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BILL AND COO

by

Mazo de la Roche

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BILL AND COO

Not many springs ago two beautiful pigeons met on the roof of a very old house. The roof was so sloping that it was hard for them to keep their foothold. They kept on slipping and sliding downward towards the moss-grown eaves. It was then that she noticed what beautiful feet he had. They were the colour of the finest coral. She was so full of admiration for them that she exclaimed:

‘Coo!’

He bowed politely and turned round in front of her, just to show her his plumage that shone like polished metal in the sunlight. When she saw the changeful shades of his collar she again exclaimed:

‘Coo!’

Again he bowed and turned round in front of her.

But even while he turned he noticed the lovely whiteness of her plumage, with just a few black feathers in wings and tail.

Now standing close together he asked:

‘What is your name?’

‘Coo,’ she answered in her sweet voice.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I always thought Coo was rather common, but since it is your name I like it.’

She bowed to him and her golden eyes sparkled.

‘And what is your name?’ she enquired.

‘Bill,’ he answered, on a deep note.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I always thought Bill was rather common, but since it’s your name I like it.’

So, in the warm spring sunlight, they sat billing and cooing together.

After a while they decided to build a nest.

They chose a place in the shelter of a gable and he worked hard for several days carrying twigs to her which she proudly arranged with her beak. A pair of robins building a nest nearby thought the pigeons’ nest very

rough indeed as compared with their handsome nest, but the pigeons thought it was perfect. Then one day Coo laid an egg in it. Then she laid another. Bill was so proud that he turned round and round showing off in front of her and the eggs, but she was too busy keeping the eggs warm to admire him, and the eggs were too busy with what was going on inside their shells.

The house was owned by an old couple named Dullard who hated all birds but especially pigeons. Dirty creatures, they called them, and if they could have reached the nest they would have torn it down. They stared up at it in hate and the man actually threw a stone at Bill when he saw him turning round to show off. But the stone hit the roof, bounced back and struck Mr. Dullard on the forehead. He cried out with the pain of it and the pigeons peered down at him in wonder.

The roof of this house leaked. The chimneys smoked. The windows rattled. When it rained there was a flood of water in the cellar. The Dullards had a daughter but she had left home because she had been so unhappy. Yet when she was born her mother had named her Joy. Everything went wrong with the Dullards but they never blamed themselves for their misfortunes.

One lovely day two fledglings were hatched in the nest. Coo felt the eggs stirring under her breast. She heard small sounds and snuggled the eggs closer and closer. As for Bill, he said her dear name over and over from morning to night, he was so full of pride.

That night a change came over the sky. A great purple cloud, heavy with rain, was blown in from the east and before long the rain fell in torrents. All the night long it rained and rained. The two pigeons spread their wings over the nestlings, but the rain was so heavy that, in spite of all their efforts, the young ones were washed out of the nest and fell to the cold ground far below. When the grey light of morning came, Bill saw the two little naked bodies lying there and he said, with a moan:

‘See what has happened, Coo. Our two babies are dead. Drowned drowned drowned.’

But Coo would not look. She could not believe in such a terrible misfortune. She snuggled the few wet twigs that were all that was left of the nest, and moaned:

‘No . . . no . . . no. I won’t believe it. My birdlings are not down there. They are safe under my wing.’

But Bill knew better. He peered down and saw Mr. Dullard pick up the cold little bodies and carry them off to show his wife.

‘Two pigeons fewer to annoy us,’ he gloated. ‘I wish they all were drowned.’

The robins too had hatched their young, but so well built was their nest and so sheltered, that it withstood the storm. Their nestlings were safe. Bill and Coo were envious as they saw the robins flying to and fro carrying fat worms to their nestlings.

They were envious when they saw the parent robins teaching the young ones to fly. Still Coo would not believe that their nestlings were dead.

‘They are still under my wing,’ she would say, and Bill almost believed her.

The end of summer came. The leaves blew from the trees and the robins and their brood flew south.

‘Let us fly away also,’ said Bill. ‘Let us find some warm sunny place and build a new nest.’

But Coo clung to the old nest.

‘Go if you will,’ she mourned. ‘I must stay here with my nestlings.’

‘But your nestlings are dead,’ Bill said. ‘They are gone.’

‘They will come back,’ she said, and settled herself on the nest.

Bill saw the other pigeons flying happily about and he longed to join them, but he would not desert Coo and Coo would not desert the nest.

When the cold weather came the pair would fly together each morning in search of food. It was hard to find enough to keep them alive but somehow they managed. A certain poor old lady never failed to put out scraps of bread for the birds, but the rich never gave even a thought to them.

