

JEANNE D'ARC, HER LIFE AND DEATH

by Mrs. Oliphant

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**TO COUSIN ANNIE (MRS. HARRY
COGHILL)**

**THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED IN LOVE OF OUR COMMON
HEROINE
AND IN REMEMBRANCE OF LONG AND FAITHFUL
AFFECTION AND FRIENDSHIP**

JEANNE D'ARC

CHAPTER I — FRANCE IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY. 1412-1423.

It is no small effort for the mind, even of the most well-informed, how much more of those whose exact knowledge is not great (which is the case with most readers, and alas! with most writers also), to transport itself out of this nineteenth century which we know so thoroughly, and which has trained us in all our present habits and modes of thought, into the fifteenth, four hundred years back in time, and worlds apart in every custom and action of life. What is there indeed the same in the two ages? Nothing but the man and the woman, the living agents in spheres so different; nothing but love and grief, the affections and the sufferings by which humanity is ruled and of which it is capable. Everything else is changed: the customs of life, and its methods, and even its motives, the ruling principles of its continuance. Peace and mutual consideration, the policy which even in its selfish developments is so far good that it enables men to live together, making existence possible,—scarcely existed in those days. The highest ideal was that of war, war no doubt sometimes for good ends, to redress wrongs, to avenge injuries, to make crooked things straight—but yet always war, implying a state of affairs in which the last thing that men thought of was the golden rule, and the highest attainment to be looked for was the position of a protector, doer of justice, deliverer of the oppressed. Our aim now that no one should be oppressed, that every man should have justice as by the order of nature, was a thing unthought of. What individual help did feebly for the sufferer then, the laws do for us now, without fear or favour:

which is a much greater thing to say than that the organisation of modern life, the mechanical helps, the comforts, the easements of the modern world, had no existence in those days. We are often told that the poorest peasant in our own time has aids to existence that had not been dreamt of for princes in the Middle Ages. Thirty years ago the world was mostly of opinion that the balance was entirely on our side, and that in everything we were so much better off than our fathers, that comparison was impossible. Since then there have been many revolutions of opinion, and we think it is now the general conclusion of wise men, that one period has little to boast itself of against another, that one form of civilisation replaces another without improving upon it, at least to the extent which appears on the surface. But yet the general prevalence of peace, interrupted only by occasional wars, even when we recognise a certain large and terrible utility in war itself, must always make a difference incalculable between the condition of the nations now, and then.

It is difficult, indeed, to imagine any concatenation of affairs which could reduce a country now to the condition in which France was in the beginning of the fifteenth century. A strong and splendid kingdom, to which in early ages one great man had given the force and supremacy of a united nation, had fallen into a disintegration which seems almost incredible when regarded in the light of that warm flame of nationality which now illumines, almost above all others, the French nation. But Frenchmen were not Frenchmen, they were Burgundians, Armagnacs, Bretons, Provençaux five hundred years ago. The interests of one part of the kingdom were not those of the other. Unity had no existence. Princes of the same family were more furious enemies to each other, at the head of their respective fiefs and provinces, than the traditional foes of

their race; and instead of meeting an invader with a united force of patriotic resistance, one or more of these subordinate rulers was sure to side with the invader and to execute greater atrocities against his own flesh and blood than anything the alien could do.

When Charles VII. of France began, nominally, his reign, his uncles and cousins, his nearest kinsmen, were as determinedly his opponents, as was Henry V. of England, whose frank object was to take the crown from his head. The country was torn in pieces with different causes and cries. The English were but little farther off from the Parisian than was the Burgundian, and the English king was only a trifle less French than were the members of the royal family of France. These circumstances are little taken into consideration in face of the general history, in which a careless reader sees nothing but the two nations pitted against each other as they might be now, the French united in one strong and distinct nationality, the three kingdoms of Great Britain all welded into one. In the beginning of the fifteenth century the Scots fought on the French side, against their intimate enemy of England, and if there had been any unity in Ireland, the Irish would have done the same. The advantages and disadvantages of subdivision were in full play. The Scots fought furiously against the English—and when the latter won, as was usually the case, the Scots contingent, whatever bounty might be shown to the French, was always exterminated. On the other side the Burgundians, the Armagnacs, and Royalists met each other almost more fiercely than the latter encountered the English. Each country was convulsed by struggles of its own, and fiercely sought its kindred foes in the ranks of its more honest and natural enemy.

