

Saint Joan of Arc

God's Soldier

by Susan Helen Wallace, FSP



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A NIGHTMARE COMES TRUE

"I can trust you with all the other chores, and this is no different, Joan," the gentle woman with tired eyes coaxed. "It isn't hard to light the fire. Watch me now so you can do it next time."

"No...Mother...please!" Joan begged, her own eyes brimming with tears. "I'm afraid of fire!"

"But fire is good. Look, it's already begun to cook our supper," her mother replied as she straightened up from the hearth. "We need fire—even to keep warm and healthy. Now the next time you'll get it going, won't you?"

"Maybe," Joan hesitated. "I mean, I want to try. Yes, yes, next time I'll do it!"

"You're too soft," Jacques d'Arc scolded his wife. "She weaves her way around you, Isabelle. That's no way to discipline a child."

"Now, Jacques," Mrs. d'Arc said softly. "Children have these strange fears. Be patient."

"Patient!" he shouted. "Why, Joan is thir-

teen years old. It's time she outgrew this foolish fear of fire. Teach her. You're her mother. Teach her!"

Life for a country girl in fifteenth-century France was hard. There were no extras. Jacques d'Arc was a peasant who had the good fortune of owning a few animals and a small piece of land that he farmed. Through careful management, Mr. d'Arc eked out a living for himself, his wife and their five children. Still, it took great effort to make ends meet, and many times he came home overtired. But Mrs. d'Arc was very wise and equally patient. She understood her husband, gruff as Jacques was. And she made sure that the children understood him, too.

All the family members had their own jobs. Joan's included housecleaning and sewing. Sometimes she also worked as a shepherdess, tending their small flock of sheep and watching over their few cows.

The family's village of Domrémy seemed ordinary enough. But fear hung over the hamlet and gnawed at the minds of everyone old enough to know how to worry.

War was a word that the villagers understood all too well. Domrémy bordered the enemy territory of Lorraine. Its tiny

population could never defend itself in the event of an attack. The citizens lived in uneasy expectation.

The people knew that at any time a raid could force them to leave their homes and flee to the next town. When Burgundian bandits overran a town, they sacked, burned and destroyed everything in sight, unless the nobles of the area could pay them enough of a bribe. But would Domrémy even have anything to bargain with?

These worries preoccupied Jacques d'Arc as he stopped his work one evening. His family, his farm, his crops—years of struggle—to think it could all go up in a puff of smoke! As he wiped his damp forehead with the back of his hand, a happy voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Father! Father!" Joan called as she ran up. "Put those heavy tools away now. Supper's ready."

"Do you have to be so noisy?" Mr. d'Arc responded roughly.

"I'm sorry," Joan mumbled. "What's the matter? You look so worried."

"It's nothing," he said, ruffling her hair. "Come on. Your mother's waiting."

That same night, frantic screams split

the air. Mr. d'Arc's worst nightmare had come true.

"It's the Burgundians! The Burgundians are coming!"

Mrs. d'Arc anxiously gathered the children. "We must get up! We must go! Hurry children, quickly now!" she exclaimed. "Take your woolen capes. I hope you'll be warm enough."

"Hurry!" shouted Joan's father.

"We're ready, Jacques," her mother answered.

The family fled from the house, running as fast as possible. The night was very dark, but Mr. d'Arc knew the way. How many times he had planned this escape in his mind, knowing that his family's safety might depend on it one day.

They walked, then ran, and walked again. It was eight miles to the town of Neufchâteau. But tonight it seemed like eighty. The hours dragged on. A combination of panic and fright made Joan's legs so wobbly she could hardly walk. She imagined leaping flames devouring the village behind her, and she wanted to close her eyes and pretend it was all just a bad dream. But the frantic, pushing crowd of refugees that

surrounded her wouldn't let her do that. She had to keep going.

"Will we ever go back home again?" Joan asked as hot tears slipped down her cheeks.

"Yes," her father said firmly. "Yes," he repeated, squeezing her tightly. "We'll go back—and very soon!"

The first streaks of dawn appeared as Neufchâteau came into full view. It wasn't home, but for now it meant safety and rest.