

I

*A. D. 1773, 11th April, the festivity of St. Demetrius
Auberge d'Italie, Valletta.*

When fra' Bartolomeo Ruspoli woke up and saw that the light of the spring sun was already flooding his room at the Auberge d'Italie, he immediately knew he was in trouble. Surely he would never be in time to attend the solemn nine o'clock mass in the cathedral of San Giovanni, and somebody would notice this. Everybody noticed everything in Malta, especially if the lack, however slight (and, indeed, especially if slight), came from a "Knight in Obedience" of a certain rank.

In itself, it would have been a small thing: although it was highly advisable from a political and social point of view, to attend the Sunday service in the cathedral was not an obligation for the Knights who had no particular office and Bartolomeo had the opportunity to fulfil his religious duties at the mass celebrated at eleven in Santa Caterina d'Italia, the church of his Langue, two hundred meters far from the Auberge.

In itself... but this was not true for those Knights who, like him, had fallen from grace and had to climb the slope of respect among the members of the Order.

Bartolomeo had two possibilities: wearing the black tunic with the large white eight-pointed cross over his crinkled shirt, putting on the wig as best as possible and, without even shaving or washing, rushing to the cathedral, in any case arriving when the mass had already begun, or, on the contrary, preparing calmly before going out, of course knowing that someone would comment negatively on his absence.

In reality, the first one was not even an option, at least not for him: he was still Bartolomeo Maria Marescotti Ruspoli, of the Princes of Cerveteri and Counts of Vignanello, a member of the highest papal aristocracy and nephew of a cardinal of the Holy

Roman Church! He would have endured any backbiting rather than appearing in public with a less than orderly appearance! So his father Alessandro had educated him, and so his centuries-old noble lineage imposed on him.

Therefore, despite his bad mood, he spent the following hour to perform his Sunday ablutions, to shave carefully and powder his face enough to make himself presentable without, however, as fitting for his monastic-chivalrous state, appearing effeminate. Then, he put on a shirt and an immaculate jabot under his monastic tunic.

By the time he reached the common refectory for breakfast, it was almost ten o'clock. The room was practically empty, save for a couple of "Donati" who directed the local servants to prepare for Sunday lunch. Therefore, he had to settle for a bit of fruit, a little bread with salted butter and a cup of macchiato.

While reluctantly nibbling at his bread, Bartolomeo tried to take stock of the situation, realizing, once more, how life in the Order had turned out to be very different from his expectations. At least from the expectations he had when, nine years earlier, at the age of sixteen, he had presented himself to the Grand Priory of Rome of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and Malta asking to be admitted to the novitiate.

The fifth son of Prince Alessandro and of his cousin, Countess Prudenza Marescotti Capizucchi, Bartolomeo had always been a shy boy, a little lonesome, in love, to the delight of his tutors, all chosen among the best in Rome, with humanistic studies and in particular with the reading of epic poems.

His future could already be written: free from dynastic commitments, belonging by inheritance to his elder brother Francesco, moreover much more inclined than him to political life and to the intrigues of the papal court, Bartolomeo could choose between the well-to-do existence, made up of lounges and parties, of an idle noble of the Capitoline elite or, in the case of a particular vocation, the rapid rise within the ecclesiastical ranks. Both perspectives, however, poorly suited

the boy's dreamy and adventurous soul, who had always been particularly attracted by the history of the monastic-knightly Orders. Of course, it was no longer the time of the wars against the Muslim invaders, of the Templars or even of the Grand Master Jean de La Valette who had defended Christianity during the Great Turkish siege of Malta in 1565! Equally, the fame of the grandeur of the now elderly Grand Master Pinto and his monastic reign that combined splendour and discipline had made a dent in the heart of the young nobleman who felt only bored at the prospect of a life just made of ease and pleasure.

His father had welcomed the idea of his entry into the Order with enthusiasm and, perhaps, also with some relief: he already saw in him, if not a future Grand Master, at least a Bailiff and, moreover, a choice of that kind could keep the substantial assets of the family intact upon his death. On the other hand, her mother had cried at the idea that one of her sons would go so far away, perhaps forever, but, in the end, she had had to accept that this was the best solution for the family.

Thus Bartolomeo had been welcomed into the novitiate. Two years later, with excellent references, he had pronounced his perpetual oaths and had been consecrated as a Professed Knight of Justice. Immediately, with the dowry of a splendid vessel called "Levriero", which, according to his father's intentions, could considerably accelerate his ascent to the high ranks of the Order, he had been transferred to the Malta fleet as commander of his ship.

