

Għall-Glorja tal-Patrija!

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Zmien il-Ħaġar Totò jsib lil Malta

Ha ngħiduha kif inhi, jekk trid tibda tifhem lill-Maltin trid qabelxejn tifhem l-istorja tagħhom. U l-istorja tagħhom ma tistax tifhimha jekk ma tifhimx l-istorja tal-gżejjer li jgħixu fuqhom, jew aħjar – li għexu fuqhom, għax il-Maltin tal-lum mhumiex il-Maltin ta' tliet mitt sena ilu, jew ta' elf sena ilu jew ta' għaxart elef sena ilu... Insomma, halli ma ngerfxekx. Ha nibda mill-bidu, għax dan l-argument ikolli nistqarr li hu kemxejn ikkumplikat.

Mela taħbat tistaqsini: Min kien l-ewwel Malti? Issa anke dan huwa argument ikkumplikat għax loġikament l-ewwel Malti għandu jkun l-ewwel wiehed li sejjah lil dawn il-gżejjer b'isimhom, mhux hekk? Imma, fin-nuqqas ta' dan l-għarfien, ejja nqisu lill-ewwel Malti lil dak li għall-ewwel darba żar dawn il-gżejjer u ddecieda li jibqa' jgħammar hawn. L-għażla tal-verb hawnhekk hija importanti: mhux jgħix, imma jgħammar, jigifieri mal-azzjoni tal-għajxien wiehed irid iżid ukoll azzjoni oħra – dik li jagħmel l-ulied u jkattar il-popolazzjoni; li jibni generazzjoni ġdida ta' Maltin li mbaġhad tibni

l-ġenerazzjoni ta' warajha u ta' warajha u ta' warajha eċċetra eċċetra.

Mingħajr dubju, tgħidlix kif imma l-istudjużi kollha jaqblu fuq hekk u mhux se niddubitahom jien, l-ewwel Malti ġie minn Sqallija. Faċli timmaġina kif ġraw l-affarijiet. Kien hemm dan l-Isqalli – kien għadu żmien il-ġebel, fejn kollox kien isir mill-ġebli, nies tal-art, jirgħu l-bhejjem – u ġurnata minnhom qabzitu li kull solstizju kellu jaqbad waħda mill-bhejjem tiegħu u jtiha lill-kap tal-villaġġ.

“Totò,” qalulu shabu tal-villaġġ, bejn boqqa ħalib u ohra wara ġurnata mal-mergħat, “jaqbillek toqgħod attent. Isibuk waħdek u taqla' xi xebgħa żul minn hemm.”

“U għaliex għandi naqla' xebgħa? B'liema dritt il-kap jeħodli żewġ bhejjem fis-sena? X'qed niehu lura jien?”

“Eh Totò, jekk jiġu għalina, il-kap iħarisna!”

Imma Totò qatt ma seta' jiftakar li ġie xi hadd għalihom. L-uniku inkwiet li kien jinqala' fil-villaġġ tagħhom kien min-nies li kien imdawwar bihom il-kap tal-villaġġ. Kienu jidhlu fil-ħwienet tax-xorb ilegilgu b'kemm jifilhu ħalib u jtilqu 'l hemm bla ma jħallsu. Jittantaw kull xbejba li tgħaddi minn quddiemhom. Jidhlu jisirqu f'nofs ta' lejl u hadd ma jista' jgħidilhom xejn. Kulhadd kien imxebba' bihom. Imma kulhadd kien iżomm fomm mitbuq bil-biża' minn dik il-marmalja.

Din l-arroganza kollha Totò ma felahhiex aktar u lsienu beda jtaqtaq u jtaqtaq sakemm f'lejla sajjja, minn dawki x-xemx tkun donnha bilkemm trid tinzel wara l-gholjiet u s-sema tibqa' lewn il-ġamar ta' fuklar, żewġ dellijiet suwed lejl laħqu miegħu u filgħodu sab ruħu mitruħ fuq ċattra, l-għadam ta' ġismu jibki bl-uġiġħ, bejn sema u ilma jcafcac hlejjju hlejjju bla ma jaf il-kif u x'fatta u 'l fejn qed ikaxkru l-kurrent. Totò xtaq jibki imma taht xemx tisreg il-blalen t'għajnejh ħasshom donnhom ġebliet imbasktin mejtin għal

qatra ilma. B'rasu ddamdam, bejn il-qilla tas-shana u t-theżżiża li kien qala', reħa ruħu f'idejn id-destin u żżerżaq f'nagħsa helwa, jitbandal mal-mewg, jonhor u jmeçlaq xufftejh. (Aktarx li kien tul dan it-tragitt li l-ewwel darba xi hadd holom bi ftira tajba, bit-tadam u l-kappar, sinna ta' tewma u difer incova!)

Totò raqad fil-fond. Sakemm... skoss qawwi hasdu hasda li qatgħetu minn għewwa. Għal mument stħajjel li kienet għejja xi xebgħa ohra. Kien għadu ma fetaħx għajnejh imma żewg affarijiet seta' jinnota: l-uġiġh itanbar f'rasu u ç-çattra li ma kinitx għadha titbandal. Fetaħ għajnejh u tmattar. L-għadam faqqa' u b'çerta awtorevolezza nistgħu ngħidu li dak il-ħin dwiet l-ewwel dagħwa fuq il-Gzejjer Maltin.

L-ewwel jiem Totò qattagħhom f'għar fond u mudlam, imma meta t-tbeżbiża li kien qala' bdiet terħih u felah mill-gdid jibda jterraq fuq saqajh dlonk beda jiskopri din l-art li sab ruħu fuqha. Kienet art stramba fejn donnu kollox kien żgħir. Ftit 'il fuq mill-għar kien hemm wied li kien iħaddar mhux ħazin, bl-ilma ġieri u frisk, li f'dik il-qilla ta' shana ta' spiss kien jaħjih xhin jintasab fid-dell għal ftit mistrieħ.

Mhix art ħazina din, qal bejnu u bejn ruħu Totò waqt li kien qed imexmex fenek jum fost ohrajn. Għax ma mmurx lura minn fejn għejt u ngħib lill-familja kollha hawn? Ikollna dil-gżira kollha għalina, bla kapijiet, bla bulijiet, bla inkwiet ta' xejn! Totò kien wieħed minn dawk li ladarba jdahhal fellus f'rasu qajla mbagħad johorgu. Aħseb u ġib lil min jaħseb u Totò rħielha biex iwettaq dak li kien ħassel. F'kemm ilni ngħidlek bena çattra li tiflah xi għaxra ohra bħalu u qagħad b'paçenzja jistudja l-baħar u l-kurrenti tiegħu biex meta jerħilha lura ma jmurx isib xi maltempata li tkissirlu ç-çattra u ma jasal imkien.

Ix-xorti dahkitlu. Wasal Sqallija waqt li kien il-lejl. Inheba kemm felah sa ma wasal lura f'daru. Il-ġirien kienu għadhom kemm dahlu għar-raqda tant li seta' jara l-fjammi żgħar tal-immajjar jintfew

hu u jitkaxkar madwar id-dwejriet tal-ġebel tond u hamran. Malli ratu jixref il-bieb ta' daru martu kienet diġà ha tibda titgħagġeb u ssemma' l-ġirien, imma dlonk hakmilha halqha bil-pala t'idu u sikkitha. Kien tard wisq! Sakemm fissrilha fuq fuq x'kellu f'rasu u qajjem lil uliedu biex jitolqu lkoll flimkien il-bieb kien diġà qed iħabbat bil-ġirien jistaqsu lil Santuzza jekk inqalghalhiex xi haġa. Totò ried jgdem minkbu imma minflok gidem ilsien u biex ma jidghix li ma jmurx l-allat jieħdu għalihom u jpatuhielu waqt li qed jaqsam bil-baħar. Il-ġirien, iżda, ma qatgħux qalbhom, sakemm Santuzza xirfet fuq l-għatba u serrhitilhom rashom li ma kien inqala' xejn u li kemm hi u kemm uliedha kienu jinsabu tajbin.

“Miskina Santuzza kif spiċċat minħabba l-ilsien twil ta' Totò,” qalu l-ġirien huma u sejr in lura d-dar. Li ma kinux jafu kien li Santuzza, flimkien ma' Totò, dak il-lejl rikbet iċ-ċattra għadha mxarrba bl-ilma baħar u, flimkien ma' wliedhom, żewġ mogħżiet u kelb, irħewlha lejn il-gżira li skont Totò kien qisha ġnien fiċ-ċokon, fejn ma kien se jonqoshom xejn u setgħu jghixu mingħajr ma jagħtu kont lil hadd. Totò kien mohħu mistrieħ li hadd ma rahom telqin... tal-anqas hekk kien mingħalih.

“Kem se ndumu ma naslu Totò? Imma inti taf ezatt fejn se jjer Totò? Tgħid se naslu qawwijn u shaħ Totò? Totò, se jkollna biżżejjed x'nieklu fejn se jrin? Totò, kellimni hi!... Totò? Totò!”

Kienu għadhom bilkemm telqu u Totò kien diġà ddispjaċieh li mar lura għaliha. Jien kelb tiegħi nnifsi, haseb, stajt bqajt hemm waħdi għall-kwiet, paxxut taħt is-siġar immexmex il-fniek. Mort nivvinta li niġi lura għaliha! Imma jien x'ċuċ jien? U hekk baqa', il-vjaġġ sħiħ, jaqla' ġo fih, l-imrar tiela' u jzommu misrur li ma jmurx jisbel u jispiċċa jagħli. Kienet għadha tgerger meta raw l-ewwel hliel tal-kosta tal-gżira. Ix-xemx kienet telgħet u nizlet tliet darbiet u lsienha ma waqafx itaqtaq, anke waqt l-irqad.

L-ewwel żminijiet kienu tajbin. Totò bena daqsxejn ta' dwejra mill-ġebel griż u ppuntat, b'tieqa tagħti għal fuq il-baħar, u Santuzza kienet tixwilu l-ħut li kien jaqbad u thawwarhomlu b'xi ftit ħabaq u kappar. It-tfal kienu jgħaddu l-ġranet jiġġerrew max-xaġhri tal-madwar, jaqbd u l-gremxul u jixhtu l-ġebel lill-għasafar fis-siġar. Kollox deher li kien għaddej sew sakemm lejla waħda...

“Totò kultant jiġini l-ħsieb li nerggħu lura.”

Kieku dak il-ħin l-allat tawhielu bil-ħarta f'wiċċu Totò ma kienx jinhasad daqstant. Biex kienet ġejja dik l-imherwla ta' mara li fettillu jkaxkar miegħu?

“M'għandix ma' min ngħid kelma Totò. Dejjem hawn insajjar u nnaddaf. Dejjem waħdi.”

“M'hawnx jien?” fakkarha Totò.

“Uuuuu... ijja veru hawn int, imma tihux għalik Totò, int tkun għajjen wara ġurnata sajd u xogħol. U int raġel hux, mhux dejjem tifhimni. Min jaf kieku...”

Kieku xiex? Totò kemmex xufftejh, berraq għajnejh u rabat idejh fuq sidru jistenna biex kienet ħierġa.

“Min jaf kieku ngħibu lil ommi toqgħod magħna?”

Kien għoddu tah ħass ħażin.

“Ifhimni ftit Santuzza tiegħi, ommok mara xiha illum. Trid nagħtuha skariġġ bħal dak u tmutilna fuq il-baħar? Santuzz! Aħseb ftit.”

Santuzza zekzket tnejn u kompliet iddawwar il-ħuta fuq il-fuklar. Totò ħassu rebbieh. Ħareġ 'il barra jhokk is-suf ta' sidru paxxut bih innifsu. Santuzza kompliet iddawwar il-ħuta...

“Imma kieku jaħasra jkolli ma' min ngħid kelma...!”

Xewqet Santuzza ma damitx wisq ma nqatgħet. Għodwa minnhom, waqt li kienu qeġhdin jitlajjaw qrib ix-xatt, it-tfal lemħu ċattra fuq ix-xefa. Telgħu jagħtu l-aħbar lil missierhom. Totò xamm l-inkwiet; ġibed bastun minn wara l-bieb (u miegħu xi żewġ

dagħwiet) u rhielha lejn ix-xatt, determinat li jekk ikun meħtieġ sa jasal li jxerred id-demmm.

“Ah, Totò! Totò!”

Possibbli? Totò baqa’ b’halqu miftuh ihokk rasu, ma jistax jemmen lil għajnejh.

Totò! Totò!

Santuzza kienet għaxxqithielu. Dakinhar li kien mar lura għaliha bl-għageb tagħha kienet qajmet lill-girien kollha u, għalkemm hi kienet baġtithom ’l hemm, mhux kulhadd kien belagħha li kollox kien sew u kien hemm min baqa’ jittawwal minn wara l-kantuniera ha jara jinnutax xi ċaqliq suspettuz. Min stenna thenna u l-kurżità pprenjatu u min kien kurjuż aktar saħansitra baqa’ jsus warajhom sakemm ra lil Totò, Santuzza, uliedhom u l-bhejjem tagħhom jitiġħu fuq iċ-ċattra u jerħulha lejn ix-xefaġ. Issa Pinu kien jinsab jilheg quddiem Totò, flimkien ma’ Pina, il-hames uliedhom, u xi ftit mogħoż li Totò ma kienx jiftakar li Pinu qatt kellu minnhom.

“Kif jien bla nifs Totò! Habbatna ftit il-baħar u diċ-ċattra qasmitli dahri sakemm għbidtha ’l gēwwa.”

“Ara Pina!”

Kienet Santuzza li malli rat lil Totò diehel sparat id-dar biex jiġbor il-bastun xammet l-inkwiet u griet warajh lejn ix-xatt. Malli Santuzza u Pina raw lil xulxin tgħannqu u tbewsu u qabzu bil-ferħ donnhom żewg itfal. Mhux l-istess Totò.

