The Grand Masters Of Malta



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CHAPTER VI

THE GRAND MASTERS OF MALTA

THE glorious issue of the struggle for Malta confirmed the Order of St. John in the position of a sovereign independent community. The Grand Master surmounted his escutcheon with a crown, received ambassadors, and sent envoys to foreign courts. Of the magnificence with which successive rulers of the Order kept their state, the city of palaces, Valletta, with its wealth of art treasures bears testimony, though shorn by French rapacity of much of its splendour. Public buildings, provided by the bounty of individual knights, aqueducts, gardens, causeways, and a hundred other improvements converted the formerly barren island rock into a land of milk and honey, and the inhabitants reaped the fruit of an expenditure maintained by the tribute of all Europe from Lisbon to Warsaw, wherever a commandery of the Order was seated.

Nor were the knights forgetful of their obligations as defenders of Christendom. Not content with repelling the attacks upon their island shores, their fleet went out for an annual cruise and brought back

the spoil of the captured Asiatic or African corsairs, and the Christian slaves who were chained to the oar of the Moslem galley saw their tyrants compelled to change places with them. The knights were not always successful, it is true, but the part which these cruises played in the gradual extinction of piracy has scarcely been sufficiently taken into consideration by the historian of the sixteenth and two following centuries.

In these transactions, however, England had no share. The events which succeeded the Reformation completely scattered the British Langue. Some of its members suffered under the politico-religious severities of the Tudor dynasty, others conformed, but few resorted to Malta. Oliver Starkey, secretary to Grand Master John de Vallette, is the only Englishman buried in St. John's.

There exists in the archives at Malta a very curious volume, recording the crimes committed by certain knights of the Order and the sentences passed upon them, during one hundred years after their establishment in the island. The compiler of this black list notes that different nations were disposed to commit offences of different kinds, and especially with regard to England that turbulence and insubordination were their leading faults. For instance, in 1535 three English cavaliers (milites venerandæ linguæ Anglicanæ), Christopher Myres, David Guyon, and Philip Babington, fought "even

to the effusion of blood," with their fists apparently, and were punished by solitary confinement and bread and water.

More serious, however, was the case of the Turcopolier Clement West, who, having been appointed to that office by L'Isle Adam, Grand Master, in 1531, was deprived of the habit and dignity for insubordinate conduct in 1533, and after being restored to his rank in 1535 was again deprived and imprisoned in 1539. What were the exact motives to this transaction we are unaware. West died in 1547.

The Auberge d'Angleterre, a plain building of small dimensions, and latterly ruinous, stood at the upper end of the Strada Reale until, under English rule, its site was occupied by the Opera House. Successive Grand Masters held in trust the official post of Turcopolier, probably to avoid the possibility of its being appropriated to some other Langue. Twice overtures were made towards a resuscitation of the English Langue. Once in the later years of the seventeenth century, when James II. entertained a hope of reconciliation between Great Britain and the Vatican, a gallant soldier. the Duke of Berwick, who derived his parentage from the King, was admitted to the Order notwithstanding his illegitimacy, and hopes were entertained that many of the noble families who adhered to the "ancient faith," or to the royal House of Stuart, might follow his example, but with no discernible result. Again, in the closing era of the sovereignty of the Grand Masters, De Rohan built an auberge for what he designated the revived Anglo-Bavarian Langue, with which he incorporated the Grand Priory of Poland; but although Bavarians and Poles became members of the new Langue, its connection with England was nominal only.

It is somewhat singular that the last actual admixture of Englishmen with the transactions of the Order in Malta can hardly be called creditable to either side. General Porter says that during the earlier portion of the sway of the Grand Masters they bore their part manfully in the naval contests which were so frequently carried on with the Turkish maritime power. As, however, that empire gradually became less and less formidable, so did the martial energy of the fraternity steadily diminish. Their naval superiority so far dwindled that their fleet became a mere appanage intended for show, and not very available for service. The so-called caravans of the galleys were mere pleasure cruises to the various ports of the south of Europe. Toronini, in his "Travels in Egypt," gives the following description of the Maltese galleys at this period: "They were armed, or rather embarrassed, with an incredible number of hands; the 'General' alone, the flagship of the Order, had eight hundred men on board. They were superbly ornamented: gold blazed on the numerous basso

relievos and sculptures on the stern; enormous sails, striped blue and white, carried on their centre a great cross of Malta painted red; their elegant flags floated majestically: in a word, everything concurred when they were under sail to render it a magnificent spectacle; but their construction was little adapted either for fighting or for standing foul weather. The Order kept them up rather as an image of its ancient splendour than for their utility. It was one of those ancient institutions which had once served to render the brotherhood illustrious, but now only attested its selfishness and decay."