From that moment on, everything had initially gone according to what anyone could expect: Bartolomeo had become a protegee of Grand Master Pinto, had scrupulously followed the rules and blindly obeyed the orders of the then Admiral Correr, a Venetian patrician of the Italian Langue to which the command of the fleet was traditionally entrusted, had fought with courage in those sporadic skirmishes with the Barbary pirates which were all that remained of the ancient enmity with the Moors and

had been highlighted for his benevolence towards the sailors and the local population.

Everything seemed perfect.

Until that cursed evening...

II

*A. D. 1771, 9th July, the festivity of St. Floriana
Eastern Buttresses, Valletta.*

Although the patron Saint of Floriana was officially Saint Publius, the festivity of “Santa Floriana”, improperly considered by some to be eponymous of the town wanted by the great Villhena only fifty years earlier and built close to the pre-existing ramparts designed by engineer Floriani (from whom the name actually derived), was a sight not to be missed.

San Publju Square, on that occasion, got transformed into a giant open-air theatre of popular music and dances sided by large drinks of white wine and “limuncel”. In the more than two years that had passed since his arrival on the island, Bartolomeo, playing on guard duties, had managed never to miss the appointment with such a pleasant and carefree evening.

This time he had gone there with his two best friends, both young Knights like him who, like him, had arrived in Malta in 1768: fra’ Henry Howard of Norfolk, from the Langue d’Angleterre and fra’ Franz Von Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingsfürstde, from the Langue d’Allemagne. The three together had carried out the first services in the various garrisons of Malta, had faced the bewilderment of passing from the comforts of luxurious noble courts to the relative harshness of monastic life in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and had had the privilege, a few months earlier, of being called to be part of the Honor Guard of His Serene Highness. All those shared experiences, lived at an age when emotions were felt all

too deeply, had helped to tie them in an almost fraternal bond despite the tremendous cultural and character differences they had.

Henry, tall, wiry, with an elongated face and sparse reddish bristly hair that inexorably sprouted from his wig despite all his efforts to keep them at bay, was the most attentive among them to national and international politics. That was probably due to the difficulties he had encountered in his youth in being a Catholic noble in a Protestant nation, Bartolomeo had always thought. Indeed, he was also the most melancholic and disillusioned of them about the fate of the Order.

Even that evening, during their return to the small trot towards Valletta, although considerably clouded by the abundant libations of “ghirghentina”, he produced one of the monologues with which he often expounded his meditations to his companions.

«For sure Manoel de Vilhena was truly the most sublime Grand Master of our times, perhaps only second in history to La Vallette and Cottoner!», he began to state, in his refined Italian despite the heavy Anglo-Saxon inflexion, as soon as he had mounted on the saddle.

Bartolomeo, suspecting that his friend was about to start a lengthy indictment, far from appropriate to their condition, on the decadence of the Knights of Saint John, decided not to give the string to his clearly tipsy companion and remained silent.

Franz, however, as usual, let himself be snared by his brethren and, even more drunk than him, immediately retorted in a loud voice, in his broken Italian punctuated by gutturally pronounced consonants and by words in the German language: *«Sheisse! What are you talking about? You mean that Vilhena was greater than our Grand Master Pinto, who, for over thirty years, has*

been ruling the Order and the island with magnificence, making us respected by everyone! Das ist wahre Größe, this is true greatness, not just to order to build a model city and leave to others the task to design it!»

Bartolomeo rolled his eyes! Was it possible that Franz hadn't learned yet? On the other hand, he knew very well that that massive Bavarian with a face perpetually scorched by the sun of Malta was like this! He was a pleasure-seeker, not at all inclined to diplomacy and intellectual subtleties but always ready to courageously defend anyone he loved, including the Order and the current Grand Master!

As he used to do, Henry remained impassive in the face of his friend's vehemence. He folded his lips outward, sarcastically assenting and, after a brief moan, his distinctive way of gathering ideas, precisely as Bartolomeo had feared, he prepared himself to the verbal dispute, which he had deliberately laid the foundations of, with a question: *«And, my friend, where would this presumed greatness of the Grand Master Pinto be?»*

Franz had no hesitation in answering and, with a particular complacent emphasis, quickly enunciated a series of merits of Pinto which, evidently expecting the question, he had mentally prepared: *«I remind you, little Albion with a short memory, that you are talking about the man who, in 1749, after having taken prisoner the Muslim governor of Rhodes Mustapha Pacha, nipped in the bud the revolt of the 1500 slaves of the island that he was stirring up; the man who, in 1760, captured a Turkish flagship with 78 guns on board and that, just three months ago, founded the University of Malta!»*

