

BIOGRAPHY



OLYMPE
DE GOUGES



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THE LAST SONG OF THE LARK

CHARACTER: MARIE OLYMPE DE GOUGES / Marie Gouze

DATES: Montauban, 7 may 1748 / Paris, 3 november 1793

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: FRANCE

HISTORICAL PERIOD: 18th century (French Revolution)

SUMMARY: Marie was born into a middle-class family. Widowed, after a brief marriage that she did not want, she moved to Paris, a beautiful but also very difficult city. Here she became a writer. Her work spoke of equality and freedom. She died for her ideas.

KEY WORDS: WOMAN, RIGHTS, FREEDOM

GENRE: BIOGRAPHY

AGE: 9 - 10 YEARS

AUTHOR: Barbara Lachi

THE LAST SONG OF THE LARK

The morning sun spread a warm light over the red brick facades in the town of Mountauban. The sky was so clear and low it hurt the heart, as if it had a revelation ready to confess. Sitting on the banks of the Tarn, little Marie listened spellbound to the crystalline song of a lark, as if that magical melody would make the sun rise.

The water flowed placidly. Her head was full of agitated and confused thoughts, she wanted to cry, to laugh, to run away. The small bird took flight and stopped on a branch from which Marie observed it. That flight, similar to a prayer that seemed to unite earth and sky, made Marie burst into sobs:

“I don’t want to get married. I don’t want to be forced to suffer. I want to decide for myself”. She said to the lark and a little to herself, as if making herself a promise that she still did not know how to keep.





From afar came her mother's voice calling her back to reality; she had to return home, for the final preparations for her wedding.

"How do you get a sixteen-year-old girl like me to marry an old man?" she kept repeating in her head, "Women, girls, should choose their life partners for themselves, and not be married to the first guy who passes by, just to be treated like a sack of beets or potatoes in marriage."

Meanwhile she crossed the great old bridge, pausing from time to time to look at the force of the river: "This is how I would like to be: like the rushing water, noble and impetuous!"

She walked through the checkered streets of her city, feeling once again like a pawn on a chess board but, wishing within herself, to become the queen of her own life soon.



The marriage lasted only a year. Her husband died, leaving her a son whom she named Pierre.

Marie thought it was time for a change: Mountauban had become too small for her, so she joined her sister in Paris, a chaotic, immense and lively city.

She finally felt that her life was taking the shape she had always wanted. First, she changed her name to Olympe.

“My mother was also called so; I feel it represents me more! Also, the surname, I will add a “De” like all nobles have and it will no longer be Gouze but Gouge! My name will be Olympe de Gouge!”

Olympe was beautiful, intelligent, had a new name but still felt she was not fully herself. In her years in Occitania, she had not learnt to speak French well, nor had she studied as much as she would have liked.

Olympe was aware that knowledge, more than anything else, could set her free. So she studied, she read, she became enlightened, and all the ideas in her head, which before seemed to have blurred contours, began to take on a clear shape.

They became clear, lucid, dazzling thoughts that she poured into her novels and plays. But as she changed, France too seemed to bubble over, and the streets and minds of the people were a ferment of ideas, discontent and rebellion. A spirit of restlessness roamed the streets menacingly.

Ever since the Sun King had retired to live in the palace of Versailles almost a century earlier, the life of the French people had gradually deteriorated. That great machine of feasting and entertainment that the palace had become, seemed to be in constant need of taxes that fell on the poorest to pay. Even with the last successors it did not seem to get any better: Louis XVI and his wife Marie Antoinette, perhaps because of the remoteness of the palace from the city, seemed to ignore the fatigue and sadness of living in greater Paris. The gilded candelabra, the rustling silk dresses, and all of that royal extravagance could not drown out the lamentations of the people, skillfully narrated by Olympe.



Everything excited her, she read and informed herself and her mind and heart seemed to float up, up – high enough to touch the clouds.

Like the lark, she could observe the world from above and far, very far away from herself.



It was not just her life that occupied her thoughts, but that of the girls, the other women, the black people and the poor.

“We are all different but that is what makes us equal!”

She asserted with conviction, as she sat in her living room lighted by the quivering light of candles.

Olympe’s hands moved to emphasise her speeches, casting strange shadows on the sumptuous walls.

They seemed to come to life, turning into the flight of a little bird that flew around her guests, who listened raptly to those truly revolutionary ideas. Strong and light words, capable of showing a different world, a better world that Olympe imagined for everyone.

“No woman or man should be a slave, each of us is born free!”

Those same words, she wrote in her works, hoping to instill in everyone the idea of true change.

She never gave up, even when her operas were rejected.

