

# Delicate Operation

## A Play in One Act

### Cast of Characters

Ted

Doctor Newfangle

Doctor Tidbit

Various Nurses and Doctors

*A hospital waiting room, with white walls, a few white couches and chairs, various people crossing back and forth to give the impression that the hospital is crowded, an TED, who is sitting on one of the couches. He finally catches the eye of DOCTOR NEWFANGLE.*

**Newfangle:** Excuse me, have you been waiting long?

**Ted:** Only a few hours.

**Newfangle:** A few hours? And no one has talked to you before now?

**Ted:** Well, the receptionist did for a little while.

**Newfangle:** And what did she say?

**Ted:** She said that if I think I have problems, I should take a look at the corns on her feet. She also said a doctor would see me presently.

**Newfangle:** Ah! Well, no that I'm here, why don't you just step into my office?  
*(TED stands up and follows NEWFANGLE to another couch. They both sit.)*

**Ted:** This is your office?

**Newfangle:** For the time being. My real office is being fumigated. Besides, we can't afford a lot of temporary scene changes. But what seems to be the problem?

**Ted:** I would like an operation.

**Newfangle:** Ah-hah. What kind of operation?

**Ted:** The kind where you remove things.

**Newfangle:** Ah-hah. A removal operation. Well, well, well, you must not be very satisfied with what you have now if you want an operation of *that* type. What is it you wish for us to remove?

**Ted:** My scruples.

**Newfangle:** Your scruples? *(He stands.)* Wait a minute! Just how old are you, young man?

**Ted:** Sixteen.

**Newfangle:** Sixteen years old and you want your scruples removed? Whatever for?

**Ted:** I want to be a politician.

*(NEWFANGLE scratches his head in puzzlement, then calls to DOCTOR TIDBIT, who is passing nearby.)*

**Newfangle:** Oh, Doctor Tidbit!

**Tidbit:** Yes, Doctor Newfangle?

**Newfangle:** Come here a moment, will you? This young man here wants to have his scruples removed so that he can become a politician.

**Tidbit:** Really? What's your name, young man?

**Ted:** Ted.

**Tidbit:** And how old are you, Ted?

**Ted:** Sixteen.

**Tidbit:** A sixteen-year-old boy wants to have his scruples removed so that he can become a politician?

**Newfangle:** That's right.

**Tidbit:** Gadzooks!

**Newfangle:** My feelings exactly. *(He pulls up a chair, turns it around, and sits on it backwards.)* Son, look here, have you ever considered the fact that you're a little young for this kind of--

**Ted:** Yes, sir. I have. But I've decided that this is what I'm suited for.

**Tidbit:** Yes, but a *politician!* *(He says it like it's a dirty word.)*

**Ted:** My mind's made up, Doctor.

**Tidbit** *(pacing back and forth):* Yes, yes, I'm sure it is--at least the occupation part of it all. But it's the operation--the *operation*--that has me worried. It's a serious thing...serious...

**Ted:** Look, if it's a question of money...

**Tidbit** *(in a sudden rage):* Money is not the issue here!! Tell him, Doctor Newfangle! Tell him!

**Newfangle** *(calmly):* Money is not the issue here.

**Tidbit:** Exactly! Why, there are things to consider--consequences! The fact that once the operation is complete, there's no turning back! We can't just keep your scruples in a little glass jar for the day you decide you're fed up with being a politician and come back here asking us to make you the way you were before! No, sir! The operation's permanent! Once those babies are out they up and wither away! Then you'll never have a conscientious doubt again!

**Newfangle:** There, there, Doctor Tidbit. Please calm down.

**Tidbit** *(almost sobbing):* Don't we have enough politicians in the world today who are *born* without scruples without having idiots like you going around trying to get them surgically removed?

**Newfangle:** Here! Here! I don't believe you have any right calling the patient an idiot, Doctor Tidbit! Please calm yourself down, and quickly! Nurse! Nurse! *(enter NURSE)*

**Tidbit:** I'm sorry. I'll do my best to regain my composure.

**Newfangle:** Nurse, please see to the doctor.

**Nurse:** Yes, Doctor. *(addressing TIDBIT with a lollipop in her hand)* There, there. Does Doc-ey want a lolly?

**Tidbit:** Is it purple?

**Nurse:** Yes.

**Tidbit:** I want a red one. *(exit NURSE and TIDBIT)*

**Newfangle** *(watching them leave):* You see, Teddy, my boy, the kind of operation you seem to want is not just one simple operation but is instead a whole series of removals and injections designed to bring about a permanent, effective change that is completely

irreversible. Why, your own mother wouldn't even recognize you. We'd not only remove your scruples, we'd have to readjust your voice box so you could spew forth double talk and fake promises, and manipulate your inner sense of time so that an immediate decision takes four years to make! Do you understand what I'm telling you, lad?

**Ted:** Yes, Doctor. And I'm prepared to take the risks.

**Newfangle:** Very well, then. I suppose that a preliminary examination is in order. Stick out your tongue. *(TED sticks out his tongue. NEWFANGLE takes out a penlight and shines it into TED's eyes.)* Hmm. Eyes are innocent and trusting. They, too, will have to be operated on. *(He takes out a mallet and tests TED's reflexes.)* Reflexes are up to par with any other average male your age. We're going to have to fix that, so that the only ones that work are the back-stabbing reflex and the button-pushing reflex.

**Ted:** What's the button-pushing reflex?

**Newfangle:** You know, someone tells you that some Middle Eastern country isn't being too friendly to Americans, so you push a big, red button that makes the bombs drop--

**Ted:** Ah, yes. Now I understand. *(NEWFANGLE continues with the examination by placing a stethoscope next to TED's heart.)*

**Newfangle:** Now cough. *(TED coughs. NEWFANGLE calls to someone offstage.)* Nurse! Nurse! Bring me those two forms we use in testing scruple patients.

