III.

ON VALLETTA, THE CAPITAL OF THE ISLAND OF MALTA

This city is the seat of the English government. Its most wonderful feature is the impregnability of its walls and the beauty of its two harbours. As for the walls, they are in large part half of solid rock, and the remainder of masonry. The harbour has been mentioned already [in Chapter 1].

The overall impression — especially if it is viewed from a distance — is one of splendour and beauty, for it is built of stone, as has been said, and its windows are glazed. On the other hand it is without minarets and the like, and because of this it looks like a bald head.

The most commendable feature of its houses is that they are built of stone in one straight row; you will never see one house out of line. On the other hand they are of varying heights, and their rooms and living apartments are ill-arranged. A large house will consist of a wide, long upper chamber [i.e. hall?] and a row of rooms opening one into the other, so that it is impossible to seclude oneself in any of them. As for small houses, especially if old, they are without order of any kind.

The woodwork is usually painted every year, and the walls are lined with decorated paper, as is the practice in European countries.

The windows of these houses are inadequate [in number] because the citizens have certain rights which limit overlooking, so that it is not permissible to cut windows into all walls. They also have apertures jutting out of the walls (i.e. screened balconies) so placed that they exclude light and air. These apertures are high up the wall, so that it is impossible for anyone inside the room to look out of them unless he stands or unless he sits on a chair [instead of squatting on a rug]. They are most like what the Syrians call a kusak[1]. It is said that the existence of these balconies in Malta is one indication that the Maltese are Arabs, for they are not to be found in any Frankish country that has not been conquered by the Arabs. There may be as many as three such balconies in the one house.

One seldom finds a house of three habitable storeys. The majority have two, and if there is a third storey, it is for [the storage of] household necessaries.

Seldom will you see there a house floored with marble. Even the Governor's palace contains not a single marble slab. What is commonly used in the houses of the great is the ordinary stone slab, except that they treat it repeatedly with oil after it has been dressed, so that it becomes like amber in colour.

Similarly, one seldom finds wardrobes or closets (i.e. chests?) or shelves in rented houses; these articles have to be bought separately.


1. The Persian word for "pavilion"; it has passed into English as "kiosk". Its use for a screened balcony appears to be peculiar to Syria, where also it is pronounced kusak.

Neither in these nor in any other houses are there water jets or spacious yards as in the houses of Damascus. Nor are there any stables; those who have a horse tie it up outside. Rarer still are store-rooms, for they buy their provisions day by day — indeed it may be that if they stored them they would rot . . .

When a house is offered for rent, the landlord writes a notice to this effect on a piece of paper which he sticks to the door, for they have no shaykh harb[2] with whom the keys (of vacant houses) are deposited, as is done in Egypt.

Whenever someone rents a house, he must find it freshly white-washed and its woodwork repainted. The practice of painting wood is a commendable one, for it is pleasant to the eye and it preserves the wood. Because of this [practice], a house may appear splendid outside although it may be otherwise inside. This is the opposite of what is common with us, for in Egypt and Syria the exterior of houses may suggest primitive living conditions although the inside is ornate and decorated. The reason for this is that in the past the rulers were ever ready to lay their hands on the property of individuals, so that the subjects made no display of wealth either in buildings or in clothing. The staining of glass is not practised in Malta . . .

In the house are cisterns in which rainwater collects. If they dry out, the landlord applies to the official responsible for conduits, who will supply him with water from a running spring. Alike in this respect are those who dwell near-by, those who are strangers, and those who have no cistern of their own — they all draw water from the public fountain.

Kitchens are often underground, with holes made into the roadway to let in the light; their ceilings, therefore, are on the level of the roadway. So also are most kitchens in London.

No house is without a small vestibule in which vases of flowers are kept. Among these flowers are some that have no scent and which do not exist in our country.

In large houses, especially those occupied by the English, there are small bells hanging from iron (sic) wires strung through the rooms attached to them at a distance by means of silk ribbons. When the master wishes to summon the servant, he pulls on the ribbon, and the servant hears the sound of the bell throughout the house. This is more adequate to the purpose than clapping hands.

On the doors they often write: "Knock at the door", or "Ring the bell". Such also is the custom in England. Unlike the houses in London, however, they have no holes in the doors through which letters may be delivered.

