

***Arms and the Man***  
***by George Bernard Shaw***

**George Bernard Shaw and Arms and the Man Background**

In 1856 George Bernard Shaw was born in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Dublin, Ireland, and was the youngest of three siblings. His mother, who was a professional singer, encouraged his interests in the arts, and eventually left Shaw's alcoholic father. In his twenties, Shaw began a course of private reading at the British Museum, allowing him to engage not only with English poets like William Blake and Percy Shelley, but with political thought then brewing in the 1870s. By the 1880s, Shaw was committed to the ideals of the "Fabians," a branch of socialists operating in England who preferred to transform Britain not through revolution, but through intellectual pursuits. Shaw wrote newspaper articles and gave speeches on the subject, and on related issues of social and political concern in England. He soon met drama critic William Archer, who asked Shaw to review plays as well. Shaw took Archer's encouragement to start writing his own plays, and created the works for which he is now famous: *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), *Saint Joan* (1924), along with a great many others, and with "theoretical prefaces" explaining the construction and political impact of his works. Shaw won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, for, as the Nobel Committee put it, "his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty."

Arms and the Man

Written in 1893-4 and first performed in 1894, *Arms and the Man* is one of Shaw's earlier plays, and one that grows out of several contexts. The first is historical. There was a Serbo-Bulgarian War in 1885, and there was, too, an historic Battle of Slivnitza, won by the Bulgarians. Although Shaw takes advantage of actual historical information in the construction of the work, he is more concerned not with what allowed the Bulgarians to gain power in the region, but in broader forces of political and social agitation, and in the manner by which love can create, and redraw, relations between groups. Raina, Bluntschli, Sergius, and the rest of the characters are simply figures through which these political and social forces play out, as much as they are characters with which the viewer is to identify.

Some scholars have called *Arms and the Man* a satire, or a work that criticizes political or social issues of the day through humor or exaggeration. It is also a comedy, as evidenced from its ending in a flurry of weddings. But there is a great deal of dark comedy evident. The stakes of the work are high; the characters in it fear death and flee it, and characters off-stage, like Bluntschli's friend, suffer terrible ends. This kind of comedy allows Shaw to broach serious issues like equality among the sexes, the nature and necessity of war, and the impact of technological development on European war making.

*Arms and the Man* is considered to be one of the dramas that investigates the nature of relationships between men and women. In his prefaces to the works, collected later in his life, Shaw explains how certain settings, scenes, characters, and dialogue might help the reader or viewer to find political truths in these works of fiction

### **Summary: Introduction**

The play begins in a small town “near the Dragoman Pass” in Bulgaria, in the bedroom of a young woman named Raina Petkoff. It’s November 1885, and a war is on between the Bulgarian troops with their Russian allies, and the combined Serbian forces. The Serbian forces include many soldiers hired from other nations. The scene description, in italics, sets a pattern for the rest of the play. Although there is no official narrator and the scene descriptions are in essence only for the eyes of the company putting on the play, they contain a significant amount of detail not perceptible to a viewing audience. Only a reader knows these details. This includes, for example, notes on the mental states of some of the characters. The notes describe Rainia’s room’s décor as lavish, if somewhat kitschy. There are chocolate cream candies visible on a dresser. Raina gazes out her open window, and her mother, Catherine Petkoff, enters, telling Raina to close the windows because it’s cold outside. Catherine is excited and delivers news that the Bulgarian-Russian army has won a great battle at Slivnitsa, against the Serbians and their allies. Catherine also states that a man named Sergius is responsible for leading the cavalry in the victory. Raina is overjoyed and relieved on hearing this. Raina admits to Catherine that, in Raina’s lonelier moments, she has doubted whether the Bulgarians can compare in cultivation and elegance to the Russians. Raina has also wondered whether men in battle really are as heroic as she has read about in the works of Pushkin and Byron. Catherine tells Raina she should be ashamed to have doubted the Bulgarians, and Sergius in particular. Louka, their maid, enters, and says that all windows and doors in the house should be closed and locked because there are fleeing Serbians in the area, and they might try to hide in Bulgarian houses. Catherine leaves the room to make sure the house is safe and in order. When Catherine is gone, Louka privately tells Raina that she can push open one of the shutters against Catherine’s wishes to continue listening to the battle, as one shutter does not bolt properly. Raina scolds Louka aloud for contradicting Catherine’s advice. Louka leaves, and Raina lies awake listening to the gunfire approach the house. At first Raina finds this exciting, but soon realizes that the scattered Serbian army is very close

by. She hears the shutters rattle, and in a moment a man strikes a match in the room, telling Raina to be quiet or he'll shoot her.

