11.2: Major Barbara: Act I

It is after dinner on a January night, in the library in Lady Britomart’s house in Wilton Crescent. A large and comfortable settee is in the middle of the room, upholstered in dark leather. A person sitting on it would have, on his right, Lady Britomart’s writing table, with the lady herself busy at it; a smaller writing table behind him on his left; the door behind him on Lady Britomart’s side; and a window with a window seat directly on his left. Near the window is an armchair.

Lady Britomart is a woman of fifty or thereabouts, well dressed and yet careless of her dress, well bred and quite reckless of her breeding, well mannered and yet appallingly outspoken and indifferent to the opinion of her interlocutory, amiable and yet peremptory, arbitrary, and high-tempered to the last bearable degree, and withal a very typical managing matron of the upper class, treated as a naughty child until she grew into a scolding mother, and finally settling down with plenty of practical ability and worldly experience, limited in the oddest way with domestic and class limitations, conceiving the universe exactly as if it were a large house in Wilton Crescent, though handling her corner of it very effectively on that assumption, and being quite enlightened and liberal as to the books in the library, the pictures on the walls, the music in the portfolios, and the articles in the papers.

Her son, Stephen, comes in. He is a gravely correct young man under 25, taking himself very seriously, but still in some awe of his mother, from childish habit and bachelor shyness rather than from any weakness of character.

Stephen. What’s the matter?

Lady Britomart. Presently, Stephen.

Stephen submissively walks to the settee and sits down. He takes up The Speaker.

Lady Britomart. Don’t begin to read, Stephen. I shall require all your attention.
Stephen. It was only while I was waiting —

Lady Britomart. Don’t make excuses, Stephen. [He puts down The Speaker]. Now! [She finishes her writing; rises; and comes to the settee]. I have not kept you waiting very long, I think.

Stephen. Not at all, mother.

Lady Britomart. Bring me my cushion. [He takes the cushion from the chair at the desk and arranges it for her as she sits down on the settee]. Sit down. [He sits down and fingers his tie nervously]. Don’t fiddle with your tie, Stephen: there is nothing the matter with it.

Stephen. I beg your pardon. [He fiddles with his watch chain instead].

Lady Britomart. Now are you attending to me, Stephen?

Stephen. Of course, mother.

Lady Britomart. No: it’s not of course. I want something much more than your everyday matter-of-course attention. I am going to speak to you very seriously, Stephen. I wish you would let that chain alone.

Stephen [hastily relinquishing the chain] Have I done anything to annoy you, mother? If so, it was quite unintentional.

Lady Britomart [astonished] Nonsense! [With some remorse] My poor boy, did you think I was angry with you?

Stephen. What is it, then, mother? You are making me very uneasy.

Lady Britomart [squaring herself at him rather aggressively] Stephen: may I ask how soon you intend to realize that you are a grown-up man, and that I am only a woman?

Stephen [amazed] Only a —

Lady Britomart. Don’t repeat my words, please: It is a most aggravating habit. You must learn to face life seriously, Stephen. I really cannot bear the whole burden of our family affairs any longer. You must advise me: you must assume the responsibility.

Stephen. I!

Lady Britomart. Yes, you, of course. You were 24 last June. You’ve been at Harrow[4] and Cambridge. You’ve been to India and Japan. You must know a lot of things now; unless you have wasted your time most scandalously. Well, advise me.

Stephen [much perplexed] You know I have never interfered in the household —

Lady Britomart. No: I should think not. I don’t want you to order the dinner.

Stephen. I mean in our family affairs.
Lady Britomart. Well, you must interfere now; for they are getting quite beyond me.

Stephen [troubled] I have thought sometimes that perhaps I ought; but really, mother, I know so little about them; and what I do know is so painful — it is so impossible to mention some things to you — [he stops, ashamed].

Lady Britomart. I suppose you mean your father.

Stephen [almost inaudibly] Yes.

Lady Britomart. My dear: we can’t go on all our lives not mentioning him. Of course you were quite right not to open the subject until I asked you to; but you are old enough now to be taken into my confidence, and to help me to deal with him about the girls.

Stephen. But the girls are all right. They are engaged.

Lady Britomart [complacently] Yes: I have made a very good match for Sarah. Charles Lomax will be a millionaire at 35. But that is ten years ahead; and in the meantime his trustees cannot under the terms of his father’s will allow him more than 800 pounds a year.

Stephen. But the will says also that if he increases his income by his own exertions, they may double the increase.

Lady Britomart. Charles Lomax’s exertions are much more likely to decrease his income than to increase it. Sarah will have to find at least another 800 pounds a year for the next ten years; and even then they will be as poor as church mice. And what about Barbara? I thought Barbara was going to make the most brilliant career of all of you. And what does she do? Joins the Salvation Army; discharges her maid; lives on a pound a week; and walks in one evening with a professor of Greek whom she has picked up in the street, and who pretends to be a Salvationist, and actually plays the big drum for her in public because he has fallen head over ears in love with her.

