

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

BUILDERS OF  
OUR COUNTRY I

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Gertrude van Duyn  
Southworth

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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# Builders of our Country I

*by*

GERTRUDE VAN DUYN SOUTHWORTH





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# Leif the Lucky

## I. THE NORTHMEN AND LEIF THE LUCKY

Way, way in the far north, in the land of ice and snow, dwelt the Norsemen or Northmen. A bold, daring race, they knew no fear. They plowed the mighty waves of the sea in their small open vessels and made war on the strongest nations, with no thought of the dangers that they faced.

The Northmen had blue eyes and golden hair. They were so tall and powerfully built that when they went into battle they seemed almost like an army of giants. Imagine how they must have looked in their coats of mail, sharp swords hanging from their belts, and on their heads helmets of iron or steel. The sides of these helmets were adorned with wings, and between the wings was an image of some fierce-looking animal. Is it to be wondered that these Northmen were the most dreaded of fighters?

On the sea they were the bravest of sailors. Their ships were small and open, only about fifty feet long, but strongly built and seaworthy. They were low in the center, curving up toward the stern and the bow; and on the bow was carved either a dragon or a sea monster. They carried terror—these little vessels—to the people who watched their ugly bows

plunging slowly through the waves and coming toward their shores.

Even France learned to dread the daring ventures of these Northmen or Vikings. There seemed no limit to what they would attempt. One of their leaders, called Rollo, forced from the French king a province on the northern coast of France. Rollo named it Normandy, and his descendants have lived there ever since.

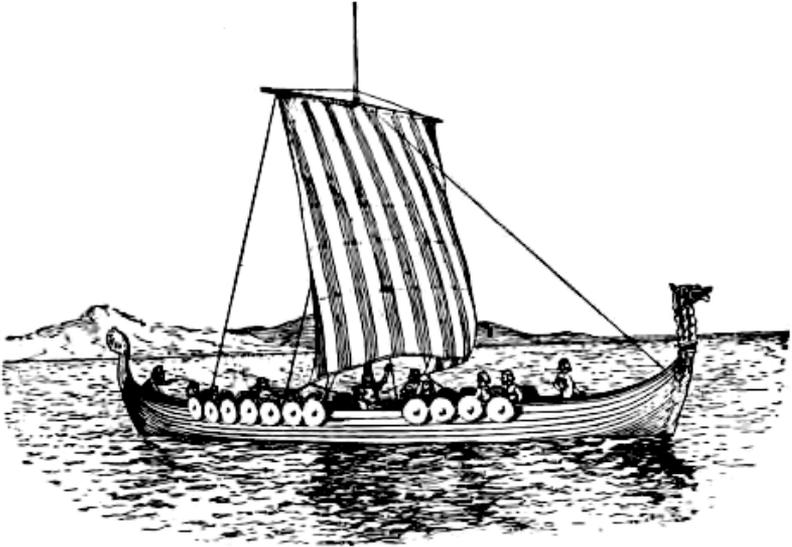
Nor was France the only land which the Northmen molested. Even before Rollo seized his French province, his countrymen had raided the English coast. But these Vikings were not so lucky as Rollo. Although they conquered large districts north of the Thames River, they were soon driven away by England's good King Alfred.

And, strange as it may seem, these bold sailors were the first white men to visit the coasts of the great continent which lay across the sea, as yet undreamed of by any European race.

It happened in this way. Out to the west of the Northmen's land lay the island of Iceland. Here the Northmen planted a flourishing colony of happy, prosperous people. And here dwelt Eric the Red and his family.

This Eric the Red was as brave and fierce a warrior as ever lived, with a temper hard to control. Once upon a time he fell out with a neighbor, and in his anger killed the man. Such actions would not do, even in the Northmen's republic; so Eric the Red was banished from Iceland, as was just and right.

Soon a little Norse ship was plowing the angry waves of the Atlantic Ocean under the command of the exiled Eric. He was determined to seek his fortune in some new land, and daringly headed his vessel for the west, not knowing what lay before him.



A NORSE SHIP OF THE TENTH CENTURY.  
THE REMAINS OF THIS SHIP WERE FOUND IN 1880.

Finally one day the outlines of a rough, forbidding coast came in sight. “This country, bleak as it is, may answer our purpose,” reasoned Eric. So for three years he and his followers explored the shores of the land they had found.

At last they chose the pleasantest place they had seen, and there decided to make their home. Eric the Red named the new country Greenland; for, as he wisely said, “It is well to give it a pleasing name, you know, if we want others to be tempted to join us here.”

