

COUNTESS MARIE OF THE ANGELS

À JEAN DE TINAN

I



AS he turned out of his hotel in the Avenue de l'Opéra, comparatively obscure at that hour, and emerged into the *grands boulevards*, Paris flashed upon him, all at once, her brightest illumination: row upon row of lamps tapering away in a double file to meet in a single point of light far away in the direction of the Place de la République. If it was winter by the calendar, the languid mellowness of a fine autumn lingered in the air. The Boulevard des Italiens was massed with wayfarers, sauntering, lounging with aimless and amiable nonchalance, while a gay Sunday crowd monopolized all the little tables outside the small and large cafés.

Colonel Mallory searched for a vacant place at one of them, then abandoned the search and moved slowly along, joining the rest of the throng with steps as aimless, but with sentiments somewhat remote from theirs.

Fifty, perhaps, of middle stature, his white moustache was in striking contrast with his short, crisp hair which had retained its original darkness. Obviously English, with his keen, blue eyes; obviously a soldier too, in gait and bearing, and in a certain sternness which comes of command, of high responsibility in perilous places, even when that command is kindly. An Anglo-Indian, to judge by his complexion, and the lines, tell-tale of the tropics, which scored his long, lean face, the colour of parchment. Less obviously English, and hardly military, was a certain grace, almost exotic, in his manner. He had emerged into the Boulevard Montmartre before a café, less frequented than the others, caught his eye, and with a certain relief he could possess himself of a vacant chair on the *terrasse*. He ordered a drink, lit a cigar, and settled himself to watch with an interest which was not so much present as retrospective, the crowd of passers-by. And as he watched his eyes softened into sadness.

He had arrived from England that morning—he had not so very long arrived from India—and this crowd, these lights, the hard, bright gaiety of the boulevards was at once fantastically strange to him and strangely familiar ; for, twenty, or was it nearer thirty years ago, Paris had been to him not merely the city of cities, but that one of them which most represented old associations, his adolescence, boyhood, childhood. True, there had been Les Rochers, the dilapidated château, half ruin to his recollection, and now wholly a ruin, or perhaps demolished—Les Rochers in the Vendée, where he had been born, where he had spent his summer holidays, where—how many years ago?—being at home on leave, just after he had obtained his company, he had closed the eyes of his mother.

But Paris ! It was his best remembered boyhood ; the interrupted studies in the Quartier, the Lycée, the boyish friendships, long since obliterated, the days of *congé* spent in the little hotel in the Rue de Varennes, where, more often than at Les Rochers, his mother, on her perpetual couch, economized her delicate days—days even then so clearly defined—as it were in an half twilight. Yes, until death and estrangement and the stern hand of circumstance had cast away that old life into the limbo of the dear irrevocable, that old life had been—Paris ! Episodes the rest : the occasional visits to the relations of his English father ; and later, episodes too, London, murky London, the days at Wren's, the month or so with an army-coach at Bonn, the course at Woolwich ; almost episodal too the first year of his soldiering. Quartered at Dover, what leave fell to him, he had spent in Paris—at Les Rochers sometimes, but more often at Paris—in those strangely silent rooms in the Rue de Varennes.

Looking out now, the phantasmagoria of the boulevards was obliterated and those old days floated up before him. Long before Woolwich : that time when he was a Lycéen, in the winter holidays. A vision so distinct ! His mother's *salon*, the ancient, withered furniture, the faded silk of the Louis XV. chairs, the worn carpet : his mother's refined and suffering face, the quaint bird-like features of the two old Mesdemoiselles de la Touche—the near neighbours of his mother and the most intimate gossips round her couch—two ancient sisters, very noble and very withered, dating from Charles X., absorbed in good works, in the merits of their confessor, and in the exile of Frohsdorf. Very shadowy figures, more shadowy even than that of himself, in the trim uniform of his Lycée ; a grave and rather silent boy, saddened by the twilight of that house, the atmosphere of his invalid mother.

More distinct was the dainty figure of a little girl, a child of fifteen, but seeming younger, united to him by a certain cousinship, remote enough to be

valued, who, on her days of exit from the *Sacré Cœur* (his mother's constant visitor), talked with him sedately, softly—for there was a sort of hush always in that house—in an alcove of the sombre room. This child with her fragility, her face of a youthful *Madonna*, the decorous plaits in which her silken hair was gathered, losing thereby some of its lustre—the child seemed incongruous with and somewhat crushed and awed beneath the weight of her sonorous names: *Marie-Joseph-Angèle de la Tour de Boiserie*.

