

VOLTAIRE

THE MAID OF ORLEANS
[La Pucelle D'Orleans]

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THE MAID OF ORLEANS.

CANTO I.

ARGUMENT

THE CHASTE LOVES OF CHARLES THE SEVENTH and AGNES SOREL. -- ORLEANS BESIEGED BY THE ENGLISH. -- APPARITION OF SAINT DENIS, ETC.

The praise of saints my lyre shall not rehearse, Feeble my voice, and too profane my verse; Yet shall my Muse to land our Joan* incline, Who wrought, 'tis said, such prodigies divine; Whose virgin hand revived the drooping flower, And gave to Gallia's lily tenfold power; Rescued its monarch from the impending fate So dreaded from victorious England's hate; Made him give praise at Rheims to God adored,¹ While on his temples holy oil was poured; Although in visage Joan appeared the maid, Although in stays and petticoat arrayed, With boldest heroes she sustained her part, For Joan possessed a Roland's dauntless heart: For me, much better should I love by night A lamb-like beauty, to inspire delight; But soon you'll find thro' every glowing page, That Joan of Arc could boast the lion's rage; You'll tremble at those feats she dared essay How dauntlessly she braved the bloody fray; But greatest of these rare exploits you'll hear, Was, that she kept virginity -- a year.

O Chapelain!² O thou whose violin Produced of old so harsh, so vile a din; Whose bow Apollo's malediction had, Which scraped his history in notes so sad; Old Chapelain, to honor thy dull Muse, In me thy genius thou wouldst fain infuse; But no, I'll none on't, 'tis for me unfit, Far better suited to Motte Houdart's wit, Whose brain produced the Iliad Travesty, Or to some friend, of his academy.

One Easter-tide, good Charles in youthful prime,³ At Tours renowned, thought fit to spend his time; Where, at a ball, for much he loved to dance,⁴ It so fell out, that for the good of France, He found a maid who beggard all compare, Named Agnes Sorel, - Love had framed the fair:⁵ Let your warm fancy youthful Flora trace, Of heavenly Venus add the enchanting grace, The wood nymph's stature and bewitching guise, With Love's seductive air and brilliant eyes, Arachne's art, the siren's dulcet strain,

All she possessed; and, in her rose chain, The sage and hero each might have been proud, and monarchs linked, before her beauty bowed; To see her, love her, feel the kindling fire, To ardent

flame, the soft, the fond desire; To tremble and regard with dove-like eyes, To strive to speak and utter naught but sighs, Her hands, with a caressing hand to hold, Till painting all the flames her breast enfold. By turns each other's tender pains impart, and own the luscious thrill that sways the heart; To please, in short, the task is of a day, For kings in love have a peculiar way.⁶ Agnes, well versed in the seductive art, 'Neath veil mysterious strove to play her part, Veil of thin gauze, through which will always pry The envious courtier's keen, malignant eye.

To mask this business, and that none might know, The king made choice of Counsellor Bonneau;⁷ Sure confidant, well versed in each device, Who filled a certain post not over nice: One who at court, where fangled terms they lend, Is commonly esteemed the prince's friend; But, in the town, and where vile peasants live, *Pimp* is the name such vulgar people give. Where Loire majestic winds its limpid flood, A stately castle on the margin stood, 'Twas Bonneau's: thither was one night conveyed, Upon the silvery stream the blushing maid; There Charles in darkness to his Agnes hied; They supped, while Bonneau served the rosy tide; No pomp was seen, 'twas all for pleasure wrought; Feasts of the Gods, ye are to this but naught.

Each fired alike with Love's ecstatic ray, Maddened with passion, to their hopes a prey, Darted warm looks which every wish inspired, Forerunners of the pleasures they desired. Their converse tender, nor with coarseness fraught, Spurred the impatience that usurped each thought; The prince inflamed, with eyes her charmes devoured, While in her ear, Love's tender tale he poured, With feverish touch, her lily hand caressed, While oft his knees 'gainst hers were closely pressed.

