Candida - Act III

di George Bernard Shaw (1898)

ACT III

Late in the evening. Past ten. The curtains are drawn, and the lamps lighted. The typewriter is in its case; the large table has been cleared and tidied; everything indicates that the day's work is done.

Candida and Marchbanks are seated at the fire. The reading lamp is on the mantelshelf above Marchbanks, who is sitting on the small chair reading aloud from a manuscript. A little pile of manuscripts and a couple of volumes of poetry are on the carpet beside him. Candida is in the easy chair with the poker, a light brass one, upright in her hand. She is leaning back and looking at the point of it curiously, with her feet stretched towards the blaze and her heels resting on the fender, profoundly unconscious of her appearance and surroundings.

MARCHBANKS: *breaking off in his recitation:* Every poet that ever lived has put that thought into a sonnet. He must: he can't help it. *He looks to her for assent, and notices her absorption in the poker.* Haven't you been listening? *No response.* Mrs. Morell!

CANDIDA: *starting.* Eh?

MARCHBANKS: Haven't you been listening?

CANDIDA: *with a guilty excess of politeness.* Oh, yes. It's very nice. Go on, Eugene. I'm longing to hear what happens to the angel.

MARCHBANKS: *crushed—the manuscript dropping from his hand to the floor.* I beg your pardon for boring you.

CANDIDA: But you are not boring me, I assure you. Please go on. Do, Eugene.

MARCHBANKS: I finished the poem about the angel quarter of an hour ago. I've read you several things since.

CANDIDA: *remorsefully.* I'm so sorry, Eugene. I think the poker must have fascinated me. *She puts it down.*

MARCHBANKS: It made me horribly uneasy.

CANDIDA: Why didn't you tell me? I'd have put it down at once.

MARCHBANKS: I was afraid of making you uneasy, too. It looked as if it were a weapon. If I were a hero of old, I should have laid my drawn sword between us. If Morell had come in he would have thought you had taken up the poker because there was no sword between us.

CANDIDA: *wondering.* What? *With a puzzled glance at him.* I can't quite follow that. Those sonnets of yours have perfectly addled me. Why should there be a sword between us?

MARCHBANKS: *evasively.* Oh, never mind. *He stoops to pick up the manuscript.*

CANDIDA: Put that down again, Eugene. There are limits to my appetite for poetry—even your poetry. You've been reading to me for more than two hours—ever since James went out. I want to talk.

MARCHBANKS: *rising, scared.* No: I mustn't talk. *He looks round him in his lost way, and adds, suddenly* I think I'll go out and take a walk in the park. *Making for the door.*

CANDIDA: Nonsense: it's shut long ago. Come and sit down on the hearth-rug, and talk moonshine as you usually do. I want to be amused. Don't you want to?

MARCHBANKS: *in half terror, half rapture.* Yes.

CANDIDA: Then come along. *She moves her chair back a little to make room. He hesitates; then timidly stretches himself on the hearth-rug, face upwards, and throws back his head across her knees, looking up at her.*

MARCHBANKS: Oh, I've been so miserable all the evening, because I was doing right. Now I'm doing wrong; and I'm happy.

CANDIDA: *tenderly amused at him.* Yes: I'm sure you feel a great grown up wicked deceiver—quite proud of yourself, aren't you?

MARCHBANKS: *raising his head quickly and turning a little to look round at her.* Take care. I'm ever so much older than you, if you only knew. *He turns quite over on his knees, with his hands clasped and his arms on her lap, and speaks with growing impulse, his blood beginning to stir.* May I say some wicked things to you?

CANDIDA: *without the least fear or coldness, quite nobly, and with perfect respect for his passion, but with a touch of her wise-hearted maternal humor.* No. But you may say anything you really and truly feel. Anything at all, no matter what it is. I am not afraid, so long as it is your real self that speaks, and not a mere attitude—a gallant attitude, or a wicked attitude, or even a poetic attitude. I put you on your honor and truth. Now say whatever you want to.

MARCHBANKS: *the eager expression vanishing utterly from his lips and nostrils as his eyes light up with pathetic spirituality.* Oh, now I can't say anything: all the words I know belong to some attitude or other—all except one.

CANDIDA: What one is that?

