

The War Sacrifices of Mr. Spugg

By Stephen Leacock

Directions: Read the short story. Answer the questions. Refer to the text to check your answers when appropriate.

ALTHOUGH we had been members of the same club for years, I only knew Mr. Spugg by sight until one afternoon when I heard him saying that he intended to send his **chauffeur**¹ to the war.

It was said quite quietly, —no bombast or boasting about it. Mr. Spugg was standing among a little group of listening members of the club and when he said that he had decided to send his chauffeur, he spoke with a kind of simple **earnestness**², a determination that marks the character of the man.

"Yes," he said, "we need all the man-power we can command. This thing has come to a showdown and we've got to recognize it. I told Henry that it's a showdown and that he's to get ready and start right away."

"Well, Spugg," said one of the members, "you're certainly setting us a fine example."

"What else can a man do?" said Mr. Spugg.

"When does your chauffeur leave?" asked another man.

"Right away. I want him in the firing line just as quick as I can get him there."

"It's a fine thing you're doing, Spugg," said a third member, "but do you realize that your chauffeur may be killed?"

"I must take my chance on that," answered Mr. Spugg, firmly. "I've thought this thing out and made up my mind: If my chauffeur is killed, I mean to pay for him, —full and adequate compensation. The loss must fall on me, not on him. Or, say Henry comes back mutilated, —say he loses a leg, —say he loses two legs..."

Here Mr. Spugg looked about him at his listeners, with a look that meant that even three legs wouldn't be too much for him.

"Whatever Henry loses I pay for. The loss shall fall on me, every cent of it."

"Spugg," said a quiet-looking, neatly dressed man whom I knew to be the president of an insurance company and who reached out and shook the speaker

by the hand, "this is a fine thing you're doing, a big thing. But we mustn't let you do it alone. Let our company take a hand in it. We're making a special rate now on chauffeurs, footmen, and house-servants sent to the war, quite below the rate that actuarial figures justify. It is our little war contribution," he added modestly. "We like to feel that we're doing our bit, too. We had a chauffeur killed last week. We paid for him right off without **demur**³, —waived all question of who killed him. I never signed a check (as I took occasion to say in a little note I wrote to his people) with greater pleasure."

"What do you do if Henry's **mutilated**⁴?" asked Mr. Spugg, turning his quiet eyes on the insurance man and facing the brutal facts of things without flinching. "What do you pay? Suppose I lose the use of Henry's legs, what then?"

"It's all right," said his friend. "Leave it to us. Whatever he loses, we make it good."

"All right," said Spugg, "send me round a policy. I'm going to see Henry clear through on this."

It was at this point that at my own urgent request I was introduced to Mr. Spugg, so that I might add my congratulations to those of the others. I told him that I felt, as all the other members of the club did, that he was doing a big thing, and he answered again, in his modest way that he didn't see what else a man could do.

"My son Alfred and I," he said, "talked it over last night and we agreed that we can run the car ourselves, or make a shot at it anyway. After all, it's war time."

"What branch of the service are you putting your chauffeur in?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he answered, "I think I'll send him up in the air. It's dangerous, of course, but it's no time to think about that."

Vocabulary

1. **chauffeur**: a person employed to drive a private car
2. **earnest**: serious; sincere, intense conviction
3. **demur**: to delay or oppose
4. **mutilate**: disable or remove a vital part such as a limb
5. **tremor**: to shake or quiver

So, in due time, Mr. Spugg's chauffeur, Henry, went overseas. He was reported first as in England. Next he was right at the front, at the very firing itself. We knew then, —everybody in the club knew that Mr. Spugg's chauffeur might be killed at any moment. But great as the strain must have been, Spugg went up and down to his office and in and out of the club without a **tremor**⁵. The situation gave him a new importance in our eyes, something tense.

"This seems to be a terrific business," I said to him one day at lunch, "this new German drive;"

"My chauffeur," said Mr. Spugg, "was right in the middle of it."

"He was, eh?"

"Yes," he continued, "one shell burst in the air so near him it almost broke his wings."

Mr. Spugg told this with no false boasting or **bravado**⁶, eating his celery as he spoke of it. Here was a man who had nearly had his chauffeur's wings blown off and yet he never moved a muscle. I began to realize the kind of resolute stuff that the man was made of.

A few days later bad news came to the club. "Have you heard the bad news about Spugg?" someone asked.

"No, what?"

"His chauffeur's been gassed."

"Fine. He's sending off his gardener to take the chauffeur's place."

So that was Mr. Spugg's answer to the Germans.

