



Marco Polo

Manuel Komroff

Marco Polo's Travels

VENICE

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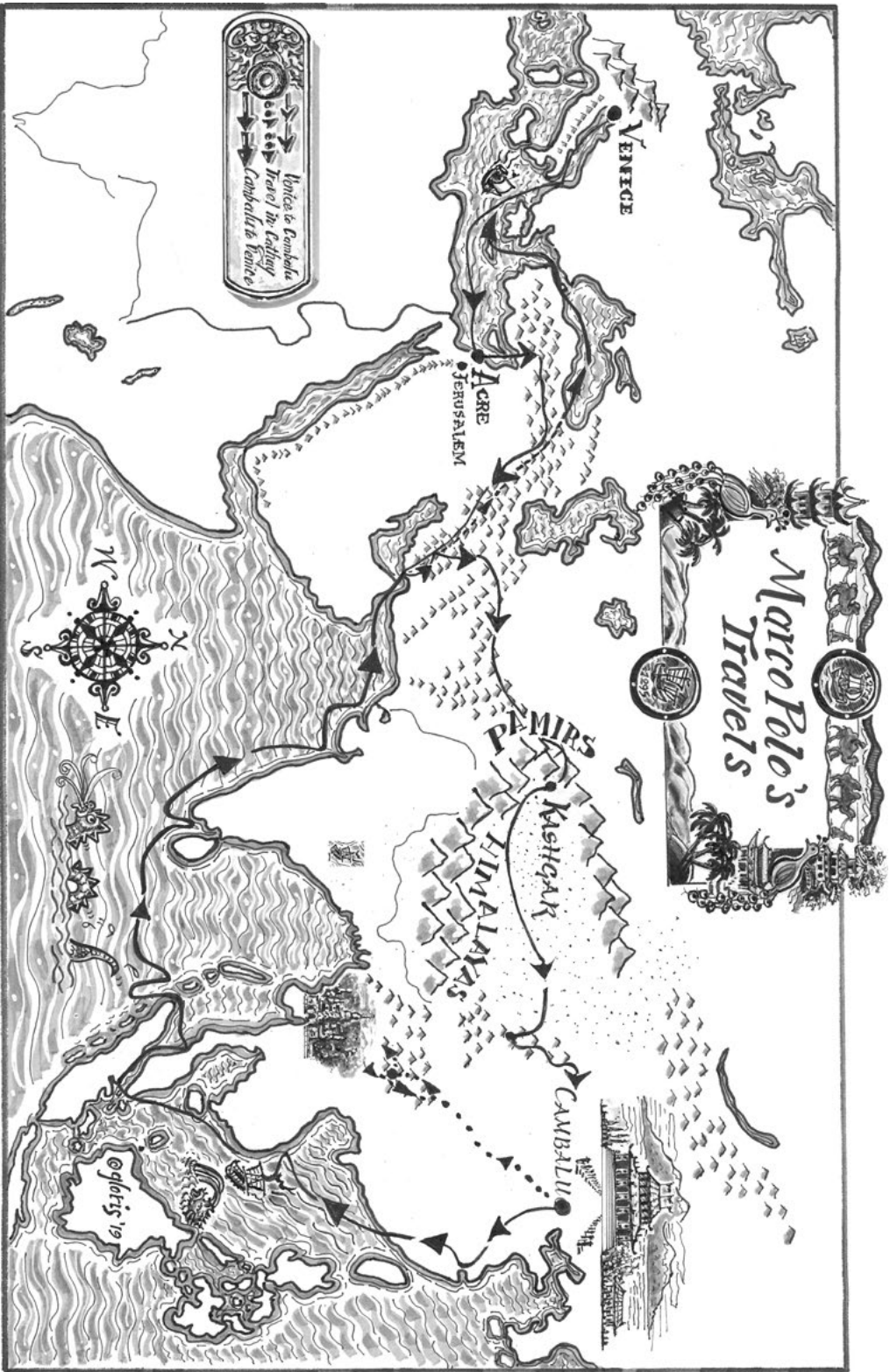
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CHAPTER I

A BOY IN VENICE

 **YOUNG MARCO POLO** looked out upon the wide blue sea from an upper window in his home in Venice. Far beyond the Gulf of Venice he saw the broad Adriatic dotted with many vessels laden with cargo. And, now and then, he saw one of the war galleys, manned by a hundred oars, racing swiftly over the water to protect the harbour from enemies and the rich cargo vessels from raiders.

