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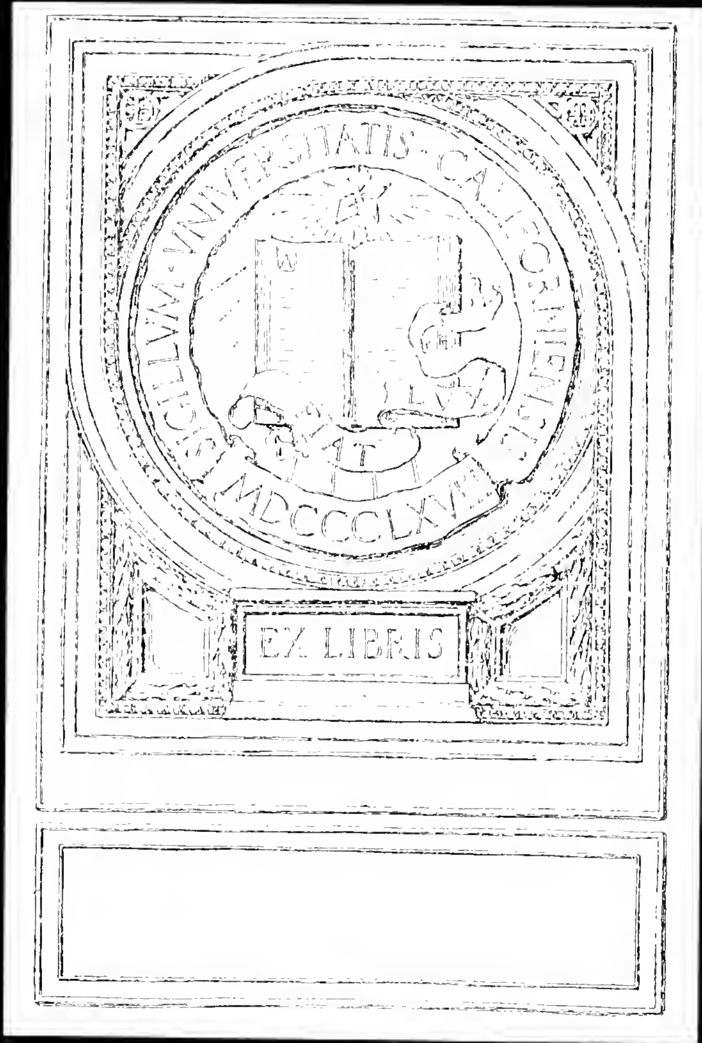
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Fifteenth Century Pilgrim Life on the Mediterranean

By

LOWELL JOSEPH RAGATZ

PAUL PEARLMAN
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WASHINGTON

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PREFACE

In speaking of large-scale movements of west European Christians to the Holy Land, one is prone to think only of the several great crusading expeditions which, from the close of the eleventh century, led hordes of occidentals to take the Cross, forsake their homes and, for the love of God or their own material gain, caused them to resolutely turn their faces eastward in order that they might battle against the infidel.

This is not unnatural, for such mass precipitations upon the Levant were spectacular military enterprises which wrought very definite political changes and romantic episodes associated with them have appealed to popular fancy throughout the ages. However, sight must not be lost of the fact that the Crusades were, in reality, mere reflections of an already long-existent burning interest in the Near East, albeit in exaggerated form, and that, both before they opened and after their close, large numbers of devout men and women reverently made the long trip to Palestine as palmers and there rendered spiritual homage in the reputed scenes of the Savior's activities.

The custom developed as an outgrowth of the familiar habit of going on pilgrimage to the shrines of local saints with which the old world abounded and of undertaking the less frequent one to Rome. The growing popularity of the far journey is revealed by the fact that, while but seven great parties are known to have set forth from west Europe in the eighth century, twelve did so in the ninth, as did sixteen in the tenth and one hundred seventy in the eleventh. Hundreds and, in some cases, even thousands of individuals travelled in each of these.