What did they converse of on those long and really isolated afternoons— isolated, for their elders, if they were present, and their presence overshadowed them, were really so remote, with their lives in the past, in lost things; their so little hold on, or care of, the future?

But these were young, and if some of the freshness of youth had been sacrificed a little to what was oppressive in their surroundings, yet they were young things, with certain common interests, and a future before them, if not of boundless possibilities, still a future.

Yet it was hardly of love which they could speak, though their kindness for each other, fostered by somewhat similar conditions, had ripened into that feeling. Of love there could be no question: for *Sebastian Mallory*, as for his little companion, their life, as it should be, had been already somewhat arranged. For *Angèle*, had not the iron-featured old grandmother, in her stately but penurious retreat near *Les Rochers*, resolved long ago that the shattered fortunes of a great house, so poor in all but name, were to be retrieved by a rich marriage? And for *Sebastian*, was not all hope of fortune centred in his adhesion to the plan which had so long been made for him: the course at *Woolwich*, the military career—with its prosperous probabilities beneath the protection of an influential relative—the exile, as it sometimes seemed to him then, in *England*? . . .

Certainly, there was much affection between these two, an affection maintained on the strength of the ambiguous cousinship, in a correspondence, scanty, but on each side sincere, for at least a few years after their roads had diverged. And there were other memories, later and more poignant, and as distinct, which surged up before his eyes; and the actual life of the boulevards grew vaguer. Had life been too much arranged for them? Had it been happier, perhaps, for him, for her, if they had been less acquiescent to circumstance, had interpreted duty, necessity—words early familiar to them—more leniently?

Colonel Mallory, at fifty, with his prosperous life behind him—and it had not been without its meed of glory—wondered to-night whether, after all, it

had not been with prophetic foresight, that once, writing, in a sudden mood of despondency, more frankly than usual, to that charming friend of his boyhood, he had said, years ago :

"I feel all this is a mistake ;" and, lower down in the same letter : *"Paris haunts me like a regret. I feel, as we say here, 'out of it.' And I fear I shall never make a good soldier. Not that I mean that I am lacking in physical courage, nor that I should disgrace myself under fire. But there is a difference between that and possession of the military vocation, and nature never designed me to be a man of action. . . . My mother, you, yourself, my dear, grave cousin and councillor, think much of duty, and I shall always endeavour to do mine—as circumstances have set it down for me—but there is a duty one owes to oneself, to one's character, and in that, perhaps, I have failed."*

A letter, dated "Simla," the last he would ever write to Mademoiselle de la Tour de Boiserie, actually, at that time, though of this fact he was ignorant, betrothed to a certain Comte Raoul des Anges. The news of the marriage reached him months later, just fresh from the excitement and tumult of a little border war, from which he had returned with a name already associated with gallantry, and a somewhat ugly wound from a Pathan spear.

In hospital, in the long nights and days, in the grievous heats, he had leisure for thought, and it is to be presumed he exercised it in a more strict analysis of his feelings, and it was certainly from this date that a somewhat stern reticence and reserve, which had always characterized his manner, became ingrained and inveterate.

And it was reticently, incidentally, and with little obvious feeling that he touched on the news in a letter to his mother :

"Et ce M. des Anges, dont je ne connais que le nom, est-il digne de notre enfant? His name at least is propitious. Tell la petite cousine—or tell her not, as you think fit, that to me she will always be 'Marie of the Angels.'"

II

That had seemed the end of it, of their vaguely tender and now so incongruous relation ; as it was inevitably the end of their correspondence. And he set himself, buoyed up by a certain vein of austerity in his nature, to conquer that instinctive distaste which, from time to time, still exercised him towards his profession, to throw himself into its practice and theory, if not with ardour, at least with an earnestness that was its creditable imitation. And in due time he reaped his reward. . . .

But there was another memory—for the past will so very rarely bury its dead—a memory intense and incandescent, and, for all its bitterness, one which he could ill have spared.

