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LAY HEALERS AND SORCERERS IN MALTA (1770-1798)

What is the power of the mind over the body? What is the degree of psychological or psychic manipulation that may be exercised over any person? Selecting numerous cases indicating popular beliefs in the supernatural, and methods of folk medicine — from confessions before the Inquisition Tribunal — FRANCIS CIAPPARA here throws some light on the dubious faith of the simple man in moments of anguish as well as his ingenuity in moments of pain, including some most weird superstitious practices caused partly by medical insufficiency and partly by an exotic, if not actually magical, disposition to life. We may laugh, but these extreme cases are recorded as having actually happened throughout the Maltese Islands not so many generations ago; nor are beliefs relating to such things as the evil eye and “natural doctors” alien to contemporary Maltese society: and indeed there appears to be no ultimate explanation of the phenomenon other than, possibly, the simplistic disdain for “ignorance.” A more profound analysis of such a variety of anecdotes in the near future would certainly make a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of social history.*

Late 18th. century Malta was a bizarre world. A whole crowd of lay healers treated patients for various diseases — swollen feet, ringworm, pterygium, warts, jaundice. Even

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people under the effect of the evil-eye and the maghmul resorted to these charlatans; while sorcery was also indulged in to win some lady's hand, to bring a husband back, to find some treasure, to win at gambling. The examples mentioned in the article are taken from the lawsuits of the Inquisition; and hence, as they are based upon statements made under oath, they are a reliable source of information. Nor are they extreme cases either: similar instances could be repeated **ad nauseam**.

Doctors rendered their services both at the hospitals and in the towns and villages of Malta. But their expertise was frequently supplemented, if not substituted, by popular types of treatment. Pasquale Calafato, nicknamed "Ciausat", of Casai Attard counselled baths of sea water for swollen feet; while little children "who felt pain in their ribs owing to coagulated milk" were to have a hedgehog cut open and applied (while it was still warm) on the part which hurt them.¹ Giuseppe Falzon, a baptised slave who lived in the prison of Senglea, treated children for ringworm. He first shaved their heads, which he then smeared with gunpowder, lemon juice, crushed date stone, burnt bones of dogs' heads, and tarred hempen threads all mixed together. Angelo Bonello, a Gozitan who lived in Gudia in 1788, had his three children treated by Falzon. The treatment started a week after the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, and continued intermittently for about two months. The slave's services were asked for in other villages as well — Casal Zurric, Citta' Pinto, and Casal Zeitun; but according to Catarina Barbara no child was ever cured by him. Falzon even tried to cure Lorenza, an old woman from Gudia, who had been paralysed in bed for a very long time. He bled her hand, changed her clothes, and gave her a bath in which he put boiled orange-leaves, lemon-leaves, rosemary, wild thyme, and **grasso di bovemarino**. He even fumigated the room with benzoin to remove the offensive smell there was. Lorenza gave him, on different occasions, 16 tari, 8 tari, 1 scudo, and a bed-sheet. But he did not keep all the money to himself since he purchased for the old woman, amongst other things, some beef and a candle, which she was to light before the crucifix she kept in her room.²

Indeed, it was natural for a credulous and backward population to resort to the supernatural in their hour of need.

This is, in fact, the psychological basis of religion and the sense of hope and of the 'Big Brother' which it instils. Religion still held sway over the people, who with fervent faith prayed to God and the Saints to have mercy on them. When Elena Xerri of Birchircara was ill she put on her chest a 'small cross of Jerusalem' her confessor had given her.³ Maria Agius "ta' Suffeira" lived in the vicinity of the churches of the Saviour and the Annunciation at Casal Attard. In 1788, she treated an 18-year-old young man, nephew of Fr. Antonio Gristi, of the same village, for pterygium or — as it was called in the village jargon — "octopus". She passed a ring, which he himself had brought, over his eye, while reciting the following charm she had learnt when still a young girl:⁴

Salip InDeu,
 Santu Luca, San Matteu,
 handi Hainea tugiahni.
 Mur fdach il Ginien
 imscleitu brigleia
 saccheitu bi Iddimuh ta' haineia.
 Acta bisbiesa hilua
 u Imsah biha hainech
 u mur fl sciat il Bahar
 issip il carnit istaham,
 hafen seba hafniet ma seba meugiet,
 hasel haineich biesc isiru phal uardiet.
 Santa Maria Margarita
 tnahi lehbara mil carnita.

