

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

MARCO POLO

HIS TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES

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Towle

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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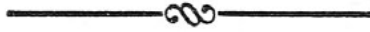
By George Makepeace Towle



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MARCO POLO



CHAPTER I.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERERS

BEAUTIFUL as Venice now is, in the days of its stagnation and decay, it was a yet more beautiful city seven centuries ago. Then its quays and Grand Canal were crowded with the ships of every nation; its bazaars and marts were bustling with active trade, and were picturesque in the mingling of the gay and brilliant costumes of the East, with the more sober attire of the European peoples; its noble and lofty palaces, not yet, as we now see them, hoary and dilapidated, rose in fresh splendor from the verge of its watery and winding streets; the dome of St. Mark's shone with new gilding, and its walls with recent frescoing; the Piazza was nightly crowded with throngs of gallant nobles and cavaliers, long-bearded, prosperous merchants, and be vies of fair dames, whose black veils

swept from their fair foreheads to their dainty feet. Venice was not only a queen among commercial cities, but a great warlike power; with brave and well-disciplined armies, hardy captains, formidable fleets, and proud strongholds, where, on either shore of the sparkling Adriatic, she held her own valiantly, against Turk, Austrian, and Genoese.

Mighty princes sought the hands of the daughters of Venice in marriage; the Doges who ruled over the stately city were greeted by Emperors and Kings as their brothers and equals; the conquests of Venice reached to Asia and to Africa; her ships rode the purple waters of the Mediterranean in haughty defiance of the galleys of her rivals. Around the patriarchal Doges was gathered a gorgeous court. There were festal days when the Grand Canal, bordered by palaces on either side, was crowded thick with gilded and canopied barges, and interminable lines of gondolas, each gay craft filled with richly attired cavaliers and dames, on whom jewels sparkled, and above whom rose many-colored banners that announced their rank and station: while, after night-fall, the air was alive with the most dazzling fire-works, which fairly hid moon, stars, and the heaven's canopy from view.

It is in Venice, at this period of her greatness and glory, that our story opens.

A mellow, hazy autumn day was drawing to its close. The sky was lit with that soft, rich, yellow sunset glow, which has always been remarked as one of the loveliest sights to be seen at Venice; the last rays of the sun glittered upon the gilded dome of Saint Mark's; the broad square before

the ancient cathedral was beginning to fill with its evening multitude of cavaliers and coquettes. In the Grand Canal, and the glassy lagoon beyond, the gondoliers lazily plied their long oars, or rested their gondolas on the still waters. It was an hour in which whatever there was of activity and bustle in Venice, became indolent and tranquil; when men and women sought their ease under a sky which compelled serenity and reverie. In the bazaars, on the Rialto, and the Piazza, the stalls were laden with bunches of large and luscious grapes, with figs of many colors, so ripe that the gummy juice oozed from them, and with pomegranates, upon whose cheeks glowed the rich red bloom which betrayed their full ripeness; and there was scarcely to be seen a Venetian of the lower class, who was not munching some of the succulent fruit which his climate produced in such cheap and varied abundance.

Not far from the centre of the beautiful city, on one of the many canals which serve it instead of streets, stood a lofty mansion, which, at one's first approach, seemed two. Three stories in height, it towered above many of the surrounding buildings: and between its two wings stood an archway, richly decorated with scrolls and figures of animals, surmounted by an ornate cross; while, above the archway, rose a tall square tower. Entering the archway, you would have found yourself in a spacious, paved courtyard, which the house, quadrangular in shape, completely enclosed. The inner walls were adorned, like: the archway, with sculptured devices, among which you might have observed a coat-of-arms, comprising a shield, with a wide bar

running across it, upon which were graven three birds. The whole mansion was stately and imposing, and betokened that its possessors were at once rich and of high rank.

On the late afternoon which has been described, an unusual bustle was going on in and near this house. It was full of gayly-dressed people, old and young, all of whom were evidently in a state of excitement. Servants hurried to and fro in the corridors; in the pretty balconies which were built at the windows facing the canal of San Giovanni Crisostomo, were gathered groups of cavaliers and ladies, who were leaning over and peering eagerly out to the end of the watery thoroughfare, as if they were anxiously expecting an arrival.