The banquet finished, music played awhile, The air Italian, in chromatic style; Flutes, hautboys, viols, softly breathed around, While three melodious voices swelled the sound; They sang in allegory, and the strain Told of those heroes mighty love had slain, Who fled of sounding glory the career, To please the tender fair they loved most dear. The concert echoed from concealed alcove, Close to the chamber, then the scene of love. Thus beauteous Agnes, the discreet and wise, Heard all, but was not seen by human eyes. The moon's pale course spoke midnight near at hand, The hour for bliss, which lovers understand.

In a recess adorned, which met the gaze, Neither obscure, nor filled by splendid rays, Between two rich embroidered sheets were laid The dazzling beauties of the heavenly maid. Near the alcove a portal open stood, Which gentle Alix, dame expert and good, The chamber quitting never thought to close. O! You in whose soft breasts the passion glows, Lovers, 'tis you can feel the sharp desire, The strong impatience of great Gallia's sire. The graceful tresses that adorned his head, Already were with choicest perfumed spread, He came! O! Tender moment, blissful night, He sprang towards his mistress with delight! Quick throbb'd their hearts; both tender love and shame The cheek of Agnes tinged with roseate flame; But bashfulness soon fled; the lover's arms Banished all fears, save tender love's alarms; Dazzled, enchanted were his ardent eyes, That wildly gazed upon the heavenly prize: Who but would worship, that like him had pressed A neck in fairest alabaster dressed; Two rising orbs at equal distance placed, Heaving and falling, by Love's pencil traced, Each crowned with vermil blood of damask rose; Enchanting bosom which ne'er knew repose, You seem'd the gaze and pressure to invite, And woo'd the longing lips to seek delight.

Ever complying with my reader's taste, I mean to paint as low as Agnes' waist; To show that symmetry, devoid of blot, Where Argus' self could not discern a spot; But virtue, which the world good manners calls, Stops short my hand, - And lo! The pencil falls.

In Agnes all was beauty, all was fair, Voluptuousness, whereof she had her share, Spurred every sense which instant took th' alarm, Adding new grace to every brilliant charm It animated:

Love can disguise, And pleasure heightens beauty in our eyes. Three months they shared this ecstasy of joy, Nor did one envious cloud their bliss annoy.

Love's couch they left, and then to table hied; There with fresh vigor was each nerve supplied, Rekindling all that strength which love had tamed; Anon to join the chase they felt inflamed, And mounted both on gallant steeds of Spain, With yelping hounds they coursed the verdant plain: Returned, they sought the bath's refreshing stream; Arabian odors, paste and perfumed cream, All that could soften, polish and delight, Was spread with bounteous hand, to please the sight.

The dinner served, what dainties met the eyes, The pheasant and each tender bird that flies; Ragouts delicious, which exhaled a smell, Pleasing the nose and palate, passing well: Wine d' Ai, whose froth in sparks died quick away, And goblets of the yellow hued Tokay Warmed the young brain with fire, that could not fail In sallies of the liveliest wit to exhale; Brilliant as liquor when the bubbles swim, And sparkling dance around the goblet's brim: Bonneau, with peals of laughter loud and free, Paid homage to his good king's grand esprit.

The banquet ended, mirth and jest went round; Blind to their own, their neighbors' faults were found; By Master Alain verses loud were bawled,⁸ Then were the doctors of the Sorbonne called, An harlequin, who wore the motley shape, Some squalling parrots, and an antic ape. Forth to the play just as the sun withdrew, The monarch hurried with a chosen few, And to conclude once more the blissful day, The pair, with love overcome, both died away.

Plunged in the soft excess of dear delight, The pleasure seemed redoubled with the night; Each moment happy and with ardor fired, No quarrel, nor no jealousy inspired; No languor: Time and Love in Agnes' sight Having forgot to wing their wonted flight: Charles oft would say when locked in her embrace, Imprinting burning kisses on her face: "My love, my Agnes, idol of my soul, Thy charms are dearer than the world's control. To conquer and to reign is folly now, My Parliament forsakes me, and I bow 'Fore conquering England's matchless bravery, Well, let them reign, but let them envy me; I have thy heart, and am more king than they." The speech was not heroic, you'll say, But when an hero's with his love in bed, 'Tis passion sways alike the heart and head; Fired with this earthly paradise his lot, What's said at night, next morn may be forgot.

