

A murmur of anger like distant thunder broke out, but, at a word from the officer, the soldiers pointed their rifles at the crowd. At that moment Babette stepped forward.

"Monsieur," she said in her pleasant voice, "if vengeance must fall, it should fall on me alone, for it was I who met the soldiers in the wood last evening, but I can only repeat to you what I said to them—that I did not know French troops were in the neighbourhood, and therefore could not know where they were."

"*Bien, madame*, it shall be as you wish."

And the soldiers seizing Babette, placed her by the side of M. le curé.

Even the risk of instant death could not prevent some of the villagers from crying:

"*Grace! M. l'officier. Grace pour notre P'tit Soleil!*"

"Silence you rabble, unless you want a general massacre," he shouted, whilst both M. le curé and Babette made signs to their friends to keep quiet.

A breathless, hopeless stillness followed, broken only by sobs; by a command; and then, the tramping of eight soldiers into line.

Suddenly Babette found herself blindfolded.

"*Mon Père*," she whispered, "will you take my hand? I am a little afraid."

"*Courage, mon enfant*, with the LORD there is mercy: and with Him is plenteous redemption" said the old man, continuing aloud the *De Profundis* which he had been reciting to himself.

Eight rifles rang out—again—yet again: and, as the setting sun crimsoned the west with glory, God took *le P'tit Soleil* by the hand.

"The bodies will be left where they fell. Go to your homes and prepare food for my men."

In sullen silence the villagers obeyed, and then little was heard but coarse laughter, tipsy shouting, or the shriek of some terrified woman, till at last night came and threw her mantle of mystery over all.

Just before dawn, there was the sharp crack of a rifle from the south end of the village, and the soldiers came pouring out of the houses to find themselves engaged in a hand to hand conflict with a body of French who had crept up during the night. The surprise and the darkness put the Germans at a disadvantage, but they quickly recovered from the surprise, and they soon remedied the darkness, for first one spear of flame, and then another, shot up into the sky. Soon it seemed as if the whole village was afire; but the French onslaught was so fierce and deadly that by degrees the enemy gave way, leaving ghastly trophies in their wake.

The church was well ablaze by now, and the illumination served to show two soldiers who, in grim silence, were shooting, hacking and hewing their way onward. They showed no quarter, and they asked for none. A nameless dread lurked in their flashing eyes,