In the main hall of the mansion, a vast apartment, approached from the court-yard by a broad flight of stone steps, and entered by a high and richly-sculptured portal stood a knot of persons who seemed even more excited than the rest. One was a tall and dignified man, clad in a long blue cloak, his head covered by a slashed blue and white cap, from which rose an ostrich feather. He wore a long, brown beard, just streaked with gray; his dark face was flushed, and every moment he approached the door, and questioned the servants posted in the court-yard. On either side of him stood two youths, one fifteen and the other thirteen, both very richly attired, and both the very pictures of boyish freshness and beauty. The elder was tall for his age, and his form was straight, graceful, and well-knit. A pair of bright gray eyes, a nose rather longer than medium, full red lips, and a handsome round chin,

comprised his features, the expression of his face was at once energetic and pleasing; his movements were quick and nervous; and every now and then he turned to the cavalier beside him, and talked rapidly in a strong, musical voice. The younger boy, while he closely resembled his brother, was of more gentle mould and manners. The one seemed made to be a warrior, to play an active, perhaps a heroic part, in the struggling world. The other appeared born to be a courtier, to shine in the society of elegant women, to be rather a favorite of the polite world, than a man of deeds. While the younger clung to the cavalier's arm with sort of air of dependence, the elder bore himself erect, as if quite able to take care of himself.

All at once loud and joyous cries were heard from the balconies in front of the house; and presently down rushed their occupants into the hall, whither all the others who were in the house flocked in a twinkling.

"They are coming! They are coming!" were the words that went eagerly around. The two lads were seized and embraced by the ladies; the elder's eyes kindled with delight as he hurried to the door; his brother danced up and down, and clapped his hands, while tears of happiness flowed over his rosy cheeks.

In the court-yard there was the greatest noise and confusion. The retainers of the household gathered in two rows at the archway, while the steward, a portly personage, in a tunic, with a heavy chain around his neck, and a long staff in his hand, passed out upon the landing to welcome the new-comers.

He was soon seen returning, walking backwards, and bowing, as he came, almost to the ground. In another moment the travellers who had been so anxiously awaited, slowly walked through the archway, and greeted the excited group before them.

A strange appearance, indeed, did the two tall, bronzed men present to those who were gazing at them. Instead of the rich and elegant Venetian costume of the day, their forms were covered with what seemed rough and barbarous garments. From their shoulders to their feet they were arrayed in long, loose gowns, or great-coats, one of them made of shaggy fur; while on their heads were fur caps. Their feet were incased in rude shoes, which turned up at the toes; while at their sides, instead of the long, slender Venetian sword, hung broad, heavy, curved scimitars. In their hands they carried stout sticks; slung across their shoulders were long, furry bags. Not less strange were their faces. Both wore long, shaggy, grizzled hair, which fell in thick masses to their shoulders; the beards of both were long and tangled, and covered their cheeks almost to their eyes; their skin was rough and brown, and here and there a seamed scar betokened that they had met with fierce and savage enemies.

No sooner had they appeared than the elder of the two boys pushed his way through the crowd, which parted to let him pass, and rushed up to the new-comers as if to throw himself into the arms of one of them. But when he came close to them, he suddenly stopped short. In place of the light of joy, a puzzled and pained expression came across



RETURN OF THE WANDERERS

his handsome face. He looked, first at one and then at the other; peered into their countenances, and seemed quite at a loss which to embrace first. His trouble, however, was soon relieved. The stouter, and evidently the elder of the travellers, advanced and folded him in his arms.

“Surely,” said he, in a hoarse, low voice, “this is my beloved Marco! No wonder you did not know me, child; for when I went away, you were but an infant, six years old. And how has it been with you? Thank heaven, I find you well and strong. But where—where is Maffeo?”

The traveller looked eagerly around; and then the younger boy resolved his anxiety by leaping into his arms.

The two boys were clasped close at last to their father’s breast. He kissed them on both cheeks, and patted their heads, and lifted their chins with his finger, the better to scan their faces. Then the tears coursed down his bronzed face; and raising his hands aloft, he made a silent prayer of thanksgiving, that he had returned home from far-distant lands, and an absence of many years, to find his darling sons alive and well.

