

A NOTE ON ALFRED DE VIGNY AND MALTA

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Before retiring to private life and following an exclusively literary career, Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863) had spent a total of thirteen years in the French army. He was never able to forget, however, his earlier vocation, and it was a tribute to certain traits he admired in soldiers, whether as a class or as individuals, that he wrote his prose masterpiece, *Servitude et grandeur militaires*, which he published in book form in 1835. In one of the stories in this collection, "La Vie et la mort du capitaine Renaud ou la canne de jonc," the hero, on the very day that the July Revolution of 1830 was to break out, tells the narrator some of his more memorable adventures. One of these has to do with his father's taking him, at the age of twelve, on the French invasion of Egypt in 1798. To his curious listener Captain Renaud mentions how, standing beside his father on the bridge of the *Junon*, he watched Corsica, Sardinia, then Sicily glide by. Then...

"One morning, it was..., yes, it was 24 Prairial, I saw, at daybreak, moving out in front of me a picture that dazzled me for twenty years.

There stood Malta with its forts, its cannon even with the water, its long walls shining in the sun like pieces of newly polished marble, and its hive of thin little galleys racing about on long red oars. One hundred ninety-four French ships wrapped it in their vast sails and their red, white, and blue flags which, at that moment, were being raised on every pole, while the Order's pennant slowly came down over Gozo and Fort St. Elmo: it was the last militant cross falling. Then the fleet fired five hundred salvos."

Unfortunately this is all, except for one or two allusions, for the scene quickly changes and the narrative is concerned with later episodes in the captain's career. May it be said in conclusion that one of Vigny's grand-uncles had been a Commander of Malta, and as a young man he could have seen a painting of the Commander bringing captured Turkish vessels into port. Perhaps it was this which caused him to arrange in his story for the brief but splendid view of Malta. The inclusion of Malta served no plot purpose whatever. It is curious too that however well he described the impact it produced upon one seeing it for the first time, in reality Vigny was never to experience the sensation personally.