This was just what Eric did want. He wanted to found a colony in Greenland. So he returned to Iceland and told the people wonderful tales about the beautiful land he had discovered. His stories so appealed to the adventurous spirit of his people that, when he set sail from Iceland the second time, twenty-five ships were needed to carry the colonists who went with him. Sad to say, eleven of the twenty-five



THE RUINS OF A CHURCH BUILT BY THE NORTHMEN IN GREENLAND.

ships were lost on the way. The other fourteen reached Greenland in safety, and the new colonists went busily to work building themselves homes.

Among Eric's colonists there was a certain man who had a devoted but roving son, named Biarni. After having made a long voyage this son went back to Iceland, full of enthusiasm in the thought of seeing his father again. Picture his disappointment on reaching his old home and being told that his father had moved to the new colony in Greenland!

But Biarni was not to be cheated out of his great desire and at once set sail for Greenland. He had scarcely left Iceland when a terrible storm arose, and the winds blew his vessel toward the south. For days and days he sailed on without knowing where he was. Then he came in sight of a thickly wooded land very different from what he had heard Greenland to be. His sailors wished to go ashore, but Biarni said, "No, I shall not rest until I have seen my father, who is with Eric the Red."

So they turned the ship northward and sailed until at

last they reached Greenland. Little did Biarni suspect that he had seen a new world!

Biarni naturally talked of the strange lands he had seen on his trip to Greenland. He told the colonists about them; and later, when he went to Norway, he told about them there.

What Biarni reported in Norway of these lands reached the ears of Eric the Red's eldest son, Leif, who lived in Norway at the time. Leif found Biarni's tales so interesting that he determined to go himself to see the new country.

First, Leif went to Greenland and there made ready for his voyage of discovery. Then he and his sailors set sail for the south. Many days passed before they saw land. Early one morning the eager cry of "Land! land!" was raised; and great was the excitement when they saw before them a low, sandy coast covered with fine forests.

"This land shall be called Markland," said Leif. "It must be the land that Biarni saw. Let us go ashore."

The Northmen did not remain any length of time in Markland, but sailed on till they came to a river that flowed into a channel. They sailed slowly up the river and soon came to a lake. Here they cast anchor. Some of the men went ashore and explored the new-found region. Everything seemed so charming that they decided to put up wooden huts and to spend the winter in them.

Explorations were cautiously made, but no inhabitants were to be seen. One night one of the men who had wandered off failed to come back. A party was sent out to find him. They became more and more anxious. After searching a long time, they came upon their lost comrade; and to their surprise, he was in a state of happy excitement.

Where had he been and what had happened? Everyone



MONUMENT TO LEIF ERICSON IN  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

wanted to know. The man replied that he had been for a ramble and, wonderful to tell, had discovered countless vines loaded with grapes; and if the others had been Germans, as he was, and had been brought up in the land of luscious grapes, they would understand his joy.

The Northmen had never seen or tasted grapes before, but you can imagine that they soon shared with the German sailor his love for them. On account of the vines, Leif named the land Vinland.

All this was in the year 1000. When the next spring came, the Northmen went

home to Greenland, their ship filled with timber and dried grapes. Leif received the name of "The Lucky," and after his father's death became head of the colony in Greenland.

## II. THORVALD AND KARLSEFIN

The voyage of Leif the Lucky greatly impressed the Greenland colonists. So much so, in fact that Leif's brother, Thorvald, became very enthusiastic over the wonders of Vinland; and in the year 1002 he and thirty companions set sail in Leif's ship.

They soon arrived at Vinland and, finding Leif's huts, spent two winters there. Early in the second spring they

sailed farther south. In coasting thus, the explorers came upon a beautiful land covered with woods. All went ashore. On seeing how attractive the place was, Thorvald said, "I should like to build myself a home here."

Up to this time the Northmen had met no inhabitants; but, as they were wandering along the sands, they came upon three canoes turned bottom upward. They lifted these. Hidden under each canoe was a man. The Northmen killed two of the men, but the third escaped. Then being weary, Thorvald and his companions foolishly lay on the beach and went to sleep.

Suddenly, and without warning, one of his men cried out, "Arise, Thorvald! Tarry no longer, but hasten to your ship! Arise, Thorvald!"

The men sprang to their feet and saw the woods alive with fierce natives who had come to avenge the death of their comrades. The Northmen ran to their boats and rowed swiftly to the ship. A few well-aimed arrows sent the natives fleeing.

