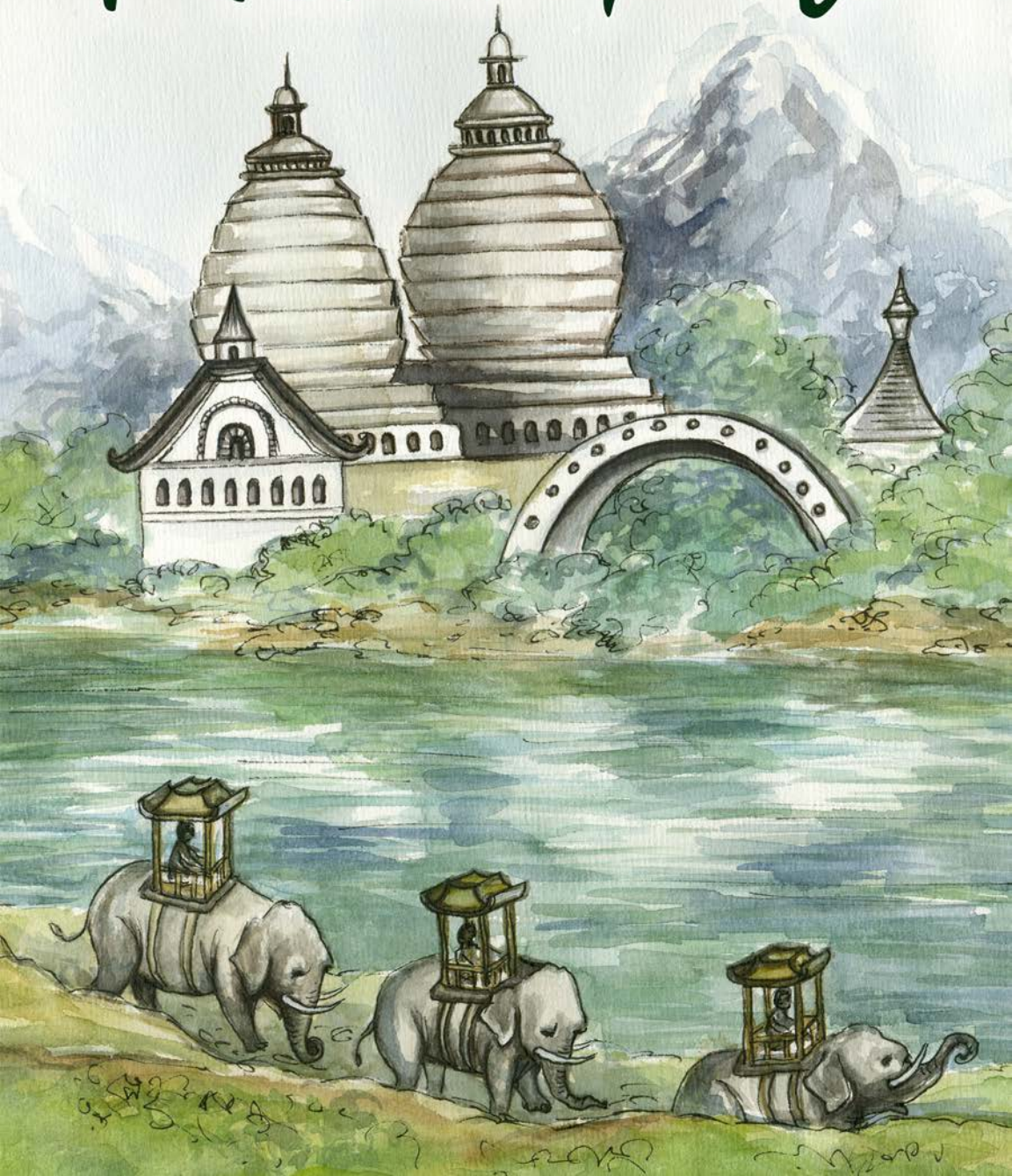
LOUISE ANDREWS KENT

He Went With Marco Polo



Publisher's Note

He Went With Marco Polo was written over 80 ago and tells the story of a young man accompanying Marco Polo on his adventures around the world.