Stephen. I was certainly rather taken aback when I heard they were engaged. Cusins is a very nice fellow, certainly: nobody would ever guess that he was born in Australia; but —

Lady Britomart. Oh, Adolphus Cusins will make a very good husband. After all, nobody can say a word against Greek: it stamps a man at once as an educated gentleman. And my family, thank Heaven, is not a pig-headed Tory one. We are Whigs, and believe in liberty. Let snobbish people say what they please: Barbara shall marry, not the man they like, but the man I like.

Stephen. Of course I was thinking only of his income. However, he is not likely to be extravagant.

Lady Britomart. Don’t be too sure of that, Stephen. I know your quiet, simple, refined, poetic people like Adolphus — quite content with the best of everything! They cost more than your extravagant people, who are always as mean as they are second rate. No: Barbara will need at least 2000 pounds a year. You see it means two additional households. Besides, my dear, you must marry soon. I don’t approve of the present fashion of philandering bachelors and late marriages; and I am trying to arrange something for you.

Stephen. It’s very good of you, mother; but perhaps I had better arrange that for myself.
Lady Britomart. Nonsense! you are much too young to begin matchmaking: you would be taken in by some pretty little nobody. Of course I don’t mean that you are not to be consulted: you know that as well as I do. [Stephen closes his lips and is silent]. Now don’t sulk, Stephen.

Stephen. I am not sulkng, mother. What has all this got to do with — with — with my father?

Lady Britomart. My dear Stephen: where is the money to come from? It is easy enough for you and the other children to live on my income as long as we are in the same house; but I can’t keep four families in four separate houses. You know how poor my father is: he has barely seven thousand a year now; and really, if he were not the Earl of Stevenage, he would have to give up society. He can do nothing for us: he says, naturally enough, that it is absurd that he should be asked to provide for the children of a man who is rolling in money. You see, Stephen, your father must be fabulously wealthy, because there is always a war going on somewhere.

Stephen. You need not remind me of that, mother. I have hardly ever opened a newspaper in my life without seeing our name in it. The Undershaft torpedo! The Undershaft quick firers! The Undershaft ten inch! the Undershaft disappearing rampart gun! the Undershaft submarine! and now the Undershaft aerial battleship! At Harrow they called me the Woolwich Infant. At Cambridge it was the same. A little brute at King’s who was always trying to get up revivals, spoil my Bible — your first birthday present to me — by writing under my name, “Son and heir to Undershaft and Lazarus, Death and Destruction Dealers: address, Christendom and Judea.” But that was not so bad as the way I was kowtowed to everywhere because my father was making millions by selling cannons.

Lady Britomart. It is not only the cannons, but the war loans that Lazarus arranges under cover of giving credit for the cannons. You know, Stephen, it’s perfectly scandalous. Those two men, Andrew Undershaft and Lazarus, positively have Europe under their thumbs. That is why your father is able to behave as he does. He is above the law. Do you think Bismarck or Gladstone or Disraeli could have openly defied every social and moral obligation all their lives as your father has? They simply wouldn’t have dared. I asked Gladstone to take it up. I asked The Times to take it up. I asked the Lord Chamberlain to take it up. But it was just like asking them to declare war on the Sultan. They WOULDN’T. They said they couldn’t touch him. I believe they were afraid.

Stephen. What could they do? He does not actually break the law.

Lady Britomart. Not break the law! He is always breaking the law. He broke the law when he was born: his parents were not married.

Stephen. Mother! Is that true?

Lady Britomart. Of course it’s true: that was why we separated.

Stephen. He married without letting you know this!

Lady Britomart [rather taken aback by this inference] Oh no. To do Andrew justice, that was not the sort of thing he did. Besides, you know the Undershaft motto: Unashamed. Everybody knew.

Stephen. But you said that was why you separated.
Lady Britomart. Yes, because he was not content with being a foundling himself: he wanted to disinherit you for another foundling. That was what I couldn’t stand.

Stephen [ashamed] Do you mean for — for — for —


Stephen. But this is so frightful to me, mother. To have to speak to you about such things!

Lady Britomart. It’s not pleasant for me, either, especially if you are still so childish that you must make it worse by a display of embarrassment. It is only in the middle classes, Stephen, that people get into a state of dumb helpless horror when they find that there are wicked people in the world. In our class, we have to decide what is to be done with wicked people; and nothing should disturb our self possession. Now ask your question properly.

Stephen. Mother: you have no consideration for me. For Heaven’s sake either treat me as a child, as you always do, and tell me nothing at all; or tell me everything and let me take it as best I can.

Lady Britomart. Treat you as a child! What do you mean? It is most unkind and ungrateful of you to say such a thing. You know I have never treated any of you as children. I have always made you my companions and friends, and allowed you perfect freedom to do and say whatever you liked, so long as you liked what I could approve of.

Stephen [desperately] I daresay we have been the very imperfect children of a very perfect mother; but I do beg you to let me alone for once, and tell me about this horrible business of my father wanting to set me aside for another son.

Lady Britomart [amazed] Another son! I never said anything of the kind. I never dreamt of such a thing. This is what comes of interrupting me.

