



Old man Milon

by

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(Translated from the French and slightly abridged by O. A. GILLESPIE)

FOR a whole month the sun had drenched the fields with warmth, and under that deluge of life-giving heat everything had swiftly sprung to luxuriant growth; as far as the eye could see the earth was green. In the distance the farms of Normandy, scattered about the plain, resembled tiny woods, for each was enclosed in a girdle of stately beech trees. As one approached and opened the worm-eaten gate to one of these farms, it seemed like entering an enormous garden, for all the old apple trees, as gnarled as the peasants themselves, were in flower. Their ancient trunks, black and twisted, held up to the cloudless sky domes of pink and white blossom whose sweet perfume mingled with the grosser smells from an open stable and a fermenting rubbish heap where fowls were scratching.

It was midday. The whole family, father, mother, their four children, two servant girls and three farm hands were all dining together in the shade of a pear tree in front of the door. Scarcely anyone spoke as they drank their soup and then uncovered a dish of stew containing plenty of potatoes and bacon. Now and again one of the girls went to the cellar to fill a pitcher with cider.

The owner of the farm, a big strong fellow of forty years, was looking at a grape vine which twisted like a serpent as it ran under the shutters along the wall of the house. Then, breaking the silence, he remarked:

"Father's grape vine is budding early this year. Perhaps we'll have a good crop."

His wife turned and gazed at the vine, without saying a word. That vine had been planted exactly where her father-in-law had been shot.

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IT happened during the war of 1870. Prussian soldiers occupied the whole countryside, though General Faidherbe, with the Northern Army, was still holding out against them. A German commander and his staff had established themselves at this farm, and the peasant who owned it, old man Milon, Pierre Milon, had received and installed them as best he could.

For a month the German advance guard remained in the village. Ten leagues away the French remained stationary, but each night some of the German invaders disappeared. None of the scouts who went out on their rounds ever came back. Each morning some were found dead—in a field, beyond the farm yard, or in a ditch. Their horses lay along the roads, their throats cut as though from the blow of a sabre.

These murders seemed to have been committed by the same man. The countryside was in terror. Peasants were shot on the slightest pretext; children were threatened fearfully. But nothing was discovered.

Then, one morning, old man Milon was found lying in the stable his face disfigured by a deep

gash. Three kilometres away two disembowelled Uhlans were discovered, one of them still clutching a blood-stained sword. A council of war was immediately set up at the farm and the old peasant brought before it.

He was 68 years of age—small, thin, twisted a little, with great hands like the claws of a crab. His cranium shone through strands of dull hair, soft and fine as the down of a young duck. Thick veins stood out of the brown and wrinkled skin of his neck, disappeared under his jaws, and revealed themselves again on his temples. People of the district thought him avaricious, and difficult in his dealings with them.

He was made to stand with four soldiers in front of the kitchen table which had been taken outside. Five officers and the colonel sat facing him; the Colonel spoke in French:

"Father Milon, since our arrival here you have always been agreeable and even helpful, but to-day a terrible accusation has been made against you. We must be enlightened. How did you receive that wound on your face?"

The old peasant did not reply.

"Your silence condemns you, Father Milon," said the Colonel. "You must answer me, do you understand? Do you know who killed the two Uhlans found this morning near the Calvary?"

The old man's voice came sharp and clear:

"I did."

The Colonel remained silent for a moment, glaring at his prisoner. Old man Milon never moved. He stood with downcast eyes, as though speaking to the village priest. One thing only revealed his emotion—he swallowed his saliva with difficulty, as though something clutched him by the throat. In the background stood his family—his son Jean, his daughter-in-law, his two grandchildren, fearful and afraid.

The Colonel again demanded:

"Do you know who killed all the scouts of our army: those we have found every morning this month?"

Without emotion the old man again replied:

"I did."

"You killed them all?"

"Yes, I killed them all."

"Alone?"

"Yes; alone"

"Tell me how you did it."

For the first time the old peasant showed some emotion. He was troubled by the necessity of speaking for any length of time; then he stammered:

"I did it—like that—as I found them."

The Colonel barked:

"I warn you that you must tell me everything. You'd better make up your mind. How did you begin?"

Bewildered, the old man looked towards his family, hesitated a moment and then, with a rush of words, he began:

"I was coming home one evening—perhaps about 10 o'clock—two days after you got here—you, and worse than that—your soldiers. You took fifty crowns' worth of my fodder and a cow and two sheep. . . I said to myself, 'I'll have my revenge.' There was something else which weighed on my heart. I'll tell you about that, too. I saw one of your soldiers sitting smoking on the edge of a ditch behind the granary. I unhooked my scythe and came up behind him, stealthily. He didn't hear a thing. I cut his head off with one blow, only one, just like a sword swipe. All he said was 'ouf.' If you look in the pond you'll find him—in a weighted coal-sack. Then I had an idea. I took all his clothes, from his boots to his hat, and hid them in the lime kiln in Martin's wood. . ."

The old man became silent, then, at the officer's order, he told them his story. . .

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HIS first murder accomplished, the old man lived with only one idea, "To kill the Prussians." He hated them with the bitter hatred of a patriotic peasant

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