As thus he lived from every sorrow free, Just like an abbot, in his rice abbey,⁹ The English Prince, with whom wasr was the word,¹⁰ In camp quite armed, well booted too and spurred, With dagger at his side and lance in rest, The vizor down of helm that cased his crest, Trampled contemptuously the conquered land; He marched, he flew, all fell beneath his hand, He levelled walls and turrets, spilt our blood, Robbed, taxed, and pillaged, for his army's good, Gave mothers, daughters, to his soldiers' rage, And violated nuns of every age, Drank of the monks' rich stores of rosy wine,

Nor left on bottle of the muscadine; Gold they purloined which relics had enchased, Then into useful coin the ore debased; Each sacred ordinance by them was spurned, Churches and chapels were to stables turned; just so when greedy wolves, with ravenous eyes, Spring 'mid the fold and seize the bleating prize, tear with their recking jaws the victim's breast, While in a distant meadow lulled to rest, Colin, enfolded in his loved-one's arms, Sleeps undisturbed, contented with her charms, While near him, lo! His dog devours the meat, Which, at his supper, Colin could not eat.

Bright apogee, golden gleam so high, Mansion of saints beyond weak mortal's eye; 'Twas thence Saint Denis gazed on Gallia's woes,¹¹ The pangs inflicted by its conquering foes; Paris

subdued, enchained its royal sire, Heedless of all, save Agnes and love's fire;¹² This Denis, Frenchmen Gallia's patron saint, As anciently of Rome, Mars was the saint, Or Pallas, with the brave Athenian race, Allowing a small difference in the case, That one bright saint I' the scale will have this odds, He'll counterbalance all the heathen gods.

"Ah! By the Lord," said he, "it is not just That mighty France should be humble with the dust, Where I myself Religion's banner spread; And shall the flower de luce thus hang its head? Blood of Valois, thy sufferings touch my breast,¹³ Let us not suffer the aspiring crest Of the fifth Henry's brothers, without right,¹⁴ The lineal heir of France to put to flight; I have, though saint, and God accord me grace, A rooted hatred to the British race, For, if the book of destiny speaks true, The day shall come when this bold thinking crew Will saints and their decrees both laugh to scorn; The Roman annals will by them be torn,

and yearly they'll in effigy destroy Rome's sacred pontiff and the Lord's viceroy. Let us revenge this sacrilegious thought, and punishment inflict, ere it be wrought; My French beloved, ye shall be Catholics, And ye, fierce English, shall be heretics. Chase hence these British dogs, leave not a man, Let's punish them by some unheard of plan, For all this wickedness which they intend," Thus spoke the patron Denis -- Franch's friend, Guardian of Gallia's flower de luce so fair, Then, muttering curses, mumbled the Lord's Prayer.

While thus alone the saint conned o'er the case, A council then at Orleans¹⁵ took place. Blockaded was the city round about, Nor could it longer for the king hold out; Some grey old counsellors and lords of might, One half pedantic, t'other bred to fight, Alike, in doleful tones exclaimed each one, "Alas! My friends, what further can be done?" Potton,¹⁶ Denois,¹⁷ LA Times Hire,¹⁸ could bear no more, So cried, as in despite their nails they tore: "Come friends, at once let's bravely death defy, And prove that for our country we can die." "By heaven," cried Richemont, "Wherefore thus sit tame? Let us at once set Orleans in a flame; Let us the foe deride, and thus expire, Leaving them naught but ashes, smoke and fire." Trimouille¹⁹ exclaimed: "That moment vain I rue, When parents made me native of Poitou; For Orleans' town from Milan did I flee, Quitting, alas! My charming Dorothy; Though 'reft of hope 'fore Heaven, I yet will fight; Yet must I die, unblest by her dear sight?" Louvet,²⁰ the president, great personage, Whose grave appearance might have dubbed him sage, Exclaimed: "'Twould previously be my intent That we should pass an act of Parliament Against the British; and that in such case, Each point be canvassed in its proper place." Great clerk was Louvet, yet he could not trace, With mental ken, his sad and piteous case; Had this been known, his grave thoughts he had bent On sage proceedings 'gainst dame president Of dire besiegers, Talbot, chief of fame, Burns to possess her -- she requites his flame. Louvet, unconscious of the fateful thrall, Strives with male eloquence to rescue Gaul. Amid this council of the wise and brave Were heard orations eloquent and grave, Virtue inspiring and the public good; Foremost in flowing phrase is understood LA Times Hire, who, though to long harangues inclined, So ably speaks as to enchain the mind. Much were their arguments with wisdom fraught; Their words were gold, but they concluded naught.