Once again, Henry assented with a wry smile: *«Of course, my mighty Teutonic brethren: the ones you are mentioning are all*

irrefutable truths. But perhaps you forget some details: you forget, for example, that both the ship of Mustapha Pacha and the Turkish flagship were not taken in a naval conflict between the pagans and us but arrived at the Grand Harbour led by Christian slaves who had decided to mutiny and you are equally forgetting that the preparation of the revolt was possible only as Pinto, intending to demand a ransom for the governor as a sleazy pirate would, had treated the prisoner with royal honours, leaving him full freedom of movement in the city and that the revolt did not succeed only thanks to the informing of a Maltese guard whom the emissaries of Pacha were trying to bribe. Moreover, you forget that by bending like a prostitute to the will of Louis XV of France and fearing an attack by Sultan Abdul Hamid, who would have conquered the island in a few days, Pinto returned the flagship to the Sublime Porte without even keeping a cannon. Finally, you also forget that the creation of the university was nothing more than a poor compensation to Maltese culture after the Grand Master, shortly after our arrival here, had knelt at the will of Charles of Bourbon and of his foxy prime minister Tanucci expelling the Jesuits and closing their college!»

Franz's face, already sweaty due to the summer heat and too much wine, became even more reddish than usual as he burst out: «*Are you saying that the expulsion of the Jesuits was bad?*» The Englishman replied calmly, maintaining his coolness: «*I'm saying, that driving out about twenty mostly elderly priests, requisitioning their home, including library and classrooms, plundering it and then pompously renaming it "university" doesn't seem to be a great act of heroism! It is not, mainly, because it did not in the least affect the power of the Inquisition*

on the island and only favoured Pope Clement who could not wait to weaken the Society of Jesus!»

«So what about the new fortifications here and on Gozo? What about the new Palace of Justice and the new Civic Library? What about the embellishment of the Auberge de Castille and the reconstruction of Qormi? Are these also the fruits of raids, in your opinion? Above all, what about the fact that now the Order's emissaries are treated on an equal footing with the ambassadors of the largest European states in all courts?», Franz, increasingly altered and controversial due to the wine, retorted.

Again Henry gave no sign of feeling the blow, and, indeed, it was as if a kind of triumphal light came on in his eyes.

«My friend, you should know that all these magnificent works that you enumerate are but the fruit of the worst and most barbarian raid that a Grand Master can carry out: that against the poor inhabitants of this nation! It is not difficult to embellish cities and palaces by taxing the Maltese to starvation, it is not difficult to set up a princely court with the money of fishermen and peasants and then be represented by ambassadors who bring lavish gifts and promises of the alliance as visiting cards, just to then boast the title of "Most Eminent Highness", while your kingdom and your own monks have become a melting pot of dirty business for half of Europe and of depravities that go against our own oaths...»

«Can you hear him, Bart!» Franz, now really nervous, exploded, turning to his Italian brethren, *«Tell him something too!»*

Bartolomeo, who for a habit of his youth could hold the wine better than his Nordic friends, had remained silent until that moment. He hoped not to be called into question in a dispute

between the two he had already witnessed many other times, though in different forms and modalities. Mainly, after all, he didn't really know who to give reason to.

Now, however, he was asked directly and, for the umpteenth time, he felt compelled to play the role of peacemaker, even if, as usual, he had to use lashing tones for both contenders.

«I believe», he began, «that both of you are partly right and partly wrong and that you are both exasperating the terms of the matter!»

Both Henry and Franz turned to him, waiting for explanations for that apparently a little too diplomatic statement to come from a companion whose sincerity they both knew.

«On the one hand», Bartolomeo went on, «I don't think Henry is completely wrong in complaining about the excessive tax burden on the population. On several occasions, we all have had the opportunity to see how many Maltese live on the verge of subsistence and how the feeling towards the Order is certainly not benevolent among the locals. And, I admit, this is a painful thing to observe for those who, like us, should have the motto "Tuitio Fidei et Obsequium Pauperum", to which we all swore fidelity, as the driving force behind our actions. I often wonder if all these taxes really arise from government needs and not, rather, from the will to power and the exhibitionism of the Grand Master. Still, I know that we, simple Knights, cannot have all the answers. Finally, I also suspect that the confidence with which Franz defends Pinto's work doesn't stem from a critical evaluation. I suppose it comes, from the enthusiasm that reigns among the members of his Langue as the Grand Master has just saved, I don't know through what political intrigues and concessions to Frederick of Prussia, the commandery deriving from their Bailiwick in Silesia...»

The Bavarian Knight was about to reply, but Bartolomeo stopped him with a wave of his open hand, implying that he wanted to finish his speech.

