



HOMING PIGEONS

The homing-pigeons were lost. It was quite obvious to anyone that they were going round in circles. Some of the residents of the small village which they passed through every twenty minutes were beginning to wonder: why is that small lorry marked *Invertay Homing Society* going round and round and round?

The driver of the small lorry was named Colin. He had been the driver for several years now. And this was the first time he had got lost. Mind you, it was also the first time he had driven the lorry without the company of a co-driver, one who could read maps. A minor outbreak of bird-flu, however, had rendered the co-driver helpless. So Colin had to look out for the route all by himself.

Colin was a large pigeon. But he was a pretty good driver. He could steer, his feet could reach the pedals in the cab, he could brake sharply, he could wind down his window and shout abuse at other drivers. No was going to tangle with him, because when he stepped out of the cab, he was impressively broad across the chest, and meaty around the shoulders. And his beak was not to be sneezed at.

Homing-pigeons are good at finding their way home.

Their problem is that they're not so good at finding their way anywhere else.

But when Colin was told to deliver the day's load of homing pigeons to Aberdookit, where they would be set loose to make their way home, he was confident. They set out on the right road, down the A9, then cut across country near Loch Leven. Nice scenery, big skies, humalong music on the radio.

And that's where it all started to go wrong. Try as he might to follow the map which lay beside him on the seat, or look out for road-signs, he just went round and round in circles.

The birds in the back were getting restless. Every time that Colin stopped to look at the map, there was a deafening chorus of *coo's* from the back, and voices wondering whether they were there yet. This made Colin nervous. Those guys were competitive by nature, and could get pretty snappy when tired and emotional. So, as soon as this chorus started up, he would drop the map hurriedly and set out on his way again, quite at random. No sooner had he done so than the layout of the land, memorised from that brief glimpse of the map, evaporated from his mind. All that was left was the protesting throbbing patch in his line of vision. And that told him they were still lost.

After they had driven through the village of Meigle Dunflean for the sixth time, at a speed dangerous to the inhabitants because he did not wish to attract attention, Colin decided it was time to consult with the gang. He pulled into a lay-by next to a field of interested cows. He switched off the engine and extricated himself from the cab. Really, he was going to have to ask for the door to be made wider - it was getting more and more difficult for him these days.

"Ooh!" came the voices from the back, "we're there at last! Ooh-wooh!"

Colin open the door at the back and clambered in. To the right and left were rows and rows of small compartments, each one with its occupant peering down its beak at Colin. "Woo-hoo, Coo-lin," they said. "Let us oot, we want to-goo, we want to-goo hoomel!"

"Not there yet," mumbled Colin.

"Hoo! Not there?" they said. "What do-hoo, do-hoo yoo-oo mean, Coo-lin?"

"Not quite sure where we are," confessed Colin, shifting from one foot to the other, peering over his shoulder at the passing traffic. All they needed now was a car full of foxes or cats to come driving along: they'd be done for. And he'd be out of a job, no question.

One of the pigeons, Nora, veteran of a hundred or so homing races, spoke up: "What on earth

do-hoo, do-hoo yoo-oo mean by 'lost'? Pigeons do-hoo, do-hoo not get 'lost!'

There were murmurings of agreement on that one. Several of the pigeons looked askance at Colin. Was he all he seemed to be? Or was he some kind of bloodthirsty beast in disguise? He was looking nervously out of the back of the lorry. Maybe they should do the same? They got agitated just thinking about that.

"Let us oot, let us oo-oot!" they began to call.

Colin shook his head. "Can't do-hoo that until we've got to Aberdookit. It's the roo-hools," he replied.

Nora nodded sagely. "It's the roo-hools," she said to everyone. "The roo-hools can't be broo-ken or abyoo-hoosed."

The passengers in the back of the Society lorry then broke up into small discussion groups, wondering what best should be done in face of the Rules.

Then Nora had a thought. "Have yoo-hoo been yoo-sing, yoo-hoosing that SatNav?" she wanted to know.

Colin was genuinely shocked. "SatNav?" he stuttered. "As if I woo-hood! Noo-hoo way!"

Nora shook her head, rather doubtful of Colin's truthfulness. "Too-hoo easy, too-hoo easy, too-hoo get lost with SatNav," she stated. "Made by foo-hools for foo-hools," she added. All the competitors nodded in agreement. No question about it.

At last Colin summoned up his courage. "Can any of yoo-hoo read a map?" he wanted to know.

There was a dead silence at this. Colin might as well have asked if anyone knew how to captain a submarine. After the silence, some tuttings of severe disapproval.

"It's just that, if anyone coo-hood read a map, we might get to-hoo Aberdookit soo-hoon," he added, rather shamefaced.

At length, when the protest had subsided a little, and pigeons had gone back into their huddle to gossip and ponder, a rather old pigeon spoke up. His name was Walter.

"I believe I coo-hood read a map," he said clearly.

A sudden disturbance broke out as Walter's neighbours shied away from him, shocked.

"Yoo-hoo," began Nora, "yoo-hoo -"

Walter interrupted her. "Yoo-hoo know quite well," he said, "yoo-hoo know quite well I can, Nora Poo-hooter. Yoo-hoo remember that time we floo-hoo back from Blackpoo, Blackpoo-hool and -"

"Never yoo-hoo mind that," said Nora quickly. She was blushing. "Walter can read a map, Colin. Let's just get goo-ing!"

Colin opened up Walter's travelling compartment and the two of them climbed down and then into the cab. Walter strapped himself in and picked up the map. He turned it round and round for a few moments, looking at it this way and that. Colin watched him, expectantly. Walter looked puzzled for a bit, then at last turned the map the right way round.

"Noo-hoo," he said, looking out over the surrounding countryside, "where are we?"

Colin had not the least idea, so he set off again and a few minutes later they found themselves in Meikle Dunflean for the seventh time. Seventh time lucky, because Walter found the village on the map, and he also found Aberdookit. He gave Colin his directions.

As the road unfolded before them, Colin asked Walter what had happened on the way back from Blackpool. Walter tapped the side of his beak, smiled slightly, winked. He said only: "We learned too-hoo read maps."

