

SOCIAL LIFE ON THE ISLAND OF MALTA

In the Footsteps of St. Paul the Apostle—Old Sanctuary of the Knight of St. John.

Special Correspondence.

L A VILLETTE, Malta, Aug. 5.—The brightness, ease and carelessness of life on this sea-girt rock is a boundless surprise to the stranger. Of course "society" is headed by English officers and their families, mostly well-born and many of them wealthy; and they indemnify themselves for temporary exile by duplicating every home luxury on the tiny island and reviving the hilarious customs of the knights of old. Paris is hardly more brilliant than the Strada Reale on a pleasant evening, with military bands playing, flags of all nations fluttering in the soft breeze, every building illuminated, and gaily dressed ladies sitting in their balconies chatting with throngs of promenaders. Shops are filled with costly goods, from London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin; handsome equipages dash past, or stand waiting before the splendid facades of the abbeys of the knights; up-to-date hotels display their sign-boards on every hand, and crowds of travelers, arriving from the east and from the west at this half-way rendezvous, create a constant stir at the hostelry and add to the life and motion so characteristic of Malta. Wherever you look, the landscape is brilliant with scarlet coats or buff of the British army. Ten thousand English soldiers are stationed at Villetta, and other well-garrisoned fortifications are scattered all over this island and its smaller dependencies. Being the headquarters of the Mediterranean fleet, a dozen black-painted men-of-war are always anchored in the harbor, their decks crowded with British tars; while every hillside is dotted with troops at drill.

The houses of Malta appear to be as comfortable to live in as they are quaint of exterior. All are low, but very large on the ground, with immense rooms, deep porches, projecting galleries and queer little green-painted oriel windows. The universal building material is Maltese stone, almost snow-white, soft as chalk when quarried, but becoming hard as marble when exposed to the air and susceptible of as fine a polish. The crowds that preambulate these streets are as remarkable for mixture of races as their costumes for variety and richness of coloring. Dusky Italians and dusky Maltese, stately Arabs and gesticulating Frenchmen and Spaniards, the human fotsam and jet-sam of every land, meet and mingle at Malta. Though so long a British possession, Italian is yet the language of the islands—that is, among the upper classes, who call themselves Mal-tah-sah, which the English, after their un-avoidable habit of overdoing names, have corrupted to Mawteeze. The population, exclusive of the military, is reckoned at 169,000; and the peasantry, who compose the bulk of it, speak a strange tongue, or rather a mixture of tongues, derived from many sources. Arabic predominates in it, however, so strongly that the Maltese can communicate with their harkery neighbors as easily as the Spaniards with the Portuguese. Education is admirably provided for in Malta by a well- patronized college at Villetta, where degrees are conferred in divinity, law and medicine; more than a hundred private educational institutions, and upwards of seventy public schools, all under the "board-school" system of England. There is also a free library, with many thousands of volumes; museum, conservatory of music, and several of those useful associations known in the Latin world as "lyceums." There are also no equivalent in America. Among many charitable enterprises, one of the most worthy is the home for incurables, founded a couple of centuries ago by an Italian lady, who, after she had visited all her possessions, including a gallery of paintings and the family plate. It used to be reserved exclusively for women, but in recent years three hundred beds have been opened to hopeless invalids of both sexes and all nationalities. There are other hospitals, civil and military; orphan and foundling asylums; and a colossal "pedestal," "mountain of pity," or colossal pawn-shop, conducted by the government, like that in the City of Mexico. The busy postoffice occupies the handsome house in which Napoleon lived during his short residence in Malta. The finest and largest of the old knight's palaces, "Auberge de Castille," now forms the joint mess of the Royal artillery, and King Edward's engineers, and the quarters of the former; and the balls they give in the great banquet hall are "swell" in the opinion of the height of a London season. In a way, some contrary to the usual custom, (literally "bone house"), a kind of tomb, or chapel, whose walls—above, below, on every side, are festooned with human bones. The crypt beneath is full of bones to the brim—tons of them, collected from the ancient cemetery of the Brotherhood of St. John, which had to be removed when the city spread out on its hillside.

There are so many interesting things to see on this tiny island that one hardly knows where to begin. One of the great "low places" of the world, you know, is the Church of the Knight of St. John, built by Grand Master Jean de Cassiere, in the year 1568. For a edifice in Europe, until Napoleon's soldiers swept away most of its treasures; but though so denuded, it is yet remarkable for splendid adornments, pictures, statuary, monuments, and so forth, of its historic associations. There seemed to be a rivalry among the successive grand masters of the order to see which should most enrich their sanctuary, and every knight was bound by law to make it a present on promotion, besides the gifts it was constantly receiving from popes, kings, nobles and private individuals. How can one describe the interior of a structure two hundred feet long by one hundred and twenty-five feet wide, whose every inch is crowded with memorials? Its great facade is surrounded by the cherished symbol of the Knights of Jerusalem—the Maltese cross of eight points. Below this is a bronze bust of our Savior. Over the main entrance appears the coat-of-arms of Pope Gregory XIII, and on either side of it the arms of Grand Master Cassiere and some Latin inscriptions. The facade is flanked at each end by a bell-tower, one containing seven bells, for the announcement of worship, the other three bells for striking the clock. This ancient piece, by the way, is worthy of notice, though now of questionable veracity. It is a sort of glorified calendar, contrived by a native of Malta's its three faces telling the hour, day of the week, and day of the month. Words are inadequate to express one's emotions on entering this church, whose very pavements are eloquent by the way, in memory of the saintly upwards of four hundred sculptured slabs, of finest marbles of every hue—green, yellow, rose brown, black—laid down in memory of the knights and embellished with their coats-of-arms, heraldic devices, military and naval trophies, mitres and croziers, crowns and palms of martyrdom, representations of angels,

