

WIDOW!

By Henri Becque

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Translated and adapted by Frank J. Morlock c 2002

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CHARACTERS

Clotilde
Adele, her maid
Lafont

+++++

A small salon where everything is most Parisian. The shutters are three quarters closed allowing only a weak light to penetrate. Clotilde, dressed in black, features drawn, pensive, is reading some letters she's just received.

CLOTILDE: (reading) "My dear cousin. I understood immediately that you had a serious reason for writing me, and that a misfortune had occurred. I wasn't mistaken. My poor Adolphe. So young and taken so quickly. I hadn't seen my cousin for a long while because he had adopted worldly habits for which he was unprepared and which have certainly shortened his life. But I'd retained a memory of our years of childhood and youth that is still present. He had well fulfilled all that he promised. He was good, industrious, confident. He was, at least, an honest man in a period when they are rare. Excuse me, my dear cousin, if I make you wait for my visit. I no longer find the time to leave my home. I don't complain of it. What can a woman do better than consecrate herself to her husband and children. Your very devoted, Sophie Martineau."

CLOTILDE: What gall! What a pest that Sophie is! (taking another letter and reading) "Dear Madame, I learned just now from the short note you kindly wrote me of the death of an excellent man so justly appreciated by all those who knew him. This sad news directing my mind to the past troubled me deeply. It's been eight years since my marriage imposed new obligations on me. I've had to separate a bit abruptly from the comfort of friends who occupied a great place in my heart. Since then, I've often evoked their memory and I always remained grateful for the hours of joy and abandon that I owed them. I wish to hope, dear Madame, that your husband left you in a situation worthy of you. I am not asking you a question; I don't allow myself to do that. It's the vow of a businessman who's only lately become one and who knows that money is a great consolation. If I can be of any use to you, dispose of me freely. You will find me at the Credit Lyonnais every day from 3 to 7. It's there my friends are certain of meeting me and accustomed to address letters to me. Believe, I beg you, dear Madame, in all my regrets for he who is no more. Accept the homage of my devotion and respect. Albert Crisier, Administrative Assistant."

CLOTILDE: An errand boy! But he remembers that's something.

ADELE: (entering) Mr. Lafont, Madame.

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CLOTILDE: Show him in.

LAFONT: (entering, soberly dressed; going to her tenderly, in a soft voice) How are you?

CLOTILDE: Very tired. And you?

LAFONT: I haven't lived for the last two days. The thought that you were here, alone, without anyone who loves you, while this unfortunate

CLOTILDE: You are good, I know it.

LAFONT: I sent a wreath. You received it?

CLOTILDE: Yes.

LAFONT: Was it good?

CLOTILDE: Very nice, I thank you.

LAFONT: What time did he die?

CLOTILDE: Around seven o'clock

LAFONT: Did he suffer much?

CLOTILDE: Moderately.

LAFONT: Did he speak of me?

CLOTILDE: Yes.

LAFONT: In good terms.

CLOTILDE: In excellent terms.

LAFONT: Dear Adolph! He never suspected anything?

CLOTILDE: Did he know!

LAFONT: What did he say to you about me?

CLOTILDE: Much later. I'll tell you all that some other day. I'm going to leave. (gesture by Lafont) I am going to spend a month with my mother-in-law.

LAFONT: Alone?

CLOTILDE: I won't be alone with my mother-in-law.

LAFONT: And your children?

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CLOTILDE: I'd like to take them with me. On the other hand, perhaps it wouldn't be wise to interrupt their studies.

LAFONT: Stay in Paris. Your presence may be necessary.

CLOTILDE: You think so?

LAFONT: Certainly.

CLOTILDE: I will see. My mother-in-law is arriving tonight. We will decide this question together. Did I ever mention a cousin of my husband, Madame Martineau?

LAFONT: Possibly. I don't recall. Why?

CLOTILDE: I was stupid enough to write her myself announcing Adolphe's death. She just replied to me with a letter, very dry, very perfidious in which she lets me understand that it was I, by leading my husband into the world, who caused his death. What are we coming to, my God! My poor husband, what would he have done with relatives like Mr. and Mrs. Martineau? If I have something to reproach myself with, that's not it.

