

# The Translation of Peter Polo

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(Prize Story — Indianapolis Branch,  
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## I

In a way, the morning opened like any other morning. Peter wakened, scratched an ear, rubbed an eye, straightened out a leg that had been folded like a bent wing beneath him. The same stiffness all over his body, the same heaviness weighting down his eyes. The difference was that he had wakened earlier. He floated quietly on a wave with his face turned to the sky.

But his mind, which had started stretching after drifting lazily in a white cloud, suddenly came to life. It began to receive messages, sending them on to Peter. The first one, nothing special, *Get up, breakfast is ready*, Peter ignored completely. The second one broke through the shell. *Ten years old today. You ought to get up.* Peter let the message hover in midair then coast like a feather to earth. A third message was coming in; slowly, painstakingly, a flower dropped in the dim pool of his mind unfolded its petals one by one. Funny, how they differed. The others had been straight to the point. This one just sidled in suggestively like a pink jellyfish with tentacles trailing. *An important day for you. You are standing in the path of an avalanche. Get up.* Now what did that mean?

Opposite the bed lace curtains swayed a little drunkenly at first. Their indistinct outlines, the blurred folds, and the softness hardened into photographic clarity. Dervishes, three of them, nodding, talking, wagging their heads over a small camp fire . . . Wild yak they were now, stampeding on a pale narrow prairie . . .

When sails sprang up, white, yellow, red, and the tropical sunset was a copper bowl overturned . . .

Hear it, the avalanche! It's sending out feelers, beginning to scatter rock already.

Peter was whisked to a coral atoll. He gathered a few cocoanuts, strolled to where the copra was spread out drying crisply in the sun, caught an orange flamingo by the tail feathers. The flamingo rippled away, too hot to hold. Peter found a lotus and tasted it. He stumbled upon tracks in the sand made by roc and followed them over a cliff, down a canyon, between boulders, at last underground.

So, an avalanche. What do you do about an avalanche?

Here, Peter, are the day's gains; count over the birthday loot. Old coins from south China, an atlas, stamps from Avis, and a pair of knitted gloves resembling sponges. But what gift from his mother? What had escaped detection, the cautious peering into dresser drawers, the opening of closets? Unanswered, that question, and with a sigh Peter let go his birthday. It sank into the chasm, an empty husk drained dry.

Now it was breakfast — and mother and father and Avis were all looking at Peter as if they shared some unmentionable secret about him. They would not talk of anything except scrambled eggs, how hard they were and how three tablespoons of milk lightly beaten in would have improved them.

"Peter, will you have toast with your eggs or muffins? Peter, some butter?"

A new experience, tom-toms disrupting the monotony of his heartbeat. Actually



he could both see and feel the drums — black lizard skins drawn taut over the thigh bones of ostriches and thumped by nervous brown wrinkled fingers. Moonstones on the fingers and living turquoise. A sweet flute, a whining bag-pipe. And Peter suddenly laughed without meaning to. His mother, talking about brussel sprouts, looked up:

"Either they are wrinkled or yellow or the delivery boy piles a lot of canned goods in, right on the top, and the bruises—"

He kissed her and was gone. He left by caravan, passing through mountains where the atmosphere was so rare that he could scarcely breathe. How impetuous Peter is! thought his mother. That boy, thought his father grimly, should show some respect for conventional rules of conduct. A wild weed, if ever . . .

"Passamint jelly please," said Avis, blond and preoccupied. They were Stoics buried to the eyebrows in averages. And they had all missed the avalanche.

## II

The first misadventure took place on Ceylon, where Peter, after some irregular navigation, landed. In every direction the island leafed and shivered, drenching him in its full green tides.

"Hey, Pete! Look! brand-new!" Two racquets, slim-handled and oval at one end, rose among the leaves. They teetered back and forth.

"Come on down. Watcha doin' in that tree?" A feathery round object of no weight bonged on one of the racquets, sailed upward and stuck fast between two twigs.

Cannibals with filed teeth, luring him to the hideous rites of the underbrush.

"We're champs, Pete! We learned

how yesterday. Teach you — for a small fee!"

"Naw," filtered out of the tree, from the core of beleaguered Ceylon, "Naw," and the leaves closed, a solid green wall. The cannibals went their way.

Peter, creeping from the island's beach warily, circled the bay of Bengal in an outrigger canoe. Stretched flat on the bottom of the boat, he could see, distantly, the yellow and blue trolley car plummet down its tracks. The monster stopped instantly, lurched and lay still. The mailman, a Red Dress and Flower Hat got on board.