An excellent storyteller, Louise Andrews Kent provides the reader with the opportunity to experience a different time and place through the eyes of the main character, including the social customs, religious beliefs, and racial relations. Taking place over 700 ago, many parts of life are foreign and sometimes offensive to us now, including specific customs, practices, beliefs, and words. To maintain and provide historical accuracy and to allow a true representation of this time period the words used and the customs and attitudes described have not been removed or edited.

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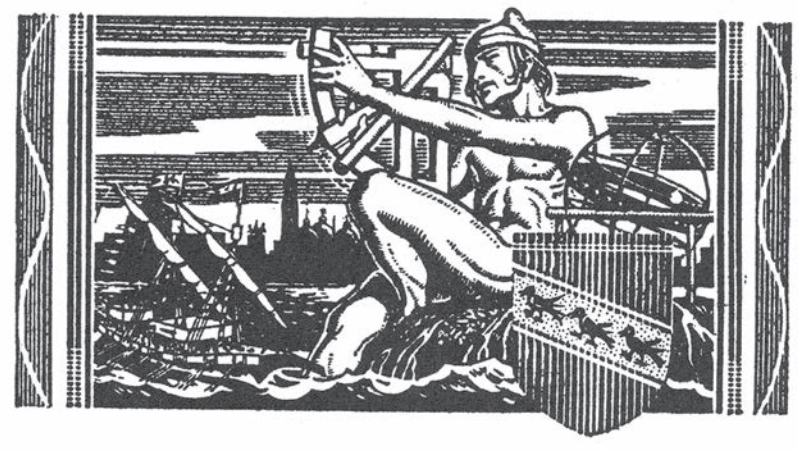

Louise Andrews Kent

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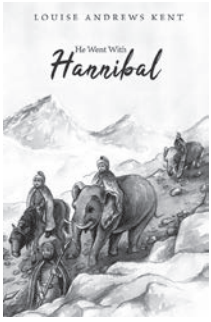
Living Book Press

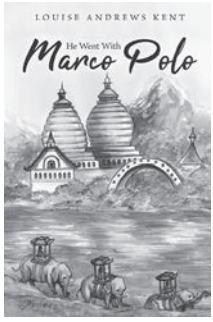
THE *He Went With...* SERIES

by

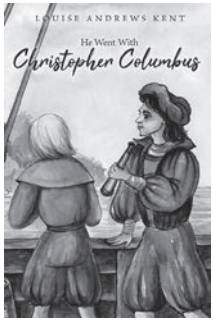
LOUISE ANDREWS KENT



Hannibal



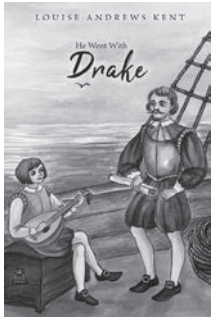
Marco Polo



Christopher Columbus

Vasco da Gama

Magellan



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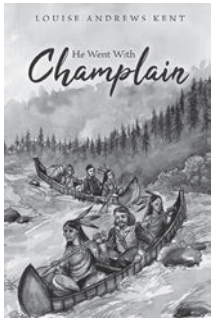

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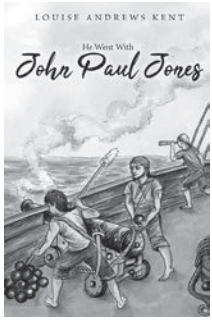

John Paul Jones

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Dear Tommy:

We haven't met for a long time. The last time I saw you, we took a walk across the fields to 'Hampton.' You asked if I knew any stories. I said I knew one about a squirrel, a bad squirrel, named Bunny. So I told it, and then you said: 'Do you know any *more* stories?' So I told you one about a dog. And then you said: 'Do you know any more stories?' So I told you one about a cat.

'Don't you know any stories about *boys?*' you asked.

I said: 'My throat is tired, but I will tell you a story about a boy some other day.'

