JOURNEY TO THE EAST

 Italy, in the year of Our Lord 1172.

 Five men, each in their mid-20s, met for the first time at the docks in the southeastern port city of Bari. Each had left their wives and children days earlier, and each had a single goal in mind: making one's fortune. Business had been so poor lately in their respective towns that each had become quite desperate for their family's very security. They sought to travel by caravan on the Silk Route to China (based on second- and third-hand accounts) and return home alive, and thus hopefully become fabulously wealthy through such exotic trade. They planned on being gone for up to three years. They had each liquidated their shop inventories to provide enough funds for their families to live on during their absence. But they couldn't do the 8000-mile, round-trip journey alone. For safety, each knew that they had to travel in a larger group. One at a time, over several hours, the men fell into conversation with each other. Soon, they were satisfied that their bold risk could be undertaken successfully, and so they agreed to band together.

 Triadano was from Padua, Saraceno from Rimini, Nicone from Trieste, Adelchi from Arezzo, and Belfante hailed from Ferrara. Each man had been a merchant at home -- buying then selling any goods that could be turned for a profit. None could read or write (other than to make their mark on legal documents -- literacy in Latin being the exclusive domain of the clergy), but all were adept at quick bargaining and doing basic arithmetic in various coinages. They spoke Vulgar, or common, Latin, which was quite unlike the Classical Latin of the old Roman Empire. None had travelled outside of Italy before. Each had ridden a horse to Bari, then sold it. Going overland all the way to China was not completely unknown by Europeans at this time, but it was extremely rare because of the many dangers involved: murdering bandits; blistering, parching deserts; freezing, snow-capped mountains; and the threat of starvation or fatal diseases. Often, it was rumored, the sheer physical and mental exhaustion involved when undergoing months of distant travel could lead to permanent injury, or even madness itself.

 The trade goods taken East would consist of finely-worked gold jewelry, Baltic amber, Nordic furs, and wool. The men hoped to return home with luxurious silks, bricks of tea, jade, and precious spices such as peppercorns, cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. Wealthy Italian nobles were willing to pay huge sums for such exotic goods, especially in Venice and Rome.

 The group planned on sailing from Bari to Candia in Crete, a voyage of a full day and night if the seas were favorable. From there, they would catch another boat for the port of St. Symeon on the coast of Syria. This port was where the Orontes River emptied into the Mediterranean Sea. By going upriver fifteen miles by barge, the five men would arrive at the metropolis of Antioch, the true beginning of the way East on the fabled Silk Route to China. Camels and wool would be purchased there, and a large caravan hopefully joined. Antioch, like Italy, was still under the control of the Byzantine Christian Empire -- headquartered in Constantinople -- but as the five companions travelled further east, they would enter the realm of Islam, specifically the Abbasid Caliphate, with Baghdad its rich capital. The bloody First (1096-1099) and Second (1145-1149) Crusades were still recalled by many Christians and Moslems at this time. But fortunately for the travelers, a peace -- however flimsy -- was currently being tolerated between the two opposing religions. For how long, no one could say.

 While on their sea voyage to the Syrian coast on this, a blustery mid-March morning, the five men exchanged their basic life stories, and enjoyed other easy conversation. But then Triadano abruptly asked if the others had heard details of the so-called "Letter of Prester John," which had been translated and made public seven years earlier in 1165.

 "They say he is both a Christian priest and a king, and is incredibly wealthy," Saraceno declared.

 "I heard that he cradles a golden scepter in the fold of his arm, with an emerald the size of a goose egg at its crown!" Nicone added.

 "And someone told me that Prester John is a blood descendent of one of the Three Magi, who presented the infant Lord Jesus with their special gifts, twelve days after Christmas in Bethlehem," Adelchi noted.

 Belfante assumed that Prester John's kingdom was either in Persia (which they would traverse and perhaps hence see for themselves), or that it was too far away -- perhaps somewhere in southern India, where the Apostle St. Thomas had preached and was said to be buried. "All the Letter said, if I recall what my cousin told me, is that Prester John is a ruler of 'The Church of the East,' probably of the Nestorians...if his kingdom even exists, that is." Belfante gave a short snort of doubt. "Nestorians are unholy heretics anyway. They deny that Mary should be called the Mother of God, because they believe Jesus was separately human and divine, and not of one Being."

 Triadano then remarked, "I only hope we can see such a kingdom for ourselves on our journey! I believe that Prester John and his realm are both out there, somewhere. The world must be filled with wonders we can hardly imagine. And wouldn't that make a marvelous tale or two to tell, once we got back home to our families and friends?"

 "Oh sure...just like Aladdin's lamp with its wishing Genie...or his magic flying carpet!" Belfante countered, good-naturedly.

 "Or like the seven voyages of Sinbad the Sailor!" Nicone quipped. All five men laughed easily at both fanciful references. They were bonding well together as companions, even as their individual personalities were unfolding.

 Once in Antioch, the five found secure lodgings for themselves and their valuable trading parcels -- each having sold virtually everything they owned of any worth to buy gold jewelry, amber, and furs -- then looked for a meal. They went to Mass and took the Eucharist the following morning in an ornate church. Such holiness would have to sustain their souls for perhaps three years. For a few silver penny denari, a priest was coaxed to formally bless them on their perilous journey. The old clergyman said, "You are headed into strange lands filled with sinful pagans, heathens, heretics, infidels, and other devils...so be ever on your guard, my sons!" Then he made a dramatic and elaborate sign of the cross over the kneeling men.

 The thriving, bustling city had a huge market which naturally also traded in camels. Nearby was an impressive caravanserai, the first they had ever seen. It resembled a kind of walled fort, with a single, protected entrance. Once permitted inside by a watchful gatekeeper who ferreted out any potential thieves or idlers, the Italians heard various new tongues being spoken, and noticed the colorfully patterned robes and curled turbans of presumably Arabian, Turkic, and Persian traders. There were also forty or so camels resting or eating, their heavy burdens of goods carefully stacked near their stalls. Knowing nothing about the business of buying a camel, Saraceno volunteered as an inquirer for the five. He eventually found a strong, imposing man with keen, dark eyes who spoke Vulgar Latin. His commanding face beneath his turban was weathered to leather by the elements, and he looked to be perhaps thirty years old. He had a prominent, beaked nose like a hawk, and a thick black beard. He was an Arab who gave his name as Hashir, and added that he hailed from Damascus.

 "Yes, my friends, I can speak your language, as well as Arabic, Persian, and some Greek. I am a caravan boss, a '*madouga*,' in my native tongue. I leave tomorrow for Hamadan in Persia, a harsh journey of some 800 miles. My band is a party of ten merchants, with twenty camels, plus my two. I will help you buy what you need. Two camels each and a generous supply of trading wool, am I not correct? My services in doing so will then be added to the cost of my guiding you East. You are desiring to go all the way to China? I have never been there. But you will find another caravan to take you beyond Persia after we arrive there in about five weeks, *Inshallah*. Now, you must know that I am a follower of Mohammed -- peace and blessings be upon him -- but I hold no malice towards the Christians. Your Jesus was also a prophet, like Abraham and Moses, and you are thus People of the Book like myself. I follow the Koran and pray to Allah, and you follow your Bible and pray to your God. It is as it must be. However, you must never interfere with our daily prayers, nor display your cross when we travel. We will respect each other so. And Moslems drink no alcohol, so enjoy your final glasses of wine here in Antioch! Eight of the merchants accompanying us are Believers, and the other two are Christians like yourselves -- only they choose to be called Nestorians. There are many of their sect where we are going. They are peaceful towards Moslems, so we shall enjoy no trouble together, yes?"

 Hashir explained that his name in Arabic meant 'one who assembles.' "My father must have foreseen my stars when he named me so," Hashir laughed. "I have been a *madouga* for six years now, going back and forth." As caravan leader, he needed no maps, but instead relied on his careful, experienced knowledge of the heavens, the winds, the position of the sun, and certain landmarks. "Trust me when I say we will not get lost, *Inshallah*, and I know too where to find water, which is the most important thing," he proclaimed.