We lunched together that day.

"Yes," he said, "Henry's gassed. How it happened I don't know. He must have come down out of the air. I told him I wanted him in the air. But let it pass. It's done now." "And you're sending your gardener?"

"I am," said Spugg. "He's gone already. I called him in from the garden yesterday. I said, "William, Henry's been gassed. Our first duty is to keep up our man-power at the front. You must leave tonight."

"Infantry. He'll do best in the trenches, — digs well and is a very fair shot. Anyway I want him to see all the fighting that's going. If the Germans won't give and take in this business they can have it. They'll soon see who can stand it best. I told William when he left.

I said, 'William, we've got to show these fellows that man for man we're a match for them.' That's the way I look at it, man for man."

I watched Mr. Spugg's massive face as he went on with his meal. Not a nerve of it moved. If he felt any fear, at least he showed no trace of it.

After that I got war news from him at intervals, in little scraps, as I happened to meet him. "The war looks bad," I said to him one day as I chanced upon him getting into his motor. "This submarine business is pretty serious."

"It is," he said, "William was **torpedoed**⁷ yesterday."

Then he got into his car and drove away, as quietly as if nothing had happened.

A little later that day I heard him talking about it in the club. "Yes," he was saying, "a submarine. It torpedoed William, —my gardener. I have both a chauffeur and a gardener at the war. William was picked up on a raft. He's in pretty bad shape. My son Alfred had a cable from him that he's coming home. We've both **telegraphed**⁸ him to stick it out."

The news was the chief topic in the club that day. "Spugg's gardener has been torpedoed," they said, "but Spugg refuses to have him quit and come home." "Well done, Spugg," said everybody.

After that we had news from time to time about both William and Henry.

"Henry's out of the hospital," said Spugg. "I hope to have him back in France in a few days. William's in bad shape still. I had a London surgeon go and look at him. I told him not to mind the expense but to get William fixed up right away. It seems that one arm is more or less paralyzed. I've wired back to him not to hesitate. They say William's blood is still too thin for the operation. I've cabled to them to take some of Henry's. I hate to do it, but this is no time to stick at anything."

A little later William and Henry were reported both back in France. This was at the very moment of the great offensive. But Spugg went about his daily business unmoved. Then came the worst news of all. "William and Henry," he said to me, "are both missing. I don't know where the devil they are." "Missing!" I repeated.

Vocabulary

6. **bravado**: a show of defiance or courage

7. **torpedo**: an underwater missile or bomb

8. **telegraph**: a message sent by wire

"Both of them. The Germans have caught them both. I suppose I shan't have either of them back now till the war is all over."

He gave a slight sigh,—the only sign of complaint that ever I had heard come from him.

But the next day we learned what was Spugg's answer to the German's capture of William and Henry.

"Have you heard what Spugg is doing?" the members of the club asked one another. "What?"

"He's sending over Meadows, his own man!"

There was no need to comment on it. The cool courage of the thing spoke "for itself. Meadows, —Spugg's own man, —his house **valet**⁹, without whom he never travelled twenty miles!

"What else was there to do?" said Mr. Spugg when I asked him if it was true that Meadows was going.

"I take no credit for sending Meadows, nor, for the matter of that, for anything that Meadows may do over there. It was a simple matter of duty. My son and I had him into the dining room last night after dinner. 'Meadows,' we said, 'Henry and William are caught. Our man power at the front has got to be kept up. There's no one left but ourselves and you. There's no way out of it. You'll have to go.'"

"But how," I protested, "can you get along with Meadows, your valet, gone? You'll be lost!"

"We must do the best we can. We've talked it all over. My son will help me dress and I will help him. We can manage, no doubt."

So Meadows went.

After this Mr. Spugg, dressed as best he could manage it, and taking turns with his son in driving his own motor, was a pathetic but uncomplaining object.

Meadows meantime was reported as with the heavy artillery, doing well. "I hope nothing happens to Meadows," Spugg kept saying. "If it does, we're stuck. We can't go ourselves. We're too busy. We've talked it over and we've both decided that it's impossible to get away from the office, — not with business as brisk as it is now. We're busier than we've been in ten years and can't get off for a day. We may try to take a month off for the **Adirondacks**¹⁰ a little later but as for Europe, it's out of the question."

Meantime, one little bit of consolation came to help Mr. Spugg to bear the burden of the war. I found him in the lounge room of the club one afternoon among a group of men, exhibiting two medals that were being passed from hand to hand.

