THE FOUNTAIN

BY

CHARLES MORGAN

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" from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within."

COLERIDGE : *Dejection.*

When a man proceeding onwards from terrestrial things by the right way of loving, once comes to sight of that Beauty, he is not far from his goal. And this is the right way . . . he should begin by loving earthly things for the sake of the absolute loveliness, ascending to that as it were by degrees or steps, from the first to the second, and thence to all fair forms; and from fair forms to fair conduct, and from fair conduct to fair principles, until from fair principles he finally arrive at the ultimate principle of all and learn what absolute beauty is. This life, my dear Socrates, said Diotima, if any life at all is worth living, is the life that a man should live, in the contemplation of absolute Beauty . . .

PLATO : *Symposium.*
Trans. ROBERT BRIDGES.

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THE FORT

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle.
A. E. HOUSMAN

CHAPTER ONE

On an afternoon of January 1915, a small train dragged itself across the flat Dutch countryside in the neighbourhood of Bodegraven, carrying a group of English officers under guard. Their heads appeared continually at the windows, for, though their destination had been kept from them, they judged by a restless movement of the guard that they were near the end of their journey.

Lewis Alison, a dark, craggy man of more than common height, gave no sign of sharing in the general curiosity. He stayed in his place, seeming to have wrapped himself in a composure not easily to be disturbed. Thirty years had left upon him more than their accustomed mark—not upon his physical appearance only, but upon his manner, delaying his smile and giving an air of deliberateness to his speech and movement. Vigour and eagerness lay in his eyes, and his hair, full and black, had the glisten of youth upon it; his body was pliant and his cheeks could darken with colour when whipped by excitement, but his good looks were of maturity, and owed so much to something austere and self-disciplined in his expression that it was hard for one who had not known him in the past to imagine him as a very young man, sanguine and impetuous. But while he sat in this train, which the early twilight of winter was already filling with shadow, even his boyhood might have been guessed at by one who watched him closely. When he spoke, there was in his voice a mingling of quietness and animation which made him master of his company. Throughout the morning and the afternoon he had spoken little. A book on his knee had occupied him, and the

turn of his fingers as he lifted a page suggested a loving reader.

Among the Englishmen in the train were a few airmen, brought down by engine-failures into neutral territory, but the greater number were of the Naval Division that had retreated from Antwerp three months earlier. Separated from their men, with whom they had been living in an internment camp at Groningen, they were now being taken to closer imprisonment in a fortress. In Lewis's compartment were two former sergeants of marine, Lapham and Shordey, upright in opposite corners like dogs on trust; Ballater, long and fair and handsome, stretched out at ease; and Sezley, still so much of a boy that, when he withdrew his head and shoulders from the window and turned round to communicate in high excitement what he had seen or guessed or thought of, his words came tumbling over one another, and he had often to stop and draw breath in an audible gasp before he could continue. Other officers had from time to time wandered in from the corridor, stayed a little while and gone.

"This fort we're going to," Lapham was saying. "Wonder what kind of a place it is? Ever served in a fort, Shordey?"

Shordey's eyes twinkled above his puffy cheeks. Now, as always, he seemed about to make a joke, but he shook his head and said nothing.

"I did once," Lapham continued. "At Sheerness. Windy sort of place. But I didn't mind it. The young officers did, though."

"You had the wife with you," Shordey said.

Ballater smiled and, seeing that Lewis had at last closed his book, asked: "Do you imagine we're going to be shut up in this place for ever, Alison? I can't get the idea of it."

Lewis took up a pipe from the seat beside him and tapped it on his boot.

"I've been trying all day to get the idea of it," he replied. "It's odd in these days and oddest of all in the middle of a war. But it wouldn't have seemed odd in the past—to be shut up. Whole communities shut themselves up. I've often

thought I'd like to go round the world in a sailing-ship. Day after day, nothing but your own job."

"What did these fellows shut themselves up for, Alison?" Shordey asked, wrenching himself out of his speechlessness. "What was the idea? Religion and so on?"

Lewis hesitated. The answer to that question would be an answer to all the questions that had for many hours, for many years, perplexed and enchanted him. Then, suddenly, fascinated by so profound a riddle, he began to speak of the monastic ideal of earlier ages, saying that there were two aspects of it, the devotional and the contemplative. "The struggle for some kind of stillness within oneself seems to run right through history," he said. "In cities and market-places as well as in monasteries. In forts, too, and camps and prisons. It's a question of how to attain it. To worship a particular god is only one means; so is seclusion; neither, perhaps, is a necessary means." Even Sezley turned from the window to listen to him. His audience was held by his argument and by the evidence of his eyes and voice that he had deep personal concern in it. He said much that surprised them, but nothing for effect—nothing that did not spring from within himself.