Stephen. But you said —

Lady Britomart [cutting him short] Now be a good boy, Stephen, and listen to me patiently. The Undershafs are descended from a foundling\(^\text{[10]}\) in the parish of St. Andrew Undershaf\(^\text{[11]}\) in the city. That was long ago, in the reign of James the First\(^\text{[12]}\). Well, this foundling was adopted by an armorer and gun-maker. In the course of time the foundling succeeded to the business; and from some notion of gratitude, or some vow or something, he adopted another foundling, and left the business to him. And that foundling did the same. Ever since that, the cannon business has always been left to an adopted foundling named Andrew Undershaf.

Stephen. But did they never marry? Were there no legitimate sons?

Lady Britomart. Oh yes: they married just as your father did; and they were rich enough to buy land for their own children and leave them well provided for. But they always adopted and trained some foundling to succeed them in the business; and of course they always quarrelled with their wives furiously over it. Your father was adopted in that way; and he pretends to consider himself bound to keep up the tradition and adopt somebody to leave the business to. Of course I was not going to stand that. There may have been some reason for it when the Undershafs could only marry women in their own class, whose sons were not fit to govern great estates. But there could be no excuse for passing over my son.

Stephen [dubiously] I am afraid I should make a poor hand of managing a cannon foundry.
Lady Britomart. Nonsense! you could easily get a manager and pay him a salary.

Stephen. My father evidently had no great opinion of my capacity.

Lady Britomart. Stuff, child! you were only a baby: it had nothing to do with your capacity. Andrew did it on principle, just as he did every perverse and wicked thing on principle. When my father remonstrated, Andrew actually told him to his face that history tells us of only two successful institutions: one the Undershaft firm, and the other the Roman Empire under the Antonines[^13]. That was because the Antonine emperors all adopted their successors. Such rubbish! The Stevenages are as good as the Antonines, I hope; and you are a Stevenage. But that was Andrew all over. There you have the man! Always clever and unanswerable when he was defending nonsense and wickedness: always awkward and sullen when he had to behave sensibly and decently!

Stephen. Then it was on my account that your home life was broken up, mother. I am sorry.

Lady Britomart. Well, dear, there were other differences. I really cannot bear an immoral man. I am not a Pharisee[^14], I hope; and I should not have minded his merely doing wrong things: we are none of us perfect. But your father didn't exactly do wrong things: he said them and thought them: that was what was so dreadful. He really had a sort of religion of wrongness just as one doesn’t mind men practising immorality so long as they own that they are in the wrong by preaching morality; so I couldn’t forgive Andrew for preaching immorality while he practised morality. You would all have grown up without principles, without any knowledge of right and wrong, if he had been in the house. You know, my dear, your father was a very attractive man in some ways. Children did not dislike him; and he took advantage of it to put the wickedest ideas into their heads, and make them quite unmanageable. I did not dislike him myself: very far from it; but nothing can bridge over moral disagreement.

Stephen. All this simply bewilders me, mother. People may differ about matters of opinion, or even about religion; but how can they differ about right and wrong? Right is right; and wrong is wrong; and if a man cannot distinguish them properly, he is either a fool or a rascal: that's all.

Lady Britomart [touched] That’s my own boy [she pats his cheek]! Your father never could answer that: he used to laugh and get out of it under cover of some affectionate nonsense. And now that you understand the situation, what do you advise me to do?

Stephen. Well, what can you do?

Lady Britomart. I must get the money somehow.

Stephen. We cannot take money from him. I had rather go and live in some cheap place like Bedford Square[^15] or even Hampstead than take a farthing of his money.

Lady Britomart. But after all, Stephen, our present income comes from Andrew.

Stephen [shocked] I never knew that.

Lady Britomart. Well, you surely didn’t suppose your grandfather had anything to give me. The Stevenages could not do everything for you. We gave you social position. Andrew had to contribute something. He had a very good bargain, I
think.

Stephen [bitterly] We are utterly dependent on him and his cannons, then!

Lady Britomart. Certainly not: the money is settled\textsuperscript{[16]}. But he provided it. So you see it is not a question of taking money from him or not: it is simply a question of how much. I don’t want any more for myself.

Stephen. Nor do I.

Lady Britomart. But Sarah does; and Barbara does. That is, Charles Lomax and Adolphus Cusins will cost them more. So I must put my pride in my pocket and ask for it, I suppose. That is your advice, Stephen, is it not?

Stephen. No.

Lady Britomart [sharply] Stephen!

Stephen. Of course if you are determined —

Lady Britomart. I am not determined: I ask your advice; and I am waiting for it. I will not have all the responsibility thrown on my shoulders.

Stephen [obstinately] I would die sooner than ask him for another penny.

Lady Britomart [resignedly] You mean that I must ask him. Very well, Stephen: It shall be as you wish. You will be glad to know that your grandfather concurs. But he thinks I ought to ask Andrew to come here and see the girls. After all, he must have some natural affection for them.

Stephen. Ask him here!!!

Lady Britomart. Do not repeat my words, Stephen. Where else can I ask him?

Stephen. I never expected you to ask him at all.

