

The TRAVELS of MARCO POLO *the* VENETIAN

EVERY
MAN
I WILL
GO
WITH
THEE
& BE
THY
GUIDE



IN
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TO GO
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LONDON & TORONTO
PUBLISHED BY J. M. DENT
& SONS LTD & IN NEW YORK
BY E. P. DUTTON & CO

INTRODUCTION

MARCO POLO, the subject of this memoir, was born at Venice in the year 1254. He was the son of Nicolo Polo, a Venetian of noble family, who was one of the partners in a trading house, engaged in business with Constantinople. In the year 1260, this Nicolo Polo, in company with his junior partner, his brother Maffeo, set out across the Euxine on a trading venture to the Crimea. They prospered in their business, but were unable to return to their base, owing to the breaking out of a Tartar war on the road by which they had come. As they could not go back, they went forward, crossing the desert to Bokhara, where they stayed for three years. At the end of the third year (the fifth of their journey) they were advised to visit the Great Khan Kublai, the "Kubla Khan" of Coleridge's poem. A party of the Great Khan's envoys were about to return to Cathay, and the two brothers therefore joined the party, travelling forward, "northward and northeastward," for a whole year, before they reached the Khan's Court in Cathay. The Khan received them kindly, and asked them many questions about life in Europe, especially about the emperors, the Pope, the Church, and "all that is done at Rome." He then sent them back to Europe on an embassy to the Pope, to ask His Holiness to send a hundred missionaries to convert the Cathaians to the Christian faith. He also asked for some of the holy oil from the lamp of the Holy Sepulchre. The return journey of the brothers (from Cathay to Acre) took three years. On their arrival at Acre the travellers discovered that the Pope was dead. They therefore decided to return home to Venice to wait until the new Pope should be elected. They arrived at Venice in 1269, to find that Nicolo's wife had died during her husband's absence. His son Marco, our traveller, was then fifteen years old. He had probably passed his childhood in the house of one of his uncles at Venice.

Nicolo and Maffeo Polo remained at Venice for a couple of years, waiting for a Pope to be elected, but as there seemed to

be no prospect of this happening, they determined to return to the Great Khan, to tell him how their mission had failed. They therefore set out again (in 1271) and Marco, now seventeen years old, went with them. At Acre they obtained a letter from a Papal Legate, stating how it came about that the message had not been delivered. They had already obtained some of the holy oil, so that they were free to proceed. They had not gone very far upon their journey when they were recalled to Acre by the above-mentioned Syrian Legate, who had just heard that he had been elected Pope. The new Pope did not send a hundred missionaries, as Kublai had asked, but he appointed instead two preaching friars, who accompanied the Polos as far as Armenia, where rumours of war frightened them into returning. The Polos journeyed on for three years and a half, and arrived at the Khan's court (at Shangtu, not far from Peking) in the middle of 1275. The Khan received them "honourably and graciously," making much of Marco, "who was then a young gallant." In a little while, when Marco had learned the speech and customs of the "Tartars," the Khan employed him in public business, sending him as a visiting administrator to several wild and distant provinces. Marco noted carefully the strange customs of these provinces, and delighted the Khan with his account of them. On one of these journeys Marco probably visited the southern states of India.

After some seventeen years of honourable service with Kublai, the three Venetians became eager to return to Venice. They were rich men, and Kublai was growing old, and they knew that Kublai's death "might deprive them of that public assistance by which alone they could expect to surmount the innumerable difficulties of so long a journey." But Kublai refused to allow them to leave the Court, and even "appeared hurt at the application." It chanced, however, that at this time, Arghun, Khan of Persia, had sent ambassadors to Kublai to obtain the hand of a maiden "from among the relatives of his deceased wife." The maiden, aged seventeen, and very beautiful, was about to accompany the ambassadors to Persia; but the ordinary overland routes to Persia were unsafe, owing to wars among the Tartars. It was necessary for her to travel to Persia by ship. The envoys begged Kublai that the three Venetians might come with them in the ships "as being persons well skilled in the practice of navigation." Kublai granted their request,

though not very gladly. He fitted out a splendid squadron of ships, and despatched the three Venetians with the Persians, first granting them the golden tablet or safe-conduct, which would enable them to obtain supplies on the way. They sailed from a Chinese port about the beginning of 1292.