And as he looked out upon the blue sea young Marco dreamed. He dreamed of the day when he would set sail for distant ports in Sicily and Greece. He dreamed of visiting the great city of Constantinople where his father and uncle owned buildings and docks. He dreamed of the mysterious lands to which the Crusaders had gone. He, too, might some day visit these far-off places. He, too, might some day see the great wonders of the world.

Entranced he gazed upon the sea, dreaming of the great world that lay beyond. All his life he had lived in the city of Venice. But to this great port vessels arrived from many places and he had heard tales of the lands beyond. He had even heard tales of a world still unknown, a world filled with mysteries and marvels.

There were some who believed that beyond the barrier of the Caucasus there lay vast lands that stretched on and on. And it was said that no one had ever ventured into this unknown world to the east, for the way was barred by the Tartar hordes.

Young Marco wondered if perhaps it was into this unknown

world that his father and uncle had gone. For such a trip, he felt, would take many years. And had not his father and uncle been gone a long time? Much too long. Surely soon, any day, they must return. And he hoped that one of the vessels that he could see entering the harbour of Venice was bringing them home. With all his heart he wished for their return.

Marco was six years old when his father Nicolo and his uncle Maffeo, who was unmarried, sailed out of the port of Venice with a valuable shipload of merchandise. They expected to be gone only a year or two and left young Marco in the care of his grandparents, for his mother had died when he was an infant. But after many years had passed and the Polos did not return, the grandparents feared that Nicolo and Maffeo were lost. Marco, however, never gave up hope. He felt certain that some day his father and uncle would return. He was six when his father and uncle left; now he was fifteen. When they left he was a little boy. Now he felt himself strong and grown.

And one day, during Marco's fifteenth year, just as he had long wished, a vessel entering the harbour of Venice brought back his father and uncle. They had been gone nine long years and now, at last, they were returned to their home.

That evening a banquet was given in the Polo home to welcome back to Venice the two brothers who had travelled far and been away so long. At this feast were many Venetian noblemen, old family friends and relatives, as well as masters from the merchants' guild. Young Marco sat proudly beside his father.

When the feast was done and the table cleared, Marco's father and uncle drew out a large chart which they unrolled on the table for all to see.

"This will help us explain our long journey," said Nicolo. "With this map which we ourselves have drawn, we will try to trace our route and tell you how it happened that we finally arrived at the lands of the Tartars."

At this the guests at the table looked anxiously at each other. There

was fear in their eyes, for all knew that the Tartars were a fierce and warlike race. Only fifty years before their armies had reached the Danube. And even at that very moment the terrible Tartars were still a threat to the peace of Europe. How many lands had they already overrun! Would their conquests never end!

“Yes,” repeated Nicolo boldly. “We have been to the land of the Tartars.”

“It is true,” added his brother Maffeo. “We have not only been to the land of the Tartars, but we have seen their emperor Kublai Khan and are now returned as his personal envoys.”

The fear in the eyes of the guests now turned to astonishment. All were silent. All were eager to hear what Nicolo and Maffeo were about to relate.

With his finger on the chart Nicolo traced the course of their sailing vessel. “Nine years ago, in the year 1260,” he said, “we sailed from the Gulf of Venice.” Then he told how, arriving safely at Constantinople, they found their ships and warehouses filled with rich and varied merchandise. Everything was in good order and, since their presence in Constantinople was not urgently required, they decided to investigate the trade possibilities of some of the lands about the Black Sea. In order to do this they were required to travel on horseback. They took with them many costly jewels which they could conceal and carry easily. With these jewels they intended to trade.

After travelling on horseback along the shores of the Black Sea they reached the encampment of one of the Tartar generals. This chief was a liberal prince—one who had respect for culture—and he at once welcomed the Polo brothers and received them with all the honours granted to ambassadors. The Polo brothers remained a whole year as guests of the Tartar Prince. During this time they learnt to speak the Mongolian tongue of the Tartars.

