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# Penelope Fitzgerald

# The Gate of Angels

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# Part One



# FRED'S THREE NOTES

How could the wind be so strong, so far inland, that cyclists coming into the town in the late afternoon looked more like sailors in peril? This was on the way into Cambridge, up Mill Road past the cemetery and the workhouse. On the open ground to the left the willow-trees had been blown, driven and cracked until their branches gave way and lay about the drenched grass, jerking convulsively and trailing cataracts of twigs. The cows had gone mad, tossing up the silvery weeping leaves which were suddenly, quite contrary to all their experience, everywhere within reach. Their horns were festooned with willow boughs. Not being able to see properly, they tripped and fell. Two or three of them were wallowing on their backs, idiotically, exhibiting vast pale bellies intended by nature to be always hidden. They were still munching. A scene of disorder, tree-tops on the earth, legs in the air, in a university city devoted to logic and reason.

Fairly was making the best pace he could. He did not much like being overtaken by other bicyclists. No-one likes being overtaken by other bicyclists. The difficult conditions (some were blown over) turned the Mill Road into a display of pride.

The year was 1912 so that Fairly's bicycle, a Royal Sunbeam, must have been thirteen years old. It had Palmer tyres, which left a pattern of long lines like wires, on a wet, glass-clear road. He felt better when he overtook a man who, from the back, might have been someone he knew slightly, and turned out in fact to be someone he knew slightly, a lecturer in the Physiology of the Senses, who called out:

'They can't get up again, you know, poor beasts, poor brute beasts!'

He was shouting. It was like sea-bathing. Everyone in turn must swerve to avoid a hat which had blown off and was darting about, crushed and deformed, at random. A whole group went by, then one of them detached himself and was riding alongside.

'Skippey!'

He couldn't hear what Skippey said, so dropped back and came up on the other side, the lee side.

'You were saying?'

'Thought is blood,' Skippey replied.

The first man, the acquaintance, caught up once more. They were three abreast.

His words streamed with the wind.

'I was in error. It's sheep that can't get up, sheep.'

'The relief of it!' Fairly called back. Now that the rain had stopped for a moment the drops blew off the trees as hard as handfuls of gravel.

At Christ's Pieces Fairly turned right, meeting the wind head-on, and made landfall at his own college, St Angelicus.

Angels was, as it is, a very small college. Jokes about the difficulty of finding it, and the troubles the inmates were put to in fitting into it, had been made at any time for the past five hundred years. The twentieth century had opened by increasing these difficulties – for example, in the case of the Fellows' bicycle shed, crouched like a peasant shack on the inner wall, close to the Founder's Entrance. Peasants, however, would have built this, or any other shack, out of the way of the wind and rain, whereas the bicycle shed, on three sides, was open to both. And then, who might have arrived there before you? The college tutor of Angels was, and had been since the Second Boer War, a volunteer with the East Anglian Territorial Bicycle Corps, and, largely for reasons of vanity, rode at all times his specially adapted safety machine with its leather case for signal flags, rifle rest and spare water barrel. It

### Fred's Three Notes

occupied its own space and three-eighths of the next one, so that if you were the last man in, as Fairly appeared to be this evening, there was nothing for it but to manhandle your own bicycle onto a large iron hook fixed by the porter in the upper

part of the wall.

Rain streamed down Fairly's face, gathered at the tip of his nose, and fell. The shed was not so much like a shack, perhaps, as like the dodger on a ship's bridge, of which one could only say that it was just about drier inside it than out. One step into the dusk, though, and he was through the Founder's Arch and then into the inner court, with its one great walnut tree. Here, cut off completely, the wind could hardly be felt. Feeling as though he had been stunned, or dreaming, and was still dreaming, he began a short diagonal walk across the grass to get to his own rooms in the north-west corner. From the larger darkness under the trees a patch of darkness detached itself. It was the Master of the College, his gown scarcely adrift in the quiet airs of the Court of Angels.

