



A view of Valetta,
capital of Malta.



A typically narrow
street in one of the
small villages.

Malta

Its Hopes and Problems

by

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A 2YA Talk

IT is a change now and again to forsake the major troubles of the world and to speak about some country which enjoys quite different conditions. It is not easy to find a country now which has no oppressive debts or political disputes, but at any rate, Malta, being a small country, has them on a smaller scale.

Malta most of us know as the home of romance throughout the middle ages; the stronghold of the Knights of St. John when the Turks drove them away from the Holy Land; and the country of the Grand Harbour of Valetta and the historic Fort St. Elmo. Most people who have been to Great Britain through the Mediterranean know that Malta stands guard at the narrow passage midway through that sea. It thus has a most important military position. Incidentally I may state that during the war it was a half-way house for our New Zealand wounded and sick between Egypt and England. Many thousands of them lay for weeks in hospital there. Later it was found that the heat was unfavourable to their recovery, and they were brought right on to England.

Malta consists of three islands: Malta itself, of 90 square miles; Gozo, of 20 square miles; and Comino, a small patch of one square mile. Malta is rockbound and by nature somewhat arid and dry, but the native farmers till the soil very successfully. They manage by their industry to grow enough in the year to keep the whole population for three months. The highest hills in Malta are just about 700 feet. There is a rainfall of 20 inches in the year, but it is very uncertain in its occurrence. The climate generally is temperate, but there is a troublesome hot wind from the north-west which scorches the vegetation and is a constant danger to small shipping.

Most of the country people are farmers, but their farms are small and they live together in villages. When I say there are 10,000 farms in an area of 90 square miles, from which a large city and port has already been taken, you will understand that the farms must be very small. As a matter of fact, they average about four acres. The principal crops are maize, wheat and barley; wine and fruit. Owing to the mild climate the Maltese are able to export fruit profitably at odd seasons. Of farm animals there are fine cattle and some sheep

and goats, but, of course, there is not room for many of them. Then we must not forget the hand industries of Malta, the chief of which is lace-making. There has also been a certain amount of pottery for centuries past.

It is obvious that, but for their position on trade routes, these islands would have no population at all. The main purpose of Malta in the modern world has been as a fortress or

strong point in British communications. In fact, its strategic position has been the mainspring of its importance all along. It was on account of that position between the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean that the Phoenicians took up their abode there, and later the Carthaginians, and later the Knights of St. John. The population has for many centuries been larger than the islands could possibly support. The Knights of St. John supplemented the island wealth by revenues they drew from their own estates in various European countries, and also by plundering the commerce of the Turks and others. In the last hundred years or so, since the British occupied Malta, the population has steadily grown to something like a quarter of a million people. The fields of Malta could not possibly support such a mass of people. Most of them have earned their living by working for the naval and military authorities, and as seamen on British and Italian ships. Somehow or other the Government has generally managed in the last half century or so to keep the accounts balanced, but there was a great problem to solve when the war ended and 25,000 men and women were suddenly thrown out of work. A scheme of emigration had to be inaugurated to ease the distress.

YOU will guess from the position of Malta, close to the mainland of Italy and the island of Sicily, that the people are mainly of Italian extraction. Yet they differ in important respects. They do not speak the Italian language. Their own patois is based on words from English, French, Spanish, Italian and Arabic. Eighty-six per cent. of the Maltese cannot understand Italian, and it is one of their main grievances that the court proceedings are in that language. They naturally consider they are being tried in a foreign tongue. Until Napoleon's time the language of the courts—(Continued on page 22.)