MALTA EPIC

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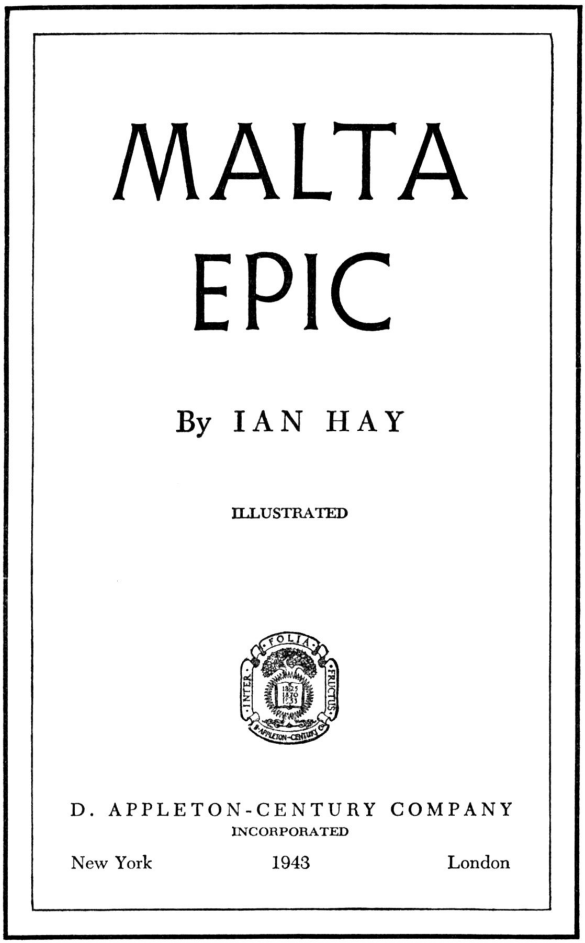
Valletta at War

Into the Grand Harbour of Valletta comes a convoy bringing more defenders and supplies to besieged Malta.



MALTA
EPIC

By IAN HAY

ILLUSTRATED

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TO THE READER

These pages will take you as far as the end of May, 1943, by which time Malta had promoted herself from beleaguered fortress to advanced Allied base for carrying the present war into the enemy's country.

But our story, you will find, goes back much earlier than 1939. This was not the first siege of Malta: the island had previously endured at least two others of historic importance to the rest of the world. The first, in the sixteenth century, probably saved Western Europe for Christendom; the second, by forcing the capitulation of the French garrison of Valletta in 1800, definitely severed Napoleon Bonaparte's lifeline to Egypt and the East.

I have therefore included all three sieges in this narrative—each typical of its period and fought out with the weapons of its time over precisely the same tiny patch of ground. Read the stories of 1565 and of 1798, and you will be enabled, I hope, to visualize, with enhanced interest and perspective, the most memorable of them all.

Also, since no story of Malta's vicissitudes is complete or intelligible unless we bring in the Mediterranean picture, I have tried to include enough Mediterranean history (which really means geography in most cases) to provide the island with its appropriate setting and background.

Lastly, it will be noticed that in the course of this chronicle I have mentioned as few names as possible, for a definite reason. Amid such a welter of heroism as the island has brought forth during the past three years, to particularize would be both distasteful and invidious.

So let us state, quite briefly and simply, that All the Brethren Were Valiant, and leave it at that. Probably the Brethren themselves would prefer it so.

IAN HAY

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PART I

CHAPTER I

SECOND WORLD WAR

Upon November 17, 1869, an event took place which revolutionized the geography (and who knows to what extent the history?) of the world.

Upon that day a procession of sixty-eight ships, the first of which had on board as guest of honor the Empress Eugénie, consort of Napoleon III, set out from Port Said upon the Nile Delta and after a stately progress of a hundred miles across the Sinai desert, arrived in three days at Suez, on the Red Sea. The Suez Canal was open at last, and in a flash the Mediterranean had been changed from a cul-de-sac into an ocean highway of unexampled importance.

The steamship had fairly come to its own by this time, and the day of the great ocean liners was dawning. The movement received an enormous fillip from the opening of the Canal. The long and circuitous sea-route to the East around the Cape of Good Hope, which all traffic from the eastern seaboard of the Americas and from every port in Europe had hitherto been compelled to follow, was straightway diverted to the new short-cut. Great vessels, soon limited in tonnage only by the width and depth of the Canal, began to converge upon the Straits of Gibraltar on their way to India, China, Japan, and Australia.

Most of these put in at Malta. The little island achieved an importance as a port of call or coaling station even greater than that which it had always enjoyed, or suffered, as a strategic base.

The Grand Harbour and Marsamuscetto, which had once housed Roman triremes or Turkish galleys or Napoleonic ships of the line, now held the Mediterranean Fleet of the British Navy and an unending succession of the mail steamers and merchant vessels of all nations. The naval ships were there for repair and refit, the merchantmen for fuel and supplies. An ancient creek, the “Harbor of the Galleys,” between Senglea and Vittoriosa, across whose mouth a giant chain had once been stretched to protect the little navy of the Knights of Malta from Barbary Corsairs, became the Admiralty Dockyard, employing thousands of men, while upon the quays of the two harbors thousands more toiled like ants upon the cargoes of the merchant ships berthed alongside. Innumerable *dghaisas* (pronounced “Dysoes”), the Maltese equivalent of gondolas, paddled about, doing a brisk trade in fruit, vegetables, and Maltese lace.

Malta was, and is, an island poor in natural resources. There were, moreover, no lakes, no rivers, barely a tree. Its rocky soil, though fertile enough, was incapable of maintaining a large population, and that population had been limited, so far, to the largest number which the island itself could support. The limitation arose from no disinclination on the part of the islanders to breed, for a Maltese, like a French Canadian, thinks nothing of raising a family of fifteen children or more.

But now, with the opening of the Mediterranean to through traffic, unheard-of prosperity descended upon the islanders. Men had no longer to depend for their existence upon a livelihood wrung from the depths of the ocean, or from a quarter-acre tomato-and-lettuce patch. The result was a rapid and enormous growth in population. To-day Malta possesses about two hundred and eighty thousand inhabitants, or two thousand seven human beings to the square mile. In other words, it is one of the most congested centers of population in the world.

Malta, too, has long since settled down into being a British Colony, prosperous, contented, and largely self-governing. Indeed, the Maltese, although they have stuck tenaciously to their racial characteristics, take a curious pride in adopting British institutions. British currency is used exclusively. The first coin which the visitor will probably be called upon to expend will be a humble penny, for a ride in a giant elevator up from the quayside; the shaft, cut in the solid rock, rises to the Valletta street-level above. The traffic in the capital, he will note, is controlled by Maltese policemen, attired in precisely the same uniforms as their famous and impassive colleagues in London. The streets are now called by English names, for Italian street-signs, where they existed, disappeared automatically with Italy's intrusion into the Second World War. To-day the principal thoroughfare of Valletta is no longer Strade Reale but Kingsway.

In one respect Maltese prosperity is, so to speak, an unnatural growth, because, as already noted, it is not founded upon the island's own resources. This is most easily demonstrated by a simple economic fact. Malta's annual export trade amounts to about £500,000, or two million dollars; its imports run to ten times that figure. How, then, are these imports paid for? By the employment furnished to the Maltese by the British naval, military, and flying units stationed upon the island—in other words, by the British taxpayer, and by the merchant shipping which makes Malta a port of call.

Malta had a sharp reminder of this dependence once. In 1921, it may be remembered, a Grand International Disarmament Conference was held in Washington, at which it was unanimously agreed that world wars were now a thing of the past and that all nations should begin systematically to reduce their naval armaments. The British people duly fulfilled their obligations in

the matter, scrapping old battleships and countermanding orders for new ones with an enthusiasm which endangered the whole of their seaborne commerce. (In 1935 they actually found themselves reduced to temporizing with the blusterer Mussolini, in a futile endeavor to mitigate his piratical designs upon the kingdom of Abyssinia.)

The Mediterranean Fleet was cut down like the rest, with the result that the Maltese dock laborers in the Grand Harbour, who had long prospered upon continuous employment and steady pay, found themselves faced by an empty dockyard and the prospect of starvation. There was acute distress and even some rioting.

The incident is mentioned here because, as we shall see, it foreshadowed some contingencies which would most certainly arise if ever the Island of Malta found itself cut off, even temporarily, from its twenty million dollars' worth of essential imports.

II

In every European war throughout history, the Mediterranean has at once become a strategic area of crucial importance to the belligerents and of acute and painful interest to the neutral states that border upon it. In the case of the solitary little keypoint that lies in its center, that interest, naturally, is intensified tenfold.

Throughout the so-called First World War, Malta was exposed to no particular peril or anxiety. The Mediterranean was, and for the most part remained, a Franco-British-Italian lake. True, Austria bordered upon the eastern Adriatic; Turkey, too, was numbered among our enemies. But Malta lay secure enough. There were no German surface warships in the Mediterranean, and no submarines could penetrate the Grand Harbour. So, for more than four years, Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus served their normal function as Allied naval bases and strong links in the chain of eastward communications.

In 1939 a different face of things was seen, but on the surface and at first it appeared not unfavorable. Of the belligerent countries only two, and they Allies, held bases in the Mediterranean; the whole of the rest of its vast perimeter lay for the moment neutral and apart.

Let us consider the Mediterranean map of 1939. In the Levant lay the great peninsula of Turkish Anatolia, holding studiously aloof from the struggle, but doggedly determined that neither side should pierce the Dardanelles. Syria and Palestine, former Turkish territory, were administered by the French and British under Mandates imposed by the League of Nations. (It is important to note that Haifa on the coast of

Palestine was the terminus of an oil pipe-line extending back into the rich oilfields of Iraq.) Egypt was in alliance with Great Britain, who had guaranteed her independence; and under the terms of the Egyptian Treaty of Friendship Egypt had granted the harbor of Alexandria to the British Navy as a base in the event of war.

The Balkan Peninsula was composed of small states each of which desired only to avoid being sucked into the maelstrom of total war—at any rate until it should become clearly apparent who was going to win.

Tripolitania in North Africa, set between Egypt and French Tunisia, was part of the Empire of Italy, and Italy stood neutral. Along the whole of the Tripolitanian coast ran a magnificent motor road constructed by Italian engineers. It traversed various little seaports and harbors—Bardia, Tobruk, Derna, Benghazi—names known to few but destined to be known shortly to all the world.

In the Western Mediterranean lay Spain and Spanish Morocco, and Spain was neutral, too, if sulkily. Thus the sea-lane between the Pillars of Hercules and the Suez Canal could be kept open and secure by the French and British navies, based upon Gibraltar, Toulon, Tunis, Malta, and Alexandria.

Therefore it was not altogether surprising that in the months of uneasy peace preceding the present war a certain false confidence should have reigned in the Mediterranean, especially in remote and secluded Malta.

The island, it should be noted, had functioned since its inclusion in the British Empire as a naval stronghold, with a defense scheme based upon purely naval considerations and requirements. To the British Admiralty it was not so much Malta as the Grand Harbour and its environs that mattered. Valletta itself had been protected by immensely strong fortifications, with guns pointing seaward, to bar hostile approach from that element. There were coastal defenses, too, but mostly in the neighborhood of Valletta.

The military forces upon the island were not large and consisted mainly of garrison artillery. As for anti-aircraft batteries, naval authorities still leaned to the opinion that the airplane was an overrated weapon of offense, especially against capital ships, and that the real menace to the security of the Grand Harbour was horizontal and not vertical.

III

On September 3, 1939, came the Second World War. Within a few weeks Poland lay crushed and prostrate, and it was realized, as usual, that this war was going to be entirely different from the last one. Gone were the days of static warfare—of limited objectives reached in mass formation under

precisely timed artillery barrages. This was to be a war of swift movement over vast spaces by tanks and bombers—blitzkrieg, in fact, and three-dimensional blitzkrieg at that.

To the defenders of Malta, tanks for the present offered no particular menace, but bombers were something else again. The dangerous situation of Valletta, in particular, with its congested population and defensive works all crowded together within an area of a few square miles, was tardily recognized.

Then there was the island as a whole. Was that so free from the menace of invasion as had been imagined, with all this new talk of parachute troops, transport planes, and gliders? What if Hitler should contrive an air base upon the Mediterranean coast, with the connivance of his lackey Mussolini? No, two things must be done: the island must be defended as a whole; its defenses must be dispersed and not concentrated.

Already the British Expeditionary Force in France had established a precedent and set an example. Though far removed from the battle-line, the troops had been housed over half the country-side, while around Arras, Headquarters of the General Staff, Lord Gort and his principal executive officers were quartered in separate billets several miles apart.

Let us consider the map and survey the island of Malta generally, in the light of modern military requirement and from the point of view of its vulnerability to attack from both sea and air.

The whole of the southern edge and most of the western is comparatively secure against landing operations from the sea, being protected by an almost continuous line of cliffs, running as high as four hundred feet. Beyond these, at the northern end of the island, considerable openings and inlets occur, including St. Paul's Bay and Mellieha Bay. Some three miles off lies the island of Gozo, a potential springboard for the invader.

Along the whole of the north (or more correctly, northeastern) coastline, on either side of Valletta, stretch a number of open beaches. To the extreme east lies the harbor of Marsa Scirocco, which was the landing-point and supply base of the Saracens in 1565.

To the would-be invader, the northwestern (or Gozo) end of the island would appear to present the most favorable point of attack. But to effect a landing here would be of little profit, for a most formidable obstacle would have yet to be encountered. About five miles inland, one quarter of the way along the island's length, Nature has provided defense with a natural bastion in the form of an escarpment, most of it sheer precipice, running right across the island from north to south, and commanding all the ground to the west of it—just as in 1915 Achi Baba commanded the western end of the Gallipoli

Peninsula. Batteries situated along these cliffs, for their seven or eight miles of length, could deal faithfully with any invading force approaching from St. Paul's Bay or other western landing-point.

Malta's defense scheme under modern requirements is now clearly indicated. The cliffs along the southern edge are a sure shield in themselves, while the Victoria Lines—this is the name given to the works strung out along the summit of the escarpment—can take ample care of any enemy approaching from the western tip of the island. But the northern beaches, together with Marsa Scirocco in the southeast, call for artillery protection by land and vigilant coastal patrolling by sea.

From the point of view of what may be termed vertical invasion, anti-aircraft batteries both long-range and short must be established everywhere, to deal with enemy bombers and carrier planes. The infantry must be posted in suitable positions from which to repel landings, protect airports, and if need be join battle with an invader already disembarked.

One other matter called for attention. If Malta was going to be bombed, headquarters and staffs—all ranks, in fact—must not be crowded together in Valletta: they must be dispersed, and control must be exercised from a position not so acutely localized.

Malta is not an island of mountains; most of its surface is flat or undulating. It is crisscrossed everywhere by gray stone walls—such walls as you may see anywhere in the Highlands of Scotland or upon the Yorkshire moors—enclosing the tiny patches of ground upon which the industrious Maltese contrive to raise their crops. But at one point, about eight miles southwest of Valletta, the ground rises to a height of seven hundred feet—to a respectable hill, in fact. From this eminence it is possible to survey the greater part of the island, and to observe, incidentally, that Malta, when viewed from above, is not gray but green. Upon the hill itself stands a town, Rábat. Notabile, the ancient capital, is not far away.

Here was an obvious keypoint, and it was from this area that for some time much of the general defense of the island was directed.

IV

It can readily be realized that this sweeping plan of reconstruction could not be, and was not, carried out immediately. In the first place, there seemed but little need for it during 1939 and during the deceptive lull of early 1940, and in the second the island at that time was lightly garrisoned and possessed neither the men nor the materials for the considerable labor involved.

It was not until late in 1942 that the new defenses of Malta took final and concrete shape or accommodated a garrison proportionate to the island's vital importance in the strategic scheme of the Mediterranean as a whole. To-day upon the island the personnel of the Royal Air Force alone runs into thousands. The garrison is made up of many infantry units, mostly drawn from famous English county regiments, with enough artillerymen to operate all the guns—and there are hundreds of them now—simultaneously.

Present fighter strength can be gaged from the fact that within the past two years British aircraft carriers (assisted upon two occasions by the *Wasp*, an American vessel) have brought to Malta more than seven hundred Spitfires and other defensive aircraft. On the offensive side, Malta to-day ranks as a bomber base of the first importance and efficiency—as the seaports and airdromes of Italy, Sicily, and Tunisia have good cause to testify.

But this is to anticipate. Much had to happen, much to be endured, before that happy state of affairs could be achieved.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAGEDY OF FRANCE

The year 1939 came to an end, and outward tranquillity still reigned over Malta. But hearts were anxious enough. Apart from any thought of danger to itself, the island was waiting apprehensively for bad news from home. How could it be otherwise at first, with Britain only a quarter prepared?

The war thus far seemed to be confining itself mainly to the Atlantic Ocean. There was much news of submarine activity. Almost before hostilities had been declared, the British liner *Athenia*, crowded with Americans returning home and English children being conveyed to a land inaccessible to bombs, was torpedoed and sunk off the west coast of Scotland.

England had not yet suffered an air raid, nor would she for another three months, but the enemy had made a considerable effort to bomb the Forth Bridge, which spans the mile-wide arm of the sea separating northeastern from southeastern Scotland—a link as vitally important to Britain as the great Hohenzollern Bridge across the Rhine at Cologne is to Germany.

The raid was the first event of its kind, and the excitement in and around the adjacent city of Edinburgh was intense. Fighters went up on their first operational flight; the new anti-aircraft guns roared. A German bomber, hotly pursued by a Spitfire, flew low across the football ground of a boys' school near-by, where a house-match was proceeding to a frenzied finish. This unusual visitation went entirely unnoticed.

In the end a British cruiser and a destroyer were slightly damaged, and three German planes were brought down. The Forth Bridge stood intact: bridges seem uncommonly hard to bomb. There were no civilian casualties —a point of which distant Malta took hopeful note.

There were constant rumors, too, as to the nature of Hitler's much publicized "secret weapon." This in due course turned out to be a magnetic mine which exploded when the steel hull of a passing ship came within its field of force. Its first victim was a neutral vessel, the Dutch *Simon Bolivar*. Finally the British Navy succeeded in getting hold of an unexploded specimen, and some devoted naval scientists volunteered to dissect it. A few hours later the secret weapon was no longer either a secret or a weapon: a simple process of electric insulation was sufficient to render any ship immune to its attentions.

From the South Atlantic came heartening news of the destruction of the pocket battleship *Graf Spee*, harried into Montevideo by British cruisers and sent out again, by Hitler's orders, not to fight to a finish but to scuttle herself in deep water.

On land there seemed to be nothing to report, except that the British Expeditionary Force had arrived in France and, under the supreme command of General Gamelin, was erecting strong defenses, not along the German-Belgian border, where they might have proved extremely useful, but along the Franco-Belgian border, where they were no use at all.

In the Mediterranean, matters had settled down to a routine so peaceful that convoys were abolished and the ordinary trade routes reopened. The Mediterranean Fleet was despatched westward, through the Straits of Gibraltar, to more promising fields of action.

In November, Admiral A. B. Cunningham, universally known and esteemed as "ABC," Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, deprived of his capital ships and cruisers, abandoned his headquarters at Alexandria and hoisted his flag, ashore, at Malta, to the justifiable gratification of the Maltese. He was destined to stay there for more than six months.

Impatient politicians and journalists at home began to talk about the Phony War.

II

Nineteen forty came in, and a wave of interest and gratification passed over Malta. A Franco-British army had arrived in Egypt for the defense of that country and the precious Suez Canal. The names Weygand and Wavell began to be heard in Malta messes and barrack-rooms.

From Paris came the news that on March 21st, an M. Reynaud had succeeded M. Daladier as Premier of France. But France changes her premiers as frequently as a woman changes her mind, so no particular significance was attached to the event.

Then, in early April, there was news and to spare. Like a bolt from the blue came the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, and the Phony War was over. A new term, Quisling, was added to the language of opprobrium. British destroyers fought a heroic and historic action at Narvik, and a hastily assembled and half-equipped British field force did what it could to stem the tide of military invasion in South Norway. But in vain. The fighter planes which could have given them cover had no airdromes: they had to take off from a frozen lake, and that fragile runway soon disintegrated under a few bombs. The British soldiers fought gallantly enough, but without overhead protection they were helpless—another lesson for Malta—

and in a few weeks Denmark and Norway had become the victims, for the time being, of German "protective" occupation—and exploitation.

Things now began to happen in the Mediterranean. The Italians were abandoning their attitude of unneutral neutrality; it was obvious that before long they would hasten openly to the assistance of what they already regarded as the winning side. Consequently on April 20th all British merchant ships were forbidden by the British Government to enter the Straits of Gibraltar. But not the British Navy. Three days later the powerful Anglo-French fleet reëntered the Mediterranean and established itself at Alexandria.

Admiral Cunningham's occupation being thus restored to him, he left Malta for Alexandria forthwith. We shall hear of him again.

Momentous events were happening, too, in London. The Norway failure sounded the knell of the Government, or at any rate of its leader. Neville Chamberlain relinquished the office of Prime Minister of England, and the conduct of affairs passed into the resolute hands of Winston Churchill.

The time to appraise Neville Chamberlain's record as a statesman and leader is not yet. He was blamed, almost hysterically, for British lack of preparedness for war. But the blame for that lay really with the British people themselves, for years of easy optimism and slothful thinking. Chamberlain, by putting his pride in his pocket and signing the Munich pact in 1938, at least gained for his country a year in which to overcome some of the arrears of preparation for the war which everybody now knew was coming. If he had not obtained that precious respite, it is difficult to see how Britain could have sustained the shock of immediate encounter.

Three days after Chamberlain's resignation, the Germans invaded Holland and Belgium. Lord Gort, as had been previously agreed with the French military authorities, immediately led the British Expeditionary Force into Belgium. He was fatally handicapped by two circumstances. The first was that, because of the morbid anxiety of the Belgian Government to avoid the faintest suspicion of unneutrality, not a single British staff officer had been permitted to enter Belgium and survey the positions which the British Army was to defend. In consequence, that Army was compelled to operate a defense scheme which, though planned with care and thoroughness, existed only upon paper.

The other was that the French Ninth Army, immediately to the south of the British, scattered like chaff before the first onslaught of the German armored divisions, and within a week or so the French and British forces were separated from one another by a corridor forty miles wide, extending from the German frontier to the English Channel and occupied by enemy troops.

British Information Services

Safe for the Moment

A Mediterranean fisherman dries his nets in the bright sun of Malta while his family enjoys life above ground on a summer afternoon.

A few weeks later Belgium sued for peace, and Gort, left defenseless on either flank and having received no orders of any kind from the French Commander-in-Chief throughout the entire operation, had no alternative but to fight his way doggedly back to the coast by a truly masterly rearguard action, on half-rations and strictly limited expenditure of ammunition. In the end he was able, by the Providence of God, the valor of the British Navy, and the devotion of hundreds of anonymous owners of small craft—tugs, yachts, motor-boats, fishing-boats, pleasure-boats—to evacuate no less than three hundred and fifty thousand men (including about a hundred thousand Frenchmen) from the beach of Dunkirk to England.

It was a desperate moment in British history, for the rescued army had lost the whole of its arms and equipment, and the troops in training at home were in no position as yet to take the field with effect. Invasion, and perhaps successful invasion, seemed inevitable.

Yet it did not come. Once more history was repeating itself, and for the same reason—human vanity. Just as in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte threw away a golden opportunity to invade England and make himself supreme in Europe, in order to gratify an insensate dream of founding some kind of exotic Empire of the East, so Adolf Hitler, with Britain, his only resolute and dangerous opponent, lying temporarily prostrate, postponed the unpostponable while he made a spectacular entry into Paris and sent his troops goose-stepping down the Champs Elysées. And with that fatuous gesture, though he did not realize it, his only chance of winning the Second World War went whistling down the wind.

III

Upon June 10th, just one month after Hitler's lightning invasion of Holland, Belgium, and France, Mussolini decided that it would now be safe for him to cut into the game and qualify for a share of the spoils. So he declared war upon a prostrate France and a reeling Britain.

Ten days later France asked him for an armistice, which was signed on June 24th, and the British found themselves alone in the Mediterranean, as elsewhere.

Nowhere was the defection of France felt more severely than in this theater, for the Anglo-French expedition to Egypt was very largely a French responsibility. Since the days of de Lesseps the French had always maintained a jealous proprietary interest in the Suez Canal, and the French Army in Egypt at the beginning of 1940 far exceeded in numbers and strength the modest force of Sir Archibald Wavell.

Now this Army was out of action for good, as was the French force in Syria, and General Wavell found himself left to defend the Egyptian border against an Italian army which outnumbered his own by about five to one. Owing to the closing of the Mediterranean to merchant traffic he was compelled to maintain his own Army lines of communication about eleven thousand miles long—the longest ever employed in a major campaign—reaching away around the Cape of Good Hope and up through the South Atlantic.

But if General Wavell was disturbed by this state of affairs, he did not show it. He knew his business, and he knew his opponent. He asked for no armistice: he merely set about building up his command to attacking strength, with results which we shall see later.

The situation regarding the French Navy was even more alarming. A defeated army usually disbands itself, but a surrendered navy can be refitted and remanned and turned against its former allies. It was now plain that if the worst came to worst the British Navy might find itself pitted against the combined fleets of Germany, Italy, and France—and the French Navy ranked second only to the British in Europe.

Providence again intervened, up to a point. The French, divided and dejected though they were, retained at least enough spirit and national pride to see to it that their fleet continued to be manned by none but Frenchmen. A considerable "Free French" contingent of two battleships, two large cruisers, eight destroyers, and some two hundred small craft betook themselves to a British port, where they lay safe from Nazi appropriation. Other French warships were lying at Alexandria, side by side with the British. The situation here was extremely delicate, but in the end the French Admiral agreed to the demilitarization of his fleet, which was to remain where it was under the polite surveillance of its late sisters-in-action.

About the situation at Oran, in Morocco, there was no delicacy at all, for the French admiral flatly declined to accede to the British suggestion that the French ships should either scuttle themselves or accept the protective custody of the British Navy, possibly in some West Indian harbor, until happier days, upon the strict understanding that they would in no circumstances be employed for British ends. So after giving due warning and allowing an interval for possible disembarkation of the crews, the British Admiral Somerville gave the reluctant order to fire. One French battleship was sunk, one heavily damaged, one battle cruiser damaged and beached, and two destroyers and a seaplane carrier set on fire. It was a sorry and fratricidal business, but the situation was too desperate for half-measures.

One other consequence of the French defection should be noted here, though its tragic significance was not realized until months later. October, 1940, was to see the landing of Japanese troops, with the concurrence of the Vichy Government, in French Indo-China: French Indo-China, which hitherto had guarded the bottleneck leading down into the Malay Peninsula; French Indo-China, which lay within comfortable bombing distance of the Philippines and Bataan. From that moment the entire defense scheme of the Pacific, from Pearl Harbor to Singapore, was dislocated in advance. But few realized this. All eyes were fixed on the European struggle.

IV

All this while it can be imagined with what agonized interest the people of Malta had been following the course of events in France and the surrounding Mediterranean.

Two months ago they had lain secure and confident in their island fortress. British naval vessels steamed in and out of the Grand Harbour; Allied and neutral shipping called periodically on the way to and from the Levant. There was even a regular daily service of Italian passenger planes between Malta and Sicily.

At home in England all seemed to be proceeding according to plan. The British Expeditionary Force was already in France, making ready for battle alongside their allies. The vast new armies in Britain were taking formidable shape, now that the tanks and big guns were beginning to swing off the production line. The splendid young Air Force was beginning to feel its wings. The Royal Navy was everywhere.

Six months of war had passed, yet Hitler seemed to have made nothing of his flying start and complete preparedness. There had been no Retreat from Mons, no First Ypres. Provided that the Franco-British front could be established as firmly as it had been twenty-five years ago, victory would merely be a matter of time. The year 1941 perhaps would prove another 1918.

Now, after a nightmare of six weeks, a whole palace of dreams had crumbled into ruins. France seemed out for good—France with her splendid navy and army of six million men—and two-thirds of the soil of France, including sacred Paris itself, was occupied by Hitler. The French Mediterranean and North African forces were immobilized or disbanded, and in Egypt Wavell stood alone. Last straw of all, Italy had declared war. Malta lay sixty miles south of Sicily and a thousand miles from the nearest British bases, Gibraltar and Alexandria. The little island, not for the first time in its history, lay in immediate and deadly peril of invasion.

CHAPTER III

DEFENSE SCHEME

The Governor of Malta, and Commander-in-Chief of the Forces there at this time, was Major General Sir William George Shedden Dobbie. The story of the defense of Malta must begin with him, for he was to prove the soul of that defense for the next two years.

There is an old saying in the British Army that all Sappers are Mad, Married, and Methodist. The Sappers accept this description of themselves without apparent resentment—almost as a compliment, in fact. They are mad chiefly in the sense that St. Paul was mad, through much learning: you need real brains to get into the Royal Engineers. They are married because the Engineers are by comparison a highly paid arm of the Service and so can afford the extravagance of matrimony earlier than most. As for the legend of their Methodism, it may have arisen merely from a desire to complete an alliteration, or it may simply mean that being trained scientists, Sappers are apt to regard the workings of Nature and the workings of Providence as one.

General Dobbie is a Sapper and has served his country in that capacity all over the world for more than forty years. He fought in South Africa in the closing years of the last century; he fought in the First World War, and was mentioned in despatches seven times, and he has served with distinction as a Staff Officer. He set the seal upon his reputation in Palestine in 1929, where, as Brigadier Dobbie, he was called upon to deal at short notice with a more than usually serious outbreak of racial and religious hostility between Jew and Arab in that distracted country.

The immediate cause of the conflict was the question of access to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem—all that is left of the original Temple of Solomon. On August 14th and 15th of each year the Jews are accustomed to foregather there in order to lament the destruction of the Temple by the Emperor Titus nearly twenty centuries ago. On the two days following, the Arabs celebrate the birth of the Prophet, in the same neighborhood, and upon occasion of public tension the two ceremonies are apt to overlap. They overlapped upon this occasion so effectively that a first-class riot took place: it presently assumed the proportions of a small civil war, of which the Arabs had decidedly the better. There was serious trouble elsewhere, too, for the Arabs were out for blood all over the country.

Unfortunately, the British garrison of Palestine had been withdrawn many months ago (with some sort of muddled idea of putting both Jews and Arabs on their honor to be good), and their place had been taken by a highly inadequate local police force. All that Brigadier Dobbie had at his disposal were some armored cars and airplanes, neither of which can make arrests. So the Brigadier, acting with great energy and promptitude, sent out a riot call, and straightway reinforcements began to materialize from various quarters. The first to arrive was an infantry battalion from Egypt—they came by air—followed by further infantry and engineer units and an armored-car squadron. Armed parties of naval ratings were landed from two warships of the British Mediterranean Fleet. Last of all came the aircraft carrier, *Courageous*, conveying yet another infantry battalion all the way from Malta, a thousand miles distant.

The early arrival of the airborne troops was particularly fortunate, for by this time many Jews were penned in their houses, separated from massacre by a few minutes. The position improved as Dobbie's forces grew, and in the end he was able to proceed to offensive action, hostile villages being surrounded and the ringleaders arrested. In due course the situation was restored and tranquillity returned. Thereafter, upon the Brigadier's urgent representations, a garrison of two British infantry battalions was maintained in Palestine. It is considerably larger than that to-day.

Having completed his Palestinian task, and having reached the British Army age-limit, Brigadier Dobbie was retired upon half-pay. Like most soldiers of sixty, he regarded his career as over. He was mistaken.

II

Before considering the steps taken by the new Governor-General for the defense of the island in the critical emergency of 1940, it may be interesting to consider how he personally measures up to the Army dictum already quoted, upon the subject of Sappers in general.

General Sir William G. S. Dobbie, K.C.B., G.C.M.G., D.S.O.

GOVERNOR AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF MALTA

". . . It may be that hard times lie ahead of us but I know that however hard they may be, the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter and that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress. . . ."

As regards Madness and Marriage, General Dobbie may be said to conform to type; that is to say, he is a master of his profession and devoted to it, and he is a happy husband and the father of two sons and a daughter. But his Methodism, if it can so be called, is outstanding. He is a devout and unashamed Christian: he puts his trust in God and says so, and the weapon that he wields in the exercise of his duty is the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. Such a man seems the natural and appropriate inheritor of the traditions of the Knights of the Order of St. John. In the dark days of 1940 he appeared, both in character and temperament, as the almost divinely appointed leader and inspirer of the deeply religious Maltese people.

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, to learn that the Governor-General's first act, when Italy entered the war and Malta found itself isolated and unprotected, was to issue the following Order of the Day to the defenders of the Island:

> The decision of His Majesty's Government to fight until our enemies are defeated will be heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the Garrison of Malta.
>
> It may be that hard times lie ahead of us, but I know that however hard they may be, the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter, and that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress.
>
> I call on all officers and other ranks humbly to seek God's help, and then in reliance on Him to do their duty unflinchingly.
>
> W.G.S.D.

The decision of H. M. G. to fight on until our Queen & our defeated will be heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the Garrison of Malta.

It may be that hard times lie ahead of us but I know that however hard they may be the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter & that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress.

I call on all officers and other ranks humbly to seek God's help, and in their reliance on Him to do their duty unflinchingly.

W. G. S. D.

The Governor-General's Order of the Day

Having duly invoked Divine aid and protection, the Governor immediately turned his practical mind to the consideration of material difficulties and dangers.

His duty was twofold. As Commander-in-Chief he had to hold the fortress of Malta for the king who had appointed him, and as Governor he had to maintain order and provide so far as was possible for the safety and welfare of the island's teeming population.

Of course a good deal had been done already. What may be called the general idea of Malta's modernized defense scheme has been outlined in a previous chapter, and some of this had already been put into effect. Work upon the remainder was pushed as further personnel and material became available.

Munitions and food supplies were accumulated and stored against possible isolation or siege. The water supply presented no problem, because though Malta possesses neither river nor fresh-water lake, water can be pumped up from subterranean sources almost anywhere.

A number of British women and children who had no reason to remain on the island, their menfolk being employed on service elsewhere, had been quietly evacuated to England on board the Orient liner, *Oronsay*, homeward bound from Australia, some time previously.

Malta itself had been put into what is technically known as a State of Defense. The island was partially blacked out. The troops were moved to their war stations, and training was intensified. Leave was restricted.

It had been decided not to defend Gozo, which was difficult of access under war conditions and had an uncertain water supply. But that little island, which is in normal times the market garden and larder of Malta, was kept under cultivation. Its subsequent experience of enemy bombing was far less severe than that of its larger neighbor, and it was used later on as a rest-center, though only by comparison, for tired troops.

One task which the island troops had been performing since the outbreak of the war in 1939—a task not only highly useful in itself but a welcome variation from garrison duty—was the exercise of contraband control. A warship starting off from Malta upon "Mediterranean patrol" regularly took with it a detachment of troops. Should a ship be encountered carrying contraband of war, a party of soldiers would be put on board, with orders to take the offending vessel to Malta or Alexandria for more thorough examination. Despite his somewhat sketchy knowledge of seamanship or navigation, Thomas Atkins never failed so to direct matters as to bring his prize safe to port.

III

So much, then, had been done. But in June, 1940, an enormous amount remained to do—first and foremost in the matter of airdromes.

Malta possessed three of these. The first, Hal Far, at the eastern end of the island, was in full running order, with good buildings and hangars; the second, Ta Kali, though complete, was in a somewhat neglected condition; the third, Luqa, was still in process of construction. It is significant that up to this date no sort of attempt seems to have been made to provide any of these airdromes with protective works. In other words, danger from enemy bombers was regarded as negligible. This despite the fact that the defenselessness of the airdromes must have been well known outside the island, for as has already been observed, Italian passenger planes, and French, too, were coming and going regularly right up to Mussolini's declaration of war.

Here immediate action was indicated, with what resources were available at the time. Lewis gun crews were therefore detailed for the defense of each airdrome, but it was not until much later that both heavy and secondary anti-aircraft batteries were available for serious defense.

Next came the problem of man-power. The size of the present garrison was totally inadequate to the demands of the situation which had so suddenly and tragically developed. This was not altogether surprising; indeed, it was almost unavoidable, for Britain, as is now well known, was desperately short of troops during the first year of the war—not so much from lack of men as from the enormously increased period of time required to train and equip the modern soldier. Malta, being regarded as a safe and soft spot, was one of the least likely outposts to have lavished upon it men and equipment sorely needed elsewhere.

So when war came to the island, practically all the force that General Dobbie had at his disposal consisted of four battalions of infantry, each somewhat below strength, and one Maltese battalion, not yet effective. There were a number of defense posts on the northern beaches, some of them arranged in depth, but nowhere upon an adequate scale. There were also the defenses of Valletta harbor, of which more later.