### **Summary: Act One, Bluntschli's entry to end of Act One**

The man, as the stage notes describe, is of "undistinguished" appearance. He does not seem as impressive a soldier as the picture of Sergius that Raina keeps in her room. Raina is surprised at the man's cleverness, and that he seems more interested in preserving his life than in behaving as a soldier "should." The man threatens again to kill Raina if she draws attention to him. Raina counters that she is not afraid to die. The man responds that, if Bulgarians were to enter and kill him, they would be left alone in Raina's room with her only in her bedclothes. The man implies that this would be a dangerous predicament for Raina, and she agrees, though is revolted. She gets up to find her cloak to cover herself, but the man takes it, as a guarantee that Raina will keep quiet, so that no soldiers come in and see her scantily clothed. He calls the cloak a weapon more powerful than a pistol. A bustling is heard outside the room. Catherine and Louka are coming, and just before they enter, Raina tells the man to hide behind a curtain. He does, and Catherine and Louka ask if everything is all right. They bring in a polite young soldier of the Bulgarian army, who reports that a runaway from the Serbians might be on the balcony and attempt to get into the house. Raina denies this possibility, testily, but she allows the soldier to search the area. He, Catherine, and Louka find no one and wish Raina good night. Raina tells Louka to stay with her mother the rest of the evening, as she, Raina, pretends to be worried that Catherine will need protection from the retreating Serbians. In a stage direction, the reader learns that Louka makes a strange face at Raina when she says this. Louka is aware Raina is up to something suspicious. When the three leave the room, the man emerges from the curtain, relieved at not having been found out. He says he is indebted to Raina for protecting him. Raina cries out, realizing that the man has left his pistol in plain sight on the ottoman while the other three were present. The man says they were lucky, and that Raina shouldn't worry, since the gun isn't loaded. Indeed, he has no space for

extra cartridges in his pockets, because he usually only carries chocolates in them, although he has just run out. Raina finds this behavior unbecoming for a soldier, but the man says that carrying candy is a sign of a veteran, rather than a novice.

Raina offers the man her chocolate cream candies, which he loves and eats. The man discusses the cavalry charge from the earlier in the day. He insults the leader of the Bulgarian side, which he does not know was Raina's future husband, Sergius. Although Raina thinks that Sergius' behavior was heroic, the man claims that it was instead foolish, unprofessional, and showy. After all, the man continues, the Serbians had machine guns and the Bulgarians and Russians had only horses. In most circumstances, the charge would have been a death sentence for the Bulgarian side, as the machine guns would have mowed them down immediately. But the Serbian forces were supplied with the wrong kind of cartridges for their guns, and only because of this were they defeated by the advancing Bulgarians. Thus Sergius and his cavalry won the battle, but only from sheer luck, and in the face of his own catastrophic military decision-making. Raina is shocked by this news and angry at the man for delivering it. She says she cannot allow the man to stay in her bedroom, since he has now spoken ill of her future husband. The man begs to be permitted to hide in her bedroom, because if she forces him outside, he will surely be killed. He only wants to sleep, but prepares to leave anyway. Raina stops him and brags that her family is famous for its hospitality. She says that if the man had asked for her pity instead of pointing a gun at her, Raina would have helped him. Raina continues bragging about her family's wealth, and that they have the only library in Bulgaria. They are so cultured, compared to other Bulgarians, that they even wash regularly. The man seems subtly amused by this, and notes that the man's father owns six hotels, although Raina appears not to notice this indication of his family's station in society.

Raina tells the man to stay awake and alert while she informs her mother, Catherine, of the situation, since her father, Major Petkoff, is still off at battle. The man promises not to sleep. But when Raina is

gone, he stumbles over to her bed and falls asleep instantly. Catherine and Raina return to find the man this way. Catherine is shocked and wants to wake him, but Raina begs Catherine to let him be.