The voyage to Persia occupied about two years, during which time the expedition lost six hundred men. The Khan of Persia was dead when they arrived; so the beautiful maiden was handed over to his son, who received her kindly. He gave the Venetians safe-conduct through Persia; indeed he sent them forward with troops of horse, without which, in those troublous days, they could never have crossed the country. As they rode on their way they heard that the great Khan Kublai, their old master, had died. They arrived safely at Venice some time in the year 1295.

There are some curious tales of their arrival at home. It is said that they were not recognised by their relatives, and this is not strange, for they returned in shabby Tartar clothes, almost unable to speak their native tongue. It was not until they had ripped the seams of the shabby clothes, producing stores of jewels from the lining, that the relatives decided to acknowledge them. (This tale may be read as allegory by those who doubt its truth as history.) Marco Polo did not stay long among his relatives. Venice was at war with Genoa, and the Polo family, being rich, had been called upon to equip a galley, even before the travellers returned from Asia. Marco Polo sailed in command of this galley, in the fleet under Andrea Dandolo, which was defeated by the Genoese off Curzola on the 7th September 1296. Marco Polo was carried as a prisoner to Genoa, where he remained, in spite of efforts made to ransom him, for about three years, during which time he probably dictated his book in very bad French to one Rustician of Pisa, a fellow-prisoner. He returned to Venice during the year 1299, and probably married shortly afterwards.

Little is known of his life after his return from prison. We know that he was nicknamed "Il Milione" on account of his wonderful stories of Kublai's splendour; but as he was rich and famous the slighting nickname was probably partly a compliment. Colonel Yule, the great editor of Marco Polo, has discovered that he stood surety for a wine-smuggler, that he gave a copy of his book to a French noble, and that he sued a commission agent for the half profits on the sale of

some musk. It was at one time thought that he was the Marco Polo who failed (in 1302) to have his water-pipe inspected by the town plumber. This sin has now been laid upon another man of the same name, who "was ignorant of the order on that subject." On the 9th of January, 1324, feeling himself to be growing daily feebler, he made his will, which is still preserved. He named as his trustees his wife Donata and his three daughters, to whom the bulk of his estate was left. He died soon after the execution of this will. He was buried in Venice without the door of the Church of San Lorenzo; but the exact site of the grave is unknown. No known authentic portrait of the man exists; but as in the case of Columbus, there are several fanciful portraits, of which the best dates from the seventeenth century.

Marco Polo's book was not received with faith by his contemporaries. Travellers who see marvellous things, even in our own day (the name of Bruce will occur to everyone) are seldom believed by those who, having stayed at home, have all the consequences of their virtue. When Marco Polo came back from the East, a misty, unknown country, full of splendour and terrors, he could not tell the whole truth. He had to leave his tale half told lest he should lack believers. His book was less popular in the later Middle Ages than the fictions and plagiarisms of Sir John Mandeville. Marco Polo tells of what he saw; the compiler of Mandeville, when he does not steal openly from Pliny, Friar Odoric, and others, tells of what an ignorant person might expect to see, and would, in any case, like to read about, since it is always blessed to be confirmed in an opinion, however ill-grounded it may be. How little Marco Polo was credited may be judged from the fact that the map of Asia was not modified by his discoveries till fifty years after his death.

His book is one of the great books of travel. Even now, after the lapse of six centuries, it remains the chief authority for parts of Central Asia, and of the vast Chinese Empire. Some of his wanderings are hard to follow; some of the places which he visited are hard to identify; but the labour of Colonel Yule has cleared up most of the difficulties, and confirmed most of the strange statements. To the geographer, to the historian, and to the student of Asiatic life, the book of Marco Polo will always be most valuable. To the general reader, the great charm of the book is its romance.

