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Dramatic Publishing

HALE THE HERO!

A Play in One Act
by
RICHARD VETERE



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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For Mary Meagher, Matthew Penn, and Gayle Sergel

HALE THE HERO!

SCENE ONE

SETTING: *British General Howe's headquarters at James Beekman's mansion, Mount Pleasant, as the high bank of the East River at Turtle Bay was called. The house is situated at Fifty-first Street and First Avenue.*

AT RISE: *GENERAL HOWE, PROVOST MARSHAL CUNNINGHAM and SERGEANT JOHN GRAHAM are standing in the greenhouse which is behind the mansion. The room is filled with a warm light.*

HOWE. It's a pleasant greenhouse. I like to walk through it in the morning for relaxation. I have one just like it back home in Manchester. Mine is a bit larger, of course. *(Pause.)* So, you found him where?

CUNNINGHAM. We found him at the Cedars. He had spent the night at the widow Chichster's tavern.

HOWE *(holding paper)*. And you found this paper on his person?

CUNNINGHAM. In the sole of his shoe. I believe those numbers scribbled down there represent the amount of troops at our garrison.

HOWE *(to SERGEANT)*. Bring in the prisoner. *(The SERGEANT exits.)* Provost Marshal, do you always drink so early in the day, or is what I smell just residue from the night before?

CUNNINGHAM. I would like to bring to the general's attention that I am employed directly by the British ministry and I am independent of your authority. Though I do not need to answer you, I drink when it pleases me and it pleases me all the time.

HOWE. You may be independent of my authority but I would like to make it clear to you that I find you an embarrassment to a British uniform and I am going to inform the British ministry, your employer, of your behavior here in New York.

(The SERGEANT enters with NATHAN HALE. HALE looks tired and his hands are tied.)

HOWE. Untie his hands. *(The SERGEANT does so.)*

HALE *(sneezing)*. Sorry. Caught a cold.

HOWE. You are Nathan Hale, captain under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knowlton of the Connecticut Rangers?

HALE. The same.

HOWE. The Rangers are on Long Island. What were you doing at the widow Chichester's out of uniform last night?

HALE. Are you sure you want to know, sir?

HOWE. Of course I want to know.

CUNNINGHAM. We know what you were doing there, Hale. We found that paper on your person.

HALE *(sees paper)*. What about the paper, sir?

HOWE. It has writing on it. What do these numbers mean?

HALE. Sorry, General, the Provost Marshal asked me that before and I have no idea what those numbers mean.

HOWE. This paper was in your shoe.

HALE. I found that paper at the tavern last night on the bar. I put it in my shoe with some other pieces of paper I found there. The others must have fallen out.

HOWE. Why did you put the papers in your shoe?

HALE (*lifts his shoes*). To keep out the rain. I have two round holes in both shoes.

CUNNINGHAM. There's as much truth to that as milk in a witch's tit!

HOWE. Cunningham, if you are going to be present, I would prefer you keep your mouth closed. (*TO HALE*) You better give me the truth, son. Why were you at the tavern?

HALE. I was going home.

HOWE. Going home?

HALE. Home. Back to New London! General, do you know what it is like on the other side? We have no money, no food, no clothes. I've had this damn cold for four weeks! (*Sneezes.*) The other night I was sitting there in camp starving to death and it occurred to me that General Washington isn't going to win any goddamn war against the British troops. General, I am an educated man. I know that when you lay all the cards on the table, every political idea is a variation of another just like it. And I am not looking to die, or lose a leg like my friend Steven Smith at Bunker Hill, just because Mister Ben Franklin wants to get into the history books! I'll serve King or Parliament! You know what I mean, General? It's not like you're French! I mean, the snotty French are talking of fighting on Washington's side. Can you believe it? We don't even speak the same language and they smell peculiar. I swear this to my King and Country that it won't matter who wins this war in the end. Our destinies will always be intertwined. Now, if we can just clear up this misunderstanding about the paper I would very much like to get on my way back to New London before the Rangers come looking for me. I have a day's start still.

CUNNINGHAM. Repulsive.

HOWE (to SERGEANT). Get him a pair of shoes.

(The SERGEANT exits.)

HALE. Thank you.

CUNNINGHAM. You don't mean to say that you are going to allow this coward...this spy, free?

HOWE. Well, which is he? He is either a very clever spy or a very honest coward.

HALE. I am neither. I am just a very hungry ex-Ranger.