Angeluzza treated Catarina, both of Casal Zeitun, for the same eye-disease. She rubbed her eyes with the ring while they recited together the following singsong:⁵

I treat your eye, and I treat it again,
 and I will remove your octopus.
 Santa Lucia, Santa Margarita,
 remove the octopus
 and throw it into the sea,
 and don't let it appear again.
 Jesus Christ met his mother, Mary,
 and asked her, "Tell me, what ails thee?"
 "My eye hurts me", she answered.

"Go by the seaside
and find a herb watered with my sweat."
St. George on horse-back,
cure this young lady.

Maria Chetcuti, also of Zeitun, had warts on her face. She was advised to seek the services of Antonio, but she decided to be her own doctor. She rubbed the warts with three straws while reciting three creeds in honour of the birth of Our Lord, believing she would be cured by the merit of the straw on which He was born. Then she rubbed them with three small stones, and said three Hail Marys "in honour of those three stones on which David wrote the names of Jesus and Mary, and with which he killed Goliath". Next, she put the straws in a water-basin, and a month later the warts dropped off. Maria treated in like manner five other women, and, on her own testimony, they were all cured.⁶ When Maria Agius of Nasciar suffered from tooth-ache, her husband, Michele "ta' Ilhmar chibir", not only went to see the doctor, but he even asked the services of several priests who read the gospel over her head.⁷ Fr. Giuseppe Camilleri "tallacham" of Casal Zebbug, who lived near St. Roque's church, was in the habit of reading to people of all ages who suffered from jaundice. He charged 4 onze a time, besides receiving gifts of various sorts.⁸

Jaundice was, in fact, a common malady. The above-mentioned Pasquale had his own way of curing it, and his fame spread throughout the Island. He skimmed the patient's bare chest with a flint, which if its movement was obstructed, indicated he had contracted the disease. The two, then, made the sign of the cross, recited five times a Hail Mary, an Our Father, and the Glory Be in honour of the Holy Trinity; a Hail Mary and an Our Father in honour of St. Francis Xavier, St. Joseph, and all the Saints; and a "Salve Regina" in honour of Our Lady. In the meantime, he applied a piece of candle blessed on Candlemas Day (*xemgha tal-Kandlora*) and another piece of candle used in church on Maundy Thursday (*xemgha tat-tniebri*) to the patient's forehead, which he removed only at the end of the prayers. He fumigated the patient once every morning with blessed olive-branches, incense, and candles. Then with the ashes, he made three crosses on the forearm, the knees, and the shin-bone, saying each time: "Jesus fili Maria San

Giuseppe". The treatment went on for four, fifteen, or twenty days according to the gravity of the illness. By passing again the flint over the chest he knew whether the disease had been lifted or not. The testing-stone was bought by Giuseppe Agius for 100 scudi; but it was worth the price since he took up jaundice-treatment as a profession and brought up a family of eight.⁹

When ten years of age Valenza Agius "ta' Scueiha" — who lived between the parish church of Zebbug and the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows — had been taken by her mother to "Ciausat". Though she was cured, she was taken ill again nine years later, and notwithstanding the doctor's treatment she was confined to bed for a whole year. As her face changed colour her friends assured her she had jaundice and she resolved to cure herself the way Pasquale had done. After five days she was able to sit up in bed; and at the end of a fortnight she was cured. Several people started to seek her services, and she showed them not only how to conduct the treatment, but also that they should have faith and recite the prayers with devotion. She also continued to treat people herself: Grazia "tal Uersiech", Maria "ta' Cinquina", and Grazia "ta' Bergili" all died in hospital, while Rosa "ta' Tuila" and Grazia "ta' Dora" were both cured.¹⁰

Anna Gatt, Valenza's sister, was another lay-doctor. Her first experiment was made on two girls whose parents had brought them back from hospital and having succeeded, she was often called upon to cure jaundice. She treated not only people from Citta' Rohan, but wherever her services were called for, being paid 2 tari by each patient. The Vicar General had warned her to desist, but moved by pity, she continued with the treatment.¹¹ Catarina "ta' Catusi", of the same town, fumigated Rosa "ta' Succhett" with olive branches, and as these turned blackish she verified she had contracted the illness. Then, while praying undertone, she blessed her with the twigs' ashes and with a piece of candle. The treatment was repeated four times, but after a few days, Rosa was taken to hospital where she died after eleven days. Catarina also treated Ignazio Camilleri "tal Kajn" and his wife, Anna, and Giuseppe Cascun's wife, Rosa — all of Siggewi.¹² Giovanni Maria Mallia, also from Siggewi, used a lengthy and curious type of treatment. He started by fumigat-

