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Sewell Collins, *The Conscienceless Objector*, 1916

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Script Source: Transcription

This script is a transcription from a manuscript which is part of their Lord Chamberlain's collection at the British Library. The script has been transcribed by a volunteer on the Great War Theatre project and we are grateful for the time and effort they have given to make this text available.



The Conscienceless Objector

A play in 1 act

By Sewell Collins (1916)

Scene: A tribunal. Seated at a large table C. are several odd-looking men. The Chairman presides at head of table. Papers, files, record books on table. There is a door at I, opening into room. Near this door stands sergeant Timmons. He is a huge, stolid and patriotic soldier. His duties here are as a sort of sergeant-at-arms.

As the curtain rises a man is being shown out the door by the sergeant who closes the door and returns smiling

CHAIRMAN: I think you had better go. what did he say, sergeant?

SERGT: I was just tellin' him, sir, that 'e was a man after my won heart; and 'e says 'e WASN'T - he is after a German's heart. And e'll GET one, too if I'M any judge. Did you notice the look in 'is eye? They could send a cove like 'em down a coal pit and 'e'd come up with a diamond bracelet.

CHAIR: Fet' in the next applicant.

SERGT: (Goes to door and calls) Next, please

ENTER, AN ORDINARY-LOOKING CITIZEN,
MCGEE. HE COMES TO TABLE AND STANDS

CHAIR: Your name?

MCGEE: McGee

CHAIR: Address

MCGEE 192 Honeywell road, Hampstead

CHAIR: Business?

McGee Not so good as it used to be

CHAIR: I mean your business address
McGee Oh - 796 Cheapside
CHAIR: What is your business?
MCGEE: Manufacturer of powder puffs
SERGT: (half to himself) Ah - in the munitions
CHAIR: You are asking exemption?
MCGEE: Yes sir, but not total. I merely want to be set back for three months
CHAIR: For what reason?
MCGEE: It will take that long for me to learn to sing 'Die Wacht am Rhine'
CHAIR: What has that got to do with your serving your king and country?
MCGEE: I would sing it in the trenches - and, on hearing my voice, every hun within earshot would fall dead in agony.
CHAIR: Request granted. next

THE SERGT SHOWS HIM OUT
DEFERENTIALLY. CALLS 'NEXT PLEASE'
HE TURNS BACK INTO ROOM

SERGT: THAT's the kind I like; the lad is not particular 'ow 'e kills 'em!

ENTER MR POTTERTON

CHAIR: Name
Potterton Peter Potterton
CHAIR: Application for exemption?
POTT: Yes, sir
CHAIR: On what grounds?
POTT: I have six children to support.
CHAIR: Boys or girls, -
POTT: Girls
CHAIR: Where are they?
POTT: Outside, sir

CHAIR: Bring them in

POTT: Yes, Sir - Come in children

ENTER SIX OR SEVEN PRETTY GIRLS

CHAIR: Are these the children you have to look after?

POTT: Yes sir.

COMMITTEE CONFERS

CHAIR: your request for exemption is refused.

POTT: But what about the kids?

1ST COMM: The country will look after the children.

CHAIR: Yes - and if the country doesn't the committee will - next. *[This line is marked with a question mark by the Examiner of Plays]*

EXIT POTTERTON AND GIRLS. ANOTHER APPLICANT ENTERS. A WINENED [SIC] UP LITTLE WORM OF A PERSON. NEATLY DRESSED, WITH A COLLAR MUCH TOO BIG FOR HIM AND HIS HAIR GUMMED WITH BRILLIANTINE. HE MINCES UP TO THE TABLE AND STANDS EXAMINING HIS NAILS WHICH HE POLISHES WITH A SILK HANDKERCHIEF. THE COMMITTEE LOOK AT HIM APPREHENSIVELY.

CHAIR: Name?

SPRATT: Spratt (in a high, almost feminine voice - but quite positive)

SERGT: (smiles and winks at one of the committee)
Fish or biscuit? (this is almost aside - but Spratt hears it and gives the sergeant 'such a look')

CHAIR: Business or profession?

