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Chestertown, Maryland.

THE HARBINGER OF SPRING

By ERNEST E. STANFORD

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The arrival of Benoni's bluebirds is a doubtful sign of spring, until later events prove conclusively that the mating season has arrived.

BENONI KEMP stood in the open doorway, his gray head cocked sidewise and his mouth slightly open. A little man, was Benoni, a good bit beyond the prime of life, but still, as he himself asserted, in good order. He was a wrinkled little man, not gnarled, but slightly bent, with blue eyes beneath bushy brows—blue eyes that twinkled even at funerals, yet held a hint of deeper feeling, of sadness even. His upper lip and cheeks were shaven, but his chin sported a tiny gray beard of the shoe-brush order, which, when his mouth closed, stuck forth at an aggressive angle, the only aggressive thing about him. Benoni's mission in the doorway was plain. Benoni was listening.

"Chee-e-e-e-rup! Che-e-e-e-rup-eerup-eerup-eerup-eerup!"

It was faint and far away, across the snow-clad fields. An ordinary listener would hardly have caught it. But Benoni Kemp had listened for the bluebirds for very many years.

"It's him! It's sure him! Two full days earlier'n last year. Well, well! Spring's a-comin'!"

Benoni's bluebirds always ushered in the spring. When he heard one in the distance—according to Benoni, it was always the same one—spring was coming. When the birds appeared in the orchard in numbers, it was well on the way. When the Ol' Settler and his wife began to carry into the old original bird house the sticks and straws that always seemed necessary to repair the nest, or build it over, spring had come. The almanac might place the date differently; the snow might all go away before, or come "three feet at a stretch" afterward; Benoni knew when spring had arrived. It was his first belief that the same Ol' Settler had occupied that first box each of the thirty years it had been there, and that it was his descendants that peopled the other bird houses whose numbers increased yearly in the orchard. Of course it was. Benoni could tell the Ol' Settler's voice as far as he could hear it. As to the continuous identity of the Ol' Settler's wife, Benoni was noncommittal. He was a bachelor, and uncertain of the ways of women.

As Benoni stood there, a man came out of the house below. He was a young man, some thirty-odd, and he walked briskly through the new-fallen snow. His walk stamped him as a brisk young man, and a man of decision, too. His hair was black; so also was his mustache.

"Morning, Uncle Ben!"

"Mornin', Johnny. Spring's a-comin', Johny. I've hearn the Ol' Settler."

The man in the road laughed pleasantly. "A storm's coming, too. It'll snow again tonight."

"Let 'er storm. Spring 'll soon be here."

A little way up the road—it had no claim to the term of street—a young woman approached. As the man passed on and neared her, she turned as if to cross the road. But the man forestalled her. Plunging into the new-fallen snow, he gained the opposite footpath that passed for a sidewalk, stamped the snow from his trouser-legs, and went on without looking backward or sidewise. The woman turned back into the path and came on.

"Good morning, Uncle Ben!"

"Mornin', Em'ly. Spring's a-comin'. The Ol' Settler's here."

The woman smiled. She seemed hardly more than a girl, a girl of few-and-twenty.

"Look out for storms," she called. "Your Ol' Settler always brings one."

"A clearin' storm," prophesied Uncle Ben. "Spring 'll soon be here."

"Folks is funny," he mused. "Folks is sure funny. I'll bet they ain't spoke in five years. An' before that—before that— I had the spoons all bought—silver spoons with an 'F' on 'em like the man said, though it did seem like a 'B' would be more sensible. I've got 'em yet. Thirty years ago, it was, I put that box in the orchard. Nary a bluebird came here afore. The Ol' Settler an' his wife, they come that year, an' every year since. An' now the orchard's full o' birds. I wonder if birds ever have tiffs an' tantrums? S'posin', thirty years ago, the Ol' Settler an' she—that's his wife— Jus' s'posin'—"

The clouds rolled up in the evening. The storm endured for a night, and then passed. In the thawing light of the morning the bluebirds sang in the orchard.

"Back again, Ol' Settler. Well, you ain't wasted any time. The box is there, Ol' Settler, like it's been for thirty year. I've put a lot more boxes in the orchard, same's I allus do. Tell the children, Ol' Settler."

The evening was a summer evening. In the early dusk Benoni sat in the doorway, watching the turbid streamlets that carried yesterday's sullied snow along the roadside. John Britton he could see in the window of his house, some rods down the road. Away beyond in the dusk a woman's figure approached. Benoni's eyes had searched for bluebirds for many years. Though old, they were wondrous keen.

"Em'ly—Em'ly Fearn!"

Benoni rose rheumatically and got a ladder from the shed. He slopped clumsily across the road, and placed the ladder against the tree trunk that held the Ol' Settler's bird house. He climbed the ladder slowly and busied himself about the lichen-covered box.

Emily Fearn walked thoughtfully up the roadside, beside the current of what should have been a side-path. A hoarse yell arrested her. Glancing up, she added to it a full-voiced scream, whose ending was suddenly drowned in a tremendous splash.