ing the patient three times with blessed olive-branches; then he read from a book he had used at school the "Veni Creatur Spiritus", the creed in honour of the Heart of Jesus, the "Salve Regina" in honour of the Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the psalm "Nunc Dimittis Servum Tuum" in honour of Holy Jesus. With the ashes of the burnt olive-branches he made five signs of the cross on the forehead, on the hands, and on the knees. Next, he recited the first chapter of St. John's gospel, and the psalm "Qui Habitat in Adjuutorium". This ritual was repeated five times in honour of the five wounds of Jesus. ¹³

A man who lived in Valletta at the back of the monastery of St. Mary Magdalene had his own peculiar way of curing people from jaundice. He diagnosed the disease by looking fixedly into their eyes. Then he measured with a piece of string the length and breadth of their bodies keeping their arms outstretched. The remaining part of the string he cut into pieces which he threw on the head, the chest, and on the feet, while looking now at the picture of St. Elia and now at the patient's eyes, and muttering "Beato Sant Elia, ed in mezzo di Maria." Maria, wife of Giovanni "ta' Mastru Bertu", Francesca "ta' Caccia", Catarina, wife of Angelo Muscat "ta Scariu", and Angela, wife of Agostino "tal Paia", all of Città Pinto went to be treated by him. He demanded 3 tarl from each as stipends for masses to be said at the altar of St. Elia; but they even gave him a dozen eggs, and all except Catarina were cured after visiting him more than once. ¹⁴

When no remedy could be found the Maltese attributed many of their infirmities to witchcraft rather than to natural causes. They firmly believed, as some still do, in the evil-eye. The Inquisitor, Mgr. Zondadari, tried to understand this belief of the people "tenaciously attached to their various customs". It was — so was he assured — the effect of poison which passed from people's eyes into what they looked at. ¹⁵

Salvatore Calleja "ta' Chnanet" of Città Rohan recognised people under the effect of this spell. He put some water and some salt in a white clay plate, blessed it and recited thrice a Holy Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory Be in honour of the Holy Trinity. Then he put two or three drops of oil into the plate. If these scattered, it was a sign the patient was bewitched, and the same experiment was repeated twice

more, each time using fresh water, salt and oil. This secret was taught to him by his father, to whom in turn it had been revealed by a Capuchin friar, a relative of his. His daughter, Grazia Vassallo "ta' Prans", who lived in the vicinity of the church of Our Lady of Light, treated Anna's child; Grazia's five-year-old daughter, Teresa, Teresa wife of Francesco "ta' Cantonieri"; and the mare of Giuseppe "ta' Mas", which would neither eat nor rise from the ground, but which later regained its health. Grazia's sister, Lorenza, wife of Francesco "ta' Zeit", treated a child of Domenico "il Gerrei".¹⁶

Maria Teresa of Senglea fumigated patients with blessed olive branches, palm-branches, and incense while reciting the following charm she had been taught by Catarina Coppola:¹⁷

Occiatura, Scantatura,
 Sana sia chista creatura
 due l'anni innociatu
 tri l'anni Sanctu
 il Padre, il figlio, lo Spirito Sancto.
 Santissima Trinita,
 Giusu' Christu colla catina,
 questo male si ritira.
 Giusu' Christu culla colonna,
 questo male mai non torna.
 Giusu' Christu culla crucl,
 chiestu mali si riduci.

These evil-eye healers, generally women, were to be found in most villages of Malta. At Rabat: Teresa, widow of Tomaso "ta' Rasu", who lived in the region of **dar hanzira**; Maddalena "ta' Ciacias"; Anna "ta' bsara" from **hariescem**, and Teresa "ta' Temp" were known to practice this type of healing.¹⁸ While at Nasciar practiced Anna "ta' Cintiu"¹⁹ and Paolica Galea "ta' Randun" who resided in the area **Ta' Bir il Hut**. The latter not only recited a Hail Mary and a "Salve Regina", but she even told the infirm:²⁰

May God set you free from the evil eye.
 May God liberate you from the wicked eye.
 May the sea come with velocity and go like a wave.

May the eye as black as mulberry
come out like the ringworm.