«On the other hand, Henry», the Italian continued, «I don't feel like sharing your pessimism and your defeatism. It is certainly true that Pinto can attribute few merits to himself in the military successes of the first years of his reign. It is equally true that very few Masters, in this historical moment, have done better. Perhaps it is no longer time for bloody wars! The philosophy spreading from France, which has now conquered almost all of Europe, suggests that the government of our lives and nations must be obtained by applying the light of reason and not the violence of weapons. It is right! I think that, even if we have dedicated our lives to the defence of the true faith, nothing requires us to exercise this defence, where it is not necessary, with the sword and not, rather, through subtleties of thought, diplomacy and the contemplation and spreading of beauty. Surely, in all these things, Pinto has been able to objectively stand out in his long principality. In any case, Henry, I am sorry I have to remind you that certain overly critical and defeatist judgments are clearly divergent from that oath of obedience that you, like all of us, took by choosing to enter the Order...»

Bartolomeo had wisely chosen not to take a stand either for one or the other but, instead, to underline the lack of moderation of both. At the end of his speech, a cloak of silence fell among the three friends, meditating about the different positions.

In the meantime, the group had arrived at the Northern ramparts of Valletta. There, in the Auberge d'Angleterre et d'Allemagne, both Henry and Franz had their rooms and Bartolomeo, seeing them a little too unstable on their saddles, had decided of

accompanying them. As the horses stopped, the three confreres greeted each other by exchanging the kiss of peace and, while the two Nordic Knights carried their horses to the stables, the Italian set about returning southward to reach the Auberge d'Italie.

It was still relatively early, and the Melitense night was warm but not too sultry thanks to a slight Greek wind blowing from East. Bartolomeo decided, therefore, to slowly descend, at the pass, along the Eastern ramparts, skirting Forte Sant'Elmo. He wanted to reach the Barrakka Gardens of his Langue from where, going around the Auberge de Castille, he could get to his Auberge. With the breeze completely clearing his mind, that walk would allow him to present himself totally sober to his quarters in case of some inspection by the superiors.

He was enjoying the silence of the desert city and, while listening only to the patter of his horse on the cobbled street along the buttresses, he was thinking back to the discussion he had just participated in.

Who was really right? Despite his efforts to mediate between the parties, Bartolomeo was almost afraid to give himself an answer!

Henry, no doubt, was even too rigid in his positions but, on the other hand, who knows how long he had dreamed, on his remote island, of being able to be part of a Catholic domain in which he could fight for his faith as he was not allowed to do at home? His disappointment was, at least partly, more than justified: what had the Order of St. John become by now? Perhaps just a maritime police force scarcely engaged and able to patrol, yes and no, a strip of the Southern Mediterranean Sea or the administrator of a hospital where few islanders and few sailors and merchants, hit by fevers or scurvy during their

navigation, took refuge. Or, perhaps, it was just a strange political-religious organism, hybrid both internally, with its chivalrous ideals, the legacy of a distant past that would never return, increasingly diluted by modernity, and externally, with that ambiguous configuration of the power of the Grand Master on the islands which deliberately left in vague whether the dominion of His Serene Grace was exercised in the name of the king of Naples and Sicily, as theoretically it should have been according to the ancient Statutes, or if the Order governed in complete independence and decision-making freedom.

Bartolomeo often reflected on how this legal uncertainty was a contributing cause of the decline they were experiencing.

Decadence: that was the keyword. With few and sometimes ridiculous exceptions scattered here and there in the various states, the very existence of the Order was a “unicum” in the world.

Who were they, today, beyond that pompous title of Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta which they boasted and which, in the light of history, seemed more a mocking commemoration of past defeats than a symbol of “honour and devotion” in the present?

In the idea of their founder Gerardo Sasso, they were born to take care of pilgrims in the Holy Land. Then they had become, at the behest of the Pope, soldier monks. Anyway, already in 1187, they had been expelled from Jerusalem and, in 1291, also from their stronghold of St. John of Acre. They had taken refuge in Cyprus, meditating on the return to defend the Latin Kingdom that no longer existed but, actually, they had been expelled from Cyprus too! The history taught to the novices was littered with rhetoric, showing the conquest of the small island of Rhodes, for which it had taken three years of battles,

like a great military victory. In any case, in 1440 Suleiman had arrived, and Rhodes had been lost too. Actually, only the benevolence seasoned with the religious fanaticism of Emperor Charles V had allowed them to take control of that Maltese archipelago which, perhaps, was not even really in their possession. And even there, to be honest, the defeats outnumbered the victories: the epic chivalry with which they were formed since childhood magnified the defence of the Grand Harbor in 1565 against the fleet of a simple corsair like Dragut but forgot the loss of Tripoli a few years earlier, not to mention, a hundred years later, the colonial disaster in the Caribbean where the Knights had abandoned without a blow the four islets they had received as a gift after fighting, more or less as mercenaries, for the Tsar of Russia.