For defense in the air, the General had a certain number of anti-aircraft guns and three venerable Gladiator aircraft, which had so far been occupied in the humble duty of occasionally towing practice-targets for the anti-aircraft gunners to shoot at. They were known and esteemed throughout the island, so the story goes, as Faith, Hope, and Charity. The original Air Force of the island was composed of these three semi-obsolete planes.

In actual fact there were four of them, and at the moment when neutral Italy burst into what then seemed timely belligerence, they were lying crated in Valletta dockyard, booked for an entirely different destination. But the existence of the fourth machine was not realized by the majority of the islanders. The reason was simple: there were only enough pilots to man three at a time. The redoubtable three were in the cheerful charge of six young members of the Royal Air Force, of whom we shall hear a good deal hereafter.

The names of these six boys deserve to be recorded here. They were Squadron-Leader A. C. Martin, Flight Lieutenants P. G. H. Keeble, P. W. Hartley, G. Burgess, W. J. Woods; and Flying Officer J. L. Waters. Day after day, hour after hour, during the earlier stages of the Italian onset they went up in their crazy craft and took on the Aeronautica Regia. Bone-weary, with gaunt faces and glazed eyes, they answered every call and persisted until reinforcements became available, weeks later.

So much for the Commander-in-Chief's military problem. Plainly there was nothing for him to do but make the very utmost of his present resources and follow the Cromwellian precept of trusting in God and keeping his powder dry until he could be adequately reinforced from home or Egypt.

CHAPTER IV

MALTA GOES MILITARY

As Governor of Malta, General Dobbie had certain civil and political problems to face and master—and they were not easy.

His first task, a "headache," was to bring home to the Maltese people the realities of the present situation—to make them war conscious, in fact. All that the islanders had seen so far of the life-and-death struggle which had convulsed the world for nine months was the reassuring activity of the British Navy. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers, submarines, and supply ships slid in and out of the two harbors, while in the Admiralty Dockyard area thousands of men were constantly and profitably employed in the work of repairing and refitting. Such an atmosphere of might and majesty was well calculated to inspire unbounded confidence in a people to whom the progress of a war was merely something to read about in the newspaper, and who had not heard a shot fired, except in the routine of target practice, for nearly a century and a half.

True, their peace had twice been threatened in the last ten years. First by the Abyssinian upheaval of 1935, when Mussolini was proclaiming to a divided and impotent League of Nations his divine right to invade and annex to his cardboard Empire the property of the Emperor Haile Selassie. It seemed almost inevitable then that Britain and Italy should go to war, in which case Malta would find herself in the very forefront of battle. But somehow that crisis had been tided over, and the age-long tranquillity of the islanders remained undisturbed.

Again, when, upon Good Friday, 1939, Italy invaded, occupied, and annexed the tiny kingdom of Albania by a single surprise attack, British intervention seemed a foregone conclusion. But the cup was not yet full, and the final reckoning was again postponed.

Now, seemingly, the Government was crying "Wolf!" for the third time, and the Maltese were inclined to reply that they were wise to that sort of thing. It is only just to add that their skepticism was shared by many of the British residents in the island.

Still, Mussolini had undoubtedly declared war on them. That new terror to a nation's peace of mind, the radio, had made his very words audible. Surely the Maltese people were awake to the situation at last!

But they showed themselves surprisingly unimpressed by the Duce's bombast. The truth was, they cherished a profound contempt for the Italians, both as fighters and as individuals, and had of late years been particularly incensed by Italy's claim to be the mother country of Malta, together with Mussolini's reiterated demand that the island should be included in his ridiculous Third Roman Empire.

"The Maltese," said the Maltese firmly, "are Maltese and not Italians. They never were Italians, and never will be. They owe allegiance to no flag save their own and that of Great Britain, under whose protection they have voluntarily placed themselves."

The Maltese flag, incidentally, is many centuries older than anything that modern Italy can produce, and its history is interesting. When the people of Malta were delivered from the Saracens in 1090 A.D. by one, Robert of Normandy, they begged their hero to bestow upon them a flag of their own. He immediately took his own flag, composed of two red and two white squares, tore it in two, and gave them half. For nearly a thousand years that little banner, composed of one white and one red square, has flown over the island—in company since 1800 with the Union Jack.

Still, Italian influence in Malta was even now considerable. Italian propaganda had been rife there ever since Mussolini's assumption of power. Italy was strongly represented in the Maltese law-courts, and it was only in 1936 that Italian had ceased to be employed as the official language therein. Maltese lawyers and jurists had thus been brought strongly under Italian influence, and some of them had succumbed. The clergy, too, were not all above suspicion. Fifth columnists of the humbler kind—the usual furtive, obvious, small-time spies and agents—abounded.

Here the Governor took prompt and effective action. He interned a prominent jurist, a prominent cleric, and the leader of the so-called Nationalist Party. He also rounded up some of the small fry, including several cabaret young ladies, adepts at extracting and passing on military information. Most of these were ultimately repatriated to Italy.

The success of these firm precautionary measures was complete. Never, during the long periods of trial which followed, did disaffection rear its head in Malta, and never, even at the very height of the bombing, was there any disorder or indication of need for Martial Law.

II

The next and most urgent necessity was that of providing protection for nearly two hundred and eighty thousand people against the aërial assaults which seemed bound to come.

The most obvious step was to disperse the population of Valletta over the ninety square miles which comprised the island as a whole. This proved neither an easy nor a popular measure. The Maltese are an intensely domestic people and are devoted to their little homes and large families. Moreover, they are extremely clannish, and were inclined to be "choosy" as to the hospitality arranged for them. And so, though each householder was provided with a billeting-ticket which entitled him and his family to accommodation in some comparatively safe district, few showed any inclination to make use of it.

The Governor, however, was not unduly disturbed. He was quite content to wait until enemy action should implement his arrangements. And he was justified in his wisdom, for after the first few raids the dispersion problem solved itself with great promptness and surprisingly little fuss.

The next precaution must be the provision of sufficient air-raid shelters. The entire population of this congested little island must be got underground, and deep underground, as early as possible.

This, providentially, was not really difficult. Malta consists of limestone rock, so soft internally that you can cut it with a knife. Upon exposure to the air it hardens rapidly, which is an added help. Numerous underground galleries were soon bored out.

Full use was made, too, of subterranean works already existing—catacombs and deep storage chambers, an inheritance from the earliest inhabitants of the island, some say from the followers of St. Paul himself. The Knights had certainly used them as places of refuge from the Saracen and other marauders.

Some of them served as repositories for the dead bodies of the Capuchin monks. A traveler who visited Malta eighty years ago has left us a gruesome description of such a catacomb, "with niches in the side-walls, containing dried-up bodies of former brethren, all dressed in their usual robes of coarse brown cloth, and with rope girdles. Above each corpse is his name and the date of his death."

In due course something like thirteen miles of tunneling were bored out and the old chambers and catacombs conditioned for their new service. The obsolete railway-tunnel upon the short railroad from Floriana to Notabile—closed since the advent of the automobile—was also utilized. Ultimately there was shelter for every one, and of all that crowded population during the ensuing months of pitiless bombing, only fourteen hundred were fated to perish. Compare these with the forty thousand and more deaths in England, most of them in and around London, similarly caused during 1940-41.

III

Having provided, as far as was humanly possible, for the solidarity and security of the people of Malta, Sir William Dobbie proceeded to his final and most drastic step. He pointed out to them that protective measures were not enough; they were up against the stark reality of total war, and they could not win, or even survive, by the road of passive defense. They must fight or perish, and since total war demands total service, conscription would be imposed forthwith upon all the able-bodied men of the island.

To a community which has never seen war and whose existence hitherto has been one of sunny, sheltered husbandry and petty trading, here was a thunderbolt indeed. There was consternation, followed by protests, even a suggestion that Authority was crying "Wolf!" again. But the Governor was firm. He, and perhaps he alone, realized the intense peril of the situation. His British garrison was inadequate to the needs of the defense which must now be put up, and knowing as he did that Britain itself was in as grave danger of invasion as Malta, and even shorter of a sufficiency of trained defenders, he knew full well that if his island was to survive its coming ordeal, it must be prepared, for a period of time that none could measure, to fight its battle alone.

So conscription was put into immediate effect, and during the ensuing months British officers and sergeant instructors labored to convert an unmilitary (though by no means unwarlike) little people into a seasoned instrument of warfare.

British Information Services

THE STRONGEST AIR-RAID SHELTER IN EUROPE

One of the thirty ancient underground galleries dug through the rock foundations of Malta. The old and new caves together total over thirteen miles in length.

They had three main difficulties to contend with. The first was the complete lack in the average Maltese of what may be called the instinct of discipline—the quality which enables a man to command or obey with equal

readiness, to give an order with conviction or execute it without question. The Maltese recruit was willing enough to learn—he had quickly reconciled himself to the adventure of soldiering—but he had never been accustomed to do anything at speed or in unison with others. He was reluctant also to assume authority over men whom he regarded as his friends and equals. (He was not alone there, of course.) The result was that reliable junior leaders, sergeants and corporals, were not readily forthcoming.

The second difficulty was to imbue the young soldier with proper pride in himself. A little swagger never did a soldier any harm; on the other hand, no man ever made a good fighter who was casual or slipshod in his habits. To quote an old maxim of the barrack square, "A dirty soldier means a dirty rifle, and a dirty rifle means a dead soldier"; which, put the other way, means that the smart, alert soldier, who takes a pride in his own personal fitness and amenability to discipline, is much more likely to withstand the strain of campaigning and the shock of battle than the professed despiser of spit-and-polish.

Spit-and-polish, so-called, is one of the most cherished targets of the advocates of the so-called democratic army, and their outcries are not without effect upon the young soldier, performing uncongenial exercises and obeying orders at the jump for the first time. But the seasoned soldier, the man who has met war face to face, welcomes spit-and-polish. He realizes its binding effect amid the general disintegration of battle. He remembers that during the First World War it was the units which persisted, throughout the mud and squalor of the trenches, in shaving themselves and cleaning their equipment daily, that proved the most reliable at critical moments. And every seasoned soldier knows another thing, and that is that a unit which has been drilled until concerted action has become a second nature has a much better chance of surviving a hot encounter in which a half-disciplined unit would break and perish.

But the task of converting the Maltese conscripts into an efficient fighting force was rendered difficult chiefly by the fact that the soldier of to-day is no longer a man who merely trails a pike or fires a musket; he is a highly trained specialist.

Twenty-five years ago, almost as soon as a man had learned to march, handle a rifle, and perform a few simple evolutions, he was regarded as being practically ready for active service in the static warfare of that time. The rest of his military education he could pick up in trench raids and attacks in mass on limited objectives.

But that is not how soldiers fight to-day. The man in the ranks must be able to strip, assemble, and operate a variety of quick-firing weapons; he must be able to drive a jeep, tractor, or tank, and prescribe for its minor

ailments. He must be taught to read a map intelligently and must understand various forms of signaling, from Morse code and semaphore to "walkie-talkie" radio. And—he must be as hard as nails.

To create a soldier capable of doing even two or three of these things takes time—time both to instruct him in his highly specialized duties and to produce the numerous and complicated engines of war which he is to operate, without which he will find himself helpless in the face of a fully equipped and long-rehearsed enemy—as both American and British soldiers have learned by the road of hard experience, within recent years.

It was not necessary, or even possible, to teach the Maltese soldier all these accomplishments, but it was necessary to teach him a good many, and the seventy instructors detailed for the task found their hands full. But the British soldier has a remarkable gift for establishing relations with people of whose language he knows hardly a word, and, moreover, of making himself intelligible to them. He invents a sort of Pidgin English of his own and speaks it with entire lack of self-consciousness and a profound conviction that he is being understood. And, to do him justice, he usually is.

The devoted band set to work. They first instructed their reluctant pupils in the elementary exercises of the barrack square—to stand in line, to move in any direction, to perform simple manual exercises. After that they initiated men who spoke no language but their own, and forty per cent of whom were illiterate into the bargain, into the mysteries of the magazine rifle, the Bren gun, the Lewis gun, the Bofors light anti-aircraft gun, even of the heavy artillery. They revealed to them the secrets of radio-transmission. They manufactured motor mechanics and truck drivers out of individuals who had never steered anything more complicated than a donkey-cart or dghaisa.

They taught each young soldier to take care of his uniform, his equipment, and himself, and to cultivate a pride in all three. They introduced him to the practice of personal hygiene, beginning with the use of a toothbrush.

Above all they inculcated pride in smartness of action and quick obedience to an order, and that led to a spirit of healthy rivalry between company and company, battery and battery. Each formation was enrolled as a unit of the British Regular Army, and so the Royal Malta Artillery and the King's Own Malta Regiment were born. Ultimately, one-third of the artillery in the island was operated by Maltese gunners.

IV

Let us take a brief survey of the island before its smiling face shall be scarred and disfigured beyond recovery by the apostles of the new civilization.

Here is Valletta itself, the capital city. Senglea and Vittoriosa and Cospicua are three "cities," each possessing some ten thousand inhabitants. The narrow inlet between Senglea and Vittoriosa is Dockyard Creek, where modern vessels are repairing the scars of their endless encounters with the enemy outside.

Fort St. Angelo stands proudly up on the extremity of Senglea; so does St. Elmo, on the other side of the Grand Harbour. According to traditional custom, St. Angelo, being a naval barracks, is officially classed as a battleship and is named H.M.S. *St. Angelo*. Each floor is a deck, each room a cabin. It is interesting to note that the enemy claimed subsequently to have "sunk" this capital ship more than once.

The Grand Harbour itself, with its tiers upon tiers of white, flat-roofed buildings, lives up more than ever to the description once bestowed upon it, of "a densely populated quarry." The entrance is not so wide as in former days, for breakwaters run out from Ricasoli and Point St. Elmo, leaving only a narrow passage between their extremities. A great battleship is entering the harbor at this moment; so vast is she, and so slight the gap between the bastions, that to the crowd of spectators looking down from the Barocca Battery—the arrival of a big ship always draws a crowd—it seems hardly possible that she can glide past them. But she makes it, passing so close to the shore that the watchers above can almost look down her huge single funnel.

Once inside the harbor the monster becomes the passive prey of some officious little Admiralty tugs, which swing her around and bring her up to her moorings with her bows turned toward the harbor entrance, in readiness for instant departure upon whatever naval occasion may arise.

Valletta itself has been modernized by the march of time, but its ancient buildings are still there—the Cathedral of St. John, where marble slabs let into the floor of the nave mark the last resting-place of four hundred of the Knights. The Church of St. Publius is there, erected in honor of the first Bishop of Malta, reputed to have been converted to Christianity by St. Paul himself. The Palace of the Grand Master is to-day the official residence of the present Governor, and the seat of Government.

But more modern buildings abound. There are barracks and institutions, schools and colleges, clubs and sports grounds. There are three airdromes and a race-track. There is a Grand Opera House in Valletta itself and, needless to add, motion-picture theaters everywhere.

Beyond the confines of Valletta stretches the island itself—the island of green scrub, yellow corn in season, gray walls, and blue sky. Notabile (or Citta Vecchia, or Mdina), the former capital, lies some eight miles away, close to Rábat. Rábat itself, from its lofty position, has acquired importance in the scheme of the island's defenses.

There are some twenty or thirty other little towns. One of these, Musta, lies near the Victoria Lines. Musta may be small, but it boasts a church whose dome is the third largest in the world, after St. Peter's in Rome and St. Paul's in London.

Such is, or yesterday was, the little Island of Malta, girt about by the sparkling Mediterranean and guarded along the greater part of its coast by high honey-colored cliffs. The sunshine plays upon its white stone churches, houses, and palaces, casting deep purple shadows upon its narrow streets, where the horse-drawn *carroze*, a vehicle which resembles a small four-post bed on wheels, still competes with the automobile.

Yes, our island is bidding farewell, and some of us realize it, to more than a century of ancient peace and unbroken tranquillity. But Malta has faced such experiences before, and surmounted them triumphantly. So General Dobbie and his following, like Jean de la Valette and his Knights, having made every possible preparation with the resources at their disposal, now await the issue, with that quiet faith and confidence which are rooted only in a high cause.

CHAPTER V

THE SIEGE BEGINS

Mussolini's declaration of war was timed to take effect from midnight on June 10, 1940, and upon that day every sentient being in Malta, from the Governor downward, sat down to his evening meal with a consciousness that this would be his last hour of tranquillity for days unmeasured, and wondering when the first bomb would fall.

The period of suspense was brief. The sirens began to wail early next morning, and the first raiders arrived at 6:55 A.M.

From the point of view of moral effect, their appearance was well timed, for the male population of the island were already on the move and on their way to their day's work, and the women and children were thus left isolated at home. But there was no panic—the experience had the thrill of novelty; neither was there undue confusion. The official air-raid shelters were as yet far from completed, but all foregathered where they could, in catacombs, caves, and half-bored tunnels. Once under cover, they had immediate recourse, characteristically, to prayer.

The Italian bombers, escorted by fighters, flew high—so high, indeed, as to be almost invisible. At fifteen thousand feet the largest plane looks no bigger than a mosquito, as the inhabitants of London had regular cause to note during the protracted Battle of Britain a few months later. But the defenders got to business none the less. The anti-aircraft batteries opened up from all over the Island, and Faith, Hope, and Charity took the air.

The gunners were new to their weapons, and their targets were almost out of range, but they blazed away resolutely. As to the pilots of the three venerable Gladiators, they had had no previous experience of aërial combat at all. But they climbed up to ceiling level just the same and took on whatever they encountered. Both gunners and pilots needed practice, and they were out to get it.

They got it without difficulty, for no less than eight raids took place on the first day. The raiders followed roughly the same route on each occasion, coming in from the northwest and making their run over Valletta and the Harbour, which gave them a line to their two main objectives, the dockyards and the airdromes in the southeastern part of the island: with the airdromes most of them were perfectly familiar.

If the barrage could not repel them, it certainly disorganized their flight, for bombs were dropped all over the island, apparently haphazard, especially as the day wore on, which shows that the gunners were improving. The Gladiators, invisible somewhere up in the "central blue," aided gallantly in the work of dispersing enemy formations.

The first raid was made by ten bombers, arriving in two waves of seven and three. The last was the most powerful, since no less than twenty-five came over, in five waves of five. This final visitation took place about 7:30 in the evening. In the short intervals between raids a good deal of what may be called spontaneous sorting-out had been going on, and by the time the final All Clear went, friends and relatives had contrived to get together in the same shelter and fathers had joined their families.

It was now possible, by the light of the long summer evening, for the island defenders to assess the damage and work out the net result of more than twelve hours' almost continuous bombing against partly organized resistance.

The outstanding and most gratifying discovery was that three enemy aircraft had been brought down; the ground defenses had proved their worth and won their spurs. Incidentally, Faith, Hope, and Charity descended to earth unscathed, after a grueling but not unprofitable day.

Damage to the dockyard was slight. The Dockyard Defense Battery, manned by volunteer dockyard laborers recently converted into gunners, who were dressed in dungarees and carpet slippers, had done sterling work, and the anti-aircraft guns of the monitor H.M.S. *Terror* and one of the gunboats *Aphis* and *Ladybird*, which were lying in the Grand Harbour, had nobly seconded them.

General damage was widespread but inconsiderable, for the bombs were not of a heavy type, and the Maltese houses, built as they were entirely of stone, with walls sometimes five feet thick, were not easily breached. Among miscellaneous objects hit, however, were a cemetery, a hotel, and a new, unoccupied hospital. Twenty-three civilians had been killed, and seven soldiers.

British Information Services

"The Maltese are an intensely domestic people, devoted to the little homes and large families."

Irish pipers play for the presentation of the shamrock by Major General Beak to Irish troops.

Of all the Italian planes which had flown over Malta that day, only one had attacked anything in the nature of a selected target. This was an anti-aircraft gun of the Royal Malta Artillery, undergoing its baptism of fire. The plane swooped low and dropped a bomb. It exploded right by the gun—and the first five names have been entered in the Maltese Roll of Honor.

II

The first day's raiding brought little enlightenment to General Dobbie and his officers as to the enemy's plan of campaign.

The attack had appeared aimless and irresolute throughout. The bombs had been dropped anywhere and anyhow, and the bombers themselves had taken no risks in the way of low flying. Was it the Italian policy to demoralize the civil population rather than to destroy military objectives, or was this ineptitude merely due to Italian lack of initiative and drive?

Only the passage of time could answer that query. Meanwhile, there was plenty to do in another direction. The civil population of Malta were badly in need of a little moral and spiritual first aid. They had withstood the turmoil and stress of the first day's bombing with spirit and courage: the

excitement of it all had keyed them up. But they were mercurial people, and the second morning found them suffering from acute reaction.

This manifested itself in two ways. There was a general cessation of ordinary routine: instead of going out to work, men sat about at home, unwilling to be separated from their families during another raid. Shops remained closed. The streets of Valletta were deserted; public transport was at a standstill. A mass movement set in from the crowded area around the harbor to more remote and secure parts of the island. The Governor's evacuation scheme was coming into automatic operation: whole families streamed off to safety, some with billeting-tickets and some without, and for the next few days the Government was kept hard at work supervising the allotment of accommodation, preventing overcrowding, and organizing sanitary measures. It was no uncommon thing to find some thirty men, women, and children, of different households, all congregated in a single room, cooking, sleeping, and carrying on with the general routine of life in a space about twenty feet square.

Fortunately the second day was raid-free. Evidently the anti-aircraft gunners (and the Three Graces) had inspired the invaders with a most wholesome respect. Only one plane appeared, and that upon a reconnaissance flight. It was shot down.

On the third day raiding was resumed, and again there were eight visitations. Altogether in the course of this first week there were some thirty alerts, though not all materialized. By the end of that time, however, Malta was almost herself again. The evacuees began to settle down. The continued vigor of the defense preparations had inspired confidence, and general morale had been braced by a radio broadcast from the Governor himself, in which he praised the people of Malta for their fortitude, assuring them of complete deliverance in God's good time. They learned, too, with pride and gratification, that their conduct had been publicly commended in the House of Commons in London.

Men went back to work in the fields or coastal waters again; dockyard activity was resumed at full pressure. The old Maltese contempt for the Italian reasserted itself. If a bomb fell upon a farmer's tomato patch, he no longer took cover; he raised indignant hands to heaven and called upon a variety of saints to punish such impertinence.

III

A fortnight, three weeks, went by, and one thing became evident beyond all doubt: the Italians, or the Eye-ties, as Thomas Atkins prefers to call them, had missed a glorious opportunity of carrying Malta by storm at the first

rush. In the original state of the Island's defenses it would have been almost hopeless to attempt to repel an invading force, especially if it were landed at several judiciously selected points under bomber protection.

But like the invasion of England, the invasion of Malta was never attempted. The Eye-ties just kept on bombing, bombing; and bombing without supplementary action gets nobody anywhere. Moreover, a bombing campaign even on a "terror" scale does not demoralize a stout-hearted people; they merely get used to it. After a few weeks they readjust their life to its latest handicap and carry on. Human existence, even at the best of times, consists very largely of adapting oneself to the inconvenience of the moment: what matters one extra burden, more or less? That was how London and the British cities worked out their salvation a few months later.

So the futile campaign went on. Two attacks were delivered upon the first Sunday. The first lasted for more than an hour. Most of the population were in Church, but no congregation dispersed or panicked. They remained where they were, on their knees, and persevered in their devotions while the raiders were dispersed by the gunners and the indefatigable Three.

By the end of June the life of the island was almost normal. Work went on in the fields, schools, and University. The *Times of Malta*, the island's principal newspaper, was on sale daily. (A band of women, headed by a daughter of Lord Strickland, a former governor of the island, edited, set up, and published this paper without ever missing a single issue throughout the siege.) Whenever the sirens sounded, all civilians dutifully took cover, to emerge, cheerful and chattering, upon the All Clear. Later on they became less punctilious in complying with orders upon this subject, as we shall see.

A certain amount of night bombing began, and this gave the search-light operators the opportunity for which they had been longing. The number and power of the search-lights obviously startled and disconcerted the enemy, and the islanders were correspondingly reassured. Light piercing darkness has a curiously heartening effect upon the human spirit.

From the outset the authorities followed the policy of informing the population after each raid, or set of raids, of the exact number of casualties and the extent of the material damage. This was wise: to attempt to minimize facts which were already staring the island in the face would have been fatal to public confidence. Sometimes the day's Situation Report would be a happily blank sheet. After an average day it might announce that five raids had taken place and that most of the bombs had fallen upon Gozo, or into the sea, indicating that the defense had deflected the attack to some purpose, for Gozo lay three miles away and possessed no military objectives at all.

Many of the statements reported attacks on the Dockyard and the three airdromes, but at this stage with trifling effect. As often as not the Statement concluded by announcing that an enemy plane had been shot down and the pilot taken prisoner.

Sometimes the news would be more serious. The enemy had attacked more resolutely than usual. There had been some damage to buildings; ten civilians had been killed and seven wounded. But so long as the Maltese knew exactly where they stood in the matter of casualties, they were prepared to accept the situation with fortitude and philosophy.

All this while the British Navy continued to control the Mediterranean, and some reinforcements began to arrive. In July a Hurricane fighter figures in the Situation Report as having shot down an enemy bomber.

But on July 16th, a little tragedy occurred which profoundly moved every soul in the island. Upon that day a most gallant partnership was liquidated. One of the sturdy old Gladiators was shot down, and its pilot, Flying Officer Keeble, was killed—our first air casualty after five weeks of ceaseless daring and almost incredible immunity. But he did not die in vain, for during those testing weeks he and his fellows had scattered countless enemy formations and actually shot some bombers down.

One terror from the air Malta was providentially spared—the incendiary bomb. Or rather, Malta proved impervious to such. The houses are almost entirely constructed of stone, and solid stone at that. They possess little external woodwork, and no lath-and-plaster partitions. There was practically nothing to set fire to, and the incendiaries which rained down during the first few weeks merely fizzled out.

In London, most of the many acres of desolation to be seen to-day are due not so much to bombing as to burning. On one night in late 1940, during the raid over the heart of the City, before an adequate water supply had been instituted, fifteen hundred buildings were on fire at once.

But Malta proved incombustible. It was not long before the Eye-ties abandoned the use of incendiaries altogether.

IV

So the summer of 1940 passed, the Italians frittering away golden opportunities either through timidity or from a fatuous belief that you can render a stout-hearted people ripe for invasion by dropping explosives on the roofs of their homes. Never more than twenty-five bombers came over at one time, and the Maltese were becoming expert in the art of taking cover. The number of casualties diminished rather than increased, and the defenses

of the island grew steadily stronger. The sea routes were still open, and reinforcements arriving.

The anti-aircraft defenses, whether by the guns or in the air, had proved their worth. The RAF planes had compelled the enemy to send fighters over to escort their bombers, while the gunners had forced the bombers to stay too high in the air to select their targets with certainty. By the middle of July, eleven of these bombers were known to have been destroyed.

The naval units in the harbor were continuously active. Their anti-aircraft armament, especially that of the monitor H.M.S. *Terror*, proved a valuable reinforcement to that on land. Conditions in general, too, were still safe enough to continue employing the island as a naval base. Really resolute bombing could have converted the crowded harbors into a shambles, but so far this was not forthcoming. So the Navy carried on, using Malta as a base and port of call for both convoys and operational units.

Patrols issued forth incessantly, and more than one Italian submarine met its doom in the clear blue waters around the island coast. Italian merchant shipping was also rounded up, no longer because it might contain articles of contraband, but because it was now a legitimate prize of war. One of these vessels, with a British prize-crew on board, succeeded in scuttling herself on the way to Valletta and had to be beached, but the rest were brought safely in. Some of these were converted to British service, and one was suffered to depart for Italy, taking with her a party of Italian nationals whose room was considered preferable to their company.

Malta also became a most valuable reconnaissance base. The British Mediterranean Fleet were at sea, constantly seeking out the elusive Italian Navy, and the Sunderland flying-boats and Swordfish planes of the Fleet Air Arm, land-based on Malta, were able to afford valuable coöperation by spotting single targets or reconnoitering over Italian ports as far apart as Tripoli in North Africa and Taranto in the heel of Italy, as we shall shortly see. In July, when the first Hurricanes arrived, Sunderlands and Glenn Martins flew out to escort them in. Fighters, of course, are short-range aircraft and have to be shipborne to within a fixed distance of their base or target. Hence the evolution of the aircraft carrier, which to-day has developed into an indispensable adjunct to victory at sea.

But the Fleet Air Arm did not limit themselves to reconnaissance work. They flew far out to sea to meet and bring in the convoys. An unescorted vessel is a terribly vulnerable target. You may drop a thousand bombs on an inhabited city without achieving any decisive results, as the Germans discovered during their intensive raid on London and other British centers in 1940-41, but one direct hit on a transport or supply ship and all is over. So

whenever a convoy came within sixty miles of Malta it found the Fleet Air Arm there to cover its arrival.

And Malta began to provide the Eye-ties with yet another headache. Mysterious aircraft began to appear out of the blue over Italian territory and drop bombs on Taranto, or Corfu, or Tripoli, or Palermo, or even Naples. No signatures were attached to these missives, for it was not considered advisable to enlighten the enemy as to their source or port of origin. But as often as not they came from Malta. Indeed, even during the period of her worst tribulations, the island maintained a considerable bombing offensive, though little was said about it.

The arrival of the Hurricanes just mentioned greatly increased the hazards of the Italian bombers over Malta. Their growing disinclination to thrust their attacks right home was demonstrated by the fact that upon one occasion, when a raid by no less than nineteen enemy bombers took place over the island, all but six of their bombs were discharged into the sea. The thrifty and resourceful Maltese immediately put out in boats and gathered in a truly miraculous draught of fishes, thrown to the surface by this providential upheaval.

The mercurial spirit of Malta was on the upgrade again. Cheerful slogans began to be chalked on walls, and public feeling was gratified and heartened by personal messages of encouragement from King George VI and Britain's new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

The Axis was reduced for the time being to a redoubled campaign of propaganda. It announced the complete annihilation of the British Naval Base at Malta (including the sinking of H.M.S. *St. Angelo*, aforesaid) and the destruction of the Maltese coal mines.

There are no coal mines in Malta.

V

It will be timely at this point to say a word about the activities of the British Mediterranean Fleet, especially in so far as they affected the defense of Malta.

The collapse of France had revolutionized the Mediterranean situation yet again. The surrounding littoral, instead of being partly friendly, partly hostile, and partly neutral, was now hostile, neutral, or, most dangerous of all, of more than doubtful neutrality.

The Fleet itself was based on Alexandria, so in order to strengthen the western end of the Mediterranean and keep open the shipping lanes from the Straits of Gibraltar to Port Said at the mouth of the Canal, a second powerful force of capital ships under Admiral Sir James Somerville, with the aircraft

carrier *Ark Royal* and a flotilla of destroyers, known as "Force H," was assembled at Gibraltar.

With the detailed plan of Mediterranean naval operations at this stage this narrative is not greatly concerned, but it will be interesting and helpful to take some note of the strategy employed by each side. Admiral Cunningham's sole and obvious task was to engage and destroy the Italian battle fleet at the earliest opportunity, thus liberating his own ships for badly needed operations elsewhere. The Italians were chiefly concerned to preserve that fleet intact and to take full advantage of their possession of innumerable air bases around the Mediterranean and in the Ægean to bomb the British fleet out of existence.

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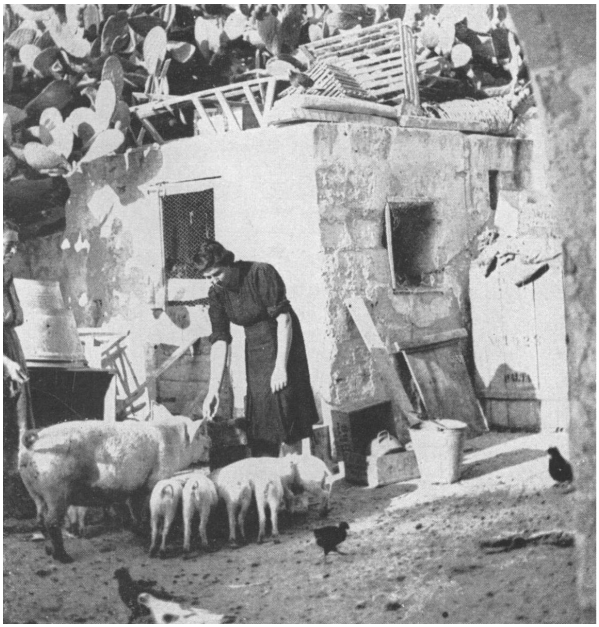
A statue of Queen Victoria—symbol of the Pax Britannica—looks out upon the ruins of Valletta.



The women of Malta go about their daily tasks throughout the siege.

The obvious and ultimate British reply to this plan of campaign was to attack the Italian bombers with fighters based on aircraft carriers. But it was some time before this policy could be carried into full effect, owing to shortage of these particular vessels. As a result, the British Navy, during the early months of the Mediterranean struggle, whether it was exposing itself in an unavailing attempt to lure the Italian Navy into action, or escorting transport and supply ships along the sea-lanes, was perpetually subjected to the attentions of the Italian Air Force.

Admiral Cunningham at this time possessed only one aircraft carrier, the *Eagle*, a veteran some twenty years old. Admiral Somerville, with the famous *Ark Royal* in his H Force, was better off.

It was Malta, or rather the necessity of keeping Malta supplied, which brought about one of the earliest naval clashes of this period.

Two convoys were due to leave Alexandria for Malta early in July, and Admiral Cunningham took the Fleet to sea in order to protect these from Italian interference. About the same time a powerful Italian fleet, consisting of three battleships, six cruisers, and seven destroyers set out on a northward course from Benghazi, after escorting a fleet of transports from Italy to the Libyan coast. This fleet was spotted by a reconnoitering plane from Malta—

could it have been one of the immortal Three?—which immediately reported to Admiral Cunningham.

The result was a sea battle fought under conditions entirely new in naval warfare—an attack by surface craft supported by torpedo-carrying aircraft. The latter were Swordfishes, launched in a continual stream from the flight deck of the *Eagle*. But it was the British Commander-in-Chief who actually started the "party," as the British sailor is accustomed to call these affairs. Opening fire at extreme range from his flagship, the *Warspite*, he actually scored a direct hit on the Italian battleship *Cesare* from a distance of about thirteen miles!

This was quite enough for the Italian fleet, which adopted tactics destined ultimately to become a second nature. It wrapped itself in an impenetrable smoke-screen and made for the Italian coast, from which in due course land-based bombers attacked the pursuing British ships. The enemy fleet having disappeared, Admiral Cunningham resumed his course for Malta, picked up his convoys, and set out for Alexandria again.

He was pursued throughout the trip by Italian aircraft. Some four hundred bombs were dropped on and around the British fleet, which, however, suffered no damage or casualty save in the case of the cruiser *Gloucester*, upon which the captain and eighteen officers and men were killed.

So ended the first test of the new technic of naval warfare. It was an inconclusive test, for the Italians had not stayed to fight the torpedo bombers, while the British, with no aircraft carrier to rely on but the overworked and venerable *Eagle*, had been unable so far to press those attacks home. Thus, owing to Italian evasive action and British lack of hitting power, Mediterranean sea warfare amounted at first to little more than a stalemate. On September 3, 1940, after three months of what may be called naval hide-and-seek, Britain had lost in the Eastern Mediterranean the cruiser *Calypso* and the destroyer *Hostile*, mined. Five submarines had not returned to their base. The Italians had lost one powerful cruiser, the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, and sixteen submarines. And Malta stood practically unscathed.

To all appearances, bombing, whether by land or sea, had failed to justify the hopes of those who initiated it and the fears of those who had to endure it. It seemed, quite literally, to be an exploded idea.

But German dive-bombers had not yet appeared over the Mediterranean.

CHAPTER VI

CUNNINGHAM AND WAVELL

The year 1940 drew to a close—perhaps the most terrible and testing year in the long history of the British people. While her sailors, soldiers, and airmen, alone, outnumbered, and still only half-equipped, fought doggedly in their respective elements, Britain had lost nearly forty thousand civilian lives, chiefly in London, through intensive and indiscriminate night bombing—and was destined to lose many more.

The Battle of the Atlantic raged. By the end of the year the shortage of food, petrol, and other supplies brought across the Atlantic under ever-increasing hazards had become a serious problem, and with the loss of French coöperation it was to become more serious still.

To purely military vicissitudes of fortune the British people have been for centuries inured, but for the whole civil population to find itself in the front line was something entirely new. Yet all rose to the occasion, men, women, and children, with a fortitude and philosophy—frivolity, even—which have become a matter of history.

And they had good cause—for the Battle of Britain, so-called, had already been won. In August of that same year had taken place, though none realized it at the time, one of the decisive battles of world history—and the first ever fought out in the air—in which, for the best part of a month, the Royal Air Force fighters went up day after day and shot the invader out of the skies, with all London gazing up and crying encouragement.

During that incredible battle two thousand two hundred and ninety-seven German bombers and fighters were sent crashing to earth, not counting the lame ducks which may or may not have got home. The British loss was seven hundred and forty-four fighters, of whose pilots three hundred and twenty-four contrived to bail out safely. In other words, this victory, which saved the British Empire and perhaps shaped the future of civilization for another thousand years, was gained at the cost of some four hundred young lives. Some day, it is to be hoped, every one of these names will be set up somewhere in letters of gold.