Totò ma ried lil hadd jiġi u jiddisturbalu l-gzira tiegħu. Ma kellu xejn kontra Pinu, avolja kien isibu kemxejn lablabi żzejjed u jhobb jilhaq salib għajru, imma f’dan il-ġnien żgħir li kien skopra b’ċikka wara d-damdima li qala’ għax fetaħ ilsienu f’għieħ is-sewwa ma ried lil hadd. Dik kienet ir-roqgħa tiegħu u tiegħu biss.

“Imma Totò isma’ minni għal darba,” ippruvat iddawwarlu fehmtu Santuzza, “Pinu u Pina nies twajbin u daqqa t’id jistgħu jagħtuna. Imbagħad hemm haġ’ohra Totò...”

Totò waqqaf widnejh. Biex kienet hierġa issa?

“Uliedna qed jikbru Totò. Iż-żmien li jagħmlu bħalma għamilna aħna wasal...”

Totò fehem li Santuzza kellha raġun. Dak il-hin ma qalilha xejn. Gemgem xi haġa minn taht l-ilsien u telaq 'il barra, rasu baxxuta mitluf fil-ħsieb u rhielha lejn l-irdumijiet. Meta wasal lura x-xemx kienet għoddha ntfiet u qamar sħiħ kien diġà mela s-smewwiet. Iż-żewġ familji kienu miġbura madwar in-nar ifaqqgħu d-daħk u jmeċilqu l-ikel.

“Totò fejn bqajt?” staqsietu Santuzza, imma Totò ma kellimhiex. Baqa' sejjer dritt fuq Pinu, taptaplu tnejn fuq spalltu u għamillu sinjal li ried ikellmu. Pinu fehem, qam minn postu u t-tnejn telqu lil hinn ifesfsu f'widnejn xulxin.

L-għada filgħodu Totò u Pinu laqqgħu liż-żewġ familji. Totò sejjaħ lill-aktar bint kerha li kellu, li minkejja l-età tenera tagħha diġà kellha par mustaċċi folti aktar minn ta' missierha, u Pinu sejjaħ lill-isbaħ iben li kellu, mibni f'saffejn u b'par għajnejn tara fihom l-istilel, u b'dik ir-rabta ntrabtu ż-żewġ familji f'alleanza dejjiema. Iben Pinu għall-ewwel tbikkem b'dik l-impożizzjoni, imma l-għada filgħodu t-tbissima fuq fommu kienet titkellem waħidha. Ftit qabel is-solstizju tas-sajf ta' wara l-familja kibret u hekk reġgħet għamlet fis-sajf ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ta' wara u ebda unjoni ma kkontribwixxiet daqs dik għat-tkabbir ta' dak il-ġens li kien għadu jitwieled. Totò kien gābha żewġ u skopra li wara l-mustaċċi bintu tassew kellha talent moħbi!

Haġ'ohra tgħallem Totò: anke l-holm xi darba jispiċċa. U l-holm ta' Totò spiċċa ma' serbut ċattri li sorgew fil-bajja eżatt taht it-tieqa ta' daru. Totò tgħallem ukoll li, jaħrab kemm jaħrab, lanqas jekk jaħrab sa xfar id-dinja ma l-bniedem jista' jaħrab miċ-ċirkostanzi ta' madwaru. Totò f'daqqa waħda hassu li tgħallem wisq affarijiet f'daqqa u ħabat se jibda jiddejjaq jitgħallem dat-tagħlim kollu.

Fi Sqallija l-istaġun tal-ilma m'għamilx ilma u n-nixfa halliet lil kulhadd bil-ġuh. In-nies fl-inhaw li kien ġej minnhom Totò baqgħu jiftakruh u l-kelma kienet griet sew li Totò sab art li tnixxi halib u għasel minn bejn il-blat. Issa huma wkoll bdew jithajru jhallu n-nixfa ta' Sqallija u jmorru jzommu kumpanija lil Totò. Wara kollox min jaf miskin xi dwejjaq għandu, wahdu ma' dik il-peçluqa ta' Santuzza u ma' dak il-lablabi ta' Pinu li, ja wiçç ta' halliel li hu, jisraq il-mogħoż ta' haddiehor! Fiz-żminijiet tal-bżonn min m'għandux irid jgħix ma' min għandu u bħalissa Totò għandu u huma m'għandhomx.

Totò ma laqagħhomx b'idejh miftuħin. Li kieku seta' kien jibgħathom lura minn fejn ġew. Li kieku seta'. Imma ma setax. Huma ma damux ma ntebħu li Totò ma riedx affari magħhom u bnew id-dwejriet tagħhom kemxejn lil hinn. F'kemmm ilni ngħidlek kellhom villagġ żgħir, bi rqajja' ta' art maħduma u hxejjex, stalel għall-bhejjem, ġwiebi għall-ilma, u Totò wara l-ħasira, bil-buri u għajjur, qagħad jara kollox tiela' b'heffa liema bħalha.

“Se jispiççaw jitfghuna lura l-baħar!” kien igerger ma' Santuzza. “Hemm bżonn li nagħmlu xi haġa! Din l-art ma tistax titma' lil kulhadd. U huma qegħdin aktar minna. Iduru għalina u jerggħu jitfghuna lura l-baħar. Ġew warajna u ħadu kulm'hawn! Ara min baġhat għalihom lil dawn!”

Santuzza kienet dratu t-tgergir tiegħu, imma f'qiegh qalbha hija wkoll kienet beżgħana minn dak li seta' jġiri. Kienet taħseb dwar il-ġejjieni aktar minn kemm kienet turih. Ftit 'il bogħod mid-dwejra tagħhom kienu bnew artal biex fuqu jmiddu xi hxejjex b'rispett lejn l-allat. Issa dan l-artal ta lil Santuzza idea brillanti. Filgħaxija, waqt li Totò kien għaddej iteftef fl-ikel mitluf fi ħsibijietu, Santuzza niżlet bilqieghda façcata tiegħu, wiçça maħruq bix-xemx u għajnejha jibru bl-eçcitament għal dak li kellha xi tgħid.

“Ara Totò, l-allat kienu ħanina magħna. Int biss

biss qsamt il-baħar tliet darbiet u l-allat ħarsuk. Veru dan li qed ngħid Totò?”

Veru.

“Mela iftaħ widnejk sew u ara għandix raġun fuq din. Jekk irridu li l-allat jibqgħu jħarsu lejna b’għajn tajba jeħtieġ li nagħtuhom sinjal, li nuruhom kemm aħna rikonoxxenti. Ftakar Totò, l-allat kultant għandhom mit-tfal...” u hawn baxxiet lehinha, mielet lejha u f’widintu kompliet, “bħat-tfal jieħdu għalihom u bħat-tfal tixtrihom.”

Veru wkoll. Imma biex kienet ħierġa?

“Min jaf kieku kellna nibnu dar lill-allat? Hawn maġenb id-dar tagħna, u b’hekk inżommuhom qrib tagħna u jħarsu lejna b’għajn tajba. B’hekk l-allat ikunu maġħna... u mhux mal-ġirien tagħna, li ġew hawn u qabdu u ħadu l-art u jridu jagħmlu b’kulm’hawn tagħhom.”

Totò tbikkem. U kif ħsieb bħal dak ma kienx ġie lilu? Santuzza kellha raġun. Jibnu dar lill-allat u b’hekk l-allat ikunu maġħhom mhux ma’ ġirienhom, u bl-allat fuq in-naħa tiegħu min kien ser jista’ għalih lil Totò?

“Nibnulhom dar akbar u isbaħ minn din l-istess darna,” qal Totò b’rieda qawwija, għajnejh jibru, hekk kif f’moħħu kien diġà qed jara dar kbira enormi li tkun tidher mill-ibgħad irkejjen tal-gżira.

L-għada filgħodu ġabar lil uliedu u lil Pinu u Pina u wliedhom u fissrilhom x’kien il-pjan tiegħu.

Mill-għada bdew jaħdmu. Hejjew l-għodda minn blat samm, sabu fondoq fil-viċin u f’kemm ilni ngħidlek beda t-tbaqqin minn filgħodu sa filgħaxija; l-irġiel jaħdmu bla heda u n-nisa jieħdu ħsieb id-dar u l-ikel u t-tkabbir tal-ħxejjex u t-tfal. Kull haġra li kienu jaqtgħu, it-tul ta’ tlett irġiel bilwieqfa fuq xulxin, kienu jkaxkruha fuq iz-zkuk mimduhin, u mbagħad imidduha f’ħofra li kienu hejjew minn qabel u jidfnu daqs terz minnha biex iżzomm wieqfa.

Il-ġirien kienu jħarsu lejhom imħassbin, jistaqsu

x'kellu f'moħħu Totò. Imma Totò kien fommu mitbuq u dil-binja misterjuża mliet lill-oħrajn bil-kurzità. Meta d-dar tal-allat bdiet tieħu l-forma l-iben il-kbir ta' Totò naqqax fil-ħaġar bosta xbihat ta' annimali biex ikompli jsebbah dik il-binja. Totò ħassu kburi immens u, meta fl-aħħar qiegħdu l-ħaġra ta' wiċċ l-artal li waqqfu f'nofs dik id-dar tal-allat, id-dmugh ġelben ma' ħaddejh, kburi b'dik l-opra li kien wettaq. Santuzza taptpitlu fuq spalltu biex turih li anke hi kienet kburija bih.

Xi jumejn wara l-ġirien marru sabu lil Totò. Meta ra dik il-ġġajta riesqa lejha ħabat jitfantas imma huma dlonk urew li ma kinux ġejjin bi ġlied.

“Totò, sirna nafu li inti bnejt dar lill-allat,” qalulu.

“U min qalilkom?” ried ikun jaf, waqt li f'moħħu kien diġà beda jberren kif se jilwi l-ġewża t'għonq min ittradieh.

“Pina kienet qed titkellem mal-mara tiegħi,” qallu wieħed mill-ġġajta, “u taf int, kelma ġġib lill-oħra...”

Li kieku seta' dak il-ħin mhux il-ġewża t'għonqha biss kien jilwilha lil Pina!

“Aħna ġejna nitolbuk biex aħna wkoll niġu nqimu lill-allat fid-dar li bnejt int Totò,” tkellmet f'daqqa l-ġġajta, waqt li ħarbitlu l-ħsibijiet ħżiena kollha li kienu għaddejjin minn moħħu dwar Pina.

“Hallina nqimu għandek Totò! Nitolbuk!”

Totò m'għarafx iwegibhom. Aħjar jitkellem ma' Santuzza qabel ma jfattarha. Lill-ġġajta talabha terġa' tiġi l-għada u hu jkollu risposta. U mbaġħad, ippoppa tnejn sidru, zekzek tnejn u kemmex xufftejh: “Għax din mhix ħaġa li niddeċidiha jien, irrid qabelxejn nistaqsi lill-allat.”

Il-ġġajta stagħbet: Mela Totò jitkellem mal-allat fid-dar li bnielhom!

Santuzza ma tatux twegiba dik il-lejla, imma waqt li hu kien mitfugh hdejha jonħor m'għalqitx għajnejha m'għajnejha. Filgħodu sabha lesta għalih.

“Totò, din għalik hija opportunità! Int sirt il-lehen tal-allat!”

Totò ma twilidx ilbieraħ, kien jaf sew x’riedet tghidlu martu. Hekk ġara li d-dar tal-allat li bena Totò fuq idea ta’ martu Santuzza saret lok ta’ qima miftuħ għal kull min ried iqim fih u jhalli kontribuzzjoni ċkejnkna li tmur għaż-żamma tal-binja u ta’ Totò u niesu li issa ma kienx baqgħalhom hin li jrabbu l-bhejjem u jaħdmu l-art għaladarba kienu lkoll medhija jaqdu lill-allat. Għadda ftit żmien u l-allat riedu jkabbru. Totò wassal l-amar lin-nies u dlonk dawk l-aktar godlija u felhana fost l-irġiel intefgħu bi hgarhom iqattgħu l-blat u jongru u jbaqqnu biex id-dar tal-allat kibret l-ewwel bid-doppju u mbagħad bit-triplu u giet donnha forma ta’ werqa miftuħa fi tlieta. Totò ma baqax aktar miġbud man-nies; anzi kont tarah kullimkien jitkellem u jfisser x’qalulu l-allat dwar kull haġa li n-nies kienet tistaqsih dwarha.

Sakemm...

Kien hemm min beda jaħseb li bħalma l-allat kienu kellmu lil Totò hekk ukoll setgħu jkellmu lilhom jekk huma jibnulhom dar ohra, akbar u isbaħ minn dik ta’ Totò. Wara kollox, x’kellu Totò aħjar minnhom biex l-allat ikellmu lilu u mhux lilhom? Veru li Totò kien l-ewwel wiehed li bena d-dar lill-allat, imma kien veru wkoll li hu ggwadanja u kif. Għaliex m’għandhomx jiggwadanjaw huma wkoll? U hekk uħud f’dik l-ewwel komunità Maltija qatgħuha li jmorru għal rashom u jibnu d-dar tagħhom lill-allat, akbar u isbaħ minn ta’ Totò.

Meta Totò ra dan sibel bl-ikrah u widdeb lil dawk ir-ribelli li l-allat xejn ma kienu kuntenti. Imma r-ribelljoni ssuktat u ma’ kull ribelljoni tiġi l-arroganza u l-arroganza tkisser kull ċertezza li tkun inbniet.

“Aħna fejn nafu wara kollox li int veru titkellem mal-allat? Hadd qatt ma rak titkellem magħhom. Hadd ma jaf ma’ liema allat qed titkellem!”

Għal darb'ohra Totò fetah qalbu ma' Santuzza. Imma din id-darba kien ibnu l-kbir li tah twegiba.

L-għada filgħodu l-iben il-kbir ta' Totò tbiegħed mill-villagġ u rhielha għal għonq it-triq bla ma rah hadd. Ix-xemx telgħet u nizlet bosta drabi sakemm bin Totò reġa' lura fis-satra tal-lejl. Ma' tluġh ix-xemx Totò gabar lin-nies tal-villagġ. Habbrilhom li kien se jerħilha biex ifittex sinjal mibgħut mill-allat biex darb'għal dejjem inehhi kull dubju li seta' kien hemm dwar it-tahditiet li kellu magħhom. Miegħu ha xi erbat irġiel ohra biex ikunu xhieda ta' dak li seta' jigrri tul il-vjagġ.