That was five years later: invalided home, on a long leave, with a fine aroma of distinction attaching to him, it was after the funeral of his mother, after all the sad and wearisome arrangements for the disposition of Les Rochers that Colonel—then Captain—Mallory heard in Paris the loud and scandalous rumours which were associated with the figure of the Comte Raoul des Anges. There was pity mingled with the contempt with which his name was more often mentioned, for the man was young—it was his redeeming feature—but an *insensé!* It was weakness of character (some whispered weakness of intellect) and not natural vice: so the world spoke most frequently. But his head had been turned, it had not been strong enough to support the sudden weight of his immense fortune. A great name and a colossal fortune, and (*bon garçon* though he was) the intelligence of a rabbit!

In Paris, to go no further, is there not a whole army of the shrewd, the needy, and the plausible, ready to exploit such a conjunction? And to this army of well-dressed pimps and parasites, Raoul had been an easy victim. The great name had been dragged in the mire, the colossal fortune was rapidly evaporating in the same direction, what was left of the little intelligence was debased and ruined. A marriage too early, before the lad had time to collect himself, for old Madame des Anges had kept him very tight, perhaps that had been largely responsible for the collapse. And it was said the Comtesse des Anges was little congenial, a prude, at least a *dévoté*, who could hardly be expected to manage *ce pauvre Raoul*. She was little known in Paris. They were separated of course, had been for a year or more; she was living with her baby, very quietly, in some old house, which belonged to her family, at Sceaux—or was it at Fontenay-aux-Roses?—on the remnants of her own fortune.

All this, and much more, Mallory heard in club and in café during that memorable sojourn in Paris. He said nothing, but he raged inwardly; and one day, moved by an immense impulse of pity and tenderness, he went down to Fontenay-aux-Roses, to visit Madame des Anges.

His visit was only for a week; that was the memory which he could not spare, and which was yet so surpassingly bitter. He had stopped at Sceaux, at an unpretending inn, but each day he had walked over to Fontenay, and each day had spent many hours with her, chiefly in the old-fashioned garden which surrounded her house. She had changed, but she had always the same

indefinable charm for him ; and the virginal purity of her noble beauty, marriage had not assailed, if it had saddened. And if, at first, she was a little strange, gradually the recollection of their old alliance, her consciousness of the profundity of his kindness for her, melted the ice of their estrangement.

At last she spoke to him freely, though it had needed no speech of hers for him to discern that she was a woman who had suffered ; and in the light of her great unhappiness, he only then saw all that she was to him, and how much he himself had suffered.

They were very much alone. It was late in the year ; the gay crowd of the *endimanchés* had long ceased to make their weekly pilgrimages to the enchanting suburbs which surround Paris with a veritable garden of delight ; and the smart villas on the hill-side, at Sceaux and Fontenay, were shut up and abandoned to caretakers. So that Captain Mallory could visit the *Châlet des Rosiers* without exciting undue remark, or remark that was to be accounted.

And one afternoon, as was inevitable, the flood-gates were broken down, and their two souls looked one another in the face. But if, for one moment, she abandoned herself, weeping pitiably on his shoulders, carried away, terrified almost by the vehemence of his passion ; for the volcanoes, which were hidden beneath the fine crust of his reticence, his self-restraint, she had but dimly suspected ; it was only for a moment. The reaction was swift and bitter ; her whole life, her education, her tradition, were stronger than his protestations, stronger than their love, their extreme sympathy, stronger than her misery. And before she had answered him—calm now, although the tears were in her voice—he knew instinctively that she was once more far away from him, that she was not heeding his arguments, that what he had proposed was impossible ; life was too strong for them. “ Leave me, my friend, my good and old friend ! I was wrong—God forgive me—even to listen to you ! The one thing you can do to help me, the one thing I ask of you, for the sake of our old kindness, is—to leave me.”

He had obeyed her, for the compassion, with which his love was mingled, had purged passion in him of its baser concomitants. And when the next day he had called, hardly knowing himself the object of his visit, but ready, if she still so willed it, that it should be a final one, she had not received him. . . . He was once more in India, when a packet of his old letters to her, some of them in a quite boyish handwriting, were returned to him. That she had kept them at all touched him strangely ; that she should have returned them now gave him a very clear and cruel vision of how ruthlessly she would

expiate the most momentary deviation from her terrible sense of duty. And the tide of his tenderness rose higher; and with his tenderness, from time to time, a certain hope, a hope which he tried to suppress, as being somewhat of a *lâcheté*, began to be mingled.