No wonder, after that, that Londoners felt they could take it—could take anything. The really unhappy and anxious folk during this period were the British Forces serving at sea and overseas, wondering, in an agony of uncertainty, as news came over the radio each morning of nightly

devastation in London or some other populous center, what had happened to their own particular little households. In Malta the anxiety was so acute that General Dobbie made a special appeal to the Government at home to devise some system by which next-of-kin in Malta might be informed instantly of calamitous news. To men assured of this, no news would be good news. The assurance was duly forthcoming.

II

Meanwhile, before the year was out, the Mediterranean campaign took a new and momentous turn. Upon September 13th the Eye-ties began their long advertised invasion of Egypt. They got as far as Sidi Barrani, just inside the border, where we can leave them for the moment, secure in the knowledge that they will get no further. General Wavell had been steadily reinforced, even though his troops had to circumnavigate most of Africa and participate in the Battle of the Atlantic to reach him. The odds against him were now not more than two to one, which meant that he was almost in a position to attack.

Six weeks later Mussolini enlarged his already fatal commitments by delivering an ultimatum to Greece which no self-respecting nation could have accepted, and yet another war began.

The British Navy found itself once more in possession of an ally in the Mediterranean, but the advantage of the help of the tiny Greek Navy was heavily offset by the fresh responsibilities incurred. In addition to the defense and maintenance of Malta, British transports and supply ships coming to the aid of Greece and Crete must now be piloted and convoyed through the waters of the Ægean Sea, with its innumerable islands—all bases for the enemy's submarines and aircraft.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to get to work and administer to the Italian Navy a blow which would paralyze its activities for some time to come. Since that Navy was at the moment securely ensconced in the great naval harbor of Taranto, behind defenses well-nigh impenetrable from the sea, it was decided to entrust the delivery of the blow to the Fleet Air Arm, or Goldfish Gang, as they were affectionately termed by their Naval colleagues in recognition of the fact that each plane of the Fleet Air Arm was popularly esteemed to be worth its weight in gold. Needless to say, this charge was joyfully accepted.

The first essential of a successful air raid is a full, methodical, and accurate reconnaissance of the area to be raided. This task was brilliantly accomplished by the Royal Air Force aircraft based on Malta. These flew over Taranto day after day, despite anything that the Italians could do to stop

them, and in due course a complete composite (or "mosaic") photograph of the harbor, with the exact position of each ship clearly indicated, was placed in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief. The hearts of Admiral Cunningham and his Staff must have leaped when they examined it, for a brief survey revealed the fact that here was practically the whole of the Italian battle fleet conveniently disposed in a single area—all Mussolini's eggs in one basket. Luck at last!

The other essential of a Fleet Air Arm raid is an aircraft carrier to take off from and, if fortune favors, to return to. The gallant old *Eagle* had recently suffered certain internal injuries from near-misses and was not available, but happily the Admiral now had under his command, ready and eager to take her place, the very last word in aircraft carriers, the *Illustrious*, a vessel destined, as we shall see, to loom large and glorious in the epic of Malta.

The Taranto "party" was timed to take place on November 11th—an auspicious date, ironically enough, in both British and Italian annals. But upon this occasion, it was realized, the auspiciousness must be of an entirely unilateral character, whatever happened.

What did happen is now a matter of history. On the day after the raid the photographers of Malta again appeared over Taranto—to check up on results, this time. When the finished products of their excursion were submitted to the Commander-in-Chief, it was found that the total spoils of the Goldfish Gang amounted to three battleships (in other words, half of Italy's capital strength) . . . two of them burning and beached and the third completely disabled—and three cruisers; not counting the destruction of an oil storage depot and the burning of the seaplane base.

Only one plane of the Fleet Air Arm failed to return to the *Illustrious*—a unilateral victory indeed.

Admiral Cunningham's subsequent signal of congratulation was characteristically terse. "*Illustrious* maneuver well executed," it said. It certainly was, for the success of that one night's raid enabled the Commander-in-Chief to dispense with two of his battleships, badly wanted elsewhere, and insured the continuance of the flow of reinforcements and supplies to Malta and Greece. In its way the Battle of Taranto was as far-reaching in its effects upon Mediterranean strategy as Nelson's victory at Aboukir Bay had been a hundred and forty years before.

III

The news of Taranto was received with joy in Malta, mingled with a sense of pride that the island should have served as base for such a victory.

The islanders themselves had by this time become acclimatized to their new existence. In six months of siege they had heard two hundred and ten alerts, of which about half had proved false alarms. It had now been rendered possible to get the entire population underground during a raid, with a minimum of two square feet of standing space for each occupant of the shelter. There was no illumination, for the island's fuel resources were limited and electric light was too precious a luxury to be squandered. But these close and cheerless quarters were cheerfully accepted, especially since the raids seldom lasted long, and shelterers soon contracted the habit of dispersing quickly to their homes or their work at the sound of the All Clear. Indeed, the chief difficulty of the authorities, since familiarity breeds contempt, was to induce many people to take cover at all—as harassed policemen in far-away London were discovering during the daylight raids incessant at that time.

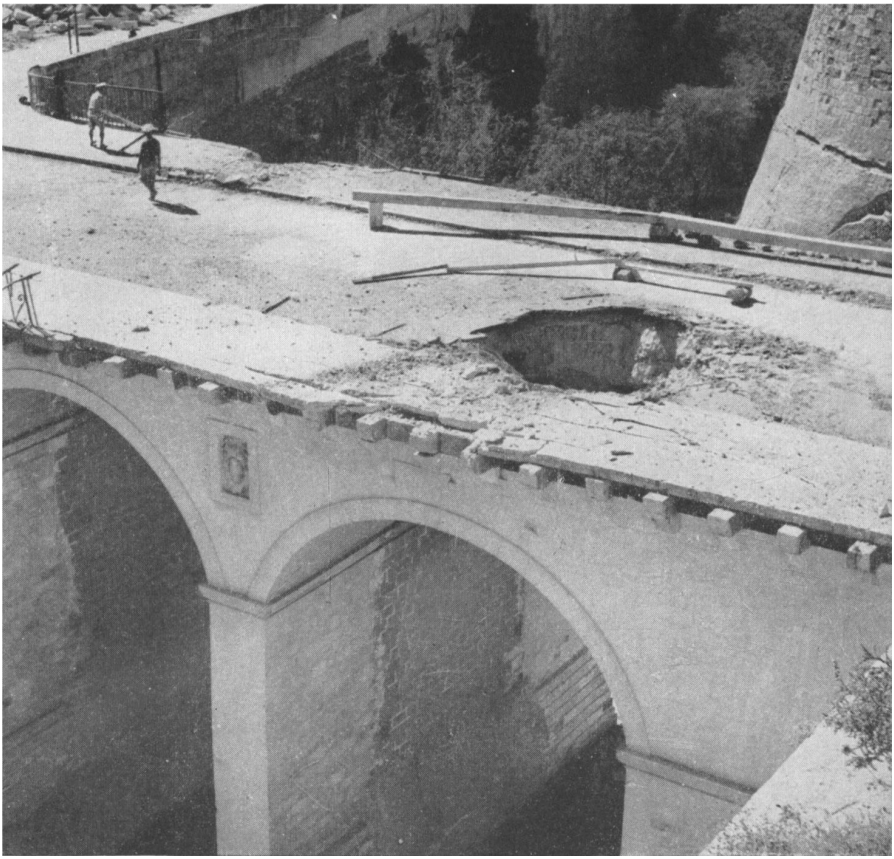
The Maltese maintained as far as possible their daily routine and traditional customs. The Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, a high occasion in the Maltese calendar, was duly celebrated. The day was marked by entire absence of air raids; perhaps the Italian bombers were taking time off for a similar observance of the *Festa*.

General Dobbie had by this time completed, as far as energy and foresight could provide for them, the material and moral defenses of his little community. A Volunteer Defense Force had been raised among the older men, and the Boy Scouts of Malta had furnished two Cadet Battalions to the Royal Malta Regiment, of whom King George VI was now Colonel-in-Chief. Every effort had been made to increase the production of home-grown food supplies; the race-course and polo-grounds stood thick with corn.

The economic situation had been regularized. The Maltese husbandman, like the French peasant, likes to keep his money where he can lay his hand on it, especially in time of national stress or peril, so there had been a run on the banks by clients who were firmly convinced that if a bomb were to drop on their own particular branch their savings would be gone for ever. So many silver and copper coins, too, were hoarded away that there was a severe shortage. The situation was adequately dealt with by a reasoned broadcast appeal from the Governor in person and the publication of an order which decreed that previous notice must be given to the bank by any person proposing to draw out more than five pounds in cash.

In all this work the Governor received the invariable and invaluable assistance of the Archbishop of Malta and the Catholic clergy, whose labors for the comfort and enlightenment of their flock had never ceased. During one of the earliest raids, we are told, the parish priest of Senglea paced up

and down the main street, reading the Office to calm and fortify his flock. A general dispensation from abstaining on Fridays or fasting during Lent had already been issued: with every man and woman engaged in arduous war work there was no need for any artificial mortifying of the flesh. In other respects the spiritual life of the Maltese pursued its pious round. Every workman went to confession before beginning his day's work, leaving his bed before five o'clock in the morning to do so. The double daylight-saving ordinance instituted during the summer months must have proved a severe test of his devotion.



British Information Services

PORTE REALE BRIDGE

Its heavy masonry—once a protection for homeless Maltese families in the daytime—has been penetrated by an enemy bomb.

Good news continued to come from outside. On December 6th the valiant little Greek Army actually drove the Italians from Greece into Albania. Three days later General Wavell took the offensive in North Africa and recaptured Sidi Barrani. He did not stop there: by December 16th the Italians had been thrust out of Egypt altogether.

Meanwhile the Battle of the Atlantic raged, and London was bombed every night.

On November 5th Franklin Delano Roosevelt had been elected President of the United States for a third term.

So ended 1940.

IV

As 1941 dawned, Britain still stood up, alone and single-handed, against vast odds. But the skies were clearing a little. The Royal Navy dominated the surface of the ocean, if not its depths; the civil population remained entirely unshaken by their ordeal. Production was mounting. The Lease-Lend Act was signed in Washington early in March. Lastly, from North Africa, there was good news, great news, of a positive kind.

General Sir Archibald Wavell, or Archie Wavell, as he is called by his intimates—and these appear to include all columnists and most of the people who travel by suburban trains—was Britain's first big military discovery of the war, or perhaps the first British General to get a real chance to show what he could do.

He had had a long and varied schooling. Originally an officer in a famous Highland regiment, the Black Watch, he served in the First World War as one of the Chiefs of Staff to Lord Allenby, when that great soldier and lineal successor to the Crusaders of old drove the Turk out of Palestine and restored Jerusalem to its rightful owners. In 1937 Wavell was given the delicate and difficult post of Commander of the British Forces in that same country, planted there under a Mandate of the League of Nations to maintain an even balance between Jew and Arab. (It will be remembered that General Dobbie had preceded him in the same hornet's nest in 1929.) He won the respect of Arab and Jew alike.

In appearance he is of middle height, and sturdy. He lost the use of one eye in 1917, in the Salient of Ypres, and keeps the vision of the other perpetually reinforced by an immovable and impressive monocle. His speech is terse and his manner informal, but to one meeting him even for a short time the conviction presently occurs: "Here is a soldier who knows what he is talking about and, rarer still, can talk about what he knows."

As a soldier his outstanding merits are, first, that he is a profound student of military science and likes his knowledge as far as possible to be first-hand. Shortly before the present war he visited Russia at the head of a Military Mission and saw the Soviet experiments with parachute troops. He was the only foreign soldier up to that time to express open belief in the possibilities of the new arm. Second, he believes in *l'audace, et toujours l'audace*: he suffers from no defense complex.

So little did he suffer in 1941 that, though still far inferior to the Italians in strength, he proceeded to bundle them back and along the coast of Libya (with the hearty coöperation of the Naval and Air Forces based on Alexandria and Malta) without ceremony or avoidable delay. He captured Bardia early in January and Tobruk barely three weeks later, then Derna, and finally Benghazi and El Agheila, half-way to Tripoli. By this time his army had gone far to adjust the numerical balance between the Eye-ties and themselves, having captured over one hundred and thirty thousand prisoners, most of whom are now in India.

Beyond El Agheila Wavell was fated not to penetrate, for reasons which will presently and tragically make themselves apparent.

For the present it is high time we get back to Malta.

CHAPTER VII

LUFTWAFFE vs. ILLUSTRIOUS

The day before Christmas, 1940, was a gala day in Malta, for the Maltese were entertaining a visitor—the Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet himself, no less. It was the first time that Admiral Cunningham had found occasion to visit the island since he had sailed away from it nearly eight months ago, to take up the challenge of Mussolini's declaration of war.

As the great *Warspite*, the flagship of the Fleet, steamed majestically into the Grand Harbour, every roof-top, every battery, every point of vantage was occupied by a seething multitude of spectators, shouting, waving, and making high holiday. Not only were they welcoming their beloved chieftain to his old headquarters, but they were, perhaps unconsciously, celebrating their own successful resistance to eight months of trial and suspense.

Then the battle fleet sailed away to Alexandria, leaving Malta in renewed heart, sturdily prepared for whatever fresh hazards the coming year might bring.

II

These were not long in declaring themselves, for presently the news broke that Hitler, once more at the end of his patience—with Mussolini and the Aeronautica Regia, or Italian Air Force, this time—was sending the Luftwaffe to Italy.

It was realized at once that as far as Malta was concerned the siege was now only just beginning, and the defenders of the island braced themselves, with hearts beating a shade faster, for the first onset of the German dive-bombers, with whose methods they had long been made familiar by both the written and the spoken word.

But those were some time in coming. The Luftwaffe had other work, priority work, to do first. Hitler was massing troops in the Balkans for the invasion of Greece from the north, and the present function of the German bombers was to destroy British Mediterranean shipping—to intercept the reinforcements and cut off the supplies that were being convoyed to the British forces in Greece and Malta. Malta itself could wait.

All of which leads us to the story, the saga, of the great aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, which we have already encountered benignly presiding over the

Taranto "party" in the previous November.

Upon January 10, 1941, the *Illustrious* was at sea with the Fleet, some hundred miles west of Malta. She had on board a consignment of Fulmar and Swordfish aircraft, sorely needed to reinforce the air defenses of the island. A squadron of these had just taken off from her flight deck, bound for one of the Maltese airdromes, when a formation of forty or fifty hostile bombers appeared from the north and swooped down upon the Fleet in a series of dive-bombing attacks.

There was no need to ask who they were, or to take note of the swastikas marked upon their wings. No Italian pilots could have handled their craft with such insolent skill, or such ruthless determination, as these. The Germans had arrived over the Mediterranean at last.

The bombing concentrated itself mainly, and quite correctly from a tactical point of view, upon the *Illustrious*, for she was at once the most vulnerable and the most valuable target. Destroy her, and you deprived the Fleet of its air-defense cover or umbrella. You also destroyed a goose which laid, or rather carried, golden eggs, and such birds were all too rare in the British naval barnyard at that time.

The first attack upon the great ship was made by two torpedo bombers, but she was superbly handled by her Commander, who, by an adroit change of course, avoided both torpedoes. Fighter aircraft promptly took off from her deck and chased their now defenseless assailants back to the protecting shores of Sicily.

Then came the dive-bombers—Junkers, a great cloud of them—in the most concentrated attack of the day, and the *Illustrious* reeled under their impact.

From above, a large aircraft carrier presents an almost ideal bombing area. Her vast flight deck, the size of a small football ground and extending over the whole of the ship's hull, lies open and exposed, featureless except for the bridge, which is not a bridge at all but a tower-like steel erection upon the starboard side, from which all the ship's movements are controlled. There are no hatches or companionways—only an electrically operated platform which is employed to raise the aircraft from the hangar below. When at rest, this platform lies flush with the deck and forms part of the landing space.

A large proportion of the ship's internal economy is occupied by the hangar itself. The ship's company is accommodated a deck below. The aloof and sacred quarter-deck, or what serves for one, is somewhere forward, under the flight deck. The ship's engineers and stokers work at a lower depth still—a service which calls for cold-drawn courage of a type at which the

imagination boggles, especially in a vessel of deep draught and without defensive armor against torpedo attack.

The anti-aircraft armament is disposed around the edges of the flight deck, in a continuous open gallery, or alleyway, overhanging the water. The guns can thus be operated without interfering with the alighting or take-off of the aircraft.

It was upon such a target that the German dive-bombers now came screaming down, and the *Illustrious* disappeared from the view of the rest of the Fleet in a cloud of smoke and spray caused by direct hits and near-misses. When next seen she had hauled out of the line, grievously stricken and on fire in more than one place. But she continued to fight. Every member of the crew knew exactly what to do, which is the secret of victory in all human enterprises. The fire-fighters got methodically to work, while the gunners maintained their barrage and the navigating officer made skilful avoiding movements. Others shored up those parts of the flight deck which had collapsed under the bombing.

The hangar itself was on fire, and seriously. What was more, aircraft were assembled there whose tanks were filled with highly volatile octane gasoline, and a devastating explosion might be expected at almost any moment. Yet the dogged, asbestos-clad fire-fighters penetrated into the hangar again and again, and though they could not extinguish the flames, they succeeded in confining them to a single section.

Overhead, two young British naval pilots, who had long since shot away all their ammunition, circled cheerfully around among the dive-bombers, frequently diverting one of these from its target by sheer, intrepid, crazy bluff.

Down below in the boiler-room the ventilating fans were feeding to the engineers and stokers not draughts of sweet, clean sea-air, but clouds of black smoke, mingled with fumes from the chemical fire-extinguishers. But steam had to be maintained whatever happened. Drawing gasping breaths through wet cloths tied over their mouths, the men worked on and the ship drove forward.

The German bombers had arrived about half an hour after noon, and they delivered six concentrated attacks upon the *Illustrious* in the course of the next three hours. Perhaps the most critical of these attacks was the third. It was no more savage than the others; in fact, it was beaten off by the aircraft still available, and most of the bombs fell into the sea. But the *Illustrious* herself was at the moment completely out of control. Her steering gear was crippled, and she was swinging and yawing in wide circles. Presently her Commander contrived to maintain direction by almost

miraculous manipulation of his engines alone, and his ship was able to resume her course toward Malta.

The last attack took place quite close to the island—a combination of high-level and dive-bombing—but it was beaten off like the rest, and as night began to fall, the *Illustrious*, escorted by Admiralty tugs, limped grandly into the harbor—battered, broken, burning, but undefeated.

And the enemy had not gone unscathed. The British gunners and fighters between them had shot down nine German aircraft and had shot up a further seven so badly as to render their return home a matter of hope rather than expectation.

"*From the fact that the ship was saved and brought into harbor*," observes the Official Report, "*it is evident that the entire ship's organization, the centralized control of damage, and the initiative and energy shown by all, was of a very high order*."

Which is what Euclid would call a self-evident proposition—and incidentally a nicely calculated exercise in understatement.

III

The *Illustrious* was in harbor, and so was the Malta section of the great convoy, carrying precious supplies for Malta and Greece, which the Fleet had been escorting. One other naval casualty had also contrived to make port, the destroyer *Gallant*, which was towed in minus her bows, having covered a distance of a hundred and twenty miles with nothing between the ship's company and a watery grave but a single flimsy bulkhead—a notable test of seamanship and sang-froid.

But in these days of aërial warfare a ship in harbor is no safer than a ship at sea, and it was obviously but a matter of time before the Junkers would be overhead again. The Fleet had continued on its way with the Greece-bound section of the convoy, so for the defense of the *Illustrious* and the supply ships in the Grand Harbour the island would have to depend upon the *Illustrious* herself and its own resources, which were now considerable.

The old monitor *Terror*, so long a trusted and familiar feature of the harbor defenses, was no longer there. A veteran of the First World War, with a great record of service off the Belgian coast, she had emerged from her retirement in 1939 and of late, as we know, had rendered invaluable aid and comfort in keeping the Italian bombers at a respectable altitude over Valletta Harbour. Now she was being employed as a unit of what was known as the Inshore Squadron, a queer assortment of ships of shallow draught engaged in harassing the Italian Army retreating before Wavell along the northern coast of Africa. She had recently participated in a most audacious attack

upon the port of Bardia, engaging the shore batteries with her six-inch guns while the tiny *Aphis*, a converted Liverpool ferry steamer, slipped into the harbor and sank three ships. But it was the old monitor's last outing. She was dive-bombed and sunk off Tobruk on February 25th and went to her rest full of years and glory.

Fortunately the Luftwaffe, with one of those strange lapses into inertia to which German military mentality is prone at important moments, gave the island five days' respite before returning to the attack. During that precious period men worked furiously to unload the supply ships and get the *Illustrious* ready for sea again, for the latter was badly needed in the Eastern Mediterranean, to furnish air-cover to the Ægean operations.

This breathing-space also made it possible to lay to rest, with appropriate ceremony, the bodies of those members of the ship's company who had given their lives in the epic encounter of January 10th. After a solemn memorial service all were conveyed out to sea, and there, in accordance with naval tradition, committed to the waters which had cradled them.

It was the last tranquil moment that the island was to know for many months, for upon January 15th a German plane appeared over Valletta, obviously on reconnaissance—though by some odd, unfathomable freak of the Nazi mind, it bore Red Cross markings. Bombers came over the same night, but there was no attack; doubtless the pilots were making a methodical survey of their new targets before proceeding to serious business.

Next day, January 16th, the storm burst, and Malta saw something quite new in its experience of aërial warfare—the dive-bomber in action. About a hundred of these came roaring across from Sicily, arriving in successive waves, with the Grand Harbour, and in particular, the *Illustrious* as their targets. It was impossible not to admire the nerve and courage of the German pilots, swooping down almost to the muzzles of the pompoms which defended the ship, yet contriving to drop their bombs with apparently effortless accuracy. Still, they were not quite accurate enough. They hit the *Illustrious* only once, though they hit almost everything else in her neighborhood.

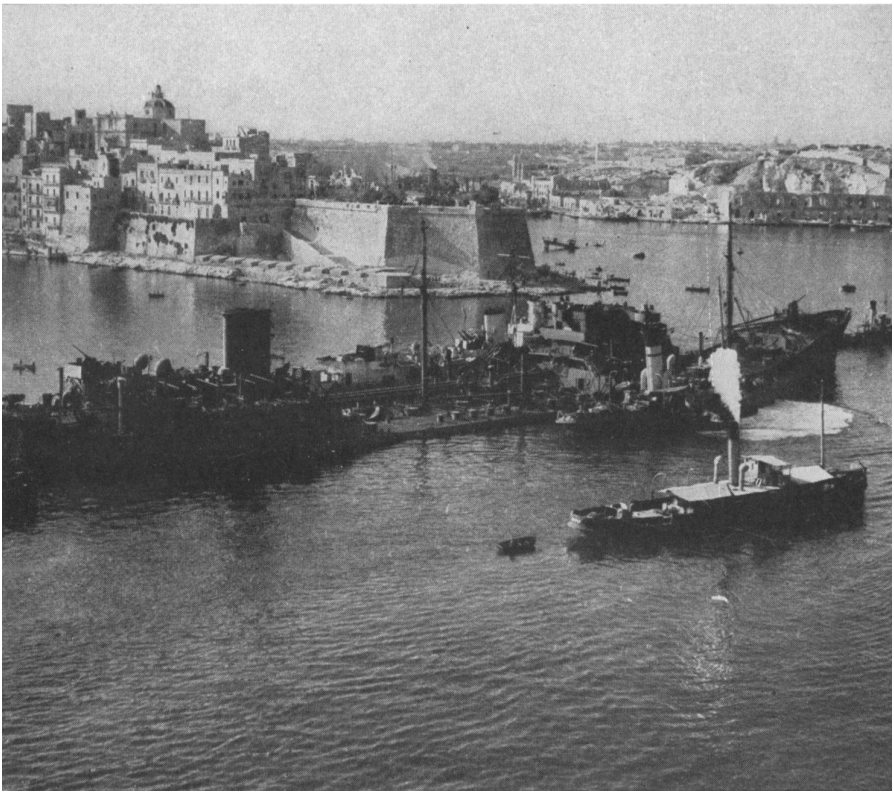
The Dockyard itself suffered severely and was to suffer further. But of course no one complained of this. Both *Illustrious* and Dockyard were legitimate military objectives, and for once in a way the German bombers were operating within the recognized rules of warfare.

But they had no walk-over. The full force of the island barrage greeted them, and was maintained without pause for the whole of the visitation. The din was terrific: never before had an attack so intensive been delivered, and never before had all the island batteries spoken together.

Only one merchant ship of any size or importance was hit. A bomb landed amidships and penetrated to her engine room, thirty-eight casualties resulting. Had she been hit anywhere else the further defense of Malta might conceivably have been rendered superfluous, for she was carrying no less than four thousand tons of ammunition—enough to disrupt the Grand Harbour and all its defenses at a single detonation.

But the general damage inflicted was heavy and grievous. Many public buildings were badly damaged and residential districts reduced to rubble. Most of their inhabitants were safely underground, but not all, unfortunately. The ineffectiveness of the Italian bombing during 1941 had lured many of the islanders back from their dispersion billets to their old homes in the Three Cities, with results now fatal to themselves. Many had to be dug out of the ruins of their shattered houses.

Nevertheless, the Maltese rose to the occasion, as stoutly—under far more testing conditions—as they had risen under the first of the Italian raids. The gunners of the Royal Malta Artillery worked unflinchingly. Women exposed themselves freely, rendering first aid to the stricken and volunteering for hospital and ambulance service. The populace remained calm and courageous.



British Information Services

GRAND HARBOUR

Another Malta convoy gets through and a crippled tanker is met by Maltese tugs. Beyond rises Valletta with its tier upon tier of white, flat-roofed buildings—a "densely populated quarry."

On board the *Illustrious* herself, volunteer gunner-crews, composed of officers, petty officers, and able seamen, worn out though they were by their recent experience, stood up to every swoop of the dive-bombers, while artisans, engine-room artificers, and working-parties toiled desperately at the ship's repairs below. The Dockyard Defense Battery roared defiance. No one let up. One man, a Maltese Admiralty diver, who had been detailed to inspect the hull of the *Illustrious* below the waterline, proceeded calmly with his job. He was afterward decorated.

Still, the longest day must have an end, and in due course the raiders whirled away and disappeared over the horizon. They had wrought havoc on a fair and gleaming city, but they had not destroyed the *Illustrious*.

Not a single one of the island fighter planes had been lost, but not less than ten of the Nazi dive-bombers had been brought down by the anti-aircraft gunnery or fighter attack. Indeed, the number must have been far larger, for where an aërial battle takes place over a tiny island the majority of the aircraft shot down must of necessity fall into the sea, and so can not be counted or claimed as "certainties."

Two facts are significant. The first is that the Germans, in their official action, described the Malta barrage as the most deadly that they had so far encountered; the second, that during the next day German reconnaissance planes were observed scouring the waters between Malta and Sicily, obviously in search of missing machines not included in the Maltese estimate.

IV

That was the first day. The second, the 17th, was raid-free, and both sides were busy, the Germans with reconnaissance, the islanders in taking stock of the damage to life and property.

The first and most pressing need was to get the whole, not just a part, of the civilian population underground during the next raid. Nearly a hundred men, women, and children had been killed upon the first day: if they had been in the officially provided shelters there need have been no civilian casualties at all, for the shelters had proved themselves impervious to bombing attack. So Senglea, Vittoriosa, and Cospicua were evacuated for the second time, thoroughly and finally, and every one in Malta was provided, willy-nilly, with adequate coverage. As a result of these prompt and drastic measures the civilian death-rate during the devastating months which were to follow was destined to become almost negligible. Indeed, as it turned out, practically the whole of the casualties were confined to the first day.

It was as well that these steps were taken at once, for the Germans returned next day, and again on the day after that, the 19th. This last was perhaps the heaviest raid of all. (The attack on the 18th was directed chiefly on the island airdromes—a tribute to the prowess of the RAF on the 16th. Heavy damage was done both to runways and to barracks, but not to the fighters, which were aloft as usual.)

In the savage onslaught of Sunday, the 19th, the main objective was once more the *Illustrious*. Once more she was hit, but once more the bombers failed to inflict a mortal wound. A change in tactics was noticeable, too. The German pilots seemed disinclined to dive as low as previously—a tribute of growing respect to the anti-aircraft gunners—and their wave formation,

whether by accident or by design, was much looser and more inclined to disperse itself.

Material damage was again very heavy. Of all the devastation brought about during this period of German bombing—it lasted from January to May—almost one-third was inflicted within the fourteen days of what may be called the *Illustrious* phase, most of it in the immediate neighborhood of the ship's berth: the Dockyard, that is, and the Three Cities. What distressed and enraged the Maltese more than anything else was the destruction of their churches. The lovely Church of Our Lady of the Victories, on Senglea, built by de la Valette himself at the founding of Valletta, had been grievously injured in the very first raid on the 17th: on the 19th it perished utterly.

But resistance was as heroic as before. The anti-aircraft batteries roared unceasing defiance; the RAF soared upward, undaunted as ever. By their joint efforts that Sunday afternoon nineteen enemy aircraft were sent hurtling to earth. The island losses during these three raids were three fighter planes.

V

On the next day came another lull, followed by another on the next day. What was the enemy up to? Had he had enough, or was he massing reinforcements for a final and decisive onslaught?

The tension was agonizing, for the best of reasons. Repairs to the *Illustrious* had progressed so far that another forty-eight hours would see her ready for sea. Every moment of immunity from further bombing was precious beyond computation. The workmen wrought furiously at their task, while a thousand eyes were strained skyward and every ear listened feverishly for the first wail of the sirens.

But the sirens remained mute, and yet another day crept by. The fourth day dawned, Thursday, the twenty-third of January. The great ship was almost ready now: within a few hours, under Providence, she could slip out of the harbor at nightfall and be on her way.

That afternoon the Governor held one of the regular sessions of the Council of Malta, in the Governor's Palace on Kingsway. Sir William Dobbie himself sat at the head of the long table; on either side were ranged the Councillors of the island, twenty in number, of whom two were British, the Deputy Governor and the Legal Secretary.

Seldom had there been so much to discuss, so many vital and speedy decisions to be taken. Throughout the winter afternoon the Council applied itself diligently to the matters in hand, but it is to be surmised that wits at times went wandering—down to the Grand Harbour. Perhaps the burden of

suspense lay most heavily upon the Governor himself, for as Commander-in-Chief of the island he alone could realize the terrible importance of getting the *Illustrious* out of Malta and back to the Fleet. But he sat on with the rest, waiting for the coming of darkness—or for the voice of the sirens. . . .

A servant entered, turned on the lights, and drew the thick curtains.

"Blackout time," said some one. "She's off—*and* safe!"

And it was so. Hitler had missed the bus again.

VI

Upon February 9th the Prime Minister of England, addressing the House of Commons in London, was able to say:

"I dare say you have noticed the very significant air battle fought out over Malta a fortnight ago.

"The Germans sent a Geschwader of dive-bombers to Sicily, and they seriously injured our new aircraft carrier, the *Illustrious*. As this wounded ship was sheltering in Malta Harbour, they concentrated upon it their force so as to beat it to pieces.

"They were met by the batteries of Malta, the Fleet Air Arm, and the Royal Air Force, and in two or three days had lost, out of one hundred and fifty dive-bombers, upwards of ninety—fifty of which were destroyed in the air and forty from the ground.

"Although the *Illustrious* in a damaged condition was one of the greatest prizes of the air and naval war, the Germans accepted defeat. They would not come any more.

"All the necessary repairs were made to the *Illustrious* in Malta Harbour, and she steamed safely to Alexandria under her own power, at twenty-three knots."

It may be added that when the *Illustrious* had carried out her allotted duties in the Eastern Mediterranean, she proceeded across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, there to receive a complete overhaul and refit in the hospitable security of an American Navy Yard. Here she was presented with a new ship's bell, in place of her own, gashed by bomb splints. Six members of her crew married American girls.

CHAPTER VIII

MUSSOLINI TRIES AGAIN

After the departure of the *Illustrious* the German dive-bombers continued to harry the island, though on not quite such a savage scale. They devoted particular attention to the three airdromes, both to the machines based on them and to their actual defenses.

The garrison of the island was handicapped at first in two ways. One was a shortage of the labor required to construct adequate shelters for planes and personnel. The military forces available were as yet insufficient to provide the necessary working-parties; they were fully occupied in their proper duty of intensive military training and of coastal and air defense. There were no working-parties to spare for the airdromes, for civilian labor was required to unload the convoys. For some time the only method of protecting aircraft on the ground was by means of camouflaged hangars or wide dispersal in the open. As reinforcements began to arrive from home and available man-power increased, really effective defenses were constructed—concrete posts just outside the perimeter of the airdrome, built of sandbags and rubble to a thickness of twelve or twenty feet. But these were a long time coming.

The other handicap was the lack of a really effective fighter force. The best planes available to Malta at this time were the Hurricanes. These were excellent machines of great speed, but their armament was too light to deal effectively with the big Junkers, as they only fired machine-gun bullets. What was needed was a fighter equipped with cannon. In due course the Spitfire appeared upon the scene, and the situation changed miraculously. But it was hard going for a long time. There was a particularly heavy raid on March 5th, when a hundred and fifty bombers came over, pitted the runways with craters, and destroyed a number of Swordfish and other planes on the ground.

Valletta and the harbors likewise continued to receive the pressing attentions of the dive-bombers. Presently a fresh menace was introduced by the dropping of magnetic and acoustic mines into the Grand Harbour and Marsa Scirocco. Later on, in April, intensive night bombing began. About eighty bombers would come over, and the raids usually lasted four hours. The Dockyard was the principal objective.

In addition to the bombs, sea mines on parachutes were sometimes dropped on the harbor. These furnished the enterprising Bofors and

machine-gunners with a new and exciting target. They soon became expert at firing at the parachute-mines in the course of their majestic descent, gloriously exploding them, by the blaze of the search-lights, in mid-air.

One of the most unpleasant adjuncts of an air raid is the delayed-action bomb. It falls, silently, and buries itself sometimes deep in the soft ground. It may explode in two minutes or in two weeks—very often in places where its presence has been entirely unsuspected. To deal with it is a work of hideous danger and is done only by volunteers.

London knows these visitants well. One of them once lodged itself right under the foundations of St. Paul's Cathedral, it will be remembered. In that case it was extracted by an iron-nerved bomb-disposal squad, and the great fabric was saved from complete destruction. When Malta became acquainted with these time-bombs there was never any lack of similar volunteers to deal with them.

Still, the progressive damage to dockyard, barracks, and other buildings was by this time considerable, and the streets of Valletta, Floriana, and the villages throughout the island began to be lined with heaps of rubble. Sliema, a suburb to the north of the harbors, near Point Dragut, suffered particularly from the fact that the raiders employed it as their direction-point when approaching from the sea on their way to Valletta and the airdromes. If attacked and driven back before reaching their goal, as they frequently were, the enemy bombers were accustomed to jettison their bombs on Sliema before turning tail.

The toll of human life kept surprisingly low. The Maltese had been caught napping by the first Stuka raid on January 16th and had learned their lesson. At the first sound of the sirens they now went to ground and stayed there until all was over. Every effort was made to keep the life of the island as normal as possible, by adherence to routine occupation and resolute maintenance of recreation facilities—of which more later. It is interesting to note that in February a new picture-theater was opened in Valletta, with the ceremonial customary in peacetime.

Nevertheless, it was a fierce and cruel ordeal. No wonder that the Maltese people, as they knelt in their shelters and told their beads, prayed to the saints to send over the Italians for once in a way instead of the Germans.

And this prayer was answered. Suddenly and without warning, toward the end of May, the Stukas disappeared from the skies. One moment they were there, the next they were gone, gone with the wind.

For the war had taken a fresh turn, and the fortunes of our island had been abruptly diverted, not for the first time, to conform to a new current of events.

Let us consider what had happened.

II

In the spring of 1941, Hitler found himself master of most of Europe. What should be devastated next? Should he strike west, and attempt the invasion of his solitary remaining opponent, Britain; east, and gather in the rich oilfields of Iraq and the Caucasus; or south, where his futile friend Mussolini was making such a sorry mess of everything? Which?

As far as Britain was concerned, even that heaven-born strategist Adolf Schickelgruber realized that the golden moment had gone by. It was a year since Dunkirk, and the British nation, though still far from ready for total war—it takes at least two years to train and equip the modern soldier—had fortified every yard of its three thousand miles of coast, and despite eight months of merciless bombing, had stepped up its output of tanks and planes to a formidable degree.

So Hitler decided to go after oil instead, of which, incidentally, he was badly in need. He had to choose between two alternatives here. He could either make war on Russia—he had always intended to annex Russia sooner or later, and the present seemed as good a time as any—and penetrate by an easterly drive through the Caucasus to the Caspian Sea and the oilwells of Baku, or he could invade Palestine and pursue a conqueror's course along the Haifa pipe-line to Iraq.