Then, in the intervals between the successive Crusades, an ever-growing number of occidentals visited the scenes made familiar through Biblical history and, following the last of the armed expeditions, by which time accurate knowledge of the Levant was general, such pilgrimages ceased to be novelties meriting particular contemporary comment.

Whereas the participants in the great military movements were activated largely by mercenary motives and frequently remained in the Near East as land owners or merchants, the pilgrims as a whole were moved by piety and the great majority returned to more familiar environments within a few months at most.

Palestine could be reached from Europe by two routes—one overland, the other by sea. The early Crusaders at least largely followed the former. Thus, we find Peter the Hermit moving across Germany, Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula to Constantinople and Godfrey of Bouillon and Raymond of Toulouse likewise using well-known highways during the first of these under-

takings. Louis VII and Conrad III did the same in the second and Frederick Barbarossa followed the example of his predecessors in the third.

But, from the outset, the sea route was also used, if only in part. In the First Crusade, Duke Robert of Normandy and Count Stephen of Blois sailed from Brindisi to Durazzo and proceeded from thence by land. Similarly, in the third, Richard the Lion Hearted and Philip Augustus, with their respective followers, took passage on vessels. But unlike Robert and Stephen who had merely crossed the Adriatic, these two set forth across the Mediterranean direct to Acre. Thus, gradually, the sea was put to greater service until we find the Fourth Crusade conducted entirely by the water way.

What was true in the case of the great military forces was likewise true with respect to the pilgrim bands. Instead of traversing southeastern Europe and Asia Minor on foot as in the past, they increasingly took to the ocean. While the land trip was less costly, it was more time-consuming and far more wearisome. But the primary reason for the gradual abandonment of the early route is to be found in the growing danger arising first, from the lamentable hostility between the Christian West and East and later from the more natural enmity between the Christian occident and the Moslem Levant.

If the Emperor Alexius, at the close of the eleventh century, was suspected of treachery, the open acts of his successors showed in no unmistakable manner their marked unfriendliness for the Latins and Germans. From allies of convenience, the ruler of the East and those of the West became bitter enemies and feeling against the Byzantines reached such heights as to culminate in the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Though the land route was once more safe enough during the period of the Latin Empire on the Bosphorus (1204-1261), the inevitable disruption of that state at the hands of the Greeks and their subsequent loss of the city to the Ottomans in the fifteenth century practically closed again the all but deserted highway to the Holy Land.

Under such circumstances, the sea route came to be employed almost exclusively and the coastal cities of Italy and southern France became great points of departure. An elaborate passenger service developed and, though closely linked with trade, the transportation of palmers became a business of first class importance, not unlike the carrying of emigrants in more recent times. Special tourist ships were constructed, laws governing the relations between ticket holders and members of the shipping interest were formulated and, under the stimulus of competition, passage might be secured under very favorable circumstances.

The journals of certain of these latter day travelers have come down to us. Outstanding among them is that of Brother Felix Fabri of the Dominican order who left his monastery at Ulm, Germany, on two occasions, in 1480 and again in 1484, to journey from Venice to Jerusalem.

The account of his second trip, written, as he himself tells us, in such detail and with such accuracy that his less fortunate brethren who were obliged to remain near the scenes of their labours might undertake the voyage vicariously, throws most interesting light on pilgrim life on the Mediterranean in the fifteenth century when the passenger service had been fully organized. It is our purpose to learn from his record what conditions surrounded a typical journey to the East at that time.

L. J. R.

Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin,
1 August 1919.

I

PREPARATIONS FOR THE VOYAGE

Twice each year, near Easter and in mid-summer, thousands of persons wishing to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem by the water route gathered in the coastal cities of Italy and France—Venice, Pisa, Genoa, Amalfi, Bari, Monopoli, Trani, Otranto and Marseilles—where passage might be taken with ship captains engaged in conducting such a passenger service. Though trips were made at other seasons, they were of relatively small importance compared to the great movements named.