The Admiralty in its decrepitude endeavoured to supplement its fighting deficiences by the grant of letters of marque to adventurers of all races, notably English, whose unscrupulous exploits caused (as Marryat has told us) the term Malta privateer to be equivalent to pirate. Prominent among these rovers in the middle of the eighteenth century was Ferdinand Wright, whose name deserved to be bracketed with those of Cochrane and Paul Jones. He succeeded so well on his expeditions that, as we learn from Lord Charlemont, who was residing in Malta in 1756 or 1757, the French actually fitted up another privateer of superior force to attack him. An action took place in the Malta channel; the ramparts of Valletta were crowded with partisans of France; two ships appeared in sight with French colours flying, but in the midst of the jubilation the white flag suddenly

gave place to the English colours: the French vessel was a prize to the English ship.

It ought, however, to be observed that the last fleet of the Order which left Valletta was charged with material for the relief of the sufferers by the earthquake in Sicily in 1783. The spirit of the old hospitallers was maintained to the end.

It must not be forgotten that the composition of the Order contained in itself elements of disturbance. Its members were, for the most part, arrogant young men of rank, whom desire of adventure, or impatience of the restraints of home, had brought into the ranks of the knights, for in those days there were no rival safety valves in the attractions of colonial life or adventurous sport. So long as active warfare could be found for such spirits they were the best and bravest support of the Christian cause, but in the peaceful routine of the intervals between the expeditions against the corsairs they would chafe at discipline and perhaps defy authority from mere ennui. In some cases peccadilloes large or small had been the secret spring of their admission to the Convent, and, judging from the list to which I have already referred, the number of expulsions from the Order (priva del' abito) indicates that the black sheep were not a few.

The reports of visitors to Malta such as Dryden and Sandys confirm this view; but more favourable evidence as to the state of the society of the Auberges in the seventeenth century is to be found in

the adventures of Count George Albert of Erbach,¹ translated from the German by a Royal Lady of Justice in our own Order. As a picture of the life of Malta in the most flourishing period of the supremacy of the Grand Masters it is unsurpassed, full of variety and yet faithful in delineation.

The hospital work primarily attracts our attention. The knights on their arrival found a hospital already existing in the ancient capital of the island; as, however, their purpose was to remove the seat of government to the Castle of St. Angelo on the northern side of the island, it was in the Borgo, the town at the rear of the fort, that their own first hospital was founded, whose gateway, of some architectural merit, still exists in the buildings of a more modern nunnery. In 1575, some forty years later, a larger hospital was erected in the new city of Valletta, on the south-east side of the promontory and close to the entrance to the great harbour, a less airy situation than the other extremity of the town would have been, but with this advantage, that it had a passage communicating with the sea front, through which sick or wounded patients might be landed from shipboard without being carried up and down the declivities of the steep streets of the rocky town. This building still exists, and is in

¹ "Count Albert of Erbach, a true story translated from the German by Beatrice, Princess Henry of Battenberg." London: John Murray, 1891.



THE GREAT HOSPITAL AT MALTA.
From an old print, 1630.

use as one of our military hospitals. In size and importance it is worthy of the traditions of its founders, although the Report of the Barrack and Hospital Commission of 1863 sweepingly condemned it for want of ventilation, of window space, and for its situation near a sewer. These defects, however, have been to a great extent satisfactorily dealt with; new windows have been opened, balconies facing the sea erected, and solid cement has replaced the friable stone of the original floor. The sewerage is now entirely diverted from the vicinity. The great ward, 503 feet long, is a magnificent interior, though necessarily divided by partitions of 15 feet high, the height of the apartment itself being 30 ft. 6 in. In the early days of its foundation the arrangements and service were on a most costly and elaborate scale. Utensils of silver, hangings and pictures, canopies to the beds whence depended mosquito curtains, and a "fortnightly" supply of clean linen, excited the admiration of the English travellers Sandys and Teonge.

