The Letter of Prester John

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF THE ACCOUNT OF THE LAND OF BLESSED JOHN

This is a Book that the King of India sent to the Emperor of Constantinople, in which many diverse strange things are understood, and in it there are new things that have never been found in other books, and never shall be found. And this is the force of that book.

I. John the priest, by the might and strength of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, King of earthly kings, and Lord of lords, sends to him that stands in the place of God, namely, the Ruler of Rome, joy and greeting by the grace of poetry, and thereby rising to things that are above. It was told our majesty that thou lovest our excellence and the plenitude of our greatness; and we have learnt through our messenger that thou art fain to send us things that are amusing, and some that are pleasant, and, as I am a man, that is good in my sight. And of the things among us we send by our messengers other things to thee, and we send and desire to know whether thou hast the faith with us, and believest wholly in our Lord Jesus Christ.

II. When those among us recognize that we are men, thy Greeks think that thou art a God. Yet, since we know that thou art mortal, and that thou art subject to human corruption, if thou dost desire any of the things that belong to joy, do thou notify it through thy messenger, and, by the wonted munificence of our bounty, thou shalt have it. Do thou take this gift, in my name, and make use of it, and we will joyfully use thy gifts, so that we may
strengthen ourselves mutually in our power turn by turn, and, as proofs thereof bethink thee and look to it. If thou wouldst fain come to the nation whereof we are sprung, we will place thee over the greatest things in our palace, and so thou canst make use of our abundance, and the many things that are in our midst, and if thou wouldst fain return, thou shalt go back rich. Remember, however, the last thing, that is, thy end, and thou wilt never more sin.

III. Now, if thou wouldst fain know our majesty, and the excellence of our highness, and in what lands our power holds sway, understand and believe without doubt that I am John the priest, lord of lords, excelling all the kings of the earth in strength, and power, in all kinds of high riches that are under heaven. Seventy-two kings are tributary to me. I have taken a vow that I am a Christian; the greatest power of our righteousness is to defend and support them from our alms. We are likewise under vow to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a great host, even as it befits the glory of our mightiness to subject and subdue the enemies of the Cross of Christ, and to exalt His Blessed Name. And our land stretches from the extremities of India, where the body of Thomas the Apostle rests; and it extends through the wilderness to the setting sun, and reaches back, sloping to deserted Babylon, near the tower of Babylon.

IV. Seventy-two kingships serve us in bondage, and of those but few are Christians; and each of them has a king, by itself, and these are all tributary to us. In our country are born animals,—elephants, dromedaries, camels, hippopotami, crocodiles, metagalinarrii, carneteniri, ownsiritæ, pantheræ, onagri, white and red lions, white bears, white ousels, silent grasshoppers,
There springs the herb called Affidos. Whoever bears the root of that plant with him, it will drive the evil spirit from him, and will constrain him to say who he is, and what is his name; and, therefore, the evil spirits dare not corrupt any man there. In another kingdom of ours there grow all kinds of pepper, and they are collected and exchanged for wheat, and skins, and cloth, and men’s food; and those regions are wooded, as if thickly planted with willows, and all full of serpents. And when the pepper ripens, all the people come from the nearest kingdoms, and bring with them chaff, and refuse, and dry branches; and they kindle the wood round about; and when a mighty wind blows, they set fire within and without the wood, so that not one of the snakes may escape; and so within the fire, after it has been thoroughly kindled, all the snakes perish, save those that reach caves; and when all the fire has died out, all come, men and women, small and big, with forks in their hands, and fling all the snakes out of the forest, and make high heaps of them.
sky high. And when they have finished shaking that refuse, the grain that is gathered from among the fagots is dried, and the pepper is boiled, but how it is boiled no one from another country is allowed to know.

**VI.** And that forest is situate under Mount Olympy, and from there an excellent spring flows; and the water has every kind of taste, and the taste changes each hour, day and night. And from there, not further than three days’ journey from Paradise, from which Adam was driven out. Whoever drinks of the water of that spring during his fast, no disease will come upon him from that day forth, and he will ever be thirty years of age. There, too, there are stones called Midiosi; and eagles bring these towards us, and through these they revive and recover the light, if they lose it. Whoever bears this stone on his hand, light never fails him, and if he would fain hide himself, it will cause that no one may see him. It drives hatred from all, and induces unity, and repels jealousy. This, too, is a strange thing that our country has, among other things:—there is a sea of sand there, and the gravel moves without water, and it surges in waves like another sea, and never rests; and one cannot go on it by vessel or in any other way, nor can it be in any way known what kind of laud there is beyond; but on the side towards us there are found divers kinds of fish, so sweet and so good that man never saw their like.

**VII.** There are likewise, three days’ journey from that sea, some mountains from which flows a river of stones, and that flowing like water, and it runs through our land to the sea of sand. And when the river reaches the sea, the stones disappear, so that they are not seen thenceforth. Three days in the week the stones move and slide, both small and great, and take with them
some trees, as far as the sea of sand, and, so long as they move, no one can ever cross it; on the other four days a passage is obtained. This is another marvel that is there; hard by the desert near the mountains, where no one dwells, there is a river beneath the earth, and no one can find a road to it, except by chance; sometimes the earth trembles, and whoever then happens to be passing by can find a road to the river, and he must travel in haste, lest perchance the earth close upon him; and whatever sand he brings with him will be precious stones and jewels. And this river runs into another river larger than itself, and therein there is none of the gravel or sand, but precious stones; and into this river the men of that country go, and seize and bring with them thence a multitude of precious stones and jewels, and they dare not sell those, until they first inform our excellency. And if we would fain have them in our treasure, we take them, and give them half their value. If we do not want them, they are free to sell them where they will. Children are brought up in that land to seek the stones, so that they can live under the water three or four mouths,