MARCHBANKS: *softly, losing himself in the music of the name.* Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida. I must say that now, because you have put me on my honor and truth; and I never think or feel Mrs. Morell: it is always Candida.

CANDIDA: Of course. And what have you to say to Candida?

MARCHBANKS: Nothing, but to repeat your name a thousand times. Don't you feel that every time is a prayer to you?

CANDIDA: Doesn't it make you happy to be able to pray?

MARCHBANKS: Yes, very happy.

CANDIDA: Well, that happiness is the answer to your prayer. Do you want anything more?

MARCHBANKS: *in beatitude.* No: I have come into heaven, where want is unknown.

Morell comes in. He halts on the threshold, and takes in the scene at a glance.

MORELL: *grave and self-contained.* I hope I don't disturb you. *(Candida starts up violently, but without the smallest embarrassment, laughing at herself. Eugene, still kneeling, saves himself from falling by putting his hands on the seat of the chair, and remains there, staring open mouthed at Morell.)*

CANDIDA: *as she rises.* Oh, James, how you startled me! I was so taken up with Eugene that I didn't hear your latch-key. How did the meeting go off? Did you speak well?

MORELL: I have never spoken better in my life.

CANDIDA: That was first rate! How much was the collection?

MORELL: I forgot to ask.

CANDIDA: *to Eugene.* He must have spoken splendidly, or he would never have forgotten that. *To Morell.* Where are all the others?

MORELL: They left long before I could get away: I thought I should never escape. I believe they are having supper somewhere.

CANDIDA: *in her domestic business tone.* Oh; in that case, Maria may go to bed. I'll tell her. *She goes out to the kitchen.*

MORELL: *looking sternly down at Marchbanks.* Well?

MARCHBANKS: *squatting cross-legged on the hearth-rug, and actually at ease with Morell—even impishly humorous.* Well?

MORELL: Have you anything to tell me?

MARCHBANKS: Only that I have been making a fool of myself here in private whilst you have been making a fool of yourself in public.

MORELL: Hardly in the same way, I think.

MARCHBANKS: *scrambling up—eagerly.* The very, very, VERY same way. I have been playing the good man just like you. When you began your heroics about leaving me here with Candida—

MORELL: *involuntarily.* Candida?

MARCHBANKS: Oh, yes: I've got that far. Heroics are infectious: I caught the disease from you. I swore not to say a word in your absence that I would not have said a month ago in your presence.

MORELL: Did you keep your oath?

MARCHBANKS: *suddenly perching himself grotesquely on the easy chair.* I was ass enough to keep it until about ten minutes ago. Up to that moment I went on desperately reading to her—reading my own poems—anybody's poems—to stave off a conversation. I was standing outside the gate of Heaven, and refusing to go in. Oh, you can't think how heroic it was, and how uncomfortable! Then—

MORELL: *steadily controlling his suspense.* Then?

MARCHBANKS: *prosaically slipping down into a quite ordinary attitude in the chair.* Then she couldn't bear being read to any longer.

MORELL: And you approached the gate of Heaven at last?

MARCHBANKS: Yes.

MORELL: Well? *Fiercely.* Speak, man: have you no feeling for me?

MARCHBANKS: *softly and musically.* Then she became an angel; and there was a flaming sword that turned every way, so that I couldn't go in; for I saw that that gate was really the gate of Hell.

MORELL: *triumphantly.* She repulsed you!

MARCHBANKS: *rising in wild scorn.* No, you fool: if she had done that I should never have seen that I was in Heaven already. Repulsed me! You think that would have saved me—virtuous indignation! Oh, you are not worthy to live in the same world with her. *He turns away contemptuously to the other side of the room.*

MORELL: *who has watched him quietly without changing his place.* Do you think you make yourself more worthy by reviling me, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: Here endeth the thousand and first lesson. Morell: I don't think much of your preaching after all: I believe I could do it better myself. The man I want to meet is the man that Candida married.

MORELL: The man that—? Do you mean me?

MARCHBANKS: I don't mean the Reverend James Mavor Morell, moralist and windbag. I mean the real man that the Reverend James must have hidden somewhere inside his black coat—the man that Candida loved. You can't make a woman like Candida love you by merely buttoning your collar at the back instead of in front.