(Telling stories tires grown-up people's throats much more than talking over the telephone about how lovely the Flower Show was and 'How did you like that green dress with the mink cape?' Have you noticed that?)

'I'd like a story about *two* boys,' you said.

Well, this is a story about two boys—Marco Polo and a friend of his, Tonio Tumba. Some day perhaps you will read the book that Marco Polo wrote about his journey to Cathay. He went nearly halfway around the world and back. Not in an automobile, because he lived more than six hundred years ago. When you wanted to take a journey then, you rode on a horse, or a camel, or an elephant. Or even a donkey.

When Marco got back to Venice, where he lived, he told people all about the new places and queer people he had seen. They didn't believe him. They made fun of him. If one boy wanted to call another a liar, he would say: 'You're a regular Marco Polo!'

One word Marco often used was 'millions.' He said that Kublai Khan, the Emperor of China, had millions of people, millions of money, millions of yards of silk, and jewels worth

millions. The Venetians gave Marco Polo the nickname of 'Marco Millions.' They called the place where he lived 'Millions Court'—'Corte del Millioni.' The arched doorway of Marco's house, with his coat of arms above it, is still there. So is the canal where Tonio used to row his gondola.

When Marco was very old, someone asked him if he didn't want to take back some of his big stories.

'No,' he said. 'I didn't tell half what I saw.'

It was six hundred years before people found out that Marco told the truth about China and the countries between China and Venice. There is a book six times as thick as Marco's own book and twelve times as thick as this one that tells how travellers at last discovered that Marco's stories were true.

Sir Henry Yule was the man who wrote that thick book. It helped me a great deal in making this thin one. Marco wrote his own book when he was in prison after a battle. I don't know how he liked being in prison, but anyway I'm glad he wrote the book, because if he hadn't, Tommy, your godmother—who is a little lazy about telling stories—couldn't have written this one for you.

Louise Andrews Kent

January, 1935

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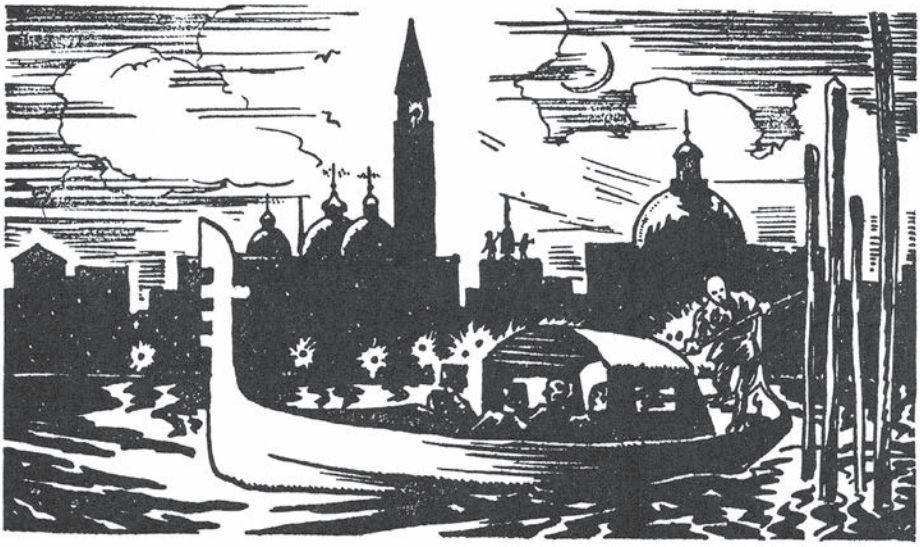

Chapter 1

VENICE

Tonio was cold—cold and very hungry. He could not remember when he had last had a proper meal. Yesterday an old woman who sold peaches near the Rialto Bridge had given him two bruised ones and he had picked up a crust of bread that someone had dropped on the quay by the gondola stand. The day before that he had caught an eel—had jumped right out of his gondola into the shallow water of the lagoon and caught it in his own hands—and had cooked it over a little fire of driftwood that he had made on the sandy beach of the Lido. Even quite a large eel is not very filling when you have had nothing else to eat and when you have to row a twenty-five-foot gondola—up and down, up and down—through long, twisting miles of canals looking for a passenger. Especially when you don't find the passenger.

