

Minna von Barnhelm
or
Soldier's Luck

A comedy in five acts
by
Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Translated for the stage by Robert Bethune

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1767

Characters

Just, Major Tellheim's servant
An innkeeper
Major Tellheim, in love with Minna
Frau Marloff, widow of Tellheim's captain of horse
Minna von Barnhelm, in love with Major Tellheim
Franziska, Minna's maid
Paul Werner, Tellheim's former sergeant
Riccaut de la Marliniere
Count von Bruchsal

Note:

The two scenes in this excerpt come from the end of the second act in the play. Minna has managed to find her beloved Tellheim—but he does not turn out to be the man she expected to find. Likewise, Tellheim finds his relationship to Minna has changed; his pride in her has changed completely to shame for himself. She tries to teach him otherwise, and the situation explodes in her face.

I have included the footnotes in which I give further interpretation of the German text. These footnotes occur throughout the play and give the reader with some German further insight into Lessing's work, and my approach to his play.

Act II, scene 8

Major Tellheim and the Innkeeper enter.

Tellheim

(comes in, sees Minna, and rushes to her)

Ah! Minna!

Minna

(rushing to him as well)

Tellheim!

Tellheim

(suddenly stopping himself and backing away)

Forgive me, gracious lady. That I should find Fräulein von Barnhelm here—

Minna

Must you really be so surprised?

As she steps toward him, he backs away even further.

Forgive you? Should I forgive you for showing me that I'm still your darling Minna? Well then, may heaven forgive you, that I'm still Fräulein von Barnhelm!¹

Tellheim

Gracious lady—

Stares hard at the Innkeeper.

Minna

(becoming aware of the Innkeeper, she motions to Franziska)

Good sir—

Tellheim

If we aren't both mistaken—

Franziska

Oh, my good man, who have you brought us here? Quick, come along, let's go find the right one.

Innkeeper

Isn't he the right man? Of course he is!

Franziska

Of course he isn't! Quick, come on; I haven't had a chance yet to wish your daughter a good morning.

Innkeeper

Oh! You're too kind—

He still isn't moving.

Franziska

(taking him by the arm)

Come along, let's go figure out the menu for luncheon. You can just show me what we'll be having—

Innkeeper

Well, the first course will be—

Franziska

Quiet, be quiet! If my lady already knows what's you're serving, it takes away her appetite. Come along, we'll just go where she can't hear us.

Pulls him out by force.

Act II, scene 9

Tellheim and Minna remain.

Minna

Well? Are we still mistaken?

Tellheim

I wish to God I were! But there's only one of you—and here you are!

Minna

What a fuss we've made! Everything we have to say could be said in front of anyone.

Tellheim

You—here! What are you doing here, gracious lady?

Minna

I've done everything I came to do.

She goes to him with open arms.

And I've found exactly what I was looking for.

Tellheim

(backing away)

You're looking for a prosperous man, a man worthy of your love, and you've found—me.²

Minna

So don't you love me any more? Do you love someone else?

Tellheim

Anyone who could love someone else after loving you never really loved anyone at all.

Minna

That only pulls one knife out of my heart. If I've lost your love, what does it matter if simple indifference or more powerful charms than mine took it away? You don't love me any more? and you don't love anyone else? How wretched you must be, loving no one at all!

Tellheim

You're right, gracious lady; a wretched man like me isn't allowed to love. If a man can't master himself; if he can let himself sink so low as to ask the woman he loves to share his misery with him, then he deserves everything he suffers. It's the hardest victory to win! Good sense and necessity both told me to forget you, Minna von Barnhelm. I tried. I tried so hard! And now, just when I was starting to hope that I might actually be able to do it—here you are, right in front of me, my lady!

Minna

I don't think I understand. Stop; let's make sure of where we are before we take any more wrong turns! Are you willing to answer me one single question?

Tellheim

Anything, my lady.

Minna

Will you answer me without any tricks or evasions? With nothing but a plain, simple yes or no?

Tellheim

I will if I can.

Minna

You can. Good. Now, no matter how hard you've tried to forget me, do you still love me, Tellheim?

Tellheim

My lady, that is a question—

Minna

You promised to answer me with just a simple yes or no.

Tellheim

And I also said, if I can.

Minna

You can; you must know what's happening in your own heart. Do you still love me, Tellheim? Yes or no.

Tellheim

If my heart—

Minna

Yes or no!

Tellheim

Well then yes!

Minna

Yes?