Meanwhile the other traveller found a welcome not less loving. A comely dame had thrown her arms around his neck and was holding him tight, overjoyed to find her husband by her side once more; and, two fair young girls, his daughters, were disputing with their mother his caresses. Then it came the turn of the other relatives and old friends of the wanderers to greet them and overwhelm them with endearments; and, before these greetings were over, night had fallen, and the court-yard was lit up by the

torches which the servants had fetched and lighted.

The scene then changed to the great hall, which, while the merry-making had been going on in the court-yard, had been quickly transformed into a banqueting-room. Two long rows of tables decked out with a profusion of flowers, and profusely laden with a bounteous, smoking hot supper, were ranged throughout its length; while the apartment was lit up by hundreds of wax candles, which gleamed from gilded candelabra fixed along the walls. The servants, clad in the livery of the house, stood beside the tables, ready to serve the many guests; who poured in and took their places, and waited till the two travellers reappeared.

The latter had gone up to their chambers, to enjoy a moment with their families in private, and to exchange their outlandish garments for their native costume. They ere long descended, clad in splendid suits of velvet, and took their places at the heads of the two tables, their children on either side of them. Very late that night, it may well be believed, was the revel of welcome kept up. The travellers, at last finding themselves cozily at home, with all who were dear around them, their appetites sated with delicious dishes and warming wines, their bodies rested from the long journey, grew very merry and talkative, and launched out into long stories of their adventures.

For nine long years they had been absent from Venice, and only once or twice had they either heard news from home, or been able to send tidings of themselves to their families and friends. The elder, Nicolo, had left his two boys

scarcely more than infants, in the care of their aunt and of their uncle Marco, the cavalier who has been described as awaiting, in the great hall, the travellers' return.

The two brothers had set out, at first, with the intention of making a trading journey to Constantinople, and then to the countries bordering on the Black Sea; for they were not only Venetian nobles, but merchants as well. It was no uncommon thing in those days for Venetian noblemen to engage in commerce; and in this way the nobility of that city long maintained themselves in wealth and power, when the nobles of other Italian cities fell into poverty and decay.

Nicolo had taken his wife with him to Constantinople and soon after their arrival there, she had died. The two little boys who had been left at home, thus became motherless. At first Nicolo was overcome with grief. He lost all desire, for the time, to return home; and now resolved to extend his travels further East than he had originally planned. After remaining awhile at Constantinople, the brothers crossed the Black Sea and tarried sometime in the Crimea, the promontory which was, centuries after, to become a famous battle ground between the Russians on one side, and the English, French, and Turks on the other. While in the Crimea, they succeeded in making some profitable trading ventures; and they learned, moreover, that further East there were countries rich in goods and treasures, though warlike in temper and barbarous in customs. Nicolo finally persuaded his brother Maffeo to venture further, and to join him in penetrating the remote countries of which they heard so much.

They first ascended the great river Volga, which flows for so long a distance through the vast territory now comprised in the Russian Empire, and entered what is now called, on the maps, Central Asia. They stopped at Bokhara, then the seat of a rude and warlike court, but where they were well treated; then sped on their way still further east, and continued their journey, pausing at the various Asiatic capitals, crossing now vast deserts, now bleak and lofty steppes, now lovely and luxuriant valleys, now dense and seemingly interminable forests, until they found themselves among the curious, squint-eyed, pig-tailed, small-footed, ingenious race whom we now call the Chinese.

Of course their journey was far from rapid. They proceeded for the most part on horseback, although sometimes they perched themselves on the humps of camels, or rode aloft on the broad backs of elephants. It took not only months, but years, to reach the limit of their journey. They were often delayed by savage Asiatic wars, which made further progress dangerous. Sometimes they were forcibly detained in the rude towns by the ruling khans, who insisted on being entertained with accounts of European marvels. Now and then they were in terrible peril of their lives from the attacks of barbarian brigands, who assailed them in lonely solitudes. Meanwhile, they were able to observe the great riches which many of the Asiatic potentates displayed; the beautiful fabrics which Asiatic skill and taste and love of gorgeous colors could produce; the astonishing variety and luxuriance of the Oriental vegetation, and the many strange animals, birds and reptiles

which peopled the forests, and had their lairs and nests in the deep, rank, overgrown jungles.