MORELL: *boldly and steadily.* When Candida promised to marry me, I was the same moralist and windbag that you now see. I wore my black coat; and my collar was buttoned behind instead of in front. Do you think she would have loved me any the better for being insincere in my profession?

MARCHBANKS: *on the sofa hugging his ankles.* Oh, she forgave you, just as she forgives me for being a coward, and a weakling, and what you call a snivelling little whelp and all the rest of it. *Dreamily.* A woman like that has divine insight: she loves our souls, and not our follies and vanities and illusions, or our collars and coats, or any other of the rags and tatters we are rolled up in. *He reflects on this for an instant; then turns intently to question Morell.* What I want to know is how you got past the flaming sword that stopped me.

MORELL: *meaningly.* Perhaps because I was not interrupted at the end of ten minutes.

MARCHBANKS: *taken aback.* What!

MORELL: Man can climb to the highest summits; but he cannot dwell there long.

MARCHBANKS: It's false: there can he dwell for ever and there only. It's in the other moments that he can find no rest, no sense of the silent glory of life. Where would you have me spend my moments, if not on the summits?

MORELL: In the scullery, slicing onions and filling lamps.

MARCHBANKS: Or in the pulpit, scrubbing cheap earthenware souls?

MORELL: Yes, that, too. It was there that I earned my golden moment, and the right, in that moment, to ask her to love me. I did not take the moment on credit; nor did I use it to steal another man's happiness.

MARCHBANKS: *rather disgustedly, trotting back towards the fireplace.* I have no doubt you conducted the transaction as honestly as if you were buying a pound of cheese. *He stops on the brink of the, hearth-rug and adds, thoughtfully, to himself, with his back turned to Morell* I could only go to her as a beggar.

MORELL: *starting.* A beggar dying of cold—asking for her shawl?

MARCHBANKS: *turning, surprised.* Thank you for touching up my poetry. Yes, if you like, a beggar dying of cold asking for her shawl.

MORELL: *excitedly.* And she refused. Shall I tell you why she refused? I CAN tell you, on her own authority. It was because of—

MARCHBANKS: She didn't refuse.

MORELL: Not!

MARCHBANKS: She offered me all I chose to ask for, her shawl, her wings, the wreath of stars on her head, the lilies in her hand, the crescent moon beneath her feet—

MORELL: *seizing him.* Out with the truth, man: my wife is my wife: I want no more of your poetic fripperies. I know well that if I have lost her love and you have gained it, no law will bind her.

MARCHBANKS: *quaintly, without fear or resistance.* Catch me by the shirt collar, Morell: she will arrange it for me afterwards as she did this morning. *With quiet rapture.* I shall feel her hands touch me.

MORELL: You young imp, do you know how dangerous it is to say that to me? Or *with a sudden misgiving* has something made you brave?

MARCHBANKS: I'm not afraid now. I disliked you before: that was why I shrank from your touch. But I saw to-day—when she tortured you—that you love her. Since then I have been your friend: you may strangle me if you like.

MORELL: *releasing him.* Eugene: if that is not a heartless lie—if you have a spark of human feeling left in you—will you tell me what has happened during my absence?

MARCHBANKS: What happened! Why, the flaming sword—[Morell stamps with impatience.] Well, in plain prose, I loved her so exquisitely that I wanted nothing more than the happiness of being in such love. And before I had time to come down from the highest summits, you came in.

MORELL: *suffering deeply.* So it is still unsettled—still the misery of doubt.

MARCHBANKS: Misery! I am the happiest of men. I desire nothing now but her happiness. *With dreamy enthusiasm.* Oh, Morell, let us both give her up. Why should she have to choose between a wretched little nervous disease like me, and a pig-headed parson like you? Let us go on a pilgrimage, you to the east and I to the west, in search of a worthy lover for her—some beautiful archangel with purple wings—

MORELL: Some fiddlestick. Oh, if she is mad enough to leave me for you, who will protect her? Who will help her? who will work for her? who will be a father to her children? *He sits down distractedly on the sofa, with his elbows on his knees and his head propped on his clenched fists.*

MARCHBANKS: *snapping his fingers wildly.* She does not ask those silly questions. It is she who wants somebody to protect, to help, to work for—somebody to give her children to protect, to help and to work for. Some grown up man who has become as a little child again. Oh, you fool, you fool, you triple fool! I am the man, Morell: I am the man. *He dances about excitedly, crying.* You don't understand what a woman is. Send for her, Morell: send for her and let her choose between—[The door opens and Candida enters. He stops as if petrified.]