He selected the latter plan. To carry it out he decided to invade Greece (where the Italian Army was already giving a most unimpressive performance, as we have seen), occupy Crete, and then spring eastward by sea and air, perhaps annexing Cyprus in his stride, to the coast of Palestine. If need be, it might suit him to grant himself an additional right of way through neutral Turkey. If Turkey disliked the idea, it would be just too bad —for Turkey.

So on April 6, 1941, the Germans invaded Greece, with the usual paraphernalia of Panzer Divisions and dive-bombers. No serious resistance seemed likely, and in any case it could not be prolonged.

But the Greeks were not alone in the defense of their historic and sacred soil. A British army was there, and the name of its commander was Archie Wavell. It had been brought there by the British Navy from North Africa, where we left it some chapters back, advancing with lengthening strides toward Tripoli.

In other words Britain, in order to keep her plighted word to the Greeks, had deliberately detached her only available army from a triumphant campaign in North Africa, upon the very eve of its fulfilment, and despatched it to the aid of the little nation she had pledged herself to help.

To describe the Greek campaign in detail does not fall within the scope of this narrative. It is sufficient to say that the British effort was a forlorn hope from the outset. Wavell was short of armor and air-cover and was operating at the end of long, seaborne lines of communication. He was opposed by the full strength of the Germany Army—which had no other campaign on hand at that moment—supplied with abundance of heavy equipment and fighting on interior lines.

There could be but one end to such a struggle. But "Never say Die!" is ever a formidable obstacle to surmount. A fierce and protracted resistance—a second and greater Thermopylae—was put up by the British forces, and it gained three weeks of precious time, for the Germans did not reach Athens until the end of the month. A minor Dunkirk followed, for Wavell succeeded in evacuating forty-three thousand of his men.

The invasion and capture of Crete followed a few weeks later—an operation unique in the annals of warfare in that it was carried out entirely by airborne troops. This was not because invasion by air is easier and cheaper than invasion by land or sea, but because, thanks to the relentless efficiency of "A.B.C." and the British Navy, not a single seaborne German soldier succeeded in landing upon the shores of Crete.

But the shipments by air were phenomenal. Fifteen hundred men landed by parachute the first day, and three thousand on the second. Even small tanks were dropped to earth by parachute. All these would have had short shrift from a few squadrons of Spitfires, but they were absent. Their airdromes in Greece had been destroyed, and those in Egypt were far beyond fighter range. This not only made it possible for the Germans to land their parachute troops, but also left the defenders at the mercy of the dive-bombers. And here was the explanation of the disappearance of the Luftwaffe from Malta.

Again a dogged resistance was put up, but the end was inevitable. On June 1st Crete was evacuated, and by the heroic efforts of the Navy seventeen thousand men were got away.

So it seemed that General Wavell had sacrificed the fruits of victory in North Africa for nothing. He had failed to save Greece, he had failed to save Crete, and the German-Italian forces, under their new Commander Rommel, had already regained in Libya all the ground they had lost, as far as Tobruk.

But something had been achieved—something so significant that its full bearing upon the course of the war can not even now be estimated; nor will it be, until all is over and the perspective of History adjusted.

During those desperate seven weeks, the British Army, outnumbered and scourged though it was, had put up a delaying action which not only had inflicted important losses on the enemy but had entirely disorganized

Hitler's timetable—and to a German a timetable is as sacred as the Ark of the Covenant. This upset Hitler completely. It threw him at least a month behind schedule, with the consequence that the revolt which he had planned in Persia, to synchronize with his invasion of Palestine, had fizzled out because he was not there to support it. His thrust for the oilfields of Iraq had been anticipated and averted.

So, with a promptitude which Napoleon himself might have envied, he scrapped Plan A and switched to Plan B—the invasion of Russia—with consequences which he had not entirely foreseen and which have not by any means ended.

Perhaps that splendid gesture of Archie Wavell and his men was not entirely thrown away.

III

Hitler's new preoccupation with Russia may have relieved Malta of the presence of the Luftwaffe, but the fall of Greece and Crete was a disaster of the first magnitude for the island, since it left its people almost completely isolated.

Except in the neighborhood of Malta itself, the danger of attack upon Maltese lines of communication had not hitherto been severe. Malta-bound convoys could proceed in tolerable safety along the Libyan coast (then in the occupation of General Wavell and the Army of the Nile) for a distance of some five hundred miles, and then complete their journey across a wide space of comparatively unpatrolled water without interference.

But the Greek disaster had put an end to all that. Crete was in the possession of the Germans, and the Italians were back in Libya. British convoys now had to run the gauntlet of aërial and torpedo attack along the full length of the channel between the south coast of Crete and the north coast of Africa. The route from Gibraltar to Malta was no better, for the southern tip of Sicily reached right down to the coast of Tunisia—within ninety miles, in fact—and with German submarines added to Italian bombing and mine-laying aircraft, the passage of this bottleneck was rendered equally perilous. In fact, it was not until late in July that a reinforcement of men and supplies was able to get through. We shall hear more of this convoy later.

But the Maltese were not disheartened by this string of misfortunes, and upon June 12th, just after the fall of Crete, they had an opportunity to demonstrate the fact. Upon that day the Italian Air Force reappeared over the island in great strength, intent upon showing the Maltese that what German bombers could do the Italians could outdo.

The anti-aircraft gunners of the island, veterans all by this time, speedily disposed of these pretensions. They shot down at least ten of the Eye-tie aircraft, and the island fighters chased the survivors back to their Sicilian bases.

So far the defense of the island had been conducted entirely by the Royal Air Force and the anti-aircraft batteries, for hitherto there had been nothing to shoot at, as it were, horizontally. But now, suddenly and at long last, the coastal defense batteries came into their own. For a year and more their gun teams had been standing by, night and day, their training and target practice unrewarded and their eyes forever scanning an empty horizon for enemy ships which never came.

But they came at last. Early upon the morning of July 26, 1941, the sirens sounded the alert, and the people of Malta, abandoning their beds, were making their way dutifully if without enthusiasm—they had been up twice that night already, in each case on a false alarm—to their accustomed shelters, when they were informed by the unfamiliar voice of the big guns of the coastal batteries that the attack this time was coming not from the sky but from the sea.

Here indeed was an exciting novelty. With one accord, in the early gray of the dawn, the civil population abandoned their excursions underground and trooped to their accustomed grandstands, the rooftops and bastions of Valletta and the Three Cities, with pleased expressions of anticipation.

They were destined not to be disappointed, for the Italians were staging a sea attack upon the Grand Harbour itself. They had probably been attracted by the presence in the harbor of the ships of the large convoy which, as already noted, had reached Malta toward the end of the month. What was more, they were trying out an entirely new tactical method, the employment of E boats and one-man torpedo-boats, so called.

The E boats were of a type familiar enough by that time to all the combatant nations—big, speedy motor-launches, powerfully engined and carrying torpedoes. But the one-man torpedo-boat was a complete novelty, and to judge by the official Italian account of its performance—written presumably, in the light of subsequent happenings, before and not after the event—the Eye-ties were exceedingly proud of having invented it.

> The remaining ships of a British convoy [it runs], which had been attacked for three days and three nights in the Central Mediterranean,[1] took refuge in the Malta Harbour of Valletta, and were detected there.
>
> The Italian Navy immediately decided to attack, with those tiny but powerful craft on which the designers had worked in

silence for many years, to perfect one of the most precious secrets of the Italian war machine.

The men chosen for this task knew that retreat was impossible—knew that they must be either taken prisoner or killed—but despite the formidable nature of the British defenses, none flinched before his task.

The reference to the impossibility of retreat was well justified, for these "precious secrets" were the merest death-traps for those who operated them. The one-man torpedo-boat was a tiny motor-launch. The whole of the forward end was packed with high explosive—a torpedo-head in itself. The engine lay amidships, and in the exiguous stern, attired for sudden and immediate immersion in the waters of the Mediterranean, crouched the one-man crew. His duty, having maneuvered his craft into a favorable position, was to pull over a switch which made the explosive charge a "live" one, and then go full speed for his objective. His part in the operation was now practically over, for the charge exploded upon impact, and the launch itself disintegrated into space. The one-man crew, if he had not already shared the fate of his craft, was then at liberty to commit himself to the deep, in the faint hope that some one might eventually pick him up. Never were brave men—and these must have been brave men indeed—condemned to a more gratuitous form of suicide.

And not only were they killed, but they accomplished nothing. The Malta coastal gunners, exultantly making up for months of monotonous inaction, were shooting with uncanny accuracy. The entire attacking flotilla, some seventeen or eighteen of them, was wiped out. Only one man succeeded in exploding his torpedo, and the damage done was negligible. Of the supply ships lying in the harbor not one was touched.

The RAF fighters, needless to say, were up early and often, to deal faithfully with such Italian aircraft as had come over to supply an umbrella to the operation. Needless to say, also, no ship of the Italian battle fleet put in an appearance. The one-man torpedoes went to their holocaust alone.

Such was the result of Mussolini's first and last attempt to attack Malta from the sea. All being over, the exultant Maltese vacated their points of vantage and dispersed to a late breakfast and the day's work.

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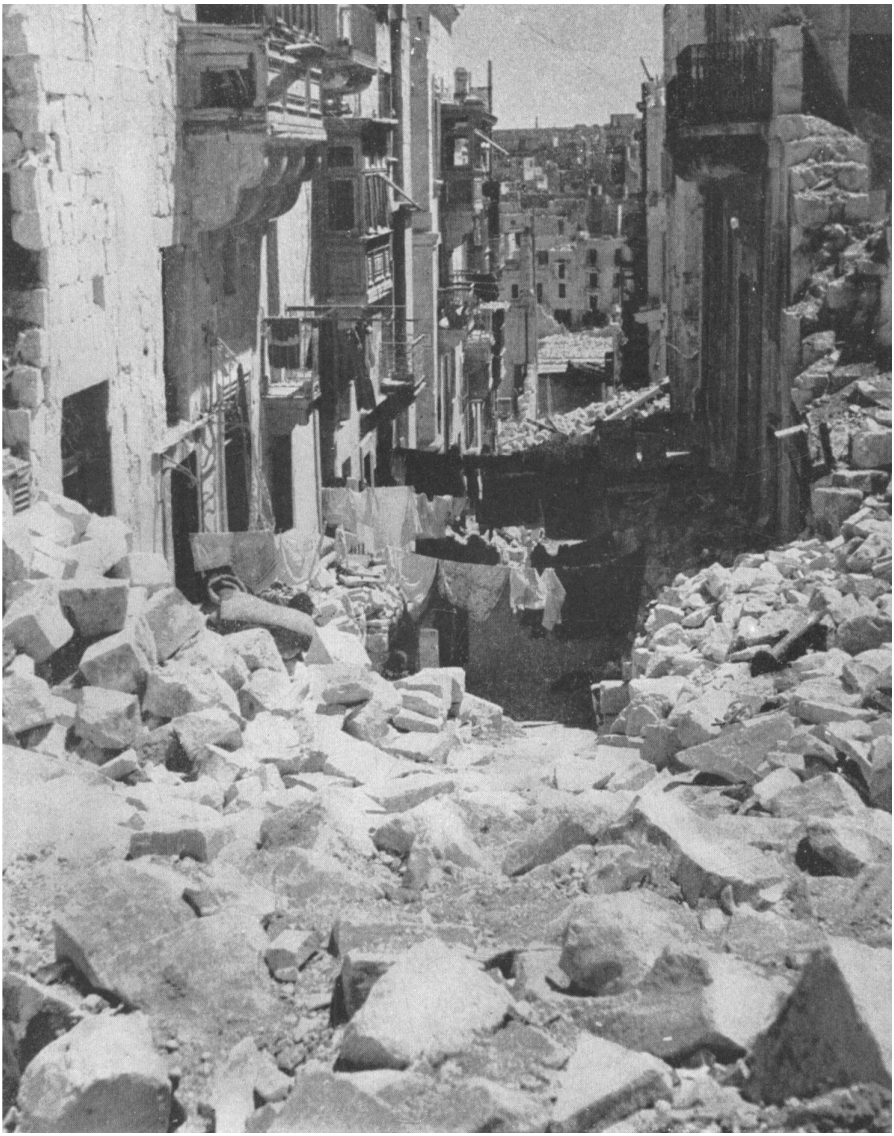
[1] It had, but not a single ship had been lost.

IV

The second half of 1941 was passed under very different conditions from the first. The Luftwaffe were far away, helping to drive the devoted Russian Army, as yet inferior in numbers and equipment, back and back to the Volga. They returned to Malta later in the year, when the hand of winter had immobilized the Russian front, but it was not until early 1942 that they were to develop an attack comparable with that of the spring of 1941.

Meanwhile the Italians continued their ineffective raids. So impotent had these become that Sir William Dobbie's official report for the month of September was able to announce but twelve nights' raiding, involving the deaths of three men and one woman—a very different record from that of March or April.



British Information Services

SIGNS OF LIFE IN A CORNER OF SENGLEA

Axis fury may destroy Malta's beautiful old buildings but not her morale.

The garrison of the island had been reinforced. The anti-aircraft batteries, both heavy and light, were much more numerous, and newly

arrived battalions of infantry were now available. The Germans, if and when they came back, would find little Malta a tougher proposition than ever.

From time to time the islanders were refreshed and invigorated by an opportunity to turn out *en masse* and let themselves go in cheering the arrival in harbor of a British naval unit returning from some fresh exploit, to execute running repairs and take a turn ashore. In November, round about the anniversary of Taranto, they received a visit from a naval force which had just wiped out two Axis convoys, sending two destroyers to the bottom and damaging a third in the process. British submarines, too, were in and out most of the time; so active were they that during one period of three days they destroyed twenty-five enemy vessels.

The great day, however, was December 13th, when all Valletta hurried to the accustomed grandstand to acclaim the arrival of four destroyers, three British and one Dutch which came gliding into the Grand Harbour, having just put "paid" to the account of two Italian cruisers, a destroyer, and an E boat.

And Malta was not content, during these days of comparative tranquillity, merely to organize resistance. For some time past throughout the summer the Italians had been puzzled and alarmed by unexpected and unexplained attacks upon them from the air. Torpedo bombers had swooped down upon their Libya-bound convoys: Naples had been bombed five times. These mysterious assailants had even penetrated to Benghazi and Tripoli.

From what source, it was demanded, did the attacks emanate? Had bombers been flown all the way from England, or had Great Britain let loose a fleet of aircraft carriers in the Central Mediterranean?

The answer was simple. These particular marauders had not flown from England, and Great Britain possessed at the moment but one aircraft carrier in the Central Mediterranean, and that a stationary one. Its name was H. M. *Island of Malta*. But Malta never said so: it was deemed more politic at that time to keep the Eye-ties guessing.

V

Two more events of 1941 must be recorded before this chapter closes. Upon August 14th the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of England met on a British battleship in the western waters of the Atlantic, and the Atlantic Charter was given to the world.

Finally, upon December 7th the Japanese Air Force, without previous declaration of war, fell upon the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, putting out of commission most of the capital ships and grounded aircraft. From that moment the international situation was instantaneously and

automatically clarified. The forces of Civilization were finally united against the forces of Barbarism, and the fate of mankind for the next thousand years hung upon the issue.

CHAPTER IX

DAYS OF WRATH

Nineteen forty-two broke, the most fateful year of the war.

Though destined to end upon a note of world-wide hope and encouragement, it began none too happily. True, the United States was now definitely ranged upon the side of the Allies—a stupendous event which must for ever deprive the enemy of the hope of victory—but Japan had come in on the other side, and Japan was ready while America was not.

The American Pacific Fleet had suffered disaster at Pearl Harbor, and the entire Pacific situation was precarious. General MacArthur and his men, cut off from all outside aid, were putting up a heroic but hopeless defense at Bataan; the British base at Singapore, exposed by the defection of the French in Indo-China to invasion from a quarter hitherto deemed secure beyond question—the base being designed to resist only attack by sea—was already doomed. In due course both fell into Japanese hands, and presently their fate was shared by the rich and productive islands of the Dutch East Indies. Over ninety per cent of the world's rubber supplies were now in the hands of the new enemy. Lastly, the Continent of Australia lay in acute danger of invasion.

In the Mediterranean theater of operations prospects were a little brighter. The Army of the Nile, destined later to achieve dazzling fame as the Eighth Army, had been reinforced and was now under the direction of General Auchinleck. General Wavell had been despatched elsewhere, to handle as best he could, with inadequate resources, the menace of Japanese aggression in Burma.

Upon January 21st, Auchinleck struck hard at Rommel, who, it will be remembered, had driven what was left of Wavell's force after the despatch of most of its strength to aid the Greeks the previous spring, right back from El Agheila in Tripolitania to within the Egyptian border, whence he was now planning an advance on Cairo. But Auchinleck was too quick for him. The British troops were by this time supplied with better tanks and anti-tank equipment. Their attack was completely successful, and Rommel, fighting hard and skilfully, was forced back for nearly four hundred miles. The whole of the lost ground had been recovered, and for the second time British soldiers occupied El Agheila, half-way to Tripoli.

Once more Malta comes into the picture, for the Royal Air Force bombers based on the island were able to assist Auchinleck's advance by flying across to North Africa and impeding Rommel's retreat, besides perpetually harrying his sea supply lines from Sicily to Tripoli.

In fact, so effective did this interposition become that the German High Command decided that Malta must be put out of business once and for all. And, since the high-sounding Aeronautica Regia of Italy had proved unequal to the job, the Luftwaffe must take over *in toto*.

The German bombers, as already noted, had returned to Sicily in November, 1941, as soon as the grip of winter had stabilized the Russian front. But their efforts so far had been tentative and sporadic. Raids were short, and the raiders flew at a great height. These were mainly Junkers 88's, heavy and somewhat cumbrous craft but capable of carrying a great weight of bombs. The Junkers 87's were lighter and swifter and were of the type usually employed for dive-bombing. They were to come later.

The Junkers 88's at first confined themselves to legitimate targets, but now, with the coming of the New Year, the raids became more frequent and promiscuous. The Nazis were putting on the heat. More bombers were employed in each wave, and more waves in each raid. Their intention obviously was to wear down both the physical and the moral resistance of the islanders by a crescendo of frightfulness. And it must be admitted that they set about the business with Teutonic thoroughness.

II

To describe each raid of the endless series delivered during the next four months would be tedious and repetitive. Generally speaking, there were about four heavy raids a day, each lasting on an average about two hours, with smaller visitations of the nuisance variety in between—all concentrated, be it remembered, upon an area not much larger than Staten Island. There were night raids, too, to maintain the tension and render sleep impossible. Alerts were almost continuous; one of them lasted for thirteen hours. "A lull of any length," said one of the gunners afterward, "produced a silence that was almost frightening."

There was just one alleviation. The Hun is not an attractive individual, but he possesses one commendable trait—he loves order and regularity. In other words, it is usually possible to foretell with complete accuracy where he will be and what he will be doing at a given moment.

There was a railroad grade-crossing in Belgium during the First World War, just outside the ramparts of Ypres, which the German Artillery used to shell punctually and punctiliously every day upon the stroke of noon for

precisely ten minutes. During that period a certain discretion had to be observed in approaching the crossing, but at any other hour of the day or night the spot was a complete rest-center.

The Luftwaffe applied the same tidy and methodical routine to the bombing of Malta. They had certain fixed and favorite targets—the Dockyard, the Three Cities, the island airdromes, and Valletta itself—and these they attacked in mechanical rotation on an unvarying time schedule. So regular were some of these operations that in course of time it became possible for the observers of the Fighter Command, upon the approach of the raiders, to indicate which particular quarter of the island was about to be bombed. A red flag was hoisted over the threatened area, and its inhabitants took cover. The rest of the population could, and usually did, stay put and enact the rôle of spectators.

But this did not lessen the intensity of the raids, and the defenses of the island were sorely tried. The anti-aircraft gunners bore the heaviest burden during the early months of that year, for the RAF could give them little help.

There were two reasons for this. The first was that our fighter planes were few in number and inferior in speed to the deadly Messerschmitt, or Me 109. The island was crying out for Spitfires, and Spitfires were not at first available, for no convoys were destined to reach the island during that nightmare period.

The second was that the three airdromes were kept under perpetual attack, with the result that the aircraft were sometimes destroyed on the ground or the runways so pitted with bomb-craters that it was impossible either to take off or to land.

These attacks had a definite purpose, and that was to prevent any further sorties by the island bombers. In consequence, Rommel's supply ships were able to proceed unmolested from Italy to Tripoli, where he was accumulating material for his tremendous and most successful counterstroke against Auchinleck and the Eighth Army in the early June of 1942. At the same time, the Luftwaffe, relieved from the attentions of the RAF, were able to repair and refit in their Sicilian bases with comfort and security.

III

Meanwhile, the Hurriboys, or Hurricane pilots, were doing their utmost against overwhelming odds. Unshaven, short of sleep, and dog-tired, they carried on. Their Hurricanes were excellent machines and skilfully handled, but the eight machine-guns with which they were equipped were incapable of penetrating the armor that protects the vital parts of the Junkers 88's while they themselves were not quite able to cope with the speedier and

better armed Me fighters, especially at odds of ten to one. Still, they put up an unceasing resistance, concentrating on the enemy bombers and philosophically taking a chance on the fighters.

These Hurricane pilots were an interesting group, veterans in their early twenties, gathered from all over the world. There were British, Australians, Canadians, Rhodesians, and Americans. They were of all walks of life; within the same sandbagged and camouflaged mess were to be found the son of a Scottish duke, a New Zealand sheep-farmer, and the stationmaster of a rural English railroad-station.

To them at long last on March 7, 1942, were added a small number of Spitfires, which arrived by the usual route—that is, by taking off from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier some sixty miles from the island, and flying direct to their airdrome, Ta Kali. This was smaller and less pretentious than those they had been accustomed to, and the surface of the runways was scarred with hastily filled bomb-craters, but they landed safely.

Hurriboys and Spits speedily coöperated. The duty of the Hurricanes was to attack the bombers, while the Spitfires protected the Hurricanes from the Me's. This plan was sound enough in theory and would have proved equally sound in practice had it not been that the enemy fighters were numerous enough not only to attack the Hurricanes but to take on the Spitfires as well, and something over.

All through March the unequal struggle went on. The enemy was devoting a great deal of attention at this period to the Grand Harbour and Dockyard, and here our own fighters were able to render considerable aid to the anti-aircraft gunners ashore and afloat, by breaking up enemy formations and so deflecting bombs from their targets.

Within this month the enemy lost fifty-two bombers and seven fighters, but they took corresponding toll of the Spits and Hurriboys—and the Luftwaffe could replace their losses at will, while the RAF could not. Once again the brunt of battle began to fall upon the anti-aircraft gunners.

Earthbound by growing shortage of machines, the spirits of the fighter pilots drooped. No longer could they "scramble"—their term for taking off—the moment the enemy came over. They must remain on the ground, impotent spectators, out of the game, pilots without planes. So numerous, too, were the Messerschmitts that they were able to maintain constant patrols over the airdromes, and so attack machines taking off or landing.

These takings-off and landings were marked by none of the ordered ritual of the modern airdrome. There was no formal signal from a control-tower, no stately departure or arrival in measured rotation. The pilots lived in dispersal shelters around the airdrome. When called to duty under enemy

attack each man betook himself to a slit-trench beside his machine, there to wait his chance of jumping on board and taking off at the first brief lull.

During this period the pilots had their first experience of dive-bombing, and it is interesting to note their verdict upon this much touted form of German frightfulness. To a man, they decided that it was a highly overrated method of attack—chiefly sound and fury, signifying nothing once you become hardened. Moreover the Stuka, they found, is very vulnerable to fighter attack. Before dropping its bombs it is heavy and hard to maneuver, and, to employ a convenient expression of the RAF, is a "piece of cake" for a well-handled Spitfire. When pulling out of a dive it is more vulnerable still, for under the tremendous jolt of the automatic device which causes the machine to stabilize itself after the dive, the pilot is for the moment only semi-conscious. Another piece of cake for a nippy Spit.

Since the winter the chosen few of the RAF had begun to develop into a flying league of nations. On December 8, 1941, Italy found herself at war with the United States. From that time on, the personnel of the Island Defense Force was augmented by recruits from far-distant localities with strange and picturesque names like Idaho, Oklahoma, Nebraska, as well as from more familiar New York and California.

They were born air-birds, these boys, and soon proved their mettle to the war-worn and appreciative young veterans of the RAF. They did not find matters too easy at first. They had to adapt themselves to the cramped physical conditions of aërial warfare over a tiny island—to the lack of elbow-room in the sky; to the constant risk of becoming entangled in the barrage; above all to the enemy's ability to bring overwhelming superiority of numbers to bear from the Sicilian airfields only sixty miles away. (That traffic is running in the reverse direction to-day.)

It was in such an atmosphere that the American pilots, only a handful at first, took their daily turn. They were keen, cool, resourceful, and daring, and from every account it is clear that they more than upheld the honor of their native land.

IV

So it went on. The raiders continued their methodical visitations, coming over, as some one said, for breakfast, lunch, and tea, and sometimes muscling in for supper. Their numbers continued to grow: upon one single day over three hundred bombers crossed the coast, with appropriate fighter escort.

The airdromes were pounded incessantly, yet thanks very largely to the devoted labors of the infantry (of which more will be said presently) all

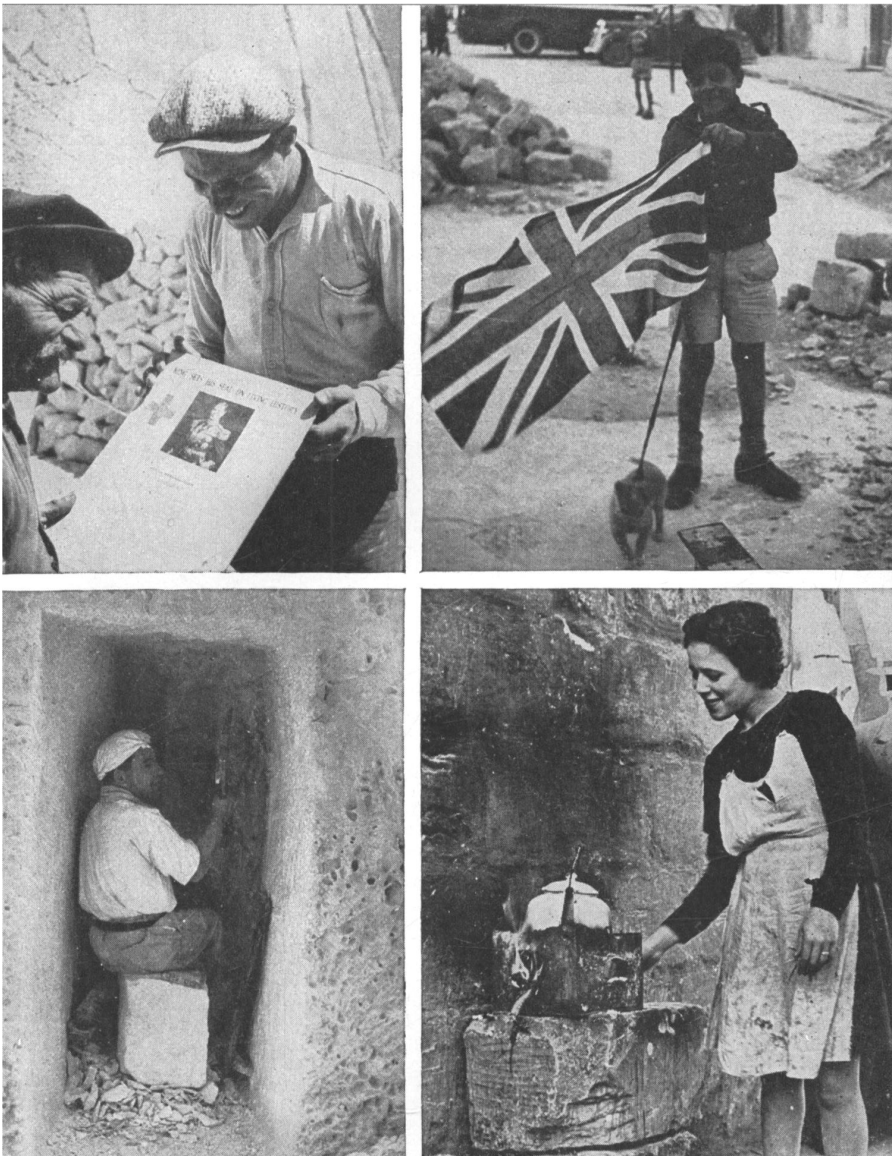
three contrived somehow to function. Administrative buildings had long been laid flat, but the staff had moved to a cave; the machines were protected by concrete dispersal pens, while personnel were lodged in their fortified messes and sleeping quarters hard by the post of duty. By this time the daily attacks on the island had assumed a settled routine. Thirty or forty bombers would come over at a time, escorted by perhaps eighty fighters, and proceed to their target for the day. To prevent interception and interference by the island fighters, a sort of advance guard of still more Me's would make for the airdrome, there to engage the Spitfires and Hurricanes or perhaps pin them to the ground altogether. At the end of the raid a rearguard of Me's would remain behind to deal with island fighters returning to their bases.

The Me's seemed to be everywhere in those days, flying high or low as they pleased. One day they made a low-flying raid and shot up a captured Heinkel which was lying in Kalafrana Bay. When the sentry on Kalafrana Gate was asked by his officer from which direction these had come, he replied: "Straight down the Hal Far Road, sir, and through this gate!"

And then, toward the middle of the month, a joyous rumor ran around the island. More Spitfires were on the way—quite a lot this time. And sure enough, on May 9th, they arrived, sweeping out of the blue over Intafa Hill, escorted by the resident fighters. It was reported that they had taken off from the American aircraft carrier *Wasp*, which made more than one invaluable trip during those months.

Like their predecessors, the new-comers found landing none too easy, for there were fresh bomb-craters on either side of the runways.

They had hardly touched ground when the enemy launched a furious attack on the airdrome, and more than one of the precious new Spitfires—the latest type, armed with four cannon—as yet unserviced and out of fuel, were destroyed without having left the soil of Malta. But the rest gave a gallant account of themselves—some of them were actually in the air again within ten minutes of landing—and from that day the position began to improve. Early in May, in the course of a pitched battle over the Grand Harbour, twenty-three enemy aircraft were shot down, with twenty probables—a record to date.



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Malta Carries on

Two islanders rejoice over the conferment of the George Cross; a young Maltese hastens to the Bastion to welcome the British Navy; a new shelter is cut in the solid limestone; a girl puts her kettle to the boil at the door of her cave home.

One day in this month, two American fliers got an opportunity rarely vouchsafed at that time to the RAF over Malta—the chance to fight the Luftwaffe on even terms. One of these boys came from Norwich, Connecticut, and the other from Berkeley, California. We will call them Con and Cal.

They were newly arrived in the island, and this was their first outing, each in a British Spitfire. Each left the ground prepared to do or die, for each realized that the honor of Uncle Sam rested upon his shoulders.

They had not been up long when they observed two Me's some thousands of feet below them. Down they dived. Cal took the Me on the right, and gave it all he had, both cannon and machine-guns, at a range of a hundred and fifty yards. The Me heeled over, burst into smoke and flame, and hurtled to the sea.

Meanwhile Con had gone after the Me on the left. He fired into it from directly astern, and in a moment the Hun machine was enveloped in a cloud of white smoke. Waiting for his opponent to become visible again Con was conscious of a blazing mass tumbling past on his right. It was the other Me, on its way to a watery grave three thousand feet below. He gave it a "squirt" for good luck, and again turned his attention to his own Me, which had emerged from its cloud and was now bearing down on him. He finished it off with a single cannon-burst, and the double duel was over. It had lasted just sixty seconds.

Far below, in the subterranean control-room of Ta Kali Airfield, the following radio-telephone conversation from the heavens above was audible:

"O.K., Con?"

"O.K., Cal."

"Let's go home."

"O.K. by me."

There for the moment let us leave our Spits and Hurriboys. They have suffered grievous tribulations, but most of their troubles are behind them now.

Let us turn to the island Infantry and to the gunners.

V

If it was the Royal Air Force which finally deprived the Luftwaffe of the command of the air over Malta, it was the Royal Artillery which saved the island during those hectic and critical months in early 1942. During that time the protective cover furnished by the fighters was gradually worn down to negligible proportions, and the anti-aircraft defenses stood almost alone

between the island and its assailants until the arrival of the second contingent of Spitfires on May 9th.

The men at the guns got no rest. Alerts were continuous, and there were sometimes as many as ten bombing raids a day. During one period of seventy-two hours the guns were in action for sixty-six. There was also a good deal of night activity, but as these raids were conducted by the Italians, they had little beyond a nuisance value. Still, they involved the manning of all the island defenses throughout the hours of darkness, with consequent loss of rest and sleep. In this connection the search-light crews rendered invaluable service. They had rapidly acquired the necessary experience and could usually be relied upon to illuminate at least thirty per cent of the planes which crossed the coast.

Later on the Germans themselves took over these night raids, and in a big way, but by this time a contingent of the new British Beaufighters—the mystery craft which on May 10, 1941, administered the coup de grâce to the mass raids on London by shooting down thirty-four German bombers in a single dark night—had arrived in Malta and dealt faithfully with the German effort.

The Maltese gunners labored under an added strain—anxiety for their families, enduring intensive bombardment only a few miles away. But this sore trial only increased their fighting spirit. A Maltese bombardier returned to his battery one day from a brief visit to his home in Marsa. It had been completely destroyed, he found, and though his wife and children were safe, they had nothing left but what they stood up in. He had spent his two days' leave searching among rubble and debris, but had recovered no stitch of clothing or anything, in fact, that could be recognized as his property. He had lost everything—except his heart. "Put me where I can get a good shot at them," was all he said as he took his place at his gun.

Presently a fresh anxiety developed; ammunition began to run short. With the enemy holding Greece, Crete, Tripoli, and, for all practical purposes, Tunisia, land-based German bombers could dominate the Mediterranean sea-lanes everywhere, and for some months supplies simply could not get through. Consequently, expenditure of anti-aircraft ammunition, both heavy and light, had to be restricted: the ban was lifted only upon special occasions—to cover the arrival of a convoy, or what was left of it, or the delivery of Spitfires. Despite this handicap, the anti-aircraft batteries shot down more than one hundred enemy aircraft during the crucial month of April—during eleven days of which not a single fighter had left the ground.

Naturally, the gunners themselves soon began to be marked out for special attention by the enemy bombers. The fighters were for the moment

almost out of commission; the Dockyard and Harbour had become a desert. Only the ack-acks remained. So the Luftwaffe concentrated upon them, without mercy. Stukas came diving down upon them day after day. The dive-bombers were difficult to see, for they attacked out of the sun, with only their wing edges visible.

Here, happily, desire out-ran performance. Guns and equipment were knocked out, but casualties among personnel were not unduly severe, less than a hundred officers and men being killed—this despite the fact that during April alone nearly seven thousand tons of bombs were rained upon them. Their comparative immunity was due to the fact that during a raid the guns practically never ceased firing, which meant that the bombers were given no chance to take deliberate aim at any target, continuously deflected from their course as they were by the unceasing barrage. They dropped their loads anywhere and anyhow and made for home.

The anti-aircraft services grew more and more efficient as they became familiar with the enemy's mentality and routine. The raiders were usually preceded by a solitary reconnaissance plane, known to the gunners, almost affectionately, as "George," which, after a brief inspection of likely targets, would return to its base and let loose the day's supply of bombers.

At the first note of warning the gun teams soon learned to drop everything—including as often as not the meal of which they happened to be partaking—and run to their stations, one or two of them finishing mugs of tea on the way.

And amid all this stress and strain, human nature, as ever, discovered its own alleviations. Beer and cigarettes, though strictly rationed, still applied their humble but comforting system of first aid. Many of the movie-houses had been knocked out, but the rest carried on. Football and cricket games were improvised between raids. And there were the numerous Concert Parties maintained by the various units. One of these ceased to operate from a fixed base and made continuous tours of the island, visiting batteries and search-light stations by means of any type of transport available—frequently a donkey-cart—and there presenting its celebrated entertainment to the thunder of the guns.

More than once the show was bombed, but the show went on. Upon one occasion the performers helped to man a battery during an emergency; upon another they did good service in helping to unload a burning ammunition truck. Great hearts, all.

VI

Meanwhile, what of the Infantry battalions, the Engineer Field Companies, and other arms that composed by far the greater part of the island garrison? For months past they had been arriving—mainly County regiments, the backbone of the British Army: men of Devon, Dorset, Lancashire, Kent, Durham, Cheshire—thousands of them. With no invasion to repel, what had they been doing all this time?

It would be simpler to ask what they had not been doing. Warfare can be of two kinds, static warfare and warfare of movement. The First World War, except at the beginning and toward the end, was almost entirely a static affair. Upon the Western Front millions of men stood facing one another for months without ever coming into actual collision. Thousands of them served and died in the trenches without ever having seen the face of an enemy.