"I believe you'd have been a monk if you'd lived then," Ballater said. "You'd like to be a monk now if you had the chance."

Lewis at first made no reply. Then: "I've no sort of religious vocation," he answered. "Anyhow I have a business to run and people dependent on me. . . . But in the fort," he went on with hungry eagerness, "there'll be none of that. As long as we live, it's the only chance that any of us is likely to have to be completely independent." He checked himself abruptly and leaned back in his corner.

"It's all very well for you," Ballater said. "You won't be without a job. You have your history to write."

"Without the history," Lewis replied, "I'd still be glad of the fort."

"But who's to look after the business?" Lapham asked. "What's your line, Alison?"

"Publishing. Alison and Ford. Educational books mostly,

and books of reference." Lewis's words came from him in jerks, forced by a reluctant memory of the past. "I've been at it ten years. I took my father's place when he died. Uphill work. Still," he added, "that's over. Everything begins afresh to-day."

But Lapham's mind had run on.

"You may have your history," he said. "But what's the rest of us to do? We're not all monks by a long chalk. No women an' no job. It's worse for the married men than the single, though you may think different, Ballater."

Ballater replied cautiously: "As for girls, the old monasteries didn't always keep them out."

"They'll get in somehow—never you mind," Lapham said after a moment's reflection. "Visitors' days. Poodle-faking in the dog-watches. Women never leave you alone. They come in like water into an old ship. First your mother. Then your wife. Then, when you think you're through with it, your daughter worryin' at you. You never get clear. This fort mayn't be as peaceful as you looks for, Alison. Things have a way of coming in, you know."

"They have indeed," Lewis answered. "I've spent my life finding that out."

The train groaned, rattled and was silent. It had stopped without show of reason among the meadows.

"It can't be here," Sezley cried, leaning out yet farther. "There's no station, no platform, nothing."

But a Dutch captain with a precise voice and a blond, silky moustache went from compartment to compartment, smiling and repeating monotonously: "Will the gentlemen please to go down here?"

"Like a butler announcing dinner," Ballater said.

"Yes," the captain was heard to explain, "this is the place. There is Wierickerschans, the fortress where you go —you see the ramparts with the trees over? That is your new country mansion."

Alison rose and slipped his book into his pocket. Six months ago he had been travelling every day from home to office, from office to home, having no thought that his way of life could ever be changed. Even the desire for a

different life had fallen asleep within him. This evening, when he took up that volume again, the gates of the fort would have closed. For months, perhaps for years, they would not be opened.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out."

Coat collars were turned up, pipes lighted and khaki caps pressed down against a blustering wind. The Englishmen climbed on to the line. With a guard of some fifty Dutch privates shambling before and after them and the blond officer in their midst, they set out across country.

Ballater and Lewis Alison walked together. At Antwerp they had served in the same battalion but in different companies, and not until they had passed several weeks in Groningen were they drawn into a loose friendship. What bound them was not a shared interest but a humorous liking or tolerance that each had for the other's foibles.

"Personally," Ballater said, "monasteries aren't in my line. No opening for talent." His face, clear red and white in complexion, moved in an easy smile.

Lewis wondered what Ballater would do in the fort. What would they all do?—and he looked at the men surrounding him. Some were naval officers or former naval officers rejoined for the war; some schoolboys, still in the adventure of a commission, no older than his own brother who had been killed at his side during the crossing of the Scheldt. Some, like himself, were mature civilians, brought by a medley of chances into the Naval Brigades. Lapham and Shordey, being old soldiers, would make themselves snug in Purgatory itself, anxious only that marching-orders should not disturb them. They would settle down to a routine of pipes and beer and five-cent Nap, outwardly resigned. But imprisonment, even the easy imprisonment that lay before them all, was a distinguisher of men. None knew what would befall him here nor what he might become.

Lewis was possessed by the fantasy of this mild walk into prison. Near him, Herriot, a Flying Corps pilot, and Dacres, his observer, were plodding on, shoulder to

shoulder. Even Dacres's chubby face wore an expression of melancholy—a grotesque, ridiculous crumpling. He was taking stock of the Dutch guards, the broad fields, the chances of a dash for liberty. When he spoke of this, Herriot growled and shook his head. "Not a hope. We'd be in the dykes."