When Bill and Coo had eaten they would fly together high above the snowy ground, looking very beautiful, then return to the nest and sit there close together, trying to keep warm. Sometimes they would turn their heads and gaze fondly into each other’s eyes or press their beaks together.

And so the long winter passed.

Sometimes up there under the gable the winter seemed too long and cold for bearing. Yet Bill and Coo bore it without complaint, except to make little moaning sounds. Once there was such a heavy fall of snow that it drifted right in over the nest and over the faithful birds sitting on it. It covered them

like a white blanket, so that only their two heads were to be seen. And their two pairs of bright eyes.

‘What do think will happen to us?’ Bill asked Coo.

‘Something very wonderful,’ she said. ‘I can feel it coming,’ and she snuggled under the snow.

Something wonderful did happen. This was the coming of spring. Firstly the snow turned to rain. All the land was rain-soaked deep down where were the roots of the big trees. The roof of the house leaked and the cellar was flooded. When the rain ceased the sun came out in full strength and a gale of wind roared and shouted across the land. The trees felt life stirring within them and waved their branches in joy. The shutters of the house rattled so loudly that the couple who lived there found it hard to sleep and when they did fall asleep they had bad dreams.

‘If only one could get rid of those pigeons,’ groaned Mrs. Dullard.

‘I’ll get rid of them if it’s the last thing I do,’ growled Mr. Dullard.

About this time the robins returned from the south. Looking at them you never would have guessed that they had flown thousands of weary miles. They were smooth and trim and pleased with everything. They tidied up their last year’s nest and at once moved into it. The hen robin, whose name was Cherry, soon laid a pretty blue egg. After admiring it, the cock robin flew to the gable and, with head on one side, took a long look at the pigeons.

‘Still here?’ he exclaimed with a giggle.

The pigeons bowed a polite assent.

‘*And* nothing doing?’ he chuckled.

Again they bowed.

‘You ought to give up—give up—give up.’

He repeated these notes, over and over, ‘Give up—give up—give up.’

Then he flew back to his mate. ‘Oh, Cherry,’ he trilled, ‘what do you suppose? Those silly pigeons are still sitting on their ramshackle nest and have hatched nothing. Think of our last year’s family—grown up—building nests on their own this very spring! There were our two eldest, Primus and Secundus. And the third—Tertius. Do you remember what has become of Tertius?’

‘I forget,’ she said, sleepily. ‘I’ve just laid another egg. Come and see, Bob.’

He hopped over to look. ‘Pretty. Very pretty.’

He sprang on to a branch of an apple tree just coming into bloom and swayed there. ‘Oh, I could die of laughing,’ he trilled, ‘when I think of those pigeons.’

When Bill and Coo heard his gay laughter they made little moaning sounds.

Old Mr. Dullard came out of his house.

‘Go away, birds,’ he wheezed, for he had a terrible cold. ‘Go away!’ And he loudly clapped his hands at them.

But the pigeons only bowed and cooed, and the cock robin only laughed and sang.

A morning came when there was great excitement in the pigeons’ nest. Coo had laid an egg. It was so long since Bill had seen an egg that he could scarcely believe his eyes. And what an egg! It was beautiful as a jewel. It shone as softly as a pearl. Its shape was as perfect as the shape of a white rosebud at dawn.

Bill and Coo perched beside the nest gazing down at the egg in wonder and delight.

‘Oh, lovely egg,’ said Coo.

‘Oh, comely egg,’ said Bill.

All the long day they admired the egg and at night dreamed of it.

The robins hatched their brood, and though Bob had done little of the sitting he was very good at bringing fat worms for the young. One after another he stuffed their wide-open mouths with worms. Often he would perch on a bough of the apple tree and shout with laughter at the thought of the pigeons’ only egg.

A day came when Coo felt the egg rocking beneath her. Something wonderful was indeed taking place. There was no sound of chipping on the egg-shell—just a steady rocking, as of something struggling to get out. It was a starry night. The air was very sweet. Yet Coo could not rest because of the rocking of the egg. All day long, all night long there was that struggle inside the egg.

At the first crack of dawn Coo raised herself a little in the nest to discover what was beneath her. All was quiet there. Broken pieces of eggshell lay about. The nestling that lay revealed was like no nestling Coo had ever seen. She was a little afraid but very proud. She nudged Bill to wake and to see what she was seeing. A shaft of ruddy sunlight pierced the grey dawn and fell on the gable and on the nest.

Bill took a long look at what had come out of the egg. Then he shook his plumage and preened himself in pride. He turned round and round in front of Coo, his beautiful collar shining in the sunrise.

‘Oh, wondrous egg,’ he said. ‘Oh, comely egg.’

Coo arched her neck and pouted her breast.

‘Oh, lovely egg,’ she said. ‘Oh, mystic egg.’

‘Oh, wondrous egg.’