Xi jiem wara wasal lura wieħed minn dawn l-irġiel.

“Terraqna tul l-irdumijiet, qalb hxejjex u ġo għerien, u rajna nħawi ta' din l-art li qatt qabel ma konna rajna. Imbagħad inżilna f'għar li fih jidhol il-baħar, fejn il-kurrenti jekk ma żżommx sew mal-blat jigbduk 'l isfel, u hemm sibna s-sinjal! Sibna xbieha li mid-daqs tagħha ħsibna mill-ewwel li setgħet kienet ta' waħda mill-allat...”

- “Imma l-allat hadd ma rahom, kif kontu tafu li hija xbieha ta' waħda minnhom?”

“Għax matul il-lejl smajna lil Totò jhewden u mbagħad qam fuq saqajh u nizel sa hdejn ix-xbieha u tkellem magħha, u dan kollu għamlu b'għajnejh għadhom magħluqin.”

- “U x-xbieha kellmitu lura?”

“Kellmitu ngħid! U l-vuċi tagħha dwiet mal-għar kollu, donnha l-hoss tan-nirien li fl-istaġun tal-ilma jigrri mas-smewwiet.”

- “U x'qalet? X'qalet il-vuċi lil Totò?”

“Biex iġorru x-xbieha u jgibuha hawn f'dan il-maqdes li bena Totò, għax l-allat iharsu b'għajn tajba lejn Totò.”

Meta Totò u l-irġiel l-ohra waslu lura l-villagġ ikaxkru fuq iz-zkuk ix-xbieha mastizza tal-alla li tkellmet ma' Totò, kulhadd deherlu li kienet tixbah ħafna lil Santuzza.

“Stajt m’ghamilthiex kopja perfetta t’ommok!” tmashan Totò ma’ ibnu l-kbir, meta kienu wahidhom f’darhom dik il-lejla. “Xejn xejn ma kontx taqsamli dahri biex kaxkarnieha s’hawn!”

Santuzza ghamlet tabirruħha ma semghetux. Kemm ilhom li l-allat bdew jtkellmu ma’ Totò għal xi raġuni hi bdiet tintefah ma’ kull jum li jgħaddi.

Bix-xbieha u mingħajrha r-ribelljoni baqgħet għaddejja. Jekk Totò kien ikkapparra wahda mill-allat, ir-ribelli setgħu jikkapparraw ohra, ehxen u aktar felhana minn dik ta’ Totò. Meta ntebah li l-maqdes il-ġdid se jkun akbar minn tiegħu, Totò sejjah lil dawk li kienu għadhom warajh u wriehom bix-xewqa tal-allat li jkomplu jkabbru u jsebbħu l-maqdes tagħhom. L-oħrajn malli ntebħu li Totò kien se jkompli jkabbar komplew ikabbru huma wkoll. Imma b’dak it-tkabbir kollu kienu meħtieġa aktar bennejja u naġġara. Mal-irġiel ingħaqdu n-nisa u ftit wara anke t-tfal.

Sadanittant, il-ħxejjex nixfu u l-uçuħ tal-art inħarqu, il-bhejjem bil-ġuħ għotru u x-xogħol beda sejjer lura. Wara l-istaġun tan-nixfa ġie mill-ġdid l-istaġun tal-ilma. Kien staġun qalil u d-djar, li hadd ma baqa’ jjeħu hsiebhom, ma felhux u ġgarrfu. In-nies ingabret fiż-żewġ imqades imma s-soqfa li kien għadhom mħumiex lesti ċedew taħt il-piż tal-ilmijiet u dakinhar mietu n-nies. Għalxejn it-talb lill-allat. Għalxejn Totò beka taħt saqajn il-mara ħoxna mqita xbihet Santuzza. In-nirien ġrew tul is-smewwiet. L-allat kienu rrabjati, qal xi hadd. Għandhom raġun ikunu rrabjati, haseb Totò. Bnejna dawn l-imqades għalihom u ħattejna djarna; ara issa fiex ġejna!

Dak il-hin tifqigħa kbira dwiet ma’ kull rokna tal-maqdes u mill-fetha tas-saqaf is-smewwiet xegħlu bi bjuda li tgħammex. Mat-treġhid ras l-alla Santuzza mielet. In-nies għattiet wiçċha, ma tafx x’tistenna.

Imbagħad it-twerżiqa, twila, taqta’ daqs ix-xfar taz-żnied dak is-skiet ta’ wara d-damdima mis-smewwiet.

In-nies neħhiet idejha minn ma' wiċċha. It-twerżiqa kienet ta' Santuzza, għarkopptejha ħdejn ġisem Totò, mgħaffeg mir-ras tal-ħaġar.

“Xi jridu jgħidulna l-allat b'din it-tabxa?” staqsew dawk li kienu miġbura hemm, mixgħufin b'dak li raw.

Bin Totò ftakar li xi jumejn qabel missieru ġibdu fil-ġenb u staqsieh kienx jaħseb li l-għonq tal-istatwa kien kemxejn irqajjaq wisq biex jiflah it-toqol tar-ras. Dakinhar bin Totò kien għoddu ha għalih; fejn qatt basar li kellu jkun missieru li jispicċa mgħaffeg taht it-toqol tal-iżball tiegħu!

2

It-Tieni Gwerra Punika Ittra lil Hasdrubal

Għażiż hija Hasdrubal, insellimlek u nibgħatlek il-barkiet tal-allat.

Qed niktiblek din l-ittra mill-belt ta' Ruma. Kif wasalt hawn hija storja kemxejn twila, li se nirrakkuntalek dalwaqt. Madankollu, m'iniex niktiblek biss biex ngħidlek li jien ninsab qawwi u shih u biex nistaqsi minghandek kif tinsabu int u qrabatna u ttarrafli x'inhu għaddej fuq il-gżira tagħna, imma wkoll biex ngħaddilek parir minn dak li tgħallimt kemm ilni hawn.

Din il-belt mhijiex kif qalulna li hi. In-nies t'hawnhekk mhumix barbari kif tgħallimna sa minn meta konna għadna tfal. Pjuttost għandhom ċiviltà matura u sofistkata, f'ċerti hwejjeg wisq aktar minn tagħna. Thabbilx moħħok, jien hawnhekk m'iniex ilsir. Interraq tul il-belt bniedem hieles, kif dejjem kont sa minn meta xiddejt il-qorq u tlaqt nivvjagġa bin-negozju. Qed ngħix tajjeb. L-ikel huwa bil-bosta u bnin. L-inbid, ikolli ngħid, huwa ifjen minn dak li tlajna bih aħna. Minn daqshekk żgur li m'għandix xi ngerger. Għandi wkoll negozju ċkejken għaddej, fid-

drappijiet; in-nies ta' Ruma, nisa u rġiel, għajnhom tikolhom kif jaraw biċċa drapp fina u ma jaħsbuhiex darbtejn biex idaħhlu jdejhom u johorġu flus tajba ħa jakkwistawha.

Imma għidli, x'inhu għaddej fil-gżira tagħna? Ninsab imħasseb għalik u għall-qraba tagħna. Hawnhekk qegħdin jgħidu li Tiberju Sempronju se jaħbat għall-gżira tagħna dalwaqt. Ara qis li ma tindax fejn ma jesgħekx, isma' minni. Jien rajtha l-flotta ta' Tiberju u nassigurak li mhux għaqli li gżiritna tiqafu. Tixrid ta' demm bla bżonn ikun, għax is-saħħa ta' Tiberju Sempronju qatt ma rajna bħalha qabel. Għażiż Hasdrubal, isma' minni, wissi lil sħabna biex jithabbu ma' Tiberju, għax Tiberju raġel ta' kelmtu u hanin, u lill-ħbieb tiegħu jaf iweżinhom sew. Dan nista' nahlef għalih jien.

Meta salpajna minn Malta kellna qalbna mimlija u hallejna l-port bl-inkantazzjoni tal-oraklu għadha tidwi f'widnejna, tamitna f'hoġor il-kbira Astarte. Biss, malli sibna ruħna f'nofs ta' baħar, it-temp inbaram f'daqqa, u dlonk inqbadna fl-ilmijiet. Ix-xita, ir-rih, il-baħar irid jiblagħna; issarajna bis-sħiħ biex insalvaw il-qluġh u nżommu fil-wiċċ. Tlabna fuq li tlabna, saħansitra qtilna żewġt ibċieċen biex kollox jgħaddi b'wiċċ il-ġid. Ma nafx ngħidlek kemm damet dik il-maltempata, imma damet sew, u anke jekk forsi ma damitx daqskemm ħsibna għalina donnha kienet eternità.

Tul it-tempesta tlifna erbat irġiel, fosthom lil Sidon. Il-baħar riedu għalih. Għalxejn ittantaajt indawwar il-habel madwar idejna biex ma jinħallx minni, il-mewġ baqa' jġebbed fih sa ma ħadu 'l isfel u belgħu. Għid lil martu li Sidon hallielha kaxxa bid-deheb li salvajnieha u se nibgħathielha minn Ruma.

Malli l-maltemp batta waqa' ċ-ċpar u wara ċ-ċpar it-temp fetax, imma ahna konna mitlufin. Minkejja t-taħbit tagħna biex insalvaw il-qluġh ma kienx irnexxielna u allura ntfajna naqdfu. Fit-tempesta

konna tlifna bosta mill-ikel u x-xorb li hadna magħna u għalhekk kien meħtieġ li nsibu l-art mill-aktar fis. Matul il-lejl ittanta jna naqraw il-mogħdija tal-kwiekeb, imma b'mod stramb hafna ma bdejniex naslu għall-mogħdija li konna fassalna qabel tlaqna. Nistqarr miegħek li hbatt niddispra, imma ma stajtx naqsam dan l-inkwiet mal-bqija tač-čorma u amart li nibqgħu naqdfu sakemm tagħtina saħhitna. Jumejn shaħ għamilna nduru f'čirku, mingħajr ma naslu mkien, bejn sema u ilma.

Sbieħ it-tielet jum fix-xefaq ilmaħna xi iġfna resqin lejna. Ma domniex wisq ma ntbaħna li kienu iġfna Rumani. Uħud mič-čorma riedu jaqdfu lil hinn, imma neqsin mill-ikel u l-ilma u saħhitna mherrija bil-kedda li tatna l-maltempata, kienet tkun battikata inutli li nittantaw naħarbu. Ġbart lin-nies fuq il-gverta u amartilhom biex la nintlaħqu mir-Rumani ma noffrux rezistenza, anzi, bil-maqlub, ingibu ruħna tajjeb u b'mod servili. L-importanti dak il-ħin kien li ngħixu.

Kienu tmien iġfna b'kollox, imma wiehed biss baqa' ġej iross magħna. Staqsewna min aħna u x'kien hadna lejn dawk l-inħawi. Tkellimt jien. 'Sinjur, nistqarr miegħek li ma nafx fejn ninsabu. Konna qegħdin inbaħħru biex inbigħu l-merča tagħna, imma qamet tempesta qalila u tlifna kollox, sal-ikel u l-ilma li ġibna magħna. Tul il-lejl ipprovajna naqraw il-mogħdija tal-kwiekeb, imma s-smewwiet ma wrewna xejn. Ma nafux fejn qegħdin u għandna bżonn l-għajjnuna.' Bla dubju li minn kliemi għarfuni li kont ġej minn art Kartaginiża u qabel ma wegħbuni lura rajthom igedwdu f'widnejn xulxin. 'Għandkom armi abbord?' staqsewni. 'Aħna merkanti sinjur, m'għandniex armi,' wegħibtu. Imbagħad tefgħu l-ħbula u niżlu čorma minnhom u wara li daru mal-ġifen kollu u raw li dak li kont għedtilhom kien kollu minnu offrew li jirmunkawna sal-eqreb port. In-nies tagħna ħarsu lejja b'għajnejhom mimlija biza', imma

jien tajthom sinjal biex joqogħdu bi kwiethom u jhallu lir-Rumani jirmunkawna wara l-ġifen tagħhom.

Meta ħabat jaqa' d-dlam ir-Rumani nizzlu dgħajsa u ġew mill-ġdid mal-ġifen tagħna. Magħhom ġabu l-ikel u x-xorb għal kulhadd. Fosthom kien hemm ukoll dak li jien sħajjilt li kien il-kaptan tal-ġifen; minn ilbiesu kien jidher li l-istatura tiegħu kienet aktar għolja minn tal-bqija. Minkejja li wiċċu kien donnu minqux fl-irħam, u għajnejh imberrqa kienu jagħtuh bixra żorra, il-manjieri tiegħu kienu distinti, il-vuċi tiegħu baxxa, u miegħi b'mod partikolari wera kortesija kbira. Talabni biex nieklu flimkien u matul l-ikla wera interess kbir fil-gżira tagħna. Kemm-il darba serrahli moħhi li huma ma kellhomx intenzjonijiet ħżiena lejna u li ladarba naslu l-port kienu se jhalluna nitilqu hielsa biex naqbd u triqitna lura d-dar.

