

Selections from: The Book of Marco Polo

Written: 1298 AD

From the Introductory Chapters:

## PROLOGUE.

Great Princes, Emperors, and Kings, Dukes and Marquises, Counts, Knights, and Burgesses! and People of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of the various races of mankind and of the diversities of the sundry regions of the World, take this Book and cause it to be read to you. For ye shall find therein all kinds of wonderful things, and the divers histories of the Great Hermenia, and of Persia, and of the Land of the Tartars, and of India, and of many another country of which our Book doth speak, particularly and in regular succession, according to the description of Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, as he saw them with his own eyes.

Some things indeed there be therein which he beheld not; but these he heard from men of credit and veracity. And we shall set down things seen as seen, and things heard as heard only, so that no jot of falsehood may mar the truth of our Book, and that all who shall read it or hear it read may put full faith in the truth of all its contents.

For let me tell you that since our Lord God did mould with his hands our first Father Adam, even until this day, never hath there been Christian, or Pagan, or Tartar, or Indian, or any man of any nation, who in his own person hath had so much knowledge and experience of the divers parts of the World and its Wonders as hath had this Messer Marco! And for that reason he bethought himself that it would be a very great pity did he not cause to be put in writing all the great marvels that he had seen, or on sure information heard of, so that other people who had not these advantages might, by his Book, get such knowledge.

And I may tell you that in acquiring this knowledge he spent in those various parts of the World good six-and-twenty years. Now, being thereafter an inmate of the Prison at Genoa, he caused Messer Rusticiano of Pisa, who was in the said Prison likewise, to reduce the whole to writing; and this befell in the year 1298 from the birth of Jesus.

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*(Note by Charianne Quille: For reasons not completely clear, due to conflict of some sort no doubt, Marco Polo was taken captive, alive, and held in prison. Can we not see God's hand in preserving him and placing him where his accounts could be written? And where he would*

*have the time and focus to do so. God's invisible and caring hand is seen by also providing Marco Polo with an inmate capable of the task of creating the written work, and determined to do so. I'm reminded of other greats, whose best work was done while the confinement of the same: John Bunyan, St. Paul, and such.*

*In the book "The Travels of Marco Polo, Part 1" it says:*

*A learned Frenchman... in reference to the meeting of Polo and Rusticiano [says]: "In 1298, being in durance in the Prison of Genoa, he there became acquainted with Marco Polo, whom the Genoese had deprived of his liberty \_from motives equally unknown\_." \_Paulin Paris, Les Manuscrits François de la Bibliothèque du Roi\_, ii. 355.)*

It came to pass in the year of Christ 1260, when Baldwin was reigning at Constantinople, that Messer Nicolas Polo, the father of my lord Mark, and Messer Maffeo Polo, the brother of Messer Nicolas, were at the said city of Constantinople, whither they had gone from Venice with their merchants' wares.

Now these two Brethren, men singularly noble, wise, and provident, took counsel together to cross the Greater Sea on a venture of trade; so they laid in a store of jewels and set forth from Constantinople, crossing the Sea to Soldaia."

Having stayed a while at Soldaia, they considered the matter, and thought it well to extend their journey further. So they set forth from Soldaia and travelled till they came to the Court of a certain Tartar Prince, BARCA KAAAN by name, whose residences were at SARA and at BOLGARA [and who was esteemed one of the most liberal and courteous Princes that ever was among the Tartars.]

This Barca was delighted at the arrival of the Two Brothers, and treated them with great honour; so they presented to him the whole of the jewels that they had brought with them. The Prince was highly pleased with these, and accepted the offering most graciously, causing the Brothers to receive at least twice its value."

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After they had passed the desert, they arrived at a very great and noble city called BOCARA, the territory of which belonged to a king whose name was Barac, and is also called Bocara. The city is the best in all Persia.

And when they had got thither, they found they could neither proceed further forward nor yet turn back again; wherefore they abode in that city of Bocara for three years.

And whilst they were sojourning in that city, there came from Alau, Lord of the Levant, Envoys on their way to the Court of the Great Kaan, the Lord of all the Tartars in the world. And when the Envoys beheld the Two Brothers they were amazed, for they had never before seen Latins in that part of the world.

And they said to the Brothers: "Gentlemen, if ye will take our counsel, ye will find great honour and profit shall come thereof." So they replied that they would be right glad to learn how.