But a sad thing had happened. A swift arrow had struck Thorvald and wounded him mortally. All the men gathered sorrowfully around their chief. Realizing that he was dying, Thorvald said to them, "Bury me here on these shores, the place where I have said I should like to build myself a home. Return to Greenland." They buried him as he had directed, and placed two crosses on his grave. Then they went back to Greenland with their sad tale.

Not long after Thorvald's death, there came to Greenland from Iceland a handsome, wealthy, and most energetic young man. His name was Karlsefin. He married a beautiful young woman; and together they hit upon the plan of trying

to found a colony in Vinland. Others gladly promised to go with them; and in the spring the expedition set sail with all that was necessary to start their colony, even to the cattle to supply milk.

In due time the colonists reached Vinland, and there still stood Leif's huts to offer them a shelter. A little fishing and hunting showed that fish and game were plentiful, and that it would be easy enough to get food in their new home.

For a year the settlers had things their own way. Then the natives began to pay them visits. Of course these natives were really what we call Indians, but the colonists called them Skraelings, meaning "inferior people."

The first time the Skraelings came was early one morning. Some of the Northmen saw them approaching in canoes. They were ugly-looking men, with coarse, unkempt black hair and black eyes. They looked in wonder at the tall blond Northmen, and after a while paddled away. For several months nothing more was seen of these strange visitors.

Then suddenly one day a great number of natives appeared in their canoes. They had come to trade with the Northmen. They proved to be especially fond of the red cloth that the Northmen had. In exchange for it the Skraelings gave skins of animals.

The Skraelings continued to come in such great numbers that the Northmen were soon short of red cloth, so Karlsefin divided what they had into narrow strips. Some were not more than an inch in width, but the natives gave as much for these narrow strips as they had given for the wider.

After a while something happened which changed this peaceful relation between the Northmen and the Skraelings. Karlsefin had a bull. Now, it is difficult to see how a bull could

bring on a war, but that is what this bull did. Once when the Indians were trading with the settlers, it ran, loudly bellowing, out of the field in which it had been kept. Terribly frightened, the natives fled to their canoes.

For fully three weeks they were not seen. When they did appear, there was no more peace for the settlers. Quarrel after quarrel with the savage Indians kept them in constant terror. They never knew when to look for an attack. At last, after many of his brave men had been killed in these fights with the Skraelings, Karlsefin decided to give up his colony and go back to Greenland.

When the disappointed settlers sailed away from Vinland, just ten years had gone by since Leif's discovery of this beautiful country, his land of grapes, which most likely lay somewhere on the New England coast.

Still later, other expeditions came to its shores; but before long the Norsemen lost their interest in the New World. All trace of the white man's visits gradually faded away: and once more the Skraelings held full sway.