SPRATT: I'm a cucumber polisher - at Cross and Blackwells.

CHAIR: (puzzled) Cucumber polisher?

SPRATT: Yes sir; I'm an expert in removing a - what one might call the warts from cucumbers.

CHAIR: Do you think this of vital interest to the nation?

SPRATT: Rather - how would you like eating a cucumber that had warts? Moreover, it is of vital interest to ME.

CHAIR: Ah - you believe then, that YOUR interests should come before those of your country?

SPRATT: I do, oh! I do.

THE SERGEANT LOOKS AT HIM
CONTEMPTUOUSLY

CHAIR: Then how do you reconcile fighting for your country?

SPRATT: I can't, I don't want to fight. I don't believe in it. It's a nasty habit.

CHAIR: Ah - then you are a conscientious objector?

SPRATT: Decidedly.

THE SERGEANT CURLS HIS LIP AND
GLARES AT HIM

CHAIR: You have conscientious scruples against fighting?

SPRATT: Yes

CHAIR: Even if your country were invaded?

SPRATT: Yes

CHAIR: You make no resistance?

SPRATT: No physical resistance.

1ST COMM: You are married?

SPRATT: Yes. Very.

1ST COMM: Suppose you came home and found a man kicking your wife - what would you do?

SPRATT: Feel very sorry for him.

1ST COMM: But wouldn't you assist your wife?

SPRATT: No necessity - you haven't seen my wife.

1ST COMM: Do you mean to say you would stand quietly there?

SPRATT: Yes - until the struggle was over.

1ST COMM: And then?

SPRATT: I should pay for his funeral -

1 COMM: But previous to that - would you take no action?

SPRATT: Yes; I should persuade him to desist.

THE SERGEANT CLENCHES HIS FIST AND
SHIFTS UNEASILY

1ST COMM: But you would make no physical effort?

SPRATT: No; I might get hurt.

THE SERGEANT GROANS WITH DISGUST

CHAIR: You wouldn't use force?

SPRATT: Certainly not. I could never bear the thought of physically injuring anyone.

THE SERGEANT LOOKS AT HIM IN
AMUSEMENT - SIZING HIM UP

1ST COMM: If you were attacked on your way home tonight by a ruffian, who demanded your watch and valuables; would you submit?

SPRATT: No; I should reason with him.

THE SERGEANT UTTERS A STIFLED 'O MY
GAWD' AND HIS FINGERS TWITCH

2ND COMM: If a squad of enemy soldiers were about to set a torch to your home - would you make no effort to stop them?

SPRATT: No. My house is insured.

2ND COMM: But if your wife and baby were asleep in the house?

SPRATT: My wife never sleeps when I'm out.

CHAIR: Supposing, Mr Spratt, that you were stationed on an anti-air craft gun and you saw a Zeppelin hovering in your vicinity, would you not shoot at it?

SPRATT: No; I might kill some of the human beings in it. I don't believe in taking life

SERGT: Seems to me he takes life pretty easily

THE COMMITTEE LOOK AT THE SERGEANT
REBUKINGLY - HE APOLOGISES

SERGT: Sorry; sir, I couldn't help it.

CHAIR: If you were on duty at a railway crossing and saw a man turning a switch that would derail a train and kill hundreds of passengers; if you were armed would you not attempt to - to - hinder him?

SPRATT: Oh yes, but not physically. I should detain him in argument until the train had passed safely.

CHAIR: Have you never fought anybody? Not even as a boy?

SPRATT: Oh! dear no - I always remember the beautiful poem

let dogs delight to bark and bite

for tis their nature to - &c and so forth

THE SERGEANT AGAIN UTTERS A TERRIBLY DISGUSTING 'OH' AND TURNS APOLOGETICALLY TO THE CHAIRMAN.

SERGT: Beg pardon sir, but I just can't help it.

CHAIR: Be careful not to interrupt again. (He turns to Spratt) Then, Mr Spratt, I suppose we shall have to put you down as a conscientious objector. Are you brave enough to be labelled thusly before the world?

SPRATT: I would be honoured by the distinction.

CHAIR: Then, I suppose, gentlemen, we will have to excuse him.

