

PLEASANT HOURS

PAPER FOR OUR YOUNG FOLK.

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FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

BY ELIZABETH PRESTON ALLAN.

"HOLIDAY! bully for Mr. Spence! Let's give the school yell!" and instantly from twenty-two lusty throats went up the hoop—"Rickety, rickety, ray-ray-ray! Hurrah for the boys of the S. B. A.!"

Well might they shout, for holiday was dealt out sparingly to the pupils of Seaside Boys' Academy, and nothing but a sudden and imperative turn of affairs could have taken Mr. Spence away in the middle of the week.

Perhaps if our boys had known the painful errand on which his absent feet were bent, the merry yell would not have rent the air; but it was better so: soon enough the burdens and cares of life would fall upon those young shoulders. Meantime God gives them this unlettered time; let them enjoy it.

"Rickety, rickety, ray-ray-ray! Hurrah for the boys of the S. B. A.!"

But a holiday burns a hole in a boy's pocket until it is invested, and these gay bondholders began at once to take stock of one another's plans.

"I say, Bert, let's go fishing," cried one. But Bert Logan declined with the promptness of a fellow whose mind is made up.

"Bert, what do you say to throwing in and hiring a sailboat for the day?" proposed another.

"I don't care to sail to-day," said Bert positively.

But he was still in demand.

"I'll tell you what, Bert: there's a circus tent about six miles up shore; I say, let's light out for her." To; he would not go to the circus, either.

"Well, what in creation are you going to be up to?" his comrades asked, out of patience at last.

Bert was not anxious to be communicative; but he need not have feared interference; his answer was received with derision.

"That old piece of chipped beef? Well, you must be hard up for company! Why, if we've heard old Hiram's sea-yarns once, we've heard 'em a thousand times. Don't be such a softy, Bert."

But they might as well have whistled down the wind: Bert was one of those people for whom the sea's salt breath has a spell. Old Hiram's smoky little hut, roughly shaped from a stranded ship's cabin, was his "glory hole"; the old sealer's tales made the chills creep down his backbone delightfully; and what if he had heard them before? To-day, however, Bert was to hear a new story, and one that he never forgot.

"Ahoy there now, mate!" cried the sailor; "have you cut the ropes to-day?"

"We've got holiday," answered Bert; "Mr. Spence has gone off somewhere."

"Gone, has he?" Hiram laid his hands, one holding a sailor's dirk-like knife, the other a half-shaped little brig, upon his two broad knees, and looked keenly at the boy: "Gone? ah, poor lad!"

"Do you know where he has gone, uncle Hiram?" asked Bert in surprise. "I didn't think anybody knew; but a certain gentlemanly instinct kept back the question that was on his lips."

"Most likely I know, most likely," said the sailor with a heavy sigh. "I'm well acquainted with the teacher: him and me has many long talks, an' though he's got a sight more book-learnin' than me, there's one book 'at I knows the best, havin'

thumbed it a sight longer. We call it the book of 'Xperience, my boy." Hiram sighed again.

Bert was entirely taken by surprise, and his respectful silence drew the old man on to talk, more than any questioning could have done.

"I let fall that I know of a lad cured of drink once, and that set him to talkin' to me of his trouble—his younger brother, you know. 'I've done everything,' says he,

The sailor gave an unmistakable start. "Never you mind," he said gruffly; "you steer off."

Bert's face flushed at the words, still more at the tone, and he was about to leave the cabin door, when the old man of the sea called out to him:

"There now, comrade, don't take me uncivilly. I might as well spin yo that yarn; it may set up a lighthouse for ye on the worst rocks that lie in any man's way."

Scott. He was an old friend of the *Nelly Bly's* captain; him and him had knocked knees together on the same bench, at the little old field school, away back in the hills. More n that, there was some'at atween them 'at wasn't just open to sight, some grave, I always heard, that hold a young thing 'at was sister to this stranger and sweetheart to the captain.

"Anyways, they was close friends, and the countryman had come long dusty miles to see Captain Scott. Not for fun neither; he was in sore trouble, was this man, his oldest son, a well-up fellow of nineteen, had taken to drink early, and was—ah!"—the sailor drew a long hard breath, as if moved by his own story—"he was nothing more or less, lad, than a hog—a hog in the mire."

"He wanted to get out of that hog-mire; oh, yes, he wanted it the worst kind, but what good did that do him? Maybe yo've seen a poor dog chained to a stake, tryin' to get away; the chain's well forged, mind you, and the stake's deep set. Well, that's the game; this young one gathered himself up, time and time again, and jumped away from his hard master appetite. What was the use? He couldn't break one single link of that cruel chain; it held him tight. He lost hope; he quit trying, he gave himself up for lost."

The spring air blew fair and fresh over the wide water, lifting the sailor's thin locks from his ears; yet the sweat stood in beads on his forehead, and the lines of his rugged face looked drawn. He drew out his gay bannanna and wiped his forehead silently. Bert began to fear that he had lost the thread of his story.