Malli l-kaptan telaq minn fuq il-ġifen tagħna waslet dgħajsa oħra. Fuqha kien hemm ġuvnott, li żgur ma rax għaxart isjuġ, għarwien ħuta, midluk biż-żjut irejhu u fuq rasu mpoġġija girlanda magħmula mir-rand. Miegħu kien hemm xi sitt suldati li tellgħuh fuq il-ġifen u baqgħu hemm magħna. Iċ-ċorma tagħna ma kinux jafu x'se jaqbd u jagħmlu bih u kien hemm min minnhom ħaseb li r-Rumani riedu jinsultawna b'dak il-ġest. Jien, li kont diġà tgħallimt xi haġa dwar id-drawwiet Rumani tul il-vjaġġi tiegħi, fhimt mill-ewwel li dak il-ġuvnott kien rigal ċkejken min-naħa tal-kaptan biex bħal jurina li konna l-mistednin tiegħu. Erbgħa miċ-ċorma għollew lehinhom li kien imissna niffrustaw lit-tfajjel u nibagħtuh lura lill-kaptan biex nuruh li ma konniex se ninxtraw bid-drawwiet żienja tagħhom u li, anke jekk salvawlna ħajjitna, aħna konna se nibqgħu fidili lejn Kartagħni u l-allat tagħha. Malli r-Rumani rawna nilletikaw bejnietna kienu pronti middeu idejhom fuq il-manku tax-xwabel tagħhom jistennew biex jaraw konniex se nqajmu xi rewwixta. Malli rajt hekk,

amart minnufih li dawk l-erbgha li għollew lehinhom jingħataw għaxar frustati kull wiehed u dlonk għbidt lit-tfajjel fil-kabina tiegħi. Qabel inżilt tajt sinjal lill-oħrajn biex il-frustati ma jkunux qawwija; wara kollox ma ridtx nikkastiga lil niesi talli kienu leali lejn nisilhom u l-allat li jħarsuhom, imma tifhem għaziż hija, li fil-ħajja anke l-lealtà għandha hinha u waqtha, u dak il-hin, kif konna f'idejn l-għedewwa tagħna, ma kienx il-waqt tal-ideali għoljin imma tal-pratticità. Fuq kollox ahna minn dejjem konna nies prattici, nies tad-dinja, li jafu kif imorru dawn l-affarijiet.

Kif niżżilt lit-tfajjel fil-kabina kont pront ferrajtlu tazza nbid u ħawwartlu platt minn dak li kien baqa'. Hallejtu jiekol u jien sadanittant dawwart ix-xbieha ta' Astarte biex ma tarax dak li kont se nagħmel. Kif it-tifel kiel qajjimtu minn postu u għamilt użu minnu kif kienet ix-xewqa tal-kaptan. Kif lestejt sibt l-aħjar pezza drapp milli kien għad fadal mill-merċa tagħna u dawwartha mat-tfajjel biex jeħodha lill-kaptan.

L-għada filgħodu l-kaptan baġhat għalija fuq il-gifen tiegħu. Il-kelma kienet waslitlu dwar x'gara fuq il-gifen tagħna u kien jidher kuntent bil-mod li bih mexxejt il-facenda kollha. Stedinni għall-ikel u tarrafla li sa tmiem il-jum konna se naslu fil-port ta' Tarentum. Kien dak il-hin li stqarrejt mal-kaptan li, filwaqt li tkellimna fit-tul, kien għadu ma tarraffix ismu. Jien jisimni Tiberju Sempronju Longo, qalli. Il-bniedem li kelli quddiemu ma kien hadd għajr il-general magħruf u konslu Ruman, l-għadu mahluf ta' Hannibal Barka. Dak il-hin hassejt għisimni jirtogħod u nżilt għarkopptejja quddiemu nitolbu ħniena u mahfra jekk inqastu b'xi mod. Hu qam minn postu, miel u gabarni 'l fuq. 'M'għandekx għal xiex tibza,' qalli, 'jien kelmti nżommha dejjem. Kif naslu ċ-ċorma tiegħek se jkun jistgħu jitolbu lejn darhom bil-kwiet. Lilek, imma, nixtieqek tibqa' miegħi, dejjem jekk trid int. Għandi bżonn bniedem bħalek.

Ejja miegħi Ruma, jekk jogħġbok ibqa', jekk le erga' lura lejn artek.'

Għażiż hija, Tiberju Sempronju żamm kelmtu. Malli wasalna Tarentum il-ġifen tagħna dahal għat-tiswiġa u din l-ittra se tkun qieghda tasallek mal-bqija taċ-ċorma u l-flus kollha li kieku konna ndaħħlu mill-merċa li kieku ma ntilfitx fit-tempesta - spiża mhallsa mis-senat Ruman.

Sadanittant jien bqajt ma' Tiberju Sempronju u sirt nafu aħjar. Tiberju huwa rispettat hafna hawn f'Ruma. Huwa bniedem kuraġġuż u astut. Bniedem kawt u metikoluż. Imma wkoll bniedem hanin u ġust. Xi jiem ilu għajjatli u qalli: 'Adohnes, iċ-ċorma tiegħek dalwaqt titlaq lura lejn il-gżira li ġejtu minnha. Jekk tixtieq titlaq lura magħhom inti hieles li titlaq. Jekk trid tibqa', dari hija darek. Kemm ilek hawn urejtni lealtà shiħa u hbiberija sinciera.' Imbagħad għamilli sinjal biex inpoġġi bilqieghda.

'Kun af li s-senat amar li tithejja flotta li se taħbat għall-gżira tagħkom. Issa li Ruma ħakmet l-aktar portijiet importanti ta' Sicilja ma nistgħux inhallu li l-portijiet tagħkom jagħtu kenn lill-flotta Kartaginiża. Ħabib, isma' minni, ibgħat wissi lil niesek issa. Għidilhom biex f'din il-battalja jagħmlu għażliet għaqlija. Ruma taf thallas tajjeb lill-ħbieb tagħha. Kemm ilni nafek dejjem kont bniedem Prattiku. Nittama li niesek huma tal-istess qatgħa tiegħek.'

Meta smajt hekk inxthitt għarkopptejja quddiemu u bistlu idu. Irringrazzajt talli fdani daqstant bil-pjanijiet tiegħu biex inkun nista' ntarraf b'dan lil qrabati u nsalvalhom hajjithom. Malli tlaqt minn hdejh bdejt niktiblek din l-ittra.

Tiberju Sempronju għandu raġun. Ġej żmien li fih irridu nagħmlu għażliet għaqlija. Int taf sew li l-Kartaginiżi, filwaqt li jagħmlu hafna negozju magħna, ma tantx jafdawna. Kemm-il darba dawru l-iġfna tagħhom lejn il-portijiet tat-Tramuntana biex ma jkollhomx għal xiex jaqsmu magħna! Ir-Rumani,

min-naħa l-oħra, iridu jidhlu shab magħna. Il-firxa tal-imperu tagħhom tibqa' tiela' lejn il-Gallja fit-Tramuntana u tasal lil hinn mill-bliet Griegi fil-Lvant. Għandhom il-flus xi jroxxu u minbarra għajn għannegozju għandhom ukoll armati b'saħħithom, lesti li jiġġieldu sal-aħħar qatra demm u għatxanin għall-konkwisti. Il-futur qiegħed f'Ruma. L-aħbarijiet li qegħdin jaslu hawn dwar Hannibal xejn mhuma sbieħ. Jidher li, filwaqt li hu qed jitqabad fil-muntanji ta' Iberja, f'Kartagni diġà hemm min qed jikkonfokka kontriħ. Fl-istess waqt, Tiberju Sempronju u sieħbu l-konslu l-ieħor Xipjun igawdu l-fiduċja tal-poplu u tas-senat, li prattikament huwa l-miġemgħa li tirrorpreżenta l-familji għonja u setgħana kollha ta' Ruma. Qed ngħidlek dan kollu biex titkellem ma' min għandek titkellem u tiftaħ għajnejn min għandek tiftaħ.

Naf li int bniedem rasek fuq għonqok, imma naf ukoll kemm int bniedem tar-ruħ u devot lejn l-allat tiegħek. Bir-raġun. X'inhu l-bniedem mingħajr l-allat tiegħu? Huma jagħmluh, jagħgnuh u jmexxuh tul ħajtu kollha. Huma jifthulu l-bibien għall-ħajja ta' wara. Kemm ilni hawn tgħallimt aktar dwar l-allat tar-Rumani: dawn l-allat mhumiex bħal Astarte, mhumiex għajjura u magħhom tista' tinnegozja. Osservajt kemm ilni hawn li meta r-Rumani jridu xi ħaġasseħħimorru għand l-allat tagħhom u jidilkuhom biż-żjut u jagħtuhom l-ikel u jagħmlulhom wegħdiet żgħar li mbagħad iwettquhom jekk l-allat jisimghu t-talbiet tagħhom. Saħansitra biex jifthulhom il-bibien għall-ħajja ta' wara, lill-allat ta' isfel iħallulhom il-flus fil-qabar tal-għeżiež tagħhom. Ma' dawn l-allat aħna mmorru minn fuq, ma jkun jonqosna xejn, għax dawn allat li nistgħu ninnegozjaw magħhom. M'Astarte ma tinnegozjax. Astarte titlob biss qima u sottomissjoni.

Issa naf li se tgħidli li wara kollox dak li ksibna ksibnieħ bil-barka u l-ħniena ta' Astarte u ebda alla

iehor, u jkollok raġun. Imma jekk nista' nagħtik parir, qatt tagħlaq bibien, lanqas mal-allat. U iva, jaf ma jkunx għaqli li nabbandunaw lil Astarte għalkollox, għax fl-aħħar mill-aħħar lanqas irriduha li tishitna u taħdem kontra tagħna. Imma, għażiż hija, hemm mod kif dil-biċċa tista' ddu magħha. Dawn ir-Rumani, għax bħalna għandhom hafna għaqal u maqtugħin għan-negozju daqsna, fit-tempju tagħhom jilqgħu l-allat kollha tal-popli li jiffurmaw l-imperu u jagħmluhom b'tagħhom. Dak ikun ifisser li aħna nkunu nistgħu nibqgħu naduraw lil Astarte filwaqt li ninnegozjaw mal-allat Rumani wkoll. Nisthajlek tgħidli, imma Astarte, għajjura kif inhi, ma tisbilx għalina quddiem dan it-tradiment? Għażiż hija, jien nghidlek li l-għira hija biss ta' min jibqa' barra - għadarba Astarte ssib postha fil-panteon tal-allat Rumani, l-għira tgħaddilha kollha. Anke l-allat għandhom il-passa tagħhom, u bħalma kull civiltà titwieled, tikber u twarrad biex imbagħhad tidbiel u tintilef fit-trabijiet tal-art, hekk ukoll l-allat tagħha. Hekk għad jiġrilha Kartagni, u fuq il-fdalijiet tagħha se tkompli tikber Ruma; Astarte tibqa' tafhulna jekk inkunu aħna li ndaħhluha fil-panteon tal-allat ta' dan l-imperu li għandu ġejjieni quddiemu. Għalhekk, uża dehnek u sejjah lil niesna biex huma wkoll ikunu għaqlin, u thabbej ma' Ruma u l-allat tagħha, filwaqt li ibqa' zomm lil Astarte qribek - ma tafx għada pitgħada lil liema alla tista' tiġi b'zonn!

Qabel nagħlaq, halli nagħtik ukoll aħbar oħra. Mal-qamar il-gdid se nkun qed nizzewweg. Tiberju Sempronju laqqagħni man-neputija tiegħu, tfajla mill-isbah u l-familja tagħha għanja u stabbilita sew f'Ruma. Missierha wegħedna villa f'Ardea, lok fil-kampanja kemxejn barra minn Ruma, imma l-art fertili u r-raba' jagħmel id-dwieli u mogħni b'bosta sigar taż-żebbuġ. Din ir-rabta tiegħi mal-familja ta' Tiberju Sempronju fiha bosta vantagġi, kif m'għandix dubju li qed tintebaħ mingħajr il-htieġa li nidhol

f'wisq dettalji; vantaġġi li minnhom tista' tiggwadanja int ukoll, kif ukoll martek, uliedek u dawk li għad iridu jitwiieldu.

Nibgħat inselli għalik u jekk l-allat iridu niltaqgħu ma ndumux. Forsi niltaqgħu mill-ġdid fuq art twelidna meta niġi mal-flotta ta' Tiberju u l-laqgħa tagħna tkun waħda ta' ferħ u paċi.

Ħuk, Adohnes, lill-għażiż Hasdrubal.

3

Żmien ir-Rumani Pupull jikkonverti lill-Maltin

60 W.K. Data li ma tistax tinsieha.

Kont għadek bilkemm missejt l-għatba tal-iskola li ma sammruhilekx f'moħħok, 60 W.K., sena importanti li bidlet għal dejjem l-istorja ta' Malta. U biex żgur iżommulek il-memorja friska ta' kull sena kienu jfakkruhielek: daqqa waqt il-lezzjoni tal-Malti, daqqa waqt tar-Reliġjon, jew l-Istudji Soċjali, saħansitra waqt il-Matematika kienu jinfilawlek taht skuża jew ohra dik id-data ta' importanza tremenda. *Jekk San Pawl ġie Malta fis-sena 60 W.K. u Kristu miet fis-sena 33 W.K.* (minkejja li hija illogika għall-aħħar li xi hadd jgħix tul iż-żmien li suppost ġie warajh) *mela kemm għadda żmien minn wara li miet Kristu sa meta San Pawl ġie Malta? 60-33= ...*

Tant dik id-data daħlitlek f'moħħok, tant sammruhielek 'il ġewwa, li żgur qatt ma ħsibt jekk fil-fatt il-ġrajja sehhitx kif twasslitlek minn għalliema varji tal-iskola u d-duttrina. Ibda minn fatt singulari, li aktarx qatt ma ħsibt dwaru. Mela Sawlu minn Tarsu, magħruf ukoll bħala Pawlu jew San Pawl jew mar-Rabtin Ġuzeppini (b'laqta kemxejn razzista)

“dak l-iswed”, kien jeċċella f’żewġ oqsma partikolari: l-ivvjagġar u l-kitba tal-ittri, żewġ affarijiet li dan Pawlu rnexxielu jżewwiġhom flimkien b’hila partikolari. Ġeneralment l-ewwel kien iżur post u mbagħad wara, biex bhal speċi ma jinsewhx, kien jiktbilhom daqsxejn ta’ ittra mimlija pariri siewja u tagħlim Nisrani. Żar Korintu u kiteb ittra lill-Korintin. Għal waħda tnejn. Mar Efesu, kiteb lill-Efesin. Mar ikla gala u kiteb lill-Galatin. U lill-Maltin?

