common book, bought for money, but one made by loving hands.

Several leaves of writing paper were used, and stiff yellow paper for the cover, the whole fastened together with pale blue silk. Then Philip printed on the back of it, "Philip Brown, Pigeon Book," but not in any ordinary plain little bits of letters. Every capital ended into a feather and was topped off with an arrow, and even each little letter had a blanket of dots, and the result was very gratifying.

The first entry was as follows, April 7th: "I wocked out to Cranes, and got 2 fan tales. I payed 25 cents."

"My father put a box on the stable for me, and I put them in on bed of straw. They are bootiful. My sister Rose would not let me have her vale, but I got a prettier one, blue. They look woozy."

On Sunday Philip declared he could not go to Sunday School—he had not time; but his mother agreed to watch the pigeons, and so his religious obligations were not set aside.

Monday he made a roost, planing it smooth with sandpaper to prevent slivers in their feet.

Monday, after four, the Browns' back yard was full of boys, inspecting Philip's pigeons, not merely idle onlookers, but prospective buyers, as shown by the next entry in the Pigeon Book.

"I sold a pare to-day to Wilfrid Garrett. He can't get them till July."

Underneath this entry, in better writing than Philip's, there was an entry, made by his brother Jack—fourteen years old:

"This is called 'selling pigeons short.'"

Philip's friends told him many and varied things that were good for pigeons to eat. He did his best to supply them all, so far as his slender means allowed. He went to the elevator for wheat, he traded his jackknife for two anaemic heads of squaw corn, which were highly recommended for pigeons, by an unscrupulous young Shylock, who had just come to town, and needed a jackknife. His handkerchief, pencils, and scribblers mysteriously disappeared, but other articles made their appearance, a small mirror to hang on the wall of their house, which Gordon Smith said would make them more contented, and seeing as it was Philip who wanted it, he was willing to sell at a sacrifice—two lead pencils and a rubber. There also appeared a swing out of a bird cage, which was duly put in place. It was too small for the pigeons, but there were going to be little ones, weren't there? Four sunflower seeds, recommended and sold by a mild-eyed little Murphy girl, who had the stubby fingers of a money-maker. Philip wanted her to take it out in eggs, but Miss Murphy expressed a preference for currency. Philip thought it just as well to make no entry in his book of these transactions.

His youngest brother, Barrie, began to be troublesome, about this time, and showed an unwelcome interest in the pigeons. The ladder which was placed against the stable under their house at first had seemed too high to climb, but, seeing the multitude of spectators, who went up and down without accident, he tried it too, and so successfully that he was able at last, after a few attempts, to carry a stick up with him, stand on the rung, and poke up the pigeons.

One day he was caught with the goods by Philip himself. So indignant was Philip that for a moment he stood speechless. His young brother, jarred by a guilty conscience, came hastily down the ladder, raising a bruise or two on his anatomy in his descent. He sat on the ground and reflected. In his infant soul he felt that it was a just punishment. Nothing was said about the affair. Philip felt that the claims of justice were met. The only really dissatisfied parties were the pigeons.

The next Sunday in Sunday School, Barrie quoted the golden text, with a slight variation. "At the last, it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like a ladder."

Only Philip knew what he meant, and he said it served him good and right.

The following entry appeared in the Pigeon Book:

"My brother barrie poks them, but he's got his lesson. To-morrow I'll let them out, there fond cnuf of home now I guess."

The next day being Saturday, the pigeons were let out, and Philip's heart was torn with hope and fear. They looked so beautiful, circling and wheeling over the stable, and then away across the road. The pride of possession thrilled him, but a chill fear of their never returning kept him in suspense all day.

The Pigeon Book showed this entry:

April 14.—"I let them out and they came back. There a pritty site."

April 15.—"I dreem about them every nite. I have to dreems. My good dreem is theve layd. My bad dreem is about a tom cat and to piles of fethers, its horrid."

April 16.—"I sold another pare to-day. I have razed the price. This pare will be delivered in August. I gave them a bran mash to-da, it makes them lay."

Under this in Jack's writing were the words:

"Thinking of the August delivery."

Then the entries went on:

Aug. 20.—"Wilfred is pritty meen, he thinks he's smart. They ain't goin' to lay all in a hurry."

It seemed that the last statement was true. They were not. In spite of bran mashes, pepper, cotton batting nest, and tender care, they refused even to consider laying.

Philip was quite satisfied with them, as they were, if they would only stay with him, but the customers, who had bought and paid for very handsome young fowl, were inclined to be impatient, and even unpleasant when the two parent birds were to be seen gadding around the street at all hours, utterly regardless of their young master's promises.

Philip learned to call them. "Cuta-cuta-coooo, cut-acutacoo," could be heard up and down the street. Sometimes they seemed to come for his call, and then his joy was full. More often they seemed to say, "Cutacutacoo yourself," or some such saucy words, and fly farther away.

A rainy day came, when Philip had had them about two weeks. He came home from school to see how they were, and put in the morning fixing an oilcloth over their house. The pigeons were out, as they usually were now. At night they came home and ate their supper, much to Philip's delight. As they grew more and more independent of him and stayed away for longer periods, it seemed to him that he could not do enough for them. He changed their bed every day, he gave them fresh water, and washed their water dish twice a day.

One night they didn't come home. Philip's "Cutacutacoo" brought no answering call. He begged himself of alleys and marbles to hire boys to help him to look. He even dared the town constable by staying out after the curfew rang, looking and asking. No one had seen them.

Through the night it rained, a cold cruel rain, or so it seemed to the little wideawake boy. He stole quietly out, afraid that he would be sent back to bed, but no one heard him but his mother, and she understood. It was dark and lonesome outside, but love lighted his way. He crawled up the ladder, hoping to find them. The straw, the cotton batting, the blue veil, and the water dish were there, but no pigeons.

Philip came back to bed. His feet were wet and cold, and he couldn't keep back the tears.

His mother, who had heard him going out, and who understood, called to him softly and sympathized. She said they were safe enough with some flock of pigeons; they would come back when they were hungry, and the rain would not hurt them, and be sure to wipe his feet.

The next day they were found across the street with another boy's pigeons, unconcerned as you please. Philip gave his Lost Heir game to the boy to help him catch them the next night when they were roosting. He shut them up then for a few days. The Pigeon Book would have been neglected only for his mother, who said it was only right to put in the bad as well as the good. That was the way of all stories, she said.

Philip wrote:

"They went awa and staid all night. I gess they were lonesome. I don't no why they don't like me. I like them."

When his mother read that she said, "Poor little fellow," and made pancakes for tea.

In a few days he let them out again. This time he was almost in tears.

They did not hesitate a minute, but flew straight down the street to the place they had been before, to the place where the people often made pies out of pigeons, and were not ashamed to say so.

Philip followed them, with a set little face.

"Say, Phil," the boy of the house called to him, "you might as well sell them to me. I'll give you ten cents each for them. They'll never stay with you. We've got about a dozen now. I'm goin' to sell a bunch of them to the hotel."

With difficulty Philip answered:

"No, Jerry, I won't sell them, but I'll give them to you if you promise not to kill them." He was watching them as they circled so gaily over his head, they were so lovely and so dear. His chin was quivering, but Jerry did not notice.

Jerry was astonished, but being a business man closed the deal at once.

The Pigeon Book was put away.

One day his mother came across it, in Philip's drawer. She found a final entry:

"I gave them away—they seem to be happy."

Then there was a smear on the paper and below it these words:

"They are ongratefull broots!"