They went on in silence, and Lewis knew what bitterness was in Herriot's mind. Dacres was an amateur of adventure; if he did not escape he would soon console himself; but Herriot was a dry, frosted little man, cool, wary, without illusions, and to fly was his life. He cared for nothing else except unending games of patience. Flight was to him a necessary drug; without it his imagination became erratic and his fingers twitched above the cards. "I must get out," he had said at Groningen. "This war's my one chance. There'll never be another until I'm too old." He lifted his grooved, sallow face out of the collar of his coat and gazed at the fort, a tree-lined eminence seemingly afloat on the ground-mist.

"Well, Alison. Like the look of it? This ought to be the place for you. Though why, I doubt if I understand. What is it you want?"

"That's a hard question."

"I know—but answer it."

"If I say that what I want is peace of mind——"

"That's too vague," Herriot interrupted. "May mean anything. Lapham has peace of mind when he's had a good dinner and his pipe is drawing."

Lewis hesitated. "There's no answer to your question," he said, "that doesn't sound like a boast. . . . What I want is stillness of spirit."

"It doesn't sound like a boast except to fools," Herriot answered. "It's what we all want—though damned few of us know it. But it's to be found in an office or an aeroplane, not only in a hermit's cell. . . . Some people have to shut themselves up. Maybe that way's right for them. Depends on the man. If the wrong man dives into solitude he goes mad—or, what's worse, he goes stale. Why you should shut yourself up, I don't know. You're not one of the incapables

of this world. I know your story; Ballater told it me; and a man who's left in charge of his family when he's still an undergraduate and pulls a business out of the fire isn't an incompetent. It's not the sort of efficiency that I'm capable of. A mother, two sisters, a young brother to educate—I'd have deserted them in a week. I did desert my own wife and children. Still, if you can stick that, you can stick most things."

"It wasn't altogether a question of sticking it," Lewis said. "It was at first. In a way it was right up to the end. But I don't take a hero's credit. I began to be proud of it—almost to like it. That's the devil of it all—that half of me began to like it. But running a business and a family wasn't what I wanted to do. This"—he lifted a hand towards the fort—"is what I've wanted inside me all my life."

"Well," Herriot said, "to every man his own fanaticism—as long as he's got one. It's a queer choice for you to make. You can do your job outside and do it damned well. Men like your company. And women too," he added, shooting a glance upward. "You could play hell with them if it amused you. You look as if you'd burn them up with your austerity—and that's a candle they'll always die in. Not all women, perhaps—the silly ones like a smoother passage—but the women worth having. . . . Look, man, there's what Ballater calls your monastery. Shout! Why don't you shout and sing and dance? I should if I saw an Avro make a landing in that field, ready to take me away."

"No, you wouldn't," Lewis said. "You'd be too excited to speak and too doubtful whether you'd get clear. This is my chance, but God knows what I shall do with it."

"Nothing would keep me from my job," Herriot exclaimed. "Not a hundred mothers and sisters and brothers—nothing but that prison. Nothing ever has. But this place is the end for me, if I can't get out of it quick. . . . Observe the corpse walking to its grave."

In the fierce extravagance of that jest there was so deep a sadness that Lewis could find no answer to it. There were peace and joy in his own heart. In the fort, he imagined, day would follow day in slow, empty routine. He would

look out over this calm, mist-bound country that separated him from all external claims and watch the spring appear. In summer, greenness would enrich it; in autumn, the few belts of trees would flame and darken; this winter or next there would be a snowfall and the canals would become a network of black cords laid upon the snow. Hour after hour, season after season, in no conflict of duties, he would do what all his life he had wished to do.

"I'd like to be a saint," said Herriot suddenly.

"A saint—why?"

"It would be exciting, that's why. Anything is that you can go mad about. The hopelessly sane men are the bores. Dacres, for instance." He jerked his thumb. "A good fellow, but sane as a stationmaster. You have the merit of being mad, Alison. Half-mad anyway. Lord in heaven, think of going mad about a history book! And a history of the contemplative life at that! That's what you want to write, isn't it? It's a good world when you see the joke of it." And he added slowly: "I suppose there's a technique of contemplation—same as in flying. You've got to learn it from ABC. And no good then if you haven't the right nerve."

They were approaching the fort—a high flat mound that was evidently a hollow square, for above the grassy ramparts were visible the tops of trees growing within on a lower level. On each of the great earthen bastions at the corners of the square was a wood of tall elms. A canal, wider than any common moat, lay about the base of the ramparts. It had been made, they soon discovered, to encircle the fortress, to which a guarded bridge was the only entrance. As Lewis crossed the bridge, he paused, with a feeling of delight and finality, to look down into the waters of the canal.

