

## THE COURAGE OF A MAID

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IN THE year of Our Lord, 1427, a French peasant dreamed to his horror that he saw his fifteen-year-old daughter going away with men at arms. "In that case," he said in the morning to his sons, "you must drown her, or I will." Two years later, that daughter did go away with men at arms; but, being prudent and French, she went off secretly. James of Arc, in those days of rare travel and much work, could do little but nurse the wound of his wrath until, as he hoped, some army commander should send the truant Joan back to him. We know, however, that she did not return; she was no light-headed runaway, but a virgin chosen by God for a mighty mission to France,—a warrior maiden whose heroic courage the Church honors at the altar.

Courage or fortitude, the Angelic Doctor tells us, is a virtue that controls the reactions of a soul aroused by the presence of danger<sup>1</sup> it controls above all the fear that wells up in a man's heart when he must face death.<sup>2</sup> Ordinarily, it is a natural virtue; that is, every man without exception may acquire it by performing the small acts of bravery that daily life demands. But more lofty than this natural courage can ever be, is the supernatural gift bearing the same name. It is poured down by the Holy Spirit into the heart of every man in the state of grace, and is increased according to His Will and the dispositions of the soul in which it resides.<sup>3</sup> In both these forms, courage is a necessary quality, too; for in a broad sense, it is a condition of every virtue. It takes a brave man to be a good man.<sup>4</sup>

Now Joan of Arc was courageous indeed; her life radiates with magnanimity, with magnificence, with patience, and with perseverance,—the four characteristics of true fortitude.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 123, a. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 123, a. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 139, a. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 123, a. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 128.

Magnanimity, the first element of fortitude, is nobility and largeness of soul and mind. It stimulates man to undertake tasks that require great virtue and bring great honor; it connotes a trust of avoiding evil and of realizing good, accompanied by a hope of finishing every work that is begun.<sup>6</sup> Without magnanimity, the Maid of Orleans would have been useless to God and to her country. For almost insurmountable were the difficulties before her, when in her thirteenth year the "Voices" of three Saints whispered to her the awful message that it was she who had been chosen to deliver France from the tyranny of England. *She!* a mere girl! a peasant, poor, peace-loving, untutored! ignorant of the art of war, unacquainted with the manners and the company of the great ones of earth! She—from a stool beside her father's fireplace and a little village in Lorraine, "to a station in the van of armies, and to the more perilous station at the right hand of kings."<sup>7</sup> The heavenly message caused her agony. She pleaded with God for two whole years to have mercy on her weakness. But Heaven's only answer was the ever-increasing insistence of her Voices, and the command to trust God: "My grace is sufficient for thee." Joan conquered her fears that seemed so reasonable, and started for the Dauphin's court at Chinon. *That* was magnanimity.

Magnificence, the doing of great things, is the second mark of fortitude<sup>8</sup>; and Joan's career was truly magnificent. Before her coming, the English were certain of their power to wrest from the rightful heir to the sceptre of France the fragment of a kingdom he yet retained. He himself, uncrowned and incompetent, despaired of success. Yet, on the second day of the second month *after* her coming, the English were forced to abandon the siege of Orleans, a city whose position was for them strategically invaluable. One of the thirteen greatest battles of all history had been won by a peasant girl of seventeen summers; and French morale had been restored. ". . . thou hast done manfully, and thy heart hath been strengthened."<sup>9</sup> Joan had done great things; her fortitude was in a very real sense magnificent.

The third characteristic of fortitude is patience, which merits a man praise for bearing things that distress him in this

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 128, a. 1, and q. 129.

<sup>7</sup> De Quincey, Thomas, "Joan of Arc."

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 128, a. 1, and q. 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Judith*, xv, 11.

life, without being unduly saddened by them.<sup>10</sup> If there was one imperfection that might have been pardoned in the Maid, certainly it was impatience; for throughout her military career, it was her evenness of temper that was most sorely tried. She had proved to her Prince, Charles VII, the Dauphin, that her mission was from heaven. Had she not revealed to him her knowledge of the deepest secret of his soul? Had she not raised the siege of Orleans, and been wounded by an arrow according to her own prophecy? Her sovereign notwithstanding this, hesitated to confide in her. Slow, very slow he was to send her against the numerous walled towns and bridges still held by the English in central France. "And thereby, should help come to them, they might cross in strength into Charles' land, and perhaps overcome him yet. Therefore would Joan have carried those cities and bridges at once and stormed them, and when they were taken march straight to Rheims for the crowning and anointing of the King."<sup>11</sup> But the court delayed; the King was kept back by one of his powerful but false counsellors. When at last her entreaties did prevail, a month had gone since the great day of Orleans. Then she set out joyously with her captains and her men, Charles following reluctantly and sheepishly. Two months and two weeks were consumed, whereas a fortnight would have more than sufficed for the Maid's splendid pageant of victories. Not until the seventeenth of July was the Dauphin anointed and crowned in the High Church of Rheims. Remember that during all these needless delays the Maid knew that she had but a year for her mission, and that her Voices kept bidding her urgently to march. Saintly and heroic was her unending patience. She accepted the disheartening and provoking sloth of men as the Will of God.