 He bargained fairly for two camels each for the Italians, then haggled likewise for large trading bales of wool. The five men paid for the purchases -- and for the agreed upon price for Hashir's guide services -- with small pouches of silver denari coins. For the camels, they also bought a wooden carrying rack for each beast, and a blanket, along with sacks of millet and several bales of hay. This reserve camel food would augment the animal's diet of palm fronds at the oases, and tamarisk or acacia tree leaves at remote village wells. For themselves, the travelers each bought a large water bladder, then a goodly supply of almonds, pistachios, dried sultanas, dates, cabbage, onions, peppers, goat meat, mutton, salt, pasta, and grain. These latter ingredients would be mixed together on the road to make nourishing stews and soups. For something sweet, they also bought a clay jar filled with sticky honeycomb.

 Next, Hashir took his newcomers to a sword-makers shop. "I assume you each have a dagger, but should bandits ever attack us on the trail, one needs a good scimitar." After hefting several versions to test the blades for balance and strength, each man made their purchase. "Look! I'm Sinbad!" Nicone clowned, waving his weapon about, thrusting and mock stabbing.

 Lastly, the caravan boss took his charges to buy the new, light-colored robes and sturdy footwear which were necessary for their upcoming travel through the desert. ("In Hamadan or Merv, you will also need to buy heavier clothes and fur-lined boots suitable for crossing the mountains," he assured them.) Of course, the Italians needed turbans as well, so Hashir led them to an adjacent stall where they made their selection. The shopkeeper patiently taught them how to wind the lengthy cloth correctly atop their heads, then tuck the end in. Of course, everyone knew that Hashir would get a few coins later by way of a commission from the various shop owners for bringing such lucrative business directly to them -- they being Hashir's special 'friends!'

 That night, the five men slept inside the fortified caravanserai (which charged a daily fee for animals and any food or supplies, but no cost for guests) with their tawny camels. "They usually carry ticks, so don't sleep too close to them," Hashir warned. "But treat them well and they will remember, and they will serve you well in return. We leave at sunrise."

 The following morning, after the Moslem call to prayer, Hashir made sure each beast was properly loaded -- balance being the key to the animal's comfort -- then tethered them together with ropes into four groups of eight camels each, nose to tail. The five Italians were introduced to their traveling companions, whom they would get to know better over the next five weeks. Hashir then gave his traditional group prayer, taken from the Koran, as he would, faithfully, each morning: "Guide us on the straight path, the path of those you have blessed...not those who have gone astray." The long journey east had begun. The date was the 25th of March, 1172.

 A typical day would see everything loaded and ready to go, with a short breakfast already consumed, by dawn. The caravan would then travel of 2-3 miles an hour, before ending its nine-hour procession around mid-afternoon. (If the weather turned excessively hot, however, travel would begin in the cooler middle of the night, and continue only until noon the following day.) First, camp would be set up; next, the camels were unloaded, watered and fed, then hobbled; and finally, the communal main meal with tea would be prepared around a central wood -- or dried camel dung -- fire. (Nuts, sultanas, or dates would be often be consumed when hunger struck at mid-morning, and water, of course, would be drunk as needed while the party progressed, until the formal meal time.) The camels were not meant to be ridden, so the travelers always walked beside their animals. Any annoying foot blisters that the men acquired were promptly attended to after they finished eating their main meal.

 In the evenings, to relax before sleep under the shimmering stars, the men shared information or told stories. They introduced the names of their wives and children, and gradually revealed their personalities. At other times, Nicone enjoyed playing the role of comic relief -- acting the fool, telling jokes, singing songs, or dancing to imaginary music. Hashir translated the Italians' spoken Vulgar Latin into Arabic, or vis-versa, because the eight Believers traveling on this journey couldn't understand any other tongue except that found in the Koran. Certain discussion topics, however, were taboo: especially anything related to the Crusades and any arguing of conflicting religious theologies.

 The party learned that the two Nestorians, Ebid and Judah, were returning from Antioch to their families in Hamadan. Each spoke both Vulgar Latin and Persian. Triadano asked the pair if they knew the whereabouts of Prester John. "His Letter has been the talk of Christian Europe these last seven years," he confessed. "Have you seen him?"

 The Nestorians both replied that neither had ever seen Prester John nor his fabled kingdom. "We believe he is a true Nestorian, but perhaps his actual kingdom is in India or somewhere in Africa," Judah added. Triadano was surprised and understandably disappointed upon hearing such news.

 Hashir changed the subject. "Seeing as we are traveling together, I should perhaps explain some Moslem customs that I trust you will respect. We pray five times daily, facing the holy city of Mecca. Our caravan will stop briefly for these rituals. I will ascertain the correct times and proper direction based on the position of the sun. If water for washing is unavailable, the Koran permits sand or soil to be used. Next, we always eat communally, using our right hand only. The left hand is considered dirty, and is to be used only for cleaning one's bodily eliminations. Moslems also squat to relieve themselves, both for modesty and purity. I have heard that men from Europe pass the unclean waters from their bodies while standing up? That practice cannot be done among us, my friends. It is '*haraam*'...forbidden. Also, eating of the meat of a pig -- even merely touching it -- is likewise *haraam*. As is the consuming of any alcohol, which I earlier explained to you in Antioch."

 The caravan leader continued. "At meals, we serve tea with a sprinkle of salt mixed in. You must drink three cups, no more and no less. It is our custom of hospitality. We say the first cup is for the stranger. The second cup is for the friend. And the third cup makes you a member of the family!"

 "As for our animal companions...the so-called 'ships of the desert.' Allah in his infinite wisdom has given us these ideal beasts for desert travel. Treat them always with care! Never beat them or curse them. Their wide feet are perfect for walking over any surface, unlike hoofed horses or asses. Camels can drink 20-30 gallons of water at a time, then they can travel for a month if necessary without any liquids. In a sandstorm, their nostrils can seal themselves. They also have an extra inner eyelid to thwart flies and other irritants. If they are hungry and their stomachs are empty, their breath will be foul and sour. Camels enjoy sweets like dates as a special treat. They can sometimes be irritable in the early morning, but will only complain if you load them too heavily or if their burden is not balanced. We choose only female camels for travel. The males are kept for breeding and for butchering when they get too old. Lastly, you may have heard perverted stories of lonely travelers being unable to resist their manly urges and having unnatural fornications with their female camels. This is strictly *haraam*. The Prophet -- peace and blessings be upon him -- has said: 'Whoever has intercourse with an animal, kill him and kill the animal.' It is so written! You must curb your sexual impulses until we reach Hamadan. There are many brothels there to satisfy your natural carnal desires. Of course, you admit that you are all married men, so you must afterwards ask for understanding and forgiveness -- from your wife and from your God -- for your bodily weaknesses."

 This aside reference to any sexual activity perked Adelchi's interest. He proved to be the most lusty and hedonistic of the five Italians. He made no secret that he enjoyed drinking wine to excess, and ogling the breasts and shape of any attractive woman. He openly admitted that his own marriage was an unhappy one, "dull and boring." He asked Hashir about where he might try hashish and opium once they arrived in Hamadan. Adelchi was also eager to frequent the many brothels there. He boasted that he would simply take Holy Confession in a local church soon after his sensual binges, and thus keep his soul safe from Hell's eternal fires and damnation.

 "Is it true that Moslems can have up to four wives?" Adelchi slyly asked, while the company was still on the topic. Hashir replied, "I myself have three...but...it is enough!" The other eight Moslem travelers grinned with their stained teeth, and nodded in acknowledgement after the caravan leader translated himself into their Arabic. Fingers were held up to indicate how many wives each had: two, three, and even one four. Then everyone laughed.

 Belfante turned out to be the most cynical and daring of the five Italians, quick to anger and rather aggressive, wanting to make a fast fortune anyway he could and get home. Saraceno, meanwhile, was worldly but cautious, systematically and patiently observing, and adapting himself when necessary, working with his head rather than being ruled recklessly by his emotions. And Triadano was the contented poet and the dreamer of the group, alone in innocently noting beautiful sunrises and sunsets or the constellations of stars at night, humming secret songs to himself, calmly reassuring his camels (whom he named Caterina and Antonia), and asking Hashir's thoughts and opinions on a seemingly unrelated vast variety of topics as they walked together every day. The world, to Triadano, was an endless source of fascination and wonder. His ready smile and upbeat personality made him a favorite among most of the group, along with cheerful, funny, and carefree Nicone.