CANDIDA: *amazed, on the threshold.* What on earth are you at, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: *oddly.* James and I are having a preaching match; and he is getting the worst of it. *Candida looks quickly round at Morell. Seeing that he is distressed, she hurries down to him, greatly vexed, speaking with vigorous reproach to Marchbanks.*

CANDIDA: You have been annoying him. Now I won't have it, Eugene: do you hear? *Putting her hand on Morell's shoulder, and quite forgetting her wifely tact in her annoyance.* My boy shall not be worried: I will protect him.

MORELL: *rising proudly.* Protect!

CANDIDA: *not heeding him—to Eugene.* What have you been saying?

MARCHBANKS: *appalled.* Nothing—

CANDIDA: Eugene! Nothing?

MARCHBANKS: *piteously.* I mean—I—I'm very sorry. I won't do it again: indeed I won't. I'll let him alone.

MORELL: *indignantly, with an aggressive movement towards Eugene.* Let me alone! You young—

CANDIDA: *Stopping him.* Sh—no, let me deal with him, James.

MARCHBANKS: Oh, you're not angry with me, are you?

CANDIDA: *severely.* Yes, I am—very angry. I have a great mind to pack you out of the house.

MORELL: *taken aback by Candida's vigor, and by no means relishing the sense of being rescued by*

her from another man. Gently, Candida, gently. I am able to take care of myself.

CANDIDA: *petting him.* Yes, dear: of course you are. But you mustn't be annoyed and made miserable.

MARCHBANKS: *almost in tears, turning to the door.* I'll go.

CANDIDA: Oh, you needn't go: I can't turn you out at this time of night. *Vehemently.* Shame on you! For shame!

MARCHBANKS: *desperately.* But what have I done?

CANDIDA: I know what you have done—as well as if I had been here all the time. Oh, it was unworthy! You are like a child: you cannot hold your tongue.

MARCHBANKS: I would die ten times over sooner than give you a moment's pain.

CANDIDA: *with infinite contempt for this puerility.* Much good your dying would do me!

MORELL: Candida, my dear: this altercation is hardly quite seeming. It is a matter between two men; and I am the right person to settle it.

CANDIDA: Two MEN! Do you call that a man? *To Eugene.* You bad boy!

MARCHBANKS: *gathering a whimsically affectionate courage from the scolding.* If I am to be scolded like this, I must make a boy's excuse. He began it. And he's bigger than I am.

CANDIDA: *losing confidence a little as her concern for Morell's dignity takes the alarm.* That can't be true. *To Morell.* You didn't begin it, James, did you?

MORELL: *contemptuously.* No.

MARCHBANKS: *indignant.* Oh!

MORELL: *to Eugene.* YOU began it—this morning. *(Candida, instantly connecting this with his mysterious allusion in the afternoon to something told him by Eugene in the morning, looks quickly at him, wrestling with the enigma. Morell proceeds with the emphasis of offended superiority.)* But your other point is true. I am certainly the bigger of the two, and, I hope, the stronger, Candida. So you had better leave the matter in my hands.

CANDIDA: *again soothing him.* Yes, dear; but—[Troubled.] I don't understand about this morning.

MORELL: *gently snubbing her.* You need not understand, my dear.

CANDIDA: But, James, I—[The street bell rings.] Oh, bother! Here they all come. *She goes out to let them in.*

MARCHBANKS: *running to Morell.* Oh, Morell, isn't it dreadful? She's angry with us: she hates me. What shall I do?

MORELL: *with quaint desperation, clutching himself by the hair.* Eugene: my head is spinning round. I shall begin to laugh presently. *He walks up and down the middle of the room.*

MARCHBANKS: *following him anxiously.* No, no: she'll think I've thrown you into hysterics. Don't laugh. *(Boisterous voices and laughter are heard approaching. Lexy Mill, his eyes sparkling, and his bearing denoting unwonted elevation of spirit, enters with Burgess, who is greasy and self-complacent, but has all his wits about him. Miss Garnett, with her smartest hat and jacket on, follows them; but though her eyes are brighter than before, she is evidently a prey to misgiving. She places herself with her back to her typewriting table, with one hand on it to rest herself, passes the other across her forehead as if she were a little tired and giddy. Marchbanks relapses into shyness and edges away into the corner near the window, where Morell's books are.)*

MILL: *exhilaratedly.* Morell: I MUST congratulate you. *Grasping his hand.* What a noble, splendid,

inspired address you gave us! You surpassed yourself.