At Casal Lia, the inhabitants resorted to the help of Anna "ta' Chetra" and to Anna "ta' Coggia", widow of Andrea Fenech. In 1789, the latter treated Maria, wife of Aloisio Mifsud "ta' Pulitu" whom she fumigated three times, while reciting the "Salve Regina" and a popular saying: ²¹

iech il hain hi cahla tmur phal nahla
u iech il hain hi zercha tmur phal berca.

The evil-eye, however, was not the only fear under which the Maltese lived. The maghmul was another kind of spell brought about on a lock of hair, nail-parings, a piece of cloth. It afforded an easy explanation when medicine could bring no relief. Maria Grech "il Pamplona" of Birchircara was in such pain that she threw herself on the ground, screaming. Dr. Perdon and the surgeon Michele Grillet assured her it was calculus; but as they could not cure her, nothing could convince her and her neighbours that it was not the result of witchcraft. She had lived in concubinage with Battista Zarb for fourteen years before settling down with Giovanni "ta' Mincuzza"; and he must surely have cast a spell on her to avenge himself. She started to be treated by Hammuda, the Turk, even though her confessor, the Capuchin friar Anselmo, forbade her betake herself to him. Such was her faith in him that she did not mind regaining her health even from the devil "now that I would soon be cured", and when she had already spend 50 scudi. ²²

Anna Maria "ta' Corom" of Burmola threatened to avenge herself on Margarita Schembri and on her sister, Maria, when they turned her friend out of a house they owned. They found a lock of hair hanging from a nail, which Fr. Giovanni removed with a cane and threw into the fire, while he read the Gospel over their head, and encouraged them to fear nothing. But then a series of misfortunes started which made them believe they were really under the effect of a spell. After four months their brother, Angelo Farrugia, drowned after his boat had sunk. Then it was Maria's turn, followed by her two daughters', Margarita, aged 16, and 23-year-old Giovanna. Their mattresses were thought to be

infected, and were burnt. The spell had worked.²³ Giuseppe "ta' Seppu l'ahmar" of Città Rohan wished to see his sister, Maria, who lived near the church of Uletchirda, dead. He placed on her door's threshold three nails, a little salt, a piece of fried meat, and a lock of hair, which he then assured her was only a sham, the hair being violin chords. But in 1787, an old woman from Floriana went to visit her and assured her a death spell had been cast on her. She gave her some water of St. Feliciano to drink; but as she refused, the old woman blessed her arms and told her to hang the bottle behind the door.²⁴ Giuseppe Callus "tal Hut" of Casal Saffi had illicit relations with Francesca Bonel "il Haucia" of Casal Gudia. After a while he left her to return to his wife. Francesca made it publicly known she would exterminate both him and his wife. Giuseppe believed her since she went on board the galleys to talk to the convicts and to the Turks, who were wont to cast such spells. Thus, on 15 May 1793, he appeared before the Tribunal of the Inquisition and asked Mgr. Carpegna to protect him.²⁵ Elisabetta Dorel of Vittoriosa cast a spell *ad mortem* on her husband, through the services of Palma, a Neapolitan woman.²⁶

To break these spells all kinds of incomprehensible methods were resorted to, which were, in fact, nothing more than easy means to earn good money. In 1786, Pietro Pace of Casal Lia was assured by a doctor at the **Sacra Infermeria** there was no remedy for his eye disease. For 24 tarl a Turk gave him some ointment to apply to his eyes, which he was also to fumigate with eight pieces of paper.²⁷ When in 1775 Felice Schembri "ta' Breita" of Casal Musta felt unwell, two Turks gave him a flint with many signs on it. He drank the water into which he had put the stone, but it was all in vain.²⁸ In 1777, Giovanna Borg of Burmola gave a biscuit to Rosa Stivala. That same night she had a bad stomach ache, which the doctors Seichel, Cerdon, Creni, and Consoli could not diagnose; and, thus, Giuseppe, her husband, suspected it was some piece of witchcraft. Her mother ordered Giovanna leave her daughter in peace; but she kissed the ground, and thanked God that Rosa would never rise up from bed, and would soon die. The Church believed in the power of such spells, and the poor woman was exorcised by the Dominican Fr. Vincenzo Aquilina, and by Fr. Fulgentio, a Franciscan friar.