The hospital, called the Infermeria (to quote from the "Adventures of Count George Albert of Erbach"), was situated in a large new building, and presided over by the Regent of the French Knights, the Great Hospitaller, who had under him five doctors, graduated in the medical college, and three apothecaries. The tending of the sick was carried out by knights and servants from time to time

deputed for this service. Sick and wounded knights, their servants standing at their bedsides, were lying in a large luxurious apartment, carpeted with oriental stuffs. One hundred and fifty beds were constantly held ready for knights who might return from the expeditions sick or wounded. Every bed had its special covering, on which was worked the cross of the Order, and at the head was a board, on which the doctor's directions for the patient's food were inscribed. At the end of the long apartment stood a small altar, at which Mass was daily said. In a second room were the beds for the servants and slaves; and such as suffered from repulsive or incurable complaints were nursed in inner wards quite apart. All these rooms were on the ground floor, over which were others with windows tightly closed; to these wards were brought those knights whose wounds affected vital organs, for in such cases it had been proved by experience that the fine, penetrating sea air was most pernicious.

Howard² at the end of the eighteenth century

La Domenica per la lingua di Provenza.

Il Lunedi per quella di Alvernia.

Il Martedi per quella di Francia.

Il Mercoldi per quella d'Italia.

Il Giovedi per quella d'Aragona.

Il Venerdi per quella d'Alemagna.

Il Sabato per Castiglia e Portugallo.

² "Lazarettos in Europe," 1789, p. 58.

¹ The regulations of 1725 prescribe a daily routine of attendance.

(1789) speaks very strongly of the shameful negligence and incompetence of the management of the hospital at that time, but the book of Regulations of 17251 (reprinted in 1882) shows that this slackness was not normal, but attributable to causes affecting the well-being of the Order generally. As General Porter has reminded us, these faults were due to that "state of decline when it only required a bold hand or a national convulsion to sweep the knights away from the scene altogether." The Hospital was placed in the particular charge of the French Langue. At the time of the death of the Grand Master de Rohan, nearly three-fifths of the knights resident at headquarters were members of one or other of the three French Langues, whom contemporary testimony describes as discontented, needy, and extravagant. Many of them had imbibed the infidel and levelling ideas of the philosophic school at that date supreme among their countrymen at home, and all viewed with anxiety the rising cloud of political change which was becoming visible.

It is noticeable in the list of Grand Hospitallers of the eighteenth century, that two years was the limit for which, as a rule, each occupied the post, though occasionally a second term was added, and more rarely a third. The number of servants had been by that time reduced, and the pewter dishes

¹ "Regulations of the Hospital of St. John" (Blackwood, 1882).

originally confined to the *gente di catena*, or criminal patients, had found their way into the upper ward, where the ordinary subjects of charity were treated. The fact that the use of perfumes was habitual in the hospital is rightly commented on by Howard as a proof of inattention to cleanliness and airiness, a charge which he brings home by his own personal observation.

In 1796 (little more than a year before the final demolition of the sovereignty of the Order) new regulations were promulgated for the Hospital, from which we learn that the number of patients was computed at from 350 to 400, for whom 38 attendants were to be provided. The summary of the annual accounts from May 1, 1795, to April 30, 1796, gives an expenditure for food—viz., baked bread, wine, oil, flour, raisins, meat, and vermicelli—of 48,866 scudi.

Howard mentions a foundling hospital, where he saw a number of fine healthy children, and thirty-nine girls from seven to about twelve years of age; also a hospital for women with 230 beds, described as offensive and dirty, and two houses for the poor, containing 140 males and 213 females, of whose condition he speaks favourably. It is in connection with this last house that the curious piece of misapplied ingenuity, which still excites the wonder of sightseers, "the chapel of bones," was originally constructed.

The disastrous part of the story of the Malta hos-

pital is the bargain which, under French influence, the members of the Order were induced to make with the Antonines. It was this. In 1095 the nobles of Dauphigny founded a fraternity of Hospitallers (erected into the regular Antonine Order in 1218) for the relief of sufferers under St. Anthony's fire. In 1777 an arrangement was made that the Order of St. John should take over the property of this Antonine fraternity, subject to various conditions which involved an excess of expenditure which in ten years (1787) had reached 732,947 scudi; but it was calculated that in 1794 the income would return, and go on increasing until 1879, when the outlay with interest would be recovered by the treasury, and the annual income reach 120,000 French livres. The Antonine estates were situated in France and Savoy. In 1792 the property of the Order in France was confiscated. Thus not only the three Langues of France, Auvergne, and Provence lost the income from their commanderies, but the Order lost its revenue from responsions and other dues of the estates, a sum estimated at 471,784 scudi, exclusive of the Antonine estates, upon which the Order up to 1792 must have lost a million scudi.1

This loss, coming upon an already depleted income, must have dealt the final blow to the solvency of the Valletta treasury. The malcontents from this time had the upper hand in the affairs of the Order.

