

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter IV. **BOIS-FLEURI**

EARLY in June we went to the country, to the villa we had taken for the summer. It was — the mind thinks persistently in the past tense, of that lost time before the world was for ever changed for us and we, alas, for it — it was not far from town ; not twenty minutes in a motor, indeed, from the Quartier Léopold and the Legation, so that we could be out and in. And yet it was in, such a retired spot, hidden away in its little grove of fir-trees, that one could imagine oneself leagues away from all that suggests the town, all that is inimical to seclusion and repose. To reach it we drove out the Avenue de Tervueren, the new street that Léopold II, the great builder, had laid out on the uplands east of town ; and at Woluwe-St.-Pierre we were already in the country on a pleasant road that soon was winding through the Forêt de Soignes, where in the solemn shadows of lofty beeches there was always the dreaming peace of some vast cathedral. The sunlight filtered through the boughs far overhead, touching to a vivid green the tiny branches, delicate as ferns, that sprouted from the massive green-grey boles, and it dappled the thick bed of leaves and mould and mosses that lay at their base. We emerged then by the old Chaussée de Bruxelles at Quatre-Bras — not the Quatre-Bras that evokes the memory of Napoleon, of Wellington, and of Waterloo, but one of the many score of Quatre-Bras scattered over Belgium — there by the *estaminet* where on pleasant afternoons there were always gay throngs of bicyclists and pedestrians, taking the air and sipping their beer or their coffee at the little tables set out on the sidewalk. And then just beyond the *lisière* of the forest was Bois-Fleuri ; such was its perhaps too poetic name.

It was built in the modern French style, of red brick with white stone trimmings, and if it was somewhat too new, if it had not yet taken on the *patine* of time that would have brought it more closely into harmony with the rest of Belgium, its clear newness meant all the modern comforts, the only thing from town that one would take to the country.

And perhaps its name was not too poetic after all, since it stood in a flowering wood, a hectare of land surrounded on three sides by a dark, sweet grove of pines. It had a rose-garden always in bloom ; the roses climbed up the façade of the house and over the terrace. There was a little lodge where lived Victor, the gardener, who spoke the odd French dialect of the Walloon provinces, and in an enormous cage kept a fierce Groenendael police-dog ; one might stroll down there and look at the dog with all the sensations of looking at a ferocious wild beast in a menagerie. We could never make friends with him, though Victor, with an air no less proudly conscious than that of a lion-tamer, would enter the cage and allow the dog to lick his face. There were pleasant paths among the trees and a thicket where a rabbit dwelt ; he came out at times to nibble at the roseleaves, dwelling in the peace that was breathed by all the countryside, until one morning tragedy, in which life abounds, was brought back to us by a scream of fear and pain and we saw a dog slinking away, and afterwards :

*Mon petit lapin*  
*A-t-il du chagrin*  
*Il ne saute plus*  
*Ne cour-e plus*  
*Dans not' jardin*

From our terrace, at tea-time, we could look across the lawn and the roses to the road and the endless fields that sloped away with their wheat and rye ripening in the sun, over to the little cluster of red roofs that marked the ancient village of Tervueren, where the legend of St. Hubert, the blessed patron of dogs, had its beginning. Farther on, where the slender spire of an old church pierced the tender blue sky, a windmill lazily turned its sails all the afternoon. It was long before I knew the name of that village ; I did not wish to know it, lest the delicate charm of it depart on acquaintance, as charm is too apt to do with villages when one sees them, or with mysterious roads when one explores them, or with women — some women — long admired at a distance, when one is presented and for the first time hears them speak.

And there on the terrace after dinner, in the long twilight, we had our coffee ; and as the soft voluptuous night enveloped that tranquil, peaceful world a nightingale poured out its melody from the dark thicket, which was so very near that we could fancy, when we stopped our idle talking and held our breath, that we heard the breathing of that rapturous little throat. It would not sing long ; it knew, consummate little artist that it was, that joy increases by its moderation and that rapture grows sweeter as it is withheld. A few moments there in the darkness, with its hush, its mysteries, and its low voices, and I would go upstairs to the manuscript of the novel which I thought at last I was to write.

I had never heard before that summer a nightingale sing ; but one evening, just as the twilight was fading from the fields — I had taken a turn in the garden — suddenly, as I entered the door, that shy, sweet melody flooded the still evening. I knew what it was, and yet there might be some mistake ; the ironic spirits are always playing such sly tricks on mortals ! One grows wary, after a while, of life, of happiness.

" *C'est un rossignol, n'est-ce pas ?* " I asked of Omer.

" *Oui, Excellence,* " he said, and the gentle smile that was so characteristic of him came to his good Flemish face.

" *Vous en êtes sûr ?* " "

" *Mais oui, Excellence ; nous disons 'nachtegaal' en flamand.* "

" *Et nous 'nightingale' en anglais.* "

" *Oui, c'est toujours la même chose.* "

It was convincing, and I could accept the miracle, just as a month or so before I had accepted another miracle that was so much like this. I was playing golf with Frank Neilson at Ravenstein. It was a spring day of sparkling sunlight and warm, caressing air. We were out on the eleventh hole ; we had played our brassies, and there remained the mashie pitch across the bunker to the sloping green. I was addressing my bail when suddenly, almost from under my very feet it seemed, something fluttered lightly into the air and vent on into the upper ether, whence it poured forth its

*full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

I stood and gazed upward, enchanted. I knew it at once ; there could be no mistake.

" It's a lark, " I said.

" Yes, " said Neilson, to whose English eyes and ears this wonder was not new, " yes, it's a lark. Play your mashie " "

I played it — into the bunker. I remember it all with perfect distinctness. But for once I did not care. I was thinking of Shelley, of course.

And so that summer brought me those two joys, which only Keats and Shelley could describe — two joys that in their simplicity, their evanescence, and their charm stand out as symbols of its brevity.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

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