Europeans had long suspected the existence, in a remote part of Asia, of a powerful and splendid empire, which they had come to speak of as Cathay. Indeed, accounts kept coming from time to time of the exploits of the sovereign of Cathay, and no less of the wisdom and energy of his rule. It was towards this mysterious land that the brothers now wended their way; resolved to discover, if possible, whether such a land really existed, and to see for themselves the mighty monarch who reigned over it.

After long years of wandering, they at last reached Cathay, which they found to really and truly exist; nor, as they saw, had any of the accounts of it which had come to their ears in Venice, at all exaggerated its extent, wealth, and power. The monarch, they saw, was indeed a great and wise ruler, a man of far higher intelligence than the Asiatic princes they had before met, and a host who welcomed them with gracious hospitality, and made them quite at home at his court.

His name was Kublai Khan, and his sway extended over a large portion of Eastern China. He was delighted with his Venetian guests, and plied them with questions about the continent from whence they came. They found, too, that he was deeply interested in Christianity, about which he eagerly and constantly asked them; declaring that he himself would introduce Christianity into Cathay.

After the brothers had spent a long period at the court of Kublai Khan, they began to feel homesick, and to wish

to bear back to Venice the story of the wonderful things they had seen and heard. At first, Kublai Khan was very loth to part with them. He was very fond of their society and conversation, and he had learned a great many things from them, useful to his government. Seeing, however, that they were bent on returning home, he finally consented to take leave of them; but before he did so, he made them solemnly promise that they would come back to Cathay again. This they did, although at that time they were very doubtful whether they would fulfil their pledge.

The khan then gave them an important mission to the pope of Rome. He desired very much, he said, that the pope should send a large number of educated missionaries to Cathay, to convert his people to Christianity, and to civilize and polish his semi-barbarous subjects, so that they might become like Europeans.


The brothers were only too glad to bear this message to the pope; for they were both good Christians, and they knew with what pleasure the head of the Church would receive the news that the monarch of Cathay was not only willing, but eager, that his people should embrace the Christian faith.

Their journey back home was unattended by any serious accident, though it was a long, weary, and dangerous one. At last, in the spring of 1269 their eyes were rejoiced to greet the waters of the Mediterranean at Acre, where they remained several months, and from whence they sailed, in a Venetian galley, directly to their native city. They soon safely reached the familiar bay, and were welcomed with

open arms, as we have seen, by their long-waiting relatives and friends.

CHAPTER II.

MARCO POLO'S YOUTH

arco Polo—for the reader has already guessed that the elder of the two boys who had welcomed their father home was Marco Polo—was born amid surroundings of wealth and luxury. His family was a noble one, and held high rank in Venice. His father, Nicolo, before he made his memorable journey to the court of Kublai Khan, had both inherited and amassed riches. Marco suffered in early life none of those privations which have hardened so many great travellers and discoverers, and have accustomed them to lives of peril and rough adventure. From his most tender years, he had not known what it was to wish for anything beyond his reach. Fine clothes, plenty of playmates, petting, fond parents, all the pleasures enjoyed by the children of his time, were his.

Instead of going to school, he was taught at home by tutors and governesses; and happily his own tastes led him to find study interesting, so that he became a better scholar than most boys of his age. He especially loved history and narratives of adventure and discovery, and it was often difficult to persuade him to leave his books and go to bed. He was fond, too, of geography, and was wont to puzzle

for hours over such rude maps and charts as he could lay his hands on; though at that period, the maps and charts in existence were but few, and represented but here and there patches of the world.

The Polo family lived all together in the great mansion that has been described. Marco's uncle, whose name also was Marco, was the eldest brother, and when Nicolo and Maffeo went on their travels, remained in Venice to retain charge of the important trading-house which they carried on in common. This elder Marco was a kindly, though rather proud and stately man; and while he treated his little nephews, deprived as they were both of father and mother, with gentleness, he kept a close watch upon their habits and conduct. As the phrase is, he "brought them up well;" and once in a great while, when young Marco's high spirits betrayed him into wild pranks, his uncle would shut him up in one of the remote rooms of the house. On this occasion the little fellow would beg, as a special favor, that one of his books might keep him company, and when his uncle refused this, the punishment he inflicted was indeed a severe one.