‘Oh, lovely egg.’

‘Oh, comely egg.’

‘Oh, mystic egg.’

‘Oh, Bill.’

‘Oh, Coo.’

So they went on and on, without tiring. The poor old Dullards could get no sleep. They lay on their bed wheezing and coughing and groaning and yawning, but there was no sleep for them.

The robins also were awake early, for they had a hungry young family to feed. They were very curious to know what was going on in the pigeons’ nest, for they knew something had happened.

‘Do hop over, Bob,’ said Cherry, ‘and try to find out if their silly old egg has hatched. Really I should think they would be ashamed. Here are our brood, almost ready to fly, and they have not a single fledgling to show.’

Therefore, as soon as the little robins had been fed and were settled down for their morning nap, Bob hopped over to the pigeons’ nest under the gable and took a good look at what lay inside.

It happened at that moment that Bill and Coo were absent from the nest. They had gone in search of food for the little newcomer, and were somewhat puzzled to know what to offer him. If they had been at home they would not

have allowed the cock robin to look in the nest. But now without hindrance he called and, cocking his head, examined the nestling.

He flew back to his own nest where sat his wife on her brood.

‘Oh, Cherry,’ he said, ‘they’ve certainly got something there. Go and see.’

‘You must baby-sit while I go,’ she said, full of curiosity.

Off she flew.

He did not baby-sit but, perching in the old apple tree, sang:

‘They’ve got something there—something there—something there—something there—something there.’

Cherry said nothing when she returned till the four young robins opened wide their mouths and screamed for food. Then she said, in a new sharp voice:

‘Behave yourselves, you ugly little creatures, or I will throw you out of the nest.’

Trembling with fear they shut their enormous mouths and huddled together.

‘Well,’ asked Bob, ‘do you agree that they’ve got something there?’

‘Ask them,’ she said, ‘how they did it.’

He flew straight to the pigeons and demanded:

‘How did you do it?’

‘We sat,’ they answered politely.

‘How long?’

‘For a year.’

‘All the winter?’

‘Yes—all the winter.’

‘Through the cold?’

‘Yes—through the bitter cold.’

‘In the rain?’

‘In the rain.’

‘In the blizzard?’

‘In the blizzard.’

‘In snow to your necks?’

‘In snow to our necks.’

The cock robin swayed among the apple blossoms singing:

‘They sat in the rain—in the gale—in the snow—but they’ve got something there!’

He was so thrilled that he rose before dawn and sang and sang.

Over and over, the pigeons repeated the wonder of it.

‘We sat . . .

‘In the rain . . .

‘In the gale . . .

‘In the ice . . .

‘In the snow . . .

‘We kept the egg warm . . .

‘For a year . . .

‘For a year . . .

‘Oh, Bill . . .

‘Oh, Coo . . .

‘What could we do . . .

‘But keep the egg warm for a year?’

‘Oh, Bill . . .

‘Oh, Coo . . .

‘This did we do.’

The Dullards never had enough sleep. Even a nap in the afternoon was impossible, for all day long the pigeons told of the wonder of the egg.

‘I won’t stand it,’ said Mr. Dullard. ‘I’ll find someone who will tear that nest down.’

‘How thankful I shall be,’ said Mrs. Dullard.

So he found a man who agreed to destroy the nest. He stood at the bottom of the ladder while the man climbed it. This bright little man, who was rather like a monkey, scrambled up the ladder. His hair lay shiny and flat on his head. After a moment he scrambled down again. But now his hair stood upright on his head.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Mr. Dullard.

‘Say, Mister,’ said the little man. ‘I wouldn’t interfere with them pigeons. Not on a bet.’

‘Afraid of a pair of pigeons,’ scoffed Mr. Dullard. ‘I’ve never heard of such a thing. All you need do is to say shoo to them.’

‘I wouldn’t say shoo to them pigeons. Not on a bet. They just stood there guarding it, and never budged when they saw me.’

‘What are they guarding? A young pigeon? Come, man, speak up.’

‘Mister, you go up the ladder and have a look.’

‘I don’t like climbing ladders. I have the rheumatics.’

‘There ain’t money enough in this country,’ said the man, ‘to tempt me to destroy that nest. If you want it destroyed, you’d better do it yourself.’

At these words Mr. Dullard went to the bottom of the ladder and began stiffly to ascend it. At the top he halted as though turned to stone.

‘Well,’ called up the little man, ‘can you make out what it is?’

‘I can.’

Mr. Dullard now descended the ladder. When he stepped off the bottom rung he said, in a trembling voice:

‘It’s a seraph.’

‘Is that what you call it?’ said the little man. ‘I’ve never laid eyes on one before. I didn’t know they’d live in this world. A seraph, you say?’