THEY MURMUR AND MUTTER AMONG THEMSELVES. COMMITTEE-MAN 2 GETS AN INSPIRATION

2ND COMM: Just a moment - do I understand you, Mr Spratt, that under no conceivable condition and in no possible circumstances, you could raise your hand either in defence of yourself your wife, your child, your home, your King or Country?

SPRATT: Quite so - under no circumstances would I fight

THE SERGEANT WHO HAS BEEN CHOKING DOWN HIS FEELINGS FROM THE START, DRAWS NEARER TO SPRATT.

CHAIR: I think that ends this case, Mr Spratt I am sorry to tell you that, under the rules, we

are compelled most reluctantly, to excuse you
- and to brand you a 'conscientious objector'.

SPRATT: Thank you so much. I am honoured!

THE SERGEANT CLENCHES HIS FIST AND
TAKES A STEP TOWARDS SPRATT WHO
TURNS TO GO.

SERGT: (Exasperated and unable to control himself) I
don't care if it costs me six months hard!

HE GIVES SPRATT A NASTY SMACK ON THE
NOSE. SPRATT REELS BACK; THEN, IN A
FRENZY OF SUDDEN TEMPER, HE FLIES AT
THE SERGEANT. HE WHIPS OUT BOTH
FISTS AND, IN SPITE OF ALL EFFORTS
OF THE COMMITTEE TO STOP HIM, HE
FIGHTS LIKE A WILD-CAT. HE SMOTHERS
THE SERGEANT WITH JABS AND SWINGS.
HE HURLS HIMSELF ON THE SERGEANT AND
LIKE A HURRICANE PUMMELS AND BEATS
HIM. ONE BY ONE OF THE COMMITTEE
ENDEAVOUR TO PULL HIM OFF AND HE
KNOCKS FIRST ONE AND THEN ANOTHER OF
THEM DOWN. HE KICKS AND BITES AND
FIGHTS EVERYBODY. HE DIVIDES HIS
ATTENTION BETWEEN THEM AND THE
SERGEANT WHO COVERS UP AND TRIES TO
GET OUT. HE KNOCKS THE SERGEANT
DOWN; THEN WIPES THE FLOOR WITH HIM.
HE PICKS HIM UP AND KNOCKS HIM DOWN
AGAIN. HE GRABS HIS COLLAR AND
SHAKES HIM LIKE A RAT. THE SERGEANT
PROTESTS IN VAIN. HE FLIES BACK AT
THE INTERFERING COMMITTEE MEN WHO
RETREAT AND TAKE REFUGE UNDER THE
TABLE AND BEHIND CHAIRS. HE
LITERALLY CLEANS THE PLACE UP. THE
ROOM IS A WRECK.

SEVERAL BIG POLICEMEN RUSH IN FROM
THE DOOR AND FINALLY GET HIM UNDER
CONTROL.

THE SERGEANT SITS DAZED ON THE FLOOR
WITH BOTH EYES BLACKENED AND NURSING
AN SANGUINARY NOSE. THE COMMITTEE
PEER TIMIDLY OUT FROM UNDER THE
TABLE AND GATHER UP THEIR PAPERS.

SPRATT SHAKES OFF THE POLICEMEN
AND CALMLY STRAIGHTENS HIS TIE AND
ARRANGES HIS COLLAR AND SMOOTHS HIS
HAIR.

THE COMMITTEE GRADUALLY GET BACK TO
THEIR TABLE; THEY REARRANGE THEIR

PAPERS. THE CHAIRMAN PULLS HIMSELF
TOGETHER AND CLEARS HIS THROAT.

CHAIR: Ahem! - eh - a - Mr Spratt, eh - EXEMPTION
REFUSED! Referred to Lord Kitchener - with
recommendation.

SERGEANT PICKS HIMSELF UP AND
BRUSHES HIMSELF - HE LOOKS BLEARILY
AFTER THE DEPARTING SPRATT - THEN
HIS FACE BREAKS INTO A SMILE OF
ADMIRATION.

SERGT: Conscientious - huh! well - that's one way to
get 'em.

CURTAIN