

THE MEETING

By Charles Louis Philippe

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HE passed her. Then he had the foolish thought that if he stopped before a shop window she would come and stand near him. She did nothing of the kind and kept on her way.

Then he made up his mind to speak to her. She was as disagreeable as she had been in the last days they had spent together. She pretended astonishment and exclaimed:

"Goodness! They told me you were dead!"

At that he became horribly vexed. If he had been dead she would have gone on living as if nothing had happened.

She was very well dressed. He could not have said whether the coat she had on was in beaver, or rabbit-skin, or astrakhan. He did not even know the names of the garments she put on her back. He was half sorry he had spoken to her, and suddenly felt himself very small beside her. He tried to take a joking tone.

"Well! well! You look as if business was good!"

She answered:

"Yes, indeed! You had a fine idea when you sued for a divorce. It's turned out well for me."

For a little while he walked along beside her like a niny. She gave him no encouragement, and he looked as if he was following her—he looked like a man who forces his company on a woman he has just met on the street. And when he asked her, "What are you doing now?" she kept straight ahead, saying: "What you see, I'm walking."

Thus they reached the Place de la Bastille. He would have to cross to the right from the middle of the side his train. He turned to go that way. She waved her hand to the left and walk so as to get to the station for said:

"I'm going up here."

She stopped out of politeness as she was leaving him. She showed him rather ostentatiously that she had good manners. He did not know how to say goodbye to her. She would be able to say that he had run after her and that she had repulsed him. There was a cafe in front of them, and to take from her the chance of any such boast, he suggested:

"If you're not in a great hurry, suppose we go in here."

She burst out laughing, thought it over for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"I don't mind. That will be rather funny."

They went in. They sat down opposite each other. They waited to be served. A waiter brought their drinks.

Then a strange phenomenon happened. The woman, especially, never

expected it. The man suddenly found on his tongue the words he used to employ when they lived together. It had been a habit of his when he came home every evening at 6 o'clock after spending the afternoon at the office to say as soon as he saw her: "Well?" That meant: "Well, has anything happened while I was away?" Eight years had passed since they had seen each other. When he opened his mouth a word came out:

"Well?"

Never in ordinary circumstances did he speak thus to any other woman.

She could not help smiling and making a little sign with her head as she recognized the familiar word.

Something of the same kind happened to her. She had always made a point of inspecting him from head to foot before he went out and setting right any negligence in his clothes. He would always have looked as if he had been sleeping in his clothes if she had not taken care to do this. In spite of herself she glanced over him and said:

"I see that you haven't yet learned how to tie a tie. Listen—just bend over the table a little. I'm going to straighten your tie for you."

He laughed. It was true; he wore his tie anyhow. He leaned forward and she tied it very carefully. When she had finished he looked at himself in the mirror of the cafe, and she added, laughing:

"Yes, it's really funny. It still makes me uncomfortable to see you not dressed right."

Neither of them had any longer the least feeling of embarrassment.

He told her all that had happened to him during the last eight years, just as he used to tell her formerly what had happened to him during the afternoon.

He had married again a year after the divorce. He had two children, two little girls. The eldest was six years old and the second was five. He was still in the same office. He lived at Saint-Mande. When he had met her he was going to the Vincennes station to take his train. When he had told that much he had told all his life. He became silent.

All the same, it was curious. The more he looked at her the more he realized that he had never seen her properly. From the time they were married he had always believed that her eyes were blue. Since the divorce, whenever he thought of her he always imagined for some reason or other that she had gray eyes, clear gray—fine eyes and no mistake! which showed you that she wasn't dark. He told her what he had observed. She laughed and said:

"There, you see! You have never understood me."

She showed interest in everything that had happened to him. To get a still clearer idea of his life she asked him:

"And what is your wife like?"

He hesitated before he answered:

"Do you know what's the truth, Alice? A man has only one wife; that's the first one. Afterwards a man marries for someone to keep house, or to have a family."

How sad he was after he had said these words! How happy they might have been if she had only wished it! He spoke of this to her. He said:

"Oh, why didn't you stick to me?"

Singularly enough, as it seemed to him who knew her and had noticed in the last days of their life together with what obstinacy she followed her questionable courses and how she always insisted that she was right, she now replied, softly and frankly:

"Yes, there it is. I was eight years younger than I am today. A person is silly when she is young."

She was very nice, as she was in the early times of their marriage, when she had a very good heart and one could always persuade her by ap-

pealing to her best side. He said to her:

"You haven't told me what you have been doing during the last eight years."

She answered:

"My poor, dear man, you wouldn't want me to tell you. You know well enough what there is for a divorced woman to do."


Then he said to her:

"It's some consolation for me, Alice, that you aren't in abject poverty."

They were two good friends, very saddened on each side of a table in a cafe. She excused herself to him:

"You mustn't think hard of me because I didn't welcome you when you spoke to me. I played the haughty. And indeed it would have been much better if I hadn't answered you. You can see yourself you were wrong. Now we're going to be happy thinking of each other."

But they had not the time to talk at any length. The clock of the cafe



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