 The first true caravanserai they stopped at after leaving Antioch was near the vast mud and stone brick ruins of Dura Europos, on the right bank of the Euphrates River. This ancient site had been used by the Greeks, the Parthians, and the Romans until it was abandoned in the 3rd Century. The group had gone from the green fields around Antioch to a dry, rocky desert terrain over the last ten days, walking about 250 miles so far, about one-quarter of the way to Hamadan, camping in the wilderness beside rare water sources. But now they were enjoying the lush green areas of old Mesopotamia. They had transitioned from the Byzantine Christian Empire to that of the Abbasid Islamic Caliphate, but took little notice of that invisible religious-political boundary. Instead, all the men happily bathed in the cool waters of the Euphrates, while their camels rested and drank their fill, after being off-loaded at the caravanserai.

 After a full day of rest, the caravan continued its journey. Ten days later, they entered the remains of the old winter capital city of the Parthians, Ctesiphon. They stayed at a large caravanserai near the ruins of the imperial city palace, where a huge stone arch (112-feet in height, by 80-feet wide and 150-feet long) called the Taq Kasra still stood over what had once been the royal throne room. Ctesiphon was on the banks of the Tigris River, and was only twenty miles from Baghdad. Triadano asked if they could divert their path for a few days to visit that legendary city, but Hashir refused. "We have a schedule to keep if we are to reach Hamadan roughly on time. But on your way back from China, yes, my friend, you should stop in that golden city for a few days. It is a beautiful place filled with many marvels. Scented gardens, soothing fountains, dozens of glittering mosques with their domes and minarets. Baghdad is still the light of the world -- a renowned center for teaching and learning such subjects as science, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, literature, philosophy, and the Koran. It is a much finer city, with more than a million inhabitants, than even my beloved Damascus."

 Leaving the green areas of Ctesiphon after a full day of rest and the replenishment of a few supplies, the party soon entered the harsh lands and rugged mountain passes which led gradually upward onto the vast plateau of Persia. They had been traveling for three weeks now, so in two more weeks, they hoped to reach Hamadan. "*Inshallah*," as Hashir kept intoning, by way of reminding his group that all of life's seemingly solid reassurances could -- and sometimes did -- suffer unexpected change.

 The caravan boss now gave instructions to regularly inspect the feet of their camels whenever they stopped, and look for any cracks or sores. He had a salve and felt boots for the beasts should such injury occur in the stony, rough passes. Meanwhile, Nicone and Saraceno confessed that each was suffering from bad constipation. The wise *madouga* recommended drinking more water and offered some castor seeds (with the poisonous hulls removed) to chew. "This will help relax your bowels until we arrive in Hamadan. A dozen dried figs consumed there, my friends, and your misery will soon end," he promised.

 After leaving Antioch five weeks earlier and marching some eight-hundred miles, the group arrived in Hamadan safely. It was now the end of April (they had missed celebrating Holy Easter, on the 23rd), and the weather was warming. The city was congested, noisy, and bustling. Here, many Moslem women were covered from head to toe in the traditional black burqa, while the Christian women were still dressed in the more familiar European manner. Hashir led his weary group to their final caravanserai together and the traveling companions said their good-byes there. Hashir pointed out a nearby exchange house where they could change their silver denari coins into the Abbasid Moslem coins that the Persians used: the gold dinar, the silver dirham, and the copper fals. Next, he showed an excited Adelchi where the brothels and opium dens were located. Hashir also directed his friends to the broad street that led to the huge central market. "Wait here at the caravanserai and rest with your camels for a few days. Then ask to join a group going east to Merv or beyond. May Allah bless your ongoing journeys!" he cried, as he rushed off to see the caravanserai director about immediately leading a new group back west to Antioch. Ebid and Judah invited the Italians to visit their Nestorian church and later their families, but the kind offer was declined by each except for Triadano. Nicone and Saraceno left to find their bowel relief in figs, while Adelchi slipped away to indulge in the myriad pleasures of the flesh. Belfante, however, went to look for some wine to quench his thirst. "Five weeks without a bottle!" he complained. "But my long drought will soon be over!" he vowed and laughed.

 Triadano walked the busy streets beside Ebid and Judah, captivated with the unique sights, sounds, and smells of this impressive Persian city. "Our Nestorian faith encompasses the largest Christian area on earth, from Anatolia and Arabia, to Persia and even China, stretching from the Kazakh steppes to the steamy tropics of India," Ebid explained. "We have thus far converted many, many diverse souls into embracing the ever merciful and loving arms of Our Lord!" Judah added, with sincere devotion.

 The pair also told Triadano that Alexander the Great had once been in Hamadan, only it was called 'Ecbatana' in those days. "Persia has an amazing history, going way back to Cyrus the Great. It is a land of great culture and natural bounty. Although they can be fierce warriors, the Persian people love their poetry and their music, and their beautiful gardens and flowers," Ebid noted. "And Persia is also the birthplace of a very strange and ancient religion that predates both the Jewish and Christian faiths. It is called Zoroastrianism. Its believers build fire altars and actually worship the burning flames as a mysterious incarnation of their god," Judah added. "Imagine that!"

 The large church they later showed Triadano looked strikingly similar both inside and out to the Catholic ones the Paduan knew back in Italy. But a schism over certain specifics in theology had caused the Nestorians to be branded as heretics by the First Council of Ephesus in 431. As a result, the Western Christian Church authorities in Constantinople formally condemned the Nestorians, who later moved away and set up their own "Church of the East" headquarters in Persia.

 Meeting Ebid's and Judah's families was a joy for Triadano, reminding him of his own wife -- Lessandra -- and two young daughters -- Madiana and Onesta -- back in Padua. The families festively combined for the evening, and set forth a mouth-watering feast of fresh baked pita bread, grilled lamb kebabs, roasted chicken, rice, yogurt, tomatoes, cucumbers, cashews, and a sliced assortment of sweet melons. A robust Armenian red wine was also served. Triadano ate until he felt he might burst from delight! Walking alone back to the caravanserai after thanking his generous hosts, the Italian merchant said a prayer under the light of a full moon to Almighty God, thanking Him as well for safety and good health thus far on this memorable journey to the East...

 The following morning at cock-crow, both Nicone and Saraceno woke quickly and then rushed to gladly empty their bowels. Triadano soon joined them for breakfast, but Belfante had no appetite for food after drinking too much wine the night before, so he merely groaned and went back to sleep. Adelchi, by way of contrast, was highly animated, as he shared in lurid detail his escapades in the city's brothels. "Pleasures in bedroom positions and in techniques which are unheard of by our women in Italy!" he boasted. "And as for two hours of hashish and opium smoking, a dream-like calm and peace ensues, like floating high in the far-away clouds of Paradise!" But he did admit, reluctantly, that his manly organ was still raw and aching from its sexual marathon.

 Saraceno talked with the caravanserai caretaker about finding a suitable caravan leaving east for Merv or beyond. The man promised to let him know at once. In the meantime, while they waited for any news, all five men had their hair and beards trimmed by street barbers, and their nails neatly pared after a visit to a recommended *hammam*, or public steam bath. The removal of weeks of grime off of their skins was indeed welcomed and refreshing!

 Four more days went by, however, and still no word of another caravan. The five Italians decided to wait until they arrived in Merv to purchase their mountain clothing and boots, because they were told it would be less expensive there. It was in Merv, too, that their camels would be traded in for small but sturdy Mongolian horses, which were adept at snowy mountain travel.

 The following day brought good news. The caravanserai caretaker introduced the band to a short, rotund but energetic Turkoman named Achmet, who luckily spoke Vulgar Latin, and who was leaving for Merv as soon as he had assembled a party of ten. As of now, he had nine, including the new Italians. The other four were Buddhist monks of unknown age, returning to their monastery in Merv. They were wearing simple burgundy-colored robes, and sported shaved heads to match their somewhat gaunt, smooth, beardless faces. The monks had no need of camels because they were not commercial merchants, so they would merely walk while carrying their own back-packs of modest, necessary provisions.

 Another day of delay occurred when a tenth party member failed to materialize. But finally, on the 9th day of May, someone showed up.