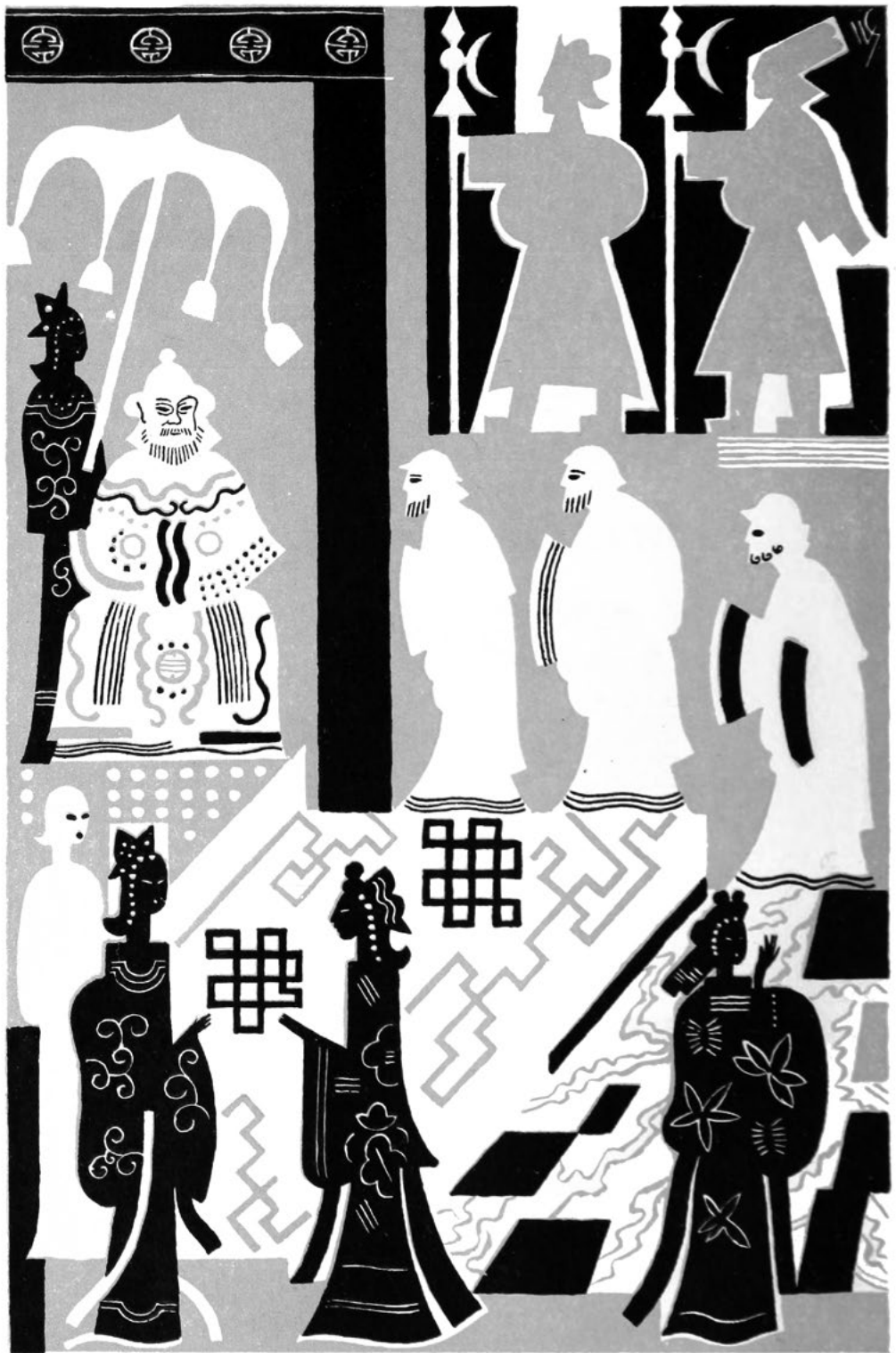
But they found the countries through which they had to pass at war with each other, and because of this they were forced to make a long detour. This detour carried them eastward. They crossed the

Volga River and then spent a full seventeen days travelling through a desolate stretch of desert land. After this they entered the dominions of Persia.

This long route Marco's father Nicolo traced on the map before them. Then pointing to a certain spot he explained that this was the place in Persia where they chanced to meet a distinguished ambassador. This ambassador was on his way to the great Khan of the Tartars who lived in Far Eastern lands.

The ambassador was much impressed with the Polo brothers. He found them cultured and agreeable. They were able to speak together in the Mongolian tongue, and soon the ambassador proposed that the Polo brothers accompany him to the court of Kublai Khan. He was certain that the brothers would be fascinated by the wonders of this land which he called Cathay. And he felt sure that since the Khan had never seen any natives of Europe he would be pleased to welcome them to his court. All this Nicolo explained to his guests seated about the table. Now, with his finger he carefully traced their long journey to the court of the Khan Kublai in far-off Cathay.