Tellheim

Yes, yes! But—

Minna

Enough! You still love me: that's enough for me. What a mood we've fallen into! A downhearted, melancholy, infected mood. Well, I'm taking my own mood back, right now! So, my dear bundle of misery, you still love me, you still have your Minna and you're still unhappy? Now just you listen what sort of fanciful, foolish thing your Minna was—and still is. She let herself dream—still lets herself dream—that your whole happiness lies in her! Quick! Tell me all your troubles at once. I want to see how much I outweigh them. Well?

Tellheim

My lady, I'm not used to complaining.

Minna

Very good! I can't think of anything I dislike more in a soldier than complaining—other than boasting. But even so, there's a certain off-hand, cold-blooded way of talking about your bravery and your troubles that—

Tellheim

Is still nothing but boasting and complaining.

Minna

Oh, aren't you sure of yourself! At that rate, you shouldn't even have mentioned being unhappy! Out with it—or say nothing at all! So good sense and necessity told you to forget me? I'm very fond of good sense, and I have a great respect for necessity, but I still haven't heard whether or not this good sense is sensible and just now necessary this necessity is.

Tellheim

Well then; just listen, my lady. You call me Tellheim; the name is mine. However, you think I'm the Major Tellheim that you knew in your own country, that flourishing man, so deserving, so eager for fame and glory, in complete command of himself, body and soul. Glory and good fortune seemed read to fall into my hands. If I wasn't yet worthy of your heart and your hand, I had every reason to hope that every day made me more worthy of them. That was the man you promised yourself to, my lady. Now, I am no more that Tellheim than I am my own father. They're both gone for good. Now, I'm Tellheim the discharged³ officer, the man whose honor is broken, the cripple, the beggar. Do you still want to keep your promise to this Tellheim?

Minna

That sounds so sad! Still, my dear sir, you know, I'm just so smitten with all these Tellheims that this one will just have to do for me until I find that other one. Give me your hand, you dear beggar, you!

She takes his hand.

Tellheim

*(tries to pull his hand away, turning away from her)*⁴

This is too much! I don't know where I am any more!⁵ Leave me alone, Fräulein! Your kindness is torture to me! Leave me alone!

Minna

What's the matter? Where are you going?

Tellheim

Away from you!

Minna

Away from me?

Folding his hand to her heart.

Dreamer!

Tellheim

I feel such despair! I'm afraid I'll drop dead at your feet.

Minna

Because of me?

Tellheim

Because of you. Because I'll never see you again. Because I'm determined, absolutely determined, that I will never be guilty of such a despicable act—I'll never let you do anything so foolish. Let me go, Minna!

Tears himself away and leaves.

Minna

(following him)

Me? Let you go? Tellheim! Tellheim!

Notes

¹ *Verzeihen? Ich soll Ihnen verzeihen, daß ich noch Ihre Minna bin? Verzeih' Ihnen der Himmel, daß ich noch das Fräulein von Barnhelm bin!*

This doesn't make a great deal of sense until we focus on what is to be forgiven—that Tellheim rushed toward the lady as if he meant to embrace her. He didn't mean to do that, and in the present state of his feelings toward her, it is misleading, which is ungentlemanly. Her first sentence, “Should I forgive you because I am your Minna?” shows that she is aware of this; the subtext is, “Don't worry; I know you displayed such feeling because I am the woman you love.” The second sentence, still oblique and also playful, seems to say, “And by the way, you were supposed to marry me, you know, and you haven't done it yet!”

² *Sie suchten einen glücklichen, einen Ihrer Liebe würdigen Mann, und finden - einen Elenden.*

Literally, “and you find—a sufferer.” In French it would be “un miserable” just as in *Les Misérables*. No natural English expression uses a noun for this idea. Since Tellheim is going to go on at considerable length about himself and his misfortunes, it seems to be a very workable solution to send him down that track right now.

³ *Ich bin Tellheim, der Verabschiedete*

Other people, such as the Innkeeper, Just and Riccault refer to Tellheim as *abgedankt*. He generally refers to himself as *verabschiedet*, using *abgedankt* only once (line 2614.)

⁴ *(der die andere Hand mit dem Hute vor das Gesicht schlägt und sich von ihr abwendet)*

Lessing seems to forget that Tellheim has only one good arm. Are we to assume that Minna has been so thoughtless as to tug on his wounded arm by taking that hand? Or is Tellheim able to take his hat off with his bad arm,? That certainly would belie Just's contention that he can hardly dress himself. No, Tellheim will have to express his distress some other way here.

⁵ *Wo bin ich?*

For some reason, “Where am I?” doesn't sound right as a natural English exclamation for a person under severe emotional distress, but “I don't know where I am any more!” does.