Parties of varying size, formed in communities throughout France, the Germanies, the Italian peninsula, England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, the Low Countries and Scandinavia gradually assembled at these ports of embarkation until hundreds of individuals, all awaiting the time of sailing, had congregated in a given one. The presence of such large numbers of wayfarers called for many hostelries and wide-awake inn-keepers stationed men in their hire along the highways traversed by the newcomers to vie with each other in recommending their respective employers' establishment above all others in the city.

After having arrived at their destination and having established themselves in some tavern, the pilgrims concluded arrangements for the trip as soon as possible. Various groups, finding each other's company congenial, banded together and formed a company for the purpose of making the voyage together.

In Venice, white banners ensigned with a red Cross were mounted in the public square before the Doge's palace. There was one for every galley that would make the next trip and near each stood the owners' agents, inviting likely individuals to take passage in the finest vessel braving the waves at the most reasonable rate. These worthies were constantly wrangling with one another and blows between them were not infrequent.

The Venetian transports lay in the Grand Canal and were open to inspection by prospective passengers before reserving space. Having decided upon a given one, the members of the company wishing to engage it drew up a contract embracing the accommodations desired and presented it to the captain. If an agreement could be arrived at, signatures and seals were affixed; if this could not be done, negotiations were opened with another commanding officer. Due to the keen rivalry between different boat owners, pilgrims were, on the whole, able to secure very good terms indeed.

The contract governing the voyage of the German, Brother Felix Fabri, in 1484, has been preserved and, as it was doubtless

representative of its kind, the main points are set forth below. It will be noted that the details were most carefully worked out.

Article

1. The trip was to be from Venice to Joppa and return and was to start within twenty-six days.
2. The galley was to be manned by experienced sailors and was to be equipped with defensive armaments.
3. No unusual stops were to be made. Provisions might, however, be taken on at any time anywhere along the route.
4. Two meals of food and drink were to be supplied daily. If indisposition prevented the pilgrims from coming to table, they were to be served in their quarters.
5. There were to be ample stores of bread, biscuit, good wine, sweet water freshly put on board, meat, eggs and similar food throughout the entire voyage.
6. Wine was to be served daily.
7. In cases where the galley might stop near a harbor without entering, the pilgrims, on reasonable demand, as for example, to purchase private stores of provisions, were to be supplied with boats and oarsmen to reach that port.
8. In harbors entered by the galley, the pilgrims were to provide their own food during the time of the stop-over if such were available. Where this was not the case, it was to be the captain's duty to furnish meals during the wait precisely as though the vessel were on the high seas.
9. Passengers were to be protected from the galley slaves.
10. The pilgrims were to remain in the Holy Land for a "reasonable" length of time and would not be obliged to hurry, the captain at all times acting as guide and protector.
11. The captain was to pay all dues, money for safe conducts, etc., in full for the pilgrims. "Small fees" of an unspecified nature were, however, to be met by the palmers themselves.
12. Each ticket-holder was to pay forty-five newly minted ducats to the captain, one-half at Venice and one-half at Joppa.
13. The goods of any pilgrim who might die along the way were to be turned over to his executor and were not to be seized by the captain.
14. The passage money of every such person was to be repaid in half to his executor.

15. Bodies of dead pilgrims were to be buried in the nearest Christian port unless their comrades specifically consented to burial at sea.
16. Should a passenger wish to leave his party at any time when in the Holy Land, ten ducats fare was to be refunded him.
17. The captain was to make arrangements so far as possible for those separating themselves from the group.
18. Pilgrims were to be given space in which to keep any fowls that they might wish to use for food. The galley cook was to permit the use of his fire for the proper preparation of this additional fare at the passengers' own pleasure.
19. Sick persons were to be given space on the upper deck where this was deemed advisable.
20. Anything not specified, which was customary, was to be thought of as having been included.

