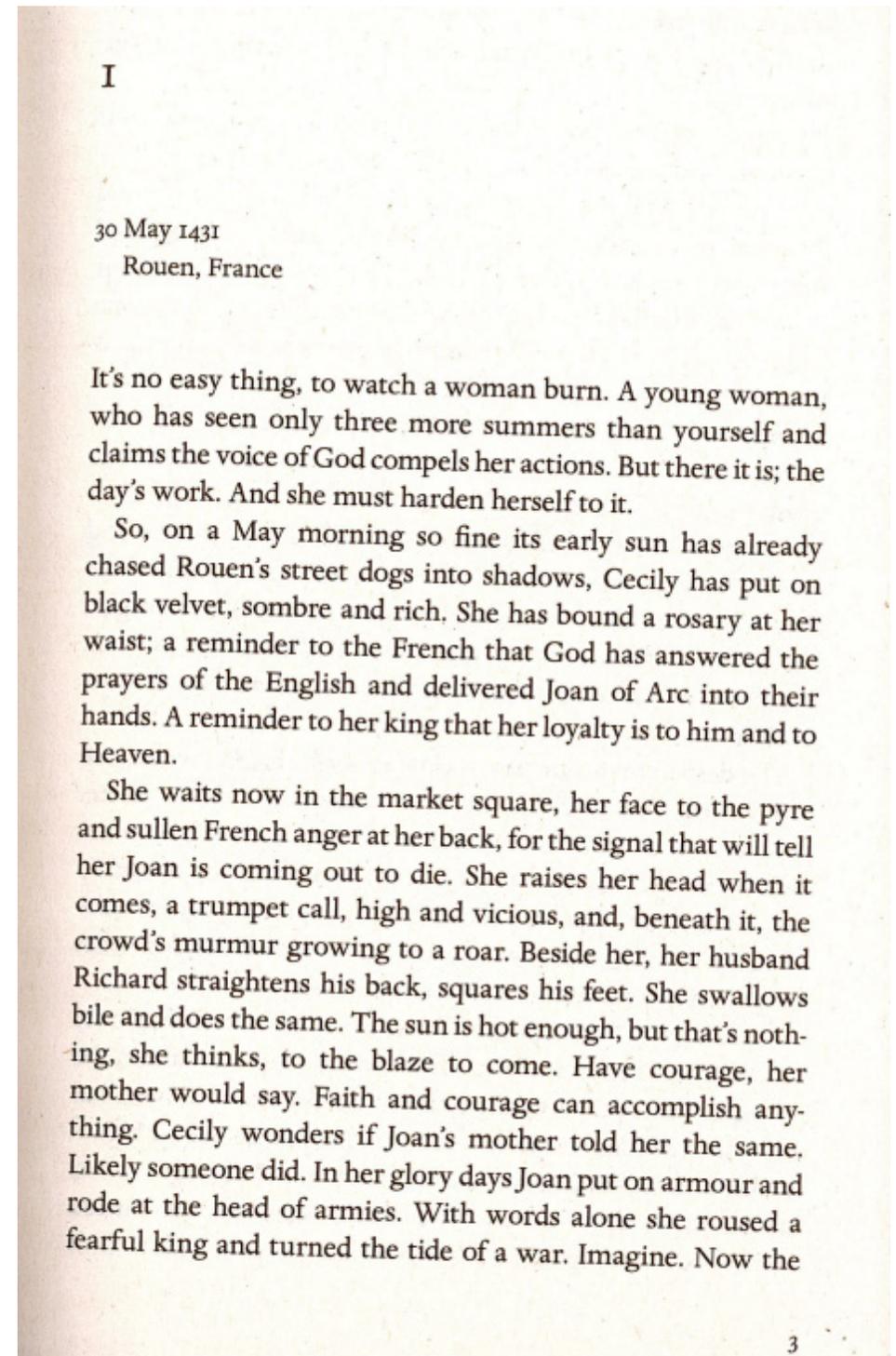


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tide runs all against her, and she must find only the courage to die. Though Joan is England's enemy, Cecily wishes courage for her now.