### **Summary: Beginning of Act Two to Sergius's first interaction with Louka**

The stage notes say that it is now March of 1886. The setting is still the Petkoffs' house in rural Bulgaria, but the action now takes place in an adjacent garden. Nicola, the male servant of the home, converses with Louka. Louka complains about her mistresses, Catherine and Raina, and Nicola scolds her for it. As he does it, he reveals that he and Louka are engaged. Nicola argues that he could never marry someone who didn't behave according to the rules of good service. Louka says she doesn't have the soul of a servant like Nicola does. Louka also says she knows many of the Petkoffs' secrets, and could use them against the family. Nicola counters that he also knows many secrets, but warns her that it is a servant's job never to betray these secrets to anyone. Nicola reveals to the audience that he one day hopes to purchase his freedom and open a shop in Sofia, the capital, at which Louka can work. Nicola and Louka hear a man's voice outside the gate. The family's patriarch, Major Paul Petkoff, has returned from the war. The household scurries about to receive him. Nicola and Louka provide coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes. Catherine greets her husband excitedly but modestly. She is surprised and offended when Petkoff reveals that the Bulgarians and Russians have brokered a peace with the Serbians, instead of simply vanquishing them without conditions. In response, Petkoff says that it would have been nearly impossible to achieve total victory. Catherine tells her husband that, in his absence, they have installed an electric bell for the servants in the house, so no one needs to impolitely shout for help. Catherine finds the bell more civilized, but Petkoff thinks it unnecessary. They hear Sergius arriving, and before he enters the scene, Petkoff tells Catherine she'll need to get Sergius off Petkoff's back. Sergius is angling for a promotion that Petkoff fears will never come, because Sergius has no tactical military skill or intelligence. Sergius enters, and the stage

directions describe him as the true image of his picture that Raina keeps in her bedroom. The directions say he looks like a genuine soldierly hero, but is cynical, moody, and thinks the world is unworthy of his ideals. Sergius announces, however, that he has resigned his commission in the Bulgarian army because he can no longer tolerate the cowardice of those in command. He repeats that although his cavalry charge was successful, the officers believed it was foolish and out of line with military etiquette. Petkoff tries to remain neutral in this, acknowledging that Sergius has been sorely treated but that being a soldier is a trade. Raina enters, greeting her father and Sergius excitedly but modestly.

Petkoff and Sergius reminisce about a soldier they met in battle near Peerot, who tricked them into trading two hundred worn-out horses for fifty strong men. This soldier was a Swiss hired by the Serbians. This immediately strikes Raina's and Catherine's interest, although they try not to let on that they are thinking of Bluntschli. Sergius and Petkoff tell a story they heard about this Swiss soldier being hidden by two Bulgarian women during his retreat. Catherine and Raina's fear is confirmed, that this man is the "chocolate cream soldier" they helped, and the women in the story are themselves. Sergius says the soldier escaped the master of the house's cloak.

Raina and Catherine try to pass off their dismay by scolding Petkoff and Sergius for telling an unseemly story. Sergius apologizes theatrically but Petkoff argues that women married to soldiers should be up to handling rough words. Catherine and Petkoff leave, and Sergius and Raina are alone for the first time in the play. Raina says that she could never remain mad at Sergius, and that she loves him. Sergius says the same to Raina, and she leaves the scene briefly, at which point Sergius turns his attentions to Louka and begins flirting with her.

### **Summary: Sergius's interaction with Louka to end of Act Two**

Now alone, Sergius begins to flirt with Louka. He comes on to her brusquely, and wonders at his own boldness, referring to himself as a hero. Sergius admits that though he loves Raina, his personality will allow him to go behind her with Louka. Louka cautions that they should