"Three chimps and a flying lizard," muttered the navigator scowling. "Gotta be careful. Might be more of 'em."

The dark Indian jungle spread like a vast opaque umbrella to shield him from impending dangers. It hid the gleaming trolley tracks, smothered the roar of the blue and yellow beast as it ate along the rails, and protected him from hostile, inquisitive men. Beneath it Peter humped and crawled and slid.

Though most of the trails had been systematically marked, their trees long ago nicked with deep cuts from Peter's knife, the one he now followed wound as faintly as a thread. Just when he decided it was no trail at all, it ended in a clump of elderberry bushes. The elderberry extended very far, forming a small jungle of its own. It grew thick and high, in one place screening an old rotted stump that blossomed with brown fungi.

Where are the maps, the charts, the compass?

Peter, diving into pockets, found none. His mother had betrayed him and laid out clean trousers. He tested the wind with a wet finger; there was no wind. He looked for moss; the trunks were bare of it. So the lost explorer sat down in the elderberry.



Before Peter, sprawled in these bushes, the white camel, Mago, who had been chewing May apple plants and now and then a pine cone, was observed by no one, not even the chipmunks. The noise drew him; and if Peter, instead of thinking about signal fires and flags and other aids to distress, had been using his ears, he would have heard Mago, for he came with all the stealth of a small landslide. He came dripping May apple leaves from his mouth and leaned over Peter's contemplative face.

The next five minutes while Peter and Mago were getting used to one another must be omitted. It is impossible to get a distinct picture of them . . . . Peter was terrified, of course. Mago — well, Mago was only tired. This may have reassured Peter, who saw, as if he watched the swirling colors under a kaleidoscope fit gradually into brilliant patterns, first the travel stains on the white fur, then the blood-shot eyes, and at last the broken and dragging chain. Mago's saddle—red leather, silver-fringed — had been shaken a little to one side. Peter touched it with a great caution. The camel neck shuddered, and from under the shaggy throat a small bell jangled.

"Well," said Peter, "Well, I never." It was a vast truth.

In order to loosen the chain which throttled Mago and was working a crimson bruise on his neck, Peter had to climb into the saddle.

"See here," said Peter, "Now don't you move." At the same time his foot caught in the stirrups.

"Wait!" echoed among the trim straight pines. "Hey, Wait!" whispered the empty woods.

Now he shouts in the wind, into the dusk and cold fog of rivers. Now he reaches for a comet's scorching hair, for

the camel is rising through a hundred churning levels; on one the earth flies in clouds from under the beating hoofs; on one more the pale spray rises; another, the mist leaps up in tiers of pearl; and the pit of night reverberates. Is this the avalanche? In the silence between two stars Peter knows and is nodding.

### III

"I am Peter Polowski from Grand Rapids, Michigan," the boy was saying to the three men in front of the camp fires. "Your camel brought me here. Where am I?"

Peter could not understand the man who spoke. The words reminded him of the soft sounds made by a covey of quail. In the impenetrable darkness animals whinnied or moved, and the general restlessness which ran through all the currents of the camp heightened. The unknown words poured over him again; helpless, Peter shook his head.

"English. Can some one speak English?"

The men looked beyond Peter where huge trees blackened. The nightmare quality of those moments only increased by the arrival of two more men in the firelight. These — filthy, grotesque, ragged — carried dirt caked loosely on their bodies, and not even the startling masses of hair could cover up the dirt-lined faces. They were received with the greatest respect. Peter watched the operations of the two men; while one piled branches on the fire the other held a silver bowl over them. The flames turned blue and a light haze began to roll upward through which, as though from the hollow of a far off valley, Peter heard one speaking:

"You, brought by Mago from beyond barren Lop, where is your home and what



are you named? Tell us, for while the fire smokes we can understand each other."

Peter's voice had been reduced to a mere trickle.

"Peter Polowski is my name, from Grand Rapids, Michigan."

Some one laughed.

"Peter Polowski? Michigan? There is no such kingdom, for if there were these men would know it. They travel the world."

"Who are you?"

"We? The Baksi, priests of Buddha, magicians to the great Khan Kublai. We come from the imperial court of Ta-in-fu to assist the Polos." The fire sank to a trace of purple, then flared.

"Who, did you say? What?"

"Speak loudly. The Polos. You know of the Polos, the travelers and merchants? Two brothers, Nicolo and Maffo, stand here with a young one, Marco. Tomorrow Kublai meets them in his winter palace."

"But the Polos," screamed Peter. . . . . "They died."