skeletons and other quaint symbols, all so rich in coloring as to produce the most striking effect. Next the roof demands attention. Its broad arches, 65 feet from the ground, are outlined by gilded palm branches, and the paintings which cover the entire surface, are apparently living and breathing figures. You would almost swear that Herodias's daughter is really dancing, that St. John is baptizing our Lord, the disciples eating their last supper, and that the recently-forgotten martyrs of the Order of Jerusalem and all the other saints and knights and nuns followed you with eyes that had "speculation" in them! For more than forty years devoted their genius to this work. The pictures are in oil, laid on the stone itself, which was specially prepared for the design.

And then the forest of pillars, all inlaid with slabs of green marble, bearing in relief the cross of consecration, and the arms of their princely donors; the multitude of chapels and altars; the host of sculptured figures, the trophies and relics! Each of the chapels deserves a week's study, so rich are they in gold and silver service encrusted with gems disappeared with the French robbers. The tapestry is particularly interesting—fifty great pieces, measuring over seven hundred square feet, and of incalculable value, though the green and azure hair, purple eyes and gorgeous apparel of the colossal figures in the tableaux are considerably dimmed by the wear of two or three centuries. A few years ago the local government paid \$150,000 to have this tapestry restored.

As for the sacred relics, it is safe to say that another such collection was never gathered under one roof. The most treasured object here of olden times was the reputed right hand of St. John the Baptist, which was kept in a splendid golden monstrance above the high altar. Think of it—the very hand that poured the water upon the head of our Lord! It is said to have been brought from Antioch to Constantinople by the Emperor Justinian, who built a church expressly for its reception. Shortly after the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, Sultan Bajazet gave it to Grand Master D. Ashubsson, at Rhodes; and when the knights came to Malta, L'Isle Adam, brought it with him. By the way, considering that the brotherhood was several years after being driven out of Rhodes, one wonders where they kept all the treasures, big and little, which they are said to have brought to Malta. The sacred hand was encased in a glove of gold, thickly set with priceless gems. Besides it, among other valuable offerings, was a magnificent sapphire ring, Napoleon I. wore the ring on his own finger, and Hamposch carried off the apostle's hand, and afterwards presented it to Paul I, emperor of Russia. It is still jealously preserved in the Winter Palace at St. Petersburg. Somehow the relic does not seem to have brought blessings to any of its possessors, if history tells true.

It would require columns of space to describe all the relics in this church. Among them is the right foot of Lazarus—let us hope with its sores all healed; one of the identical stones which martyred St. Stephen, still stained with his blood; some of the bones of Thomas a Becket, portions of three of the Apostles; a bit of the cradle in which the virgin mother rocked her babe; a crucifix made from the metal basin in which the Saviour washed his disciple's feet; pieces of the true cross; and one of the identical thorns that pierced the head of the tortured Christ. In the crypt beneath the high altar, L'Isle Adam, La Villetta and Ximena await the resurrection morning, and under other altars of the same sanctuary hundreds of the knights of Jerusalem are sleeping. Beneath the French chapel lies the young son of Louis, Philippe, who died in Malta of consumption, in 1797.

Of course you must visit the scene of St. Paul's shipwreck, which is said to have occurred near the eastern end of this island. You will find a minute description of that ancient disaster in the Acts of the Apostles; and there is little doubt that it actually did occur in the large harbor now known as Marsa Sirocco, into which the dreaded south-east wind (siracco) blows with such force the year around that it is of no use to shipping. The event, "two seas," which caused the accident, as recorded in holy writ, exist today in the powerful currents between the land and the open sea, and that caused by billows dashing into the bay over a line of submerged rocks. One of these partially hidden reefs, which pokes a bold head above the waves, called Salmon Island, is believed to be the rock upon which St. Paul came to grief. Upon its topmost knob a colossal stone statue of the early navigator has been erected, to warn others away. It would not be advisable, even in calmest weather, to follow by water in the wake of the Apostle; but you may reach his reputed landing place by carriage from Villetta, via Casti Naasin. Just above the spot, on the highest point of the cliffs that enclose the bay, a tower and fortress have been planted at the very verge of overhanging rocks—though it would seem that nature had well enough defended that portion of the coast. Far below this eyrie, which is garrisoned by a regiment of his majesty's foot, is the curious straggling straggling beach lined with humble fishing boats—probably about as it was when discovered by St. Paul. The rocks on every side have been worn by dashing surf into innumerable hollows, grottoes, promontories and caverns. In one of the latter the Apostle is said to have lived for a time, while performing his miracle, by prayer and fasting, of freeing Malta from the plague of serpents—the same friendly service which St. Patrick long afterwards accomplished for Ireland. Local tradition asserts that the shipwreck occurred in Palestine, and that the Saint, wet to the skin and chilled to the marrow, set about building a fire, soon as he reached the shore. While picking up driftwood, he was bitten on the hand by a viper, which he had speared then common on the island. The people expected to see the standard marine drop dead on the spot, and when he remained unharmed, they at once recognized his sainthood.

FANNIE B. WARD.

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