It is accounted a romantic thing to wander among strangers and to eat their bread by the camp-fires of the other half of the world. There is romance in doing thus, though the romance has been over-estimated by those whose sedentary lives have created in them a false taste for action. Marco Polo wandered among strangers; but it is open to anyone (with courage and the power of motion) to do the same. Wandering in itself is merely a form of self-indulgence. If it adds not to the stock of human knowledge, or if it gives not to others the imaginative possession of some part of the world, it is a pernicious habit. The acquisition of knowledge, the accumulation of fact, is noble only in those few who have that alchemy which transmutes such clay to heavenly eternal gold. It may be thought that many travellers have given their readers great imaginative possessions; but the imaginative possession is not measured in miles and parasangs, nor do the people of that country write accounts of birds and beasts. It is only the wonderful traveller who sees a wonder, and only five travellers in the world's history have seen wonders. The others have seen birds and beasts, rivers and wastes, the earth and the (local) fulness thereof. The five travellers are Herodotus, Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar, and Marco Polo himself. The wonder of Marco Polo is this—that he created Asia for the European mind.

When Marco Polo went to the East, the whole of Central Asia, so full of splendour and magnificence, so noisy with nations and kings, was like a dream in men's minds. Europeans touched only the fringe of the East. At Acre, at Byzantium, at the busy cities on the Euxine, the merchants of Europe bartered with the stranger for silks, and jewels and precious balms, brought over the desert at great cost, in caravans from the unknown. The popular conception of the East was taken from the Bible, from the tales of old Crusaders, and from the books of the merchants. All that men knew of the East was that it was mysterious, and that our Lord was born there. Marco Polo, almost the first European to see the East, saw her in all her wonder, more fully than any man has seen her since. His picture of the East is the picture which we all make in our minds when we repeat to ourselves those two strange words, "the East," and give ourselves up to the image which that symbol evokes. It may be that the Western mind will turn to Marco Polo for

a conception of Asia long after "Cathay" has become an American colony.

It is difficult to read Marco Polo as one reads historical facts. One reads him as one reads romance; as one would read, for instance, the "Eve of St. Mark," or the "Well at the World's End." The East of which he writes is the East of romance, not the East of the Anglo-Indian, with his Simla, his missions to Tibet, and Reuter telegrams. In the East of romance there grows "the tree of the sun, or dry tree" (by which Marco Polo passed), a sort of landmark or milestone, at the end of the great desert. The apples of the sun and moon grow upon that tree. Darius and Alexander fought in its shade. Those are the significant facts about the tree according to Marco Polo. We moderns, who care little for any tree so soon as we can murmur its Latin name, have lost wonder in losing faith.

The Middle Age, even as our own age is, was full of talk of the Earthly Paradise. It may be that we have progressed, in learning to talk of it as a social possibility, instead of as a geographical fact. We like to think that the old Venetians went eastward, on their famous journey, half believing that they would arrive there, just as Columbus (two centuries later) half expected to sight land "where the golden blossoms burn upon the trees forever." They did not find the Earthly Paradise; but they saw the splendours of Kublai, one of the mightiest of earthly kings. One feels the presence of Kublai all through the narrative, as the red wine, dropped into the water-cup, suffuses all, or as the string supports the jewels on a trinket. The imagination is only healthy when it broods upon the kingly and the saintly. In Kublai, the reader will find enough images of splendour to make glorious the temple of his mind. When we think of Marco Polo, it is of Kublai that we think; and, apart from the romantic wonder which surrounds him, he is a noble person, worth our contemplation. He is like a king in a romance. It was the task of a kingly nature to have created him as he appears in the book here. It makes us proud and reverent of the poetic gift, to reflect that this king, "the lord of lords," ruler of so many cities, so many gardens, so many fishpools, would be but a name, an image covered by the sands, had he not welcomed two dusty travellers, who came to him one morning from out of the unknown, after long wandering over the world. Perhaps when he bade them farewell the thought

occurred to him (as it occurred to that other king in the poem) that he might come to be remembered "but by this one thing," when all his glories were fallen from him, and he lay silent, the gold mask upon his face, in the drowsy tomb, where the lamp, long kept alight, at last guttered, and died, and fell to dust.

JOHN MASEFIELD.

December 1907.