III

"*Paris haunts me like a regret!*" That old phrase, in his last letter to Mademoiselle de la Tour de Boiserie, returned to him with irony, as he sat on the boulevard, and he smiled sadly, for the charm of Paris seemed to him now like a long disused habit. Yet, after all, had he given reminiscence a chance? For it was hardly Paris of the *grands boulevards*, with its crude illumination, its hard brilliancy, its cosmopolitan life of strangers and sojourners, which his regret had implied. The Paris of his memories, the other more intimate Paris, from the Faubourg Saint Germain to the quarter of ancient, intricate streets behind the Panthéon:—there was time to visit that, to wander vaguely in the fine evening, and recall the old landmarks, if it was hardly the hour to call on Madame des Anges.

He dined at an adjacent restaurant, hastily, for time had slipped by him—then hailed a cab, which he dismissed at the Louvre, for, after the lassitude of his meditation, a feverish impulse to walk had seized him. He traversed the Place de Carrousel, that stateliest of all squares, now gaunt and cold and bare, in its white brilliance of electricity, crossed the bridge, and then striking along the Quai, found himself almost instinctively turning into the Rue du Bac. Before a certain number he came to a halt, and stood gazing up at the inexpressive windows. . . .

More than a year ago that which he had dimly hoped, and had hated himself for hoping, had befallen. The paralytic imbecile, who had dragged out an apology for a life, which at its very best would hardly have been missed, and which had been for fifteen years a burden to himself and others, the Comte Raoul des Anges, that gilded calf of a season, whose scandalous fame had long since been forgotten, was gathered to his forefathers. That news reached Colonel Mallory in India, and mechanically, and with no very definite object in his mind, yet with a distinct sense that this course was an inevitable corollary, he had handed in his papers. But some nine months later, when, relieved of his command, and gazetted as no longer of Her Majesty's service, he was once more in possession of his freedom, it was a very different man to that youthful one who had made such broken and

impassioned utterances in the garden of the Châlet des Rosiers, who ultimately embarked in England.

The life, the service, for which he had retained, to the last, something of his old aversion, for which he had possessed, however well he had acquitted himself, perhaps little real capacity: all that had left its mark on him. He had looked on the face of Death, and affronted him so often, had missed him so narrowly, had seen him amid bloodshed and the clash of arms, and, with the same equanimity, in times of peace, when, yet more terribly, his angel, Cholera, devastated whole companies in a night, that life had come to have few terrors for him, and less importance.

Yet what was left of the old Sebastian Mallory was his abiding memory, a continual sense (as it were of a spiritual presence cheering and supporting him) of the one woman whom he had loved, whom he still loved, if not with his youth's original ardour, yet with a great tenderness and pity, partaking of the nature of the theological charity.

"Marie of the Angels," as he had once in whimsical sadness called her. Yes! He could feel now, after all those years of separation, that she had been to him in some sort a genius actually *angelic*, affording him just that salutary ideal, which a man needs, to carry him honourably, or, at least, without too much self-disgust, through the miry ways of life. And that was why, past fifty, a grim, kindly, soldierly man, he had given up soldiering and returned to find her. That was why he stood now in the Rue du Bac—for it was from there, on hearing of his intention, she had addressed him—gazing up in a sentimentality almost boyish, at those blank, unlit windows.

IV

Those windows, so cold and irresponsive, he could explain, when, returning to his hotel, he found a note from her. It was dated from the Châlet des Rosiers. She was so little in Paris, that she had thoughts of letting her house; but, to meet an old and valued friend, she would gladly have awaited him there—only, her daughter (she was still at the Sacré Cœur, although it was her last term) had been ailing. Paris did not agree with the child, and, perforce, she had been obliged to go down to Fontenay to prepare for her reception. There, at any time, was it necessary to say it? she would be glad, oh, so glad, to receive him! There was sincerity in this letter, which spoke of other things, of his life, and his great success—had she not read of him in the papers? There was affection, too, between the somewhat formal lines, reticent but real;

so much was plain to him. But the little note struck chill to him ; it caused him to spend a night more troubled and painful than was his wont—for he slept as a rule the sleep of the old campaigner, and his trouble was the greater because of his growing suspicion, that, after all, the note which Madame des Anges had struck was the true one, for both of them ; that a response to it in any other key would be factitious, and that his pilgrimage was a self-deception. And this impression was only heightened when, on the morrow, he made his way to the station of the Luxembourg, which had been erected long since his day, when the facilities of travel were less frequent, and took his ticket for Fontenay. So many thousand miles he had come to see her, and already a certain vague terror of his approaching interview was invading him. Ah ! if it had been Paris ! . . . But here, at Fontenay-aux-Roses there was no fortunate omen. It represented no common memories, but rather their separate lives and histories, except, indeed, for one brief and unhappy moment which could hardly be called propitious. . . .