Xejn. Lanqas biċċa postcard jgħidilhom ‘Wasalt Ruma qawwi u sħiħ’ jew ‘Grazzi tas-soġġorn’. Xejn.

Fil-verità t-tort mhuwiex ta’ San Pawl.

Din tan-nawfragju hija biċċa ta’ tabxa ta’ ċertu wieħed Pupull, Malti ta’ nisel Grieg, magħruf sew fi żmien bħala raġel ħajjen u imbrolljun.

Kien proprju minħabba imbroll li Pupull spiċċa jiġġerra mat-toroq ta’ Ruma. Dan Pupull kien ħabib sew tal-gvernatur Ruman f’Malta, Luċju Sistu, sakemm Pupull daħħlu f’waħda tinkiteb u kellu jizgiċċa ’l bogħod mill-gżira biex jeħles mill-qilla ta’ Luċju li halef li jithallas tal-gażiba li wikkielu. Dak iż-żmien Ruma kienet iċ-ċentru tad-dinja; kull triq kienet tagħti għal Ruma, u triqet Pupull, bħal ta’ ħafna oħrajn, wasslitu proprju hemm, fil-qalba tal-Imperu.

Pupull tgħallem kmieni f’ħajtu li meta tkun bla flus trid tagħmel il-ħbieb u f’qasir żmien tħabbeb ma’ ħafna nies. Plebej u patrizji, barbari u skjavi, fid-dinja ma tafx min tiġi bżonn. Il-ħbiberiji li għamel Pupull wassluh sas-salott ta’ bint l-Imperatur, imma dawk li spiss kienu jitingħuh filgħaxija kienu l-membri ta’ setta ġdida li kienet tqim lil ċertu Ġesù, profeta mill-Palestina li kien sejjah lilu nnifsu l-iben ta’ Alla. Ir-Rumani kienu sallbuh mat-tletin sena qabel fuq xamma ta’ ribelljoni li, f’dawk l-inħawi mqanqla tal-Imperu, kienu soltu jitqanqlu mqar fuq kelma jew suspett. Is-segwaċi ta’ Ġesù, li huma kienu jsejnhulu Kristu, kienu magħruffin bħala ‘Insara’ u kont issib

minnhom fost kull klassi tas-soċjetà Rumana. Dawn l-Insara kienu jgħixu bit-twemmin li trid titma' lil min ikun bil-ġuħ u tagħti dejr lil min ikun bla saqaf. Pupull malajr għaraf japprofitta ruħu minn dan l-ispirtu ta' karità, u sakemm dam Ruma qatt ma sab ruħu b'zaqqu vojta jew inkella raqad għall-beraħ. Pupull ma kienx iblah u sal-għaxra kien jaf jgħoddom sew. Malajr intebaħ li l-Insara, għad li ufficjalment ippersegwitati mill-awtoritajiet governattivi, kienu midhla sew ta' whud mill-membri tal-familja rjali u fosthom kien hemm ġenerali tal-armata Imperjali, senaturi u saħansitra mħallfin. Pupull ma damx ma sar konvint li ż-żmien kien l-aqwa alleat tal-Insara u fil-gejjieni qrib l-alla tagħhom għad jiknes lill-allat l-oħrajn kollha 'l barra mill-konfini tal-Imperu.

Kien fid-dar ta' wiehed minn dawn l-Insara li lil Pupull laqqgħuh ma' Luqa. Qalulu li dan ir-raġel, b'leħja bajda silġ u ġilda maħruqa bix-xemx, kien tabib Grieg. Biex jinħabb miegħu Pupull fissirlu b'reqqa kbira kif anke l-għerūq tiegħu kienu mħawlin fil-ħamrija taċ-ċiviltà Ellenika u kif familtu sa mill-ibgħad żminijiet kienet fost l-ewlenin li harsu l-valuri ta' dik iċ-ċiviltà kontra t-theddida tat-terror Persjan. Luqa semgħu b'paċenzja kbira. Imbagħad xi hadd minn ta' madwar il-mejda semma l-ġabra li kien qed idomm Luqa tal-ġrajjet li għaddew minnhom id-dixxipli ta' Ġesù. Pupull waqqaf widnejh u, għalkemm Luqa ma tantx deher wisq f'aptitu li jitkellem, Pupull baqa' jiffittah, jistad għad-dettalji, sakemm Luqa beda bit-tlikki tlikki jisqih rakkonti ċkejknin minn dak li kien qed jikteb.

Pupull ma tantx tqanqal b'dak li kien qed jikteb Luqa... mhux li eżattament kellu materjal ta' bestseller... sakemm...

“Bħalissa qed nikteb l-istorja tan-nawfragju...”

Fl-aħhar! Ġejja storja li ċcaqlaq ftit l-ilmijiet, haseb Pupull, filwaqt li fuq xofftejh xirfet tbissima m qarba.

1

Toto discovers Malta

One of the problems that has intrigued archaeologists is the concentration of prehistoric temples on such small islands. Many theories have been put forward. The author takes a tongue-in-cheek look at this issue, but with a twist. Because one Maltese characteristic is to keep splitting into smaller units. Therefore, a village might have two feasts, two band clubs, two political clubs, another club (sometimes two) in charge of festive street decorations and one or two fireworks clubs. The other question that has attracted attention is where did the first inhabitants of these islands come from? But read on. You'll find many answers, at least ones that 'explain' present characteristics.

The history of the Maltese people is interwoven with the history of their isles. Any attempt at understanding these people must depart from that premise. That is quite simple. But the Maltese now are not the same as their forebears of three hundred, a thousand, ten thousand years ago. And that is quite complicated. For the sake of simplicity therefore, allow me to begin at the beginning.

The question is: Who was the first Maltese person? Now that is a complex question. Logically, it

should be the one who called these rocks by name, shouldn't it? But in the absence of that knowledge, we have to attribute this honour to the one who stumbled upon the islands and decided to inhabit them. That verb 'inhabit', rather than 'live', is not an idle choice. Inhabiting implies populating, so the action of living begs for another action: that of reproducing. In short, the first Maltese were two or more, and the plan was to start a new generation of Maltese who would, in turn, keep on generating. You get my drift.

The first Maltese came from Sicily. There – a simple answer on which luckily all scholars, bearded and non, agree. And it's easy to postulate – to use a word favoured by these same scholars – it's easy to postulate how things might have happened. We are in the Stone Age and a small group of men are tending their herd. One man seems to be quite angry.

"I tell you I've had enough. Stop gurgling that milk. Listen. Every solstice, the leader has to have one of my goats. I won't stand it any longer".

"Toto," the rest whimpered in chorus. "Guard your tongue. You might end up soundly thumped." And they glanced furtively around as they wiped white froth from scraggy beards.

"Soundly thumped? Soundly thumped, they say! And why, may I ask? By what right does our leader take two goats per year? And what do I get in return?" It was supposed to be a rhetorical question, but the men had never met one, so they threw the tribe's reply, "Ah Toto, the leader protects us from the Others."

But Toto could not remember any 'others', friendly or hostile. The only hostilities came from the leader's own men: scroungers who drank milk without shepherding, defilers who ravished daughters without settling, and hoodlums who took hovels without building. All the tribe had had

enough, but none dared voice their feelings. Fear is the best gag.

Toto dared to voice it. One summer evening, when the sun is reluctant to set and hovers behind the hills, painting the sky in hues of embers, two shadows expressed their disapproval. We did say it was the Stone Age, and their arguments were made of stone. Toto woke up floating on a raft, every inch of his body crying in pain and the sun beating it some more for good measure. He wanted to cry, but he lacked the tears to dissolve the swollen saltcakes hiding his eyes. His head throbbed with the merciless sun and even more merciless trouncing it had received. As his beaten body drifted aimlessly on the raft, his mind followed suit and abandoning himself to Fate, he fell asleep. Snores escaped his parched lips (We have no record of what he dreamt about, but perhaps it was here that the Maltese *fira*, that oil-soaked flat bread with tomatoes and capers and hints of anchovies and garlic, was anachronistically born).

Toto's dream shuddered to a halt. He blinked to consciousness, terrified that another beating awaited. Still hazy, Toto was sure of two things: his swollen head still danced, but the raft didn't. Gingerly, he opened his eyes and tentatively stretched his bruised limbs. His body creaked in protest and here we can say with a certain authority that this was when the first blasphemous obscenity echoed on the Maltese Islands.

Toto spent his first days in a cave. In its darkness, his bruised body and beaten ego slowly healed until he felt brave enough to wander forth and explore this land that Fortune had thrown him upon. It was a strange land where all things seemed smaller. There was a valley close by with a gurgling stream that eased his thirst. It was a hot land where scraps of trees gave scraps of shade.

But in its raggedness, it was a kind land. Toto

formed this opinion as he munched his way through a rabbit he had caught. And what keeps me from going back, bringing my family and settling here? Our land, no leaders, no hoodlums, no woes and troubles! The dream quickly morphed into a plan. Toto was that sort of man. Once his mind was set, the north-easterly wind wouldn't sway him. And so, one day the sun shone on another raft, one that could take ten people and some supplies. Toto was stubborn but not impulsive. He observed the currents and the wind for some time before he dared to venture out to sea.

The Augurs smiled. It was night when his rude craft hit the coast of his homeland. No moon betrayed his movements as he crept along the dozy hamlet, as the oil lamps winked their last light in the sleeping hovels. The neighbours had just retired. When his wife saw him, she shrieked in disbelief. Toto's hand quickly clasped her mouth shut but was too slow to grasp the shriek. Too late! The curiosity of well-meaning neighbours rattled their door and voices filled the air: "Is all well, Santuccia?" they clamoured, shaking the stillness of the night. Toto bit his tongue to control the colourful obscenities that came to mind. He didn't want to get on the wrong side of the gods' mood. A sea voyage awaited. Meanwhile the rattling on the door changed to banging. Santuccia had to come out and put their mind at rest. "A dream, just a bad dream," she mumbled.

The neighbours sympathised. "Poor woman," they commiserated. "Toto should have kept his mouth shut." They passed judgment with the air of someone who knows everything. What they didn't know was that Santuccia was soon to board a still wet raft, along with her three children, two goats and one dog. And Toto was sure that the blanket of the night had hidden them from prying eyes. At least, that's what he hoped.

"It's like a garden," Toto replied to his wife's

questions. “However, what’s most important is that we don’t owe anything to anybody; Yes, there is food; No, it’s not that far; Yes, I know the way; Yes, there is a sun; Yes, it rains; No there are no monsters ...,” and on and on, till it dawned on Toto that this had been his greatest mistake. *‘Why, oh why, had he gone back for her?’* His temper fumed and, for two days and three nights, he toyed with the idea of breaking her head against the raft. But, instead, it was the last dawn of the voyage that broke for, on the third day, the island appeared, like a pink cloud floating on a deep blue sky.

Things were pleasant at first. Toto built a hut. The grey malformed stone was initially daunting, but soon he got the knack of using the ungainly shape to fit the stones snugly together. He even managed to leave a gap as a window, facing the sea. Fish were plentiful if one ventured further out and Santuccia knew which herbs to pick to make mouths water. The children explored the hills and molested the gullible fauna that knew not the heavy hand of Sapiens. Then one evening...

“Toto, I wonder...,” Santuccia left the sentence unfinished, hanging in mid-air, and Toto knew it did not bode well.

“Toto, sometimes I wonder if we should return,” she muttered at last, when Toto’s silence was louder than anything he could have said.

Toto felt like the gods had united their many hands and slapped him collectively in the face. This island had everything except oppression and, apparently, Santuccia was missing it.

“I have nobody to talk to, Toto,” she moaned plaintively. “I cook alone, I tidy the hut alone and then we sleep... alone.”

“That’s untrue!” he yelped. “We share the covers and you know it”.

“We share a bed, but not a life, Toto. You have to

fish all day to feed everyone. By the time you finish your plate, you nod off. And anyway, you're a man," said Santuccia, as if being a man was the worst crime one could commit. "What if...?"

This time there was no long silence. "What if what?" he blurted.

"What if we bring my Ma, here, with us?"

Toto steadied himself against the wall. His generous eyebrows knitted together, a sure sign he was either thinking, or losing it.

"Santuccia, my own heart, your mother is too old for a rough sea voyage. We don't want to hasten her death bobbing on a raft. You're not thinking straight, Santucc."

The woman didn't like the answer and continued to turn the sizzling fish, muttering beneath her breath. Toto felt he had scored a victory. He went out, gazed upon his island and scratched the pelt that adorned his chest. He took a deep breath, "My air!" he congratulated himself.

The victory was short-lived. One strange morning, the children ran to the hut shouting that they had seen a raft on the horizon. Toto picked up his hefty stick, warmed up for the possible fray with a wild oath and swaggered to the beach. He would defend his land even if he had to paint the sand red.

"Ah, Toto! Toto!"

Could it be? Were his eyes playing tricks?

He heard his name again.

It was Santuccia's fault. It had been that night he had risked life and limb to bring her here. That night when her scream woke up the neighbours, and they came, like ticks to a dog. She hadn't fooled anyone with her bad-dream act. All had gone back home, fear overcoming curiosity. But the most inquisitive one of them all had tarried awhile. And when the village yawned and settled back to bed, his tenacity was repaid with interest, for out emerged the Toto

family, crouching from shade to shade till on the shore they drew a raft from the tangled reeds. The curious eyes had followed them until raft and all were swallowed by the darkness.

And now here was Pino, gasping for breath on his land. There was also his wife Pina, their five children and some plump goats that Toto could not remember as part of Pino's majestic herd of two.

"The sea was rough, Toto," panted Pino. "It broke my back to row this raft and pull it ashore."

"Pina!" screamed Santuccia with unfeigned joy. They hugged and kissed and skipped like little girls. Not so, Toto!

Toto didn't want anyone on his island. It's not that he hated Pino. Granted, the man was a gossip and meddlesome but he wasn't dangerous. But yet, he had disturbed this little paradise of his. This was his land, given to him by the gods after the hammering he had received.