 At first, Achmet was reluctant to accept the newcomer. His name was Mohsin, and he was an Uzbek from Bukhara. His right hand was missing at the wrist. According to Moslem law, this marked a man for life as a former thief -- after it was publicly chopped off -- if and when the man was found guilty. The additional shame was that the culprit was forced to forever eat alone, non-communally, with his unclean left hand.

 "How can I accept a thief into my company?" Achmet cried. "And even more importantly, how can such a deformed man fight off bandits should we ever be attacked?"

 Mohsin calmly defended himself. "Kind sir, it is true I made a tragic error as a callow youth in once stealing another man's horse. It is a decision that I truly regret every day of my life. But isn't Allah all merciful through his Believers? Will you not gain favor in His Eyes if you forgive me my one long-lamented sin? I will always prove my worth and honesty to you as we travel together. I have lived a good and pure life since my offending hand was removed -- May Allah be my witness and strike me dead this instant if I lie or blaspheme!" He paused dramatically, eyes closed, raising to the sky both an arm with a intact hand and another with a stump, then resumed speaking. "Plus, you may test me now, as I will thus prove my skill with a sword, which I can wield with either deadly force or in defense, using my left hand." He quickly drew his scimitar from its scabbard and boldly made a stance, ready to fight.

 The five Italians listened with keen interest to this debate, while the four monks remained polite but outwardly impassive. Finally, Achmet scratched his bushy beard and agreed to allow Mohsin to join the caravan, frankly admitting, "We cannot wait any longer for an alternative tenth person. It is done. We leave at sunrise tomorrow. Those that have camels, have them fed, watered, loaded, and ready. Buy all the food you need for yourselves at the city market. It is about 850 miles to Merv, and it will take us roughly thirty-seven days of hard travel to get there."

 Seeing as Achmet and Mohsin were the only Moslems in the group, daily prayer times while on the route were more relaxed than with Hashir's party. The Buddhist monks, meanwhile, would softly chant their prayers together in the evenings. Triadano bubbled over with questions, as was his nature, so he wanted to know from the monks all about their faith. Did they worship their Lord Buddha as a divine being? Was it true they did not eat meat? Did they have any churches or undergo baptism? Were they vowed to celibacy, or could they someday marry and have children?

 The only monk who could speak Triadano's language -- Daiko (whose name meant 'powerful light') -- acted as a spokesman for the four, and seemed happy to explain.

 "The Lord Buddha was simply an enlightened man, not a divine being. He performed no miracles and offered no holy scriptures. He was a gentle teacher, a humble man who set a wise example for how all men should live in peace. He taught that life is an endless cycle of suffering. But by transcending our desires and emotions, he also taught that we could attain oneness with the Supremely Divine and reach a place beyond eternal suffering, a place which we call Nirvana. Our souls are awakened in birth, and later put to slumber in death after a lifetime -- but then we are reborn, again and again in different human form, until the cycle of desire is finally broken. This can only be achieved through many hard years of devotion and surrender, by the ways of meditation, chanting, fasting, and especially focusing on one's breathing. Breath, you see, is the basic life force. The monks in India call it '*prana*.' It is God's living essence inside us, our constant connection with Him while we are alive. And to answer your other questions, Buddhists have temples but no churches or baptisms. We choose not to eat meat because it means harming a living creature. And we choose celibacy so as not to be distracted away from our spiritual path by carnal desires. Finally, it must be said that we Buddhists are friendly towards all Christians and Jews and Moslems, and we never force our faith upon others." Triadano gratefully thanked Daiko, and was fascinated by this concise explanation of yet another mystical way of reaching an intimate personal relationship with God.

 Later, for fun in the evenings, Nicone came up with a game called "Who is the Biggest Liar?" The object was to make up the largest lie one could imagine, and share it with the group. Everyone enjoyed trying to outdo their companions with an outrageous boast or experience, as the spoken tongues of the party were translated back and forth. Nicone himself was judged to be the ultimate winner with a tale about an ugly country woman: "She was as fat as a milk cow, with a rump as wide as a wine barrel, and had bucked teeth like a donkey. And her nose...well, it was simply enormous...Did I tell you that her nose had three warts on it, one atop another, with a single black hair growing out of the summit? Then one day, when she dared to look at her face in a mirror for the first time, the mirror itself let out a scream, quickly sprouted legs, and ran away -- I swear it!"

 Obviously, all was not such merriment. Twice, the caravan was beset by ferocious sandstorms, and the camels were turned backwards away from the howling, stinging winds as the men covered their heads with their robes and crouched in the protective leeward sides of their stalwart desert animals.

 But a worst disaster had since befallen poor Adelchi. First, he had been thwarted in making a Holy Confession for his excesses while in Hamadan, having discovered that Nestorian priests would only grant such absolution to those of their own sect, but not to any Catholics. Secondly, Adelchi was suffering a dangerously high fever, with blood mixed in with his urine, and painful nightly discharges of yellow pus from his manly organ. When Achmet was consulted, he diagnosed the malady as the "female pox," with relations from unclean women as the likely cause. There was little to be done, if anything, until they arrived in Merv, the caravan leader announced to the shocked and stricken sybarite. His four Italian companions offered to unload one of Adelchi's camels and divide the burden among themselves so the man could ride, should he become too weak to walk. Achmet approved the idea. Still, Adelchi moaned, "I must live at least until I can confess my sins in Merv, or my soul shall surely burn forever in Hell! Oh, Madonna..I was a fool!"

 About seventy-five miles out from Merv, the caravan was suddenly attacked in the dark of night by a party of ten, black-clad, armed nomadic bandits. The four Buddhist monks went unmolested, but the other men sprang into action, and had to fight hard for their very lives. Scimitars sliced the air, then found flesh, and daggers stabbed violently until hot blood flowed. Screams and curses rang out as the opponents struggled to the death in the chaos. Triadano, Saraceno, and even a weakened Adelchi fought like fearless warriors, fully realizing their serious situation. At one point, in the flickering campfire light, Mohsin saved Nicone's life by running through an attacker with a sword using his skilled left arm, mere seconds before Nicone would have been cut down from behind by the attacker. Powerful Belfante similarly saved Achmet's life in the battle, killing three of the intruders single-handedly, but then he collapsed from his severe wounds, just as the only two surviving bandits fled back into the rocky desert darkness -- certainly bloodied, but empty-handed of any attempted loot.

 When the group checked and realized that Belfante from Ferrara was dead, prayers and chants from all three religious faiths were somberly said over his corpse as Achmet ritually prepared it for burial. "He saved my life, and perhaps all of our lives, by how well he fought...he was a good, brave man," the leader decreed. At first light, a small cave was found in a nearby rocky escarpment, so there Belfante was laid to rest, with stones reverently placed to cover the entrance. Each other man who fought had suffered lesser wounds and bruises and torn robes, but were attended to by the monks. As a final act before leaving the area, the bodies of the eight dead bandits were dragged into a pile and burned. Triadano was surprised yet impressed that even such heinous enemies were given a few murmured Buddhist chants of regret by the four devout monks as the corpses were slowly consumed by the crackling flames. Achmet then ordered the party to resume their advance towards their destination, now three days away.

 Merv featured a population of 500,000, and was one of the largest cities in the world after Baghdad. It was encircled by high, protective walls, and was situated in a lush green valley with many orchards and tended fields, watered by the inland delta of the Murghab River.

 Achmet led his exhausted band of travelers to the central caravanserai of the city. Adelchi announced here to his friends that he was unable to continue on to China in his present ill condition. "Perhaps if I could recover in Merv for six weeks or so, after seeing a physician, my health would return," he offered. "But it is both unfair and impractical to ask that you three wait for me."

 It was then that Daiko spoke up for the monks with a suggestion. "I propose that your friend stay with us at our monastery. There, he will receive medical care, food, and shelter. You can collect him from us on your way back from China." Adelchi agreed that this was the best idea, and so his friends bade him and the monks goodbye. Farewells were also said to Achmet and Mohsin, the latter who would now look for his final caravan back home to Bukhara. "Thank you again for saving my life, Mohsin...I will never forget you," Nicone said, his eyes moist as he embraced the selfless, reformed man with the missing right hand.