move to where they can't be seen. Sergius also bristles at Louka's mention of Raina, and says that he cannot talk about his engagement with a servant, thus toggling between wooer and haughty noble. Louka, angry, tells him that Raina will never marry him because Raina is in love with another man. Sergius demands to know who that man is, but Louka says she will never tell. Sergius insults her, calls her a sneak and a bad servant, and grabs her so hard on the wrist that he bruises her. Sergius regrets that he's harmed Louka and asks for her forgiveness right away, but Louka says that such apologies are of no use to servants, who must do what nobles say. Raina enters, breaking up their conversation, and asks, jokingly, if Sergius and Louka have been flirting. This flusters Sergius, and Raina apologizes for what she considers a harmless joke. Sergius goes to Petkoff's office to help him with plans for troop movements in the final stages of the war, despite Sergius's poor command of military strategy. Catherine enters and wonders with Raina at the terrible luck of Sergius and Petkoff meeting the soldier that the two women helped. They wonder what to do, and Catherine worries that if anyone finds out about the soldier's presence in Raina's room, Sergius will break off the engagement. Raina replies bitterly that she sometimes feels Catherine wants to marry Sergius more than she does. Raina departs. Louka returns and announces the arrival of a Swiss soldier named Captain Bluntschli. Catherine realizes that it's the soldier she and Raina helped. Catherine conspires to keep Sergius and Petkoff from finding out about the soldier's presence. Bluntschli has returned to give back Petkoff's coat, which Catherine lent him to stay warm and disguise himself when he left the house. Much to Catherine's dismay, Sergius and Petkoff have already seen Bluntschli from the window and come out to greet him happily, as they have already met him during the war. Raina enters, sees Bluntschli, and, in a moment of shock, says aloud "the chocolate cream soldier." This quietly amuses Bluntschli and confuses Petkoff and Sergius, who assume Raina and Catherine have never met Bluntschli. Raina clears the confusion by lying that Nicola has destroyed a soldier ornament she has constructed to place on a chocolate dessert dish. Nicola returns with Bluntschli's bag in which Petkoff's coat is concealed. Catherine freezes, as she realizes that if Petkoff and Sergius



were to see this exchange, they would know something is amiss. Petkoff asks Bluntschli to stay with them, as he is happy to have Bluntschli among them and senses nothing of the drama. Bluntschli smiles to himself and agrees, much to the despair of Catherine.

### **Summary: Beginning of Act Three to Nicola's conversation with Louka**

The scene shifts to the library, where Bluntschli is drawing up the troop movements for Petkoff and Sergius, both of who are in awe of his abilities. Petkoff wonders where his old coat went. He's wearing a replacement and doesn't like it. Catherine tells him his coat is in the closet where he left it, and Petkoff bets a large sum it isn't there. When Nicola does in fact bring the coat in, Petkoff is flummoxed and Catherine and Raina are not surprised, as it was Bluntschli who returned that coat the same morning. Sergius and Petkoff leave the library, Sergius somewhat embarrassed by Bluntschli's expertise and leadership in drawing up the plans for the troops. Raina and Bluntschli are alone for the first time since his arrival. Raina says that Bluntschli looks better than he did the first time they met, and he replies that he's had a chance to wash up. Raina, pressing him, gets him to admit that he told the story of hiding in Raina's to only one man, whom Bluntschli trusted. But he learns from Raina that that man relayed this story to Petkoff and Sergius in the encampment. This worries Bluntschli, and Raina says that, if Sergius finds out that Bluntschli is the soldier from the story, he'll challenge Bluntschli to a duel.

Bluntschli replies that Raina should not tell Sergius his identity. Raina is aghast at this, since it would mean her telling a lie. She says she has only lied one other time in her life, which was when she told the army officer that Bluntschli wasn't present in her room. Bluntschli says that, in his line of work, lying is commonplace, as is people trying to save their lives. He has no trouble with Raina's lying, which she sees as a slip in character. He believes she should keep the secret from Sergius. When Raina becomes even more indignant, Bluntschli tells her to stop acting high and mighty. This shocks Raina thoroughly. She admits that no man

has ever spoken to her honestly, and without idolizing her. She says that Bluntschli doesn't take her seriously, but he replies that he's in fact the first man to take her seriously. Bluntschli declares that is infatuated with Raina. She admits to leaving a picture of herself for Bluntschli in the pocket of her father's coat that Bluntschli wore when he escaped the house. She assumed he would have seen it there. But Bluntschli did not find the picture, and Raina figures it must still be present in the pocket of the coat that Petkoff is now wearing. Bluntschli admits that he's not sure whether the picture is there, on second thought, because he had the coat pawned during the battle before he reclaimed it. This horrifies Raina. Louka enters to deliver a letter for Bluntschli that says his father has died. Bluntschli responds with dismay only at all the affairs that must be sorted out, since, Bluntschli realizes, his father was manager of far more hotels than he thought initially. Bluntschli leaves to begin planning his departure. Raina departs, and Nicola enters, finding Louka alone.