Maria Mangion, also of Burmola, had been insane for twenty years, and she could regain her health neither by spiritual nor by medicinal means. Her sister, Catarina, widow of Pasquale Carciella, sought the services of a Turk, who fumigated her with benzoin and "cosbor" and passed a sheet of paper over the fire. The outline of a face and some letters soon could be made out on the paper, which drawings had been made by the Spirits who would cure Maria and whom the slave tied to a tree in the outskirts of Zabbar. To pay the Turk for this worthless service, Catarina gave him a hen and 10 scudi after she had pawned her clothes.³⁰ Rosaria's husband, Paolo Gambin of Valletta, was in chains at the mental hospital. His father-in-law, Saverio Savona, took pity on him, and procured for him all medical remedies available, and had readings made over him by many priests. As a last resort, he summoned the help of Gaetano Schembri, a baptised slave, who wrote some letters on a "lampuca", cut off its head, roasted it and gave it to Paolo, who also drank the wine with which Gaetano had washed the plate.³¹ When in 1784, Giuseppe Bonello's wife, Rosa, of Siggeui was sick with dropsy, Francesco "il Barbir" gave her a jar of honey and spices, and three pieces of paper written with the blood of a chicken Rosa had given him to fumigate herself with.³²

It seems incredible that the people did not see through the Turks' machinations, and let themselves be made fun of and robbed time and time again. But desperate as they were they had nobody to turn to except these charlatans, who were their last hope, and in whom they so firmly believed. Lorenzo, son of Catarina Aquilina of Siggeui, was paralysed in the legs. His mother believed this was the sinister work of Maria Anna, her former servant who had given him two "ravioli" to eat. Her brother, Giovanni Maria Balzan, a soldier on the Order's galleys, asked the help of a Turk, who gave him three pieces of paper with which to fumigate Lorenzo's legs, while three other sheets of paper were to be put in water and vinegar which the boy was to drink. It was all in vain, though the experiments had cost 9 tari. He even got worse; and Giuseppe, a neophyte, gave him some ointment to use on his joints, and some blessed olive-leaves to fumigate him while invoking the name of God. Catarina now paid 2 onze, but again without result. Lastly, Agata "Cinclejna" took pity on her, and won the services of another

baptised slave, who gave her some lentils with which to fumigate Lorenzo's legs. He was likewise paid 2 onze.³³ Feliciano Brincat of Valletta was impotent and let himself be fooled several times. The slave Giuseppe "ta' Karrup" gave him a little piece of lead to put into the water which he had to drink during three days. Another slave gave him seven boiled eggs to eat, and eight written pieces of paper to swallow one at a time. Hibraim gave him some fried dog's meat to throw into a canal; Harabi, two eggs, written on the outside, to eat; Hali, some ground pepper mixed with honey to swallow. The last slave, even gave him some grass roots and a few written pieces of paper to boil and drink, and a heart drawn on a paper to pierce with pins.³⁴

In cases when the illness took its natural course, people believed they had been cured by the Turk's power. A slave of Valletta was so sure of his type of treatment that he would be paid only if it succeeded. In 1776, he gave two written pieces of paper and some powder to Clemento Zarb of Gargur, whose son, Luca, was mentally ill. The boy was to be sprinkled with the powder and to drink the hot water in which the writing was dissolved. Luca made some improvement and his chains were removed.³⁵ Maria Bezzina of Naxar, however, returned to the slave and reprimanded him for having robbed her of 5 scudi. But he knew how to get out of tight corners. The small bottle of red liquid which he had given her to treat her son's eyes with was a good prescription, but another spell had been cast on him, which it was beyond his powers to cure.³⁶

These treatments could lead the patients into trouble. Giuseppe Vassallo of Burmola had been married to Rosa "ta' Hasra" for 35 years; but when he went blind in 1771, she turned him out of the house, and took as her lover Antonio Sultana who lived near St. Paul's church, Michammet, a slave at the "bagno" of Vittoriosa, promised to cure him. He burned a piece of paper, put the ashes into some wine which he gave him to drink, made him swallow a pill, and washed his eyes with water. At once, Giuseppe felt a stomach ache, and his tongue got swollen. He was taken to the **Sacra Infermeria** where he was treated; but as it was in vain, he made his way to "that Friar Minor who reads the Holy Gospel over people's heads". He put some oil of St. Anthony on his tongue, pressed it, and at once there issued a stream of blood. Giuseppe felt

relieved. "You need not go to hospital", the friar told him "go to the Holy Office".³⁷

Late 18th century Malta was a strange world. Sorcery was used not only to cure diseases, but for various other purposes. Maria Sayd of Burmola lived near the church of St. John "ta' Huscia". Her daughter, Concetta, was badly treated by her husband, Saverio, who abandoned her. Hibraim promised to bring him back and make him give up gambling. He demanded a piece of his clothes and some salt, and put a paper on the fire in which yellow letters appeared.³⁸ Maria Pavia, of Valletta, was equally disturbed when her husband, Giovanni Battista, left her and their six children for another. In 1788, she asked the help of a Turkish shoe-repairer, who gave her a piece of paper to sew inside her husband's dress. Of the 30 tari he demanded, she gave him only five; but as it was to no avail, she asked the services of another slave who tried to violate her as payment.³⁹ Francesca "Tscellughia" of Gudia was badly treated by her parents and by her sister, Maria, who bit her arm and her shoulder. She asked Francesca Bonello, who lived near the Annunciation Church, to make them consent to her marrying a young man who then (in 1788) was away from the Island, and to give her as dowry the piece of land called "ta' Borrison". She dissolved some starch in water which she gave them to drink, while she kept some of her own hair in her blouse's sleeve.⁴⁰ Salvatore Saliba of Casal Chercop returned home drunk almost every day and made love to his wife in front of their six daughters and four sons. She always consented since he threatened to kill her; but at last a Turk promised to make him impotent. The slave let her sit down on his knees, whispered something in her ears which she did not understand, and then assured her that she would have the required wish. But it availed her nothing.⁴¹ Fortunato Sacchet of Senglea not only could not maintain his family, he even beat his wife, Vincenza, with a stick. His wife had no one to turn to, being an orphan; but one day, as she was in tears at her door's entrance, a slave passed by. He gave her a scrap of paper with some words written on it to put inside her husband's pillow. But when Fortunato found it, he beat her badly!⁴²

Even husbands resorted to the Turks' help. Giuseppe Moraghes of Valletta was abandoned by his wife when he

went blind. For 20 tari a slave gave him a heart of stone to throw into the sea. ⁴³ Lucio Micallef, who lived in the outskirts of Birchircara, led a desperate life on account of his wife's infidelity. A slave, who was blind in one eye, succeeded in defrauding him of 15 tari on each of the first two occasions he tried to help Micallef, and a dozen eggs, half a loaf of bread and 13 tari on the third. ⁴⁴ The cleric, Lorenzo Bugeia, of Rabat, was in love with a married woman, Maria "ruch ittaiba" of Mdina. When his wife came to know of the affair, he sought the help of a Turk who gave him a cane filled with salt to throw into the house-well. He was also to fumigate himself with some odoriferous matter, and to burn three pieces of his lover's blouse. ⁴⁵

Both Lorenzo Muscat "haten berchucin" who lived at Musta near "ta' Cumbo" tower ⁴⁶ and Francesco Demartino of Valletta ⁴⁷ asked the help of slaves to win the hand of the lady they loved. Giuseppe Chercop "il Cenacolo" of Casal Chercop tried his own experiment. He put some of his own sperm in a piece of bread just out of the oven, and gave it to his love to eat! A Turk gave Simone Xicluna "ta' Tombu" of Casal Tarxen an egg, and some wine to pour on the ground over which his lady passed. ⁴⁸ In 1789, Michele Xerri "ta' Tantailo" of St. Roque Street, Valletta, quarrelled with his lover. To make her come back, he held across his face a red handkerchief which a corsair had sprinkled with some powder while he held it over the fire. ⁴⁹

Sorcery was resorted to for various purposes. Antonio Dimech of Valletta wanted the mare of Baron Pietro Paolo Testaferrata take first prize in the races held annually on the feast of St. John the Baptist. A Turk gave him two pieces of paper to put on its forehead; a second slave went round the animal several times holding a plate with some water; while a third put a paper on the mare's forehead and another on its back. ⁵⁰ Antonia Magri of Senglea, in order to get rid of the misery she was in, sprinkled a soft-toy with anisette, and beat it with a stick for five consecutive days. ⁵¹ Nicola Borg "ta' Hleila" of Siggeui ⁵² and Francesco Camilleri of Naxar ⁵³ sought the services of a Turk to win at gambling; while Antonio Mallia of Senglea asked the help of Ibrahim when his ten-year-old daughter, Felicita, lost her golden necklace in church. ⁵⁴