Besides their uncle, Marco and young Maffeo were left in the care of their aunt, the wife of that uncle who had gone away with their father; and their daily companions were their two cousins, the daughters of this aunt, not far from their own age. But their aunt was a fine lady of the doge's court, and was always going to balls, the theatre, or galas in the lagoon; and so they saw but little of her. Marco and his brother spent many happy hours in their gondolas,

which they themselves learned to manage with skill; and once in a while as they grew older, their uncle took them with him on hunting expeditions on the main land.

At this period, ferocious wars were continually going on between Venice and its great maritime rival, the republic of Genoa. Both struggled for the supremacy of Mediterranean commerce, and sought to gain as many military stations and fortresses as possible on the islands and seaboard of the Levant. In these wars, Venice up to this time had been generally successful; the time was, indeed, drawing near when the Genoese would become the conquerors; but it had not yet come.

It was one of Marco's chief delights to watch the brilliant arrays of troops as they were reviewed by the doge in the Piazza before leaving for the seat of conflict: and to haunt the quays and watch the preparations for departure of the quaint war-galleys of the age. He caught the martial spirit which was then in the air, and often longed to be old enough to go to the wars and fight under the proud flag of Venice; and thus came to have adventurous and military tastes. He was not destined to indulge these tastes for many years to come; but the time was, long after, to arrive, when he would engage in furious battle with his country's foes, and have a romantic and thrilling experience in the fortunes of war.

At the period of his father's return from Cathay, Marco, as has been said, was fifteen years of age, a bright, promising boy, intelligent beyond his age, and a great favorite with all who knew him. It may well be believed that he

was delighted to see his father once more, after the lapse of so many years; and to hear from his lips the tale of his many and marvellous adventures in the East. Nicolo, on his side, was rejoiced to find his elder son grown up to be so vigorous and attractive a youth, and was extremely proud of him. He freely indulged Marco's desire to hear him recount his adventures; and used to sit talking with him for hours together. He soon perceived that Marco had a keen taste for a life of stirring adventure, and was far from displeased to make the discovery.

One day, when Nicolo had been at home for several months, he was chatting with Marco, and happened to say that he had given his promise to Kublai Khan to return to Cathay.

"And you will go, sir, will you not?" eagerly asked Marco. "You will keep your promise to the great king?"

"In truth, I know not," was the father's reply. "There are many things to keep me at home. These wars interfere much with our trade, and it needs all three of us brothers to be here to look after it. The journey to Cathay, too, is not only long and dreary, but dangerous. The man who goes thither, holds his life, every hour, in his hand. At any moment, a hidden enemy may despatch him before he can lift a weapon; or, he may be lost on the great deserts, and die of sheer thirst and starvation. Then, my son, how can I leave you and your brother again, for so long a time? It would be too hard to part from you; to be far away, and not able to watch you, as month by month you grow towards manhood. On the other hand, there are vast riches to be

had in Cathay; and noble service to be done for our Holy Church, by once more venturing thither."

"But, father," replied Marco, grasping Nicolo's arm, "you need not leave me behind. I beg you to go, and to let me go with you! Surely I am old enough and big enough now to go anywhere. Think, sir, I shall be soon sixteen: why, that is almost a man. Look, I am almost as tall as you are now. I can handle a sword, javelin, and cross-bow as well as any boy of my age; I am strong and well, and can walk and ride with the stoutest. My uncle Maffeo said, the other day, I would make a fine soldier, young as I am. Pray, sir, let me go with you to Cathay!"

Nicolo smiled, and patted the eager boy's flushed cheek; but gently shook his head.

"You ask, dear Marco," said he, "what cannot be. What! Do you suppose I would risk your young life amid those fierce Tartar tribes, those frightful jungles, those dreary, trackless wastes? And even if you reached Cathay in safety, do you think I would trust you with that Eastern despot, Kublai Khan, who might take it into his wilful head to separate you from me, and keep you forever? No, no, Marco, I should not dare take you, even if I went."