When walking along the streets of the city one keeps rising and falling like the bows of a ship over waves! They do however have steps which make them easier to negotiate. It is also possible to walk along the sides when it is raining, for each street has two pavements — one on the right hand and the

2. An official in charge of a single quarter in an Arab town. See Lane, Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, London, 1844, Vol. I, p. 170. "Every quarter in the metropolis has its shykh, called Shykh el-Buu'ah, whose influence is exerted to keep order, to settle any trifling disputes among the inhabitants, and to expel those who disturb the peace of their neighbours"
There are very many boats in Valletta harbour. They are all painted and attractive, but they lack the seats of the Egyptian gondolas, and the canopies and decorations of the boats of Istanbul. However, it must be admitted that these last are a danger to their passengers, for they are so light that they rock from the slightest cause.

It is open to anyone to say that the Maltese are like the English in that in many respects they take into account utility alone, and have no regard for luxury or elegance. Thus their coaches, their balconies, their chairs, their boats, and the saddles of their horses are made to serve only a utilitarian purpose.

Stranger still are their shops, for there the shopkeeper remains on his feet from morning till evening. Few of them have a chair either for him or the customer. In this last respect they differ from the English.

They call a boat a du'jah (dgħajja); this appears to be a diminutive of the word for a sandy hillock, du'ah; the boat having been likened to it because it is rounded and small. Such is the usual practice of the Arabs: they name objects unfamiliar to them after something familiar in their own country. To this an objection may be raised: Though this was the practice of the Arabs, how did it come to be that of the Maltese? My reply is that no one can deny that the Maltese language is Arabic, and that it was the Muslims who — when they occupied the island, as has been mentioned (in chapter 1) — named these objects. That they did not use qirah although it is a chaste Arabic word (for boat) is (not without parallel), because there are many things that the Franks use which have been derived from their original usage (i.e. the original words for which have become obsolete) and for which words synonymous or nearly so have been borrowed. For example, for “a little” (in Arabic: qu'il) they use ƒa'izza (in Maltese, fţiz; in Arabic, a collective term for “crumb”), for “mush” (in Arabic, kathir) they use awq (Maltese, waq; in Arabic, “a camel’s load”); for the horse (in Arabic, khaig), they use żamilt with inmal (in Maltese, żiemel) — a word applied (in Arabic) to any beast that, because of its sprightliness, appears to distribute its weight unevenly on its legs; and for a village (in Arabic, qarṣ) they use raha (in Maltese, ruhaḥ) which in lexicography means not only the utensils and other things that a man carries with him (which is what is most commonly conveyed by the word) but also his dwelling.

Another such, i.e. another amusement, is strollling before the Governor’s palace when the military band is playing; this is indulged by all those who are moved to levity and affect cleverness, so the men, the women, and the women daily with the men.

Another is the Church’s festivals, which are very many, for each saint has a special feast at a given season and in a known place. As the time approaches, those in search of pleasure go there and indulge in whatever delights are available, listening to music, watching fireplays, and the like. Inevitably at these festivals, the rabble get drunk and commit all the abominations they can.

Another is racing contests, in which horses, donkeys, or boats may vie. The winner receives the stakes.
Another is a sliding game peculiar to them, which thousands of people attend. It consists of this: they tie a long piece of wood, like a ship's mast, to a wheel, they smear it with something slippery; they set up a goal before it, then they walk towards it on that piece of wood — whoever loses his footing falls into the sea.

Another is [a festival extending over] three days — namely the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday — at the time of the lifting (of meat); it is known as the Carnival. Then men dress as women and women as men, they deck themselves in various fashions and different forms, they cover their faces with pieces of leather shaped like a face, and go about the city aimless and drunk. This wearing of disguises they call “maskarah” (sic), which appears to be a corruption of masshabah (in Arabic: a laughing-stick, hence a mask, a buffoon). During this period, they refrain from no debauchery, no revelry, no abominations. The streets then are packed with people and with vehicles. But on Wednesday morning they go to church and sprinkle ashes on their heads as an indication of repentance. For this reason, this day is called Ash Wednesday, a name which remains in use among the English although they have abolished the custom. The meaning of the word Carnival is the lifting, i.e. the removal, of meat.