Soon the ring of metal feet overwhelms the clarion, and the crowd parts for a wagon, its blade-bristling guard, and the prisoner bound upon it. It's the first time she's seen Joan and isn't sure what to expect. Just a pale, thin girl, it seems, head shorn and bloodied. It doesn't look like there's much fight left in her. The bright armour of Joan's soldiering days is long gone and today's thin shift, with the filth of a prison year upon it, is scant covering for a body that, some say, English soldiers have been allowed their way with. Though Richard says surely not, Cecily can believe it. The King's uncles have long wanted Joan dead. But they wanted her shamed, first.

Cecily sees Joan stumble as she's pulled from the wagon and thinks for a moment she will fall and knock herself senseless. And what then? But the guards press in to hold Joan upright, her body crushed between their bulk as they jostle towards the pyre, her arms pinioned behind her, her small breasts jutting.

The desperate parade passes close enough that Cecily can see Joan's eyes. One is closed by livid bruises, the other, white-rimmed and wide, is fixed on the crucifix borne high above her by a priest, leading the way to death and whatever might lie beyond it. Joan's lips are moving and Cecily recognizes the words of the Ave, falling stuttering and fast. She wonders what she prays for. Rescue? Or just an end to this?

I would pray for the death of every Englishman here, Cecily thinks. Then suddenly she is afraid, for no one can fathom the power of Joan's prayers, and Richard stands beside her, who has seen Joan tried and nodded his head at her sentence. Her breath catches and she pants, once, and he's holding out a hand to steady her. She raises a palm, shakes her head to signal no, then makes a fist to hide her fingers' trembling. He draws back, and she feels

his gaze follow hers to where the guards are handing Joan into the reaching arms of men who wait to receive her. They draw her up, bare legs flailing, then bind her and bring more wood, so that she stands deep among a thicket of staves.

She can no longer hear Joan's prayers so, out of pity and to guard her own soul, she speaks them with her, as the men clamber down and reach for their torches. At last the fire is set and the flames lick like dogs at Joan's feet and thighs. Cecily feels their growing heat against her own cheek as Joan's voice, steady at the last, rings out above her head,

'All I have done was by God's order.' Then, urgent, as the priest's arms falter and his burden dips, 'Hold up the cross of Christ that I may see it as I die!'

Cecily narrows her eyes against livid sparks as Joan's prayers give way to hacking coughs and shrieks, then sudden silence. She sets herself to watch as flesh burns, blossoms and falls away. There's grit in her eyes, sweat runs the cleft of her shoulder blades and, beneath her clasped hands, her stomach shrivels. But she won't flinch. She knows this is a test.

It seems an age, but at last the fire is sated, and into the hush it leaves behind, Joan's body sags and falls with a soft sigh of ash.

Cecily looks down at last, swallows hard and blinks sore eyes.

Richard turns towards her. 'Come away now,' he says. 'It's done.' He moves to wrap an arm about her waist.

She stalls him, placing her fingers, still warm from the fire, on the back of his gloved hand. 'I stood firm.'

There's ash in his hair, his face is pinched and smutted, but he manages a wry smile. 'Firmer than your husband, I think.'

That morning she'd confessed to him her dread of it. He'd said she needn't go. That he himself did not relish the burning of women. She shook her head. No. We go together. It must be seen that we can watch the King's enemies die, and not falter.

And there, across the still-smoking fire, beyond the greasy stink of Joan's death, the child king's uncles, the Dukes of Bedford and Gloucester, stand shoulder to shoulder.

Watching.

She raises her chin, and then, having measured the depth of Bedford's slow bow, the slide of Gloucester's eyes, lets Richard raise her hand, turn her about, lead her away. The crowd parts for them and, as if their leaving is a signal, begins to disperse.

Englishmen murmur and pat each other's shoulders as they go, well done, well done.

Frenchmen, penned in to witness this defeat, slip between guards who part their pikes to let them pass and chide, 'Go home now, and take a lesson from this.'

Cecily watches them go. What lesson should she herself take? she wonders. Only that, if a woman takes up arms, she must be very sure of winning.

Further book recommendations:

