

CLASSICS OF SCIENCE:

Tales of Marco Polo

Exploration

Long abused as an extravagant liar, Marco Polo has only recently received his due place as a sober recounter of adventures in alien lands. The great sheep described in the first story was named for the explorer, who, so far as European records go, was the first to discover the species.

THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO, the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East, Translated and edited, with notes, by Colonel Sir Henry Yule, R. E., C. B., K. C. S. I., Corr. Inst., France. Third Edition, revised throughout in the light of recent discoveries by Henri Cordier (of Paris), in two volumes. London, 1903.

Prologue

Great princes, emperors and kings, dukes and marquises, counts, knights and burgesses! and people of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of the various races of mankind and of the diversities of the sundry regions of the World, take this Book and cause it to be read to you. For ye shall find therein all kinds of wonderful things, and the divers histories of the Great Hermenia, and of Persia, and of the Land of the Tartars, and of India, and of many another country of which our book doth speak, particularly and in regular succession, according to the description of Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, as he saw them with his own eyes. Some things indeed there be therein which he beheld not; but these he heard from men of credit and veracity. And we shall set down things seen as seen, and things heard as heard only, so that no jot of falsehood may mar the truth of our Book, and that all who shall read it or hear it read may put full faith in the truth of all its contents.

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



OVIS POLI

in those various parts of the World good six-and-twenty years. Now, being thereafter an inmate of the prison at Genoa, he caused Messer Rusticiano of Pisa, who was in the said prison likewise, to reduce the whole to writing; and this befell in the year 1298 from the birth of Jesus.

The Great Sheep—Ovis Poli

In leaving Bedashan you ride twelve days between east and northeast, ascending a river that runs through land belonging to a brother of the Prince of Badashan, and containing a good many towns and villages and scattered habitations. The people are Mahometans, and valiant in war. At the end of those twelve days you come to a province of no great size, extending indeed no more than three days' journey in any direction, and this is called VOKHAN. The people worship Mahomet, and they have a peculiar language. They are gallant soldiers, and they have a chief whom they call NONE, which is as much as to say *Count*, and they are liegemen to the Prince of Badashan.

There are numbers of wild beasts of all sorts in this region. And when you leave this little country and ride three days northeast, always among mountains, you get to such a height that 'tis said to be the highest place in the world! And when you have got to this height you find [a great lake between two mountains, and out of it] a fine river running through a plain clothed with

the finest pasture in the world; in-somuch that a lean beast there will fatten to your heart's content in ten days. There are great numbers of all kinds of wild beasts; among others, wild sheep of great size, whose horns are good six palms in length. From these horns the shepherds make great bowls to eat from, and they use the horns also to enclose folds for their cattle at night. [Messer Marco was told also that the wolves were numerous and killed many of those wild sheep. Hence, quantities of their horns and bones were found, and these were made into great heaps by the wayside, in order to guide travelers when snow was on the ground.]

The plain is called PAMIER, and you ride across it for twelve days together, finding nothing but a desert without habitations or any green thing, so that travelers are obliged to carry with them whatever they have need of. The region is so lofty and cold that you do not even see any birds flying. And I must notice also that because of this great cold, fire does not burn so brightly nor give out so much heat as usual, nor does it cook food so effectually.

Asbestos the Salamander

CHINGINTALAS is also a province at the verge of the desert and lying northwest and north. It has an extent of sixteen days' journey and belongs to the Great Kaan and contains numerous towns and villages. There are three different races of people in it—Idolaters, Saracens and some Nestorian Christians. At the northern extremity of this province there is a mountain, in which are excellent veins of steel and ondanique. And you must know that in the same mountain there is a vein of the substance from which Salamander is made. For the real truth is that the Salamander is no beast, as they allege in our part of the world, but is a substance found in the earth; and I will tell you about it.

Everybody must be aware that it can be no animal's nature to live in fire, seeing that every animal is composed of all the four elements. Now I, Marco Polo, had a Turkish acquaintance of the name of Zurficar, and he was a very clever fellow. And this Turk related to Messer Marco Polo how he had lived three years in that region (*Turn the Page*)

on behalf of the Great Kaan, in order to procure those Salamanders for him. He said that the way they got them was by digging in that mountain till they found a certain vein. The substance of this vein was then taken and crushed, and when so treated it divides as it were into fibres of wool, which they set forth to dry. When dry, these fibres were pounded in a great copper mortar, and then washed, so as to remove all the earth and to leave only the fibres like fibres of wool. These were then spun and made into napkins. When first made these napkins are not very white, but by putting them into the fire for a while they come out as white as snow. And so again whenever they became dirty are bleached by being put in the fire.

Now this, and nought else, is the truth about the Salamander, and the people of the country all say the same. Any other account of the matter is fabulous nonsense. . . .

North Star Out of Sight

When you leave the Island of Pentam and sail about one hundred miles, you reach the Island of JAVA THE LESS. For all its name, 'tis none so small but that it has a compass of two thousand miles or more. Now I will tell you about this island.