LAFONT: You have nothing to reproach yourself with.

CLOTILDE: Be quiet.

ADELE: (entering) Here are some letters for Madame.

CLOTILDE: Give them to me. (after glancing at them) This one is from a person who is distasteful. I don't know why.

LAFONT: Madame Beaulieu!

CLOTILDE: Exactly. (after having read the letter with a half smile) What a child that Pauline is. She's always making fun of herself.

LAFONT: Show me her letter, would you?

CLOTILDE: Never.

LAFONT: It's true I don't like her, young Madame Beaulieu. I can't understand this infatuation you have for her. You lost your husband. This one makes you laugh and you approve of her.

CLOTILDE: I don't approve of her.

LAFONT: If I allowed myself the most inoffensive joke you wouldn't find enough reproaches to make me.

CLOTILDE: It's not the same thing. Pauline didn't know how to talk to my husband. They spoke to each other only once a year. Whereas, Adolphe and you, you've been linked since college and you never left each other. Adolphe had a deep affection for you and demonstrated it with his last breath.

LAFONT: What did he say to you about me?

CLOTILDE: You want to know it?

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LAFONT: Certainly.

CLOTILDE: So be it. Almost an hour before he died my husband felt much better. He no longer suffered. He took my hands, he spoke to me of his business, of the money he had that I would get when he was no longer. He was very touching at that moment. He had nothing to say. He looked at me and added: "You are going to find yourself in a delicate situation with all your needs and two children to raise. Remarry, that would be the wisest thing. You get on very well with Lafont. He's a man of heart and a smart fellow. If he gets the idea to marry you, you ought to accept him."

LAFONT: He said that?

CLOTILDE: I am repeating his words to you verbatim.

LAFONT: That's funny. I thought that things like that only happened in comedies.

CLOTILDE: Relax, my friend. I won't follow Adolphe's advice. I am not for a moment thinking of remarrying. (Adele enters) What's the matter, Adele?

ADELE: They've just brought a wreath on behalf of Mr. Simpson. (gesture by Lafont)

CLOTILDE: That's nice. Put it with the others.

LAFONT: Are you still seeing that gentleman?

CLOTILDE: I told you a thousand times to the contrary.

LAFONT: Then what's he meddling for?

CLOTILDE: Adele's mistaken. It's Madame Simpson who is sending this wreath. Perhaps she charged her son to do it in her place. No scenes, okay? Think a bit where we are today. You will come to see me tomorrow after the ceremony.

LAFONT: Certainly.

CLOTILDE: That's fine. You've got to leave me now.

LAFONT: Already?

CLOTILDE: Yes, already. The visitors will arrive any minute; I don't want them to find you installed in my home.

LAFONT: You're right. (rising and going to her with emotion) Can I see him?

CLOTILDE: If you like. Here. Go this way.

LAFONT: (reaching the door) Till tomorrow!

CLOTILDE: Till tomorrow. (he goes in to the funeral chamber) To choose between him and my husband, perhaps I'd rather have lost him. (taking another letter and reading it)

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"Madame Living in the same house as you, I think that my name is not unknown to you. Still, I wouldn't feel myself authorized to write you if we weren't henceforth attached to each other by the identity of our situation and our misfortune. You are a widow, Madame, and I am, too. You adored your husband and mine was everything for me. Baron Formichel had only merits and no faults. With him I knew all the happiness of this world and I've forsaken them after losing him. It will soon be twenty years since my husband died. And I've not ceased for an instant to cherish his memory. If you'd like to, Madame, one day next week, I will come up to take you and we will go prostrate ourselves before God. The support of religion is very powerful in such cases; it's that which gives me the strength to live and to sacrifice myself. To vanquish my flesh while waiting for the Baron and myself to be reunited for eternity. Allow me, Madame, to call myself your friend. Rose Christiane Adelaide, Baroness Formichel." She's mad.

CURTAIN