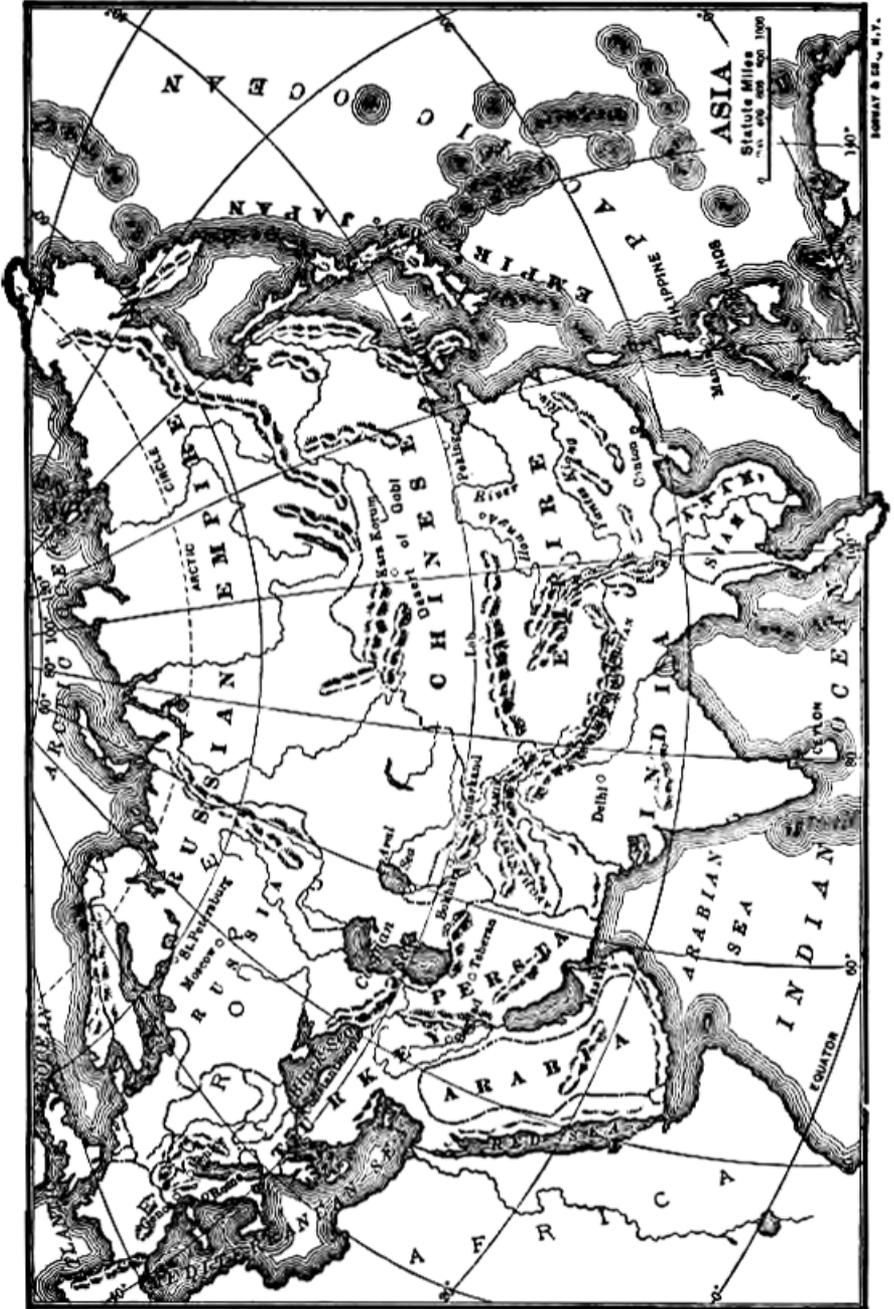
## II

# Marco Polo

### I. THE ADVENTURES OF NICOLO AND MAFFEO POLO

Of course this round world of ours has not grown any larger or any smaller in the last seven hundred years. What really has grown very much in that time is the amount known about it.

In the year 1200, two hundred years after Leif Ericson had explored one little part of the earth, the people of Eastern Europe really knew very little about geography. They believed, however, that they knew all there was to know. They felt sure that the earth was a great square. On the four sides of the square anyone could see the four blue walls of sky. And resting on the four blue walls were the heavens where dwelt God and His angels. The lands that they knew formed the center of the square. On the west the lands ended in water. On the east lay Cathay, and about Cathay the people of Eastern Europe knew nothing. They thought of it as a great bog or swamp, full of dreadful beasts, hobgoblins, bugaboos, and monsters, which roamed about howling in a way to make one's hair fairly stand on end. And so it is no wonder that few of these people ventured into Cathay.



MAP SHOWING THE COUNTRIES CROSSED BY THE POLO FAMILY.

Now just as they were all wrong about the shape of the earth, so they were all wrong about Cathay. What they called Cathay, we call China; and in 1200 China was no more a swamp than it is to-day.

A mighty people lived in China, and they had a mighty empire and a mighty ruler. Their lands were rich in mines of coal and gold; ebony, bamboo, corn, silk, and spices were plentiful; and game of many sorts made hunting a favorite pastime. The subjects of the mighty Emperor journeyed in all directions, extending his power on every side by conquering the lands they visited.

While the Chinese Empire was thus spreading out north, east, south, and west, the merchants of Italy began, during the thirteenth century, to work gradually farther and farther east in order to increase their commerce.

In 1260 two merchant brothers of Venice, named Nicolo and Maffeo Polo, started on an eastern journey. To travel through the East, or even around the world, takes only a few weeks or months in this twentieth century. But in the thirteenth century traveling was a very different matter. There were no ships better than those of the Northmen, and a railroad was undreamed of. To journey by sea meant to be at the mercy of winds and tides, with no compass. To journey by land, one must go on foot or ride a mule or a horse.

So when the Polo brothers left home they said good-by for a long time, how long no one could tell. They were not bound for any particular point. They merely traveled on and on, making money by trading, seeing new and interesting sights, and still not coming to even the edge of the dreadful swamp which was supposed to lie to the east. They went

so far that at last they found themselves before the very palace gates of the Emperor of China.

