

BREATHES THERE A MAN

A Dramatic Monolog

by
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A character study of Edward Everett Hale's Philip Nolan (The Man Without a Country).

The year was 1863. There had just been erected a tombstone on a piece of earth, not many feet wide nor many feet deep, and oddly enough, there was not even a body resting within. It was a hollow grave and men tossed the last shovel of earth on the grave with the words: "It is over for him, and what a life he had."

Though I have lived this story over and over again and have beaten my brain back to where I now begin, I must tell my story once more--once more in the frantic plea, that those who hear, will listen and prevent losing what is dearest in their lives.

The United States Army was my life. My rank was that of a Lieutenant. My daring and wisdom had given me a fine position in the armed forces of my country. I was favored by my men and I had all I could hope for. Nevertheless, being young and unknowing, I took heed to the words of a traitor. Drunk by his dreams, I sided in with him, only to find myself convicted of treason.

I stood alone in a courtroom filled with a jury of men who would give, and had given, their all for their country. They were veterans who knew of life and death and, above all, love of country.

Before me, on the bench, sat Judge Morgan, his face white with grief at a soldier so lax in his love.

I was young. I didn't know, I didn't understand.

They came back in, that jury. They were a sickly yellow, and their lips were tightly drawn and blue with pain. Some looked at me with a hollowness, some studied the floor, and others, wiped silent tears from tearless eyes.

Old Judge Morgan's hands trembled, but in a staid voice, powerful in command, he read: "Prisoner, hear the sentence of the court! The court decides, subject to the approval of the President, that you never hear the name of the United States again."

I laughed.--I have never laughed again. The laughter went out of my heart in that instant and never came back.

but the months grew more monotonous and the hours longer. When changing ships, I searched the horizon for just a sign of my country, but I never had the luck.

The remaining years grew longer and longer, and every hour was a torturous reminder of what I had done. If only--if only I could turn the hands of the clock back, back before my crime. If only, but instead I must ride those hands of time forward, forever--forever.

I began to search for little pieces of news from America, but the newspapers were carefully read and references of home were cut away. I would read half a selection, the other half, with an advertisement of an article from home on the opposite side, was cut out.

Oh, I had more than some prisoners perhaps. I had the right to wear the United States uniform; but my buttons were plain. "Plain Buttons" they called me. It was a joke, then it was torture, then it was more than a nightmare, a little mark of an American eagle was nothing to trouble a man; but without freedom to wear it, it reminded me again of my fate.

I knew what the men were saying or of what they thought when they stopped talking while I came by. I knew how they longed to relate stories of the United States and of home, of the tomorrows they would

spend on her shores. I knew they argued politics without me, but with me, they could only talk of things that did not concern our country.

A dance on board our ship once brought new hope to my starving mind. It was my fortune to meet a friend that I had had as a child, and the years intervening gave to me a beautiful young lady who was aboard ship.

We talked much and danced and my heart pounded within me. As I gathered my courage, I asked in a faltering voice, "And what do you hear of home?"

"Home, Mr. Nolan, home? I thought you never wanted to hear of home again!"

She left me alone on the dance floor. As I saw her going away from me, it was like the ship pulling away from the shore. It was as though she were America, and America's shores were leaving me as my boat brought me out to my living hell. I was an island in the midst of the sea of agony, and never more alone than now. "Home, Mr. Nolan, home"--"Oh God," I whimpered, "what have I done?"

My hair was grey when it should have been brown, my eyes were yellow and dull when they should have been white and sharp, and lines on my face were the rivulets of the many tears that fell from my crying eyes. I was old when I should have been young. I was alone when I might have had the world.

It was a listless day with nothing much to do, so to amuse ourselves, we often spent the time reading to one another. Many of us were on the deck, and many were listening as I began my section. The poem had been enjoyable up to now and I was eager to read my part.

The words leaped at me and, not knowing what was ahead, I kept on:

"Breathes there a man with soul so dead Who never to himself hath said:

"This is my own, my native land!"

Yes, my mind kept hammering, there breathes so dead a man. At last, I could stand it no longer. I flung the book into the salt spray and ran for my cabin. Yes, my soul was dead and so was I.

The cabin became my haven. I slept within it, I ate my meals within it. I was utterly beaten and defeated. When I again emerged on the deck, I was old--and my body and mind adhered to it.

I dragged my feet where once I had jumped from stern to stern. My back bent as though my load were too great to bear.

I studied often to drive the hundred thoughts of home out of my mind. I kept large books of science, I studied all the different insect lives I could. I did this subconsciously, I suppose, so I should not be able to think but only do and live and die.

I learned the language of all the countries, I read so much that I grew to love every word like a person. I studied, long into the night when I couldn't sleep. I prayed to God that death would come and spare me my long hours of loneliness. I prayed for America always, of her shores, golden in the morning sun, warm in the afternoon glow and radiantly alive with colors at sunset.

Once I recall the meeting of black men bound for home after being captured as slaves, and how they rejoiced to know they were being sent home. Oh God, why--again and again, that question--why?

The question screamed in my ear, the walls of my head echoed it. In maddened frenzy I caught a young man by the arm and spoke--my heart crying in tumult: "Youngster, let me show you what it is to be without a family, without a home and without a country. Never leave it, in body or in soul, love it, protect it, guard, and always my son, pray for it. Love it as you would your mother, keep her flag as high as the heavens. Oh my son! look to America as your home and love her as I do now."

Shortly after, God called me to a permanent home; and before I entered this eternal country--land, I was given the most beautiful hour of my life. Before me and around me, in my stateroom, were the things that I held dearest and what I had made.

The stars and stripes were around my bed, George Washington was painted on my wall with the American eagle clasping lightning rods in his claws, and yes, the map of my country I had painted. I had

tried patiently to draw in the lines where states were added. I knew there were thirty-four, I could figure out Michigan, Mississippi, and Indiana but I didn't know of the other twenty.

The young man I had once befriended, sat by my bed and I was filled with delight when he told me that there was Texas, California and Oregon and oh, she had grown and no one stopped her expansion.

He told of Presidents, and Fulton, of my own Kentucky. He drew in places on my map and I wept with joy.

When he was through, he read from my bible and I repeated after him, "For ourselves and our country, O gracious God, we thank Thee."

Death opened the gates of a heavenly kingdom and I walked inside to be forever free, no longer a subject of the courts, but in Heaven where there are no ships that ride on an endless sea; where all love and honor and devotion prevails; where one flag, the flag of heaven flies, and every man has his country.

On the tombstone near Fort Adams, my name is blurred with the ages, but those who come to read the inscription, mark well, for about my grave there is a cold reminder to those whose lives are filled with evil.

Oh, you who play the part of traitor, step closer and read between the lines. Read what is buried there, the grief, the loneliness, the torment of a wretched the man whose folly as a boy marked him a traitor; whose country would never welcome him again.

Oh you who speak against America and do nothing to build goodness in its place, stand by my tomb, read my story, and change your life before it is too late.

Love your country, speak of her, guard her and pray for her as you would your mother, then repeat to yourself:

"Breathes there a man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said:
'This is my own, my native land!'"

(WITHOUT A COUNTRY is another monolog by Hilda Guldseth in which Edward Everett Hale's great character speaks.)