Lady Britomart. Now don’t tease, Stephen. Come! you see that it is necessary that he should pay us a visit, don’t you?

Stephen [reluctantly] I suppose so, if the girls cannot do without his money.

Lady Britomart. Thank you, Stephen: I knew you would give me the right advice when it was properly explained to you. I have asked your father to come this evening. [Stephen bounds from his seat] Don’t jump, Stephen: it fidgets me.

Stephen [in utter consternation] Do you mean to say that my father is coming here to-night — that he may be here at any moment?

Lady Britomart [looking at her watch] I said nine. [He gasps. She rises]. Ring the bell, please. [Stephen goes to the smaller writing table; presses a button on it; and sits at it with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, outwitted and overwhelmed]. It is ten minutes to nine yet; and I have to prepare the girls. I asked Charles Lomax and Adolphus to dinner on purpose that they might be here. Andrew had better see them in case he should cherish any
delusions as to their being capable of supporting their wives. [The butler enters: Lady Britomart goes behind the settee
to speak to him]. Morrison: go up to the drawingroom and tell everybody to come down here at once. [Morrison
withdraws. Lady Britomart turns to Stephen]. Now remember, Stephen, I shall need all your countenance and authority.
[He rises and tries to recover some vestige of these attributes]. Give me a chair, dear. [He pushes a chair forward from
the wall to where she stands, near the smaller writing table. She sits down; and he goes to the armchair, into which he
throws himself]. I don’t know how Barbara will take it. Ever since they made her a major in the Salvation Army she has
developed a propensity to have her own way and order people about which quite cows me sometimes. It’s not ladylike:
I’m sure I don’t know where she picked it up. Anyhow, Barbara shan’t bully me; but still it’s just as well that your father
should be here before she has time to refuse to meet him or make a fuss. Don’t look nervous, Stephen, it will only
encourage Barbara to make difficulties. I am nervous enough, goodness knows; but I don’t show it.

Sarah and Barbara come in with their respective young men, Charles Lomax and Adolphus Cusins. Sarah is slender,
bored, and mundane. Barbara is robust, jollier, much more energetic. Sarah is fashionably dressed: Barbara is in
Salvation Army uniform. Lomax, a young man about town, is like many other young men about town. He is affected with
a frivolous sense of humor which plunges him at the most inopportune moments into paroxysms of imperfectly
suppressed laughter. Cusins is a spectacled student, slight, thin haired, and sweet voiced, with a more complex form of
Lomax’s complaint. His sense of humor is intellectual and subtle, and is complicated by an appalling temper. The
lifelong struggle of a benevolent temperament and a high conscience against impulses of inhuman ridicule and fierce
impatience has set up a chronic strain which has visibly wrecked his constitution. He is a most implacable, determined,
tenacious, intolerant person who by mere force of character presents himself as — and indeed actually is —
considerate, gentle, explanatory, even mild and apologetic, capable possibly of murder, but not of cruelty or coarseness.
By the operation of some instinct which is not merciful enough to blind him with the illusions of love, he is obstinately
bent on marrying Barbara. Lomax likes Sarah and thinks it will be rather a lark to marry her. Consequently he has not
attempted to resist Lady Britomart’s arrangements to that end.

All four look as if they had been having a good deal of fun in the drawingroom. The girls enter first, leaving the swains[17]
outside. Sarah comes to the settee. Barbara comes in after her and stops at the door.

Barbara. Are Cholly and Dolly to come in?

Lady Britomart [forcibly] Barbara: I will not have Charles called Cholly: the vulgarity of it positively makes me ill.

Barbara. It’s all right, mother. Cholly is quite correct nowadays. Are they to come in?

Lady Britomart. Yes, if they will behave themselves.

Barbara [through the door] Come in, Dolly, and behave yourself.

Barbara comes to her mother’s writing table. Cusins enters smiling, and wanders towards Lady Britomart.

Sarah [calling] Come in, Cholly. [Lomax enters, controlling his features very imperfectly, and places himself vaguely
between Sarah and Barbara].

Lady Britomart [peremptorily] Sit down, all of you. [They sit. Cusins crosses to the window and seats himself there.
Lomax takes a chair. Barbara sits at the writing table and Sarah on the settee]. I don’t in the least know what you are
laughing at, Adolphus. I am surprised at you, though I expected nothing better from Charles Lomax.

Cusins [in a remarkably gentle voice] Barbara has been trying to teach me the West Ham\textsuperscript{[18]} Salvation March.

Lady Britomart. I see nothing to laugh at in that; nor should you if you are really converted.

Cusins [sweetly] You were not present. It was really funny, I believe.

Lomax. Ripping.

Lady Britomart. Be quiet, Charles. Now listen to me, children. Your father is coming here this evening. [General stupefaction].

Lomax [remonstrating] Oh I say!

Lady Britomart. You are not called on to say anything, Charles.

Sarah. Are you serious, mother?

Lady Britomart. Of course I am serious. It is on your account, Sarah, and also on Charles's. [Silence. Charles looks painfully unworthy]. I hope you are not going to object, Barbara.

