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ROMMEL AS A "GUEST".

"Simple Life" at Sfax_Villa

OUR WAR CORRESPONDENT, WILLIAM MUNDAY.

ALGIERS, April 14

Monsieur Pierre Fages, rich owner of 20,000 olive trees, was sunning himself before his house, ten miles from Sfax, on February 22 when a big open car flashed down the drive and stopped beside him. There was a German officer standing in it, holding on to the windscreen for support.

M. Fages, who was an artillery commander in the last war, does not like Germans. His bushy eyebrows, his fierce upturned moustache bristled. His eyes flashed fire as he threw back his head and roared, "Who the devil are you?"

M. Fages was abashed by the reply, "I am Rommel and I have come to stay with you for a little while." Later, a German sentry, with fixed bayonet, stood on guard at the entrance to M. Fages' big colonial home.

Rommel's chauffeur came to the Frenchman, who was still agitatedly snorting his anger.

"Don't worry," the chauffeur consoled, him.

"We never stay anywhere for very long these days."

But that day was merely the first of 21 more during which Rommel stayed as a non-paying guest - 21 days during which Monsieur and Madame lived in the servants' quarters while the Nazi war chief brooded in the panelled rooms of their mansion or strode gloomily and thoughtfully through the olive groves. There were, of course, staff officers from the German Command with Rommel, and, of course, the best of everything went to them - meat, eggs, chickens, and vegetables from the farms around.

TOOK LINEN AND SILVER

Madame Fages' best linen went on their beds and on the dining table. All her silver went into

their quarters, too. You would have thought that Rommel would have been grateful. But no. On March 15 the Fages woke to find that Rommel and his men had gone in the night. They always slipped away in darkness without saying thanks, and they had taken all Madame Fages' silver and linen with them. M. Fages is a fair-minded man. He would not say that Rommel himself was a sneak thief, but he is quite certain that the linen and silver went when Rommel went - and it was very nice linen and very valuable silver. And in everything else he says about the Germans who lived with him for three weeks M. Fages is fair minded. He saw Rommel as one soldier sees another, and grudgingly, perhaps, but nevertheless fairly and firmly. M. Fages told me that he was a great soldier. "Rommel," M. Fages adds, "is nothing like the tall, commanding figure he is represented in all his pictures. He is just the opposite. He is a short man with ruddy complexion and round face, who is always simply dressed."

All the time that M. Fages knew him Rommel wore the same shoddy khaki drill uniforms issued to the German troops, only a silver band across his cap denoting his high rank. But there was no doubt that Rommel was a very worried man.

All day long and half the night he worked with staff officers in the study in M. Fages's house or in his own caravan parked in the court-yard. His own private aeroplane was in a field nearby. He had masses of flowers cut from M. Fages's flowerbeds put into his room, and his only relaxation and exercise were long walks each morning and evening in the olive groves.

It was only of flowers, olive trees, and farming generally that he spoke to M. Fages. Never did

he speak of the war. "He seemed very interested in a colonial farmer's life, and said that maybe some day he would have a life like mine himself - an old retired soldier living on the land," M. Fages told me.

"LIVED AS SIMPLE SOLDIER"

Flagons of wine, lots of fresh meat and vegetables and tobacco went into the German quarters in M. Fages's home, but M. Fages believes that Rommel had none of them. He lived as a simple soldier, not smoking, not drinking, and eating the ordinary soldier's rations while the Nazi officers glutted themselves.

Rommel yielded to only one weakness - he loved fruit, and every meal ate a whole tin of canned fruit himself.

An Italian general stayed with Rommel and M. Fages, too, but he lived in a tent in the backyard, and Rommel never had him in to dinner. Even the German sentries did not salute the Italian general, but they sprang into rigid erectness every time that Rommel appeared.

"It was plain that they were fond of him and trust him," said M. Fages. Rommel slept on an iron bedstead white enamelled, such as is to be found in any London boarding-house, and he had his own private bathroom opening from the bedroom. Through another door he entered the big dining-room with its great table, high backed chairs, and panelled walls hung with coloured plates. On the shelves were other specimens of native craftsmanship - gourds,

claypots, vases, coloured earth, wicker baskets, old Moorish weapons. While Rommel was there the room, too, was filled with flowers, so that, according to M. Fages' contemptuous description, it was like a funeral parlour.

LIKED FLOWERS

"Never did I know such a man for flowers," said M. Fages. The Fages home, solitary in its olive groves far inland, was safe from a military viewpoint - a fact which undoubtedly helped to recommend it to Rommel and his staff. Olive grove owners had escaped the suffering which the German invasion brought to their compatriots in the towns, but methodically all foods went from this lonely countryside. The Germans paid "not overmuch, but just a right, fair price," says M. Fages, "but it was not till later that the settlers learnt that they had been paid with their own money which the Germans had stolen from Sfax banks or taken as fines inflicted on the Jews in the community."

M. Fages, in fairness, draws a sharp line between Rommel and his Nazi officers.

"Rommel is a great soldier, very correct, very austere, a soldier and nothing but a soldier, but his German officers they are pigs.

"Perhaps," says M. Fages, still anxious to be fair, "Rommel doesn't know what is going on behind his back." But M. Fages wishes that his fine linen and valuable silver had not disappeared at the same time as the Nazi commander.

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