In short, theirs was actually a story of defeats, perhaps even heroic defeats but still defeats.

And yet... yet everywhere they had fought with courage, they had been losers, yes, but with the honour of arms, with the sacrifice of their lives, with the idea of being a bulwark, even the last, of Christianity! Perhaps, it had been that eagerness for martyrdom which had made them great even in defeat and which had irresistibly attracted the young Roman idle and dreamer aristocrat that Bartolomeo had been in his adolescence! Was it still like that, he wondered now? Was that still the spirit that animated the Order, now a receptacle for noble cadets and adventurers linked to the past, as he sometimes felt to be, who gave very little importance to their oaths and boasted of military undertakings consisting in the boarding of miserable Berber pirate schooners? Social climbers, politicians and shrewd courtiers, operetta soldiers, proud rulers of poor people:

this they had become, rather than intrepid soldiers of a faith that too often had become nothing but form and ostentation!

When was the subsequent defeat coming, this time without even the screen of heroism?

And what about Pinto? How was old Pinto, now over eighty, to be judged? Perhaps as a shrewd diplomat imbued, like some of his recent predecessors, with the will of personal revenge. Indeed, with the luxuries of his court and the scant attention given to the humbler classes of his domains, not as a holy monk nor, in the persistent military stasis that characterized the life of the island, as a warrior or a true commander of armies...

These were the bitter thoughts that Bartolomeo was mulling over in that Valletta night and which, probably, became the ultimate cause of everything that happened later.

While he was immersed in his reflections, just after skirting Forte Sant'Elmo, his attention was drawn back to reality by a scene that intrigued him.

To his right, he could see a series of alleys, the ones the Maltese called "sqaq", many of which were illuminated by oil lamps lit above some doors, a clear sign that, inside that house, some woman was exercising the oldest profession of the world.

Usually, this would have had no effect on him: the laws of Malta, just like those of Papal Rome, theoretically prohibited prostitution but, probably, the legislation on prostitution was, again precisely like in Rome, the most disregarded on the island and nobody, including the Bailiff of Justice and minions, noticed that Valletta, like every other capital in the world, had its "protected areas" in which, albeit with discretion, the "ladies" could receive their customers.

Not even seeing a black cloak adorned with the octagonal cross sneaking out of the door of the house where Lucia Zoratto, one

of the best known and most appreciated Venetian courtesans of Valletta, practised her profession was such a shock: it was no secret to anyone that the oath of chastity was now considered a joke by many Knights and it was rumoured that even Pinto did not do much to hide that he had had, many years earlier, a child by a certain Rosenda Paulichi, who had suddenly become, from being the wife of a Sanglea fisherman, a wealthy landowner in Mosta shortly before giving birth to a child not at all looking like her husband.

Indeed, it could not be the breaking of a monastic oath to surprise Bartolomeo! Up to that moment, he had kept faith with the commitments undertaken at the time of his still relatively recent investiture but, frankly, he could not exclude that one day he would have capitulated. Surely he would have never put his hand on fire that many of the confreres close to him had not already done so.

Therefore, out of discretion, he kept his gaze straight ahead when the Knight, taking great care to cover his face with a wide-brimmed hat and to remain in the shade as much as possible, slipped out of what had probably been the scene of a momentary outburst of pleasure: he was not interested in investigating who that man was, nor he was the kind of man for frivolous gossip and backbiting with friends.

However, he could not help but notice, out of the corner of his eye, a detail that really absorbed all his attention. On the black saddle cloth of the horse tied to the narrow manger next to the entrance to the house, the embroidery of a heraldic shield stood out, another element in itself prohibited by the Rule but now very popular among the noble scions of great families that formed the backbone of the Order.

He knew that ornament, formed by lilies of France on a blue field surmounted by two lions on a red background: it corresponded to that of the house of fra' Yves de Compigny.

"Therefore, even the aide-de-camp to the Commander General of the Military Forces allows himself some entertainment!", he thought. A half-smile pursed his lips at the idea that even the austere and authoritarian right-hand man of the Knight that many indicated as the future Grand Master yielded to sexual needs from time to time.

Then, suddenly, a memory leapt to his mind. That same morning he had checked, in the entrance hall of his Auberge, the daily sheet of the shifts of the guard to be quite sure that he had no assignments that prevented him from going to Floriana. He remembered well having read the name of Compigny as appointed commander for the troops stationed in Sant'Elmo and assigned to defend the Northeastern ramparts!