 The next order of business was to sell their camels in the thriving Merv camel-horse-sheep-goat market. The Italians had to purchase the sturdy Mongolian horses which they needed to safely cross the Pamir Mountains once they journeyed past Samarkand. After some shrewd bargaining, the deal was done: nine strong ponies, three per man -- one to ride and two to carry. Triadano said a sad goodbye to Caterina and Antonia, his faithful animal friends. He gave each camel a handful of dates as a parting gift, and caressed their necks one last time. When they grunted and bawled, was it likewise from sadness?

 The main market bazaar of Merv was a riot of noise and colors, of jostling crowds, grilled meats smoking over glowing beds of charcoal, mounds of ripe fruit, and the smells of ginger and mint and spices such as cardamom, saffron, and turmeric. It was here among the many shoppers that Triadano noticed his first true Asiatics -- Chinese, Mongols, and Tibetans -- each with distinctive, almond-shaped eyelids. These types were mixed in with Tatars, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and other ethnic groups. Here, in the bazaar, the Italians would purchase the necessary foods for the next leg of their journey, as well as the new warmer clothes and fur-lined boots for their upcoming treacherous trek over the mountains. (The trio had been told that such items would be cheaper here, in a large city, rather than in the more modest-sized city of Samarkand.) Still, they needed to save their desert robes for trekking the many Taklamakan desert miles past Kashgar, after crossing the snowy northern Pamirs. Each Italian also purchased a saddle for their riding mount. The last purchase made in the market that day was three large bales of cotton, one for each man. Achmet had earlier suggested this useful addition to the wool bales they were already carrying, and hoped to trade (along with their gold jewelry, amber, and furs), once they arrived in the rich, exotic land of China.

 It was now the 14th day of June. Summer heat was upon them. The Italians had been traveling for roughly 1650 miles, with another 2350 miles to go until they reached their ultimate goal of Chang'an -- the fabled terminus city of the Silk Route.

 Back at the central caravanserai, the three Italians found a Kazakh caravan leader named Sanzhar, who was heading to Samarkand in two days. He was a pleasant man of average height, with curly black hair and green eyes, but there was one serious drawback: he could not speak Vulgar Latin! The trio had to pantomime their questions and answers to him. Fortunately, an older Jew from Palestine, with white hair and a matching beard, soon joined the group. His name was Levi, and he could speak Hebrew, Persian, and the Italian's language. Along with three somewhat shy Uzbeks from Tashkent who spoke only their local dialect, the party would number eight members. Nicone related the previous bandit attack details through Levi to Sanzhar, who in turn translated what was said to their other new traveling companions. "Yes, the authorities in Merv have been notified, and a patrol has been sent out. It is a terrible thing which hopefully won't occur on our journey. I am also very sorry for the loss of your brave friend...But looking ahead now, you should know that Samarkand is 390 miles from here, so about fifteen days of travel," Sanzhar announced, while generous and helpful Levi further translated.

 Saraceno later confessed to his two friends that he had the beginnings of a sore upper left molar, so they suggested that he ask Levi if he had any useful advice. "I would say try oil of cloves first. They sell it in the grand bazaar and elsewhere. If the pain gets worse, I would have the tooth pulled once we arrive in Samarkand. You don't want to be stuck suffering when you cross the Pamirs -- no street dentists there, and you can't risk infection and fever," Levi counseled. Some of the painkiller was soon purchased, and Saraceno was pleased with its numbing effects and its breath-freshening qualities too.

 While they waited to depart still further to the East, laundry was attended to, as was bathing and the usual bodily grooming. The Italian trio learned that the Persian coins they had would thankfully still be valid tender all the way to the end of the Silk Route.

 Sanzhar's caravan arrived in Samarkand without incident at the start of the month of July, having earlier crossed the mighty Oxus River five days out of Merv. The city was finely laid out, its attractive broad streets lined with cooling shade trees, and adjacent, foot-wide, flowing water channels. The caravan leader explained through Levi that the city had once been conquered by Alexander the Great in 329 B.C., when it had been called 'Maracanda.' It was a pleasant place to rest, all agreed, after fifteen days in the saddle. Its central caravanserai was clean and well-organized, half-filled with horses and half-filled with camels. Here, the Italians also saw their first Bactrian camels, with their distinctive and impressive double-humps.

 Bidding farewell to their Kazakh guide and the three shy Uzbeks who were returning to their families in Tashkent, the Italians unloaded their pack horses and removed their riding saddles from their mounts and gave all their animals feed, water, and a good rub-down after inspecting their hooves. The welcomed news was that the old Jew, Levi, would be staying and accompanying the trio through the steep Pamirs to Kokand, then on to Kashgar. His skills as an interpreter had been invaluable thus far. The caravanserai caretaker offered his new guests their first taste of kumiss, a mildly alcoholic local beverage made from fermented mare's milk. Nicone initially declared that the frothy brown brew was rather refreshing, but privately, he later confessed that it was too sour and frankly nauseating for his taste. The other Italians nodded in full agreement, and shivered in memory!

 By this time, the oil of cloves was unfortunately not useful anymore in helping relieve poor Saraceno's dental agony. His upper left gum area was enflamed and swollen, so a street tooth surgeon was sought out and put to task. Using a curved metal tool, he quickly and skillfully excised the Riminian's errant molar. Saraceno spit out a cheek-full of blood into a wooden bowl, then was instructed to rinse with -- but not swallow -- a small tumbler of spoiled wine, then spit again. He announced that he felt some blessed relief almost immediately, feeling with his tongue the now missing area where the source of his pain had once been. "Chew on the other side of your mouth for two days," the street surgeon pantomimed with his own mouth and upheld fingers, after he was gladly compensated with two silver dirhams.

 It would take about ten days to ride the 250 miles through increasingly steep mountain passes, then down into the green valley of Kokand. Back at the caravanserai, the three Italians and Levi found a new caravan boss, a fierce-looking Uygher named Erkin, who wore an eye patch where a sword had once slashed his cheek from jaw to scalp. He would take them through Kokand and then over the high, snowy peaks on to Kashgar. Erkin spoke his own native language, and some Persian and Chinese, but no Vulgar Latin. Levi would need to translate for the European merchants once again. Three Chinamen returning home would join the group, making it a party of seven.

 All went well on their journey out of Samarkand, up to the sixth day. The air had grown increasing thin as they ascended in altitude on the rocky trail passes, and the travelers' breathing became labored, particularly the elderly Levi. But the mounted horses and their tethered pack companions were stalwart and undaunted, and soldiered on without balking. The path was narrow and treacherous, and the travelers had to keep in strict single file. Over the last two evening's campfire meals, Triadano noticed that the flames and the subsequent heat given off by the fire were both noticeably reduced due to the thin air. He was discussing this remarkable phenomenon aloud with Levi as they rode when suddenly a large, alarming rumbling occurred, and the Paduan heard a panicked cry from Nicone, who was bringing up the rear of the caravan line.

 "Rock slide!" Erkin shouted as all turned to look behind where the dangerous noise was located. No language translation was necessary, for each traveler realized what horror was about to happen. Because they were on a trail between two large and steep rock faces, there was nowhere to flee going either left or right. The six astonished men then witnessed Nicone --still astride his horse -- get completely crushed to death and buried by tons of lethal grey boulders.

 It had happened so quickly that no one was prepared. Erkin quickly scanned the rock faces with his one good eye, looking for any other sign of movement, but the stone walls were still. Everyone then dismounted and walked the short distance back to where Nicone had died. All realized that it was futile to try and dig out the Triesten's corpse for any kind of burial, so Christian and Jewish prayers were said in memoriam. Because the group was now out past the eastern range of the Abbasid Caliphate -- and as a result neither Erkin nor the three Chinese were Moslem (although some believers of Islam did penetrate China) -- no prayers from that faith were offered over Nicone's remains. Obviously, Saraceno and Triadano were particularly shocked and saddened. Dear God...happy, laughing, clowning Nicone -- gone! Surely he rests now in heaven, with Belfante, Triadano hoped.