‘That’s what it is.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘What can I do? Nothing but wait and see.’

The cock robin had overheard. Now he flew to the apple tree and shouted: ‘Wait and see! Wait and see! It’s a seraph! Just wait and see.’

The man went off grumbling.

Mr. Dullard went indoors to find his wife.

‘I’ll believe it when I see it,’ said she.

‘How like a woman,’ chuckled the robin. ‘I’ll believe it when I see it! I’ll believe it when I see it.’ He swayed in the apple tree till the blossoms began to fall.

Mr. Dullard said to his wife, ‘It’d make a dog laugh to see you climb a ladder.’

She did not reply.

She climbed to the top and came down again.

‘Did you see it?’ he asked.

‘Yes—poor little darling.’

Poor little darling! Mr. Dullard could scarcely believe his ears. It was so long since he had heard his wife speak tenderly. And she had the sweetest smile on her face. She was like a different woman.

She went straight to the kitchen and began to mix bread and honey and fresh milk in her best china bowl.

‘The poor little darling is hungry,’ she said, ‘and those silly pigeons have no idea what to feed him.’

‘But—our best china bowl,’ he objected.

‘Nothing is too good for him,’ she said.

She carried the bowl up the ladder and set it near the nest.

Bill and Coo eyed it with suspicion.

‘Oh, Bill,

‘Oh, Coo,

‘What shall we do?’

They said this over and over.

‘Oh, Bill,

‘Oh, Coo,

‘What shall we do?’

The cock robin shouted: ‘Feed it or it will die. I know the signs. Hurry up.’

Bill and Coo took turns in feeding the nestling, which took the food with relish. It thrived. It was bright-eyed and lively. Three times a day Mrs. Dullard made delicate food for it. Nothing was too good or too much trouble. The Dullards spent their days preparing food for the seraph or standing at the bottom of the ladder to guard it.

They smiled at each other in the new secret happiness.

A heavy rain came but it did not harm the nest or the seraph. Neither did the roof leak nor did the water enter the cellar. A gale blew but the chimneys did not smoke. Neither did the shutters rattle. Everything was different since the seraph had come.

The robins' family learned to fly. The young ones were now almost as large as their parents.

The cock robin peered in at the pigeons' nest.

'You'd better let me take this nestling of yours south with my family,' he warbled.

'Never,' said Bill.

'Never,' said Coo.

'He'll not survive your northern winter.'

'He survived last spring,' said Coo, 'and it was as cold as winter.'

'Colder than winter,' said Bill.

'He has no proper plumage,' said the robin.

'We shall keep him warm under our wings,' said Coo.

'Our wings are lined with down,' said Bill.

'We will not let him go.'

'Oh, no. We will not let him go.'

The Dullards' daughter now came on one of her rare visits to her home. Scarcely could she recognize her parents. Always were they smiling with a new secret happiness. On the very night of her arrival her mother told her about the seraph. The daughter, whose name was Joy, did not believe her. She thought her poor mother was out of her mind. And her poor father too. 'I shall just have to stay at home and nurse them,' she thought.

'And now,' said her mother, 'I must make haste and get the seraph's supper ready.'

She brought out the best blue china bowl.

Surely this poor old mother was out of her mind.

Joy said: 'That is our best china bowl, mother.'

'It is the seraph's favourite,' said Mrs. Dullard.

What was Joy to do with a poor old mother like that?

Mr. Dullard had the ladder in position.

'Mother!' cried Joy, 'you're surely not going to try to climb that ladder!'

Mrs. Dullard fairly flew up the ladder, carrying the bowl of arrowroot and cream. When she came down, Mr. Dullard asked anxiously:

'How is he?'

'He's fine,' she answered. 'Prettier every day.' And she smiled happily.

Mr. Dullard turned to his daughter. 'Your turn now, m'dear,' he said, and helped her to mount the ladder.

Up she went, and came down smiling.

'A nice girl,' said Coo.

'A very nice girl,' said Bill.

From four o'clock the next morning till bed-time they said she was a nice girl.

'That seraph of yours,' said the robin, 'gets livelier every day. He'll soon be leaving the nest.'

It was true. He sat on the edge of the nest, his lovely eyes bright with interest in all he saw, the white clouds that moved across the blue depths of the sky, the golden leaves that fluttered down to the grass, the family of robins preparing for the flight to the south.

Bill and Coo saw none of this. They saw only the seraph. They were scarcely surprised when he burst into song. They were scarcely surprised when he flew straight up out of the nest singing. Up and up and up he went into that azure blueness. The shrill ecstasy of his song came down to them till he was no more than a speck in the vastness of the sky; even after he had disappeared his song came down to them.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Bill and Co* by Mazo de la Roche]