

The Schizophrenia of Joan of Arc.

by

Clifford Allen.

A great many of the tragedies of the past must have been caused by mental disease which was undetected and misunderstood. Such a case may well have been that of Joan of Arc.

She was born in the village of Domredy near Vaucouleurs, on the border of Champagne, on January 6th, 1412. Her parents were poor, but she was brought up religiously and frequently went to church and confession. In fact, she was teased by other young people for her piousness. Her father was strict but nothing seems to have been known of her mother.

Childhood appears to have been normal until as she says, "I was in my thirteenth year when God sent a voice to guide me. At first I was very frightened. The voice came towards the hour of noon, in the summer in my father's garden. I had fasted the previous day. I heard the voice on my right hand in the direction of the church. I seldom hear it without seeing a light. The light always appears on the side from which I hear the voice."

She was convinced that the voice was that of the Archangel Michael. Afterwards Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine appeared to her as well as the Archangel, an impression which continued most of the rest of her life and she heard their voices even when she was later confined to prison.

Joan was completely convinced regarding these apparitions and nothing would alter her opinion. On the other hand she was determined not to say too much about them: she believed firmly that she had heard, touched and even smelled them. This did not occur on one occasion but almost daily for hundreds of times over a period of seven years. Finally she preferred the terrible death of the stake rather than make an confession that they did not exist, which might have saved her life.

The saints who visited her commanded her to deliver her country from the English. She therefore went to Robert Baudricourt, the Governor of Vaucouleurs, but he merely laughed at her and told her to go back home. Later she made a second visit to him dressed in men's clothes and, no doubt to rid himself of an awkward visitor, he permitted her to go to see the Dauphin.

Joan's father disapproved of her riding about with soldiers and

suspected the worst, but finally she got a small group of men to go with her. She wore a man's doublet, and wore her hair short as we have seen so often in films and stage plays. Later she was to wear a man's suit of white armour. All this was quite contrary to the customs of the time when women were expected to wear only feminine attire.

Finally she got to the court of Louis de Bourbon, Count of Vendome, who gave her troops, and she rode on a black charger ahead of 6,000 men. They went to aid Dunois in the siege of Orleans which they took after fourteen days. On 29th April she penetrated the city and by May 8th she forced the English to abandon the siege. Within a week they had to abandon their positions along the Loire.

Joan showed determination and enthusiasm and urged the weak Dauphin to celebrate his coronation in Rheims. This he did and she stood beside him weeping with joy to salute him as king. This was her year of triumph — 1429.

She continued fighting with the French armies and was involved in a number of conflicts, but failure to liberate Paris made her unhappy. Finally, in May 1430 she attacked the forces of Burgundy which were besieging Compiègne in a wild sally with only a few soldiers she was captured, and later sold to the English in November for the sum of 10,000 livres.

At the English headquarters in Rouen she was tried by the Bishop of Beauvais, who was in the pay of the English, and accused of being a sorceress and a heretic.

After a long trial she was found guilty of sacrilege, profanation, disobedience to the church, pride and idolatry. The whole trial was brutal and shameful. She was tortured by alternative threats and promises, and at last declared that she submitted to the church. Her sentence was perpetual imprisonment. Then she relapsed and was ordered to be burned at the stake. This was done on 30th May 1431. Her family later managed to have her trial revised and in 1456 she was formally pronounced innocent.

The story of Joan of Arc, the bare bones of which are given here, has been obscured by romanticism and differing views but for some reason nobody seems to have tried to unravel her mental state and discover the causes of her behaviour.

It is difficult for us to appreciate the fact that at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when Joan of Arc lived, nobody had any understanding of insanity. Only when somebody behaved oddly or wildly; when a person talked nonsense, was it realised that he or she was mentally ill. Often indeed, the peculiar behaviour was attributed to possession by some malicious spirit or devil.

Indeed, mental illness as far as any form of proper classification was concerned was in a state of confusion until recent times, right up until 1893, when the great German psychiatrist Kraepelin, differentiated it into two recognisable groups. He had had a chance

to observe patients over a long period and so knew what he stated.

