

CANDIDA

by

George Bernard Shaw

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Candida

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ACT I

A fine October morning in the north east suburbs of London, a vast district many miles away from the London of Mayfair and St. James's, much less known there than the Paris of the Rue de Rivoli and the Champs Elysees, and much less narrow, squalid, fetid and airless in its slums; strong in comfortable, prosperous middle class life; wide-streeted, myriad-populated; well-served with ugly iron urinals, Radical clubs, tram lines, and a perpetual stream of yellow cars; enjoying in its main thoroughfares the luxury of grass-grown "front gardens," untrodden by the foot of man save as to the path from the gate to the hall door; but blighted by an intolerable monotony of miles and miles of graceless, characterless brick houses, black iron railings, stony pavements, slaty roofs, and respectably ill dressed or disreputably poorly dressed people, quite accustomed to the place, and mostly plodding about somebody else's work, which they would not do if they themselves could help it. The little energy and eagerness that crop up show themselves in cockney cupidity and business "push." Even the policemen and the chapels are not infrequent enough to break the monotony. The sun is shining cheerfully; there is no fog; and though the smoke effectually prevents anything, whether faces and hands or bricks and mortar, from looking fresh and clean, it is not hanging heavily enough to trouble a Londoner.

This desert of unattractiveness has its oasis. Near the outer end of the Hackney Road is a park of 217 acres, fenced in, not by railings, but by a wooden paling, and containing plenty of greensward, trees, a lake for bathers, flower beds with the flowers arranged carefully in patterns by the admired cockney art of carpet gardening and a sandpit, imported from the seaside for the delight of the children, but speedily deserted on its becoming a natural vermin preserve for all the petty fauna of Kingsland, Hackney and Hoxton. A bandstand, an unfinished forum for religious, anti-religious and political orators, cricket pitches, a gymnasium, and an old fashioned stone kiosk are among its attractions. Wherever the prospect is bounded by trees or rising green grounds, it is a pleasant place. Where the ground stretches far to the grey palings, with bricks and mortar, sky signs, crowded chimneys and smoke beyond, the prospect makes it desolate and sordid.

The best view of Victoria Park is from the front window of St. Dominic's Parsonage, from which not a single chimney is visible. The parsonage is a semi-detached villa with a front garden and a porch. Visitors go up the flight of steps to the porch: tradespeople and members of the family go down by a door under the steps to the basement, with a breakfast room, used for all meals, in front, and the kitchen at the back. Upstairs, on the level of the hall door, is the drawing-room, with its large plate glass window looking on the park. In this room, the only sitting-room that can be spared from the children and the family meals, the parson, the Reverend James Mavor Morell does his work. He is sitting in a strong round backed revolving chair at the right hand end of a long table, which stands

across the window, so that he can cheer himself with the view of the park at his elbow. At the opposite end of the table, adjoining it, is a little table; only half the width of the other, with a typewriter on it. His typist is sitting at this machine, with her back to the window. The large table is littered with pamphlets, journals, letters, nests of drawers, an office diary, postage scales and the like. A spare chair for visitors having business with the parson is in the middle, turned to his end. Within reach of his hand is a stationery case, and a cabinet photograph in a frame. Behind him the right hand wall, recessed above the fireplace, is fitted with bookshelves, on which an adept eye can measure the parson's divinity and casuistry by a complete set of Browning's poems and Maurice's Theological Essays, and guess at his politics from a yellow backed Progress and Poverty, Fabian Essays, a Dream of John Ball, Marx's Capital, and half a dozen other literary landmarks in Socialism. Opposite him on the left, near the typewriter, is the door. Further down the room, opposite the fireplace, a bookcase stands on a cellaret, with a sofa near it. There is a generous fire burning; and the hearth, with a comfortable armchair and a japanned flower painted coal scuttle at one side, a miniature chair for a boy or girl on the other, a nicely varnished wooden mantelpiece, with neatly moulded shelves, tiny bits of mirror let into the panels, and a travelling clock in a leather case (the inevitable wedding present), and on the wall above a large autotype of the chief figure in Titian's Virgin of the Assumption, is very inviting. Altogether the room is the room of a good housekeeper, vanquished, as far as the table is concerned, by an untidy man, but elsewhere mistress of the situation. The furniture, in its ornamental aspect, betrays the style of the advertised "drawing-room suite" of the pushing suburban furniture dealer; but there is nothing useless or pretentious in the room. The paper and panelling are dark, throwing the big cheery window and the park outside into strong relief.