The matter, at this point, was becoming quite different: one thing was the already sinful yielding to the satisfaction of natural instincts, on which it was perhaps even suitable to turn a blind eye, but quite another thing was that to satisfy these instincts, one would knowingly abandon the command of an assigned position, failing to fulfil those duties on whose fulfilment one had sworn on his honour! On such a thing, it was not possible to compromise!

What was he, then, supposed to do?

On the one hand, he didn't like the idea of having to report to the authorities a confrere with at least twenty years of seniority in the Order more than him and, to add to the dose, tied hand in glove, for matters of service, language and personal friendship, to one of the most influential personalities of the island. He

could already foresee the reactions that his denunciation would arouse and the legal messes he would get involved in.

On the other hand, however, the matter could not be allowed to go smoothly. Yves de Compigny was one of the reference figures for the young Knights: arrogant, superb, unpleasant to almost everyone, of course, but also impeccable from the point of view of the discipline, upright in military virtues, courageous, ready for personal sacrifice, a staunch supporter of chivalrous spirit and as hard as a stone with others as well as with himself. Or, at least, this was the image that everyone had always had of that man! Bartolomeo felt nauseated by such duplicity, by such hypocrisy, that same hypocrisy that was gradually infecting the whole Order and leading it to collapse.

Once arrived at his Auberge and set up his horse, the Italian Knight hoped that the night would bring advice. In reality, tormented by doubts, he hardly slept a wink. It was as if two people were fighting inside of him: one advised him not to fight against the windmills and not to meddle in matters that did not concern him, risking, perhaps, to appear in a bad light, but the other reminded him of his duties and of his oaths and prodded him by tapping on the button of his personal honour and of the integrity of the entire Sovereign Order.

The latter won, and the following morning, even before the bells of San Giovanni called the third hour, he was in front of the Magistral Palace to speak with the Bailiff of Justice.

Although having frequented that place for years, he felt overwhelmed by the halo of magnificence that the building managed to emanate despite its boxy simplicity every time he entered the palace. Perfect harmony could be perceived already from the internal courtyard, called “Neptune’s Courtyard” for the bronze statue that was exhibited there. Already at that hour,

the portico that surrounded the cloister decorated with palm trees and small flower beds was all swarming with officials, armigers and Knights. All were intent on their various services, and Bartolomeo, observing that ongoing work meant to govern the island, felt refreshed in his purposes.

With all the imperious authority that, despite his efforts to behave with more humility, had remained to him as a legacy of his birth, the Roman Knight ordered one of the guards to announce him to the Bailiff of Justice. Then, without even waiting for an answer, he followed the soldier through the armoury to the threshold of the office occupied by the confrere with whom he wished to speak.

For the Conventual Knights, the resident Knights in Malta, that of Bailiff of Justice was an intermediate position in the power hierarchy. It was a sort of no man's land, not explicitly assigned by the Statutes to any Langue. After years of service, many ascending Knights aspiring to Priories in the mainland and more critical positions in the government of the archipelago wanted that position. However, it could also be assigned to elderly Knights who had distinguished themselves, over time, for their particular military skills or, what was much more common in that substantially peaceful period, for their diplomatic, political and, above all, patronage skills.

At that time, fra' Francisco Fernández de Córdoba-Figueroa de la Cerda, of the Langue de Castille, was the Bailiff of Justice of the island and he undoubtedly belonged to the second category. Almost seventy years old, plump, a descendant of one of the most high-ranking Spanish ducal families, that of the Medinaceli, fra' Francisco by nature had probably never wielded a sword in combat all over his life. This had prevented him from aspiring to more outstanding honours, but his

apparent bonhomie, behind which a shrewd and calculating mind was hidden, had allowed him, since the last years of Vilhena, under his countryman Despuig and in the long period of Pinto's dominion, a quiet and relatively comfortable existence as a government official of His Serene Highness.

Now, in his last months of active service, he was happy of a role which, while not implying the political responsibilities of his superior, the Grand Commander, gave him considerable power over the Maltese as head of all judicial forces and over his confreres as guardian of the Statutes and of discipline.

«*Come in, dear brethren!*», fra' Francisco exclaimed, smiling and struggling to get up for the ritual kiss of peace as soon as Bartolomeo, who was waiting on the threshold of the office, was announced to him. «*What brings you? The attendant tells me you have a serious complaint to make...*»

Although reluctantly, because of his mood of that morning, Bartolomeo returned the smile. Then, he sat next to the elderly brethren and, in a low voice, almost as if in confession, told him about the events of the previous evening.

Upon hearing the name of Compigny, the courteous smile that curled the Bailiff's lips suddenly disappeared and his eyes narrowed slightly as if his attention to the account of the Italian had multiplied.