**VIII.** Beyond this stony river there are ten tribes of the Jews. Though they presume they are kings, yet they are subject to us, and are tributaries to our majesty. In another kingdom of ours, beyond the place where the island lies, there are worms, called in our tongue Salamandre, and those worms can live only in fire, and they have around them skins like the skins of worms that make silk. And to spin this is the work of our ladies in our palace, and thereof is made all kinds of apparel for the use of our majesty; and these clothes cannot be washed save in a large and strong fire. In gold, silver, precious stones, in dromedaries and camels, is the abundance of our greatness. No one is poor among ns; no adulterer is found there; all meu of strange lands, to
wit, guests and pilgrims, our gentleness receives. No thieves, no oppressors, no misers are found in our midst; there is no envy in our midst.

IX. Our men have abundance of all kinds of riches; there are not many horses among us, and they are but sorry. We liken none on the face of the earth to us in riches. When we go to war in force against our enemies, we let carry before us fifteen large, magnificent crosses made of gold and silver, with precious stones therein, one in each car, in stead of standards, and behind each one of them twelve thousand men of arms, and a hundred thousand foot soldiers, without counting the five thousand who have to do with bearing food and drink. But when we walk abroad in peace, a wooden cross precedes our majesty, without any legend whatever, either of gold or silver, that the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ may be brought back to our remembrance constantly; and a vessel full of earth, that we may recognize that our flesh returns to its own source, that is, to earth; and other vessels, full of gold, are borne before us, that all may understand that we are lord of lords.

X. In all the kinds of riches that are in the world our greatness abounds and excels. No one tells a lie among us, and no one can tell one; and whoever tells a lie willingly, straightway he dies, and no ill will is borne about him. All of us follow after truth, and all love one another mutually; no kind of sin reigns there. Every year we go on a pilgrimage to the place where lies the body of Daniel the Prophet, taking great hosts with us, to deserted Babylon, and those too under arms, because of animals called tyri and some other serpents called deviles. In our country some fish are caught, and with the blood of these the most precious purple is coloured.
XI. We have many places, the bravest nation in the world, and ugly withal. We lord it over the races called Amazons and Bragmans. The palace wherein our majesty dwells was made in the form and likeness of that which the Apostle Thomas ordained for Wyndofforns, king of India; and its wings and structures are exactly like it. The columns of the hall, its pillars, and its fretwork, conic from some tree called ccthiui. The roofing of the hall is made of some plants called hebenus, the reason being that no one in the world can in any way burn it. On the farthest extremities on the top of that ball there are two apples of gold, and in each of them there is the precious stone called carbunculus, so that the gold may give light during the day, and the stones by night. The largest parts of the hall are made of stones called sardoniehi, blended with eerastes, the reason being that no one may secretly bring in poison with him. Other things in the hall are made of the plants called hebenus; the windows were of crystal; the tables to eat on in our palace are, some of them, gold, and others of the precious stone amestic. The pillars that support the tables are of whalebone. Before our palace there is a street, wherein our justice is wont to look on those who fight in duel. The top of the hall and its walls are made of onichiuus, the purpose being that energy may arise in our combatants by the virtue of the stones. In that hall light is not kindled at night, save that which the precious oil called balsam feeds.

XII. The chamber wherein our majesty rests was fitted with wondrous work, and that of gold, and every kind of precious stone in the world, because of the excellence of onichinus instead of light. Around this is made a work, four-square, as large as itself, that the harshness of the onyx may be tempered. Precious ointment is ever burned in this chamber; our bed is made of sapphire, because of the virtue of chastity. We have the fairest wives in the
world, and they come in to us only four times in the year, that we may have heirs, and thereafter each one returns to her own place, as healthy as Beersheba from David.

XIII. In our palace we eat once a day; each day thirty thousand men eat at our board, besides the guests that come and go. And these all receive their charges from our palace, both in horses and other things also. That table is made of precious stone called smaragdins, and it is supported by two pillars of amethyst. The virtue of this stone is that it suffers no one to get drunk so long as he sits thereon. Before the doorposts of our hall, near where the combatants are, there is a watch-tower of great height, and thereto one climbs by one hundred and twenty-five steps; and these steps, some of them are made of porphyry, blended with the blood of serpents, and alabaster ointment. The third part at the bottom of these is made of crystal, and jasper, and sardooyx, and another part, at the top, is of amethyst, and amber, and jasper, and sardonyx, and panthera. This watch-tower is supported by one pillar, and on this there is a base, that is, some stone-work so called, and on this base two columns, that is to say, arms; and on these there is a base, and on this four columns, and again a base, and on this sixteen arms; and so the work proceeds, until the number thirty-four is reached, and then the number of the bases lessens, and the columns, until they come to one, and that by ascending upwards, as they increased before, ascending to thirty-four.

XIV. Now the columns and bases are of the same kind of precious stone as the steps through which men ascend. On the summit of the highest there is a watch-tower placed by some graceful skill, so that no one in the various kinds of laud subject to us can work any fraud, or treachery, or dissensions against
us whatever, nor those among us, without it being clearly seen from that watch-tower, and without its being recognized who they are, or what they do. There are three thousand men of arms ever guarding this watch-tower night and day, lest by chance it be broken or overthrown to the ground.

XV. Each month in the year seven kings serve me, each one of them in his order, and forty-two princes, and three hundred and fifty-six earls. That number is always at our board, without those placed in the various duties in our palace. At our board there eat each day, on the right twelve archbishops, and on my left hand twenty bishops, and the patriarch from the place where is the grave of the Apostle Thomas and he that is in place of a pope.