

# 7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY **S. Baring-Gould**

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 *best*  
*short stories by*  
*S. Baring-Gould*

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# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Author](#)

[Jean Bouchon](#)

[Pomps and Vanities](#)

[McAlister](#)

[The Leaden Ring](#)

[The Mother of Pansies](#)

[The Red-haired Girl](#)

[A Professional Secret](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

# The Author

Sabine Baring-Gould's life is a story in itself, with his unconventional childhood, his marriage to a mill-girl half his age and his dedication to antiquarian pursuits alongside his life as squire and parson of a small Devonshire village. He was regarded as one of the top ten novelists of his time, but wrote prolifically on his travels, religious matters, historical figures and on many other topics. Over 1200 publications are listed in his bibliography.

He was an early archaeologist, respected for his work on Dartmoor, in Cornwall, in Wales and in France. He was also a folklorist, but he regarded his greatest achievement to be his collection of songs, most of them heard from singers in Devon and Cornwall. Beside his writing he re-created the twin hearts of his beloved parish of Lew Trenchard – his home, Lew House and the beautiful little church of St Peter, Lewtrenchard. For these he was his own architect.

At his death in 1924 he largely dropped out of the public's memory and if he was remembered it would have been for his best known hymns such as 'Onward, Christian soldiers' and 'Now the day is over'. In recent years members of the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society, with the help of the descendants of his 15 children, have searched out forgotten manuscripts and letters which help to give a better picture of the life of this remarkable man.



# Jean Bouchon

I was in Orléans a good many years ago. At the time it was my purpose to write a life of Joan of Arc, and I considered it advisable to visit the scenes of her exploits, so as to be able to give to my narrative some local colour.

But I did not find Orléans answer to my expectations. It is a dull town, very modern in appearance, but with that measly and decrepit look which is so general in French towns. There was a Place Jeanne d'Arc, with an equestrian statue of her in the midst, flourishing a banner. There was the house that the Maid had occupied after the taking of the city, but, with the exception of the walls and rafters, it had undergone so much alteration and modernisation as to have lost its interest. A museum of memorials of la Pucelle had been formed, but possessed no genuine relics, only arms and tapestries of a later date.

The city walls she had besieged, the gate through which she had burst, had been levelled, and their places taken by boulevards. The very cathedral in which she had knelt to return thanks for her victory was not the same. That had been blown up by the Huguenots, and the cathedral that now stands was erected on its ruins in 1601.

There was an ormolu figure of Jeanne on the clock—never wound up—upon the mantelshelf in my room at the hotel, and there were chocolate figures of her in the confectioners' shop-windows for children to suck. When I sat down at 7 p.m. to table d'hôte, at my inn, I was out of heart. The result of my exploration of sites had been unsatisfactory; but I trusted on the morrow to be able to find material to serve my purpose in the municipal archives of the town library.

My dinner ended, I sauntered to a café.

That I selected opened on to the Place, but there was a back entrance near to my hotel, leading through a long, stone-paved passage at the back of the houses in the street, and by ascending three or four stone steps one entered the long, well-lighted café. I came into it from the back by this means, and not from the front.

I took my place and called for a café-cognac. Then I picked up a French paper and proceeded to read it—all but the feuilleton. In my experience I have never yet come across anyone who reads the feuilletons in a French paper; and my impression is that these snippets of novel are printed solely for the purpose of filling up space and disguising the lack of news at the disposal of the editors. The French papers borrow their information relative to foreign affairs largely from the English journals, so that they are a day behind ours in the foreign news that they publish.

Whilst I was engaged in reading, something caused me to look up, and I noticed standing by the white marble-topped table, on which was my coffee, a waiter, with a pale face and black whiskers, in an expectant attitude.

I was a little nettled at his precipitancy in applying for payment, but I put it down to my being a total stranger there; and without a word I set down half a franc and a ten centimes coin, the latter as his *pourboire*. Then I proceeded with my reading.