«*What you are telling me is very serious!*», he affirmed at the end of Bartolomeo's exposition. «*Are you sure fra' Yves de Compigny was the one you saw coming out of that house?*»

«*I am sure of what I have exposed to you*», replied the young Knight, a little piqued. «*As I explained to you, I didn't see his face but I assure you that I can recognize the coats of arms of my confreres and I could swear that the one I saw on that horse was that of fra' Yves!*»

«And you tell me that last night Yves should have been in Sant'Elmo to command a guardhouse...», the Spaniard continued with an inquisitive look.

«Absolutely: to be on the safe side, I double-checked the service order as soon as I got back to the Auberge. It is, anyway, easy for you to make sure about this...»

«In fact, in fact...», fra' Francisco murmured, leafing through a pile of documents that cluttered his table until he found the sheet that confirmed the words of his interlocutor.

Now the old Bailiff had a big problem on his shoulders. Indeed, he could not pretend nothing had happened: if the facts he had heard were confirmed, he was faced with a real case of desertion from the abandonment of the guard post, an intolerable thing even in the laxity that now prevailed in the Order. But Yves de Compigny was not a Knight like all the others and not only for his personal prestige: he was the right-hand man of Grand Marshal Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc, "piliere" ("headman") of the Langue d'Alvernie, strong man of the three French-speaking Langues and possible next Grand Master to the death, probably not so far away, of Pinto. Accusing Compigny or, at least, giving credit to an accusation against him could mean, indirectly, discrediting his protector, one of the most powerful men in the archipelago, implying his veiled inability to choose friends and collaborators.

To antagonize fra' Emmanuel was the furthest thing from the will of the placid Iberian. Moreover, it could mean daring to fuel a particular vague enmity that had been snaking between the Castilians and the French for some time. However, that young Italian seemed very determined! Even an accusation of incompetence and carelessness brought before the Grand

Council was, actually, not the best prospect for concluding so many years of impeccable service among the Knights.

Suddenly, the Machiavellian mind of the Spaniard, long trained to get by on so many occasions, gave birth to a possible solution: why not let Rohan-Poldun get by on his own in the face of that affair?

Therefore, looking deeply into Bartolomeo's eyes, Francisco tried to show the most severe and circumstantial attitude that he could find in his vast repertoire of facial expressions to be used "ad hoc". Then, straightening his back, with a brooding manner, he exclaimed: *«It is such a complex matter, my friend! There is no doubt that we are in front of two different shortcomings: if what you say is true, then Compigny almost certainly disregarded one of his sacred oaths, and this would fall within my competencies as well as those of his spiritual father. But, let's talk frankly, would you be ready to jeopardize the honour of one of your confreres for a lack, indeed, I would say more, for a yielding to the weakness of the flesh of so little consequence? Because here we are not faced, let's say, with a long relationship "more uxorio" but only with a momentary fall with a female of public utility, such an abject and insignificant being to make carnal sin her source of sustenance...»*

After waiting for Bartolomeo to show with a gesture of denial his reluctance towards the definitive condemnation of an act which, after all, was the most common one could find among the occupants of all the Auberges, the Spaniard continued: *«It is, for sure, the second lack, that of a military nature, to be much more serious! But here, unfortunately, we come to a field beyond my competencies to enter, instead, those of the Grand Marshal: all things concerning issues involving the war*

aspects, including disciplinary matters, are under his control. It is therefore to him that you must turn, not to me. I will make sure that you can get an interview with fra' Emmanuel as early as tomorrow to explain to him the same events you had the complaisance to tell me. I am sure that the Grand Marshal will be able to act for the best!»

«But, my brethren, you know very well that Compigny is very close to Rohan-Polduc: I might as well talk about it with the concerned person!», Bartolomeo naively objected.

Fra' Francisco's brow frowned and his eyes became severe: *«My young brethren, I am amazed at you! I hope you are not questioning the honesty and objectivity of one of the beacons of our Order, an illustrious Knight of exemplary virtue! He will certainly not allow himself to be influenced by personal opinions and prejudices in investigating and, possibly, acting for the common good!»*

Having several times heard anecdotes about the Grand Marshal, Bartolomeo actually questioned much more than his honesty. Anyway, it would have been foolish and unseemly to share thoughts that he knew he should not even have with a bailiff being much elder than him. So he fell silent, and the broad, feignedly benevolent smile that opened again on the face of the Spanish brethren showed him that the interview was over.

After leaving the Magistral Palace, Bartolomeo rode towards the port of Sanglea as he wanted to supervise some restoration work that he had ordered to carry out on the deckhouse of the "Levriero". Once reached the dry dock, he realized that his thoughts remained entirely absorbed by the interview he had just had and, above all, by the one he was to have the following day.