BURGESS: So you did, James. It fair kep' me awake to the last word. Didn't it, Miss Garnett?

PROSERPINE: *worriedly.* Oh, I wasn't minding you: I was trying to make notes. *She takes out her note-book, and looks at her stenography, which nearly makes her cry.*

MORELL: Did I go too fast, Pross?

PROSERPINE: Much too fast. You know I can't do more than a hundred words a minute. *She relieves her feelings by throwing her note-book angrily beside her machine, ready for use next morning.*

MORELL: *soothingly.* Oh, well, well, never mind, never mind, never mind. Have you all had supper?

LEXY: Mr. Burgess has been kind enough to give us a really splendid supper at the Belgrave.

BURGESS: *with effusive magnanimity.* Don't mention it, Mr. Mill. *Modestly.* You're 'arty welcome to my little treat.

PROSERPINE: We had champagne! I never tasted it before. I feel quite giddy.

MORELL: *surprised.* A champagne supper! That was very handsome. Was it my eloquence that produced all this extravagance?

MILL: *rhetorically.* Your eloquence, and Mr. Burgess's goodness of heart. *With a fresh burst of exhilaration.* And what a very fine fellow the chairman is, Morell! He came to supper with us.

MORELL: *with long drawn significance, looking at Burgess.* O-o-o-h, the chairman. NOW I understand.

Burgess, covering a lively satisfaction in his diplomatic cunning with a deprecatory cough, retires to the hearth. Lexy folds his arms and leans against the cellaret in a high-spirited attitude. Candida comes in with glasses, lemons, and a jug of hot water on a tray.

CANDIDA: Who will have some lemonade? You know our rules: total abstinence. *She puts the tray on the table, and takes up the lemon squeezers, looking enquiringly round at them.*

MORELL: No use, dear. They've all had champagne. Pross has broken her pledge.

CANDIDA: *to Proserpine.* You don't mean to say you've been drinking champagne!

PROSERPINE: *stubbornly.* Yes, I do. I'm only a beer teetotaller, not a champagne teetotaller. I don't like beer. Are there any letters for me to answer, Mr. Morell?

MORELL: No more to-night.

PROSERPINE: Very well. Good-night, everybody.

LEXY: *gallantly.* Had I not better see you home, Miss Garnett?

PROSERPINE: No, thank you. I shan't trust myself with anybody to-night. I wish I hadn't taken any of that stuff. *She walks straight out.*

BURGESS: *indignantly.* Stuff, indeed! That gurl dunno wot champagne is! Pommery and Greeno at twelve and six a bottle. She took two glasses a'most straight hoff.

MORELL: *a little anxious about her.* Go and look after her, Lexy.

LEXY: *alarmed.* But if she should really be—Suppose she began to sing in the street, or anything of that sort.

MORELL: Just so: she may. That's why you'd better see her safely home.

CANDIDA: Do, Lexy: there's a good fellow. *She shakes his hand and pushes him gently to the door.*

LEXY: It's evidently my duty to go. I hope it may not be necessary. Good-night, Mrs. Morell. *To the rest.*

Good-night. *He goes. Candida shuts the door.*

BURGESS: He was gushin' with hextra piety hisself arter two sips. People carn't drink like they huseter. *Dismissing the subject and bustling away from the hearth.* Well, James: it's time to lock up. Mr. Morchbanks: shall I 'ave the pleasure of your company for a bit of the way home?

MARCHBANKS: *affrightedly.* Yes: I'd better go. .[He hurries across to the door; but Candida places herself before it, barring his way.]

CANDIDA: *with quiet authority.* You sit down. You're not going yet.

MARCHBANKS: *quailing.* No: I—I didn't mean to. *He comes back into the room and sits down abjectly on the sofa.*

CANDIDA: Mr. Marchbanks will stay the night with us, papa.