"In truth," said the Envoys, "the Great Kaan hath never seen any Latins, and he hath a great desire so to do. Wherefore, if ye will keep us company to his Court, ye may depend upon it that he will be right glad to see you, and will treat you with great honour and liberality; whilst in our company ye shall travel with perfect security, and need fear to be molested by nobody."

So when the Two Brothers had made their arrangements, they set out on their travels, in company with the Envoys, and journeyed for a whole year, going northward and north-eastward, before they reached the Court of that Prince.

And on their journey they saw many marvels of divers and sundry kinds, but of these we shall say nothing at present, because Messer Mark, who has likewise seen them all, will give you a full account of them in the Book which follows.

When the Two Brothers got to the Great Kaan, he received them with great honour and hospitality, and showed much pleasure at their visit, asking them a great number of questions.

First, he asked about the emperors, how they maintained their dignity, and administered justice in their dominions, and so forth. And then he asked the like questions about the kings and princes and other potentates.

And then he inquired about the Pope and the Church, and about all that is done at Rome, and all the customs of the Latins. And the Two Brothers told him the truth in all its particulars, with order and good sense, like sensible men as they were; and this they were able to do as they knew the Tartar language well.

When that Prince, whose name was CUBLAY KAN, Lord of the Tartars all over the earth, and of all the kingdoms and provinces and territories of that vast quarter of the world, had heard all that the Brothers had to tell him about the ways of the Latins, he was greatly pleased, and he took it into his head that he would send them on an Embassy to the Pope.

So he urgently desired them to undertake this mission along with one of his Barons; and they replied that they would gladly execute all his commands as those of their Sovereign Lord.

Then the Prince sent to summon to his presence one of his Barons whose name was COGATAL, and desired him to get ready, for it was proposed to send him to the Pope along

with the Two Brothers. The Baron replied that he would execute the Lord's commands to the best of his ability.

After this the Prince caused letters from himself to the Pope to be indited in the Tartar tongue, and committed them to the Two Brothers and to that Baron of his own, and charged them with what he wished them to say to the Pope.

Now the contents of the letter were to this purport: He begged that the Pope would send as many as an hundred persons of our Christian faith; intelligent men, acquainted with the Seven Arts, well qualified to enter into controversy, and able clearly to prove by force of argument to idolaters and other kinds of folk, that the Law of Christ was best, and that all other religions were false and naught; and that if they would prove this, he and all under him would become Christians and the Church's liegemen. Finally he charged his Envoys to bring back to him some Oil of the Lamp which burns on the Sepulchre of our Lord at Jerusalem.

When the Prince had charged them with all his commission, he caused to be given them a Tablet of Gold, on which was inscribed that the three Ambassadors should be supplied with everything needful in all the countries through which they should pass--with horses, with escorts, and, in short, with whatever they should require. And when they had made all needful preparations, the three Ambassadors took their leave of the Emperor and set out.

When they had travelled I know not how many days, the Tartar Baron fell sick, so that he could not ride, and being very ill, and unable to proceed further, he halted at a certain city. So the Two Brothers judged it best that they should leave him behind and proceed to carry out their commission; and, as he was well content that they should do so, they continued their journey.

And I can assure you, that whithersoever they went they were honourably provided with whatever they stood in need of, or chose to command. And this was owing to that Tablet of Authority from the Lord which they carried with them.

So they travelled on and on until they arrived at Layas in Hermania, a journey which occupied them, I assure you, for three years. It took them so long because they could not always proceed, being stopped sometimes by snow, or by heavy rains falling, or by great torrents which they found in an impassable state.

They departed from Layas and came to ACRE, arriving there in the month of April, in the year of Christ 1269, and then they learned that the Pope was dead. And when they found that the Pope was dead, they went to a certain wise Churchman who was Legate for the whole kingdom of Egypt, and a man of great authority, by name THEOBALD OF PIACENZA, and told him of the mission on which they were come.

When the Legate heard their story, he was greatly surprised, and deemed the thing to be of great honour and advantage for the whole of Christendom.

So his answer to the two Ambassador Brothers was this: "Gentlemen, ye see that the Pope is dead; wherefore ye must needs have patience until a new Pope be made, and then shall ye be able to execute your charge."

Seeing well enough that what the Legate said was just, they observed: "But while the Pope is a-making, we may as well go to Venice and visit our households."

