

THE  
WORLD'S EXPLORERS;

OR,

TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES.

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ILLUSTRATED WITH  
MANY ENGRAVINGS FROM DESIGNS BY EMINENT ARTISTS.



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## II.

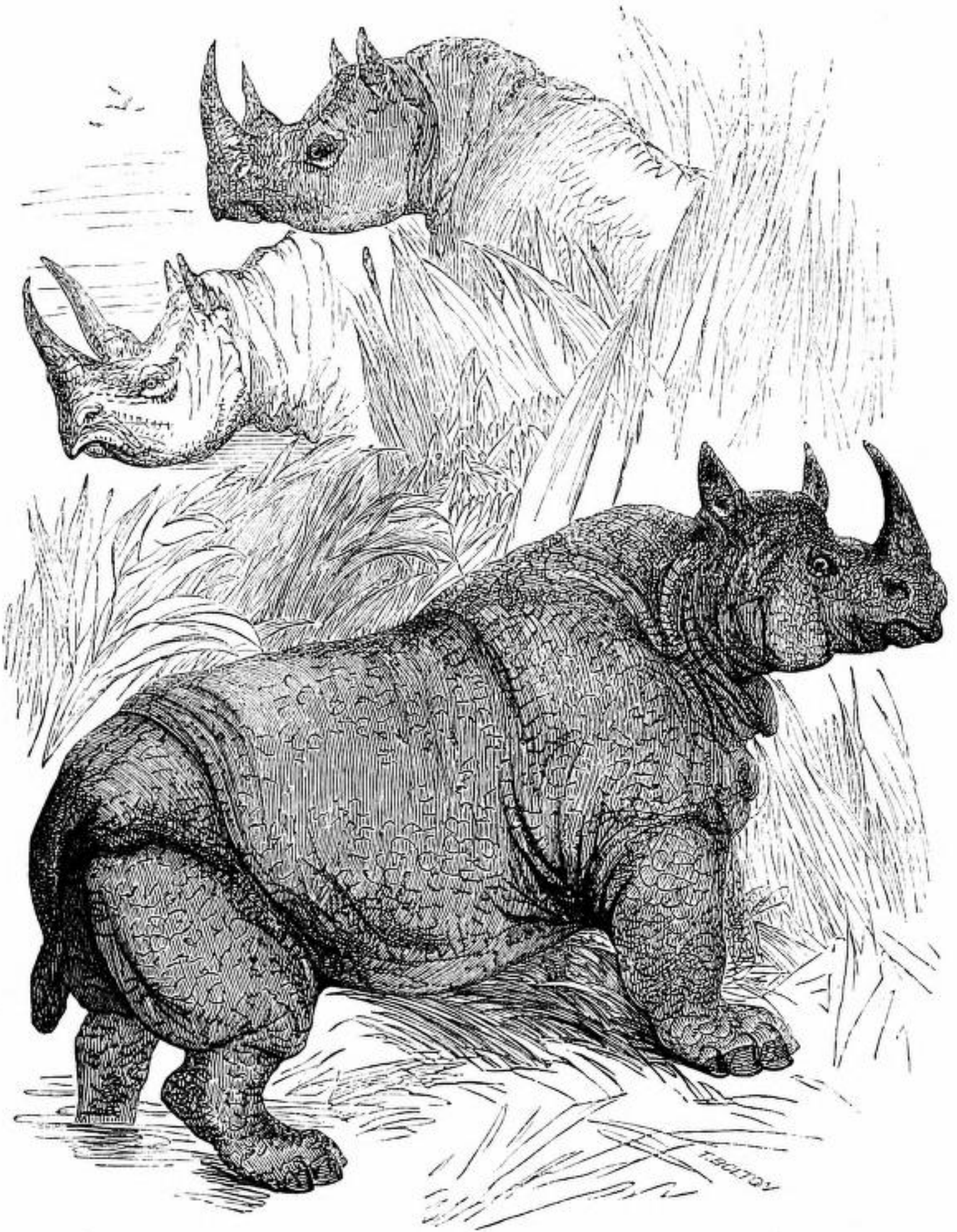
Arrival at the Confines of China—Reception by Kublai Khan—Account of the Alligator—Elephants and Rhinoceroses—Talent and Energy of Marco—The Poli Promoted by Kublai Khan—Account of China—Desire of the Poli to Return Home—Refusal of the Khan—Opportunity Afforded by the Proposed Marriage of the Khan's Granddaughter—Proposal to Reach the Borders of Persia by Sea—The Khan's Parting Injunctions.

**L**ONG journeyings succeeded the crossing of the desert of Gobi. During these Marco records many things then considered new and strange, but now "familiar as household words." Among others he describes the rhubarb-plant, and the cloth made from asbestos, "in the nature of a salamander." At length the party reached the confines of China, and here they were detained a whole year, for the Khan was absent on a distant expedition, and they and their mission seemed to have been forgotten. But at length they were admitted into the presence of the great Kublai, and performed the kotoo, or nine prostrations. The conqueror, who was at that time engaged in the conquest of China, from whence he expelled the Ming dynasty, received the travellers as graciously as before, and extended his especial favour to young Marco, whom he employed in many affairs of importance. At one time he made him governor of a province for three years, a period beyond which, according to the laws of the empire, no officer could hold authority in the same place.