 The trail eventually went down again a few days later, and soon the group arrived in the fertile valley of Kokand. Through Levi's translations, Erkin explained that they would rest here for two days, then attempt the most difficult and dangerous portion of their journey: over the snowy northern Pamirs, then down into impressive Kashgar, home city of the Uyghers. Being both saddle-sore and suffering from continual diarrhea, Saraceno and Triadano welcomed the needed rest. They had earlier each taken one of Nicone's surviving pack horses and added those goods to their own lot. The two remaining Italian friends vowed to inform the families of Nicone and Belfante of their tragic deaths once they returned to Europe, and share an appropriate portion of their eventual trading riches with the widows. They also wondered how Adelchi was recovering back at the Buddhist monastery in Merv. The remaining pair had traveled 2290 miles since leaving Antioch, and were now more than half-way to exotic Chang'an, with some 1710 miles to go. It was the middle of July.

 Erkin next announced that it was about 300 miles to Kashgar. "If we were traveling on flat ground, that would be about twelve days in the saddle. But we have to climb up and up and up, then gradually down and down. So probably it will be an eighteen or nineteen days ride, so as not to overwork the horses. Feed and water and groom them well, and prepare your heavy clothing and warm boots. Also, buy fur-lined hats with earflaps. It will be very cold and windy where we are going."

 The journey east soon turned brutal as the caravan struggled up through the steep mountains. When crossing the intermittent snowy areas, the horses were forced to trudge through two-foot high drifts. Hooves slipped on ice. Drinking and cooking water for both men and beasts had to be melted from snow or ice each evening. Horses and travelers alike had to be wrapped in extra blankets to stay warm enough to catch a few fitful hours of sleep each night. Elderly Levi particularly suffered. The wind was bitter and relentless. It was an awful place, and, unlike other trails on their journey thus far, the caravan saw no other travelers going in the opposite direction. They were utterly alone, and wished for no accidents or injuries -- for if either occurred, it could prove fatal in this remote desolation. Once, Saraceno saw what looked like large cat paw tracks in the snow. "Snow leopard," Erkin noted, as Levi translated. The Uygher leader boldly drove his party ever onward, cajoling or cursing, fully aware of the dangers of stopping too often to rest.

 The torturous ordeal lasted six days. But gradually, the caravan descended into the welcomed tree line, then eventually the journeyers saw a broad, green valley stretching out before them. They could see the vast spread of a large, well-established city. "Kashgar!" Erkin proudly shouted. The seven men embraced each other in thankfulness and relief.

 Kashgar was unlike any city the Italians had seen so far, some 2590 miles from Antioch. It was the third week of August now, yet there was another major challenge ahead if Triadano and Saraceno hoped to reach Chang'an by November, which was still 1410 miles away -- the Taklamakan Desert, almost 600 miles of brutal, sandy wasteland with scant shade and precious little water. But it was best not to dwell on that upcoming ordeal now. The pair would rest here until September.

 Though most were made of the standard mud-brick, some of the houses in Kashgar had been built in the tiled Oriental-style, with curling, upswept roof corners. Other dwellings showed the Mongol influence through large, circular, one-roomed tents -- made of collapsible wooden frames covered with wool felt panels -- called yurts. These curious structures (which could be readily moved when needed) were set up on the outskirts of the city for the grazing benefit -- on the rich, open grasslands -- of their owners' many horses, sheep, and goats. Triadano also noticed his first, impressive, shaggy-furred yaks -- great horned beasts, seven-feet tall at the shoulder and ten-feet long, with males weighing more than 1000 pounds. Later, he and Saraceno sampled their first salted yak-butter tea at the caravanserai where they toasted, then parted ways, with Erkin, Levi, and their three Chinese caravan companions. The tea was an acquired taste, however, seeing as the butter used to make it was rancid! Which was worse: kumiss or this? the Italian friends debated and teased. The pair tended to their horses and their supply packs, and informed the caravanserai caretaker of their need for a caravan heading directly, if possible, to Chang'an. Soon, they would trade their loyal horses in for the necessary new camels. Meanwhile, they changed back into their light-colored robes and turbans after having a much-needed bath. Their heavier clothes and boots were laundered and saved for their eventual return trip.

 For meals here in Kashgar, tasty pork (being no longer *haraam*) was back on the menu, along with healthy fresh fruits and vegetables, soups, noodles, and something new to the Italians -- bowls of rice. Though the majority of the town's native Uyghers always ate with their fingers, the Chinese residents customarily ate with wooden chopsticks. Triadano and Saraceno gradually mastered the somewhat tricky art of these exotic new utensils themselves.

 When September arrived, the two travelers found what would be their last eastward caravan leader. He was a formidable Chinese named Wang Yong, whose name meant 'brave.' He would take them all the way to their final destination of Chang'an, transiting through the desert and then the towns of Aksu, Dunhuang, Anxi, and Wuwei. They would be back to walking beside heavily-laden camels again for the remaining sixty days, if all went well. But neither Wang Yong or the other twelve Chinese making up the group spoke any Latin. These last traveling companions only spoke their native tongue. Pantomime would have to do until the two Europeans picked up several dozen basic words and phrases of spoken Old Mandarin over the upcoming weeks traveling together. Reading and writing the new language, however, would later prove to be too difficult for either Saraceno and Triadano to learn -- no matter how hard they tried.

 Green grasslands and neatly-ordered farmland gave way to rocky desert after just two days, once each pair of new camels had been procured and loaded in Kashgar. Then began the arduous, twenty-four day, 600-mile hell of the Taklamakan Desert, with its great dunes and blowing, shifting drifts of fine, granulated sand. Surviving the daytime heat and the nighttime frigidness -- and most importantly finding enough water -- would ultimately test all involved.

 Wang Yong proved to be an excellent leader. He was short but strong, and demonstrated his strength of limb and power of will each day. But the travel was a grueling ordeal. Monotonous stretches of shade-less, dun-colored landscape. A daily, fiery, afternoon sun mercilessly tormenting them. Silence, except for the wind, with each man lost inside his own private thoughts. Long stretches between oases, often three or four days. Punishing thirst. Aching feet. Strange mirages. Dehydration and loss of appetite. Burned faces. Cracked lips. Swollen tongues. Water skins dangerously empty. On and on...

 In the evenings, exhaustion coupled with the bitter chill. Extra blankets brought out. Encouraging talk from Wang Yong, pantomimed for the Italian pair around the weak campfire. Some brief, two-way language lessons. Midnight skies with swaths of bright stars. A crescent moon slowly moving through its phases each night. Lonely and empty. An eerie feeling of being away from time itself in some vast, lost space. Oh, how I miss Lassandra and my daughters! Triadano silently lamented. And Saraceno wondered: when will this awful journey be over?

 Yet eventually the caravan made it, as Wang Yong knew they would. With one-day rest stops each in Aksu, Dunhuang (where they saw an aged, Han Dynasty portion of an eighty-five mile 'Great Wall,' made of towering stacked layers of sand and turf), then in Anxi and Wuwei, the party at long last reached the fabled city of Chang'an -- eastern terminus of the Silk Route! It was a joy to see green fields, shade trees, and flowing channels of water again, as well as colorfully dressed people, and to hear the noisy sounds of civilized life, and smell lively city smells again. Men and beasts had survived and were very tired -- but, thank God, all were still healthy. The group proceeded directly to a most convenient caravanserai, and off-loaded their trade goods. Then the pair said their good-byes (the Italians speaking in Old Mandarin for the first time) to a smiling Wang Yong and their other twelve Chinese companions. The date was the 3rd of November, 1172. They had traveled four-thousand miles by foot and on horseback in just over seven months, since leaving Antioch back in late March.

 Chang'an was an amazing metropolis, unlike any city that Saraceno and Triadano had ever beheld. It had a pleasing, uniformed look -- with yellow-tiled roofs, spacious parks, well-tended gardens, decorative fish ponds, and towering structures that the Italians later learned were called pagodas. They found a small house to rent (after hard-bargaining, using their crude Old Mandarin and gesturing various numbers with their fingers) on one of the main thoroughfares leading to the grand market bazaar. They then went back to the caravanserai and had their goods securely transferred to their new dwelling, after selling their four camels for a fair price. Next, they found a good meal and a bath house and a laundry. Soon, the Italian friends felt refreshed and relaxed, and had largely put behind them any thoughts of the last 1410 miles of their punishing journey.

