

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter I. **THE SILVER BOWL**

ON an evening late in the month of May 1914 we were dining at the German Legation. We had risen from the long table and gone up to the *salons*, and as we stood about waiting for the coffee I found myself beside Herr von Below-Saleski, who said to me in a low voice and with a sigh :

" Weil, thank God, it's over now."

He spoke, no doubt, in the sense of intimacy that was somehow ours because we had come at about the same time to Brussels, where we knew no one, not even each other ; the fact was somehow a bond, the only one, between us. I could quite understand the relief he felt, the relief of the host who has done his duty ; I had the same sensation myself in my capacity of guest.

" Yes," I said, " it's over at last."

" We can be tourists now," he went on, " go where we please, do what we please."

" Where are you going ? " I asked.

" Oh, I don't know ; anywhere to be free, to get away Take a trip somewhere. And you ? "

" To the country."

And I thought of Bois-Fleuri, waiting for me there that night, in the dismal rain that made the Quartier Léopold so drear, and emphasized that expression of vague sadness it always wears, even when the sun lights up its blocks of austere houses. My heart was lighter for an instant in the thought of the country, the noble forest, Ravenstein with its golf-links and the red roofs of little Tervueren.

While my thoughts played with the pleasant anticipations of vacation my colleague left me standing there, to greet a dog, a German dachshund that just then came wriggling into the *salon*, as delighted to be admitted to the company as the company was to have it come : there is perhaps nothing as efficient as a dog, even one of these dachshunds, to entertain the guests of a formal dinner. The dog was gambolling about and writhing ecstatically on the floor, which it thumped with its tail, and the guests exclaimed over it and spoke to it in French, though doubtless' German was the only language it understood, and flattered it with endearing epithets:

" *Oh, le gentil petit toutou ! . . . Quel amour de chien ! . . . Qu'il est charmant, n'est-ce pas ? . . . Ici, mon vieux ! . . .*"

The dog accepted all their compliments with a dog's frank love of flattery ; the *salon* was enlivened with talk, with exclamations, with laughter. The footmen were serving the coffee and the cigarettes, and, leaving his other guests, Herr von Below came back to me. We were standing by a table in a corner of the room, and from among the *objets d'art*, the various trinkets, the signed photographs in silver frames with which it was loaded, he drew forward a silver bowl that he used as a *cendrier*. As I dropped the ash of my cigarette into it I noticed that it was pierced on one side near the rim by a perfectly round hole, the jagged edges of which were thrust inward ; it was plainly a bullet-hole, and doubtless the bOwl had a history. I asked him.

" Yes, a bullet-hole," he said. " In China it stood on my desk, and one day during the riots a bullet came through the window and went right through it."

Several of the guests pressed up to see. Such a bowl, with its jagged

bullet-hole and a history, was an excellent subject for conversation ; the German Minister had to recount the circumstances several times,

" I have never had a post," he said, " where there has not been trouble ; in Turkey it was the Revolution, in China it was the Boxers. I am a bird of ill omen (*Je suis un oiseau de mauvais augure*)."

He laughed, standing there very erect and tall and distinguished, with his pointed black moustaches, raising his cigarette delicately to his lips with a wide and elegant gesture, while the guests purred about, examined the silver bowl, thrust their fingers into the bullet-hole.

" But now," he went on, " I have the most tranquil post in Europe ; nothing can happen in Brussels."

And we ail fell to celebrating the pence, the cairn, the repose of the loveliest, the most charming city in Europe. . . .

I think we ail felt thé relief that the end of the season brought us, for Herr von Below's was the last of the long series of dinners and formal functions 'of the winter. There were only a few more moments to be got over ; then the footmen would wheel in the service of the tea and announce the carriage, and we could go. . . . And then, Bois-Fleuri and the links at Ravenstein, and the manuscript of the novel I had so long wished to write !

I went over to where Prince Koudacheff, our Russian colleague, was standing by a great red curtain at the entrance to the adjoining *salon*, peering with that sharp, cynical glance out at a world that had stripped him of his last illusion. It was always a pleasure to chat with Prince Koudacheff ; he was so good at heart in bis Russian way, and his incorrigible pessimism was se, delightful. But near by, in the great hall, one of the German secretaries of legation was recounting the history of an enormous oil-painting of the Kaiser that hung over the staircase ; the history was neither important nor interesting, but since the portrait was of the Kaiser the secretary adopted the courtier's tone in speaking of it, and I could like the young Belgian who, squinting up at the theatrical figure in its bald and too vivid colours, said :

" *Il serait permis de dire, n'est-ce pas, que comme art, la peinture n'est pas fameuse* "

But then Herr von Below was said to be a man of superb taste ; he played the piano well and had a knowledge of all the arts. Under him the German Legation would be immensely improved. He had set out a new formal garden ; he would enhance the already widening German influence in Belgium. His dinners that spring had been excellent ; the *Bourgogne* we had just had for dinner, for instance, was the famous *Château-Chose-1873*,

Brand WITHLOCK

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