Venetian contracts were registered by the protonotaries of the city after having been signed.

When a galley had been contracted for, pilgrims hastened on board to select their quarters. These were merely spaces on the floor sufficiently large to accommodate an adult each. There was always a rush to reserve them as some locations were naturally more desirable than others and here veteran travelers profited by past experience. A ticket holder acquired the right to a given location by being the first to chalk his name there.

Each passenger supplied his own mattress, pillows, sheets, coverlets and a mat. All could readily be purchased at near-by markets. As soon as quarters had been chosen and a supply of bedding had been laid in, this was brought on board, together with the owner's baggage, and the pilgrim took up his residence on the vessel though the date of sailing might yet be some time distant. The interim was spent in sight-seeing. Of particular interest to the gaping faithful were the wonderful Venetian churches whose patron saints enjoyed high repute in consequence of the special protection they afforded voyagers to distant Jerusalem.

At length, just before the day of departure, local physicians gave the pilgrims medical examinations and supplied them with written rules for the safeguarding of health at sea together with physic and such other medicines as they might need.

II

A PILGRIM SHIP

Galleys were employed in transporting west Europeans to the Holy Land. These were propelled by both sails and oars. All were alike with respect to shape but there were two great types according to motive force, triremes and biremes. The former, the larger of the two, were rowed with three slaves to an oar while biremes were rowed with but two to each.

The ship on which Brother Fabri made his journey of 1484 was a trireme thirty-three cubits in length, a cubit being reckoned as the distance between the finger tips of a man's outstretched arms. It was seven cubits wide at the mast while the distance from the keel to the top of the mast was eighteen. When the oars were extended at either side, the vessel's width was increased to thirteen cubits. Our good churchmen states that "Venetian galleys are as like to one another as swallows' nests." The description just given, then, is that of a typical trireme, while the bireme would be slightly smaller.

Galleys were constructed of wood, the stout timbers being fastened together with many bolts, chains and irons. The prows were helmet shaped when viewed from the front and were sharpened for ramming purposes. Their upper parts were "beak shaped", somewhat like a dragon's head with open mouth. Anchors were fastened along the sides.

The stern was higher than the prow. On either side was a boat, one large and one small, used on entering harbors. At the right side of the stern were steps by which one descended into the boats when they had been lowered.

The castle was three-storied, the upper one being occupied by the pilot and his helpers, the second by the captain and the third, the lowest one, by the noble ladies of the party while also serving as a store-room for the captain's treasure.

At the stern was an uncovered kitchen which could be looked down upon from the upper deck. Beside it was a stable housing animals destined for slaughter, such as hogs, sheep, goats, oxen and calves and below them was a cellar containing stores of edibles and drink.

The pilgrim ships had three floors, as it were. The galley slaves occupied the upper one, the deck, living and rowing on their benches, two to each if the vessel was a bireme and three to each in the case of a trireme. The benches were arranged in parallel rows along the two sides of the deck, running the length of the vessel, with merchandise piled between them. The captain's

room, the central part of the castle and quite a spacious enclosed chamber, was on a level with the upper deck.

The greater part of the pilgrims, male and female, occupied the cabin making up the second or middle floor. This consisted of one large room, running the length of the ship from the kitchen and stable at the stern to a separate compartment for noble women, the lower part of the castle, at the prow. It was reached from the deck by means of loose ladders suspended down open hatchways which likewise afforded the only means of lighting and of ventilation.

Each pilgrim had his own floor space, as already noted. These were arranged along the walls, one adjoining another, so that the travelers lay side by side. They slept with their heads towards the outside of the ship, feet to feet. Baggage was piled in the open space in the middle of the cabin and so cramped were these quarters that one could seldom stretch out at full length.