When we add to these strange circumstances the facts that the French King, Charles VI., was mad, and incapable of any real

share either in the internal government of his country or in resistance to its invader: that his only son, the Dauphin, was no more than a foolish boy, led by incompetent councillors, and even of doubtful legitimacy, regarded with hesitation and uncertainty by many, everybody being willing to believe the worst of his mother, especially after the treaty of Troyes in which she virtually gave him up: that the King's brothers or cousins at the head of their respective fiefs were all seeking their own advantage, and that some of them, especially the Duke of Burgundy, had cruel wrongs to avenge: it will be more easily understood that France had reached a period of depression and apparent despair which no principle of national elasticity or new spring of national impulse was present to amend. The extraordinary aspect of whole districts in so strong and populous a country, which disowned the native monarch, and of towns and castles innumerable which were held by the native nobility in the name of a foreign king, could scarcely have been possible under other circumstances. Everything was out of joint. It is said to be characteristic of the nation that it is unable to play publicly (as we say) a losing game; but it is equally characteristic of the race to forget its humiliations as if they had never been, and to come out intact when the fortune of war changes, more French than ever, almost unabashed and wholly uninjured, by the catastrophe which had seemed fatal.

If we had any right to theorise on such a subject—which is a thing the French themselves above all other men love to do,—we should be disposed to say, that wars and revolutions, legislation and politics, are things which go on over the head of France, so to speak—boilings on the surface, with which the great personality of the nation if such a word may be used, has little to do, and cares but little for; while she herself, the great race, neither giddy nor

fickle, but unusually obstinate, tenacious, and sober, narrow even in the unwavering pursuit of a certain kind of well-being congenial to her—goes steadily on, less susceptible to temporary humiliation than many peoples much less excitable on the surface, and always coming back into sight when the commotion is over, acquisitive, money-making, profit-loving, uninjured in any essential particular by the most terrific of convulsions. This of course is to be said more or less of every country, the strain of common life being always, thank God, too strong for every temporary commotion—but it is true in a special way of France:—witness the extraordinary manner in which in our own time, and under our own eyes, that wonderful country righted herself after the tremendous misfortunes of the Franco-German war, in which for a moment not only her prestige, her honour, but her money and credit seemed to be lost.

It seems rather a paradox to point attention to the extraordinary tenacity of this basis of French character, the steady prudence and solidity which in the end always triumph over the light heart and light head, the excitability and often rash and dangerous *élan*, which are popularly supposed to be the chief distinguishing features of France—at the very moment of beginning such a fairy tale, such a wonderful embodiment of the visionary and ideal, as is the story of Jeanne d'Arc. To call it a fairy tale is, however, disrespectful: it is an angelic revelation, a vision made into flesh and blood, the dream of a woman's fancy, more ethereal, more impossible than that of any man—even a poet:—for the man, even in his most uncontrolled imaginations, carries with him a certain practical limitation of what can be—whereas the woman at her highest is absolute, and disregards all bounds of possibility. The Maid of Orleans, the Virgin of France, is the sole being of her kind who has ever attained full expression in this world. She can neither

be classified, as her countrymen love to classify, nor traced to any system of evolution as we all attempt to do nowadays. She is the impossible verified and attained. She is the thing in every race, in every form of humanity, which the dreaming girl, the visionary maid, held in at every turn by innumerable restrictions, her feet bound, her actions restrained, not only by outward force, but by the law of her nature, more effectual still,—has desired to be. That voiceless poet, to whom what can be is nothing, but only what should be if miracle could be attained to fulfil her trance and rapture of desire—is held by no conditions, modified by no circumstances; and miracle is all around her, the most credible, the most real of powers, the very air she breathes. Jeanne of France is the very flower of this passion of the imagination. She is altogether impossible from beginning to end of her, inexplicable, alone, with neither rival nor even second in the one sole ineffable path: yet all true as one of the oaks in her wood, as one of the flowers in her garden, simple, actual, made of the flesh and blood which are common to us all.

And she is all the more real because it is France, impure, the country of light loves and immodest passions, where all that is sensual comes to the surface, and the courtesan is the queen of ignoble fancy, that has brought forth this most perfect embodiment of purity among the nations. This is of itself one of those miracles which captivate the mind and charm the imagination, the living paradox in which the soul delights. How did she come out of that stolid peasant race, out of that distracted and ignoble age, out of riot and license and the fierce thirst for gain, and failure of every noble faculty? Who can tell? By the grace of God, by the inspiration of heaven, the only origins in which the student of nature, which is over nature, can put any trust. No evolution, no

system of development, can explain Jeanne. There is but one of her and no more in all the astonished world.