The brightest badge that the courageous wear is perseverance.<sup>12</sup> Joan of Arc wore this badge, and kept it on her breast while fire reached down into her being and separated soul and body. What was the secret of this perseverance?

When all her mission was accomplished,—when Orleans was liberated, when Charles was crowned, when the retaking of Paris was entirely prepared for,—Joan was made prisoner by traitors to France, sold to the English, and turned over to the Church—that is, to the rascal bishop, Peter Cauchon, who ap-

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<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 128, a. 1, and q. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Belloc, Hilaire, *Joan of Arc*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 128, a. 1, and q. 137.

propriated to himself and his evil dependents the name of the Church. He had received a questionable jurisdiction to try the Maid; so, three days after her nineteenth birthday, he began proceedings that were to last four months. During all that time, Joan showed how a weak girl can persevere. Of the unnumbered sufferings to which she was subjected, let us consider those that throw most light on her lofty virtue.

First of all, she understood that this trial was the merest travesty of justice, a machine wound up daily by Bishop Cauchon to run until it struck her dead. Despair might have been born of her knowledge of this, of her inability to understand the pedantic diction of the theologians, of her awareness of small and mean attempts on the part of the judges to make her contradict herself. Her Voices were silent. There was little to strengthen and comfort her, from a human point of view, save her natural sharpness of wit and buoyancy of spirit. Firm as her belief was that God had not abandoned her and that He would not, she was unable nevertheless to perceive the influence of His all-powerful help. Yet she answered resignedly, even cheerfully, all the foolish questions; she foiled her learned interrogators, and often her simple, ringing replies made them blush for shame.

When they were finally gone for the day, she turned back to the four bare walls of her prison, to the oppression, "almost inconceivable to us, of those five months of heavy chains, persecutions, moral and physical violence, sickness, absence of human friendship and support, lack of hygiene and honest food . . . and lastly, the unbreathable atmosphere of snare, spying, and treason."<sup>13</sup>

We find her, too, with a temptation exceedingly bitter; she was confronted by an insoluble riddle. She knew that her visions and all her life had been directed by God, and with all her heart she was loyal to the Church. But Cauchon claimed that he was the infallible representative of that Church; her Voices were from the Devil, he said, and damnable. In her conscience, she was certain that her supernal visitors were from God; yet . . . what a dilemma! "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?"<sup>14</sup> Fiercely racked on this spiritual engine of torture, still she kept her trust in God, and her indomitable strength.

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<sup>13</sup> Jules-Bois, H. A., "The Trial of Joan of Arc."

<sup>14</sup> I *Cor.*, xiv, 8.

Far worse than the false trial, her oppressive dungeon, and this bitter riddle, was her fourth intense sorrow. "Out of his power for granting or denying the sacraments, he (Bishop Cauchon) made a weapon against her and her Revelations. These sacraments, the very life of her soul, he refused to her, if she would not repudiate her Apparitions . . . Cauchon used the consecrated Host, offered or drawn back, as an instrument of his satanic force."<sup>15</sup>

And finally—a pain perhaps worst of all—the sweet Voices of Michael, Margaret, and Catherine, the heavenly comforters and teachers of Joan, now seldom spoke with her. They had promised her deliverance, so that she had hoped for escape from prison. Instead, she had been judged guilty and turned over to the "mercy" of the State. She was alone—alone, almost, as Another had been alone, when the sun hid its face at midday, and a dreadful cry broke the cowed hush of a Jewish rabble. But Joan could not be separated from her Lord. "Charity never falleth away; whether prophecies shall be made void, or tongues shall cease, or knowledge shall be destroyed."<sup>16</sup>

Let us look upon her for the last time as she stands, happiness and peace in her eyes, bound to a stake that tops a high pile of faggots, and crowned with a paper mitre bearing the inscription "*Heretic, Relapsed, Apostate, Idolater.*" She understands now what the deliverance is that her Saints promised her. As the slow, cruel flames lick upward and the thick smoke chokes and blinds her, she cries aloud that her Voices do come from God and have not deceived her. Six times from the blazing cloud she cries out the name of Jesus. "And after that there was silence, and no sound but the crackling of the fire."

The daughter of God, of whom the world was not worthy, had gone home to her Father's house. She had gone home, but behind her she had left in the minds and memories of thousands who loved her, a sweet and powerful example of fortitude and courage in every hardship: of magnanimity in undertaking the mission divinely pointed out to her, of magnificence in its achievement, of patience amid the treachery and incredulity of a nation for whom she gave her life, and of perseverance to the last hour of anguish, on this stake in the market-place at Rouen. Into the waters of the Seine, the executioner cast the ashes of her body, and her heart unconsumed by the fire. But Michael

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<sup>15</sup> Jules-Bois, H. A. *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> I *Cor.*, xiii, 8.

and Margaret and Catherine bore aloft to the arms of God a spirit whose fortitude had shone more brightly and towered more loftily than the glare and reach of the mightiest flames of adversity.

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#### ANGELICUS

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Where great men tried to look and fainting failed,  
 Dazed by the brilliance of eternal skies,  
 Into the sun you gazed with face unveil'd.  
 It blinded not your pure angelic eyes.

O Thomas, wingèd messenger of Truth,  
 Whose written words indeed are ebon jewels  
 Bearing God's image every one,—in sooth  
 The world salutes you, Angel of the Schools.