"Sent to me by the French government," he explained proudly, —"they're for William and Henry. The motto means, 'For Conspicuous Courage' " (Mr. Spugg drew himself up with legitimate pride). "I shall keep one and let Alfred keep the other till they come back." Then he added, as an afterthought, "They may never come back."

From that day on, Mr. Spugg, with his French medal on his watch chain, was the most conspicuous figure in the club. He was pointed out as having done more than any other one man in the institution to keep the flag flying. But presently the limit of Mr. Spugg's efforts and sacrifices was reached. Even patriotism such as his must have some bounds.

On entering the club one afternoon I could hear his voice bawling **vociferously**¹¹ in one of the telephone cabinets in the hall, "Hello, Washington," he was shouting, "Is that Washington? Long Distance, I want Washington."

Fifteen minutes later he came up to the sitting room still flushed with indignation and excitement.

"That's the limit," he said, "the absolute limit!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"They **drafted**¹² Alfred," he answered. "Just imagine it. When we're so busy in the office that we're getting down there at half past eight in the morning. Drafted Alfred! 'Great Caesar,' I said to them! 'Look here! You've had my chauffeur and he's gassed, and you've had my gardener and he's torpedoed and they're both prisoners, and last month I sent you my own man! That,' I said, 'is about the limit.' "

"What did they say," I asked.

"Oh, it's all right. They've fixed it all up and they've apologized as well. Alfred won't go, of course, but it makes one realize that you can carry a thing too far. Why, they'd be taking me next!"

"Oh, surely not," I said.

Vocabulary

9. **valet**: a personal attendant

10. **Adirondacks**: a mountain region in New York State

11. **vociferous**: a noisy vocal outcry or clamor

12. **draft**: to require military service by the government

The War Sacrifices of Mr. Spugg | Reading Quiz

- Which best describes the **TONE** of this story?
 - Sarcastic
 - Sincere
 - Tragic
 - Heroic
- Why does Mr. Spugg claim that he cannot fight in the war himself?
 - His luggage would take up too much room.
 - He doesn't have enough training or physical strength.
 - He lacks the courage to risk his own safety.
 - His business is too busy for him to leave the office.
- How does Mr. Spugg's concern for his son Alfred compare to his concern for Henry?
 - He is prepared to lose Alfred but not Henry.
 - He is prepared to lose Henry but not Alfred.
 - He is prepared to lose both Henry and Alfred.
 - He is not prepared to lose either Alfred or Henry.
- Which statement best characterizes Mr. Spugg?
 - He is willing to give ALL for his nation.
 - He is willing to sacrifice other people but not himself.
 - He is a model for bravery during wartime.
 - He is a double-agent that is helping the enemy troops.
- What is **IRONIC** about the war medal that Mr. Spugg wears?
 - It is a medal that is supposed to be awarded to children and he doesn't know it.
 - He saved hundreds of men from a sinking submarine while looking for his golf ball.
 - It belongs to another man yet he wears it proudly as his own.
 - He earned the medal for performing extreme acts of bravery by accident.
- From which perspective is this story narrated?
 - First-person
 - Third-person objective
 - Third-person omniscient
 - Third-person limited
- Which **THEME** does this story suggest?
 - The costs of war may be heavy but they are paid by society and everyone benefits.
 - War is a futile and unnecessary effort that only results in pain and suffering.
 - The costs of war are great but paid unevenly and mostly by the poor.
 - War is very painful for everyone no matter who or where you are.
- Which figurative language technique is used in the following?
"Here Mr. Spugg looked about him at his listeners, with a look that meant that even three legs wouldn't be too much for him."
 - Simile
 - Onomatopoeia
 - Understatement
 - Hyperbole
- If the story continued with Mr. Spugg being drafted to war, we can **PREDICT** that he would do which?
 - He **WOULD** go to war **BUT** he would complain.
 - He **WOULD** go to war without complaint.
 - He **WOULD NOT** go to war and he'd complain.
 - He **WOULD NOT** go to war but he'd keep it a secret.
- Which statement best **SUMMARIZES** Mr. Spugg's war sacrifices?
 - Mr. Spugg has sacrificed very little for the war but made a big show about it.
 - Mr. Spugg has sacrificed a lot for the war effort and he has received little credit.
 - Mr. Spugg has sacrificed a good amount for the war effort but everyone else has too.
 - Mr. Spugg has sacrificed more than any man he knows and no one seems to appreciate it.

Extended Response: Answer the following question in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

Is this story funny or sad?

Support your answer with evidence from the text and explain your argument completely.