ITINERARY

THE elder Polos, when they left Constantinople in the year 1260, had not planned to go far beyond the northern borders of the Euxine. They first landed at Soldaia, in the Crimea, then an important trading city. From Soldaia they journeyed in a northerly and east-northeasterly direction to Sara, or Sarra, a vast city on the Volga, where King Cambuscan lived, and to Bolgara, or Bolghar, where they stayed for a year. Going south a short distance to Ucaca, another city on the Volga, they journeyed direct to the south-east, across the northern head of the Caspian, on the sixty days' march to Bokhara, where they stayed for three years. From Bokhara they went with the Great Khan's people northward to Otrar, and thence in a north-easterly direction to the Court of the Khan near Pekin. On their return journey, they arrived at the sea-coast at Layas, in Armenia. From Layas they went to Acre, and from Acre to Negropont in Roumania, and from Negropont to Venice, where they stayed for about two years.

On the second journey to the East, with the young Marco Polo, they sailed direct from Venice to Acre towards the end of the year 1271. They made a short journey southward to Jerusalem, for the holy oil, and then returned to Acre for letters from the Papal Legate. Leaving Acre, they got as far as Layas, in Armenia, before they were recalled by the newly elected Pope. On setting out again, they returned to Layas, at that time a great city, where spices and cloth of gold were sold, and from which merchants journeying to the East generally started. From Layas they pushed northward into Turcomania, past Casaria and Sivas, to Arzingan, where the people wove "good buckrams." Passing Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark was supposed to rest, they heard stories of the Baku oil-fields. From here they went to the south-eastward, following the course of the Tigris to Bandas. From Bandas they seem to have made an unnecessary journey to the Persian Gulf. The book leads one to suppose

that they travelled by way of Tauriz (in Persian Irak) Yezd, and Kerman, to the port of Ormuz, as though they intended to take ship there. They could, however, have progressed more swiftly had they followed the Tigris to Busrah, there taken ship upon the Gulf, and sailed by way of Keis or Kisi to Ormuz. After visiting Ormuz, they returned to Kerman by another road, and then pushed on, over the horrible salt desert of Kerman, through Khorassan to Balakshan. It is possible that their journey was broken at Balakshan, owing to the illness of Marco, who speaks of having at some time stayed nearly a year here to recover his health. On leaving Balakshan they proceeded through the high Pamirs to Kashgar, thence south-eastward by way of Khotan, not yet buried under the sands, to the Gobi desert. The Gobi desert, like all deserts, had a bad name as being "the abode of many evil spirits, which amuse travellers to their destruction." The Polos crossed the Gobi in the usual thirty days, halting each night by the brackish ponds which make the passage possible. After crossing the desert, they soon entered China. At Kan Chau, one of the first Chinese cities which they visited, they may have stayed for nearly a year, on account of "the state of their concerns," but this stay probably took place later, when they were in Kublai's service. They then crossed the province of Shen-si, into that of Shan-si, finally arriving at Kai-ping-fu, where Kublai had built his summer pleasure garden.

On the return journey, the Polos set sail from the port of Zaitum, in the province of Fo-Kien. They hugged the Chinese coast (in order to avoid the Pratas and Pracel Reefs) and crossed the Gulf of Tong King to Champa in the south-east of Cambodia. Leaving Champa, they may have made some stay at Borneo, but more probably they sailed direct to the island of Bintang, at the mouth of the Straits of Malacca, and to Sumatra, where the fleet was delayed for five months by the blowing of the contrary monsoon. The ships seem to have waited for the monsoon to change in a harbour on the north-east coast, in the kingdom of Sumatra. On getting a fair wind, they passed by the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, and then shaped a course for Ceylon. They put across to the coast of Coromandel, and may perhaps have coasted as far to the northward upon the Madras coast as Masulipatam. On the Bombay side, they would seem to have hugged the coast as far as they could, as far perhaps as Surat, in the

Gulf of Cambay; but it is just possible that the descriptions of these places were taken from the tales of pilots, and that his fleet put boldly out to avoid the coast pirates. Marco Polo tells us much about Aden, and about towns on the Arabian coasts; but the fleet probably never touched at them. All that is certainly known is that they arrived at Ormuz, in the Persian Gulf, and passed inland to Khorassan. On leaving Khorassan they journeyed overland, through Persia and Greater Armenia, until they came to Trebizonda on the Euxine Sea. Here they took ship, and sailed home to Venice, first touching at Constantinople and at Negropont. "And this was in the year 1295 of Christ's Incarnation."