 Although most Chinese followed the tenets of Taoism, or the philosophical teachings of Confucius rather than any Western-styled, organized religion theologies, Chang'an did have a small handful of temples for Buddhists, mosques for Moslems, synagogues for Jews, and Nestorian churches for Christians. (Catholic Christianity, however, had been unable to send any missionaries this far East as yet.) Seeing a Nestorian Church, Triadano went in, and -- after introducing himself -- again inquired about the whereabouts of Prester John. "He is nowhere in China, that is a certainty, my friend," a kindly, gray-haired priest responded in (very-pleasing-to-Triadano's-ear) Vulgar Latin. "Maybe Prester John rules in the ancient lands of the Queen of Sheba in Africa, perhaps near the devout Coptic Christians. Or maybe he dwells in splendor somewhere in India. No one I've ever talked with really knows for sure."

 China at this time was ruled by the Southern Song Dynasty, specifically Emperor Xiaozong, who was the adopted son of the previously retired Emperor Gaozong. The latter was still alive, and was rumored to be the real power behind the throne. The capital of the Song was in Lin'an, near the seacoast, a huge city with an enormous population of over two million people -- making it the largest city on earth at that time. From here, ships could sail back and forth to the vibrant port cities of the Spice Islands in southeast Asia, and even on to India, Persia, and remote Arabia.

 The two Italian merchants tentatively planned to stay in Chang'an and trade in the city and surrounding areas for possibly seven to eight months, at least until next May or June. Hopefully, they would then return safely home to their waiting families by mid-January 1174, with fabulous wealth -- after selling their rare, exotic wares to the rich merchants and patricians in Venice.

 Over the ensuing months, Triadano and Saraceno saw many astonishing wonders which were new to them, but were long-established with the Chinese throughout their sprawling empire: explosive gunpowder (used to make fireworks); burning rocks of coal; wood-block printing (to mass-produce books); legal 'promissory note' paper money (backed by gold and silver); and two types of directional compass -- wet, with a floating magnetized needle always pointing north in a bowl of water; and dry, with a similar needle stroked on magnetic lodestone, then encased in a special liquid container set inside a wooden framed and calibrated box.

 Because of the cosmopolitan nature of the city, many languages besides Old Mandarin were freely spoken, so the two Italians could be readily understood and hence could deal either in their native tongue or in their slowly improving pidgin Chinese. First, their cotton bales and wool bundles were sold for five times what they initially paid for them. Next, they went from merchant to merchant in the grand market bazaar over several days, bargaining to sell their rare offerings of finely-worked Italian gold jewelry, Nordic furs, and Baltic amber. These prizes brought incredible bidding upwards until they were finally sold, to as much as forty times their European worth! Saraceno and Triadano had at last succeeded in becoming very, very wealthy. They asked to be paid in gold Abbasid Moslem dinars (being hesitant yet in trusting the novel paper money), then opened separate bank accounts and deposited most of their wealth for safety.

 Over the next few weeks, the men gingerly shopped -- both in Chang'an and in the surrounding nearby communities -- for what they needed to take back to Italy: colorful bolts of luxurious silk cloth, valuable exotic spices (raw peppercorns, curls of cinnamon bark, pods of cloves, unshelled nutmegs), carved jade ornaments, and bricks of strong black tea. Prices bargained for these items -- while nominal and common here in China -- would bring immense profit back in Europe, up to fifty times their initial cost! These purchases were soon delivered and secured in a trusted, recommended and guarded warehouse, until the Italians would eventually begin their long return journey home.

 Over time, Saraceno and Triadano (in their new traditional silk robes) became regarded by the both European and Chinese wealthier classes of the city, and hence were invited to fancy dinners and other notable gatherings given by the rich and famous. Their hosts ached to hear of their amazing travels and experiences, so the guest pair graciously and repeatedly obliged. Naturally, they too had many questions in return about China and her customs, her people, and her many plans for the future.

 Being men of property and position now in Chang'an, Triadano and Saraceno agreed that they should move out of their humble quarters and rent larger houses nearby each other, for the purposes of socially entertaining their new-found city friends. They soon found two suitable homes in a popular, attractive neighborhood near a nice park and lake.

 One of Triadano's new neighbors was a cheerful, middle-aged Jew from Hebron named Eliyahu, who acted as a kind of informal rabbi at a small synagogue nearby. He praised the Song rulers as enlightened, particularly regarding their peaceful tolerance of all religions. "I have lived in China now for eleven years, and have no plans on ever going back home to Palestine. There are no Moslem-Christian-Jewish antagonisms or conflicts here," he proclaimed. After getting to know each other better, Eliyahu suggested that the Italian consider dictating the entire, detailed chronology of his journey from Antioch to China to him -- a little each day -- and that he would write it all down on paper for Triadano to take home with him when he finally left Chang'an. The illiterate Paduan thought it was a wonderful idea, and so the task was happily agreed to and gradually undertaken.

 Cold, wet winter weather soon set in, even with considerable snowfall on several occasions, over the next few months. Saraceno and Triadano spent more time apart now, with each learning about China and her secrets at his own individual pace. They did, however, make it a point to meet each other at least once a week for lunch or dinner, so as to compare their experiences and discoveries.

 The warmth of spring was welcomed by April, and the Italian merchants tentatively planned to leave for home in another two months at the beginning of June. Meanwhile, Eliyahu had completed the writing down of Triadano's caravan travel memories. It had proven to be an enjoyable project for both men, and they had become fast friends in the process. The rabbi had also explained to the Paduan the basics of the Jewish faith -- the Torah and the Talmud -- when the ever-curious Triadano urged him to share the details. Lively debate and discussion would always follow, sometimes late into the night, to the intellectual delight of both seekers of Truth.

 The gardens of the city were now in flower, filling the air with a mixture of sweet fragrances. While discussing business in the courtyard of the home of one of Chang'an's wealthier merchants named Dingxiang one sunny afternoon, Triadano was introduced to his daughter, Zhang Li, whose name meant 'beautiful.' And indeed, she was, and Triadano was instantly captivated. Her long hair was black as a raven's wing, and her dark eyes were welcoming yet mysterious. She was seventeen years old.

 Before long, the two were meeting in public together for walks in the park, or picnics near the fish ponds under swaying weeping willow trees. Conversation was somewhat stilted, but Triadano had learned more spoken words and phrases of Old Mandarin over the past months since arriving in the city, so the pair generally understood each other. The Italian was honest in confessing that he had a wife and two daughters back in Padua, but Zhang Li was not put off. She shyly brushed her hand against his on occasion, then just as gently grasped and held it one afternoon as they walked. Triadano felt an aching jolt of attraction surge through his body. Later, when he saw Saraceno for their weekly visit, he told his friend all that had happened.

 "Don't be ashamed of what is happening, my friend. It is natural. I too have been secretly seeing a young Chinese woman. Her name is Jinjing. It means 'bright, clear crystal.' I thought about my wife and children, and about the serious sin of adultery. I thought about the risk to my immortal soul without the cleansing power of confession and an act of contrition. I also thought about what happened to Adelchi, and how his health was ruined. I haven't slept with Jinjing yet, but I feel it will probably happen soon. My flesh is weak for the comfort and my bodily release with a woman," Saraceno admitted.

 The next time Triadano met with Zhang Li, she slowly kissed him on the cheek as they parted. His sleep, alone in his fine, furnished, rented house that night, was restless. The next time the pair met, she kissed him once, slowly on the lips. The smell of her skin and her hair was intoxicating! An aroused Triadano was seriously afraid now that he was falling in love with this beautiful young woman. He explained that they should probably not see each other for a while because he was emotionally torn and confused.

 Days passed. But then the couple joyfully resumed seeing each other. They could not help kissing and embracing, after finding discreet meeting places hidden in the shadows of evening. One night, Zhang Li spoke her first words of Latin, with a murmuring Chinese accent, to Triadano: "I love you..."

 A few more weeks passed. It was now the 7th of June, 1173. Saraceno reminded his love-struck friend that they were still scheduled to leave soon and go home to their families with their riches. "I have arranged for us to join a caravan leaving for Kashgar on the 15th day of June. I inquired about possibly taking the alternative sea route back, departing from Lin'an and stopping in Melaka, Calicut, and Hormuz. But I was further advised that there were recent rumors of plague and quarantines and much delay in some unspecified port cities, so I think we should stay with our original overland plan. Plus, we need to pick up Adelchi again when we pass through Merv."

