

Question:

Explain the significance of Act II.

Answer:

Act I took place at night, inside the house of Major Petkoff, in a hectic, war-fevered atmosphere. In complete contrast, Act II takes us into Petkoff's garden, in a fine spring morning three months after the war. However, Shaw's description of the garden insists on the same mixture that characterised Raina's bedchamber in the previous act. Shaw's detailed description is not simply intended to remind us of the part homely, part romantic atmosphere; certain elements in the set will be dramatically useful later on, like the garden steps and the stable yard gateway.

Rather than finding at once what happened to the fugitive Swiss, the audience must wait. They must first encounter a new character and the preoccupation of a different social class. Nicola's chief contribution to the action and ideas of the play will spring from his lack of 'illusions'. He lays bare the relationship between master and servant. Like other relationships in the play, this should be seen as universal. Nicola's views are expressed in the

course of an argument with Louka, to whom we find he is engaged. Even before she speaks, Louka's air of "*angry disdain*" for Nicola emphasises her defiance of his conventional views, as does the fact that she is smoking a cigarette - a rather daring gesture on the part of a servant. Her tone of voice is cross and petulant, while Nicola remains calm throughout. It is hardly surprising that he manages to extract Louka's secret from her, and that he has the last word in the argument.

The debate concerns the proper behaviour of servants. Louka has clearly been impatient, stubborn and ill-mannered; Nicola coolly tells her that this is no way to succeed and that he will not marry her if she persists in such an unproductive attitude. It is not a matter of "*taking sides*" as Louka bitterly suggests; it is simple inevitable that the goodwill of the wealthy and noble is essential if a servant is to better himself.

Although Major Petkoff is introduced as confident, he is hardly the dominating figure the audience has been expecting. When we see him with Sergius later, he is suspicious of the younger man's idealism, offering realistic

criticism of his military performance. When Catherine arrives to greet her husband, her clothing at this early hour combines both naive and sophisticated elements, just as the stage settings have done so far. Catherine may not be the play's most important figure, but through her too, its central message is enforced: a man or woman's true self is more splendid than the most glamorous imaginary self, and will not be expressed or replaced by fantasy or pretension.

Petkoff's conversation with Catherine shows that he is 'submissive'. He uses the placating-condescending phrase "*my dear*", but he manages to have the last word in the argument and establishes the peace he prefers - both on the domestic and military front. Their argument returns us to the conflict between idealistic patriotism and common sense, and we realise that Petkoff is a potential ally of Bluntschli. He even uses similar tactics: good humoured, ironic depreciation. Shaw shows that Major Petkoff shares Bluntschli's view of Sergius' military prowess; "*he hasn't the slightest chance of promotion until we're quite sure that the peace will be a lasting one.*" Petkoff treats Sergius ironically, but Catherine

offers him enthusiastic admiration. Sergius' reaction to his treatment has been to resign in a temper and to pour scorn on the petty spirits, who fight according to the rulebook and do not appreciate his genius. This is an important aspect of the romantic hero: he must regard himself as superbly isolated, misunderstood by the common herd. While soldiering, he has found that war is for calculating cowards, not dashing spirits like his. "*I have no ambition to shine as a tradesman*", says he.

Raina enters the scene and after a display of platonic or "*higher love*" via mutual flattery, goes upstairs to get dressed up for a stroll. Sergius, an opportunistic fellow, flirts with Louka during Raina's absence. Gradually, he comes to know about his rival and tension persists between him and Louka during this time. He reprimanded Louka, insulted and injured her physically in his state of shock, while Louka showed a strong character, called Raina a pretentious cheat and claimed to be "*worth six of her*."

After Sergius goes to the library and Raina leaves the scene, Louka informs Catherine about a Swiss at the gate with a large carpet bag

- Captain Bluntschli. In a comically frantic fashion, dismissing and recalling Louka three times, Catherine arranges to receive the visitor in the garden and to see him out through the stable yard. Catherine realises that Bluntschli has her husband's coat in the carpet bag. Bluntschli appears cleaner and neater than in Act I. Catherine wastes no time in trying to hurry him away. She claims that her husband's war-like temper makes the house unsafe for any foreigner. Petkoff is like a "*lion baulked of his prey*".

It is too late, Major Petkoff rushes from the house, looking and sounding most unlike a "*lion baulked of his prey*". Catherine makes a last effort to hint to Bluntschli that he must go at once, but Petkoff insists on his staying; he is just the man they need to solve their forage problem. When they turn towards the house, Raina emerges from it. On seeing Bluntschli, her composure deserts her and she exclaims, "Oh! The chocolate cream soldier!" Catherine gains a few seconds by 'introducing' Captain Bluntschli to her daughter. In those few seconds, Raina thinks up a weak but passable explanation. In this case the comically innocent

victim is Nicola, while the audience sees the action through the eyes of Catherine. They watch her web of deceit becoming even more tangled. Nicola is being unjustly treated, but he knows better than to raise objections. Following his servant's code, he humbly leaves.