

Question:

Explain the significance of the flirting scene in Act II.

Answer:

“Sergius. Louka: do you know what the higher love is?”

“Louka. *(astonished)* No, sir.”

“Sergius. Very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time, Louka. One feels the need of some relief after it.”

So begins the flirtation with Louka in which Sergius receives rather more than he had bargained for - the information that Louka believes he has a rival for Raina's affection. The “higher love” is of course exploded the instant Sergius starts his flirtation with Louka. It is true that it is a fairly normal conduct. Shaw's point, however, is that Sergius does not accept it as normal. He despises himself for such behaviour, since, if this is normal human conduct, then the conversation that had just had with Raina is neither normal nor reasonable; it is nonsense. Since he believes this nonsense to be true, he can only hate himself.

“Sergius. Take care, Louka. I may be

worthless enough to betray the higher love; but you do not insult it.”

In the same way, when Sergius grabs Louka’s hand and slips his arm around her waist, Louka sensibly tells him to stand where they won’t be seen. She suggests that Raina might be spying on them from a window. When Sergius tries to kiss her, she tells that all aristocrats are alike. Both Sergius and Raina cheat each other. Sergius falls for the bait and becomes upset. He tells Louka not to speak about Raina, but also asks her who his rival is. Louka says she does not know his name, but heard his voice in Raina’s room and if the man comes to the house again, Raina will marry him whether “*he likes it or not*”. The reason for her being so sure is not that Raina’s manner was affectionate or loving towards the rival, but affected or unreal towards Sergius. The difference, Louka says, is obvious between real passion and the false love. Both Raina and Sergius’ love is fake and they pretend in front of each other.

The question that torments Sergius in this scene is which of the six Sergius is the real one - an apostle of higher love, a hero, a buffoon, a

humbug, a blackguard, or a coward. He stops in his self introspection, looks at Louka, and says that the coward, out of these six, is also jealous, "*like all cowards*".

Sergius grabs Louka's arm, hurting her and accusing her of dishonouring him. He calls her "*an abominable little clod of common clay, with the soul of a servant*" - a remark which hurts her further as she herself has used the same expression against Nicola. She calls Raina a liar and claims to be worth six of her. Sergius tries to apologize for hurting her, but Louka says that an apology may satisfy a lady but is of no use to a servant. Feeling mocked he tries to pay her with money, but she refuses and grandly offers him her arm to be kissed. Realising that she is acting as an equal, he says "*Never!*" She picks up the tray with dignity and goes into the house. It seems that Sergius is less heroic and noble minded than he pretends, while Louka, despite the difference in social position, is his equal, in strength of will and pride.

The episode reflects Sergius' true self to a great degree at the same time it is revealed that his saint is not as pure as he had imagined. But

in disillusioning Sergius, Louka demonstrates that Nicola is wrong - she is Sergius' equal and shares his capacity for self dramatisation. It is to be noted that Sergius is not the only one of the lovers to find the strain of higher love more than he can bear. Raina's protest of higher love and sense of frustration also breaks out later. Here Shaw wanted to highlight that the engagement between Sergius and Raina is clearly a case of mutual understanding.