So they departed from Acre and went to Negropont, and from Negropont they continued their voyage to Venice. On their arrival there, Messer Nicolas found that his wife was dead, and that she had left behind her a son of fifteen years of age, whose name was MARCO; and 'tis of him that this Book tells. The Two Brothers abode at Venice a couple of years, tarrying until a Pope should be made.

When the Two Brothers had tarried as long as I have told you, and saw that never a Pope was made, they said that their return to the Great Kaan must be put off no longer.

So they set out from Venice, taking Mark along with them, and went straight back to Acre, where they found the Legate of whom we have spoken. They had a good deal of discourse with him concerning the matter, and asked his permission to go to JERUSALEM to get some Oil from the Lamp on the Sepulchre, to carry with them to the Great Kaan, as he had enjoined.

The Legate giving them leave, they went from Acre to Jerusalem and got some of the Oil, and then returned to Acre, and went to the Legate and said to him: "As we see no sign of a Pope's being made, we desire to return to the Great Kaan; for we have already tarried long, and there has been more than enough delay." To which the Legate replied:

"Since 'tis your wish to go back, I am well content." Wherefore he caused letters to be written for delivery to the Great Kaan, bearing testimony that the Two Brothers had come in all good faith to accomplish his charge, but that as there was no Pope they had been unable to do so.

When the Two Brothers had received the Legate's letters, they set forth from Acre to return to the Grand Kaan, and got as far as Layas. But shortly after their arrival there they had news that the Legate aforesaid was chosen Pope, taking the name of Pope Gregory of Piacenza; news which the Two Brothers were very glad indeed to hear. And presently there reached them at Layas a message from the Legate, now the Pope, desiring them, on the part of the Apostolic See, not to proceed further on their journey, but to return to him incontinently. And what shall I tell you?

The King of Hermenia caused a galley to be got ready for the Two Ambassador Brothers, and despatched them to the Pope at Acre.

And when they had been thus honourably conducted to Acre they proceeded to the presence of the Pope, and paid their respects to him with humble reverence. He received them with great honour and satisfaction, and gave them his blessing. He then appointed two Friars of the Order of Preachers to accompany them to the Great Kaan, and to do whatever might be required of them.

These were unquestionably as learned Churchmen as were to be found in the Province at that day--one being called Friar Nicolas of Vicenza, and the other Friar William of Tripoli. He delivered to them also proper credentials, and letters in reply to the Great Kaan's messages [and gave them authority to ordain priests and bishops, and to bestow every kind of

absolution, as if given by himself in proper person; sending by them also many fine vessels of crystal as presents to the Great Kaan].

So when they had got all that was needful, they took leave of the Pope, receiving his benediction; and the four set out together from Acre, and went to Layas, accompanied always by Messer Nicolas's son Marco.

Now, about the time that they reached Layas, Bendocquedar, the Soldan of Babylon, invaded Hermenia with a great host of Saracens, and ravaged the country, so that our Envoys ran a great peril of being taken or slain. And when the Preaching Friars saw this they were greatly frightened, and said that go they never would. So they made over to Messer Nicolas and Messer Maffeo all their credentials and documents, and took their leave, departing in company with the Master of the Temple.

So the Two Brothers, and Mark along with them, proceeded on their way, and journeying on, summer and winter, came at length to the Great Kaan, who was then at a certain rich and great city, called KEMENFU. As to what they met with on the road, whether in going or coming, we shall give no particulars at present, because we are going to tell you all those details in regular order in the after part of this Book. Their journey back to the Kaan occupied a good three years and a half, owing to the bad weather and severe cold that they encountered. And let me tell you in good sooth that when the Great Kaan heard that Messers Nicolo and Maffeo Polo were on their way back, he sent people a journey of full 40 days to meet them; and on this journey, as on their former one, they were honourably entertained upon the road, and supplied with all that they required.

And what shall I tell you? when the Two Brothers and Mark had arrived at that great city, they went to the Imperial Palace, and there they found the Sovereign attended by a great company of Barons. So they bent the knee before him, and paid their respects to him, with all possible reverence [prostrating themselves on the ground]. Then the Lord bade them stand up, and treated them with great honour, showing great pleasure at their coming, and asked many questions as to their welfare, and how they had sped.