HOWE. Provost Marshal, I think I would prefer the Connecticut Rangers deal with the matter. We are winning the war. The last thing we need right now is an issue.

(The SERGEANT returns with shoes.)

SERGEANT. Sir!

HOWE. What is it?

SERGEANT. Smoke and fire has been seen coming from east of Broadway!

HOWE (to HALE). This is the Whigs doing, isn't it? They have no interest in seeing my army comfortable for the winter.

HALE. It could be Whigs burning down the city or it could also be British soldiers pretending to be Whigs just to get the people in the city to side with the British. That is what is so ugly about war. Nearly nothing makes much sense.

HOWE. The prisoner is to remain here in the greenhouse until I decide what to do with him.

(HOWE and the SERGEANT exit. HALE smiles at CUNNINGHAM who takes a rope and ties HOWE's hands behind his back.)

CUNNINGHAM. A mama's boy, aren't we? It always pleases me to hang a mama's boy.

HALE. Can I at least get something to eat?

CUNNINGHAM. No sense feeding a dead man.

HALE. What did you do before the war, Provost Marshal?

CUNNINGHAM. Fought in another one.

HALE. Quiet right. Somehow I don't see you around children. I bet you're the sort of man who visits the Tower of London on holiday, nostalgic for all those wonderful executions you missed!

CUNNINGHAM. Too bad there isn't time to get your mother here. I would love to watch the look on her face as she watches your eyes bulge.

HALE. Do you hide your fear with cruelty as I try to hide mine with talk? (CUNNINGHAM slaps HALE across the face.) I suppose you didn't notice that my hands were tied.

CUNNINGHAM. And what if they weren't?

HALE. I would beat you to a pulp. I was a top athlete at Yale.

CUNNINGHAM. Ha!

HALE. Untie them, then. (CUNNINGHAM smacks HALE across the face again.) How did you get this job? By poisoning the man who had it before you? (CUNNINGHAM hits HALE in the stomach. HALE steps back then falls to one knee.)

(GENERAL HOWE enters with the SERGEANT.)

HOWE. Major Cunningham!

CUNNINGHAM. The prisoner was making an attempt to escape.

HOWE (*to SERGEANT*). Help him to his feet. (*The SERGEANT does so.*) Provost Marshal, there is no reason for you to be here. The prisoner is still under my jurisdiction.

CUNNINGHAM. You will hand him over to me eventually, General. It is only a matter of time. (*CUNNINGHAM exits giving HALE a look.*)

HALE. Not a very cheery fellow.

HOWE. Your rebels have set fire to a tavern on the wharf near Whitehall Slip. Five hundred buildings are aflame.

HALE. I had nothing to do with your fire.

HOWE. That may be so. But you have to take the responsibility for it. (*To the SERGEANT*) Feed him. (*GENERAL HOWE exits leaving the SERGEANT alone with HALE. The SERGEANT takes out food prepared for HALE. He hands it to him.*)

HALE. Thank you, kindly.

SERGEANT. Doing my job.

HALE. What is your name? If I can ask.

SERGEANT. The name is John. John Graham.

HALE. Good name for a soldier, John Graham. Is this your first campaign?

SERGEANT. Yes.

HALE. Mine, too. Bloody awful. Since this damn war started I have been shot at, smacked around, caught the damndest cold, killed a poor bloke, and now the Provost Marshal wants to hang me. Who the hell said there was any glory in this? I have come to the conclusion that when two people can't agree to something they should just drop the matter entirely. If the king wants to have his colonies pay their taxes and they don't, the hell with the colonies, I would say, if I were king. They'll come around to a different point of view. In time, everything comes around. War is just a sign of impatience.

SERGEANT. You are a strange one.

HALE. That's what I mean about war! Look, John Graham, because of this stinking mess you have to spend time with the likes of me! Why should you be submitted to that? War! That's why!

SERGEANT. You said you killed a man?

HALE. Yes, I did say that. I had the misfortune of firing my musket at a British soldier who was about to fire his musket at me. I did a neat job of it, so don't fret. He fell quickly. The bullet went right through his heart. It was during the battle of Long Island, so that's what they are calling it. But I didn't see any battle and I didn't see Long Island. All I saw was a lot of scared young men shouting at each other to stop themselves from running in the opposite direction.

SERGEANT. I haven't killed a rebel, yet.

HALE. Well, take your time. There's plenty around. Just be careful one doesn't kill you first. You seem a nice soldier. The rebels are pretty angry at the king.

SERGEANT (*going to leave*). I am aware of that, thank you.