BURGESS: Oh, well, I'll say good-night. So long, James. *He shakes hands with Morell and goes on to Eugene.* Make 'em give you a night light by your bed, Mr. Morchbanks: it'll comfort you if you wake up in the night with a touch of that complaint of yores. Good-night.

MARCHBANKS: Thank you: I will. Good-night, Mr. Burgess. *They shake hands and Burgess goes to the door.*

CANDIDA: *intercepting Morell, who is following Burgess.* Stay here, dear: I'll put on papa's coat for him. *She goes out with Burgess.*

MARCHBANKS: Morell: there's going to be a terrible scene. Aren't you afraid?

MORELL: Not in the least.

MARCHBANKS: I never envied you your courage before. *He rises timidly and puts his hand appealingly on Morell's forearm.* Stand by me, won't you?

MORELL: *casting him off gently, but resolutely.* Each for himself, Eugene. She must choose between us now. *He goes to the other side of the room as Candida returns. Eugene sits down again on the sofa like a guilty schoolboy on his best behaviour.*

CANDIDA: *between them, addressing Eugene.* Are you sorry?

MARCHBANKS: *earnestly.* Yes, heartbroken.

CANDIDA: Well, then, you are forgiven. Now go off to bed like a good little boy: I want to talk to James about you.

MARCHBANKS: *rising in great consternation.* Oh, I can't do that, Morell. I must be here. I'll not go away. Tell her.

CANDIDA: *with quick suspicion.* Tell me what? *His eyes avoid hers furtively. She turns and mutely transfers the question to Morell.*

MORELL: *bracing himself for the catastrophe.* I have nothing to tell her, except *here his voice deepens to a measured and mournful tenderness* that she is my greatest treasure on earth—if she is really mine.

CANDIDA: *coldly, offended by his yielding to his orator's instinct and treating her as if she were the audience at the Guild of St. Matthew.* I am sure Eugene can say no less, if that is all.

MARCHBANKS: *discouraged.* Morell: she's laughing at us.

MORELL: *with a quick touch of temper.* There is nothing to laugh at. Are you laughing at us, Candida?

CANDIDA: *with quiet anger.* Eugene is very quick-witted, James. I hope I am going to laugh; but I am not sure that I am not going to be very angry. *She goes to the fireplace, and stands there leaning*

with her arm on the mantelpiece and her foot on the fender, whilst Eugene steals to Morell and plucks him by the sleeve.

MARCHBANKS: *whispering.* Stop Morell. Don't let us say anything.

MORELL: *pushing Eugene away without deigning to look at him.* I hope you don't mean that as a threat, Candida.

CANDIDA: *with emphatic warning.* Take care, James. Eugene: I asked you to go. Are you going?

MORELL: *putting his foot down.* He shall not go. I wish him to remain.

MARCHBANKS: I'll go. I'll do whatever you want. *He turns to the door.*

CANDIDA: Stop! *He obeys.* Didn't you hear James say he wished you to stay? James is master here. Don't you know that?

MARCHBANKS: *flushing with a young poet's rage against tyranny.* By what right is he master?

CANDIDA: *quietly.* Tell him, James.

MORELL: *taken aback.* My dear: I don't know of any right that makes me master. I assert no such right.

CANDIDA: *with infinite reproach.* You don't know! Oh, James, James! *To Eugene, musingly.* I wonder do you understand, Eugene! No: you're too young. Well, I give you leave to stay—to stay and learn. *She comes away from the hearth and places herself between them.* Now, James: what's the matter? Come: tell me.

MARCHBANKS: *whispering tremulously across to him.* Don't.

CANDIDA: Come. Out with it!

MORELL: *slowly.* I meant to prepare your mind carefully, Candida, so as to prevent misunderstanding.

CANDIDA: Yes, dear: I am sure you did. But never mind: I shan't misunderstand.

MORELL: Well—er—[He hesitates, unable to find the long explanation which he supposed to be available.]

CANDIDA: Well?

MORELL: *baldly.* Eugene declares that you are in love with him.

MARCHBANKS: *frantically.* No, no, no, no, never. I did not, Mrs. Morell: it's not true. I said I loved you, and that he didn't. I said that I understood you, and that he couldn't. And it was not after what passed there before the fire that I spoke: it was not, on my word. It was this morning.

CANDIDA: *enlightened.* This morning!