"From Persia we travelled in an easterly direction. We travelled many roads and through many lands. We travelled over tall mountains and through vast stretches of desert land. But all these details are not important. The important thing is that, at last, after a full year's journey we finally reached the court of the great Kublai Khan. He received us as royal visitors. By this time we had become most proficient in the Mongolian tongue and we were fortunately able to converse with him freely. Oh, there was so much he wanted to know! He asked hundreds of questions, for we were the very first people from Europe that he had ever seen. He asked us about the lands through which we had passed and he wanted to know about the kingdoms of Europe and how they were governed. He was curious about everything. He wanted to know about our religion. We answered all that he asked. He was interested in the Pope and he asked us to explain to him the Christian doctrine."



THE COURT OF KUBLAI KHAN

The Polo brothers explained to the Khan how the Christian religion differed from the religions in the Orient and they professed that Christianity was superior to all.

The Khan found the Polo brothers endowed with good sense and filled with worldly information. And so, after consulting with his ministers, the Khan decided to employ them as his ambassadors to the Pope.

Now Maffeo spoke: "Here are the letters which the Khan has written to the Pope. They ask the Pope to send to Cathay one hundred men of learning, thoroughly acquainted with the principles of Christianity, as well as the seven arts which form the bases of our culture. Several times we explained to the Khan that our seven arts include rhetoric, logic, grammar, arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry. Now the Khan desires that these hundred learned men come to Cathay as his guests. While they are in Cathay he would like them to teach the scholars in his court all that they know. And in time, if these hundred men can prove that the religion of Christ is superior to all other religions, then the Khan promised that he, and all under him, would become Christians."

When these words were spoken the Polo brothers unpacked the costly gifts which Kublai Khan was sending to the Pope. These gifts they displayed to the astonished guests.

"And here," said Nicolo loosening the collar of his coat, "here is the golden tablet of authority given us by the Khan. This is inscribed in the Mongolian language and bears the seal of the emperor. Wherever we travelled in Cathay this golden talisman secured for us all that was necessary. We had but to command."

He held up the golden talisman for all to see. It was about as long as his hand though not as broad. This tag of pure beaten gold was suspended around his neck by a silken cord. Young Marco, who sat close to his father, could see the fine Mongolian engraving on this golden badge of authority. It was a strange script of a strange language.

Nicolo now opened the letters to the Pope which he had from the Khan and displayed the Khan's seal imprinted in royal vermilion.

After a brief silence one of the nobles at the table spoke: "You have been away, and at sea, and therefore you could not have heard the sad news. Only a few months ago our good Pope, Clement IV, died. The cardinals are now at this very moment journeying to Rome."

"This is indeed sad news," said Nicolo. "For now we will have to wait until a new Pope is elected. The Khan is determined to have one hundred learned men from Europe."

Later that night, when the guests had departed, young Marco asked to see again the Khan's golden tablet which enabled his envoys to demand all they required on their journey. This was truly a wonderful thing. He examined it closely. His eyes were round with wonder.

"How long, Father, does it take to elect a new pope in Rome?" asked Marco.

"Not long," replied his father.

"Then you will be returning to the Khan in Cathay?"

"Yes, we have promised faithfully that we shall return."

Young Marco looked up at his father. "When you sail again," he said boldly, "then I will sail with you. I am ready."

"How are you ready?" asked his father.

"All these years I have not been idle. My tutors have been preparing me for the life of a merchant. They have taught me Persian, and I know how a vessel must sail. I understand the ropes and the sails. I can read a chart, measure the winds—and I know how to steer by the stars at night and by compass in the day. And besides all this I already have a fair knowledge of arithmetic, geography and history."

"Good," said his father. He was pleased with Marco, his accomplishments, his youthful enthusiasm. He was also pleased with Marco's appearance. Before him stood a growing youth of medium height with broad shoulders. His well-set head was covered with thick, dark curly hair. His eyes were brown, large and sparkling. His lips were well formed, his chin strong and his nose well shaped. His brow was clear and altogether there was about him an intelligence which radiated from his face. Nicolo Polo looked at his son and smiled.

“You have grown, you are strong,” he said. “Yes, this time you shall go with us to the court of Kublai Khan.”

It had been a wonderful day. Such a wonderful day. But now Marco’s joy knew no bounds.