I think a quarter of an hour had elapsed, when I rose to depart, and then, to my surprise, I noticed the half-franc still on the table, but the sous piece was gone.

I beckoned to a waiter, and said: "One of you came to me a little while ago demanding payment. I think he was somewhat hasty in pressing for it; however, I set the money

down, and the fellow has taken the tip, and has neglected the charge for the coffee."

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed the *garçon*; "Jean Bouchon has been at his tricks again."

I said nothing further; asked no questions. The matter did not concern me, or indeed interest me in the smallest degree; and I left.

Next day I worked hard in the town library. I cannot say that I lighted on any unpublished documents that might serve my purpose.

I had to go through the controversial literature relative to whether Jeanne d'Arc was burnt or not, for it has been maintained that a person of the same name, and also of Arques, died a natural death some time later, and who postured as the original warrior-maid. I read a good many monographs on the Pucelle, of various values; some real contributions to history, others mere second-hand cookings-up of well-known and often-used material. The sauce in these latter was all that was new.

In the evening, after dinner, I went back to the same café and called for black coffee with a nip of brandy. I drank it leisurely, and then retreated to the desk where I could write some letters.

I had finished one, and was folding it, when I saw the same pale-visaged waiter standing by with his hand extended for payment. I put my hand into my pocket, pulled out a fifty centimes piece and a coin of two sous, and placed both beside me, near the man, and proceeded to put my letter in an envelope, which I then directed.

Next I wrote a second letter, and that concluded, I rose to go to one of the tables and to call for stamps, when I noticed



that again the silver coin had been left untouched, but the copper piece had been taken away.

I tapped for a waiter.

“*Tiens,*” said I, “that fellow of yours has been bungling again. He has taken the tip and has left the half-franc.”

“Ah! Jean Bouchon once more!”

“But who is Jean Bouchon?”

The man shrugged his shoulders, and, instead of answering my query, said: “I should recommend monsieur to refuse to pay Jean Bouchon again—that is, supposing monsieur intends revisiting this café.”

“I most assuredly will not pay such a noodle,” I said; “and it passes my comprehension how you can keep such a fellow on your staff.”

I revisited the library next day, and then walked by the Loire, that rolls in winter such a full and turbid stream, and in summer, with a reduced flood, exposes gravel and sand-banks. I wandered around the town, and endeavoured vainly to picture it, enclosed by walls and drums of towers, when on April 29th, 1429, Jeanne threw herself into the town and forced the English to retire, discomfited and perplexed.

In the evening I revisited the café and made my wants known as before. Then I looked at my notes, and began to arrange them.

Whilst thus engaged I observed the waiter, named Jean Bouchon, standing near the table in an expectant attitude as before. I now looked him full in the face and observed his countenance. He had puffy white cheeks, small black eyes, thick dark mutton-chop whiskers, and a broken nose. He

was decidedly an ugly man, but not a man with a repulsive expression of face.

“No,” said I, “I will give you nothing. I will not pay you. Send another *garçon* to me.”

As I looked at him to see how he took this refusal, he seemed to fall back out of my range, or, to be more exact, the lines of his form and features became confused. It was much as though I had been gazing on a reflection in still water; that something had ruffled the surface, and all was broken up and obliterated. I could see him no more. I was puzzled and a bit startled, and I rapped my coffee-cup with the spoon to call the attention of a waiter. One sprang to me immediately.

“See!” said I, “Jean Bouchon has been here again; I told him that I would not pay him one sou, and he has vanished in a most perplexing manner. I do not see him in the room.”

“No, he is not in the room.”

“When he comes in again, send him to me. I want to have a word with him.”

The waiter looked confused, and replied: “I do not think that Jean will return.”

“How long has he been on your staff?”

“Oh! he has not been on our staff for some years.”

“Then why does he come here and ask for payment for coffee and what else one may order?”

“He never takes payment for anything that has been consumed. He takes only the tips.”