The rounding hold of the galley formed the lower story. It was filled with sand for ballast up to the floor of the cabin on which the pilgrims lay and they frequently lifted up the planks and buried jugs of food and bottles of drink in the wet, cool grains underneath.

In the central part of the cabin, where the mast came through from the upper deck, was the "well." Such water as had seeped through into the hold collected there. It had an offensive odor and was consequently frequently pumped out. Along the outer edge of the galley, presumably off the upper deck, were toilets.

Such was the standard pilgrim ship of the larger size. In time of expected trouble, an archer with his bow and quiver of arrows sat on the end of each rowing bench, alongside the merchandise.

III

THE BOAT PERSONNEL

The captain of the galley was the owners' representative. He seldom knew a great deal about navigation as such but rather devoted himself to selecting the exact course to be followed, to determining what stops were to be made en route and to acting in a general executive capacity. It was also his duty to settle any disputes which might arise at sea between either pilgrims or members of the crew. He was customarily at the same time "noble, powerful, rich, wise and honourable."

A chief of armament and a master of arms, engaged by the commanding officer, laid in a proper store of weapons and ammunition. A steward, likewise named by him, was given charge of the food and planned all meals. Innumerable grievances against him accumulated and he was commonly most cordially hated before the close of a voyage. The "caliph" was responsible for the cargo and repairs. He looked after the well being of the galley in general and was an official of no mean importance.

Each ship had one pilot who was advised by astrologers, soothsayers and kindred folk. Compasses were used to keep the vessel in its course, but if it went astray and got into unfamiliar waters, the helmsman was required to steer for the nearest port where someone well acquainted with local sailing conditions was engaged in his stead. The pilot was further assisted by a compass man and a rudder man.

The chief under-officer, the mate, stood at the head of the crew. He was frequently a cruel man, necessarily of powerful build to maintain the proper spirit of subordination. Next in rank was the boatswain, who kept a critical eye on the ropes, sails and anchors. He was in command of a group of some ten men known as "compani"—reckless fellows called upon to risk their lives in keeping the vessel trim during storms. Because of the nature of their work they were well paid.

Below the boatswain were the mariners, several in number. They were generally old, respected persons who directed the common seamen at their work. Orders were sung out to the latter and they replied in turn. Thus all labour was performed in unison. The variety of chants was at first of great interest to the palmers aboard a galley but the incessant calling back and forth ultimately came to be rather disturbing.

The seamen at this time were galley slaves. They sat on cross benches on the upper deck to work the oars and, when not employed in that fashion, they performed any other services that

might be required. They were harshly treated and brutal punishments, such as being beaten on the bare back with scourges, were the ordinary thing. The more unruly were chained to their benches and all were shackled when a port was entered. They were kept under strict surveillance by trusties from among their own number who reported infringements of orders to the mariners and were rewarded accordingly.

Galley slaves were captives of war who had been purchased by the captain. They were of mixed nationality and creed and ordinarily spoke several languages each.

In time of calm their labour was of a most arduous nature, but when the wind was fair and there was no other work to be done, they passed their time in dicing or at cards.

Among the slaves were some who served the pilgrims as tailors, shoemakers or washermen during spare moments. All were thieves and all were likewise merchants, having small stocks of provisions and goods to sell.

In addition to the officers and crew members already mentioned, each vessel carried a few cannoneers, trumpeters, physicians, barbers and singers. There was likewise a clerk in charge of the records.

IV

COMMUNITY LIFE AT SEA

On the open Mediterranean, each galley was a little world in itself. Acquaintanceships were quickly struck up and a spirit of general good fellowship prevailed. The ship officers, nobles and clergy constituted the aristocracy of the voyage but they mixed freely with the more humble folk aboard.

Daylight hours were spent on the deck near the center mast about which there was an open space. Awnings stretched here afforded shelter from sun and rain. The activities of the oarsmen afforded some diversion, but time inevitably came to hang heavily on almost everyone's hands. The majority of passengers soon fell into a sort of easy going life, passing the long days in drinking, gambling, playing cards or chess, engaging in idle talk, trading, reading, writing, sleeping, or what not, as the spirit moved.