You see, there are upon it eight kingdoms and eight crowned kings. The people are all Idolaters, and every kingdom has a language of its own. The island hath great abundance of treasure, with costly spices, lign-aloes and spikenard and many others that never come into our parts.

Now I am going to tell you all about these eight kingdoms, or at least the greater part of them. But let me premise one marvelous thing, and that is the fact that this island lies so far to the south that the North Star, little or much, is never to be seen!

Now let us resume our subject, and first I will tell you of the kingdom of FERLEC.

This kingdom, you must know, is so much frequented by the Saracen merchants that they have converted the natives to the Law of Mahomet—I mean the towns-people only, for the hill-people live for all the world like beasts and eat human flesh, as well as all other kinds of flesh, clean or unclean. And they worship this, that and the other thing; for, in fact, the first thing that they see on rising in the morn-

ing, that they do worship for the rest of the day.

Having told you of the kingdom of Ferlec, I will now tell of another, which is called BASMA.

Rhinoceros the Unicorn

When you quit the kingdom of Ferlec you enter upon that of Basma. This also is an independent kingdom, and the people have a language of their own; but they are just like beasts, without laws or religion. They call themselves subjects of the Great Kaan, but they pay him no tribute; indeed, they are so far away that his men could not go thither. Still all these islanders declare themselves to be his subjects, and sometimes they send him curiosities as presents. There are wild elephants in the country and numerous unicorns, which are very nearly as big. They have hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick. They do no mischief, however, with the horn, but with the tongue alone; for this is covered all over with long and strong prickles [and when savage with anyone they crush him under their knees and then rasp him with their tongue]. The head resembles that of a wild boar, and they carry it ever bent towards the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. 'Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon, and is not in the least like that which our stories tell of as being caught in the lap of a virgin; in fact, 'tis altogether different from what we fancied. . . .

The Land of Darkness

Still farther north and a long way beyond that kingdom of which I have spoken, there is a region which bears the name of DARKNESS, because neither sun nor moon nor stars appear, but it is always as dark as with us in the twilight. The people have no king of their own, nor are they subject to any foreigner, and live like beasts. [They are dull of understanding, like half-witted persons.]

The Tartars, however, sometimes visit the country, and they do it in this way: They enter the region riding mares that have foals, and these foals they leave behind. After taking all the plunder that they can get, they find their way back by help of the mares, which are all eager to get back to their foals, and find the way much better than their riders could do.

Those people have vast quantities

of valuable peltry; thus they have those costly Sables, of which I spoke, and they have the Ermine, the Arculin, the Vair, the Black Fox and many other valuable furs. They are all hunters by trade, and amass amazing quantities of those furs. And the people who are on their borders, where the light is, purchase all those furs from them; for the people of the Land of Darkness carry the furs to the Light country for sale, and the merchants who purchase these make great gain thereby, I assure you.

The people of this region are tall and shapely, but very pale and colorless. One end of the country borders upon Great Rosia. And as there is no more to be said about it, I will now proceed and first I will tell you about the Province of Rosia.

Marco Polo was born in Venice in the year 1254, and died in the same city in the year 1324. He was the son of Nicolo Polo, who, with his brother Maffeo, set out from Constantinople in 1260 on a more adventurous trading journey than any they had before undertaken, and eventually reached the court of Kublai Kaan in Cathay (China). Upon their return that monarch requested that they have the Pope send him one hundred scholars to aid in educating his subjects. The Polo brothers reached Acre in 1269, but found that the Pope had died and the cardinals could not agree on a new one. Going then to their home in Venice, Nicolo found that his wife had died, and decided to take his son Marco, aged 15, back to Cathay with him. After waiting two years until the new Pope was elected, they started back for the East with two scholars, who promptly lost heart when they realized the dangers of the journey, and turned back. The three Polos reached Kublai Kaan's summer palace near the Khingan Mountains in 1275. Kublai Kaan was delighted with the young Marco and kept him in his employ for nearly twenty years. Finally, after the Polos had been refused the privilege of returning home more than once, their opportunity came when a young princess, who was being sent as a bride to the Kaan of Persia, needed an escort who could navigate the journey by sea. Thus Marco returned to Venice in 1295 and settled there. From the tall stories he told of his adventures, his townsmen nicknamed him "Millione." In 1298 he took part in a sea fight between the Venetians and the Genoese, in which he was taken prisoner. In the Genoa prison he met Rusticien of Pisa, who was a professional writer of tales of chivalry. He had been in the prison since a fight between his city and Genoa several years before. Rusticien seized the opportunity to write down the stories Marco Polo could tell of his adventures. Marco was released the next year and married soon after. He continued to live in Venice for the rest of his life. On his death-bed his friends begged him, for the sake of his soul, to tell them which parts of his book were true. He replied that he had not told half of his wonderful adventures.