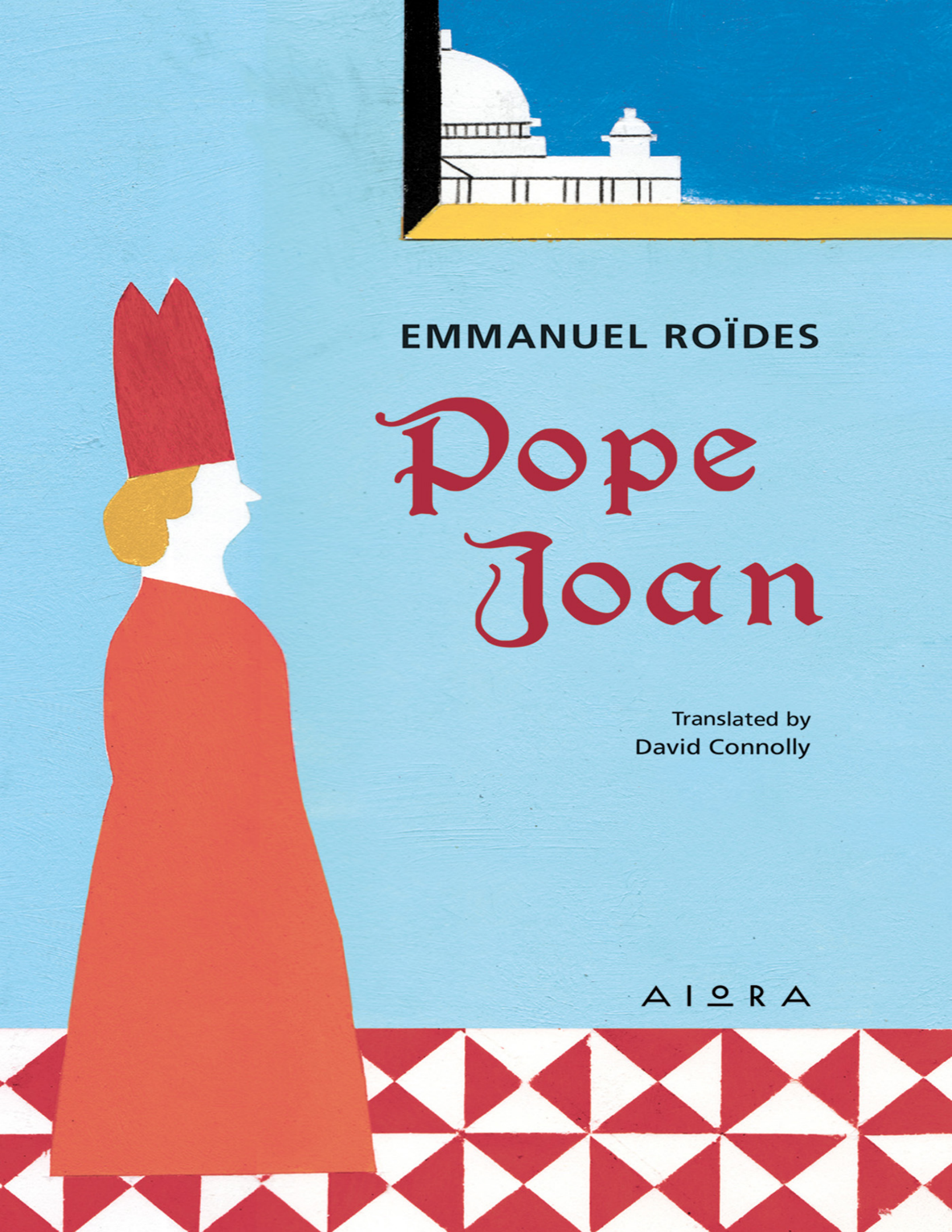

EMMANUEL ROÏDES

Pope Joan

Translated by
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AIORA

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Emmanuel Roïdes (Roidis, Rhoides, Royidis) was born in 1836 on the Greek island of Syros into a wealthy family originally from Chios. He was still young when his family moved to Genoa, where his father had been assigned to the Greek Consulate and where he lived through the revolutions of 1848 and the revolt of Genoa. He returned to Syros in 1849 and completed his schooling there, before leaving once again to pursue his university studies in history, literature and philosophy first in Germany and later in Romania. He subsequently returned to Greece to live in Athens where, apart from a brief stay in Egypt, he spent the rest of his life until his death in 1904. His family wealth enabled him to enjoy a carefree, aristocratic life until the family business foundered in the stock-market crisis of 1880. Reduced to near-poverty in his later life, he was obliged to find work and earned a meagre living as a librarian in the National Library of Greece. He is best known for his novel, *Pope Joan*, but most of his literary work was as an essayist, critic and translator.[1] He also wrote a number of short stories, many of which were

set in his native island of Syros.[2] He is regarded today as one of the classic authors of modern Greek literature.