They replied that they had in verity sped well, seeing that they found the Kaan well and safe. Then they presented the credentials and letters which they had received from the Pope, which pleased him right well; and after that they produced the Oil from the Sepulchre, and at that also he was very glad, for he set great store thereby. And next, spying Mark, who was then a young gallant, he asked who was that in their company? "Sire," said his father, Messer Nicolo, "'tis my son and your liegeman."

"Welcome is he too," quoth the Emperor. And why should I make a long story? There was great rejoicing at the Court because of their arrival; and they met with attention and honour from everybody.

So there they abode at the Court with the other Barons.

Now it came to pass that Marco, the son of Messer Nicolo, sped wondrously in learning the customs of the Tartars, as well as their language, their manner of writing, and in fact he came in brief space to know several languages, and four sundry written characters. And he

was discreet and prudent in every way, insomuch that the Emperor held him in great esteem.

And so when he discerned Mark to have so much sense, and to conduct himself so well and be seemingly, he sent him on an embassy of his, to a country which was a good six months' journey distant. The young gallant executed his commission well and with discretion.

Now he had taken note on several occasions that when the Prince's ambassadors returned from different parts of the world, they were able to tell him about nothing except the business on which they had gone, and that the Prince in consequence held them for no better than fools and dolts, and would say: "I had far liever hearken about the strange things, and the manners of the different countries you have seen, than merely be told of the business you went upon;"--for he took great delight in hearing of the affairs of strange countries. Mark therefore, as he went and returned, took great pains to learn about all kinds of different matters in the countries which he visited, in order to be able to tell about them to the Great Kaan.

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When Mark returned from his embassy he presented himself before the Emperor, and after making his report of the business with which he was charged, and its successful accomplishment, he went on to give an account in a pleasant and intelligent manner of all the novelties and strange things that he had seen and heard; insomuch that the Emperor and all such as heard his story were surprised, and said: "If this young man live, he will assuredly come to be a person of great worth and ability." And so from that time forward he was always entitled MESSER MARCO POLO, and thus we shall style him henceforth in this Book of ours, as is but right.

Thereafter Messer Marco abode in the Kaan's employment some seventeen years, continually going and coming, hither and thither, on the missions that were entrusted to him by the Lord [and sometimes, with the permission and authority of the Great Kaan, on his own private affairs.] And, as he knew all the sovereign's ways, like a sensible man he always took much pains to gather knowledge of anything that would be likely to interest him, and then on his return to Court he would relate everything in regular order, and thus the Emperor came to hold him in great love and favour.

And for this reason also he would employ him the oftener on the most weighty and most distant of his missions. These Messer Marco ever carried out with discretion and success, God be thanked. So the Emperor became ever more partial to him, and treated him with the greater distinction, and kept him so close to his person that some of the Barons waxed very envious thereat.

And thus it came about that Messer Marco Polo had knowledge of, or had actually visited, a greater number of the different countries of the World than any other man; the more that

he was always giving his mind to get knowledge, and to spy out and enquire into everything in order to have matter to relate to the Lord.

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When the Two Brothers and Mark had abode with the Lord all that time that you have been told [having meanwhile acquired great wealth in jewels and gold], they began among themselves to have thoughts about returning to their own country; and indeed it was time. [For, to say nothing of the length and infinite perils of the way, when they considered the Kaan's great age, they doubted whether, in the event of his death before their departure, they would ever be able to get home. They applied to him several times for leave to go, presenting their request with great respect, but he had such a partiality for them, and liked so much to have them about him, that nothing on earth would persuade him to let them go.

Now it came to pass in those days that the Queen BOLGANA, wife of ARGON, Lord of the Levant, departed this life. And in her Will she had desired that no Lady should take her place, or succeed her as Argon's wife, except one of her own family [which existed in Cathay]. Argon therefore despatched three of his Barons, by name respectively OULATAY, APUSCA, and COJA, as ambassadors to the Great Kaan, attended by a very gallant company, in order to bring back as his bride a lady of the family of Queen Bolgana, his late wife.

When these three Barons had reached the Court of the Great Kaan, they delivered their message, explaining wherefore they were come. The Kaan received them with all honour and hospitality, and then sent for a lady whose name was COCACHIN, who was of the family of the deceased Queen Bolgana. She was a maiden of 17, a very beautiful and charming person, and on her arrival at Court she was presented to the three Barons as the Lady chosen in compliance with their demand. They declared that the Lady pleased them well.