Gaming was a great evil. Pots frequently ran as high as 200 ducats and many lost all of their possessions, even to the clothes on their backs, through courting the Goddess of Chance. Blasphemy and incessant bickering were natural accompaniments. There was comparatively little drunkenness, for most of the voyagers had been bibulous since infancy and only sweet wine was served. Large numbers carried musical instruments and amused themselves and others as well by playing, singing and dancing. Harpooning was a popular and exciting, though rather unprofitable, sport.

Worship was held three times a day—at morning, noon and night. Services were conducted on the upper deck beside the mast with voyaging churchmen officiating in turn. Mass was first said for pilgrims and officers and then for the galley slaves. However, many additional prayers were offered by the pious through both day and night and some could be seen at almost any time counting their beads and bowing head in meditation or supplication. Holy Eucharist could not be received nor was extreme unction administered because of conditions on board the vessel. Confession might be made to any priest.

The dead were normally shrouded and buried in the nearest Christian port of call; at times, however, with the consent of the deceased's traveling companions, a corpse was cast into the sea after having been weighted down. A special service was then held and, as the priests chanted, the body was thrown overboard by the galley slaves. In the case of a Venetian Grandee dying, his body was temporarily interred in the hold sand used for ballast and was subsequently exhumed when the ship again reached the home harbour.

The effects of pilgrims meeting death en route were inventoried by the galley clerk, who likewise paid their debts and presented the accounts to the captain where there were no friends on hand to perform those services. Unless otherwise specified by contract, the commanding officer fell heir to the victims' bedding and clothing while their other goods were turned over to intimates or relatives.

A daily and necessary occupation was the catching of lice and other vermin. Inhabiting close quarters in a dark, poorly aired and seldom cleaned cabin, the pilgrims were naturally much tormented by crawling things. Ship rats, too, contaminated much of their private stores of food and it was a nightly occurrence for the palmers to be awakened by rodents scurrying over their faces.

Two meals a day were served under contract—dinner and supper. Passengers took precedence. Tables for the men were set on the poop and and a mad rush followed the giving of the signal that all was in readiness since the rule first come, first served, was observed. Churchmen and lords sat with lesser folk and fared as best they might. There was no order whatever and everyone scrambled to secure large and choice helpings. Waiters attended the ladies in the cabin, as well as the sick, who might be either in bed or on deck.

Food was dressed after the Italian fashion. There was always a salad with oil if greens could be obtained. Meat and pudding alternated with a mess of meal or bruised grain or with panada and cheese. On fast days, fish was served with egg cake and a pudding. Bread was eaten for several days out of port, but as it regularly spoiled in less than a week, biscuits were then substituted for it. There was always as much wine as pilgrims wished available. Some lords and ladies to whom the regular menu was dissatisfying, came equipped not only with private supplies, but with their favorite culinary artists as well.

Next came the officers' turn. They ate much the same food as did the passengers, but from silver rather than from pewter dishes.

The galley slaves then messed on their rowing benches, preparing their own meals. They were likewise given the portions of the nobles who chose to look out for themselves. There were always several cooks aboard and if voyagers without servants wished their own food prepared these individuals were properly feed. Passengers with the lunching habit either provided themselves with eatables at the ports touched and engaged the cooks to prepare it for them in odd moments or bought what they could from the galley slaves. The latter, strange as it may seem, always had provisions and wine for sale and engaged in lively commerce along these lines.

After evening service, the pilgrims climbed down the hatchway ladders to their quarters. Altercations on a grand scale promptly ensued. The beds were narrow, the pillows hard, the air was close, bad odors permeated the atmosphere, vermin was a constant source of annoyance and the noise of the animals, as well as the shouts of the galley slaves who gambled late into the night and the groans of the sick made sleep a difficult matter. Then, too, many of the travelers themselves lit candles and diced, frequently almost until dawn. In groping their weary way to their berths, they woke their slumbering comrades by stepping upon them and loud and numerous were the imprecations from these unfortunates.