MARCHBANKS: Yes. *He looks at her, pleading for credence, and then adds, simply* That was what was the matter with my collar.

CANDIDA: *after a pause; for she does not take in his meaning at once.* His collar! *She turns to Morell, shocked.* Oh, James: did you—[she stops]?

MORELL: *ashamed.* You know, Candida, that I have a temper to struggle with. And he said *shuddering* that you despised me in your heart.

CANDIDA: *turning quickly on Eugene.* Did you say that?

MARCHBANKS: *terrified.* No!

CANDIDA: *severely.* Then James has just told me a falsehood. Is that what you mean?

MARCHBANKS: No, no: I—I—*blurting out the explanation desperately* —it was David's wife. And it wasn't

at home: it was when she saw him dancing before all the people.

MORELL: *taking the cue with a debater's adroitness.* Dancing before all the people, Candida; and thinking he was moving their hearts by his mission when they were only suffering from—Prossy's complaint. *She is about to protest: he raises his hand to silence her, exclaiming* Don't try to look indignant, Candida:—

CANDIDA: *interjecting.* Try!

MORELL: *continuing.* Eugene was right. As you told me a few hours after, he is always right. He said nothing that you did not say far better yourself. He is the poet, who sees everything; and I am the poor parson, who understands nothing.

CANDIDA: *remorsefully.* Do you mind what is said by a foolish boy, because I said something like it again in jest?

MORELL: That foolish boy can speak with the inspiration of a child and the cunning of a serpent. He has claimed that you belong to him and not to me; and, rightly or wrongly, I have come to fear that it may be true. I will not go about tortured with doubts and suspicions. I will not live with you and keep a secret from you. I will not suffer the intolerable degradation of jealousy. We have agreed—he and I—that you shall choose between us now. I await your decision.

CANDIDA: *slowly recoiling a step, her heart hardened by his rhetoric in spite of the sincere feeling behind it.* Oh! I am to choose, am I? I suppose it is quite settled that I must belong to one or the other.

MORELL: *firmly.* Quite. You must choose definitely.

MARCHBANKS: *anxiously.* Morell: you don't understand. She means that she belongs to herself.

CANDIDA: *turning on him.* I mean that and a good deal more, Master Eugene, as you will both find out presently. And pray, my lords and masters, what have you to offer for my choice? I am up for auction, it seems. What do you bid, James?

MORELL: *reproachfully.* Cand—*He breaks down: his eyes and throat fill with tears: the orator becomes the wounded animal.* I can't speak—

CANDIDA: *impulsively going to him.* Ah, dearest—

MARCHBANKS: *in wild alarm.* Stop: it's not fair. You mustn't show her that you suffer, Morell. I am on the rack, too; but I am not crying.

MORELL: *rallying all his forces.* Yes: you are right. It is not for pity that I am bidding. *He disengages himself from Candida.*

CANDIDA: *retreating, chilled.* I beg your pardon, James; I did not mean to touch you. I am waiting to hear your bid.

MORELL: *with proud humility.* I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your defence, my honesty of purpose for your surety, my ability and industry for your livelihood, and my authority and position for your dignity. That is all it becomes a man to offer to a woman.

CANDIDA: *quite quietly.* And you, Eugene? What do you offer?

MARCHBANKS: My weakness! my desolation! my heart's need!

CANDIDA: *impressed.* That's a good bid, Eugene. Now I know how to make my choice.

She pauses and looks curiously from one to the other, as if weighing them. Morell, whose lofty confidence has changed into heartbreaking dread at Eugene's bid, loses all power of concealing his anxiety. Eugene, strung to the highest tension, does not move a muscle.

MORELL: *in a suffocated voice—the appeal bursting from the depths of his anguish.* Candida!

MARCHBANKS: *aside, in a flash of contempt.* Coward!

CANDIDA: *significantly.* I give myself to the weaker of the two.

Eugene divines her meaning at once: his face whitens like steel in a furnace that cannot melt it.

MORELL: *bowing his head with the calm of collapse.* I accept your sentence, Candida.

CANDIDA: Do you understand, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: Oh, I feel I'm lost. He cannot bear the burden.

MORELL: *incredulously, raising his bead with prosaic abruptness.* Do you mean, me, Candida?