While thus haranguing, they beheld in air A strange appearance, most divinely fair; A lovely phantom, tinged with vermil dye, Enthroned on sunbeam, 'mid the azure sky, Which, through the wide aerial expanse sailed, A saint-like odor all around exhaled; This imp, o'er front, a pointed mitre wore, With gold and silver wrought: behind -- before; A streamer, loosely hung on either side His Dalmatic, the breezes wafted wide; With dazzlingglory was his front arrayed;²¹ His head reclined, the embroidered Stole displayed;²² He bore the pastoral Crozier in his hand,²³ Which was, in ancient times, the Augur's wand.

Struck with the sight which they but ill discerned, Each his regard upon his fellow turned; Trimouille the first, a lecherous devotee, Began to pray upon his bended knee. Richemont, whose breast an iron heart concealed, Blashphemer, and whose lips but oaths revealed, Raising his voice, exclaimed: "It is the devil From hell arrived, dread mansion of all evil" "Twould be, methinks, agreeable and strange, Could we with Lucifer some words exchange." Away ran Louvet, in his zeal quite hot, To fetch of holy water a full pot: Bewildered Poton, Dunois, and LA Times Hire, Opened their eyes all three, appalled with fear; Stretched on his belly every valet laid: The Saint appeared, in lustrous garb arrayed; Borne on bright gleam, descended to the ground, Then dealt his holy benediction round. They knelt, and crossed themselves; the vision fair Raised them from earth with kind paternal care, Then said aloud: "My sons, be not afraid, My name is Denis,²⁴ I'm a saint by trade; Gaul has by me been loved and catechised, But all my favor now is scandalized, To see my godson Charles I loved so dear, Whose land's in flames, whose subjects quake with fear, Rather than seek to comfort the distressed, Spend all his time upon a strumpet's breast. I have resolved, by saint-like mercy led, To fight for those who in his care have bled; I wish to end the woes you have endured, 'Tis said all ills by contraries are cured; So, if the monarch for an harlot fain Will lose his kingdom and his honor stain, I have resolved to save the kind and land, and work my purpose by a maiden hand; If for protection from on high you'd sue, If ye are Frenchmen tried and Christians true; If ye love King, Church, and State, arise, Assist me in my sacred enterprise; Guide me where I should seek the bird at rest, and rouse the glorious phoenix from its nest."

Thus having spoke, the Sire then held his tongue, When lo! The chamber with loud laughter rung; Young Richemont, framed for pleasantry and joke, Anon the learned preacher thus bespoke: "Ah! Wherefore, good Sir Saint, take so much pains, Abandoning for earth your heavenly plains, Of us poor sinful mortals to inquire For this dear treasure you so much admire? To save a city, I could never see That there was magic in virginity; Besides, to seek it, wherefore hither come, You that already have such stores at home? The countless tapers at Loretto's shrine,²⁵ Are naught in number to your maids divine; With us in France, there are, alas! No more, Our convents are all silent on that score: Our princes, officers, and archers free, The prinvinces have stripped of each degree; Of saints, to prove that they were naught afraid, More bastards far than orphans have they made. To finish, Mister Denis, our dispute, Seek maids elsewhere; there's no one here will suit."²⁶ The saint blushed to hear such loose discourse, Then quick remounted on his heavenly horse, Upon his golden gleam; nor word spake more, Spurred either side, and through the air did soar, To see if that bright jewel could be had, So wondrous rare -- for which he seemed stark mad: Well, let him go, and while perched on a ray, Bespeaking the approach of jocund day, Friend reader, when on love you fix your mind, May you gain that which Denis went to find.

END OF CANTO I