"But Toto, listen to me for once," Santuccia pleaded after the Pinos had been helped to settle in a makeshift hut. "They're not a bad lot. Their hearts are in the right place. And there's another thing you seem to be blind to."

Toto pricked his ears 'What now?'

"Our children are growing fast, Toto. Mother Earth will have her way, and as we did, so will they."

Toto knew his wife was right. He mumbled some excuse and took his thoughts to the cliffs. The sun had already hidden behind the hill when he returned. The two families sat beside one fire, curling their mouths in smiles around the food the land had given.

"You worry me sometimes, Toto, away all day," Santuccia said. Toto nodded but gave no answer. He beckoned Pino. He rose in a man-to-man understanding. They whispered visibly but not audibly.

Next morning the men gathered their families. Toto called for his ugliest daughter, the one who looked nothing like any one of them, except for her moustache, which was definitely Toto's. Pino called for the eldest, and most beautiful, of his sons. He was built like a cliff-face and his eyes robbed the stars of their twinkle. Still, his face was doleful when he saw his bride-to-be, but the smile he bore the morning after sang another song. And the alliance of the two families was thus sealed.

Sure enough, a few days before the summer solstice, the first homegrown islander was born. As would happen again and again, every year for many years. Toto learnt that, behind her moustache, his daughter had a hidden talent, albeit very well hidden indeed, but proof was in the children she kept bearing.

There was another thing he learnt. Dreams do not last. And Toto's dream ended when raft after raft kept piling up on the coast, beneath his window. He learnt as well that man can never escape from his circumstances. He can travel far, but his invisible baggage he will carry with him, even unto the edge of the Earth. Toto was not a man of wisdom, and all this sudden learning confused him.

The rains had failed in Sicily and a cruel drought had brought famine upon the land. The villagers where Toto had dwelt recalled his plight, and a myth was born. Toto had found a land where milk and honey flowed from rocks. The myth became a dream, the dream a wish, the wish a plan. After all, he must be ever so lonely there, with long-tongued Santuccia, and that gossip Pino, who apparently could neither count nor recognise his own goats. Hunger is a very persuasive argument. In times of need, those who have should share with those who don't. Toto had. They didn't.

Toto welcomed them as a cornered rat welcomes

a ferret. Had he the power, he would have pushed them all back out to sea. But there is no arguing with numbers. Him not being much of a diplomat, it did not take long for the newcomers to realise that Toto was not exactly chuffed with their presence. They built their hovels at a distance. There is strength in cooperation, and their haphazard huts soon became a tidy village, with wells and stables and pockets of well-tended fields. Toto peered with jealousy from behind his makeshift cane curtain, watching the village taking shape with alarming speed.

“At this rate, we’ll end up on the raft again,” Toto used to grumble on a daily basis. “We have to do something about it. This land can’t support this many people. And there’s more of them than there is of us. One hothead is all it takes, and we’ll either be bobbing on a raft or feeding the fish. They came uninvited, like ghosts from the troubled past, and took our island. Our home!”

Santuccia had got used to his incessant griping, but deep down inside she knew he was right. She too was afraid. She had been looking forward to the future. Now the future was uncertain, and what remained were memories from the past. Something had to be done. A short distance away, the newcomers had built an altar, on which they left offerings to appease the gods. Santuccia felt that that rudimentary table had something to say. By evening, the message was clear, and it was a sun-scorched, wild-eyed Santuccia that tore through Toto’s thoughts like flint through butter.

“Toto. Hear me. The gods have been good. You were beaten, left for dead on a raft, crossed the sea three times and the gods protected you. True?”

True.

“Then listen to me. If we want to continue basking in the favour of the gods, we have to show them a sign, a token of our appreciation. Sometimes

gods are like children, Toto ...,” continuing, as she lowered her voice, “... easily offended, easily appeased.” She smiled.

Toto agreed. But what was she up to?

“I was wondering, what if we built a whole house for the gods? They built a table. We will build a whole house. And the gods will come and live in it. They will be our neighbours. And the gods will forsake the newcomers, who scoffed your dream then reaped its fruits. We must have the gods on our side, to protect our land, our Ma!”

Toto was speechless. Why had it never crossed his mind! The wife was right. Build a house for the gods, and the gods would be theirs, not the others’, and with the gods on your side, who needs more allies?

“We will build them a larger and more beautiful house than ours. One fit for the gods.” Toto envisaged a temple of massive stones, one that stood up and caught the morning, one that could be seen from the farthest corners of this island.

Next day, the sun rose on a sort of council of war. Toto gathered his and Pimo’s families and expounded his plan.

Work started immediately, if not sooner. The women took over all the work of tending the fields and herds along with their usual duties. The men hewed stones from living rock, each megalith the size of three men. Day and night they toiled, till the unceasing music of singing flint became a hymn of praise in itself. They rolled the dressed stones over tree trunks to the designated place where the sun rose. A hole prepared beforehand swallowed a third of the stone till it stood proud with its fresh grey face taking the sun.

The neighbours grew suspicious. Toto kept his silence, and their curiosity grew as the building started showing signs of grandeur. Toto’s son had

carved images on the stones, beasts in flight and endless rings and little chips that seemed like shade but weren't. The majesty of this building was too eloquent. Something, somewhere had to speak. And as the last horizontal plinth was laid and formed the altar, Toto wept at the beauty, at the workmanship, at his achievement. There was pride to be sure, but it was well-earned, and Santuccia gently tapped his formidable shoulders in approval.

Some days later, a crowd approached Toto's hut. He stood tall in front of the doorway, unsure of their intentions. However, his fears were unfounded. They came without malice, but with a plea.

"Toto, we have come to know that you have built a house for the gods," they said.

"Who told you?" The question left his mouth without thought. His brain was busy thinking what he would do to his betrayer.

A short thin man with a short thin voice said, "Pina was chatting with my wife, and words, you know....," letting the sentence trail off.

Toto had images of his hands tightening round Pina's neck.

"We have come to ask your permission to worship in the house you built for the gods," the crowd blurted out in one voice. This new turn of affairs banished the violent thoughts he had just been harbouring for Pina.

"Let us worship with you Toto, we beg you!"

Toto had no idea what to say. Best discuss this with his wife before he botched it up. He filled his chest and addressed the crowd, "What you ask is not for me to give. I will ask the gods. Come tomorrow and you will have your answer."

And the crowd was amazed. Toto spoke with the gods!

Strangely enough, Santuccia did not have an answer that night. She couldn't sleep a wink and

found herself thinking to the rhythm of Toto's snores. Morning came at last.

"Toto, this is a golden opportunity. You have become the voice of the gods."

He knew what she meant. And so it happened that the house that Toto built became the place of worship for all the islanders. A little contribution was asked for the upkeep of the temple and for Toto and his extended family, who were now too busy serving the gods to work the land and to tend goats. Time passed. Somehow the gods expressed their wish to enlarge the temple. Toto knew he could rely on the people, and sure enough, the strongest came in earnest, cutting, chipping, transporting, with the temple first doubling, then tripling, until the original structure had branched into a three-fold leaf. Toto did not keep himself aloof anymore. You'd find him everywhere, chatting, encouraging, answering, interpreting the will of the gods.

Until...

Some were having certain thoughts. If the gods spoke to Toto, couldn't they speak to them as well if they too built them a house? Perhaps even larger and more beautiful than Toto's. After all, how come Toto was the chosen one? True, he had been the first one to build a temple, but it was also true that he had profited well from it. Couldn't they profit as well? And that is how the first Maltese community split in two, with the second group deciding to build a larger and even more beautiful temple.

Toto flew into a rage. He warned the rebels that the gods were not happy at all. But the rebellion could not be quelled and, with rebellion, comes arrogance, and arrogance destroys certainty.

"After all, we have only your word for it. How do we know you really talk to the gods? No one ever saw or heard you. No one knows which gods you speak with!"

It was again to his wife that Toto took his woes. But it was his eldest son who gave him an answer.

Early next morning, before the sun bathed the land in light, the eldest son left the village. Many days passed before he returned in the dead of the night. That dawn, Toto gathered the village. He needed to go on a mission, to seek a sign to end once and for all these malignant doubts. He left, taking with him four men to bear witness of all that would transpire.

A few days later, one man returned.

“We walked along these cliffs, through scrub and caves and saw places that we had never seen. And then we stumbled upon a cave so deep that the bottom was the sea, where the currents whirl and skirl and suck you to its inky depths. We clung to cragged rocks and there we found the sign. An image, hewed in stone by the gods themselves, and from its size we knew it must be one of the gods.”

“But no one has seen the gods. How could you tell it was a goddess?”

“Because that very night, when we had lain down to rest, we heard Toto mumbling words we could not understand and he rose and clambered down with his eyes still closed, while we held our breath lest we disturb him and he fell to his death. And when beside the graven image, he spoke.”

“And the image answered?”

“Indeed she did. Her voice echoed around the cave, and it was like serpents of light that split the sky during the rainy season, for the language of the gods is tongued by flames beyond the language of mere man. Only Toto could understand.”

“And, what did she say? Tell us, tell us! What did Toto say?”

“To take this image to the heart of the temple that Toto built, because Toto has found favour with the gods.”

When at last the goddess appeared over the hill, impressively if not majestically rolling over the logs, everyone was in agreement that it looked very much like Santuccia.

“There was no need to make an exact replica of your mother!” Toto fumed, when alone with his eldest. “At least, it would have been easier to transport.”

Santuccia pretended not to have heard, though it was true. Since the building of the temple, she was widening at an alarming rate.

The ruse of the image did not work after all. The revolt continued. So, Toto had secured a god for himself? Well, there was a whole firmament to choose from. They would have their own god, even larger and stronger, with a larger temple to accommodate it. When Toto realised that the new temple would be bigger than his, he urged his followers to set to work on the next extension. The rebels, not to be outdone, enlarged theirs. Men set to work, then women joined, because the men were not enough. Then the children were drafted.

The crops shrivelled. The fields became parched. Where once wheat had danced to the breeze, was now covered with weeds and thorns. The mangy beasts fled, seeking fodder. The rains came at last, but there was no respite. It was a harsh season, and water gushed down the hillside, tumbling down the unkempt houses that the villagers in their folly had not seen to. The people gathered in their respective temples, but the workmanship was rushed. The roofs could not withstand the weight of the water and caved in. Many lives were lost that day, crushed beneath that which had been built to protect them. The heartfelt prayers were fruitless. In vain did Toto sob at the feet of the fat lady. The stern copy of Santuccia remained unmoved. Flames split the sky. “The gods are angry,” someone said. “And for good reason,” thought Toto.

“We built two temples and demolished our homes. Look at us now”.

He looked up in one last attempt at prayer. A loud clap tore the sky and for an instant the temple shone with the white light of the gods, and the earth itself trembled. The massive head of fat lady Santuccia leaned to one side. The frightened crowd hid their eyes, afraid of what could possibly happen next.

A shrill, long shriek, sharp as flint, made them look in spite of their fears.

Santuccia was kneeling beside the massive head and the crushed body of what had been Toto.

“Surely it’s a sign,” someone said. “But what does it mean?”

And the crowd babbled and muttered and ran about confused, in total dismay at what they had just witnessed.

Toto’s eldest son remembered how, some days before, his father had drawn him aside and earnestly enquired about the strength of the neck. Surely that size of head needed a thicker base. That day, the son had taken offence and stressed that the proportions were perfect. He could not have foretold that his father would be crushed by the weight of his error.

2

Letter to Hasdrubal

Historically, the Maltese Islands had passed from Carthaginian to Roman control during the Punic wars. With eons of foreign domination, the Maltese learnt that their best option was to bend to the greater force and try to earn a living in the bargain. Here we see this trait in the making, for even the gods can be bargained with.

My dear brother Hasdrubal, I greet you and may the gods bestow their blessings upon you.

I am writing this letter from Rome. How I ended up here is quite a long story, which I will tell you shortly. Know Hasdrubal, that I am not merely writing to say I am in good health and to enquire about you and our kin and to obtain news of our island. This too, of course, but I wish to share with you what I have learnt from my sojourn here.

This city is nothing like we have been told. Ever since we were children, we were taught that the Romans are wild and barbaric. Well, they are not. Frankly speaking, they have a sophisticated and mature civilisation and, in certain aspects, superior to ours. Do not fret over my fate. I am not a slave. I go where I please, a freeman, as I have always been

since I put on sandals and followed the trade winds. I live well. Food is good and abundant. Wine flows, finer than the one we were used to. I can't complain, far from it. I even have a small, yet thriving, business, in textiles naturally. The Romans, men and women, have a good eye for quality, and pay good money for a good product.

But tell me, how fares our island? I am concerned about you and our families. Rumour has it that Tiberius Sempronius is preparing to launch a massive attack. Listen. Do not get embroiled in anything. Steer clear of politics. I have seen the fleet he is amassing. Tiberius's strength is unequalled. My dear Hasdrubal, listen to me, warn our friends to befriend him. Tiberius is a man of his word and merciful. He takes good care of his friends. I can vouch for this.

We left Malta in high spirits, emboldened by the oracle, the incantation still echoing in our ears, our hopes like babes cuddling in Astarte's lap. But, when out in the open sea, the weather changed. Rain fell in torrents. The wind whipped up the sea to a murderous frenzy and all the elements raged, as if our ship was an insult to the gods. At first, we struggled to save the sail, then we struggled to remain afloat. We prayed in mournful desperation and sacrificed livestock in the hope that all would be well. I lost track of time, and I can't say how long it lasted, but it must have been a long time. Even if it wasn't, to us it seemed to last forever.

We lost four men during the storm. Alas, Sidon was one. The sea wanted him. Ropes and knots were in vain. The vicious waves pulled him to his watery grave. Tell his wife that we managed to save a casket with gold. I will send it from Rome.