Pope Joan, or *Papissa Ioanna* as is the title of the book in Greek, was presented by Roïdes as a "medieval study". It is based on the story that first appeared in 13th-century chronicles and later spread throughout Europe of a female pope, who reigned, according to some sources, from 855 to 857 AD. Different versions of the story describe her as a talented and learned woman who disguised herself as a man in order to enter the Church and follow her lover. Because of her exceptional abilities, she soon rose through the church hierarchy and was eventually elected pope. Her sex was discovered when she gave birth during a religious procession and she is said to have died shortly after. The story was widely believed for centuries, but today it is generally regarded as fictional.[3] In his preface "To the Reader", Roïdes describes how he heard the story from the mouth of a newspaper editor while in a cellar in Genoa, sheltering from the siege guns of Victor Emmanuel, and how, fascinated by the story, he later researched the historical facts surrounding it in the library of Berlin.

Published in 1866 (with successive editions in 1879 and 1882), Roïdes' *Pope Joan* immediately caused a sensation because of its caustic criticism of the Catholic clergy of the time and of the Church's traditions and customs, for the book is not just a portrait of Joan, but paints a tapestry of her entire age. Surprisingly, it was the Greek Orthodox Church that took offence, perceiving its own clergy as being the real target of this criticism and its own traditions and customs as being the object of ridicule and satire in the loosely-veiled comparison Roïdes makes between the medieval times he

describes and his own times. Consequently, the Holy Synod denounced the book and anathematized it. Roïdes himself seems to have been quite indifferent to this, although, in later editions of the work, he takes pains to point out to his critics that all the facts and events related in the book are based on indisputable testimonies and that his descriptions of life in the monasteries, of church rituals and theological doctrines are all taken from medieval sources and are the result of extensive historical research.

As might be expected, the controversy surrounding the book only enhanced Roïdes' fame, while the book itself was soon translated into other European languages. It enjoyed a huge success, for example, in France, where the translation of 1878 went through seven reprints in only three years and was notably re-translated by Alfred Jarry and Jean Saltas in 1908. In England, two translations of the work appeared during Roïdes' lifetime: the one by Charles Hastings Collette (1886) and the other by J.H. Freese (1900). It was presumably in one of these translations that the work was known and admired by Mark Twain. The work was re-translated in the 20th century by T.D. Kriton (1935) and achieved further notoriety in the English-speaking world in the rather free and racy translation by Lawrence Durrell (1954).

In Greece, the book remained for a long time the subject of scathing criticism or, at best, a cause for perplexity among critics, who were at pains to classify it in terms of genre (historical study, romance, parody, satire?). Apart from the criticism relating to its irreverence, anticlericalism and bawdiness, it was criticized for its borrowings, its often outlandish similes and a style that was far removed from the romantic norms of the day, at

which Roïdes constantly pokes fun. In more recent times, however, it has come to be admired for its elegant and rhetorical style, for its inventive and striking similes and for its irony and wittiness. Roïdes' distorted and often incorrect references to Biblical passages, for which he was criticized in the past, are now more properly seen as a deliberate part of his overall satirical and subversive intentions and, in this, the work is notably modernist in its outlook and anti-conformism. Even his playful asides to the reader are very modern in their subversive and tongue-in-cheek effect. Today, the book is generally regarded as a comic masterpiece of modern Greek literature and remains ever relevant for its satire on both secular and religious authority.

This brief translator's preface would be incomplete without a mention of Roïdes' choice of linguistic idiom and its consequences for the translator. When the Greek State was established following the 1821 War of Independence, one of the burning questions concerned what the language of the new State should be. Opinions were divided between supporters of the existing spoken language (demotic) and supporters of a return to ancient attic Greek. Katharevousa, an artificial language purified of foreign (mainly Turkish) words, represented something of a compromise between these two tendencies and was eventually adopted as the standard form of written Greek and remained the official language of the Greek State until 1976, though demotic remained as the everyday spoken language. It was katharevousa that Roïdes consciously chose to use for his literary works. In the prologue to his translation of Chateaubriand, he explains that having been brought up and educated abroad and consequently unversed in the

(demotic) language of the people, he preferred to use katharevousa while, at the same time, expressing his reservations about this artificial language.[4]

His use of katharevousa cannot be adequately reproduced in English, which contains no corresponding phases in its historical evolution and no corresponding linguistic idiom.[5] Given that it was the standard literary idiom of his day, it might be argued (as some people do) that it might simply be translated into standard literary English, whether of the present day or of the mid-19th century. Nevertheless, to many contemporary Greek readers it is a language no longer easily comprehensible, as is evidenced by the translations of the works by Roïdes[6] and by other 19th-century Greek authors, such as Papadiamantis and Vizyenos, into the contemporary Greek language. My approach has been to adopt a somewhat "stylized" English idiom including archaisms in an attempt to give a taste, at least, of what contemporary Greek readers experience in their reading of Roïdes.