Among the animals here met with, Marco Polo especially notices the yak and the musk animal, the account given of which is much more accurate than the particulars wherewith we are favoured concerning the alligator, which Marco describes as a huge serpent with two feet. His account, in another part of his work, of the rhinoceros, of which many wondrous fables had been reported, the shape of the creature being even altered to that of the graceful unicorn, is much more correct. He tells us—

"In this country" (he is speaking of Java) "are many wild elephants and rhinoceroses, which latter are much inferior in size to the elephant, but their feet are similar. Their hide resembles that of the buffalo. In the middle of the forehead they have a single horn, but with this weapon they do not injure those whom they attack, employing only for this purpose their tongue, which is armed with long sharp spines, and their knees or feet, their mode of assault being to trample

upon the person, and then to lacerate him with the tongue. Their head is like that of a wild boar, and they carry it low towards the



THE RHINOCEROS.

ground. They take delight in muddy pools, and are filthy in their habits. They are not of that description of animals which suffer themselves to be taken by maidens, as some people suppose, but are quite of



a contrary nature." He adds—"There are found in this district monkeys of various sorts, and vultures as black as crows, which are of a large size, and pursue the quarry in a good style."

Marco appears to have been in many respects a model traveller, sparing no pains to acquire the languages of the countries he visited, anxious to please the Khan by activity in business, and not neglectful of his private affairs when circumstances permitted him to make a journey on his own account. Like his father and uncle, he seems to have lived on the very best terms with Kublai Khan, and describes his position, speaking of himself in the third person, modestly, yet with a certain sense of dignity. He says—

"Marco, on his part, perceiving that the Grand Khan took a pleasure in hearing accounts of whatever was new to him respecting the customs and manners of people, and the peculiar circumstances of distant countries, endeavoured, wherever he went, to obtain correct information on these subjects, and made notes of all he saw and heard, in order to gratify the curiosity of his master. In short, during seventeen years that he continued in his service he rendered himself so useful that he was employed in confidential missions to every part of the empire and its dependencies, and sometimes also he travelled on his private account, but always with the consent, and sanctioned by the authority, of the Grand Khan. Under such circumstances it was that Marco Polo had the opportunity of acquiring a knowledge, either by his own observation or by what he collected from others, of so many things, until his time unknown, respecting the eastern parts of the world, and which he diligently and regularly committed to writing, as in the sequel will appear."

Our traveller here speaks truly. His position at the court of Kublai gave him peculiar and exceptional facilities, of which he availed himself to the utmost; and it may be added that what he saw "by his own observation" he generally describes with tolerable accuracy; it is in "what he collected from others" that the strong flavour of the marvellous and the supernatural is found. And, indeed, this credulity of our good Marco is not so wonderful as may at first appear. Here was a man surrounded with things which, familiar as they are to the children of this age, from their spelling-book days upward, were to him strange and new. In China he found cities and provinces whose population and extent far exceeded the population and extent of the famous Italian republics; he saw public works whose magnitude asto-

nished him; where he had expected, according to the ideas of his countrymen, to find a savage and barbarous people, little advanced in civilisation beyond the state of nomadic tribes, he found a mighty and well-organised empire, full of industry and wealth, teeming with a vast population, and ruled by a prince of considerable power, enlightenment, and talent; and every day brought under his own observation things new and strange, of which till then he had had no conception. It is hardly to be wondered at, therefore, that he was ready to give ear to any new marvel the report of which might reach him; and that imaginative tellers of wondrous tales found in him a ready and willing listener. It must be remembered, moreover, that the travels of Marco Polo were written down long before the invention of printing; that there are many traces of interpolations in the work; and that very probably some of the most marvellous tales, and many of the most glaring inaccuracies, have been added long after the death of the original author of the travels by the transcribers who copied his work.

At length, after many years of residence, in wealth and honour, at the court of the great Kublai, our travellers began to think of turning their faces homewards. The two elder Poli were now advanced in years, and were naturally anxious to see their native land again, and after their many perils and wanderings to husband out life's taper at the close, and spend the evening of their days in the beautiful city of the Adriatic. But when the subject of their departure was mooted to the aged Kublai Khan, that gracious but despotic prince would in no wise grant them leave to go. If they wanted more wealth and honours, he said, he had enough to satisfy them to the utmost of their expectations; but they had become indispensable to him, and must remain where they were; nor did he seem to understand what attractions the distant city of Venice could have to compensate them for what they would lose in quitting his empire, or to warrant the long and perilous journey they must undertake to get there. Chance, however, not long afterwards came to their aid, and procured them the permission they had sought in vain. It happened that a certain Prince Arghun, a Tartar chief who ruled in Persia, and who was a relation of Kublai Khan, was in want of a wife, and despatched an embassy to the great emperor to solicit that a lady of the family of Kublai might be sent to him from China. Kublai accordingly determined to bestow on Arghun one of his grandchildren, a young princess of seventeen, who accordingly set forth with the ambassadors to go with them to Persia.