Meanwhile Messer Marco chanced to return from India, whither he had gone as the Lord's ambassador, and made his report of all the different things that he had seen in his travels, and of the sundry seas over which he had voyaged. And the three Barons, having seen that Messer Nicolo, Messer Maffeo, and Messer Marco were not only Latins, but men of marvellous good sense withal, took thought among themselves to get the three to travel with them, their intention being to return to their country by sea, on account of the great fatigue of that long land journey for a lady. And the ambassadors were the more desirous to have their company, as being aware that those three had great knowledge and experience of the Indian Sea and the countries by which they would have to pass, and especially Messer Marco. So they went to the Great Kaan, and begged as a favour that he would send the three Latins with them, as it was their desire to return home by sea.

The Lord, having that great regard that I have mentioned for those three Latins, was very loath to do so [and his countenance showed great dissatisfaction]. But at last he did give them permission to depart, enjoining them to accompany the three Barons and the Lady.

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And when the Prince saw that the Two Brothers and Messer Marco were ready to set forth, he called them all three to his presence, and gave them two golden Tablets of Authority, which should secure them liberty of passage through all his dominions, and by means of which, whithersoever they should go, all necessaries would be provided for them, and for all their company, and whatever they might choose to order.

He charged them also with messages to the King of France, the King of England, the King of Spain, and the other kings of Christendom. He then caused thirteen ships to be equipt, each of which had four masts, and often spread twelve sails. And I could easily give you all particulars about these, but as it would be so long an affair I will not enter upon this now, but hereafter, when time and place are suitable. [Among the said ships were at least four or five that carried crews of 250 or 260 men.]

And when the ships had been equipt, the Three Barons and the Lady, and the Two Brothers and Messer Marco, took leave of the Great Kaan, and went on board their ships with a great company of people, and with all necessaries provided for two years by the Emperor. They put forth to sea, and after sailing for some three months they arrived at a certain Island towards the South, which is called JAVA, and in which there are many wonderful things which we shall tell you all about by-and-bye.

Quitting this Island they continued to navigate the Sea of India for eighteen months more before they arrived whither they were bound, meeting on their way also with many marvels, of which we shall tell hereafter. And when they got thither they found that Argon was dead, so the Lady was delivered to CASAN, his son.

But I should have told you that it is a fact that, when they embarked, they were in number some 600 persons, without counting the mariners; but nearly all died by the way, so that only eight survived.

The sovereignty when they arrived was held by KIACATU, so they commended the Lady to him, and executed all their commission. And when the Two Brothers and Messer Marco had executed their charge in full, and done all that the Great Kaan had enjoined on them in regard to the Lady, they took their leave and set out upon their journey. And before their departure, Kiacatu gave them four golden tablets of authority, two of which bore gerfalcons, one bore lions, whilst the fourth was plain, and having on them inscriptions which directed that the three Ambassadors should receive honour and service all through the land as if rendered to the Prince in person, and that horses and all provisions, and everything necessary, should be supplied to them.

And so they found in fact; for throughout the country they received ample and excellent supplies of everything needful; and many a time indeed, as I may tell you, they were furnished with 200 horsemen, more or less, to escort them on their way in safety. And this was all the more needful because Kiacatu was not the legitimate Lord, and therefore the people had less scruple to do mischief than if they had had a lawful prince.

Another thing too must be mentioned, which does credit to those three Ambassadors, and shows for what great personages they were held. The Great Kaan regarded them with such trust and affection, that he had confided to their charge the Queen Cocachin, as well as the daughter of the King of Manzi, to conduct to Argon the Lord of all the Levant. And those two great ladies who were thus entrusted to them they watched over and guarded as if they had been daughters of their own, until they had transferred them to the hands of their Lord; whilst the ladies, young and fair as they were, looked on each of those three as a father, and obeyed them accordingly.

Indeed, both Casan, who is now the reigning prince, and the Queen Cocachin his wife, have such a regard for the Envoys that there is nothing they would not do for them. And when the three Ambassadors took leave of that Lady to return to their own country, she wept for sorrow at the parting.

What more shall I say? Having left Kiacatu they travelled day by day till they came to Trebizond, and thence to Constantinople, from Constantinople to Negropont, and from Negropont to Venice. And this was in the year 1295 of Christ's Incarnation.

And now that I have rehearsed all the Prologue as you have heard, we shall begin the Book of the Description of the Divers Things that Messer Marco met with in his Travels.