J. M.

CONTENTS

BOOK I

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| PROLOGUE | 9 |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. | 10 |
| II. Of Armenia Minor—Of the Port of Laiassus—And of the Boundaries of the Province | 30 |
| III. Of the Province called Turkomania, where are the Cities of Kogni, Kaisariah, and Sevasta, and of its Commerce | 32 |
| IV. Of Armenia Major, in which are the Cities of Arzingan, Argiron, and Darziz—Of the Castle of Paipurth—Of the Mountain where the Ark of Noah rested—Of the Boundaries of the Province—And of a remarkable Fountain of Oil | 34 |
| V. Of the Province of Zorzania and its Boundaries—Of the Pass where Alexander the Great constructed the Gate of Iron—And of the miraculous Circumstances attending a Fountain at Teflis | 37 |
| VI. Of the Province of Mosul and its different Inhabitants—Of the People named Kurds—And of the Trade of this Country | 41 |
| VII. Of the great City of Baldach or Bagadet, anciently called Babylon—Of the Navigation from thence to Balsara, situated in what is termed the Sea of India, but properly the Persian Gulf—And of the various Sciences studied in that City | 42 |
| VIII. Concerning the Capture and Death of the Khalif of Baldach, and the miraculous Removal of a Mountain | 44 |
| IX. Of the noble City of Tauris, in Irak, and of its Commercial and other Inhabitants | 47 |
| X. Of the Monastery of Saint Barsamo, in the Neighbourhood of Tauris | 49 |
| XI. Of the Province of Persia | 50 |
| XII. Of the Names of the Eight Kingdoms that constitute the Province of Persia, and of the Breed of Horses and of Asses found therein | 51 |
| XIII. Of the City of Yasdi and its Manufactures, and of the Animals found in the Country between that place and Kierman | 55 |
| XIV. Of the Kingdom of Kierman, by the Ancients named Karmania—Of its Fossil and Mineral Productions—Its Manufactures—Its Falcons—And of a great Descent observed upon passing out of that Country | 56 |

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| XV. Of the City of Kamandu, and District of Reobarle—Of certain Birds found there—Of a peculiar kind of Oxen—And of the Karaunas, a Tribe of Robbers | 58 |
| XVI. Of the City of Ormus, situated on an Island not far from the Main, in the Sea of India—Of its Commercial Importance—And of the hot Wind that blows there | 63 |
| XVII. Of the Shipping employed at Ormus—Of the Season in which the Fruits are produced—And of the Manner of Living and Customs of the Inhabitants | 67 |
| XVIII. Of the Country travelled over upon leaving Ormus, and returning to Kierman by a different Route; and of a Bitterness in the Bread occasioned by the Quality of the Water | 69 |
| XIX. Of the desert Country between Kierman and Kobiam, and of the bitter Quality of the Water | 69 |
| XX. Of the Town of Kobiam, and its Manufactures | 71 |
| XXI. Of the Journey from Kobiam to the Province of Timochain on the Northern Confines of Persia—And of a particular Species of Tree | 72 |
| XXII. Of the Old Man of the Mountain—Of his Palace and Gardens—Of his Capture and his Death | 73 |
| XXIII. Of a fertile Plain of six Days' Journey, succeeded by a Desert of eight, to be passed in the Way to the City of Sapurgan—Of the excellent Melons produced there—And of the City of Balach | 77 |
| XXIV. Of the Castle named Thaikan—Of the Manners of the Inhabitants—And of Salt-Hills | 80 |
| XXV. Of the Town of Scassem, and of the Porcupines found there | 81 |
| XXVI. Of the Province of Balashan—Of the Precious Stones found there and which become the Property of the King—Of the Horses and the Falcons of the Country—Of the salubrious Air of the Mountains—And of the Dress with which the Women adorn their Persons | 82 |
| XXVII. Of the Province of Bascià lying South of the former—Of the golden Ornaments worn by the Inhabitants in their Ears—And of their Manners | 86 |
| XXVIII. Of the Province of Kesmur situated towards the south-east—Of its Inhabitants who are skilled in Magic—Of their Communication with the Indian Sea—And of a Class of Hermits, their Mode of Life, and extraordinary Abstinence | 87 |
| XXIX. Of the Province of Vokhan—Of an Ascent for three Days, leading to the Summit of a high Mountain—Of a peculiar Breed of Sheep found there—Of the Effect of the great Elevation upon Fires—And of the Savage Life of the Inhabitants | 90 |
| XXX. Of the City of Kashcar, and of the Commerce of its Inhabitants | 92 |
| XXXI. Of the City of Samarcand, and of the Miraculous Column in the Church of St. John the Baptist | 93 |
| XXXII. Of the Province of Karkan, the Inhabitants of which are troubled with swollen Legs and with Goitres | 95 |
| XXXIII. Of the City of Kotan, which is abundantly supplied with all the Necessaries of Life | 96 |