Palmistry was not unknown. In 1787, on the feast of

Our Lady of Carmel, Teresa, wife of Ignazio Camenzuli, of Rabat, took her children to the house of Maria Vassallo at Mdina, where an unknown woman of Vittoriosa interpreted their hands. Maria who had contracted jaundice twice, looked well after the house and her parents, had suffered three terrible frights, was devoted to Our Lady, had had many suitors, and she would inherit a great sum of money. Anna, who easily lost her patience, had three children and she would give birth to another four. Rosa could earn good money by practising a skill she had. Teresa had brought a fat dowry; and she would give birth to nine boys. Maria Vassallo had been on the point of death, and had extreme unction administered to her. Vincenza, of Casal Chercop, would have a devoted husband, but her newly-born child would die soon after baptism, and even she would be severely ill.⁵⁵ Another palmist was Manena of Strait Street. She looked at the hand of Vittoria Ellul and assured her that her son would not be imprisoned. She even had a magic magnet which she had borrowed from Giuseppe, a baptised slave, for 18 tari a month. Vittoria kept it for a night so that her lover would return to her. She placed the magnet under the pillow he used to sleep on.⁵⁶

Treasure-hunting was a common pastime. In 1774, Giovanni Maria Bonello of Casal Naxar was assured by Mahruf, the barber, there was a treasure hidden at *hain targia*. He was swindled of 60 scudi before he realized that he was being fooled.⁵⁷ As proof of her power at treasure-finding, Anna Delicata of Città Pinto prophesied to Rosalia and her husband, Giuseppe Borg, they would hear knocking on their bed chamber door. As all this happened they believed her, but they were defrauded of 5 scudi and a black cockerel. Anna also tricked Grazia, wife of Angelo "ta' Mascu", Elisabetta, wife of Giovanni "ta' Gaitu", Francesco Gristi and his children, Michele and his wife, Maria Ciangura, and Anna.⁵⁸ Both Giovanni Vassallo of Valletta,⁵⁹ and Giuseppe Barbara "ta' Sebha irgiel" of Casal Gudia⁶⁰ were likewise taken in, but not Paolo Caruana, the cab-driver of Bailiff Frisani.⁶¹ Antonio Spinella of Augusta, Giuseppe Bugela "ta' l'auditur" of Città Pinto, and the latter's uncle, Fr. Giorgio Tanti of Valletta, went treasure-hunting in an underground cave at *hain chaïet*, limits of Rabat.⁶²

It is no wonder that the mass of the people believed in

witchcraft when even priests did. When Fr. Orazio Xicluna's mother, of Casal Luca, died, his father started an affaire and turned him out of the house. Giovanni Muscat of Casal Tarken advised him seek the help of some slave, who gave him a written piece of paper to tie round his arm with some green ribbon.⁶³ In 1788, Fr. Nicola Magri of Città Rohan was falsely charged by his sisters of having robbed them. On that account he even lost the friendship of Fr. Salvatore Tabone, and of Eugenia Moneta. He, thus, commissioned Giovanni Camilleri "ta' Tajar", who lived near the church of Our Lady of Light, to find him a slave to prove his innocence. He burned a piece of paper and mixed its ashes with a pinch of snuff which he gave to Fr. Tabone; and he put some powder on the door's threshold through which Eugenia passed.⁶⁴ When in 1780, the Conventual Chaplain Fr. Stefano Caroana wanted to regain the love of a woman, he resorted to the galley-convict, Antonio Vollero, a Neapolitan, to cast a spell upon her.⁶⁵ Fr. Michele sought the services of the "forzato" Bernardino Cerfella of Aquila, to make him invisible and avenge himself on the Conventual Prior. The sorcerer smeared the soles of his feet with oil, put the head of a black cat on the floor between two candles while the priest read the divine office, and, as a last resort, he put a genie inside a ring which was to answer all Fra Michele's wishes.⁶⁶

These experiments were only a means to deceive the common folk, who led a "hand to mouth" existence, Gaetano Schembri cast a spell on Catarina's lover, but, he said, "I knew very well that was impossible. I did it only to earn 16 tari, being very much in need that day".⁶⁷ Giuseppe Maria was equally frank. He dabbled in palmistry, but only because he was dismally poor: especially in winter when work was so scarce.⁶⁸ Giuseppe de Durino assured Nicola Vassallo of Siggeui that there was a treasure hidden in his garden; and he only needed a hen for the experiment which would allegedly lead to its discovery; he ate the hen but failed to find the treasure. This charlatan used a simple device to deceive the Maltese: he made drawings with lemon-juice, which were recognised only when passed over the fire. He delineated the figure of Maria "il Ahchieca" and made Anna Delicata "tal Cubrit" of Casal Curmi believe it had been she who had cast a spell on her. It had been manufactured out of some hair twisted round a comb, which Giuseppe himself hid in the

garden wall. "I did all this to have free access to Anna's house with whom I had illicit relations, while deceiving her husband with vain promises". Moreover, he was supplied with all the vegetables he needed.⁶⁹

