

WISH VS THE WIND SOUTH



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NOTES  
ON THE  
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NOTES OF A NATURALIST  
IN THE  
NILE VALLEY AND MALTA

A NARRATIVE OF EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH IN CONNECTION WITH THE  
NATURAL HISTORY, GEOLOGY, AND ARCHÆOLOGY OF THE  
LOWER NILE AND MALTESE ISLANDS.

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Denizens of the Egyptian Palm Groves.

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or about the towns and villages, not a blade of grass or plant of any sort is there to gladden the eye or relieve the glare of a semi-tropical sun.<sup>1</sup> The great heat of the day rendering outdoor pursuits unpleasant from the want of tree and shade, I was compelled at this season to restrict my excursions to the early morning and afternoon.

*Reptiles.*—The quantities of loose stones and bare rocks offer tempting retreats for scorpions, snakes, and lizards. The latter are very plentiful, more especially the common lizard (*Podarcis muralis*), which may be seen basking on almost every stone by the road-side. Scarcely two are marked alike; the brightness and variety of their hues are most beautiful and attractive, and, like the chameleon, they change colour with the coruscations of sunshine, but of course not to the same extent. During an excursion to the islet of Filfla, on the southern coast of Malta, in the month of June, I was surprised to find that all the lizards on the rock were of a beautiful bronze black, and so much tamer than their agile brethren on the mainland. Many individuals were so tame that they scrambled about our feet, and fed on the refuse of our luncheon. I subsequently sent specimens of this variety, or rather race, to England, and had them confirmed as being identical with the above species. How are we to account for all the lizards being black on this little rock, not more than 600 yards in circumference, and only three miles distant from Malta, seeing that, during six years' sojourn in Malta and Gozo, I never observed one black individual? unless we suppose that two or more dark-coloured varieties had been either introduced, or were left on the

<sup>1</sup> The cultivated districts of the islands amount to 54,716 acres; the uncultivated, or rather rocky and irreclaimable districts, compose 46,810 acres.—*Smyth's Mediterranean*.

islet when the subsidence took place which severed it from the mainland; the latter I will show to be clearly defined by the opposite fault or downthrow, of which Filfla is a fragment. We found the stormy petrel, Manx, and the cinereous shearwaters breeding in the crevices of the rock, the two latter so tame that many were actually captured in their nests. The eggs are pure white.

None of the Maltese snakes are poisonous,—a rather remarkable circumstance, for, according to bibliologists, it was here that the apostle Paul was bitten by the “venomous beast,” which “he shook off and felt no harm.”<sup>1</sup> The spotted snake (*Callopeltis leopardinus*) and the *Coluber viridiflavus* are the only two vipers; both are plentiful, but exceedingly timid. This is not, however, the case in Sicily. I recollect mounting a hill behind Messina one afternoon, and so abundant and indifferent was the former species, that I had to look out in order not to tread on them; indeed, it was only when touched with our alpenstocks that they would move, whilst other individuals glided off for a short distance, and, as we approached, they reared up as if to set us at defiance. Several other lacertine species, besides that described, are met with in Malta, including the *Ascalabotes mauritanicus*, *Hemidactylus trichedrus*, and *Gongylus ocellatus*. The sea-tortoise (*Thalassochelys caretta*) is frequently seen in the market, and in the immediate vicinity of the islands; and, lastly, the frog (*Discoglossus pictus*).

The Maltese and Italians indulge in a dish by no means inviting to Englishmen; but I have been assured by the lower classes, to whom it is most welcome, that that most

<sup>1</sup> Maltese historians mention certain native earths and clays esteemed as remedies. St. Paul's earth was supposed to be an antidote for snake-bites, and the terra sigillata Melitæ was considered cordial and sudorific.—See *Boisglin's Malta*.

loathsome-looking mollusc, the octopod, better known as the poulpe,<sup>1</sup> when stewed with tomatoes and other vegetables, is extremely savoury; and the same of the calamary. I have seen a fisherman spend an afternoon hunting after a single poulpe, which they generally catch in baited basket-nets. The species usually observed were the *Octopus quoyanus* and the *Eledone, octopodia* of Aristotle, mentioned also by Homer. Both are plentiful along the rocky shores of the islands, but are not easily captured.

*Mammals.*—The indigenous quadrupeds are not numerous, and comprehend only the weasel, hedgehog, rabbit, horse-shoe, and long-eared bats. The first affects the dikes and stony places, but is not common; the hedgehog and rabbit cultivated tracts. The latter is seemingly a variety with a sparser fur, and lighter brown shades on the upper parts than the rabbit of Northern Europe.<sup>2</sup> It burrows in the marl-heaps in sequestered parts along the coast-line, but is nowhere common.

The domesticated animals of Malta, more especially

<sup>1</sup> In France they are both stewed and fried, and, among our own fishermen on board the trawlers, the young cuttles are frequently eaten. In Mr. Campbell of Islay's delightful book, *Life in Normandy*, an epicure says, "Let us take a small glass of this Spanish wine, and then I must beg you to try the cuttle-fish. I have taken them under my own special care, and I am anxious they should please you, for I can answer that the eyes were properly extracted, and every fish has been well hammered." For those interested in the subject, I would refer them to this book. The poulpe holds on most tenaciously by means of its many suckers. I know of an instance where one gained admittance into a bathing-house on the shore of Malta, and nearly caused a child to be drowned by twisting the long arms around its legs.

<sup>2</sup> Although there is every facility for rabbits to increase, especially among the rocky parts along the southern coasts, they are not plentiful, perhaps for the reason that they have formidable enemies in man and the weasel.