**Question**:

*Describe the significance of Act II in Arms and the Man*.

**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 intended to remind us of the part homely, part romantic atmosphere; moreover, 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, first encountering 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 real 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 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 matter of “taking sides” as Louka bitterly suggests; it is simply 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 young man’s idealism, offering realistic criticism of his military performance. When Catherine arrives to greet her husband, her clothing at this hour combines 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 establish the peace that he prefers - both on the domestic and the 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 hasnt got the slightest chance of promotion until were 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 wars 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.

[Sergius’ flirting episode with Louka]

In 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. The Swiss has a large carpet bag with him, which Catherine realises, contains her husband’s old coat. Bluntschli appears cleaner and neater than in Act I. Catherine wastes no time trying to hurry him away. She claims that her husbands war-like temper makes the house unsafe for any foreigner. Petkoff is “*like a lion baulked of his prey*”.

It is too late however as Major Petkoff rushes out of the house, looking and sounding unlike a “*lion baulked of his prey*”. Catherine makes a last effort to hint to Bluntschli that he must go home 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. Her composure deserts her and she exclaims “*Oh! The chocolate cream soldier!*” Catherine gains a few seconds by ‘introducing’ Captain Bluntschli to her daughter and in those few seconds, Raina thinks up a weak but passable explanation. In this case, the comically innocent victim is Nicola, while it is Catherine through whose eyes the audience sees the action, watching 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.