

CHAPTER 18

THE GAIETY THEATRE

the Island Fortress of Malta to bear witness to a Heroism and Devotion that will long be famous in History.

The *final all clear* came on the evening of August 28th, 1944. Released from a life of curfews and death lists, those who could returned to their homes. The great siege was over and a chorus of victory bells replaced the sirens' constant alarm. Collaboratively clanging from every belfry, all of the island churches echoed one another for twenty-four hours that momentous day.

Malta came up from the damp darkness of her fallout shelters. She regained her posture; glad to face the morning sun. Although she stood in rubble and dust, at least she stood in peace. Her people were dancing in the streets.

In Valletta, a corps of kilts sashayed in step down Royal Street. Drums and bugles preceded the honorary bagpipes blaring behind George VI and his chuffing convoy of waxed and swaged automobiles. A salvo of cocked cameras captured the monarch parading through the capital, his entourage of royal architects in tow.

Their inventory of damage caused by bombings tallied over two thousand Axis air raids in 1942 alone. That year, Malta was honored with the illustrious George Cross; the only time the distinguished Medal for Bravery decorated an entire nation. The King declared:

To praise her courageous people, I award the George Cross to

Great Britain's message to the world was clear. Valor enabled the Cappadocian Saint to slay the beast that plagued the Middle Ages; the red crucifix on his crusading shield deflecting reptilian fire. Likewise, it was the determination of the Maltese people that survived the contemporary dragon's breath.

The tiny island was back on the map for surviving its second great siege. A new flag was designed to memorialize defiance against the Nazis. In red and white, the George Cross became the celebrated emblem of twentieth century triumph.

Previously, the national standard commemorated the first great siege of 1565, when the Maltese battled alongside the Grand Knights of La Vallette. Together they fought off the mighty Turks successfully protecting the southern shores of Europe from Mohammedism. The Knights of Malta flew their distinguished eight-pointed star until the end of World War II when history repeated itself.

With each major victory, new banners were raised to honor heroic engagements against arduous opponents. Each time the little nation should have been defeated but was not.

Building anew came with peace in 1945. Focus shifted from what fell from the sky to what was left on the ground. Health replaced hunger. Resilient children knew to search the rubble for whole bricks. Thankfully, normal life resumed.

Eventually, films returned to Maltese cinemas. In uniform, John always slipped into the Gaiety Theatre for free. Originally, the grand knights built the auditorium as a tribute to their sixteenth century

fight. Mirroring the national flag, a magnificent oak star spread across the floor. Above, crystals dangled from seven gold tiers. The spiraling chandelier tiaraed the parquet where the Maltese danced through 376 years of antiquity without war.

For the sergeant, the old, ornate drama hall was filled with fond memories; especially the renaissance ballroom pronounced a national treasure. He associated the splendid architecture with lavish parties, none more elegant or memorable than the night he married Stella.

John's sister, Diriana, was the maid of honor. She designed the bridal gown and sewed each eyelet by hand. Before church, she buttoned up thirty-seven tiny silk balls on the back of the dress. When she reached Stella's neck, Riana gave her sister-in-law to be the traditional smack on the back for good luck.

Holy crowns were woven into the twenty-foot train of famous Maltese lace. Wized fingers tatted for weeks, nimbly threading a rackets shuttle from side to side with skillful speed. Managing the length kept two children busy all night. Like the newlyweds, the ring-bearer sported a tuxedo and their flower girl wore floor-length white.

After the bride and groom's first dance, a hundred champagne bottles popped at once. This French extravagance was due to the panache of Stella's father. Carmenu was likewise effervescent and had a reputation for being a big show-off prone to excess. Although he needed no excuse, he certainly had a good one. Since Stella was his only daughter, her wedding would be his single opportunity to make a grand stand.

He told his wife, "I don't care about expense, Georgia! I'm organizing every limousine on the island to chauffeur guests from their homes right to the front steps of the Gaiety!" Once the hired sedans

started pulling up, the end of the caravan was out of sight.

Carmenu arranged for the bride and groom to arrive in a *parilja*. Above both portals, lanterns lit up their four-horse *carriage*. Carousel steeds pranced with red ribbons braided into their white manes and tails. Like the colors gracing the Maltese flag, Stella's flamboyant father orchestrated a red and white party that would be unforgettable even though the photographer consumed too much of the free-flowing champagne far too quickly. With no resistance, he passed out before he ever took a shot.

Carm favored an expensive cigar while sipping fine scotch so he arranged a private smoking room for his male companions. Later he took two carloads of them to Saint Paul's Bay for three days and nights of drinking, gambling, and baiting Sergeant John outside the window of the nuptial suite at their honeymoon hotel. As usual, Carmenu's excessive behavior would be uninvited, unwelcome and unbecoming. Stella never forgave her father or the photographer.