He wondered what the point of denouncing Compigny to Rohan-Polduc, his direct superior, his comrade in arms for twenty years and, above all, his closest and most trusted friend could be.

Fernández may say what he wanted about Rohan-Polduc's honesty! Still, rumours about him were anything but flattering, not so much about his almost undisputed leadership abilities as about his moral integrity.

A distant cousin of the Bourbons, it was widely known that he had grown up in Parma, where he had been initiated into Freemasonry as a boy. He had then completed his studies in London, a city where, according to what some murmured, he had had close contact with members of the English royal family and had become very close to Anglican positions. Once entered the Order, relatively late in respect to the average of his companions, he had had a dazzling career. At first, he had become naval commander, then ambassador to Emperor Francis I, and it was a common opinion that, in that role, he had shared the joyful life of court between hunting parties and gallant adventures. When he had returned to Valletta, he too had been a Bailiff of justice and, later, even though the position belonged by right to the Italian Langue, he had been appointed Grand Admiral of the entire fleet. From there to obtain, as soon as it had become available, the position of Grand Marshal, this time rightfully due to his Langue, the step had been short, and anyone knew that, within a few years at the most, he would have taken hold of the entire island.

All this at less than fifty years of age: too much and too quickly not to suspect that his being, not even so secretly, the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Malta, part of that Freemasonry which, despite the solemn condemnation of Pope Clement XII

in 1738, was very powerful among the high ranks of the Order and of which, of course, Yves de Compigny was also a part, had to be involved in that fulminating ascent.

While sitting on a large mooring bollard and absently staring at the two bunches of grapes springing from a mountain on the Ruspoli's coat of arms which his father had ordered to carve on the keel of the ship, he reflected that denouncing Compigny to Rohan-Polduc was like asking the Papal Curia to judge a Cardinal for not having paid a supplier: it only meant passing for a fool without obtaining anything but powerful enemies.

He was almost on the verge of renouncing, giving up everything and sending a message to fra' Francisco asking him if it was not too late to forget the dialogue they had had. Then, looking up, he observed the flag waving on the mainmast, the large white cross on a red background of the Order of St. John and made his decision: for everything he believed in, for the oaths he had sworn and for his own honour, he would get to the bottom of the matter, cost what it cost.

That evening, returning to Valletta for the evening mass in San Giovanni, he immediately realized that the price he was about to pay could be even higher than he expected.

Entering the cathedral, he immediately perceived something strange: as he passed, the low whispering of the various Knights chattering while waiting for the beginning of the function was interrupted, all the Francophone confreres, usually quite expansive, greeted him coldly and even the members of his Langue cast long glances at him.

Evidently, somehow the news of his desire to denounce the famous and upright fra' Yves de Compigny had already leaked, and the effect, it seemed, had not been to increase his popularity.

Fortunately, after a few moments, Henry and Franz, coming from the Auberge d'Angleterre et Allemagne, joined him and bravely took him by the arm. Franz seemed visibly uncomfortable, as if he didn't know where to start. Still, Henry, with his usual sarcastic half-smile, broke the ice: *«And so our young Roman captain decided to load spear against the powerful Gauls!»,* he whispered in a forcedly joking tone.

«I couldn't help it, Henry. My own honour as a Knight was at stake!»

«You did well, Bart!», Franz interjected. *«In the Auberges, every Knight is talking about it, but it was high time for someone to show not to be afraid of the Französisch clique!»*

«I don't care about his Languie, Franz: I only care about what I know he did, and I hope my testimony will be judged only on that!», Bartolomeo tried to answer as if to take courage but, already from his tone, it was clear that he did not trust that possibility either.

«We'll see, my friend, we'll see...», Henry whispered a moment before the priest made his entrance and everyone fell silent and immersed themselves in prayers.

During the homily, Bartolomeo, like everyone else kneeling on his left leg, raised his head a couple of times to observe his confreres gathered in prayer. He saw that Compigny was not there but, above all, his attention was captured by the imposing figure of Rohan-Polduc: straight as a spindle, impeccable in his crusader cassock of black silk with the light cloak held in place by a precious cameo, the Grand Marshal was kneeling in the front row, at the side of the altar, a few steps from old Pinto sitting on the Grand Master seat. The marked features, the plump lips and the thick black eyebrows that contrasted with

the perfect white wig gave him the air of a Levantine, and the big black eyes seemed both burning as coals and cold as ice.

At the sight of the authority that that man emanated, Bartolomeo felt all his intentions melting like snow in the sun, but now it was too late to back down.

After mass, he immediately left the cathedral and instantly took refuge in his room without any desire to dine.

Even that night, he could hardly sleep at all.