That night when young Marco closed his eyes he dreamed of far-off lands and of strange races of men. He dreamed of oriental wonders, of marvels and splendours.

He awoke early the next morning. From his bed he could see the rim of the sun mount the eastern horizon across the bay. How far east was the sun? How far east was Cathay?

Soon, very soon, he would be journeying eastward to that magical land of Cathay. This was the place of his heart’s desire.

NO SCHOLARS FOR CATHAY

WHILE THE POLO brothers and young Marco waited in Venice, there were difficulties in Rome. The college of cardinals could not agree upon a successor to the late Pope. It usually takes only a few days or weeks to reach a decision. But now, in the year 1269, many months had gone by and still the cardinals could not decide upon the one whom they considered worthy of holding this high office.

“We must be patient. We must wait,” said Marco’s father. “And while we wait let us use our time to good advantage. Let us prepare ourselves for the long journey.”

Marco entered eagerly into all their plans. He was filled with the expectation of this oriental journey. And he asked his father and uncle to teach him the Mongolian language, for he realized that it would be a great advantage to him to be able to speak with the Tartars in their own tongue. The lessons were immediately begun and Marco learned quickly and easily.

The boy was also eager to learn all that he could about the lands of the Orient from which his father and uncle had just returned. Of these eastern countries very little was at that time known in Europe. Marco asked endless questions and the elder Polos told him all they knew.

They also explained to him how it was that they were the first to penetrate into the mysterious East.

“It is known that in ancient times,” Nicolo explained to his son,

“there was a trade route that ran from the Orient through the Holy Land and on to Rome. The merchants of old traded in spices and silks which came from the East. But soon after the decline of the empire of Rome this trade route was closed. And during the long centuries that followed, no attempt was made to establish contact with the East. The high Caucasus, the Ural Mountains and the deep Russian forests formed a natural barrier. But oddly enough, the Tartar conquests have once more opened the way. The Tartars have cut roads through the forests; they have bridged the wild rivers and pierced the rocky mountains. And it is because of these military roads that your uncle and I were able to reach Cathay.”

“It is all so interesting but so confusing,” said Marco. “Here at home we have good reason to believe that the Tartars are a fierce heathen race who show no mercy to their enemies. They plunder, they kill. Yet you report that they have treated you kindly and with great consideration. And you say that they have learning and that their princes are well mannered! Truly, it is all most confusing.”

“They treated us with great consideration,” said his father. “When we return to their dominions and pass through their conquered lands you will learn something of their remarkable history and their sudden rise to power. You will see a new world that is completely different from the world you know.”

Then Nicolo asked his son: “Do you know why we in Europe call these people Tartars, when in reality they are Mongols from the land of Mongolia north of Cathay? It is because the word *tartaros* in Greek means hell. And when these armies first broke through the mountain barriers, with all their savage fierceness, they were said to resemble devils. Not having any other name for them, we in Europe called them ‘men from hell’, or Tartars. But now we know that they come from far-off Mongolia.”

Young Marco was eager to see these “men from hell” and decide for himself. Were they really so fierce? And was it dangerous to travel among them? Or would the golden tablet of Kublai Khan fully protect

them on this long journey? When could they start? What was the news from Rome? Would the deadlock between the cardinals never end?

A whole year went by and no pope was elected. And then another half year went by and still there was no new pope.

Now the Polo brothers grew impatient. They knew that the great Khan would not be pleased with this delay. They feared that the Khan might suppose that they had broken their promise to him and that they had no intention of returning to his land. And since the Polos were the only men from Europe that the Khan had ever encountered, he might, because of this failure, believe that all men from Europe break their promises easily.

No. It was not possible to wait much longer. So they decided to gather together what they needed for their journey and make preparations for leaving. But still they hesitated. To arrive before Kublai Khan without those hundred learned men which he so ardently desired would be to fail in their mission. But not to arrive at all was also bad. At length they decided to wait until two full years had expired since the death of Pope Clement.

When these two years had passed they dared not delay another day. And so saying good-bye to all, they boarded their ship, weighed anchor and hoisted the sails. The journey was now begun. The bobbing bow turned eastward.

Marco stood in the prow of the vessel. He was happy. He looked out across the blue sea. Occasionally he glanced back at the proud city of Venice with its hundred islands, its winding canals and its arched bridges. All this he knew so well. But the lands far to the east, these mysterious lands he did not know.