Every time Tonio thought someone wanted to ride in his gondola, other gondoliers would be too quick for him. They

crowded him away from the gondola stand near the Doge's palace, the best stand in Venice, where his father used to work before he died. Tonio had no right there any longer, but once in a while he picked up a fare because the older gondoliers, those who had known his father, sometimes let him get in near the steps. But the new ones shoved him away. Tonio was afraid of their harsh voices and scowling faces. If one of them should ram the polished steel beak of his gondola into the faded green side of Tonio's, the boy knew that it would be the end of his boat. If it were once broken, he would never earn enough money to get it mended. And that would mean he would never be a gondolier like his father. He had had to sell his father's place at the gondola stand. On the money he got he had lived for the last year, but now it was all gone—every scudo.

Tonio had slept all night in the gondola. When the tide was low the evening before, he had pushed his boat in to a shallow channel between two banks of dark green seaweed, pulled the shabby rug over his shivering legs, put his tangled head of golden curls on a hard cushion, shut his big brown eyes, and curled up in the bottom of the boat under the tattered awning like some small animal in a burrow. At first he had been so cold he could not sleep. At last he grew warmer. The soft lapping of the water, the gentle rocking of the gondola as the tide lifted it and gurgled under it made him drowsy.

Even in his sleep he must have been listening to the water and feeling the motion of the boat, for when the tide turned and began to run out again, he woke up. It was still dark and there was a cold mist all around him, but he could feel rather than see that his floating bed was being gently carried down towards the Lido. At the Lido was the entrance through which the tide swept in and out of the canals of Venice. It was the

place from which the Venetian ships sailed all over the world; the gateway through which Tonio had seen the Doge go in his galley, all shining with scarlet and gold, to drop a ring in the sea, and tell the world that Venice was the master of it.

Tonio let the gondola drift along with the tide.

'Perhaps,' he thought, 'someone off a fishing boat will want to be carried to the city. It is so early now, perhaps I shall get a fare. Perhaps some big galley came in last night. With strangers. Rich strangers who want to see the city.'

The boat drifted on a little faster. Tonio could feel the wind coming up behind him, the crisp cold wind from across the mountains that blows all the mist out to sea. In a few minutes it was clear around him. There were stars above him in the sky; more stars moving below him in the rippling water of the lagoon. The city was a dark mass behind him, with only a few small points of light low down that Tonio knew were the lamps at the gondola stands. High above it a light burned in the bell tower of San Marco.

Tonio liked that light. He always looked at it every night before he went to sleep, and the light seemed to say to him: 'Cheer up, Tonio. I'm looking at you. You'll be all right tonight.'

The light seemed to know what it was talking about, for so far Tonio had been all right, but this was the coldest and hungriest time the boy had yet known. The wind cut through his thin tunic and seemed to find every hole in his ragged hose. His clothes felt damp, and there was a hollow place inside him, a hollow place that he did not think anything would ever fill. However, he looked back at the light again and it winked at him in that friendly way.

As it did so, Tonio had an idea. Perhaps the flashing light gave it to him, but anyway it came suddenly into his head.

'I'll go down to the Church of San Nicolo,' he said to himself, speaking out loud for company. 'San Nicolo is the friend of all poor boys. I'll go and pray there and ask him to send me a passenger.'

It was beginning to grow light now. There were little patches of flame-colored cloud floating above the bell tower. The morning star slipped out of the pink sky. Someone put out the big lamp in the tower. It gave Tonio one last encouraging wink. Then the tower and the domes and turrets below it were black against the sunrise.

Tonio mounted into his place at the stern of the gondola, put his heel into the heel-plate, turned out his toes as a gondolier should, and began to swing away at the heavy oar. It felt lighter than usual, for the tide and wind helped him. The gondola slid quietly through the pink-and-silver water.