He found that a large number of patients suffered from alternating fits of depression or mania, and these could be classed as manic-depressives, whereas the other large section was composed of patients who showed mental deterioration. These he called "dementia praecox" or prematurely demented patients.

Although this classification was a great advance it was not entirely satisfactory. Not all these cases of dementia praecox deteriorated, and some even recovered. Moreover, many showed no signs of dementia at all, but retained their full intelligence in spite of their delusions, or false beliefs, and false sensations or hallucinations.

This led Bleuler, a famous Swiss psychiatrist, to coin the word "schizophrenia" because a patient who believes that he is the all-powerful God and yet complains that he is being detained in a mental hospital against his will, has a curious division in his thinking.

It is unnecessary to discuss the various types of schizophrenia here, but the paranoid type does interest us very much because it applies very closely to Joan of Arc. This type has none of the stupors, or emotional disorganisation of catatonics or hebephrenics, but often these patients have a clear-cut delusional system which is not open to argument, and their hallucinations reinforce their false ideas. *They know that they are right in what they say and do, and have divine messages to prove it.*

Usually patients of this type tend to become ill rather older than others, and the disease usually appears about the age of thirty, although it may at times occur much earlier. The delusions are often persecutory, but sometimes they are grandiose. It is these who receive messages which they feel are sent by the Deity instructing them that they have some special duty or function to perform. These messages are, of course, hallucinations.

Let us, therefore, consider Joan's psychological condition and try to discover the causes of her behaviour. We have little to judge about her childhood, except that she was a meek little girl, and her father was a somewhat dominant and strict man. She was very religious and frequently attended mass and confession, so much so that her equals were inclined to scoff at her for her piety. Nothing seems to have been known about her mother or whether her home was a happy one.

There is no doubt, however, that she started to develop schizophrenic symptoms at an early age. Most schizophrenics do not complain of symptoms before the age of fifteen, but, although thirteen is unusual, it is not impossible.

She had constant aural hallucinations or "voices" which are an almost certain indication of schizophrenia. Hallucinations heard on one or two occasions might be due to hysteria, but recurring ones are surely schizophrenic. The other unusual symptom is the presence of a blinding light, and the claim that she had actually seen the saints with whom she held conversation. Visual hallucinations are not so

common as aural ones in this disease, but there is no reason to suspect toxins or drugs which are a common cause.

The other interesting thing is her complete certainty of being right. Even before the judges and the interrogation of the court, which surely must have been terrifying to an ordinary peasant girl, she held firmly to her belief that she had divine orders to do what she did. She was only reluctant to tell the court exactly what God her told her, which did not give a good impression at the trial.

This sort of obstinate belief that there is no question of doubt that she had heard the voices and that they were from saints with divine instructions clearly indicate that she was deluded.

We cannot know what would have happened to Joan of Arc, whether she would have deteriorated and become finally demented, whether she would have made a partial or complete recovery, or what would have happened to her, because she was burned alive. It is not much good trying to speculate and it would probably be wise to disregard her so-called recantation because prisoners, even young girls, were hardly treated gently in those days.

The question now arises, why did Joan of Arc become mentally ill?

We can answer some of the points which this query arouses. Firstly no doubt the strict household dominated by her father may have affected her personality. It has been found that many children, who will later develop schizophrenia, show signs of a prepsychotic personality. They show in 25 percent a personality which is odd or queer, and display inappropriate reactions. The other 25 percent are shy and withdrawn. It would seem possible that Joan with her piety might have fitted into this latter group.

Again a large percentage of those who will later develop schizophrenia show signs of homosexuality. Could the fact that Joan wore men's clothes, which were quite contrary to feminine custom in those days, and rode about with soldiers, be taken as an indication of such an abnormality? It seems very likely.

Her military successes probably indicate her desperate bravery and conviction that she was special and absolutely right. This could result in a wild leadership which would inspire the simple soldiers following her. In those days battles were won by such means and not elaborate strategy.

The trial to which she was subjected indicates really mainly political manoeuvring and probably whatever she had pleaded she was going to be found guilty. Unfortunately her delusional system led to her rejecting even the imprisonment from which she might have been freed in a few years, and resulted in her being killed in a horrible way through the ignorance and superstition, brutality and religious fanaticism of the times.