Inside was a paved courtyard, flanked by buildings chiefly of one storey—long narrow bungalows stretching out on either side to the full breadth of the old fortress. High above their roofs stood the gatehouse rampart, a steep bank already equipped with arc-lamps, sentry-boxes and barbed wire. It overshadowed the room that Lewis

found was to be his dormitory. Through the windows on one side, nothing was to be seen but this great rampart and a narrow path that divided it from the buildings. On the other side, the prospect was more open. Here, beyond the path, were a few yards of turf, fringed with barbed wire and bordered by a stagnant inlet from the moat. The main ramparts of the fortress rose out of the farther bank of this strip of water. Their earthy bulk stood across the world, but above them and their soaring elms the twilit sky was visible. From this quarter in the daytime the sun would for a little while make its way into the room.

Ballater and Lewis chose beds within a few feet of each other and sat down upon them. Baggage was being brought in, but their own was not yet come and they had nothing to do. Other officers, whose place was in this dormitory, were standing about in knots, hesitant and restless. "What are we going to *do* here?" Ballater said. "We shall be lucky if we aren't at each other's throats in a fortnight."

Sezley was handing round lumps of marching chocolate. "Rations for the troops!" He was as excited as a girl at a party.

Among the baggage that had come was Sezley's gramophone. He turned it on, and soon Lauder's voice was grinding into the dusk. Someone began to sing, was shouted down, and persisted in his singing. A chorus sprang up and in the midst of it the gramophone choked and died. A grey hush fell on the room.

"This place will be damp, so near the water," and Ballater stared up at the whitewashed walls. It was now too dark to see whether they were patched with wetness.

Sezley was examining his gramophone. "Can't see a thing. Anyone got some matches?" He looked over his shoulder at the brass oil-lamps hung from the ceiling. A chair was dragged across the boarded floor; a match fizzed and illumined the faces looking upward. "No oil." But Sezley prevailed among the shadows; soon a jarring of the needle was changed to a stifled rag-time, and Ballater said:

"That's one of the snags to your monastery. You won't have a room to yourself night or day."

But nothing could now disturb Lewis's tranquillity. While he sat on his bed and the noise of the room drummed upon him, his mind returned to a time when, still a child, he had felt that he was at the gate of a mystery which, if he could but open his eyes anew, would be revealed to him. To learn how to open his eyes it had seemed necessary that he should be alone, that he should be still with an absolute stillness, until his self that was blind had fallen from him like the skin of a snake. Within the apparent form of all things was another form, waiting to appear; within stones another stone; within the vitality of trees a secret and ghostly sap; beyond God who, he had been taught, was his Father in Heaven, another god whose being sprang, not from instruction and rule, but from his own apprehension. As he grew older, he had perceived in certain books that their authors had been seeking what he sought, and scholarship had become a passion in him, a means, not of learning only, but of association with minds coloured as his own. To their diverse voyages he would now return, seeking always in them that discipline of stillness beneath which, if any man perfectly attained it, his blind self might be shed like the skin of a snake, and he be changed.

He went out into the dusk, wishing to visit the ramparts before others came and to walk among the great elms on the bastions. But there was a gate, heightened with barbed wire and padlocked, across the path leading from the courtyard on to the main ramparts, and a Dutch lieutenant appeared out of the arc-lamp shadow of an elder bush to say that he might not go by that way until morning.

"It would be too simple," he explained in an English that came from him uneasily, as though, while he spoke, he were nervously collecting it from a book of idioms. "The outer ramparts cannot in the night be closely guarded. You would escape, *niet waar?*"

Escape. All day that word had been repeated—in the train, in the meadows, by groups of men unpacking their gear and setting up photographs in the dormitories. They had chattered of tunnels and barges and disguise. They

would learn Dutch, they said, and had asked Lewis, who had already made progress in the language, whether he would help them. As he walked under the darkening and austere sky, watching an electrician in overalls inspect an arc-lamp circuit, the word escape seemed to come to him from another age. It was a thing you could pick up between your fingers and toss in your hand like an old coin, thinking of the remote world in which it was currency. But he heard his own mind say: "It's our job to get out of this place if we can," and his eyes were on the barbed wire, testing it.

In the messroom, he found Herriot with his patience cards, sitting at the end of a long empty table covered in red chenille.

"Cut to me, Alison, and bring me luck. I've made a bet with myself. Every card I don't get out keeps me in this place a week."

Lewis stretched across the table and cut the pack.