"They say that, do they, in your kingdom Michigan? The world bellies with rumor. No, the caravan of the Polo brothers has doubled in strength and tomorrow will find honor. You, boy, how do they say the Polos have died?"

"I think . . . . I think in prison . . . ."  
Peter could not go on.

More laughter rose. Then softly,  
"Where does this Michigan lie?"

"In America."

"Mago found you in America? He has brought you, then, like the others?"

"What others?"

"Listen, Peter Polowski. The white camel has broken loose before, three times, and returned with strange men. Never a boy till now, never a young one."

"Who are they? May I see them?"

"They wait at the court. You may see

them tomorrow when you are presented to the Khan."

"Why are they here? Why am I?"

"Mago brought them. One said he climbed a mountain named Everest and slipped through a deep crack. Mago found him lying in the snow. Another comes from your America, from a place called Ecuador. The last one was crossing a desert, Australia he said it was, when he lost his company. They are brave men, all of them. They will travel with the Polos."

A long silence fell on Peter. The wind pushed the flames to one side and he could see the Baksi talking.

"You must learn the language, boy. Marco desires to teach you."

A fear seized Peter. "Must I stay too? Can't the camel take me back?"

"Mago is chained . . . . . Why, think of it, boy, do you want to return so badly?"

Peter thought of it. He reached for his home and parents but stubbornly they refused to transcend the mist. He felt that they were lost to him. Determined, he asked:

"Is there any way back?"

"Why, if you say so. We can send you before the sun rises. Our power can, when summoned, hold off the monsoon. Yet there are limits; after the first dawn we can no longer help you."

"I must go. I belong at home."

"Then why have you come? And who knows, at least in his heart, where he belongs?" Then . . . . "What do you do at home, in Michigan?"

"I go to school. I play and . . . ." remembering a phrase from his father . . . "study to make my place in society."

"There is more to learn here. There is the mystery to be resolved of lands beyond men's knowledge. There is Zipangu, an island of pearls, which has never been



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"There is more to learn here. There is the mystery to be resolved of lands beyond men's knowledge. There is Zipangu, an island of pearls, which has never been



seen. Also castles like Thaikim and mountains where swift falcon fly. Shandu is a city set in the hills like a dove among emeralds . . . You care for such things?"

"Oh," said Peter, "I have always wanted to be an explorer, but my father says I am to study law."

"What does your father do in this society?"

"Why, he is in business. He works hard every day in an office, buying and selling stocks. He is very successful."

"What is an office that he works in?"

"It's . . . . a small room where people work and telephones ring a lot . . . ."

"He stays there every day? In one room? Always the same?"

"Yes."

"Men do not live in a box here. But perhaps in his mind he is free. What of the law you will learn? Where will it take you?"

"Well . . . to courtrooms and offices. It settles men's problems, you see."

"Our camels will carry you farther. And here you will find problems. Some survive the plagues, some do not. Wisdom is needed in the desert."

"Don't you see. I can't stay. This place isn't real. It's not the world or anyplace or anywhere. I can't stay."

"You know what is real and not real then? You know where each world stops and where each begins?"

"No, no," choked Peter, "I can't understand."

"There are many worlds and many confusions . . . . It is your choice, boy, since it has been given to you. Make it."

With that the Baksi withdrew. Peter stared for a long while into the smoking

ashes. It was nearly dawn. He could glimpse minarets like shafts of radiant silver pointing into the heavens. Around him the notes of a flute spiraled infinitely high as if they would pierce the moon. The odor of grapes and mulberries drifted from darkened gardens.

The Baksi returned. The old man, Maffeo, stood behind them. "It is dawn soon, boy. You may stay, Peter Polo, or leave, Peter Polowski."

Tears stood in the boy's eyes. "They will miss me. They will miss me." His arms which had been rigid and tensed dropped freely. "But I am here now."

The sun rose all at once as if a giant basket of red magnolias had spilled over the sky.

\* \* \* \*

Mr. Polowski was speaking:

"Phyllis, I'm going to do something about that boy. I'm going to send him to a military academy, that's what I'm going to do. Get some sense knocked into him for once."

Avis tossed her head. "Oh, you know how Peter is. He's always chasing tigers or climbing imaginary sand dunes. He can't even remember when he has a birthday."

Mr. Polowski growled, "Hang it, I'll remember him into a good stiff school."

Mrs. Polowski brought out a book from under the sofa cushions. "This is my present to Peter. Do you think he'll like it?" The book title read *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated from the French.

"Like it?" remarked Avis. "Yes, I think he will."

Mr. Polowski had begun reading the newspaper.