

A Tumbler Tale

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

"You will meet a handsome stranger tonight." I read my fortune once again just to be certain that my number three combination plate and that hot Chinese mustard hadn't affected my vision.

Steve and I were on our way to a pigeon show, and I didn't think I dared entertain the idea of meeting a handsome stranger. But two hours later I could see that my fortune was as good as its promise. There in the corner of the exhibit hall stood the most marvelous hunk I'd ever laid eyes on. I dropped Steve's hand and raced to the other's side.

"Tonight," I exclaimed, "you will be mine."

I opened my purse and handed the man a twenty dollar bill. Within minutes I was leaving with Nero, my beautiful long faced, clean-legged tumbler.

I say beautiful because, to me, Nero



Photos by Jan Parrott-Holden

*Nero —
the handsome bird
that introduced me
to the world of
the tumbler.*

*This head shot of
a mealy-barred
tumbler shows how
nice and full the
cranium should
look at maturity.*



Photo by Steve Holden



*Picture shows proper stance —
eye carried directly over the ball of the foot.*

"Mustard" at five months. Tumblers mature very slowly and often have not developed the large, impressive skull until they are two to three years of age. Mustard has lots of room to grow. The short, neat beak and the large head are important features of the tumbler breed.

was about the most attractive bird I'd seen. Of course his good looks weren't outstanding, really, when compared to the other feathered beauties. He was a good red. But there were a number of excellent blacks, adorned with that brilliant beetle green lustre about the hackle. There were blues and creams and mealies, all possessing the large, well-rounded skull that hallmarks the breed. So what drew me to Nero? It may have been the fact that he was wearing his seed cup (a 3 ounce Dixie) over his head. It could have been the fact that no one seemed to notice his predicament. No one but me. I knew the rules, "*No one but the owner or judge is to handle the showbird.*" Still, I threw the rule-book aside for situations such as this. Carefully I extracted the cup and examined the bird. He seemed barely ruffled, his bold, black eyes giving me a careful once-over. I removed my hand from the cage and he strutted jauntily toward me, cooing a little, while spreading his tail. That was all it took. I was in love.

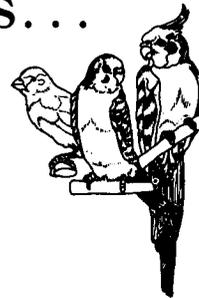
Now I'd had other pigeons before meeting up with the tumbler. Fact is, I had fifty other pigeons. But none of them would make a suitable mate for Nero. And, however grateful the bird was to me for having rescued him from near suffocation, he was definitely looking for an avian attachment — not a human one. Thus, I needed to find him a hen.

Nero's lady friend turned out to be a yellow tumbler. She was ready, and seemed to be favorably impressed with her selected suitor. Within a few days they were settled in a private box and actively preparing their nest for the arrival of new tenants.

Well, I was feeling pretty proud. But truth is, I hadn't anticipated the challenges ahead. Of course, I had heard that tumblers were a difficult bird for the seasoned breeder, not to mention the novice. Johnnie Blaine, a friend and accomplished tumbler man, had warned me that this was a breed for the stout-hearted and weak-minded. Maybe Johnnie didn't realize it at the time, but it was that statement, more than anything else, that convinced me, unequivocally that tumblers were my breed.

I discovered how right Johnnie was some days later when another breeder asked me how many pairs of foster feeders I was going to keep for each pair of tumblers. It hadn't occurred to me that "long-faced" didn't refer to beak length, but the distance between the eye and wattle. The term would also describe my countenance if I didn't locate some long-beaked feeders soon.

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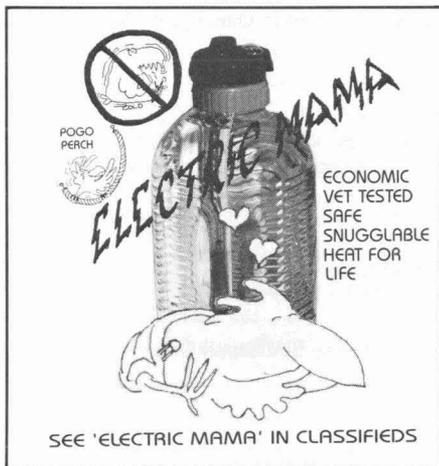
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(While tumblers make strong, capable feeders for long-beaked squabs, they cannot successfully rear their own short-beaked progeny.)