In those days the Chinese were willing and anxious to learn, and their doors were open to all who might come. The Emperor, whose name was Kublai Khan, was a wise and good ruler. He had never



KUBLAI KHAN

seen any Europeans before, and he welcomed Nicolo and Maffeo Polo to his court with great honor and was delighted to hear all they could tell him. He questioned them about their rulers, how they lived, how they fought. He asked the brothers all about their religion, about the Pope and about Rome. And as Nicolo and Maffeo told him all these things, he grew so interested that he wanted to have his subjects learn about the Christian faith.

Accordingly he urged the two Polos to go back to their own country, carrying a letter from him to the Pope. This letter begged that the Pope would send Kublai Khan one hundred Christians who could teach their faith to his people.

One of the Emperor's barons was to go with the Polo brothers. The two merchants willingly undertook the mission and promised to obey all the Emperor's commands.

When they were ready to leave the palace, the Emperor gave them a Tablet of Authority. This was a tablet made of gold, such as was carried by the Emperor's army officers or messengers. On it was engraved Kublai Khan's order to

supply them with all they might need in any country they were crossing.

On the long journey home all went well with Nicolo and Maffeo Polo, but the Chinese baron was taken ill and had to be left behind.

In 1269 the two merchants reached Italy, only to find that the Pope was dead. They could not deliver Kublai Khan's letter until a new pope was elected; so, while they waited, they went home to Venice to see their families.

Nicolo's wife, too, had died while he was away, leaving their son, Marco Polo, a boy fifteen years old. For two years Maffeo and Nicolo stayed in Venice with the boy. Then, a new pope being elected, they set out once more on their travels. And this time they took young Marco with them.

## II. MARCO POLO IN CHINA

First, the Polos went to Rome to see the new Pope. But although he was very gracious and willing to oblige Kublai Khan, he could furnish only two friars instead of the one hundred asked for as teachers. And these two at the last moment were so frightened at the idea of going into Cathay that they would not start.

In the fall of 1271, without a single friar, Nicolo, Maffeo, and Marco Polo and a few followers left Italy to carry the Pope's answer to Kublai Khan.

They crossed Turkey and came to the city of Bagdad. From Bagdad they went on to Persia. They had to be well armed as they traveled along, for in certain parts of Persia the people were very cruel and savage. They would stop at nothing, and often killed a whole party of merchants simply to get their wares.

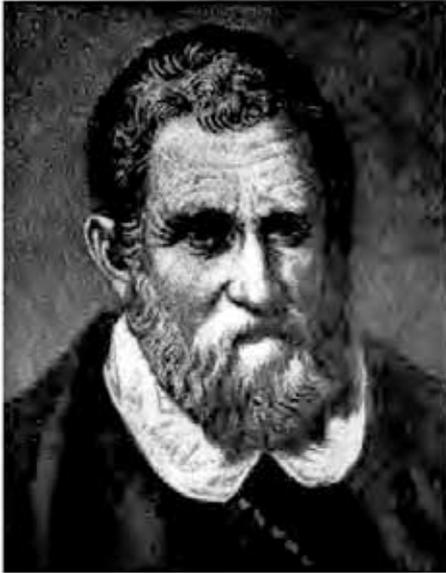
At length the travelers reached a great plain where the heat was intense. Here and there they came upon a village surrounded by high walls of mud, built to shut out the bands of robbers which were a terror to the whole region.

Now these robbers were supposed to be able to bring such darkness over the plain that men riding side by side could hardly see each other. Then in this darkness the robbers would form long lines of many hundreds of men abreast and ride out over the plain. No one could see them coming, and whoever might be traveling on that part of the plain would be pretty sure to run into the lines and be taken.

Once Marco Polo himself was all but caught in this manner, but he got away and rushed to a near-by village. Only seven others of his party escaped. All the rest were caught and either sold for slaves or put to death.

Marco fully believed the robbers had the power to bring about the dreaded darkness. What really happened were dust storms. The dust of the great plain would rise so thick that, no one could see through it. And the robbers, knowing the plains so well, that they had no fear of being lost, used the storms to serve their wicked purposes.

Out of the heat of the plain the travelers rode on day after day until they came, after much climbing, to the Pamir Plateau. This plateau was so high that the people of that country named it "The Roof of the World." Here it was as cold as the plain was hot. Twelve days' riding was needed to cross the plateau, and during all that time the travelers had only what food they had brought with them. It was so cold that no people lived here, nothing green could grow, and even no birds were seen.