Barbara. If why should I? My father has a soul to be saved like anybody else. He's quite welcome as far as I am concerned. [She sits on the table, and softly whistles 'Onward Christian Soldiers'\textsuperscript{[19]}]

Lomax [still remonstrant] But really, don't you know! Oh I say!

Lady Britomart [frigidly] What do you wish to convey, Charles?

Lomax. Well, you must admit that this is a bit thick.

Lady Britomart [turning with ominous suavity to Cusins] Adolphus: you are a professor of Greek. Can you translate Charles Lomax's remarks into reputable English for us?

Cusins [cautiously] If I may say so, Lady Brit, I think Charles has rather happily expressed what we all feel. Homer, speaking of Autolycus\textsuperscript{[20]}, uses the same phrase.

Lomax [handsomely] Not that I mind, you know, if Sarah don't.

Lady Britomart [crushingly] Thank you. Have I your permission, Adolphus, to invite my own husband to my own house?

Cusins [gallantly] You have my unhesitating support in everything you do.

Lady Britomart. Sarah: have you nothing to say?

Sarah. Do you mean that he is coming regularly to live here?
Lady Britomart. Certainly not. The spare room is ready for him if he likes to stay for a day or two and see a little more of you; but there are limits.

Sarah. Well, he can’t eat us, I suppose. I don’t mind.

Lomax [chuckling] I wonder how the old man will take it.

Lady Britomart. Much as the old woman will, no doubt, Charles.

Lomax [abashed] I didn’t mean — at least —

Lady Britomart. You didn’t think, Charles. You never do; and the result is, you never mean anything. And now please attend to me, children. Your father will be quite a stranger to us.

Lomax. I suppose he hasn’t seen Sarah since she was a little kid.

Lady Britomart. Not since she was a little kid, Charles, as you express it with that elegance of diction and refinement of thought that seem never to desert you. Accordingly — er — [impatiently] Now I have forgotten what I was going to say. That comes of your provoking me to be sarcastic, Charles. Adolphus: will you kindly tell me where I was.

Cusins [sweetly] You were saying that as Mr Undershaft has not seen his children since they were babies, he will form his opinion of the way you have brought them up from their behavior to-night, and that therefore you wish us all to be particularly careful to conduct ourselves well, especially Charles.

Lomax. Look here: Lady Brit didn’t say that.

Lady Britomart [vehemently] I did, Charles. Adolphus’s recollection is perfectly correct. It is most important that you should be good; and I do beg you for once not to pair off into opposite corners and giggle and whisper while I am speaking to your father.

Barbara. All right, mother. We’ll do you credit.

Lady Britomart. Remember, Charles, that Sarah will want to feel proud of you instead of ashamed of you.

Lomax. Oh I say! There’s nothing to be exactly proud of, don’t you know.

Lady Britomart. Well, try and look as if there was.

Morrison, pale and dismayed, breaks into the room in unconcealed disorder.

Morrison. Might I speak a word to you, my lady?

Lady Britomart. Nonsense! Show him up.

Morrison. Yes, my lady. [He goes].

Lomax. Does Morrison know who he is?
Lady Britomart. Of course. Morrison has always been with us.

Lomax. It must be a regular corker[21] for him, don’t you know.

Lady Britomart. Is this a moment to get on my nerves, Charles, with your outrageous expressions?

Lomax. But this is something out of the ordinary, really —

Morrison [at the door] The — er — Mr Undershaft. [He retreats in confusion].

Andrew Undershaft comes in. All rise. Lady Britomart meets him in the middle of the room behind the settee.

Andrew is, on the surface, a stoutish, easygoing elderly man, with kindly patient manners, and an engaging simplicity of character. But he has a watchful, deliberate, waiting, listening face, and formidable reserves of power, both bodily and mental, in his capacious chest and long head. His gentleness is partly that of a strong man who has learnt by experience that his natural grip hurts ordinary people unless he handles them very carefully, and partly the mellowness of age and success. He is also a little shy in his present very delicate situation.

Lady Britomart. Good evening, Andrew.

Undershaft. How d’ye do, my dear.

Lady Britomart. You look a good deal older.

Undershaft [apologetically] I AM somewhat older. [With a touch of courtship] Time has stood still with you.

Lady Britomart [promptly] Rubbish! This is your family.

Undershaft [surprised] Is it so large? I am sorry to say my memory is failing very badly in some things. [He offers his hand with paternal kindness to Lomax].

Lomax [jerkily shaking his hand] Ahdedoo.

Undershaft. I can see you are my eldest. I am very glad to meet you again, my boy.

Lomax [remonstrating] No but look here don’t you know —[Overcome] Oh I say!

Lady Britomart [recovering from momentary speechlessness] Andrew: do you mean to say that you don’t remember how many children you have?

Undershaft. Well, I am afraid I—. They have grown so much — er. Am I making any ridiculous mistake? I may as well confess: I recollect only one son. But so many things have happened since, of course — er —

Lady Britomart [decisively] Andrew: you are talking nonsense. Of course you have only one son.