The Reverend James Mavor Morell is a Christian Socialist clergyman of the Church of England, and an active member of the Guild of St. Matthew and the Christian Social Union. A vigorous, genial, popular man of forty, robust and goodlooking, full of energy, with pleasant, hearty, considerate manners, and a sound, unaffected voice, which he uses with the clean, athletic articulation of a practised orator, and with a wide range and perfect command of expression. He is a first rate clergyman, able to say what he likes to whom he likes, to lecture people without setting himself up against them, to impose his authority on them without humiliating them, and to interfere in their business without impertinence. His well-spring of spiritual enthusiasm and sympathetic emotion has never run dry for a moment: he still eats and sleeps heartily enough to win the daily battle between exhaustion and recuperation triumphantly. Withal, a great baby, pardonably vain of his powers and unconsciously pleased with himself. He has a healthy complexion, a good forehead, with the brows somewhat blunt, and the eyes bright and eager, a mouth resolute, but not particularly well cut, and a substantial nose, with the mobile, spreading nostrils of the dramatic orator, but, like all his features, void of subtlety.

The typist, Miss Proserpine Garnett, is a brisk little woman of about 30, of the lower middle class, neatly but cheaply dressed in a black merino skirt and a blouse, rather pert and quick of speech, and not very civil in her manner, but sensitive and affectionate. She is clattering away busily at her machine whilst Morell opens the last of his morning's letters. He realizes its contents with a comic groan of despair.

PROSERPINE. Another lecture?

MORELL. Yes. The Hoxton Freedom Group want me to address them on Sunday morning (great emphasis on "Sunday," this being the unreasonable part of the business). What are they?

PROSERPINE. Communist Anarchists, I think.

MORELL. Just like Anarchists not to know that they can't have a parson on Sunday! Tell them to come to church if they want to hear me: it will do them good. Say I can only come on Mondays and Thursdays. Have you the diary there?

PROSERPINE (taking up the diary). Yes.

MORELL. Have I any lecture on for next Monday?

PROSERPINE (referring to diary). Tower Hamlets Radical Club.

MORELL. Well, Thursday then?

PROSERPINE. English Land Restoration League.

MORELL. What next?

PROSERPINE. Guild of St. Matthew on Monday. Independent Labor Party, Greenwich Branch, on Thursday. Monday, Social-Democratic Federation, Mile End Branch. Thursday, first Confirmation class-- (Impatiently). Oh, I'd better tell them you can't come. They're only half a dozen ignorant and conceited costermongers without five shillings between them.

MORELL (amused). Ah; but you see they're near relatives of mine, Miss Garnett.

PROSERPINE (staring at him). Relatives of YOURS!

MORELL. Yes: we have the same father--in Heaven.

PROSERPINE (relieved). Oh, is that all?

MORELL (with a sadness which is a luxury to a man whose voice expresses it so finely). Ah, you don't believe it. Everybody says it: nobody believes it--nobody. (Briskly, getting back to business.) Well, well! Come, Miss Proserpine, can't you find a date for the costers? What about the 25th?: that was vacant the day before yesterday.

PROSERPINE (referring to diary). Engaged--the Fabian Society.

MORELL. Bother the Fabian Society! Is the 28th gone too?

PROSERPINE. City dinner. You're invited to dine with the Founder's Company.

MORELL. That'll do; I'll go to the Hoxton Group of Freedom instead. (She enters the engagement in silence, with implacable disparagement of the Hoxton Anarchists in every line of her face. Morell bursts open the cover of a copy of The Church Reformer, which has come by post, and glances through Mr. Stewart Hendlam's leader and the Guild of St. Matthew news. These proceedings are presently enlivened by the appearance of Morell's curate, the Reverend Alexander Mill, a young gentleman gathered by Morell from the nearest University settlement, whither he had come from Oxford to give the east end of London the benefit of his university training. He is a conceitedly well intentioned, enthusiastic, immature person, with nothing positively unbearable about him except a habit of speaking with his lips carefully closed for half an inch from each corner, a finicking articulation, and a set of horribly corrupt vowels, notably ow for o, this being his chief means of bringing Oxford refinement to bear on Hackney vulgarity. Morell, whom he has won over by a doglike devotion, looks up indulgently from The Church Reformer as he enters, and remarks) Well, Lexy! Late again, as usual.

LEXY. I'm afraid so. I wish I could get up in the morning.

MORELL (exulting in his own energy). Ha! ha! (Whimsically.) Watch and pray, Lexy: watch and pray.

LEXY. I know. (Rising wittily to the occasion.) But how can I watch and pray when I am asleep? Isn't that so, Miss Prossy?

PROSERPINE (sharply). Miss Garnett, if you please.

LEXY. I beg your pardon--Miss Garnett.

PROSERPINE. You've got to do all the work to-day.

LEXY. Why?

PROSERPINE. Never mind why. It will do you good to earn your supper before you eat it, for once in a way, as I do. Come: don't dawdle. You should have been off on your rounds half an hour ago.

LEXY (perplexed). Is she in earnest, Morell?

MORELL (in the highest spirits--his eyes dancing). Yes. _I_ am going to dawdle to-day.

LEXY. You! You don't know how.

MORELL (heartily). Ha! ha! Don't I? I'm going to have this day all to myself--or at least the forenoon. My wife's coming back: she's due here at 11.45.