“But why do you permit him to do that?”

“We cannot help ourselves.”

“He should not be allowed to enter the café.”

“No one can keep him out.”

“This is surpassing strange. He has no right to the tips. You should communicate with the police.”

The waiter shook his head. “They can do nothing. Jean Bouchon died in 1869.”

“Died in 1869!” I repeated.

“It is so. But he still comes here. He never pesters the old customers, the inhabitants of the town—only visitors, strangers.”

“Tell me all about him.”

“Monsieur must pardon me now. We have many in the place, and I have my duties.”

“In that case I will drop in here to-morrow morning when you are disengaged, and I will ask you to inform me about him. What is your name?”

“At monsieur’s pleasure—Alphonse.”

Next morning, in place of pursuing the traces of the Maid of Orléans, I went to the café to hunt up Jean Bouchon. I found Alphonse with a duster wiping down the tables. I invited him to a table and made him sit down opposite me. I will give his story in substance, only where advisable recording his exact words.

Jean Bouchon had been a waiter at this particular café. Now in some of these establishments the attendants are wont to have a box, into which they drop all the tips that are received; and at the end of the week it is opened, and the

sum found in it is divided *pro rata* among the waiters, the head waiter receiving a larger portion than the others. This is not customary in all such places of refreshment, but it is in some, and it was so in this café. The average is pretty constant, except on special occasions, as when a fête occurs; and the waiters know within a few francs what their perquisites will be.

But in the café where served Jean Bouchon the sum did not reach the weekly total that might have been anticipated; and after this deficit had been noted for a couple of months the waiters were convinced that there was something wrong, somewhere or somehow. Either the common box was tampered with, or one of them did not put in his tips received. A watch was set, and it was discovered that Jean Bouchon was the defaulter. When he had received a gratuity, he went to the box, and pretended to put in the coin, but no sound followed, as would have been the case had one been dropped in.

There ensued, of course, a great commotion among the waiters when this was discovered. Jean Bouchon endeavoured to brave it out, but the *patron* was appealed to, the case stated, and he was dismissed. As he left by the back entrance, one of the younger *garçons* put out his leg and tripped Bouchon up, so that he stumbled and fell headlong down the steps with a crash on the stone floor of the passage. He fell with such violence on his forehead that he was taken up insensible. His bones were fractured, there was concussion of the brain, and he died within a few hours without recovering consciousness.

“We were all very sorry and greatly shocked,” said Alphonse; “we did not like the man, he had dealt dishonourably by us, but we wished him no ill, and our resentment was at an end when he was dead. The waiter who had tripped him up was arrested, and was sent to

prison for some months, but the accident was due to *une mauvaise plaisanterie* and no malice was in it, so that the young fellow got off with a light sentence. He afterwards married a widow with a café at Vierzon, and is there, I believe, doing well.

“Jean Bouchon was buried,” continued Alphonse; “and we waiters attended the funeral and held white kerchiefs to our eyes. Our head waiter even put a lemon into his, that by squeezing it he might draw tears from his eyes. We all subscribed for the interment, that it should be dignified—majestic as becomes a waiter.”

“And do you mean to tell me that Jean Bouchon has haunted this café ever since?”

“Ever since 1869,” replied Alphonse.

“And there is no way of getting rid of him?”

“None at all, monsieur. One of the Canons of Bourges came in here one evening. We did suppose that Jean Bouchon would not approach, molest an ecclesiastic, but he did. He took his *pourboire* and left the rest, just as he treated monsieur. Ah! monsieur! but Jean Bouchon did well in 1870 and 1871 when those pigs of Prussians were here in occupation. The officers came nightly to our café, and Jean Bouchon was greatly on the alert. He must have carried away half of the gratuities they offered. It was a sad loss to us.”

“This is a very extraordinary story,” said I.

“But it is true,” replied Alphonse.