Undershaft. Perhaps you will be good enough to introduce me, my dear.

Lady Britomart. That is Charles Lomax, who is engaged to Sarah.
Undershaft. My dear sir, I beg your pardon.

Lomax. Not at all. Delighted, I assure you.

Lady Britomart. This is Stephen.

Undershaft [bowing] Happy to make your acquaintance, Mr Stephen. Then [going to Cusins] you must be my son. [Taking Cusins’ hands in his] How are you, my young friend? [To Lady Britomart] He is very like you, my love.

Cusins. You flatter me, Mr Undershaft. My name is Cusins: engaged to Barbara. [Very explicitly] That is Major Barbara Undershaft, of the Salvation Army. That is Sarah, your second daughter. This is Stephen Undershaft, your son.

Undershaft. My dear Stephen, I beg your pardon.

Stephen. Not at all.


Undershaft. Sarah, of course. [They shake hands. He goes over to Barbara] Barbara — I am right this time, I hope.

Barbara. Quite right. [They shake hands].

Lady Britomart [resuming command] Sit down, all of you. Sit down, Andrew. [She comes forward and sits on the settle. Cusins also brings his chair forward on her left. Barbara and Stephen resume their seats. Lomax gives his chair to Sarah and goes for another].

Undershaft. Thank you, my love.

Lomax [conversationally, as he brings a chair forward between the writing table and the settee, and offers it to Undershaft] Takes you some time to find out exactly where you are, don’t it?

Undershaft [accepting the chair] That is not what embarrasses me, Mr Lomax. My difficulty is that if I play the part of a father, I shall produce the effect of an intrusive stranger; and if I play the part of a discreet stranger, I may appear a callous father.

Lady Britomart. There is no need for you to play any part at all, Andrew. You had much better be sincere and natural.

Undershaft [submissively] Yes, my dear: I daresay that will be best. [Making himself comfortable] Well, here I am. Now what can I do for you all?

Lady Britomart. You need not do anything, Andrew. You are one of the family. You can sit with us and enjoy yourself.

Lomax’s too long suppressed mirth explodes in agonized neighings.

Lady Britomart [outraged] Charles Lomax: if you can behave yourself, behave yourself. If not, leave the room.
Lomax. I’m awfully sorry, Lady Brit; but really, you know, upon my soul! [He sits on the settee between Lady Britomart and Undershelf, quite overcome].

Barbara. Why don’t you laugh if you want to, Cholly? It’s good for your inside.

Lady Britomart. Barbara: you have had the education of a lady. Please let your father see that; and don’t talk like a street girl.

Undershelf. Never mind me, my dear. As you know, I am not a gentleman; and I was never educated.

Lomax [encouragingly] Nobody’d know it, I assure you. You look all right, you know.

Cusins. Let me advise you to study Greek, Mr Undershelf. Greek scholars are privileged men. Few of them know Greek; and none of them know anything else; but their position is unchallengeable. Other languages are the qualifications of waiters and commercial travellers: Greek is to a man of position what the hallmark is to silver.

Barbara. Dolly: don’t be insincere. Cholly: fetch your concertina and play something for us.

Lomax [doubtfully to Undershelf] Perhaps that sort of thing isn’t in your line, eh?

Undershelf. I am particularly fond of music.

Lomax [delighted] Are you? Then I’ll get it. [He goes upstairs for the instrument].

Undershelf. Do you play, Barbara?

Barbara. Only the tambourine. But Cholly’s teaching me the concertina.

Undershelf. Is Cholly also a member of the Salvation Army?

Barbara. No: he says it’s bad form to be a dissenter. But I don’t despair of Cholly. I made him come yesterday to a meeting at the dock gates, and take the collection in his hat.

Lady Britomart. It is not my doing, Andrew. Barbara is old enough to take her own way. She has no father to advise her.

Barbara. Oh yes she has. There are no orphans in the Salvation Army.

Undershelf. Your father there has a great many children and plenty of experience, eh?

Barbara [looking at him with quick interest and nodding] Just so. How did you come to understand that? [Lomax is heard at the door trying the concertina].

Lady Britomart. Come in, Charles. Play us something at once.

Lomax. Righto! [He sits down in his former place, and preludes].

Undershelf. One moment, Mr Lomax. I am rather interested in the Salvation Army. Its motto might be my own: Blood
and Fire[24].

Lomax [shocked] But not your sort of blood and fire, you know.

Undershaft. My sort of blood cleanses: my sort of fire purifies.

Barbara. So do ours. Come down to-morrow to my shelter — the West Ham shelter — and see what we’re doing. We’re going to march to a great meeting in the Assembly Hall at Mile End. Come and see the shelter and then march with us: it will do you a lot of good. Can you play anything?

Undershaft. In my youth I earned pennies, and even shillings occasionally, in the streets and in public house parlors by my natural talent for stepdancing. Later on, I became a member of the Undershaft orchestral society, and performed passably on the tenor trombone.

Lomax [scandalized] Oh I say!

Barbara. Many a sinner has played himself into heaven on the trombone, thanks to the Army.