Yet they were kept busy enough—perpetually sapping, mining, repairing, renewing, building up or pushing forward, a yard at a time, this position or that—against the day when it would be time to launch another attack in mass, covered by a concerted artillery barrage from guns of huge calibre and fixed positions.

That was how men fought in 1917. To-day, with the advent of tank battalions and the bombing airplane, all that is gone. War has become a gigantic game of chess—three-dimensional chess—played at lightning speed over a board a hundred miles square. In the days of trench warfare an advance of ten miles was considered almost phenomenal; to-day a whole country can be, has been, overrun in a few weeks—hours.

Of all the many theaters of the present world struggle, there was but one in which the conditions of static warfare still prevailed—the island of Malta. Here the combatants, despite unceasing exchange of bombs and gunfire, had never actually come to grips and probably never would. The effect upon the defending side was marked and definite: the predominant sensation, as those who served upon the Western Front twenty-seven years ago will recollect, was one of perpetual strain, without the relief of movement or of change of scene.

Of course static warfare presents one advantage over warfare of movement—the comfort of permanent quarters, of organized sanitation and opportunity for ablution, of regular supplies and rations. But to Malta these alleviations were denied. No quarters could be regarded as permanent under that unending hail of high explosives; cut off for months from outside aid, no dependence could be placed on the hope of regular supplies, and that final resort of a defensive force, retirement to a safer position, was out of the question.

Such, then, was the existence to which more than a quarter of a million Maltese people found themselves committed and which somehow they

contrived to endure, during the spring of 1942, and such was the seemingly hopeless task imposed upon the soldiers and airmen whose duty it was to defend them.

The contribution of the Artillery and the RAF to the general defense scheme has already been described. Let us come back to the Infantry.

The British soldier is essentially a jack-of-all-trades, and he is never so happy, be it noted, as when he is asked to do something which is not his proper job—unload a ship, for instance, or valet a Spitfire. Thomas Atkins had many opportunities to gratify such predilections during the Siege of Malta.

Of course, he had plenty to do in the normal way of things. The troops were regularly exercised in defense operations—the repelling of landing parties, the patrolling of ninety miles of intricate coastline, together with the guarding of airdromes and magazines. They were even trained in Commando work, against the day when Malta should be in a position to take the offensive.[1] Super enthusiasts could and did work off their superfluous energies by disposing of delayed-action bombs. Over three hundred tons of these were located and destroyed. The largest weighed nearly four thousand pounds.

To all this routine was added a series of emergency jobs. The first of these was the construction of aircraft pens—a rush order, for this precaution had been neglected far too long. Under the comparatively innocuous attentions of the Aeronautica Regia the necessity for dispersing aircraft and for garaging each in its own bombproof pen had not arisen; neither had it seemed likely that a larger fighter force would be required for the island than existed at that time.

But the arrival of the Germans in the Mediterranean changed all that. The painful lessons of Greece and Crete rubbed themselves well in, and it was speedily realized that an airdrome upon a small and congested island must be fortified and camouflaged to the limit or become the merest “piece of cake” for a resolute bomber.

So a comprehensive program of strong points and aircraft pens was straightway put in hand, and the army was called upon for working-parties. As many as three thousand soldiers were employed in the course of a day, laboring in twenty-four hour shifts, with twelve hours’ relief, to provide secure accommodation for the aërial reinforcements which were known to be on their way. They worked right through air raids, and in less than three months laid out twenty-seven miles of dispersal area, handled 100,000 tons of concrete and masonry, and constructed over three hundred aircraft pens.

They also provided parties to keep the runways in repair and fill up the bomb-craters as they occurred—and they never ceased to occur. Parties of

soldiers one hundred to three hundred strong stood by, night and day, with trucks loaded with earth and stone, ready to rush to any point on the airdrome. They were frequently bombed, even dive-bombed, as they worked, but they carried on. They kept their rifles handy, too, and occasionally a member of this party or that would utilize a moment of leisure to snatch up his own and take a potshot at a Stuka—an unauthorized but most comforting exercise.

And that was not the only assistance that the army rendered to the Royal Air Force. Air Force personnel does not by any means consist solely of men who fly; each unit contains a large ground staff for the maintenance of the airdromes and the repairing and servicing of the aircraft. No such staff was available in Malta at that time, for it will be remembered that the majority of the aircraft then on the island had taken off from the flight decks of aircraft carriers far out at sea and had perforce arrived unaccompanied by their maintenance personnel.

So the army took over, and the army loved it. They bombed up the bombers—and they refueled the fighters. They had everything ready for each pilot when he arrived for his day's work, and they were waiting to take over his machine and run it into safety when he landed. They became expert belt-fillers and armorers' assistants. They learned to operate steam-rollers; they employed their tanks and Bren gun tractors to drag bogged aircraft out of trouble. Despite casualties—371 of them were killed—they never weakened. In between spells of duty they discoursed learnedly of Wellingtons, Sunderlands, bomb-sights, and slip-streams.

The army helped the navy, too. Soldiers assisted sailors to locate enemy mines. Soldiers helped to unload such ships as contrived to get through the blockade, and conveyed their precious cargoes, using army transport for the purpose, to dispersal dumps about the island. Upon one occasion a cargo of many thousand tons was unloaded and dispersed in four and a half days, all under continuous bombing. Soldiers turned themselves into winchmen, hatchway men, stevedores, and carpenters.

One ship of another convoy was heavily hit and lay half-submerged in the harbor. In less than two weeks, men of an infantry regiment, working in her water-logged holds, had salvaged most of her cargo—a very important one.

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[1] Barely a year later, toward the end of the North African campaign, a Commando from Malta raided and occupied the Kerkenna Islands, just off Sfax, on the Tunisian coast.

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SUPPLIES AND REINFORCEMENTS

More troops from England for Malta arrive in the Grand Harbour.

All this time, of course, as we shall see in the next chapter, Malta herself was suffering grievously. Homes were being destroyed by the thousand, families being buried under ruins. Public utilities were constantly out of action. Here the highly expert Royal Engineers showed themselves ubiquitous and invaluable, while the Royal Corps of Signals were indefatigable in repairing broken telephone wires and maintaining communications generally. The Infantry were permanently available for rescue and salvage work.

Such was the defense of Malta during that grim and testing period of many months, by the sailors, soldiers, and airmen of the island, with the

uncomplaining compliance and coöperation of the Maltese people.

At that time, as it is now, the spirit of mutual benevolence and coöperation was noteworthy. The women of Malta, whether British officers' ladies or the wives and daughters of Maltese professional and business men, have combined to help their less fortunate neighbors, whether whole or sick, civil or military.

Gone is the pleasant social life of the island—the tea-parties, the luncheons, the picnics. The so-called Snakepit, the ladies' lounge at the Union Club, has lost its former inmates. They are dispersed about the island, intent upon works of necessity and mercy.

There is a Ladies' Hospital Visiting Committee. Both British and Maltese ladies belong, and there are two Visitors to each hospital, of which there are many. In them is a medley of strangely contrasted patients—Maltese laborers and British soldiers laid low for a time by "Malta Dog," the undulant fever endemic to the island; children suffering from malnutrition; expectant mothers by the hundred.

Then there are the casualties, both civil and military. Airmen who have been shot down over the island or into the sea—British, German, Italian; wounded ack-ack gunners; bombed civilians; the sick and maimed carried ashore in scores from incoming convoys and their escorts.

Blood transfusion, that modern miracle, is perpetually on call; for it enables a desperately wounded man to survive an operation which in former days would have been fatal.

There are numerous patients, too, of a particular class—men who have been rescued from a sea of blazing oil or gasoline, terribly burned about the face, neck, and arms. A new device has been adopted for relieving these men of the agonies of a daily dressing. The afflicted parts are now plastered with a healing substance of a tarry nature, which is left untouched—sometimes for weeks—until the inflammation has subsided. Then it is carefully peeled off, and there is a man with a new, whole, and healthy skin!

There are Welfare Committees, too, who visit Maltese homes all over the island and do what they can to alleviate the very real complications which arise from enforced dispersion, overcrowding, and promiscuity.

All these activities, it is needless to say, have been carried on as the merest matter of course, amid the distraction of air-raid warnings and their subsequent fulfilment.

Not only in Malta, but elsewhere, a significant and hopeful portent of total warfare is its devastating effect upon social and professional distinctions. Nobody looks down his (or her) nose at anybody else to-day. Nobody cares who anybody is or what anybody was. We are all in the same boat and nobody is going to rock it. In Britain itself the whole male

population has become liable for military or industrial service. In the army no man may achieve an officer's commission until he has served in the ranks and shown himself possessed of the quality of leadership. The second highest officer (a lieutenant general) on the British General Staff to-day was an enlisted man in the First World War.

Women, to the age of forty, are regularly called up to serve in the Navy, Army, or Air Force, or to make munitions of war. You can see girls serving the guns during the tumult of an air raid, or steering naval pinnaces in and out of tideraces and mine fields in all weathers. The picture of the year at the Royal Academy in London shows a young woman with a snood on her head, handling a delicate and complicated machine in a shell-factory where she works fifty-six hours a week.

In the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Arctic seas through which the convoys for Russia fight their way, the Merchant Navy has become practically indistinguishable from the Royal Navy which escorts it. The courage of the crews of those slow, lumbering transports and tramps—patiently zig-zagging in obedience to signals, menaced from the deep and scourged from above, risking or giving their lives with cheerful equanimity—has earned the undying respect of their more mobile and better protected brethren.

Not long ago a British naval officer, returning to England from helping to escort a convoy to Malta, found himself detailed, in the usual sudden and unexpected fashion of these days, to proceed with a large contingent of lower-deck ratings (Royal Naval seamen), to the United States.

Upon arrival in an eastern port, he and his followers found themselves whirled across the continent of America to the Pacific Coast. There the secret of their new chore was revealed for the first time: to take over a new auxiliary aircraft carrier, of what is popularly known as the Woolworth type—an American merchant vessel reconditioned as an escort ship for convoys. A large number of these vessels is being turned out at top speed to-day, and it is to their activities that the recent reduction in transport sinkings is largely due.

This particular ship was shortly destined for service. While dockyard workers were putting the finishing touches to her flight deck and hangar, our officer (whom we will call Commander English) and his attendant mariners were at liberty to employ their spare time as they might feel disposed; needless to say a good time was had by all.

Somewhere in a remote valley of the Pacific slope, Commander English discovered a rather unexpected little monastery, founded centuries ago by Spanish fathers, but now manned by perfectly good American monks, who

—like the people of Malta in the case of St. Paul—showed him no little kindness.

These good brethren, he found, were seriously disturbed by a domestic problem common enough the world over in these days—shortage of help. Their chief distraction from their purely religious duties was the growing of grapes for the manufacture of California wines; and in this particular season, by the irony of events, they had produced the greatest crop ever. But though the harvest was plentiful the laborers were woefully few.

One day the Abbot mentioned the shortage mournfully to his guest, Commander English.

"Is that all?" said the Commander. "Father, I have two hundred men down on the beach right now, just killing time. They'll gather your grapes for you and be glad to. Of course I can't officially order them to do it, but I don't expect that there'll be any lack of volunteers."

Next day, accordingly, he summoned his men and addressed them.

"There's a bunch of grand old monks in a monastery up there," he told them, "and they're in a jam over their vintage. With the Japanese laborers cleared away from the coast and every American on war service, they simply can't get their grapes gathered. If any man here feels inclined to help, the Monastery will feed him and give him union rates of pay for the job."

Rather to the speaker's surprise, the men for a moment seemed to hang back. Then, after a brief murmured conversation, his Chief Petty Officer approached him.

"Every man of the ship's company will volunteer, sir," he said, "on one condition."

"And that is?"

"That they are allowed to turn in every cent they earn for the job to the British Merchant Seamen's Benevolent Fund, sir."

That was the Royal Navy's way of saying "Thank you!" to the Mercantile Marine.

But we have strayed far from Malta. Let us return to the island.

CHAPTER X

THE CIVILIAN FRONT

Five years ago the island of Malta, with its flat-roofed houses of pink, green, and yellow, its little walled enclosures, its terraced hills and stepped streets, its oleanders and hibiscus, its fig-trees, orange-trees, and grapevines, differed but little from the ancient Malta of the Knights.

The Great Harbour and Marsamuscetto lay glistening in the sun. Fort St. Elmo, with its lighthouse, dominated the headland between the two entrances. Shipping crowded the harbors, dghaisas flitted from side to side. The sun-browned, tranquil people went about their business, the men in the strictly utilitarian attire of hard-working manual laborers, the women in their bright-colored dresses, shielded from the heat of the sun by that curious compromise between a cowl and an awning, black silk stretched on wires and known as a faldetta.

Valletta, too, still lived up to its reputation as a city of "bells and smells." The perpetual tinkle from the belfries furnished the one; the flocks of goats, parading from street to street and milked from door to door, made a modest but effective contribution to the other.

To-day the scene is different. Where Mustapha and Dragut, Bonaparte and Vaubois passed by and spared, the Hun has left his mark for ever. A million and a half tons of broken masonry, which once sheltered a peaceful and industrious population, are now spread over Valletta and Floriana, where seventy-five per cent of the buildings have perished. Down in the harbor, Senglea, Cospicua, and Vittoriosa, which the Knights once held for four months against the Saracen, have ceased to be. Sliema, the favorite suburb on the north side of Marsamuscetto, with its clubs, fine theater, and pleasant sea-view, has suffered particularly, from bombs intended for the harbor or the airdrome but prematurely jettisoned through the relentless importunity of the anti-aircraft gunners.

Throughout the island some thousands of buildings have been destroyed. These include churches and convents, together with schools, hospitals, and other presumably military objectives. To effect this noble consummation has cost the enemy over one thousand aircraft—roughly one aircraft for each civilian killed.

The most important and lovely buildings in Malta are for the most part an inheritance from the Knights. They stand, or stood, chiefly in Valletta and

Floriana. Seven of these were originally "Auberges," the headquarters of the various "Langues"—branches of the Order, classified according to language. There was the Auberge de Provence, the Auberge d'Auvergne, and perhaps the most famous of all, the Auberge de Castile et de León, the residence of the Great Chancellor of the Order, now converted into naval and military offices and a naval signal station.

Apart from the Auberges, buildings of outstanding fame and beauty were the Grand Master's Palace, subsequently the residence of the Governor and the seat of Government; the great Opera House, and the Cathedrals of St. Paul and St. John.

Of these, how many stand intact to-day, if they stand at all?

The Governor's Palace has been heavily hit and is no longer available as a place of official residence. The historic and priceless collection of armor, one of the sights of the Palace, has long been removed to a place of safety. The Courts of Justice, once the Auberge d'Auvergne, are destroyed; but the Castile, though to-day a mere shell (like the Guildhall in London) can, happily, be restored. The parish churches upon Senglea and Vittoriosa have shared the fate of the rest of that neighborhood, and in Floriana the Church of St. Publius—St. Paul's host during the period of his captivity and first Bishop of Malta—has been totally destroyed. Priests and their flock were killed sheltering within its crypt. The Great Market, one of the sights of the island, exists no longer, and the Opera House lies in ruins. Kingsway, running along the Valletta ridge, is a vista of desolation.

At Musta, seven miles inland, the dome of the Church, the pride of the island as the third largest in the world, has had a miraculous escape. It was penetrated by a bomb—which failed to explode.

In all, about fourteen thousand tons of bombs have been dropped upon Malta—an indication in itself of the measure of fortitude required, and forthcoming, from the islanders during those terrible months. Civilian casualties have averaged one in seventy, probably the highest percentage in any theater of war. Yet never, during those months, as the soldiers will tell you, was there any word of the Maltese having had enough, and never was a child seen to cry.

British Information Services

CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF VICTORY

The Crucifixion in the Oratory alone remains in this Senglea church that was built by the Knights of Malta.

II

Life, especially in total war, consists very largely in getting used to things. Within a month or so the Maltese had learned to endure their intensified tribulations with philosophy, and to adjust their lives to the new pattern. It was quite a simple pattern: either you were being bombed, in which case you were safely underground, or you were not, in which case

you went on with what you were doing. In other words, Malta was now morally bombproof.

A working-woman of eighty, living alone in a much blitzed town in the north of England, when asked what she did during an air raid replied,

"Well, when I hears 'em overhead I gets out my Bible and reads it a bit; then I says 'Damn 'em!' and then I goes to bed."

The Maltese reacted in precisely the same way, if we make due allowance for the respective temperaments of a rugged, matter-of-fact old Anglo-Saxon Methodist and an emotional, volatile, and devout near-Oriental.

In the first place, it will be noted, our old lady did not go to a shelter. Having said what she obviously regarded as an appropriate evening prayer, she went to bed.

But you could not go to bed in Malta—not, at least, in your own home for that had long ceased to exist. You went underground, and stayed there.

One of the Maltese shelters has already been briefly described. Here is another and more intimate picture. This haven, situated sixty feet down, is a communication tunnel hewn centuries ago by medieval galley-slaves to connect one of the harbor forts with another. The tunnel itself is pitch dark, but a few yards along its length a glimmering ray emerges from a narrow doorway cut in the living rock. This doorway opens upon a chamber lit by a tiny lamp made of a pepper-tin holding a smoky cotton wick.

The tunnel is more than a temporary refuge; for the duration of the siege it is the hearth and home of the Mazzone family, and contains all the worldly possessions that Hitler and Mussolini have left them.

The furniture consists of a deck-chair and a soap-box. The adult members of the family—which numbers eight altogether—take turns of two hours each, occupying the deck-chair during the night—all except Mother Mazzone, who gives up her turn to her eldest son, "because he has to work the hardest." Mothers, as a class, do not seem to vary much.

Farther along the tunnel is a more pretentious establishment. There is more than one family in this chamber, and life proceeds on communal lines. The room contains a tier of bunks, and a real stove on which cooking is done (when fuel is available) to the accompaniment of an irrepressible canary.

But the Mazzone family are too clannish, and, to tell the truth, too poor to indulge in such luxurious refinements. They sit in the dark for the most part, and when the blast of the bombing sweeps through the tunnel, and choking dust comes swirling into the doorway of their little home, Mother Mazzone wets a handkerchief and spreads it over the baby's face to enable it to breathe without choking.

And all pray—pray without ceasing. Their orisons are less robust than those of our old lady of Lancashire, but no less sincere. Here is the substance of what they say:

Or perhaps the eldest girl, a woefully slender child of fifteen, stands at the improvised altar, and recites the rosary with a muffled response from her kneeling family.

Not far away, deep in the basement of the ruined Church of Our Lady of the Victories, the parish priest is holding a slightly more formal celebration, reciting the office among his humble congregation. But while the raid lasts the voice of prayer is continually raised somewhere.

The all-clear sounds. All rise. Mother Mazzone hurries off to join the ration-line. Perhaps she will be able to draw for her household before the next alert. The eldest daughter takes charge of the baby. Father hastens off to work. The younger children go tumbling up the winding steps to romp in the sunshine again without a care in the world.

Two years of tunnel life, off and on—and five months of that time, almost continuous. And yet, when you ask Mother Mazzone what she finds to do when not being bombed or performing such household duties as cooking and washing, she will reply:

"Me, I sing all day."

You cannot stampede people of that breed.

Of course the raids varied in length and intensity. Upon one day in February, 1942, there were no less than seventeen. The longest single alert lasted thirteen and a half hours. March was a crowded month: the time of its alerts totaled three hundred and seventy-two hours, the equivalent of fifteen continuous days and nights.

Still, however short the period of respite, everybody managed on most days to put in some work somehow. The majority of the male population were either in uniform or employed as laborers in the Dockyard or on the airdromes, and raids made little difference to the continuity of their exertions. The older men and many of the women worked in the fields and were sustained by knowing exactly where to go to ground.

Storekeepers and traders, most of whose premises had long since crumbled into ruin, constructed open-air booths and stalls out of rubble and tarpaulin and conducted business with one eye on the customer and the other on the signal-tower upon which, in a certain eventuality, a red flag would be hoisted. (Even so, during the worst period in London, it was no uncommon spectacle to behold some eminent lawyer or stockbroker sitting in a wrecked chair on the sidewalk, upon the site occupied by his office yesterday, placidly dictating to his stenographer, herself enthroned upon a pile of broken bricks.)

The schools kept open most of the time, and when the siren sounded boys and girls, some of them very small, would fall into rank behind their teachers and march serenely to their appointed shelter, where their education was continued as far as circumstances permitted. Priests, too, celebrated mass and preached sermons in roofless churches under the open sky, like the rector in the Mrs. Miniver film.

By this time the shelter situation was well in hand. There were over twelve hundred such places of refuge available in July, 1942, with more under construction or undergoing enlargement. Every person in the island was now assured of at least four square feet of shelter space. The larger shelters were furnished with tiers of sleeping bunks, and around these each family group would congregate—cooking, sleeping, singing, or telling their beads. Each shelter had its own little shrine, with its flickering lamp and picture of the Virgin, and maybe a few flowers.

The Dockyard workshops and repair-depots had long been transferred to secure and roomy quarters underground, where their important duties could be maintained without cessation, whatever the Hun was doing overhead. Not only did the artificers and electricians continue to manufacture and repair the necessary gadgets of war, but they turned out a most welcome line of domestic utensils—pots and pans, knives and ladles, to replace those lost to the civil population by the destruction of their homes.

The ordinary air-raid shelters could not be artificially illuminated except by an occasional kerosene lamp, or candle, for fuel was growing short, and electric light was the rarest of luxuries, but they were made as comfortable and homelike as possible. In due course a universal radio system was installed, as we shall see.

III

The children have been mentioned, and there are thousands of children in Malta. (Remember that a good Maltese thinks nothing of a family of ten or fifteen.) And of course there were a large number of British children, small sons and daughters of officers and men of the Forces, and of the civil officials.

How have all of these stood up to the strain of the past three years? The answer is that youthful spirits are alike the world over and that those spirits can never be depressed for long, whatever their surroundings. If the children of Malta were nervous and apprehensive in the beginning, like their elders, they recovered not only their confidence but their natural exuberance sooner than any other section of the community. The war and its appurtenances had assumed for them the proportions of a new and fascinating game.

Youth, as most adults know from painful experience, is not allergic to loud and unpleasant noises. On the contrary, youth enjoys these to such an extent that if the necessary noise is lacking, youth will voluntarily repair the omission for itself. The children of Malta were much more frightened by the dark shelters, or on being separated from familiar faces and surroundings, than they ever were by bombs. They were thrilled, moreover, by the thunder of the anti-aircraft barrage, by the dogfights high up in the sky, and by the spectacle of enemy bombers crashing to earth or into the sea.

The Royal Air Force were their especial heroes, and embarrassed pilots, visiting a town or village on an afternoon off from the airdrome, were invariably accompanied, in their search for bodily and mental refreshment, by a shrill retinue of youthful admirers, executing victory rolls, looping the loop, and shouting "Speetfire! Speetfire!"

The children soon learned to invent games based upon their own observation and experience of total war. One of the simplest and most satisfying of these was the Bomb-Game. You threw a ball into the air and waited. If the ball descended on to your head, you were dead; if it missed you, you were not, and could try again.

Young Malta, needless to say, became intensely military-minded. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides acquired sudden and gratifying prestige. Most of the infant population enlisted in some highly irregular military unit of their own organizing. Everybody went about saluting everybody else.

And inevitably, every child in Malta became a confirmed souvenir-hunter. Finally official steps had to be taken to prevent the adventurous from blowing themselves up through indiscriminate hoarding of high explosives.

Pitched battles were organized—British and Maltese on the one side, Germans and Italians on the other. The difficulty was to persuade anybody to impersonate the enemy. A German, possibly, but no son of Malta would consent for one moment to play the part of a despised Italian. As a rule, sisters and toddlers were conscripted for this degrading duty. Doubtless the baby was allotted the rôle of Mussolini.

Many small boys constructed private fortresses of their own, which they were prepared to hold against all comers. They were fascinated, too, by the system of warning signals conveyed by the red flags on the signal-towers, and most of them furnished themselves with red flags, too, as auxiliary aids to constituted authority. Some of them stood by their flags in the open, during the raids.

IV

The fury of the attacks increased through February, March, and April. Rommel, across the Mediterranean in North Africa, was completing preparations for his great and successful counter-thrust against the British Eighth Army, and the order went forth that Malta, that tiny but most effective thorn in the side of his supply lines, must be rendered once and for all incapable of further interference. The raids waxed in number and weight, and the raiders abandoned all attempt to discriminate between military and civil targets. If they could not silence the anti-aircraft guns or sweep the fighters from the sky, they could at least scarify the weak and the helpless.

More houses were bombed and more churches destroyed. Toward the end of April a particularly flagrant attack was made upon two hospitals. In the first of these, two wards were entirely demolished and six patients killed, despite a large Red Cross displayed on the flat roof. The outrage was too much for a German officer prisoner, himself a patient, who roundly denounced his own countrymen and did good service in aiding the injured. More than that, he urged the nurses and staff to take refuge in the shelters forthwith. “Now they have started,” he said, “they will not leave any part of the hospital standing.” And he was right, for two more raids followed in which more civilians were killed, including a child, together with some Italian prisoners whose camp had been included in the hospital area for their greater safety.

Indeed, from this time on, the enemy abandoned all pretense of conducting war upon the principles, and within the limits, agreed between civilized nations. Common decency and even common sense went by the board. Since airmen of both sides were constantly being shot down off the coast, or bailing out into the sea, the Vice Admiral in command of the Naval Forces of the island had organized a flotilla of swift motor-boats, “mercy launches,” to speed out of harbor, pick up survivors, whether friend or foe, and bring them safe ashore. But the Hun would have none of this. The Me’s swooped down time and again and shot the launches to pieces, irrespective of the passengers they had picked up. A drowning British airman was naturally fair game, despite age-long international understandings on the matter, but to the Nazi mentality a German airman rescued by the British was obviously of no further use to Germany. He might as well be dead. So they killed him, too.

Much gallantry was displayed during this period by the Maltese themselves. The A.R.P. services, the salvage parties, and the Police worked indefatigably, while the women, nurses, and welfare workers exposed themselves without fear.

V

But as the weary months wore on, a new and subtle danger reared its head. The island as a whole began to display a tendency, not unnatural after a long period of endurance, to go stale. The fighting spirit threatened to give way to sheer boredom. There was so little to do—no shopping, for instance. Everybody was earning money, but there was practically nothing to buy. There was no transport, which made it difficult to pay little social visits or gossip on fresh topics. Public utilities such as gas, water, and sanitation were constantly being interfered with by bombing—petty hardships which still further tended to depress public morale. Above all, supplies were getting lower and lower, and short rations do not breed long views or high hearts. Even the children had lost a little of their natural exuberance. There was no panic or defeatism—just a drift toward resigned apathy.

Vigorous steps were, therefore, taken by Authority to prevent this atmosphere of stagnation from becoming permanent. The general aim was to inject as much color and variety as possible into the drab routine of siege existence, by restoring the ordinary distractions, recreations, and hobbies of peacetime.

In this effort the Governor and his staff, needless to say, received the full backing of the clergy of the island and of such institutions as Talbot House (or Toc H), that notable establishment founded for a precisely similar purpose amid the mud and blood of Flanders twenty-five years before.

With the exercise of duty was emphasized the duty of exercise. Boxing-matches were organized and facilities for sea-bathing increased. Football, cricket, and hockey were played.

St. George's Day, April 23rd, was celebrated, as far as circumstances would permit, as a general holiday, and the Gunners held a tennis tournament. The play is described as "fierce but inaccurate," and was watched by a large and highly interested body of spectators. The Luftwaffe came, too, but not for long, and fortunately during the tea interval. The center court has since received a direct hit.

Social life was stimulated by gatherings of various kinds. Clubs were thrown open to all wearers of the King's uniform. Owners of country houses invited parties of soldiers and airmen to tea and provided dance-partners for them. Theaters and picture-houses were kept open, and they carried on until bombed out of action.

Amateur entertainers were encouraged in every way. The RAF possessed a concert-party of its own, the Raffians, and they were assisted by the young ladies of the island. That plucky little organization which had devoted itself, as already noted, to the entertainment of gunners and search-light operators,

now soared to fresh heights. It devised an entertainment on the lines of an English pantomime—*Aladdin*, no less. A corporal of the RAF disported himself as a comic Chinese policeman. The part of the Princess So-Shi was played by the daughter of a Dockyard officer: in private life she served as a plotter in the Fighter Control. The Fairy Queen was the daughter of an engine-room artificer on board H.M.S. *Penelope*, of which more will be heard later.

The island could even boast professional talent, in the person of a popular young lady named Christina, a dancer who had originally arrived in Valletta as a member of a cabaret troupe, having already figured in Barcelona and Tunis. After the outbreak of hostilities she had stayed on, to work, like the Princess, as a plotter in the Fighter Control.

A great effort was next made, and with marked success, to lighten the long hours of tedium and suspense in the island shelters, by the installation of a universal radio service.

The wizards of the Royal Corps of Signals devised a most ingenious system of so-called radio rediffusion, from a central station far below ground, whence they relayed to every shelter in the island not merely the radio news as it came in from London and elsewhere, but entertainment items originating in the island itself. They could also, when it was needful, broadcast official intimations and orders to the population in general.

No means of promoting a confident and cheerful spirit seem to have been overlooked. Men stationed at lonely posts were encouraged to devote their spare hours to gardening and chicken-raising.

VI

So far as the civil population was concerned, the customary celebration of the Carnival was omitted—there seemed no point in bidding temporary farewell to the flesh when there was no flesh to bid farewell to—but a giant Fun Fair, with innumerable side-shows, was held instead, under distinguished patronage. There was also a Fur and Feather Show, which offered, *inter alia*, a prize for the Dog with the Kindest Face. It is regrettable to have to add that the winner of this competition, upon being presented with his prize by no less a personage than His Excellency, the Governor, attempted to bite the hand which bestowed it.

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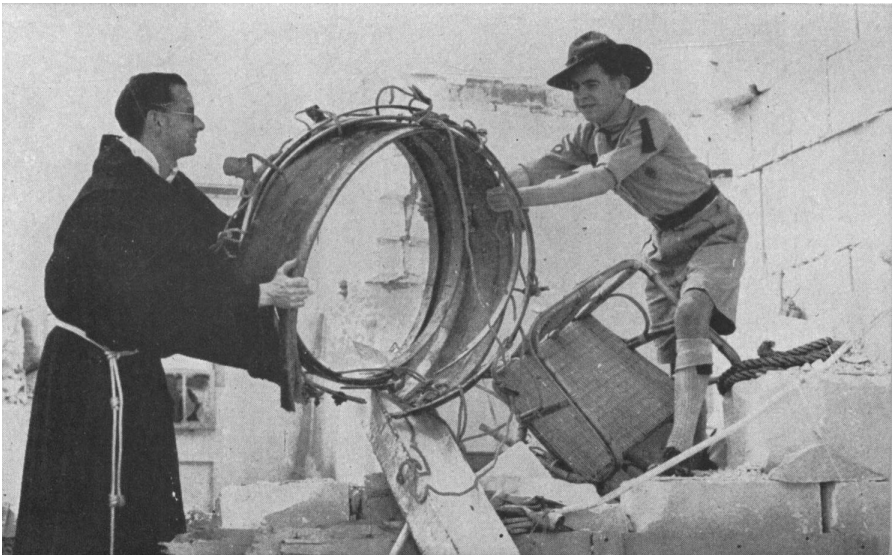
THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

All the little people at the ceremony are given a small package of blessed barley and a picture of St. Anthony Abbot.



British Information Services

BOY SCOUTS HEADQUARTERS BOMBED OUT

And of course the children were not forgotten. For one thing, a special occasion was made of the celebration of one of Malta's most ancient ceremonies, the Blessing of the Animals, held in honor of St. Anthony Abbot, the Patron Saint of animals. Upon the appointed day, horses, donkeys, birds, dogs, and cats were brought by the children to the entrance of the Church of Our Lady of Victories. Here they were welcomed by a priest, who appeared upon a balcony attended by two acolytes and, after a brief address in Maltese, outlining the history and significance of the ceremony, pronounced a benediction upon his dumb (though far from silent) congregation and their small custodians.

The Royal Artillery, in the meanwhile, had been preparing a little surprise of their own for the children. During the long hours of waiting and watching at their gun positions, they had contrived to manufacture a large number of most attractive and ingenious toys, mostly out of scrap—bully-beef tins, ammunition cases, and the like. Before distribution of these, the usual exhibition was held and prizes were awarded. The palm went to a quite wonderful doll's house.

Indeed, Army and Air Force combined to give their young friends as happy a time as possible. They threw parties for them, at which the guests were regaled with an ingenious article of confectionery composed of a specially softened Army biscuit covered with pink icing. Games and competitions followed, at which a prize was tactfully awarded to every single competitor. Tea without Tears, in fact.

And so, by the ancient but none the less infallible expedient of bearing one another's burdens, the Slough of Despond was safely passed.

CHAPTER XI

SHIPS AND MEN

H.M.S. *Pepperpot*, or as an alternative, H.M.S. *Porcupine*—that was how her crew described her, as she lay docked in a hospitable American Navy Yard some time during the summer of 1942.

Her real name was H.M.S. *Penelope*: they called her Pepperpot because she was pitted all over with holes, and Porcupine because the holes were stopped up with wooden pegs—over two thousand of them. She was a British light cruiser, and she had crossed the Atlantic all the way from Malta under her own steam—a considerable feat in her state.

The story of the *Penelope* will serve as a worthy peg upon which to hang our first convoy story. All these stories can not be told here, but some certainly must be, or the Malta epic will only be half an epic. So the *Penelope* story, though it has comparatively little to do with convoys, shall lead off.

It has always been a tradition of the British Navy to preserve the same name throughout a dynasty of ships of war. The first *Penelope* was launched somewhere toward the end of the sixteenth century, and our own particular *Penelope* is actually the ninth of her line.

In November, 1941, she found herself at Malta, despatched thither in company with another cruiser of a similar class, the *Aurora*, and two destroyers, *Lance* and *Lively*. The four vessels formed a little striking force, Force K, and their business was to employ Malta as a base for offensive action against Italian supply ships and their escorts. They sallied forth, usually each week-end, upon what their facetious crews came to describe as a Club Run, because so far they had encountered no enemy and their excursions were beginning to assume the innocuous character of a bicycle picnic. But their luck turned at last, and at their first engagement Force K sank ten supply ships and two Italian destroyers.

About this time, however, the Luftwaffe returned to Italy, and the Island began, early in 1942, to endure its martyrdom of months, some of which has already been described. The immediate result was a complete change of occupation for the *Penelope*. Instead of harassing the Axis supply ships, she was now called upon to provide escort for incoming British convoys. And not before it was time.

The situation was already critical and was destined to grow worse. The island was short of supplies of every kind, for in early 1942 the Luftwaffe dominated the Mediterranean sea-lanes so completely that for a time it was almost impossible to get a convoy through—or anything more than a fraction thereof.

The route to Malta, whether from Alexandria in the East or Gibraltar in the West, was a full thousand miles, and with Greece, Crete, Sardinia, and most of North Africa in enemy control, a supply ship could be dive-bombed or torpedoed by land-based aircraft throughout the whole of its passage. Even if it got through to Malta it was no more secure, for the Junkers were over the island night and day. Spitfires were not yet available, and the indefatigable anti-aircraft gunners, for all their efforts, could furnish only a partial air-umbrella. So the *Penelope* and the rest of Force K were called in to render what chaperonage they could.

On March 23rd a cruelly battered little flotilla from Egypt approached the island. It included a naval supply ship, the *Breconshire*, which had been practically disabled. Through the good offices of the *Penelope* she was taken in tow and, despite heavy weather, conveyed to a safe anchorage. Once in harbor, the ships of the convoy, including the *Breconshire*, were submitted to immediate and intensive bombing raids. One or two were actually sunk before they could be unloaded.

The enemy's purpose was now quite clear. He was out to destroy not only every ship in the harbor but every ship which might ultimately succeed in reaching the harbor, and so to starve Malta into submission.

In the absence of complete air-cover it was obviously useless to expose valuable naval vessels to concentrated bombing in cramped waters. For the moment a policy of dispersal was indicated, and Force K received orders to betake itself elsewhere.

Unfortunately, one member of the Force was in no position to comply. A near-miss had knocked a considerable hole in the *Penelope's* hull, well below the waterline; so while the *Aurora*, with *Lance* and *Lively*, disappeared over the horizon, the *Penelope* found herself relegated to dry-dock. There, under a perpetual hail of bombs, she was to undergo repairs which might take a month to complete—if, indeed, they could be completed at all.

As a matter of fact, the repairs were carried out in a little more than two weeks, by dint of turning on every available artificer and rigger to help the regular Dockyard hands. Even the army contributed some welders.

Not a moment of time was wasted. The moment a raid finished, a swarm of workmen emerged from the adjacent shelters and set furiously about their tasks again, until the next alert—which might come only a few minutes later

—when they retired to the shelter once more, leaving only essential officers and damage-control men to carry on, while the gunners fought the Stukas.