Next day I left Orléans. I gave up the notion of writing the life of Joan of Arc, as I found that there was absolutely no

new material to be gleaned on her history—in fact, she had been thrashed out.

Years passed, and I had almost forgotten about Jean Bouchon, when, the other day, I was in Orléans once more, on my way south, and at once the whole story recurred to me.

I went that evening to the same café. It had been smartened up since I was there before. There was more plate glass, more gilding; electric light had been introduced, there were more mirrors, and there were also ornaments that had not been in the café before.

I called for café-cognac and looked at a journal, but turned my eyes on one side occasionally, on the look-out for Jean Bouchon. But he did not put in an appearance. I waited for a quarter of an hour in expectation, but saw no sign of him.

Presently I summoned a waiter, and when he came up I inquired: “But where is Jean Bouchon?”

“Monsieur asks after Jean Bouchon?” The man looked surprised.

“Yes, I have seen him here previously. Where is he at present?”

“Monsieur has seen Jean Bouchon? Monsieur perhaps knew him. He died in 1869.”

“I know that he died in 1869, but I made his acquaintance in 1874. I saw him then thrice, and he accepted some small gratuities of me.”

“Monsieur tipped Jean Bouchon?”

“Yes, and Jean Bouchon accepted my tips.”



“*Tiens*, and Jean Bouchon died five years before.”

“Yes, and what I want to know is how you have rid yourselves of Jean Bouchon, for that you have cleared the place of him is evident, or he would have been pestering me this evening.” The man looked disconcerted and irresolute.

“Hold,” said I; “is Alphonse here?”

“No, monsieur, Alphonse has left two or three years ago. And monsieur saw Jean Bouchon in 1874. I was not then here. I have been here only six years.”

“But you can in all probability inform me of the manner of getting quit of Jean.”

“Monsieur! I am very busy this evening, there are so many gentlemen come in.”

“I will give you five francs if you will tell me all—all—succinctly about Jean Bouchon.”

“Will monsieur be so good as to come here to-morrow during the morning? and then I place myself at the disposition of monsieur.”

“I shall be here at eleven o’clock.”

At the appointed time I was at the café. If there is an institution that looks ragged and dejected and dissipated, it is a café in the morning, when the chairs are turned upside-down, the waiters are in aprons and shirt-sleeves, and a smell of stale tobacco lurks about the air, mixed with various other unpleasant odours.

The waiter I had spoken to on the previous evening was looking out for me. I made him seat himself at a table with me. No one else was in the saloon except another *garçon*, who was dusting with a long feather-brush.

“Monsieur,” began the waiter, “I will tell you the whole truth. The story is curious, and perhaps everyone would not believe it, but it is well *documentée*. Jean Bouchon was at one time in service here. We had a box. When I say we, I do not mean myself included, for I was not here at the time.”

“I know about the common box. I know the story down to my visit to Orléans in 1874, when I saw the man.”

“Monsieur has perhaps been informed that he was buried in the cemetery?”

“I do know that, at the cost of his fellow-waiters.”

“Well, monsieur, he was poor, and his fellow-waiters, though well-disposed, were not rich. So he did not have a grave *en perpétuité*. Accordingly, after many years, when the term of consignment was expired, and it might well be supposed that Jean Bouchon had mouldered away, his grave was cleared out to make room for a fresh occupant. Then a very remarkable discovery was made. It was found that his corroded coffin was crammed—literally stuffed—with five and ten centimes pieces, and with them were also some German coins, no doubt received from those pigs of Prussians during the occupation of Orléans. This discovery was much talked about. Our proprietor of the café and the head waiter went to the mayor and represented to him how matters stood—that all this money had been filched during a series of years since 1869 from the waiters. And our *patron* represented to him that it should in all propriety and justice be restored to us. The mayor was a man of intelligence and heart, and he quite accepted this view of the matter, and ordered the surrender of the whole coffin-load of coins to us, the waiters of the café.”

“So you divided it amongst you.”