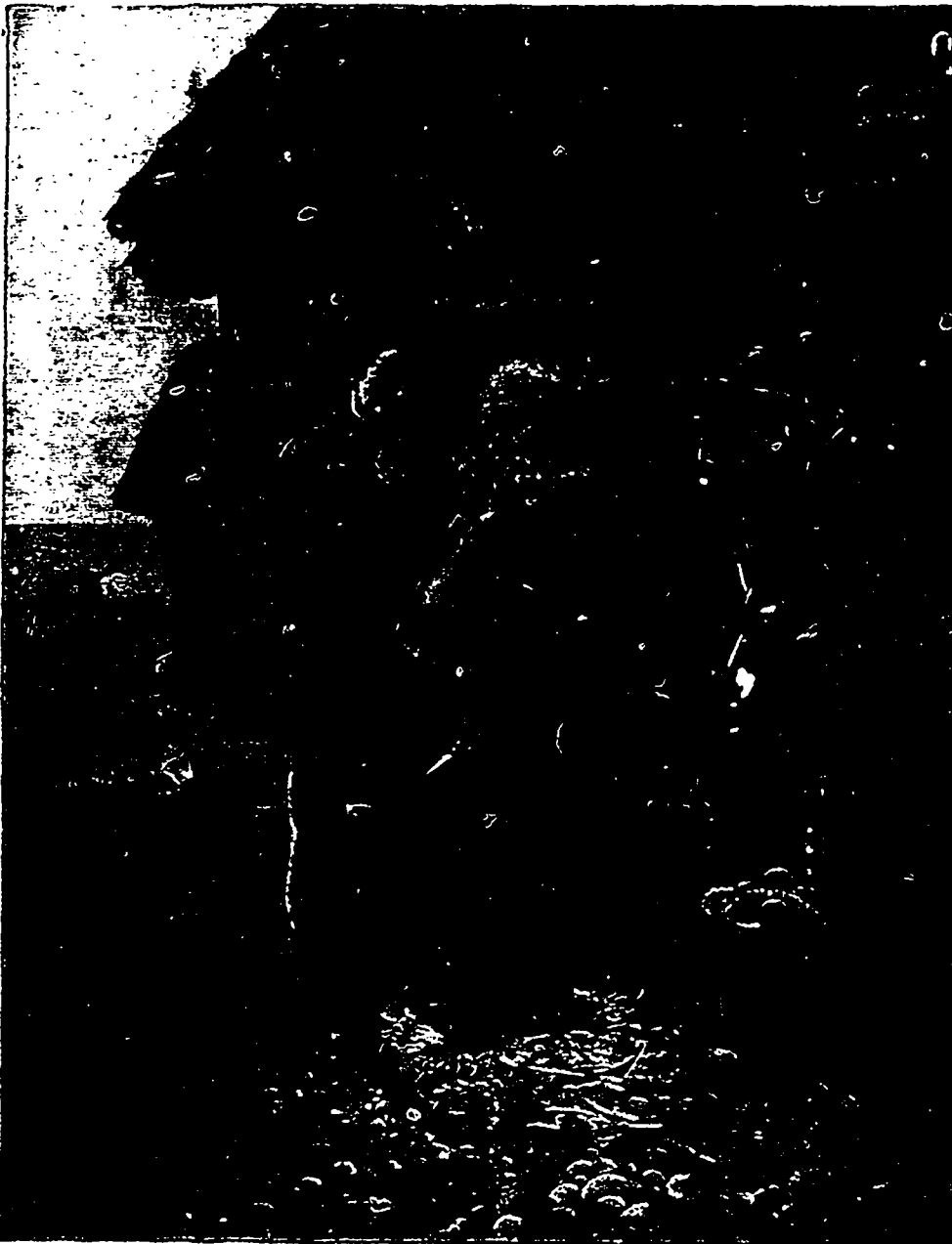
"And what did the man want to see Captain Scott for?" he ventured.

"He wanted him to take this poor slave out to sea; to keep him away from the sight and smell and taste of the fire-water, and give him a chance to shake off his bitter shackles. Captain Scott was slow to agree; he knew what he was takin' on his hands—a soft, useless land-lubber at best; a lunatic, presently; and mayhap a corpse before he was through."

"But the father made his point. I guess that grave in the hills won the day, and the young man shipped in the *Nelly Bly*. Not for the Arctic at once, you see, lad, but cruising about a bit till spring was on the way again."

"And contrary to Captain Scott's lookin', the fellow (we'll call Tom) held up his head wonderful while the ship was waitin' for spring orders: it seemed like he had taken on some fresh hope himself and plucked up a little pride. But it was bound to come: captain wa'n't fooled, he was 'spectin' it. About the time the *Nelly Bly* hove in sight of the ice-packs the fit was on the poor devil."

"You don't know what I mean? No, laddie; thank God every night, by your bedside, that you don't; and pray him every morning when the sun lights up your world, that he'll never, never let ye know what it is to be tormented by a ragin' thirst and longin' that tears at your vitals, till you don't care what hell you sink into, jes' so you can get out of that one; that makes you a coward, a sneak, a driveler, a thief, and likely enough a murderer. Mind you now, I ain't talkin' poetry; no more I ain't paintin' fancy pictures; I'm jes' showin' you a sort o'



THE ANCIENT MARINER.

"and sometimes I think I've got him cured, and then it breaks out again." "You've got to keep on till seventy times seven, Mr. Jim," says I, "and then begin the count over from the first, sometimes. You've got into the biggest fight on God Almighty's battlefield, but it ain't fer you to give up, while you got him to back you."

Hiram sighed again, and went back to making delicate shavings from the side of his little craft. Bert's horizon was suddenly widened, taking in for the first time the cruel vision of the drink-devil. He wanted to hear more, but launched his question at a courteous distance from Mr. Spence's private affairs.

"How was that fellow cured that you know of, Uncle Hiram!"

The sailor was evidently clearing his throat for the story, and Bert was at his side again with a bound.

"Somewhere round forty year ago," began the narrator with an artistic sense of perspective, "the *Nelly Bly* lay in port, discharging cargo, sealskins and blubber. She was a heavy-built thing, as a Greenlander's got to be, and by the cuts and scars on her water-edge, you'd 'a' told she'd many a fight with icypacks. Her crew, from captain to cook, looked as brown and shaggy as bears, yet a kindly set o' fellows too."

"Well, about the time she was a clean ship, emptied, ye understand, lad, and ready to spread her wings again, there came to the quay a man to see captain