**Nurse (bringing forms):** Here you are.

**Newfangle:** Thank you. *(turning to TED)* Now, suppose these are two treaties to be signed with Russia and Japan. Let's assume you've already signed the Russian treaty, which specifically states that any treaty signed with Japan would be a declaration of war. Are you with me so far?

**Ted:** I guess so.

**Newfangle:** Good! Now let's suppose that Japan then offers you its own treaty. You know you can't sign it because if you do, millions of people will be killed with the Russian bombs come over. However, by signing the treaty with Japan, you are guaranteed billions of dollars worth of income that will help to ease the national debt, promising new and better ways to take away the taxpayers' money. Now, given this situation, what would you do?

**Ted:** Well, naturally, if signing a treaty with Japan meant millions of Americans would be killed by the Russians, I wouldn't sign it.

**Newfangle (scratching his chin):** Hmm...I can tell this operation is going to be tricky. *(He ponders for a moment.)* Very well, if you are absolutely sure you want the operation...

**Ted:** I do, Doctor.

**Newfangle:** Very well, then. I have only one more question, and then we can proceed.

**Ted:** Yes?

**Newfangle:** What were your ambitions before you decided to become a politician?

**Ted:** I wanted to be a humanitarian.

**Newfangle (in extreme shock):** Mercy! Doctors, nurses! Come here immediately! I need your assistance in the scruplectomy!

*(Instantly, a whole battery of DOCTORS and NURSES enters. One is wheeling a hospital bed upon which TED is hoisted and forced to lie down. Several NURSES arrive with surgical instruments, complicated machines, and bedpans. The DOCTORS,*

*including DOCTOR NEWFANGLE, are assisted into their operating gowns, masks and gloves. Finally, several NURSES wheel in several screens, which surround the patient so that he can no longer be seen. A bright light is turned on behind the OPERATING CREW, who are also behind the screens. In this manner, the operation is seen by the audience only in silhouette.)*

**Newfangle:** Nurse, administer the anesthetic.

**Nurse:** Anesthetic administered, Doctor.

**Tidbit:** I don't like this, Newfangle. I don't like this operation one bit.

**Newfangle:** The patient is aware of the consequences, Doctor Tidbit. He's also been briefed on the entire procedure...Sponge.

**Nurse:** Sponge.

**Doctor #3:** Uh, Doctors I hate to have to tell you this so late in the game, but...I've never really performed an actual scrupectomy before. Uh...are the scruples on the right side or the left side? *(EVERYONE stops.)*

**Newfangle** *(after a moment):* Get this idiot out of the operating room! *(DOCTOR #3 is promptly thrown out from behind the screen, where he stumbles across the stage, falls, and exits.)* Doesn't he realize just how important this operation is? "Are the scruples on the right side or the left side?" Mercy! Scalpel.

**Nurse:** Scalpel. *(As NEWFANGLE is about to cut, TIDBIT grabs his arm.)*

**Tidbit:** This is your last chance, Newfangle. After this, there's no turning back.

**Newfangle:** I'm going through with it, Doctor. Now let go of my arm.

**Tidbit** *(releasing arm):* Very well. But remember, what you're doing for the patient may only be self-interest in disguise.

**Newfangle:** Nurse, give me 500 cc's of evading-the-issues.

**Nurse:** Yes, Doctor.

**Newfangle:** Scissors.

**Nurse:** Scissors.

**Newfangle:** Clamp.

**Nurse:** Clamp.

**Newfangle:** Now, Doctor, you will have to assist me here. Help me to insert the false-sympathy. Help me to insert the false sympathy.

**Tidbit:** You're the boss.

**Newfangle:** Cotton.

**Nurse:** Cotton.

**Newfangle:** Good! Now that that's in, we must connect the voice box to the filibuster-oblongata. *(They work in silence for a few moments.)*

**Tidbit:** The operation is taking longer than we thought.

**Newfangle:** On humanitarians they usually do...Scissors.

**Tidbit:** What about the perpetual handshake?

**Newfangle:** I'll be getting to that. I want to do the campaign transplants all at once. The perpetual handshake will be inserted along with the baby-kisser and the fake promises.

**Tidbit:** You know best.

**Newfangle:** That's right. Now don't question my authority. *(Again, they all work in silence for some moments.)* Well, that's it. The last order of business was the complete removal of the scruples. Now that that's done, we can sew him up and send him on his merry way.

**Nurse:** Was the operation a success?

**Newfangle:** Not a single compunction left in his entire body. *(pause; slowly)* He should go far. *(A picture of the White House is projected on the screen, blocking out the characters who stand behind. Lights increase, then dim.)*

\*\*\*\*\*

First published in *Literary Cavalcade*, Vol. 37 No. 8, May 1985. Used with permission of the author's mother.

## **David Jackson**

David Jackson was an extremely talented high school junior when he wrote *Delicate Operation*, as well as a number of works of short fiction. (The play was actually conceived in response to an article he had read about Japan's slaughter of whales in defiance of the American government's attempts to stop them, though this initial spark was subsumed by the overriding themes of corruption.) While cursed with a great depth of feeling and keen sense of the injustice and absurdity inherent in the human condition, he was blessed with the intelligence and wicked sense of humor evidenced in his writing. His life and work were cut short when he committed suicide in college. His death is a loss not only to those close to him, but to all those who appreciate insightful, humorous satire written with a thirst for justice at heart.