

BOOK II — CHAPTER 24:

HOW THE GREAT KHAN CAUSETH THE BARK OF TREES, MADE INTO SOMETHING LIKE PAPER, TO PASS FOR MONEY ALL OVER HIS COUNTRY

The Emperor's Mint (where money is made) then is in this same City of Cambaluc (Khanbaliq), and the way it is made is such that you might say he has the Secret of Alchemy* in perfection, and you would be right! For he makes his money in this way.

He makes them take of the bark of a certain tree, in fact of the Mulberry Tree, the leaves of which are the food of the silkworms, - these trees being so numerous that whole districts are full of them. What they take is a certain fine white skin, which lies between the wood of the tree and the thick outer bark, and this they make into something resembling sheets of paper, but black. When these sheets have been prepared they are cut up into pieces of different sizes. The smallest of these sizes is worth a half tornesel; the next, a little larger, one tornesel; one, a little larger still, is worth half a silver groat of Venice; another a whole groat; others yet two groats, five groats, and ten groats. There is also a kind worth one Bezant of gold, and others of three Bezants, and so up to ten. All these pieces of paper are issued with as much solemnity and authority as if they were of pure gold or silver; and on every piece a variety of officials, whose duty it is, have to write their names, and to put their seals (stamps). And when all is prepared duly, the chief officer deputed by the Khan smears the Seal entrusted to him with ink, and impresses it on the paper, so that the form of the Seal remains printed upon it in red; the Money is then authentic (real). Any one forging (faking) it would be punished with death. And the Khan causes every year to be made such a vast quantity of this money, which costs him nothing, that it must equal in amount all the treasure in the world.

With these pieces of paper, made as I have described, he requires all payments on his own account to be made; and he makes them to pass current universally over all his kingdoms and provinces and territories, and wherever his power and sovereignty (rule) extends. And nobody, however important he may think himself, dares to refuse them on pain of death. And indeed everybody takes them readily, for wherever a person may go throughout the Great Khan's dominions (lands) he shall find these pieces of paper in use, and shall be able to transact all sales and purchases of goods by means of them just as well as if they were coins of pure gold. And all the while they are so light that ten bezants' worth does not weigh one golden bezant.

BOOK II — CHAPTER 8:

CONCERNING THE PERSON OF THE GREAT KHAN

The personal appearance of the Great Khan, Lord of Lords, whose name is Cublay (Kublai), is such as I shall now tell you. He is of a good stature, neither tall nor short, but of a middle height. He has a becoming (large) amount of flesh, and is very shapely in all his limbs. His complexion is white and red, the eyes black and fine, the nose well formed and well set on. He has four wives, whom he retains permanently as his legitimate consorts; and the eldest of his sons by those four wives ought by rights to be emperor... when his father dies. Those four ladies are called empresses, ...each of them has a special court of her own... and each of these ladies has not less than 10,000 servants attached to her court.

When the Emperor desires the company of one of these four consorts (wives), he will sometimes send for the lady to his apartment and sometimes visit her at her own. He has also a great number of concubines (women of lesser status than wives who are retained by the Emperor for companionship), and I will tell you how he obtains them. You must know that there is a tribe of Tartars (Tatars, another nomadic group, sometimes used by Europeans to refer to Mongols) called Ungrat, who are noted for their beauty. Now every year an hundred of the most beautiful maidens of this tribe are sent to the Great Khan, who gives them to the charge (responsibility) of certain elderly ladies dwelling in his palace. And these old ladies make the girls sleep with them, in order to ascertain (determine) if they have sweet breath and do not snore, and are sound in all their limbs. Then such of them as are of approved beauty, and are good and sound in all respects, are appointed to attend on the Emperor by turns. Thus six of these damsels (young ladies) take their turn for three days and nights, and wait on him when he is in his chamber and when he is in his bed, to serve him in any way, and to be entirely at his orders. At the end of the three days and nights they are relieved by other six. And so throughout the year, there are reliefs of maidens by six and six, changing every three days and nights.

BOOK II — CHAPTER 22:

CONCERNING THE CITY OF CAMBALUC (KHANBALIQ), AND ITS GREAT TRAFFIC AND POPULATION

You must know that it is forbidden to bury any dead body inside the city. If the body be that of an Idolater it is carried out beyond the city and suburbs to a remote place assigned for the purpose, to be burnt. And if it be of one belonging to a religion the custom of which is to bury, such as the Christian, the Saracen (Muslim), or what not, it is also carried out beyond the suburbs to a distant place assigned for the purpose. And thus the city is preserved in a better and more healthy state.

Moreover, no public woman (prostitute) resides inside the city, but all such abide outside in the suburbs. And it is wonderful what a vast number of these there are for the foreigners; it is a certain fact that there are more than 20,000 of them living by prostitution. And that so many can live in this way will show you how vast is the population.

Guards patrol the city every night in parties of 30 or 40, looking out for any persons who may be abroad at unseasonable hours, i.e. after the great bell has struck thrice. If they find any such person he is immediately taken to prison, and examined next morning by the proper officers. If these find him guilty of any misdemeanor (minor crime) they order him a proportionate (fitting) beating with the stick. Under this punishment people sometimes die; but they adopt it in order to avoid bloodshed; for their elders say that it is an evil thing to shed man's blood.

To this city also are brought articles of greater cost and rarity, and in greater abundance of all kinds, than to any other city in the world. For people of every description, and from every region, bring things, including all the costly wares (products) of India, as well as the fine and precious goods of Cathay (China) itself with its provinces, some for the sovereign (ruler), some for the court, some for the city which is so great, some for the crowds of Barons and Knights, some for the great hosts of the Emperor which are quartered round about; and thus between court and city the quantity brought in is endless.

As a sample, I tell you, no day in the year passes that there do not enter the city 1000 cart-loads of silk alone, from which are made quantities of cloth of silk and gold, and of other goods. And this is not to be wondered at; for in all the countries round about there is no flax, so that everything has to be made of silk. It is true, indeed, that in some parts of the country there is cotton and hemp, but not sufficient for their wants. This, however, is not of much consequence, because silk is so abundant and cheap, and is a more valuable substance than either flax or cotton.