¹ Scudo equivalent to a dollar.

On the death of Grand Master de Rohan, in 1796, Ferdinand von Hompesch, a Knight of the German Langue, was elected his successor, a man who neither possessed the ability nor the influence necessary to cope with the treachery with which he was encompassed. In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte, on his expedition to Egypt, landed part of his army, and after three days' negotiation Valletta was surrendered into his hands, for, as an English historian puts it, "The capitulation of the place had been previously secured by secret intelligence with the Grand Master and principal officers." This at least is certain, that a powerful party being ready to support the pretensions of the French, the government was a prey to dissension at a moment when unanimity was the only chance of safety. Preparations for defence had been altogether neglected, and in the midst of panic and confusion the terms of capitulation were hastily slurred over. To the Grand Master was promised a principality in Germany or a pension for life of 300,000 francs; the French knights were to receive a pension of 700 francs apiece; and a promise was given that the property of the inhabitants should not be confiscated, nor their religion disturbed. Thus, says Bartlett, "ignominiously came to a close, on June 12, 1798, the once illustrious Order of St. John of Jerusalem. having subsisted for more than 700 years. At this time its members consisted of 200 French knights.

90 Italian, 25 Spanish, 8 Portuguese, and 5 Anglo-Bavarian—in all 328, of whom 50 were disabled by age and infirmities. The military force amounted to 7,100 men, which might easily have been increased to 10,000."

The French might well congratulate themselves upon the ease with which they gained possession of such a stronghold. It is said that Napoleon, walking round the bastions, suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "What sublime fortifications!" to which his chief of the staff, Caffarelli, replied, "It is well, general, that there was some one within to open the gates to us. We should have had more trouble in working our way through had the place been empty." The works were at once put into an effective state for defence, and the bastions furnished with 1,000 cannon. Leaving General Vaubois with a garrison of 3,000 men, and carrying off with him all the disciplined soldiery as well as the liberated Turkish galley slaves, Bonaparte set sail for Egypt on the 19th June, after rifling St. John's of its treasures, and seizing every scrap of valuable bullion or art work which could be gleaned from the public edifices or the churches.

The indignation of the Maltese people was excessive at finding themselves thus betrayed. With great difficulty they were persuaded not to attempt to hold the principal forts in Valletta on their own account, and several of the treacherous knights were



put to death in a tumult which arose at the surrender. The news of Nelson's victory at Aboukir emboldened them to rise in open insurrection against their oppressors. A body of soldiers were about to despoil the cathedral at Citta Vecchia, when the populace overpowered and dispersed them; and the whole island arming against the French, the latter had to shut themselves up within the walls of Valletta, where they were hemmed in by the insurgents and blockaded by an English fleet, which landed some regular troops, as well as arms and ammunition for the natives, and vigorously invested them by sea and land for a period of two years. After enduring the extremity of famine and disease, which indeed seriously affected the besieging force also, and carried off thousands of Maltese, the brave French commandant, with only a few quarters of wheat left in his stores, surrendered to General Pigot, commanding the English forces.

Besides co-operating with ships and soldiers in the deliverance of Malta from its invaders, the English, with the entire consent of the natives, who had elected Nelson's representative, Captain Sir Alexander Ball, as their governor, assumed the civil direction of its affairs. At the Peace of Amiens an attempt was made to reconstitute the Order as ruling authority in the island, under the protection of the Great Powers of Europe; but the Maltese people themselves most strenuously protested against this,

THE GRAND MASTERS OF MALTA 97

and Bonaparte, who is reported to have said that he would as soon endure to see the English in possession of a faubourg of Paris as of a fortress of Malta, did in fact renew the war on this account. On the 15th of June, 1802, the members of a congress elected by the free suffrages of the Maltese people solemnly made over the sovereignty of the island to the King of Great Britain and his successors. At the Congress of Vienna, 1814, the conflicting claims were settled in favour of the British Government, the possession of the island finally confirmed to them, and the following inscription placed on the Main Guard, in the square of St. George, opposite the palace:

MAGNAE ET INVICTAE BRITANNIAE MELITENSIUM AMOR

ET

EUROPAE VOX

HAS INSULAS CONFIRMAT

A.D. 1814.

¹ The inscription runs thus, "confirmat," in the original.

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