

**THE ELM-TREE ON THE  
MALL; A CHRONICLE  
OF OUR OWN TIMES**

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The elm-tree on the mall; a chronicle of our own times by Anatole France

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# THE ELM-TREE ON THE MALL

A CHRONICLE OF OUR OWN TIMES  
BY ANATOLE FRANCE



A TRANSLATION BY  
M. P. WILLCOCKS



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## THE ELM-TREE ON THE MALL

### I



THE salon which the Cardinal-Archbishop used as a reception room had been fitted, in the time of Louis XV., with panellings of carved wood painted a light grey. Seated figures of women surrounded by trophies filled the angles of the cornices. The mirror on the chimney-piece being in two divisions, was covered, as to its lower half, with a drapery of crimson velvet which threw into relief a pure white statue of Our Lady of Lourdes with her pretty blue scarf. Along the walls, in the middle of the panels, hung enamel plates framed in reddish plush, portraits of Popes Pius IX. and Leo XIII. printed in colours, and pieces of embroidery, either souvenirs of Rome or gifts from the pious ladies of the diocese. The gilded side-tables were loaded with plaster models of Gothic or Romanesque churches : the Cardinal-Archbishop was

fond of buildings. From the plaster rose hung a Merovingian chandelier executed from the designs of M. Quatrebarbe, diocesan architect and Knight of the Order of Saint Gregory.

Tucking his cassock up above his violet stockings and warming his short, stout legs at the fire, Monseigneur was dictating a pastoral letter, whilst, seated at a large table of brass and tortoiseshell, on which stood an ivory crucifix, the vicar-general, M. de Goulet, was writing: *So that nothing may occur to sadden for us the joys of our retreat. . . .*

Monseigneur dictated in a dry, colourless voice. He was a very short man, but the great head with its square face softened by age was carried erect. Notwithstanding its coarse and homely lineaments, his face was expressive of subtlety and a kind of dignity born of habit and the love of command.

"*The joys of our retreat. . . .* Here you will expound the ideas of harmony, of the subduing of the mind, of that submission to the powers that be which is so necessary, and which I have already dealt with in my previous pastoral letters."

M. de Goulet raised his long, pale, refined head adorned by beautiful curled locks as though by a Louis Quatorze wig.

"But this time," said he, "would it not be expedient, while repeating these declarations, to show that reserve appropriate to the position of the secular



powers, shaken as they are by internal convulsions and henceforth incapable of imparting to their covenants what they themselves do not possess—I mean continuity and stability? For you must see, Monseigneur, that the decline of parliamentary predominance . . .”

The Cardinal-Archbishop shook his head.

“Without reservation, Monsieur de Goulet, without any species of reservation. You are full of learning and piety, Monsieur de Goulet, but your old pastor can still give you a few lessons in discretion, before handing over the government of the diocese, at his death, to your youthful energy. Have we not to congratulate ourselves upon the attitude of M. *le préfet* Worms-Clavelin, who regards our schools and our labours with favour? And are we not welcoming to our table to-morrow the general in command of the division and the president-in-chief? And, *à propos* of that, let me see the menu.”

The Cardinal-Archbishop inspected it, made alterations and additions, and gave special directions that the game should be ordered from Rivoire, the poacher to the prefecture.

A servant entered and presented him with a card on a silver tray.

Having read the name of Abbé Lantaigne, head of the high seminary, on the card, Monseigneur turned towards his vicar-general.

#### 4 THE ELM-TREE ON THE MALL

"I'll wager," said he, "that M. Lantaigne is coming to complain to me again about M. Guitrel."

Abbé de Goulet rose to leave the salon. But Monseigneur stopped him.

"Stay! I want you to share with me the pleasure of listening to M. Lantaigne, who, as you know, is spoken of as the finest preacher in the diocese. For, if one listened only to public opinion, it would seem that he preaches better than you, dear Monsieur de Goulet. But that is not my opinion. Between ourselves, I care neither for his inflated style nor for his involved scholarship. He is terribly wearisome, and I am keeping you here to help me to get rid of him as quickly as possible."

A priest entered the salon and bowed. He was very tall and immensely corpulent, with a serious, simple, abstracted face.

At sight of him Monseigneur exclaimed gaily :

"Ah! good-day, Monsieur l'abbé Lantaigne. At the very moment that you sent in your name the vicar-general and I were talking about you. We were saying that you are the most distinguished orator in the diocese, and that the Lenten course you preached at Saint-Exupère is proof positive of your great talents and profound scholarship."

Abbé Lantaigne reddened. He was sensitive to praise, and it was by the door of pride alone that the Enemy could find entrance to his soul.

“Monseigneur,” he answered, his face lit up by a smile which quickly died away, “the approval of Your Eminence gives me a deep delight which comes felicitously to soothe the opening of an interview which is a painful one to me. For it is a complaint which the head of the high seminary has the misfortune to pour into your paternal ears.”

Monseigneur interrupted him :

“Tell me, Monsieur Lantaigne, has that Lenten course at Saint-Exupère been printed ?”

“A synopsis of it appeared in the diocesan *Semaine religieuse*. I am moved, Monseigneur, by the marks of interest which you deign to show in my apostolic labours. Alas ! it is long enough ago since I first entered the pulpit. In 1880, when I had too many sermons, I gave them to M. Roquette, who has since been raised to a bishopric.”

“Ah !” cried Monseigneur, with a smile, “that good M. Roquette ! When I went last year *ad limina apostolorum* I met M. Roquette for the first time just as he was gaily setting out for the Vatican. A week later I met him in Saint-Peter’s, where he was imbibing the solace that he much needed after being refused the cardinal’s hat.”

“And why,” demanded M. Lantaigne, in a voice that whistled like a whip-lash, “why should the purple have descended on the shoulders of this poor creature, a mediocrity in character, a nonentity in