

Excerpt from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo:*
The Venetian Concerning Kingdoms and Marvells of the East

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BOOK SECOND. PART I.

**CHAPTER XXIII. CONCERNING THE OPPRESSIONS OF ACHMATH THE BAILO,
AND THE PLOT THAT WAS FORMED AGAINST HIM**

You will hear further on how that there are twelve persons appointed who have authority to dispose of lands, offices, and everything else at their discretion. Now one of these was a certain Saracen named Achmath, a shrewd and able man, who had more power and influence with the Grand Kaan than any of the others; and the Kaan held him in such regard that he could do what he pleased. The fact was, as came out after his death, that Achmath had so wrought upon the Kaan with his sorcery, that the latter had the greatest faith and reliance on everything he said, and in this way did everything that Achmath wished him to do.

This person disposed of all governments and offices, and passed sentence on all malefactors; and whenever he desired to have anyone whom he hated put to death, whether with justice or without it, he would go to the Emperor and say: "Such a one deserves death, for he hath done this or that against your imperial dignity." Then the Lord would say: "Do as you think right," and so he would have the man forthwith executed. Thus when people saw how unbounded were his powers, and how unbounded the reliance placed by the Emperor on everything that he said, they did not venture to oppose him in anything. No one was so high in rank or power as to be free from the dread of him. If anyone was accused by him to the Emperor of a capital offence, and desired to defend himself, he was unable to bring proofs in his own exculpation, for no one would stand by him, as no one dared to oppose Achmath. And thus the latter caused many to perish unjustly.

Moreover, there was no beautiful woman whom he might desire, but he got hold of her; if she were unmarried, forcing her to be his wife, if otherwise, compelling her to consent to his desires. Whenever he knew of anyone who had a pretty daughter, certain ruffians of his would go to the father, and say: "What say you? Here is this pretty daughter of yours; give her in marriage to the Bailo Achmath (for they called him 'the Bailo,' or, as we should say, 'the Vicegerent'), and we will arrange for his giving you such a government or such an office for three years." And so the man would surrender his daughter. And Achmath would go to the

Emperor, and say: "Such a government is vacant, or will be vacant on such a day. So-and-so is a proper man for the post." And the Emperor would reply: "Do as you think best," and the father of the girl was immediately appointed to the government. Thus either through the ambition of the parents, or through fear of the Minister, all the beautiful women were at his beck, either as wives or mistresses. Also he had some five-and-twenty sons who held offices of importance, and some of these, under the protection of their father's name, committed scandals like his own, and many other abominable iniquities. This Achmath also had amassed great treasure, for everybody who wanted office sent him a heavy bribe.

In such authority did this man continue for two-and-twenty years. At last the people of the country, to wit the Cathayans, utterly wearied with the endless outrages and abominable iniquities which he perpetrated against them, whether as regarded their wives or their own persons, conspired to slay him and revolt against the government. Amongst the rest there was a certain Cathayan named Chenchu, a commander of a thousand, whose mother, daughter, and wife had all been dishonoured by Achmath. Now this man, full of bitter resentment, entered into parley regarding the destruction of the Minister with another Cathayan whose name was Vanchu, who was a commander of 10,000. They came to the conclusion that the time to do the business would be during the Great Kaan's absence from Cambaluc. For after stopping there three months he used to go to Chandu and stop there three months; and at the same time his son Chinkin used to go away to his usual haunts, and this Achmath remained in charge of the city; sending to obtain the Kaan's orders from Chandu when any emergency arose.

So Vanchu and Chenchu, having come to this conclusion, proceeded to communicate it to the chief people among the Cathayans, and then by common consent sent word to their friends in many other cities that they had determined on such a day, at the signal given by a beacon, to massacre all the men with beards, and that the other cities should stand ready to do the like on seeing the signal fires. The reason why they spoke of massacring the bearded men was that the Cathayans naturally have no beard, whilst beards are worn by the Tartars, Saracens, and Christians. And you should know that all the Cathayans detested the Grand Kaan's rule because he set over them governors who were Tartars, or still more frequently Saracens, and these they could not endure, for they were treated by them just like slaves. You see the Great Kaan had not succeeded to the dominion of Cathay by hereditary right, but held it by conquest; and thus having no confidence in the natives, he put all authority into the hands of Tartars, Saracens, or Christians who were attached to his household and devoted to his service, and were foreigners in Cathay.

Wherefore, on the day appointed, the aforesaid Vanchu and Chenchu having entered the palace at night, Vanchu sat down and caused a number of lights to be kindled before him. He then sent a messenger to Achmath the Bailo, who lived in the Old City, as if to summon him to the presence of Chinkin, the Great Kaan's son, who (it was pretended) had arrived unexpectedly. When Achmath heard this he was much surprised, but made haste to go, for he feared the Prince greatly. When he arrived at the gate he met a Tartar called Cogatai, who was Captain of the 12,000 that formed the standing garrison of the City; and the latter asked him

whither he was bound so late? "To Chinkin, who is just arrived." Quoth Cogatai, "How can that be? How could he come so privily that I know nought of it?" So he followed the Minister with a certain number of his soldiers. Now the notion of the Cathayans was that, if they could make an end of Achmath, they would have nought else to be afraid of. So as soon as Achmath got inside the palace, and saw all that illumination, he bowed down before Vanchu, supposing him to be Chinkin, and Chenchu who was standing ready with a sword straightway cut his head off. As soon as Cogatai, who had halted at the entrance, beheld this, he shouted "Treason!" and instantly discharged an arrow at Vanchu and shot him dead as he sat. At the same time he called his people to seize Chenchu, and sent a proclamation through the city that anyone found in the streets would be instantly put to death. The Cathayans saw that the Tartars had discovered the plot, and that they had no longer any leader, since Vanchu was killed and Chenchu was taken. So they kept still in their houses, and were unable to pass the signal for the rising of the other cities as had been settled. Cogatai immediately dispatched messengers to the Great Kaan giving an orderly report of the whole affair, and the Kaan sent back orders for him to make a careful investigation, and to punish the guilty as their misdeeds deserved. In the morning Cogatai examined all the Cathayans, and put to death a number whom he found to be ringleaders in the plot. The same thing was done in the other cities, when it was found that the plot extended to them also.

After the Great Kaan had returned to Cambaluc he was very anxious to discover what had led to this affair, and he then learned all about the endless iniquities of that accursed Achmath and his sons. It was proved that he and seven of his sons (for they were not all bad) had forced no end of women to be their wives, besides those whom they had ravished. The Great Kaan then ordered all the treasure that Achmath had accumulated in the Old City to be transferred to his own treasury in the New City, and it was found to be of enormous amount. He also ordered the body of Achmath to be dug up and cast into the streets for the dogs to tear; and commanded those of his sons that had followed the father's evil example to be flayed alive.

These circumstances called the Kaan's attention to the accursed doctrines of the Sect of the Saracens, which excuse every crime, yea even murder itself, when committed on such as are not of their religion. And seeing that this doctrine had led the accursed Achmath and his sons to act as they did without any sense of guilt, the Kaan was led to entertain the greatest disgust and abomination for it. So he summoned the Saracens and prohibited their doing many things which their religion enjoined. Thus, he ordered them to regulate their marriages by the Tartar Law, and prohibited their cutting the throats of animals killed for food, ordering them to rip the stomach in the Tartar way. Now when all this happened Messer Marco was upon the spot.