The text translated here is that contained in: Emmanuel Roïdes, *Papissa Ioanna*. The first complete facsimile of the original edition of 1866 with a biographical and critical foreword by Tassos Vournas (Athens: Tolides 1971). Also included is the translation of Roïdes' preface "To the Reader", but not his "Introduction", which has been omitted in keeping with his own suggestion for those not particularly "enamoured of historical discussions, somnolence and references", but also in order not to overburden the present volume. For the same reasons, the copious endnotes to the text provided by Roïdes have also been omitted. All the footnotes to references in the text are by the author unless otherwise stated.

Durrell, in the preface to his translation of the book, quotes George Katsimbalis (Henry Miller's "Colossus of Maroussi") as saying about Roïdes' *Papissa Ioanna*: "Now there's a good book… It is a typical scamp of a book, a Greek book, full of good fun, bad taste, and laughter and irreverence." Let the "dear reader" decide whether it remains so in this new translation.

David Connolly

Athens 2019

Pope Joan

To the Reader

At the beginning of his *Histories*, Herodotus considered it prudent to outline the reasons that motivated him to relate the triumphs of Miltiades and the "caprine" loves of the Egyptian women. Later historians, Thucydides, Tacitus, St. Luke, Gibbon and Guizot, hastened to imitate the good example of the father of history; consequently, all histories invariably begin with the historian's justification, just as epics do with an appeal to the Muse. Bowing to this historic rule and so as not to be accused of being a fanciful grave-robber, I, too, hasten to explain how I came to disturb the slumber of Pope Joan, resting in peace as she has been now for so many centuries.

Religious feeling in the West was still at its height (that is, there were still people who ate lobster on Fridays and kissed the hem of the priest's cassock) when, some twenty years ago, still in the bloom of youth, I travelled to Italy. Living for many months of the year in the countryside in keeping with the local custom out of love of the rural life, often during the long autumnal evenings while the snails were crawling upon the bare vines and

the mushrooms were sprouting beneath the chestnut trees and while I was sitting beside the fire of the harvesters, from whom I heard nothing but of the miracles of holy icons, the escape of vampires from their tombs and of souls from purgatory, I had, because of this association with rural folk, grown quite credulous; and I thought that the Pope, who, so I heard, opened and closed the gates of Paradise, who enjoyed the most cordial of relationships with the Holy Spirit which came down upon his shoulder every morning, and who proffered his holy feet for the temporal kings to kiss, was an enormous and mythical being hovering like a hot-air balloon between heaven and earth.

It was in just such a mental state that I found myself, while living in Genoa, when in 1848 the revolution broke out that would send shockwaves through the whole of Italy. Religion and the clergy were included, as is the case in all political upheavals in the West, in the imprecations against kings and tyranny. An evil wind had been blowing for a number of years over this unfortunate peninsula, filling all hearts with displeasure, disobedience and an unquenchable thirst for freedom. Thrones teetered ready to fall; their royal occupants even more so. Inconsonant words, alien to Italian ears, such as “constitution”, “militia”, “free press” and “joint ownership” echoed from all sides like the hissing of vipers. And as for blind faith, accustomed for countless centuries to the compassion and attention of the blind, this was ousted as a troublesome beggar and, terrified, made for the mountains, seeking refuge beneath the roofs of peasants and indeed often finding their doors shut and barred. Yet while this poor wretch was wandering in the dark, stumbling with every step, the kings whose power this wretch

supported did not remain idle; the rebelling Genoa was put under siege, the shells blasted the roofs of the houses, while the poor inhabitants, terrified lest they suffer the same fate as the roofs, sought refuge where, below ground, were kept the most fragile of all utensils; the bottles. It was to such a wine cellar that I, too, betook myself in the middle of the night together with my family and neighbours, who had come to seek refuge under the folds of the Greek flag.[1] More than fifty, men and women, gentry and fishmongers, countesses and coalmen, all squeezed together in that narrow place, between bottles and crocks, onions and dried figs. The shells of Victor Emmanuel, failing in their tyrannical purpose to kill the populace, destroyed nevertheless the old bastions of social inequality, bringing together his pallid subjects in a democratic fraternity of fear. Initially, the gloom and silence of the graveyard prevailed in that subterranean assembly. But the house consisted of five storeys and the vaults of the wine-cellar were sound and inaccessible to the shells so that the faces around me, hitherto pale-green like the glass of the surrounding bottles, gradually assumed a more human colour. And so, almost fearlessly, we listened to the terrible sounds on the ground above, confident that, however much it stooped, death would be unable to reach us down below. With the removal of the danger, the tied tongues of the Italians gradually became loosened; the echo in the vault repeated incoherent words, promises of candles lit to the Madonna, arguments between the men, appeals to saints and terrible curses against the *Bombardatore*. Yet just as in the battles of Ariosto, when two renowned heroes engage in combat, and the rest of the warriors lower their arms watching the combat in silence, so also, one after the other, those in the wine