When the storm subsided, a thick mist covered us like a blanket. Finally, the sun lifted the mist, but we were hopelessly lost. Blown off course and

without a sail, all we could do was try to row. Most of our supplies, including water, had gone overboard. We needed to find land soon or perish. At night, we tried to navigate our way by the aid of the stars, but somehow, we could not reach our original position. I admit there were moments when I lost all hope, but I couldn't show my despair in front of the crew. I gave the order that we were to row for as long as our arms had strength. We spent two days going around in a wide circle.

On the third day, we saw some ships approaching us. It didn't take us long to realise they were Roman. Some of the crew wanted to try and escape, but with no food, little water and less strength, it would have been futile. I called all the crew on deck. My orders were clear. We were to offer no resistance. We were to swallow any ounce of pride we had left and act in a servile manner. Survival was our only goal.

The squadron consisted of eight ships, but only one drew alongside our battered hull. They asked us who we were and what our business in those waters was. I spoke, "Sir, I must confess that we do not know where we are. We are merchants, and we were sailing to sell our goods. A storm blew us off course and we lost everything, even our supplies. We tried to chart another course by the aid of the stars, but the skies denied us even that. We are lost and need help." Obviously, my words betrayed my Carthaginian origins and they whispered furiously amongst each other. "Do you have weapons?" they demanded. "We are merchants sir, we bear no arms," I replied. Ropes were thrown and fastened and a group boarded our ship for inspection. When they found that I spoke the truth, they offered to tow us to the nearest port. My people turned their fearful eyes upon me. I nodded, to quieten their fears and to comply with the Romans. After all, we had no choice.

When darkness fell, the Romans lowered a

dinghy and brought food and drink for all of us. There was one whose bearing spoke of authority. His clothes were also of a finer cut, so I quickly assumed he was the captain. His face seemed to be carved out of marble, showing no emotion. In spite of this and his distinctive manners, he was courteous, especially towards me, and invited himself to my table. During the meal, he probed me with questions on our island, interspersed with reassurance that his intentions were honourable, insisting that the minute we reached the shore we were free men.

No sooner had the captain returned to his ship when the boat returned, bearing this youth, a lad who had barely seen ten summers. He was naked as the day he was born, save for a coronet of bay leaves on his curls, his tender body glistening with perfumed balms. The crew did not know what to make of it and considered it a Roman insult. I had learnt something of Roman customs in my travels, and knew that the boy was a little gift from the captain. Four of my more impulsive sailors wanted to whip the boy and send him back, to show that we were not to be corrupted by their debauched customs. Even if they had saved our lives, we would never turn our backs to Carthage and her gods. When the Roman guards saw our altercation, their hands instinctively clutched their swords, fearing a mutiny. I had to act fast. I ordered a whipping for the vociferous four and took the boy to my cabin, but not before I made a sign to ensure that the whipping was to be light. After all, I did not want to punish my men for being loyal to their roots and their gods. But you must understand, my dear brother that, in life, even loyalty has its time and place. We were in the hands of our enemy. It was not the time for lofty ideals. The weak reed bends in the flood, it is the unyielding tree that breaks. We are a practical people, brother. Sometimes we have to bend, as our proverb says.

And so, I took the boy to my cabin, poured him some wine and gave him some food that had been left over from what his master had given us. This done, I apologetically turned the statue of Astarte so that she wouldn't see what I was going to do. This done, I made use of the boy in the Roman way and according to Roman wishes. It wasn't as bad as I expected. Having finished with him, I chose the finest piece of cloth from what remained of our merchandise and told the boy to give it to the captain.

Next day, I was invited to share board with the captain. He was aware of what had happened on our ship and was happy with the way I had conducted the affair. During the meal, he told me that we would be reaching Tarentum, a Roman port. It was at this point that I casually remarked that, though we had exchanged conversation, we had not yet exchanged names. "I am Tiberius Sempronius Longus," he said. The man across the table was none other than the famous consul and general, the sworn enemy of Hannibal Barka. I trembled at the confidence I had dared show. I knelt in front of him, begging for forgiveness for anything amiss I might have said. But he rose from his chair, and gently pulled me up. "You have nothing to fear," he said. "I always keep my word. When we arrive, your crew are free to leave and return to their homes in peace. As for you, however, I would like you to stay with me for a while, that is, if you so wish. But I need a man like you. Come with me to Rome and, if you like it, stay. If not, you are free to return home whenever you wish."

My dear brother, Tiberius Sempronius kept his word. Once we touched Tarentum, our ship was taken in for repairs. This letter should have reached you along with the rest of the crew and the money we had planned to make in this enterprise. The tempest dashed our hopes, but the Roman Senate decided to compensate our losses.

I remained with Tiberius Sempronius and got to know him better. He is highly respected in Rome. A brave and astute general, yet cautious and meticulous. Most of all, he is merciful and just. Some days ago, he called me and said, "Adohnes, your crew will soon leave to return to the island whence you came. You know you are free to leave. If you stay, my house is your house. You have shown me loyalty and sincere friendship during your stay here." And then he gestured for me to sit.

"Know that the Senate has declared that a fleet is to set for your island. Rome now controls the most important harbours of Sicily, and it cannot afford your harbours sheltering the Carthaginian fleet. My friend, listen to me, warn your people. Tell them to choose wisely in the coming battle. Rome never forgets her friends. You have shown me you are cut from practical cloth. I do hope your people are made from the same stuff."

The minute I heard these words, I knelt and kissed his hand in gratitude. He had trusted me with his plans, simply so I could warn my family and save their lives. I started writing this letter the moment I left his side.

Tiberius Sempronius is right. In the coming times, we have to make wise choices. You know well that although Carthage is happy to do business with us, they never trusted us. Many a time have their ships bypassed us, as they ventured up North, taking their commerce elsewhere. The Romans, on the other hand, want to enter into a partnership. Their empire reaches from Gaul in the North, and stretches beyond Greek cities in the East. They are rich and, apart from a good eye for commerce, they also have the finest armies to protect it. Their legions hunger for conquests and will shed every drop of blood to obtain it. The future lies with Rome. The news concerning Hannibal is not heartening either.

It is said that whilst he wages war in Iberia, there are those who plot against him in Carthage. Whereas Tiberius Sempronius and his friend Scipio wallow in the trust of both the people and the Senate, which basically represents the most powerful families of Rome. I share all this so that you can open the eyes of those you deem worthwhile.

I know you are a sensible man, but I also know you to be devout and faithful to your gods. And that is as it should be. What is man without his gods? They create him, knead him and guide him throughout his life. And beyond that, they open the doors that lead out of the valley of the shadow of death into the next life. Now, I have learnt a thing or two about the Roman gods. They are not jealous like our Astarte. You can negotiate with their gods. If the Romans ask for a favour, they go to their gods and offer food and oils and promise them more of the kind. But the people keep their promises if the gods keep theirs. One can even do business with the gods of the underworld, and so the bereaved leave a little money in the grave, so that the dead man can pay his fare to the next life. Now with such gods we can really prosper, precisely because we can negotiate. Not so with Astarte. Astarte just demands worship and submission.

I know you might say that all we have managed to build so far, we have done with the blessing of Astarte and no other god. True, true. But if I may offer some advice, never close doors, not even to foreign gods. And so, yes, we will never close our door to Astarte completely. If we do not seek her blessing, much less can we risk her curse. But my dear brother, there is a way you can go round this. As I said, the Romans are a practical people, and given to business as much as us. Therefore, in their temples they welcome all the gods they come across in their vast empire. Even the gods become Roman. So, we can retain Astarte but conduct business with the Roman gods as well.

Fine, you might say, but Astarte, jealous Astarte, wouldn't she fly into a fury at this betrayal? But I'll tell you this, brother. Jealousy consumes those gods that remain outside the temple. Once Astarte finds herself in the Roman pantheon, I'm sure she'll get over her jealousy. Everything in the firmament has its time. And so, just as a civilisation is born, grows and flourishes and then fades and turns to dust, so it is with the gods. This is what will happen to Carthage and on its ruins Rome will grow even more. Astarte will be forever grateful if we are the ones who introduced her to the Roman pantheon and ensured her lasting name. Keep Astarte close to your heart, by all means. You never know which god you will need one day. But be wise and befriend the Romans and their gods. Carthage had a past. Rome has a future.

Allow me to close this letter with a different piece of news. The next new moon will see me a married man. Tiberius Sempronius introduced me to his niece, a beautiful lady hailing from one of the foremost families in Rome. Her father promised me a villa in Ardea, a countryside place some distance from Rome. The land is fertile and covered in vineyards and olive orchards. This is the tie I now have with Tiberius Sempronius and his family. You can see the advantages, I don't have to elaborate. You too can reap from these benefits, along with your family, your children and those yet unborn.

I send my love to you, my dear brother, and if the gods will it, we will meet soon. Perhaps we meet in our homeland, when I return with Tiberius's fleet, and we embrace again with joy and peace.

Your brother, Adohnes, to my dear Hasdrubal.

3

Pupull converts the Maltese

One event of extreme national pride is the mention of Malta in the Acts of the Apostles. This has been debated, even sparking a sense of outrage when some theorist argues that the author of Acts was referring to some other island. Here we find how Malta 'earned' the mention.

60.A.D. The date that Malta can never forget. Hardly would you have crossed the threshold on the first day of school when this date, 60.A.D., would have been hammered into your head. The year that changed the history of Malta forever. And to make sure that this date remained forever etched in your memory, they kept reinforcing it. It cropped up during a variety of lessons: during Religion, naturally, during Maltese, why not? Social Studies? Definitely. Occasionally they even managed to weave it in during Mathematics, under some pathetic excuse or other. Thus, some Maths teacher with more zeal than logic would intone: *If St Paul came to Malta 60 years after Christ, and Christ died in the year 33, after Christ of course (though how one lives during a time that he supposedly came after beats all logic), then how many years passed between the death of Christ and the*

coming of St Paul? Come on, 60-33... For the Maltese, it is THE DATE.

The date was so deeply entrenched in your mind that you never asked whether the story, as narrated by various teachers at school, in church and during Christian doctrine lessons, actually happened as it had been drilled into you. Let's start from a singular fact that probably never crossed your mind. Saul from Tarsus, known also as Paul or St. Paul (although if you're from Rabat and a devout disciple of St Joseph, chances are you'd be blatantly racist and call him 'That nigger!' alluding to the dark colour of the statue), was famous for two things: travel and letter-writing. Paul managed to marry these two talents with admirable skill. Generally, he would first visit a place, and then, as if not to be forgotten, he'd send a letter filled with good advice and Christian teaching. Thus, when he visited Ephesus, the Ephesians got a letter. Galatia too was not forgotten, nor were the Romans. The Corinthians even received two. And the Maltese?

Nothing. Not even a miserable postcard saying 'I'm in Rome, thanks for your hospitality.' Nothing.

But in truth, it wasn't his fault.

The whole story of St. Paul, the shipwreck and the viper was totally fabricated by a certain Pupull¹, a Maltese man with Greek ancestry, known in his time as a scoundrel and a crook.

In fact, it was due to some scam that Pupull ended up wandering about in the streets of Rome. For a time, Pupull had been in cahoots with the Roman governor of Malta, a certain Lucius Sixtus, until one time, Pupull entangled him in some mad caper that went horribly wrong. To escape the governor's wrath, Pupull chose self-exile, at least till the clouds cleared.

1 Pronounced 'Pooh Pull'. It is a short version of the name Publius. Another version is Pullu, pronounced Pull loo.

And where else but Rome? Rome was the centre of the world at the time. And the road Pupull travelled led him to the heart of the Empire, as it had led many who had gone that way before him.

Pupull had learnt early in life that in times of no money, you need to make friends as quickly as possible. Patricians, plebians, barbarians, slaves - Pupull was not choosy. The more contacts from every walk of life, the better. You never know. In fact, these contacts led him as far up as the divan of the Emperor's daughter. But in truth, it was the members of a new sect that fed him and sheltered him at night. This sect worshipped a certain Jesus, a prophet from Palestine who had claimed to be the son of god. The Romans had crucified him some thirty years before on suspicion of rebellion. Palestine was certainly one of the most volatile corners of the Empire. The followers of Jesus, whom they called Christ, were known as Christians. They could be found in all strata of Roman society. They lived by certain precepts that suited Pupull no end. In particular, they fed the hungry and sheltered the homeless. Pupull callously took advantage of their sense of charity. Throughout his sojourn in Rome, he never went to sleep hungry or with the sky as a roof. What Pupull lacked in morality, he had in cunning. He soon learnt that, although nominally outlawed, the Christians were everywhere. Some rubbed shoulders with the royal family. There were Christian generals in the army, Christian senators and even Christian judges. Pupull realised that this new sect had a future. Time was its strongest ally. He foresaw that one day the Christian god would sweep the old gods out of their temples and outside the confines of the Empire.

It was in the house of one of these Christians that Pupull was introduced to Luke. They told him that this man, white bearded and his face burnt by a hundred suns, was a Greek doctor. To ingratiate

himself with him, Pupull told him in detail of his Greek roots, how his family was rooted in the soil of Hellenic civilisation and how his ancestors had defended the values of that same civilisation against the threat of the Persian terror. Luke listened politely and with infinite patience. Then, someone sitting at table mentioned the memoirs, which Luke was writing, told of the vicissitudes of Christ's disciples. Pupull pricked his ears. Luke seemed rather reticent about it, but Pupull kept wheedling information out the venerable gentleman, inch by inch, like a sly fisherman angling for a sly fish.

Pupull was far from impressed. Luke's writing wasn't exactly bestseller material, until...

"Right now, I am working on a shipwreck event..."

At last! This sounds promising. "A story that stirs the water a bit, thought Pupull, as a naughty smile spread across his face."

And Luke started to narrate how they had left for Rome, where Paul was supposed to appear before the Imperial Court. He spoke of how a mighty storm had hit their vessel and how vicious currents had dragged them off course. Paul had assured the captain that no soul would be lost, because god would protect them. The ship struck a reef, but they were not too far from shore and all the crew reached dry land safely, as Paul had predicted. The natives of that island had seen the tragic demise of the ship, and ran to the shore, where they lit a fire and helped the survivors as best they could. As they huddled for warmth near the fire, a viper sprang and bit Paul's hand. The natives expected Paul to swell up or fall dead with the venom, but Paul stood there, tall and gaunt like a cliff face. When the people of the island saw that he had suffered no ill effects they assumed he was a god. They then took him to the Governor, whose father was on his deathbed. Paul put his hand

on the dying man and immediately he was up and about, completely healed, and the people gaped in awe.

