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Book One

Chapter One

The play lasted for a very long time. Old Barbara went to the window several times to see if the coaches had already started leaving the theater. She was waiting for Mariane, her pretty mistress who was that night delighting the audience as a young officer in the epilogue—waiting for her with more impatience than usual, when she merely had a simple supper ready. For this time a surprise package had come in the mail from a wealthy young merchant named Norberg, to show that even when he was away, he was still thinking of his beloved. A trusty servant, companion, adviser, go-between and house-keeper, Barbara had every right to open the package. And this evening she could not resist, for the favors of this generous lover meant even more to her than they did to Mariane. To her great delight she found in the package not only fine muslin and elegant ribbons for Mariane, but for herself a length of cotton material, scarves and a roll of coins. She thought of the absent Norberg with great affection and gratitude, and eagerly resolved to praise him to Mariane, to remind her of what she owed him, and of his hopes and expectations that she would be faithful to him.

The muslin, brightened by the color of the half-unrolled ribbons, lay like a Christmas present on the table, and the light of the candles added a special luster to the gift. Everything was in place as she heard Mariane's footsteps on the stairs and she hastened to meet her. But how surprised she was when this female officer disregarded her affectionate greeting, and, pushing past her, rushed into the room, dropped the sword and plumed hat with unusual haste, walked restlessly up and down and never noticed the festive candles.

"What is it, my dear?" asked the old woman, puzzled. "For heaven's sake, girl, what's wrong? Look at these presents. Who could they be from but your loving friend? Norberg has sent you a length of muslin for a nightgown. He'll soon be here, and seems more eager and generous than usual."

Barbara was about to show Mariane the gifts that she too had received from him when Mariane, turning away from the gifts, cried out: "No! No! I don't want to hear any more about all this. I did what you wanted, so be it! When

Norberg comes back, I'll be his again, I'll be yours — do with me what you will. But until then, I want to be myself. If you had a thousand tongues, you couldn't change my mind. I am going to give all of myself to the one who loves me and whom I love. Don't make such faces! I am going to love him with everything I have as if it could last forever."

The old woman had counterarguments enough. But when the exchange began to get violent and bitter, Mariane jumped up and grabbed her. The old woman only laughed uproariously and said, "If I am to be sure of my life, I have to see to it that you are soon in a long dress again. Go and change! I hope that you will apologize, as a girl, for the harm you did me as a flighty officer: off with that coat and with everything underneath it. It's an uncomfortable costume, and dangerous for you, I see. The epaulettes have gone to your head."

Barbara tried to hold her but Mariane broke free. "Not so fast!" she said, "I'm expecting a visitor tonight."

"That's not good," the old woman replied. "Surely not that young, lovesick, unfledged merchant's son?" "Exactly! Him!" said Mariane.

"Magnanimity seems now to be your ruling passion," the old woman scornfully replied. "You exert yourself for those who are either immature or poor. It must be nice to be adored as an unselfish benefactress."

"Make fun of me if you like! I love him! I love him! Oh, how happy I am to say this, for the first time in my life. This is the passion I have acted on the stage and yet never really known. I will throw myself at him, embrace him as if I would hold him forever. I shall show him all my love and enjoy all of his!"

"Calm down! Calm down," said the old woman quietly. "I must interrupt your joy with the news that Norberg will be here in two weeks. Here is his letter, which came with the presents."

"The dawn may take my lover away, but I won't think about that now. Fourteen days! That's an eternity! Just think what can happen, what can change, in two weeks."

Wilhelm entered the room. How eagerly she rushed towards him! And how passionately he embraced that red uniform and the white satin vest. Who would dare to describe, who has the right to describe, the bliss of two lovers. The old womanservant went off muttering, and we, too, leave the happy couple to themselves.

Chapter Two

When Wilhelm greeted his mother the next morning, she told him that his father was very angry and would soon forbid those regular visits to the theater. "I, too, like to go to the theater sometimes," she continued, "but I am often annoyed at the way our domestic peace and quiet are disturbed by your wild addiction to this pleasure. Your father is always saying, 'What's the use of this? Why waste one's time in the theater?'"