Also customary in those days is for the Governor to give a sumptuous banquet to which he invites the most important people in the land by cards stipulating that they are to come in fancy dress. They comply with his invitation by hiring such dresses from shops, and he stands awaiting them in a room in his palace; as each family approaches him it bows to him, and he welcomes it. Then, when the welcoming is over, dancing begins. When the women have danced a little, the men take them to the table to eat and drink whatever they like, then they go on dancing until dawn when the company disperses. Off this table some greedy Maltese sometimes took away a "tuck" (in Arabic, khubnah), that is to say, some food that was served in the ordinary garb, and was then taken to be one of the masqueraders. I also used to be asked, "Is there anything like this in your country?" and I used to answer, equivocally, "If not this, then something better." But, by my life, it is shameful for a respectable man to be seen dancing like a child.

One of the greatest places of entertainment and delight is the theatre (in Arabic: malha) which they call thiyyar or thiyyarī (sic). In the whole of Valetta there is only one theatre; most of the actors in it are from Italy, but they are not of the first rank. All this I shall discuss in due course.

The truth is that, ill-favoured as Malta is, the abundance of beautiful churches in it is an object of wonder. You will find three or more in every village. Indeed the first thing that the Maltese boast about is the large number of churches they have — for they have nothing else to glory in, and self-advertisement is an inborn trait. If you go on a pleasure outing in a village, you are no sooner there than you are surrounded by a group who wish to show you their churches.

The ringing of bells by means of ropes, as is done by the English, is unknown to them; instead they climb up the bell-tower and move the clapper of bells from its place. Distress to the soul and distance to one's nature . . .

There is a bazaar in Valletta where all kinds of foodstuffs are sold. There you will find all varieties of fish and of meat — beef, mutton, veal, chickens and fowl. The fish is most delectable. As for meat, the best is that of the young lamb slaughtered before it is three months old, its flesh being then more delectable than that of fowls; this is a delicacy not to be found in London or even in Paris. Fowls are very scarce. It is not considered shameful to buy half a chicken, or even a quarter, or a wing, or a head, or even the entrails; this is a manifestation of their thrift, for they are of all creatures the most expert in this. It is no shame either for anyone to go and buy the day's provisions in person, even if one is a judge — why, even ladies do it; and when they have bought some article, they have it carried by one of the children whose occupation it is to do so — and they are many.

There are in the city none of the brisk donkeys [to be hired] for riding that there are in Egypt. Instead, people go about in carriages. These are not like the Frankish carriages, in that there is no seat in them for the driver; he walks alongside, barefoot. Whenever the owners of these see someone approaching, they press round him more [importantly] than the donkey-boys of Egypt.

In the whole of Malta there is no factory for making watches, glass, instruments of war, cloth, or anything else. The best known crafts among them are carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking, weaving, and the working of precious metals. The typical products of the carpenters' work are chairs, couches, tables, cupboards, chests, wardrobes, and the like, but they are also sometimes skilled in boat-building. Goldsmiths produce earrings, rings, chains, bracelets, the likenesses of birds and flowers, buckles, needles, and the like; silversmiths make spoons, ladles, coffee, and tea-pots, cups, plates, lamps, sugar-basins and the like. Weaving is not developed beyond the making of cloth lengths for napkins, beds-cover, and boats' sails; of this last commodity, great quantities are sent to Muslim countries.

None of those who practise these crafts are equal to the English or the French in the quality or finish [of their products]; the work of the Maltese, however, is reliable and strong. If, for example, you buy shoes or Maltese, however, is reliable and strong. If, for example, you buy shoes or silver article, you go to the master of the craft to enquire whether it is of silver or gold; he goes to the master of the craft to enquire whether it is worth; he weighs it and gives him a card on which he records the information. The wages to be paid [for workmanship], however, is left to be decided by agreement. Generally gems are bought at prices below valuation.