 Triadano agreed with his friend's assessment. Zhang Li's father, Dingxiang, had earlier -- through an interpreter -- recommended that the Italians convert most of their surplus wealth from gold dinars into precious jewels and pearls, and to have those, in turn, sewn into the seams of their clothing to thwart any bandits that might ambush their upcoming caravans as they returned to Antioch. So for safety, both Italians later did just that -- buying rubies, sapphires, turquoise, lapis lazuli, topaz, amethyst, and other gemstones, then sewing them covertly into their clothes, along with some white and rare black pearls.

 On June 14th, a grand farewell feast gathering at Dingxiang's house was arranged by all the many friends that the Italians had made since their arrival back in November. Zhang Li was also in attendance. Eliyahu ceremoniously presented Triadano with a leather-bound copy of his written travel journal. Others offered hugs and small gifts of remembrance, and parcels of food for the next day's journey. The silks, spices, jades, and tea bricks earlier purchased were taken out of warehouse storage and securely sent to be loaded on fresh camels at the central city caravanserai. The weather forecast was favorable for the trip, and a fortune teller who had been invited to the gathering predicted much success and good luck.

 That night, Zhang Li visited Triadano for the last time. She surprised him in the still of the night, tip-toeing barefoot into his bedroom, with a half-moon shining through his open balcony window, a soft jasmine fragrance floating up from his flower garden. When he made to light a candle, she shook her head 'no' and proceeded to slowly remove her gossamer pink silk robe and let it drop to the floor. Triadano was transfixed, and immediately became aroused. Zhang Li's virginal body resembled flawless alabaster, her delicate breasts firm and ripe, her maidenhead dark and inviting. He could smell her natural womanly scent -- instantly recalling his wife, but only briefly. Zhang Li's face was like flawless porcelain, and was magnificently framed by her long, raven-black hair. Her dark eyes flashed desire, her lips parted, displaying her pearl-white teeth. She was eager for utter surrender to her first lover.

 Triadano was beyond thought or control as he took her -- first thrusting gently as she uttered a soft cry, then more vigorously -- again and again in joyous, passionate union, until the rose-colored dawn peeked in a few hours later through his balcony window. Before departing, Zhang Li pressed a jade ring affixed to a leather string into her lover's hand as she tenderly kissed him a last goodbye. She wordlessly got dressed, then softly wept as they parted, and finally tip-toed away.

 The exhausted and dazed Paduan dressed, then dragged himself to the caravanserai, where he met Saraceno and their new caravan leader and party. His Italian companion instantly assessed what had happened. "I know, I know...Jinjing and I also succumbed to making love last night. I'll never forget her. But now I feel guilty, remembering my wife and children. It is strange how a man can truly love his own wife, but also fall completely in love with another woman! However, my friend, it is over and done with, and we must focus instead on surviving our long journey home."

 So it was back -- across the dreaded desert and over the high, forbidding mountains in reverse direction -- to Kashgar. When they arrived in Merv, they again changed caravans, then looked up Daiko at his Buddhist monastery to collect their companion, Adelchi. But Daiko regretfully explained that the unfortunate Arrezon had died about six weeks after being left in the monk's care last year. Saraceno and Triadano were taken to the neatly marked grave of Adelchi behind the monastery and paid their respects. Daiko was then given ten gold dinars by the men as they departed, as a kind of donation for all he had done.

 After seven hard months, the two Italians were finally back in Antioch. It seemed like they had been gone for several years, so much had they learned and endured! The date was the 11th of January, 1174. Triadano went directly off to find a Catholic priest in the nearest church to confess his one act of adultery, the guilt of which had plagued him ever since leaving Chang'an.

 The elderly priest, Father Cyril, listened patiently to the contrite Paduan. "For your penance, my son, you must sincerely pray the rosary twice each day for one month. But then you must also do something much more difficult: You must confess exactly what you did to your wife, and beg her forgiveness. Now, make a good Act of Contrition, young man, and go with God's blessings back to Italy." When Triadano shared what had happened with his friend, Saraceno replied that he would similarly confess his grave mortal sin once he returned home to Rimini. But he secretly hoped (by utilizing another priest there) that he would not be required to inform his wife of what he had done.

 After the pair was sufficiently rested, they gathered their valuable Oriental trading goods and took a boat down the Orontes River to the familiar port of St. Symeon, on the Mediterranean. From there, they caught a sail to Cyprus, then went on to Crete, Corfu, Split, and Pula, until finally, the seasoned merchant-travelers arrived in Venice.

 In the rich Republic of Doges and canals, Triadano and Saraceno sold their Chinese bounty of silks, spices, jade, and tea for an enormous profit. The sale money would be securely transferred to banks in their home towns. They were now both extremely wealthy men. Was it all worth it? Realistically, yes. Both journeyers were financially set for life, their children's futures and their own old ages assured. But three of their original fortune-seeking companions had died on the route, surely a sobering reality.

 By prior agreement, Saraceno pledged to deliver a fair share of the journey's profits to the widows of Nicone (in nearby Trieste), Belfante (in Ferrara), and Adelchi (in Arezzo) -- the last two after he first reported home to see his own family in Rimini. So it was here in Venice that the two good friends embraced, then parted company. Would they ever meet again, each wondered alone, as the pale winter sun set that evening?

 On the 26th day of January, 1174, after a twenty-five mile horseback ride from Venice, Triadano had the long-awaited and joyous reunion with his wife, Lessandra, and his two lovely daughters, Madiana and Onesta, at their modest home in Padua. He gave them each several amazing gifts from China, then ceremoniously asked for a small knife. Having them stand back, he stood and slowly tore open the seams of his Oriental robes, and dramatically let spill forth the hidden fortune of precious gems and pearls! He also explained that pouches of Venetian gold and silver coins were waiting to be used by the family at Padua's largest city bank, and suggested that his wife look soon for a new, larger, more suitable house for them in a finer neighborhood.

 The time came, many days later in bed, after Lessandra asked her husband why he was still wearing a green jade ring on a leather string around his neck, that Triadano confessed his brief affair with Zhang Li. "I am so sorry, my love. It happened so unexpectedly and so quickly. Looking back, it seems like a dream now, like something that couldn't have happened in reality. China has that mysterious effect on a person...it is so far away. But it did happen, and confessed it to a priest in Antioch." She sat in silence as he removed the amulet and gave it to her. "You should sell this, or bury it, or throw it away. And I promise to never be unfaithful again." Lassandra understood and believed her contrite husband, and eventually forgave him. "Men and women understand such actions differently," she admitted. "And you did return to us, when you could have stayed in China with her. So that proves your greater love for me and for our children." The matter was never mentioned again. She secretly threw the jade piece away in the Bacchiglione River, not far from their new house, unseen one morning after buying food for her family in the market.

 As to the leather journal that Eliyahu had written and gifted, Triadano discussed with Lassandra if he should go to Vicenza, where a monastery had a scriptorium that engaged monks making copies of books by hand. Perhaps his Silk Route travel journal and what he had seen in China would be of value to future merchants, the government, and of course, the Church -- particularly because no Catholic missionaries had been there yet. Lassandra agreed, so her husband rode the twelve-miles west on horseback to Vicenza with his journal the following day. The project was accepted there by the director of the Abbey, and a monk-scribe was set to the long, pain-staking task. Duplicating just one copy could take up to a year.

 Triadano died a natural death after a happy and productive life, surrounded by his loved ones, in 1196 -- some twenty-two years after his return from the Orient. He had lived to see his two beautiful daughters mature, then marry, with each gifted a generous dowry. He was forty-nine years old, and had seen more of the world than almost anyone in Italy at that time. However, he never told his wife that he sometimes saw the face of Zhang Li -- just for a second -- when they made love, nor did he share a dream he once had whereby Zhang Li had become pregnant from their sole union and had given birth to a son.

 But his original journal -- and all of its fifteen copies, which had been waiting many years for official approval by the Vatican for distribution throughout Europe -- was destroyed in an Abbey fire in 1214, when the roof collapsed on the Scriptorium, burning every hand-copied volume of those and all other books housed there.

 History would have to wait more than eighty years in that same century for a young Venetian named Marco Polo to make a similar journey to China and back, and make its many wonders finally known to the Western world. And as for the spectacular Letter of Prester John? It was later proven to be little more than a fanciful forgery...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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