

(Continued from previous page)

but, as he said, he had his idea, so he bided his time for a few days.

The Germans permitted him to go about his farm as he wished, so long as he displayed a sense of humility towards them. By mixing with the soldiers he was able to learn certain German expressions which would be essential to him. The old man noticed that mounted messengers went out each evening, and one night he overheard the name of the village where the horsemen were to meet.

Quietly he left his yard and crept through the wood until he reached the lime kiln. There he recovered the dead man's clothes, where he had hidden them, and exchanged them for his own. Then, with the stealth of a poacher, he roamed the countryside, following any banks so that he could conceal himself if necessary. When he thought the time was ripe, he regained the main road and hid in the undergrowth. Towards midnight he heard the sound of a horse galloping along the highway. The old man put his ear to the ground to assure himself that only a solitary horseman approached. Then he waited.



"You killed my father—he was one of Napoleon's men," said Old Milon, "and last month you killed my youngest son, Francis. I owed you this. I've paid. Now we're quits"

A Uhlan, carrying despatches, approached at a full trot but with eyes and ears alert. When he was within ten paces the old peasant threw himself across the road crying "Help! Help!" Recognising a fellow German, perhaps wounded, the unsuspecting Uhlan stopped and dismounted. Then, as he bent over the unknown figure, he received the length of a curved sabre blade full in the stomach. Radiant with a joy he could not express, the old peasant got up from the roadway, cut the throat of the corpse to give himself complete satisfaction, and threw it into a nearby ditch. Then he mounted his horse, which had waited quietly for its master, and galloped off across the fields. An hour later he came on two other Uhlans

riding side by side as they returned to their billets. He went straight for them, again crying for help. The Germans let him approach. He passed between them like a bullet, killing one with his sabre, the other with a revolver. Then he slit the throats of the horses—the German horses. Quietly the old man returned to the kiln, hid his horse in the dim gallery, changed into his own clothes and returned home, to sleep until morning.

For four days after that Milon stayed at home, because of the inquiry which had begun. On the fifth evening, however, he went out again and killed two more soldiers, by the same ruse. From then on he never stopped. Each night he galloped about the deserted fields—a lost Uhlan seeking victims, killing Prussians wherever he found them and leaving their corpses lying on the roads. Then, his task ended, he returned to the lime kiln to hide his horse and change his uniform. Towards midnight he always carried oats and water to his steed, on which he lavished food in plenty because of the heavy demands he asked in return.

One night, however, one of the Uhlans he attacked was on his guard. The old man killed them both, but not before one of them had slashed his face with a sword. He was able to hide his horse and change his clothes as usual, but as he dragged himself to the stable a fit of giddiness overcame him; he was too weak to reach the house.

They found him there, still bleeding, lying on the straw. . .

WHEN his story was ended, the old man raised his head, swiftly, and stared proudly at the Prussian officers.

"You have nothing more to say?" demanded the Colonel, pulling at his moustache.

"No, nothing more. It was a just reckoning. I killed sixteen of them—not one more, not one less."

"You know that you are going to die?"

"I haven't asked for mercy."

"Have you been a soldier?"

"Yes, in my time I took the field. But you killed my father—he was one of Napoleon's men—and last month you killed my youngest son, Francis. I owed you this. I've paid. Now we're quits."

The officers looked at each other as the old man continued:

"Eight for my father; eight for my son. We're quits. I didn't seek a quarrel with you. I don't know you. All I know is where you come from. You come to my house and behave as though it belonged to you. Now I've revenged myself and I don't regret doing it."

And straightening his twisted body, old man Milon folded his arms like a humble hero.

The Prussians discussed the situation quietly among themselves; one of the

captains defending him. At last the Colonel rose and spoke to Milon in a low voice:

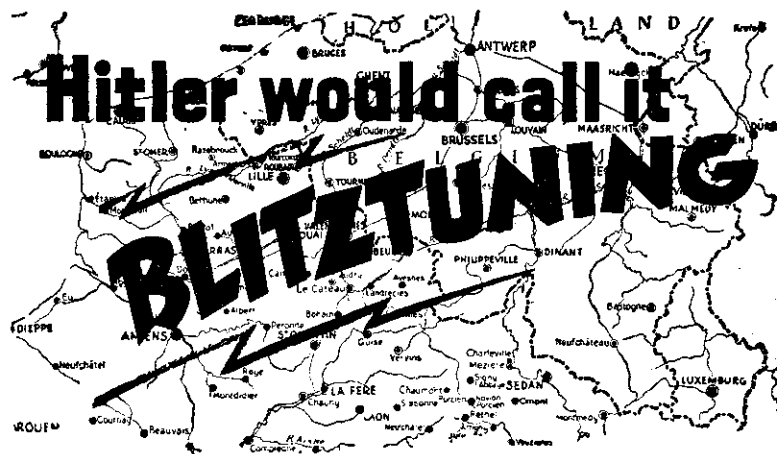
"Listen, old man, perhaps there is a way of saving your life; and that is. . .

But the old peasant did not listen. Instead he gazed steadfastly at the Prussian officer, the wind playing about his downy head. Suddenly his face twisted to a hideous grimace—that thin face cut about by the conqueror's sword. Then, swelling his chest, he struck the Prussian full in the face. Maddened, the Colonel lifted his hand, but not before the old man had struck again, with all his force.

All the officers staggered to their feet, yelling orders in confusion.

In less than a minute old man Milon, impassive as always, was thrust against the wall and shot; but in those last moments he smiled at Jean, his eldest son, and at his daughter-in-law, and their two children who looked on—hopeless and desperate.

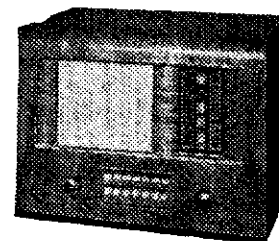
— THE END —



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