3. What is meant by "fowl" throughout this paragraph is probably pigeons; v. Barthélémy's Dictionnaire.
A hateful feature [of life] in Malta is the large numbers of beggars and their persistent importunity; they even come knocking at doors at meal-times and run alongside passers-by never ceasing to plead for alms until they get something. They consider it incumbent on the well-to-do that they should give them a portion of their wealth. And if once you give alms to one of them, it is as if he recorded the fact against you in a register: whenever he sees you he clings to you. The first words they use in pleading for alms are “ghani ruh missierak” i.e. (for the sake of) your father’s (soul), or “an amraa al-birkaatayri” (for ghall-issiech tal-Purgatory), i.e. (for the soul in Purgatory). To me some of them used to say, “ghani ruh il-Muhammad tieghek” (for the soul of your Muhammad). In Paris and London, begging is forbidden.

Another hateful feature — apart from the constant clanging of church bells — is the cries of the vendors who go about the streets selling fruit, vegetables, fish, milk, and water, for the way they stretch their mouths and strain their voices, and the hideousness of their lahn in both meanings of the word (i.e. tone of voice and barbarism in speech) are things from which one must seek (divine) refuge. How can it be otherwise when for tufjeh (apples) they say tufjih, for rumman (pomegranates) they say rummiens, for baṭṭikh (melon) they say baṭtih (with h instead of kh), for khiyar (cucumbers) they say hjar (again with h instead of kh), for ijjas (pears) they say langus, for dillia (in N. Africa: water-melon; see Cherronnu’s dictionary) they say dullieh (sic for dullieh), for khubz (bread) they say kobs (for kobz), for mà (water) they say ilma, for khaqkh (peaches) they say kawh (with h instead of kh in both instances), and so on. No Arab can [bear to] hear these words, especially when they are uttered several times a day by ill-natured and churlish individuals . . . .

(To be continued)

StREET NICHEs AT RABAT, GOZO

By J. BEZZINA

Rabat, the capital of Gozo, has been described as a mason’s earthly paradise. Handsome stone balconies are a feature throughout the fifty-seven streets that compose it. These balconies, although they present a distinctly oriental appearance, are the heritage of the Knights. The eight-pointed Maltese cross can be seen again and again, carved out in the soft stone; the crescent of Pinto, the cockades of Zondadari, the Fleur-de-Lys of Wignacourt and the stars of Gavazzi are all present in these balconies — traditional motifs of the stone-mason’s art.

Wherever the visitor goes at Rabat, he will also see evidence of the religious background. Shrines are found everywhere, and most of them are fine pieces of sculpture, enshrined in artistic niches. Every street has two or three of these manifestations of the religious sentiment of the people. There are 97 such niches at Rabat, but strange to say only seven of them are dedicated to Christ, whilst 51 are dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary under different titles. This shows that these statues were erected by a very sentimental populace crossed by famine, plague, cholera and war. This view is strengthened furthermore by the fact that, of the niches dedicated to the Madonna, nine bear images of Our Lady of Sorrows, nine figure the Immaculate Conception, eight are in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, four are dedicated to Our Lady ta’ Pinu (Assumption), three represent the Annunciation, two are in honour of the Assumption, locally known as Santa Marija, two represent Our Lady of Pompey, another couple are dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto, and two others to our Lady of Grace. The remaining ten niches in honour of the Madonna are all dedicated singly to other known titles of the Blessed Virgin. It is still customary that during the month of October, a month dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, the old womenfolk as well as little children congregate at sunset around these shrines to recite the rosary in front of the lighted image which during this month is usually decked with flowers.

Thirty four other niches commemorate male saints, eight being the number dedicated to St. Joseph, while five figure St George who is considered to be the mini-patron saint of Gozo. Another five bear the image of the emblem of St. Francis of Assisi. Six more are dedicated three to St. Paul and three to St. Anthony of Padua. The remaining nine niches are singly dedicated to other less known male saints. It seems rather strange that only three niches are dedicated to St. Paul, this saint being considered the principal patron of the Maltese islands.

Three niches honour female saints commemorate St. Rita, St. Anne and St. Teresa; another figures the Holy Family and yet another a soul in Purgatory. There are also five empty niches in the following streets: Dawwara (Ħamhiska ta’-Bjurtelli), St. Bonenita’s — (Fejn San Kalißa), Sabha square (Ħaġar Arab), Windmill (ta’-Cailla) and Xaghra Road (Is-Sellum).

4. Shidyq apparently confuses Maltese ghal with Arabic ‘as.