

AN ARAB'S VIEW OF XIX C. MALTA *

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III.

ON VALLETTA, THE CAPITAL OF THE ISLAND OF MALTA

This city is the seat of the English government. Its most wonderful features are 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 I].

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 *kushk*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 necessities.

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.

* Continued from Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 62-69.

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 *kishk*.

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 hârah*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 are 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 street(s) 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 sheykh, called *Sheykh el-Hha'rah*, whose influence is exerted to maintain order, to settle any trifling disputes among the inhabitants, and to expel those who disturb the peace of their neighbours".

other on the left — for the use of pedestrians, while horses and carriages use the middle. They used to be paved throughout, but the rattle of the carriages over them was unendurable, so the English removed the paving from the middle and replaced it with dust and pebbles. The Maltese thereupon said that it was the practice of the English to plunder their country as they had done before when they took away brass cannons and replaced them by iron ones. In truth it must be said that to overspread roads with dust and pebbles is to make of them dust-bowls in summer and mud-swamps in winter. The English did it out of consideration merely for a few notables who had carriages; for the benefit of these alone, they disregarded the interests of the common people. Such is their usual practice: they take into account the inclinations of the upper class rather than those of the public. The stone that has been left in the pavements becomes dazzling when the sun falls upon it in the summer.

Also, because the Maltese are most careful of their clothes and shoes, they seldom go out into the streets, especially in winter, so that the streets remain clean. In London, on the other hand, women go out summer and winter, and wear a kind of clog (i.e. galoshes?) to protect them from the mud; for this reason, its streets are very dirty. I have known many Franks to express wonder at the cleanliness of Maltese streets, declaring them superior to the streets of many great European cities. In both [Maltese and European cities], however, the blind alleys are full of dirt and filth, and there are some where two cannot walk side by side. In each such alley (in Malta), there is a lantern resting on iron supports which is lit the whole night through; in London and Paris, such lanterns are found only in the narrowest and worst streets. Since writing this, I have heard that Valletta is now lit by gas

In the whole of this city there is not one raised platform to sit on; people can sit only in their houses or in cafes. True, there is one such platform before the Governor's palace, but only the rabble use it, for the English consider it shameful to sit in this way, and the Maltese follow suit. It is said that there used to be several platforms in the city, but that the English removed them to make it like London.

As for the cafes of Valletta, they are no more than dim shops without a window overlooking the sea or some garden; if you sit long in one, the waiter will come and wipe the table before you, hinting that he is expecting other customers, his whole attitude seeming to say, "You weary me, when are you leaving?"

One cannot sit facing the sea [in open places at water level] for a single hour for they are all dirty; nor can one eat or drink or smoke on the higher look-outs, out of respect for the English ladies.

At the seaside, where for five months (in the year) people swim, there is no cover, no booth, no tent: the swimmer must expose his unprotected face to the sun, so that he is burnt even before he comes out of the water.

The truth is that the English have deprived Malta altogether of any place of recreation or pleasure-spot.

One of the greatest amusements of the Maltese is going out in boats in the summer nights to wash (sic) in the sea. Men and women go out together and spend part of the night swimming and singing.

There are very many boats in Valletta harbour. They are all painted and attractive, but they lack the seats of the Egyptian gondols, 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 all their concerns they take into account utility alone, and have no regard for luxury or elegance. Thus their couches, 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 for the customer. In this last respect they differ from the English.

They call a boat a *du'aysah* (*dghajsa*); this appears to be a diminutive of [the word for] a sandy hillock, *da'sah*, 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 *qârib* although it is a chaste Arabic word [for boat] is [not without parallel], because there are many things in the Maltese tongue which have been diverted 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: *qalil*) they use *fatîl* (in Maltese, *fit*; in Arabic, a collective term for "crumbs"), for "much" (in Arabic, *kathîr*) they use *wasq* (Maltese, *wisq*; in Arabic, "a camel's load"); for the horse (in Arabic, *hisân*), they use *zâmil* with *imâlah* (in Maltese, *ziemel*) — 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, *qaryah*), they use *rahl* (in Maltese, *rahal*) 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 strolling 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 ogle the women and the women dally 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 fireplay, 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 vessel; 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 *mzskharah* (in Arabic: a laughing-stock, hence a mask, a buffoon). During this period, they refrain from no debauchery, no revelry, no abomination. 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 carried in the sleeve. I used to go to this party in my 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: *malhâ*) which they call *thiyâtir* or *thiyâtrû* (sic). In the whole of Valletta 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 detail later, if God will [in a companion book on Europe]. I have bound myself to be brief on such matters as they are to be found in Malta, that my words may be in keeping with what obtains there, for everything that is in it is but a reduced form of [what is to be found in] European countries

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 to 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 by hand, producing [such a din as gives] distress to the soul and distaste 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 fowls³. 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 as 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 [importunately] 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, bed-covers, 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 a sewn garment, it will serve for a long time without need of repair. English workmanship on the other hand is attractive in appearance but does not stand up to much wear, and French workmanship is in between these two.

A good custom in Malta is that when someone wishes to buy an article of silver or gold, he goes to the master of the craft to enquire what 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 "fowls" 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 importunacy; 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 “*ghan⁴ ruh missierek*” i.e. (for the sake of) your father’s (soul), or “*‘an arwâh al-bûrkâtûryû*” (for *ghall-irwieh tal-Purgatorju*), i.e. (for the souls in Purgatory). To me some of them used to say, “*ghan⁴ 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 *tuffâh* (apples) they say *tuffieh*, for *rummân* (pomegranates) they say *rummien*, for *battîkh* (melon) they say *bittih* (with *h* (instead of *kh*), for *khiyâr* (cucumbers) they say *hjar* (again with *h* instead of *kh*), for *ijjâs* (pear) they say *langas*, for *dillâ* (in N. Africa: water-melon; see Cherbonneau’s dictionary) they say *dulliegh* (sic for *dullieh*), for *khubz* (bread) they say *hobs* (for *hobz*), for *mâ* (water) they say *ilma*, for *khawkh* (peaches) they say *hawh* (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)

4. Shidyâq apparently confused Maltese *ghal* with Arabic ‘an.