There were no pictures. The Gaiety foyer was trimmed with Phoenician leather sconces, Indian rugs, and massive Tuscan columns stretching to the ceiling where bouquets of flowers carved into rose marble molding. Only those in attendance noticed 216 guests with gifts chat their way through the welcome line right to the center of the dance hall where the floor was inlaid with a magnificent Maltese Cross. Each of its eight points reached burgundy brocade wainscoting below scarlet satin walls. Smaller stars created a perimeter in mahogany where fringed chaises and velvet settees offered stylish perches.

On evening patrol, John peeked into the historic hall whenever he had the opportunity. Although it was empty, the floorboards reflected memories of his wedding reception. All his friends had stood

aside to make room when the band struck up the newlyweds' favorite tune. The sergeant would never forget their matrimonial floorshow. They chanced to waltz on a work of art.

Still on duty, John closed ballroom doors on the panorama dancing in his head and went back to work. On his way to the converted cinema, he checked for foolhardy adolescents who regularly snuck backstage unnoticed, daring one another to climb the catwalk. Panels of black velvet winged the proscenium. On either side, bags of sand tied to diagonal ropes suspended scrim and painted scenery. Together they waited for the infrequent Neapolitan tour that brought Carmen or Rigoletto to Sliema so footlights could once again flood the talent with amber and blue. Until then, they sat in the dark collecting dust.

John never had time for a full-length movie, but previewed news releases before the feature. One particular clip made a lasting impression. Often the timing of his neighborhood patrol allowed him to watch. Familiar to local patrons, this poor-quality print was haunting, unforgettable, and shown at every screening.

Spotchy burnt frames documented the liberation of Auschwitz. The camera moved through the death camp, building to building, room to room. One filled with eyeglasses. Another bore hills of human hair. A warehouse stored stacks and stacks of suitcases filled with remains of the slaughtered. Illustrated with shots of gas chambers and hollow corpses in mass graves, a journalist for the BBC reported:

It took better than three and a half years, but the Fascisti were ultimately forced to surrender. Having lost the war, they succeeded in constructing one of the greatest horrors the world has ever

known. Millions of Jews around the world are demonstrating their sorrow by raising their right arms to vow, Le'olam le'od! Le'olam le'od.

Subtitles on the bottom of the screen read, "*Never again! Never again.*"

The Nazis tattooed all victims. Likewise, whoever witnessed the clip's final footage was marked for life. As the movie projector rapidly flicked and ticked, the effect was enhanced by a slow zoom and close-up of an emaciated but redeemed camp survivor. Like Lazarus, the smiling bald boy rose up to wave a miniature Stars and Stripes. Forever on film, the child came to attention and saluted a Black American GI.

John was struck by the boy's resemblance to his own son Charlie; both had big dark eyes and long lashes. Giving thanks all his children were still alive, he choked up when he saw the boy's rejuvenated image expand across the huge scrim. Sallow skin. Head held high. His spirit undying.

The exact second his hopeful eyes looked right into the camera, the child looked into the soul of each member of the audience. His indelible face called for world-wide human rights and justice.

Standing in the back of the dark theatre, John crossed his arms and held his breath. Astral beams lit slow-moving specks of dust in the air. Shadows strobed across the back wall of faded curtains. Although he'd seen the clip before, John's hand unconsciously covered his mouth to keep from gasping. As he teetered back and forth in his boots, the officer thought, 'He made it. The little chap made it. If I took him home, Stella would fatten him up in no time!'

The correspondent concluded:

The torment and misery of German death camps leave an eternal scar on the face of human decency.

After the final note, the sound track swelled as an orchestra played 'God Save the King!' While credits rolled, more close-ups of Jewish and gypsy children filled the silver screen at The Gaiety. Like Churchill, their fingers signed 'V for Victory!'

CHAPTER 19

BIG CHARLIE

Sergeant John often worked late after the war was over so Stella would send her youngest to the wharf with a warm dish so her husband could eat a home-cooked supper while still on duty. One evening, Big Charlie routinely found his father and handed him the customary dinner plate knotted in a tea towel. As soon as John took it, a barroom window crashed and crumbled, spewing glass all over the pavement. The flying chair that started the brawl fractured at their feet.

The officer handed the meal back to his son, unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and asked Charlie to hold them. With his father's hat on his head, the boy stood still with supper in one hand and the top half of his father's uniform in the other.

"Tiċċaqlaqx minn hawn! Okay? Stay right here and wait," the officer warned with a grin. "I'll be hungry when I'm through so *don't move.*"

With a silver half-crown in each fist, Sergeant John climbed right through the large, broken storefront. He was the guardian of the strand and a big bully, all mettle and ire. If you accidentally bumped into him, he demanded an explanation. An unexpected sneer could merit a bloody nose. Although a loyal ally, the sergeant was an intransigent opponent.

John boxed his way out of the bar with a pair of antagonized