With the permission of the reader I will retain her natural and beautiful name. To translate it into Joan seems quite unnecessary. Though she is the finest emblem to the world in general of that noble, fearless, and spotless Virginity which is one of the finest inspirations of the mediæval mind, yet she is inherently French, though France scarcely was in her time: and national, though as yet there were rather the elements of a nation than any indivisible People in that great country. Was not she herself one of the strongest and purest threads of gold to draw that broken race together and bind it irrevocably, beneficially, into one?

It is curious that it should have been from the farthest edge of French territory that this national deliverer came. It is a commonplace that a Borderer should be a more hot partisan of his own country against the other from which but a line divides him in fact, and scarcely so much in race—than the calmer inhabitant of the midland country who knows no such press of constant antagonism; and Jeanne is another example of this well known fact. It is even a question still languidly discussed whether Jeanne and her family were actually on one side of the line or the other. "Il faut opter," says M. Blaze de Bury, one of her latest biographers, as if the peasant household of 1412 had inhabited an Alsatian cottage in 1872. When the line is drawn so closely, it is difficult to determine, but Jeanne herself does not ever seem to have entertained a moment's doubt on the subject, and she after all is the best authority. Perhaps Villon was thinking more of his rhyme than of absolute fact when he spoke of "Jeanne la bonne Lorraine." She was born on the 5th of January, 1412, in the village of Domremy, on the banks of the Meuse, one of those little grey hamlets, with its

little church tower, and remains of a little chateau on the soft elevation of a mound not sufficient for the name of hill—which are scattered everywhere through those level countries, like places which have never been built, which have grown out of the soil, of undecipherable antiquity—perhaps, one feels, only a hundred, perhaps a thousand years old—yet always inhabitable in all the ages, with the same names lingering about, the same surroundings, the same mild rural occupations, simple plenty and bare want mingling together with as little difference of level as exists in the sweeping lines of the landscape round.

The life was calm in so humble a corner which offered nothing to the invader or marauder of the time, but yet was so much within the universal conditions of war that the next-door neighbour, so to speak, the adjacent village of Maxey, held for the Burgundian and English alliance, while little Domremy was for the King. And once at least when Jeanne was a girl at home, the family were startled in their quiet by the swoop of an armed party of Burgundians, and had to gather up babies and what portable property they might have, and flee across the frontier, where the good Lorrainers received and sheltered them, till they could go back to their village, sacked and pillaged and devastated in the meantime by the passing storm. Thus even in their humility and inoffensiveness the Domremy villagers knew what war and its miseries were, and the recollection would no doubt be vivid among the children, of that half terrible, half exhilarating adventure, the fright and excitement of personal participation in the troubles, of which, night and day, from one quarter or another, they must have heard.

Domremy had originally belonged(1) to the Abbey of St. Remy at Rheims—the ancient church of which, in its great antiquity, is still an interest and a wonder even in comparison with the amazing

splendour of the cathedral of that place, so rich and ornate, which draws the eyes of the visitor to itself, and its greater associations. It is possible that this ancient connection with Rheims may have brought the great ceremony for which it is ever memorable, the consecration of the kings of France, more distinctly before the musing vision of the village girl; but I doubt whether such chance associations are ever much to be relied upon. The village was on the high-road to Germany; it must have been therefore in the way of news, and of many rumours of what was going on in the centres of national life, more than many towns of importance. Feudal bands, a rustic Seigneur with his little troop, going out for their forty days' service, or returning home after it, must have passed along the banks of the lazy Meuse many days during the fighting season, and indeed throughout the year, for garrison duty would be as necessary in winter as in summer; or a wandering pair of friars who had seen strange sights must have passed with their wallets from the neighbouring convents, collecting the day's provision, and leaving news and gossip behind, such as flowed to these monastic hostelries from all quarters—tales of battles, and anecdotes of the Court, and dreadful stories of English atrocities, to stir the village and rouse ever generous sentiment and stirring of national indignation. They are said by Michelet to have been no man's vassals, these outlying hamlets of Champagne; the men were not called upon to follow their lord's banner at a day's notice, as were the sons of other villages. There is no appearance even of a lord at all upon this piece of Church land, which was, we are told, directly held under the King, and would only therefore be touched by a general levy *en masse*—not even perhaps by that, so far off were they, and so near the frontier, where a reluctant man-at-arms could without difficulty make his escape, as the unwilling conscript sometimes does now.