And they did not fight in vain. In the course of the fortnight they brought down three 87's for certain, and probably a dozen more—for, as usual, it was impossible to count the winged birds which failed to get home. Of course the never-ceasing barrage of the island gunners took its own individual toll.

They fought, too, without flurry, or departure from accustomed routine. The Easter week-end occurred during the fiercest period of the bombing, and on both Good Friday and Easter Day the ship's company, six hundred of them, paraded for service between two raids, singing lustily under the direction of the Captain and the Chaplain. It may be that the shades of the Knights of St. John were present, too, singing with them.

And it may be that those same shades made special intercession with Providence on behalf of their valiant successors in the defense of the island. At any rate, though bombs continued to rain down upon every square yard of the Dockyard, not once did the *Penelope* receive a direct hit.

But practically everything else happened. The Dockside itself became a mere mesh of craters. Masses of masonry were flying up in the air and coming down again, until the ship's quarter-deck assumed the appearance of a rock-garden and was referred to as such. The dock-gates were damaged and began to leak. The dock itself began to fill. Pumps were set going; knocked out; set going again; but the water continued to gain. Once it rose so high that another six inches would have floated the *Penelope* off the blocks, and that would have been the end of everything.

But again Providence intervened: the waters ceased to rise at the eleventh hour, and in due course the dock was pumped clear and the shipwrights got to work again.

The strain increased with each day. The gun-barrels were becoming worn out, and so were the gunners, for sleep was almost impossible. There were grievous casualties, too. But there was never any lack of volunteers—bandsmen, cooks, stewards, signalmen—to take their places. Morale never deteriorated; indeed, a certain cheerful detachment distinguished the fiercest of the fighting. One pompom gunner was the owner of a most vociferous canary, which used to accompany him to Action Stations during the raids. At moments of special intensity he was accustomed to cover it up with his steel helmet, despite shrill protests.

At last, by incredible efforts, the repairs were completed and the ship was pronounced fit to take a chance. The patches had been welded on, and the two thousand-odd holes in the Pepperpot plugged up. It remained only to take in oil and supplies and make steam. The ship was accordingly floated

out of the dock and moved to the oiling wharf between two raids—the fourth and fifth of the day. The fifth, as it turned out, was one of the worst of the series. The Gunner Officer was killed, and the Captain himself wounded. Anti-aircraft ammunition ran short, but a posse of volunteers from outside contrived to repair the deficiency in part.

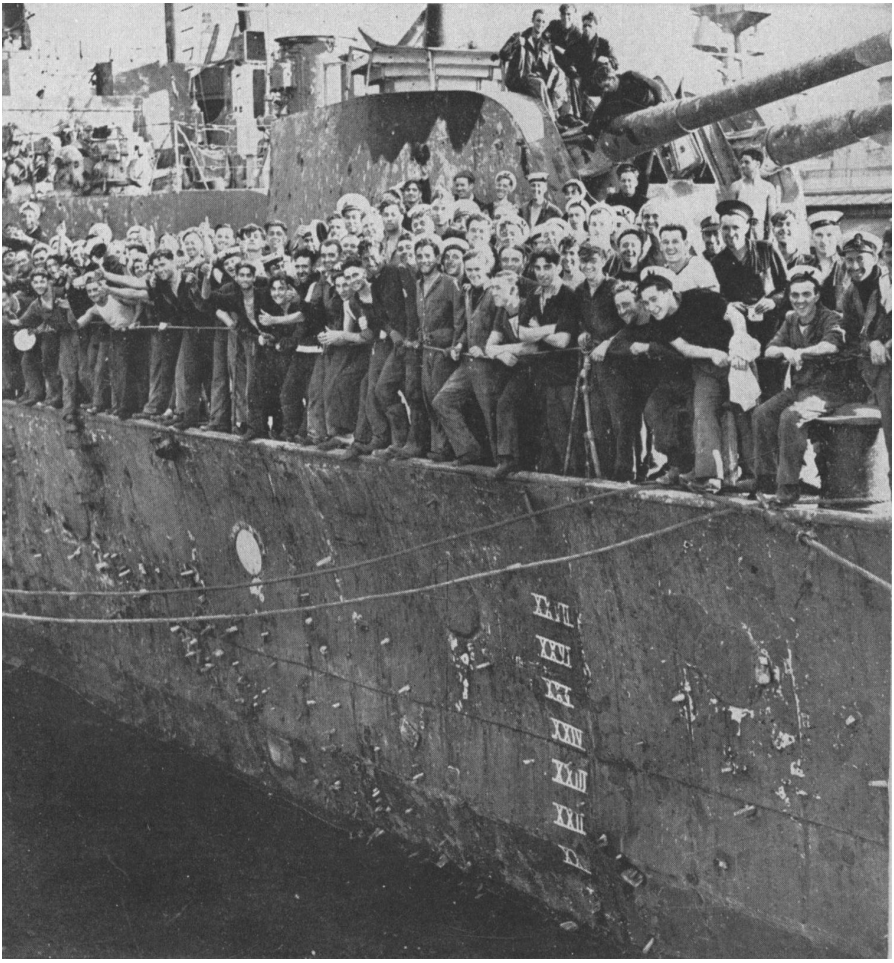
Once again the *Penelope* survived every assault, and a few hours later, under the kindly cloak of darkness, she slipped out of the Grand Harbour and took the sea-road again—not feeling quite sure whether she would float or her engines turn over. But her luck held. She fought off the pursuing Luftwaffe next day and in due course made her way to Gibraltar.

There she received some further patching-up, and a few weeks later, as already recorded, she found herself indulging in the luxury of a complete repair and refit, physical and moral, at the hands of American dockyard workers, who expressed themselves both proud and happy to be ministering to the needs of such a worthy guest.

II

The *Penelope* saga covers perhaps the most difficult period of the raids. Matters improved greatly with the advent of the Spitfires, but not all at once.

Until the middle of April, 1942, as already noted, the defense of the island against the Luftwaffe was maintained almost entirely by artillery barrages. The arrival of the first contingent of Spitfires brought welcome relief to the hard-worked gunners but presented a new and considerable problem to the Fighter Control, in general charge of the defenses.



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H.M.S. "Pepperpot"

The *Penelope*, British cruiser, fought her way through the Mediterranean to Malta where her two-thousand-odd wounds were patched and plugged under almost constant attack from the air.

Air defense over such a small and congested area as Malta is complicated by the fact that everybody is on top of everybody else. Where elbow-room is plentiful, airdromes and gun-sites can be separated from one another by reasonable distances; in other words, the territory to be defended can be organized laterally. There can be a search-light belt and a fighter belt and a gun-defended area. The fighters can thus keep out of the way of the

guns. If they fail to do so, either they get hit by the barrage or the guns have to cease firing and a gap is created in the general pattern of defense.

This was the difficulty at Malta. Gun-sites and airdromes were packed close together: air defense had to be organized not laterally, but vertically. The atmosphere had to be layered, as it were. Matters had to be so ordered that the guns should not be ranged above a certain level and air-lanes be left through which fighters could enter or leave their airdrome without interfering with or being shot up by the artillery. Warships in the harbor must also be included within the scheme. All this required much careful organization, and organization takes time. So does experiment, and numerous devices had to be tried and found wanting before a really satisfactory combination could be achieved—as in the end it was.

May 10th was the great occasion: in some way it marked the turning-point of the siege. Upon that day a British mine-layer, H.M.S. *Welshman*, steamed into the Grand Harbour—the first vessel to do so under the perfected scheme of air-cover. She had been met out at sea by Spitfires, which had successfully held off the enemy aircraft that swarmed about her. Then, as she neared the island coast, the island gunners joined the "party" with a system of fixed barrages, designed to protect the ship's path and prevent the bombers from getting directly above her. Additional cover was furnished by a smoke-screen, while the fighters, high above all, harried Junkers and Messerschmitt alike.

The whole operation was a triumphant success, and it was realized that the ideal formula for harbor defense had at last been worked out. Never again thereafter were the ships in harbor attacked by dive-bombers.

H.M.S. *Welshman* was a remarkable ship, with a service record notable even in this war. Needless to say, she had not come to Malta to lay mines: she had abandoned that particular occupation after the first year and had since served as a troop-transport and a bullion-ship. Having one day arrived at an English seaport and there unloaded twenty million pounds' worth of gold, she took in yet another cargo—powdered milk, canned meat, smoke-containers, and thousands of rounds of Bofors gun ammunition. Her experienced crew, putting two and two together, decided that this particular assignment could be intended for but one type of customer, a beleaguered garrison running short of food and ammunition—Malta, maybe. And Malta it was.

They had no easy passage, especially after entering the Mediterranean. There the *Welshman* ran the gauntlet of the successive attentions of U boats, E boats, dive-bombers, torpedo bombers, and the Italian Navy. But she came through it all, and the new air-defense scheme of the island itself brought her in and kept her safe thereafter.

She arrived at a timely moment. But it was not so much what she brought as what her safe arrival promised that mattered. If, under the new air-coverage scheme, the *Welshman* could come through unscathed and be unloaded in safety, other ships could do the same. The blockade was not impenetrable after all. All Malta swarmed exultantly to the Grand Harbour and gave the visitor a rapturous reception.

She came again more than once after that, and became an object of adoration to the Maltese. They regarded her, perhaps rightly, as their mascot.

To-day the *Welshman's* task is done: she lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean, somewhere off the North African coast, and her story is ended. But it is still told in the island, and always will be.

III

About this time the Luftwaffe once more disappeared, with their usual unexpectedness, from the Sicilian airfields: the shooting-season had reopened on the Russian front, and though the raids continued, they were conducted only upon the Italian scale. The island was thus left in comparative tranquillity, and ships entering the harbors could be unloaded and turned around in comfort.

But they had to get there first. The Axis had relaxed not a jot of their determination to starve Malta into impotence. The only change was one of policy. Instead of dive-bombing transports and supply ships as they lay in harbor, the enemy sought out the convoys while still at sea, in an effort to annihilate them by mass-attack before they could get under the new Maltese umbrella.

It was a desperate and determined campaign, expensive for both sides. A great British convoy, very strongly escorted, put out from Gibraltar for Malta on June 26th, and a running battle was joined almost from the start. In the course of it the convoy lost a cruiser and five destroyers of its escort. The enemy casualties were a cruiser, a U boat, and at least seventy-three aircraft, while the Italian battleship of the *Littorio* class was torpedoed. The convoy got through—though not, alas, all of it.

These desperate excursions never ceased, and reinforcements, of both material and men, continued to trickle into the island. All were welcome, but it was a lean time and getting leaner.

First aid of an unexpected but invaluable nature was administered more than once by a somewhat unlikely Good Samaritan—a British submarine, no less: H.M.S. *Porpoise*. This benevolent vessel paid at least four unobtrusive visits to Malta, carrying not torpedoes but aviation spirit and other essential

supplies. There is even a legend—probably baseless, though one hopes not—that her torpedo tubes were stuffed with sausages.

Not long ago the *Porpoise* returned to a British base after a total of fourteen months' continuous Mediterranean service—an astonishing record. The service included not only the succoring of Malta but some strenuous achievements against Rommel's supply lines.

This submarine also holds the record for having survived the heaviest depth-charge attack in British naval history—eighty-seven within a space of four days. She sailed into harbor at the end of the fourteen months displaying a banner of her crew's own devising—a blue-over-red submarine flag, with the letters P.C.S. superimposed: "*Porpoise* Carrier Service."

IV

But all such service, valuable though it was, merely added up to relief in penny packets. Something much bigger was needed if the guns of Malta were to continue firing, the fighters to go up, and the island population to be kept alive.

And at last, when August was reached, this happened. A considerable convoy got through, and the worst—though it was not realized until later—was over. Here is the story, the last of our series.

The convoy was a large one and was heavily escorted. The flagship was the great battleship *Nelson*, and the escort included cruisers, destroyers, and aircraft carriers.

It was an imposing array of ships which swept silently through the Straits of Gibraltar, eastward bound, on the night of Sunday, August 16th, with the lights of Tangiers twinkling to starboard and of the Spanish coast to port. First came the leading ships of the destroyer screen, then the convoy itself, closely ringed in by its escort of cruisers and destroyers. The carriers followed immediately astern, ready to launch their aircraft at the first call of danger.

Monday the 17th passed uneventfully, for enemy air bases were not yet within range. Tuesday came, and still the foe remained invisible. But he was there, none the less. About noon, suddenly and without warning, the *Eagle*, that brave old aircraft carrier whose acquaintance we made in early 1941 and from whose flight deck scores of the fighters now operating over Malta had first taken off, was struck by a whole salvo of torpedoes, boldly and skilfully launched from an invisible U boat. Three great columns of water shot up from her side; she heeled right over and was gone almost immediately, taking her precious freight of fighters with her.

It was a stunning blow, but not mortal, for the *Eagle* had not been the only carrier in the escort. From the deck of a much more modern consort, when enemy aircraft appeared later in the day, poured a swarm of hornets of the Fleet Air Arm, intent upon swift and thorough retribution. They shot down thirty-nine enemy aircraft in the course of the afternoon.

But more took their place, and then more—German Ju 88's and Italian torpedo bombers—and toward sunset a heavy and general action developed. The scene, as darkness fell, was overwhelming. The shattering roar of the barrage, the whistle and crash of the bombs, the swift, luminous course of the tracer bullets, the spouting columns of water, the innumerable shells bursting high above all, combined to create a picture at once terrible and fascinating.

In the center of this pandemonium of fire and thunder steamed the merchantmen, hidden time and again in clouds of spray from a near-miss, but proceeding sedately on their way and periodically changing course in perfect formation to avoid torpedoes, in answer to the siren-signals of the escorting ships. They had been through all this before, these imperturbable merchant seamen, and as far as cold-drawn courage and iron self-discipline could achieve anything, they were determined to come through again—and again. So they plugged along stolidly. But every now and then, as yet another Ju 88 fell flaming from heaven into the waters beneath, with forlorn parachutes drifting slowly down after it, a great roar of cheering went up from a score of decks.

The attacks were renewed next day, Wednesday, at crack of dawn, and continued all through the blazing August heat until dusk. A brief lull followed: then, once more, suddenly and without warning, another torpedo struck home, this time on the flagship of the admiral commanding the cruisers and destroyers. She took on an immediate and heavy list and lost speed. The crew assembled on the upper deck and stood looking up at the bridge, waiting calmly for instructions. Meanwhile the destroyer *Ashanti* had ranged alongside.

The admiral on the bridge, having paused for a moment to light a cigarette, addressed the ship's company.

"My job," he said, "is to get this convoy through to Malta in the shortest possible time, so I'm changing over to the *Ashanti*. Your job is to stop here and get your ship home." So he left, in the middle of a Stuka attack, and sped away followed by the cheers of his men.

Night fell again, but this time there was to be no respite, for the convoy was passing between the southern tip of Sicily and Cape Bon in Northern Tunisia—the dreaded Western Bottleneck. Star shells and search-lights flashed out, and E boats and U boats were busy. The cruiser *Manchester* was

hit by mine or torpedo and ultimately had to be sunk. Some of the supply ships suffered, too. An ugly night, but all the time Malta was coming nearer.

Early next morning, sure enough, like harbingers of victory, a squadron of Beaufighter aircraft appeared in the east, despatched from the island to reinforce the weary Fleet Air Arm. A little later, as the distance shortened still further, Spitfires also appeared upon the scene, to the complete discomfiture of the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica. And then, still later, a shout went up: "Ships ahead!" They were mine-sweepers and motor-launches from the Grand Harbour, come to usher the supply ships in.

This they did, to the exultant cheers of assembled Malta. But the escorting vessels did not follow. Instead, they swung about, exchanged good-luck signals with their late charges, and sped away to another pressing and perilous job.

V

Of all the ships of that great company which came successfully through, perhaps the most precious and the most welcome was the oil-tanker *Ohio*, an American-built ship manned by a British crew.

The enemy realized her value as fully as did her escort, and singled her out for continuous attention. Late on Wednesday, the nineteenth, she was hit by a torpedo and brought to a standstill, but during the ensuing night—the ugly night off Cape Bon—her ship's company, by superhuman efforts, got her engines going again. Next morning, without a compass and steered from aft, she came hobbling after the rest of the convoy and contrived to overtake it.

She was promptly made the center of a Stuka attack. Time and again she disappeared in a cloud of spray from near-misses, and at last, as was almost inevitable, she received a direct hit and caught fire. This seemed to be the end, for a burning tanker is just one big imminent explosion, but once more the *Ohio's* indomitable crew achieved the impossible. They got the fire under control, though by this time the ship's engines were partly disabled and she could make only two knots. It is hardly surprising that she was hit again, and this time her engines stopped for keeps.

A destroyer promptly took her in tow. The tow parted, but Malta was now in sight, and a final effort was made. A destroyer and a mine-sweeper closed in on the sinking vessel and lashed themselves firmly to either side of her. Another destroyer resumed the tow, and that very night, Thursday, August 20th, the *Ohio*, battered, helpless, but with her precious cargo intact, was literally boosted into the Grand Harbour.

VI

Such is the story of what is always described in Malta as the Big Convoy. It was not as big as when it left home, but never before had so many ships got through. The immediate necessities of the island were for the moment relieved, and hearts once more beat resolutely.

CHAPTER XII

MALTA, G.C.

The story of the convoys has carried us somewhat beyond our objective. Let us return to Malta and the month of April, 1942—the final month, as it turned out, of the great Luftwaffe offensive.

It was perhaps the darkest period of the siege. Food and ammunition were growing scanty; the island air-defense scheme was as yet incomplete for continued lack of Spitfires, and Valletta and the Grand Harbour were being steadily pounded to pieces.

All over the world the people of the United Nations were following, with increasing admiration and suspense, the heroic resistance of the islanders to the common enemy. Suddenly that warm sentiment took material shape. On Tuesday, April 14th, a glorious surprise was sprung upon the Maltese. Out of the blue came the announcement that His Majesty King George VI had conferred the George Cross—the British civilian equivalent of the Victoria Cross—upon the Island of Malta as a whole. Henceforth the postal address of every inhabitant of the island from the Governor and Commander-in-Chief to the humblest dock-laborer in the harbor, would be, not "Malta," but "Malta, G.C."

It was an inspired gesture and came at precisely the right moment. From now on there could be no question—if indeed there ever had been—of faint-heartedness or defeatism in a people so signally honored.

Congratulations poured in from all over the world. Even the Russian gunners in Cronstadt and Sevastopol found time, in the midst of their own pressing duties, to salute the defenders of the distant little island.

The Cross itself arrived in Malta in the custody of General Viscount Gort, V.C., the new Governor and Commander-in-Chief, and was committed by him, at a great public ceremony in the battered Palace Square, to the keeping of Sir George Borg, Chief Justice of the island.

"How you have stood the most concentrated bombing in the history of the world," he said in his dedicatory speech, "is the admiration of all civilized people. . . . The Axis powers have tried again and again to break your spirit, but your confidence in the final triumph of the United Nations remains undimmed. Battle-scarred, George Cross Malta stands firm, undaunted and undismayed, waiting for the time when she can call: 'Pass, friend; all is well in the Island Fortress!' "

The Chief Justice made a full-hearted reply, then took delivery of the Cross on behalf of the people of Malta. When victory has been achieved the Cross will be permanently enshrined in the Cathedral of St. John.

At the same time the new Governor despatched to the Colonial Secretary in London the following message:

> "I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of the George Cross and the letter from His Majesty the King.
>
> "The people and garrison of Malta present their humble and loyal duty to His Majesty, and on their behalf I beg leave to state that the Gracious Message of Our Sovereign and the bestowal of the George Cross will serve as a common inspiration to us all, to remain steadfast in our duty and in our fixed determination to defend our fortress."

The day which saw Lord Gort's arrival in Malta also witnessed the departure of Sir William Dobbie, Malta's tower of strength and sheet-anchor to windward during two long years of trial and endurance. He left behind him in the hearts of the people of Malta a lasting memorial of gratitude and affection. His unfailing energy and example had inspired them again and again, while his deep and openly expressed religious faith accorded exactly with their own tradition of devout and simple piety.

That day his strength was all but spent, but his task was done and he could rest. So he bade farewell to a little people who would never forget him and sailed out of the Grand Harbour for the last time. Upon arriving home he was immediately received by his King, who thanked and decorated him.

II

The new Governor and Commander-in-Chief was a soldier of a different type from his predecessor, save in the conviction that in fighting for a high and just cause you must never lose sight of spiritual values.

Lord Gort is a natural soldier. His outstanding quality is that of a leader of men: he would a thousand times prefer, one feels, to march in the forefront of a battle than to direct it from the rear. This is borne out by his record as a junior officer. During the First World War, as a Company Commander in the Grenadier Guards, he achieved every distinction open to the fighting soldier. He was mentioned nine times in despatches, and was awarded the Victoria Cross, the Military Cross, and the Distinguished Service Order.

Later in his career he rendered conspicuous service as second-in-command to General Duncan in the organization of the Shanghai Defense Force, in 1927, at a very critical moment in the Chinese Civil War. It was mainly by his exertions that a great city was saved from rapine and with it the lives of thousands of people of the International Settlement in Shanghai, not by any means all of them British.

In 1927, after fulfilling various Staff appointments with distinction, he was suddenly promoted, though barely forty-one, to the position of Chief of the Imperial General Staff, which made him virtually Commander-in-Chief of all the military forces of the British Empire. At the outbreak of the present war he left his desk in the War Office, probably with a sigh of relief, to take command of the British Field Force in northern France. In due course came the German invasion, the disaster of the French collapse, and the miraculous evacuation of the greater part of the British Force from Dunkirk. Some day, when the whole story is told, the British people will realize the extent of Gort's achievement during those nightmare weeks.

And now he had come to take over in Malta. It was a job after his own heart. For one thing, he was going to be right among soldiers again, in close and intimate contact. (Thomas Atkins has always been Gort's hero—and Thomas Atkins reciprocates.) For another, there was work for him to do, hard and intensely responsible work. He was not endowed with the spiritual exaltation of his predecessor, but his steadfast faith, his practical mind and energetic nature, fitted him perfectly for the labors which now confronted him.

These were prodigious enough, but in one respect Lord Gort was more fortunate than General Dobbie. The disappearance of the Luftwaffe had coincided almost exactly with the departure from the island of the old Governor and the arrival of the new. Henceforth the only raiders to be dealt with were the Italians, and these did little beyond providing the gunners and fighters with a little healthy target practice. True, the Luftwaffe returned during October and November, but by this time the combined and coördinated air defenses of Malta were the strongest in the world, and such visits as were paid were of a fleeting and perfunctory nature.

Yes, as far as air raids were concerned, the troubles of the islanders were practically over. But now they found themselves confronted by a less violent but far more demoralizing form of visitation—slow starvation.

Supplies of every kind had been short for a long time and in the continued absence of relief ships were growing shorter. The food situation was acute. Sugar, coffee, flour, and jam were at rock-bottom. Of course every inch of the island was cultivated, producing potatoes, wheat, and rye. (Potato-flour was usually mixed with wheat-flour.) Grapes, oranges, and

lemons grew profusely. But the soil of Malta could support but a fraction of its population, and the islanders were by this time suffering severely from malnutrition.

A Bofors crew of Scots ready for the enemy
who has been forced to admit their accuracy.

British Information Services

General Viscount Gort, V.C., talks with soldiers of the Maltese Palace Guard.

The Maltese eat little meat, but they require enormous quantities of bread, vegetables, and edible oil. The Maltese workman is accustomed in normal times to consume about six pounds of bread a day. He scoops out the inside of a loaf, stuffs the cavity thus created with a mixed mass of lettuce and tomato soaked in oil, and devours the lot. Now oil was unobtainable, and the bread ration had been reduced to ten ounces a day. Little wonder that backs were bowed and muscles relaxed. Some of the dock laborers, it is said, had grown so feeble from hunger that they could hardly unload the supply ships when at last they came through. And the women and children, with their lesser powers of resistance, were in even worse case.

Much had been done by Sir William Dobbie and the Maltese Government to relieve these privations. Communal meals had been organized, and so-called Victory Kitchens started, to which the inhabitants of the island could bring their humble food rations—sardines, onions, spaghetti—and have them cooked, for, because of the oil shortage, there was little fuel available for household consumption. Here the prevalence of large families was a real convenience, for it is much simpler to cook one large pooled ration than a number of small ones.

There were some thirty-five thousand goats in Malta. The milk of these was now pasteurized at collecting stations under Government supervision and made available in bottles—a hygienic precaution which greatly reduced undulant fever, almost chronic throughout the island.

Lord Gort took immediate and vigorous steps to intensify these arrangements. The Victory Kitchen system was extended to cover practically every one in the island. Ultimately more than two hundred thousand people were being fed every day. The army, as usual, were at once on hand to supply butchers, cooks, and orderlies. Cooking utensils were manufactured from scrap at the Admiralty Dockyard.

The British households of the island shared the privations of the rest and labored incessantly among their poorer neighbors. If an officer's lady possessed a small store of coke and an Aga stove, the stove was at the disposal of any one who cared to drop in.

An ingenious device was employed to economize in the use of the scanty supply of kerosene oil. You filled the kitchen grate with burning cotton waste, and on to this dripped kerosene and water, in a proportion of two drops of water to one of kerosene. The kerosene caught fire and turned the water to super-heated steam, over which food could be cooked on an iron plate. The chief drawback to this method was the roaring noise produced by the violent chemical reaction involved.

By the organization and encouragement of such activities as these did Gort inspire and sustain the islanders during those months of endurance. And in the austerity campaign, it is needless to say, he led the way himself. His men were on half-rations, so he went on half-rations, too. Petrol spirit was all needed for strictly military purposes, so the Governor put down his own official automobile and pedaled about the island on a bicycle.

III

The fortunes of Malta continued to conform to the general fluctuations of the war elsewhere. This meant that June and July were particularly lean and hungry months. Early in June Rommel, heavily reinforced through a far shorter supply line than Auchinleck, sprang upon the British Eighth Army at El Agheila and drove it back once more, through Benghazi, Derna, and Tobruk, to El Alamein within the Egyptian border.

The Eighth Army was destined in due course to strike back again and continue striking until Rommel was driven not only out of Egypt and Tripolitania but out of the continent of Africa. But the immediate consequence of Rommel's present success was to render the North African coast once more available as a land base for German aircraft, which put the

passage of convoys from Alexandria to Malta almost beyond the bounds of possibility.

But Malta held on somehow. Stomachs were empty, clothing and uniforms growing threadbare and patched, yet morale remained steady. With the Luftwaffe out of the way you could at least sleep at nights.

And occasionally a supply ship got through. One particularly providential arrival was that of a tanker carrying octane aviation spirit, the supply of which had fallen so low that the activities of the RAF and the Fleet Air Arm were being seriously threatened.

There were originally two tankers in this particular convoy, and they were steaming one behind the other. The second tanker was commanded by an elderly sea captain. His retirement was long overdue, and this was to be his last voyage. As the convoy approached the island the usual bomber attack developed. The leading tanker received two direct hits: her terribly inflammable cargo caught fire, and the tanker herself blew up and sank, leaving the surrounding surface a sea of flame.

The captain of the second tanker found himself confronted by a seemingly impenetrable wall of fire. He could have turned around and gone back, but octane spirit was sorely needed in Malta, so he went on. He tried at first to circumvent the fiery barrier, but it was spreading wider and wider to right and left of him, so he decided to go through.

He informed the crew of his intention. “If things get too hot,” he said, “you have my permission to abandon ship.” Then he steered his tanker into the furnace ahead, with smoke and flames rising high above his funnel. At any moment the ship was liable to catch fire herself, but the old sea-dog up on the bridge drove her on.

The crew however decided that things were getting too hot, and some twenty or thirty of them availed themselves of the permission granted to them and jumped overboard.

They landed in a small patch of water which was for the moment free from oil. Straightway one of the escorting destroyers perceived their plight, turned around, backed into the heart of the flames, and picked up all but five of them.

The tanker came through, and the RAF got their octane. Their offensive sweeps over Rommel’s Army in Libya could now be resumed.

IV

Malta was around the corner at last. In November a considerable convoy arrived from the East, and during the following months no fewer than four

got through without the loss of a single ship. The famine was ended, and rations were increased both for the garrison and for the civil population.

So 1942, that fateful year in world history, during which the pendulum had definitely begun to swing the other way, drew to a close.

That year had seen Malta pounded to pieces by twelve thousand tons of enemy bombs and the Maltese people well-nigh starved to death. But Malta had never stopped fighting. In the past twelve months, seven hundred and seventy-three enemy aircraft had been shot down by the RAF against a loss of their own of one hundred and ninety-five, half of whose pilots were safe. The anti-aircraft gunners had accounted for one hundred and eighty-two more. Of the island's achievement in the way of counter-offensives there will be something to say in the chapter which follows.

Upon New Year's Eve Lord Gort delivered a radio broadcast to the islanders. He thanked them all, men and women, old and young, for their fortitude and gallantry under both the threat of violent death and the pinch of starvation. He paid full tribute to the devotion to duty of those who had overcome the one and averted the other.

"The story of the convoys," he said, "is an epic which adds fresh luster to the history of British sea-power. The price is heavy, but the gallantry of those who died that Malta might live will for all time be remembered in these islands."

Then he bade them all good night and wished them good luck in 1943.

Let us see how far those good wishes have been fulfilled to date.

CHAPTER XIII

VICTORY AND BEYOND

What had happened to enable four convoys to get through to Malta, unscathed, during the month of December?

The answer is simple. Once more the fortunes of the island had reflected the general conduct of the war. Upon November 9th a vast fleet of warships and transports had appeared off the northwest coast of Africa and had landed the British First Army and the American Second Corps in various ports of French Morocco and Algeria. These, backed by the British Eighth Army, which burst triumphantly from the vast spaces of the Eastern Desert into Southern Tunisia, had combined, under the supreme command of General Eisenhower, with General Alexander as his Chief of Staff, to set about the reduction of the last Axis stronghold upon the African continent. Malta was thus converted overnight from a beleaguered fortress to a base for attack.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say a base for attack on the grand scale, for even in the extremest period of its adversity the island had never ceased to maintain some sort of offensive, though for obvious reasons no public attention was drawn to the fact at the time.

During 1942, for instance, the Royal Air Force based on Malta attacked no less than forty-six convoys conveying supplies to Rommel in Libya and Tripolitania: five naval forces, and numerous single vessels. Forty-six ships were either sunk, crippled, or left in flames. The Fleet Air Arm supplemented these efforts with thirty-seven ships hit by bombs or torpedoes, including four cruisers and two destroyers—a grand total of eighty-three "strikes" in twelve months.

In bombing operations over land targets, something like fifteen hundred tons had been dropped upon Sicily, Naples, and North Africa: a stout contribution, considering the shortage of octane spirit and the perpetual raiding of the Maltese bomber stations.

And here it might be appropriate to interpolate the tale of the kidnapping of the Italian flying-boat.

II

One day a British torpedo bomber put out from Malta in search of a suitable target. It carried a crew of four—two Englishmen, an Australian,

and a New Zealander—which gave the expedition a pleasantly representative character.

Fortune upon this occasion did not favor them. They encountered a squadron of Italian fighters somewhere off the coast of Greece, and after a spirited little battle were shot down into the sea. They took to their rubber dinghy, from which they were presently removed as prisoners by their late opponents.

They were taken ashore to an Italian bomber station, where they were treated with the kindness and consideration customary between civilized opponents. Their captors gave them dry clothing, entertained them in their mess, and furnished them with comfortable quarters for the night.

Next morning the four prisoners were informed that they were to be conveyed by air to an internment camp in Italy. They were duly put on board a large Italian flying-boat, manned by a crew of five and piloted by a flight sergeant. The prisoners having been disarmed, no particular watch was set over them. They were merely directed to dispose themselves on the floor of the bomber, just behind the pilot's seat, and to make themselves as comfortable as possible. Presently they found themselves soaring high over the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean, bound for their place of captivity. Within the bomber all was peace, save for the roar of the engines.

Then the New Zealander was struck by a sudden idea, which ripened into immediate purpose. It was perhaps unkind, he reflected, to offer such an ungracious return for hospitality, but after all, there was a war on. So he rose to his feet and regretfully, but most efficiently, knocked the Italian pilot cold. He then swiftly deprived his prostrate victim of his revolver, with which he covered the remaining members of the crew, who, having thus far regarded the trip as an unusual and agreeable pleasure-trip, were entirely off their guard and were in no position to resist the combined assault now delivered upon them by the New Zealander's three colleagues.

In due course the Italians were overpowered and trussed up. The New Zealander had taken the pilot's seat and, though sadly unfamiliar with the design and mechanism of this particular engine, had contrived somehow to get the lurching bomber back under control. On again she sped high above the waters of the sparkling Mediterranean.

So far so good, but the question which now had to be faced was what to do next. No land was visible, and the present navigator had but the vaguest idea where he was, for he had no map. But since Malta lay somewhere west of him, and Malta was his natural homing-place, he turned his craft in that direction and hoped for the best.

Presently land appeared below them. Plainly it was not Malta, but something considerably larger—a portion of the Continent of Europe, in fact

—so the pilot swung away to the southwest. Before long he picked up a new and this time unmistakable landmark, the crater of Mount Etna. He was over Sicily.

After that to locate Malta was the merest child's play, and in due course the tiny and familiar outline of the island appeared below them. Gracefully the great flying-boat began to glide down, and the four usurpers chuckled rapturously. They were about, they felt, to spring a delightful surprise upon their friends.

But it was their friends who sprang the surprise on them, for the moment their presence above the island coast was detected they were greeted by furious salvoes from the anti-aircraft batteries. They had forgotten that their conveyance carried Italian markings and not British: to the bloodthirsty gunners below they were merely Eye-tie intruders and anybody's meat.

Obeying an immediate instinct of self-preservation, they promptly hung out signals of distress and tokens of surrender. Indeed, one of them is said to have crawled out on to a wing and waved a conciliatory pocket-handkerchief. In the end they got down safely and were taken off, amid cheers and laughter, by a motor-boat sent out from the harbor.

Upon reporting at Headquarters they asked, as a special favor, that they should be left in charge, at least temporarily, of the five Italians. They were anxious, they said, to show their involuntary guests as good a time as they had been given themselves. Permission was granted.

Finally the day dawned upon which the balance of air supremacy over the Island swung permanently to the Allied side, and the hunter became the hunted. The gallant ack-acks still banged away and took their toll, but it was the fighter planes that now got the big results. Day by day, week by week, the returns mounted up. Hundred succeeded hundred, and at length one single ambition fired the breast of every fighter pilot in the island—to be the man who shot down the thousandth Hun machine.

And it was an American who did it. His name was Lynch. No one grudged him his distinction, for all shared it.

III

With the coming of 1943, the Allies could launch their final and triumphant drive against the Axis Forces now rounded up in the northwest corner of Africa. Egypt was free, Libya was free, Tripolitania was free: there remained only Tunisia, and now that the Americans had arrived and the French were back in the ring again, the end could not long be delayed.

To this campaign Malta, situated only one hundred and forty miles from Cape Bon, contributed a full and increasing measure of assistance. The

island, as we know, was no longer on the defense. The sirens were silent at last, and the batteries idle. In February only four alerts were sounded, and not a single bomb was dropped.

Nor were the islanders unduly hungry. Two more large convoys had arrived in January, and the ration scale was increased both for the Forces and for the civil population. Luxuries were still lacking—but they were lacking all the world over now.

So, from a recently beleaguered fortress, the island speedily developed into a base for whole-time, round-the-clock, offensive operations against Rommel and von Arnim. All day and all night RAF machines could be seen and heard departing for or returning from raids over Africa and the Axis sea supply lines between Tunisia and Sicily or Sardinia.

In a single month—February, 1943—six enemy ships and three tankers were sunk, while two destroyers and another tanker were badly crippled. Aircraft were shot down. Marching columns of troops and motor transport were attacked by long-distance aircraft along the congested Tunisian roads. The new de Haviland Mosquito, the fastest fighter-bomber ever designed, was now in commission, and a squadron had arrived in Malta.

Targets nearer home were also attacked, particularly factories, dockyards, and power-stations in Sicily. Most effective of all, because of its demoralizing effect upon the Eye-tie nervous system, was the shooting-up of railroad trains running along the Calabrian and Sicilian coasts. "A fine night for the RAF," observed one youthful pilot on returning from a raid, "but a restless one for the Italian State Railways."

Farther afield, across the Central Mediterranean and the vast stretches of the Tyrrhanian and Ægean seas, torpedo-carrying aircraft sought out and destroyed Axis ships in all weathers and in all waters. By the end of March the grand total of enemy tonnage destroyed by aircraft based on Malta had passed the million mark.

Last, but not least, the Malta submarine flotilla was now able to resume its customary activities from its old place of business. Its record to-day, covering a period of two years, adds up to two battleships torpedoed, five cruisers and eight destroyers sunk, and seventy transports and supply ships, including six considerable liners, destroyed.

