

I. B. F.  
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BIRDS' WINTER BEDS.

woodpecker  
bluebird  
geese

Sunset in October and the early shadows falling over the green valley (and) the darker firs sloping down the banks of the river; bits of brilliance where the dogwoods and maples have turned red and yellow.

For all of the color and glow, winter was in the air. The goldfinches and bluebirds flitted about, calling plaintively as if they had a premonition and were a little uneasy. I heard a sharp, quick note near the study door. It was the little Gairdner woodpecker coming home to sleep. (I looked out at him.) He flew straight to the door of the small birdhouse fastened to the maple tree about six feet from the house. It was going to be cold tonight and he had better go to bed early. In he popped. Then he poked his head out for a last look at the world, like a boy's head from under the covers when the rest of him is snug and warm.

What he looked at were the graying fields of evening and the scattered old apple trees that he had girdled for a number of years perhaps, for that precious juicy food. They looked as if he had been at it for a life time, for the old trunks were covered with circles of holes. Many a time I have seen him light upright against the boll of an (old) apple tree and begin to pound with his head bobbing back and forth like a trip-hammer. To me, it looked like a hard way to get a living. The bark of those old trees was so thick and tough. But he brought blood, for I have gone out and found sap oozing out of these round holes. What a perverted taste he has! It was

gummy and as palatable as quinine. But this was his way of sucking out his food, and it was a good dinner to him.

I looked again at the round doorway of the bird house. There was no head sticking out now. All was still. The scene was empty. Little Downy had slept in this house for the second season now. It was a house of family traditions. In summer it was alive and bustling with violet-green swallows. And a swallow family can overflow its bed in no time and spill out into the world like bright little puff-balls on a sunny spring morning. But this was October, and Downy was alone and sound asleep. He had earlier cleaned out the mussy swallow family's summer litter, fetching the old feathers and dirt to the door and dropping them down. And he had found the doorway a little too snug for his liking, so he had clutched himself lightly to the front of the house and chiseled the entrance out to fit him. But one must not have his door too large when he is alone in this wintry world on dark nights.

And by this time, it was a real wintry world. The air was cold and gray. A wind was blowing. I glanced across from Downy's door in the maple to the corner of the house. Under the eaves is an electric light with an iron bracket around it. Huddled up on a band of the bracket sat a bluebird. He looked chilled and a little dejected. There was a roof over his head, but no walls to his bedroom to break the bite of the wind. The iron was cold to his feet, too. I turned on the switch. Would the sudden light scare him? <sup>Now</sup> There he sat in the full glare almost crowding the warm globe. I could see his eyes shine, and they were not afraid. Pretty soon he began to fluff and

shuffle his feathers. This was a good place to be. It felt like warm wooly blankets. So he sat in contentment while the dark dropped down. And I was contented, too.

"Honk! Honk!" came out of the gray sky above. The geese were flying over. Storm clouds were rolling fast along the highways of the sky. They must hurry. A great wedge of two hundred plowed swiftly on in the very teeth of the gale, their wings pulsing rythmically as they ~~swept on~~ <sup>passed</sup>. A continuous gabble of voices trailed back to me. They were not out of sight when the tell-tale voices of another flock came down (to me.) It was a smaller one, perhaps seventy-five, and in the rear, dropping behind inch by inch, came four little fellows. Their wing-beats were laborious. I could hear them talking excitedly, and I felt they were breathing hard. But they soon passed out of sight in the dark sky to the South. Behind came another wedge <sup>of a hundred or so</sup> in a little better form. Two more wedges followed fast on their heels. They were lower down and working hard to catch up. My eyes strained to follow them down the clouds. All at once as I watched, a strong gust of wind struck the wedge. That even triangle strung out in the sky bent like a veil and blew away in one puff like scattered snowflakes. Quickly the twisted strings pulled themselves back into line as if strung on a rubber cord, - and they were on their way again. What changes there were in those living lines! They bent and wavered and scattered and came back. One impulse, one purpose welded them together against all buffets and carried them on.

On where? Had they agreed to meet at a certain sleeping place for the night in some grassy meadow in the valley?

Was this the cause for the mile-a-minute pace and the fever to follow their comrades? Were they afraid of getting lost? There seemed no danger of this. As straight as an arrow on its swift course, one flock followed another down the valley and over the rim of the hills. Or would they go on and on with those strong wing-beats through the long hours of the night and the darkness?