CANDIDA: *smiling a little.* Let us sit and talk comfortably over it like three friends. *To Morell.* Sit down, dear. *Morell takes the chair from the fireside—the children's chair.* Bring me that chair, Eugene. *(She indicates the easy chair. He fetches it silently, even with something like cold strength, and places it next Morell, a little behind him. She sits down. He goes to the sofa and sits there, still silent and inscrutable. When they are all settled she begins, throwing a spell of quietness on them by her calm, sane, tender tone.)* You remember what you told me about yourself, Eugene: how nobody has cared for you since your old nurse died: how those clever, fashionable sisters and successful brothers of yours were your mother's and father's pets: how miserable you were at Eton: how your father is trying to starve you into returning to Oxford: how you have had to live without comfort or welcome or refuge, always lonely, and nearly always disliked and misunderstood, poor boy!

MARCHBANKS: *faithful to the nobility of his lot.* I had my books. I had Nature. And at last I met you.

CANDIDA: Never mind that just at present. Now I want you to look at this other boy here—MY boy—spoiled from his cradle. We go once a fortnight to see his parents. You should come with us, Eugene, and see the pictures of the hero of that household. James as a baby! the most wonderful of all babies. James holding his first school prize, won at the ripe age of eight! James as the captain of his eleven! James in his first frock coat! James under all sorts of glorious circumstances! You know how strong he is *I hope he didn't hurt you—how clever he is—how happy! With deepening gravity. Ask James's mother and his three sisters what it cost to save James the trouble of doing anything but be strong and clever and happy. Ask ME what it costs to be James's mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one. Ask Prossy and Maria how troublesome the house is even when we have no visitors to help us to slice the onions. Ask the tradesmen who want to worry James and spoil his beautiful sermons who it is that puts them off. When there is money to give, he gives it: when there is money to refuse, I refuse it. I build a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him, and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it, and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so. With sweet irony. And when he thought I might go away with you, his only anxiety was what should become of ME! And to tempt me to stay he offered me leaning forward to stroke his hair caressingly at each phrase his strength for MY defence, his industry for my livelihood, his position for my dignity, his—Relenting. Ah, I am mixing up your beautiful sentences and spoiling them, am I not, darling? She lays her cheek fondly against his.*

MORELL: *quite overcome, kneeling beside her chair and embracing her with boyish ingenuousness.* It's all true, every word. What I am you have made me with the labor of your hands and the love of your heart! You are my wife, my mother, my sisters: you are the sum of all loving care to me.

CANDIDA: *in his arms, smiling, to Eugene.* Am I YOUR mother and sisters to you, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: *rising with a fierce gesture of disgust.* Ah, never. Out, then, into the night with me!

CANDIDA: *rising quickly and intercepting him.* You are not going like that, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: *with the ring of a man's voice—nolonger a boy's—in the words.* I know the hour when it strikes. I am impatient to do what must be done.

MORELL: *rising from his knee, alarmed.* Candida: don't let him do anything rash.

CANDIDA: *confident, smiling at Eugene.* Oh, there is no fear. He has learnt to live without happiness.

MARCHBANKS: I no longer desire happiness: life is nobler than that. Parson James: I give you my happiness with both hands: I love you because you have filled the heart of the woman I loved. Good-bye. *He goes towards the door.*

CANDIDA: One last word. *He stops, but without turning to her.* How old are you, Eugene?

MARCHBANKS: As old as the world now. This morning I was eighteen.

CANDIDA: *going to him, and standing behind him with one hand caressingly on his shoulder.* Eighteen! Will you, for my sake, make a little poem out of the two sentences I am going to say to you? And will you promise to repeat it to yourself whenever you think of me?

MARCHBANKS: *without moving.* Say the sentences.

CANDIDA: When I am thirty, she will be forty-five. When I am sixty, she will be seventy-five.

MARCHBANKS: *turning to her.* In a hundred years, we shall be the same age. But I have a better secret than that in my heart. Let me go now. The night outside grows impatient.

CANDIDA: Good-bye. *She takes his face in her hands; and as he divines her intention and bends his knee, she kisses his forehead. Then he flies out into the night. She turns to Morell, holding out her arms to him.* Ah, James! *They embrace. But they do not know the secret in the poet's heart.*

Le note di scena sono tra parentesi *quadre* o *(tonde).*

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