But all these are mere statistics—mere figures. And in these days of total war and global devastation, figures mean little or nothing. They have no further significance for the human mind. These are quoted here only as an indication that Malta is herself again—prepared and eager to serve as the spearhead of the attack, long promised to us by Winston Churchill, against "the soft underbelly of Europe."

IV

As I write these lines the church bells of Malta are ringing and people are dancing in the streets, for to-day, May 14, 1943, with stunning suddenness, has come the announcement that in Tunisia General von Arnim and at least two hundred thousand Axis troops have surrendered unconditionally. The Battle of Africa has been won at last, after a see-saw conflict of three years, two thousand miles from the place where it started. From now on, the North African coast can be employed throughout its length as a springboard for the invasion of enemy territory upon its most vulnerable flank.

The Third Siege of Malta is over. Reinforced and fully equipped once more, the island and its garrison are merged in the general strategic scheme of the coming Allied offensive.

But of one thing we may be certain: that submersion will never be complete or permanent. Through all the centuries, the Maltese people have tenaciously preserved their racial characteristics and traditions. Few in numbers though they may be, they have steadfastly maintained their own point of view and habit of mind in the face of every ebb and flow of outside influence or circumstance.

They have even retained their own language. If St. Paul were to land upon the Island again to-day and were to preach to them in the Aramaic of the first century A.D. they would still understand him. At heart and in speech they are Orientals, nearer akin to the Arab than the European. Twenty-five years ago, in the First World War, when General Allenby occupied Jerusalem, he wished to address a reassuring proclamation to the Arab population. He was unable to lay his hand on an Arab interpreter, so he committed the task of reciting the proclamation to a Maltese, who delivered it in the Maltese language. The Arabs understood every word of it.

Of the future of the island, the ultimate future, who can say? One thing is sure: Italian influence has gone for ever. The Italian propagandist, with his perpetual suggestion that Italy is the mother country of Malta, and his grandiose claim that Malta lies within the "Roman Empire," will return no more.

Lord Strickland—he is dead now—was a most notable character, and has left an abiding mark on the history of the island which he once ruled and loved. Himself a devout English Catholic, he spent most of his term as governor fighting the efforts of various island clerics and lawyers to Italianize the Maltese into subjects of the "Roman Empire"—inhabitants of "Mare Nostrum."

In this effort he received the enthusiastic support of the Maltese themselves. To them, as already noted, a German is a barbarian and a menace, but an Italian is just a monkey and a bad joke. *Maccu*, they call the Italians—a maccu being the diminutive fish which is netted in the waters around the island and is fried and eaten like whitebait.

Maltese mockery of Italy achieved its apotheosis in June, 1943, when King George VI, their King, after a flying visit to Tripolitania and Tunisia, newly cleared of Hun and Maccu, paid a formal call upon his Unconquered Isle. He did not fly: he came by sea, over Mussolini's private lake, in a British cruiser—our old friend *Aurora*—steaming into Valletta Harbour amid exultant cheers from the people of Malta, mingled with derisive shouts of "Mare Nostrum!"

Since the beginning of the war the affairs of the island have actually been conducted by an Island Council of twenty. Of these, ten are elected by the Maltese people; two are nominated, and eight are officially appointed. Of the entire body only two are British—the Deputy Governor and the Legal Secretary. The Governor himself presides but is not a member and does not vote.

British Information Services

MALTA, G.C.

They have heard the air-raid sirens more than three thousand times since the third siege began.

No doubt, when final victory comes and normal legislation can be resumed, the Maltese will ask for some form of independent self-government, which will be freely granted them. But the ties of sentiment and affection with Britain will endure.

The problem of material reconstruction will be a heavy and expensive one, but the free grant of ten million pounds, recently bestowed by the British people, at least guarantees a flying start.

In time to come, too, Malta's perpetual congestion of population must be relieved by a systematic policy of dispersion to other countries. The Maltese

are not averse to emigration or foreign adventure. Maltese settlements can be found in many parts of the world. There is a thriving and industrious Maltese colony in New York. There are several hundred Maltese evacuees in London at this moment, mostly children. It is doubtful if they will want to go back to Malta. Maltese sailors serve in large numbers in the British Navy. Maltese doctors are quite an institution upon the islands of the Pacific.

Emigration on a large and really helpful scale is for the time being hampered by two handicaps—lack of means and lack of personal ambition. Few educated Maltese aim at an ultimate income greater than one thousand dollars a year. But this modest ambition will increase with the general improvement in education inevitable after the war. (At present forty per cent of the islanders are illiterate.) Education will create wider aims, and wider aims will breed readiness to emigrate to countries offering more profitable fields of action.

But, whatever changes may be in store for the life of the island, one thing will remain constant. One thing the Maltese will never abandon or let die: the eternal spirit of simple piety and devotion which they have inherited from the Knights of St. John. That spirit has been manifest throughout the island's story: in the building of Valletta and the founding and dedication of the island churches; in the defense of the island against the Saracen; in the fierce and successful resistance to the paganism of the early French Republicans. And never has that spirit burned more brightly, never has it been more steadfastly maintained, than during the past three years—the spirit of simple faith and firm reliance upon the Providence of God.

The tradition of the Knights lives on and will live on unbroken. Where Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Jean de la Valette planted, where Graham of Balgownie and Captain Alexander Ball watered, Dobbie and Gort have not been found wanting as trustees and exponents of the same high and sacred obligation.

PART II

CHAPTER XIV

FROM MELITA TO MALTA

"And the barbarous people shewed us no little kindness." Information, please?

There should be no difficulty about answering that query or verifying that quotation. It has been familiar to most of us since our childhood days, when we first read (or had read to us) in the Acts of the Apostles the story of St. Paul's shipwreck—perhaps the most graphic and exciting narrative passage in all Scripture.

The barbarous people in question were the inhabitants of a little island in the Mediterranean, called Melita—now Malta, G. C.

St. Paul, with his escort (for he was traveling as a prisoner under guard) sojourned there as the guest of one Publius, described as the chief man of the island, for three months, before boarding the ship from Alexandria which was to carry him to Rome and ultimate martyrdom.

Publius, we are told, was converted by St. Paul and was consecrated by him as first Bishop of Malta. There is a church of St. Publius in Valletta to-day—or rather, there was.

Tradition tells that during his stay upon the island, St. Paul was lodged in St. Paul's Cave, a sandstone grotto situated near what is now the little township of Citta Vecchia, or Notabile, once the capital of the island. Malta is honeycombed with such grottoes and catacombs, and as we have seen, these were destined, nearly two thousand years later, to shelter and preserve the lives of a population of over a quarter of a million people from a barbarism which the military science of preceding ages, drastic and ruthless though it was in all conscience, never achieved, or, for that matter, dreamed of.

The story of St. Paul's shipwreck in St. Paul's Bay, an inlet at the northwestern end of the island, may or may not be authentic, but the legend persisted throughout the ensuing centuries.

It is (or was) even possible to visit the cave. An English tourist of eighty years ago has left us a minute description of it. It lay, he says, under a church in Citta Vecchia: it was dark and gloomy and "about the size of a small parlour." But the Apostle bequeathed to it a miraculous property. Souvenir hunters throughout the succeeding centuries formed the habit of taking away with them fragments of the friable rock of which the walls were composed,

yet despite this persistent quarrying the cave has never altered in shape or increased in size to this day.

But Malta goes much further back in history than to St. Paul. Indeed, it first comes to our notice in the Odyssey of Homer, as part of the Trojan legend—respectable ancestry indeed. It was then called Ogygia and was one of the numerous places where the wily and much-enduring Ulysses suffered shipwreck. He was hospitably received by the tutelary goddess of the island, the nymph Calypso, who indeed fell in love with him and, we are told, "promised him immortality if he would remain with her." The hero, however, proved impervious to her wiles and put up a resistance which lasted for seven years. Then the gods intervened and allowed him to resume his interrupted journey homeward.

II

Malta lies almost exactly in the center of the Mediterranean, which made, and still makes, it the keypoint, the strategic focus of that landlocked ocean. This accounts for the persistently prominent part which the island has played in the world's history. Therefore, in any Mediterranean story, however sketchy, Malta and its setting must be considered in conjunction.

We will take the setting first.

"To visit the Mediterranean," Dr. Samuel Johnson once remarked, "is the chief object of all travel." If this somewhat pontifical assertion was true in the eighteenth century, it was truer still at the dawn of history, when the world as then known was a mere rim of territory surrounding the Mediterranean lake.

Let us briefly survey the shores of the lake in question, from the Pillars of Hercules in the west to the Land of Canaan in the east, and more particularly the various nations which came into being, flourished, waned, and faded from participation in history around its tideless shores. Almost every one of these nations, we shall discover, was destined at one time or another, throughout the centuries, to control the fortunes of the island of Malta.

The real founders of Mediterranean, and for that matter, European history, were the Phœnicians, for they never stayed put. From Tyre and Sidon they roamed far over the world—sailors, explorers, and pioneers by instinct and tradition. They founded Carthage, they founded Marseilles, they penetrated into the Atlantic and landed upon the south coast of England, where they worked the tin mines of Cornwall. The British Isles therefore make their first appearance in history, with becoming but unexpected modesty, as the Cassiterides, or Tin Islands.

Needless to say, the Phœnicians were early callers at Malta. This was not surprising in an era when navigation consisted in hugging the coast or making short dashes, in open galleys, from island to island. But they did more than call; they stayed. They arrived about 1500 B.C. and held on to Malta for more than seven hundred years. And it is here that the history of the island emerges from the pleasant mists of mythology into recognizable focus.

The marks of the Phœnician occupation still endure, for they were substantial builders. One of the most venerable relics of antiquity in the world is Hagiar Chem, a Phœnician temple open to the sky and situated near the eastern end of the island, of the same period and character as the British Stonehenge. The name signifies "Stones of Veneration" and is a Phœnician word.

After the Phœnicians came the Greeks. They appear to have occupied Malta early in the eighth century B.C. They renamed the island Melita, which means "a bee." Malta is still famous for its honey. The Greeks, too, left their mark, as we shall see.

Then, a century and a half later, as was almost inevitable during that era, Malta became part of the great Empire of Carthage, and a contact was established which, though it lapsed in time, has been dramatically and violently renewed at the present moment, for a glance at the map will show that what was Carthage yesterday is Tunis to-day. To the Carthaginians, as rulers of the Mediterranean, the little island which lay so handily in the ocean fairway must have been of inestimable value as a depot and distributing center for a vast mercantile marine, as well as an essential naval base in the Mediterranean.

That value still persists. The only difference is that to-day the stronghold is in other hands—British hands—which clung to it of late through months of continuous siege and over three thousand air raids, and found themselves at long last in a position to strike back, not merely at Sicily and Italy in the north, but at Axis-occupied Tunisia in the south. Where the flashing oars of Carthaginian galleys once covered the hundred and forty miles of Mediterranean water between Malta and Carthage in twenty-four hours or so, British bombers, on their way to avenge in kind the long martyrdom of the sturdy Maltese people, performed the same journey with grim and purposeful determination in as many minutes.

III

After three centuries of Mediterranean—in other words, of world—supremacy, the great Phœnician Empire found itself confronted by the

youthful vigor and amazing military genius of the young Republic of Rome. The great clash, long predestined, had come at last, and the three so-called Punic Wars decided once and for all whether Europe was to be ruled by Europeans or Asiatics, by Aryans or Semites. The whole future of history rested upon that decision, and more than once, especially when Hannibal stood at the very gates of Rome, it was touch and go.

The First Punic War broke out in 264 B.C. and lasted for three years. It was at first confined to the sea, where Carthage was supreme, for Rome possessed no navy at all. Rut the Romans were an adaptable and intensely practical people and speedily converted themselves into a maritime power. They built a fleet of warships, employing as a model the wreck of an enemy trireme, and taught themselves to row by setting up oarsmen's benches on land and practising there. Knowing little of navigation and less of naval tactics, they applied the technic of land warfare to the sea. They gave the enemy ships no opportunity to maneuver; they closed with them and captured them bodily, by dropping a broad and heavy bridge across the intervening space and marching on board in battle formation.

By the end of the three years the Carthaginians had been soundly beaten in two sea fights and driven from Sicily. But in the Second Punic War, fifty years later, the tables were turned, for the Carthaginian Hannibal, perhaps the greatest soldier who ever lived, invaded Italy and maintained himself there for fifteen years, winning victory after victory and penning the Romans within their own walls. If only he had been adequately supported from home, the history of the world would have been changed. Rut he was not, and the war ended with his own defeat and death upon his own soil.

The third war was a short and decisive business. Carthage was already broken; all that now remained was to destroy her altogether. And destroyed she was. The mighty city fell in 146 B.C., after a defense in which every member of the population participated and women cut off their hair to equip the catapults. The inhabitants were massacred or sold into slavery, and of Carthage itself not one stone remained upon another. In Tunisia to-day, as you stroll along the sandy beach which runs from La Goulette, the port of Tunis, toward the promontory of Sidi-Bou Said in the north, you will observe upon your left, towering above a string of modern French villas and bathing-huts, a bare rocky eminence, destitute of buildings and pitted with excavations. That is all that is left of the Byrsa, the citadel of ancient Carthage.

Among her other spoils of war, Rome appropriated Malta and ruled the island for seven hundred years.

IV

But Rome's long innings ended at last. After Augustus had defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the great sea-battle of Actium in the year 31 B.C., the Empire succeeded the Republic, and the ancient Roman virtues of austerity and personal service softened steadily. The populace began to subsist upon a free diet of "bread and circuses"; the Roman eagles were carried into battle by alien mercenaries, and civilian labor chores were transferred to the shoulders of slaves imported from conquered countries. Under a series of emperors either incompetent or degenerate, Imperial Rome gradually collapsed upon herself. Her territories were invaded by Huns, Goths, and Vandals—in other words, by the forefathers of the present enemies of civilization—and Rome itself was occupied and sacked by each in turn.

But by that time the Empire itself had split apart and was ruled from two separate capitals, Rome and Byzantium, later Constantinople. It was into the Byzantine Empire that Malta was absorbed. The island did not escape visitations from the northern marauders, for during the fifth century it was ravaged both by Vandal and Goth, but in 553 A.D., Belisarius, the generalissimo of the Emperor Justinian—recently designated by no less an authority than General Wavell as the greatest military leader of all time—recovered it for the Byzantine Empire, and within that Empire Malta remained for three and a half centuries.

Of its history during that obscure period we know little or nothing, but we do know that its next masters were the Arabs, who arrived in the tenth century and employed the island chiefly as a base for piratical raids elsewhere. They left one abiding mark upon the character of the Maltese people. The Maltese language to-day is very largely an Arabic dialect.

V

All this time, that motley collection of European kingdoms and principalities known as the Holy Roman Empire—though, as the English historian Bryce has pointed out, it was neither Holy, Roman, nor an Empire—was gradually taking shape, and in due course it absorbed Malta and drove out the Arabs.

Malta now ranked as a fief of Sicily. The two islands are not far apart; on a clear day you can discern the smoke of Mount Etna. Under the rule of the Byzantine Emperors, Malta developed into a Christian and devoutly Catholic country and remains so to this day. Its long and stormy history gave some promise at last of settling down to a more tranquil routine.

But it was not to be: our island's most tremendous experiences still lay ahead of it—once more by the accident of its geographical position.

In the sixteenth century the Emperor Charles the Fifth, overlord of practically the whole of Europe save the kingdoms of France and England, and one of the mightiest monarchs that ever lived, found his supremacy over the Mediterranean threatened by new and most formidable antagonists, the followers of Islam—the Turks, or Saracens. The long struggle between Cross and Crescent, dating back three hundred years to the time of the First Crusade, was approaching a climax. Already the Infidel was at the gates of Vienna, while by sea the island fortress of Rhodes had fallen, with the result that the Levant or eastern half of the Mediterranean was lost and the western seriously menaced.

Charles therefore decided to establish, across those waters, what may be called a Frontier of Christendom, extending down from Venice, in the North Adriatic, to Tripoli upon the North African coast. West of that deadline the Saracen galleys must not penetrate. But it was a long and tenuous front, sorely in need of reinforcement in its center—some intermediate stronghold, some maritime pill-box or hedgehog which no marauding expedition from the east could afford either to approach or to by-pass.

The Emperor had not far to look. Right on the line itself, and midway between Tripoli and the southern tip of Sicily, lay our little island, Malta. Beholding it, the shrewd Charles conceived a twofold plan and promptly put it into execution. He bestowed the island in perpetuity upon a body known as the Knights of St. John, who had recently been evicted by the enemy from the island of Rhodes, in the Ægean Sea, thus combining a gracious and pious gesture with a sound strategic move.

With Malta, to complete the defensive line, he threw in the tiny island of Gozo, lying a few miles from its western coast, and, as already noted, the considerable port of Tripoli in North Africa. But Tripoli was abandoned after twenty years, and centuries were to pass before its history was again to be coupled with that of Malta.

So the Knights of St. John, headed by their Grand Master, moved in, and the tradition of high courage and knightly faith which accompanied them was in due course transmitted to the Maltese people. To-day the Knights have been gone from Malta for nearly a century and a half, but the tradition remains, as recent history has amply testified.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIRST SIEGE

We first hear of the Knights of St. John about the time of the First Crusade, which delivered the Holy City of Jerusalem from the Moslem Turks at the end of the eleventh century.

Three hospitals, or hostelries, had already been established in the city for the relief and comfort of the pilgrims who arrived from all over Europe to visit the Holy Sepulchre. One of these was dedicated to St. John the Almoner; its Governor was a Florentine named Peter Gerard. With the arrival and victory of the Crusaders, the Governor sought from the Pope permission to elevate his institution into a religious order, bound by the customary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Leave was granted, and the Hospital of St. John was formally instituted in the year 1113.

Its members were distinguished by a white cross of four double points—what has now come to be called, for obvious reasons, a Maltese Cross—displayed upon a black robe. The Order of St. John of Jerusalem still exists, in a modified and modernized form, and upon occasions of ceremony the ancient uniform is still worn.

Branch hospitals of the Order grew up all over Europe, for the same pious purpose of smoothing the path and supplying the needs of pilgrims bound for the Holy Land. One of these was established in England, at St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell, London. The original building still stands, occupied in its original design of furnishing a base of operations to the members of the Order, their activities in these days being mainly devoted to philanthropic work among the sick and suffering. For the duration of the present war they have combined forces with the British Red Cross and between them have raised rather more than sixteen million pounds.[1]

The Order continued to extend itself, and secured constant additions to its property, mainly in the form of bequests from grateful pilgrims and their friends. But in the course of time, as frequently happens, its constitution underwent a change. A fourth vow was added to the original three—that of military service, and active protection to the pilgrims. This automatically converted the Knights of St. John from peaceful almoners and welfare workers into a disciplined corps of knights-errant. Each unit of the Order became an armed bodyguard, ready to defend its dependents, if need be, at the point of the sword.

The innovation was destined to have a profound effect, some centuries later, on the history of Europe in general, and of a rocky, windswept little Mediterranean island, lying some sixty miles to the south of Sicily, in particular.

Jerusalem did not remain in Christian hands for long. In the year 1187 it was recaptured by the Saracens, under their famous leader Saladin. The Hospitallers of St. John, like the rest of the Christian fraternity, were forced to evacuate the city and, indeed, the Holy Land itself. But they fought to the end and were the last to go. Thereafter they devoted the whole of their considerable property and resources to the ransoming of prisoners. They so impoverished themselves, we are told, by the munificence of their charity, that the chivalrous Saladin and his followers "were constrained to express their admiration of such noble conduct." Furthermore, the fame of their action spread through the world and firmly established the Knights of St. John in the esteem and affection of Christendom. It probably increased their revenues as well and with them the prestige and influence of the Order.

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[1] The head of the Order in Britain is the King, who bestows a decoration upon its officers—a silver Maltese Cross, suspended from a plain black ribbon.

II

After a short sojourn in Cyprus the expatriated Hospitallers established themselves in the romantic Ægean island of Rhodes. Here they remained for two centuries. They were not left unmolested, however, for the Turks, the undisputed masters of the Eastern Mediterranean, could brook no rivals, especially of an opposing faith. This island was twice besieged, once in 1480, when one Peter d'Aubusson was Grand Master of the Order, and again fifty years later, in the day of the most illustrious of all the Grand Masters, Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle Adam.

The first of these onslaughts, despite a bombardment so fierce that it was reputed to have been heard a hundred miles away, was repelled by the persistent valor of d'Aubusson and a comparative handful of Knights, and ultimately the siege was raised. But the second was final. It was ordained by that picturesque and impressively named potentate Solyman the Magnificent, who despatched his most able general, Mustapha Pasha, from Constantinople, with a following, we are assured, of two hundred thousand men, to invest and capture a stronghold defended by six hundred knights and some five thousand auxiliaries.

It was one of those contests, not uncommon in those days of formal and somewhat exaggerated chivalry, in which both sides performed prodigies of valor, combined with most punctilious observance of all the rules of warfare and of the courtesies due between honorable opponents. Twice did Solyman offer liberal terms of surrender to his hopelessly outnumbered opponents, and twice were these refused. Finally, when the day was obviously and irretrievably lost, the Knights, or what was left of them, reluctantly accepted their opponent's conditions, which had not been altered in any way, and evacuated the island, taking their property with them. Modern warfare seems to be governed by somewhat less rigid standards of conduct or consideration.

III

Seven years later the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, as already recorded, took up their abode upon the island of Malta.

The intervening period had been spent by de l'Isle Adam in traversing Europe in search of a haven for his followers. He even visited London, where he was lodged at St. John's Gate already mentioned and where Henry VIII received him most graciously but informed him that in the royal view the Knights of St. John had now outlived their usefulness. His Majesty endorsed his own opinion by confiscating all the English possessions of the Order.

But de l'Isle Adam, indomitable old warrior that he was, never relinquished the struggle, and finally, as we know, through the not altogether disinterested benevolence of the Emperor Charles V (and the loyal support of Pope Clement VII), the Knights entered into possession of what was to prove their most enduring stronghold.

Malta, from a residential point of view, was no Rhodes. It was less than a hundred square miles in extent—an area equal to that, roughly, of a considerable modern city. It possessed no towns or villages—only a few scattered buildings. True, it boasted two noble harbors, but these had served for the last century or so as a lair and hide-out for piratical shipping and offered few amenities for peaceful trade. Seven miles inland lay the cluster of primitive dwellings which constituted the capital. This was called by its Arabic name of Mdina, signifying "the city." It is now Notabile, or Citta Vecchia, already mentioned.

The native population, semi-barbarous and inured by long experience to the hard rule of successive Phœnician, Carthaginian, Roman, and Arab taskmasters, were in race rather Phœnician and Semitic than Italian and

Aryan. They spoke a language almost identical with that of the Arabs of the North Africa coast.

The island itself, together with its little satellite Gozo, lying three miles to the northwest, was composed almost entirely of limestone or soft yellow sandstone and was clothed in a layer of fertile but shallow soil, cultivation of which was rendered next to impossible by the gales which howled perpetually across its flat and almost treeless surface. Its southern coast was girt by lofty cliffs.

Altogether an unpromising domain and a discouraging inheritance. But the Knights accepted it and set to work to erect it into a monument of chivalry and culture. They succeeded gloriously, but their early struggles must have been enough to dishearten any but men inspired by superhuman devotion and faith.

One of their earliest disasters was the death of their venerable chief, de l'Isle Adam, the greatest of all the Grand Masters of the Order. Not many years later, fortunately, there arose for them another leader second only to Adam himself in courage and vision. This was Jean Parisot de la Valette, for whom Valletta, the capital of the island, is rightly named to-day.

La Valette's first care upon assuming office was to put his kingdom into a state of defense. Adam and his immediate successors had never taken kindly to their strong heritage and had wasted much time and energy on planning the recovery of their beloved Rhodes, with its undulating plains and abundant verdure. Malta, with its scant vegetation and miserable inhabitants, had entirely failed to arouse paternal or protective instincts.

But the practical La Valette soon changed all that. He was well aware that sooner or later the Turks would endeavor to complete at Malta what they had begun at Rhodes, namely, the dissolution of the Christian Order of St. John. So he and his followers set to work to convert their island, or at least a part of it, into an impregnable fortress. His efforts were stimulated by the knowledge that a large Turkish galleon, loaded chiefly with the personal effects of the odalisques of Solyman's harem, had recently been sunk in the Adriatic by Maltese galleys, and that the bereaved ladies were exerting all their powers of persuasion, which were considerable, to incite their elderly and uxorious lord to avenge the insult in prompt and signal fashion.

La Valette's defense scheme was based upon the two harbors already mentioned. They opened upon the north (or more properly northeast) side of the island, and it will be well to consider their general lay-out in some detail, for the whole history of Malta is enshrined in them. The city of Valletta grew up on the narrow peninsula which divides them, and, as we have seen, it was upon these harbors and that city that the full fury of Axis barbarism was vented nearly four hundred years later.

IV

The general aspect and setting of Valletta, in its position upon the peninsula aforesaid, with a deep and well-sheltered tideway on either side, gives a curious resemblance to a miniature Manhattan Island. The only points of difference are that Valletta is flanked not by rivers but by narrow harbors, and that its lower extremity points not south but almost north. The peninsula itself, originally called Monte Sceberras, is about one-and-a-half miles long and half a mile broad.

The Grand Harbour, lying on what may be termed the New Jersey side of the Peninsula, is one of the great natural havens of the world and for a century past has been the principal base of the British Mediterranean Fleet. An examination of the map will show that upon the farther side of it, projecting as it were from the Jersey shore, two spits of rock jut out, separated from one another by a considerable creek, and named respectively the Bourg, or "Town," and Senglea. The latter is named for a former Grand Master of the Order; the former, which stands nearest the harbor mouth, formed the core and nucleus of La Valette's defense scheme, for hereon stood the convent in which the Knights resided.

Marsamuscetto Harbour, on the other side of the peninsula—the Brooklyn side, so to speak—was slightly smaller, and was occupied for part of its area by an island, Jezira.

Time being short, La Valette abandoned his original scheme of fortifying Monte Sceberras from end to end and concentrated upon establishing forts and bastions at vital points.

He paid particular attention to the Grand Harbour, especially to the Bourg. He strengthened the ancient fort of St. Angelo which stood there, and constructed a battery below to command the entrance. He also established a new fort, St. Michael, upon the adjacent spit of Senglea. Across the mouth of the creek separating Senglea and the Bourg—the Harbor of the Galleys, so called—he fixed a gigantic chain, some links of which survive to this day. He seems to have made no attempt to fortify the other harbor, Marsamuscetto: perhaps there was no time.

The double harbor mouth itself he protected with a powerful fort, St. Elmo, upon the very tip of the peninsula of Monte Sceberras, but he failed to establish similar works on the two headlands which enclosed the harbor mouth, or mouths, on either side—an omission which was to cost him dear, for St. Elmo was commanded by each of these.

The work hurried on at breathless speed, for La Valette could not tell how much time he had in hand. He and his Knights, we are told, labored side by side with the common soldiers of the Maltese garrison, even with the

slaves from the galleys. Meanwhile, appeals were issued to the various outposts of the Order scattered over the Empire, for volunteers to swell the knightly host. The response was immediate, and when La Valette came to review his command, he found himself supported by six hundred and forty-one members of the Order, drawn from no less than eight centers. The largest contribution, one hundred and sixty-four, came from Italy; the smallest from England—a single knight, Sir Oliver Starkey. He was thus the first, though not the last, Englishman to fight in defense of Malta.

In addition La Valette could count upon auxiliary troops to the number of eight thousand, composed of the regular garrison, slaves, and volunteers from Sicily and the mainland of Italy.

So far as was possible he distributed his following among the various defensive points by nationalities and languages—a sensible move. Then, after solemnly commending their cause to God, the Knights of St. John awaited the onset of the Infidel.

It came upon May 18, 1565, and was sustained for four months.

V

The Turks have always been noted for their fondness for heavy artillery, and upon this occasion they arrived with sixty-three guns, of a caliber exceptionally large for those days, capable of discharging stone cannonballs of one hundred and sixty pounds weight. They must have been cumbrous weapons to ship, transport, and operate. They were conveyed in a fleet of one hundred and thirty vessels, and were accompanied by thirty thousand Janissaries, once more under the command of Mustapha Pasha. The entire force was landed, apparently without opposition, in the bay of Marsa Scirocco at the eastern end of the island.

It was augmented a few weeks later by a fleet of thirteen galleys from Algiers, the principal base of the Mediterranean pirates. It was led by one Dragut, the redoubtable Pasha of Tripoli and the arch-corsair of his time, accompanied by as select a retinue of cut-throats as ever harried the seas.

(There were pirates in Algiers as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, and at one time and another almost every civilized community in the world made war upon them. Their depredations were responsible for the appearance for the first time of the American Navy in Mediterranean waters in 1815, when American warships under Stephen Decatur arrived upon a punitive expedition and bombarded Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. The pirates were finally cleared out in 1830.)

Previous to the arrival of this disreputable reinforcement, Mustapha had laid siege to the fort of St. Elmo, at the tip of Monte Sceberras. Until that

strong point, lying as it did between the two harbor mouths, should be put out of action, it would be impossible for him to bring his galleys within the shelter of Marsamuscetto. He attacked from the land side only, advancing down the peninsula from the direction of Mdina and placing his heavy guns within easy range of the fort.

St. Elmo was not completely cut off, however, for the guns of Fort St. Angelo, firing across the Grand Harbour from the Bourg, effectively denied Mustapha's access to the eastern side of the fort. On the western or Marsamuscetto side, he appears to have been unmolested.

In due course a breach was created, and the Turks, attacking with great fury, succeeded in carrying the outer works of Fort St. Elmo. But they got no farther, for the garrison clung stoutly to the central keep, and La Valette actually contrived to throw in a reinforcement of two hundred men from the Bourg.

It was at this point that Dragut arrived upon the scene. He entered into an immediate criticism of Mustapha's dispositions and strategy—inter-allied relations do not seem to have altered greatly in the last five hundred years—and proceeded to amend the Turkish plan of operations by establishing a battery of culverins upon the western of the two headlands already mentioned, which formed the entrance to the harbors, Fort St. Elmo lying midway between them. This headland has been known as Point Dragut ever since. From this site, firing across the narrow fairway, Dragut could batter St. Elmo at will. He established a second battery upon Monte Sceberras itself, within range not only of St. Elmo but of St. Angelo in the Grand Harbour. Then the reduction of St. Elmo began in earnest.

So intense was the new bombardment that the fort was soon in ruins, and its unhappy defenders began to realize that surrender was now merely a matter of time. They accordingly despatched an emissary to beg La Valette that he would grant them permission to abandon the defense of the fort and join him upon the Bourg.

La Valette had already realized that St. Elmo could not be held much longer, but he firmly declined to consent to its evacuation. He had been promised help by the Viceroy of Sicily, and a relieving force might reasonably be expected to arrive sooner or later. Every day that St. Elmo could hold out would serve to divert the enemy from his main and final objectives, the Bourg and Fort St. Angelo. So the garrison of St. Elmo were bidden to resist to the last man.

The result of this order was something very near a mutiny, due not to faint-heartedness or lack of loyalty but to the peculiar processes of knightly thought. The garrison declared that they had no fear of death, and were

willing at that moment to make a sortie and die fighting, but they declined to perish like rats in a trap. They even set about organizing the sortie itself.

La Valette, to whose tactical difficulties such a spectacular sacrifice of life would have brought no relief whatsoever, replied coldly that if the defenders of the fort felt themselves incapable of performing their duty further, they were at liberty to withdraw within the shelter of Fort St. Angelo, and that he would send a detachment of volunteers, of stouter fiber, to continue the defense of Fort St. Elmo.

This brought the mutineers to their senses. They retracted all they had said, humbly craved their leader's forgiveness, and resumed the defense of the fort.

VI

A few days later Mustapha delivered his grand and, he hoped, final assault upon St. Elmo from both sea and land sides, and a desperate struggle ensued. The garrison, anxious to redeem their somewhat tarnished reputation for courage, performed prodigies of valor. They drove the enemy from the breaches; they hurled back the scaling-ladders and poured liquid fire upon their assailants, "whose flowing garments," we are told, "rendered them particularly sensitive to this species of annoyance." In the end the great assault failed, and to the accompaniment of rapturous cheers from the men of St. Angelo, across the Grand Harbour, who had been following the course of the battle in agonized suspense, the Turks sullenly withdrew.

Dragut now realized that the reduction of St. Elmo could be achieved only by its complete isolation from outside aid or direction. Yet another battery was therefore established, under his personal supervision, to prevent the landing of any supplies or reinforcements from the direction of the Grand Harbour. But here fortune took an unforeseen turn, for while this very work was in progress Dragut himself was hit by a stray shot from St. Angelo, fell mortally wounded, and died where he lay. His sword was afterward retrieved and is still treasured in Malta to-day.

Still, the construction of the new battery went on, and in due course the garrison of St. Elmo found themselves effectively cut off from their Commander-in-Chief and the main body of the Christian forces. Encircled though they were, they refused to capitulate. They fought doggedly on and even repelled another heavy assault.

It was their supreme effort. Their supplies of food and ammunition were almost exhausted, and all that was left of the garrison itself were sixty men, mostly wounded. The end had come at last. But they would meet it in no

spirit of passive resignation: they would die weapons in hand, at grips with the Infidel till the last.

After a solemn ceremony of confession and absolution in the St. Elmo chapel, the devoted band took up their arms and resumed their battle stations. Some even had to be carried there. The final assault was not long in coming, and when at last the Crescent was hoisted over the keep of St. Elmo, not a man of its garrison remained alive.

But those sixty Knights had saved Malta. The siege of St. Elmo had cost eight thousand Turkish lives, and although Mustapha's Janissaries now occupied the ruins of the fort, and the Ottoman galleys lay moored in Marsamuscetto Harbour, a delaying action had been fought which had preserved the main defenses of the island almost intact, ready for prolonged and unweakened resistance to the enemy's next onset.

Nevertheless, the position was desperate. Mustapha held not only the whole of the peninsula of Monte Sceberras, from which he could command the Grand Harbour from end to end, but all the ground on the landward side behind the Bourg and Senglea, upon which stood Fort St. Angelo and Fort St. Michael, the last strongholds of the Order.

Bombarded from Monte Sceberras on their front and from Coradin and Salvator Hills upon their left flank and rear, the two forts crumbled. Furious attacks followed from the land side, to be repelled again and again. La Valette and his followers still maintained a desperate hope of relief from Sicily, and not without justification. His emissaries had at last reached their destination and delivered his appeal, and the dilatory Viceroy was rousing himself to action.

It was time, for the Malta garrison was at its last gasp. Penned now in the two forts, all they could do was to resist, endure, and wait. Such was their determination and faith that at the eleventh hour they rejected an offer of terms which would have enabled them to evacuate their island with all the honors of war.

And then, at last, salvation came. One day a rumor ran around that a relieving force had landed somewhere on the coast. The Turks heard it, too, and its effect upon them was as demoralizing as it had been stimulating to the islanders. They had maintained a four months' offensive, with the loss of thousands of men, and had no trophy to show but the ruin of St. Elmo. They were tired, discouraged, and wasted by sickness. They had long been deprived of the stimulus of Dragut's ruthless drive and initiative. The news that they must now brace themselves to encounter a fresh and doubtless powerful enemy—rumor had, as usual, doubled the strength of the relieving force—was too much for their waning morale. Terror seized them. Hasty orders were given for embarkation. This was in full operation when it was

learned that only a portion of the relieving force had arrived and that there was no occasion for panic. The order was countermanded, but it was too late. Many of the soldiers refused to disembark, and the exultant garrison sallied forth and fell upon those who did.

A few days of confused and half-hearted resistance, and all was over. Such of the Turks as survived were driven on board their galleys and disappeared over the horizon. Sudden tranquillity and peace fell upon the stricken scene. The first great siege of Malta was over, and for the first time in its history the magnificence of Solyman had been tarnished by defeat.

CHAPTER XVI

THE YEARS OF PLENTY

The expulsion of the Ottoman invader from Malta was acclaimed throughout Christendom, and the prestige of the Order reached its highest pinnacle. Services of thanksgiving were held everywhere, and Pope Pius V conferred upon La Valette a Cardinal's Hat.

The gift was declined. Ecclesiastical and military headgear do not mingle readily, and La Valette was keenly aware that his career as a soldier was not by any means at an end. He felt convinced that Solyman would not accept this disaster to his arms as final, and he was right. After visiting his wrath upon the unfortunate Mustapha in no uncertain fashion, that aged but indefatigable fire-eater immediately set about the preparation of another expeditionary force against Malta, to be led by himself in person.

A vast fleet of galleys was assembled and equipped in the dockyards and arsenals of Constantinople. But it was destined never to see service, for shortly before it was due to set forth, the entire water-front was swept by a sudden, unexplained, and disastrous fire, which destroyed both ships and stores and effectively disposed of any immediate idea of bringing retribution to bear upon the presumptuous Knights of their island.

It is probable that La Valette, had he so wished, could have explained the mystery of the outbreak. He was a shrewd and energetic tactician in other fields than military and seems to have been well served upon this occasion by the posse of spies and agents whom he maintained in Constantinople.