Half way across the road, old Benoni opened his eyes. He was being carried, swiftly. Strong arms felt good. Someone walked beside.

"That snow was harder'n I'd thought," murmured Benoni, half-consciously, "an' awful wet."

"What?" Two voices spoke that rarely were heard together.

"Huh-uh?" Benoni's wits came back. "My goodness! My ankle hurts!"

They helped him into the darkening house, and John Britton removed his wet clothes and got him into bed while Emily heated water on the kitchen stove.

"You stay with me, Em'ly, while John goes for the doctor. I guess mebbe I'm killed."

"Nonsense, Uncle Ben. We—I won't let you die. Oh, your poor, mussed-up pillow!"

She hovered over him, doing the many little things which only a woman's hands can do for a sick or injured man. Benoni smiled with great content.

"D'ye know, Em'ly, nobody's done that sort of thing f'r me f'r forty years—since mother died. There was one that might have. But I was a fool, and awful, stubborn fool. I think now she'd 'a' forgive me—if I'd asked her. She would, if she'd knowed what it's meant to me, through all the years. But I wouldn't bend. Forty years—it ain't nice, Em'ly, for a man to grow old alone, with nothin' but thoughts an' thoughts o' what might 'a' been, with no human thing to care for ye an' keep ye human. I might 'a' been killed a hundred times, I guess, an' nobody'd cared. But I ain't kicked much. I've had the Ol' Settler. He's raised me a fam'ly—only birds, o' course, but they've helped some."

The girl had turned to the window, and did not look back as the old man's voice trailed off.

When the doctor had pronounced Benoni sound save for a twisted ankle, Emily slipped silently away. But John remained for a space.

"What ever made you climb that tree, at such a time of night, Uncle Benoni?"

Benoni smiled faintly, and his eyes roved.

"Oh, there was just a nest that needed fixin'. You wouldn't think, John, how much them birds have been to me. They're all the fam'ly I've got, an' I'm an old man—an' old, lone man, John, with nothin' but years o' wasted life, with nobody to carry my name, nor my work when I'm done with it. The Ol' Settler, he's had his own, an' he's worked for 'em an' fed 'em an' fought for 'em an' protected 'em. He's filled the orchard with song, an' that song o' his 'll go forever, I suppose. . . . Good night, John. You might look in in the mornin'."

The next morning, rather early, Benoni's breakfast came on a tray—a silver tray with white napkin and dainty china. Benoni grinned feebly.

"I'm obleeged," he said. "I guess you'd been put to it to find a clean dish in my house."

"You poor Uncle Ben! I'm going right out and wash them all for you. Call me if you want anything."

The door closed behind her. Presently another opened, the door toward the road.

"Hello, Uncle Ben!"

The rattling in the kitchen hushed suddenly. Benoni trembled. The kitchen door key was safe under his pillow, but after John had entered the bedroom she might escape through the other.

"Anything you want? Anything I can get for you?" asked John, as he entered.

Benoni crooked his forefinger.

"John!" he whispered hoarsely. "They's somethin' in the kitchen I wish you'd get. You'll know it when you see it. Wait a minute—wait, I say! It ain't anythin' for me. It's for you—somethin' you've wanted a long time. Hurry up, John!"

The door to the kitchen opened and closed. There was silence out there for a space. Then faint sounds came.

"Emily, I've been a fool—an' awful fool. Can you forgive me? I've always wanted you—only you."

The words came very faintly, but Benoni had harked to the distant mating call of the Ol' Settler for many years, and his ears were wondrous keen.

"John, there's nothing to forgive, unless you forgive me. Will you, John?"

With a blissful smile Benoni sank back upon the pillow and thrust a stubby finger in each ear. Presently the outer door opened. Half-rising, he saw them walking down the roadside, hand in hand, unashamed, in the broad daylight. Above and beyond, in a tree where a ladder had lately stood, perched a bright bluebird, with a straw in his beak. As Benoni looked, his mate, in soberer garb, reached from the old gray box and took the straw.

"Spring's come," said Benoni Kemp.

Had Him Anchored

"Were you afraid he would be carried away by his eloquence while proposing?"

"There was little danger of that. I happened to be sitting on his lap."

Subscript To The Chestertown Transcript $1.50

MILLINGTON

Millington High School observed Washington's Birth-day by using the following program on Monday afternoon of last week,—Song "America; "Like Washington,"—by three boys of second grade; Washington and his Hatchet" by Frank Barnhart; a dialogue, "Like Washington," by A. Price, Jr., and Woodward Howze; "Characteristics of Washington," by George Duling; Exercises by three girls of 6th and 7th grades; "February Heroes," by three boys of 7th grade; song, "Many Flags in Many Lands;" "Like Washington," by Mildred Neal; "Washington's Birthday," by Emma Jones; song, "Star Spangled Banner."