Contents

3

PAGE

CHAPTER

| | |
|---|-----|
| XXXIV. Of the Province of Peyn—Of the Chalcedonies and Jasper found in its River—And of a peculiar Custom with regard to Marriages | 97 |
| XXXV. Of the Province of Charchan—Of the kinds of Stone found in its Rivers—And of the Necessity the Inhabitants are under, of flying to the Desert on the approach of the Armies of the Tartars | 98 |
| XXXVI. Of the Town of Lop—Of the Desert in its Vicinity—And of the strange Noises heard by those who pass over the latter | 99 |
| XXXVII. Of the Province of Tanguth—Of the City of Sashion—Of the Custom observed there upon the Birth of a Male Child—And of the Ceremony of burning the Bodies of the Dead | 101 |
| XXXVIII. Of the District of Kamul, and of some peculiar Customs respecting the Entertainment of Strangers | 106 |
| XXXIX. Of the City of Chinchitalas | 108 |
| XL. Of the District of Succuir, where the Rhubarb is produced, and from whence it is carried to all parts of the World | 110 |
| XLI. Of the City of Kampion, the principal one of the Province of Tanguth—Of the nature of their Idols, and of the Mode of Life of those amongst the Idolaters who are devoted to the services of Religion—Of the Almanac they make use of—And the Customs of the other Inhabitants with regard to Marriage | 111 |
| XLII. Of the City of Ezina—Of the kinds of Cattle and Birds found there—And of a Desert extending forty Days' Journey towards the North | 114 |
| XLIII. Of the City of Karakoran, the first in which the Tartars fixed their Residence | 115 |
| XLIV. Of the Origin of the Kingdom of the Tartars—Of the Quarter from whence they came—And of their former Subjection to Un-khan, a Prince of the North, called also Prester John | 116 |
| XLV. Concerning Chingis-Khan, first Emperor of the Tartars, and his Warfare with Un-khan, whom he overthrew, and of whose Kingdom he possessed himself | 118 |
| XLVI. Of six successive Emperors of the Tartars, and of the Ceremonies that take place when they are carried for Interment to the Mountain of Altai | 120 |
| XLVII. Of the Wandering Life of the Tartars—Of their Domestic Manners, their Food, and the Virtue and useful Qualities of their Women | 123 |
| XLVIII. Of the Celestial and Terrestrial Deities of the Tartars, and of their Modes of Worship—Of their Dress, Arms, Courage in Battle, Patience under Privations, and Obedience to their Leaders | 126 |
| XLIX. Of the Tartar Armies, and the manner in which they are constituted—Of their Order of Marching—Of their Provisions—And of their Mode of attacking the Enemy | 128 |
| L. Of the Rules of Justice observed by these People—And of an imaginary Kind of Marriage contracted between the deceased Children of different Families | 131 |

