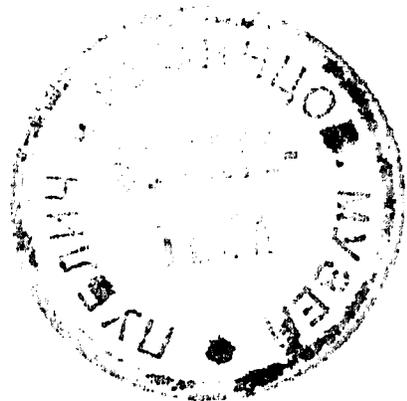


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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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CHAPTER I.

“MONSIEUR JACOBI—the Baroness de Nantille!”

Monsieur Jacobi bowed with grave courtesy—the Baroness de Nantille inclined her head without raising her eyes, and the introduction was complete. The introducer, Mrs. Wright, turned away with a little sigh of relief to continue her duties of hostess. Monsieur Jacobi and the Baroness had never been to her house before, and the astute little Englishwoman was not prepossessed in favour of the foreign lady. Monsieur Jacobi, of course, was irreproachable. Everyone knew the name of the new musician whose violin had insinuated him into every circle in London where the fine arts came under unprofitable discussion. Mrs. Wright rather prided herself upon being particularly English, however. She avoided Continental celebrities who, like prophets and other self-made folk, are entirely unknown in their own land. She was, no doubt, terribly prejudiced, after the manner of her countrymen and women; but the fact remains that Bohemianism, long hair, and sallow faces

received a scanty welcome in her drawing-room. Affectation in any form or manner was singularly distasteful to her, and she was not afraid of showing her feelings in this matter.

The most regular frequenters of her cheerful little entertainments were not, as a rule, celebrated in any way. There was a sprinkling of young military men, a carefully selected assortment of active politicians, and some waifs and strays who followed various crafts and professions. It is to be feared that Mrs. Wright found her friends among a circle of very cheery idlers. Men without lofty aspirations — women without ambition. Maidens who danced, and sang, and loved, and laughed — youths who rowed, and rode, and roamed, and smoked wooden pipes in the streets.

Of such the small rooms were full this evening, and Madame la Baronne de Nantille was hanging heavily upon her hostess's hands. The stalwart youths at that moment dancing in the other room had, by some strange mishap, one and all discovered that their programmes were full when Mrs. Wright proposed to introduce them to the distinguished stranger. Every hostess knows the difficulty attached to allowing their guests to bring friends, and if Mrs. Wright had thought it worth her while she would have borne some ill-will towards the ladies who had been the means of introducing two such "unlikely" people as the Baroness and Monsieur Jacobi into her house. But, as was her cheery habit, the little lady took things and guests as they came, making the best of everything. And now a weight was removed from her mind. The sudden inspiration had passed through her brain to introduce these two to each other,

and trouble little more about them. Monsieur Jacobi, as already mentioned, was a most presentable person. Clean-shaven, dark and sleek, his manners were suave and courtly; his medium-sized, graceful figure an ornament to any room. Such minute peculiarities of dress as he indulged in were offensive to none, and most allowable in a musician somewhat above the average. In Kensington he was much run after by damsels who mistook, in themselves, bodily weakness for mental woe, dressing in sombre misshapen garments in order to pass on the belief to others. But in Mrs. Wright's house Monsieur Jacobi had not as yet succeeded in creating in any fair young bosom the least thrill of interest. The hostess herself, who it is to be feared was somewhat cynical, persisted in looking upon him as a vilionist and nothing else. She accorded to him no greater attention—and indeed not so much—as she did to young Sparkle who had just scraped his way into Woolwich Academy and his first dress-coat.

With the Baroness, however, it was a different matter. Mrs. Wright honoured her with a good deal of attention of an unobtrusive order. In fact, she took every opportunity of glancing unobserved in her direction, noting with her quick gray eyes every detail of the Baroness's dress, every tiny movement, many of which betrayed to the woman of the world that this stranger was out of her element.

The introduction took place in the smaller drawing-room, which was almost deserted at the moment. Indeed, there was only one other person present. This was a man with hair and pointed beard, moustache and overhanging eyebrows as white as snow. The head was

that of an old man—such as one pictures the ancient patriarchs to have been—but the body was straight, and the movements, without being lithe, were far from denoting infirmity. This was Laurance Lowe—a mossless stone whose rolling-days were done. People whispered to each other that in days gone by Laurance Lowe would fain have ceased his rolling ways, but that Providence had willed it otherwise, sending a courageous and fairly intelligent young soldier—one Lieutenant Wright—to set the stone once more agoing, and to gather for himself the moss. Whatever may have passed between the white-haired man and the cheery little matron (still comely and hearty) in those forgotten days was only known to themselves, and neither ever referred to it. People wondered why Mrs. Wright should trouble herself with this silent old man, who contributed in no way to the entertainment of her guests. They considered him an old bore, though he never displayed the least anxiety to be honoured with their attention—never yawned, never confessed to fatigue, and never partook in a general conversation.

It was to him that Mrs. Wright turned with her ready smile, which, however, had something different in it when her eyes met his. She raised her eyebrows and made an almost imperceptible movement with her lips, which plainly said, “I do not like those people.” Lowe gazed at her solemnly beneath his shaggy white eyebrows as she crossed the room, but his face betrayed no sign of having read aright the expression of hers. His eyes never returned the little flash of mutual understanding: the light from the candles on the delicately tinted wall glimmered on the surface of the small single