Mr. J .R. Price, of Warwick, attended the funeral of Mr. R. W. Moffett last Sunday.

Mrs. Eva Bartlett and little son, Roland, and Mr. Carroll Burris, of Wilmington, spent the past week-end with their parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Burris.

Miss Helen Numbers spent a few days last week with friends in Galena.

The regular monthly meeting of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of Asbury M. E. Church will be held on next Tuesday evening at the home of Mrs. J. P. Ahern.

Mrs. T. C. Meginnes, Mrs. Kate Tonkin and son, George, Miss Willie Moffett, Miss Florence Harding, Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Tonkin and little son, Henry Jr., of Wilmington, and Mrs. Lon Gardner and son, Dr. Frank Gardner, of Smyrna, Del. were guests last Sunday of Mrs. L. A. Hurtt.

Mr. Victor Stevens had his automobile badly damaged on Monday of last week, when he was struck by a Ford truck driven by Mr. Herman Wood, of Delaware, on the curve on the stone road near Galena. Both cars were damaged but fortunately no one was hurt. The hedge on the road-side at this point makes it a very dangerous curve and it should be removed for the safety of the traveling public. Mr. Wood has admitted his responsibility for the accident and paid the costs of repairs.

Mrs. Candidi Komorowski and daughter, Miss Wanda, have returned to their home at Amityville, L. I. after spending a week with Mrs. Frank Slez, near town.

Dr. Lee Pennington, of Havre De-Grace, Md., visited his brother, Mr. Liston Pennington, last week.

Mr. E. T. Stevens and Mr. and Mrs. Spencer Stevens were guests last Sunday of the latter's parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Brice, near Chestertown.

Mrs. Morgan King, of Middletown, Del., spent the week-end with her sister-in-law, Mrs. James Moore.

Mrs. Addie Starkey returned home last Monday, after spending a few weeks with relatives in Wilmington.

Mrs. Mollie Boggs, of Clayton, Del., is the guest of her daughter, Mrs. Henry Stevens, near town.

Mr. Charles Church attended the funeral of his mother, Mrs. Belle Church, at Rochester, N. Y., on Friday of last week.

Mrs. L. A. Hurtt returned home on Wednesday of last week, after spending two weeks with relatives in Wilmington.

Mr. R. W. Moffett, a prominent citizen of Millington, died at his home on West Cypress St. on Thursday morning of last week, after a short illness, aged 63 years. The funeral took place on Sunday at 2 p. m. from TrinityM. E. Church, South,of which he had been a member a greater part of his life and attended regularly whenever his health permitted. Rev. H. A. Wilson officiated and was assisted by Rev. S. F. Newton, pastor of Asbury M. E. Church, and Rev. J. L. Saunders, rector of Holy Cross chapel. Mr. J. A. Tobin was the undertaker and interment in Millington Cemetery.

The funeral was attended by a large number of friends also a large body of Masons, most of whom were from Chestertown and Queen Anne's County who had charge of the burial services. The Male Quartette from Chestertown. Messrs W. W. Chapman, T. D. Bowers, A. L. Sparks and J. Hydie Thompson rendered several pretty selections. The deceased leaves a widow, who before her marriage was Miss Ethel Crouch.

—The thermometer dropped to eight degrees above zero Monday night. The cold spell killed thousands of tomato plants for Mr. E. R. Anthony and done other damage to hotbed plants.

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We put in our FIRST HATCH MONDAY, JANUARY 12, for both Custom Hatching and Day-Old Chicks. A hatch every week from January 12 until fall.

CHIX OF HIGHEST QUALITY

All our chix will be of the very highest quality, from free-range, purebred stock. We will have the following varieties: S. C. White Leghorns, Brown Leghorns, Barred, Buff and White Rocks, White Wyandottes, S. C. Rhode Island Reds, Blacks Giants (higher).

(All the above breeds for $15 per 100, excepts Giants). 100% delivery guaranteed,

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We spare no pains to give our customers who bring Custom Hatching GOOD HATCHES and GOOD CHICKS. Have your Custom Hatching Done Early.

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Fast Color Dress Ginghams	18c "
Hill Muslin	19c "
Heavy Outing Flannel, solid colors	22c "
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Shirting Percale, fast colors	22c "

A large lot of Ladies' Shoes at one-half price to clean out stock.
Ball Band and Goodrich Boots, in Short, Three-quarter and Hip. Rubber Shoes for the whole family.
Men's and Boys' Heavy Pants and Coats, made by Sweet-Orr & Co.
Floor Coverings in Congoleum, Matting and Woolen Fibre Rugs.
Cook Stoves, Ranges and Airtight Heaters in stock.

GROCERY SPECIALS

Seeded and Seedless Raisins	12½c lb.
Currants	22c "
Citron	55c "
Mixed Nuts	20c "
Six Velvet Soap	25c
Six P&G White Naptha Soap	30c

Will take Chickens and Eggs in trade.

T. H. M. BRAMBLE, Fairlee, Md.

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