Marco hung his head in deep disappointment. He had long had it in his heart to implore his father to let him return with him to Cathay; and now Nicolo's words chilled and grieved him. But he was not easily discouraged. In spite of his father's refusal, he resolved to leave no persuasion untried. Again and again he returned to the subject that absorbed his mind; but all his pleading might have been

in vain, had it not been that a powerful ally took up his cause. This was his uncle Maffeo: who, besides admiring Marco greatly, said that the companionship of a brave and vigorous youth would be of great value to his brother and himself, in case they again crossed Asia, and that Marco might win the special friendship of Kublai Khan by his youth, lively spirits, and agreeable bearing.

In due time, the two brothers definitely made up their minds to fulfil their promise to the oriental monarch; and after many long and earnest talks, Nicolo filled his son's heart with joy by telling him that he might go with them.

Much remained to be done, however, before they set out. On arriving at Acre, returning from their first journey, the brothers Polo had borne in mind the message of Kublai Khan to the pope; and the first thing they did was to visit a famous Church dignitary who was staying there, named Tedaldo, archdeacon of Liege. This eminent man had no sooner heard their errand, than he astonished them very much by telling them that, just now, there was no pope at all, and that consequently, they could not deliver their message! Not long before their arrival, Pope Clement IV had died; and the cardinals had not yet been able to agree upon a successor. This vacancy in the papal chair was not, indeed, yet filled. The Polos, after having resolved to go again to Cathay, delayed their departure until a new pope should be chosen, so that he might send some missionaries with them, as Kublai Khan desired.

But they grew tired of waiting; for, after two years, the great council of the Church seemed no nearer electing a

pope than at first; and the Polos made up their minds that they must return to Cathay, if at all, without the missionaries. Then the naval wars going on between Venice and Genoa made it for a while unsafe for Venetians to cross the Mediterranean to Syria, and this compelled another postponement of their plans. At last, however, a favorable opportunity occurred to traverse the sea to Acre, which as before was to be the starting-point of the travellers. A war-galley destined for that Asiatic town, then in the possession of Venice, was about to set forth; and by Nicolo's great influence at court, where he had been heartily welcomed back by the reigning doge, a passage was secured in her for all three.

Marco had scarcely slept since permission to go had been wrung from his reluctant father. He devoted himself ardently to the practise of the sword and the cross-bow; he was measured for two suits of clothes, fit for rough travelling; again and again he went over the proposed route, on such charts relating to it as his father had brought with him: and he constantly talked about the wonderful things he was about to see, and the many adventures he would undoubtedly meet with. Happily his younger brother, Maffeo, whose tastes were gentle and domestic, did not share his eagerness for a wandering life; and, well content to stay at home, was only distressed at the thought of the long absence of his father and of the brother who had been his constant companion.

On the eve of the day appointed for the departure of the travellers, the great house on the canal of San Giovanni



MARCO STUDYING THE CHARTS.

Crisostomo was once more crowded with a numerous and brilliantly attired assemblage. Nicolo had resolved to give a bounteous parting feast to his family and friends; and the doge himself had consented to honor the feast with his presence. There was no family more honored and respected in Venice than the Polos; and the doge regarded Nicolo as one of the bravest and most estimable of his subjects.

The appearance of the guests was very different from that on the former occasion. The joyful welcome was replaced by the sad leave-taking. Little Maffeo's face was suffused with tears, which he in vain tried to repress; and the elder Marco looked grave and downcast. As for young Marco, his anticipations of the journey so excited him that he could scarcely think of grief, even at leaving his home and parting from his brother and kind kindred. His fair face was flushed with eager expectation: and he felt very proud of the brand-new sword which swung, for the first time, at his side. He felt himself already a man and a soldier, and never once thought of shrinking from the dangers of the tour. To him it was more like a holiday journey than a dangerous venture; and it seemed as if the morrow would never come.

At last the guests tearfully embraced the brothers and Marco, and one by one departed. The candles in the glittering candelabra were put out, and the house was left in darkness.

The sun had scarcely risen when Marco leaped from his bed, donned the suit which had been prepared for his setting out, and buckled on his sword; and while almost

all the people of Venice were still wrapped in slumber, the travellers wended their way to the war-galley on the quay, and went on board.