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# “THE KAPPILLAN OF MALTA”

**May Borg**

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Time and time again Malta, its people and its history have been the touchstone of inspiration to writers of many nationalities.

Books about the island are numerous and varied in their contents, covering a vast range of subjects, from archaeology to cookery, yet the one which seems to have captured the imagination of the world reading-public is *The Kappillan of Malta* by Nicholas Monsarrat.

This book, with the solid looking figure of the Maltese priest dominating its cover and story, has been read by thousands; and has certainly done more than any tourist guide-book to place Malta on the map.

Indeed, it is impossible to think of the novel without being reminded of the unsinkable rock from which the main character came to have an identity. A rock, rich above all in the complexities of its human factor, deceptively jovial and friendly, yet often enigmatic and paradoxical. For any oversimplification of the Maltese temperament ignores its tormented history and its long struggle to preserve an identity, often against odds threatening it with extinction.

The novel is divided into six parts, each section of the story being paralleled by a historical counterpart in which a past episode from the History of Malta is recalled, mainly by the Kappillan himself.

The introductory chapter — “Memoirs of a day tripper” — is, I think,

one of the best in the book — we are immediately *in medias res*, for it contains in embryo much of what the rest of the story enlarges upon. It reveals a great deal about Monsarrat himself, — his naval background with a deep love for the sea; his eye for landscape, his interest in human nature, and his warmth of character and humour; qualities that have made this novel so readable and popular.

From first to last the stocky casked Kappillan holds the reader's attention, moving and speaking against the austere backdrop of the bastioned towns round the blue waters of the Grand Harbour — trudging up the steep Valletta streets on his way to his mother's stately home, or picking his way through the debris which the war had left in its path. For the story is like the staging of Malta's most recent historical drama, its desperate bid to survive the hammering it received in World War II.

It is fit at such a time in the Island's history, or rather in the work that tells the tale, that the protagonist should be a priest. A figure that invariably comes into its own when the going is hard, and death hovers over all, irrespective of social status, power and money. At such times, more than anything else man needs the comforting word of courage and compassion, and the reassurance that an understanding and forgiving God awaits beyond the shadows.

*The Kappillan of Malta*, however,

is not just the simple story of a man of God — his struggles and frustrations, his human frailty and his Fears of not making the grade. The book is also a mine of historical data almost casually interwoven into the very fabric of the tale it tells. It provides the reader with lively, and often humorous sketches and vignettes of the Maltese life, with comments on the local character mainly through the Kappillan himself, “for Father Salvatore knew his people well — well enough never to be surprised at what they did”.

Monsarrat’s portrayal of the Maltese street scene is sharp and sensitive, it is here that his good natured empathy for humanity is most evident — even when it comes to such people as Mgr. Scholti looking at, “an elegant orb of a watch which sat on his fat wrist like a favourite canary which would never leave home”. This Uriah Heep in clerical garb is treated with wry amusement, as if such people had better not be taken too seriously.

The book teems with people of all kinds, suave diplomats like Scholti, faithful domestics of the old school, Teresa the stolid-looking country lass from Mellieha, and, of course, Nero the irrepressible dwarf of the catacomb saga.

It is obvious that the author revels in the serio-comic aspect of the Maltese life. In such instances the style, which is simple and graphic, seems to gather tempo carrying the reader forward like a sail before the wind. Adjectives abound in colour and action, building up scenes of three-

dimensional proportions, high-lighted by a rich choice of similes and metaphors: “It was a marvellous morning, clear as a mirror, warm as the promise of love”, or again, “the bulging toe-caps reared up like swollen fists; after two years, they became cracked, deformed, bulbous, repellent, like a drunkard’s nose”. This last being the Kappillan’s own version of his offensive and inelegant - looking boots.

The less convincing parts of the novel, at least, to this reader, refer to the domestic activities of the Santo Nobiles; here the dialogue is somewhat stilted and contrived; but what one finds hardest to accept is the incredible fare indulged in at a time when a loaf of white bread was as hard to come by as the Biblical pearl of great price, and food stuffs of all kinds were memories of the remote past, or dreams of the nebulous future. Yet this vintage family of the Maltese nobility is described as sitting down to a meal ushered in by “dates with cream-cheese, biscuits topped with caviar”, soon to be followed by “avocado pear, gazpacho soup, a baked fish, the traditional turkey, a relève of iced sorbet, and a vintage Christmas Pudding pregnant... with sixpences”! — passages hard to reconcile with the food rationing and shortage at the time.

One other incident which the present writer objects to is Nero’s wedding attire, when he is said to be wearing, “a tiny suit of evening tails, white tie, white waistcoat, glittering patent-leather pumps, and a top hat”, when people of his social class would

have rather been seen in sackcloth and ashes than in such attire.

These shortcomings, however, are quickly forgotten, and, perhaps, hardly perceptible to those not familiar with the social niceties of the Maltese past.

On the other hand Monsarrat's handling of anything remotely nautical is the fruit of first hand experience. The book could be called a tribute to the Royal Navy, and the many merchant ships that braved constant lethal attacks bearing supplies of all sorts to the beleaguered island. The banter and bonhomie among crews decimated by bombs, is true to life. The plight of the *Illustrious*, below decks, the moving pageant of the Santa Maria Convoy limping into harbour, and other scenes in the chapter called 'The worst day', will remain engraved in the mind and heart of those old enough to have witnessed them.

The love story of Marija and her Naval lover is treated lightly for the young couple is anything but unique in its experiences. Moreover, one

almost suspects that the author uses the situation to illustrate how young lovers dealt with sexual problems, at a time when more sophisticated means were not only strictly taboo but also non-existent; much of what Monsarrat says about these *delicate* matters, through no less a character than that of the Baroness, is another way of stating that love will always find a way — methods may differ but the end results vary not at all!

Sometimes one wonders what could have led Monsarrat to write the book, whether it was his naval background and the Royal Navy's strong links with Malta. Or, maybe it was that islands have somehow fascinated the author at certain moments of his writing career.

Whatever the answer, one thing is clear enough, — like others before him, Monsarrat came to the island, saw, and was conquered, for he made the local scene and its inhabitants the most salient features of the novel.

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