Inside the Church of San Nicolo it was dark, except for the few candles burning low here and there. One of them threw its dim light on the picture of the Saint near the altar. He was a big, kind-looking man with a brown beard and a coarse brown robe. Tonio knelt down in front of the picture, and said his prayers, just the way his father had taught him to say them—all the prayers he knew. Then in his own words he said a prayer for his father and one for his mother. She had died so long ago that all Tonio knew about her was that she had come from the North and had golden hair like his own. Last of all he said the prayer for himself:

'Please, San Nicolo, I know you're good to poor boys—please help me today to go where I can find a passenger. I am so hungry.'

It did not sound much like the prayers his father had taught him, but Tonio felt better when he had said it. The Saint looked kindly down at him. The candle flared up and went out. In the last flash of light Tonio almost thought there was a smile on the brown face, a twinkle in the blue eyes, and that San Nicolo's big hand moved a little. Then the candle went out. There was a waxy smell, and a little blue smoke drifted across the picture. Tonio could hardly see the Saint now in the dim light.

'Did you point to the harbor, San Nicolo? Or the city?' murmured Tonio, but the Saint only looked past him into the shadowy church.

Tonio rowed towards the docks. There were boats of all shapes and sizes there, with brilliant sails—yellow, orange, red—shining against the rippling blue water. The sun was up now, but the wind was still cold. Everything seemed to stand out with unusual clearness—every rope of the fishing boats, every scale on every fish, every grain of yellow sand on the beach, every tiny silver ripple on the water, every sharp peak of the mountains. The men at the docks moved more quickly than usual with their kegs and baskets. Their laughing and singing seemed to ring over the shining water.

Suddenly Tonio heard a shout, then more shouts. Men, all talking at once, were running towards the side of the dock that he could not see. A man in a rowboat, just ahead of Tonio, began to row hard and in a moment disappeared around the dock. Tonio followed him as fast as he could. He buzzed the gondola along through the water, forgetting his tired arms and empty stomach, and made it swoop around the end of the dock ahead of the rowboat.

Out in the open water of the Adriatic he saw the cause of the excitement, a big galley coming up against the wind. The sun

winked on the dripping oars, her bow cut through the frothing caps of the waves, flags fluttered from her masts. As she turned to come alongside the dock, Tonio saw that one of the flags was one he had often seen before—the red flag of Venice with the gold lion of San Marco on it. There was another red flag, too, with a wide gold stripe going from one corner of it to the other and three black birds on the gold stripe. Somewhere he thought he had seen it. The birds were starlings. A starling was a 'Polo' in Tonio's language. He had heard of a family named Polo. Perhaps the flag was theirs.

Tonio went to a small wharf, where he moored his gondola, then hurried towards the big dock. Men were already landing from the galley and there was the usual noise and chatter going on. In fact there was rather more than the usual noise. Most of it seemed to be centred around two men in brown robes of a cut strange to Tonio, men with bushy beards and bronzed faces. People were slapping them on the back and making much more fuss over them than over the more brightly dressed men who were still streaming off the ship. Tonio saw the admiral of the fleet himself, in his scarlet satin doublet and violet cap, taking the taller of the two bearded men by the shoulders and giving him a friendly shake.

The porters began unloading the cargo. By his nose Tonio could tell that this ship was from the East, for he could smell all kinds of spicy smells—cinnamon, mace, pepper, cloves. The fragrance hung around the ship and everything in it. Even the baskets of figs, the kegs of honey, the sacks of almonds had a breath of the Far East about them. Tonio would have liked to stay until the last bale of silk or cotton was unloaded,

but he saw gondoliers and other boatmen arriving and heard men from the galley bargaining for the trip to the city. He knew that if he were ever going to get a passenger, this was the time. He would have liked to speak to one of the big men in the brown robes—the taller had about him something that reminded Tonio of the kind face of San Nicolo in the picture—but they were still the centre of a talking, laughing group. The other men who were coming off the galley looked too proud and too gaily dressed. Tonio wished he had been able to make himself look better. He had run his fingers through his untidy curls, and washed his face in the half-salty water of the lagoon. His skin felt sticky, and he knew by his reflection in the water—the only mirror he had—that he looked shabby and rumpled.