The bow pounded against the choppy water and with each pound a salty spray filled the air. The air was fresh. The sky was broad. And the blue of the sea stretched on and on as far as his eyes could see.

At last, after two years of waiting, they were on their journey. Marco was fifteen years old when his father and uncle returned from the East. Now he was seventeen. And he was tall and strong.



BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

A light breeze carried them on. They steered at night by the aid of the stars, while during the day they used the compass and their charts. Now and then they touched at some Mediterranean port to take on fresh water and food. And sometimes they docked to unload some of their cargo. In this leisurely manner they passed many of the scattered Greek islands and in time they arrived at the coast of Syria. This coast was close to the land of Jerusalem. And along this coast they found the harbour of the city of Acre. It was this city that was once captured by Richard I and his brave crusading knights.

As they sailed slowly into the harbour, Marco noticed that many of the vessels, recognizing the flags and pennants of Venice, were signalling to them. At length a rowboat came alongside their vessel and the men cried out: "Messages have arrived from Rome! A new pope has been chosen!"

The high lords of the city were at the wharf to greet them. There was much excitement. Letters for the Polo brothers had been sent by fast galley. They were signed by the new pope, Gregory X, who commanded these envoys to return immediately to Rome. For this journey the fast war galley that had brought the letters stood waiting.

While the Polos did not relish this return after they had made so good a start on their long journey, still they were eager to have the Pope comply with the wishes of the Khan and send the hundred learned men to the East. And so, after instructing their sailors to bring their vessel with its cargo to Constantinople, they boarded the fast war galley. It started out at once. It darted swiftly out of the harbour.

The galley was manned by a hundred slaves, who groaned and chanted while they worked the heavy oars. Soldiers stood over them with whips. And another hundred slaves reclined on the decks ready to relieve those who wearied at their labour. The sharp prow parted the water in front and a long trail of foam was left behind. When the winds were favourable and the sails hoisted, it seemed to Marco that they almost flew over the smooth surface of the water. And when the sun went down and night covered them, even then the slaves were at

their places chanting their songs to the rhythmic strokes of the oars.

In this manner they raced across the sea. And before many days had passed they arrived at their destination.

In Rome, Gregory X received them without delay. He dictated several letters addressed to the Khan and also charged the Polos with the delivery of handsome presents made of gold and crystal. But instead of the hundred scholars which the Khan desired, the Pope ordered two friars to go along with them. "These brothers," he said, "are men of letters and of science, besides being profound theologians. They have my authority to ordain priests, to consecrate bishops and to grant absolution. These two can do everything that a hundred might accomplish." Then he wished them all well on their long journey and dismissed them from his audience hall.

Once more the Polos started eastward. Now accompanied by two timid friars, who had never before been out of Rome, they made their way back to the coast of Syria. Here the party of five bought good pack horses and started out toward the land of Armenia. Some nights they slept in the open and some nights they found lodging.

But they had not travelled many days when they heard bad news. The sultan of Babylonia had invaded Armenia with a great army and this army had begun on its work of destruction. The two friars were terrified at this news and, fearing for their lives, decided that they could not possibly go any further.

"But the journey has hardly begun," urged Nicolo.

"For us it has now ended," spoke one of the friars.

"The Khan waits for you. He is eager to learn about Christianity. And is it not your vow to spread the teachings of Christ?"

But many years in the shelter of a monastery had made the friars fear the great world outside, and they argued this way and that. "Let the infidels come to Rome," they finally said.

So they entrusted to the Polos the special letters that the Pope had given them to be delivered to the Khan. Then turning their horses around they started back toward the coast of Syria with all possible speed.

The three Polos continued on their journey. They travelled by day and rested at night. Soon they were deep into the land and far away from those shores of the Mediterranean that touched the countries of Europe. Now they were entering the little-known lands of the East.

The elder Polos had been through these eastern lands before. But to young Marco these lands were all new, and as he rode along his sharp eyes saw many things that were interesting to him. He saw strange birds and strange animals. He witnessed strange customs and he heard strange tales. And everything that was new and curious he noted.

In the pocket of his coat young Marco carried note paper. And he kept records of everything he saw, everything he learned. He wrote down the names of the countries and cities through which they passed. And he wrote down many other things which he heard on the way and which he did not want to forget.

During his long journey he filled many sheets with many notes. And it was from these notes that—years later—he was able to put together a full account of his travels. That travel record remains to this day the greatest journey ever recorded.