Yet it was a really kind and friendly reception which she gave him ; and his heart went out to her, when, after *déjeuner*, they talked of quite trivial things, and he sat watching her, her fine hands folded in her lap, in the little faded *salon*, which smelt of flowers. She had always her noble charm, and something of her old beauty, although that was but the pale ghost of what it had once been, and her soft hair, upon which she wore no insincere symbols of widowhood, was but little streaked with gray. She had proposed a stroll in the garden, where a few of its famed roses still lingered, but he made a quick gesture of refusal, and a slight flush, which suffused her pale face, told him that she comprehended his instinctive reluctance.

He fell into a brooding reverie, from which, presently, she softly interrupted him.

“You look remote and sad,” she murmured ; “that is wrong—the sadness ! It is a pleasant day, this, for me, and I had hoped it would be the same for you too.”

“I was thinking, thinking,” he said,—“that I have always missed my happiness.”

Then abruptly, before she could interrupt him, rising and standing before her, his head a little bowed :

“It is late in the day, but, Angèle, will you marry me ?”

She was silent for a few minutes, gazing steadily with her calm and melancholy gaze into his eyes, which presently avoided it. Then she said :

"I was afraid that some such notion was in your mind. Yet I am not sorry you have spoken, for it gives me an opportunity,—an occasion of being quite sincere with you, of reasoning."

"Oh, I am very reasonable," he said, sadly.

"Yes," she threw back, quickly. "And that is why I can speak. No," she went on, after a moment, "there is no need to reason with you. My dear old friend, you see yourself as clearly as I do,—examine your heart honestly—you had no real faith in your project, you knew that it was impossible."

He made no attempt to contradict her.

"You may be right," he said; "yes, very likely, you are right. There is a season for all things, for one's happiness as for the rest, and missing it once, one misses it for ever. . . . But if things had been different. Oh, Angèle, I have loved you very well!"

She rose in her turn, made a step towards him, and there were tears in her eyes.

"My good and kind old friend! Believe me, I know it, I have always known it. How much it has helped me—through what dark and difficult days—I can say that now: the knowledge of how you felt, how loyal and staunch you were. You were never far away, even in India; and only once it hurt me." She broke off abruptly, as with a sudden transition of thought; she caught hold of both his hands, and, unresistingly, he followed her into the garden. "I will not have you take away any bitter memories of this place," she said, with a smile. "Here, where you once made a great mistake, I should like to have a recantation from your own lips, to hear that you are glad, grateful, to have escaped a great madness, a certain misery."

"There are some miseries which are like happiness."

"There are some renunciations which are better than happiness."

After a while he resumed, reluctantly:

"You are different to other women, you always knew best the needs of your own life. I see now that you would have been miserable."

"And you?" she asked, quickly.

"I may think your ideal of conduct too high, too hard for poor human flesh. I dare not say you are wrong. . . . But, no, to have known always that I had been the cause of your failing in that ideal, of lowering yourself in your own eyes—that would not have been happiness."

"That was what I wanted," she said, quickly.

Later, as he was leaving her—and there had been only vague talk of any further meeting—he said, suddenly:

"I hate to think of your days here; they stretch out with a sort of grayness. How will you live?"

"You forget I have my child, Ursule," she said. "She must necessarily occupy me very much now that she is leaving the convent. And you—you have——"

"I have given up my profession."

"Yes, so much I knew. But you have inherited an estate, have you not?"

"My uncle's place. Yes, I have Beauchamp. I suppose I shall live there. I believe it has been very much neglected."

"Yes, that is right. There is always something to do. I shall like to think of you as a model landlord."

"Think of me rather as a model friend," he said, bowing to kiss her hand as he said good-bye to her.

ERNEST DOWSON.

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