### **Summary: Nicola's conversation with Louka to end of play**

Nicola notes that Louka's sleeve is down, but she does not admit that the sleeve is covering the bruise on her wrist that Sergius gave her. Nicola brags that Sergius has given him money for no other reason than to demonstrate Sergius' wealth. Bluntschli, too, has given Nicola money for "supporting the lies" told to protect Bluntschli's truth from Sergius and Petkoff. Nicola tells Louka that, if she were more willing to behave obediently for men like Sergius, she might one day marry a noble. He says this not knowing that Louka and Sergius are already flirting. Before Nicola leaves, and as Sergius arrives, Nicola states that although Nicola and Louka are engaged, Nicola would help her to become a lady if she could arrange it. He is so devoted as a servant that he would put her interests above his own.

Sergius, alone with Louka, talks about how his confidence initially faltered in battle, but he quickly gained an overmastering courage. Louka says that if she were Empress of Russia, she would marry the man whom she loves without a care for public image. Sergius pledges that

Louka will be his and that he has a hold on her. Louka, testing his influence, reiterates that another man loves Raina, and that Raina is open to this man's affections. When Sergius presses her, she tells him that the man is Bluntschli. Upon this knowledge, Sergius states that Louka is still the object of Sergius' affection, but that he will challenge Bluntschli to a duel. He says that Bluntschli has disrespected Sergius's honor by setting his sights on Raina. Sergius quickly finds Bluntschli and challenges him to the duel. Bluntschli says he does not take the charge lightly and says he will fight if he has to. Raina enters. As she is on the verge of admitting to Sergius that she loves Bluntschli, Bluntschli argues that Raina only took him in because he threatened her with a gun. He also notes that the friend to whom he told the story of being helped by Raina and Catherine was brutally killed by the Bulgarians. Sergius and Raina find this knowledge horrible, and Sergius compares it to the "horror" of love. At this, Raina snaps that she has seen Sergius with Louka together, and Sergius seems tacitly to admit that he has been courting Louka. He has not been aware, until Raina tells him, that Louka is engaged to Nicola. Sergius is greatly agitated to hear this news. When Bluntschli coolly tells him to calm down, Sergius becomes doubly angry, figuring that Bluntschli thinks he is a "cultivated" Swiss telling a "barbarian" Bulgarian to be reasonable. Sergius asks Bluntschli to render judgment on Louka, who Sergius believes knows everything about the family and has been eavesdropping so as to gain information on the Petkoffs and use it for blackmail. But Bluntschli says he can judge no one for this because he's also eavesdropped in his military days. He says that people will do what they will do to survive and gain an advantage over others. Petkoff enters, telling Raina and the rest assembled that he thinks someone has been wearing his coat and has stretched it out. Raina removes her picture from the coat pocket secretly. Petkoff reaches for the picture of Raina the he had just discovered in his coat just before. When he finds it missing, he inquires about it to Raina and Sergius. Bluntschli finally admits that the picture was meant for him. Raina's earlier lie about the nature of the chocolate creams, which she blamed on Nicola, is also revealed. Bluntschli tells Petkoff that Bluntschli is the man in the story about the soldier being helped by the Bulgarian

women that Sergius and Petkoff heard during the war. Nicola enters and reveals that he no longer wishes to be engaged to Louka, and that she deserves to be married to a wealthier nobleman. Catherine enters as the scene is in progress. After Nicola releases Louka, Sergius apologizes to her, acknowledging their flirtation. Bluntschli says he will take on Nicola as the head of some of the hotels he has recently inherited, again hinting at his wealth. Louka says that Sergius's touch makes them formally engaged, and Sergius, pleased, accepts this. Catherine and Petkoff are confused and dismayed, and Bluntschli reveals that he has long harbored a crush on Raina and that he has a hopelessly romantic temperament. But Bluntschli says he cannot make a formal offer of marriage to Raina because he is middle-aged and she is too young at only seventeen. At this, Raina cries that she is really twenty-three, and Bluntschli immediately proposes marriage to her. Petkoff and Catherine, judging the reversals that have taken place to be in their favor, agree, on the condition that Bluntschli can supply the kind of life to which Raina is accustomed. But when Petkoff and Catherine realize that Bluntschli has much more money than they do, including more horses and more property, they agree gaily to the marriage. As the play ends, Bluntschli leaves to handle his father's estate, and promises to return to marry Raina. He also asks Sergius to wait to marry Louka until his return so they can all celebrate together. Sergius has the last words of the play, exclaiming, "What a man! What a man"!