The Master was blind. Fairly hesitated. After thirteen years the Master might have been expected to know the ins and outs of his little college, and he did know them. Probably he had paused under the walnut tree to sense what the crop was likely to be. It was an old sort, a Cornet du Périgord, which flowered late.

The Master called out, scarcely raising his voice, however. 'This grass is reserved for the Fellows of this college. Should you be walking on this grass?'

'Yes, I should, Master.'

'But who is it?'

'It's Fred Fairly.'

'Fairly, didn't you have an accident? An accident quite recently?'

'Yes, I did.'

'On your bicycle, or off your bicycle?'

'I suppose, both.'

'I hope you weren't unwise enough to go to hospital?'

'I'm all right now, Master.'

'Please take my left arm.'

This had to be done in a particular way, laying two fingers only on the forearm. It was the Master, however, who did the steering, slowly round and once again around the great tree trunk. He said quietly, 'You're very wet, Fairly.'

'Yes, Master, I'm sorry about that.'

'Now, tell me, have you made up your mind on the most important question of all?'

'You're talking about my religious beliefs?'

'Good God, no!'

A rectangle of light opened in a wall and the Senior Tutor came out and took affectionate charge of the Master, who did not need it in the least.

'Senior Tutor, just one or two points. In the first place, Fairly is very wet, for some reason. Where does he keep?'

'I think, in the north-west corner.'

'And then, Senior Tutor, there are kittens somewhere on our premises, very young ones. I heard them distinctly. As with all mammals, their first sounds are angry, the pleading note comes later.'

'Possibly in the kitchens,' the Senior Tutor said. 'I shall speak to the Steward.'

As on Mount Athos, no female animals capable of reproduction were allowed on the college premises, though the starlings couldn't altogether be regulated. There were no women bedmakers or cleaners of any age. These were very ancient regulations. Fairly continued on his diagonal. When he reached the bottom of his staircase he took off his Burberry, hung it on the ancient newel post and gave it one or two sharp blows to shake off the damp. Then he went up to the top floor, where he kept. On the way up he passed Beazley, the gyp. Beazley was short, like all the college servants, who were selected, probably, with this in mind. Fred had an arrangement with this man, which they had arrived at five years earlier when he had been appointed as a Junior Fellow, that

### Fred's Three Notes

Beazley wasn't to ask whether his fire needed making up, because he was perfectly well able to make it up for himself, that he never wanted to order anything up from the kitchens, and that he didn't want to be told that his messages, brought up from the porter's lodge, were urgent.

'These are urgent, Mr Fairly,' said Beazley, catching up with him and handing him three envelopes, two of them clean

and one of them not quite.

There was no gas laid on in the college and Fred turned on the Aladdin lamp, which threw a circle of inner radiance, as calm as it was bright. The fire was banked up like a furnace, dividing the room into areas of dismaying heat and cold. Up here the wind could be heard once again, battering at the panes for admission, while the roof-slates braced themselves against a fall. The college had never been thoroughly heated or dried out since its foundation, but Fred, who had been brought up in a rectory, one of the draughtiest places on earth, saw no reason to complain. He hung up his boots, his socks, his sock-suspenders, his cap, like offerings to the fire-God, on the solid brass fender. They steamed, and his long-jointed feet also steamed. Being too late for dinner in Hall, he took a knife and a cottage loaf out of a cupboard and began to make himself toast. He knew how fortunate he was to have got a Iunior Fellowship at Angels.

The first note was from the Master. The writing sloped a good deal downwards, but it was clear enough. 'I have to apologise to you for saying, or implying, just now in the court, something that was not true. I asked you who you were, but I, of course, knew who you were. I know the voices of everyone in the college. I also know their steps, even on the grass – particularly on the grass. Normally you cross the court directly from the SSW to the NNE, but this evening you did not do this. You must have walked a little up the gravel path, and that confused me. My remark, I am afraid, reflected something of my annoyance at that confusion.' The Master was fond of sending these notes in the interest of truth, or

rather with the intention of going to bed every night in the knowledge that he had neither said or written anything untruthful which he had not corrected. For the Master, it was a very short note. And Fred had learned to live among these people and indeed (as with the cold in his room) already found it difficult to imagine anything else.