For the first time that night, Pupull was speechless. There was something in that story that intrigued him. A thought kept churning in his mind. Sleep left him as the thought wormed its way into his head. Yet the moment he felt he could grasp the thought, it eluded him, as if mist kept fogging his hazy view. He started spending days beneath a tree, away from the bustle of the city, pondering, striving to shed the cloud that had settled upon him. Days passed like years and his brain began to feel the toll. His body too was sending him signs that it was not taking the absence of women and wine well. Pupull didn't like these symptoms. They were unpleasant. He had to take care of his health. And so, he left the tree and ran to the brothel run by Poppea Livia, so that he might be relieved.

Poppea's brothel was considered by many as the prize jewel gracing Imperial Rome. The best merchandise from the furthest flung corners of the Empire ended up there, *placer autem populus romanus*. That day, fresh meat had come from the East; tender and fleshy, olive-skinned delicate beauties that would ruin the reputation of the most determined eunuch-priest. Pupull dug deep into his pockets and, as luck would have it, found enough coins to taste the flavours of the Orient, albeit not the finest specimen available, but still worth the price. He parted from the mattress somewhat reluctantly, rubbing his belly, and with a smile plastered on his face that bespoke satisfaction. Then it dawned on him. A good bang was all he had needed to clarify his mind. The thought that had darkened his brow was now as clear as daylight. Light had poured through the missing teeth of that rotund merchandise he had spent the last thirty minutes wrestling with.

“Come on Luke, I’m not asking much, am I?”

“You are asking me to toy with the truth.”

“Nooo!, as if! By giving a name to an island you’re not really altering anything. After all, you never mentioned it by name anywhere in your book.”

Luke’s point of departure had been a vehement NO. And to this he stuck like a limpet, despite Pupull’s plaintiff begging to insert the name of his island in the Acts of the Apostles. How could that compromise Luke’s precious truth? It’s just identifying the rock where Luke’s ship emptied its contents for the last time. Just put in Malta, and he, Pupull, would have written a history that spelt the end of his exile.

I suppose by now you know enough about Pupull. You know he’s not one to give up easily. He has eyes and ears everywhere and any crumb of information that miraculously fell in his lap was carefully sifted, kneaded and moulded into a new truth to suit his purpose according to prevailing circumstances.

“Look here Luke, I will not ask again. This will be the last time. And, may I add, if you grant me this little favour, I have something in return, far more precious than the trifle I’m asking.”

For the first time, Luke didn’t proffer his usual reply in the negative.

“I have learnt that Paul is to be executed in the coming days.”

“I know. I know,” replied Luke, and fresh tears welled in his red-rimmed eyes.

“This is not exactly the best time to lose Paul...,” added Pupull.

“No, it isn’t. Many churches are still in their infancy. Losing Paul’s leadership would mean they will die before maturity.”

“I can help Paul.”

Luke pricked his ears.

“I cannot promise that Paul will regain full freedom, but at least I can help him cling to life. And

he will have an amount of liberty, you know, move about." And Pupull winked like a naughty child.

"You can save his life?" gasped Luke incredulously. "And how?"

"I have many friends, amongst whom I count the daughter of the Emperor. Her Imperial Highness has already heard Paul preach and has many Christian friends. Let's just say that she bears some sympathy for Christians. If I exert a little pressure, she might plead with her father for Paul."

"Yes, yes, Pupull. Intercede for our brother Paul. Save him, and you will also save his Church."

With tears washing his furrowed face, Luke knelt in front of Pupull, kissing the hem of his tunic. Pupull bent low to lift the aged evangelist. With infinite gentleness, he took Luke's arms, gazed into his eyes and said,

"I will help you. I will help you because I love you and the Church. But I need your help as well."

"Whatever you wish. Whatever. Ask and I will do it. I'd walk through fire to save Paul's life!"

"Ah. You know what I want. A very small favour. I wish to see the name of my land in your book. A passing comment that you learnt that the island where you were shipwrecked was called Malta. That's all."

Luke was taken aback. He instinctively withdrew slightly, but Pupull pressed his arms in endearment. Luke realised that the only way to save Paul's head from rolling was to toy a tad with the truth. Anyway, what's in a name? Whatever the island was called would not affect the ultimate truth of the Christian faith. A minor detail. Insignificant. What could it change? After all, what is the truth?

Even Jesus the Nazarene had been addressed with this question. Pilate had looked into his eyes, and Christ had gazed back; two pairs of eyes staring into each other, examining the depths of each other's soul. What is the truth? The truth is much larger than

all of us, and no minor detail can hide it. Whatever the island was called, the truth is the conversion, the embracing of the ultimate Truth, the words of Christ gushing from Paul's mouth, announcing Christ to all the nations.

"As you wish," said Luke, resignedly.

"And say that the Governor of Malta's name was 'Pupull' while you're at it."

Et sic scriptum erat.

When Lucius Sixtus saw Pupull back in Malta, he nearly had a fit.

"What are you doing here? You were strictly forbidden to touch upon these shores. Are you aware that I can order your arrest and immediate execution?"

"Wait, Lucius. Hang on a second."

"I'll hang you! Why did you come back?"

"I brought you a gift. I have put your name in history. I bring you immortality."

Lucius Sixtus was not the brightest star in the galaxy. He had the intelligence expected of one who had spent most of his life marching behind the bronze effigy of an eagle. He had been modestly successful in this mission, enough to earn him the governorship of a small province where time was measured by the cycle of the seasons, and honour by the number of children whelped. In spite of this, Lucius had his own ambitions, and the thought that his name would go down in history aroused in him a pleasant curiosity. What could this rascal Pupull have to offer?

"You see Lucius, the future is being born in Rome as we speak. This is the new fashion in Rome, a fashion that, as far as I can see, will change the Empire forever. And thanks to me, history will remember you as one of the protagonists of this revolution."

The last word brought a frown on Lucius' face. Revolution. He did not like the word. Pupull read the shadow on the Governor's brow.

“Perish the thought. As if I would come, bearing a gift that spelt bad news for you. Look here, look at this book. Few eyes so far have seen these pages, yet in a couple of years’ time it will be treasured in every corner of the world.”

“What book is this?”

“This book narrates the story of a new sect that is dispersing all over the Empire like lava spouting out of a volcano. These people, who call themselves Christians, can be found everywhere in Rome. Even within the oldest and noblest of families.

“The Christians? I’ve heard of the name, but as far as I know, they are persecuted. The Emperor wants them hunted down.”

“So far!” Pupull replied.

“So far? What do you mean ‘so far’? What, pray, do you think will happen later?”

“Well, what will the Emperor do when he learns that his beloved daughter is one of them? And another thing, I know them. I lived with them. They are stubborn. The harsher the persecution, the stronger they emerge. Five join for each one killed. I know what I’m saying. A few years from now, and goodbye Mars and Venus and all the other gods. The Roman Empire will only know one god, the god of the Christians.”

Lucius wasn’t convinced.

“And where do I come in?”

Pupull told Lucius how he had met Luke and convinced him to insert Malta in the shipwreck story.

“So,” continued Pupull, “in less than six months Paul will be sentenced to death. That’s for sure. Then our hour will come. Yours actually. Let me explain, because this occasion could mean a fortune for you.”

“A fortune?” Lucius was intrigued. “How?”

“Tourism, Lucius. Tourism! Christian tourism. Let me explain. So, the minute Paul is executed, all the Christians will want to see all the places related to

his life. They would feel the need to tread the same land that Paul's feet had trodden. Obviously, Rome would remain a place of choice. Jerusalem too, but it's too risky. The constant upheavals there would deter many. And Rome is far away, especially for travellers from the East. The journey is fraught with many dangers. But Malta! Malta is bang in the middle of the trajectory. It is here that the Christian tourist would choose. In Paul's shipwreck, they'd see the hand of their god. And in their excise duties, you'd see your fortune. The harbours will be thronging with Christians eager to part with their money, which they despise anyway."

"Hmm, not a bad idea at all, not bad at all..." Lucius mused aloud.

"Wait. There's more," continued Pupull, warming up to the subject. "Your name will remain linked with the wonderful tale of Paul and his shipwreck. When the Empire bows to the Christian god, your name will be known in all the civilised world. This book will be read in every gathering, and your name will resound with glory."

Lucius was gripped by the fervour that the combination of money and prestige can give.

"Show me where the story is. Show me, show me!"

Pupull bit his lips as the colour drained from his face. How could he get out of this one? He found the story with the shipwreck and the viper. Lucius started reading aloud, eager to encounter his name that would go down to posterity.

"The governor of the island was called Pu... Publius?! What is this? What are you playing at, Pupull? This is your official name. Where is Lucius? This is YOUR name, you scoundrel."

Lucius was livid. He stamped his feet and threw the book on the floor and shook his fist at Pupull's face. Pupull's heart thumped in his chest.

He managed to hide his terror, picked up the book calmly and smiled angelically at Lucius.

“Calm down please, Lucius,” he said soothingly. “Allow me to explain further.”

“You’d better explain!” Lucius screamed hysterically. “And if you wish your head to remain attached to that scrawny neck of yours, pray that your explanation pleases me. Otherwise, I swear by Jove that you will not see another sun.”

“I fear you have not been listening, my friend.”

“I am not your friend.”

“A friend and a true one. A true friend indeed. I have just told you that this book will be in every inch of the Empire. Wherever Christians meet, this book will take centre stage. With such a wide circulation, I have no doubt that it will fall in the wrong hands. I daresay the Emperor himself might read it. At this early stage, would you like the Emperor to see your name associated with enemies of the state? Some gift from my part that would be. I’d have brought you a death sentence.”

Pupull clasped his face and convincingly sobbed like a child, “Yes, we’ve had our differences in the past, but I never wished you any harm. Believe me Lucius, I beseech you. In all this, I only have your interests at heart. Nothing more.”

Lucius softened down a little, but was still concerned about being left out.

“But how will my name be remembered then?”

Through his fake tears, Pupull took a furtive glimpse at Lucius, and said, “Have you ever come across a governor with a Greek name? Might as well appoint a woman! If the Emperor reads a Greek name, he’d laugh his laurel wreath off. He’ll probably think it’s some comedy by Plautus or Terentius. But not so the future generations of Christians. They’d realise that something is amiss. They will seek an answer in the Imperial archives. Rest assured that

they will find who the true Governor was. And when the truth is out, they will correct the book, and the name of Lucius Sixtus will remain enshrined both in the book and in their hearts. Lucius Sixtus, the kind Governor who welcomed Paul when he was shipwrecked in Malta on his way to Rome.”

“Yes! Yes! I see your point now. I must say, you thought it out so well.” And Lucius Sixtus could barely refrain from dancing madly around the table.

“There’s more...,” continued Pupull.

“More? What else have you concocted?” asked Lucius, anticipating even more good news.

“Luke has appointed me Bishop of Malta,” winked Pupull.

“Excellent. Excellent indeed. So, what exactly is a bishop?”

“He’s like the head of a community of Christians. Each community has its own bishop.”

“But you’re not a Christian. There aren’t any Christians in Malta. You’re babbling now, Pupull.”

“With all due respect, dear Lucius, you’re a military man. Sometimes you fail to understand certain complexities of life...”

“Yes, I forgot you were a philosopher. Come, tell me, what has your wicked mind conceived?”

“Hardly a philosopher ... ,” grinned Pupull. “ ... but the gods gave me a mind which knows no rest. First and foremost, in religious questions, it does not matter which god or gods you believe in. Religion is politics. And the e-co-no-my! You do not know whether there are Christians here or not. But I do. Because I am their leader. Their bishop. And thanks to this, you will now learn of each and every Christian who lives on the island. You see Lucius, with me, your loyal friend, as bishop, you will have full control over the Maltese Christian community. You never know what the Emperor might ask of you in the near future...”

Lucius sat down, his fingers toying with the curls of his beard. Pupull studied Lucius's face, struggling to come to grips with all this information. Silence fell, a pondering one for Lucius, and a very uneasy one for Pupull. Everything was hanging in the balance. Lucius stood up, walked towards Pupull and embraced him,

“You are a true friend, Pupull!”

Pupull tapped him on the back and heaved a sigh of relief.

Time proved Pupull right on many things. Paul was beheaded, regardless of the promises Pupull had made in Rome. A new martyr produces new followers. People are naturally intrigued, and religious ones even more so. And they feel they must visit the places hallowed by the martyr's presence when he still walked amongst them. They want to see places associated with miracles. They need the tangible to make sense of the spiritual. They want to be in the places linked with the 'man of God'. And people flocked to Malta. Religious tourism took off with a vengeance. Pupull found a tiny cave, poky and nondescript, but conveniently situated just outside the walls of the city. He started organising visits for the Christians, who wanted to see the cave where somehow Paul lived during the three eventful months that he had spent on the island. For a small donation, pilgrims could also take a piece of rock or a handful of miraculous dust from Paul's cave. The word spread that this rock was truly miraculous, especially if dissolved in a little water. Constipation, nausea, unwanted pregnancy, stammering, numbness, gonorrhoea, diarrhoea - it seemed to be a universal panacea. Rock chipping became an exporting industry. Some rogues tried to sell off a poor imitation of this rock but Pupull, with the help of his friend Lucius, used all the power that Roman law gave him and guaranteed a certificate of authenticity and perpetual monopoly.

However, Pupull ended up a victim of his own success. He died in Rome, mauled and eaten by lions. Lucius had sent him to his death when it eventually dawned on him that he could be both Governor and Bishop, and thus obtain the revenue of both the cave and the customs duties. And so Pupull's name went down in history, whilst his body went down the digestive system of wild cats. History will remember Pupull, but history never filled coffers.