Although they were often blatantly deceived, the people still regarded these weird experiment as their last hope. The case of Nicola Ciantar of Rabat amply summarises this attitude. He was swindled 1 French oz. by a Turk, but he confessed: "if he had asked me for a higher price, I would have paid it all the same".⁷⁰ Superstition, in fact, held the inhabitants firmly in its grip. In 1769, the Capitular Vicar, Fr. Pietro Francesco Gristi, had exhorted all parish priests and confessors to extirpate this "pestiferous venom". At least twice a year, they were to preach to their parishioners about the grave harm which such errors brought to their souls as well as to the Divine cult.⁷¹ But the church's injunction to refrain from such practices carried no weight when the people's misery could end simply by reciting a prayer or by burning a piece of paper. Not that Malta was backward medically: foreigners — Greeks and Sicilians, among others — came here to study.⁷² But when medicine proved to no avail, some inhabitants sought the helping hand of lay-healers, generally women, who were invariably, to be found in the towns and villages of the Island.

- 1 Archives of the Inquisition, Malta, **Processi**, Gallarati-Scotti, Lawsuit 99. As this study is based on material taken from the proceedings of the Inquisition, only the name of the Inquisitor and the number of the lawsuit are given.
- 2 Scotti, 186.
- 3 Scotti, 85.
- 4 Scotti, 99. Cf., A.C., "Folklore Malti". **Il-Malti**, (March, 1931), pp. 17-18; M.A., "Folklore Malti". **Il-Malti**, (June, 1931), p. 68; J. Cassar-Pullicino, **An Introduction to Maltese Folklore**, (Malta, 1947), pp. 15-16.
- 5 Zondadari, 224.
- 6 Zondadari, 68.
- 7 Carpegna, 1.
- 8 Lante, 168.
- 9 Lante, 106.
- 10 Scotti, 246.
- 11 Scotti, 99.
- 12 Scotti, 99.
- 13 Zondadari, 292.
- 14 Scotti, 117.
- 15 A.I.M., **Corrispondenza**, 96, ff.275 v-276 r. Cf., A. Cremona, "Race, Language, and Myth", **Melita**, Vol. 1 (1921), pp. 400-402; V. Busuttill, **Holiday Customs in Malta**, (Malta, 1922) pp. 138-139.
- 16 Scotti, 236.

- 17 Zondadari, 242.
- 18 Zondadari, 23.
- 19 Scotti, 190.
- 20 Carpegna, 8.
- 21 Scotti, 251.
- 22 Lante, 1.
- 23 Lante, 113.
- 24 Scotti, 148.
- 25 Carpegna, 35.
- 26 Scotti, 74.
- 27 Scotti, 49.
- 28 Zondadari, 22.
- 29 Zondadari, 65.
- 30 Scotti, 111.
- 31 Carpegna, 179.
- 32 Zondadari, 365.
- 33 Scotti, 106.
- 34 Scotti, 163.
- 35 Lante, 165.
- 36 Carpegna, 28.
- 37 Lante, 94.
- 38 Scotti, 126.
- 39 Scotti, 191.
- 40 Scotti, 105.
- 41 Carpegna, 22.
- 42 Zondadari, 52.
- 43 Zondadari, 246.
- 44 Scotti, 51.
- 45 Lante, 101.
- 46 Scotti, 80.
- 47 Scotti, 78.
- 48 Scotti, 121.
- 49 Scotti, 129.
- 50 Scotti, 13.
- 51 Lante, 171.
- 52 Scotti, 98.
- 53 Carpegna, 169.
- 54 Scotti, 128.
- 55 Scotti, 113.
- 56 Scotti, 230.
- 57 Lante, 119.
- 58 Scotti, 117.
- 59 Scotti, 203.
- 60 Scotti, 257.
- 61 Scotti, 265.
- 62 Scotti, 34.
- 63 Zondadari, 259.
- 64 Scotti, 161.
- 65 Scotti, 94.
- 66 Scotti, 79A.
- 67 Carpegna, 179.
- 68 Lante, 34.
- 69 Lante, 39.
- 70 Scotti, 178.
- 71 Archives of the Archbishop, Malta, **Secretariat, Corrispondenza**, Vol. XVL f.7 v.
- 72 Lante, 187.