

2. The first person who attempted to gather and string the facts of Marco Polo's personal history was his countryman, the celebrated John Baptist Ramusio. His essay abounds in what we now know to be errors of detail, but, prepared as it was when traditions of the Traveller were still rife in Venice, a genuine thread runs through it which could never have been spun in later days, and its presentation seems to me an essential element in any full discourse upon the subject.

Ramusio's preface to the Book of Marco Polo, which opens the second volume of his famous Collection of Voyages and Travels, and is addressed to his learned friend Jerome Fracastoro, after referring to some of the most noted geographers of antiquity, proceeds : *—

“Of all that I have named, Ptolemy, as the latest, possessed the greatest extent of knowledge. Thus, towards the North, his knowledge carries him beyond the Caspian, and he is aware of its being shut in all round like a lake,—a fact which was unknown in the days of Strabo and Pliny, though the Romans were already lords of the world. But though his knowledge extends so far, a tract of 15 degrees beyond that sea he can describe only as Terra Incognita ; and towards the South he is fain to apply the same character to all beyond the Equinoxial. In these unknown regions, as regards the South, the first to make discoveries have been the Portuguese captains of our own age ; but as regards the North and North-East the discoverer was the Magnifico Messer Marco Polo, an honoured nobleman of Venice, nearly 300 years since, as may be read more fully in his own Book. And in truth it makes one marvel to consider the immense extent of the journeys made, first by the Father and Uncle of the said Messer Marco, when they proceeded continually towards the East-North-East, all the way to the Court of the Great Can and the Emperor of the Tartars ; and afterwards again by the three of them when, on their return homeward, they traversed the Eastern and Indian Seas. Nor is that all, for one marvels also how the aforesaid gentleman was able to give such an orderly description of all that he had seen ; seeing that such an accomplishment was possessed by very few in his day, and he had had a large part of his nurture among those uncultivated Tartars, without any regular training in the art of composition. His Book indeed, owing to the endless errors and inaccuracies that had crept into it, had come for many years to be regarded as fabulous ; and the opinion prevailed that the names of cities and provinces contained therein were all fictitious and imaginary, without any ground in fact, or were (I might rather say) mere dreams.

* The Preface is dated Venice, 7th July, 1553. Fracastorius died in the same year, and Ramusio erected a statue of him at Padua. Ramusio himself died in July, 1557.