MARCO POLO

When Nicolo, Maffeo, Marco, and their followers reached the city of Lob, they stopped for a week's rest. And well they might, for ahead of them lay the great sandy desert of Gobi. It would take a month to ride over even the small part of it which they must cross. All their supplies must be carried, as they could expect nothing from the desert except here and there fresh water from a spring.

The journey was much to be dreaded, for the desert was believed to be haunted. Spirits were supposed to be on the watch for any traveler who might fall behind his party. If one of the party loitered, the spirits would call to him, making him think he heard the voice of his friends, but really leading him off to die alone. The voices were in truth nothing but the blowing of the winds across the sands. But in the silence of the desert and in the fear of being lost, it is no wonder that travelers often fancied themselves called; and rushed

off toward the sounds. However, by keeping close together, by tying bells on the necks of their horses, and by putting up a sign at night to show which way they must go in the morning, the Polos crossed the desert in safety.

Finally, after having been nearly four years on the way, they reached Kaipingfu or the City of Peace. Here was the beautiful cane palace where the Emperor spent the summer months, and here the travelers now found the great Kublai Khan.

Kneeling before him, they addressed him with all respect and gave him the letter from the Pope, which said that, although the Polos had not succeeded in doing all that the Emperor wished, still they had faithfully done their best. Kublai Khan was much pleased to see Nicolo and Maffeo again and gave them a cordial welcome. Then, noticing Marco, he asked, "Who is this with you?"

"Sire, this is my son and your liegeman," promptly answered Nicolo.

"Welcome is he too," graciously replied the Emperor. And from that time he took a lively interest in the young man.

At once Marco set himself to learn all he could in this new land. He was soon able to speak several languages, and he quickly came to understand the customs and manners of the Chinese court.

Oftentimes Marco was with the Emperor when some ambassador to a distant province reached home, and nearly always the ambassador would report on just what he had been sent to do and no more. When the Emperor would ask questions about other matters, he would learn little. Then he would say, "I had far rather hear about the strange things and manners of the different countries you have seen than merely to be told of the business you went upon."

Marco Polo remembered this point; and when the Emperor began sending him as ambassador to various parts of the kingdom, he took pains to notice all that was new and strange. On his return, therefore, he could tell Kublai Khan much that was interesting and valuable which he had either seen or learned by asking questions.

He told of a queer way in which bamboo was used in Tibet. He said: "In this region you find quantities of canes, full three palms in girth and fifteen paces in length, with some three palms interval between the joints. And let me tell you that merchants and other travelers are wont at nightfall to gather these canes and make fires of them; for as they burn they make such loud reports that the lions and bears and other wild beasts are greatly frightened and make off as fast as possible in fact, nothing will induce them to come near a fire of that sort. In fact, but for the help of these canes, which make such a noise in burning that the beasts are terrified and kept at a distance, no one would be able even to travel through the land."

In another province Marco saw crocodiles for the first time. He called them "great serpents" and told of their huge mouths, large enough to swallow a man whole, and of the terrible fear the people had of them.

In still another province Marco found that the men had their teeth covered with cases of gold, which they took off when they ate; and that their arms were tattooed in broad black bands. Excepting in time of war these men did nothing but hunt and take their ease, leaving all the work to their wives and slaves.

Although he never visited Japan, young Polo was much impressed with all he heard about the vast amount of gold,

the great number of pearls, the fine woods, and the spices to be found in that empire. Indeed, so glowing were the tales he repeated of these riches, as well as of the diamonds of India, that the reports were never forgotten. After centuries they still influenced explorers looking for wealth.

Year after year Marco Polo, his father, and uncle lived in China. While Marco served the Emperor, the other two gathered riches in various ways. Often they longed to return to their own country, but whenever they talked of leaving, Kublai Khan urged them not to go. However, when they had been in his court for seventeen years, their chance came.

The Khan of Persia was a great nephew to Kublai Khan. He wanted a wife and asked the Chinese Emperor to send him one. A beautiful girl of seventeen was chosen to be his bride. But then came the question of how to get her to Persia. Wars which were being carried on made it unsafe to go by land, and the Chinese were not great sailors. Therefore, when the three Venetians offered to take the little bride by sea, Kublai Khan could not say no.

In 1292 they sailed away from China. The voyage was so stormy that they did not reach the Persian Gulf for twenty-six months, and by that time the Khan who had sent for a wife had died. What became of the poor little princess? She was married offhand to the old Khan's son.