About sunrise, the bedding was rolled up and hung on nails above the sleeping spaces, after which everyone went up onto the deck. Because of their thievish inclinations, the galley slaves were not permitted to descend into the cabin. However, the pilgrims did so much pilfering among themselves that no one's property was safe unless on his own person, and then only when closely guarded. Little things, such as handkerchiefs, shirts and belts, were constantly disappearing.

Frequent stops were made, especially when the weather was inclement. Any passengers who cared to were then permitted to go ashore and the opportunity was seized with great alacrity. Because the inns, as a rule, were houses of ill fame, the palmers preferred to engage rooms in private homes where each group prepared its own food.

The natives were generally hospitable and did considerable business during the galley's stay. Fights between the pilgrims and residents of the ports of call were by no means infrequent, for the former were inclined to profiteer and the latter all too often had long fingers.

Sight seeing was a great feature of such stop-overs. Churches and monasteries in particular drew many visitors, the more so since the latter dispensed lavish hospitality. The ship's officers and galley slaves employed their time in trafficking with local merchants who came aboard. When sailing conditions were once more favorable, trumpets were blown as a signal for all to come on board. Those lingering too long generally caught up with the party at the next port. The ill were left behind to die or recuperate.

A galley always flew four banners on leaving port, the pilgrim one (a red cross on a white background), that of the home city and those of the Pope and the captain. Many ships under the black flag infested the sea and, to guard against them, pilgrim vessels seldom struck out directly across the open Mediterranean, but rather hugged the shore line. Boats were armed against pirate craft with small catapults, bows, arrows and spears.

Landmarks were closely watched for by the pilot on following the coast.

Whenever two vessels met at sea, the one that held itself to be the more important signalled the other by firing a cannon. The master of the lesser bottom then came on board to exchange greetings and gifts. In the case of Venetian galleys, the bigger invariably hailed the smaller one and the latter was, by law, obliged to respond to the summons. If the smaller ship was not a Venetian one, but came nevertheless, all was good. If, however it failed to do so, preparations were made for an encounter. This could then be averted only by the lesser vessel dipping its sail and its commander hastening over and satisfactorily explaining why custom had not been complied with sooner.

Keen rivalry prevailed among the captains from a given port to see who could get his passengers to the Holy Land first for, by the close of the fifteenth century, the Saracens would admit but one party at a time and late-comers were obliged to wait until those more fortunate than themselves had completed the tour of inspection before they could commence it.

During the last days of the journey, the weary and restless pilgrims constantly climbed up into the rigging in the hope of getting the first glimpse of the land of their dreams. The question of when the shores of Syria and Palestine would be sighted was the all-absorbing topic of conversation and there was much betting done as to precisely when this eagerly looked forward to event would occur.

Brother Fabri's outward-bound trip, a typical one of his day, required precisely a month—from the first of June to the first of July. Part of this time was spent in ports of call en route, hence the vessels can be said to have made very good time.

When the faint blue land mass at length appeared above the eastern horizon, a meeting of thanksgiving was called by the captain. After it, wild revelry prevailed and joy knew no bounds.

On the galley reaching its destination (Joppa in the case of Brother Fabri), gallant show of any kind was rigorously avoided so that harbour guards might know that it came peacefully. The captain promptly sent agents ashore to negotiate for a safe conduct covering all his passengers. Everyone save the agents remained on board until the necessary document arrived. When at length it was delivered, the party disembarked and began the short march inland to the Holy City. The captain served as leader and armed escorts to afford protection against fanatical natives were furnished by the ruler of Jerusalem. The ship meantime remained in the harbour being fitted out for the homeward journey which normally began in about thirty days.

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