Lomax [to Barbara, still rather shocked] Yes; but what about the cannon business, don’t you know? [To Undershaft] Getting into heaven is not exactly in your line, is it?

Lady Britomart. Charles!!!

Lomax. Well; but it stands to reason, don’t it? The cannon business may be necessary and all that: we can’t get on without cannons; but it isn’t right, you know. On the other hand, there may be a certain amount of tosh about the Salvation Army — I belong to the Established Church myself — but still you can’t deny that it’s religion; and you can’t go against religion, can you? At least unless you’re downright immoral, don’t you know.

Undershaft. You hardly appreciate my position, Mr Lomax —

Lomax [hastily] I’m not saying anything against you personally, you know.

Undershaft. Quite so, quite so. But consider for a moment. Here I am, a manufacturer of mutilation and murder. I find myself in a specially amiable humor just now because, this morning, down at the foundry, we blew twenty-seven dummy soldiers into fragments with a gun which formerly destroyed only thirteen.

Lomax [leniently] Well, the more destructive war becomes, the sooner it will be abolished, eh?

Undershaft. Not at all. The more destructive war becomes the more fascinating we find it. No, Mr Lomax, I am obliged to you for making the usual excuse for my trade; but I am not ashamed of it. I am not one of those men who keep their morals and their business in watertight compartments. All the spare money my trade rivals spend on hospitals, cathedrals and other receptacles for conscience money, I devote to experiments and researches in improved methods of destroying life and property. I have always done so; and I always shall. Therefore your Christmas card moralities of peace on earth and goodwill among men are of no use to me. Your Christianity, which enjoins you to resist not evil, and to turn the other cheek, would make me a bankrupt. My morality — my religion — must have a place for cannons and torpedoes in it.
Stephen [coldly — almost sullenly] You speak as if there were half a dozen moralities and religions to choose from, instead of one true morality and one true religion.

Undershaft. For me there is only one true morality; but it might not fit you, as you do not manufacture aerial battleships. There is only one true morality for every man; but every man has not the same true morality.

Lomax [overtaxed] Would you mind saying that again? I didn’t quite follow it.

Cusins. It’s quite simple. As Euripides says, one man’s meat is another man’s poison morally as well as physically.

Undershaft. Precisely.


Stephen. In other words, some men are honest and some are scoundrels.

Barbara. Bosh. There are no scoundrels.

Undershaft. Indeed? Are there any good men?

Barbara. No. Not one. There are neither good men nor scoundrels: there are just children of one Father; and the sooner they stop calling one another names the better. You needn’t talk to me: I know them. I’ve had scores of them through my hands: scoundrels, criminals, infidels, philanthropists, missionaries, county councillors, all sorts. They’re all just the same sort of sinner; and there’s the same salvation ready for them all.

Undershaft. May I ask have you ever saved a maker of cannons?

Barbara. No. Will you let me try?

Undershaft. Well, I will make a bargain with you. If I go to see you to-morrow in your Salvation Shelter, will you come the day after to see me in my cannon works?

Barbara. Take care. It may end in your giving up the cannons for the sake of the Salvation Army.

Undershaft. Are you sure it will not end in your giving up the Salvation Army for the sake of the cannons?

Barbara. I will take my chance of that.

Undershaft. And I will take my chance of the other. [They shake hands on it]. Where is your shelter?

Barbara. In West Ham. At the sign of the cross. Ask anybody in Canning Town. Where are your works?

Undershaft. In Perivale St Andrews. At the sign of the sword. Ask anybody in Europe.

Lomax. Hadn’t I better play something?

Lomax. Well, that’s rather a strong order to begin with, don’t you know. Suppose I sing Thou’rt passing hence, my brother[27]. It’s much the same tune.

Barbara. It’s too melancholy. You get saved, Cholly; and you’ll pass hence, my brother, without making such a fuss about it.

Lady Britomart. Really, Barbara, you go on as if religion were a pleasant subject. Do have some sense of propriety.

Undershaft. I do not find it an unpleasant subject, my dear. It is the only one that capable people really care for.

Lady Britomart [looking at her watch] Well, if you are determined to have it, I insist on having it in a proper and respectable way. Charles: ring for prayers[28]. [General amazement. Stephen rises in dismay].

Lomax [rising] Oh I say!

Undershaft [rising] I am afraid I must be going.

Lady Britomart. You cannot go now, Andrew: it would be most improper. Sit down. What will the servants think?

Undershaft. My dear: I have conscientious scruples. May I suggest a compromise? If Barbara will conduct a little service in the drawingroom, with Mr Lomax as organist, I will attend it willingly. I will even take part, if a trombone can be procured.

Lady Britomart. Don’t mock, Andrew.

Undershaft [shocked — to Barbara] You don’t think I am mocking, my love, I hope.

Barbara. No, of course not; and it wouldn’t matter if you were: half the Army came to their first meeting for a lark. [Rising] Come along. Come, Dolly. Come, Cholly. [She goes out with Undershaft, who opens the door for her. Cusins rises].