'I am dirty and my boat is dingy,' thought Tonio. 'All the other gondoliers look so grand and their gondolas shine like the sun and the sea. Of course no one will hire me.'

Just then his eye fell on a man who was standing a little outside the noisy group, a short, round-faced man with a moustache the color of straw drooping over a thin, straw-colored beard. He was looking at the laughing men out of a pair of gentle, pale blue eyes. No one was paying any attention to him. He was shabbily dressed in faded blue cloth, stained with sea-water and patched with squares of various colors here and there. He had a queer straw hat on his lanky, straw-colored hair. On his feet were scarlet leather boots, much too big for him, and pulled on over blue hose as ragged as Tonio's. The boots were splendidly stamped with gold patterns of vines and flowers. They were so gay that they made the rest of the man's costume look all the dingier. Beside him was a big bag made of a cow's hide with the hair still on. It had leather cord run through slits in the top of it. The man had his hand pushed

through a loop in the cord. Every now and then he walked a step or two, still looking patiently at the jolly group. Every time he took a step, the bag moved a little and things clinked inside it. At last he spoke softly to one of the men in the brown robes, the short fat one with the curly black beard.

The fat man bellowed cheerfully:

'Go on, then, Hans. We'll see you later. Take care of my bag,' and he turned back to his friends. 'Don't believe me if you don't want to,' Tonio heard him say. 'It's nothing to me. But I tell you this Khan is so great that lions and elephants bow before him. And the beggars in Cathay wear silk...'

The man with the scarlet boots smiled. When he smiled he looked so kind that Tonio felt brave enough to speak to him.

'I have my gondola here, sir, if you would like to go to the city.'

The man smiled again and looked at Tonio out of his kind blue eyes.

'The bag is not light,' he said in a gentle voice, speaking slowly, as if he had to hunt for the words. 'You think your arms are strong enough? You are not very big.'

Then, seeing the look of disappointment on Tonio's face, he added hastily: 'But then I am not so big either. Come, then, where is this fine boat?'

He would not let Tonio take his bag, but walked after him in his scarlet boots with the clinking, hairy sack thrown over his shoulder.

It was hard work rowing the gondola back to the city—tide and wind were both against them—but Tonio managed it, in spite of his tired arms and the empty place inside him. He began to think what he would have for breakfast—a hot, crusty loaf of bread from the bakery in the Piazzetta, hot roasted chestnuts, perhaps, and sausages sizzling and spitting in the

pan at the cookshop. No eels. Anyone who wanted eels was welcome to them!

There was the smell of new baked bread blowing across the Piazzetta from the bakery as Tonio slid his gondola skillfully along the steps and sprang out to help his passenger. The little man took out of a leather pouch that was hung at his belt a handful of silver coins and a piece of yellow paper. Tonio had never seen a piece like it. There was strange-looking writing on it, and a scarlet seal. Tonio's father had taught him to read a little, but he had never seen writing like that on the yellow paper.

Hans of the Scarlet Boots—that was the name Tonio had given his passenger—held out both hands, the silver coins in his right hand and the yellow paper in his left.

'Which will you have, left or right?' he said, smiling at Tonio out of his kind blue eyes. 'That yellow topknot of yours makes me homesick'—he jerked his head towards the mountains to the north. 'I want to pay you well for the trip. Take whichever you like.'

'I'll take a silver piece, thank you,' said Tonio. He really could have sausages, he knew now, and all the bread he wanted.

The little man smiled again and poured all the silver into Tonio's thin hand.

'Take it, then,' he said, patting the boy on the shoulder. 'And if you should ever go to Cathay, don't tell my friend Kublai Khan that you took a handful of Venice groats rather than his money that's worth a hundred golden ducats! Well, I see I'll have to go back to Cathay to spend it.'

He smiled again at Tonio, crammed the yellow paper back into his pouch, shouldered his clinking bag, and strolled off towards the Doge's palace.

Tonio wondered who Kublai Khan was.

'Cathay,' he said to himself—'Cathay. I never heard of it. It must be a long way off.'