HALE. One thing, John. Would you mind answering a question for me? Does anyone know I am here? I mean to say, that since this morning, I have no idea if anyone knows I'm being held here.

SERGEANT. I believe it is the talk of the day, actually.

HALE. Is that true?

SERGEANT. They say you are a great spy and you were sent to the city by Washington himself.

HALE. Not really? Oh, drat. That does sound awful. How can the general release me if the people in the city think I am a spy. I wish someone would tell them I am not a spy! I am a reasonable man on his way home!

SERGEANT. It is war. What can you expect from them?

HALE. You see! There goes that damn war again! Well, thank you, John. You have been most kind. (*The SERGEANT wipes the blood from HALE's lips.*) Thanks. (*The SERGEANT exits as HALE continues to eat. He looks around at the plants, gets up and touches one or two.*) And how are you today? Good. Me? Well, I am in a predicament. (*Checks one particular plant.*) There, now you're standing up straight. (*Looks.*) Yes.

(*The SERGEANT enters.*)

SERGEANT. You have a visitor.

HALE. I do? Show him in.

SERGEANT. It is a she.

HALE. A she?

(*ALICE ADAMS enters. She is carrying a pie.*)

HALE. Hello.

ALICE. How are you feeling?

HALE. A stuffed up nose. But it seems to feel better in the greenhouse here.

ALICE. Thank you, Sergeant. (*The SERGEANT smiles at HALE and exits.*) I brought you a pie.

HALE. How wonderful! I haven't eaten this well since the damn war broke out.

ALICE. How are they treating you?

HALE. Outside of an occasional beating, I'm actually doing fine.

ALICE. Damn British.

HALE (*cuts pie*). Well, what can you expect? They are stuck on that wretched little island.

ALICE. What is this place?

HALE. A greenhouse. Meet Mister Plant. Mister Plant, this is...? What is your name, may I ask?

ALICE. Alice Adams.

HALE. Is that so? And who are you?

ALICE. I am your fiancée.

HALE. How delightful. *(ALICE runs to the door and checks to see if she can speak freely, HALE continues to munch on the pie and check ALICE out.)* Pretty. Certainly not a farm girl. I have good taste.

ALICE. Keep your mouth shut and sit down.

HALE. Sit down, shut up, everybody is telling me what to do! You sound just like Cunningham! I am tired of people telling me what to do! Now, Alice Adams, or whoever you are, will you please tell me what you are doing here and what this masquerade has to do with me?

ALICE. Hush up! They will hear!

HALE. I don't care what they hear! I don't have anything to hide from them!

ALICE. General Washington sent me. I am with the Rebels.

HALE. Do they know this?

ALICE. Of course not. I told them I was your fiancée.

HALE. So now, Washington has women fighting for him? What next? Little cats and dogs? Will household pets line the streets with muskets to kill the bad British soldiers? Women, children, young boys! Do we have to kill everybody to be happy?

ALICE. Are you Nathan Hale of the Rangers?

HALE. The same.

ALICE. The first to stand up at the New London courthouse to volunteer to fight!

HALE. How I wish that wasn't true. Were you there?

ALICE. No. But I heard all about you. You are a brave man.

HALE. I was a brave man. I've since come to my senses.

ALICE. What are you saying?

HALE. I am saying that I am now a proud coward. I was running back home when the British caught me.

ALICE. I don't believe you.

HALE. I am sorry if you went to any great trouble coming here to see me. I don't mean to be a disappointment but you can't make everyone happy. Thank you so much for the pie. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll go back to enjoying the greenhouse where I am a content, happy prisoner. I recently have found that I dislike discussion about politics and bravery.

ALICE. No, you can't send me away.

HALE. I am not interested in what you have to say.

ALICE. They are going to hang you.

HALE. Who?

ALICE. The British. We set fire to the city. They will blame you.

HALE. Oh, terrific! That's just dandy. You burn the city and now I have to hang for it? Whose idea was that? Washington's?

ALICE. Why are you so difficult?

HALE. Difficult? I am not fond of being tossed about like some puppet, that's why! Look, go back to Washington and tell him I quit.

ALICE. You can't quit.

HALE. Why not?

ALICE. You can't quit a war. Nobody won yet.

HALE. Good reason. I have to hang around and shoot some more people just because nobody won the war yet? Look, I am not interested in who wins. I am young, handsome, intelligent and, with some luck, I may make a good living some day. I'll do well no matter who wins the war.
(Pause.) What's your name again?