Lady Britomart. I will not be disobeyed by everybody. Adolphus: sit down. Charles: you may go. You are not fit for prayers: you cannot keep your countenance.

Lomax. Oh I say! [He goes out].

Lady Britomart [continuing] But you, Adolphus, can behave yourself if you choose to. I insist on your staying.

Cusins. My dear Lady Brit: there are things in the family prayer book that I couldn’t bear to hear you say.

Lady Britomart. What things, pray?

Cusins. Well, you would have to say before all the servants that we have done things we ought not to have done, and left undone things we ought to have done, and that there is no health in us. I cannot bear to hear you doing yourself such an injustice, and Barbara such an injustice. As for myself, I flatly deny it: I have done my best. I shouldn’t dare to marry Barbara — I couldn’t look you in the face — if it were true. So I must go to the drawingroom.

Lady Britomart [offended] Well, go. [He starts for the door]. And remember this, Adolphus [he turns to listen]: I have a
very strong suspicion that you went to the Salvation Army to worship Barbara and nothing else. And I quite appreciate the very clever way in which you systematically humbug me. I have found you out. Take care Barbara doesn’t. That’s all.

Cusins [with unruffled sweetness] Don’t tell on me. [He goes out].

Lady Britomart. Sarah: if you want to go, go. Anything’s better than to sit there as if you wished you were a thousand miles away.

Sarah [languidly] Very well, mamma. [She goes].

Lady Britomart, with a sudden flounce, gives way to a little gust of tears.

Stephen [going to her] Mother: what’s the matter?

Lady Britomart [swishing away her tears with her handkerchief] Nothing. Foolishness. You can go with him, too, if you like, and leave me with the servants.

Stephen. Oh, you mustn’t think that, mother. I— I don’t like him.

Lady Britomart. The others do. That is the injustice of a woman’s lot. A woman has to bring up her children; and that means to restrain them, to deny them things they want, to set them tasks, to punish them when they do wrong, to do all the unpleasant things. And then the father, who has nothing to do but pet them and spoil them, comes in when all her work is done and steals their affection from her.

Stephen. He has not stolen our affection from you. It is only curiosity.

Lady Britomart [violently] I won’t be consoled, Stephen. There is nothing the matter with me. [She rises and goes towards the door].

Stephen. Where are you going, mother?

Lady Britomart. To the drawingroom, of course. [She goes out. Onward, Christian Soldiers, on the concertina, with tambourine accompaniment, is heard when the door opens]. Are you coming, Stephen?

Stephen. No. Certainly not. [She goes. He sits down on the settee, with compressed lips and an expression of strong dislike].

Contributors and Attributions

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1. Heroine of Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene, Book 3, she represents English virtue (chastity) but also military power (Brit + Mars). She is “destined to secure the future for her children.” (Wise and Walker, Broadview Anth., p. 227.) She is modelled on Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle (1845-1921), a Liberal advocate of women’s suffrage and supporter of temperance. ↓

2. A wealthy residential area in London’s Belgravia district. ↓
3. A Liberal weekly newspaper.

4. Famous public (independent) boarding school for boys. School to eight former British prime ministers. Located in the town of Harrow in northwest London.

5. Names for political groups dating back to the 17th century; the Tories are now identified with the Conservatives, the Whigs with the Liberals.

6. A cannon weighing 35 tons, made at Woolich Arsenal in southeast London, considered nearly obsolete in 1905.

7. King’s College, Cambridge.

8. An allusion to the partnership between the Christian Undershaft and the Jewish Lazarus. See Luke 16 for Lazarus, the poor man. Another biblical Lazarus was the man Christ raised from the dead in John 11:44.


10. An infant found after its unknown parents have deserted it, and usually presumed to be illegitimate.

11. St. Andrew Undershaft is a historic Church of England church in the City of London. It survived both the Great Fire of London (1666) and the Blitz.


13. The Roman emperors Antoninus Pius (reigned 138-161) and his adopted son and heir Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180).


15. Bedford Square and Hampstead were recently established “garden suburbs” of London, which would have been considered vulgar by the upper-class Stephen.

16. Undershaft relinquished control over this money in a marriage settlement before marrying Lady B.

17. Male admirers or suitors, used facetiously here.

18. Working-class district in London’s East End.


20. See The Iliad, Book 10. Autolycus, a thief, goes to a “thick” or strongly fortified house.

21. Slang. Something that closes a discussion...a thing one cannot get over. Hence something very striking or astonishing.

22. Originally, “Hall Mark,” the official mark stamped on gold and silver articles to attest their purity, done at the Goldsmith’s Hall.

23. Member of any nonconformist Protestant body, such as the Salvation Army, that dissents from the doctrines of the Church of England.


25. District of east London, near West Ham.

26. Perivale is a London suburb in the borough of Ealing.

27. Poem by Felicia Hemans (1783-1835). As with "Onward Christian Soldiers," it too was set to music by Arthur Sullivan.

28. According to Nicholas Grene, “to ring for prayers” was to summon the servants to the family gathering for prayers (customary in some upper-class households) (Major Barbara, London: Methuen, 2008, p. 30.)