LEXY (surprised). Coming back already--with the children? I thought they were to stay to the end of the month.

MORELL. So they are: she's only coming up for two days, to get some flannel things for Jimmy, and to see how we're getting on without her.

LEXY (anxiously). But, my dear Morell, if what Jimmy and Fluffy had was scarlatina, do you think it wise--

MORELL. Scarlatina!--rubbish, German measles. I brought it into the house myself from the Pycroft Street School. A parson is like a doctor, my boy: he must face infection as a soldier must face bullets. (He rises and claps Lexy on the shoulder.) Catch the measles if you can, Lexy: she'll nurse you; and what a piece of luck that will be for you!--eh?

LEXY (smiling uneasily). It's so hard to understand you about Mrs. Morell--

MORELL (tenderly). Ah, my boy, get married--get married to a good woman; and then you'll understand. That's a foretaste of what will be best in the Kingdom of Heaven we are trying to establish on earth. That will cure you of dawdling. An honest man feels that he must pay Heaven for every hour of happiness with a good spell of hard, unselfish work to make others happy. We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it than to consume wealth without producing it. Get a wife like my Candida; and you'll always be in arrear with your repayment. (He pats Lexy affectionately on the back, and is leaving the room when Lexy calls to him.)

LEXY. Oh, wait a bit: I forgot. (Morell halts and turns with the door knob in his hand.) Your father-in-law is coming round to see you. (Morell shuts the door again, with a complete change of manner.)

MORELL (surprised and not pleased). Mr. Burgess?

LEXY. Yes. I passed him in the park, arguing with somebody. He gave me good day and asked me to let you know that he was coming.

MORELL (half incredulous). But he hasn't called here for--I may almost say for years. Are you sure, Lexy? You're not joking, are you?

LEXY (earnestly). No, sir, really.

MORELL (thoughtfully). Hm! Time for him to take another look at Candida before she grows out of his knowledge. (He resigns himself to the inevitable, and goes out. Lexy looks after him with beaming, foolish worship.)

LEXY. What a good man! What a thorough, loving soul he is! (He takes Morell's place at the table, making himself very comfortable as he takes out a cigaret.)

PROSERPINE (impatiently, pulling the letter she has been working at off the typewriter and folding it.) Oh, a man ought to be able to be fond of his wife without making a fool of himself about her.

LEXY (shocked). Oh, Miss Prossy!

PROSERPINE (rising busily and coming to the stationery case to get an envelope, in which she encloses the letter as she speaks). Candida here, and Candida there, and Candida everywhere! (She licks the envelope.) It's enough to drive anyone out of their SENSES (thumping the envelope to make it stick) to hear a perfectly commonplace woman raved about in that absurd manner merely because she's got good hair, and a tolerable figure.

LEXY (with reproachful gravity). I think her extremely beautiful, Miss Garnett. (He takes the photograph up; looks at it; and adds, with even greater impressiveness) EXTREMELY beautiful. How fine her eyes are!

PROSERPINE. Her eyes are not a bit better than mine--now! (He puts down the photograph and stares austerely at her.) And you know very well that you think me dowdy and second rate enough.

LEXY (rising majestically). Heaven forbid that I should think of any of God's creatures in such a way! (He moves stiffly away from her across the room to the neighbourhood of the bookcase.)

PROSERPINE. Thank you. That's very nice and comforting.

LEXY (saddened by her depravity). I had no idea you had any feeling against Mrs. Morell.

PROSERPINE (indignantly). I have no feeling against her. She's very nice, very good-hearted: I'm very fond of her and can appreciate her real qualities far better than any man can. (He shakes his head sadly and turns to the bookcase, looking along the shelves for a volume. She follows him with intense pepperiness.) You don't believe me? (He turns and faces her. She pounces at him with spitfire energy.) You think I'm jealous. Oh, what a profound knowledge of the human heart you have, Mr. Lexy Mill! How well you know the weaknesses of Woman, don't you? It must be so nice to be a man and have a fine penetrating intellect instead of mere emotions like us, and to know that the reason we don't share your amorous delusions is that we're all jealous of one another! (She abandons him with a toss of her shoulders, and crosses to the fire to warm her hands.)

LEXY. Ah, if you women only had the same clue to Man's strength that you have to his weakness, Miss Prossy, there would be no Woman Question.

PROSERPINE (over her shoulder, as she stoops, holding her hands to the blaze). Where did you hear Morell say that? You didn't invent it yourself: you're not clever enough.

LEXY. That's quite true. I am not ashamed of owing him that, as I owe him so many other spiritual truths. He said it at the annual conference of the Women's Liberal Federation. Allow me to add that though they didn't appreciate it, I, a mere man, did. (He turns to the bookcase again, hoping that this may leave her crushed.)

PROSERPINE (putting her hair straight at the little panel of mirror in the mantelpiece). Well, when you talk to me, give me your own ideas, such as they are, and not his. You never cut a poorer figure than when you are trying to imitate him.

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