

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, PART 1

BY WILBUR F. GORDY



At last all was ready, and a half-hour before sunrise on Friday morning, August 3, 1492, this little fleet, with one hundred and twenty men and provisions for a year, sailed out of the port of Palos. It was a sorrowful hour for the poor sailors, who felt that they had looked upon their homes and their friends for the last time. Columbus steered for the Canaries, where he delayed three weeks to repair the rudder of the Pinta.

On September 6th he set sail again. When once out of sight of land the sailors, overcome with fear, cried and sobbed like children. But new trials awaited them. At the end of a week the compass needle no longer pointed to the North Star, and this strange fact filled the superstitious sailors with alarm.

Great was their consternation when a few days later the vessels entered vast stretches of seaweed. At first the little fleet easily ploughed its way through this mass of floating green, but at the end of three days, on account of a light wind, the vessels moved more slowly. In their dismay the sailors feared that the vessels might never get through this immense sea of grass, but might have to lie there and rot, or, perhaps,

escaping this danger, run upon rocks and shoals lying just beneath the grass and be broken in pieces.

Though they were in the midst of obstacles apparently insurmountable, they were also in the path of the trade winds that steadily bore them onward. But in their terror, the sailors imagined they could never return

because the wind would not allow them to sail in the opposite direction. When the wind began to blow from the southwest they were once more relieved of their fears.

After many days all hearts were gladdened by the sight of birds, which indicated that land was near. It was an idle hope.

Again and again some eager eyed sailor shouted "land," but found later that he was looking at distant clouds.

The crews were in despair. Now in the belt of trade-winds that were steadily blowing them farther and farther from home and friends they cried in dismay: "We can never return to Spain. We are lost! What shall we do?" They begged Columbus to turn back. They became angry when he refused, and declared he was crazy and was leading them all to destruction. They even plotted to throw him overboard some night and say that he

fell into the sea while looking at the stars. Columbus felt, that dangers were growing thick about him, but he never faltered in his purpose. His strong will and his abiding faith in success kept him stanch in face of difficulties that would have caused an ordinary mind to give way.

On October 11th unmistakable signs of land appeared. A thorn branch with berries on it, a reed, and a carved stick came floating by. New life stirred in every heart, and the sailors looked eagerly in every direction for land.

The king and queen had promised a reward equal to nearly \$600 of our present money to the sailor who should be the first to see land. Columbus had promised in addition a velvet cloak. Accordingly, all were on the alert to catch the first glimpse of land, and kept on the watch during the entire night after the appearance of the thorn-branch and carved stick.

About ten o'clock Columbus himself saw in the distance a light, which looked like a torch in the hands of some one moving along the shore. About two o'clock next morning, Friday, October 12th—or October 21st, according to our present method of reckoning time—a sailor on the *Pinta* saw, about five miles off, a low strip of land. This was an island of the Bahama Group. Just ten weeks had elapsed since the voyage began at Palos, and with intense eagerness Columbus and his men awaited the coming of daylight.

At dawn the boats were lowered, and all went on shore. Columbus, dressed in a rich robe of scarlet, carried the royal standard. His followers also bore banners, on each of which was a brilliant green cross with the letters F. and I. the Spanish initials for Ferdinand and Isabella—on each side. Above the letters were crosses. Columbus threw himself, kneeling, upon the ground. He wept for joy, and, kissing the earth, took possession of the land in the name of the king and queen of Spain. The sailors now fell upon their knees at Columbus's feet. They kissed his hands, and begged him to forgive them for their evil thoughts toward him.

At first the natives, whom Columbus called Indians because he thought he was in the East Indies, fled to the woods in fear of the Spaniards; but later they returned and worshipped the white men as beings from the sky. They thought the vessels were great birds and the sails wings. The Spaniards at once began to trade with the Indians, giving them such trifles as tiny bells, red caps, and glass beads, in exchange for tame parrots, cotton yarn, and a few small ornaments of gold, such as the natives wore in their nose.