cellar fell silent when the grizzled Abbot of St. Matthew's and the aged editor of the *Genoa News*, sitting opposite each other on facing barrels, began quarrelling about liberty and kingship, about progress and papism. The events taking place up above us rendered this discussion most timely, while the adversaries were both well versed in such combats and the audience encircled them with mouths and ears open just as the Carthaginians with Aeneas. The journalist maintained that all the sufferings to which we were being subjected were as a result of the influence of the clergy, while the abbot insisted on seeing the fraternal blood flowing all around us as a propitiatory sacrifice to the Supreme Being. The night, however, was progressing and the discussion did not appear to be drawing any nearer to a close. The tongues swished sharply and scathingly like gladiators' swords. Gradually becoming accustomed to all this verbal din, I soon succumbed to an involuntary stupor, resting my head of just ten years on the lap of the woman next to me, when suddenly a strange noise drove the sleep from my eyelids. The irascible newspaperman, finally losing his patience at the abbot's obstinacy, who responded to the most cogent of arguments with church maxims and passages from Bonaldo and Demaitre, changed his tactics. Desperate to open the eyes of that blessed man, who feared the light as much as bats do the rays of the sun, he ceased his reasoned discussion and was already attempting to present the other's position to those listening as being detestable and ridiculous. Opening the dirtiest pages of papal history and gathering together every kind of ignominy and stain contained therein, he spat it out like a viper into the face of the poor priest. He presented to us Benedict IX, Gregory VI and Sylvester

III, contemporaneous popes, as a three-headed Cerberus, each excommunicating the other and plunging Italy into a sea of blood; Zacharias as condemning to the flames those geographers who taught the existence of the antipodes, for in the abundance of his knowledge, for there to be antipodes, there would have to exist two suns and a double moon; Stephen VII as a despicable grave-robber for exhuming the body of his predecessor Formosus, dragging the rotted corpse before the synod and subjecting it to an abominable and ridiculous interrogation; John XXII as wasting his life in pursuit of the philosopher's stone and finally discovering this through the drawing up of a list which noted the exact price for forgiving every type of sin, murder, rape or other; Julius III as a latter-day Caligula, ordaining his monkey, amidst wine-cups and women, as a cardinal; and John XII as placing the Holy Altar cloths at the feet of his mistress, getting drunk with her using the holy chalices and, finally, being murdered by his wife, who discovered them, or by the devil, as the chroniclers would have it, though certainly there is some common characteristic between the devil and a wife played false. This, then, is what the old man said amid the deep silence, occasionally interrupted by the explosion of a shell nearby or the collapse of some roof. A goodly number of those listening were making the holy sign of the cross, others covered their ears and the women hid their faces in their aprons; but what shall I say of myelf when the unrelenting orator, no longer satisfied with just the outrageous behaviour of the male popes, began to relate the tale of Pope Joan? Of the love and maternity of a pope and her childbirth in the midst of the marketplace!

Presently, the day dawned; the explosions lessened and gradually ceased. Invincible Genoa capitulated following three days of siege and surrendered the leaders of the revolution, which the very next day was renamed sedition, into the clutches of the tyrant, as they then called Victor. The peddlers disguised as militiamen, the tenors and bases of the melodrama, who had removed the make-up from their cheeks and had girdled on their medieval swords chanting "Freedom or Death" in the streets together with the students priding themselves that alone with their law books and medical books as weapons they were capable of fending off the tyrant's swords all vanished at the first flash of the royal lances like the crows of night as soon as the sun rises. And as for the Italian women who had sewn flags and woven tricoloured ribbons, they once again remembered the counsels of their confessors, and if any officer were to kiss them in the marketplace, they turned the other cheek in vilification. After only a few days, red flags and freedom hymns and martyrs' blood and bullets and ruins were all forgotten. Yet it was impossible for me to forget the popess. The odd circumstances in which I had learned of her, the strange manner of the speaker, the cellar, the fear, the massacre up above, all this rendered the impression left on my heart as indelible as the footsteps of the Saviour on the stony ground of Judaea.

Since then, Joan's doleful shade has often visited me in sleep, holding a stillborn babe in her arms; while in the daytime I sought in every way to learn more concerning this singular heroine. First I asked the teachers, the servants, the peasant digging the ditches, the Capuchins begging for much more than a mite, spending long hours in the libraries breathing the dust of worm-eaten tomes in the hope of finding some trace, which with such