There would seem to have been no one of more importance in Domremy than Jacques d'Arc himself and his wife, respectable peasants, with a little money, a considerable rural property in flocks and herds and pastures, and a good reputation among their kind. He had three sons working with their father in the peaceful routine of the fields; and two daughters, of whom some authorities indicate Jeanne as the younger, and some as the elder. The cottage interior, however, appears more clearly to us than the outward aspect of the family life. The daughters were not, like the children of poorer peasants, brought up to the rude outdoor labours of the little farm. Painters have represented Jeanne as keeping her father's sheep, and even the early witnesses say the same; but it is contradicted by herself, who ought to know best—(except in taking her turn to herd them into a place of safety on an alarm). If she followed the flocks to the fields, it must have been, she says, in her childhood, and she has no recollection of it. Hers was a more sheltered and safer lot. The girls were brought up by their mother indoors in all the labours of housewifery, but also in the delicate art of needlework, so much more exquisite in those days than now. Perhaps Isabeau, the mistress of the house, was of convent training, perhaps some ancient privilege in respect to the manufacture of ornaments for the altar, and church vestments, was still retained by the tenants of what had been Church lands. At all events this, and other kindred works of the needle, seems to have been the chief occupation to which Jeanne was brought up.

The education of this humble house seems to have come entirely from the mother. It was natural that the children should not know A from B, as Jeanne afterward said; but no one did, probably, in the village nor even on much higher levels than that occupied by the family of Jacques d'Arc. But the children at their mother's knee

learned the Credo, they learned the simple universal prayers which are common to the wisest and simplest, which no great savant or poet could improve, and no child fail to understand: "Our Father, which art in Heaven," and that "Hail, Mary, full of grace," which the world in that day put next. These were the alphabet of life to the little Champagnards in their rough woollen frocks and clattering sabots; and when the house had been set in order,—a house not without comfort, with its big wooden presses full of linen, and the *pot au feu* hung over the cheerful fire,—came the real work, perhaps embroideries for the Church, perhaps only good stout shirts made of flax spun by their own hands for the father and the boys, and the fine distinctive coif of the village for the women. "Asked if she had learned any art or trade, said: Yes, that her mother had taught her to sew and spin, and so well, that she did not think any woman in Rouen could teach her anything." When the lady in the ballad makes her conditions with the peasant woman who is to bring up her boy, her "gay goss hawk," and have him trained in the use of sword and lance, she undertakes to teach the "turtle-doo," the woman child substituted for him, "to lay gold with her hand." No doubt Isabeau's child learned this difficult and dainty art, and how to do the beautiful and delicate embroidery which fills the treasuries of the old churches.

And while they sat by the table in the window, with their shining silks and gold thread, the mother made the quiet hours go by with tale and legend—of the saints first of all—and stories from Scripture, quaintly interpreted into the costume and manners of their own time, as one may still hear them in the primitive corners of Italy: mingled with incidents of the war, of the wounded man tended in the village, and the victors all flushed with triumph, and the defeated with trailing arms and bowed heads, riding for their

lives: perhaps little epics and tragedies of the young knight riding by to do his devoir with his handful of followers all spruce and gay, and the battered and diminished remnant that would come back. And then the Black Burgundians, the horrible English ogres, whose names would make the children shudder! No *God-den*(2) had got so far as Domremy; there was no personal knowledge to soften the picture of the invader. He was unspeakable as the Turk to the imagination of the French peasant, diabolical as every invader is.

This was the earliest training of the little maid before whom so strange and so great a fortune lay. *Autre personne que sadite mère ne lui apprint*—any lore whatsoever; and she so little—yet everything that was wanted—her prayers, her belief, the happiness of serving God, and also man; for when any one was sick in the village, either a little child with the measles, or a wounded soldier from the wars, Isabeau's modest child—no doubt the mother too—was always ready to help. It must have been a family *de bien*, in the simple phrase of the country, helpful, serviceable, with charity and aid for all. An honest labourer, who came to speak for Jeanne at the second trial, held long after her death, gave his incontestable evidence to this. "I was then a child," he said, "and it was she who nursed me in my illness." They were all more or less devout in those days, when faith was without question, and the routine of church ceremonial was followed as a matter of course; but few so much as Jeanne, whose chief pleasure it was to say her prayers in the little dark church, where perhaps in the morning sunshine, as she made her early devotions, there would blaze out upon her from a window, a Holy Michael in shining armour, transfixing the dragon with his spear, or a St. Margaret dominating the same emblem of evil with her cross in her hand. So, at least, the

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