Certainly he and the Order were in no position at that time to withstand a second invasion. Two hundred out of his six hundred Knights had perished, with them nearly three thousand soldiers, and of the other inhabitants of Malta—auxiliaries, galley-slaves, and war workers of both sex—some seven thousand. So it seems more than likely that the conflagration at Constantinople was no happy accident, but was contrived by La Valette himself, upon the sound principle that prevention is better than cure.

Solyman himself died before a new punitive expedition could be organized, and thereafter no more was heard of it, so La Valette and his followers, released from present fears, were free to concentrate upon the restoration of their sorely battered island fortress.

II

One decision of the first importance was made—namely, to transfer the headquarters of the Order to the rocky peninsula of Monte Sceberras, and relegate the low-lying and vulnerably situated spits of the Bourg and Senglea to fortresses of secondary importance in the general defense scheme. As a gesture of remembrance and recognition, the name of the Bourg, the scene of the heroic and successful defense of Fort St. Angelo, was changed to Vittoriosa and so remains to this day.

After that, La Valette embarked upon one of the most ambitious experiments in town-planning in history.

He began by inviting monetary contributions from the world in general. These were speedily forthcoming, mainly from the pious and grateful monarchs of Europe, who were more than ready to reward the Knights of St. John for their successful defense of the outpost of Christendom and, more important still, to subsidize them for any further efforts that might become necessary in that direction. Money poured in from France, Spain, Portugal, and the Vatican.

Reassured as regards ways and means, La Valette at once set to work. His first idea was to lower the level of the Monte Sceberras peninsula by removing its backbone—the ridge which ran along its whole length—and so reduce the gradients of its streets and byways. But the scheme proved too ambitious and had to be abandoned. As we have noted, the consequence was, and is, that in the Valletta of to-day the principal thoroughfares, which run parallel to one another from end to end of the peninsula, are traversed by cross streets which rise from the water-front on either side so steeply that many of them have been compelled to assume the humbler form of staircases. Despite this fact, the ground plan of Valletta still conforms, as already noted, to the pattern of a miniature Manhattan, with its long straight avenues and regularly spaced cross streets.

The work was pressed on with enthusiasm and under firm direction. Each knight was encouraged to build his own house, with the added inducement that upon completion the house would become his own property, to be disposed of as he willed, and would not revert upon his death, like the rest of his possessions, to the Order as a whole.

The architectural consequence was inevitable. Owing to their celibate manner of life, the Knights of St. John set small store by domestic amenity or personal comfort; in building their homes they had no need to make provision for wife or family. The houses which they have left behind them are remarkable for the size and elegance of the apartments designed for ceremonial occasions, while the sleeping quarters are as cramped and comfortless as a monastic cell.

In 1571, only six years after the raising of the siege, the Knights of St. John abandoned their old home in Vittoriosa and moved across the Grand Harbour to the great new city which was springing up from end to end of Monte Sceberras. But they went unaccompanied by the man who had made the migration possible, who had proved himself a tower of strength at a time of peril and tribulation and a fountain of inspiration during the subsequent period of peaceful development. Their Grand Master, Jean Parisot de la Valette, had died the year before. His name survived, and survives, in the city which he envisioned and set up.

To-day he lies buried in the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John, beside his gallant predecessor, de l'Isle Adam. At his feet rests Sir Oliver Starkey, his secretary, the only English Knight, it will be remembered, to participate in the First Siege of Malta.

III

The building of Valletta, as we may now call it, continued intermittently for another century at least. Famous architects and equally famous military engineers arrived by invitation, and in perpetual relays, from all quarters of Europe. Like all experts, they did not fail to disagree. Proposals and counter-proposals filled the air, with the details of which we, happily, are not particularly concerned. It will suffice to say that by the end of the seventeenth century the new city of Valletta had assumed a more or less finished pattern and appearance. It covered the whole of the peninsula. Terraces of gleaming, cream-colored, flat-roofed houses rose up, tier upon tier, from the water-front of the Grand Harbour, over the saddle-backed ridges, and down again to the water-front of Marsamuscetto, interspersed with the domes of innumerable churches. Palaces lined the great central thoroughfare, the Strada Reale, or Royal Road. The whole vast fabric was reflected in the blue Mediterranean below and silhouetted against the still bluer sky above.

Of the defensive equipment of Malta already familiar to us, Fort St. Elmo had been rebuilt upon a much greater and more modern scale and was itself the center of a system of elaborate defense works upon the tip of the peninsula. It was flanked by Fort Tigne, upon Cape Dragut, and by Fort Ricasoli upon the opposite headland. Down in the Grand Harbour Fort St. Angelo, commanding the entrance from within, now presented to any future invader a prospect of no less than four batteries superimposed one upon another. The lowest was at sea level, and its usefulness was somewhat hampered by the fact that it was usually under water during bad weather.

The suburb of Floriana, situated upon the neck of Monte Sceberras, had been fortified against landward attack, and a powerful fort, Manuel, had been erected upon the island in Marsamuscetto Harbour. The so-called Cotonera Lines covered the rear of Senglea and Vittoriosa.

These elaborate works, however, were but the bare bones of the general defense scheme, for few of the eminent engineers who had visited the island during the period of reconstruction had failed, before departing, to leave their mark upon it in the shape of a bastion, or ravelin or curtain-wall.

The defenses are mentioned here in some detail because before another century was out they were to be put once more to the test.

IV

Such was the change-over of Malta from an inhospitable rocky islet to a world-famous center of chivalry and culture, and such were the beginnings of Valletta, the glittering focus of it all. All this while, too, in addition to the community of the Knights, drawn from the noblest families of Europe, there was growing up throughout the island and its little satellite, Gozo, a sturdy, patriotic, and intensely religious race of seamen, craftsmen, and tillers of the soil, destined to prove to the world more than once hereafter that knightly valor is not necessarily the prerogative of the knightly born.

Malta came to birth as a settled and civilized community at a moment in the world's history rich in new impulses and brave figures. When La Valette laid the foundations of the first building in Valletta—his own lovely chapel of Our Lady of Victory—St. Peter's in Rome had been completed just fifty years. Tintoretto and Titian were alive, Michelangelo was recently dead. Over the sea in England young Queen Elizabeth had been upon the throne for eight years, and certain of her subjects were beginning to make some noise in the world. Francis Drake, at twenty-one, was busy with plans for the opening up of the newly discovered continent of the West, whither Walter Raleigh, ten years his junior, was already dreaming of following him. The Invincible Armada was still twenty-two years away, but ere now England and Spain had clashed upon the Spanish Main. William Shakespeare was two years old. Certainly there were prospect and promise enough of adventure and romance in the new era that was dawning, for all who might desire it.

And yet from this moment the Knights of Malta seem to have declined in energy and enterprise. Perhaps they needed the spur of adversity to bring out their heroic quality. True, they maintained a navy and participated with credit in the great sea-battle of Lepanto, in which Don John of Austria, half-brother of Philip of Spain, commanding the combined fleets of Spain,

Venice, and the Papal States, slew or captured thirty thousand Turks, destroyed one hundred and thirty Turkish galleys, and released twelve thousand Christian galley-slaves from their benches. But perhaps after that stupendous victory there was nothing left to do. Whether or no, the Knights of St. John softened from that hour, relapsing into a graceful life of academic but not entirely cloistered ease, broken by an occasional naval operation against the Barbary Corsairs.

In June, 1770, a century after the founding of Valletta and a few years before the American Revolution, a wandering Englishman named Brydone visited Malta and has left us a gossipy but illuminating record of his experiences.

He crossed over from Sicily in a *speronare* and was much impressed with the entrance into the Grand Harbour, commanded by a "castle" on either side—the reader would have been able to name these for him—and with the crowds of well-dressed and elegant-mannered persons who filled the streets. Of the Knights whom he observed, and of their various nationalities, he says: "The French skip, the Germans strut, and the Spanish stalk."

He was surprised by the size of the navy, which consisted even at that late period of four galleys, three galliots, four ships of sixty guns, a frigate, and a number of light craft. He was fortunate enough to witness the departure of this argosy upon one of its periodic excursions against the Bey of Tunis. In each galley, he tells us, were about thirty Knights, "many of them signaling to their lady friends weeping for their departure upon the bastions." The imagination reels at the thought of what de l'Isle Adam would have had to say to such uncelibate goings-on.

Brydone also notes the curious fact that although the practice of dueling was strictly forbidden by the statutes of the Order, it was tolerated by the law, subject to certain rather embarrassing restrictions. The duels could be fought in one particular street only, and the combatants were obliged to desist at once when ordered to do so by a woman, a priest, or another Knight. Still, a good many must have taken place, for the observant Brydone counted no less than twenty crosses painted upon the walls of the street in question, to indicate that here a duel had been fought and had terminated fatally. These crosses are still to be seen.

Brydone also had audience with the Grand Master, one Emanuele Pinto da Fonseca, a Portuguese. He is described by Brydone as a "clear-headed little sensible old man, upward of ninety years of age. He has no minister but manages everything himself." Further enquiry might have elicited the fact that this nonagenarian autocrat had long outlived his popularity with those whom he ruled, especially the common people of Malta. The spirit of self-

determination was awakening in the little island by this time, just as it was awakening in a far greater community beyond the Atlantic Ocean. In other words, the Maltese were becoming conscious of themselves as a people.

And so, though outwardly opulent, disciplined, owners of vast estates scattered through Europe, and possessed of considerable naval strength, the Knights of St. John, still nominally the guardians of the Christian Front in the Mediterranean, were beginning to decline in energy and authority—perhaps for the simple reason that their occupation was gone, or going.

At any rate, though none realized it at the time, the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, with a record of seven centuries of chivalrous achievement to its credit, was even then within thirty years of its dissolution.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SECOND SIEGE

Upon the ninth of June, 1798, a fleet of fifteen ships of the line, escorting transports carrying nearly forty thousand men, appeared off the coast of Malta. All flew the tricolor flag of the young French Republic.

Three days later the entire argosy lay moored within the Grand Harbour of Valletta, and French troops occupied the island. They were commanded by a young general of twenty-nine. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte.

What was Napoleon doing in Malta, and how did he get in so easily?

Let us go back a few years.

II

In 1789 the Paris mob stormed the Bastille, and the knell of the Old Order sounded around the world. The American Colonies had won their freedom less than ten years before, and now it was the turn of the French peasantry and proletariat. Their grievances were of longer standing and far deeper than those of the Americans, and terrible was the revenge which they took for centuries of grinding oppression. There is no need to tell the tale here, except in so far as it impinged upon the security and peace of the island of Malta.

The Grand Master at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution was one de Rohan, a Frenchman, and most of the Knights were of aristocratic French birth and sympathy. The Master himself was on terms of cordial and indeed affectionate friendship with the French King and Queen —the gentle, helpless Louis XVI and his lovely and impulsive consort, Marie Antoinette. The royal pair addressed de Rohan as “Cousin,” and were in the habit of writing to ask him to bestow this or that mark of favor upon the French Knights of the Order. Consequently, when the Revolution came, the Grand Master and the majority of his followers were strongly pro-Bourbon. They made large monetary contributions to the Royalist cause, and later on Maltese sailors were despatched to assist the British in the blockade of Revolutionary Toulon.

But the Revolution grew, spread, and intensified. The King and Queen were dethroned and imprisoned, and one followed the other to the guillotine.

Aristocrats perished by the thousand, and their property was confiscated—and with it that of the French Knights of the Order of St. John.

The years of the Terror followed and ran their course. Marat, Danton, and Robespierre suffered the fate of their victims, and finally the Republic achieved some sort of ordered unity out of chaos, impelled thereto by the fact that it now found itself at war with the monarchies of Europe.

It was during this period of stark emergency that Napoleon Bonaparte first sprang into prominence, commanding the artillery in the defense of Toulon. Thereafter his rise was phenomenal, for he quickly proved himself a military genius of the first order. He soon obtained command of an army, with which he fought a ruthless and successful campaign in Northern Italy.

In 1798 the so-called Directorate, the political masters of France at the moment, set him in command of another army—the Army of the Orient. It was that army which now lay cooped up within the stifling transports in the Grand Harbour of Valletta. It had not always borne that name, for it had originally been intended for the invasion of England. But Bonaparte had diverted the Directors from that idea. England, he insisted, could keep: her shopkeeper army could be obliterated at any odd time. A far more effective and timely blow could be inflicted in the East, upon British commerce and British possessions. France could thus be compensated for the colonies of which she had been robbed in the Seven Years' War of forty years ago. Let the Army of England be renamed the Army of the Orient.

The directors agreed, almost with enthusiasm. The truth was, they were thoroughly scared of this dynamic and dangerous young visionary: the farther he could be removed from the sphere of home politics the better for the Directorate.

But they had not penetrated the real purpose of this Corsican's proposals, which was, quite simply, to realize a private, Hitlerian pipe-dream of his own—that of carving out for himself a vast Asiatic Empire, in which his frenzied ambition and exotic imagination should have full play. He was even prepared, he confided to his brother, Lucien, to invent a new religion and if need be wear a turban. But all that the Directors saw was an opportunity to get rid of him, and they seized it.

III

The reason for the presence of the Army of the Orient in the Grand Harbour in June, 1798, is now made plain. Malta was the obvious first stage upon the sea-road to Egypt, and the road itself was clear, for the British Navy had evacuated the Mediterranean two years before.

In the eyes of the British Government the Mediterranean was a mere cul-de-sac. There was no Suez Canal in those days, and the direct route to the East, they considered, lay through the South Atlantic and around the Cape of Good Hope. Napoleon's view was different: a century ahead of actual events, he was already planning to cut a canal through the Isthmus of Suez himself.

Such is the answer to the first of the two questions asked at the beginning of this chapter. Now for the second. Why had the Knights of St. John acquiesced so tamely in the occupation of their reputedly impregnable stronghold?

The reply to that is that there are more ways of capturing a stronghold than by direct assault. Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, used to say that no city was impregnable whose gates were wide enough to admit a mule-load of silver. Napoleon Bonaparte held a very similar belief, but his subtle intellect leaned to methods more effective (and economical) than those of open and vulgar bribery. He now set out to gain his ends by the employment of a method which, though then comparatively new, has to-day achieved the status of a permanent adjunct to military science—a campaign of propaganda.

De Rohan, the Grand Master, had died the year before, and the Knights had lost a leader who was not only sagacious and resolute, but above all things a patriotic Frenchman. He had been succeeded by Ferdinand de Hompesch, a German.

The defensive forces available at that moment consisted of some three hundred Knights, or Grand Master's Guard, the Maltese regular regiment, some marines, the Corps of Galleys, the local militia, and the rest of the civil population, available for duties of a semi-military nature. The island itself was provisioned for eight months. There were abundant water and ammunition, and taken with her immensely strong fortifications—with which the reader has already been made familiar and which had recently been supplemented by a system of *fougasses*, or primitive land-mines—there seemed no reason why Malta should not put up a stout and successful defense against any invader.

But a far more insidious foe had already penetrated her defenses—the forces of what would be called to-day the Fifth Column. The island swarmed with Bonaparte's agents and propagandists, sapping the loyalty or playing upon the fears of her garrison.

The Grand Master, de Hompesch, was a flabby and irresolute creature, and being a German was held in small esteem by the French Knights. The Knights themselves were at the moment particularly vulnerable to subversive argument. Their property and revenues in France had been

confiscated: their ancient Order seemed doomed hereafter to poverty and insignificance. Was it worth while to fight (and probably die) for what was left? Would it not be better to cut their losses, make the best of a bad job, and coöperate with the winning side?

Such arguments have a strangely familiar ring to-day. In 1798 they achieved the same effect upon the Knights of Malta as they did upon Pétain and his following at a later stage of French history. When the French Admiral, Brueys, and his flotilla appeared off Valletta and demanded instant admittance into the harbor, the Knights, after a heated and despairing debate of three days, chose the easiest way, and so anticipated Vichy by a hundred and forty-two years.

The gallant Maltese, left without leadership, put up what resistance they could, but in a few days all was over. The French General Vaubois, already designated Governor of Malta, landed at St. Julian's Bay, to the west of the island, marched his men into Notabile, the ancient capital, and dined that night with the Archbishop. General Desaix disembarked, practically without opposition, at Marsa Scirocco in the southeast, while Marmont and Lannes —two names destined in time to glitter in the constellation of Napoleon's Marshals—occupied Fort Tigne and Marsamuscetto. Even little Gozo was taken over.

General Bonaparte himself arrived a day or two later, to find Malta, as he expected, in the full and orderly possession of his soldiers, and his fleet at anchor in the Grand Harbour. So certain had he been of the success of his propaganda campaign that he had given an order limiting the number of troops to be landed to three thousand and the stay of the expedition upon the island to three days. (In the end he stayed for six, with interesting consequences, as we shall see.)

He occupied himself during that time in setting up a new Constitution and issuing innumerable decrees. He installed Vaubois as Governor and gave him a garrison of three thousand men, billeting the officers upon the inhabitants of Malta. The Order of the Knights of St. John was liquidated, and de Hompesch and others were expelled from the island. Many of what may be called the Vichy section of the Knights, however, decided to accompany the conqueror upon his Eastern venture.

IV

Meanwhile a British battle fleet, commanded by Rear-Admiral Horatio Nelson, was scouring the Mediterranean in search of the enemy.

Nelson was laboring under a heavy initial handicap. The outfitting of the French battle fleet and the embarkation of the Army of the Orient had taken

place at Toulon. The British Government were fully cognizant of this fact, but they had entirely mistaken the aim and purpose of the expedition. Haunted by the perpetual bogey of invasion, they were convinced that Napoleon intended to sail westward through the Straits of Gibraltar out into the Atlantic, then to throw his army on to the shores of England, either by direct assault or by way of Ireland, where upon Vinegar Hill some thirty thousand exultant Catholic rebels were waiting to welcome him.

But no French sail was seen upon the horizon: the Straits of Gibraltar remained disconcertingly clear. Finally, Lord St. Vincent, the British Commander-in-Chief, who had been lying off Cadiz for months awaiting an enemy that never came, received news that Napoleon had actually sailed from Toulon for an unknown destination. He promptly despatched Nelson in search of him.

Nelson at this time was nearing his fortieth year. He was regarded by his fellow-countrymen as a simple and rather reckless sailorman: none of them had realized as yet that here was a genius who could match upon water every warlike device of Bonaparte upon land. He had lost an arm in the service of his country and had actually been retired for some five years, eating his heart out. Then St. Vincent gave him his chance, and he seized it.

Into the Mediterranean he sped, and after a setback caused by the dismasting of his ship, the *Vanguard*, during a storm, encountered a Genoese brig whose master informed him that Bonaparte had captured Malta—which was true—and had sailed again upon June 16th—which was not. As we know, he had not sailed until the 19th.

Nelson's command had by this time been reinforced to thirteen ships of the line, and he had been given a free hand by St. Vincent to "pursue and attack the enemy, wherever found." Here was a task after Nelson's own heart, and as usual it brought him inspiration. In a flash of intuition he divined Bonaparte's whole plan. It was not England he was bound for, but Egypt—and after Egypt, India and the East. Without a moment's hesitation Nelson shaped his course for Alexandria. He could hardly expect to overtake the enemy before he arrived there, but he hoped to be able to engage him immediately thereafter.

But his calculations were based, through no fault of his own, on a false premise, for the French had nothing like the long start that he had been given to understand. They were barely over the horizon. Upon the night of June 22nd he actually crossed their track, so close that the enemy were warned of his proximity by British minute-guns, firing through the mist. We may be sure that the French fired no minute-guns. All unconscious, Nelson passed them by, plowing resolutely on to Alexandria.

It was a critical moment in history. Had Nelson but known, he could, and most certainly would, have brought Bonaparte to action in mid-Mediterranean, and there, with freedom of maneuver and ample sea-room, he could have anticipated the crushing victory which he afterward gained over an opponent anchored in a fortified position and protected by reefs and shoals. His ships, though inferior in size and number to the French, were in full fighting trim, as were their crews; those of the enemy were in poor shape through long confinement in port and were manned, not by hard-bitten sea-dogs, but by crews more concerned with the enjoyment of their newly won liberties than with an appreciation of the discipline which is indispensable to victory, whether by land or sea. But for the master of that Genoese brig, the Army of the Orient might have been sent to the bottom, Napoleon Bonaparte with them, and the world have been saved nearly twenty years of bloodshed and misery.

But Nelson had no frigates—Admiralty bungling or parsimony had seen to that—so his fleet, deprived of its eyes, drove blindly on. Weeks were to elapse before Nelson, after a search which involved doubling back from Egypt to Sicily and then to Egypt again, rounded up Brueys' fleet in Aboukir Bay and destroyed it, in what is usually called the Battle of the Nile. But by that time Bonaparte was ashore, and the great chance had gone.

V

Now let us return to Malta, with the Knights disbanded to the four winds and a French army of occupation installed.

The sturdy Maltese had not taken kindly to their new masters. If they had chafed under the narrow and exclusive rule of the Knights, their treatment by the exponents of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity exasperated them to the point of rebellion.

Their grievances were many and various. Maltese sailors had been impressed into Bonaparte's fleet and their wives and children left to starve, although promised subsistence. All civil pensions were suspended, causing further hardship. Officers of the garrison were billeted upon private households, with resultant domestic complications, and heavy taxes were imposed to pay for barracks for the troops.

Perhaps, by stern measures, the French could have compelled the islanders to stomach these material indignities, but they went a step further—a fatal step further. They outraged the feelings of a deeply religious people. In accordance with Napoleonic custom, the occupation of Malta had been accompanied by wholesale looting. Churches in particular were despoiled of their decorations, tapestries, and sacred vessels, all to be

transmuted into cash for the war-chest of their oppressor. The last and worst error of all was the studied flouting of Catholic susceptibilities by the imposition of such secular practices as civil marriage.

And then, one day towards the end of August, just as the people of Malta were approaching the limit of patriotic endurance, there limped into the Grand Harbour three broken and battered ships of war—French ships of war. They were the battleship *Guillaume Tell* and the two frigates *Diane* and *Justice*—sole survivors of the Battle of the Nile. Nelson had triumphed, then! That was enough: the train was fired, and within three days the island had flamed into open revolt.

The immediate occasion was the public sale of some church ornaments and vessels at Notabile, the old capital. A riot broke out, and the small French garrison, with their commandant, were annihilated to a man.

Next day, September 3rd, the revolt became general, and Vaubois, the French Governor, found himself, to his surprise and concern, penned into Valletta by an exultant mob of Maltese, led by a Canon of the Cathedral, Xavier Carnova, destined later to be Archbishop of Malta.

The insurgents had no arms or ammunition to speak of and no organized supply system. They were besieging a walled city deemed impregnable, defended by a resolute garrison provisioned for seven months. But Bonaparte's fleet lay at the bottom of Aboukir Bay, and that was sufficient inspiration. If one miracle could happen, men agreed, so could another.

And they were right, for already outside help was on the way. A Maltese deputation, sailing to seek aid from Sicily or Naples, had fallen in with Saumarez, one of Nelson's captains in the Nile battle, and had given him the news of the uprising of the Maltese people. Saumarez promptly communicated with Nelson himself, who was not far off, and asked for orders.

Nelson, whose line-of-battle ships were badly in need of repair after their recent achievement, ordered Captain Ball of the *Alexander* and some Portuguese ships under his command to proceed to Valletta and give what immediate help he could. Nelson himself felt bound to stay with the main body of his fleet until they reached Naples for refit.

Early in October Captain Ball arrived off Valletta. He began by summoning Vaubois to surrender. The answer was a contemptuous refusal. Indeed, there seemed no reason at that time why it should be anything else, for Vaubois was really stronger than his opponents. Thus the Second Siege of Malta began. It was maintained over ground with which we are already well acquainted, including as it did such familiar objectives as St. Elmo, Tigne, Ricasoli, and Vittoriosa. The outstanding difference was that this time the Maltese, by an odd turn in the military situation, were the besiegers and

not the besieged. The struggle was maintained without intermission for close on two years.

Ball was not in sufficient strength to press an attack from the sea, but he could and did maintain a resolute blockade. On land the Maltese drew an encircling ring around the outer fortifications of Valletta, fiercely repelling such sorties as the garrison made, but effecting little else. Ball, however, succeeded in landing upon Gozo, where his marines occupied the castle. It was handed over to the Gozo patriots next day.

At this juncture Admiral Nelson himself arrived upon the scene. He made no long stay. Having placed Ball in supreme control of the siege operations, he returned to Naples, carrying with him as a trophy the French flags captured at Gozo, for a present to the King and Queen of Naples, with whom he had struck up an odd, romantic friendship.

Even odder and more romantic was the wild affection which he had conceived for Lady Hamilton, wife of the British Ambassador at Naples—an affection more than reciprocated, as the historical gossipers of those days were careful to record. Indeed, there is no doubt that Nelson's infatuation seduced him for a time from the path of duty. He took but fitful interest in the siege of Malta. To be just, he was suffering from a head-wound received at Aboukir Bay and, indeed, appeared to regard his active career as ended. The glories of Copenhagen and Trafalgar were still wrapped for him in the mists of the future.

Fortunately Captain Alexander Ball proved himself a thoroughly competent and most human commander. The Maltese idolized him, and when final victory came he was very properly appointed first Governor of Malta.

But victory was as yet a long way off. Ball had only three ships with which to maintain his blockade, and as we shall see, even these could not be employed solely for that purpose. But the Maltese displayed increasing energy and resource. They erected batteries at various commanding points, with which to harass, if they could not reduce, the garrison; maintaining almost continuous fire upon Fort Manuel in the Marsamuscetto Harbour and upon Fort Tigne on Cape Dragut. The civil population within the walls, though nominally acquiescent in the French occupation of their city, were in entire sympathy with the besiegers and assisted them to the best of their ability by what would to-day be called "a campaign of civil disobedience," heightened by various acts of sabotage.

Vaubois on his part proved himself a most gallant soldier and an inspiring leader. He continued to hold his own at all points and maintained the morale of his followers by more than one successful sortie. His men, though by no means first-line troops, were of the real stuff of the

Revolution. Though completely cut off from outside aid and, worse still, from outside news, they fought with unflinching courage, and in the end it was mainly hunger and physical exhaustion which defeated them.

Indeed, for a while, after the blockade had proceeded for nine months or so, the tide of battle turned somewhat in their favor. The French Navy had recovered from the disaster at Aboukir Bay, and a fresh battle fleet was at large in the Mediterranean. Nelson's ships were scattered everywhere, guarding vital points and debarred from collective action. Ball himself was called away to aid in the defense of Minorca, in those days a British Mediterranean stronghold second only to Gibraltar. The three French ships hitherto penned in Valletta harbor promptly emerged and turned the tables, blocking the Maltese at Marsa Scirocco in the east and St. Paul's Bay in the northwest. The Maltese in their turn began to be sorely reduced by hunger—not for the last time in their history.

VI

However, in June, 1799, Captain Ball reappeared with his squadron. The three French ships, the *Guillaume Tell*, *Diane*, and *Justice*, were driven back into the Grand Harbour, and the original blockade was resumed.

At long last, too, in the following December, some British troops arrived to help in the land operations—two infantry regiments, the 30th and 89th. They were led by a remarkable man, Thomas Graham of Balgowan, a Scottish laird of birth and fortune, whose life at the age of forty-five had been permanently clouded by domestic tragedy.

In 1789 Graham was returning home from a visit to the South of France, carrying with him the dead body of his young wife for burial in Scotland. At Toulouse he encountered a Revolutionary mob. These laid violent hands upon the sorrowful little cavalcade, broke open the coffin, and offered insult to both living and dead.

Thereafter Thomas Graham existed only for revenge. He returned to Scotland and, though middle-aged, became a soldier. He even raised a regiment to fight the French, a regiment which flourishes to-day as the 90th, or Second Cameronians.

Graham's own record as a soldier is astonishing, especially since he was a man with no military background or experience to sustain him. He participated in the capture of Minorca and was mainly responsible, as we shall see, for the recovery of Malta from the French. Thereafter he served under Sir Ralph Abercrombie in a victorious campaign in Egypt. Later he was with Sir John Moore in the retreat to Corunna—perhaps the greatest rearguard action in the history of the British Army, with the notable

exception of Dunkirk. He fought as second-in-command to Wellington throughout most of the Peninsular War and particularly distinguished himself at Vittoria and the capture of San Sebastian. His last appearance in military history is in June, 1815, when, at the age of sixty-one and almost blind, he handed over the command of the Allied Army in Brussels to Wellington on the eve of Waterloo. He died as Lord Lynedoch, an almost unique instance of a private individual launched into a brilliant military career by a burning desire to avenge a private wrong.

Now for Graham's activities in Malta. He had at his disposal some thirteen hundred British and fifteen hundred Maltese troops, besides a thousand Maltese irregulars, with some seventy guns. This force was not nearly sufficient for a decisive assault upon, or complete investment of, the Valletta perimeter, even when augmented later by twelve hundred Neapolitan soldiers. All Graham could do was to wear down the enemy by an unending series of raids from selected points, until the latter should become sufficiently reduced to succumb to general attack. He felt bound to be sparing of his resources, especially his British regulars, for he was convinced that sooner or later Bonaparte would despatch a strong relieving force. In this he was both right and wrong. The relieving force was duly despatched, but it never reached Malta, being interrupted and despatched (in another sense) by the British Navy.

The policy of defensive offense began to tell, and presently Vaubois and his garrison were reduced to sore straits. A record survives of food-prices in Valletta during the second year of the siege. In it we read that a rabbit cost the equivalent of two dollars. A pound of sugar cost four dollars and a pound of coffee five. By the end of the siege a pound of sugar (if procurable) fetched ten dollars, of coffee twelve. Rats and other vermin became regular articles of consumption.

Still the garrison and their leader held out, rejecting every invitation to surrender. They even contrived to sustain their spirits by the employment of that highly modern adjunct to military morale known as a Concert Party. A company of Italian comedians, we are told, had continued to reside in Valletta, and their theater was kept constantly open for the amusement of the garrison. It is not surprising to learn that the troupe frequently besought permission to leave the city, but until near the close they were not allowed to do so, their services being considered too valuable. At last, however, it became necessary to conserve all food for the support of the garrison, and the tragic comedians were suffered to depart. Whether they subsequently entertained the forces of General Graham history does not relate, but we do know that their place in the theater at Valletta was filled by a company of amateurs from the garrison—another unexpectedly modern touch.

Then a further and final disaster fell upon the defense. Vaubois, realizing that his position was growing desperate and being anxious to cut his losses as far as possible, attempted to save the great line-of-battle ship, the *Guillaume Tell*, and her two consorts, which were lying pent up and immobilized in the Grand Harbour, from falling into British hands. Orders were issued to the vice-admiral in command to make an effort to run the blockade and escape, and upon a dark night shortly afterward all three ships slipped out.

But keen eyes were on the alert. A signal was flashed from Point St. Elmo, and the blockading fleet, out upon the horizon, promptly responded. The swift frigate *Penelope* set forth in pursuit. She soon overhauled the *Guillaume Tell*, and though outgunned and outranged, stuck grimly to her big opponent until two line-of-battle ships, the *Lion* and the *Foudroyant*, came up in the morning.

The *Guillaume Tell*, although her doom was now certain, put up a most heroic resistance, and it was not until two hundred and seven of her crew had been killed and a large number wounded, including the vice-admiral and captain, that she struck her flag. She was brought back in triumph, and was subsequently included in the British Navy as H.M.S. *Malta*. The *Justice* and *Diane* were captured at the same time, and the final liquidation of the great fleet which Bonaparte had assembled for his fantastic Egyptian adventure was completed.

For the French garrison, starving and decimated, nothing now remained but surrender. Accordingly, upon September 5, 1800, General Graham and the British naval commander, Commodore Martin, met Vaubois to arrange the terms. These, as were natural between such worthy opponents, were both just and generous, and hardly anything was asked by the vanquished which was not conceded by the victor. The garrison were to march out with the honors of war, and their personal property was secured to its owners. Provision was made for the sick and wounded left in hospital, and it was agreed that there should be no reprisals upon the French civilian inhabitants of Valletta.

Thus, after a brief and unhappy existence of two years and three months, the French occupation of Malta came to an end, and the island passed, for the moment provisionally, under British rule. Fourteen memorable and strenuous years were to elapse before that rule was made permanent.

VII

The capture of Malta was followed almost immediately by the short-lived Treaty of Amiens: less of a treaty, in fact, than an armistice which gave

Bonaparte time to consolidate his present gains and complete his plans for the further conquest of Europe—above all for the invasion of England—and which he was prepared to break at any moment that suited him. And it was Malta, oddly enough, which furnished him with a pretext.

The terms of the so-called peace were the subject of the usual complicated bargaining. Bonaparte, now First Consul, held most of the cards, and right cunningly he played them. The British Government, who have never in all their history been colonially minded—they have left that to their enterprising and ubiquitous merchant venturers—were more concerned in the present negotiations with restoring some measure of independence to the fallen monarchies of Europe than in retaining their own hard-won conquests overseas. So, actuated by a sort of muddled magnanimity, and in return for the restoration of Egypt to Turkey and a pie-crust promise by Bonaparte to withdraw French troops from certain Italian ports and refrain from invading Portugal, they handed back to France practically the whole of her pre-war possessions, from her West Indian islands to her forts and trading-posts in British India. Of British conquests from Holland and Spain only Ceylon and Trinidad were retained. Such conduct won the esteem of prostrate Europe, but it laid up inevitable trouble for Britain in the years to come, notably in South Africa.

Among other apparently unimportant objects dumped upon the bargain-counter at this time was Malta, recently won from the French by British sailors and soldiers aided by the devotion and courage of the Maltese themselves.

It was agreed by the bargainers that the island should be returned to the Knights. As the Knights had for all practical purposes ceased to exist, the execution of the agreement seemed more than problematical.

Bonaparte as usual was ready with an expedient. The British forces, he suggested, should withdraw from the island after three months and their places be filled by Neapolitan troops, pending the resuscitation of the Order of St. John. The independence and "permanent neutrality" of Malta itself would be guaranteed by a vague confederation of European monarchies, most of which had yet to be apprised of their prospective responsibilities.

That the First Consul even for one moment contemplated letting go of the strategic keypoint of the whole Mediterranean is beyond human belief. The implications of his proposal were plain even to the British Government, who, however, found themselves in a grave dilemma. They were by this time practically committed to the Treaty; the country had accepted it with thankful acclaim and was clamoring to be permitted to settle down to the blessings of peace. Was little Malta worth a resumption of the war?

Apparently it was, but only just; for it was only at the actual moment of signing the treaty in Paris, at three o'clock in the morning of March 25, 1801, that the clause was cut out by the British signatory, Lord Cornwallis, and the question of Malta's future left in abeyance.

The determining factor in this excision was the attitude of the Maltese themselves. They at least knew their own minds. They had received the news of the arrangement contemplated for them with horror and indignation. They saw at once that Bonaparte's proposal was a trap and said so. They declined to be absorbed into the Napoleonic maw. They were determined, they announced, to remain under the British Crown. They had come to admire their British allies for their efficiency and fair dealing, and the British had come to understand and appreciate the brave spirit of the Maltese people.

To press their claim home, an influential Maltese Delegation visited England in 1801 and presented a petition to the King, worded in no uncertain language.

"The Maltese," it said, "have already begun to experience the advantages and enjoy the happiness of being governed by His Britannic Majesty." The document further pointed out that by withdrawing Ball and his garrison the British Government would be virtually abandoning Malta to the French, for the Knights, even if they could be rematerialized, would be powerless to protect her. It concluded with a fervent "prayer to the Almighty that Great Britain might ever remain the bulwark and asylum of liberty, fidelity, and religion."

VIII

Three months elapsed, and no agreed clause regarding the future status of Malta had as yet been inserted into the Treaty of Amiens. Moreover Captain (now Sir Alexander) Ball and his British garrison had not evacuated the island. In point of fact, they never did, for a short time later the First Consul announced, in terms which have a grotesquely familiar ring to-day, that "his patience was exhausted," and that if Great Britain wanted war instead of peace, she should have it. So he tore up the Treaty of Amiens, which he had always intended to do when ready, and embarked upon that long career of conquest and annexation which was to end with Waterloo and St. Helena.

The British continued to occupy Malta, and Malta's inclusion within the British Colonial Empire was formally ratified by the Council of Paris in 1814, after Napoleon's first abdication, and confirmed by the Congress of Vienna the following year. And to that allegiance Malta has remained

constant for nearly a century and a half, as is recorded in lasting stone for all to behold. To-day, upon the face of a tablet set over the Main Guard Room, opposite the Palace of Valletta, may be seen a Latin inscription bearing the date 1814 A.D.

"The Love of the Maltese People," it runs, "and the Voice of Europe, Have for Ever Entrusted the Guardianship of These Islands to Great Britain, the Unconquerable."

Transcriber's Notes

Spelling and punctuation have been changed silently to achieve consistency.

[The end of *Malta Epic* by John Hay Beith (as Ian Hay)]