The second note was from Skippey, who must have dropped it in to the lodge on his way back to his own college, Iesus. It read, 'Dear Old Fellow, I don't think you heard me just now on Mill Road. Thorpe has let us down to-night on the Disobligers' Society. He says he is ill. He calls it influenza, and we call it letting us down. It's lucky that you've recovered from your accident, because we want you to speak for us in the debate to-night. We want you to speak against the motion. The motion is "that the soul doesn't exist, has never existed, and that it isn't desirable that it should exist". Charles Reding is going to propose the motion. The point is that he's a theologian, and a pious fellow, and so on, and so of course he'll have to say that there's nothing we can be sure of except the body, and that thought is blood, and so on, and then you, Fred, as a rank unbeliever, will have to stick up for the soul. Afterwards, wine and biscuits. And, Fred - ' Beazley was still hanging about. Fred asked him: 'Did the Master want an answer to his note?'

'He didn't ask for one, Sir.'

I'm a disappointment to Beazley, Fred thought. Steaming socks, making toast, though a lot better, mind you, than he makes it himself – where's the dash, where's the display? Although after the first glance he must have given up all hope of making any substantial amount of money out of looking after me – still, there he is, and I like him, oughtn't I to entertain him a little?

'It seems as if I've got to go out and make a speech, Beazley. It was raining, and I'm just drying out. Do I look untidy?'

'Yes, very untidy, Mr Fairly.'

## Fred's Three Notes

Beazley went out, quite well pleased, shutting the four-inch oak door, which deadened the sound of his steps as they descended the winding stairs.

Fred looked at his watch. It was a silver watch, belonging to his father, given to him when he took up his appointment, and yet not quite given to him either, since when he went back on vacations his father tended to borrow it back. It came to him that he didn't at all want to go out again to-night, that he had a letter of his own to write which must go off – must – but on the other hand he ought not to disoblige the Disobligers' Society. This was because he had once done Skippey a good turn, something to do with money, a temporary loan, and you are always under an obligation to anyone you've helped once. But his mind had not warmed up at the same rate as his body, and he was not able to think, still less to put in order, what he could possibly say in defence of the soul.

The third note, in the envelope that was not so clean, consisted of a couple of pages torn out of a note-book. It was from an acquaintance. Fred couldn't remember where he had first met Holcombe, or why, having met him but not ever much wanting to see him again, they now considered themselves acquaintances. It was on a subject they had been talking about a couple of days ago. Holcombe must have thought of something else he wanted to say, gone to the lodge, found that Fred had signed out, and immediately started writing, since it would have been as dangerous for him not to express himself as to block his digestive system.

'... Long tramps, Fairly, over our beloved Fenland, speaking together of intellectual problems and those only, descending at last after say fifteen miles for whisky and a warm at some friendly Cambridge hearth! That is a man's recreation. Now, if one were to marry – well, look at it in this way – a wife has a legal right to be in the same house and even the same room as oneself! From the point of view of the temptations of the flesh that may be convenient enough, but what if she were to want to talk? Your own position is so much

simpler. You don't have to make up your mind. At the age of twenty-five years, it is made up for you. If you stay at St Angelicus you can't marry. If you leave, you may get another appointment, but not, you can be pretty certain, another Junior Fellowship. You are choiceless. In fact, you must be careful that your powers of choice don't fall into disuse. I think of rust, I think of springs becoming weaker. You may find you can't remember how to choose at all. And yet the prospect of an alternative is absolutely necessary to human will and human action. Still, let us be honest, there seems no point, as far as I can see, in your ever getting to know any young women at all –'

At this point Holcombe had run out of space. When Fred next met him, he would start straight away from where his letter had broken off, as though between words spoken and words written there was no dividing line.

Out of a carved oak locker on the opposite side of the fire from the coal-scuttle, but distinct from the bread-cupboard (and breathing out a different smell of mould when opened), Fred took a few sheets of the college paper. He shook his fountain pen to see how much ink was left in it, and wrote: 'Dear Miss Saunders'.