Well, I had capuchines. No good! While they were steady, productive birds, they lacked the strength to go the long haul. Chances are they wouldn't even be able to take one tumbler to maturity. Fantails? Too clumsy. They'd stomped their last pair of squabs and I couldn't take the chance. Homers. Now here there was hope. I'd give the breed a try.

Timing is critical in the foster parenting game. Both the homers and the tumblers needed to produce their clutches very close to the same date. It would be ideal if they came across simultaneously, a wash if there were more than two days difference in laying schedules. Call it beginner's luck, if you will. But my pairs laid their first eggs on the very same day.

After the second eggs were laid I made the switch. The tumblers would feed homer babies and vice versa.

On the eighteenth day two homer young pipped out of their eggs. Only one of the tumblers made it full term. And he was weak. Carefully I assisted him from his eggshell prison. It would be up to the homers now.

Everything I had heard about the tumbler's excellent parenting was proven by the steadfast vigil both cock and hen kept in the nestbox. The homers gained strength and grew rapidly while the foster parents fed until their chests were stained with pigeon milk.

My tumbler squab struggled along, making little gain in size despite the regular attention paid by the homer fosters. He showed no vitality which caused me to delay banding for several days beyond the customary age of one week. As time passed it was difficult not to compare the strength exhibited by the young homers to the lethargy shown by Nero's youngster. Still, I was prepared to see this project through, no matter what materialized.

Something did materialize, something I'd quite forgotten. A long-planned vacation was sitting just a week away and I still had a dependent tumbler. Problem was that the tumbler was *now* dependent upon me, the homers having long since abandoned their nestling for the lure of renewed courtship.

Crazy as it might seem, Steve and I departed for California right on schedule. And, with health certificate and carrying case, Nero's offspring accompanied us. When we left him at

the baggage counter I couldn't help thinking how appropriate the term "baggage" seemed for this scruffy, yellow pigeon we'd adopted. Deep down I realized my chances of raising anything but a cull were slim. But time would tell.

This is probably as good a place as any to stress that the long-face clean-leg tumbler, and his muffed counterpart are strictly showroom specimens. They, despite their name, are not athletes like their performing relatives. Fact is, they really aren't much for flying at all. But *my* tumbler didn't even flap his wings back and forth for eight whole weeks. Worse yet, he refused to peck at seed until he was nearly seven weeks along. And, just to complicate my already complicated life, he developed a sinus infection on that California holiday leaving him with a greatly swollen wattle, filled with cheesy, yellow exudate.

Following a veterinarian's instructions, I applied warm compresses to the bird's wattle twice daily. In addition, there were regular doses of Chloromycetin Palmitate to be administered. The weeks went by and recovery, along with maturity, seemed elusive at best. I watched grimly as the only tumbler I had raised that season went from a rather plain to downright homely creature. Nero had been so beautiful. His mate, too, had been blessed with good type. I hoped that their offspring was only going through an awkward stage.

Aftermath

They say that time heals all things. And, frankly I'm inclined to agree. That first tumbler breeding season is behind me now. Only a memory I can barely recall. Still I can't ignore the fact that I took a few tumbles myself while struggling with this interesting pigeon breed. One of them was "Mustard," a fitting name for Nero's only offshoot. Mustard, as it happened, turned out to be a cock. He also turned out to be a fairly decent looking fellow. His wattle doesn't bear even a trace of a scar, his plumage has begun to show some lustre. So it looks like we won't have to turn his picture to the wall after all. Mustard is living, breathing proof that it's always better to breed *one* than *none*. He's a symbol of the challenges we find in our wonderful avian hobby. And isn't it the challenges that keep calling us back for more?

Oh, yes, I've sworn off of tea leaves, fate and fortune cookies. But I'll return next season to my tumblers. Of that you can be sure. ●

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