

Winbeam Winter

When Van returned from town one day in December he went around to the trunk of his car and took out a dozen bird houses and food trays.

"What now!" said Sike.

"Come over to the cabin," said Van.

"I'll need you to hold these houses and trays while I step off to see how they look as I put each one in place."

"What's the idea?" asked Sike.

"Entertainment for me when there's snow and ice on the trees. I have a friend in the middle west who has an old apple tree filled with bird houses and food trays. I aim to have the apple tree by my south

windows fixed up exactly like it. His tree is mighty interesting. I've seen at least a dozen birds at a time feeding there in the wintertime. I've been studying winter birds and their habits for the past month. I've got a good supply of beef suet, grains, and peanut butter. I aim to feed every hungry bird that visits this neighborhood."

"I rather like the idea," said Sike. I've seen birds in our chicken yard in the wintertime. Joe throws a lot of bread crumbs in the dooryard when there is snow. Last year I saw a flock of Fox Sparrows down among the red cedars eating
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the berries. There's a lot of spicebush near the brook and the birds find something there they like. One always thinks of a Hairy Woodpecker on the trunk of an old tree. I saw one eating bittersweet berries, and I came across a Blue Jay eating the faded red berries of sumac. City people have an idea that we who live in the country don't appreciate the beauties of Nature. They're all wrong. Why my Joe goes daffy over a glowing sunset!

"Looks like a bird's Christmas tree," said Sike when they had finished hanging bird houses on limbs, and placed food trays in

the crotches of the tree.

Before winter was over Van had reason to be proud of his feeding station. The birds came in flocks and in pairs the Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, a flock of Purple Finches, two Goldfinches in their dull winter coats, a couple of Golden-crowned Kinglets, flocks of Juncos, and White-throated Sparrows. One day when the thermometer registered ten above zero two Song Sparrows sang. One morning before daylight Van was awakened by a Great Horned Owl in a pine tree on the north side of the cabin.

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One winter day when the Earth was as beautiful as a dream, dressed up in soft fluffy snow, a flock of Pine Siskins bright in the sunlight alighted on the Honeysuckle vine by the front door. They stayed on the vine half an hour fluttering their wings and twittering while they ate the berries.

A deep snow in January remained until the last of February, then the snow began to melt in spots at the foot of trees. Van looking out of a south window at twilight one night counted nine deer at the edge of his apple

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orchard. They were browsing in the open spaces at the foot of the trees. In the morning Van was out early to see the tracks. Uno following in Van's footsteps sniffed at the deer tracks. At a word from Van, Uno would have been on the trail.

"Don't these Spring catalogues look good," said Van when Sike walked in one snowy afternoon. "Expect to do a little farming?" asked Sike. "Not much. I'll plant a few potatoes, set out a few tomato plants, and have a few rows of golden-bantam corn, just a little garden patch for exercise. I'm more interested in fruit trees

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than I am in vegetables. I'll leave my old apple orchard as it is. I like the twisted limbs and knot holes - a good place for the birds to home in. I'll set a couple of bee hives in the old orchard, and a hive or two in my new orchard."

"Someone told me I might get lonely in this Wimbeam country, come winter. So far I haven't had a chance to get lonely - what with goats and chickens to take care of, birds to feed, fires to keep going, books to read, and catalogues to look over, not to mention a walk over to your house for three square meals ⁵⁰ a day, and all

the hikes I take. I don't know where the time goes. Here is a list of the apple trees in my old apple orchard that you and I made last fall. Read them over to me. I like the sound of them."

"Baldwins, Greenings, Canfields Northern Spys, Spitzenbergs, Golden Russets, Bellflowers, Van Hines, Royal George, Sheepnose and Ben Davis."

"Now help me out with the new trees I want to order, Sike.

We'll start with apples on our list. Two Cortland, two Winesap, two Mc Intosh, two Rome Beauty

two Golden Delicions, and two Jonathan. I don't need them.

I want to watch them grow up.

I've got all the pears I need, but I'd better have some young ones coming on. Put down a couple of Bartletts, two sweet Seckel Pears, and two Gorhams. I'd better get a couple of Hamson Plum trees and a dozen Concord Grape vines. We used to have a small white peach that had a delicious flavor. I don't see anything like it in this catalogue so I'll order a couple of Ellbertas. And put down two cherry trees, these big sweet red ones for the birds."

Sike said it was a hard winter. Van didn't find it hard or long. There was snow, wind, and sleet, but he didn't mind the weather. He tramped through the snow every week or two to see the old hermit, and they became good friends.

Van often watched Sike chop wood in Sike's woodshed. He liked the smell of the chips.

"Good exercise," said Sike one morning as he swung his axe - "Don't you want to try it?"

"I had enough of that, when I was a boy. I don't want any more of it," said Van.

"You did!" said Sike, surprised. I supposed you never did a stroke of hard work in your life."

"I did my share," said Van.

At the very tail-end of the long cold Drinbeam winter Van got a visitor that warmed his heart and made him very happy. One mid-morning there came a loud knock on his front door. The figure of a stocky man stood with his back to the door gazing down over the orchard. At the opening of the door he turned, and his ruddy face beamed with pleasure.

"You old son-of-a-gun!"
shouted Tom. "How did you get here!"

The man gave a hearty laugh as the two men clasped hands in a hard grip.

The man stood off a pace and looked Tom over. "It agrees with you all right," he said. "If I ever in my life have seen a healthy looking man who is satisfied with his world it is you, Tom. You used to be too serious. Now you look as if you'd be willing to take time out to enjoy a joke. It was high time you made a break and gave up that strenuous life. Why you look ten years younger, man!" 88.

The two men fired questions at each other and whacked each other on the back, then drew chairs up in front of the open fire to talk as only old friends can talk.

When the clock struck twelve, Sam jumped. "Get your hat and coat on. We'll go over to Sibe's for dinner. I take all of my meals there. We'd better get your car off the road first and up in my barnyard."

Sibe met them at the door. "Our lawyer friend, By Gosh!" he said, as he gave the man's hand a hearty shake. "Hi Zee," he called, "Here's our lawyer friend."

"Glad you came today," said Zoe,
"I've got just the kind of a dinner
men like - a big pot-roast with lots
of good brown gravy, mashed potatoes
mashed turnips, little creamed white
onions, an apple-pie just out of the
oven, and all the coffee you want to drink.
Sit down at the table while I get
an extra plate."

"That reminds me," said Van.
"You can stay over night, can't you?"

"You can sleep in my spare
room," said Zoe.

"No, he can't," said Van. "I've
got an army cot in my store-room
This good friend of mine can sleep
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on my couch, and I'll sleep on
the army cot. We'll want to
talk half the night."

"Couldn't have had anything
better to top off my first winter here,"
said Sam at parting the next day.