The theatres refused to stage them. For Olympe, freedom and equality were not mere words of declaration, but important truths in which she firmly believed and, above all, knew that they could not exist if only a few people enjoyed them.

It was summer in Paris, the people seemed more outraged than ever and that July morning, they poured into the streets, armed with whatever they could find.

They attacked and destroyed the Bastille, an old fortress that they considered the symbol of the king's power.

What followed was a difficult life for many, even for the king and queen who were arrested.

The revolution seemed like a big, blind, cruel giant that took from one to give to a few and never to women.

Olympe wanted something different; she imagined a “gentler” revolution.



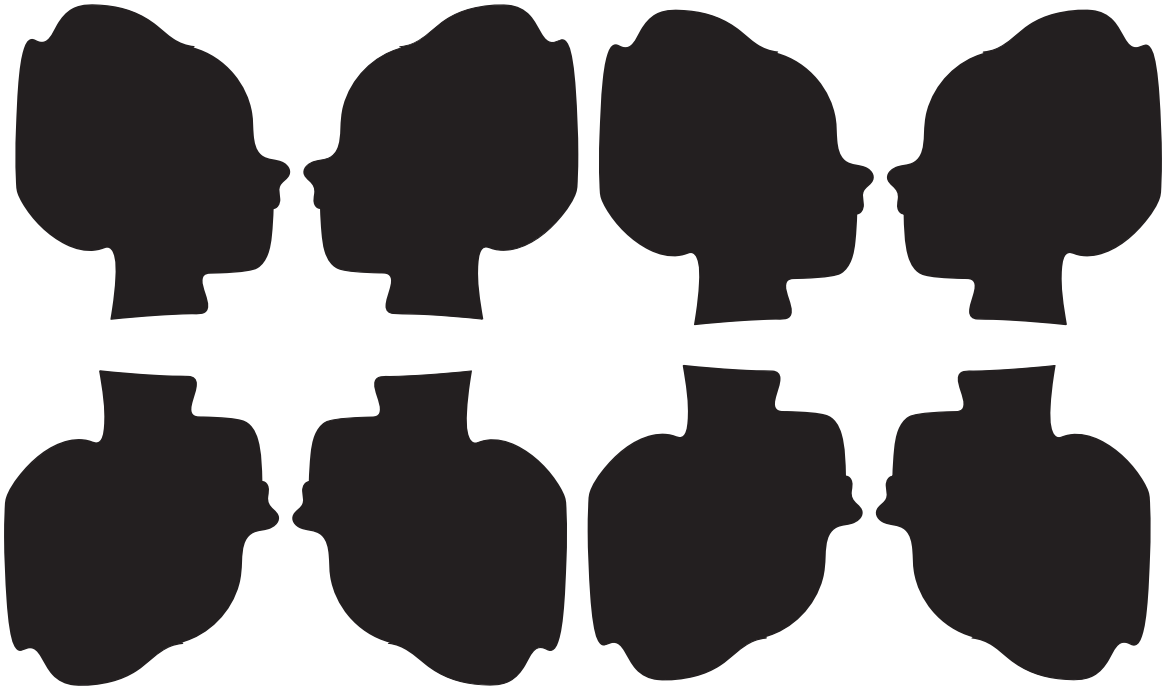
“There is no need for violence, no need to kill those who have different thoughts and ideas from ours!” she kept repeating, even trying to save the life of the king and queen, but without success.

Meanwhile, the revolution proceeded blindly, and the heads of those who opposed it were simply... torn off.

Terror reigned and was incomprehensible to Olympe, yet she was not intimidated and continued to write and disseminate her ideas.

She wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens, because the revolutionaries in their declaration seemed to have forgotten about it.

Nothing had changed, women continued to be considered a sack of potatoes or beets, to be given in marriage to the first person who came along.



“That evil Robespierre doesn’t scare me and won’t shut me up!” Olympe added, deciding to have the entire city plastered with her truly revolutionary posters that spread her words of inclusion and respect for all.



“This is the last straw,” shouted Robespierre furiously,
“That woman has gone too far. If she doesn’t know her place,
I’ll show her!” he said, before ordering her arrest.
Olympe underwent a false proceeding, in which no lawyer took
her defence, lies were told and excuses were made,
all so that she could be sentenced to have her head cut off.



The months in prison passed slowly, but November finally came. Olympe despite everything was not repentant, she believed in what she thought and would have written it down a thousand more times.

On a tree opposite the prison, she saw her lark come to greet her and the new day, the last of her life.

At the sight of the guillotine, Olympe's heart leapt.

She closed her eyes and seemed to take flight, to soar as high as the lark.

She flew above the rooftops, up to the clouds, to greet the new day that would soon come: no more slavery, no more differences, singing her song of freedom.







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