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THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS DINNER

by

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If one could translate the conversations of our feathered families in the back yard at this uncertain season of the year, he might hear almost the same sentiments that run in the human mind and some of the small talk that floats about the city suburbs, especially over the fences. Food and weather are the main bird topics, and voices and wings are hushed instead of hurried and purposeful as in the spring and summer seasons.

"It seems lonesome around the yard with the thrushes and swallows gone," complains the dressy towhee in his querulous tone, "but I guess it is just as well there are no more of us here since the summer larder is about empty. If some one didn't keep this Santa Claus tray under the kitchen window full of bread crumbs, I don't know what we towhees would have to live on. There is always suet tied up in the trees, too, but I don't care for that."

"If you know enough to eat some of that suet, you wouldn't always be whimpering about cold feet at night," retorted little Gairdner woodpecker. "We've had mild winters lately and the time is ripe for us to have a real one. Then you will wish you had gone south with the thrushes and the rest of the tender-feet. Do you remember that fierce winter about eight years ago when the bluebirds staid with us too long? They didn't leave when the other migrants did, and all at once an ice-cold spell came on. It was too cold to snow. It was a blizzard and the birds couldn't move about. The gentle bluebirds stuffed themselves in the bird houses about the yard. I remember the one nailed up on the side of the house below an upper window. One morning there were eleven bluebirds found dead in that bird house. The night before they had been cold and afraid, and they chose a smothered death to starvation. If they had been fighters like the rest of us, they would have eaten suet, crumbs, or any old thing and pulled through."

"As for me," he ended, "I never get the chills. I always dig a hole in the under side of one of the grape arbor beams, and the wind and the winter

rains can tear themselves inside-out for all I care. None of it touches me and I sleep like a top. Of course, if there wasn't a plenty of suet tied on a post where I can almost reach it from my door, I would be scratching my head, too, for I can't milk these old apple trees for much more sap. They must be fifty years old if they are a day, and the bark is like rhinoceros hide."

The husky flicker, he of the chisel bill, was running a tattoo around a gnarled apple limb just above. He tapped it here, and he tapped it there. Getting little, he jabbed testily at a half frozen apple that was wrinkled and dry and hanging in the wind. It wasn't to his taste, but on a soggy cold afternoon like this it was better than going to bed hungry. He glowered down at little Gairdner.

"If these old apples and the half soured grapes hanging on the trees down the hill play out, I'll sample some of your suet one of these days," he warned. "The angleworms under the lawn seem to have gone down to China, or else that horde of robins cleaned them all up before they left for the South. You never saw such a noisy rabble as they were. They gathered on the lawn and all talked at once so you couldn't hear yourself think. Then they dashed down the hill and attacked the elderberry bushes and left them literally bare. The bushes had been full of red berries. Not satisfied, they swarmed into the red holly trees and finished them off. It seemed like a fever. Dozens at a time tried to take a bath in the little front yard pool, and they almost pulled each other's hair for standing room. All of them were filling up or doing something getting ready to go."

"There have been tons of wild grapes this year," he continued, "but these last frosts have nipped them and they are all on the ground in an oozy mass. Smells like a boot-legger's joint. The China pheasants are going for them as if it was their last jag. A bunch of varied thrushes or Alaska robins just dropped in from the North, and they are going for the grapes, too. I heard their wheezy talking from the fog in the fir tops, and when they found those grapes there was a free-for-all fight, fathers, mothers, brothers and all the kin jabbing at each other trying to get the last bite. Those prize-fighters

are gay birds in their brilliant orange and black trappings, but they wouldn't be much help in a hard winter to the Community Chest or the Tuberculosis Fund."

"None of us are very swanky in our winter clothes," chattered the drab little songsparrow who had just come along under the bushes. He went on diligently stirring up the dead leaves and flipping one off of his way to see what was under it. There might be a half asleep spider that would make a tasty supper. But there were few insects now, so he hopped up to the free lunch counter and contented himself with bread crumbs. In the fading light one saw the dark splashes on his rusty throat. A few minutes later he flew up into the thick tangle of the big bamboo bush in the shelter of the back porch. There were others there before him, for companionable twitterings were heard. The sparrows always went to bed a little early.

A little round ball of a bird with a stumpy pinkish bill and white tail feathers hopped hesitatingly on the gravel of the roadway, getting nothing for supper as far as one could see. But he kept at it briskly, picking up bits of salty gravel. The junco is a seed eater as well as an insect hunter, and he stands the winters better than most birds. When the snow falls he seems to be a part of it, picking up the blown seeds and the stranded insects. He said nothing and paid little attention to the complaining towhee and the songsparrow who sung in his sleep. No one saw the junco go to bed, but it probably wasn't far off the ground, perhaps in some sheltering bunch of brush or the thick wild blackberry tangle. He is an unfailing winter dooryard bird, half shy, half friendly.

"See who's here," called the irrepressible flicker, hitching backward down the apple tree. "There goes little Tippy Winter Wren into his hole under the garage door. He comes back every winter and sleeps in there. He goes all over the rafters and pokes his nose in every corner, under old boxes, in the cobwebs on the windows for spiders, and I can tell you there is nothing edible left when he is through twitching his tail about. He is terribly shy, but he can certainly take care of himself in cold weather. His cousin, the Vigor or Seattle wren, is somewhere around, too. This fellow likes a hole in one of the decrepit waxon apple trees down on the river bank, and how he does fidget if one tries to visit him."

"The wind is blowing colder and it is going to freeze deeper tonight," sighed the towhee. Christmas is coming. I wonder if there will be anything left to eat."

"Well," said the flicker, hitching jerkily up the limb, "let's figure out what we would like for dinner, even if we don't get it. I vote that we make it a bang-up celebration anyway." His speckled coat, red cheeks, and black collar shone in the late autumn light. But the brightest thing about him was his eye. It sparkled now at the thought of good food. "For myself," he continued, bobbing his head to emphasize his remarks, "I want some juicy ants and some fat white grubs seasoned with apple-sap sauce. And I want plenty of them, not the niggardly few I have been able to dig out lately in this freezing weather. You would think Christmas would come in summer time when there is an abundance of grubs, insects, spiders, and a lot of other things to make one happy."

"Put in some bread crumbs," crooned the towhee.