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| LI. Of the Plain of Bargu near Kara-koran—Of the Customs of its Inhabitants—Of the Ocean, at the Distance of forty Days' Journey from thence—Of the Falcons produced in the Country on its Borders—And of the Bearings of the Northern Constellation to an Observer in those Parts | 133 |
| LII. Of the Kingdom of Erginul, adjoining to that of Kam-pion, and of the City of Singui—Of a Species of Oxen covered with extremely fine Hair—Of the Form of the Animal that yields the Musk, and the Mode of taking it—And of the Customs of the Inhabitants of that Country, and the Beauty of the Women | 135 |
| LIII. Of the Province of Egrigaia, and of the City of Kalacha—Of the Manners of its Inhabitants—And of the Camelots manufactured there | 139 |
| LIV. Of the Province of Tenduk, governed by Princes of the Race of Prester John, and chiefly inhabited by Christians—Of the Ordination of their Priests—And of a Tribe of People called Argon, the most personable and the best-informed of any in these Countries | 140 |
| LV. Of the Seat of Government of the Princes of the Family of Prester John, called Gog and Magog—Of the Manners of its Inhabitants—Of their Manufacture of Silk—And of the Mines of Silver worked there | 141 |
| LVI. Of the City of Changanor—Of different Species of Cranes—And of Partridges and Quails bred in that Part by the Orders of the Grand Khan | 143 |
| LVII. Of the Grand Khan's beautiful Palace in the City of Shandu—Of his Stud of White Brood-Mares, with whose Milk he performs an Annual Sacrifice—Of the wonderful Operations of the Astrologers on occasions of Bad Weather—Of the Ceremonies practised by them in the Hall of the Royal Palace—And of two Descriptions of Religious Mendi-cants, with their Modes of Living | 145 |

BOOK II

| | |
|---|-----|
| I. Of the admirable Deeds of Kublai-Kaan, the Emperor now reigning—Of the Battle he fought with Nayan, his Uncle, and of the Victory he obtained | 152 |
| II. Of the Return of the Grand Khan to the City of Kan-balu after his Victory—Of the Honour he confers on the Christians, the Jews, the Mahometans, and the Idolaters, at their respective Festivals—And the Reason he assigns for his not becoming a Christian | 158 |
| III. Of the kind of Rewards granted to those who conduct themselves well in Fight, and of the Golden Tablets which they receive | 161 |
| IV. Of the Figure and Stature of the Grand Khan—Of his four principal Wives—And of the annual Selection of Young Women for him in the Pro-vince of Ungut | 162 |

Contents

5

CHAPTER

PAGE

| | |
|---|-----|
| V. Of the number of the Grand Khan's Sons by his four Wives, whom he makes Kings of different Provinces, and of Chingis his First-born—Also of the Sons by his Concubines, whom he creates Lords . . . | 165 |
| VI. Of the great and admirable Palace of the Grand Khan, near to the City of Kanbalu . . . | 166 |
| VII. Of the new City of Tai-du, built near to that of Kanbalu—Of a Rule observed respecting the Entertainment of Ambassadors—And of the nightly Police of the City . . . | 171 |
| VIII. Of the treasonable Practices employed to cause the City of Kanbalu to rebel, and of the Apprehension and Punishment of those concerned . . . | 176 |
| IX. Of the Personal Guard of the Grand Khan . . . | 181 |
| X. Of the Style in which the Grand Khan holds his Public Courts, and sits at Table with all his Nobles—Of the Manner in which the Drinking Vessels of Gold and Silver, filled with the Milk of Mares and Camels, are disposed in the Hall—And of the Ceremony that takes place when he drinks . . . | 182 |
| XI. Of the Festival that is kept throughout the Dominions of the Grand Khan on the Twenty-eighth of September, being the Anniversary of his Nativity . . . | 186 |
| XII. Of the White Feast, held on the First Day of the Month of February, being the Commencement of their Year—Of the Number of Presents then brought—And of the Ceremonies that take place at a Table whereon is inscribed the Name of the Grand Khan . . . | 188 |
| XIII. Of the Quantity of Game taken and sent to the Court, during the Winter Months . . . | 193 |
| XIV. Of Leopards and Lynxes used for hunting Deer—Of Lions habituated to the Chase of various Animals—And of Eagles taught to seize Wolves . . . | 193 |
| XV. Of two Brothers who are principal Officers of the Chase to the Grand Khan . . . | 194 |
| XVI. Of the Grand Khan's proceeding to the Chase, with his Gerfalcons and Hawks—Of his Falconers—And of his Tents . . . | 195 |
| XVII. Of the Multitude of Persons who continually resort to and depart from the City of Kanbalu—And of the Commerce of the Place . . . | 201 |
| XVIII. Of the kind of Paper Money issued by the Grand Khan, and made to pass current throughout his Dominions . . . | 202 |
| XIX. Of the Council of Twelve great Officers appointed for the Affairs of the Army, and of Twelve others, for the general Concerns of the Empire . . . | 205 |
| XX. Of the Places established on all the great Roads for supplying Post-Horses—Of the Couriers on Foot—And of the Mode in which the Expense is defrayed . . . | 207 |
| XXI. Of the Relief afforded by the Grand Khan to all the Provinces of his Empire, in Times of Dearth or Mortality of Cattle . . . | 212 |
| XXII. Of the Trees which he causes to be planted at the Sides of the Roads, and of the Order in which they are kept . . . | 214 |

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| XXIII. Of the kind of Wine made in the Province of Cathay-- And of the Stones used there for burning in the manner of Charcoal | 214 |
| XXIV. Of the great and admirable Liberality exercised by the Grand Khan towards the Poor of Kanbalu, and other Persons who apply for Relief at his Court | 215 |
| XXV. Of the Astrologers of the City of Kanbalu | 217 |
| XXVI. Of the Religion of the Tartars--Of the Opinions they hold respecting the Soul--And of some of their Customs | 219 |
| XXVII. Of the River named Pulisangan, and of the Bridge over it | 222 |
| XXVIII. Of the City of Gouza | 224 |
| XXIX. Of the Kingdom of Ta-in-fu | 226 |
| XXX. Of the City of Pi-an-fu | 227 |
| XXXI. Of the Fortress of Thaigin or Tai-gin | 227 |
| XXXII. Of the very large and noble River called the Kara- moran | 230 |
| XXXIII. Of the City of Ka-chan-fu | 231 |
| XXXIV. Of the City of Ken-zan-fu | 231 |
| XXXV. Of the Boundaries of Cathay and Manji | 233 |
| XXXVI. Of the Province of Sin-din-fu, and of the great River Kian | 234 |
| XXXVII. Of the Province of Thebeth | 236 |
| XXXVIII. Of the Province of Kain-du | 240 |
| XXXIX. Of the great Province of Karaian, and of Yachi its principal City | 243 |
| XL. Of the Province named Karazan | 246 |
| XLI. Of the Province of Kardandan and the City of Vochang | 249 |
| XLII. Of the Manner in which the Grand Khan effected the Conquest of the Kingdom of Mien and Bangala | 252 |
| XLIII. Of an uninhabited Region, and of the Kingdom of Mien | 257 |
| XLIV. Of the City of Mien, and of a grand Sepulchre of its King | 258 |
| XLV. Of the Province of Bangala | 260 |
| XLVI. Of the Province of Kangigu | 261 |
| XLVII. Of the Province of Amu | 262 |
| XLVIII. Of Tholoman | 263 |
| XLIX. Of the Cities of Chintigui, Sidin-fu, Gin-gui, and Pazan-fu | 264 |
| L. Of the City of Chan-glu | 267 |
| LI. Of the City of Chan-gli | 268 |
| LII. Of the City of Tudin-fu | 268 |
| LIII. Of the City of Singui-matu | 270 |
| LIV. Of the great River called the Kara-moran, and of the Cities of Koi-gan-zu and Kuan-zu | 272 |
| LV. Of the most noble Province of Manji, and of the Manner in which it was subdued by the Grand Khan | 273 |
| LVI. Of the City of Koi-gan-zu | 277 |
| LVII. Of the Town of Pau-ghin | 277 |
| LVIII. Of the City of Kain | 278 |
| LIX. Of the Cities of Tin-gui and Chin-gui | 278 |
| LX. Of the City of Yan-gui, of which Marco Polo held the Government | 279 |
| LXI. Of the Province of Nan-ghin | 280 |
| LXII. Of the City of Sa-yan-fu, that was taken by the means of Nicolo and Maffeo Polo | 280 |
| LXIII. Of the City of Sin-gui and of the very great River Kiang | 283 |
| LXIV. Of the City of Kayn-gui | 285 |
| LXV. Of the City of Chan-ghian-fu | 286 |